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Chetan Bhagat's Poetics of Management for an Optimizing India

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Abstract
In this article I attempt to examine the role that a literary figure, using an idiom of management speak, may play in proliferating selective narratives of nation and nationalist ideologies.
Unlike in the Global North, the project of nation-building remains perpetually incomplete in the South. This is particularly the case with an ex-colonized nation like India that harbors local secessionist tendencies and communitarian nationalisms. 'India' as an entity has therefore to be perennially replenished with a managerial rhetoric that may help maintain it in a state of cohesion. Such a managerial rhetoric can, however, assume a dangerously conservative character: exalting a globalized economy, it can simultaneously draw on a theological politics to portray minorities as constituents of an "un-Indian" nation. To discuss the literary transposition of one such perverse brand of managerial rhetoric, I reflect upon certain coordinates from populist Anglophone Indian writer Chetan Bhagat's novelistic and nonfictional oeuvre.

Keywords
Indian Anglophone literature; globalization; management speak; cricket nationalism

A Management Speak for an India Shining

Chetan Bhagat has called forth both popularity and notoriety for his claims about diagnosing what ails young India. In a novel like *One Night@the Call Centre* (2005), Bhagat traces this ailment to the burgeoning of what I term a *new urban poor* in the country. This new urban poor is a class that is financially impoverished because exploited as cheap labor by the Global North. It is a class that, despite this exploitation, aspires to the status of a globally urbane community. This class is, in short, a community that, though located *in* the Global South, *aspires not to be of the Global South* in a liberalizing India asserted to be an all-round optimum—or, at any rate, optimizing—version of the nation. Using a populist lingo, Bhagat's literary idiom reaches out to this class of the new urban poor, giving it the illusion that it is catching up with the ever-receding mirage of an "optimum" India, as Manisha Basu gestures (192). In other words, Bhagat's literary idiom has a politically managerial bent to it: it gives its new urban poor readership the illusion that they *can* achieve their aspirations. The production of this common sense among the class perversely helps it consent to its exploitation by the Global North—and this despite the unfulfilled goals of the millennial protagonists of Bhagat's novels (Maqbool; Bhagat, *One Night@the Call Centre*; *Revolution Twenty20*).

What helps Bhagat soothe his impoverished young Indian readership into contentment is the way his literary idiom functions much like an extended motivational speech in the era of TED Talks: the writer acts as "an authority figure" who, depicting the ups and downs his protagonists face, gives his readers "friendly advice," "restores their self-confidence," and redirects them toward "[t]he right approach in life, the right thought process and the right goals" ("the chetan bhagat motivation series"). This "right thought process" demands that the new urban poor temper their expectations of employment and social mobility in the neoliberal Indian nation-state. Such a problematic literary idiom, thus, suggests that 1. brand India has heightened its capacities thanks paradoxically to its economy being founded on its exploitation by the Global North; 2. the young Indian urban poor must content themselves with what place they can find in this optimizing economy ("the chetan bhagat motivation series"; Presidium schools). Through such a questionable silencing of discontent among this class, Bhagat's idiom sets itself the project of reconstituting the new urban poor into a "motivated, happy and bounded workforce with good values" that will "add value to their teams" ("the chetan bhagat motivation series"). As a "motivated" workforce, the new urban poor will genuflect before their economic manipulation by the Global North in the call centres and academies of liberalizing India (Maqbool; Bhagat, *One Night@the Call Centre*; *Revolution Twenty20*). By producing consent to this contract among the new urban poor in India, Bhagat's motivational literary idiom functions as a management speak in the sense of a management guru exerting influence over management thinking and strategy (Greatbatch and Clark i). In Bhagat's output, then, motivational speech and management speak craftily intertwine and feed into each other to help exert control over—and manage the rising aspirations of—an impoverished globalizing workforce in a developing nation.

Controlling the desires of the new urban poor, Bhagat's literary idiom almost chiasmically claims that they can "do whatever [they] really want" though his novels portray them chasing socioeconomic mobility in futility (Bhagat, *One Night@the Call*

Center). If, despite their potential, they remain stagnant, asserts Bhagat in his unkindest cut, that is because "God" has situated them accordingly in the order of things. Hence the need for them to remain satisfied with their lot, however paltry it be (Bhagat, "The Meaning of True Wealth"; "My Stupid Suicide Plan"). Even as he plays at being god to a young India, then, Bhagat invokes a theological politics by alluding to a monotheistic "God" as a management guru—a guru who passes judgment upon his readers' potential for mobility. This "God," as a figurehead evocative of theological politics, keeps resurfacing in Bhagat's texts and motivational speeches and in the prefaces to many of his novels (*The 3 Mistakes of My Life*; *One Night@the Call Center*; Presidium schools). It is interesting that this theological figurehead is Hindu almost by default ("The Meaning of True Wealth"). Taken to its limit, then, Bhagat's management speak is the Word of a monotheistic Hindu godhead who speaks for and to an India shining, controlling the desires of the new urban poor by perversely evoking their consent to their scanty lot (*One Night@the Call Centre*).

Bhagat's management speak for a pluralistic nation, with its theological bent in an era of global Islamophobia, evidently faces multiple questions. Does the default Hindu character of Bhagat's theological politics conservatively displace a Hindu-majoritarian India's self-constructed others? Does it pass judgment upon these others by constituting them as misfits in an optimizing India? An exploration into these matters may reveal more about the implications of Bhagat's politically managerial literary idiom.

Managing the Indian Nation-State: A Hindu Nationalism and Its Neoliberal Outcasts

With the end of British colonialism in sight in 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of decolonized India, was intent on mapping the Indian nation as an entity that would set aside language, religion, or any other such principle as the foundation for secessionist organizational tendencies among local political communities. Such a setting aside was, according to Nehru, important because the strengthening of regional identities would impede the consolidation of a new nation (Tillin 29). After all, regionalisms tend to assign primacy to a region as value, in comparison with the nation as value, be the regionalist tendency in question cultural, linguistic, economic, political, or administrative (Das Gupta 54). As a pre-emptive measure, though, Nehru infused provisions into the Constitution of India that helped the Indian nation-state as an imagined body accommodate states reorganized on the bases of regional nationalist tendencies. This helped India lodge regionalist cultural nationalisms through the political recognition of identities generated by and through the creation of new states—identities that drew on differences of caste, class, region, and sub-state regions (Tillin 29-39). In the long run, then, Nehru's concession to the creation of new states helped keep secessionist-nationalist tendencies within limits, thus allowing India to be held together as a nation. Nehru's, then, was a project of building a nation—and of managing and sustaining it—by smoothening its internal fractures to keep it a coherent whole. His project was founded not merely on a managerial rhetoric of appeasement and accomodation of nationalist tendencies but also on a setting of this rhetoric to work. Unlike Bhagat's managerial idiom, though, his rhetoric did not wear the plenitudinous garb of a management guru's

motivational speak—it confessed its failures, recognizing that the decolonized India it had set out to build had gained political liberty "substantially" at best, thanks to the Partition of India (Nehru).

Indeed, Nehru realized that the most difficult secessionist tendency to be accommodated within India was a conservative Hindu nationalism vis-à-vis Muslims—and never more so than after the Partition of India. After all, India being a Hindu-majoritarian nation, Muslims were and still are often viewed as being in the wrong place in the wrong time, even in the most trivial of instances such as that of cricket nationalism. According to Ashis Nandy, viewers of cricket matches between India and Pakistan frequently manifest a disturbing conjunction of religion, nation, and nationalism—the Indian viewer, vicariously participating in Indo-Pakistan cricket matches, is ambivalently "anti-Pakistani without being openly anti-Muslim" (105-06). Taking this argument a step further, James Astill, the political editor of *The Economist*, provocatively suggests that given Pakistan's ostensibly xenophobic Muslim character as a nation, there is always the possibility that a Muslim viewer of cricket in India will have his allegiances lying with Pakistan when watching an Indo-Pakistan cricket match. Extending this insinuation, both Nandy and Astill gesture that religion and national allegiance may intersect binaristically among Hindu viewers in India. Such an intersection, says Nandy, will teleologically produce a "collective, militant nationalism" among Indian Hindu viewers who will, in the end, tautologically prove anti-Pakistan and anti-Muslim (Nandy 103). This teleology will end with Indian Hindu viewers manifesting their almost self-evidently conservative nationalism.

Bhagat's management speak for a new urban poor in India bolsters an argument like Nandy and Astill's, producing Muslims as 'bad'/"un-Indian" misfits in India—misfits who unwittingly but binaristically carved out 'bad' Hindu nationalists in, for instance, a Godhra in 2002 (*The 3 Mistakes of My Life*; "Don't Let Them Divide and Rule Anymore"). It is, then, hardly coincidental that Bhagat's literary idiom antinomically projects his writerly identity as that of a 'good' male upper-caste Hindu Indian Self. This Self, bearing tidings from a monotheistic Hindu 'God,' provides the new Muslim urban poor in India with a simple axiom: as part of a national minority aspiring for socioeconomic mobility, they should not play into a Nehruvian rhetoric of nation management, else they will help produce 'bad' Hindu nationalists and make India "un-Indian" (Bhagat, "Don't Let Them Divide and Rule Anymore"; "The Silly Season"). To articulate it differently, should the new Muslim urban poor play into a Nehruvian politics of managing Indian nationalisms, the inevitable production of conservative Hindus will inflame an economically optimizing India with a regressive character, putting its future on the global stage at stake (Bhagat, *The 3 Mistakes of My Life*).

Bhagat's management speak, then, calls for scrapping pre-existing political praxes of managing internal Indian nationalisms. It instead hints at the necessity for a managerial rhetoric that will soothe the new Muslim urban poor into *not* claiming their rights as India's "un-Indian" others (Bhagat, *One Night@the Call Centre*). Bhagat's political rhetoric may therefore be viewed as outlawing the self-evidently 'bad' Muslim in India in the aftermath of 9/11. This is an outlawing that yokes colonial-era communal tensions with the Islamophobic turn that the Global North took after the attacks upon the World

Trade Center in New York City on September 11, 2001. How can this Islamophobia in India be dealt with? Bhagat's answer is disturbingly obvious: let the Muslims be expelled as "un-Indian," if only to prevent the continuation of the colonial policy of divide-and-rule—a policy that Bhagat accuses Nehru's accomodation of secessionist nationalisms of championing (Bhagat, "Don't Let Them Divide and Rule Anymore"). As for the new urban poor in India—who will, of course, be Hindu by default—Bhagat's 'good' Hindu 'God' will placate them against turning "un-Indian" by situating them in a state of passive consent to their socioeconomic stasis in India (*One Night@the Call Centre*; *The 3 Mistakes of My Life*; *One Night@the Call Center*). Bhagat's is an optimizing India that will keep this class running merely to remain on the same spot, much like Alice in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* (1871).

"God is Always with Me:" Managese and Monotheism

Bhagat's *One Night@the Call Centre* (2005) sees twenty-four hours in the lives of the new urban poor employees of a call center in India. The employees vituperate against their manager who cryptically communicates with them using a trite idiom that they sarcastically call "managese." This managese is essentially vacuous, resembling managerial memos with short clipped sentences that are full of sound and sophistication signifying nothing: "What did I tell you about how to approach problems?...[F]ocus on the big picture. Learn to identify the strategic variables" and "deliver the output" by "coming up with an optimal solution" (Bhagat, *One Night@the Call Centre*). Saturated in this managese, the employees, "twenty-something urbanites trying to better themselves in the call centres and academies of liberalizing India" (Maqbool), genuflect before the Global North in the call center.

Blending India into the digital networks of the entire globe and gesturing toward a liberalizing optimization of India's upper social strata, the call center gives the employees one consolation—functioning in the night, the call center sees the employees nocturnally controlling the economic fate of India. Sitting at their computers and working away in conjunction with the North, the employees "temporarily rule" India from subalternity (Bhagat, *One Night@the Call Centre*).

Realizing their own predicament and the greater predicament of the new urban poor in India as underpaid glocal labor, the employees want to "build something for their country's future." This future is currently yoked as a necessary evil to the Global North in the dark night of India. The evil of globalization is necessary because, as more than one employee claims in the novel, the pre-neoliberal Nehruvian project of imagining a formally decolonized India through the Planning Commissions has apparently failed, producing little "progress" (Bhagat, *One Night@the Call Centre*). Just as the call center needs a new manager who will not talk in vacuous managese to the employees, so does India need a new managerial dispensation—a dispensation binaristically opposed to its Nehruvian political counterpart. That this counterpart will unleash the Pandora's Box of secessionist Indian nationalisms seems not to matter to the employees' delusions of national "progress." Indeed, the employees insinuate that Nehruvian India has irresponsibly produced them in their current class status. A Nehruvian managese, they suggest, will not take India toward an optimal economic direction, which is why India

needs a management guru. In this management guru the employees will ostensibly find their messiah. Bhagat, as a self-advertised and popular motivational speaker proclaiming his ability to produce a "happy and bounded [global] workforce" ("the chetan bhagat motivation series"), unsurprisingly and seamlessly steps into the novel as his eponymous self, the bearer of the messiah's message (*One Night@the Call Centre*).

It is interesting that the Bhagat of the novel writes the story of the call-center employees' plight at the behest of a lady who reveals herself to be 'God.' All the gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon collapse into this monotheistic figure who achieves two victories in the narrative. First, she has makes her motivational Word manifest through the digital networks of a new India, talking to the employees of the call center by phone and making them realize that they can "do whatever [they] really want" to improve an ostensibly failed Nehruvian nation-state (Bhagat, *One Night@the Call Centre*). Second, as the "very dear *friend*" of the new urban poor, she makes Bhagat her ambassador: Bhagat as a motivational speaker will, like her, offer "*friendly* advice" to the new urban poor to "restore their self-confidence" and their belief in the progressive possibilities of India's globalizing future (Bhagat, *One Night@the Call Centre*; emphases mine). There is a paradox in *One Night@the Call Centre*, though: the employees, motivated by the managerial axiom of their "very dear friend," quit the call center to take up entrepreneurial ventures that will seemingly benefit the nation and themselves; yet, they remain stuck on the same socioeconomic rung as when they were working at the call center.

Bhagat, in his extra-textual role as a self-styled motivational speaker, stays true to the axiom of *One Night@the Call Centre* in his public speeches: he evokes a Hindu godhead in whom his audiences should believe if all else fails in their careers—as well it might (Presidium schools). This axiom, molded upon such a disturbingly defeatist foundation, negates the aspirational new urban poor into a non-aspirational but oxymoronically "happy and bounded workforce" ("the chetan bhagat motivation series"). Bhagat's speeches therefore tacitly confess to having no "friendly advice" to offer the new urban poor; by extension, they abject themselves itself before Nehru's style of political management. After all, "the stroke of the midnight hour" was the moment when Nehruvian India awoke to life and freedom; this midnight hour was not supposed to be the global temporality for a financially impoverished class to be consolidated into a famished workforce—a workforce that would precariously rule India each night only to be usurped by the morning of the Global North. Nonetheless, not confessing defeat, Bhagat, in his motivational columns, claims that leaving the Nehruvian India of the Indian National Congress behind is a perennial necessity, founded as it is on the colonial policy of divide and rule, setting Hindus against Muslims and vice versa ("Don't Let Them Divide and Rule Anymore").

Questions inevitably arise in response to Bhagat's position: if the new urban poor have inherited a failed nation-state as Bhagat claims, where would the rhetoric of Bhagat's monotheistic Hindu God-as-management guru locate Muslims in the nation? Do the new Muslim urban poor have a voice in Bhagat's India, or does Bhagat's motivational managese—conservative in its Hindu theological politics—subsume their voices? In negating a Nehruvian mapping of India, does a post-Nehruvian dispensation unleash the

nationalisms that hitherto remained controlled? Bhagat provides answers that are warped, insular, and, indeed, dangerous.

"Playing Bat Ball" with the Nation: "Un-Indian" Muslims in a New India

Heedless of its nationalist bent, Bhagat's monotheistic Hindu Word would indicate that Nehruvian efforts to manage Muslim nationalisms in India had failed. This failure, Bhagat's ambiguous motivational column "Don't Let Them Divide and Rule Anymore" (2012) argues, was unavoidable because a Hindu-majoritarian nation would inevitably carve Muslims in India as a deprived minority open to being "wooed" by "deceptive vote bank schemes." Such schemes, instead of alleviating Muslims' oppression, would perpetuate it so that Muslim members of the new urban poor, in hopes of bettering their lot, would "commit [their] vote or loyalty to any [one] political party indefinitely." The political party Bhagat refers to is, of course, the Indian National Congress. Bhagat goes on to suggest that the Congress' "vote bank politics…be [therefore] branded un-Indian." Metonymically, then, Indian Muslims would brand themselves "un-Indian" if they voted for the Congress (Bhagat, "Don't Let Them Divide and Rule Anymore"). Bhagat inversely uses this suggestion to indicate that he never parochially played into the Congress' "vote bank politics" to carve an "un-Indian" identity for himself. Axiomatically, then, Bhagat's motivational column speaks to the young Muslim urban poor to determine, manage, and limit what they want ("Don't Let Them Divide and Rule Anymore"). Contrary to its protestations, then, Bhagat's majoritarian theological brand of Hindu conservative politics plays divide-and-rule by constructing Muslims as politically 'lesser' beings.

Complementarily, in another motivational article, "The Silly Season" (2012), Bhagat claims to find reservations for the Muslim urban poor "sinister." After all, according to Bhagat, these reservations "sanction [Muslim] privilege and advantage." This state of affairs, Bhagat believes, can be corrected only through the political establishment of an "environment that nurtures [Muslims'] talent, rather than [providing Muslims] meaningless poll-time freebies." Such a religiously sanitizing electoral environment is perhaps what Bhagat would term "Indian" as opposed to the unsettling "un-Indian" Real ("The Silly Season"). Indeed, "The Silly Season" suggests that the Real is unavoidable in the doling of sanctions to Muslims because the new Hindu urban poor, being deprived "poll-time freebies," will unwittingly turn Islamophobic. This reiteration of the Islamophobia inherent to Bhagat's rhetoric takes up the cudgels for a new India by determining the nation's "un-Indian" others. These others, in Bhagat's novel *The 3 Mistakes of My Life* (2008) are clearly adjudged Pakistani by dint of being Muslim, recalling Nandy and Astill's argument in the context of cricket nationalism, as I will discuss shortly. Much as the reader would try to separate the intersection of nation and religion, Bhagat sutures the two. Nor is this order of things against the creation of a "happy and bounded" workforce, a post-9/11 globalizing economy being founded on a decentralized Islamophobia. Judging by Bhagat's viewpoint, then, post-Nehruvian India indeed unleashes a teleology for a conservative nationalism in a Hindu-majoritarian nation, xenophobic in its exaltation of a Hindu theological politics. It is a nationalism that would thrive on the assertion that the Muslim urban poor are un-reluctant fundamentalists

caught in the time warp of a Nehruvian dispensation; as collateral damage, they have to be expelled into "un-Indian" environs for the greatest good of the greatest number in India. If this be the endpoint of Bhagat's post-Nehruvian teleology, his conservative managerial rhetoric for the nation remains open to critique, given its crippling telos.

The Islamophobic character of Bhagat's viewpoint paves the way for his portrayal of "un-Indian" Muslims in *The 3 Mistakes of My Life*. Set in Gujarat against the backdrop of the Godhra riots of 2002, the climax of the novel sees a Muslim boy, Ali, being attacked by a right-wing Hindu rioter who heads the conservative Hindu forces in Godhra. Well on his way to becoming yet another member of the new Muslim urban poor in India, Ali's one way out of his almost irrevocable class position is his talent at playing cricket. He uses this talent strategically not only to eventually become a famous cricketer but also in the riot: using a bat to strike a ball which he aims at the rioter leading the forces, he injures the rioter's head and saves his own life. With the inflicting of this injury, the riot suddenly becomes a scene of "playing bat ball," recalling cricket nationalism's alignment of Indian Muslims with Pakistan. Godhra transmogrifies into a cricket field in which Hindu and Muslim nationalists fight as representatives of two countries—India and Pakistan—with a Muslim child prying open the way to the "un-Indian" outside—Pakistan (Bhagat, *The 3 Mistakes of My Life*). It is this outside that is the new Muslim urban poor's unheimlich home—or so Bhagat's novel would imply.

Now that the Islamophobia inherent to Bhagat's conservative ideology lies stripped naked, a few parting questions crop up: where will Bhagat's motivational literary idiom lead the new urban poor? In their inability to climb the socioeconomic rungs of a liberalizing India, will the new urban poor among the Hindus keep running on the same spot? Or, searching for a new object a to validate their selfhood, will they carve out not merely Muslims but also other communities as "un-Indian" internal enemies perceived to threaten their socioeconomic lot in a post-Nehruvian Hindu utopia (Fazal)? An answer is difficult to give. All I can say is that Nehru's practice of controlling nationalisms should perhaps not be set aside in favor of cranking open "un-Indian" apocalypses, whatever Bhagat's managerial rhetoric might argue.

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