

Campus Setting In Five Point Someone

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Abstract: *Study on setting specially campus as setting in Indian novels is a fascinating subject. Yet it is a virgin area. We come across a number of studies on plots, themes and characters in novels but when it comes to setting, we find a few and far between, that to sketchy and unsystematic. Primarily such a state of affairs in literary studies prompted me to undertake this study to unravel its various facets, frailties and fecundities. In a novel, like character and plot, setting is an integral and important ingredient. Besides serving the purpose of a backdrop, it is of overriding importance as it determines the characters in most cases.*

Although, there are early examples of campus setting in Indian novels but full-fledged campus setting is found in Chetan Bhagat's Five Point Someone. Thus I have selected this novel for a study on Campus Setting.

Keywords: *Chetan Bhagat, Five Point Someone, Campus Setting, Grading, Ragging, fears and insecurities of the students, campus love-affairs, joys and sorrows of friendship, drug and booze sessions, teaching style, examination phobias, placement dreams, monotony of classroom studies, behavior of professors, convocation ceremony,*

I. Introduction

Chetan Bhagat's "Five Point Someone", being a trend setter and a highly popular campus novel is a fit case study for examining use of campus setting in a novel.

The Novel gives a glimpse of different aspects of campus life that included fears and insecurities of the students, campus love-affairs, joys and sorrows of friendship, drug and booze sessions, teaching style, examination phobias, placement dreams, monotony of classroom studies, behavior of professors, convocation ceremony and also ragging .

The novel, set in the Indian Institute of Technology Delhi, in the period 1991 to 1995, depicting the adventures of three mechanical engineering students, Hari Kumar, Ryan Oberoi, and Alok Gupta, who fail to cope with the grading system of the IITs, captures the campus setting of a residential engineering institution . It describes the various facets of campus life in IIT. Five Point Someone is one of the most popular novels to successfully capture the unique ethos of India's elite institutions.

II. Main Body

Five Point Someone is set in the present era when education system had undergone a sea change. There was a shift of interest from the non- vocational courses taught in degree colleges and universities to highly professional courses like engineering, medical, and business administration. Hence, students flocked in large numbers in technical institutes, medical colleges and business schools. However, these institutions were scattered across the country making it impossible, in most cases, for the students to acquire that specialized knowledge as day scholars. The concept of residential campuses invariably found prominence among students around this time. The traditional campuses used to be enclosures or cloistered spaces but with the growing importance of residential campuses in the twenty first century, modern universities became decentralized and urban. The university campuses then evolved as a kind of microcosm society at large, in which the principles, drives and conflicts that governed collective human life were displayed, leading to the development of a cosmopolitan culture there. This had its obvious effects on the campus environment.

Five Point Someone is set against the backdrop of the residential campus, IIT- Delhi. IIT is that place where students gathered at a very impressionable age of their lives. These young lads after seeking admission in an IIT were destined to share the four years of the course duration with other students there, both contemporaries and seniors, and who belonged to different backgrounds and regions. In fact, their lives gets intertwined with each other during their stay at IIT and sometimes even afterwards.

Moreover, in IIT, where your grade point average (GPA) defined who you were and "once you get a GPA in IIT, everyone has an opinion about it, about you, even if it's a fashion design student" (P 69). It showed that GPA was the primary determinant for choosing friends. The nine and ten pointers looked down upon the so called 'under- performers'. Hence, if anyone with a GPA of less than eight on a ten point scale and a departmental rank in the twenties in a class of forty-five tried to display his erudition in class, would be insulted by his fellow class mates.

The class toppers, too, had to face hostility from their class mates. No one desired their company. Their presence was rather abhorred. As such, Venkat in this novel who had a GPA of nine point five was without any friend, both in the Kumaon hostel where “nobody... talked to Venkat” (P 65), as well as in the class. Alok once tried spending a year with Venkat in the hope of improving his grades. Unfortunately he had to walk out on Venkat when his peculiar behaviour became unbearable.

“Alok, this is too much. I mean, I have to study for ten hours a day to keep my GPA. The least I can expect is to count on my group partners... I am a nine- pointer, do you understand? I have to maintain my position... I have to maintain my rank. The second guy in the department is only 0.03 behind me you know.” (P 91- 92)

The high browed attitude of snobs like Venkat made them unfriendly towards the laggards. Interestingly, the erudite did not even have a friend from their very own league of the high rankers because those belonging to that league were seen as rivals.

Friendship could be enjoyed only when students having the same GPA clubbed together. Consequently, the bonding between the three five pointers, Ryan, Hari and Alok was inevitable. They ate, drank, slept, studied, and partied together. And when it came to partying, the triad invited other students like Sukhwinder, Anurag and Vaibhav simply because they too were in the five- point something range of scores and were 'underdogs'. These boys together rejoiced at bringing the average score in the class down. They were the ones who disliked their examiners and the vice versa. These below average students also felt the unfairness of the college system, and consequently criticized the IIT system and the professors for giving much value to the grading pattern:

“This IIT system is nothing but a mice race. It is not a rat race, mind you, as rats sound somewhat shrewd and clever. So it is not about that. It is about mindlessly running a race for four years, in every class, every assignment and every test. It is a race where profs judge you every ten steps, with a GPA stamped on you every semester. Profs who have no idea what science and learning are about”. (P 101)

Therefore, Ryan's design of an advanced suspension bridge failed to get a recommendation from Professor Bhatia for a special internship project. As Ryan says, he, “Gave him some ideas on how one could design a suspension bridge and he got all excited. He told me to make a scale drawing and submit it, said he would give me a special internship project. Then he asked me my name and found out my GPA. So then he calls me and says to forget about the drawing and internship”. (P 78)

In the hostel life , the students have to come to terms with both the seniors and the juniors. These seniors, as per tradition, initiated the juniors into the hostel life, the first phase of which comprised the ragging period. Introduction of the juniors to the seniors did not remain limited to a formal one inside the department. Instead it gave way to the more informal ragging sessions in the hostel where the juniors were subjected to acts like stripping as is found from Hari's account in the novel. Three seniors, Baku, Anurag and an unnamed third one rounded the juniors up on the balcony for ragging: 'You bloody freshers, dozing away eh? Rascals, who will give an introduction?' he screamed... 'No talking!' Baku said one scrawny hand up. 'No talking, just remove those damn clothes...!' There seemed to be no choice so we surrendered every item of our clothing, shivering at the unholy glee in Baku's face as he walked by each of us, checking us out and grinning... (P 3-4)

Such sadistic behaviour in the name of introduction and interaction between the juniors and the seniors **has** occupied a significant place in the campus culture of the twenty first century. Ragging is not mentioned as a rule, either written or spoken, anywhere in the campus rulebook. Yet, it is religiously carried out by all students across the residential campuses and in some cases even acts as a catalyst in building relationships for a lifetime. Ragging has also another positive silver lining. During this phase, known as settling down phase, the students are spared from the ragging by the professors in the form of grading tests like quizzes, impromptu tests etc A part of campus setting is hostel life. Hostel life has been described very vividly in the book. After their fiasco in the Quiz, they come to the canteen . “We kept our answer-sheet, the proof of our underperformance, in our bags and strolled back to Kumaon. We met at dinner in the mess. The food was insipid as usual, and Alok wrinkled his pug nose as he dispiritedly plopped a thick blob of green substance mess-workers called bhindi masala into his plate. He slammed two rotis on his stainless-steel plate and ignored the rest of the semi-solid substances like dal, raita and pulao. Ryan and I took everything; though everything tasted the same, we could at least have some variety of colors on our plate”.

Hostel life is all about friends, alienation from families, smoking cigars, drinking vodka and listening to Pink Floyd. Commitment to relationship overrules the fresh admitted undergraduates to such an extent that they are ready to do anything for earning name and fame. Ryan Oberoi always prioritizes his friends more than his parents. Alok , a resident of Rohini Colony, Delhi is a sincere guy but he too gets ready with Ryan and Hari in mischievous acts to overcome the shackles of poverty. In his own words, Bhagat describes in an interview “ Life at IIT transforms your personality completely, leaving permanent changes – as if you have had genetic mutations. Yet, I say this in a good way. You have never been around such smart people and such workload. And all the while, your pent-up hormones are just about getting started.”

Hostel life fosters friendship which is unique and permanent. Ryan's heroics which saved Alok and Hari from a traumatic ragging experience helped the three of them to 'bond faster than fevicol' (P 7). Consequently, the boys converted their three single rooms in Kumaon hostel into one apartment. Ryan's room became the party room, Hari's room became their bedroom with three beds and Alok's room became the study room with three tables. This was mainly done to have maximum fun outside the class routine which meant weekend trips to Connaught Place in Delhi, eating butter chicken at a 'cheap dhaba' there, catching good Hindi movies at Priya Cinema and checking 'out some girls in the market' (P 36). In addition to attending regular classes, the three friends studied for three hours daily and the rest of the time was devoted to playing chess and squash, occasional drinking of vodka on the roof of the institute, regularly hanging out at Sasi's dhaba eating lavishly its famous parathas as the mess food was inedible: "Kumaon had 'continental' dinner. In reality, it was just an excuse for mess workers to not give us real food. The menu sounded nice - noodles, French fries, toast and soup. It tasted awful" (P 155). The friendship between Ryan, Hari and Alok presents a glimpse of how the 'best years' of students' lives are spent in the IITs. In an interview, Bhagat puts friendship in the campus as below. "It is a very special age. In this system, all you have is your friends – you find respite in the same people you compete with. And soon, you bond like you never will with anyone else in life. Yes, I would go to the extent of saying that you bond better with your IIT friends than to your spouse (big statement, know I am going to regret this one)."

Like friendship, love and romance also form an integral part of campus life. Throughout history, our society has provided ways to encourage pair bonding by providing opportunity and favourable situations. Coming to the twentieth and the twenty first century, colleges and universities started offering these opportune situations in the form of dances, clubs, fests and other recreational activities. All these are designed to help their students find happiness, meaningful relationships with those of the opposite sex and maintain such healthy and satisfying intimate relationships during their years on campus and even afterwards.

Hari's romantic involvement with Neha highlighted the academic culture affecting all the students whether in technical institutes or otherwise. Hari met Neha for the first time when Neha's car hit him. After that incident they bumped into each other in a book shop which was soon followed by regular meetings. With time they came close to each other, sharing their darkest secrets- the secrets to which even their parents had no access, especially Neha's parents. That is to say, on one hand, Neha and Hari were trying to make their relationship work at every step, and on the other hand, their relationship provided significant insights into the fears and insecurities of faculty members. For Neha was none other than the daughter of the head of the mechanical engineering department, Professor Cherian, who was a living threat to many young students.

Professor Cherian was an example of a perfect ten in his engineering days. As such, he preferred students with above nine GPAs. According to him, the nine and ten pointers were the true IITians, and that GPAs indicated the intelligence of students. He could never accept the fact that a five point something GPA holder like Ryan could be creative enough to test the impact of lubricant efficiency on scooter fuel consumption and present a very original lube project based on that. Hence, he tried to dissuade Dean Shastri, who took a keen interest in the project from approving it. "Dean Shastri was quite impressed with the findings" of the project but Professor Cherian told the Dean "not to trust these students. He said, 'who knows? They have cheated once, they could have cheated to make the findings. They just want their credits'" (P 238- 239).

Professor Cherian did not want Ryan to have his way with the lube project, for that would expose the professor's vulnerability. Thus, he could not even tolerate Professor Veera, who unlike the other professors gave priority to talent over GPAs. Individual free thinking did not have any value in Professor Cherian's life. His son, Samir wanted to be a lawyer. He detested maths but his father failed to see his son's likes and dislikes. The professor could not allow Samir to let down his family's 'strong intellectual tradition' (P 259). The glory could be retained only when Samir succeeded in getting into an IIT. Unfortunately Samir failed to make it even in three attempts. Professor Cherian was insecure which pushed Samir to such an extent that he had to take the drastic step of killing himself.

Ostensibly IITs are known as Centres of Excellence but the institute could not succeed to win laurels for the country by making significant technical contributions. The grading system to assess the students performance has not only overburdened the students but also spoiled their originality. The IIT professors to keep the students under pressure packed the eight to five slots with lectures, tutorials, practical classes, and assignments. Moreover, these same professors designed a tight schedule of two minor tests, one major test and three surprise quizzes for each of the six courses every semester. The marks of the students in each of the above mentioned category of tests were taken together to determine their GPA on a ten point scale.

However, the most painful of the lot of exams was the surprise quizzes. They added to the woes of the students. The IIT professors spared the students in the first month of their course, citing ragging season and settling- in period. Unfortunately, that ragging season ended soon, and it occurred only once during the entire programme. This implied a quiz could happen at any time and whenever any professor sinisterly advised the students to "keep revising your notes" (P 17) it meant surprise quiz was awaiting them. Such hints of surprise

quizzes usually put students in great problem. Everyone would be on their toes. The campus would be abuzz with such strong rumours and on the night before the quiz, every student from the toppers to the back benchers would be running around with notepads and books.

The 'quickie quiz of multiple choice questions' (P 19) was a means to constantly evaluate the students' performance in class before the major examination at the end of each semester. It was the scores in such quizzes which made IITians susceptible to various insults- the worst being labelled as 'commerce students'. Their prestige would be at stake after a poor show in the minor test. Measures were taken to rein the students and simultaneously spur them to achieve higher CGPAs: "You get bad grades... 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 11).

Apart from grading tests, Competition, being so intense in IITs, creates lot of pressures among the students and one of the **professors** made a remark at the end of his class: "Best of luck once again for your stay here. Remember, as your head of department Prof. Cherian says, the tough workload is by design, to keep you on your toes" (p 11)

Despite a rigorous grading system, the IIT system has its own limitations, which was intricately brought out by the remarks of Ryan Oberoi in a get together party: "You know guys, this whole IIT system is sick. Because, tell me, how many great engineers or scientists have come out of IIT? I mean that is supposed to be the best college in India, the best technology institute for a country of a billion. But has IIT ever invented anything? Or made any technical contribution to India? Over thirty years of IITs, yet, all it does is train some bring kids to work in multinationals. I mean look at MIT in the USA... What is wrong in the system... This system of relative grading and overburdening the students. I mean it kills the best fun years of your life. But it kills something else. Where is the room for original **thought**? Where is the time for creativity? It is not fair."(P34-35)

It seems that it was this undue stress of the students which affected the kind of language they used in their day to day conversations both on and off campus.

Campus life gave enough opportunities and situations which necessarily urged the students to use slangs, nick names and choice expletives. Campus was the place where, therefore, lingua franca sprang from caricaturing each other, and the resultant language was unique to each campus.

We find several uses of this type of slangs and jargons. In fact, Five Point Someone has an impressive list. First there are a number of the abbreviations of the courses taught there. As such, the course was Manufacturing Process, often shortened to ManPro for easier pronunciation. Similarly, quanto- physics was actually quantum physics, ApMech was Applied Mechanics, industrial engineering and management became Indem and fluid mechanics was FluMech. Such 'portmanteau' words formed as a result of 'blending', that is, combining the meaning as well as the sound of two words became viral throughout the campus. Another portmanteau word often used in IIT, but was not the name of any course, was the 'Disco' or the Disciplinary Committee. IIT also made extensive use of a clipped word 'insti' in place of 'institute', that 'insti' building where classes were regularly held, and that 'insti' roof where the boys went for occasional vodka joints. The word 'mug' which was derived from the phrase 'mug up'- the phenomenon which viciously afflicted the students was also very popular among them. Undoubtedly these words were coined keeping in mind the needs of the students but there were some words which caught on really well even with the faculty members. One such word was 'funda' that came from fundamentals and IIT was all about 'funda'. Besides acronyms, blending terms and clipped words, campus slang language also continued even in the domain of nick names.

Students across the globe have the tendency of substituting the proper names of their fellow classmates, hostel-mates, batch- mates and even their teachers with nick names for ridicule or for familiarity. These names, in most cases, are influenced by certain traits of the persons in question. Alok was lovingly called 'Fatso' by Ryan because as the name indicates Alok was fat and a glutton.

Interestingly, where students could give code names to their teachers without any fear, they could at the same time use expletives on campus without much hesitation.

The advancement of learning and technology since the last two decades of the last century had brought with it the increased use of abusive words by students. The students used such words randomly almost in every utterance not for assaulting someone but to add to their 'cool' image. The frequently and commonly used swear word by them was the 'f' word.

There was Alok who used too many 'fuck'(s) in his sentences. He was upset with his five point something grades and when Ryan tried to cheer him up he simply said, 'fuck you' (P 61). The number of times Alok used the 'f' word and the ad joint word 'damn' increased when the normal discussion changed into a heated argument between Ryan and him. "It is not just stupid grades for me. I don't have my parents earning dollars like yours. I came to this institute with a purpose. To do well, get a good job and look after my parents. And you have fucked it up" (P 64).

Behaviour of Professors and their peculiarities are another interesting element of Campus novel. This novel dwells with the helplessness of the Professors' to handle the brilliant students who can pose challenging questions based on their common sense. Prof. Dubey, Mechanical Engineering Department, mentions "The definition of a machine is simple. It is anything that reduces human effort. Anything. So, see the world around you and it is full of machines." (P 9) A student, Ryan asks: "Sir, what about a gym machine, like a bench press or something? That doesn't reduce human effort. In fact, it increases it." (P10) This is a clarion call for the teaching fraternity to equip themselves to handle the cream students of institutions like IITs and encourage the students to think beyond the textbooks.

The professors, from the frightening Cherian to the accessible and inspiring Veera, will have most engineering students remembering their own experiences with men who could take common subjects like Circuits and Systems. It will be worthwhile to mention about some Professors' attitudes like Prof. Veera who appreciated the creativity of the students. He loved creativity of Ryan though he was a five pointer and gave him an opportunity as Research Assistant of him. He tried his level best to save the three students from termination. Prof. Veera is a symbol of humanity who came to meet Alok in the hospital with a box containing 'Kaju- burfi' and disclosed the news of Ryan's Lube -project approval. Prof. Veera has set an example before us that a teacher should encourage his/her students and motivate them a lot. A teacher has a missionary zeal and an angelic motive to recognize the latent talents both in achievers and underachievers and also treat them humanely.

During a convocation ceremony, Prof. Cherian, Head of the Engineering Department, addresses the **the** graduating students and congratulates them. During this moment he becomes quite emotional and narrates his own story.

"Once upon a time there was a student in IIT. He was very bright, and this is true, his GPA was 10.00 after four years. He didn't have a lot of friends, as to keep such a high GPA, you only have so much time for friends." "This bright boy thought his classmates were less smart than him, were selfish and wanted to make the most money or go to the USA with minimum effort. And many of his classmates did go to work for multinationals and some went abroad. Some of them opened their own companies in the USA – mostly in computers and software." (P258)

"We judge people here by their GPA. If you are a nine, you are the best. If you are a five, you are useless. I used to despise the low GPAs so much that when Ryan submitted a research proposal on lubricants, I judged it without even reading it. But these boys have something really promising. I saw the proposal the second time. I can tell you, any investor who invests in this will earn a rainbow." (p 261)

Through this novel the writer intends to convey a social message that GPAs are not the ultimate factor to decide students' potentialities and creativity. To become a topper with 10.00 GPA is a great achievement undoubtedly but there is something more in life which is yet to be achieved i.e. commitment towards family, friends and our internal desires and goals.

Chetan Bhagat wrote the novel 'Five Point Someone' in a mild note and in some areas it has given an alarming call for the pedagogues to come out of their traditional text book theories and meet up the challenges posed by the intelligent students. Another most striking feature is that the whole background is set in an engineering institution where an engineering student should be encouraged to present his/her concepts in a creative way so that he can have hands-on experience only then a country can advance both technically and economically. Each and every student is bestowed with unique qualities and CGPA (Cumulative Grade Point Average) should not be the criteria to ascertain their future prospects. One who is a five pointer in college may reach the pinnacle of his career and set an example for all those who are striving to achieve success.

The trio suffers ridicule of the teachers as well as the classmates. However, they avow to reform the patriarchal system of education. They dislike the teaching method, which is as old as the college itself. The students are asked to mug the subjects in order to score good grades. Bhagat puts emphasis on the observational teaching and hints towards a post modern thought of incorporating a technique called 'learning by doing'. He believes this technique must help the students in getting rid of mugging. It must support them to apprehend the things in a natural way. The observational technique makes the students to observe the things minutely and find out solution in the objects. After all, if they fail to make it out, they are invited to discuss the same with the teachers and other classmates. At last, the student finds answer to his query. Nonetheless, such method is a good for nothing in the big sci-fi institute. Bhagat grieves for the sterile dogmatism of the education system. He finds the professors bigotry not to allow any prolific change in the system. Bhagat is straightforward in his approach to life. He listens to the voice of his soul, which he strongly believes in, is ever true. The man listening to the inner voice may suffer a big loss but finally emerges out victorious.

For instance, all three friends suffer ignominy at college campus. All the teachers as well as the students take them for nuts, idiots and losers only because they under perform in the exams and notch five points something. But like others they are not muggers, they are freethinkers, true lovers of life, harbingers of innovative ideas, icons of liberty and precursors of the youth-**centric**-approach. They never lose confidence,

work harder on the lube project and consequently their project is approved and they succeed to achieve big fame and name.

Chetan Bhagat deals with these three friends who were below average guys among the **crème** of knowledge. It directly as well as indirectly discusses the grim side of the IIT education system, which is lauded by the elite. The disdain of the three protagonists could be the experiences of several students who have somehow passed out of several IITs. Chetan Bhagat's characterization fit the character of the present day youth most aptly; the intelligence, indifference, irreverence, irresponsibility, irritating traits all could be seen through Ryan, Hari and Alok.

Description of campus setting was so vivid in this novel that many IITians recalled their campus days and idiotic love stories they had. Many people tried to discover a connect in the novel of their old days at the campuses.

Campus is more important than the message in this novel. While Chetan Bhagat tried to convey something in his first novel 'Five Point Someone', he forgot his own mantra of success in the later novels which are bereft of any thoughtful message. So is the case with most other authors. The sole purpose of writing such a novel has become to have campus background for your story. This became a success mantra.

The young readers for sometime even forgot whether there is any other genre that deserves respect. Reading novel became synonymous with campus fiction. When they were asked as to what they mean by literary fiction they only recalled Chetan Bhagat and the class he has inspired to write like him. This was the frenzy created by the campus novel. Even if authors such as Arvind Adiga hit the scene with a bang with his 'White Tiger', barely a few people applauded the 'Booker Prize' win for his maiden novel.

There is another positive side to the campus fiction that the young IIT authors at least simplified the literary landscape. Even though many authors do not regard this trend as part of the literary landscape, readers love it for the moment. Particularly for the reason that these novels are quick to finish. You take a train from Bhubaneswar to finish the novel of 267 pages by the end of the journey in Delhi. The authors do not know the complexities of language and write the novels in simple language, making them easy to understand for everyone. Literary fiction by authors such as Vikram Seth, Salman Rushdie and others is complex and has used complex language which is not easily understood by the average reader.

Five Point Someone has no doubt turned non-readers into 'neo-readers'. But it has also spawned a number of new novels on campus like "Sumthing of a Mocktale At JNU where Kurta Fell in Love with Jeans" by Soma Das, a former post-grad student at the university. Her book takes a look at JNU politics and culture that is characterized by jeans, kurta and jhola. Harishdeep Jolly, an alumnus of IIM Bangalore is the author of "You Desire: A Journey Through IIM", a book, which deals with the issues of career and relationships. The Inscrutable Americans, a novel by Anurag Mathur published in 1991 still remains hugely popular. Other novels creating a buzz on the campus include The Funda of Mix-ology by Mainak Dhar, Mediocre But Arrogant (MBA) by Abhijit Bhaduri and Above Average by Amitabha Bagchi.

III. Conclusion

Let us conclude in the language of the author,

"The other aspect of IIT being special, is that later in life, when you have created comforts that you always dreamt of, you may not be so happy after all. Ask any IITian or for that matter anyone who has been in college – despite the broken rubber chappals and roadside meals, those days are some of the happiest times of their lives. Why is it? This book is an attempt to explore that as well."

"I think it not only explores the dark side, but also the bright side. Therefore for every student facing pressure, another one succeeds. If someone finds the situation stressful, another one finds it funny. Thus, I'd like to think it is a more balanced approach. But yes, it is not just a praise-filled work about IIT. It is more real – and real life doesn't work that way."

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