

From Visible Walls to Invisible Data: Surveillance and Spatial-Informational Segregation in Prayaag Akbar's *Leila* and Samit Basu's *Chosen Spirits*

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Abstract

This paper compares Prayaag Akbar's *Leila* (2017) and Samit Basu's *Chosen Spirits* (2020) to argue that Indian speculative fiction tracks a historical shift in the logic of surveillance and social sorting, from a visible, architectural regime of exclusion built on walls, gates, and identity checks, to an invisible, informational one built on drones, biometric wristbands, livestream algorithms, and failed social-credit systems. Reading the two novels through Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power, Gilles Deleuze's societies of control, David Lyon's concept of social sorting, and Shoshana Zuboff's surveillance capitalism, the paper argues that Basu's data-driven Delhi does not simply replace Akbar's walled city but absorbs it, reinforcing rather than dissolving the older architecture of exclusion. Both novels root their surveillance regimes in the same underlying ideology of purity and caste, suggesting that new surveillance technology in Indian speculative fiction gives old forms of exclusion a faster and less visible delivery mechanism.

Keywords: Surveillance, Spatial Segregation, Social Sorting, Surveillance Capitalism, Indian Speculative Fiction

1. Introduction

Prayaag Akbar's *"Leila"* (2017) and Samit Basu's *"Chosen Spirits"* (2020) are separated by only three years of publication and by very different registers. Akbar's novel is a spare, mournful account of a mother's search for her abducted daughter in a city cut into walled sectors [1], while Basu's is a fast, satirical portrait of a livestreaming influencer economy in near-future Delhi [2]. Yet both are, at bottom, novels about who gets to move through the city and who is watched while doing so. This paper argues that the two novels chart a historical shift in the logic of Indian surveillance and social sorting, from a visible, architectural regime of exclusion, made of walls, gates, uniformed militias, and public identification checks, to an invisible, informational one, in which drones, biometric wristbands, livestream algorithms, and failed social-credit systems perform the same sorting function without requiring a physical boundary. Reading the two novels together through the vocabulary of surveillance studies, Michel Foucault's disciplinary gaze [3], Gilles Deleuze's societies of control [4], David Lyon's social sorting [5], and Shoshana Zuboff's surveillance capitalism [6], reveals that Basu's Delhi does not so much replace Akbar's walled city as absorb it, so that the wall persists, reinforced rather than dissolved by data. Underneath both regimes runs the same older ideology of purity, caste, and communal belonging, which

suggests that in Indian speculative fiction, new surveillance technology does not invent new forms of exclusion so much as give old ones a faster, less visible delivery mechanism.

2. Theoretical Framework: From Discipline to Control

Michel Foucault's (1995) account of disciplinary power provides the starting point for any discussion of fictional surveillance regimes. Foucault argues that modern power operates less through spectacular violence than through the organisation of visibility, since subjects internalise discipline because they know they might always be seen, as in Jeremy Bentham's panopticon, where a single unseen observer can watch many cells at once [3]. Akbar's sector walls and gate checks are a fairly direct, almost literal restaging of this architecture of visibility, where power is exercised by segregating bodies in space and making transgression instantly visible to a watching community.

Gilles Deleuze's (1992) "Postscript on the Societies of Control" complicates this picture for a text like "Chosen Spirits". Deleuze argues that the enclosed, disciplinary institutions Foucault describes, the school, the factory, the prison, are giving way to open, continuous, and modulated forms of control that do not require walls at all, since control becomes something a person carries with them, coded into a number, a password, or a data profile [4]. David Lyon's (2007) "Surveillance Studies: An Overview" extends this into the idea of social sorting, the process by which categorisation through data, rather than through physical boundary, determines a person's access to spaces, services, and opportunities [5]. Shoshana Zuboff's (2019) "The Age of Surveillance Capitalism" sharpens this further by describing an economic order in which human experience itself becomes raw material for data extraction and behavioural prediction, monetised by corporations rather than simply monitored by the state [6]. Taken together, these frameworks let us read Akbar's walls and Basu's data as two historically distinct, but related, technologies for accomplishing the same task, deciding who belongs where.

3. Visible Walls: Spatial Segregation and Embodied Surveillance in Leila

"Leila" imagines its unnamed Indian city as a set of gated sectors separated by towering walls, the oldest and most sacred of which is called Purity One, "first of the sector walls" [1, p. 8], built to keep the city's elite apart from everyone else. Movement between sectors is not merely discouraged, it is policed at the gate by identification checks and by an informal militia called the Repeaters, described as "a loose band of men" who patrol borders, examine papers, and mete out summary violence to anyone who cannot account for their presence [1, p. 46]. When the protagonist Shalini's family is targeted early in the novel, it is the Repeaters who arrive at the house, and later, at a sector gate, a Repeater directly demands identification from another character before the family can pass [1]. Eligibility to live in a given sector is explicitly tied to birth, and the ruling Council's governing slogan, chanted and gestured with a hand over the heart, is simply "Purity for All" [1, p. 30].

This is Foucauldian discipline almost without metaphor. Exclusion in "Leila" is accomplished by bodies stationed at thresholds, by badges and papers checked in person, and by punishment staged as public spectacle rather than administered anonymously. Shalini's incarceration in the Purity Camp, where inmates are indoctrinated and medicated into compliance, and the biometric mark printed alongside a person's identification number and address on formal correspondence, both function as instruments that fix a body to a category and make that category legible to any Repeater checking papers at a gate [1, p. 123]. Crucially, this surveillance is communal as much as bureaucratic, since neighbours watch each other, and the internalised pressure of that gaze is rendered directly in the novel's own vocabulary of comparison and

watching, "Everyone is watching. Comparing" [1, p. 134], while later a group of Repeaters is literally assigned the job of "watching us" from a rooftop [1, p. 144]. Hemkant Vijay Dhade (2022) argues that the walls in "Leila" function to contort the identities of the city's inhabitants through both brute physical force and a segregated urban geography [7]. Surveillance here, in other words, is inseparable from architecture, to be watched is to be walled in.

4. Invisible Data: Informational Segregation and Surveillance Capitalism in Chosen Spirits

"Chosen Spirits" begins where "Leila" leaves off, in a city where the checkpoint has been supplemented, though not fully replaced, by a pervasive informational layer. The novel opens on its protagonist Joey editing "algorithm-controlled surveillance-cam clips" of herself for public consumption, and a nearby park's own cameras are casually vandalised and repaired within the first few pages, signalling how ordinary and infrastructural such monitoring has become [2, p. 4]. A minor character reflects that "surveillance used to be run by humans in the good old days", contrasting an earlier, embodied watching with a new automated regime in which, as she puts it, "the walls really have ears" [2, p. 14], an image that directly inverts Akbar's architecture of visible walls into a domestic space listening invisibly. Joey's own fantasy of producing "24/7 surveillance of herself" [2, p. 17], the wish to make her every hour into content, shows how thoroughly the line between being surveilled and performing for surveillance has dissolved in the novel's Flow livestreaming economy.

The novel gives its own name to Lyon's concept of social sorting, since characters describe a new elite defined not by bloodline but by data-verified "access-caste" status, with the most connected individuals mockingly called "access-Brahmins", people whose worth is established not by a wall or a gate but by a glance at their public activity feed [2, p. 52]. This vocabulary makes explicit what Foucault's and Lyon's frameworks would predict, a new, informational hierarchy borrowing its structure and even its language directly from the older caste system. The novel also recalls a government attempt to formalise this sorting through a social-credit rating system, modelled, in the text, on programmes built with Chinese surveillance technology, which collapsed only after public backlash, not principle [2, p. 52]. Ambient biometric identification recurs throughout the novel, drivers are tracked by wristband devices called "smartatts" [2, p. 24] and identified by tollbooth cameras capable of catching a fugitive mid-journey, while drones, advertising drones, police drones, and camera drones, saturate the sky as a form of continuous, non-checkpoint-based observation [2, pp. 24, 26, 153-154]. Even sexuality is refracted through this apparatus, "Big-Brother Surveillance porn", the novel tells us, is the most popular entertainment genre worldwide, eroticising the very condition of being watched [2, p. 59]. And where "Leila"'s Repeaters single out individual bodies at a gate, "Chosen Spirits" shows the state placing a specific dissident journalist under "special surveillance" of her digital followers [2, p. 91], a targeted, data-driven analogue to Akbar's checkpoint interrogation [1, 2]. Anindita Shome (2022) reads this world as one of "extreme surveillance and dystopia" built specifically around technological control of the underprivileged [8], while Aman Deep Singh (2024), drawing on Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence alongside Zuboff's surveillance capitalism, argues that the novel's data economy inflicts a gradual, normalised erosion of privacy and autonomy on its characters rather than a single dramatic harm [6, 9].

5. Continuity, Not Rupture: The Wall Persists Inside the Data Society

It would be a mistake, however, to read "Chosen Spirits" as depicting a clean replacement of wall by data. Joey lives in a literal gated community, India China Harmony Place, and her difficulty in leaving it is

caused not by an algorithm but by a "neighbourhood militia", uniformed and sponsor-branded, physically "herding" a group of undocumented people out of the enclave in a scene that closely echoes the Repeaters of "Leila" [2, p. 24]. Elsewhere, characters navigate literal "guards and barriers and the spikes" [2, p. 24], alongside the drones, suggesting that architectural exclusion and informational exclusion now operate side by side rather than in succession. This is, in fact, how the novel's own publisher describes it, the official blurb for "Chosen Spirits" promises a story that dismantles "the invisible walls that divide the city", in a world where "every wall has eyes" [10], language that fuses Akbar's architecture directly with Basu's optics of surveillance in a single image. Deleuze (1992) himself anticipated this overlap, insisting that his societies of control do not simply succeed disciplinary societies but coexist and interpenetrate with them, producing hybrid, layered systems of power rather than a clean historical break [4]. The more accurate account of the shift these two novels track, then, is not walls giving way to data, but walls being reinforced, extended, and made more efficient by data, so that the checkpoint does not disappear, it simply gains a camera, a scanner, and an algorithm behind it.

6. The Common Root: Purity, Caste, and Necropolitics Beneath Both Regimes

Both novels root their surveillance regimes in the same older Indian social logic, the ideology of ritual and communal purity historically organised around caste and religious endogamy. Akbar's Council frames its wall-building explicitly as the pursuit of "Purity for All" [1, p. 30], and the text notes that purity came to have different meanings across the city even as the underlying project of sorting people by birth remained constant [1]. Basu's "access-caste" and "access-Brahmin" vocabulary performs the identical manoeuvre in reverse, taking the language of an ancient purity hierarchy and re-mapping it onto data access and digital proximity to power [2, p. 52]. In both cases, a very old vocabulary of ritual pollution and belonging is repurposed to legitimate a very new apparatus of control, whether that apparatus is a masonry wall or a server farm.

Achille Mbembe's (2003) concept of necropolitics, the exercise of sovereign power through the capacity to decide who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not [11, p. 27], illuminates the stakes of this shared root. Akbar's novel makes the necropolitical dimension of purity ideology unmistakable in its scenes of public, communally sanctioned violence against those who transgress sector boundaries. Basu's novel is quieter about outright killing but no less concerned with disposability, detention centres absorb the undocumented, and low-income "dronejacking" workers and gig labourers are treated as expendable inputs to an economy of surveillance and delivery infrastructure [2, p. 160]. What both novels insist upon, in other words, is that surveillance, whether embodied in a Repeater or automated in a drone, is never a neutral technology of observation, it is always in the service of deciding whose life is protected and whose is exposed.

7. Resistance and the Limits of the Gaze

If the two novels share a diagnosis, they also gesture, unevenly, toward resistance. "Chosen Spirits" stages a small but vivid image of counter-surveillance, a local crime boss known as the King of Nehru Place deploys trained hawks to physically knock police and corporate drones out of the sky above a contested market, protecting the area's informal economy from being seen by the authorities' cameras [2, pp. 153-154]. It is a literal, almost folkloric answer to ambient aerial surveillance, resistance mounted not with a competing algorithm but with a bird of prey. "Leila" offers a quieter, more interior form of resistance, Shalini's sixteen-year search for her daughter is itself an act of refusing the Council's demand that she

accept the boundaries assigned to her, a narrative that insists on tracing connections the wall was built to sever [1]. Neither novel offers a technological fix to surveillance, both locate resistance instead in bodies that refuse to stay where the system has sorted them.

8. Conclusion

Read side by side, "Leila" and "Chosen Spirits" trace a shift in Indian speculative fiction's imagination of surveillance, from the disciplinary wall, gate, and militia of Akbar's near-future city to the ambient drones, biometric scanners, and livestream economy of Basu's [1, 2]. Yet the more important claim this comparison supports is not that data has replaced the wall, but that it has absorbed it. Basu's gated colony and its uniformed militia demonstrate that the architecture of "Leila" persists inside the data society of "Chosen Spirits", now working alongside cameras and algorithms rather than in their place. And beneath both regimes lies the same enduring logic of purity and caste, repackaged as access. For a reader of Indian speculative fiction, the lesson of these two novels is not that surveillance technology is new, but that it is old power finding a faster, quieter way to build the same wall.

9. References

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