Dystopian Visions of Neo-Feudal India: Capital, Caste, and Authoritarianism in Post-Millennial Fiction

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Abstract:
Neo-feudalism has become an increasingly visible formation shaping the contours of post-millennial global capitalism. Recent dystopian fiction, with its scepticism toward authoritarian power and its interrogation of technological progress, has offered compelling visions of this emerging world order. This paper identifies a significant gap in scholarship concerning how contemporary Indian dystopian writing engages with neo-feudal transformations across social, political, and economic spheres, and how these developments reconfigure state power. Drawing on key theoretical accounts of neo-feudalism, the study outlines its central features and examines their literary manifestations in Indian speculative fiction. It further considers the specifically Indian dimensions of neo-feudalism, shaped by the country's colonial history and its uneven trajectories of capitalism, modernity, and democracy. Ultimately, the paper evaluates the extent to which Indian dystopian narratives recognise these complexities and contribute to a nuanced critique of the neo-feudal structures taking form in the present.
Keywords: Neo-feudalism, Indian dystopian fiction, capitalism, corporate hegemony, caste, authoritarianism.

Introduction

Amongst the many changes that define the contemporary era, one that is often overlooked is how the sociopolitical paradigms shaping the modern period are being reshaped by developments that recall the rigid hierarchies of medieval feudalism—now recast in modern, technologically advanced, and corporatised forms. This emergent phenomenon, frequently referred to as neo-feudalism, corporate medievalism, or techno-capitalist feudalism, signals the return of segmented power structures through a fusion of corporate dominance and a new aristocracy. As wealth becomes increasingly consolidated and social mobility restricted, neo-feudalism has become, for many, an apt descriptor for the widening disparities in power and privilege that characterise our times.

Used in this paper as a common term for economic, political, and cultural developments identified in recent works such as Yanis Varoufakis's *Techno-feudalism: What Killed Capitalism*, Cédric Durand's *How Silicon Valley Unleashed Techno-Feudalism*, Joel Kotkin's *The Coming of Neo-feudalism*, and W. Paul Bellemare's *Techno-Capitalist-Feudalism*, neo-feudalism here refers to capitalism's growing inclination towards medieval modes of power and the prospect of reinstating a highly stratified and ossified social and economic order.

Contemporary Western dystopian fiction has taken upon itself the task of offering a prophetic critique of these societal evolutions. By envisioning futures dominated by authoritarian regimes and corporate oligarchies, postmillennial dystopias forecast the rise of neo-feudal orders. Iconic works in the genre—critiquing unchecked authority manifested through surveillance states, technarchies, and ecological or humanitarian collapse—include Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*, and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

In India, this phenomenon has unfolded along a parallel yet distinct trajectory. Rapid postmillennial economic transformation, accompanied by sweeping political change, has

created an environment in which democratic ideals are being reinterpreted amidst renewed centralisation of power and the revival of older social and ideological structures. In a society historically half feudal in its stratifications and half modern in its aspirations for progress and individual freedom, the growth of neo-feudal tendencies in India has been complex and, in many respects, different from those observed in the Global North.

Responding to these shifts, a burgeoning corpus of Indian dystopian fiction has emerged. These narratives not only mirror global anxieties about political and economic upheaval but also articulate concerns specific to an India in transition. Against the backdrop of rapid urbanisation, market liberalisation, corporate ascendancy, and a resurgence of cultural practices reminiscent of the medieval past, Indian dystopias probe the intricacies of neo-feudal developments and the ways in which societal fragmentation and expanding capitalist power may shape the nation's future.

According to Michael Gordin, Gyan Prakash, and Helen Tilley , dystopias are "histories of the present" inscribed in the future. They instil fear not because they are purely imagined but because they amplify the horrors of the contemporary moment. As Darko Suvin argues, dystopia enables "cognitive estrangement," allowing readers to view the present critically through a reconfigured sense of space and time. These futuristic narratives thus become chronicles of the current era, using altered temporal scales to produce a stark and compelling realism.

This paper examines how Indian dystopias engage with the pressing issues of our time, marked by neo-feudal trends and tendencies. By juxtaposing sociopolitical commentary with dystopian fiction, the study seeks to reveal how these narratives reflect local realities while resonating with global concerns. Ultimately, it hopes to illuminate the genre's critique of contemporary power structures and its imaginative potential for envisioning alternative futures in India.

Literature Review: Critical Perspectives on Indian Dystopian Fiction

Amy S. Kaufmann's influential article "Our Future Is Our Past: Corporate Medievalism in Dystopian Fiction" provides a compelling account of the convergence between medieval power structures and modern corporate dominance in Western dystopian narratives. Kaufmann argues that as capitalism becomes increasingly intertwined with state mechanisms, the resulting hybrid order begins to resemble the rigid hierarchies and vassal relationships characteristic of medieval feudalism.

When viewed in relation to India, Kaufmann's framework reveals a significant gap in scholarship concerning contemporary Indian dystopian fiction. Although Western critics have developed robust methods for analysing neo-feudal trends, these approaches have not yet been systematically applied to Indian dystopias. A brief survey of existing work on Indian dystopian fiction demonstrates the extent of this gap.

In "Post-Millennial Indian Dystopian Fiction: A Developing Canon of Precarity, (Im)purity and Ideas of India(nness)", E. Dawson Varughese explores how recent dystopian texts articulate a pervasive sense of precarity. Her work foregrounds shifting notions of India(nness), as well as debates around purity and impurity resurfacing amid rapid political change. However, the study does not explicitly connect these dynamics to neo-feudal structures.

Tereza Østbø Kuldova examines what she terms "delirious pandemic governance by numbers" in Samit Basu's *Chosen Spirits* and Prayaag Akbar's *Leila*. She highlights the rise of technocratic authority, where data and statistical modelling function as tools of governance, producing new forms of hierarchical control reminiscent of feudal alliances. Yet her analysis stops short of framing these structures within a broader neo-feudal paradigm.

Dolores Herrero's "Populism and Precarity in Contemporary Indian Dystopian Fiction" investigates caste, communal segregation, and Foucauldian biopolitics. While Herrero provides

a rigorous critique of social fragmentation and right-wing authoritarianism, her work does not address the specific influence of neo-feudal realignments wherein traditional loyalties are reshaped by corporate and political power.

Similarly, in "Of Dystopias and Deliriums: The Millennial Novel in India", Mrinalini Chakravorty argues that Indian dystopias respond to the conditions produced by millennial capitalism. Although she offers valuable insights into economic contradictions and social fissures, the implications of these trends for neo-feudal formations remain underexplored.

Taken together, these studies reveal a persistent lacuna: To what extent do Indian dystopias engage with neo-feudalism, and how does neo-feudalism—shaped by the intersection of corporatism and political power—operate within narratives that imagine the future of India?

Bridging the Gap: The Neo-feudalism Question in Indian Dystopias

While the aforementioned studies—as well as several others in the field—have provided rich insights into varied dimensions of Indian dystopias, a concerted examination of neo-feudalism in this context is conspicuously absent. The prevailing scholarship has engaged with themes of precarity, technological governance, and sociopolitical fragmentation, yet has largely overlooked how these elements coalesce into a neo-feudal order marked by the resurgence of medieval Indian hierarchies and allegiances. This paper aims to fill this gap by interrogating the emergence of neo-feudal trends and tendencies and their reflection in Indian dystopian narratives, thereby complementing and extending the existing body of research. This task becomes especially important because contemporary dystopia as a genre has emerged as a response to the social and economic—or rather humanitarian—crisis created by capitalism, of which neo-feudalism is merely an altered form.

Neo-feudalism should not be viewed simply as a return to medieval structures; it is a transformation of twenty-first century sociopolitical and economic realities shaped by digital power consolidation, growing wealth inequality, and pervasive surveillance. Luc Bellemare, in *Techno-Capitalist Feudalism*, argues that we are not witnessing the end of capitalism, but rather its metamorphosis into a profoundly different mode. This evolved form—techno-capitalist feudalism—is characterised by the rise of corporate empires owned by the "big five" corporate moguls (Google, Microsoft, Apple, Amazon, and Facebook) and a growing reliance on exploitative rent extracting practices reminiscent of medieval times. In effect, capitalism's inherent tensions have entered a "dark age," wherein latent feudal traits of hierarchy, dependency, and coercion are reactivated under the guise of technological advancement.

Defining neo-feudalism as an altered mode of capitalism carries important implications for dystopian theory and praxis, particularly because the critique of capitalism has always been central to contemporary dystopia. Dystopia, as defined by one of its central theorists, Tom Moylan, is a direct outcome of the all-round crises produced by world capitalism in the twentieth century. This clearly implies that any study of contemporary dystopian fiction is incomplete without assessing how it maps modern millennial capitalism, whose altered form is neo-feudalism or corporate medievalism.

For a systematic study of neo-feudalism in India's contemporary dystopian fiction, it becomes necessary to situate neo-feudalism—or, as Bellemare terms it, techno-capitalist feudalism—within its broader historical evolution, because neo-feudalism has followed a unique trajectory in the countries of the Global South. This distinct trajectory stems from the fact that the development of modernity in these countries was mediated by colonialism, which stymied its reach and impact. Consequently, democratisation suffered, and many feudal social and cultural practices continued unabated. Scholars such as Partho Chatterjee and Dipesh Chakrabarty, in seminal works *Nation and Its Fragments* and *Habitations of Modernity*

respectively, have studied the complexities of colonial and postcolonial histories and the construction of modernity in India.

Neo-feudalism concerns the growth of corporate oligarchy, the concentration of wealth and power, increasing authoritarian control, ubiquitous surveillance enabled by technological advancement, and the erosion of labour rights alongside diminished upward mobility. Dystopian fiction of the Global North frequently addresses these developments, and they are shared by Indian dystopias as well. However, neo-feudal developments in India have their own peculiarities. In modern India, precolonial social hierarchies remain dominant, perpetuating systemic inequities. These differences in the nature and functioning of corporate oligarchy or authoritarian control in India inevitably shape divergences in dystopian form and content. Moreover, the dynamics of repression and dominance in India are intricately tied not only to capital but also to religion, caste, and gender. Therefore, the study of neo-feudalism in Indian dystopian fiction requires an understanding of how techno-capitalist feudalism develops in a society where modernisation and democratisation have been historically mediated by colonial influence. It becomes important to ask how Indian authors confront these entrenched structures of power and identity. Do their writings offer critical reflections on these specific dimensions of contemporary India's sociopolitical landscape? In an age defined by communalism, caste politics, corporate capitalism, and the perils of advanced technology, can this genre craft a narrative of resistance? Do its dilemmas and restlessness testify to its contemporary relevance? These are some of the questions this article seeks to answer.

To address these questions, it is necessary to make parallel inquiries into the development of neo-feudalism in India and locate its historical specificities, while examining dystopian texts for how they engage with them. Drawing largely from prominent works on neo-feudalism, this analysis broadly identifies common features of neo-feudal systems and explores how modern urban life increasingly mirrors these feudal hierarchies. It also analyses how

representative works of Indian dystopian fiction reflect or engage with these features. The next section places these studies alongside recent research on neo-feudal trends and tendencies in India to identify developments that mark India's distinct neo-feudal turn, and examines how these developments appear in Indian dystopian fiction.

Neo-feudalism remains an underdefined concept within the Indian context. Consequently, given the nascent state of scholarship on neo-feudalism in India and its representation in Indian dystopian fiction, it is imperative to undertake a broader exploration. Therefore, rather than limiting the analysis to a select group of novels, this study examines multiple dimensions of neo-feudalism and the varied ways in which it permeates and shapes Indian life as depicted across a wide spectrum of contemporary Indian dystopian narratives.

The Architecture of Neo-feudalism

The Rise of Technological Oligarchy

One of the defining features of neo-feudalism highlighted by various scholars is the rise of digital lords and feudal hierarchies. In feudal society, land was the primary source of wealth and power—feudal lords controlled land, tenants depended on them for access, and authority operated through a rigid hierarchy. Today, power and ownership are consolidated not primarily in the form of land or factories, but in digital assets, platforms, and cloud capital, where tech elites function as modern day feudal lords. Surpassing historical monopolies, contemporary tech oligarchs exercise near total control over their markets. A significant outcome of this expanding digital oligarchy is a widening class divide reminiscent of medieval feudalism.

Joel Kotkin's *The Coming of Neo-feudalism* outlines a dystopian trajectory in which technology heightens control over society, undermining individual rights and human connection. This concern forms a key starting point for several Indian dystopian novels such as Priya S. Chabria's *Clone* and Manjula Padmanabhan's *The Island of Lost Girls*, both of

which metaphorically imagine the future of digital platforms through rigid feudal hierarchies dominated by an elite class wielding sophisticated technology.

Anxieties about the emergence of a digital aristocracy recur throughout India's dystopian fiction. In Samit Basu's *Chosen Spirits*, for instance, digital lords from the former Delhi plan to expand their ventures to another planet and colonise it. This powerful class includes the family of the rebel Rudra. Similarly, in *The Island of Lost Girls*, a small group of generals create a class of servile human-machines after annihilating all women. In *Clone*, Chabria imagines a twenty-fourth-century society that maintains an army of digitally controlled clones serving a privileged and technologically advanced aristocracy.

In his analyses of neo-feudalism, Kotkin argues that Big Tech constitutes a new aristocracy, demonstrating how companies such as Google, Meta, Amazon, and Apple shape economic, political, and social realities. This neo-feudal dominance already appears as a central concern in many Indian dystopias. *Chosen Spirits* imagines a near future governed by powerful business elites who control both the economy and the state. The novel presents a landscape of highly digitised surveillance managed by corporate giants. Joey, its protagonist, works as a "Reality Controller" for an influential digital platform, and the narrative traces her movement from powerlessness towards an awareness of human agency.

Padmanabhan's *The Island of Lost Girls* offers another direct portrayal of rising digital aristocracy. It depicts a technologically advanced state that constructs false realities, eroding any sense of the real. A related consequence of digital aristocracy—repeatedly emphasised in *Chosen Spirits*—is the "platform dependency trap," in which individuals find it increasingly difficult to live outside the systems they rely on.

As digital aristocracy expands, one of its first casualties is free speech—a recurring concern of dystopian fiction. To show the reader the hazards of corporate control over public discourse, *Chosen Spirits* presents a heavily surveilled future Delhi where digital gatekeepers

determine what is visible, acceptable, and profitable. Free speech is dictated not by democratic institutions but by corporate policies, algorithmic filtering, and monetisation strategies. The novel clearly comments on the possible future of Facebook's moderation rules, Twitter's algorithmic decisions, and Amazon's control of e-commerce. These practices govern socio-economic structures much like feudal lords governed trade and social interactions within their domains.

Corporate control over individual life also forms the core of Lavanya Laxminarayan's *Analogue/Virtual*. The stories depict Apex City (formerly Bangalore), ruled by Bell Corporation. It is a "Meritocratic Technarchy" sharply divided into the privileged "Virtuals" and the deprived "Analogues." Here, technology is the key to survival, and one's existence depends on constant professional success and unquestioned service to the corporation, much like neo-medieval serfs.

Wealth Concentration: The Reproduction of Inequality

The second major feature of neo-feudalism is wealth concentration. Feudal societies in the past were marked by rigid class divisions: the nobility owned resources while peasants worked the land with little opportunity to accumulate wealth. Today, wealth gaps mirror these patterns, with capital increasingly concentrated among tech elites. In dystopian fiction, the concentration of wealth and extreme economic disparity figure as recurrent concerns. The future societies depicted in dystopian fiction are often presented as the realisation of a capitalist utopia cherished by millennial capitalism at the cost of broader human wellbeing and progress.

In India, as in Western contexts, dystopian fiction voices grave anxieties about widening economic inequality through vivid and often unsettling portrayals of hyper-developed metropolises and their impoverished outskirts, ghettoes, and slums. The dingy outer roads beyond the city walls, inside which the ambitious "Skydome"—a symbol of power and

privilege—rises in *Leila*; the devastated, deserted villages on the margins of the elite defence facility in *Signal Red*; the hungry and ferocious "Uttar Pradesh Wildlands" threatening the stability of the hi-tech metropolis in *Chosen Spirits*; and the deprived, outcast "Analogues" who live in the perpetual shadow of privileged "Virtuals" in *Analogue/Virtual*, all demonstrate the genre's engagement with extreme inequality. Likewise, the highly technologised worlds of *Clone* and *The Island of Lost Girls* are starkly class-divided. Each novel depicts a society reminiscent of medieval times, divided into two classes: slaves with no rights and powerful masters who exert total control. These novels communicate their arguments through striking and memorable imagery.

Decline of Upward Mobility

One of the most telling features of neo-feudalism, to which Kotkin draws attention, is the decline of upward mobility. Modern serfdom closely resembles historical serfdom in the way it restricts the ability of individuals to rise from daily wage labour—whether digital labourers, gig workers, or low wage employees—into financial security. By making upward movement increasingly difficult, it reinforces oppressive economic stratification.

Many Indian dystopian novels use mechanisation and the automation of humanity to symbolically represent the growing threat of large sections of society becoming trapped in a state of perpetual servitude. In *Clone*, for example, a technologically advanced ruling class maintains an army of laboratory-bred, genetically modified clones. Similarly, the ruthless and perverted Generals of the "Whole World Union" in Padmanabhan's *The Island of Lost Girls* command "drones" with limited intellect and "Vermins"—sex-machines functioning as "non-men" within the bodies of Vermins. In these futuristic narratives, the decline of vast portions of humanity into something less than human becomes the dystopian culmination of wealth concentration and unequal divisions of labour.

Surveillance: The Return of the Watchful Lords

Another development that aligns the post-millennial period with the medieval age is the form of social control now exercised through digital surveillance, a defining feature of modern states. Medieval societies relied on close social monitoring—villages were intimate spaces where behavioural conformity was strictly enforced. Today, surveillance has intensified through digital tracking, algorithmic oversight, and the extraction of personal data. In her paper "Thinking the Delirious Pandemic Governance by Numbers with Samit Basu's *Chosen Spirits* and Prayaag Akbar's *Leila*", Kuldova examines prominent Indian dystopias to explore how governance "backed by powerful transnational organisations, international development actors, and corporations" (168) operates in the dystopian societies depicted in these novels. Surveillance is undeniably a central concern of modern dystopian literature, though representations of the surveillance state vary from novel to novel.

One of the most significant works to offer a graphic picture of future algorithmic control over individual behaviour is *Chosen Spirits*, in which corporate authority looms large. Basu illustrates how digital tracking shapes and regulates user experience, ensuring that individuals like Joey remain confined within predetermined behavioural boundaries. This intertwining of corporate and governmental surveillance relies heavily on social media companies to monitor user behaviour. Within this complex digitalised system, governments deploy facial-recognition technologies and data brokers compile extensive digital profiles.

The Rise of Neo-Medieval Smart Cities

Another central preoccupation of dystopian fiction is the challenge of modern urban living, which has grown increasingly difficult with rising inequality. Reminiscent of medieval city layouts, neo-feudalism is reshaping demographics and urban planning as professionals and ruling elites cluster in expensive urban cores, while vast slum populations live on the outskirts

with abysmally low life expectancy. Neo-feudalism can be held responsible for the emergence of smart cities driven by tech oligarchs, emphasising surveillance, control, and the erosion of privacy.

The settings of many Indian dystopias themselves suggest a neo-feudal order, with city spaces strictly divided between the rich and the poor. Set in the distant future, *Analogue/Virtual* is one of the most representative texts, vividly portraying highly compartmentalised urban spaces. Set in the near future, *Leila* offers a graphic picture of a neo-feudal smart city, with posh political sectors on one side and the "outroads" beyond the city walls on the other. *Chosen Spirits* provides another detailed depiction of a metropolitan city marked by stark divisions. It describes "other cities under Delhi's skin, city-states with their own internets, their own currencies, their own economies—not just the fortress paradise cities of the rich, but watering holes for the very poorest. And Cyber Bazaar is where these cities intersect, where micro religions come for artificially powered exoskeletons" (198). Cyber Bazaar—"some sort of biopunk pirate port paradise"—once known as Nehru Place, symbolises the vast majority excluded from privileged city centres.

Neo-feudalism in India

The aspects of neo-feudalism discussed above are largely universal, and their reflection is evident in India's dystopian literature. However, certain dimensions of its development in India are uniquely Indian and warrant separate study. As noted earlier, the emergence of neo-feudalism in India follows a distinctive trajectory, shaped by the country's colonial past, uneven modernisation, and persistent feudal hierarchies. Unlike the West, where capitalism evolved through industrial revolutions and democratic consolidation, India's economic and political landscape has been moulded by colonial legacies, incomplete democratisation, and entrenched feudal social structures. The persistence of caste, class, and gender-based hierarchies, as well

as the stark rural–urban divide, underscores how feudal remnants continue to shape contemporary power dynamics, even as corporatism and authoritarianism gain ground.

Historical and Structural Foundations

This complex historical and structural foundation makes the study of neo-feudalism in Indian dystopias particularly challenging. In this context, it is important to recall India's colonial past. Corbridge and Harriss offer a historical assessment, "In the early nineteenth century, however, as Moore surmised, the effects of colonial rule were indeed to enhance the power of Indian owners of capital and land over producers and labourers, so that it can be argued 'they had never had it so good' (35). Corbridge and Harriss quote David Washbrook (87) to point out that "this also meant that India embarked on a process of capitalist development which more or less prevented its 'normal' economic consequence in industrialisation,' and in which capital was accumulated 'almost exclusively by expropriating an ever larger share of resources from labour and the production system without having to take the risk of reinvesting more than a tiny fraction of capital'" (35).

Another significant factor shaping neo-feudalism in India is the rise of a hybrid system in which traditional hierarchies coexist with late capitalist forces. India's colonial experience left an indelible mark on its postindependence economic and political structures. The British administration, while introducing capitalist frameworks, simultaneously reinforced feudal landholding patterns, contributing to the persistence of hierarchical power. This legacy continues to influence governance and economic policy, as land ownership, political patronage, and corporate influence remain concentrated among elite groups.

To break this down further, the incomplete democratisation of Indian society—arguably its most enduring colonial legacy—manifests in two important ways in relation to the development of neo-feudalism. First, political dynasties and entrenched bureaucratic elites

often function as modern-day feudal lords, wielding disproportionate influence over governance and economic decision making. This phenomenon is particularly visible in electoral politics, where "kinship-based leadership and patronage networks" dominate, limiting democratic participation (Kumar). It is equally evident in the continuation of caste and gender hierarchies from medieval times into the social and political present.

Second, the colonial legacy is apparent in the form taken by India's corporate class. As Harsh Wilson notes in *Fuss and Fury: Of Neo-feudalism*, the "corporate culture in India mirrors medieval feudal practices" (5). His analysis highlights how ensuring "corporate dominance," rather than enabling economic democratisation, has created new forms of dependency and servitude, particularly among the working class. Wilson draws compelling parallels between hierarchical corporate structures and traditional feudal allegiances. In this context, Ashok Mody's reflections on India's post-independence trajectory are particularly revealing:

> Despite regular elections, voters' voices didn't count for much. The traditional "power structures" maintained their hold on key policy decisions. Large landlords fought land reform legislation and implementation. In the industrial sector, the import controls and industrial licensing system—intended to curtail the bleeding of foreign exchange—became tools in the hands of big businesses to prevent the entry of competitors (101).

These two major aspects of neo-feudalism's growth in India call for special attention in the study of Indian dystopian fiction.

Social and Political Implications of Caste and Other Feudal Hierarchies

The rise of neo-feudalism in India has been mediated by the persistence of caste, class, and gender hierarchies within the country's socio-political framework. Despite constitutional guarantees, social mobility remains restricted, with marginalised communities facing systemic barriers to equal participation in economic and political affairs. The rise of authoritarian

governance, coupled with growing corporate influence, has further exacerbated these inequalities and created a system in which power is concentrated among a select elite, while the majority—historically, economically, and politically disenfranchised—remains excluded.

A broader survey of India's dystopian literature reveals two dominant strands: one set in the near future, engaging directly with contemporary socio-political questions, and another set in a distant future, offering a more generalised critique of power and inequality. Novels set in the remote future often depict technologically advanced authoritarian states characterised by repression and stark inequality. Notable examples include Manjula Padmanabhan's *The Island of Lost Girls*, Priya Sarukkai Chabria's *Clone*, and Lavanya Lakshminarayan's *Analogue/Virtual*. These works foreground the dangers of unbridled technological advancement. Echoing Kotkin—who views the decline of the middle class as inevitable under neo-feudalism—these narratives portray societies rigidly divided into rulers and ruled, in which upward mobility is entirely stalled. However, this preoccupation with technological dystopia often sidelines questions of caste, religion, and gender.

In contrast, novels set in the near future engage more explicitly with the socio-political dimensions of neo-feudalism. *Leila* deserves special mention for its incisive critique of caste and community divisions in a near-future dystopian society. By imagining a metropolis divided into neo-medieval "sectors" that enforce rigid caste hierarchies, the novel literalises future caste segregation through physical walls ensuring strict compliance. This vision of a neo-feudal society reflects the enduring obsession with "purity" embedded in India's socio-religious fabric. The walls serve as a stark allegory for structural oppression, underscoring how feudal remnants continue to marginalise communities. Geographically, the future city in *Leila* mirrors medieval Indian villages, in which caste and religious groups occupied separate settlements.

Religion also emerges as a central concern in several near-future dystopias, including *Leila*. These narratives interrogate the rise of religious apartheid, exposing gaps in India's

democratic framework. Notably, *When the Moon Shines by Day* explores the spectre of religious fascism and minority persecution. In *Leila*, the protagonist Shalini's home is targeted because of her interfaith marriage, culminating in her husband's brutal lynching and her daughter's disappearance.

Among the feudal hierarchies persisting in post-millennial India, gender remains the most visible in dystopian fiction. Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* and *The Island of Lost Girls* offer scathing critiques of patriarchy and the commodification of women. These novels depict male-dominated dystopias in which women have been systematically eradicated, save for one young girl, Meiji, whose survival depends on invisibility. While exposing the dehumanising consequences of unchecked patriarchy, these narratives reveal how gendered violence intersects with authoritarian power. The commodification of female bodies in these works reinvents medieval practices, illustrating how authoritarian regimes' control over economic resources perpetuates exploitation. Priya Sarukkai Chabria's *Clone* further interrogates the ethics of reproductive technologies, depicting a dystopia in which cloning replaces natural reproduction and women's bodies are appropriated for state purposes. Lavanya Lakshminarayan's *The Lesson* also deserves mention for its stark portrayal of neo-feudal patriarchy in its most brutal form.

India's dystopian fiction set in the near future confronts the social reality of neo-feudalism more consciously than its distant-future counterparts. Through its engagement with caste segregation, gender discrimination, and the resurgence of patriarchal structures, these narratives imagine a future politics shaped by majoritarianism and systemic inequality.

Economic Restructuring and the Neo-Feudal Turn in India

The distinct way neo-feudalism is manifesting itself as a social and political force in India has much to do with post-millennial economic developments. Therefore, the study of the economic

contours of neo-feudalism in India becomes necessary, especially because of the distinct trajectory that capitalism has followed in this country since the colonial period. From the very beginning, the growth of capitalism in colonial India diverged from the early Western model of capitalism based on industrial capital. The development of the capitalist class here went hand in hand with the reinvention of powerful class, caste, gender, religious, and other feudal hierarchies, and continues to do so even today. Thus, ironically, over time, instead of fostering widespread economic mobility, India's capitalist expansion reinforced existing disparities in altered forms. The growing concentration of wealth and resources in the hands of a select few took unimaginable dimensions with the rise of millennial capitalism. The rise of these corporate oligarchies, coupled with state-backed economic policies favouring large conglomerates, has led to a system in which economic power is increasingly centralised.

Parag Khanna's analysis of neo-medievalism contextualises this phenomenon within global trends, arguing that modern governance increasingly resembles medieval power structures, in which corporations, religious groups, and political elites function as autonomous entities, often bypassing traditional state mechanisms ("Neo-Medieval Times"). In India, this manifests in the growing influence of corporate-backed political figures, who shape policies to benefit elite interests while marginalising vulnerable populations.

The rural–urban divide in India exemplifies this uneven development. While metropolitan centres have emerged as highly technologised spaces, rural areas remain greatly underdeveloped, lacking access to basic infrastructure and economic opportunities. This disparity reflects the neo-feudal nature of India's economic expansion, in which highly influential urban elites, living in their colossal neo-feudal city palaces, dictate national policies, often at the expense of rural populations.

While assessing the growing reach of capital and the inroads it has made into the social and political life of India, it is also crucial to note that those higher up in the post-millennial

power structure are often those who were higher up on the social ladder in medieval times. Economic power in the neo-liberal era seems increasingly centralised in the hands of those who, for centuries, have been more privileged and higher in the feudal hierarchy.

These complex aspects of India's economic structure call for a cross-examination of how contemporary dystopian writing recreates the neo-feudal realities definitive of the nation. In particular, an investigation into how India's dystopian fiction portrays corporate hegemony, addresses the uneven development of capitalism, negotiates its complicated relationship with pre-capitalist power structures, and represents its transformation into neo-feudalism is necessary.

To take up the dystopias set in the distant future first, it is notable that most of them imagine autocratic states that can be taken to symbolically represent the future of corporate control, with monopolies aggressively intruding into state affairs and attempting to dictate politics and regulate people's lives through technology. Examples include *Chosen Spirits*, in which a small and all-powerful class of elite corporates dictates everything from public to personal life with the help of cyber-technology. The picture of corporate control is well defined in this novel, and there is a more direct engagement with the development of millennial capitalism in India, which is rather hazy in most other dystopian works. In *Clone*, it is the powerful class that owns technology which has emerged as the new aristocracy, enslaving humans and turning them into clones. *The Island* has a similar plot, featuring powerful and perverted generals who wield absolute power and use technology as a weapon to rule in the most barbaric ways imaginable. Another book that explores the future of growing corporate dominance in cities like Bengaluru—often called the electronic capital or the Silicon Valley of India—is *Analog/Virtual*, which imagines a Meritocratic Technarchy where humans are reduced to machines for production with no freedom of choice. These novels, thus, can be seen

as glimpses into a future of corporate hegemony and an inhumane race for technological progress.

The most striking aspect of the novels mentioned above is the universalised and generalised nature of autocracy or authoritarianism in them. That is to say, the novels that seek to explore the future of global capitalist hegemony adopt a generalised approach that overlooks the intricacies of the Indian capitalist system. Mainly centred on the unbridled use of technology, machines, and authoritarian regimes, these novels appear hardly different from classical dystopias that imagine undemocratic dictatorial regimes based on technological advancement. Thus, these works align more closely with the tradition of Western dystopian literature, and the future worlds they depict appear similar to those of the Global North. Understandably, their primary concerns remain those of the Global North: environmental anxieties generated by growing corporate greed and the unethical race for technological development; the erosion of liberal individual freedoms due to the expanding power of the state; and the diminishing status of women. This preoccupation with global concerns often goes so far as to overshadow the most urgent issues of India's own neo-feudal social structure. The result is especially problematic when global issues—such as digital surveillance and the decline of individual rights under technologically driven authoritarian rule—eclipse the concerns of the marginalised sections of India who remain at the bottom of entrenched hierarchies.

Though sporadic attempts, such as the study of "Dalit-futurist feminism" (Naik) in *Clone*, have been made, they hardly alter the more general fact that an active engagement with growing corporate control and its crucial links with India's feudal power structures, the related changes in political dynamics, and the resuscitation of old social hierarchies is largely sidelined in these novels. Their engagement with deeply rooted class, caste, religious, and gender hierarchies thus remains rather oblique.

It is precisely for these reasons that such novels fall short of addressing the most significant social and political issues of our time while imagining corporate hegemony in India. With this crucial social gaze missing, these works are unable to fully connect the global and the local, and therefore unable to render a complete picture of neo-feudalism in India. However, as far as corporate control is concerned, it is worth noting that it is largely dystopian fiction set in the distant future that has taken it up as a key concern, as the preceding discussion of representative texts demonstrates. By comparison, most Indian dystopian novels set in the near future—though more realistic in content—define corporate hegemony only loosely, and its points of contact with the plot remain ill defined. In short, it is difficult to find an Indian dystopian novel where corporate hegemony and the neo-feudal socio-political structure meaningfully converge.

Turning to Indian dystopias set in the near future, three stand out for the neo-feudal social and political structures they portray: *Leila* by Prayag Akbar, *When the Moon Shines by Day* by Nayantara Sahgal, and *Signal Red* by Rimi B. Chatterjee. Although they are also the most political works, it is significant that, as mentioned above, none directly engages with corporate hegemony and its subtle links with neo-feudalism. There is an unexplained lack of concern in more "presentist" Indian dystopias over the expanding presence of corporate power in various spheres of life and the aggressive inroads it makes into personal and political spaces.

A closer look at how *Leila* represents the state is helpful here. In the novel, the populist leader Joshi rises to the highest political sector and draws the support of the Outroads to construct his political persona. With the slogan "Purity for All!!" the new powers segregate people on the basis of caste and community. Later, desperate to find her missing daughter, Shalini, the protagonist, is compelled to justify the regime in an acquiescent tone before powerful men, declaring that the walls segregating castes and religions are necessary:

"We must have them. The whole city used to be like the Outroads. Lawless. Filthy.... We needed the walls."

In this significant exchange, which illuminates the nature of power and the design of the state in *Leila*, another character representing the elite adds:

"See how beautiful the city is now… Each sector so clean… Would it be possible if people did not respect the walls?"

The conversation clearly reveals the neo-feudal politics of imposing rigid class and caste segregations. However, *Leila* has almost nothing to say about how capital is crucially involved in this high-stakes political game. The absent cause remains absent in the novel. Similarly, *When the Moon Shines by Day*, another work with an overtly political subject, remains silent about corporate interests in the rise of fascism and religious fanaticism, despite a brief mention of a mining company displacing villagers. Millennial capitalism—its crony character, its role in the deep state, and its neo-feudal alliance with the far right—remains entirely outside the frame.

Here it becomes vital to recall Fredric Jameson's concept of "social totality." He argues in his seminal essay "Cognitive Mapping" that the core realities of a given historical period are not immediately accessible to individuals. Tracking and interpreting this "absent cause"—which Louis Althusser defines as a force shaping experience without ever appearing directly—is essential for understanding the larger totalising system (350). In the "postmodern space of late capitalism", where individuals navigate "a multidimensional set of radically discontinuous realities," Jameson stresses the necessity of apprehending the social totality (353). He argues, the "conception of capital is admittedly a totalizing or systemic concept" and must be analysed in an equally totalizing analysis ("Cognitive Mapping" *354)*. Tom Moylan extends this idea, observing that "an aesthetic of cognitive mapping. . . names the process of grasping both the

global picture and immediate experience" (*Scraps* 60) Seen in this light, Indian dystopian writing calls for a critical analysis along these lines.

Returning to *Leila*, the novel depicts a neo-feudal order in which caste and gender discrimination converge with a highly surveilled future state. The novel offers graphic descriptions of the city's planning: the walls dividing sectors and caste enclaves, the slums outside city limits, the ambitious Skydome, the Purity Camp, and the Towers where detractors are detained. It narrates the rise of Joshijee, the rabid fundamentalist, to political power, and his populist agenda, which draws the support of the unprivileged, from among whom Ashish becomes his man Friday and ascends to the most elite political sector, described as "for the Council's highest echelons, top of the ancient ladder, cream of the city" (Location 2370 of 2811). The ruling class's agenda is articulated by Joshijee in a rousing speech:

> We must live according to our own great principles. Our history… Our purity has been perverted over the centuries. Centuries of rule by outsiders have led to spiritual subjugation. But the atrocities of this age can be combatted. They are nothing but a passing phase. Our cultural roots are too firm. They are deeply struck into the spring of immortality. Now we once again find that purity, the purity that comes from order, from respect, from each of us remembering our communities. Our roles. What runs in our blood.

It is clear that those who desire power in *Leila* seek to impose old feudal norms and practices; they are mostly those who have, since time immemorial, stood at the top of India's caste hierarchy and now aim to preserve their inherited superiority and privilege. This is unmistakably neo-feudalism. Nevertheless, the picture of this neo-feudal future society remains incomplete because the post-liberal economic system that sustains it remains entirely outside the narrative frame. *Leila* says nothing about the revival of conservative feudal ideologies as an essential condition for the functioning of millennial capitalism in economically

underdeveloped and partially democratised postcolonial societies where, as Ashok Mody notes, "the caste and economic class hierarchies overlap heavily" (Mody 91).

Shedding light on the flaws in India's economic development after independence, Mody in *India is Broken* underlines the failures of economic planning: "The scarcity of good jobs reinforced caste divisions because caste groups clung on to hereditary occupations" (98). In another section of the book, he quotes Gunnar Myrdal to illustrate the rise of monopoly capital soon after independence, which had benefited mainly the "industrialists, big merchants, and other privileged classes", while inflation eroded the incomes of the poor (98). Mody also explains developments in rural India after the abolition of zamindari: "The implementation of the legislation (on Zamindari) did little for the small Indian farmer. The main beneficiaries of the change were the former large tenant farmers, who now owned the lands they cultivated. That empowering of large peasants kick-started 'capitalist' farming in India. Others gained little or nothing" (39).

Stuart Corbridge and Stuart Harris address the same issue in *Reinventing India*. They quote Byres, who labels the rich peasantry as "Kulaks" (58) to describe how "a positive spiral of increasing wealth and political power" enabled them to emerge by the mid-1960s as the greatest beneficiaries of post-independence economic developments, becoming "the new dominant class in the emerging agrarian structure" (49).

It is also useful to recall at this point Jan Breman's work on the persistence of bonded labour in twenty-first-century India. Breman contextualises this deeply feudal practice "as part of a globalised economy dictated by the interests of capital at the expense of labour" (ix). However, such vital interconnections between the development of capitalism and the persistence of feudal social structures in India are scarcely visible in the country's dystopian fiction. The gap in representing the "social totality" that Jameson emphasises is evident. Thus, while the novels that are more overtly political remain silent about the presence of corporate

capital and its hegemonic agenda—closely aligned with its political interest in sustaining old social and feudal hierarchies—novels set in the distant future, preoccupied with the rise of technarchies, surveillance states, and giant corporations, leave the social question untouched. Notably, the rural world is almost entirely absent in these dystopian narratives, without which no Indian dystopia can be considered complete.

Conclusion

The study of neo-feudalism in Indian dystopian fiction reveals a body of literature grappling with the complex social realities of post-millennial India. These narratives attempt to imagine India's dystopian future within a post-liberal world dominated by global capitalism that has mutated into neo-feudalism. In seeking to situate the country's intricate socio-political dynamics within a broader global framework, Indian dystopian novels craft distinctive narratives that strive to expand the boundaries of the genre—a potential inherent in its very form.

This analysis underscores not only the influence of the Global North on Indian dystopian fiction but also the attempts to modify a dominant narrative framework that remains heavily fixated on crises primarily affecting advanced metropolitan centres of the Global North. Indian dystopias reimagine the feudal order of the past in futuristic settings, drawing attention to the enduring social and economic discriminations and injustices that have historically shaped Indian society. Their efforts to define authoritarianism, corporate oligarchies, and neo-feudal servitude within India's context through speculative narratives represent a vital endeavour: the attempt to cognitively map the present in its historical and global dimensions.

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