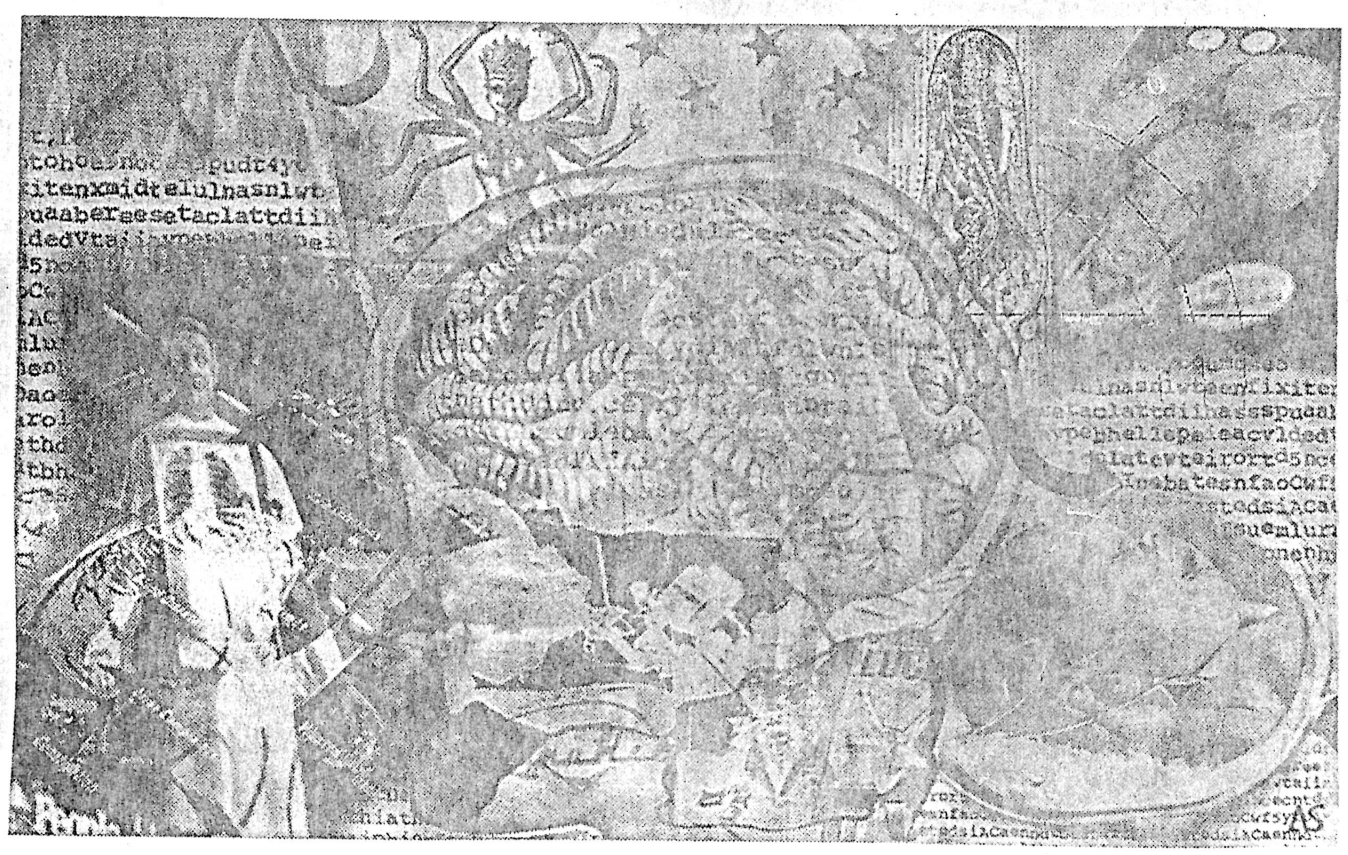
# Stories of the future



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What is science fiction? There is no unique answer to this question. Hugo Gernsback, after whom the famous Hugo Awards for Sci-fi are named, gave his interpretation of what constitutes the "scientification" of a story in these words: "By 'scientification', I mean the Jules Verne, H.G. Wells or Edgar Allan Poe type of a story — a charming romance intermingled with scientific fact and prophetic vision." John Campbell, the man who gave the name "science fiction" to this type of literature, had a somewhat broader scope in mind. Rather than necessarily be prophetic, sci-fi may, according to him, be like science in not only explaining known phenomena but predicting new and undiscovered phenomena, written in story form applied "not only to machines but human society as well".

There are much more permissive interpretations used by others which just about permit anything to be called science fiction. Which explains why there is so much trash going around under the guise of this genre these days, with horror, black magic, fairy tales and what have you.

Around the turn of the century, in 1897 to be exact, the famous scientist J.C. Bose wrote one of the earliest Indian sci-fi stories called *The Taming of Storm*. Around the same time, S.B. Ranade wrote a Marathi science fiction story called *Tareche Hasya* (Laughter of the Stars). Since then, Bengali and Marathi have led the field in Indian science fiction. More recently, no less a person than Satyajit Ray had shown the way in Bengali.

Bal Phondke, a sci-fi writer in Marathi, brought out an anthology of sci-fi stories by writers in India in 1993. This collection, entitled *It Happened Tomorrow*, contains stories in English, either written in original or translated from an Indian language. The collection is, not surprisingly, dominated by stories from Bengali and Marathi. The other Indian languages represented are Tamil, Kannada, Oriya and Hindi. Phondke's preface gives a good introduction to the overall genre of science fiction and its present status in India.

Phondke has made the valid point that the Indianness of Indian sci-fi has more to do with cultural ambience than with geographical factors. This is as it should be. For, as far as the science part is concerned, there are no national boundaries. Even though there are some in this country who decry it as "western", there is nothing in the truths discovered by science that have western cultural values attached to them. So if we are looking for any national flavour in a sci-fi story, it should come, if at all, from the "fi" rather than the "sci".

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Personally, I have set great store by science-society interaction as a motivating force for a science fiction story. In India, there is a continuing battle between scientific facts and age-old superstitions. Science and technology are seen both as means of curing all existing evils and ailments of society and as sources of new evils and ailments. Reality lies between the Utopian expectations and doomsday forecasts. Sci-fi can focus on such issues, and the more subtly the message is presented by the fictional setup, the greater is the success of the story.

Science fiction stories written with this motivation have a very constructive role to play in the India of our times. For, our country has been pushed or carried headlong into the age of science and, consequently, many misconceptions, fears and antipathies of science exist at all levels of society. Sci-fi can be a means of making society aware of the power and influence of science.

But even if there is no such message, even if sci-fi is a futuristic exercise, its setting can still be Indian, as many of the stories in the above-mentioned anthology illustrate. Another aspect of such stories is the intermixing of cultures brought about by some worldwide catastrophe wherein the Indianness is seen against an international backdrop.

Returning to the Hugo criterion of prophetic vision, that is a very stringent requirement. The Jules Verne description of man's voyage to the moon turned out to be close to the actual Apollo missions. But such prophetic pieces are few and far between. Many exercises were reasonable extrapolations at the time they were written but today by hindsight appear fantasies. Nevertheless, by Campbell's definition they are good science fiction.

Can a scientist write good science fiction? He does start with an advantage, given his "inside knowledge" of the subject. But boldness and vision are needed to write good science fiction. When Fred Hoyle wrote the famous *Black Cloud* in the 1950s, he did so to underscore his expectation that gigantic inter-stellar clouds containing molecules should exist. He had been unsuccesstul in convincing his fellow scientists on that count; they felt that nothing more complicated than atoms of hydrogen could exist out there. The expectation was borne out a decade later when millimetre wave antennas began to detect complex organic as well as inorganic molecules in interstellar space. It must have given Hoyle smug satisfaction to see giant molecular clouds become an established fact of astronomy.

On a more modest scale, I experienced similar satisfaction when the story of Comet Swift Tuttle broke in early 1993. It was stated that this comet on its next trip close to the sun might hit the earth. If true, this would be a disaster far worse than Hiroshima. Although this would, if at all, happen in the year 2126 (August 14 to be precise), the period allows the earth only a brief respite. Can the collision be avoided? Experts say that it is in any case too early to be sure that the collision will definitely take place; most probably it will be a close but safe shave. But if it turns out to be inevitable, then it can be averted by deflecting the onrushing comet slightly from its path by exploding a nuclear device in its vicinity. Exactly the same scenario with the same solution formed the theme of my 1976 Marathi story called *Dhoomaketu*.

The *Dhoomaketu* story also underlines what I said earlier about Indianness. While an international task force of scientists plans the secret operation of deflecting the comet, there are several *yagnas* performed in India to avert the evil. The discoverer of the comet, an Indian amateur astronomer, ridicules these superstitions and is proud when the secret operation of deflecting the comet succeeds. However, when his superstitious wife equally proudly announces that the cometary disaster was averted because of the *yagna* performed by his grandson, he realises the chasm existing between science and superstition in the country.

Of the various Indian languages, Marathi, followed by Bengali, enjoy the largest following for science fiction. In Marathi, one of the stimuli to would-be writers is provided by the annual competition for the best science fiction short story under the auspices of the Marathi Vidnyan Parishad in Bombay. Several of today's established authors were award winners in this competition. The various periodicals of light literature now solicit science fiction stories, a genre which not many cared for before 1975.

Nevertheless, a respectability-gap still exists for sci-fi in the minds of the literati in India. The writer of science fiction is not considered on par with the writer of ordinary short stories or novels. In a sense, this is a gap between two cultures. In India, a person opting for a profession in the arts or literature is one who has abandoned science and, therefore, feels uncomfortable with any scientific topic. Such a person, therefore, tends to keep science fiction at arms length, as something beyond comprehension. If the established luminaries of literature become science-friendly, and take to writing science-based stories, it will definitely improve the literary standards of science fiction in India.