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Director Peter Brook's Unorthodox Vision And Multi-Racial Cast Globalize Indian Epic

"We are touched by the love that Indians bring to the Mahabharata," director Peter Brook confided to HINDUISM TODAY correspondent Rakesh Mathur in August, 1989. "This fills us with respect and awe for the task we have assumed."

Having awed audiences worldwide as a nine-hour play (in French and English), a six-hour TV-movie and a 171-minute feature film, Peter Brook's Mahabharata is a runaway success. But along with the accolades come controversy. Many Hindus are accustomed to and would prefer a more religious and conventional rendering of the classic, heavily perfumed with grandeur and fantasy - a method of presentation already well established and accepted in India. For some, Brook's universal but literal and sometimes gruesomely realistic interpretation grates nervous and seems almost blasphemous.

In the beginning, some wondered if Brook, a non-Hindu, had bitten off more than he could chew when he decided to tackle the 2,000-year-old Sanskrit epic, consisting of 110,000 couplets in 18 volumes - nearly 15 times the length of the Bible

The Mahabharata is literally "the great history of the Bharata family." In an extended meaning, Bharata refers to the clan of Hindus, and even more generally to the clan of man. So the Mahabharata is often perceived symbolically as "the great history of mankind" Brook has tried to amplify this more universal interpretation of the epic by using Indian, British, Senegalese, Japanese, Turkish, Trinidadian, French, German, Italian and Polish actors to portray the play's 16 main characters. The video's superb sound track easily compensates for what of the

multiracial cast. Every word is crystal clear and the music is stunning.

Brook's unprecedented use of the global cast to dramatize what is generally understood to be a story told exclusively in India by Indians has drawn both praise and blame.

"We are not attempting a reconstruction of Dravidian and Aryan India of three thousand years ago," explains Brook. "We are not presuming to present the symbolism of Hindu philosophy. We have tried to suggest the flavor of India without pretending to be what we are not. On the contrary, the many nationalities are trying to bring something of their own. In this way, we are trying to celebrate but which carries echoes for all mankind."

S.P. Sharma, Vice Chancellor of Vedic University of America, faults Brook for using a non-Indian cast - more specifically, for using black actors. In his critique of the video he wrote for HINDUISM TODAY: "Kunti, Bheeshma, Bheema, Parashurama are all black in color. Bheeshama, a lean, unimpressive fellow with a goatee, looks odd...By watching this movie one can easily see that Peter Brook is, like other foreigners, of the view that 5,000 years back the Indians were all in a primitive state." In another assessment of the film, Gautam Dasgupta of Performing Arts Journal intimates that only Indians could create or appreciate a production of the Mahabharata. He writes: "Episodes from this epic are frequently performed in India, but always with a deeply ingrained structure of ritual beliefs and ethical codes intrinsic to its audience. The Mahabharata is an empty shell if it is read merely as a compendium of legends. And that precisely is the reading attributed to Mr. Brook's work."

Such criticisms are far outweighed by accolades. Stephen Holden of The New York Times writes, "Mr. Brook's multi-ethnic, multi-lingual company make up a richly evocative global portrait gallery." Ida Panicelli of Artforum calls Brook's film "an expression of a positive curiosity, touched with an irony and lightness that invite a passionate enjoyment of the beauty and authentic power of the Mahabharata." The literary journal, Apoc, further extols the film, "This is no second-hand rose, but a fine piece of work completely rethought in terms of cinema."

No one can that Brook has set a precedent. Already his Mahabharata has been

cited as a prototype for international coproductions likely in Europe after 1992 we will see the dominance of certain languages, particularly English."

Is the 110,000 Verse Mahabharata Poem or Scripture?

For about 2,500 years the Mahabharata was the sole and soulful possession of India. Then Peter Brook came along. Now, a worldwide audience, largely unschooled in the fundamentals of Hinduism, is encountering a work which assumes the viewer is well-grounded in Indian culture. Many of these new viewers will marvel at the potent vows which men and women once took, commitments from which not even threats of death could dissuade them. On the other side, they will wonder about Draupadi's marrying five men just because their mother made an off-hand comment - never mind that their dads were gods - and Lord Krishna's doing ungodly things like dying and encouraging Arjuna to lie and cheat to win "the great war." Then there is the matter of Yudhisthira, "the son of Dharma," being so helplessly obsessed with the game of dice that he gambles away everything, even his brothers, his wife and himself. It's a story overflowing with curses, bloodshed and death from start to finish.

All of this is not a problem if the audience takes it as an epic drama, as the Indian interpretation of the human condition, full of all that is good and not so good in us, much like Homer's Illiad was for ancient Greece. It is the story of us all.

Troubles arise, however, when the magnificent poem is presented as Hindu scripture. True, there is much that is profound in the Mahabharata. And true, the Bhagavad Gita is a lofty hymn which has inspired many toward dharma. Nonetheless, the primary scriptures of Hinduism are the Vedas, the Agamas and the Upanishads. Mahabharata, Ramayana and the Puranas are literature, not scripture. If we explain all this to new viewers, their appreciation will be deepened.

The Competition

Peter Brook must share the stage with another far different and equally successful

Mahabharata. For the past two years a more customary version has been showing on Indian Television. Although it was more like what Asian-born Hindus were used to seeing, it was not without its own controversy. When producer/director B.R. Chopra engaged the services of Muslim author Dr. Rahi Masoom Raza to create the massive script for the megadrama, there was a storm of criticism from Hindus. Yet, it vanished like smoke in the wake of the film's tremendous success, which was largely due to a superb script. The 93-week series (featuring one 50-minute episode per week) just concluded its first showing in July. At least 190 millions adults and 100 million children were among the viewers toward the end of the serial. Everyone was happy. Especially advertisers! According to one survey, Indian television raked in \$31 million from commercials shown before each episode.

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