

PERSONAL AND POLITICAL: CHANGING FACE OF BENGALI MIDDLE CLASS IN AMIT CHAUDHURI'S FREEDOM SONG

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ABSTRACT

The middle class in India has emerged as a very powerful section of society who has played a very decisive role in the course of history of the nation, specially after independence. Through time this rather unorganized class has undergone a lot of transformations, both socially and culturally. Amit Chaudhuri, in all his novels faithfully presented the Bengali middle class society. In his third novel, *Freedom Song*, Chaudhuri has portrayed the relation of mainstream Bengali middle class families with political and economic situations of the country. Set in the backdrop of Calcutta, he picked up contemporary political upheavals and the reaction of the people belonging to that apparently secured section of the society, known as Bengali *Bhadralok*. At the same time he makes frequent journey through time and brings up socio-political scenarios from various time frames a compilation of which holds up the complete picture of the changes the people of this class has went through. The apparent non-involving nature of the middle class, irrespective of their provincial identity is not only portrayed perfectly but also seems to be infiltrated into the narrative of the novel and set the mood.

Keywords: Bengali *Bhadralok* class – 1990's - Babri Mosque demolition – Hindu Muslim tension – curfew – Leftist politics in Bengal – partition – industry]

Since his much acclaimed first novel, *A Strange and Sublime Address* (1991) to his most recent venture, *Odysseus Abroad* (2014), Amit Chaudhuri undoubtedly is most comfortable in representing the limited and engirdled lives of urban middle class people in various cities. The city may shift from Mumbai (Bombay in his writing) to London or even in most cases, Kolkata (again Calcutta in Chaudhuri), the ethnic identity of these people is always Bengali. Shifting from the incurable Post-colonial habit of the Indian English fiction writers, as pointed out in his introduction of *Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*, of portraying ‘the idea of India as a recognizable totality’(Chaudhuri, 2001, Introduction XXVI) Chaudhuri concentrates on the subtle and minute details of the local. He declares in a loud and clear voice in the same introduction:

It is worth remembering that those who write in the languages of India, whether that happens to be English or one of the modern ‘vernaculars’, do not necessarily write about ‘India’ or a national narrative (that narrative wasn’t present in any clear way before Independence), but about cultures and localities that are both situated in, and disperse the idea of nation. (Chaudhuri, 2001, Introduction XXIV)

Chaudhuri is very clear in his perspective that, “Indian life is plural, garrulous, rambling, lacking a fixed centre, and the Indian novel must be the same” (Chaudhuri, 2001, Introduction XXV). So, the pulse of the bigger national activities can often be subtly felt under the apparently calm surface of his novels, in the futile day to day movements of the main characters.

Freedom Song (1999) is Amit Chaudhuri’s third novel. Anu Shukla observes in her essay Such Staff as Amit Chaudhuri’s Song Is Made of, compiled in *The Novels of Amit Chaudhuri: An Exploration in the Alternative Tradition* (2004), ‘The story time is 50 years, a few years before the independence till the winter of 1992 but the discourse time is just a few months’ (Shukla, 100). Throughout these years Indian middle class, specially Bengali middle class has undergone massive changes in almost all aspects of life. *Freedom Song* (1999), more than any other novels of Chaudhuri seems to be keeping the account of these changes faithfully in a rather low key tone.

The emergence of educated and economically privileged Indian middle class was an outcome of British rule in India. And by default it started in Bengal. The origin of a Bengali *Bhadralok* (1) class can be traced back to the 18th century and “The first identifiable *bhadralok* figure is undoubtedly Ram Mohan Roy” (Wikipedia, cited on 24.02.15). Saayan Chattopadhyaya in his essay ‘Making the Global Bhadrakok : Bengali Men and Transitional Indian Middle Class in India’ *Masculinities in a Global Era* (2014), included in the book observes that

..it was during the eighteenth century that the Bengali *Bhadralok* achieved their sociopolitical ascendancy under British rule because they were the first to obtain essential education and entered the civil service. They appeared to be the main intermediary class in India, embodying western education and culture but retained a sense of “Indianness”. (Gelfer, 119).

Keeping in mind the effect of the prolonged hegemony of British education system Pavan K Verma summerises in his celebrated book *The Great Indian Middle Class* (1999), “The creation of a native elite in its own image was the most spectacular and enduring achievement of British colonialism in India.” (Verma, 2).

Since the country got independence, the Indian middle class (or Bengali middle class to be specific) has undergone a massive change in terms of social political and intellectual aspects of life. It all started with a considerable amount of patriotic feelings. Pavan k Verma again observes in *The Great Indian Middle Class*, ‘..for the middle class in India the freedom movement had generated a powerful ethical and intellectual legacy quite distinct from the anti-colonialism inherent in a liberation movement’ (Verma 29). The legacy was that of Nehru and Gandhi, under whose influence the newly liberated middle class people thought of building a modern nation, ‘dismissive of the obscurantisms of the past and striving towards progress on the foundation of science, technology and industrialization’ (ibid.)(as

dreamt by Nehru) pursuing the path of absolute morality (the teaching of Gandhi). This idealistic flow towards the construction of a dream nation soon got some blows; some are the internal and some from the neighbours. From the miserable defeat from China in 1962 to the dwindling of morality and the infiltration of corruption in the field of politics, from the era of licence-permit raj to free economy and globalization of the 90's — Indian middle class has travelled a long way. Amit Chaudhuri has delicately and minutely touched some important chords of this vast series of events in *Freedom Song* (1999) in a very personalized way.

Of all his novels so far, *Freedom Song* is definitely most deeply rooted into politics. Though the story is about two closely related Bengali middle class families and the marital prospect of one of the members of the families. On one hand there is Khuku and Shib, living a rather secured and financially well off life in their flat in south Calcutta. To Khuku's pride, Shib, after a quite successful career in a private company is now working in Little's, "once reputable and British owned" (Chaudhuri 18) company that produces sweets and chocolates, even after the age of retirement. On the other hand there is Bhola, Khuku's brother and his wife Abha and their three children, Bhaskar, Manik and Piyu. Bhola is a man of certain whims and has strong opinion about almost everything. His son Manik has gone to Germany to study Engineering but Bhaskar has left studies and joined his father's factory what did not look prudent to the family and the relatives, to join a company which is a practically dying, that is to at the time of a global recession. To the extreme embarrassment and anxiety of the family he is the only character in the novel who has direct connection to the leftist politics of the time. (Though it is clarified in due course that his interest lies more on the cultural wing than hardcore political activities.) There in Mini, Khuku's childhood friend and the tragic but not uncommon story of her family. Here her elder brother (whom they called Dadamoni) brought the other siblings up but unfortunately died quite prematurely at the age of forty two soon to be followed by his brother Chanchal. Two consecutive deaths of two brothers left the family astray and Shantidi an Mini had to take up jobs to run the family and did not get the chance to marry. There are other characters who comes with the baggage of their own stories and Chaudhuri glides over them giving sudden glimpses of their lives.

Much has been said about the narrative technique of Amit Chaudhuri. Pankaj Mishra, in a review of *Freedom Song* remarks, "...as a novelist, Chaudhuri is a camera, a slow-tracking one" (Mishra 1999 Blurb *Freedom Song*) In other places Chaudhuri has often been marked as an impressionistic writer or writing with a quality of miniature painting etc. But in *Freedom Song* particularly this narrative technique seems to be playing a more important role than just bearing the signature style of the author. Commenting on the general nature of the post-independence Indian middle class, Pavan K Varma said in a rather disdainful way:

Today, in the aftermath of fifty years of a socialist State, if we seek to catalogue the dominant social traits of the middle class, the first thing that comes to mind is a truly amazing imperviousness to the external milieu except in matters that impinge on its own immediate interests. (Varma, Middle Class 130).

This very nonchalant non-committal standpoint of the middle class, irrespective of their provincial identity is reflected even through the narrative here.

The year 1992 and the preceding years were politically very turbulent for India. Towards the end of 1992, the demolition of Babri Masque happened. This mishap and the resultant riot-like situation play more than a backdrop for the novel. Chaudhuri gave a rather impressionistic description of the riot and curfew, a description from the safe corner of the household of a Bengali middle class family, distant and unaffected.

During the curfew a month ago, all had been disorder and silence. ...Jochna (the maid) did not come to work for two days. Ordinarily this would have irritated Khuku, but this time the atmosphere, distant but palpable, of strife precluded any response, unfortunately, except sympathy. (Chaudhuri 71)

But at the same time, the vulnerability of this secured existence is also exposed. Chaudhuri reflects, "It

was at such times that the sketchy unfencedness of their existence become palpable, that they must lead lives perpetually and nakedly open to duress.” (Ibid.)

The demolition of the masque was definitely a watershed to not only Indian polity but to the entire trajectory of Hindu-Muslim relationship in India. Ramchandra Guha observed in his book *India After Gandhi* (2008), ‘..with the riots sparked by the Ayodhya movement, the ambivalences had been replaced by an unambiguous animosity. Hostility and suspicion were now the governing — some would say only — idioms of Hindu-Muslim relations.’ (Guha, 645). Amit Chaudhuri brought this politics into the very domestic sphere of the Bengali Hindu middle class household in *Freedom Song*. The novel opens with the sound of Azaan, ‘..a solitary voice saying Allah-hu-akbar and other familiar but incomprehensible syllables.’ (Chaudhuri, 1). With this graphic description at the very beginning Chaudhuri summarises how, even after living side by side for centuries, the ‘mainstream’ Hindu middle class has considered Muslims as suspicious ‘other’. Even Mini, a major character claims in a private sphere, ‘..it was no bad thing that they toppled that mosque’ (Chaudhuri 55)

According to Pavan K Varma’s analysis, the root of disintegration lies in the origin of Indian Middle Class. He observes, the majority of the Indian middle class population belongs to Hindu community. And the theological base of Hinduism is very much decentralised as there is no single God or doctrine to follow or any one strict prayer or ritualistic regime to maintain. The various, often contradictory ideologies left ample scope for the Hindus to search for personal salvation in their own way. But this kind of liberty is definite not helpful in building up a regimented society glued together on the basis of even religion. Soon after the independence, they were virtually united to follow the Nehruvian legacy of a modernised and specially secular India. But the gradual erosion of ideology and the fall of the legacy left them scattered and often suspicious to each other.

Numerous examples of this discordant attitude can be drawn from the novel. Chaudhuri describes:

Each day, at some point, they talked of the Muslims. ... They grew excited about the azaan on the loud speakers, and about Muslim festivals in which people beat themselves with whips and cords. Once, when talking thus, and saying, ‘They should change as well not just the Hindus,’ they had forgotten that Abdullah the tailor, who had come to take measurements, was sitting, only a small distance away, self-consciously on the sofa, more self-conscious about sitting on the sofa than about anything the two might have said. Khuku had bit her tongue and indicated Abdullah with her eyes to Mini, and said quietly, ‘he didn’t hear us,’ and then, ‘Even if he did, so what?’ (Chaudhuri 54)

What is more disturbing, this estrangement roots back into their childhood when they are injected with partial and often distorted version of history which builds up their mental bend later on. In case of Khuku, “It was he (Dada, elder brother) who first told her of the Hindoos , who were a fierce wandering tribe with swords who cut up everything in their path,...and Musholmaans, he explained, were ghosts who haunted the dark and hilly regions of Sylhet.” (Chaudhuri, 56). In this scenario even B.J.P. who were emerging as a strong political power throughout the nation, but had a distinct communal label attached to them, was welcome to them. “ ‘BJP,’ said Khuku, her eyes larger than usual. I might even vote for BJP. Why not?’ ” (Chaudhuri 55)

People from Indian middle class society, like middle class people anywhere in the world have always solicited for peace and personal prosperity. They would lay their allegiance to anybody who would ensure them social and economical stability. Their attitude towards the leftist politics, as portrayed in this novel is definitely parochial and somehow amusing. Communist Party of India (Marxist) came to power in West Bengal in 1977 through a proper electoral process. Before that the party had a long and rich historical background in the state. Bipan Chandra, Mridula Mukherjee and Aditya Mukherjee writes in their seminal work *India After Independence* (2000), ‘ Since 1930 the Communist Party had enjoyed significant support among intellectuals and workers in Calcutta, and it emerged as a major political force in Bengal by 1947.’ (Chandra, Mukherjee, Mukherjee 312). But here we can see, as late as 1992, the members of a middle class Bengali family becomes anxious about finding a suitable match

for the boy who has 'party connections'. Even the name of the party is hardly pronounced, rather conspiratorially termed as 'party' only. As it appears that Bhaskar, elder son of Bhola distributes *Ganashakti* (2) in the neighbourhood and is involved not even deeply enough to the cultural wing of the local unit (Unit 69) of the leftist party. In their meetings every significant national and international issue is discussed. But Chaudhuri's narrative makes them appear like mere fleeting thoughts, or more like background noise of Calcutta. Sounds like 'foreign investment', 'International Monetary Fund', 'Castro', 'Cuba' etc. come and go in the speeches, but the focus of the narrative soon shifts to tea drinking, or cigarette smoking or Lenin's bald head in the photograph. Yet it is interesting to find how this harmless political connection is treated as a social stigma. The root of this antipathy may be traced back to the origin of leftist politics. In India, like rest of the world communism came up as revolutionary power with a conviction to uproot the established (rotten in their term) order. And in Bengal especially leftist politics took a militant turn with the Naxalbari (3) movement. Young students shunned their bright future to bring socio-political change and lost into oblivion. Pavan K Varma observed, 'The extreme left Mao-inspired Naxalite movement of the late sixties, which had its leaders in the intellectual 'addas' of Calcutta ...spread like a rash among students in places as far away as Delhi..' (Verma 96) Even Mini informs that, "There are many boys in my area' said Mini,... 'who got so involved they don't do anything else for the rest of their lives. Many, two boys, Angshuman Biswas and Partho Guha — good students at school – have even left their jobs'" (Chaudhuri 25). So even after fifteen years of consecutive rule, turbulent it may be, any allegiance to this party is assumed to be disruptive to the normal social growth of a young man and therefore disapproved by the family.

The intellectuals of Bengal, specially of Calcutta always had a reputation for being socially and politically conscious. The major challenge to the leftists in the first half of 90's was the threat of a globalised market oriented economy, towards which the nation was approaching steadily. Initiated in mid-1991, the economic policies were shaped with the goal of making the economy more world market oriented and in this process the role of private and foreign investment was very crucial. So the state moved towards taking the steps like reduction in import tariffs, deregulation of markets, reduction of taxes etc. The major concern of the leftists was that it would increase inequality between the rich and the poor which eventually lead the country to economic degradation. Samaresh Hajra, the major spokesperson of the leftist ideologies in this novel gives a long speech about the adverse effect of a globalized economy on the industry of the country. But, to much surprise of a reader, the author seems to be agreeing with the view quite overtly. Chaudhuri writes, 'what samaresh Hajra had told them was true — the foreign investment was dangerous to India, though the bourgeoisie, whose needs had made India bankrupt in the first place, were looking forward to it.' (Chaudhuri 47). It is rather unusual for a writer like Chaudhuri to take a stance in his novel. On the other hand, it may also be assumed that these words were the immediate thought process of Bhaskar, who was listening with rapt attention and the author has moulded his narrative into the shape of a gullible young man's thoughts.

It is rather important to notice the young men who are present there do not seem to have taken the hardcore party line too seriously. There is Dipen, who has joined the party to follow his family tradition and 'Sometimes it seemed that he is more interested in singing revolutionary songs than in party work' (Chaudhuri 48). Or Bhaskar who is like his fellow party workers is more interested in smoking at the end of a meeting which, as this political involvement is like another childish adventure to him. The stronghold of a strict revolutionary ideology has lost its vehemence and purpose to the young generation which is definitely a common symptom of the middle class throughout the country. Moreover the discrepancy between the ideology and the reality is often sharp. He who speaks of International Monetary Fund has no job for the last two months. And as Bhaskar is the only member in the group who can be considered as someone coming from truly middle class family, 'he was hold in respect' (Chaudhuri 49). So the social equality the communist ideology advocates is subtly defeated even among the followers of it. Even the author somehow in a good humour had marked the 'strange and sublime address' of all these seriousness in the grand scheme of the universe:

Here, in the deep green humid Gangetic delta in Bengal, among jack-fruit trees, malaria, and bluebottle flies was one of the last Socialist governments in the world, and here, in a lane ten minutes away from Ishewar Chandra Vidyasagar Road, was one of its local outposts. (Chaudhuri 46-47)

In this novel, the sad history of the gradual downfall of the industrial sector of the state and the country runs as a subplot. Bhola started his own factory with some of his friends in the 60's. He is a representative of the generation about whom Pavan K Varma observed in *Great Indian Middle Class* that, 'Many professionals, recent beneficiaries of the expanded infrastructure of technical education, preferred a path of self-employment and set up units of their own.' (Varma (91). Chaudhuri also remarked in this novel, "That was a time when many middle-class people decided to start small businesses" (Chaudhuri 136). But the factory went bankrupt 'during the year of the Naxals'. (Chaudhuri 137). The deplorable condition of industries in Bengal is perfectly exemplified in the case of Little's, the company where Shib works off late. At first it was under British ownership. After independence it came under state government. And after making loss for many years was marked as a 'sick unit'. Chaudhuri described the situation with excellent precision:

Years of labour problems had sapped the factory and its adjoining offices of impetus, but ever since the Communist Party came to power the atmosphere had changed to a benign, co-operative inactivity, with a cheerful trade unionism replacing the tensions of the past, the representatives of the chocolate company now also representing the government and the party, and the whole thing becoming a relaxed, ungrudging family affair. (Chaudhuri 18)

The nexus of a militant trade unionism with parochial interest and the lack of enthusiasm on the part of government can be held responsible for this. And Chaudhuri reminds us in the very next line that, "This kind of company was not rare in the 'public sector';" (ibid.). So the gradual journey of the entrepreneurial identity of the Bengali middle class to oblivion is definitely portrayed in this novel very sensibly. The narrative of the novel moves backward and forward in time with impeccable smoothness. The partition of Bengal is a major disaster in the lives of Bengali people. Thousands were uprooted from their ancestral home and were forced to march towards the unknown future in an unseen country. No word is sufficient to capture the brutality of the incident, Chaudhuri writes,

Then the upheaval came, and friends, brothers, teachers, magistrates, servants, shopkeepers were all uprooted, as if released slowly, sadly, by the gravity that had tied them to the places they had known all their life, released from their old orbit. They had awaited it with more than apprehension; but when it came they hardly noticed it. The votes were counted after the referendum; their country was gone; (Chaudhuri 116)

Lives were changed permanently. Most of the families presented here are victims of this mass eviction. Mini's family suffered partition tremendously. They had to move to Shillong and then to Calcutta, where the struggle was so hard that neither she nor her elder sister Shantidi could think of getting married. On the other hand, marrying Shib was a welcome escape from the bleak fate for khuku. Even as late as the 90's, the aftermath can be felt in the lives of the characters of the novel. Most of them has relatives in Bangladesh, and post cards come from them at a regular interval. After the cordial exchange of well being, there must be a 'plea for financial help for a daughter's marriage' (Chaudhuri 32). All of them go through the similar feeling of being rootless. Mini thinks, 'This, these buildings, was home and not home; the country she'd left behind in youth was home and not home; where you went later was not home either;' (Chaudhuri 122). The oscillation between root and rootlessness is a syndrome always seen among the first generation migrants everywhere. The next generation is free from these doubts. Bhaskar, Manik, Piyu and even Mohit know Calcutta as their home and they are quite content with it. As partition is a very personal holocaust of Bengalis (though Punjab also suffered the same fate), there

are other traits of a Bengali middle class society is presented here with subtly. The novel is full of tit-bits of everyday behaviour of the characters that not only presents the Bengali ethnicity exclusively, but also shows the changes this ethnic identity underwent through time. At the early phase of their married life, Bhola and Abha often had disagreement regarding the matinee idol Uttam Kumar. 'She had been a fan of Uttam Kumar, but Bhola, she found, thought he was a 'bad actor' and had a 'stupid face', and these revelations came as a shock and at the first she could not possibly understand how anyone could think these things about Uttam Kumar.' (Chaudhuri 78). The entire 60's and 70's were much undulated by the mere cinematic charisma of Uttam Kumar and debate about his supremacy and stardom was a regular affair in the Bengali household those days. But this cultural icon became obsolete in regular household exchanges within a decade. Bhaskar is also working on the cultural front but he never thinks about these things once. Even for Abha, she remembers the *Mahanayak* as a issue of disagreement with his husband, just like another issues those shaped her marital life. Another aspect of Bengali middle class society (rather Indian middle class society) is presented here. We see the families are breaking. The large joint families are replaced silently by the nuclear families. Chaudhuri states, about Mohit, 'He was an only child; as was his cousin Sameer. That was neither an accident nor coincidence. Their parents had planned it this way. No more large untidy families like Bhola's; they would devote all their attention to their one child.' (Chaudhuri 90). In Mini's family, she and Shantidi used to live in a small flat with their younger brother Shyamal after the death of their two brothers. But sometimes after his marriage he (and his wife as well) found the place inadequate for all of them and shifted to another flat nearby. Chaudhuri rightly observed that 'the large family shattered and became, temporarily, little islands' (Chaudhuri 124). Yet they all, like Bhaskar grew up 'on the border that separated middle-classness from a fathomless darkness' (Chaudhuri 48) and from the surroundings imbibed a typical Bengali identity. "Once he understood what a wonderful thing it was to be a Bengali, and that he was Bengali himself, he went around the house chanting, 'We are Bengalis! We are Bengalis!'" (Chaudhuri 59). Bhola spent his entire life loving Calcutta and avoiding the idea of living it. But Manik, his younger son, though took pride in his Bengaliness, left for Germany. This shift from a loyal resident Indian to a nostalgia infected migrant Indian is a change in the middle class mindset indeed. Anu Shukla in her essay *Such Stuff as Amit Chaudhuri's Song Is Made on*, compiled in the book *The Novels of Amit Chaudhuri: An Exploration in the Alternative Tradition*, finds it difficult to explain the title of the novel *Freedom Song* and finally concludes, "The title sings of not the freedom of the country but what freedom has come to." (Shukla 98). Chaudhuri's writings seem to be keeping a track of what the Bengali middle class society has come to. Thomas Hardy concluded his famous poem about the perpetuality of the lives of common folk *In Times of Breaking of Nations* with the lines, "War's annals will cloud into night/ Ere their story die" (poemhunter.com cited on 24.02. 15). Chaudhuri aims to capture such an immortality of Bengali middle class life in his novels. But simultaneously he moves frequently in time and picks up fragments of the insignificant daily life of ordinary people in Bengali society, a compilation of which holds up a perfect picture of the changing face of Bengali, or rather Indian middle class at large, automatically.

NOTES:

1. Bhadrakok: It is rather hard to define what the Bengali Bhadrakok really means. Wikipedia (cited on 22.02.15) defines them to be "the new class of 'gentlefolk' who arose during British colonial times (approximately 1757 to 1947) in Bengal." They are generally well educated people from upper casts and are economically privileged. Their origin can be traced back to late 18th century. They generally belonged to the middle class of the Bengali society. Initially they were mostly the Jaminder or the landowner class, but as time passed by, people from various occupational fields like doctors, engineers, service holders etc. were incorporated into this section of society.
2. Ganashakti: *Ganashakti Patrika* is an Indian Bengali daily newspaper published from Kolkata, West Bengal, India. The paper is an organ of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) West Bengal State Committee. It first appeared as a fortnightly in 1967 and then it started as an evening daily for quite some time and finally converted into a full-fledged daily newspaper. Presently Ganashakti has 3 editions in Kolkata, Durgapur and Siliguri. (Wikipedia, cited on 23.02.15)

3. Naxalbari: Naxalbari is a village situated in the northern part of West Bengal under Siliguri sub-division of Darjeeling district. The village is well known for being the birthplace of Naxalite movement in India in 1960s. The name Naxalism also came from the name of this village.

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