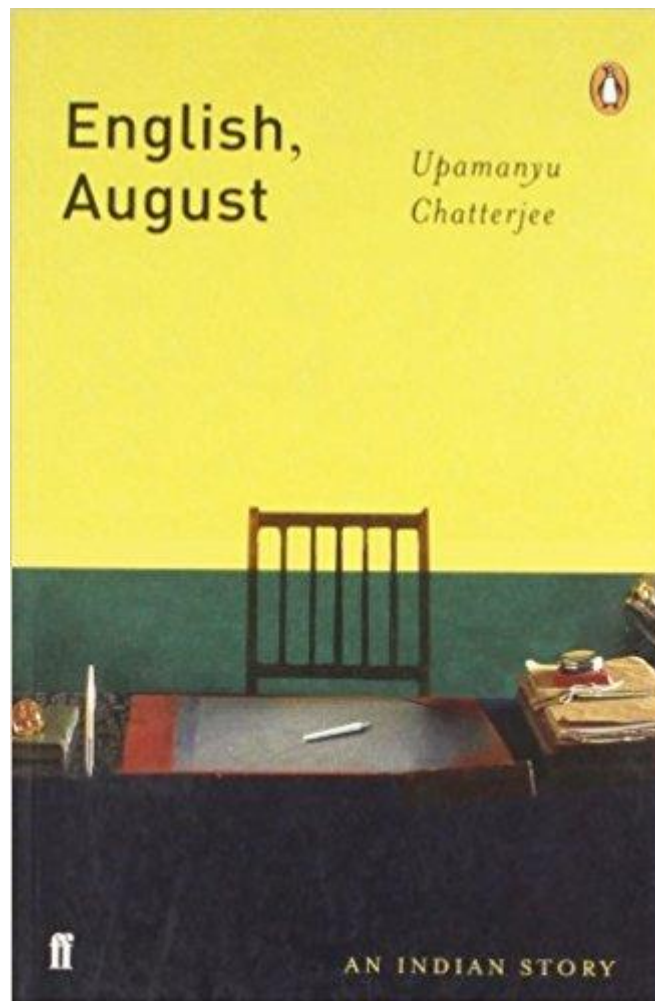


Portrayal of Social Evils in Upamanyu Chatterjee's  
*English August: An Indian Story*

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**Abstract**

The present paper is an attempt to explore social evils in Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English August: An Indian Story*. It is important to study the social and political milieu because the society is facing many problems and challenges. Upamanyu Chatterjee is one of the major Indian writers who focuses on the social and political circumstances of

contemporary India. His novels are written in a humorous style and satire on Indian Administrative Service. His prominent themes are the urban and rural life, corrupt bureaucracy, and sexual relationships. His novels are concerned with the contemporary Indian problems-social, economic, political and cultural. He has written five novels: *English August: An Indian Story* (1988), *The Last Burden* (1993), *Mammaries of Welfare State* (2004), *Weight Loss* (2006) and *Way to Go* (2010). He also has written short stories which include: “*The Assassination of Indira Gandhi*” and “*Watching Them*”.

Upamanyu’s best-seller novel *English August: An Indian Story* is published in 1988. The realistic picture of contemporary India is clearly portrayed in this novel. He talks about social issues which affects the lives of people especially in rural areas. They have no water and transport facilities. He attacks Indian politics and Indian Administration Service where corruption is deeply rooted. His novels depict social, political, economic and sexual aspects of contemporary India. He presents modern India where drugs corrupt youths.

**Keywords:** Upamanyu’s *English August: An Indian Story*, Social Issues, Corruption, Urban and Rural Life

### **Indo-Anglian Literature**

The early decades of the 19th century marked the beginning of Indian writing in English. V. K. Gokak, in his book, *English in India: Its Present and Future*, interprets the term ‘Indo-Anglican Literature’ as comprising ‘the work of Indian writers in English’ and ‘Indo-English literature’ as consisting of ‘translations by Indians from Indian literature into English’(161). M. K. Naik in his book, *A History of Indian English Literature* says,

Indian English Literature may be defined as literature written originally in English by authors Indian by birth, ancestry or nationality. It is clear that neither ‘Anglo-Indian Literature’, nor literal translations by others (as distinguished from creative translations by the authors themselves) can legitimately form part of this literature. (2)

Indian English Fiction gets attention after India attained independence in 1947. Thousands of novels have been written on a variety of themes. The novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya, G.V. Desani, and R. K. Narayan are written on Indian experience. The 1950s

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witnesses a rapid growth of Indian English Fiction when nearly three dozen novels are published. Kamala Markandaya depicts the social scenes in her novels. She explores the themes of poverty, hunger, morality, and life of low class people. Her novel *Some Inner Fury* deals with the theme of struggle for independence.

### **Upamanyu Chatterjee**

Upamanyu Chatterjee is born in Bihar in 1959. He is educated at St. Xavier's School and St. Stephen's College, in Delhi. After completing his university education, he has appeared for I.A.S. Examination and in the first attempt he has passed the examination in 1983. His professional career not only marked the beginning of his literary career, but also was the source from which he created his wonderful characters. In 1990, Chatterjee lived as Writer in Residence at the University in Kent, U.K. In 1998, he is appointed as the Director in the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India.

### **Focus on Social and Political Circumstances**

Upamanyu Chatterjee is one of the major Indian writers who focus on the social and political circumstances of contemporary India. The representation of Indian social milieu makes him as a prominent writer among Indian writers. His novels are written in a humorous style. His prominent themes are the urban and rural life, corrupt bureaucracy, and sexual relationships. His novels are concerned with the contemporary Indian problems-social, economic, political and cultural. He has written five novels: *English August: An Indian Story* (1988), *The Last Burden* (1993), *Mammaries of Welfare State* (2004), *Weight Loss* (2006) and *Way to Go* (2010). He also has written short stories which include: "*The Assassination of Indira Gandhi*" and "*Watching Them*".

### **On Administrative Services in India**

Chatterjee's best-seller novel *English August: An Indian Story* is published in 1988. The novel comments on the administrative services of India-the corruption in educational field, government office and inability to the eradication of poverty and social evils. He many focuses on the corruption in Indian Administrative Service and explore how people are suffering without proper water and transport facilities in rural areas like Madna and Jompanna.

### **Affairs of a Small Town – Agastya the Protagonist**

Chatterjee clearly portrays a picture of contemporary India in this novel. The novel is set in Madna, a small town in West Bengal. Agastya, the protagonist of the novel, joins the Indian Administrative Service and goes to Madna for training. He is not interested in administrative service, but he is compelled to join in the service. Later Agastya realises that the life in Madna makes him to understand the day-to-day problems of rural people. It is a new experience for the modern youth. There are many people come to collector office with a complaint. Chatterjee draws the clear picture of collector office, where crowd of people standing to meet the collector and some people arguing with the officer who has to give answers to their questions. “The Collectorate was a one-storey stone building. Its corridors had benches and more people” (*English, August: An Indian Story* 12). Agastya has to learn many things from Srivastav, who has been in Madna for many years. As a modern youth from urban area to rural, it took time for Agastya to understand the problems and struggles of rural people. The training gives him a good experience about the rural life.

The Visitors came all day. Agastya could eventually categorize them. Indeed, that was all he could do, since the conversations were beyond him. The petitioners always stood... the variety of complaints, from the little that Agastya grasped through instinct, gestures... Labourers on daily wages at some road site complained that the contractor paid them irregularly... Srivastav ought to be confident because he had been dealing with such matters for years. (*English, August: An Indian Story* 18)

### **Scarcity of Water – Tribal Society**

The people face the problems of scarcity of water. Children have to go the well to fetch water. The studies of the children get spoiled due to the problems in Jompanna. Agastya makes arrangement of drinking water for them immediately. He sends the junior engineer, Chaudhary back to Jompanna to bring water tank for them. Chatterjee is quite critical about the contribution of the government in the development of the tribal people. Agastya does not know the problems of the rural area because he is born and brought up in urban areas like Delhi and Calcutta. Agastya later finds that the politicians and civil servants are responsible for the terrible conditions of villagers. He clearly tells Bajaj about the real situations of Jompanna.

Half the population of the block of Jompanna is tribal, try and help them as much as you can... there is no caste war or anything like that in the area. It's simpler, just economics and politics. The tribals there have been ignored for decades, primarily because most of them stayed in those inaccessible hill forests. 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. (*English, August: An Indian Story* 240)

### **Rampant Corruption**

Chatterjee talks about corruption which is one of the major social evils. It affects the growth and development of the country. The government and its employees are corrupted. It is everywhere, especially in government office. Mrs. Srivastav does not complete her studies but she obtains degree by bribing the officer and becomes lecturer. She is not able to answer the question in an interview, still she has been selected. The Engineers like Shankar is ready to pay any amount as bribe to the minister to get transfer. Kumar tells Agastya,

In government, you'll realize this over the years, Sen, there is nothing such as absolute honesty, there are only degrees of dishonesty. All officers are more or less dishonest-some are like our engineers they get away with lakhs, 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 degree of dishonesty. (*English, August: An Indian Story* 138)

Chatterjee presents the dark image of woman in his novels. For modern man like Agastya all women are just objects of sex. He has no respect for woman. Agastya likes to see at Mrs. Srivastav thighs, observes her back bra beneath a yellow or pink blows. Chatterjee says that most of the women in postmodern age lose their virginity before marriage. Agastya's girlfriend, Neera, loses her virginity in Calcutta.

He talks about the Christian missionaries who attempt to convert tribals to Christianity. They help these poor to get hospitals built in the most remote corners of India.

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Socially and economically constructive work of the missionaries also focus on enabling the tribals to adopt Christianity. The sick and illiterate people turn to Christianity.

He wondered at motivation: what had induced the Dutch to build a hospital of charity in an obscure corner of India, or the Germans to fund an Indian curer of lepers? But he was greatly amused, a few weeks later, to learn that the Dutch missionaries at the hospital were converting tribals to Christianity... God, he laughed, when will these Christians ever grow up? (*English, August: An Indian Story* 245)

Chatterjee has pointed out various social evils in this novel. He has given his view of the picture of contemporary rural India. His novel is more in the form of lecturing to an audience, with less focus on episodes, characters and emotions, etc. As a literary writer, Chatterjee concerns about the society and writes to create social awareness in the society in his own way. He mainly focused on the rural areas like Madna and Jompanna where tribal people are living. Some deeper understanding could have helped him to make his novel more attractive to his readers.

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