Review of *Chosen Spirits/The City Inside*

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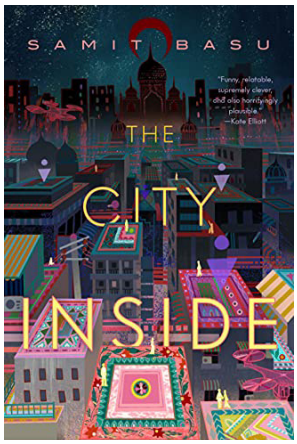
Chosen Spirits, by Samit Basu. Simon & Schuster, 2020. To be republished by Tor in 2022 as *The City Inside*. 256 pp. Price/ISBN yet to be established.



Chosen Spirits by Samit Basu is a novel set in the late 2020s in a New Delhi that still carries the scars of real, recent political violence, albeit hidden beneath the glib veneer of technological advancement and a plethora of distractions. Dubbed as a "capitalist technocrat's wet-dream" (Deepanjana) by one reviewer, this near-future view of the city unsettles the present-day reader both by the familiarity of its history and the strangeness of its present. The people now live under constant surveillance from their gadgets, houses, and even toothbrushes all watching and listening; they are distracted from dissent via the stories they are fed from their omnipresent screens. This distraction is primarily in the form of the new-age social media platform, the Flowverse, a cross between reality television and live-streaming. The Flowstars are the new celebrities/influencers of this era, streaming artificial, scripted stories about their lives, the content of which is pre-determined by their teams in accordance with the policies of their corporate bosses. It is not only the Flowverse, but also the actual reality of ordinary people that is largely controlled and curated by a combination of safety filter settings on the television channels, a firewall around the country's internet, and the manipulation of information by the powers that be. As Nikhil, a potential investor, tells Indi, the Flowstar, "Bro, you have no idea who even runs the country.… It's certainly not the dumbfucks on the hoardings" (Basu 106).

It is appropriate then, that the protagonist of this novel, Joey, holds the designation of a "reality-controller," a professional image-builder and storyteller whose role it is to curate the feeds of Flowstars assigned to her. However, Joey's own position as one of the objects of constant surveillance and her lack of control both over her own reality and over her Flowstars' actions renders the job-title of "reality-controller" ironic. The opening sentence of the novel sets the mood for this world of mundane but sinister compliance: "Sometimes Joey feels like her whole life is a montage of randomly selected, algorithm-controlled surveillance-cam clips, mostly of her looking at screens or sitting glazed-eyed at meetings" (3). As a professional storyteller, Joey notes the lack of structure and story qualities in her own life, sometimes fantasizing herself as the star of those perfect montages she curates for her clients. In a world watched by some undefined, multi-entity Big Brother, life is a series of social media stories. While Orwell had the Thought Police, Basu's characters are watched not only by their devices but also by their own bodies. Smart tattoos on

their wrists can monitor their hormones and stress levels for the personal AI assistant called Narad,[1] who can order the coffeemaker to make coffee, order takeout, schedule a therapy session, and even send puppy gifs and loving emojis to their phones. Basu brings Orwellian dystopia and satire closer home with click-bait headlines that you may have read last week (Chattopadhyay). However, despite this omniscient surveillance, there are hints of an undercurrent of resistance. Surveillance cameras are mysteriously smashed and roadside *kolams*[2] with QR codes lead to secret protests with maximum bloodshed ratings.

Unlike many cyberpunk novels written by Western authors, Basu does not create a lone, male protagonist fighting the system. Rather, his protagonist, Joey, is a more relatable Indian, upper-middle-class woman, trying to do her job, look after her elderly parents, and survive without getting into trouble with the authorities. In creating an upper-middle class protagonist with a privileged social standing, Basu ensures that the readers are given entry into the world of the powerful while simultaneously sharing in her helplessness and insignificance. Rudra, the secondary protagonist and disfavored second son of a powerful family, is another character who functions as an observer of this world through all his cameras and VR sets. In his Dear Reader interview, the author declares that:

> …this is a book about people who I might have known if they'd really existed, set in a world that's pretty much identical to ours right now, and will be wholly so very soon. Which is why what the protagonists want is a normal, everyday life; peace, happiness, clarity — not adventure, not escape, not any form of saved or improved world; just the ability to cope with a regular day. (Deepanjana)

This is perhaps the reason why, unlike his earlier, more fantastical work such as the *Gameworld* trilogy, there is no grandstanding, saving-the-world scenario in *Chosen Spirits*. The protagonists of *Gameworld* learn to view all grand narratives with a degree of cynicism and irony, but they are nevertheless players with stakes in the game, rulers, powerful sorcerers, and prophesied heroes. In *Chosen Spirits*, the characters would simply like to get by without getting into trouble. Basu's primary milieu is of "a middle-class family, complete with domestic help, facing the usual problems—ageing parents, a younger brother who isn't 'settled.' Basu even posits a kind of 'jugaadpunk'[3] aesthetic in his depiction of the semi-formal cyberbazaars of Delhi" (Unudurti).

What makes *Chosen Spirits* specifically Indian and particularly disorienting is its rootedness in current Indian socio-political events. Basu wrote this novel in a milieu of protests relating to, among other issues, the Citizenship Amendment Act or CAA, which could compel citizens to prove their citizenship (*The Hindu*); the Farm Laws, which farmers allege would leave them without legal recourse against traders' hoarding and arbitrary pricing (Chaba); and the attack on the students of Jawaharlal Nehru University (BBC News). More popularly known as JNU, the university has long been one of India's premier educational institutions as well as a stronghold of Left-Wing student politics. In November 2019, an MP of the ruling party proposed that the

university be closed for a period of two years "to curb the presence of antisocial elements" (Press Trust of India). In *Chosen Spirits*, we are casually informed that the mall selling the world's largest air-conditioning machine has been built "over the ruins of what was once Delhi's most prestigious post-grad university, demolished after three years of demonstrations, terror strikes and bloodshed the city pretends hard to forget" (Basu 122). Likewise, Shaheen Bagh, the hotbed of anti-CAA protests, "exists only in memory" (7) in the novel, with a new name that Joey refuses to learn. It is this near familiarity with the real world that paradoxically gives the novel its quality of displacement. As the author says, unlike classic sci-fi, there is "no central sci-fi or fantasy plotline or regular-physics-distortion in *Chosen Spirits*, so physical and digital objects, places, and character transformations based on both real (and imaginary near-future) historical events are where the dislocation from here and now comes from" (Deepanjana). Instead of taking a dive in an unspecified far future, Basu takes us on a ride through the dystopia of a possible near future, and the effect is both fascinating and discomfiting. In Joey's world, our present has become 'the Years Not To Be Discussed' (Basu 14), a time when opinions could still be expressed before:

> the Blasphemy laws in several states, … the mass de-citizenings, the voter-list erasures, the reeducation camps, the internet shutdowns, the news censors, the curfews, … data-driven home invasions… the missing person smart-scrolls on every lamp-post…. (15)

Joey's parents, belonging to an older generation, continue to cling to a lingering faith in the idea of protests and standing up for what is right. But in a world where anyone from pest-control or app-based cleaning crews can plant *molka* cams in one's kitchens and bathrooms and young girls may disappear a few days after attending a protest of the demolition of their schools (18), the individual has very little agency to do anything to change the state of things.

The ubiquitous surveillance technology described in the novel is very similar to an early 2000s Georgia Tech project called 'Aware Home' (Kidd 191-198), a "human-home symbiosis" consisting of a network of "context aware sensors" embedded in the house and wearable computers worn by the home's occupants. The network of smart tattoos, personal AIs, smartphones and kitchen appliances in the houses of Joey or her parents in *Chosen Spirits* recalls this concept of 'aware home.' However, whereas the original intention of the scientists might have been optimistic and idealistic, the idea of a truly 'aware' house takes on a far more sinister connotation in Basu's novel where the idiom about walls having ears comes true in the most literal and frightening sense. As Joey tries to explain to her uncomprehending parents, while one could still express one's opinions in the good old days when surveillance was run by people, it was "your own house spying on you now" (Basu 16). While the scientists at Georgia Tech assumed that the knowledge produced by the new data systems would belong exclusively to the people who live in the house, the data in *Chosen Spirits* is subjected not just to government surveillance but also to corporate espionage. Shoshana Zuboff in her book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* discusses how this original benign idea might have influenced a present-day smart home appliance such as the Nest Thermostat, which uploads its personalized data to Google's servers "to be shared with other smart devices, unnamed personnel, and third parties for the purposes of predictive analyses and sales to other

unspecified parties" (Zuboff 6). The project, in the year 2000, "imagined a digital future that empowers individuals to lead more effective lives" (7). Writing in 2019, nearly two decades later, Zuboff observes how those inalienable rights to privacy and knowledge have given way to the age of "surveillance capitalism", which "unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data" (7). And writing just a year later in 2020, Basu predicts a future in which personal data is not simply sold for marketing purposes but is also monitored to ensure the maintenance of the status quo of inequality and injustices that allows for more profitable trade.

While Joey leaves for work from her posh gated community, the militia is busy herding out people in rags, possibly to some detention centre. She wonders if they have become non-citizens already or if they are going to lose their organs, but can't voice any of her concerns because "she'll hear they were illegal terrorists or Pakistani spies, and her concern will be noted in the Welfare Association's ledgers, marking her out as a potential troublemaker" (Basu 27). Meanwhile, a Singapore real estate tycoon advertises for partners for an organ-farm business and the debate on the news centers not around human trafficking and slavery, "but around the maximum allowable percentage of foreign ownership of these farms" (29). Farmer protest processions still happen, but in single file as they submit to face scans and searches through data implants installed on their necks (30). While a fraction of this makes its way to the Newsflow, real news is to be found in the gatherings of the powerful, as Rudra discovers during his father's funeral by shadowing Chopra, an 'access-caste' elite, one of the people with access to people's data and the means to use them (63). As Zuboff notes, "Surveillance capitalism's actual customers are the enterprises that trade in its markets for future behaviour" (10). As Rudra learns from this gathering, there are new plans in place to implement a new system of social-credit ranking, an automated, algorithm-based system where the average citizen will be ranked according to "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 64) to be filtered and categorized by their biometrics and their role in family and community against their optimum, ideal potential as a member of society. The resultant data will only be available to people like Chopra to be used while the ordinary citizens, thus judged, will never even know about it; "Surveillance capitalists know everything about us, whereas their operations are designed to be unknowable to us. They accumulate vast domains of new knowledge *from us*, but not *for us*" (Zuboff 11).

The surveillance capitalists in this new world continue to grab for even more control, not just for data but for the very identities of individuals. As Zuboff says, "the competitive dynamics of these new markets drive surveillance capitalists to acquire ever-more-predictive sources of behavioral surplus: our voices, personalities, and emotions. Eventually, surveillance capitalists discovered that the most-predictive behavioral data come from intervening in the state of play in order to nudge, coax, tune, and herd behaviour toward profitable outcomes" (8). In *Chosen Spirits*, Basu posits a future where faceless corporations not only control the social media content of the influencers but eventually control their digital identities—for all time—where this new digital

icon/filmstar/influencer might become the face and voice of anything without the consent or even involvement of the actual individual. According to this estimate, in some undefined but not far off future, the individual may not even exist, and celebrities would be created from scratch, without the need to sign up an actual human being (Basu 115). This is the offer that is made by a potential investor to Indi and Joey, an offer they refuse at first, because in a world where every action performed by the body is recorded and measured, "talking is all we can do…" (116). Thus, digital expression via the Flowverse, however scripted, remains one of the last vestiges of freedom of expression, or an illusion of it at least. But the oligarchs in this world get what they want, and Indi is soon convinced into signing to save his career when a video-clip of him sexually assaulting a makeup-artist mysteriously finds its way to the feed of a rival Flowstar. In the ensuing damage-control measures, the issue of justice for the victim is of course buried.

Surveillance capitalism thus depends upon knowing and thereby shaping human behaviour towards goals that suit those in power. While Basu's dystopian Delhi has neighborhood armies marching in jingoistic uniforms, simultaneously advertising vegetarian restaurants and flushing out *undesirables*, the real power of the state is exerted not via "armaments and armies" but "through the automated medium of an increasingly ubiquitous computational architecture of 'smart' networked devices, things, and spaces" (Zuboff 8). Thus, while Indi dreams of the poor rising like a zombie herd someday to overthrow the current order, Joey is aware of the difficulty of achieving that in a regime that has foreseen every possible means of insurrection and taken measures to prevent it.

Basu's dystopian Delhi can be described as a cyberpunk cross between the Orwellian world of surveillance and Huxley's *Brave New World*, where instead of Soma, the people are drugged by the constant diversion of catchy, clickbait entertainment. Moreover, this distraction is often a conscious and necessary choice in a world where "not looking away means seeing terrible things" (Basu 28). Early in the novel, Joey and her brother attempt to prevent their parents from having "a full-scale fight about the State of the Nation…. She barges in and makes the standard gestures—they stop immediately, and stare back at her with their usual mix of rage and shame" (14). The crisis is then more properly averted as Joey sets the television to a puppy adoption show, which acts as a 'smart pacifier' to distract the elderly from ranting about the government; "There will be no van full of murderers pulling up outside their house today" (16). When Tara, aspiring Flowstar, speaks of participating in protests as a student while promoting the supermarket built at the site of the former university, she manages to disturb the audience who would rather forget student protests when "the mall and the accompanying religious park… are an attempt at dazzling the city into distraction" (122).

Even Joey, who is more adept than her parents at keeping her opinions unheard, and less tone-deaf than Tara, is often tormented by having "Real Thoughts" and must distract herself with the work of creating stories for her clients. A major theme of the novel therefore is that of storytelling and narratives. *Chosen Spirits* looks at how stories are constructed, which stories are told, and which ones are buried beneath the onslaught of relentless entertainment. While Joey selects the

stories that might get maximum engagement from Indi's followers, another slum not far from her upper-middle class, respectable neighborhood is being evacuated by the police and the builder-militia.

Although written from the perspectives of the upper-class elites of the city, the novel manages to highlight this clear line between the privileged and the poorer section of the population. Basu posits the 'Chosen Spirits' of the title as the privileged, 'chosen', conformist elites who have always been a part of the city's top brass, "the chosen ones of the age" (Basu 1) mentioned in the Mir Taqi Mir poem used as an epigraph. In a private Twitter conversation, Basu states that the poem reflects "both the timeless nature of Delhi" as the city of the powerful and "the representative/popular/conformist nature of the workspace of the protagonists." Joey herself is aware of this "low-level court intrigue" (12) that makes her feel a little out-of-place amongst her Delhite friend circles despite belonging to the same social class. Although she has adapted herself to this new position of being in the surveillance state, this sense of discomfort never really dissipates, much like the constant itching of her smart tattoo. Similarly, the privileged may pretend that everything is perfect, protected as they are by their air-sealed, air-conditioned apartments and cars, but even for them stepping out on the streets entails packing essentials such as water bottles, smog masks, and pepper sprays. Even for the chosen ones, the problems of environmental pollution and social degeneration are hiding just around the corners, and neighborhoods must hire private militia (wearing patriotic uniforms with sponsorship logos in a beautiful marriage of jingoism with capitalism) to ensure that their ration of weekly drinking water is not raided by someone less fortunate. This state of being is maintained by a combination of surveillance and the dissemination of too much information that drowns out news that matters, such as the new age slave-trades and environmental disasters.

> Although the book, toward the latter part, does consider the possibility for change, Basu's main focus is to dig into the mechanics of oppression, the way those in control silence or marginalise the "other"—whether it be Muslim, Dalit or LGBTQIA+ voices—by feeding an eager audience with spectacle and distraction. (Mond)

Flowstars are often willing participants in this circus of 'spectacle and distraction.' Indi may speak of uprisings and the freedom to use his own voice and Tara may speak of her struggles and trauma from participating in student protests in her hometown. Yet, in truth, they have very little agency or even intention beyond building their own careers. Even celebrities less selfish than Indi or Tara can do nothing to change this state of affairs. Joey has seen other reality controllers and Flowstars fade and disappear from the industry after being seen at protests. Even looking at inspiring photographs of protestors braving police brutality and fascist mobs across the world is of no help, if not downright dangerous as potential ID traps (Basu 28). This is in contrast to the Shaheen Bagh and Jantar Mantar protests, which Joey remembers as a time of hope, of people coming together from all walks of life for a common cause: "…they'd thought they were alone, that most people in the country had been swallowed up by a tide of bigotry and hate. They'd never been happier being proved wrong" (5). Those people from 'the Years Not To Be Discussed' were united

by stories of faith against a common enemy, and as history will show, stories are important as tools that can both make or break a civilization. As Yuval Noah Harari says in his famous work, "The ability to create an imagined reality out of words enabled large numbers of strangers to cooperate effectively.… Since large-scale human cooperation is based on myths, the way people cooperate can be altered by changing the myths- by telling different stories" (Harari, 36).

In the fictional near future of the late 2020s India, all possibilities of cooperation and collective protest have been nullified through a multiplicity of stories. As Nikhil tells Indi during their business meeting, "They wouldn't know if there was another epidemic happening right now, or a genocide, or a civil war. Even if they knew, they wouldn't know how to join it. They would have no idea what to do. They're that easy to distract" (Basu 116). Unlike the protestors from the past, the oppressor in *Chosen Spirits* is faceless, even more so than Orwell's Big Brother:

> …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 16)

In an interesting conversation between Joey, Indi, and Nikhil where the latter proposes to make Indi a global icon in exchange for his digital identity, the reader is offered an insight into what it means to be an 'influencer' and the mechanics of garnering an audience in India and in the West. In this new age of 'Cultural Warming,' the digital identity of the icon can be constantly altered to stay relevant to public demand, becoming a film-star or spiritual healer or social justice activist as the need be. Whatever public dissatisfaction exists may be weeded out without causing any real impact: "The state funds and controls the resistance, so there's no left or right, everything's a distraction, everyone's observed and under control" (Basu 120).

The real resistance in the novel is offered by tertiary figures who have learned to subvert the system to their benefits, sometimes using VR gaming platforms: DesiBryde, a radical porn-star who performs while wearing the masks of religious leaders, creating a Flowstream powerful enough to circumvent all culture-policing and censorship; E-Klav, a Banksy-like Dalit graffiti artist who has somehow managed to stay hidden while vandalizing the symbols of the establishment; and Zaria Salam, an investigative journalist who has managed to build up an online notoriety despite her videos disappearing off the Indian internet within seconds of release. There is also cyberbazaar, the market for pirate-tech run by working class people where Rudra and Zaria get their smart-tattoos removed when they go off-the-grid. At the end of the novel, Basu does not offer revolution, only the possibility of change through slow, long-term efforts as Desibryde and Joey begin to discuss the possibility of working together. This leaves the novel open for sequels, but also makes it more realistic. As history might prove, the mass uprising of the poor, as envisioned by Indi, rarely affects a sustainable shift in the dynamics of power imbalance, especially against an insidious, all-pervasive system. Basu thus creates a cautionary tale of a possible future, leaving us only with an outline of how to navigate it.

Notes

1. Narad or Narada is a god-sage in Hindu mythology famous as a travelling musician and storyteller.
2. *Kolam* is a form of traditional decorative art made of a series of dots joined by lines and loops that is drawn by using rice flour, generally seen during festivals and celebrations.
3. *Jugaad*, a Hindi word meaning hack or makeshift solutions. Cyberbazaar in the novel is a market for pirate tech.

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