Nationalist Utopias and Science Fiction

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Abstract:

The ascendant genre of Indian science fiction cinema with its unique generic conventions and thematic codes, can be seen as symptomatic of a new change in the politics and the economics of Indian popular culture. While India's geopolitical ambitions and apprehensions have seen expression in science fiction films as early as 1967 in *Wahan Ke Log*, and its cultural traditions have been extolled in others like *Kalai Arasi* (1963), these films never had overt connections to religious or mythological themes. However, post 2000, the commingling of divine and religious elements with scientific or rational concepts, both in thematic and aesthetic aspects of the film, is so prevalent that it has to be considered as a generic marker of Indian science fiction. Combined with the altered geographic location of the events and characters in these films which almost always include foreign locations, this paper argues that this trend is emblematic of a change in the ideological deployment of popular culture as well as the geopolitical aspirations of the present day. By textual analysis of the plots, visuals and songs of recent science fiction films, this paper will investigate the bricolage of narrative strategies and audio-visual assemblages that seek to imagine a nationalist utopia and the political rationale for this configuration of meanings in this historical moment.

Keywords: Indian Science Fiction Cinema, Genre Analysis, Religious Discourses in Cinema, Hindu Revivalism, Bollywood and Geopolitics

The post liberalization era has seen a marked increase in the production of science fiction films in various regional industries of Indian cinema. While the entire corpus of these films remains very small compared to other genres, there has been almost four times the number of science fiction films produced since 2000 compared to the years that came before. India has emerged as the largest producer of films in the world, putting out nearly 1500-2000 films per year (Jain, et al. 5) far outstripping any other national industry. While the growth of science fiction as a filmic genre is consistent with the tremendous overall growth that the

industry has achieved in recent years, it would be imperative to consider at length the sudden upsurge in the production of these films and the unique generic structure that has evolved around it. Post 2000, science fiction has not only emerged as a bankable genre, attested by films like *2.0* (2018) - the most expensive film in the history of Indian cinema, but also as a vehicle for ideological and cultural battles. This paper seeks to investigate the themes and motifs of the genre and the ways in which they have evolved to reflect both India's current political milieu and its geopolitical ambitions.

Science fiction, even in the West, is a genre marked by great flexibility and hybridity. This natural inclination of the genre for cross genre influences is even more complicated by Indian cinema's preponderance for genre blending *masala* movies. However, the new global order of increasingly porous and overlapping media markets, transnational citizenry, and even the changing viewing practices of multiplexes and online streaming platforms has forced Indian cinema to move away from the *masala* model and to etch out specific markers for each genre. Meheli Sen, in her book *Haunting Bollywood: Gender, Genre and the Supernatural in Hindi Cinema*, refers to this kind of "genre distillation" as a removal of "generic tropes and constellations that are shorn of the local in any recognizable way."(135) While this is true for the few examples of recent Hindi horror movies that she talks about it still doesn't hold true for the majority of horror, science fiction, and fantasy films produced in India. While these few films are aimed at an audience who is mostly urban, middle class, multiplex going, and consumers of global popular culture, the rest of these genres still imbricate with the nebulous borders of the Indian *masala* film.

Taking this ineluctable imbrication as a given there are still ways in which these genres, especially science fiction has developed an idiom that is unique to itself and has evolved immediately recognizable, consumable markers of a genre. However, rather than being "shorn of the local "in this process, these films have codified themselves into an identifiable genre by foregrounding culturally unique aspects such as religion, mythology, and tradition. These religious and mythological aspects are no longer just the culturally specific and conveniently available buttresses that would make what is a "foreign" genre, in terms simply of its availability for consumption so far, more palatable to an Indian audience, rather they tend to serve a higher ideological function. Both thematically and aesthetically this practice has become so pervasive that the framework of a science fiction movie is almost always a medium to articulate the glory of the past and a need to find a unique Indian philosophy rooted in that past. The victory of the protagonist in the end is also the victory of the truths, values, and wisdom of this mythic past. This is more than a postcolonial impulse to stand up to Western imperialism as in most of the films the West is at once in the usual role of the other, to be overcome, but also that of a validator, a touchstone that gives legitimacy to the claims of the valorized past.

Anustup Basu posits that the increase in superhero/science fiction films since *Koi Mil Gaya* in 2003 is an indication of the Hindi film industry expanding into foreign and niche markets due to increased financial returns and improved and cheaper technology. He also considers this "pioneering spirit directed towards breaking new frontiers in the world market." as a brave new way of essaying a "national destining in the era of transnational information flows and techno-financial development." (558) Basu problematizes the impulse of recent science fiction films to thematically blend science and religion as an attempt to push an agenda of Hindu revivalism, one that has been around since the nationalist struggle but has not been manifested in cinema until now. He argues that these films reconcile the apparently conflicting discourses of myth and scientific modernity by creating certain crucial moments where "...aspects of technology cease to be imprimaturs of science. That is, marks of technologism ...are effectively split from the horizon of 'science' in order to be consigned to an ontotheology of a Hindu revivalism." (ibid., 569) The deployment of science as a rationalizing agent for religion and religious beliefs is something that has recently been figuring more and more in our political discourse too.

It is not merely through its themes but also through its visual codes and aesthetic choices that the science fiction film articulates religious and mythological agendas. Indian science fiction cinema could be accused of deriving from the West the staple science fiction themes of kind aliens, mad scientists, and murderous robots but over the past two decades it has developed an aesthetic that is culturally unique to itself. The transnational audience that Indian SF films have garnered is indeed a remarkable achievement, considering the "spectacle lag" between it and its Hollywood counterparts (Basu, 558). While these spectacles are sometimes overt depictions of Hindu symbols, they have now evolved to become the generic markers of Indian SF, just like themes that are drawn from Hindu mythology. A few examples would be the alien, Jadoo, in *Koi Mil Gaya*, who is modeled after Lord Krishna (Khan), the spaceship in *Joker* (2012) which is shaped like a Shiva linga, and robots which are presented as divine beings by attiring them as traditional deities as in *Enthiran* (2010), or foregrounding them in front of idols of gods or demons as in *Ra.One* (2011). This affect is reinforced by the plot and background music too, for example the robot in *Enthiran* is greeted by people prostrating themselves at his feet and crying out in prayer and the robot in *Ra.One* stops a runaway train, coming to rest at the feet of a huge Ganesha idol to rousing chants of "Ganapati Bappa Moriya" in the background. This conflation of the scientific and the divine entity is doubly effective and believable as these characters are portrayed onscreen by superstars who are venerated as quasi divine off screen too.

0The science fiction films of the new millennium are fascinating not only because of the diegetic and aesthetic choices that they make but also because of the spaces in which they choose to locate them and the movement of the

characters in them. Many of these films, usually Hindi and Tamil-which are the most successful languages in this genre, are either set in part in foreign countries or have antagonists/protagonists who travel to India from somewhere outside. The locations are usually those with a sizeable diasporic population of Indians, like UK (*Baar Baar Dekho*) USA (*Ra.One, Dasavatharam, Joker*), and Australia (*Love Story 2050*), Canada (*Koi Mil Gaya*), or South East Asian Countries (*Iru Mugan, Krrish*). Science fiction films are therefore furthering a transnational cosmopolitanism that seeks to bring in a global Indian audience and unite them being invested in a portrayal of India that is identifiable to the diasporas and aspirational to the local audience. The geopolitical ambitions of Indian science fiction cinema is not limited to these strategies of identification and aspiration that arguably increase the market for these films overseas, thereby increasing the opportunities for improving the much touted soft power of Indian cinema. These ambitions also lie in the narrative positioning of India as a global player able to hold its own in terms of science and technology against external aggressors and foreign antagonists, most notably China (*7aum Arivu, Tik Tik Tik*) and the USA (*Dasavatharam*).

The two films I would like to look at more closely are emblematic of the above discussed characteristics that define Indian science fiction cinema today. *7aum Arivu* (transl. Seventh Sense) is a 2011 Tamil science fiction film directed by A R Murugadoss. The film follows Arvind (Suriya), a circus artist, and Subha (Shruti Haasan), a genetics student, who tries to revive the powers of the ancient Buddhist monk Bodhidharma (Suriya) through Arvind who is his descendant. These efforts pit them against a Chinese superspy Dong Lee who is sent to India on a mission to spread a deadly virus in India and to kill Subha whose research might be an obstacle to China's designs to control India through bio-war.

The film starts with the tale of Bodhidharman, a prince of the Pallava dynasty, who leaves his city of Kanchi to travel to China on the orders of the Queen Mother. He adopts a village in China, rescuing it from a plague and ravaging marauders, and passes on to its inhabitants his vast knowledge of martial arts and medicine. Many years later, on expressing a wish to return to his country, the villagers try to poison Bodhidharman in the belief that the land where he is buried will not be affected by any diseases. He accepts the poison and dies in his adopted village which later becomes the famed Shaolin temple in China. The narrative then shifts to a documentary style where people on the streets are asked if they know who Bodhidharman is. None of the people in Tamil Nadu know his name while all the people in China do. The narrator talks about how none of us know an Indian, a Tamilian, who is worshipped in his countless temples all over China, Japan, and Taiwan. The camera cuts to web pages, including Wikipedia, which highlight the parts which mention Bodhidharman as an Indian and as the founder of the Shaolin Temple.

The film continues to play on this trope of lost ancient knowledge that is somehow appreciated and utilized in other countries but of which Indians are sadly ignorant. To recruit Arvind to her project of reawakening this ancient knowledge through the modern science of genetics, Subha takes him to a museum where she tries to impress upon him the value of this lost knowledge.

Subha: *Everything on display here has a story behind it. We are not the real citizens of this country. Thousands of years ago, the people who taught this country bravery and pride were the true citizens of this country. They were 500 years more advanced than today's modern science. Scientists have discovered that there are 9 planets using Space Theory. They are saying this by observing space through telescopes. How did ancient Indians know to worship nine planets, Navagraha, in temples? How did Aryabhatta calculate the radius of earth 1200 years ago? Modern weather forecasts cannot even predict rainfall correctly. How can people look at the Panchang and predict amavasi and poornima years in advance? This is 'our science'.*

The rest of the film sees the protagonists in a race against a rampaging epidemic, similar to the one Bodhidharman had cured aeons ago in China, antidote to which is known only to the Chinese, and a Chinese superspy as they combine ancient texts and modern technology to awaken Arvind's genetic memory which would be the key to protecting the land and its people from a devastating biowar. At the end of the film the speech given by Arvind, who is now celebrated by the media for having cured the plague, in a television interview sums up it's message succinctly-

Arvind: *We have to know our history. Only by knowing history we will know our senses. Those who have ruled us have hidden the stories of our bravery and pride somewhere. By changing our religion, language and traditions they have hidden our identity.*

He goes on to give a lot of scientific explanations for rituals and about how other countries are getting ahead because the new generation has forgotten all this

Arvind: *The saints and yogis are still alive in our blood and our beliefs. We don't have to conduct research on it, we just have to take their knowledge forward.*

7aum Arivu mthologises a historical figure and an ancient system of knowledge, valorizing it as having far reaching consequences into the future. The film starts off by establishing the ancient Pallava kingdom as a place of learning, science, and martial excellence, all of which was transferred by an altruistic prince to an alien community in distress. His own people however lost that knowledge because of a tyrannical imposition of rulers, ostensibly outsiders, who sought to destroy this knowledge by changing their "religion, language and traditions" thereby denying them their true identity. The film calls for a return to that unsullied and glorious past as the only way to survive in a world that has seemingly advanced because of "our" knowledge.

The film legitimizes these claims by juxtaposing the narratives of ancient wisdom with objective, modern, scientific "proofs". The narrative about Bodhidharman being revered in many Asian countries as the founder of the Shaolin school is intercut with Wikipedia pages and on location shots of Buddhist monasteries. The reverence for Bodhidharman in those countries is juxtaposed with the pitiful ignorance of Tamilians about this "national" hero is shot in a documentary style- one that is associated with objectivity and truth. Subha steals Bodhidharman's book from a museum and brings Arvind to one to educate him about the past, establishing the narrative as truth by using the understanding of the museum as a site for an objective, scientifically verified history. The science of Genetics is used as a modern tool that can help us access if not understand a higher truth that was lost by invasions and impositions left unmentioned. It is crucial that the film equates this reclamation of knowledge to a reclamation of a lost monolithic identity. A reclamation that would establish India as a redoutable modern political power with the legitimacy of a genuine classicism of science, martial prowess, and nationhood behind it. The existence of the country in the present as a utopic space of strength and prosperity could only be realized by the revival of the ancient systems of beliefs, knowledge and traditions.

The evoking of a classical, monolithic, Hindu past as a past utopia that is to be revived in order to flourish is a recurring theme in Indian science fiction. In certain cases the argument for this revival is made directly by the diegesis of the film. In *Baar Baar Dekho* (2016), directed by Nitya Mehra, Jai, a mathematics scholar who questions the logic of rituals and traditions, is forced to skip ahead into his own future at accelerating rates by a sacred thread that is tied onto his wrist by a mystical *pundit*. Jai, who is about to marry his longtime girlfriend, receives an offer from his old professor in Cambridge to pursue his research in Vedic mathematics. The film pitches Vedic mathematics as something that would have a tremendous impact on space travel , the professor encouraging him to take it up as "...the answers to the future lie in the past…". The dilemma of the protagonist in choosing between a future in England doing his research and a future with his traditional girlfriend and her comically absurd religious family is solved by time travel, a science fiction staple, albeit done without a time machine but using a sacred thread. As Jai skips forward into the future, the setting shifts to London where he focuses on his job ignoring his family. Even cutting away the thread does not seem to affect his inadvertent time travelling. As he lives out his entire life in a few days decades apart, Jai realizes his mistakes and his loss and the realization helps him to get back to the present and go through with his marriage.

Though the film has absolutely nothing in it, other than time travel, that could classify it as science fiction, it was still marketed and is considered a science fiction film. The concept of time travel with a sacred thread (and inexplicably without it) underlines the uniqueness of this chimerical assemblage

that is Indian science fiction. The novum, conceptualized by Darko Suvin as a scientifically plausible element that is central to the plot of any science fiction narrative and which changes the world it is situated in drastically thus driving the narrative forward is not scientific at all in this instance. It does however throw into relief the socio cultural impulses of its birth- a dialectical opposition between tradition, characterized by familial bliss and fulfilment, and an overreaching and ultimately doomed ambition fueled by disdain for the truths and wisdom of tradition, signified by the spare impersonal London of the future. The film is not concerned with giving its narrative over to logical explanations rather leaving the questions of understanding well beyond the ability of science or logic in a truth that is to be implicitly believed in rather than reasoned out. This truth which is intimately tied to rituals and traditions of the mystical *pandit* is the knowledge that is to be revived or atleast lived with to make meaning in a life that would otherwise only alienate the ones living it.

Dominic Alessio and Jessica Langer in their essay, "Nationalism and Postcolonialism in Indian Science Fiction: Bollywood's *Koi . . . Mil Gaya* (2003)" analyse the religious motifs in the film such as the semi divine alien modelled after Lord Krishna, the universally recognizable "OM" sound that contacts the aliens and the OM shaped spaceship of the aliens as evidence that the film itself is a piece of overt propaganda. Citing that the film was lauded by the BJP, the party ruling at that time, and the fact that its songs were used in the BJP campaign, they allege that "It seems, therefore, that *KMG* has aligned itself both formally and ideologically with extremist Hindu nationalism, combining formal elements from Hollywood SF and from Hindu religious iconography to reinforce a nationalist cultural hegemony." (168) They see the inclusion of Hindu myth and religion in the film as a conscious political choice rather than an apparent manifestation of the very dynamics of collective/national imagination, the roots and rationale of which run much deeper. Ericka Hoagland and Reema Sarwal, in their introduction to the book Science Fiction, Imperialism and the Third World *Essays on Postcolonial Literature and Film*, describe SF as "a genre that feeds off of conflicting impulses—of exploration and xenophobia, conquest and exchange, and technophilia and technophobia, to name a few."(9) This holds true for Indian science fiction as well as it navigates conflicting impulses of post colonialism and geopolitical ambitions, a glorious past and future progress, technology and faith, and science and religion. What is evident is that the intertwining of science and religion to envisage a monolithic Hindu nationalist utopia rooted in a classical past of advanced scientific knowledge and traditional "Indian" values is being articulated clearly and consistently through science fiction cinema in the new millennium.

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