Gods of War Toke While Riding a *Vimana*[1]: Hindu Gods in Three Indian Science Fiction Novels

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Abstract:

This paper studies the overt manifestations of Hindu gods in three Indian science fiction (SF) novels written in English, and the reasons behind such vivid portrayals. It analyses the specific mechanics of these representations, whereby Hindu mythology is hybridized and transposed with the quasi-science of SF to propel the narrative. This paper discusses the appropriation of these mythological narratives, their subsequent reinterpretation in Indian SF, and how this reworking constitutes a direct critique of contemporary material realities. It aims to place the "divine" within the context of the materiality of a text, and to that effect, borrows Darko Suvin's "novum" as a theoretical framework to first locate the tangible heart of a text, and then explains how and why Hindu gods play an important role in the contouring of this kind of "mythological SF".

Keywords: Hindu gods, Indian science fiction, appropriation, mythology, novum

The Saffron[2] starship came out of the sun… its overall hue was saffron,
the shade of a bindi dot on a Hindu married woman's forehead …
and assumed stable orbit at Sun-Earth LeGrangian Point L5.
-- Ashok Banker, *Gods of War*, 2009a, p. 3-4

"Science" and "God" are not always locked in a persistent battle of binary opposition—at least not in the context of Indian Science Fiction (SF). If SF can bring together "science" and "fiction", two vastly diverging structures of human knowledge and experience, then is it not possible that SF, in its myriad forms, can transcend the binaries of faith and rationalism, the dichotomy between belief and empiricism, and result in a kind of fiction that—despite being rooted in science—can also feature divine beings?

The presence of mythological and spiritual themes in global SF is nothing new. Roger Zelazny's *Lord of Light* (1967) and Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), to cite just two examples from popular culture, explore these dimensions of SF. This paper is conscious of the cultural paradigms which Western authors (such as Roger Zelazny) appropriating Indian (in this case, Hindu/Buddhist) imagery might have missed (since it is written by an Indian). [3]

Hugo Gernsback once famously wrote, "The ideal proportion of a scientifiction story [SF] should be 75 percent literature interwoven with 25 percent science" (as cited in Landon, 2002, p. 51). In the case of these three novels, a significant mythological component constitutes the

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[1] "Vimana" translates to a "flying vehicle".
[2] Saffron has a particular significance to Hindus as it is associated with light, renunciation and salvation.
[3] No offence is intended to the genius of such writers, and I salute their path-breaking, genre-bending endeavours.

"75% literature", too. In addition to Gernsback, many great minds have tried to define SF and propounded definitions that attempt to holistically capture the essence of SF. The question of their success lies beyond the purview of the paper, but let this suffice—if defining American SF is hard, the problem of accurately encapsulating the core of Indian SF in words is all the more difficult, even when one narrows it down further to SF written by Indians in English. This difficulty results from the diverse responses exhibited by a heterogeneous, polyphonic and prismatic country like India when reacting to trends and traditions in "western" SF. [4]

While SF is generally built on a platform of science or—to be more precise—pseudo/quasi-science, Indian writers, in accordance with the hybrid literary genres and ludic forms of representation usually prevalent in the country, often appropriate "semantic" elements from "western" SF but rearrange them in a "syntax" that reads as radically different from SF being produced in the United States (U.S.) (Altman, 1984, p. 10). An example of this Indian science fiction syntax is Shirish Kunder's Bollywood film *Joker* (2012), where aliens land in an Indian village but only *after* a villager prays to the gods and seeks divine intervention towards securing first contact with an extra-terrestrial species. Moreover, the hallmark of divinity granting that wish is visible in the simple fact that when an alien spacecraft *does* land in that quaint Indian village, the UFO is shaped like a *Shiva-Linga*, a manifestation of Shiva—the Destroyer, one of the three major Hindu deities.[5]

The presence of gods in Indian fiction is nothing new, and Indian classical narratives are full of such appearances. Historically, India has had a healthy Speculative Fiction (SpecFic) tradition: these literatures of "what if" include genres such as Science Fiction, Fantasy (F), Mythology etc., and differ from realist and mimetic stories. Until the recent past, the tilt has been towards fantasy and mythology, though now SF is becoming increasingly popular.[6]

The existence of non-mimetic worlds in Indian Speculative Fiction is quite common. In the context of Indian SpecFic films, M.H. Srinarahari (2004) writes:

> A number of India's films in the nineteen sixties have shown imaginary worlds with imaginary beings. There is: the paradise, the pathala (an imaginary world in the centre of the Earth); the fairy worlds such as Gandharva lok (lok means world) Yaksha lok; Kinnara lok; Mathsya lok (an underwater world with aquatic beings that have mermen and women: human bodies in their upper part and the lower part resembles the scales of fishes, but usually with divine qualities); Chandra lok (the Moon); Naga lok (the world of snakes) and others. (para. 4)

Interestingly, all the tropes and narratives of SF, and more importantly, the reactions they elicited, were successfully evoked by Indian classical texts over time. For example, what the 'other' aliens of western SF elicited in a reader—havoc, wonder, and possibly even terror—is evoked in Indian Fantasy and Mythology by hostile beings from other *lokas* (planets/worlds): the *daityas* and *rakshasas*. Replacing one "other" from Mythology/Fantasy with another was not that difficult: with the "modernization" of India, religion and mythology's "other" gave way

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[4] "Western SF" is an umbrella term in itself, and I use it to here to refer to SF emerging out of North America and Europe.

[5] I have written about this aspect of Bollywood SF film in another paper, "Bollywood's Encounters with the Third Kind" (Khan, 2014).

[6] Regional languages in India such as Marathi, Bengali and Tamil have had a healthy SF tradition too.

to science's "other" in fiction as a rational-scientific education (modelled on western systems) became the norm.

Anil Menon addressed these changes, writing in the comments section of an article on Indian SF hosted by Jeff VanderMeer's website:

> Hindu mythology does talk about stuff like flying vehicles, world-nets and mantra-guided missiles. But I don't think we really had a science-fiction tradition till the British arrived. However, we seem to have had a speculative-fiction tradition that's remarkably postmodern in temperament" (2008, para. 1).

Thus, though elements and phenomena in Indian classics could be interpreted as being flying vehicles, aliens, and nuclear weapons, making these texts "replete with examples of Indian storytellers' fascination with the occult and supernatural phenomena that, seen through a modernist lens, resemble some of the conventions of SF", the fact remains these classical texts are *not* SF (Khan, 2014, p. 187) but are instead Speculative Fiction.

This is why studying the literary manifestations of this epistemological shift when gods "chose" to appear in hard-core SF narratives becomes important. It is with this background in mind that this article studies three Indian SF novels (in English) and locates the reason why Hindu gods work well within SF narratives. Moreover, each of these three novels portrays the gods as slightly different epistemological categories, though they are always benevolent, helpful and "good". Mainak Dhar's *Vimana* (2012)*,* for example, builds on the "ancient astronaut" hypothesis, which posits that aliens visited Earth in the past and shaped humanity's evolution. *Vimana* portrays Hindu gods as advanced extra-terrestrials chaperoning humanity towards progress, but they only unveil themselves to the world at large to combat the forces of global terrorism. Jugal Mody's tongue-in-cheek *Toke* (2012) uses the figure of Vishnu—the Preserver—and Shiva—the Destroyer—to rail against global capitalism and indicts an increasingly consumerist society that systematically negates individual choices and free will by viewing people through the prism of productivity and purchasing power alone. The third text, Ashok Banker's *Gods of War* (2009a)*,* features Ganesha—a much-worshipped god in the Hindu pantheon—as he leads a motley crew of humans from parallel universes to prevent the fall of "heaven" to the forces of darkness, while at the same time critiquing *machtpolitik*[7] in the contemporary world order. In this essay, I study these "gods" and link them with contemporary material realities.

Flying Saucers Battle Al Qaeda: Hindu Gods as Ancient Astronauts

Vimana is a 2012 SF novel by Mainak Dhar for young adults that features the Hindu holy trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. To borrow Rick Altman's terminology again, this novel uses overt semantic elements usually associated with SF (such as spaceships, high-tech bases, aerial dogfights, etc.), and arranges them in a syntax that is quite unconventional: this in-your-face SF novel contains advanced aircraft, state-of-the-art weapons, and Hindi gods.

Vimana traces the journey of a college-student, Aaditya, who is an expert at flight-sim games and dreams of following the footsteps of his father by joining the Indian Air Force after college. However, Aaditya loses a leg in an accident and his dreams are shattered. To make things worse, Aaditya's father, a fighter-pilot, goes missing in action during a sortie, thereby

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[7] Machtpolitik is a term for power politics in which sovereign powers threaten each other with military, political and economic aggression to protect their own interests.

subjecting Aaditya to simultaneous personal and professional loss, even as the teen struggles to lead a normal life. One day, he comes across some individuals attacking a woman in a park. Concerned, he joins the fight to save the woman, only to realise this is not just some random gang-related violence, but a trans-human engagement.

Aaditya is unwittingly caught in a fight between two covert, all-powerful groups. One represents the forces of good – the gods – and the other, evil: these are the *daityas*, who are a
> mixture of early proto-human species and created cloned monsters. Strong, ruthless and obedient, but not very smart. With those demons, they unleashed their reign of terror. They sided with human dictators, promising them power and helping with these demons and their technologies, but in reality making them slaves. (Dhar, 2012, pp. 95-96)

Aaditya then realises that the members of the group to which he has sworn allegiance not only happen to have names of Hindu deities, but actually *are* those very gods. Much to his chagrin, they also have extra-terrestrial origins. These gods tell him that his father might have been shot down by another group of technologically-advanced people led by Kalki,[8] the same people who are fighting these extra-terrestrial gods. Kalki intends to conquer and/or destroy the planet Earth. Aaditya sides with the gods, wins their confidence by proving his mettle in a fight against the demons, and prepares for the final assault. He raids the *daitya* base on the sunken city Atlantis, frees his father and other prisoners of war, and then helps secure the defeat of Kalki and his evil minions. The novel ends with the extra-terrestrial gods finally revealing themselves to humanity.

The fusion of science and spirituality is evident in the novum of *Vimana*. The novel exemplifies Darko Suvin's concept of the "novum", or that "historical innovation or novelty in a SF text from which the most important distinctions between the world of the tale from the world of the reader stem" (Csicsery-Ronay, 2008, pp. 118-119). In *Vimana,* Hindu gods are actual extra-terrestrials and live away from humanity's gaze in a secret base on Mount Kailash, the abode of Shiva (a mountain considered holy by all Hindus). These gods are introduced to the reader thus:

> The first to speak was Narada.
>> "Aadi, we have met, but let me introduce myself properly. I am Narada Muni and I handle Intelligence here."
>> Next to him was the ash-covered man, looking none the worse for wear from his drinking bout. "And I am Shiva. I lead our Special Forces."
>> The woman he had met in the fracas that had started this all was seated next to Shiva. She was wearing a red-bordered white suit, and she smiled as she introduced herself. "I am Durga, and I never did thank you for trying to help me."
>> Some connections were forming in Aaditya's mind, when the last three men there introduced themselves. The tall, muscular man with a beard spoke next. "We have met in the air, Aadi. I am Indra, the Military commander here."
>> Next to him was a man with a dark complexion, who seemed to be playing with a disc shaped object in his hand. "And I am Vishnu. I am the administrative head here.

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[8] Similar to the Second Coming of Christ for Christians, Kalki is the tenth and final incarnation of Vishnu (in the current age) for Hindus. Kalki will usher in *Satya Yuga* by bringing about the end time in Hindu eschatology.

Think of me as the Chief Operating Officer, if that analogy works for you." (Dhar, 2012, p. 80)

Aaditya first thinks that these are extra-terrestrials messing with his head, but then Brahma tells him that he leads a group of pioneering, galactic travelers, hyper-sentient beings who came to Earth almost 15,000 years ago. When Aaditya asks if these Vedic gods were aliens, Brahma replies, "So many people say that. What a curious word. *Alien*. Considering how long we've been here, one would have hoped for more hospitality" (Dhar, 2012, p. 91).

Brahma then explains that his people were part of a galactic alliance that sought out intelligent life and shepherded them towards a certain level of self-awareness, after which they were asked to join this galactic community. He tells Aaditya that long ago, when humanity was still in its crib, some humans chanced upon these benevolent alien visitors and began to think of them as gods. This is a mirror reflection of what Erich von Daniken proposed in *Chariots of the Gods?*,[9] his 1968 cult-classic:

> The gods of the dim past have left countless traces which we can read and decipher today for the first time because the problem of space travel, so topical today, was not a problem, but a reality, to the men of thousands of years ago. For I claim that our forefathers received visits from the universe in the remote past. Even though I do not yet know who these extra-terrestrial intelligences were or from which planet they came, I nevertheless proclaim that these 'strangers' annihilated part of mankind existing at the time and produced a new, perhaps the first, homo sapiens. (p. 8)

While this theory has been totally rejected by academics and scientists as pseudo-history, SF still uses the ancient-astronaut hypothesis with great enthusiasm. The same technique is employed by Dhar in *Vimana*. One of these visitors, upon seeing the nascent stage of humanity's development, starts considering himself as superior, and decides to rule as a divine being. As author Damien Walter (2013) wrote, "If SF is grounded in hard scientific fact, and science is killing God, then what place does that leave for divine intervention in the pages of SF literature?" (para. 1). Walter further remarked, "When I tweeted this question, [author and video game designer Dave Morris] gave Arthur C. Clarke's famous dictum a twist, quipping, 'Any sufficiently advanced technocrat will be indistinguishable from God'"(2013, para. 1).

Technological advanced-ness transforms into organic, physical and intellectual superiority. The fallen visitor referred to above is Kalki—who, along with his other supporters, left the visitors to embark on his quest of world domination. Brahma further says, "We knew him and his crew as Ashwins. Indian mythology calls them Asuras and we became known as the Devas. The land they hid in is known to your people as Atlantis" (Dhar, 2012, p. 93). In the novel, the gods attacked and destroyed Atlantis, and it sank to the bottom of the ocean. The lost city still remains the epicenter of Kalki's power and *devas* must invade it during the novel's climax. Dhar fuses a scientific outlook with mythology, religion and fiction, and uses the "extra-terrestrials have long been involved with earth" belief to further his novel's plot.

The "ancient astronaut" hypothesis can also be linked with what Stephen Clark writes in an essay on SF and religion. Clark argues, "But science fiction is often 'religious' in a wider

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[9] Not only has Daniken's hypothesis been rejected, it has also been accused of plagiarising from other contemporary thinkers and texts. I use Daniken here only since I regard him as one of the most well-known thinkers to popularize the ancient astronaut theory.

sense, even at its most atheistic. Sometimes this is no more than euhemerism, the theory that God and the gods are memories or premonitions of technologically advanced intruders or especially gifted leaders" (2005, p. 95). Dhar's *Vimana* looks back at a "golden past" from the perspective of a technologically inferior present and regards the past as the point of origin for all technologically advanced marvels which redefine the new millennium. In fact, a crater at Lonar is revealed to be the site of Earth's first nuclear attack thousands of years ago, thereby evidencing the Indian belief that time is cyclical and not linear.

The relevance of the semantics and syntax of such a narrative as Vimana is hard to miss. The novel's theme of good versus evil spans across time and space—and highlights global terrorism. The gods have been fighting the *daityas* for time immemorial, and their fight in our times has metamorphosed into the battle between Al Qaeda and the rest of the world. This fight against Kalki, Shaitan, Satan, the Devil, and the Anti-Christ is fought not only by Indians, but also by people from across the world. For example, when Kalki's base is breached by Aaditya and the gods, men and women from across the globe cast away their shackles and raise their voices against his tyrannical oppression by attacking the base from within. Kalki represents global terrorism literally too: his *daityas* supply Al Qaeda with a nuclear weapon intended to be deployed at a civilian target in the U.S. Aaditya, however, aided by the gods, prevents this horrific eventuality from happening.

Vimana might be a YA narrative that aims at wish-fulfillment (the protagonist emerges as a "chosen one" and is accorded the honour of fighting alongside the gods) but there is a deeper meaning at play. Stephen Clark further wrote,

> On the one hand, alien or mechanical intelligences that purport to have the power of gods are routinely shown to be demons or ordinary creatures of no higher metaphysical or moral standing than ourselves. On the other hand, human beings themselves may become "like gods": immortal, powerful, and creative. (2005, p. 102)

The gods are shown to be extra-terrestrial but still on the same metaphysical plane as the humans; Aaditya, on the other hand, emerges as more than just a human. In re-reading mythology that posits gods as extra-terrestrials, Dhar engages in a "scientification" of faith and religion. By bringing gods from the realm of the mythological, the incomprehensible, to the realm of the science-fictional (and by extension, the scientific), he engages in a massive decentering of the contemporary fascination for "God". The interpretations surrounding God have fragmented societies, people and polities—in both the novel and the world we live in—as evident from the rise of religious fundamentalism, parochialism, and fanaticism. By placing God within a structure that may be empirically validated—in this case, by the "ancient astronaut" hypothesis—Dhar undercuts the roots of fanaticism built around the conception of a god as the *ultimate creator*, and instead focuses on God as a device to bring people together to combat a greater foe—terrorism. In this respect, the portrayal of gods in *Vimana* as ancient astronauts has contemporary political relevance.

Ganesha to the Rescue: Indian Gods Meet the New New York Police Department

Ashok Banker's *Gods of War* is an anti-war novel that often borrows thematic elements from Philip Pullman's science-fantasy *His Dark Materials* trilogy. The novel follows five individuals from five different parallel universes "only a fraction of an instant apart in the ring-around-the-sun parallax continuity" (Banker, 2009a, p. 50). These five individuals are as different as chalk and cheese, but travel together with Ganesha to the end of space and time to

fight the ultimate evil. Santosh is a ten-year-old from a Mumbai slum, Salim is a socialist trader from Birmingham, Ruth is a ship-welder from New Jersey, and Akechi and Yoshi are Japanese twins.[10] These five individuals resist assimilation by the Oort, a hyper-intelligent, pan-dimensional entity that is harvesting worlds across the space-time continuum. Oort cannot compute how these individuals resisted assimilation, and addresses this quandary by quarantining their respective worlds outside the known boundaries of the multiverse.

These five are brought together by Ganesha, one of the most worshipped gods in the Hindu pantheon, in an effort to fight the forces of darkness. The group travels with Ganesha to *Lokaloka*, the space between worlds, and sees countless beings from across space-time gathering to witness a cataclysmic event, a sight which amazes, terrifies, and shocks the travellers. Before they can come to terms with what is happening around them, Ganesha is assassinated. They run for their lives and suddenly come across the *New* New York Police Department (N2YPD), which polices the entire creation, and the novel ends before these five join an all-out war for the existence of reality as we know it.

Gods of War, with its subject matter and style of narration, manages to instill a "sense of wonder" in its readers, which may be why the text also resists critical commentary from the perspective of the reader. According to Istvan Csicsery-Ronay,

> Readers of sf expect it to provide an intense experience of being translated from the mundane to the imaginary worlds and ideas that exceed the familiar and the habitual. They expect to feel as if they are witnessing phenomena beyond normal limits of perception and thought that people have not been able to witness before, or perhaps even to imagine. (2008, p.146)

This could explain why and how Banker brings religion into SF; the responses elicited by a phenomena that exceeds the normal limits of perception among the characters and readers alike is clearly a mark of wonder. The way Banker describes gods, journeys to other worlds, their physicality, and inhabitants is meant to evoke not only wonder, a sense of not only colliding people, worlds, mythologies, and perspectives, but also ruptures in reality itself.

Interestingly, despite the overt presence of SF elements, Banker vehemently denies *Gods of War* being SF. In a 2009 interview, Banker said, "I would debate the classification of *Gods of War* as science-fiction. It is a very basic and generic contemporary story, which uses some scientific devices and concepts. But that does not make it a hard-core science fiction"[11] (Banker, 2009b, para. 3). Banker's disdain for tags and classifications is also evident in a comment he left on the blog post "In Search of Indian Science Fiction" by Anil Menon and Vandana Singh:

> I object to the term "Indian SFF" on the grounds that it implies an Indian embracing of the western SFF tradition, which I, for example, don't attempt to do at all, contrary to opinion. I see myself very much as trying to go back to the roots of Indian epic storytelling and finding a new form, a kind of hybrid beast that romps and frolics through Indian tropes—pushpaks and maya, instead of Ramjets and sorcery, to simplify

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[10] Perhaps it is this coming together of humans and uniting despite differences of race, religion, gender, orientation, and nationality on which Banker wants to focus.

[11] This is not the first time an Indian Speculative Fiction writer has chosen to stay away from the label of SF. Jugal Mody, for example, prefers *Toke* to be called SFF rather than SF.

> briefly—and to follow a pathway that is neither SF, F, Dark Fantasy, Military SF, Heroic Fantasy, S&S, or any existing category, but a wholly new category altogether, or perhaps a very old one, the oldest of all, before there were chain stores and any need for categorization, apartheid, and all these separatist pigeon-holing […] I would rather stand alone without a genre, than be filed away in what I see as a non-genre, or an imitative one. (Banker, 2008)

Banker's argument does make sense in these times when genres are increasingly being fused. I, however, read this text as SF due to its novum—extra-terrestrial intervention from outer space, which, in this case, happens to be something on the lines of sentient nano-technology (the Oort cloud). The novum of *Gods of War* features nanotech-esque bugs—reminiscent of Scott Derrickson's *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008)—that cover this world in a thick blanket of black clouds and enter every human being, rendering him or her incapable of individual thought. The entire population goes immobile in a trance—humming. Moreover, this affects not just our world but everyone on *all* Earths across multiple planes and dimensions (except for a select few); all humans gather together at certain specified places, as if under remote control. In order to combat this sudden disruption of life, Ganesha comes to Earth and recruits five civilians from around the globe to win the "War of the Worlds", the ultimate battle between the forces of light and the scourge of darkness—that rages on throughout multiple dimensions and alternate realities.

Studying this text by looking at its novum becomes all the more important in the light of Banker's own assertions enumerating on the linkages between writing and material realities. In the author's note to *Gods of War*, Banker wrote,

> For my part, I believe it's no longer possible for any writer to just 'tell a story', without regard for the connections between that story to the writer's own life, milieu, socio-cultural and political background and environment, and the myriad crisscrossing lines that traverse from fiction to fact and back again." (2009a, p. xii)

The critique of *machtpolitik* in the current world order also finds a direct reference in the text with the N2YPD. The figure of the U.S. as a global policeman is manifested in how the N2YPD polices not just the entire city, or the globe, but *all* of creation itself. N2YPD serves as Banker's satirical take on American foreign policy, and illustrates how he is not comfortable with the interventionist approach adopted by the US. However, the N2YPD is not entirely American—there are marked differences between this organization and U.S. that are evident in how these police officers think.

Ogbunabali, chief of the N2YPD police unit that comes in contact with the five, raises the issue of secularism versus faith when she declares:

> We are proud of our faith and our gods. We all are. Every last citizen of New New York is a religious fundamentalist. That is what New New York stands for. The freedom to follow one's faith without restrictions. All gods in harmony. We are not […unionists, secularists, scientists] *Americans!*" (Banker, 2009a, p. 232)

One can infer that Americans are different from New New Yorkers, who are deeply fundamentalist yet somehow respect each other's religions, unlike those in a "secular" state. Ogbunabali continues,

> We did not kill your god. Or any god. It's unthinkable, unspeakable […] It would have been our privilege and his [Ganesha's] grace had we experienced such a darshan

> [meeting the divinity]. We only came here to the interzone in pursuit of crossover
> criminals [mostly Americans]. (Banker, 2009a, p. 232)

With nano-beings invading not only earth but all of creation, and a god (Ganesha) utilizing scientific (or what appears to be magical/scientific) equipment, coming to earth, and recruiting a motley crew to save the creation, *Gods of War* blurs the boundaries between SF and F. Banker, a staunch critic of American foreign policy vis-à-vis intervention and expansionism, plays with the invasion metaphor. With the Iraq and Afghanistan fresh in his mind, this novel paint a glum picture of invasion, and how an innocent populace has to suffer. Only a handful manage to fight back—who, in this case, happen to be aided by a Hindu god, one who exhorts the five to forget their differences and see each other as human beings alone, thus raising them above the paradigms of nationality, religion, colour and orientation. Banker might be making a point about how faith—and not religion—can play a role in healing this world. He implies coming together is not difficult for people with different faiths as long as organised religion does not come between them.

Maybe, by choosing this novum, Banker draws upon a template through which he can include the thematic issues and concerns that bother him the most. When asked by Sonam Jain of *The Hindu* about the core concerns behind *Gods of War*, Banker replied,

> The core concerns that we all have as human beings: War and how to avoid it, violence
> and how to stop it, love and how to proliferate it to name a few. I always write with an
> agenda. For instance, in *Gods of War*, you will find an introduction that talks about
> violence and why should it be there in the first place. In which so-called science fiction
> book do you ever find such an introduction? (Banker, 2009b, para. 9)

It is this anti-war, syncretic message radiating from the text that makes *Gods of War* a direct response to the times in which it was written. The novel emerges as a critical dystopia, especially in its attempts to caution *a la* a parable if humanity continues on its current path, then earth's future is in peril. As Banker mentions multiple times, he is not very comfortable with superpowers imposing their will on others and proliferating violence in the name of the war against terror. He is simultaneously critical of using terrorism as a tool of political change and emphasizes humanism (at the expense of organized religion) as a solution to the socio-political ramifications of a unipolar world. *Gods of War* exhorts people to unite and seek similarities in differences rather than vice versa.

Stoned Gods versus Brain-dead Zombies

If *Vimana* uses gods to unite people so that they can combat the chimera of global terrorism, and *Gods of War* employs divine beings to indict current *machtpolitik*, then Jugal Mody's *Toke* utilizes Hindu deities to critique the social and personal ramifications of global capitalism and commodity fetishism. *Toke* recounts the story of how three friends—Nikhil, Aman and Danny—save the world from the forces of evil. Nikhil is the classic representative of an average, angst-ridden, middle-class Indian youth caught between a corporate desk job he hates and a family unit with oppressive moral values. He finds solace in zoned-out dreams and by hanging out with Aman and Danny, his friends who spend their days doping, watching films and playing videogames. One day, Nikhil is fired from work for sleeping during work hours and makes his way to Aman and Danny's flat. There, after the three friends have had a couple of drags, Vishnu—the Preserver—appears and tells them of a startling development. The world is

about to end and only this gang of chilled-out dopers can save it from assured destruction when united as the "Boys of Vishnu":

>"So, er, what do you want from me?"
>
>>"I am here to be your friend, Nikhil."
>
>"Really?"
>
>>"What are you? Stupid? I'm here because Earth is about to be destroyed in the next few days."
>
>>"What?! And aren't you going to stop it?"
>
>"Actually, not Earth, but human life as we know it, which will then lead to the absolution of the universe." Very calm and taking slow long puffs.
>
>>"AND AREN'T YOU GOING TO STOP IT?"
>
>"I could, but it is too late for me to take another birth, and if I do take the kalkin birth, then I'd have to demolish the entire planet single-handedly—like the Judaeo-Christian god—by raining sulphur probably. I'm in a particularly caustic mood, so I might just use Sodium Hydroxide instead." He passes me the joint. (Mody, 2012, p. 32-33)

The gods have spoken. The world is about to end—and only these three friends can save it. To do that, they have to fight demon-zombies, and keep their wits by toking constantly.

The novum of this tongue-in-cheek, satirical zombie-comedy—featuring Indian gods, doped youths, and mindless zombies—is as mind-bogglingly strange as a novum could (and should) be. Vishnu explains that the forces of evil, led by demons, have infected the world with special maggots—which enter the body via the oral passage, swim directly to the brain, and take control of the subject. Vishnu commands the three friends to fight on his behalf, and explains the threat to the trio:

>Vishnu takes his trademark deep drag and makes his elaborate smoke clouds that look just like his throne. "Yep. The maggot slowly gains control over the brain and starts converting all brain signals into its own language. The minute the last neuron of your brain hands over power to the maggot, you are technically dead and your soul is gone. Your weight will go down by twenty-one grams, but your body will continue all its functions like normal. After which, as days go by, your body starts preparing itself as the pod for a demon soul. Meanwhile, you will continue working as usual, following your everyday routine and, slowly but surely, as the last human turns undead, free will as we know it will die." (Mody, 2012, p. 44)

Not only does Vishnu quantify the exact weight of the human soul (twenty-one grams), but he also enumerates on the exact procedure as to how these maggots take control. Alarmed by this news, the three friends decide to fight back. Using a special instrument given to them by Vishnu—which can teleport them to places of their choice—the trio, joined by two Japanese twins, then visit a marijuana field in Himachal Pradesh, Nikhil's office (where he rescues the girl he likes), and an experimental laboratory. They then hijack a plane, crash it into a slum full of zombies, evade the state apparatuses (which have been overtaken by zombies), and battle maggot-infested zombies to save this world from total annihilation.

Over time, the gang discovers that the maggots die when exposed to marijuana smoke. They use this to their advantage, keep toking, and travel around to destroy more zombies. Eventually, they successfully combat Scott Ludwig, one of the evil brains behind this apocalypse, and save the world. As the novel ends, the reader sees the frustration of Nikhil

stuck in a dead-end job, one who is bitter at being regarded as inferior to an elder brother who sells spare automobile parts.

This ending lends even more credence to the interpretation that *Toke* is a critique of contemporary society rather than a narrative of mindless blood, gore, and drugs. Set in today's Mumbai, the apotheosis of toking and the subsequent counter-culture is a larger commentary on how the middle-class veneer of respectability, when combined with corporate/government work-cultures, dehumanizes people. It also emphasizes how the pressure to succeed professionally makes Indian youth opt for careers that do not really interest them—often at the cost of individualism, creativity, and freedom. The Taylorian imposition of order on chaos has also been critiqued in the way Mody's beloved Mumbai—a city full of haphazard chaos and disorder, something that makes it what it really is—becomes very un-Mumbai-like after the zombies have infiltrated all levels of social, political and economic organisation. Mumbai looks like "the insides of a massive clock, which is completely made out of humans. Everybody is constantly ticking" (Mody, 2012, p. 158).

The gods play an important role in this narrative since they not only give the protagonists the tools to fight against the forces of evil but also make them realize something is amiss. Nikhil had accepted his fate until Vishnu came to him and implicitly told him that he must fight the system—he must not become a zombie, quite literally. Vishnu and the other gods led Nikhil to realize he must not simply be a conformist or status-quoist; instead, he must chase his dreams and stand up for what he believes. He should not be what his family or bosses want him to be—rather, he should be what *he* wants to be. A god taught him to think for himself, have an individual opinion, and follow one's heart—not any political, institutional, or religious leader. Therein lies the indictment of rituals, institutions, fundamentalism, conformism, organized religion, and parochialism. Thus, while *Toke* may feature Hindu gods, it subverts religion. It condemns imposition of religious rituals. Nikhil's family chides him for missing the morning *aartis,* and he hates his family forcing him to take part in a religious ceremony that holds no interest for him. If gods undercut religion and rituals, they reinforce the importance of faith and belief, moving towards a liberal, spiritual, and more progressive world order. Inspired by Shiva and Vishnu, Nikhil and his friends develop the strength required to challenge the status quo.

Toke also critiques a corporate work-culture that focuses on tangible productivity, on-the-dot punctuality, a hierarchal chain of command, etc. For example, the protagonist, Nikhil, has a strained relationship with his boss, Anil George. Later, when Nikhil battles zombies, he runs into Anil George again, who is now a zombie warrior:

> I presume you've met one of our warriors, specially trained with demon strength. Inside each one there is a demon consciousness that has hatched**.** *The evilest of the evil suits. The best CEOs and vice presidents who have made their companies billions, who are at the forefront of human civilization, development and sophistication*… (Mody, 2012, p. 192, emphasis mine)

I have italicized a few sentences to show what Mody thinks about corporate ethos. He does not look kindly on the CEOs who have made their companies billions as he regards these financial successes to be driven by crass consumerism, unbridled greed, and societal pressure, not enlightened self-interest, genuine interest, or passion. *Toke* highlights how "suits" become mindless zombies serving a demon consciousness of commodity fetishism, social respectability

(at the cost of one's own preferences), and the tendency to judge everything on its ability to be monetized. Having divested people of their basic humanity, free will, and the power to choose, the zombies pretend the benevolent *rakshasas* do so for the betterment of the masses. By depicting the zombies as the epistemological category of the mindless "other", *Toke* is not merely against capitalism per se; both fascism and communism utilize the forceful imposition of uniformity to serve a higher purpose. *Toke* categorically rejects these three paradigms of social organization and borders on the anarchic. The protagonists are social misfits, rebels who fight the system with the help of Hindu gods who tell them to follow their hearts (without becoming fundamentalists). *Toke* is thus not specifically against capitalism, communism, religion, or any other -ism, but rather against any ideology that denies humans their free will and imposes its own diktats on them, making it all the more relevant to today's India.

"Mythological SF" in India Today

Indian SF has a unique operating logic of its own that manifests in the novels *Vimana*, *Gods of War*, and *Toke.* These novels feature a kind of science which is as connected to society and politics as it is to religion and faith. Thomas M. Disch wrote in "Mythology and SF",

> As mythmakers, science fiction writers have a double task, the first aspect of which is to make humanly relevant—literally, to humanize—the formidable landscapes of the atomic era [...] The second task of sf writers as mythmakers is simply the custodial work of keeping the inherited body of myths alive." (2005, p. 22-23)

The presence of gods in these three SF novels by Indian writers can be reinterpreted in the light of Disch's second task. For example, Dhar's emphasis on the golden past in *Vimana* successfully keeps Indian myths alive. The novel even begins:

> *"The Pushpaka vimana that resembles the Sun and belongs to my brother was brought by the powerful Ravana; that aerial and excellent vimana going everywhere at will [...] that vimana resembling a bright cloud in the sky [...] and the King got in, and the excellent vimana rose up into the higher atmosphere."*
> The earliest written account of a flying vehicle called a vimana. This is found in the Indian epic the Ramayana, which was written at least 3000 years before the Wright Brothers made what we widely believe to be the first manned flight on Earth in 1903.
> (Dhar, 2012, p. 0)

Vimana tries to popularize the view that Indian civilisation was at its peak during the Vedic age, and what we witness today is a product of devolution, not evolution. On a similar note, though with very diverging politics, *Gods of War* begins with an invocation to Lord Ganesha, and seeks his blessings in an almost Milton-esque vein:

> Salutations to you, O Ganesha,
> O lord with a twisted trunk and immense body
> Radiant with the effulgence of a million suns
> O lord may all our endeavours
> Always be accomplished without obstacles. (Banker, 2009a, p. 0)

Perhaps only an *Indian* SF text can begin with an invocation to the gods. *Toke* also begins with a god—Krishna. Keeping in line with the rest of the novel's tone, *Toke* begins not with an invocation or prayer, but instead with a dream, which is distinctively more sacrilegious since it features seductively a god dancing seductively. In the opening scene, Nikhil dreams tantalisingly about a god (Krishna) gyrating to a James Bond opening song and waving a golden Desert Eagle

in his face. This sets the tone for the rest of the novel—there are no sacred cows in this text, only toking gods and mindless zombies.

One can conclude that in these three novels, faith and belief in divinity are just as important as faith and belief in SF's pseudo-science. These novels cater to a framework where science (or pseudo-science) is not antithetical to divinity and they portray a universe where science complements, rather than counters, religion. Perhaps Priya Sarukkai Chabria, a noted Indian SF writer, best rationalized this when she said,

> Speculative fiction—at least ours—draws significantly from the esemplastic imagination and our folktales and epics that explore the fantastic. The thrust of sub-continental art has been the quest for 'inner vision' not only the achingly real. Speculative fiction— more than sci-fi—is deeply contemplative. One looks into the future as one does into the past to seek *atmagyana* to live in the aching real and know there is something far vaster than ourselves and the undoubtedly real." (Personal communication, 9 May 2011)

Even SF in India redirects the quest for knowledge inwards (apart from its external projections), and works at the confluence of multiple structures of knowledge, thought and experience.

This inward-directed quest for knowledge, apart from a desire to comment on external reality, is evident in the novels *Vimana*, *Gods of War*, and *Toke*, and how their authors use the influence of western SF to fortify Indian "mythological" SF is noteworthy point. These novels proudly contain Hindu gods, faster-than-light spaceships, Islamic angels, teleportation devices, Al Qaeda terrorists, helpful aliens, baked youth, mind-controlling slugs, talking birds, parallel universes, rakshasas, and mythological beings. The fluid, fuzzy boundaries of SF in the Indian context is cause for celebration, not alarm. In *The Cambridge Companion of Science Fiction*, Farah Mendlesohn wrote, "Science fiction is less a genre—a body of writing from which one can expect certain plot elements and specific tropes—than an ongoing discussion" (James and Mendlesohn, 2003, p. 1). The word "discussion" describes Indian SF well because Indian SF can be read as an interaction between the structures of western SF (zombies, for example), Indian mythological and fantasy narratives (gods and *daityas*), and techno-science (such as advanced weapons and nano-clouds).

SF is not a genre but a mode. Since SF employs the narrative structures and tropes of other genres with so much panache that the appropriation becomes utterly natural, SF, especially Indian SF in English, emerges as a mixture of genres borrowing semantic elements from all of them and arranges these characteristics in a distinct syntax separate from the assimilated genres. This complex synthesis also explains why there are multiple definitions and viewpoints to look at SF. The novels *Vimana*, *Gods of War*, and *Toke* draw upon western SF traditions and then reinterpret them as per the material realities of India—and their ensuing psycho-spiritual aspects—and then fuse this reinterpretation with the structures of Indian Speculative Fiction. The extent to which Dhar, Banker, and Mody have influenced global SF can only be ascertained in the future, but a new sub-genre of "mythological SF" has already successfully evolved and will likely continue to mutate.

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