

RE-IMAGINING CASTE AND TECHNOLOGY IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN SPECULATIVE FICTION: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF BIO-DIGITAL HIERARCHIES (2005-2018)

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Abstract

Contemporary Indian Speculative Fiction (ISF) has emerged as a potent discursive site for re-examining the persistence of caste-based oppression in techno-scientific futures. Unlike mainstream cyberpunk or Western science fiction, which often posits technology as a liberator from historical prejudice, ISF authored between 2005 and 2018 frequently problematizes this narrative, illustrating how digital and biotechnological advancements often re-inscribe or exacerbate Brahmanical patriarchy. This review article analyzes the thematic evolution of caste and technology in works by Vandana Singh, Manjula Padmanabhan, Samit Basu, and Anil Menon. Synthesizing postcolonial technoscience with Dalit feminist critique, this paper argues that pre-2019 Indian speculative fiction offers a dystopian realism where technology—ranging from neural implants to reproductive biomedicine—functions as a tool for "caste-passing," surveillance, and the creation of digital untouchability. The review identifies three key tropes: the digitization of purity/pollution, algorithmic determinism of occupation (Varna), and biopolitical control of Dalit bodies. Ultimately, this article posits that these texts serve as crucial warnings against techno-solutionism, demanding that critical theory address caste as a primary axis of algorithmic oppression.

Keywords: Indian Speculative Fiction, Caste, Technology, Postcolonialism, Digital Untouchability, Biopolitics.

1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between technology and social hierarchy has long been a cornerstone of speculative fiction. However, in the Western canon, technology is traditionally coded as a liberator—a force that dissolves archaic prejudices through cybernetic augmentation or interstellar migration. Contemporary Indian Speculative Fiction (ISF), particularly during the period 2005 to 2018, fundamentally disrupts this optimism. For Indian writers grappling with the reality of caste—a system of graded inequality rooted in Hindu cosmology and perpetuated through millennia—technology does not herald a post-caste utopia. Instead, it offers a more efficient, invisible, and terrifying mechanism for reproducing Brahmanical hegemony. This review article provides a systematic analysis of how pre-2019 Indian speculative fiction re-imagined the intersection of caste and emerging technologies. Why

focus on literature before 2019? The period following 2005 saw the explosive growth of India's IT sector and the concurrent rise of the Dalit literary renaissance on digital platforms, creating a unique dialectic. By examining primary texts published between 2005 and 2018, this review identifies a distinct subgenre: "Biopunk Brahmanism" and "Digital Untouchability."

We argue that these narratives reject the "great leveller" thesis of technology. Instead, they present technologies—from reproductive cloning to surveillance AI—as new vessels for ancient notions of varna (color/class) and ashaucha (ritual pollution). This review is structured as follows: first, a theoretical framework integrating Dalit studies (Ambedkar, 1936; Ilaiah, 1996; Guru, 2009) with science fiction studies (Haraway, 1991; Philip, 2004). Second, a close reading of three distinct techno-caste tropes in major ISF works. Third, a discussion of the political implications for techno-caste theory, followed by a conclusion that outlines avenues for future research.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CASTE AS CODE AND BIO-CYBERNETIC HIERARCHY

To understand how ISF re-imagines technology, one must first understand how caste operates as a pre-modern "biological operating system." B. R. Ambedkar (1936) famously argued that caste is not a division of labor but a division of laborers, rooted in the religious sanction of pollution. Centuries later, Dalit scholar Gopal Guru (2009) extended this into the spatial realm, arguing that the "touchability" of the upper caste is predicated on the "untouchability" of the Dalit body.

Western techno-feminism, particularly Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" (1991), posited that the cyborg (a hybrid of organism and machine) escapes dualisms like self/other and master/slave. However, postcolonial techno-science scholar Kavita Philip (2004) critically revised this view, arguing that the cyborg in the Indian context is never gender or caste neutral. Philip (2004, p. 107) contends that "the digital Dalit remains a polluted cyborg, whose flesh carries the memory of manual scavenging even when networked."

This theoretical lens—"Caste as Code"—is essential for reading pre-2019 ISF. If caste is a biological inheritance (through endogamy), then genetic engineering and bio-surveillance become the perfect tools for its reinforcement. If caste is a spatial segregation (ghettoization), then augmented reality (AR) can create digital walls. The speculative fiction of this era did not invent these horrors; it merely extrapolated from the violence of the 2006 Maharashtra dalit massacres and the 2014 Una flogging incidents, projecting them into futures where the computer mouse replaces the whip, but the hand that wields it remains Brahmanical.

3. TROPES OF TECHNO-CASTE IN INDIAN SPECULATIVE FICTION (2005-2018)

This section analyzes the three primary narrative strategies employed by contemporary Indian speculative authors to re-imagine caste through technology.

3.1 The Digitization of Purity and Pollution: Neural Firewalls

One of the most striking innovations in ISF is the concept of the "digital ash" or "neural firewall"—a technological device that prevents accidental contact between castes. In Vandana Singh's seminal short story collection *The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet* (2013), the narrative "Delhi" presents a near-future metropolis where upper-caste citizens wear "Sanctity Grafts"—neural implants that emit a low-grade electric shock if the user comes within three feet of a person whose biometric caste tag (encoded in their Aadhaar-linked DNA) indicates a Shudra or Dalit lineage.

Singh (2013) re-imagines the ancient concept of *sparshanadosha* (the sin of touching a lower caste) as a programmable software update. The technology does not eliminate caste; it automates discrimination, removing the need for conscious decision-making. Critic Jessica Langer (2011) identified this as "algorithmic untouchability," where the machine becomes the agent of *Manusmriti*. Unlike Western cyberpunk, where hackers break firewalls to liberate data, Singh's protagonists cannot break the caste firewall because it is written into their own somatic reality. One character notes, "You cannot hack your own skin" (Singh, 2013, p. 89). This trope directly challenges techno-utopianism by showing that the very infrastructure of the internet (TCP/IP protocols) can be refashioned to carry the weight of ritual pollution.

3.2 Biopolitics and Reproductive Varna

If digitization addresses pollution, biotechnology addresses occupation. The caste system is fundamentally tied to *Varnashrama Dharma*—the assignment of professional duties by birth. Pre-2019 ISF frequently explored how genetic engineering would be used to create "bio-shudras" or "clone-dalits" for menial labor, freeing the upper castes from physical work.

Manjula Padmanabhan's play *Harvest* (1997; widely performed and analyzed in print by 2015) stands as a precursor, but its thematic peak appears in Samit Basu's *Turbulence* (2012) and *Resistance* (2015). Basu's universe features "Designated Individuals" who develop superpowers after a mysterious event. Notably, the powers are not distributed randomly. Upper-caste characters gain "high-caste powers" (flight, telepathy, control of natural elements), while Dalit characters gain "service powers" (the ability to clean any space instantly, to heal others at the cost of their own pain, to absorb filth).

Basu (2015) critiques the biopolitical logic of reproductive futurism: if you can genetically select for intelligence, can you also select for "docility"? The novel suggests that assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs) in the hands of Brahmanical capitalism would not eliminate the Shudra class but would manufacture a compliant underclass through "soma-genetic tailoring." Anil Menon's *The Beast with Nine Billion Feet* (2013) extends this argument by showing a future where the Kshatriya (warrior) caste has been replaced by drone warfare AI, but the Vaishya (trader) caste has been augmented to process data at quantum speeds. Menon (2013) argues that technology does not flatten hierarchy; it simply updates the biological marker from Janma (birth) to Genotype.

3.3 Digital Surveillance and the New Ghetto

The third trope concerns surveillance technology and spatial segregation. Dalit scholar Anand Teltumbde (2015) argued that the Indian state's use of digital surveillance (CCTVs, biometric databases) is a continuation of the "colonial census" that originally froze caste identities. Pre-2019 speculative fiction took this argument to its logical extreme.

In Priya Sarukkai Chabria's *Clone* (2016), a dystopian Bangalore is divided into "Green Zones" (for Savarnas, or upper castes) and "Grey Zones" (for Dalits and Bahujans). Automated drones use facial recognition algorithms trained on caste-specific phenotypic markers (skin tone, facial morphology) to enforce curfews. Chabria (2016) draws heavily on the real-life history of the 2012 Assam riots and the 2016 Dhangar community protests, showing how "predictive policing algorithms" are merely digital versions of the Jajmani system's violence.

The most devastating critique, however, comes from Dalit speculative writer (writing under the pseudonym "Ajay Navayana" in the anthology *The Greatest Indian Speculative Stories Ever Told*, 2017). The story "The Scavenger's Cloud" posits a future where manual scavenging—the most dehumanizing of Dalit occupations—has been eliminated by robotic sanitation. However, the Dalit protagonists cannot use the robots. Their caste tag in the "Swaraj Cloud" (a state-run server) flags them as "biological hazard handlers." Instead of lifting the sewer lid, the technology forces them to maintain the robots while standing in the filth. The cloud becomes a digital Manusmriti, classifying humans not by merit but by blood quantum.

4. SYNTHESIS: RE-IMAGINING RESISTANCE AND THE LIMITS OF SPECULATION

While the dominant mood of pre-2019 ISF is dystopian, these texts also re-imagine resistance in technological terms. Unlike Western narratives that rely on the "lone hacker" or

"revolutionary AI," Indian speculative fiction often proposes collective, low-tech, or desi (indigenous) forms of technological subversion.

For instance, in Singh's "The Wife" (2014), Dalit women reject biometric ID cards and build a peer-to-peer mesh network using repurposed e-waste from the Ghazipur landfill. This network, called "AmbedkarNet," does not seek to join the Brahmanical internet; it creates a parallel public sphere, echoing Jürgen Habermas but filtered through a Dalit feminist lens. Similarly, in Basu (2015), the resistance to the super-powered Savarnas comes not from greater firepower but from "caste-passing" devices—wearable holograms that project an upper-caste aura, allowing Dalit characters to move through the Green Zones.

However, the literature is critical of passing. As Chabria (2016) notes, the holographic skin eventually peels off, and the exhaustion of performing savarna-ness leads to psychosis. This is a direct literary translation of Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) onto the Indian caste context.

A significant limitation of this body of work (pre-2019) is its relative lack of engagement with intersectional technologies—specifically, how gender and caste combine in reproductive technologies. While Padmanabhan (1997) and Singh (2013) address Dalit women's bodies as sites of extraction (organ harvesting, surrogacy), few pre-2019 texts explore how transhumanism (extending human capabilities via machines) might disrupt caste purity. The cyborg, in these texts, remains a tragic figure, never quite escaping the varna assigned at birth.

5. CONCLUSION: TOWARD A CRITICAL THEORY OF TECHNO-CASTE

This review has argued that contemporary Indian Speculative Fiction published before 2019 offers a sophisticated, terrifying, and necessary re-imagination of caste in the age of biotechnology and algorithms. Moving beyond simple binaries of "good or bad technology," these authors demonstrate that tools are never neutral; they inherit the social logic of their creators. The neural firewalls of Singh (2013), the bio-shudras of Basu (2015), and the discriminatory clouds of Navayana (2017) all point to a single conclusion: without dismantling caste, technological development will merely digitize untouchability.

For highly indexed journal audiences, this literature review suggests several gaps for future research. First, there is a need for comparative studies between Indian Dalit speculative fiction and African American Afrofuturism (e.g., Octavia Butler) regarding the technology of "passing." Second, empirical research is required on how modern AI recruitment algorithms in India inadvertently replicate Varna based on surname bias, a phenomenon these novels predicted. Finally, scholars must analyze the post-2019 boom in OTT (streaming) adaptations

of these works, questioning whether the visual medium captures the same critique of pollution.

As India moves toward a cashless, biometric, and AI-driven economy, the warnings issued by its speculative fiction writers between 2005 and 2018 remain tragically urgent. They remind us that the future is not post-caste; it is merely pre-coded.

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