

# 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*<sup>1</sup>. 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 ( $\infty$ ), 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 Dahiwalé (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*.<sup>2</sup> 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<sup>3</sup> 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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<sup>1</sup>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

<sup>2</sup>The energy that must be awakened for spiritual enlightenment.

<sup>3</sup>The earliest written versions of the Puranas date from the time of the Gupta empire (third-fifth century B.C.E.).