Four-Hour Vivekananda Film Is a Fleet-Footed Turkey
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Choodie Shivaram, Bangalore

After "Adi Shankara," "Madhvacharya," "Ramanuja" and "Bhagavad Gita," 83-year-old G.V. Iyer, veteran of "Indian spiritual cinema" and one of India's finest film makers, was finally ready with his latest film, "Swami Vivekananda." Iyer studied the colossus for 11 years before writing both screenplay and song lyrics. Two years in production, "Vivekananda" is a big-banner movie, unlike his previous films.

In February I was invited to a preview of the film. For the last year and a half I had, at the request of Hinduism Today, followed the production of what promised to be a very significant movie and was eagerly awaiting the results. The private audience was mostly journalists and eminent personae from cinema and theater, all with high expectations. The film began well and proceeded at a brisk pace covering most parts of Naren's childhood with the titles and credits, set to a tuneful song. The first half of the four-hour film was gripping, especially with Mithun's superlative portrayal of Ramakrisha. The one-time heart throb, disco dancer and martial arts fighter in the role of Ramakrishna held the audience spell bound.

But after two hours Iyer couldn't sustain the pace, and midway the movie turned south, turning the evening sour. What really irks the viewer is the commercial treatment where most of the songs are out of context and irrelevant. As the reels rolled by a sense of disappointment set in. The octagenarian's painstaking efforts to bring to the cinemascopic canvas the life and times of one of India's most illustratrious sons--an effort we all applauded--falters and fails. The film runs though like a school textbook without the trademark insightful Iyer interpretations. Salil Chowdary's music is tunefully sung by Jesudas and S.P. Balasubramaniam. This was Salil's last film; he died halfway through. Madhu Ambat's photography is at its best when the camera takes you on a sojourn through the snowclad Himalayas. Vivekananda's Bengali composition soulfully rendered elevates you to Mount Kailash.

For the rest of the film none of the actors and actresses impress. Hema Malini remains as Hema and not as Goddess Kali. So also Tanuja as Vivekananda's mother and Meenakshi Seshadri as his prospective bride. Sarvadhaman Banerjee, who was an electrifying presence in "Adi Shankara," is a shadow of his former self; he remains wooden; forgetting the fiery monk he portrays.

The scenes of Vivekananda carrying the message of Ramakrishna run past without making an impact of what Swami Vivekananda really intended to convey. Iyer's Vivekananda is weak and unstable, and we don't see a confident monk emerging from him.

One cannot understand how Jayadeva's Asthapadi fits into a

spiritual film like this, though credit must be given to actress Shobana for her brilliant classical dance. The most ill-conceived song and dance sequence in the film is that of Meenakshi Seshadri as one who tries to lure Vivekananda into wedlock. It does not relate to the life of Vivekananda, and defeats Hindu moral values. The Bengalis had protested against the inclusion of such impropriety even during shooting. The song is meant to be a test for Vivekananda, as Iyer says, "I want to show that there can exist a man without any sexual inclinations."

Swami Harshanandaji, head of the Ramakrishna Math in Bangalore, also attended the pre-release viewing. He expressed disappointment with a number of issues, including this dance sequence. "Swamiji will be writing a detailed letter to Iyer," state sources from the RK Mission. Knowing Iyer, he is not likely to make any changes in the film, say film critics. He will most likely leave the scenes as they are, holding that it is a movie and not a history book.

I was hardly alone in my disappointment. "This film is going to be a commercial flop despite having big names on its titles. I would call it 'Vivekananda, a Paramahimsa'--'Ultimate Agony.' The film neither entertains nor enlightens, confided M.N. Chakravorthy, a senior journalist for the Indian Express. His printed review described Sarvadaman Bannerjee's Vivekananda as "wooden throughout, his anquish and search for truth do not become part of the audience's yearning for the same." The Times of Indialamented the film's "lanquid pace and lack of tautness in the script and editing, putting the viewer off rather than engrossing him in the drama that unfolds. The fluidity, finesse and exquisitness of Iyer's "Adi

Sankara" are missing."

The film ends with the departure of Vivekananda to Chicago with a clear hint that there is more to come as Vivekananda Part II. The decision to split the film into two parts was due to Iyer's inability to shoot in the USA depicting the monk's thumping speech at the Chicago Parliament of the World's Religions. Some crew members, including Sarvadhaman Banerjee and Iyer's daughter, were refused visas by the American Consulate.

The Making of the Movie

"Why Vivekananda?" Iyer has been asked frequently. "I decided on Vivekananda because he can inspire, enthuse and stimulate the present generation. Our prosperity lies in them," he replies.

Unlike Iyer's earlier films, "Vivekananda" seems more like a commercial venture with a view to attract the audience--and this approach was perhaps the movie's fatal flaw. Iyer has often said, "I don't make my films for the masses; they are for the thinking elite, even if it's only one person." "Swami Vivekananda" contradicts Iyer's statement, though proclaiming to be a "reverential/celluloid tribute to the soul of India," the film unabashedly justifies the surfeit of glamour queens and glamour elements in the "saintly film." Stating it was "so as not to make philosophical overtones of the film 'too dry' as it happened in my triology on the acharyas," Iyer adds that the stars help a lot in pulling the crowds. "But none of them are

merely there to entertain. Who says they are not good actors and actresses? Nobody becomes a good artist without any talent."

Iyer admits to having treated the character of Vivekananda as a practical man, with no mysticism or superhuman powers. "My Vivekananda eats meat, as he really did," announces Iyer. He feels that the younger generation deserves to know and see that spiritual giants are not always premolded mannequins of "orthodoxy." But Iyer does not despiritualize Vivekananda. "My emphasis is on his superlative philosophic thoughts. No other philosopher gave Hinduism the kind of new dimension he did."

Vivekananda is closer to people, he belonged to this century. Iyer's Vivekananda is rascal-of-a-boy who made his mother once wail, "Siva, I prayed to you for a deva and you sent me a demon." Iyer's "Naren" is the cocky, anglicized Bengali university egghead that he was who does not go limp anaesthetized by Ramakrishna's God-intoxicated sting. Iyer's Vivekananda questions all the time and believes only what he experiences.

Sarvadhaman Banerjee, in the role of Vivekananda, is tall, fair and well built, sort of Al Pacinoish-looking. When I met him on location, he seemed more of a "cool guy," often moody and preferring to stay aloof. A half hour with him won me an unuseable collection of vague responses. But finally I did catch an inspiring glimpse of a depth that lurks inside his frustratingly offish veneer. Confirming this, I was later told by a crew member that, "He had taken off during the shooting

schedule for a few days to a wooded hill infested with animals simply to meditate."

Handling Vivekananda in an 83% Hindu nation is a delicate business. Hindus are possessive about their icons, God or Godmen, in film or in book. They can get pushy with directors. Even before the film was done Iyer was being told where it went wrong. For example, the Bengali community told him not to leave out Sharada Ma, Ramakrishna's wife. "I had given a small role for Sharada, but on the insistence of the Bengalis, her role was extended," revealed Iyer. Now if Iyer takes the comments on the preview in a similarly responsive mood and makes necessary corrections, "Swami Vivekananda" could be a turkey turned eagle. We'll see.

Choodie Shivaram, a free-lance journalist, holds a BA and law degree and lives in Bangalore with her husband and two children.

Sidebar: Until I Die . . .
Interview with Filmmaker G.V.Iyer

Flowing white beard, hair knotted, deep-set eyes, thick eyebrows, barefoot (he never wears shoes--a Gandhian vow) clad in a white banian and dhoti--he looks much more a nameless ascetic than doyen of India's religious cinema.

Ganapathy Venkataramana Iyer was born to a well-to-do--later poverty-struck--orthodox brahmin family near Mysore. As a boy, he preferred filching coconuts, swimming and monkeying around to schoolwork. Determined to reform the truant lad, his

parents stopped his schooling and had an upanayanaceremony (acceptance as a member of the "twice-born" elite) performed and started him learning Sanskrit and Vedic rituals. He however shortly ran away with a traveling company of actors, roughing through a difficult life on the road until finally gaining some success as an actor. His big break came when, with two actor friends, he made a Kannada film which became a big hit. With newly-won director status, more films followed--some soulful, some not, some successful, others not.

After one devastating failure, he swore off films for life and went into hiding only to blitzkrieg back with the award-winning "Adi Shankara," filmed totally in Sanskrit. Many had hoped "Vivekananda" would be of equal quality.

In his sixties, he took a second wife and had a daughter Kalpana and a son Raghavendra. She is his costume designer. The son is both an actor and production manager.

Hinduism Today:You seem possessed with making movies with philosophical themes.

G.V. Iyer:Unless you are totally immersed in what you are doing, how can you achieve anything? And, philosophy is not unrelated to life! The opposite. It is life, the way you live your life.

HT:Many of your films are unwatched by the masses. Why is that?

GVI:My films are for the elite, for people who are thinkers. I don't make films to educate or inform the layman. It does not matter to me if no one sees my films.

HT:You love to humanize religious figures in your movies.

GVI:I simply cut out blind beliefs. For example, I've never shown Shankara performing pujas.

HT:At 83, your energy shames chaps half your age. Any secret?

GVI:What would I do if I retire? I can't sit quiet. The urge to create is always pushing me. There's some Energy within me guiding my actions. I bow to that Energy. It's omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent. That Energy dictates everything that I do.

HT:Does all the rape and violence in films today upset you?

GVI:In what generation did people not say degeneration had set in? You say Ashoka was great. But the man massacred hundreds of people! And just because some nude posters of women get put up, does it mean that all our men are bad? These are notions of people eager to make an issue. When watching vulgarity in films becomes intolerable, then good, clean films set the trend.