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Ashish Avikunthak's Rati Chakravyuh: Tales of a long-take

BY APARNA FRANK (HTTP://DEARCINEMA.COM/AUTHOR/APARNA-FRANK) • PUBLISHED ON OCTOBER 15, 2014

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A still from Rati Chakravyuh

ASHISH AVIKUNTHAK'S *RATI CHAKRAVYUH* (2013) WILL HAVE ITS INTERNATIONAL PREMIERE AT Aicon Gallery, New York, on October 22. If you are unfamiliar with Avikunthak's cinema, then I recommend *Rati Chakravyuh* as an ideal primer for exploring some of his more intricate and philosophically oriented works. In the art and independent film circuits, Avikunthak is known as someone who is very much at the forefront of an exciting resurgence of experimental filmmaking in India. Selected as a 2014 great artist in Art Review's annual list, he has been working in the medium of film for over a decade. He also teaches film at the University of Rhode Island and has curated film programmes devoted to showcasing non-mainstream film practices in India. Preferring to define himself as a film-artist than a filmmaker, Avikunthak's films are mostly self-financed with modest budgets, and they have been exhibited in both galleries and film festivals in India and abroad.

His first feature, *Nirakar Chhaya* (Shadows Formless, 2007), an adaptation of the novella 'Pandavapuram' by the

The characters are seated in a circle,

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renowned Malayalam literary icon- Sethumadhavan, is a surreal, enthralling, portrait of loneliness and desire. The film won both the best director award for Avikunthak and best actress award for Mandira Bandhopadhyay at the 2008 Mahindra Indo-American Arts Council Film Festival (MIAAC).

His second feature, *Katho Upanishad* (2011), presents in a tripartite structure one of the most famous dialogues from the Upanishads between Yama (the God of death), and Nachiketha on the achievement of moksha. In substance and style, *Rati Chakravyuh* can be seen as an amalgamation of Avikunthak's two preceding features, but it differs in an aspect that has already caught attention – the film is one long-take lasting for 102 minutes. The long-take is not a new form for Avikunthak, he has been experimenting with it in his short films, and *Katho Upanishad* features one that runs for 58 minutes.

Rati Chakravyuh, digitally shot in a 4K Red-One camera, is the latest installment in what appears to be his ongoing preoccupation with cinematic time and narrative. The film is based on an original English script by Avikunthak that was translated into Bengali by Souagata Mukherjee. The cast, composed of student actors and theater artists, rehearsed for 6 weeks before the final shooting that lasted for two days. The third take was used for the final film.

Many film artists have taken up the long-take challenge. Andy Warhol's *Empire* (1964), supposedly consisted of long-takes that lasted for 33 minutes, and more popularly, Alexander Sokurov took us on an uninterrupted, 96 minute, selective tour of Russian history staged at the State Hermitage Museum in *Russian Ark* (2002). But not all long-takes are equal. And the long-longer-longest- take contest arguably came to an end when Warhol hitched it to an eight-hour duration. Moreover, with the relative conveniences ushered in by the 'digital revolution', there is a burden on the long-take to reinvent itself aesthetically rather than just expand temporally into a kind of extreme-sport. Like Sokurov, Avikunthak recognizes this challenge and risk. So how does he retain our interest in a scene that doesn't 'change' for 102 minutes? He tells stories, particularly stories that have no use for 'plots'.

All of Avikunthak's films defy an easy summary, but in *Rati Chakravyuh* he shows that he is aware of this tendency by opening the film with an unassuming, yet fairy-tale like introduction: "On the night of a complete lunar eclipse, twelve newly wed couples come together after their mass wedding with a priestess and talk." He concludes the film with an intriguing, shocking note that upends this 'Arabian Nights' kind of structure. I will not reveal the ending, for only upon seeing it will you be compelled to watch the film again. Between the two title cards that cue the beginning and ending, lies a sea of discussions, stories, and poetic declarations that are epic in scope, cosmic in vision, and alluring in its boldness.

The characters are seated in a circle, in full wedding attire, and a slow, mobile camera floats around them for the entire 102 minutes. Claiming that he was inspired by Da Vinci's 'The Last Supper' and the 'adda' (informal colloquium) culture of Calcutta, Avikunthak has the six couples and the priestess tell tales of all different kinds: stories of India, Calcutta, personal memories, collective memories, and imagined genealogies. They debate philosophical topics such as the beginning of life, the nature of an ending, and rewrite stories from the great epics so that Sita, Ravana, and Rama are recast as vulnerable, desirous mortals like us.

The camera, revolving at varying speeds and heights, tracks the faces of the speaking figures, and at times advances and recedes to linger on the faces of the listeners. Possessing a rhythm of its own, the shape it manifests is of the 'chakravyuh', a circular military defense- formation described in the battle of Kurukshetra in Mahabharatha. But then, how does this 'chakravyuh' connect to the discussions we hear? And, indeed, why the chakravyuh in relation to 'Rati', the Goddess of love who appears to have inspired the subtext of desire and eroticism in the tales? Avikunthak abstains from explaining such juxtapositions, and halfway through the film, under the influence of these heady stories and poetic expressions, you start searching for dots to connect, and wonder if a reference here or an allusion there would unlock the significance of this fascinating ritual. Then suddenly, you lock into the faces onscreen, and it hits you that it doesn't matter if there is some esoteric concept driving this ceremony. The camera has revealed, perhaps unwittingly, that the pulse of the film is manifested in the face of each individual in this group portrait.

Without lapsing into monotonous delivery or theatricality, or appearing as masks, the student actors are not performing for the camera, but representing something real and ephemeral. Their very anonymity renders all that has a whiff of abstraction, as believable, sincere, and even personal. They sustain the long-take as embodiments of mothers, wives, lost friends, comrades, and victims and survivors of public and private cruelties. On a lighter vein, they are also our voices, narrating the peevs and pleasures of an Indian middle-class family's fascination with the Maruti car, quibbling on how 'Maruti' is another name for Hanuman, and recollecting cricket matches at Eden Gardens. These voices effortlessly flow into each other, erasing the distinction between 'I' and 'we', the part and the whole. Where one character leaves off, the other picks up, modifying and improving the narrative, and in doing so, they keep the story alive. Memories give way to secrets, and philosophical ruminations glide into poetry and confessions, but it is all one narrative, superbly held by the cast and Avikunthak's impassioned text.

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What you have here is a powerful work that demands an adventurous, dauntless viewer who is willing to shed some arcane assumptions of what a film is supposed to do. The film proves that sometimes, to fully experience 'time' one has to forget time; that to listen to desire is to listen without inhibition. That when you participate in a ritual, meanings are indistinguishable from expressions, for ceremonies don't require a plot. *Rati Chakravayuh* is one of Avikunthak's most original works because it has used a technique that is habitually and reflexively linked to time, such as the long-take, to tell timeless tales. The provocative, melancholic, and often shocking voices that you will encounter in this film, are also, in the end, one man's deep, passionate, and at times angry monologue on life, death and indeed India. But above all, he would want you to think about it as a cinematic meditation.

Aparna Frank is a PhD student at the Department of Cinema Studies, New York University.

Watch the trailer here:



Rati Chakravayuh, Trailer 2



01:51

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