

KEEPING THE BENGALI BAITHAK STYLE ALIVE: CULTURAL PROGRAMS AT CHOWDHURY HOUSE

By Jayashree Chatterjee

City of furious cultural energy. That is how historian P. Sinha describes Calcutta. Perhaps it is this furious energy that inspires businessman and patron of the arts Aniruddha Chowdhury of Chowdhury House, Kolkata to promote India's creative arts with great fervor, because what Mr. Chowdhury does is truly remarkable. During the wedding season in India, he rents out his Chowdhury House to the public for holding receptions but in late December and January, his house becomes a cultural center that hums to the strains of Indian Classical Music, the beat of Indian classical Dance, and the ringing tones of actors taking part in dramas of different kinds. And all these events are free to the public.

An appreciation of the classical arts of India is part of entrepreneur Aniruddha Chowdhury's heritage. He comes from a family that is closely connected to the cultural history of Bengal. His mother was related to Raja Ram Mohan Roy. In fact, Mr. Chowdhury's mama bariwas a cultural center in its own right, and outstand-

ing musicians like Ali Akbar Khan (whom Mr. Chowdhury called Ali Dadu), Ravi Shankar, Annapurna Devi and Nikhil Banerjee were frequent visitors. So were Uday Shankar, and many of the post Tagore poets like Premendra Mitra, Shakti Chattopadyay, Samar Sen.

What Aniruddha Chowdhury has responded to most since childhood is Indian Classical Music. "The difference between pop classical music and actual classical music is that in the latter the musician loses his identity completely; all that matters is the music," says Mr. Chowdhury. "This music does not have a language or religion.....It has ananda, which comes from being with the Lord, and the musician and the listener submit to it.....This is my Saraswati Puja."

Aniruddha Chowdhury studied at IIT Kharagpur, and then did a master's in structural engineering in the US. He was offered a job in the field of US defence research, but his father wanted him to return to India. "It was a tough decision for me to make," recalls Mr. Chowdhury.

hury, "but I don't regret it. What would have been better for me in the US?"

The family business that he came back to was stevedoring and ship repairing. After a while, he began concentrating on real estate, and now, one of his ventures is to rent out Chowdhury House for receptions.

Chowdhury House stands at 5/1 Gariahat Road, Kolkata - 700019. The entrance to Chowdhury House is like a storybook secret doorway that leads to a place of enchantment. The ordinary door on a small street off Gariahat Road gives no indication of what lies inside. But once you walk in it's the open spaciousness of the place that impresses you. A fairly wide corridor leads to a larger room on the right, which in turn takes you to the covered courtyard that is the auditorium. It seats over three hundred people. The stage is smaller than that of most commercial theater halls, but as one of the actors said to me, "That doesn't matter. We feel so welcome here that we have no problem with the size of this stage."

For 3 days in December, every year since 2014, Aniruddha Chowdhury's Calcutta Performing Arts Founda-

tion, which is registered as a "not-for-profit, philanthropic organisation", presents three days of all-day classical music and dance programs. In January, this is followed up by 3 days of theater. The Foundation's mission, as stated in its website www.cpacf.in is "to showcase the potential of performing arts and uphold the age old tradition of Bengal to encourage and support young talented artists and present them to the world of music, dance and drama and all such forms of performing art in the Baithak style allowing the audience to interact directly with the performers and provide constructive criticism as well as encouragement. Core to the foundation's philosophy is a commitment to public benefit by making it open to all with no entry fee."

Mr. Chowdhury says that he generally chooses musicians who are "very good but not all that well known."

And how much does he pay them? (I am wondering for how long he will be able to continue this - providing high quality music free of charge.)

Mr. Chowdhury tells me a story. Mohammed Rafi was once asked by the members of an organization with

very little funding to sing for them. Rafi knew they would not be able to give him a large amount of money but what mattered more to him was that they were all bhaktas of music. So, he sang for them for a very nominal fee.

"I pay my artistes an honorarium", he tells me.

This December, Chowdhury House celebrated its sixth music conference. Each session (there were two sessions a day) was dedicated to a musical legend such as M.S. Subbulakshmi, Pandit Ravi Shankar, Ustad Ali Akbar Khan and Mian Tansen. The musicians included Ustad Murad Ali Khan on the sarangi, Ustad Ali Akbar Khan's student Ken Zuckerman on the sarod, Pandit Samar Saha on the tabla, Dr. Nirmala Rajasekar on the veena and Vidwan S. Shekhar on the mridangam. Amongst the vocalists was Mitali Bhawmik from New Jersey. The classical Indian dancers comprised Sujata Mohapatra (Odissi), Sayani Chakraborty (Bharat Natyam) and Saberi Misra (Kathak).

"During these three days, what we experienced was not entertainment," says Mr. Chowdhury. "It was a spir-

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his mother - a friendly lady who called herself "Lily". I was under a constant anxiety that I would not be able to do a problem correctly or take an unusually long time thinking about it. Finally, I decided to be upfront with Lily. I told her that I would be more effective if I had the same book at home that Daniel followed and asked where I could find a copy. Lily fully understood the situation but said that a new book would cost \$225. It was a very thick hard-covered book, but I was still shocked by the price.

I was impressed and overwhelmed by Lily's generosity when she handed me a book she got from e-Bay, the next time I saw Daniel and told me that I could keep the book as a "gift". Clearly Lily was ready to do almost anything for better grades for Daniel so that he could get admission to a good college and money

was not an issue.

The book did not go into too much details on any topic; it relied heavily on a few worked out "examples". The expectation was that the students would learn by doing the exercises. The number and variety of the problems at the end of each chapter were exceedingly large. I spent literally hours in preparation, time for which I was not compensated. In the process I realized that the course covered topics in this course that we learned in second or third year of college and a few in M.Sc. class. I even learned some new subjects and techniques that I had never learned before.

I also had several conversations with Lily which gave me an inside scoop on how the Chinese families thought about their children's education. It seemed that behind every student there was a mother acting like a "tiger mom" watching their every

step, every grade and every activity and pushing them to excel all the time. It was apparent from the way they spoke that they had virtually ruled out the non-Chinese students from their group of worthy competitors. Finally, they were ready to spend whatever money it took.

At the end, both Lily and Daniel were very satisfied with my job. I had similar experience with a few other Chinese students I have tutored since then. This experience opened my eyes to a cultural phenomenon going on in this country. A lot of Chinese people (both the ones living in China as well as those in USA) made tons of money from the soaring Shanghai stock market in recent years and this money has been making its way to USA because of future uncertainties in the Chinese economy, mainly in the form of real estate investment. As a result, they have "invaded" upscale

neighborhoods in places like Irvine, Pasadena, San Francisco and Dallas with good schools and even the people who are still living in China are sending their kids to USA for education.

One of the universal goals of everyone is to get a solid education in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) subjects. From what I see among the children of my Indian friends and colleagues, the second-generation Indians are not that focused on STEM subjects. It seems that medical fields, business schools, economics, journalism and even law school are more popular areas.

Secondly, while the Indian parents certainly impose a high expectation on their children as far as their academic achievements are concerned, they do not seem to have the same kind of zeal and regimented approach that I saw in Lily in driving their kids. Also, they prob-

ably are reluctant to spend money in seeking tutoring help perhaps because they think that it is an unnecessary expense and they can tutor themselves if necessary.

I do not get too many Caucasian students. The ones I have tutored all seemed to have some issues such as attention deficiency disorder, some type of addiction, extra-curricular activities or low expectation set by parents.

My view has changed. Now my conviction is that the entire brain of Silicon Valley would eventually be run by the second-generation Chinese. They will not have the handicap in language or people interaction like their first generation. Of course, there will still be hundreds of Indian engineers on H1B visas, but not the kind with a futuristic vision and commitment to the company or country. I feel a certain degree of sadness at this realization.

Cultural Programs at Chowdhury House

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itual experience for everyone - Hindu and Muslim. Classical music brings us together and this was the music of multicultural India."

Audience member Falguni Khan, who attended both the music and the drama festivals, had this to say about the music festival: "It was a 3-day long musical extravaganza of Hindustani and Carnatic music.... (It) was a very well-structured mosaic of vocal, instrumental and dance programmes The conference was such a sumptuous treat for avid lovers of music and dance that we, the audience, were spoilt for choice".

In January 2020, the Chowdhury House Theater Utsab presented three plays performed by actor-director Falguni Chattopadhyay's theater group Lokokrishti. (Falguni Chattopadhyay and his wife actress Rumki Chattopadhyay are the parents of movie star Abir Chatterjee) They were *Ihai Satya*, the Bengali version of Pirandello's *Right You Are.*, Samarendra Mazumdar's *Teen Nombor Chok* (a social drama about how financial wants can affect the value system of a middle class family), and Jeet shatraghni's *Punoray Ruby Rai* (a comedy dealing with artificial intelligence and how it can enter our lives in an alarming way). The last named play was the group's first public performance. I had the pleasure of watching the last two plays. After the curtain call, the cast took questions from the audience, very much in keeping with the Foundation's guidelines.

Aniruddha Chowdhury's wife Anindita Chowdhury selects the plays. "She's very well-read", says Mr. Chowdhury.

I spoke with the cast members after the last play. They were all clearly thrilled to be performing at Chowdhury House. "Our group performed all three plays this season," they said. "It was an honor. They clearly want us to be here. We love the atmosphere of this place."

There are a few other festivals that are held at Chowdhury House. Vasant Utsab, during which Tagore's dance dramas are staged, the Thumri Festival in July, Janmashtami, when kirtans are sung and Ganesh Puja. One should also mention that during the performances, coffee and Bengali shingaras are served free of cost. At the music festival, free meals are provided. "It's probably because that way, people who come in the morning won't have to go home for lunch and then feel reluctant about returning for the afternoon session," one of the audience members told me.

The common assumption is that Bengalis do not have the acumen or the bent of mind to be successful businessmen. The other common assumption is that the pursuit of culture is the Bengali's birth-right. How impressive it is to meet a Bengali who runs a flourishing business and whose overriding obsession is not only to keep Indian culture alive but to also make it available to the public free of charge! Such a businessman is one with a difference. With an outstanding difference!

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Asians in America, including Indians, had to wait till the end of World War II to gain immigration and naturalization rights. The *Luce-Cellar Act of 1946* finally allowed immigration and naturalization of Indians (and Filipinos). However, the number of people from Asian countries who could actually do so was very small. That was because the National Origins Quota, established back in 1924, was basically left intact, making large-scale immigration of Asians impossible until 1968 when President Johnson threw open America's doors to Asians and other non-white settlers.

Cruel Indignities: From Resentment to Discrimination to Violence

What kinds of cruel indignities did our predecessors face in the pre-1968 years, especially before 1946 when they were finally given naturalization rights? The types of indignities varied from location to location and evolved over time, and included resentment, discrimination, segregation, open hostility, even occasional violence.

Before they could enter the US, immigrants, particularly from Asia, had to convince the authorities that they were not "criminals or prostitutes" (1875 Act), "convicts, lunatics or idiots" (1882 Act), "polygamists, mentally ill or carrying contagious diseases" (1891 Act), "anarchists, political extremists, beggars or epileptics" (1903 Act), "imbeciles, feeble-minded or guilty of moral turpitude" (1907 Act), "homosexuals, criminals, insane, alcoholics, paupers, vagrants or people with constitutional psychopathy" (1917 Act), or "subversives" (1940 Act).

Insulting or demeaning words and labels were often the precursors to openly hostile treatments. The most notorious case of violence towards Indian workers was "the Bellingham riot" of 1907. Starting in 1903, bands of Punjabi workers, mostly Sikhs from Canada, had arrived in this city in the state of Washington to work in lumber and railroad industries. By the time the riot broke out, there were several hundred Sikhs living in Bellingham's "Hindoo alley". Resentment against these hard-working but low-paid men and women ran high, and one night in September 1907, a mob of several hundred white people attacked the residents of the "Hindoo alley", drove the Indian workers and their families out of their homes and looted their properties. Some 125 Sikhs were physically pushed out of the city and 400 were jailed by the police under the guise of "protective custody". Within a matter of days Bellingham was totally free of Indian laborers. As the displaced Sikh laborers moved to other towns in

Washington, Oregon and California, they faced similar resentment from the local people, and in some instances, suffered violence as well.

Segregation was the indignity imposed on another group of Indian settlers. Some twenty to thirty years before the bands of Sikh workers began to arrive in the US, a couple of hundred Bengali Muslim silk traders had settled along the East Coast and in several southern cities like New Orleans and Atlanta. These *chikondars* and their stories had received little publicity before the book, *Bengali Harlem*, was published in 2013. Unlike the Sikh workers in the West Coast in the early twentieth century, these traders did not face significant social resentment or opposition. In the communities where they settled, they were mostly treated as exotic foreigners and as objects of curiosity. However, they had to live in black or colored neighborhoods, and marrying white women was prohibited. Not surprisingly, most of these *chikondars* ended up marrying women of color and raising their children in mixed race households with divided religious affiliations.

These *chikondars* were probably able to escape the hostility and violence that confronted the Sikh workers years later because they did not arrive in large groups nor did they build prominent places of worship like the Sikhs.

Inter-racial marriage was socially frowned upon and legally prohibited for a long time. Owning real estate was also a major challenge for our predecessors. Land and home ownership was possible for an Indian only if he married an American citizen which was, of course, prohibited under anti-miscegenation laws!

Some Indian intellectuals and students had to live under a constant threat of deportation. Until independence in 1947 all Indians were British subjects, and many of the Indians living in the US were considered by the British rulers as dangerous freedom-seeking criminals. The long arm of the British Intelligence reached into the U.S., thanks to the strong alliance between America and Great Britain. As a result, the British had full support of the American government in spying on Indian students and intellectuals living in the US and in deporting the "undesirables" to India.

Changes in Policies and Attitudes after 1968

The *Hart-Cellar Act of 1965* signaled a remarkably positive change in the immigration policies of the United States. The infamous, racially based "National Origins Quota" system was gone, and the US opened its doors to the world on a fairer and more rational basis. Two post-1968 laws further strengthened this non-discriminatory "open door" policy.

The Immigration Act of 1990 (became effective in 1995) added two provisions that significantly benefited the entry of people from the Indian sub-continent. *The Diversity Visa Program*, created by this law, made available permanent residency visas annually to people from countries that were historically under-represented in the US population. Visas were given to applicants through a lottery process; educational qualifications or existing family ties were not considered. This program enabled a large number of Bangladeshis to immigrate to the US. -- The second feature of this law, "*Temporary Worker Visas for Highly Skilled Individuals*", known as *H1B visas*, paved the way for a large-scale influx of IT professionals, mostly from India.

As the immigration laws changed, so did the societal attitudes towards immigrants from India, China and other Asian countries. Changes did not happen overnight and took several decades to gain a solid foothold. Indian (and other Asian) students and professors became very successful in American universities and research organizations. Physicians and surgeons trained in India became commonplace and highly respected. India-educated engineers and IT professionals became ubiquitous, and Indian shop-owners, taxi drivers and other service industry employees became familiar faces in many cities and towns. A number of Indian immigrants and their descendants rose to very high positions such as governors of states and CEOs of global corporations while a few received high-level recognition such as the Nobel Prize, the Pulitzer Prize, the Grammy Award and memberships in the National Academies of Science and Engineering. Many successful high-tech companies were founded by entrepreneurs of Indian origin, and Indians made a mark in a wide variety of fields ranging from journalism to finance to the performing arts.

Concluding Remarks

From humble beginnings, Asian immigrants in general, and Indian Americans in particular, have come a long way in achieving acceptance, recognition and success in America. Admittedly there have been some rough patches even in recent decades but all in all, Indian immigrants and their descendants in this country are on a positive trajectory.

For the long term, Indian immigrants and their descendants should proactively pursue all avenues available to them for open and frequent cultural exchange with their neighbors, coworkers and friends. Only through greater familiarity and understanding would all segments of the American society come to appreciate and value each other more.

From Rejection to Respect