
Chetan’s books have remained bestsellers since their release, and have been adapted into major Bollywood films. *The New York Times* called him the ‘the biggest selling English language novelist in India’s history.’ *Time* magazine named him as one amongst the ‘100 Most Influential People in the world’ and Fast Company, USA, listed him as one of the world’s ‘100 most creative people in business.’

Chetan writes for leading English and Hindi newspapers, focusing on youth and national development issues. He is also a motivational speaker.

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Many writers are successful at expressing what’s in their hearts or articulating a particular point of view. Chetan Bhagat’s books do both and more.

– A R Rahman, in TIME magazine, on Chetan’s inclusion in the Time 100 Most Influential People in the world

The voice of India’s rising entrepreneurial class.

– Fast Company Magazine, on Chetan’s inclusion in the 100 Most Creative People in business globally

India’s paperback king.

– The Guardian

The biggest-selling English-language novelist in India’s history.

– The New York Times

A rockstar of Indian publishing.

– The Times of India

Bhagat has touched a nerve with young Indian readers and acquired almost cult status.

– International Herald Tribune
2 States
THE STORY OF MY MARRIAGE

A novel by
Chetan Bhagat
This may be the first time in the history of books, but here goes:

Dedicated to my in-laws*

*which does not mean I am henpecked, under her thumb or not man enough
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I also want to make a couple of disclaimers. One, this story is inspired by my own family and experiences. However, this book should be seen as a work of fiction. Also, for authenticity, I have used names of some real places, people and institutions as they represent cultural icons of today and aid in storytelling. There is no intention to imply anything else. I’d also like to tell all South Indians I love them. My better half will vouch for that. I have taken the liberty to have some fun with you just like I have with Punjabis—only because I see you as my own. You only make digs at people you care for.

With that, I’d like to welcome you to 2 States.
‘Why am I referred here? I don’t have a problem,’ I said.

She didn’t react. Just gestured I remove my shoes and take the couch. She had an office like any other doctor’s, minus the smells and cold, dangerous instruments.

She waited for me to talk more. I hesitated and spoke again.

‘I’m sure people come here with big, insurmountable problems. Girlfriends dump their boyfriends everyday. Hardly the reason to see a shrink, right? What am I, a psycho?’

‘No, I am the psycho. Psychotherapist to be precise. If you don’t mind, I prefer that to shrink,’ she said.

‘Sorry,’ I said.

‘It’s OK,’ she said and reclined on her chair. No more than thirty, she seemed young for a shrink, sorry, psychotherapist. Certificates from top US universities adorned the walls like tiger heads in a hunter’s home. Yes, another South Indian had conquered the world of academics. Dr Neeta Iyer, Valedictorian, Vassar College.

‘I charge five hundred rupees per hour,’ she said. ‘Stare at the walls or talk. I’m cool either way.’

I had spent twelve minutes, or a hundred bucks, without getting anywhere. I wondered if she would accept a partial payment and let me leave.

‘Dr Iyer. . . .’

‘Neeta is fine,’ she said.

‘OK, Neeta, I don’t think my problem warrants this. I don’t know why Dr Ramachandran sent me here.’

She picked my file from her desk. ‘Let’s see. This is Dr Ram’s brief to me – patient has sleep deprivation, has cut off human contact for a week, refuses to eat, has Google-searched on best ways to commit suicide.’ She paused and looked at me with raised eyebrows.

‘I Google for all sorts of stuff,’ I mumbled, ‘don’t you?’

‘The report says the mere mention of her name, her neighbourhood or any association, like her favourite dish, brings out unpredictable emotions ranging from tears to rage to frustration.’

‘I had a break-up. What do you expect?’ I was irritated.

‘Sure, with Ananya who stays in Mylapore. What’s her favourite dish? Curd rice?’

I sat up straight. ‘Don’t,’ I said weakly and felt a lump in my throat. I fought back tears. ‘Don’t,’ I said again.

‘Don’t what?’ Neeta egged me on, ‘Minor problem, isn’t it?’

‘Fuck minor. It’s killing me,’ I stood agitatedly. ‘Do you South Indians even know what emotions are all about?’
‘I’ll ignore the racist comment. You can stand and talk, but if it is a long story, take the couch. I want it all,’ she said.
I broke into tears. ‘Why did this happen to me?’ I sobbed. She passed me a tissue.
‘Where do I begin?’ I said and sat gingerly on the couch.
‘Where all love stories begin. From when you met her the first time,’ she said. She drew the curtains and switched on the air-conditioner. I began to talk and get my money’s worth.
Act 1:
Ahmedabad
She stood two places ahead of me in the lunch line at the IIMA mess. I checked her out from the corner of my eye, wondering what the big fuss about this South Indian girl was.

Her waist-length hair rippled as she tapped the steel plate with her fingers like a famished refugee. I noticed three black threads on the back of her fair neck. Someone had decided to accessorise in the most academically-oriented B-school in the country.

‘Ananya Swaminathan—best girl in the fresher batch,’ seniors had already anointed her on the dorm board. We had only twenty girls in a batch of two hundred. Good-looking ones were rare; girls don’t get selected to IIM for their looks. They get in because they can solve mathematical problems faster than 99.9% of India’s population and crack the CAT. Most IIM girls are above shallow things like make-up, fitting clothes, contact lenses, removal of facial hair, body odour and feminine charm. Girls like Ananya, if and when they arrive by freak chance, become instant pin-ups in our testosterone-charged, estrogen-starved campus.

I imagined Ms Swaminathan had received more male attention in the last week than she had in her entire life. Thus, I assumed she’d be obnoxious and decided to ignore her.

The students inched forward on auto-pilot. The bored kitchen staff couldn’t care if they were serving prisoners or future CEOs. They tossed one ladle of yellow stuff after another into plates. Of course, Ms Best Girl needed the spotlight.

‘That’s not rasam. Whatever it is, it’s definitely not rasam. And what’s that, the dark yellow stuff?’

‘Sambhar,’ the mess worker growled.

‘Eew, looks disgusting! How did you make it?’ she asked.

‘You want or not?’ the mess worker said, more interested in wrapping up lunch than discussing recipes.

While our lady decided, the two boys between us banged their plates on the counter. They took the food without editorials about it and left. I came up right behind her. I stole a sideways glance—definitely above average. Actually, well above average. In fact, outlier by IIMA standards. She had perfect features, with her eyes, nose, lips and ears the right size and in right places. That is all it takes to make people beautiful—normal body parts—yet why does nature mess it up so many times? Her tiny blue bindi matched her sky-blue and white salwar kameez. She looked like Sridevi’s smarter cousin, if there is such a possibility.

The mess worker dumped a yellow lump on my plate.

‘Excuse me, I’m before him,’ she said to the mess worker, pinning him down with her large, confident eyes.

‘What you want?’ the mess worker said in a heavy South Indian accent. ‘You
calling rasam not rasam. You make face when you see my sambar. I feed hundred people. They no complain.’

‘And that is why you don’t improve. Maybe they should complain,’ she said.

The mess worker dropped the ladle in the sambar vessel and threw up his hands. ‘You want complain? Go to mess manager and complain . . . see what student coming to these days,’ the mess worker turned to me, seeking sympathy.

I almost nodded.

She looked at me. ‘Can you eat this stuff?’ she wanted to know. ‘Try it.’

I took a spoonful of sambar. Warm and salty, not gourmet stuff, but edible in a no-choice kind of way. I could eat it for lunch; I had stayed in a hostel for four years.

However, I saw her face, now prettier with a hint of pink. I compared her to the fifty-year-old mess worker. He wore a lungi and had visible grey hair on his chest. When in doubt, the pretty girl is always right.

‘It’s disgusting,’ I said.

‘See,’ she said with childlike glee.

The mess worker glared at me.

‘But I can develop a taste for it,’ I added in a lame attempt to soothe him.

The mess worker grunted and tossed a mound of rice on my plate.

‘Pick something you like,’ I said to her, avoiding eye contact. The whole campus had stared at her in the past few days. I had to appear different.

‘Give me the rasgullas,’ she pointed to the dessert.

‘That is after you finish meal,’ the mess worker said.

‘Who are you? My mother? I am finished. Give me two rasgullas,’ she insisted.

‘Only one per student,’ he said as he placed a katori with one sweet on her plate.

‘Oh, come on, there are no limits on this disgusting sambar but only one of what is edible,’ she said. The line grew behind us. The boys in line didn’t mind. They had a chance to legitimately stare at the best-looking girl of the batch.

‘Give mine to her,’ I said and regretted it immediately. She’ll never date you, it is a rasgulla down the drain, I scolded myself.

‘I give to you,’ the mess worker said virtuously as he placed the dessert on my plate.

I passed my katori to her. She took the two rasgullas and moved out of the line.

OK buddy, pretty girl goes her way, rasgulla-less loser goes another. Find a corner to sit, I said to myself.

She turned to me. She didn’t ask me to sit with her, but she looked like she wouldn’t mind if I did. She pointed to a table with a little finger where we sat down opposite each other. The entire mess stared at us, wondering what I had done to merit sitting with her. I have made a huge sacrifice—my dessert—I wanted to tell them.

‘I’m Krish,’ I said, doodling in the sambar with my spoon.

‘I’m Ananya. Yuk, isn’t it?’ she said as I grimaced at the food’s taste.

‘I’m used to hostel food,’ I shrugged. ‘I’ve had worse.’

‘Hard to imagine worse,’ she said.

I coughed as I bit on a green chilli. She had a water jug next to her. She lifted the jug, leaned forward and poured water for me. A collective sigh ran through the mess. We had become everyone’s matinee show.

She finished her two desserts in four bites. ‘I’m still hungry. I didn’t even have
breakfast.’

‘Hunger or tasteless food, hostel life is about whatever is easier to deal with,’ I said.

‘You want to go out? I’m sure this city has decent restaurants,’ she said.

‘Now?’ We had a class in one hour. But Ms Best Girl had asked me out, even though for her own stomach. And as everyone knows, female classmates always come before class.

‘Don’t tell me you are dying to attend the lecture,’ she said and stood up, daring me.

I spooned in some rice.
She stamped a foot. ‘Leave that disgusting stuff.’

Four hundred eyes followed us as I walked out of the mess with Ms Ananya Swaminathan, rated the best girl by popular vote in IIMA.

‘Do you like chicken?’ The menu rested on her nose as she spoke. We had come to Topaz, a basic, soulless but air-conditioned restaurant half a kilometre from campus. Like all mid-range Indian restaurants, it played boring instrumental versions of old Hindi songs and served little marinated onions on the table.

‘I thought Ahmedabad was vegetarian,’ I said.

‘Please, I’d die here then.’ She turned to the waiter and ordered half a tandoori chicken with roomali rotis.

‘Do you have beer?’ she asked the waiter.
The waiter shook his head in horror and left.

‘We are in Gujarat, there is prohibition here,’ I said.

‘Why?’

‘Gandhiji’s birthplace,’ I said.

‘But Gandhiji won us freedom,’ she said, playing with the little onions. ‘What’s the point of getting people free only to put restrictions on them?’

‘Point,’ I said. ‘So, you are an expert on rasam and sambhar. Are you South Indian?’

‘Tamilian, please be precise. In fact, Tamil Brahmin, which is way different from Tamilians. Never forget that.’ She leaned back as the waiter served our meal. She tore a chicken leg with her teeth.

‘And how exactly are Tamil Brahmans different?’

‘Well, for one thing, no meat and no drinking,’ she said as she gestured a cross with the chicken leg.

‘Absolutely,’ I said.
She laughed. ‘I didn’t say I am a practising Tam Brah. But you should know that I am born into the purest of pure upper caste communities ever created. What about you, commoner?’

‘I am a Punjabi, though I never lived in Punjab. I grew up in Delhi. And I have no idea about my caste, but we do eat chicken. And I can digest bad sambhar better than Tamil Brahmans,’ I said.

‘You are funny,’ she said, tapping my hand. I liked the tap.

‘So where did you stay in hostel before?’ she said. ‘Please don’t say IIT, you are
doing pretty well so far.
‘What’s wrong with IIT?’
‘Nothing, are you from there?’ She sipped water.
‘Yes, from IIT Delhi. Is that a problem?’
‘No,’ she smiled, ‘not yet.’
‘Excuse me?’ I said. Her smugness had reached irritating levels.
‘Nothing,’ she said.
We stayed quiet.
‘What’s the deal? Someone from IIT broke your heart?’
She laughed. ‘No, on the contrary. I seem to have broken some, for no fault of my own.’
‘Care to explain?’
‘Don’t tell anyone, but in the past one week that I’ve been here, I’ve had ten proposals. All from IITians.’
I mentally kicked myself. My guess was right; she was getting a lot of attention. I only wished it wasn’t from my own people.
‘Proposals for what?’
‘The usual, to go out, be friends and stuff. Oh, and one guy from IIT Chennai proposed marriage!’
‘Serious?’
‘Yes, he said this past week has been momentous for him. He joined IIMA, and now he has found his wife in me. I may be wrong, but I think he had some jewellery on him.’
I smacked my forehead. No, my collegemates can’t be doing this, whatever the deprivation.
‘So, you understand my concern about you being from IIT,’ she said, picking up a chicken breast next.
‘Oh, so it is a natural reaction. If I am from IIT, I have to propose to you within ten minutes?’
‘I didn’t say that.’
‘You implied that.’
‘I’m sorry.’
‘It’s OK. I expected you to be like this. Let me guess—only child, rich parents?’
‘Wrong, wrong. I have a younger brother. And my father works in Bank of Baroda in Chennai. Sorry, you expected me to be like what?’
‘Some girls cannot handle attention. Two days of popularity and every guy in college should bow to you.’
‘That’s not true. Didn’t I come out with you?’ She neatly transferred the bare bones of the chicken on to another plate.
‘Oh, that’s huge. Coming out with a commoner like me. How much is the bill? I’ll pay my share and leave.’ I stood up.
‘Hey,’ she said.
‘What?’
‘I’m sorry. Please sit down.’
I had lost interest in the conversation anyway. If there is nothing as attractive as a pretty girl, there’s nothing as repulsive as a cocky chick.
I sat back and focussed on the food and the irritating instrumental music for the next ten minutes. I ignored the Brahmin who stereotyped my collegemates.

‘Are we OK now?’ she smiled hesitantly.

‘Why did you come out with me? To take your score to eleven?’

‘You really want to know?’

‘Yes.’

‘I need some friends here. And you seemed like a safe-zone guy. Like the kind of guy who could just be friends with a girl, right?’

Absolutely not, I thought. Why would any guy want to be only friends with a girl? It’s like agreeing to be near a chocolate cake and never eat it. It’s like sitting in a racing car but not driving it. Only wimps do that.

‘I’m not so sure,’ I said.

‘You can handle it. I told you about the proposals because you can see how stupid they are.’

‘They are not stupid. They are IITians. They just don’t know how to talk to women yet,’ I said.

‘Whatever. But you do. And I’d like to be friends with you. Just friends, OK?’

She extended her hand. I gave her a limp handshake.

‘Let’s share, sixty each,’ she said as the bill arrived.

That’s right, ‘just friends’ share bills. I didn’t want to be just friends with her. And I didn’t want to be the eleventh martyr.

I paid my share and came back to campus. I had no interest in meeting my just friend anytime again soon.

‘You OK?’ I said, going up to my just friend. She remained in her seat as her tears re-emerged. The last lecture had ended and the classroom was empty.

I hadn’t spoken much to Ananya after our lunch last week. Pretty girls behave best when you ignore them. (Of course, they have to know you are ignoring them, for otherwise they may not even know you exist.)

But today I had to talk to her. She had cried in class. We had auditorium-style classrooms with semi-circular rows, so everyone could see everyone. Students sat in alphabetical order. Ananya, like all kids doomed with names starting with the letter A, sat in the first row on the left side. She sat between Ankur and Aditya, both IITians who had already proposed to her without considering the embarrassment of being rejected and then sitting next to the rejector for the whole year.

I sat in the third row, between Kanyashree, who took notes like a diligent court transcriber, and five Mohits, who had come from different parts of India. But neither Ankur, nor Aditya, nor Kanyashree, nor the five Mohits had noticed Ananya’s tears.
Only I had caught her wiping her eye with a yellow dupatta that had little bells at its ends that tinkled whenever she moved.

In the past week, I had limited my communication with Ananya to cursory greetings every morning and a casual wave at the end of the day. During classes we had to pay attention to the teacher as we had marks for class participation – saying something that sounds intelligent. Most IITians never spoke while people from non-science backgrounds spoke non-stop.

Twenty-three minutes into the microeconomics class, the professor drew an L-shaped utility curve on the blackboard. He admired his curve for ten seconds and turned to the class.

‘How many economics graduates here?’ asked Prof Chatterjee, a two-decade IIMA veteran.

Fifteen students out of the seventy students in section A raised their hands, Ananya included.

Chatterjee turned to her. ‘You recognise the curve, Ms Swaminathan?’ He read her name from the nameplate in front.

‘The basic marginal utility curve, sir,’ Ananya said.

‘So, Ms Swaminathan, how would you represent that curve mathematically?’

Ananya stood up, her eyes explaining clearly she had no clue. The remaining fourteen economics graduates lowered their hands.

‘Yes, Ms Swaminathan?’ Chatterjee said.

Ananya clutched the trinkets on her dupatta so they didn’t make a noise as she spoke. ‘Sir, that curve shows different bundles of goods between which a consumer is indifferent. That is, at each point on the curve, the consumer has equal preference for one bundle over another.’

‘That’s not my question. What is the mathematical formula?’

‘I don’t know that. In any case, this is only a concept.’

‘But do you know it?’

‘No. But I can’t think of any real life situation where a mathematical formula like this would work,’ Ananya said.

Prof raised his hand to interrupt her. ‘Shsh. . . . ’ He gave a sinister smile.

‘Notice, class, notice. This is the state of economics education in the country. Top graduates don’t know the basics. And then they ask – why is India economically backward?’

Prof emphatically dropped the chalk on his table to conclude his point. He had solved what had dumbfounded policymakers for decades. Ananya Swaminathan was the reason for India’s backwardness.

Ananya hung her head in shame. A few IITians brightened up. Microeconomics was an elective course in IIT and those who had done it knew the formula. They were itching to show off.

‘Anyone knows?’ Prof asked and Ankur raised his hand.

‘Yes, tell us. Ms Swaminathan, you should talk to your neighbours more. And next time, don’t raise your hand if I ask for economics graduates,’ Prof said.

He went to the board to write lots of Greek symbols and calculus equations. The course had started with cute little things like how people choose between tea and biscuits. It had moved on to scary equations that would dominate exams. The class
took mad notes. Kanyashree wrote so hard I could feel the seismic vibrations from her pen’s nib.

I stole a glance at Ananya. As a smug Ankur saw his words inscribed on the board, Ananya’s left hand’s fingers scrunched up her yellow dupatta. She moved her left hand to her face even as she continued to write with her right. In subtle movements, she dabbed at her tears. Maybe Ms Best Girl had a heart, I thought. And maybe I should cut out my studied ignorance strategy and talk to her after class.

‘You OK?’ I said again.
She nodded while continuing to wipe her tears. She fixed her gaze down.
‘I miss Topaz,’ I said to change the topic.
‘I’ve never been so humiliated,’ she said.
‘Nobody cares. All professors are assholes. That’s the universal truth,’ I offered.

‘At least where I come from.’
‘You want to see my economics degree? I’ll show you my grades.’
‘No,’ I said.
‘I came third in the entire Delhi University. These wannabe engineer profs have turned economics from a perfectly fine liberal arts subject to this Greek symbol junkyard,’ she said as she pointed to the formulae on the board.

I kept silent.
‘You are from IIT. You probably love these equations,’ she said and looked up at me. Despite her tears, she still looked pretty.

I looked at the blackboard. Yes, I did have a fondness for algebra. It’s nothing to be ashamed of. Yet, this wasn’t the time. ‘No, I am not a big fan. Greek symbols do take the fun out of any subject.’

‘Exactly, but these profs don’t think so. They will have these equations in the test next week. I am going to flunk. And he is going to turn me into this specimen of the educated but clueless Indian student. I bet I am the staff-room discussion right now.’

‘They are all frustrated,’ I said. ‘We are half their age but will earn twice as them in two years. Wouldn’t you hate an eleven-year-old if he earned double?’
She smiled.
‘You need to hang that dupatta out to dry,’ I said. She smiled some more.
We walked out of class. We decided to skip lunch and have tea and omelette at the roadside Rambhai outside campus.

‘He is going to screw me in microeconomics. He’s probably circled my name and put a D in front of it already,’ she said, nestling the hot glass of tea in her dupatta folds for insulation.

‘Don’t freak out. Listen, you can study with me. I don’t like these equations, but I am good at them. That’s all we did at IIT for four years.’
She looked at me for a few seconds.

‘Hey, I have no interest in being number eleven. This is purely for study reasons.’
She laughed. ‘Actually, the score is thirteen now.’
‘IITians?’