

**MONEY MATTERS: EXPLORING COMMERCIAL WORLD OF
LITERATURE THROUGH CHETAN BHAGAT**

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Abstract

India has been a country of events and actions. From the time immemorial India has seen great changes, new dynasties, revolts and transformations as the result. People have kept on coming from foreign lands and settled here, making this their own land and adding on to the culture, tradition and language of this Indus valley civilization. The same fate has been met by the literature of this great and diverse nation. However, literature has been the part and parcel of Indian culture and society ever since the evolution of civilization here, it started with the Vedas in oral form and then with some rishis coming on the literary scene of Indian society the Vedas were compiled and written. This later developed from pure spirituality to romance in form of Shakuntala written by Kalidas with of course a lot of spirituality in it. After undergoing various stages, Indian literature felt handicapped at the times of imperialism, and with Lord Macaulay saying, “a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia” the sudden need of going to English literature was felt, as in order to compare, one need to know about both the things thoroughly. The language which was introduced to Indians only for raising the clerks of company soon started giving voice to the Indian emotions of revolt and anger against colonial rule. After that the literature in English writing was so well conceived and produced by Indians that it found its place in global literature with Rabindra Nath Tagore receiving the first Nobel Prize in literature for “*his profoundly sensitive, fresh and beautiful verse*”. However, Indian literature has witnessed a sudden and drastic change with the changing social, political and economical structure of India since 1990s. With youth taking the front seat in almost all the aspects of developmental journey of nation, literature has also been over taken by them .Hence forming a new genre on literary landscape of nation, called commercial fiction. This paper analyse this emerging new genre and its impact on readership and publishing industry. All this is done in the light of works of Chetan Bhagat, the pioneer of commercial fictional trend in India.

Indian encounter with English is totally the outcome of colonial control and their necessity of economical and easily available clerks. However, Indians have maintained their virtue of accommodating whatever comes to them from foreign lands and have made the language an integral part of their culture and used it for representing themselves. The English language has become a tool in the hands of the Indian authors to reveal the quintessential Indian experience. Indian English Literature has been made, developed and conditioned by the historical forces. Imitation has been the force behind its birth, ever since its birth it has undergone various and radical changes from mere imitation, it became the voice of revolution and the representative of down trodden and marginalized people and now it is a distinctive voice with its own space in globalized world. The Indian literary scenario has gone through the stages of- Historical romance, Socio – Political realism, Existential quest, Feminism, to post modern modes of writing. Moreover, as any literature would, changing trends of Indian society with globalization and society are being represented by Indian literature. The recent explosion of outsourced business and foreign investment taking interest in India has changed the financial opportunities of young and urban Indians hence totally changing their lifestyle. The sections of society started benefitting from these economic liberations in the early 1990's and this have been portrayed by authors through their characters who are middle class, aspiring youth. Their works revolve around the lives of educated, urban, English-speaking elite. Many of the novels are set in India's premier educational institutions, or fictionalized versions of them or in what are collectively known as IT enabled workplaces — call centres, banks, or business process outsourcing companies (BPOs). Therefore, giving birth to a new kind of genre called Commercial fiction which is opposite to traditional and in the hand, literary fiction. Both of them are same as far as fiction is concerned still they are poles apart. Fiction was only available in the form of “literary” or “foreign” fiction which was meant for and accessible to smaller and selected audience. Though commercial fictions were known and produced by foreign authors years ago, it is way back when Agatha Christie started writing murder, mystery and romance and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle made the world known character of Sherlock Holmes as early as 1886, but in India, the novels were more of literary bent and were written for a purpose with very ceremonial and literary language which of course was out of reach of much of the Indian population who still face problem with English language. Manohar Mulgaonkar was the first to write crime in the 1950s and after that Shobhaa De and Ashok Banker were published by Penguin India in mid 1990s. However, the name “Commercial fiction” for India is to be credited to Chetan Bhagat's account. One of the first successful commercial novels before Bhagat was Anurag Mathur's *The Inscrutable Americans* by Rupa Publishers, published in 1991 still it could not meet the success of Bhagat's *Five Point Someone*. Chetan Bhagat has been called the new face of young India. To be more precise and accurate with Bhagat hitting the ground, there emerged the sub-genre called alumni or campus novel. Ever since his first book has become the bestseller; he has become the youth icon. The phenomenal success of Bhagat has given rise to a new era that will undoubtedly be called Bhagat's period in Indian writing in English. Though the reasons behind his success are till date a matter of debate but truth is that he sells. In 2008, New York Times called him ‘the biggest selling English language novelist in India's history’. In 2010, Time magazine named him as ‘one of the 100 Most Influential People in the World’. It looks like a life out of dreams, a rags-to-riches story. The reason that Chetan Bhagat witnessed such a huge success and made a luxuries living out of writing in a country where making living out of writing

was a dream, is that he had clicked with the nerves of Indian youth who is undergoing a drastic change. On the one hand, the urban youth is having a tough time in coping up with the globalization and westernisation of India and the traditional familial and societal set up and values, whereas on the other hand the village youth is actually facing the problem in coping up with fast moving city life and English come as a nightmare to them and so do English fiction. Bhagat has succeeded in removing this awe and fear and made the English fiction available and understandable for all by using simple and undemanding language. However the commercial fictions are different from literary fictions in many ways and so is their impact on readership and publishing industry. In this charged scenario Chetan Bhagat has served as igniting tool. His works and success has given a new outlook to the world of authors and publishers. However, following are the major points on which the commercial fiction differs from literary fiction and its impact:-

1. Language and Style
2. Purpose
3. Publishing Industry
4. Aspiring Authors
5. Marketing Industry
- 6.

LANGUAGE AND STYLE: Any literary work is judged and qualified on the basis of its language, style and narrative techniques. They have been the pointers for the work to be termed as “literary” or “commercial”. Literary language on one hand, celebrates verbosity, simplicity is the ornament of the commercial language on the other hand. Chetan Bhagat while writing his works religiously follow the rule of language for commercial fictions. He rejects the customary use of bombastic style of writing. His language is simple, lucid and easily comprehensible even to the reader with non literary backgrounds. A critic with literary bent of mind will call his language unlitrary, almost bad instead of simple. He uses simple, short and very Indian sentences to develop his story. He makes his characters speak in very familiar language to the reader. He may not be using Hinglish, as he say, but the language is used in such a way that it clicks with the faulty language of youth which now a days is mix of slangs and Indianised English. It is his use of language and style that takes his readers on easy and comfortable ride. One does not need a dictionary while reading his novels. This snatches the only frolic way of learning vocabulary and sentence formation from Indian youth. Here comes a flaw, no learning means no reading at all. There is nothing to be learnt by the youth except some silly things as what could happen in IIT, love, marriage and premarital lose of virginity. His works makes the readers reject and neglect the use of dictionary, grammar and classics. It becomes more dangerous since he targets the youth as his readers and characters. He makes his novels speak for the Indian youth, their inabilities of achievement and helplessness against the system. A young reader goes through his novels and admires them as he is himself the protagonist of the novel. The novel becomes his own story or the story of someone similar rather exactly the same as the reader, hence giving the satisfaction and security of being in group. Therefore defining the purpose of reading as is rightly said by William Nicholson “We read to know that we are not alone.” Moreover, the plots and sequences are often more confusing than interesting. The writings lack the broader societal landscape. Furthermore Chetan’s non literary background resonate in his novels when there is narration of unrelated events, for instance in *Three Mistakes*

of My Life, when Vidya met her soul mate it was deviation from the main theme and for no reason. It is no ways something similar to stream of consciousness neither it is the need of story. The only for doing so may be to create suspense for the reader but somehow it breaks the flow and continuity of the novel. His novels undoubtedly have a nail biting climax, he ends up his novels miraculously, and a person connects to the story and thinks about it hence developing a connotation with real life.

Purpose: Writing has covered a long journey, the variety of genres have left no aspect untouched and so have its purpose, which have shifted its concern from spirituality to social and political rationale and finally it has come up with the pace of globalizing world where economy is changing with commendable pace. However, writing has ever served as a mirror to social, political, economical and psychological conditions of human race. The fictions which were written as representatives of the times of author gradually included the element of entertainment along with representations and finally the hunger for grabbing prizes joined the squad. This is to be noted that the history of Nobel and Booker says that they are no older than 1901 and 1968 respectively but the fiction writing was there even before that period rather classic, mesmerizing and outstanding fictions were produced before that, so it eliminates the idea of accusing the literary fiction authors in the words of Bhagat (an interview with NDTV), “The fiction always targeted the elite and most often Western audience, and were written to win prizes”. This statement once again echoes with the fact about his non literary background as If they were written targeting elite then they must have been written in the favour of elite whereas the elite has most of the times been mocked and the ills that prevails in high class society have been targeted, can we forget *Volpone* and *The Rape of Lock* . As far as prizes are concerned then who will hate being applauded for what is done? Whereas it will not be wrong to say that commercial fictions here are being written only to bag money because for prizes they may not even qualify and on the grounds of teachings they lose the battle at the very beginning. Still, their impact and success cannot be denied out rightly as they succeed at involving more people in reading. After Chetan Bhagat and his contemporaries hit the field there are more people now into reading the English fiction which otherwise would have not been possible. In response to all the criticism the Indian commercial fiction has received the authors defend themselves by saying that they are working towards improving the reading habits of youth. As Durjoy Dutta says, “ Only stories that they like to read can bring them back to books and our primary focus should be on how to make people read, not on deciding what they should read.” Somehow they forget that once addicted to this kind of reading they will never be able to read and appreciate the literary good books, as for reading literary fiction they will need altogether new sort of conditioning and understanding of mind. This actually will accustom them permanently to commercial fiction, once again making us out of the global race.

PUBLISHING INDUSTRY: - There were times when Chetan Bhagat was rejected for his first book by many publishers because of unliterary language and un-aesthetically developed plot of the novel. He was given chance only by one of his friends who agreed to print thousand copies, that too after repeated requests of Bhagat. However, his first novel was a huge success and over the night Bhagat became the hero of publishing industry. The unparalleled success of this novel was an eye opener for the publishers and a question mark for critics. Why a simple story of three

friends of IIT was so appreciated by India where number of readers is almost negligible, is a question still to be solved. Is it the story of the facts about IIT, one of the hard to reach dream destination of young India or allowing premarital sex with authority which appealed the young India, is still unresolved question, but one thing is for sure and that is he sells and that is enough for publishing industry. The NBT-NCAER 2010 survey covered 3,11,431 literate youth (13-35 year olds), across 207 rural districts and 199 towns in India. The latter estimates the youth population of India to be 459 million (38% of the total), of which 333 million is literate. Of the literate youth, this survey indicates, about 25% read books for pleasure, relaxation and knowledge enhancement; and English is the preferred language for leisure reading of 5.3% of those (Hindi is for 33.4%, Marathi 13.2%, Bengali 7.7%). By these figures, the number of readers of an extraordinarily successful English language commercial fiction book is unlikely to exceed 4.41 million. So if the commercial authors are targeting youth then they have a reason to do that. Moreover, the man along with his contemporaries has proved his strategy right and the publishing industry is witnessing a boom. Ever since Bhagat came into the writing scene the publishing industry has been revolutionized in many ways. First, the definition for bestseller has been changed, in pre-Bhagat period the typical Indian 'bestseller' sold between 3,000 and 5,000 copies; whereas with Bhagat's novels selling million copies a year, sparked off a new trend and the publishers soared the bestseller slab to a minimum of 10000 copies. It changed the face of publishing market, finding the prospect of money and success the countless number of publication houses started mushrooming. The local publishers decreased prices of novels at RS.100 hence making them available to everyone and everywhere. These strategies helped publishers like Srishti and Rupa to make huge profits. The Indian publishing industry has been driven by commercial fiction. The sweeping success of commercial fictions forced the big guns like Penguins to shed of their conceit and jump into this advantageous scene without wasting time so Penguin came up with Metro Reads, Random House brought forth Ebury Press. This came as a bless for authors like Rashmi Bansal, Ravinder Singh, Durjoy Dutta, Ravi Subramaniam, Preeti Shenoy who have been picked by these big houses. The critics may ask what, why, when, How but fact is that Chetan Bhagat has changed the face of publishing industry. He and his troop has made the Indian publishing industries present felt globally. Today, India is the third-largest publisher of English language books. Chetan Bhagat may be accused by literary critics for many things but he had been awarded for his unprecedented success by titles like The Paperback Messiah (Perur), The Game Changer, The Trendsetter, The Golden Goose (Sarkar).

ASPIRING AUTHORS: - Along with all the above effects Bhagat's phenomenon has made another visible and drastic impact on the Indian fiction world. With so many Publishers coming forward, the market has become open and wide for many aspiring authors. Moreover with scintillating success of Bhagat's five novels, the young India has started believing that writing a book is not a difficult task. His over simplistic language and away from societal set up plot helps in developing confidence among youth that to write a book they just need to know how to doodle on the paper and make some sentences and have a story of own. Today we have more writers with no literary background. Almost all the graduates of IIT and IIM are now looking forward to become new Chetan Bhagat. His success have mesmerised them so much that they are fanatically following his footsteps, we have Ravi Subramanian, who defined his niche with his

first novel, *If God Was A Banker*, Amitabha Bagchi, author of *Above Average* (2006, Harper Collins) that is a book about a student's life in IIT, Tushar Raheja, a fourth year student of IIT-Delhi in 2005 published *Anything for you, Ma'am*, a romantic story of an IITian, the market is flooded by the title like *Of Course I Love You* (2008), *Oops! I Fell in Love!* (2009) etc, all authored by engineering students. Bhagat's commendable success is the reason behind such a large number of budding authors, It is he who have made English fiction reading and writing both much affordable and accessible task for everyone in India. Though it has helped in inculcating confidence in aspiring authors but it has again confused the minds of young India in which every IIT or IIM graduate with a love story of his own or a friend and some knowledge of English grammar tends to find another Chetan Bhagat in himself. This of course is going to Detroit the Indian literary image globally because in race of publishing more books and make more money the publishers are even publishing unedited, poorly structured books. To be at the top in world publishing market is no doubt a nice ambition but is it justified at the cost of quality? All the publishers and even the authors know that in process of producing quantity we are missing upon quality and this have been agreed by the youth icon Chetan Bhagat himself though smugly but he agreed by saying "Publishers are not as interested in Booker prizes now,".

MARKETING INDUSTRY: - Marketing and advertisement industry in India is catching up the pace with global market. Indian literature has never followed the trend of marketing or advertising. Never before mid 2000s was any fiction or nonfiction publicised by the author or publisher. The sale of piece of literature was always credited to the mesmerizing writing skill and the intellectual level of author. With the boom in publishing industry and the money flowing from all ways, the publishers and authors now days make it sure that the piece of writing should reach everyone. They are creating their customer base as any other company would probably do with their product and its sale. Chetan Bhagat was already a name in the world of fiction and with the success of *3 Idiots*, that was his adaptation of his first novel, he was enjoying international fame and this had set a plot for Indian fiction writing, amidst of such a wave of IIT and IIM based love story it was really difficult for someone to move away from this. However Amish Tripathi had published his first novel and first of *The Shiva Trilogy* which was certainly not Bhagatish – pertaining to love, relationships, youth, career, but rather mythological fiction. There was another changing to be welcomed in the published genres. But to make his voice heard he need to build his own customer base and for this he shifted towards the idea of marketing his book as a product. For his books, he even launched the first video trailer of a book in India and followed it up with a music album with Times Music for book promotion (HT). Amish, unlike Bhagat, is more open about the role of marketing in making his books take India by storm. In his interview with Sunil Sethi in NDTV's *Just Books*, he says, 'Books don't sell on their own. I know so many books that deserved to be bestsellers, but lack of marketing didn't make them become one.' Tripathi used innovative marketing to popularise the first self published book of the trilogy, and within three months was able to sell 45,000 copies. The author who was rejected initially due to the subject and language was doing wonders. This made Westland clinch the marketing rights of this book and publishing rights of other two books of trilogy. The shiva trilogy recorded frenzied sales of 1.5 million copies till 2013, which is an over two and half year.

CONCLUSION: - While no words of approval and kindness can ever be expected from the critics with literary bent of mind for the popular works of bestselling author still there is no denial to the fact that his works sell and he is the hero of new revolution in publication industry. He has to be applauded for the Bhagtian effect on the youth and his success in reaching the minds and libraries of youth. He made possible for the young small-town high-school going student to buy and read what it is to be inside the IITs, to work in a call centre, to have a love marriage, and how to make it big despite not getting into the IITs. With his unprecedented success he forced the publishers not only to listen to anyone coming to them with a manuscript but also to slash down their prices hence making the bestsellers easily available to the young India. It is just a minimal share of their pocket money and least knowledge about literature and fictions and just beginners knowledge of English language that takes for understanding and reading his bestsellers. As far as critics are concerned then they hold a valid point while talking about corruption of language. However, Hinglish, didn't bother the mass market readers, rather it connects well with them since it speaks to them in their language and there is no need of a dictionary while reading. Undoubtedly he is the man behind an upward trend not only in readers but also authors. He has made young India believe that they can write and read in English, but at the same time he has developed a flashy taste of reading among them, which has been made inflexible because of redundant plots. His readers feel comfortable with Bhagatized fiction and want to read more of that, as can be seen by following the bestsellers in the market, which often are laden with clichés and melodrama. The authors of his style may defend themselves that they are preparing the audience for literary fictions but still such audience is very little, almost negligible to the size of the market. Moreover, to understand the aesthetics and subtle nuances of literary fiction, it takes an entirely new conditioning, sensibility, and motivation, which is quite difficult to build. If this state persists, the huge gap between the mass market and the elite readers is only going to widen, and days are no far away when Chetan Bhagat will be accused of damaging the intellect of young India and if the process of publishing love stories by IIT graduates goes on like this with passion of becoming Chetan reincarnated, then Chetan will ever be remembered in the history of IITs and literature, as he will not be a hero for any of them. Since, in order to write and get published they will not be able to make good engineers and managers and the faulty and tawdry writing is going to reach a stagnating point soon, therefore the industry is going to look back at literature and books not merely as a product to be sold but the work of intellectual and creative minds.

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