

## Chapter-4

### Afternoon Raag

Amit Chaudhuri's second novel **Afternoon Raag** (1993) seems to be more culture-specific in so far as it adopts the metaphor of Indian classical music, the 'raag' to evoke the complex emotions of the narrator Sandeep who is a young man studying at Oxford. Like his debut novel **A Strange and Sublime Address**, the novel straddles between two entirely different spaces and cultural locales. In the first novel, Calcutta and Bombay form the background for the narrative whereas the second novel, **Afternoon Raag** has Oxford, Bombay and Calcutta as its locale and background. The city of Calcutta and the protagonist's relation to it remain the common though a pronounced feature of both the novels.

**Afternoon Raag** shows the author's love of Indian classical music. The novel unselfconsciously blurs the thin and indistinct line between poetry and music. Chaudhuri's evocative writing – his ability to exalt even the most ordinary details – conjures up the moods of a place and an era in each of the small, everyday scenes he depicts. Though it is not specifically autobiographical, the novel follows a young man of Bengali origin, studying at Oxford in the 1980s : a trajectory very similar to Chaudhuri's own. Amid rich depictions of student life and the back roads

of Oxford, Chaudhuri scatters his reminiscences of Calcutta and Bombay, and his parents' household.

The description of college life reminds one of the academic novels of Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge. Again Chaudhuri's talent for the representation of minute details deserves applause. Within the college walls there is a world – geography and a weather – that clings to its own time and definition and retains its ethos. This world can be glimpsed briefly by the passerby through the open doorway. In this world, there is a certain light and space during the day, and at night a certain balance of lamplight, stone and darkness. Both these features co-exist almost eternally. The college houses students with different nationalities and individual features, different voices and accents. They also differ in terms of their habits, temperament, their attempts at adjustment, their sense of bathos and recognition of reality. These students seem to vanish and they are strangely neglected so much so that when the passerby later remembers what he saw, the students seem blurred, colourful, accidental, even touching. However, the students constantly strike the edge of his vision.

As Chaudhuri's protagonist mourns and anticipates his departure from Oxford, he is keenly aware of the fact that, in the 1980s, neither his beloved Oxford nor his native India will stay the same for too long. When his parents move into a new, 'modern', apartment building or when his friend Sharma takes up word-processing (computer) instead of a typewriter, he feels the twinges of a world beginning to crumble. That

poignancy, and those glimpses into a world that will never exist again, make the novel worthreading at least once, if not again and again.

**Afternoon Raag** is a series of sketches about the life of an Indian graduate student at Oxford in England, moving back and forth between Oxford, where he studies, and Bombay and Calcutta where his parents lived. The ways in which the representations of the ordinary and the dramatic, the local and the global, are placed in an almost dialectical relation with each other is heightened not only by the 'foreignness' of this novel's main locale, but also through subdued reminders that this 'foreignness' has a spatial familiarity in individual and collective cultural histories relevant to the protagonist's character. It also reminds us that the definitions of the local are never absolute as are those of banality, even though often conceptualized universally. In other words, banality can only be correctly apprehended at the local level. That is why disparate forms co-exist and even merge in the Oxford room of another student.

Chaudhuri's second novel, **Afternoon Raag**, is by far the shortest of all his five novels. The entire body of the novel is informed by music, melody and poetry. It begins with a poem dedicated to the memory of Pandit Govind Prasad Jaipurwale (1941-1988). The title of the poem is a curious blending of English and Hindustani words : Afternoon (English), and Raag (Hindustani). The classical north Indian musical form of the raga is central to the structure of this novel. It is, therefore, important to examine and appreciate the contents of the poem as it is crucial to the thematic texture of the novel. The poem opens with music teacher's visit.

He is shown as smiling and his body-language expresses his happy mood and inclination to sing. As he starts humming a complicated tune, the forces of nature such as 'wind, light and rain revolve the landscape in a shifting treadmill of shadow.' (Amit Chaudhuri : Three Novels, 177)

The narrator's mother is a pupil who learns classical music from this teacher. When she starts playing the harmonium, her teacher joins in intermittently and 'shows what a strange thing human voice is' (ibid, 177) The vocal chords in the throat vibrate to voice a tune. The music is represented here 'with its hidden universe of notes, its delicate, inscrutable laws. There is an attempt to define a raag :

A raag spacious as the mansion the rain builds, enfolds and sighs, Like one of the elements.

Inside the great architecture of the raag, through the clear archway of notes, world without humans. (ibid, 178)

There is a note of pathos in the poem as the teacher is shown, by turns, listless and dying. Death may put an end to the musician's body but his voice stays at least with his disciples and in albums : "Nothing remains but the human voice, this tiny instrument inside the throat/endeavouring to carry a world inside it. Then, that too/becomes silent." (ibid 178-179) Obviously, the novel seems to celebrate music : "The raag, self-created galaxy of notes, sigh of the elements,/ signs like the rain, pours into nature." (ibid, 179). The poem underscores the likeness between a raag and rain, both of which have the quality of

metling and washing. When the singer is absorbed in singing she/he forgets even mortality as the notes go on repeating their own life.

The next immediate reference to a raag concerns the protagonist himself who is a post-graduate student at Oxford. There was another Indian student cryptically referred to as Sharma who used to visit the protagonist's room now and then. He entered the room in a very forthright manner :

Banging on the door in a forthright manner, he would enter, if I happened to be midway through practising a raag, he would sit quietly on a chair and nod and shake his head in vigorous appreciation as I sang. (ibid, 186)

In the fourth chapter of **Afternoon Raag**, we again come across a detailed description of the protagonist's mother who despite the trouble of chronic constipation is devoted to learning and practising Indian classical music for which purpose, she has engaged a guruji and a tabla player, Sohan Lal. Once again, the famous Bollywood musician Naushad Ali is mentioned to emphasize the undercurrent of music running through the novel. The protagonist reminisces the music maestro as he had seen him in Bombay, where he received his early education and attained adolescence :

Sometimes the famous music director, Naushad Ali, whose film songs we still hum in our solitary moments, can be seen walking down this lane with a cane in his hand and a companion by his side, his face

wizened, almost Chinese, but humorous gesticulating furiously with the hand that has waved at a thousand musical instruments, bringing a loud melody to life, as he passes the sleepy lane. (ibid, 193)

The protagonist remembers his music teacher, guruji, who taught him classical Indian music and the correct way to play the tanpura. Sohanlal, a harmonium player from Rajasthan works as an accompanist, the protagonist had perhaps imbibed the interest in music as an inheritance from his mother who played the harmonium while Sohanlal accompanied on the tabla. The domestic cook Ponchoo would carry the harmonium with a delicate care and place it on the carpet. The minute details exhibit the author's keen perception of the entire scene :

Then my mother will settle on the rug and unclap the bellows, pulling and pushing them with a mild aquatic motion with her hand, the fingers of the right hand flowering upon the keys, the wedding-bangle suspended around her wrist. Each time the bellows are pushed, the round holes on the back open and close like eyes. Without the body the music is not possible; it provides the hollow space for resonance as does the curved wooden box of the violin or the round urn of the sitar. At the moment of singing, breath tips in the swelling diaphragm as water does in a pitcher. The voice box itself is a microspic harp, its cords tautening and relaxing with each inflection. My mother begins to practise scales in the raag Todi. (ibid, 194-195)

In this novel, one is apt to get glimpses of a first person narrator who has an obvious fondness for and command of music. On one

occasion in the novel he mentions "my love of music" (247) and also claims that his "own private joys came from – the love of songs, of music, of pride and delight in creation." (247). However, the allusions to and the description of music do not register their sustained presence in the novel. Notwithstanding the criss-crossing of settings or time frames in the novel, "it is more or less a predictably alternated, languid and disconnected recounting across a 'present' tense in Oxford and a recent personal 'past' in Bombay and Calcutta." (Kundu, 72)

While the narrator was in Oxford, his parents who lived in Bombay metrocity moved to a lane in the Christian area in the suburbs of Bombay. It was a tidy flat that was smaller than the flats the narrator had lived in earlier all his life when his father worked in his company. "The people", the narrator observes, "who really belonged to our lane were those who were on its margins – servants, sweepers, watchmen, hawkers of vegetable and fish who sent their cries out to the balconies and went with their baskets from door to door, even the beggars who, like the tradesmen, worked on a repeated route within a definite area." (240). This locality is now dotted with match-box like flats in which a mix of Hindus, Sikhs and Christians moved. Now the narrator moves back in time to narrate the birth place of his parents, with its particularities and specific ethos. Here, too, the city of Calcutta appears as a dominant motif both in cultural and spatial terms, as the narrator goes on to tell us about himself and his parents :

Calcutta is my birth place. It is the only city I know that is timeless, where change is naturalized by the old flowing patterns, and the anxiety caused by the passing of time is replaced by fatigue and surrender. It is where my father, having left Sylhet, came as a student fifty years ago. These were the last years before independence; and my father lived in a hostelin North Calcutta. (243)

The narrator continues the account of his father's stay to highlight the contours of Calcutta in the colonial period. The father, as a student, took great delight in eating rice and fish. He was an only child, parentless, in this city where people spoke Bengali differently and more coldly than he did, because he came from Sylhet, a place in East Bengal. North Calcutta was then classical and beautiful. It had all the vestiges of colonial empire : Central Avenue and the colleges of Tropical Medicine and other sciences, the imposing colonial buildings, the institutions of learning and the roads matching the nobility of their names. His father was all alone in this city as he had no relatives and neighbours to speak of. The tiny village in East Bengal in which he was born and where he got his early education in the village-school was nearly faded in his memory. It was all before history was born, first in 1947 marking the partition of India and Pakistan, then in 1971 crystallizing into the rise of a new nation, Bangladesh. His village is now on the other side of the border, in Bangladesh. The details of the father's student life in North Calcutta are underscored by a reference to the independence and partition of India. Millions like his father were bypassed and yet changed by these two great events. Tagore's death and Satyajit Ray's documentary appear as fruitful



and meaningful interventions to valorise Bengal and its cultural life again :

Strange to think that a poet should have suddenly brought to the world's brief attention a small corner of the earth, where a rounded musical tongue was spoken, where freshwater fish was eaten daily and its bones sorted nimbly with the fingers, where small earnest men walked in white dhotis with tender, overlapping folds in the heat. An unknown tongue, unknown emotions, strange impoverished Bengal ! From the dense forests and swamps of the Sunderbans, to the magical place, Kalighat, a port and people grew, a poet and singer in each family, ideals and romance and the love of art nurtured among these frail quick-tempered people, and the wide Hooghly flowing in the midst of all this. Wide rivers, the Hooghly and the Padma, with indistinct horizons on either side, a constant thoroughfare for river-transport and civilization, with lonely passages of water and horizon where ferrymen journeyed from one side to the other side. (244-245)

This fascinating picture of Bengal drawn by Tagore is further supplemented by the narrator when he recounts how he came to know his father's family that had once been landowners. With the change in their fortunes, they scattered and gradually became poor, settling down in towns on this side of the border. Their great house became a memory in Bangladesh. The narrator's father spoke to his relatives in Sylhet dialect of Bengali, and his ancestral village was on the banks of a tributary of the

Surma. Here the narrator has beautifully drawn a portrait of rural East Bengal :

To leave that village and approach the outside world one must use the waterway and the canoe, and emerge eventually into another world. Heat, mud, water, the flight of water-insects, roots holding the earth, women washing clothes, their heads covered by saris, ponds made green by water-hyacinth, the flatwide soils of the lotus – such images come to me of journeying down that river. It is a Bengal that missed the changes taking place elsewhere, the middle class reforms of Brahmoism, the intellectual movements in Hinduism. More important, there, than the secular nationalist figures, Rammohun Roy and Tagore, initiators of modern Bengali culture, was a native strain of Vaishnavism, the worship of Krishna, Ganesh, Parvati, an ecstatic love of their images, sung out in unwritten songs and poems. (245)

The narrator adds by way of emphasis that his father's family belongs to the 'native strain of Vaishnavism : And the practitioners of Vaishnav faith were dispersed over Eastern and Northern India, from Cachhar to Brindaban, rarely in contact with each other. Indeed they were uprooted from tradition, a refugee people. The narrator would hear of singers and painters in every branch of the family. He distinctly recalls his visit as a child to the house of his father's aunt from whom he received blessings and a book of poems she had written herself. She had never been to school, hence her Bengali was self-taught. The narrator appreciates their love of poetry :

Their love of poetry was not created by the new secular reverence for culture and literature that came with Tagore, but an indigenous offshoot of a long line of ecstatic worship and craftsmanship. (246)

Later, as a youngman the narrator found an opportunity to visit the place in Calcutta where the second generation of his father's aunt, namely her son lived. His cousin was an artist and all his paintings were devotional. Knowing the narrator's love of music, the cousin had taken out harmonium and tabla and urged both narrator and his mother to sing. The cousin also sang self-composed songs and the entire family took delight in creation – music, song, poetry and sculpture – and in the realm of imagination which sustained their interests further. It is to this Vaishnavaitic tradition that the narrator links himself to :

For the first time I could see where my own private joys came from – the love of songs, of music, of pride and delight in creation. That delight is my family's gift. (247)

It is worthwhile to note that the story-line of **Afternoon Raag** follows two distinct trajectories : his family and the years spent in Bombay and Calcutta, and his experiences and perception of student-life in Oxford. The narrator's parents knew each other from childhood ; both were born in undivided Bengal, in Sylhet, which is now in Bangladesh. In the late forties, his father went to England, and six years later his mother. They were married there, in London. His mother learnt English a lot, yet the Bengali inflection stayed and persisted in her English speech :

Like most Bengalis, she pronounces 'hurt, as 'heart' and 'ship' as 'sheep', for she belongs to a culture with a more spacious concept of time, which deliberately allows one to naively and clearly expand the vowels; and yet her speech is dotted with English proverbs .... (223)

In his journey down the memory lane, the narrator seems to be keenly interested in describing the upper-class life-style of his parents. His household attracts attention for the life-like characters that are represented as part of it. This becomes evident if one looks at chapter ten of the novel in which two servant girls Chhaya and Maya and their parents are shown with their individual identities. The portrait of Chitrakaki evokes both humour and pity for the lack of composure of her body and also for the fact that she is now no more. The narrator remembers her for her taste of new and different cuisines – as she loved exploring the tastes of different regions. Since food is centrally placed in a given culture, the novel contains some beautiful patches which describe some special food and the way it is eaten by people in a seriocomic manner. Here is a description of the 'paper dosa' :

They are large white cylinders made of rice paste; from a distance, they look like rolled-up rugs, and coming closer, they resemble ridiculous hairdresses of vast importance; from table to table, the waiters bore them glumly, as if they were gifts. (213)

The varieties of food and the peculiar ways of eating these form a special characteristic of Bengali people. This is how the narrator describes his mother's knack at eating fish: 'When I think of food, I think

of the catlike way my mother disposes of fish-bones, and eats the head of the rohu fish, meticulously destroying its labyrinths. Here a silent contest ensues, as she chews and bites at it from all sides, till the head disappears and the indigestible bones lie clean and polished on one corner of the plate. At dinner, our leftovers – chicken bones, ribs, the white comb-like tail of the pomfret, which is simple and symmetrical – we deposit on her beggar's plate for her to chew and gnash and then blissfully spit out.' (214)

However, the narrator's mother was not only a gourmet, but also a meticulous cook who could make things from the disposable objects. "My mother made things from peelings, fish-heads, dried fish. It was East Bengali cuisine, with its origins in villages on drought and floodhit riversides, a poorman's diet, perfected by people who could not afford to throw away even the skin of a white-gourd or the head of a fish, transformed into food by adding oil and garlic and chilli paste and poppy seed and common salt" (240). After his retirement from the job, the narrator's father moved to a flat in suburban Bombay where he lived for three years and then moved to Calcutta to settle there. It was in Bombay that the narrator had learnt music from the guru, his brother and his brother-in-law Sohanlal. The love of music was an inherited quality in the narrator's personality, so he has described in the novel, the course of learning music, explaining the working and intricacies of some raags. He discovered 'tunefulness' in the unintelligible songs sung by Sindhi women who inhabited the same suburban locality, "... womenfolk who sang an impassioned, strangely tranquil version of devotionals in the evening;

hovering wistfully somewhere on the border of tunefulness, it brought the quality of a faraway time and place to the area." (242)

Quite early in the novel, in the sixth chapter, the narrator recalls the incident when he bought a tanpura under the supervision of his guru, the music-teacher. His guru taught him how to tune the instrument. Like a teacher, the narrator meticulously presents the details of what a tanpura consists of and how it is played : "the tanpura can be held vertically on the lap or next to the upraised knee as it is played, when it looks male and perpendicular, or laid horizontally on the ground before one, when, with the surrendering slope of its long neck and the stable fullness of its urn, its mixture of acquiescence and poise, it looks feminine. The four strings provide only two notes as a background to the song; **sa**, or **shadja**, the first, the mother-note, from which all other notes come, with which one's relationship is permanent and unambiguous, and the second note, depending on the raag, the father-note, circumstantial but constructive. To tune the tanpura, you must turn the keys on its upper end, keys which are huge, ornate, and antique, like the doorknobs of a palace." (203)

He goes on to sketch the details of the lower part of tanpura which looks like an urn upon which there is a flat bridge on which the strings rest briefly, before they pass through small ivory-coloured beads that are used for the finer adjustments in tuning and travel at last to a small plank of wood at the end, where, pierced through four open but infinitesimal eyes, they are knotted. While this painful business, this struggle, of tuning continues, four white threads are slipped beneath the strings as they lie on

the bridge, and moved up and down till a point is discovered where each string loses its flat metallic note, and buzzes, a hum like that of the wandering drone, or electricity. This buzzing of the strings, this resonance, the musicians call **jawari**. That afternoon the narrator and his guru tuned the tanpura till the room filled with notes **shadja** and **nikhad**. (203-204)

Evidently, the narrator's close engagement with Indian classical music underscores the thematic thrust of the novel. For him, the music and its raags remain of great, though not central, importance in the novel. His dilations on music, and its intricate raags do not appear in a sustained way but as references to specific situations which serve as distinct points in the description of cultural spectrum. In the twelfth chapter of the novel, the narrator introduces Mohan and Sohanlal who accompanied his guru on tabla and harmonium respectively. While Mohan was the guru's own brother, Sohanlal was the brother-in-law. The narrator distinctly recalls that Mohan used to both hero-worship and humour his brother (the guru). Mohan had once told the narrator that he had turned to tabla-playing because there couldn't be two singers in a family. An additional reason for this choice was the guru's quickness in learning the intricacies of vocal music from their father. The narrator had noticed this especially when his guru performed vocal music, and "when singing, would laugh happily after a difficult tune and shake with mirth when he arrived at, after much deliberately drunken meandering, the sama, bringing a small, reluctant smile to his younger brother's lips on tapes on which I recorded

my guru singing in my house, complex melodic leaps and falls performed by him can be heard punctuated by brief chuckles." (205-206)

This patch of memory detailing the guru's skill and mode of vocal performance is followed by a description of how the accompanists support, sustain and elevate a singer during a vocal performance : "When a singer performs, it is the job of the accompanist to support him dutifully and unobtrusively." (206) Like a music-teacher, the narrator illustrates with an example. A cyclical rhythm pattern of sixteen beats is played at an unchanging tempo on the tabla, and the song and its syllables are set to the pattern, so that one privileged word in the poem will coincide ineluctably with the first of the sixteen beats in the cycle. This first beat is called the sama, and much drama, apprehension and triumph surround it. The narrator explains the intricacies of performance as follows :

"For the singer is allowed to, even expected to, adventurously embark on rhythmic voyages of his own, only to arrive, with sudden, instinctive and logical grace, once more at the sama, taking the audience, who are keeping time unawares. Once this is achieved, the logic seems at first a flash of genius, then cunningly pre-meditated. While the pretence is kept up, and the singer's rhythm appears to have lost itself, the tabla player, with emotionless sobriety, maintains the stern tempo and cycle, until the singer, like an irresponsible but prodigious child, decides to dance in perfect steps back into it," (206).

Likewise, when a singer is executing his difficult melodic patterns, the harmonium-player must reproduce the notes without distracting him.



The tabla and harmonium players behave like palanquin – bearers carrying a precious burden. The immediate reference of this explanatory note on music brings out the contribution of Mohan and Sohanlal to the standing and popularity of the guru in the domain of music. Both these accompanists "created the ground on which my guru constructed his music" (207) In the care of these two custodians, the guru sang and shone with his true worth.

There is yet another reference to music, this time Rajasthani music, which is culturally significant because of a perceptible variation on the central theme of the novel. While tracing Sohanlal's origin and the place where he grew up and learnt music, the narrator exploits the occasion to gloss over some Rajasthani cultural practices including musical performance in the court. It begins in chapter twenty-three of the novel with Sohanlal's whereabouts. He was born in a kingdom in Rajasthan when India was under the British rule. As a boy he became a court-dancer, and on certain occasions he had to perform before the king when the guru would take him and another boy to dance as Radha and Krishna at the court. When the dance was over, the audience would bow before the two children as if they were Radha and Krishna. Here the narrator notes with a nostalgic sense of loss : "This world, of gestures and wonder, existing in the wide, silent margins of the land, is gone now." (257) Sohanlal, too remembers the darkness of what was there before, the old language and its life. He would conjure up a scene of the lanes of Brindaban through gestures and the motion of his body, while singing the words in Avadhi that had been composed by Bindadeen Maharaj. The narrator's remarks

on Avadhi announce the author's focus on the local and marginalized cultural artefacts, Avadhi being a dialect of Hindi : Avadhi, an older version of Hindi, still spoken in the villages, is such a poetic language that its most common expressions can bring places and spirits before the eye, can stir love in the heart. Its discontinuous grammar and incomplete sentences are a product of the consciousness that existed before there was any difference between the past and present." (257)

Sohanlal's role-playing as a dancer-boy clearly brings into focus a popular cultural practice spread over different parts of India. When Sohanlal played Radha, he would successfully identify with Radha, representing her shyness and a sense of hurt at Krishna's transgressions. But when he played the role of child Krishna, he brought to life the child-like behaviour of Krishna – his pranks, his mischief, and his lies. A digression follows soon after this account as the narrator switches over to a description of the raag Maand. When he hears this raag, he is reminded of his guru, Mohan, and Sohanlal. He reflects that the said raag bears the characteristics, the stamp and the life of their region, Rajasthan. Their lives, their language, the colour of their skin, and cotton clothes they wear, are set and have their meaning against the same landscape. The added emphasis on music and the raags of a specific culture and region marks a focus on the local culture – its spaces, people and their way of life. Here, music is represented as a potential aspect of the everyday life of a community and its culture :

Each raag was once a folk melody, a regional air sung, with tiny variations, to different words, by members of a community of families before its notes were ordered and systematized into the melodic progression called a raag. But when a Rajasthani sings Maand, or a Punjabi sings Sindhi Bhairavi, he returns to his homeland, which for him is a certain landscape influenced by seasons, a certain style of dressing and speaking, a web of interrelationships and festive occasions. (258)

It is obvious, then, that each region has its own grace-notes which the narrator had to learn and relearn arduously which Sohanlal told him came naturally and without practice to the people of his land, from temple singers to peasant boys. The narrator finds himself unable to resist the temptation of appreciating the merits of raag Maand : "Maand was a raag which, when sung by my guru or Sohanlal, revealed its airy, skeletal frame, with holes and gaps in it, its unnameable, magical beginnings, and its spirit-like mobility in covering distances, in traversing scorched mountain-sides, deserts, horizons, water, following back on the route of migrations that had led away from that country." (258)

Thus, the raags of music epitomize the life, culture and history of a region and its people. The raags, woven together, are a history, a map, a calendar of Northern India. They are territorial and temporal, they live and die with men, even though they seem to be timeless and exist outside them. They are simultaneously the evidence of the palimpsest-like texture of Northern India, with its many dyes and hues, its absence of written texts and its peculiar memory. The raags betoken the collective cultural

consciousness and practice of a given community without having any record of specific contributions by certain individuals such as the guru or Sohanlal. The narrator's engagement with music and its raags displays his passion for music when he explains the timing of different raags of the Indian classical music :

Each raag has its time of day, a cluster of hours called 'prahar', or its season. Gond Saarang and sudh Saarang are sung at midday, while Madhuvanti is sung in the late afternoon verging on twilight, Purvi and Shree from dusk to early evening, and in late evening, Abhogi Kanhra. Midday brings the smell of ripening jackfruit, the buzz and gleam of bluebottle flies, the fragrance of mango blossoms, which, Tagore said, opens the doorways to heaven. The notes sa re ma re ma pa of Sudh Saarang, with the sharp and yearning ascent of the second ma, its resolution in pancham, define the bright inactivity of midday, its ablutions and rest, the peace of a household. Twilight cools the verandah; midday's boundary of protective shade separating household from street, inside from outside, is dissolved; the sad, flat risha in conjunction with the sharp madhyam and pancham, the notes of Shree related to each other by dancing swoops and curves, calm the mind during the withdrawal of light. No raag is so pure that it does not remind one of another raag, that it is not, in some elementary way, a variation or a version of a raag sung at some other time of day, or some other season.... The seasons and hours have no absolute existence, but are defined by each other. (259)

Additionally, the narrator celebrates the memory of his guru, the music-teacher, and presents a picture of his household which speaks volumes on middle class family and its struggle for survival in a dream-city like Bombay. The occasion for a gathering in his guru's family was an annual ritual/ceremony in the memory of the guru's father's spiritual teacher. The ceremony was held in a small temple in old Bombay. It began early in the evening and continued to the dawn of the next day. During this period musicians came one by one and performed their piece and received the disorganized hospitality of the guru's family and then left. The family on its part stayed wide awake through the night. It included all members, from grandfathers, daughters-in-law to children. Both the narrator and his mother were invited to sing as well, and they took the performance seriously. Their landmark was the Ganesh temple at Matunga, and to arrive there, they had to go down the drizzly roads of North Bombay, past eating houses, local railway stations, and old cinema halls. Before they reached the guru's house, they passed through a lane which was "a shaded space of middle-class Marathi civility, where, in the houses, boys did their homework and young girls, their hair tied in a plait, studied harder than the boys and learned natya sangeet from their mothers, and in the other room, the father-in-law, a widower, waited for dinner, while his son stood on the balcony in a vest and pyjamas." (261)

After this view of middle-class Marathi locality, the narrator and his mother finally reached the guru's house. Here, he takes the opportunity to describe the family where communal gatherings took place on special occasions : "All the family was there, in the courtyard

adjoining the small temple, and already there was a singer performing inside ... The women – my guru's mother, his wife, Mohan's and Sohanlal's wives – sat together in a small room with no door, to enter which one had to take off one's sandals. Distant cousins, ne'er do well uncles, in dhotis and turbans irresponsible brothers-in-law who were fathers to several children, hung around in semi-joyous, semi-disgraced abeyance in the festive crowd and were always available when an extra cymbal player or tanpura player was needed. Family snobberies, hierarchies, bonds, made themselves felt from the powerful, segregated clan of elderly women to the excited children in shiny clothes. This was my guru's world, a little Rajasthani village in Bombay." (261)

This description of the guru's family and clan conjures up the image of the local in the backdrop of the global as represented by the city of Bombay. This community of family members would rematerialize in much the same way at funerals and weddings, and at the airport when the narrator's guru went to England. The narrator focuses attention on a cultural mode when he observes that at the time of a family-member's travel abroad, the elders specifically came to offer their blessings. Nearly everyone was given a chance to hug and garland the traveller. This group included close to seldom-seen relatives who reappeared at such moments to display family-love and solidarity. As the narrator comments : "This solidarity, which was a form of dependency, for the poorer relatives used this as an opportunity to ask favours of those who, like my guru, were doing better for themselves, became evident again, in all its formal

comedy and transient but sincere show of love, during my guru's illness." (261-262)

The narrator's guru struggled with illness when his parents were preparing to sell their flat in Bombay in order to settle in Calcutta for good. At the time, the narrator was still in Oxford. He recounts what his mother told him later about the gathering of relatives at guru's house during his illness. The clan grew in proportions with the arrival of concerned relatives who had come down from villages for this special purpose, and as the narrator wryly notes, rallied around his guru and made every effort to hasten his death: "Some of them came and stayed in his tiny flat; for them, it was a pilgrimage to see Bombay." (262)

Ironically enough, Bombay may appear a big and sprawling city but most of its inhabitants occupy tiny and cramped spaces which range from chawls to flats. Once, when the narrator's mother went to visit the ailing guru in Versova, she found the creation of a great lunch in progress, the women chopping spinach and boiling milk in the kitchen, the relatives moving about in the tiny space of the 'hall'. A realistic though ironic description of space follows : "In Bombay, where property is sold at thousands of rupees per square foot, each inch of space is magnified; a hall is called a hall, a bedroom a bedroom, though none of these rooms may be larger in size than a kitchen." (262) This spatial poverty of Bombay is juxtaposed with the free-laughing behaviour of Rajasthani women who "wore bright chiffon saris, draped them over their heads, and kept a small part of their faces symbolically covered with the

last remnant of a veil." (262) The narrator points out the vacuity of the decorum expressed by the relatives : "The fabric of an ancient hospitality, irrelevant courtesies, meaningless gestures of goodwill, all-important in the creation of the decorum of that village-life-and they owned little else but that decorum – this was eternal, non-individual, it would go on ...." (262).

There is another picture of village-life drawn in the last chapter of the novel which might appropriately be taken as the beginning of the story. Here, the narratory recalls his first day in Oxford marked by a fine drizzling rain. His first experience of the lodging where he was to stay as a student is described in the style of a miniature-painting : "I travelled then to my room in the modern annexe across the road, but returned each day for food and letters, to that fairy-tale site, with its series of roof-tops like witches' hats, which would disappear in a mist in January, its irregular flagstones outside the steps that had iron rings like knockers upon them (as if they opened onto secret underground entrances), and its mysterious employees who had ranks that set them apart as members of an ancient English sect – 'porter', 'steward', 'scout'." (272)

It was in Oxford that the narrator made friends with three individuals : Sharma, Shehnaz and Mandira. On his second day, he got a glimpse of Sharma in the dining room in the basement. Sharma was dressed up like a provincial colonial but his hair style was quite Indian. At that time, with a stern expression on his face, he resembled, with complete accuracy, the discomfited man facing the camera in his old



passport photograph. The narrator has drawn a portrait of Sharma which is occasionally loaded with cultural references to Northern India, especially Uttar Pradesh from where he came. Sharma was a strict and avowed vegetarian but he was generously open to everything that was new then, for instance computers. He became computer-friendly, party-friendly, library-friendly, supermarket-friendly. He was kitchen-friendly as well, and spent a good amount of time making food that emitted an aroma of spices that magnified the sense of what it meant to live in England. In fact, Sharma stood as a representative of Northern Indian culture when he was in a relaxed mood :

But when he was at ease, he would be motherly and genuinely caring, and exude a strength that was strange in one who was so much more a foreigner to this land than I was. (274)

As the narrator recalls his days with Sharma, he discovers that Sharma was matter-of-fact and buoyant in his outlook. For him, perception was a different thing; he discovered England afresh, and on him its impact was direct, more immediately generous than it was on me; and yet, outwardly, he remained untouched. If he yearned for home, he did not mention it. He yet he did not exchange his persona for a new one, as many city-educated Indians do in England. Moreover, unlike the narrator, there did not exist in Sharma any choice between nostalgia and looking towards the future. He was from a village in North India, and his presence in Oxford was no less than miracle. Sharma's room gave an impression of devout Hindu culture of worshipping a plurality of gods :

His room used to blaze with pictures of gods and goddesses .... Sharma stuck calendar pictures on the wall, in red, blue, orange Kali biting her tongue, Parvati riding a tiger ... With their octopodal limbs, Kali's face faintly reminiscent of Hema Malini's, they were such good companions of the common man at home. Although they would have had no place in a middle class house in Bombay, here in England, in Sharma's room, they existed for a while comfortingly and unironically. (275)

Sharma's religious temperament created no hurdles in his collection of a wide variety of books. As a child, he had read ancient Hindu epics but no longer read storybooks. However, his recollections of childhood seem to be moving in the sense that they throw light on such marginalized spaces in India as remote villages. The narrator rewords Sharma's memory of his village :

His village was like a fiction, it had no electricity; it was not to be found on the map of India. He confessed this with a mixture of deprecation and pride. Such was the intensity of the dark in that village that when the landlords lit their patromax lamps a mile away the shadow of that light fell on the earthen walls of Sharma's house. (276)

The narrator gathered from Sharma's account of his family and the village that his mother was "a frail woman of puritan fervour and great vision", whereas his father was an idle, fun-loving dandy who liked only gossip with the other men of the village. His parents were the man and wife only in name as both of them led their own mutually different lives. Sharma and his brother grew up in their mother's wings "in a village, with

its vain and ignorant landlords, its huddled families, its canals, fields, and thunderstorms was a little universe." (276) Sharma travelled outward first by foot, to a school in a neighbouring town; then, years later, on a train, he arrived at the big city; and finally, by another train, he went to Delhi. The narrator has thus mapped the upward mobility of a middle class boy who finally reached Oxford through his firm determination and relentless pursuit of his goal.

While mapping the spaces of a culture, the sketches of those who inhabit these spaces also get invested with extraordinary importance. The temperament, interactions and the responses unfold multiple dimensions of the given culture. Sharma's personality might serve as a fitting example. He was a sensitive person. A memory, a poem or a song could move him to such an extent that sometimes a large drop of tear would trickle down from his eyes. He reacted very quickly and took offence soon and would not speak to the narrator for hours or even the whole day.

Besides Sharma, the narrator evolved a bond of friendship with two youngwomen, Mandira and Shehnaz both of whom were students at Oxford, a township distinguished worldwide for its high academic and cultural standards. The in-flow and the outflow of students continued from year to year. After a while, a student comes to know the streets and bylanes, all of which lead to each other in the north. No one goes beyond Summertown, and the road leading to London goes out via Headington. The town of Oxford comes to life on the day when the matriculation ceremony commences. Men and women wear their black gowns to take

exams at the end of the year. The narrator visualizes Oxford town as it gets transformed into a wartime township in the vacation "because all the young people, with their whistling, their pavement to pavement chatter, their beer-breathed, elbow-nudging polemics, are suddenly gone, leaving the persistent habits of an old way of life ... (181)

Among the many features of Oxford, the narrator dwells first on students who form the hub of academic life there. He describes vividly the dress-varieties of students : "Students dressed in the oddest of clothes, in secretive overcoats, in long and black primitive skirts, men with earrings, women wearing gypsy ornaments, would gather each morning for lectures, or pass in and out of doors recklessly with books clutched to their bosoms, or sit on the steps in abandonment, as if they had forgotten their appointments." (162) As Oxford is still held in high esteem for its academic excellence, one feels privileged to be or to have been a student there. The narrator strikes a wistful note when he states :

How unique student life is, with its different rooms, its temporary enclosures and crystallizations, its awareness and memory of furniture and windows and spaces. (183)

In the second chapter of the novel, the reader comes across two students – Shehnaz and Sharma – who became friends with the narrator. The first of these, Shehnaz was apparently indistinguishable from the other students but she was remarkable for her thoughtful gait, her backward looking quality, her simplicity and happiness, the parts which attracted the narrator. He has described her personality in graphic details :

"She was essentially a lonely person searching for the right company, a wise little girl in a woman's body, dressed in black trousers, a blue top and a coat, and black sneakers... She had been married once, very briefly, and then divorced, later, she had an involvement in Oxford which came to nothing" (185) However, Oxford seems to the narrator not so much a setting as part of the heart of their (Shehnaz and the narrator) friendship. After a few brief meetings, both of them decided to meet at St. Gole's Cafe but it was comically not to be. Here, too, the narrator seems to be occupied with space as he furnishes the details of the cafe :

The cafe was a small, ugly and crowded place, full of students, and tramps minding their own business, hatted and bearded, with an unworldly look about them, like musicians. On either side of each table, there was a bench, and one had to squeeze past people to sit down, or have people squeeze past you as they got out. Thus, as one made small adjustments in position, one was always feeling grateful or obliged, strangely powerful or powerless; one shrank and hunched, and then graciously expanded again, in regular accordion-like time. (199)

It is obvious that the narrator's concern with space reveals itself time and again in the novel. Mandira, who came to be the third friend of the narrator lived in a room in college. A view of her room leads the narrator to the following observation :

These undergraduate rooms were larger and more comfortable to look at than the box-like, modern rooms in my building. A light hung from the ceiling, enclosed by a comical, globe-like shade, and at evening

it gave a light that was both encompassing and personal. The window opened on to a path to the garden and the hall, and all day, laughter and footsteps could be heard, coming and going, and these sounds too became a part of the room's presence. (189)

The narrator further goes on to capture the details of Mandira's room. The furniture consisted of the bed, the study-table, its chair, the cupboard, the bookshelves. It was old and enduring. The armchair was solid and stoic, and seemed to cradle the space that existed between its thick arms. When the narrator got to know Mandira better, their intimacy led to increasing unhappiness. The room, then became her refuge, her dwelling. Her desire to go back to 'my room' suggested both her loneliness and her resolve to survive in a foreign land. This necessarily underscores the sense of dislocation which infrequently invades foreign-students because "for a foreigner and a student, the room one wakes and sleeps in becomes one's first-friend, the only thing with which one establishes a relationship that is natural and unthinking..." (190)

In chapter eight of the novel, the narrator gives out the details of Oxford's topography and its road-map all of which had come to his cognition through his walk almost everywhere in Oxford. This way, he gained a lot of information about different kinds of spaces there, which included cafes, restaurants and pub-houses ranging from High Street to Cowley Road. Perhaps, the author seems to impress upon the reader, his knowledge of whereabouts in Oxford.

Sometimes the narrator escaped to London as a diversion from Oxford. En route he had occasion to think of his parents and felt assailed by a strong sense of nostalgia, when he would see miles of suburbia on the edge of the motorway. Houses passed one after another, filling him with a sense of loss. At such moments Bombay and Calcutta became truly alive to him. Sometimes he was drawn back to the memory of his Bombay household of which characters like Chitrakaki and maid-servants Chhaya and Maya were luminous spots. However, the city of Calcutta occupied a central place both in his imagination and memory. He records his impression of the city when he returns from England after completing his studies :

The drive homeward goes past a village scene, with huts, plantains, lakes and malnourished but energetic children. Then without hiatus, the city begins with a great drum-roll of traffic and one is in the midst of a marketplace of houses, tailors' and butchers' shops, billboards, and tramlines, bargaining for movement, haggling to go forward. Nothing has changed for the last twenty years. (265)

Despite the narrator's disclaimer that nothing has changed for the last twenty years, Calcutta has definitely shed some part of its earlier self. He compares Bengalis to Irish families with the only difference that the Irish are tall and hard drinkers. The city is a mixture of officiousness and circumlocution that makes one despair. The air is awash with Marx and Trotsky, suggesting the communist ideology and governance in West Bengal. In Calcutta, nothing has happened after Marxism and modernism.

Its peculiar Bengali ethos is succinctly captured by the 'adda' a routine habit among the middle class Bengalis :

In tea-shops and on street corners, Bengalis men as ever indulge in 'adda', a word that means both a pointless, pleasurable exchange of opinions and information, and the place or rendezvous in which it is conducted, if it were possible to say, for instance, of a certain kind of languorous conversation in England. (265)

Apart from 'adda', Calcutta acquires its identity on the road-traffic through the presence of Ambassador cars, which are depicted in an ironic and deprecatory tone, suggesting the backwardness of the city which still delights in the possession of this particular brand of cars. Ambassador car was created by Birlas from odds and ends, the body of a Morris Oxford and a tractor's engine. Every few years, the Birlas produce a new model at their factory, Mark III, Mark IV, which exactly replaces the previous one, for the Ambassador has remained faithful to the ideal that was perfected in the secure organic era of the 'protected market. "In its shape, it still retains that philosophical look, that aura of being cut off the 'real' world, squat, conservative, and spacious.

Like Ambassador cars, Calcutta too seems to rejoice in its conservatism which forecloses the rapidly stretching impact of postmodern developments. In this respect, Calcutta bears some resemblance to Oxford though only partially. He recalls the conservative and routinized academic world of Oxford which continues to be a witness to its annual dress-rehearsals and theatre of exams. The summer time



turns into metaphor which stimulates the narrator's memory in which Shehnaz appears. A nostalgic feeling of student-life begins to slowly assail his mind : It was at this time that I began to realize that we were here in Oxford less as individuals than as students, attempting, in a touchingly innocent way, to complete a course and obtain a degree that would not only please us, but also our parents, whoever and wherever they were. We were children sent here who, for a period of time till the exams began, behaved and felt like adults. Once the exams were finished the childhood was over, the childhood of which even Shehnaz, Mandira, and I – the affection we felt for each other at our intersection of each other's life, and the loneliness of being in Oxford – were part (266).

It is evident from the foregoing discussion of **Afternoon Raag** that Chaudhuri has captured the cultural ethos of three cities Oxford, Bombay and Calcutta. In between these, he has deliberately introduced the world of music and the enchantment it evokes. There are some fine patches describing the Rajasthani and north Indian culture, lending both novelty and variety of cultural fabric of India. However, what makes these remarkable is the author's ability to visualize and reminisce the minute details of the local life which range from kitchen to college and finally to the cities mentioned above. An additional charm of the novel is the use of poetic language at places which transports the reader to an altogether different world in which the ordinary and extraordinary become one and indistinguishable.

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