



The Alien Device as Catalyst: Technology, Wonder, and Ethical Questions in Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay's *Patalghor (The Mystery of the Underground Chamber)*

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Within Indian speculative fiction and Bengali *kalpabigyan* (science fiction and fantasy), Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay has established a unique presence. Mukhopadhyay is best known for his adult fiction and his *Adbhut* (strange or weird) series meant for children. He often brings humour, rural oddity, and magic to the mix. Mukhopadhyay's *Patalghor (The Mystery of the Underground Chamber)* employs this flexible style. In it, a powerful technological sound-wave device that can cause sleep for extended periods in all living beings is the centre of the plot. Popular culture at times vaguely identifies it as an "alien device." In reality, the machine is the brainchild of the nineteenth-century Bengali scientist Aghor Sen. The device's association with the exiled alien Vik from the planet Nyapcha brings together imagination, alien presence, children's wonder, and important contemporary ethical questions. Here, I analyse how the device in *Patalghor* generates the plot, and explore the questions of technological potential for darkness and light, the importance of children's wonder, and the ethical questions of scientific knowledge in a postcolonial Indian speculative realm.

Mukhopadhyay's writing captures a larger speculative tradition in Bengali literature. This includes writing from Satyajit Ray and Premendra Mitra, and a unique tradition of combining Western science with Bengali culture. Indian science fiction refuses fully developed technological rationalism. It prefers to depict interactions of sophisticated science with folklore and social and ethical concerns. As Suparno Banerjee argues in his study of postcolonial Indian science fiction, such texts often operate through "epistemic continuity and assemblage,"



deliberately blending ghosts, aliens, and machines within the same narrative universe without epistemic rupture. This blending, Banerjee notes, functions as “a device of subversion of hegemonic western notions of science and reality,” while simultaneously highlighting “alternative and subaltern concepts of knowledge” that have been subjected to what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak terms “epistemic violence.”

In *Patalghor*, Mukhopadhyay creates Aghor Sen, who is portrayed as a rural Bengali scientist. In the narrative’s present, he has invented a machine in his laboratory to create sound waves that can almost completely remove the life processes of a living being (in the most extreme case, for one hundred and fifty years). When the alien Vik, who was expelled from Nyapcha, came to his laboratory in his spaceship in order to steal the sound wave machine, Aghor used the machine against him and put him in suspended animation. When Aghor died, the machine disappeared in the Patalghor, a secret underground laboratory. Its location was encoded in the scientist’s diary in mystery poems. In Mukhopadhyay’s present, the diary is found by Dr. Bhootnath Nondy (or Nandy), and a chaotic situation begins, where greedy foreigners, the gang leader Begum, her son Kartik, his uncle Subuddhi, and Vik, who is awakened, are all vying for the machine.

Technology as Disruptive Inheritance

The technology of the device is intentionally simple, but powerful. Rather than stepping into the realm of speculative fiction with things like laser guns and warp drives, it employs the science of sound, which, while grounded firmly in accessible science, does allow for a speculative leap. Much of the Bengali science fiction for children does exactly this: it grounds the fantastic in the likely and, with any luck, inspires children to use their imaginations rather than to be overwhelmed and lose interest. Aghor Sen is a perfect example of the eccentric genius whose unorthodox pursuits of science reside in his very own lab. The device is a precursor to countless discussions around the ethics and implications of cryogenic stasis, non-lethal weaponry, and the ethics of induced stasis.

This grounding of the fantastic in the accessible aligns with what Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay has theorised as the “mythologerm” in Indian *kalpavigyan*. Chattopadhyay adapts



Roland Barthes's description of myth as a type of speech to describe how Indian speculative writers continually appropriate pre-colonial myths and indigenous knowledge systems, reabsorbing and transforming them within the broader systematisation of scientific knowledge that emerged under colonial modernity. Aghor Sen's sound-wave device, emerging from a nineteenth-century rural Bengali laboratory rather than a metropolitan research centre, enacts precisely this mythologermic gesture: it claims scientific legitimacy for a form of knowledge produced at the periphery, thereby contesting the colonial hierarchy that positioned Western technoscience as the sole legitimate source of innovation.

Present-day, the act of the device being turned on is not simply the act of turning on old technology; it collapses the historical continuum, and the characters in the story must grapple with the consequences of the device that contains knowledge beyond its creator. The device accelerates social chaos. Begum, who is loud, adventurous, and the gang leader, believes it is a tool for a new world order. She thinks it has the ability to disarm entire armies without the need for traditional methods of slaughter. Foreign agents are circling the village of Nischintipur, trying to either buy or take control of the land that may hold the laboratory. Even the good-natured, well-meaning scientist, Bhootnath, is forced to work with the dark side of the collaboration for the sake of rediscovery.

Technology is never neutral. It always exacerbates the desires for power, safety, or affirmation of people. As Langdon Winner and other theorists of technological politics have long argued, artefacts have politics; they embody and amplify particular social relations. Mukhopadhyay's depiction of rural life sharpens the contrast: the sophisticated acoustic technology emerges from and is returned to a world of quirky villagers and amateur actors and within the scope of domesticity. The contrast of the theater within the text critiques the view of simplistic, linear tales of urban or Western advances of civilization. The story claims that rural imagination and large leaps of scientific creativity can be the basis, originating from the people. While it may be a contested legacy, the moral obligation to curate it ethically rests with the new generations.



Kartik's moral claim to the laboratory after inheriting the property from his father further conveys the idea of technology as inheritance. The boy does not develop the machine. He inherits its potential and danger. His and Bhootnath's work on solving the diary's riddles and locating the Patalghor moves the stewardship of science across generations, as well as across the divide between professional science and youthful imagination. The story also expresses the impossibility of the fantasy of ultimate control over technology when Bhootnath, after the machine is used to forcibly put Vik to sleep again, destroys the machine in the chaos that ensues. When knowledge is set free, it cannot be governed. The answer can be to destroy its physical form in order to prevent an even worse case of its use. This resolution resonates with postcolonial anxieties about the control of scientific tools: as Banerjee observes, Indian science fiction frequently stages the tension between emancipatory technological possibility and new forms of external (neo-colonial) or internal (elite) control.

Wonder and the Child's Gaze

If the machine serves as a technological and ethical prompt, it acts as a wonder generator, especially through the consciousness of the child protagonist Kartik. Mukhopadhyay's children's literature places special value on the viewpoint of the child, the lonely, and the slightly marginalized, who all realize that the normal world contains the extraordinary. Kartik, in *Patalghor*, arrives in Nischintipur as an outsider in a world where he lives with his uncle and becomes the legal heir to a secret laboratory. His interaction with mechanical devices, coded messages, concealed chambers, and an actual alien allows him to focus on things that most of the adult characters have lost, due to their overwhelming greed, ambition, or eccentricity.

Wonder, in this text, does not mean the same thing as naïve enchantment. Wonder here is an active way of constructing knowledge. Within the classical Indian aesthetic framework of *rasa*, the dominant mode of *kalpabigyan* is often identified with *adbhuta* (the marvellous or wondrous). Recent scholarship on Bangla science fiction has proposed that wonder functions as the structuring emotional-aesthetic response of the genre, enabling other rasas such as the comic (*hāsya*) and the grotesque to operate in productive tension. Kartik's intelligence and bravery help him bypass all the physical and intellectual challenges to reach the Patalghor. The underground



chamber crystallizes revelation, where past alien presence and scientific achievement and now action combine.

Wonder as a child's ability prevents him from treating the alien Vik, who is both a threat and a curiosity, as a curious threat. It lets him view Vik as a being who, like him, is also an exiled and longing being. The fact that Subuddhi, who recruits Vik to play a role in his play, manages to momentarily alienate Vik from the pure absurdism of Mukhopadhyay, here using alien Vik as an actor in a cultural expression, both simultaneously domesticate Vik, and situate him within the realm of absurdist comic artistic expression of a framework that prevents the boundary between the pure absurd of artistic expression, and the humorous, the mundane, and the extraterrestrial. This domesticating gesture is itself a form of hybridity in Homi Bhabha's sense: the alien is neither fully assimilated nor wholly other, but occupies an in-between space that unsettles fixed categories of belonging.

This has significant pedagogical impact. Children's physical engagement with the world is mediated by screens and virtual worlds. *Patalghor* embraces the appreciation for machines that can be disassembled and the pleasure in decoding texts and the bravery for dark spaces. Once rediscovered, the device no longer amazes; it teaches. It states that the world does not only contain what the village does, and while it contains things beyond the village, it can be met with resourcefulness, not fear and not imposed rationality. The last image of Kartik on Earth as heir of Aghor Sen and Bhootnath's legacy, while Bhootnath goes to Nyapcha with the sleeping Vik, leaves the child as the keeper of the legacy of a responsible, tempered science and wonder.

Ethical Questions: Power, Consent, and the Limits of Control

Most of *Patalghor*'s value lies in the ethical issues the device addresses directly. The capacity to inflict long-term, involuntary sleep raises concerns around autonomy and issues of consent. While we can justify Aghor Sen's initial use against Vik as a self-defensive act against theft, it opens a door towards a practice of temporarily suspending agency for 150 years. When the device resurfaces, the same capability would then be available to Begum, whose ambitions are imperial in a violent and aggressive manner, as well as to the scientific community, who may choose to weaponize or commercialize the device. The story, therefore, presents a classic



speculative fiction dilemma: When a technology is created that has the ability to nullify resistance, who can rightfully use that technology and under what conditions?

Begum's aggressive ambition to dominate is an example of the unbounded potential of technology without an ethical framework. It echoes both historical and modern worries about weapons of mass disruption. The foreign property-seekers represent yet another form of appropriation: the neo-colonial extraction of indigenous scientific resources. Even Bhootnath's scientific curiosity is not entirely altruistic. His public disclosure of the diary's contents activates a race. Only the alliance of child and scientist, motivated by curiosity, not conquest, is still able to use the device to address the immediate problem, which is to return Vik to sleep. Yet, the subsequent destruction of the device indicates that some forms of knowledge are too dangerous to maintain in a physical form. This resolution is not anti-science. In fact, it shows that science has a responsibility that sometimes dictates the conscious curtailment or sacrifice of that science.

The alien presence complicates the ethics involved. Vik is neither entirely bad to the bone nor good to the core. The narrative intentionally leaves Vik's motives opaque, but being an exile from his world, he pursues the device for his own reasons. Vik's actions antagonize the human characters. He is subsequently put to sleep. This solves the problem of his theft, but not the original question of the justice of Vik's exile and the morality of the indefinite suspension. Bhootnath's action of going to Nyapcha and bringing a sleeping Vik back home can be seen as a restorative action of returning Vik to his home world. However, it also takes the problem of Vik's presence out of the jurisdiction of the earth. The narrative here touches upon the problems of ethics of inter- as well as intra-species, which is absent in a majority of early speculative fiction from Indian writers and is increasingly becoming relevant in contemporary SF from the world.

When it comes to Indian speculative fiction, we can see that postcolonial societies experience both emancipatory digital technologies and new forms of external control. By placing sophisticated technologies in the context of a Bengali village laboratory of the 19th century and placing Mukhopadhyay's text in the context of 20th- and 21st-century struggles over the control of modern scientific tools, we see the struggle over the control of modern scientific tools and



technologies. Banerjee's observation that Mukhopadhyay's stories "highlight alternative and subaltern concepts of knowledge" is particularly pertinent here: the Patalghor itself becomes a site where rural, non-elite scientific practice challenges both colonial and neo-colonial regimes of knowledge. The hopeful and perhaps temporary answer is that science and technology can be controlled by those who have a childlike wonder about the world rather than those who use it as a tool for domination.

Conclusion

In *Patalghor*, the sleep-inducing device and its various forms of invention, human and alien, serve a multitude of purposes. Mukhopadhyay captures the aesthetic disruptions brought forth by speculative acoustic technology and the social disruptions of any radical social change. He also captures the ethical disruptions brought to his characters and his readers by the power to suspend life. Mukhopadhyay's achievement is that he captures all of this in a narrative of comic eccentricity, and of adventure at a rural scale that is designed for young readers.

The story's final destruction of the machine doesn't answer the questions that the story poses; rather, it leaves them unanswered, similarly to the silent echo of the sound waves that the machine once produced. In these modern times of rapidly evolving technology, the simplicity of the sound machine of *Patalghor* reminds us that the more important technologies are the ones that challenge us to question whether the advancements of technology will be used to enforce greater control and power over others, or whether those advancements will be used to inspire and cultivate a sense of greater awe and wonder. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of postcolonial science fiction, the mythologem, epistemic assemblage, and the aesthetics of *adbhuta*, we can see that Mukhopadhyay's text does more than entertain: it stages a sustained meditation on the politics of knowledge, the ethics of technological power, and the irreplaceable position of the child who believes that the world can continue to be both known and filled with awe and wonder. As Indian speculative fiction grows, so too will the site of underground Patalghor remain a critical locus for these enduring questions.



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