



Rati Chakravyuh *Spirals of Love*

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IN THE BEGINNING WAS LOVE. IN THE END IS MA.

We are told that at midnight during a lunar eclipse twelve newlyweds and a priestess gather in a circle after a mass wedding to talk. *Rati Chakravyuh* is an unfolding of their conversation spanning the history of the universe as we orbit them. They unravel the most fundamental questions about human existence, memory and trauma in an ominous tone stripped of all emotion. In their circle, they encompass the spectrum of human experience from philosophical ponderings to banal banter. They are dressed up in their wedding fineries for their wedding night, but they seem unable to move out of the circle, hypnotized by their own words. We too are but powerless voyeurs, held in rapt attention as the camera circles them relentlessly.

A frame at the end of the conversation informs us that the thirteen people proceed to commit mass suicide. Before I ponder how or why, these lines from their earlier conversation prevent me.

*Krishna is the only God that committed suicide.
How did he commit suicide?
Is that important?*

The text goes on to say it is not important how or why, it is not important that they do not live in our midst.
They are all dead.

IN THE BEGINNING IS SOUND. IN THE END IS LIGHT.

I happened to be in Mumbai in July 2012 when Ashish Avikunthak invited me to watch the first cut of *Rati Chakravyuh*, fresh after post-production work. I sat alone in a corner of the screening room in Goregaon studios with his friends and colleagues. In my solitude, I observed Avikunthak's nervous excitement as he walked around and spoke to his friends about the film. It was a unique attempt after all, a single take film of 102 minutes through an intense conversation. I had earlier read the script as one would a book; the file was entitled *The Last Supper*. I completed my reading in three sittings, reeling in its openness, which allowed me to relate fragments my life to the text in absurd ways. How different could the film be from the script, I thought. I waited patiently for the darkness to burst into a glow, for the first utterance of sound. 105 minutes later, I remember heaving a sigh, and taking one deep breath. Avikunthak's friends

had an animated discussion about the film and when he asked me what I thought, I muttered, unconvinced by own thoughts and coming out of a daze “it is a difficult film to sit through. It is a challenge to read English subtitles of a Bengali conversation and simultaneously watch faces go in circles.” I wish I had articulated myself better, but how does one speak about everything in a sentence? To write about the film is to write an epic.

IN THE BEGINNING WAS I. IN THE END ARE YOU.

After experiencing a terribly painful week in July 2014, I felt weak, defeated, hurt and vulnerable. I was on the edge all the time and the conversations that played in my head resembled the one had by the 12 newlyweds in the film. A friend’s abusive husband, a marriage on tethers, a child traumatized to silence by aggression, a child raped by her teachers, state-supported destruction of books in a library in the name of censorship, death of a loved one, death of a friend, death of a person who remains as a recorded voice memory in a hard disk, incessant news about the violence in Gaza and Israel, diplomatic relations between nations... the breadth of human traumas from daily micro-aggressions to state violence in contemporary times. These stories merged to a singular point of absurdity, and when one cannot hold its pain in any longer, one writes, one screams in silence, one cries, and one makes a film called *Rati Chakravayuh*.

To write about the film is to write the human condition – life, death, love, sex, violence, religion, war, marriage, children, mythology, lust, gods, history, the quotidian and the transcendental in the mundane. The stories that I watched are stories I had read, stories we shared and exchanged with friends, colleagues, family, and other kindred individuals; stories familiar to us growing up in a certain era, stories that were universal to human struggles to love and exist. At the risk of sounding reductionist, I ask if *Rati Chakravayuh* is the narrative of everyone’s life; our subconscious mind sifting through memory to randomly surface disjointed and disconnected moments, and weave a dream narrative in which there is no memory of the beginning and no sight of the end. There is only the experience of being in it.

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Vakratunda Swaha 2010



Katho Upanishad 2011

WHY DOES KALI NOT SWALLOW TIME?

The film creates a world that is palpably claustrophobic to me; my body felt a sense of entrapment in the dizzying spiral that Basab, the man behind the camera creates. This is the world where Gods are cars; the gods commit suicide, or feel impotent because a woman’s love for the devil is greater than her love for the divine. This is the world where myths are examined and torn apart into conflicting stories – true and false at once; all that remain are words and sounds. However, the thought of the newlyweds’ mass suicide returns. How does one contemplate death, except as an ungraspable abstraction? To contemplate death is to be alive, completely in the moment. Their utterances shatter our arbitrary boundaries of morality and reality, and for those 105 minutes, we can just be. The film, despite its morbid undertones, is brimming with all it means to live – the futility and the beauty of it.

EVERYTHING IS ALWAYS IN THE MIDDLE.

To write about the film is to write about Ashish Avikunthak. The film alludes to snippets in Avikunthak’s biography, distilled through the circular camera in a manner that they dance like specks of dust in light – random, but drenched in his engagement with death, mother Kali, Tantra, and the pain of his life experiences. His stint in Bombay during the riots, activism against the Narmada dam, life as a Gandhian, disenchantment with activism, vulnerability to heartbreaks and his overpowering preoccupation with death are the ruptures in the film that make me view it as one made with an aching and perhaps tired soul. One that knows the ways around the labyrinth, but has no way of escaping. Is suicide the conscious choice out of the Chakravayuh?

To write about the film is to write about cinema. Avikunthak has depicted his meditation about death, suicide and redemption in his earlier works, especially in *Vakratunda Swaha*, *Kalighat Fetish* and *Katho Upanishad*. His single takes in *Et Cetera* and *Katho Upanishad* are a cinematic quest for real time (and space) and he captures death of time on film. The reverse shots in his films are a metaphor for the impossibility of redemption, but more importantly, deathlessness. In *Vakratunda Swaha*, the shattering motion of his hands create idols of Lord Ganesha from shards. In *Katho Upanishad*, the modern day Nachiketa walks backward even as he steps forward in the middle of a busy traffic road. His works are a quest to return to the very essence of cinema by engaging with temporality, and in a certain sense, they appear to be a longing to capture what it means to exist – an unravelling of time through space.

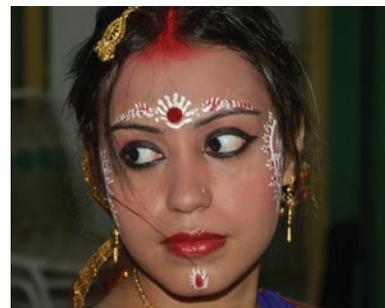
IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE SELF—UNBORN BUT ALIVE.

Reflecting on the film, I feel like a modern day Abhimanyu entering the Chakravayuh with an intuitive understanding of its intricacies, but clueless about my exit, doomed to die fighting, just like Abhimanyu on the battle of Kurukshetra. Are we all Abhimanyus in our own ways, trapped in multi-layered defense formations? What is our battle and where is the battlefield? Why, oh why did his mother Subhadra fall asleep when Arjuna was explaining the exit strategy from the Chakravayuh? Had she stayed awake, maybe Abhimanyu, still a foetus in Subhadra's womb would have learned the wisdom that would help him decipher the exit route out of the military formation in the battle. Maybe lord Krishna ushered Arjuna away, midway through his explanation to Subhadra, because he intended us to navigate our own labyrinths to arrive at our preordained ends. Maybe ignorance is our doom, one that we must die fighting. Maybe the beginning in the womb is the end, our existence as a non-entity with latent knowledge of the universe; a recollection of its memory utters words in a circular game until silence, just like the newlyweds.

One of the protagonists in the film says, "We are all enlightened when unborn". Birth and death are then two events that have no place in memory. If they are to be considered the beginning and the end, what is in between? Love? Love that brought the newlyweds together. Love that prompts them to have an existential conversation on their wedding night. "Love that keeps us alive and is the cause of our doom." It is no wonder that Avikunthak invokes Rati, the goddess of love, while describing the Chakravayuh. Rati's power brings her consort Kama (god of love) from ashes to life, to be reborn as the son of Lord Krishna. Rati is the female seed, the pleasure of sexual activity, the union of the masculine and feminine principle, the moment of creation of the universe. In Tantra, Chinnamasta is depicted severing her own head and standing on the copulating couple of Kama and Rati (Rati on top). It seems as though the universe spins in chakras of love as Ma Kali dances on the copulating couple. In these spirals, I contemplate the oneness of existence, where my daughter is also yours. My pain is also yours. My story is also yours. There is no beginning or end because time is created the moment we exist, and we move in circles, unraveling layers of the chakravayuh, traversing deeper in search of the core, in search of love.



Production Still, *Rati Chakravayuh*



Production Still, *Rati Chakravayuh*

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IN THE BEGINNING WAS NOTHING.

IN THE END IS INFINITY.

After my first viewing of the film and my dazed utterances right after, it took me several days to write down a few words about the film. It has taken me two years to scribble the disjointed thoughts here. I am reminded in many ways that the duration of a film is how I live it; contemplate about it and how it comes back in innumerable ways and ineffable absurdity. One evening on July 2012, I wrote an email to him.

The film is the experience of an inescapable maze created through the dizzying effect of the camera that moves in spirals throughout. In that dizzying spiral, words vanish, faces blur into a stream of light and eyes crave for the darkness of ignorance, of innocent illusions, of dreams where redemption is really possible. The stories are non-existent, they are the same, yet very different; but we must transcend them. How do we do that? Temporality is a painful truth to reckon with. It stretches out in a painstaking fashion, trapping every attempt to radiate out of the circle. It is our pain on that screen and we cannot look away, we cannot wish it away or magically transform it into a dreamscape. There is simply no space for any space. Space collapses into a speck, but floats endlessly unlike that moment which is out of time. The circular motion of the camera creates that spiral maze and makes us aware of the harsh truth – that we must fight a losing battle, only to inevitably lose, die and disappear. The film thwarts all our attempts to hide, to run, and all we can really do is to watch those faces blur in the spiral motions, watch those words become a hazy long stretch of intimately familiar sound, watch everything turn into myself – the emptiness that gave birth to these words.