



## Humour in the State of Affairs in Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English, August*

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“You are IAS? You don't look like an IAS officer.”

One of the most commonly asked question to Agastya Sen, the protagonist in Upamanyu Chatterjee's 1988 novel *English, August: An Indian Story*, is about the strangeness of his personality in relation to his profession. From almost the very start, the reader is made aware of the fact that Agastya is a sort of anomaly in the bureaucratic system – a young, rich, urban boy who neither seems to fit into the stereotypical image of a bureaucrat nor does he understand the importance of his job. Agastya views the bureaucracy in a distant manner, while still being a part of it, providing an interesting and humorous account of life in the civil services from the point of view of a narrator that cannot find happiness in this job. At its core, it is a novel about the insecurities of a young urban man living in the heart of rural India and the loneliness that comes with this displacement. In this paper, I would like to discuss the ways in which Upamanyu Chatterjee's novel mocks both the Indian bureaucracy and the society it works for through the lens of his profane protagonist, Agastya Sen.

The novel begins by setting up the major theme of displacement and dislocation, as Agastya moves from the South Delhi residence of his uncle to a shabby government guest house in the fictional district of Madna, somewhere in the tribal belt of central India. Chatterjee shows the inherent anxieties of his protagonist as he is now going to live in a small town, not very different from the numerous, unnamed places that he had only seen out of train windows until then. Agastya has a very distant view of the rural Indian society due to his urban, upper class upbringing but now “he was going to spend months in a dot in this hinterland” (Chatterjee, *English* 5). Yet, before leaving for Madna, Agastya's major concern regarding his change of environment was the uncertainty of the availability of marijuana in this small, distant town,



showing how his priorities, even as a trainee administrator, were limited to his own pleasures. Agastya never shows any interest in his job either, constantly lying to his colleagues about his life and using excuses to skip office work, and even after leaving his office, he would spend time all alone in his room listening to music, reading Marcus Aurelius, and smoking cannabis. Even though his discomfort with his surroundings is the cause for his reclusive nature, it is his constant avoidance of contact with the outside world that can be seen as detrimental for him in settling at his job. While he is under the care of the District Collector Srivastav, Agastya notices about himself that he does not “look like a bureaucrat” and should rather be doing a more “shallow and urban” job, a sentiment that he repeats throughout the novel (13).

Writing for a guest article in the magazine India Today, Upamanyu Chatterjee had mentioned how “At the age of 25, we, in tears, leave our mothers’ laps only when the jobs we’ve avoided for years force us to get up and move”, which makes sense when read in relation to Agastya who spends the entire novel unable to adjust to his job after having spent his life until then in a comfortable environment (Chatterjee, “Rambling at Fifty”). Throughout his stay in Madna, Agastya always feels restless due to his lack of interest in his job which is amplified by his negative opinion of his seniors in the bureaucracy and his inability to mix into his surroundings. At multiple times in the story, he looks at the fat-bellied officers and comes to a realization that he does not want to end up like them. He tries to find humour in everyday events, and his constant lying to his colleagues and his indifference towards his job are a result of him trying to keep himself interested in Madna. Agastya is not only dislocated physically into a new environment from his home in Delhi or Calcutta, but it is also an emotional dislocation from the people who surround him in this unfamiliar town. It is ironic then, when he has to finally leave Madna for the town of Jompanna to finish his training, he asks Vasant, the guest house caretaker, to keep his room available for himself whenever he shall return. In the months he spent in that room, the place became a humble escape from the problems of the world, where he could live his secret life filled with recreational drugs, music, and his uninvited roommate, a frog, showing both the maturity of his personality and an attachment to a place he had initially resented himself. The dislocation of identity is not limited to Agastya only, many of the officers he meets



in the novel also show their distaste for the situations their job puts them in and while some of them, like Shankar, a Deputy Engineer, choose to turn to spirituality and others like Bhatia, a Forest Service officer, faced a dilemma similar to Agastya himself. Almost all the government employees shown in the novel are restless with respect to their surroundings and are trying to move in order to get to a better position (Scott 108). Perhaps Shankar summarises the mental condition of both himself and Agastya when he says, “we have both been banished in Madna” (Chatterjee, English 72).

From the very beginning, Chatterjee drives home the point that Agastya does not feel comfortable with his identity. Growing up in a convent in Darjeeling, Agastya wishes to have been born as an Anglo-Indian, whom he had seen as the popular students in his school. In fact, the two words that form the title of the book are both nicknames given to Agastya by his schoolmates; “English” because of his resentment at not being born an Anglo-Indian, and “August” as an anglicised disfiguration of his name Agastya. At various occasions, Agastya is called as the “English type”, which is best defined in the novel as “any Indian who speaks English more fluently than any Indian language” (23). Agastya’s discomfort with his identity can also be understood from his mixed heritage as his father was a Bengali Hindu while his mother was a Goan Christian, and his father’s Bengali influence on Agastya had overshadowed his mother’s. As a result of this, he grew up with a primarily Bengali identity, a fact that was stated by the cartoonist Sathe as an act “in keeping with your race, your father did to your poor mother what all of you did to Assam, but we only begin to whine when the British did it to us”, making his father’s marriage the subsequent loss of Agastya’s Goan heritage as a pseudo- colonial act (83). In some ways, Agastya can be seen as a representative of the modern Indian citizen, a result of intermarriage between people of different cultures. His taste in music also shows him as a product of the confluence of East and West, a weird mixture of Tagore and Vivaldi, thumri and jazz, stuck between being a “Mother-tongue type” and an “English type”.

Essentially, the novel is a discussion on boredom and routineness in the bureaucracy. For the initial part of his training, Agastya moves from one office to another, unenthusiastically trying to understand the functioning of each one of them from officers who were equally



unenthusiastic in training him. Agastya rightfully calls his first year in Madna as “anchorless” (24). It does not help him that his surroundings in the various offices are filled with “the decaying walls and the leaking water cooler in the corner, the fading map on the wall and the government calendar” creating a decaying, stagnant image of the bureaucratic machinery, which seems to mirror the state of Agastya’s mind during his stay in Madna (71). Agastya is acutely aware of his privilege while he is just worried about trying to find happiness in a life that is free from financial woes or any kind of oppression, as he places himself in opposition to Srivastav, a self-made man who is content with his life, and a young medicine salesman of roughly his age, struggling to make ends meet.

The novel seems to be structured around bureaucratic features like routineness, repetitiveness, procedures and delays (Scott 108). Everyone in the novel is either stuck in a loop of repetitive actions, or they are waiting for someone or something to happen that can push them in a certain direction, and Agastya becomes the biggest victim of this routineness. Agastya’s story is a quest of finding happiness, something which eludes him in Madna. Spending his days reading Marcus Aurelius and the Bhagavad Gita, he falls into a state of apathy and indifference (109). He views his own lack of ambition as a result of an absence of unhappiness in his life before he had entered Madna, but he found it difficult to explain it to anyone else, neither in Madna nor back home because “no one would be really interested, and the others would not understand” (Chatterjee, English 136). Neither does Agastya show any interest in his job, nor does he show a lot of agency in his actions. It is only at almost the end of the novel that we see Agastya take some initiative when he decides to stay behind in a village Chipanthi to ensure that water-scarcity is resolved because;

“sitting in the Block Office at Jompanna, Chipanthi and its problems would’ve seemed very remote and everything would’ve been postponed” (257).

While the mundaneness of the bureaucratic process makes life boring for Agastya, the corrupt and disinterested officials make life difficult for the common people. While some officers show awareness of the problems, others are actively responsible in making life miserable for commoners. Early on, the Superintendent of Police Kumar tells Agastya how giving one man



power over a district is not “conducive to humility” and “India has had a tradition of bureaucracy” (39). The bureaucracy is always shown as distant and uninterested in the affairs of the people, looking at events as “the kind of case you only read about in the papers” (41). The bureaucrats all seem to be implicated in their dishonest acts, whether it is in showing increased expenditures in the name of an official visit or by siphoning funds in the name of construction of roads, and Kumar justifies it as “only degrees of dishonesty” (138). The lower level government employees of Madna seem to have more or less accepted a seemingly parasitic role in relation to their superiors, willing to do odd, menial jobs for the sake of a promotion or some other favour. Chatterjee does not show this as a uniquely post Independence feature, as he says that “Their fathers and grandfathers had done much the same, but the skins of those Collectors had been red, and the accent of their English alien” even though the employees are shown to believe in the “inferiority of labour” (57). Other instances, such as the local college’s inability to reject the Collector’s wife for a teaching job and the struggle between Agastya and a local politician to assert control over a government vehicle, further show how the State and its officials were constantly involved in abusing their power for their own benefits.

Chatterjee’s Madna can be seen as a representative of a typical Indian town. The subtitle of the novel, “An Indian Story” seems to reflect that while the novel talks about one person and one district of India, the setting serves to narrate the story of India post-Independence. Even early on in the novel, Srivastav tells Agastya that “the development of Madna must be a representative Indian story” of a district losing its natural and cultural heritage to make way for symbols of modernity like roads and factories (20). Throughout the novel, scenes of development and progress are always juxtaposed with scenes of deprivation, including in the scene just quoted where Srivastav is lecturing Agastya in his car about development, while the driver almost runs over a cyclist. The difference is also visible in the way the narrator addresses menial workers as “urchins” and “shadow figures” almost throughout the novel. While there has been progress in the country and Madna itself shows signs of modernity and development, these hidden people have not been able to benefit from this progress. Not only is Madna distant from



the rest of the country in terms of development, it had also been impervious to historical developments in the country over many centuries, as Agastya notes about the city,

“The whole seemed to have been bypassed by all that had made history and news, had remained impervious to the Mughals and 1857 and Bande Mataram and the mid-century travails of megalopolitan India. In the distance, cutting off the inch-line of forest, the futuristic structure of the new thermal power station, steel threatening the sky, beside the shrunken river, waiting for rain to flood the district and remind its people of the horrors that customarily lay beyond the orbit of their lives.” (45-46)

Set in the tribal heartland, the novel also shows the ineffectiveness and the inability of the Indian state and civil society to accommodate the tribal population in the development of India, albeit he does it in a controversial manner. In the later parts of the novel, an officer named Bajaj informs Agastya of the financial and logistical issues faced by the government in taking development to the remote places of tribal population. However, his explanations put forward the question whether development should be centred on the social responsibility of the government or should development be essentially economically viable, a question of which Bajaj himself seems aware. When Agastya moves to Jompanna, a place with high tribal population, he sees a hospital constructed by the Dutch which essentially served to convert the sick tribals to Christianity, showing how even after gaining independence there was Western intrusion in India’s religion and culture. Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar discusses this intrusion of foreign religions in his story “The Adivasi Will Not Dance”, where he too shows how the promises of development from the missionaries were just a façade for religious conversion and the destruction of the unique tribal culture, making the tribals “people from nowhere” (Shekhar 173).

Towards the very end of the novel, Agastya meets a Naxalite, Rao, who discusses with him the failures of the State to provide the tribals their fair share in the various development schemes and were in turn, exploited for their innocence. Agastya, however, notes that even the Naxalites had not done much to uplift the tribals, instead of making them self-sufficient, the Naxalites looked at tribals as people who need to be told how to fight for their rights and this process involves the use of violence, especially against forces from the government and the



business class. While these conflicting views can be seen to rise out of the ideological differences, at the end it is the tribal population that suffers and Agastya seems to be subtly aware of this problem when he looks at the tribals and “he dreads their innocence, for it was dangerous, so tempting to corrupt” (Chatterjee, English 263). Agastya’s refusal to admit sexual exploitation of a tribal woman by a Forest Officer, and friend, Mohan, is extremely problematic. Earlier in the novel, Bhatia tells Agastya how the forest officials exploited tribal women by keeping them at their homes “for sex and scrubbing the floors” (104). Yet when faced with the reality, Agastya finds it difficult to fathom that someone he knew would indulge in said exploitation. The fact that the book was published in a less politically charged climate might have allowed Chatterjee to get away with the victim-blaming his protagonist indulges in, even if Agastya does feel bewildered at his own statement. His reaction can be seen as a result of an inability to understand the politics of exploitation and the need to justify the actions of a friend, both of which are equally problematic.

In his novel, Upamanyu Chatterjee takes us through the repetitive, lonely life of Agastya during his first year as an IAS officer. His loneliness in a strange new town in a country right on the verge of economic liberalisation shows us the anxieties of the urban youth of the time while at the same time keeping a humorous tone to cope with the banality of bureaucratic lifestyle.

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