

# Religious Xenophobia and Casteism in India's Futures in Dystopian Fiction

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## **Abstract**

The caste system is an ancient structure of society which still has its roots spread in the Indian social sphere. However, its ancient foundation based on profession, or what Dr B. R. Ambedkar called the 'division of labour,' has been shifted to the rigidity of bloodline, thereby a destiny one cannot escape. Therefore, contemporary India consists of a rigid caste division of people based on hereditary. Indian authors have been addressing such issues of severe discrimination based on caste and religion in their writings for a long time, such as in *Untouchable* (1935) by Mulk Raj Anand, *The God of Small Things* (1997) by Arundhati Roy, and *The White Tiger* (2008) by Aravind Adiga. The recent genre of Indian science fiction also depicts religion, caste, and class systems in a different array and concretises them in a technologically advanced India. This article explores religion, caste, and class consciousness in *Leila* (2017) by Prayaag Akbar and *Chosen Spirits* (2020) by Samit Basu. It delineates how the contours of casteism are resilient and adapt to the dynamic attitude of Indian society in different times and places.

**Keywords:** Casteism, xenophobia, class consciousness, dystopian fiction, India

Where the world has not been broken up into fragments  
By narrow domestic walls...  
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.<sup>1</sup>

## **Introduction**

Rabindranath Tagore's vision of a utopic India, *Where the Mind is Without Fear*, scrutinises the political usage of fear, walls, safety, technology, science, and manipulation. This article considers these same themes in a selection of novels that present a futuristic, science-fiction vision of India. Interrogating science-fiction visions of the nation is especially pertinent now, as India is moving further away from what was envisioned more than a century ago by the Bard of Bengal. Tagore's words revisit the precolonial hope, which acutely juxtaposes the futuristic subjects in focus, thus questioning the praxis of religious and caste belief systems prevalent in contemporary Indian society while strengthening the arguments delineated in this article. Tagore's walls, though referred to as "narrow," have been contrarily concretised into Prayaag Akbar's *Leila* (2017), which divides India on the basis of caste through "fifty-nine feet high and two feet thick" walls in a literal sense.<sup>2</sup> Such projections of utter disparity and

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<sup>1</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1913), pp. 27–28.

<sup>2</sup> Prayaag Akbar, *Leila* (New Delhi: Simon & Schuster, 2018), p. 38.

discrimination based on religion and caste have been observed in contemporary dystopian imaginations, which are undeniably based on the current political scenario of India.

This article explores the representation of religion, caste, and class consciousness in the following contemporary Indian English dystopian fiction: *Leila* (2017) by Prayaag Akbar and *Chosen Spirits* (2020) by Samit Basu. While *Leila* captures religious intolerance in its central theme rather than in the context, *Chosen Spirits* incorporates casteism in its context and displays it as a foundational ideology on which its social structures and biopolitics are based. In contemporary India, caste and religion play a significant role in the survival or failure of a governing political party, and the two novels, while set in a futuristic India – *Leila* in the 2040s and *Chosen Spirits* in the 2030s – reflect the disparity of social privilege in contemporary India.

These narratives function as a warning to people about the futuristic threats posed by the present status quo. The representation of discrimination based on caste and religion in both novels is completely different but still results in the same repercussions. This article emphasizes that religion and caste are inherent factors in India's social structure that can imbue themselves into more subtle forms of discrimination. It further asserts that their political usage in the exploitation of the underprivileged sections of society is imminent even in times of technological progress, as the novels collectively suggest. The article is divided into three sections. The first section discusses the significance of caste and religion in the context of India. The second section analyses *Leila* as a narrative of religious xenophobia. Finally, the third section scrutinizes casteism in the technologically advanced hyperreal India in *Chosen Spirits*.

### **Casteism and Religion as Categories of Distinction and Discrimination in India**

The Brahman was his mouth, of both his arms was the Rajanya [Ksatriya] made.  
His thighs became the Vaisya, from his feet the Sudra was produced.<sup>3</sup>

The *Rig Veda* propounded caste stratification as a structure for the Indian social system, which was grounded in the Vedic period. According to this, the ancient Indian population was divided into four *varnas*, which included a hierarchy among people based on their profession. This division was founded upon the professional needs of society at that time rather than attaining any other meaning: *Brahmins* were intellectuals and scholars; *Kshatriyas* were warriors and soldiers; *Vaishyas* were the traders, merchants and agriculturalists; and *Shudras* were people carrying out menial labour. Additionally, there was also a “fifth category” called *Avarnas*, who were “untouchable” (contemporarily Dalits or Harijans) and considered outside this social stratification. There has been significant debate about whether the untouchables are in the category of *Shudras* or outside.<sup>4</sup> Divya Vaid's review manifests that the traditional *varnas* or castes have been complicated through their multiple subdivisions, thereby rendering hierarchies within individual *varnas* themselves. She uses the word *jatis* for subdivisions of castes, which she defines as “the empirical manifestation of caste and the level at which occupational diversification, endogamy, and purity and pollution rites are actually

<sup>3</sup> ‘Puruṣa sūkta’, *Complete Rig Veda in English* (2023). At: <http://archive.org/details/rigvedacomplete>.

<sup>4</sup> Divya Vaid, ‘Caste in Contemporary India: Flexibility and Persistence’, *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 40, no. 1 (2014), p. 393.

performed.”<sup>5</sup> These professional categories, which provided the possibility of mobility among people from different *varnas*, were slowly transformed into a rigid system of hereditary imposition on people in the long historical changes of India. Additionally, castes and *jatis* are rigidly established in India, and were emphasised in caste-based documentation of the population in the government records of the British colonial administration in the 1872 census. Even more than previously, this became the undeniable social identity of every person in India.<sup>6</sup> This type of documentation lawfully solidified the hierarchical distinction among people, attaching their caste category to their blood relations and erasing any possibility of change in their caste status. The destiny of their future generations is permanently dictated by a particular *jati* or caste, making certain groups to subsist their lives in eternal precarity and exploitation. The British interventions in the Indian social structure permanently institutionalized the upper castes’ domination over the lower strata of society in terms of respect, power, class, and status.

In contemporary India, there is also an emerging xenophobic religious distinction fuelling intolerance and disharmony in the social order. In addition to the caste praxis, the novels also carry class and religion as the basis for discrimination-cum-division among people, exploiting the lower strata of society. Moreover, the texts do not merely signify imaginative stories, but rather compellingly correspond to the current Indian *zeitgeist*, which can be exemplified through one of the incidents that recently occurred in Uttarakhand. On 6 June 2023, Purola, a small town in Uttarakhand, faced a peculiar situation when the Hindu majority of the town collectively issued a poster instructing and warning all Muslims to vacate the place by 25 June.<sup>7</sup> The incident was provoked due to the suspicion of “Love Jihad”<sup>8</sup> practices following an incident of a female minor being abducted by two males, one of whom was Muslim. Later, the family of the girl denied any religious angle in the case. Still, the incident became a communal agenda for politicians and extremists, resulting in discontent among the Muslim population in the region.

This same kind of stratification affected the fictional Shalini’s family during her childhood in *Leila*. The family was forced to leave their ancestral home because it was situated inside the walls of a different sector from theirs. This dystopia is evidently similar to the current social reality; the only difference is, as Zaria (in *Chosen Spirits*) puts it, “Dystopia ... requires distance. Some of us are actually sitting in the fucking middle of it, and we may never learn to care in time. This isn’t a dystopia. This is reality.”<sup>9</sup> The stratification of social and religious ideologies permeates every part of contemporary India. The aforementioned incident also corroborates Sapna’s words in *Leila*, “There can be no question of impurity. Even the hint of a

<sup>5</sup> Vaid, ‘Caste in Contemporary India: Flexibility and Persistence’, p. 393.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Anderson and Arkotong Longkumer, ‘“Neo-Hindutva:” Evolving Forms, Spaces, and Expressions of Hindu Nationalism’, *Contemporary South Asia* 26, no. 4 (2018), pp. 371–77; Arjun Appadurai, ‘Number in the Colonial Imagination’, in *The Rise and Fall of Modern Empires: Volume II*, ed. Saul Dubow (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 243–268.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Posters Asking Muslim Traders to Leave Surface in Uttarakhand’, *Hindustan Times*, 6 June (2023). At: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/posters-asking-muslim-traders-to-leave-surface-in-uttarakhand-101685991761377.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Love Jihad is believed to be an allegedly notorious practice by Muslims to “seduce, convert, marry, and have children with non-Muslim women to ensure that the Muslim minority in India becomes majority.” See Kenneth Bo Nielsen and Alf Gunvald Nilsen, ‘Love Jihad and the Governance of Gender and Intimacy in Hindu Nationalist Statecraft’, *Religions*, vol. 12 (2021). At: <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/12/12/1068>.

<sup>9</sup> Samit Basu, *Chosen Spirits* (Delhi: Simon & Schuster India, 2020), p. 195.

suggestion that my daughter is a girl like Leila [a child with a Muslim father and a Hindu mother] and my husband won't be able to do a thing."<sup>10</sup> This contemporary discourse on caste and religion also includes a widespread political dimension, which has been captured in multiple studies.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Leila: Concretisation of Tagore's Walls from *Where the Mind is Without Fear****

The dystopian novel *Leila* is set in the 2040s, in an India where castes, *jatis*, and religion do not remain merely a consciousness or abstract entities, but are materialised through high walls cutting across colonies, towns, cities, and states. The divisions are referred to as "sectors" and prohibit free mobility among them without a permit or proper documentation, according to the regulations created by the Council (the controlling body of the imagined India). The protagonist, Shalini, in her early 40s, is on a quest to search for her lost daughter, Leila. The story traces the past of Shalini as well as of the nation from the contemporary India of the 2020s to the new India of the 2040s through flashbacks and her reminiscences in the novel. Shalini is a Brahmin who married a Muslim boy, Riz, and shifted to an outer colony, East End, which falls outside the territory of sectors and is a colony for liberals, anomalous people, and the aberrant. One day, repeaters—the local army of fundamentalists who surveil the management of the city—attacked her home, killed Riz, and transported Shalini to the Purity Camp, where deviants are to be re-educated. While she was a Brahmin Hindu, her belonging to the Towers of the Purity Camp gradually turned her into an outcast. Despite this, her social status was still considered above the slummers, who are Dalit and live at the periphery of the city in an impecunious state amidst all the garbage and dirt discarded from the sectors. As Sapna, a character from the slum, puts it, "The Towers is where they put high-borns. The people who broke their rules. Still they get big, big buildings. Toilet, fans, electricity, flush. Even when they break the rules, they're too good to be put out here with us. But us? Our crime is being born. We don't get anything. We don't deserve it."<sup>12</sup> The slums accommodate the untouchables (*Avarnas*) and are established amidst toxic waste at the periphery of the cities. These people are what Ramchandra Guha calls ecological refugees,<sup>13</sup> who subsist in a precarious state and are victims of slow violence.<sup>14</sup> This system is maintained by the mysterious Council, which is seemingly made up of the richest people in every sector who dominate their respective sectors. As the description of the council's public meeting reads, "The elders rose as one, the orange-robed priests, the dumpy imams, the thin bishop and his Protestant counterpart, and the rest, in

<sup>10</sup> Prayaag Akbar, *Leila* (New Delhi: Simon & Schuster, 2018), p. 261.

<sup>11</sup> See Eviane Leidig, 'Hindutva as a Variant of Right-Wing Extremism', *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol. 54, no. 3 (May 26, 2020), pp. 215–237; Anderson and Longkumer, 'Neo-Hindutva'; Catarina Kinnvall, 'Populism, Ontological Insecurity and Hindutva: Modi and the Masculinization of Indian Politics', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 32, no. 3 (2019): pp. 283–302.

<sup>12</sup> Akbar, *Leila*, p. 234.

<sup>13</sup> Madhav Gadgil and Ramchandra Guha categorise the Indian population into three parts: a) omnivorous: the city dwellers; b) ecological refugees: the people who dwell at the periphery of the cities and provide services to omnivorous; c) ecosystem people: Indigenous people who are dependent on natural resources and largely reside in natural ecospheres. See Madhav Gadgil and Ramchandra Guha, *Ecology and Equity: The Use and Abuse of Nature in Contemporary India* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>14</sup> See Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

suits and kurta-pyjamas, whose provenance I could not tell. They cheered with their hands above their heads.”<sup>15</sup> It is quite ironic that while individuals are instructed not to get involved with people from other sectors, politicians and bureaucrats from all sectors hold their meetings, shake hands, and enjoy luxuries openly in the name of maintaining the purity of sects and religions.<sup>16</sup>

This is a type of exploitation of the poor that Slavoj Žižek calls “systemic violence.”<sup>17</sup> It does not have a specific perpetrator, and often does not even seem like violence at all due to its sophisticated practice. It generates from institutionalised power imbalances and gives power to certain people to exercise a direct form of violence on others under the legal periphery. Consequently, the repeaters could kill Riz and abduct Shalini without any repercussions. Taking the validation from the ancient Hindu scriptures, the political anatomy of the new India is founded upon a single ideology of ‘Purity’, which “came to have different meanings. Some people wanted no meat at all, some would eat only fish. In other areas, Muslims were evicting anyone who drank alcohol or ate pork. Once a community had control, its society revived laws written ... a hundred years ago, ensuring land could not be sold to those who did not belong.”<sup>18</sup>

Such blind persuasion toward purity resembles the Lacanian “*objet petit a*” as mentioned by Šarūnas Paunksnis.<sup>19</sup> The desire for such purity is, as J. Peter Burgess calls it, “a marker or expression of its impossibility.”<sup>20</sup> This tantalising object (Purity) and its resultant anxiety play a significant part in sustaining the continuous flux of conflicts among citizens and have a larger biopolitical implication in the form of constant exploitation of the lower sections and prosperous lives of the upper sections of society. Moreover, this system is equally enabled by the ideological state apparatuses of the state manipulating the interpretations of ancient scripture and history. In one speech, the politician Joshi says, “We must live according to our own principles. Our history. Why must we live with compromise? Our purity has been perverted over the centuries. Centuries of rule by outsiders have led to spiritual subjugation.”<sup>21</sup> This is an ideological appeal to the people, the foundation of the whole structure. Repeaters, as a repressive state apparatus, are there merely to keep in line the few deviants who can cause serious damage to the system. Otherwise, the whole system is being sustained by the religious convictions of the very people it oppresses. Further, the sectors are not strictly caste or religious divisions but also include *jatis*, the sub- and sub-sub-castes within a traditional caste or religion. Nayar explains,

Soon the city was in segments: the Tamil Brahmin Sector, Leuva Patel Resience, Bohra Muslim Zone, Catholic Commons, Kanyakubj Quarters, Sharif Muslimeen Precinct,

<sup>15</sup> Akbar, *Leila*, p. 120.

<sup>16</sup> Manoj Rajbanshi and Nagendra Kumar, ‘Climate Change, Urban Dystopia, and Unimagined Communities: Reading Prayaag Akbar’s *Leila*’, *Literature & Aesthetics* 34, no. 2 (2024), pp. 79-88.

<sup>17</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (London: Profile Books, 2009).

<sup>18</sup> Akbar, *Leila*, p. 41.

<sup>19</sup> Šarūnas Paunksnis, ‘Biopolitics of Hindutva: Masculinity and Violence in *Leila* and *Aashram*’, in *Gender, Cinema, Streaming Platforms: Shifting Frames in Neoliberal India*, ed. Runa Chakraborty Paunksnis and Šarūnas Paunksnis (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023), p. 50.

<sup>20</sup> J. Peter Burgess, ‘For Want of Not: Lacan’s Conception of Anxiety’, in *Politics of Anxiety*, ed. Emmy Eklundh, Andreja Zevnik, and Emmanuel-Pierre Guittet (London: Rowman & Littlefield), p. 24.

<sup>21</sup> Akbar, *Leila*, p. 118.

Maithil Acres, Chitpavan Heights, Syrian Christian Co-op, Kodava Martials.<sup>22</sup>

Inside these sectors, class consciousness, rather than caste or religion, comes into play. This abstract class consciousness, alongside the *jati*-division among sectors, also emerges as rich sectors continue to flourish due to their wealth and power, whereas the poor sectors struggle to fulfil their fundamental needs.

Social status, economic status, and power politics determine who gets to form the rules and regulations. The rich sectors have the advantages of “flyroads known all over the world ... One community to another above all the mess,” above the ordinary people’s mode of transportation.<sup>23</sup> However, unlike caste and religion, mobility from lower to upper strata is possible inside a particular sector. Additionally, schools, professions, and sports institutions have automatically incorporated the hierarchical class structure due to favouritism toward some sectors and prejudice against others. For example, “every school in the city was affiliated with a particular sector. The richer communities had acquired the better schools and put them behind one set of walls or the other.”<sup>24</sup> Similarly, the national or international sports team selections are carried out with utter prejudice based on community and caste: “The selectors have routes. They know who has the best fast bowlers, which communities produce the batsman, best fielders.”<sup>25</sup>

These developments create a more complex system of exploitation from the top political sectors to the lower ones who could not even afford to fulfil fundamental needs but “erected walls out of a sense of ancient pride.”<sup>26</sup> The walls are not built for so-called ‘Purity’ but for the certainty of immobility of the lower strata of society towards the upper level, ensuring the status quo behind the façade of communal sacredness while spreading precarity and violence.

### **Casteism in a Technology-Enabled Hyperreal India in *Chosen Spirits* (2020)**

Where *Leila* can be considered as “soft” science fiction, *Chosen Spirits* is undoubtedly hard science fiction. It is set in Delhi in the 2030s and envisions a deep algorithmic AI-embedded technology to anticipate the future course of actions of different groups and people manipulated by capitalists and politicians using the technology. This type of ultra-advanced surveillance and its imminent threats can also be observed in the main plot of the recently aired season 2 of the *Asur* series. In the two-season television drama *Asur* (2020-2023), the prime antagonist, Shubh Joshi, causes massive chaos and violence in India to re-establish law and order with the help of surveillance technologies that can anticipate the probability of every movement of every person on earth with high accuracy.<sup>27</sup> In this regard, *Chosen Spirits* goes beyond and takes the reader to a hyperreal world through 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

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Pramod K. Nayar, ‘Purity, Precarity and Power: Prayaag Akbar’s *Leila*’, in *Representations of Precarity in South Asian Literature in English*, ed. Om Prakash Dwivedi (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), p. 137.

<sup>23</sup> Akbar, *Leila*, p. 174.

<sup>24</sup> Akbar, *Leila*, p. 105.

<sup>25</sup> Akbar, *Leila*, p. 202.

<sup>26</sup> Akbar, *Leila*, p. 181.

<sup>27</sup> Gaurav Shukla, *Asur: Welcome to Your Dark Side* (India: Ding Entertainment, 2023), Season 2.

like Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.”<sup>28</sup> The Flowverse has many Flowstars (celebrities), whose sham lives are broadcasted by ‘Reality Controllers’ to attract people’s attention to their respective Flowcos (similar to YouTube or Instagram accounts). It is owned by upper-class access-caste Brahmin characters such as Chopra, Nikhil, or Guptas in the novel. This popular platform ascertains the traditional hierarchical hegemonic structure of caste through its ideological representation and promotion of people accordingly. At the same time, it uses the abovementioned algorithmic surveillance to maintain this hierarchy as hidden propaganda.

The story revolves around the life of Joey, a Reality Controller of one of the flowcos in Delhi. She is an upper-class ‘Roy’ girl, which traditionally “means a family of small rulers, zamindars, land administrators managing turf for the local king. A reality manager in an age where data and attention are real estate.”<sup>29</sup> Joey attains the job as a reality controller because of her caste affiliation (without being aware of the condition), not because of her expertise in the field. At a death ceremony, she comes across Rudra, an irresponsible upper-caste teen who is a die-hard gamer with computing and hacking skills. She hires him for her Flowco. Rudra’s brother, Rohit Gupta, is one of the influential people in Delhi who regulates all types of crimes—“trafficking, body farms, mass testing, gene hacking”<sup>30</sup> in a clandestine manner. The story moves along toward the epiphany by Joey about her own professional responsibility as a Reality Controller of a Flowco, and the discernment of the absence of the ‘real’ by Rudra in the artificial world of Flowverse. The platform is the sole medium of ideological dissemination, without actually claiming to do so. It is so powerful that lives are lost and saved based on its statistics; it ascertains which politician will dictate the Indian population for the next political session. In other words, it generates a more refined, statistically proven truth for its audience.

The novel directly engages with this kind of society’s movement toward a hyperreal simulacrum, where the representation on the Flowcos refers to the image of reality. The novel implies that if society continues to transform in this direction, there will be a time when reality will cease to exist; the complete “simulation threatens the difference between the ‘true’ and the ‘false,’ the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary,’” which is yet to be reached in the novel.<sup>31</sup> *The Chosen Spirits*, in the order of hyperreality, is the third-order simulation which Baudrillard defines as “the *absence* of a profound reality” when the “image... plays at being an appearance—it is of the order of sorcery.”<sup>32</sup> Baudrillard calls it ‘sorcery’ because there seems to be an absence of a controller of this image-reality. The image appears to have lost any connection with its referent and is gradually taking the place of the ‘real.’ This structure is created and regulated by the upper-access-caste-people. As Rohit tells Rudra, “we’re ... Magicians, because advanced politics is magic. And the country is being rebuilt by our magic.”<sup>33</sup> In the novel, this ‘sorcery’ is accomplished through systematic surveillance, AI, and Flowverse, as mentioned above.

<sup>28</sup> Priteegandha Naik, ‘Exploring Dalit-Futurism in Caste-Flavored Techno-Scientific Worlds’, *SFRA Review* (blog), 25 January (2023). At: <https://sfreview.org/2023/01/25/exploring-dalit-futurism-in-caste-flavored-techno-scientific-worlds/>.

<sup>29</sup> Basu, *Chosen Spirits*, p. 171.

<sup>30</sup> Basu, *Chosen Spirits*, p. 197.

<sup>31</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 3.

<sup>32</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 6.

<sup>33</sup> Basu, *Chosen Spirits*, p. 169.

There is also an additional plot at play that indicates the novel's future as a complete construction of simulacrum, the fourth and final stage of the hyperreal simulation, when there shall be no referent but only the image that will completely take over reality. This will be achieved by, as Rudra deciphers Zaria's story,

upcoming physical brain implants that will be forced on the poor soon will do more than identify and monitor citizens—they'll measure them, fortify the national Lakshman-Rekha internet, power the national blockchain, vote on their behalf in sham elections, store and share data, and eventually become their bearers' only source of education, income and wholesome entertainment. They'll make the process of selling people's bodies wholesale to anyone who has use for them much more efficient.<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, the relevance of *Chosen Spirits* to the recent COVID pandemic scenarios in India through "Techno-solutionism" and "Surveillance capitalism" and its resultant delirium caused by the amalgamation of "capital, technology, and governance," has recently been explored by Tereza Østbø Kuldova.<sup>35</sup> She comments, "Basu's *Chosen Spirits* oscillates between allusions to real events and a near-future dystopia of New Delhi in the 2030s." Its portrayal indicates the future of casteism, how caste, along with class consciousness, will survive in a future techno-scientific India.<sup>36</sup> Apart from this, the structure of the novel itself evinces the concealment of the presence of any hierarchical structure as the first half of the novel engages the readers with the problems and technicalities of the Flowverse, completely eluding the larger picture of society, which is revealed only in the denouement.

Interestingly, this novel also employs the conviction of walls, although in a quite different and surreptitious manner. Unlike *Leila*, these walls are not reified in the novel but are abstract and concealed. Further, they are not based on strict caste-based grounds: class, economic status, and power also play equally important roles in entering the next level of the wall. Therefore, there is a possibility for mobility toward the upper level; as Rohit remarks, "Delhi has always been a city of seven walls ... You could guess you'd crashed into your wall before when you couldn't go further, but now the walls can be mapped and measured, the tools exist.... Anything marking *class*—therapist location density."<sup>37</sup> When Rudra shows his unawareness about his own caste, Rohit points out, "That's called privilege. We might not believe in caste, but caste believes in us."<sup>38</sup> The imperceptible walls of discrimination have been embellished and become discreet behind the hyperreal façade in the process of simulation. However, the desired effect of this phenomenon is enjoyed by capitalists and bureaucrats unabashedly in a hypocritical and malevolent manner. The quintessence of this argument is reflected in Rohit's character. Near the Peach Spring lounge, in a café, when Rudra asks his Brahmin brother, "I thought you were vegetarian," Rohit replies, "I am" while "digging in" his fork in the "crispy duck."<sup>39</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Basu, *Chosen Spirits*, pp.189–190.

<sup>35</sup> Tereza Østbø Kuldova, 'Thinking the Delirious Pandemic Governance by Numbers with Samit Basu's *Chosen Spirits* and Prayaag Akbar's *Leila*', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 58, no. 2 (March 4, 2022): pp. 169, 174.

<sup>36</sup> Kuldova, 'Thinking the Delirious Pandemic Governance', p. 170.

<sup>37</sup> Basu, *Chosen Spirits*, pp. 169–170 (emphasis added).

<sup>38</sup> Basu, *Chosen Spirits*, p. 171.

<sup>39</sup> Basu, *Chosen Spirits*, p. 168.



In the absence of any pertinent rights to protest against the systemic exploitation of the poor, mysterious groups like Desibryde and E-Klav exercise subversive and deviant representations against the status quo of class and caste consciousness using the same platform of Flowverse. Desibryde releases a video featuring herself “sitting in a cage reading the preamble to the constitution out loud, while all around the cage, men in god masks had angry sex with one another.”<sup>40</sup> This depiction has a profound rhetorical connotation. While the constitution is being invoked out loud, men who have taken the place of gods in this god-forsaken hyperreal country are enjoying their lascivious lives in the open. The perfect example of this line of argument is again Rudra’s brother Rohit, who claims to be a Brahmin and enjoys a nonvegetarian diet in the powerhouse of terror and crime – a meeting hub of mafias, mobsters, and politicians – the Peach Blossom Spring lounge.

Eventually, the solution to the situation is also provided through technology. Even in contemporary India, there are contentions and controversies about the unequal representation of the problems of the underprivileged. Therefore, Joey, as a reality controller, resolves to do something about it and launches her new Flowco and decides to have her Flowstars from various underprivileged sections of society. Rather than focusing on elegant and charming hero-like figures, she aims to reveal the reality of the lower strata of society. In the denouement, she reveals that the future direction of her work as a reality controller is to provide equal voices and opportunities for representation to all the marginalised groups of society; she declares,

We need Muslim Flowstars, and Dalit Flowstars, and LGBTQIA+ Flowstars. We need differently abled Flowstars, immigrant Flowstars, so many other categories it makes my head spin ... We need to do all this for people running the Flows as well, for crews, for managers, for everyone in the system. They’ll all have to be ... heard. Not just by me, but by people with more empathy, more experience and less privilege than I have.<sup>41</sup>

In contemporary times, amidst the rampant extremism and intolerance in India, equal representation should be demanded through honest media work, social applications, and inclusivity for all. The novel strictly alarms the readers about the dire consequences of these nuisances in the future unless dealt with proper caution.

## Conclusion

This study insinuates that the conventional systems of caste and religion are strongly rooted in Indian history and culture; therefore, India’s futures, from different perspectives, at different ages, and in varied contexts, are almost always deduced under the obnoxious shadow of discrimination based on caste, class, and religious parameters in an Indianised way. Every year, there are myriad cases of exploitation and violence based on unjust discrimination in India. The situation does not seem to improve; therefore, speculative fiction continues to warn people about the future implications of the present conditions. The article particularly focused on the trope of religious, caste, and class consciousness and, therefore, covers certain parts rather than the whole essence of the novels. Further, these narratives also carry negative environmental

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<sup>40</sup> Basu, *Chosen Spirits*, p. 162.

<sup>41</sup> Basu, *Chosen Spirits*, p. 243.

factors that criticise the androcentric perspective of humans, which can be explored from the Anthropocene theoretical approach.

The two novels conspicuously relate to contemporary Indian political scenarios. The caste system, as has already been noted, adopted changes over the course of time, and the concepts of 'class' and 'status' have attached new tropes to the traditional notion of caste; therefore, it is the "merger of ... neoliberal democracy ... with capital" that somehow in a complex web of events affect not caste-specific people, but *jatis*-specific citizens, who belong to the lower strata of society inside a particular caste.<sup>42</sup> In this way, the disparities no longer remain religion or caste-specific but incorporate economic, bureaucratic, and bio-power factors to further injustice against the poor and the downtrodden.

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<sup>42</sup> Pramod K. Nayar, 'The Signs of a Dystopian Democracy Are All Around Us', *The Wire*, 25 July (2017). At: <https://thewire.in/government/dystopian-democracy-aadhaar>.