CINEMA OF PRAYOGA

INDIAN EXPERIMENTAL FILM & VIDEO 1913-2006

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Ashish Avikunthak with Amrit Gangar

Ashish Avikunthak, Kalighat Fetish (1999)

He was a regular and unique presence – in Mumbai – wherever there were film screenings. But I think he felt more comfortable in Screen Unit, the film club I headed then, maybe because of its craziness, because of the youthful and restless curiosities it had around. Screen Unit always supported the cinematography on the edge, the non-absolutist quests into its archaeology. A decade ago, I remember, I was on the selection panel of the Mumbai International Film Festival of Documentary, Short & Animation Films (MIFF) and a short film called *Et cetera* came for viewing, moments passed; some started yawning, some started scratching their heads, some craned their necks forwards holding their chins, perhaps like Rodin's *Thinker*, etc etc. And the obvious happened: *Et cetera* was put to vote and rejected. I was dejected. Not because it was a film by someone I knew but because it was a film that attempted to seriously explore the contours of time and human existence in its tetralogy of four separate films. I just conjecture how many such films might have been thrown out of broader festival audience viewing because of certain level of conservatism or resistance to *prayoga's* oddity.

Curiously, even in his lifestyle Ashish looked an odd man out – in his *khadi dhoti, kurta*, a black ribbon on his sleeve, metal-rimmed specs and black silky moustaches! He always wore the black ribbon in support of the 'Save Narmada' movement, a protest against the big dam and massive human displacement. Though a Punjabi, Ashish Chadha (he changed to Avikunthak on the way) is a complete Bengali by spirit – all this is part of his *jeevan-prayoga* (life-experiment). Though born in Jabalpur in Madhya Pradesh, Ashish Avikunthak (34) grew up in Kolkata near the Kali temple.

Filmmaking is not his full time profession. Academically, he is a student of archaeology at Stanford University in the USA, where his dissertation is on the anthropology of Indian archaeology. This followed his undergraduate degrees in social work and archaeology, in Mumbai and Pune Universities, respectively. He has worked as a folklorist among the Warli aborigines in Maharashtra. He is also a still photographer – his black and white photographs of Kolkata's iconic Howrah Bridge were exhibited at the NCPA in Bombay in 1999. Self-taught and financed, he is a *prayoga* filmmaker for over a decade. His works have been shown in film festivals around the world. This interview was held on the cyberspace, densely surrounded by serendipity.

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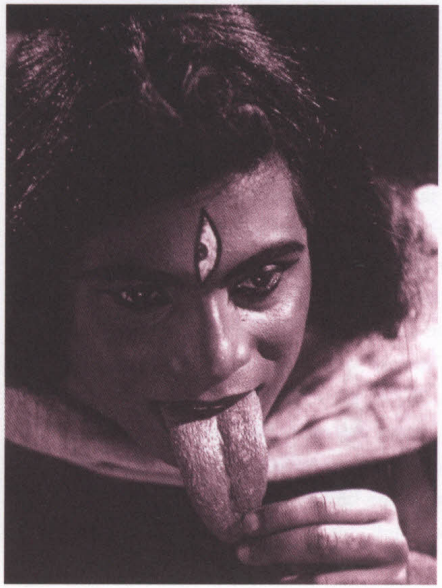
Amrit: ***Whenever I see your film* Kalighat Fetish, *I remember Mahatma Gandhi's visit to the Kalighat temple. He was quite disturbed by the killing of animals there. He asked his host, "How is it that Bengal with all its knowledge, intelligence, sacrifice, and emotion tolerates this slaughter?" (Source: Gandhi's autobiography,* The Story of My Experiments with Truth*). In your film, you give so much time and space to the 'violent' images. Is it your 'experiment with truth'?***



Ashish Avikunthak, Kalighat Fetish (1999)

Ashish: *Kalighat Fetish* is contemplation on two ideas – transgression and morbidity. They are connected by the act of transformation, leading to death. Both the violence of sacrifice and the performance of transformation for me are transgressive acts performed as an engagement with morbidity. They are part of the same act of reverence and anguish. For me, *Kalighat Fetish* is an outcome of my own interaction with the memory of death and dying. The 'brutality' of the sacrifice is for me a meditation on the morbidity of death.

Personally, the film is a cinematographic rendition of memory. The film has been shot in two spatial formations that are an integral part of my memoryscape – the house I was raised and the famous neighbourhood Kali temple in Kolkata – the Kalighat.

My home has been an ambivalent space for me – I don't really have very fond memories, nor do I have any terrible memories of the space – it has always been, and very simply, the house where I spent eighteen years of my life from 1973-1991. My parents don't live in that house any more, but we still own it. Over time, it has virtually become an ossified memory space, where I have shot other films too, *Dancing Othello and End Note*. Whenever I go to Kolkata, I spend a lot of time in this house.

Kalighat Fetish is a manifestation of these recollections – more an experiment with memories than with truth. And unlike Gandhi I do not claim to inhabit any moral universe. Gandhi's comment originated from the Vaishnava sectarian belief that he firmly held and was raised in. He was unable to appreciate the ritualistic necessity of the sacrifice within the domain of the Tantrik Shakta cult of Kalighat.

Amrit: ***Were your parents religious?***

Ashish: Yes, both my parents are religious but have a very different sense of practice. My mother comes from a Punjabi Hindu family and is a staunch believer of the Krishna cult, so much so she now runs a community Krishna temple in Calcutta, which is now nearly her full time occupation. Where as my father came from a staunch Punjabi Arya Samaji family who had never entered any temple in his lifetime – a strict non-idol worshipper, however we would have the Vedic fire ritual (havan) regularly if not every week.

My mother was a regular visitor to the Kalighat temple. The first time I saw a buffalo being sacrificed was during my visit to the temple during the Kali Puja festival. At the age of six or seven,

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I was simultaneously fascinated and abhorred by the event. Not really traumatized. Later when I started roaming on the streets of Kolkata alone, I would often go to Kalighat, just to see these daily sacrifices as part of the temple ritual.

Amrit: Tarpor? ***And then?***

Ashish: And then, during my high school studies, I volunteered to work for about two years at Nirmal Hirdaya – the home for the dying run by Mother Teresa's 'Missionaries of Charity'. Very close to Kalighat, this institution was transformed from a dharmashala. It was given to Mother Teresa to run her home for the dying, the first institution with which 'Missionaries of Charity' was formed. It was here that I encountered death very closely, when I saw inmates dying before my eyes. The film, in a certain way, is a manifestation of these memories and experiences.

Amrit: ***How come you turned* atikatha *into fetish?* Atikatha *in Sanskrit would mean 'an exaggerated tale or idle, meaningless talk'. And why do you call it 'fetish'? The Bengali title is* Kalighat Atikatha. *Which is not fetish! Is it because of 'fetish' that it has found place in Anglo-Saxon gay and lesbian film events?***

Ashish: *Atikatha* as is used in the title is a Bengali word, which, as in Sanskrit, means an excessive tale, an intense tale (***ati*** = intense / excessive / exceedingly, ***katha*** = tale). I usually try to play around with the English and the vernacular titles in all my films; it is mostly a response to the difference: a way of causing disjuncture. And also I think there are different audiences that I am trying to woo with the titles, but eventually they are just titles, the impact has to emerge from the work itself. I feel that the reason the film has got some positive response from the West has little to do with the title but rather it has to more with the intrinsic context, which is primarily a juxtaposition of cross-dressing as understood by the West and the ritualization in the context of Kali worship.

Amrit: ***Your cinema makes me feel* kaal, *its temporality. Do you treat cinematography as a temporal art?***

Ashish: In a certain sense I do look at filmmaking as 'sculpting in time' as Tarkovsky puts it. And my foray into filmmaking was directly an attempt at playing with time – all the four films in Et cetera are directly an attempt at engaging with real time, the fact that they are single shot, single take, unedited films. For me, as a temporal experience they are the most linear of cinematic narratives, the most pure. These films, rather than sculpting in time, were slicing time. However I feel video art has been more successful as an engagement with real time. I look at my films as an attempt at invoking kaal as a metaphysical entity, rather than kaal as a temporal category; *Et cetera* and *Kalighat Fetish* being articulation of such an invocation.

Amrit: ***Your body of work shows preference for the celluloid. Any particular reason? What do you think of video, of digital technology?***

Ashish: I do not differentiate between celluloid and video within an aesthetic framework, as most

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filmmakers tend to do. I believe this distinction will not hold ground for long, as with growing possibilities of digital technology, it will be very difficult to differentiate between a cinematic image and a digital image aesthetically. My distinction between celluloid and video is within a framework of a 'theory of work and practice' and my preferences are for the 'aura' of the mechanical image rather than the digital one.

Amrit: *On the one hand, digital technology has made it easier and cheaper for anyone to make films or installations, while on the other this very phenomenon has thrown challenges at creativity. We don't really see many astounding works nowadays. The general tendency is to take short cuts.*

Ashish: With the digital revolution, there has been an exponential increase in the realm of image production. Digital technology has democratised the possibility of image production and now virtually anyone with very little money, and also little expertise, can create a professional image. You can say that digital technology has domesticated the visual image making process within the confines of its economic logic and portability. In a way, what has actually happened with the rise of digital technology is that the 'theory of work and practice' associated with filmmaking has been devalued. Now it is not necessary to spend endless years in a film school or as a trainee in the film industry to make moving images. The need to master a craft has given way to just the importance of the final 'product'. What has changed with digital technology is a theory of work and practice; it has given rise to a new theory of work, which is driven by the ability to produce more images, faster, cheaper and in great numbers. This technology has made image making rampant and commonplace. The loss of the aura of image, that Walter Benjamin laments in his essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', has further diminished and is nearly getting erased with the rise of the digital technology and its ability to produce images ubiquitously.

Amrit: *How do you differentiate the two images?*

Ashish: I like making films on celluloid primarily because somewhere I am still wedded to the idea of the aura that is preserved in a cinematic image. For me, the cinematic image is more sacred than the digital image, primarily because the image emerges from a theory of work, which values the aura of an image. Because the cinematic image is more expensive to make, its production is heavily depended on craftsmanship and I believe somewhere the aura of the image is retained. It is because of this that I enjoy the theory of work and practice that is associated with celluloid filmmaking.

But let me tell you, it is not nostalgia. It is a preference for theory of work that does not allow for opulence (ability to shoot few hours rather than hundreds of hours in video); the image is not instantaneously produced; neither is there instant editing, and precisely because of that there is room for contemplation. It is this process that I believe preserves the aura of the mechanical image. I would even go to the extent of making films on 8mm rather than on video.

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Amrit: *You are archaeologist by your academic discipline and have also made an archaeological film. Somehow your films seem to me to be an archaeology of human mind, of human psyches and their relationships with themselves, with others, with the spaces they inhabit, the absurdities they encounter.*

Ashish: The film you are talking about is called *Rummaging for Pasts: Excavating Sicily, Digging Bombay.* I had made it for an archaeology conference in Stanford (Narrative Pasts | Past Narratives, 2001). Let me reiterate, space is very important to me. I look at cinema as an exploration both in spatiality of our existence and temporal inconsistency. Mostly I use space as a metaphor for the existential predicament and it recurs constantly in all my films. Technically I do that by using wide-angle lenses, hand held movements and high-speed film. The spatiality becomes an implicit way of exploring space between relationship as in *End Note* and way of investigating the self in *Kalighat Fetish*. In both the films, spaces become memory spaces, as metaphors for an inconceivable loss. The usage of black and white, high-contrast stock and colour, edited in an in-concerted way is also a formal process through which I try to weave temporal and spatial disjunctures to produce a form of existential predicament that is located in a loss, a bereavement of past, that is not only nostalgic but also traumatic. I tried this very consciously while making the short fiction *End Note*.

Amrit: *Any particular reason for selecting Samuel Beckett for* **End Note***?*

Ashish: I discovered Beckett in my college days in Bombay, when I saw a Marathi rendition of *Waiting for Godot* there. Around that time I was also exploring Theatre of the Absurd, which I chanced upon while reading existential literature. I was very influenced by Beckett, not so much by his longer plays but by his short ones. His ability to produce philosophically profound dramatic works with a strong sense of brevity and sparseness awed me. So much so that in my college in Pune we performed his shortest piece ever – *Scream*. The choice to decide to make Beckett's *Come & Go,* on which *End Note* is based, is located during my engagement with Beckett in those days.

The play haunts me because of its intricate formal structure, cyclical in nature. Within this formalization, Beckett produces a profound sense of trauma. It is this sense of melancholic trauma that I wanted to bring out in the film. This is a very personal film for me, incredibly personal, for not only has it been shot in my childhood house and neighbourhoods, but specifically because I decided to cast women dear to me in this film. It has my wife, her sister and my cousin. I always wanted to make a film that connected to me in a very intimate way, hence I avoided professional actors. The film was shot in two schedules over two years, in December 2000 and in the summer of 2002. Because of terrible lack of money and technical problems it took another two years to finish.

Formally, the first part of the film is a deconstruction of *Come & Go*, and the second part a kind of reconstruction. This was done in order to destabilise Beckett's brevity and to simultaneously exacerbate the trauma.

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Amrit: *Could you tell me something about your still-to-be completed feature film?*

Ashish: The feature film *Nirakar Chhaya* (Shadows Formless) is an 80-minute interpretation of a novella Pandavpuram written in Malayalam by Sethumadhvan. I read this book in an English translation in 1998, during one of my fieldworks among Warli aborigines. I was fascinated by the story, which deals with a lonely, abandoned wife who conjures up a paramour in her imagination. The narrative in the book has been set in such a way that reader believes that the paramour is real and only in the end do we come to know that it was actually her fantasy.

I take the kernel of this story and try to experiment with the idea of imagination as a movement between real and non-real, and end the film unresolved, as we do not know if she was really imagining. Shot entirely in Kolkata, the film (both colour and black and white) is in Bengali. The narrative is embedded with a symbolic world that is designed to make the film into a deeply melancholic experience. The film has original score by a music composer who has just completed her doctorate in music composition at Stanford University.

Amrit: *And, along with Beckett, your preference is also for Shakespeare – in* **Dancing Othello,** *for example.*

Ashish: *Dancing Othello* is a political film, unlike the rest. It stands apart from rest of my work. The idea of the film took roots when I saw Arjun Raina perform in Stanford. I then decided that I would like to make a film on his *Khelkali*, which was juxtaposition between Kathakali performance and Shakespearian dramaturgy. The core concept of the film was to subvert both the traditions of classical art to bring out the irony of the postcolonial situation. This is done throughout the film as the narrative moves between Kathakali, Shakespeare and the performance of postcolonial mimesis done by Arjun. The film ends with a self-reflexive turn with the last monologue that Arjun delivers, where he gesticulates and mocks the filmmaker for making a self-indulgent film. This film is most influenced by my academic training as a cultural anthropologist. Through this cinematic text I attempt to grapple with the irony of the postcolonial situation, which cultural theorists such as Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have tried to enunciate in their scholarly works.

Amrit: *I thought you were, in a way, dealing with the postcolonial fetish.*

Ashish: True. It is a film that attempts to critique our postcolonial fetish with the idea of the classical, both native (Kathakali) and foreign (Shakespeare), through the usage of Khelkali's English usage that Arjun had developed. This was made during the incipient years of the call centre BPO revolution in India (2001). Arjun had just left his job as a professor at the National School of Drama in Delhi and was flirting with the emerging BPO industry as a voice culturist, teaching young Indians to speak in American English. He was at once amused and shocked at the political and financial valence of the English language in contemporary globalized India. On the other hand this film is also a product of my biography. I went to a very elitist English medium convent school in Kolkata, where we were fined one rupee if we spoke in 'vernacular', Bengali or Hindi. We were taught Shakespearian classics,

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Julius Caesar, Macbeth and the Romantic poets. Simultaneously Doordarshan, the Indian television channel, would bombard us with what the state considered classical, Hindustani classical music and Indian classical dance, from Odissi to Kathakali. So in effect *Dancing Othello* is a process of engaging with this idea of classical that I grew up. It is an attempt at questioning the symbolic and political meaning of such classical idiom in our postcolonial daily lives. The strategy that I used was to destabilize its symbolic universe and undermine their classical status that they have been endowed with. But eventually, I end the film with a self-reflexive turn where I subvert and destabilize my own authorial legitimacy; in a way transforming this film into an "ironical irony".

This is also the most collaborative film that I have ever made, without a dialogue or a script. It is mostly a product of improvisation and collaboration as we were shooting. The narrative of the film was laid only when I started editing the film.

Amrit: ***The 'archaeology' of Indian cinema has very few relics of 'independent' cinema in the context of the cinema of prayoga. How independent is independent cinema in India?***

Ashish: Historically, once the studio system collapsed after the World War II, Indian films have been independent. That is, if you define independent cinema like the American Independent cinema. But I think this term 'independent' cinema, has no meaning in India. Indian cinema has always been part of capitalist modes of production, and therefore, very conservative. Politically, in the late 40s and early 50s, in the immediate wake of the country's independence movement and freedom, some radical cinema happened but that was co-opted by the rising commerce.

Then it was only the state-funded cinema that offered the possibility of producing radical cinema in the 70s, perhaps because they were beyond the logic of capital and commerce. Along with the political pessimism of the post-Naxalite India, the state-funded cinema did produce some exceptional cinema, but I think that radicalism was only limited to the type of subject matter chosen. Like most of the commercial stuff, they just wrote different scripts, and attempted to tell a story which was not often seen on the screen in Indian cinema theatres. Other than Mani Kaul, Kumar Shahani, G. Arvindan and John Abraham, I don't see any filmmakers attempting to experiment with narrative, form or content. In the Indian context, the genealogy of the cinema of prayoga only comes, according to me, from these three filmmakers, who were in some way indebted to Ritwik Ghatak for their cinematographic radicalism.

The documentary short filmmakers who are part of Vikalp can be called the independent cinema in India, they come closest to the idea. However even with documentary cinema, the 'genrification' has taken roots, and it has become a hybrid between television aesthetic and propaganda.

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Amrit: *Do you miss India in North America?*

Ashish Avikunthak, Antraal (2005)

Ashish: I look at myself as in exile in the US, an exile that I have condemned myself to, perhaps forever. The reason is only one – cinema. I hope I could raise money to make the films that I could in India but you know how impossible it is. With the rise of liberalization, traditional funding sources for the films have been completely extinguished. I see the corporate academia in the US as the only way to get funding to make films. Not that Stanford University is funding my films, but the scholarship money that I have, if saved well, is enough for me to make films on a regular basis. As a friend of mine says, "it is the buying power of the dollar". And in my case it has worked. I have just finished a feature film solely out of my own savings. Most of my peers have bought houses and cars with the money they save – I just made a film.

Amrit Gangar
Mumbai, 14 May 2006

Ashish Avikunthak, Antraal (2005)

Ashish Avikunthak, Antraal (2005)

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