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MOVIES

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Director draws upon Hindu metaphysics for the mystical aura of "Sixth Sense" ans "Unbreakable"

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Known as m. night shyamalan to the world at large, his work is unforgettable. Before it left theatres in 1999, the thriller, The Sixth Sense (Buena Vista Films, starring Bruce Willis and Haley Joel Osment; directed and written by Shyamalan), a movie about a young boy who sees ghosts, gained recognition as the ninth-top grossing film in history, earning more than us$600 million worldwide and six Oscar nominations. To date, Shyamalan's current film, Unbreakable (Buena Vista Films, starring Bruce Willis and Samuel L. Jackson; directed and written by Shyamalan), focusing on the mythological reality of comic books, has grossed at least us$77 million in its third week in theatres. Critical praise has been high. "M. Night Shyamalan has risen to the top of the screenwriting spectrum in my opinion," states Christopher Wehner of Screenwriters Utopia. "His screenwriting style, in its form and structure, is masterful."

Yet even more interesting is the popularity that Shyamalan himself has been receiving. He is a celebrity in his own right. Although not the first South Asian to break into mainstream films, Shyamalan is the first to gain significant name and personality recognition.

Why the rousing renown? Much of Shyamalan's success can be credited to his directing skills, namely to his extraordinary planning, unique angle shots and moving cinematography, and to his writing skills. After all, the this-changes-the-whole-movie twist at the end of The Sixth Sense proved one of the best in film history.

Perhaps the world sees in Shyamalan an ability to offer them something that they have been craving: logical spirituality. Unlike the myriad spiritual films before, which obviated spirituality and, by doing so, rendered it attractive only to those interested in thrills or who reveled in the paranormal, Shyamalan's films inextricably tie spirituality to everyday life. Consequently, he introduces spirituality to his audience in a manner

that makes sense to them, rendering it acceptable in their understanding of the meaning of life. Through this refreshing spiritual angle, he forges a personal connection with the masses.

Spirituality in The Sixth Sense and Unbreakable can be traced to Shyamalan's personal life. The early stages of his childhood read like that of most second-generation Hindus in America. Soon after Manoj Nettiyalu Shyamalan was born on August 6, 1970, in Pondicherry, Tamil Nadu, his parents immigrated to a suburb of Philadelphia. Sent to Catholic school as a means of acquiring discipline, throughout his childhood and adolescence Shyamalan struggled to balance Hinduism, the religion he practiced at home, and Christianity, the religion preached in school and in his environment at large. The struggle often left him feeling out of synch with his classmates, especially as teachers told him that those who were not baptized would go to hell. "I'd be like, 'I'm not baptized, so I guess I'll see you later,'" he recalls feeling. In another incident, he was made an example to other students for having received the highest grade in religion class. "The teacher was upset that I got the best grade and I wasn't

Catholic," he notes. In his teens, Shyamalan's interest in American Indian spirituality lead him to adopt his now popular name, "Night," the literal translation of shyamalan.

His spiritual exploration has clearly crept into the scripts of his blockbuster hits, The Sixth Sense and Unbreakable. The Sixth Sense centers on the life of young Cole Porter (Haley Joel Osment), who struggles with paranormal sense, namely the ability to see and to be physically/mentally affected by ghosts. Unable to understand her son's sixth sense, his mother (Tony Colette) grows apart from Cole, leaving the boy to share his fears with Dr. Malcom Crowe (Bruce Willis), a psychologist who has some problems of his own. Cole and Dr. Malcom find comfort in each other's loneliness and help each other with personal problems. The plot continues in what seems to be a predictable manner until a throughly surprising twist in the final scene. Without giving away the ending we may say that Dr. Crowe comes into a spiritual awakening of sorts and is able to resolve personal issues with his wife and his own soul at the same time.

Shyamalan's current film, Unbreakable, is rooted in the good-versus-evil plot of popular comic books and focuses on the life of David Dunn (Bruce Willis), a security guard who struggles with his failed marriage and almost nonexistent relationship with his son in center city Philadelphia. After emerging as the sole survivor from a terrible train accident, Dunn is contacted by Elijah Price (Samuel Jackson), a cartoonist who is every bit as physically frail as Dunn is strong. Eventually, Price coaxes Dunn into a spiritual awakening of his purpose in life, to be a hero. Once Dunn recognizes and accepts his spiritual value and identity, he is able to bring meaning and value to his life, to his family and to the world.

In order to understand the plot, purpose, and characters in The Sixth Sense and Unbreakable, Shyamalan requires that we realize and accept the spiritual facet of the films. This key may resonate strongly with Hindu audiences as it highlights the most integral aspect of Hinduism: that there is more to life than the physical plane, and that to understand life, one must view it through spiritual eyes. But the Hindu aspects do

not stop there. Shyamalan's work has been strongly influenced by many additional Hindu themes.

Both movies purport strongly to the Hindu theme of balance. In The Sixth Sense, balance, especially with regard to karma and retribution, is reflected in Cole's interaction with ghosts. He encounters spirits who appear to have died violently and to remain as ghosts because they are tied to unresolved personal circumstances on the earthly plane--intimating that their release from these karmas is necessary for evolution, even reincarnation, to proceed. Sensing his paranormal abilities, they solicit Cole's help to resolve their earthly issues. The theme of balance in both films points directly to another key facet of Hinduism: that we are all part of one balanced life force in which our actions have consequences.

As a second generation Hindu Indian American, I find it exciting that Shyamalan has introduced Hindu themes to the world in film and has solicited positive response. Perhaps through his work, such Hindu themes will become more

acceptable to those who had viewed them before as alien. Rumor has it that Steven Spielberg has asked him to write the script for the next Indiana Jones movie. Perhaps, as a Hindu, he can improve on the previous sequal's version, The Temple of Doom, criticized for its insensitive portrayal of Hindu Gods.

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