CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

"I like to think that his [Nirad C. Chaudhuri's] bitter criticism of India is rooted in a deep patriotism, and that nothing would cause him greater pain than to find that he has been right all these years."

— Sunanda K. Datta Ray, 'The Last Englishman'

In Greek mythology, Cassandra was the name of a Trojan princess whose unrequited Apollo had given her a blessing and a curse. She was blessed with the power to prophesy but cursed with the inability to convince. Accordingly, the noun 'Cassandra' is described by the Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary as "any one who expresses gloomy views of the political or social future and is not listened to." This role appealed so much to Nirad Chaudhuri that he grabbed it with both hands early in life. Not minding the possibility that his words of caution would be thrown to the wind, he went on to issue prophecies most of which were pessimistic in content. About his self-imposed prophet act, Chaudhuri writes solemnly:
I wanted to be a writer, and one who was to be involved in 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. I began to utter them from the very beginning of my career as a writer . . . (Thy Hand xvi)

One prophecy of Nirad Chaudhuri which is verifiable, in the present context, is on neo-imperialism. He believed that the second half of the twentieth century would witness the ascent of a new imperial power because the first half had seen the descent of the old one, Europe. This followed his personal theory of rise and fall of dominant civilizations. Moreover, it was not difficult to foresee the rising power — Uncle Sam. Hence, Chaudhuri writes:

The United States will never export any of its products to the East except those of which every decent American is ashamed. . . But American national projection on the rest of the world is too deep, large, and important subject to be commented on incidentally. In its irresistible amoral power accompanied by both goodness and vileness on the moral plane, it is bound to continue and grow. (The Continent 2-3)

Nirad Chaudhuri was not deterred by the fact that his dire prophecies went mostly unheeded. Indeed, that was the curse on the mythological Cassandra and
Chaudhuri was more than aware of it. Knowing that he had no power to enforce his thoughts on others, but only to warn them, all that he could do was to ‘save’ himself and his immediate family. Otherwise, he took the people’s indifferent response with equanimity, saying:

Those who do not like me or my views do indeed tell me that people listen to me with the object of laughing at me, instead of with me. I do not think that is wholly correct. But even if it were, I am not one of those high-placed and therefore extra-solemn countrymen of mine who cannot bear to be laughed at. I agree with the dictum of one of the greatest wits in English literature: "For what do we live, but to make sport for our neighbours, and laugh at them in our turn?" I am always ready to make sport for somebody without even the countervailing right to laugh at somebody. (Culture vii)

It is significant that Nirad Chaudhuri was exclusively a writer of non-fiction. The genres he wrote in are autobiography, biography, travelogue and socio-political critique. Another noteworthy aspect of his was bilingualism — eleven of his books are in English and five in Bengali. Apart from those sixteen books, he also penned a number of articles in both the languages. As far as the languages are concerned, his English works are full of quotations from Sanskrit, Hindi, English, Greek, Latin, French and German sources. He provided English translations for the Indian, i.e. Sanskrit and Hindi, quotations but not for the European ones. Chaudhuri’s Bengali works contain quotations from Sanskrit and
they, too, are left untranslated. Perhaps Chaudhuri expected his readers to be as polyglottal as he was. Whatever the reason, multi-lingual references are a feature of Chaudhuri's writings. It is surprising that despite these difficulties, some of his books became best-sellers. Perhaps they were bought but not read!

It is pretty difficult to build a case for Nirad Chaudhuri simply because his colonial sympathies are too apparent to be overlooked. Nevertheless, if one were to take the pain of scratching beneath the surface, a number of alibis would come up in his favour. One would then be able to take a holistic view of Chaudhuri's writings. Hence, the concerned issues have been investigated thoroughly in Chapter III earlier and are summarized in this section for the purpose of emphasis.

At the outset, we may like to remember that Chaudhuri is not alone in his historical iconoclasm. His incessant efforts at demolishing the grand edifice of India's national movement have found resonance, in varying degrees, with a few Indian historians. For instance, the so-called Cambridge school of historiographers denies that there was a national movement at all because the school doubts the existence of India as a cohesive nation in the second half of the nineteenth century. The subaltern school of historians dismisses the movement led by the Indian National Congress as elitist and harps on parallel movements supposedly carried on by marginalized sections of Indian society. Marxist historians are none too enthusiastic about the Indian movement because of its failure to revolutionize our feudal society. These schools are iconoclastic in the sense that they do not
easily subscribe to the nationalist school of thought. Their positions on the events prior to India’s independence are qualitatively different from the commonly held views on the topic.

One issue regarding Nirad Chaudhuri, which is quite unknown, is that he was attracted to the freedom struggle in his childhood and supported it till his early adulthood. More specifically, he was supportive of the anti-partition movement of 1906-7, the passive resistance movement of 1919 and the civil disobedience of 1930-1. Given Chaudhuri’s ultimate dissociation from the national movement, his one-time association with it appears incredible. It may also be noted that, in the early years, he was so involved with the anti-colonial struggle that he rooted for Indian Extremists instead of their Moderate counterparts. This marked one end of the pendulum swing which he went through in respect of his relationship with the freedom struggle, much like the transformation of Aurobindo Ghose who went from being an Extremist leader to a spiritual philosopher. Even after turning pro-colonial, Chaudhuri remained critical of the repression unleashed by the colonial rulers as he was not one to fall silent on matters of concern.

The first, if not the foremost, reason for Nirad Chaudhuri turning away from the freedom struggle has to do with the violence which was occasionally resorted to by Indian nationalists. In this, Chaudhuri was influenced by his semi-literate mother who did not think that the end justified its means. She would not justify murder and arson merely because the victims were British. Due to such a rigid
morality, Nirad disapproved of the violence in Indian protests against the passage of the Rowlatt Act or against the visit of the Prince of Wales. He certainly did not think that the movement was a peaceful one, although that is how it has been portrayed. Chaudhuri's stand on violence was obviously closer to that of Gandhi's than of Fanon's — the former precluded all sorts of violence, as is seen from his withdrawal of the Non-Cooperation Movement in the wake of the Chauri Chaura massacre, whereas the latter defended the violence of Algerian nationals targeted at their French colonizers.

Another reason for Nirad Chaudhuri to question the nationalist movement was the bitter communalism of pre-Independence India. He was staunchly secular without being politically correct — he criticized Hindus and Muslims alike, for their communal words and deeds. Chaudhuri refused to forget the barbarism of the pre- and post-Independence riots which were directly caused by Indian masses. Hence, he thought that championing nationalism in a riot-ravaged country was as meaningless as fixing a square peg in a round hole. In fact, for him, the communal riots put a serious question mark on the nationalist project. As staunch nationalists like Mohammed Ali Jinnah metamorphosed into hardcore communalists, Chaudhuri's doubt grew even stronger. Unfortunately, the toll in communal riots was way higher than that in government brutalities, prompting Chaudhuri to argue that Indians suffered more because of their compatriots than because of colonialists. On 15 August 1947, he felt too saddened by India's bloody partition to enjoy the country's new freedom. Incidentally, even Gandhi did not join those
celebrations due to similar reasons.

Moreover, Nirad Chaudhuri's disenchantment with the anti-colonial movement was due to its, what he called, hypocrisy. What he found most hypocritical is that on the one hand Indians were protesting against the British but, on the other, they were joining in millions the British-led army. It confirmed in him the belief that our people are a duplicitous lot. Chaudhuri also considered the Japanese-backed Indian National Army to be a gang of turncoats because they had originally joined the Indian Army and subsequently changed sides after being captured by the Japanese. He wanted to know why their patriotism had not surfaced at the time of joining colonial forces. Thus, it becomes clear that if he hated one thing, that was hypocrisy.

Nirad Chaudhuri distrusted India's anti-colonial struggle also due to the rampant corruption of its middle-rung leaders. He had seen at close range the corrupt practices of pre-Independence politicos, and had sensed that the same people would continue in the post-Independence phase too. The nepotism and manipulation he saw at the Calcutta Municipal Corporation made him turn away in disgust. Therefore, he refused to believe that the country would get a brighter future in post-colonial times. Chaudhuri was also let down by the arrogant behaviour of many Congresspeople like Mahadev Desai and Mani Ben Patel. They were cold, just short of being curt, to commoners. As the personal secretary to the President of the Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee, Chaudhuri happened
to witness the infighting and conspiracies between some of the top-level leaders of the Indian National Congress including Mahatma Gandhi and Netaji Subhas. He quotes letters to prove that Gandhi was frequently evasive while the latter was mostly over-sensitive. These experiences convinced him that this nation's freedom was not worth fighting for.

Surely the most serious aspect to disturb Nirad Chaudhuri was the negativism that he saw in the freedom movement. He knew that it would not result in a comprehensive revolution because Indians had not thought out their post-independence strategy. Chaudhuri felt that India was in need of a revolution which would be more drastic than the French, Russian, Chinese or the Turkish ones. Due to the absence of such a social overhaul, he pooh-poohed the Indian movement as an insignificant half-measure. Chaudhuri was sure that a transfer of power would not cure India's real sickness because he had seen how power had corrupted those Indians who had already attained it. He believed that till the time the country was truly revolutionized, her citizens would not be socio-economically free. It is curious that in his insistence on a revolution, Chaudhuri was echoing the contemporary refrain of the Communist Part of India which had called India's independence a false achievement.

The case against Nirad Chaudhuri is, quite obviously, strong. He unfailingly wore his pro-colonialism like a badge of honour, almost as if nationalism were a matter of disgrace. At times, his writings were so needlessly provocative that they
generated more heat than light. The weird mindset of Chaudhuri has been analyzed closely in Chapter IV of this thesis with the sole aim of identifying the method in his madness. The salient points of that analysis are recapitulated herein.

Nirad Chaudhuri was a pitiable victim of colonial discourses. These discourses, in the sense that Michel Foucault used the term, were certain thought systems propagated by colonizers with the ulterior motive of subjugating the colonized. Various discourses of such self-serving nature were spread in British India, some of them through allegorical means. Chaudhuri had started enjoying the fine arts at a tender age in the town of Kishorganj and in the city of Calcutta, not realizing that arts like English literature and British sculpture were actually colonial allegories. All the European paintings that he saw and the Western music that he heard reinforced in him the idea of occidental superiority. Moreover, his mastery of the English language was indicative of his appropriation of the British ethos. In fact, he felt proud to be able to teach contemporary Englishmen how their ancestors conducted themselves. As a result of being trapped by these various forms of colonial discourses, Chaudhuri was led into believing that colonial rule was a benevolent presence. Surprisingly, his vast knowledge did not give him the required wisdom of seeing through that insidious propaganda.

The most serious problem with Nirad Chaudhuri was his ambivalence, which is an inexorable feature of the colonial conundrum. The most readily recognisable
indication of his ambivalent attitude was his outlandish dressing sense – he went to
work in western suits when he lived in Delhi but he wore Indian dhotis to receive
guests while he lived in Oxford. It was a colonial variant of the Dr-Jekyll-and-Mr-
Hyde syndrome, the literary embodiment of a split personality. His ambivalence
came to the fore also during the wars fought by Britain, because he could not
decline as to which side he was on. If Britain won a war, he became anti-British
and attributed the win to bribery; on the other hand, if she lost a war, he became
pro-British and attributed the loss to misfortune. Moreover, the numerous flip-flops
of Chaudhuri in which he says something at one place but contradicts himself
elsewhere, are actually examples of his colonial ambivalence.

Irrespective of Nirad Chaudhuri's disdain for postcolonialism, this theory can
justifiably claim to solve one problem which flummoxed him throughout his long life.
Chaudhuri was never quite able to understand why the British were particularly
uncooperative towards those Indians who tried to emulate them. He had expected
the colonizers to be very welcoming to such natives. However, the unexpected
behaviour of Englishmen is easily explained by Homi Bhabha's concept of colonial
mimicry. Bhabha has clarified why the ones who are imitated, the colonizers, can
never be comfortable with those who imitate them, the colonized. The British had
to resist Indian attempts at adopting European traditions because the former did
not have the confidence that those attempts were wholly sincere, the colonizers
could never be sure that they were only being mimicked and not mocked. Despite
the likeness that Indian imitations had with their European originals, there was
always a hidden possibility of ridicule like the distorted image in a curved mirror. This secret fear in the hearts of the rulers made them distance themselves from the ruled. Thus, colonial mimicry made it difficult for Anglophiles like Chaudhuri to mix intimately with the British colonizers.

In postcolonial terms, Nirad Chaudhuri is best described as a comprador. Initially borrowed from the Portuguese language by Marxist theoreticians, the term now stands for that section of the colonized intelligentsia whose independence might have been compromised by a psycho-social dependence on the colonialists. Nevertheless, the saving grace for Chaudhuri is that he was not stereotypical as a comprador. In fact, his uniqueness lies in the fact that he defied being stereotyped. In other words, his pro-colonial expressions were rarely uni-dimensional. While his colonial bias was never in doubt, he could surpass the colonizer versus colonized debate at times by writing about the universal. While a typical comprador would think only about Europe, Chaudhuri would bring in references to Africa. In his tender moments for the great African continent, Nirad Chandra Chaudhuri reminds one of Ernest Miller Hemingway.

The arguments for and against the colonial culpability of Nirad Chaudhuri’s writings have been analyzed in Chapters III and IV respectively. However, a peculiar difficulty in judging Chaudhuri is the complicity between him and his critics. They accuse him of being pro-British, something which he never denies. In legal parlance, he pleaded guilty to the charge against him. This kind of plea might
appear to simplify the matter whereas, in actuality, it does quite the opposite. Chaudhuri's acceptance of the accusation complicates the issue by making the judge wary. The latter has to be extra cautious in dispensing justice because prosecutors and the defendant not differing from one another is a strange occurrence.

The detailed evidence placed in the previous chapters, when read in conjunction, leads us to a number of significant discoveries. Firstly, it is found that Nirad Chaudhuri was not the only Indian writer to harbour colonial sympathies. Contrary to popular belief, many Indians who wrote in English had been pro-colonial. They included not only the non-descript Dean Mahomet of the early nineteenth century but also social reformer Rammohan Roy, novelist Bankim Chatterjee and poet Rabindranath Tagore. In fact, indulgence towards colonialism was not confined to writers alone — even nationalist leaders like Dadabhai Naoroji, Aurobindo Ghose and Jawaharlal Nehru occasionally betrayed a soft corner for the British. Not to be left behind in the display of colonial sympathies were comparatively less known personalities like Keshub Chunder Sen, Surendranath Bannerjea and Madan Mohan Malviya. However, it seems that the soft-colonial environment of pre-Independence literature, in which Chaudhuri started writing, is rarely remembered nowadays.

Another issue highlighted by this thesis is that Nirad Chaudhuri was more careful than most in maintaining the difference between the terms 'imperialism' and
'colonialism'. It is only when we realize how strictly he maintained that difference, do we notice that he supported one and not the other. For him, as for other practitioners of terminological exactitude, 'imperialism' implied rule by a foreign country while 'colonialism' meant settlement by foreigners. That imperialism affected the administration of a native country whereas colonialism changed its demographics, was a very important distinction for Chaudhuri. It followed that imperialism was not as drastic or inhuman a process as colonialism and that is why he favoured the former instead of the latter. Chaudhuri was convinced that the 'occupier colonies' in Africa and Asia, including India, had witnessed imperialism but the 'settler colonies' in Africa, America and Australasia were experiencing colonialism. Accordingly, there never was any British 'colonialism' in India, and hence, the question of him supporting it does not arise.

In addition to the aforementioned, this project finds that Nirad Chaudhuri's support to imperialism was not a general one but specific to British rule in India. He rarely justified European imperialism except for its British variant. That too, he did not volubly defend British imperialism except its Indian project. In other words, Chaudhuri's affiliation with foreign rule is not universal but contextual i.e. Raj-specific. This particularized justification means that he held either or both of two beliefs. One of them could be that Britain was better than other European countries as far as imperial practices went, a conviction corroborated by many professional historians. The other belief was probably that India's pre-British decades were worse than those of other occupied countries, a proposition which is
debateable at best. It was due to any one or both of these beliefs that he considered British rule in India to be a blessing in disguise. His broad feeling was that the best of imperialists, the British, happened to come to the country which needed them the most, India. Therefore, one needs to take a special note of the case-specific nature of Chaudhuri's imperialist advocacy.

What has come to the surface on the application of Homi K. Bhabha's concepts to Nirad C. Chaudhuri's writings would be of considerable interest to any discerning critic. It is a revelation that the idea of colonial mimicry put forward by the former can answer the one question which troubled the latter no end. Chaudhuri was always very disturbed to find that Englishmen did not encourage the appropriation of English customs by Indians. However, he never understood why the colonizers should be bothered if the colonized people wished to adopt their ways of life. The fact is that the local British resisted all Indian reconstruction of European culture because they were uncomfortable with their 'mimics'. It is obvious that what Chaudhuri thought of as the Indians' devotion to English literature was actually looked upon by Englishmen as exercises in imitation. Ignorant of Bhabha's brilliant analysis of this conundrum, Chaudhuri found the British behaviour to be inexplicable and held it responsible for souring the mutual relationship between the two countries.

Finally, the most important contribution of this research pertains to the extent of Nirad Chaudhuri's collusion with British imperialism. While his writings
were certainly not anti-British, they were not entirely pro-British either. It would be grossly erroneous to label them as anti-Indian because that is not the whole truth, and we must not forget the danger of half-truths. The fact is that ensconced deep within his strong anti-national shell was a subtly patriotic kernel. Such a contradictory inside and outside inevitably led to a duality in expression. Those self-contradictions betray the complex mix of attraction and repulsion which marks the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. They were the external manifestations of the inescapable conflict between colonial discourses and counter-discourses. Hence, one concludes that Chaudhuri’s writings were ambivalent in terms of postcolonial criticism, rather than being merely pro-colonial as they are often accused.

The discovery of colonial ambivalence in Nirad Chaudhuri prompts one towards a related issue. Chaudhuri, who generally supported British colonialism but also lent occasional support to the Indian resistance, is surely among the best embodiments of hybridization, a phenomenon which entailed the fusion of certain elements on both sides of the colonial divide. Hybridized personalities like him were both suppliants and threats, rolled into one, for the project of colonialism.

Nirad Chaudhuri, like Jawaharlal Nehru, drew a similarity between discovery of modern India and discovery of the self. They made use of the autobiographical stage to unveil history. Through western knowledge, Nehru does a positive discovery while Chaudhuri does a negative one. While both were idealistic in their
own ways, the latter missed the bus due to his undying cynicism. He was radically
cut of sympathy with the century in which he had to live. Ironically, that was both
his strength and his weakness, the source of his uniqueness and contradictions.
From the point of view of Victorian culture that he had developed for himself,
Chaudhuri refused to see the efforts made to formulate an integrated India. It was
an effort in which Nehru's secular and socialist mindset played a major role, as did
Gandhi's tolerance. When the fervour of Nehruvian modernity and secularism was
at its peak, in the 1950s, Chaudhuri's writings sounded peevish and shallow. But
with the Nehruvian vision now looking exhausted, perhaps Nirad Chaudhuri has
won the right to a second hearing.