Untitled from the series Vakratunda Swaha
Film still on archival paper
11 X 14.75 in
Edition 5 + 2APs

Ashish Avikunthak

Vakratunda Swaha

Untitled from the series Vakratunda Swaha
Film still on archival paper
11 X 14.75 in
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Untitled from the series Vakratunda Swaha
Film still on archival paper
11 X 14.75 in
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Untitled from the series Vakratunda Swaha
Film still on archival paper
Triptych (each 11 X 14.75 in)
Edition 5 + 2APs

Untitled from the series Vakratunda Swaha
Film still on archival paper
11 X 14.75 in
Edition 5 + 2APs

Untitled from the series Vakratunda Swaha
Film still on archival paper
11 X 14.75 in
Edition 5 + 2APs

A Performative Ontology for the Ritual

A lone voice would trickle out of a black box-speaker fixed above the classroom door. *Vakratunda Mahakaaya, Suryakoti Samaprabha, Nirvighnam Kurumedeva Sarvakaryeshu Sarvada*[1]. Far from saccharine shlokas floating on the internet, this one, recited by one of my school teachers, was temperamental, unpredictable and changed through time. It would go off-key, skip words in between and slip in and out of audible range. All of us school girls sang along—with no understanding of what these multi-syllabic Sanskrit words meant—before the national anthem and our school song. It was a morning ritual, the necessity of which remained a mystery to me.

I returned to this popular invocation with Ashish Avikunthak's *Vakratunda Swaha*, a celluloid ritual for the tusked god. Since his earliest films, Avikunthak has been concerned with rituals—secular and religious—but also the ritualising of daily, mundane acts. In this case, ritualising is not the sanctifying of an object or an act within a religious framework. At a formal level, Avikunthak borrows from the ritual its repetitive occurrence and recreates this cyclical temporality in film. At a conceptual level, he engages not only with the prescribed and grandiose acts of religious devotion, but also the mundane ones that surround them. He uses familiar images and acts associated with Hindu religious practice to create performative scenarios in which they acquire new meanings.

He periodically returns to his personal footage archive and often, images shot at one event show up in different films. He treats his footage with the reverence an archeologist might have for his excavation site and culling out images for one film is no reason for the footage to be banished from the editing table. Symbols, acts and preoccupations also appear across his body of films giving us the impression that he is moving along the edge of the infinity symbol (∞), always returning to its centre (its beginning and its end) before branching out again into the new.

Vakratunda Swaha opens with the late artist Girish Dahiwale (1974-1998) immersing a Ganapati idol into the sea on Ananth Chaturdashi, the tenth day of Ganesha Chaturthi. Avikunthak, a close friend of Girish's, had initially meant for this two-minute shot to be longer, a film unto itself, and part of his *Et Cetera* series of structuralist, one-shot films. The attempt fell through because of heavy rain and Avikunthak's crew, standing knee-deep in the Arabian Sea, was only able to record a short take. Girish committed suicide on September 18, 1998 and, in retrospect, Avikunthak has described this footage as "a friend who I had in my cans…a real memory". While the footage certainly preserves the memory of Girish, almost in real time, the film, as whole, extends beyond the project of memorialising.

On first viewing, one might be tempted to think that *Vakratunda Swaha* is a film about Ganesha, the rituals performed in his name or his manifestation as Vakratunda. This religious and ritualistic landscape certainly informs the film but its kernel lies elsewhere. Avikunthak's placing of himself within the frame underlines his desire to reflect on his relationship not only with loss, death and regeneration, which Ganesha symbolises, but ritual and religiosity. By his own admission, this is Avikunthak's most self-reflexive film.

In the title itself, Avikunthak invokes the sacrificial fire ritual in Hinduism during which *swaha* is uttered, in an exclamatory fashion, at the end of the mantra. Offerings are poured into the fire to appease the gods and in return, health and prosperity are promised. Through annihilation, therefore, emerges the possibility of well-being, recovery and regeneration.

In a similar vein, the final act of devotion during Ananth Chaturthi is to immerse the idol into the water, after life has been infused into it by a priest and offerings have been made to the god. This parting from the devotee after ten days of worship is a form of ritual death and Ganesha takes with him any misfortune that might befall his worshippers. In that two-minute shot of Girish, then, both ritual death and real death are suggested and held together, metaphorically speaking.

By invoking Vakratunda and not Ganesha or Vinayaka, Avikunthak excavates the popular god's Tantric form. Vakratunda refers to the one with the twisted trunk, which, within Tantric imagery, also mirrors the form of the *kundalini*.[2] The latter is represented visually as a coiled snake sitting at the bottom of the human spine. The seat of the kundalini is the *muladhara chakra*, located in the anal region, where our sexual energies reside. This chakra is also the abode of Ganesha and thus, with Vakratunda, Avikunthak is recovering the god's transgressive incarnation.

One of the key motifs in the film is the tonsure, a Hindu funerary ritual performed by the eldest son after the death of a family member. It is a rite of passage, a symbolic representation of a new life after death, for the living. By getting tonsured for the "Girish film" and not Girish, Avikunthak dislodges that act from its theological context and a new, performative intention begins to override the religious. A person is tonsured only once after death but Avikunthak goes through the ritual three times, over a period of eight years (2001-2008) and films it each time. This re-enactment for the camera makes it more than just a witness: it becomes a participant, a performer. The impulse to film the ritual, then, is as important as the ritual, and the act of filming itself a ritual. Here, the tonsure is freed of funerary associations, but not melancholia. In an early sequence when Avikunthak is tonsured on a boat, his body exudes a pathos that can perhaps only be the result of having resigned oneself to sadness. His periodic return to the tonsure is a return to the inability to cope with loss; it is not a letting go of vanity, but a form of self-sacrifice.

After these tightly composed, black and white shots, another key player enters the frame: the mask. A man who has tonsured Avikunthak, ties a Ganapati mask around his head. In subsequent sequences, the mask is worn by a worshipper, a rickshaw puller and a man carrying out the tonsure. These masked Ganapati performers make us wonder: What would happen if god were to take human form? Could he challenge human mortality? Could he, as a human, be reborn? Indeed, could the dead come back to life?

The rational answer to these questions is an unequivocal no. Death, as we know it, is irreversible, not retractable, unlike the death in the mythic universe of the gods. Ganapati can re-emerge after his ceremonial sacrifice, but Girish will not. It is precisely this tension between the ritual of a god's sacrifice and that of a human, of ritual death and real death that Avikunthak wants to underline. The tension exists not because of any clash of the rational and the mythic, but because Avikunthak is positioned at the intersection of devotion and disbelief. He articulates an ambivalence, a disillusionment really, with a godly figure who is supposed to usher in fortune and well-being. The gas mask, then, with all its ominous and violent associations, only underscores this disappointment.

The function of the gas mask has been to protect the person who wears it from poisonous gases, from contagion. Its modern history reveals its use in chemical warfare, as witnessed in World War I. The first time it appears in *Vakratunda Swaha*, it is being worshipped by a woman, who does a *namaskaram* in its honour. Cut to: A sequence featuring this woman, now gas-masked, dancing on a city terrace top. This is the only time a woman appears in the film, as a performer, and that too to introduce the gas mask. A paradox surfaces: Could grace and beauty also be sinister and malevolent?

The gas mask's semblance to Ganapati's visage is inescapable and Avikunthak cleverly plays on this visual similarity. He uses the gas mask as a formal device to embark on an archaeological dig of sorts into the prehistory of the present-day Ganapati. Unearthed is a malevolent *yaksha* or protective god of the non-Vedic people, who was eventually domesticated during Puranic times[3] and given a more benevolent disposition. Avikunthak addresses this transformation in the perception of Ganapati most directly in the sequence featuring the rickshaw puller with a Ganapati mask, who leads a passenger with a gas mask through the deserted streets of Calcutta. The surreal quality of the sound here infuses the scene with foreboding, suggesting that something is amiss. If the malevolent Ganapati is the powerful sahib and the benevolent Ganapati a compliant labourer, might Avikunthak be implying that Ganapati's dark genealogy is, in fact, his essence?

Yet, the gas mask needn't always be read as the harbinger of ill will. When Avikunthak walks through the modern metropolis in a gas mask and the traffic moves in the opposite direction, it is hardly malevolence that one senses. The mask here is a marker of the filmmaker's location in a modern time-space, of his mortality. In this performative scenario, there is a desire to break through the restrictions of time and space, to realise that which seems humanly impossible. If a man is moving forward while the world retreats, is reincarnation be possible? Could we bring back the dead or those whom we have lost?

This fleeting moment of hope eventually gets overwritten by a crushing conclusion. The gas-masked devotee immerses his Ganapati idol into the pond and emerges as Ganapati himself; god has the power to take human form but human aspiration for god-like powers is only a flight of fancy. Avikunthak must submit to the fact that reincarnation is possible only in the world of the gods: he is helpless, condemned to his mortality, to irretrievable loss, to the irreversibility of death. It's a dismaying confrontation that provokes the smashing of the Ganapati idols. This is an ambivalent destruction, however, and the use of reverse here underlines this. It is as if the filmmaker were collecting the shards of the idols, shattered by his own hands, and returning the god to his rightful place in the pantheon.

Avikunthak may be disillusioned but cannot abandon religion or the ritual. He grew up in a moderately religious family in Calcutta and these are sites of familiarity, of memory, of intimacy for him. The religious is a milieu he recognises and the ritual an act he re-visits in most of his work. While he often plays with the ritual's 'original' meaning, it still through the ritual that he puts forward his existential exegesis.

At the film's close, Girish appears for the last time, slowed down and sepia-tinted. Voices chant the *Ganapati Upanishad*, a Sanskrit text of southern Indian provenance praising the god, slowly hypnotising the viewer with their consistent rhythm. This footage has appeared as opening performance, as mournful remembrance and now, as concluding obeisance. For Avikunthak, Girish's suicide may have been a self-sacrifice that cleared a path for resurrection. For me, Avikunthak's film is the cathartic release he needed to continue to live with death.

- Subuhi Jiwani

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[1]Oh, the curved-faced, mighty Lord, you are like a billion suns in brilliance; kindly free us always from hurdles in all that we endeavor

[2]The energy that must be awakened for spiritual enlightenment.

[3]The earliest written versions of the Puranas date from the time of the Gupta empire (third-fifth century B.C.E.).

वक्रतुंड स्वाहा।

Vakratunda Swāhā

Transplantations. In Transcendence.

वक्रतुंड स्वाहा: पौराणिक-अनुबोधक प्रतिरोपणकी प्रक्रिया

Vakratunda Swāhā: Mytho-Memorial Transplantations

Ashish Avikunthak's film work, and particularly *Vakratunda Swāhā*, provokes a personal feeling towards considering cinematography as a transplantary art. In *Vaktratunda Swāhā*, we see twin metaphoric narratives linked through a kind of leitmotif – that of transplantation. As if through the oldest Indian (xeno) transplantation myth manifested by Lord Ganesha and the way Avikunthak transplants his narrative limbs[1]. As I understand, before Avikunthak embarked upon making *Vaktratunda Swāhā*. he had only a tiny 'cell', a fragment of footage that he had shot some years back. Of a young and handsome artist friend, Girish Dahiwale, with whom, along with other student-artists, such as Riyas Komu and Justin Ponmany from Mumbai's J.J. School of Arts Avikunthak had planned a collaborative manifesto[2].

He could not have a longer footage on location because of weather constraints and unfortunately later Girish Dahiwale choosing to end his life quite abrutply, leaving behind only a melancholic memory-void and a vibe. The 'cell' stayed in the filmmaker's mind like a living fossil. Interestingly, Avikunthak has an academic background in archaeology and anthropology[3]. *Vakratunda Swāhā* seems transplantary partly also in the sense that it hones anthropology, archaeology and cinematography – anthropology, for the way Avikunthak contextualizes Ganesha; archaelogy, for the way he fathoms the landscapes and ruins of memory and myth, and cinematography, for the way he temporalizes space or spatializes time. I personally believe that there is a persistence of this aspect all through Avikunthak's cinematographic praxis so far. And this has largely become possible because he finances himself and no work of his has been commissioned by an outside agency so far. The archaeologist-anthropologist-cineaste disciplinary combination, I would personally think, demands of a भावक, the viewer-receiver, an exploration into a possible interpretative-aesthetic variation in his work and its overall philosophy.

मूर्ति-शिल्प-आकार प्रतिरोपण

Iconographic Transplantations

Back to the 'cell' on which Avikunthak builds a 'mytho-biological' structure of his film *Vaktratunda Swāhā*. I do not know whether Avikunthak had intended the film to be so, but when I saw the film for the first time in Mumbai and then at the Yale University where Avikunthak teaches, this association had flashed across my mind. Ganesha, as depicted in the Hindu mythology, has been generally accepted as the first example of (xeno)transplantation in the world. The filmmaker, I would think, turns this myth into his film's leitmotif as it transplants its whole aesthetic-biological body onto a small fragment of a shot footage that I prefer to call a 'cell'. Besides this macro-transplantary association, there is yet another association, that of multiple forms of Ganesha and the film's own formal polyvalence.

रुप-बहुसंयोजकता

The Formal Polyvalence

This becomes yet another side of the leitmotif that haromonizes Ganesha through transplantary evocation. Avikunthak masks the manifestations, the *swaroopas*, his own body included. Mythologically, Ganesha has thirty two different forms, while Siva has sixty four. However, the *Mudgala Purana*, an ancient text on Lord Ganesha, cites eight forms of Ganesha, prevailing over eight human weaknesses or demons / asuras.[4] (1) Vakratunda (twisted trunked), first in the series, represents the absolute as the aggregate of all bodies, an embodiment of the form of Brahman.[5]

Avikunthak integrates such formal polyvalence-ness into *Vakratunda Swāhā* – in a more contemporaneous manner, tangentially suggesting the Ganesha myth and its pli-ability, spatially and temporally, geographically and historically. Avikunthak's Ganesha even becomes vāhaka (e.g. rickshaw puller, a driver) himself; an interesting transition from having a vāhana (वाहन) to being a vāhaka (वाहक). In the Hindu pantheon, Ganesha has always been a very fascinating deity for his formal flexibility and flamboyance. Ganesha is a compound of gana (गणः), meaning a flock, multitude, group, troop, collection or a body of followers or attendants, particularly, a troop of demigods considered as Siva's attendants, and isa (ईशः); or lord, master; Gana+Isa = Ganesha. He is also called गणपति, Ganapati or Lord of the Ganas. Ganapati is the son of Siva and Pārvati, or of Pārvati only, for, according to one legend, he sprang from the scurf of her body. He is the god of wisdom and remover of obstacles; hence he is invoked and worshipped at the commencement of every important undertaking. He is usually represented in a sitting posture - short and fat, with a protuberant belly, and four hands; riding a mouse, and with the head of an elephant. This head has only one tusk, the other having been lost in a scuffle between him and Parasurama when he opposed the latter's entrance to Siva's inner apartment (whence he is called Ekadanta or as Ekadanshtra). There are several legends accounting for his elephant-head. It is said that he wrote the *Mahābhārata* at the dictation of Vyāsa who secured his services of a scribe from the god Brahma.[6]

In *Myth and Reality*, D.D. Kosambi looks at the Siva-Parvati-Ganesha mythic iconography thus: "Siva managed to remain united to Pārvati in marriage, though she is supposed later to have stripped him of everything at a game of dice. His entourage has the sacred bull Nandi, the cobra, goblins of various sorts, an elephant headed son Ganesha, another (Skanda) with six heads. It might be noted that the son of Pārvati's body was not of Siva's, and he cut off the child's head, later replaced by that of an elephant in myth. On the other hand, Skanda was born of Siva's seed, but not of Pārvati's womb. This complex iconography and ridiculously complicated myth cannot be explained by Siva's elevation to the highest abstract principle. If, however, we note that Siva is a cosmic dancer, that a dance by the tribal medicine-man or witch-doctor is essential in most primitive fertility rites, the way to an explanation seems clear."[7] Kosambi draws an interesting comparison with the Ice-age Chamois-masked dancer of Les Trois Freres or the French stone-age 'diablotins', with the medieval dancing Siva-Natarāja and the buffalo-horned Indus Siva. The elephant-headed Ganesha also appears as a dancer, *nrtta-Ganesha* at times.[8]

वक्रतुंड स्वाहा

Vakratunda Swāhā

The foregoing text explains the myth of Vakratunda Ganesha but by adding the word *Swāhā*, Avikunthak offers his film's title a deeper signification, terraineously

and subterraineously. The compound word vakra वक्र + tunda तुंड refers to Ganesha, having an elephant's curved (vakra) trunk (tunda). The popular sloka reads and sings:

वक्रतुंड महाकाय सूर्यकोटिसमप्रभ।
निर्विघ्नं कुरु मे देव सर्वकार्येषु सर्वदा॥
Vakratunda mahākāya suryakotisamaprabha
Nirvighnam kuru, me deva sarvakāryesu sarvadā

Oh, the curved-faced, mighty Lord, you are like a billion suns in brilliance; kindly free us always from hurdles in all that we endeavor

Swāhā स्वाहा - sva (self, स्व) + aha (spoken or said), with its multiple echoes, interestingly gets into the film's title. In Hindu mythology Swāhā is a minor goddess, wife of Agni, the God of Fire. She was originally a nymph but became immortal after marrying Agni, with whom she became the mother of Kartikeya.[9] Whenever first sacrifices are made, the word Swāhā is chanted as per Agni's order. Swāhā literally means 'self-spoken' or 'spoken by me' and could be rendered 'thus have I spoken'. Agni is also the acceptor of sacrifices. The sacrificial aspect somehow becomes crucial in our context of the film, as if young Girish Dahiwale offered himself as a sacrificial being, I would conjecture, within the macro-myth of Swāhā.

Through his cinematography, Avikunthak keeps invoking the ritualistic necessity of the sacrifice within the domain of the Tantrik Sakta cult, e.g. it is very much evident in *Kalighat Fetish*. The 'cell' seems to be developing itself into the film's 'tantra'. In the 'cell' we see Girish Dahiwale holding the image of Vakratunda Ganesha standing in the waters at Mumbai's Chowpatty Beach. He is one of the multitude gathered at this beach to immerse Ganesha idols at the end of the ten-day Ganesha festival in the city.[10] Swāhā, in the film's title, echoes the multiplicity of sacrificial undertones, or so would I presume. *Vakratunda Swāhā*, the film, momentarily but primarily invokes the persona of the young artist – in his death. The film sets itself to in-trospect in re-trospect. And in this 'space' Swāhā amplifies its sacrificial echo. Killing the Self becomes Narrating the Self, आत्म हनन becomes आत्म कथन as if.

The 'immersion' aspect leads to yet another cyclical temporal resonance.

शरीर, स्वचेष्टा और आनुष्ठानिक प्रक्रिया

Cinema of Performativity and Ritual

My reference here is to the act or the ritual of मुंडनं, of tonsuring that Avikunthak incorporates in his cinematography, e.g. one of his tetralogy (1995-1997) *Et cetera* is all about tonsuring (of self) taking place in a single unit of *duree*.[11] The tetralogy as a whole seeks to examine the various levels at which the reality of human existence functions. In these films, specific ritual exercitations have been focused on and their movements, contemplated upon, by studying dynamics of their etymologies within anthropological-cinematographic framework. *Kalighat Fetish*, too, uses the human body as site. In *Vakratunda Swāhā* the act of tonsuring recurs, as a surrogate or ritualistic gesture of sacrifice. This is yet another opportunity of 'provocation' that Avikunthak offers us to think.[12] Obviously, performativity and ritual plays a significant part in Avikunthak's 'figurative' cinematography – evoking references within history of anthropology, and as an engagement of the ritual, myth and time. And self.

The tonsural surrogacy of hair evokes interesting tantrik or occultist allegories, and even a partial reference to पंचमहाभूत, the five great elements. As Benjamin Walker says, hair is regarded in occultism as one of the most extraordinary parts of the body. It belongs to the element of earth as it is solid and tangible; to the element of water since it is free and flowing; to the element of fire since it is fed from the furnace of the brain; and to the element of air since it is light and can be blown by the wind. Hair is both living since it grows, and dead since it is without sensibility. It has its own life; grows more rapidly than anything else and continues to grow after the death of the body. Hair is a source of vital strength and magic power, for the life principle resides in it. It forms a crown encircling the head, the most sacred part of the body and is full of personal mana. It plays a role in all forms of the head-taboo. It was a substitute for the whole body, and its sacrifice to the deities was an acceptable surrogate for a human victim. Youths dedicated to the service of the deities also cut off their hair, thus giving rise to the custom of tonsure, or shaving a priest's head, which was believed to have originated in Egypt. The hairless or tonsured head was said to represent emasculation (which was demanded in many shrines dedicated to the Great Goddess); or was a symbol of the circumcised phallus; or of the solar disc; or of innocence and purity. Often associated with the tonsure was the scalp-lock, a strand of hair left uncut, like a pigtail (what we call in Hinduism shikhā). Some think it was left to mark the bregma, the occult aperture at the top of the cranium.[13] Broadly, I see Avikunthak's cinema as the cinema of surrogacy, of substitution. And within anthropology-archaeology-cinematography triangle (tantra), the act of tonsuring in Avikunthak's cinematography perhaps demands a deeper associative reflection.

Most of the images of tonsured heads in pan Indian cinema pertain to young widows, e.g. Prema Karanth's Kannada film *Phaniyamma* (1983), based on Kannada novel by M.K. Indira or Vijaya Mehta's Hindi film *Rao Saheb* (1986), based on a Marathi novel by Jaywant Dalvi, where the act of tonsuring suggests penance or social punishment in societies dominated by males. Or the tonsured heads of Brahmins in G.V. Iyer's Sanskrit films such as *Adi Shankarāchārya* (1983), where tonsuring is part of ritual and religious convention. There is a huge body of films in all the major Indian languages dealing with वैधव्यं (widowhood) and सतीत्वं (satihood, chastity) and hence tonsuring, suggesting a collective social pain of the woman. Among the early European cinema, an image of a tonsured head that has become archetypal is that of Joan of Arc, e.g. in Carl Dreyer's silent film *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928).[14] Within such cinematographic tonsuring universe, Avikunthak's elaborate references to the act of tonsuring seem to be within the tantrik sacrificial surrogacy.

तंत्र, मंत्र, यंत्रः जंतर मंतर या यंत्र मंत्र

Cinematography is a tantra within yantra

As already mentioned, Avikunthak's cinematography implicitly or explicitly plays within the Sakta cult beliefs, and hence within Tantra; mystical formularies mostly in the form of dialogue between Siva and Parvati (Durga or Kali). Mantra is an instrument of thought, a sacrificial formula or incantation while Yantra is any instrument for holding or restraining or fastening mechanical contrivance.[15] This aspect keeps recurring in Avikunthak's cinematography, though much more pronounced in *Kalighat Fetish*, which broadly contemplates the twin ideas of transgression and morbidity, connected by the act of transformation, leading to death. Both the violence of sacrifice and the performance of transformation for Avikunthak are transgressive acts performed as an engagement with morbidity. They are part of the same act of reverence and anguish. Within the tantra, memory also plays an important part in Avikunthak's cinematography. *Kalighat Fetish*, as he said, was a 'cinematographic rendition of memory.'[16] This rendition of memory acquires a real-mythical proportions in *Vakratunda Swāhā*, both in the mordity of suicide and in retrieval of life.

The thought of yantra and mantra brings to my mind the image of Jantar Mantar (Yantra Mantra) that Mani Kaul so evocatively integrates into his film *Dhrupad* (1982). In this short film, Kaul weaves within its complex narrative-cosmology, the Jaipur astronomical edifice.[17] By doing this, Kaul also offers a certain mythical-temporal tenor to the film. In their intrinsic moods, the works of four *Prayoga* artists, viz. Kabir Mohanty, Amit Dutta, Vipin Vijay and Ashish Avikunthak, inherently play upon the spatial-temporalities of such *tantra* and *yantra*. Though comparatively, Avikunthak's cinematography is more predominated by its figural anthropology, and *mantra*. However, *duree* is somehow secularly ritualized or transfigured in all these artists' works, almost echoing Maya Deren's *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1946) in their austerity.[18]

पंचमहाभूत प्रबोधन

Invoking the five Great Elements

Water being its obvious and dominant element, *Vakratunda Swāhā*, also invokes the other four elements, viz. fire अग्नि, earth पृथ्वी, air वायु and ether (space) आकाश in its tangential or mythificatory narrative. Perhaps Ganesha contains them all. According to the Hindu philosophy, the Creator used ākāsa as the most subtle element that helped create the other four traditional elements. All creations, including human body, is made up of these five essential elements and that upon death, the human body dissolves into these five elements of nature, thereby balancing the cycle of nature set in motion by the Creator. Each of the five elements is associated with one of the five senses, and acts as the gross medium for the experience of sensations. Earth, the basest element, could be perceived by all five senses, i.e. hearing, touch, taste, scent and sight. Interestingly, Avikunthak's film work, including *Vakratunda Swāhā* retains its peculiar sensuality.

सर्जन-विसर्जन-सर्जन: अनंत चक्र

Re-Solution, Dis-Solution-Re-Solution: An Endless Cycle

Avikunthak employs young Girish Dahiwale's image retrospectively and hence it sounds a bit strange that the young beholder of Ganesha's मूर्ति, idol takes recourse to आत्महनन, the act of self-killing later.[19]

One of the epithets of Siva is मृत्युंजय, victor over death. This is an aspect of Siva worshipped as the conqueror of death as manifested in the Hindu lord of death, Yama. The particular legend in question deals with the sage Mārkandeya, who was fated to die at the age of sixteen. On account of the sage's worship and devotion to Siva, the lord vanquished Yama.

Visarjan (विसर्जन) would also mean allowing (the deity invoked) to go; it is giving away, abandoning; a gift, donation. Obviously there is सर्जन within विसर्जन it is an embedded cycle, resounded in loud popular chants of the devotees.

स्वभाव, भावसंधी एवम् अविकुण्ठक की सिनेमेटोग्राफी

Svabhāva, *Bhāvasandhi* and Avikunthak's cinematography

Avikunthak, in his cinematography, has been able to sustain a certain consistency of स्वभाव, svabhāva of his art largely because he occupies himself with self-commissioned artistic engagements. I personally do not believe in the 'independence' of the so-called independent cinema but in a sense Avikunthak's work is exemplary in this realm. Avikunthak's cinematography retains its power of provocation – for delving deeper into far off associations, mythical, metaphysical, metaphorical and mundane at the same time. There is also a current, running through his belief in Tantrik Sakta, a cult that believes the world has been created by Kāli, the mother goddess. Tāntrik belongs to the Tantra philosophy. And this link further links us with Siva and than naturally to Ganesha. This could probably be an interesting macro-way to understand the nuances of *Vakratunda Swāhā*, which, in the end, like Ganesha himself, symbolizes the transplantatoriness of cinematography. In Memoriam. In Transcendence.

- Amrit Gangar

End Notes

[1]Xenotransplantation is the transplantation of living cells from one species to another.

[2]Besides this film, a collective manifesto about new ways of doing art and critiquing its rampant commercialization was on cards – almost one and a half decades back. Riyas Komu and Justin Ponmany are well established artists now.

[3]In the United States, contemporary anthropology is typically divided into four sub-fields: cultural anthropology (also called 'social anthropology'), archaeology, linguistic anthropology and biological / physical anthropology.

[4]The Mudgala Purana is a Hindu religious text dedicated to Ganesha. The incarnations described in this text have supposedly taken place in different cosmic ages. Essentially, the text uses these incarnations to suggest complex philosophical concepts associated with the progressive creation of the world. Each incarnation represents a stage of the absolute as it unfolds into creation. Besides the Mudgala Purana, the Ganesha Purana is yet another text that is exclusively dedicated to Ganesha. Some scholars date this purana between AD 1100 and 1400, the Mudgala Purana is older. The eight forms include the following: (1) Vakratunda (twisted trunked), first in the series, represents the absolute as the aggregate of all bodies, an embodiment of the form of Brahman. The purpose of this incarnation is to overcome the demon Matsaryasura (envy, jealousy). His mount (vāhana) is a lion. (2) Ekadanta (single tusked), who overcomes the demon Madasura (arrogance, conceit). His mount is a mouse. (3) Mahodara (big bellied), a synthesis of both Vakratunda and Ekadanta, he conquers the demon Mohasura (delusion, confusion). His mount is a mouse. (4) Gajānana or Gajavakra (elephant faced) is a counterpart to Mahodara, who conquers the demon Lobhasura (greed). His mount is a mouse. (5) Lambodara (pendulous bellied) corresponds to Sakti, who conquers the demon Krodhasura (anger). His mount is a mouse. (6) Vikata (unusually formed or misshapen) corresponds to Surya (the Sun), who conquers the demon Kāmasura (lust). His mount is a peacock. (7) Vighnarājā (king of obstacles) corresponds to Visnu, who conquers the demon Mamasura (possessiveness). His mount is the celestial serpent, Sesa. (8) Dhumravarna (grey coloured) corresponds to Siva, who conquers the demon Abhimānasura (pride, attachment). His mount is a horse.

[5] ब्रह्मन, the Supreme Being, regarded as impersonal and divested of all quality and action; according to Vedantins, Brahman is both the efficient and the material cause of the visible universe, the all-pervading soul and spirit of the universe, the essence from which all created things are produced and into which they are absorbed.

[6] परशु:, Parasu, an axe, a hatchet, a battle-axe; an epithet of Parasurāma (axe-wielding Rama). Parasurāma was a celebrated Brāhmana warrior, son of Jamādgni and the sixth incarnation of Vishnu. A great devotee of Siva, he got an axe from the latter as weapon. From Siva he learnt the methods of warfare and other skills. It is said that he fought the advancing ocean back, thus saving the lands of Konkan and Malabār on India's west coast. The coastal area of Kerala, along with the Konkan region, i.e. coastal Maharashtra and Karnataka, is also sometimes called Parasurama Kshetra (Parasurama's region) According to one legend, when Parasurama went to visit Siva; he was denied access by Ganesha. Enraged Parasurama threw his axe at him, and recognizing the weapon as that given by his father; Ganesha permitted it to sever one of his tusks as he waited to receive it. Of the Hindu trinity, Brahma is the creator. In Peter Brook's play Mahabharata, we see Ganesha as Vyāsa's scribe of the epic.

[7] *Myth and Reality: Studies in the Formation of Indian Culture*, Damodar Dharmanand Kosambi, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1962.

[8] Trois-Freres is a cave in southwestern France famous for its cave paintings. The cave is named for the three sons of comte Begouen who discovered it in 1910. In French, trios freres means 'three brothers'. There is a 1995 French film titled *Les Trois Freres*. The cave art appears to date to approximately 13,000 B.C. Chamois is a type of porous, non-abrasive leather used also for making masks. Mask plays an important role in Avikunthak's cinematography, particularly in *Vakratunda Swāhā*.

[9] Kārtikeya, also called Skanda or Murugan is Ganesha's brother. Regional differences dictate the order of their births. In northern India, Skanda is generally said to be the elder, while in the south, Ganesha is considered the first born. Skanda was an important martial deity from about 500 BCE to 600 CE, when worship of him declined significantly in northern India. As Skanda fell, Ganesha rose.

[10] The annual festival honours Ganesha for ten days, starting on Ganesha Chaturthi, which typically falls in late August or early Steptember. The festival culminates on the day of Ananta Chaturdashi, when idols (murtis) of Ganesha are immersed in the most convenient body of water. In 1893, as a strategic fight against the British imperialists, Bal Gangādhar Tilak transformed this annual Ganesha festival from private family celebrations into a grand public (sārvajanik) event. He did so, 'to bridge the gap between the Brahmins and the non-Brahmins and find an appropriate context in which to build a new grassroots unity between them' in his nationalist strivings against the British in Maharashtra. The festival assumes phenomenal proptions in Mumbai.

[11] Interestingly मुंडिन, mundin (barber) is one of the epithets of Siva.

[12] I remember to have been on a selection jury of an Indian international short and documentary film festival, when the 'tonsuring' film came in for viewing. After few minutes, most members had begun either to scratch their heads or question the film's non-stop act of head-shaving. They thought it was non-sensical and wanted to fast forward the film.

[13] *Body Magic: An Encylopaedia of Esoteric Man*, Benjamin Walker, Paledina Books, 1979. Because of the power inherent in hair, great precautions were taken in primitive societies in the selection of a barber; in appointing an auspicious time for cutting, and in the disposal of the remains. Special days were set apart for the purpose and spells and incantations recited. Because hair could be used for many magical operations directed against the owner, care had to be taken that it should not fall into the hands of sorcerers. The cut hair therefore was buried in a secret place.

[14] The actors were signed exclusively to him for the film's shooting time from May to November 1927, so they had to "live" their roles to the point of keeping their hair cut so it never appeared to change. The lower churchmen wore visible tonsures, bald heads with a fringe of hair. But Dreyer also demanded that the higher officials keep their tonsures cut, in spite of the fact that their hair was invisible under the grandiose caps they wore throughout. They secretly began referring to him as "Gruyere" because the set had as many "holes" (trenches Dreyer built for making low-angle shots) as Swiss cheese. In spite of the film's realism, helped by Rudolph Mate's brilliant cinematography, it's also one of the most stylized, *un*realistic in the annals of cinema.

[15] The primary mantras are held to be 70 million in number and the secondary innumerable. It is interesting how we in India mystify scientific/electronic gadgets, e.g. we called radio, ākāshvāni (voice from the sky) while television, dōōrdarshan (remote vision).

[16] Avikunthak in conversation with Amrit Gangar, *Cinema of Prayoga: Indian Experimental Film & Video 1913-2006*, Eds. Brad Butler and Karen Mirza, London: no.w.here, 2006.

[17] The Jantar Mantar is a collection of architectural astronomical instruments, built by Maharaja Jai Singh II at his then new capital of Jaipur between AD 1727 and 1734. It is modeled after the one that he had built for him at the then Mughal capital of Delhi. Largest of the five (others being in Varanasi, Ujjain and Mathura), the Jaipur one is the best preserved of all because in 1901 Raja Ram Singh, the then ruler of Jaipur, refurbished it with the help of a British engineer. The various abstract structures within the Jantar Mantar are, in fact, instruments that were used for keeping track of celestial bodies.

[18] Maya Deren criticized Hollywood endlessly for its artistic and economic monopoly over American cinema, stating, "I make my pictures for what Hollywood spends on lipstick." In 1947, the Guggenheim funded a trip to Haiti for Deren to study dance and religious possession in Voodoo rituals, which she documented in her *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*.

[19] In Sanskrit, the word 'murti' also means an embodiment, incarnation, personification or manifestation.

Anirban's Requiem

Suicide has had a distinctive place in my biography. I experienced death viscerally for the first time when Anirban Manna committed suicide in October 1988. I was sixteen years old studying in Class 10. Anirban Manna was 'failure', a common term in our school for a class repeater. He joined our class of 9A in 1987. He was a burly boy, virtually a young man, and sixteen years old - an abrasive teenager, brash and assertive. We would often sit on the same bench. We like all the losers in the class called ourselves LLBs - Lords of the Last Benches. We shared a special camaraderie – from listening to cricket commentaries on hidden transistors during class hours, to specializing in 'non-veg' jokes, solidarity cheating during class tests and just loafing around.

One day I came to school early. I reached school at 8.15am after jostling in a crammed tram and an overcrowded bus, on a sweaty, bright Monday morning. I used to come early to play table tennis. I was playing with my usual TT partner when suddenly the game was interrupted. A rushing classmate came breathless. He haltingly stuttered that Anirban had died. He had committed suicide by jumping in front of a local train. For a moment I could not understand what this meant. I was stunted. There was an unusual buzz during the school assembly. Our deepest fear came true when the principal announced that "Anirban Manna of Class 10A" had died. I distinctly remember that he did not mention suicide. As a mark of respect, the principal declared a holiday for our class and most students went home.

I joined a group of friends and went to Anirban's house, tucked in a lane next to Deshapriya Park in south Calcutta. There was a simmering crowd in front of this house – a neatly constructed, fading yellow, mid century Bengali art-deco two-storied architecture, with wrought-iron grills – typical to this part of Calcutta. His elder brother who was also in our school hastily ushered us to Anirban's room - a small barsati on the terrace. His body had not arrived from the government morgue. We were told that he committed suicide a day earlier, on a Sunday afternoon. I must have been taking an afternoon nap then, I recalled. And he was walking on the railways tracks facing an incoming local. I tried to reconstruct the chilling moment in my head. It was not an accident. Passersby had seen him jump in front of a rushing local train on the tracks next to the Dhakuria Lake. The body had been sent for post mortem to the railway hospital in Sealdah. So we sat in his room waiting for his body to arrive. We were all silent, sometimes whispering. The air had turned somber and the afternoon Calcutta sun was now harshly oppressive. None of us were crying, although we could hear a continuous sobbing, often uncomfortably loud, at times almost a piercing shriek.

Anirban's mother along with other relatives was in the quarters below.

The dead body arrived in late afternoon in a rickety, white, retrofitted, Ambassador hearse, with large glass windows. Through it we could see his body tucked sloppily in a white shroud, hastily surrounded by Rajnigandha bouquets. Flower garlands were nervously resting over his body to hide blood marks on the white cloak. We could only see his face. It was composed but had a whiff of trauma – someone sleeping but probably going through a nightmare. It had fresh bruise marks and spots of coagulated blood. His forehead was gingerly decorated with sandalwood paste – a mark of final departure. Someone whispered in my ears that his body was baldly mauled. His mother rushed onto the street, dressed in faded green cotton sari, her hair flying madly, her eyes red with grief and tired of weeping. A soft yell escaped her mouth and she fainted on seeing her son's dead body. Anirban's father, a heart patient, declined see the face of his dead son.

We were hurriedly informed that the body had to be burnt right away. All the responsibility fell on Anirban's elder brother to do the last rites. His father and mother did not have the energy to go to the burning ghat. Along with the brother and few relatives were we – Anirban's friends from school. We took the body in the same hearse it had come. We followed the Ambassador hearse as it cautiously meandered through the narrow lanes behind Lake Market onto to Rash Behari Avenue and negotiated the traffic towards Keoratala.

Keoratala Crematorium was an ancient burning ghat in south Calcutta next to the Kalighat temple. It derived its name from a local grove of keora, a species of screw pine whose flowers had had an endearing fragrance and were used in making perfumes. It was also sacred to Shiva. The crematorium, now housed in a distasteful bureaucratic concrete structure, was slowing falling apart. It was situated adjacent to the Tolly nala that poured its putrid waters into the Hooghly. Once upon a time, people say boats would ply and people would bathe in the waters. It was the ancient Ganga – the Adi Ganga. Now the nala was virtually a large sewerage line, spewing industrial waste, lined with decrepit slums, housing rancid brothels.

Keoratala was in my neighborhood, and an integral of my childhood memories. I would pass this bridge almost daily, as my school bus would go past it to my home. I distinctively remember how the smell of the air would change, as we would go past it. Once I was going past it with my parents in our car, a grey Fiat 1100D, that I asked my father why the fetid air was so acrid. He nonchalantly retorted, "that's smell of burning flesh." Another childhood memory was of passing dead bodies, bundled in white bed sheets on bamboo piers carried by young men trotting in unison. Chanting rhythmically: "Bolo Hari! Hari Bolo! Bolo Hari! Hari Bolo!" Everybody will end up in Keoratala – we were told. From very early on I knew that Keoratala is where we go when we die. However it was with Anirban's body that I entered there for the first time. It was here that I confronted the ritual of death for the first time.

We reached Keoratala burning ghat late in the afternoon. It was not empty. There were about half a dozen bodies before us. Keoratala, like most ghats in Calcutta, had two forms of disposing the dead body – electric crematorium and wood burning. It was decided that Anirban would be consigned to the fire through the electric crematorium. It was fast, cheap and efficient. Everything would be over in 45 minutes, unlike the wood fire method that took nearly 6 hours. But we were in a queue. We had to wait there for nearly four hours.

Standing in the burning ghat waiting for Anirban's turn to come was a probably one of the most profound experiences of my sixteen years of life. I waited with a small group of school friends. Many who had come with us from school to Anirban's house with us had left. They just wanted to see off the body, pay respect. It was just a group of 4-5 friends, his brother and a couple of relatives that accompanied the body to Keoratala and stayed till the very end.

Most of the other dead bodies before us were of older men and women. Their faces - pale, with wrinkled cheeks and shriveled skins. Cotton wads gently stuffed in their nose. Faces decorated with sandalwood paste. Some even had their black reading glasses on. They were solemnly laid on bamboo piers waiting in a queue; something that was part of their daily life. Waiting in the line for milk, for ration, for kerosene, for railway tickets. Now they were waiting on the last leg of their life. Most women were sitting on their haunches around the body – exhausted and tired. Men were nervously smoking unfiltered cigarettes and bidis, mostly pacing nervously and anxiously. Most of them were not crying, but their eyes were red and the gloom written on their faces. Like them we were also waiting, while Anirban's uncle was hurriedly getting the priest and buying the necessary ingredient for the final ritual - ghee, incense, flowers, oil and ganga jal.

We were all quiet, just sitting and observing. We were there because a close friend of ours had died. We were to give solidarity to the last leg of our classmate's journey - somber but inquisitive. We had come to the burning ghat for the first time in our lives. Often we would walk around curiously, to look at the last rites been performed on other dead bodies. I distinctly remember, as we waited a group of people arrived with a body on a thela with women shrieking – crying aloud. Her cries I can still recall 22 years later, piercing my very existence. She seemed to be from a poor working class family and the body was that of her husband who had died when a bus ran over him, or something similarly horrific. All that I remember sitting and waiting inside the crematorium, that evening was the Calcutta humidity, the heat of the burning dead bodies (three bodies being burnt simultaneously), the musty stench of decomposing flowers, the acrid stink of burning flesh, my own sweat, the overpowering fragrance of burning incense and ghee.

When Anirban's turn came everything moved swiftly. The uncle helped his brother perform the last rites as the priest was muttering mantras. After an hour of antyeshti ritual it was time for the final act. We picked up the dead body on the floor and gently placed it on the iron frame balanced on rails. A bare bodied worker, his chest glimmering with sweat opened the chamber shutter. A whiff of hot air engulfed us for a moment. He speedily pushed Anirban's body into the red-hot chamber. As the body slid I saw his face for the last time, luminous in the red glare of the chamber. Suddenly the chamber shutter clamped shut. The temperature, we were told, rose to 500 degree Celsius. We waited. It seemed like eternity. Staring at the dark iron shutter for it to open. And when it finally opened all that came out was hot grey ash. That was it.

We were given some ash in a steel thali and were asked to take it to the Tolly nala and pour it there. I touched the ash. It was very warm. We poured it into the pungent waters of Adi-Ganga. Exhausted, we parted ways. I walked alone, towards my home. It was still not very late at night - must be round 9 pm. The world was intact. Rash Behari crossing was as usual bustling - the cars were haltingly moving, the buses were tiredly plying, the trams were placidly crawling, people in despair waiting at the crossing jostling to get into overcrowded buses. As if nothing has changed. But for me, my life had changed. Suddenly the meaning of life changed for me. I had finally seen death. I had finally seen what it means to die. I reached home, and had a shower. I sat down under the running tap water. I did not even realize that I was weeping as the cold tap water cleansed me of the sweat, smell and the exhaustion.

When Girish committed suicide ten years later suddenly all the old memories of Anirbans's death came back. But this time I had the footage of my dead friend. I had a real memory with me. That single shot was not a symbolic representation of temporality, but that was real memory – it was really a friend who I had in my cans.

- Ashish Avikunthatk

Note on Et cetera

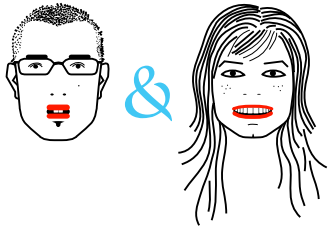
Et cetera is a tetralogy of four separate films thematically coherent within a conscious bonding and exploratory in nature. They seek to examine the various levels at which the reality of human existence functions. In these films, specific ritual exercitations have been focused on and their movements, contemplated upon, by studying the dynamics of their etymologies. The relationship between the living and the inanimate is the pivot on which the action in the films occur. These largely mundane actions, prevailing in the vocabulary of daily living is deliberated upon. Here they are mythized in the context they appear, either as a tonsuring act or a walk in the cemetery.
Thus the attempt is to move beyond the creations of grandiose actions to give semiotic credibility to often observed dianural performances, which are neither grand gestures nor major events. The tetralogy is an intention to comprehend the complexities, subtle and obvious, inherent in these movements. This is constantly emphasized in Et cetera as symbolic poetics and celebrated.

- Ashish Avikunthatk

Ashish Avikunthak

Vakratunda Swaha
35mm
22 mins
2010

Et cetera
16mm
32 mins
1997



chatterjee & lal
01/18 Kamal Mansion Floor 1
Arthur Bunder Road Colaba
Mumbai 400 005 India
Tel. +91 22 2202 3787
Email. info@chatterjeeandlal.com