

THE UNBLINKING EYE

RATI CHAKRAVYUH AND A CINEMA OF SINCERITY

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“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 Chakravayuh 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 Chakravayuh 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 Chakravayuh* 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 Chakravayuh, 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 otherworldly 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 chakravayuh 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, twilight 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 Chakravayuh 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-hysterical'. 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 Chakravayuh'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 Chakravayuh 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 Chakravayuh befits this epoch of pessimism.