modernity. But, when the videos are coupled with appropriate con-

and sadhu obsessed, instead of its true mixture of tradition and

The videos misguidedly portray all of India as religiously devout

issues present in India, such as the caste system, inter-religious

“Living with the Dead,” for example, explicates the controversy surround-

ing Ramnath, a decisively human side to the story, but fails to pro-

vide enough context to Indian and Hindu culture to allow students

to see and understand the larger picture. Brief explanations of sad-

hus’ concept of renunciation, enlightenment, spirituality, self-mor-
tification, and so forth, preferably with the aid of pictures, should

be sufficient for upper-level high school students and lower-level

college students. There are, indeed, some very useful resources in

print and on the internet for essential information and photo-

graphs, including Dolf Hartsuiker’s Sadhus: India’s Mystic Holy

Men, to assist teachers in presenting this material.

While it is not crucial that students view all three videos, a

broader picture begins to emerge when they do. Shown consecu-

tively, the three videos provide students with knowledge of the vari-

ety of lifestyles, objectives, and beliefs of sadhus. Some compar-

isons are straightforward—for instance, the austere living condi-

tions of Lotan Baba and Ramnath contrasted with Jayendra

Saraswati’s comfortable life in his large monastery/temple complex,

with millions of rupees being donated for building a university and

library in the name of his guru. Other comparisons are not so easy

demand more analysis from students. The concept of the worldly-

ly detachment of sadhus also is elucidated through all three videos.

Students cannot help but notice the attitudinal difference between

an accessible village sadhu such as Lotan Baba and the powerful

sadhus of the Kanchi temple of Jayendra Saraswati, who so strictly

abide by the rule that people cannot touch sadhus that they are fre-

quently flanked by several men acting literally as bodyguards.

Overall, Sadhus: India’s Holy Men is an excellent resource for

teachers of religion and Indian culture and society. The complexity

of some of the background necessary to view the videos and of the

religious concepts inherent in the stories makes the series better

suited to at least upper-level high school students. However, the

wonderful scenes of India’s urban and rural landscape throughout

the videos, in addition to those of religious worship, can speak

effectively even to younger students. Also touched on, especially in

“The Living God,” are several unconnected, but not irrelevant,

issues present in India, such as the caste system, inter-religious

conflict and violence, arranged marriages, and poverty. While this

inclusiveness can give the impression that the videos try to do too

much, the issues can serve as further topics for student discussion.

The primary flaw of the series is the failure to provide a more

complete picture of Indian society vis-à-vis religion and sadhus.

The videos misguidedly portray all of India as religiously devout

and sadhu obsessed, instead of its true mixture of tradition and

modernity. But, when the videos are coupled with appropriate con-
textual discussion of religious devotion and ritual, students are able

to understand the local significance and larger meaning of the reli-
gious acts highlighted in the videos. And because students easily

become engaged and interested in learning after witnessing the

intensity with which the sadhus treat their role as India’s religious

leaders, Sadhus is undoubtedly a real asset for Indian religion and
culture teachers in the pre-collegiate or college classroom.

JON ZELJO is the Chair of the History Department and Coordinator of the

Chinese Studies Program at Sidwell Friends School in Washington, DC,

and teaches courses on East Asia, modern China, and Asian religions.

A Voice from Heaven

Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan

Directed by Guiseppe Asaro

Produced by Guiseppe Asaro,

Alessandro Storza, Shafiq Sad-
diqui, and Vikas Bhushan, MD

2001. DVD. Color. 75 minutes.

Distributed by Winstar Home

Entertainment

Web site:

http://dvds.ontheweb.com

Crossmedia Communications

419 Park Avenue South

New York, NY 10016

A Voice from Heaven is a

music documentary that

provides a glimpse into the life of famed qawwali singer

Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan along with information about the music of

qawwali and the Sufi mystic tradition. Qawwali is a devotional

music performed by Muslims primarily in South Asia. A signifi-
cant expression of Sufism, it is believed to be a path for union with

the divine. Qawwali’s poetry is derived from mystic Sufi poets

such as Jalaluddin Rumi (1207–1273), and the qawwal (singer of

qawwali) is believed to convey the very essence of Sufi mysticism

through text and song. The vocal style is light classical in nature,

and requires intense improvisation, flexibility, and a thorough

knowledge of lyrical content. A rigorous and energetic perfor-

mance style is highly desired, and Nusrat, considered one of the

greatest performers in this genre, delivers accordingly.

The documentary begins by describing the qawwali perfor-

mance and its contexts in relation to the basic tenets of Sufi reli-
gious philosophy, all of which unfold through a number of brief

interviews. Interviewees include South Asian London DJs, record

producers, relatives, collaborators, and admirers of the genre and

of Nusrat. The broad range of interviews provides diverse and

interesting viewpoints, but several interviewees contribute little to


A Voice from Heaven

Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan

Directed by Guiseppe Asaro

Produced by Guiseppe Asaro,

Alessandro Storza, Shafiq Sad-
diqui, and Vikas Bhushan, MD

2001. DVD. Color. 75 minutes.

Distributed by Winstar Home

Entertainment

Web site:

http://dvds.ontheweb.com

Crossmedia Communications

419 Park Avenue South

New York, NY 10016

A Voice from Heaven is a

music documentary that

provides a glimpse into the life of famed qawwali singer

Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan along with information about the music of

qawwali and the Sufi mystic tradition. Qawwali is a devotional

music performed by Muslims primarily in South Asia. A signifi-
cant expression of Sufism, it is believed to be a path for union with

the divine. Qawwali’s poetry is derived from mystic Sufi poets

such as Jalaluddin Rumi (1207–1273), and the qawwal (singer of

qawwali) is believed to convey the very essence of Sufi mysticism

through text and song. The vocal style is light classical in nature,

and requires intense improvisation, flexibility, and a thorough

knowledge of lyrical content. A rigorous and energetic perfor-

mance style is highly desired, and Nusrat, considered one of the

greatest performers in this genre, delivers accordingly.

The documentary begins by describing the qawwali perfor-

mance and its contexts in relation to the basic tenets of Sufi reli-
gious philosophy, all of which unfold through a number of brief

interviews. Interviewees include South Asian London DJs, record

producers, relatives, collaborators, and admirers of the genre and

of Nusrat. The broad range of interviews provides diverse and

interesting viewpoints, but several interviewees contribute little to
the subject, and the film could do without them. Few scholars of qawwali are interviewed, however, although their commentary is excellent and informative.

After exploring the role of music among Sufis, the film addresses the often neglected but interesting role of women in qawwali, and includes some of the most poignant singing in the film, performed by several of Nusrat’s female students. An exploration of Nusrat’s family background presents his initial impetus for performing qawwali, and his significant public performances after the death of his father, who was also a qawwal. Nusrat is known outside of India and Pakistan primarily due to his association with popular music artists such as Peter Gabriel. A discussion of Nusrat’s “internationalization” also includes the controversy regarding use of his music in Hollywood film soundtracks. Nusrat is the most recognized and beloved qawwali singer, and his untimely death has left a void in the qawwali musical community. The film ends by introducing a possible successor, his nephew Rahat.

Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Rahat Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Nusrat’s nephew, and Farruck Fateh Ali Khan, Nusrat’s brother, provide music for the film. Although qawwali is played throughout the film, the variety of songs is limited and footage is drawn from only a few concerts. Using a select number of songs, however, does provide continuity for the film, and the cumulative effect makes an impact on the listener by the end of the documentary.

While the film is certainly appropriate for college, high school, and even middle school, both the content and the structure of the video require some preparation by the instructor, regardless of level. In terms of content, one unfortunate drawback is the film’s lack of emphasis on lyrics and poetry. Since the Sufi poetry is of primary importance, it would be highly beneficial to familiarize students with translations to illustrate the use of metaphor and depth of devotional expression. The technique used in formatting the documentary alternates short segments of concert footage and interviews, with overlying voice narration. The truncated concert clips, however, do not provide those unfamiliar with the genre to grasp an overall sense of the musical form, and students should listen to a qawwali song in its entirety.

This documentary is accessible to students with little or no familiarity with Islam, Sufism, or qawwali, but is equally interesting to those who are more knowledgeable. The narration is succinct and clear, and explains complex ideas in a straightforward manner that will provide abundant material for further classroom discussion.

**SUGGESTIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM**

- Discuss the role of women in Islam and in qawwali.

**SUGGESTED LISTENING**

- *Songs of the Mystics*, Abida Parveen (a well-respected female Sufi devotional singer), Navras NRCD 5505/6.
- *The Sabri Brothers—Greatest Hits*, Shanachie SHA 64090
- *Qawwali: Vocal Art of the Sufis*, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, JVC World Sounds, VICG 5030

**SUGGESTED READING**


**NATALIE SARRAZIN** is a Lecturer in Music and South Asian Studies at the University of Virginia. She holds a Ph.D. in Ethnomusicology from the University of Maryland and a Masters in Music Education from Johns Hopkins University.

---

**Kutiyattam (A CD-ROM)**

**Sanskrit Theater of India**

By Farley Richmond


Web site: www.press.umich.edu

Phone: 800-621-2736

This multimedia, interactive CD-ROM is a visually rich and appealing survey of the ancient South Indian theater of kutiyattam, associated with temples and religious ritual since the tenth century CE Special temple servant castes produce the dance-story performances that are considered to be visual sacrifices to the temple deity.

The main musical instruments are a special kind of drum with an elaborate repertoire, hand cymbals, and a small hand drum. After years of comparative research on performing arts in India, Richmond learned that kutiyattam is probably the only kind of performing art in India that still carefully follows the ancient Sanskrit treatise, the *Natyashastra*.

An unusual feature of kutiyattam is that actors playing male roles chant in Sanskrit, and while playing female roles they chant in Prakrit (also an ancient, classical language). The theatrically...