

Amit Chaudhuri
"An Indian in Oxford"

*There is a large 'Asian' community in the U.K., comprising immigrants from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, as well as Indians who migrated from East Africa, often after being expelled by newly independent African governments. They tended to congregate near cities which offered jobs in large factories in the 1960s; such jobs were available in textile mills and car production plants. In these areas, and elsewhere, Indian shops and restaurants sprang up. The Indian shopkeepers were prepared to work longer hours and sell goods cheaply, and they also provided goods which many of the immigrants would have been used to from home. Indian shops and restaurants are now a common feature of English towns and cities. The book from which this extract is taken describes an Indian's experience of being a student at Oxford in the 1980s. — Amit Chaudhuri, *Afternoon Raag* (London: William Heinemann, 1993), pp. 34ff.*

10 Once, I took a double-decker to Cowley Road. It was like entering another life, right from ascending the wide berth of the foot-board at the entrance, clutching with great immediacy the pole-vaulter's pole that rose there from the floor, ignoring the stealthy staircase that crept primitively upward, to make one's way shyly inside, braving the curious but not unwelcoming glances of other people. As the scene changed from the civic architecture of High Street to the grey brick houses and Indian restaurants on Cowley Road, bodies circulated gently and continually inside, as people got in and got out; it was strangely but peacefully crowded, and one had to cling economically to a loop of leather or a horizontal rod travelling over one's head, and sway containedly from the top of one's head to the base of one's feet, and privately regain one's balance, as the bus went on its stately but mildly drunken, intemperate course. Another time, I took a less dramatic journey on a white bus to Summertown. Everything about it was small and detailed, from the coin handed for my fare to the driver, the neat black seats, the roof lowering over my head. Behind me sat a group of chattering boys and girls, and their impudent London accent filled the bus. Only a little way from me sat the Indian bus driver in his blue uniform, but for some reason I thought of him as 'Asian', and he became for me mysterious and unclassifiable. At each stop, he greeted kindly old ladies in a hearty English manner, 'Hullo, dear! It's lovely day, innit?' and later bid them inimitable farewells, 'Have a nice day, dear', but the way he was more English than the English was very Indian, and there was something surprising about his utterances.

30 Cowley Road was on the other side, East Oxford. [...] The road was lined with Bangladeshi shops, and energetic little Muslim boys wearing skull-caps played on the pavement; they did not look foreign, but very provincial and East London. After darkness fell, the shops remained lighted and open, and old Pakistani gentlemen in overcoats, holding crumpled carrier-bags in their hands, had a chance to meet each other inside and converse in idiomatic Punjabi. Politics was discussed; the Bhuttos; Kashmir; cowardly India; bullying India; and the Indian cricket team was dismissed, quite rightly, with a contemptuous but decorous burst of air from the lungs. 'Asian' couples with shopping-trolleys went down aisles stacked with boxes of chilli powder, packets of dried fruit, jars of pickles, and imported vegetables — roots and tubers — with the flecked soil of Bangladesh still upon them; the shopkeeper continued his conversation in full-throated asides while his hands worked at the till; and to pay him, finally, in pounds rather than in rupees was like a joke whose meaning we both shared.

Calcutta, and brought up in London, then at Balliol Oxford and Cambridge Sublime Address (1991). was Best First Book. His second, of Britain and India, won the magazine noted the author's extraordinary magic". [Available edition: Amit Chaudhuri, Afternoon Raag (London: Minerva, 1994)



Amit Chaudhuri was born in 1962 in Bombay. He came to Britain to study, first in College, Oxford. He now teaches at both Universities. His first book, A Strange and awarded the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Afternoon Raag, a collection of impressions 1994 Encore Award. The Spectator- "ability to invest ordinary things with

Vocabulary

berth (n.): a dock for a ship in a harbour; here, the platform one steps on first - **to brave** (v.): to risk a danger (of embarrassment) without showing fear - **civic** (adj.): connected with the official functions of a town or city - **stately** (adj.): grand or ceremonious in style, graceful - **intemperate** (adj.): tending to exaggerate or drink too much - **impudent** (adj.): sounding rude or disrespectful - **innit**: (colloquial dialect) isn't it - **utterance** (n.): s.th. that is said - **chilli powder** (n.): very hot spice used in Indian dishes - **pickle** (n.): vegetables or fruit preserved in a sauce containing vinegar, eaten as a side-dish - **tuber** (n.): a fleshy, swollen underground stem (e.g. potato or yam) - **flecked** (adj.): with patches of different colour - **rupee** (n.): the name of the currency in both India and Pakistan

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1. Do you think immigrants should be more concerned with the politics and culture of their new country than of the places they come from? Why?
 2. What two types of buses does the author describe?
 3. What becomes clear in the text about the geography of Oxford?
 4. What sort of people does the author describe in Cowley Road?
 5. How does the author make the description of the first, ordinary, bus journey seem like a strange adventure? (see: author)
 6. Look at the use of adverbs and adjectives in II. 12-20. Show how the author uses them to achieve certain effects.
 7. What impression does the text leave you with about the social and ethnic composition of a typical English town like Oxford.
 8. In what ways can a cultural mixture enrich a community?
 9. Try to describe an everyday scene, and use unexpected but apt adjectives and adverbs so that your reader sees it with other eyes.
 10. Try to find a recipe and make an Indian dish.