

Chetan Bhagat and the New India

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Abstract

Chetan Bhagat has been identified by *The New York Times* as 'the biggest selling English language novelist in India's history'. In *Time* magazine's poll of 100 most influential people conducted in 2010-11, Chetan Bhagat secured 1,364 votes, which put him above Arnold Schwarzenegger, Warren Buffet and Rupert Murdoch. The most pertinent question that emerges in any discussion about him is what constitutes the reason behind this mammoth popularity. The most common answer that comes to our mind is that though Chetan Bhagat's other merits might be open to question, he matters precisely because he sells. He has emerged as a youth icon and his novels have taken India by storm. His popularity has given hope to struggling writers in India and unleashed a new wave of Indian bestselling fiction. The paper seeks to explore the socio-cultural economic impact and relevance of this new phenomenon of Indo English bestsellers.

Key Words: best sellers, culture, globalisation, India.

The most pertinent question that emerges in any discussion about Chetan Bhagat is: what constitutes the reason behind this mammoth popularity? The most common answer that comes to our mind is that though Chetan Bhagat's other merits might be open to question, he matters precisely because he sells. He has emerged as a youth icon and his novels have taken India by storm. Easy to read, fast, gripping narratives, cheaply priced, these best sellers are currently riveting readers' attention in the Indian literary scenario.

Books like these by not-so-famous-authors and mainly young writers making their debut as novelists give us respite from boredom, and offer a fruitful means to pass the time while waiting for a flight or travelling by trains. Currently, the most popular writers besides Chetan Bhagat are Ravinder Singh, Karan Bajaj, Preeti Shenoy, Amish Tripathy, Novoneel Chakraborty, Durjoy Dutta, Sachin Garg, Tushar Raheja, Abhimanyu Jha, Tuhin Sinha and many others. These writers constitute a part of India's popular culture. Popular culture is composed of ideas, perspectives, attitudes, images, and other phenomena that are within the mainstream of a given culture. Heavily influenced by mass media, this collection of ideas permeates the everyday lives of society. Popular culture is often viewed as being trivial and dumped-down in order to find consensual acceptance throughout the mainstream. As a result, it comes under heavy criticism from various non-mainstream sources (most notably religious groups and counter-cultural groups) which deem it superficial, consumerist, sensationalist, and corrupted.

Douglas Kellner in *Media and Culture* shows how cultural studies constitute an analysis of the importance of media culture and how it is involved in the processes of domination and resistance:

There exists some debate concerning the proper terminology to describe the objects of those forms of culture that permeate everyday life in the familiar form of such things as Radio, pulp fiction or television. Raymond Williams and the members of the Birmingham school were responsible for the rejection of the term "mass culture," which according to them tends to be elitist, erecting a binary opposition between high and low, that is contemptuous of "the masses" and its culture. The concept of "mass culture" is also monolithic and homogeneous, and thus neutralizes cultural contradictions and dissolves oppositional practices and groups into a neutral concept of "mass." Fiske, Grossberg, and others, see "popular culture" as one that collapses the distinction between high and low art form. (33)

Popular culture is another name for consumer culture. In the words of noted cultural studies scholar Pramod Nayar, 'Consumer culture's aim is to use images, signs and symbolic goods which summon up dreams, desires and fantasies,' (xii) which it then proceeds to fulfil by providing goods and services. Public culture is the realm of social and cultural expressions in civil society. It is the space of cinema, advertisements, TV, celebrity culture, the woman's magazine, the Indian Premiere League (IPL) and sporting events, autobiographies of public figures, websites and web pages of institutions, tourist guides, museums, comic strips, and so on. It is a space where meanings are made, fought over, re-done, appropriated and subverted. The Frankfurt School of theorists identified 'popular culture' as a pejorative concept, a product of a bourgeoisie culture industry that essentially gave birth to commodity fetishism.

Frederic Jameson in *Post Modernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* claimed that in the post modern age, aesthetic production is similar to commodity production and there exist no distinct binaries between high art and low art. Alan Swingewood in *The Myth of Mass Culture* claimed that popular culture is guided by the logic of consumer capitalism and the culture industry is dominated by vulgarity, kitsch, homogeneity and standardisation. According to Structuralist critics like Roland Barthes, 'popular culture' responds to the subliminal desires in human beings to create compensatory myths, creating icons and heroes to find meaning to the otherwise empty life. The social media and consumerist culture floods us with numerous images which we mistake for reality. Jean Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation* talks about the hyper reality of human lives under the impact of popular culture which flooded by signs and symbols (simulacra). Baudrillard claimed that our present society has replaced all reality and meaning with symbols and signs, and that human experience is of a simulation of reality. In the post Industrial Revolution world, where one encounters mass-reproducible copies of items, art itself becomes a consumable commodity. The commodity's ability to imitate reality threatens to replace the authority of the original version, because the copy is just as 'real' as its prototype. Of all forms of literature, the novel perhaps, is driven the most by the sense of past in context of the political present.

Chetan Bhagat's most striking feature as a novelist is his simple, transparent and unadorned language which even a secondary grade student can easily

comprehend. His language is so enjoyable that it flows without any burden of metaphysical or existential philosophies and even a layman can follow his world of fiction where reading does not become a tiresome endeavour in which only the academic elite can participate.

It was his conversational, colloquial style and lucid depictions of the simplicity of middle class Indian life in his first novel that made Chetan Bhagat instantly popular with the masses. Chetan Bhagat inspired a new generation of young writers who took up writing campus novels. His novels engendered a trend of reading for pleasure. The discourse of 'pleasure reading' can also become a social discourse. Writing for a distinctly urban English reading youth, this genre of new fiction written by young writers went on to become a popular cultural commodity for consumption. The author became a cultural icon and he was no longer alienated and placed in the pulpit. These new writers actively marketed their fiction and completely revolutionized the concept of author-reader relationship in India for they endorsed a direct interaction between the two, a thing which was unheard of even a few years ago.

Chetan Bhagat's first novel, *Five Point Someone*, adopted a breezy, ironic tone to explore the lives of the exam-oppressed students who cram to get admitted into the Indian Institute of Technology and then rebel against the coercive and stultifying atmosphere of academic competition. Published in 2004, the novel fictionalizes Bhagat's personal IIT experiences with a tinge of love and comedy. *One Night @ the Call Centre*, Chetan Bhagat's next novel is a 'rom-com' set in an office where young Indians try to resolve the mindless inquiries of Midwestern American technophobes. *The 3 Mistakes of My Life* which follows next is set in Gujarat and subtly alludes to the blood soaked sectarian riots of 2002, and deals with grave issues like that of religion, politics, tolerance which according to Bhagat were the most important issues that baffled and confused the young Indians. The next novel *2 States: The Story of my Marriage* is more autobiographical than a work of fiction. It presents the problems which the protagonist from North India had to face to marry a girl from South India which clearly delineates the south - north divide in the Indian culture and hints at the inherent racial and regional prejudices of the common middle class people despite their education and enlightenment. *Revolution 2020*, the latest of his novels, has broken the sales record of his own earlier novels. The novel which also deals with more or less the same theme of an individual colliding with a prevalent system was published at a time when the anti - corruption movement was at its zenith in the country. Love, corruption, success and failures in the life of middle class Indians constitute the main focus and theme of Chetan Bhagat's novels - all of which have been bestsellers breaking, smashing and creating history in sales records.

The question that arises out of these facts and figures is what is this 'Chetan Bhagat Syndrome' all about? The most important thing about Chetan Bhagat is perhaps the fact that he knows how to strike the right chord for the youth! His books have the formula for a super-hit bestseller, Bhagat makes intelligent use of the 'technique' of repetition creating images and familiar markers that one

can easily identify with. A book priced at Rs 95 attracts almost everyone. The major attraction in his novels constitutes the themes, which youth all over the country can relate to. The success of a middleclass hero is valorised and though his accomplishment is essentially measured in terms of material success, what emerges from his vision is essentially an honest man at heart, with respect for traditional values.

Looking at his accomplishment from a literary point of view, Chetan Bhagat is a writer who, technically speaking, does not belong in the same league as those of Vikram Seth or Arundhati Roy, yet the youth prefer to read him in their free time. In the post modern age where there is nothing called 'free time' such light reading can become a kind of stress buster providing entertainment as well as inspiration at the same time. In an interview published in *The Hindu* on October 10, 2009, Chetan Bhagat remarked, 'I am 90 per cent entertainer and 10 per cent reformer'. The novels do not deal with exceptional people chasing meaningless dreams. It is something realistic, something that common Indians are familiar with, for it is something which has happened to many of us, but possibly no one wrote about it before in such a way. When it comes to literary satisfaction, it is incorrect to claim that it is a completely ephemeral phenomenon, for it is true that Chetan Bhagat has emerged as one of the most popular youth icons of modern India who speaks about every pertinent issue that affects the country. The novel *Five Point Someone* was adapted for a film entitled *The Three Idiots* with Amir Khan in the lead role. The film not only met with huge success but also went on to become a milestone in the history of Indian cinema.

The popularity of the Chetan Bhagat phenomenon has given rise to the cult of campus novels in India. Following him was *Sumthing of a Mocktale* by Soma Das, set in the JNU campus which was a transparent delineation of JNU life in its vivid detail. Inspired by Bhagat's *Five Point Someone*, Harshdeep Jolly went on to write *Everything you Desire* which is set in the IIM campus. Tanushree Podder's *Boots Belts Beret* is a vivid portrayal of life at the NDA that reaches out with its honesty and ingenuity.

Chetan Bhagat does not occupy a canonical place; nevertheless he is what the young Indians are reading at the moment. It is true that he is not a literary writer, but, what is more important is that he is a successful and popular writer. It is difficult to determine the relationship between what constitutes the popular and what is canonical, or to find who ascertains and accords the status of a literary text. It cannot be assumed that the inclusion of a literary work into the canon has always been determined by its popularity, neither can it be concluded that those which are necessarily a part of the canon can be identified as 'classic', for in post modern times the distinction between high and low art is getting hazy and blurred. There has been a move towards democratization of the arts and the Bhagat novels bring it out in a unique way. He has paved the way for a new generation of writers in India and his fictional characters too show that if one can dare to dream then one can indeed achieve.

A newspaper report published in *The Telegraph*, Kolkata, on 21st March, 2010 went on to observe how Bhagat's popularity has resulted in stimulating 'a growing

breed of young Indian professionals penning pulp fiction, and their success is quietly spurring dozens more to join the trend. Be it Indian authors or foreign, young generation of readers prefer light-hearted reads, fun novels'. The primary readers of his fiction constitute young Indians, and hence he has published a collection of his own non-fictional writings entitled *What Young India Wants*. The readers find it easy to identify their own lives in that of the characters in his novels that recount the journey of a modern young middle class Indian engaged in several conflicts with himself as well as the world around him. His protagonists come into clash and divergence with the system, they argue with society and fight against established norms, and survive with their own ideals and values and eventually go on to discover a new meaning of existence. His women are strong, powerful and independent entities capable of deciding their own destiny.

The novels centre on the world of middle class people, the real force behind India's economic growth, wherein lies the secret of his success as well. The aspirations and anxieties as well as the sad predicament of the middle class are depicted with an omniscient insider's view in his novels. Being a member of the same strata of society, he reveals what he or persons familiar to him have experienced in real life and the border of fiction and real life blur in his novels. Corruption, unemployment, the materialistic attitude of the people, the superficial love-hate relationships among the youth are some of the themes that he has discussed in his novels. The highest ideals and ethics of Indian democracy which are really on the cross roads at present because of the all-pervading corruption and self-destructive tendencies in society and the lament of the middle class for the sorry state of affairs of the country can also be seen in his novels.

The tone of the author towards his readers is also worth mentioning. He shows a conversational intimacy with his readers throughout the narration. He is not an outsider in the story but in all of his novels we can identify the presence of a man who went through all or similar situations that he narrates. The lack of distance between the reader and author is one of the reasons for the great fascination for his novels among the readers. His books can be read at one go and if readability is the yardstick of the success of a writer, Bhagat's novels have that quality in abundance.

The reception of his novels has been wide and varied. They have also been subjected to appropriations and adaptations on screen and in different languages. In the silent war that continues between classics and bestsellers, Chetan Bhagat's works continue to enjoy a commendable place of their own in terms of popular readership in the same way as Stephanie Meyer does with her vampire tales in the *Twilight* series.

The Frankfurt School of theorists believed that popular culture was essentially ephemeral in spirit, an extension of the commodity culture that deprived individuals of the power to think, rationalize or choose. It creates a sense of false need and develops a packaging culture and brand consciousness. The Bhagat novels with their images of plush coffee shops, malls, call centres, pubs, fast food joints, discos, jeans, rock music, and soft drink etc create a desire for global consumer goods which in turn results in the proliferation of an addictive and

potentially destructive consumer culture. Theodor Adorno and Horkeimer in 'The Culture Industry: Entertainment as Mass Deception', argued that the content of popular culture is produced by processes that are akin to factory production. The cultural goods found in magazines, radio, records, and films effectively lull the masses into passive, docile, accepting dupes of a system that might otherwise be oppressing them economically. More than just being a tool of false consciousness, they suggest that popular culture creates false 'needs' that can be fulfilled by mass produced commodities, contributing to modern man's alienation. The more challenging 'high' arts, by contrast, challenge us to cultivate our true needs: freedom, creativity, authenticity, and the like. In the early days, advertisements provided information to buyers and sellers, but at present they have become expressions of social power. The image of modern India that gets advertised and showcased through Bhagat's novel is one that is globalised, connected by social networks, one that believes in cultivating a metro sexual image of flat abs, fair face and anorexic bodies. Bhagat deftly plays with language, creating a sense of collective consciousness and we enter a world of consumerism where personality means hardly anything more than a dazzling white teeth and freedom from body odour and emotions.

Bursting suddenly on the world scene in the last quarter of the twentieth century, particularly after the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the disintegration of the Soviet Union around 1990, the concept of globalization has come to dominate contemporary discourse about human affairs. As a social phenomenon, globalization has acquired a pervasive influence in the lives of the people today. It has resulted in a compression of the geographical distance and brought forth a veritable growth in the media and academia spanning a wide variety of disciplines.

In an article published in *The Times of India* on 26th September, 2010, Bhagat wrote, 'Countless articles, books, theses, papers and research reports have tried to answer the question, "what is wrong with our nation India?" Global experts are startled that a country of massive potential has one of the largest populations of poor people in the world. Isn't it baffling that despite almost everyone agreeing that things should change, they don't? Intellectuals give intelligent suggestions - from investing in infrastructure to improving the judicial system. Yet, nothing moves. Issues dating back thirty years ago, continue to plague India today. The young are often perplexed. They ask, "Will things ever change? How? Whose fault is it that they haven't?" (Bhagat, xix)

Bhagat offers answers to these concerns in his own way. He claims that merely blaming politicians is not the right way to solve the crisis for politicians are elected by a sizeable mass of people and a leader assumes leadership only because he enjoys popular support. Since people choose their leaders, it is them in whom the real power to transform lies. However, 'the simple but bitter truth is that the electorate just doesn't care much about financial impropriety. Sure, we bicker, moan and fuss about politicians looting us. However, corruption is not that high up in the hierarchy of wrongs a politician could commit. A moderate amount of corruption is almost expected and accepted. It is only when graft is done in an

obvious, large-scale and arrogant manner that Indians get somewhat upset – and that too for a short period of time. “Do it, but don’t be so blatant and rub it in our faces,” is what we seem to be telling them.’(Bhagat, 22)

Bhagat’s novels bring out various areas of everyday concern and provoke us to think and question the prevalent socio-political and economic system instead of blindly accepting traditions that have been practiced for decades. These problems are closely integrated to our everyday life; in fact we often fail to realize that these are problems at all. Bhagat does not offer any policy solutions to these problems through his novels. He identifies the most important concern that propels Indian life. ‘Even though regional cultures are different, all Indians want the same thing- a better life in a good society.’(Bhagat, xviii)

He believes that there are three traits embedded in the Indian psyche in particular, that hinders the growth of an individual and proves detrimental to the growth of the country. Each of these comes from three distinct sources – our school, our environment and our home. The first trait that he refers to is servility. In his analysis of the education system of the country, he alludes to the fact that at school the education system stifles our individual voices and kills our natural creativity, turning us into servile, coarse material slaves. In his novel *Five Point Someone* he refers to this trait and the repressive system that seeks to convert students into automatons, depriving them of happiness and the joys of living. Indian kids are not encouraged to raise their voices in class, they are discouraged from asking questions, and penalized particularly when they disagree with the teacher. The Indian education system encourages cramming and very few subjects actually teach the students to imagine by encouraging creativity or innovation. In India, study course materials are designed for no-debate kind of teaching. ‘For example, we ask: how many states are there in India? 28. Correct. Next question –how is a country divided into states? What criteria should be used? Since these are never discussed, children never develop their own viewpoint or the faculty to think.’(Bhagat,p 23)

The second trait which according to Bhagat is one of the causes of concern that he seeks to address is the numbness to injustice. Bhagat refers to this trait in the compilation of his columns entitled *What Young India Wants* as an integral aspect of Indian psyche. Bhagat claims that the essential attribute of numbness in our psyche is a trait that originates from our environment. Accustomed to seeing corruption from childhood, Indian kids become immune and before they realize it, they become part of the process that engulfs them gradually. Almost all Indians lie about the age of children to the train TC, claiming their kids are less than 5 years old to get a free ride. It creates a value system in the child’s brain that ‘anything goes’, so long as you can get away with it. A bit of lying here, a bit of cheating there is seen as acceptable. Hence, children grow up slightly numb to corruption. Not even one high profile person in India has been put behind bars for corruption yet. Despite protests and mass movements regarding anti-corruption, nothing much has been done so far. This could be because, to a certain extent, a majority of Indians do not care about what is going on around them. Most of them are driven by narrow selfish personal interest and goals;

hence concerns regarding national issues are mere objects of debates and conversations over coffee.

The third trait that defines Indian life is the principle of divisiveness. This often comes from home, particularly family and relatives, where one gets to learn about the differences amongst people. A child is taught to respect his religion, culture and language and the idea of the 'other' being a different entity altogether gets embedded into his consciousness. Other people are not only different –but it is often implied that they are not as good as us. This characteristic gives rise to a communal or regional bias and it is this bias that serves as the dividing principle and segregates lives thereby nullifying the vision of a unified India, like the Tower of Babel. Ramachandra Guha, in his analysis of the true nature of the Indian democracy, states that 'it is due to these differences that one can presume that there was no Indian nation in the past, nor would there be one in the future.' (Guha, p xiii) It is this bias or prejudice that Chetan Bhagat refers to in his novels like *The Three Mistakes of My Life* and *Two States*.

Bhagat advocates mass self-psychotherapy as a solution for the ailments that affect the nation. His novels evince this. He hopes for a change in the traditional system by depicting a few individuals with the guts and faith to question and mould it. He pleads for a transformation happening in the mindset of the people. He refers to a new vision of young India and the title *Revolution 2020* resembles the title of A.P J Abdul Kalam's work *India Vision 2020*. Bhagat talks of breaking barriers, raising voices and protesting so that the next generation has an example and precept to follow:

'Our children should think creatively, have opinions and speak up in class. They should learn what is wrong is wrong – no matter how big or small. And they shouldn't hate other people on the basis of their background. Let us also resolve to start working on our own minds, right now. A change in mindset changes the way people vote, which in turn changes politicians.'
(Bhagat, 45)

Bhagat's first novel depicts how the socio economic scenario of the country is on the verge of a transition. Women working in late night shifts and balancing home and job are a common fact today, a phenomenon which was unthinkable even a few years ago. India's economic growth has received a strong impetus in the post 1991 era and Bhagat's novels talk about these changes and how they have affected the lives of average middle class Indians.

Bhagat's protagonists are middle class Indians aiming to acquire a life of security and prosperity. These common people do not have much understanding of government statutes, policies and laws but they hate corruption and terrorism and wish to live a life of peace and satisfaction. In an interview published on 4th July, 2012, Bhagat wrote, 'I either comment on the system or on society. The system changes with better policies. Society changes with better values. I have a bias towards youth based issues, as most of India is young. Corruption, education, secularism are the topics that I focus on the most. And even though some people may find it preposterous, I often propose solutions in my writings. That is

because if I offer no solutions, then all I am doing is ranting. We must always suggest a way out, however simplistic it may be. It is more positive attitude towards life. I believe India has major problems. However, I also believe they can be fixed.' (Kulkarni, 3)

It has been rightly observed that while children constitute the future of the country, youth constitutes its present. 'The energy, enthusiasm, dynamism, innovative ideas and creative thinking they possess make the youth population an important asset for any country's accelerated development.' (Bhagat, xxvi) According to Bhagat's own admission it is for this section of the population that he primarily writes his novels.

The youth population in India (13-35 years) constitutes almost about 38 percent of the total population of the country, and is expected to reach 574 million by 2020. The population of literate youth was 333 million in 2009, which accounts for 27.4 per cent of the country's total population and about 73 per cent of the total youth population. Population of literate youths has grown at 2.49 per cent between 2001 and 2009, which is higher than the overall population growth (2.08%). Growth was more rapid in urban India (3.15% per annum) than rural (2.11%). It is significant that of the total literate youth, 62 per cent (206.6 million) live in rural areas and the rest (126.1 million) in urban areas.' (Sukla 10)

Fiction is the most preferred genre among the youth (42%) followed by non-fiction (24%). Three most preferred genres of fiction books are fantasy, comics and classics and the least preferred are romance and graphic novels. 'Most preferred non-fiction books are religious books and biographies/ autobiographies.' (Sukla 24)

The four reasons usually mentioned for Indians for not reading enough are: 'lack of interest in reading', 'lack of time to read', 'advent of new channels of information' and 'lack of availability of books at affordable prices'. Bhagat's novels have become popular for they fulfil all the four criteria that impel a youth to develop a reading habit. His success has inspired young writers like Amish Tripathi, Durjoy Dutta and Tuhin Sinha who have taken up their pen to write about the story of middle class Indian life. These new authors are shaking up the publishing industry by devising innovative ways to sell their books. When former Infosys manager, Ravinder Singh, wrote his first book, *I Too Had a Love Story*, he approached the popular matrimonial agency *shaadi.com* for a tie-up, which sent his sales soaring. In this age of globalization there have been significant changes in the relationship between authors and readers. Authors now-a-days seek to communicate directly with their readers and hence they keep a tab on the pulse of popular taste. Authors proudly flaunt websites, Facebook and Twitter accounts, encouraging readers to contact them directly. Not only readers' queries, but even their complaints are dealt with by the authors on a daily basis.

Thus, we see that Bhagat's novels do not merely serve the purpose of relaxation and pleasure but are also important case histories of culture studies. Chetan Bhagat as a writer is a dynamic personality with an opinion on practically every matter that does or should concern us. As such, he often comes across as being somewhat arrogant and sometimes flippant. This, however, doesn't stop him from saying things that make him sound presumptuous. Bhagat is often belligerent in his criticism of the government. 'The government in India thrives on hubris. It is used to passing unjust orders that common people in India are only too happy to accept. It has power over the police, never reforms the judicial system lest it gets efficient and controls all vital resources in the economy. In such an atmosphere, arrogance is bound to set in.' (Bhagat, 26)

In his own blog <http://www.chetanbhagat.com/blog> Bhagat goes on to claim that his novels reflect a generational divide in India. Bhagat's model society is China, not the modernising China of Deng Xiaoping, but the radicalising China of Mao. In Bhagat's own words, 'India needs a cultural revolution to change mindsets,' He told the *Guardian*, 'In China, it was gory but India needs to learn that the old ways are not always the best ways. India has to grow and evolve with time.' It is this new changing value system and empowerment of the middle class that gets reflected in his novels. He is aware of the adverse reaction that is often meted out to him. In one of his interviews on television, he declared that 'The book critics, they all hate me! One of them even remarked that my novels were fit for toilet reading.'

Though some critics consider Bhagat's works as lacking in lasting literary merit yet it is not perfectly correct to dismiss him altogether as a passing fancy. He writes for a consumerist generation that seeks to see the reflection of its aims, heartbreaks and language in contemporary literature. He has touched a nerve with young Indian readers. In the words of Bhagat 'The members of the country's current young generation are "more gutsy" than their parents, and perhaps as interesting as the generation that led India to secure independence in 1947.' Through his novels Bhagat wants to be a part of the historic changes taking place in India at present. It is true that Bhagat might not be another Vikram Seth or Arundhati Roy, but he has authentic claims to being one of the major voices of middle-class Indian youth today.

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