

STATES WITHIN THE STATE?
THE PORTRAYAL OF CULTURAL POLARITIES IN
CHETAN BHAGAT'S 2 STATES

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Abstract

This paper first makes an attempt to define the notion of culture and then to underscore cultural polarities across India, more particularly between Delhi and Tamil Nadu. These cultural differences are found to be in terms of people's pattern of behaviour, their food related behaviour, their rules of conduct, their physical traits or their overall bearing, features related to their wedding, their music and so on. It seems that there are many states within the state of India due to all these cultural polarities. This paper is directed to discuss how the novelist advocates crossing the narrow borders drawn by language, culture, region, complexion, etc. in the national interest.

Keywords: *culture, cultural polarities/asymmetries/pluralities/dissimilitude, multiculturalism, autobiographical novel, food culture.*

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2 States: The Story of My Marriage is Chetan Bhagat's fourth novel after Five Point Someone (2004). 2 States is partly autobiographical novel which is outwardly a story of Krish and Ananya who face problems to get married as they belong to two different states, namely Delhi and Tamil Nadu respectively. At the deeper level, the novel is a close analysis of Indian cultural pluralities (in many cases, polarities). It adeptly points out varied cultural factors that jeopardize the integrity of the 'state of India'. In other words, the novel is a genuine document to understand how India is a unified country despite of its multicultural facets.

The present paper initially makes an attempt to define culture and then to underscore cultural polarities across India, more particularly between Delhi and Tamil Nadu. These cultural differences are found to be in terms of people's pattern of behaviour, their food related behaviour, their rules of conduct, their physical traits and style or bearing, features related to their wedding, their music and so on. It seems that there are many states within the state of India due to all these cultural polarities.

The phenomenon of culture is viewed from different perspectives by scholars. For Parsons, cultural patterns are the matter of inheritance. He claims that 'culture...consists in those patterns relative to behaviour and the products of human action which may be inherited, that is, passed on from generation to generation independently of the biological genes' (8). According to Hofstede, it is our culture that distinguishes one type of people from another. He thinks that 'Culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one category of people from another' (51). Damen believes that

culture is our primary mechanism. She defines culture as 'mankind's primary adaptive mechanism' (367). Banks and Banks view culture as 'the symbolic, ideational, and intangible aspects of human societies' (26). Lederach connects culture to our social realities. He argues that 'Culture is the shared knowledge and schemes created by a set of people for perceiving, interpreting, expressing, and responding to the social realities around them' (9). Carla associates culture with our process of socialization. She defines culture 'as the shared pattern of behaviour and interactions, cognitive constructs, and affective understanding that are learned through a process of socialization' (19).

The novel is narrated by Krish Malhotra, the protagonist, in the first person point of view. He begins his story from the IIM Ahmedabad where he was an MBA student. In his mess he meets his Tamilian classmate Ananya Swaminathan who is rated as 'the best girl in the fresher batch' (3). Krish and Ananya become a couple within a short period and decide to marry later. After completing MBA, Krish chooses to work in Citibank at Chennai where Ananya too was already posted in the HLL. He intentionally prefers Chennai over Delhi so as to convince Ananya's parents about his marriage with their daughter. Somehow he succeeds in his 'mission Chennai' as Ananya's parents grant their permission for the marriage. Krish even successfully convinces his mother about the marriage. However, the chances of their marriage severely get affected because of the two families' Goa tour. During the tour, Ananya and her parents find some faults in Krish and his mother. As a result, Ananya and her parents decide that she would not marry Krish. However, Krish's father steps forward to convince Ananya's parents about the matter. Finally the wedding takes place at Chennai in the presence of relatives from both the sides. Thus, the novel is a crispy account of the couple's love affair and the hurdles on their way to marriage.

It is quite clear that the novel is a cultural encounter between Punjabis and Tamilians. People from both the communities have distinctive pattern of behaviour. In the novel we can easily distinguish Punjabis from Tamilians if we closely look at their pattern of behaviour. In the prologue of the novel, Krish is asked to meet Dr. Neeta Iyer, a psychiatrist in Chennai. He accuses Dr. Iyer in the words: 'Do you South Indians even know what emotions are all about?' (x).

It is clear that he generalizes all South Indians because of his bitter experience with Ananya and her parents. He feels that Ananya did not care for his emotions as she declined to marry him. Krish's mother passes a general judgment about South Indians women as: 'These South Indians don't know how to control their daughters. From Hema Malini to Sridevi, all of them trying to catch Punjabi men' (48). During her visit to the Sabarmati Ashram, Krish's mother raises a question to the tourist guide in the words: 'Why is it called Dandi March? Because he carried a stick?' (51) Ananya's mother reacts to this sheer ignorance as 'Intellectually, culturally zero. Something something crass uneducated something' (51). Krish's mother tells him: 'I don't like her mother — arrogant woman' (220). He responds to this charge as 'It's not arrogance. They are quiet people' (220). So South Indians' quietness is perceived to be arrogance by Punjabis. During their Goa tour, there had been some altercation between the two families. Here Krish offers three behavioural tips to Ananya's family. These steps are: 'Step one, buy my mother an expensive gift' ; 'Step two, when we go out in Goa tomorrow, always offer to pay'; 'Step three, never let me do any work when everyone's around' (224). Although funny, the steps underline what exactly Punjabis expect from the 'girl's side.' Krish's mother seems to represent conservative Punjabi mother-in-laws when she asserts 'We don't have bahu in Punjabis like that, no matter how high-profile. We keep them straight'; 'I don't want my daughter-in-law to raise her voice or answer me back. She has to be under my thumb' (229). This intimidating language bespeaks how some people treat their daughter-in-laws. Ananya's father rightly points out about this attitude as 'It's not about communities. It's about the kind of people to be with' (230). Ananya too blames Krish's mother in the words: 'Will your mother change? Will her bias towards girl's side change?' (233). Thus Ananya condemns Krish's mother for having bias towards South Indians. Similarly, Krish's mother lambasts Ananya's family as in 'I've never met such a dry breed of people. Look at how they eat dinner, like it is a punishment. Ananya's mother — does she ever laugh? Dark from outside, dark from inside' (235). While talking with his former South Indian boss Bala, even Krish accuses South Indians for having 'too much brain but little heart' (238). In essence, shallow generalization, ignorance about a fact and bias are the major

factors causing cultural asymmetries between different cultures.

The rules regarding our conversational conduct play a crucial role in our day-to-day life. It has been observed that Punjabis and Tamilians have different rules of conduct. After their convocation ceremony, Krish and Ananya took their parents to some important places in Ahmedabad. During their visit to these places by a car, Krish's mother takes out a packet of biscuits and starts eating herself without offering it to others, except to her son. This incident shows her lack of propriety. On the other hand, his mother expects good conduct from Ananya's parents. She shows her vexation through her statements: 'I gave her a silk sari for two thousand bucks. She didn't even appreciate it' (222). She further claims: 'Actually, Punjabis are quite large-hearted people...When we meet people; we give them nice gifts' (223). She could not resist suggesting her expectations from the girl's side: 'Oh and meeting the boy's side empty-handed, unthinkable' (223). All these instances cited above demonstrate varied pattern of etiquettes among Punjabis and Tamilians.

Food is another aspect in the novel which suggests cultural dissimilitude between North Indians and South Indians. This food or food culture involves names of eatables, peoples' habit of eating, their attitude towards food and how food is being served and eaten. There is an array of eatables eaten in both the parts of India. When Krish and his mother visit one of their rich relatives in Delhi, they are offered food in a '...gigantic tray with somosas, jalebis, chole bhature, milk cake, kachoris and... the red and green chutneys' (63). Krish was awestruck to know that there had been eighty-five kinds of dosas available in a Chennai hotel. In South India, eatables have quite exotic and bizarre names. For instance, kuruvapillai yera, kozhi melagu Chettinad, kozhakattai, masala paniyaram, adikoozh, kandharappam, seeyam, athirasam, idiyaappam, (181) etc. are unpronounceable eatables at least for North Indians. Punjabis' fascination towards specific food is described as 'Nothing soothes an upset Punjabi like dairy products' (44). For Punjabis there is a close connection between weddings and food. This is pointed out in the words: 'It is cruel to keep Punjabis away from their food at wedding' (215).

Ananya pours out her intense feelings towards South Indian food on the very first day in her IIM mess. She terms the sambhar prepared in the mess as 'disgusting'. She further goes on criticising the sambhar as 'Oh, come on, there are no limits on this disgusting sambhar but one of what is edible' (5). Through her dislike of the Ahmedabad sambhar, she clearly suggests that only Tamilians can prepare 'edible' sambhar not any others. The snacks provided to Krish at Ananya's house resemble him 'fossilised snakes' (90). He even terms vegetables prepared by South Indians 'funny looking' (94). Moreover, he calls a South Indian eatable 'sawdust mixed with chillies' (94).

It is quite interesting to know how food is served and eaten in South Indian. People generally sit on the floor for eating, exactly opposite to most North Indians who use tables for the purpose. Krish feels it very strange when provided a banana leaf at Ananya's house as the plate for having meal. His bafflement is put in the words: 'I wonder if I had to eat it or wipe my hands with it' (93). Krish's aunt's feelings are quite similar when she complains in his wedding about the banana leaves: 'We have to eat leaves?...What are we? Cows?' (253). It is mentioned in the novel that South Indians have discrete ways of eating their food. Krish finds 'It is scary to eat with Ananya's family, who ate their meals as if in mourning' (225). The novelist brilliantly differentiates between Punjabis and Tamilians in terms of their food as follows:

Few things bring out the differences between Punjabis and Tamilians than buffet meals. Tamilians see it like any other meal. They will load up on white rice first, followed by daal and curds and anything that has little black dots of mustard, coconut or curry leaves.

For Punjabis, food triggers an emotional response, like say music. And the array of dishes available in a buffet is akin to the Philharmonic orchestra. The idea is to load as many calories as possible onto one plate, as most party caterers charge based on the number of plates used. Also, like my mother explained since childhood, never take a dish that is easily prepared at home or whose ingredients are cheap. So, no yellow daal, boring gobi aloo or green salad. The focus is on chicken, dishes with dry fruits in them and exotic desserts. (222)

Both North Indians and South Indians have their own physical traits, style or the way of day-to-day living. South Indians have a typical appearance or bearing. It is mentioned in the novel that Ananya had waist-length hair like most South Indian women. Krish observes that many South Indian people have dark hair dabbed with coconut oil. He finds that ninety per cent of people in Chennai were dark complexioned. In this connection, Krish's mother warns him as 'Don't get trapped in that city with horrible black people' (159). His mother promises Krish that she would show him Punjabi girls fair as milk. It shows North Indians strong dislike towards dark skin and fascination towards white. As Ananya is fair complexioned, one of Krish's aunts brands her as 'gori Madrasin' (201). Krish's mami puts her doubt about Ananya's fair skin in her words: 'You are so fair. Are you hundred per cent South Indian?' (201). Krish's mother contends that fair South Indian women are dangerous. To support her argument she gives a proof: 'The fair ones are the most dangerous. Sridevi and Hema Malini' (56).

The novel involves some observable features related to wedding. As compared with Tamilians, there are few rituals in Punjabi marriages. Punjabi weddings are found to be extravagant and quite showy. Krish and Ananya attended Minti's (Krish's cousin's) wedding where there were real elephants and ice sculptures of fairies. The landscape gardens and dolphin shaped fountains were among major attractions at the venue. Food stalls served eight cuisines including Punjabi, Chinese, home-style Indian, Thai, Italian, Mexican, Goan and Lebanese. Besides, eatables such as chaat, somosas, tikkies, golgappas also attracted hungry Punjabis. On the other hand, Tamil weddings are less flamboyant in which the main focus is not on preparing and serving food but on wedding rituals. These rituals include Vrutham, Nishayartham, Kashi Yatra, Maalai Maatral, Kanyadan, Oonjal and so on.

Punjabis and Tamilians give importance to different conditions to be fulfilled before the actual marriage. Ananya's brother Manju tells Krish that Nakshtram or horoscope of the would be couple needs to match properly before their marriage. The protagonist observes a rather contrasting situation among Punjabis. Instead of horoscope, they give prime importance to taking expensive gifts and dowry from the girl's side. It is witnessed in Krish's cousin

Minti's wedding that her in-laws blackmailed her parents for a Hyundai Accent car instead of a Santro.

In case of their liking towards music, some differences have been found between Punjabis and Tamilians. The latter boundlessly love Carnatic music as seen in case of Ananya's mother. Krish was bewildered to hear Ananya's mother's Carnatic singing. He describes his puzzled state regarding the 'Carnatic noises' as 'They sounded like long wails, as if someone was being slowly strangled' (91). While coaching Ananya's brother, Krish overhears Tamil devotional music played in the morning. Krish wonders what would happen to his mother if Ananya plays such music after their marriage. He says that his '...mother could have serious trauma with that sound' (106). Like Tamilians, Punjabis too have their peculiar liking towards music. It is shown in the novel that Punjabis mostly like fast-paced music. They are crazy about DJ music, bhangra and beats of bashing dhols. Punjabis never think of a marriage without music and dance as witnessed in the novel.

It is evident throughout the novel that both Punjabis and Tamilians have their own likes and dislikes. What is liked by one community is odd to another. It is quite true even in case of their behavioural pattern. What is normal for one society is entirely weird for another due to different cultural conventions. All these differences have full potential to turn the state of India into so many states. Krish precisely cites reason behind this disorganized condition in his words: '...these stupid biases and discrimination are the reason our country is so screwed up. It's Tamil first, Indian later. Punjabi first, Indian later. It has to end'; 'National anthem, national currency, national teams – still, we won't marry our children outside our state...' (102). He thinks that if he marries Ananya, their children '...won't be Tamil or Punjabi. They will be Indian. They will be above all this nonsense. If all people marry outside their community, it is good for the country' (103). After Ananya's marriage with Krish, her father hails the 'humanitarian' achievement in the words: 'Yes, the Tamilian in me is a little disappointed. But the Indian in me is quite happy. And more than anything, the human being in me is happy. After all, we've decided to use this opportunity to create more loved ones for ourselves' (266). The novel reaches its conclusion through a brief epilogue declaring the birth of twin sons to the

Krish-Ananya couple. The following climatic lines about the new-born babies put an end to all differences so far in the novel:

‘You are from two different states, right? So, what will be their state?...’the nurse said... ‘They’ll be from a state called India,’ I said. (269)

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