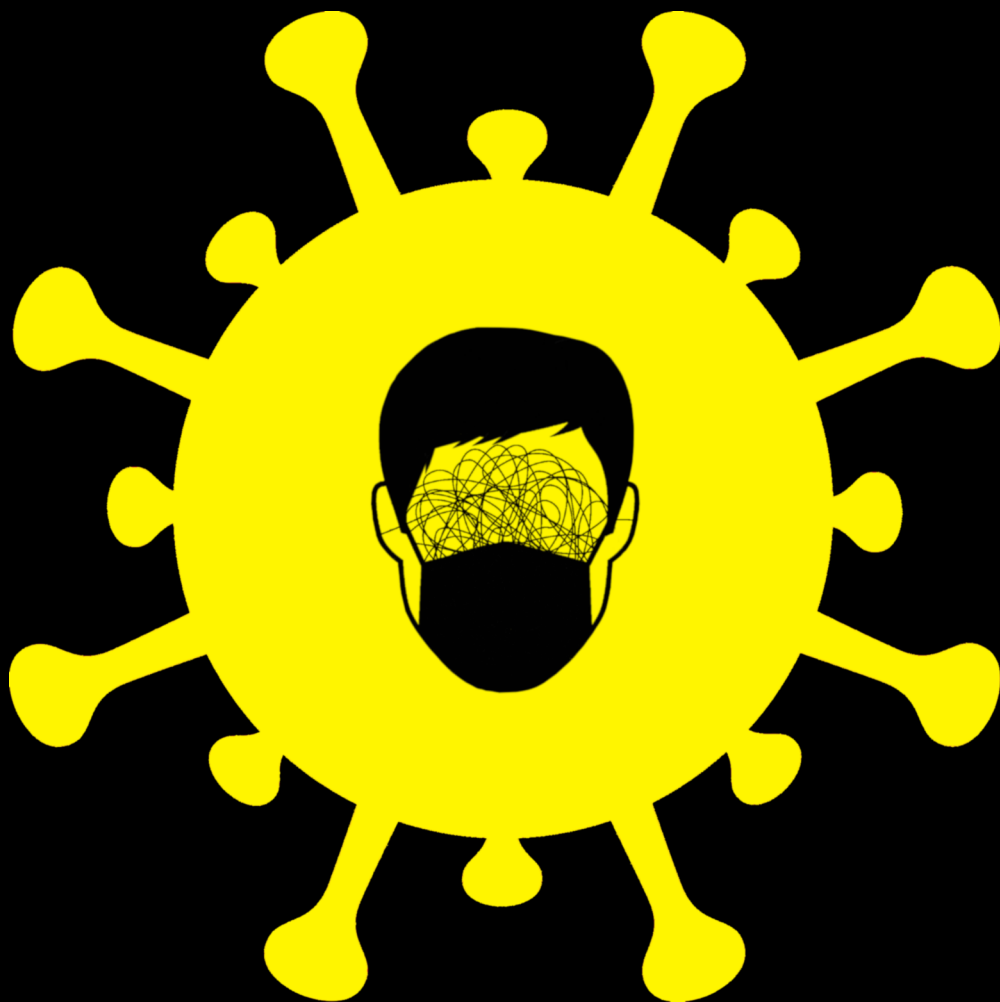


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# **Pandemic Perspectives: Reflections on a Post-Covid World**



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# Pandemic, Dystopian Fiction, and Increasing Inequalities: A Reading of Samit Basu's *Chosen Spirits*.

Anindita Shome<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>UGC Centre for the Study of Indian Diaspora, University of Hyderabad, India; anindita1089@gmail.com

**Correspondence:** Anindita Shome: anindita1089@gmail.com

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## Abstract:

This paper examines Samit Basu's *Chosen Spirits* (2020), a speculative narrative, which depicts a world of extreme surveillance and dystopia, technology-controlled, and the deep differences between the privileged and the underprivileged. The Indian version of the novel is considered for this paper. Through this work of dystopian fiction, this paper understands how this pandemic could accelerate the world into a living dystopia, and how dystopian fiction speculates the futures awaiting us. This paper is an effort to understand the privileged spaces and power structures that ensure the marginalised populations are bound to the margins, and how, a pandemic could lead to the further erasure of the unprivileged, until and unless, the ones on the comfortable side of the power structures, take a stronger stance.

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**Keywords:** COVID-19, Literature, Dystopian Fiction, India

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## Preamble

The Covid-19 pandemic brought the world to a standstill, affecting all of us in different ways, and reminding us of the fragility of life. Many have perceived the pandemic as a leveller of the inequalities that existed in societies, a pandemic that threatens everyone across class, gender, and community. The pandemic has been experienced by every country in unprecedented ways. Yet, as the months unfolded, the realisation dawned that the pandemic has starkly highlighted the inequalities that existed, and pushed already marginalised people into more precarious situations than ever before. The pandemic has left the ones suffering from mental health disorders more vulnerable; daily wage earners were left at the mercy of the help provided by the government and different organisations; migrant labourers in a few places had to take long journeys back home on foot; etc. In a world of

unsustainable development, shortages of fresh water, extreme levels of pollution, and an everyday struggle to survive, a pandemic quickens the pace of our destruction as a species.

Fictional narratives act as windows through which readers can understand how a pandemic could lead to a dystopian world in the near-future. Dystopian narratives show how cities, already on the brink of disasters, could crumble during deadly pandemics, and hasten towards a bleaker future for the present as well as future generations. Gorman Beauchamp (1974: 463) contends: “[...] while the purpose of the dystopian writer differs diametrically from that of the Utopian, he faces the same artistic challenge, to create an imaginary world both vivid enough to convince us of the validity of his thesis yet consistent with his ideological premises.” This paper examines Samit Basu’s *Chosen Spirits* (2020), a speculative narrative, which depicts a world of extreme surveillance and dystopia, technology-controlled, and the deep differences between the privileged and the underprivileged. The Indian version of the novel is considered for this paper. Through this work of dystopian fiction, this paper understands how this pandemic could accelerate the world into a living dystopia, and how dystopian fiction speculates the futures awaiting us. This paper is an effort to understand the privileged spaces and power structures that ensure the marginalised populations are bound to the margins, and how, a pandemic could lead to the further erasure of the unprivileged, until and unless, the ones on the comfortable side of the power structures, take a stronger stance.

## Introduction

The speculative, totalitarian worlds of dystopian narratives of the twenty-first century now seem to be predictions of a near-future, with increased surveillance, an unforeseen pandemic, and restrictions on the movement of people not only across borders, but also inside one’s nation-state, or home. Samit Basu’s *Chosen Spirits*, published in the year 2020, is an example of dystopian fiction recounting the present as well as predicting a plausible future, even though the author does not categorise it under the genre of dystopian fiction. The novel gives us the sense of hopelessness; ubiquitous presence and control of technology, the internet; a crumbling law and order; and heightened barriers amongst the economic and social classes in the near-future. The word dystopia, placed against the word utopia, creates an imaginary place of our worst fears becoming realities, thus, rendering the dystopian worlds as fictive in nature, too impractical or unrealistic, as opposed to the utopian genre. In the words of Tom Moylan (2000: xi): “Although its roots lie in Menippean satire, realism, and the anti-utopian novels of the nineteenth century, the dystopia emerged as a literary form in its own right in the early 1900s, as capital entered a new phase with the onset of: monopolized production and as the modern imperialist state extended its internal and external reach.” There has been a proliferation of Indian dystopian fiction in recent times with the predominant themes of technology-controlled futures. Basu’s novel is in the tradition of contemporary Indian dystopian fiction.

The pandemic and preceding political milieu in several parts of the world have made dystopian narratives seem more realistic than ever. Basu’s *Chosen Spirits* was published in a year that witnessed the world coming to a standstill and a global lockdown being imposed to curb the pandemic. The novel is set in a dystopic future in Delhi, India’s capital, which had witnessed political turmoil before the pandemic struck. Basu, in his fictional narrative, mentions the youth-led protests that failed to have a long-term impact, as well as depicts the probabilities of more protests in the future, which would take discreet forms as surveillance and control have seeped into the homes and personal lives of people, and how disappearances of people who speak against the state or the powerful corporates, will have become increasingly common. The novel portrays a highly controlled yet extremely confused state of affairs, where the online and offline worlds are barely distinguishable, with the young characters always living in fear of portraying a wrong online image, which would have severe offline repercussions. The online reactions could be in the form of, “... online hate-mob attacks, offline revenge killings, and general furore over mass-downratings of every single well-known person on

every point on the political spectrum had almost brought down yet another government.” (Basu 2020: 53) The paranoia of the youth is evident through their constant fear of the prying eyes.

The novel engages with the themes of conformity, suspicion, and fear of dissent. The primary characters in the novel, named Joey, Indi, Rudra, Tara, and others, work for “Flowco”, a firm that creates a series of social media influencers with huge online followings and fans obsessed with the social media avatars. The extreme world of surveillance places characters within a web of complexities depending on the socio-economic class and gender of the characters. Technological dominance intersects with the inequalities of gender, class, race, and caste to construct a dismal future. Most of the time of all the characters is spent indoors or in enclosed spaces, while poisonous and toxic air and confusion keeps brewing in the outside world. The characters are always being watched and their world is dominated by cameras, with personal spaces of everyone being invaded by various firms as well as the ones in power. Surveillance, control and monitoring of every person’s action, online or offline, is a predominant theme in the novel, as every character is wary of someone snooping in on their opinions or actions, which could lead to arrests and disappearances, “[...] but can't process the idea that it isn't just the government snooping any more, but a peak-traffic cluster of corporations, other governments, religious bodies, cults, gangs, terrorists, hackers, sometimes other algorithms, watching you, measuring you, learning you, marking you down for spam or death.” (Basu 2020: 16) Lavanya Lakshminarayan’s (2020) “Analog/Virtual: And Other Simulations of Your Future” engages with a similar theme of an AI-led, dystopic world. A lack of agency, incompetent and authoritative governments, and misuse of technology are the common themes of contemporary Indian diasporic fiction.

Basu’s novel engages with the theme of conformity and non-conformity in a totalitarian state in a dystopian future. A world of surveillance in public as well as domestic spaces, where no word of protest or disagreement with the authoritarian state is tolerated, leading to dire consequences. Disappearances are common, and taking part in any kind of protest is prohibited. Throughout the text, there is a dominance of the privileged majority over the others, and the walls that divided them with the unprivileged have become unscalable, with multiple layers of guards protecting the rich from the poor. There are mob riots drawn on the lines of caste, class and religion on a daily basis. The dystopian world of Delhi and its people in the novel are dealing with severe pollution levels so much so that living without masks is unthinkable. This reality is not far-fetched as, even before the pandemic struck, there have been times when people have had to use masks in the city due to the hazardous levels of pollutants in the air, making it to the national headlines. The novel makes readers realise that it would be a disastrous scenario if high pollution levels and the mutating Covid-19 virus, and other unforeseen diseases, strike together in the future.

## Dystopian and Digital Inequalities

Suparno Banerjee (2020: 185-6) discusses what constitutes the “other” in many Indian science fiction, and cites examples of how the “other” has stood for western technological innovations, the colonial rule of the past, a fear of Islam, etc. in different Indian science fiction novels. The world of increased digital surveillance and autocratic state forces portrayed in Basu’s novel reinforces and widens the inequalities that exist amongst the different classes, castes, and religions, and this is evident through the dialogues and monologues in the text. In a dystopian world, the differences are going to build literal walls around the privileged and the underprivileged, with the privileged using every resource possible to keep themselves safe and guarded, as one of the characters remarks:

“Baba was a clever man; he found the safest thing to do in this world. No matter who’s in power, no matter who needs land or blood, no matter which country’s secretly running ours, there’s one thing all sides agree on — the children of the rich must be protected. The scientists

making them perfect must be safe. We're on the way to hacking mortality itself, regeneration, replacement, human-machine integration." (Basu 2020: 129)

The terrifying, automated, technology-controlled world dictates who gets to be a "good citizen" and who gets excluded from the rights and privileges. Each individual has a social rating according to their choices and decisions in everyday life, and as can be seen in the novel, Rudra realises that the social rating system will render the citizens powerless as the entire system will be "...wholly secret, wholly automated, based on every transaction, every observed adherence to or violation of every unwritten rule, every movement, every word spoken or messaged, every act of consumption, participation or expressed emotion..." (Basu 2020: 53). The citizens are going to be placed in categories and expected to be "good citizens" leading a life without any complaints against the system. (Basu 2020: 53) The social ratings are indicators of how useful and compliant one citizen is to the state as well as the big corporations. Human lives are quantified on the basis of their actions and beliefs, which are under surveillance all the time.

In this dystopian future, freedom of speech and personal liberties are all taken away from the citizens. Basu speculates how liberal spaces of discussions and dialogues are demolished for air-conditioned shopping malls for amusement and entertainment, and how reputed universities are turned into shopping malls and entertainment spaces. The educational spaces of protests and contestations are not tolerated in this dystopian future. Citizens are provided with amusement spaces as distractions from the lack of their basic rights and liberties (Basu 2020: 99). Educational spaces which, at many times, act as spaces of protest and questioning of arbitrary actions of a nation-state are turned into spaces of amusement on the basis of the needs of the privileged classes and as metaphors of amnesia of public memory. The virus has not been selective but the social processes and power structures in place have ensured who gets the hospital beds on time, who gets the vaccination, who gets to not earn their daily wages or walk home on foot covering miles, and who gets to spend vacations in luxury homes. The power structures and systematic oppression of the unprivileged communities have become blatant due to the ongoing pandemic, and with the country facing a severe second-wave of the pandemic, the class differences are more pronounced than ever before. A UN Women news report (2021) states how India suffered unparalleled losses during the second wave of the deadly pandemic and "The poorest and the most marginalized, including women and girls, face more risks without the means to absorb the economic shocks and mitigate the health crisis." The pandemic exposed the need for major improvements in India's health sector so as to not remain unprepared in the future. It has also highlighted the need for equitable access of healthcare services to all sections of the society.

Caste and class distinctions have constructed the identities of individuals and communities in Indian society. In the novel, Basu's characters themselves acknowledge that they belong to privileged social classes and castes, and many of them prefer to remain apolitical, preferring not to be "too liberal". As one of the characters observes, the statement that one is not aware of one's caste in the country is a statement of privilege, "'I don't know what our caste even is.' 'That's called privilege... How many Dalits and Muslims do you think have jobs like hers? She thinks she's where she is because of her own choices, chance friendships, hard work..." (Basu 2020: 128). The workings of the caste system in the work and educational spaces are emphasised here, because the exclusion of individuals from a dignified life due to the power structures is still prevalent in Indian society.

When healthcare collapses, the people living on the margins are the last ones to get help, that is if they get any. The unequal social structures led to the migrant labourers being stranded on roads after the lockdown was announced, and everyone was advised to stay at home, except that the migrant labourers having no means of transport to reach their homes, losing their livelihoods in the process as well. Basu's novel makes one think of the technology-haves and have-nots, especially in "developing and underdeveloped" nation-states. In the novel, he writes that the traditional jobs are all extinct, with people of the older generations losing their jobs, and finding it difficult to get new ones. If technology, big corporations, fascist states, and other privileged sections control the society, then

there will be no place for the minorities, the immigrants, and other disadvantaged classes. Basu predicts a Delhi in the near-future, which would be a post-pandemic Delhi, with the intersection of climate change, authoritarian rule, and technological control. This authoritarian environment will exist along with a mob rule vying for dominance over the other, the dominant classes are strengthening their walls to survive, leaving the rest out, and as one of the characters in the novel assert, “Climate change will break walls. The robots will break walls. New diseases, tech disasters, all these things. They’re all coming, all at the same time, until one day there’s only one wall, and the people inside it are gods, and the people outside it are monsters, or dead. [...] I’m going to be inside the wall...” (Basu 2020: 130). The advantaged will conform to the authoritarian rule to enjoy the favours and safety provided by their class privileges.

This novel brings forth the dire conditions of the immigrants from the Global South, migrant labourers, and other vulnerable sections of the city, in a dystopian situation. “[...] they’d bonded over living in South-Del immigrant neighbourhoods, about knowing what the warning signals for a police crackdown were, knowing how to get along with and occasionally shelter climate change refugees and medical immigrants from Burkina Faso, Gabon, Zimbabwe and Swaziland.” (Basu 2020: 70). Even without the pandemic, the contestations and differences amongst communities are rife in the novel, and a dystopian future combined with a deadly virus, would mean the collapse of health systems, law and order, political systems, and the complete absence of rights and liberties of people, especially the unprivileged and the disadvantaged classes and communities. The novel concludes with a few of the young characters resolving to fight the war against the forces that strive to keep the inequalities alive. It is an optimistic stance in an extremely helpless and dire situation. The novel stresses on the failure of the human race to survive trying times yet every generation fails to learn the lessons to not repeat the mistakes of the past. The narratives of progress and development falls apart with a deadly disease, or a natural disaster- the pace of which is quickened by human-led actions.

This paper, thus, engages with an Indian dystopia novel that explore the motifs of conformity, inequalities, state- and corporate-controlled lives, and dominance of technology. The impact of climate change along with autocratic forces lead to continued suffering of the unprivileged. The paper places Basu’s novel within the larger narrative of pandemic and post-pandemic Indian society. It stresses that the dystopian future in the novel is a replication of the structural and institutional inequalities existing in the nation.

### **Competing interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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