



Ashish
Avikunthak

Aapothkalin Trikalika
The Kali of Emergency

2016

Bengali feature film with English Subtitles

Duration 79 min

On view: 27 June – 22 July

Screening times: 12pm | 3pm | 5pm



Aapothkalin Trikalika

Niru Ratnam

1. London, Summer 2017

When does a society come to the realization that it is living in a state of emergency? On the late evening of 3 June, three attackers drove a van into pedestrians on London Bridge before getting out and launching a knife attack on people enjoying a warm summer night out. This followed a similar terrorist attack in March when a driver mounted the pavement of Westminster Bridge to mow down pedestrians. The morning that I write this, a retaliation attack has taken place at a mosque in North London. Over the English Channel another attacker has today rammed into a police convoy on the Champs-Elysee. France has been under a government-imposed state of emergency for fourteen months. Across Europe, governments have adopted anti-terrorism measures that verge towards the draconian although none have gained the notoriety of Donald Trump's Executive Order 13769 (superseded by Executive Order 13780), or, as it was more popularly known, the 'Muslim ban'.

Trump's victory in the American elections of November 2016 was regarded in many quarters around the world as being indicative of another type of state of emergency. An authoritarian with little regard for democratic protocols took charge of the most powerful country in the world, celebrating victory by immediately rounding on opponents in the free press provided by social media. Just over six months into his administration, Trump has carried out scattergun policies that have included firing the director of the FBI for failing to demonstrate loyalty to the President, appointing family

members in key positions, undermining international cooperation on climate change, accusing London's Muslim mayor of being indifferent to terrorism in the wake of a terrorist attack on that city and hiring an agent of the Turkish government as national security advisor. Trump has torn up the playbook of liberal democracy to the delight of his followers who increasingly see liberalism as the consolidation of wealth and power amongst a self-satisfied metropolitan elite. His victory followed another shocking defeat for liberal democracy – the decision of the British referendum to leave the European Union. Similar forces of nativism, anti-foreign sentiment, anti-liberalism and a hostility to globalisation lie behind both Brexit and the rise of Trump. And whilst western liberal democracy breathed a large sigh of relief when Emmanuel Macron won the French elections, it is worth noting that 34% of the French population voted for the Front National, a party closely associated European fascism.

Around the world in Russia, the Philippines, China, Hungary, Turkey, India and China, the old-fashioned figure of the "strongman" leader is back in charge. Just hours before American voters handed the keys of the Oval Office to Trump, Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India, went on television to announce that all of India's five hundred-rupee and thousand rupee notes would be banned from use, with virtually no forewarning of this demonetization plan. The announcement caused financial chaos, suffering and a sharp downturn in India's economic growth. Modi, like Trump, Erdogan, Putin and the rest of these strongmen revel in unpredictability,

populism and bending constitutional rules. They disrupt and destroy the pillars of liberal society, paradoxically whilst using the pillars of that society to do so – Trump's use of the freedom of press provided by the social media platform Twitter is a small but revealing example. When does liberal society realize the state of emergency to which it has succumbed? The liberal consensus that seemed to be enjoying hegemony in the world after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 is disappearing: victim to strongmen politicians who pointed at the elitism that was settling into liberalism and talked directly to constituencies beyond liberalism's echo chamber. The alternative ideologies they have put in place have populist appeals but can easily veer into authoritarianism. Yet there are no tanks on the streets in the countries who have elected these strongmen, no imminent army coups, no widespread civil conflict. The state of emergency is widespread, prevalent across the world, but increasingly comfortably ensconced.

2. "And how are things going?"

One of the most famous Hindu legends about the goddess Kali is her victory over the demon Raktabija. Durga and the Matrikas have attempted to kill Raktabija but find that every drop of the demon's blood that is spilled produces clones of the demon. Durga summons Kali who appears armed with a sword, noose and skull-topped staff. Her tongue lolls out of her gaping mouth and she devours Raktabija and his clones, sucking the blood from the demon before it can reach the ground. Ashish Avikunthak's film Aapothkalin Trikalika ('The Kali

of Emergency') also is a summoning of Kali, but to today's world, today's state of emergency. The film is a space of enquiry as to what might happen if a god or goddess, in this case Kali, might be called upon now to see the state of today's world. Viewers familiar with Avikunthak's oeuvre will recognize a number of techniques he uses. A number of narrators, usually in groups of two's or three's, question and answer each other in short bursts that echo previous sets of questions and answers between the same interlocutors. They act in a deliberately non-realistic fashion, not meeting each others gazes, sitting in theatrically arranged tableaux, repeating themselves in a way that gives the script of the film the quality of a long poem. The result of these techniques is that the narrative of the film emerges unevenly, if at all. Instead the script is a series of overlapping dialogues where the hints of a narrative emerge fitfully before escaping out of view. After an opening scene where Kali seems to appear on the rooftop of an Indian townhouse, the film cuts to two characters looking straight out towards and beyond the viewer. The first asks, "And how are things going?" to which the second replies: "As a matter of fact, things are improving. Things are improving day by day." The film will repeatedly circle back to variants on this piece of dialogue with different answers to what might be getting better; in the first instance, the light. Avikunthak's imagery is dream-like and allusive, again something that viewers familiar with Avikunthak's oeuvre will recognise. The film cuts between the narrators and shots of Kali and her avatars, as they progress through the countryside and the city. The narrators comment on both this physical journey but also, seemingly, the state of both Kali's mental landscape as well as the state of the world that she finds herself in. At times the narrators switch to being protagonists, further muddying the waters. It becomes apparent that the progress the narrators blankly talk about might not be progress after all. "Now there are

only malls with brand names. Those small shops that you thought existed have all vanished," explains one of the narrators. Briefly Kali is seen pulling a cart through the street as a car jostles past, then in the middle of the road as the cars roar past, their occupants indifferent to the appearance of a goddess amongst them.

3. "Things are improving day by day"

The state of emergency for liberal society is a situation where the daily incremental progress that is the driver of these societies stops or goes into reverse. The progressive direction of liberalism, the belief that things will get better for societies around the world, is overturned. The populism that has propelled Trump, and other strongmen, as well as phenomena like Brexit, appeals to constituencies who crave certainties, and a rejection of the complexities that globalization has brought. Their response to liberalism is to use the power it has given them through the voting box, to overthrow it. How can progressive forces resist this? One method might be to engage in debate with regressive authoritarianism to re-assert liberal society. This could be through reasoned analysis in the press or social media or peaceful protests such as the women's marches that took place after Trump was elected. And yet as these marches fade away and those reasoned articles lie unread by those who voted for the strongmen another way is perhaps worth considering: that of resisting populism and the urge for black and white answers through difficulty and a refusal to engage. Most commentators on Avikunthak's films have noted the difficulty in offering a straightforward reading of his works. Some try to decode the complex sets of symbolism that the film-maker foregrounds or the religious mythologies that lie behind the films. However, the problem with this approach is to ignore that a resistance to straightforward interpretation lies

at the heart of works such as Aapothkalin Trikalika. It is a film that is deliberately meant to be difficult to understand. It actively resists being packaged up into a straightforward press release for easy consumption. So perhaps it is more appropriate to understand the re-appearance of Kali in the contemporary world as the hailing of something that is deliberately incongruous. Throughout the film Kali is a force that resists assimilation into the world that she finds herself in, instead seemingly remaining part of an old order that is incongruous to the contemporary one. She embodies a creative destruction, refusing a binary position within the dominant discourse of the new world order, that of the state of emergency. The perpetual state of emergency around the world threatens to become a new normal for liberal society. The very mechanisms of a progressive liberal society, such as a free press analyzing current affairs, or the freedom of speech exemplified by lack of censorship of social media, is allowing authoritarian and repressive politics the space to become normalized. Trump comes over as the guy next door on Twitter. How might we instead resist this process of the normalization of the state of emergency? What part might opacity or a refusal to engage play? What part might a creative destruction play? Perhaps instead of hoping to improve things day by day by engaging with a set of beliefs, that (through its every action) paradoxically undermines the old liberal beliefs (of engagement, dialogue and everyday progress), it is time to do something that has resistance, difficulty and destruction at its core. Perhaps it is time to begin again.

The Function of Orality, Aurality and Visuality in Ashish Avikunthak's *Aapothkalin Trikalika*

Erin O'Donnell

The Bengali filmmaker Ashish Avikunthak has been making films in India since the mid-nineties – completely self-financed; two of his earliest being *Etcetera* (1997) and *Kalighat Fetish* (1999), which is filmed largely at and around the Kali temple in (one of) his hometown(s) – Kolkata. Under discussion at present, the director's fifth and perhaps most provocative feature film, *Aapothkalin Trikalika* ("The Kali of Emergency," 2016) invokes an inquisition of human, cosmic and cinematic configurations of time and being through an engagement with Mahakali herself, frequently represented by both women and men – at times nude, their corporeality laid bare – wearing only Kali and Ganesha/ Ganapati masks (beautifully rendered by Ganesh Mukhosh Bhandar). Masking of the actors and actresses in the film activates a divine alterity possessing a purposeful political instrumentality to critically question the manifestations and machinations of present neoliberal global power structures. *Aapothkalin* had the distinct honor of being selected for and screened at this year's 2017 Berlin International Film Festival.

The film perpetuates Avikunthak and his cinematic team's exploration and excavation of the abstract, real, religious, political, and phenomenological functions of ritual, transgression, transformation and morbidity in late 20th/early 21st century in West Bengal and India. Visceral orality/aurality – the sonic vocabulary of the film which emanates both senses of the instinctive and the profound, and haptic visuality – the tactile,

proprioceptive visual field of the film – are how the work puts forth and participates in the multifaceted processes enumerated above. Language, sound and image operate in requisite conjunction with the film's characters who inhabit Kali and Ganesha masks and adopt the persona of gods and goddesses to dictate the diegetic space as one where the divine and the human unequivocally forefront what is at stake in the current historical moment. In terms of visceral orality, *Aapothkalin* continues Avikunthak's dialogic adaptation (in partnership with his screenwriter Moloy Mukherjee) into Bangla of absurdist theatrical works, here British playwright Martin Crimp's *Face to the Wall* (2002) and *Fewer Emergencies* (2005). The film's actors and actresses deliver the seemingly nonsensical dialogue in a staccato, chant-like monotone. Near the beginning of the film, shot in vibrant 16mm color, two actresses depicting goddesses, starkly lit from below, face the camera, framed by window bars, and speak:

And how are things going?
As a matter of fact, things are improving.
Things are improving day by day.
What kind of things?
Well, this light (alo).
The light is improving day by day.
(Adapted from *Fewer Emergencies*.)

And later, a male god and female goddess, shot in grainy 16mm black & white, stand by a water tank and

discuss:

Everything you had imagined did exist.
But now it has disappeared.
Yes, everything has vanished.
Now there are only malls with brand names.
Those small shops that you thought existed
have all vanished.
Now only a handful of small shops remain in
Belmuri.
The civilization is moving forward.
(Adapted from *Face to the Wall*.)

This relentless visceral orality acts as both an intervention into and magnification of the incomprehensible, corrupted blather – from the frivolous and comic to the vile and dangerous – of what constitutes much of current global political discourse in the cynical opportunistic age of Mamataism, Modism and Trumpism, with their ceaseless drumbeat of portending always existing emergencies. In *Aapothkalin*, the oral recitations and visual incarnations of Kali, Ganesha and other gods and goddesses serve to interrogate the multiplicity of all too often imagined, manufactured crises in today's world. As Avikunthak stated to me via a recent e-mail exchange: "Kali's invocation is addressing a larger postcolonial culture of perpetual emergencies that we have normalized in our consciousness. We live in abnormal times, or times of perpetual emergencies, and these times require paranormal normativeness."

Language is the front line of Aapothkalin (as is the case in most of Avikunthak's films), in an historical time period when violence to language is an hourly endeavor for authoritarian figures like the compulsive tweeter Trump. Applicable here are the apt words of Russian journalist Masha Gessen from "The Autocrat's Language":

Trump's word-piles fill public space with static. This is like having the air we breathe replaced with carbon monoxide. It is deadly. This space that he is polluting is the space of our shared reality. This is what language is for: to enable you to name "secateurs" (garden shears), buy them, and use them. To make it possible for a surgeon to name "scalpel" and have it placed in her open palm. To make sure a mother can understand the story her child tells her when she comes home from school, or a judge can evaluate a case being made. None of this is possible when words mean nothing.

Pushing back against this nihilistic language turn, the visceral orality of Avikunthak's work in the form of an adapted Bangla dialogue in Aapothkalin is rooted in the local and particular (like the above Belmuri) which performs as a bulwark against the hyper-melodramatic and chaotic CGI, IMAX globalized cinematic experience of the Tollywood/Bollywood/Hollywood industrial complex. By foregrounding orality, the director strategically interrupts the hegemony of the narrative driven by visual pyrotechnics to shift to a narrative driven by temporal phenomenology.

An additional, quintessential sonic layer of the film is that of visceral aurality via a myriad of resonances utilized on the soundtrack – from reverberating bells and chimes, droning and whirring noises (at times from jet planes and helicopters), throat singing, birds calling, water dripping and the repeated utterance of mantras to the Divine Mother Goddess. These chants bracket the

film, and accompany Kali's initial mesmerizing, circular dance of destruction on a Kolkatan rooftop, as well as the concluding slow motion stroll of gods and goddesses taking a suicidal leap from the same rooftop. However, we do not actually see the final goddess jump – her image remains suspended – perhaps offering a small glimmer of hope. The film's dense soundtrack produces a vibratory, enlivening encounter to essentially animate the sensorium of the viewer, specifically in relation to the work's pronounced divine agency of the now.

A contemplative, sensuous relationship is further initiated between film and spectator in Aapothkalin by means of haptic visuality – developing tactile potentials and interconnections among the celluloid skin of the film, the film narrative's divine and human characters, and the audience. Jennifer Barker astutely expressed in *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience*: If we take "skin" to mean the literal fleshy covering of a human or animal body, then to say a film has a skin would be quite a stretch. But if, as Merleau-Ponty has said of touch, "skin" also denotes a general style of being in the world, and if skin is not merely a biological object but also a mode of perception and expression that comprises the surface of a body and the site where it meets the world of others and objects, then film can indeed be said to have a skin. Through its skin, the film is caught up in a reciprocal, intimate, and fundamentally erotic intersubjectivity with its viewer.

Haptic visuality is achieved in Aapothkalin through the use of old and expired 16mm color and black & white film stock to produce a frequently granular image. As Avikunthak related to me: "This produces a haptic affect that results in a disrupted diegetic continuity, which accentuates in a dominant style the temporality of the cinematic phenomenology." The color and black & white stock is intercut throughout the film, along with

the use of measured long and short takes, deliberate fast and slow film speeds, all to produce a vital dynamism within and between shots, and between the film and the viewer. A pronounced phenomenological particularity is constructed in Aapothkalin with masked and unmasked – costumed as god and goddesses, and at other times dressed in modern-day street clothes – actors and actresses (either solo, in pairs, in trios or in groups), who walk, dance, stand, sit, crawl, embrace, kiss, and caress (themselves and each other) within a diverse array of Kolkata's and West Bengal's singular settings of urban rooftops, city streets, train lines, courtyards, home interiors, abandoned buildings, sal forests, rivers, and industrial sites. The film's employment of both haptic visual techniques and divine disguises serves to decisively unsettle and transgress the standardization of contemporary globalized socio-cultural norms in order to engender political awareness. Aapothkalin Trikalika vividly concludes in a bazaar, where a man beheads, skins and cuts up a live chicken on a boti. But the scene runs in reverse, so that the animal is reconstituted, suggesting a possible opening for not only material but also sacred renewal – if we deeply reflect and pointedly act.



CREDITS

Cast

Ruma Poddar, Saswati Biswas, Sharmistha Nag, Siddhartha Banerjee, Sandeep Mukherjee, Sougata Mukherjee, Marylea Madiman, Satakshi Nandi, Saheli Goswami, Mishka Halim.

Screenplay, Director & Producer

Ashish Avikunthak

Cinematography

Basab Mullick

Editing

Pankaj Rishi Kumar, Nikon, Ashish Avikunthak

Dialogue

Moloy Mukherjee

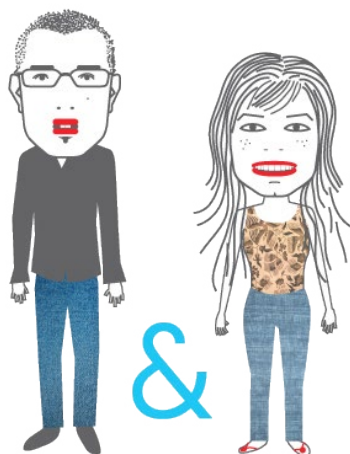
Sound Design

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