*An excerpt from* **Finding the Raga** *by Amit Chaudhuri*

# Ah-nanda

From my mother I unwittingly inherited the template that the singing voice must be pitch-perfect, saturated in *sur*, and that it must be calm. As a child, I took this to be 'normal'. Calm and tonal richness attracted me, and, through my mother's example, went hand in hand.

Not that she was calm. As a child, I preferred my father's company: a very patient man. Handsome, too. My mother was excitable. She threw a bunch of keys to the floor in a fit of rage. Her anger died very soon, coming, going, as inspiration does. The next moment she'd be happy. She did a number of things to excess: get angry; laugh; consume sweet things.

There was no relation between her vocal style and her temperament.

Her voice and singing were transcendental. This is a suspect word, and I don't mean 'unworldly' by it. I mean her style – in a productive way – rejected emotion.

She told me a couple of times when I was about twenty one or twenty two that singing should be like speaking. She was arguing with the idea that it should be consciously 'different', a mode of heightened self-expression. Speaking doesn't draw undue attention to the self, or to the act of speaking. We forget the effort it's taken us to learn how to speak, and the skill involved. Speaking is as much a forgetting of the self as it has to do with self-disclosure. I think my mother was hinting at the forgetfulness that's necessary for, and is a consequence of, song.

Here – since her main domain was the Tagore song – she was going against the grain. Whatever Tagore intended for his interpreters, Rabindrasangeet or the Tagore song had, by the 1960s, become a vehicle for bourgeois self-expression. By this I mean a humanism that places the self at the centre. Parodic self-expression is what became identifiable as emotion – darad or bhaab – in the Tagore song, and is almost all that remains of it today. The process began with three of the most popular exponents of the genre: Suchitra Mitra, Kanika Bandhopadhyay, and Hemanta Mukherjee. Their earliest recordings are memorable for their vitality. Things start to change in the mid-sixties, until their renditions come to occupy a middlebrow register, marked by certain techniques and mannerisms: vibrato in Suchitra and Hemanta, leading to a portentous tremulousness; an exaggeration of meend, by all three, once more to simulate emotion. These mannerisms were then picked up by their various imitators, and used towards one end: to bring the self centre-stage. The project was also partly justified by the fact that Tagore was a poet, which implied that his words contained a meaning that had to be forcefully conveyed and dramatised.

Two artists took a different position: my mother, Bijoya Chaudhuri; and Subinoy Roy. My mother removed herself from the interpretation, putting the song centre-stage. The note must be allowed to speak for itself. Her convictions bring to mind Eliot's belief that 'emotion… has its life in the poem and not in the history' – implicit or explicit – 'of the poet'. Both her approach and Roy's to Rabindrasangeet were, I think, anti-humanist. The human must be set aside for the song to shine. Is this what Eliot meant when he said: 'Poetry… is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality'? The refusal to give self or emotion centrality gives Roy's singing, and my mother's, a consistent calm. It also places them at an angle to their contemporaries.

Calm came, in terms of technique, from a rejection of vibrato, which is also hardly used in North Indian classical music. Though my mother never learnt classical music formally, she practised its techniques to the end of her life, and – though she didn't spend a huge amount of time listening to it till I began to sing khayal – was close to it temperamentally. Subinoy Roy was an admirer of Ustad Amir Khan. The Indian classical musical traditions are non-humanistic, in that their focus is not personality or psychology, but sur and taal, pitch and temporality. Vibrato adds emotion; but the note alone is joyous and equanimous, and makes the artist (and vibrato) redundant. The belief in the proximity of calm to joy goes back, in India, at the very least to the 10$^{th}$-century philosopher Abhinavagupta, who was also a theorist of *rasa*, or aesthetic 'juice' or 'savouring'. There are nine *rasas*, and, for Abhinavagupta, the one underlying them all – the 'shant' or 'tranquil' *rasa* – is coeval with 'ananda', 'joy'. This is to point to a lineage also for a great deal in 19$^{th}$ and 20$^{th}$-century Western art that constitutes a silent rebellion against the Enlightenment's human-centred universe and its tendency to think of art primarily as self-expression. Take Wordsworth's curious remark that poetry is 'emotion recollected in tranquillity'. How can emotion, felt or remembered, be tranquil, unless by 'recollection' Wordsworth means self-extinction?

There were two other ways in which my mother made the musical note more important than herself. The first had to do with her precision in pitching. Precision is often associated with control and objectivity, a privileging of fact over embellishment. But precision also has a very long history in many cultures – think of the haiku – related to another sort of ambition. It means refusing to add, or to supply meaning, because the detail is significant already. If there's craft involved in precision, it's do with curtailing the self's interference with what we hear and see.

Tagore, in his memoir *Jiban Smriti* (*My Reminiscences*), says that the first rhyme he was drawn to as a child was the four-word Bengali couplet *jal pade/ pata nade* – 'The water falls,/ the leaf trembles'. On one level, this is indistinguishable from empirical detail; on another, it's an inaugural registering of the world's movement. Nothing has been added.

When the self empties itself, it becomes the world. It no longer needs to tell us of its feelings about a colour or object – it becomes colour; it becomes object. So Tagore, in the first verse of a poem called 'Ami' or 'Myself':

It's the colour of my consciousness that's made the emerald green,
the ruby has become red.
I looked up at the sky:
light began to shine
in the east and west,
Turning to the rose, I said, 'Beautiful',
beautiful it became.
You'll say, This is information,
not a poet's words.
I'll say, It's truth,
that is why it's poetry.
This is *my* pride;
- we all have a pride of our own. (my translation)

The difference between objective fact ('information') and poetry isn't that the latter adds something to fact. It both surrenders to, and creates, what's true: the 'fact' that the rose is a rose, and that it's beautiful. For many, this isn't enough; they want a description of the rose's beauty. For Tagore, adding takes away from the transformative power of immersion: 'It's the colour of my consciousness that's made the emerald green'. As emotion and psychology recede, a consciousness of colour and beauty begin to emerge. The belief that this is possible he calls 'pride': an indifference, a hauteur, that also characterised my mother's investment in melody. Her voice is not imbued with emotion: it aims to become the music in the note – the emerald's green.

The other means by which my mother made room for the note is connected to a fundamental of Hindustani classical vocal music: aakar. The term refers to the cultivation of the 'ah' sound in meend and in alaap. The 'ah' liberates the self, dissolves it; the self's place is occupied by the note.

There's a tendency in Anglophone society to associate the 'aw' and 'oh' sounds with socialisation, politeness, civility. The 'ah', in comparison, is unbridled. It must be contained.

You could see *My Fair Lady* as a socio-spiritual allegory, where destiny and music are shaped by pivotal vowel sounds. It's possible to watch the opening scenes of the Broadway version on YouTube, where Julie Andrews is selling flowers in a square. She's still without self-consciousness – about who she is, about the social registers of the English language. She's poor and unconstrained. As a prelude to singing, she makes guttural vowel-based noises: 'Aaau! Aaaau! Aaaaau!' Then, with some tradesmen keeping the chorus, she starts to sing a song about losing oneself in a reverie: 'Wouldn't it be loverly', a daydream of idleness, satiety, and warmth.

> All I want is a room somewhere
> Far away from the cold night air
> With one enormous chair
> Ah wouldn't it be loverly?

The opening vowel – in 'All' – is attenuated; but the Cockney mouth opens wider and wider with 'somewhere', 'far', 'away', 'air', 'chair', and even 'lah-verly'. The words are both apposite and redundant; we feel the presence of pure voice, especially in the impassioned 'Ah' before each 'Wouldn't it be loverly'.

This 'ah', or 'aakar', is subsequently corseted and tamed. The story of *My Fair Lady* is the story of how happiness must be found in gentility; how what's unbounded must be checked. By the time Julie Andrews sings 'I Could Have Danced All Night', the polite self is firmly in place: 'dance' verges on 'dawnce'; the singing is tremulous. It has emotion, underlined by a light vibrato, but – although it's a song expressing Eliza Dolittle's new-found joy in love – the flower-seller's self-forgetfulness has gone. As has the 'ah'.

The pop-rock artist who most courted self-extinction in singing was John Lennon. In no other performer in that genre do we hear such gasps and 'ah' sounds. The singing itself is reed-thin, pure, as in 'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds': melody on oblivion's brink. Here's a singer who barely chooses to exist. The great self-expunging aahs occur in 'A Day in the Life'. After the bodiless vocalising of the first section, there's a mild waviness, a shruti, at its end, in the words 'turn you on': a sign of oncoming dissolution. An alarm clock goes off. Routine asserts itself with McCartney – 'woke up, fell out of bed' – matter-of-fact, worldly. Soon, however, Lennon's aahs take over, returning us to the dream-state.

Lennon's aahs can be heard in recordings prior and subsequent to 'A Day in the Life'. They punctuate his idea of song, and give to his singing (which could be melodiously raucous, as in 'Twist and Shout') a never-worked-up laziness: a teetering towards escape

from the fatigue of being. It's there in the early 'A Hard Day's Night', starting with the ah in the word 'hard', in the evenness of the singing – a kind of rock samadhi whose unexcitability is clearer in contrast to McCartney's pressing 'When I'm home' – and in the drowsy 'mmm' with which Lennon returns, after the interjection, to the prospect of retreating from daytime consciousness. It's neither sex nor sleep he wants.

The other aahs I love include the one before the third chorus in 'Ticket to Ride', where the self swoons forgetfully in the midst of the complaint; and the aahs in 'Because' and 'Sun King' on *Abbey Road*. The singer is so recumbent – there's an in-breathing hiss before the words 'sun king' are sung – that he can hardly animate himself: both songs, very short, are bursts of breath.

The calm of Lennon's style comes from detachment. In some Beatles' songs, Lennon's lines represent a departure from emotion that's being played out elsewhere: for instance, the tranquil 'Everybody had a hard year/ everybody had a good time' at the end of 'I've Got a Feeling', a song that's mainly a showcase for McCartney's robust rock vocals. Lennon is both in the song and strangely, wonderfully indifferent.

The great anti-humanist development in modern Western song comes with the blues. We know it's an expression of human – specifically, Negro – anguish. But two things won't let it be pinned down to the humanistic. The first is the blues' pentatonic scale. The second is the relative eschewal of vibrato, and blues' singing's ah-based sound.

The pentatonic is a scale found worldwide in several variants. The blues is its modern Afro-American incarnation, and comprises a departure from the mimesis of post-Enlightenment Western music, in which the major seven-note scale is happy, the minor sad. The pentatonic fits into neither one side nor the other in this binary. It shapes the blues, but also lends itself to the high spirits of rock and roll, the pounding ecstasy of rock. It generates an experience beyond happy-sad. The role of the blues may be to communicate pain, but the pentatonic embodies pure life and aliveness. So the blues becomes radiant; it becomes – without in any humanistic or Christian sense being 'positive' or 'uplifting' – joyous.

The joyousness finds voice in the singing, a vocalising with no antecedents in opera, plainsong, evensong, or in white renditions of swing music, where there's a tendency to constrict the mouth and vowel, and add, according to context, vibrato. Compare Fred Astaire's 'Cheek to Cheek', where the singing is light, charming, 'o'-based, bordering on falsetto, with Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong's version, where the mouth is open, and there's no vibrato except what's organic to their voices. The latter's singing descends from

the blues' style, where note is given precedence over singer. Its first great recorded practitioner is maybe Bessie Smith. The southern origins of these singers means that certain key words – like 'I' – open up into 'ah'. The home of the self, the 'I', becomes, in Smith, the 'ah' of the musical note.

The Tagore song (Rabindrasangeet) is probably the first expression of a pure middle-class sensibility in Bengal; maybe even in India. It and the bhadralok – literally, in Bengali, 'polite people' – belong to each other. In it, Tagore created, between 1878 (when he was seventeen) to his death in 1941, a deceptively simple (by the standards of Indian classical music) genre of extraordinary subtlety and variety of register, bringing to his words a finesse, sensuousness, and philosophical beauty that it's hardly ever the song's role, or ambition, to achieve.

Rabindrasangeet and its interpretation are the site of a contest between modernist and anti-humanist impulses on the one hand and human-centred self-expression on the other. There are deep reserves of calm in the Tagore song, tapped by singers like Subinoy Roy. But Roy is an exception; the Tagore song, over decades, was seized by politeness, and an accentuation, in the careers of Suchitra Mitra and Kanika Bandhopadhyay, of the 'aw' sound. The 'aw' sound in Bengali speech denominated class and socialisation. It's not to be found in aakar-based khayal singing, and can't be compared with the 'o' in the nonsense 'nom tom' syllables of dhrupad, which have no associations of class.

Early exponents of Rabindrasangeet, like Kanak Das and K L Saigal, who recorded in the 30s and 40s, owe much to the classical temperament. Their renditions – whatever the emotional content of the words – are ah-based, self-forgetful, and joyous. What's audible in their recordings is purity of tone, and the fact that singing is a kind of freedom. The ponderousness, the careful politeness are a few decades away.

Having noted the secular Bengali, and Indian, middle class's ambivalence towards classical music – because of its social milieu, but also because of what was misunderstood as religious content – it should also be said that the resurrection of the classical arts in India owes a lot to this middle class, especially in the early to mid-twentieth century: to its receptivity and patronage. Actual crossovers from the middle class to the field of classical practice are rare, but not unheard-of: take, for instance, the sitar player Ravi Shankar, the son of a barrister. In comparison to the reconstruction of monuments and archaeological sites, which is the result of a collaboration between colonials and Indians, the revival of the classical traditions in music and dance is entirely a consequence of a partnership between

traditional practitioners and Indian moderns. The English found these forms utterly alien. The response of the late 19th- and 20th-century Indian modern to classical music and classical texts is modernist, secular, and aesthetic, rather than utopian, proprietary, and reverential. This revolutionary engagement with antiquity and classicism might be one reason why Western classical music never gained centrality in India.

Aakar in singing – and, alongside it, the abjuring of emotion and vibrato – is accompanied by calm (shanti) and joy (ananda). This insight emerges from a creative and critical tradition in India which contributes to developments in Europe from the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century onwards, when Hindu and Buddhist texts begin to become available in European languages, and, suddenly, theories of 'disinterestedness' and 'impersonality' start to abound among Western philosophers, poets, critics, and novelists.

It's the *Gita* (circa 2nd-5th century BCE) that's possibly the earliest text to articulate the notion that an act may be passionate and detached at once; in other words, involve both the expression and the annulment of the self. Krishna, addressing Arjuna, who's despondent on the eve of going to war with his cousins, instructs him in a peculiar definition of action:

> Set thy heart upon thy work, but never on its reward. Work not for a reward; but never cease to do thy work.
>
> Do thy work in the peace of Yoga and, free from selfish desires, be not moved in success or in failure. Yoga is evenness of mind – a peace that is ever the same. (trans. Juan Mascaro)

The *Gita*'s impact in the West, where Charles Wilkins' English translation becomes available in 1785, and the French in 1787, is most palpable in the realm of the aesthetic. Kant, in 1790, in the *Critique of Judgement*, arrives at his formulation that aesthetic experience constitutes a form of 'disinterestedness'; the pleasure it gives is unconnected to the satisfaction of desire. Creativity he describes as 'purposeful purposelessness'. These observations have few forebears in European thought, but have a very long lineage in the Indian texts that had then just begun to circulate in Europe.

In 1865, Matthew Arnold, without mentioning Kant, uses the word 'disinterested' of not creative but of critical work, which he sees as neither subjective nor objective assessment, but as calm, detached 'action'. Without naming it, he makes a reference, in his essay 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time', to the *Gita*, which he'd begun to study in 1845.

> It will be said that it is a very subtle and indirect action which I am thus prescribing for criticism and that, by embracing in this manner the

> Indian virtue of detachment and abandoning the sphere of practical life, it condemns itself to a slow and obscure work. Slow and obscure it may be, but it is the only proper work of criticism.

With Kant in relation to creativity, and then with Arnold in relation to critical thought, we see a gradual abandoning of the idea that it's the writer's or the artist's job to express themselves through emotion or opinion.

The most significant Western theorist of literary craft, roughly contemporary with Arnold and preceding Eliot, is Flaubert, Joyce's mentor. Flaubert was immersed in Buddhist texts and, by the time he began writing *Madame Bovary*, was convinced that 'reality' couldn't be constructed artificially in fiction, but must be arrived at or discovered through authorial surrender. Word and detail must gain precedence, and author become secondary. In 1852, Flaubert writes to Louise Colet: 'I don't believe you have any idea what kind of book this one is… No lyricism, no reflections, the personality of the author absent.' Also: 'the author in his work must be like God in the universe, present everywhere and visible nowhere'. What sort of deity does Flaubert have in mind when he refers to an author-creator who brings the work to life by withdrawing from it? The Christian God is either an overseer up above, or a paternal creator who sends a temporary emissary, a progeny, to earth. For the contradictory being Flaubert describes as a model – who's simultaneously invested in, and detached from, creation – we have to look at the opening verses of the Isa Upanishad: 'He moves, and he moves not. He is far, and he is near. He is within all, and he is outside all.' (By 1796, Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil Duperron had translated fifty Upanishads from Persian translations into French.)

The paradox of detachment starts establishing the foundations, by the end of the nineteenth century, for the curious yoga of 'modernism'.

In 'Lapis Lazuli', we have a striking instance of an Anglophone poet, W B Yeats, arguing for the ananda that accompanies calm. His word for it is 'gaiety'.

> All perform their tragic play,
> There struts Hamlet, there is Lear,
> That's Ophelia, that Cordelia;
> Yet they, should the last scene be there,
> The great stage curtain about to drop,
> If worthy their prominent part in the play,
> Do not break up their lines to weep.
> They know that Hamlet and Lear are gay;
> Gaiety transfiguring all that dread.

Yeats is reminding us – as he often did, but from yet another perspective this time – of art's difference from life. We exude our tragic losses; actors are both invested in and detached from theirs: 'they…/ Do not break up their lines to weep'. Is there a meeting-point, here, between ananda and 'catharsis', what Aristotle called the 'pleasure' of the tragic, and the 'purgation', in the audience, of 'pity and fear'? To a point. Aristotle is focused on the peculiar way in which we receive tragedy. Yeats focuses on the artist: the fact that the artist experiences a detached joy *only* in becoming Hamlet or Lear: 'Gaiety transfiguring all that dread'.

This has a bearing on the decisions that made my mother refuse, unlike some other exponents of the Tagore song, to 'break up [her] lines to weep'.

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