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Aspirations and Anxieties: Middle-Class Mobility in the Novels of Chetan Bhagat

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Abstract

Chetan Bhagat's fiction has become emblematic of India's post-liberalization middle class, capturing its hopes for upward mobility and its underlying insecurities. This article investigates how Bhagat's seven major novels – *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* (2016), and *The Girl in Room 105* (2018) – narrate the changing contours of aspiration in an era of neoliberal globalization. Drawing on theories of the Indian middle class (Fernandes, 2006; Deshpande, 2010), neoliberal subjectivity (Ganti, 2012), and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), the paper analyses how education, romance, entrepreneurship, and migration intersect with issues of gender, language, and class. While Bhagat's accessible prose and Hinglish idiom democratize English-language fiction, his narratives also expose deep anxieties: fear of failure, cultural alienation, gender backlash, and moral compromise. Through close textual reading supported by sociological and cultural studies scholarship, the study argues that Bhagat's novels both celebrate and problematize middle-class success stories, illuminating the precariousness of mobility in contemporary India.

Keywords: Chetan Bhagat; middle class; neoliberalism; aspiration; globalization; Indian English fiction.

Introduction

In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, Chetan Bhagat emerged as one of the most widely read novelists in India, selling millions of copies and reshaping the market for English-language popular fiction (Chaudhuri, 2014). Bhagat's stories—set in elite engineering campuses, call centers, coaching hubs, and globalized cities—are often dismissed as “airport novels” or lightweight romances (Mehrotra, 2012). Yet their enormous popularity signals something crucial: they speak directly to India's expanding middle class, narrating its dreams of success while revealing the cracks beneath its aspirational surfaces. In a society transformed by economic liberalization since 1991, new educational and professional pathways promised social ascent, but also produced new anxieties about belonging, authenticity, and identity (Fernandes, 2006; Deshpande, 2010).

Bhagat's fiction chronicles this paradoxical terrain. His debut *Five Point Someone* portrays three underperforming IIT students negotiating pressure and alienation; *One Night @ the Call Center* dramatizes the precariousness of outsourced labor; *The 3 Mistakes of My Life* links entrepreneurship to Gujarat's volatile politics; *2 States* navigates interregional marriage and cultural mobility; *Revolution 2020* exposes the moral cost of education-business collusion; *Half Girlfriend* dramatizes linguistic and class divides; *One Indian Girl* interrogates gendered expectations around ambition; and *The Girl in Room 105* experiments with the thriller form while retaining middle-class sensibilities.

This body of work reflects what Appadurai (2004) calls “the capacity to aspire”—a navigational skill shaped by social location. Bhagat's protagonists often embody upward mobility yet feel inadequate in elite spaces dominated by English, cultural capital, and inherited privilege (Bourdieu, 1986). His frequent use of Hinglish—mixing English with

Hindi slang—bridges elite and non-elite readers, offering an inclusive narrative style (Kothari & Snell, 2011). Simultaneously, these novels dramatize failure: exams not passed, love thwarted by caste and class, start-ups undone by corruption, or careers stalling in global outsourcing.

This article situates Bhagat within scholarship on neoliberal India and the changing middle class. By reading his novels not merely as light fiction but as sociocultural texts, it argues that Bhagat maps the contradictory textures of mobility—freedom and precarity, cosmopolitanism and parochialism, empowerment and vulnerability. The analysis combines literary close reading with insights from cultural sociology, particularly middle-class studies (Fernandes, 2006; Deshpande, 2010), neoliberal subjectivity (Ganti, 2012), and postcolonial urban studies (Roy, 2011). In doing so, it contributes to a nuanced understanding of popular English fiction as a cultural site where India's emerging middle class negotiates identity and aspiration.

Review of Literature

Scholarly interest in Chetan Bhagat's fiction has evolved alongside debates on India's neoliberal transformation and the popularization of English literature. Early criticism focused on his commercial appeal and stylistic simplicity. Mehrotra (2012) described Bhagat as emblematic of “airport fiction,” while Chaudhuri (2014) saw his writing as symptomatic of a democratized but commodified literary marketplace. Yet this dismissive framing has been challenged by studies that locate Bhagat's work within broader sociocultural shifts.

Middle Class and Liberalization: The Indian middle class expanded rapidly after the 1991 economic reforms, gaining access to new educational and professional opportunities but also confronting intense competition and identity insecurity (Fernandes, 2006; Deshpande, 2010). Scholars such as Baviskar

and Ray (2011) argue that middle-class subjectivity is produced through aspiration but haunted by precarity and exclusion. Bhagat's protagonists—struggling IIT students (Five Point Someone), call center workers (One Night @ the Call Center), small-town entrepreneurs (The 3 Mistakes of My Life), and ambitious young professionals (Revolution 2020, Half Girlfriend)—mirror this sociology. Reading these novels as cultural narratives allows critics to track the everyday negotiations of status and belonging in neoliberal India.

Language and Popular Fiction: Another critical thread concerns language politics. English remains a key marker of social capital and access, but its democratization through popular fiction is significant (Kothari & Snell, 2011). Bhagat's deliberate use of simple English peppered with Hindi idioms makes his novels legible to first-generation English readers and symbolically undermines elitist literary hierarchies. Scholars link this "middlebrow Hinglish" to a reimagining of Indian modernity that is inclusive yet still aspirational (Rai, 2015). Roy (2018) suggests that Bhagat's linguistic choices mediate between global cosmopolitanism and vernacular belonging, reflecting a class anxious about authenticity and cultural continuity.

Gender and Neoliberal Intimacies: Feminist critics have interrogated the gender politics of Bhagat's romantic plots. While his male protagonists often embody the self-made neoliberal subject, women characters negotiate double binds: professional ambition versus domestic expectations (One Indian Girl), love constrained by patriarchy (Half Girlfriend), or cosmopolitan autonomy troubled by traditional family norms (2 States). Roy (2011) and John (2014) caution that neoliberal narratives of female empowerment can be superficial, masking persistent inequality. Yet Bhagat's female leads have sparked conversation about career-oriented Indian women, indicating how popular fiction can catalyze gender debates.

Moral Ambivalence and Corruption: Another area of engagement concerns ethics and corruption in aspirational India. Revolution 2020 depicts the commodification of education and the compromises required to "succeed," echoing sociological accounts of moral tension within India's new economy (Ganti, 2012). Bhagat's entrepreneurs are simultaneously innovative and complicit, dramatizing the fragile boundary between ambition and exploitation. Scholars have linked this to neoliberal subjectivity's moral ambiguity (Chacko & Jayaram, 2018).

Reception and Popular Culture: Finally, Bhagat's massive readership and Bollywood adaptations—3 Idiots (from Five Point Someone), 2 States, Half Girlfriend—highlight the synergy between popular literature and mass media (Chaudhuri, 2014). Studies of Indian popular culture argue that Bhagat's success exemplifies a new cultural economy where aspirational narratives circulate across print, film, and digital spaces (Punathambekar & Mohan, 2019). These circuits amplify both hope and anxiety, suggesting that the appeal of Bhagat's novels cannot be divorced from the emotional economy of neoliberal India.

Positioning this Study: Existing scholarship recognizes Bhagat's centrality to popular culture and his representation of neoliberal dreams, but much of it either critiques his "low" literary value or isolates specific themes—language, gender, corruption—without synthesizing them into a holistic account of middle-class mobility. This article builds on but extends previous research by reading Bhagat's entire oeuvre through the combined lenses of aspiration and anxiety. It foregrounds how his narratives simultaneously empower and destabilize the self-made subject: celebrating education, love marriages, start-ups, and cosmopolitan freedom while exposing alienation, failure, and ethical compromise.

By integrating sociological frameworks—Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital, Appadurai's

(2004) “capacity to aspire,” and feminist readings of neoliberal labor (Roy, 2011; John, 2014)—the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how popular fiction both reflects and shapes the imaginaries of India’s urban middle class. This positioning allows us to move beyond the binary of “serious” versus “mass” literature and treat Bhagat’s novels as complex cultural documents of India’s shifting class terrain.

Theoretical Framework

To analyze how Chetan Bhagat’s novels register both the hope and the fragility of India’s middle-class mobility, this study draws on three intersecting theoretical strands: (1) sociological theories of the Indian middle class and cultural capital, (2) the concept of aspiration within neoliberal globalization, and (3) feminist and postcolonial critiques of neoliberal subjectivity.

Middle Class and Cultural Capital: Pierre Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of cultural capital—non-economic resources such as language, education, and cultural competence that produce and reproduce class distinctions—is central to reading Bhagat. English proficiency remains one of the most powerful forms of cultural capital in India (Deshpande, 2010). Bhagat’s protagonists often possess partial or insecure cultural capital: they access elite spaces like IIT or multinational corporations but feel inadequate compared to those with inherited privilege and polished cosmopolitan fluency. The novels dramatize the costs of this “deficient” capital—alienation, imposter syndrome, and the search for authenticity.

The sociology of India’s new middle class deepens this frame. Fernandes (2006) notes that liberalization has produced a consumption-oriented but anxious class, acutely aware of precarious labor markets and uneven globalization. Baviskar and Ray (2011) similarly argue that India’s middle class oscillates between triumphal self-narration and fear of downward mobility. Bhagat’s characters—students barely surviving IIT grading curves,

call center workers vulnerable to outsourcing volatility, or small-town youth trying to “make it big”—embody this liminality.

Aspiration and Neoliberal Globalization: Arjun Appadurai’s (2004) notion of the “capacity to aspire” provides another critical lens. Aspiration is not merely individual desire but a socially situated capacity shaped by available cultural maps and horizons. Bhagat’s novels track how young Indians recalibrate their aspirations amid global capitalism: learning to dream beyond caste and region (2 States), imagining entrepreneurial futures (The 3 Mistakes of My Life, Revolution 2020), or reaching for cosmopolitan romance (Half Girlfriend). Yet these aspirations often meet structural barriers—language hierarchies, gender bias, corruption—that expose the limits of neoliberal promises.

Neoliberal globalization also shapes emotional life. As Ganti (2012) shows, neoliberal reforms created new forms of risk-taking, mobility, and precarity in India’s media and service sectors. Bhagat’s fictions of start-up ambition and call center labor reflect this “economy of risk,” where self-making collides with systemic exploitation and moral compromise.

Gendered Neoliberal Subjectivity: A critical feminist frame illuminates how neoliberal mobility is gendered. John (2014) and Roy (2011) note that neoliberal discourse celebrates empowered, self-managing women but often reinscribes patriarchal expectations. Bhagat’s heroines—Ananya in 2 States, Riya in Half Girlfriend, Radhika in One Indian Girl—navigate the double bind of ambition and cultural belonging. One Indian Girl especially stages the backlash against female economic success and sexual autonomy, while also critiquing tokenistic empowerment narratives.

Postcolonial urban studies add nuance here: cities like Delhi and Bangalore in Bhagat’s novels promise cosmopolitan freedom but remain structured by class and gender violence

(Roy, 2011). Migrant protagonists must negotiate both opportunity and vulnerability in these urban landscapes.

Popular Fiction as Cultural Text: Finally, theories of popular culture validate the study's focus on Bhagat's accessible novels. Storey (2018) argues that popular fiction is a key site where everyday ideological struggles play out. By blending romance, comedy, and thriller elements with sociocultural critique, Bhagat mediates middle-class anxieties for a mass audience. His use of Hinglish (Kothari & Snell, 2011) can be read as a democratizing strategy, resisting elite linguistic gatekeeping while signaling aspirational modernity.

Analysis & Discussion

Campus and Education Anxiety: Bhagat's earliest and most enduring theme is education as both a ladder and a trap. Five Point Someone exposes the competitive intensity and cultural dislocation of the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs). Hari, Ryan, and Alok embody middle-class aspiration: they have cracked the elite entrance exams, but instead of upward mobility they encounter alienation. Ryan, creative but rebellious, suffers under rote learning; Alok shoulders family financial strain; Hari battles low self-esteem in a meritocratic but emotionally isolating campus. The novel critiques an education system that promises mobility but enforces conformity and mental stress (Fernandes, 2006).

Similarly, 2 States stages education as the enabling force of love and class transcendence – Krish and Ananya meet at IIM Ahmedabad – yet academic success cannot erase entrenched regional and caste prejudice. The novel dramatizes how degrees confer symbolic capital but cannot fully dissolve cultural boundaries (Bourdieu, 1986; Deshpande, 2010).

Revolution 2020 takes the critique further by satirizing the private engineering college boom. Gopal, from a modest background, sees education as his ticket upward but is thwarted

by systemic corruption. The “coaching industry” and profiteering colleges mirror neoliberal India's commercialization of learning (Ganti, 2012). Education appears as a double-edged sword: it enables entry to aspirational spaces but often produces exhaustion, cynicism, and ethical compromise.

Work and the Global Labor Precariat; One Night @ the Call Center captures India's early 2000s outsourcing boom. Its characters – Shyam, Vroom, Priyanka – are well-educated but precarious, working night shifts for foreign clients while feeling culturally estranged. Bhagat illustrates what Appadurai (2004) calls aspirational navigation: access to global labor but also alienation from family rhythms and healthful life. They are salaried yet insecure, speaking scripted English to irate American callers while privately struggling with identity and dignity.

Later, The Girl in Room 105 shifts from call centers to the start-up economy and freelance hustles. Keshav's drifting career – neither secure nor fully entrepreneurial – embodies the risk-laden neoliberal subject (Ganti, 2012). Though the novel is packaged as a thriller, its protagonist's anxious mobility – failure to settle in a white-collar job, dependence on tutoring apps – echoes middle-class precarity.

Entrepreneurship and Moral Ambivalence: Bhagat often frames entrepreneurship as the new Indian dream but complicates it morally. The 3 Mistakes of My Life follows Govind, Ishaan, and Omi as they launch a cricket shop in Ahmedabad. Initially a tale of self-made ambition, the venture gets entangled with religious riots and political patronage. Economic mobility intersects with communal violence, revealing fragility beneath neoliberal optimism.

In Revolution 2020, Gopal's move from failed student to corrupt education entrepreneur dramatizes moral slippage. He uses real-estate capital and political networks to

open a coaching college, embodying the neoliberal mantra of “self-making” but also its corruption. Critics (Chacko & Jayaram, 2018) argue that such narratives expose India’s aspirational economy as structurally complicit with graft and inequality.

Language Hierarchies and Hinglish Resistance: Across Bhagat’s novels, English proficiency functions as a visible barrier. Elite spaces – IIT, IIM, multinational offices – reward fluent, globally inflected English. Yet his characters often speak “in-between” tongues: Hinglish or informal English mixed with Hindi idioms. This reflects Bourdieu’s (1986) notion that language is cultural capital; lacking polished English keeps many middle-class youth semi-outsiders. *Half Girlfriend* dramatizes this gap explicitly: Madhav, a small-town Bihari boy, fails to impress Riya’s cosmopolitan circle because of his “poor English.” His journey—reading aloud to improve, finally pitching basketball to Bill Gates—symbolizes aspiration to join an Anglophone elite but never full comfort.

Bhagat deliberately turns this linguistic anxiety into accessibility. His narrators often break standard English with colloquial jokes, creating solidarity with first-generation readers (Kothari & Snell, 2011). This democratizes Indian English fiction, rejecting older “high” literary codes. Yet it also encodes unease: aspiration toward global belonging still means chasing English mastery.

Gendered Mobility and Neoliberal Feminism: Women’s upward mobility in Bhagat’s fiction is both celebrated and constrained. *2 States*’ Ananya is highly educated and career-driven, yet marriage negotiations remain steeped in patriarchal ritual. *One Indian Girl* directly tackles the contradictions: Radhika is an investment banker, wealthy and independent, but judged “too ambitious” and pressured to temper her career for marriage. Bhagat voices her internalized double consciousness – self-made success clashing with traditional

femininity – while ultimately framing resolution through compromise rather than structural change (Roy, 2011; John, 2014).

In *Half Girlfriend*, Riya’s oscillation between cosmopolitan autonomy and return to familiar relationships signals how female ambition remains precarious. Bhagat’s heroines embody neoliberal “choice” but remain tethered to family and male approval. These gender narratives show that middle-class aspiration is profoundly gendered: women can be cosmopolitan but not fully free.

Urban Aspirations and Precarious Cosmopolitanism: City spaces – Delhi, Bangalore, Ahmedabad – function as aspirational arenas but remain exclusionary. Postcolonial urban theory notes how neoliberal cities promise meritocratic opportunity yet reproduce violence and segregation (Roy, 2011). Bhagat’s protagonists migrate to metros for study and work, but their belonging is fragile: Krish’s negotiation with Tamil and Punjabi families in *2 States* shows cultural friction; Govind’s business is swept into communal riots in Ahmedabad; call center workers inhabit nocturnal, alienating cityscapes.

Urban life amplifies both freedom and loneliness. Access to malls, pubs, and dating breaks older taboos, yet home traditions persist, causing psychic strain. This oscillation – cosmopolitan taste and local rootedness – defines Bhagat’s narrative world.

Synthesis: Aspirations vs. Anxieties: Taken together, Bhagat’s novels chronicle a generation stepping into global modernity but carrying historical and cultural baggage. Education, English, and entrepreneurship promise escape from provincial limits but also induce exhaustion, impostor syndrome, and moral tension. His use of popular storytelling and Hinglish makes these contradictions legible to mass readers.

Rather than trivial “chick-lit” or “airport fiction,” Bhagat’s oeuvre can be read as a

cultural archive of India's neoliberal turn – narrating both the euphoria and unease of mobility. The aspirational dream remains fragile, shot through with language anxiety, gendered compromise, and structural inequality.

Conclusion

Chetan Bhagat's novels offer more than light entertainment; they chart the complex emotional and structural terrain of India's post-liberalization middle class. From IIT hostels to call centers and corporate boardrooms, his characters embody a generation determined to climb socially but haunted by the fragility of that climb. The novels celebrate meritocracy, romance across cultural divides, and entrepreneurial ambition, yet they also reveal how mobility is hampered by entrenched hierarchies of language, region, caste, and gender. By using Hinglish and an accessible narrative style, Bhagat democratizes English fiction, inviting readers historically excluded from Anglophone literary spaces. At the same time, his plots often end in partial compromise, acknowledging the limits of individual striving within uneven globalization.

Reading Bhagat through frameworks of cultural capital, aspiration theory, and feminist critique enables a more nuanced view of his cultural work. His fiction dramatizes both the empowerment and precarity of neoliberal India: success is possible but fraught; freedom coexists with deep-seated social anxieties. As India's literary market diversifies and mass readerships grow, Bhagat's texts remain important cultural artefacts for understanding the hopes and hesitations of a new middle class negotiating modernity.

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