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TEACHING SCIENCE FICTION IN INDIAN UNIVERSITIES: A STUDY

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Abstract:

Science fiction (commonly shortened as SF) as we know it today has grown into a rich literary genre in its comparatively short history. Despite numerous attempts to incorporate SF into education, it has yet to garner widespread acceptance. In India, it is nearly unheard of to teach or study science fiction, and our youngsters and young adults are rarely exposed to enough SF literature. As a result, we are missing out on the potential of science fiction as a vehicle for popularising scientific and technological topics. Science fiction is all about 'thought experiments,' and it's all about extrapolation and exploration. The genre's complexity lies in its ability to think beyond the immediate. There is a multitude of SF texts that can be used at many levels of education since SF engages in diverse frames of reference, analyses technological advancements, opportunities, and risks. Furthermore, because of its multidisciplinary character, SF may be utilised to teach a variety of disciplines. At its best, science fiction compels readers to think concretely about subjects that are often rejected as too esoteric to tackle. It allows us to explore deeper into questions that arise in an ever-changing universe. However, when we look at the attempts in India to incorporate SF into the school curriculum, we find that there are very few. The reasons behind this scenario are examined in this article. It also tries to figure out why and how this situation should be altered. The report concludes with some potential avenues in which we could attempt to incorporate SF content into other schools.

Keywords: *Courses, Future Studies, Higher Education, Science Fiction, SF Teaching, etc.*

In many parts of the world, science fiction has become regarded as important literature. At numerous forums, the topics of writing, reading, and teaching science fiction are discussed. However, there is a scarcity of knowledge regarding SF in academic circles in India. Few literary experts are even aware of the genre, its popular elements, the emergence of many sub-genres, its interdisciplinary nature, and so on. There has been very little attempt to introduce SF as a teaching tool. This study looks at the situation in India, namely the large gap between what can be done using SF in the classroom and what is now being done. The paper also examines numerous attempts undertaken in other educational systems outside of India, particularly in Western countries, in order to determine how far SF has penetrated curriculums around the world and to assess SF's standing in education. The research is forward-looking in that it recommends some ways to incorporate SF into our educational systems as a teaching tool.

In the beginning, it has to be noted that SF as an area of study has acquired currency for nearly five decades. Since the first course in SF, introduction of these courses have been happening mostly in the west and an attempt to find out about such efforts in India or even other Eastern countries does not lead us much further. Either, they are non-existent or they are not being documented. Literature survey and speaking to a few scholars in some of the universities in the western countries indicate that the whole issue is handled differently there. Be it the various efforts that were made to introduce SF at Universities, or be it documenting such efforts, they are systematically handled. This is especially so



in the United States of America where the experiences by the pioneers are shared through publications in academic journals or conferences. Understanding the efforts made and the experiences gained in running courses in SF serve us a long way as they give us leads and let us build on the existing modules. I hope this national meet makes some initiative in this direction.

To begin, it should be mentioned that SF as a field of study has only been around for approximately five decades. Since the initial course in SF, most of these courses have been introduced in the west, and attempts to learn about similar efforts in India or other Eastern countries have yielded nothing. Either they don't exist or they aren't being recorded. I conducted a survey to learn more about what has been done/is being done elsewhere in the globe in the domain of "teaching SF" before attempting to investigate its presence/absence in the Indian context.

Whether it's the many initiatives to introduce SF at universities or the recording of such efforts, they're all so well-done that I'm convinced of the value of such documentation. This is especially true in the United States of America, where pioneering experiences are shared through academic journals and even conferences such as this one! Understanding the efforts taken and the lessons learned go a long way in providing us with leads and allowing us to build on the existing educational modules peppered with SF courses.

Teaching science fiction has long been a foreign concept in India. When we look at school, college, and university education, we discover that attempts to incorporate SF works into educational modules are rare. We occasionally came across some scientific fictional short stories at the classroom level, among the numerous levels. Even when some attempts were made to introduce pupils to SF themes, it rarely came across as a self-conscious genre of literature. In such circumstances, the focus has never been on science fiction, and educators have seemed to overlook the genre's ability to broaden the horizons of young minds until recently.

The case is the same at higher levels of learning too. Rarely research scholars take up SF for their M. Phil. or doctoral dissertation. On considering possible reasons for such a scenario, a few points emerged:

Science fiction is rarely taken up as a serious subject of study. This can be attributed to lack of awareness about the genre. The scholars engaged in literary pursuits at university level are hardly sensitized to the richness of the genre of SF. Not many attempts have been made to use SF in other areas of study, say, that of Sciences and Social Sciences. Even when a school curriculum has had some sporadically thrown-in SF story, I doubt if the instructors have been sensitized to the world of SF to make their teaching effective. As Dilip M. Salwi, a well-known science writer points out, "The power of good SF as an educational tool is not realized in Indian context. He says, it is not realized that "good science fictions by showing the circumstances and novel milieus, the temperament and reasoning of the protagonist inculcate scientific temper in a child and prepare him for the scientific and social developments that are to come" (NCERT).

There are some important reasons for this scenario. First and foremost, Science Fiction has been for long, an ignored genre of literature in India. We do not have a SF culture in India as yet. Secondly, SF writing happening in India so far has been very less in comparison to the mainstream literature being written. Even when we consider the huge publishing industry in India, SF out-put has been very less. The list of prominent names of SF writers from India is not very long, though it is growing. Thirdly, the exposure to good SF from different parts of the world is very limited.

Besides these, in the academia too, we have not had the much needed exposure or an atmosphere that is conducive to take up SF studies seriously at higher levels of education. Of the numerous doctoral theses being produced in the area of language and literature, one hardly finds studies in the area of SF. It is hard to find libraries that are self-sufficient to support such research. SF academicians even feel alienated if they focus only on SF studies.



There is another dimension to the whole issue: unlike in the West, in the Indian university system of education, there is not enough thrust given to courses in humanities including language and literature. The concept of compulsory freshman courses with some focus towards language, literature, and humanities is a well-accepted phenomenon in the west. In India, it is hardly so. For example, a student who gets into an engineering program in India mostly studies courses in core Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Thermodynamics etc. as a freshman without really studying any course in humanities. This leaves us educators with not much option in terms of designing courses with contents such as science fiction, literature or other such subjects.

Having previously said that our school curriculum did not employ much SF as course topic until recently, I would now like to call your attention to a recent, albeit little, change in this regard. After being intrigued by the paucity of SF for a long time, and seeing some positive developments in SF output in India, I wanted to see if any efforts had been made to integrate SF in course materials. At this point, it's worth noting that the only way SF has been represented in school curriculum thus far has been through English course books and literature sections.

Hence, this search focused on various text books of English for class 4th to 12th as prescribed by NCERT, after the recent revisions. And the search did not go in vain as the findings are somewhat encouraging. Following paragraph sums up the findings of this survey.

The new syllabus in English, prepared as a follow-up to the National Curriculum Framework 2005 draws on different genres and science fiction is one such genre. It spells out SF as one of the genres to be included in the course content. Being an SF enthusiast, I could not miss this interesting feature: some of the text books were named after the science fictional stories that formed a part of the course content of the respective books. For example, the eighth class and the tenth class Supplementary Readers are named as *The Alien Hand and Footprints without Feet*- both being titles of SF stories that are a part of these books!

On examining the course content as mentioned earlier, I have found that the recently designed books do include contents from SF in its syllabus and it is done in little more structured way. To be more specific, I'd list down the appearance of SF in different classes and the way in which the idea is introduced.

Thus, to conclude, in the context of teaching science fiction in India, where there have been little attempts to make SF's presence felt in academia, the paper investigates the causes behind this scenario. It also tries to figure out why and how this situation should be altered. The report concludes with some potential avenues in which we could attempt to bring SF content into courses. One of the overarching themes has been that we should not overlook the possibilities of a discourse genre that is rich in exploratory, inspirational, and visionary qualities.

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