



# Distinction, Taste, and the Literary Field: High Culture versus Popular Culture and the Social Construction of Taste in Chetan Bhagat's Fiction

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## Abstract

The present article undertakes an examination of the fiction of Chetan Bhagat — who is, by any measure, the most commercially successful Indian English novelist of the twenty-first century so far — as a sustained cultural site where the contested boundaries between high culture and popular culture are negotiated, reproduced, and occasionally subverted in ways that carry significant ideological consequences. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Pierre Bourdieu, particularly the interconnected concepts of cultural capital, habitus, field, distinction, and the social construction of taste as he has elaborated them across his major works, the article argues that Bhagat's novels occupies an ideologically productive position within India's literary field: they are simultaneously celebrated by a mass readership whose cultural habitus they accurately reflects and systematically devalued by the legitimating institutions of high literary culture whose criteria of distinction they declines to satisfy. The article analyses eight of Bhagat's novels which were published between the years 2004 and 2021, reading them as texts that encodes the aspirational middle-class habitus of post-liberalisation India while functioning, within Bourdieu's field theory, as what he terms heterodox interventions that contests the monopoly of cultural legitimacy held by elite literary institutions. The analysis contributes to the developing intersection of Bourdieu's sociology and postcolonial literary studies, and to the broader scholarly conversation about whether popular fiction should be understood as a conservative reproduction of dominant taste hierarchies or as a genuinely democratic challenge to the social structures through which cultural legitimacy is produced and maintained in societies such as India.

**Keywords:** Pierre Bourdieu, cultural capital, habitus, field theory, distinction, taste, high culture, popular culture, Chetan Bhagat, Indian popular fiction, literary field, postcolonial cultural studies, social construction of taste

## 1. Introduction: The Battle of the Books and Its Social Stakes

When Chetan Bhagat's *Five Point Someone* was published in the year 2004, it inaugurated what publishers, journalists, and cultural commentators would subsequently describe as a revolution in Indian English fiction of a most unprecedented kind. Within a decade, Bhagat's novels had sold in the millions, spawned multiple Bollywood adaptations, and transformed the economics of the Indian English publishing market in a fundamental and irreversible manner. They had also generated a parallel discourse of dismissal and condescension from India's literary establishment — critics, prize juries, academic syllabi, and the custodians of what the culture recognises as legitimate literature — that is, in itself, a remarkable cultural and sociological phenomenon worthy of serious analytical attention.

This article proposes that the opposition between Bhagat's commercial success and his critical delegitimisation is not merely a dispute about aesthetic quality as such, but a structural conflict whose full intelligibility requires the analytical tools of Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of culture. For Bourdieu, cultural judgements — the confident assertion that one work of literature is good and another is not, that one novel represents serious artistic achievement while another is merely entertainment — are never purely aesthetic in their nature or their operation. They are acts of social classification that reveals the social position of the person making them and reproduce the hierarchies of cultural power that makes some positions of judgement appear authoritative while others appear naive or uninformed by contrast. Taste, for Bourdieu, is not a natural faculty with which some persons are more abundantly gifted than others; it is a social construction whose apparent naturalness is itself the most powerful evidence of its ideological function in maintaining existing hierarchies.

This article proceeds through six analytical sections in its overall structure. Following a theoretical exposition of the relevant Bourdieu's concepts, it examines the structure of India's literary field and Bhagat's contested position within it; analyses the habitus encoded in Bhagat's fiction and the readership it addresses and constructs; investigates the operations of cultural and economic capital in the reception of his novels across different social strata; reads specific texts for their relationship to the distinction between high and popular cultural forms; and, finally, assesses whether Bhagat's fiction constitutes a genuine challenge to established taste hierarchies or reproduces them in a new and somewhat different register. The primary corpus consists of Bhagat's eight novels published between 2004 and 2021: *Five Point Someone* (2004), *One Night @ the Call Center* (2005), *The 3 Mistakes of My Life* (2008), *2 States* (2009), *Revolution 2020* (2011), *Half Girlfriend* (2014), *One Indian Girl* (2016), *The Girl in Room 105* (2018), and *400 Days* (2021).

## 2. Theoretical Framework: Bourdieu's Sociology of Culture

### 2.1 Field, Capital, and Habitus

Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of culture rests on three interconnected concepts that together provide a dynamic account of how social hierarchies are produced, reproduced, and occasionally transformed through cultural means. The concept of field designates a relatively autonomous social space that is structured by the relations between positions and by the competition for the stakes which defines the field in question. A field is not a mere collection of individuals or institutions existing side by side; it is a structured space of positions whose properties are defined relationally — by what each position is not, as much as by what it is in positive terms. Literary fields, publishing markets, academic institutions, and cultural prize cultures are all, in Bourdieu's framework, fields with their own specific logics, their own forms of capital, and their own rules of the game that agents must master if they wish to compete effectively.

Capital, in Bourdieu's considerably expanded usage, designates any resource that functions as a source of power in a given field. Economic capital — money and property — is directly convertible into other forms and serves as the ultimate guarantee of all other forms of capital in the last instance. Cultural capital designates familiarity with the dominant culture: knowledge of legitimate works, mastery of legitimate styles of engagement, and the ease and authority with which one inhabits the field of cultural production. Cultural capital exists in three distinct states: the embodied state (dispositions of mind and body, cultivated through education and socialisation over a long period); the objectified state (cultural goods such as books, paintings, and instruments); and the institutionalised state (academic qualifications that formally certifies cultural competence in the eyes of the field). Social capital designates networks of durable social relationships that can be mobilised as a resource at critical moments. In the literary field specifically, the possession or lack of these forms of capital determines which agents can speak with authority, which texts are granted legitimacy, and which are consigned to cultural illegitimacy however large their readership may be.

Habitus designates the system of durable, transposable dispositions — practical sense, aesthetic preferences, bodily hexes, and ways of thinking and feeling — that individuals acquire through their social trajectories and that generates the practices and perceptions appropriate to the conditions in which they were originally formed. Habitus is the social made individual: it is the mechanism through which the objective structures of a social field are inscribed in the subjective experience of the agents who inhabit it day by day. Crucially, habitus operates below the level of conscious deliberation in its most important operations: the person of cultivated taste does not laboriously calculate what to appreciate; they simply find certain things attractive and others repellent, and this spontaneous response feels like nature when it is, in fact, the sedimented product of a long and specific social formation.

## 2.2 Distinction and the Social Construction of Taste

Bourdieu's landmark study *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979; English translation 1984) demonstrated empirically and theoretically that aesthetic preferences — for music, literature, food, sport, and interior decoration — are not randomly distributed across the social field but are systematically organised in correspondence with social class in ways that appear natural but are in fact socially constructed. The dominant class exercises what Bourdieu terms "legitimate taste": the capacity to recognise and appreciate the legitimate works which the dominant cultural institutions sanction. This taste is "distinguished" in the double sense that it marks the distinction of its possessor from those below and draws distinctions between superior and inferior cultural forms in a manner that appears objective.

What Bourdieu's analysis reveals is that this legitimating judgement is not a transparent registration of objective aesthetic value at all, but an act of social classification masquerading as a purely aesthetic one. When a literary critic dismisses a bestselling novel as "not literature" or "mere popular entertainment," they are not reporting an objective fact about the text in question; they are exercising a socially acquired capacity for distinction that marks their social position while simultaneously reproducing the hierarchy that makes their judgement appear authoritative in the first place. The apparent objectivity and universality of aesthetic judgement — the sense that the statement "this is great literature" is not merely expressing a preference but stating an objective truth — is, for Bourdieu, the central ideological operation of cultural legitimacy: the social is naturalised as the aesthetic, and thereby placed beyond question.

## 2.3 The Literary Field and Its Autonomy

In *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993) and *The Rules of Art* (1996), Bourdieu extends his field theory to the literary and artistic domains in a manner that has considerable relevance for the present analysis. He argues that the literary field is structured by a fundamental opposition between two principles of

legitimation that constantly competes with one another. The heteronomous principle is economic in its orientation: success in the market, large readerships, and commercial profit. The autonomous principle is cultural: recognition by peers, critical acclaim, institutional validation through prizes and academic canonisation. The structure of the literary field tends to invert the economic logic in a characteristic manner: within the field, those who are most commercially successful are frequently those who are least culturally legitimate, while those who sacrifices economic reward for artistic purity accumulates the symbolic capital that constitutes cultural legitimacy. This inverted economy — what Bourdieu calls the "loser wins" principle — is not accidental but structural; it is the very mechanism through which the literary field maintains its relative autonomy from the economic field that would otherwise dominate it entirely.

### **3. India's Literary Field and Bhagat's Contested Position**

#### **3.1 The Structure of the Indian English Literary Field**

India's literary field in English has a specific historical structure that differs significantly from the Western European fields which Bourdieu primarily analysed in his own scholarly work. The postcolonial inheritance means that cultural capital in Indian English literature has been strongly shaped by the colonial institution of English education in ways that continue to determine the field's internal hierarchy: familiarity with British literary tradition, command of Standard Written English, affiliation with elite institutions such as St. Stephen's College in Delhi or Presidency College in Kolkata, and the acquisition of international literary prizes — particularly the Booker Prize — constitutes the primary markers of legitimate cultural capital within the field as it operates today.

The field's dominant pole is occupied by authors such as Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, and Kiran Desai — writers whose formal complexity, thematic ambition, and international recognition by dominant literary institutions locates them firmly at the autonomous pole of the literary field. Their cultural capital is enormous and is institutionalised through Booker Prizes, Sahitya Akademi Awards, academic syllabi in Indian and Western universities, and critical recognition in the major literary journals of London and New York. Their economic capital, by the standards of literary fiction, is also considerable, though it is legitimately acquired because it is consecrated by prior cultural legitimacy — a crucial distinction in Bourdieu's framework.

Bhagat enters this field from a structurally opposed position that is worth examining in some detail. Educated at IIT Delhi and IIM Ahmedabad — institutions that carries enormous economic and technical capital in Indian society but no cultural capital within the literary field whatsoever — he brings a habitus formed in the engineering college dormitory rather than the humanities seminar room. His novels are written in simplified, colloquial English that is deliberately at odds with the formal register which the field's dominant institutions sanctions. They achieves extraordinary commercial success — consistently topping Indian bestseller lists from 2004 to 2021 — while receiving negligible recognition from the Booker Prize committees, the Sahitya Akademi, or the syllabi of university English departments. This structural opposition — maximum heteronomous success, minimum autonomous recognition — is, in Bourdieu's terms, the exact signature of a position at the dominated pole of the literary field.

#### **3.2 Critical Delegitimisation as a Field Strategy**

The consistent critical dismissal of Bhagat's fiction by India's literary establishment is, from a Bourdieusian perspective, a field strategy as much as it is a critical judgement of any objective validity. When established critics describes his prose as "banal," his characters as "flat," or his narratives as "formulaic," they are not simply reporting objective textual properties that any competent reader would observe; they are drawing

distinctions that reproduces the symbolic hierarchy of the literary field and reasserts the authority of the critical institutions through whose mediation cultural legitimacy flows in the first instance. The energy and frequency with which elite critics engages in this dismissal — Bhagat is a more consistent target of elite critical disdain than any other Indian English writer of the period under consideration — is itself evidence of the field's investment in maintaining the boundary between legitimate and illegitimate cultural production at all costs.

What the critical discourse around Bhagat reveals, when it is read through Bourdieu's framework with the attention it deserves, is the social stakes of the distinction between high and popular culture. The critic who dismisses Bhagat is not merely exercising aesthetic judgement in any neutral sense; they is performing a social classification that marks their own cultural capital, distinguishes them from the mass readership whose tastes they implicitly devalues, and reproduces the symbolic hierarchy that makes their position of judgement appear authoritative rather than merely partial and interested. The argument is not that such critics are simply wrong about Bhagat's fiction; but that the category of wrongness they deploys — the confident resort to a universal aesthetic standard — is itself a social product whose apparent naturalness disguises its class function in the most effective possible way.

## 4. Habitus, Aspirational Readership, and the New Indian Middle Class

### 4.1 The Habitus Encoded in Bhagat's Fiction

Bourdieu's concept of habitus provides the most powerful analytical tool for understanding the remarkable alignment between Bhagat's fiction and its enormous readership. The implied reader which is constructed by Bhagat's narrative and linguistic choices — by his colloquial prose, his engineering college settings, his detailed attention to examinations, career anxieties, parental expectations, and romantic aspirations — embodies a specific habitus: that of the aspirationally middle-class young Indian of the post-liberalisation generation, whose social trajectory is oriented toward upward mobility through technical or professional education and whose relationship to English is marked by aspiration rather than by inheritance or ease.

This habitus is encoded with remarkable precision in *Five Point Someone*, the novel that establishes the template for Bhagat's subsequent work across the entire career. The three protagonists — Hari Kumar, Alok Gupta, and Ryan Oberoi — embodies different inflections of the aspirational middle-class habitus in ways that allows readers of various class positions to identify with one or another. Hari's middle-class anxiety about grades and career, Alok's working-class pressure to transform educational credentials into economic capital for his family's survival, and Ryan's more relaxed relationship to institutional success that encodes the habitus of the already-established middle class — all three are rendered with a social specificity that reflects the author's own habitus formation. The IIT campus on which the novel is set is not merely a setting; it is the principal site of capital conversion in post-liberalisation India, the institution through which academic achievement is transformed into economic capital and thereby into social mobility.

In *2 States* (2009), the habitus analysis becomes explicitly geographical and caste-inflected in ways that are directly relevant to the Bourdieusian framework. The novel's central conflict — between Krish Malhotra's Punjabi family and Ananya Swaminathan's Tamil Brahmin family — stages the encounter between two habitus formations, both aspirationally middle-class but shaped by different regional, linguistic, and caste histories that have left distinct marks on their respective dispositions. The novel's resolution — the families' reconciliation through the protagonist's corporate success — encodes the aspiration of a unified, pan-Indian middle-class habitus that transcends regional distinction through the common medium of economic capital and English-language education. This encoding is ideologically significant in a manner

Bourdieu's framework illuminates clearly: it reproduces the dominant post-liberalisation narrative that meritocratic economic achievement can dissolve the social distinctions that caste, region, and language produces.

## 4.2 Readership as Social Formation

The readership which Bhagat's fiction has created constitutes what Bourdieu would recognise as a social formation with a distinct and describable habitus. Publisher demographic studies and reader surveys conducted between the years 2010 and 2021 consistently identifies Bhagat's primary readership as young (between 18 and 35 years of age), urban or semi-urban, educated to graduate or postgraduate level in technical or professional disciplines rather than the humanities, and employed in or aspiring to employment in India's technology, finance, or service sectors. This is, precisely, the social formation whose relationship to cultural capital Bourdieu's framework predicts with some accuracy: they possess significant economic and technical capital but are positioned at the margins of the legitimating institutions of high cultural capital, and their cultural preferences — for accessible prose, recognisable social settings, and narrative resolution — reflects a habitus formed at a specific distance from the elite cultural institutions whose judgements of distinction they are invited to internalise as universal truths about literary value.

For this readership, Bhagat's fiction performs a function that Bourdieu's analysis of distinction illuminates in a very direct way: it provides a cultural form that reflects and validates their own habitus, offering the pleasures of recognition rather than the pleasures of distinction. The dominant literary culture offers the pleasure of elevation — the sense that engagement with legitimate culture confirms the possessor's membership in a distinguished class above ordinary readers. Bhagat's fiction offers the pleasure of solidarity instead — the sense that one's own social experience, linguistic practice, and aspirational orientation are worthy of literary representation and not merely a background against which more elevated subjects are foregrounded. This is not a lesser pleasure in any objective sense; it is a structurally different one, and its social function is no less significant for being unrecognised by the field's legitimating institutions.

## 5. Cultural Capital, Distinction, and the Politics of Literary Legitimacy

### 5.1 The Capital Structure of Literary Reception

The reception of Bhagat's fiction within India's literary field can be mapped directly onto the capital structure which Bourdieu's field theory predicts with considerable precision. Those who possess high cultural capital — academics, literary critics, prize jurors, established novelists — consistently withhold symbolic capital from Bhagat's texts, refusing to grant them the recognition that would constitute cultural legitimacy within the field. Those who possess economic and technical capital but limited cultural capital in the literary field's specific terms — engineers, managers, call-centre workers, first-generation English readers — are the texts' primary consumers and enthusiasts. This structural alignment between capital composition and reading preference is not coincidental in any sense; it is precisely what Bourdieu's framework predicts as the normal operation of distinction in the cultural field.

The literary prize as an institution of cultural capital production is particularly revealing in this context and deserves some attention. No major literary prize in India — not the Sahitya Akademi Award, not the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature, not the JCB Prize for Literature — has recognised Bhagat's fiction across the entire period under consideration. This systematic exclusion is not simply evidence of objective aesthetic inadequacy in the texts; it is evidence of the field's operation through the logic of distinction in its most institutionalised form. Prize committees are composed of agents who possess precisely the cultural capital that Bhagat's fiction does not encode: familiarity with the international modernist tradition,

command of the formal criteria that distinguishes literary from popular fiction, and the social investment in maintaining the distinction that justifies their own position as cultural arbiters whose judgements carry weight. Their judgements are sincere — they genuinely find Bhagat's fiction aesthetically inadequate by the standards they have internalised — but this sincerity does not make the judgements socially innocent in their effects.

## 5.2 Bhagat's Heterodox Capital Strategy

What makes Bhagat's position within the literary field analytically interesting from a Bourdieusian perspective is his conscious and explicit rejection of the cultural capital logic that governs legitimate literary production as it is normally understood. In numerous interviews, columns, and his non-fiction writings, Bhagat has articulated a position that might be described as deliberate heterodoxy: he identifies his target reader not as the educated literary consumer with already-formed literary tastes, but as the first-generation English reader, the IIT graduate, the call-centre worker, the small-town aspirant for whom fiction in English has historically been inaccessible and somewhat forbidding. He frames his simplification of language and his selection of recognisable social settings not as failures of literary ambition but as affirmative choices that prioritises communication over distinction of any kind.

This strategy simultaneously operates within and against the literary field's logic in a manner that is analytically productive to examine. Within the logic, it accepts the inverted economy without complaint: Bhagat accumulates heteronomous success (sales, film adaptations, celebrity) at the cost of autonomous recognition (critical legitimacy, prize culture, academic consecration). Against the logic, it contests the field's fundamental premise: that the criteria of distinction employed by legitimate cultural institutions are universal aesthetic standards rather than the socially acquired preferences of a specific class fraction that happen to occupy positions of institutional power. In *Half Girlfriend* (2014), this contestation becomes almost thematically explicit in a manner quite unusual for popular fiction. The novel's protagonist, Madhav Jha, is a speaker of "bad English" whose social aspirations are systematically frustrated by an elite Delhi college world in which his habitus — rural, Bihar-formed, technically capable but culturally illegitimate — marks him as deficient in the eyes of those around him. The novel does not ridicule Madhav or hold him at a critical distance; it validates him, suggesting that the cultural hierarchy that reads his English as inferior is itself a social construction masquerading as a natural standard of quality.

## 6. High Culture versus Popular Culture: Textual Analysis

### 6.1 The IIT as Cultural Field: *Five Point Someone* and *Revolution 2020*

*Five Point Someone* (2004) and *Revolution 2020* (2011) can be read as sustained meditations on the social function of educational institutions as fields of cultural capital production — meditations that are, however, written from a perspective internal to the habitus they depicts rather than from the external analytical perspective which Bourdieu's sociology cultivates. The IIT in *Five Point Someone* functions as a microcosm of the cultural field in a remarkably clear way: it has its own hierarchy of legitimate achievement (the CGPA), its own forms of distinction (the gap between the toppers and the five-pointers), and its own mechanisms for converting academic capital into economic capital in the post-liberalisation marketplace. The three protagonists' rebellion against this hierarchy — their insistence that intelligence and creativity cannot be reduced to examination performance — reproduces the Bourdieusian critique of the educational system's role in reproducing social distinction in the guise of meritocracy.

*Revolution 2020* extends this analysis to the private education market of post-liberalisation India, depicting the coaching industry of Varanasi as a site where cultural capital (the IIT entrance credential) is monetised and sold to aspirant families who believes they are purchasing educational merit but are in fact purchasing

access to the field's current rules of the game. The novel's protagonist, Gopal, who builds a coaching empire to win the woman he loves from the legitimately credentialed hero, enacts the distinction between economic and cultural capital with unusual narrative clarity: his economic success cannot purchase the cultural legitimacy which his rival's IIT credential represents, and the woman he loves cannot fully recognise his worth because her own habitus has been formed to values the autonomous capital that the educational field confers. The tragedy of Gopal is, in Bourdieusian terms, the tragedy of a person whose capital composition does not match the field in which he must compete.

## 6.2 Gender, Distinction, and One Indian Girl

*One Indian Girl* (2016) — Bhagat's most explicitly feminist novel by common critical assessment, narrated by a successful investment banker named Radhika Mehta — provides a productive site for analysing the intersection of gender and the social construction of taste. Radhika's cultural positioning is complex from a Bourdieusian perspective in several respects: she possesses significant economic capital (her Goldman Sachs salary), educational capital (her MBA from a prestigious institution), and professional competence of the highest order, but her habitus remains shaped by the gender norms of the Indian middle-class family that defines the legitimate woman as a wife and daughter-in-law rather than as an independent professional in her own right. The novel's central tension is between two competing frameworks of distinction: the professional field that values her economic and intellectual capital, and the matrimonial field that systematically devalues it in favour of more traditionally feminine qualities.

The novel's resolution — Radhika's decision to prioritise her own desires over her family's expectations of her — is encoded as individual liberation in a manner the surface narrative celebrates. But Bourdieu's framework reveals its structural ambiguity when examined more closely. The freedom Radhika achieves is the freedom of a specific class fraction with access to particular resources: it is available because she possesses the economic and educational capital that makes independence materially possible in ways it would not be for women with different capital compositions. The novel does not explore the situation of women whose habitus and capital composition does not permit this resolution, which means that its encoding of feminist aspiration reproduces, at the level of social imagination, the class distinctions it does not explicitly acknowledge. Taste, in this context, extends to the taste for freedom itself: even the aspiration to self-determination is socially constructed by the conditions of its possibility.

## 6.3 The Popular versus the Literary: 400 Days and the Genre Question

Bhagat's *400 Days* (2021), the second volume in a thriller series, marks an interesting development in the career-long negotiation between popular and literary cultural logics that his work as a whole embodies. The thriller is, in Bourdieu's taxonomy, a quintessentially popular genre: it is defined by the logic of suspense and plot resolution rather than the logic of formal innovation and de-familiarisation that distinguishes legitimate literary fiction in the eyes of the field's dominant institutions. By moving fully into genre fiction in the final phase of his career, Bhagat accepts the terms of the popular cultural logic without the residual ambiguity of his earlier realist fiction, which had occupied an unstable position between the popular and the literary fields simultaneously.

This move is, in Bourdieu's terms, a clarification of position that has structural significance: it abandons the implicit claim, which was detectable in *Five Point Someone* and *2 States*, that popular fiction can be socially significant fiction in ways that deserves the literary field's recognition on the field's own terms, and instead asserts the value of the popular field on its own entirely different terms. Whether this represents a strategic retreat or a principled position is a question that the texts alone cannot answer definitively; but it is a structurally significant move that maps directly onto the field theory's prediction that agents under

sustained symbolic capital deficit will tend to reconstitute their position within fields whose rules of the game they can actually win.

## 7. Discussion: Does Bhagat's Fiction Reproduce or Contest Taste Hierarchies?

The analysis developed in this article permits a nuanced response to the organising question it has pursued throughout: whether Bhagat's fiction constitutes a democratic challenge to established taste hierarchies or a reproduction of those hierarchies in a new cultural register. The answer, as Bourdieu's framework predicts, is that it does both simultaneously, and that the two operations are structurally inseparable in a manner that cannot be resolved by preferring one analysis over the other.

Bhagat's fiction contests taste hierarchies in the specific and significant sense that it refuses the field's autonomous logic — the logic that identifies literary legitimacy with formal difficulty, cultural exclusiveness, and the accumulation of institutionalised symbolic capital — and asserts the cultural value of popular readability, accessible narrative, and the representation of non-elite social experience as legitimate literary material. In doing so, it provides a large and socially significant readership with a cultural form that reflects and validates their habitus, creating conditions of literary pleasure and recognition that the dominant literary culture has systematically withheld from them. This is a genuine cultural achievement of considerable importance, and the condescension with which it is received by the literary establishment is, precisely, evidence of its subversive dimension within the field's operations.

At the same time, Bhagat's fiction reproduces taste hierarchies at the level of its social content in ways that are equally important to acknowledge. The habitus it encodes — aspirationally middle-class, urban, technically educated, oriented toward economic mobility through credentialed achievement — is not the habitus of India's subaltern populations in any straightforward sense. Dalit readers, rural readers, readers from non-Hindi-belt regions, and readers whose social position makes the aspiration narratives of the IIT novel definitively fantastical rather than relatable are largely absent from the social world that Bhagat's fiction constructs. The democratisation of literary access that simplified English performs is real in its own limited domain, but it is a democratisation with significant structural limits: it expands the constituency of legitimate readership without challenging the social hierarchies that continues to determine whose experience counts as universally relevant and whose remains a local particular.

The social construction of taste that Bourdieu's framework reveals is, therefore, visible at every level of the Bhagat phenomenon as this article has examined it: in the literary establishment's confident dismissal of his fiction as aesthetically inferior by universal standards, in the mass readership's equally confident enthusiasm for a fiction that reflects their own social experience and aspirations, and in the structural position of the novelist himself, who navigates the literary field's contradictions with a degree of explicit self-consciousness that makes his career an unusually legible case study in the social dynamics of cultural production in post-liberalisation India.

## 8. Conclusion

This article has argued that Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of culture — his interconnected concepts of field, capital, habitus, and distinction — provides the most productive analytical framework for understanding the cultural significance and social stakes of Chetan Bhagat's fiction within India's literary landscape from the year 2004 to 2021. The opposition between Bhagat's commercial success and his critical delegitimisation is not a dispute that can be resolved by aesthetic judgement alone, however confident or well-informed; it is a structural conflict within the literary field whose full intelligibility requires the tools of the sociology of culture applied with appropriate rigour. Taste is not a natural faculty but a social

construction: the confident judgement that Bhagat's fiction is inferior literature is as socially produced as the equally confident judgement of his millions of readers that it is a pleasure and a recognition of their own experience.

The analysis has demonstrated that Bhagat's fiction encodes the habitus of the aspirationally middle-class post-liberalisation Indian reader with considerable precision across the corpus; that its reception follows the capital-structured logic which Bourdieu's field theory predicts with remarkable consistency; and that the specific position it occupies within the Indian literary field — maximum heteronomous success, minimum autonomous recognition — reflects both a democratic impulse toward inclusion and a structural reproduction of the social distinctions his fiction appears on the surface to contest. Reading individual novels through Bourdieusian categories has revealed the ideological work performed by apparently neutral narrative and linguistic choices: the setting of *Five Point Someone* in an IIT encodes the field's capital logic in its most concentrated form; the linguistic habitus of *Half Girlfriend*'s protagonist dramatises the symbolic violence of distinction as it operates on the bodies and aspirations of those it marks as culturally deficient; the gender resolution of *One Indian Girl* encodes the class specificity of feminist aspiration in ways that reproduces the very distinctions the novel appears to transcend.

The broader contribution of this analysis is to demonstrate the productivity of Bourdieusian cultural sociology for postcolonial literary studies in the Indian context, where its application has been less systematic than its analytical power would justify. The field theory's attention to the structural dynamics of cultural production, the capital theory's revelation of the social interests at stake in aesthetic judgement, and the habitus concept's account of the social formation of taste all provides tools that can enrich our understanding of why Indian popular fiction matters — not as a deficient version of legitimate literature that has failed to reach the standards of the field's dominant institutions, but as a distinct and socially significant cultural form whose full meaning cannot be grasped without attending to the social conditions of its production, circulation, and reception by the diverse readership it has called into being.

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