

# ASHISH AVIKUNTHAK'S Kalkimanthankatha/The Churning of Kalki

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The opening of Ashish Avikunthak's Kalkimanthankatha/The Churning of Kalki closely echoes Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot. It would be easy to assume that the latter serves as some sort of source material for the former and whilst that might be true to an extent it fails to fully describe the relationship between the two works, or what is at stake in such a relationship. Nor is Kalkimanthankatha an 'Indian' re-working of Beckett's play. For one thing, Godot never turns up in Beckett's play, whereas there is a very different resolution to Avikunthak's film. Avikunthak has used a similar strategy before in his 18 minute long, 16mm film Endnote (Antaral) which references Beckett's short play Come and Go (which lasts between 121 to 127 words depending on the translation used). Speaking about Endnote's relationship to Come and Go, Avikunthak has said, "I did not want to make a film that simply mimicked the structure that Beckett had constructed, but I wanted to

experiment with the narrative...and push the polysemic narrative intrinsic to the play to further its disenchantment."

Kalkimanthankatha uses Waiting for Godot in a knowing manner, foregrounding textual parallels as well as motifs from the play such as the two protagonists wearing hats, but it often considerably departs from Beckett's text, only to return later down the line. So for example, the section that follows the opening quoted above sees the two characters engage in a dialogue about the existence or non-existence of the river at which the Kumbh Mela is taking place. There is seemingly, at this moment, no river in sight although that does not seem to bother our protagonists. "But, all I know that, those who immerse themselves into the waters are only in search for the womb," observes the second figure. "Because in that emptiness they can merge with the ultimate void." Here emptiness is positioned as something to be

actively searched for. There are numerous interpretations of Waiting for Godot but most commentators agree that the emptiness at the heart of that play is most definitely not something one would actively seek. In that play, emptiness is seen in the perpetual wait for Godot, the repetition in action between Act I and Act II with no sense of ending and the blinding of Pozzo that culminates in his withering assessment of life: "They give birth astride a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more." Our protagonists in Kalkimanthankatha have more purpose. They search for a river which when they find, they do not particularly comment on finding. Instead they float happily along it in a boat feeding gulls. Later, at the end of the film, standing naked, they will cast saffron and yellow robes into it. A third character unexpectedly disturbs the dialogue of our two protagonists, at a moment which structurally has similarities to the appearance of Pozzo in Waiting for Godot. But unlike Pozzo's appearance, this again is a moment of revelation – a woman plays a tanpura underneath a tree (Vladimir and Estragon cling onto the idea that Godot will appear under a tree one day) and as the screen is filled with colour, the landscape that we have seen earlier in the film transforms into something soft and almost luscious as opposed to cold and unwelcoming, a choreographed release of beauty after thirty-five restrained minutes.

Our protagonists search for Kalki and perhaps somewhat surprisingly, towards the end of the film, they seemingly find him in a moment where the tone of the film shifts register from the deliberately circular to visual circularity (as the protagonists walk in high speed around the camera) and then finally to the revelatory. According to Hindu texts, Kalki, the tenth and final avatar of Lord Vishnu, will appear at the end of the current epoch. His appearance in the film thus marks a moment of fulfilment, something singularly lacking in Waiting for Godot. The characters' subsequent shedding of their clothes suggests that they too have reached a state of being or consciousness, which they have been seeking. The search has been fulfilled.

Most importantly, our protagonists in Kalkimanthankatha, are not, despite appearances, alone. Granted they spend nearly all the film in dialogue with each other but there is often another presence in the film - the vast crowds who visit Kumbh Mela and who have been visiting over the centuries. Their shadowy presence offers the context for our protagonists' discussions. They are heard in the background, they are gestured to by our protagonists and they occasionally appear on screen. Our protagonists might not directly be part of that crowd but they are not entirely removed from it. This is a presence that stretches over time, over the many years

that Kumbh Mela has taken place in the locations that it alternates between. Our first protagonist asks: “Why are you trying to say the same thing over and over again?” And our second protagonist answers: “Because for thousands of years we come back to the same place.” That “we” might refer to the two of them, returning to this place in their search for Kalki, but equally it might refer to the larger multitude of pilgrims (and we first encounter our protagonists right at the start of the film seemingly as part of a small group of pilgrims) who every four years over millennia return to the Mela, following a trail that according to one set of interpretations are the locations where Vishnu spilled drops of nectar.

A number of commentators have talked about Avikunthak’s use of an Indian epistemology framed through a formal structure that nods to western writers and directors such as Beckett and Andrei Tarkovsky. But something else seems to be going on here – as if Kalkimanthankatha references Waiting for Godot in order to erase it, so that what is sought after (Kalki, some sort of personal fulfilment) is found, where emptiness is something akin to purity, where the search itself has meaning and resonance (which bursts out in the music from the lady under the tree). Unexpectedly one of protagonists produces Mao Se-Tung’s Little Red Book halfway through the film and both proceed to quote extensively from that book

whilst preparing for the battle that might or might not herald the appearance of Kalki. That book adds another layer of erasure as the first protagonist in particular starts a physical regime of yoga and exercise that is far removed from the shambolic exercises performed by Vladimir and Estragon.

This is not a strategy of simply overwriting a Western text with an Asian one in order to articulate an Indian epistemology but perhaps more akin to what Homi Bhabha talks about when he writes: “The ‘time’ of translation consists in that movement of meaning, the principle and practice of a communication that, in the words of de Man ‘puts the original in motion to decanonise it, giving it the movement of fragmentation, a wandering of errance, a kind of permanent exile.’” (Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture, p.326). Emptiness, it turns out, is far from empty, filled instead with fragments of ‘original’ texts, weaved around each other to create a condition where to paraphrase Bhabha, newness, in the form of the previously unseen and unexpected form of Kalki, unexpectedly enters the world.



**Featuring**  
*Joyraj Bhattacharya*  
*Sagnik Mukherjee*  
*Aastha Goswami*

**Screenplay, Director & Producer**  
*Ashish Avikunthak*

**Executive Producer**  
*Ashwini Deo*  
*Kristina Konrad*

**Cinematography**  
*Basab Mullik*

***Kalkimanthankatha***  
***(The Churning of Kalki)***

2015

*Bengali feature film with English Subtitles*  
*Duration 79 min*