

Reviews



Films

Nadav Harel, director, and Arik Moran, writer. *Chidra*

Israel, 2018. 40 min, color. No Process Films Inc. <https://www.noprocess.com/chidra>

Chidra follows the figure of Ram Nath, a low-caste villager in the West Himalayan highlands of Himachal Pradesh, who plays a special role in the biannual Kahika festival: he serves as the “human sacrifice” that culminates the ritual proceedings. Over the course of several days, the documentarians follow Ram Nath as he and his wife make preparations for the festival and perform their various ritual activities for Ram Nath to take on the negative karma of the villagers through the *chidra* rites, rites that “perforate” the link between action and consequence and allow for the dispersal of negative karma. Ram Nath is sacrificed to the gods as a “poisoned gift” but then resurrected by the gods’ power at the culmination of the festival so he can return to his own village at some distance away. “Human sacrifice” in the context of religious studies has been extensively written about, albeit less so in recent years, including: whether and when such sacrifices may have been literally carried out in the ancient past, what remnants may exist today (albeit in less literal forms), and the relationship of religious communities and practices at the margins to a purported “center” of orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Thankfully, the film largely sidesteps those issues to focus on ethnography.

The film opens with the village medium channeling Lord Shiva, who despite reappearing in several scenes, remains an enigma. This medium, Ram Nath, Ram Nath’s wife, and the village chief Arjun (who ultimately sacrifices Ram Nath) are the central figures of both the film and the sacrifice. Of these figures, though, only Ram Nath himself is presented with any significant background or dialogue. The performances of the *chidra* itself and the culmination of the festival where large effigies of Ganesha, Vishnu, and finally Parvati come from nearby villages to visit and pay respects to Lord Shiva (the king of the village) are the visual height of the film. The sacrifice itself, intentionally obscured from the camera by the crowds, appears understated and brief. While this is clearly the climax of the rite as a brief cacophony of noise from the crowd signals, it is also the marker of the conclusion of the festival. It is, of course, not uncommon that processual activities take performative and visual prominence over concluding ones in religious festivals, even when the import of the conclusion is considered the most religiously significant.

Given the range of audience responses that such a human sacrifice might elicit—even if not literally realized—the film could have approached its topic in an especially grave, reverential, or exoticized fashion (one need look no further than Reza Aslan’s short-lived CNN series for a range of such market-driven approaches, especially the last) and thus give a distorted (or at best, partial) view of the proceedings. Instead, this film wonderfully focuses on *the human*: the lived lives of the villagers, which includes their intimate conversations, joking banter, occasional bursts of ribaldry, and even drunkenness, and also the anticipatory tension of various performers in the festivities (both in the importance of the ritual for the dispensing of negative karma and in the apprehension surrounding the sacrificed person’s revival by the divinity; also the underlying tensions of those wanting to perform well or get paid appropriately). The film is neither dismissive of the seriousness of the ritual undertaking nor of the humanness of its participants.

This balance is also found in the voice-over narration, which is neither too heavy-handed to rigidly fix how we are to understand the ritual proceedings, nor is it so minimalistic as to leave the audience without an anchor. The documentarians themselves are generally kept in the background, but they are also not entirely absent (such as when a speaker gestures toward them in talking or, in a single instance, when the filmmaker asks a villager whether he thinks the sacrifice is a “real” death). While there are several occasions where I think the narration could have been minimally expanded to good effect, such as a sentence or two more about the role of Ram Nath’s wife or on the background of the village medium, Arik Moran of the University of Haifa has composed an admirable script. The narrative voice itself is mellow and unassuming, allowing the scenery and villagers themselves to dominate, giving primacy to the people and activities over their interpretation.

Pedagogically speaking, I find this film to be ideal for use in the classroom. The film takes the potentially controversial topic of human sacrifice and connects the purportedly transformative and highly charged, divinely constructed arena with the everyday, particularly useful in cultivating empathy in students when coherence of religious activities apparently far removed from their own can be a challenge. While the film’s narration centers around the importance and role of karma, it leaves significant interpretive room for students to engage in analyses of their own, whether in discussions or in written assignments. Moran has also published an article (Moran 2018) in conjunction with the film that elaborates on the role of karma and its dissipation in this sacrifice in a way that is accessible to undergraduates and can be especially useful as a post-viewing analysis. While of lesser importance, I was pleased that all of this could be accomplished in a very manageable length; shorter films usually lack depth, but longer films require breaking up a viewing or viewing outside of the classroom (personally, I prefer participation and immediate discussion for documentary films over a flipped-classroom approach). I look forward to using this wonderful film in the semesters to come as a sensitive example of what is often characterized as “Hinduism at its fringes” but is here shown as equally at the center of real human lives.

REFERENCES

Moran, Arik. 2018. "The Invisible Path of Karma in Himalayan Purificatory Rite." *Religions* 9: 78.

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