FILM GUIDE

An Indian Pilgrimage: Ramdevra

Part of the South Asian Documentary Film Series,
Presented by the University of Wisconsin-Madison
Center for South Asia
AN INDIAN PILGRIMAGE: RAMDEVRA

Film Guide

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Date: 1975

Running time: 25 minutes

Funding: National Endowment for the Humanities,
Office of Education, U.S. Department of
Health, Education, and Welfare (under
the authority of Title VI, Section 602,
NDEA). The film and film guide do not
necessarily reflect the views of the
funding agencies.

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SYNOPSIS

The film conveys the experience of a folk pilgrimage and its significance in the lives of pilgrims.

Ramdev, a medieval martial hero and saint, has become the focus of a miracle cult spread by a growing body of folk music. The film shows a group of people on pilgrimage from Bombay to Ramdev's gravesite in a Rajasthan desert village. The devotees of Ramdev usually make the pilgrimage with specific desires or vows in mind. In a folk pilgrimage such as this, devotion rather than ritual is emphasized, and pilgrims express their devotion in their own ways, with little need of priestly intermediaries or rules.

The film includes both sacred and secular aspects of Hindu pilgrimage. The Bombay pilgrims make their collective offering at Ramdev's grave; a woman is shown in trance after the spirit of Ramdev has "entered" her; tens of thousands of pilgrims mingle at the fair outside the temple as they shop in the bazaars, watch puppet shows and Government films on family planning, and listen to preachers, hawkers and singers.

The devotional songs that tell the stories of Ramdev and are sung as a form of worship feature prominently in the film.

GLOSSARY OF NAMES AND TERMS USED IN THE FILM

Bhajan: Devotional song describing or praising the devotees' Lord. Most of the Ramdev bhajans are in Marwari, Gujarati or Hindi. The bhajans heard in this film are in Marwari, a dialect of Rajasthani which is the language of most of the traditional singers of Ramdev bhajans.

Dalibai: A female disciple of Ramdev. She was an untouchable orphan whom Ramdev adopted. Her shrine stands next to Ramdev's temple.

Darshan: The "auspicious sight" of a deity, saint, or holy place by means of which a devotee experiences the power of the sacred.

The term is often used in Hindu devotional songs, as in: "Grant me your darshan, beloved Krishna, My weary eyes yearn..."

Krishna: One of the principal Hindu deities, the eighth incarnation of Vishnu. The devotees of Ramdev believe Ramdev to be an incarnation of Lord Krishna.

Mela: A fair, a celebration or assemblage, usually of a religious nature. Melas include a blend of many secular elements.

Prasad: "That which is given out of divine favor." Devotees coming for darshan may bring offerings of fruit, flowers, sweets, coconuts, foodgrains, or coins. They receive prasad -- a food that has been offered by worshippers and "enjoyed" by the God. Prasad is considered to be a gift from the God, and carries His special power and blessing.

Ramdev: A 15th century martial hero-saint regarded by his devotees as a God, an incarnation of Lord Krishna. His devotees believe that Ramdev performs miracles, and they pray for his help with immediate and concrete problems. Ramdev is the focus of a cult that has survived five centuries in rural areas of western India, and also has relevance to a growing number of city people.

Ramdevra Village: A village of 1500 people, in Jaisalmer district of western Rajasthan state which has become a regional pilgrimage site. The village is named after Ramdev who is buried there.

OUTLINE OF CONTENT OF FILM

A group of nineteen pilgrims -- Gujaratis of artisan castes -- is about to leave on a pilgrimage form Bombay to Ramdevra, a village in Rajasthan, where the medieval saint Ramdev is buried. The film begins by introducing us to five members of this group:

SONABEN has been going on pilgrimage to Ramdevra annually to give thanks at the grave of Ramdev. Ten years ago her son survived a
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serious illness after she prayed for Ramdev's help.

NANIMA is over 90 years old and has been to Ramdevra several times. During one pilgrimage she saw a vision of Ramdev. She hopes that this pilgrimage will bring blessings for her grandson's business.

MIRABEN and her family are relatively well-to-do. Her health is poor. She is very devout and often attends temples and all-night devotional meetings.

RANJAN is 19, the daughter of a tailor. She has a disfiguring skin condition called leucoderma because of which her parents have difficulty in finding a husband for her. She has heard that pilgrims have been cured of various diseases through Ramdev's power. She is making her first pilgrimage to Ramdevra, accompanied by her mother.

DHANJIBHAI is a flower-vendor. He is making the travel arrangements for the group. He and his wife have no children.

After the introduction to this group of pilgrims in Bombay, the scene shifts to Ramdevra. We learn about Ramdev's life and the miracle cult centered around him. Ramdev's grave, the central object of worship, is today enclosed by a temple. Crowds of pilgrims throng the entrance to the shrine, bringing with them, as tokens of their devotion, the symbols of Ramdev -- the horse and the flag. They come for many reasons, seeking Ramdev's help with all kinds of personal problems. The pilgrims we see crowding around the door of the temple have come on foot from the city of Bikaner, a distance of 140 miles across the desert.

Outside the temple is the mela -- the annual fair held on the anniversary of Ramdev's death. The mela lasts for 10 days in the lunar month of Bhadon (August - September). Over 100,000 pilgrims come to this mela every year, together with merchants, craftsmen, entertainers, musicians, and preachers.

The group of Bombay pilgrims arrive at the mela grounds. For their collective offering to Ramdev, they have brought with them a silver horse which they will present along with a larger silver horse rented from the temple. In preparation for their worship at the grave, Dhanjibhai and Nanima decorate the horses with flowers, adding coconuts, miniature flags, small cloth horses and incense. The tray bearing the horses is then carried by Sonaben in procession to the shrine. The pilgrims lay their offering on Ramdev's grave, receive prasad and leave the temple.

Near the shrine is the grave of Dalibai. After leaving the temple of Ramdev, Miraben goes into a trance when the spirit of Ramdev enters her. She is brought by the other women to this shrine, where she prostrates herself before Dalibai's grave. She rises, still in a trance, to receive prasad, and the women around her chant and clap rhythmically. Miraben joins them, and the chanting becomes more and more intense.

In sharp contrast to this personal religious scene, the camera shifts once more to the mela. Here secular and religious elements blend in an ambience typical of an Indian mela. Pilgrims wander around looking at one another and at the variety of food, jewelry, clothing and religious pictures on sale. Above the crowds a family planning sign proclaims: "The next child -- not now. The third child -- never!" The Bombay pilgrims stay at a resthouse close to the temple. Every day they visit the shrine for darshan. We leave the pilgrims from Bombay to observe the activities in the immediate vicinity of the temple. Here too are the ubiquitous bhajan singers. Pilgrims are seen performing a variety of devotional acts. Some pilgrims approach the temple by prostrating themselves on the ground in fulfillment of a vow. We catch glimpses of a bridal couple waiting in the line outside the temple, tied together by the red marriage cloth, and of a ritual hair-cutting nearby, indicating the auspicious significance of Ramdevra.

As the film draws to a close, the camera takes us once again inside the temple where the
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Traditional Hindu forms of worship are carried on at the grave of Ramdev: Camphor, incense, and an eternal flame burn, pilgrims make their offerings, receive prasad and holy water from the priests, and as they leave they ring the temple bells to mark their presence and devotion.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

THE PILGRIMS

Although there is a mixture of urban and rural, most pilgrims at Ramdevra are peasants who come from the surrounding areas of Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Madhya Pradesh. Traditionally, Ramdev devotees belonged to the scheduled (ex-untouchable) castes. This is understandable in view of the reluctance of the higher Hindu castes to perform grave-worship. Ex-untouchables and tribals still make up a large proportion of the pilgrims at Ramdevra, but there are also many pilgrims from the artisan castes, some from the higher castes, and some Muslims and Jains.

About a quarter of the pilgrims come from cities. To his urban devotees Ramdev had been a familiar but minor deity before they migrated from their village homes. Interestingly, it is among his urban devotees that his cult now seems to be spreading and growing in importance.

About half the pilgrims have made the pilgrimage to Ramdevra at least once before. Many come in groups, and the social aspect is a very important part of the pilgrimage. When time and money allow, they like to combine this pilgrimage with visits to other holy places and to secular tourist sites.

A large proportion of the pilgrims are women. For them pilgrimage (and a visit to their parents) may be the only escapes from routine. They are more likely than men to have the time required by pilgrimage. Generally it is the women who tend the family shrine, attend devotional meetings, undertake regular fasts, and so on -- for they are the guardians of the family's wealth and spiritual welfare.

THE ROLE OF PILGRIMAGE IN HINDUISM

Unlike Islam, which has the pilgrimage to Mecca as one of its five main tenets, Hinduism does not hold pilgrimage as mandatory. Pilgrimage (tirth�atra) is not mentioned in the Vedas, even though there are some references to the spiritual benefits to be gained from it in the Upanishads. Although pilgrimage is not required for attaining salvation, it is seen as a meritorious act and has remained a vital force. The important role that pilgrimage plays in the tradition of bhakti (the path of devotion to a personal God) is no doubt significant in maintaining the vitality of pilgrimage in popular Hinduism.

The institution of pilgrimage is remarkable in the variety of motivations it encompasses: One may go on a pilgrimage as an act of devotion to God, in order to discharge one's duty to ancestors, to be cured of an illness, to gain release from the cycle of rebirth, to fulfill a vow made at a time of crisis, or simply to gain merit, with no specific goal in mind.

As in other religious traditions, pilgrimage in popular Hinduism is both a joyous outing (an escape from routine, a vacation, a chance to be with relatives and meet new people, to make business contacts . . . a brief period set apart for devotion, a time out of time) and also an arduous journey (a process in which the going is as important as the goal, a journey which in itself provides a transforming experience).

Pilgrimage sites vary in their ritual function, in their priestly specialists, and in the complex of motivations which draw pilgrims to them. Some sites attract pilgrims from all parts of India, others only from nearby villages. Some are found in the Bhagavata Purana's list of holy places; others have only recently become places of pilgrimage. Some sites are holy because of their association with the great Gods of the Hindu pantheon. Others are linked with local deities outside the textual tradition. Still others draw their power from association with a saint, or a hero, or some miraculous event. Mela pilgrimage sites usually provide ample opportunities for sacred as well as secular
activities (e.g., the Kumbh Melas, Pushkar Mela, Ramdevra Mela, or purely local village mela sites).

Although sites vary greatly, two central concepts structure all pilgrimage experience -- darshan and prasad. At Ramdevra, as at Kashi (Banaras) or any other pilgrimage site, pilgrims come for the darshan of a sacred power -- whether it is of God in His or Her "own" (and therefore most auspicious) place, or of a river, such as the Ganga at Kashi.

In any visit to a holy place there is an exchange: Pilgrims may show their devotion by the offerings they bring, and in return they receive prasad from the God (or Saint, or priest). Like darshan, prasad conveys a special kind of contact with the object of one's devotion and is therefore at the core of much Hindu religious experience, not only of pilgrimage.

PILGRIMAGE TO RAMDEVRA

The central focus of worship at Ramdevra is Ramdev's grave. (See also the Note on The Role of Islam.) Although grave-worship (more generally associated with Muslim practice) is not accepted by the orthodox Hindus, it is not uncommon in popular Hinduism. Ramdev's grave is enshrined in a temple, and both priests and pilgrims perform puja (worship) to the grave, offering the flame, incense and camphor. The Ramdevra pilgrimage thus has in common with other kinds of Hindu pilgrimage the basic elements of puja, darshan, and prasad. However, this folk pilgrimage, still known almost exclusively through an oral tradition, departs from orthodox pilgrimage in some significant ways. Most of the pilgrims are motivated by highly specific and personal desires, rather than by the sense of duty or desire for salvation which generally characterize orthodox pilgrimage. Neither pilgrims nor priests have elaborate rituals to perform. The mediation of "sacred specialists" between the pilgrim and Ramdev is, strictly speaking, not required at all. Only to the extent that priests perform puja, accept offerings, and dispense prasad do they play a role in the Ramdevra pilgrim's experience.

In their devotional behavior, the pilgrims at Ramdevra are guided not by priests or sacred texts, but by the experience of others, by their own imagination and ingenuity, and by their needs. Pilgrimage to Ramdevra is a flexible form of religious expression that allows the pilgrim considerable creativity. Its flexibility also illustrates the ways in which new symbols, new saints, heroes and Gods, and new reasons for undertaking the journey can be accommodated within the larger structure of Hindu pilgrimage.

SYMBOLS OF RAMDEV

The horse, flag and footprints, the chief symbols of Ramdev, signify both his heroic and divine nature. The small silver statue the pilgrims brought as an offering from Bombay represented Ramdev astride his horse. The larger silver horse they rented from the temple was riderless. Ramdev's presence is said to be understood when his riderless horse is worshipped, as when, at the beginning of the film, a woman is seen in the Ramdev temple, pressing the legs of a large cloth horse in devotion. In Rajasthan, with its pride in its martial past, images of the mounted hero and of his horse continue to be popular.

The flags that pilgrims bring as offerings range from tiny banners to grand silk and spangle creations fluttering in the desert wind from the top of Ramdev's temple. They all hark back to the medieval Rajput warrior's banner fluttering atop his lance. The red bootprints on Ramdev's banner signify that he is an incarnation of Krishna.

THE TRANCE EXPERIENCE

The direct relation between the devotee and his God, which is central to bhakti (devotional) cults, may at times be expressed through the trance experience when the God is described as "entering" the devotee. This kind of communion with their God is a fairly common experience for Ramdev followers, both at the pilgrimage site and wherever Ramdev is worshipped. In Bombay, at monthly devotional gatherings, one or more of the worshippers may go into a
trance. Ramdev may speak through his devotee at such a time, answering the questions of other devotees, sometimes chastising them for bad behavior or lack of devotion. The traditional priests of Ramdev's village temples were said to develop healing powers when Ramdev "entered" them.

Miraben, the Bombay pilgrim who is seen in trance in the film, had previous trance experiences. She is also a devotee of Mother Goddess Ambaji, whose spirit had "entered" her in the past.

THE ROLE OF ISLAM

To medieval Rajasthan, Islam presented a challenge both through military conquests and through conversion. In response, movements sprang up around heroes and saints, some of whom tried to bridge Hindu-Muslim differences, and some of whom conquered Muslims in battle.

Current cult tradition portrays Ramdev as "the God of Hindu and Muslim" -- a synthesizer who worked to reconcile the two traditions, an egalitarian saint who opposed religious and caste barriers. The cult reflects no blending of Islam and Hinduism at a doctrinal level. What remain today of the encounter with Islam are miracle stories recounting Ramdev's spiritual triumphs over Muslim saints and kings; his Islamic appellations; and, above all, the fact of grave-worship. The grave of Ramdev's mother, adjoining his, is inscribed with a verse from the Qur'an, the sacred book of the Muslims. Since most Hindus cremate their dead and scatter the ashes on sacred water, grave-worship is not a characteristic part of Hinduism.

In the past Muslims also made the pilgrimage to Ramdevra, but their attendance has declined in recent years following the emigration of Muslims from adjoining areas to Pakistan and the subsequent closing of the border to pilgrim traffic after the 1965 Indo-Pakistan War. Additionally, the self-conscious attempts by the Indian Muslim minority to purify their practices of what are now considered to be Hindu influences make such religious expression as Ramdev-worship less acceptable. Paradoxically, whereas the boundaries delineating Muslim and Hindu practices become more sharply fixed, the myths of synthesis continue to flourish.

BHAIJANS (DEVOTIONAL SONGS)

Bhajans convey the "life-story" of Ramdev, depicting him as God-king, all-powerful father, compassionate savior, heroic conqueror, miracle-worker, problem-solver and solace. Ramdev bhajans continue to be composed; through radio, recordings, motion pictures and song pamphlets they are reaching a wider audience.

Along with the grave-site itself, bhajans have been the main vehicle for spreading the cult of Ramdev. Regularly held bhajan sessions not only propagate the cult but also serve to unite the devotees. Singing and listening to bhajans is an important part of the Ramdevra pilgrimage. It is a meritorious act to pay the traditional singers wandering through the mela to perform a few bhajans. Many pilgrims (including some of the Bombay group) stay awake three consecutive nights beside Ramdev's sacred lake, singing his bhajans, in the hope of being granted a vision of Ramdev.

EXCERPTS FROM RAMDEV BHAIJANS

In your hand a lance with white flag,  
Oh Horseman, Jakh Dada, please help me!  
In this world no one is mine.  
You are my only support, please help me!

Oh God of Ramdevra, the memory of You comes to me.  
I remember You, Beloved, and cannot sleep.  
Oh God of Ramdevra, the memory of You comes to me.  
Your temple is beautiful, the white flag flutters.  
Your temple is beautiful, the white flag flutters.

From distant lands pilgrims come to take Your darshan.  
Your temple is beautiful, the white flag flutters.  

Good rice, halva and puri, sweet churma are offered.  
Good rice, halva and puri, sweet churma are
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offered.

Sitting in Your court, every day You eat laddu. Oh God of Ramdevra, the memory of You comes to me. The memory of You, oh You with the flag, with the face that I love. Oh God of Ramdevra, the memory of You comes to me.

Oh You with the flag, on Your horse of five colors, seeing You pleases the heart. Oh You with the flag, on Your horse of five colors, seeing You pleases the heart. Oh God of Ramdevra, the memory of You comes to me...

The first miracle He gave to His mother... He turned the boiling milk cold.

Hail, Hail the son of King Ajmal!

The second miracle He gave to the merchant... He kept his ship afloat.

Hail, Hail the son of King Ajmal!

The third miracle He gave to the peddler... He turned sugar into salt.

Hail, Hail the son of King Ajmal!

The fourth miracle He gave His sister... He brought her dead son back to life.

Hail, Hail the son of King Ajmal!

He stays forever with those who believe in Him. Hail, Hail the son of King Ajmal!

To the land of Marwar came a God, His miracles were many...

From distant lands the pilgrims come, The mela is chock full of people. The unhappy are made happy, Ramdevji showers radiance over their homes. Ting-a-ling, the bells tinkle, The horse's hooves sound... King Ramdev comes riding on the blue horse.

DISCUSSION TOPICS

1) What motivated the Bombay pilgrims to travel 1600 miles -- a long and costly journey by third-class train and bus -- in order to spend a few days at Ramdevra?

2) Why do pilgrims return to Ramdevra and maintain their faith, even if their wishes have not been granted?

3) How is the experience of pilgrimage at once secular and sacred? Are there parallel religious events in the western tradition? (Consider the tales of Chaucer's pilgrims in The Canterbury Tales, pilgrimages to Our Lady of Lourdes in France, the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico, St. Anne de Beaupr6s in Québec, etc.)

4) What does the variety of clothing and jewelry observable at the Ramdevra mela reflect about the caste, economic status, and origins of the pilgrimage population?

5) How does the Ramdev cult mirror the history of the Hindu-Muslim religious encounter in India?

6) How do the symbols of Ramdev reflect both his divine and his heroic aspects?

7) Which elements in the Ramdevra pilgrimage appear to be unique to it, and which elements does it share with other types of pilgrimages?

8) What elements does the Ramdev cult have in common with other bhakti cults?

ADDITIONAL NOTES

THE FILM

A film makes a statement by what it leaves out as well as by what it includes. Many scenes were left out of An Indian Pilgrimage: Ramdevra to make the film of suitable length for classroom use. Many scenes we would have liked to include were never filmed because of bad luck, bad timing or our own limitations as filmmakers.
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We would like to have shown more of the Bombay pilgrims at Ramdevra, more of the "in-between" times, the relaxed banter, mixing with other pilgrims, quarrels over the expenses of the trip, discussions among themselves about what they expected and what they saw and felt. One very important element of pilgrimage in general, and of this particular pilgrimage, has been left out entirely. It would be a mistake to conclude that pilgrims go directly from home to pilgrimage site, turn around and head straight back home. Pilgrims from south India on pilgrimage to holy places of the North such as Kashli (Banaras) or Badrinath also make entirely secular, sight-seeing stops at New Delhi or the Taj Mahal, or whatever places they can afford to visit. The group of pilgrims from Bombay who are seen in this film made sight-seeing and shopping stops at Jodhpur and Pokaran, and also visited the all-India pilgrimage site of Mt. Abu and Ambaji, sacred site of the Sanskritic Mother Goddess Amba. They also went on short side-trips from Ramdevra to sites associated with events in Ramdev's life -- places where his miracles are said to have occurred, to his guru's shrine and his ancestral castle.

MIRABAI

Near the end of the film an old man in saffron sings: "Oh all-powerful Warrior... loudly I sing your name".

This bhajan is by the medieval Rajasthani mystic poet, Mirabai. The widow of a Rajasthani king, Mirabai was a great devotee of Krishna and came to be regarded as a saint. Her songs are widely known and loved throughout north India. It is noteworthy that Ramdev devotees sing not only his bhajans but also those of bhakti saints like Mirabai and Kabir.

SANSKRIZATION

Local religious expressions in Hinduism often tend to legitimize themselves by borrowing elements from the larger all-india tradition, and by clothing their uniqueness in traditional forms. Some signs of this process can be seen at Ramdevra.

-- In bookstalls in the Ramdevra bazaar, the legends of Ramdev are sold under such titles as Shri Ramdev Gita, Shri Ramdev Brahma Purana, and Ramdev Ramayan, thus linking the legends of Ramdev with classic Hindu literature.

-- Pamphlets are sold describing the "teachings" of Ramdev and the rituals for special Ramdev pujas (worship services), and there is a half-Sanskrit mantra (sacred formula) which is to be recited 108 times in order to obtain Ramdev's help.

-- According to the legend, Ramdev is an incarnation of Krishna, (specifically the Dwarka Krishna).

-- The footprints, which are one of the "signs" of Ramdev, are an ancient symbol commonly associated with Vishnu and Krishna (as well as the Buddha).

-- After the spirit of Ramdev "entered" the pilgrim Mirabai, the other woman took her into a small temple where the film shows them as they chant "Bole Radhe Govinda"-- Govinda being one of the names of Vishnu and Krishna.

THE SACRED COMPLEX OF RAMVEDRA

Ramdev's gravesite is in the village of Ramdevra, Jaisalmer district, Rajasthan, in an area where the annual rainfall is measured in millimeters. It is a ten-hour bus ride from the city of Jodhpur. Ramdev is said to have founded the village, or to have died there in battle. There seem to be no written records to validate the legends about the origin of the village or the identity of the graves. The temple complex, on a hillock overlooking a small lake, is a short distance from the village and its
railway station. The present Ramdev temple, enlarged by the Maharaja of Bikaner in 1931, contains 14 graves. According to the priests tending them, these graves are those of Ramdev, his sons, parents and other family members, his guru and some of his disciples, including Dalibai.

The temple complex is a private enterprise, a complicated patchwork of individual and group rights. The bulk of the donations to the temple is divided equally among the 300 families of Tonwar Rajputs of Ramdevra village who are considered to be Ramdev's descendants and proprietors of the temple. The remaining portion is set aside for the support of the temple and its charitable work. The coconuts brought by pilgrims are shared by the descendants with the tribals and scheduled caste people of the village.

**THE PRIESTS**

The Tonwar Rajputs who are trustees of the Ramdev temple hire brahmans as priests rather than the scheduled caste traditional priests of village Ramdev temples. This gesture toward orthodoxy, however, seems neither to have resulted in an elaboration of ritual, nor to have created a need for more mediation by sacred specialists between the pilgrims and Ramdev. There seems to be no significant distinction between the hired brahman priests and the hereditary low-caste priests who look after the lesser shrines at Ramdevra. None of the priests seem to follow any prescribed form of behavior, nor do they wear any distinguishing mark or apparel.

The only important priestly ritual is the arati puja performed five times daily to Ramdev's grave, during which the priest waves camphor, incense, and the eternal flame before the grave. Although the priests said that they use the miracle stories of Ramdev as a text for the arati, they did not do so during the crowded mela days. Clearly, texts and ritual are of minimal importance to them. At Bombay Ramdev temples, the priests are not specialists--anyone can fill the role. At one Bombay temple, the right to perform the arati at the monthly puja is auctioned among the devotees, and the pujaris (priests) at this temple include women.

**RELATED REFERENCES**

1. A companion film, AN INDIAN PILGRIMAGE: KASHI, has been released by the South Asian Area Center, University of Wisconsin.


