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VRINDAVANI VAIRAGYA

A film by Ashish Avikunthak

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AN INTER-PLAY OF BHAVAS: LOVE, DEATH, AND DISCOVERY IN ASHISH AVIKUNTHAK'S VRINDAVANI VAIRAGYA

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In the stillness of a mist-wrapped part-dilapidated house, the sense of temporality remains warped, unfathomable, and fluid. It is only when the extra-diegetic refrains of 'Ban Ban Dhoondhan Jaaon' (I go searching for the lover amidst forests) play emphatically, that one is made aware that it is afternoon; after all, Vrindavani Sarang is an afternoon raga. It is believed that singing the Vrindavani Sarang had brought Krishna to Vrindavan where he remained forever in idolised devotion. But Sarang ragas are also narrations of historic pasts tying myth and history together in an endless yet unfurling knot. In Vrindavani Vairagya (Dispassionate Love), the Sarang raga bursts into the soundscape as an epiphany before culmination. It occurs, as if, in a music-drenched précis to one of the foremost and dominant question in the film- 'How did Girish die?' In this entrenchment of history and myth, the three characters—man, wife, and lover—can only relay their unconnected memories to come to (dis)agreements. Their commentarial conversations might seem disparate, dislocated, and dispassionate. In a 'cinema of commentary', this is a deliberate directorial practice centred not on erasure but on abandonment. To extend this abandonment aesthetically is to look beyond emotions and speak of states of being- to abandon rasas to be able to speak about bhavas. As a 'cinema of prayoga', Vrindavani Vairagya comments on and personifies the inter-play of the three bhavas of Indian aesthetics- sthaayi (stable), sanchaari (travelling) and saattvika (pure).

'If death is not to dominate us, we have to learn to live with it. This must have a double focus: how to live with the shadow of our own mortality, and how to survive the death of others.' (Mark Robinson, Theatre and Death) In Vrindavani Vairagya, death remains the key motif of the film manifesting itself through repeated questions as to how Girish died, what made Girish kill himself or even how does technology enable self-immolation. In a lone sequence in the film (perhaps a dream sequence of sorts) can one find a performed act of dying- the man asphyxiating his lover. In at least one instance, death surpasses the domain of the human to bring non-humans into focus; there are no more vultures in sight as they have been dying of toxic steroids while feeding on carcasses of other animals. There might be an uncanny (non)resemblance here with a later documentary—All That Breathes (2022, dir. Shaunak Sen)—testifying to an ecologically defenceless cityscape where two Muslim brothers try desperately to save black kites falling from the sky. Contrarily enough, one of the women in Vrindavani Vairagya dispassionately announces that she does not like cats and that humans kill dogs in their mating season. Yet, the cinematic landscape, bereft of any non-human presence, only underlines 'our quotidian sense of an innate assurance that the Earth provides a stable ground on which we project our political purposes.' (Dipesh Chakraborty, 2018) Death in Vrindavani Vairagya revolves around the quotidian existences of the three characters who role-play themselves and each other in their commentarial conversations.

The colour blue remains the dominant hue of Vrindavani Vairagya apparently signifying the complex web of love that the characters inhabit. Blue, as the rasas flow, is then predominantly the colour of sringaar (love). But blue is also the colour of vibhatsyam (disgust/aversion) emerging as a curious foil to sringaar. The gory minutiae of Girish's death are a persistent memorial refrain in this love triad, marked by the different shades of blue. The characters display no overt emotions of love except in three marked scenes- at the beginning when the woman sobs relentlessly, the uninhibited laughter of the two conversing women in friendly banter and the violent pre-emption of lovemaking between the man and his lover. As the sometimes-grey mist of kaarunyam (compassion) and sometimes white haze of shaantam (peace/tranquillity) shroud the backdrops of travelling scenes, scenes of neighbourhoods and riverbanks, Vrindavani Vairagya becomes more and more about the states of being (bhava) and a slowly burgeoning friendship; for bhava is also indicative of friendship(s) guided by admiration, fondness or love.

Bhava has more than one way of being as it can either suggest that which happens or that which causes an experience to be manifested or become explicit. Girish, who is later revealed to be an 'ideal lover' becomes explicit only through his death. It is not in the act of death or killing himself that Girish's absence (and presence) is manifested, but he becomes explicit through the performative act of recounting. 'Performance in a strict ontological sense is nonreproductive', and 'implicates the real through the presence of living bodies.' (Peggy Phelan, 1996) Girish's death, recurring throughout the film, as a permanent state of being (sthaayi bhava) is kept alive in speech-acts. Answering as a performative utterance is a speech-act as the facts about Girish's death unfold in a dialogic format. Girish's many lives manifest themselves in the dialogic encounters and metaphors about love and death only- a permanent state of being for those who question and rationalise his death but do not mourn him. It is this dispassionate loop of love and death that suddenly offers a flicker

of transience (sanchaari bhava) or transgression as the two women confide and submit in each other.

As the man and his lover talk about Girish's death and the longue durée of the .303 Enfield rifle that killed him, the inconspicuous half feminine and half masculine idol (ardhanaari) diverts our gaze. Draped in the colours of blue (sringaar/love) and yellow (adbhutam/wonder), it becomes a pre-cursor to the seemingly flickering passion that the two women have for each other. In another glimmer of a later sequence the man dons a red saree remaining briefly symbolic of the various transformable relations in the film. The performers of the Vrindavan Raas-Leela troupe (Shri Ram Krishna Kripa Mandal) appear and disappear almost in their cross-dressed choric existence echoing these transformations. Gender transformations in Avikunthak's cinema is an exploration of what happens 'when God becomes human' and vice versa. The process of transformation or mutability is guided by transience- a liminal phase that etches a much more stable existence for some time. The two women undertake a boat journey together, their silent travelling (sanchaari bhava) signalling another tale of love and passion that will eventually unfold.

Vrindavani Vairagya ends on the note of transience rather than asserting permanence or purity (saattvika bhava). It is almost as if the commentarial conversations of the characters—stories, anecdotes, arguments, and counter-arguments—end in fulfilment of their quest for love and death. As the women meet towards the end of the film, the brevity of their exchange scripts the fulfilment of this quest: 'Is Girish there? No, Girish is not here'. The earlier refrain of another extra-diegetic note—Piya Paas Re, Jaa Re Jaa Re Kaagaa (Fly, dear bird to see where my beloved is)—is perhaps a more brutal imagery of love and death. Unlike a dutiful messenger, the scavenging bird might discover the corpse of Girish who could have been immersed in a river upon his death. The refrain connects the human, non-human, and transcendental motifs of Vrindavani Vairagya, which then concludes in the brief exchange about his (non)existence. As the two women wrap each other up in passionate embrace, they appear and disappear transformed into the other. They become concatenated personifications of love and death, sringaar and vibhatsyam, now steered by their fluid states of being upon discovering each other- rati (love), shoka (sorrow) and vismaya (astonishment).

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Reading Space in Vrindavani Vairagya

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Space in realist cinema functions integrally with all other elements. When characters interact in a scene, the space around them organically blends with expressions, movements (of bodies and of the camera), and speech to shape context. Barely acting alone, cinematic space in such an instance is subservient to the realist mandate of the film. This is true even when nothing much happens in a scene; a space devoid of action and speech can become emotive simply via its sequential ties to the rest of the film. But what happens when the other elements are minimally present, or absent altogether? When characters hardly interact, speech is drained of emotion, and the camera remains static? What becomes of space when detachment on all fronts paradoxically becomes confrontational because it challenges audience expectations of a medium known for its power of re-presenting corporeality?

For Ashish Avikunthak, cinema is a director's craft, where actors and actions are secondary. In most of his films, lead characters do not have names, barely move, exist in individual bubbles, and seldom make eye contact; conversations happen in stoic voices devoid of affect even when characters seem to respond to one another (while the term "conversation" is used here for convenience, it can be debated if disaffected interaction between characters qualifies as conversation); loaded with metaphors and symbols, speech is allegorical and non-linear; infrequent camera movements are calibrated to attentively follow speech, albeit guised as a detached observer; and finally, space shifts radically when the same speech occurs in multiple settings. His films thus consistently provoke confrontation by frustrating conventional expectations of cinema.

There is no question that it takes an unfamiliar audience a while to forge a connection with Avikunthak's approach to filmmaking, which he calls Cinema Prayog. As serious engagement with his films brings one closer to his structure and aesthetic, one learns that emotions and movements are, in this mode of filmmaking, distractions. Once this is accepted, what initially seemed confrontation becomes an invitation to interact; the audience is encouraged to pay more attention to speech. Recognition of the intensity of speech then gradually leads to discerning subtexts in cryptic spoken texts that are occasionally structured in sinuous syntaxes. And space plays a curious role in this process.

The physical settings of an Avikunthak scene may initially seem incidental and passive; consistent with the overall stasis of action, they often appear more pictorial (as in still photographs) than cinematic— silent witnesses, if you will. Yet even there, space can be as evocative as speech. In fact, choices of locations and framings of backdrops in several films strongly suggest that for all his effort to distance himself from "the hegemony of the visual", as he likes to put it, Avikunthak is a modernist at heart when it comes to cinematography of space: impeccable composition, precise use of light, and meticulous attention to detail show how important space is for him. Vrindavani Vairagya (2017) demonstrates how, despite its seeming passivity, space actively contributes to content.

Unlike some of Avikunthak's other films where landscape dominates as backdrop, space in Vrindavani Vairagya is almost exclusively defined by architecture. The film was shot in multiple houses. Between a derelict antique house, a vintage house, and a slick contemporary one, the differences are glaring— as if they exist in disparate time zones (time, as it will follow shortly, is particularly relevant to Avikunthak's work). The physical settings used throughout the film can be divided into four categories, three of them architectural: closed interior, such as a room or a hallway; open interior, such as an enclosed open-air space within a building; rooftop; and total exterior.

If a scene is defined as a logically structured sequence of actions and speeches captured in a coherent series of shots, Vrindavani Vairagya challenges that convention when speech between two characters shot at multiple locations is edited to produce the kind of disaffected conversation typical of Avikunthak films. In other words, editing for Avikunthak is a tool for reshaping the textuality of a script in collaboration with visual aids.

While most conversations in Vrindavani Vairagya across different spaces are shot from various angles, the camera barely moves within a shot. Frequent changes of visible space therefore evoke the feel of an animated slide show where spatial disposition becomes a part of the textual formation. For instance, a conversation about the suicide of the invisible protagonist Girish begins on a rooftop, then moves back and forth between it and a variety of other sites, often repeating the same one. The list includes, among others, a stairwell in a modern house, an atrium (*uthon*) in a vintage house, a hallway with mosaic floor, a riverbank, a couple of shrine complexes, and a porch and a front door to an old house. Glancing at the speakers made optional, one

becomes inclined to notice the structure and content of speech while also rapidly scanning the fleeting sites, which initially appear all but irrelevant to the speech. Specific properties of the sites, however, gradually command attention: the exceptional compositional clarity of the architectural backdrop on a rooftop; the majestic terracotta temple façade in the background; the foreshortened "Krishna" written on an adobe wall occupying the left of a shrine complex; the couple of tilted calendars featuring Hindu deities on a shabby wall; the electric cord emerging from a square vent; the unclean wash basin in a corner against rain-stained walls; the brilliant balance of blue between the dresses of two characters (one of them standing around a corner, unseen by the other) and the walls with flaked blue paint.

In their variety and ambiguity, such quotidian details tempt one to discern a possible connection between the content of the dispassionately delivered speech and the mundane sites where the speech happens, and time emerges as a thread. Implying the passage of time, the fleeting spaces with all their idiosyncrasies acquire a temporality in tandem with the temporal unfolding of speech. In other words, space and speech come together in a dialogic relationship hinged on time.

Philosophical notions of time are central to Tantra, the esoteric yogic traditions of South Asia common to both Hinduism and Buddhism. Avikunthak's deep investment in tantric texts, therefore, makes time crucial to the conceptual framework of much of his work. The role of time in the collaboration between space and speech becomes more provocative when a site remains unchanged during a conversation in the *thakurdalan* (family shrine) of a vintage house toward the end of the film. The rectangular open interior is an atrium, with the shrine located atop a few steps on one side and rooms lining the other three. The man and the woman stand in the middle and talk about Girish. Like Beckett's Godot, this dead protagonist is always discussed; but unlike Godot's, his deconstructed identity is forever displaced through repetitive and contradictory observations that move in loops. Addressing reality and fiction, past and present, and life and death, the fragmented, back-and-forth speech plays elegantly with time. And as the camera rotates around the two characters echoing the pattern of speech, its circumambulatory movement provides an opportunity to inspect the site. The house, with its severely decrepit walls, marble floor, and wrought iron railings and arches, seems a vestige of a prosperous feudal past bearing harsh traces of time. The scene thus unequivocally bridges space with speech. In the final shot, the camera moves through the dark corridors of the thakurdalan for a few seconds, with no accompanying speech. This strategy, at the end of all speeches, is a final acknowledgment of the temporality of space.

Like all inward-looking artists, Avinkunthak believes he is not obligated to the audience. While such a statement about a medium known for its legendary power of outreach might seem outright blasphemous to many, Avikunthak argues that the audience is not an outside entity that needs convincing. Rather, he wants the audience of his Cinema Prayog to have active agency in the production of meaning, which he believes is possible only when the submission to affect as demanded by a mimetic conversation in realist cinema is resisted. To achieve this, he has moved away from the Cartesian-driven visual legacy of cinema, leaning instead on the more fundamentally South Asian traditions of orality. Thus, in Vrindavani Vairagya, Avikunthak tames visuality by giving it a temporal identity and making it a crucial partner to speech.

Vrindavani Vairagya or Vrindavani Anurag?

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मरते हैं आरजू में मरने की, मौत आती है पर नहीं आती.

--मिर्ज़ा ग़ालिब

Ashish Avikunthak's Vrindavani Vairagya (2017) is a complex film to read. The film has three friends, one man and two women, shown in continuous conversation with each other. In that sense, this is a deeply conversational film. When the characters do not talk, it is the frames and the color in the frame that talks. If one wants to listen that is!

The film starts with the first woman, supposedly Girish's lover, sobbing, crying to the extent that perhaps her intestines would have felt terrible aching. First sign of Vairagya (separation, detachment) or Anurag (love), perhaps? On tears and crying, Barthes wrote,

> The amorous subject has a particular propensity to cry.... By weeping, I want to impress someone, to bring pressure to bear upon someone ("Look what you have done to me")…. but it can also be oneself: I make myself cry, in order to prove to myself that my grief is not an illusion: tears are signs, not expressions. By my tears, I tell a story, I produce a myth of grief, and henceforth I adjust myself to it: I can live with it, because, by weeping, I give myself an emphatic interlocutor who receives the "truest" of messages, that of my body, not that of my speech….(2000:180-1)

The three friends wonder how and why Girish, their mutual friend, killed himself. The film starts with a puzzle on a suicide, and ends on a complex Freudian note on Girish's identity; who is he, a lover, a father, a son, or just a man. The film covers diverse issues, from suicide to death, from technology to human emotions, from Krishn bhakti to human love, from heterosexual to homoerotic bonds, insinuating presence of an incestuous love between a father and a daughter, etc. While I enjoyed the brilliance of the film, it reminded me of few films and film-makers. The description of Girish's fantasy about and sexualized treatment with the rifle he used to kill himself, reminded me of Kamal Haasan's Hey Ram (2000). Saket Ram, about to assassinate the Mahatma, is making love to his wife. He begins hallucinating about the big rifle suggesting erotic notions about it. A gun in popular culture (remember Anurag Kashyap's Gangs of Wasseyur (2012) song, "Hunter") is used to represent phallus, and signifies virulent masculine violent energy. Kamal's Saket and Ashish's Girish come across as homo/bi-sexuals, fantasizing about a gun, a phallic symbol, in such a way!

Girish's suicide covers the first part of the film; rest of the film follows from this one incidence. The second woman is curious about technology assisting in self-annihilation as we are told Girish killed himself with a gun, a .303 Lee Enfiled rifle – "a killing machine left in India by the British".

The .303 Lee Enfield rifle was a British era rifle used in the Commonwealth regions, including India, thanks to colonialism. The history of this rifle goes back to 1895. India has a tragic memory of this rifle; the rifle used in the Jallianwala Bagh massacre (1919) was .303 Lee Enfield rifle. It was widely used during the two World Wars. The rifle also has the dubious merit of having the highest kills to its name. The Indian army stopped using them after the disastrous India-China war (1962). It was then handed over to the Indian police, particularly in the northern states of Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Madhya Pradesh (MP). Mumbai police used it against the Dalits in 1997 in the brutal Ramabai Ambedkar Nagar firing, and to fight the terrorists from Pakistan in 2008 during the 26/11 terror attacks. It gave it up since then. The UP police bid it adieu in 2020. Delhi police will dismantle soon the stock they have. The Naxals continue to use them. It has been praised for being 'as smooth as butter even after 20 rounds of back-to-back firing' by its users, which modern day weapons lack. Ashish's film gives the rifle a mystical layer. It claims it was used by a mystic in Africa, who invented a seed mantra for the rifle, which "liberates the causal link between the consequences of the bullet and your action. Then you won't be responsible for the bullet's action." It mentions that the rifle was used during the Bombay riots of 1992, by Girish's father, who was in police constabulary. And finally, Girish uses it to kill himself.

Why did Girish kill himself? He had friends and love. The conversation between the three friends on this matter seems very Barthesian.

> Woman 2 – All those who commit suicide have love in their being. The contentment with love makes them prone to suicide.
>
> Man – The problem was, after a while, he could not love himself anymore.
>
> Woman 1 – Those who get possessed with love, look for their self in the other.
>
> Woman 2 – Their wanton desire drains their love dry. Then they feel like an insect trapped in a spider's web. It doesn't end until all the love is diminished. Then they become completely hollow. Their desire becomes devoid of love.
>
> Man – After sometime, Girish figured that out and he decided to commit suicide.

Durkheim's much celebrated, now

outdated in sociological circles, work on suicides (1952) suggests, among many things, that suicides are social and not individual acts. A failure or pressure to be socially integrated can lead to deaths or suicides. Barthes, on the other hand, discussed suicides in the lover's context. He wrote, "In the amorous realm, the desire for suicide is frequent: a trifle provokes it" and "a trifle will distract" the lover. In situations a lover is caught in where they cannot express or speak, the idea of suicide saves them. The mere utterance of the idea of suicide enables the lover to be "reborn", to color their life, and either use it against the loved object in "a familiar blackmail" trope, or to use it as fantasy to unite in death with the loved object (2000:218). In both ways, it is the amorous lover who benefits from the ideas of suicide.

Did Girish really commit suicide? I think, he did not. Perhaps he thought of committing suicide, then reconsidered, and instead decided to break out of the cycle of love by denouncing it and choosing exile over settlement and attachment, vairagya as the film suggests. Girish is also one of the many names of Lord Shiva, the lord of the mountains and eternal ascetic. There is another reason to not believe that Girish may have committed suicide. The story is narrated in Vrindavan, the city also called as the city of widows in India, where Lord Krishn was born and raised and lived most of his life. An important seat of Vaishnavism tradition, Vrindavan is one of the important Krishn pilgrimage sites. Like Benares, Vrindavan is one place where people come for salvation, Moksha. By renouncing love, the human bondage, and chain of birth and death, Girish perhaps attained moksha, and not suicide/death.

The second part of the film depicts a homoerotic attraction developing between the two women, one is Girish's wife, and other his lover. The two women could very well be portrayals of Rukmini and Radha, sans the homoerotic tie. The woman 2, playing Girish's wife, questions monoamory, advocates a backing for polyamory, and dismisses logical analysis to objectify one's passion. Polyamory will have a divine consent in Krishn's own city.

The third and important dimension in the film remains heterosexual though, with an intense and passionate love portrayed between the man and woman 1. The man is often referred to as Girish, but there is confusion on his identity. Woman 1 tells him that she wants to exchange him with her father, and that she loves dead people. The man asks if that means he will have to die to obtain her love. The last conversation they have has all the elements of a Sophoclesian/Freudian drama. The woman claims to be the man's, whom she is wedded to, mother; the man calls her his daughter, she calls him Girish, and he denies to be Girish. This part reminded me of Kumar Shahani's Tarang (1984), which also suggests a semi-incestuous bond between the father and the daughter. Ashish's film ends with a situation which is "neither a dream nor a possible reality."

The generous and fearless use of nude scenes prompted me again of Barthes. Barthes' amorous subject often catch themselves "carefully scrutinizing the loved body", as if the "mechanical cause" of their "desire were in the adverse body". Barthes' lover compares themselves with "those children who take a clock apart in order to find out what time is" (2000:71). It says,

> …I am then in the process of fetishizing a corpse. As is proved by the fact that if the body I am scrutinizing happens to emerge from its inertia, if it begins doing something, my desire changes; if for instance I see the other thinking, my desire ceases to be perverse, it again becomes imaginary, I return to an Image, to a Whole: once again, I love. (2000:71-2)

A body, in Barthesian discourse, arouses distortion; an image creates love. But the road to love has to cross through the lane of body aka perversion.

The film-maker has fascinatingly withheld the names of the three characters from the audience. We never know their names. Some texts have been taken from a short story titled "Baba Eshechhen" by Procheto Gupta from the collection Nil Alor Phul (2005). For the believers of cinema as an extension of painting and photography, the film is a visual treat. Shot on location in Vrindavan, the frames covering the windows, doors, balconies, galleries, rooftops, and sky open up a different language of story-telling. The hues of yellow and blue only add to the recurring theme of bhakti, love, devotion in the film. The winter shots, taken on the river, river bank, and the boats were my favorites. One wonders why there was no evening or night shots and sequences in the film. One also desires if the Raas Leela troupe got more shots, with dialogues, rather than just being used as a prop to break the monotony arising out of the dense highbrow discussions between the three central characters.

Also, I have a slight disagreement with the title of the film. There is no vairagya in the film, except perhaps when we share Girish's story. Girish certainly starts the story, but is not dominant in the narrative. The three characters bring curiosity about each other, and explore themselves emotionally, sexually, and rationally. The films is mostly about raag (attachment, passion) and anurag (devotion, eternal love). The prefix Vrindavani in the title is used as an adjective, which is intriguing. It stands for love in the title. However, the juxtaposition of Vrindavan to describe vairagya, absence of passion, is antithetical to my sensibility. Vrindavani Anurag would have been a more appropriate title.

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Vrindavani Vairagya: A Philosophical Quest for the Eternal

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‘Girish ache? (Is Girish there?)
Girish nei. (Girish isn’t here.)’-
(Avikunthak, Vrindavani Vairagya)

How can one define “absence” when the presence is all-pervasive? Is the gulf between the “real” and the “unreal” an illusion? A Maya?

Ashish Avikunthak’s Vrindavani Vairagya provokes our existential angst. The film’s intense obsession with every piece of information about Girish’s death poignantly reminds us that Avikunthak’s cinematic quest not only entails a seamless osmosis of the mundane and the marvelous, but it also offers a deeply-enlightening experience of the Eternal. His other film Vakratunda Swaha, which begins as a requiem to his friend Girish Dahiwale who committed suicide in 1998, becomes in its course a philosophical exploration as it interrogates the ephemerality of life and the transient nature of death. Interestingly, the underlying message of Vakratunda Swaha resounds through Vrindavani Vairagya as one of the characters in the latter, describes Girish’s death as a ‘philosophical undertaking’. While Avikunthak’s “non-traditional” way of weaving the image and the “story” may seem distracting to some, it is through this deceptively broken diegesis and non-intrusive camera angles, he enables us to comprehend the unbroken continuity of Time and Existence.

Vrindavani Vairagya undertakes a spiritual peregrination unraveling the enigmatic truth concerning the absolute union between the atma (individual soul) and the Paramatma/Brahma (the supreme Eternal Soul). Avikunthak delineates this search for our cosmic Anam Cara with nuanced metaphors and carefully-selected collage of images. An instance of it is visible in the scene where the two unnamed female characters participate in the Vaishnava ritual of wearing the “Urdhva Pundra”. It is interesting how this and subsequent scenes are woven together to underscore the notion of absolute surrender to the Paramatma. Avikunthak ensures that the bliss of divine union is accentuated with accompanying dialogues, visuals and music, and we are intuitively led to presume that these two female characters do not merely represent Radha (as a passionate lover of Krishna) and Mirabai (as a pious devotee to Krishna). They, rather more importantly, convey the profound truth that Radha and Mirabai are anything but disparate entities; they are, in fact, manifestations of the incomplete mortal love, that is questing eternally for its union with what Rabindranath Tagore described as the ‘amritam, the immortal bliss’ (Tagore, Sadhana p. 104). This theme is further emphasized by the film’s locale- Vrindavan, a place which in India’s cultural tradition, is associated with the love-lore of Krishna and Radha. Avikunthak employs a plethora of contrasting images to reinstate the philosophical truth that ‘imperfection is not a negation of perfectness; finitude is not contradictory to infinity: they are but completeness manifested in parts, infinity revealed within bounds’ (Tagore, Sadhana p. 48). The message is also glaringly present in the ambivalence of the film’s title which consists of two seemingly misaligned concepts- “Vrindavan” and “Vairagya”. Contrary to the popular meaning of “Vairagya”, which is often understood as a synonym for renunciation of passion, the word, here, exudes a transcendental quality as it connotes attainment of the Eternal Bliss through non-attachment towards corporeal desires. Instead of any negation/separation, the title, therefore, seems to imply the final re-union of the individual soul with the Everlasting Love. Quite predictably, Vrindavan is deemed as the perfect locale for enacting the saga of this continual union of the ephemeral and the eternal; of the passion of love and the equanimity of non-attachment. Avikunthak consistently harps on the fragility of what appears to be contrary; he reminds us that “Pranay” (love/passion) and “Vairagya” (dispassion) are not intrinsically antithetical in the grand design of our cosmic existence. In Sadhana: The Realisation of Life, Tagore writes: ‘We have what we call in Sanskrit dvandva, a series of opposites in creation…They are only different ways of asserting that the world in its essence is a reconciliation of pairs of opposing forces’ (p. 96). In Tagore’s interpretation, ‘…God’s love from which our self has taken form has made it separate from God; and it is God’s love which again establishes a reconciliation and unites God with our self through the separation’ (Tagore, Sadhana p. 87). The profound knowledge that contrariness/duality is but an illusion, a necessity to attain the absolute unity with the Eternal Life/Love, permeates through the visual and sonic elements of the film. While on the one hand, melancholia oozes out through blue-washed walls of the decrepit buildings of Vrindavan, on the other hand, the grandeur of Raslila, performed by folk artists, is laid out in full display. This continuous interweaving of the celebration of the Eternal Love and the banal materiality of temporal existence marks the film’s underlying philosophy.

Vrindavani Vairagya echoes the Upanishadic truth about the immenseness of life, which extends beyond our corporeal understanding of finitude, and which, as Tagore brilliantly explicated in Sadhana, ‘…knows no decay or diminution’ (p. 21). While the film, on the surface, seems to engage with an account of self-annihilation, its core message reiterates

the Upanishadic meta-narrative that is succinctly encapsulated in Tagore's song- 'Tomaro asime praanomon loye jato dure aami dhaai/ Kothao dukkho, kothao mrityu, kothaa bichchhedo naai' ['(O Creator), the farther I travel in your endless universe, the more I realize there is no sorrow, no death, no separation'- Translation mine]. Hence, although the grief-soaked opening scene that bewails of some irrevocable loss and the haunting silhouette of a solitary boat on a mist-swept river heighten the film's pensive preoccupation with Death, yet at a more subliminal level, it indicates a journey that knows no end. The film seems to reassure that Girish is not lost forever; he is merely invisible to those eyes that search for him within the restricted boundaries of their perception. Girish, like every individual soul is beyond death; beyond separation, for, 'there is no such thing as absolute isolation in existence' (Tagore, Sadhana p. 4).

What is most commendable is the way Avikunthak impeccably blends such philosophical observations of the Upanishads with the esoteric principles of Tantra. In an otherwise abstruse scene, flower petals that cascade down on a naked supine human body, also simultaneously soar up, resembling the endless flow of life that is continually arriving and departing. Again, the same trope is restated through the imagery of the successive openings of several doors, symbolizing the ever-continuing pathway that connects the evanescent with the Eternal. The invocation of Tantric rituals is more pronounced in the minute description of Girish's death. The narrator informs that Girish uttered Beej mantra (seed syllable) before pulling the trigger of the Enfield rifle, which had already been smeared with the blood of many previous murders. The Beej mantra, as explained in the film, exonerates an execution from its sins, and consequently, it renders Girish's suicide an act of self-sacrifice. Furthermore, his death gains more esoteric significance since a "boli" (sacrificial slaughter) in the Tantric context can be deemed sacred when it is accomplished with the consent of the sacrificed. Girish's suicide, thus, ceases to be an individual's personal desperation to annihilate himself; it, rather, signifies the Tantric process of transforming the mortal into the eternal. Avikunthak's engagement with the Tantrik epistemological tradition continues as his vertiginous camera rotates around the four inter-connected balconies of an unremarkable traditional house overlooking a square courtyard. The fast-paced circular movement of the camera followed by its focus on the empty square space at the centre, evokes unmistakable suggestions of a Mandala. This scene re-emphasizes the notion of perpetual journey from the periphery to the centre; from disintegration to reintegration; from the Atma to the Paramatma. These subtle hints, however, come to be perceived more palpably in the penultimate section of the film when Avikunthak employs two of his characters- a female and a male -to engage in a stimulating debate on the illusive borderline between dream and reality. With brilliantly-crafted dialogues and equally-befitting camera movements, Avikunthak endeavours to enshrine the philosophical doctrine that

….Life cannot slay. Life is not slain!
Never the spirit was born; the spirit shall cease to be never;
Never was time it was not; End and Beginning are dreams!
(The Bhagavad-Gita)

Vrindavani Vairagya, despite its ostensible pessimism, is about eternal hope. The film is pregnant with individual soul's perennial desire for re-uniting with what the poet-saint Lalan Fakir described as the 'moner manush' (Trans. Love of one's heart, Translation mine; Fakir, n.page); however, it also transmutes passion into equanimity since re-union with the Eternal Soul/Love is contingent on dispassionate love. Avikunthak, an archeologist by training, constructs Vrindavani Vairagya as a palimpsest to re-affirm

….That which is
Can never cease to be; that which is not
Will not exist.
(The Bhagavad-Gita)

The film ends abruptly. Or, does it? In Tagore's inimitable words: 'Shesh naahi je, shesh katha ke bolbe?'
('Since there's no end, who can have the final say?' Translation mine).

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