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### Living for Ganesh

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Living in the presence of Mother Ganges is heaven for the holy men of India

Review by Judith Salkin

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In India, with a population of more than a billion people, there are 13 million yogis.

These holy men wander the country offering blessings for the massive populous. When they take on a young acolyte, the apprenticeship is long, arduous and just the beginning of the path to enlightenment.

In *Naked in Ashes*, writer, director and producer Paula Fouce gives the Western world a look in the seemingly simple lives of these intensely dedicated holy men. The star - if there is one - of this film is Mahant ShivRaj Giri (Silver King of the Mountains) and his acolytes, Raman Giri, the standing Baba and Santosh Giri, a 14-year-old boy who left his family to live and learn from the holy man.

The film follows these three and several other holy men as they live their daily lives by the side of Mother Ganges and search for higher state of being through "austerities" they impose upon themselves.

It is incredible to watch these men who have chosen a life of deprivation and are dedicated to the betterment of the spirit - they do it with such joy. Most of the film is set in Hardwar, where Shiv Raj camps out in the elements along the mother river and bathes daily in its icy waters. In one section of the film, Fouce and her crew follow Shiv Raj, Santosh and Raman on a trek to a holy shrine high in the Himalayas while walking barefoot through the snow.

The last part of the film documents the Kumbh Mela, the pilgrimage of more than 100 million people to the holy city of Ujain, who come to bathe together in the Ganges and where Santosh is finally accepted as a novice in a ceremony along the river.

Along the way, the yogis all speak in disarmingly simple languages about the joys of the path they have chosen and the humility each has learned from his own chosen austerity.

In one sequence, Shiv Raj Giri tells how he admonished the Indian parliament for its policies regarding the nations poor. To get parliament's attention, he pulled a car filled with eight passengers only with his penis. Fouce then shows a sequence proving that he

has pulled this stunt more than once in his life. I doubt that, though, would raise any eyebrows in our own Washington, D.C., Congress.

Considering this time of year when Christians and Jews are celebrating some of the holiest days on their calendars, it seems especially heartening to watch this film and be reminded that while Western civilizations believe they have all the answers in spiritual matters, there are simple men who can prove them wrong - while using very soft voices.

Naked In Ashes

Rated: Not rated

Time: 1 hour, 43 minutes

Genre: Documentary

Language: English and Hindu with English translation

Starring: Shiv Raj Giri, Santosh Giri, Raman Giri, Burfani Das, Hanuman Das

Director: Paula Fouce

Showing: Opens Friday, April 14. See page 34 for theaters and times.

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