Reviews

Films

Jillian Elizabeth & Neil Dalal, Directors. *Gurukulam*

USA/Canada, 2015. 109 min, color. $299.00. Advaita Films, Inc.

Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1930–2015) was the founder of the Arsha Vidya Gurukulam and a religious leader who propagated a form of Advaita Vedanta, especially in the US and India. Arsha Vidya Gurukalam has many centers throughout the world, with its main institutions located in Pennsylvania and Tamil Nadu. These centers host spiritual aspirants in training sessions of various lengths. Dayananda has been particularly influential in the last several decades, not only in the religious realm where his teachings have spread quite broadly, but also in the political realm. For example, the current Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, is said to have been his *śiṣya* (religious student). Newspaper accounts of Modi visiting his teacher soon before Dayananda's death ran in every major Indian newspaper.

None of these details, however cursorily mentioned here, enter at all into the film *Gurukulam* directed by Jillian Elizabeth and Neil Dalal. In a phenomenological—or perhaps contemplative given its subject—mode, this film foregoes framing, context, voice over, or obvious narrative structure. Instead, the audience is led visually and aurally through life in Swami Dayananda Saraswati's ashram in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu. There is a strong emphasis on the mundane: sweeping, cooking, eating, assembling, driving to (and back from) the airport and—albeit only occasionally and briefly—teachings from the Swami himself or a rare conversation with a disciple at the ashram. In a fashion reminiscent of "direct cinema," the camera and cameraperson largely disappear into the ambient sounds of nature and the activities of the ashram.

While the film is principally an "experience" of the ashram, it is an experience that is free floating and that lacks geographical or temporal grounding. The audience is not given a clear sense of the layout or size of the ashram (barring that it at least contains a dining hall, residence quarters, a lecture hall, and a shrine). Different than a "day-in-the-life" sort of documentary such as *Forest of Bliss,* which utilizes a similar method, there is no "day," narratively or practically, to speak of here. Although the footage seems to have been shot over an extended period of time, it is edited in a fashion that largely elides time altogether. With rare exception, there is little sense of elapsed time in the film itself; the period it unfolds over could be a day, a month, or even a year or more. Generally, this works fairly seamlessly and gives a sense of timelessness, which

must have been intentional. Occasionally, it is slightly off-putting when the timelessness is broken, such as in excursions outside the ashram (e.g., picking up a visitor from the airport or a visit to a village) or an apparent reverse time jump in one interview (where a speaker's change in hair style marks either a transposition of footage or an extended time lapse; see 21:55ff).

While the film is dominated by ambiance and mundane activity, we do meet several individuals who have come to the ashram at different stages in their spiritual pursuits: a psychologist who came for a multi-year study program but decided to stay for over a decade; a British traveler who "wouldn't settle for anything less than the universe" (16:55) in his chosen spiritual pursuit but who must return home to inform his parents of his choice to stay at the ashram (75:40); a UN diplomat; an engineer; and other devotees of different stripes. Except for the psychologist and British seeker, there is little background given even for their monologues (the questions that apparently prompt the interviewees are usually elided from the film). These snippets from the spiritual aspirants suggest a more traditional documentary but ultimately are relatively secondary in the greater scope of the film.

The Swami himself plays only a slightly more significant role, which I found delightfully surprising, especially since charismatic religious leaders are generally central to such movements (and clearly this is the case for his devotees who carefully attend upon him in the film), and I initially expected this same trope in the documentary. Instead, the Swami appears at multiple points in the film in his daily life of being attended upon, travelling, and occasionally giving a brief discourse. These discourses are short and lack a larger context as they are probably extracts, but the impression from the teachings shown is more of "non-dualistic truisms" based on Advaita Vedanta and general advice for spiritual daily living, rather than complex philosophical thinking or deep exposition, even when he is engaging a centrally important religious text like the Bhagavadgita. None of this is to say that the Swami didn't engage in such teachings (and on more than one occasion in the film the teachings are more complex) but that they don't take primacy.

I suspect many audience members will be off-put by the non-standard mode of this documentary (also the use of diacritics and occasional lack of translation of terms), especially for the first several minutes but perhaps longer, and by the fact that the film does not hone in the history of the movement or institution, particular devotees, or even the Swami himself. But this film—and ultimately the Advaita that is being taught in it—is not about any of these things. While on the one hand, the film might be interpreted as raw—albeit beautifully shot—ethnographic data without form, on the other hand, the film is about the experience of *becoming advaita*, where the abstracted oneness found in philosophical texts is fundamentally what an aspirant is trying to find in daily living and that daily living is here represented in the ashram. In this fashion, the film is *not* about the institution, the devotees, or even the Swami, but about living a life that aspires to the type of oneness that the Swami teaches—and that life includes trips to the airport, long meditative pauses on flora and fauna (whether of crickets or elephants), dining, cleaning, etc. The general stereotype of monastic life dominated by constant meditation and textual learning is the exception, not the rule. People often forget that "the religious life" of dedicated individuals is usually remarkably mundane, even boring. One particularly telling statement of the Swami that appears first as a bland platitude—e.g., "...to say that means to see that. Saying is only an expression of

what you see "(15:15)—thus takes on a deeper meaning in the film. "Saying" is pushed to the background of the film while seeing is foregrounded. Any particular audience member's reception of the film, I think, will largely depend on receptiveness to this underlying message.

This film will prove challenging for use in the classroom because of its lack of narrative and context but also because of its length, which, to my mind, is longer than it needs to be (several nature scenes or random mundane activities, for example, could easily be removed without substantively modifying the impact). If used in the classroom, some background (or at least forewarning of the style of the film) is necessary. But I do think this film can be used in various types of assignments separate from group viewing, such as individual viewing followed by ethnographic analysis, contemplative exercises, or other types of reaction papers. Given that many anthropology and religious studies courses require local temple site visits, this film allows for an experience of ashram life unencumbered by the heavy hand of narrative interpretation. Elizabeth and Dalal should be commended for a beautifully shot film of a rare glimpse into the daily life of a living ashram.

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