



ChetanBhagat: Representing Indian Urban Reality

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Abstract

ChetanBhagat brilliantly shows his understanding of the pain and passion of young lot. Most of his characters are young blood. He uses his refined Post-Modern Literature as an element to bring positive change in India, to make young generations' mind both technically as well as mentally strong. He helps the people dream through his easy words and provides inspiration through witty examples. The novelist wants to be the part and parcel of the never-ever-before kind of historic changes taking place as India is awakening to its full potential. The surmounting pressure to succeed is one of the reasons that is making India a vibrant, fast growing and fast changing economy and society. His entire writing has emerged up as a potential blockbuster delighting the new generation to find reality in his works thereby developing the mindset of the readers for progressive India, where not only the spirit of patriotism but also the standard of living is high. ChetanBhagat's success has demonstrated that there is a huge market for Indian fiction with everyday Indian characters outing out everyday Indian stories. The approach of ChetanBhagat as a novelist explains his characters' efforts to obtain sound financial standing in Indian conditions. Talking about New generation authors including ChetanBhagat, must always keep in mind that — mere eat, drink and be merry is not the sole end of life, that a couple need not run away from their children, entrusting them to the supervision of others, just to make love and get involved in sex in a hotel or dormitory.

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The New Generation author ChetanBhagat was born in New Delhi in a middle class Punjabi Family on 22 April, 1974. ChetanBhagat's contribution to the field of entertainment is noticeable. He never confined his literary talents to just writing novels. As a responsible social person, he also writes columns in newspapers, citing and dwelling on various social and national issues. The tremendous success of ChetanBhagat as a novelist is a miracle of rare device. The credit goes to his management skills, mushrooming of thousands of new private engineering colleges necessitating his mastery over simple past tense, his justification of immoral instinctive human acts in garb of new age realism and above all one term from great Hindu philosophy called *Prarabdh*—“Throw a lucky man into the sea, and he will come up with a fish in his mouth”.¹ Since the phrase, the bestseller English language author has become the synonym for ChetanBhagat. The legend deserves some critical attention and evaluation as the master of sentiments of young generation, a name and place, both in the hearts of their sweet hearts and in society. His five novels *Five Point Someone*, *The Three Mistakes of My Llife and One Night @the Call Centre*, *Two States of my Marriage Life* and *Revolution 2020* have adventure, romance, background music, expert comments on social, political and education systems. This writing style is now recognized as one of the important innovations taking place in the field of novel writing. ChetanBhagat finds a ready market for the Indian English Literature. It is but natural that he is much bolder than the masters of the initial years. This boldness is specially found in his characterization. His characters have nothing essentially Indian about them. In fact, the main characters in *One Night @the Call Centre*, the six Call Center Executives –Radhika, Esha, Priyanka, Varun, Military Uncle and Shyam - could belong to any other nationality. In their denial of the typical Indian value system, the emergence of a new India can be located on India which is poles apart from the Indian reality rotted in the much talked about timeless India excessively found in the writings of the great triumvirate. Shyam's disregard for a marriage party in his family in order to reach office in time or Military Uncle's decision to join a Call Center at an age when most of the Indians choose to live a retired life are examples in hand. Their own little world of the Call Center is cosmopolitan in nature. The cosmopolitanism does not spring out only as a result of the revealed or unrevealed



presence of the customers from USA on the other side of the phones, but it is also in some measures due to the cosmopolitan life style of the male and female leads of the novel. Indeed drinking, dancing and partying at 32 milestone, working for a company headquartered at Boston, dating at ‘Mocha Café’ with its coloured Arabian lights and at Pizza Hut at Sahara Mall and going to the night club ‘Bed’ for break, the Call Center Executives may easily belong to young upcoming generation of any ultra modern society - with the exception of the Military Uncle - not because he is not cosmopolitan but because he is not exactly young. Their business names also give the taste of cosmopolitanism, for example: Radhika is Regina, Esha is Eliza, Varun is Victor and Sam for Shyam. Radhika is the only character in which some traits of Indianness or Indian womanhood is found. She works hard day and night to keep her parents-in-law in good humour. Shyam comments on her condition : “Cooking three meals a day and household chores and working all night.... the dark circle around her eyes”³ testify to her struggles to be an ideal Indian housewife. However, in course of chances upon the infidelity of her husband Anuj and decides to walk out from her marriage and her in-laws. The discovery is made through a telephonic talk from the Call Center, suitable to the prevalent atmosphere of the composition. Through the microcosmic reality of a call center the novelist takes into consideration to build up a simulated world to showcase the macrocosm of the prevailing reality of the Indian society. The revolt of Radika is the sheer display of the rejection of the traditionally found Indianness in the novels of the Big Three.

The point of crisis in form of looming pink slips is fabricated through subtle and intelligent touches of the narrator. Since the very beginning the atmosphere of slow down and fear of insecure job have been created by the novelist. He makes the reader aware of the crisis in their professional lives of the characters of the novel, as they fear that they are sure to lose their jobs since the business is low in their Call Center office. However, the novelist makes a brilliant shift from the professional crisis of the characters to the crisis in their personal lives. Shyam’s affair with Priyanka has been almost ended in whimper, leaving soul shattered Shyam struggling hard to get over the mental depression. Priyanka is bogged down by her extremely possessive mother, who hastily decides her daughter’s wedlock with an NRI. Esha, who inspires to be a model, finds her dreams shattered when she agrees to sleep with —a forty year old designer. Only to realize later on that she has been rejected as a model, which leads her to an attempt to commit suicide. The Military Uncle is not accepted by his son and daughter-in-law and he is forced to stay away from his grandson. The website developed by Victor and Shyam has been stolen by their boss Bakshi, who has taken the credit of developing the website which is going to be really very helpful in increasing the business of the company. Beautifully interwoven professional and personal crisis builds up pressure cooker like situation in the climax of the novel, that reminds the reader some of the most disturbing moments of the modern Indian social life. “A recent phenomenon in the Indian National life would be the financial slump, when the professional crisis of several Indians precipitated individual crises in their personal lives.”³

Desperate in their effort to overcome the pressure the executives opt to visit a night club that is going to be a temporary escape from the disturbing events of the night. It is during their journey back from the night club all sorts of confusions take place. First, Vroom feels nauseated as a result of excessive intake of alcohol; second they break the window-pane of a restaurant which causes a burglar’s alarm to ring and most importantly, the Qualis in which they are travelling skids, crashes into a construction site and hangs precariously over a grid of iron rods. This is the height of the climax in the novel with death staring at their faces, the panic spreads as the rods begins to yield slowly. To further complicate their predicament they find to their horror that there is no network coverage in that place, which simply means they are not going to take any kind of help from the outside World.

This section of the novel unfailingly takes us to the pages of William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, where some British teenagers marooned from the modern civilization of their ultra modern life-style, and in spite of using state of the art gadgets like mobile phones and laptops, the six Call Center employee, none find themselves completely at the mercy of nature. The all enveloping utter darkness adds to the sense of doom. The novelist superbly fabricates the situation of calamity. First catastrophe in the professional crisis, then the individualistic crisis and last and final is the crisis of death. Here intention of the novelist seems to make his reader aware of the illusion of the Meta narrative and to bust the myth of scientific progress. Here, the novelist touches the post- modernist ideas of his



contemporary world - a feature that is not to be found in the writings of his predecessors. If William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* is the picture of the predicament of the human race under the shadow of cold war and the possibility of devastating Nuclear War, *One Night @ the Call Center* by ChetanBhagat shows the predicament of the mankind in the Post-Modern consumerist social set up. It shows the real value of the human kind, shorn off all its artificial embellishments.

In the same light the first novel of the author deals with dilemma of today's engineering students in India who get into the country's top University, only to rebel against the stultifying atmosphere of academic competition. The novelist has, from his first hand experience, clearly portrayed ragging, hostel life, work pressure from the higher authority, increasing suicide cases, a great criticism on education system in India following internationally landed IIT system that has stifled students creativity by forcing them to value grades more than anything else; uninspiring teaching and numerous assignments adding to their woes, while still making time to enjoy one's youth. The novel very realistically describes the present scenario while revealing the fact that in India young people had begun to have far more options than their parents, but their choices remain circumscribed by traditional education system, and overbearingly high expectations.

ChetanBhagat speaks out the mind of new generation. His characters are young blood, not the old age people. The author talks about three inmates of IIT in his *Five Point Someone*. The author loves to see the spark in the people around him. "I see students like you, and I still see some sparks. When I see older people, the spark is difficult to find. That means as we age, the spark fades".⁴He knows very well that India has the largest population of youth in the world and he is sane enough to target these inexperience people as his reader or customer, most of them have just started opting reading as habit and unfortunately found easily available works of ChetanBhagat in every nook and cranny. It is the voice of youth and its emotional cord that touches his readers the most- "He did nothing in particular and did it very well."⁵

The novelist doesn't show expertise in writing about rural people and the seamy side of their lives but he prefers talking and targeting the Bermuda and Capri generation. Alok represents a ever perturbed lower class family in *Five Point Someone*, the striving friends Neha and Hari ever struggle to exploit every occasion to gain some sensual pleasure out of their friendship- the girl in pretext of an antidote to her dear departed brother who is the victim of the cruel education system and, of course, the brutality of inconsiderate career oriented attitude of his father Prof. Cherian. "With the pace of an autobiographical account, the characters are simple people with whom one can identify with almost instantaneously. Needless to say this pocket friendly tome is a lucid and clear account of a young wordsmith who succeeded in making this book a must read for the fun of it."⁶Ryan is easy go lucky kind of fellow with the sound financial background he manages to thumb down studies at the prestigious institute and compel to do the same to his new friends. Alok and Hari –who are very much impressed with heroics of Ryan: "Ryan Oberoi, I repeated his name again mentally. Now here was a guy you don't see in IIT too often; tall with spare height purposefully lean and unfairly handsome. A loose gray T-shirt proclaimed "GAP" in big blue letters on his chest and shiny black shorts reached his knees. Relatives abroad for sure, I thought. Nobody wears GAP to bed otherwise."⁷The amazing pace of - *Five Point Someone* with successive logical showcasing of the events keep the reader spell bound, with the disclaimer of the author that "This book will not help youngest into IIT."⁸The hard work that involves into securing admission in an IIT has been described in funny way. "I think half the trees in the world are felled to make up the IIT entrance exam guides_ __. All we would say as advice is, if you can lock yourself in a room with books for two years and throws away the key, you can probably make it here."⁹Soon after the sane advice, the author describes the hard core reality of every higher educational institution of India- the social evil- a crime namely —Ragging—"Another demon grinned at us, slapping his bare stomach every few seconds. There seemed to be no choice so we surrendered every item of our clothing, shivering at the unholy glee in Baku's face as he walked by each other of us, checking us out and grinning".¹⁰

Choosing the IIT element was itself half a success. After cinema, politics, sports, IIT is the brand that enjoys celebrity and salability status in India. The IIT factor helped a lot initially. Mouth talk spread like a wild fire that the book *Five Point Someone* is all about the dark secrets of IIT life. However, the realistic convincing story of



erstwhile meritorious students Alok, Hari and Ryan who mess their quiz in IIT and from then screw up their lives struggling to maintain their grades. Apart from the routine way of securing good marks which is given the term mugging, the unheroic hero Ryan tries some other unconventional way to upgrade the grades of trio. Disgusted with the IIT system, Ryan gives vent to his dissatisfaction: “And this IIT system is nothing but a mice race. It is not a rat race, mind you, as rats sound somewhat shrewd and clever. So it is not about that. It is about mindlessly running a race for four years, in every assignment and every test. It is a race where professor judge you every ten steps, with a GPA stamped on you every semester. Professor who have no idea what science and learning are about. Yes, that is what I think of the Professors. I mean, what have IITs given to this country? Name one invention in last three decades.”¹¹Ryan, the unheroic male lead of the novel devises a system to crack the tricky examination questions and for the completion of the assignment; he gives it an attractive title: “The C2D Plan” that is “co-operate to dominate.”¹²

The plan is like a war cry against the elite education system that is nothing but the process of driving a set of prejudices down one’s throat. The comment on the conventional process of learning in *Five Point Someone* reminds and warns, at the same time, that education is an admirable thing, but it is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught. According to this novel, the IIT system extracts the most promising years of one’s life from the country’s best minds thereby it suppresses talent and individual spirit. The evaluation of the students on the basis of draconian GPA system is faulty and it spreads malice among the fellow students. The faculty is heartless and Professors don’t care for the taught. As far as the contribution to the country is concerned the premier institute has done nothing for the sake of nation in the form of offering it any path breaking research or invention. To fight against the system the mind of Ryan fabricates “*The C2D PLAN*” that appears to be less logical and more silly, that nobody would love to emulate and that proved to be an unsuccessful scheme in the later part of the novel. The key tenets of “*The C2D PLAN*” were – don’t try this at home, or anywhere else:

1. “All assignments to be shared – one person will do each assignment by turn. The others will simply copy it. Saves times, saves duplication of effort.
2. We will divide up the course responsibilities. For instance, if there are courses in the semester, we will take care of only two each. One must attend all classes that one is responsible for but can skip all others.
3. We share lab experiment observations.
4. Our friendship is above GPAs. With all the new spare time, we live our lives to the fullest.
5. We combine our hostel rooms into one living unit – one common bedroom, one study room and one fun party room.
6. We split the cost of Vodka regardless of how much drinks each person has had.”¹³

The glorification of waywardness makes *Five Point Someone*, a silly piece of composition. Kabul is famous for its horses but it doesn’t really mean that one cannot get donkeys there. But one does not look for donkeys in Kabul so is the case with IITs as one does not look for duffers like leading male leads of the story in IITs. The popular novel is unfortunately about the self-proclaimed so called smart mavericks devoicing a curious reader from the glory of the grand world class institutions. The same story line has been adopted for the major motion picture “*3 Idiots*”, but Rancho of the movie is a hero in a real sense who tops the list with the sheer power of his practical knowledge, who of course, does not agree with the mugging pattern cheating the essence of education. The specimen of a mugger is Venkat in the novel who is disliked by one and all. The author paints the picture of the fellow who is an ideal inmate of the great institution. Nobody in Kumaon talked to Venkat ; given a choice he wouldn’t talk to himself. He had a good GPA and everything, but he was hardly human. Venkat woke up at four in the morning to squeeze in for hours of mugging before classes. Every evening he spent three hours in the library before dinner. Then after dinner, he studied on his bed for another couple of hours until he went to sleep. “Who on earth would want to be with him”.¹⁴The way *Five Point Someone* is narrated is splendid with witty humour and required spice laced throughout the book. Ryan is carefree, Alok is careful and Hari is balanced with imbalanced thoughts. There is a beautiful and charming young lady Neha who acts as a item to the plot. Placing her as the daughter of Professor Cherian gave



enough scope to bring in drama of trauma. Emotions are also worked out well by bringing in plot of Neha's brother who commits suicide upon not meeting his father's expectations of getting into IIT. It is a fun ride and becomes nostalgic on many occasions. Then there is the milieu of IIT and tough system and hard professors, who have been targeted by the author every now and then. Prof. Cherian is the embodiment of the most serious and sincere kind of professors in IITs as he himself was a perfect 10 points grader, he devoted his entire life to the cause of education. And of course people like him are the foundation stone in making IIT a brand. But the negative aspect of the strictness of the kind results in the loss of unprecedented kind that the men like Prof. Cherian does not even know for long, like the suicide of his son Samir. This suicide note is very touching and unfolds the layers of shocking truth. He writes to his sister:

“Dear Neha, I love you my little sister as much as the day I first held you in my arms when you were born. I was so proud that that, and will remain so forever. Neha, can you keep a secret? By the time you get this, I may not be in this world. But you must understand that no one in the world must know of this letter. I have tried three times to get into IIT, and time I have disappointed Dad. He cannot get over the fact that his son cannot handle Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics. I cannot do it Neha, no matter how hard I try, no matter how many years I study or how many books I read. I cannot get into IIT. And I cannot bear to see Dad's eyes. He has seen thousands of IIT students in his life and cannot see why his own son cannot make it. Well Neha, he sees the students who make it, but he doesn't see the hundreds of thousands who don't make it. He has not spoken to me for two months. He doesn't even talk to mom properly because of me. What can I do? Keep trying until I die? Or simply die? If any one finds out that I took my own life, mom would probably not be able to survive. But I had to tell someone –who else but you. I love you Neha. And you tell them I went jogging. Yours in eternity Samir”¹⁵

By writing *Five Point Someone*, ChetanBhagat has undoubtedly, touched a nerve with young Indian readers and acquired almost cult status while detailing what not to do at IIT. The critics may think of his works as literature in making but he has become the need of the new generation readers. ChetanBhagat, though widely read, does not give any message to the youth of the nation. None of his characters are heroic, none of them are wonderful human attributes. The novelist is known for his best sellers and not for the creation of any brilliant character, rather most of the characters in his novels are driven by instinct, like sleep, food, fear, sex and self and above all unconventional foolshner, glorified everywhere by the money minded author. With little experience of life he does not display world-view of any kind. His books have silly titles and he has chutzpah. Critics go on even saying that: “Chetan is no real writer. He is simply pulp-fictioneer with luck.”¹⁷ Whatever may be the case but ChetanBhagat finds lucrative niche in chronicling lives of middle class youth. He is the bestselling author in English one has ever heard of. His name doesn't grace any Booker list, but it is found on the lips of every college student in India. While the global literate dwell on the fiction of India's glorious past, ChetanBhagat has become India's favorite author by embracing the present. At the age of thirty five, Bhagat's chronicling of the trials and tribulation of the country's luckier middle class youth has made him a publishing phenomenon in India. He even favors young generation by dwarfing the grown up aged people. He doesn't specially spares professors who are working hard to produce minting new generation. “They are all frustrated”, I said: “We are half their age but will earn twice as them in two years. Wouldn't you hate an eleven year old if he earned double.”¹⁸ The novelists covet mass appeal. He prefers supermarkets and malls to launch his books. He wants his books next to jeans, jams and bread. His formula is simple: write in quirky, quick fire campus English that young Indians use and focus on absurdities of how novels feature everything which is popular among the young generations. They feature drinking, games, soft drug use, an affair between a student and his professor's daughter, the back ground music supporting the ongoing dominating emotions, religion, politics and even the kind of marriages which are found in SurajBarjatya's movies. For Bhagat, generational divide is the one that India desperately needs to bridge.

According to the feel of his works; the older generation grew up in a time of scarcity and prized a suffocating social conformity where everyone lived separate but equal lives. The young are almost a race apart with a liberal attitude



that is inimical to the Indian hierarchies of caste and creed. The author's own story is a reflection of the hunger that drives the young India of his novels.

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