

## **The Fade of Secrecy: Surveillance of Capitalism and Dictatorial Truths in Samit Basu's *Chosen Spirits***

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### **Abstract**

The early 21st century has been marked by the dominant forces of surveillance capitalism, including companies such as Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft, among others. These entities and their interconnected networks have established a comprehensive political-economic institutional framework. This framework exercises oligopolistic dominance over the majority of realms, systems, and processes related to digital information and communication. In this context, Samit Basu, a renowned figure among contemporary Indian science fiction novelists, addresses the erosion of privacy and surveillance capitalism through his recent novel, *Chosen Spirits*. Basu highlights a societal shift towards authoritarianism.

By conducting a comprehensive analysis of the novel's depiction of a surveillance-intensive Delhi, the study reveals alarming parallels between Basu's speculative narrative and the contemporary realities of digital oversight, corporate dominance, and diminishing personal freedoms in the context of contemporary India. By integrating theoretical insights on surveillance capitalism with Basu's vivid depiction of a world where individual autonomy is compromised, the paper sheds light on the profound implications of technological and capitalist advancements on privacy and democracy. It advocates for the fostering of a more democratic and less intrusive technological future.

**Keywords:** Surveillance, Oligopolistic Dominance, Samit Basu, Privacy, Democracy

The contemporary era is marked by optimistic depictions of a highly advanced technical future in literature and culture, sometimes paired with fantastical figures like crazy scientists or gigantic robotic humanoid. This suggests that, with the advent of the information age, there was a heightened awareness among people about the potential risks tied to contemporary technologies. Such risks include the unauthorized use of devices like computers, cellphones, tablets, and networks to compromise systems, endanger user privacy, exfiltrate documents and data, or disrupt data-related activities. “In the context of contemporary technological ubiquity in the matter of surveillance,” D. Banarji points out: “the collapse of the division between public and private spheres, and the fragmentation and ordering of individual subjectivity (dividuation) for the purposes of capital commodification and thanato-political governmentality” (Banerji 3). In this sense, “we become the codes we punch” (Hayles 46) and (T)he narrator (in any story) is not a storyteller and not a professional authority, although these functions linger in the narrative as anachronistic allusions and wrenched referentiality. Rather, the narrator is a keyboarder, a hacker, a manipulator of codes” (Hayles 46).

The concept of informational secrecy is on the brink of extinction, driven by the rapid adoption of technology by businesses and governments that compromises privacy. These technologies are incredibly diverse, encompassing regular transactional data collection, increased automated surveillance in public spaces, the use of biometrics and facial recognition, satellite surveillance, vehicle and cell phone tracking, workplace monitoring, and internet oversight through methods ranging from cookies to comprehensive browsing histories.

Over the course of two decades, the institutional growth of surveillance capitalism has centered on the commodification of human activity. This commodification is achieved through the covert and comprehensive extraction of data generated by individuals. As a result, the rise of surveillance capitalism signifies that private experiences are persistently sought after and captured by digital platforms. These platforms then use these experiences as raw materials for data processing, manufacturing, and sales. In this context, the words of Shoshana Zuboff are significant. In his book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, He characterizes surveillance capitalism as a “new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales” (Zuboff 10). Thus, it represents a new form of instrumental power that employs ubiquitous digital tools to psychologically control targeted messages, impose incentives and punishments, shape choices, initiate social comparison dynamics, and influence subliminal cues. These strategies are designed to keep people unaware while remotely adjusting, directing, and altering human behavior toward desired outcomes.

The notion of secrecy undergoes a dramatic transformation in the contemporary digital era, characterized by ubiquitous surveillance that lays the foundation for authoritarian claims to truth and capitalist objectives. During this era, the sanctity of privacy is undermined both as a

right and as a practical reality, marked by an omnipresent gaze that penetrates both personal and public domains. The erosion of confidentiality is not merely a byproduct of technological advancement but a deliberate outcome of systems designed to monetize personal data and strengthen control under the guise of efficiency and security. This degradation of privacy prompts a more comprehensive social reckoning with the ideals and concepts that underpin our notions of freedom, autonomy, and democracy. In this context, Samit Basu emerges as a distinguished figure whose novel, *Chosen Spirits* (2020), delves into the reflections of a synchronous reality. Here, surveillance capitalism and social media reveal the essence of a new regime centered on surveillance-driven capital accumulation. The novel seeks to understand the social and political circumstances that have paved the way for the establishment of this regime.

The narrative unfolds against the backdrop of late 2020s New Delhi, a city scarred by the enduring aftermath of recent political turbulence, overshadowed by numerous realities and looming catastrophes. Behind the glossy façade of technological progress and an abundance of diversions, the city conceals the scars of genuine and recent violence. The novelist depicts this city, stating:

Delhi has always been a city of seven walls, and the men who live inside each. No, they're not demolishing CP again, focus, use that famous imagination of yours. You could guess you'd crashed into your wall before, when you couldn't go further, but now the walls can be mapped and measured, the tools exist (Basu 170).

Joey, the central character in the novel, holds the title of a "reality-controller." A proficient image-shaper and storyteller by trade, she makes the unorthodox decision to stay in Delhi. This decision sets her apart from her peers, many of whom, bearing names that resemble applications or shampoo brands, opt to escape abroad. Her responsibilities include overseeing the online presence of 'Flowstars'. The novel's first line sets the tone for a world characterized by commonplace yet sinister conformity, as indicated by the novelist's words: "Sometimes Joey feels like her whole life is a montage of randomly selected, algorithm-controlled surveillance-cam clips, mostly of her looking at screens or sitting glazed-eyed at meetings" (Basu 1).

The combined and amplifying impact of technologies could make every aspect of modern life fully transparent and accessible to those observing, leaving no room for concealment. In this context, the life of Joey, the experienced storyteller in Basu's novel, is not different. She realizes that the structure and complexity she weaves into the stories for her clients are missing from her own life. This realization starkly contrasts her reality of living under the constant surveillance of a vague, complex 'Big Brother,' where she often fantasizes about being the heroine of the perfect novels she writes. Beyond the Thought Police, as George Orwell imagined in his classic dystopian novel, *1984*, contemporary surveillance extends to monitoring individuals through both their bodies and their devices. Such is the reality for Joey. She has a personal AI helper named Narad, which receives data through smart tattoos that monitor her stress and hormone levels. This information is then used to manage daily tasks and provide digital comfort to her. Basu captures this reality through the following conversations:

-You seem unhappy, Narad texts. Care to share?

- No.

-I can read your emotions more effectively if simple series of facial exercises. Initiate fun-learn now? - No.

-Would you like me to set up an appointment with a therapist? Tap here to see Top 5 results for you.

'I have to find my ex-boyfriend and current colleague an onscreen girlfriend,' Joey says. 'Do you have anything helpful to say?'

\_\_Would you like to hear a selection of inspirational quotes about love, break-ups, coping, finding new love, office relationships, hiring the best candidate or secrets of long-format content?

'No.' (30).

The pervasive surveillance technology depicted in the novel draws an uncanny parallel to Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon concept, as articulated in his influential 18th-century treatise, *Panopticon, or The Inspection House*. This architectural innovation, originally designed for prisons, ensures constant observation of inmates by guards, preventing any inter-prisoner communication. Adding to the psychological impact, inmates remain oblivious to the identity and timing of the surveillance, as guards are strategically concealed. Michel Foucault expanded upon this concept in his 1975 work, *Discipline and Punish*, delving into the functionality of discipline within the Panoptic prison framework. Foucault vividly describes the Panopticon's operational mechanism and its implications through the following passage:

To induce a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual use unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who uses it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they themselves are the bearer (Foucault 201).

The novel's all-encompassing surveillance technology bears a striking resemblance to Georgia Tech's 'Aware Home' project from the early 2000s. At the core of this endeavor lay the ambitious concept of fostering a profound "human-home symbiosis" through the integration of wearable technology worn by residents and a sophisticated network of "context-aware sensors" strategically embedded throughout the living space. This intricate network, comprising elements such as smart tattoos, personalized artificial intelligences, smartphones, and smart kitchen gadgets seamlessly incorporated into Joey's and her parents' residences, mirrors the innovative 'aware home' paradigm. The envisioned symbiotic relationship aimed to not only enhance the efficiency and convenience of daily living but also redefine the very essence of how individuals interact with and experience their domestic environments. While the scientists' initial concept may have been upbeat and utopian, Basu's story imbues the idea of an "aware" house with a far darker tone, rendering the proverb "walls have ears" (16) unnervingly real. Joey attempts to

explain to her parents that, in contrast to earlier times when monitoring was conducted by humans and one could freely voice opinions, the current surveillance technology has changed the dynamics.

The novel depicts the disintegration of the illusion of a democratic India in the aftermath of widespread opposition to the 'Citizenship Amendment Act' (CAA), which requires individuals to prove their citizenship. This situation is compounded by the controversial Farm Laws, feared by farmers to increase their vulnerability to exploitation by traders, and the violent attacks on students at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), a prestigious institution known for its left-wing student activism. Additionally, the narrative addresses internet shutdowns, news censorship, and invasive, data-driven intrusions into homes, all of which may disturb contemporary readers. By weaving together a sense of familiarity with its historical resonances and a sense of strangeness in its present state, the novel fosters a unique connection with its audience. Basu captures this peculiar landscape through the following prophetic words:

They say they've seen all this before-the fear of speaking out, the fear of people around you, the fear that you'd wake up one morning to find you'd lost everything-no bank account, no citizenship, no job, no rights. It's fear they live with, just like the fear, in their twenties, of a terrorist bomb in every market, every empty car, back when terrorists and the government were on different sides. (17)

Basu creates a more approachable and sympathetic figure in Joey, departing from the traditional cyberpunk story dominated by Western authors, featuring lone, masculine heroes fighting against tyrannical governments. In contrast, Joey, an upper-middle-class Indian woman, navigates work obligations, strives to avoid conflict with the law, and takes care of her elderly parents. Basu skillfully illustrates the lifestyles of the powerful while expressing a sense of helplessness and insignificance through a protagonist with a certain level of social privilege.

Rudra, the younger son of a well-known family, is forgotten but serves as Joey's companion. Acting as an extra set of eyes to view the world, his perspective is enriched by extensive use of cameras and virtual reality equipment. Through these characters, Basu presents a nuanced view of resistance and survival within a surveillance-heavy society.

Within the novel's intricate tapestry, authentic resistance emerges not from mainstream protagonists, but rather from the fringes, where peripheral figures adeptly manipulate the system for personal empowerment, often leveraging immersive VR gaming platforms. DesiBryde, an unorthodox adult entertainer, challenges societal norms and censorship by ingeniously performing in masks reminiscent of religious leaders, thereby creating a profound cultural disturbance through her influential Flowstream. E-Klav, echoing the enigmatic flair of Banksy, operates as a Dalit graffiti artist, skillfully navigating the shadows while defacing symbols synonymous with the establishment, thus embodying a subversive form of silent protest. Meanwhile, Zaria Salam, an intrepid investigative journalist, attains online notoriety despite the ephemeral nature of her videos, which mysteriously vanish from the Indian internet mere seconds after release. These peripheral figures collectively embody a nuanced and dynamic resistance, showcasing the potency of unconventional tactics in challenging and reshaping the status quo within the intricacies of the novel's sociopolitical landscape. Basu finely states: "we are building our own replacements, no? We cannot live in peace, we cannot learn from our pasts,

we cannot agree on our futures. So we are building gods who can. We are teaching the machines how to be better than us" (81).

The cyberbazaar, a clandestine pirate-tech market predominantly operated by the working class, emerges as the clandestine hub where Rudra and Zaria discreetly shed their smart tattoos, effectively disconnecting from the pervasive digital grid. As the novel unfolds towards its conclusion, Basu diverges from a revolutionary narrative, offering instead a nuanced portrayal of potential transformation achieved through persistent, incremental endeavors. The cyberbazaar, with its subversive nature, becomes a symbolic space embodying the characters' defiance and the possibility for gradual, systemic change that permeates the narrative's thematic fabric. Basu's narrative arc unfolds, not in explosive revolutions, but in the subtlety of sustained efforts, echoing the resilience of individuals navigating a complex sociotechnical landscape.

With a backdrop of capitalism and authoritarian realities, Basu's *Chosen Spirits* offers a moving investigation into the vanishing domain of concealment, revealing the complex web of monitoring. The novelist's pen power compels the readers to speculate how privacy is changing in a world where power and technology are becoming more and more dominant via the prism of his story. Apart from exploring the consequences of widespread monitoring, the book also emphasizes the fine line that must be drawn between individual liberties and social control, offers a riveting commentary on the junction of human liberty, political power, and the unstoppable march of technology progress.

Therefore, at the end, it can be said that this novel is a wake-up call to the unseen collapse that is swallowing our communities and the globe, demanding that we acknowledge the interdependence of our activities and how they will affect the future of the world. By doing this, his novel not only portends disaster but also highlights the chance of redemption, whereby a more just and sustainable society may materialize from the shadows of the current situation.

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