

# HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN CHAUDHURI'S WRITINGS

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Nirad C. Chaudhuri, one of India's most controversial writers, was profoundly influenced in his formative years by his father who was a lawyer by profession. Though he was born in a rural environment, he was brought up in an intellectual environment. He was born at Kishorganj in East Bengal on 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1897 and moved to Calcutta in 1910. But, for him life at Calcutta was irksome. Since he wanted to become a historian, he did well in history, at B.A. (Hons.) getting a first class and topping the list. Though he started his life as a clerk, he had an unquenchable thirst for knowledge and a keen spirit of enquiry. Even as a boy he was fascinated by Western Civilisation. He was educated in India but it was a Western type of education in Arts.

As far as historicity is concerned even Gandhi is second to Chaudhuri and Nehru. Nehru had studied in European countries but he tried to discover and rediscover India and Indian tradition. Though Chaudhuri studied in India, he tries to

explore Western culture and so he criticizes studied in India, he tries to explore Western Civilisation and Western culture and so he criticizes sharply Indian ethos and Indian culture. Because of his deep love for Western culture he became a bitter critic of Indian culture and Indian religion. He could not reconcile completely Indian tradition and Western culture. Nehru, on the other hand, was able to reconcile them through scientific rationalism the Indian tradition and Western knowledge.

Chaudhuri developed an unorthodox view of Indian history and civilization. According to him, Indian history comprises three cycles during each of which a strong and creative foreign influence provided the primary motive force, i.e. the mid-European Aryan, the Muslim and the British respectively. He makes his autobiography 'more of a national than personal history, it is at its best at the personal and social levels. He calls himself an 'Unknown Indian' but the title 'Unusual Indian' would have been more appropriate than the former. In his small book *To Live or Not to Live* he speaks of Hindu social life. He is critical of Indian social life which is noisy, lacking in privacy and leisure and destructive of 'civilized mental communication'.

In spite of his blind admiration for Western culture, he disapproves of women employed in offices. What distinguishes his autobiography is not merely the depiction of his personal life but also the way in which he tries to project his own inner conflict as an Indian born and brought up in pre- Independence India and to correlate it to the conflict of the whole race. His conflict with Indian background is apparently due to his European sensibility acquired through English education and Western influences. He confesses to an emotional relationship that has existed

between him and England ever since his childhood. This is clear in the fourth chapter of his autobiography. One chapter is specially meant for England which comes immediately after three chapters dealing with the impressions formed in his boyhood days at Kishorganj. His birth place, Benagran, his ancestral village and Kalikutch, his mother's village by introducing a chapter on England, Chaudhuri gives us his impressions about England.

The religious and political ideas of his father and mother had already been influenced by the liberal European thought. Everything Chaudhuri read about England "evoked pictures of the external appearance of the country even when not avowedly descriptive" (16).

In the beginning he defines his village negatively in terms of what it is in contrast to an English town which he has not seen. He visited England only in 1955 but the book was published in 1951. His encounter with Englishmen and his fears about them and how these were proved meaningless are related in some details. It is this which leads him to comment on Indians' attitude towards Englishmen. It attempts to offer an account of India's encounter with the west. In the preface he states that his intention is to "to tell the story of the struggle of a civilisation with a hostile environment, in which the destiny of British rule in Indian became necessarily involved" (17).

Chaudhuri's excessive details distract him from making the autobiography a spontaneous integration with national life. The chapters which describe Id Festival, Durga Puja and his ancestral house have a place independently as descriptions but mar the spontaneity of the autobiography. But his works is not merely to tell the

story of the growth and development of an ordinary Indian boy but to relate the story of a man whose mind took on ideas and impressions and at the same time accepted a good deal from the west.

Hindu-Muslim enmity finds expression in almost all the books written by Indian during and after freedom struggle. Chaudhuri also portrays the Hindu-Muslim enmity. At one time Muslims dominated not only Bengalis but also Hindus in general. There was a general concern and contempt for the Muslim not only among the illiterates but even among the literates like Bankin Chandra Chatterji and Ramesh Chandra Dutt who showed Muslims in a poor light and glorified the Hindus. One of the reasons for such an abomination was that the Muslims were allies of the British and the opponents of nationalists. The hatred resulted in burglary, idol breaking and looting.

British rule was supposed to be noted for efficiency and disciplined administration. But to Chaudhuri, students teasing teachers, corruption and inefficiency of the C.B.I. existed even during the British rule. "A man's wealth had originated in a fraud on an insurance company. The intelligence Branch was not at its most intelligent even in this" (18).

What Manohar Malgonkar did in *A Bend in the Ganges*, Chaudhuri does in portraying the conflict between the two manifestations of the Freedom Movement, namely, the non-violent movement of Gandhi and his followers and the terrorist movement of the extremists. Like R.K. Narayan, he gives a realistic picture of the middle class family in India. His family itself is a typical Indian middle class family. We see an age-old society with a powerful disposition towards inertness in the state of being penetrating by Western concepts of God, nature, personality, nationalism

and freedom. Chaudhuri himself is a great contradiction produced by that contradiction. So he appreciates as well as criticizes his own culture, namely, Indian culture.

The rural scene of the village Kishoregonj in Bengal is typical of an Indian village with its endless woes of family feuds, litigation, superstition, casteism, corruption, injustice, murder and the tyranny of the money-minded class. Since Chaudhuri was brought up in rural atmosphere unlike Nehru who was out brought up under urban sophistication, life in Calcutta was irksome to him. Bengal was not only a centre for learning but also a centre of British power. When the British came to India they occupied Bengal literature and also in Indian culture. Even now many Indian writers in English have come from Bengal.

The significance of the place in Chaudhuri's life is the principle of composition in the autobiography and its development through the sequence of places like Kishorganj, his birth place, Benagram, his ancestral the Assam hill station and more than any other place, Calcutta is handled with imaginative that which makes the book a genuine composition obeying inward initiative. We have the pictured actuality of the town, the village, the hill-station everything in the physical appearance from the quality of the dust and the shape of the trees to the design of the houses and the configuration of the land. Chaudhuri's description of Calcutta includes even the sewage system in Calcutta. "None but the inhabitants of these localities could go about in them without handkerchief to the nose" (19).

Just as the ever flowing Ganges was a solace to Nehru, the river Brahmaputra was a solace and consolation to Chaudhuri. Bengal also produced politicians. People from remote villages in Bengal also produced politicians. People from remote

villages in Bengal walked many miles to attend a politics. The boys refused to play a cricket because the caps to be awarded to them were of English make and something it resulted in the boys seeking admission in other schools and colleges.

The bright boys going in naturally for the coveted prizes of Indian life like government service or as the second best for the professions, drifted towards leading purely private lives because they dared not spoil their worldly prospects by participation in public affairs frowned upon by the Government, or, if they themselves dared, their parents dragged them back.

On the other hand, with rare exceptions political activity and agitation became the business of an insufficiently educated, insufficiently intelligent and insufficiently cultured, though serious and earnest minded class and this gradually brought down the standard of political life till it seemed to have become the monopoly of pig-headed fools and faddists. (20)

Chaudhuri wanted to become a world historian. But today we remember him more as a literary artist than a historian. He chose to write only when his attempts to secure a desirable profession failed. He wanted his autobiography to be a contribution to history but it is more a contribution to literature than to history. Had it been written in the form of a story, it would have been one of the best novels in the gamut of Indian Writing In English. Nehru never wanted to become a historian but ye being conscious of it he became an established historian. Chaudhuri not being aware of his becoming a literary artist produced masterpieces for literature.

Chaudhuri gives a very true and realistic account of the different effects of the East and west on both of them. Though Chaudhuri has a sharp eye and intellectual vivacity and gifts which might not qualify him to be an impartially objective critic. He is a literary artist and an autobiographer of a rare kind. But Nehru is a better artist and the greater man.

Since Chaudhuri was organising his intellectual and moral life along independent lines even from his childhood, he was becoming a stranger to the Indian atmosphere and environment. He thought that he “was born to be misunderstood and rebellious”(22). He imbibed moral convictions from his mother. It was from his father that he imbibed non conformatism and liberal humanism. His father believed in the attainment of knowledge for its own sake and not for any material reward.

My father was driven by a passion for creating a new type of human beings, a new breed, so that he might rise above his environment, have his revenge on it, not individually and for all time.”(23)

Chaudhuri's first sentence exposes that his autobiography is out a personal history and not a national history.

The India that Chaudhuri discovers is only an extension of the image of himself. He sees history as a dialectical process of becoming. Then he says that we have escaped the doom of petrification that hangs over everything that lives when it passages from the stage of becoming to that of being, but again paradoxically he says that it is not due to an organic development from within, but through a miracle of history which brought us into contact with others. There is a certain amount of truth

in the statement that we became participants in a larger history and also that whenever we as a nation withdrew into a narrow shall of ourselves, an external agent served as a super ego which awakened the true, identity of the own inner. But vitality which had absorbed his interpretation of his history which is an application of his interpretation of his own life, he also feels emancipated from India.

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