

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:

1. *Kafka, Franz. The Blue Octavo Notebooks. Ed. Max Brod (New York: Exact Change, 2004).*
2. *Benjamin, Walter. Illuminations: Essays and Reflections. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 264.*
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).*