



Sahitya Akademi

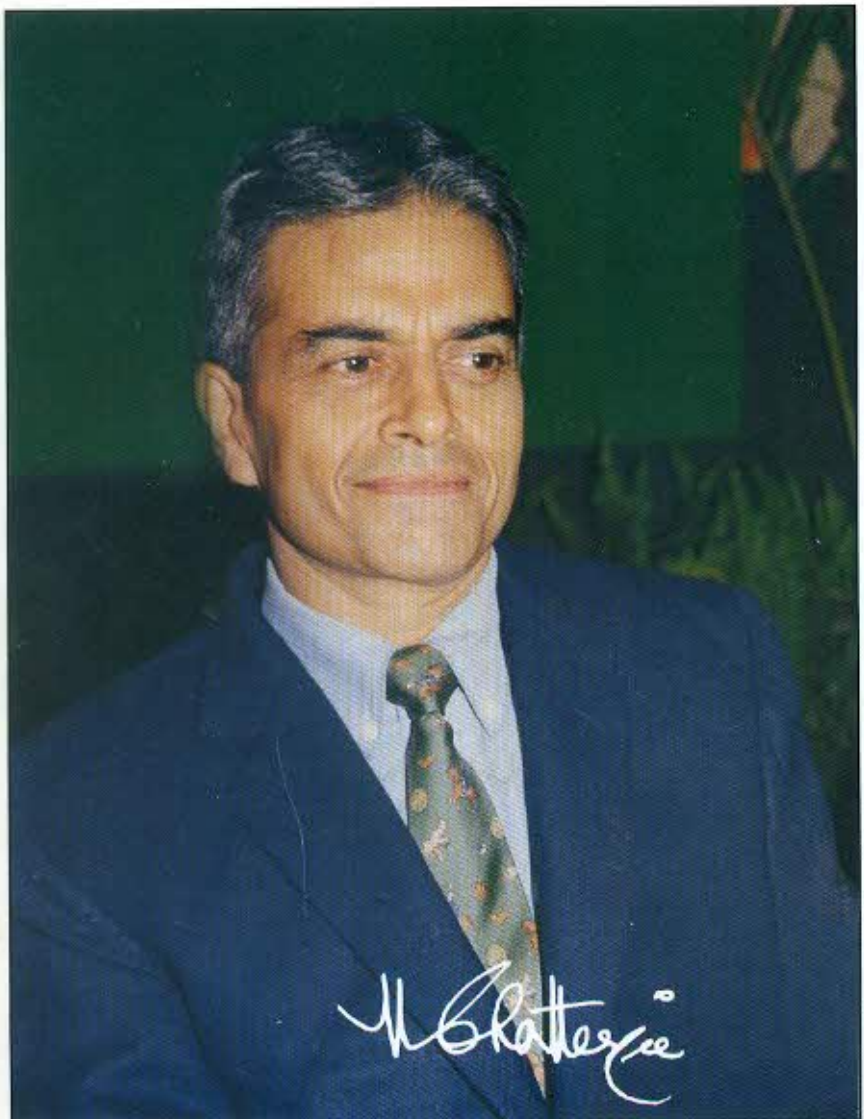


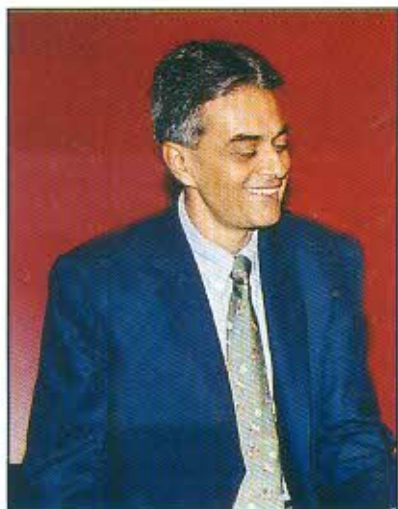
India International Centre

21 April 2005

meet the author

Upamanyu Chatterjee





through in a personal encounter with him: a very sensitive, witty, withdrawn artist of letters.

Upamanyu Chatterjee was born in 1959 in Patna. He grew up in Delhi and has a B.A. and an M.A. in English from Delhi University; recently he has also successfully completed an M.Phil Course in Public Administration at the Indian Institute of Public Administration, New Delhi. He taught English for one year at St. Stephen's College, Delhi, before joining the Maharashtra cadre of the Indian Administrative Service in 1983. He lives at present in Mumbai. He is fluent in five languages, which include English, Bangla, Hindi and French. His hobbies include reading, writing, swimming and he enjoys taking long walks.

Upamanyu took to writing very early in life. "He likes writing, particularly with fountain pens," he adds serio-comically. He began with one-act plays in school and graduated in college to a handful of short stories. After joining the Civil Service, some of those stories were published in *Debonair* and *London Magazine*. One of them, "The Assassination of Indira Gandhi" was published in the Heinemann collection, *Best Stories 1986*.

'Day-to-day life is frustrating, even for someone ensconced within the administration of the Welfare State such as Agastya. "I'm a girder of the Steel Frame, okay?" Agastya reminds others by way of explanation why he shouldn't get the usual runaround. But it is hopeless — the Welfare State is a mystery within and without and getting things done is pretty much last on the list of everyone's priorities.' This is a quote from a review of *The Mammaries of the Welfare State*. This seems to profile Upamanyu Chatterjee himself in his daily official role of a bureaucrat. But what of the individual, the private person? This persona of the writer comes



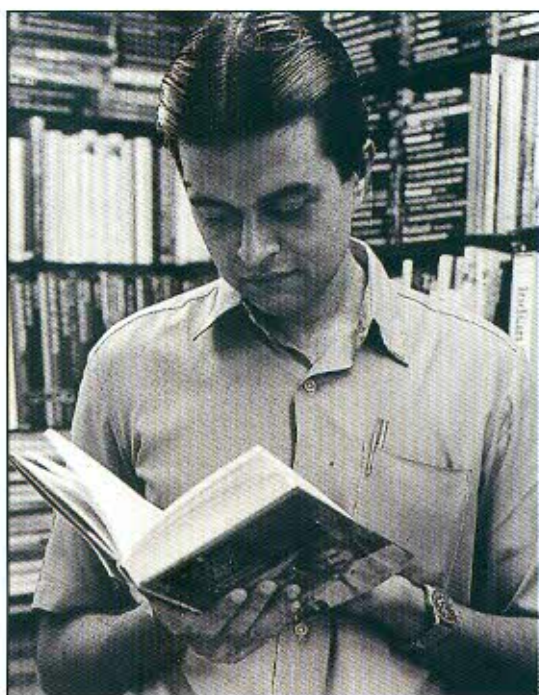
In a Writers' Conference L-R: Rukmini Bhaya Nair, Upamanyu Chatterjee, K.P. Vijayan, Alka Saraogi

His wry sense of humour is manifest in his description of the derivation of his name. As he tells us in a lighter vein, "My name Upamanyu (literally means. Vice- or Deputy - Anger, in Sanskrit. (Cf. Upa - rashtrapati - jee.)" He learnt it up - practically blazoned it on his forehead around his third eye - for his Civil Services interview. They asked him instead about vasectomies! He has brothers with equally distinctive names—Tishyarakshit and Beetashok. He has four novels in English to his credit. *English, August* was published in 1988. It was later made into an award-winning film, for which Upamanyu helped to write the screenplay. *The Last Burden* came out in 1993, followed by *The Mammaries of the Welfare State* in 2000. The last won the Sahitya Akademi award for 2004. A fourth novel, *Weight Loss*, is due for release. He has begun work on a fifth, "partly because of my fine collection of fountain pens," he comments carrying the fetish forward.

He married Anne Vaugier in 1989 and they have two daughters. As if to laugh at the curious who would insist on peeping more into his intimate, private life he states about himself: "I gave up smoking in 1995 and took it up again in right earnest when Wills Silk Cut was introduced in the country." He believes that, more than China or India, the future belongs to the noxious weed.

U p a m a n y u Chatterjee's first novel *English, August* which launched its author so decisively, tells the story of the young civil servant Agastya ("August") Sen. Joining the Indian Administrative Service — which author Chatterjee

self joined at the same age, in 1983 — Agastya is sent off for a year's training in district administration to a small district town called Madna.... The novel presents a new generation of Indians already strongly influenced by modern American culture (several of the characters have studied in the US) — though not quite the MTV generation yet (the novel was written in 1988, when the impact of cable and satellite TV in India was still limited). It is a generation that is not entirely disaffected or alienated, but that is unsure of its future, its goals, and its ambitions — Agastya, often affable but generally choosing to remain an outsider too, more than most. The changes in society are even more pronounced when seen from Madna, a small place of extremes, that obviously can't quite keep up with the fast-paced life and changes in the big cities.... Agastya is still a youth, trying to find meaning and direction. "I've become your American, taking a year off after college to discover himself", Agastya writes



The book launch of *English, August* 1988, Mumbai



With wife and daughters

to his best friend Dhrubo at the end of his year in Madna, and the training-year is, indeed, very much like that.

The book is a satire, the humour veering from the blunt and crude to the delicate. Still, little of the comedy comes across as too forced — and much of it is very funny indeed. Much of the humour is almost as if incidental, the obvious consequence of the absurdities all around.

About his second novel, *The Last Burden*, Theresa Munford writes in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*:

"The three generations that Upamanyu Chatterjee draws under one roof in this uncomfortable portrait of an urban Indian household seem to be bound to each other as much by bile as by blood. (...) The only silence is that of a sulk. Perhaps that is why the rare glimmers of tenderness, even of affection, are all the more poignant (...). Despite the author's wit and humorous prose, the nastiness of it all soon begins to wear. The reader may close the book with the same sense of relief as slamming the door behind a house full of quarrelsome, rowdy acquaintances."

But *The Last Burden* is not

meant as an uplifting tale. Chatterjee remains a realist — and occasionally the realism can appear brutal. The writing is very solid throughout the book. There is some humour, but little of the lightness found in much of *English, August*. But Chatterjee strikes the proper tone throughout: it is both assured and accomplished.

Mammaries of the Welfare State, his third novel and a sequel to *English, August*, carries his satire on the bureaucracy even further. "Compared to *English August* (and one can't help the comparison of a sequel to a prequel) *The Mammaries of the Welfare State* has a greater breadth, a broader sweep, a far bigger *mélange* of unforgettable characters. It is also often dark, brooding, even scary. The humour is sometimes all black. Nonetheless, it is unputdownably funny," remarks Soumya Bhattacharya, in *The Hindustan Times*. Nirmal Sandhu, in *The Sunday Tribune*, invites the reader to the serious aspect of the work. "It is a hilarious satire. But the issue it focuses on ... is too serious to be laughed off. It provokes one to realise, how worthless one's upbringing has been when it comes to facing one's own country...."

Upamanyu Chatterjee's work is intended to be comic. He has great respect for the comic tradition in literature. Even when what he writes is sad and depressing, he argues that it was meant to be funny and that there is no accounting for how people read books. He was happy to note that the Sahitya Akademi, in the award citation for 2004 to *The Mammaries of The Welfare*

State, acknowledged its 'richness arising out of an interlacing of fascinating humour and the biting power of critique and satire.' Happily noting it, Upamanyu could hardly resist the temptation to invoke his pet obsession even a third time. He exclaimed: "More power to the Akademi's fountain pen." Small wonder his handwriting is real calligraphy! □

A Select Bibliography

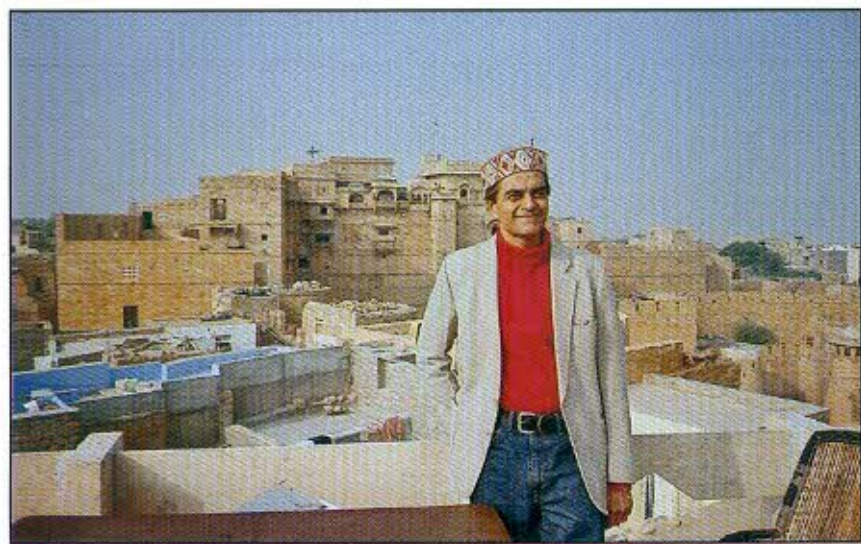
Novels

English, August, 1988, London, Faber and Faber.

The Last Burden, 1993, New Delhi, Penguin India.

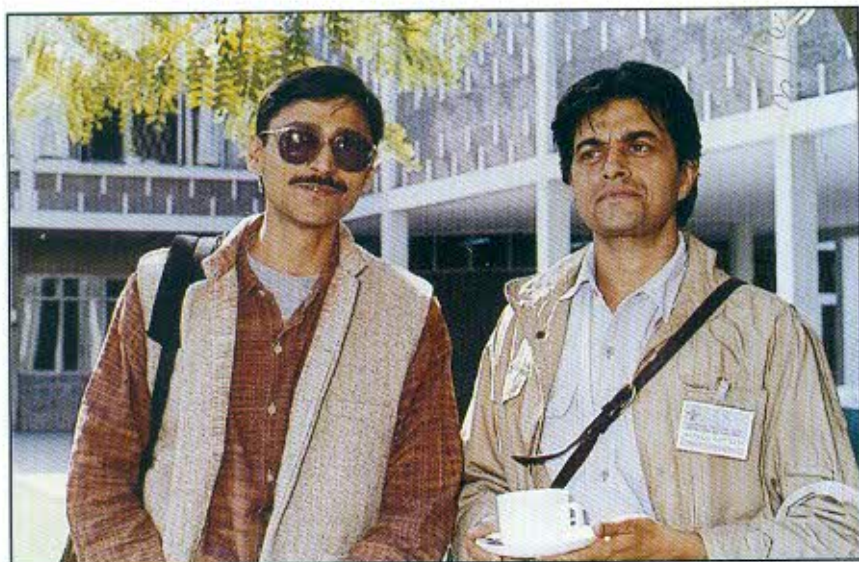
Mammaries of the Welfare State, 2000, New Delhi, Penguin India.

Weight Loss (forthcoming)



On tour at Jaisalmer, December 2003

Chronology



With Makarand Paranjape

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| 1959 | Born in Patna | 1993 | <i>The Last Burden</i> comes out |
| 1983 | Joins I.A.S. | 2000 | <i>The Mammaries of the Welfare State</i> published |
| 1986 | His story, "The Assassination of Indira Gandhi" was published in the Heinemann collection, <i>Best Stories</i> | 2003-04 | Successfully completes M.Phil in Public Administration |
| 1988 | <i>English, August</i> published | 2004 | Wins Sahitya Akademi Award for <i>The Mammaries of the Welfare State</i> |
| 1989 | Marries Anne Vaugier | | |



At the Sahitya Akademi Award ceremony, February 2005