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Heaven and Earth at Violent Odds in an Indian Epic

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

The volcanic passions that rumble through "Agni Varsha: The Fire and the Rain," a dense, colorful dramatization of a portion of the Indian epic "Mahabharata," are literally earthshaking. In one scene, a vengeful demon explodes out of a hilltop. Late in the movie, a deity materializes and tempts a human character with an offer to turn back time.

The relationship between heaven and earth throughout the movie is volatile, as the human characters, who imagine they have more power than they do, find themselves at the mercy of divine forces whose purpose remains enigmatic. But even though "Agni Varsha" is set in ancient times and rooted in Hindu traditions, the questions it poses about morality, faith and destiny transcend culture. Generally speaking, hubris is punished and devotion and humility are rewarded.

"Agni Varsha," the first feature directed by Arjun Sajnani, was adapted from a drama by the noted Indian playwright Girish Karnad. It is the first of a series of art films being released in North America by the Los Angeles-based company Cinebella with the theme "Beyond Bollywood." The goal of the company, prompted by the positive reception of Indian films like "Lagaan," is to build the same kind of niche market for Indian art films in North America that Chinese and Iranian movies have.

The director has described the hybrid of commercial and art film in "Agni Varsha" as "stylistic mythology." Like mainstream Bollywood films, "Agni Varsha" includes elaborate song and dance sequences, but here they have a deeper ritualistic and musical weight than in typical Indian movies.

"Agni Varsha," which opens today in the New York metropolitan area, Boston, Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area, is set in a timeless era centuries before modern technology during a drought that has lasted a decade. Water is sacred, and when it is spilled, there is usually a price to pay. The characters' goal is to persuade the gods to bring rain, but politics, class divisions and bitter family rivalries intervene.

Dramatically the film is a tumultuous family saga that has much in common with Greek tragedy. Powerful men with oversize ambition cross swords, while the women in their lives try in vain to talk some common sense into them. Much of the action revolves around a fire sacrifice presided over in the royal palace by the chief priest, Parvasu (Jackie Shroff), a Brahmin who has renounced earthly pleasures to tend to his sacred duty. Parvasu has abandoned his adoring wife, Vishaka (Raveena Tandon), after only a year of marriage.

Family strife erupts when Parvasu's cousin and rival, Yavakri (Nagarjuna) returns earlier than expected from a frustrating 10-year retreat in the jungle, where he sought divine wisdom but received no clear knowledge. A deadly chain of events is set off when he is caught making love to Vishaka, whom he once loved.

Meanwhile, Parvasu's younger brother Aravasu (Milind Soman), violating Brahmin tradition, has fallen in love with Nittilai (Sonali Kulkarni), a tribal girl from a lower caste, whom he hopes to marry after obtaining the approval of the elders in her village. When he offends her father by showing up late for the meeting, Nittilai is forcibly wed to another man, leaving Aravasu heartbroken. Aravasu, who emerges as the film's hero, has a complicated relationship with his older brother, who loves but also fears him and has Aravasu

nearly beaten to death by his guards. Risking her life, Nittilai flees her new marriage to nurse him back to health.

The story's climax, echoing "Hamlet," is a play within a play performed for Paravasu and his court by a troupe of traveling players, including Aravasu, who disguises himself as a demon.

Although "Agni Varsha" is more than two hours long, its story hurtles forward with a new crisis every few minutes. The momentum is interrupted by joyous production numbers that serve as dramatic palate-cleansers as well as exhibitions of the actors' singing and dancing skills. If the robust performances verge on melodrama, their size seems appropriate given the mythic ethos of "Agni Varsha."

Filmed at Hampi, the well-preserved capital of the Vijayanagar Empire, which ended in the 16th century, "Agni Varsha" has a lavish ceremonial gloss. It is also a very erotic movie. The characters (the women as well as the men) have voracious sexual appetites, and as they exchange steamy glances and fall into passionate embraces, the camera admires their glistening bodies and luxuriates in their desire.

AGNI VARSHA

The Fire and the Rain

Directed by Arjun Sajnani; written (in Hindi, with English subtitles) by Anil Mehta, T. Jayshree and Mr. Sajnani, adapted from the play of the same name by Girish Karnad, based on "The Myth of Yavakri" from the Indian epic "Mahabharata"; director of photography, Mr. Mehta; edited by Jabeen Merchant; music by Sandesh Shandilya, lyrics by Javed Akhtar; choreographers, Bhushan Lakhandri, Prabhudeva and Daksha Sheth; art director, Shashi Adappa; produced by iDream Productions; released by Cinebella Entertainment. At the Loews State Theater, 1540 Broadway, at 45th Street, Manhattan. Running time: 126 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: Jackie Schroff (Paravasu), Raveena Tandon (Vishaka), Milind Soman (Aravasu), Sonali Kulkarni (Nittilai), Nagarjuna (Yavakri), Mohan Agashe (Raibhya) and Amitabh Bachchan (Lord Indra).

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