

**The Antekaal Thesis: Rendezvous with Rama (Rajya) and the Golden Past in India's
Anglophone Science Fiction**

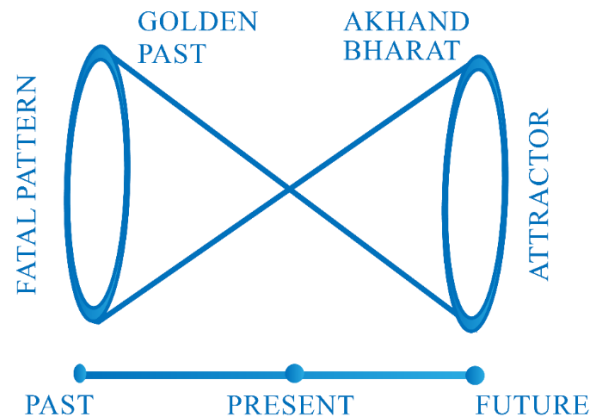
Sami Ahmad Khan

Source: "The Antekaal Thesis: Rendezvous with Rama (Rajya) and the Golden Past in India's Anglophone Science Fiction" in *The Routledge Handbook of CoFuturisms*, Edited by Taryne Jade Taylor, Isiah Lavender III, Grace L. Dillon, Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay, Routledge, 2023.

Hold on to a story long enough and it begins to make a people. – Anil Menon (*Breaking the Bow* vii).

A past that is not yet known is a form of the future. So too is a present unanticipated by the past. – Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. (*Seven Beauties* 4)

A specter is haunting India's Science Fiction (SF) – the specter of an indigenous *pastism*. This specter appears at the crossing of two streams: a proto-imperial, irredentist *Akhand Bharat* (Unified India) that subsumes modern-day India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Afghanistan, etc. within its cartographic and notional ambit, and a quasi-historical, revivalist golden age from which all (modern) scientific, technological and civilized *tantras* (systems) flow. Contemporary speculative fiction in India bears witness to the dialectic between a "fatal pattern" (Fisher 19) of the golden past and a future "attractor" of Akhand Bharat. A template of Hindu Nationalist (Hindutva) resistance and rejuvenation emerges, and the *Rama Rajya* – the rule of Rama – lies at its core of this past ⇌ future (see Sharma's "On the Difference" for the debates between Hindutva and Hinduism).



(Fig. 1: Light Cone of India Today)

The shadow of this irredentist, revivalist Hindutva hegemon – as a political and aesthetic imperative – falls on futures within the nation’s speculative fiction, including India’s Science Fiction in English-language (ISFE). Suparno Banerjee claims that ISFE revisits “the past in the light of the present and the future” and that it utilizes “devices of spatio-temporal disjunction and utopic projections and thought experiments” that enable “the authors to explore the future possibilities of the nation” (*Other Tomorrows* 208). The future of ISFE does manifest tangential outcomes: a near-future India has been ostracized by the world owing to a state-sponsored genocide of women in Manjula Padmanabhan’s *Escape* (2008); the country fights a bitter war against a Pakistan-Saudi Arabia-US alliance in Ruchir Joshi’s *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh* (2001); and Neelanjana Banerjee’s “Exile” portrays the trials of an Indian-American in the near future, a time when a Pax Indica rules the world and (Hindu) epics became the “source-material” (14) for all cultural production.

Banerjee further avers that ISFE deploys “indigenism and hybridity” to reflect upon “Indian epics, Vedic philosophy and folklores as by Western science, Western science fiction, and the English language” (209). Mainak Dhar’s *Vimana* (2012), for example, showcases Hindu gods as ancient extra-terrestrials who chaperone humanity’s evolution, and the Kiru

(tribal) people in Srinath Perur’s “The Crater of Kiru” (2018) believe themselves to be the descendants of aliens from some other planet or dimension. This mode of cultural production stands by Thomas M. Disch’s assessment that “the second task of sf writers as mythmakers is simply the custodial work of keeping the inherited body of myths alive” (23). There are, however, political and historical reasons at work.

If we map certain strains in SF texts – representing (emergent) technologies, (imperial) ideologies, and (global) market forces – onto a four-dimensional axis (x, y, z, and time), then trajectories of post-2000 ISFE shares metaphorical similarities with the imperialism-driven SF produced in/by Europe of the 19th (despite the two being imbricated in different material realities). The rise of SF in Europe was made possible by “the technological expansion that drove real imperialism, the need felt by national audiences for literary-cultural mediation as their societies were transformed from historical nations into hegemons, and the fantastic model of achieved technoscientific Empire” (“Sf and Empire” 231). India 2021 witnesses an upsurging Hindutva amidst an ongoing digital revolution, an onslaught of global market forces, and increasingly reified politico-religious models of mythological empires: the stage is set for Indian audiences to globally broadcast yearnings of a Rama Rajya in a (future) Akhand Bharat. Moreover, just as Euro-American SF in the nineteenth century was shaped by the Industrial Revolution and colonial expansion (*Other Tomorrows* 204), post-2000 Indian SF in English-language (ISFE) – and India in SF – derives from its own versions of market-driven industrial/digital revolution(s) and the concomitant yearnings for newer empires: an envisioning that relies on India’s “rapid rise in its economic, techno-scientific and political clout” after the 1990s (Banerjee 204).

While SF has long been dotted with alternate, distinct futures and distant, exotic spaces, ISFE is equally pockmarked by alternate pasts – and not just futures – rooted in domestic spaces. Shaping – and shaped by – the ideological exigences of and towards Hindutva, Indian

SF resists or reinforces a (past \Leftrightarrow future) Akhand Bharat. If SF doesn't merely predict a future but also explains "a future past" (*Seven Beauties* 76), then ISFE also projects a golden past *backwards* in time – an inverse imaging of the future history which impinges upon the present as much as it shapes the future. This golden past reinterprets the past, reorders the present *and* projects a new future – Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., might have called it a multidirectional "feedback" (*Seven Beauties* 78) that comes from the past *and* future alike – and percolates down to SF. Such predictions and projections arrange science, fiction, history, myth, etc. within a novel spatiotemporal syntax. A word of caution: the golden past as a recent geopolitical/geoeconomic formulation, as a mode of (a)historical consciousness, and as a plank of anti-colonial struggle, should not be confused with the golden age in India's history (attributed chiefly to the Gupta rule during fourth to sixth century CE).

Now, the epistemological interventions in the discourse of time can be accessed via multiple vantage points – I briefly cite just three. The first approach comes from physics (as in theory of relativity): time can be "coordinate time" (i.e. time specified by the time coordinate, where it is located at a distance of infinity from the source of gravity) and "proper time" (or wristwatch time, i.e., time measurable by proper clocks using worldlines).¹ The second approach comprises the (classical) cosmic view of time held by Aristotle, in which time is dependent on the natural world; the (medieval) divine view subscribed by Christian theologians finds time to be ordered by God; and the (modern) view of Descartes et al views time as being subjective and comprehensible in the mind of the rational observer) (*Heidegger* 74). This classification of time *changes* with time: it moves from the ancient Greeks to current philosophers, from classical to quantum mechanics, and (back) from western normativity to

¹ In the special theory of relativity, time "appears in two guises—coordinate time, which has held center stage thus far, and proper time"; Savitt finds that while subluminal "material objects are represented in Minkowski spacetime by timelike world lines", the "timelike world lines can be parameterized by a quantity, *proper time*, which is measured by ideal clocks following such world lines" ("Being").

eastern traditions. For example, time in Indian philosophy can be dependent on the natural world, as per the Jain scholar Silanka (qtd. in Kalupahana 181); it can also be a creation of/by the will of god, a subjective experience, and the god (Vishnu) himself in simultaneity.² The third indicative model/paradigm of time borrows from metaphysics, which, again, finds three major views of time: (Heraclitean) Presentism, Possibilism and (Parmenidean) Eternalism, as per Savitt (“Being”). From the presentism of Buddhist thought to the Eternalism of Upanishadic philosophy, Indian schools manifest similar concerns.³ To take one example from *astik* and *nastik* traditions each: Kalupahana opines that “self-causation” in Upanishadic thought finds that *sarvam asti* (everything exists) since “this [*atman*] essence of everything exists” (“The Buddhist conception of time and temporality” 182). He further adds that even in Buddhism one finds different modalities of engagement with time: “early Buddhism” presents an “empiricist and relativistic conception of time”, whereas the Abhidharma scholasticism believes in an “absolutistic conception” owing to its “speculative approach”; and the Madhyamikas (such as Nagarjuna) deny the reality of time as a “a result of their transcendentalism” (188).

Carl Sagan finds that cultures do not “evolve in lock-step” (*Cosmos*, 182), implying different originating points and rates of scientific progress for different civilizations. The rising tide of Hindutva in India believes Hinduism to be the arche of *all* science. The golden past derives from how India’s popular imagination, rather than viewing the past, present and future as hermetically sealed, stable locations, view forward movement in time as recurring cycles of

² A disclaimer – this paper is about the golden past and political ideology, in specific, and not about the conception of time and eastern and western philosophies. Also, this paper is not about time-travel in ISFE. Hence, the temporal agents in Swapna Kishore’s “Regressions”, the machine that sees across time in Vandana Singh’s “With Fate Conspire”, or the Ali, Pande and Hemonto, the time travellers in Shovon Chowdhury’s *The Competent Authority*, do not appear in this analysis.

³ One can also engage with Sider’s assessment in this context: “there seems to be disagreement concerning the following assertion” that “dinosaurs exist” (qtd. in Savitt). While Presentists “deny this claim” (since there are no dinosaurs *now*), “eternalists are supposed to affirm it” (there will always be dinosaurs since what is-is); the issue is of how one approaches the “verb ‘exist’”, and if it can be “tenseless” and a “present tense” verb alike (which them makes the claims of both sides correct), as Savitt mentions, remains (“Being”).

decay. For Anustup Basu, the “time of Kali... is a mythic postulate that ‘curves’ into the inevitable finite presentism of not just individual consciousness, but also institutions of history and the state... It is therefore time that cannot be either tracked or traced; it can only be ‘recalled’ to absolve the profane and render it sacred” (222). This recalling, contingent on absolving the profane, becomes the ontotheological basis for the golden past, especially with reference to history and the state. Another note of caution here. Basu mentions how Romila Thapar challenges the presumption that only the cyclic ruled ancient India’s imagination; Thapar executes a “powerful dispelling of a *categorical* separation between cyclical and linear orders of time” since “these two orders can actually combine in myriad and material ways in different forms of humanistic, statist, astronomical, theological, and eschatological thinking” (Basu 220). The acts of somehow reliving the past or projecting an ostensible recurrence in the future do not imply self-sustaining, self-repeating cycles which are exactly the same; if the orbit (worldline) of the planet we inhabit is helical, especially since the Earth can never return to the *same* spacetime coordinates, then any notion of (three-dimensional) cyclical event must evolve into a four-dimensional helix. This disrupts the ontological cyclicity that has (erroneously) come to be thought to characterize time in India; for example, though the Boys of Vishnu always save the planet in different epochs in *Toke*, but their players/actants (and thus, phenomenon) keep changing.

Considering the abovementioned divergences, ISFE illustrates three distinct modalities of engagement with the golden past – those of acceptance, rejection and appropriation – that are directly contingent on authors’ attitudes towards the *raison d’être* of the golden past (Hindutva, Akhand Bharat and Rama Rajya). For example, Mainak Dhar’s *Vimana* (2012), with its ancient astronaut hypothesis and Hindu gods as technologically-advanced aliens (*Star Warriors* 109) reinforces and accepts the golden past *in toto*. Rimi Chatterjee’s *Signal Red* (2005) rejects it by indicting how the golden past furthers the goals of a Hindu nation-state:

Rahil Vidyadhar in *Signal Red* believes that “ancient Indian science connected Earth and space in various ways” but the invading “Mughals and the British sundered that connection” – thereby, the “science in the hands of the colonial masters” became India’s indigenous knowledge from the past, one that had been “disfigured” (87). This appropriation of scientific epistemology can be explicated by how science was “re-re-projected unto the Indian past and presented as something essentially Indian” through the “construction of a Golden Age” (Harder 106). The creation of an anti-hegemonic discourse also builds on Chattopadhyay’s assertion that SF “must also arise in the literature of the colonised at the same time as it does in the literature of the coloniser, at least in the secular domain” (“Kalpavigyan and Imperial Technoscience” 113). Lastly, Suraj Clark Prasad’s *Baramulla Bomber* (2013) “while utilising the golden past theme, differs from the others by attributing the source of knowledge to not only Hindu scriptures, but also to Abrahamic ones” (*Star Warriors* 64) – it diffuses a golden past across religious and spatiotemporal traditions and constructs an eclectic mythic-historic mingling of multiple eastern and western discourses, thereby subverting Hindutva’s claims towards being the sole originators of ‘real science’.

While Banerjee’s argument can be extended to say that Indian SF exists not just at the edges of culture but time itself, this essay is not about time-travel as a *topoi* in ISFE but about four broad temporalities in ISFE (as discussed later in the antekaal). Hence, the temporal agents in Swapna Kishore’s “Regressions” (2012), the machine that sees across time in Vandana Singh’s “With Fate Conspire” (2018), or the Ali, Pande and Hemonto as time travellers in Shovon Chowdhury’s *The Competent Authority* (2013), do not figure here. Instead, we observe the sutures of futures that link variable visions and versions of India’s futures to mythic semantic elements and a majoritarian-prime syntax; these sutures not only weave futurisms to pastisms but also interpolate science in myth, history in *itihasa*, and technology in the fantastic.

The Empire Strikes Back: *Rashtra*, *Itihasa* and *Bazaar*

The interaction between past and future, memory and possibility, and science and religion that golden past generates can be explicated by a quantum trialectic of a ‘future’ *rashtra* (nation), a ‘past’ *itihasa* (myth+history) and ‘present’ *bazaar* (market). While Chattopadhyay delves into the “framing of mythology as history, mythic elements as science, and myth as a cultural prism occurs in many significant works of Bangla kalpavigyan” (“Kalpavigyan and Imperial Technoscience” 114), a similar thrust into contemporary ISFE reveals interesting aspects. The ideological notion(s) of a Hindu *rashtra* (nation-state) as an ‘attractor’ changes the fundamental nature of a democracy; two, a mythic imagination inspired by *itihasa* seamlessly fuses history, myth and narrative to construct a ‘non-origin’; three, the forces of *bazaar* (market) contour consumption patterns and national reimaginings alike.

To tackle each strand separately: India of 2021 is a *de facto* heterogenous, multicultural and multilingual civilization, and a *de jure* democracy that is currently caught in a right-wards shift; majoritarian “religious consolidation, economic liberalisation, jingoistic reassertion and historical revisionism” have become the norm (*Star Warriors* 48). The enterprise of Hindutva often relies on a selective, politically-tinged *itihasa*: R. Malhotra finds that “accounts of past are not made through *either* myth or history exclusively” but by *itihasa*, “which may not always be the opposite of truth” (qtd. in Dawson Varughese 30); Shail Mayaram accepts that in the Indian context “history and myth are not exclusive modes of representation” (qtd. in Ashis Nandy, 45). This *itihasa* not only leaves notional space for the construction and exploration of India’s golden past but actively supports its synthesis. Lastly, this golden past can be regarded as a revivalist response to the onslaught of the *bazaar* (and the forces which prop it up). Earlier, an economic base (and market requirements), orientalism (a specialized knowledge/power dispositif), and colonialism (as a state policy) etc. hybridized across former imperial states to galvanize them into action – which then evoked national movements as reactions to the

violation of territorial sovereignty and civilizational dignity. Spurred by the neoimperial tsunamis of transnational corporations pummeling the Global South, the successor(s) to those impulses today morphose into local/glocal movements of identity formation and indigenous reassertion. For example, Vandana Singh’s “Oblivion: A Journey” (2012) reworks the *Ramayana* in a galaxy far, far away, with the primary antagonist being a metaphor for predatory capitalism and neo-imperial enterprises. Tarun Saint’s “A Visit to Partition World” (2019) is set in 2047 and takes us back to India’s partition via a partition *theme* park. Moreover, contemporary India negotiates the material, market-driven globalizing discourses imposed from without, spouting from what Freedman might call First World metropolitan economies, “those social formations on the increasingly integrated” centres of “the multinational capitalist system” (198), and the internationalizing discourses precipitated historically from within, that is, from the Sanatana traditions of *vasudhaiva kutumbkum* (the world is one family). Both these strands find themselves at loggerheads with Hindutva’s xenophobia.



The vertices of *rashtra*, *itihasa* and *bazaar* can be seen as extensions of the transMIT thesis (*Star Warriors* xiv) – about how ideology (nation/nation-state), mythology (and *itihasa*) and technology (with its double, the *bazaar*) contour SF. Since the struggle of each people against oppression is unique – though *sutras* linking them with other struggles do exist – ISFE creates its own epistemology. Grace Dillon acknowledges how “native” writers of SF must negotiate an ancient tradition that “weds sf theory and Native intellectualism, Indigenous scientific literacy, and western techno-cultural science...” (*Walking the Clouds* 2). Even

Sukanya Datta tries to fuse myth, science and history in “Gem of a Story” (2012) and “A Little Learning” (2012); the former attempts to engage in a scientification of Hindu myth of Ashwatthama and the latter specifically foregrounds a tribal traditional ecological knowledge as opposed to a Vedic or Western science (*Star Warriors* 137).

The polarizing insertion of the golden past in ISFE is not only an ideological weapon but also a psychological technique of reorienting a reader’s grasp of the real. Chattopadhyay asserts in “Kalpavigyan and Imperial Technoscience” that colonization “results in a pressure to generate at once something out of the general mass of local knowledge something resembling western science”, a native science that builds on its own “cultural strength” to reinvents “the values of the coloniser culture” (113). This thesis, once linked with Hans Harder’s assessment, establishes why the golden past and Akhand Bharat – past patterns and future attractors – cultivate their personalized “native” sciences, technologized alternate realities and cultural strengths.

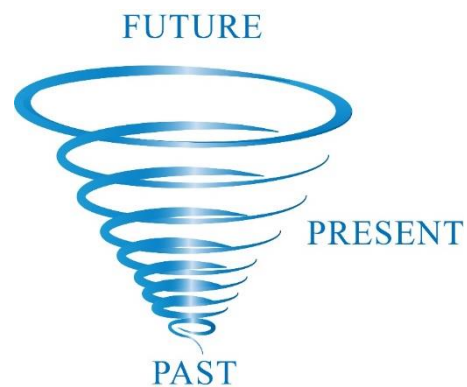
Return of the King: Rama Rajya and Golden Past

For Edmund Husserl, a melody can only be known through a simultaneous operation of three acts of consciousness, viz, retention (how *memory* retains the notes no longer available), attention (an impression of notes which exist *now*) and protention (imagining the shape of things to come) (*Heidegger* 77). The retention, attention and protention works together in India’s popular imagination in a slightly different way. Ashis Nandy’s believes that “*traditional* India not only lacks the Enlightenment’s concept of history” but also shies away from viewing history as objective, ethical, “or reasonable way of constructing the past”; the past, present and future are not seen as “pre-formatted” and “myths, legends, itihisas” remain a force to be reckoned with (63). Even in a *modern* India, the Golden Age of Science Fiction meets the

golden past in ISFE, a twisted extension of Carl Freedman’s dictum which views SF as “an inverted or paradoxical version of historical fiction” (187).

The ontotheology of a Rama Rajya is grounded in an Akhand Bharat and/or a golden past that manifests itself as a political ideology *and* a religious goal. Anustup Basu asks of films how “*Hindutva*...can actually enter into assemblages of cinematic spectacle and affect with metropolitan lifestyles, managerial codas of the ‘free market’, individualism, consumer desire, and neo-liberal imperatives of polity and government” (211); a similar enterprise can be executed with ISFE, which, after all, depends on how future possibilities rely on pasts. This leads us to view how the historical mode “attempts to embed and entwine SF *into* the mainstream” as per Roger Luckhurst, an attempt to construct “a *non*-origin [of SF], to disperse it, to deny specificity” (“Many Deaths” 40). ISFE reinterprets this process since “a lot of Indian SF is equally about a protoscientific antiquity that zeroes in on an origin (usually in the Vedic times) but simultaneously diffuses specific (arche) moments across the time-period by considering the actual origin as forgotten, inaccessible and/or repressed” (*Star Warriors* 17-

18). The proponents of the golden past also disperse and diffuse the essence: one is left wondering where the arche of science and technology is located, whether in Satya Yuga, or in Treta Yuga (with the *Pushpaka* and the Rama Rajya), or in Dwapar Yuga (with the divine weapons of the *Mahabharata*) or in Kali Yuga (in India’s Golden Age during the Gupta rule). The



temporal phenomenon as manifested in ISFE locates how the golden past projects tales of technological wonder to diffused – yet specific – moments in India’s past. The supporters of this re-envisioning approach this ‘real’ origin as the basis of true ‘history’, which has been suppressed by colonial and communist historians.

This tension between the past, present the future is readily weaponized – and not merely exacerbated – by ideologically extenuating circumstances. Margaret Atwood opines that “the past no longer belongs only to those who once lived it; the past belongs to those who claim it, and are willing to explore it, and to infuse it with meaning for those alive today” (qtd. in Hulan 71). This can be read with the remarks made by Biplab Kumar Deb (the chief minister of the Indian state of Tripura) in 2019 that “we [Indians have] had Internet and satellites when the battle of Mahabharat was fought” (‘Internet’) – a classic case of the golden past projecting technology to ancient times and then used to reinforce a Hindu Nationalist identity. This is not only an instance of the empire writing back, but also of creative alternative histories and inverting power dynamics by reclaiming the ‘actual’ history, which has supposedly been ‘suppressed’. The banner men of India’s golden past insist that all scientific breakthroughs occur(ed) in *India’s past* and not in the *west’s future* (*Star Warriors* 104). The spatiotemporal dislocation is further evidenced by how Kritika Sharma notifies of a course that “credits ancient Indians with being the pioneers of electricity production, inventing batteries, aeronautics, maritime engineering and the discovery of the phenomenon of gravity” (“Engineering”). For example, the Rama Rajya, the Mahabharata War, the Vedic Age and the Gupta Age become possible locations of the scientific *gyana* (knowledge) and *tantra* (system) India intends to deploy to become a *vishwaguru* (world leader). Chattopadhyay’s mythologerm, which considers “historical factors related to the usage of the concept of science, the specific conditions within which each of these literary traditions emerged, and the critical deployments through which this literature negotiates with the past” (435), can become one mechanism to explain such aberrant behaviour.

While “a central project of Western modernism was to invent the future as an autonomous time that could give purpose to the present, supplanting the myth of divine providence that itself had supplanted myths of eternal recurrence” (*Seven Beauties* 81), India’s

golden past invented the past as an origin *and* as a frame of reference to give value to the present. When John Rieder notes that “the relation of the colonising societies to the colonised ones is that of the developed, modern present to its own undeveloped, primitive past” (*Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*, 30), when Carl Freedman sees the First World as another planet (198), and when Uppinder Mehan believes that “the West is rational and scientific” and “the East is mystical and fantastic” in the ‘Orientalist’ scheme of things, (“The Domestication of Technology” 54), east and west emerge as categories which are not co-planar; they are separated by both space *and* time.

India’s fascination with a past golden age rather than a “scientifically-advanced future” is probed further by Philip Lutgendorf, who attributes this to mythology’s readiness to be “reinterpreted to suit contemporary [imperial] needs”; the notion of recurring *yugas* (eras) “shortcircuit any teleology of change-as-progress by asserting that the most utopian epochs lay in the distant past and that subsequent world history was a sordid saga of continuous loss and decline”; lastly, while “the future ... had already been colonized” but the past “remained available for imaginative conquest” (“The Mahābhārata as Dystopian Future” 366–7). The primacy of mythology (reinforced a resurgent Hindutva), the spiritual and philosophical notions of Yugas entrenched in the minds of a people, and the ready availability of a past not yet fully (or truly) known, guide cultural production towards the creation of a golden age of India.

ISFE, thus, swings between the non-being of a (present) constitutional republic and the non-origin (of a past \rightleftharpoons future) theodemocracy where religion – Rama Rajya in an Akhand Bharat – becomes both the past and the future. The phantom of this golden past flicker in and out of existence *a la* Jacques Derrida’s assertion that “it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept” (*Specters of Marx* 202). India becomes the site of reappearance of ideological specters of alternate pastisms, and the golden past becomes a

(non)concept as well as the site of haunting. This haunting, moreover, is by a *non-being*: Roger Luckhurst, finds that “if the projection back, as a fantasy of non-origin, is SF's past, its complement in the future is the fantasy of non-being” (“Many Deaths” 43). The hauntology of ISFE negotiates with contemporary India’s *zeitgeist*: the golden past boasts of a mythic non-origin that has been resurrected by its proponents to shape today’s political thought and tomorrow’s social reality.

This, again, advances Mark Fisher’s ideas that “the future is always experienced as a haunting: as a virtuality that already impinges on the present, conditioning expectations and motivating cultural production” (16). Not only does hauntology foreground a “fatal pattern” from the past with a “compulsion to repeat” but also provides an “attractor” from the future, “an anticipation shaping current behaviour” (Fisher 19). The symptomatic dimensions of the golden past and its percolation down to present cultural production echoes in the popular imagination. Interestingly, this conflation of past, present, and future is also present in Western SF. To give just two examples: the arc of *Battlestar Galactica* (2004) ends in Earth’s past and *Star Wars* (1977) begins a long time ago (even though if it is in a galaxy, far, far away). This, again, can be explained by Chattopadhyay’s mythologerm, “the site of a struggle between closed scientific tradition—which can be defined in national, racial, cultural, and even gendered terms—and the historicity of scientific knowledge as a continuous entanglement across time among nations and peoples to which no single culture or tradition can lay claim” (438). These divergences now lead us to the antekaal thesis, which identifies four nodes of how ISFE negotiates temporalities.

The Antekaal Awakens: Before and Against Time, End-of-time, and Eternal Time

The past arrives at the doorstep of our today, and then creates a tomorrow, a process that continues till the kingdom come – at which point spacetime (or perhaps, consciousness capable of perceiving time), either ceases to be, or merges with the divine and becomes ‘eternal’.



Fold the line into a circle now, and ask yourself: how does the future fare when the conception of spacetime is not linear but helical (despite being cyclical)? As evidenced earlier, this ‘circular’ cycle is actually a helix, (a version of Yeatsian gyre). Not only should territorial integrity of this (past \Leftrightarrow future) unified India be (re)claimed in the popular imagination, it should also lead to and follow from a ‘Rama Rajya’, the double of the ‘golden past’, under the aesthetic/political hegemon of Hindutva – thereby necessitating the application of sutures of future, which link variable visions and versions of India’s futures to mythic semantics elements and a majoritarian-prime syntax. They not only connect indigenous futurisms to their national/civilizational pasts, but also locate India as the arche of all science and technology, an act which consciously interpolates science in myth, history in *itihasa*, and technology in the fantastic. This is a result of India’s popular imagination insisting on *not* viewing the past, present and future as hermetically-sealed, stable locations of existence, but as recurring cycles of decay (or its totality, the ouroboros radioactivity), which, create their own spirals/helices.

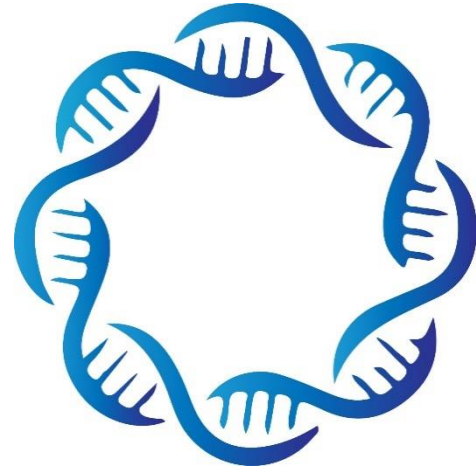
Eternal recurrence within the multiverse become a paradox. The gravity-distorted spacetime and helical loops are a feature of dharmic/Hindu eschatology that divides time into four Yugas. Satya Yuga, Treta Yuga, Dwapara Yuga and Kali Yuga. Romila Thapar finds that the Yuga not only refers to “the notion of a natural cycle and was therefore benign and harmonious”, but also connotes “a variety of bi-polarities – good and evil, divine and human,

life and death” (qtd. in Basu 221). For Arvind Sharma, “each phase of such manifestation has its beginning and end, followed by an equally long period when it remains dormant—until the cycle starts again. Within this large cycle there is another cycle during the period of its manifestation, as one Age succeeds another” (“Philosophy”). These polarities reappear in how each distinct era is followed by another in a never-ending cycle of ever-lasting recurrence, a degenerative (though not fatalistic) cycle that repeats itself infinitely, though in a different spacetime – this may echo Nietzschean eternal recurrence but differs in terms of its fundamental being. The linear stability of ontologically ephemeral temporal moments in these futures destabilizes when examined in four dimensions, that is, when viewed vis-à-vis spacetime in a changing multiverse; it accentuates an interminable cosmic ‘helical cyclicity’ of enduring continuation. It may be cyclical and self-repetitive, but, when mapped, this movement is helical in spacetime. Its loop is both self-repeating and eternally recurring, yet, leads to a different state each time. With the ‘quanta of energy’ being the ultimate constituents of the world for Nietzsche, can these recurring states be viewed as “configurations of simultaneously existing material, static, immutable elements”, or if they can be perceived as “simultaneously occurring values of energy” which avoid a “misplaced concreteness”? (Pfeiffer 279, 281).

The imaginary predictions dependent on any algorithmic and predictable *telos* implode in the face of a quantum-mechanics-tinged interpretation of the yugas. India’s futures in its SF are quantum-helices: they are neither (solely) extensions of the present, nor simple derivatives of ancient pasts; they can also be those *very* moments from our past(s) which are relived in futures, which both deny and celebrate a misplaced concreteness, and despite being generated by the same algorithm, appear to be different entities. However, it also “becomes meaningless to speak of a particular, definite, fixed state of the universe” and “of the return of such a state” as “there are no permanent, self-identical, static elements” so “there are no

recurring configurations of these elements” (Pfeffer 281). Likewise, these futures can even be the present/futures of other yugas – based on a conception of criss-crossing, quantum yugas, which keep on generating newer universes and worldlines. *The Kaurava Empire* (2014) is an example of this.

The shift from three dimensions (x, y, z) to four (x, y, z and t), from circular to helical, from myth to science/philosophy, from past to future, from classical to quantum, and from cyclical nature or *laksan* to helical being or *dravya* in ISFE is exploited by the ‘antekaal thesis’, which also draws from nodes



of SF/neo-empire, religion/politics, history/myth and time/progress, nodes which permeate contemporary ISFE. Examples may range from the cross-temporal (narrative/semantic) movements manifested in Vandana Singh’s “Somadeva: A Sky River Sutra” and Priya Sarukkai Chabria’s non-human narratives from across time and space in *Clone*.

Time for Aristotle revolves around the “number of motions in respect of ‘before’ and ‘after’” (qtd. in Gupta 189); Madhyamika Buddhism finds “no justification for the recognition of a present and a future [and past] time” (Kalupahana 188); and Bergson finds time to be “a flow involving past, present, future, and an experience of existing within that flow” and considers “memory” and “projections” from the realms of past and future (*Heidegger* 75, 76) – to cite examples from three philosophical traditions. If one bypasses the debates around the nature of time – whether it is linear, cyclical, helical, quantum, or even non-existent – and focus on how the past and future operate in ISFE, then one has to shift from three dimensions to four, from mythic to quasi/proto-science, and from the present of the text to the past ⇌ future of the reader.

Arguably, a phenomenon (say, a novum) occurs when/where it is supposed to have occurred, such as, the discovery of radioactivity in 1896 CE – adhering thus to a historical reality principle – and leads to a kind of SF that may explore the impact such a breakthrough. However, the phenomenon/novum can radically unsettle the milieu of its production and consumption when it appears at spatiotemporal coordinates not determined or recognized by consensual reality – such as, radioactivity discovered in 1096 CE (which is common as a lot of SF based in the future or alternate locations).

This specific disruption within the flow of time is exploited by the *antekaal*, especially as a play on four disrupting temporalities (apart from the more social science-fictional phenomenon-as-per-its-time). Inspired by the polyphony and eclectic nature of the subject-matter it is meant to explicate, the nomenclatural underpinnings of antekaal yoke together not only Latin ‘ante’ and Sanskrit ‘kaal’ (time/period), thus meaning *before time*, but also the Greek ‘anti’ with ‘kaal’, that is, *against time*; they also fuse Sanskrit/Hindi and Persian/Urdu in ‘ant-e-kaal’, that is, the *end of time* with the Hindi *anantkaal* (eternal time). This quadralectic between *before time* (ante), *against time* (anti), the *end of time* (ant) and *eternal time* (anant) defines the function, dynamics, mechanics, and scope of antekaal (*Star Warriors* 104) – and work alongside the epistemic frameworks of novum-as-per-time. The four nodes of antekaal operate in clusters of two each: the metaphorical dimensions of ‘before’ and ‘against’ time work together and so do those indicated by the ‘end of time’ and ‘eternal time’.

One, the antekaal (ante) as in ‘before period/time’ foregrounds a phenomenon temporally present before it is supposed to manifest itself in time and history – a forced spatiotemporal interpolation that becomes a disruption in the ontic and ontological alike. Such a disruption binds future(s) to its past, one full of possibilities and technological prowess, which ultimately becomes a new *arche* for today, a template of a new today. Warring Hindu gods nuking each other thousands of year ago in *Vimana* is an example (Dhar 1-3): for if a

civilization is portrayed as having possessed nuclear weapons millennia ago then its present is considered a devolution. The present becomes a devolution of a pure, hyper-advanced state that existed in the ancient times; the golden past heralds a new arche that has the potentiality to construct a new today.

Two: the antekaal (anti) as in ‘against period/time’ entails that not only does the phenomenon precede its ‘agreed upon’ location, but its mere presence throws an ideological gauntlet at dominant and residual epistemological or normative frameworks. The discovery of a “new” time-before fundamentally reorients the way that our today is perceived. The golden past becomes a tool of ethno-nationalistic reassertion in this case. For example, Rahil in *Signal Red* asserts how the (Muslim) Mughals robbed (Hindu) India’s knowledge and sold it to ‘unworthy’ recipients such as the Europeans (Chatterjee 22–3); thus, western science and civilization are portrayed as borrowing from the original Hindu knowledge systems. The being of time – as promulgated by the dominant powers today – is challenged by a blast from the past.

When taken together, the ‘ante’ and ‘anti’ operate together in a cluster that projects novel present(s) via rediscovered pasts ⇌ futures. The play between the no-longer-there, the not-yet-happened and that-which-must-surely-be-reclaimed necessitates application of the sutures of futures to a “nation culturally predisposed to[wards] the fantastic” (Samit Basu). The future in ISFE – and thus, of the reader – is not only what lies ahead in the spacetime manifold based on today, but also what a civilization has left behind *and* what is bound to be relived again (though perhaps not in a manner of one’s own choosing). Perhaps there can be no future *ex nihilo*, only versions of the past, projected forwards again and again – a spacetime loop that adheres to a cyclical nature but whose being is helical – strands of an r-DNA that keep on mutating as per an ostensibly stochastic pattern.

Three: the antekaal (ant-e-kaal) as the ‘end of time’ heralds a fatalistic telos – which precipitates quests to stop the apocalypse(s) undertaken by the protagonists in the ISFE narratives. This node is influenced by a linear and stable temporality and closes possibilities of rejuvenation and renewal due to a dead-end after which projections of future – and the future itself – fail, perhaps in the same way as it is difficult to see beyond a technological singularity. For example, the Maoist-Islamist terrorists in *Baramulla Bomber* – and their plan to attack a UN concert in Oslo – represent a threat that must be prevented at all costs as it can lead to a state of no return (Prasad 276-82). *Gods of War* (2009) sketches another temporal full-stop: a ‘War of all the Worlds’ that is being fought at *Lokaloka* between the forces of darkness and light; *all* time is under threat of extinction unless the war is won by the forces of good (Banker 50). These are the worldlines in which time – and being – is threatened with *the* absolute end.

Four: the former temporality is complemented by anantkaal as in ‘eternal time’, where, rather than being terminated, time is characterized by helical recurrence of a phenomenon. For example, the Boys of Vishnu reappear at various moments in history to save the world (*Toke* 208) and Kalki’s attempts to rule the world promise both an end and a rejuvenation (*Vimana* 93). This eternalism is built on a civilization’s ‘ouroboros radioactivity’ that system restores a civilization to its original factory setting at the end of its decay cycle, that is, the civilization/system inches towards its original/zero state with physical/temporal movement across the process of its decay.

The temporalities emanating from end-of-time and eternal time often intertwine since the reclaiming, reinventing, repeating, and requiting new yesterdays *and* tomorrows come across as not just extensions of the past but *as* versions of the pasts themselves. These pasts exist in eternal (helical) recurrences relived in futures – despite being generated by the same algorithm, they are different processes as the actants have changed. The linear stability of ontologically ephemeral temporal moments destabilizes when examined in four dimensions –

it often accentuates an interminable cosmic helical cyclicity of enduring continuation, whose fractal movement is both self-repeating and eternally recurring, and yet, leads to a different state each time.

Moreover, there can be multiple vantage points to construct such a revivalist arche: for example, while Dhar's *Vimana* locates a golden past in Western India (of 13,000 BCE), JV Jayakumar's *Rise of the Cholas* (2019) locates a golden past in the Chola Empire of Southern India (around 1000 CE) and features a Tamil king who travels to the future (our present) to save the planet from a black hole (1). Also, India is not the only civilization to apotheosize non-linearity; Friedrich Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal recurrence states that "a recurrence of past configurations becomes necessary" over time (qtd. in Pfeffer 278).

As manifested by the four nodes of the antekaal, ISFE negotiates temporalities through its eclectic operations, and locates how era and ages are linked via space and time. The nodes of antekaal are simultaneously tethered to a past, present and a future (though not always in that order) and generate sutures of future that links divergent temporalities, cultural production, popular imagination, and political ideologies. Antekaal emerges as an extension of Chattopadhyay's mythologerm on which a tincture of Derrida's hauntology and a civilization's (helical) ouroboros radioactivity has been applied.

Lastly, while postcolonial SF may be the site and action of "decolonizing" the future (Langer, 8), it may also result in a "recolonisation, whereby the dominant western discourses (of the present) are replaced by Hindutva-centric ones (from the past), as Banerjee also notes" (*Star Warriors* 57-58). The essay observed how ISFE's negotiations vis-à-vis (emergent) technologies, (neoimperial) ideologies, and (global) market forces during a sustained attack on India's founding Nehruvian ideals underscores a totality that looks at the past as a compulsion to re-enact, views the present as a site of revolutionary change, and yearns towards the future

as a mytho-religious utopia. These temporalities negotiate India's pluralistic, multicultural core by creating alternate discourses of resistance and remembering that rewire the assemblages of knowledge/power in a multipolar world – and ISFE approaches the golden past with either joyous apotheosis, or subtle subversion, or vehement denial. The fictional tendencies in ISFE are often contoured by eclectic mythologies and political ideologies and the antekaal – through its nodes that negotiate streams of temporalities – gives a glimpse into how contemporary cultural production hybridizes mythic and science fictional semantics with an ethnonationalist-driven and commercial syntax. These reinterpretations of and in ISFE both terrorize – and enrapture – our present time-stream(s).

Acknowledgements: This essay is a part of a project that has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 101023313. The author owes a debt of gratitude to Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay, Ashutosh Mohan and Vivek Sachdeva.

Works Cited

- Banerjee, Neelanjana. "Exile". *Breaking the Bow: Speculative Fiction inspired by the Ramayana*. Anil Menon and Vandana Singh (eds.) Zubaan, 2012. Pp. 12-37
- Banerjee, Suparno. *Other Tomorrows: Postcoloniality, Science Fiction and India*, doctoral thesis, Louisiana State University, 2010.
- Banker, Ashok. *Gods of War*. Penguin, 2009.
- Basu, Anustup. *Mantras of the Metropole: Geo-televisuality and Contemporary Indian Cinema*, doctoral thesis, University of Pittsburgh, 2005.

Basu, Samit. "The Trousers of Time". *Samitbasu.com*, 4 July 2006. URL: <http://samitbasu.com/2006/07/04/the-trousers-of-time-possible-futures-of-indian-speculative-fiction-in-english> (accessed 25 March 2021).

Battlestar Galactica. Dev. Ronald D. Moore, NBC, 2004.

Bould, Mark and Vint, Sherryl. *The Routledge Concise History of Science Fiction*. Routledge, 2011.

Chatterjee, Rimi. *Signal Red*. Creative Commons, 2005(Penguin)/2011. E-Book.

Chattopadhyay, Bodhisattva. "Kalpavigyan and Imperial Technoscience: Three Nodes of an Argument". *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2017), pp. 102-122

Chattopadhyay, Bodhisattva. "On the Mythologerm: Kalpavigyan and the Question of Imperial Science". *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 3, Indian SF (November 2016), 435-458.

Chowdhury, Shovon. *The Competent Authority*. Aleph, 2013.

Clark, Prasad. *Baramulla Bomber*. Niyogi, 2013.

Collins, Jeff and Howard Selina. *Heidegger: A Graphic Guide*. Icon, 2010.

Csicsery-Ronay Jr., Istvan. *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*. Wesleyan University Press, 2008.

Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., Istvan. "Science Fiction and Empire". *Science Fiction Studies*, July 2003, 30/2, Social Science Fiction (Jul., 2003), pp. 231-245, URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4241171>

Datta, Sukanya. "A Little Learning", *Worlds Apart*. National Book Trust, 2012). pp. 36–78.

Datta, Sukanya. "Gem of a Story". *Worlds Apart*. National Book Trust, 2012. pp. 201–39.

- Deb, Debraj. "Internet dates back to Mahabharat: CM". *The Telegraph*. 18/04/2018, URL: <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/internet-dates-back-to-mahabharat-cm/cid/1342310> (accessed 19/05/2021)
- Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, translated by Peggy Kamuf, Routledge, 1994.
- Dhar, Mainak. *Vimana*. Penguin, 2012.
- Dillon, Grace. "Introduction", *Walking the Clouds*. Arizona University Press, 2012. pp.1–12.
- Disch, T. "Mythology and Science Fiction." *On SF*. University of Michigan Press. URL: <https://www.press.umich.edu/pdf/9780472068968-3.pdf>, 2005 (accessed 15/08/2021)
- Fisher, Mark. "What Is Hauntology?" *Film Quarterly*, 66/1 (Fall 2012), 16–24.
- Freedman, Carl. "Science Fiction and Critical Theory". *Science Fiction Studies*, 14/ 2 (July 1987), 180–200.
- Gupta, RK. "What is Heidegger's Notion of Time?" *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 1960, Vol. 14/ 52 (2) (1960), pp. 163-193. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23940118>
- Harder, Hans. "Indian and International: Some Examples of Marathi Science Fiction Writing", *South Asia Research*, 21/1 (2001), 105–19.
- Hulan, R. "Margaret Atwood in Search of Things Past" *Canadian Historical Writing*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. URL: https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137398895_3
- Jayakumar, JV. *Rise of the Cholas: Apocalypse*. Notion Press, 2019.
- Joshi, Ruchir. *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh*. Harper Collins, 2001.

- Kalupahana, David J. "The Buddhist Conception of Time and Temporality". *Philosophy East and West*, Apr., 1974, Vol. 24, No. 2, pp. 181-191. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1398021> (accessed 16/10/2021)
- Khan, Sami Ahmad. *Star Warriors of the Modern Raj: Materiality, Mythology and Technology of Indian Science Fiction*. University of Wales Press, 2021.
- Kishore, Swapna. "Regressions". *Breaking the Bow: Speculative Fiction inspired by the Ramayana*. Anil Menon and Vandana Singh (eds.) Zubaan, 2012. pp. 230-254.
- Luckhurst, Roger, 'The Many Deaths of Science Fiction: A Polemic', *Science Fiction Studies*, 21/1 (1994), 35–50.
- Mehan, Uppinder. "Domestication of Science in Indian Science Fiction Short Stories". *Foundation*, 74 (Autumn 1998), 54–66.
- Menon, Anil, and Vandana Singh. eds. *Breaking the Bow*. Zubaan, 2012.
- Mody, Jugal. *Toke*. Harper Collins, 2012.
- Nandy, Ashis. "History's Forgotten Doubles", *History and Theory*, 34/2 (May, 1995), pp. 44–66.
- Padmanabhan, Manjula. *Escape*. Picador, 2008.
- Pfeffer, Rose. "Eternal Recurrence in Nietzsche's Philosophy". *The Review of Metaphysics*, Dec., 1965, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Dec., 1965), pp. 276-300, URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20124111>
- Rieder, John. *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*. Wesleyan University Press, 2008.
- Sagan, Carl, *Cosmos*. Ballantine, 2013.

- Savitt, Steven, "Being and Becoming in Modern Physics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/spacetime-bebecome> (accessed 01/01/2021)
- Saint, Tarun. "A Visit to Partition World". *The Gollancz Book of South Asian Science Fiction*. Tarun Saint (ed.) Hachette, 2019. Pp 95-106
- Sharma, Arvind. "On the Difference Between Hinduism and Hindutva". *Asian Studies*. Volume 25:1 (Spring 2020) Asian Philosophies and Religions. pg. 43-47 URL: <https://www.asianstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/on-the-difference-between-hinduism-and-hindutva.pdf>, (accessed 01/09/2021)
- Sharma, Kritika. 'In engineering courses soon: Wright brothers didn't invent plane, batteries existed in Vedic age'. *The Print*. 26/09/2018. URL: <https://theprint.in/governance/in-engineering-courses-soon-wright-brothers-didnt-invent-plane-batteries-existed-in-vedic-age/124540/> (accessed 28/7/2021)
- Singh, Vandana. "Oblivion: A Journey". *Ambiguity Machines and Other Stories*. Small Beer Press, 2018. Pp 81-106
- Singh, Vandana. "With Fate Conspire". *Ambiguity Machines and Other Stories*. Small Beer Press, 2018. Pp 1-24
- Srinath, Perur. "The Crater of Kiru" *Strange World! Strange Times*. Vinayak Varma (ed.) Speaking Tiger, 2018. Pp 19-32
- Star Wars: A New Hope*. Dir. Lucas, George. Lucasfilm, 1977.
- Varughese, E. Dawson, *Genre Fiction of New India: Post-millennial receptions of 'weird' narratives*. Routledge, 2017.