

THE METROPOLIS ON SATURDAY

The land of the confused

'Truant, feckless, anarchic, unsaddled, piebald creatures, all mane and tail' is how Vaibhav J Purandare sees today's urban Indian youth. How can such a generation be responsible for the country's future, he asks

When I read, nay, devoured, Upamanya Chatterjee's *English, August : An Indian Story* two years ago, I was, to put it mildly, thrown into paroxysms of shock and amusement. Here I said to myself, is a book that tingled and teased. And tortured. A marvellous work of fact-based fiction that spoke volumes about India's young generation.

Don't get me wrong. *English, August*, the novel, isn't a heavy tome that threatens to dislocate one's wrists. Tis, in fact, easy and manageable, and even when I pick it up today with a kind of gleaming fanaticism to re-read it for the nth time, I find it as compelling as ever before, if not more. I've also seen the film now, and methinks it's not a patch on the book. But there can be no denying that the film has given Chatterjee's masterpiece a new lease of fame. And the attention it has grabbed in Mumbai has also given me the opportunity to voice my 'Indyan' feelings on the story's overwhelming artistic and ironic power.

One can be sure that metropolitan youngsters will flock to see the film based on the fantastic book. Point is, just how many of them have the critical acuity to understand the truth that the saga so effortlessly portrays? Not many, really. This question needs to be asked, and answered, because it's precisely the intellectual, moral, cultural and spiritual bankruptcy that renders them incapable of discernment and sound judgment in the first place, the Upamanyu Chatterjee has very effectively brought to light in his work.

He exposes the majority of metropolitan Indian (male) youngsters for what they are - stags in a rut. Truant, feckless, anarchic, unsaddled, piebald creatures, all mane and tail. The river of progress and advancement is wide where they camp on either side, and they appear clothed. But if you bother to look closely, their reflection is naked.

Upamanyu Chatterjee presents his wryly observed account of Agastya Sen's 'year in the sticks' in such a way that any conscientious Indian would, after having derived a certain malicious delight from the protagonist's predicament, nearly swoon in the drool of their brothers' and sisters' similar plight.

After all, Agastya epitomises the modern day urban Indian youngster as nobody else does. He has all the attributes of the majority of India's high-flying teeny wannabes. To begin with, an utterly confused mind-set. Agastya has no special aptitude for anything. He doesn't know what his work in life is and he doesn't

even know where he's headed. Agastya has no sense of identity either. Like most yuppies, he can't relate to things Indian. Rural Indian is anathema to him. And like his completely rootless chums, Dhruvo and 'Mandy' Bhatia, his thought-process is well on its way to getting warped.

Agastya is all at sea when he finds himself placed willy-nilly in the midst of reality and away from the superficial levels of existence. And, last but not the least, as a logical corollary as it were, Agastya has zero socio-historical perspective. Could there be a better example of modern day urban Indian youth than 'Ogu' Sen ?

Morally crippled. Culturally uninformed. Civilisationally wretched. That's a whole generation of Indians for you. Blindfolds on eyes. Plugs in the ears. Truly a generation unique in its self-imposed darkness.

What does one say of these ethical, cultural and spiritual raga-muffins that India is saddled with ? Well, on every side one witnesses the spectacle of these perplexed oddities fleeing from true life and hugging the mere illusive and specious appearance of it. Because that's easier than yielding to its obligations and accepting its demands. A life of fleeting sensations and momentary impressions, in which the shallow and the skin-deep rise prominently above deeper and enduring things - the life they lead.

That's why facing real-life situations is mighty uncomfortable for them. These hollow minds, enlisting hollow passions in the name of hollow fantasies, can't stand the real and the actual. It makes them feel breathless. And any acquaintance with India's history and her great civilisational past sends their heads wobbling.

Having mortgaged their memory to the United States of Amnesia, the cultural cripples around us are busy replacing their inherent spirituality with soulless materialism, the quality of thoughtful reflection with flimsy curiosity, and they're following treacherous will-o'-the-wisps which will sooner, rather than later, make them eligible for getting a green card. To oblivion.

But all is not over yet. The Agastyas, the Mandys and the Dhruvos of India can still come out of the rut they're stuck in, provided they discover their true identity, go back to their roots and do away with the misleading influences of the filthy West. If they do this, they can still save themselves.

Otherwise, history will consign them to the dustbin, and a resurgent Indian nation will look upon them, unapologetically and sneeringly, as good-for-nothing wastrels who disowned the great legacy bequeathed to them by a wonderful civilisation, only to end up enmeshed in a stagnant pool of confusion and uncertainty. In other words, "Hazaar (expletive deleted)," as Upamanyu Chatterjee makes Agastya

himself admit.

Surely my nation, which is the mother of human civilisation, deserves better children than these baffled boys to guide her destiny. What can youngsters who've distanced themselves from their roots and become directionless do for India except force her to adopt the same suicidal course they've chosen ?

No wobbly, stumbling ways, please. At least not for a country where the human mind has reached the summit of thought. The mother who's destined to be the teacher of all lands will be taken to her pre-ordained greatness by her own sons and daughters, The Amrutasya Putrah, Children of Immortality !

India's destiny will be shaped by those deeply rooted in her grand ethos. India's future will be moulded by fresh young minds full of nationalist self-confidence and tremendous energy to restore the motherland to the heights of glory. Those who've cut themselves adrift from their moorings and sold their minds out can have no role to play in building the edifice of future India.