

Sadhus: India's Holy Men (3 films)

The Rolling Saint (52 min.)

The Living God (52 min.)

Living with the Dead (52 min.)

1995. VHS. Color.

A Bedi Films/Denis Whyte Films Production for BBC TV
Produced by Denis Whyte

Canal Plus, Premiere; Multicultural Programmes Department, BBC
<http://www.bediji.com/filmographysocll.html>



From the film "The Rolling Saint." Lotan Baba meditating in his village shrine.

Courtesy of R. Bedi/Bedi Films.

How would your students respond to dramatic images of a man who, after standing in place for seven years, rolls his body 2,500 miles through busy streets, over rough roads, and up mountains to manifest religious devotion? Or of a living man revered as a god by several hundred million people? Or of another man who lives and meditates in Hindu cremation grounds and eats human flesh when the urge overtakes him, disregarding all social and religious rules regarding purity? These are the absorbing stories contained in the three-part video series titled *Sadhus: India's Holy Men*. Even for sophisticated students with knowledge of other peoples and cultures, these stories of Hindu holy men in contemporary India are remarkable and sometimes fantastic. Students are given a rare opportunity to see in action the disparate group of holy men in India, and, almost without exception, are eager to engage in lively discussion about various issues raised such as practice, devotion, and the concept of religious "leaders."

The first video in the series, titled "The Rolling Saint," is, perhaps, the best told of the three. It is a seamless chronicle of Lotan Baba's 2,500-mile journey from his village in western India, where he is the head of the village temple, to a religious shrine in north-west India. Of course, pilgrimages to religious sites are undertaken every day in India. What makes Lotan Baba's trip so unique is the fact that he will *roll* the entire way, including the last leg which is up winding mountain roads. His reason for undergoing such an effort? People are losing values and there is too much violence in society, he says, and his position as a sadhu obligates him, and gives him the strength, to perform such a mission for the unity of the country and harmony of the people. He makes it to the shrine, along with his team of devotees who have helped organize the trip, but not without sores and cuts, sickness, exhaustion, inclement weather, and conflict. Initially, students see Lotan Baba's act as too extreme, and perhaps even foolish. But by the end of the journey,

and with some reflection, students typically are in awe and drawn to his inner strength, discipline, and single-mindedness.

Part two of the series, titled "The Living God," concentrates on Jayendra Saraswati, head of one of the oldest and most important temples in South India. This story is somewhat more difficult for students to follow: the video highlights several different people at the temple, all with seemingly similar names and titles, and the temple organization is a story within the story. But, there are incredible scenes of devotion; for example, there are impressive lines of Hindus waiting just to catch a glimpse of Jayendra Saraswati. In an opening interview, a couple who attends the temple say, "When he sees me, looks at me, some kind of electricity goes through me," and "I feel he is God."

Ramnath, the focus of the third part, titled "Living with the Dead," became a sadhu in the rare *aghori* sect because he "wanted a challenge." Worshipping at the cremation ground and owning only a bowl made out of a human skull, the aghori defies normal social and even religious convention. But to an aghori, nothing is profane. Nothing makes this more clear than when Ramnath eats human flesh from a burning corpse. To Ramnath, perhaps, being extreme is more attractive than being disciplined. Eventually, he embarks on a journey that includes a trip to Calcutta and its "red-light district," which he defends by maintaining the prostitutes are happy to meet a sadhu. "Everybody looks down on them," he says, "but I call them Mother and Sister." Ramnath also makes the decision to break a sadhu vow and visit his family (something inside has brought him home, he



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explains). It is an emotional visit, but an inappropriate one for a sadhu and leads his guru to assert that Ramnath is headed into “darkness.”

In addition to an understanding of Hinduism, some background on sadhus is necessary for students to get the most from the videos. For instance, the idea, and indeed the controversy, that a sadhu may have flaws isn’t something that the video series specifically discusses. The fact is, many Indians are skeptical of the authenticity of some sadhus and find them suspect. “Living with the Dead,” for example, explicates the controversy surrounding Ramnath, a decisively human side to the story, but fails to provide enough context to Indian and Hindu culture to allow students to see and understand the larger picture. Brief explanations of sadhus’ concept of renunciation, enlightenment, spirituality, self-mortification, 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 photographs, 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 consecutively, the three videos provide students with knowledge of the variety of lifestyles, objectives, and beliefs of sadhus. Some comparisons are straightforward—for instance, the austere living conditions 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 and demand more analysis from students. The concept of the worldly 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 frequently 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 religious 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. ■

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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 significant 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 performance style is highly desired, and Nusrat, considered one of the greatest performers in this genre, delivers accordingly.

The documentary begins by describing the *qawwali* performance and its contexts in relation to the basic tenets of Sufi religious 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