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AI and Indian Dystopias: Cultural Disruption and Ethical Dilemmas in *Asur* and *Ok Computer*

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the intersection of artificial intelligence (AI) and cultural disruption in Indian dystopian narratives, with a focus on the shows *Asur* and *Ok Computer*. Both series offer compelling insights into how AI reshapes societal structures, ethical paradigms, and human identities in a rapidly evolving technological landscape, particularly in the post-COVID context. *Asur* blends mythology and technology to depict a chilling dystopia where AI tools like facial recognition and behavioural analysis become weapons for moral and ideological battles. The show critiques the ethical ambiguity of AI applications and highlights the dangers of unchecked technological advancement in a culturally diverse society. It raises critical questions about the relationship between traditional Indian philosophies of dharma and karma and the cold logic of AI systems. In contrast, *Ok Computer* offers a satirical lens on a future where AI and robotics are deeply entrenched in daily life, questioning the ethics of automation, data governance, and the boundaries of human-machine relationships. The series critiques blind faith in technology, juxtaposing Western models of technological determinism with Indian spiritual perspectives on consciousness and ethical responsibility. This analysis investigates how these narratives reflect the broader anxieties surrounding AI in India, including digital colonialism, socio-cultural disruptions, and ethical dilemmas. By integrating Indian philosophical frameworks with global AI discourses, the paper aims to highlight the unique dimensions of human-machine relationships in the Indian context. Through the lens of *Asur* and *Ok Computer*, this paper demonstrates how Indian dystopian fiction engages with pressing concerns about technology and cultural identity, offering critical insights into the

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evolving dynamics of AI-driven futures.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Dystopian, Digital colonialism, Culture, Artificial Intelligence (AI), Post-Pandemic, AI ethics, Technological determinism, Cultural identity, Surveillance, Dehumanization, Human-Machine Relationships

In the last few decades, the evolution of technology in India has been nothing short of remarkable. Societal subsectors like healthcare, education, and security were fundamentally altered due to the swift adoption of AI tools which machine learning, automation, and data analytics facilitated. The COVID-19 pandemic caused a shift in the technological paradigm, increasing the rate of innovation. The innovations AI has driven such as facial recognition contact tracing systems and AI-based diagnostic tools serve as solutions to current issues in society (Saka, Preface xvi). The shift also gave birth to many modern-day issues such as privacy and the loss of traditionalist values. People are worried about surveillance, global bias, and the issues revolving around privacy. The fears surrounding these complex ideas can be found in Indian popular culture and are starting to emerge as a counter-narrative to AI, Indian Dystopian Fiction.

Indian Dystopian fiction, primarily through the creations of *Asur* and *Ok Computer* weaves ancient myths, philosophies, and current political issues into the storyline. Each of these pieces serves as a concentric medium for the ancient good-bad split that has existed in humanity. In much the same way, *Ok Computer* uses satire to challenge the contradictions and absurdities of an AI-powered society. The series is set in a hyper-automated future, where machines control every aspect of human existence, using humor to dial in on the dangers of over-reliance on technology. The program, a remix of Douglas Adam's *The Hitchhikers' Guide to the Galaxy* (1980), critiques the dehumanization of AI, highlighting how automation takes away people's agency and autonomy. As Parasuraman notes, *Ok Computer*, "... is intended as a darkly funny commentary on the depths of despair to which programmed greatness can sink." The series envisions a world where AI, despite its technological superiority, fails to understand the nuances of human emotions, culture, and spirituality—issues that are central to Indian identity.

Together, *Asur* and *Ok Computer* illuminate the tensions between tradition and modernity, spirituality and technology, and human agency and machine determinism. These narratives explore the ethical dilemmas posed by AI, not only through the lens of technological innovation but also by rooting their critiques in deeply embedded cultural and philosophical frameworks. In doing so, they offer a nuanced perspective on the role of AI in reshaping the human experience, one that challenges the global dominance of Western technological paradigms. The growing field of AI ethics and cultural studies is beginning to recognize the importance of integrating non-Western perspectives into the discourse. AI cannot be understood solely through the lens of Western liberalism, which often privileges individualism, autonomy, and progress. To fully comprehend the impact of AI on global

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societies, we must engage with diverse cultural and philosophical traditions. As Basu notes how adopting AI without training it in the ways of the Global South, "... can lead to various issues, from cultural misrepresentation and appropriation to reinforcing stereotypes. Ethical perspectives on AI implementation vary widely across different regions. In certain parts of the world, the introduction of AI technologies can conflict with deeply rooted cultural beliefs, long-standing traditions, and established social frameworks. These differences significantly influence how AI is perceived, accepted, and governed within local contexts (Basu and Omotuboraa). This paper seeks to contribute to this emerging discourse by examining how Indian dystopian fiction critiques the ethical challenges and cultural tensions surrounding AI. By integrating Indian philosophical perspectives, such as those rooted in dharma (moral law) and karma (action and its consequences), the paper advocates for a more inclusive and culturally grounded approach to understanding the implications of AI.

Indian dystopian fiction, particularly *Asur* and *Ok Computer*, not only mirrors global concerns about technology but also offers an opportunity to see how AI can be framed and evaluated through the prism of India's rich cultural heritage. One of the broader needs, as an upcoming human civilization with emergent AI, is to engage with varying cultural perspectives to help inform and direct what our future might be, including if that might be anything its creators might think human. Incorporating the concerns of Indian dystopian fiction — spirituality, morality, socio-political context — as essential materials for grappling with the complexities of an AI-driven future. By situating technological debates within specific cultural and historical contexts, these narratives offer valuable insights into the evolving dynamics of human-machine relationships.

AI and Dystopian Narratives in India: A Contextual Overview

The dystopian genre has long mirrored societal anxieties, offering cautionary tales about unchecked technological and political power (Bhattacharjee and Gope 53). In the Indian context, dystopian narratives have gained traction as AI and digital technologies permeate daily life. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this digital transformation, exacerbating concerns about surveillance, data privacy, and ethical governance. As Bhattacharjee and Gope observe, "Digital dystopia denotes the artificial, ahistorical digital society where there is a dominance of technology over public and private ongoing of human life" (Bhattacharjee and Gope 53).

Indian dystopian fiction often intertwines technological themes with cultural and mythological elements. The web series *Asur* exemplifies this trend by integrating AI and Indian mythology, creating a narrative that reflects on the ethical implications of technological advancements within a culturally resonant framework. Similarly, *Ok Computer* employs humor and satire to critique the consequences of a hyper-automated society. The series presents a future where AI and robotics are deeply embedded in daily life, prompting viewers to consider the societal and ethical ramifications of such integration. As noted in a review, "*Ok Computer*...is an uneven but entertaining show, swimming in the ambitious territory of mystery, comedy, science fiction, and philosophy, all in a uniquely Indian setting" ("The Long, Dark Chai-Time of the Soul").

Both *Asur* and *Ok Computer* challenge the deterministic view of technology as an

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inevitable force, instead presenting it as a site of ethical and cultural contention. By embedding their narratives within India's rich cultural and philosophical traditions, these works offer nuanced critiques that resonate with contemporary societal concerns. As digital technologies continue to evolve, such narratives remain vital in fostering critical discourse on the direction of technological progress and its alignment with ethical governance and cultural values.

Asur: Mythology Meets Machine

Asur is a psychological thriller that interweaves mythology with modern technology. The series follows forensic experts as they grapple with a mysterious killer who uses AI tools like facial recognition and behavioural analysis to execute his plans. The narrative situates AI within a broader moral and ideological battle, raising questions about the ethical use of technology.

One of *Asur*'s central themes is the ethical ambiguity surrounding AI applications. The show depicts AI as both a tool for solving crimes and a weapon for perpetuating them. This duality underscores the potential for AI to amplify human intentions, whether benevolent or malevolent. In doing so, *Asur* critiques the unchecked advancement of AI in a society where moral and ethical boundaries are already fluid.

A unique aspect of *Asur* is its integration of Indian philosophical concepts such as dharma (duty) and karma (action and consequence). These frameworks clash with the cold and binary logic of AI systems, which operate without moral or cultural context. For instance, the antagonist's reliance on AI to justify his actions highlights the tension between traditional Indian ethics and the dehumanizing potential of technology. This tension invites viewers to reflect on the compatibility of AI with culturally rooted ethical systems.

Ok Computer: Satire and Speculation

A central theme in *Ok Computer* is the exploration of consciousness and ethical responsibility. The show introduces advanced AI systems, such as the self-aware robot Ajeeb, whose actions lead to a moral and legal quandary. This philosophical debate questions whether AI entities with advanced cognitive abilities deserve rights similar to humans. The interrogation scenes in *Ok Computer* highlight the absurdity of assigning moral accountability to a machine while avoiding human culpability. In one of these scenes Ajeeb, the self-conscious robot exclaims, "Mere aur insaano ke beech mein koi bhi dushmani nahi hai. Insaan toh waise bhi ek dusre ko maar daalte hain, kisi robot ki zarurat hi nahi hai" (I have no conflict with humans. Humans kill other humans already; robots have no place in that system). (*Ok Computer*, ep. 2, 34:66). The show attempts to deal with several questions related to artificial consciousness vs human consciousness, robots vs humans, as well as AI and ethics. As Neil Pagedar notes while sharing the questions that create the basis of this AI-centred series,

"Our own morality is completely constructed; our laws are completely artificial and have evolved over thousands of years. Will those laws, morality and ethics inform synthetic consciousness that does not share our biology? What ethics would these machines rely on when they are only two decades old? That is the thesis of the show." (Pagedar)

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The Indian science fiction series *Ok Computer* offers a nuanced exploration of artificial intelligence (AI) ethics, distinctively framed within India's cultural and philosophical milieu. Unlike several Western narratives that often oscillate between utopian and dystopian portrayals of AI, *Ok Computer* employs satire and humor to critique the societal fixation on technological perfection. This approach invites viewers to reflect on the ethical dimensions of AI integration in daily life. Set in a futuristic 2031, the series centres on a self-driving car implicated in a human fatality, challenging the assumption that robots, by design, cannot cause harm. This premise serves as a narrative device to delve into broader philosophical and ethical questions surrounding AI autonomy and accountability. The show tackles AI's larger philosophical and ethical issues, prompting audiences to consider the ramifications of delegating critical decision-making processes to machines.

A distinctive feature of *Ok Computer* is its embedding of AI discourse within the Indian socio-political context. The series juxtaposes characters with divergent perspectives on AI: a law enforcement officer inherently suspicious of artificial entities and an AI scientist advocating for robot rights. This dynamic mirrors ongoing debates in India regarding the ethical treatment of AI and the societal implications of its integration. As highlighted in *The Chakkar*, the character of Laxmi Suri, portrayed by Radhika Apte, embodies the progressive stance on AI ethics, emphasizing empathy and rights for artificial beings (Madhok).

Philosophically, the series resonates with principles from Advaita Vedanta, an Indian school of thought emphasizing non-duality and interconnectedness. This perspective aligns with the portrayal of human-AI interdependence in the narrative. The integration of such philosophical motifs enriches the global conversation on AI ethics, offering a culturally embedded approach that contrasts with Western paradigms. As discussed in the *Cambridge Companion to Religion and Artificial Intelligence*, Hindu philosophical traditions provide unique insights into the ethical considerations of AI, particularly concerning the nature of consciousness and the moral status of artificial entities (Sherman 182). Furthermore, the series underscores the importance of contextualizing AI ethics within specific cultural frameworks. By situating its narrative in India, *Ok Computer* highlights how cultural values and societal norms influence perceptions of technology and ethical considerations. This localized approach contributes to a more pluralistic understanding of AI ethics, acknowledging that ethical frameworks are not universal but are shaped by cultural and historical contexts.

Socio-Cultural Disruptions and Digital Colonialism

Both *Asur* and *Ok Computer* critique the phenomenon of digital colonialism—where global technology giants impose Western technological paradigms on non-Western societies. *Asur* portrays this through the misuse of imported AI tools in a deeply traditional society, highlighting the clash between local cultural norms and global technological influences. *Ok Computer*, on the other hand, depicts a future where indigenous practices are subsumed under the weight of hyper-automation, with self-driving cars and data-driven governance systems reflecting a homogenized, technocratic ethos.

As Oji and Nzeaka explain in their study, “Digital colonialism exacerbates the

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marginalization of local knowledge systems, replacing them with universalized solutions that fail to account for cultural specificity” (18). These series underscore this issue by showing how technology disrupts not only societal structures but also cultural identities.

The narratives also explore how AI exacerbates societal fragmentation. In *Asur*, the use of facial recognition technologies perpetuates surveillance and undermines interpersonal trust. Similarly, in *Ok Computer*, automation-driven governance alienates individuals from their communities. This theme reflects sociologist Shoshana Zuboff’s assertion that “Surveillance capitalism is the puppet master that imposes its will through the medium of the ubiquitous digital apparatus” (273).

Ethical Dilemmas in AI Narratives

One of the most compelling contributions of Indian dystopian fiction is its reliance on philosophical traditions to interrogate AI ethics. Both *Asur* and *Ok Computer* incorporate ideas of dharma and karma to critique Western utilitarian frameworks that often dominate global AI ethics. For example, in *Asur*, the antagonist uses AI to justify his twisted sense of justice, arguing that “karma is just an algorithm we cannot escape.” This parallels debates in AI ethics about algorithmic bias and fairness. Similarly, *Ok Computer* critiques the reductionist approach of AI systems by emphasizing ethical accountability- a concept deeply rooted in Indian philosophy.

Indian Dystopian Fiction in a Global Context

Indian dystopian fiction, as exemplified by *Asur* and *Ok Computer*, contributes significantly to global discussions on artificial intelligence (AI) by merging indigenous cultural motifs with universal technological concerns. This fusion challenges the dominance of Western perspectives in AI discourse, which often focus on utopian or dystopian extremes without addressing localized cultural, historical, and ethical dimensions. As Basu highlights, incorporating Indigenous epistemologies into AI development can counteract biases inherent in Western-centric models, fostering a more inclusive framework for technological advancement (Basu and Omotuboraa). By embedding local cultural elements into speculative narratives, Indian dystopian fiction offers valuable critiques and alternative paradigms for ethical AI governance.

One of the most compelling aspects of Indian dystopian fiction is its ability to weave mythology and spirituality into its exploration of AI ethics. In *Asur*, Indian mythology becomes a narrative tool to highlight the ethical dilemmas posed by technological advancements. The show’s integration of mythological figures and allegories into its AI-driven plotline creates a culturally resonant critique of AI’s potential to disrupt societal harmony. As Banerjee observes in *Other Tomorrows: Postcoloniality, Science Fiction and India*, postcolonial science fiction is uniquely positioned to critique technological imperialism by juxtaposing Western technological paradigms with indigenous knowledge systems (102). This juxtaposition allows narratives like *Asur* to transcend the binary view of technology as either inherently beneficial or harmful, offering instead, a nuanced understanding of its socio-cultural implications.

Similarly, *Ok Computer* employs satire and humor to critique the consequences of

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unbridled technological development. Set in a near-future India, the series explores themes of AI autonomy, accountability, and ethical governance through a culturally specific lens. The show challenges the deterministic view of AI as an inevitable and neutral force, instead presenting it as a contested site of power dynamics, societal inequalities, and ethical dilemmas. This approach aligns with findings in the *Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*, which emphasize the role of postcolonial narratives in interrogating the socio-political implications of technological modernity (Parry 68). By situating its critique within an Indian context, *Ok Computer* not only contributes to global AI ethics discourse but also highlights the importance of contextualizing these debates within specific cultural and historical frameworks.

Moreover, the blending of mythology, spirituality, and speculative storytelling in Indian dystopian fiction offers a richer framework for understanding the socio-cultural impacts of AI. This approach critiques AI's role in perpetuating existing inequalities while proposing culturally embedded solutions to ethical governance. For example, the concept of *Dharma*, or ethical duty, frequently surfaces in Indian narratives as a guiding principle for decision-making. By incorporating such philosophical motifs, these stories promote an alternative paradigm of AI governance that emphasizes interconnectedness and collective well-being over individual gain. As Ghosh notes in *The Great Derangement*, integrating indigenous worldviews into contemporary discourse is critical for addressing global challenges, including those posed by AI (67).

The significance of these narratives extends beyond cultural specificity to address broader global concerns about AI ethics. In a world increasingly shaped by algorithmic decision-making, the insights offered by Indian dystopian fiction are particularly relevant. The series *Asur* and *Ok Computer* demonstrate that AI ethics cannot be universally defined but must be adapted to reflect the diverse cultural, historical, and philosophical contexts in which technology operates. This localized approach contributes to a more pluralistic understanding of AI ethics, challenging the hegemony of Western frameworks and advocating for a more inclusive global discourse.

In essence, Indian dystopian fiction exemplifies how speculative storytelling can serve as a platform for critiquing and reimagining the socio-cultural impacts of AI. By integrating local cultural motifs with universal technological concerns, these narratives not only enrich global discussions on AI ethics but also offer alternative paradigms for ethical governance. The fusion of mythology, spirituality, and speculative elements in works like *Asur* and *Ok Computer* demonstrates the power of culturally embedded storytelling to address complex ethical dilemmas in a rapidly changing technological landscape.

Conclusion

The examination of *Asur* and *Ok Computer* elucidates how Indian dystopian fiction critically engages with the cultural, ethical, and societal dimensions of artificial intelligence (AI). By intertwining mythology, satire, and speculative fiction, these narratives offer unique perspectives on the interplay between tradition and technology. This fusion not only enriches

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storytelling but also provides a culturally grounded framework for understanding the ethical challenges posed by AI. Incorporating Indigenous epistemologies into AI development is crucial for counteracting biases inherent in Western-centric models. As noted by Goffi and Momcilovic, “The idea of a universal code of ethics denies the diversity of ethical standpoints based on the diversity of philosophical cultures the world is made of” (119). By embedding local cultural elements into speculative narratives, Indian dystopian fiction offers valuable critiques and alternative paradigms for ethical AI governance. Furthermore, the blending of mythology, spirituality, and speculative storytelling in Indian dystopian fiction provides a richer framework for understanding the socio-cultural impacts of AI. This approach critiques AI's role in perpetuating inequalities and suggests culturally embedded solutions. As discussed by Banerjee, postcolonial science fiction possesses the perspectives of both Western and Indian cultures, offering powerful critiques of technological imperialism. By integrating indigenous knowledge systems, these narratives promote a more equitable and inclusive understanding of AI's role in society. As the global discourse on AI continues to evolve, the contributions of Indian dystopian fiction highlight the need for pluralistic frameworks that respect cultural diversity. By integrating Indian philosophical traditions with contemporary debates, these series provide valuable insights into the complexities of AI-driven futures. This approach aligns with the perspective that opening up to ethical plurality is essential for a comprehensive understanding of AI ethics. In a world increasingly shaped by technological determinism, the narratives of *Asur* and *Ok Computer* serve as timely reminders of the enduring relevance of cultural and ethical considerations in shaping human-machine relationships. They underscore the importance of culturally grounded approaches to understanding the ethical challenges posed by AI, advocating for a more inclusive and context-sensitive discourse.

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