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BOOK REVIEW:

Indian Science Fiction: Patterns, History and Hybridity

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Not a long time ago in a galaxy not-so-far away, Shashi Tharoor noted that the "singular thing about India is that you can only speak of it in the plural. What makes us, then, a nation?" (Tharoor). Unlike many other nations united by a shared language, religion, culture, or ethnicity, India has a heterogeneous, polyphonic diversity that inevitably percolates down to its cultural production. This mind-bogglingly multi-religious and multi-ethnic composition is further amplified by linguistic factors: India has 22 recognised languages per the Eighth Schedule to its constitution. Each language boasts of distinct literary movements, styles, genres, and innovations that continuously challenge form, content, and the market. What, therefore, constitutes the being of "Indian" writings?

Now, SF is a fair component of such literary experimentation and cultural evolution – and it has generated quite a few academic commentaries in its global wake. The past few years have witnessed a spectacular rise in studies directed at SF in different national and language-specific traditions: work by scholars such as Brian Attebery on Australian aboriginal SF (2005), Eliza Ginway on Brazilian SF (2005), and Anindita Banerjee on Russian SF (2013). We can even include scholars who have previously discussed India's own genre traditions – for instance, Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay and Anwesha Maity on Bangla SF, not to mention Hans Harder on Marathi SF. Moreover, the last two years have witnessed a dramatic rise in new monographs on Indian SF: Pablo Mukherjee's *Final Frontiers* (2020), Sami Ahmad Khan's *Star Warriors of the*

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Modern Raj (2021), and Urvashi Kuhad's *Science Fiction and Indian Women Writers* (2021).

Suparno Banerjee adds to this eclectic mix in *Indian Science Fiction* by connecting the patterns and hybridity of an otherwise dispersed Indian SF tradition within a "national tradition" of genre literature that can be seen alongside a larger Western tradition. Banerjee's critical intervention demonstrates how SF is inching towards a critical mass for a nation caught between a technoscientific transformation and a geopolitical mutation. For our part, we are aware that while language-specific and time-specific studies are vital to the growth of SF criticism, they cannot identify the macro-patterns and "cultural cross-pollination" that exist *across* SF. Arguably, many language-specific studies lack a more comprehensive "national" scope, something that creates the need for connecting tissues spread across cultures and languages. Banerjee's *Indian Science Fiction* accordingly becomes an archive of the evolution of Indian SF *and* a bridge that connects indigenous and external SF traditions alike.

Now, we acknowledge that the word "milestone" is thrown around quite a bit these days – and often becomes a millstone around the neck of readers, writers, and reviewers alike. However, Banerjee's trailblazing and eminently readable book, courtesy of how it chooses a relatively unexplored area of study and its eclectic theoretical vantage point, can be called – without hyperbole – a true milestone. *Indian Science Fiction* offers an impressively synoptic view of India and its SF. Citing texts from Bangla, English, Hindi, and Marathi, Banerjee seeks to designate the "Indian" SF text within what he calls a "reasonably specific" idea of India, despite India's dispersed cultural imaginations (12). Banerjee, furthermore, connects broader epistemes of Indian SF with Western academic discourses and indigenous language-specific epistemes, showing how Indian SF is dependent on "this relationship between Indian and western culture, making the genre a cultural hybrid par excellence" (7).

A cornerstone of Banerjee's panoramic lens borrows from arguments made by Rabin Bal and Satyajit Ray about Bangla SF – specifically, that we can describe SF writers as falling into two camps: a camp devoted to Jules Verne, which includes writers "who prefer a stronger allegiance to science and logic", and a camp devoted to H. G. Wells, who "use science only as a device to break through contemporary reality to imagine alterities" (Banerjee 5). India's SF often swings between these two camps, but this enables it to convey "fascinating vistas of alternative possibilities of existence" that, overall, challenge "western perceptions about imagining India and the world … complete with dominant ideologies, exoticism and representational politics" (197). As a mode and a genre, Indian SF therefore becomes a battleground where clashing ideologies meet as well as a broadcast signal that colours the popular imagination. This dual character and function of India's SF creates a shape-shifting chimera that comprises multiple – often conflicting – vantage points, political agendas, market practices, literary styles, and historical realities. The goal of Banerjee's book is to isolate, identify, and foreground all these factors.

Chapter One, "Genealogies: A Brief History of Indian SF", showcases Banerjee as a genre historian, and it maps a trajectory of SF imaginations in Indian literary productions by historicising the emergence of distinct SF elements. It loosely divides the evolution of Indian SF into four historical periods:

1. 1835–1905 ("primarily revolutionary future histories in the utopian mode etc.");
2. 1905–1947 ("a slow consolidation of SF as a genre in popular culture");
3. 1947–1995 (the rise of a "nationalistic element"); and
4. 1995–2019 (marked by dystopias and postcolonial identity politics). (14)

Building from Kylas Chunder Dutt's "A Journal of Forty-Eight Hours of the Year 1945" (1835), Banerjee establishes how SF made inroads due to the advent of colonial education into the literary traditions of India, primarily within Hindi, Bangla, and Marathi. The SF of India sprang up courtesy of Western technoscientific influences on an imaginative space long bubbling with mythological and speculative traditions. This dialectic engagement between India and the "West" gave rise to early 19th-century Indian SF in the form of temporal fictions: revolutionary future histories, exotic adventures, utopias, parody SF, alien encounters, etc. In this trajectory formation, Banerjee globalises the growth of early Indian SF (1835–1947) with influences from H. Rider Haggard, Arthur Conan Doyle, Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, Edgar Allan Poe, Jonathan Swift, Edward Bellamy, and William Morris; generic developments such as detective fiction, adventure fiction, and comics; international events such as the Bolshevik Revolution; and media cultures such as that of the magazine. The later trajectory of post-Independence SF, which begins what Banerjee calls the "Golden Age" of Indian SF in indigenous languages (1947-1995), saw a growth of indigenous-language magazine cultures and films along with a sudden rise in SF production and readership "indicating a larger and perhaps scientifically educated reading public" (39). These narratives raise complicated issues of traditional knowledge(s), colonial hegemony, feminism, cultural hybridity, and identity. Banerjee then finds a marked increase in Anglophonic SF and a globalisation of India's SF from 1995 onwards.

Banerjee's second chapter, "Cognitions and Estrangements: Epistemes and World Building in Indian SF", engages popular Indian interpretations of the "scientific" imagination and how they constantly negotiate between (Western) science and technology with (Indian) tradition and mythology, not merely as a postcolonial rejection of Western hegemony but also as an assertion of an "eternal" Indian nationalistic identity. The manifestations and inter-actions of Western techno-science, Vedic "science", and regional subaltern knowledge within Indian SF hybridise frameworks but also seek to carve spaces for particular modes of thought. While various Indian SF imaginations consistently lay claim to "Knowledge", one that historically precedes and qualitatively trumps other systems of knowledge, especially in its Enlightenment-scientific-western variant, the contours of Indian SF also follow the operating mechanics of identity, politics, and nationalism. Thus, cultural literary production became a cauldron where "Indian epistemic traditions compete" with those of "colonial science" (65). Banerjee historicises this collision (and coalition) of opposing traditions through the 19th and 20th centuries, focusing especially on the ideologies of resurgent Hindu nationalism. For Banerjee, nationalistic Indian SF arose as a quest for seeking – or reclaiming – an imaginary identity, one that was distinct from and superior to the competing

Western episteme(s). This type of SF depended upon an ethno-national identity regarded as original or ancient, or as accurately prophesying future phenomena. Often labelled as the "golden past" narrative, this strand of Indian SF emerged as a way to reclaim a romanticised ethno-national identity in the present, and it vehemently separates Vedic from Western science and blurs the temporal distinction between past and present. In addition, "localised subaltern knowledge" constitutes another tradition running tangential to nationalistic fervor. This subaltern knowledge, as Banerjee explains, appropriates aspects of speculative fiction such as magic, ghosts, and premonitions, rooting the supernatural as a precursor to scientific discourse and establishing an oriental hierarchy over its occidental counterpart (78). As Banerjee argues, this subaltern historicisation of the past subverts hierarchies and recreates a "past to repair the violence done to Indian culture through colonial domination, but without resorting to cultural essentialism" (102).

The following three chapters of *Indian Science Fiction* are best read concurrently. The third chapter, "Other Times: Alternative Histories, Imagining the Future and Non-linear Temporalities", interrogates how Indian SF generates and deploys multiple visions of time. The first section explores the "glorious ancient past" and its specific deployments vis-à-vis Hindu Nationalism, the subversion of colonial authority, and the reassertion of postcolonial identity. The next section handles how the imagined futures in Indian SF negotiate a "multiplicity of oppressions" amidst "technoscientific advances" and "geopolitical sovereignty" via utopian hope and dystopian anxiety. The third section in Chapter Three views how despite being set in the author's world, Indian SF creates alternative realities *a la* a "Borgesian forking path that develops possibilities already existing within real historical moments" (122). Chapter Four, "Other Spaces: Utopian Discourses and Non-expansionist Journeys", observes the spatial interactions between Indian and foreign forces and exposes their "correlation to western ideological formations of Indian and global spaces, either through resistance or self-reflection" (131), and the fifth chapter, "The Others: Aliens, Robots, Cyborgs and Other Others", handles the metaphorical dimensions of these eponymous agents of the narrative. Banerjee aptly categorises the aliens/Others under two headings: the Other as the self (i.e. how Indian SF often speaks through the voices of such Others), and the Others as others (i.e. as intruders, external aggressors, or disruptions from without) – a categorisation that grants him ample space to comment on divergent constructions of alterity.

In these three chapters, Banerjee poses colonial occupation as India's authentic experience of the alien-other, and these experiences appear in later imaginations through assimilation, subversion, or utter rejection. The thematic pattern that Banerjee seeks to unveil in Indian SF thus becomes largely a postcolonial matrix. Not only does he critique texts of different languages, he finds similarities between them, and this process justifies his stance about an "Indian" tendency. In terms of temporality, the extrapolations of Indian SF revolve around neocolonial, postcolonial, or anti-colonial ideologies that create alternative histories through subaltern discourses, golden past narratives, and even disparate non-monolithic antiquities that challenge – and sometimes reject – orientalist tendencies. Also, according to Banerjee, present non-linear temporalities "actually project a desire for a different future" (127). As revealed by Banerjee's final chapter, which focuses on viewing Others as selves and

Others-as-others, there appears a marked but unfortunate tendency of "oriental" subjects to orientalise also *amongst* themselves – for example, an ascendant majoritarianism. Banerjee locates protean structures of India-as-a-whole (as per Hindu Nationalism) interacting with India-as-a-fractured-self (as per subaltern knowledges, multiple languages, and cultures) *and* the Western traditions, especially Anglophonic or Francophonic ones, as generating infinite permutations and combinations of textual mechanics, which are then re-inforced or railed against through specific narratives.

This pathbreaking study by Banerjee nonetheless suffers from some drawbacks. Considering the geographical, political, social, and linguistic diversity of India, the tag of "Indian" SF is only justifiable as a synecdoche – although, to be fair, Banerjee's enterprise is burdened by the inherent flux and polyphony manifested in India's literary and cultural traditions, and he seems well aware of this. In fact, this study of SF in four diverging languages across time is what makes *Indian Science Fiction* stand apart from its peers. At the same time, Banerjee often invokes the colonial-other to identify the Indian-self within the tradition of SF. This construction of an Indian unity *only* through a postcolonial perspective – and not, say, as an united Indian identity as a thing-in-itself – is problematic, although even here Banerjee continues to demonstrate a keen awareness of the historical and ideological forces at work within Indian genre fiction.

To conclude, Banerjee's pioneering study of India's SF, charting as he does the select SF traditions within a multilinguistic and heterogeneous country, emerges as entertaining and informative in equal measure. While being essentially "postcolonial", it spans over a hundred years of texts across various languages and cultural traditions; it reflects a cohesive, comprehensive, and higher-dimensional understanding of the SF imaginations from – and within – India; and it advances multiple well-argued formulations that will be extremely beneficial for SF researchers, writers, students, and teachers alike. We thus highly recommend *Indian Science Fiction*. Even without a blue police box or a speeding DeLorean, Banerjee takes us through time and relative dimensions in India's science-fictional space(s).

Biography: Sami Ahmad Khan is a writer, academic, and documentary producer. Sami holds a PhD from Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Delhi, and is the recipient of a Fulbright grant (University of Iowa) and a Marie Sklodowska-Curie Actions Postdoctoral Fellowship (University of Oslo). His future-war debut *Red Jihad* won two awards, and his second novel – *Aliens in Delhi* – garnered rave reviews. Sami's critical essays have appeared in leading journals and magazines; his overview of Indian SF has been translated into Czech, and his fiction has been the subject of formal academic research. Sami has taught at IIT Delhi, Jindal Global University, JNU, and GGS Indraprastha University, Delhi. His latest book is *Star Warriors of the Modern Raj: Materiality, Mythology and Technology of Indian Science Fiction* (2021).

Biography: Rahul Rana is a PhD scholar at GGS Indraprastha University, Delhi. He currently works on Enlightenment epistemology and realism in SF. His previous research explored ideas of spirituality within 21st-century SF.

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