

## DIGITAL CULTURE

### Approaching Digital Natives: Technoculture in Chetan Bhagat's *One Night @ the Call Centre*

Amitabh Roy

Chetan Bhagat, the author with a fashionable IIT background published *One Night @ the Call Centre* in the year 1995. The popularity of the book was widespread. Many fan communities were formed to greet the author of the book and the members of these communities ranged from teenagers to serious researchers. The question was raised soon that whether this popularity was for his first successful fiction *Five Point Someone* or for something else? This novel deserves critical attention as a self-conscious product of digital culture. In this paper I have tried to initiate that process.

New technologies create new human receptive abilities. In turn, these abilities generate new human desires. By the term "Digital Culture" I mean to include the vast range of sub-cultures that have grown up around the modern digital experience. This includes researchers in the traditional fields of computing such as artificial intelligence, but also hackers and techno-pagans. The theorists of the computer culture such as Sherry Turkle, the advertisers selling technological dreams and utopias, science fiction writers such as William Gibson and Bruce Sterling, futurists such as Kevin Kelly, magazines such as *Wired*, and visions of the digital culture emanating from Hollywood in some movies like *2001: A Space Odyssey* may be included.

For the sake of understanding of this comparatively new idea about digital culture we may turn to two theorists whose works throw ample light on the subject. Through the study of these two theorists about Digital Culture it becomes helpful to locate the subject in Chetan Bhagat's fiction *One Night @ the Call Center*. Nicholas Negroponte in his book *Being Digital* says, Digital communication is a determining factor in virtually all of culture and society, and embraces the idea that it sharply divides our age from the past. Negroponte, popular columnist for

*Wired* magazine and founding director for the MIT Media Lab, describes how advancements in computer technology and telecommunications will transform workplaces, households, and educational institutions. He explains how this revolution will change the way we live, think, and interact with one another and with technology and foresees some mind-boggling challenges that lie ahead in developing truly global systems for delivering multimedia and other forms of digitally based information (Negroponte 18).

In 1995, Negroponte predicted that in ten years the digital technology will become wireless from its present wired state. Now, we know that he was not mistaken. Internet communication even in the third world countries has become popular without big modems, joint boxes and jungle of wires. Fashionably enough it is being replaced by wireless data cards or small USB equipments. This is only an example. The same way wireless laser mouse is taking their position soon in place of wired mouse. The list is never ending: new technology creates not only new forms of expression but also, and importantly, new ways to satisfy human cravings (Stein 88).

Digital Culture brings with it a hunger for widespread digital knowledge. Negroponte is not only a theorist in this regard. He is also an active worker in this field of Digital Culture. He has worked actively for the sake of the expansion of knowledge. He is popular for his projects on OLPC or One Laptop Per Child. The aim of the project was to offer the poor children of the third world countries digital access through cheap laptops. The learning process in primary education will become in this way more and more attractive and the children will participate more spontaneously. It was proved a huge success and it reached the farthest corners like Haiti, Cambodia etc. Negroponte's monumental work has proved that only with little aid from State primary education can be changed in this age of Digital Culture. People now have started thinking about right to digital access which will make them more focused, knowledgeable and well equipped. Before going to the textual study of Chetan Bhagat's fiction, we must keep in mind this backdrop of overwhelming response to Digital revolution.

In *Digital Culture* Charlie Gere articulates the degree to which our everyday lives are becoming dominated by digital technology, whether in terms of leisure, work or bureaucracy. This dominance is reflected in other areas, including the worlds of finance, technology, scientific research, media and telecommunications. Out of this situation a particular set of cultural responses has emerged, for example, in art, music, design, film, literature and elsewhere (Gere 223). During the last twenty years, digital technology has begun to touch on almost every aspect of our

lives. Nowadays most forms of mass media, television, recorded music and film are produced and even distributed digitally; and these media are beginning to converge with digital forms, such as the internet, the World Wide Web, and video games, to produce a seamless digital mediascape. At work we are surrounded by technology, whether in offices or in supermarkets and factories, where almost every aspect of planning, design, marketing, production and distribution is monitored or controlled digitally.

Chetan Bhagat's characters are mostly 'call centre' people. They belong to this digital age where everything from birth to death is interpreted through the digital frame of reference and the ethos of the digital culture. The digital culture has become so powerful that it extends its influence in every sphere of human life – right from a baby's nomenclature to the business of his finding a job or a life partner. Even one can commit suicide digitally to delete his virtual presence in the world of web based existence now with few clicks. To quote Charlie Gere, technology has become "an integral part of the very fabric of our existence" (224).

If we begin to analyse the novel from its name, we have to admit that the writer is consciously giving a name that looks like an email address. All the essentials of a mail address like an initial name, the symbol and even the domain name exists in the title. The setting of the novel is night, the pick hour of the call centers and the domain of the protagonists is certainly their workplace "call center". The novel is termed "witty, dark novel" in its blurb. A bright picture of the White T-Shirt and Blue Jeans-clad young author is shining in the blurb also. It adds to the effect the book gains as a complete digital production. After taking this initial entry into the world of Chetan Bhagat, the readers find the primary condition to move forward, a type of agreement we usually find while installing software – a declaration which cannot be retained blank. The gate pass to enter the digital world is thus fulfilled. This popular bestseller which retained its position in the top for weeks after weeks had seen good many legitimate editions other than cheap photocopied ones in the footpaths of metro cities. We also found too many covers of the book in one after another edition. The book changed the popular assumption of the critics about its target reader and became popularized among both teens and matured readers. The 'new' India gave an overwhelming response to this complete digital product of the turn of the century. The novel has a definite storyline which moves but not without jerks. The well known industrial cliché 'outsourcing' has lot to do in the novel. The home of the transnational companies Gurgaon is the place where the Call Center is situated. The events described in the novel is taking place in only one night and all through the story 'darkness'

prevails, rather dominates. The unique novelty of the author includes his choice of names of the protagonists. Victor becomes 'Vroom' and Shyam becomes Sam to become Americanized. Shehzad Nadeem captures the truth in this way: "Workers also undergo training in Western accents and popular culture and are discouraged from disclosing their geographical location on the phone. (If pressed, many are simply told to lie.) This results in masked accents, masked names, and masked locations. Whole offices of workers act like Americans and Europeans and live as if they are in time zones a world apart" (Nadeem 7).

The choice of the word 'Vroom' is something associated with the sound of the start of a motor bike. The name rightly echoes not only the protagonist's character but also the general habits and mannerisms of call center people. Generations who 'gossip', 'make a fuss' or remains 'cool' is well known to the author. He thinks like them, tells story in their language and finishes his production the same way. Even the only love making scene in the novel takes place inside the company Qualis with a reminder to *Titanic* movie by the protagonist herself. The conscious ladylove does not forget to ask "By the way, do you have a condom?" to the narrator. The reply is also very interesting: "Yes sir. We live in constant hope..." (107). The author's acquaintance with the call center life and his way of storytelling simply amazes us.

The use of font, font size and selection of programme has found immense importance in the hand of Chetan Bhagat. He expresses his indebtedness to MS Word in the Acknowledgement. Even the dedication message bear the mark of the author's Romanticism along with his sense of humour. Unlike other authors of his age, he mentions the main font used in the book – American Garamond and also its size 12 points. Consciously he has changed the fonts of 5 chapters out of 38 in which his love affair with Priyanka is described. The font used here is Verdana, possibly to separate the portion from the other part of the book.

Let us delve little deep to understand the meaning of the fonts used here. If we search the history of the font, we find that: "Garamond's letterforms convey a sense of fluidity and consistency" while Verdana is associated with feminine sensibility: "Demand for such a typeface was recognized by Virginia Howlett of Microsoft's typography group. The name Verdana is based on something green and Ana, the name of Howlett's elder daughter". Such conscious use of fonts to match the emotional ethos of the protagonists is a new feature produced by digital world. A hunger for perfection is making things run here. Even inside one chapter, separate fonts are used while quoting email message just to make the

presentation more reader-friendly, the important characteristic of this twenty first century digital culture.

According to Dr. Gary Small too much indulgence in Internet and Smart Phone causes loss of skill in individual to communicate face to face. Also people fail to recognize facial expression during any conversation which is otherwise a normal human characteristic. It finally leads to one kind of social isolation which affects the people living within the digital spectrum (26). Chetan Bhagat's characters prove this to some extent. The friends of the Call Center cannot accommodate others easily in their circle. Naturally they try to find their life partners within their own professional world. Shyam and Priyanka are instance to the point. Still some digital natives can raise themselves above such limitations. When Shyam declares, "I think eye-talk is more effective than word-talk. Every now and then, human beings should shut up and let their eyes speak" (174), we cannot blame this man to be unemotional or anti-romantic. It proves that Dr. Small is only hypothetical about his assertion.

Chetan Bhagat's characters negotiate their roles to fit inside the digital culture. The notion of virtual presence of things is a very common feature of this digital world. As a result, we find that question of morality or immorality cannot be attached or applied to the incidents narrated in the book. The call center friends around whom the story revolves round ignore the question of taking wrong path to revenge their wrong-doer boss Mr. Bakshi. A fake email message addressed to Esha Singh inviting her to spend a night with him is put in his account after hacking his password and for that he simply becomes white faced: "Bakshi's face turned white. His mouth opened five inches wide as he re-read the email several times" (245). Such acts are not at all new in the era when authors are dominating the bestsellers list with their titles like *An Ethical Guide to Internet Hacking*.

Much attention has been paid to the broadening of workers' insecurity in the advanced industrial economies since the 1970s. Downsizing, privatization, deregulation, and union decline have all undermined the position of labor. The outside gloss of the digital industry has a dark inside story which is told by the author in a convincing way. 'Downsizing' is a nightmare that always waits behind every employee and to make it ethical the industry call it 'rightsizing'. "We never want to fire people, Mr. Victor. But we have to right size sometime", says Mr. Bakshi in the fiction (183). Though the incidents here remind us of *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller, the degree of downsizing is much more widespread in the present day IT world. To quote Shehzad Nadeem, "Globalization extends insecurity to workers in developing countries through a process of inclusion and

marginalization. They are included through the "spatialization" of jobs and work. Yet they are simultaneously excluded from core and creative activities, thereby ensuring their vulnerability, if not expendability" (3).

Every night the employee sleeps with a hope that he will not be sacked next morning. This truth at once unites the conflicting characters in the fiction and they give a united fight against Mr. Bakshi in *One Night @ the Call Centre*. Not only the question of downsizing but also an unethical competition goes behind the scene to get benefit from the employer. Leg pulling, oiling are the words the call center people are habituated with. For a trip at Washington or for a juicy posting in Boston, such never ending rat race goes on. Most in the cases one wins but with the expense of downsizing others.

The amazing presence of a beautiful lady inside the railway compartment who insists the writer to write this story has significance of its own. At the end of the story we find the lady is given the attribute of Almighty: "...She had an open book next to her. It was the English translation of a holy text. My eyes focused on a few lines on the page that lay open: Always think of Me, become My devotee, worship Me and offer your homage unto Me" (289). The lines comes from the advice of Krishna to Arjuna in Bhagavad Gita:

"man-manā bhava mad-bhakto  
mad-yājī mām namaskuru  
mām evais#yasi satyam te  
pratijāne priyo 'si me" (18/65)

In his almost trance like state of mind, the narrator even went on worshipping the lady: "...the train had stopped, and I knelt on the floor with my head down" (289). The presence of the lady or the presence of the imaginary 'God' who saves the narrator's friends from a severe accident is nothing but the imaginary construct of the troubled mind. More than that the writer also knows life needs some kind of spices to look better: "Rational or not, it just gets better with God in it" (288), says the narrator in the last part of the fiction.

Straightforwardness is one major secret of Chetan Bhagat and his protagonists too. I feel tempted to quote him here: "But somehow we cannot say "I just need some more love". Why can't we say it, Shyam? It is as basic a need" (275). This type of expression of simple truth comes from the smart lady Priyanka

who is ready to embrace the new century. Her emotional outburst never isolates her brain. The author who believes that life is like a pre paid card and the validity may expire anytime, advocates crossing over the boundary. Human beings are not programmed devices, naturally the craving for breaking the norms or surpassing the limitations always exists.

Scanning the novel with a digital frame in mind, we find it a very organized, neatly designed conscious piece of digital culture. The generation who are already trapped in this World Wide Web will find more and more such consciously produced products where poetry and prose easily mingle, where digital world smoothly steps inside pure literary world and they announce a 'new' arrival.

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