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Review of *Chidra* by Nadav Harel and Arik Moran

Mark Turin

University of British Columbia, markturin@gmail.com

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Chidra.

Nadav Harel and Arik Moran. Israel. 2018. 40 minutes. English, Hindi, Kului.

<https://www.noprocess.com/chidra>

Production Company: noprocessfilms.

Reviewed by Mark Turin.

We meet the protagonist Ram Nath while he milks his buffalo, the curiously named ‘Cheeky,’ in the valley of Kullu, North India. Ram Nath is a member of a caste of death ritual specialists known as Nar who preside over the Kahika Mela, a rarely studied religious festival of the West Himalayan highlands. In the Kahika ritual, as in other Indic rites of purification, the goal is to “negate the law of karma by removing the residues of malignant past actions from their patrons” (Moran, A. 2018. “The Invisible Path of Karma in a Himalayan Purificatory Rite.” *Religions* 9, 78: 1). In this striking film, the viewer is invited to follow along as the ritual specialist is ultimately offered to the gods in an approximation of ancient human sacrifices. That which could easily have become a romantic and even voyeuristic study if poorly handled is rather an intimate, elegant, and sensitive treatment of a complex purification rite, underscoring the dignity of the participants and their commitment to the rigors of the ritual.

During the Kahika Mela, Ram Nath transforms from a highland peasant into the master of ceremonies, a

powerful redeemer who cuts holes (*chidra*) in the fabric of society, gathering sins together into a cosmic trap that only he can operate, and thus lending the film its name. *Chidra* is a compelling and remarkable visual narrative that follows Ram Nath through the various aspects that comprise ritual, revealing how men, gods, and mediums handle the dangerous substance of actions—or *karma*—at the frontier of the Hindu cultural world. *Chidra* can be viewed at various levels—both as a timeless and disturbing allegory of the human condition or as methodical exploration of the social and psychological constructs relating to the removal of sin in this community. Best of all, *Chidra* pairs well with an article by one of the makers of the film, and its scriptwriter, Arik Moran, in the journal *Religions*, that unpacks the ritual through the through the prism of karmic transference. The multimodal nature of this coupling—a careful academic treatment of a subject accompanied by an arresting audio-visual record—is particularly welcome since textual descriptions of rituals can be hard for the mind to animate and visual representations risk being insufficiently intricate. As an academic community, we are fortunate that filmmaker Nadav Harel and scholar of South Asian history and culture, Arik Moran, have worked together to produce this unique and aesthetically memorable contribution.

From a cinematic perspective, *Chidra* is effective at conveying the mood of the Kahika Mela. The sophisticated camerawork and coloring brings out the shadowy, emerald beauty of the landscape, and the shots are expertly framed to showcase the range of activities occurring at any one time. While the filmmakers are never in shot, their presence is also not effaced: at times, characters intentionally perform and play

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Mark Turin on *Chidra*

to the camera, at other moments, making sure that the camera “doesn’t film the sacrifice.” The rumbling and earthy darkness that pervades the film—accentuated by plumes of cigarette smoke and displays of public drunkenness—is offset by the transcendent quality of the ritual, and the intimacy of the relationships that it documents, such as a group of girls squabbling as they get ready to head to stage. In a manner that is difficult to describe, and even harder to accurately represent, *Chidra* integrates the networked modernity of Kullu (replete with ever-present cell phones, electrified sound systems and cultural displays of choreographed performances) with the timelessness of ceremony and ritual practice. The tone and timbre of the narrator, Dahlia Lynn, initially somewhat soporific, gathers authority and significance over the course of the film, working effectively to tether the viewer to the characters and their ritual process.

Chidra is a consummately professional contribution to the more traditional genre of ethnographic film of the Himalayan region. It is educational, engaging and visually faultless, leaving the viewer with an enriched understanding of this profound moment in the cultural world of Kullu. While the ritual narrative of the film is clear, the underlying philosophical questions that it raises remain open for interpretation. *Chidra* means “pierced,” but we are left wondering: who is pierced, and by what or by whom? *Chidra* has

created a space for introspection and contemplation, and for reconciliation and atonement.

Mark Turin is an anthropologist, linguist, and occasional radio presenter, and an Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia. For over twenty years, his regional focus has been the Himalayan region (particularly Nepal, northern India, and Bhutan), and more recently, the Pacific Northwest. He is the author or co-author of four books, the editor of nine volumes, and edits a series on oral literature.