

# Historical, Political and Cultural Consciousness in the Autobiographies of Nirad C. Chaudhuri

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## ***Abstract-***

*The proposed research paper seeks to trace the public, political, historical and cultural cognizance in two autobiographies of Nirad C. Chaudhuri. Nirad C Chaudhuri is one of the few Indian English writers who have used English language for non-fictional purpose alone. The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian (1951) and Thy Hand, Great Anarch! (1987) remained his best works. The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian gave an account of Chaudhuri's childhood and student days till 1921. Thy Hand, Great Anarch! takes the account up to 1952. Both the autobiographies give a portrait of the slow but triumphant self-discovery of a powerful writer. During this process Nirad C Chaudhuri was in the grip of dramatic public events in India. Independence and partition of the continent in 1948 were widely hailed as statesmanship and the reparation of imperial wrongdoings, but Chaudhuri drew quite another conclusion- that his country had no future. Nirad C. Chaudhuri's both autobiographies are more of a national than personal history as it reveals precedence to the environment over the product. And it is more of an exercise in descriptive anthology than autobiographies.*

**Keywords:** *Autobiography, Indian Independence, character delineation, culture, British Empire,*

Nirad Chaudhuri to his credit wrote two autobiographies – *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* and *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!* He witnessed both the independence struggle and the attainment of freedom. The *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* and its successor, *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!* The *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* and *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!* are a valuable social document which gives intimate picture of Nirad C. Chaudhuri's milieu. It is one of the most vivid recreations of social life of Bengal in Indian English literature. As seen through observant young, eyes, it is an account remarkable for its comprehensiveness and its living quality, and provides several glimpses into a society which has now undergone sweeping changes.

This book consists of a magnificent memoir with the most vivid and touching account of his private life and 'working life' which began in 1921 and came to a close at the end of 1952. This book is also a survey of Indian and Bengali politics in the turbulent years leading to independence. Chaudhuri provides memorable portraits of Gandhi, Nehru, Tagore, Subhash C. Bose and other Indian and British leaders. Chaudhuri himself enumerates certain elements from this book;

Actually, this book has three elements in it: first, my personal life which I have made the framework of whatever history I wish to offer; second my thoughts and feelings about the public and historical events through which I have passed; and third an account of what happened in India in the political and cultural spheres in the period from 1921 to 1952, free from current myths. (XIV)

The book reveals various aspects of the struggle for existence of Nirad C. Chaudhuri's life. And it is also an exploratory study of Indian political events and social ethos during this period.

Nirad C. Chaudhuri lived through the crucial period of Indian independence and great social political changes. It reveals Nirad C. Chaudhuri's rare talent for character delineation and analysis of events. John Gross says:

Having lived through the struggle for Indian Independence and its aftermath, Chaudhuri delivers some unsparing verdicts. His opinions are certainly open to dispute.... The political chapters constitute a slice of political theory, and history in the grand manner. They bound in poignant anecdotes, terse reflections and, above all masterly portraits. (21)

It was all very well to be a strong-minded individualist and libertarian with marked literary tastes, Chaudhuri realized early, but he had to find a proper outlet, too. Moving to Calcutta, he was first a clerk in a department of military accounts, and then a journalist. His first published articles were in English in 1925 and in his native Bengali two years later.

Chaudhuri came to repudiate Indian nationalism on the one hand and on the other the complacency of self-delusion that the British showed at each step on the road to their rout. He remembers well how the nationalist movement first began, in Bengal, in 1906, in response to a British proposal to divide the province for administrative purposes. This could only set Hindu and Muslims against each other. Chaudhuri's repudiation of nationalism is all the more intense because he himself had once felt these excitements.

He is shrewd observer of people and has keen eye for spotting the hidden springs of human motives and behaviours. When these qualities are allied to a sympathetic understanding of the subject of his scrutiny, the result is an accurate and fair estimate. He gave a splendid portrait of Sarat Babu:

He illustrates Sarat babu's strong sense of social responsibility, his generosity and kindness, his urbanity, his courage in facing his trials, and how he, in fact, represented the "true aristocracy of character in Bengal". (Rao Jan-Feb)

Apart from his career as a secretary, he continued to contribute article in Bengali and English to newspapers and magazines. His familiarity with the workings of inner circle of Indian politics led him to be skeptical about its eventual progress, and he became progressively disillusioned about the ability of Indian political leaderships. The quarrel between Gandhi and Bose brothers threatened of split the nationalist movement, but in Nirad C. Chaudhuri's view it was a question of self-assertion, without intellectual significance.

The war was an opportunity for the nationalists to weaker Britain by supporting Hitler, Sarat Chandra Bose was arrested, and thus he had to look for new job. He got it and because the commentator on All India Radio, putting to good use of his knowledge of military matters. A new phase of life opened and gave a different direction. As he left for Delhi and it was the ultimate farewell to Bengal as he never went back to Calcutta again.

As a politician's secretary, a broadcaster for all India Radio, or a writer on military topics, he takes everything personally. Everything provoked a moral as well as an emotional response. He takes pride in having been right about certain aspects of British policy, or about the Indian attitude to World War II, even though his opinions were never likely to affect the course of history.

All history is written from one point of view or another: there is no such thing as an "objective" history. Where Chaudhuri distinguishes himself is in the frankness with which he expresses his idiosyncratic views, and in the force and accuracy of his writing. Whether Chaudhuri is right when he describes popular music or western preoccupation with the third world, will ultimately be less important than that he has succeeded in weaving his life together with the life of modern Indian.

As a man he is so clearly all of one honest piece. Everything he says is drawn from some depth of conviction within him. There is certain crankiness about him, but this too is a part of the wholeness of his character – it too comes from a depth of conviction within him, and therefore, has its place in our affection for him". (Verghese 204)

Nirad C. Chaudhuri devoted a full length of chapter on Delhi. He described old Delhi, its streets, lanes, history, New Delhi and its architecture, life in new and old Delhi and politics behind New Delhi. He said, in Thy Hand, Great Anarch! "It was like discovering a new continent for me. Certainly, I regard my knowledge of Islamic history and civilization as my greatest acquisition in Delhi." (737)

As a commentator on the war, he described the course of events with great attention. Till the end of the war, he thoroughly described every international affair related to World War II. "During the war I was too preoccupied with its ups and down to think about what would happen when it would end victoriously." (753)

He gave a lengthy account of the formation of so-called interim government in August 1946 and brought down the story to 1947, the year, preparing the Red Carpet for Indian Independence, dyed in the blood of hundreds and thousands of Indians who perished in the mass murder committed by the Hindus, the Muslims and the Sikhs on one another in 1946 and 1947. He wrote, in Thy Hand, Great Anarch! :

These Massacres were the real prelude to the coming independence to India. . . . . And these massacres were bound to take place, although those who liquidated the British Empire in India failed both to anticipate them and to prevent them. (804)

He saw the consequences of independence and the partition with his own eyes. He felt the pathetic situation of India at heart and was deeply moved by this. He emphasizes that defining themselves primarily as Hindu or Muslims, Indians could be mobilized into fanatical mobs defending what they believed to be their group interests and identities, but constituencies, as understood in the West, could not be made of them. Britain in effect handed over the continent to those Hindus or Muslims who had the ruthlessness to fanaticize and then tyrannize their own kind for their own purposes.

Nirad C. Chaudhuri's power as a described speaks for itself in the pages that follow and needs no elaboration; he is a fascinating, ground-level witness and expositor of a vanished Indian way of life and of what British imperialism, then as its height, meant to its humble and not so humble subjects. In this book Chaudhuri is courageous in two ways: in his literary ambition and in the open declaration of his political and historical beliefs.

Dedicated to the memory of the British Empire in India, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* in the course of revealing the personal life of the author, expresses in a representative way the typical conflict suffered by a middle-class Indian intellectual in the early of the twentieth century, because of his 'European Sensibility' acquired through English education and Western influences. Nirad C. Chaudhuri's intention is to tell the story of the struggle of a civilization with a hostile environment in which the destiny of British rule in India became necessarily involved.

There are chapters in autobiography dealing with the new cultural movement mainly based on the formula of a synthesis of the values of the East and the West, which passes under the name of the India Renaissance, the three historical cycles in Indian Civilization and Gandhism and Indian nationalism. He wrote in his *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*:

Our cultural movement began in the early part of the nineteenth century and reached its apogee in about one hundred years. Then it began to break up. If I were asked to specify when the signs of decay made first appearance, I should say in the years between 1916 and 1918. After the end of the First World War, and in the years immediately following, the change had become clearly perceptible. (212)

In all these chapter the interaction between the personal and the national or cultural is so unobtrusive that the reader becomes exposed to Chaudhuri's interpretation of history without ever getting the impression that he is not reading an autobiography. The autobiography is a history of ideas even though all his ideas are not acceptable to us or sustainable in terms of logic and history.

What impress the reader are his originality, brilliance and forthrightness. Ideas flow from his mind; they are, however, not supported by historical facts or evidence. But he seeks a rationalization of these ideas in history. And it is this ideational process that makes his creative endeavor quite stimulating to the reader.

*Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* when published in 1951 first time, it was instantly acclaimed. And it remained one of the classics of contemporary Indian literature. But it also provoked a furious debate for its controversial insights into Indian and European history. But it is not the controversy, generated by his writings that make him a major Indian writer in

English. There are excellences in him as a man and a writer. Tara Sinha in her book exalts *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* in such words:

Chaudhuri's powers of observation come to the fore in his *Autobiography* and rightly establish him as a social observer of rare distinction. Strictly speaking, out of four books in which the *Autobiography* is divided; we can classify the first three as 'autobiographical' and the last containing 'essays on political, historical and sociological topic.' Yet in the first three books, too, we get a delightfully authentic picture of the rural and urban societies of East Bengal and Calcutta. (42)

Nirad C. Chaudhuri being an intellectual person went into the depth of the things on whatever subject he did work. For example, he was very fond of European music and painting or European literature, he went in to the depth of all these things. Another important feature of his autobiography is this that he gave sublime portrait of the eminent personalities of the day, belonging to the political and literary world and his personal acquaintances as Mahatma Gandhi, Jawahar Lal Nehru, Subhash Chandra Bose, Ravindra Nath Tagore, Sarat Chandra, Bibhuti Bannerji, Rawal Gosh, Mohit Babu and many other persons, about them sometime he gave lengthy description and sometime gave short view.

When one turns from the Man and the men the author met or observed to the milieu he tries to survey, understand and interpret, one immediately notices how Chaudhuri's views on Indo-British connection, the Hindu mind, the Indian freedom struggle, both in its ideological and practical aspects and his interpretation of Indian history during the last century or so have hardly undergone any change since he published his *An Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*.

At one place, he mentions in *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!* his, "natural inclination to become a Don Quixote" (159); this self-confessed natural instinct gets ampler scope and this book, because the author has much larger space at his command. He was a productive writer till the very end of his life; publishing his last work at age of 99. His wife Amiya Chaudhuri died in 1994 in Oxford. He died in Oxford; England two months short of his 102nd birthday in 1999.

In the ultimate analysis, therefore, *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!* Perhaps succeeds admirably in its depiction of the "Man". It has caught the attention for its scathing and forthright observations. The most interesting parts of the book are those in which the personal and national merge. The life it describes is festinating and the observations about Indian history and culture shed an unconventional light on the vast subcontinent. He continues to dazzle us with well written intelligent prose. And whatever controversy his writing generates is so because his ideas are not acceptable to everyone. They are characterized by self-opinionated.

*Thy Hand, Great Anarch!* is not just an evolutionary one in which western protestant astringency displaces the warm appeal of an Indian past—although it certainly is that. It is also a more personal and strenuous achievement which involves, on the one hand, and on the other constructing a fresh identity which would join a questioning Western mind to a temperament laced with Bengali fury.

It was an undertaking which required on the part of Nirad C. Chaudhuri not only intellectual energy and an analytical skill, but also courage, will, stamina and a quite unabashed interest in himself. His autobiographies are exceptional combination of individual encounter and national history. The creator may be a man of colossal insights and learning, both of which he has connected to verifiable investigation, gadfly news coverage, and the annulment of pseudo-patriotic myth. His rundown of the genuine accomplishments of Gandhi, as restricted to the commonsense comes about of Indian autonomy, will stun admirers of the Mahatma. His

suppositions on other subjects will startle and sometimes amuse numerous perusers, for he may be a viciously genuine man who can put acerbic opinions wittily. There's a pitiful sharpness basic this personal history, since Mr. Chaudhuri may be a man who got what he needed, the flight of the British from India, on terms that crushed what he needed it for: security of the energetic mental culture of his local East Bengal.

In this way Nirad C. Chaudhuri's importance as an autobiographer comes from the depth of his writings, his erudition, his originality, his controversial, often deviant sociological theories and historical interpretation, the pain-taking intellectual approach he practiced in dealing with his subjects, the sheer bulk of facts he revealed, and above all, the dignity and the decorum of the kind of English he writes in his endeavour to be forthright and downright in the expression of his thoughts and ideas.

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