



## “Agency and Resistance in Contemporary Indian Dystopian Narratives”

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This article examines how contemporary Indian dystopian narratives imagine agency and resistance under regimes of intensified surveillance, communal polarization, and structural violence. Focusing on selected Indian novels that rework dystopian motifs within specifically South Asian socio-political contexts, the study explores how characters located at the margins—women, subaltern communities, religious minorities, and other vulnerable subjects—negotiate power through everyday acts of refusal, solidarities, and survival. Rather than reproducing the total despair characteristic of much Euro-American dystopian fiction, these texts articulate fragile, contingent forms of hope that emerge from embodied practices of care, affective ties, and alternative spatial imaginaries. Drawing on dystopian theory and postcolonial criticism, the article argues that Indian dystopian narratives recast agency not as spectacular revolution but as dispersed, relational, and often ambiguous practices that persist within and against oppressive structures. By foregrounding narrative strategies such as fragmented form, polyphonic voice, and linguistic hybridity, the analysis shows how these works keep open a horizon of possibility even in foreclosed political landscapes. The article ultimately contends that contemporary Indian dystopian fiction offers a distinctive contribution to global dystopian discourse by reimagining resistance as both ethically fraught and historically grounded, yet still irreducibly necessary.

**Keywords -** Contemporary Indian dystopian fiction

Agency and resistance

Everyday resistance

Postcolonial dystopia

Subaltern subjects



## Introduction

Over the past two decades, Indian writing in English has begun to engage more explicitly with dystopian imaginaries, reworking global dystopian motifs through the specific histories of colonialism, Partition, caste hierarchies, communal violence, and neoliberal restructuring. In contrast to the industrial or technocratic futures that dominate much Euro-American dystopian fiction, contemporary Indian dystopian narratives are often anchored in recognizably local landscapes—segregated cities, militarized borderlands, informal settlements, and bureaucratic zones of exception—and populated by subjects whose lives are shaped by overlapping regimes of caste, class, gender, and religion. Within these contexts, questions of agency and resistance acquire a distinct inflection: they are negotiated not in abstract futures but within the dense, uneven geographies of the contemporary Indian nation-state.

Critical work on dystopia has tended to emphasize either the totalizing power of authoritarian regimes or the bleak inevitability of systemic domination, with classic texts frequently culminating in defeat, co-optation, or despair. At the same time, postcolonial criticism has extensively examined how power operates through discourse, space, and representation, yet there remains comparatively less sustained attention to how postcolonial dystopian texts imagine resistant subjectivities and practices of hope in conditions that appear structurally foreclosed. Existing studies on Indian English fiction often foreground themes of displacement, development, and democracy, but agency in dystopian Indian narratives—particularly when exercised by subaltern and marginalized subjects—has not been explored with the same analytical focus.

This article intervenes in that gap by examining how contemporary Indian dystopian narratives configure agency and resistance in settings marked by intensified surveillance, communal polarization, and normalized violence. Taking as its point of departure selected Indian novels that adapt dystopian conventions to South Asian socio-political realities, the discussion attends to the ways in which characters situated at the margins—women, religious minorities, Dalit and other subordinated communities, precarious urban dwellers—negotiate power through practices that are often small-scale, fragmentary, and morally complex. Rather than staging resistance as a singular, heroic event, these narratives foreground dispersed and everyday forms of refusal, negotiation, and solidarity that destabilize the neat binary between domination and liberation.

In order to conceptualize these dynamics, the article draws on dystopian theory in dialogue with postcolonial and subaltern studies. Such a framework makes it possible to read dystopia not simply as a genre of futuristic catastrophe but as a mode of narrating the intensification of already existing structures of exclusion and oppression. Within this frame, agency is understood less as autonomous individual will and more as relational practice—emerging through affective ties, collective formations, and the reoccupation of spaces marked for erasure. Resistance, similarly, is approached as a spectrum, ranging from overt defiance to subtle acts of non-compliance, survival, and care that contest the terms of the dystopian order.

By focusing on how these narratives keep alive the possibility of hope—however fragile, contingent, or compromised—within landscapes saturated with violence and control, the article argues that contemporary Indian dystopian fiction offers a distinctive contribution to global dystopian discourse. It recasts agency and resistance as historically grounded, ethically fraught, and embedded in everyday life rather than as purely abstract ideals or spectacular revolts. The analysis thus seeks to show that even where dystopian structures appear overwhelming, Indian narratives imagine forms of agency that persist within and against them, complicating both the pessimism of classical dystopia and overly celebratory accounts of resistance.

The sections that follow first outline the conceptual framework for reading agency and resistance in dystopian contexts, and then turn to close readings of selected novels to trace how specific characters, spaces, and narrative strategies materialize these concepts. Through this approach, the article aims to illuminate how contemporary Indian dystopian narratives open up new ways of thinking about power, subjectivity, and the politics of hope in the present.



## Conceptual Framework: Agency, Resistance, and Dystopia

### Dystopia as Mode and Context

Dystopia, as a critical and literary category, has often been understood as the imaginative extrapolation of existing structures of domination into intensified, frequently futuristic scenarios. Classic Euro-American dystopias project authoritarian states, technocratic control, and surveillance regimes onto speculative futures in order to critique tendencies already latent in the present. In postcolonial contexts, however, dystopia frequently functions less as a purely speculative genre and more as a mode through which writers narrate the heightened visibility of violences that are already historically embedded in colonial and postcolonial state formations. Contemporary Indian dystopian narratives thus bend and localize familiar dystopian conventions—total surveillance, segregation, militarization—through the specific histories of Partition, caste hierarchies, communalism, and developmental violence.

In such texts, the boundary between present and future is deliberately blurred. Rather than imagining a distant catastrophe, these narratives portray futures that feel uncomfortably proximate to the current socio-political climate. Dystopia becomes a way of naming the intensification of already existing inequalities and exclusions, rather than an entirely new order. This shift has important implications for how we think about both power and resistance: the dystopian state is not an abstract, decontextualized system, but an extension of familiar bureaucracies, policing practices, and social hierarchies, and the subjects who inhabit it are shaped by long histories of marginalization.

### Reframing Agency in Postcolonial Settings

Within such a landscape, agency cannot be conceived simply as the exercise of free, autonomous will detached from material and structural constraints. Postcolonial theory has repeatedly emphasized how subjectivity itself is formed within relations of power—through discourse, institutions, and everyday practices. In contexts marked by caste, gender, and communal hierarchies, agency is necessarily partial, negotiated, and relational. For subaltern and marginalized subjects, the very capacity to act is conditioned by their position within overlapping systems of domination; action is rarely an expression of pure sovereignty, but rather emerges through compromises, ambiguities, and tactical manoeuvres.

This article therefore understands agency not as a heroic, all-or-nothing attribute but as a set of situated practices that can coexist with vulnerability, coercion, and complicity. By focusing on characters who do not fit the conventional mold of the dystopian rebel—women confined within domestic and communal spaces, religious minorities living under constant suspicion, precarious urban dwellers navigating segregated cities—the analysis foregrounds forms of agency that are fragile, reversible, and often morally ambivalent. These forms of acting and choosing do not always yield spectacular transformations, yet they register as meaningful interventions within the constraints of the dystopian world.

### Everyday Resistance and Subaltern Practices

Closely related to this rethinking of agency is a shift from spectacular revolt to everyday resistance. The canon of dystopian literature frequently centres on narratives of overt rebellion—organized insurgency, underground movements, or decisive acts of defiance aimed at overthrowing the regime. While such moments may exist, contemporary Indian dystopian narratives often emphasize quieter, less visible practices: small acts of refusal, everyday transgressions of imposed boundaries, the maintenance of forbidden relationships, or the formation of informal networks of care and solidarity.

These practices can be read as forms of everyday resistance that do not necessarily announce themselves as political in grand terms, but nonetheless disrupt, evade, or subtly reconfigure the operations of power. For subaltern subjects whose lives are tightly regulated by caste, gender, religion, and class, resistance frequently takes the form of survival strategies, micro-negotiations, and creative re-appropriations of space. Such acts may appear modest when measured against the scale of the dystopian apparatus, yet they mark crucial sites



where power is contested and its inevitability unsettled. By attending to these subaltern practices, the article seeks to expand the notion of resistance to include those acts that remain at the edges of visibility and legibility within dominant narratives.

### Hope, Affect, and Alternative Imaginaries

Finally, the framework for this study considers the complex role of hope within dystopian narratives. Dystopia is commonly associated with pessimism, closure, and the foreclosure of alternative futures. However, contemporary Indian dystopian fiction frequently sustains forms of hope that are neither triumphant nor purely utopian. Hope appears as fragile, contingent, and often deeply entangled with loss, grief, and failure. It is located less in grand visions of transformation than in affective ties—friendship, love, kinship, and care—that persist in the face of systemic violence.

These affective relations often crystallize around alternative spaces and imaginaries: liminal zones such as cemeteries, encampments, hidden enclaves, and marginal neighbourhoods that function simultaneously as sites of exclusion and as shelters for new forms of community. Narrative strategies such as fragmentation, polyphony, and linguistic hybridity further reinforce this openness, refusing neat resolutions and instead keeping alive the possibility of other ways of living. In this sense, hope is not presented as an easy antidote to dystopia, but as a tenuous, contested resource that emerges through practices of relation and imagination.

Taken together, these conceptual coordinates—dystopia as an intensified present, agency as relational and constrained, resistance as everyday and subaltern, and hope as fragile yet persistent—provide the framework through which the article reads contemporary Indian dystopian narratives. The following sections will apply this framework to close readings of selected novels, tracing how specific characters, spaces, and narrative forms materialize agency and resistance within dystopian worlds.

### Structures of Oppression in Contemporary Indian Dystopias

Contemporary Indian dystopian narratives construct their worlds through dense and often claustrophobic architectures of power. Segregated urban spaces, fortified enclaves, and zones of exclusion recur across these texts, translating long-standing social hierarchies into concrete spatial arrangements. Walls, checkpoints, and invisible borders mark who can move, who must remain confined, and who is rendered permanently vulnerable. The city becomes a cartography of segregation in which access to water, housing, education, and safety is strictly regulated, and entire communities are pushed to the edges—physically, economically, and symbolically. These spatial regimes do not simply appear as future fantasies; they draw directly on existing patterns of ghettoization, communal demarcation, and caste-based segregation in the contemporary Indian landscape.

Alongside spatial control, bureaucratic and technological apparatuses play a central role in consolidating dystopian authority. Identity documents, biometric databases, and continuous surveillance transform citizens into endlessly monitored subjects whose lives can be tracked, categorized, and erased with disturbing ease. Official narratives of security, development, and national unity are used to legitimize extraordinary measures: demolitions, curfews, disappearances, and the creation of camps or detention centres. Within this framework, the law appears less as an instrument of justice than as a flexible tool that can be selectively applied to discipline particular populations. The arbitrariness of bureaucratic decisions—who receives a permit, who is denied a ration card, who is labelled a suspect—intensifies the sense of precarity for those already positioned at the margins.

These regimes of control are further inflected by the specific histories of caste and communal politics. The texts repeatedly stage situations in which religious minorities, Dalits, and other subordinated groups become primary targets of suspicion, surveillance, and violence. Pogroms, lynchings, and forced displacements are not aberrations but integrated features of the dystopian order, often carried out with tacit or explicit state support. The rhetoric of purity, tradition, and cultural protection is mobilized to justify exclusion, while those who



question or resist are branded as traitors or enemies of the nation. Gendered violence, too, is woven into the fabric of these worlds, with women's bodies becoming crucial sites where patriarchal, communal, and state power intersect.

Importantly, these structures of oppression are not presented as distant or unimaginable. The narratives emphasize their continuity with present realities, suggesting that dystopia emerges when existing hierarchies and exclusions are allowed to harden, intensify, and generalize. By foregrounding how space, bureaucracy, and ideology work together to produce disposable populations, the texts create a setting in which the odds appear overwhelmingly tilted against any meaningful change. This is the terrain on which agency and resistance must operate—a world where power is diffused through everyday institutions and relationships, and where survival itself can become a form of struggle.

Against this backdrop, the analysis of agency and resistance in the subsequent sections must remain attentive to scale and constraint. Acts that might appear minor in more liberal contexts—crossing a forbidden boundary, sheltering a persecuted neighbour, refusing to participate in violence—acquire heightened significance in these tightly controlled environments. By first mapping the structures of oppression in detail, this section underscores the weight and complexity of the systems that contemporary Indian dystopian narratives imagine, preparing the ground for a close reading of how characters nonetheless carve out spaces of action, refusal, and hope within them.

#### Everyday Agency and Practices of Resistance

If the dystopian structures mapped above appear overwhelming, contemporary Indian dystopian narratives nonetheless insist that power is never absolute. Within heavily regulated spaces and under conditions of near-total surveillance, characters continue to act, choose, and improvise in ways that cannot be fully anticipated or controlled by the dystopian order. These actions are rarely grand or spectacular; more often they take the form of everyday negotiations, quiet refusals, and micro-level solidarities that carve out provisional zones of autonomy. It is in these modest yet persistent practices that the texts locate agency, reframing it as a relational and constrained capacity to act rather than as an expression of unbounded freedom.

Such agency frequently emerges at the intersections of gender, caste, and community. Women characters, for instance, may appear to be confined within domestic or communal roles, yet they often undertake risky decisions that subtly reorient the distribution of power around them: sheltering those marked for elimination, circulating forbidden information, maintaining clandestine relationships, or refusing to internalize the stigmas imposed upon them. These acts do not necessarily overthrow the dystopian regime, but they disrupt its smooth functioning, introduce delays and uncertainties, and keep alive alternative modes of relation. For subjects whose lives have long been structured by patriarchal and communal expectations, even small deviations from prescribed behaviour can acquire the force of resistance.

Similarly, members of marginalized communities—religious minorities, Dalits, precarious urban dwellers—exercise agency through practices that might, at first glance, be dismissed as mere survival strategies. Informal networks of support, mutual aid in times of crisis, the sharing of resources across rigid social boundaries, or the quiet reoccupation of spaces from which they have been expelled all exemplify ways in which subaltern subjects refuse to accept the totalizing logic of disposability. These gestures are often improvisational and contingent, emerging in response to immediate threats rather than from a pre-planned political program, yet they cumulatively erode the aura of inevitability surrounding the dystopian order. By foregrounding these practices, the narratives suggest that resistance can be both deeply embedded in everyday life and ethically complex, marked by compromise and ambivalence.

The texts also emphasize the importance of speech, memory, and narration as forms of agency. In worlds where official histories and media narratives are tightly controlled, the act of telling one's story, preserving suppressed histories, or witnessing violence becomes a way of contesting the monopoly of the state over meaning. Characters who refuse silence—who insist on naming injustices, documenting disappearances, or recounting





alternative genealogies of the nation—participate in a discursive resistance that challenges the erasure of certain lives from the national imagination. Even when such testimonies circulate only within small communities, they contribute to the formation of counter-publics that resist the homogenizing narratives of the dystopian regime.

At the same time, the narratives resist romanticizing these acts. Agency is portrayed as fraught, partial, and often costly: characters who resist may face exile, imprisonment, or death; their efforts may fail or be co-opted; their choices may implicate them in new forms of violence. By attending to these risks and failures, the texts underscore that resistance in dystopian contexts is not a straightforward moral triumph but a complex process in which actors navigate conflicting obligations and uncertain outcomes. This emphasis on ambiguity does not negate the value of resistance; rather, it situates agency within the messy realities of lived experience, where clear distinctions between complicity and opposition are difficult to maintain.

In tracing these everyday practices of resistance, contemporary Indian dystopian narratives thus challenge dominant understandings of both dystopia and agency. They demonstrate that even under pervasive regimes of control, subjects can and do act in ways that open cracks in the edifice of power, however small or temporary. The next section will explore how these acts of agency are intertwined with forms of hope, affect, and alternative imaginaries, suggesting that resistance is sustained not only by political calculation but also by emotional bonds and imaginative visions of other possible worlds.

#### Hope, Affect, and Alternative Imaginaries

While contemporary Indian dystopian narratives expose the violence of exclusionary political systems, they do not end in absolute closure. Even within landscapes marked by surveillance, segregation, and fear, these texts preserve fragile forms of hope that complicate the bleakness commonly associated with dystopian fiction. This hope is not utopian in the sense of promising a complete transformation of society, nor does it erase the structural violence that shapes the lives of marginalized subjects. Rather, it appears as a tentative yet persistent force that survives in moments of intimacy, memory, solidarity, and care. By locating hope in the ordinary rather than the triumphant, these narratives shift the focus from final victory to the continuing possibility of human relation under oppressive conditions.

Affective bonds play a crucial role in sustaining this horizon of possibility. Friendship, kinship, grief, love, and shared vulnerability become important modes through which characters resist the isolating logic of dystopian power. Systems of domination often seek to fragment communities, sever trust, and reduce individuals to categories of suspicion or disposability. Against this fragmentation, emotional attachments create small but significant forms of continuity. Care itself becomes political when it protects vulnerable lives, preserves memory, or refuses the dehumanizing classifications imposed by the state. Such affective relations do not abolish violence, but they interrupt its claim to totality by demonstrating that alternative modes of belonging remain possible.

These narratives also imagine hope through alternative spaces that exist at the margins of the official social order. Cemeteries, rivers, encampments, hidden shelters, and peripheral neighborhoods often become zones where the dominant logic of exclusion is partially suspended or reworked. These spaces are rarely ideal; they remain precarious, temporary, and vulnerable to intrusion. Yet they function as counter-sites in which different forms of community can emerge. Their importance lies not in offering a fully realized utopian order, but in making visible forms of coexistence that exceed the rigid binaries of purity and pollution, insider and outsider, citizen and threat. In this way, space itself becomes a medium through which hope is imagined.

Narrative form further contributes to these alternative imaginaries. Fragmented structures, multiple voices, nonlinear temporalities, and linguistic plurality resist the closure often associated with authoritarian systems and with dystopian endings. By refusing a singular, uncontested narrative perspective, such texts open room for suppressed experiences, contested memories, and unfinished futures. Polyphony becomes more than a stylistic choice; it serves as a formal expression of resistance to ideological homogenization. Likewise, the



coexistence of different linguistic registers and social idioms unsettles the fantasy of a purified national voice. Form and theme thus work together to suggest that even within dystopian worlds, history and subjectivity remain open to interruption, revision, and reimagination.

Hope in these narratives is therefore neither naïve optimism nor a denial of suffering. It is shaped by grief, compromise, and uncertainty, and often emerges precisely because characters continue to act in the face of likely failure. This makes hope ethically and politically significant: it is not based on certainty, but on persistence. Contemporary Indian dystopian fiction thus redefines hope as a fragile practice of endurance and relation, one that survives within structures designed to extinguish it. In doing so, these narratives challenge the assumption that dystopia must culminate in total despair, and instead reveal how even damaged worlds may contain the seeds of alternative futures.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that contemporary Indian dystopian narratives offer a distinctive reconfiguration of agency and resistance by locating both within the uneven social realities of caste, communal polarization, state violence, and spatial exclusion. Rather than presenting dystopia as a distant future detached from history, these texts intensify conditions already visible in the contemporary Indian context. As a result, their understanding of resistance differs significantly from the model of spectacular rebellion that often shapes classical dystopian fiction. Agency emerges not as sovereign freedom, but as relational, constrained, and deeply embedded in everyday acts of survival, refusal, care, and solidarity.

By tracing structures of oppression alongside practices of resistance, the analysis has shown that these narratives do not merely document violence; they also reveal how marginalized subjects continue to negotiate power in complex and meaningful ways. Women, religious minorities, subaltern communities, and precarious urban subjects become central to this reimagining of political action. Their agency is often partial, morally ambiguous, and vulnerable to failure, yet it remains crucial because it unsettles the totalizing ambitions of dystopian power. In this sense, the article has sought to demonstrate that Indian dystopian narratives expand the scope of dystopian studies by foregrounding forms of resistance that are historically grounded, socially situated, and inseparable from the politics of everyday life.

Equally important is the role of hope in these texts. Far from offering simplistic consolation, hope appears as a fragile and contested possibility sustained through affective ties, alternative spaces, and open narrative forms. It does not resolve the violence of dystopia, but it prevents that violence from becoming absolute. Contemporary Indian dystopian fiction therefore contributes to global dystopian discourse by showing that even in conditions of systemic domination, the future remains unsettled. Through its attention to marginal lives, fractured communities, and precarious forms of agency, this body of writing insists that resistance and hope, however limited, remain necessary to the imagination of political and ethical life.