

वक्रतुंड स्वाहा ।

Vakratunda Swāhā

Transplantations. In Transcendence.

वक्रतुंड स्वाहा: पौराणिक-अनुबोधक प्रतिरोपणकी प्रक्रिया

Vakratunda Swāhā: Mytho-Memorial Transplantations

Ashish Avikunthak's film work, and particularly *Vakratunda Swāhā*, provokes a personal feeling towards considering cinematography as a transplantary art. In *Vakratunda Swāhā*, we see twin metaphoric narratives linked through a kind of leitmotif – that of transplantation. As if through the oldest Indian (xeno) transplantation myth manifested by Lord Ganesha and the way Avikunthak transplants his narrative limbs¹. As I understand, before Avikunthak embarked upon making *Vakratunda Swāhā*, he had only a tiny 'cell', a fragment of footage that he had shot some years back. Of a young and handsome artist friend, Girish Dahiwalé, with whom, along with other student-artists, such as Riyas Komu and Justin Ponmany from Mumbai's J.J. School of Arts Avikunthak had planned a collaborative manifesto².

He could not have a longer footage on location because of weather constraints and unfortunately later Girish Dahiwalé choosing to end his life quite abruptly, leaving behind only a melancholic memory-void and a vibe. The 'cell' stayed in the filmmaker's mind like a living fossil. Interestingly, Avikunthak has an academic background in archaeology and anthropology³. *Vakratunda Swāhā* seems transplantary partly also in

the sense that it hones anthropology, archaeology and cinematography – anthropology, for the way Avikunthak contextualizes Ganesha; archaeology, for the way he fathoms the landscapes and ruins of memory and myth, and cinematography, for the way he temporalizes space or spatializes time. I personally believe that there is a persistence of this aspect all through Avikunthak's cinematographic praxis so far. And this has largely become possible because he finances himself and no work of his has been commissioned by an outside agency so far. The archaeologist-anthropologist-cineaste disciplinary combination, I would personally think, demands of a भावक, the viewer-receiver, an exploration into a possible interpretative-aesthetic variation in his work and its overall philosophy.

मूर्ति-शिल्प-आकार प्रतिरोपण

Iconographic Transplantations

Back to the 'cell' on which Avikunthak builds a 'mytho-biological' structure of his film *Vakratunda Swāhā*. I do not know whether Avikunthak had intended the film to be so, but when I saw the film for the first time in Mumbai and then at the Yale University where Avikunthak teaches, this association had flashed across my mind. Ganesha, as depicted in the Hindu mythology, has been generally accepted as the first example of

(xeno)transplantation in the world. The filmmaker, I would think, turns this myth into his film's leitmotif as it transplants its whole aesthetic-biological body onto a small fragment of a shot footage that I prefer to call a 'cell'. Besides this macro-transplantary association, there is yet another association, that of multiple forms of Ganesha and the film's own formal polyvalence.

रूप-बहुसंयोजकता

The Formal Polyvalence

This becomes yet another side of the leitmotif that harmonizes Ganesha through transplantary evocation. Avikunthak masks the manifestations, the *swaroopas*, his own body included. Mythologically, Ganesha has thirty two different forms, while Siva has sixty four. However, the *Mudgala Purana*, an ancient text on Lord Ganesha, cites eight forms of Ganesha, prevailing over eight human weaknesses or demons / asuras.⁴ (1) Vakratunda (twisted trunked), first in the series, represents the absolute as the aggregate of all bodies, an embodiment of the form of Brahman.⁵

Avikunthak integrates such formal polyvalence-ness into *Vakratunda Swāhā* – in a more contemporaneous manner, tangentially suggesting the Ganesha myth and its pli-ability, spatially and temporally, geographically and historically. Avikunthak's Ganesha even becomes vāhaka (e.g. rickshaw puller, a driver) himself; an interesting transition from having a vāhana (वाहन) to being a vāhaka (वाहक). In the Hindu pantheon, Ganesha has always been a very fascinating deity for his formal flexibility and flamboyance. Ganesha is a compound of gana (गणः), meaning a flock, multitude, group, troop, collection or a body of followers or attendants, particularly, a troop of demigods considered as Siva's attendants, and isa (ईशः); or lord, master; Gana+Isa = Ganesha. He is also called गणपति, Ganapati or Lord of the Ganas. Ganapati is the son of Siva and Pārvati, or of Pārvati only, for, according to one legend, he sprang from the scurf of her body. He is the god of wisdom and remover of obstacles; hence he is invoked and worshipped at the commencement of

every important undertaking. He is usually represented in a sitting posture - short and fat, with a protuberant belly, and four hands; riding a mouse, and with the head of an elephant. This head has only one tusk, the other having been lost in a scuffle between him and Parasurama when he opposed the latter's entrance to Siva's inner apartment (whence he is called Ekadanta or as Ekadanshtra). There are several legends accounting for his elephant-head. It is said that he wrote the *Mahābhārata* at the dictation of Vyāsa who secured his services of a scribe from the god Brahma.⁶

In *Myth and Reality*, D.D. Kosambi looks at the Siva-Pārvati-Ganesha mythic iconography thus: "Siva managed to remain united to Pārvati in marriage, though she is supposed later to have stripped him of everything at a game of dice. His entourage has the sacred bull Nandi, the cobra, goblins of various sorts, an elephant headed son Ganesha, another (Skanda) with six heads. It might be noted that the son of Pārvati's body was not of Siva's, and he cut off the child's head, later replaced by that of an elephant in myth. On the other hand, Skanda was born of Siva's seed, but not of Pārvati's womb. This complex iconography and ridiculously complicated myth cannot be explained by Siva's elevation to the highest abstract principle. If, however, we note that Siva is a cosmic dancer, that a dance by the tribal medicine-man or witch-doctor is essential in most primitive fertility rites, the way to an explanation seems clear."⁷ Kosambi draws an interesting comparison with the Ice-age Chamois-masked dancer of Les Trois Freres or the French stone-age 'diablotins', with the medieval dancing Siva-Natarāja and the buffalo-horned Indus Siva. The elephant-headed Ganesha also appears as a dancer, *nr̥tta-Ganesha* at times.⁸

वक्रतुंड स्वाहा

Vakratunda Swāhā

The foregoing text explains the myth of Vakratunda Ganesha but by adding the word *Swāhā*, Avikunthak offers his film's title a deeper signification, terrainously

and subterraneously. The compound word *vakra वक्र + tunda तुंड* refers to Ganesha, having an elephant's curved (*vakra*) trunk (*tunda*). The popular sloka reads and sings:

वक्रतुंड महाकाय सूर्यकोटिसमप्रभ ।

निविद्धं कुरु मे देव सर्वकार्येषु सर्वदा ॥

Vakratunda mahākāya suryakotisamaprabha

Nirvighnam kuru, me deva sarvakāryesu sarvada

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

Swāhā स्वाहा - *sva* (self, स्व) + *aha* (spoken or said), with its multiple echoes, interestingly gets into the film's title. In Hindu mythology *Swāhā* is a minor goddess, wife of Agni, the God of Fire. She was originally a nymph but became immortal after marrying Agni, with whom she became the mother of Kartikeya.⁹ Whenever first sacrifices are made, the word *Swāhā* is chanted as per Agni's order. *Swāhā* literally means 'self-spoken' or 'spoken by me' and could be rendered 'thus have I spoken'. Agni is also the acceptor of sacrifices. The sacrificial aspect somehow becomes crucial in our context of the film, as if young Girish Dahiwalé offered himself as a sacrificial being, I would conjecture, within the macro-myth of *Swāhā*.

Through his cinematography, Avikunthak keeps invoking the ritualistic necessity of the sacrifice within the domain of the Tantrik Sakta cult, e.g. it is very much evident in *Kalighat Fetish*. The 'cell' seems to be developing itself into the film's 'tantra'. In the 'cell' we see Girish Dahiwalé holding the image of *Vakratunda* Ganesha standing in the waters at Mumbai's Chowpatty Beach. He is one of the multitude gathered at this beach to immerse Ganesha idols at the end of the ten-day Ganesha festival in the city.¹⁰ *Swāhā*, in the film's title, echoes the multiplicity of sacrificial undertones, or so would I presume. *Vakratunda Swāhā*, the film, momentarily but primarily invokes the persona of the young artist – in his death. The film sets itself to in-trospect in re-trospect. And in this 'space' *Swāhā* amplifies its sacrificial echo. Killing the Self becomes Narrating the Self, आत्म हनन becomes आत्म कथन as if.

The 'immersion' aspect leads to yet another cyclical temporal resonance.

शरीर, स्वचेष्टा और आनुष्ठानिक प्रक्रिया

Cinema of Performativity and Ritual

My reference here is to the act or the ritual of मुंडन, of tonsuring that Avikunthak incorporates in his cinematography, e.g. one of his tetralogy (1995-1997) *Et cetera* is all about tonsuring (of self) taking place in a single unit of *duree*.¹¹ The tetralogy as a whole seeks to examine the various levels at which the reality of human existence functions. In these films, specific ritual exertions have been focused on and their movements, contemplated upon, by studying dynamics of their etymologies within anthropological-cinematographic framework. *Kalighat Fetish*, too, uses the human body as site. In *Vakratunda Swāhā* the act of tonsuring recurs, as a surrogate or ritualistic gesture of sacrifice. This is yet another opportunity of 'provocation' that Avikunthak offers us to think.¹² Obviously, performativity and ritual plays a significant part in Avikunthak's 'figurative' cinematography – evoking references within history of anthropology, and as an engagement of the ritual, myth and time. And self.

The tonsural surrogacy of hair evokes interesting tantrik or occultist allegories, and even a partial reference to पंचमहाभूत, the five great elements. As Benjamin Walker says, hair is regarded in occultism as one of the most extraordinary parts of the body. It belongs to the element of earth as it is solid and tangible; to the element of water since it is free and flowing; to the element of fire since it is fed from the furnace of the brain; and to the element of air since it is light and can be blown by the wind. Hair is both living since it grows, and dead since it is without sensibility. It has its own life; grows more rapidly than anything else and continues to grow after the death of the body. Hair is a source of vital strength and magic power, for the life principle

resides in it. It forms a crown encircling the head, the most sacred part of the body and is full of personal mana. It plays a role in all forms of the head-taboo. It was a substitute for the whole body, and its sacrifice to the deities was an acceptable surrogate for a human victim. Youths dedicated to the service of the deities also cut off their hair, thus giving rise to the custom of tonsure, or shaving a priest's head, which was believed to have originated in Egypt. The hairless or tonsured head was said to represent emasculation (which was demanded in many shrines dedicated to the Great Goddess); or was a symbol of the circumcised phallus; or of the solar disc; or of innocence and purity. Often associated with the tonsure was the scalp-lock, a strand of hair left uncut, like a pigtail (what we call in Hinduism *shikhā*). Some think it was left to mark the bregma, the occult aperture at the top of the cranium.¹³ Broadly, I see Avikunthak's cinema as the cinema of surrogacy, of substitution. And within anthropology-archaeology-cinematography triangle (tantra), the act of tonsuring in Avikunthak's cinematography perhaps demands a deeper associative reflection.

Most of the images of tonsured heads in pan Indian cinema pertain to young widows, e.g. Prema Karanth's Kannada film *Phaniyamma* (1983), based on Kannada novel by M.K. Indira or Vijaya Mehta's Hindi film *Rao Saheb* (1986), based on a Marathi novel by Jaywant Dalvi, where the act of tonsuring suggests penance or social punishment in societies dominated by males. Or the tonsured heads of Brahmins in G.V. Iyer's Sanskrit films such as *Adi Shankarāchārya* (1983), where tonsuring is part of ritual and religious convention. There is a huge body of films in all the major Indian languages dealing with वैधव्य (widowhood) and सतीत्व (satihood, chastity) and hence tonsuring, suggesting a collective social pain of the woman. Among the early European cinema, an image of a tonsured head that has become archetypal is that of Joan of Arc, e.g. in Carl Dreyer's silent film *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928).¹⁴ Within such cinematographic tonsuring universe, Avikunthak's elaborate references to the act of tonsuring seem to be within the tantrik sacrificial surrogacy.

तंत्र, मंत्र, यंत्र: जंतर मंतर या यंत्र मंत्र

Cinematography is a tantra within yantra

As already mentioned, Avikunthak's cinematography implicitly or explicitly plays within the Sakta cult beliefs, and hence within Tantra; mystical formularies mostly in the form of dialogue between Siva and Parvati (Durga or Kali). Mantra is an instrument of thought, a sacrificial formula or incantation while Yantra is any instrument for holding or restraining or fastening mechanical contrivance.¹⁵ This aspect keeps recurring in Avikunthak's cinematography, though much more pronounced in *Kalighat Fetish*, which broadly contemplates the twin ideas of transgression and morbidity, connected by the act of transformation, leading to death. Both the violence of sacrifice and the performance of transformation for Avikunthak are transgressive acts performed as an engagement with morbidity. They are part of the same act of reverence and anguish. Within the tantra, memory also plays an important part in Avikunthak's cinematography. *Kalighat Fetish*, as he said, was a 'cinematographic rendition of memory'.¹⁶ This rendition of memory acquires a real-mythical proportions in *Vakratunda Swāhā*, both in the mordidity of suicide and in retrieval of life.

The thought of yantra and mantra brings to my mind the image of Jantar Mantar (Yantra Mantra) that Mani Kaul so evocatively integrates into his film *Dhruvad* (1982). In this short film, Kaul weaves within its complex narrative-cosmology, the Jaipur astronomical edifice.¹⁷ By doing this, Kaul also offers a certain mythical-temporal tenor to the film. In their intrinsic moods, the works of four *Prayoga* artists, viz. Kabir Mohanty, Amit Dutta, Vipin Vijay and Ashish Avikunthak, inherently play upon the spatial-temporalities of such *tantra* and *yantra*. Though comparatively, Avikunthak's cinematography is more predominated by its figural anthropology, and *mantra*. However, *duree* is somehow secularly ritualized or transfigured in all these artists' works, almost echoing Maya Deren's *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1946) in their austerity.¹⁸

Invoking the five Great Elements

Water being its obvious and dominant element, *Vakratunda Swāhā*, also invokes the other four elements, viz. fire अग्नि, earth पृथ्वी, air वायु and ether (space) आकाश in its tangential or mythificatory narrative. Perhaps Ganesha contains them all. According to the Hindu philosophy, the Creator used ākāśa as the most subtle element that helped create the other four traditional elements. All creations, including human body, is made up of these five essential elements and that upon death, the human body dissolves into these five elements of nature, thereby balancing the cycle of nature set in motion by the Creator. Each of the five elements is associated with one of the five senses, and acts as the gross medium for the experience of sensations. Earth, the basest element, could be perceived by all five senses, i.e. hearing, touch, taste, scent and sight. Interestingly, Avikunthak's film work, including *Vakratunda Swāhā* retains its peculiar sensuality.

सर्जन-विसर्जन-सर्जन: अनंत चक्र

Re-Solution, Dis-Solution-Re-Solution: An Endless Cycle

Avikunthak employs young Girish Dahiwalé's image retrospectively and hence it sounds a bit strange that the young beholder of Ganesha's मूर्ति, idol takes recourse to आत्महन्त, the act of self-killing later.¹⁹

One of the epithets of Siva is मृत्युञ्जय, victor over death. This is an aspect of Siva worshipped as the conqueror of death as manifested in the Hindu lord of death, Yama. The particular legend in question deals with the sage Mārkaṇḍeya, who was fated to die at the age of sixteen. On account of the sage's worship and devotion to Siva, the lord vanquished Yama.

Visarjan (विसर्जन) would also mean allowing (the deity

invoked) to go; it is giving away, abandoning; a gift, donation. Obviously there is सर्जन within विसर्जन it is an embedded cycle, resounded in loud popular chants of the devotees.

स्वभाव, भावसंधी एवम् अविकुण्ठक की सिनेमेटोग्राफी

Svabhāva, Bhāvasandhi and *Avikunthak's* cinematography

Avikunthak, in his cinematography, has been able to sustain a certain consistency of स्वभाव, svabhāva of his art largely because he occupies himself with self-commissioned artistic engagements. I personally do not believe in the 'independence' of the so-called independent cinema but in a sense Avikunthak's work is exemplary in this realm. Avikunthak's cinematography retains its power of provocation – for delving deeper into far off associations, mythical, metaphysical, metaphorical and mundane at the same time. There is also a current, running through his belief in Tantrik Sakta, a cult that believes the world has been created by Kālī, the mother goddess. Tāntrik belongs to the Tantra philosophy. And this link further links us with Siva and than naturally to Ganesha. This could probably be an interesting macro-way to understand the nuances of *Vakratunda Swāhā*, which, in the end, like Ganesha himself, symbolizes the transplantatoriness of cinematography. In Memoriam. In Transcendence.

- Amrit Gangar

End Notes

¹Xenotransplantation is the transplantation of living cells from one species to another.

²Besides this film, a collective manifesto about new ways of doing art and critiquing its rampant commercialization was on cards – almost one and a half decades back. Riyas Komu and Justin Ponmany are well established artists now.

³In the United States, contemporary anthropology is typically divided into four sub-fields: cultural anthropology (also called 'social anthropology'), archaeology, linguistic anthropology and biological / physical anthropology.

⁴The Mudgala Purana is a Hindu religious text dedicated to Ganesha. The incarnations described in this text have supposedly taken place in different cosmic ages. Essentially, the text uses these incarnations to suggest complex philosophical concepts associated with the progressive creation of the world. Each incarnation represents a stage of the absolute as it unfolds into creation. Besides the Mudgala Purana, the Ganesha Purana is yet another text that is exclusively dedicated to Ganesha. Some scholars date this purana between AD 1100 and 1400, the Mudgala Purana is older. The eight forms include the following: (1) Vakratunda (twisted trunked), first in the series, represents the absolute as the aggregate of all bodies, an embodiment of the form of Brahman. The purpose of this incarnation is to overcome the demon Matsaryasura (envy, jealousy). His mount (vāhana) is a lion. (2) Ekadanta (single tusked), who overcomes the demon Madasura (arrogance, conceit). His mount is a mouse. (3) Mahodara (big bellied), a synthesis of both Vakratunda and Ekadanta, he conquers the demon Mohasura (delusion, confusion). His mount is a mouse. (4) Gajānana or Gajavakra (elephant faced) is a counterpart to Mahodara, who conquers the demon Lobhasura (greed). His mount is a mouse. (5) Lambodara (pendulous bellied) corresponds to Sakti, who conquers the demon Krodhasura (anger). His mount is a mouse. (6) Vikata (unusually formed or misshapen) corresponds to Surya (the Sun), who conquers the demon Kāmasura (lust). His mount is a peacock. (7) Vighnarājā (king of obstacles) corresponds to Viṣṇu, who conquers the demon Mamasura (possessiveness). His mount is the celestial serpent, Sesā. (8) Dhumravarna (grey coloured) corresponds to Siva, who conquers the demon Abhimānāsura (pride, attachment). His mount is a horse.

⁵ब्रह्मन्, the Supreme Being, regarded as impersonal and divested of all quality and action; according to Vedāntins, Brahman is both the efficient and the material cause of the visible universe, the all-pervading soul and spirit of the universe, the essence from which all created things are produced and into which they are absorbed.

⁶परशुः, Parasu, an axe, a hatchet, a battle-axe; an epithet of Parasurāma (axe-wielding Rama). Parasurāma was a celebrated Brāhmana warrior, son of Jamādgni and the sixth incarnation of Viṣṇu. A great devotee of Siva, he got an axe from the latter as weapon. From Siva he learnt the methods of warfare and other skills. It is said that he fought the advancing ocean back, thus saving the lands of Konkan and Malabār on India's west coast. The coastal area of Kerala, along with the Konkan region, i.e. coastal Maharashtra and Karnataka, is also sometimes called Parasurama Kshetra (Parasurama's region) According to one legend, when Parasurama went to visit Siva; he was denied access by Ganesha. Enraged Parasurama threw his axe at him, and recognizing the weapon as that given by his father; Ganesha permitted it to sever one of his tusks as he waited to receive it. Of the Hindu trinity, Brahma is the creator. In Peter Brook's play Mahabharata, we see Ganesha as Vyāsa's scribe of the epic.

⁷Myth and Reality: Studies in the Formation of Indian Culture, Damodar Dharmānand Kosambi, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1962.

⁸Trois-Freres is a cave in southwestern France famous for its cave paintings. The cave is named for the three sons of comte Begouen who discovered it in 1910. In French, trois freres means 'three brothers'. There is a 1995 French film titled *Les Trois Freres*. The cave art appears to date to approximately 13,000 B.C. Chamois is a type of porous, non-abrasive leather used also for making masks. Mask plays an important role in Avikunthak's cinematography, particularly in *Vakratunda Swāhā*.

⁹Kārtikeya, also called Skanda or Muruga is Ganesha's brother. Regional differences dictate the order of their births. In northern India, Skanda is generally said to be the elder, while in the south, Ganesha is considered the first born. Skanda was an important martial deity from about 500 BCE to 600 CE, when worship of him declined significantly in northern India. As Skanda fell, Ganesha rose.

¹⁰The annual festival honours Ganesha for ten days, starting on Ganesha Chaturthi, which typically falls in late August or early September. The festival culminates on the day of Ananta Chaturdashi, when idols (murtis) of Ganesha are immersed in the most convenient body of water. In 1893, as a strategic fight against the British imperialists, Bal Gangādhār Tilak transformed this annual Ganesha festival from private family celebrations into a grand public (sārvajanik) event. He did so, 'to bridge the gap between the Brahmins and the non-Brahmins and find an appropriate context in which to build a new grassroots unity between them' in his nationalist strivings against the British in Maharashtra. The festival assumes phenomenal proportions in Mumbai.

¹¹Interestingly मुंडित्, mundin (barber) is one of the epithets of Siva.

¹²I remember to have been on a selection jury of an Indian international short and documentary film festival, when the 'tonsure' film came in for viewing. After few minutes, most members had begun either to scratch their heads or question the film's non-stop act of head-shaving. They thought it was non-sensical and wanted to fast forward the film.

¹³*Body Magic: An Encyclopaedia of Esoteric Man*, Benjamin Walker, Paedina Books, 1979. Because of the power inherent in hair, great precautions were taken in primitive societies in the selection of a barber; in appointing an auspicious time for cutting, and in the disposal of the remains. Special days were set apart for the purpose and spells and incantations recited. Because hair could be used for many magical operations directed against the owner, care had to be taken that it should not fall into the hands of sorcerers. The cut hair therefore was buried in a secret place.

¹⁴The actors were signed exclusively to him for the film's shooting time from May to November 1927, so they had to "live" their roles to the point of keeping their hair cut so it never appeared to change. The lower churchmen wore visible tonsures, bald heads with a fringe of hair. But Dreyer also demanded that the higher officials keep their tonsures cut, in spite of the fact that their hair was invisible under the grandiose caps they wore throughout. They secretly began referring to him as "Gruyere" because the set had as many "holes" (trenches Dreyer built for making low-angle shots) as Swiss cheese. In spite of the film's realism, helped by Rudolph Mate's brilliant cinematography, it's also one of the most stylized, unrealistic in the annals of cinema.

¹⁵The primary mantras are held to be 70 million in number and the secondary innumerable. It is interesting how we in India mystify scientific/electronic gadgets, e.g. we called radio, ākāśhvāni (voice from the sky) while television, dōōrdarshan (remote vision).

¹⁶Avikunthak in conversation with Amrit Gangar, *Cinema of Prayoga: Indian Experimental Film & Video 1913-2006*, Eds. Brad Butler and Karen Mirza, London: no.w.here, 2006.

¹⁷The Jantar Mantar is a collection of architectural astronomical instruments, built by Maharaja Jai Singh II at his then new capital of Jaipur between AD 1727 and 1734. It is modeled after the one that he had built for him at the then Mughal capital of Delhi. Largest of the five (others being in Varanasi, Ujjain and Mathura), the Jaipur one is the best preserved of all because in 1901 Raja Ram Singh, the then ruler of Jaipur, refurbished it with the help of a British engineer. The various abstract structures within the Jantar Mantar are, in fact, instruments that were used for keeping track of celestial bodies.

¹⁸Maya Deren criticized Hollywood endlessly for its artistic and economic monopoly over American cinema, stating, "I make my pictures for what Hollywood spends on lipstick." In 1947, the Guggenheim funded a trip to Haiti for Deren to study dance and religious possession in Voodoo rituals, which she documented in her *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*.

¹⁹In Sanskrit, the word 'murti' also means an embodiment, incarnation, personification or manifestation.