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The Hyper Real Educational System: A Study of Chetan Bhagat's Novel "Five Point Someone"

Abstract

The novel Five point someone argues about the grade point averages (GPAs) of the IIT students in India. Chetan Bhagat criticizes the conviction of IIT in particular and the whole technical educational system in India in general. The three friends Ryan, Hari and Alok exhibit psychological trauma which the majority of the students go through due to tight IIT schedule. This paper aims to underline the faulty education system in India and its remedies.

Keywords: education system, IIT, technical, traditional, students

Chetan Bhagat, an Indian novelist, columnist, and speaker is the author of eight bestselling novels which include *Five Point Someone* (2004), *One Night @ the Call Center* (2005), *The 3 Mistakes of My Life* (2008), *2 States* (2009) *Revolution 2020* (2011), *Half Girlfriend* (2014), *One Indian Girl* (2015) and *The Girl in Room 105* (2018). All of his books have remained bestsellers since their release and five of them have inspired Bollywood films. He is an alumnus of IIT Delhi and IIM Ahmadabad and is considered more as a youth icon in India

than as an author. Time magazine has declared him as one of the ‘100 Most Influential People in the World’. The novel *Five Point Someone* managed to generate a strong footing among youngsters, who had almost forsaken interest in novels and books. The highly capable generation got awestruck by the simplicity, emotional connectivity and simple language of the IIT-based campus novel.

Five Point Someone is Chetan Bhagat’s first novel, published in 2005 and it has remained as one of the highest selling English novels published in India. The novel begins with the opinion of the author that the book is not to show how to get into IIT but it is an example of how screwed up your college years can get if you don’t think straight. He points out that getting into IIT is not a hell of a task as many of us think. To put it straight he says, “If you can lock yourself in a room with books for two years and throw away the key, you can probably make it here.” (Bhagat 2)

The novel is about the college years of three students from IIT Delhi, which is one of the most influential engineering institutes in India. The three students, Hari Kumar (the narrator) who wants to be like Ryan and always takes Ryan’s side, Ryan Oberoi, a bit smart and outspoken and Alok Gupta, a cry baby live together in the hostel and eventually become best friends. They fail to cope with the grading system of the IIT and screw up the first class-quiz upfront. They try to make up for it but it gets even worse for them to such an extent that they are at the lowest echelons of IIT society. They end up with a five-point-something GPA out of ten which ranks them among the low pointers of the class. The five-point something tag will come in their way of anything else that matters for them the most – their future goals, their love life and their friendship. A little unconventional IITians maybe, but they are considered to be among the ‘cream of the crop’ in the world. It is only an IITian who exactly knows what an “average student” in IIT means.

According to a statement of Infosys chairman emeritus, N R Narayana Murthy concerning IIT, one of the most prominent institutes of our nation, only top twenty per cent of students who crack the tough IIT entrance examination can be considered among the best of the world, while the other eighty per cent students leave much to be desired. Now, this is the statement which leaves a lot to be desired for the higher authorities concerning the stature of IIT that is supposed to produce the best talent of our country. A teacher in the documentary 'Waiting for Superman' (2010) shares almost the same opinion:

“So you're a kid, you're doing fine in school till you hit the fourth grade, fifth grade. Between the fifth grade and seventh grade, you see a huge number of minority kids go from being B students to D students. Now, one of two things is happening. Either the students are getting stupider every year, right? Or something is wrong in the education system.”

The legendary American writer Mark Twain once said that he has never let his schooling interfere with his education, by which he was asserting that our geniuses and intelligence are not dependent on the traditional schools. In the age of computer the competition is very strong and to prove one's talent there should be a combination of diverse potentialities in a student like innovation and technology as in this age these are key factors to success. One's talent can be nurtured through potent education and through his novel *Five Point Someone* Chetan Bhagat conveys a stern message that traditional teaching style of 'I teach; you listen' in the elite technical institutes should be replaced with an approach that develops students' creativity to gather, filter and incorporate information; that teaches students how to learn proficiently and energetically and that inspires students to expand their own aptitude. He puts a lot of emphasis on the observational method of teaching and preaches for a postmodern technique called

‘learning by doing’. He believes that this method will help the students to apprehend the things in a natural way and in getting rid of the habit of mugging. The observational technique helps the students in observing things minutely and to find out a solution to the problem. The novel in a meek tone points out that our technical education system has become a dead system and needs urgent reformation.

The book illustrates the academic structure of IIT through various sources like management, professors, students and their race to get better grades. Bhagat is clear-cut to point out that the professors do not allow any productive change in the system. For instance, Prof. Dubey takes the topic of a machine in the class and says, “The definition of a machine is simple. It is anything that reduces human effort. Anything. So, see the world around you and it is full of machines.” (Bhagat 09). Ryan’s mind thinks differently and asks, “Sir, what about a gym machine, like a bench press or something?” Prof. replies, “That doesn’t reduce human effort. In fact, it increases it.” Before Ryan could say anything more, Prof. disrupts by saying, “Are you saying that I am wrong.” (Bhagat 10). So, the doubt remains in the minds of students as the professor could not satisfy them by the definition of machine. Again, when instead of a traditional screw-jack assignment Ryan designs a modified one, which is battery operated and that does not have to open manually and raise the jack professor does not accept it. He could not come out of his traditional world to accept Ryan’s creative thinking due to the conventional mindset which is there for years. This example illustrates the lack of modern thought process of many professors at the IITs who are unable to handle the bright students. Though, it will be unfair to say the same about Prof. Veera who always appreciates the inventiveness of the students. He is very much fond of Ryan’s creativity even though he is a five-pointer and he likes his lubricant assignment and assures him of his help in getting consent to use college laboratory

and get some research grant as well. He tries his best to save the three friends during disciplinary action against them. He also gives him an opportunity as his Research Assistant at the end when he could not find the job. Prof. Veera is a prime example of an ideal teacher who encourages and motivates his/her students.

Competition has been intensified in IITs which has created a lot of undue pressure on the students which can be portrayed by the remark of Professor Dubey which he makes at the end of the class:

“That is it for today. Best of luck once again for your stay here. Remember, as your head of department Prof. Cherian says, the tough workload is by design, to keep you on your toes. And respect the grading system. You get bad grades, and I assure you – you get no job, no school and no future. If you do well, the world is your oyster. So, don’t slip, not even once, or there will be no oyster, just slush” (Bhagat 11)

The novel also touches the topic of grading system and grade point averages (GPAs) in IIT where Hari, Ryan and Alok always remain five-pointers. They are overburdened by the excess of assignments, quiz tests, project works, unit tests and majors. As IIT is known as ‘Centre of Excellence’ but in the view of Ryan, the institute could not make any noteworthy technical contribution to the country till now. Ryan describes the limitations of the IIT system in a ‘Get together Party’ as:

“You know guys, this whole IIT system is sick. Because, tell me, how many great engineers or scientists have come out of IIT? I mean that is supposed to be the best college in India, the best technology institute for a country of a billion. But has IIT ever invented anything? Or made any technical contribution to India? Over thirty years of IITs, yet, all it does is train some bright kids to work in multinationals. I mean look at MIT in the USA. What is wrong is the system.

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.” (Bhagat 34-35)

To counter the overburden of scheduled work Ryan sets out a plan of ‘Cooperate to Dominate’ (C2D) formula to save time, in which they share assignments among themselves to take some time out for sake of fun. All the three friends suffer from the ignominy at the college campus due to their low GPAs. But they are not muggers like other students of the college because they want to take full advantage of their college life by spending some time in other aspects of life too. They plan to steal the question paper from Prof. Cherian’s room to maximize Hari’s GPAs to get to the position where he can impress Prof. Cherian to marry his daughter Neha. But they get caught red-handed while stealing the paper resulting in their termination for one semester by disciplinary committee (DISCO). Consequently, Alok jumps from Institute building roof but fortunately survives with thirteen fractures. The incident compels the three to take the grading system seriously else they would suffer even more. They start to work hard on the courses including ‘lube project’ by spending more than fourteen hours a day to maximize their grades and eventually to get a degree in time. Consequently, their project gets approval which helps them to achieve their lost glory to some extent. Finally, they achieve their target by sweating it out which results in getting Hari and Alok placements in different companies while Ryan begins to work as a research assistant to Prof. Veera.

The crux of the novel lies in the speech of Prof. Cherian while addressing the convocation ceremony where he gets quite emotional and narrates his own story. He confesses that he was a bright student and remained topper with 10.00 GPA score. He had a dream to get his only son, Sameer into IIT who himself wanted to become a lawyer. For not fulfilling his

father's dream of getting into IIT, he killed himself by getting under the train. He also admits that he called Hari, Ryan and Alok as underperformers due to their low GPAs. He states that his daughter Neha lied to him to meet Hari and also trusted Hari instead of him to disclose Sameer's letter. He adds,

"And that is when I realized that GPAs make a good student, but not a good person. We judge people here by their GPA. If you are a nine, you are the best. If you are a five, you are useless. I used to despise the low GPAs so much that when Ryan submitted a research proposal on lubricants, I judged it without even reading it. But these boys have something really promising. I saw the proposal the second time. I can tell you, any investor who invests in this will earn a rainbow." (Bhagat 261)

Thus the writer wants to convey a public message that GPAs are not the decisive factor to decide upon students' potential and creativity. Getting 10.00 GPA is indeed a great achievement but there are many more important things in life which need to take care of, which include friends, family, love and our own aims and aspirations.

Conclusion

Chetan Bhagat eventually puts a lot of weight behind the importance of 'Human Resource Development' which is one of the main goals of technical institutes. These institutes should develop the technical skills of an individual. The author wants to put forth the flaw of the present educational system of IITs in India. The novel also brings to light how students suffer from the overburden of college work and restlessness of their campus life. The novel epitomizes teachers support in showing students the right path and encouraging them to originality and creativity.

Works Cited

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