
Book Review

Wendy J.N. Lee (Director), *Pad Yatra: A Green Odyssey* (Pad Yatra Film LLC, New York City, 2013), 1 hour 10 minutes.

The Pad Yatra, or walking pilgrimage, focused on in this documentary was ostensibly about the response to climate change by a group of 700 pilgrims led by His Holiness the Gyalwang Drukpa across the Himalayas. There was also a subtext, accessible to the viewer, that made the video more compelling from a scholarly point of view, although this subtext did not appear to have been consciously constructed. Its narrative thread spoke to two radically different perspectives on the pilgrimage, illustrated by two different 'characters' in the story, one being the Gyalwang Drukpa and his followers, the other being a lawyer from Los Angeles, Carrie Lee, sister of the director, representing a non-indigenous experience of the Pad Yatra.

The story of the pilgrimage itself was a somewhat romanticized relationship between environmental degradation and the Ladakh (India)-based monks and nuns who saw themselves as stewards of their environment. They clearly grasped the connection between the local reality of climate disaster—as illustrated by the unique climatological phenomenon of a cloudburst which opened the video—and human action. The cloudburst was as acute as a 'natural disaster' can get, reportedly unleashing two inches of rainfall in a mere 60 seconds, leaving enormous environmental destruction and human suffering in its aftermath. This event was juxtaposed with the chronic disaster of global warming. Glaciers were melting in the region having the most glaciers outside the poles, and climate change was creating unusual weather-related events, like the sudden snowstorm the pilgrims encountered. The Pad Yatra's inspiration derived from His Holiness's perception that such disasters resulted from the Earth's revenge on humans for having failed to treat the environment, its rocks and trees, its insects and mammals with the kindness it deserved. Environmental preservation was a fundamental goal for His Holiness, who founded an organization, Live to Love, for that purpose.

The key idea here was the role that spirituality played in human–environment relationships. Spirituality, according to the Gyalwang Drukpa, equated to having a clean, kind, selfless mind, one full of loving kindness, all virtues promoted throughout Buddhist dharma. This sense of spirituality is connected to the ability to value trees and nature in 'the traditional life' of the people who practiced it and lived in the Himalaya.

The driving force for the Pad Yatra seemed to be to cultivate and spread this encompassing and experiential relationship with nature while also standing as an example to others around the world. My take on the reason for the Pad Yatra differed

from the one narrated to us by Darryl Hannah, who emphasized the dangers of plastic, which appeared to me to be more an emblem than a driving force behind the Pad Yatra. The focus on plastic waste detracted from the larger, deeper message conveyed through the many references made to spiritual attitudes of kindness, love, joy, heritage, and compassion. These were not only discussed but practiced by the indigenous pilgrims who avoided stepping on insects, drank in the natural beauty, conducted prayer sessions each morning and night, greeted and educated locals, tied kata (a blessing scarf) onto horses and yaks, and so on.

While these practices were glanced at, they were not explored in the kind of depth that would satisfy a serious student of spiritual practice and the environment. Similarly, environmental issues tended to get equally superficial treatment. The pilgrims picked up 800 pounds of plastic on their journey, little more than a pound per person, showing us that this act is more symbolic than the deeper environmental engagement His Holiness sought. Moreover, there was no explanation of how the pilgrims disposed of this trash. My hope was that disposal was not done the same way that I often witnessed in Nepal, simply dumped into the nearest river because there was no effective system of disposal. I was no expert on these issues when this video began; it did not make me more of an expert.

I have already alluded to the perspective of His Holiness, who was clearly on a mission to disseminate a deep spiritual message to villagers along the path and to the pilgrims. He, not surprisingly, was as focused on the experience itself and what it symbolized. Why a walking pilgrimage? His Holiness explained, 'It is very important to walk on the ground; you are communicating; you feel it (that you are there)'. And by walking, 'your spirituality will grow'. He observed of one of his fellow religionists, 'He's doing this for others. He is quite happy'. Comments of this type frequented His Holiness's observations and messages.

His experience was contrasted with that of American lawyer, Carrie Lee, who was the secondary focus of the narrative of this video. Her (also valid) purpose was to experience something new and also rewarding. Her tone contrasted with his. She reflected more on herself than others: 'If I had missed out on my Indiana Jones adventure, trekking through the Himalayas, I would have been devastated'. And her experience strummed a different set of value chords: competitiveness ('I was in good shape...the Westerners may have been very physically fit...but when we got there, compared to the locals, we didn't compare. We were pathetic'), difficulty (they sometimes walked 16 to 18 hours in a day), and worried about personal image ('I had to ride a horse one day, but I'm embarrassed still about it'). These two approaches to the experience and meaning of this long trek were interwoven throughout, illuminating contrasts that gave the viewer greater perspective on the Pad Yatra as a result. These contrasts were expressed stylistically as well. Lee frequently appeared in the studio, answering questions about the Pad Yatra. His Holiness was nearly always on the pilgrimage itself, at times with voice-overs of his thoughts. This difference in cinematic approach accentuated the contrasts in their voices.

The video ended by witnessing how Carrie Lee's experience evolved into a somewhat deeper appreciation for the pilgrimage, but one that was still distinct from that of His Holiness. The Pad Yatra resolved into an epilogue that documented its replication in other places.

The ideal audience for this video would be students in a college-level course, especially one that introduced them to the overlap between religious and environmental studies. Its length was about right for that purpose, just over an hour. Viewing it should spawn interest and discussion and perhaps a desire to treat the earth with greater loving kindness.

*Steve Folmar
Wake Forest University
Department of Anthropology
folmarsj@wfu.edu*