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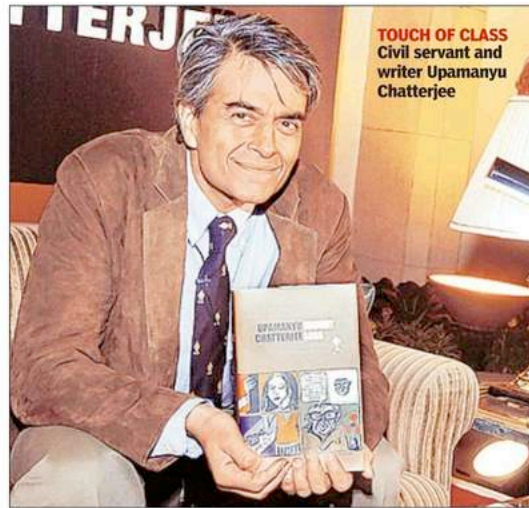
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# A Novel Question

A good book does not necessarily take sides or provide answers. Its value lies in the fact that it makes the reader think

I WAS in school when *English, August: An Indian Story* was first published. Growing up in government Delhi, an English-speaking world that rolled in gentle orbit around the bookshops of Khan Market, I found all the jokes funny. I went to school with people who were Agastya Sens in the making: bright, highly-strung young men who amused themselves, in that pre-Internet era, by turning English phrases into ornamented daggers. Like many of those friends of mine, a major part of the shock, and pleasure, of reading *English, August* was in recognising a possible future self.

It didn't turn out that way. I went to a college that was largely populated by the kind of people Agastya Sen meets in Madna and mocks. Most of the year I lived and worked with these people from places like Indore and Muzaffarnagar, and I spoke in Hindi. *English, August* faded quickly from my mind. But in the third year, some of my friends registered for a class in Indian writing in English, a class in which a major part of the grade depended on a presentation to be made on one book of the student's choosing. It was widely known that presentations on the

books the teacher liked got good grades. And it was known that the teacher liked *English, August*. So began a sequence of evenings where one or the other person would seek me out in my hostel room, put a copy of Upamanyu Chatterjee's book down on my table and say: "Yaar, talk *likhwa de*."

Grades being more important than critical honesty, I set about figuring out ways to praise the book so that my friends could favourably impress the professor. And there was much to commend. The prose was superbly balanced and possessed of a finely acerbic aesthetic; the dialogue was energetic and revelatory in its formulations. I spent much of my time teaching these boys from small towns how to use "alienation" in a sentence. But whenever I tried to explain how funny the book was I had to stop short. The joke was on them.

I began to feel that *English, August* had achieved cult status because it validated English-speaking urban India's life in a particular way: by making fun of another India. The Laloo joke phenomenon, current at that time, gave another insight: it was not the fact that these other Indians didn't speak English well that was being parodied, but that they aspired to be accepted as people of stature despite not speaking English well.

By the time I graduated college I hated *English, August*. I moved to the US to study, travelling even further from the cultural complex that had produced this book. On the Internet, I met a person who said that *English, August* was a complex document of the problem of communication between classes in India. At first, I dismissed his defence of the book as nostalgia gone awry. But when I thought about it a little more, the argument took shape: Agastya's inability to find a way to connect with his life in Madna is a bitter, self-critical assessment by the writer of his own class's inability to communicate with the rest of the nation.

But where was the textual evidence? Perhaps Marcus Aurelius, Agastya's favourite ancient Roman philosopher, could provide a clue. In *Meditations* (6:48) he says: "Whensoever thou wilt rejoice thyself, think and meditate upon those good parts and especial gifts, which thou hast observed in any of them that live with thee." Aurelius's stoic philosophy implied humility and generosity in judging others, quite opposite to the attitude I had found in the book. Was it then possible to say that the book undercuts its protagonist's superciliousness, or even shows him to be somewhat confused or self-critical?

This was definitely not enough to go on but the idea lingered in my head. I didn't get around to reading *Last Burden*, but I did plough through *Mammaries of the Welfare State* from beginning to end. The growing bleakness of Upamanyu Chatterjee's vision seemed to buttress the notion that *English, August* was, perhaps, trying subtly to unsettle the smugness of the very people who had celebrated it as a comic triumph.

Subsequently, I started writing my own novel. As I worked on it over a period of a few years, I began to find that the writing process draws you towards ambiguity.

It began to appear to me that what was more important was not to take this or that position but to animate an interesting and important set of questions. And with this realisation came a re-assessment of *English, August*.

The strength of the book was that it was able to sustain more than one reading. What made it a good book was that it

was able to discomfort and reassure at the same time. I didn't get a lot of answers from *English, August*, but I did get a lot of questions. And for that any reader should be grateful.



## English, August

The novel chronicles the life of Agastya Sen, a civil servant posted in a tiny place called Madna. The posting comes as a culture shock for the English-speaking urbanite. The novel was made into a movie, starring Rahul Bose

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