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Servants of Ganesh

Servants of Ganesh: Inside The Elephant Stable (2006). Mark Dugas (Producer, Writer, Camera, Editor); Piers Locke (Anthropological Consultant, Co-Producer). Ethnographic Documentary. DVD format. 42 minutes. Released by One World Films. <http://www.oneworldfilms.com/> (the film is currently being re-edited for distribution by Octapixx.) A gallery of photographs from the project is located here: http://home.earthlink.net/~oneworldfilms/piers_gallery/

The *second* time I watched this film, I saw it with my nineteen-year-old niece, who physically winced during several scenes. I asked her why she felt she responded the way she did and she said she didn't like to see a baby elephant taken from its mother, tied up, and beaten. The *first* time I watched this film, I saw it by myself and found myself considering a long list of questions around such issues as directorial intent and how the camera is a perplexing presence in documentary film, perhaps especially in works where it is unacknowledged as a producer of actions and words. The distance between my niece's response and my own was not simply the distance between our different capacities to empathize with an animal. My own response, I believe, was more a result of my current reading about the issues surrounding captive elephant management, animal rights activism, and ethnographic strategies of participant observation. My niece's response, though, highlighted for me quickly that many people are likely to be upset by this important film.

Servants of Ganesh introduces us to the Khorsor Elephant Breeding Center, a government-run stable or hattisar in Chitwan, Nepal. The film gives us glimpses into the daily lives and activities of the men who work at the elephant stables. The men are described as having committed their lives to the care of elephants; and the elephants themselves are seen as critical elements in the local tourist economy as well as irreplaceable tools in the protection and care of the Chitwan National Park as they carry scientists, poacher patrols, and park managers, and wardens into otherwise inaccessible areas. The men of the stable are portrayed as a brotherhood of predominantly Tharu ethnicity dedicated to the elephants and traditions of worship and care for animals and gods.

The central plot of the film focuses on the ritualized training of a three-year old elephant bull named Paras Gaj as he and his handler, Satya Narayan, pass through the ritual process of changing Paras Gaj from a young “wild” elephant who lived in companionship with his mother (a trained elephant at the stable) to a working elephant bonded to his human handler. The film shows the difficult process of separating Paras Gaj from his mother, the rituals associated with asking the gods to look benevolently on the training, the training sessions for Paras Gaj, and the nascent relationship between the young elephant and his handler. Tharu elephant training practices, it is argued, are not the same as techniques used in other elephant range countries, and focus on building a relationship between the human and the animal based in religious ritual, especially practices of placating and appealing to the gods and in particular the Hindu god Ganesh. Beyond these practices, however, we see the close binding of Paras Gaj to a training post, his obviously terrifying moments during night training when the keepers, who sing loud songs and bring flaming torches near the elephant, “massage” the elephant’s skin — the keepers seek to desensitize the young elephant to human touch by constant physical handling all over his body. Throughout these nights during which Paras Gaj can barely move because his legs have been bound together and his body has been secured to the training post, Satya must try to stay on top of the young elephant and teach the elephant that he does not represent a threat. After the night training sessions, Paras Gaj is shown going through driving training during which he is tied to two other elephants. With Satya on his back using two sharpened bamboo sticks to guide Paras Gaj, the young elephant is taught to be driven by an elephant handler on his back. Eventually, the young elephant is seen walking beside the larger elephants through villages and along car-filled roads as he learns about the world of humans and working under his handler.

The film has been shot and edited by Mark Dugas and is based in the ethnographic research of Piers Locke, currently a lecturer in anthropology at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand. The film is intended to show how the elephant handlers of Khorsor understand their own practices and traditions. The film is not the place to look for an analysis of the claims made by the elephant handlers, nor is it the place to find a broader discussion and critique of the traditions and contemporary practices of training and using working elephants in their range countries. It may well be that many viewers will focus, as my niece did, on the difficulties faced by Paras Gaj as he endures his training. Other viewers will likely be swayed by the sympathetic account of Satya Narayan and his colleagues at Khorsor. Still other viewers will see this film as part of the dynamic and evolving discussion about the place and significance of captive elephant management, and the ways that elephants and humans do, in fact,

make lives together. Beyond all this, the film captures a moment in the history of the stables and the animals and people who lived there during the filming in 2004. Several of the elephants in the film have now died as a result of an outbreak of tuberculosis; as of this writing, Paras Gaj continues on his path while Satya Narayan has retired.