

## Chapter-3

### **A Strange and Sublime Address**

This chapter examines the first novel of Chaudhuri in terms of its specific focus on cultural spaces. Hence, the focus of critical attention in this chapter is fixed on **A Strange and Sublime Address** (1991) which narrates social change through the representation of local cultures and socio-cultural aspects of life. The novel loudly proclaims Chaudhuri's profound interest in and involvement with the cultural spaces, both domestic and public.

Instead of giving into facile generalisations about this novel, it would be proper to point out categorically the cultural spaces inhabited by the characters. **A Strange and Sublime Address** manifestly celebrates the local cultures and subjectivities and highlights the significance of the middle class life in Bengal, especially in Kolkata. Chaudhuri's uniqueness as an author rests largely on the fact that his most sensitive evocations of reality come into being through an exclusive focus on the commonplace and the quotidian in fragmented, episodic form. This is why his thematic concerns are seldom woven into a holistic narrative. Unlike many of his contemporary authors, Chaudhuri deliberately eschews any fictional representation of modern Indian nation state.

Apparently, Chaudhuri's fictional range is limited insofar as he has confined himself to the representation of the Bengali middle class and its culture. The celebration and apotheosis of the commonplace and the quotidian sometimes lead to an effect of banality. However, this banality reinforces and invigorates his representation of locality. Banality and locality complement each other and construct themselves as mutual precondition in his fiction. The thematization of the socio-cultural identity in his novels remains a matter of prime importance.

It may sound a bit dictatorial but the fact remains that no writer or ideologue in India can either ignore or deny the colonial reality which has affected Indian society and culture in a very plausible and vigorous manner. Chaudhuri, too has a realization of this undeniable reality so he has compromised with it. But he has invented an alternative space for his fictional representation : the recognition and representation of local culture through its positively faithful projection in his novels. A work of fiction, say a novel, definitely carries the evidence of the social and cultural practices of the community in its evolutionary history. At the same time, it plays a vital role by serving as a selective memory of traditions and rituals. Chaudhuri is keenly alive to the potential of literature as an avenue of cultural signification. Its immediate and contemporary significance lies in its ability to assume an anxiously hybrid realm where private interests and details assume public significance.

Interestingly, Chaudhuri's novels under discussion explore the seemingly disconnected fragments of the quotidian. They refract, in an idiosyncratic manner, the larger historical realities of the public spheres of rational life. His novels invariably continue to remind the reader that the marginalized spaces and objects, practices and behaviour-patterns of routine life are valuable sites of the rent and ideologically conflicted cultural realities of post-independence India. Such sites often have a domestic habitat which forms part of the overall representation of cultural spaces.

**A Strange and Sublime Address** captures middle-class Calcutta, a city of industrial and economic stagnation but with the unique cultural flavour, seen through the eyes of the twelve-year old protagonist, Sandeep, who comes to the city from Mumbai to spend his summer vacation in the household of his maternal uncle. This novel is the story of a school-going boy. It has a very thin plot, and it is a journey down memory lane. The boy Sandeep, who happens to be the protagonist of the novel, lives with his parents in Mumbai in a multi-storey building - twenty-third floor of a twenty-five floor building. Every year during the summer vacation he comes to Calcutta with his mother and stays at the house of his maternal uncle. Compared to Bombay, it is an entirely different world. With a feeling of amazement, he enjoys his new world, the living place in Calcutta and the adjoining localities. Chaudhuri has observed almost complete fidelity in the depiction of a vivid picture of Calcutta - life. The city appears with its summer, its power-cuts, the daily puja of the household deity, the hustle and bustle of city-life and so on.

These details give an impression of a typical middle class Bengali household in Calcutta. With a marvelous skill, Chaudhuri recreates in the novel simple pleasures of childhood-bathing, eating, sleeping and so on. He successfully transforms this world of children into a universal vision. The narration moves both spatially and temporally; it does not merely present a story but rather it makes us live and share an actual experience with minute details of time and place.

Alongwith Calcutta, Mumbai also figures as the symbol of disorienting modernity. The city of Mumbai serves as a fitting contrast. The possibility of an idea of Indianness built on the differences within the culture seems to Chaudhuri quite often a lack, leading to a sense of disorienting loss. Every detail of **A Strange and Sublime Address** has its proper place. The evocation of a child's world-view clearly announces the author's engagement with the base and root of human life and, by extension a vision of innocence, unadulterated by adult choices and attitudes. The local spaces and people give an impression of nostalgia which is simultaneously accompanied by a sense of loss and a sense of dislocation.

There seems to be an autobiographical strain in the novel insofar as Sandeep, the protagonist, bears sufficient resemblance to Chaudhuri's own childhood. Sandeep celebrates not only the simple joys of childhood-bathing, eating, sleeping and exploring the city. At the same time, the novel brings to light the business of living, working and interpersonal interaction and consequent adjustments and accommodations. The life in

the city of Bombay is more organized, mechanical and lonely. In contrast, the city of Calcutta is marked by a lively and vigorous local culture, and a sense of community-life, togetherness. Sandeep's periodic stay in Calcutta manufactures a vision of the ways in which the middle class Bengali society behaves and acts. Through the eyes of a ten-year old, a vast kaleidoscopic backdrop emerges. Even an act of bathing takes on the overtones of a ritual and the reader unfailingly recognizes a streak of nostalgia. The novel, thus, celebrates twin themes - simple joys of childhood and the evocation of a way of life - themes which are inextricably linked together. A simple act as a family having a lunch in their own house acquires intensity and a new meaning in the lyrical prose of Chaudhuri. It is important to point out that Bengalis are very specific about their food and eating-habits. Different varieties of food prepared from the same material speak volumes of the ingenuity of Bengali cuisine which is commonly supposed to mainly rest on fish and rice. An excerpt from the novel reveals how Bengalis have cultivated a taste for good food prepared differently :

Pieces of boiled fish, cooked in turmeric, red chilli paste, onions and garlic, lay in a red fiery sauce in a flat pan; rice, packed into an oven-white cake, had a spade like spoon embedded in it, slices of fried aubergine were arranged on a white dish; that was served from another pan with a drooping ladle; long complex filaments of banana flower, exotic, botanical, lay in yet another pan in a dark sauce; each plate had a heap of salt on one side, a green chilli, and a slice of sweet-smelling lemon. The grown-ups snapped the chillies (each made a sound terse as a satirical

retort) and scattered the tiny, deadly seeds in their food. If any of the boys were ever brave or foolish enough to bite a chilli their eyes filled tragically with tears, and they longed to drown in a cool, clean lake. Though chhotomama was far from affluent, they ate well, especially on Sundays, caressing the rice and the sauces on their plates with attentive sensuous fingers, fingers which performed a practical and graceful ballet on the plate till it was quite empty.

(A Strange and Sublime Address, 6)

A marked shift in cultural values in the context of two generations - the old and the new - becomes pronounced in the scene when a younger relative, during a social visit, tries to touch the elder's feet as a traditional gesture of respect, the latter forbids him. This generational gap accounts for the dichotomy between the India of Gandhi and Nehru. Nehru's India is secular and stands in contrast to the India envisioned by Gandhiji the 'India of ceremony and custom.' (A Strange and Sublime Address, 61)

In the quoted incident from the novel, the act of touching an elder's feet as a mark of respect is constructed as a quotidian custom within the given local culture. The behavioural conflict between the old and new generation figures as a cultural cliché. Yet this cliché pulls together strands of banality and locality as contingent upon one another. It also provides valuable cultural knowledge about a larger ideological conflict that problematizes the demarcation of private and public, notwithstanding its occurrence within the realm of the domestic site. Larger ideological, historical and cultural conflicts are banalized and domesticated within the

recurring quotidian spaces of home and private lives, and embody a lot of cultural meaning and significance.

Chaudhuri has a keen eye and ear for minute details, and sometimes he juxtaposes two entirely different realms of experience. In another situation in **A Strange and Sublime Address**, an adult comes across three young boys occupied in role-playing. They are busy acting out the ‘pretend’ game of ‘freedom fighters’. Sandeep’s maternal uncle is provoked when he finds young Sandeep assuming the role of Mahatma Gandhi. His provocation gives way to an excitement in which he accords Subhas Chandra Bose greater importance over Gandhi. This shows the impact of Bengali culture. Almost all Bengalis feel proud of their Bengaliness and leave no opportunity to valorise Bengali people and things. The details of the incident referred to above might appear trivial but it reveals how everyday practices at the local level achieve a significance through being pushed into the margins of cultural knowledge production. The representation of local culture configures everyday life with a vividness and force that both of these appear mutually interdependent. Chaudhuri manages to depict the subjectivities of the local Bengali culture through the behaviour and interaction of the characters in **A Strange and Sublime Address**. To explain this, one has to move from the general to the specific representation of a character like Chhotomama. He is a good example of a local subject which is a crucial factor in the mapping of cultural spaces. His inclination towards political regionalism crystallizes in his comic and incongruous behaviour for he

forgets at the moment that he is talking to young boys, who are shorn of any political allegiance.

Chaudhuri's fiction places an almost exclusive emphasis on such spaces which have been marginalized by dominant historiographies. Moreover, such spaces do not hold a mirror to these historiographies. Such spaces, in fact, constitute the crucial site of the production and cultivation of the quotidian in his novels which weave the tangible texture of locality. The local culture is shown as distinct from the dominant national culture, still remaining a part of it : **A Strange and Sublime Address** seems to offer space for the local culture as a viable alternative which helps us apprehend the intricate relationship between the public and the private in the context of the cultural realities of post 1947 India.

**A Strange and Sublime Address** is replete with cultural spaces which are described in minute details. He includes houses, the city, characters, rituals, customs and interpersonal interaction. The author seems to identify with the ten-year Sandeep and narrates the story from his point of view. Properly speaking, the novel has a thin plot and forges ahead on the basis of Sandeep's memories which move around everyday incidents and daily routine life. As Chaudhuri himself confesses in a very subtle way that there is not a story-line in the novel when he makes an observation about the description of some houses in streets :

.... why did these houses seem to suggest that infinitely interesting story might be woven around them ? And yet the story would never be satisfying one, because the writer like Sandeep would be too caught upon



jotting down the irrelevancies and digressions that makeup lives, and the life of a city rather than a good story - till the reader would shout 'come to the point!' --- and there would be no point except the girls memorising the rules of grammar, the old man in the easy chair fanning himself ... The 'real' story with its beginning, middle and end would never be told, because it did not exist. (A Strange and Sublime Address, 57-58)

With all modesty, Chaudhuri keeps away from direct authorial intrusion and lets Sandeep narrate the tale. The domestic space, traditionally called 'the inner space' is a vital site of culture. The description of Chhotomama's house, the way it is cleaned, the puja rooms, and the description of other houses in the city of Calcutta which are very close to each other, has all been done in great depth and detail :

There were two rooms on the second and topmost storeys. The first was the large one facing the road ... There were two beds, one big and small ... The other room, facing the background, a few palm trees, a field and a professor's house, was much smaller, with one double bed in it .... within this room was another room, hidden away in corner ... It was a prayer room. Different gods and goddesses reclined or stood in various postures within.

(A Strange and Sublime Address, 34-35)

The 'puja-room' happens to be the most sanctified space in the house. Children are forbidden to enter it unless called for. The boy-like curiosity in Sandeep comes about as quite realistic. The puja-room

fascinates him and he views it with eagerness and curiosity. He is nearly spellbound when he looks at the array of different gods and goddesses reclining or standing in various postures within. The deities include Krishna, Saraswati, Lakshmi, Ganesh and Durga. Of all the Gods Sandeep liked Ganesh the most, 'because he seemed so content with his liked appearance', (35) Chaudhuri tells this in good humour. He has captured the minutest details, describing how the entire puja is done by Sandeep's aunt and how curiously Sandeep watches all this. Chaudhuri invariably becomes ironic/humorous after describing an incident, character or ritual. Sandeep, on his part, did not believe in God, much less in gods. Like most children, he was not imbued with child-like innocence; he was sceptical but tolerant of other creeds', (36). The author seems, here, to identify himself with the protagonist, Sandeep. Inevitably, Sandeep lives in a small world composed of relatives and cousins. He feels closer to Calcutta and feels free while the very thought of going back to Bombay, where he lives with his parents, makes him sullen. He derives great pleasure in the company of his cousins who are nearly of his age.

Chaudhuri vividly describes natural phenomena such as nature, rain and storm, because the climate and atmosphere of a place accentuate it in specific terms. However, he eschews authorial intervention again and lets the protagonist be himself. The nature is viewed in the novel from a child's perspective. Sandeep observes the movement of trees and finds them dancing in the wind. The sounds and noises of rain, wind and of the people talking in the locality seem peculiar to him and get invested with a

new meaning and significance : ‘Only the children had time to investigate or smile at spirits, because the grownups were busy, panicky.’ (72) Children’s curiosity and their habit of questioning come up as a delightful relief in the novel. Sandeep’s vision facilitates the further details about the lives of other characters. Through him, the reader learns about the marriages of Chhordimoni or Mamima. Moreover, the perspective of a child, though apparently circumscribed and shallow, enables the adult folk to see how children watch or perceive simple things like pigeons making love or quarreling, or listening to the sweet cooing of a koel. It is interesting to read their observations about grown ups who do not pay much attention to their perceptions and opinions. Chhotmama’s behaviour, as perceived by Sandeep, might serve as an apt example. He usually disturbed everyone in the morning with his clumsiness, though not making any noise. His hands and legs moved involuntarily without his having any control over the habit. So the children, Sandeep and Abhi particularly, tolerated and took it for granted :

Anyway Sandeep and Abhi had decided that one had to simply and unquestionably tolerate the grown-ups. One had constantly to see comic aspects of their characters to remain sane. (A Strange and Sublime Address, 74)

Chaudhuri foregrounds the knowledge of local language, Bengali as a cultural artifact but in this too, he creates humour. For instance, Sandeep’s inability to read Bengali surfaces as a funny incident; as he saw the letters as characters in both the senses of the word : ‘(One) was a

fat man standing straight with his belly sticking out; (another) was the fat man scratching his back .... The letters were intimate, quirky, ancient, graceful, comic, just as he imagined the people of Bengal to be.’ (81) Not only the Bengali language but English is also subjected to irony in the novel. Chaudhuri uses irony as a tool to express situations in a comic way with a seriousness underlying it. Abhi’s tutor is a source of fun and amusement to the children. His English is terrible though he comes to teach Abhi English. The novelist seems to mock him when he says, ‘It was pleasurable to hear his natural eloquences in Bengali after his brave guerilla invasion into the rocky terrain of English.’ (101) Chhotomama’s heart attack comes in as an opportunity for comment on society. His relatives and friends visit him in the hospital but end up discussing their children, relatives still sat talking, sipping now and then from a flask, eating dry crumbling sweetmeats from paper containers, shawls around their shoulders as if it were a picnic in a hill station.’ (111) Among the visitors, there were people who even speculated whether Chhotomama had any chance of survival.

**A Strange and Sublime Address** is densely dotted with the description of cultural spaces. The city of Calcutta figures as a site of outer space, and the novelist’s knowledge of this city appears to be very sound. He suggests that one may enjoy a Sunday evening in Calcutta in a number of ways; for instance, ‘one should drive to Outram Ghat, take a stroll at river Hooghly, could stay home and listen to plays on radio or watch a cinema.’ (11). There is an incident which clearly demonstrates how the members of a Bengali family behave in certain situations. For

instance, the humorous episode of Chhotomama's struggle to take out his car brings out the middle-class aspiration to own a car. The entire situation is so comic that one can hardly suppress a laughter :

He [Chhotomama] was sitting at steering wheel of the old Ambassador, one arm casually hanging outside, one arm on the wheel ... They (idle men) took position, like a small battalion - two by the window, two at the back, and another reserve, who would do the indispensable work of shouting from the rear. At Chhotomama's words, the team strained forward and the recalcitrant car, after some stolid silent thought, decided to concede a few feet into the road ... 'Harder boys, harder' ! persuaded his uncle. He looked almost heroic and serene, in complete control of the troubled situation. (31-32)

Additionally, the act of sitting in the car also denotes the desperation and urgency of the members of the family to occupy space. The cramped space of the car may be taken as an analogue of the domestic space in the local culture. Almost all the members of the family get squeezed into the car. The way Chaudhuri compares this situation to a stuffed tiffin box - creates abundant humour. The simple act of blowing the conch in the puja-room comes about as a conspicuous cultural practice. Bengali music and poetry also occupy a pre-eminent place in the culture of Bengal. Chhotomama's humming of songs in the bathroom signals Bengalis' love of song and music. And Bengali poetry is also sonorous and musical though the protagonist, Sandeep finds little opportunity to learn either music or poetry.

The third person narrative changes to first person after 130 pages as the boy Sandeep grows into manhood. Now Sandeep narrates the many incidents related to his life. Through his vision, we get a different picture of Calcutta which has changed a lot in all these years. After completing his higher studies at Oxford, Sandeep is back at Calcutta as his parents have shifted from Bombay to Calcutta. At his grownup stage, he views things differently with a new perspective. However, in the last two chapters of **A Strange and Sublime Address**, the narrative focus shifts from Sandeep to the author once again. Chaudhuri narrates the life of Sandeep as a grown-up man. He draws a clear outline of Sandeep's routine in Calcutta as well as in Bombay. Sandeep spends a summer and winter with his parents in a Bombay high-rise building, and spends other summer in Calcutta where he feels more at home in the more traditional life of his uncle's extended family.

Although Chaudhuri prefers to call himself a modernist, his handling of the local culture and its numerous spaces seems to be equally inclined towards postmodern celebration of the fragments of the ordinary, local and quotidian life of Bengali people. The banal and the extraordinary are brought together in a dialectical relationship. The power-cuts in the city of Calcutta are shown as a regular feature of everyday life and the difficulties that result from it. Sandeep's uncle puts the black-out hours to the best use as he thinks so. He takes his two sons and Sandeep for a walk along the streets. These walks unfold a vast though dim panorama of local life and culture. The stray glimpses of people's lives on the streets, from windows and house-porches seemed to

Sandeep to encase infinitely interesting stories that were, however, never destined to attain fullness :

But why did these houses seem to suggest that an infinitely interesting story might be woven around them ? Yet the story would never be a satisfying one, because the writer, like Sandeep would be too caught up jotting down the irrelevancies and digressions that make up life .... (53-54) As Chaudhuri is culturally conscious, his fiction inevitably turns culture-specific. His inclination to depict culture often leads him to survey the contradictions and paradoxes underlying particular cultural constructs, spaces and situations. This helps to bring out the differences within the ostensible unity of a given culture in which the ordinary and dramatic, the familiar and the strange merge into one visible pattern quite imperceptibly. It is aptly exemplified by the description of Sandeep's uncle who is shown to be busy in his daily preparation before he rushes off to work :

He would become an archetype of that familiar figure who is not often described in literature - the ordinary breadwinner in his moment of unlikely glory, transformed into the centre of his universe and his home. Over and over again, he would shout, "I am late !" in the classic manner of the man crying "Fire" or "Timber" or "Eureka !" while Saraswati and Mamima scuttled around him like frightened birds.

(A Strange and Sublime Address, 20)

Chaudhuri, thus, seems to take delight in the delineation of opposites - famously called juxtaposition. In the novel under discussion,

the construction of the ordinary and the extraordinary, the familiar and the unfamiliar comes up, at least partially, as a matter of cultural valorization. Familiarity, which especially breeds in domestic and daily spaces, is seen to be a detractor of grandeur as bestowed by cultural canons. The irony acquires a sharper edge when this crucial character, the breadwinner of the family, is represented as bereft of this grandeur. This is not mainly due to his peripheral position, but on account of his economic status. However, Sandeep's imagination reverses such overdeterminations. There is something disorienting about the way he imagines the people, things and situations. He looks at his uncle's business from an altogether different perspective, investing it with a mythical grandeur.

He liked listening to his uncle about business. He liked it because his uncle's account of the small business world always seemed like a suspense story or a myth or a fairy tale, full of evocative characters that worked themselves slowly into his imagination; cheats, sophisticated two-timers, astringent moralists, clever strategists, heroic fighters, risk-takers and explorers. Each new business venture sounded like a new military onslaught, each new product like a never-before weapon capable of conquering the world added to a nameless arsenal. (27)

The perception of the quotidian fragment as a valuable paradigm of cultural knowledge production has significant historical links with literary contexts which are important in Chaudhuri's fiction and critical thinking. Following the cultural traditions of high modernism, Chaudhuri's work



bears echoes of urban flanerier (idle, leisurely walk), which often surfaces in the writing of great writers such as Baudelaire, T.S. Eliot, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. Flanerier figures conspicuously in Chaudhuri's novels. The examples of Sandeep's walk through power-cut Calcutta suffices to point out its presence and cultural significance. The older protagonists in **Afternoon Raag** and **A New World** invariably demonstrate it time and again. In **Afternoon Raag**, leisurely walk shapes and determines the protagonist's sense and perception of the cityscape and its spatial quality : "There is no centre in Oxford, only different points of reference, from each of which the conception of the city is altered slightly."

(Afternoon Raag, 88)

**A New World** also places flanerier in the context. The protagonist, Jayojit comes from America with his young son to visit his parents in Calcutta. A walk in the city comes about as a concrete experience to him. Through his aimless walking, neighbourhoods initially appear more alien and bewildering but eventually materialize in closer spatio-temporal familiarity and ordinariness :

He felt somewhat conspicuous as he turned back he did not know why. Perhaps because people don't wander about and not go anywhere; perhaps this was what made him feel strange and doubtful and that he stood out. Everyone else, whatever they looked like, had somewhere to go, or postponing doing something, as some of these people squatting by the pavement, who seemed to be in part time employment, were doing it

for a reason. But the small journey in the heat constantly assailed by traffic on the small are back had somewhat settled his thoughts.

(A New World, 50)

Alongwith the walk on the streets of Calcutta a person and his address turn into a cultural space which oftentimes serves as a means of the production of knowledge. The title of the novel gathers its meaning and significance on page 72 when the protagonist Sandeep discovers it on the first page of his cousin's book :

Abhijit Das,  
17 Vivekanand Road,  
Calcutta (South),  
India,  
Asia,  
Earth,  
The Solar System,  
The Universe (72)

Obviously, it was a strange and sublime address, suggesting Chaudhuri's love for such an address. It appropriates the title of the novel in a serio-comic manner. This attempt at cognitive mapping of Abhi connects his home with the world, echoing Joycean fashion of bringing together the micro as well macro levels of human contemplation and knowledge. It helps us to trace Chaudhuri's indebtedness to European modernism which seeks to highlight cosmopolitan outlook and approach. At the same time it is a departure from nationalist modes of

self-identification and evinces the desire to be a part of the global community, while simultaneously retaining the features of local particularities. The novel goes beyond the framework of national allegories only to foreground the interplay of the global and the local.

Although the terms global and local stand in binary opposition, contemporary critics and theorists have tried to fuse them together by coining a new term ‘glocal’. Chaudhuri manages to bring the global and the local together in **A Strange and Sublime Address** with a frequency which serves to accentuate the thematic focus. The local is present in this novel in its plurality, unfolding its multiple dimension. The references to sights, smells, flavours, and collective customs make it clear. However, Chaudhuri remains most sensitive to the obscure, the marginal and the banal elements of daily existence. In **A Strange and Sublime Address**, Sandeep perceives his immediate surroundings, his uncle’s house and the streets of Calcutta as things imbued with the quality of novelty, enchantment, or even magic. As stated earlier, the novel opens with a boy’s perception of his uncle’s house in a Calcutta lane where he locates “small houses, unlovely and unremarkable” (7) yet the boy’s perspective transforms this otherwise unremarkable place. The boy Sandeep straddles the two worlds literally and more importantly imaginatively - between Calcutta and Bombay. In an interview given to Sumana R. Ghosh Chaudhuri frankly admitted :

I’m more interested in that kind of movement between two different worlds, this inner and outer, sometimes two incompatible

cultural worlds which can be signified by the use of shajana tree and Colgate toothpaste in the same sentence. So, that is, what I find, has the movement of narrative. (161) Chaudhuri's statement is aptly validated by a simple incident in **A Strange and Sublime Address** when Sandeep takes his first bath. The boy protagonist observes the bathroom, the inner space in the cultural life of Bengal :

There was a tap in the middle; at the top, a round eye sprinkled with orifices protruded from a pipe that was bent downward like the neck of a giraffe; this was the shower. There was no hotwater and no bath tub, but no one seemed to miss what was not there. (10)

Sandeep's experience of the bath is followed by post-bath ritual in which his Mamima applied mustard oil on his body, "a sharp aura of mustard oil flowered, giving Sandeep's nostrils a faraway sentient pleasure - it was not a sweet smell, but there was a harsh unexpectedness about it he liked. It reminded him of sunlight." (10) Here, Chaudhuri has picked up the application of the mustard oil to body as a cultural practice common to almost all the sections of Indian society. The author has successfully captured the sensuous and the smallest fragments of everyday life, especially the local, and configured them in minute details. The sounds of radio babble "like a local idiot" (13) to thunder that, after a "moment's heavy silence" speaks "guruguruguru" (67).

These sensuous descriptions represent the author's intimate and subtle knowledge of the local and quotidian life. One should not, however, mistake these for a metonymic representation of the sights and

smells of India. They are, rather, an attempt at poeticising the experience of the local minutiae and its imaginative reconfiguration. The colours of the Indian flag, for example, appear in **A Strange and Sublime Address** when Sandeep's aunt, Mamima, goes to the prayer room with an offering to the gods. The items include arranged slices of cucumber, oranges and sweet white batashas. The ceremony is curiously observed by Sandeep who, as a secular and neutral observer, enjoys the sight of "a grown-up at play. Prayer-time was when adults became children again" (37). He remarks :

All that was important to the gods and mortals was the creation of that rich and endlessly diverting moment in the small chamber, that moment of secret, almost illicit communion, when both the one who prayed and the one who was prayed, too were released from the irksome responsibility of the world. Oranges, white batashas, cucumbers. (37-38)

Mamima is a local character who feels secure in the world of mythology and the external symbols of Indian mythology. The national colours are, in this instance are, however, real physical objects, not symbols; they smell, taste but are not tellingly permanent. And in perceiving his aunt's ceremony as child's play, Sandeep's perception transcends the religious and the national. It remains open to new interpretations and ways of inhabiting the world. In addition to the ritual of puja - the worship of gods - Chaudhuri broadens the perspective to comment on the worldliness and the materialistic outlook of Bengali

society. The practice of religious rituals stands in palpable contrast to the assimilated capitalist ethos in **A Strange and Sublime Address** :

Everywhere in the lane, fathers prayed their sons would be successes .... No effort would be spared, “future” and “career had become Bengali words, incorporated unconsciously but feverishly into Bengali parlance. Meanwhile, children, like Egyptian slaves, dragged huge blocks of frustrating study all day to build that impressive but non-existent pyramid of success. (23-24)

This extract reveals the intense desire for upward mobility and the spirit of cut-throat competition in Bengali society. All of them appear to be busy in building the ‘impressive but non-existent pyramid of success.’ The fact that success is elusive renders their ambitious endeavours futile. However, despite their flair for intellectual pursuits, Bengali society is shown here through an ironic perspective. Their nostalgia for a pre-capitalist past is privileged only to offer a contrast to their desperate ambition for upward mobility in socio-economic terms. Calcutta’s transformation in the wake of globalization, rapid industrialization and progress still bears traces of pre-industrialized Bengal, remembered nostalgically by Sandeep’s aunt when Chhotomama’s car breaks down in the morning :

Better perhaps to go back to the horse and horse carriage. On bad days like this, when the fans stopped turning because of power-cut, when the telephone went dead because of a cable-fault when the taps became dry because there was no power to pump the water, and, finally when the

car engine curtly refused to start, it seemed a better idea to return to a primitive, unpretentious means of subsistence - to buy a horse and a plough, to dig a well in one's backyard, to plant one's own trees and grow one's fruit and vegetables. Calcutta, inspite of its fetid industrialization, was part of that primitive, terrocota landscape of Bengal, Tagore's and the wandering poet Vaishnav poet's Bengal - the Bengal of the Bullock Cart and the earthen lamp .... in time people would forget that electricity had ever existed, and earthen lamps would burn again in the houses. (34)

Here, the city of Calcutta seems to pass through a phase of transition. The author brings out the beauty of the streets, full of shabby doors and windows. The streets and houses are covered with a layer of dust "constantly raised into startling new shapes and unexpected forms by the arbitrary workings of the wind, forms on which dogs and children sit doing nothing" (15). Another example of the inner space can be seen in the description of the dining table that was "old and weathered; stains from tea-cups and gravies and dirty fingers had multiplied on it like signatures" (26).

For the novelist, Calcutta becomes a confluence of two distinctly visible trends: the post-industrial and pre-industrial. Chaudhuri's characters often reveal a preference for pre-industrial society, and appreciate its aesthetic beauty in the high-modernist way. That is, they learn to perceive the present moment as it was perceived by modernists. Chaudhuri is interested in recovering this moment in the rapidly changing globalized world. In the manner of James Joyce, he evokes epiphanies in

ordinary, immediate surroundings which, through the use of an expression, reveal the inner life and get invested with new meanings. Both **A Strange and Sublime Address** and **Afternoon Raag** are rich in frozen moments which show the relation between a character and his surroundings but also establish the character's identity and render his/her experience unique. This happens during Sandeep's walk to the **maidan** with his uncle and cousins, during a power-cut in the evening : "When the lights came back, it was a dramatic instant; like a photographer's flash going off, which recorded the people sprawled in various postures and attitudes, smiles of relief and wonder on their faces .... There was an uncontrollable sensation of delight, as if it were happening for the first time. With what appeared to be an instinct for timing, the rows of fluorescent lamps glittered to life simultaneously. The effect was the opposite of blowing out candles, and the magic exhalation had brought a flame to every wick at once (A Strange and Sublime Address 53-54).

Chaudhuri engages with the trivial details of local life in a way that reminds one of Joyce's use of epiphany. For instance, the routine act of hanging clothes on a clothes-line on the terrace is a common feature of the local middle-class households. It denotes once again the focus on the spaces in **A Strange and Sublime Address**. Terrace also becomes a site of fleeting glances exchanged between lovers who steal the moment and opportunity to interact and communicate through gestures. Here the language of gesture surfaces as a subtle though perceptible activity within the frame of cultural communion. The language of a given cultural community facilitates communication and interpersonal interaction and



hence language obviously becomes a cultural artifact. The gestural aspect of the language of a given culture surfaces in the extract, “such shy, piercing glances exchanged in the heat of the afternoon ....”. The lovers make the best and the most fruitful use of such evanescent moments. The novelist has successfully captured such fleeting moments in **A Strange and Sublime Address**, for example when Sandeep finds out the meaning of the name Alpana, he remembers a girl he had once known :

Now he knew what the name meant. He did not know what to do with the unexpected knowledge. But he felt a slight, almost negligible, twinge of pleasure, as a meaning took birth in his mind, and died the next instant. (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 117)

Furthermore, the fleeting nature of an epiphanic moment is beautifully rendered in the last pages of the novel. In the hospital garden, Sandeep listens to the voice of two kokils, busy with their mating cries. At times, the cries seem to resemble a question or an exclamation, “so that it either sounded like ku-wu ! - as if a child who had not yet learnt to speak were showing an adult something, and, in this communication without language, were asking, with the merest inflection of its voice, Have you seen it ? And then affirming, again with its voice, I have seen it (119). As the boys are fascinated, they try to locate the birds in the trees, but the Kokil itself is invisible : “it did not seem to exist at all, except the cry, which rose questioningly and affirmatively again and again from the leaves” (120). After some time-gap, when the boys have already forgotten about it, Abhi catches a glimpse of the Kokil in the tree “eating the

orange flower” and points it out to the fellow boys who ‘watch in wonder’ (12). The bird itself, however, “must have sensed their presence, because it interrupted its strange meal and flew off-not flew off really, but melted, disappeared, from the material world. As they watched, a delicate shyness seemed to envelop it, and draw a veil over their eyes” (121)

**A Strange and Sublime Address** is remarkable for the representation of the local culture, which is exemplified by the description of the local, familiar spaces, people, their behaviour and experiences. The novel which begins with a boy seeing, ends with a veil that indicates the fleeting nature of the vision. The scene with the kokil further makes the reader both inquisitive, wary and a little surprised. The bird’s meal is especially curious as we learn that only “.... in a month, the gulmohur trees would explore into fierce orange flowers, in an undifferentiated trembling orange mass, with the effect of a volcano erupting and balancing, momentarily (119). Thus, Chaudhuri fashions a highly sensuous world that goes beyond the postcolonial dichotomies of the global and local; foreign and native; and East and West. His local habitations are situated in relation to a wider world perspective. It is substantiated by Heidegger’s argument, “culture and the literary being a habitation for the human, in a way that incorporates the everyday and the local, but somehow transcends the national or the racial.”

Thus Chaudhuri has attempted “to create a dwelling for man, rather than to be only fashioning a national literature. The everyday life, the specific, and the local become, in this notion of culture, aspects of that

making” (Clearing a Space, 30). The city of Calcutta comes alive with its sights and sounds, its gastronomic delights. The interactions of characters are real rather than realistic. They carry an imminent simplicity and lyricism about them. Every detail in the novel has its proper place and is closely linked to the child’s world-view against adult choices and altitudes. For instance, the affectionate rendering of Calcutta is mixed with wry realism. The city the characters inhabit is the ‘city of dust’. The dust turns into a comprehensive metaphor of a prominent feature of this city, highlighting the view of the spaces both public and private :

If one walks down the street, one sees mounds of dust-like sand-dunes on the pavements, on which children and dogs sit doing nothing, while sweating laborers dig into the macadam with spades and drills .... The old houses, with their reposeful walls, are crumbling to slow dust; their once gleaming gates are rusting. Dust flakes off the ceilings in offices; the buildings are becoming dust, the roads are becoming dust. At the same time, dust is constantly raised into startling new shapes and unexpected forms by the arbitrary workings of the wind, forms on which dogs and children sit doing nothing. Daily, Calcutta disintegrates, unwhispering, into dust, and daily it rises from dust again.

(A Strange and Sublime Address, 8-9)

In fact, Calcutta figures as the macrocosm which embodies the myriads of local habitation and people. Both the inner and outer, the private and public worlds of people are subsumed in the city. In the novel the two worlds often meet and mingle giving way to a biter-sweet

nostalgia. This happens when Sandeep knocks at the bathroom door, as his uncle sings, to ask the meaning of ‘godhuli’:

As Chhotomama explained .... Sandeep saw in his mind like a film being shown from a projector - the slow moving indolent cows, their nostrils and their shining eyes, the faint white outline of the cowherd, the sense of the expectant village and the dust, yest the dust, rising unwillingly from the cows’ hooves and blurring everything. The mental picture was set in the greyish-red colour of twilight. It was strange how one world could contain a world within it. (53-54)

This evocation of the rural life seems to offer a contrast to the metropolitan city of Calcutta though the dust figures in both the contexts and with different meanings. In the like manner, the subtle exploration of the two levels of existence, the secret, intense one of Sandeep and his cousins and the remote one of the grown-ups is carefully orchestrated. Both these worlds are beautifully borne out by the extracts that follow :

Sometimes Sandeep and Abhi would walk up quietly to a window and open a single shutter, slanting it so that little light entered the room as possible. Then they both peered through it .... It was possible, on certain moments, for Sandeep and Abhi to call out to a dazed passer-by ‘Eh, stupid !’ or ‘Faster, fat man !’ and close the shutter and become invisible .... They felt they had the dangerous power to unsettle the world outside and then fade innocently into thin air like spirits. (27-28) And here is the children’s view of the adults :

Chhotomama's business ran in fits and starts, like his car. There was no demand for this and no demand for that .... And there were unpredictable breaks, when Sandeep's mother and Mamima would begin to murmur conspiratorially about the colour of a sari. And there were unpremeditated instants when everyone would suddenly stop talking, perhaps to think, each one about something different .... (49-51)

By contrasting the world of children with that of adults, Chaudhuri seeks to assert the routine life of the local culture. When Chhotomama suffers a heart-attack, the humdrum details of life reassert themselves, pointing to a new beginning :

At night after they had said goodbye to Chhotomama, they returned homeward through the lit lanes and alleys of Calcutta. Watching the lanes, they temporarily forgot their own lives, and, temporarily, their minds flowed outward in the images of the city, and became indistinguishable from them. Even at night, the streets were theatres full of actors and extras, reckless dogs, insufferable cows lying in the centre of the lane, families arguing, old women gossiping, children chasing cats, rickshaw-wallahs idling, Vaishnav devotees singing religious songs for all to hear. As they watched from the car they were charmed by the illusion, some nagging uncertainty in their minds was soothed into extinction, they briefly merged with this vague, vast enterprise in which everyone seemed to be taking part. (123-124)

This new beginning is related to rebirth in nature. 'In the hospital garden, the Sajna tree had broken into white blossoms. In a month, the

gulmohur trees would explode into fierce orange flowers .... (127). The novel ends with a final affirmation of life as it passes by the fleeting glimpse of the **kokil** which “gave an overall impression of shapeliness and stateliness” (129). As it disappeared from the material world it seemed to draw a veil over the children’s eyes. Chaudhuri’s lyrical prose is particularly well-suited to evoking this enigmatic city itself.

The foregoing analysis of the novel shows that Chaudhuri has consciously captured the minute details of local culture and its various spaces : houses, streets, city, people and the cityscape. His keen perception of the ordinary details, things, events and persons has a poetic and engaging quality about it. The sights, smells and sounds appear as patches but enliven the description, which validates the author’s ability to depict the local culture in its multiple dimensions.

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