

Chapter - II

FREEDOM SONG

Amit Chaudhuri's third novel **Freedom Song (1998)** is about the family afflicted or changed by old age. The younger people in the family are either absent or gone to some other part of the world, or other parts of India; the young people who have stayed are doing all kinds of things that are perceived as idiosyncratic. It deals with the events that intersect with the ordinary people's consciousness.

The old couple, Khuku and Shib live in Calcutta. Mini, Khuku's childhood friend stays with them temporarily and undergoes treatment for her chronic arthritis. She has an elder brother Borda, a younger brother Bhola, and a sister Pulu. Bhaskar, the son of Bhola, joins the Communist Party because he is not good for anything else. Puti, the daughter of Pulu, has a son Mohit. Bhaskar and Mohit though cousins, differ widely in the nature of their career. Mohit, who is now in upper matriculation level, works hard and aims to take JEE exam. Later, he has to go to America to appear for the SAT exam while Mohit is busy in these activities, Bhaskar works in a factory, takes active participation in all the communist activities of Calcutta. He even sells the newspaper *Ganashakti* every morning. Bhaskar's parents are much worried about the future of Bhaskar. So, Khuku and Puti take charge of searching a match for Bhaskar with a fond hope that he gets changed after marriage. In the course of the novel, though they succeed in making Bhaskar enter into a wedlock, their desire of change in him doesn't occur.

In the novel, the vivid characters, Khuku and Mini now old, and at a certain point in their lives, show their slightly outrageous views about Muslims. It shows that they live in times of great political upheaval. Calcutta has

always had a communist party, so communal tension has been kept under control and it has not experienced the physical turmoils or riots. There are more characters in this novel, and there is superficially more action in some parts of the novel but in other parts there is little action.

In the novel, Chaudhuri, as usual, eschews anything as heavy as a plot hovers around two families – that of Khuku's and of Mini's in Calcutta. Khuku and her husband Shib live a quiet life, settling slowly into a pleasant retirement that's staved off by a Shib's job at a declining public sector company called "Little's." Mini, Khuku's old friend, is on an extended visit to Khuku and Shib when the story opens. Khuku's brother Bhola and his family live a short distance away in Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar Road. Bhola's son Bhaskar has presented his family with the dilemma that a suitable girl must be found for him, which is a trifle difficult because of his insistence on hawking copies of *Ganashakti*, every morning.

The Bengali pulse can be well felt in the conversation between Bhaskar's mother and Mohit when he comes to their house:

'Will you have luchi, Mohit? She asked.

'No', he said.

'Omelette?'

'No'

'Pithha? Have a pithha. I made them yesterday.'

'No' said Mohit firmly as if he were used to warding off such requests.

(*P.287)

Typical Bengali food "luchi", "omelette", "pithha" and the culture of welcoming people are what Amit Chaudhuri has tried to present in the very

first few pages of the novel. He has very well woven Bengali life into a complex structure by representing the multi-faceted aspects of the Calcuttans within a framework surcharged against a political back ground:

There was a message on the wall outside: C.P.I.(M.) FOR
UNITY AND HARMONY AMONG ALL THE
COMMUNITIES. A man, wearing pyjamas, a shirt, and a
sleeveless pullover, came to the door and said: 'you're late'.
'Give it to me, don't waste time' said Bhaskar. The man in
the sleeveless pullover emerged with a pile of *Ganashakti*
and transferred it from his arms to Bhaskar's.

(P.290)

With the largely even tenor of their lives forming a background rhythm, Chaudhuri slowly introduces two problematic themes – the swelling current of anti-Muslim opinion in the post-Babri Masjid days, and the steady crumbling of a certain way of life that used to mark Calcutta.

Calcutta has since national independence taken a backseat to Bombay, New Delhi and even Bangalore. In Chaudhuri's novel it is a city which attracts the old and arthritic near retirement while the young leave. Chaudhuri brings the novel a vivid, affectionate life. The small social dramas that accompany Bhaskar's eventual marriage, the bi-play between the three servants Nando, Uma and Jochna, even the patterns of light created by clothes hanging out to dry and the repertoire of songs that accompany every true Bengali; this little details come together in pointillist patterns to create an unforgettable picture of Calcutta. As per Bruce King, "*Freedom Song* can be read as about Calcutta and Bengali culture since independence."¹

A country so vast and varied and displaying such tremendous diversity of regional traditions and culture cannot but produce regional fiction displaying rich variety. From the quoted lines, it is quite evident that this novel has been set in the hearts of Calcutta. Another vivid example the sights and sounds can be cited:

Now, at half-past six, two state transport buses went down Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar Road, blowing their loud hooting horns; they were halfempty, an unusual sight. There was a small encampment of rickshaws along part of the pavement, their extended arms planted on the ground, their collapsible roofs raised, their wheels at rest, rickshaw-wallahs, heads and shoulders covered with a piece of cloth, were slapping their hands in imitation of applause and hurling tobacco into their mouths. Retired men, as free as children, all of them dressed for some reason in white dhoti and kurta,.... The first to go about their business were the crows, clamorous, a little neurotic, turning up, as usual by the tea-shop entrance... upon the roofs.

(P.289)

This narrative passage is sensitive in its own way and pinpoints the realistic cosmopolitan sights of an early winter morning typical of Calcutta.

The two elderly women, Khuku and Mini, chat and remember young Bhaskar dabbles in politics. His father Bhola goes to the sweet factory in whose office he still works. Servants, friends and relatives eddy around the central group. *Little's*, the once respectable British firm manufacturing sweets and chocolates, settles down into the sludge that overtook so many companies once they dropped into the maw of the public sector. Shib's realization that he represents merely a token attempt to get the company back

on its feet is echoed and is still being echoed by a hundred boxwallahs who complain gently at the club that they just can't seem to get the buggers to work.

It was an old company, once reputable and British owned, called Little's, and it produced sweets and chocolates. There was a time when its oval tin – Little's Magic Assortment – was available in every shop in Calcutta, and its toffees and lozenges in cellophane wrappers stored in jars in every cigarette shop.

(P.295)

Khuku's husband, with the working experience in a private company, takes the job of upbringing the 'sick unit'. Within no time, he is able to bring drastic changes and raise the state of the company to a better position, through his sheer 'work ethic'.

And though Khuku's husband was only an adviser, they treated him with a bit of extra respect and sometimes, as if he ran the place. Khuku's brother, in a kind of infatuated haze, said, 'Little's – Little's will be all right again'.

(P.297)

In a way, Khuku's husband mingles with all the employees and spends most afternoons with them. Bhaskar, the young son of the household, is a Communist party member, committed to meetings, street-plays and a daily newspaper, *Ganashakthi*.

The many layers of Indian reality are suggested in Chaudhuri's elliptical approach and it is in the placing of different images that he achieves his best effects. As, for instance, a domestic scene where both women are sitting

together eating oranges and the all the while discussing Bhaskar's involvement with the Marxist party as we are told.

As Mini, with her small dark fingers, ripped the peel, the smell of orange suddenly burst upon the air.

(P.301)

And a little later,

Khuku and Mini worked busily while talking, spitting out pips which were being heaped in torn pieces of the peel. They were enjoying the winter.

(P.301)

Later Chaudhuri makes a subtle description about Bhaskar's father's mother who has seven children, scattered with their respective families in different parts of India. She is used to wear a white sari after her husband's death. She spends her time reading newspaper all the day. In summers she tells stories about ancient Rome to Bablu, Bhaskar and Manik. These stories quite naturally center around 'rakkhoshes'.

She, wearing her white sari, for her husband had died thirty years ago, sat peering at the *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* through her reading glasses, beginning with the first paragraph on the first page and ending at the last.

(P.308)

As a wedding gift this house had been given to Bhola from his father-in-law. Since then they made several changes to it, to make it better. In childhood, Manik and Bhaskar slept on their sides, one side of their face sunk in the pillow. It used to be a hectic task to their mother, to wake them up, and make them ready to school soon.

At half past six, his mother would come to raise him out of his bed: 'Ei Manik! Ei Bhaskar! Get up! Get up!' While they clutched their pillows tightly and grew more and more angry in their sleep. They shows typical childishness of the two brothers Manik and Bhaskar.

Not only the sights and sounds are vivid but the typical Bengali culture of learning Rabindra Sangeet with vocal exercises on the harmonium is also included in the routine of Khuku who had her own unworldly routines. She sings to the accompaniment of her own harmonium and her voice is still young and as tuneful as it had been when she was sixteen.

Bhaskar's father and mother tour almost the whole of North India and even wish to go south, to Kerala, and to Cochin, and Kovalam, and Kanyakumari, the tip of India. Even Manik wishes the same. This sort of dying desire to tour is referred to a black spot on the sole of her right foot.

The so-called protagonist Bhaskar is an activist of sorts, the **Freedom Song** is part of his attempt at organising a Marxist inspired street play. There are copious references to the Babri Masjid and its after shocks in the bomb blasts that rocked Bombay. But all these are filtered through the consciousness of the two women – Khuku and her old school-friend Mini, who form the still and soft centre of the novel – a centre that eventually seems to absorb all the contradictions that swirl around it.

What if one mosque had gone – for hundreds of temples had been destroyed before. She could not understand what the fuss was about.

Promises, always promises. No sooner had the mosque gone down than the government had promised that it would be built again.

'Who'll rebuild those temples?' She asked.

'That's right,' said Khuku. 'No one talks about them'.

(P.353)

Unlike others, Khuku and Mini do not believe in the traditional deity; they create their own deity in which they seek solace in it.

But Khuku and Mini did not believe in Ram or Krishna; Khuku's personal deity, which she might have created herself, or which had possibly been created by her mother, was one she called Bipad Nashini, or Destroyer of Distress, whom she saw as a maternal figure who watched over her and her family, and whose name she muttered whenever she was worried: 'He bipad nashini, he bipad nashini.'

(P.327)

Many topics are discussed during the conversation between Khuku and Mini – politics, religion, yogasanas and so on. Nothing was left undiscussed. Meanwhile, Khuku takes Mini to 'Ma Sharada Devi nursing home', where she once received treatment. The doctors, Dr. Sarkar and Dr. Majumdar recognize and receive them addressing 'mashima.' Even Mini has much faith in such a nursing home and is also a member in Ramakrishna Mission. On their way back home, Khuku comes across Jodhpur park, where her elder sister resides. Though her sister was dead, her daughter Puti and son Manas live in the same house. Khuku's grand-nephews – Puti's son, Mohit and Manas's son Sameer are very fond of Khuku, their 'Didimioni.' So, she is always tempted to visit the house whenever she passes by.

'Ma Sharada Devi nursing home', said Khuku to Mritunjoy, the driver. The words were enough to please Mini. She was

something of a devotee of Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda; had long been one; not a formal one, but one who'd read their books, life stories, and sayings.

(P.336)

The very cover of the novel and the title itself suggest the idea of freedom. The undertone is politicized. The concept of freedom is portrayed through the main character Bhaskar. This aspect is further highlighted through Bhaskar's mother's apprehension for her elder son.

"Sometimes when Bhaskar's mother heard them rehearsing she thought about Bhaskar worrying for the poor people in the world and she thought just how difficult a place to live in and understand the world was. Look after your own, was her own view."

(P.345)

She is a typical Indian lady, very loving and a caring mother. She watches her sons grow up and her concern for them is quite obvious. In her prayer room, she keeps portraits of Ramakrishna sitting cross-legged, a picture of his wife Sharada Devi, Lakshmi, Saraswati, Kartik and Krishna out of sheer interest. She has much taste for all these.

The morning azaan opens up the discussion between Khuku and Mini about the word 'fundamentalism.'

The word 'fundamentalism', traveling everywhere and belonging nowhere:

People tried to understand what it meant.

In one news paper; a Muslim writer said, 'The heart of the parrot of Hindu fundamentalism beats in the giant of Muslim fundamentalism. Kill the giant, and you will have killed the parrot.'

(P.354)

Soon, at around half-past ten, a lemon-coloured government Ambassador car arrives to pick up Khuku's husband. Shib visits 'Writers Building' to attend a meeting held by all the 'sick' companies. The so-called large firms, which were once impressive, now joined the list of 'sick' companies. Inevitably the Central Government had to take charge of these units. Mr. Seal of the department tells about the aims and wishes to be tackled by Shib. Centered around these concepts, meetings are held at length discussions are conducted.

In Little's history, infact, the history of Calcutta could be seen to have been written. First the company created by the Englishman of the same name eighty-five years ago; then the buying over of the company by an enterprising Bengali businessman of the name of Poddar; then the death of Poddar after Independence,...but not a real one.

(P.357).

The partition resulting in the creation of Bangladesh, and the globalization of business are alluded to in the novel. Businesses formerly run by the British become successfully Indianized, but privatized and facing international competition without the resources and leadership to advertise, they are kept going by the last ruling Communist Party to make work. The vigour of the past has been lost.

On one hand as Puti's son Mohit is about to take his Joint Entrance, on the other, Bhaskar and his troupe have been busily involved in the arrangements and rehearsal of the street – play. Bhaskar and his friends – Sumanta, Nikhilesh and Mahesh, all carefully plan and select their venue to be a by-lane after the small barricaded grassy triangle. They even select two

men Jodu and Pyari from the adult literacy class as the participants in the play.

After Vidyasagar Road had curved right and moved towards the house where *Ganashakti* arrived for distribution, and after the small barricaded grassy triangle there was a by-lane on the left.

No one knew for certain yet that it was in this by-lane that the performance would take place. But they'd begun to make a stage.

(P.364)

Mini, under medical supervision regularly visits the hospital and takes the course of passing infrared rays for half an hour to soothe her arthritis. This time Mini persuades Khuku and wishes to go back to her house after a long time.

Half an hour of the infra-red had soothed her arthritis and numbed the leg into the sweetness of acceptance.

(P.366)

Shib, a high spirited person always motivates his co-workers. He strives hard for the upliftment of *Little's*. Strangely after retirement he loses all his taste for business or speculation. He spends most of his day in reading news papers.

His youthfulness (though they knew he was a retired man) had moved the rest of the staff from apathy to something approaching constructiveness.

How little concerned he was about the silence outside, in which the sound of a single car horn became disconcerting, as he sat all morning reading!

(Pp.370-374)

Coming to Mini and Shantidi, it was said that they were five, having both ratio of sisters and brothers in that family. Sisters being Mini and Shantidi and the three brothers, Shyamal, Chanchal and the eldest one being addressed as Dadamoni. He used to look after them patiently. Later he moved from Guwahati to Calcutta and joined as a sales representative in a chemicals company, named 'Dutta Chemicals.' When he was forty-two years old, Dadamoni died. Within two years, Chanchal was attacked with tuberculosis. At that juncture, Khuku, Mini's friend got married and had to leave for England. Later, she gave birth to a male child, and returned to Calcutta when Bablu was learning to walk.

Meanwhile, Mini and Shantidi used to live in a flat with their younger brother, Shyamal. All the three became earning members and somehow made a living. Soon, Shyamal was married to Lalitha. At first, they all lived in the same flat. Later, quarrels cropped up and very soon their relations had been strained.

But what was begun in a certain way never arrived at its expected conclusion. So there was almost no surprise when nine years ago Shyamal and his family moved to a house in a different part of the city. And the two sisters were left to lead their lives in this building.

(P.384)

After Dadamoni's death, they had been allocated this flat in the New Municipal Corporation Building. They had just continued over there, hiring a part-time maidservant, living a peaceful life.

In one of their usual conversations, Khuku once again recollects her childhood and her dying desire to learn music. She used to secretly practise harmonium that was presented to her brother by her elder sister. She just restricted her singing just before her husband and Suleiman, a tabla player. She even used to be too sharp in singing and quick at grasping tunes. Their elder sister bought Bhola a harmonium, but Bhola was too impatient to sit and play it; and it was Khuku, not Bhola, who learnt how to play.

Her familiar song :

Lost Heart

On a verdant road

I gather strewn flowers

By myself

(P.394)

Penelope Lively rightly remarks, “This is a fictional exploration of the interface between public and private life. Its mood and substance are entirely private – the small happenings of family life interwoven with backward glances at how these people came to be where and how they are.”²

The last part of the novel is taken up with his parents’ search for a bride for Bhaskar – the viewing of likely candidates, somewhat arbitrary selection, the ceremony and the installation within the family of the oddly bewildered pair. For the first time they go for an alliance to see the daughter of Duttas. Her name was Anasuya. She was somewhat overweight to look at. Bhaskar had decided that he would not could not marry this girl.

Bhola, Bhaskar’s father, at times recollects incidents related to his career and his marriage. Bhola soon after coming back to India from

Germany married at the age of twenty-nine. During the first two years of his married life, he and his wife quarrelled frequently because of petty misunderstandings. Later he moved to Calcutta. Two years after his marriage, Bhola had decided to leave his job, and wished to start some business. As a result, "Goodforce Literod Ltd." – came into existence.

The name they came up with for the factory, Goodforce Literod, was a judicious composite of English words; and Literod became the brand name of a pulley they manufactured.

(P.399)

Bhaskar, after completion of his graduation in commerce, wishes to seek employment in their company.

But for Bhaskar, who, after graduating with a second-class commerce degree, and rather desultorily, for a period, studying Cost Accountancy – ...
...for he would not work under anyone except his father and with his father's old friends.

(P.401)

Bhaskar and his parents see two more alliances to him. One is in Lansdowne Road. It is Dr. Ghosh's daughter, Sandhya, who did her M.A. in Sociology and is also well-versed in interior decoration. Dr. Ghosh is a widower and so brings up his daughter Sandhya and his son Bipul with great care. Sandhya serves tea to Bhaskar and his parents.

'She's doing an MA in Sociology, but she's an interior decorator as well...

That, I would say' – he smiled – 'is her first love. Everything in this house was decorated by her...'

No, she was, admittedly, not particularly beautiful, but youth – she was twenty-four – has its own beauty wherever it resides,... an apparition before its bloom fades.

(P.406)

The other alliance is in Jodhpur Park. She sings before them despite her less beauty.

... this particular father occupied a respectable position in a fairly well-known company; and the daughter, 'although no beauty', had 'personality.'

(P.416)

At last, Bhaskar has to take a decision. Bhaskar's mother also has high expectations upon his decision. Finally, Bhaskar chooses the second girl, out of the three.

After a few days, Bhaskar agreed to marry the second girl he'd met.

The girl was two years younger than her son; she's dark, but so am I, thought Bhaskar's mother.

(P.418)

... but Bhaskar's mother's was practical rather than grandiose; for she hoped, no, she believed, rather calculatingly, that the marriage would divide Bhaskar's energies and weaken his attachment to politics;

(P.419)

So, they are busy in deciding the date for the marriage out of the choice in the list of 'auspicious day.'

The vivid moments of **Freedom Song** are moments when the world catches characters off-guard. During the wedding the bridegroom feels "as if

he had been smuggled into another world but could still communicate in monosyllables with this one.”

After his parents got him married to Sandhya,
They were in the large room on the second floor, where
Bhaskar used to sleep alone.

(P.432)

Occasionally the author’s talent for showing the ordinariness of the significant, and vice versa, makes one gasp as in this description of a honeymoon night.

He didn’t know what to do next. As she sat on the bed, he turned around again; he glanced at her narrow back, at the dark skin above the neck of her nightie, the colour of her shoulders ... The nightie, starched cotton, was a pattern of pink flowers with white borders, almost like a curtain, probably made recently by some tailor or chosen from ten nighties that looked nearly the same at some shop, and when she lay down beside him, he scratched his arm pretended to be tired.

(Pp.432-433)

Geeta Doctor rightly states that - ‘It’s almost as if Chaudhuri is defying the contemporary mode of schlock, sleaze and sex, and endless pages of conversational chatter by asserting his belief in the strength of a carefully crafted language that is both supple and transparent.’³

The bride’s arrival had been keenly observed by the servant maid Haridasi.

She had looked carefully at the bride, and thought she was graceful, if not beautiful. And the bride too had glanced at her once or twice.

(P.436)

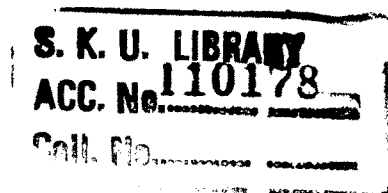
Sandhya curiously enquires about all the elder people's portraits that are lined along the wall. Feeling bored, she even embroiders a piece of cloth to make a doll's dress. It is a "small shiny blue dress." Even after marriage, they hardly have any time together. This shows their unspoken longing.

The waited. But married life and its responsibilities seemed to leaved Bhaskar unchanged. He was still selling *Ganashakti*...

(P.445)

The newly wedded have a real prospect of emulating the elderly married couple in the book who were acquainted in childhood. Khuku's long and successful marriage has shown her 'a different way of taking someone's presence for granted.' Punita Jha rightly comments – 'The Indian realities begin to appear determinate and precisely defined. The realistic Indian world has been very well communicated in this novel.'⁴

According to Geeta Doctor, "that seems to describe the life of most of his characters. Their lives are to a large extent inconsequential, made up of routine acts that may or may not have a significance. Chaudhuri's skill is in making us aware of these lives. It's part of his delicacy and tact that having brought them to light, he is content to set them free so that they can linger on either as phantoms singing a 'freedom song' or as portraits of the ordinary person, the reader, you and me".⁵



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