

/FILAMENT - RATI CHAKRAYYUH

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ASHISH AVIKUNTHAK





Rati Chakravayuh, Film, 105 minutes, 2013

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/VIOLENCE OF HER DESIRES

"Man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world."

- Albert Camus,
The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays

The Myth of Sisyphus by Albert Camus is a retelling of the mythological figure of Sisyphus. Sisyphus, the King of Corinth, imprisoned the god of death by trickery. As punishment Zeus banished him into Tartarus, a prison-labyrinth waste land beneath the underworld. Here, Sisyphus endlessly rolls a rock up a hill, just to have it roll back to start anew. Homer, Ovid, Plato and Kafka wrote and interpreted *Sisyphus*. Camus reimagines the story of Sisyphus to create his own story about the man alone with a rock. Sisyphus's story as retold by Camus illustrates how man copes with the graspable world around him.

It is Camus's manner of re-imagining Sisyphus that is crucial. The act of reimagining becomes an act of revolt. For Camus, *'Revolt ... is a constant confrontation between man and his own obscurity ... [It] is certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation which ought to accompany it'*.

Like Camus, filmmaker Ashish Avikunthak indulges in this very own Camusian revolt, in his latest film *Rati Chakravyyuh*. Avikunthak's, *Rati Chakravyyuh*, is one long-take lasting for 102 minutes and preoccupies itself with the questions of suicide, mortality, meaning of existence and the fate of individual in the era of modernity sanctioned by the nation state. Like Camus, who reimagines the story of Sisyphus to create his own story about the man alone

with a rock, Avikunthak theorizes the deviant historiography of post colonial India through the medium of cinema. The film re-evaluates hegemonic discourse in order to accommodate alternative, marginalised, and often discarded subaltern perspectives, which renders it a powerful tool of postcolonial interrogation.

At the heart of this cinematic project is the story of India, narrated and imagined differently - an allegory that exposes the false consciousness of nationalism. It incorporates traditions of oral storytelling and techniques of magical realism. Numerous tellings, fragmented temporality, mixing of discourses, shifts in focalization, wordplays and repetition are some of the devices Avikunthak uses to address the complex landscape of trauma and memory, that accompanied the birth of India as a Nation State. A mode suited to exploring and transgressing boundaries, whether the boundaries are ontological, political or philosophical.

The subtle genius of the script, penned originally in English by Avikunthak and later translated into Bengali by Souagata Mukherjee, lies in disregarding the socratic method and moulding the dialogues into to seamless stories and imaginings of its thirteen protagonists: Six newly wed couples and a priestess come together after their mass wedding, sit and talk about the history of India through two memetics lenses - violence and desire. The title *Rati Chakravyyuh*, also bears this mark of desire and violence. 'Chakravyyuh', a circular military defense- formation described in the battle of Kurukshetra in Mahabharatha and *Rati* is the Goddess desire and lust.

An intersection of Da Vinci's 'The Last Supper' and Calcutta's colloquial tradition of 'adda', the conversation occurs in the night of a lunar eclipse, where the protagonists tell, retell and reimagine stories of India, Calcutta, memories of riots, objects of desire, collective histories, and imagined genealogies. They debate fundamental philosophical problems, such as those connected with reality, existence, knowledge, ethics, reason, mind, and language, while deconstructing mythical protagonists like Ram, Ravan, Sita, Radha and Nachiketa amongst other. They not only challenge inherited stories, they also implicate the storytellers of the epic - Valmiki and Tulsidas. They shed light on violence, both political and intimate. They discuss desire, lust and love.

By excavating personal memories, the film gives way to the unconscious to enter the narrative structure, gradually revealing much larger issues of existence and death. The conversations inextricably intertwine the magical/supernatural, personal/philosophical and the realistic/mythical —what Jean-Pierre Durix defines as the coexistence of two mutually exclusive ontological codes within a single fictional environment.

Avikunthak presents us an alternate genealogy that represents a rejection of the project of national history. In one of its most lyrical moments the film you hear,

In the season of fornication

the city was rioting.

Yes! It was the season of rioting.

It lasted till we were all dead.

In the season of rioting...

I waited for rains.

To wash the blood

on the streets.

The history of India, as a history of violence would produce a very different kind of history than the narratives found in the canonical texts. It would produce a people's history where violence and community constitute each other; and the repository of memories are triggered and fuelled by trauma.

Today Indian history — the story of the nation recast by nationalist and politicians alike, has a well-defined narrative form: established origins, narrative watersheds, national gods and an agreed-upon chronology of significant events. Liberal freedom is also under threat from the forces of bigotry and hate, in the guise of language marchers, religious rioters, and the many-headed mobs. In India, not long ago, it was inherently understood that stories had no beginning or an end. Instead in a continuum of various beginnings and various ends, people appropriated and re-told their own stories. That was true of their gods and their own histories. *"How many Ramayanas? Three hundred? Three thousand? At the end of some Ramayanas, a question is sometimes asked: How many Ramayanas have there been?"* wrote the late poet, author and scholar AK Ramanujan of the Indian epic in a compelling essay in 1987. Two decades later, the essay, *Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation*, was discarded from the history syllabus of Delhi University after protests from hardline Hindu groups and a number of teachers. They asserted that the many versions recounted in the essay offend Hindu beliefs.

The nuance of million multiplicities, the diversity and heterogeneity of beliefs, is now beginning to erode. India that was tolerant of such deviations is fast disappearing. Rati Chakravayuh, the film is

a recognition of that change, and in some ways an act revolt against this recognition.

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