



Vikram Gandhi, *Kūmārē: The True Story of a False Prophet*

New York: Kino Lorber, 2012. 84 Minutes. Color. \$29.95 (DVD); \$7.99 (digital download at Amazon and iTunes).

VIKRAM GANDHI'S FILM is simultaneously (1) a documentary into the nature of transnational religious movements in the U.S., (2) a "gotcha comedy" (somewhat akin to Borat, though without the emphasis on "embarrassment as comedy"), and (3) a social experiment on the effect of Gandhi's self-created "religion" on his followers and, ultimately, upon himself. The film is based upon a deception—that Gandhi is a guru named Kūmārē who came to the West to share his teachings. These teachings, like the invented "biography" of Kūmārē, are a hodge-podge of Hindu teachings, Western appropriations and new-age interpretations, and self-conscious inventions (including, for example, odd yoga positions, slogan-based mantras, a symbol akin to OM albeit with a sexual referent, and even the nonstandard diacritics used in his name itself). This deception, though, is a deception that the film ultimately tries to overturn at the conclusion, arguing that a larger truth underlies it and that Gandhi is as transformed by this deception as are his followers ("This is the story of the biggest lie I've ever told and the greatest truth I've ever experienced"; 7:20).

The film begins (1:09) with an all-too-brief biography of Gandhi and his voiceover discusses his motivations behind the project. Through spliced vintage footage of his childhood, Gandhi discusses his own general disaffection with religion while growing up in the U.S. within a relatively devout Hindu family ("...they immersed me in Hindu mythology, Indian philosophy, and endless ritual"; 1:38). This preamble sets up a conflict between his Hindu heritage and his Western upbringing as an explanation of his disaffection not only with Hinduism, but with religion in general ("Maybe this was all just a bunch of nonsense somebody made up a long time ago"; 2:08). The documentary, then, is supposedly an attempt to understand the nature of religion while subverting it; to show his followers that their true power is within themselves when he reveals himself to not be who he said he is ("I wanted to prove to others who are looking for answers that no one is more spiritual than anyone else"; 5:22).

Particular responses to the film will likely depend on whom a particular audience member empathizes with—whether with the deceiver or the deceived. The latter will see profound ethical problems in Gandhi's deception—his followers are portrayed as fragile or struggling individuals (for example, a recovering drug addict, a death

penalty defense attorney overwhelmed by her occupation, a depressed woman, and a number of other individuals in various stages of sorting out their lives) who attach to him and his teachings as a “solution” to their difficulties. His deception, then, will be seen more than as simply a lie, but as a lie that could have profound—even disastrous—consequences when he reveals this deception.

Audience members who empathize with Gandhi—that is, those who see religion as fundamentally a deception or, at best, a psychological salve—will point out that “how we deceive ourselves” is a fundamental theme in Kūmārē’s teaching (for example, “Basically, I was just telling everybody I was fake”; 15:12). Throughout the film, the audience is privy to the double-meaning behind such statements, often with an intended comic effect, though his followers are not (and they even make claims to the exact opposite, such as the recovering drug addict, who says, “There’s nothing, uh... phony about him”; 13:37).

The film is bookended by Gandhi looking at his reflection in a mirror (0:20 and 76:11). In the first case, as Gandhi becomes Kūmārē, this foreshadows his impending deception; in the second case, as Kūmārē is transforming back to Gandhi, the mirror is actually a question: Is it Kūmārē or Gandhi that is being reflected back and what might such a distinction mean? This is brought into relief when Gandhi reveals himself in person: “Hello, gurus ... My name is Vikram and my ideal self is Kūmārē” (78:55).

In neither case is the self-reflection really explored, which is unfortunate since the movie hinges fundamentally on how one interprets Gandhi himself (particularly whether one sees him as transformed at the end of the film and whether this absolves or mitigates the deception). The ethics of such an experiment—a project that would be impossible in the university setting because of IRB standards—is simply bypassed in the film as if the audience is simply supposed to accept that Gandhi is sincere in his endeavor. The problem here lies in the fact that a critique of “sincerity” or “authenticity” is supposedly at the heart of Gandhi’s project, but he never turns that critique upon himself.

Like the mirror, though, Gandhi’s self-reflectivity in the film contains little depth, but significant surface, recalling the myth of Narcissus. The difference here, though, is that Gandhi claims to be explicitly exploring that reflection, but like Narcissus, cannot ever quite break free of his own reflection. While that reflection supposedly shifts by the end, in stark contrast to Narcissus, it is still ultimately about him. After the reveal of the deception at the end of the film, the audience is told frustratingly little about its impact on his followers (we get only snippets of their impressions and, via text-overlay, are told that ten of his students are still in touch with him, but four are not; 80:48). What is put forth as a social experiment ultimately becomes mainly biography, since the “test subjects” almost disappear at the end. In this way, the movie becomes a variant of a narrative every academic serving on a scholarship committee has read a thousands times: “I went to study abroad to change the world, and it was ultimately me who was changed.” In fairness, the details are what makes this narrative frame interesting—and Gandhi does a fine job at that—but it is hard not to feel that the film ended ten minutes before it should have.

I screened this film in my Introduction to Hinduism class in the Fall of 2014 and reactions to the film were largely positive. While the students overwhelmingly enjoyed the film and had sympathy with Gandhi’s project, there was a decided turn in opinion when asked what their interpretation might be if it were them who were duped or if

Gandhi impersonated a religious leader from their own particular traditions. Students who self-identified as Hindu were sharply split between those who appreciated the project and those who thought it went too far in its mockery (though we all agreed that his affected Indian accent as Kūmāré was particularly grating).

Though this review has largely focused on criticism, I still strongly recommend it. Yes, the film utilizes overly simplistic and unanalyzed concepts—such as religion as “psychological crutch” or ritual as nonsensical action—and often resorts to caricature (especially of extremes in new age religious movements in the West). Moreover, its ethics and conclusions can be—and, to my mind, should be—sharply criticized. But all of that said, its accessibility and high production value must be commended. In fact, it is because the film opens itself up (whether intentionally or not) to such larger and difficult questions in such an accessible fashion that it is a wonderful tool in the classroom.

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