New Encyclopedia Unscrews The Inscrutable - Asian History
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The world is globalizing: TV shots of Armenian earthquake victims wrench hearts in Bombay; deforestation in Asia and Africa reduces the oxygen level in Armadillo, Texas; Tokyo bankrolls the US national debt and Beijing students rally around a Statue of Liberty in Tiananmen Square.

Asia is the largest and most populous of the seven continents, home of great religious civilizations and now a power broker in world economics. Oddly, it is still very much an enigma to most of the Western world. Yesterday, that was acceptable; today it's a handicap. The 4-volume, 1988 Encyclopedia of Asian History is The Asia Society's most recent contribution to help unravel the East for the West. Its publisher, Macmillan Publishing Company, sent HINDUISM TODAY a set. We scrutinized it, tested it and compared it entry for entry with the mighty standard of encyclopedias-the 30-volume Encyclopedia Britannica Number 3 released in 1980 at a cost of US$32 million. One logic would be: if the Encyclopedia of Asian History is covering 1/7th the globe and is as good as the Britannica, it should cost $4.6 million and be 1/7th as long, whereas it cost only $300,000 and is 1/20th the size. But the comparison, though worth making, is flawed. This new Asian encyclopedia is strictly history-oriented. In fact, that's its strength, not its weakness and why it can, in only four volumes, accomplish its task and claim its own distinguished niche as a resource tool. In net, it is unquestionably authoritative, current and a cache of historical facts, names, dates and places. Other features designed to adapt it for high school use-where study of Asia is increasingly being required are: large type, simple page design, 63 well-crafted original maps and a word-index.

"Some users of the work will no doubt object to the slighting of art, literature, and religion," admits project director Datus Smith. For example, we looked up Lord Ganesha, Lord Vishnu and the Chinese Goddess Kuan-yin and came up empty-handed. We called the encyclopedia's South Asia associate editor. Prof. Lelyveld, at Columbia University and asked for his explanation. He confirmed their strict editorial scope, "This is essentially an historical encyclopedia" and

recommended Macmillan's 1986 16-volume The Encyclopedia of Religion for art and religion "which has a very full article on Ganesha." But if you need data on small dynasties like the Indian Vakataka and Varman Dynasties or the Vietnamese Ngo Dynasty, don't look for them in other encyclopedias. Only the Encyclopedia of Asian History will serve you. Although China might win the best representation, India's coverage appears proportionate. And, refreshingly, one of the fullest entries is Women-detailing the modern feminine struggle for social equality within Asia's traditionally patriarchal society.

A few marginal criticisms: Some entries abort well before the 1988 publishing date-e.g., the article Vietnam ends in the year 1976, omitting a decade of vital history. And words like salvific, orthoprax and sapiential-though nuts scholars easily crack-will only tax and tire the lay user. And the photos, though excellent, are scarce.

A Bumpy Production Journey

On August 1, 1982, editors were 30,000 feet above the earth, excitedly en route to the first strategy meeting in New York, blithely unaware that trouble lurked below. Five thousand dollars had been promised by then-publisher McGraw-Hill, mostly to cover the meeting's travel expenses. According to Datus Smith, when the editors landed, "Alfred Prettyman [who first conceived the encyclopedia], told [everyone] with great embarrassment, there had been a change of heart in his publishing house..." Fortunately, "A friend of The Asia Society offered to advance the $5,000...Discussion began with Scribner's within 24 hours, and a publishing agreement was reached in four days."

Hundreds of distinguished contributors were recruited at 7.5 cents per word. Though article manuscripts started pouring in, further funding was still in the lurch and Scribner's $50,000 advance royalties were already used up. Datus Smith quickly wooed the National Endowment for the Humanities for $150,000 and procured $110,000 from other foundations. Then disaster struck again. Scribner's was sold to Macmillan, the project editor resigned, staff editors vanished and the entire cadre of copy editors faded from sight. It took a year and half to piece everything back together but finally the project coasted to a victorious 1988 release of what Library Journal calls a "first rate, professionally sound and invitingly handsome" resource. (Available from: Macmillan Library Sales, att: Scribner Dept., 866 Third Ave. N.Y., N.Y. 10022. Cost: $335.00 plus $6 shipping and

handling.)