

# Conversational English and Campus Comedy: A Linguistic and Sociocultural Study of Humour in Chetan Bhagat's *Five Point*

## *Someone*

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### Abstract

This paper studies the function of conversational English and linguistic humour in Chetan Bhagat's *Five Point Someone: What Not to Do at IIT!* through stylistic, pragmatic, and sociocultural approaches. It argues that the novel's informal narrative manner is not simply a marker of popular readability but a purposeful literary device. Bhagat's use of student slang, Hinglish, exaggerated imagery, and self-mocking humour constructs a comic mode through which academic anxiety, institutional discipline, and fear of failure are reimagined in more manageable terms. By drawing on humour theories such as incongruity and relief, and on pragmatic concepts including Grice's Cooperative Principle and Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory, this paper shows how humour becomes a strategy of survival in the highly pressurized environment of IIT. The analysis further suggests that Bhagat's conversational idiom reflects the lived sociolinguistic reality of urban Indian youth and broadens the reach of Indian English fiction by moving away from elitist literary codes. At the same time, the paper also acknowledges the limits of this comic world, especially its male-centered perspective and the restricted agency granted to female characters. Ultimately, the essay contends that the

humour of *Five Point Someone* works at once as entertainment, social criticism, and a linguistic record of contemporary campus life in India.

**Keywords:** Conversational English, Campus Humour, Indian Campus Fiction, Sociolinguistics, Pragmatics

### **Introduction: Reimagining the Indian Campus Novel**

When *Five Point Someone* appeared in 2004, it altered the texture of Indian campus fiction by shifting attention from literary ornament to youthful immediacy. The novel became widely popular not because of stylistic complexity in the conventional sense, but because it sounded close to everyday student speech. Its language is casual, rapid, and often comic, making it feel less like a carefully elevated literary performance and more like hostel conversation retold from within. Critics have noted that Bhagat's fiction helped foreground youth culture, aspiration, and the frustrations of middle-class student life in a form accessible to a broad readership (Biswas 1-7).

The novel centers on three mechanical engineering students at IIT–Hari, Ryan, and Alok—whose academic underperformance places them in constant conflict with the expectations of family, institution, and society. Their lives unfold under the pressure of grades, comparison, and the symbolic burden of the IIT label. Yet the narrative does not present this pressure through solemnity alone. Instead, Bhagat repeatedly filters fear and humiliation through jokes, banter, exaggeration, and confessional irony. This paper argues that such humour is central to the novel's meaning. Far from being an ornamental feature, conversational English becomes a narrative instrument through which anxiety is processed, authority is mocked, and student solidarity is sustained.

### **Theoretical Perspective: Positing Humour**

A useful way to understand the humour of *Five Point Someone* is through the theory of incongruity. Humour often arises when expected patterns are disrupted, especially when

something serious is suddenly reduced to something ordinary, absurd, or trivial. Bhagat's novel depends heavily on this contrast. IIT is widely imagined as an elite, disciplined, and almost sacred educational space, yet the narrator describes it in a vocabulary shaped by boredom, confusion, irritation, and comic disbelief. The result is a steady reduction of institutional grandeur. What is culturally treated as untouchable excellence is rendered through the language of those who are exhausted by living inside it.

Relief theory is equally relevant. The students in the novel exist under relentless psychological strain: grades determine status, parental expectations narrow their options, and the fear of future failure shadows even ordinary conversation. In this environment, humour functions as a release mechanism. The jokes do not erase tension; they make it bearable. Muthamil and Akila observe that Bhagat's realism lies in his depiction of the emotional and social pressures experienced by students, especially those caught between ambition and academic disappointment (167-70). In that sense, the novel's comic energy is inseparable from its realism.

### **Humour in Dialogue: A Pragmatic Reading**

Bhagat's campus world also rewards pragmatic analysis because much of its humour emerges from how people speak rather than merely from what happens. Grice's Cooperative Principle helps explain why many exchanges become funny. Comedy frequently appears when speakers disrupt expectations of relevance, clarity, or seriousness. In *Five Point Someone*, classroom discourse often demands precision and obedience, but students respond with irreverence, digression, or mischievous over-literalism. Such moments reveal not only a comic impulse but also a skepticism toward a system that prizes memorized correctness over genuine engagement.

The friendships among Hari, Ryan, and Alok can also be read through Brown and Levinson's idea of face-work. In ordinary social situations, insults and mockery threaten face.

In the hostel environment, however, teasing often functions as intimacy. The boys repeatedly joke about each other's weaknesses, appearance, fear, and emotional confusion. Their language may sound abrasive, but in context it often signals acceptance rather than rejection. Humour becomes a way of offering emotional support without openly performing vulnerability. Under institutional conditions that rarely allow emotional openness, banter turns into an informal structure of care.

### **Conversational English as Narrative Strategy**

One of the novel's most distinctive features is its first-person narrative voice. Hari does not narrate like an omniscient commentator or an elevated literary observer; he speaks as someone remembering events in a familiar, almost oral register. This stylistic choice creates immediacy and intimacy. The prose often relies on brief sentences, sudden confessions, and matter-of-fact phrasing, which give the narration the feel of spoken recollection rather than polished exposition. Chaudhari remarks that Bhagat's narrative method and stylistic simplicity are essential to the novel's popularity and readability, particularly for younger readers who recognize their own speech patterns in the text (141-47).

This informality also has ideological force. The language of IIT as an institution is associated with technical precision, rank, performance, and measurable achievement. Hari's voice works against that official idiom. By telling the story in accessible, self-conscious, and comic English, the narrator symbolically takes control of an experience otherwise dominated by administrative judgment and academic hierarchy. Conversational English therefore performs more than accessibility; it becomes a mode of narrative resistance.

### **Comic Language and Exaggeration**

Bhagat often achieves humour through comparison, exaggeration, and deliberately overstated imagery. Authority figures are reduced through comic description, and stressful situations are narrated as though they are catastrophes of absurd magnitude. These devices are

stylistically simple, but their effect is powerful. Hyperbole mirrors the emotional reality of student life, where a bad grade can feel like the end of the world even when it is not. The exaggeration is comic precisely because it is excessive, but it also remains emotionally credible because academic pressure distorts proportion. Similarly, the novel's frequent comic comparisons strip intimidating people and situations of their symbolic power. Teachers, seniors, and institutional rituals are repeatedly dragged from the pedestal of reverence into the realm of the ridiculous. This pattern of deflation makes humour a subtle form of resistance. It allows students to imagine themselves as less powerless than the institution would have them believe.

The same comic pattern extends to the boys' understanding of love, friendship, and self-worth. Because they are products of a highly competitive, technical system, even their emotional lives are often narrated in semi-mechanical or semi-mathematical terms. This creates comic incongruity: intimate experience is filtered through the habits of analytical thinking. The effect is humorous, but it also exposes how deeply institutional logic shapes self-perception.

### **Code-Mixing and Campus Humour**

An important dimension of the novel's linguistic texture is code-mixing. English in the novel is not isolated from Hindi; rather, the two exist in a flexible relationship shaped by context, intimacy, and emotional need. English often carries the institutional world of formal learning, while Hindi and Hinglish frequently convey irritation, closeness, playfulness, and comic force. This bilingual fluidity strengthens the realism of the campus environment and reflects the speech habits of urban Indian youth. Biswas identifies youth culture as a central aspect of Bhagat's fiction, and that culture is inseparable from linguistic hybridity (1-7). The novel's humour depends in part on this hybrid register because campus comedy is rarely produced through standard English alone. The rhythm of informal speech, the energy of slang, and the tonal shifts made possible by code-mixing all contribute to the text's social credibility.

This issue becomes even clearer in discussions of adaptation. Bemi's study of the novel and its film versions notes the relationship between language, gender, and cultural reception, showing how popular adaptation often intensifies colloquial and vernacular features in order to heighten humour and immediacy (71-78). This observation helps us see that Bhagat's comic idiom belongs to a wider cultural pattern in which language choice is tied to class, youth identity, and the politics of accessibility.

### **Humour as Social Critique**

The comedy of *Five Point Someone* is not merely playful; it is satirical. One of its recurring targets is the educational structure that values memorization, ranking, and narrow definitions of success. The novel repeatedly shows how such a system reduces students to numbers and encourages conformity rather than curiosity. Humour becomes a way of exposing this contradiction. By laughing at the absurdity of "mugging," grade obsession, and institutional rigidity, the novel questions whether meritocratic prestige necessarily corresponds to intellectual or human worth.

Muthamil and Akila emphasize the novel's grounding in recognizable student reality, and this realism includes not only pressure but also the frustration produced by mechanical educational routines (167-70). Bhagat's humour makes that frustration readable to a mass audience. The comic mode softens the delivery, but the critique remains sharp.

### **Limits of the Comic World**

The novel's humour, however, is not beyond criticism. Its comic universe is largely shaped by male friendship, and women remain comparatively peripheral within that structure. Neha is significant to the plot, yet she is often filtered through Hari's desire, awkwardness, and anxiety rather than granted full independent narrative complexity. As a result, the novel's humour sometimes reinforces the assumptions of a male-centered campus culture instead of fully interrogating them.

Bemi's discussion of language and gender is especially relevant here, since it points toward the ways comic representation can reproduce cultural imbalance even while appearing harmless or entertaining (71-78). A serious reading of Bhagat's humour must therefore recognize both its democratic energy and its exclusions. The same informality that makes the novel lively and accessible can also normalize a limited gender perspective if left unquestioned.

### **Conclusion**

*Five Point Someone* remains influential because it transforms student pressure into a language of comic survival. Its informal narration, slang-based exchanges, exaggerated imagery, and code-mixed speech are not accidental features of easy popular writing; they are central to how the novel imagines campus life. Through humour, Bhagat turns fear into narration, failure into fellowship, and institutional seriousness into something open to criticism. His conversational English does more than simplify style: it records a social world, resists an official one, and invites into Indian English fiction a readership that may not see itself reflected in more elevated literary modes. At the same time, the novel's gendered limits remind us that accessibility and satire do not automatically produce inclusiveness. Even so, Bhagat's comic idiom remains a significant literary response to the emotional and linguistic realities of contemporary student life in India.

**Conflict of Interest:** The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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