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Dissolving Barriers and Resolving Conflicts: A Composite Critique of Regional Rigours in Chetan Bhagat's *Two States*

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Chetan Bhagat is not one of the most critically acclaimed writers of contemporary India. He is not the blue-eyed boy of the predominantly high-brow academia. His fictional works are often considered to be pulp fiction. However, it is not for nothing that he has been one of the best-selling writers -- a craze among readers -- for quite some time now. The *masala* elements of his novels acknowledged, we would possibly do well not to brush off his writing as trifle. His novels always address in a most straightforward way quite a few plaguing issues of present-day India. First published in 2009, Bhagat's fourth novel *Two States* is no exception. This novel is a poignant interrogation of the parochial and regional divisions -- social, cultural, and above all, psychological. It is a novel that demands dissolution of out-dated barriers of race, caste and ethnicity. It is a novel of threshold, delineating the dilemma of a young generation that is unwilling to accept -- let alone cling on to -- the socio-cultural mores of the elder generation and yet, finding it difficult to adapt fully to the westernized values of an increasingly capitalist society. However, it does not throw to the winds the age-old Indian family values, the tradition of taking parents on board in matters of crucial family decisions. In negotiating the conflicting demands of a widening progressive mind-set and traditional familial rootedness, Bhagat's novel lays out an exemplary blue-print for a professionally qualified fledgling generation of a globalized India.

Introduction:

Chetan Bhagat has been consistently touching the chords of millions of readers since his first novel *Five Point Someone* was published in 2004. The New York Times called Bhagat 'the biggest selling English language novelist in India's history'. His appeal lies primarily to the younger generation; his novels speak for them. What Hari Menon writes in his article *How the Supermarket Racks Were Won*^[1] in the magazine *Outlook* is true. In this review of Bhagat's second novel *The 3 Mistakes of my Life*, Menon observes that Bhagat's novels 'annoy critics and please casual readers in roughly equal measure'. In Menon's assessment,

"...his [Bhagat's] is a proposition of relevance and attractiveness in a large market of his choosing. It is why Dan Brown or Paulo Coelho are so successful. If their entire oeuvres put together can't match the literary merits of a single Don DeLillo chapter (they don't) it makes not a whit of a difference to the larger reading public."

Menon's concluding observation in the said article is also worth-quoting in full:

"Bhagat only lacks literary skills the way the Da Vinci Code's Dan Brown, thriller writer Alistair MacLean or horror/crime writer Dean Koontz lack literary skills. Clunky writers all, they are nonetheless engaging in their varied styles, have sold in the millions, and have plots that tend to translate very easily into film scripts."

Two States was also subsequently made into a successful movie. However, it is the novel, and not the movie, that is the object of analyses here.

Bhagat's novel *Two States* is professedly auto-biographical. However, like most other auto-biographical novels, it is a blend of facts and fiction. The novel is befittingly set in IIM-A, perhaps the most prestigious B-School in the country. Starting at this premiere management institute of the country is a love-affair between two young graduates. So far there is nothing unique in it. The liaison between Krish and Ananya assumes a special significance when we know their surnames. After all, in India names do not matter; but surnames do. Krish's is Malhotra; Ananya's is Swaminathan. The former comes from a traditional Punjabi family; the latter from an orthodox Tamilian Brahmin family. Herein lies the problematic aspect of this boy-meet-girl story. The title of the novel ostensibly refers to these two states of India: Punjab and Tamil Nadu. Possibly it could also refer to the two states of two generations -- the embracing outlook of a younger generation that is truly Indian and the narrowly Punjabi or conservatively Tamil mind-set which is characteristic of Krish's and Ananya's parents. The novel pinpoints how even sixty-odd years after India's independence, even after prolonged free mixing and inter-action among people from various parts of the country, inexorable socio-cultural barriers exist amongst people from two different provinces of the same nation. Some of these barriers can truly be attributed to cultural gaps; as one reviewer writes: "...it draws your attention to cultural differences in diverse India. Some of them are as simple as boisterous, loud Punjabi music versus quiet, mellifluous Tamilian Carnatic music."^[2] However, most other hostilities are based on deeply rooted cultural prejudices which come in the way of an informed understanding. These cultural prejudices are further aggravated by vague but powerful cultural and parochial chauvinism. Answerability to one's community seems to rule the mind of the elder generation. Marital ties with a family from a different provincial and cultural background become so threatening and appear to pollute the sanctity of a family.

Reluctant as they are to build up family ties, Krish's Punjabi family and Ananya's Tamil family have affinities in their hidebound structure and centre of authority. The two families from two parts of India share the same patriarchal bias. Krish's father unleashes violence on Krish's mother. Krish's mother never dares to stand up against her husband's atrocity. She silently bears it. As for Ananya's mother, although she is not tortured by her husband, restrictions on her abound. She has been conditioned so thoroughly into women's stereotypical domestic role, coming out of her house and singing in front of a sizeable audience seems frightening to her. In this respect, Ananya presents a sharp contrast to her mother. Unlike her mother who is scared to make a public performance, Ananya has pursued and excelled in a career which is highly competitive and financially rewarding. However, this does not mean that Ananya has the liberty to choose her partner for marriage. Her Tamil Brahmin parents keep on insisting on her having a Tamil Brahmin groom.

In Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, the Ayemenem House has "Love Laws [that] lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much." The situation is no different either for the Malhotra family or the Swaminathan family in Bhagat's novel. Krish's mother has a very rigid idea regarding who can be married. Krish's mother, despite being a woman herself, values a potential bride in terms of the dowry she fetches. An educated and highly earning girl like Ananya never seems to her to be a good enough bride. A sumptuous ceremony and a fat dowry are what make the prospective bride lucrative to her. This is an irony of even present-day India that a marriage with a member of a different community is such a taboo, but exacting dowry from another family of the same community is a matter of glory to a section of the population. Interestingly, the novel contains within itself an episode where resistance is registered against the evil custom of dowry as perpetuated with impunity by traditional arranged marriages. This resistance, not surprisingly, comes from educated Ananya. At the marriage ceremony of Krish's cousin, Ananya takes a tough stand against the

boy's family. However, the novel is not so radical that it would castigate the dowry system in its totality. Even Ananya in her tough position only persuades the boy's family to relinquish the demand for an expensive car and agree to be content with a not-so-expensive car. And it is from a position of practical limitation rather than from a position of ideological fortitude that Ananya spearheads her negotiation. The boy's family should be content with a not-so-expensive car because the girl's family cannot afford anything costlier and because that moderately priced car is good enough for a groom of only a decent income! Possibly, Indian society is yet to arrive at a point where it can think of abolishing the practice of dowry altogether in their actual lives.

The novel is unique also in portraying scenes of domestic violence; and that too through the eyes of the son of the fighting couple. Bhagat deserves credit in tearing open the façade of the happy family that is so often bravely put up even by a bickering couple. The Indian myth of the sacred relationship between husband and wife is burst open by the atrocity relentlessly inflicted by Krish's father on Krish's mother right in front of Krish and also in his absence. This pointless male chauvinist aggression is a sad reality of many a marriage. This facet also serves to heighten the central theme of the novel. The reality of the married life of Krish's parents succinctly shows that marriage within one's community does not guarantee a happy marriage. Nevertheless, Krish's mother continues to think that only a Punjabi girl can make a good wife to Krish. The irony is obvious.

The relationship of Krish with his father is equally sour. This derailed relationship between Krish and his father is also one of the highlights of the novel. However, this is not exceptional in Bhagat's fiction. Bhagat himself recounts in an interview how a French journalist once told him:

"In all three books of yours, the relationship between the protagonist and the father is dysfunctional. In *Five Point Someone*, one guy doesn't like his parents, the other guy has a paralysed father and the third guy has a strict father, in *One Night @ The Call Center*, Shyam is underconfident and his parents are always fighting. In *The 3 Mistakes Of My Life*, the father has deserted him and even Ishan's father slaps him and he has a bad relationship with his father."^[3]

It is rather a paradox that despite portraying so many strained relationships within a family, the novel is after all a negotiation with -- and not an outright repudiation -- of the underlying basic assumptions of an Indian family.

It is interesting to note that socio-cultural prejudices, though fading, are not completely things of the past to the professionally qualified and open-minded Generation Y. Ananya is not altogether free from the societal structures and casteist hierarchies she grew in. She retains a tinge of the age-old divisions. On the very first day of their meeting, Ananya reminds Krish: "...you should know that I am born into the purest of pure upper caste communities ever created." However, she is simultaneously critical of this identity of hers. She is quick to clarify: "I didn't say I am a practising Tamil Brahmin." She not only relishes chicken, but also gulps beer. Furthermore, she is adamant about her drinking habit, and is even annoyed that drinking is prohibited in Gujarat, the state where Gandhiji was born. She even questions this prohibition. Her argument is simple -- possibly simplistic -- but the point is driven home well: "But Gandhiji won us freedom... What's the point of getting people free only to put restrictions on them?" Freedom means something else to the present-day generation. However, such an interrogation of the way Gandhiji's legacy is carried on is not unique to Bhagat. In his Man Booker Prize-winning novel *The White Tiger*, Arvind Adiga makes his protagonist Balram Halawienvisage a "school where you won't be allowed to

corrupt anyone's head with prayers and stories about God or Gandhi." Possibly, a re-appraisal and a redefined application of the ideals of the Father of the Nation are required to fit the contemporary Indian context. Even on a visit to Sabarmati Ashram, Krish' mother and Ananya's parents bicker, oblivious of the message of Gandhiji and the significance of the Sabarmati Ashram. Probably, the elder generation, too, is not often heedful to the glorious legacy of Gandhiji.

The novel is relentless also in underscoring the materialistic predilection of the citizens of the country cutting across cultures despite so much of thrust on cultural pride and cultural 'purities'. With a piercing sense of humour, the narrator describes a super-rich South Indian lady: "A fifty-year-old lady with gold bangles thicker than handcuffs came to my cubicle." The fascination of Krish's mother, an out-and-out North Indian woman, with the wealth of the prospective bride-groom's family cannot be over-exaggerated either. Commenting on Binti's marriage, Krish' mother says: "Rajji mama is spending five lakh on the parties alone", and goes on to tell Krish: "...if Duke's budget is five lakhs, yours should be ten lakhs." Around two centuries back, Jane Austen had clinically shown the material basis of so much of social and cultural pretensions in an English context. This piece of reality is equally applicable to the present Indian context, though the show of materiality is more blatant than nuanced.

The novel is, however, not free from racial over-generalizations from a narratorial point of view, especially given the fact that the novel is largely auto-biographical. The South Indian women have been persistently described as 'dusky'. Early in the novel, Krish says: "I looked at a wedding picture of her [Ananya's] relatives. Given the dusky complexion, everyone's teeth shown extra white." Ananya is, however, fair-skinned. At Binti's marriage-ceremony, Shipramasi comments: "By South Indian standards, she [Ananya] is quite pretty." One might argue this is just a representation -- and not a justification -- of prevalent attitudes. However, one would not be off the point to wonder whether the fairness of South Indian Ananya makes her more acceptable as the heroine of the novel to a wide gamut of North Indian readers.

The novel is no less critical of the corporate world, the way it functions, and the manner in which it exacts profit. After speaking highly of a corporate entity in a job-interview, Krish thinks: 'I've not said one true thing in that interview today'; and a voice within him answers: 'They don't want to hear the truth.' On joining a lucrative management position, Krish says of his duty: '...I readied my pitch about which loss-making company to buy.' Later, when the client has indeed incurred the loss, he clarifies: 'Actually madam, the market went into self-correction mode', and thinks in his mind: 'I now understood the purpose of complex research terms. They deflect uncomfortable questions that have no answer.' All this criticism sounds more authentic as it comes from an author who has significant experience in investment banking. Hence, this is an insider criticism on the part of Bhagat.

Conclusion:

May be, we -- the readers -- already knew what we are told by Bhagat in this novel. But possibly it was not redundant to be reminded once again of our own divisions and divisiveness, how little we work towards the elimination of these 'given' barriers, how 'racist' we the good-hearted Indians can potentially be. The concluding aphorism of the novel is predictable, though not ineffective by any means. Krish speaks of his children: 'They'll be from a state called India'. The many India-s within India ought to move forward in tandem. The message is simple, but worth-repeating.

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