



Career Conflicts and Challenges in Chetan Bhagat's Five Point Someone

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Abstract

Chetan Bhagat is known for his youth-oriented novels. The themes of his novels always reflect the true picture of the contemporary Indian youth; their likes and dislikes, their strengths and weaknesses and more importantly their mindsets and attitudes. In his debut novel *Five Point Someone*, Bhagat portrays the students' struggle for scoring good grades and their consequent blunders in achieving their objectives. He also exposes the parents' irrational craze for IIT seat for their children. Having been an alumnus of IIT, Delhi, the writer has flawlessly portrayed the firsthand knowledge of the lifestyle of students at IITs. The paper primarily focuses on the darker side of the students' career conflicts and challenges for IITs and at IITs.

Key Words and Phrases: Contemporary Indian youth, blunders, irrational craze for IIT, career conflicts and challenges

Full Paper:

Chetan Bhagat is an adept at portraying the true picture of the contemporary Indian youth; their likes and dislikes, their strengths and weaknesses and more importantly their mindsets and attitudes. For most of his novels, he chooses the topics largely from the youth's point of view. Every young Indian can easily identify himself or herself with each of the young characters of his novels. In his debut novel *Five Point Someone*, Bhagat portrays the students' struggle for scoring good grades and their consequent blunders in achieving their objectives. He also exposes the parents' irrational craze for IIT seat for their children.

Irony blended with subtle humour is generally Chetan Bhagat's

forte in any of his novels but 'Five Point Someone' has more dose of it than any other novel. Touted to be semi-autobiographical, Chetan Bhagat narrates his story in the first person perspective in disguise of Hari. The novel begins with the brutal ragging by seniors and how macho and suave Ryan saves the other two protagonists of the story, Alok and Hari, the narrator. The writer is highly successful in creating the perfect setting for the reader to identify the genre of the novel he or she is going to explore. The mood of the reader never gets deviated at any point of the novel till the end. All most all the events of the story revolve in and around the IIT Delhi campus. Having been an alumnus of IIT, Delhi, the writer has flawlessly portrayed the firsthand knowledge of the lifestyle of



students at IITs and we can find in him a great authenticity in reflecting the mood and ambience of a campus novel.

The novel deals with plethora of student related issues of the current Indian scenario. The common man's opinion on IIT entrance, IIT institutes and their standards is of something extraordinary far above excellence. If it comes to its students, they are generally viewed as super human beings. Chetan Bhagat's novel proves such exaggerations to be false. After reading the novel, the readers' perception changes to a great extent and they start believing that IITians too are like any other students with their weaknesses and follies. They are like any ordinary students who are notoriously associated with bunking classes, watching late night movies, craving for fast foods at road side dhabas, enjoying vodka with buddies and attending classes and even viva under the influence of vodka. The narrator falling in love and even making love with his professor's daughter is another extremity. The darkest episode of all these is their stooping to the level of snatching question papers. As the very title of the novel suggests it is all about what is not supposed to be done at IIT.

Hari, Ryan and Alok, the three protagonists of the story were highly successful in their academics until they have joined IIT. Since a class of an IIT institute consists of the students who have been the toppers of their respective schools or cities or the districts, it is really hard for most of them to digest the bitter fact that they can no more enjoy the tag of class topper which remains a delusion in spite of their best efforts. They have to get adjusted with the tag of

underperformers of the class with five point someone grades lagging far behind the cream of the class with nine points or more. The inability to cope with exam stress and cutthroat competition provokes the trio to commit blunders one after another.

Prof. Cherian is a professor of Delhi IIT. As an IIT student, he was very bright and his GPA was 10. Though his classmates went abroad, he was left behind for his principles. He stayed back in India to do research and help his motherland. He has two children; Sameer, the son and Neha, the daughter. But this professor decided that his son must get into IIT. He wished his son to continue the legacy of his family by getting a seat in an IIT. But that was just his big ego contrary to his dreams; the son wanted to be a lawyer and hated maths. The father hated his son for hating maths. He pushed him but he failed consecutively for three times and finally killed himself for he couldn't face his father. In his suicide letter to his sister he confesses his weakness:

I have tried three times to get into IIT, and each time I have disappointed Dad. He cannot get over the fact that his son cannot handle physics, chemistry and maths. I cannot do it Neha, no matter how hard I try, no matter how many years I study or how many books I read. I cannot get into IIT. And I cannot bear to see Dad's eyes.

He has seen thousands of IIT students in his life, and cannot see why his own son cannot make it. Well Neha, he sees the students who make it, but he doesn't see the hundreds of thousands who don't make it. He has not spoken to me



for two months. He doesn't even talk to mom properly because of me. What can I do? Keep trying until I die. Or simply die? (p.167)

The letter by Sameer represents the anguish of not just one individual but thousands of young students of this country who are forcibly plunged into the vicious cycle of IIT where the success rate is almost less than one percent. The craze for IIT among the Indian middle class is such that they are under the fantasy that a seat in an IIT is a ticket to heaven on earth. The parents ignore their children's actual aptitudes and interests, deprive them of a normal childhood and youth, and force them to go through the years-long grind of coaching classes and, at the end of it many of their children are psychologically damaged, possibly forever. Many parents and their children have an opinion that just securing a seat in an IIT is panacea for all their problems but the novel showcases the other side of the coin. Professor Cherian's son too could not carry the Herculean task of securing a seat in an IIT and the result is the father's guilt for his life time for being the reason for the death of his very son.

He killed himself because he did not get into IIT. He killed himself because of me. (p.260)

Prof. Cherian's distress is immeasurable. The loss of a son is excruciating for any father but if the very reason for the loss happens to be the father himself, his suffering is inconsolable. He Prof. Cherian never tried to empathize his son while he was alive and by the time he realized his folly, his son is no more.

One, believe in yourself, and don't let a GPA, performance review or promotion in a job define you. There is more to life than these

things- your family, your friends, your internal desires and goals. And the grades you get in dealing with each of these areas will define you as a person. I thought my son was useless because he didn't get into IIT. I tell you what, I was a useless father. It is great to get into IIT, but it is not the end of the world if you don't. All of you should be proud to have the IIT tag, but never ever judge anyone who is not from this institute – that alone can define the greatness of this institution. (p. 261)

Despite all the hype and hullabaloo, an IIT degree by itself hardly guarantees one a hotshot career. Parents should realize their folly in coercing their children to study engineering. Engineering and medicine are seen by the middle class as the only careers that guarantees their children a good life. In fact there are many more professions which are more creative and productive than engineering and medicine and they even pay very reasonably for talent and merit. The parents must value their children's interests and aptitudes and they should not force them to do any course that they don't like or feel comfortable with.

According to a survey conducted in IIT-Kharagpur, the mental health of students is an actual predicament of nearly 84% of the students on the campus. While 72% have undergone anxiety or depression about 24% of them have gone to such an extent that they have the thought of committing suicide. Many students felt that parents must realise that they should not force their dreams onto their children and give them the freedom to make mistakes and fail from time to time.



As the very title of the novel "Five Point Someone- What Not to Do at IIT" suggests, the novel depicts the true picture of the world of IIT; not just what to do but also what not to do. IITs themselves are not worth it. There are innumerable problems embedded deep within the system. One of the prominent reasons for IITs having gained so much fame is due to their students. They get the best students in the country through one of the toughest entrance examinations of the world. But the most deplorable thing is everyone over here is obsessed with grades. Grades are important but there is more to life than just grades. The conflict between grades and creativity is the darling topic of Ryan and he bewails the apathetic teaching and educational system overburdened with numerous assignments. *To put in Ryan's words;*

This system of relative grading and overburdening the students. I mean it kills the best fun years of your life. But it kills something else. Where is the room for original thought? Where is the time for creativity? It is not fair. (p.35)

When students are too much obsessed with grades alone there is no scope for learning with joy. Even the teaching fraternity also forces students to get good grades in IIT rather than encouraging them to be more creative. In the recent years the craze for IIT seat is sky-high among parents as well as students. The most ironical thing about coaching centres is that they make money from those who cannot cram the entrance examination. They even can afford to give scholarship or even sponsor candidates who are likely to get a good

rank. Even most of the students who crack the most prestigious competitive examination of India fail to continue the same spirit after joining IIT. It suggests that rote learning plays a key role in cracking IIT entrance examination.

Ryan who is more dynamic and creative among the three friends always complains about the uninspiring educational system that prevails in IITs and persuades the other to enjoy the simple beauties of life like watching movies and visiting fast food centres to escape from the insipid life style at the institution and hostel. But one cannot have one's cake and eat it too and as a result their grades slip to such an alarming low level that Hari and Alok even sometimes consider Ryan the spoilsport for their downfall in the academics. But their aggravation is only temporary for they realize that his role in their getting low grades is negligible and they know they themselves have involved in all the activities and they cannot ignore the fact that he is helpful to them on many occasions. They also admire his creativity, audacity and frankness.

Though all the three protagonists of the story seem to be fun loving and happy-go-lucky guys, they have the dark side of their lives when it comes to their families. Alok has a sick father and an elder sister to get married. The only bread winner of the family is his mother. Half her salary regularly goes to support her husband's medical treatment. Alok is very conscious of his position every moment. He frequently mentions his family problems and worries a lot. That is why he is ridiculed by Hari and Alok as cry-baby or sissy. He seems to be very sentimental and he is very much aware of



his shortfalls and the dire necessity for him to get a good job at the earliest.

'But it is my duty man and I love them. I don't see it as trouble,' Alok said dully.

'So what job you are going to take up?' I said

'Whichever pays the most, I don't care,' Alok said. (P. 146)

Though Ryan is financially sound, he has some ego issues with his parents and consequently he never maintains good relations with them and he even doesn't like to read their letters to him. Even the narrator of the story, Hari too has bitter experiences with his tyrannical father who never allows his son to enjoy any kind of freedom or recreation. Hari's inability to communicate well with his teachers and his debacle in the viva has a direct connection with his father's dictum to him not to answer his superiors back anytime. Thus the three friends have personal problems which have played a great role in affecting as well as molding their careers.

The inflexibility in the present day education system which doesn't allow the students to think creative is portrayed in a humorous yet thought provoking manner. The anguish of the author is reflected in the attitude of Ryan towards the follies in the education system where the professors show indifferent attitude and bias towards the students who come up with novel ideas only just because their inferior grades. They are looked down upon by the toppers as well as the teachers because

their grades which are not so impressive. But the significant point is that their project is well appreciated despite the mental agony they have undergone during the period of their rustication.

As per a report from a leading national daily *The Hindu*, many students only dream of getting into an IIT and once they enter any of these institutes they lose interest in the studies. As the students are taking easier path by maintaining just an acceptable Cumulative General Point Average (CGPA), the quest and competition to outperform each other and come up with innovative ideas is not there. This is clearly evident from the theory of C2D i.e. Cooperate to Dominate devised by the three friends. Basically it is the brainchild of Ryan. He opines that IITs have hardly contributed to the country in the last three decades. Since the IIT system suppresses talent and individual spirit and extracts the best years of one's life from the country's brightest minds, they have planned to overcome these difficulties with a master plan. So the only way to take on the unfair system is through unfair means – which is Cooperate to Dominate. As per this plan, the assignments should be shared among the three friends. If one person does an assignment the other two will copy it to save time. All the responsibilities are supposed to be divided among the three. Though the plan seems to be innovative, it cannot be encouraged and followed because the true essence of education will be badly affected.

Despite getting five point someone grades, Alok and Hari clinch very good jobs much to their disbelief. Alok joins his software company at New



Delhi and he has been sent to the US for six months owing to his workaholic nature. All the financial woes of his family have been wiped with the US stipend. Hari joins in Mumbai and he is glad spending half his salary towards phone calls to his beloved girlfriend Neha. Ryan's is the worst grade in the class but he is not all affected by this since he gets what he really wants. In spite of his very unimpressive performance in academics, he realizes his dream of achieving something bigger for his original thoughts rather than for rote memory. His lube project getting approved and well appreciated by Prof. Veera really stands out as a testimonial to his smartness and creativity. Interestingly it is funded by his father thus bringing the father-son duo together for a happy cause. In fact Hari's letters to Ryan's father in guise of Ryan help them to bury their differences with each other.

Justifying the title of the novel, Chetan Bhagat enlightens the readers about the things that should not be done in an IIT. He gives them an undercurrent message that one should not get carried away by the temporary problems that arise during the course of life and one must try to solve them while keeping intact with one's ideals and goals. Prof. Cherian's distressed and ill-fated son Sameer remains as an example how not to make a career choice. This episode must be an eye-opener for many aspiring parents who want their children to crack IIT exam by hook or crook irrespective of their likes and dislikes, their potentialities and the lowest success rate in the exam. Unable to cope with failure, Sameer commits suicide. But his death causes an everlasting mental agony to his parents and sister. Even *Alok who is*

overly obsessed with family emotions and unable to digest his rustication takes the extreme step of attempting suicide. However he is fortunate enough unlike Sameer and survives to realize his dreams. Thus the novel also preaches the young that suicide can never be a solution to any problem. Even after getting through the exam successfully, one should not stay in the euphoria all through the duration of the course. No one can overcome a weakness with another weakness and it is proved in the case of Hari. In order to conquer his weakness of stuttering of speech and fumbling for words, he attends the viva while having drunk. This in fact worsens his already pathetic situation regarding his grade. The futile adventure of the three friends to steal the question papers from the chamber of the head of the department is a typical example for the deterioration of values and ethics in general and standards of IITs in particular. It not only leads to the rustication of the three friends but also remains a blot in their personal lives forever.

With his very first novel, Chetan Bhagat has carved a niche for himself as a novelist who has immense concern for the issues and challenges related to the youth. As Chetan Bhagat himself said in an interview, when a reader remembers the characters after reading the book it's all what a book needs to have i.e. an independent connection with the readers. In case of *Five Point Someone*, Bhagat's words prove to be absolutely true because the characters of Ryan, Alok, Hari and Prof. Cherian haunt the readers for a longtime and it is a testimony to the kind of success the novel has achieved.



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