

## Navigating modernity and tradition: Regional identity, inter-caste marriage, and cultural negotiation in chetan bhagat's 2 states: The story of my marriage

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### Abstract

Chetan Bhagat's *2 States: The Story of My Marriage* (2009) occupies a distinctive place in contemporary Indian popular fiction, dramatizing the tensions between individual agency and entrenched cultural norms in post-liberalization India. The novel traces the relationship between Krish Malhotra, a Punjabi Hindu from Delhi, and Ananya Swaminathan, a Tamil Brahmin from Chennai, whose decision to marry across regional and caste lines becomes a site of intense familial and social negotiation. This article examines how *2 States* constructs regional identity as a lived, affective category attached to language, cuisine, ritual, and space, while simultaneously staging an inter-caste union as both personal choice and political act. It argues that the narrative represents modernity and tradition not as simple opposites but as mutually entangled forces that shape the subjectivities of India's aspiring middle classes. Through close reading, the discussion foregrounds three interlocking domains: the dramatization of North–South cultural difference; the partial, often oblique treatment of caste; and the deployment of English-medium, elite education as a putative route to social mobility. The article also analyses gendered agency, showing how Ananya's apparent autonomy is circumscribed by patriarchal family structures, even as the text celebrates romantic love as liberatory. While Bhagat's narrative endorses the ideal of a pan-Indian, meritocratic order in which love and hard work can overcome prejudice, it ultimately leaves untouched deeper structural inequalities related to caste, class, and gender. By situating *2 States* within debates on popular literature, middle-class consciousness, and national integration, this study contends that the novel functions as both a document of aspiration and a symptom of the limits of liberal individualism in contemporary India.

**Keywords:** *Chetan bhagat, 2 states, regional identity, inter-caste marriage, cultural negotiation, modernity, tradition, middle class, patriarchy, social mobility.*

## 1. Introduction

Chetan Bhagat has emerged as one of the most widely read Indian English novelists, his fiction circulating among urban and semi-urban youth and frequently adapted into mainstream cinema.

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*2 States: The Story of My Marriage* (2009) is often received as a light, semi-autobiographical campus-and-marriage narrative, yet its plot is anchored in questions of region, caste, family authority, and the aspirations of a liberalizing middle class. The narrative unfolds primarily between Delhi, Chennai, and the elite space of the Indian Institute of Management (IIM).

Ahmedabad, thereby symbolically connecting North and South India through the shared idiom of English-medium education and corporate employment. The relationship between Krish Malhotra, a Punjabi Hindu banker, and Ananya Swaminathan, a Tamil Brahmin engineer, provides the central framework through which the novel explores the friction between modern, individualistic notions of choice and deeply rooted collectivist norms governing marriage. Their attempt to secure parental approval transforms a seemingly conventional romance into a tale of cultural pedagogy, compromise, and staged mutual accommodation. As Rajani Sharma notes, the text “dramatizes the clash of cultures within the same nation-state,” making the family the primary arena where this clash is negotiated (Sharma 154-160). This article reads *2 States* as a narrative of cultural negotiation in which regional identity, inter-caste marriage, and middle-class mobility intersect but do not radically disrupt the underlying hierarchies of caste, class, and patriarchy. Drawing on recent critical work on Bhagat as well as sociological studies of the Indian middle class, it argues that the novel offers a cautiously reformist vision of India in which romantic love can stretch boundaries but largely within the safe limits of upper-caste, urban respectability.

## 2. Regional identity and everyday difference

Bhagat constructs regional identity as an embodied, everyday experience rather than an abstract category. Krish's Punjabi family is associated with loud, informal speech, conspicuous hospitality, and what the narrative codes as a “fun-loving” ethos, whereas Ananya's Tamil Brahmin household is marked by linguistic formality, vegetarian cuisine, ritual correctness, and an ethic of restraint. These features are frequently played for humour, yet they also function as affective markers of belonging that shape how characters perceive one another. Language becomes a key index of regional belonging and social location.

Krish's ease in Hindi and English aligns him with North Indian metropolitan culture, while Tamil appears in Ananya's world as the language of intimacy, respect, and domestic authority. English, however, remains the primary narrative medium and shared code between the protagonists, reflecting the prestige of English-medium education as a passport to national and global mobility. As Aarthi observes, Bhagat's text “foregrounds English as a unifying force even as it acknowledges the emotional pull of regional languages,” thereby dramatizing the ambivalence of multiculturalism in India. By staging repeated journeys between Delhi and Chennai, the novel performs the trope of a North–South encounter that echoes wider debates on linguistic states, regional autonomy, and national integration (Aarthi, 2014). The eventual softening of parental resistance and celebration of a “two-states” marriage symbolically endorses an India where cultural plurality is possible, provided it is mediated through the sensibilities of an English-educated, professional middle class.

## 3. Inter-caste marriage and the coding of caste as culture

Although marketed primarily as a story of two states, *2 States* is equally a story of caste. Ananya's identity as a Tamil Brahmin is foregrounded through family rituals, food practices, and social expectations, all of which are historically tied to Brahminical ideas of purity, status, and endogamy. Yet the narrative rarely names caste explicitly, preferring to speak of “tradition,” “culture,” and “family background,” a rhetorical move that recasts caste hierarchy as benign difference. Similarly, an article on inter-caste marriage in *2 States* observes that while the union appears to cross a significant boundary, it remains firmly intra-Hindu and within broadly upper-class parameters. Krish's own caste status is never clarified, but his social ease, educational access, and unquestioned suitability suggest his location within a dominant-caste, upper-middle-class milieu.

The narrative's resolution constructs the couple's success as the triumph of love and reason over "old-fashioned" prejudice. However, as Dipankar Gupta argues in a broader context, Indian "modernity" often operates as "mistaken modernity," in which new consumption patterns and educational credentials coexist with unchallenged traditional hierarchies (Gupta, 2000). The marriage in *2 States* is best understood as a modest extension of acceptable boundaries within an elite Hindu framework rather than as a radical disruption of caste as a structuring principle of Indian society.

#### 4. Education, meritocracy, and middle-class aspiration

Education in *2 States* functions as a central technology of self-fashioning for India's liberalizing middle class. Krish and Ananya meet at IIM Ahmedabad, an institution emblematic of meritocratic success and global employability. Their relationship develops in a space that is geographically and symbolically distant from their respective families, underscoring how elite educational institutions enable young adults to imagine selves not wholly determined by regional or caste identities. Bhagat's own public persona as an IIT-IIM graduate-turned-best-selling author reinforces this narrative of education as a route to autonomy, risk-taking, and creative possibility.

Within the novel, corporate jobs, campus placement, and transnational opportunities are markers of aspiration and upward mobility, helping Krish and Ananya justify their wish to make an unconventional marital choice. As Sumanti's reading of the text suggests, "transcultural marriage" in *2 States* is intelligible precisely because the characters share a common classed and educated habitus (Sumanti, 2004). Yet the rhetoric of meritocracy tends to obscure structural inequalities in access to elite schooling, coaching, and English proficiency, which remain heavily stratified along caste and class lines.

Gupta points out that Indian middle-class modernity can be deeply exclusionary even as it celebrates individual success. In *2 States*, Krish and Ananya can imagine crossing regional and caste boundaries only because they already inhabit the shared world of English-medium higher education and corporate work, while those outside these spaces remain invisible to the narrative (Gupta, 2000).

#### 5. Gender, agency and patriarchal negotiation

Ananya is introduced as an assertive, outspoken, academically accomplished woman who challenges professors, rejects unsatisfactory suitors, and pursues her own romantic choice. At first sight, she appears to embody the figure of the "new Indian woman" who combines professional ambition with personal autonomy. However, as the plot progresses, her agency is increasingly constrained by family expectations and the emotional labour of managing cross-cultural relations. Patricia Uberoi's analysis of the Indian family underscores how women are often positioned as the primary bearers of familial honour and cultural continuity.

This dynamic is evident in *2 States*: Ananya must repeatedly prove her worth to Krish's family by adapting to their tastes, cooking Punjabi dishes, and performing the role of an ideal daughter-in-law, while Krish's efforts in Chennai focus more on persuasion and humour than on deep self-transformation. A study on inter-caste marriage in Bhagat's work notes that such narratives frequently celebrate women's "choice" while leaving intact the patriarchal structures within which that choice operates (Uberoi, 205-307). The narrative's closure ultimately depends on the consent of both sets of parents, particularly the fathers, whose approval validates the couple's union. Ananya's earlier defiance is reabsorbed into a patriarchal framework where her happiness is narratively secured only when elders bless the marriage and she is successfully incorporated into Krish's family.

In this sense, the novel's apparent endorsement of female agency remains circumscribed by, and reconciled to, the authority of the heterosexual, patrilineal family.

## 6. Cultural negotiation and the idea of India

The micro-story of Krish and Ananya's relationship can be read as a metaphor for the macro-story of Indian national integration. The repeated journeys between North and South, the gradual accommodation of festivals and customs, and the final celebration of a "2-states" wedding stage an ideal of India as a mosaic of compatible differences. Aarthi's discussion of multiculturalism in the novel highlights how such representation "normalizes" diversity while rendering it primarily through an upper-middle-class lens. However, the model of integration proposed in *2 States* is neither egalitarian nor radically pluralist.

The couple's eventual life is urban, English-speaking, and professionally mobile, embodying what Amartya Sen calls the argumentative but also aspirational Indian middle class, which values debate yet often naturalizes its own privilege. Differences of language, food, and ritual are acknowledged and selectively retained, but the deeper structures of economic and social inequality that separate regions, castes, and classes remain unaddressed. In this respect, the novel exemplifies what several critics identify as the ideological work of Indian popular fiction: Articulating middle-class anxieties and desires in forms that question overt prejudice while ultimately reassuring readers that the basic social order will endure. Cultural negotiation in *2 States* thus involves tactical adjustments within families rather than the structural transformation of society.

## 7. Conclusion

*2 States* offers a compelling narrative of love, conflict, and compromise that speaks directly to the lived experiences.

English-educated Indian youth navigating the pressures of family and the lure of individual choice. By centring regional identity, inter-caste marriage, and cultural negotiation, the novel invites readers to envision a more flexible, culturally inclusive India, yet it does so from the vantage point of an upper-caste, urban, middle-class milieu. The analysis here has argued that Bhagat's text carefully stretches social boundaries without fundamentally challenging the hierarchies of caste, class, and patriarchy that shape its world. Regional difference is reconciled through the mediating power of English-medium education and corporate mobility; caste is recoded as "culture", and women's agency is celebrated but ultimately contained within patriarchal family structures. As Gupta's notion of "mistaken modernity" suggests, Indian modernity in the novel appears as a negotiation that allows new freedoms while leaving intact older forms of privilege. Located within a growing corpus of scholarship that reads *2 States* in terms of cultural contradiction, multiculturalism, and transcultural marriage, this article positions Bhagat's novel as both a rich cultural document and a revealing limit case for liberal individualism in contemporary India. It captures the aspirations of a generation seeking to navigate modernity and tradition, even as it exposes the constraints that continue to shape whose choices are recognized, authorized, and celebrated.

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