

FILM REVIEWS

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Editor's Note: The first two videos are from the Long Search series, a set of thirteen videos on world religion.

Hinduism

330 Million Gods

BY PETER MONTAGNON

FROM THE BBC THE LONG SEARCH SERIES. 1977

52 MINUTES

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This second episode of the widely acclaimed BBC Long Search series serves as an excellent introduction to the basics of Hindu life that is suitable for both high school and introductory college courses.

Beautifully filmed in Benares and in a small village in northern Bihar, this video is organized by the vast number of deities in the Hindu pantheon, ultimately arguing that, for most devout Hindus today, each deity represents but a single aspect of the one supreme reality or truth. The bulk of the film focuses on the village and its rich devotional life, paying particular attention to the many ways in which the festival of Sarasvatī, the goddess of learning, is celebrated in the village's four schools. Ronald Eyre, the "ordinary man" who serves as commentator for the entire Long Search series, often seems most fascinated by the villagers' worship of multiple gods. At one effective juncture, for example, he notes a Vaisnava performer singing a song in praise of Siva in the context of the festival dedicated to Sarasvatī. Also effective is the visual juxtaposition of a stone Siva *linga* (abstract symbol of Siva) in the relatively lifeless setting of a Western museum alongside a similar *linga* being worshipped with song, chant, incense, fire and ritual in the village temple.

With a minimum of comment and explanation, some of the fundamentals of a Hindu worldview are addressed: karma and rebirth, the joint family, caste, and the stages of life. Particularly compelling is the treatment of the village "Mahatma" or "Great Soul," a former high court lawyer who has renounced all ties to wealth, social position, and family in order to live an ascetic life in pursuit of spiritual liberation. While Eyre asks a few pointed questions of his informants, his presence is generally less intrusive than

in other segments of the series; the audience is simply allowed to watch and absorb the rich visual imagery of the celebration of the goddess, the worship in the village temple, the procession of a corpse through the village, and a widow spending her days in study and meditation. The lack of commentary allows the viewer to enter into the world of the village, and is bound, in turn, to generate many questions for further discussion in class.

The only significant shortcoming of this film is its complete reliance on Hindu "informants" who speak English and who are, to varying degrees, Westernized. Eyre's host in the Biharī village, for example, is a professor of philosophy at a British university who grew up in that village but left long ago. While his comments do provide a valuable window onto village life and the ways in which that life is rapidly changing, he often adopts an apologetic tone toward certain Hindu ideas and practices, interpreting them through the lens of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century neo-Hindu reformulations of tradition. The conclusion reached above regarding the essential unity behind Hinduism's "330 million gods," for example, is one indication of such a bias on the part of Eyre's interpreters. The problem becomes acutely apparent when the discussion turns to the nature of Hindu images. Ignoring hundreds of years of Hindu theological commentary to the contrary, both the philosophy professor and Eyre's tourist guide in Benares insist that such images are merely "symbols" of the divine, not the living presence of the deity itself. This sort of commentary perhaps reaches its nadir when Eyre asserts that Hindu images are merely "educational toys," meant to point one in the direction of the divine but nothing more. Had Eyre interviewed devout Hindus in the village or in Benares who were less familiar with reformist and heavily intellectualized answers to the Christian charge of Hindu idolatry, surely all the talk would not have been of mere "symbols."

This reliance on English-speaking Hindus to speak for the tradition as a whole does not, however, overly detract from the value of the film for an introductory course on world religions, religions of Asia, or Hinduism at either the high school or college level. In the space of less than an hour, students see Hindu notions of deity, caste, life stage, and karma in practice, as actually lived by villagers and urban worshippers alike. ■

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