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## **Cultural Paradigms in Contemporary Indian Science Fiction: A Thematic Exploration**

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### **Abstract:**

Indian science fiction has emerged as a major site where scientific speculation intersects with mythology, nationalism, caste and class politics, and gendered experience in ways that differ sharply from Euro-American models of the genre. Rather than simply localizing Western tropes of space travel, artificial intelligence, or time travel, Indian writers frequently embed these motifs in narrative worlds shaped by *Kalpavigyan (speculative science)*, a tradition that fuses speculative science with mythic and philosophical reflection—and by the lived realities of postcolonial modernity. This paper offers a thematic exploration of the cultural ramifications of Indian science fiction, focusing on three interrelated axes: the negotiation between mythology and technoscience; the reworking of colonial histories and national futures; and the representation of social hierarchies and everyday life under conditions of rapid technological change. Through close reference to critical accounts by Suparno Banerjee, Sami Ahmad Khan, and others, and to works by authors such as Jayant V. Narlikar, the essay argues that Indian science fiction should be read as a form of cultural critique that uses speculative futures to interrogate contemporary anxieties about science, authority, community, and justice.

**Keywords: Cultural paradigms, Contemporary Indian science fiction, Kalpvigyan, Speculative Science, Jayant Narlikar.**

### **Introduction: Defining Indian Science Fiction (SF)**

Critical work over the last decade has rejected the idea that science fiction (SF) is a predominantly Western form that India merely imitates. Suparno Banerjee describes Indian SF as a “shape-shifting chimera” whose formal hybridity reflects long-standing indigenous traditions of myth, fantasy, and philosophical speculation interacting with imported technoscientific discourses. Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay similarly traces the term *kalpavigyan* (*speculative science*) to a practice that “articulates truths in sources that have been discarded by modern knowledge” (Padmanabhan, Jaya), suggesting that Indian SF draws on myth not as superstition but as an alternative epistemology (Chattopadhyay, *americancommunitymedia*).

Sami Ahmad Khan proposes an “IN-situ” model for reading Indian science fiction, arguing that Indianness does not depend on the geographic origin of the text but on the specific cultural, social, and political matrices within which its speculative worlds operate. This perspective foregrounds the fact that many Indian SF narratives are less interested in technological spectacle than in analyzing how science and technology collide with caste hierarchies, religious identities, and state power. Indian SF thus becomes, in Banerjee’s phrase, both a “battleground where clashing ideologies meet” and a “broadcast signal” that shapes popular understandings of modernity (Khan, *thebeacon*).

### **Mythology, Kalpavigyan, and the Scientific Imagination**

A frequently noted feature of Indian science fiction is its deep entanglement with mythological material from texts such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Rather than simply retelling these epics, contemporary writers mobilize mythic figures and cosmologies as frameworks for thinking about artificial intelligence, environmental catastrophe, or alternate timelines. The recent popularisation of *kalpavigyan* (*speculative science*)



(Padmanabhan, Jaya) underscores this tendency, positioning myth as a reservoir of conceptual tools for reimagining science rather than as a pre-scientific relic (*Altermag Authors*).

Journalistic accounts of this emerging “myth-AI” nexus note that many Indian Science Fiction (SF) narratives ask what it would mean to inhabit a future where the past is understood as a four-thousand-year-old civilisational archive that remains intensely present. As one commentator observes, Indian fiction often treats the future as a “reimagined past,” layering technological novelties over enduring ritual practices and religious images. This temporality destabilizes the linear progress narratives that underwrite much Euro-American SF, hinting instead at cyclical or recursive models of history drawn from Hindu cosmology (*Reddit Forum*).

### **Narlikar’s “scientifiction” and cultural ambience**

Jayant V. Narlikar’s work provides a paradigmatic example of how myth, science, and everyday cultural practices intertwine in Indian (SF). A world-renowned astrophysicist, Narlikar consistently uses his fiction to popularise scientific reasoning while situating his plots within recognizably Indian social settings. In *The Comet*, for instance, an international team of scientists secretly attempts to deflect a comet on a collision course with Earth, while the protagonist’s wife simultaneously arranges a *yagna* to ward off its supposed malign influence. The narrative juxtaposes highly technical discussions of orbital mechanics with scenes of ritual performance, creating a dialectic between rational calculation and religious faith (Shenoy, *archive.factordaily*).

Commentators argue that the “Indianness” of Narlikar’s SF lies not simply in Indian names or locations but in this sense of cultural ambience, where scientific debates are inseparable from familial obligations, linguistic diversity, and ritual practices. Stories such as

“Antaralatala Bhasmasur” (“Bhasmasur in Space”) explicitly invoke mythic figures to frame questions of scientific hubris and ethical responsibility, suggesting that mythological narratives can serve as allegories for contemporary technoscientific power. Narlikar’s choice to write many of these stories in Marathi further underscores the way Indian SF develops through regional languages and readerships rather than solely through English-language metropolitan publishing (Narlikar, *iucaa*).

### **Postcolonial Histories and National Features**

Indian SF emerges in a context marked by the colonial history of Western science in South Asia, where technologies such as railways or telegraphs were instruments of imperial control as much as symbols of progress. Banerjee emphasizes that Indian SF must be understood as a negotiation between “Western technoscientific influences” and local imaginative spaces that had long been “bubbling with mythological and speculative traditions.” The resulting texts frequently dramatize ambivalent attitudes towards science, which appears both as a tool of emancipation and as a potential continuation of colonial domination under the guise of development (Parkar, *EPW*).

Critical essays on the history of Indian SF trace how early works engaged with nationalist projects by imagining scientifically advanced futures that would reverse colonial hierarchies. At the same time, some contemporary writers question triumphalist narratives of Indian technological ascendancy, foregrounding the persistence of inequality, communal violence, and environmental degradation in the wake of liberalization. Indian SF thereby turns the future into a space for re-examining the unfinished business of decolonization and for interrogating the uses of science in national policy and public culture (Khan, *rupkatha*).



### **Nationalism, majoritarianism, and market pressures**

Sami Ahmad Khan notes that recent Indian SF is often pressured to “toe the line of some sort of nationalist, majoritarian or apolitical commercial agenda,” making politically critical work both “pragmatically risky and socially courageous.” (*Ibid*). Some texts participate in Hindu nationalist fantasies of civilizational supremacy by suggesting that ancient Indian texts already contained advanced scientific knowledge, a claim selectively supported by readings of mythological motifs as disguised descriptions of aircraft or genetic engineering. Others ironize or contest such assertions, using satire and dystopian futures to expose the dangers of conflating mythic glory with scientific authority (Khan, *thebeacon*).

The publishing industry’s enthusiasm for mythological retellings that foreground deities and heroic figures - visible in the success of writers like Devdutt Pattanaik or Amish Tripathi - has also structured the science-fiction market. While these works are not always SF in a strict sense, the commercial success of myth-inflected narratives encourages SF authors to embed their speculative futures within recognizable Hindu iconographies. Critics observe that this market-driven emphasis can marginalize more experimental or socially radical SF that does not offer easily commodifiable mythic content, contributing to what Basu calls a perceived lack of “literary punch” in the genre as a whole (Chattopadhyay, *americancommunitymedia*).

### **Social Hierarchies, Everyday Life, and Technological Change**

Recent scholarship on Indian young-adult science fiction (YA SF) highlights its engagement with the “tangible materiality and political relevance” of everyday life under conditions of rapid scientific and technological change. A study of three YA SF stories by Indian writers argues that these narratives treat technology not as a neutral tool but as a field through which caste, class, and gender relations are renegotiated. School settings, family spaces, and urban neighbourhoods serve as key sites where characters encounter new devices, infrastructures,

and scientific discourses, revealing how access to technology is unevenly distributed (Khan, *rupkatha*).

Such stories often complicate celebratory discourses of “Digital India” by showing how surveillance, precarious labour, and environmental risk accompany the expansion of communication networks and extractive industries. At the same time, they offer models of youth agency, depicting young protagonists who learn to appropriate or hack technological systems to contest authority or protect vulnerable communities. The cultural ramifications here lie less in grand visions of planetary futures than in micro-narratives of how science and technology reshape intimate relationships, educational aspirations, and local ecologies (Altermag Authors, *altermag*).

While sustained critical work on caste in Indian SF is still emerging, commentators note that some stories explicitly address how caste determines access to education, scientific careers, and experimental spaces. In these texts, laboratories and research institutes are not meritocratic spaces but contested terrains where Dalit or lower-caste characters confront exclusion, tokenism, or the requirement to serve majoritarian projects. The speculative imagination thus becomes a lens for examining how scientific institutions reproduce or challenge existing hierarchies (Parkar, *EPW*).

Feminists’ utopian and dystopian SF in India has similarly interrogated the gendered dimensions of technoscientific modernity. Alter Magazine’s overview of the “secret history” of Indian SF points to feminist works that imagine alternative social orders, ecological futures, and reproductive technologies in order to critique patriarchal norms. These texts often place women and queer characters at the centre of speculative plots, framing questions of corporeality, labour, and care in relation to the climate crisis, biopolitics, and cybernetic systems. In this sense, Indian SF participates in a broader feminist project of rethinking



citizenship and community in technologically saturated societies (Altermag Authors, *altermag*).

### **Hybridity, Language, and Literary Form**

Banerjee's *Indian Science Fiction: Patterns, History and Hybridity* offers one of the most systematic attempts to map the field across multiple Indian languages. The study emphasizes that Indian SF cannot be reduced to English-language texts or to a single regional tradition; instead, it unfolds across Bengali, Hindi, Marathi, Tamil, and other linguistic spheres, each with its own histories and readerly expectations. Hybridity operates at the levels of language, genre, and epistemology, producing experimental forms that combine realist description, allegory, satire, myth, and scientific exposition (Bardhan, *scroll*).

This hybridity is not merely aesthetic but also ideological, reflecting the coexistence of scientific rationalism, religious belief, and plural cultural identities in contemporary India. Banerjee notes that Indian SF often constructs an "Indian unity" through postcolonial opposition to Western hegemony, a strategy that risks overlooking internal differences of caste, region, and religion even as it asserts national agency. The tension between these homogenizing tendencies and the heterogeneity of actual Indian experience is itself one of the genre's key cultural ramifications, as writers struggle to imagine inclusive futures without erasing conflict (Khan, *journal.finfar*).

### **Literary prejudice and genre hierarchies**

Basu and other critics highlight how literary prejudice and market conditions have shaped the reception of Indian SF. On one hand, the prestige of "serious" realist fiction has long led to the dismissal of SF and fantasy as derivative or merely commercial, discouraging experimentation and narrowing publishing opportunities. On the other hand, the global

success of Anglophone speculative fiction has created a demand for export-oriented Indian SF that fits existing Western expectations, potentially flattening local specificities (Khan, *thebeacon*).

These pressures can lead to what Basu describes as a lack of “literary punch,” as writers and publishers prioritize easily translatable plots over formally daring or politically contentious narratives. Yet recent years have seen the emergence of small presses and online platforms that support more diverse and critically ambitious SF, including work that foregrounds regional languages, Dalit perspectives, or experimental narrative structures. The evolving ecosystem suggests that the cultural ramifications of Indian SF will continue to shift as new voices and venues reshape the field (Patel, *IJRAR*).

### **Environmental Futures, climate change, and environmental degradation**

Climate change and environmental degradation have become central concerns in contemporary Indian public discourse, and Indian SF has increasingly turned to these themes. Stories set in flood-prone megacities, drought-stricken rural areas, or toxic industrial zones use speculative scenarios - such as geoengineering projects, AI-managed resource regimes, or genetically modified crops - to interrogate the social unevenness of environmental risk. These narratives highlight how ecological crisis intersects with class, caste, and gender, making clear that climate catastrophe is experienced differently across social groups (Chattopadhyay, *americancommunitymedia*).

Critics situate such works within a broader tradition of South Asian environmental writing that links land, labour, and community, but note that SF adds an important temporal dimension by projecting present tendencies into near or distant futures. This temporal stretch allows authors to dramatize the long-term consequences of current policy decisions and to imagine alternative ecological arrangements grounded in indigenous knowledge, cooperative



economies, or post-growth models. In doing so, Indian SF participates in global debates about the Anthropocene while grounding them in specific local histories of extraction and dispossession (Patel, *IJRAR*).

### **Alternate pasts and speculative archaeologies**

Some Indian SF texts respond to environmental and historical concerns by developing alternate pasts in which different technological paths were taken, or in which colonization unfolded otherwise. By staging contact between present-day characters and artifacts or messages from these divergent timelines, such stories encourage readers to think of history as a field of choices rather than as a fixed sequence. This strategy resonates with the broader cultural fascination for a “lost ancient past culture and civilization” that Reddit readers identify as deeply ingrained in Indian popular imagination (Reddit Forum, *reddit*).

In speculative archaeologies of this kind, ruins, fossils, and archival traces become narrative devices through which characters and readers confront questions of responsibility, memory, and futurity. The cultural ramification lies in the suggestion that both past and future are open to reinterpretation and that scientific inquiry itself - whether in cosmology, geology, or archaeology - is a historically situated practice suffused with power relations. Indian SF thus denaturalizes scientific authority by showing how knowledge about deep time or planetary change is entangled with state projects, corporate interests, and cultural mythologies (Parker, *EPW*).

### **Conclusion: Indian Science Fiction as Cultural Critique**

Across its diverse languages, markets, and subgenres, Indian science fiction functions as a critical laboratory for thinking about how science and technology are lived, contested, and reimagined within the specific cultural formations of the subcontinent. Its narratives of

comets and *yagnas*, climate-stricken cities and myth-inflected AIs, young hackers and feminist utopias, reveal how scientific modernity in India is inseparable from debates about myth, nationalism, caste, gender, and ecology. The genre's hybrid forms and uneven reception testify to the ongoing struggle to reconcile inherited epistemologies with global technoscientific systems, and to the role of speculative storytelling in articulating possible futures beyond both colonial and majoritarian frames (Shenoy, *archive.factorially*).

For teachers and critics, reading Indian SF through the lenses of *kalpavigyan* (*speculative science*), postcolonial history, social hierarchy, and environmental crisis offers a way to connect classroom discussions of science, literature, and culture. For writers, the field opens space to experiment with new narrative structures and to foreground marginalized voices in conversations about technology and the future. Indian science fiction, understood in this way, is not a peripheral variant of a Western genre but a significant arena in which the cultural meanings of science are actively debated and creatively transformed (Khan, *Journal Fafnir*).

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