NIRAD C. CHAUDHURI'S CRITICAL VISION

A STUDY OF HIS MAJOR WORKS

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N.C. Chaudhuri is one of the most maligned authors we can think of. Ever since the publication of his first book, The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian on September 8th 1951, Chaudhuri has created angry waves of controversy among his readers. Some reviewers were critical, and administered very lofty rebukes on him 'for lacking in charity towards the new regime in India, although they, too, did not deny the quality of the book. As a rule, these reviews were by those Englishmen who had worked in India, and who, after the withdrawal, had suddenly become wholehearted admirers of the Indian nationalist leaders.'[1]

The public reaction of the book in India was totally different and except for one review, 'uniformly not only hostile, but even abusive.'[2]

Its publication and reception in Britain however made a very different story. The English reviews had created considerable advance interest in the book. 'No other book by an Indian had received so much attention in England before. Nehru's autobiography, published in 1935, had been favourably reviewed. Even so, the reception had not been of this order. Thus, when at last

The Statesman of Calcutta and Delhi received the book and was ready with the review, it announced beforehand that its Sunday edition would be publishing a review of the autobiography, 'one of the most acclaimed books of the year. The review was very enthusiastic and had been written by the anthropologist, Verrier Elwin.'[3]

The Statesman was run with British capital and edited by Englishmen, and its review was the only favourable one in India. All the rest were not only severe and condemnatory, but in many cases even scurrilous. 'The book was denounced as a second Katherine Mayo attack on India.'[4] Chaudhuri was placed in the category of anti-Indian writers, and that labelling has stuck.'[5]

Although he was very angry at these violent attacks, he could understand them. He thus writes:

> 'No nationalist reader of my book needed to go further than its dedication to acquire a strong and unconquerable prejudice against me, for it was dedicated to the memory of the British Empire in India, and I made matters worse by going on to say at the end of the dedication that all that was living within us was made, shaped, and quickened, by British rule. This was not simply heresy, but treason, and it was the high-placed Indians, educated at Oxford and Cambridge, who resented the statement most violently.'[6]

Chaudhuri remains one of the most controversial writers — loving and hating his people at the same time. In studying his major works I have sought to draw attention to his critical vision which forms the core of his writings. From a very early age Chaudhuri had a very strong sense of vocation. He says — 'I wanted to be a writer, and one who was to be involved with public affairs. I always thought that a writer was a man of action in his way, and since I could not take part in real action I conceived of my role as an observer with a practical purpose, that of being a Cassandra giving warnings of calamities to come.'[7]

His sense of vocation as a writer went hand in hand with a strong instinctual desire for change. But at the same time he says:

> 'I was a traditonalist in this sense that I believed that novelty could only grow as a new shoot out of a tradition. I had already realized that change by itself meant nothing unless we could diagnose its character, for it led both to progress and to decay, and could be good as well as bad...
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> ... I tried to base our criticism on standards which were less parochial than those adopted in current Bengali criticism. My aim was to make our criticism and condemnation of the new trends as broadly and firmly based as possible by adopting a standard of reference which would place these against the highest excellence achieved in literature in all ages and among all peoples. I had

> already come to disbelieve in progress in art and literature, and on the contrary held that great literature and art of all ages and all peoples had the same level of excellence, although not the same kind of excellence. However, I was ready to admit, and indeed formulated for myself the historical view of literature, that within its expression in a certain language and among a particular people literature evolved like anything organic; that is to say, any particular national literature had birth as well as death, with childhood, youth, maturity, age, and senility in between. The corollary to this theory was that new trends in both literature and art could stand for decay and disease as well as for growth.
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> Thus I was never afraid of referring to distant precedents, whether they were to be found in Indian or European literature, in a bygone age or in our times. Among Bengali writers this kind of critical writing was not common... Actually in my discussion of Bengali literature I was trying to be something like a European, and more specially a French critic. Circumstances so shaped my career that I became and have remained a controversialist.'[8]

Thus it can be affirmed with justification that from his very early days Chaudhuri assumed the role of a critic. His prime concern as a writer is not to provide entertainment to readers, but to unveil the truth by calling attention to all that is hypocritical, jejune and falsely imitative in our prevailing society and culture. This task he performs by interpreting whatever is happening with reference to the centrality of his cultural awareness. It is no doubt true that there is sometimes a negative slant in Chaudhuri's writings. But

this negative slant must be seen as a necessary aspect of an inclusively vital critical intellect at work, the intensity of which makes 'all disagreeables evaporate.' Through his astonishingly informed criticism of man and manners he tries to clarify our vision of things. William Walsh thus calls Chaudhuri a 'cultural historian' who has given a dramatic and impassioned account of the origins and growth of Indian civilization. Dwelling on The Continent of Circe Walsh writes:

> 'Chaudhuri has evolved as much from imagination as from history, a theory of Indian development which, he is satisfied, provides him with a casual explanation of the character and failures of his society. We may not agree with what is a passionately subjective and intuitive explanation of the origins of Indian society. But Chaudhuri's sharp, unforgiving eye natural audacity and impatient intellectual edge — ... do offer what impresses as a pure intensity of perception. The evidence for, or perhaps, I should say the source of Chaudhuri's theory or conviction about, the shaping of Indian society by immigration is, first, the undoubted fact of the diffusion of the Indo-European languages and, secondly, his own interpretation of the early Indian epics, supported thirdly by a method of extrapolating backward into history and pre-history the logic of his observations of contemporary Indian society. And when I say 'logic' I do not mean to omit feeling. Chaudhuri is a man lacerated by the present and by scorn for the poverty and degradation he sees in every corner of contemporary society and powerfully impelled to find in the past a coherent explanation for the chaos and despair that surround him.'[9]

It cannot be denied that there are personal and psychological undertones in Chaudhuri's readings of the origins of Indian culture in The Continent of Circe. But in the end he comes down unambiguously on an impersonal and objective influence as the key item, namely the brutalities of life in a tropical climate. To ignore the geography is to misconceive the history. Life and climate in a sub-continent of quite harsh extremes are ,except to a tiny favoured few incomparably hard.'[10]

Chaudhuri himself led the life of an average Indian. Faced by failure, poverty and humiliation he experienced life in the raw. And yet in spirit he remained undaunted and finally made his debut as a writer with his autobiography.

'Perhaps it needed a near lifetime of failure and poverty to prepare him for writing this book, because behind it burn not simply events but a life and a character. He shows himself bitterly forging a will capable of risisting an overwhelming environment... Sometimes he suggests — not altogether mischievously — that the troubles of India are caused by an exclusive

diet of carbohydrate sprinkled with chilli, or by a belief, as he puts it, in a pantheon of Gods as corrupt as the Indian administration. But at the centre of his work is an attempt to account for the destruction of a spirit originally strong by an appalling external climate. He fiercely cherishes what most people would find intolerable, the identity of the alien, but that again he makes coherent — at least for himself — by a theory which involves making half the population of India foreigners in their own country.'[11]

With this double edge of sensitivity Chaudhuri achieves insights denied to most. Thus The Autobiography claims for itself 'a different existence and significance — literary rather than philosophical or sociological. Its achievement rests less on the correspondence of its theory with actuality and much more on an inward life and coherence. It is not the doctrine propounded but the presence evoked which justifies and supports the book.'[12] In this context it can be said that the force and relevance of Chaudhuri's criticism of Indian society cannot be rejected outright. For there is much in our society which needs to be rectified. As a critic Chaudhuri isolates himself from the mass by his highly

individualized critique on men and affairs in contemporary India. His lashing pen, it may be noted has not even spared a Nobel Laureate — Tagore. On Tagore Chaudhuri writes :

> 'His activities as a Nobel Laureate ran as a dissonant contrapuntal line to his creative activities in verse and prose. Not even the Nobel Prize could stop that flow, and thus during the last twenty-eight years of his life there was an artifical emanation of his, enveloping and obscuring the real man. Of Victor Hugo it was said that he was a genius who had most of the charlatan in him. There was no natural streak of the charlatan in Tagore. But the Nobel Prize inflicted an incurable falsity on him by making a mime of him.'[13]

For putting forward this view there arose a hue and cry from the Bengali fetish worshippers who alleged that Chaudhuri had denied the literary greatness of Tagore. This was however far from the truth. For Chaudhuri did not deny Tagore his greatness. What he wanted to stress was —

> 'It is one thing to admire Tagore for his literary greatness and quite another to extol all his doings after the award of the Nobel Prize. I shall never make him the holy mascot of Bengali provincial vanity in an age when Bengali achievement is not sustained. But before I consider the second and adventitious role of his, I would explain why he was driven to it.

> Few literary men have been subjected to more unjustified, malicious, and indecent abuse than Tagore... Before he got the Nobel Prize he was uniformly underrated and often dismissed as a writer, except by a small and scattered body of admirers, who in derision were called Rabindra-bhaktas...
>
> After the Nobel Prize the attacks on his writings ceased, but a new line of personal and political attack on him as an internationalist opened up. For the rest of his life he was denounced by the Bengali chauvinists almost as a traitor to his country. In the late twenties a nationalist daily of Calcutta reproduced the story from some foreign magazine that he was not even a pure Bengali but had Portuguese Blood.'[14]

Throughout his life Tagore remained acutely sensitive to these attacks and to the continuous disparagement of him by fellow Bengalis, which never came to an end until he died. Infact Chaudhuri maintains that Tagore died without being reconciled to fellow Bengalis. In this context he opines —

> 'I know that every attempt will be made to prove that what he said all through his life was not meant by him. This does not seem so perverse to me as does the other fact that the Bengalis should make out of him a fetish to protect their own provincial vanity without having the rightness of mind to atone for their treatment of him while living.'[15]

What Chaudhuri is up in arms against is the Bengali or even the Indian habit of making a fetish of a man. Thus, 'the more the Bengalis are worshipping

Tagore as an idol, the more false are they becoming themselves and, at the same time, less capable of seeing what is really great in Tagore. Both the worshipped man and the worshippers are suffering.'[16]

What Chaudhuri intends through this bit of criticism is to open our eyes to the reality of the situation. In his attempt at showing us the unveiled face of our society Chaudhuri has been branded as an iconoclast. He is fully aware of this fact, and today he has finally 'institutionalized himself as an arch iconoclast.' Extreme old age has scarely blunted the intemperate edge of an obsessive contrariness. And yet, the urgings of an insistent nostalgia for a renounced yet beloved country provokes him to write in the preface to Thy Hand Great Anarch —

> 'This has led me to a ceaseless conflict with the world in which I have had to live. For this reason at one time I thought of giving the title One Man Against his People to this book. But that would have given quite a false idea of my life. I was against historical trends, not any people. I have had no personal maladjustments, far less quarrels of my own seeking, with the society in which I have lived, due either to injustice or frustration. I was born and brought up in a class of Bengali society which had been dominant during British rule. Again, the class which dominates India today is some sort of an extension of the

> Bengali class to which I belonged. Thus, if I speak of alienation from a world, that does not mean social or personal alienation....Although I have rejected the whole ideology of the dominant order in India, I am socially at home only among them. I could have shared their position and prosperity if I had wanted that, and if I have not, that has been my free choice. Therefore, I have never been under the compulsion to go on that wild goose chase which in these days is called discovering one's identity. I never lost mine, and never had any doubts about it.'[17]

Chaudhuri has the knowledge that he will never perhaps see India and more particularly Bengal again. Two decades of self-imposed exile have served, above all, to heighten the engagement with an earlier life. And much of the force of his writings thus springs from the intensity of this confrontation with the vicissitudes of a remarkable life which has ended by bringing a man who travelled on elephants in his boyhood to England in a jumbo jet to spend his last days there. But what is striking is that, the essential Indianness in Chaudhuri often comes to the forefront. Thus in every picture that he draws one can see his intense love for India. Recalling the rushing waters of East Bengal rivers he writes:

'But it was in two far distant countries outside India that the rivers of East Bengal came back to me with the revived force of a direct meeting. The first occasion was in 1967 in Israel by the Sea of Galilee, and the second in 1976 at Kingston in Canada by the waters of St. Lawrence where it issues out of Lake Ontario.

... The Sea of Galilee looked like the Meghna... I was awakened by the roar of waters, and looking out of the window I saw below it foaming waves rushing through the reeds growing in a small inlet... The Sea of Galilee was looking ink-black then, with the waves crested with white foam. I had seen exactly such a scene on the Meghna in 1907, near Bhairav Bazar.

At the end of 1976 I went to Canada to be reminded again of the waters of Bengal. I saw the St. Lawrence both at Montreal and Ogdensburg...But at Kingston, when I went out of the Faculty Club of Queen's University and stood by the extreme end of Lake Ontario, I could fancy that I was on the banks of the Meghna again... it looked exactly like the Meghna. Somehow, if there is wooded country on the other side of a very big river, the trees look like grey-green curtains hanging on the water, and the faint blue of the sky can be seen through the shadowy trees, or at all events a mirage-like illusion is created. I had seen this sort of scene on the Meghna and saw them again at the lower end of Lake Ontario. It was almost seventy years since I had seen the Meghna but standing by the waters of the St. Lawrence I could murmur — Super flumina Babylonis ...'[18]

The emotion and passion with which Chaudhuri recalls the lost rivers of East Bengal is intensely touching and one is emotionally moved by the nostalgic pangs that Chaudhuri experiences for a much-loved country. In the Continent of Circe also Chaudhuri paints a much loved picture and says:

> ...The static beauty of our humped cattle has been embodied for all time in our sculpture. But the beauty of movement which it shows is not less enchanting. Dust is called Go-dhuli, Kinedust in Sanskrit, and it is a sight of extraordinary beauty to see the herds coming home. It is only then and in this condition that the dust of India is transformed into something lovable. It rises in whirling clouds of grey to form a background for the wavy lines of moving cattle, in their colour schemes of dun, tawny, chocolate, white, black, and many pastel shades.'[19]

Chaudhuri invokes the immemorial India with emotion and passion. What drives him to wrath is the corrupting process of our obfuscating political and national life. Chaudhuri's Gibbonian eye, which rests most bleakly on the 'decomposing' of Bengal, is fired by a sense of tragic loss. As a Bengali, he feels he has to record a decline which has a poignant relevance to him. Thus he writes:

> 'During the same period of political and cultural decline in India I had also to observe the eclipse of Bengal as a force in Indian politics and culture. From the beginning of British rule down to 1920 the Bengali people dominated the political and cultural life of India... But from 1921 onwards the influence of Bengal in Indian politics began to decline. With independence, the eclipse of Bengal was completed.'[20]

The spectacle of an all-embracing decline pressed so heavily on Chaudhuri's mind that he set down his

forebodings in a passge of The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian. He wrote:

> 'If there is to be any vanished or vanishing Atlantis to speak of in this book, it should be and would be all our life lived till yesterday. All that we have learnt, all that we have acquired, and all that we have prized is threatened with extinction. We do not know how this end will come, whether through a cataclysmic holocaust or slow purid decay. But regarding the eventual extinction there does not seem to be any uncertainty.'[21]

Written in 1947 this passage is almost prophetic. With the powers of a visionary Chaudhuri sees a vision of the future and at the end of his life he writes:

> 'I have come to the conclusion that civilized human existence all over the world is completing the latest cycle of its history by descending into its natural Avernus. I think our times are comparable to the fifth century of the Christian era when St. Augustine saw the Graeco-Roman world crumbling all around him. The present situation of humanity is different from that only in this, that the scale is larger and the decadence universal.'[22]

Chaudhuri feels very strongly —

> 'that the decline of Bengal is part and parcel of Indian decline as well as world decline. And I do not stop at a delineation of the literary paralysis. I extend the notion of decay to religion and politics. For instance young people today have hardly any political interests. In my time, apart from our cultural interests, political interest was burning over the whole question of Indian independence... That sort of passionate involvement has disappeared. People have sunk into private life.

> And a people that withdraws entirely into private life can never maintain or evolve a high order of civilization.'[23]

The decadence and degeneration that Chaudhuri sees around him forms the focal point of his critical vision. He very strongly feels that 'Civilized human existence will perish through internal decay as the Graceo-Roman world did.'[24] The human situation special to our age is, 'on the one hand, a wholesale decadence of civilized life with its face towards the past, on the other, almost unlimited technological power looking towards the future, which must be regarded as progress.'[25]

The presence of universal human decadence, physical as well as moral poses as a very major problem of our age. Considering this world situation rationally and realistically, no observer can see a spot of light on the dark scene. And yet, the visionary in Chaudhuri feels that 'there is a great mercy immanent in the Universe which takes care precisely of those who are least fit to take care of themselves. ...Belief in the mercy is part of that faith.'[26] Chaudhuri very emphatically opines that, the present human situation can be sustained only through faith. This 'problem of sustaining faith would not have been so difficult had there been

a frank recognition by thinkers of our age of the reality of the decadence in social life and mores. If there were, faith could have come to terms with decadence, and taking its stand on a cyclical view of the rise and the fall of civilization, would have faced the inescapable decadence saying:

> 'The world's great age begins anew,
> The golden years return,
> The earth doth like a snake renew
> The winter weeds outworn...'[27]

It is clearly evident that as a writer Chaudhuri imparts a message to his readers. With all his adverse criticisms against men and manners Chaudhuri intends to open our eyes to all that lies under the veiled face of society. With the powers of a visionary like Blake, Chaudhuri too forsees a dismal future for us. And he makes a fervent appeal to rouse ourselves from this stupor of inertia.

Chaudhuri himself a man with a relish for the specific loved the 'quality of concreteness' in English civilization. He was fascinated by the vitality and pragmatism of the English character, by the genius for the concrete shown in English art and by the English capacity to give form and solidity to its insight. The

absence of this concreteness in Indian civilization led him to give a measured philosophic expression. He thus writes:

> 'I think there is even in the highest and most characteristic teaching of Hinduism ... something impelling a Hindu towards the unmerged in preference to the emergent, and towards the general in preference to the particular. According to some of the noblest teaching of Hinduism, the manifested universe is an illusion, the ultimate reality attributeless, and man's supreme happiness lies in putting an end to the cycle of birth and deaths... For I believe in change and hold all reality to be a process, a process which is justifying itself, as well as making itself more significant, by becoming more particular and differentiated, and by endowing itself with ever more new values.'[28]

This acute reading of a fundamental strain of Hindu thought and this affirmation of a personal point of view are without any malice. At times Chaudhuri does bristle with indignation and carries his criticism a bit too far. It is on account of this perhaps that he has often been criticized in India for an excessive Anglophilia. This criticism however is far removed from the truth about character for he is as critical of the English as he is of the Indians. In The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian and in Thy Hand, Great Anarch Chaudhuri has very strongly condemned the British Community

in India. On the one hand he contends that the worst crime the British committed in India was to desert it and to fail in their mission to bring European civilization in thought, art and science to the sub-continent. On the other, he combines this powerful implicit defence of the nature and purpose of the British Raj with the utmost scorn for the British in India, who were incapable of forming human or even humane relationships with Indians, and severe contempt for the ones he has lived among for the last eighteen years as an exile in Britain. 'The former he detests for their inhumanity, the latter for their illiteracy.'[29]

It is with a great humanist's passion that he assails whatever is counterfeit and decadent in whatever culture or community he encounters. Sometimes he does lay it on but basically his writings act as a kind of purgation cleansing our minds of all that is anti-human and anti-culture. It can be seen that Chaudhuri's mind is free from inhibitions, and so ideas enter and flow out in free abundance allowing full inner interaction and leading to quick development of thoughts and words. Searching and constant exploration of new ideas, sharing

thoughts with others is his endeavour. What follows thus, is a natural flow of a mighty river of thoughts and ideas that nourishes those on its path with the fertility of his mind. He is a natural thinker who opines 'I would not accept an opinion simply because it was a product of the times. Fashion, the tyrant of humanity taken in the mass, had no hold on me. Moreover, it has never been in my character to form opinions or formulate even historical conclusions with no apparent practical application, without seeing their relevance to my personal life and acting on them.'[30]

This 'cultural historian' has a keen eye for the present as shaped or distorted by the past and an avid zest for interpreting whatever is happening with reference to the centrality of his cultural awareness. The vigour of his humanist thoughts informs his writings and their acuity lends a measure of sharpness and astringence to them.