



Modern Middle Class in Chetan Bhagat's Novels

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Characters that populate his novels, preoccupations they have, ambitions they nurse and obstacles they encounter are all endearingly those of today's real-life India, says Ajit Balakrishnan

According to Nielsen, the official scorekeeper of book sales, these five novels sell over half a million copies a year in India, a market in which sales of 10,000 copies a year make a book a bestseller.

Bhagat is the author of bestselling novels, and "Five Point Someone" (2004), "One Night at the Call Centre" (2005), "The Three Mistakes of My Life" (2008), "2 States" (2009), "Revolution 2020" (2011), and "Half Girlfriend" (2014). All the books have remained bestsellers since their release and four have inspired Bollywood films (including the hit films *3 Idiots*, *Kai Po Che* & *2 States*). In 2008, The New York Times cited Bhagat as "the biggest selling English language novelist in India's history". Time magazine named him as one of the 100 Most Influential People in the World. Bhagat voices his opinion frequently at leading events. He quit his investment banking career in 2009, to focus on writing. He debuted as a screenplay writer with the 2014 film *Kick*. His new book *Half Girl Friend* has created quite a buzz before its release.

One Night at the Call Centre opened up the inner world of India's teeming call centres, that haven for young people with modest grades in school and no discernible talent other than being able to answer the phone in decent enough English. In *The 3 Mistakes of My Life*, three guys, pals since their days at a municipal school in Ahmedabad and avid cricket fans, contemplate their dismal career options. Beg people to buy insurance? Sell credit cards at street corners? Work as a priest in a temple? In the end they decide to open a shop that sells cricket balls and bats.

In *2 States: The Story of My Marriage*, boy from Punjab meets girl from Tamil Nadu in college and falls desperately in love. The two, however, meet with parental objections when they decide to get married.

In *Revolution 2020*, the young protagonists in Varanasi search for success in life, one by starting a private college and the other by being a crusading reporter for a newspaper. In *Half Girlfriend*, the love story of Madhav and Riya is described. Before some initial confusions and misunderstandings, finally they get married and live happy married life and contributing great to the society. The characters that populate Mr Bhagat's novels, the preoccupations they have, the ambitions they nurse and the obstacles they encounter are all endearingly those of today's real-life India. When the under-qualified protagonist at the call centre hears that his fellow call centre worker, who is also his love interest, has an arranged marriage proposal from a 'big catch' NRI, an engineer at Microsoft in the United States, I find myself waiting with bated breath -- I guess like hundreds of thousands of Chetan Bhagat readers - whether the girl would succumb to the NRI's attractions or whether she would remain true to our man. When communal mobs during the Ahmedabad riots, frothing at the mouth, demand that our three young cricket shop owners give up their Muslim assistant, I find myself ready to kneel and pray for their protection.

Mr Bhagat's novels deal with the tribulations of the average young Indian -- one who is neither talented enough nor well-connected enough to succeed in today's India -- earning a living in a call centre, pushing back against intractably conservative parents. Dickens' own reception by the literati of his time was not flattering either.

The Major Characteristics:

1. **Hope:** Chetan's books give you hope. You get that ingredient of life by virtue of which you fight the battle called 'life'. In a society marred by communal feelings there exists an 'Ali' in 'Three Mistakes of my Life' who says, "It's ok if I don't become a player, but it's not ok if I am not an Indian". Even if all hope is lost God may come calling in your cellphone without a network. And even though a student jumps from the ninth floor in an utterly hopeless situation his friends are there to rescue him and bring him back to the doors of new expectations and aspirations. Trapped by corruption on all fronts, a Gopal Mishra of 'Revolution 2020' rises above all his petty ambitions to ensure that the fresh breeze of progress and development blows in his homeland. He lets all the fortune accumulated through unfair means go to hell just to be called a good and noble man.
2. **Simple language, no verbosity:** Chetan does not take to the bombastic style of writing. His language is simple, lucid and quite comprehensive even to the new bees of reading. It is for this reason that school and college goers enjoy his novels.



Chetan's mainstay is the matter or the content of the story and not its language. Even when the language takes precedence, it is straight to the heart. Characters tell their story in no complicated language but directly to the eager listener. The language though very simple, exactly produces the impact that is needed.' The Shakespeare among them' in "Two States: The Story of my Marriage" tells you quite humorously but very surely that one among the auto-drivers knew only some English words. So Chetan's eloquence of the language, takes his readers on an easy, comfortable but absorbing ride. You never get ebbed because of the language barrier even though you are shocked due to jolts and twists in the story.

3. **The youth factor and readership from all sections of the society:** Youth is the main focus of Chetan's novels. The young generation has its dreams sparkled with the glitters of hope as well as bruised with the tales of inabilities of achievement and helplessness against the system. Even though the youth force is said to be able to dislocate mountains and block the flow of rivers, it faces its own problems when it fights the age old red tape and a corrupt infra-structure. The victories and defeats of the youth are trademarks of Chetan's stories. A young reader sails through his novels as if he or she is living and not just reading the novel.
4. **Narration of Unrelated Events:** Remember how Chetan deviated the reader away from the main theme of the story when Vidya met her soul mate in a confined space in 'Three mistakes of my life'. What was the necessity of such a non-event in the narration? For a moment the reader gets distracted and disconnected from the flow of the story. The reader keeps guessing. Why am I being taken there? There is a point. Your anxiety increases, the unpredictability builds up, you keep sniffing. There must be something to it. Suspense clouds form and every such non-event adds to the milieu in which the story is conceived. To put it another way, the story gets a philosophical touch. You are being silently told that you are arriving at a critical juncture in the story.
5. **A piercing climax:** In all the stories of Chetan we have observed a nail-biting climax. Be it God's call in 'One night @ the Call Centre' or saving Ali from the jaws of the riot in 'Three Mistakes of my Life' or Gopal Mishra's sacrifice in the end game of 'Revolution 2020', there is drama, emotion and twist. Climax is the part of the tale which can provide the real thrill and sums up the story. Chetan has shown the ability to wind up his novels miraculously. Even after the story is gone you are left with the shadows. You think. You connect. You see them in real life. Govind, Vidya, Neha, Ali, Ryan and Arati meet you in everyday life.

His Novels:

Five Point Someone:

The book is narrated by first person by Hari, with some small passages by his friends Ryan and Alok, as well as a letter by Hari's girlfriend Neha Cherian. It deals with the lives of the three friends, whose elation on making it to one of the best engineering college in India is quickly deflated by the rigor and monotony of the academic work. Most of the book deals with the numerous attempts by the trio to cope with and/or beat the system as well as Hari's fling with Neha who just happens to be the daughter of Prof. Cherian, the domineering head of the Mechanical Engineering Department of their college. Their most important attempt was "C2D" (Co-operate to Dominate).

While the tone of the novel is humorous, it takes some dark turns every now and then, especially when it comes to the families of the protagonists. Most of the action, however, takes place inside the campus as the boys, led by the ever creative Ryan, frequently lamenting how the internationally lauded IIT system has stifled their creativity by forcing them to value grades more than anything else. Uninspiring teaching and numerous assignments add to their woes, though the boys do find a sympathizer in Prof. Veera, the new fluid mechanics professor. The film "3 Idiots" has been based on this novel.

One Night at the Call Centre:

The book begins with a frame story which recounts a train journey from Kanpur to Delhi. During the journey, the narrating author meets a beautiful girl. The girl offers to tell the author a story on the condition that he has to make it his second book. After a lot of hesitation, the author agrees. The story was about six people working in a call center. One night they got a phone-call from god within the story, which comprises the bulk of the book, relates the events that happen one night at a call center. Told through the eyes of the protagonist, Shyam, it is a story of almost lost love, thwarted ambitions, absence of family affection, pressures of a patriarchal set up, an insight on the lifestyle of youth of this country and the work environment of a globalized office. Shyam loves but has lost Priyanka, who is now planning an arrange marriage with another; Vroom loves Esha. Esha wants to be a model, Radhika is in an unhappy marriage with a demanding mother-in-law, and military uncle wants to talk to his grandson; they all hate Bakshi, their cruel and somehow sadist boss. Claimed to be based on a true story, the author chooses Shyam Mehra (alias Sam Marcy) as the narrator and protagonist, who is one among the six call center employees featured.

A phone call from God is one of the salient features in the novel. In order to cheer themselves up, all the lead characters of the novel decide to go and enjoy at a night club. After enjoying for a while, they leave for office. While returning, they face a life-threatening situation when their Qualis crashes into a construction site hanging over a mesh of iron construction rods. As the rods began to yield slowly, they start to panic. They are unable to call for help as there is no mobile phone network at that place, but Shyam's mobile phone starts ringing. The phone call is from God, who speaks modern English. He speaks to all of them and gives them suggestions to improve their life, and advises them on how to get their vehicle out of the construction site. The conversation with God motivates the group to such an extent that they get ready to face their problems with utmost determination and



motivation. Meanwhile Vroom and Shyam hatch a plan to throw Bakshi out of the call center and prevent the closing of Connexions call center, whose employees are to be downsized radically. When they emerge from danger, they have clear-cut goals in their mind. On returning to the call center, they carry out their plans with dexterity.

The themes involve the anxieties and insecurities of the rising Indian middle class, including questions about career, inadequacy, marriage, family conflicts in a changing India, and the relationship of the young Indian middle class to both executives and ordinary clients whom they serve in the United States. There is an aspect of self-help in the book as the author invites readers to identify aspects of themselves and their lives that make them angry and that they would like to change.

The Three Mistakes of My Life:

This is the third book written by Chetan Bhagat. The story is not his own but that of Govind Patel, a business man of Ahmedabad. The story starts with a prologue in which Govind Patel sends a suicidal email to the author. And the author rushes to see him in a hospital in Ahmedabad (from Singapore!).

Govind tells him that his story is not like any hit Bollywood movies but just ordinary. But the author patiently sits beside him and listens to his story. The story starts in the year 2000. Govind is a bright student living in the sleepy metropolis of Ahmedabad. He has two friends Ishaan and Omi who do not know what to do about their life. Ish is a former district level cricketer and Omi is the son of the priest of the Swamibhakti temple. They are obsessed with cricket and so Govind does what he thinks best: he opens a cricket shop in the Swamibhakti temple. The rent was cheap and there was guarantee of customers as the temple was a busy area. The business takes off very well. They have a promising future and they take a super talented cricketer Ali under their wings. To earn extra money Govind also tutors in maths. He is also eventually coaxed in to teaching Ish's 17 year old sister. As time passes by something more develops between them. From Ahmedabad the story has a detour to Australia. They get Ali to bat against the Australians and he is a smash hit. After a week they return to India as things do not work out. Meanwhile the business does not go well. Govind has grand plans and even manages to save enough but Nature has something more in store. The triple blow that hits the three friends is a massive earthquake, 9/11 and the 2002 Godhra train attacks. The last of the three led to communal violence in Ahmedabad and the three friends found themselves in the thick of things during the communal riots. Govind's story culminates with the danger that the three friends and their protégé, Ali find themselves in just because Ali is a Muslim.

The story has been written in relation with 3 real life incidents and he does the job of inter relating the incidents well. But of the three mistakes the first mistake was not avoidable as earthquakes are caused by nature. The second mistake is alright as it deals with morality. And the third mistake is about what could have happened if action had been taken a second earlier. Do these really qualify as mistakes? All of us lose money due to bad decisions and unexpected circumstances. Most of us fall in love (one sided at least) and at some point in our life we do think and act selfish. Not feeling anything unique about these mistakes. According to me these do not really qualify as mistakes. Anyone may lose money due to unexpected circumstances. Most people fall in love at that age and sometimes we do think of ourselves first before rescuing others. The book gives a very vivid description of why students hate maths, electoral politics, Gujarat riots and the challenges one faces in life in order to succeed.

Excluding the death of two people the book otherwise has a happy ending.

2 States: The Story of My Marriage:

2 States: The Story of My Marriage is partly autobiographical. The story is about a couple, Krish and Ananya, who hail from two different states of India, Punjab and Tamil Nadu respectively, who are deeply in love and want to get married.

The story begins in the IIM Ahmedabad mess hall, where Krish, a Punjabi boy from Delhi sights a beautiful girl, Ananya, a Tamilian from Chennai, quarreling with the mess staff about the food. Ananya was tagged as the "Best girl of the fresher batch". They become friends within a few days and decide to study together every night. In the mean time, they become romantically involved. They both get jobs, and have serious plans for their wedding. At first Krish tries to convince his girlfriend Ananya's parents and at last convinces them by helping Ananya's father to do his first PowerPoint Presentation, her brother, Manju, by giving him tuition and later convinces her mom by asking her to sing in a concert organised by Krish's office, i.e. CitiBank (Yes bank in the adapted film). She is convinced as her biggest dream of singing at a big concert comes true. She sings along with S. P. Balasubrahmaniam and Hariharan. Then they try to convince Krish's mom. But the problem is Krish's mother's relatives who don't quite like this. They say that Krish should not marry a Tamilian but end up agreeing with them when Ananya tries to help one of Krish's cousin to get married and succeeds to do so. Now as they have convinced both their parents they now try to introduce each other's parents. They go to Goa. But this dream of theirs ends as Ananya's parents find something fishy between Krish's mom and him. Ananya's family end up deciding that Krish and Ananya will not marry each other. But, at last, Krish's father, who was like an enemy for Krish, helps Krish and Ananya to get married as he convinces Ananya's family well. They really do very hard to convince each other's parents and finally make it. It is narrated in a first person point of view in a humorous tone, often taking digs at both Tamil and Punjabi cultures. The novel ends with Ananya giving birth to twin boys. They say that the babies belong to a state called 'India'; with a thought to end inequality.

Revolution 2020:

Set in the holy city of Varansi Revolution 2020 is the story about two boys Gopal, Raghav, and a girl, Aarti. The story is narrated by Gopal, the protagonist of the story, and is chiefly concerned with Gopal's love for Aarti. Gopal's mother died when he



was very young, and he was raised by his father, who was poor due to a long running property dispute with his brother. Gopal and Raghav are school friends. Aarti and Gopal are very close intimate friends, and are very affectionate towards each other. While Gopal wants Aarti to become his, she repeatedly refuses him saying she doesn't want to enter a relationship.

After performing bad in both the IIT-JEE (Indian Institution of Technology Joint Entrance Exam) and AIEEE (All India Engineering Entrance Examination) exams, Gopal moves to Kota, the so-called "capital of coaching classes" to undertake them again, to please his father who is determined to make Gopal an engineer. In order to pay for the entrance coaching, Gopal's father spends all his savings and takes on many loans.

Raghav however had scored very well in his exams and joins the prestigious IIT-BHU to study engineering, though his real ambition is to become a journalist and affect social change. While Gopal is away at Kota, Aarti and Raghav become close and then started going out, which causes much strain to Gopal and Aarti's friendship along with Gopal and Raghav's friendship. Gopal is distraught, and the novel explores the strains of unrequited love between intimate friends, which is a major component in the novel.

Partly due to the emotional difficulties brought on by his friends' relationship, Gopal again fails to fare good at the AIEEE. Gopal's father cannot bear his son's repeated failure and dies, leaving Gopal an orphan. Debt loaded, through a friend he meets a powerful MLA, Shukla, who agrees to help start an engineering college on his father's disputed land. Shukla agreed to provide financial backing and political support to construct the new college, named GangaTech, with Gopal who will be its director. In order to build the new college Gopal had to handle corrupt politicians, bureaucrats and regulators, all of whom had to be bribed during various stages of planning and construction of the college.

Meanwhile, Raghav finishes his engineering studies and becomes a trainee reporter for a popular newspaper, "Dainik". He publishes a critical article regarding Gopal's college-Ganga Tech - on the day of its inauguration in which he accuses Shukla of corruption. Gopal takes this personally while also considering it as betrayal after agreeing to being interviewed by Raghav for the article. Shukla gets Raghav sacked from his job at Dainik but Raghav starts his own newsletter called Revolution 2020. He later publishes an article about a Ganga Treatment Scam and this time with sufficient evidence to prove that Shukla is a corrupt man. Shukla was forced to resign. Raghav continues on his quest to expose corrupt leaders who he accuses being the root reason for India's poor economic background. In the process, Gopal and Raghav become rivals as Gopal does the exact opposite of what Raghav sees is ideal, since Gopal only wants to make money. However after seeing what Raghav has gone through due to the joint revenge taken by the MLA and Gopal himself yet sustaining his determination to bring the revolution, Gopal decides to change some things on his part and help his friend anonymously. He stops the affair he has with Raghav's girlfriend Aarti and lets go of her despite his unconditional love for her. He also asks Dainik to hire Raghav back. Things slowly improve for Raghav financially as he can now work on his articles, while Gopal is shown to slowly become a better person. Although in the end we see Gopal is alone and prefers to be isolated, he is indeed rich and successful as he wanted to be and Raghav, who is now almost the MLA (since his in-laws were mildly involved with politics helped him) sees his dream of bringing about change as well.

Half Girlfriend:

The story begins with Madhav Jha, a boy from Dumraon, Bihar, as he comes to meet the author Chetan Bhagat and leaves behind a few journals from his half-girlfriend who he thinks to have died. When the author calls him back the following morning to narrate his story, he begins with his struggles to deal with students in St. Stephen's College. Being from a village, Madhav is quite bad at English. He has come for an interview in Stephens. A good basketball player, Madhav Jha manages to get admission through his sports quota.

The rich and beautiful Riya Somani, a girl from Delhi, is also selected through the sports quota. Meeting her, as he would call it a twist of fate Madhav and Riya become close friends due to their association with basketball. Madhav always wants to make her his girlfriend, which she refuses. Desperate to get physical with Riya, he demands to get physical with her. Offended by his obscene ultimatum (*Deti hai to de, warna katle*), Riya parts company with him and warns him not to talk to her any more.

A year later, Riya marries her childhood friend Rohan and settles in London where Rohan has a big business. Finding Delhi unbearable on grounds of losing Riya due to his own fault, Madhav decides to settle in his hometown and help his mother with her school. Seeing the condition of the school – no proper classes or toilets – Madhav decides to meet local MLA Ojha for financial help, but MLA is of no help. An opportunity comes when Ojha informs him of Bill Gates' visit to some schools in Bihar. Madhav tries his best to convince Gates to fund his schools' development, but in order to do so he has to prepare a speech, preferably in English.

In the course of his struggle, he comes across Riya, who was already a divorcee. As Madhav is in a fix as to how he would prepare the speech, Riya helps him. The two are successful in their fundraising, but, after the speech, Riya leaves a letter for him which says that she has lung cancer. With three months left to live, Riya leaves for New York to become a singer, a dream she wanted to pursue. After three years, it is revealed from Riya's journals that she is alive. Madhav goes in search of her in New York and stays in his friend Sailesh's apartment. After three months of extensively searching, he finds her in a bar working as a singer, two days before leaving for India. They two marry and the story sets off.



The book ends as the author visits the rural school in Dumraon three and a half years later; he discovers it is being run successfully by Madhav and Riya, who now had a son, Shyam.

"Meri Naukri, Meri Chokri (My job, my girl)". Young India's rallying cry is simple. They want love, they want money and they want stature in society, says Chetan Bhagat.

"They want a good life and a great girlfriend. If your cause will help them get a good life, then they are with you. That is what young India wants. The social causes must be linked to this ambition," – Chetan Bhagat

