Hinduism Fares Feebly in CD-ROM's Multimedia Fray
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At Hindusm Today we have watched the explosion of the multimedia market over the last decade. The CD-ROM ("Compact Disc, Read-Only Memory") has become a powerful tool for education and recreation, and it wields considerable power in its potential to influence individuals, especially unattended youth, both positively and negatively. Hearing of a handful of CDs relating to India and Hinduism, we set out to assess the market for dharma on CD.

It is a telling tale. But before we tell it, let us explore the technology. A CD-ROM is a 0.6 ounce plastic disc, 5 inches in diameter and thin as a credit card. It can hold over 600 megabytes of data (enough to record the text of multi-volume encyclopedias) and is read by a common computer drive. Developers create multimedia presentations on these discs which can be purchased and played on a home computer. "Multimedia" means that the user can read text, look at pictures and short videos and listen to sounds such as music, narration and sound-effects. Most CDs are interactive, meaning that the viewer can decide what to read, see or hear at any time. It is much like watching TV, but being able to stop and start a program or jump to any part of it at will. In order to view a CD-ROM you need to have a computer with a CD drive, a monitor (color preferred) and some basic software to play the sounds and videos.

Used with wisdom and supervision, the CD-ROM is one of the great educational tools of the future. But be careful not to blindly embrace, accept and trust the information on the CD and leave your child or yourself alone with its influence. The combination of sounds, images and words can make deep impressions in the subconscious mind and thus effect our behavior. Lamentably, many of the products on the market are truly demented, even asuric. So we recommend strict censorship. However, due to the positive potential, we wanted to be sure Hinduism was included. Thus our search began.

The number of discs available and the variety of subjects encountered is staggering--even confusing--but definitely impressive. For example, Educorp stocks over 1,400 Macintosh and PC titles ranging from brainless virtual-reality games to mindful scientific, cultural (Western) and religious (non-Hindu) selections. There are many similar catalogs easily available. Our search found only one disc that fit our criteria, listed only in Educorp's catalog. It looked promising--India in a Nutshell, by Cymbidium Multimedia. But Educorp said Cymbidium never delivered the disc, and the company proved to be a phantom.

So, in a nutshell, after our soulful searching, we concluded that there are no CD-ROM products available in the mass Western market that focus on India or Hinduism. There are a few such CDs available, which are described below and to the right, but they are invisible in the market, and they do not come close to competing with the sophisticated productions one can easily obtain on other topics. In this market, which is profoundly impacting the youth around the world, and with the technical know-how in hand, we must ask, why not?

The Virtually Unknown Indian Offerings

Our researchers were able to track down only three CD-ROMs relating to India or Hinduism, with most of their focus being on India: Mystica India, Wisdom of the Panchatantraand Multimedia Introduction to India. These are described briefly on the right side of this page. We came to learn of these discs indirectly, through advertisements or reviews in the local (US) Indian newspapers, including India Currentsand India West.

Our tests were done on a PowerMac 7200/90 and an 8100/80AV. For the Windows discs we used Insignia Solutions SoftWindows 2.0 utility which allows us to run Windows version 3.11 and MS-DOS 6.22 directly on our Macs. Even with 80mbytes of RAM on our 8100/80AV, the Windows discs were sluggish in their responses. In Soft Windows, we never got beyond the feeling of interfacing with a computer, though performance on a PC in a native Windows environment should be much better. With the Panchatantra, we interfaced with the narrator and jumped right into the stories. It is the only one of the three which comes formatted to run on the Macintosh computer.

Our main difficulty, however, was accepting the different interpretations of Hinduism, especially of the Hindu Gods. True, it is extremely difficult to define Hinduism in a way that will satisfy all Hindus. But in several cases we felt little effort was made to provide accurate descriptions of the different Hindu sects, particularly those of South India. Also, the preponderance of Puranicstories left us looking for more substantive explanations of the profound metaphysics and cosmology of Hinduism. The way these stories are told nowadays consigns Hinduism to the realm of comic books. In

their time, the Puranasserved their purpose, but today's Hindus demand the deeper truths. Today's Puranacstories describe the Gods as jealous, angry, violent and even vengeful beings. This is far from the truth. Even a functional human family living by dharma does not indulge in these lower states of consciousness.

Perhaps this explains why there are so few multimedia products available on Hinduism and India. The abundant philosophies, scriptures and their many interpretations make it difficult for anyone to adequately describe them all in one volume, even on CD. The magnitude, complexity and profundity which is so compelling to seekers may in turn be confounding when the effort is made to reduce it to digits. Maybe a narrower focus is the answer. In any case, we hope the effort continues.

The Macintosh CD Passage to Vietnamis an example of the excellent production standards we hope can be applied to discs on Hinduism. Passagedoes not delve into the Hindu presence in Vietnam, but it does look at Buddhism, and it is as close as your computer can take you to Asia. It is worth a look to see how full-featured a CD-ROM can be. Who will make a Passage to India?

Order from: Against All Odds Productions, Post Office Box 1189, Sausalito, California 94966, USA. Tel: 415-331-6300; fax: 415-331-9400; e-mail: RickSmolan@aol.com.

Marketing India's Mysticism

INDIA MYSTICA: A MULTIMEDIA JOURNEY THROUGH THE MYSTIQUE OF INDIA, 1995, for Windows.
Magic Software pvt. ltd., N-114 First Floor, Greater Kailash-I, New Delhi, India. Tel: 91-11-647-6556, 647-6989, 621-6965; Fax: 91-11-647-2688; Internet: mystica.magic@axcess.net.in. In the US: 3867 Riverbend Terrace, Fremont, California 94555, USA. Tel/Fax: 510- 475-7815.

Magic Software is by far the leader in terms of sophistication of presentation and graphics. In fact, many of their images are stunning in their subtle beauty. There are well-composed paintings that relate to the topics discussed in the text, such as the holy Hindu cow shown below, and there are some exquisite examples of the iconography of Hindu worship.

The general layout simulates scanning a book, but this book has links and buttons to allow you to jump around freely and to augment your study by calling up special images and sound tracks. Links for key words simply appear blue in the text you are reading. Clicking on the blue text takes you quickly to that new subject. This is a common system which is also used on the World Wide Web (you can find a demo version of Mystica Indiaon-line). Sound files include a phonetic breakdown and pronunciation of the Sanskrit words (though our in-house Sanskritist did not always agree with the pronunciations given--for example: yoga, was pronounced yog).

Magic Software's premise is, "to know India you must understand Hinduism," and they did a commendable job. Yet we felt their reliance on Puranicstories to explain Hinduism dominated too strongly.

Ancient Wisdom Stories

WISDOM OF THE PANCHATANTRA,
1995, IBM and Mac CD-ROM. us$34.99. Kathakaar, 34317 Eucalyptus Terrace, Fremont, California 94555, USA. Tel: 510-713-8012; Internet: kathakaar@aol.com.
To date, this is the only Macintosh-ready CD-ROM relating to Hinduism. It is an excellent product, focusing completely on the traditional wisdom-stories of the Panchatantra. As stated in the liner notes, the Panchatantra"has long been regarded the world over as a treatise on 'the art of life.' Firmly rooted in the practical world, its intention is not to try to teach what is 'right' and 'wrong' so much as what works and what does not." As such, these stories are well-suited for teaching youth, as well as for recreation.

The presentation is charmingly captivating, especially with the charismatic parrot-guide Shuka [shown, top right]. Clickable buttons allow you to navigate quickly and easily through the the stories. Original Indian music, buoyant narration and amusing sound-effects accompany you on your adventure.

An extra bonus on this CD are four simple games for children. One game serves purely as entertainment, while the other three also serve as memory and concentration increasing tools. Parents should be alert to the game, Save that Fox.In the game, the player trys to solve a word puzzle by guessing letters from the keyboard. If a wrong guess is made, the fox cringes as if hurt. If enough incorrect guesses are made, the fox falls into a ravine filled with water. Obviously, the child would feel he is hurting the fox by guessing wrong, and he would ultimately learn that he could fail completely. Surely,

there is a way to teach, instead, that incorrect guesses are a part of the learning process and that, as long as we do not abandon effort, we cannot fail. These basic truths are integral to Hinduism and a spiritual life.

One other regret is that the producers chose to compare the Panchatantrawith the Christian Bible. The comparison was meant to show similar wide distribution of both texts, but it seems strangely out of place and unnecessary.

Overall, the Panchatantrashould provide you and your youth with hours of educational recreation. It is a pleasant family alternative to television, and even parents may learn a thing or two.

Bharat in Bits and Bytes

MULTIMEDIA INTRODUCTION TO INDIA
1994, version 1.1 for Windows, Gyana, Tuxila Inc., USA. Tel: 408-908-7313. No address given.

If you have visited India, you have undoubtedly been awed by the variety and depth of culture, religion, art, architecture and philosophy. To learn of it all, even by living there, would take a lifetime's effort, nay more. Yet the ambitious intent of Gyana's Introduction to IndiaCD-ROM is "to expose the user to India's history, geography, culture and tourism through the use of text, pictures and sound."

The sheer breadth of topics covered and the relative ease of

access to the information held herein make this CD a valuable resource. It does succeed as an introduction to India, including sections on culture, travel, geography, a talking dictionary and more. It places its discussion of Hinduism alongside the many other religions Bharat has given birth to and embraced.

Overall, however, we were disappointed with the quality of the multimedia presentations. The sounds often had hiss and the images were poorly reproduced. The text was crudely typeset and somewhat hard to read as it was all in blue. The interface was found lacking in our useage--links felt slow and cumbersome.

More importantly, certain explanations of Hinduism were found to be objectionable. Particularly the reference to Saivism as "the Shiva cult" which "co-existed alongside the Vedic culture," as if Saivism and Vedic culture were somehow separate. We would not consider this CD as a tool for teaching Hinduism, but rather as a digital encyclopedia of India. As such, it has much to offer.

A Window into Hatha Yoga

YOGA SOFTWARE FOR WINDOWS,
IBM, two high-density discs (not CD-ROM).WeCare Technologies Incorporated, 11520 North Central Expressway, Suite 137, Dallas, Texas 65243, USA. Tel: 214-340-8252; fax: 214-340-8253; e-mail: wecare@mcimail.com.

YogaSoftis the most basic of the multimedia presentations examined. It is well conceived and implemented. The software

presents a means to learn hatha yoga, including a "Follow Me" routine which will take you step by step into and out of the asanas.

The software can teach you to perform the asanas, but we found missing any mention of the need for a living and breathing yoga teacher for a full and fruitful study. YogaSoft will prove most useful for someone already studying or having studied with a teacher (make sure your teacher agrees first). For such a person, there is a wealth of information on a wide variety of asanas, easy and difficult. Each asanais defined with its Sanskrit name, the breathing to be performed, the benefits of the position, times to be cautious and several choices of simple drawings for viewing the posture. The presentation is simple, soundless, but easy to navigate, making it an easy-to-use, quick reference resource for hatha yogis.