Ashish Avikunthak

Rati Chakravyuh

2013

single channel video 105 minutes

On view: 27 June – 2 August

Screening times: 1pm | 3pm | 5pm

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Future Greats, 2014

Niru Ratnam

While moving from the gallery to the cinema might be very of-the-moment (McQueen, Taylor-Wood and, prior to them, Schnabel), it is unusual to see a practitioner go the other way. However, this is the trajectory of Indian filmmaker Ashish Avikunthak, a regular on the film-festival circuit for over a decade. Avikunthak's film Katho Upanishad (2011) was shown as a three-channel projection in Mumbai's Chatterjee & Lal in 2012. His new work Rati Chakravyuh (2013) will be shown there this year.

Avikunthak's films are highly formal meditations on ritual, time and death. They are rooted in Indian religion, philosophy and history, without being about any of these in an anthropological way. Unlike his Indian peers, who use symbols (tiffins, bindis and so on) of their cultural identity in a way that is decipherable for biennial and art-fair audiences, Avikunthak's works strongly resist being so easily packaged for the new global artworld circuits. Vakratunda Swaha (2010) begins with a piece of footage, shot in 1997, of Girish Dahiwale, a friend of Avikunthak, immersing a statue of the elephant god Ganesha into the sea, before the film moves on to a funeral ritual (Dahiwale committed suicide a year after the footage was filmed). The work then takes a turn for the hallucinatory with masked subjects, including the artist in a gas mask (invoking the elephant god's trunk), walking against the flow of traffic, before a final appearance of the footage of Dahiwale immersing the statue, as voices chant the Ganapati Upanishad. The effect on a viewer unfamiliar with Indian religion and history is akin to being thrust into a series of rituals without having any literal idea of what those rituals might be about.

This is important. In an artworld where an increasing number of critics are arguing that much globalised art takes the form of hollowed-out visual Esperanto, Avikunthak's works insist on an Indian epistemology while utilising a rigorously formal visual language that is clearly aware of Western avant-garde practices such as those of Andrei Tarkovsky and Samuel Beckett. These are self-consciously difficult works that are filmed in a self-consciously beautiful way. Katho Upanishadis a dreamily meandering adaptation of a 2,500-word Sanskrit text about enlightenment and nirvana. On the one hand, the work is clearly open to an interpretation that is rooted in an in-depth understanding of the Upanishads, a series of texts that are the source of the key tenets of both Hinduism and Buddhism. On the other hand, there is no prerequisite to have a full grasp of the Upanishads in the same way that there is no prerequisite to understand the complex symbolic system Matthew Barney devised for The Cremaster Cycle (1994–2002) in order to watch those similarly visually lush works.

In a recent interview Avikunthak has stated that his films 'are not codes that have to be decoded or cracked'. Instead he has drawn parallels with visiting a temple, where the majority of worshippers do not have a literal understanding of the ritual that takes place in Sanskrit (a situation analogous to attending church ceremonies that still take place in Latin). There is something wilfully idiosyncratic in this mode of making work that is visually seductive while being on another level deliberately incomprehensible to many viewers. Avikunthak's work was largely ignored as his contemporaries at art school entered the speculation-driven contemporary Indian art market during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Now that that scene has shot off a cliff and left a bruised generation of gallerists and artists, his belated emergence within the gallery circuit is to be welcomed.

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THE CIRCULAR TROLLEY

Duration in Cinema

Ashish Rajadhyaksha

Everything is always in the middle – *(*dialogue from ***Rati Chakravyuh)***

The duration of a shot – not merely its length, but its stretch – has been one of the cinema's great enigmas. For a decade after the movie camera was invented, filmmakers did not know how to cut and, more relevant, did not see the point of cutting. After all, for Lumiere or Edison, the cinema was the shot, self-contained, capable of capturing the universe on its own.

Then of course came the great arts of editing. With time was also discovered the past, memory, history and so forth. And then came a third moment, combining the first and second: when time could be found through space. Modifying Tarkovsky, sculpting – not with time, but through space to find time. And so duration.

This new discovery has however proved to be a two-edged sword. Duration was, first of all, a very fragile thing. More than that, it opened up a terrifying prospect, one that Laura Mulvey names as 'Death 24x a Second' – in other words, that all time recorded when a camera was switched on became a record of impending catastrophe: a catastrophe that could only be kept at bay as just long as the shot could sustain life.

Even the cinema's great durationists – the Pasolinis, Rochas, Jancsos – would however have thought the idea of hanging in there for a hundred-minute single take as plain inconceivable, maybe also plain crazy. This was only partly for technical reasons, a celluloid magazine's length having a comparatively short time limit. But even the ten-odd minutes that a 35 mm magazine could run was pushing the envelope, taking us to the limits that opened up a dangerous recognition: that when duration ends, the time that remains is dead.

Today of course anybody can keep a movie image recorder switched on for hours on end. But such time is literally empty time incarnate, its best example millions of hours of closed-circuit video recording nothing at all. Just as splicing two shots may have once seemed an empty and even pointless act, today the act of switching on a camera has itself emptied itself out with its ubiquity.

It you are Ashish Avikunthak, therefore, what you need to do today is very complicated, and your act resonates through at least three epochs in the cinema's history. First, you return meaning to the act of switching on your camera, which means breathing life into space – it's your cameraman who does it for you, really – and thence bring time back. But that's not the real challenge: it's what follows that is. For, second, you then keep time alive only as long as you possibly can: this is what defines its

duration. But this turns out to be a zero-sum game, for when you cannot do so any longer, time will instantly empty itself out like sand in an hour-glass. In front of your eyes. Because, third, in the era of all-seeing technological reality, when duration is over, while the camera may well roll on, it will soon find itself capturing nothing. Death will have taken place.

The Last Supper

In the beginning was the dead air
We gave life to it
We float in dead air so that it can live
This is a film of one such death: or more accurately, thirteen such deaths. At midnight during a lunar eclipse, six young newlywed couples and a priestess meet after a mass wedding. This will be their last conversation, and after it lasts for some time, they commit mass suicide. This is how the film is described. And it doesn't begin to capture the sheer drama of it.

The original image has these young couples gathered together on their wedding night, sitting together in a circle, in the courtyard of a rajbari where their group wedding must presumably have occurred, and in their full regalia, taking part in an adda. The tight circle signals both a collective ritual act as well as a game. The conversation moves randomly. One of Avikunthak's sources was The Last Supper, and so we must assume, with the original legend, that in these random conversations the death itself was foretold: that with it would have been a denouement, and a farewell also.

The usual questions come up: why was I born? When will we all die? And the awareness, that Pain gave birth to me/ Pain will also kill me, from which emerges a debate and an unusual conclusion: that the end is more important than the beginning. Yes! Says one, the end is very important. From that a further realization: If we don't forget then we will never remember. Remember to forget.

An entire universe of stories is now opened out. As these stories come and go, what we get is nothing less than the very insides of tragedy, the form being dissected as though with scalpel and scissors. They are random, seldom with an end, moving in some kind of free-associative form in a sequence, which sequence itself will be revealed as a game.

Did Ram ever kill Ravan? Or was it a hoax, since Sita wanted to live with both Ram and Ravan? What was having sex with Ravan like, with his ten heads and his hundred fingers touching her everywhere at once? Why, one asks, did Radha dream that Krishna killed her? Because he loved her? Because he could not kill her when she was awake? And what did he do after that? He went, says another, 'in search of peace to the never-ending city', There he fought wars with his own brothers and finally, in depression, he committed suicide.

He is the only God who committed suicide.
How did he commit suicide?
Is that important?
No, it is not important.
All we know that he was last seen driving a car leaving the never-ending city.

The phantasy of abstract stories gives way to autobiographical phantasy, about how I came to be: because my father may have raped my mother. My father, says one, was a 'manly soldier' who wanted a healthy son,

and so he forced himself on my mother, one night. He only knew how to have sex and shoot with a Light Machine Gun, since he was an infantryman, and during sex he only thought of shooting the Pakistanis.

I become the world around me.

In the season of fornication, the city was rioting. It was the season of rioting. It lasted till we were all dead
It was the season of slaughter
In the season of rioting I killed my daughter
And hung myself
I also fell in love... and killed my daughter
Because my brother raped her
His cries made her weary. I was that child...

Amid the phantasy is the banal: I used to go to school in a school-bus, reminisces one of the newly married: the bus was among those made in a garage behind my house, fabricated with tin and wood. In that rickety bus I would read Enid Blyton.

Memory

There is the pointless debate, with which all addas are full: when Sachin Tendulkar got out first ball at Eden Gardens, there was a near-riot. No, it wasn't Tendulkar but Gavaskar, and when he got out, the crowd called his wife, sitting in the stadium, a whore. Did India win or lose? Autobiography, phantasy, popular culture, all fuse into a single memory:

Rahul falls in love with Simiran in all the films
Vijay is always the dying Amitabh Bachchan
It was me and my first lover. All I remember were her orgasms. We met every Tuesday evening

We bunked classes and went to Victoria Memorial
She was a beautiful girl
I could not eat anything that shed blood. I thought I ate myself

I don't remember the day Indira Gandhi died.
But I remember the day Rajiv Gandhi died
I don't remember when leaders were killed
But I remember when the superstar died

There is an entire section on Bengali movie star Uttam Kumar: a long one, as befits a Calcutta adda, even one as macabre as this. When Uttam Kumar died, the city came to a standstill, schools were closed, the radio played mournful music.

Mother was crying. My mother was a small time actress. She had acted in his last film. The scene was shot at Hotel Hindustan International. It was the scene of the heroine's birthday

The inevitable phantasy that must follow: 'I don't remember her name', says one, 'but she was very young. 'She was very attractive, I am sure she slept with Uttam'.

The topic turns to suicides. 'Madhumita committed suicide', says one. Didn't she die in a train accident? No, it was suicide. 'I was there at the metro station' After school the metro station was crowded. People said she slipped and fell in front of the train, but I saw it – she deliberately jumped. How, asks another, can someone so young commit suicide? One says knowledgeably, 'one day while playing she told me she did not want to grow old'.

Many of these stories reprise others that have appeared in his earlier films. A clear ancestor to the relationship between the moving image on celluloid with death is Vakratunda Swaha and the Girish Dahiwale sequence, of the Ganesh visarjan, which was the only shot he took before Dahiwale himself committed suicide. The effort to stop the relentless movement forward of time by playing out the specifically cinematic phantasy of getting time to move backward, is seen both in Vakratunda Swaha and his Katho Upanishad's last episode. There is the ruined house, the rajbari – apparently the Chatu Babu Latu Babu Rajbari in North Calcutta also known as the site of one of Calcutta's earliest Durga Pujas in the late 18th C. There is also the Kalighat 'fetish' that peppers his films. All these will take a considerably longer essay to explore than the present one.

The End

But let me end with thinking through the 'end'. When the end is nigh, or is actually taking place '24 x', when does the end end, so to say? An adda usually ends when people have to go home, the last bus is due, or more likely when the adda has run out of steam. But when does a shot end?

This is a problem that earlier had surfaced when watching the second episode of Katho Upanishad, and also recalling an interesting observation Mani Kaul had once made to me, on how hard it was with a very long shot to cut it at all: how much harder it got as the shot lengthened: more than say five minutes made the problem practically unmanageable. He was speaking of The Stalker, and said that Tarkovsky usually solved the problem of cutting very long takes by creating a trick 'diversion': where something 'happens', a sound or movement, and in the middle of that he sneaks in a cut. I was thinking of this when, ten or fifteen minutes into the second episode, I suddenly asked myself: was this still really the same take, or had a cut been slipped in, somewhere? If not, then as the shot wore on, the suspense grew – when would this end? When the magazine, or in this instance, the hard disk space, ran out?

There is a link between the two kinds of ends. In Rati Chakravyuh a memory game is played, both in the beginning and the end, In the game, a relay follows, where one person says a word, say A, the second follows with a second connecting word that continues the chain of thought, say AB, the third goes on with ABC, and so forth, until some one, perhaps saying ABCDEFG stumbles on the sequence, and loses. Given that the most famous, perhaps the origin, of this Memory Game may have been Satyajit Ray's 1970 film Aranyer Din Ratri, where a group of four Calcutta men and two women play one involving famous names through the ages, I had assumed this to have been a direct reference. (It turns out that this wasn't, which was a bit of a bummer for me, but since I took the trouble to access and watch Aranyer Din Ratri in full as I prepared to write this short essay, I shall take the risk and make my argument anyway).

In his landmark essay 'Ray's Memory Game' (2012) Sibaji Bandyopadhyay comments that the longer the game lasts, the longer gets to be the tally sheet. In Ray's film, 'each new call makes the tapestry of names more colourful, and correspondingly, the business of remembering increasingly taxing'. The 'catalogue that the victorious keeper of records maintains is flawless –neither is it haphazard nor is any item missing from it'.

Avikunthak's game is different: here nobody forgets, everyone is word-perfect. What is taxing, and the man who is being taxed, is the man behind the circular trolley:

cinematographer Basab Mullick tracking, panning and dollying, wondering no doubt through the hundred-odd precarious minutes whether his own end would survive that of his fictional protagonists. (The thought may well have also passed his unnamed trolley pusher's mind). As the camera moves, and the actors play out an elaborate ritual, its movement is like a game of Russian Roulette: for the game can last only as long as the duration of the shot lasts. The 'take' may itself have been something of a ritual, I imagine: the actor might have stumbled on a dialogue nearly into the end of the shot, making them do it all over again, and again. I understand they took three complete takes, and one incomplete one. With each completed shot, in the act of its completion, would lie the death. Of the fiction, of the couples in frame, of the shot itself, and of the time-memory that had, like dying embers, briefly flickered to life.

Both approaches, for all their difference, however find themselves asking the question that Bandyopadhyay too asks: how to deal with memory in the cinema? Isn't it very difficult, if not impossible? 'Isn't the fact of a meaningful cinematic representation of memory perplexing? Being an audio-visual medium, isn't cinema itself inimical to the exercise which Ray sets for himself in Aranyer Din Ratri?'

Given that 'frank nakedness' is at best an 'elegant chimera' of fiction, it is often the case, says Bandyopadhyay, that what one age believes to be expressly manifest, 'exposed' for eternity, appears impregnable to another –

the taken-for-granted 'natural' irradiance itself may, at some point in history, become so mystifying as to suggest, in lieu of the fixed destination, a fresh departure.

Can the cinema, he asks, make such a departure?

Given that the cinema has shown its ability to clog both communication and production, and thereby remembrance, can the cinema properly have 'an agenda of its own'?

Realism cannot do it: the last person who can entertain any kind of totalizing ambition is the filmmaker who dares to label himself a 'realist'. Such a filmmaker has no better option than to don the robe of a jester, the practical person who understands and acknowledges freely that all moves intended as retaliations are 'merely circumstantial, commonsensical retorts employed under pressure of time'. Since to be forgetful of one's own finitude is death, it follows that only jesters, or those who play out their ends, are alive.

But what is the agenda here? It remains in a curious way an open question, with perhaps an answer in both ritual and sacrifice, from both of which the cinema has over its existence sought answers. And perhaps that does remain the curious, unanswered, final question in a film that ends in mass-suicide: and where the relentless circling trolley ends with one final Memory End-Game that goes like this:

One participant: In the end was darkness and light, soil, fire, ego, and death.

Second participant: In the end was darkness and light, soil, fire, ego, death, and sex.

Third participant: In the end was darkness and light, soil, fire, ego, death, sex and Kali.

THE UNBLINKING EYE

RATI CHAKRAVYUH AND A CINEMA OF SINCERITY

Kamayani Sharma

"In the beginning..."

The black screen blooms into the diffused glow sheening the nuptial red and white of a newlywed couple flanking a priestess. A mass wedding of twelve couples has just been solemnized on the night of a lunar eclipse. The inauguration of the cycle of conversations among the thirteen protagonists of Rati Chakravyuh evokes an ancient moment of contemplation about the origins of the world, a version of which is common to all religious texts. It is almost as if the world of humans can be considered truly begun with the birth of shared language, its possibilities raised to an Upanisadic pitch as the unfolding discussion hits an entire range of notes across the scale of history, from metaphysical ponderings to reports of civil strife.

We slowly orbit these brides and grooms sitting in a tight circle and conversing in aphoristic dialogues. Despite the title, implying a maze of sensual pleasures, our protagonists are hardly blushing brides and eager grooms but philosophers attending to an existential emergency of some kind. Perhaps the withdrawal of the moon into the shadows of the earth signals a portentous event, anticipating the aftermath of this session: the collective suicide of these young men and women. The soft golden radiance engulfing them and laminating their youth hints at a sacred fire. Is it Agni blessing a marriage or a pyre devouring self-sacrificed bodies? What awaits the flesh – consummation or consumption? This tantalisingly Freudian question haunts the 102 minutes of uncut viewing time, as the couples engage in a half-scholarly, half-playful, and darkly flirtatious banter that encompasses the breadth of human experience from life to death and the spectrum of contemporary traumas from riots to repression.

There is a bewitchingly somnolent aura around this circle of interlocuters, conjuring up childhood campfires, the exchanging of spooky tales a ritual unto itself. The night sky hinted at in the tight wide angles panning attentively across the group grants an eerie

thrill to the colloquy. Overtones of The Decameron and its plagued raconteurs distracting themselves from the Black Death heighten the hypnotic, faintly ominous quality of the mise-en-scene, hinting at some evil to come. What is this penumbral horror tucked out of tense and sight? Shot in a single take, the film makes helpless voyeurs of us, the camera refusing to blink as it prowls along the edges of this council of youngsters, rapt and relentless like a predator kept at bay only by the fire. A whiff of the cultic about the conference intensifies the mythic promise of its proceedings, its high religious gravity leavened by the deceptively ludic form it takes, becoming an intriguing parlour game for these just-married pairs.

Rati Chakravyuh traces its lineage to the artist's earliest experiments with the medium, from the retreating Ruchenfigurs of Et Cetera (1997) right up to the searching stumbles of Nachiketa looking for Yama in an adaptation of Katho Upanishad (2011) to which it is most closely related. The long take, a mainstay in his work, pays homage to the cinematic quest for continuous space and lost time exemplified by the cinema of Andrei Tarkovsky and Mani Kaul. The experience and knowledge of enduring time is captured by the sleek, sinuous mobility of the filming apparatus, carried over from Katho Upanishad. Our eye glides over each speaker as it accompanies the measured turns, the temporal translated into the visual, the twelve couples marking the hours in the countdown to their unknown fate, revealed to us only at the end. But this is not a teleological text, its seemingly linear progression undercut by arbitrary ventriloquial enactments spanning centuries and tackling questions that have persisted across eras. The trappings of chronology are excised, dialogues become almost like units that can be rearranged without affecting the flow of the film. Resisting the temptations of characterization, the stylized discourse plays out more like a dream – we see neither how it began nor how it ended, compelled to stay even as we have no clue about how we got there.

And yet, the deep luminous colours and the uninterrupted gaze of the camera imbue Rati Chakravyuh with a radioactive veneer. Its ambitious use of the long take and the expressive possibilities of the film aesthetic – a reframed, unedited single take that reveals the structure of duration – are pushed to their limits by the ceremonial circumambulations of the camera, suggesting the seven pheras of the Hindu wedding in which bride and groom take turns leading each other around the fire. As Agni was witness to the vows they took, so the camera conspires with the spectator to observe them, visually erasing the difference in space and time between the viewers and the actors. Told in historical present, the account on screen exists in the twilight zone between fact and fiction, truth and artifice. We are made aware of the passing of time as it unwinds, of the ontology of the moving image as it exists in multiple moments and our relationship to it as we process the past, present and future momentarily in the same frame. The temporalities of subject and object rhyme and coalesce

as viewing takes on the character of participating. Testing the boundaries between the real and the virtual, a sort of Deleuzian “crystal-image” finds purchase in the ductility of time in Rati Chakravyuh, as well as in its narrative imbrications.

True to the artist’s concept of the ‘cinema of religiosity’, the yagna-like atmosphere charges the conversation with a Vedic energy even as it eschews hieratic posturing for the earthier themes of sex, lies and explosive violence in public and private spaces. The anticipation of the fateful finale right from the start mingles with the knowledge of the marital milieu we are amidst, fusing the promise of the wedding night with the eventuality of death. This macabre erotic-thanatotic impulse runs throughout the otherwordly adda, thrilling the conversational synapses that connect the disparate strands, the spectre of tragedy ever-present. Threads borrowed from the fresh cobwebs of the contemporary archive are spun bit-by-bit and spooled along the invisible circumference of the talking circle. Woven in between whimsical confessions and ambiguous backstories are gratuitous descriptions of nonconsensual sex between parents and marauding sprees during communal riots.

The eponymous chakravyuh or labyrinth is evoked not just by the slow circulations of the camera but also by the circuitry of hyperlinked stories, a warren-like frame narrative which we may not be able to exit. Congealing into a dense entanglement of eclectic ideas, theological reflections and intimate revelations, these are tales told by would-be lovers, as rati suggests, and represent a form of lovemaking in the tradition of Arabian Nights. But our Scheherezades and Shahryars are far more saturnine, all too committed to cerebral pleasures than corporal ones, interested not in preventing death but in welcoming it, hoping not for romance but self-annihilation, for a release not physical but spiritual. Their night of passion mocks the notion of one, their union aimed not at exalting the power of fantasy to amend wrongs but putting it into the service of highlighting the lethality of history. Instead of escaping from the inevitable, these conversations are reiterations of horrors past and present on a collision course with Yama, god of death.

A cauldron of volatility – furrow-browed reflections on existential dilemmas, twilit nightmares, banal generational nostalgia and repressed civic agony – is stirred with unnerving coolness, sentences quickly completed before the camera moves away from the speaker. The contradiction between the minimalism of tone and maximalism of ground covered captures our age’s paradox of communication, where online newsfeeds offer little consolation for those craving knowledge, not quotes and quips. As the conversation rotates from bride to groom to bride, it transforms into a game. Each thought is passed from one person to the next, becoming a test of memory and recall, an exercise in cataloguing, the theatre of philosophy stripped off its romantic extravagance, whittled down to the spare performance of doubt and curiosity at the heart of it.

Rati Chakravyuh is a slow-burning philosophical procedural, importing the phenomenological vocabulary of immersive media to meld with the earliest tendencies of video art's interest in time and being. There is a playing down of the hyperreal enthusiasm of say, a work like Kalighat Fetish (1999) or Vakratunda Swaha (2010), for a restraint and responsibility more becoming of an ethic sensitive to the social and the political. In the context of fiction, David Marcus has termed this subdued passion, this new late capitalist nervousness about late capital, 'post-hysteric'. One might argue that this latest work on love, death, and the meaning of life, so shorn of immoderation as to strike a chord of resonance in generations emerging from the shrill alarms of a morally panicked political economy, is an example of that. The deadpan allusion to spurts of madness and deviance out on the streets is enunciated, almost satirically, by the casualness of the barbarism indoors. There is a sincerity to the stories being told, aimed at capturing the stoic compulsions of the early 21st century imaginary. Irony has doubled back to return to its earliest consorts, defiance and death, best exemplified by one of the most celebrated conversationalists, Socrates. That the speakers are richly garbed and bejewelled, clearly belonging to an upper-caste, upper-class stratum, while holding forth on scenarios tinged with blood, grime and squalor, becomes disorienting, almost upsetting.

The dry incantations of the thirteen speakers take shape as questions, answers and responses, disaffected deliveries that are vexingly at odds with the often-explicit imagery they summon up. Accounts of mythological characters' sex lives punctuate placid commentary on cricket and consumer goods in a steady rhythm as though the materials of the epic and the mundane were of the same heft and texture. Like some obscure rite, lists of possible first and final causes are compiled, canonical texts are challenged, gruesome violations and acts of terrorism are divulged, and quotidian details of shared cultural experiences are recollected. This is a collective meditation on memory and forgetting, words that come up in the course of the real-time progression of the film. What is to preserve civilizations through the stories they pass on as legacies? What is to inherit the past? These are questions at the heart of Rati Chakravyuh's coil. There is an insistence that we watch the subversion of the sacred – we aren't allowed to look away as we hear how Sita made wild love to Ravana willingly, how Radha was murdered by Krishna in her dream, or how the car brand Maruti was really Hanuman's avatar. The 'religiosity' made palpable by the ceremony is slyly upturned by the polemical irreverence of the conversation, the visual and oral almost competing for epistemic privilege.

The determination to forget received antique wisdom and the desire to commemorate the endangered facts of recent years speak to the meaning of truth that these thirteen speakers want to draw out. As the words of the Buddha and the sounds of the Ramayana and the Bhagwat Purana recede into the hoary past, scenes

of horrendous crimes and misdemeanours that mark religious fundamentalism and everyday domestic abuse echo in our collective consciousness. A palimpsest of the histories of the home, the city and the nation becomes available as we pay attention. Deeply personal fond reminiscences of a mother's dates follow the disturbing report of a father raping a mother to beget a son. Dystopian, military-havocked settlements flicker in our imaginations, as there is mention of army hospitals, combustible days after assassinations and the echoes of a persistent urban paranoia as parents are waited for in scary schoolrooms. The finer points of famous cricket matches between India and its neighbours, emblematic of greater political tension and turmoil, are debated and dissected as if these are adolescent sports aficionados grown old as security analysts. With events raging outside the door often foregone in favour of the microhistorical, the latter often more uncomfortable than the former, anxieties about the elusiveness of truth and its frustratingly unstable value seem to circumscribe the deliberate longueurs that characterise the sharing of memories across space and time.

"In the end..."

Rati Chakravyuh trains its cursive camerawork on a panoply of ponderings, forcing us to eavesdrop on this wry, drifting repartee. The desultory meanderings of the visual and the oral combine the urgencies of the moment with the deferred resolutions that have persisted through eons. The breakneck brio that characterised the promised pleasures of globalisation and liberalisation and found its way into art of years past, or the overwrought drama much of it deployed in recent times has given way to an equanimous examination of the age. A symphony emerges, in which many voices converge, contradicting and interjecting and maintaining different registers, trying with quiet desperation to collect many sounds. Is this not a fitting aesthetic for the current climate of unprecedented eruptions and explosions in which it is becoming difficult to listen even as it becomes impossible not to?

The illusory gleam of opulence vies with the wish to rehearse a litany of fast-fading or selectively remembered margin notes on the pages of history books. A generation suffered a coming of age marked with delusions of grandeur that are disintegrating in the wake of worldwide protests against corrosive structures of polity and economy. Hopes are dashed and disappointments abound. Is it a wonder that an occasion for the inauguration of a new life becomes the prelude to the voluntary extringuishment of an old one? The young can only play-act at having the agency and wherewithal to change their circumstance. Maybe the morbidity of contemporary reality, having drained irony of its piquancy, can only be represented with the tenacity of an unblinking gaze that makes it unacceptable to turn away and the jaded earnestness of terse truths being bartered. Perhaps the sincerity of Rati Chakravyuh befits this epoch of pessimism.

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