



The Social and Academic World in Chetan Bhagat's Fiction

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In his novels, Chetan Bhagat emerges as a keen observer of the present-day social and academic scene in India. In his fictional world Indian education system suffers from two diseases, namely stress and corruption. Stress takes a heavy toll primarily on the students who, under intense parents-teacher-peer pressure, prepare for board exams or a ruthlessly competitive entrance test, or are enrolled in some professional course. According to a report in The Times of India on November 02, 2011 while, 5857 students killed themselves in 2006 in India, the figure rose to 7379 in 2010. The stress factor hits hard, especially the students who are enrolled in professional courses because the stakes there are very high. They find it very hard to cope with the rising academic expectations and quite a few of them fall prey to their own and the parents' unrealistic expectations.

On the other hand, as a UNESCO report puts it, corruption has seeped through the whole education system, leaving no part of it untouched or undefiled. Teacher absenteeism is a big issue in India as with 25% teacher absenteeism the country ranks among the highest in the world, coming second only to Uganda. A study by Transparency International shows that more than half of those surveyed had first-hand experience of paying bribes. The same report estimates that the monetary value of bribes paid in 11 basic services provided by government amounts to Rs. 21,000 crores, education being one of these services. Corruption in education has taken different forms. It is a country where “teachers pay bribes to public officials to get preferred posting and promotion... Corruption in education sector can also mean the bypassing of criteria in [granting status to universities and colleges], in the approval of school establishment and accreditation, cronyism and nepotism in procurement and teacher appointment.” (Dadlani)

There can be no denying of the fact that the problems of stress and corruption do exist in Indian education system. Chetan Bhagat takes up these two topical and burning issues in two of his novels, namely *Five Point Someone* and *Revolution 2020*. *Five Point Someone* is set in the IIT Delhi and tells the story of three mechanical engineering students Hari, Ryan and Alok who fail to cope with the demanding grading system of the institute and the stress attached to

it. In fact, the stress begins with the very idea of making it to an IIT or other such elite engineering institutes. At the very outset, the novelist jokingly remarks that people blindly go after the IIT entrance exam guides most of which are crap and for which half of the trees in the world sacrifice their lives. Several lakh students struggle hard to get into these prestigious engineering institutes through the entrance exam called JEE and the reader comes to know what it takes to get through such a test when Hari, the narrator, comes out with a reluctant piece of advice:

... If you can lock yourself in a room with books for two years and throw away the key, you can probably make it there. And if your high school days were half as miserable as mine, disappearing behind a pile of books will not seem like such a bad idea. My last two years in school were hell. (FPS 2)

A healthy system would stand on healthy practices but the mere preparation for such an entrance exam can give so much stress and anxiety that in many cases the student stops being healthy both physically and spiritually. Both Hari and Alok are called 'fatso' in the novel. Their fatness is a result of their two years' vegetative life which they spent while preparing for IIT JEE. Venkat, the studious boy in the novel, is a product of this system, who shows his high level of insensitivity when he stops Alok from paying a visit to home because he is supposed to study for a group assignment even when his father has had a stroke and is unconscious. Though only a few thousand out of the lakhs of aspirants who struggle make it to the institutes like IITs, yet the professors keep complaining that the standard of the students is falling with every passing year which also adds to the pressure. When a student fails to answer a question properly in Professor Dubey's class, he says "See, the standard just keep falling every year. Our admission criterion is not strict enough." (FPS 09) This is the very admission criteria which takes the life of the son of Professor Cherion who is the H.O.D. of mechanical engineering. Samir, the son, has tried three times unsuccessfully to get into IIT. His father just can't stand it. He wants his son in the institute at every cost. The son knows that however hard he may try, he can't do it. Ultimately, unable to cope with the pressure, he jumps before a train and takes his own life.

The one idea which the novelist is particularly critical of is the system of relative grading. It makes the whole scene highly stressed. It means that despite getting a reasonably good score in a test or exam, a student may get poor GPA. It is a rat-race where if one slips once, one doesn't get a chance to get up again. He or she is run over and crushed in the stampede. Lack

of fun and leisure time, and the burden of classes, practicals, tests, quizzes, and assignments make life very hard for the students. Hari says:

Fun was conspicuous by its absence. Everyday from eight to five, we were locked in the insti building with lectures, tutorials and labs. The next few hours were spent in the library or in our rooms as we prepared reports and finished assignments. And this did not even include the tests! Each subject had two minor tests, one major and three surprise quizzes; seven tests for six courses meant forty two tests per semester, mathematically speaking. (FPS 12)

It shows that students are overburdened and overloaded which naturally results in stress. Most of the teachers merely add to the already existing pressure. Ryan, the most creative among the trio, feels that there is no scope for creativity and original ideas. He is so creative that he makes a radio in the physics lab with the available instruments. He designs a new motor-jack which the professor disapproves and thus kills something inside him. His ingenious Lube Project is ruthlessly and unwisely rejected by the Head of the Department just because of his low GPA. Little wonder then that the boys take to the roof, drugs and vodka to make their life in the institute somewhat bearable. This, to some extent, explains the problem of drug addiction in professional colleges and universities. It is very revealing when Ryan tells Hari:

I gave [Prof. Bhatia] some ideas on how one could design a suspension bridge and he got all excited. He told me to make a scale drawing and submit it, said he would give me a special internship project. Then he asked me my name and found out my GPA. So then he calls me and says to forget about the drawing and internship, can you believe that scum?" (FPS 78)

The things turn from bad to worse for the three friends. They become the proclaimed underperformer of the institute. All of them had been school toppers. Alok even had never got a second rank in school. In boyish hope and sense of misadventure they break into the office of the HOD and are caught red-handed while stealing question paper for the major. Alok takes a terrible decision and jumps from the nine-storeyed building- "the highest point in the institute".

Chetan Bhagat takes up the issue of corruption along with stress in his latest novel *Revolution 2020*. The novel is set in the ancient and holy city of Varanasi. It is about three friends and classmates, namely Gopal, Raghav and Aarti. Gopal is an average student who thus represents the majority. Though he does quite well to beat nine lakh and fifty thousand

candidates and gets an all India rank of 52043. But even this rank is not good enough to get him an admission in any of the NITs. His father does not have money for donation to get into a private college. Hence, things start taking an ugly shape for Gopal. The father, who is already debt-ridden, decides to raise more money to send his son to Kota in Rajasthan where thousands of students reach every year to get coaching for engineering and medical entrance tests. This shows how the parents push their wards really hard and thus put more pressure on them when they are already stressed enough.

It gives a revealing insight into the rotten system when a watchman asks Gopal whether he had come to Kota to study for real or he was just a “time-pass”. On being pressed the watchman tells him that “many students come here because their parents push them. They know they won’t get in. At least, the parents stop harassing them for a year.” Gopal rents a room where a student had killed himself two years back and it had been empty since then. Here in the section entitled *Kota*, the novelist gives the reader a peep into the systemized fraud and loot which is being run in the name of coaching centers. The students and parents spend days visiting various coaching schools and collecting brochures. Each institute asks for “a thousand bucks for an application form. Whether they selected you or not, whether you joined or not, the fee had to be paid.” (RLCA 57)

Gopal starts developing a low self-esteem. Wherever he goes, he gets the derogatory title of ‘repeater’. He starts calling himself a loser. He sees terrorists in the stamp-sized “ugly” pictures of successful JEE candidates. His girlfriend Aarti deserts him for Raghav who with his high JEE rank is considered successful in life. He sinks into depression and finds it hard to concentrate on his studies. He makes friends with a second time repeater Prateek and takes to drinking. The AIEEE results are out again and this time too he gets a good but a never-good-enough rank of 42342. His world comes tumbling down. His father, unable to bear this, dies a sad and silent death, leaving indelible scars on his son’s psyche. The latter half of the novel explores and satirizes corrupt practices in Indian education system. Gopal attends a career fair where the private colleges try hard to trap students. College owners bargain with prospective students like shopkeepers. There is a darkly humorous occasion when two country liquor barons-turned- deans and academicians literally fight for the possession of Gopal, a prospective student, each holding his one wrist and pulling hard in opposite directions. A dumbfounded Gopal describes the scene:

In one swift move [Mahesh] ripped off the Chintumal banner. Jyoti's face went red. He went to the Sri Ganesh stall and threw the box of brochures down. I tried to run out of the stall. Jyoti held me by my collar.

'Wait, I will give you a seat for fifty thousand a year.' ...

Mahesh returned with three people who resembled Bollywood thugs. Apparently, they were faculty. They started to rip out all the hoardings of the Chintumal stall. Jyoti ordered his own security men to fight them.

As I tried to escape, one of Sri Ganesh's goons pushed me. I fell face down on a wooden table covered in a white sheet. It had a protruding nail that cut my cheek. Blood covered one side of my face. Sweat drops appeared on my forehead. I had finally given my blood and sweat to the studies. (RLCA 115)

Gopal comes into contact with the corrupt local MLA Shukla. He has inherited 15 acres of disputed agricultural land just outside the city which according to the MLA could be used for an engineering college. The meeting between the two exposes the racket which is being run in the name of professional and technical institutes in India. In fact education has become a lucrative business where schools, colleges and universities are being run and owned by the people who are not even remotely linked with the field of education. It has become a means to convert the black money into white. It is a very interesting when Sunil, the MLA's agent, tells Gopal that "Stupid people go to college. Smart people own them". It is also shocking to see how the members of a non-profit trust siphon-off money for their personal benefit. Bedi, an education consultant, explains it to Gopal that the trustees can take out cash from the trust, showing it as an expense. Or some fee in cash can go unaccounted for. They can also ask the contractor to pay back a portion of what is paid to him. There are so many more ways.

When finally the idea of opening a college is put into practice, the MLA, calling it a safe investment, puts crores of rupees made illegally from the Ganga Action Plan into the making of the college. Gopal uses this money for construction as well as for paying bribes to a number of people. He bribes the UGC and AICTE inspectors and a Vice-Chancellor to get favorable reports. He bribes the Varanasi Nagar Nigam authorities for re-zoning. Then, there is a retired Professor-cum-Dean who wants half of his salary in cash to evade taxes. His dream has come true but there is something broken inside him. He muses:

Ganga Tech Engineering College – two laborers fixed a metal hoarding in the muddy ground. I should have felt more emotion. After all, I had slogged for



months. However, I felt nothing. Maybe because I knew the exact amount of bribes it took to reach this day. Seventy-two lakhs, twenty-three thousand and four hundred rupees to obtain everything from electricity connections to construction site labour approvals. (RLCA 141)

To conclude it can be said that in these two novels Chetan Bhagat looks into the problems of stress and corruption in Indian education system. A reading of the texts leaves the reader better informed and sensitized towards these issues. So far as the impact factor is concerned, Bhagat's novels have certainly had a deep impact on the students as well as the parents. After the release of the movie *3 Idiots*, which is based on *Five Point Someone*, a growing consciousness has become discernible. The blind hankering for professional education has subsided to some extent in the last three years or so. For instance, in my own college the courses like BBA and BCA are losing steam. On the other hand, in 2008 there were about 150 applications against 240 seats in the course of B.Sc. (Non. Med.). In 2010 and 2011, the college received 600 and 932 applications respectively against the same number of seats. The central government also has set up a panel to study stress levels among students on IIT campuses. And there are stories doing the round about the move to scrap IIT-JEE. The panel is supposed to have suggested that 70% weightage may be given to board examinations in picking students and there will be a common aptitude test which will contribute the remaining 30% weightage. Emphasizing the effectiveness of Chetan Bhagat's works Shashi Tharoor remarks:

He is saying something to young Indians that hasn't been said before in quite that way; he is reaching an extraordinarily large number of readers; and he is seeking to use his reach to bring about a change in the country, starting with the mindset of young Indians. That is why he must be read. (Tharoor)

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