CHAPTER IV

IDENTITY CRISIS IN
PARTAP SHARMA’S DAY’S OF THE TURBAN AND
UPAMANYU CHATTERJEE’S ENGLISH, AUGUST

The problem of identity has been one of the major problems of mankind in every society. It does not really matter which ethnic group, culture or religion someone belongs to as far as identity crisis is concerned. The conflicts, negotiations, search of identity could have to do with various issues such as West vs. East, New vs. Old or Modern vs. Conservative. The present study is to exhibit the common points of identity crisis and the treatment of identity crisis in Partap Sharma’s Day’s of the Turban and Upamanyu Chatterjee’s English, August. It is no wonder that the major characters in each novel possess some basic similarities with the authors in quality. In other words the duality along with the nostalgia of the main characters for different reasons obviously originates from the experiences and personal choices. The resolutions of this dilemma suggested by the two writers are naturally not the same as a result of the differences of both cases in nature. However different they are, the ultimate disillusionment in exposure to identity crisis is inevitable in every culture.

Today the world is suffering from identity crisis. For the present phenomena moreover every writer has indicated towards it, Rushdie’s novels also reflect in this direction. In each novel Rushdie uses the same pattern he explores the
philosophical significance of ideals and concepts through a number of characters who are so intimately connected that they literally or figuratively fuse, and when they separate they share the identity of one another. Thus one’s identity is a part of universe and one’s identity has its entity in universe and universe is the reflection of one’s identity. The theme of identity operates with intensity and purpose. The political or even politico-cultural and other themes of India's national development are artistically and emotionally well integrated into the motif of quest for identity of Partap Sharma and Upamanyu Chatterjee. As their quest is essentially spiritual, the historical detail only becomes a transitory phase in their growingly temporal awareness of the world of facts into an introvert world of intuitive perception of reality through Fantasy, or Dream and Memory. They are the close observers of the national growth of the post-independence India. As a result of their relationship with Indian national history, as a form of fulfillment, in their quest for true identity, they move in and out of Time in the narrative. Their fictional worlds explore the world of eternity.

The novels selected for the study are mostly complementary in their thematic exploration of identity of their respective protagonists. Both are explorers of an identity to which they belong by reasons of history, and cannot alter the identity of their own personalities.
PARTAP SHARMA’S *DAYS OF THE TURBAN*

**Introduction:**

Partap Sharma is a playwright, novelist and author of four books for children. He was born in Lahore, which was then a part of India. His father was a civil engineer, who served as Technical Advisor to governments in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Tanganyika and Libya and later retired to their ancestral property in Punjab as a farmer. This colourful Punjabi village forms much of the backdrop of the novel, *Days of the Turban*.

His early education was in Trinity College, Kandy and Bishop Cotton College, Shimla. His college education was completed at St.Xavier’s, Bombay. His best known plays, *A Touch of Brightness*, *Begum Sumroo*, *Sammy and Zen Katha*, have been staged in various countries. His books have been published in India, England, USA, France, Denmark, Holland and Canada. As an actor, he has played the lead role in five Hindi feature films and won the National Award in 1971 for his performance in ‘Phir Bhi’. He has also played the role of Nehru in the film ‘Nehru: Jewel of India’. In the year 2002, he spent three months in China to take part again as Nehru, in an international film titled ‘Chou-en-Lai’ in Bandung. He has also directed a number of documentary films, including a historical series for Channel Four Television London, titled ‘The Raj Through Indian Eyes’. As a result, England's Museum of the British Empire and Commonwealth in Bristol now
Partap Sharma’s novel *Days of the Turban*, published in 1986, presents a picture of Indian society from the inside. It shows a country in transition, where the old values are under attack for new ideas but where in the end, the traditions and the ways of life of the past still have their place. The book provides an insight into the mind of extremists. It shows how extremism builds on fear and then has to reach further into terrorism, not necessarily to further its aim, but for its leadership to keep ahead of its supporters and rivals. The descent from revolutionary to terrorist can be jagged and rapid.

**Plot:**

The novel *Days of the Turban*, tells the story of Balbir the youngest member of a wealthy Punjabi family, the descendant of a great Brahmin warrior dynasty. In Punjab the family counts for everything. His grandfather still holds patriarchal sway over his extended family and their lands. Over-educated and bored with life in a Punjabi village, he wants only to escape, to get away from the demands of an ever-present family. Most of all, he would like to follow his glamorous elder...
brother Raskaan, who has escaped to Europe and has become Westernized and a rich businessman in Berlin.

Searching for adventure and trying to raise the money to finance his escape, Balbir becomes entangled with local gunrunners and ventures into the Golden Temple at Amritsar with a message for the Sikh extremists who have fortified it. There he is held hostage to ensure that his cousin Satyavan will provide the arms for the need of the movement. But the family rallies round and the patriarch plots to rescue his beloved grandson.

**Analysis:**

In contrast to Naipaul’s abbreviated *The Shadow of the Guru* stands Sharma’s lengthy novel *Days of the Turban*, which tells the story of Balbir a son of the Brahmin Mohiyal clan, and of his rebellion against his family, a rebellion cast against the larger canvas of, and serving as a metaphor for Bhindranwale’s militant agitation for Sikh rights and the ensuing Operation Bluestar. While Sharma’s analysis of Sikh history and politics is surer than Naipaul’s - it is after all conducted by an insider, an Indian documentary film maker and commentator who traces his lineage to a Punjabi village and who was shooting a film on location in Amritsar in June 1984 when Operation Bluestar was undertaken - whereas Sharma’s is the fullest treatment of contemporary Punjab, his narrative too betrays a similar male bias, both in its form and content, even though in contrast to
Naipaul’s assessment, it is unmitigatedly critical of the divisive politics of pro-Khalistan Sikhs.

From the foregrounding of the turban in the novel’s very title, which in Sharma’s words, “owes its inspiration to the cockaded frontier-style turban but is a tribute to all turbans and the times they have seen”¹ to its metaphoric associations in the narrative, it retains its status as male referent, coming to serve as the defining structural framework of the text as well. At times nothing more than a practical headdress, “it keeps the head warm, protects it like a helmet”² or an appendage of violence, Uday Singh “wound the saafa [turban] round Randhira’s neck over the hilt of the dagger. No point in getting blood all over his own clothes.”³ The chief function of the turban in the novel is as a sign of clan honour, of tradition and of male courage. Balbir “didn’t like to wear a turban. That was old-fashioned. But there in the village…..needed a token of conformity to rustic custom.”⁴

The setting of the novel is Jagtara a village, a proper village that has grown over centuries of an unmoving habitation. It is not a village of families but of generations. It is forty miles away from Jalandhar where lives the family of Khushi Ram. The novel starts with the incident that Balbir son of Khushi Ram, forges his father’s signature on a cheque at Punjab Farmer’s Co-operative Bank Jalandhar branch, and draws twenty thousand rupees which was a significant amount to the twenty four year old Balbir who was desperate for money. The local passport
racketeer Tarsem, had told him clearly to make payment the week before, because Balbir wants to go out of Punjab with the help of Tarsem, who used to say, “I’m just a social worker helping people get what they want. I don’t turn up my nose at people because they have their own political views.” He is businessman. Balbir wants to become like his elder brother Raskaan, who has left Punjab made lots of money and lives in Germany. But the family does not give Balbir the freedom to grow like Raskaan, who would never help Balbir to leave the village. He was just like a hostage to the responsibilities that his elder brother had forsaken towards his family. Because someone had to be on the land, someone had to stay with the ageing parents. His father is fifty-five years old and his grandfather is of eighty-four. Balbir was educated at boarding schools and universities. In the village he feels alienated by his better education. Tarsem wants Balbir to become his partner in fulfilling the big orders he has.

Satyavan is Balbir’s cousin, his elder uncle’s son, the one in direct line of succession to the patriarch. He was like chameleon, dangerous, a peasant among peasants, a rich man among the rich, a chieftain’s grandson among the feudal, the power behind the local political throne and the sharpest henchman of the patriarch. He was an operator beyond the dreams of Tarsem.

Tarsem was the local gunrunner and Satyavan was also in the gun trade, which was unknown to Balbir. Tarsem persuades Balbir to put him in touch with
his family’s contacts in case he wants to earn money and become rich. Tarsem knew it that the Balbir’s family had its own stock of guns somewhere in Chamkalan, where his grandfather was living. He wanted twenty thousand rupees or one Light Machine Gun to help Balbir. He said, “Everyone’s gearing for action in Punjab. The police are out-gunned. President’s rule has been declared. Punjab is now officially ‘A Disturbed Area’. There are factions preparing to fight. Even within the Golden Temple they’re preparing to kill each other. They’re building barricades…….You are missing an opportunity. You can earn money, by the shovelful. They’re desperate for carbines and machine guns. With those kinds of weapons, a few men can hold a fortification against thousands.”

Tarsem knew the forgery of Balbir because his father had sent for him the previous night and warned him not to help Balbir. His father comes to know about the forgery by V.P. Joshi head clerk of the bank. Joshi was in touch with Khushi Ram in relation to the marriage of bank manager’s son to Khushi Ram’s daughter, Balbir’s sister, Aadren. When he sees that twenty thousand rupees had been withdrawn from the bank, Joshi is worried that it might be in preparation for a wedding. He asks his father. Who is horrified, but when he learns that Balbir has collected the money, he realizes that Balbir has forged his signature. He guesses that Balbir wants it to pay Tarsem. So Tarsem advises Balbir to put the money back in the account. But Balbir said “My father’s money is my money.” Tarsem
was not ready to receive the money. Actually, he was not a big-time operator of
guns but a small fry. So he wants Balbir to supply the guns which were in
Chamkalan. Balbir in pursuing those goes to his grandfather’s village with Uday
Sing and the novel gets its turn.

Balbir’s family was Muhiyals and once had lived in the mountains; fourteen
generations ago his ancestor was one of the clansmen who fought against the
invader Ahmed Shah Abdali and had been driven south to the vicinity of this
village. “That very same Ahmed Shah Abdali had desecrated the Golden Temple in
Amritsar.” Among the Muhiyals are Hindus, Sikhs and even some Muslims.
Balbir’s family, though they were Brahmins by caste, were all Muhiyals and Sikhs.
Half of the Balbir’s relatives were in the armed forces and most of the rest were
farmers.

Raskaan, whose original name as considered by some German friends was
Rais Khan, was living in West Berlin with his German wife Renate. He was
running his own Chai Khana and Mai Khana restaurants, the cheapest and the
cleanest best eating places in Berlin. He was a rich man in Berlin. His cousin
Satyavan came to meet him and to tell what was happening in Punjab with Balbir.
Even his visit to Berlin aroused no suspicion or foreboding. He travelled often and
those who loved him never asked him of his travels. He was obviously in Berlin on
some errand of his own. Raskaan had a terrible guilt, guilt about leaving Balbir
there in India. Both visited restaurant and had their dinner and wished to spend the night with girls. Satyavan would screw the whore of his choice in Berlin. He used to say, “Life is a play of illusion. You have to understand the illusion.” Satyavan was not ignorant of the way of life in Europe. He had been to the West many times to arrange for guns, to ensure that Raskaan’s Spice Bazaar was well-supplied, to visit relatives abroad. This was just his method of reminding him of his rural North Indian origins, his way of retaining a sentimental grip on his cousin. In leisure they talk about the problems and troubles at home in Punjab, about Khalistan movement and the political situation in India. Satyavan in his words says that, “We’re increasing our own family’s stock of guns, improving it……No one wants another partition. Punjab has been divided and reduced twice already, first by Pakistan, then by Haryana. Khalistan is like cutting off your nose to spite your face…..Indira Gandhi is clever. The extremists are few and in factions and badly led. Leave it to the panditani and her police.”

Raskaan was thinking that if anything had happened to his young brother, Balbir, he would not only not forgive the man who had done it, but also he would never be able to forgive himself. He had years ago abandoned everything to escape abroad. He was semi-literate, half-schooled, but he had educated himself in the ways of the world and had graduated to wealth. He was much worried about Balbir, who involved in gun racketing. Satyavan told him everything about Tarsem
and his rackets, passports, guns, opium and Balbir’s wish to migrate. Balbir was only concerned with money. He could not care one way or the other about Khalistan. He just wanted to collect LMG’s, MMG’s, AK47’s, rocket-propelling guns and mortars for the sake of money and because the extremists needed them. There were some active supporters within the police force. The trouble was that the extremists were bringing religion into politics and guns into religion. They were terrorizing the average Sikh. The moderates were losing their grip on the situation. The vast majority was being intimidated by small cliques and they had entered the gurudwaras as pilgrims and worshippers, and then by a show of sophisticated arms frightened the others into silence. Tarsem had already sent his last consignment of rifles and carbines into the Temple. There were about seven hundred people living inside the Temple complex; “Some genuine pilgrims, some terrorists, some politicians, a few priests, also some thugs, goondas, wanted criminals and smugglers.”

All these people had to be fed. Bags of wheat, rice, provisions had to go in. It was perhaps the biggest free feeding centre in the world. Many Sikhs were against it. But they were intimidated and scared to speak out. The whole Temple had become a hideout of assassins and smugglers. Once Satyavan said to Raskaan, “there’s a whole international network behind the troubles in Punjab. The only way to defeat it is to pool all our strengths and put everything at the disposal of…..” Raskaan is of the opinion that police should go in the Goldan Temple and clean up
the place and it was the common man’s opinion also. But nobody dared to face the modern weapons of terrorists. They not only killed policemen and specific officers but wiped out entire families one by one systematically who dared to do it. Indira Gandhi did it after some time by sending the army and she did face the result in after years.

In Punjab a man could die for a diddle. Tarsem used to carry a gun because he was afraid he might be misunderstood to have diddled when he had only dealt and also as precaution against fools and the long arm of the law. In fact, he was not a diddler at all. Till then his sources had been limited to men who made duplicates in illegal factories. He never dealt with the sophisticated, high caliber, rapid-firing weapons that could decimate large numbers. The country-made pistols, revolvers and guns were crude and unreliable. Even then such factories, some in Punjab, others in Jammu and Kashmir and a few across the border in Pakistan, were working overtime to produce more. In Afghanistan there was pressure from the demands for weapons made by the rebels fighting Soviet Russia’s forces. The American weapons that came into that market were absorbed like anything. In Punjab, Bhindranwale’s fight for supremacy was only just beginning and the demand for accurate, effective weapons would grow. These were not just dacoits but terrorists with political aims. They hoped to increase their numbers by the
successful use of guns, bombs and timed explosives for sabotage. So Tarsem felt his future was opening up.  

Balbir twenty-four years old always thought of his future. He was well educated like other boys, who were sons of zamindars, maharajas and nawabs, but they were all being prepared for a bigger world than that of their land-owning fathers. Balbir felt land-bound and land-locked. He felt landed in the worst possible way with the land he would one day inherit. His father once said with a sigh, “I shouldn’t have listened to Raskaan about giving you all that fancy schooling. Too much education is not good. Just enough to read the newspapers and do the accounts—that’s best. Otherwise everyone will be wanting to run away from work, real work……A landowner’s son must work the land or he’s no good.”

His father is of the opinion that Balbir should do all the work like, milking the buffaloes, chopping the fodder, watering the fields and taking food to the working men in the field. He looked at Balbir and said more softly that “It was those educated men who ruined our peace and carved out Pakistan. Then they made Haryana and Punjab. Now may be they’ll start riots in the cause of Khalistan. Is this education, is this culture, that teaches man to misbehave with man?”

He had employed Uday Singh, who was called simply Kumhareya meaning that he was a potter’s son, as farmhand. He was a Jat. He was also a Sikh. Both Uday and Balbir were of the same age. The bond between them was not of the mind but of
the heart. In an industrialized modern city it would be odd to see them together, but in a farming community, men of different backgrounds and varied means were thrown together. “Man is a gregarious animal; friendship is an essential need.”

They used to wrestle each other. The novelist has given a detailed commentary on the wrestling between Balbir and Uday with the spectators exclaiming, commenting, arguing and joking. Wrestling took the place of games. The villages of Punjab and Haryana have always been the spawning ground of India’s greatest wrestlers. Uday wanted Balbir to meet some special people. So he planned to get him to Amritsar, to the golden temple. He was involved with the terrorist movement. So he knew the Jheera, the guant-faced opium smoker, who was therefore called Afeemchi, who was also in contact with the special people. Balbir was in hurry to get out of Punjab. When Uday insisted Balbir to go to Amritsar, he said “I couldn’t care a damn about Amritsar, Jalandhar, Jagtara, Chamkalan or the whole of Punjab. I owe it to myself to get out.”

There are many instances in the novel that the novelist proposes his ideas on the rural Punjab and the way of life the people lead. In one instance, Khushi Ram says to V.P.Joshi, “It’s the farmer who feeds you, and we will feed the entire country, but we must have tractors, water, electricity and fertilizers…..We could do with more wells. But there is a shortage now of diesel, kerosene, petrol……there’s not enough power coming from Bhakra Nangal. It’s going to
Haryana and Rajastan.” The actual problem of production of electricity is depicted in clear terms. Every farmer has sold his bullocks or kept them only for churning out sugarcane juice. When there is no water for the fields, the crop fails, and Punjab fails to do what it could. And there is no wonder the Akali Dal is making political capital of the situation. It is mixing this up with some purely religious demands and seems to be a communal party. It is merely an attempt to sway the Sikh vote against Indira Gandhi. It has taken completely a political turn. Meanwhile the extremist Bhindranwale is using fanaticism to take control of the Akali Dal. His supporters, terrorists are causing havoc, shooting all opponents. And it is even dangerous to rant against him in public. He and his followers took control over the Golden Temple. There they gathered with all sorts of weapons threatening the Central Government. They are attracting the young people who are disgusted with the existing condition of Punjab. They also create horror in the minds of people who want to remain away from their activities. They collect weapons from any source from the people like Tarsem and Satyavan. In such a condition, many young men and women of Sikh and Hindhus as well try to earn money by helping those terrorists. Balbir is one among them who wants to supply the guns of his grandfather to earn money to go out of Punjab and settle abroad like his brother. There are also many people who protest the terrorist activities publicly and make speeches against Bhindranwale. V.P. Joshi has attended one in Amritsar,
in which Kuldip Nayyar and General Aurora address the public. He said, “They said Bhindranwale was set up by Indira Gandhi and President Zail Singh in order to divide the Akali Dal.” But Khushi Ram says, “but he has got out of hand. If someone employs a servant in good faith and he goes berserk and turns out to be a murderer, you cannot blame the employer.” He defends both the Prime Minister and the President. He talks of the progress of Punjab. The progress of Punjab is built upon taking the bull by the horns. It is not robbery. There are too many middlemen and agencies that rob the farmers. He says, “The farmer is a good man in a good season and a bad man in the bad because first and always he must farm.” He is of the opinion that if the government is slow, it is a drag on the development of Punjab.

Balbir wanted to locate the family armoury in Chamkalan which was not an easy job. But he had to do it. He knew it was not a big collection of weapons. Satyavan had been building it up slowly, only as a precaution against the increasingly volatile situation in Punjab. Since 1961, the authorities had encouraged the population to be armed. Almost every land-owning farmer had weapons. But many of these weapons had fallen into the hands of terrorists and criminals. Now the situation in Punjab was what is termed a “disturbed” one. Licensed revolvers and guns were worn and displayed. Swords were even more common. But there were other weapons that were never displayed. Those were
kept for possible use in an emergency. It was these weapons that Tarsem and his men were intent on collecting and conveying to their clientele. Balbir became the victim in that situation. Satyavan, who was the politically active member of the family, could deliver votes, men, guns, passports, documents and the work. He could always rely on the family’s vast legitimate holdings. Tarsem was a little fry, but Satyavan was a popular figure being the offspring of an established family. Tarsem was an operator; Satyavan was a director of various underworld businesses.

Punjab was booming with enterprise and rackets. Prosperity was on the increase and so was crime. It was becoming more and more unsafe to travel the roads at night. People used to carry weapons and women were escorted by armed men. Along with other forms of crime, rape too was on the increase. Uday Singh Kumhareya was accused of this crime. He was not part of any racket. He had a genuine commitment to Bhindranwale’s politics. The murders he did commit he did not think of as crimes but as political assassinations, as assignments fulfilled. He did not even know his victims and feel any guilt but there was only a sense of triumph. He was leading such a double life and had attended the training camp in guerrilla tactics at Jammu. Fifteen days’ camp does not help anyone to become a competent commando, but “the camp succeeded more with indoctrination than with physical training.”

Compared with Uday Singh, Balbir was a mere dilettante,
a mere featherweight. They were not in the same category. They were just friends, who came together merely by virtue of circumstances. Uday Singh was in contact with Gulnari of Maina. She was an educated girl. They both were in contact with terrorist group. She used to read letters relating to the terrorist activities for him. He was in love with Gulnari. That was the reason why her parents were marrying her to a person who was in abroad. They were doing it to get her away from him. Udaya Singh wanted to take Balbir to Maina to meet Gulnari because Balbir was from a well-known respected family. And no one would suspect they were going to meet Gulnari together. These Ahluwalias were Sikhs; they were cloth merchants and shopkeepers. They did not want the status quo disturbed. Uday Singh thought that he was a revolutionary under the banner of Bhindranwale. Gulnari was also one among the revolutionaries. She had joined the group much before Uday had joined. She was supposed to blow up the Bhakra Nangal, bomb people’s houses and burn railway stations as part of her assignments. Ahluwalias did not like Gulnari to mix up in all that. So they were thinking of marrying her to another person who was not engaged in terrorist activities. Uday Singh actually wanted to elope with Gulnari. So Balbir and he went to Maina to meet Gulnari and her friend Kulavanti and Balbir wanted to collect some of the guns and ammunitions which belonged to his grandfather. Uday asked Balbir for a favour after they would elope to which Balbir agreed. According to Uday, Balbir had to visit the Golden Temple
in Amritsar, the place which was crawling with terrorists and extremists. Balbir was not a political man. Though police were watching the temple, he should visit as pilgrim or a worshipper. He had to meet a person called Amar Singh, who can be found in the third room on the first floor and convey a message from Uday Singh. The message was that Uday Singh was “at Fat Aunty’s place in Chak Deedar.”

Amar Singh was educated and he was one among the terrorists. He would understand the situation and would explain everything to Balbir.

In the episode of eloping with Gulnari, Uday was interrupted by a person called Randhir Sian, whom he had killed with a dagger in fighting and put the body into a disused well. And then went away with Gulnari towards Chak Deedar. Before that, he told her that he had thought of running away, getting to the others in the Golden Temple and staying there among the pilgrims. He had also told that the people in the Temple needed him in their work of liberation of Punjab. The group was headed by Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and Major General Shabeg Singh. There were many other women helping them in this work. Major General Shabeg Singh’s own daughter was there with them and already she had notched a few killings on her gun.

Uday and Gulnari go away, Balbir gets fever and Kulavanti treats him and he becomes shank less. They make love in hurry. He fulfils his lust as she did the same. After that Balbir “took out the carbine, the ammunition, the bayonet in its...
case, a .32 pistol, two hand grenades, some sticks that he couldn’t identify in the
gloom, some string-like things, some objects wrapped in cellophane”, which
were put in a wall behind the bricks, and stuffed them all in a sack. Then he hurries
along the road till a tonga takes him on with the sack. It was already loaded with
people who were talking of the increasing incidents of terrorism in Punjab. He was
thinking of meeting Tarsem to handover the sack full of ammunitions and
wondered how far he should be prepared to collaborate. He thinks of Kulavanti’s
lust and of his own. Other people were talking in their own way as they were all
illiterate, but like most Indian peasants they were educated in philosophic concepts
and aware of political intricacies. They spoke loudly too. “It’s all the fault of these
politicians…. They want smaller states based on language so that they can be petty
dictators!” The other man said, “They say they’ll divide us up by language but
it’s really religion and race they mean….imagine what would happen….wouldn’t
be able to shift jobs from one state to another….children’s education would be a
mess…..” The peasants were talking without any hesitation on the activities of
terrorists and about Bhindranwale. They talk of how Bhindranwale appoints the
killers and shooters. If any man offers to join the terrorists, he just “nods and says,
“All right, go to that bag there and pull out any one among the slips of paper
inside.” The man does so. On the slip of paper is a name and address. “Right,” says
Bhindranwale, “your first task is to go and kill that person within the next twenty-
four hours.” The man breaks into a sweat, trembles and finally confesses that he cannot kill someone in cold blood. Bhindranwale smiles and says, “Doesn’t matter, don’t give it another thought. Now just write your name and address on a piece of paper and drop it in the bag along with the others.”

Balbir goes to the chabara of Tarsem with the sack where Tarsem, Karnail Singh, the trucker, and Hazara Singh, who was working in the passport trade, on illegal emigration, were worrying about Balbir, because he belongs to a Chibber family which was very powerful in that part of the country and it was not so easy to involve him in their gun running activities. They were talking about Balbir’s intrusion into the terrorist activities, even though he was a potential resource. They never wanted to tangle with the old fellow of Chamkalan. He would blow their whole thing through the roof. They wanted just the channels that were open to Raskaan and Satyavan. Karnail Singh used to supply guns and revolvers from Nepal and Pakistan to the Temple through his truck using the fake passes which were issued to carry goods at curfew times. His trucks were running between Delhi and Kashmir which were involved in smuggling and trespassing the borders. Finally, they agree to get Balbir with them and send him wherever he wishes. He earns the money by selling the ammunition to Tarsem. He feels a sense of exhilaration. Whatever he earned this way would be his own. No one would know of it and was ready to accompany Karnail and Hazara.
The news of Uday Singh and Gulnari’s elopement already spread out and reached Jagtara. The Ahluwalias of Maina said that Uday had abducted their girl. They came to Jagtara and threatened his father the very next morning. One of the working men in Balbir’s fields said, “Imagine, running off with a girl who was about to be married-and a higher caste girl at that!” and it shows how was the social set up in Punjab. Balbir argued with them in support of Uday Singh. He had used the whip of traditional prejudice to scourge him. “In the old days, the higher castes did not deign to eat with persons of low caste. To dine together was to reach across the barrier of social status.” The Ahluwalias caught a person called Jassa, Jasbir Singh, who was obviously a terrorist colleague of Kumhareya, and assumed that Jassa was an accomplice. They came to this conclusion because Uday and Gulnari went on a motorcycle which belonged to Jassa. They decided to grill him. But he was not an easy person. He had many criminal records with him that pre-dated his indulgence in political extremism. He had escaped easily from the hands of Ahluwalias after their enquiry. All the news was brought to Balbir by Jheera and he informed that they wanted to question Balbir in this regard. So Balbir decided to go to Chak Deedar on a horse ride that night even though it was ridiculous to find out the home of a woman known as Fat Aunty. When he had come to that village he found that “if Jagtara was old and Chamkalan ancient, the village of Chak Deedar was primitive.” It was more transitory than the old and ancient villages of
Punjab. The place was a hive of small illegal flour mills. It consisted of mud huts. It was a poor village, a village of the lower castes and untouchables. The village was less protected, less secure and poorer. But all around were signs of the new prosperity. The fields were green and gold; there were stacks of hay and the unlicensed flour mills’ illegal advertisements. In such a village, at such a stillness of night he had to find out the Fat Aunty’s home. But for his wonder, Kumhareya himself came out and made his work easy. It was a difficult task for Uday Singh to reach out for Amritsar because the main road was clogged with pickets and barriers made of drums for security reasons. The security was made everywhere to control the possible terrorist attacks on the Asian Games held in Delhi. The Akali Dal had threatened to disrupt the games in order to draw the world’s attention to their demands. Indira Gandhi, the Prime Minister, had retaliated with strict security measures that prevented demonstrators from travelling freely or reaching Delhi. There were check points and all Sikhs were searched for weapons. Balbir advised Uday to get away only at night. Otherwise the Ahluwalias would reach them on anybody’s information. It was not an easy task if Balbir had delivered the message to Amar Singh, because then it would have been the work of his men to arrange for them to get through. Balbir was thinking of going to Temple the next day and deliver the message. Uday and Gulnari thought of marrying in the Golden Temple. Balbir came to know that Uday, before leaving the Old Ruin in Maina, had killed a
man and he killed many on assignments. He wondered he had never realized that a terrorist could be someone he knew. People who killed beyond the level of the emotional personal scale were not expected to have faces. They were horrifying unknown quantum in newspaper reports. “They were aberrations of social rationality, clusters of group insanity. They formed the black hole in the universe of social perceptions.”

Balbir still wondered that this farmhand, this labourer, this son of a potter, this friend, actually used those weapons, which were maintained by his grandfather, on order. And thought that soldiers fight wars, but these people fight against peace, attack the unarmed and unprepared people. Balbir would never join the movement even if he were an extremist in some ways. He did all this just for the sake of money and friendship.

Lok Raj father of Khushi Ram studied his son the tough skin, the strong hands, the brush moustache, the clan turban, the Muhiyali turban with its proud cockade, its turrah. “No,” he said, “the honour of the family is safe as long as I uphold it, it will stay erect like the turrah of our turbans.” In addition, as the turban symbolizes the age-old link between Sikhs and Hindus - having been the choice of head apparel of both communities - and as the novel is itself intricately wound like a turban, the latter becomes the synecdochical equivalent of the whole Punjab, Sikh as well as Hindu, and of Sharma’s nostalgic evocation of his ancestral land, as he describes it in the dedication as well as in the narrative proper. Lok Raj
was the patriarch of his vast joint-family and an elder of one of the martial Muhiyal clans and still one of the biggest landlords in the region. He was the lion of his village, Chamkalan. He was a chess player and he was of eighty-four years old. It was because of him that Khushi Ram got back the money that Balbir had drawn from the bank. Jheera and Parsini, the sweeper woman were his people. He had sent them to look after the things in Jagtar with Balbir. He had sent another person to bus stand to prevent Balbir from going out of Punjab. His social strength was now based on the willing consent and respect of his peers. Even today, Punjab has not lost its feuding spirit. A feud involved not just individuals but entire families. In agricultural Punjab, the nuclear joint-family had not broken up but merely spread out. Elsewhere in India too the Joint-family continued to exercise its hold. The family unit was content usually to keep its grip subtly on an area of business, politics, administration or the field of entertainment. A slight to a family could be avenged through the manipulation of commerce, the law, bureaucratic red-tape or star value. Reparation was possible through a form of barter. It was enough to get the better of an exchange. It was enough to return insult with humiliation. The standard was money and prestige. In Punjab the standard was blood. Indian society is a jungle of familial vines. It is a maze of hierarchical social structures. Elders get respect in every family. The preservation of the family and the regulated extension of it is a prime concern. So it has come about that four thousand year old values
and viewpoints have been passed on unaltered. The real core of India has not merely survived but won over the centuries. It has won over every conqueror absorbing every thought, language and mode. It has passed over honours, distinctions and titles bestowed by rulers and not bent the knee to the honoured or the honouring. It is this woebegone, bull-headed, recalcitrant core that has, deep down, kept India fighting. This core all over India knew itself and held to itself and kept studying more about itself in order to be sure. “For all decisions of governance had to take into account this core that could not be moved except by its own will. This is what makes for the inner pride of India.”

Portuguese had come to India and were rebuffed by it and called it casta, and India took the word to herself and said she was caste-ridden. The Greeks and Persians pronounced the word Indus as Hindus. And India had taken the name to her peoples. The Moghuls came and said this was the land of the Hindus and the land was Hindustan. The British came and presumed ‘Hindu’ was a religion. And again India took that to herself. But the core remained what it was, unique and indivisible. In the name of caste, country and religion battles were and are fought, people died. But the core remained spreading its tentacles. Its strength was underestimated by the foreigners. Yet when two Indians meet anywhere, they are linked by the same core. The institution of the family in India goes beyond the nuclear joint-family with its forty to fifty members, often living under the same
Balbir’s was a farming family of the rambunctious, warring kind that inhabits most areas of Punjab. It had its individuality and spreads out too, to other regions. But the head of the clan remained his grandfather Lok Raj, generally known as Babaji, the patriarch. The emphasis on family spirit is so great that the best of the breed will follow like lemmings or a herd of wild horses over the cliff. There are always relations among the different families. That is why the familial web is strengthened and reinforced. So the family grows, making the distant near and closing upon its own extensions. In the agricultural communities, a patriarch has great power and his will can hold sway over the life and death wishes of the clan.

So Lok Raj was unique. He was not just a man but the embodiment of two villages. Both Jagtara and Chamkalan carried the impress of his personality. He was their very soul. Gyan Chand was his son, sixty-four years old. He was the father of the “powerful and popular Satyavan who was now philandering somewhere in Europe along with that rascal Raskaan.”

Lok Raj and his son were against the marriage of Aadran to the Bank Manager’s son because nobody had seen the boy, who was in England. There were many instances of such marriages that the boys were not at all in the scene, but the parents were giving away their daughters in marriage only because the boys were in foreign countries. One such instance is that of a village of Maina where the parents were marrying off a girl called Gulnari, Gulnari Kaur the Ahluwalia girl, to a photograph. The man was in Canada and such a miser that he
would not even come to his own wedding. “Many girls from India, especially from Punjab, were sent as spouses to bridegrooms-in-absentia. Thus, registered as wives, they could get into western countries through the loophole in immigration laws.”

Lok Raj was also opposed to Balbir’s intentions of going out of Punjab, and warned Khushi Ram about Tarsem and the forged money. He gave clear instructions to Khushi Ram that Balbir should not be given time to think. He was as quick as a young leopard. If permitted, he would fly away. “Beware”, said Lok Raj, “Balbir is my blood after all. The more you thwart him the more dangerous he will become.”

Balbir visits the Golden Temple and meets Amar Singh and delivers the message from Uday. Amar Singh agrees to help Uday and orders his men to act in that direction. They both talk much and exchange their views on the present politics and the reason behind the activities of the extremists. They were fighting for a cause and they were fighting because the government did not listen to them. Balbir listens to the speech of Bhindranwale who says that the injustice done to Sikhs must be avenged. A Sikh must retain his identity and he must insist on some difference from a Hindu. He must fight for himself. Otherwise a Hindu would replace a Sikh everywhere. Mahatma Gandhi with a walking stick is not the father of India, the father of India must be with a weapon. Balbir has lots of questions to
ask Amar but returns with the intention to meet Uday again. In the second visit, Balbir and Amar continue their talk. Basically Balbir was not a political person, and he could not understand the views of Amar. Balbir sees lives as lives, human beings as human beings. Amar is of the opinion that they were fighting to teach a lesson to the Hindu government. Balbir opposes the idea on the fact that the government is a secular one elected by millions of people. But Amar says, “the hindus are in a majority so it ends up being a hindu government.” Balbir says, “To an average hindu, religion is not a dogma but a code of behaviour, a way of life” and “Man is not just a religious entity.” He opposes firmly the violence that the Amar and his group engage in, because the response to violence will only be violence. When he is about to leave the place, he finds Uday who was kept in room stripped to the waist, wrists were tied to his top knot and the cord bound him to the bar of the string-bed. His feet were a few inches above the floor, tied at the ankles to the frame of the bed. It is the punishment for him for breaking up an action group. And then he goes away with the intention to talk to the Fat Aunty.

Meanwhile, Gulnari comes back to her village and her family keeps her in a room because she is in a state of shock and it is impossible to get one coherent sentence out of her. When her father meets her, he asks her to fly away anywhere she likes and keeps open the door of the room. But she thinks in the other way. She writes a letter to her mother and Kulavanti. Then she takes off her red bridal
bangles and using the stone, patiently and diligently, crushes the glass bangles to powder and adds it to water and swallows the powder. Thus she ends her life without troubling Balbir.

When he visits the Temple for the third time with Dev Singh, Gulnari’s uncle, Amar comes to know that he belongs to the family of Chibbers and a relative of Satyavan, a big shot in the gun running trade. So he keeps Balbir as a hostage in order to use him as a lever to get his relative Satyavan to have in touch with a bigger pipeline of gun running business. So he is to be in the Temple till Satyavan manages to supply a big consignment of guns to Tarsem, who was in charge of this conspiracy. Then only will they release him. When the matter reaches the patriarch, the old man and Satyavan, they plan a plot, with the help of Karnail Singh and two of Satyavan’s friends from Germany and Raskaan, to bring out Balbir out of the Golden Temple. They succeed in it anyway. The plan for the rescue of Balbir is audacious and brilliant. Balbir is out but he has left part of himself in the Temple. Then the family arranges the marriages of Aardan and Balbir. In the plane to Europe, Balbir sitting beside his wife laughs at her and sheepishly he begins to take the turban off. “The days of the turban were over.”

Before that the Indian army enters the Temple and begins to clean it up. In the fight, which was narrated realistically as it was happened, 92 soldiers had died and nearly 300 had been injured. 554 terrorists had been killed, 121 wounded and
1592 persons had been apprehended. Bhindranwale’s body is identified among a pile of others. Shahbeg Singh too was dead. In the village of Jagtara the days and nights of sudden curfew were over. Balbir never hears of Amar Singh again. More than that, Balbir wants to leave. He wants to be free of Punjab and its blood-letting, bloodthirsty concerns. He wants to be free of his family. The only avenue he could see was marriage, that too at the will of the patriarch.

The novelist himself explains the situation in Punjab as “here, in my village, the men carry guns and anger easily between their quotidian farming chores. These are the men of the far North.......born out of and into war. They carry their bloodshed lightly between jokes and daily lawful living. They are men and women of the earth, as basic as that - as quick to yield harvests of kindness and goodwill, as quick to dry up and turn sullen and destroy. These are my people.”

Even though Sharma’s rhetoric passes from “men” to “men and women” above, women remain the repositories of alterity and otherness, lacking autonomous subjectivity in a narrative cast along the axes of male bonding and brotherhood, of father-son relations, of family loyalty and betrayal. While there are some seemingly strong female characters - Gulnari assists Uday a Bhindranwale follower, in his terrorist activities, while Renate Raskaan's German wife, is the one who is business savvy and runs their restaurants almost single-handedly - they remain secondary to the male plot of high adventure and fraternal relations. The return to the patriarchal
fold of Balbir, the prodigal son, remains the crux of the narrative, whereas the women - Gulnari and Renate, Kulwanti and Aadran - support both sexually and ideologically the male quest for an andocentric clan identity. Cast one and all in sexually over determined imagery - Gulnari, who has “a slightly plump figure” and “eyes . . . like dancing peacocks,” is “ravishingly attractive” and is pursued by both Uday and Balbir. Kulwanti seduces Balbir with her “nipples….long and tapering like cloves” and her “rich pubescence,” and he comes to her “not as a lover....but as a plunderer roiling in to desecrate and sully”; Schliemacher’s mistress poses in the nude for him and he shares her photographs with his “admir ing” male companions - sexual beings all, the female characters overwhelmingly re-enact stereotypical male typologies of women.

Further, Gulnari’s story in particular underscores the masculinist enterprise of the Sikh fundamentalists. A young woman who seeks release from a tragic family life - her mother is mad, her father paralytic - in the “togetherness, friendship, adventure” of the movement, she ends up earning only the distrust of the leaders when her lists of freedom fighters’ names fall into the hands of the police. In addition, Uday falls in love with her and so sullies the purity of the movement, the punishment for both is death: by suicide for her, and by torture and murder for him. As Amar Singh, a leader in the Bhindranwale camp, puts it, “It’s an example to the rest. They come and see how he is being punished for breaking
up an action group. Girls who join us can see how we protect them. The movement cannot be sullied by lust.”

There are only a couple of passing mentions of women joining Bhindranwale’s faction and training as guerrillas in the Khalistan liberation movement. Arguments for and against the fundamentalists’ militant tactics are phrased in masculine terminology that labels women as weak and in need of protection; “What do you gain by making women into widows and children into orphans?” queries Balbir of Amar Singh, displacing the emphasis from the suffering of men to that of women, but only to elicit a male response; “sisters and mothers are common to all religions,” answers Amar Singh, adding, “we don't kill women unless absolutely necessary.”

The third-person narrator, whose point of view appears to be conterminous with Sharma’s, while critical of the extremists, voices his opposition to their tactics and general approval of the Punjabi character in language that glorifies patriarchal kinship and violence.

Conclusion:

As a novel of social realism, it celebrates the values of class, caste, tribe, race, gender, bravery, violence, sex, adventure, and victory. When a Punjabi wishes to do well, he can be totally self-sacrificing; when he wishes to do damage he can be terrible. He will often martyr himself unhesitatingly in order to avenge what he thinks is a wrong. As a popular folk-song has it: “Doh din jeena par jeena toard dey naal. Live two days but live with flair.”
Among Punjabi Hindus and Sikhs, the ties were even stronger, closer and often literally bonds of immediate blood kinship. “If the extremists had their way they would turn father against son and brother against brother. There would be murders within the family.” In order to condemn what he regards as his murderous fanaticism, Sharma quotes some of Bhindranwale’s speeches verbatim but fails to see the similarities in the phallocentrism underlying both the latter’s and his own, the narrative focalizer’s ideological stances. In the contemporary Indian context, such movements in Punjab, Kashmir, and Assam, are certainly worthy of the critical attention that the political involvement is more than that of the involvement of society.

The narrative is set against the horrendous events of 1984 in Punjab. Sharma sets his thriller around the 1984 Operation Bluestar military action taken against Sikh militants in Amritsar, adopting the metaphor of the turban as his defining structural device. Naipaul focuses primarily upon the evolution of Bhindranwale as a charismatic, millenarian leader in conducting his journalistic inquiry into the exigencies of post-Bluestar Sikh militarism and Rushdie employs the framework of Star Trek and its camaraderie to tell the tale of a Sikh loyalist.
Introduction:

Upamanya Chatterjee is an Indian author and administrator, notable for his work set in the milieu of the Indian Administrative Service, especially his first novel *English, August*.

Born in Patna, Bihar (India), he was educated at St.Xavier’s School and St.Stephen’s College in Delhi. He joined Indian Administrative Service (IAS) in 1983, later following the success of his novel *English, August*, moved to the United Kingdom to serve as the writer in Residence at the University of Kent. A writer of short stories and novels, in 1998 he was appointed Director of Languages in the ministry of Human Resource Development for the Indian Government.

Chatterjee has written a handful of short stories of which “*The Assassination of Indira Gandhi*” and “*Watching Them*” are particularly noteworthy. His best-seller *English August*, subtitled *An Indian Story*, was first published in India in 1988 (subsequently made into a major film) and has since been reprinted several times. A review in Punch described the novel as - beautifully written …… *English, August* is a marvellously intelligent and entertaining novel, and especially for anyone curious about modern India. New York Times book review says that the novel is convincing, entertaining, moving and timeless. It merits an accolade that’s
far harder to earn than ‘authentic’. It is a classic. It is also a novel with resonating concerns about the meaning of maturity in the modern era. It is one of the most important novels in Indian Writing in English, but not for the usual reasons. Indeed, it is at war with ‘importance’, and is one of the few Indian English novels in the last two decades, genuinely and wonderfully impelled by irreverence and aimlessness. It is this acutely intelligent conflation of self discovery with the puncturing of solemnity that makes this novel not only a significant work, but a much-loved one.

**Plot:**

Chatterjee’s *English, August*, a slacker bildungsroman, first published in 1988 is set during that decade, tells of a privileged young man’s year of living languorously. Agastya Sen, nicknamed “August” for his anglophile tendencies, is the urbane, aimless son of a respected government official, who enters the elite Indian Administrative Service and is posted as a trainee to a small town deep in the interior, remote provincial village of Madna, a ‘tiny-dot’ in the vast Indian hinterland. Here he finds himself a foreigner in his own country, wary of cholera, defenseless against mosquitoes, and shocked by the sight of a tribal woman.

The posting-cum-training starts as a tremendous culture shock for Agastya, a city boy. However, it eventually becomes one long philosophical journey and a
process of self discovery. Agastya Sen’s sense of dislocation is only compounded by his extreme lack of interest in the bizarre ways of government and administration, while his mind is dominated by marijuana, masturbation and the meditations of Marcus Aurelius, images from his previous profoundly urban life. His work in Madna would ideally require him to be a devoted servant of the people.

The novel follows Agastya Sen, a young westernized Indian Civil Servant, whose imagination is dominated by women, literature and soft drugs. This vivid account of real Indian by the young officer posted to the small provincial town of Madna is a funny, wryly observed account of Sen’s years in the sticks, says a reviewer in the Observer.

The major theme of the novel is the isolation of the author’s experiences, (as the novel is based on the author’s experiences, in the first few months of being an IAS Officer, and the novel has this autobiographical background), and the impossibility, considering he is a city boy, of his coming to terms with his new rural status. Some of the themes explored in the novel are boredom, existential crisis, scarcity of women, masturbation, bouts of intensive exercise alternating with extended dope sessions.
There are several fascinating, memorable and well-drawn characters in the novel; bureaucrats and their snobbish wives, a visiting westerner, a holy man, a police chief who likes pornography, Sen’s father, his boss Srivastav, Bajaj, his cook Vasant, Dhrubo, Sathe, Shankar, his uncle Pultukaku, Mohan Gandhi, and his wife Rohini, John Avery and his Indian wife Sita; these characters are so real and detailed that anyone can recall them at some point of time.

The story was written in the third person, from his point of view. It recorded mainly the daily round of activities, the characters he met and his restlessness.

Analysis:

Chatterjee’s story centers around a recent college graduate named Agastya Sen, known to his friends as August and to his family as Ogu. Agastya lives the dissolute, carefree life of the privileged in Delhi, his father being the Governor of Bengal. Unfortunately his mother, a Catholic from Goa, “died of meningitis when he had been less than three.”\textsuperscript{54} So he was raised largely by his aunts. He passes seemingly effortlessly through school and colleges, acquiring a hybrid (Western/Indian) life style that includes ample quantities of alcohol and marijuana. His major goal in life is simply to be happy, to live contentedly and not be bothered, and certainly not to fall into the rut of commuting to an office, working, commuting home, and then rising the next day to do it all again until he dies.
Having successfully achieved a high score on the national examinations for government service, however, August consents to a position in the Indian Administrative Service. He is sent off for a year’s training in district administration to “a small district town called Madna”, which was eighteen hours away from Delhi by the fastest train. Madna is the hottest town in India, deep in the sticks. There he finds “the sun seemed to char his head and neck. Eight fifteen in the morning and he could almost sense the prickly heat spring up on his skin.” Brought up in cosmopolitan cities like Calcutta and Delhi all his life, Agastya finds it difficult to adjust to the ambience in Madna. At one instance the driver said to Agastya, “you are from a city. This place will initially seem very different.” Agastya’s friend Dhrubo comments on his going to Madna that, “what’ll you do for sex and marijuana in Madna?” and “I’ve a feeling, August, you’re going to get hazaar fucked in Madna.” These comments themselves set much of the tone of the novel-as a marked pointer to the cultural confusion of Agastya. At a crucial moment, Mrs. Rajan tells Agastya, “Agastya - you have a lovely name, really so ethnic - how would you define the word “Indian”?” Agastya avoids the question because, he is in a quandary not knowing the cultural and mythic import of his name where as he knew well his social status as an IAS officer. Agastya recognizes the confusion: “Amazing mix, the English we speak……our accents are Indian, but we prefer August to Agastya.” The novel presents a new generation of
Indians strongly influenced by modern American culture. Agastya is an unlikely bureaucrat and he does not even attempt to fit into the mould. All that he does as a trainee baffles him completely. But he is eager to find meaning and get a sense of direction in life.

In Madna, Agastya finds himself surrounded by incompetents and cranks, time wasters, bureaucrats, and crazies. Once there, he begins a training period and proves himself to be a heroic shirker of work, an incorrigible pot smoker, a compulsive freeloader, and an almost pathological liar. He arrives to work at 11.30 in the morning and works until lunch, and then retires to his private room for the rest of the afternoon, getting bored, listening to music, reading some occasional Marcus Aurelius, and sleeping. Still, despite his best efforts to do little or nothing, August ingratiates himself into the local society and actually learns bits and pieces of his future job. Along the way, he develops friendship with an iconoclastic editorial cartoonist named Sathe, a good-hearted alcoholic government worker named Shankar, and Madna’s Police Chief Kumar, who likes pornography. When he finally moves into a position of modest responsibility as a Block Development Officer in the even smaller and more backward village of Jompanna, August surprises himself by unexpectedly, and modestly heroically solving the village’s water shortage problem.
The entire story is told in a serio-comic vein and humour arises from incongruity and dislocation. The novelist mixes the absurd with the poignant. While being affectionate, he is unsparing in his projection of contemporary India. Agastya and his city friends are drawn to and are troubled by the growing domination of western culture. But during his tenure as a trainee in Madna, Agastya begins to have some sense of what is important and what is of interest to him. There are no absolutes, no certainties, but perhaps a growing realization of the need to be himself, to be rooted and the ultimate need to be happy.

Chatterjee’s *English, August* carries a paradoxical subtitle, “*An Indian Story*”, and indeed it is, yet it is also a universal story about growing up and finding one’s place in the world, about giving up one’s ideals and acceeding to the tedious realities and responsibilities of adult life. The subtitle clearly underlines Agastya’s hybridized position. The novel projects the troubled consciousness of Agastya and portrays the conflict within his ‘fractured self’. The conflict finally forces him to step out of his colonial self, his western education and training and discover himself through his own cultural moorings. At the end of the novel he writes to Dhrubo “…… I’ve become your American, taking a year off after college to discover himself.”

Chatterjee’s is a tale of India’s multiple worlds, from the west itself, the cosmopolitan strivers of the big cities, the ineffectual but life-time-employed government workers, and the countless millions of Indians living in the
rural countryside. The whole story is set in rural India. Chatterjee reminds us constantly of India’s many languages, of the difficulty that the people of one nation can have in understanding one another’s lives as well as their speech.

No doubt, the most noteworthy aspect of *English, August* is its humour. But equally important is its concepts of rural life in India. Many a times it is observed with the facts in the novel itself. Agastya appears as a comic hero sometimes, wise-cracking and irreverent with regard to India’s social and cultural institutions. One of his first observations in Madna is an excruciatingly ugly statue of Gandhi. The best of Chatterjee’s observations concern India itself. He describes his father’s serious approach to life as a blend of Marcus Aurelius and Reader’s Digest, describes an over westernized college classmate as a kind of person who would love to get AIDS because “it is raging in America”, and notes that most of us seem to be so grateful that Forster wrote that novel about India. Chatterjee creates an exceptionally strong cast of distinctly memorable supporting characters who orbit dizzily around August’s search for himself. August’s boss Srivastav, is a partly bloviating big shot, yet a surprisingly good-hearted and efficient administrator. Another government administrator named Bajaj is described as “very tall and worryingly thin, with large woebegone eyes and a receding chin, as though his progenitors had been a female Spaniel and Don Quixote.” Then there is August’s cook Vasant, Dhrubo, Sathe, Shankar, August’s hilariously sarcastic
uncle Pultukaku, Mohan Gandhi with his wife Rohini, and the strange story of John Avery and his Indian wife Sita, who set out to find the place where Avery’s grandfather was devoured by a lion half a century earlier.

The characters written by him are so real and detailed that while reading the book one could recall meeting the Srivastav’s and Sathe’s and Shankar’s at some point of time in one’s life. One can find oneself in Madna, breathing amongst the cows and rickshawallahs and all those government officials. One cannot believe that any Indian who has been brought up in the cities of this country faces the problem of blending in with smaller districts due to factors like language, convenience and prejudice.

The novel offers a marvellously entertaining passage to modern India, with all its complexities, paradoxes, sufferings and inanition. Along the way, Chatterjee drops little observational gems on the path, as when he observes that most Indians “would never read Gandhi, much less implement him” because “it was always much easier to deify a hero than to understand him”.

Agastya was westernized and urbanized. He had taken the post impulsively to gain a new perspective on his country. But soon he grew stupefied from the heat of Madna, the boredom of the daily routine and his self-important superiors, the bad food, too much pot and the lack of available women. Because of his education
and background he felt like an outsider. He sought comfort from his tapes of Tagore and Ella Fitzgerald and solace in the Bhagavad Gita and Marcus Aurelius.

The kind of life the main protagonist leads in Madna is perhaps what most of the people of this generation go through when they are put in situations similar to what he finds himself in. The author has used satire and wit extremely well to disguise the catastrophes ensued by the culture and traditions in India. The sheer variety of languages within a few blocks of a town makes it very difficult to communicate, leave alone trying to administer a whole state.

Son of a Governor anglicized and megapolitan, Agastya Sen is induced into the elite Indian Administrative Service when he is 23. Apparently Agastya Sen’s is a success story. But he fails to become part of his new set up. He stands alone and detached and scans the whole bureaucratic structure with the objectivity of a man of science. India’s complex bureaucracy is an unwieldy bequest of the Raj and in spite of its Indianization, the bureaucracy in India continues to retain much of its imperial character. The bureaucrats exhibit the old accouterments of importance like the “flashing orange light on the roof of the car” with bureaucratic attitudes like “if the country is moving it is because of us only.” Pomposity is the norm rather than the exception, all in the name of maintaining the dignity of office. The reason for such pomposity is “to be able to play God” over thousands of kilometers is “not conducive to humility.” Sen sensitive, young, lover of music,
with a public school education and masters in English literature finds real India too remote either for his comprehension or active intervention. Delhi and Calcutta, the two metropolis are part of his past. His first glimpse of Madna, a small provincial town in the South, where he is posted as a trainee, disturbs and unsettles him: “Cigarette-and-paan dhabas, disreputable food stalls, both lit by fierce kerosene lamps, cattle and clanging rickshaws on the road, and the rich sound of trucks in slush from an overflowing drain; he felt as though he was living someone else’s life”. Delhi and Madna seem to be “two extreme points of an unreal existence” and naturally real India and those who rule it do not organically connect. Agastya’s public school education alienates him from his cultural heritage and his position as an IAS officer distances him from the masses.

In the course of the book, author observed various paths that people around him had taken: throwing themselves into administrative routine; facing life with mockery; drinking, getting stoned or other debaucheries; devoting themselves selflessly to others; or engaging in revolutionary agitation like the local Naxalites. Or like his college friends in Delhi, beginning lucrative careers in the private sector as bankers or accountants. But at the end of the book, after achieving a bit of perspective he seemed still unsure of the path to take. As the novel progresses August becomes very self involved, cynical, with little compassion for others. He does not really grow close to anyone over time, and it made things a bit
monotonous by the end. Yet it was also highly entertaining to read his reactions to the people around him, as he tried to deal with his new surroundings and work out how to proceed. The atmosphere of boredom in a strange unattractive place, of groping of one’s bearings, of being a person between two worlds, is communicated well. The quiet introspection is refreshing, compared to some other more flamboyant writers for this reason. And many of the mordant observations and comments, especially in the early chapters are very funny, real and life like.

The perspectives of the man’s father and uncle, the voices of traditional values and experience that he couldn’t quite share, were a useful contrast: “The greatest praise you mimic long for is to be called European Junkies……”73 “Most of us, Orgu, live with a vague dissatisfaction if we are lucky. Living as we do, upon us is imposed a particular rhythm - birth, education, job, marriage, then birth again, but we all have minds, don’t we?”74 told his father at their last meeting.

Perceptive and discerning, Agastya soon realizes that bureaucracy is all about putting up an image. The image of the officer is all-important and he finds everyone in the elite circle vying with each other in trying to put up an image. If the SDM of Rameri Mr.Menon’s smugness is endemic among IAS officers, there is Rajan with his egregious pomposity. But then the yawning gap between their human, fallible, vulnerable and erring selves and their perfect public image is only too visible. Agastya, a novice in administration is tutored by his seniors. Srivastav
cautions him, “As an IAS officer you can’t mix with everybody. It’s not a job, bhai, where what you do after office is entirely your own private business, you’re also responsible to Government in the after-hours.”  
Ironically the Dainik reports that the same Srivastav was having an extra-marital affair with a female BDO of Nurana who later committed suicide. Agastya’s identity is also super imposed in Madna. “…..Mr. Sen, IAS?” “……IAS was always to be attached to his name; it almost became his surname”. One also has to look like a bureaucrat: “……a bureaucrat ought to be soft and clean-shaven, bespectacled…..” and Agastya’s friend Dhrubo tells him “…..you don’t look the role.” Later Agastya’s efficiency as an officer is also attributed to his being an IAS. The residents of Jompanna where he is posted as a BDO say, “IAS after all.” From dress to demeanour, style of functioning, an IAS officer is expected to play a pre-defined role and play it to perfection.

Agastya’s sense of alienation deepens not finding a reasonable answer to the question as to who he is. He lacks a definite sense of identity which comes from being rooted in one’s culture. Every human subject is necessarily “encultured” and an identity is constituted out of cultural experience. Agastya has no doubt that he is an Indian, a Bengali. But he is distanced from his native culture and tradition, from ties that bind family, friends, history, and myths of the Land. Brought up by surrogate parents in the absence of a mother, educated in a boarding school in
Darjeeling when he paid occasional visits to his father, Agastya does not develop very strong family bonds. Home is not for him the place, which is the reservoir of public myths and private memories. Here he does not get his education or training in the indigenous cultural texts, such as the Bhagavata, the Puranas or the Gita. English translation of the Ramayana is a mere literary curiosity for him and while at Madna when he reads a verse aloud from the Gita, “strong men know not despair, Arjuna, for this winds neither heaven nor earth”, his own voice sounds strange and unfamiliar. He is unable to connect; does not feel connected and the words of the Gita do not register in his mind. He desperately feels the need for believing in something, “in anything beyond himself”, but fails. Agastya recalls that all the while Durga Puja meant “watching the women in eye blinding silk, and releasing balloons against the night sky”, faith for him has always been just festivity. Always desirous of being an Anglo with an ability to speak in English with their accent, Agastya fails to realize the mythical import of his name. And his name is anglicized from the name of a revered sage in the Ramayana to English August. Pultukaku is anguished and angry when he hears the name August, he considers it as a “mimic” of “European Junkies”. Agastya, August, Orgu, Mr.Sen IAS, his numerous “names seemed like aliases, for his different lives.”

The novel however does not focus on Agastya’s plight alone but on the plight of the entire “cola generation” who like Agastya suffer from a sense of
inauthenticity and dislocation. Agastya’s childhood friend Dhrubo with a Ph.D. from Yale is bothered about everything that doesn’t hang together. “Yale and Durga Puja”...“it’s unreal”.83 His other friend Mahindra Bhatia, now a Forest Officer in Madna, with his fascination for western lifestyle is ready to contact AIDS simply because it is raging in America. An identity involves a continual interface and exchange of cultural performances that in turn produce a mutual and mutable recognition of cultural identity. Agastya tries to feel settled and assumes some kind of role to fit into the image of a bureaucrat. He has to act out the role of a bureaucrat. Consciously, he tries to sound pompous, “Sir, my name is Sen, I am an IAS Officer”,84 while introducing himself to Mr. Bajaj, the District Development Officer. He starts lying and says that he has done his BA from Cambridge, that his wife is a Norwegian Muslim while he is still unmarried. In time he learns to scowl like Srivastav, learns to make “night halts”, and “playing personality games with a care-taker cook”.85 While posted as a BDO in Jompanna he seemingly tries to establish a “purposeful dialogue” with the intriguing parties and fails, learns to react to most topics in the Block Panchayat meetings with “competent bureaucratic vagueness.”86 But finally he is unable to cope with the multiple roles that he is expected to play: the tentative and oppositional identities exasperate him and he makes a hasty retreat into his secret life. He longs “for privacy” “....Marijuana and nakedness, soft hopelessly incongruous music, and the
thoughts that ferment in isolation”, 87 a place where he could “fantasize without restraint” 88.

The dislocation between his present and past makes him restless because his past does not integrate into his present time and again his mind goes back to his past and in Madna he longs for simple touches of his past. His only ambition while at Madna is to clutch the simple things associated with Pultukaku’s house in Delhi, “simple things, good food, a lawn shaded by neem, jacaranda and gulmohar trees……”89 He tries to revive his sense of belonging there. His masters in English had not prepared him for the ground realities of the country. The world of ideas and the practical world seem to be wide apart and in perpetual conflict as Srivastav remarks, “that a young man in Azamganj should find it essential to study something as unnecessary as Hamlet that is absurd…”90 Chaucer and Swift become irrelevant while dealing with problem like scarcity of water in a drought prone area or tackling problem like a Police Patil conniving for a murder.”91 The heterogeneous nature of problems exasperates Agastya. Remembrances of things past continue to mock him with images of lost worlds and “semblances of a pattern.”92 But he realizes that perhaps he longs for the past just to escape an uncongenial present. His present also refuses to cohere, “Endless movement……transfers to alien places, passages to distant shore, looking for luck…..”93 all without purpose makes him feel restless and reinforce his need to be
happy. He grows weary of living three different lives in Madna, “…… the official with its social concomitance, the unofficial which included boozing with Shankar and Sathe, and later with Bhatia, and the secret in the universe of his room, which encompassed jogging by moonlight.”\textsuperscript{94} He is unable to accommodate more than one world at a time and cries out in despair, “Please, only one world at a time”.\textsuperscript{95} Whenever he looked forward to his future, “anchorlessness” seemed to be one of his “chaotic concerns”, “battling a sense of waste…… was another.”\textsuperscript{96} He feels guilty about being immersed in himself while “a doctor had worked a miracle”.\textsuperscript{97} Agastya is overcome with a painful realization that, “you can’t really help anyone else if you yourself aren’t feeling alright.”\textsuperscript{98}

No one has captured the widening chasm between urban and rural India as brilliantly as this. An average Indian growing up in an Indian mega polis like Bombay or Bangalore will tell that he feels more at home in New York or London than in a place like Madna in rural India. A host of Indian authors like Rushdie and Naipaul write books for the western audience, but this one is written for the Indian one - in a satirical style, totally against the current trend of Indian authors who write in a moving spiritual and philosophical way. While Naipaul is eternally pessimistic and defeatist, and Rushdie amazingly reminiscing, Chatterjee is a realist. Agastya Sen the main character is the average Indian. He basically cares about India and genuinely wants to make a difference, but knows that it is not his
cup of tea and so accepts the reality and tries to live through it, by looking at the whole experience through the prism of satire. Truly, if there is an Indian author who deserves accolades as much as Naipaul and Rushdie, it definitely is Chatterjee.

This novel is based on the author’s experiences in the first few months of being an IAS officer when he is posted to a small township like Madna. This autobiographical background gives authenticity and depth to the novel. Not surprisingly, a major theme of the book is the isolation the author experiences, and the impossibility considering he is a city boy, of his coming to terms with his new rival status.

The book has a deliciously irrelevant air about it, about life and the IAS which is what makes it such compelling reading. It’s the first job the protagonist has ever had and one finds it very easy to relate to the dilemmas and challenges he faces therein. This book has character and a very ‘real’ feel to it, it scores high on originality and everything about it feels new, the author seems to be covering ground not covered before by any other author. The novel is quite critical about the bureaucracy and some of the characters the author mocks at are easily recognizable as being based on real people he encountered when he was in the town that serves as the model for Madna. Chatterjee manages to capture the red tape surrounding much of Indian governing to perfection, and does it with the perfect dose of
humour and self-depreciation. No surprise then that the book caused quite a few ripples in the IAS circle when it came out.

*English, August*, coming from the pen of a civil servant himself, it lends itself the empathy so eminent in the flow of the book and adds an extraordinary charm to it. The fact that this is a bit overdone might be excused as a means of bringing it all the more closer to life. In Madna, Sen experiences the Indian Kitsch in all its forms - relics of the British empire like the district bureaucracy and the language it speaks, the monsoon, Gandhi, savants, the enduring contours of underdevelopment and more. Through this confusion, he is led in lurches to the old Hindu belief in the virtues of renunciation and towards an uncertain knowledge of the self.

For Agastya, this journey is a traumatic one. The novel delves into the innate struggle between rationality and the principle of contradictions that always returns to prove a point. Being brought up in a ‘big city’ with its typical life style and then moving to a ‘small’, in fact very small town where life is so very different and in pursuit of what? This is the question that raises its head only after one is into the situation. Like a reactive complaint, it exists only after the event has happened and gives a person little chance to try to avoid it. This then leads to attitudes and responses that are the most extraordinary in the ordinary occurrence of things until it provokes the barren thoughts that are perhaps always very close to the surface in
all the readers. This whole flow has found basis in the book in its most natural form. The imagery and characters are all symbolic of the living entities that go through the readers’ lives in various unprecedented ways as they in oblivion jump from one incident to another. In oblivion more because readers’ actions are conscious but their basis seldom are. This struggle that readers always run away from, is what keeps returning to them. To face it or to make it an excuse for what they could have been but are not, is in their hands. This is perhaps what Chatterjee in a very subtle manner has tried to bring out for the readers to reflect upon.

**Conclusion:**

As a novel of Social Realism it has painted an accurate, colourful and at times depressing picture of the realities of the Indian Administrative Service. This novel provides an excellent window into the India that was and gives a perspective on things as they stand today. It has its most insightful moments when August is having conversations with his drugged, bored and creative mind. The novel has achieved a cult following among much of India’s urban youth because it succeeds in exploring the absolute dichotomy of the two worlds they inhabit - the western city and the Indian village. As a particularly enjoyable character, Sathe always used to say laconically that each language has its own culture, almost begging the question about the culture and the attitude of the protagonist Agastya and his culture.
Chatterjee may be forgiven some literary excesses in a book that is quite frankly a premier on modern India; an Indian that is real and immediate in distinction to Rushdie’s exotic caricatures. For any fortunate souls that have visited and endured any Indian government office of small town, this book rings hilariously true in its conception and details.

While some flashes of humour are to be found at the expense of various wives, visitors, servants and officials, the overall impact of this narrative is minimal. Few will be surprised to learn that the privileged urban Sen feels like a foreigner in the country, and few will be surprised by the biting portrayal of the IAS. And while one gets a rather vivid picture of an Indian backwater, nothing really ever happens in the story. So, while the novel may be considered commendable for “telling it like it is”, it’s a fairly plodding tale which fails to resonate.
Notes

1 Partap Sharma, *Days of the Turban* (New Delhi: Rupa, 1986) Title page.
2 Sharma 143.
3 Sharma 54.
4 Sharma 4.
5 Sharma 3.
6 Sharma 4.
7 Sharma 5.
8 Sharma 6.
9 Sharma 78.
10 Sharma 86.
11 Sharma 101.
12 Sharma 102.
13 Sharma 12.
14 Sharma 12.
15 Sharma 15.
16 Sharma 18-19.
17 Sharma 22-23.
18 Sharma 24.
19 Sharma 24.
20 Sharma 25.
21 Sharma 42.
22 Sharma 44.
23 Sharma 51.
24 Sharma 69.
25 Sharma 70.
26 Sharma 71-72.
27 Sharma 73.
28 Sharma 126.
29 Sharma 126.
30 Sharma 141.
31 Sharma 149.
32 Sharma 38.
33 Sharma 30.
34 Sharma 34.
35 Sharma 45.
36 Sharma 39.
37 Sharma 222.
38 Sharma 223.
39 Sharma 225.
40 Sharma 385.
41 Sharma Dedication page.
42 Sharma 55.
43 Sharma 63.
44 Sharma 66.
45 Sharma 64.
46 Sharma 93.
47 Sharma 238.
48 Sharma 231.
49 Sharma 221.
50 Sharma 230.
51 Sharma 230.
52 Sharma 173.
53 Sharma 173-74.
55 Chatterjee 1.
56 Chatterjee 7.
57 Chatterjee 19.
58 Chatterjee 3.
59 Chatterjee 1.
60 Chatterjee 187.
61 Chatterjee 1.
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