



Screen shot of an opening scene from *The Story of India*. ©2008 Maya Vision International, Ltd.

The Story of India

WRITTEN AND PRESENTED BY MICHAEL WOOD

DIRECTED BY JEREMY JEFF

MAYA VISIONS INTERNATIONAL, 2009

360 MINUTES ON 2 DISCS, DVD

Reviewed by Marc Jason Gilbert

For almost two decades, celebrity anthropologist Michael Wood has developed lavishly produced video documentaries exploring the world's civilizations. In each, the slender, ebullient Wood, rarely off center screen, climbs ruins, rides trains, and sails the seas while attempting to provide sweeping, thematically comprehensive overviews based on reasonably up-to-date scholarship. These video essays are presented with an unjustified "you heard it here first" breathlessness that knowledgeable viewers find grating, but novices cannot help but find engaging. These works usually are accompanied by a "companion" print publication.

Wood visited the subcontinent of India in a segment of his five part series *Legacy: The Origins of Civilization* (originally broadcast in 1992). However, *The Story of India* (a six-part series first shown by the British Broadcasting System in 2007 and by the Public Broadcasting System in 2009) is a far superior work. Its length (six hours as opposed to one) allows more meaningful discussion, while offering a little less Wood in the frame. *The Story of India's* DVD companion print publication, not under review here, was published under the same title by BBC Books in 2007.



Episode 6: Freedom, "The Indian Mutiny." Left to right: Michael Wood, historian, Mahood Farooqi, and William Dalrymple, the author of *The Last Mughal*.
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The Public Broadcasting System is marketing *The Story of India* to educators as an introduction to Indian history and, in the main, it is well they should. *The Story of India* is a never-boring, though necessarily reified sojourn across the subcontinent through six commonly accepted periods of Indian history. In the first segment, labeled "Beginnings," Wood dabbles in DNA and climate science simplistically, but with little harm when explicating Indian history from the Stone Age to the Iron Age. "*The Power of Ideas*" follows, which focuses on the life of the Buddha. In "*Spice Routes and Silk Roads*," the subsequent acceleration of long-distance trade by sea with the Roman Empire and along the Silk Road is traced effectively, while "*The Golden Age*" examines the great scientific achievements of the imperial Guptas and the glories of the seaborne empire of the Cholas. The arrival and climax of Islam in India is addressed in a section entitled "*The Meeting of Two Oceans*," which brings the story up to 1700. The final section, "*Freedom*," examines the colonial period and the Indian nationalist movement to the subcontinent's partition at independence in 1947.

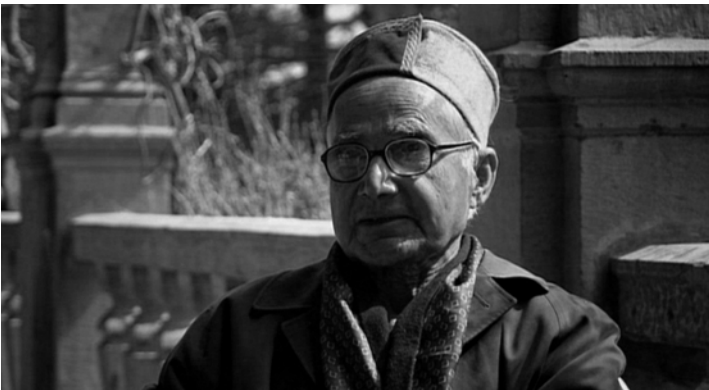
Throughout each of these epochs, Wood does no great violence to any of the subcontinent's traditions. For example, his treatment of the controversial "Aryan invasion thesis" (a term he avoids using) is mainstream, and educators will find Wood's defense of the standard view extremely useful (it is offered via an interactive "Program Response" blog at http://www.pbs.org/thestoryofindia/ask/answers_1.html). *The Story of India* also offers a wide range of indigenous voices (if not of the masses which Wood pointedly remarks upon, but from whom we hear very little). New to Wood's second encounter with South Asia are brief samplings from Indian cinema, ranging from the very old (*Light of Asia*, 1925) to the relatively new (*Asoka*, 2001). Some of these clips work well, and others call out for explication they do not receive. There is one egregious coeducational bathing scene (from *Asoka*) that may be much tamer (and classroom-safe) than some other illustrations of the *Kama Sutra* it is intended to illuminate, but even those who can appreciate the passionate, if chaste, glances of Bollywood actors will find this scene so silly in this context as to guarantee giggles among viewers, young and old.

As in *Legacy*, *The Story of India* features vignettes that are used to put flesh on the grand narrative. These are often well chosen, such as glimpses into the imperial lives of Asoka, Kanishka, the Emperor Akbar, the Orientalist Charles "Hindoo" Stuart and Allan Octavian Hume—the latter referenced as if no one has ever known that an Englishman, Hume, served alongside others as a midwife to the Indian nationalist movement.

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Prakash Tandon. ©2008 Maya Vision International, Ltd.



S. L. Malhotra. ©2008 Maya Vision International, Ltd.

Many of these vignettes are in the form of interviews with engaging experts, including well-respected senior historians S. L. Malhotra, Irfan Habib, and the late and much-beloved writer, Prakash Tandon, but these encounters are often edited in a way that squanders the opportunity they might offer for clear in-depth analysis. Tandon's interview is limited to a veiled remark about Nehru's self-confidence and a mere statement that Gandhi was a "remarkable man," no more. A Sikh discusses his religion's proscription against cutting the hair and the four ritual adornments central to the performance of his faith, but no effort is made to explain the divinely syncretic aspect of this proscription, or that the adornments reflect the militancy that arose as a result of Mughal religious persecution. Fortunately, Mridula Mukherjee of Jawaharlal Nehru University is given the opportunity to explain how forms of administration introduced by the British, such as the modern census, served to divide Indians. She also demonstrates how, since independence, South Asians suffer from the continued use of these instruments of "modernity," thus providing a clear introduction to the concept of post-coloniality. There are many other eminently teachable moments as this; one just wishes there were fewer unteachable ones, such as the prolonged discussion of the Emperor Akbar's birth horoscope.

Educators considering watching *The Story of India* as preparation or classroom tool need to be aware of several of its facets and quirks. Though Wood frequently raises the issue of the seemingly endless number of Hindu gods and notes that devotion to the Lord Shiva is particularly popular in the South, he does not attempt to enlighten his audience on the meaning of these 330 million manifestations of the divine in Hindu theology, nor does he examine its regionalized aspects. Further, artists' reconstructions are few and very far between. When they do appear, it is usually for less than two seconds. Instructors need

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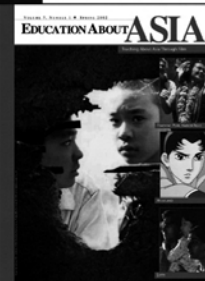
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to show the film not only with the remote control firmly in hand, but also with a finger above the pause button. Often, the viewer is asked to look at medieval or modern sites and imagine what they must have looked like centuries before, though ample reconstructions and other images of the older sites are readily available.

Many monument sites and people appear without adequate establishing shots or labeling. Much of the rich photography—color saturated and employing ultra wide-angle lenses—offer less definition than is optimum, and the camera often flies above terrain that is gorgeous but unidentified.

The narrative is also punctuated by references to items, historical sites, and people that student-viewers are unlikely to know. Wood refers to the “vernacular press” and at least twice refers to “Tamburlaine” (Timur). V. S. Naipaul’s phrase “a million mutinies now,” calls attention to social unrest in India today as potentially greater than that which led to the Great Rebellion or Indian Mutiny in 1857. It is casually evoked without attribution or appropriate context. The few “extra features” are not very valuable, and the best are featured among more valuable resources available under the “For Teachers” tab at the Public Broadcasting System’s open-access Web site, alongside some segments of the film presented as free lesson plans (see <http://www.pbs.org/thestoryofindia/> and <http://www.pbs.org/engage/blog/five-good-questions-story-indias-michael-wood>).

Yet, Wood’s narrative is as invariably sparkling as his effervescent on-screen persona. While no documentary has yet to offer a “fair and balanced” view of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb (Alamgir I), Wood makes an effort to contextualize this ruler’s Islamist views. Wood’s clumsy portrait of Jinnah at least rises above the “Jinnah as Judas” image familiar to viewers of the film *Gandhi* (1982). The treatment of Hindu-Muslim relations wisely and effectively emphasizes both their perceived common bonds and their perceived differences against a constantly shifting political scene. Wood gives extremely short shrift to the claim recently revived by British imperial apologists that the British East India Company (EIC) was solely interested in trade; dominion was forced upon it by events beyond its control in Europe and India, and was thus acquired in “a fit of absence of mind.” Wood begs to differ with this

assessment, which he illustrates through EIC ledgers of growing profit after the conquest of Bengal. Such proofs are not in themselves convincing, but in an era of Euro-American commentators touting that “empire is good for you,” Wood may believe that a little ham-fisted debunking may go a long way to illuminate how empires based on free trade do not necessarily promote free markets or the cause of freedom.

The Story of India has other virtues. The narrative’s chief strength may be its treatment of South India throughout Indian history, of the Kushans of the North, and also the role of Sufism from medieval to modern times. These topics often receive insufficient attention in commonly used textbooks, let alone cinematic surveys such as this. Even the film’s greatest weakness reveals its ultimate value. This story of India stops in 1947 with a cursory and uneven discussion of the independence movement, but this treatment is partially redeemed at the last moment by a recounting by still-living participants of an act of grace during the horrors of India’s partition. This account demonstrates the ability of human beings to rise above fear and intolerance amidst their darkest hour. It is a tale that perfectly encapsulates the complexities and ambiguities of Indian civilization, which has an enormous capacity for synthesis, but this by itself does not automatically produce righteousness, let alone equality, nor does it engender the complete surrender or hybridization of cultural identity. Wood’s *Story of India* is, above all, an exploration of the failures and successes resulting from the past efforts of Indians to negotiate the spaces at the extremes of and in between equality and inequality, righteousness and self-righteousness, and competing local and global identities. Wood presents this familiar thesis as a hopeful one, and for that alone, it will be a welcome as well as useful resource for courses addressing not only the history of South Asia, but also the issues of civility and cross-cultural encounters and exchanges in world history. ■

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