

FILM REVIEWS

Ancient India

DIRECTED BY BOB CARRUTHERS

1997. COLOR. 47 MINUTES. COLOR. VHS

PART OF A SERIES OF FILMS ON ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS

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About the time I read in *India Today* of the discovery of an ancient city under the waters of the Gulf of Cambay that may predate Harappa and Mohenjo Daro, I received a copy of the film *Ancient India* to review. From the title, I anticipated an opportunity to revisit scenes of the Indus Valley Civilization and possibly catch up on recent archaeological discoveries I may have missed. My first disappointment is that this film's title is misleading. Rather than exploring "Ancient India," which I would guess might include the subcontinent's pre-history or possibly events prior to the Gupta Era (even A. L. Basham stopped before the appearance of Islam), I soon discovered that the film covers an assortment of scenes and artifacts that reach right into the Mughal Period. Rather than pre-

history, this film mostly deals with what is sometimes called "above ground archaeology," that is, ruins and monuments.

There is a discernable theme that provides some structure for the succession of images and topics. It has to do with continuities; elements of aesthetics and style, whose origins, the film implies, are grounded in India's extensive past but which still find expression in contemporary society. Unfortunately, to establish the theme of continuity, the narrative begins and ends with snake charmers and bazaar scenes, and the narrator refers at the outset to the "mystical and mysterious." The negative impact of such trite exotica is exacerbated by skimming the jacket cover where Harappa, Mauryan, and Mughal are all misspelled. That blurb also promises scholars to "provide insight into a culture that remains vibrant today."

Compounding the film's misleading title is the fact that the single view we get of the Indus Valley Civilization is one still, sepia-colored shot of Mohenjodaro featuring the ruins of a Buddhist stupa and the fleeting glimpse of a water buffalo from a single seal. Absent are scenes of the great baths or views of impressive brick work or even a mention of the undeciphered Indus script. The narrative erroneously locates all the archeological evidence of this civilization in Pakistan and Afghanistan, ignoring the existence of sites in India such as Dholavira in Gujarat.

To compensate for the absence of truly "ancient" material, while the narrator introduces the "Aryan Invasion" and describes the fall of the Indus Valley cities, the views on the screen are either of rustic fields of wind-blown grain or what appear to be Kushan-era ruins. To compound this anachronism, we also get a view of what appears to be a British-era pen and ink drawing of a Hindu temple with columns and what appears to be a generic Hindu deity.

The film's handling of the transition from the Indus Valley to later Hinduism is particularly simplistic and misleading. No questions are raised as to the validity of the invasion thesis; the narrative accepts that the Aryans "swept in" and "conquered." In addition to the implication that the cities fell as a result, all too quickly religious practice is described as being "very close to modern Hinduism." As for the origins and nature of the caste system, one of the less successful scholars explains that occupations were passed from father to son, and people "just fell into compartments" because there were no "inter-caste marriages." His generalizations become outright distortions when he explains that Brahmins rose to prominence by taking over all the household religious functions that previously were conducted by women.

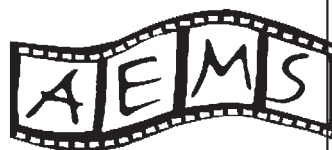
The film proceeds with the story of the Buddha and the growth of monastic communities and describes Asoka's conversion to *dharma* and the distribution of his edict pillars. This section is supported by a number of fine Buddha images in freestanding statues, details from stele, and cave paintings from Ajanta. Curiously, there are no Gandharan examples which would build naturally on the obligatory inclusion of Alexander's invasion.

Suddenly, the narrative makes a leap to the Rajput kingdoms and on to Khajuraho (Madhya Pradesh) and sex. Thanks to a rather convoluted attempt to explain the sexually explicit images that populate the Khajuraho temple, there is a welcome digression dealing

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with dance and song. Leyla Sampasar, described as a “traditional dance instructor,” is one of the film’s bright spots discoursing articulately on the meaning of the dance and the quest of the human soul for fulfillment. While she mentions the existence throughout India of a variety of schools and forms of dance, the film restricts itself to one rather mundane North India example.

With the rise and spread of Islam, the film noticeably changes its pace to explore two Delhi sites in considerable detail. The first is the Qutb Minar and its mosque, the oldest in South Asia. The close-up shots of the Minar since its restoration are clear and precise, providing visual detail that is probably not accessible to the usual tourist. Then the camera lens is turned on the adjoining mosque and the pillars of the Hindu temple that was plundered to build it. For nearly five minutes, we view details of stone pillars and screens and decorative elements in the form of calligraphy, vines, flowers, and geometrical designs. The purpose is to demonstrate how Hindu stone carvers used their skills to build a house of worship for their Muslim overlords. While the point is valid and supports the continuity theme, this lengthy segment would likely serve an art history class better than the general audience targeted up to this point.

The second site which holds the camera for a substantial amount of time is the ruins of Tughlukabad. This fortress city was built by one of several Turkish Mongol dynasties. Called the Slave Dynasties, this one ruled from 1320 until Timur plundered and destroyed the area in 1398. The ruins appear immense, massive, and evocative. The deserted site includes extensive and massive fortress walls, interior dry reservoirs, vacant roads, tombs, and the remnants of a substantial citadel. Having never visited this site, I was impressed, but am not at all sure why the Tughluk capital attracted the filmmaker’s attention. Built rapidly and to protect the Delhi Sultans from further Mongol incursion, its impressive bulk suggests the power these Muslim rulers wielded, but the narrative never mentions buildings in the Indo-

Islamic style left by Feroz Shah (1351–88), whose building program bankrupted the kingdom.

The earlier rapid pace resumes with Babur’s preoccupation with gardens and brief mention of his fellow Mughals. This most important Muslim dynasty comes almost as a footnote, portrayed by means of details from a few very lovely miniature paintings. Then suddenly, a wrap-up by two of the guest scholars returns to the question of continuities, but the film manages to end with scenes of snakes, a bazaar, and a shot to the Taj Mahal for good measure.

Historian Sunil Kumar and dance instructor Leyla Sampasar served to raise the film momentarily above the trite and hurried with perceptive comments. And some of the footage, especially that dealing with Islamic-era architectural detail, is valuable. But, would I purchase this film for use in a classroom? I think not. While the film is apparently meant to introduce South Asia to students who have little or no background on the topic, the extensive segment that focuses on floral and geometric details would provide youngsters with too much opportunity to cause all sorts of mischief in a darkened classroom. These same segments assume more background on the part of the audience than the earlier chronological survey portion. An art history teacher would find some clips from this film that would be of value, but I conclude that this film would be most appropriate for use in an art museum to introduce a general audience to premodern South Asia as preparation for a gallery tour featuring artifacts portraying the same period. ■

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