**HINDUISM FILM RECOMMENDATIONS**

**FROM INDOLOGY LIST**

September 2012

Compiled by Vanessa R. Sasson

**James Fitzgerald**

A wonderful classic is **“The God with a Green Face”** which centers upon a Kathakali performance of the Ramayana in Kerala. Besides providing many insights into the training and techniques of this performance tradition, the film provides one of the most compelling representations of bhakti on the visual record, especially in the look on the face of the young tabla player in the course of the performance. Unfortunately, copies of the film are now scarce (and in bad shape) and something needs to be done to digitize a decent copy before they have all disappeared. (Sorry to say I do not have one.) Many years ago I successfully tracked down the man who made the film, but he had no copies and no longer knew where any might be.

**Horacio Francisco Arganis Juárez**

Scientific Verification of Vedic Knowledge in Hinduism 1, 2, and 3

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rY4Q2xx7BTc>

**Matthew Kapstein**

**Dans les brumes de Majuli:** About the monastic communities in Assam founded by the 15th c. bhakti teacher Sankaradeva is excellent, though I don't know if an English version is yet available.  
  
**Between the Lines:** A superb documentary on the hijras (transvestites and eunuchs) of the Bombay area, with some very good coverage of the religious aspects of their world  
  
**Staal's Altar of Fire:** Now almost 40 years old, may still be recommended to introduce aspects of Brahmanical traditions.

**Axel Michaels**

2005    *Handling Death. The Dynamics of Death and Ancestor Rituals Among the Newars of Bhaktapur, Nepal*. With Contributions by Johanna Buss and Nutan Sharma and a Film on DVD by Christian Bau*.* Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag (Ethno-Indology; 3).

2008 *Growing Up – Hindu and Buddhist Initiation Rituals among Newar Children in Bhaktapur, Nepal.* With a Film on DVD by Christian Bau*.* Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag (Ethno-Indology; 6).

forthc (2012):  *Getting Married Hindu and Buddhist Marriage Rituals Among the Newars of Bhaktapur and Patan, Nepal.*With Contributions by, Manik Bajracacharya, Christiane Brosius and Tessa Pariyar and a Film on DVD by Christian Bau*.* Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag (Ethno-Indology; 13).

**Michael Slouber**

\***The Story of India**\* is a nice series. I have not used it in classes, but enjoyed it very much. <http://www.pbs.org/thestoryofindia/>.

**John William Nemec**

There is also the film on Tantra recommended by James Mallinson on this list some time ago. I bought that film and found it enthralling, though the scene involving cannibalism was haunting.

**Raphaël Voix**

Here are two films that I use quite often in the introductory courses I teach on Hinduism :

[The Wages of Action, Religion in a Hindu village](http://www.southasia.wisc.edu/films/wages.html), a great film on popular Hinduism in a village of Uttar Pradesh. It is easily divided into different section, which is useful when teaching. The classical (and marvelous) Satyajit Ray's [Devi, The Godess](http://www.satyajitray.org/films/devi.htm), that find it very good to illustrate *darsana*.

**Tatiana Oranskaia**

Sorry if the film "**Vari - an Indian Pilgrimage**" by the great ethnologist Guenther Sontheimer and Henning Stegmueller (1989 <http://www.onlinefilm.org/de_DE/film/51112>) has already been mentioned during this exchange of information.

It is one of the most fascinating and moving - in the best sense of the word - documentaries I have ever seen.

**Victoria Lysenko**

I would like to mention a very good film series (12 documentaries) in English and French entitled **L'Inde des jours & des hommes/ Daily life & people in India**.

A golden mine of visual information about India and Hinduism!

**Herman Tull**

This discussion, I am afraid, reveals that we a bit out of touch. Along those lines, I was trying to remember the name "Forest of Bliss," and so did a quick google search for "Varanasi documentaries." A stunning array of films appeared, many available on you tube, and many apparently made by young film makers.

Also, not on the plane of a documentary, but the most successful film showing I ever had in a South Asian studies class was the 1975 film "**Jai Santoshi Maa**." I intended to show just a bit of it, but the students were captivated, and so we watched the entire film. It also led to a tremendous discussion...

**Lance Nelson**

One of my favorites, though now a tad dated, is the BBC film "**The Fourth Stage**," which documents the deliberations of a retired Deccan Herald editor as he tries to decide whether he should follow a family tradition and take samnyasa in his old age. Included is his pilgrimage to Srngeri (where he has an interview the Sankaracarya) and Banaras (where he observes a ritual initiation into samnyasa), as well as a fascinating discussion with his family ("We're all against your idea!). Now available on DVD. See:

<http://www.southasia.wisc.edu/films/fourth.html>

**Elizabeth M. Rohlman**

I'd recommend two trilogies that I've used very successfully:

1. **Sadhus: India's Holy Men** (Films for the Humanities & Sciences, 1995). I break the trilogy up and use it across three different courses, but they would certainly work well in a single introductory course.

2. **Pleasing God** (Harvard Films, 1985) includes three installments: "Loving Krishna," "Sons of Siva," and "Serpent Mother." The three films are not of equal quality (Loving Krishna is definitely the best of the lot). But I like that they are all shot in the same Bengali village, and so give a snapshot of three different bhakta communities in the same regional and cultural context.

**Artur Karp**

Not a film --- but a novel about the Indian film industry and its super-heroes. Contains six mock screenplays.

Shashi Tharoor's "Show Business".

<http://tinyurl.com/8e8dbfx>

**Tim Cahill**

A list of about 30 films with short descriptions can be found here: <http://www.montclair.edu/RISA/biblio/b-filmSurveyCrs.html>

These were compiled by Jack E. Llewellyn, Missouri State University, from contributions to the Religions in South Asia list.

Below, is the list copied directly from the website:

**Adi Shankaracharya**, 1983  
Synopsis from imdb:  
The first and only Indian movie to be made in Sanskrit. The movie follows the life and times of Sankara. 130 minutes.

**Agni Varsha**, 2002  
Snippet from the imdb synospsis:  
This sets off an irrevocable chain of events that lead to Aravasu losing his love, Paravasu desecrating the great sacrifice, the creation of a demon and the deaths of Yavakri and Raibhya. Finally, the purity of Arvasu and Nittilai's love brings salvation to the land. This film is adapted from the play The Fire and the Rain by one of India's foremost playwrights, Girish Karnad. The story is derived from the myth of Yavakri, which is a part of the great Indian epic, the Mahabharata. 126 minutes.

**Altar of Fire**, 1976. Available from der.org.  
From the der Website:  
This film records a 12 day ritual performed by Mambudiri Brahmins in Kerala, southwest India, in April 1975. 58 minutes.

**Amar, Akbar, Anthony,** 1977  
Synopsis from imdb:  
Three brothers are separated and united after many years - one is brought up a Hindu, another a Muslim and the last (and most memorable) a Christian. Hilarity and adventure ensues. 184 minutes.

**Devi**, 1960. Directed by Satyajit Ray.  
Synopsis from imdb:  
Devi focuses on a young woman, who is deemed a goddess when her father-in-law, a rich feudal landlord, envisions her as the Goddess Kali. 93 minutes.

**Dharmatma**, 1935  
Christian Novetzke reports that this film is ostensibly about the Marathi Varkari sant Eknath (16th Century), but with a heavy Gandhian critique of casteism. 152 minutes.

**Eklavya**, 2007. George Pati reports using this to illustrate problems with dharma.  
Synopsis from imdb:  
As the kingdom of Devigarh comes apart at the seams, an aging bodyguard attempts to protect the Royal Family, as well as keep its darkest secrets from ever coming to light. 105 minutes.

Father, Son, and Holy War. Directed by Anand Patwardhan. Mackenzie Brown uses it "in relation to contemporary Hindutva politics."  
Documentary, 120 minutes.

**Fire**. Directed by Deepa Mehta. Mackenzie Brown uses it "in conjunction with the Ramayana and the contemporary issue of colonialism, suttee, etc."  
Snippet from the imdb synospsis:  
At first glance, you see a happy middle-class family going through the normal paces of everyday life. However, as the layers are slowly peeled back, we find a simmering cauldron of discontent within the family, with almost every family member living a lie. 104 minutes.

**Forest of Bliss**, 1986

Bruce Sullivan says "No narration, it's like being parachuted into Benares by the ghats and learning by observation."  
Documentary about life and death in Varanasi. 90 minutes.

**Great Tales in Asian Art**, 1995

Phyllis Herman uses "the sections on the Ramayana and on the Gita Govinda."  
From amazon.com:  
Filmed on location, four beloved stories of India, Indonesia, Korea and Japan are told through the masterpieces of visual art and the stirring performances these tales have inspired for centuries. The Ramayana, the epic adventure of India’s legendary hero, is illustrated with Indonesian sculpture and Javanese shadow play. In the Korean Masked Dance Drama, told by actors wearing audaciously conceived masks, social satire is masked by bold humor and comic dance. Gita Govinda, India’s great erotic poem, is interpreted by a beautiful dancer and celebrated in lyrical painted images. In The Tale of Genji, the amorous adventures of Prince Genji are told by a Japanese woman in period costume, as colorful paintings from scrolls and screens illustrate Japan’s most famous romantic novel. Combining the visual arts with performance in a new original format, Great Tales in Asian Art is an imaginative and entertaining introduction to the art of Asia. 82 minutes.

**Guide,** 1965  
Snippet from the imbd synopsis:  
He is mistaken for a Saint, and asked to preside over a temple in a region that is stricken by severe drought. Raju must offer prayers for rain and appease the people, or else they will expose him for fooling them. The question remains will he succeed in conning devotees that have come far and wide to watch him perform a miracle? 183 minutes, with a U. S. A. version, 120 minutes.

**Jai Santoshi Ma**, 1975  
Snippet from the imbd synopsis:  
She refuses to believe her husband is dead, also refuses to behave like a widow, and steadfastly starts sixteen weeks of fasting and devotion to appease Devi Maa Santoshi - little knowing that her very own plight is due to three jealous Devi Maa's' - Gauri, Lakshmi, and Parvati - the spouses of Bhagwan Shri Brahmaji, Vishnuji, and Shivji - and there is no power on Earth that can save her from their wrath. 145 minutes.

**Louis Theroux's Weird Weekends**. Episode about going to India in search of enlightenment. Clips available on YouTube.

**Loving Krishna**, 1985. Available from der.org.  
From the der Website:  
Loving Krishna is about the worship of Krishna and the meaning of devotion. It explores the rural and urban character of the town of Vishnapur in West Bengal by examining the royal past, everyday life, work in traditional arts and crafts, bazaar exchange, and sacred rituals and festivals. Public and private devotional life is represented by detailed visual narratives of the Chariot Journey of Krishna, celebrated by the whole town, and the Birthday Festival commemorated on a much smaller scale of intimate family worship. 37 minutes.

**Mahabharata**. Available from nehaflix.com.  
Television serial of the epic that ran in 94 45-minute episodes. Originally aired from 1988 to 1990.

**The Mahabharata**. 1989. Written by Peter Brook, et al. Ellen Goldberg shows the Bhagavadgita portion and the dice scene.  
Originally in a 318 minute version (6 55-episodes), there is also a 171-minute U. S. A. theatrical version.

**Masala**, 1991.  
Synopsis from imdb:  
Five years ago, under the watchful eye of the great god Krishna, a plane of Indians returning to the homeland exploded in Canadian skies. A mortal also named Krishna lost his family in that crash. In the present, this mortal Krishna has found himself a former heroin addict with a nebulous past, and has returned to his mother's family: an aunt who married a sari dealer. He becomes involved in their lives, as they deal with their cultural identity with a fawning Canada, eager to patronize their Indian subjects when convenient, but willing to be aggressive when they need to, as when Mr. Tikkoo wants to keep a rare stamp he found for his collection but which the Canadian authorities determine is of historical interest. In all of this, the mighty god Krishna moves, increasingly troubled by his lack of relevancy in this alien land. 106 minutes.

**Naked in Ashes**, 2005.  
Documentary on sadhus at the Kumbh Mela. 103 minutes.

**Nastik**. 1954.

**Puja**. Available from freersacklershop.com.  
From the Freer and Sackler Gallaries Web site:  
Puja: Expressions of Hindu Devotion introduces viewers to one of the basic elements of Hinduism, the world's third-largest religion. In puja, Hindus honor gods and goddesses through rituals focused on objects that are believed to be filled with the divine being's spirit. On this videotape American Hindus discus puja and what it means to them and devotees offer food, water, and flowers during worship seeking to make a spiritual connection with the gods. 29 minutes.

**Ramlila**: The Traditional Performance of the Ramayana. Shaman Hatley shows this in connection with: Linda Hess. "An Open-Air Ramayana: Ramlila, the Audience Experience," pp. 115-139 in The Life of Hinduism, eds. John Stratton Hawley and Vasudha Narayanan. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006. Acquired from exoticindia.com.  
117 minutes.

**Religion in Hindu India**. Produced by Films in the Humanities and Sciences. Michael Baltutis says he uses the Holi sections for his classes on Krishna.  
Synopsis from the Films in the Humanities and Sciences Webpage:  
From ritual ablutions to ceremonial cremation, the religious life of a Hindu is intimately associated with the spiritual properties of water and fire. This program steps off the beaten path for a journey with two sadhus as they visit holy locales, witness religious rites, and, in general, immerse themselves in Hindu culture as it is exists in the religion's motherland, India. The Festival of Shivaratri, in Benares, and the Festival of Holi, in Mathura, are featured, along with devotional and secular activities in Allahabad that follow the official conclusion of the

Kumbh Mela. Contains nudity associated with Nagas, male warrior ascetics. (52 minutes).

**Sadhus-Holy Men of India**, 1994

Three documentaries: Living with the Dead, The Living God, and Lotan Baba The Rolling Saint.

**Sant Tukaram,** 1936  
Imdb synopsis  
This classic film chronicles the life of Tukaram (17th C.), one of Maharashtra's most popular saint poets. 131 minutes.

Serpent Mother. 1985. Available from der.org.  
From the der Website:  
Serpent Mother is about devotion to the Goddess of Snakes and the importance of divine female power in West Bengal Indian life. The film's focus is the Jhapan Festival, the great celebration of snakes. Shown are festival preparations, the role of traditional arts and crafts in the worship of the Goddess, devotional singing, and an exposition of ritual action. The difficult and complex symbolism of the ritual is explained by the participants themselves. In addition to the commentary, this makes accessible what is, at first glance, exotic and inexplicable behavior. 28 minutes.

**Sholay**, 1975

Jim Lochtefeld reports the film has a song/scene about Holi, and a bit about vrats.  
Synopsis from imdb:  
After his family is murdered by a notorious and ruthless bandit, a former police officer enlists the services of two outlaws to capture him. 188 minutes, but with several versions/running times.

**Sita Sings the Blues**. Available on the Internet for free.  
Synopsis from imdb:  
An animated version of the epic Indian tale of Ramayana set to the 1920's jazz vocals of Annette Hanshaw. 82 minutes.

**Sons of Shiva,** 1985. Available from der.org.  
From the der Website:  
Sons of Shiva is a sustained attempt to film a four-day ceremony concerned with the worship of Shiva. Devotees of the God Shiva are shown from the initial taking of the Sacred Thread through gradually intensifying action to a culmination in a variety of ascetic and self denying practices. Devotees are also shown in informal activities such as preparing food and listening to recitals of devotional songs by the famous mendicant Bauls of Bengal. 29 minutes.

**Water**. Directed by Deepa Mehta. Mackenzie Brown uses it "in in conjunction with Manu."  
Synopsis from imdb:  
The film examines the plight of a group of widows forced into poverty at a temple in the holy city of Varanasi. It focuses on a relationship between one of the widows, who wants to escape the social restrictions imposed on widows, and a man who is from the highest caste and a follower of Mahatma Gandhi. 117 minutes.

**\* \* \* \* \***

One video that my students have found useful is by Kesang Tseten:

**On the road with the red god: MACHHENDRANATH** (75 minutes)

This documentary shows the rowdy, interreligious side of the rath yatra, along with the touching story of a Newari Buddhist priest who was separated from his mother as a baby. This is tied to the traditional narrative of the theft of a god from a demoness to save the Kathmandu Valley. Kapil Muni's ritual duties include warding off the goddess once a year as she tries to recover her son.

I'd like to echo the call for using contemporary videos, especially from Youtube. As an example, colleagues on another list pointed me to a clip from a Telugu classic (N.T. Ramarao) that depicts Rāvaṇa propitiating Śiva with a gut-wrenching performance. It complements the readings we've done very well, and it gets across in 5-6 minutes, just how arduous tapas was imagined to be:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y7yLmE6eOUs>

Or search in Youtube for: Seeta Rama Kalyanam Part - 3