The Indian Recipe for Good Science Fiction: Technology, Politics, and Religion

(Sami Ahmad Khan)

Source: "The Recipe for Good Indian Science Fiction: Technology, Politics and Religion." *Worlds of Difference: Arab and Muslim SF*. Ed. By Elzembely and Aysha. McFarland (2022)

ESSF: You have a PhD in science fiction. What was your thesis statement?

I worked on Indian Science Fiction (written in English) at Jawaharlal Nehru University's Centre for English Studies. I focused on how extrapolations/projections/speculations (in Indian-English SF) were responses to specific historical events, and how the themes of these narratives drew attention to the contemporary material realities of a developing India. In a nutshell, after studying the socio-political aspects of select SF texts, I located how Indian English SF writers – through their narratives – reinterpreted, reworked, and addressed maladies prevalent today. For example, Shovon Chowdhury's *The Competent Authority* satirizes multiple social evils such as communalism, casteism, red-tape, corruption, xenophobia, etc. Rimi Chatterjee's *Signal Red* and Priya Sarukkai Chabria's *Generation 14* paint dystopias borne out of political/genetic/religious fundamentalism and highlight not just the suffering of individuals under repressive regimes but also how resistance to such exploitative power structures is universal and intrinsic to human nature.

ESSF: How long have you been writing?

Everyone feels and thinks, whether consciously or not. If one can think, imagine or feel it, then one wants to express it. Some sing, some dance, some paint, and some write. Although there are multiple modes available for such expressions, I write simply because the act makes me happy. It always has. I started writing stories in school itself. As a child, I remember staring at the star-studded skies for hours at a stretch. I used to squint at the distant planets in the hopes of finding any movement. My earliest SF memory is from primary school, when I read about a space battle in a Hindi comic book I got my hands on while visiting my grandmother's village during the summer vacations. It changed the way I saw the world. Suddenly the home-school-home-playground-home-school routine started looking so mundane, so insignificant to me. We're such tiny specks in the universe, *ashraful makhluqat* or not.[i] I started creating worlds in my head where life – as we didn't know it – existed. Thus began a journey which continues till today.

While I wrote a few pieces in school, my first (major) SF publication was a one-act play about time-travel I wrote in my first year of BA: it was published in *Science Reporter*, India's leading science magazine brought out by the government. After a few other short stories over the next few years, my first novel *Red Jihad* came out in 2012. It was a political thriller set in India's troubled red-corridor and questioned the menace of terrorism. I kept

writing SF – and on SF – since I am a researcher on this genre/mode. This led me to *Aliens in Delhi*.

A long time ago, I was driving around Raisina Hill (India's Capitol Hill) on a rather balmy evening. As the fierce sun set, traffic personnel, yellow police barricades, and security forces lined the streets in order to facilitate the top brass returning home after a hard day at work. Red-beaconed convoys slipped past me, and frenetic police whistles burrowed in my ears. I saw Rashtrapati Bhawan (President's House) and Sansad Bhawan (Parliament House) in the distance, and a web of interconnected questions immediately sprang to my mind. Why is the security beefed up like this? I got my answer in one word: terrorism. Half-jokingly, I started to ponder over threats worse than the usual terrestrial 'others'. Why don't, I asked myself, aliens visit India? What if Jadoo (the happy, helpful alien from *Koi…Mil Gaya*) landed in India one day – except this time, it wanted us all dead? What would India do to when aliens attack? *Aliens in Delhi* emerged out of such a speculative exercise, fusing SF with genre thriller. Interestingly, in much of 'western' SF, the hostile/invading alien is a thinly veiled representation of the 'menace from the Orient', that is, the geographical location I write out of, and I was curious to know who would constitute the other/alien for those who *themselves* are regarded as aliens – at least by western pulp SF.

ESSF: What drew you to science fiction specifically?

Perhaps because SF is a genre/mode that ideates, interrogates and speculates about the problematic interfaces between technology, humanity and social realities, and this becomes all the more pivotal in our times where, for example, a cell phone not only makes phone calls but can as easily incite a riot or a revolution. SF emerges as a software that recalibrates the readers' mind so as to counter fundamentalism, extremism and parochialism by portraying the existence of a plurality of voices and viewpoints, and by showcasing dystopian futures. I am intrigued by the infinite possibilities of SF. That being said, I don't just write SF to make this world a better place. Maybe that will happen later. I write it because it's *fun*. That's why pulp speaks to me the most – both as a reader and a writer. Since it's the act of writing that gives me the kicks, it's empowering to think that the ice-cream joint you visit weekly might soon have an ominous UFO poised over it. What will happen then? How would the ice-cream guy react? What would I do? What would a kid next-door do? How would the constable at the corner react? I then proceed to think along similar lines, and conjure up a narrative that is impossible, but extremely thrilling to envision!

ESSF: What kind of SF did you grow up with?

I didn't read any local SF writers while growing up, sadly. A major influence when I was in high school was popular western SF, primarily French and American. The only Indian SF I remember till my BA was Satyajit Ray's unforgettable Professor Shonku. However, I realized in post-graduation that fantastic (SF) work has already been done in Indian regional languages for over a century now. India is country of a billion people and a thousand

languages. The fault was mine – I was limited by English, the medium of instruction in school, and had unwittingly neglected other languages: a colonial hangover. It was only much later I realized that Indian SF has had a substantial creative and critical corpus, one that can be termed even richer and deeper than (present) Indian English SF. For example, Sujatha in Tamil, Jayant Narlikar in Marathi, DC Goswami in Assamese, Ray in Bangla, are just a few iconic writers who are revered across many Indian states, cultures and languages. I finally read English translations of some of them in university, and realized the SF scene in India had been thriving for a long time – it was I who was ignorant of the situation, thanks to the language barrier. Here, I must concede right away that this conversation is about Indian SF written in English, and acknowledges its limitations of not being able to engage with SF in other Indian languages. That being said, I must point out that SF in Indian English still doesn't have the same critical mass as it has in other Indian languages despite notable work in it, and that's something I want to work upon – as a writer and researcher both. Returning to your question, I am a huge fan of *Star Trek, Star Wars, Doctor Who,* and *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. These were the texts that made me fall in love with SF in the first place. I respect how SF, while being full of space battles and laser guns and experiments gone wrong etc., somehow also ends up commenting on the world we live in, thereby indirectly telling us to take better care of the world around us. We've got just one planet. Fighting injustice, standing up for human rights, exploring strange new worlds to initiate peaceful contact – these are some of the themes which drive the abovementioned texts forward. Writing SF, as I earlier said, is also fun, even if politically catatonic! After all, who wouldn't want to read about evil bug eyed monsters from outer space trying to seize your popular haunts?

ESSF: Are the readers, critics and publishers in India cordial to the genre? Is writing SF a challenge?

I would say yes, writing SF is a challenge – just as reading it is, with its absent paradigms (Angenot)[ii] and Subjunctivity (Delany)[iii]. Many see SF as a genre imported from the 'West'. I don't. Indian SF has had its own history and tradition, and isn't 'new' here. As I have argued elsewhere (*Star Warriors of the Modern Raj*): the question whether SF is a recent import to India or if it has a long history of adoption and adaptation that pre-dates its currently presumed 'westernised' avatar, ravels more strands than it unravels. To locate an unbiased evolutionary history of Indian SF, one has to be equidistant from two separate approaches. The first perceives Indian SF as a recently imported form that has started to be used by our writers of late, a form that merely imitates western SF (for example, viewing *Koi… Mil Gaya* as mere copying of *ET*). The second believes that SF has been present in India since times immemorial: it regards SF as a fairly old mode in India, one whose examples can be found in Indian classical/mythological texts (the approach that sees *brahmastras* as nuclear weapons). I differ from them both. SF may not be as old as the Indian classics, but it is also not as new; it is not a reflection of its western counterpart, nor is it a direct import from the west. Indian SF may be a relatively new form, but it is indigenous, and most scholars today regard SF to have been available in Indian articulation for some time now. Though I concede that Indian

SF in English has not had the same share of critical and creative successes that SF enjoys in other regional languages. While this situation is fast changing, Indian SF in English still has a lot of uncharted space to explore. It is also true that getting an SF text (in English) out is relatively more difficult than, say, romance/mythology in these times. Constrained by prevailing market forces, publishers are often a bit reluctant about SF since they feel it will not 'sell'. Sometimes escaping the limitations imposed by market forces becomes imperative. Also, as Indians turn to yet more forms/modes of writing, SF is on the rise. Moreover, good stories always have a market (irrespective of their genre). The time is ripe for Indian SF in English getting more visibility and acceptance. This is also manifest in the rise of *Mithila Review* and *Kalpabiswa*, two important SFF magazines from India. Two more organisations dedicated to SF in India are the Indian Science Fiction Writers' Association (ISFWA) and the Indian Association for Science Fiction Studies (IASFS): both are doing stellar work. They also organize conferences etc. on SF, and seek to popularise the writing and critical reading of SF.

ESSF: Can SF face up to fantasy?

Here I would like to use an example I often cite: it involves *Star Trek*, *Harry Potter* and *Thor*. Speculative Fiction (SpecFic) can be seen as an umbrella term for the literatures of 'What if' and includes genres such as Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Mythology etc. All these genres construct alternate realities which deviate from realist narratives (hence categorised under speculative fiction, which 'speculates'), worlds which are not real in nature, and only their operating mechanisms make them different from each other despite having similar narratives themes and phenomena. A person might travel from point A to point B in an instant in a SpecFic text. In Fantasy, this might be due to 'floo power/apparition' (*Harry Potter*), in SF this might be explained by teleportation (*Star Trek*), and in mythology this might be the result of the will of a divine being (Bifröst in *Thor*). While events remains the same (instantaneous travel between two points), the *way* they are described determine whether the text is classified as SF or F. I see them both as twins. Both SF and Fantasy can be viewed as falling under the umbrella term of Speculative Fiction, and I don't perceive them as locked in a perpetual battle of binary opposition. In fact, they meet more than they differ, as the growing SFF in the world exhibits.

ESSF: Even in the marketplace and among the critics?

Critics judge a text by its literary merit, not genre – at least that's what I'd like to believe. So yes, SF can face up to fantasy in the eyes of the critics (whether it has to is a different question since I don't think we need to see SF and F as existing at opposite poles, engaged in an antagonistic relationship). As for the marketplace, it all depends on the prevailing mood of the readership, and shaping this mood are various factors – what's being produced, how is it being marketed, what about the target audiences, what are the existing spaces for 'growth', what contours the demand-supply chain etc. Writing, especially popular writing, is being

shaped not merely by the merit of the text, but by how it is deployed in the market, and to what effect. I personally feel this is precisely why SF must strive to escape the clutches of such market forces but at the same time use the market to carve a space for itself.

ESSF: How receptive is the English-language market to an Indian SF writer?

Gollancz has recently come out with two volumes of South Asian Science Fiction – the first volume has my story "15004" and the second has "Biryani Bagh". However, the market is receptive to SF but perhaps not as much as romance, mythology or other genres. Even a casual reading of Indian SpecFic writers reinforces the belief that SF isn't just a pulp form: Indian SF in English can also be layered, aesthetic, politically-conscious, and aware of the paradigms of oppression and exploitation. Many Indian writers in English use SF to highlight social evils. To cite four examples: Vandana Singh's *The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet and Other Stories* critiques, among other things, India's patriarchy, gender violence, and regressive perspectives towards women. Mainak Dhar's *Zombiestan* indicts terrorism, mindless violence and religious fundamentalism; Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* questions patriarchy, totalitarianism and male chauvinism; and Anil Menon's *The Beast with Nine Billion Feet* interrogates the ramifications of profit-driven, nature-bending global capitalism. In short, the kind of SF that is worthy of being canonized, and one which commands English-language market to receive it with open arms. However, at the other end of the spectrum, Indian English SF also has pulp narratives which have no pretensions of aesthetic or political superiority and unabashedly celebrate the pulp nature of SF. Both these variants end up enriching the scope and nature of Indian English SF.

ESSF: How important is 'religion' as a theme and backdrop to your writing?

It isn't for me. While I have studied how *other* Indian SF writers in English are conscious of religious paradigms in their works, I don't really ponder over the 'religion vs. science' question in my creative writing. I do that in my critical writing. I have, for example, authored two research papers on religion/gods in Indian SF which are presently hosted by *Fafnir* and MOSF's *Journal of Science Fiction*; they are titled "Goddess Sita Mutates Indian Mythology into Science Fiction" and "*Gods of War Toke* While Riding a *Vimana*" respectively. In essence, this is a question that I have asked of others, but not of me, since personally, I am happy delinking my writing till now from religion, though this may change in the future.

ESSF: Would you say that this pitting of religion against science is a Western construction and not necessarily something evident in the experiences of other cultures?

I would say that Indian SF breaks away from the conception of pitting science against religion. Even the west has its own Lords of Light, a la Roger Zelazny. In Indian SF, science usually complements religion, not counters it – though there are no hard and fast rules. I'd

like to mention *Joker* (Kunder 2012) here as an example, a Bollywood film which features an Indian space scientist (Agastya) who seeks to locate ET life in an US Lab. Agastya is forced to return to his village (Paglapur) in India because of his father's ill-health; the village itself has been forgotten by various state governments, and is plagued by scarcity of water, electricity etc. Agastya comes up with a development plan to transform his village into a tourist destination and builds crop-circles in the nearby fields. Some villagers even dress as aliens and roam in the nearby jungle to corroborate the alien story. While the deception is successful at first, it is ultimately caught, and Paglapur and Agastya face ridicule. Shorn of all hope, the villagers pray and seek divine intervention. In a deus ex machina, an *actual* ET lands in Paglapur in a UFO that is shaped like a Shiva-Linga (a Hindu religious symbol and a manifestation of God). Paglapur becomes the centre of attention once again. I'd like to quote from a research paper of mine:

> *Joker* …is the only contemporary film to bring back aliens and takes the fusion between science and divinity to a whole new level… *Joker* depicts the failure of socio-economic developmental models that focus on urban industrialization at the expense of rural consolidation. Not only is the alien-ship based on a mythological shape (no wonder the manifestation of mythological in Bollywood SF films has now become an important axis around which contemporary analysis revolves), the movie has political underpinnings too, thereby uniting Indian materiality and mythology.
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> (Khan, 2014: 198).

I then proceed to utilize Prof. Rick Altman's frame of reference in the paper and conclude that perhaps Bollywood SF films (and Indian SF, where faith/belief is always as important as science) have all the semantic elements of SF (aliens, spaceships, hi-tech laboratories etc.), but they are arranged in a syntax that is not always regarded as SF by producers in other cultural, linguistic and geographical locations. This hybridization ensures discrete structures (of mythology) are perused to create a space-ship that looks like a Shiva-Linga (*Joker*), a separate form of communication devised to emit an "Om" which then aids in First Contact (*Koi… Mil Gaya*), and an alien invasion (modelled on aliens invasions in Hollywood) is turned on its head when the invaders turn out to be from a neighbouring country, not planet (*Wahan Ke Log*). It seems as if Bollywood is comfortable with a science that is either rooted in a mythological past, or is derived from it.

ESSF: Is the kind of SF you wrote in America different than the kind you write in India? Basically, is where you live have an effect on your imagination?

Geography always gives a local tinge to the narrative being produced, apart from, of course, providing different target audiences. Even while writing SF, one would think about how the society one lives in responds to science, and how science permeates the minds of the people. Geography and cultural context were of paramount interest in my head when I was writing my second novel. Why didn't, I asked myself, aliens visit India? Why did they always go to the US or Europe? A repressed, post-colonial angst raged within me. India is a thriving

democracy, a rising superpower, and a country of more than a billion people. Are we not *good* enough to deserve being invaded by aliens? Moreover, how *exactly* would a hostile alien race proceed to conquer earth? Lastly, how would the Indian state apparatus respond to such a horrifying eventuality? It all began as a joke in my mind– and became a military-SF-thriller with the passage of time. As of now, I am working on a zombie story set in Oslo.

ESSF: Those are the exact same sentiments of Neill Blomkamp's *District 9*. Do you believe that science fiction can help put the Third World on the global agenda?

That's precisely my point. Or perhaps its exact opposite. The Third World doesn't need to be intentionally hoisted to the global stage – it already *is* the global stage by the virtue of its people. The developing world doesn't need to play according to anyone else's tune on any stage. We're writing for ourselves, and we surely don't need any external validation from anyone else. If we think we do – then we're still colonized mentally.

ESSF: Bollywood is bigger than Hollywood. Is there a thriving SF movie industry in India and can locally made SF cinema help popularise SF in Third World countries?

The qualitative and quantitative presence of SF in Bollywood is negligible when compared to Hollywood. Despite massive film production, not many SF films have been produced by Bollywood[iv]. The fact that it is the voice of a nation that is increasingly viewing science as the panacea to all issues merely deepens this paradox, as I argue in *Bollywood and its Other(s)*. The whys of it are interesting, and I'll briefly skim over a few reasons to explain this dearth of SF in Bollywood here (though it would require a full-fledged PhD thesis to answer them fully, perhaps not even then): SF films are expensive to produce as they need special effects and CGI. They may not always be cost-effective. They require advanced technologies to produce. Also, Indian audiences already have a taste of Fantasy and Mythology in their (cultural) lives and Bollywood films utilise this already existing immersion rather than create a new kind of entertainment that SF films provide. However, as I said, things are changing, and with a rising middle-class with more contact with popular western SF, and a desire to try something new, indigenously produced SF is on the rise, and the future looks bright.

ESSF: Do you think SF can play an important role in helping the Muslim world?

I think SF can play an important role in helping the entire world, not just Muslims. We are all human beings, and are driven by the same hopes, dreams, aspirations, fears, and emotions. India, just like the Arab world, has its own ancient civilisation with developments in mathematics, science, astronomy, navigation etc. taking place millennia ago: the precursors to modern-day science. But since SF talks about what it is to be human, and how to retain that humanity in the midst of chaos, it belongs to us all – for all times. That's why I am wary of labels such as Muslim/Christian/Hindu/Right/Left/Hard/Soft SF. Very often these labels,

coined to explain and categorise, start distorting what SF really is. James Gunn established SF as a literature of more than the individual since it talked about threats to humanity, and in doing so, united it. SF emerges as a genre that, unlike others, portrays the whole of civilisation in danger. To top it all, SF becomes mankind's search for itself. This is why it has the potential to help the entire human race. Though yes, SF has the potential to fight against radicalism, extremism, parochialism, and actually does so. I still think SF's larger political goals are directed towards creating a better world and a more conscious human species, and are not just limited to singing paeans to technologically-advanced civilisations, (though even when it does, it is well within its rights to do so).

ESSF: Your story "Operation Mi'raj" got the third prize in the Islamicate SF Short Story Contest (2016). We're all fans of Gandhi, and Nehru, here in the Arab world. Would you say that science fiction creates a space for cross-cultural dialogue?

SF is all about building bridges, about creating a shared tomorrow, about speculating – and then acting – for a better world. However, that being said, the story you mention is about a military operation that is driven by realpolitik rather than humanitarian betterment. It's not as innocuous – it's what happens when you fuse SF with political and war thrillers. It has its dose of (ultra)nationalism too! I engage with SF as someone who loves the pulp-roots of the genre, someone who embraces it, someone who knows SF crawled out of the sewers, and someone who understands that SF's political correctness needn't always be visible – or even present. It all depends on who's writing, why, when, and for whom. That's the beauty of SF: that's why we've even invented labels for all kinds of SF. The ultimate aim is to tell a good story. And what is 'good'? To each his own!

ESSF: Is writing SF a science or an art? How much is research, how inspiration – and where do you get your inspiration from?

It's both – 25% science, and 75% art, as Gernsback also put it. It requires extensive research, yes, but also tremendous amounts of inspiration. I usually get my inspiration from the (depressing) news we see/hear/read every day – daily happenings are much more dystopian than we could have imagined. Not only are we killing each other, we are also killing ourselves with the air we breathe, the food we eat, and the water we drink. We are killing our flora and fauna; and we are killing our planet. It is, sadly, this dystopia in our daily lives that ensures SF is here to stay, for it is in this precise genre/mode that a solution to our problem lies. Extrapolating such future(s) from our (dystopian) today is an exercise that keeps me on my toes: for if we can predict the apocalypse, maybe we can stop it.

ESSF: What do you hope to accomplish when you write?

The act of writing itself gives me the maximum amount of happiness. I don't write for good reviews or commercial success – I hope to get the creative kicks from writing when I'm

building up a narrative. I may have had the honour of being bestowed with a few awards, and the privilege of securing a decent readership and encouraging reviews in the process, but I still think the best compliment is when you read something you wrote years ago, and as you do that, a faint smile tugs at the corners of your lips. You want to read more, and remember what you wrote years ago since it still sounds interesting, crazy – and readable.

ESSF: Advice for us here in the Arab world?

The Arab world has an extremely rich history and boasts of a cultural heritage that spans back to the dawn of man. I look forward to reading more from the Arab world. The universal nature of science meets the local tenor of fiction in SF.

As for promoting SF from an academic perspective: well, not many universities in India offer MA-level courses in SF, but I am happy to share that I taught a course on SF at GGSIP University, Delhi (2020-2021). Let's see what happens in the future! I sincerely hope there is more cross-cultural engagement with each others' SF. Reading about SF from various national, cultural and linguistic paradigms can be extremely enriching and enlightening.

ESSF: Future plans?

The intersection of religious and political ideologies in Science Fiction fascinates me. My latest book (*Star Warriors of the Modern Raj*) comes up with an 'IN situ model' that advances three nodes vis-à-vis the space, time and being of India's SF: the 'transMIT thesis' evidences how Indian SF transmits (emergent) technologies, (sedimented) mythologies and (mutating) ideologies across/through its narratives; the 'antekaal thesis' interrogates the ruptured temporalities of Indian SF; and the 'neoMONSTERS thesis' approaches marginalisation-monsterization as contingent on specific material realities. Presently, I am on a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Fellowship at the University of Oslo, Norway, where I work towards evolving the neoMONSTERS– mutating/mutagenic ontological narratives in space-time echoing realistic situations–thesis. I hope to comprehend how monstrosity/alterity are deployed in India's SF, and how these others/monsters become about the demons within and without. Perhaps this might help, in its own insignificant way, towards vanquishing the ghouls of violence, fanaticism, xenophobia and bigotry that plague our world today.

ESSF: A science fiction question. If you could go backwards in time and meet Rudyard Kipling and EM Forster, what would you tell them?

Kim, the Indian SF machine will *not* stop![v]

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Acknowledgement: This chapter 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.

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[i] This is an Islamic religious expression meaning the 'most noble of creation'.

[ii] *Science Fiction Studies*, "The Absent Paradigm: An Introduction to the Semiotics of Science Fiction", # 17 = Volume 6, Part 1 = March 1979

[iii] Quoted in *Science Fiction After 1900: From Steam Man to the Stars*, Twayne Publishers (1997). Brooks Landon, page 8.

[iv] Bollywood is the Hindustani-language (Hindi+Urdu) contributor to the Indian film-industry. Indian cinema is equally represented by film industries in other Indian languages, which have their own thriving film cultures such as Kollywood (Tamil), Tollywood (Telugu/Bangla) and Mollywood (Malyalam) etc.

[v] E. M. Forster wrote "The Machine Stops"; it was published 1909.