

## **Bhagat, Chetan (2015). *Making India Awesome*. New Delhi: Rupa, pp. 177**

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For the western readership, the name of Chetan Bhagat is typically associated with the new voice of Indian fiction, including examples of ‘call centre fiction’ (*One Night @ the Call Center*, 2005) and coming-of-age literature (*Five Point Someone*, 2004), but in reality his swift and provocative prose works well for non fiction too. His new book, *Making India Awesome*, features short essays and columns previously published in newspapers and elsewhere with the purpose to stimulate, encourage and challenge the young generations of India to tackle and solve the many social and cultural questions that still affect the country. The volume is organised into five specific sections, each relating to a macro-theme, in particular politics, economy, society, equality and resources (the youth), and offers reflections and considerations on the contemporary situation of India, its complexities, ambiguities and heritage. The essays here collected touch on a range of topics from the echoes of the colonial past to the present-day language scenario and policies, the reinforcement of ideologies and religious thought as well as the endemic problem of political corruption, the binary connotations attached to the fair and dark colour of the skin, the mass entertainment deriving from Bollywood and cricket as well as people’s attitudes towards sex, food, community and many other related issues.

Of course Chetan Bhagat looks at and discusses the present, with all its ramifications, but he also takes into account the weight of the colonial experience of India, in particular pondering the general approach to power that authorities and some individuals consider as the tool to master, exploit and degrade most of society. This context is made even worse when such type of behaviour concerns elected representatives and political men who should pursue goals of general improvement and welfare: on the contrary, however, many of such powerful figures use and abuse their official role for a personal profit. The author criticises the arrogance of the politicians, depicted with the Indian English term *netas* (actually a Bengali word from a Sanskrit root):

Our political class inherited a British colonial system, which had zero accountability to be colonized. Quite cleverly, they didn’t change laws to bring in accountability, the cornerstone of any democracy. [...] A large

part of the problem is also the Indian mindset. We do see them as our kings. We do think that “they are in power” means “being in power only to do things in the national interest”. (33)

Thus, the writer invites the young to critically revise and resize the position of political leaders, whose privileges should not be uncontrolled and everlasting, and whose work should aim at developing wellbeing for all classes irrespective of any religious or ethnic belonging.

Bhagat’s writing draws attention to the need of a more inclusive, fairer and open-minded reconsideration of society, remembering that “India’s poor are not a separate species from us” (161), but it also takes the form of explicit and practical suggestion to resist and react to the spread of society’s ills and disadvantages, including national ideology, religious intolerance or lack of rights for minority groups. For example, with reference to Hindutva, i.e. the process of Hinduisation of the country that intends to marginalise or uproot any form of difference in order to pursue cultural homologation, the author lists various real actions to perform: “shut up regressive Hindutva fanatics. We’ve heard them talk poisonous nonsense. You ignore them. They are your supporters. You have to tell them out loud and clear this is not okay. The young generation doesn’t find it cool to support a leader who doesn’t believe in a free and equal society. Send some of your old-fashioned partymen abroad to learn about gender issues and minority rights. They will make you sink otherwise” (20). Addressing a large variety of issues and questions that modern India has to come to terms with, the essays try to generate a constructive and deep debate in a dialogic manner, i.e. trying to involve readers, in particular the younger ones, so as to open their eyes and develop civil conscience, which advocates secularism but does not purge religion. In Bhagat’s words, “it isn’t easy for Muslims to live in a society that discriminates against them” (155), but the same kind of intolerance and bias applies to many other social categories or members, for instance women, or minority groups such as certain castes or ‘tribals’ (i.e. the Adivasi, or autochthonous communities of South Asia) or gay people. As far as marginalisation and persecution of the gay community is concerned, the writer traces the historical reasons behind this generalised stance as another heavy legacy of the colonial past, whose deleterious effects were and still are visible in many contexts and in the lives of people:

Section 377 is not an Indian law but an inheritance of British law. The same law, with the same section number, existed in over forty colonies of the British empire. Most of them have junked it or modified to decriminalize homosexuality. We have held on to it as if it is part of India’s cultural heritage, whereas it is nothing but a relic of an unscientific Victorian past. (141)

Bhagat also brings in other matters, such as access to education and literacy, for example in the article “We, the half-educated people”, in which he condemns the paucity of facilities, the inefficient grading and teaching methods, the old-fashioned contents of curricula. Indeed, the education system of India seems to be split between paradoxical contradictions: on the one hand, with incredible levels of tension and stress that some children experience when they sit the entrance examination for prestigious schools or ITTs (Indian Institutes of Technology), which in the worst cases even lead to suicide and depression, and on the other the precarious conditions of schools for a huge number of pupils, especially in the rural areas. Interestingly, the book briefly examines the sociolinguistic scenario of the country, in particular the opposition between Hindi and English, which fuels debates and responses of various kinds. Certainly it is not an easy problem to address and solve. However, in arguing and promoting linguistic and cultural hybridity, a feature that has always been present in India in so many contexts, the author elaborates his option, namely: “embracing Roman Hindi. Roman Hindi is not Hinglish. It is Hindi language written in the Roman script instead of Devanagari. For example, ‘Aap kaise hain?’ is Hindi for ‘How are you?’, but written in the English script” (106). In reality, this type of phenomenon already exists, and has been detected and documented in much academic research: it is especially attested among the young, creative generations, who not only can switch between languages but also apply this capacity to the new media and digital environments, with the final result of a novel, mixed and innovative code, for example in texting, i.e. the script used for text messages or WhatsApp.

Although at times Bhagat’s writing style may sound slightly rhetoric, with a tone of excessive patriotism, his sense of commitment and critical gaze are honest as it is his intention to unearth and expose the unsolved questions that still hinder the economic, social and civil growth of India. As a matter of fact, the author is not afraid to openly give visibility to sensitive and controversial issues that traditionally have been put aside by the establishment: “there are writings that get you into trouble, and this might just be one of them” (154). Rather than a celebration of shining India, a type of myth grounded upon the interests and speculations of various forces that totally annihilates marginal voices and subjects, today we need a closer look at a complex, changing reality, with its many values and contradictions, and in this vein the writer fleshes out the pieces of the Indian mosaic and the challenges of the future.

