



## Kalighat and Vakratunda Swaha

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*Kalighat Fetish* (1999) and *Vakratunda Swaha* (2010) exhibit a range of Ashish Avikunthak's work as an experimental filmmaker and they embody a number of his preoccupations: anthropology and cinema, the persistence of epic and mythic structures in the modern and in daily life, the intermingling of the sacred and the quotidian, and the echoes in narrative of the old and archaic aspects of our culture—but with a sensibility that is contemporary and modern in a way not often encountered in Indian cinema.

In *Kalighat Fetish* we see the fiesta of Kali, but, so to speak, dreamed—or created—by Kali herself. Her coming into being is a sort of performance: a man meticulously takes on her character, elaborately dressing himself up in all of the terrifying aspects of a Devi. Quite literally, he *incarnates* her. He enters into the

role with as much elaborate ceremony and immersion into detail as a Kathakali performer. In him, we see a process by which, gradually, the ordinary is transformed into the sacred.

The deadly violence of the dark figure of Kali, the consort of Shiva, finds its analogues in the ritual sacrifice of two goats, bathed and prepared for the occasion. And we are not spared the violence of the ritual either. The filmmaker brings alive and to the forefront of our consciousness the significance of the idea of sacrifice. Kali, however, is largely indifferent and detached from the mayhem around her.

This new embodied Kali is cinematically surrounded by decapitation and death and dismemberment—and it is an integral part of the sacredness of the time and space we are in: something on the lines of a tableau or a

dynamic icon. It is neither immoral nor obscene but presented as the cycle of life—the victim and scapegoat as the expiator of the sins of the collectivity. The goats are finally prepared for the market and eager customers await.

In many ways, other artists have used the image of mother goddesses in their *oeuvre*. Not least of them, Tyeb Mehta in whose spare and robust images of trussed bulls, falling figures and goddesses, such violence is aesthetically the very theme. In fact, Tyeb Mehta's short film *Koodal* (1969) may be usefully seen alongside this film as exploring the same terrain. In it, the filmmaker is also seen, a lonely walker in the city, mobbed by crowds on the busy crossroads of Bombay, but the scene then moves to a vacant abattoir and the awesomeness of destruction is even more graphic in the suggestion.





The ruling colors in the film are red and black and gold, the colors of Kali. The brilliant contrast of ebony and crimson recurs as a motif: blood red lips, tongue, flowers, fabrics against dark fleeced goats, dusky skin tones and brilliantly contrasting and ornament. However, unlike as in some of his other films, this Kali does not really “walk among us”. She is not seen by anyone of the worshippers and celebrants, and the intention is not to introduce the holy into the world of our senses even if as performance. It is in fact a sort of conjuring up of a world through this gesture. We have a sensation of being outside time, or in a microcosm of her making. For the duration, he has become her, but in doing so, he appears to enable and substantiate the frenzy and festiveness. The ritual he performs has almost the force of *creation*.

It is perhaps the idea of the gift and sacrifice that underlies the various aspects of this work, for what is a gift if not pure expenditure without the thought of profit? *Kalighat Fetish* depicts—and participates in—the momentary creation of a sacred interval, before the return to the economy of everyday life.

The next film is more complexly structured and bears the indelible stamp of personal experience. As with the first, *Vakratunda Swaha* also moves in complicated formal and circular structures, with many of the variations returning obsessively to a single document: an extended shot of a personal friend, whose life was tragically and early cut short. The brief titles provide the minimal context we need. The film is in a sense both performance and expiation, as the director himself undergoes the ritual tonsure on camera, after which we see a series of formal variations on the theme of mourning.

It is, in fact, a sort of meditation on the idea of loss, and on of the ways in which—in the disenchanting modern—we have to find new rituals to replace the methods to which we no longer have full access: to mourn, to grieve and to connect to the general economy of birth, of life and of extinction and, perhaps, return as well.

A series of masks are exchanged, interchanged, and paraded in the new urban spaces that have

no way of responding to these fundamental and liminal experiences. The images are sometimes almost numinous: to see a god walking among men takes on the character of a miracle.

In fact, throughout the film, the key cinematic trope is the—now rarely resorted to—technique of reverse action. In the work of modernist and revolutionary film makers like Dziga Vertov, reverse action was often used as a demystifying device to make plain the things not visible to the fallible perceptual capacities of the human eye. The film camera became in their hands a sort of extension of the eye, a way of expanding and deepening our perceptual and epistemological limits in terms of speeding up or slowing down time or even reversing its direction. Here, we certainly sense some of that, and additionally, there is the deep wish in the mourning process to simply “turn back the clock”.

But perhaps more interestingly, we also see a contemporary reinvention of the techniques of the trick film which found so much scope in the traditional genres of the mythological and the devotional films, which we have known well through our own film history in the subcontinent.

Stop motion and reverse motion in films from Dadasaheb Phalke to Babubhai Mistry regularly gripped audiences through the forms of *darshan* they were able to replicate, mobilizing the cinematic apparatus to vividly portray the miraculous, and to make it so convincing and immediate. The difficulty with the traditional mythological films was that in their industrial form of production—and despite all the frenzies of devotion they famously provoked—they were, for the most part, only this side of calendar art and *kitsch*. Here, however, the filmmaker abjures the merely illustrative and evocative, and finds ways to recreate a kind of aura of the image. The music especially helps in creating the right conditions for such a reception. There are a series of tableaux that present uncannily presentiments of the holy in this film.

*Vakratunda Swaha* provides a series of intimations of the figure of Ganesha in the modern world. But then, in the exchange and

interchange of masks, it goes on to make a gas mask a latter day homologue to the deity of good beginnings and auspicious undertakings.

The Ganesha Chaturthi Festival, especially in the topos of “Bombay” and the Bombay cinema, is always the locus classicus of excess. Few films that took the contemporary city as their setting do not end up at that carnivalesque scene. But what is invariably for filmmakers the mark of strangeness, of the exotic and of the *outside*, is for this film, just the starting point: an accidental beginning. But that beginning is also an end which has to be, through the element of performance in the film, atoned for, grieved over, and accepted. If there is going to be any kind of reconciliation with loss, it can only be through submission to a rite: a structured action that is capable of creating satisfying meaning.

But ritual had, perhaps, in archaic times, the precision, the clarity, even the *certainty* we now ascribe to science and technology—and that is probably the most significant general thought we may take away from this film. Is the grim image of the gas mask a suitable equivalent to the icon? And if so, what consolations does this new power over nature give us to replace the consolations we have lost?

The violence of our epic and mythic past is often literalized – and one may even say *dramatized*—in his work, but he does not also ignore the pure visual, musical and sensual delights that the history of organized religious practice also left behind.

In much of Ashish Avikunthak’s work we find little or none of the armature of narrative which is such a staple of the cinema. But they are not documentaries of the political or even anthropological variety. They do not report or record or depict events. But they do encapsulate a great deal of anthropological thinking in the way they mobilize a range of theatrical devices like masks and performance and ritual. They are formal essays and stagings of the meanings of such procedures which have, for the most part in our culture, taken on a purely mechanical, instrumental and economic dimension.