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Mapping the Algorithmic Metropolis: Urban Space and Digital Mediation in Indian Science Fiction

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Abstract

Smartphone-centric, content-rehashed realities permeate a sense of proximal hybridity, and fictional representations earmark tendencies of dioramic reflection. This paper, however, perceives the representation of the algorithmic metropolis in contemporary Indian science fiction, focusing on the convergence of urban space and digital mediation in Samit Basu's *Chosen Spirits* (2020). Set in a near-future Delhi, the novel imagines the city as a hybrid spatial formation governed through corporate influence, nationalist ideology, and data-driven technologies. Drawing on spatial theory and digital culture studies, the paper analyses how physical urban environments and algorithmically structured digital platforms function as interconnected systems of governance. Urban space in the novel is characterised by sanitisation, zoning, and controlled mobility, while digital spaces such as social media networks operate as mechanisms of visibility management, surveillance, and behavioural regulation. The study argues that Indian science fiction increasingly conceptualises the city not only as a physical site but as an algorithmically mediated environment in which citizenship, identity, and dissent are negotiated. By mapping the interaction between urban infrastructure and digital mediation, *Chosen Spirits* offers a critical vision of the contemporary Indian metropolis as a curated and managed space. The paper positions Indian science fiction as a vital genre for interrogating the political and cultural implications of algorithmic governance in urban futures.

Keywords: Indian science fiction, algorithmic metropolis, urban space, digital mediation, surveillance capitalism, anti-dystopia

Indian science fiction has increasingly turned toward fractured and proximate visions of the future, privileging immediacy over speculative distance. Samit Basu's *Chosen Spirits* (also published as *The City Inside*) exemplifies this shift through its depiction of a near-future Delhi governed by surveillance, corporate power, and data-driven systems. Labelled an "anti-dystopia" (Mandal), the novel resists narratives of rebellion or systemic overthrow, focusing instead on ordinary protagonists whose lives unfold within an urban space shaped by algorithmic control. In doing so, *Chosen Spirits* reimagines the city not as a site of spectacular collapse but as a curated and regulated environment where power operates through normalisation rather than force.

Samit Basu's depiction of New Delhi, when examined through the lens of spatial theory, bears a closer resemblance to the lived realities of the contemporary capital city than to the totalising and spectacular dystopias commonly associated with science fiction. Rather than constructing an overtly objectivist dystopia such as *BioShock*, *Chosen Spirits* grounds its speculative elements in recognisable urban conditions. For instance, the city's deteriorating air quality renders it impossible for characters to move through public space without oxygen masks, transforming environmental degradation into an everyday constraint on mobility rather than an exceptional catastrophe.

In *Chosen Spirits*, the governance of urban life extends beyond environmental regulation and infrastructural decay into digitally mediated systems that actively produce and manage space. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's conception of space as socially produced rather than passively inhabited, the novel presents the city as a hybrid formation where algorithmic processes shape everyday experience alongside physical architecture. Digital platforms in the narrative function as spatial extensions of the city, regulating visibility, mobility, and participation through data-driven mechanisms. Social media networks, content moderation systems, and algorithmic ranking structures determine which bodies, opinions, and identities are rendered visible or erased, effectively transforming digital space into a site of urban governance. These platforms do not merely reflect the city but actively organise it, mediating access to economic opportunities, public discourse, and social legitimacy. As a result, urban space in *Chosen Spirits* is no longer confined to streets, buildings, or zones but is reconstituted through interconnected digital infrastructures that normalise surveillance, behavioural regulation, and ideological conformity. The algorithmic metropolis thus emerges as a spatial regime in which power operates subtly through interfaces, metrics, and curated flows of information, reinforcing control while maintaining the appearance of everyday normalcy. This logic of algorithmic governance reaches its most explicit articulation at the conclusion of *Chosen Spirits* through Narad, the AI personal assistant that mediates access to digital life. Positioned at the end of the narrative, Narad's forced system upgrade functions as a culminating instance of how consent is rendered procedural rather than substantive within algorithmically managed environments. When the character refuses the upgrade, the interface momentarily acknowledges dissent only to override it:

> Congratulations! You have qualified for an exclusive beta run of our revolutionary Narad network system upgrade. This will enable us to serve you even better, and grow even closer as we stay focused on our goal of bringing you absolute happiness. Please say 'Yes' to receive this life-changing upgrade. 'No! Her screen goes dark. A soothing pattern of small circles appears as Narad upgrades anyway (Basu).

The placement of this episode at the novel's conclusion highlights the inevitability of algorithmic control within Basu's urban future. Choice is simulated through interface design, while refusal is absorbed and neutralised by automated systems that operate beyond individual agency. Narad's rhetoric of care and optimisation reframes coercion as service,

revealing how digital mediation becomes a final and inescapable layer of urban governance. By closing on this moment, *Chosen Spirits* presents the algorithmic metropolis as a space where power no longer announces itself through overt force but through seamless, user-friendly domination.

Lefebvre's critique of urban space foregrounds the unequal distribution of spatial power, emphasising that cities have historically been shaped by dominant social groups rather than by their inhabitants. As Makinde and Lanrewaju note, "from his communalist perspective, he perceives the masses have never really shaped a city. The intellectuals, merchants, and politicians structured and modelled it, and the industrialists and manufacturers destroyed it. The blue-collar had no other space than that of its segregation, expropriation, and deportation" (68–69). In *Chosen Spirits*, this historical imbalance is spatially rearticulated through the demolition of a university campus formerly associated with protest and dissent and its replacement by a shopping mall, a gesture that converts a politically charged site into a depoliticised zone of consumption. The implied reference to institutions such as Jawaharlal Nehru University underscores how spaces of intellectual resistance are overwritten by corporate urban redevelopment.

To theorise how this hybrid urban environment is rendered legible, Robert T. Tally Jr.'s concept of literary cartography offers a productive framework. Tally argues that narrative functions as a mode of mapping, enabling readers to cognitively orient themselves within complex and fragmented spatial realities (Tally, *Spatiality* 12). In Basu's narrative, urban space is organised through sharply stratified zones of access and visibility, where even ostensibly communal residential areas are governed by rigid hierarchies. This is evident in the depiction of the Residents' Welfare Association, where symbolic authority over space is restricted to a select few: "Only the very top-most uncles in the RWA pyramid get to write inspirational messages on the whiteboard at the block's gates" (Basu 23). The rest of the residents are confined to repetitive, gendered, and surveilled routines, occupying liminal spaces near gates, corridors, and water tanks rather than positions of spatial or political agency. The passage maps the residential block as a microcosm of the wider metropolis, structured through exclusion, performative authority, and regulated movement. By rendering such everyday environments in painstaking detail, the text constructs a cartography of ordinary domination, where spatial control is exercised not through overt force but through banal rituals, infrastructural scarcity, and hierarchical visibility. This narrative mapping reinforces the novel's anti-dystopian mode, revealing how algorithmic and bureaucratic governance is normalised through lived spatial experience rather than spectacular repression.

The regulation of space in the text thus operates not only through physical boundaries but through regimes of visibility that determine whose presence is acknowledged, amplified, or erased. This dynamic becomes evident when Joy travels to the metro station known as Cyber Bazaar, a marginal locality that circulates bootleg futuristic technologies and unofficial commodities. Although physically accessible, the space remains largely absent from public consciousness, rendered invisible through the selective suppression of information and the cultivation of fear surrounding the regime that governs much of the

city. Cyber Bazaar exists as a tolerated yet disavowed zone, where spatial presence does not guarantee political or cultural recognition. Its concealment demonstrates how urban governance in the narrative functions less by outright prohibition than by managing what can be seen, known, and spoken about. In this way, the novel foregrounds visibility itself as a mechanism of spatial control, reinforcing the operation of algorithmic and ideological power across the metropolis.

These regimes of visibility and erasure ultimately converge in the text's depiction of algorithmic mediation as an infrastructural condition of urban life. Digital systems do not merely overlay the city but operate as governing mechanisms that regulate access, choice, and participation across physical and virtual spaces. As Rob Kitchin argues, algorithmic systems increasingly function as forms of governance, embedding political decision-making within ostensibly neutral technical processes (17). The AI assistant Narad exemplifies this logic by collapsing the distinction between service and surveillance, presenting coercive upgrades and data extraction through the language of care and optimisation. Such mediation aligns with Couldry and Mejias's formulation of data colonialism, wherein everyday life is rendered legible, extractable, and governable through continuous digital capture (xix). The city thus becomes an environment that cannot be opted out of, where refusal is acknowledged only to be overridden. Algorithmic mediation, rather than eliminating agency outright, reshapes it within tightly managed parameters, rendering dissent procedural, delayed, or invisible.

This paper has argued that contemporary Indian science fiction offers a crucial framework for understanding the evolving relationship between urban space and digital mediation. By reading Basu's speculative city through spatial theory and literary cartography, the analysis demonstrates how the metropolis is mapped as a hybrid formation shaped by infrastructural control, algorithmic governance, and managed visibility. Rather than staging a distant or spectacular dystopia, the narrative constructs a proximate future in which power operates through everyday spaces, interfaces, and routines. The city that emerges is neither wholly repressive nor emancipatory but meticulously curated, producing compliance through normalisation rather than coercion. In foregrounding the convergence of physical urban environments and algorithmically structured digital platforms, Indian science fiction positions itself as a vital critical genre, capable of interrogating the political, cultural, and spatial consequences of contemporary urban governance. Mapping the algorithmic metropolis, therefore, becomes not only a literary exercise but a means of apprehending how contemporary cities are increasingly organised through data-driven governance, predictive systems, and mediated consent (Kitchin; Couldry and Mejias).

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