

# ONE INDIAN GIRL

## Chetan Bhagat

(2016)

### Story

Chetan Bhagat's seventh novel is narrated in the first person by Radhika Mehta, whose internal dialogue is also used to tell the story, fill in background information and let the reader into her deepest secrets. The story opens in Goa, a resort on the west coast of India, where Radhika, an investment banker in San Francisco, is about to marry Brijesh Gulati, who works for Facebook, also based in the San Francisco area. They have had several conversations of skype but have never actually met before the wedding. There is a 'bachelor' party for him and a 'bachelorette' party for her. Immediately, we know we are firmly in 'Bhagat territory,' with this wealthy, westernised Punjabi social milieu. One of the characters introduced by Radhika's inner voice (her 'mini-me', as she calls it) is her sister, Aditi, who, in contrast to her younger sister, is practical and more conventional and less high-flying, having married a Punjabi man who only 'owns a chain of sanitaryware shops.'

The drama kicks off when Radhika receives a text message from Debuashish Sen ('Debu'), a young man she hasn't seen for three years. Debu, who was unaware that she was getting married, is shocked at the news but tells her he will come to the wedding, even before she thinks of inviting him. Meanwhile, Radhika is slowly getting to know Brijesh, her husband-to-be, with several awkward moments and misunderstandings. Debu then arrives, something Radhika did not want, and he makes things worse when he 'gate crashes' a private religious ceremony that takes place around the wedding. Later, they meet in the gym of the hotel where the wedding guests are staying and she lets him know that she was not pleased with his 'crude behaviour.'

Then Radhika gives the reader the backstory of her relationship with Debu. Four years earlier, just when she began to work at Goldman Sachs in New York, they met, begin to date and end up living together. Radhika, however, is promoted to a part of the bank, called the Distressed Debut division, where she works very long hours and gets large bonuses. The relationship with Debu starts to go sour, as he doesn't like the idea of his lover making more money than he does.

Radhika wants to get married, even though they quarrel all the time, but Debu won't agree, saying he wants a 'housewife' and not a 'business partner.' In an effort to win him, Radhika quits her job but is then devastated to find that Debu is with another woman.

The action then shifts to Hong Kong, where Radhika has found a new position in the Goldman Sachs office there. Radhika now puts all her energy into her job and becomes successful, especially in closing a big investment deal in the Philippines. She also finds herself attracted to her boss, Neel Gupta, who is married and twenty years her senior, but also very handsome. They carry on their affair for a year, but then Radhika realises that there is no future in the relationship.

There is another geographical shift as Radhika moves to London to work for Goldman Sachs. Now her mother enters the story and pushes hard for her to 'settle down' and get married. Her mother wants to arrange the marriage, and Radhika agrees to at least look at the potential groom profiles on a website. She chooses Brijesh, they chat online and 'propose' to each other.

The action then shifts back to the present, in the hotel in Goa, where the wedding with Brijesh is about to take place. With ex-boyfriend Debu already on the scene, Radhika has another surprise when she gets a text from Neel, who then arrives in the hotel the following morning. With two ex-lovers and a future husband on her hands, Radhika is completely flummoxed and manages to annoy not just her

mother but also a whole brigade of aunts and uncles. Debu and Neel both claim that they want to marry Radhika and plot among themselves to get rid of Brijesh.

In a dramatic conclusion, Radhika turns them both down and then cancels the wedding, too. She is full of apologies and says she will take a year off work and travel in order to 'find out what I truly want.' In the final scene, Radhika stops off in San Francisco on her worldwide tour and gets in touch with Brijesh. They meet for coffee, and she agrees to help him with his new business venture. In the last sentence, they share a laugh, and the reader is led to believe that they might very well share more very soon.

## Themes

Feminism The dominant theme of this novel, which charts the ups and downs of Radhika's life, is that women should be able to choose their own life and marriage partner. This much is clear from the author's dedication, which reads: 'To all Indian girls, especially those who dare to dream and to live their life on their own terms.' The heroine of this story, unlike those in earlier Indian fiction, however, is not 'married off' while still a teenager by rapacious parents anxious for a substantial dowry. She is not even the unwilling victim of an 'arranged marriage' by enlightened parents, which is the case in some novels. Radhika is a 21<sup>st</sup>-century heroine, who looks for her potential husband via a special online service set up for young Indian men and women. This does not mean that Radhika's mother is not looking over her shoulder and commenting on each shortlisted candidate, but it does mean that Radhika can choose whom she wants. The feminist message is also delivered through the sexist attitudes shown by her lovers. Debu, the creative advertising man, with whom she lives for more than a year, is laid back and loving but ultimately unable to accept a successful woman as a wife. Neel Gupta, Radhika's boss in Hong Kong, has more confidence but he treats her as little more than a plaything. It is only Brijesh who seems to understand that, for a relationship to be successful, men must allow a woman to be herself. He says as much in the final pages of the book, when he meets Radhika after the humiliation of the cancelled wedding. 'I came to see that a girl doesn't need a man to define her,' he explains. 'You need a man to support and understand you. Help you be the best person you can be, banker, mother, both, whatever. Until you find a man who can do that, why get married?' An even clearer articulation of this feminist message is given by Radhika herself in the very beginning, when she introduces herself to the readers as having lovers and making a lot of money. 'If all this was the case with a guy, one might be cool with it. But since I am a girl these things don't really make me too likeable, do they?' These articulations of the message are a little wooden, and critics have savaged Bhagat's 'feminist novel' for being a man's vision of what a woman ought to feel and think. Still, his dramatisation of the struggle of a young Indian woman to find herself has proved immensely popular with readers.

Corporate culture Radhika's struggle, of course, is somewhat easier than it is for most 'girls' because she comes from a privileged background and earns a very large salary. But Bhagat's story has the merit of pointing out that even wealthy and successful women, like Radhika, have problems, especially when they live in a corporate culture, as she does. Sometimes the issues can seem trivial, as for example, that she is expected to wear high heels when she prefers 'flats.' 'I may be a vice president at Goldman Sachs,' she says, 'and I may have rescued dozens of companies and organised complex takeovers, but I can't even wear the shoes I like.' She also has to get used to wearing short-ish skirts, which makes her pine for the sari she had discarded long ago as too traditional. The deeper problems, as Radhika discovers, are contained in Goldman Sachs's famous 14 business principles. When she goes to the office on her first day, her senior partner sits her down and says, 'Long term greed. That's the underlying principle here. Of course, everyone works hard—if you want an easy life, look elsewhere. But investment and greed go hand in hand.' Radhika learns fast and is soon involved in taking over companies that have failed. One case is Megabowl, a company who built bowling alleys that combine leisure, sport and family fun. Radhika watches on in amazement as her colleagues manage to deceive the desperate owners of the business into selling their assets to Goldman Sachs at a fraction of their value. Another case is a failed company that owns factories in China. This time, Goldman Sachs will take over the concern, destroy the factories, build apartments and make \$70 million profit. When someone asks about the workers, it is glibly suggested that they be given a meagre compensation and chucked out. 'It's naked capitalism,' says Debu. 'You're like vultures who feed on other's deaths.' Radhika tries to counter this argument but realises that he is right. Unfortunately, she also realises that she doesn't care and that she likes her

job because she is good at it. Radhika, the innocent girl from India, has been transformed into a ruthless corporate raider.

## Characters

Radhika Mehta Radhika is the main character and the narrator of the story. She is born into a rich family in New Delhi but ends up working for an international bank in New York, then Hong Kong and finally San Francisco.

Aditi Mehta Aditi Mehta is Radhika's married, older sister, who primarily plays the role of a (failed) guide to her ambitious younger sibling.

Mrs Mehta Radhika's mother, or 'mom,' as Radhika invariably refers to her, exists largely on the margins of the story. She worries that her daughter will never get married and pressures her into accepting Brijesh.

Brijesh Gulati Brijesh Gulati works for Facebook in the San Francisco area. He and Radhika meet through an online vetting service for selecting possible marriage partners. They agree to marry but she calls off the wedding at the last minute. He then reappears at the end of the novel, and it seems that they will get together again.

Debuashish Sen Debuashish ('Debu') works for a Madison Avenue advertising company, where he is said to be the 'ideas guy.' He meets Radhika when she takes her first job in New York. They live together for a year, but then break up largely because he is jealous of her success and salary.

Neel Gupta Neel Gupta is the CEO of Goldman Sachs in Hong Kong, where Radhika goes to work. He is older and married but also charming. They carry on a love affair that ends without acrimony.

## Radhika (Conflicted)

**Character** Radhika is the protagonist of this novel. Indeed, it is her novel, inasmuch as she narrates almost every page and then gives us access to her jumbled thoughts via her interior monologue. She is from a wealthy family in New Delhi, went to the best schools and ended up at the Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad (IIMA), which is often compared to Harvard Business School. She describes herself as 'nerdy,' meaning that she concentrated on her studies and not on social life. Apparently, her older sister, who is already married, is considered to be prettier. All this makes her somewhat vulnerable when she goes abroad and takes up her first job with Goldman Sachs in New York. Meanwhile, back home, 'mom' is desperately trying to get her married through the conventional connections, in other words, an arranged marriage. Radhika is not particularly rebellious and listens to her mother's anxieties, but she is more focused on earning promotions and bonuses. She is the proverbial high-flyer, except that she is also inexperienced and unwilling to tone down her ambitions to fit the preconceived image of an 'Indian girl.' One of her redeeming features is that she is self-critical and tries to understand other people's points of view. The book is dedicated to 'all Indian girls, especially those who dare to dream and to live their life on their own terms. And to all the women in my life, thank you for being there. Despite me being a total pain sometimes.' That is Radhika: warm, candid and reflective.

**Activities** Radhika is a workaholic, spending long hours in her investment banker job. She also travels long distance to secure deals abroad, staying in alienating hotel rooms. We see her in meetings, at parties and in restaurants with her partners and associates. She is not a drinker, which causes minor friction within her group. She is concerned with her appearance, shops for new clothes and goes twice a month, or whenever she is promoted or shifts to a new office, to get 'waxed' (for body hair removal). She is often on the telephone, texting and talking to a variety of people, including her mother, who is worried that she'll not be able to find a boy who will marry a girl who is already earning \$150,000 a year.

## Illustrative moments

Brash Radhika is a 'straight-talking' person, candid, brutally honest and also brash. We get a taste of her assertiveness in the opening scene, when she introduces herself to us the readers: 'I'm Radhika Mehta and I'm getting married this week. I'm twenty-seven, and I grew up in Delhi and now I work at Goldman Sachs, in London, where I'm a Vice President. Thank you for reading my story. However, let me warn you. You may not like me too much. One, I make a lot of money. Two, I have an opinion on everything. Three, I have had a boyfriend before. Ok, maybe two. Now if all this was

the case with a guy, one might be cool with it. But since I am a girl these three things I mentioned don't really make me too likeable, do they?' In this revelatory passage, the male author has carefully calibrated Radhika's voice, which dominates the novel. It has to be brash, we might even say 'cocky', but it also has a slight undertone of apology. 'Let me warn you,' she says. And the passage ends with a question, which again softens the otherwise sharp-edged message. Notice also that she calls herself a 'girl', not a 'woman,' which might be insignificant if the book had been written in 1986 instead of 2016.

**Conflicted** Radhika is often at war with herself, second-guessing her decisions and motives, not fully trusting herself. This aspect of her character is made prominent by the technical device of her 'inner monologue', which makes us privy to every twist and turn of her thoughts. A good illustration of her inner conflict is given in an early scene when she meets Brijesh, her fiancé, for the first time in the hotel in Goa. He says something to the hotel staff, and her first thought is: 'His accent. 90 percent Indian, 10 percent American. Not good enough. But what the hell.' They then exchange a few words and again she thinks: 'What am I supposed to say to him? When are we officially going to have sex? Shut up, Radhika. Shut up!' Then he compliments her, saying she looks beautiful and her inner demon gets going again: 'Couldn't you do better than that, Mr Groom? Stop it, Radhika!' She then says something to him, using his name (Brijesh) for the first time to him. 'What kind of a name is that, Brijesh? Can it be more unfashionable? I'm going to be Mrs. Brijesh Gulati. That's terrible. No, stop this, Radhika, stop it right now!' At times, this inner monologue, her 'mini-me,' can be annoying, but that is just the point. She doesn't always like herself, and she is often unpleasant to others. At the same time, this storytelling technique lets us become intimate with the main character, whose flaws are nothing more than those we might recognise in ourselves.

**Unhappy** One of the most appealing things about Radhika's character is her unhappiness. Her problems enable us to sympathise with the investment banker who makes almost half a million dollars, who is snobby and full of ambition. Her disappointments come mostly in love, an early example of which is the slow deterioration of her relationship with Debu. After living with him for about a year, she comes home one night, exhausted from a long day at the office, and finds him in a T-shirt and shorts watching football on TV with a beer in his hand. The author describes it like this: ' "Hey," he said, not moving his eyes from the screen. "Hi," I said, my voice curt. *Is it too much for him to get up from the sofa and give me a hug?*' Later, she asks him if it's too much for him to pretend that he's happy to see her. He assures her that he does love her, but she isn't satisfied. 'Where are we going, Debu?' she asks. 'Are we just sharing rent and having sex?' Debu is non-committal, blaming her mother for bringing up the 'marriage' topic. But we know that Radhika is deeply unhappy, despite her salary and promotions. She wants more than a live-in lover. She wants a wedding, a house with children and, most of all, a husband who understands her.

**Brijesh** (Dependable)

**Character** Perhaps the best way to understand Brijesh's character is to see him alongside the two rivals in the competition to win Radhika's love. If the older, established Neel Gupta is suave and self-assured, and the younger, creative Debu is charming and unpredictable, Brijesh is uninspiring but steady. Even his name, as Radhika says to herself, is 'completely unfashionable.' He works in the IT field in the San Francisco Bay area, not part of the high-octane investment banking that is Radhika's world or Debu's Madison Avenue advertising world. He has a secure job with Facebook, with a good salary and, as he says more than once, 'stock options and a pension.' He is polite and mild-mannered. When Radhika first meets him, she says that 'his neatly combed, side-parted hair made him look like those schoolboys whom teachers first ask to be prefects.' And she adds that 'he had innocent, teacher's-pet eyes.' Brijesh is an ordinary guy in the elite world of successful Indians who work in the USA. He is a little awkward socially but manages to create a good impression through his impeccable manners. Not a complete goody-goody, he shows a daring streak when, on the eve of their wedding, he takes Radhika on a late-night drive to a café, where he rolls some marijuana cigarettes for them. He also expresses some modern views when he says that he can't see why girls can't smoke 'weed' if boys can. When Radhika praises his attitude as 'feminist', Brijesh modestly says he prefers the label 'humanist.' And when they are arrested by the police, he employs his polite manners to avoid a heavy fine. Finally, when asked by her mother, what she thinks of him after their first face-to-face meeting, Radhika gives a one-word answer: 'Decent.' By which, she appears to mean that he is a 'nice bloke.' Or does she mean that he is just 'adequate'? Either way, Brijesh does not make a memorable impression on anyone.

**Activities** Brijesh is mostly defined by his work. In a skype conversation, as part of his search for a bride, he tells Radhika (who is also searching for a husband) that he likes cricket and Bollywood movies. Then he says, 'Typical, right? IT, cricket, Bollywood.' He does, however, like to smoke marijuana. He also travels a lot, working for Facebook, mostly to New York and London. At one point, after losing Radhika, he begins to work out in the gym on a daily basis.

### **Illustrative Moments**

**Polite** The well-mannered Brijesh displays his 'decent' character in the first scene in which he appears. He and Radhika, their families and friends, have gathered at an expensive hotel in Goa to celebrate their wedding. The couple themselves have never met in person, only on skype, so their initial encounter is bound to be revealing. His first words to her, as they stand awkwardly together in the hotel lobby, are, 'Great idea of yours, to have a wedding in Goa.' He complements her good judgement, her taste and her values. When she thanks him for saying that, he follows up with, 'You look....beautiful.' Not original, as Radhika says to herself, but still, not bad. His next statement is: 'Yellow looks nice on you.' Radhika smiles because she knows this isn't true, but 'it's the thought that counts.' Suddenly, they are surrounded by Brijesh's aunts and cousins, trying to greet the bride-to-be. Brijesh, ever the gentleman, says, 'Hey, is this getting too much for you?' She says nothing but he reads her mind and says, 'C'mon. Let's go for a walk somewhere.' In those few minutes, we get a clear idea of Brijesh. He is polite, maybe a little too flattering, but still he shows good manners. And he is concerned about her welfare, and shows enough insight to be able to assess her feelings and suggest a solution to relieve the pressure. Radhika is not swept off her feet, she's not really even that impressed, but she has nothing to complain about, either. As she says to her mother, he's 'decent.'

**Forbearing** An even greater test of Brijesh's decency comes when Radhika suddenly cancels the wedding on the night before the ceremony is scheduled to take place. He doesn't know it, but two of her ex-lovers have turned up at the venue and confront her with the past. Confused, she summons Brijesh to meet her in the hotel coffee shop. He enters, completely unaware of what is going to happen, and smiles at her, saying, 'Good morning, wife-to-be. How are you?' She says they 'need to talk', and he is baffled by the stern expression on her face. He tries to cheer her up, saying that whatever troubles you might have, they always look better in the morning. Then she drops the bombshell, and he is shocked. He utters a few angry words (not too angry would be unrealistic) but then quickly recovers his composure and asks why she is doing this. When she explains that her ex-lovers have turned up, he says that he can accept that because that's in the past. But Radhika says the past has caught up with her, she's confused and needs to sort herself out. He remains silent as she walks away. Now he realises that he must inform his whole family, relatives and all, that the event is cancelled. And then he has to adjust his whole life's plan. Still, he does not blame Radhika for the crisis and does not even get angry, except for a few, brief words. He tries to understand, and even though he does not fully comprehend her motives, he is too polite to cause upset. Underneath his creased brow is a huge reservoir of patience and tolerance.

**Reliable** One of Brijesh's greatest assets is his dependability, the fact that one can rely on him. This quality is illustrated in the final pages of the novel. It has been more than a year since Radhika caused him untold humiliation in front of his assembled family by cancelling the wedding the day before the ceremony was to take place. Brijesh has had to get over that terrible rejection, for which Radhika never gave a proper explanation. Then, without any prior contact, he gets a message from Radhika asking to meet him. She is in San Francisco, on her worldwide tour, undertaken in order to 'sort herself out.' When they meet in a coffee shop and she tries to apologise for what she did, he waves hand in the air and absolves her of all guilt. 'No problem,' he says, unconvincingly. 'I'm over it. Life goes on.' He then makes some slightly forced and artificial comments about how a woman needs to be absolutely sure about marriage. Then the conversation turns to their work projects, and Radhika asks if he could help her with an idea she has, to start up a new kind of investment banking company. Brijesh adjusts his black-rimmed glasses and listens carefully. Within minutes, he is suggesting ideas about technology and platforms and audience outreach. That is Brijesh, humiliated without explanation, but still there for her at the end.

**Debu** (Insecure)

**Character** Debu is a young man from Calcutta who works in advertising in New York. He is described as the 'philosopher', the 'dreamer' and the 'ideas guy.' As he himself puts it, he works 'in the creative side' of the business. He appears to have a lot of self-confidence, is glib and at ease with people socially. One of his habits is a good-humoured slab of flattery. When he meets Radhika and she says her older sister is considered the prettier one, he says, 'Only if she is Miss Universe.' He is, however, not a sexual predator, and, although he appears to court Radhika, it is she who must take the initiative in the physical part of the relationship. This is a small hint that he doesn't actually possess all the self-esteem that his bonhomie might suggest. As the novel progresses, we glimpse more and more of this seemingly gentle and kind man. He is difficult to please, especially if you are his lover. He gets jealous, especially if your mother is prying into his life. He is competitive, especially if you are his wife and make three times as much money. His character is portrayed with some depth and complexity. As readers, we might find him weak-willed and sexist in his attitudes, but we never doubt that he did actually love Radhika and wanted to marry her.

**Activities** Debu likes his leisure time, watching sports on television and sipping a beer. In the morning, he spends an inordinate amount of time trimming his beard with a special mechanised razor. He has a passion for drinking in fancy bars, but he also loves to eat pizza delivered to the apartment from his favourite Italian restaurant. What he does at the advertising agency remains a closely guarded secret, except that it is 'creative.'

### **Illustrative moments**

**Charming** Debu is annoying and manipulative, but he also has charm, especially for the ladies. His romantic charisma is on display, brightly lit up, in fact, when he first meets Radhika in New York. She is the newly-arrived recruit, from Delhi via London, and fairly unfamiliar with the fast-paced business and social world of New York. The scene is set in 'Whisky Blue at 9,' a bar and night club on the fashionable upper West Side, which has a 'plush bar and lounge with decadent leather seats and dim lighting.' When she is introduced as a 'top mugger' [meaning 'brainy', focused only on grades], Debu says, 'She doesn't look like a mugger to me.' He slides over, making room for her, and when she says she doesn't drink much, he says, 'That's ok. They only give you one drink at a time here.' Then he playfully points out that the price tag on her new dress is showing and offers to cut it off. This he does in a slow, sensual way, allowing him to become almost physical intimate with her. He then tells her about himself, emphasising the 'cool, creative' side, projecting himself as the opposite of the 'numbers guys' who stare at spreadsheets all day. He laughs, she laughs and by the end of the evening, he has manipulated her into accepting a dinner date. She looks at him, tongue tied, and he says, 'Just you and me.' In the space of one hour, his charm has disarmed her initial reluctance, and they embark on a year-long relationship that, in retrospect, she wishes had never begun.

**Presumptuous** Debu is an impertinent male, who presumes a good deal, especially in his relationship with Radhika. A good example of his overconfidence is provided when we first meet this 'ideas guy' from the world of Madison Avenue advertising. He has arrived, uninvited, to Radhika's and Brijesh's wedding. We later learn that he and she had lived together in San Francisco more than a year before breaking up (when Radhika wanted to get married and he didn't). Now, she sees him again, for the first time in four years. The scene is a special room in the Goa hotel reserved for religious ceremonies, in this case, the singing of Hindu songs to bless the soon-to-be-wed couple. The room is decorated to look like the inside of a temple, with marigolds and pictures of gods everywhere. In the centre on a table is a large photograph of Sai Baba, a saint very popular with upper-class Indians. When the singers begin to perform their songs, Radhika notices a bearded man in his late twenties, with curly hair and wearing white kurta and pyjama. It is Debu. While the religious chanting is going on, he sends her text messages: 'Must meet', etc. They meet, in the hotel gym, she in a sari and he in the kurta-pyjama, completely incongruous among the people working out on bicycles and lifting weights. He greets her with the flirtatious 'How are you, babe?' Then he drops his bombshell: he wants to marry her. Outrageous, presumptuous, but, as Radhika has to admit, he was the first man to come half way around the world to marry her.

**Fragile** For all his bluster and pompous posturing, Debu is basically an insecure person, with a weak sense of himself. His fragility is exposed in several scenes in the novel, mostly in the cut-throat advertising world, when he lands a big contract but gets little credit for it and sulks for two days. However, an even more revealing example of his low self-esteem occurs in a long conversation with Radhika. They have been living together for some time, but she is the one who is getting the

promotions and bonuses. This bothers him and he confronts her, saying, 'Look, you're a simple Indian girl. Forget all this high-flying stuff. You want to love and be loved.' She is furious for this gender-based advice and retorts that he just wants a docile little Indian wife to cook his dinners and look after his kids. Hearing this, he stops shouting for a moment and says, 'Well, maybe I do. Maybe that's what I want. Someone to look after me and not be online all the time, worrying about this "big deal" and that "big deal".' Radhika then asks him what they should do, should she stay home? 'No, but you might consider taking a few days off a week, you know.' But that would mean a cut in her salary, which she's not prepared to accept. The scene ends with Debu losing his temper and storming out of the apartment. It's obvious that Debu has a fragile ego, threatened by a woman who is his lover and yet has a more successful career than he does. A macho male who cannot accept a woman as his equal in the external world is not exactly a unique character, and yet Bhagat uses the fast-clipped dialogue and the internal monologue to great effect, making us believe in this fragile person.