

Aapothkalin Trikalika

Catalogue essay by Niru Ratnam

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that verge towards the draconian although none have gained the notoriety of Donald Trump's Executive Order 13769 (superseded by Executive Order 13780), or, as it was more popularly known, the 'Muslim ban'.

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

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

Around the world in Russia, the Philippines, China, Hungary, Turkey, India and China, the old-fashioned figure of the "strongman" leader is back in charge. Just hours before American voters handed the keys of the Oval Office to Trump, Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India, went on television to announce that all of India's five hundred-rupee and thousand rupee notes would be banned from use, with virtually no forewarning of this demonetization plan. The announcement caused financial chaos, suffering and a sharp downturn in India's economic growth. Modi, like Trump, Erdogan, Putin and the rest of these strongmen revel in unpredictability, populism and bending constitutional rules. They disrupt and destroy the pillars of liberal society, paradoxically whilst using the pillars of that society to do so – Trump's use of the freedom of press provided by the social media

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

2. "And how are things going?"

One of the most famous Hindu legends about the goddess Kali is her victory over the demon Raktabija. Durga and the Matrikas have attempted to kill Raktabija but find that every drop of the demon's blood that is spilled produces clones of the demon. Durga summons Kali who appears armed with a sword, noose and skull-topped staff. Her tongue lolls out of her gaping mouth and she devours Raktabija and his clones, sucking the blood from the demon before it can reach the ground. Ashish Avikunthak's film *Aapothkalin Trikalika* ('The Kali of Emergency') also is a summoning of Kali, but to today's world, today's state of emergency. The film is a space of enquiry as to what might happen if a god or goddess, in this case Kali, might be called upon now to see the state of today's world. Viewers familiar with Avikunthak's oeuvre will recognize a number of techniques he

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

past, their occupants indifferent to the appearance of a goddess amongst them.

3. "Things are improving day by day"

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

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