Chapter 6:

Illusion and Disillusion of Power of Bureaucrats in Postcolonial India–Upamanyu Chatterjee’s *English, August*
Chapter three, four and five of the study have described the turmoils of National Emergency whereas this chapter describes the prevalent bureaucratic culture of India through the protagonist, Agastya. It focuses on how politics is played by bureaucrats by making pawn of the common man and also how bureaucrats themselves become pawns in the hands of the system.

The novelist, Upamanyu Chatterjee is an Indian Civil Servant who currently serves as a Joint Secretary to the Government of India in the Ministry of Defence. He is best known for his novel *English, August* which is adapted into a film of the same title. *English, August* is an account of urban India’s encounter with the provincial Bharat. The novel describes the experiences, beliefs and attitudes of Agastya Sen, who is a mouthpiece of the author, a trainee bureaucrat.

The novel opens with an informal conversation between Agastya, who is to leave for Madna for his probationary period as an IAS officer and Dhruvo, Agastya’s friend who is back from Yale University after his higher studies. Agastya considers himself as one “with no special attitude for anything” and thinks, “I should have been a photographer or a maker of ad films something like that, shallow and urban.” He considers himself a misfit, anchorless and misplaced and does not seem to enjoy the role of an IAS officer. Used to metro life, he finds happiness in nothing and thinks he is misbegotten in a world which he does not seem to fit in.

He finds it difficult to get used to his job and Madna. His life in Madna consists of idling in his room, watching lizards racing across the room, day – dreaming, thinking of past, extracting an invitation for meal either from his seniors, friends or subordinates to escape the awful meals prepared by the guesthouse cook, Vasant. He visits various government offices to learn the intricacies of the functioning of bureaucracy. He is not happy in his personal life and he does not enjoy his role of an IAS trainee which he is privileged to. There is no way out of his uneasiness and suffocation. He wants to run away from this situation and even thinks of leaving the present job to join his relative in publishing business in Delhi. “I don’t want challenges or responsibility or anything; all I want is to be happy,” he observes. His uncle is right when he says, “You are interested in nothing and you think that is a virtue.” His father, too, tried to persuade him by pointing endless possibilities of experience and knowledge of the new world. He writes in one of his letters:
“Your job will provide an immense variety and will give you glimpse of other situations and existences which might initially prove startling. Your dissatisfaction now seems to wear me out… But Ogu, remember that Madna is not an alien place. You must give in time. I think you will like your job eventually. But if you don’t, think concretely of what you want to do instead and change.”

Agastya considers himself to be “a dot in this hinterland” and the letters do not make any positive impact on his mind, which is clear from the response letter written to his father. It reads:

“I’m sorry but what you read into my last letter was true. I just can’t get used to the job and the place. I’m wasting my time here and not enjoying the wasting. This can be a sickening feeling.”

Agastya does not relish working in Madna, as Srivastava, Kumar and others do. His uneasiness is increased by his close observation of the Indian bureaucracy and thinks he is incapable of attaining desired goals. He could not bring about any positive change in the bureaucratic culture. He tries to bridge to a considerable extent between the agents of the administration and the tribals of the drought – hit area of Chipanthi village through his visit as a BDO. He could not find any solution to the problems that confront him inspite of many powers conferred on him as a bureaucrat by the Constitution.

For the analysis of this novel, the guidelines of the constitutional provisions of bureaucracy (articles 309 and 312) are used. The provisions declare the bureaucracy to be separated from the legislature so that they serve all the governments impartially and are treated with justice as far as the terms and conditions of their services are concerned. We find Agastya and his bureaucrat colleagues are pressurized by the politicians and have limited rights. Also the bureaucrats instead of serving the people exploit them physically and financially. An example of this tendency is found in Gandhi, a forest officer, who tried to rape a tribal woman and his hands are cut off by the tribals.

Agastya’s action and behavior stand in contrast with his mythological counterpart, the sage, Agastya. He is neither of the forest, nor finds a Ram to give him a bow and an arrow. He loves city life. He enters the dark forests of the Vindhyas of corrupt bureaucracy but is incapable of stopping them from growing. He is not able to push the mountain of inefficiency, corruption and snobbery even by an inch. He pines for Delhi. No
The novel appears to be a cluster of different stories woven with the main story of Agastya. The story of Govind Sathe, a cartoonist, serves a contrast to Agastya’s. Sathe was worried about being invisible in the metro city of Mumbai where he might lose himself. Whereas, Agastya wants to escape from the notice of a small town like Madna where he is an IAS officer. He wishes to go back to Delhi and get lost. There are also other stories, of which prominent ones are “Shankar’s sick story,” Mohan Gandhi’s story, Dr. Darshan Multani’s story scarred with the wounds inflicted by the partition on the body and psyche, Richard Avery’s and “Baba Ramanna’s story” narrated by his son Karanth. All these stories centre from Madna. Most of them enjoy their stay in Madna – even Richard Avery likes Madna. Only Agastya is an exception.

Though Agastya appears to be a gloomy personality, he is skilled at fabricating stories so well that almost no room is left between truths and lies. At times, he gets into embarrassing situations by cooking up different versions of the same story to the same person. He cooks stories even about his parents, education and his marital status. On the very first day when questioned in the Collectorate office about his (non-existent) wife, he says: “She’s in England. She’s English, anyway, but she’s gone there for a cancer operation. She has cancer of the breast.” He told the District Inspector of Land Records that “his wife was a Norwegian Muslim.” He made another story about his parents who were said to have a Ph.D. in Oceanography from the Sorborne. He tells Menon that he had been in Cambridge for education. When Mr. Kumar asks him, “When are you getting married, Sen?” He replies, “Not for a while.” The immediate remarks of the narrator are noteworthy: “He had forgotten which story he had fabricated for Kumar.” Agastya formulates stories to avoid communicating on certain issues or to stop people from nagging him. He never regrets for speaking lies. The reason for this is psychological since Agastya is disillusioned by the expectations he carries from his job. He becomes aware of himself, his physical needs, his confused mind and even things like food and sleep which he had taken for granted earlier now acquire significance in Madna:

“Food became very important in Madna and he was soon to encourage and concentrate on his stomach pangs. For hunger was evidence of one’s good health and thinking about eating itself gave him something to do … A very few days in the district and he was sick, even scared, of abstract thought – the problem of food gave him something concrete for cogitation.”
“In Madna he could never take sleep for granted. He would repeat the activities of the afternoon, thinking that for more than twenty years he had always slept well, except for one or two nights when excitement kept him awake … But in Madna he seemed to have appalled sleep.”

He seeks in physical actions an answer to his rootlessness. Exercise provides a relief from the absurdity of his daily routine. The writer says in his interview about Agastya:

“Running felt splendid, clockwork movement, the cisscross of arm and leg, rhythm and balance, the steady, healthy painting, the illusion that his (Agastya’s) body was being used well. The mind wandered pleasantly, yet not into chaos because the physical strain provided the leash.”

Agastya senses dislocation and displacement. Rootlessness shatters his dreams completely. His alienation is sociological and psychological. He is out of touch with his inner self because he is not involved in professional life. He is fragmented emotionally and culturally. Agastya’s problem has to be examined in the context of the changed postcolonial, social and psychological realities of modern India. Rapid urbanization and modern education caused a dislocation in the psyche of the young generation leading to the feeling of rootlessness. Madna was 1400 kms away from Delhi and more than 1000 kms away from Calcutta. It caused cultural estrangement. The Collector of Madna and SP explain him the details of corrupt administration and the role of political bastards in it. He saw all civil servants were filled with inefficiency and corruption. So he feels that he is wasting time in Madna. Madna is a microcosm of the entire bureaucratic functioning of the nation. At Madna, Agastya leads three lives, the official, the unofficial and the secret life in his room. He realizes that the feelings of dislocation, rootlessness and alienation are not his problems alone but of the whole generation since they realize that the gap between reality and idealism is wide. For example, Dhruvo lives unreal life with his girlfriend in Delhi.

Agastya stands as a contrast to Sonali, also a bureaucrat in *Rich Like Us*. He is completely disillusioned as he could not bring about any positive change in the bureaucratic culture. Bureaucracy is a part of the political system and fresh bureaucrats like Agastya become pawns in the hands of the corrupt system. When we compare Agastya and Sonali, we find that both are bureaucrats who suffer due to different circumstances. Sonali suffers due to Emergency whereas Agastya suffers because of administrative
constraints on him. Sonali suffers differently being a woman but Agastya too suffers though a male in a male dominated culture.

Two possible methods of coping with Agastya’s problems and discontent are: the rational method of Marcus Aurelius and the Karmic acceptance advocated by the Bhagavad Gita. Agastya reads both the books. Initially, he relates his situation to that of Marcus:

“In those months he grew to like immensely this wise sad Roman. Marcus immediately made him feel better because Marcus seemed to have more problems than anyone else – not the soul – squashing problems of being poor but the exhilarating abstract problems of one immersed wholly in his self.”

Agastya even starts maintaining a diary in which like Marcus, he records his meditations. The Gita, on the other hand, Agastya had always associated it with old age when the afterlife gains importance. Ultimately neither Marcus nor the Gita matters because while human reason seemed “so inadequate” and ill – equipped “to answer the overwhelming questions.”

In Madna, Agastya is put to considerable pain in explaining the meaning of his name, which amused some and puzzled many. When an engineer, the first person whom he meets on his way to Madna, asks him irritably about his name, he says:

“He’s a saint of the forest in the Ramayana, very ascetic. He gives Ram a bow and arrow. He’s there in Mahabharata too. He crosses the Vindhyas and stops them from growing.”

Shankar, the Deputy Engineer in Minor Irrigation, who shares the Circuit House with Agastya says about his name:

“Agastya, a good name, quite rare, means born of a jar. The jar is the womb, and thereby the mother goddess but the jar could just as easily have contained Vedic whisky. Soma – type, good quality scotch, bottled for twelve years.”

Much later some meaning is extracted through etymological dissection:
“Agam is mountain. Agastya could be agam plus asyati, one who pushes a mountain. Or agam plus sthayayati, one who stops a mountain. We often have this ambiguity, an uncertainty about our names, their origins. It should also be linked to the Latin augeus which means to advance. That is appropriate since the sage Agastya was also the wanderer who pined for Benares.”

There is parody used in the name of Agastya. “Parody,” says Linda Hutcheson “is a typical post – modern paradoxical form because it uses and abuses the text and conventions of the tradition. It also contests both the authority of the tradition and the claims of art to originality.” Parody is seen in the categorization of certain characters. For example, the sage, Agastya was born in an “unnatural” manner and Agastya also is born “unnatural,” for he was born of a Goanese mother and a Bengali father.

We come across belittling of the mythical and historical characters like Agastya and Mahatma Gandhi through their parodied counterparts. There is parodic situation in Mohan Gandhi’s case. Mohan Gandhi takes his name after the whim young generation has started forgetting, it is clear from Agastya’s thoughts, when the name of the person being introduced to him turns out to be Mohandas Gandhi, “Now why does the name sound familiar?” To add to this confusion, his sister is named Indira, of which Mohandas himself is not unaware:

“It’s very embarrassing. I have an elder sister, my parents named her Indira. They do not care for confusing families and generations.”

The parody reaches a climax when Mohandas’ story ends abruptly with the information that his hands were chopped off by the tribals for ‘raping’ one of their women. It is tribal justice for his crime, yet his nomenclatural associations with Mahatma Gandhi tells us that he is farfetched from the Father of the Nation whose ideology finds no following in his own nation. No wonder that his statue before the Gandhi Hall in Madna is in such a pathetic condition that a rod is fixed to support the statue which symbolizes the downfall of Gandhian principles in postcolonial India.

Also, the administrators have failed to implement the Constitution in its true spirit. According to the Constitutional provisions mentioned in chapter one, the Constitution takes care of the independence of the Public Service Commission through various provisions. The civil servants are expected to serve with equal vigour all
governments, irrespective of the political parties in power and implement all the policies efficiently and effectively. The bureaucracy is said to be nameless, faceless and speechless. We do not find the bureaucracy to be functioning impartially. The law-abiding citizens perceive the bureaucracy as inefficient, indisciplined and self-seeking. The experience of citizens who approach the bureaucracy to get any work done or a grievance redressed, finds obstruction, deliberate delay and unresponsive attitude. The flourishing corrupt culture is a part and parcel of the present public administration and the system has become a slave to this culture.

*English, August* exhibits these traits of bureaucracy. Superiors dominate subordinates. In fact there is a chain of corruption of exploitation and it exists in the hierarchy of bureaucracy. If you can mark off a subordinate, you’re really fluent in the language. The petitioners always stood and they are either subordinates or common man. They sit only if it seemed that they would take long; if they sat it was on the edge of the chair.  

This is how the higher officials exploit the lower ones. Sometimes politicians make bureaucrats scapegoats to achieve their selfish aims. Srivastav informs Agastya, “Oh, there was a big riot here a few months ago, Hindu – Muslim. The last Collector, Antony, was transferred, I think, because of the riots. They said he’d bungled there, but more likely the politicians who were actually behind the riots just wanted a scapegoat. These politician bastards, you’ll really know what they are like when you’re Block Development Officer. So we formed an Integration Committee, it meets once a month. Both Hindu and Muslim goondas get together and eat and waste time.”

The strategy of bureaucrats is to collect information from people through public gatherings like the Integration Committee meetings. Srivastav instructed Agastya, “Nothing on the surface, we just eat some rubbish together and nurse raw stomachs for a week. But it helps in many ways. We find out from them what’s really happening in the district – gossip, the things that our Police and Revenue officials won’t tell us because they themselves might be involved.”

The novel also shows how bureaucrats run away from their duties and extract leisure time during the working hours. It is a strategy to shirk away from duties putting the common man into trouble. SP, Kumar sleeps in the afternoon during working hours. Kumar informs Agastya, “Office starts at ten thirty, I reach at eleven sharp.” He made it sound like
a virtue. “But no going home for lunch.” “Now, our SP followed quite another pattern earlier but I fixed that. He reached his office at ten thirty but would go home for lunch at one and would sleep till four! And then come back to office at five. I fixed that. For one whole week I telephoned him at office at about three for some work or the other. His office would say, he’s at home. They couldn’t lie, no, because Collector was asking and say he’d gone out. So I used to ring him up at home. His constable could not say he was sleeping, not to the Collector, so he was woken up. And when he talked he couldn’t pretend that he’d been sleeping. One week of this. You have to straighten out these people, who think they’re being paid to sleep in the afternoons. Kumar is an interesting fellow. He talks real big, about serving the people, that you’ll soon find out, but he’s a hopeless policeman.”

The novelist has explored several areas of bureaucracy, development, politics, language and education which tend to be integral parts of his story. People are allowed to starve and die of thirst. The officials exploit them physically and financially expose them to hazards. The Forest Contractor indulges in “bribing the Forest officials, underpaying the tribals, beating others like him to a timber contract.” Therefore, it is not surprising that the Naxalites have occupied the vacuum. The politicians are equally responsible for this bad state of undeveloped parts of the country like Madna and Jompanna. Even the meaningless slogans of development have not yet reached these interior parts:

“Development is as major a leitmotif in the Indian story as are the goulash of cultures and the other legacies of a long and complex history but development would never be fashionable or glamorous in Jompanna. Jompanna was an Indian oblivion; life for most was slow and unheroic there, and the visits of those who had, had been quinquennial, to make the promises and get the votes … The superficies of development were visible elsewhere – in the skyline of a thermal power station, in the dead saplings edging a road, but here it seemed a mere word in a government file.”

Consequently, there has not been any substantial change in the plight of the tribals.

“They’ve never been touched by the Indian mainstream. What do the tribals have to show for these decades of Independence since 1977? Just a few photographs with Nehru.”

Politicians and bureaucrats exploit the tribals. Bajaj informed Agastya, “But
your posting seems to have upset a few people in Jompanna. The Sabhapati, tried to get me to cancel your posting order. Then other politicians too, but I put them off by saying, look, it’s only for two months and Mr Sen is an IAS officer, he will not let the IAS down. Half the population of the block of Jompanna is tribal, try and help them as much as you can. The main fear of the politicians there is that you will. The money that was pushed into Jompanna was directed by the politicians to benefit the non–tribal population of the plains, you know, primary schools, dispensaries, roads, wells, bank loans– in return the same politicians were voted back to power in the local political body, the Block Panchayat. Your Sabhapati, for instance, has been President of that Block Panchayat for almost thirty years.”

The political system is twisted in such a way that under the guise of public welfare, it has become a system of advantages and privileges for the few blessed in power. The system only creates such chaos that nobody seems to be accountable for it since the power changes hands as per the hierarchy. Infact creating chaos is one of the prevalent tools of playing politics over the common man. Common man doesn’t know how to go about and fulfill his needs. Bureaucracy rarely lets the common man have the fruits of various provisions and hardly works for its upliftment.

The novel also describes the government’s attitude to the development of the tribals. “As BDO,” said Bajaj, “You will ask why there are so few all – weather roads. What is the population of a tribal village? Some have as low a population as fifty. Remember that till a few decades ago many were nomadic, moving from one part of the forest to another. So the villages are scattered. So what do they expect that we build a road to benefit a group of just fifty tribals? So we say, here, if you group these villages together, ask them all to shift to one or two spots, then we’ll help to develop the area, build their houses. But show me one tribal who wants to be left alone, who is opposed to development as we understand it. Dispensaries, schools, roads, access to markets, bus services, bank loans, of course the tribals want all that, but for that they just have to live together in larger groups. We are a poor country; we can’t have one road and one dispensary for every fifty tribals.”

This is how the politicians frame the policies for the welfare of the deprived sections of the society and then mould it for their selfish gains and to secure their vote banks elsewhere. Agastya is tossed between his senior bureaucrats and the politicians.

We find the exploitation of tribals at several levels in the novel. Rao, the tribal
leader describes sexual exploitation of tribal women by bureaucrats to Agastya, “As late as ten years ago, in the more remote areas of these forests, especially towards Pirtana, these women did not cover the upper half of their bodies. That was their custom.”

“Yes and various people must’ve,” Agastya said, “taken advantage of their innocence, various minor district officials. Range Forest Officers and Revenue Circle Inspectors, Head Constables.”

“But only minor but more respectable officers too. At Pirtana the new Assistant Conservator of Forests, too. A man called Gandhi; even he abused the honour of the tribal woman who cooked for him. The men of her village were very angry. They visited Gandhi three nights ago and as punishment, they cut off his arms.”

For the tribals of Jompanna, however, Madna’s culture is the mainstream. Mannoni in his psychological approach towards colonialism asserts that in order to get rid of inferiority complex, the European exploits the natives and casts himself in a paternalistic role of the parent and the master and becomes the protector/provider to the native child. One finds this kind of approach in the case of tribals of Jompanna. The bureaucrats and the political system appear to play a paternalistic role and pretend to be the protector of the tribals and their ethnic culture but in reality the picture is complementary. They take undue advantage of the innocence of the tribals and deliberately keep them away even from basic amenities.

Along with the tribals, railway, postal system, the clubs, the sports and the English language, Indian bureaucracy has also survived in Madna. The structure of Indian Administrative Service remains more or less the same, though the nationality and integrity of bureaucrats have profoundly changed. The world of bureaucracy as depicted in the novel is vertically compartmentalized as IAS, IPS, DC (direct recruit), promotee and so on are the various levels of this hierarchy. The IAS is at the limelight at the top of this hierarchy which incites sharp reactions from subordinates and colleagues out of professional rivalry, as is evident from Kumar’s statement: “And your senior IAS bastards swell up because of the power they fool around with.” However, Srivastava, himself an IAS holds that “If the country is moving, it is because of us only.”

“But these foresters,” scowled Srivastav, “seem to suffer from inferiority complex. Why can’t they gracefully accept the fact that their job and position is far less
important than that of a Collector, or,” he added, mindful of those present, “an SP? They always invite us for their functions and get – togethers, as though we have all the time for these things. You see in the picnic, how they behave like equals, especially the wives.”

“Kumar’s an Indian Police Service specimen, they are all jealous of the IAS,” said Srivastav. “You must also call on the District Judge Mishra and the District Development Officer Bajaj. Bajaj is another specimen, a bloody promotee.” A promotee was one who was not recruited to the IAS through the National Civil Services examination like Srivastav, Menon and Agastya but promoted to the cadre from something lower, the regional Civil Service of the Engineers. In Srivastav’s vocabulary, ‘promotee’ was a evil curse, ranking somewhere between bastard and motherfucker.

This is how the system of hierarchy and professional rivalry exists in bureaucracy which affects its functioning. The officials in Madna are typically Indian at their mentality and do not pay for the commodities they would buy. Agastya is irritated by this tendency. When he offers Rs. 20 to the Naib Tehsildar to buy napkins for him, he declines to accept it. Curtly he informs Agastya that bureaucrats need not pay for the commodities they buy. Thus making the common man suffer economically for their sake.

Bureaucrats also have a culture of extracting free provisions. Agastya when was on the way to Rameri with the Avery’s, they had lunch with the Tehsildar. Agastya pushed a fifty – rupee note into the Tehsildar’s shirt pocket. Agastya said to Avery, “Well, if we hadn’t paid, then in a few days they would be saying, Sen is like all other officers, never pays. Most officers pay, of course, but never fully. Setting up that lunch wouldn’t have cost less than hundred rupees,” said Agastya, “we paid fifty. The Tehsildar didn’t spend anything, of course. There are too many small – time businessmen in his jurisdiction only too happy to spend some money on his behalf, owners of small rice mills, petrol pumps, that sort of thing. Everyone is happy with this arrangement.”

In this way, the bureaucrats enjoy the fruits of dirty politics since their pockets are benefited by it. The common man pays favours to the bureaucracy to get their work done. Thus this give and take system is of advantage for both of them.

The Indian bureaucracy today behaves in accordance with the colonial culture steeped in artificiality, snobbery, inefficiency, corruption, “interference, ingratitude, insolence, disloyalty, ill will and selfishness.” The postcolonial bureaucracy has
undergone some positive changes, which the novelist sums up:

“But Indianization (of a method of administration, or of language) is integral to the Indian story. Before 1947, the Collector was almost inaccessible to the people; now he keeps open house, primarily because he does a difficult, more difficult job. He is as human as infallible, but now others can tell him so, even though he still exhibits the old accoutrements (but now Indianized) of importance – the flashing light on the roof of the car, the passes for the first row at the sitar recital.42

At the same time, there is a misuse of authority by bureaucrats and they dominate and reign over the common man. A very good instance is when there was traffic on the road due to parking a truck in a wrong manner; Srivastav and Kumar decide to teach the truck driver a lesson. Both were used to command and they spoke with a sense of their own importance; an attitude that was appealing.

“You’ve parked in a very wrong place,” said Kumar… you are talking to the Collector and the SP of Madna.” The driver left his tea, put on his slippers, and ran clumsily towards the truck. His friends stood up. The truck moved off at a great speed. “Good,” said Kumar, “shall also catch the bastard for speeding on a narrow road.”43 Srivastav and Kumar lectured the disinterested assembly on the absence of road sense in Madna and in general, in India. In Delhi or Calcutta, thought Agastya, this reaction from a truck driver is unimaginable, unless some constable beat him up and took away his money, license and truck.

The novelist also describes the rampant corruption in the bureaucracy. For example, the Rest House was built on an artificial hillock. Kumar informed Agastya, “Some years ago the Government sanctioned the Madna River Dam Project. Crores and crores. The first thing the engineers did after siphoning off their own lakhs was to build this Rest House. Tomorrow morning you’ll see it properly, looks like an expensive whoosphere from a Hindi film, the kind the villain hangs around in. Then a change of government, the project was shelved.”44

The house for the Collector and District Magistrate of Madna had been built in 1882, in a twenty – acre compound. After 1947, occasional Collectors had donated a few acres - for the district offices of the Rehabilitation Department, a housing colony for government servants, cooperative bank. The house had twenty – two rooms; most
Collectors used about seven. The smallest room was the size of the government flat in Delhi which Srivastav would get if he was posted there.

“Vegetation had thrived for a century in the compound and on the stone walls of the house. Some of the families tried agriculture too, but, of course, none of their sweat ever dropped in the soil. The gardeners on the municipality pay roll were summoned to the house and made to plant paddy and potatoes and cabbage. Some Collectors who did not carry the belief in the dignity of office to any pompous extreme, even made good money on the sale of rice (In a developing country we must never waste food, they explained).”

Thus the bureaucrats enjoy liberties and a parallel source of income through corruption in its own way. Nobody questions since all of them sail in the same boat.

There are different levels of dishonesty in bureaucracy. Kumar puts forth his view regarding honesty, “In government, you’ll realize this over the years, Sen, there’s nothing such as absolute honesty, there are only degrees of dishonesty. All officers are more or less dishonest – some are like me, who won’t say no when someone gives them a video for the weekend, others are subtler, they won’t pay for the daily trunk call to Hyderabad to talk to their wives and children. Only degrees of dishonesty. But, of course, honesty does not mean efficiency.”

The bureaucrats misuse public money on personal luxuries. In the novel, Srivastav arranges for a dinner at his home. Agastya knew Srivastav would certainly put down this dinner under any one of the many expenditure heads: perhaps ‘working dinner with Collector of Paal to discuss law and order problems in border Tehsils’ or ‘working dinner with Deputy Secretary Industries to discuss problems of District Industries Centre, Madna; Srivastav’s office would be able to concoct a million things to explain the dinner away on the lawns of the Collector’s house, chaperoning an unknown Englishman and his outspoken sexy wife.

There is misuse of government property by bureaucrats. Patel apparently had come to warn Agastya about his office. “The Sabhapati always wants to use the office jeep for his private trips, sir. But you are IAS, sir, you can stop that.”

The education of the family members of bureaucrats depends on their transfers and is influenced by nepotism. A good example of it is Mrs. Srivastav. She was
one kind of wife to a Collector; their ‘further studies’ depended entirely on where their husbands were posted. While the husband worked, the wife gathered degrees from the sad colleges of the small towns. It was not easy to refuse admission or a degree to the wife of a Collector, or a District Development Officer, or a Superintendent of Police, even if their previous degrees were from places that the Principal of the College was not sure existed. Thus when Srivastav had been Assistant Collector at Lalchuck, Mrs Srivastav had become a Master of Arts at the Lalchuck National College. And when the husband had been District Development Officer of Haveliganj, Gandhi Graduate College and now a Master of Education at the Janata College, Madna. But these wives used their degrees well, for showing off with pride, they returned to those colleges to teach the rubbish they had learnt. It was even more difficult to prevent them from teaching because that would mean depriving the Collector’s family of a good monthly sum. One could say that these bright young officers invested well in the education of their wives. The wretched college gained too, people said, “It is a good college. Madam Collector teaches there.”

Thus they further contribute to the degradation of the already deteriorated system of education. The young generation which needs a good guidance suffers at the hands of the half–knowledge of ill–learned wives of the bureaucrats.

Agastya does not relish this state of corruption, exploitation and snobbery, which aggravates his problems in Madna and makes him develop a strong hatred for this much – desirable job. He tries to escape this insensitive culture as much as possible. He is unable to accommodate himself in accordance with the needs of his new job or in changing the administrative system for better. The novelist himself told Indu Saraiya in an interview:

“The whole structure of the Civil Service is its administration, but it is part of something larger and it has nothing to offer. We are just a bunch of completely ordinary English speaking Indians. When I say that, it sounds pompous; what I mean is no one is interested in your generation angst.”

Agastya is a contrast to Kandan in K. S. Venkataramani’s Kandan, the Patriot. Kandan shows resemblance to Gandhi and his ideology in his efforts at awakening, organizing and leading rural masses of the town, Akkur against all feudal and political oppression. He had given up his probation for ICS at Oxford to serve his Motherland. He had a task of fighting injustice implicit in Indian system, the foreign rule and slavery to passion and violence which were subject to ignorance whereas, Agastya shuns away from

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his responsibilities as an IAS officer and wants to escape from the rural town of Madna due to personal disinterestness.

There is use of symbolism in the novel. One morning, Agastya finds a dead lizard at the door of his room. When he returns home in the evening, he finds the carcass was eaten up by the ants leaving skeleton behind. It symbolizes how the vitals of the nation have been eaten up by the bureaucracy of the nation leaving behind only the ideal theory of a democratic nation.

The novel also exhibits the tendency of the peons of the office preferring to work on the bungalows of the Collectors. For many reasons, they like to work there because they want to get the favor of these officers. It throws light on the call of nepotism and favoritism of the class. Sometimes if the peons refused to work, they got transfer orders. This exposes the hypocritical nature of bureaucrats. Agastya’s colleague, Shankar wanted to get transferred to Koltanga and was ready to pay Rs. 30,000 to the Minister for it. This shows the cycle of bribery and corruption which is all inclusive.

Many peons, officially government servants, did the domestic chores of successive Collectors. Many preferred to do this for in the office the Collector was out of their reach but at home close enough to plead for their desires, for a little land, for the expedition of a government loan, for a peon’s post in some office for their sons. Srivastav informed Agastya, “Antony, my predecessor, transferred one peon to Rameri because that fellow had refused to work at his house. He came to me a few days ago, saying, saab, bring me back to Madna. I’ll work anywhere you like. You see, now he’s feeling stupid because everyone is calling him a fool for having missed a chance to work at the house.”

We also find the criticism of Gandhian ideologies in the novel. Agastya accompanies Kumar, the SP of Madna to the Police Attachment at Mariagarh. They both halted at a Rest House there. It was designed by Tamse who had created another India in the Rest House.

“That Tamse bastard,” said Kumar, “all his fault. He didn’t want wire mesh on the windows, d’you know why, because of that Gandhi quotation from Young India, it’s written outside somewhere – that my windows should not be stuffed and cultures of all lands should blow around me freely. Tamse’s mind is like that. So cultures of all lands means mosquitoes and huge grey bugs. But equally possible that some Junior Engineer
pocketed the money sanctioned for the wire mesh and then spread this story about Tamse. But the story fits in with this Rest House, doesn’t it?”

There was, a Gateway of India porch, a Taj Mahal dome, a Konark wheel on one of the walls etc. Kumar with a lack of aesthetic sense and beauty, harshly criticizes Tamse and says,

“Wanted to squeeze all of India into this Rest House, as though the Prime Minister spends every weekend here and needs to be reminded of national integration.”

This shows the tendency of unaccountability in bureaucrats who misuse the public money as they like for most of the times. Nor the public bothers to question the bureaucracy and the vicious circle is carried forward unquestioningly.

There is non-cooperation towards trainees by the bureaucrats. Kumar shamelessly neglected his duty to train Agastya, indulged in drinking and watched blue films at the Rest House. Srivastav said, “In your training you will move from office to office trying to learn what each office does. Most officers will tell you nothing because they are uninterested, lazy, incompetent or just too busy. Just keep your eyes and ears open, that’s the only way to learn.”

Sometimes, when Agastya reached any specified office for training, the officer was absent, or touring, or was on leave. Sometimes he would be there, but with no idea of what he was to do with, or say to. Sometimes his lack of interest was far outmatched by the officer’s. Agastya would sit and look around, at the decaying walls, the leaking water cooler in the corner, the fading map on the wall and the government calendar. The officer would ask a few questions, Agastya would lie without restraints. When he felt that he knew enough about that office to lie to the Collector that same evening about what he had learnt that day, he would announce that he ought to return to the Rest House for lunch and add, with a smile, that it would be just too hot in the afternoon to return. The officer would beam his complete agreement.

This is how Agastya shows apathy towards his training and the trainers too are least bothered to guide him. The bureaucrats loved to shun their responsibilities.

The bureaucrats have an attitude to dump their responsibility on the general
public. This tendency is found in Kumar who describes how police was pressurized by people who are themselves not aware of their responsibilities:

“Nothing new. But it’s a disgusting newspaper. Kumar suddenly turned virulent; it says highway dacoities have increased because the police don’t patrol roads. What do they mean? What do they know of what they write, sitting in small smelly offices blackmailing people? Can any police patrol highways? Bastards, they always go on about our responsibility, what about theirs?”

Decay and misuse of bureaucratic power as portrayed in *English, August* is also seen in Nayantara Sahgal’s *A Situation in New Delhi*. It deals with the aftermath of Nehru’s death, the Naxalite movement and the student unrest. In this novel, Shivraj and his sister Debi dominate the scene of action. In the two new states, Punjab and Haryana, there were quarrels over boundaries, water and electric power and both claimed Chandigarh to be their capital. Sahgal believes bureaucracy is an important link in the democratic set-up but has deteriorated. The novelist traces the presence of two breeds: one which was guided by the spirit of service, dedication and learning and the new one, which looks only for privileges, promotion and pleasure. Finally in both the novels, it is the common man who finally becomes a pawn at the hands of politicians, bureaucrats and the anti-social elements.

The novel displays a contrast to the irresponsible attitude of the bureaucrats with that of the selfless service to humanity by Baba Ramanna. Agastya visits Baba Ramanna’s Home meant for lepers. He was stunned to see the devoted service offered to the outcastes like lepers. He is surprised to know that the Home didn’t accept any government aid but worked independently and efficiently. He realizes the value of serving mankind. He returns from the Home peaceful, firm and with a conviction to carry out his duties sincerely. The visit imbibes positive values in Agastya and somewhat clears his disillusionment for his job.

Agastya joins as BDO of Jompanna, a terribly drought – prone block. As usual on the very first day of his duty, a politician and some local goondas come to meet him. In his third week in Jompanna, a tribal woman from Chipanthi complained that the only well in their area had dried up and needed cleaning. No officer had paid heeds to her complaint. When Agastya visited Chipanthi, he was full of pity for the people there. He saw women tying children to ropes and letting them into the well. The tribals were risking the life of
their young children for the sake of half – buckets of mud. The ropes were bringing up buckets. Agastya gave orders to clean up the well and brought water – tanker for the tribals.

“Uh – a few days, I think. One tanker is out of order, it’s being repaired at Tilan, another tanker is leaking very badly, by the time it gets here, there’ll be no water in it. And the third one is at Choppa.” Agastya looked at him with distaste. “Choppa is the Sabhapati’s village, isn’t it. It’s probably as wet as - No, let’s do it my way.” He smiled wickedly at Chaudhri. “It’s good that you brought your jeep. You go back in that jeep, take everybody with you. You’ll reach Jompanna by about two thirty, I think. Arrange for one tanker and your - “ he stopped, what they were called “- gang that cleans up wells to come here. I’ll wait here for them, to sort of ensure that you - you do some work about this when you reach your office.”

When Agastya next met an impressed Bajaj, he explained, “I thought it was the only way to get them to work, sir. If I’d gone back that afternoon to Jompanna, I would’ve been distracted from this business by the usual office routine and those Junior Engineers would’ve turned up one by one, to explain what was wrong with the tankers and why the well couldn’t be desilted until a month later or something like that, their usual arguments – you know, sir, their laziness hidden by jargon – and I’d have agreed, because sitting in the Block Office at Jompanna, Chipanthi and its problems would’ve seemed remote and everything would’ve been postponed.57

At least, Agastya has some sense of duty in him. He tries to lessen the troubles of his block in his own way. We find him a reformed person towards the end of the novel. From a sullen, brooding and nostalgic individual, he has turned to a duty – conscious and optimistic individual. Through his journey from misery to happiness and peace, the writer shows the brighter prospect for the protagonist. It shows that after all everything is not bad with bureaucracy. There is still hope left due to bureaucrats like Agastya.

Along with the bureaucratic culture, the novelist throws light on various issues. English education and standard system of education are other crucial issues which have merited the attention of various characters in the novel. In the opening part of the novel, Dhruvo compares education in India with what he saw at Yale:

“In Yale a Ph.D wasn’t a joke, it meant something… students thought before they enrolled. But here in Delhi, all over India … education is biding time, a meaningless

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accumulation of degrees, B. A., M. A., then as M. Phil. While you join the millions in trying your luck at the Civil Services exam, so many people every year seem to find government service so interesting … I wonder how many people think where their education is leading them.”

Agastya himself sees the rottenness of Indian education at the time of the interview of candidates for the post of teacher. The candidates could not answer, “What is twenty percent of eighty?” and “Who is called the Father of the Nation?” are finally selected to teach their teenage victims.

In higher education, the scenario is not much different, as is proved by the appointment of Mrs. Srivastava as a lecturer in the local college, which is not due to her academic excellence over others but because she is Collector’s wife. Agastya’s head of the department, Dr. Upadhyaya, was dissatisfied with his job and the educational situation, for “I used to teach Macbeth to my M. A. English classes in Hindi. English in India is burlesque.” His Uncle, on the contrary, does not see any point in studying the English authors in India: “Chaucer and Swift, what are you going to do with these irrelevancies? Your father doesn’t seem to think that your education should teach the life around you?” Even Srivastava has something to say on this subject and he tries to hide his weakness in English through his own philosophy of English:

“A useless subject, unless it helps you to master the language, which in most cases it doesn’t … The English we speak is not the English we read in English books … Our English should be just a vehicle of communication. Other people find it funny but how we speak shouldn’t matter as long as we get the ideas across.”

However, English language and literature remain a growth industry. People are fascinated by English and consider it “A very fine subject, Keats and Tennyson, very good – for girls especially, for it gives “a distinct advantage in the marriage market.” English flourishes in various places in India and even books are being written on English authors, without much justification. Tonic, a relative of Agastya who is in publishing business remarks,

“Dr. Prem Krishen of Meerut University has written a book on E. M. Forster, India’s darling English – most of us seem to be grateful that he wrote that novel about India. Dr. Prem Krishen holds a Ph. D. on Jane Austen from Meerut University. Have you
ever been to Meerut? A vile place but comfortably Indian. What is Jane Austen doing in Meerut? Or Macbeth in Ulhasnagar, and Wordsworth in Azamganj – no nothing, do go on.

We’re publishing Prem Krishen because he’ll fetch us lots of money. His book is entirely in a question and answer form. Students lap that up… Why is some jat teenager in Meerut reading Jane Austen? Why does a place like Meerut have a course in English at all? Only because the Prem Krishens of the country need a place where they can teach this rubbish? Surely they can spend the money they waste on running the department usefully elsewhere?” 63

Precisely speaking, our education was never imparted usefully or managed properly. The case of Uttarkashi where Mohandas taught for two years in a horrible college before taking up his present assignment is illustrative of it:

“The college was supposed to be post – graduate level but the labs were not even worth intermediate. Everything broken or stolen. There were two goondas claiming to be Principal, each had younger goondas as bodyguards. I used to wonder which of them was drawing the Principal’s salary. When they met in the corridor they used to curse each other quite colorfully and most students would rush out of class to hear them… Actually, to be fair to Uttarkashi, the college wasn’t worse than many other colleges elsewhere.” 64

The novelist’s position on the contemporary issues is voiced through many characters. His views are scattered through the novel written against the obscurity which these institutions enjoy in our country. Geeta Doctor appreciates the novel for “the accumulation of details that produce a powerful image of Madna and the oppression of a way of functioning that passes for life in an I.A.S.”

She further makes a valid point when she says: “Obviously Chatterjee does not feel at ease with women characters as yet. He still seems to see them as August does, purely as objects of lust.” 65 Along with the shadowy female figures of Renu and Neera there are in the crowd of characters a few other faceless female faces like Mrs. Srivastava, Rohini, Sita and a host of other ladies who clutter and chatter die out like that of plates and spoons along with the party.

We have other characters in the novel who crave for the attention of bureaucrats. For example, the white collar, Dr. Multani treats bureaucrats and flatters them.
He informs Agastya,

“I’m a private doctor.” Multani smiled beatifically, “Joshi saab doesn’t seem to trust government doctors. I’ve treated his family for years. I treat all the important people of Madna, Collector saab, SP saab, all the important people.”

Later when Srivastav visited him he was to say, “If you weren’t an IAS, Multani would never have come to your room.”

Multani refused to accept any fee. “How can I expect fees from my good friends?”

This is how people love to catch the attention of bureaucrats in power.

Another interesting aspect of the novel is its language which is free from all inhibitions. The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin claimed that writers were creating new ‘englishes’ through various strategies: inserting untranslatable words into their texts; by use of obscure terms; by refusing to follow standard English syntax and using structures derived from other languages; of incorporating many different creolized versions of English into their texts and so on. The novelist’s flexibility of expression and minute observation go together with his symbols, similes and images used in the novel:

“Joshi and Co. trotted behind the car, like modern out – of – condition version of some eighteenth – century runners … accompanying a queen’s palanquin.”

“… thoughts that scurried in his mind uncontrollably, like rats in a damp cavern …”

“… office – goers hanging out of the door like tongues out of canine mouths.”

“… the Supply Officer … smelt like a scented eraser out of geometry box…”

“… the woman was some kind of whore, as loose as a tooth about to fall…” and “as pleased as pimp.”
Upamanyu Chatterjee’s Indian story is told in the third person narrative, which lends greater objectivity to the narrative and allows various characters to participate in it. The protagonist’s “desultory diary” which he maintained like his intellectual mentor Marcus Aurelius and the undated letters are part of his narrative technique and reveal parts of the personality of his characters. However, the novel rejects all the myths about India.

Three aspects of *English, August* make it a recognizably contemporary novel. The ease in the use of Indian English is the first. Reflection of larger issues of corruption and loss of ethics is the second. Finally, there is the unavailability of options in life for Agastya that earlier generations had.

One can agree with Indu Saraiya’s critical acclaim that “He (Upamanayu Chatterjee) brings to the Indian novel a style and feel, a conviction and maturity all its own.” Thus *English, August* presents the various intricacies of the working of bureaucracy and stands out differently from the other Indian English novels. The next chapter deals with the Naxalite movement in the North – Eastern states and the problem of illegal immigration in Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*. 
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