

Exploring Dalit-Futurism in Caste-Flavored Techno-Scientific Worlds



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This paper introduces Dalit futurism as a methodological framework to analyze the concept of caste in English-language Indian science fiction. I use the novel *Chosen Spirits* (2020) by Samit Basu to demonstrate its potential to speculate about different avatars of caste against a technoscientific culture. In the Indian subcontinent, the dominant groups tend to imply that caste is an “ancient” category which does not have any contemporary relevance. However, caste continues to determine different aspects of life for *all* individuals, depending upon one’s caste location (high or low). Dalit futurism provides a vocabulary to engage this ancient phenomenon with modern, exaggerated versions of reality, and explore this interaction to uncover various nodes of intersection. Taking the international audience into consideration, I think it is important to explain the significance of the caste system, a discriminatory system, on which Dalit futurism is premised and the resistance mounted by the anti-caste movement. In this paper, I begin by briefly explaining the characteristics, history, and contemporary effects of the caste system and the anti-caste movement. I then discuss the concept of Dalit futurism and its foundation in order to demonstrate its potential to analyze the novel.

The Caste System and Modes of Resistance

The caste system is a centuries-old system of stratification, mandated by Hindu religious scriptures, that dominates the Indian subcontinent. It divides the population into four *varnas*.¹ The first three groups are referred to as *Savarnas* or the upper castes: the *Brahmins*, associated with learning and other intellectual activities; the *Kshatriyas*, the warrior caste, and the *Vaishyas*, the merchant caste. On the other hand, the *Shudras* and *Avarnas* (referred to as Dalits and Tribals, are outside the caste social order), are associated with manual labor; they are considered to be the lowest in the hierarchy and have to face Untouchability.² B. R. Ambedkar, one of the most formidable critics of the caste system, has insightfully stated that it does not just divide labor but also divides laborers as it associates each occupation with a pure or impure status (Ambedkar 14). This status is ascribed at birth and cannot be changed. The caste system has created an unequal society that privileges and discriminates individuals on the basis of their caste membership. Thus, unlike economic classes which allow mobility, caste is a rigid system that has created historical advantages for the *Savarnas* and historical disadvantages for the Dalits who have difficulty accessing education, employment, and several other aspects of social and cultural life because of their status as “Untouchables.” In addition, it prescribes endogamy and hereditary occupation, thereby impeding social interaction, exchange of ideas and opinions, and social networks.

However, this system has been actively resisted by several anti-caste visionaries who have fashioned alternate modes of thought at different points of time. For instance, Gail Omvedt

itches the thoughts and ideas of anti-caste intellectuals during the Bhakti movement, especially Ravidas, a *Shudra* saint, as one of the earliest articulations of utopia in the Indian subcontinent (18). Ravidas's utopia opposed caste divisions and advocated for an equal and casteless society, built on "companionship" and free movement (107).³ Omvedt contends that these visions of an ideal tomorrow were in stark opposition to the dystopian visions embodied in *Kaliyuga*,⁴ espoused by Hindu Brahmin saints and scriptures. Since then, activists like Jyotiba Phule, Savitribai Phule, Periyar, Ambedkar, and several others have tried to steadily establish a foundation for the growth of an anti-caste movement that challenges the dominance and supremacy of caste ideologies. Their ideology resists caste discrimination by uncovering how caste disadvantages Dalits, Adivasis, and all other marginalized sections and posits an alternate system that privileges equality and social justice.

Over time, the anti-caste movement was promulgated by writers, activists, and scholars through literature, poetry, art, music, theater, and the online avenues to highlight their perspectives and culture, thereby privileging an alternate mode of imagining their community. For instance, in literature, writers and activists used the autobiographical mode to discuss the impact of life not just on themselves but also on their community. Autobiographies like *The Outcaste* by Sharankumar Limbale, *The Kaleidoscope of my Life* by Shantabai Kamble, *When I Hid my Caste* by Baburao Bagul, connect their plight with the societal treatment of their community. In recent times, authors like Suraj Yengde and Yashica Dutt have used the mode to discuss the contemporary avatars of caste through their books *Caste Matters* and *Coming Out as a Dalit* respectively. Artists like Arivu, Mahi Ghane, and Sumit Samos are using hip-hop to resist caste structures. The digital medium has also added another dimension to the Dalit movement by making protest sites virtual.

Dalit Futurism

Dalit futurism is a contemporary of these efforts. I conceptualize it as a contemporary of other Indigenous Futurisms, such as Chicano futurism, Adivasi Futurism, Subaltern Futurisms, etc. It is an analytical framework that explores the representation of caste and gender in Indian science fiction in English. It is an interdisciplinary project that draws from Dalit studies, science fiction studies, and science and technology studies. I argue that the government's belief in technology as the solution for all issues fails to consider the inherent inequalities associated with their adoption. Thus, my project builds on extant scholarship that highlights how engineers, developers, and multi-national corporations embed their biases and prejudices in the design, development, and deployment of technology (Boeri 113; Toyama). This is visible in Indian matrimonial apps and websites, the lack of effective engineering solutions to eradicate manual scavenging, e-governance services for identity cards that do not account for landless and paperless Dalit communities, and online regulations that do not recognize caste-based hate speech (De' 46; Pradhan and Mittal 275). As the twenty-first century rides on the back of new and emerging technologies, I suggest that it is important to understand and explore how caste interacts with technology and the emerging technoscientific culture.

I propose this investigation through Indian science fiction on caste. I theorize Dalit futurism as a methodological tool that enables the exploration of caste futures in alternate technoscientific worlds. It upholds Ambedkarism,⁵ which resists caste discrimination by uncovering how caste influences different aspects of social, cultural, and political reality. It recognizes the potential in SF to defamiliarize the familiar and thereby provide freedom to its writers to explore different features of caste. As a result, it can disrupt, question, and challenge various notions about the caste system. Moreover, this defamiliarizing technique enables the genre to link past, present, *and* future on a single platform illustrating the contemporary avatars of caste. It uses the concepts of cognitive estrangement, the novum, and the mega-text to analyze how caste mutates in these science-fictional worlds and how our science-fictional and cultural vocabulary helps readers to comprehend the defamiliarized fictional environment (Naik 18). Dalit futurism destabilizes the boundaries between science fiction and Dalit studies to create an interdisciplinary space. It allows a simultaneous movement between the fictional and the real world. The fictional engagement with caste-flavored technologies encourages us to think about our reality.

Dalit Futurism as a Methodological Tool

To illustrate this phenomenon, I analyze *Chosen Spirits* (2020) by Samit Basu, a dark, dystopian novel set in 2050s India. Basu extrapolates and exaggerates the events that led up to the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019⁶—both the protest and the government crackdown. The fictional world is replete with imaginary technologies that are embedded with caste biases and attitudes. These function as novums that are introduced into the market by Savarna businessmen who wish to maintain their status quo.

Here, Dalit futurism enables me to analyze how caste is deployed in two major ways: firstly, by the amplification of the neoliberal economy that effectively sheaths caste ideologies; secondly, how this facade is maintained through the media discourse and challenged by the marginalized through the same platform. This hegemony is ensured by controlling the public discourse through the FlowVerse, a 24/7 live platform that is the major source of news and entertainment and can be compared to an amalgamation of social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.

Basu parodies the caste-corporate entities by exaggerating the social capital and networks cultivated by the *Savarnas*, i.e., Baniyas by creating the fictional “access-caste Brahmin,” a group that has been able to convert their social capital and networks to cultivate “one-degree relationships with real power” (Basu 68). This element signals the Brahmin-Bania nexus, first explained by Ambedkar, as a symbiotic relationship between the educated Madras Brahmins who were reporters and journalists, and the Baniyas, who provided financial support to the newspaper organizations. By pointing out the importance of historical advantages accrued by Brahmins, Ambedkar illustrates how the community has been able to re-adapt and re-fashion itself into advantageous positions, even as it acted internally, in isolation. Fuller and Narsimha’s study on Tamil Brahmins interprets this general prosperity as an art of power cultivated through

accumulated social and cultural capital, which allowed them to adapt their professions and perceive upcoming opportunities while withdrawing from extremely competitive ones (27). In the novel, the success of Chopra as an access-caste Brahmin makes caste visible in political and economic governance. His investment in the development of an app to sell the lower castes, immigrants, and climate-change refugees; the antagonist Rohit's belief in the contemporary manifestation of caste-ascribed occupations, and the hindered access to the market experienced by Dalit-run businesses all explain how caste blocks Dalit entry.

These social inequalities are orchestrated and maintained through media organizations that operate on the FlowVerse. The FlowVerse hosts multiple FlowStars simultaneously and engineers multiple realities, a hyperbolized version of our contemporary reality wherein AI algorithms on social media craft an exclusive “feed” that is in tune with an individual's tastes, preferences, and attitudes. Initially, the FlowVerse was being used by the marginalized to highlight their opinions, but over time was seized by caste-corporate entities. This is analogous to the Indian social reality which was reflected in the abysmal coverage of COVID-19, incidents of caste atrocities, and lopsided coverage that ignored Dalit issues or misrepresented them—indicating how news reportage has been compromised due to the nexus (Abhishek; Menon). The near-complete blackout of Dalit issues reflects the caste-prone mindset of the mainstream media, also a result of lack of effective representation as regular studies have revealed the lack of Dalits, Bahujan, and Adivasis in newsrooms (Who Tells Our Stories 1, 6). This state of affairs helps to contextualize Ambedkar's warning about the Brahmin-Bania nexus in news organizations as the latter would be swayed by profit, not well-being.

However, there is a secret underground movement brought together by Dalit artists and other marginalized folks that challenges the establishment. The most prominent activists in this fictional world are E-Klav and Desibryde, multi-media artists who subvert and challenge dominant narratives through Ambedkar's ideas. E-Klav and Desibryde reject the holiness and reverence accorded to Hindu gods and goddesses and instead privilege the ideals espoused in the Indian constitution. E-Klav and Desibryde's protests are a reflection of the Ambedkarite ideology, which promotes modern, secular attitudes.

I suggest that the performances enacted by these activists must not be considered solitary activities but efforts to build a counter-culture that foregrounds Ambedkar thought: “Educate. Agitate. Organize.” By visibly inserting Ambedkarite ideology in their protest, E-Klav and Desibryde locate oppression in caste-flavored neoliberalism. Thus, E-Klav and Desibryde's protests are reminiscent of the multi-modal strategies utilized by Dalit activists like Thenmozhi Soundarajan, Anurag Minus Verma, Meena Kandasamy, @anti-casteCat, and others, who use an eclectic array of styles to present the Dalit perspective and challenge the neglect accorded by the mainstream media, by asserting their presence. These artists intervene in the perception of a single reality and highlight how caste privilege creates a reality that erases the struggles of the marginalized from their “feed.” This assertion amidst their mainstream negation is a powerful manner of resistance.

Thus, Dalit futurism seeks to highlight how caste is made invisible in the economic realm, actively supported by the propaganda propagated by a complicit media. It allows a back-and-forth movement between caste and the techno-scientific cultures. These strategies are effective in portraying a reality that rejects caste atrocities or discrimination, and normalizes caste-accrued privileges. Thus, the novums enable us to perceive how caste mutates with the emerging techno-scientific culture.

Notes

1. *Varnas* is a Sanskrit word that refers to social groups.
2. Untouchability was a ritual practice prescribed by the caste system wherein the touch of the Shudras and Avarnas was considered to be “polluting.” Thus, these social groups were excluded from public spaces and institutions.
3. This is in stark contrast to the restrictions imposed on the Shudras and Avarnas that prevented them from accessing public spaces (roads, markets, etc).
4. Hinduism believes in four *yugas*, i.e., different periods of time. The world began with the age of Gods and has slowly deteriorated to *Kaliyuga*, the contemporary period which is ruled by greed, sins, and vices. Brahmanical saints envisioned *Kaliyuga* as dystopic precisely because of the breakdown of the caste system and the admixture of different castes. This “deterioration” of the social order is considered to be apocalyptic enough to lead to the end of the world.
5. Ambedkarism is an anti-caste philosophy that is largely attributed to the ideas and thoughts of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, but like all movements has grown and expanded in scope and reach.
6. The Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019, is an Indian law that enables persecuted religious minorities like the Sikhs, Hindus, Christians, Parsis, Buddhists, and Jains from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh to gain Indian Citizenship. The Act led to widespread protests across the country and was heavily criticized for using religion as an eligibility criterion. The brutal government crackdown on these protests drew global attention. See “The Citizenship Amendment Act was the straw that broke the camel's back” by Guarav Lele on the news portal, Newslaundry.

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