CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION
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The introduction of English language in the sub-continent can be traced to the inception of East India Company in 1600 at Calcutta. The English being more far-sighted than the other Europeans felt the need for training Indians in English. They wanted to advance their trade by gaining power through education. Consequently more and more English schools came into existence. English prominence in the political field both in Europe and India further facilitated the triumphant march of English language in India. A great landmark in the progress of English education in India was the establishment of the Hindu college in Calcutta in 1817. It created not only the modern Bengal but modern India.

Indians have been making creative use of English language since they imbibed the spirit of English literature after the introduction of English as a medium of instruction. It started a rage for English studies and as more and more Indians started to read, speak and comprehend English language and literature, they started trying their hands at creative writing also. Their writings ranged from the most utilitarian prose to the most spiritual verse. As Iyengar describes the Indian Renaissance almost as Legouis does about the European Renaissance — the exhausted, almost sapless, native soil received the new rich fertilizer from the west, and out of this fruitful union as it happened in the Elizabethan England—a new literature was born. Thus this new creative urge in the nineteenth century is
also referred to as the literary renaissance in India. As the talented intellectuals of
the nineteenth century India were determined to use English for the effective
propagation of views and values there emerged the literature in abundance which
was called later as Indo-Anglian literature.

Raja Rammohan Roy (1774-1833) was the first of the notable line of
intellectuals who expressed themselves in English in a masculine way. He is
considered to be the first of the great builders of modern India and also the first of
the Indian masters of English prose. His versatility has rightly won him a
permanent place not only among the Indo-Anglian writers but also in the Indian
history. The Indo-Anglian literature owes much to him as it was he who started the
tradition of Indian leaders writing autobiographies and left for the other enthusiasts
of English, a prose, which is a model of clarity, energy. He inaugurated a tradition
in which Indians found a sense of peculiar intimacy with the English language,
making it a natural voice for the Indian mind and sensibility. Paul Verghese
observes “Indian writing in English is primarily a part of the literature of India…
As long as the operative sensibility of the writer is essentially Indian it will be
Indian literature”¹

Prof. Iyengar made an attempt to recognize Indian writing in English as a
separate entity by describing it as Indo-Anglian literature. Though he had not
coined the phrase he gave general currency and wide popularity to the term by
freely using it in reviews and articles. Finally it resulted in his detailed survey, *Indian Writing in English* (1962). A general awareness of the identity of Indo-Anglian writing has spread in Indian literary circles largely owing to the pioneering efforts of Prof. Iyengar.

Indo-Anglian literature is viewed as a curious native eruption, an expression of the practical creative genius of the Indian people. Indian writing in English is one of the voices in which India speaks. It is a new voice, but it is as much Indian as the others. Prof. Iyengar quotes C.R. Reddy’s foreward to his P.E.N book on Indo-Anglian literature:

> Indo-Anglian literature is not essentially different in kind from Indian literature. It is a part of it, a modern facet of that glory which, commencing from the Vedas, has continued to spread its mellow light, now with greater and now with lesser brilliance under the inexorable vicissitudes of time and history, ever increasingly up to the present time of Tagore, Iqbal and Aurobindo Ghose, and bids fair to expand with our and humanity’s expanding future.²

Many spiritualists and philosophers, followed the footsteps of Rammohan Roy. Extraordinary men like Vivekananda, Tagore, Sri Aurobindo used English for the effective propagation of views and values which they thought, would thrust India to political maturity and cultural modernity. The most important spiritualist
who deserves special mention is Swami Vivekananda, (1862-1902) a man of profound spiritual force, powerful intellect and great learning who used English language with utmost precision and concreteness to analyze the ancient Indian spiritual tradition.

Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) is a mystic, prophet, patriot, politician, philosopher, scholar, and critic rolled into one. His contribution to Indo-Anglian poetry is also very large. His collected poems and plays and that philosophical epic Savitri rank him among the supreme masters of poetic art.

Another versatile genius is Viswakavi, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). His Gitanjali brought reputation and recognition not merely to himself but to the entire nation by winning the world prestigious award, the Nobel Prize. He was a bilingual writer who wrote both in Bengali and English. Two of Tagore’s songs are adopted by our country and Bangladesh as the national anthems.

Tagore, Sri Aurobindo and Michael Madhusudhan Dutt represent the earlier period of Indian Renaissance and Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.Narayan in fiction and Nehru, S.RadhaKrishnan and Nirad C. Chaudhuri in non-fiction represent the later period.

S. Radha Krishnan’s intimacy with the western thought on one hand, and his mastery of the English language on the other made him a writer of rare quality. In him, masterly survey, proportion and clarity are the most striking characteristics.
“Genius is indeed three parts memory and one part industry” and while Prof. Radha Krishnan’s memory was phenomenal, his industry was prodigious. He read voraciously and his intellectual curiosity was insatiable. Nehru is another outstanding writer of Indo-Anglian literature. His contributions like his *Autobiography* and *Discovery of India* make an authentic statement of his creed and the political situation of his time.

Nirad Chandra Chaudhuri, is a critic and interpreter of the Indian personality. He belongs to a tradition of prose writing in English in India that can be traced back to Raja Rammohan Roy. He stands as a towering literary personality in the domain of narrative non-fictional English prose. He is a prolific writer who has devoted his life to the pursuit of knowledge. He bloomed to the fullest extent imbibing the true spirit of Indian Renaissance in the early years of the twentieth century.

Chaudhuri is one of those rare intellectuals who have forgone the safety of a regular salary and dedicated themselves entirely to the pursuit of knowledge. With exceptional courage, he has made intellectual writing, his main vocation. He has occasionally taken jobs but, with all the economic hardships, he has not lost faith in his lofty pursuits. He had an unquestionable faith in his intellectual endeavour. He claims himself to be a cosmopolitan writer belonging to international community. He proclaims that as a writer, he cannot be constrained by the
boundaries of a nation nor restrained by religion. He says that as a writer he belongs neither to India nor to England. He attributes universal citizenship to the writers: “when I write in English, I am not writing as an Indian or an Englishman. I am just a writer. Writers know no nationality”.

On being asked curiously by his admirers about the immense popularity of his maiden work, Chaudhuri replied simply that he was not surprised as the fame did not come unexpectedly and without toil. He glorifies the writers and their authorship: “Certain things pleased me very much. I, somehow very foolishly lost faith in the immortality of the soul, retained faith in the immortality of the mind as perpetuated in my books. Only writers can be assured immortality for themselves. Not princes. Only a writer gets that kind of immortality. Nobody else”. He made a constructive contribution for generation to come taking writing as his vocation.

Chaudhuri lived in Calcutta for thirty two years from 1910-1942 and the city had considerable influence in moulding his personality during the formative years of his life. He was a precocious intellectual boy. The school life in Calcutta was a great disappointment. But the literary atmosphere was more lively and Chaudhuri was much excited by the literary societies and activities. Besides, the English teacher was a man of literary tastes, a poet and critic. It was his influence and inspiration which made Nirad, a writer. Apart from this, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* was a great source of knowledge and inspiration.
Chaudhuri had a scholarly temperament and so he studied every branch of learning – literature, diplomacy and history and a number of other subjects. He had a special passion for the study of history. His goal in life was to become a Professor of history. His history teacher, Prof. Bipin Gupta deeply influenced him. He was also influenced by Prof. T.R. Glover and listened attentively to his lectures on Christianity and the Roman Empire. He felt attracted towards specialized scholarship and its methodology. The Imperial Library (now National Library of Calcutta) also stimulated his interest in history. There he mastered a number of classics of history. He acquired the requisite historic attitude and historic integrity. Chaudhuri could do well in B.A. Honours in history in 1917 and was placed in the First Division. But his great ambition of becoming a Professor of history was not fulfilled and it remained a dream for him all his life as he failed to pass M.A. History due to his ill health and depression of spirits.

Chaudhuri was married to Amiya Chaudhuri in a respectable and well-to-do family in Shillong in 1932. For some time he worked in the Military Department as a clerk and he also served as secretary to Sharat Chandra Bose for four years. The life of a clerk in the military accounts department did not suit him and it was most distasteful for him. He gave up his job, suffered great poverty and humiliation and gradually drifted to journalism.
He left Calcutta and went to Delhi in 1942. He worked as a commentator in All India Radio on the operations of the World War-II, since his student days Chaudhuri cultivated a taste for military history and art of warfare. It enabled him to earn his living. He made his mark with the publication of *Autobiography of An Unknown Indian*, in 1951. The book shot him to name and fame, glory and recognition. In 1955 he paid a short visit to England that he had longed to see since his boyhood. His experiences and observations of England find an eloquent expression in his famous book, *A Passage To England* published in 1959. He was awarded the Duff Cooper Memorial Prize for his book, *The Continent of Circe*. His two books *The Intellectual in India* and *To Live or Not To Live* appeared in 1967 and 1970 respectively. In 1974 appeared his famous book, *Scholar Extraordinary*, a biography of Frederickk Max Muller, a German scholar.

A prolific writer, Chaudhuri has written nineteen books in English and in Bengali. Apart from his *Autobiography*, his other better known book is a sequel, *Thy Hand Great Monarch*. Many of the books of non-fictional prose have gushed from his pen in a ceaseless flow. They are *To Live or Not to Live*, *The Intellectual in India*, *Clive of India*, *Culture in the Vanity Bag*, *Hinduism*, *The East is East and The West is West*, *Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse*, *From the Archives of a Centenarian*. The first fifty years of his life is spent in accumulation of knowledge and the later part is dedicated for his creative work. Chaudhuri is
perhaps, the only centenarian writer who has published a work of his own and has celebrated his 100\textsuperscript{th} birthday living for 102 years.


Chaudhuri’s maiden work, \textit{Autobiography} (1951) narrates the events, personal feelings, emotions and attitudes to different situations and national events during his inward journey from childhood to maturity as a historian and socio-cultural investigator. His chief intention is to delineate the state of an old society encroached upon by the western colonialism and imperialism. The title of the book has become an ironic misnomer as it shot him into an unexpected fame and established him as a writer of rare reputation. The book put him on the short list of great Indian English writers. Chaudhuri courted controversy in the newly independent India in the dedication of the book itself- “To the memory of the British Empire which conferred subject hood on us but withheld citizenship. Still the empire was good for us, because all that was good and living within us was made, shaped and quickened by the same British rule”. Though the form of the book is autobiographical, in reality, it tells the story of the growth and maturity of a
scholarly mind in a hostile environment. It shows how Chaudhuri as a young man of scholarly tastes grows to maturity.

The Autobiography besides presenting his personal history, it also narrates the socio-economic and cultural conditions of Bengal in particular and political condition of India in general. He narrates the places like Kishoreganj, Banagram and Kalikutch that had a profound influence on his boyhood, family antecedents and the cultural milieu. He also narrates the city and university of Calcutta, his scholarly initiation, coming of Gandhi and eruption of new politics. His chief intention is to draw our attention to some of the common beliefs and practices of the East Bengal people with birth, parentage, motherhood, astrology and so on. In description of customs and practices Bhagabat Naik comments: “The book is Chaudhuri’s intimate picture of his milieu which has also made his Autobiography a valuable social document. There is no more vivid recreation of rustic life in Bengal in Indian English literature that the book offers”.  

The book provides unorthodox views of Chaudhuri’s love for the British and British imperialism. He is cynical towards India’s independence as the epigraph sparked a controversy which has been amply proved by the contents of the book. Thus he exhibits the unpatriotic sentiments which wounded the feelings of his fellow countrymen who were sincerely trying to emancipate the country from the colonial rule. Instead of enthusing over the English people, Chaudhuri celebrates
the spirit of Empire and the vitality of inter-cultural contact. He anticipates the decolonization of India with a foreboding. He regrets that the British did not complete their job and carry the process a stage further. Chaudhuri feels in times to come it is possible that the U.S.A. alone, or along with the British Commonwealth, might rejuvenate India and it has always needed for its life and vitality such foreign influences: “In plain words I expect either the United States singly or a combination of the United States and the British Commonwealth to establish and rejuvenate the foreign domination of India”. 4 Sunil Dasgupta writes on anglophilism of Chaudhuri: “I failed to understand why a man so much more knowledgeable and intellectually superior than the British lower middle-class that ruled India chose to celebrate his own slavery”. 5

Thus, the book is a pleasant study to know how Chaudhuri from a tiny seed of Kishoreganj has sprouted and grown into a big banyan tree stretching his branches of knowledge into different directions with his lush greenery of his luminous brilliance. To an ordinary person his attainment of mastery is a great mystery. He epitomizes some of what is best in the Bengali Badralok (gentry) the learned enlightened and civilized man of the city of Calcutta. Chaudhuri concludes his Autobiography with ‘An essay on the Course of Indian History’. It tells little of Chaudhuri’s personal history. He justifies its inclusion, for the book is: “more of national than personal history”. 6
Chaudhuri’s third book, *The Continent of Circe (The Heart of India, 1966)* is a denunciation of the Hindu society. If Chaudhuri’s second book *A Passage to England* is written with total fascination for England where he turns a pro-British; *The Continent of Circe* expresses his complete disillusionment with India and he seems to be an anti-Indian. His already pre-conceived and well established ideas have come to their logical conclusion in *The Continent of Circe*. The main purpose of the book is to describe the people of India in their natural grouping, both ethnic and cultural and analyze their collective personality in the light of historical evolution which has formed it.

The book is written as a self-dissection, a postmortem on Indians, particularly, the Hindu society. All the great ideas that we have nourished from our age-old traditions and all the self-praise in which we have seeped ourselves in our religion would be shattered while going through the book. The hypocrisy, self-vanity, self-deception, false prayers, double standards and dichotomy of Indian society are exposed nakedly to the much humiliation of Indians. The bold views that Chaudhuri expresses would hit on the head and prick the hearts of the Hindus, especially, conservatives who are described as ‘swine’. The book is a mirror reflecting the naked picture of the Indian society that needs to be corrected.

Chaudhuri has propounded a new theory called environmental fatalism. He puts forward the revolutionary thesis that the Hindus are originally Europeans.
settled in India corrupted and denatured by the tropical environment. Thus the book is a lament on the fate of the Aryan who left his homeland in Europe only to be caught in the steamy-heat of the Indo-Gangetic plain. His is an enquiry into the origins of Indian philosophy, a philosophy of sorrow prompted by the motive to rescue India from sorrow.

Chaudhuri expresses his strong conviction which is based on his life long observation. He says that there is a streak of insanity in the Hindu and that nobody will arrive at a normal personality: “In all Hindu activities, especially, in the public sphere, can be detected clear signs of either a feebleness of mental faculties or perversion of them”. The title of the book is symbolic that the vast continent of India is identified with Circe, the demoness and sorceress in Greek mythology under whose magical spell people became de-humanized and turned into swine. The geographical setting pervades the book influencing all the incoming people, for which reason the author has called India the continent of Circe. It has enervated and enfeebled the natives as well as the foreigners with her cruel and inimical environment by casting her everlasting spell. With its topical climate it affected even the brave and kindly people- the English. Even the best type of the English man could not escape being denatured by his stay in the country. He lost his sense of proposition, usual kindliness and equability; became a sexual pervert, deteriorated in collective behaviour and became extremely offensive. The subject
of comparing the Hindus with the swine is a major controversy which explodes like bomb shell. One cannot help observing that this is the “accumulated anger of seventy years bursting like a bombshell on a land that has been and is stifling to him” 8.

**To Live Or Not To Live** (1970) considers how we can have a happy social and family life under the conditions to which we are born in this country. Indians always brood in self-pity. They cannot be happy and cannot tolerate seeing others happy. He sarcastically says that “Indians as a people possess a remarkable genius for being unhappy and making others unhappy” 9. He expresses his earnestness for a happy personal and social life by quoting R.L.Stevenson: “There is no duty we so much underrate as the duty of being happy”.10

Chaudhuri quotes Plato’s dictum, ‘The uncriticized (or examined ) life is not worth living’. ‘Living to some purpose’ alone is living to Chaudhuri and ‘living unsoundly’ is not living at all. He analyses the basic facets of social and family life with a view to make life worth living and more meaningful. In his pungent manner, he exposes the hollowness of age-old Indian traditions which govern our system of values, morals, family and social life. He then enables the readers to reconsider their values, ideals and actions they have hither to live by.

Genuine social life is not a matter of compulsory or unavoidable meetings with relatives, neighbours, and the like. It is ‘to be in the company of the people for
whom we sincerely care’. But it is rare for people in India to value a person regardless of his wealth or position. Another major short coming is the virtual segregation of the sexes in social life. The joint family has outlived its usefulness because it does not allow its members to develop individual personalities. Nevertheless, women should not be allowed to work, as working women are a threat to the family.

The book is the embodiment of Chaudhuri’s personal vision which is the result of his life-long observation. His generalizations about the Indian society are based upon his personal experience with people, events and situations of the Indian society. And this makes his essay personal. The book turns out to be a treatise on social and family relations in India in which he both probes into the sociological foundations of our social and family life. He advances suggestions as to how they can be moved towards an end which will offer greater happiness and fulfillment. Individual life and social life are complementary but not contradictory with each other.

Chaudhuri spent the first twelve years of his life at Kishoreganj and he occasionally visited his ancestral village, Banagram, and his mother’s village, Kalikutch. He was brought up and nurtured in an atmosphere of urbanity and rusticity at Kishoreganj and his visits to his ancestral village created in him an
awareness of blood kinship and family traditions and relations. This enabled him to understand the peculiar problems of the Indian society.

*Culture in the Vanity Bag* (1976) has a lot of exciting titillation as it is an exercise in erotics. Chudhuri describes the erotics of men and women, their modish behaviour and their craving for fashions in imitation of the film-stars are described with amusement. He keeps the sartorial culture of subcontinent in the colourful vanity bag which is no other than India. Costumes out of custom or fashion are used in a wholly different and even unsuitable environment. He points out certain quaint sartorial customs: “In Madras people wore a tie even when they put on coat over the dhoti”. ¹¹

It shows that Chaudhuri is a keen observer of life around him. His analysis is tinged with satire and intellectual humour. Chaudhuri wants to show the connection between the Indian clothing and the Indian history. Clothes are the external manifestations of the innermost cultural habits of men. He views India as a “museum or warehouse of cultures’ exhibiting a motley of clothing. He rightly points out the close connection between jewellery and clothing. He equates the Hindu woman’s attachment for gold to her madness for saris. Chaudhuri says that the dowdyism, eve-teasing and molestation of girls and women is the result of provocative and glamorous methods of feminine dressing or clothing. He shows the connection between the cheapening of clothes and the vulgarity of the Indian
film world. The book is historical, analytical and satirical and holds a mirror to Chaudhuri’s microscopic intelligence.

The climate and weather of the country are hostile to the effective adoption of European clothing by the Indian people. The impulse to wear the European clothes came not from taste, but from snobbery and it is easy to indulge in this. The wholesale imitation of British ways which characterizes the Indian ruling class today is a strange paradox—pride of possession without possession in any real sense. There is a great deal of truth in what he says about the current fashions in clothing and adornment in India. The imitation of fashions in cinema is endless as it is a powerful force working in favour of ugliness. Exhibition of luscious flesh to the lusty eyes looks not only unpleasant but also unaesthetic.

Chaudhuri speaks openly that garments are worn more in obedience to fashion than custom now a days. This natural drift towards sensuality has been powerfully helped by the cinema in India. Here it is primarily a money making and even a sordid industry and business, and in order to attract the largest body of the customers it has for decades been exploiting all the vicarious sensuality that exists in the country: “A vicious circle of sensual inflation, our cinema has reached a level whose degradation is not approached even by the lowest films from Hollywood”. Chaudhuri says that many women and young girls take their dress makers to see a film, so that they might point out to them the clothes of the
particular film star they wish to imitate. Thus, the fashions in dress arouse sensuality. Chaudhuri has inculcated the habit of measuring Indian life style with the European yard sticks.

*Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse* (1997) is an excellent commentary on the decadence of human civilization. With the publication of this book, in the twilight of his hundredth year, Chudhuri holds unique record for being the world’s oldest author. Here he brings to bear the accumulated wisdom of a life spent in dispassionate pursuit of knowledge. He tells us about the decline of the civilization all over the world. There is a mood of disillusionment as Choudhuri describes one day the universe be gone and the universe will cease to exist. With this dejected mood he describes at great length the decadence in England, India and the U.S.

Chaudhuri says that Western civilization today is no longer exclusively western. It has expanded all over the world. It has two clearly marked divisions. There is the inner circle which is fully lighted and is occupied by peoples of European origins; around it is a very much larger circle, which is the penumbra of the central sun and is occupied by diverse non-European people like Asians and Africans. Chaudhuri considers the concepts of Individualism, Nationalism and Democracy are the ‘three horsemen’ of the ‘new apocalypse’. He says that these three are mainly responsible for the decadence of contemporary civilization.
Chaudhuri lived in England for twenty-six years. He describes decadence in government, religion and morality. He also finds decadence in morality, in adultery and homo-sexuality, which are now considered natural. One of the signs of decadence in America is the ease with which marriage is dissolved. This absence of conjugal felicity surprised Chaudhuri: “The same persons who were husband and wife today became ‘Friends’ the next day”. The other sign of decadence is overdependence on technology. But when Chaudhuri describes the supposed decadence of English and American societies he only talks of the disintegration of the old institutions such as the aristocracy, the family and the church. R. K. Kaul comments: “Chaudhur’s obsession with the glory of the good old days prevents him from observing the radical alterations that have taken place since the end of the World War-II”.

A great historian, a literary giant, a man of letters and an extraordinary scholar Chaudhuri makes an indelible impression on his readers by offering a delightful reading of his books. At times, he is an iconoclast, at others, an atheist questioning the deep-rooted irrational beliefs and superstitions which are deeply seeped in Indian society. He doesn’t accept anything blindly just because it has been accepted for a long time. Chaudhuri’s vision of life is essentially earth bound as he is of the conviction ‘that man is nothing but a product of historical and
environmental forces’. His historical knowledge prevents him from mythifying and glorifying the persons or events under discussion.

One of the interesting and noteworthy features of Chaudhuri’s writings is the sociological aspect. As a scholar and a very keen observer of the society, he presents vivid and revealing pictures of different societies namely the Hindu, the English, the Muslim, the Christian and the Anglo-Indian. He views these societies, from the perspectives of history, ethnology, sociology, and philosophy, and makes some very illuminating comments on them. In this process, he sometimes, assumes the role of a social moralist and preacher; at other times, he is essentially a social critic bitterly criticizing these societies for their lapses, and on still other occasions, he becomes a sociologist formulating and laying down some very individualistic and original, sociological theories. Thus, having placed Nirad C. Chaudhuri, against the background of Indo-Anglian tradition in general, and Indo-Anglian prose writing in particular, it would be merely a step further to pass on to an assessment of Nirad Chaudhuri as a sociologist, or rather, ‘a social thinker’ because of the heavy weight of social content in the body of his writings.

Chaudhuri is often described by his critics as, The Little Big Man and The Angry Old Man. He is short-statured, tiny and delicately built, with a large head, out of proportion with the rest of his body, and bald, therefore, closely resembling a caricature. But his works bristle with information and opinions, illumine with
thought, provoke ideas and sparkle elegant epigrams. What is said of Bacon – His words come down like the strokes of hammer – is also true in the case of Chaudhuri. He not only enlightens and entertains in the best of neo-classical tradition, but also enrages his readers often. Sometimes he gets a malicious delight out of annoying people, pushing them to the end of their tether. He is angry and aggressive, hot and acrid for the benefit of the world. His wit is sharp, his analysis brilliant, his point of view original — yet, the taste it leaves in the mouth is mostly bitter-sour. Paul Verghese sums up:

Nirad Chaudhuri’s ideas are controversial; they are characterized by self-opinionatedness; he is pedantic and his writings are heavy with references and innumerable French and Latin quotations. But the fact nevertheless remains that he is the most conscious craftsman among the Indian writers of English prose today. Chaudhuri’s views on India and her people may be irritating, but he compels our admiration even when he causes irritation.¹⁴

One cannot but agree with Kushwanth Singh who declared Chaudhuri “a scholar extraordinary” after the title of Nirad Chaudhuri’s own book written in 1974 on the German writer, Max Muller. His encyclopaedic erudition has captivated many.
REFERENCES


10  Ibid. p.174.


12  Ibid. p.177.
