



Ashish
Avikunthak

Kalkimanthankatha
(The Churning of Kalki)

2015

Bengali feature film with English Subtitles

Duration 79 min

On view: 27 June – 2 August

Screening times: 1pm | 3pm | 5pm



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THE POLITICS OF NON-ARRIVAL: Avikunthak Waiting for Kalki

Arka Chattopadhyay

In the third of his Blue Octavo Notebooks (1917-1919), the German writer Franz Kafka had written that “the Messiah will come only when he is no longer necessary, he will come only one day after his arrival, he will not come on the last day, but on the last day of all.” (the entry of December 4)¹ The promised arrival of a saviour has haunted the trans-religious and trans-cultural imaginary for ages. We could think of the German philosopher Walter Benjamin’s assertion that “every second of time was the strait gate, through which the Messiah might enter”² in ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ (1940) or Samuel Beckett’s famous play *Waiting for Godot* (1953) where the two tramps wait on in vain for their potential saviour who fails to appear. What Kafka, Benjamin and Beckett share in this arrival which turns into a potential arrival with the actuality of non-arrival is the 20th century Europe, devastated by the two World Wars. In the Hindu cultural imaginary of the Indian sub-continent, Kalki is the name of a similar promise. Kalki meaning ‘eternity’, ‘white horse’ or ‘destroyer of faith’ is the tenth and final incarnation of Lord Vishnu and the Puranas foretell his arrival on horseback at the end of the present Kali Yuga and he is supposed to

usher us back into Satya Yuga. Kalki as our saviour has the double function of terminating one full time cycle (Satya, Treta, Dvapara and Kali) and initiating the next cycle with the resumption of Satya Yuga. And unlike the Messiahs or Godots of the War-stricken Europe, the cult of Kalki is not necessarily one of failed arrival. In other words, we can count on Kalki much more than we can on Beckett’s Godot or Kafka’s Messiah to save us from the impiety and corruption of our times and revive the lost glory of religiosity. This is precisely where Ashish Avikunthak’s latest film *Kalkimanthankatha* (Bengali; Colour; DCP; 79 minutes; India and Germany; 2015) scores by unifying the optimism of Kalki’s arrival with the stoicism of Godot’s non-arrival. The film subverts Kalki with Godot as arrival translates into non-arrival.

Avikunthak transplants Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* from its Francophone and Anglophone European contexts (Beckett wrote the play in French and English respectively) to Bengali language and the Hindu pilgrimage of the Kumbh Mela, giving it a specific geographical setting unlike the famously generic and undefined ‘a country road’ in Beckett’s directions.³ Avikunthak’s adaptation

is faithful more to the spirit of Beckett and doesn’t want to follow the text to the letter. In this inter-medial adaptation of the play into the film, the director begins with translations of Beckett’s text but as the film proceeds, matures and concentrates on its condition of waiting, it moves away from Beckett’s text, establishing its own cinematic world with the faint local colours of the foggy Kumbh setting. The film alternates between ruins, vast fields, electricity towers, a green tree, unlike the almost barren one in Beckett and shows an empty passage of time from day to night and a circular return of the same hours. It politicizes the condition of waiting with another transnational and trans-linguistic reference as the two tramps start reading from Chairman Mao’s Little Red Book. By the end of the film, the tramps name Bukharin, Trotsky, Kamenev and Ceaușescu among the ten avatars of Vishnu as the Communist gallery of proper names bite into the Hindu religious series. With the introduction of the Maoist sub-text, *Kalkimanthankatha* (literally meaning the churning of Kalki) acquires a more explicit political shape as the wait for Kalki assumes proportions and preparations of the Maoist and Naxalite People’s War in India. This hybrid reference frame which brings together Hindu mythology, Samuel Beckett and Mao Zedong, cutting across various national and linguistic identities, aims at being internationalist in a good old Left fashion without subjecting itself to be appropriated by the neo-liberal discourse of Globalization. If Beckett and Kalki come together on the spectrum of a mythology of waiting for a liberator; the Maoist reference is picked up from within

Indian history or more specifically from the Bengal Naxalite uprising of the late 1960s and early 1970s—not so long after the premiere of Beckett’s play.

The transcultural texts are already intermeshed when Avikunthak cobbles them together in *Kalkimanthankatha*. If Mao’s Little Red Book had been the quintessential Naxalite text, the ultra-left revolutionaries swore on, in the decades of the sixties and seventies in India, Beckett’s *Godot* had briskly struck a chord in Bengali and Indian culture at large. It resonated with a host of Bengali and Indian playwrights ranging from Badal Sircar to Mohit Chattopadhyay and from Girish Karnad to Mohan Rakesh. The play had been translated into Bengali and performed on stage from the 1950s and major Bengali theatre personalities like Dipak Majumdar and Indian theatre activists like Naseeruddin Shah were inspired to translate the text and put it on stage respectively. As transnational and transcultural texts, Mao’s Little Red Book and Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* both spoke to the culture of resistance in post-colonial India, struggling to make unity and diversity meet as a nation under the spell of a hurried imperative of western modernity. Avikunthak exploits the anonymous openness of the Beckettian text which always gives room for these experimental re-imaginings without forcing the audience with any specific context. Having said that, as *Kalkimanthankatha* politicizes the wait for Kalki by inflecting it with the Maoist and Naxalite contexts, it also taps into the numerous political readings of *Godot* as a play that reacts against the War. Insofar as Beckett himself

was an activist for the French Resistance and wrote the play during his wartime activism, the play can very well be seen as an allegory of Europe at War. It is not only the despair of the European War that forces Godot into non-arrival but we can also see his non-arrival in an affirmative light by seeing in it, a failure of any grand transcendental scheme of life. Godot's failure to arrive connotes the failure of any masterful narrative like religion for example to solve the puzzles of life and dictate human beings with remote controls. The fact that he fails to appear can be seen as a disclosure of the false religious seductions of salvation and the metaphysical fiction in the name of God. The opening line of Beckett's play, "Nothing to be done",⁴ maintained in the film is often seen as a response to Lenin's titular question in *What is to be Done?* (1902) and it's not for nothing that one of the two tramps is named Vladimir after Vladimir Ilich Lenin. The dialectical tension between action and passivity one observes in Vladimir and Estragon, the two waiting tramps, is affirmative in relation to the imperialist myth of War as action. In the play we hear ethico-political questions, calling for action such as "Was I sleeping, while the others suffered?"⁵ and yet when the tramps talk of going away and don't move, it's an exercise in passivity which critiques the eulogizing of action in the name of war.

Ashish Avikunthak's film subverts the religious colours and reference points built into its own body as it critiques the religious promise of salvation and the cult of the grand divine saviour with the staunch materialist politics of Mao and the Beckettian Kalki who eventually doesn't appear

and exposes the ungroundedness of religious faith. It is interesting to note here that 'Kalki' as we have seen above means 'destroyer of faith' among other things in Sanskrit. This is not the U.S. based Indian filmmaker's first outing with Beckett. He has adapted a mini Beckett play *Come and Go* (1965) in his 2006 Hindi short film *Antaral/Endnote* which dramatized a similar exploration of the limits of knowledge where faith enters as a complexity if not a problem. In *Endnote* too, Avikunthak had set Beckett's unlocated play in his own ancestral house in Kolkata and forced the Beckettian preoccupation with the unknown and the unknowable with a Tantric sub-text of the Indian rituals of 'dandi khata' where believers crawl on the road in a procession to fulfil their wishes. One can see a continuum from the ritual of 'dandi khata' in *Endnote* to the pilgrimage of Maha Kumbh in Kalkimanthankatha where the incendiary possibilities of the political tramps, waiting for their master perpetrator, ironically cuts into what is considered the largest peaceful religious gathering in the world. Instead of investing in the simplified notion that the secular and the sacred are mutually exclusive realms, Avikunthak's film engages with them as mutually entangled terrains and Kalkimanthankatha works through the sacred to arrive at the secular by profaning the religious mythology embedded in its subject.

In terms of Avikunthak's filmography, the film extends his abiding interest in Puranas and Upanishads, coming after faithful renditions of such texts as in *Katho Upanishad* (2011) and courageous re-imaginings into more secular and modern scenarios e.g. his previous

film *Rati Chakravayuh* (2013). Amrit Gangar, the Indian film scholar, considers Avikunthak to be part of 'Cinema Prayoga' i.e. cinema as an aesthetic practice and not a capitalist commodity of entertainment. Avikunthak has always chosen festivals and art galleries over theatres for the release and viewing of his films. If I briefly go back to Benjamin with whom I had started, we can see how Avikunthak's cinema is part and parcel of Benjamin's Marxian project of politicizing aesthetics as a reaction against fascism's effort to aestheticize politics.⁶ The very fact that Avikunthak treats cinema as an aesthetic object in our digital age where popular and commercial cinema and its visual regime have become a force of mercantile capitalism and its global investments, makes his cinematic practice inherently political and dissident. In subverting cinema's collusion with the market, Avikunthak returns to the theatrical origins of ritualistic action and reduces the narrative content of cinema to its bare bones. Hence a minimalist and anti-realist playwright like Beckett appeals to him. It's not that he doesn't have a story to tell but he doesn't choose to tell it in a realistic fashion.

As he observed in a 2006 interview with Amrit Gangar, Avikunthak sees himself in a cinematic genealogy with ascetic experimental Indian filmmakers like Mani Kaul, Kumar Shahani, G. Aravindan and John Abraham who not only experimented with their content or subject matter but also with the form of their narratives.⁷ His cinema is poised at the cusp of narrative and non-narrative and instead of letting the latter dominate the former, Avikunthak chooses to narrate a story in fits and starts

through the randomness of the real world. In his films, and Kalkimanthankatha is no exception, he prioritizes the existence of narrative over its essence and decides to narrate by way of non-narrative. In the process, his films achieve a rare aesthetic balance of narrative and discourse, hinging on a minimalist visual regime of poetically arrested images which interrupt the ever so eventful logic of the blockbuster movie with the static poise of non-event— Kalki's non-arrival and the infinite waiting of the tramps. Beckett's *Godot*, being a play where "nothing happens" not once but "twice" in its two acts, as the Irish theatre critic Vivian Mercier had famously reflected, becomes an ideal foil for Avikunthak's cinematic practice.

References:

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3. *Beckett, Samuel. The Complete Dramatic Works (London, Faber, 2003), p. 11.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Beckett, Samuel, p. 84.*
6. *Benjamin, Walter, p. 242.*
7. *Gangar, Amrit. In Conversation: Ashish Avikunthak with Amrit Gangar. Mumbai 14 May 2006. <http://www.avikunthak.com/Amrit%20Gangar%20Interview.htm> (Accessed May 19, 2015).*

THE LONELINESS OF *SADHU BHASHA*

Naeem Mohaiemen

First came the word. Soon after, came divisions: regulations and lines that set up hierarchies and domains.

My earliest encounter with these sharp lines was in a St. Joseph classroom in Dhaka. In Bangla class, we learned sadhu as the high written language of Tagore, Saratchandra, and Bankim (few Bengali Muslims entered this list, something we noticed much later). Shuddho was a variation of this, working as the spoken language of the elite. Cholito was the language that the nascent middle class and city subaltern spoke in. Gradually and grudgingly, it was entering the written word. Later it became cholti; the naming of the colloquial was subject to opobhrongsho— an alteration that was both destruction and birth. Though one of our frequent exercises was to transform sadhu sentences to cholito, it was clear that sadhu was the aspirational proper way “to be.”

Sometime in the 1980s, a broadside was launched against shuddho in Bangladeshi textbooks.

Saratchandra Chattopadhyay’s Srikanto was removed from the SSC (“Matric”) syllabus. My father was horrified: If you don’t read Srikanto, how can you learn proper Bangla? The education board sternly insisted that the way to improve national pass averages (and build the model citizen) was by removing “difficult” works. Soon textbooks were filled with essays and stories written in cholito. There was now a gap between the Bangla literature we read, and that of our parents in the days of “united” Pakistan (ironically, the period when Bangla itself was under attack by the state).

Was there a tinge of religious anxiety to this replacement? There may very well have been, although it was not formally articulated to students. Recent scholarship has documented the development of “Musalmani” Bangla in pre-1947 Bengal. My encounter with these currents was at a granular and unremarkable way in the classroom. The familiar phrase “Thakur ghore ke? Ami Kola khai ni!” (Who is in the worship room? Came the guilty reply, I didn’t eat

the banana!— ascribed to a child caught as she stole a god’s offering) was quietly converted in the 1980s. “Thakur Ghor” was replaced with “Bharar Ghor” (Storage room), a manifestation of discomfort with the putatively “Hindu” origins of words and phrases. Modernization of the nation meant transforming the language— cholito now dominated and the success of novelists like Humayun Ahmed can be attributed to novels shorn of shuddho. Almost accidentally, an erasure of Sanskritic origins was accomplished in the process.

In the last few years, during repeated viewings of Ashish Avikunthak’s films, I have revisited buried memories of that St. Joseph classroom. The association of a specific project of modernity with the erasure of shuddho Bangla sits at sharp angles with Avikunthak’s most recent films Rati Chakravayuh and Kalkimanthankatha. The latter film is translated as The Churning of Kalki, intriguingly omitting the phrase Katha (words, tales, legends). The language spoken by the characters in these two films fascinates and alienates me—an effect very much the director’s intent, as part of his argument against forms of modernity associated with jono-mukhi and bastob-mukhi. These two phrases translate as “for the people” and “realistic,” but mukhi also translates to “facing toward” and can be a parable for the janus-faced sadhu/cholito that marks one possible high/low experience of Bengali in the last century.

When Rati Chakravayuh premiered, the breathtaking cinematic achievement of a 105-minute single shot film overcame our senses. It was as if Russian Ark’s

languorous Steadicam single take journey through the Hermitage Museum had been transposed into a tightly wound sacred thread around a spindle in Rati (clocking in at 9 minutes longer than Sokurov’s film). As Rati’s reel unwinds, and the nihilistic despair of the lovers’ worldview sinks in, a slow dance of the destroyer begins (an inter-cinematic reference where Avikunthak prefigures the finale of Kalkimanthankatha). At the end, Rati cuts to black and in the absence of image arrives the ritual completion of self-death.

In an interview about Rati, Avikunthak said his films were not codes that needed unraveling; instead, they were akin to the liturgical Sanskrit that the majority of worshippers do not understand . Since his public commentary is as precisely constructed as his films, one can glean even from this disavowal a hint at a complex cosmology that will take many pleasurable viewings to unpack. The invocation of an illegible temple Sanskrit brings to mind the fate of Harihar in the second part of Satyajit Ray’s Apu Trilogy (Aparajito, 1957). Harihar recites Sanskrit to a crowd of possibly unlettered Benares pilgrims, and their largely vacant expressions do not interfere with the flow of alms at the reading’s end. The soothing effect of the illegible text is clear in the scene, and can also invoke the effect of Quranic Arabic on a Bengali Muslim population that finds it as alien as the Benares pilgrims found Sanskrit.

In yoking together Ray’s film and Avikunthak’s commentary, I want to highlight the way that the latter constructs films in radical opposition to the neorealist observation style pioneered by Ray in Bengali cinema’s post-partition decades. Each of Avikunthak’s films is

constructed in a deeply anti-realist style— both in visual structure, and in the language that I have been fascinated by. In *Rati*, the spinning camera is matched by a dialogue that is arch construction, with sentences that bear little similarity to how dialogue may work in everyday Kolkata (or, further east, Dhaka). Language games, such as the finale of remembering the last words uttered and adding your own, are another gesture away from reality—even that of an imagined, Sanskritic, pre-colonial past. Yet, just as we sink ourselves into allusions to stories from the Puranas, contemporary violence enters stage left. Which riots are they referring to, when characters say, “Something we know but cannot see...”? Noakhali 1946, Delhi 1984, Gujarat 2002, or Ramu 2012? We are not told and will never know. This too is part of Avikunthak’s design, a purging of familiar signposts that would allow the viewer comforting purchase.

I want to return to Ray one more time in thinking through the visual structure of *Kalkimanthankatha*. In Avikunthak’s film, rumors—of war are faced down by readings from Chairman Mao’s red book (in Bengali, naturally—and here, the theatricality of martial language carries out a second purification of *shuddho bhasha*), recalling also the mischievous employment of the same red book in Godard’s *Le Chinois*. The clearly Beckettian underpinning of scenes within the Kumbh Mela reminded me of Rabindranath Tagore’s hallucinatory *Tasher Desh* (a children’s musical that may have been inspired by Lewis Carroll; in its 1930s staging it also predicted the ascendancy of European fascism).

Throughout the scenes (immersion, walking, writhing, and war games), the actors look almost always out into the horizon, barely at each other (even though so much of their dialogue comes soaked in tender eroticism—not quite homoerotic, but rather what I would call homosocial). I thought of the *jatra* scenes in Ray’s work while watching this. In Part one of the *Apu Trilogy* (*Pather Panchali*), the *jatra* is on a stage built in the middle of the village. In Part two (*Oporajito*), modernization has moved the *jatra* to celluloid, with silver painted streaks encircling the minor god’s head. In Ray’s hands, the theater form of looking into the horizon underscored the gap between fiction and the village life he so meticulously reconstructed as the real. In Avikunthak’s film, this relation is inverted— the stylized, archaic and hyper-emotive acting of a certain form of theater is the entire film. There is no cutaway to a “real” moment; the fictional form is all—a Bengali language that rarely existed in the spoken word except in the imagination of mythmakers.

When watching Bengali films with subtitles, I often try to effect a temporary blind spot in the lower third of my vision. Otherwise, the temptation is too strong to read the subtitles and inevitably turn to my companion and whisper, “Uhhu, that is not really what she said.” Avikunthak’s films however are deeply textual—they contain reading exercises inside the visual arc, and reading his subtitles doubles that motion. He writes his original screenplay in English, and longtime collaborator Sougata Mukherjee translates it into Bengali. I say “translate,” but the act is closer to another grammar exercise from our childhood classroom— *bhabanubad* (translation of the soul of the

text) rather than *banganubad* (translation into Bengali). Sougata’s Bengali is stylized high form, inflected with his experience of growing up outside the metropolitan center of Kolkata. Instead of matching this dialogue with his original screenplay, Avikunthak does a fresh translation for the subtitles. In several scenes, the translations therefore lead to new puzzles for the Bengali viewer. Why, for example, is a river’s description as *chirabega* (forever rushing, or, possessed of velocity) and *chirasthir* (forever still) translated as “ever-flowing, unperturbed and forever”? These bilingual moments may add up to nothing more than a creative flow in translation. But, given the meticulous structure of the films, I like to think that Avikunthak placed his subtitles for multiple readings. For a Bengali audience, darting between spoken Bengali that is distant and subtitles that seem from another playbook, the film offers numerous textual possibilities.

These films intend to produce a sharp alienation in the viewer, detaching them from the realism they encountered in the first decades of post-1947 Bengali cinema (e.g., Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, and Mrinal Sen in West Bengal; Zahir Raihan, Sheikh Niamat Ali, and Subhash Datta in Bangladesh). I think there is an additional layer of removal that Avikunthak had not planned, and that is these films’ possibilities for a Bangladesh (the former East Bengal) audience. In drawing explicitly and immersively from Puranic and Tantric texts, Avikunthak has placed his cosmology firmly within a Hindu religious and scriptural tradition. I want to suggest that the effect of partition has been to abruptly remove many traces of this Hindu scriptural tradition from one of its two homes—what was once

East Bengal, and today is Bangladesh.

As the upper caste were often the earliest to leave for West Bengal after 1947, East Bengal was left with a Hindu population largely shorn of its Sanskritic elite. Practical expediencies of surviving inside an increasingly strident monoculture (ironically growing more shrill after independence from “Muslim” Pakistan) has led to outward expressions of Hinduism shrinking from public life in Bangladesh. Over the last four decades, this erasure of traces of Hindu mythology from everyday practices has sharpened; the nervous “conversion” of something as microscopic as the phrase “Thakur ghor” is only one example among multitudes. As a part of the first generation that was deprived of fundamental texts such as *Srikanto* from our curriculum, I approach Avikunthak’s films almost as if Bengali is not my language. I understand every word (and those I do not are found quickly in a weathered copy of *Chalantika*), yet it is almost as if I understand little. The films sadden me in the end; in their expression of mythology in a high linguistic register, they remind us again of what was lost to both Bengals through partition.

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1. Ratnam, Niru. “Future Greats, 2014,” Art Review, March 2014.

ASHISH AVIKUNTHAK'S Kalkimanthankatha/The Churning of Kalki

Niru Ratnam

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)

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