



Chetan Bhagat: The best selling voice of Middle-class young India

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Abstract

In 2003, the Rupa publication published a novel titled "Five Point Someone." Bookstores like "Oxford" and "Crossword" placed it under the "bookshelf genre" of "Indian Fiction." On commercial frontiers, this new author was competing with literary Laurels like "Arundhati Roy," Shobha De," "Sudha Narayan" and Vikram Seth." The contents and pricing of the novel "Five Point Someone" was far from this classic league of "Indian Fiction." It was a tale written for the masses. This novel was different from other novels in a big way. During that period established Indian fiction writers were introducing Indian themes from a Western outlook and carving a niche for Indian Fiction in the Western world (Chetan Bhagat's writing Style , 2018). Figuring out the discrepancies in Indian culture was in vogue.

During the release period of "Five Point Someone," Indian fiction in the English language was confined to elites, intellectuals, and high-flung societies of India. Clubhouses in South Delhi and bookstores in South Mumbai were the prime target audiences for writers. They were keen to sell their books in off-shore countries on the pretext of creating a cultural landscape for Indian soil. The success of novels like "Sacred Games," "Santaram," and "Slumdog Millionaire" is an ideal example to corroborate the above statement. In a time like this, it was very difficult for a critic or a book publisher to believe that an ordinary novel like "Five Point Someone" may become a universal hit and mint money for the publishers and authors (E.Anushree, 2020).

Keywords: Urban Middle class, Chetan Bhagat, Great Indian Middle class, Five Point Someone, middle-class India, great Indian Middle class, the emancipation of youth, Indian Fiction, thematic style of Chetan Bhagat, Voice of youth in 21st century.

Introduction:-

Critics were not aware of the fact that "Five Point Someone" was not another cheaply priced novel on the bookshelves. It was a revolution of its kind. Proficient writers of that era and critics were not aware of the fact that this novel would first create a "league" for it and give rise to a new league for Indian Fiction writers. They were not aware that this was going to be a league dedicated to the readers of "Middle-Class Young India." Indeed, Chetan Bhagat brought a revolution in the Indian fiction writing scene, he broke many perceptions that were prevailing and developed new trends that proved to become money-minting tools for the publication industry (Dhruvita, 2023). Marketers associated with the marketing of published books compared it with the revolution in the Indian music industry when Business Baron, the "late Gulshan Kumar" reinvented the music industry of India. During his career Chetan Bhagat never acted as a publisher, but under the capacity of a writer he developed a genre focusing more on the youth population of India. While doing it he figured out new demographics that could attract the moniker of "Middle-class Young India."

The present Article is an attempt to capture this journey and examine elements of the style propagated by Chetan Bhagat to attract and define "middle-class Young India."

"Five Point Someone", heralding the era of the New Age of Indian Fiction

"Five Point Someone" emerged as a trendsetter novel. Before this novel, the reach of Indian fiction in the English language was primarily confined to the creamy layers of "Tier 1" and "Tier 2" cities of India. Elite authors were competing with Western world authors at various selling points. Airport lounges and big bookstores in the Western world were showcasing Indian Fiction as a gallery or postcard of Indian culture. Reviews of Western world critics were acting as poignant "pull and push" factors for the purchasers. At the same time natives of "Middle-Class young India" were looking up to these novels with an aspirational value, but this fact alone did not support the reach of these novels (S.Kalita, 2008). As far as the pricing of these novels was concerned, they were out of the reach of Indian readers. Fake copies of these novels were available on the footpaths of big cities like Delhi and Mumbai.

Then came “Five Point Someone,” the low pricing of this novel helped in curtailing the impacts caused by fake publishers. In an era like this “Five Point Someone” became successful because of its content and removal of the pricing barrier. During the initial run, the success of “Five Point Someone” was attributed to its “rock bottom pricing.” Indeed, its pricing instantly attracted book lovers, critics, and rival publishers. The majority of them believed that this novel is degrading, Indian fiction written in the English language because of its low pricing (An interview with Chetan Bhagat, 2022). India is a price-sensitive market big publishers like Harper-Collins, Penguin India, Pan Macmillan, and others were selling novels @INR 250. On average, it was a high price for Indian book lovers. The concept of libraries was prevailing where readers were finding access under subscription. Ownership of a novel was out of the question during this period. Book lovers and literature enthusiasts living in small towns in India were finding it difficult to access good literature in the English language.

Knowingly or unknowingly Chetan Bhagat’s novel figured out a cutting edge in this scenario. His first novel was published by Rupa Publications. Rupa presented “Five Point Someone” at an introductory price of INR 100. Many Western world critics and book barons even ridiculed this success by dubbing it the “manifestation of the cheap mentality of the great Indian middle class.” But soon they realized that the content of this novel was appealing to the masses in India and this novel would make money in a business model where the volume of the sales would supersede the low pricing and bring the books of the publisher into profit (Ali, 2013).

While rendering harsh criticism for the pricing, these critics were not aware of the fact that in the coming future, Author Chetan Bhagat will become the voice of the dreams and aspirations of the “young middle class” living in India.

They were unaware that novels like “One Night @ Call Center” and “Three Mistakes of My Life” would create a new history in the Indian fiction writing arena. The consecutive success of these three novels changed the market scenario completely. More and more publishers started thinking in terms of publishing “Indian authors for Indian markets”. Chetan Bhagat with his three novels became the pioneer of this new revolution (Chetan Bhagat Writing for Millennials, 2022).

Raised the bar of language for setting up new standards of simplicity

“Five Point Someone” was the first ever novel published by Chetan Bhagat, this novel was unconventional in many ways. The characters depicted in this novel were hailing from the “closed backyard of IITs.” Until that point, it was a perception that “students of IIT are nerds, they are super-humans because of their High IQs, and most

importantly they are too focused to enjoy mundane pleasures like love, intoxication, and youthful activities. Many critics thought that it was a titillating tale, full of aspirational values. Many critics said that Chetan Bhagat has created another college campus at par with the college campus created by Karan Johar in his movie “Kuch Kuch Hota Hai.” Most of the critics failed to understand the fact that the writings of Chetan Bhagat echo the “human agency” of the “young middle class in India” that too in a language that is comfortable for them (Botamo, 2024).

During the initial run, many critics penned “Five Point Someone” down because of its “poor English.” Even Chetan Bhagat admitted this fact in one of his interviews where he said that the standard of English in his first few novels was not at par. He went one step ahead and thanked the copy editors who worked hard to make his words palatable for the esteemed English Reader language. However, the expressions presented in the manuscript of “Five Point Someone” were “out of this world” at that point in time because even copy editors failed to come up with interesting corrections to maintain the simplicity of the expression caused by poor language (Bhattacharya, 2018). As a result, even the copy-edited version of these books showed a great affinity with the English language which was popular among the masses of India. This simplicity of the language helped these books to figure out new horizons of success everywhere.

Many expressions presented by Chetan Bhagat in various novels were too simple, esteemed authors and critics even dubbed them as “down-market” or “playing for the gallery.” However, this simple language and rock-bottom pricing instantly attracted “middle-class young India”. The simplicity woven in the pages helped the spread of this novel, individuals who were not very proficient with elite or literary English also enjoyed this tale. “Five Point Someone” became an instant hit; “selling like a hot cake” became the right adjective for the increasing sales volumes. “Middle Class Young India” received this novel with great fanfare, reprints of this novel created a history of sorts for the Rupa Publication. The printing Industry of India realized that a “new era is dawned in the realms of Indian Fiction”.

In the year 2003, Chetan Bhagat, Critics, and Rupa publication were unaware of the fact that they were going to create history with this novel. They were unaware that “Five Point Someone” is not a simple novel; it is a giant piece of literature that is going to give rise to a new genre of “Indian Fiction” writing. During the last decade and a half, we have already seen the advent of more than a hundred successful authors writing consistently to serve this new genre of “evolved Indian fiction.”

These authors are mainly catering to the "Middle-Class Young India."

“The great Indian Middle class” versus “Middle class young India

In the year 1991, when Prime Minister Shri Manmohan Singh introduced liberalization and free skies in the Indian economic scene, experts in the field of "socio-economic" studies immediately identified the concept of the "Great Indian Middle Class." According to the initial studies, this class was an aspirational class, ready to change "ways of life" in the favor of latest technologies and exotic cultures. Manufacturers in the Western world were keen to import their products along with the native culture in India. Culinary delights like Pizza and day-to-day wear like Jeans were the new hot products of this culture (Karthik, 2023). The emergence of brand clubs and projections of a new society where role models were based on brands, gave rise to a new psychological order. Celebrities and role models of this society promoted these brands heavily and supported the "culture of consumerism". The majority of the multinational brands promoted a new culture where brands became a new social identity for individuals.

Before 1991, Indians were a "self-satisfied sleeping society." Hints of consumerism were present in the upper crust, but the majority of them were happy in their "middle-class existence." The focus of life was more on attaining a "secure life." The concept of "saving for hard times" was scoring over the "concept of consumption for living a fulfilled and enriched life." Economic Liberalization gave new wings to this "self-satisfied" society and created a bucket list of sorts for them. At the turn of the previous century emergence of a "new restless young middle class" came into existence. Natives of this "Middle-class young India" were restless because they were chasing goals set by consumerism" and nurturing a life where conventional values were guiding "emotions and family relations (Botamo, 2024)." Brands became a new status symbol for them; ownership of expensive watches became a shield of success for them. Display of carnal emotions like love and physical attraction figured out a voice in the form of expensive paperbacked greeting cards. Pleasantries shared with an intent to strengthen the relationships became more tangible because of gift items associated with them. It was also the time when Western world celebrations like "Friendship Day" and "Valentine's Day" became a flavor for the youth (E.Anushree, 2020).

It was a complex evolution for Indian society, it was a kind of transitional phase for human emotions, where materialistic success was setting up a new "moral compass" for the middle class. They were longing to become rich because the onset of new and expensive product lines was forcing them

to work hard and even adopt the wrong means to become successful. Chetan Bhagat's novels like "Revolution 2020" and "Half Girlfriend" show us some rebellions and class climbers. The protagonists of both these novels were emotional to the core, but at the same time, they were victims of class war as well. They got rejected in love because of their "lower middle class" status." This rejection inflicted revenge and class-climbing became a tool or a weapon to execute that revenge. On the scale of "literature mirrors society," many critics may consider the protagonists of "Half Girlfriend" and "Revolution 2020" as out of the box, larger than life characters (Dhruvita, 2023).

The crux of the "Great Indian middle class versus "middle-class young India," defines the demographics of a society where phrases like "Lower Income group", "middle-income group" and "higher income group" were emerging as the new caste system. Matured natives of this society were focusing more the economic wellbeing and compromises whereas "middle-class young India" was accommodating an ambition and aspiration about the accumulation of wealth and attainment of luxurious defined as a status symbol. Chetan Bhagat captured the imagination of this new rising class and gave a new voice to them. He described the complexities caused by this social transition and defined a new restless "young Indian middle class. This young Indian Middle class was affected by consumerism and found it difficult to survive in a world where financial resources were limited and opportunities for earning were restricted. This young class created a new demographic division in the society where the needs of the youngsters were increasing constantly and means to meet their needs were out of sight. In a way, it was class war redefined for the 21st century. Before it caste and religion were a major issue for love stories. During this period, caste in itself was a class; economic status was a sub-topic in the context of comparison. Chetan Bhagat's novel brought financial indifferences to the forefront and established them as the first major bone of contention (Karthik, 2023).

A writer catering to the “new age Demographics” of Liberalized India

While explaining the phenomenal success of Chetan Bhagat, many critics often suggest that he is among the very few authors who wrote to cater to demographics but ended up delivering some universal messages. When we glance at his initial journey, we find that his first two novels were mainly catering to the urban and evolved middle class of India. The families of the main characters were educated, they were offering a fair deal of liberties to the youngsters, and for instance, the female protagonists in "One Night @ Call Center" were working during the night shifts and enjoying a

fair deal of financial, social and sexual emancipation because they were free to make choices as per their wish. No moral guardians were guiding them (Ali, 2013). Social pressures were there but the moral compass was wide enough to accommodate hidden and clandestine affairs. The main characters of this novel were fighting a class war where they were competing with foreigners and carving a niche for survival.

It was new demographics, which was emerging in that society. These individual were cast away from the main society because their timings were designed to meet the peak hours of a country that was 12 hours ahead of them. This lack of social activity was playing badly on them. Now, in the era of Web 3.0 and 4.0, we can see an evolved class mainly dealing with foreigners and sometimes dealing with them at a superior level because of acceptance and knowledge-based superiority. One Night @ call center also defines the concept of "living expense", faced by the urban middle class. This novel establishes a new order where families were compromising on their social beliefs because of a rise in inflation in the cities. Their decisions were highly influenced following with the price of the luxurious setup by the marketing sources. These high prices were predominantly causing a lot of financial troubles for middle-income group families. This change in society gave rise to a new young middle class in India (Ali, 2013).

In the same vein "Five Point Someone" also depicts the story of class climbers who were treating education and technical excellence as a means to lead towards a better and financially well-off life. However, the quest for emotions and impoverished status becomes a roadblock for them. "Five Points Someone" also depicts a social order churned out of a complex scenario. This complex scenario indicates a complex life for youngsters, it shows they are also victims of consumerism, and studies have become a high-pressure job for them because the stakes are very high.

Chetan Bhagat is special because he figured out streaks of "small-town mentality" among the natives of the "urban middle class." He commented on this economic divide in strong words and created some characters that were dealing with the inner voices rendered by these characters.

Figuring out a new demography within an existing demography

Chetan Bhagat figured out "demography within the demography" of the "urban middle class" and "upper middle class" living in small towns of India. He echoed the voice of these characters while donning the boots of an insider and came up with some tales where "impossible feats were achieved by protagonists". He created a surreal world that was very close to the reality of the urban middle class (Chetan Bhagat's writing Style , 2018). This type of

depiction was unheard of in the past when a new demographic class was explored in such great detail. Before it, the Indian fiction scene was populated by superficial characters, spies, larger than than-than-life characters mainly dealing with "entertainment thriving on titillation of the senses." It was also the period where Indian fiction writers were obsessed with a depiction based on the tools of realism; however their sensibilities and world view was more of a westerner.

Urban middle class, upper, and lower middle class living in small towns of India, and great Indian middle class were three major demographics for Chetan Bhagat. His messages are universal because he catered to this new socioeconomic section of society which was evolving after liberalization and free skies. Here it will be pertinent to mention the impacts of Hollywood films on Indian Society. Hollywood films were more explicit while presenting the description of sexual desires. Their display of love and related emotions was more physical and sensuous. Chetan Bhagat also created some scenes that were full of sensuousness; however, while doing it, he maintained an essence of Indian sensibilities. Love-making scenes in "Three Mistakes of My Life" and "Five Point Someone" testify to the above-mentioned statement (Ali, 2013).

A simplistic story-telling dealing with the complex life of Middle-class young India

The majority of the writings offered by Chetan Bhagat follow a linear pattern of storytelling. This type of storytelling is always best to attract the interest of non-readers as well. The success of Chetan Bhagat can be attributed to the fact that many conventional "No-Readers" also find an engagement with these novels. The storytelling is simple because the realism derived by Chetan Bhagat is very close to the real-life situations and themes of urban class and middle-class readers. He never tried to add adjectives or heavy words to become upmarket; he never tried to impose an intellectual or writer-like (stereo-typical) personality. But it never means that he is not an intellectual or he is someone who cannot witness his life and times from the point of view of a well-read man (S.Kalita, 2008). His essays and articles in some of the leading newspapers in Indian newspapers testify to his ability to act as an "intellectual person awarded with an ability to comment upon social and political peripheries".

While writing novels Chetan Bhagat refrained from complex themes and focused more on the complexities of human character. Storylines are simple; on most occasions, he developed an analogy weaved around day-to-day situations. The majority of the events like "grading system in IIT," and "appraisal systems in Call centers," are events

that everyone can relate to. He expanded his horizon in novels like “Revolution 2020” when he figured out some serious loopholes in the Indian education system; he exposed a bitter truth showing and underlining a corrupt nexus between the land mafia and education experts. This "social approach" also added to the realism presented by him and supported him in the creation of a successful journey.

Conclusion

On a summative note, it can be stated that Chetan Bhagat became successful because he figured out a new demographic segment hidden in the regular demographic details of urban and semi-urban India. His writings and characterizations acted as a thread that connected many characters based on this new demographic division. He became successful because he very prudently added elements from this stratum of the people in his offerings. Many critics believe that the marketing and pricing strategy of these novels helped him in finding new readers and exploring a new market segment. However, this statement never undermines the content offered by a Chetan Bhagat novel; he catered to the young middle class of India in the best possible way. The storylines and characterization were up to the mark and showed great resemblance with the aspirations of this new urban, young middle class of India. Instead of focusing more on the presentation with the help of words, he adopted the technique of weaving interesting situations and bold dispositions of various characters to propagate his stories.

The quantum of success attained by him makes him the voice of this newly emerged young middle class of India. This concept was also in synchronization with the anthropology of 90's India where consumerism was gradually bringing a change in the social order. Masses and particularly youngsters liked his book because the sublime messages propagated by these books were progressive. He never preached anything, instead, he inspired the youth to learn from their experiences.

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