
**Breaking the Chains of Conformity: A Critique of Indian Education System in
Chetan Bhagat's Five Point Someone**

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Abstract:

Chetan Bhagat's *Five Point Someone* critiques the Indian education system's focus on grades, rote learning, and institutional rigidity. Through the lives of three IIT students, the novel reveals the psychological strain of academic pressures, the role of socioeconomic disparities, and the disconnect between education and real-world needs. Bhagat uses humor and realism to advocate for reforms that nurture creativity, individuality, and holistic growth. This paper explores these systemic flaws and Bhagat's vision for meaningful educational change.

Keywords: Education system, Psychological impact, Educational inequality, Rote learning, Institutional rigidity, Chetan Bhagat, Five Point Someone

Introduction

Chetan Bhagat's *Five Point Someone* blatantly portrays the Indian education system. It highlights its rigid emphasis on grades and rote learning, which comes at the cost of creativity and personal growth. The novel portrays the emotional toll of this conformity-driven model through the experiences of three IIT students—Hari, Ryan, and Alok—who struggle under the pressures of academic expectations. Bhagat highlights the need for an education system that values individuality, fosters critical thinking, and prepares students for real-world challenges. This paper examines the novel's critique of the Indian education system by analyzing its structural flaws, psychological impact, and socioeconomic implications. It also proposes a reimagined model focused on holistic development.

Critique of the Educational System

Chetan Bhagat critiques the Indian education system. He emphasizes its rigid focus on grades and rote memorization, which undermines creativity and critical thinking. Grades dominate the academic culture, reducing students to numbers and fostering relentless

competition. Professor Dubey's remark, "... 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." (p.14) summarises the fear-driven environment, while Alok's observation, "relative grading here, so if we don't study and others do, we are screwed" (p.17), illustrates the constant pressure to outperform peers. Hari's comment, "assignments can get dull as hell after a while, and you need a break" (p.21) and Ryan's remark "I have finished today's crap," (p.21) reflect the monotony of this routine. The novel shows how rote memorization replaces critical engagement. Ryan laments, "Continuous mugging, testing, and assignments—where is the time to try out new ideas?" (p.21). Standardized exams and rigid grading systems discourage innovation, as illustrated when Ryan challenges Professor Dubey's definition of a machine but is silenced with, "Watch it, son. In my class, just watch it" (p.13). This resistance to alternative perspectives prioritizes obedience over intellectual curiosity. The bureaucratic constraints of the IIT system further suppress individuality. Hari describes the grueling academic schedule:

Every day, from eight to five, we were locked in the eight-story insti-building with lectures, tutorials, and labs. The next few hours of the evening were spent in the library or in our rooms as we prepared reports and finished assignments. And this did not even include the tests! Each subject had two minor tests, one major, and three surprise quizzes; seven tests for six courses meant forty-two tests per semester, mathematically speaking ... In every class, we had to look out for the instructor's subtle hints about a possible quiz in the next class. (p.15).

Frequent surprise quizzes and unrelenting workloads leave no time for self-discovery or exploration. Ryan expresses his disillusionment: "...this place has let me down. This isn't exactly the cutting edge of science and technology as they describe themselves, is it?" (p.21). His frustration reflects the system's preference for rote tasks over meaningful learning. Surprise quizzes reinforce the rigidity and lack of empathy in the system. Alok's request for a re-quiz after a poor performance is dismissed, highlighting the institution's inflexibility and focus on compliance. Through these struggles, Bhagat critiques an education model that prioritizes mechanical learning over intellectual growth and individuality.

Psychological Impact on Students

Chetan Bhagat examines the psychological toll of the Indian education system and reveals the stress and alienation caused by its relentless focus on grades. The grueling schedules and constant demands leave little room for rest or recreation. Hari reflects, "Every day, from eight to five, we were locked in the eight-story insti-building...and this did not even include the tests!" (p. 25). This cycle of lectures, assignments, and surprise quizzes pushes students to exhaustion.

Alok's character highlights the mental health challenges faced by students under immense familial and societal expectations. His reaction to poor grades, as Hari observes, reflects "a mix of anxiety and sadness" (p. 33), stressing the vulnerability of students judged

solely by academic performance. Ryan, though outwardly rebellious, also struggles to reconcile his dissatisfaction with the system. His bitter humour after scoring the lowest on a quiz, “I have three. How about that? One, two, three” (p. 34), masks deeper frustrations with the system’s rigidity. The competitive culture fostered by relative grading isolates students and fosters rivalry. Alok voices his frustration: “It’s relative grading here, so if we don’t study and others do, we are screwed” (p. 17). This zero-sum approach erodes relationships, as seen in the tensions between Alok, Ryan, and Hari, whose differing views on academics strain their friendship.

Bhagat critiques the reduction of self-worth to test scores. He portrays how high-achieving students like Hari feel demoralized when confronted with IIT’s unforgiving standards. Reflecting on his first quiz, he admits, “I had never in my life scored less than three times as much. Ouch, the first quiz in IIT hurt” (p. 36). Ryan’s frustration expresses this systemic flaw: “This system of relative grading and overburdening the students kills the best fun years of your life... Where is the time for creativity? It is not fair” (p. 27). The novel also critiques the disconnect between education and its outcomes. Ryan’s observation that IIT produces workers for corporations rather than innovators highlights the disillusionment many students face. This failure to align institutional goals with students’ aspirations contributes to a sense of purposelessness. Bhagat stresses the human cost of a system that equates success with grades. He calls for an education model that nurtures creativity, collaboration, and holistic growth, challenging the conformity-driven culture of competition.

Socioeconomic Dimensions of Education

Bhagat examines how socioeconomic status affects the educational experiences and aspirations of students. It reveals the class-based disparities that shape opportunities and coping mechanisms. He highlights how financial background impacts the pursuit of education and its role as a tool for upward mobility. Alok, from a financially struggling family, views education as a survival tool. Burdened with responsibilities, including caring for his paralyzed father and supporting his sister’s impending marriage, Alok remarks, “How do you think I got into IIT? I was taking care of [my father] for the past two years, reading my books every night” (p. 45). For him, an IIT degree is a lifeline to economic stability, intensifying the pressure to succeed. In contrast, Ryan’s affluent background offers material comforts and a safety net. This privilege allows him to adopt a detached and critical attitude toward the system. While his financial privilege shields him from the immediate consequences of failure, it also leaves him feeling emotionally unsupported. Reflecting on his strained family ties, Ryan observes, “I don’t love my parents.” (p. 50). Hari represents the middle ground, as he faces typical student pressures without the extremes of privilege or poverty. His experiences reflect the systemic flaws that impact students across the socioeconomic spectrum, such as the prioritization of competition over collaboration.

Bhagat critiques societal expectations that equate education with upward mobility, particularly for disadvantaged families. Alok’s family places their hopes on his academic success, which drives him to prioritize grades over personal fulfillment. Frustrated with Ryan’s nonchalance, Alok asserts, “You can’t screw with the system too much; it comes

back to screw you” (p. 47). His pragmatic approach emphasizes the stakes of failure for students from less privileged backgrounds. Bhagat also highlights the societal norm of tying personal worth to academic and economic success. Institutions like IIT are viewed as gateways to lucrative careers, which creates immense pressure to conform. Ryan critiques this mindset, stating, “Over thirty years of IITs, yet all it does is train bright kids to work in multinationals” (p. 48). His observation highlights the limitations of an education system focused on economic outcomes over intellectual creativity. The socioeconomic divide also affects how students navigate the system. While Ryan’s rebellion reflects his disillusionment, Alok’s compliance stems from necessity, often creating tensions within their friendship. Hari, caught between these perspectives, exemplifies the shared struggles of students subjected to systemic inequities. By portraying these class-based dynamics, Bhagat critiques an academic culture that prioritizes institutional goals over individual needs. He emphasizes the importance of reforming the education system to address socioeconomic disparities, fostering equity, and creating a more inclusive learning environment.

Systemic Failures Highlighted in the Novel

The novel critiques the systemic failures of the Indian education system by addressing its rigid structure, reliance on rote learning, and disconnection from practical applications. The novel highlights how the system suppresses creativity, innovation, and critical thinking. The focus on rote memorization and standardized testing turns education into a mechanical process of recalling information. Ryan summarises this frustration, asking, “Continuous mugging, testing, and assignments—where is the time to try out new ideas?” (p. 18). Professor Dubey’s rigid teaching style illustrates this flaw, as his lectures prioritize strict grading over curiosity and creativity. When Ryan challenges Dubey’s definition of a machine, the professor silences him with, “Watch it, son. In my class, just watch it” (p. 14). This interaction emphasizes the system’s resistance to dissent and alternative perspectives. Bhagat critiques the excessive focus on theoretical knowledge that leaves students ill-prepared for real-world challenges. Despite its reputation, IIT is portrayed as an institution focused on training workers for multinational corporations rather than fostering innovators. Ryan’s observation, “This isn’t exactly the cutting edge of science and technology as they describe themselves, is it?” (p. 21), highlights the gap between the institution’s claims and its outcomes. A curriculum dominated by exams and assignments further widens this disconnect, sidelining hands-on projects and interdisciplinary learning. Authoritarian power structures within academic institutions further suppress intellectual growth. Professors like Dubey hold unchecked authority, which fosters a culture of fear. Punitive measures, such as surprise quizzes and rigid grading, discourage students from taking risks. Alok’s plea for a re-quiz after a family emergency is summarily dismissed, exemplifying the lack of empathy within the system.

The relentless workload also dehumanizes students and leaves little room for personal development. Hari describes their schedule: “Every day, from eight to five, we were locked in the eight-story insti-building with lectures, tutorials, and labs...seven tests for six courses meant forty-two tests per semester” (p. 25). This grueling routine leaves students exhausted and demoralized, with little time to pursue extracurricular interests.

The grading system reflects the narrow scope of the evaluation. It reduces students to numerical scores and ignores qualities such as creativity and emotional intelligence. Hari reflects on this reductionist approach after receiving a low score: “The instructor had written my score in big but careless letters, like graffiti written with contempt” (p. 36). This focus on grades perpetuates conformity and diminishes self-worth.

Bhagat also critiques the societal implications of this system, particularly its emphasis on producing workers over innovators. Ryan laments, “Over thirty years of IITs, yet all it does is train bright kids to work in multinationals” (p. 48). By prioritizing corporate success over intellectual growth, the system undermines its potential to drive meaningful change.

Through its portrayal of these systemic flaws, *Five Point Someone* urges reforms that prioritize creativity, holistic development, and the alignment of education with real-world needs. Bhagat challenges readers to envision a system that values individuality and innovation over conformity, offering a blueprint for a more inclusive and empowering future.

Narrative Techniques in Critiquing Education

Chetan Bhagat employs humour, satire, and realism in *Five Point Someone* to critique the Indian education system. These techniques make his narrative engaging while emphasizing systemic flaws, enabling readers to connect with the issues he presents. Humor exposes the absurdities of academic life, making the characters’ struggles relatable. Ryan’s comparison of IIT to a “jail” where students are “locked up from eight to five” (p. 15) humorously conveys the oppressive nature of the institution. Similarly, his self-deprecating remark after scoring low on a quiz—“I have three. How about that? One, two, three” (p. 34)—adds levity to bleak situations while highlighting systemic pressures. Satire, particularly in the portrayal of professors and classroom dynamics, underlines the rigidity of the education model. Professor Dubey, with his pedantic lectures and fixation on grades, caricatures the traditional Indian educator who values conformity over creativity. His declaration that students must “fall in love with machines” (p. 13) contrasts sharply with his inability to inspire intellectual curiosity, reflecting the system’s flaws.

Realism grounds the novel in the lived experiences of students, vividly depicting the relentless pressures of academic life. The detailed description of the protagonists’ schedule—“Every day, from eight to five, we were locked in the eight-storey insti-building with lectures, tutorials and labs...Each subject had two minor tests, one major, and three surprise quizzes” (p. 25)—immerses readers in their world while exposing widely recognizable issues within the education system.

Irony further critiques the contradictions in the system. Professors like Dubey emphasize innovation yet suppress creativity through rigid teaching methods. When Ryan questions Dubey’s definition of a machine, he is silenced, revealing the disconnect between the institution’s rhetoric and its practices (p. 14). Similarly, IIT’s reputation as a hub of technological advancement contrasts with its focus on rote learning, as Ryan observes, “This

isn't exactly the cutting edge of science and technology as they describe themselves, is it?" (p. 21).

Bhagat's conversational style enhances accessibility and resonates with young readers who face similar challenges. His use of colloquialisms and humor reflects the protagonists' voices, making complex themes relatable and engaging. Ryan's sardonic comments and Alok's exaggerated reactions exemplify this approach, connecting readers to their struggles.

Through the diverse perspectives of Hari, Ryan, and Alok, Bhagat captures varying responses to the education system. Ryan's rebellious nature symbolizes the desire for individuality, while Alok's pragmatism reflects societal expectations. Hari's position between these extremes represents the average student's internal conflict, enabling a multidimensional exploration of systemic flaws.

By blending humour, satire, and realism, Bhagat delivers a critique that is both impactful and accessible. His narrative sparks essential conversations about the need for reform, urging readers to envision an education system that values creativity, individuality, and holistic development.

Conclusion

Chetan Bhagat exposes the structural flaws, psychological toll, and neglect of creativity and individuality in the Indian education system. Through Hari, Ryan, and Alok's experiences, the novel highlights how an overemphasis on grades and rote learning undermines students' potential and well-being. It reveals the human cost of prioritizing institutional success over personal growth, where education becomes either a survival tool or a source of disillusionment. By addressing themes of socioeconomic disparity and systemic rigidity, Bhagat emphasizes the need for an inclusive education model. His accessible style, blending humor, satire, and realism, resonates with readers, encouraging reflection on meaningful reform. He advocates for an education system that values individuality, fosters innovation, and equips students to contribute meaningfully to society.

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