

wknd lifestyle

Cracks in the city-state ball

At the end of a year no one could have predicted, we sat down with eight authors of dystopian and speculative fiction to discuss what they made of 2020, and to ask: if they were writing 2021, where would the plot go next?

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It's been a surreal year. A bit like living in a movie, but not the kind with a happy ending. Dystopian is a word that's been used over and over. As the death toll climbed and the streets emptied out, supermarket shelves were laid bare and people huddled indoors month after month, reality caught up with speculative fiction.

A year on, it's hard to relate to what life was like before India's national lockdown was announced on March 24. It's easier, almost, to relate to the future-dystopia books and films that once seemed so unreal.

It's going to get worse, says author Samit Basu, whose *Chosen Spirits*, released last April, is set a decade in the near future, in a smog-choked city plagued by wealth disparity, climate change, corrupt governments and invasive technology, and populated by people who'd rather be distracted by their screens than deal with the world around them.

As long as there is life, there is hope, says Priya Sarukkai Chabria, a poet, novelist and author of *Generation 14* (2008), the sci-fi tale of a 14th-generation clone in a 24th-century India. Chabria spent the lockdown with her husband at their home in Pune. "It's been a time for reflection, taking stock, and finding faith in ourselves and others," she says. "I've been trying to face my fears, ponder the hard questions, cherish the time I have with family, friends, art and nature, and be grateful."

Prayaag Akbar

We lived in a dystopia even before the pandemic

Prayaag Akbar is the author of *Leila* (2017), which was recently turned into a Netflix series. Set in an alternate present, the book traces a woman's search for a daughter she lost 16 years earlier. She now hunts for her in a world that values cloned bloodlines and communal segregation, a land ruled by a Council that demands total compliance.

Akbar spent the lockdown in a village in Goa, where he lives with his wife Shanta, son Aagey, nanny Pushpa and two cats, Jade and Dushi. He spent the pandemic working on his second novel and teaching a creative writing class online at Krea University.



PHOTO: MINT ARCHIVE

What were your first thoughts when you realised we were in a pandemic?

I was unsure and wary, as I imagine most people were, as we went into lockdown. There was the fear of contagion, of our government's inability to handle such a crisis, of the inability of people to follow the rules that would get us through it.

My son was not yet two years old when we went into lockdown, so most of my fear was centered on keeping him safe and healthy through this.

I could never have predicted that the pandemic would become a way of deepening ethnic hatred. In my naïveté, I assumed a disease like Covid-19, which threatened us all, would become a unifying force... we would have to pull together as a team. People tend to forget this, but the lockdown came in the immediate wake of the Delhi riots—a horrifying moment of anger, stoked by politicians primarily targeting the Muslim minority of Delhi. I had hoped the nation would unite under the threat of Covid. Instead it was used as another way to malign Muslims and malign the poor.

What barriers has the pandemic broken in terms of the futuristic themes of science fiction, dystopian writing?

The pandemic acted as an accelerator. It brought dystopia to our doorstep. I'm not sure it has broken barriers in terms of the themes writers choose. The imagination was free to go where it wanted before and it is free to go where it wants now.

When I talk to fellow novelists I sense the opposite impulse: there is a sense of darkness, of trying to find light instead of darkness. And scriptwriters friends tell me that produc-

tion houses and platforms are staying well away from dark themes. When the world is troubled, we tend to seek light, frothy entertainment.

Do you think we are living in a dystopian society or a brave new world?

When my novel (*Leila*) came out, back in 2017, I made this point repeatedly: one person's utopia is another's dystopia. We might imagine we are living in a safe and nourishing society, but for many people, this very dystopia and the migrant crisis brought that aspect of reality home to us all—you might enjoy driving on that new road, or living in that nice new home, but the people we pay to build us those things are living right on the edge. They can drop into despair any moment. Isn't that dystopic? Yet we enable that every day simply by continuing to live in society.

Based on what's played out over the past year, how do you think the world will look 10 years from now?

The novelist's job is to tell a good story, a convincing story, a story that makes you care. I would never presume to be able to predict how things turn out. I could never have predicted 2020, for instance. That's a personal peeve: why do people still listen to fortune-tellers when not a single one predicted the virus and how it would change our lives? I was hoping 2020 would destroy the fortune-telling industrial complex. But in times of distress people turn even more to forms of easy solace.

Gautam Bhatia

I believe work and education have changed for good

Legal scholar Gautam Bhatia's debut novel *The Wall* (August 2020) unfolds in a city confined by a looming wall with no gates and which nobody has ever crossed. It's a city organised in concentric circles, with the richest and most powerful at the centre. Within the wall, the people are free to eat, think and dress as they like. But for Mithila and her young friends, these freedoms mean little if they can't look beyond the boundary that confines them.

Bhatia was also nominated for a Hugo Award in 2018, for his work with *Strange Horizons* magazine, in the Best Semiprozine category. He spent the lockdown finishing the sequel to *The Wall*, *The Horizon*, which is due out in September.



What metaphorical walls have gone up and which ones have come down, would you say, during the pandemic?

I've remained in the UK all year. So I have, for the most part, been an outside observer. It seems to me that the pandemic

has unfortunately reinforced the walls that already existed. Its impact was disproportionately felt by the most vulnerable, especially migrant workers, and it seems to have given an excuse to many people to treat vulnerable individuals such as domestic work-

Anil Menon

I think the "we" has weakened

Anil Menon's *The Beast with Nine Billion Feet* (2019) is set in a 2040 Pune of emotional cars, illusion pods and synthetic life. The world unravels when the two teenage protagonists decide to question what it really means to be human in a place of rampant genetic engineering and transhumanism.

Menon says he spent the lockdown largely alone, being obnoxiously productive, writing short stories and collaborating on a web series. "It was odd to be busy and bored at the same time," he says.

When you first realised we were in a pandemic, what were your expectations and how did reality compare?

The trouble with being an optimist is that surprises tend to be nasty. The pandemic surprised me on an ongoing basis. I was surprised by the limited usefulness of pandemic models. By how easy it was to shut down industrial supply chains. By the sheer ineptitude of the central government. I was surprised by the infinite capacity of our society to endure abuse of the poor. That was the nastiest surprise of all.

A year in, how do you think the pandemic has affected our psyche?

I think the "we" has weakened. People seem to have a lot less trust in "the system" and with each other. When you have a government that declares a nationwide lockdown with four hours' notice, you lose trust. When you live in a paranoid housing colony that tries to eject renters because they're nurses, you lose trust. We've all become thespians in the theatre of precautionary measures. Adjusting our masks at traffic stops; offering our paws for the temperature scanner; squirting sanitiser on our spouses before we kiss them; pretending to pay attention on Zoom calls.

ers and delivery personnel even worse than usual, citing the pandemic as an excuse.

What are the changes you think there will be no returning from?

Remote work, for those whose work allows it, is the most obvious and visible change. This is probably going to be an irreversible change in educational institutions, most of all.

How has this past year influenced your writing and thoughts?

I think that prolonged isolation makes one understand more vividly the importance of the collective, of solidarity as change. This is probably going to be an indispensable to what it means to be human.

Hope is a recurring feature in dystopian tales. What gives you hope?

I very consciously don't write dark or dystopian fiction. *The Wall* and *The Horizon* are not set in dystopic worlds, but worlds that are messier than ours. As to where I get hope from—I think Ursula K Le Guin, the legendary science-fiction writer, put it best: "We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable—but the divine right it claims is a lie, it is a fraud, it is a deception. Any power can be resisted and changed by human beings."

Mimi Mondal

We must erase our sense of distance from disaster

Mimi Mondal is a writer of fantasy and science-fiction, originally from Kolkata and now based in the US. Her works of speculative fiction are rooted in the themes of identity, history, language and future technologies. In 2018, she was nominated for the prestigious Hugo Award, for co-editing *Luminescent Threads: Connections to Octavia E Butler* (2017), an anthology of marginalised authors in science-fiction and fantasy. She spent the last year in a tiny New York apartment.

The pandemic seemed to bring out the best and worst in people. What surprised you about how we dealt with it?

The pandemic immediately shut people into hyperlocal bubbles and really highlighted the difference between having and not having privilege, access to six feet of personal radius, the ability to work from home, a disposable income to support one through a period of sudden joblessness or reduced pay.

I think all of humanity collectively experienced the pandemic as a global event, but each person experienced a very different pandemic from someone elsewhere in the world, or living under other circumstances. One of the positive, hopeful things I saw was how hyperlocal communities became supportive, reaching out to help neighbours... Even this didn't happen everywhere.

At a time when humans are feeling invincible, what has an experience like a global pandemic done to our collective psyche?

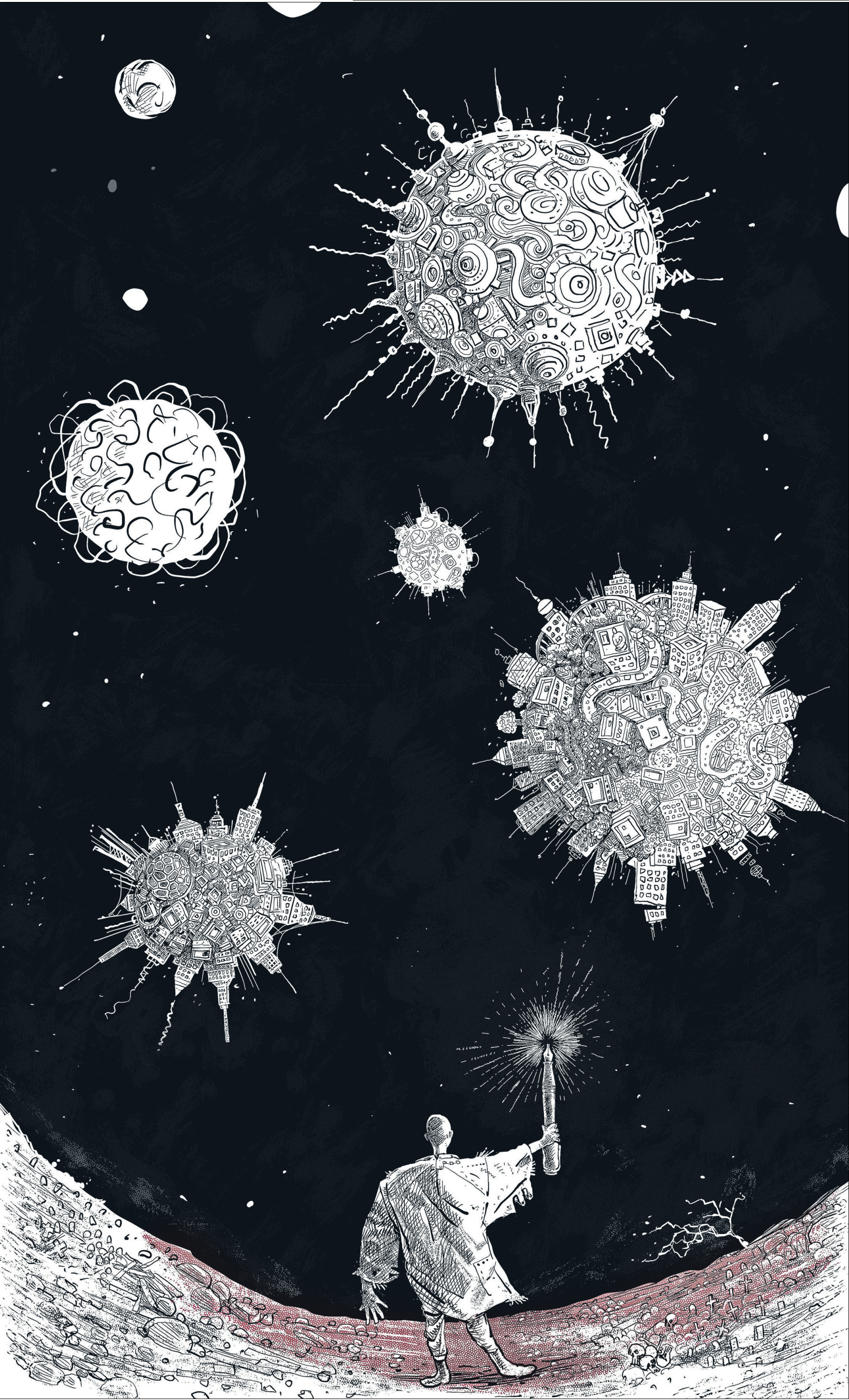
I do think about questions like this a lot, and the answer is complicated, because I don't consider only highly privileged scientists and intellectuals to be the spokespersons for the collective human psyche. The economic changes, the mental-health repercussions of the pandemic will continue to roll out indefinitely. But before that,

I must also return to the root question: Can we really claim to be collectively felt all that invincible before November 2019? Those highly privileged scientists and intellectuals who act as the spokespersons of humanity as a whole and proclaim its invincibility were also the ones who were the least impacted by the Covid crisis. Let's not ask people like Elon Musk how humanity will be impacted by the pandemic. You and I and 99.99% of humanity aren't remotely similar to them.



How has surviving the past year influenced your own thoughts and writings?

I recovered from my own infection less than a month ago... I don't think I have yet fully "chewed down" the experience of the pandemic to be able to write about it in the third person, or in fiction. But I also think, as intellectual establishments, we need to stop framing large disasters in language that suggests we're only observing them from an analytical distance. It's a great error of our discourses that the survivors' accounts (of this pandemic, but also of rape, of war, of any traumatic event) is considered an inferior, unreliable, sensationalist version of events from the expert's uninvolved analysis. If I ever choose to write about the pandemic, which I may not, I hope I don't write it like it's something that happened to other people while I watched and took notes from my ivory tower.



HT ILLUSTRATION: JAYACHANDRAN

Sarnath Banerjee

We are the lobster in a hot bath

Graphic novelist Sarnath Banerjee's *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* (2015) is set in a dysfunctional Delhi running out of water. The inhabitants engage in brutal battles, while a bigger threat of privatisation of their water supply looms. One man heads to the centre of the city to find the mythical Saraswati.



PHOTO: HEMANT SAREEN

What were the parts of 2020 that you could never have predicted? The slightly privileged were

enjoying the lockdown. They were doing their video blogs, discovering culinary skills, learning new languages. I myself was going on 10-km walks in forested areas. It was all fuzzy and nice in the beginning. Then society started getting darker, economic challenges became harsher, the need to meet other people became stronger. Then came the worst thing—home schooling. It was this nightmare that parents and children had to figure out.

Additionally, policies were being implemented. We were losing more of our democratic and environmental rights. A slow dystopia was taking over, almost like a London fog. Your eyes adjust to it, you can navigate around it. Then you begin to normalise it. We are the lobster in a hot bath.

Was there a different dystopia where you were?

I can't make those distinctions so easily. Germany has a hidden pride in how they dealt with the pandemic. It was one of the first countries to get the vaccine.

In a much more global world, I thought there would be a more fruitful global exchange of ideas

On the other hand, India did something that works. I don't have a big sample size, but from those I know, people are meeting each other, mental health is much better. Of course, we lived in fear of being completely financially ruined. The German government paid all its citizens, artists included, five thousand Euro each.

How do you think the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns have changed our collective psyche?

The world has gone through these situations before. We could look at what happened after the plague in Europe to get an idea. I am collaborating with plague historian Julia Hauser. She theorises that changes in society then, such as the limited interaction among people, helped make the church more powerful and strengthen institutions such as marriage, monogamy.

The ghettos, where the minorities lived, were destroyed. Jews were asked to leave city limits. Homosexuals and prostitutes were considered super spreaders. Bath houses were closed. The rise of conservatism has a direct relation with the plague.

This time around, since it's a much more global world, I thought there would be a more fruitful global exchange of ideas. Instead, the future is doomed and people are still having babies. I don't know whether to dismiss it as foolishness or to admire the strength of the human spirit.

Priya Sarukkai Chabria

As long as there is life, there is hope

Priya Sarukkai Chabria is a poet, novelist and author of *Generation 14* (2008), the story of a 14th-generation clone in a 24th-century India, who gains consciousness and begins to remember past lives. She followed it up with *Clone* (2019), also a reflection on repression and the fragility of freedoms.

Chabria spent the lockdown with her husband at their home in Pune. "It's been a time for reflection, taking stock, and finding faith in ourselves and others," she says. "I've been trying to face my fears, ponder the hard questions, cherish the time I have with family, friends, art and nature, and be grateful."

What are the bits about 2020 that you could never have predicted?

I couldn't have envisioned, even in a nightmare, that migrants would be forced to walk hundreds of kilometres to get home when their jobs dried up in the city. I couldn't have envisioned either the irresponsibility of the thousands who do not wear masks or practice social distancing, thereby endangering families, friends and front-line workers.

In many ways the pandemic has revealed the best and worst in us as a species. On the one hand I am appalled by the callousness of many, on the other, many are finding strength in these dark times to be more compassionate in word and action. I prefer to focus on the latter.

What barriers has this broken in terms of the futuristic themes of sci-

Samit Basu

It's going to get far worse

Samit Basu's latest book, *Chosen Spirits*, was released last April. It is set a decade in the future, and follows two young men, Joey and Rudra, as they navigate adulthood in their smog-choked city plagued by wealth disparity, climate change, corrupt governments and invasive technology, and populated by a people who'd rather be distracted by their screens than question the workings of the world around them.

Basu spend most of the pandemic working on his next book. "I've been luckier than most," he says, "and I'm just hoping we all survive this without further terrible news."

When news of a contagious virus first emerged, did you think it was going to get this bad? What are the bits you could never have predicted?

I don't think I could have predicted any of it, which is fortunate. I was wrapping up a near-future novel in January last year, but it was set about a decade in the future, so fortunately I didn't have to include the pandemic. Even though it hadn't escalated widely at that point, it was clear that there was something different about this one, which is why it got a few mentions in the book a couple of months before the virus really hit India. I don't think people listened enough to actual field experts about the pandemic learning the how-to of publishing a novel during a pandemic, which I am not anxious to repeat at all. But I've been luckier than most. Several people close to me have lost people close to them, so I'm just hoping we all survive this without further terrible news.

How do you think the pandemic will alter the fabric of Indian society?

Our society was already in chaos before the pandemic, and it's going to get far

ence fiction and dystopian writing?

This is a large question. I recall Bertolt Brecht's quote: "In the dark times will there also be singing? Yes, there will also be singing. About the dark times." In my recent speculative-fiction short stories I find myself sing about a more inclusive, equitable time which could be possible if we listened well to others, ourselves and to the earth; if we heard silences speak the wisdom of interconnectedness. This sharpened, cultivated capacity for listening to the pain and rapture of others is significant to me.

In my near-future story, *Listen: A Memoir*, the narrator is attuned to various species speaking in their diverse tongues. We must be receptive to the larger picture over gloom-and-doom scenarios. Because as long as there is life, there is hope.

How do you think this year has affected our collective psyche?

It is time when each one of us to ask ourselves: what have you done or not done to bring about these dark times? What are you doing to the planet and the future of your children if current political ecological and lifestyle choices continue? On what grounds can you say you love your children if you hand them an impoverished future? I accept that I too am part of this, and, in my writing, work towards a more participatory mode with readers.



PHOTO: S CHARABORTHY

Your latest book *Chosen Spirits* includes events as recent as the Citizenship Amendment Act protests. Diving into that world, how do Joey and Rudra remember the pandemic?

Chosen Spirits is set a decade in the future, so Joey and Rudra remember the pandemic as a bad thing that happened in their teens. And because it's fundamentally a hopeful book, there were no more pandemics after.

How did you spend the lockdown?

I was already working from home in isolation before the pandemic, so I probably had the least change in routine of anyone I know. That said, I was not one of the people who suddenly decided to become productive and learn new skills. I spent most of the pandemic learning the how-to of publishing a novel during a pandemic, which I am not anxious to repeat at all. But I've been luckier than most. Several people close to me have lost people close to them, so I'm just hoping we all survive this without further terrible news.

Appupen

Our suspension of disbelief has risen to another level

Graphic novelist Appupen has been building his dystopian fantasy world of Halahala for over a decade. Here, humanity has lost touch with nature and devolved, cities grow from seeds, and love takes on new dimensions.

He is the founder of Brained India, a platform for graphic art, on which he posts his comic series *Dystopian Times*, which satirises current affairs, as well as segments of his satirical *Rashtaman* series.

He spent the lockdown at home in Bengaluru, working on *Rashtamana II: Divine and Fool*, the second instalment in the *Rashtaman* series, which he released in October.

Where does science and dystopian fiction go from here?

In our current setting, it's definitely a



challenge. It seems like anything can happen in the real world.

Our suspension of disbelief has been raised to another level. Still, I think the dystopian world will expand, we will have more areas explore.

It is a watershed moment for writers and artists. It will also be challenging for people who have established their dystopian worlds and territories. In my *Rashtaman* comics, I have been racing to stay ahead of the government, but then the government is catching up, and I'll don't exaggerate more, then my comic reality is lagging behind, and that's no fun.

How do you think the pandemic has affected our collective psyche?

People are in a state of anxiety and in that state it seems we cannot think very straight, or on our own, so we would rather rely on what we hear or on the general mood. A lot of quick decisions and changes are being made at the centre, which is adding to the sense of turmoil. The divide is now much bigger. The smaller enterprises have suffered, so the power stays more strongly with the bigger ones who have the resources to see themselves through such a long slump.

What made you laugh during this time?

I didn't laugh much. What was interesting to watch was how easily we adapted and how much we are like sheep. One day you say, everyone wear a mask, and everyone's wearing a mask. Okay, but then banging plates, switching off lights, wearing horns, it just seemed we could go anywhere. We are so conditioned that we are ready to do anything we're told.

{ BY THE LETTER } A GLOSSARY

THOUGHT CONTROL

From novelist George Orwell to satirist George Carlin, the great observers of the human condition have pointed at the power of language to illuminate as well as manipulate and sway. Here are terms from great dystopian tales that seem eerily prescient today.

Doublespeak

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) as well as much of his other writing, Orwell predicted that technology would be used to rewrite history and spread fake news. Doublespeak is the name he gave to language used to disguise, distort and reverse truth. In *Oceania*, one of the fictional superstates in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, people are governed by tenets such as Freedom is Slavery. Euphemisms are used to diffuse and dissemble.

Soma

Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) seems at first like a utopia, until you realise the bliss is manufactured—one part ignorance, two parts a state-issued drug called soma. In this future World State, pleasure is a priority and any feeling that isn't pleasure is to be erased. Soma is used to keep the populace in a numbed euphoria. What's the 21st-century version of soma you rely on most?

Aqua Cola

In the 2015 movie *Mad Max: Fury Road*, directed by George Miller, Immortan Joe controls the only aquifer in a post-apocalyptic desert wasteland. He commodifies the water and brands it Aqua Cola, after a beverage brand accused of sucking the earth dry. The film is a sharp look at what wars and the commodification of natural resources can do to a land and its people.

Firemen

Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), set in a future America, follows a breed of firemen whose mission is to find and burn books. While the book was inspired by the literal threat of books being burned during the McCarthy era of anti-Communism witch-hunts unfolding at the time, Bradbury later explained it was also a metaphor for television's effect on the dissemination of news. The factoids, he felt, left neither the time, space nor motivation for a multidimensional picture. What would he make of today's character counts?

Soylent Green

It's 2022. In a world ravaged by overpopulation, pollution and climate catastrophes, a food substitute, *Soylent Green*, supposedly made from plankton, is highly sought but in short supply. In *Richard Fleischer's* 1973 film of the same name, the oceans no longer produce plankton. An NYPD detective begins to investigate where the *Soylent* is coming from. The source of the food's protein turns out to be dead humans. "*Soylent Green* is people," the detective screams in the last scene, as he is taken away. We're nearing 2022, and our food may not be made of people, but today's corporate entities are bigger, more powerful and some more ruthless, than any we've known before.

Hunger Games

In the dystopian *Panem*, in Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* (2008), a tribute of two children from each of the 12 districts must fight to the death. The oppressed gather and cheer at these death matches. It's the worst kind of entertainment, created for an audience too desensitised to see the ugliness. A definition that would fit much of today's reality TV.

Omegas

What happens to a race that cannot reproduce anymore? PD James's 1992 novel *The Children of Men*, set in the UK, imagines a 2021 in which the men are all infertile and have been since 1995, the year they call *Omega* (*The Last*, after the last letter of the Greek alphabet). The last humans to be born are called the *Omegas*, and are spoiled, entitled and egotistical.

Sense offenders

Kurt Wimmer's 2002 film *Equilibrium* is set in *Libria*, a totalitarian state run with the aid of the drug *Prozium*. Go off the drug and you begin to feel things and sense emotions, which is a crime. This is what happens with high-ranking law enforcement cleric John Preston.

Big Brother is watching

With this phrase, Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* introduces the idea of full and complete surveillance. Through hidden cameras and listening devices, those in power know where you've been, what you've said. Today's *Big Brother* is an insidious host of devices and algorithms that listen, track and have the ability to report back. The irony: much of the data gathered is surrendered voluntarily, with every keystroke and voice command.

—Natasha Rego