

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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ENGLISH, AUGUST : AN INDIAN STORY

Upamanyu Chatterjee

(1988)

***English, August: An Indian Story* (U. Chatterjee, 1988)**

Story

This novel is a highly fictionalised account of the author's own experience as a government official during his posting to a rural region in the early 1980s. The protagonist is Agastya Sen, nicknamed 'English, August' by his friends at school because he is so enamoured of the English language and Anglo-Indians. The second word, 'August,' is added because it is the closest phonetic equivalent in English to 'Agastya.' Agastya comes from a highly westernised, English-educated elite. He graduates from college and, with no sense of direction, simply follows his father into the prestigious IAS (Indian Administrative Service). Instead of the posh life-style he imagined, however, he spends a year as a trainee in the Forest Department in an isolated district called Madna in the north Indian state of Bihar. Aimless to begin with, in this entirely new cultural and geographical context, Agastya spirals further into disorientation and undergoes cultural shock. His confusion is, in part, attributable to his habit of smoking marijuana. Left on his own in what is practically a jungle, Agastya struggles to cope with the heat, the mosquitoes, the lack of hygiene and the local language. In effect, he discovers that he is a 'foreigner' in his own country. As the author explains, from Agastya's point of view, 'The only claim to much of any fame for the place [Madna] is that it is almost invariably a contender for the title of hottest place in India. Temperature wise, that is -- decidedly not popularity-, action-, or other-wise.' Frustrated and fed-up with the isolation of Madna, Agastya flees back to the big city, where he considers entering the publishing business. But he returns to Madna and finishes his trainee year.

Agastya navigates the bureaucracy of the IAS, its pompous officials and mind-boggling red-tape with a certain detachment and sense of humour. However, he does not discharge his own duties with anything resembling objectivity or efficiency. Instead, he indulges his fantasies and invents information on the spot, causing confusion and distress among the people whom he is paid to serve. There are meetings of all sorts, and journeys by jeep and bicycle to visit villages and tribal regions within his district. Eventually, Agastya makes friends with Sathe, a political cartoonist and professional satirist. Drama builds when Agastya discovers that one of his fellow officers, ironically named Gandhi, has been accused of raping a tribal woman. It is not clear whether the man is actually guilty, but he is captured by two men from the tribe and has his arms cut off. The only other significant 'event' is that Agastya comes in contact with a revolutionary tribal group, who are fighting the government to prevent loss of their land and culture.

At the end of his trainee year, and of the novel, Agastya decides not to continue with a career in the elite IAS, even though he has been accepted as a full-time officer and given a new posting. Too much has happened in Madna, too many discoveries about who he is and who he is not. 'I need to think,' he tells his friend Sathe. 'I can't just keep moving ahead.' He also decides that he will get married, but not out of passion. Instead, he will go through the conventional arranged marriage process. It is a far from dramatic ending, which is a perfect match for this unsensational but perceptive novel about a confused young man.

Themes

Hybridity A major theme of this novel is the significance of hybridity, the admixture of cultures, languages and identities. Indeed, the title of the book ('English, August'), which is a nickname of the protagonist, introduces this theme even before we have turned a page. Agastya Sen, the Bengali hero, is so enamoured of all things western that his friends call him 'English' and then add 'August' as the closest phonetic equivalent of 'Agastya.' The novel is also written in a combination of English and 'Hinglish' (a hybrid of Hindi and English), with other dialect words thrown in when Agastya goes to

work in a rural part of north India, where the local patois is not standard Bengali or Hindi. The opening scene is a good example of the linguistic mix that is sprinkled throughout the book. While still in Delhi, Agastya's friend (and fellow marijuana-smoker) Dhruvo tells him: 'I've a feeling, August, you're going to get *hazaar* fucked in Madna.' Agastya then replies, 'It's an amazing mix, the English we speak. *Hazaar* fucked. Urdu and American.' Fortunately, the Faber and Faber edition of the novel includes a comprehensive glossary, which informs us that *hazaar* is the Urdu word for 'a thousand, generally used to mean "a lot".' Moreover, Agastya himself has mixed ancestry—his father is a Bengali Hindu, his mother a Goan Catholic—a fact that is brought to his attention more than once when someone says, 'You're Bengali? You don't look Bengali.' Other examples of hybridity include the 'foreign' couple, John and Sita Avery. He is the grandson of a man who served in the colonial administration, the same organisation (with a change in name only) in which Agastya now works. Sita, his wife, is the daughter of Indian parents who emigrated to the UK in the 1960s. She wears saris and folds her palms together very sweetly like an Indian wife, but her speech, her walk and her ideas are very western. Both of them come to India searching for their roots, but they find that they cannot disentangle their identity from its variegated soil. Finally, mixtures, juxtapositions and incongruities are also fundamental to irony and satire that pervade the novel.

Rural India The other major theme of the novel, which can be seen as correlated with the first, is the overwhelming reality of rural India to a person born and bred in a big city like New Delhi. On his arrival in Madna, somewhere in the isolated interior of the huge subcontinent, Agastya feels immediately out of place. 'He saw disreputable food stalls, 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.' When Agastya is taken to his room in the government bungalow, he gets a further education in rural living. The room is filled with useless and battered furniture. The room has been sprayed with a horrible-smelling insecticide, and he sits down to a watery and tasteless meal. Later, he is told that Madna is the hottest place in India, hot, that is, in temperature, not in terms of nightlife or other entertainment. Agastya learns to adjust, to the local language, to the food and the hot climate. Like a foreign tourist, he learns to boil water before he can drink it. Things get better, but he is not prepared for his encounters with the tribal population in his district. On one occasion, he is travelling by jeep down a narrow road in a forest and sees men and women sitting on the road. 'Why do they do that?' he thinks. 'Maybe to escape from snakes? Or maybe the road is cleaner than the jungle?' No one riding him is interested in his questions, but then the answer strikes Agastya. 'Of course,' he thinks, 'it's not the road that attracts them, it's the shade of the trees planted along it.' That discovery excites Agastya so much that he spends much of the rest of the journey trying to unravel the 'minor mysteries of rural India.' This scene highlights the subtle significance of the book's sub-title: 'An Indian Story.' It is not a story of a man from the privileged elite in the big metropolitan centres, as is the case with a great deal of Indian fiction written in English. Rather, it is the story of how such a person is confused and lost among 'his own' people' in rural India.

Characters

Agastya Sen Agastya Sen (called 'English, August', or just 'August' by his friends) is the central character in this *bildungsroman*, a debut novel by Upamanyu Chatterjee. A city-slicker, Agastya is posted to a remote part of India for a year of training as a member of the elite IAS (Indian Administrative Service).

Mr Sen Mr Sen is Agastya's father, who is largely absent from his life, being the Governor of Bengal. But he finds time to dispense rather tired bits of advice to his son, emphasising the generation-gap that underlies much of the story.

Ravi Srivastav Ravi Srivastav (or just Srivastav) is the Collector of Madna District, where Agastya has been posted, and is therefore Agastya's boss. A comical, vain figure, he is partly responsible for Agastya's decision not to continue in government service.

Govind Sathe Govind Sathe is a cartoonist in Madna, who becomes a good friend of Agastya. They share intellectual interests and smoking marijuana. Sathe also has the wicked humour of a satirist.

Mohan Gandhi Mohan Gandhi is an officer in the Forest Department in which Agastya is a trainee. They become friends but then fall out over an allegation that Gandhi raped a tribal woman.

John Avery John Avery is an Englishman who turns up in Madna, ostensibly to research his ancestors' colonial past.

Sita Avery Sita Avery, daughter of an Indian couple who emigrated to the UK, is John's wife.

Srivastav (Arrogant)

Character Srivastav, or (to give him his full title, which he definitely prefers) R.N. Srivasta, IAS, Collector and District Magistrate of Madna District, is the top government official in the lonely region of Madna, where Agastya, the protagonist of the novel, is sent for his first posting. Srivastav is described as 'short and fat.' He is married with three children and lives in a palatial mansion built for the British Collector in the 1880s, with expansive lawns and well-tended gardens. He is, in effect, a little prince, a mini-maharaja, who rules over his district with both administrative and judicial powers. He is both the Collector (so-called because his predecessors would actually have collected taxes on behalf of the government) and the Magistrate of the district. Only a man of firm conviction and principles would not have been corrupted by the omnipotence of his position, and Srivastav is not that man. Instead, he is an ordinary person transformed by the powers of his office into a petty-minded and manipulative bureaucrat. He appears, in public at least, to be a kind father and loving husband, but this, too, is a performance designed to maintain his public reputation.

Activities Srivastav gets up early, before seven o'clock, in order to play a game of badminton before it gets hot. He has a bath, a full-English breakfast, reads the papers and then appears at his office at ten-thirty. Two hours of looking at files and dismissing petitioners takes him to lunch, which stretches for another two hours. An additional strenuous hour of reading files and signing documents, then tea and finally home in his comfortable car. Other days are filled with meetings and/or visits to institutions in his district, such as schools or factories. Srivastav also likes to play cards, drink whisky and play the gracious host at grand garden parties.

Illustrative moments

Arrogant Srivastav displays his characteristic arrogance in the opening scene of the chapter in which he makes his first appearance. It is mid-morning, in his office, when Agastya meets him, or rather hears him bellowing at a subordinate. Even after offering a seat to Agastya, the Collector keeps yelling at the dark man, who is trembling in his khaki uniform. Srivastav then turns to his young trainee with a beatific smile and says, 'You've got to get used to this sort of thing. These monkeys don't know what to do. Unless you tell them.' Then he resumes his dressing down of the man, who apparently had mislaid a file, probably filled with useless statistics, anyway, thinks Agastya. Next, he peremptorily orders his servant to bring two cups of tea. 'And be sure to bring a saucer, eh!' he calls after the man, explaining to Agastya, 'You see, Mr Sen, these backwoods people don't even know what a saucer is. Pity, they're really very sweet. Simple and sweet.' Tea over, Srivastav rings a bell on his desk with as much ferocity as if he were warning the world of a nuclear attack. A servant enters, bows and stands at attention. 'Bring them in,' orders Srivastav. At once, the supplicants file into his office, bowing and scraping like slaves. Srivastav deals with their requests like a man swatting away flies, a wave of a hand here, a sharp word there. Never anything concrete or useful. 'Just got to let them know we'll take care of it. Someday,' he says by way of explanation to Agastya. Suddenly, however, the line of petitioners parts like the Red Sea, and a tall man enters. The newcomer is the local Member of Parliament. Now, Srivastav leaps from his chair and shoos the riff-raff out of his office, like a flock of chickens. 'Welcome, sir, welcome,' he says with a wide grin. Soon the two most important people in the district are discussing the latest government contract and to whom they should grant it. Srivastav has almost unbridled power, in part because his fiefdom is so isolated that no one from New Delhi cares what he does. The extent of his arrogance is in directly relation to the backwardness of the district.

Manipulative Srivastav exercises considerable power, but not only to execute government policy and (hopefully) improve the living conditions of the people in his district, but also to manipulate others. He particularly enjoys moulding his subordinates in his own image. That way—looking at a mirror all the time and hearing what he wants—he faces no opposition. A good illustration of his manipulative urge occurs during a normal day when Agastya comes into his office. Agastya has just had a meeting with the Superintendent of Police, who is also a high-ranking officer in the district. But Srivastav

reveals to Agastya how he brought the superintendent to heel. 'Do you know how many meals he ate a day?' Srivastav asks. 'Three. That SP (Superintendent of Police) consumed food three times a day.' Srivastav then explains that he makes it a rule that everyone should eat only two meals a day, one before and one after office hours. 'And that SP used to go home after his lunch and sleep for an hour or two. Can you imagine that?' Agastya cannot. 'So, I put a stop to that, all right. You know how? I telephoned his house every half hour. They couldn't tell me he was asleep. I'm the Collector. So they woke him up. And then he'd have to talk to me to pretend that he hadn't been sleeping. A whole week of this. But it changed him. Now, he's like me. Two meals a day.' The petty nature of Srivastav's obsession is staggering, but it becomes more explicable the more we read of the mindless bureaucratic routine that governs the lives of the government officers in Madna. Srivastav likes to manipulate people, even change their eating and sleeping patterns, just because it is a display of his power.

Gracious Let it not be said, however, that Srivastav, the Collector and District Magistrate, has no redeeming features. No, he is possessed of the artificial and saccharine charm of most puffed-up officials. This aspect of his character is on display when, a few weeks after Agastya's arrival in the district, Srivastav hosts a garden party on the expansive grounds surrounding his house. As the guests arrive at dusk, Srivastav floats about the lawns, dressed in traditional men's clothes of a long tunic (*kurta*) over flowing trousers (*pyjama*). Uncharacteristically, it seems to Agastya, he even allows his children to mix with the cocktail-sipping crowd, shrieking and playing like mad dogs. Then Agastya realises that this is Srivastav's way of presenting himself as a 'family man,' an indulgent father who loves his offspring. Probably beats them for so much as a peep on normal days, Agastya says to himself. He is also surprised to see that his boss forswears any alcohol on this occasion, again to project a favourable public image of himself. When Srivastav's daughter insults a servant ('You idiot. I said I wanted a rose sherbet'), he gently asks the insulted servant to 'kindly bring the young lady what she wishes.' Then he slips his arm through the arm of the owner of a large mining company and guides him toward a table laden with food. 'Yes, yes,' he chuckles, 'we will resume our bridge game after we eat.' Soon, Srivastav claps his hands, waits for silence and then makes a gracious speech about his 'band of beloved friends and dedicated colleagues.' Now, finally, everyone can consume the food that they have been eyeing all evening. The Collector has played his part as the benevolent little dictator.

Sathe (Perceptive)

Character Govind Sathe, a Brahmin, is a local journalist and cartoonist in Madna. He is introduced by another character as the 'joker of Madna' and as a 'yellow journalist.' Sathe publishes his political cartoons in four dailies that are printed in the Marathi language in faraway Maharashtra (near Bombay). Sathe lives in Madna, 'in the middle of nowhere,' because (he says) he 'likes the place.' In fact, he is the son of a successful local contractor who made a lot of money building dams and hotels, and arranging for the sale of timber and forest produce. Sathe is a satirist, who likes to poke fun at officials through his cartoons and by word of mouth. His conversation is so peppered with jokes, sarcasm and innuendos that Agastya (like the reader) does not know how 'to read' him. His friendship with Agastya is one of the strands that links together the somewhat disparate incidents recounted in the novel. The two friends are presented as a pair, the older Sathe playing the role of advisor or guide to the younger Agastya. He not only introduces the newcomer to the town of Madna and its district, but he also gives him advice about life. By the end of the novel, Sathe the joker comes across as a serious person, who reports on the shocking violence committed in the countryside. Although Sathe is a cartoonist, and although he smokes a lot of marijuana, he provides something of a moral seriousness to this otherwise scathing satire of Indian bureaucracy in the backwaters of north India.

Activities Sathe spends most of his day drawing and redrawing his political cartoons, although he smokes marijuana whenever he can. He explains that marijuana is one of the reasons he likes living in Madna, where 'ganga is easier to get than cholera.' Sathe is also addicted to his cassette tape recorder, on which he listens to music of all sorts, from western pop to Bollywood film songs. Sathe reads a lot, too. When we first meet him, he is reading *Yes, Minister* (a famous satire on politicians in London) in order to steal some jokes to use against officials in India. But he is disappointed, explaining that 'those British politicians are all so civilised and boring. Nothing scandalous to steal.' Finally, he likes to drive his red car around the countryside and to go on picnics.

Illustrative moments

Humorous The most prominent aspect of Sathe's character is his humour, which is often used to puncture pomposity and ridicule officials. But humour is also his default mode of speaking. Even when talking about himself, he is often self-deprecating. This streak of satire and irony is displayed by Sathe throughout the novel but is especially evident when we first encounter him. Agastya has just arrived from New Delhi and meets Sathe in his boss's office. Immediately, Sathe (who plays the role of guide to the newcomer) takes Agastya on a tour of Madna. After a few minutes, he stops beside a house next to a hotel. 'That's the Madna International Hotel,' Sathe says. 'Absurd, isn't it? What could be "international" about Madna?' Agastya agrees and Sathe adds, 'What's more absurd, we [his family] own the damn thing.' Then Sathe leads Agastya into the family house, guiding him past a large closed door. When Agastya asks what room that is, Sathe says, 'Not for you, my friend. The furniture in there is far too ugly for what I'm sure are your refined tastes.' He then explains that his older brother owns the hotel: 'He had the business sense, like my father. Knew a hotel would pull in the executive types who have to visit all these mines and factories around here. I don't need money. Now you see why I'm a cartoonist!' Finally, Sathe shows Agastya a drawing on his easel, a cartoon-in-the-making. The image is of a young man dressed in western clothes writhing around on a dance floor. 'I don't know what the punch-line should be,' Sathe says. 'Maybe something about the Coca-Cola generation, but I've already used that ten times.' Sathe also explains that a cartoon can't be too ambitious. 'The best ones only suggest pettiness and absurdity, very rarely something more complex.' Agastya looks at his watch and says, 'I've got to be at a Revenue Department meeting in ten minutes.' Sathe's final remark is: 'I think it's a very bad idea to go out in this heat to any meeting, and especially to a Revenue Department meeting.'

Critic Despite this tongue-in-cheek quality of Sathe's conversation, he is also a serious person, concerned with social and economic issues. He often speaks about the cruelty shown to poor peasants and tribal people in Madna district; there are rapes, murders and abductions of young children to be sold into slavery and/or prostitution in the big cities. But he is particularly scathing about people like himself. A good illustration of his criticism of his fellow middle-class Indians occurs when he is discussing another one of his cartoons with Agastya. That cartoon shows an Indian man at a typewriter, looking out the window at the Statue of Liberty. 'Now this is an ambitious one,' Sathe admits. 'I want to suggest an Indian writer writing about India, after having spent many years abroad, or living there. There many of them [an obvious reference to famous, prize-winning 'Indian' novelists, such as Salman Rushdie, Amit Chaudhuri and Rohinton Mistry). I find these people absurd, full with one mixed-up culture and writing about another. What kind of audience are they aiming at? That's why their India is just not real, a place of fantasy, or confused metaphysic, a sub-continent of goons. All their Indians are caricatures. Why is that? Because there really are no universal stories. Each language is an entire culture.' When Agastya protests and argues that people can understand each other across cultures and languages, Sathe continues, 'No. Great literature has to be distinct. Have its own special taste. A great Tamil novel, for instance, should be obscure to any non-Tamilian. That's what I like about Madna. I speak Hindi, English and Marathi, and yet I can't fully understand what they speak here.' Sathe may be a 'joker', but in this scene he is also capable of articulating a perceptive critique of Indian literature.

Guide The son of a wealthy man, Sathe received a good education and has the habit of reading good literature. In that respect, he is similar to Agastya, the protagonist, but he is also perceptive, which sets him apart from his younger friend. While Agastya flounders in his new situation, Sathe displays insight into people and the society around them. With that maturity, he plays the role of a guide or advisor to Agastya. From the very beginning, he introduces him to the key people in Madna and gives him an understanding of how local society works. This advisor role is illustrated clearly in the final pages of the novel, when the two friends go on a picnic. They walk through the woods to a place that is considered sacred by local people. Drinking beer, smoking marijuana and eating beef sandwiches, they drift into confessional mode. When Agastya complains about his own aimlessness, Sathe puts a hand on his shoulder and tells him about his own life, how he hated the way his father made money (through corruption and intimidation) but accepted his money anyway. 'He thought I was looking at him, as a cartoonist,' Sathe says to Agastya. 'But I wasn't. I was grateful for the money.' Agastya looks at him, confused, and Sathe says, 'There's no point in having regrets. Regret is stupid. You've got to accept yourself, as you are, Agastya.' After Agastya again says how confused he is, Sathe laughs and offers him a final piece of wisdom: 'You're not James Bond, you know. You only live once.' As a cartoonist who becomes a guide to Agastya, Sathe plays the role of

the 'wise fool,' a character best known to world literature in Shakespeare's play 'King Lear' but who also appears in classical Sanskrit plays and the novels of R K Narayan.

Agastya (Reflective)

Character Twenty-four-year old Agastya is the central character in this classic and humorous 'coming-of-age' novel. He is a lonely person, having lost his mother while very young and having a father who is busy as governor of a large state. Father and son communicate almost entirely by letters, which are emotionally arid. Unsure of his direction in life, preferring marijuana over any career decision, Agastya aimlessly chooses to follow the path his father chose, that is, to join the elite Indian Administrative Service (IAS). Agastya is also confused about his identity, as indicated by his nicknames. While at boarding school, he was nicknamed 'English' because of his obsession with the language and with Anglo-Indians. Some friends found it difficult to pronounce 'Agastya' (the name of a legendary Hindu sage) and began to call him 'August' instead. His journey to some degree of self-discovery begins when he is posted to a rural district as a bureaucrat. Although he continues his desultory life-style in that role, he does confront hard realities and comes to something like a decision at the end.

As a member of a generation for whom Bob Dylan and Miles Davis are more important than Gandhi and Nehru, and having grown up in New Delhi and Calcutta, Agastya has a hard time adjusting to life in rural India. Fortunately, he possesses enough resilience to survive. Marijuana helps, too, but more important is the fact that he does not take himself too seriously and glides through his year in the backwoods with a certain degree of detachment. He often uses his power of imagination to solve problems experienced by the villagers in his district, plucking facts and figures out of the air and making suggestions that bear no relation to reality. Although unable to commit to anything, he does come to a few sober conclusions. Namely, that he will not marry out of passion but will follow convention and marry someone chosen for him. Agastya, a fictionalised version of the author himself, is aimless, callow and sometimes irresponsible but affable, nonetheless.

Activities While in Delhi, with his friends, Agastya likes to go for drives, smoke marijuana and think about girlfriends. He also likes western culture, especially the music of Bob Dylan and Miles Davis. He reads a wide variety of books, from classics to erotic novels. Not much of this changes when he lands up in a rural backward part of India as a bureaucrat. He drinks whisky more than before, he attends more meetings and 'deals with' more official files than he ever thought was possible, but his recreations remain the same. Two of his favourite books are Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. The *Meditations* might seem an unusual choice for Agastya, but it turns out to be suitable. As the author comments, 'The self-deluding emperor [Marcus Aurelius] lied, but he lied so well, this sad Roman who had also looked for happiness in living more than one life, and had failed, but with such grace.' That comment might be applied to Agastya himself.

Illustrative moments

Aimless As in all good 'coming-of-age' novels, the chief malady that afflicts Agastya is his aimlessness. He comes from a privileged background, but he has no idea what to do with himself. This lack of direction is evident in the opening pages of the novel, when Agastya is talking with his friend, Dhrubo, in New Delhi. It is the day before Agastya is to take a long train journey to Madna, where he will begin his year as a trainee in the Indian Administrative Service as an officer in the Forest Department. It is late at night, and the two friends are sitting in a car somewhere in the vast city, smoking marijuana. When Dhrubo says that Agastya doesn't look like a bureaucrat, more like a star in a porn film, Agastya laughs and says, 'Well, I'd much rather act in a porn film than be a bureaucrat. But I guess you have to do something in life.' His friend points that that Agastya at least has had a good education, but Agastya replies, 'Yeah, but look at me. I've got no special aptitude for anything, not even wondering how to manage, not even really thinking. Try your luck with everything, hopefully something will click.' The problem is that Agastya, who is articulate about his lack of direction, doesn't show much commitment even to that laissez-faire approach to life. He has become an IAS officer only because his father was in the service and he didn't know what else to do. In this moment, his last before he begins the adventures that will comprise the novel, he can only shrug his shoulders and take another drag on the marijuana cigarette.

Reflective Another essential component of the *bildungsroman* is that the youthful protagonist should be a reflective person, often painfully so. Throughout Chatterjee's story, we are given access to Agastya's reflections on life and on himself, but a crucial moment occurs on a train journey. Agastya has taken a ten-day holiday from his boring job in Madna and returned to New Delhi to see his friends. Now, he is trundling along on the 18-hour journey back to the mosquitoes and heat and bureaucratic numbness of his job in the 'sticks.' He lies down on a sleeping berth and realises that New Delhi and Madna are so completely different, joined only by the 'rhythm of the beast beneath him.' He shrinks from the other passengers and reflects on his brief escape back to the big city: 'No more journeys, please. Life had become simpler, gliding from day to day and discovering more and more what he did not want. Now all he wanted, or thought he wanted, was one place, any one place, with no consciousness in his mind of the existence of any other. He could even make do with Madna.' Agastya then arrives in Madna, where the beggars assault him, but where he finds himself almost at home. The language (a distinct dialect of Hindi) is not so strange as before. Even the tepid, sugary tea served by his servant tastes good. This is a moment of self-discovery. Most readers would have expected Agastya to have found that he felt at home in New Delhi, where he has just visited. Instead, it is the dusty jeep rides and miles of sugarcane fields that seem familiar and comforting to him. From another angle, however, this moment of self-awareness makes perfect sense. It is only when you leave your once-familiar world and are jolted by another, strange world, that you can gain a new perspective on life.

Conformist After a few short weeks in Madna, Agastya becomes a stereotypical bureaucrat, bored, mechanical, unthinking and irresponsible. He does not carry out his duties with any sense of commitment to the welfare of the population but merely to pass the hours, to follow convention and, above all, not to rock the boat. A good illustration of this conformist tendency occurs in a scene when he has just arrived in his office in the morning. He looks at his desk filled with petitions, applications, memoranda, reports, letters and files—stacks and stacks of files. After a brief glance, he throws a few files on the floor, imitating what he has seen other officers do. Then he opens a file and closes it—it was in Hindi—and reaches for one in English. Something about midwifery in his district. He flips through a few pages, smirking at the descriptions of the birth of children in villages, and then searches for the place at the bottom of the last page that requires his signature. He finds it, a stamp reading 'Block Development Officer, Madna'—that's his official title—and he snorts again. Beside the stamp there is a little cross, put there by Malik, his subordinate, as if to say, 'Sign here, you idiot.' He signs. Malik comes in with another document and points to the place where he is to sign. Agastya hesitates, but only for a moment, and then looks up at him, as if to ask, 'And this is to do with...?' He gets a mumbled reply, nods and signs the document. He knows it is irresponsible, signing documents about whose contents he is completely ignorant. He knows he should enquire, study the issue at hand and ponder the consequences of such and such an action. But he can't be bothered, if only because he would create a bad impression as a trouble-maker. Better to conform and get through the hot day.