

Empires of the Spirit

Science Fiction from India



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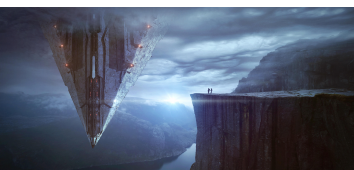
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Editorial

MICHAEL K. IWOLEIT

My first encounter with contemporary Indian literature was *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947 – 1997*, edited by Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West, a celebration of the first fifty years of India's independence through its literature that has spawned my interest in Indian culture in general and consequential in literature, arts and culture of the world outside of the Western sphere. (*InterNova* is one fruit of these interests and its host project, the *World Culture Hub*, is an ongoing and still admittedly embryonic attempt to share some of my findings). Salman Rushdie has been much criticized for his thesis, elaborated in the introduction, that Indian writing in English is superior to most of the contemporary literature in the vernacular languages of India. Many readers have perceived Amit Chaudhuri's – in my opinion richer and more rewarding – anthology *The Vintage of Book of Modern Indian Literature* (2001), although it was not intended this way, as an attempt to prove the opposite.

It can't be denied that through the work of pioneering Indian authors writing in English such as Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan and contemporary practitioners, many of them expatriates living and writing between the cultures, such as Amitav Ghosh (in discussion for the Nobel Prize in Literature this year), Vikram Seth, Rohinton Mistry, Arundathi Roy and of course Salman Rushdie himself, the literature of the subcontinent has gained international recognition. I have read enough translations from Indian languages, however, to confirm that Rushdie's thesis is at least doubtful. There are many vernacular writers that stand comparison with Saadat Hasan Manto, one

of the world's greatest short story writers and the only vernacular writer present in Rushdie's/West's anthology. Some of my personal favorites include Sunil Gangopadhyay, Nirmal Verma and Qurratulain Hyder (the latter the author of *River of Fire*, one of the monuments of post-independence Indian literature that easily matches any of the best books by the better-known Anglo-Indian writers). If controversies and differing views like this prove one thing then it's that Indian literature and culture is too rich, too many-voiced, too contradictory to narrow it down to simple formulas.

In the brilliant BBC documentary *India: The Empire of the Spirit* (1991) author and presenter Michael Wood quotes at the outset a remark by Mark Twain from the end of the 19th century: "The Indian may seem poor to we rich Westerners but in matters of the spirit it is we who are the paupers and they who are millionaires." Admirers of the thousands-of-years old history of India's religions and spirituality that the country is still most spontaneously associated with have added: "History is full of empires of the sword, but India alone created an empire of the spirit." The traditions of its beliefs, manners, customs, and folklore are still vivid in India today – including their down-sides such as the caste system, religious conflicts and the position of women – and have a bearing even on the lives of contemporary secular Indians. Viewing India only in this light, however, can easily be misleading as the country has not only been one of the cradles of civilization but also one of the cradles of science. The decimal number system and its numerals are still called Arab numbers in the West, but are actually of Indian origin and the Arabs, equally deft as inventors and intermediaries in the golden age of their civilization, were just clever enough to realize their advantages and spread them through the Muslim ruled world as far as to the doorsteps of Europe. The averagely educated Westerner is still little aware of the accomplishments of ancient Indian science which include, among others, one of the greatest intellectual achievements of mankind, the ingenious Sanskrit grammar of Pāṇini (520-460 MC), which might well be regarded as the earliest precursor of algorithmic computing and was, in comparison to

similar developments in Europe, a baffling two and a half thousand years ahead of its time.

As India is on the verge of becoming one of the world's economic, political, and cultural superpowers, along with China likely destined to be one of the domineering nations in the world in the second half of the 21st century and maybe among the ground breakers for several centuries of a global Asian dominance to come, the awareness of such achievements and traditions is beginning to merge in the most surprising ways with a swift industrial, technological, and scientific development. Several contributions to this *InterNova* issue try, each in their own way, to reconcile the spiritual with the scientific approach to the world, which are both present in Indian culture. It would thus be premature to view the concept of science fiction, as presented in our little snapshot of Indian sf, as somewhat outdated. The Indian science fiction community has clearly tied in with the American science fiction of the 1940ies and 1950ies by assigning it not only an artistic and literary but also a social purpose: to promote science and to encourage reflection about the consequences of technological and scientific change. Science fiction in India is in service of a transition era that might be even more profound and critical than the transition from an agricultural to an industrial state that at times has almost torn China apart. India, the empire of the spirit, is turning into a high-tech country still deeply rooted in its multifaceted cultural heritage and it is discovering science fiction as a means to explore what it could mean to be an Indian in the future.

Being a science fiction enthusiast it was only natural that my general interest in Indian literature lead to a growing curiosity about the state of science fiction writing in India in particular. My contacts to India date back to 2005 when me and my co-editors of *InterNova*'s German sister magazine *Nova* made our first attempt with establishing an international science fiction magazine and I was immediately convinced of the potential of Indian science fiction by the excellent works of Vandana Singh, Anil Menon and others. When I restarted *InterNova* in 2022 among my first activities was to re-contact

the Indian science fiction community and collected material for a theme issue on Indian science fiction. It was a long way and lots of hard work to finally present you the result of our efforts now. I owe special thanks to Dr. Srinarahari of the Indian Association for Science Fiction Studies and Dr. Arvind Mishra of the Indian Science Fiction Writers' Association and of course all the contributors to this issue. Speaking of which: one special feature of *InterNova* #7 was not planned but I'm happy that it came about. The fiction part has almost completely been provided by female writers and I'm sure that the only young man present will not mind the good company he is in.

It would be an additional benefit if this issue would inspire readers to further delve into science fiction from India and Indian literature and culture in general. Maybe they will gain a similar insight that I had during work on this and similar projects: The first step to understand a different culture is not to become an expert but to learn enough that you get an idea of the amount of your ignorance.

Michael K. Iwoleit
October 2025

An Unrequited Question

PRAGYA GAUTAM

Ms. Anubha had left her home. She was leaving for the university early that day, at 9:00 am. She had hardly opened the door of her car when she heard a scream from her home.

"Mangala? What has happened to you?" She rushed back into her house calling out and was taken aback as she glanced inside. Mangala, her maid, had been tightly captured in Peter's arms. Mangala had been busy with house chores when Peter came from behind and ...

Anubha dragged him back by grabbing his golden hair and pulling with full strength. He fell down on the floor like a collapsed tree. Mangala was dumbfounded. She began to cry.

"Madam, I won't come here to work anymore. Please find someone else ..." She was sobbing.

"It's fine, Mangala," Ms. Anubha replied. "It will be better for you."

Anubha made her drink some water and saw her off forever. She was getting late for the meeting. Only for this important meeting had she left early today, otherwise Mangala would have left by 10:00 am, after finishing her household chores. And Peter? Only today had she made him stay back home, even though he usually accompanied her everywhere. And now this had happened, of all days. She was fouled up. So many things were going through her mind. She set her car up to auto driving mode and rested her head on the back seat. She was fond of driving usually, but her hands did not support her and everything seemed dark in front of her eyes. There was a commotion in her brain. It was like clamoring voices echoing through her skull. She reflected back upon her past, many years ago.



Pragya Gautam is a biology lecturer in senior secondary school and a popular science writer. She lives in Kota, Rajasthan. She has published three science fiction collections and a novel. She has also received several awards in the fields of writing and teaching.

Anubha, the only daughter of a rich industrialist, was pretty and had an impressive personality as well. She was snobbish by nature. Numerous marriage proposals were waiting for her when she was twenty two and pursuing her Ph.d. at that time. She regarded marriage as an obstacle, restricting her freedom. However, marriage was taken as an inevitable social custom in those days. That was before marriage institutions had reached their limits, as it is today. But every social being necessarily needs a companion or a partner, regardless of whether he or she gets married or not. Her arrogant nature kept her suitors at bay. Twenty years of her life had passed in search of a partner who would be a combination of wisdom and modesty. She was around forty now. This solitary life had made her introvert and fractious. Now at this mid age she felt meek and insecure despite all luxuries. There was no one to welcome her when she came back from college. Everything was automatic so there was no need of servants. There would be a weird silence inside the house. There were sounds ... but without essence ... lifeless. The wind blowing through the cracks of the glass door of the balcony of her apartment in the 28th floor produced eerie sounds. *Whooo ... hoo ... hooo ...* how ghastly!

One day she unexpectedly happened to meet Kanupriya and her husband Dr. Karamveer. Kanu had been her school mate. They both were extremely happy to see Anubha and visited her home at home the next day without any formal invitation. Kanu was still full of zeal and the versatility of youth. Her inner happiness could easily be seen on her shining skin. On seeing this Anubha became a little upset. Kanu had a treasure trove of stories and gossip to tell but Anubha remained silent.

"We are meeting after many years and you are just sitting there, dear. What has happened to you?" Kanu inquired. "You have been the brightest and most intelligent student. Are you feeling hesitant in front of Karam?"

"No ... no, it's nothing like that ..." Her eyes became watery. She choked. Kanu and Karamveer left. Anubha's fingers touched the smart phone once and went still. Surging emotions began to take the shape of letters on the screen of the

cell phone. Kanu read her messages after coming home. "Your friend needs a companion." Karam suggested.

"She is so stubborn. Would she be compatible with anyone at this age?" She doubted it.

"I have an idea." Karam said and explained it.

"It could be a fantastic way out, Karam", Kanu said zealously. "I'll talk to Anubha."

Kanu had suggested to bring Peter home to Anubha. Peter had been with Anubha for two years now.

Peter was an android, an ultramodern android. Around thirteen years ago from today in 2025, these androids had been launched onto market. Peter was from the third generation of this line of androids. His skin was made of silicone which appeared like human skin that was soft to the touch and completely adaptable to the environment with powerful sensors. His eyes had vision sensors. His silky, lustrous hair supplied energy to his brain, absorbing solar energy. He was capable of thinking and developing new connections in his brain. Besides, he had digital hormones which could react to human emotions. The Neil and Robinson company had introduced both male and female versions onto the market.

Anubha had visited the showroom of this company. She was astonished to see androids of such a wide variety of forms and features. There was a great diversity with regard to eyes, hair color and facial features as if they were representing every part of the world. She chose Peter, a android with golden hair, fair complexion and high intellectual capability.

Two employees from that company came to Anubha's home to commit Peter to her care. They introduced her to Peter very decently.

"Ms. Anubha, meet Peter, your partner, advisor and companion from today onwards," said one of them.

"You can call him a soul mate too," said the other one, grinning mischievously.

"Soul mate? This machine?" she said to herself.

"And Peter, this is Ms. Anubha, your companion. Hope you both will spend a nice time together." Peter stretched out his