



AAPOTKALIN TRIKALIKA

The Kali of Emergency

A Film by Ashish Avikunthak

APRIL 10 - 15, 2019

Aicon Gallery, Great Jones Street, New York

THE SCREAM OF KALI

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The most relentless and compelling quality of *Aapothkalin Trikalika* is that the film renders the presence of Kali empty by having her be manifest everywhere. In one way, she suffuses the sensual spirit of the film – her voice is echoed in the sounds of the liturgy out of which a substantial part of the background score is composed; her actions, after she first appears in the everglades, are carefully reported by the narrators of the film to the audience; her physical form is pervasively multiple as she resides within any person who dons her visage. Yet, she seems not quite present. Her mantras only exist as unpierced voiceovers and refrains that are interrupted by the whirring sounds of an airplane overhead or a train passing; her actions are narrated as if they belong to the social dramaturgy of a different universe in which even the simple act of holding hands is done in a manner of affectionate love, the equivalent of which in our own world can only be found in the innocence of childhood; and her multiple physical forms seem trapped in balconies that do not have an exit, and in bodies that seem to not belong unto themselves. This latter sentiment is most viscerally felt in a powerful sequence in which a woman rolls her left index finger over one of her breasts and uses the same finger from her right hand to trace a similar movement over the mirror reflection of what is allegedly her other breast - all this while the audience hears the incantatory words to *Hrdayam Mayi* that evokes our own Oneness with our hearts and the world. The formal language of Kali's Tantric rites remains immediately recognizable yet their cosmological landscape has become illegible. Avikunthak wants to call on her but she doesn't seem to be answering. In between the desired presence and the inexorable absence of Kali, the film achieves its purpose of being an insistent documentation of this metaphysical failure.

Absence

The absence of Kali, however, is a created absence; it is not vacant. More importantly, The absence is productive as it is of a form which impels a person to look for it everywhere. Avikunthak's images dwell on this palpable absence of Kali, allowing it to gather its own affects of anxiety, dread, and impatience. While Kali has conferred herself to utmost abstraction in the non-figurative Tantric diagrams of yantra, the film does not want to reach a finished mystical image in which Kali becomes available for inner perception. Instead, the film constantly relinquishes and restores the density of her invocations, such that her absence becomes recurrently felt and unfelt. Kali walking with a rickshaw becomes just another person who goes unidentified by all the onlookers. She stands herself in the middle of the road only for the cars to scurry past her, not one stopping to acknowledge her. While skepticism about the formality of Sanskritic rites is echoed amongst several audiences, Avikunthak wants to make a more potent observation. Even if Kali were to come and interrupt the flow of our lives, we no longer have the mind to contemplate her. An entire manner of be-holding the divine is lost – a be-holding in which anyone, anywhere could possibly and unanticipatedly become the seat for the goddess to descend. How does one visually show the loss of this singular mode of possibility through which Kali comes to be present in our world? Avikunthak's characteristic cinematic response is to make her be present everywhere and yet have her presence be felt nowhere.

Let me illustrate this using Martin Heidegger's beautiful parable of the jug. When a potter makes a jug, what is he making? Is he just shaping the material sides of the jug, or is he also making the void that forms the jug as a vessel and not just as a physical object with a handle and a base? According to Heidegger, as the potter runs and massages the clay with his fingers, he is not making the material artefact that supports the empty space within it, but he is rather making that void which makes the jug into a vessel that is able to hold emptiness within it. "From start to finish the potter takes hold of the impalpable void and brings it forth as the container in the shape of a containing vessel. The jug's void determines all the handling in the process of making the vessel".¹ If I am permitted to extrapolate this sculptural image to the cinematic form through which Kali, or her absence, is sensed, then the series of imagistic depictions of Kali become the material supports through which the shape of her emptiness is created. We might be tempted to read these images through the ritual grammar of Tantra, but the emptiness that is constantly being made interrupts any representational reading from reaching a complete resolution. There is no final separation between these fabrications, just like there is no way in which the materiality of the jug can be separated from the immateriality of the void it contains. Kali's absence can only be sensed from within the means through which she is sought to be made present, and it is this endemic quality of loss that is created through constant juxtaposition, repetition, and images. The avoidance of cinematic dead time and the abnormally contracted, or even interpolation of her diverse completely dissipated, duration of the film through



rapid and heavy editorial cutting is a way of saying, 'Don't pause and start making up stories about these images'.

To be sure, Avikunthak wants to put a temporal signature to this absence. Let's hear him: "the film is a metaphysical contemplation in the time of perpetual emergencies". The perpetuity of an ongoing emergency is most soberly captured in the familiar dimensions of technological and industrial annihilation that the film depicts through its quick backdrops of massive oil pipes and distant chimney stacks. Its permanence can also be sensed in the perfunctory discussion amongst the narrators of seeming massacres of people known to them, collated with the recurrent sounds of war reportage with their inconstant presence in news channels. One could find a panoply of such conventional signs of "perpetual emergencies", if one wanted to look for them. However, what is perhaps less obvious and more intriguing is the question of what impress does this have on the evocative images of Kali that pervade the film. Herein lies the flipside to her inexorable absence. If the images and invocations of Kali construct her as an indelible void that is viscerally sensed, then this sensation also emerges from a world that still desires her full presence. How is this desire conveyed and how does a person channel the world such that they are able to feel the sensations of the absence of Kali? It is here that the film not only documents the various celestial forms of Kali but also become the echoes of the narrators, not unlike Avikunthak, who walk the streets chanting her name and hearing her screams.

Absent Presence

The narrators of the film are the ones through whose words the battery of conditions for the emergency is communicated. But the etiology of this emergency cannot simply be recounted as a list of things we do to the world and to each other. The idea of an emergency also has to do with the specific manner in which we restrict the signs of Kali only to their specific ceremonial contexts while leaving the rest of our actions untouched by their grace. I think what Avikunthak would like to do is to approach every image and gesture in the world as if it were a living hieroglyph of Kali, even if it constantly leads to the disappointing realization that she is permanently absent; this is different from saying that they are vacant. The latter is a mere gesture of dismissal, while the former is a pain that arises from a confrontation with a metaphysical lack.

A sign of vacancy is provided from within the film when three narrators are describing the response of 'they' when they encounter the 'exhausted earth' with their 'weary eyes'. The narrators convey that they are smiling and singing a 'light hearted song': "*Hat-tim-a-tim-tim, taara maathe pare dim, taader khaara dooto singh, taara haat-tim-a-tim-tim*" (*Hat-tim-a-tim-tim, they lay eggs in the field, they have two straight horns, they are the haat-tim-a-tim-tim*). A characteristic nonsense rhyme from the affective world of Bangla. However, in a state of created absence, the world appears as a hallucinatory whole in which every element of dress, acting, emotion, speech is chiseled into a highly condensed cipher. The observance of strict acting conventions makes the entire film into a hyper-ritualized act that harkens back to the formal perfection required from the dramatic performances of *Natyasastra*. The narrators of the film, dressed in highly ornamented clothing, speak as if their words are coming from elsewhere, or that the dialogical space of communication between them is deliberately forged through mathematical gestures of conditionals and negation such that their speech becomes a mirror-reflection of each others'. Even though there are different people, they seem to channel a single experience of the world, and the world for all its variance, nevertheless insists as a single entity. In this Avikunthak seems to be on the same side as Antonin Artaud who found the

exaggerated theatricality of Balinese dances to be the most dynamic form of a theater of cruelty.² For Artaud, the fixity and exactness of all the masks, gestures, postures, speech of the Balinese performance he witnessed, articulated a vision of a 'total' and 'wordless' theater that could be monstrous and metaphysical enough to affect the audience in his times of degeneracy. Avikunthak seems to value the same set of dramatic elements, but is there an equivalent to the madly ambitious and confrontational shock of cruelty in his film? What is the sensation that accompanies the saturated absence of *Kali*?

Avikunthak has said that it took him seven years to make this film. In the metronome of ideas, this is equivalent to at least seven years worth of failed efforts to find *Kali*. I can imagine Avikunthak repeatedly encountering the weight of this absence in the mundane vicissitudes of his world, as he scoped the chaos of its surroundings for further materials for his cinematic endeavor. He is not very different from that medieval fakir who when asked to repeat the *shahada*, stopped at its first clause wondering what would it mean to first contemplate the absence of divinity before one proceeded to the subsequent declaration of affirmation – there is no god, but... Is it possible to make the lost unlost? Not really. The last enigmatic scene in which the slaughter of a chicken is shown in reverse, as if the butcher were putting it together rather than preparing it to be sold as meat, discloses the irreversibility of our descent into this time of emergency. But what is possible is to give an impression of how the loss of *Kali* can be fabricated from the world's noise. Avikunthak's film shows us how to feel its vibrations from within our missed calls to her. He obsessively juxtaposes the images of dystopic visions of our world and the sounds of the repeated stutters of our communication to emphasize those tones of *Kali* that freezes her majestic anger into a seeming reflection of Munch's *The Scream*. Two rapid shots in which *Kali* holds her face with her hands literalizes this intuition. Even Basab Mullick's searching camera seeks to capture the different bodies of *Kali* from all possible slants, breaking from the frontal portraiture of the icons that one can find lodged within the sanctum sanctorum of her innumerable temples and houses. It is as if he wants to wrench something out of that still poise, despite herself. Maybe a scream that is held deep inside and that emerges as the reverberating vibration of *Kali* that remains even when she herself does not; the question is, can we hear it? As you watch this film, you may or may not hear the scream in the same way as I did. You may even put together the images of the film differently, to feel its divine void as something more favorable and reassuring. But if you look at Avikunthak's earlier films, you will notice an obsessive struggle with the theme of death. In *Aapothkalin Trikalika*, he seems to have taken this compulsion one notch higher, as *Kali* herself is afflicted with mortality. We should try and understand Avikunthak's despair as his is not private; he despairs of *Kali*, and in her all our lives are implicated.

Notes

1 Martin Heidegger, "The Thing" in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (tr. Albert Hofstadter), Harper Collins Publisher (1971), pp 161-184.

2 Antonin Artaud, "On the Balinese Theater" in *Selected Writings*, University of California Press (1976), pp 215-226.



A CONSTANT BATTLE BETWEEN THE FRAGILITY OF TIME AND ANTIFRAGILITY

Amrit Gangar

The Title Etcetera

On screen, the film is titled in Bengali *Aapodhkalin Trikalika* (2016), which in Roman types is rendered as *Aapotkalin Trikalika* and offscreen it becomes *Aapothkalik Trikalika* translated into English as *The Kali of Emergency*. In Sanskrit आपद (Āpad) or आपत (Āpat) would mean a calamity, distress or misfortune. Āpatkaal is season or time of distress while Āpatkaalika occurs in time of calamity or belonging to such time. The English word 'emergency' underlines all this, whether an Emergency Ward in a hospital or a political emergency in a country.

Independent India witnessed a state of draconian emergency that lasted between 25 June 1975 and 21 March 1977 (21 months), when President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, upon advice of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, declared a state of emergency under Article 352 of the Constitution of India, effectively bestowing on her the power to rule by decree, suspending elections and civil liberties. All the fundamental rights and legal remedies protected by the Constitution of the Republic of India were suspended.¹ This nationwide emergency went on to change the political history of Independent India, giving rise to new political formulations, configurations and coalitions eventually pushing the country into the present state of 'undeclared' emergency under the right-wing parties' rule.²

Significantly, the 2019 showing of Ashish Avikunthak's film *The Kali of Emergency* is observing the centenary of yet another emergency that was clamped down on people of India by the British colonialists under the 1919's Rowlatt Act, which was also called the Black Act, about which I will talk later. However, in this context, the title of Avikunthak's film is significant as it refers to a perpetual emergency, of Trikaal constituting Past, Present and Future. Trikālīka is a Kālī triumvirate. Kālikā is also the name of a Yogini, who has different contexts and connotations among Hindu, Buddhist and Jaina traditions, and in Tantra, it would also refer to the sacred feminine force made incarnate, as an aspect of Pārvati who is revered in yogini temples of India as the 8 Matrikas or 64 Yognis. To me, this seems closer to 'Kālikā' as referred to by Avikunthak in his film title. But what is also significant is the numerical prefix 'Tri' within a Tāntrik triangle. Sometime both tri and trai are used denoting the same meaning of triple, threefold or consisting of three, e.g. Trilocana or Trailocana for the three-eyed Siva. In short it is always important to understand the import of Avikunthak's film titles.

The Mantra-Tantra-Yantra and the Triangular Circuitry

Temporally, Trikalika suggests perpetuity and that precisely the film refers to in its Tantrik narratival over-tones or under-tones. To draw from it any short term, contemporary political meanings will be to my mind much too myopic a view of the film. The film sets its tone right with its inaugural shot of a fully-clad Kālī-masked woman swirling in circle to the chanting of mantras, fleetingly beginning with Mahāsodasī Mantra as the credit titles begin to end

and then Sri Chakra Khadgamala takes over the sound track and the swirling woman with Kali mask is now joined with nude man with Kali mask. The female-male seem to intermingle like Purusha and Prakriti; the soul, the Self, pure consciousness and nature in all her aspects, the female-creative energy.

The initial Mahāsodasī Mantra is one of the bija (seed) mantras and recites only syllabic beeja in different numbers, e.g.

Om

śrīm – hrīm – klīm – aim – sauh:

om – hrīm – śrīm

ka – e – ī – la- hrīm

ha – sa – ka – ha – la – hrīm

sa – ka – la – hrīm

sauh – aim – klīm – hrīm – śrīm

Namah

Sodasi Vidya is a sixteen (sodasi)-letter mantra in which Srim or Aim or Klim are the seed-syllables added at the end, which is regarded as secret.

At the outset, Avikunthak's film prescribes this Mantra in Bengali script followed by the titles and the actual verbal recitation of the Mantra begins when Executive Producers' names appear on screen and the Mantra lingers on the sari-clad swirling woman on terrace. The worship of Devi Sri Chakra is regarded as the highest form of the Devi worship. Originally, it is said that Siva had given 64 Chakras and their Mantras and Tantras to the world, to attain various spiritual and material benefits. For his consort Devi, he gave the Sri Chakra and the highly coveted and the most powerful Sodāshakshari (16-letter) Mantra, which is equivalent of all the other 64 put together. Some scriptures proclaim that Sodasi worship is the only one which grants the sādhaka (the meditator) both iham (material) and param (spiritual) benefits. It is said that reciting of mantra beginning with Om removes any impurity of birth.³

These mantras have their numerical significance and precision, e.g. Saptadasa-vidya (17-letter mantra), Ashtadasa-vidya (18-letter mantra). The basic structure remains that of the Panchadasi and care is always taken to group the letters and other seed syllables into three explicit units, with fourth unit either spelt out or implied. Avikunthak's films (and particularly his Kali oeuvre) would demand of us some sense of this aural-visual Mantra ritualism within the context though perhaps with all the attendant risk of simplifying the complex overlaying with political implications. And perhaps that makes his films' interpretation a little more difficult than what is obvious, and we might hurry to find clues in 'realpolitik', the political here and now!



The Swirl, the Mantra and the Chakra

Sri Chakra Khadgamala is a mantra dedicated to Shakti who is referred to as Sri Devi. Khadaga means sword, mala means garland or rosary; it is a hymn (stotram) to the Divine Mother, who is said to bestow a garland of swords upon those who recite it. Sri Chakra is a mystical geometric representation of the Supreme Goddess.

Thus Mahāsodasi mantra is a layered formulation, placing one bija upon another and so on. There are many types and levels of worshipping the Devi of Sri Chakra, which is the mystical geometric representation of the Supreme Goddess. The Khadgmala is supposed to be the simplest way because it only recites the names of all the Devis of the Sri Chakra and there is a particular sequence to follow, e.g. Kameshwari, Bhagamalini, Nityakinne, Bherunde, Vannivasini, Mahavajreswari, Sivaduti, et al... It is a long list and the devotee keeps on reciting it in almost endless circularity. It is the Sakta belief that there is no 'positive' or 'negative' energy. Energy is always the Creatrix. The Khadgmala Stotra envisions Devi in coitus with her consort.

Obviously, it is ritualistic but Avikunthak, being a Sakta himself has a certain formal investment in it. A risk and risqué, but the latter often misunderstood for obviously wrong reasons. The yantra (geometrical diagram) of the Sri Chakra consists of nine enclosures, each more secret and esoteric than the one before, surrounding a central point, or bindu, in which Devi in the first order, comes as Kāmeshwari since her form is erotic (kāma). She is joined in coitus with her consort. As we move to the centre of Sri Chakra, we pay homage to the 98 Yoginis or aspects of Devi (by reciting each of their names), who guard the various 'power points' of the Chakra along the way. We internalize each Yogini to become her and this prepares us to meet the next Yogini on our path, and so on until we reach the centre.

The Chausathi Jogini (Sixty-four Yogini) Temple located at the village of Hirapur near Bhubaneshwar, the capital city of the state of Odisha, depicts all of them from Bahurupa to Kalaratri to Jwala Mukhi to Bhadrakali. The numbers play a pivotal role in Tāntrik or Hindu rituals and religious iconography.

What is important is all these iconographic signs, e.g. coitus, copulation, mutual holding of the male-female genitals, as found in Avikunthak's *Trikālikā*, are rooted in these sources and hence transcend in signification without being seductive or voyeuristic.

Faith, Form and Feeling

An artist (whether theist or atheist) carries a certain faith either in Self or a Philosophy or an Ideology which deeply governs her or his worldview, her artistic praxis and formal dispensations. And here rather tangentially and not to draw any comparison as such, Robert Bresson and his cinematography come to my mind.

I personally believe that in order to understand and perceive some subtle and inherent aspects and nuances of Bresson's cinematography, we should be able to understand and perceive his faith in Jansenism lurking in the way he gives shape and form to his cinematographic work. As we know, Jansenism was a theological movement, primarily practiced in France that emphasized original sin, human depravity, the necessity of divine grace and predestination. Bresson's cinematography would inform us of this elementality.

Here in this context I would like to argue that in order to understand and perceive Avikunthak's cinematography, as *bhāvaka* (receptor) or *ālochaka* (critic), it might help perceive his governing faith in the Sakta ritual, theology and philosophy. Bresson and Avikunthak's cinematographies are poles apart in their worldviews and belief systems, in their rigours and religiosities and there are no meeting points as such but one that I find lies in their esoterisms of Jansenism and the Sakta.

Also, as I believe, essentially an artist makes only one film in her or his lifetime, all the rest are variations of the same core, the punarāvartans or repetitions of the deeply ingrained faith varying in intensity and hence in the density and depth of feeling or the *rasa* produced. In *Trikālikā*, for instance, Avikunthak's characters return to the same dialogues again and again but in newer spatial-temporal significations, in circuitry!

In the context of his Sakta faith, I recall my conversation with Avikunthak that took place over a dozen years back with reference to Cinema of Prayoga. In this context, I had recalled Avikunthak's film *Kalighat Fetish* vis-à-vis Mahatma Gandhi's visit to the Kalighat temple in Calcutta and his getting disturbed by the killing of animals. In his autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Gandhi had asked his host, "How is that Bengal with all its knowledge, intelligence and emotion, tolerates this sacrifice?"

Avikunthak's response remains relevant here. He said, *Kalighat Fetish* is contemplation of two ideas – transgression and morbidity. They are connected by the act of transformation, leading to death. For me, *Kalighat Fetish* is an outcome of my own interaction with the memory of death. The 'brutality' of the sacrifice is for me a meditation on the morbidity of death. Personally, the film is a cinematographic rendition of memory." About Gandhi, he added, "And unlike Gandhi, I do not claim to inhabit any moral universe. Gandhi's comment originated from the Vaishnava sectarian belief that he firmly held and was raised in. He was unable to appreciate the ritualistic necessity of the sacrifice within the domain of the Tantrik Sakta cult of Kalighat.⁴

"To this day," wrote Joseph Campbell in 1962 in his book *The Masks of God: Oriental Mythology* (Martin Seeker & Warburg Ltd., Great Britain), "seven or eight hundred goats are slaughtered in three days in the Kalighat, the principal temple of the goddess in Calcutta, during her autumn festival, the Durga Puja. The heads are piled before the image, and the bodies go to the devotees, to be consumed in contemplative communion. Water buffalo, sheep, pigs and fowl, likewise, are immolated lavishly in her worship, and before the prohibition of human sacrifice in 1835, she received from every part of the land even richer fare." Campbell also talks about the prevalence of human sacrifice.

"By one human sacrifice with proper rites, the goddess remains gratified for a thousand years," we read in the *Kalika Purana*, a Hindu scripture of about tenth century A.D., and by the sacrifice of three men, one hundred thousand. Shiva, in his terrific aspect, as the consort of the goddess, is appeased for three thousand years by an offering of human flesh. For blood, if immediately consecrated, becomes ambrosia, and since his head and body are extremely gratifying, these should be presented in the worship of the goddess. The wise would do well to add such flesh, free from hair, to their offerings of good."⁵

As I believe, a certain faith in Sakta cult governs Avikunthak's cinematographic conscience and the form, and it is not the market that governs it because if it were surrendering to market and the forces of consumerism, his cinematography would have compromised and crafted manipulated imagery that would desire a sale. Avikunthak's cinematography increasingly keeps asking us questions about 'nudity' of male or female body, but he problematises it by masking the most prominent part of the body – the Face which is unlike in the other realms of art – painting or sculpture. Why do we feel so sensitive about the nude bodies of the humans and not animals, e.g. we never even felt that the 'dog' in *Trikālikā* was nude!? Sooner, I will talk about this 'dog' scene in detail.



Futility of Control and the Redundant Censorship

The political emergency of 1975 was the grand draconian censorship on democratic rights of people of India as supremely enshrined in the Constitution of India. Trajectories of human history move not on a straight line but on an octave or on a zigzag path that unpredictably push tyrants in and out on history's stage, with people's power intervening and leading to a series of *sansodhan* (corrections), which seems to me to be *Aapotkalin Trikalika*'s philosophical anchor.

And if the members of the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) understand the Sakta cult and its philosophy of Tantra, they will find the *sharira* (body) in its essential form and not in its moralistic or puritanistic, of being naked or covered. Even Truth needs to be Naked, to be True Truth, the Naked Truth, so does the Eye, the Naked Eye.

In its filmic and thinking progression, we find Avikunthak increasingly depicting the frontal aspects of the Linga and Yoni, and the body as a whole, though faces often masked with Kali or Ganesha or animals, implying some mythical meanings. The Yoni thrown up right in your face in *Trikalika* would take you directly to Devi Kamakhya and the worship of her Yoni. All classes, genders and ages of people, men, women and children go there and worship the Devi's open Yoni. It is such sublime celebration of fertility, of the regenerative power. How could human civilization reach such a point of revelation and purity of innocence; to such a deeply evolved moments? What a great civilizational evolution that India has achieved over centuries and how could she continue to embrace this colonial scar called censorship?

Censoring Avikunthak's films would be like announcing emergency on the temples of Kamakhya, on the Siva Linga placed on the Yoni. It would be like censoring Siva. Technological leeway apart, parallel ritualistic cults of Indian cultures and civilizations render all controls futile and redundant; they defy emergencies of any kind, in any time.

However, by masking the 'face', Avikunthak seems to complicate the issue of even 'nudity'. It is the 'face' that gives an 'identity' to a human body, once masked the so-called nudity remains anonymous, non-specific; uncovered genitals could only inform us about the 'gender' and their procreative power of 'fertility' and hence the frontal exhibition of breasts, nipples, vaginas and penises (shaven or unshaven) remain as the objects of 'grace'. However, Avikunthak creates a spoken vocabulary around the bodies that juxtapose 'grace' against 'grate'. And perhaps there the division between sacred and the profane begins to blur and eventually evaporate. By taking no recourse to titillating bedroom sex scenes, Avikunthak does not reduce us to being voyeuristic or pleasure-seeking vicarious, fantasizing males or females.

Incidentally, while celebrating anarchy of its form, the show of *Aapotkalin Trikalika* in 2019, is actually observing-in-defiance the centenary of the colonial Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Act of 1919, historically known as the Rowlatt Act or Black Act. This Act indefinitely extended the emergency measures of preventive detention, incarceration without trial and judicial review enacted in the Defense of India Act 1915. This act of emergency is in perpetuation, the *apotkaal* for the establishment as it always remains insecure within or without the so-called modern democracy. It is the notion of 'modernity' that always remains tentative, whether post- or post-post! The *Trikal* of the Past, Present and Future is also of Pre-Modern, Modern and the Post-Modern that perhaps Avikunthak's film makes us aware of through time. But is it *Kaal* (Time) that continues to wear the *chhadmavesha*, the masquerade?

Masquerade as noun finds its roots in its usage tracking back to AD 1590: "assembly of persons wearing masks and usually other disguises," from French *mascarade* or Spanish *mascarada* "masked party or dance," from Italian *mascarata* ", a ball at which masks are worn," variant of *mascherata* "masquerade" from *maschera*. Later around AD 1600s, as verb, masquerade meant: "to wear a mask, to take part in a masquerade" (now archaic or obsolete) also transitive, "to cover with mask or disguise" from *masquerade* (n.) In India, large crowds wore masks during prime ministerial election campaign some years back, going hysterical, they wore the mask of the would be Prime Minister of India, who is still ruling, carrying his RSS ideological baggage. Implicitly, Avikunthak's film has all such referential links to India's realpolitik, warning us of the tyrants and tyrannies and the eternal human battle against them through three-fold time, the *Trikaalika*.

Perhaps, this is basic Tantric ethos that Avikunthak's cinematography in which *Aapotkalin Trikalika* seems to be anchoring at its core and that defies the need for any political (more than the so-called moral) censorship in India as a legacy of colonialism. Indian silent films of the 1920s had no inhibition in showing passionate lip-locked kissing between man and a woman, and they didn't need two buds or two birds moving their heads 'kissingly'. They didn't need artificial rain to drench saris and shirts to produce fake eroticism or lust in mainly masculine minds. But the producers needed to hoodwink the members of the censor board, the self-custodian of morality appointed by the sarkār, the government that rules; the obscenely "naked sarkār" that *Aapotkalin Trikalika* refers to!

The first known political censorship was clamped on the film called *Bhakta Vidur* (1921) because the British rulers thought it propagated the Gandhian message of freedom. In fact, the character of Bhakta Vidur played by Dwarkadas Sampat (Kohinoor Film Company's owner himself) had donned Gandhian garbs. It was when the film reached Hyderabad (Sind) that the censor got wise to its popularity and the district magistrate of Karachi clamped a ban on it on the grounds that 'it is likely to excite disaffection against the government and incite people to non-cooperation', and for being 'a thinly veiled resume of political events in India, Vidur appearing as Mr Gandhi, clad in Gandhi cap and khaddar (coarse cloth) shirt. The intention of the film is to create hatred and contempt and to stir up feelings of enmity against the government.'⁶ India should have place for no censorship whatsoever and if there is any anarchy caused because of orderly impositions, it will push humanity a step forward towards a diviNation and no diviSion.

The Presence of the Dog and Expansion of Consciousness

At about 8th minute of the film in its granular grey zone, we find a dog straying away from us. In my conversation with Avikunthak about this pariah dog scene in the film, he said he had the closing chapter of the *Mahabharata* in mind when the Pandavas make a pilgrimage to their final resting place. The eldest Yudhisthira led the way followed by Bheema, Arjuna, Nakula, Sahadeva and Draupadi. A dog also accompanied them through their journey. On the way, Pandavas, including Draupadi, die one after another, leaving behind Yudhisthira and the dog.

Finally, Indra, the Lord of Svarga (Heaven) descends in his chariot and he invites Yudhisthira into his chariot to ascend to heavens. Yudhisthira insists on taking the dog along to Indra's disagreement. After a prolonged argument Indra agrees as he finds Dharma in the dog. And they ascend to heavens.



I find a different analogy with the dog – that is with Kali and her lolling tongue. It becomes a significant marker on the film's narrative firmament. The English word 'Dog' has at least twenty different names in Sanskrit language and one of them is: Laljivha, i.e. the one whose tongue is lolling. Has Kali bestowed him with her lolling tongue? Who is this Vakrapuchha, the one with a curved tail? Has Vakratunda, Ganesha, the one with a curved trunk, blessed him?

The Laljivha, the one with a lolling tongue, has merged with Kali and her lolling tongue, and we don't actually become conscious of the physical nakedness of Laljivha as we don't while looking at Kali's naked sharira. She always remains sacred and divine. Interestingly, in one of the 18th century paintings from Rajasthan showing Chhinmasta squatting on Siva in coitus, while cremation pyres appear in the background, we see a dog /s in the foreground eating severed human heads or skulls.

Often, in Tantra philosophy, the head represents 'Ego', the Self that thinks it can control the world with power of 'Emergency' to rule humanity. The head is associated with masculine energy; the rational self that thinks, manipulates and plans. The heart, on the other hand, represents feelings, emotion and devotion, and is associated with the feminine energy that imbues everything, the source of goddess herself. Severing the head from the body symbolizes the annihilation of Ego that leads to Emergency; and it is a perpetual battle of head and heart.

The Vakrapuchha, the one with a curved tail, is very much the part of the 18th century Rajasthani painting of Chhinmasta and Siva and I find his movement (barely a minute) in the film significant even with the Tantra and Yantra of the film. Yantra is a geometrical diagram used as an aid to meditation in Tantrik worship.

Dog also becomes a significant anchor as it is he who is the vehicle of Bhairava, the fierce manifestation of Siva. Kashmiri Saivism names the Absolute Reality (Para-Brahman) as Bhairava, so does the Trika (meaning three, a Triad) philosophy, developed by the Kashmiri Saivite philosopher Abhinavagupta. And Dog is making us meet the triad of Kalika (Trikalika) in Avikunthak's film. This is a strange alchemy of images and sounds I stumbled upon in my swapnalok, my dreamzone. Or is this how some inherently powerful images get invoked in our mind, at random? It is the non-linear randomness of *Trikalika* narrative that becomes deeply evocative.

As the Laljivha leaves the camera pans towards left to yet another mythical-historical 'triad' as each one of the three women introduces herself one by one. They are Lalit Lavanga Lata, Amrapali and Vasantsena. Who are they? And here Avikunthak opens the doors for Radha (and hence Krishna) to enter and breezes in an elegant male-female-bodies-in-love through Jayadeva's *Ashtapadi*.⁷

Our story proper starts just before this ashtapadi. It is springtime, and poor Radha is desperately looking for Krishna, and asks a friend if she knows where he is. She sure does! And she delicately describes the beauties of the spring season and how Krishna is frolicking in the Yamuna woods with other gopis! This is just the beginning...

lalita-lavanga-latā-pariśilana-komala-malaya-samīre |
madhukara-nikara-karambita-kokila-kūjita-kuñja-kutīre ||

Viharita harirīha sarasa vasante |
Nrutyati yuvati jan ena samam sakhi virahi janasya durante ||

O dear friend Radha! Cool breeze of spring season from clove bushes is gently blowing. Cuckoos are cooing sweetly, bowers and cottages are echoing with humming sound of bees, Krishna is strolling and dancing with gopis delightfully. Come on; let's go there as we are pining in love for him. Amrapali is yet another woman of Indian historicity, who is quite different from Lalit Lavanga Lata, finding place in Buddhist literature. Also known as Ambapalika or Ambapali, she was a celebrated royal courtesan of the Republic of Vaishali (located in present-day Bihar) around 500 BC. Following the Buddha's teachings, she became an arahant, i.e. the one who has destroyed the foes of afflictions.⁸ She is mentioned in the old Pali texts and Buddhist traditions, particularly in conjunction with the Buddha staying at her mango grove, Ambapali vana. Amba could also mean Kali.

And the third one is Vasantsena, who was a courtesan of Ujjayini and earned fame and prosperity due to her finesse in various art forms such as singing, dancing, poetry, courting and her beauty. She is the nayika (heroine) of the ten-act Sanskrit play *Mrchhakatika* (The Little Clay Cart) written by Sudraka who is believed to have lived between 3rd century BC and 5th century AD.⁹

Expansion of Consciousness: Sex, Sexuality and Gandhi's Experiments

Having known Ashish Chadha (Avikunthak) for many years now in his typical but principled dress of khadi dhoti and jibba (long shirt), I would like to make some theoretical and practical connections with his film making practice and its ethos. I also know that at home, often does he spin yarn on his box or peti-charkha. He had committed to protest against construction of a big dam on the river Narmada. He was active in the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) or Save Narmada Movement based on Gandhian non-violent principles. Gandhi's experiments with sex and sexuality remain fascinating within his practice of Brahmacharya (Celibacy) along with his political practice. Though precariously, it could perhaps link with Avikunthak's own belief in Sakta cult, of living and filmmaking.

At the age of sixty, particularly after the death of his wife Kasturba, Gandhi began to share his bed with naked young women including his personal doctor, Sushila Nayar and his grandnieces Abha and Manu, who were in their late teens then. Gandhi undertook those experiments to conquer the most difficult human desire of *kāma*, to attain the purity of Brahmacharya, a Hindu concept of celibate self-control to conserve *virya* (semen) and thereby the power, energy of actions and their non-violent purity. He wanted to make his political practice much more clean and effective. Obviously, Gandhi's experiments were more misunderstood; they became a matter controversy.

In an oft-quoted long letter, his secretary and typist, R.P. Parasuram had also referred to Gandhi getting naked and massaged by women. Parasuram felt that Gandhi could 'at least have covered his genitals.'¹⁰ Perhaps like Gandhi, in his films, Avikunthak also sheds such inhibitions towards male or female genitals. Could these two apparently differing paths to sexuality and its practice merge somewhere – towards control of *kāma*? Was Gandhi following a Tantrik path? These are some of the questions that crop up in my mind while watching *Aapotkalin Trikalika*.

Ultimately, it is the control of *kāma* (among six enemies, shadripu that could lead to attaining *moksha* or salvation as believed in Hindu theology.¹¹ Through *bhakti* and renunciation, these six vices (viz. lust, anger, greed, temptation, hubris and envy) could be overcome. The great Vaishnava saint Chaitanya Mahaprabhu exhorted *Krishna Nama Sankirtan*, i.e. the constant chanting of the Lord's name is the supreme healer of *Kali Yuga* or the Age of Kali, which is the last of the four ages or yugas that world goes through as part of a cycle of time (kaal): Satya Yuga, Treta Yuga, Dvapara Yuga and Kali Yuga.



Somewhere, Avikunthak brings in Vaishnava cult / Krishna within his film's conscience and hence such meetings become points of signification. What is he experimenting with Kali? With male and female bodies that Indian cinema has never made any explorations with, the way Avikunthak has been engaged with for many years now? The explorations that are multi-focal and political too, which, to me, are not in exigencies or in emergencies but in their fragile temporal eternalities. Gandhi, as an extraordinary political, moral, spiritual experimentalist with his own body somehow becomes crucial to the film and Avikunthak's own persona as a Gandhian thinker and also practitioner in a way. Obviously, his film making praxis is radically different from other Indian or global film makers and the film *Aapokalin Trikalika* (2016) could provide us an important example in this respect. To me, in its *garba* (womb) it seems to be bringing together his previous cinematographic works such as *Kalighat Fetish* (1999), *Vakratunda Swaha* (2010), *Katho Upanishad* (2011), *Rati Chakravyuh* (2013) *Kalikamanthan Katha* (2015), *Nirakar Chhaya* (2007), and as if *Trikalika* was carrying the beeja (seed) of *Vrindavan Vairagya* (2018) in a sort of Avikunthak's cinematographic, philosophical crucible.

Politically, Gandhi joins us with the colonial act of emergency that the Black Rowlatt Act was as also with banning of the film *Bhakta Vidur* as already referred to before. The Rowlatt Act gave a new direction to the mass protest Gandhi organized at all-India level. In the beginning of April 1919, a nation-wide strike was called and around that time the Jalianwalla Bagh massacre happened. These were the significant political trajectories that happened in India during the time when Gandhi had just arrived on the political scene. In its political elasticity, Avikunthak's film *Aapokalin Trikalika* possesses a certain parenthetical expansiveness, within and without.

Personally, I find in Avikunthak's oeuvre a biographical streak lurking inside its veins; he also seems to be surrendering his Self into the *havan kund* (the centre place in the holy ritual in which the fire is put on and all the offerings are made, a kind of a sanctum sanctorum for a *yajna*) of life-experimentation while negotiating between Marx and the Mahatma, Saka and Socialism, *Vāstu* and *Vulva*.¹² In his Gandhian streak he would like to suffer himself a belief, his own experimentation with 'self', e.g. living in Mumbai's Dharavi slum to experience it, to observe austeries of practical life, his cinematography has a different aural-visual rigour rooted in his own Self and subjectivity that transcends into the universality of the body, the naked body, the Digambara – of renunciation. I had witnessed him on work – while he was shooting or editing some of his films and that had given me opportunities to engage in conversations with some of his actors, they being mainly from theatre, have the unusual ability to memorize given lines and long dialogues. Also, I believe, these actors share some of Avikunthak's belief-resonances that go on to produce a certain harmonious mutual-faith and relationship with their *sharira*, the body, sky-clad or cloth-clad. These mutual intellectual and emotional harmonies are seen in Avikunthak's films, including *Aapokalin Trikalika*.

Faith, Form and Feeling: Recalling the Phad scroll, its geometry, memory

The way Avikunthak navigates his narrative and negotiates its temporalities and spatialities in his film *Aapokalin Trikalika* or The Kali of Emergency reminds me of the Rajasthani Phad painting and its non-linear story-telling tradition (as I find it myself on its scrolled episodic topography) that still survives with some dynamic improvisations. The intricate art of phad painting is believed to have begun 700 years ago or perhaps longer and is still practiced largely in the Bhilwara and Shahpura districts of Rajasthan. These Phad scrolls are like portable temples dedicated to the two deities of the nomadic shepherd community of Rabaris. Devnarayan and Pabuji were local heroes who lived in the 10th and the 13th centuries, respectively. As leaders of a largely pastoral tribe, they came to acquire a mythical status for their ability to protect the community's most prized possession: the cattle, particularly cows and camels. Soon they became demigods, regarded as incarnations of Lord Vishnu. With this, the stories of their lives came to be infused with an element of magic.

What is interesting is the way the Phad painting story is constructed around the middle core occupied by Pabuji's court. Around his court are courts of allies all over on the left, on the right, down further or up further and the story-teller would negotiate these spaces to weave a coherent tale. Somehow, I find Avikunthak's film like a Phad scroll that has its gravitational centre but it could pull or push into centripetal or centrifugal forces. The story moves all around and yet holds together in our mind, Avikunthak takes us into lanes and bylanes of history; imaginary and ritualistic spaces of bodies and minds. It uninhibitedly creates a peculiar geometry like the Tantrik Yantra.

And that is quite conducive to nurturing healthy anarchy, able to defy the linear order, aurally or visually. It is this unpredictability that becomes wondrous organicity.

The Transcendental Triad: Luminosity, Dynamics, Homogenous Bliss

Among various triads of the Trika tantric philosophy is the transcendental triad of *prakāsa* (luminosity), *vimarśa* (dynamics) and *samarasya* (homogenous bliss). Avikunthak's film almost begins with *prakāsa* (Ālo in Bengali), which in the process forms the triad with *vimarsa* and *sāmarasya* through a series of *sansodhan*, which, in the film, is subtitled as 'correction'. Human history of trial and error is also the history of a series of corrections.¹³ The first time the word 'sansodhan' occurs and overheard in the film is at about 7th minute when two Kali-masked male and female nudes scrub each other on their bare backs with water; they crawl, walk front and back, in each others' arms and alone, they lie down flat and naked, in shallow but clear waters of a river amidst infinite space and sonorous sounds; they sail on automated boat – floating towards their 'place of desire'. Where is their place of desire? What is their desire? Who are they? It is their mystery that meanders on through spaces known or unknown.¹⁴

Somewhere later in the film, we see in grained monochrome, decorated man and woman (with their faces visible) engaging in conversation about them:

Man: Do they walk fast?
 Woman: No.
 Do they walk side by side?
 Woman: Yes
 Man: Are they husband and wife?
 Woman: No.
 Man: Do they walk like lovers?
 Woman: Yes.

These questions keep on repeating like notes in musical fugue while conversations move through closed spaces of rooms to open spaces of forests, tangentially reminding us of Avikunthak's previous film *Katho Upanishad* (2011), where Yama answers Nachiketa's questions about 'death', moving into a forest in a hour-long single take. At formal level, in *Aapokalin Trikalika* what attracts our attention is the choreography of actors' movements and words' intonations. Avikunthak's constant and deliberate use of spoken words becomes like incessant prosaic mantra chanting, when masking becomes dialogic relation between Kāli and Prāni (animalistic or animistic). Avikunthak's fascination for 'masks' is now firmly part of his Kālika oeuvre.



The organs of fertility and nurturing, the vagina and breasts that we see with masks of *roudra* (fierce) and *saumya* (gentle) Kali, the swaroopas that turn like pages of *iti-hāsa*, a tradition recognized as a proof by the Pauranikas. Avikunthak seems to surrender *iti-hāsa* to the process of corrections, to *sansodhan*. It is the *Trikaalika* octave that we seem to be eternally swaying upon, Adiparashakti looking at us with her red tongue lolling and she dancing on her consort Siva lying calm and prostrate beneath her foot. Recently, while walking around and watching the 7th century Mamallapuram (Mahabalipuram) caves, I was inside the granite-carved Mahishasura Mardini temple and the mandapa (prayer hall generally built in front of the temple's sanctum sanctorum or the garbhagriha). The carved narrative shows Durga killing the buffalo-demon Mahishasura, considered to be invincible. Following his slaying she was given the title Mahishasuramardini (Conqueror of the Mahisha).

Inside the same temple, we see sleeping Vishnu that refers to the 6th century *Devi Mahatmyam* (Glory of the Goddess), describing her as the supreme power and creator of the universe; it is part of the *Markandeya Purana*.¹⁵ The deity of the first chapter of *Devi Mahatmyam* is Mahakali, who appears from the body of sleeping Vishnu as goddess Yoga Nidra to wake him up in order to protect Brahma and the world from demons, finally killed by Vishnu. In other words, there is a constant battle between good and the evil (emergency). The seeming temporal anarchy is but Kali's *lilā*. To my mind, it is this anarchic verbal-visual *lilā* that acquires a certain political significance.

Through his cinematography, Avikunthak keeps creating this 'anarchy', and that is political to me. Tyrants and tyrannies keep entering and exiting the theatre of human history, the *lilā* that has been going on non-stop through Ages – stone, metal, plastic, analog and digital, all through the *Trikaal*. No wonder we have attributed 1008 names to the Goddess Kāli.¹⁶ It is this politico-philosophical terrain that keeps Avikunthak's cinematography away from the conflict between Free Will and Determinism. Also, is not foreordained, as if any time a pariah dog could stray in, within the Kali consciousness.

Temporal-Visual Anarchy, Yoni, Body, Naked Government

As Adishakti, Kali is depicted naked symbolizing her being beyond the covering of Maya since she is pure (*nirguna*) being-consciousness-bliss and far above *prakriti*. She is shown as very dark as she is Brahman in its supreme manifest state. She has no permanent qualities, and she will continue to exist even when the universe ends. It is therefore believed that the concepts of colour, light, good or bad do not apply to her. She is pure, un-manifested energy, the Adishakti. It is this state of *nirguna* that comes to us in the form of 'yoni'.

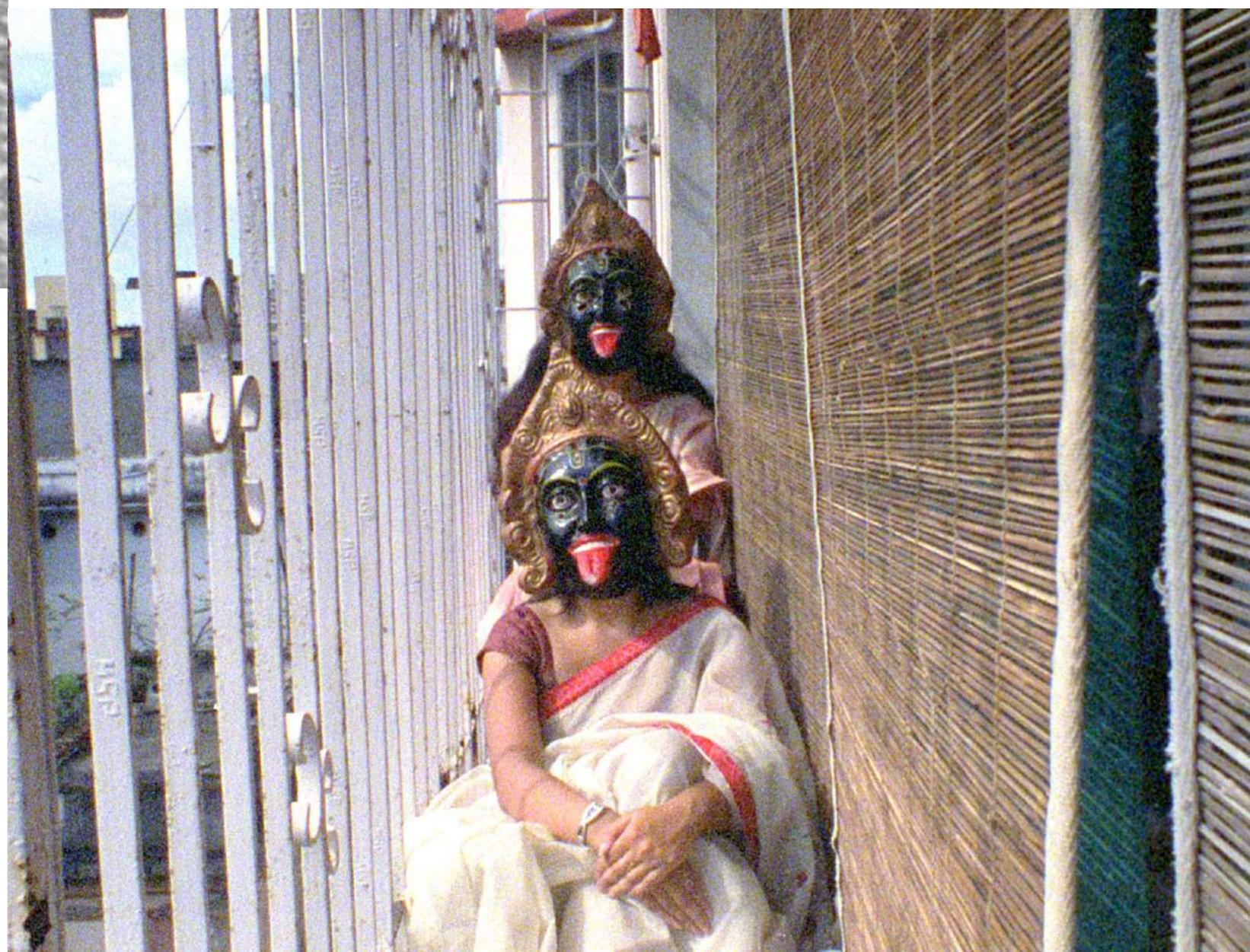
Through its verbal-aurality, *Aapokalin Trikalika* also shapes its own politics of form and to me that becomes significant. It is this formal politics that challenges the order (fascism) and oppressive rule that produces tyrants and tyrannies in the form of political-social-moral emergencies. The form of Avikunthak's films becomes defiant in the process, defying the monstrosity of the market and hence the orders of the ruling classes that keep imposing suffocating censorships in their fragile insecurities. In the history of Indian cinema, Ashish Avikunthak's oeuvre evokes a radical alternative voice and *vichaar* (thought), it defies vivisection of the body or the land – neither *vibhajan* nor *angaviccheda*. It is the *Cinema of Prayoga*.

Aapokalin Trikalika has many verbal references to politics of division, as someone in the film says, "They have kicked out Oriyas, Biharis and Bengalis, Tamils and Gujaratis, decent Marwaris, decent Marathis, some really decent Punjabis. Some really decent families have scrubbed themselves of their filth." There is also reference to the malls replacing small shops.

The Indian political history is a grand site of human displacement, of uprootment. There are social and cultural emergencies too, all the time, besides economic. The crises of identity undergoing strange fragile rigidities in this fake Age of Globalization where capital and power are getting concentrated in fewer and fewer hands, where newer and more walls are rising up on the earth that should be indivisible, where the chameleon of cinema is becoming more and more deceptive in the neo-liberal economies, where democracy itself wears the macabre mask, where technologies of instant communication and mass outreach are controlled by the few but have massive networks for garnering profits, where the Marxian 'surplus value' would search for newer meaning in transformed / transforming circumstances. Through his cinematography, Avikunthak seems to me to be groping into the dark alleys of these thoughts. His red and black masked Kali is also busy walking on precarious rope of our *Yuga*.

And in this search, somewhere in Avikunthak's cinematographic oeuvre, we find musical notes entering his sound-tracks, both *dhrupad* and *khayal*, which, I think, is a later meditative phenomenon as part of his sound environment along with the intonations of spoken words becoming mystical or material, direct or indirect, global or local, concrete or abstract, easily understood or un-understood, sensical or nonsensical. All that forming the *politics of form*, two-faced mask, frontal or rear, *roudra* or *saumya*! Its tangents keep defying the one-to-one relationships – in defiance of the oppressive order! The formal anarchy becomes dangerous for and detrimental to the ruling classes. In the process, Avikunthak's Kali of Emergency moves beyond the myopic politics of here-and-now, beyond finding meanings that would keep changing! Somewhere in the middle of *Aapokalin Trikalika* we hear the *Hrdayam Mayi: Aham amrute, Amrutam Brahmani*, "Taking the identity from the Individual to the Infinite," that explains the famous verse from the *Taittriya Upanishad*. I think, it is this Individual to the Infinite that Avikunthak is trying to draw our attention to! To Kali's pregnancy, to the hope of the newborn! To Chhinamasta, at the same time; and in its cinematographic theatricality *Aapokalin Trikalika* becomes the *lila* of simultaneities.

This *lila* also creates simultaneity of the physiognomical and the anatomical 'real' of the bare bodies and the non-realism of the decorated bodies. In his cinematographic *chetanā* (consciousness) Avikunthak seems to retouching the real with real – in male-female bodies, their reproductive organs and their frontalities within his *Sakta* philosophical context and that remains unprecedented in the history of Indian cinema. The issue of *realism* has always been at stake in our aesthetic discourse. Avikunthak renders realism transparent ending up with a final realism that is not simply *realism*, as Bresson would express.¹⁷ Avikunthak's bare-bone ascetic *realism* of the body defies the realism of the so-called art-house cinema and its claims. It, to my mind, demolishes the binaries of sacred and the profane. If there is any profane, it is in the naked government (*nagna sarkar*) and its immoral recourse to immoral censorship emerging from insecurity of losing power, in its profane act of imposing emergencies.



A constant battle between the Fragility of Time and its Antifragility

In my fromal ellipticity, I would like to return to the title of my essay – to fragility and antifragility of Time; to Ashish Avikunthak's film *Apotkalin Trikalika* once again.

Antifragility is the term that I tentatively borrow from Nassim Nicholas Taleb (b. 1960) whose work focuses on problems of randomness, probability and uncertainty, as also non-linearity. The antifragile loves randomness and uncertainty, which also means – crucially – a love of errors, a certain class of errors. Antifragility has a singular property of allowing us to deal with the unknown, to do things without understanding them – and do them well.

Taleb's writings discuss the error of comparing real-word randomness with the 'structured randomness' in quantum physics where probabilities are remarkably computable and games of chance like casinos, where probabilities are artificially built. Taleb defines antifragility as a nonlinear response, which I find fascinating while applying to Avikunthak's film *Apotkalin Trikalika*. The concept of anti-fragility has been applied in physics, risk analysis, molecular biology, aerospace, computer science, etc.

And when combined with Time which, though eternally sustaining, is vivacious and collapsible, perhaps the antifragile gains significance. In its holisticity, Avikunthak's cinematography gets more complex in its layers and in its politics of elemental form. It has its discreet charm of non-bourgeoisie, in its elegant anarchy that Kali has control on, temporally and spatially, Siva lying under her foot.

The obviously meaningless syllables śrīm hrīm klīm aim in the *Mahāsodasī Mantra* that we listen to in *Aapotkalin Trikalika* have their tonal esoteric mysteries, in enchantment.

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Notes

1 By depicting Prime Minister Indira Gandhi as Durga, the well-known painter M.F. Husain had annoyed the liberals during Emergency. In the 1990s, the late Tyeb Mehta made a series of paintings on the theme of the Mahishasura. That was a time the country was rife with communal violence and many mutinies. The artist was disturbed with the violence associated with Durga. So, instead of showing the Goddess slaying the demon, it showed her holding the demon and soothing him to change with her calm touch. [Nirupama Dutt, *The Sunday Tribune, Spectrum*, Sunday, 10 October 2010]

2 Part of the Sangh Parivar, some of these parties were banned in India following the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi but post-1975 emergency, they got a certain political legitimacy under new political mergers and coalitions. In 1977, the Akhil Bharatiya Jana Sangh became Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In 1977, the Janasangh merged with other left, centre and right parties that opposed the Indian National Congress led by Mrs. Indira Gandhi. The strange and ideologically uncomfortable coalition formed the Janata Party, which around 1980 got split and the former Jana Sangh was recreated as the BJP or the Bharatiya Janata Party, which is a majority party ruling India at present.

3 *Chhandogya Upanishad* begins with *Om iti etat aksaram udgitham upasita*, implying Om is closest to Brahman and should be recited as part of a prayer. The Vedas begin with Om. Some Jains also recite their *pancha-namaskara-mantra* beginning with Om. (*The five classes of blessed beings*, Amrit Gangar, *The Speaking Tree*, *The Times of India*, 20 August 1997). Eminent Indian scholar and polymath Prof. D.D. Kosambi had yet another coinage, for him, OM stood for Official Marxists.

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

5 E.A. Gait, Human Sacrifice (India), in James Hastings' *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928, Vol. VI; Kalika Purana, translation adapted from W.C. Blaquier, *Asiatic Researches*, Vol. V, 1797, quoted in Campbell.

6 *Silent Cinema in India: A Pictorial Journey*, B.D. Garga, Harper Collins, 2012.

7 Ashtapadis or Ashtapadi (literally 'eight steps') refers to the Sanskrit hymns of Geeta Govinda composed by Jayadeva in 12th century. The lyrics describe the beauty of Krishna and the love between him and the gopis. They are considered to be a masterpiece in esoteric spirituality and the theme of 'divine love'. Each hymn is made of eight couples, eight sets of two lines.

8 Also called Arahant, the Jaina Navkar Mantra begins with bowing down to Arihant, Namo Arihantanam, the ones who have conquered the desires, ari + hant.

9 All these women have been part of Indian popular cinema, drama, music or art.

10 In this context a collection of Gandhi's letters compiled into a book titled *Mahatma Gandhi's Letters on Brahmacharya, Sexuality and Love* by Girja Kumar (Vitasta Publishing, 2011) and Rita Banerji's book *Sex and Power: Defining History, Shaping Societies* (Penguin Books, 2009) provide interesting readings. There are other books also that deal with Gandhi's experimenting with 'sexuality' and 'brahmacharya' along with his praxis of political non-violence and truth.

11 The six enemies or *arishadvarga / shadripu* are kama (lust), krodha (anger), lobha (greed), moha (delusory emotional attachment or temptation), mada (pride, hubris) and matsarya (envy, jealousy).

12 As I know, Avikunthak believes in vastu shastra or the traditional Hindu system of architecture which literally translates as 'science of architecture'. Three are texts found that describe principles of design, layout, measurements, ground preparation, space arrangement, and spatial geometry. This sastra follows ancient beliefs utilizing geometric patterns (yantra), symmetry and directional alignments. Somehow, I find its resonances in Avikunthak's spatial-temporal engagement in Avikunthak's later feature films including *Aapotkalin Trikalika*.

13 Sansodhan would also mean amendment or revision; it would also imply purifying the impure.

14 They even seem to be referring to the ten primary avatars (incarnations) of Hindu god Vishnu, while looking at them crawling in water, I thought of the Kurma Avatar, i.e. Turtle Avatar. Kurma is the second Avatar of Vishnu. Like other avatars of Vishnu, Kurma appears at a time of crisis (aapott kaal) to restore the cosmic equilibrium. His iconography is either a tortoise, or more commonly as half man-half tortoise. These are found in many Vaishnava temple ceilings and wall reliefs. The ten avatars (known as Dashavatara) of Vishnu are: Matsya, Kurma (Turtle), Varaha (Boar), Narasimha (Man-Lion), Vamana (Dwarf), Parasurama, Rama, Krishna and Buddha.

15 Composed in Sanskrit, approximately between 400 and 600CE; Dadasaheb Phalke's and India's first silent feature film *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) adapts a *Markandeya Purana* story.

16 From (she who is the remover of darkness from the cremation grounds or from death) to Varnajapamalavidhyini (she who is the giver of the garland of all expressions that could be recited).

17 *The Rigour of Austerity: Robert Bresson, Luis Bunuel, Amrit Gangar*, Mumbai: Federation of Film Societies of India (Western Region), 1989.



The Kalicene? On first viewing of Ashish Avikunthak's *Aapothkalin Trikalika*

Avishek Ganguly, Rhode Island School of Design

Nearly twenty years ago, when the 'Great Goddess' – Devi moved into a well-known American art gallery, perhaps for the first time, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak had astutely observed that the "internalized" 'new' museum discourse was yet to become a part of the South Asian "migrant episteme."¹ As Ashish Avikunthak's film *Aapothkalin Trikalika* ["The Kali of Emergency"] gets ready to be screened in Aicon Gallery, one that "specialize[s] in modern and contemporary non-Western art with a special focus on South Asia," I write in the shadow of that earlier, altogether striking moment of appearance. The first time as object, this time as apparition.

The mis-en-scène in Avikunthak's films, as commentators have frequently noted, are non-realist but less often discussed are their "in-*yer-face*" verbal structures, to use an inter-textual reference that resonates with the filmmaker's preferred theatrical interlocutors. The films invite us to extricate the visual text from the voiced, over multiple viewings, so that we can direct separate but sustained attention to each of these vectors. To explore the different registers in these films is to try and read not a fissure but an excess in the work. *Aapothkalin Trikalika*'s visual narrative opens with a swirling, eddying, churning Kali on a semi-urban rooftop – an actor in a goddess mask; Masks, mostly Tara-blue and Kali-black, put on by male and female actors, sometimes in the nude, intercut with the occasional Ganesha, are central to the film; they are one of the two principal instruments for mediation of the divine, the other being the figure of the *bahu-rupi*, literally 'many-formed,' performers of a declining art but still a common enough sight in rural, and less frequently in urban India, wandering the streets in full make up, with home-made props, impersonating divine and mythological figures.

"What would be the nature of divine intervention in times of political emergency? What would Gods and Goddess do when the world is facing a social emergency?" asks the brief description that accompanies the film. The *bahu-rupi*, gods and goddesses literally walking on earth ("are the world/martya and the earth/prithibi the same thing?"), remarkable yet familiar, offer Avikunthak a fantastic springboard from where to explore the responses to these metaphysical speculations. If the gods and goddesses have always lived but not always appeared among humans, then perhaps the film is an attempt to re-cite the divine performative, activate the ordinary in extra-ordinary ways, to "make strange." But to what end? To raise alarm? Or perhaps, to despair? Modernity as a placeholder of upheaval now seems too ubiquitous, so at large that it appears to lose its oppositional charge on this occasion.² Neoliberalism sounds too undifferentiated, predictable even. I have seen Kali being worshipped inside police stations, and metallic Vishwakarma on the shop floors of steel plants manned by communist trade unions. Of course, the autobiographical is only example, never evidence. Defamiliarization seems crucial.³

Emergency/*Aapothkal*, on the other hand, sounds unmistakably temporal; properly apocalyptic, yet another revealing; Kali emergent. But trikalika is not quite three manifestations of Kali. How then does the 'ka' in '*aapothkalin*' sit with the 'kali' in '*trikalika*', we might ask? In a way the movement of the film is the playing out of a possible response; conflating provocatively, the *tri-kalika* of the three-fold nature of time/kal – of which the past-present-future is perhaps only one limiting manifestation, and that of creation-preservation-destruction seems to be the one invoked more explicitly here – with Kali as a form of the primordial essence, time itself. In the Indian political context, 'the Emergency' still conjures up the one imposed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi between 1975-77 – gently evoked in the film in passing – even as we witness disconcerting examples of executive political overreach (sound familiar?) and hear rumblings about the suspension of fundamental rights on the stage of militant nationalism as the current Hindu-supremacist dispensation prepares for the next national elections.

In her proposal for "the Chthulucene — past, present, and to come" Dona Haraway admits, "The suffix “—cene” proliferates! I risk this overabundance because I am in the thrall of the root meanings of —cene/kainos, namely, the temporality of the thick, fibrous, and lumpy “now,” which is ancient and not." ⁴ *Aapothkalin Trikalika* seems to partake of that spirit of overabundance and gesture towards — what else — but a 'Kalicene'! Under the sign of the goddess of time and terror, a state of emergency. Irreversible ecocide, Kali, it was reported, had recently appeared over Manhattan, in the Fall of 2015, as a massive live video projection on the Empire State Building, towards the end of a spectacular display called 'Projecting Change' that had aimed to highlight the terrible plight of animal species on the brink of extinction. ⁵ This time as apparition.

On the film's soundtrack, we hear a different re-citation: the incantatory rhythms of the goddess' mantra as the striking opening sequence subsumes into granular images, before it cuts to a scene with two actors as goddesses in 16mm *bahurupi* mode at a barred window. They talk about how the state of things (including the light) are definitively improving. The dialogues are adapted from British playwright Martin Crimp's play *Fewer Emergencies* (2005); a second extract, in black and white, is adapted from his *Face to the Wall* (2002). The actors face the camera as they say the pared-down lines in a dispassionate manner, non sequiturs reminiscent of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter. This verbal sequence repeats at regular intervals. The stylized Bengali spoken by actors in Avikunthak's films is consistently idiosyncratic, closer to being an idiolect, and participates only haphazardly in the pervasive diglossia of *Shuddho/Sadhu/literary* and *Cholito/Cholti/vernacular* of the language. The episodic narration functions as yet another element in an elaborate artifice of estrangement. More Bertolt Brecht than Antonin Artaud. The work of defamiliarization continues.

There is a telling moment towards the end of *Aapothkalin Trikalika* where one of the actors assures her companions during a boat ride about how things are improving 'now' in a repetition of the extract from Crimp; what she says is this: "Less stones are being hurled. Less cars are being smashed. Less bullets are being fired. It's less dangerous now. There's an emergency right now," but the subtitle text translates the last sentence as "But there's an emergency right now." Perhaps in this tiny slippage between listening/reading, the unnerving normality of the state of perpetual emergency spoken about by the actors and the insertion of the conjunction 'but' in the subtitle to highlight the apparent contradiction between reduced violence and the state of emergency, lies the task of the viewer of this meticulously constructed film.

The widespread frontality of address, actors facing the camera, seems to index the mythologicals of early Indian cinema; the substantive quality of the *darsanic* mode of viewing gods on screen as proxy worship for devout Hindus, however, is subverted by the use of minimalist dialogue from absurdist British theatre. Between the formal sounding Bengali idiolect and the Sanskrit extracts from the Puranic text of the "*Devi Mahatmya*" the verbal text of the film summons the antiquated with the only interruptions being the sound of fighter jets and helicopter gunships on a couple of occasions; the visual narrative, on the other hand, lingers in the quotidian contemporary, oscillating between the lived interiors of a mostly-urban middle class, and disjointed outdoors consisting of thinly forested tracts of land, abandoned structures, frenetic city high streets and railway tracks.

The whirling Kali appears again towards the end of *Aapothkalin Trikalika*, which ends with the twilight of the gods and goddesses, as they jump off in slow motion from the edge a rooftop into seeming oblivion. This scene recaps for us the halting arrival of the gods on earth at the beginning of the film. So, are we now in a world abandoned by the gods? Or, is this the descent of the divine onto the plane of the merely mortal the *ava-tarana/* 'coming down' that gives us the *avatar*? Something not quite wistful animates the becoming flesh (literally, in-carnation) again of a bloody, decapitated chicken in the road side butcher shop, an elemental scene of unremarkable death and re/birth cleverly played in reverse, in the final scene of the film.

Notes

1 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Moving Devi," *Cultural Critique*, No.47 (Winter 2001), pp 120-63.

2 The idea of "modernity at large" was superbly argued and illustrated in Arjun Appadurai's eponymous book *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1996).

3 Viktor Shklovsky first outlined this idea of "defamiliarization" or "making strange," antecedent in some version to Bertolt Brecht's idea of "estrangement," in 1917, in the essay usually translated as "Art as Technique" (Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis ed. *Russian Formalist Criticism* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1965), pp. 3-24).

4 Dona Haraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin," *Environmental Humanities*, Vol 6. 2015, pp. 159-165.

5 Projecting Change is at <http://obscuradigital.com/work/racingextinction/>





Gods on Earth in a Time of Emergency

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A few minutes into *Apotkalin Trikalika*, we see two women with goddess masks lying flat on a boat drifting through a river near a massive steel bridge. Another three goddesses watch their journey from a roof. “Even their ability to ride boats is improving,” they note, “they’ve learned about sexual techniques, satellite phones, air-conditioners, heaters for warmth, and the sex lives of saints, sages, gods and goddesses.” Rivers are widely known symbols of crossing boundaries in Hinduism: *tirtha*, the word for pilgrimage, literally means a ford; it is not an accident that many Hindu sacred sites are next to rivers. Yet in the film the conventional human-divine relation in pilgrimages is inverted. The gods cross into the human realm and enter a human city in the midst of a political emergency.

It is not unusual for gods to descend on earth, especially in Bengal. The goddess Durga comes home every autumn, and Bengalis welcome her with the love and care every daughter deserves. This tender relationship with Durga- “mother of my heart, daughter of my dreams”- has been a cherished Bengali practice for several centuries.¹ Epic poems from medieval Bengal, the *mangalkabyas*, routinely describe gods and goddesses taking human forms, intervening in people’s domestic affairs, and restoring political and social harmony.

This fluidity of human-divine interactions has encouraged imaginative artistic representations, much of it absurdly satirical in nature. In the 1880s, Durgacharan Ray wrote a hilarious novel titled *Debganer Martye Agaman* (“Arrival of Gods on Earth”). The novel traced the travels of Lord Brahma in colonial Calcutta, and reveled at his befuddlement at various interventions of colonial modernity like roads, carriages and bridges. Some decades before Durgacharan, the famous playwright Dinabandhu Mitra penned the novel *Jamalaye Jibanta Manush* (“An Alive Human in the Realm of Death”). Dinabandhu showed the intrusions of modern technology in heaven: Lakshmi ties her hair in European style, Brahma reads the proofs of the 4th edition of the Vedas, and Vishnu rides a phaeton to Brahma’s house. The protagonist, an alive human sent to hell by mistake, incites utter chaos in the heavens and is finally sent back to earth. The popularity of the text has far outlasted the nineteenth century, largely due to the popular 1958 Bengali film adaptation starring Bhanu Ban-dyopadhyay that was later remade in Tamil and Telugu.²

The comedy of gods is even more pronounced in popular festivals. In agrarian rites of spring such as Gajan and Gambhira, human beings are temporarily thought to acquire divine qualities through ascetic practices. Performances around these rituals, akin to street theater or *jatras*, involve people dressing up as gods, cracking jokes about people in power, and providing subversive political commentaries. One Gambhira song from the 1940s, for example, describes the poor fate of Shiva in the era of technology:

How did such nonsense come to your head, god?
You have perhaps started drinking foreign liquor, instead of our local weed.
King Indra’s thunderbolt you have given to the telegraph;
The Moon in the night is defeated by the electric light.
The gods are tied to a stake, and there is no respite.
The skill of the divine chariot that traversed the sky
You have now given to the airplane,
Sails chain Wind; Water is a slave of steam.
We sit and think day and night, London is your new Kashi,
Your intimate friend Englanders; Will you remember us anymore?³

The song is about grappling with various contradictions of modernity, like the replacements of gods with machines. It is only because of Shiva's whims (perhaps due to some enticement with foreign liquor) that the skills of the gods had been transferred to the machines of the West. So, if someday Shiva decides to desert his new "intimate friends" and return to Indians, western technological superiority will crash. The critique of Western technological superiority, a central claim of Indian nationalism, is presented through a comic conversation with Shiva. Indeed, the genre of "gods on earth" in Bengali literature and performance is largely comic in nature, expressed through laughter, jokes and humorous twists.

And this is where *Apotkalin Trikalika* subverts the genre. It is not a comic film. It is a serious film for serious times. The seriousness is apparent in the faces of the characters: they never smile. Indeed, they rarely have any facial expressions when they are not wearing masks. Their speech is monotonous and devoid of emotions. The background score is glum and quiet, sometimes interrupted by deep chant of the verses of *Chandi* or police sirens. The atmosphere is so meditative and anti-theatrical that we experience a starkly different human-divine interaction than familiar comic themes. In rejecting the comic, the director, Ashish Avikunthak, establishes a new cinematic vocabulary for rethinking divine intervention in human affairs.

This vocabulary remains in dialogue with established conventions but also challenges them. Consider the city, for instance. Contrasting the dazzling modernity of the city of Calcutta with the antiquity of the gods has been a common trope at least since the late nineteenth century. The film, too, portrays its main narrative in a big city (unnamed in the film, but shot in recognizable neighborhoods of Calcutta), along with a parallel story in a primeval forest. Yet, unlike previous generic patterns, the modernity of the city is not the focus of divine activities; much of the film is shot in residential and domestic spaces: bedrooms, corridors, living rooms, and, importantly, rooftops. Gods inhabit human spaces, learn new technology quickly and calmly, and try to live everyday lives at a time of emergency. This choice of *mise-en-scène* reduces the element of wonder and allows the film to explore psychological layers of everyday emergencies.

Even the film's depiction of divine realm challenges tradition. Instead of depicting the high heavens in mountains and skies, a staple in film portrayals since the 1950s with their gaudy sets, the director paints a divine realm more rooted in the ecology of Bengal. This position is in fact closer to the medieval epic poems, many of which show gods living in villages, islands and streams considered sacred by their followers. But Avikunthak's portrayal of the primordial forest as the divine realm—where goddesses are masked and naked—also contains a charged political message. Occasional references are enough to remind us about the political insurgency over tribals' forest rights: in our times, the most brutal impact of the emergency has been precisely on this forest and its inhabitants. The film's spatial subversions, then, raises complex questions regarding power configurations in divine spaces.

Despite responding to a range of cultural symbols and traditions, this is not an ethnographic film. The director, himself a trained anthropologist, argues very subtly with the genre of visual anthropology. Despite deploying a wealth of symbols today packaged as "folk art"—masks, make-up and dress like *jatras*, and a forest setting—the film is not interested in unearthing a native point of view about gods. Rather the film presents the philosophical and political explorations of the director by engaging with a bricolage of symbols. This makes the film a rather nuanced and layered cultural text that negotiates the genre of ethnographic film.

The non-ethnographic nature of the film is most apparent in the disjunction between the appearance of the characters and the language of their dialogues. The goddesses are dressed much like Bengali village performers, complete with jewelry and masks. But their language is not rustic at all. They recite mystical lyrics written in urbane Bengali reminiscent of the verses of the modernist poet Jibanananda Das. Unlike so many other contemporary theatre and film productions where urban actors comically try to ape the diction and beliefs of villagers, this film rejects the ethnographic mode altogether. This subtle linguistic intervention can be difficult to note for those unfamiliar with the Bengali language. Yet, given the distinct regional and class-based registers of the language, the use of lyrical Bengali prose dislodges fundamentally dislodges the ethnographic eye.

Set in a time of emergency, *Apotkalin Trikalika* challenges generic conventions of depicting gods on earth and representing popular culture. Its non-conforming, subversive attitude disturbs the viewer and encourages serious reflections on issues of politics and divinity. In combining visual symbols of popular performances, uncommon combinations of urban and rural spaces, and a highly urbane poetic diction, the film explores truly novel ways of exploring philosophical issues through cultural vocabularies.

Notes

1. Rachel Fell McDermott, *Mother of My Heart, Daughter of My Dreams: Kali and Uma in the Devotional Poetry of Bengal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
2. Durgacharan Ray, *Debganer Martye Agaman* (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 1984); Dinabandhu Mitra, "Jamalaye Jibanta Manush" in *Dinabandhu Rachanabali*, edited by Ajitkumar Ghosh (Kolkata: Haraf Prakashani, 1956).

3 From Ashutosh Bhattacharya, *Banglar Lok-Sahitya*, Volume 3 (Kolkata: Calcutta Book House, 1965), 253. My translation. The italicized words were in English in the original Bengali song.



Credits

Screenplay, Director & Producer: Ashish Avikunthak

Cinematography: Basab Mullick

Editing: Pankaj Rishi Kumar, Nikon, Ashish Avikunthak

Dialogue: Moloy Mukherjee

Cast: Ruma Poddar, Saswati Biswas, Sharmistha Nag, Siddhartha

Banerjee, Sandeep Mukherjee, Sougata Mukherjee, Marylea Madiman,

Satakshi Nandi, Saheli Goswami, Mishka Halim.

Sound Design: Sukanta Mazumdar

Co-Producer: Kristina Konrad weltfilm GmbH Berlin

Catalog Design: Kuldeep Singh

Photo Credits: Dibyendu Dutta



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NEW YORK