Chapter-2

Stories, Poems and Non-fictional Prose

Chaudhuri ia a prolific writer who has successfully written in several genres. His creative genius has successfully grappled with poetry, stories, essays, memoir and literary criticism in addition to novels. With his penchant for modernism Chaudhuri is interested in the movement between two different worlds – inner and outer. He has therefore written about two or more incompatible cultural worlds in a variety of genres. In fact, poetry was his first love and he started writing poems at the early age of fifteen or sixteen. But he could not keep up his fidelity to poetry as other genres equally called for his active engagement and practice. He continued to write and publish poems now and then which were finally published under the title ‘St Cyril Road and Other Poems’ in 2005. However, his collection of stories, ‘Real Time: Stories and a Reminiscence’ appeared earlier in the year 2002. This volume of stories was followed by the publication of a miscellaneous volume containing a poem, six prose pieces and a conversation with swagats Ganguly. Coterminal with the appearance of small orange Flags in 2003 was the publication of a critical book on D.H. Lawrence which happens to be a slightly modified version of Chaudhuri’s doctoral dissertation at Oxford. His next collection of essays, Clearing a Space: Reflections on India, Literature and Culture came out in 2008. It is an invaluable document to understand Chaudhuri’s views on India, literature and culture both in general and particular terms. ‘Several essays of this volume were
published in journals such as the London Review of Books and the Times Literary supplement. These essays reveal a literary project of great value in understanding Indian and global modernity.

In her review of this book, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan remarked, ‘Amit Chaudhuri’s collected essays and reviews constitute an intellectual autobiography of the first importance.’ Another reviewer, Samuel Eisenstadt indulgently praised this collection as ‘….. a wonderful key to the understanding of the vitality and specificity of Indian modernity and of the modern transformation of Indian civilization…. Worth the serious attention of scholars in the social sciences as well as the humanities.’ Pankaj Mishra’s appreciation accords great importance to Amit Chaudhuri when he observes: ‘Whether making music or writing prose, Amit Chaudhuri offers a distinctive spiritual history of modernity. These collected meditations which are as elegantly fastidious as they are intellectually adventurous – confirm him as one of our most provocative and consistently interesting artists. On Tagore: Reading the Poet Today incorporates five critical and scholarly essays on Tagore’s poetry, commemorating the 150th anniversary of Tagore in 2011. This collection of essays appeared in 2012, there years later than his fifth novel ‘The Immortals’ which was published in 2009. Culcutta: Two years in the City is Chaudhuri’s memoir of his two year stay (2009-2011) in the megapolis. He offers an account the city beginning from the 19th century to the twenty – first. He travels the city in both physical and imaginative terms. Published in 2013, Calcutta is lyrical, brilliantly observed and profound. This memoir beautifully charts out Calcutta’s journey as a city which comes to life in the poetic prose of Chaudhuri. He evokes all that is most particular and extra-ordinary about the city - from its houses with slatted windows to its effervescent cultural life. What is more he paints an acute,
often ironic picture of life in city today – of its malls and restaurants, its fitful attempts to embrace globalisation, its middle class who leave and then return reluctantly, its bygone aristocracy, and its poor. Chaudhuri captures the spirit of Calcutta which seems to be on the verge of another turn. It seems to be on the horns of a dilemma it its desire to retain the essence of old life, culture and values on the one hand and its easy acceptance of and assimilation with the forces of globalization.

In fact, Chaudhuri’s first love was poetry but he switched over to both fictional and non-fictional forms of writing wherein his genius found a more fertile soil to grow and blossom. As pointed out in the preceding chapter, he is fundamentally inclined towards modernism and takes delight in the representation of fragments which reflect a composite picture of the local culture he has known, experienced and observed both as insider and outsider. These fragments carry immense import in so far as his poetic impulse invariably brings about a transformation, rendering the banal and ordinary into an extraordinary and exhilarating experience. His collection of poems, ‘St. Cyril Road and other Poems (2005)’ is a valuable document in understanding his preoccupation with cultural spaces which are configured in a variety of themes and styles. Neatly divided into three parts, this volume contains fifty poems in all. But it does not incorporate all the poems by Chaudhuri who confirms this fact in his preface: However, taken together, these poems represent about nineteen years’ work (I confess that they are not all I have written, many early poems haven’t been included). They represent a tectonically slow but ongoing development, and a love that I have not, barring a few instances, made public until now. (Chaudhuri 2005: x)
In her review of St. Cyril Road and other Poems, Nilanjana S. Roy seems to be reserved in her appreciation when she observes: St. Cyril Road and other Poems is an unusual collection of poetry from a prose writer often praised for the poetic quality of his prose. It bears the stamp of poems written in Chaudhuri’s youth when he intended to be not just a writer, but a poet, and the more private watermark of poems written at a stage when he had become the writer, poems not meant for publication. And it has the hallmark of his prose work, his ability to store away apparently unremarkable moments and images and illuminate them in recollection, his love for the mundane over the extraordinary, the connections he makes between language and music….. for all that, St. Cyril Road suffers from inwardness; Chaudhuri’s world is deeply internal, implacably personal, despite the stray poems here on war and Kashmir and violence…. St. Cyril Road is important for readers in search of the quiet moment, or readers who want to race Chaudhuri’s development as a writer in love with language. And it is an important book for Chaudhuri to have published, it takes some courage, after years of being identified as a prose writer, to stake claim to the poetry that was his first love. But this is too slight a collection, its impact too mild, to establish Chaudhuri as a major poet. He has staked his claim; perhaps a second collection, less haphazard, will consolidate it. (Indian Express, 16 Feb, 2005)

Despite the guarded appreciation accorded to St. Cyril Road and Other Poems, the poems remain a significant document to understand Chaudhuri’s sense of place and by implication illuminate his efforts at mapping the cultural spaces. His attachment to the cities of Bombay and Calcutta forms the core of some of his early poems, though the latter poems grapple with a variety of themes related to other cities, domestic
spaces like veranda and kitchen, winter and rain, poets such as Nissin Ezekid and Rimbaud, cloudburst, and a host of other themes.

This slim volume of poems seems to introduce a variety of concerns that evoke poetic response in Chaudhuri. Sometimes a place like St. Cyril Road becomes a thing of immediate interest to the poet transporting him back to his adolescent life in Bombay. The point of focus in the poem is the Christian minority that clings like ivy to its own branches of faith.’ (St. Cyril Road and Other Poems: 5). Interestingly, the place itself grows into a metaphor of minority culture which seems to promise a kind of relief to the poet as he yearns to be one with nature and its music….. There is a Yeatsian strain of escapism from the jungle of concrete and stone which the city of Bombay stands for. Chaudhuri verbalizes his feelings in the lines,

That’s why I’ve come to
St. Cyril Road

to lose myself among the Christians and feel Bombay like a huge load
off my long suffering chest (St. Cyril Road: 6)

In fact, Bombay is so deeply ingrained in the poet’s mind that he can’t help celebrating its fragments, aptly exemplified in the poem, The Bandra Medical store.’ His keen poetic observation invariably captures spaces such as houses seen in an aerial view. The sense of place combines both familiarity and strangeness with an added emphasis on the minutiae which is evident in the line, ‘But I took care/not to squash a warrior ant that scuttled before me (ibid). Like D.H. Lawrence who celebrates the dignity and otherness of a creature like snake (I had missed my chance
with one of the lords of life), Chaudhuri invests the ant with an unprecedented glamour ‘He was so dignified, so black.’ (ibid, 6)

In a long poem divided into five sections – Midday, Evening, Sunday, Community, Afterlife – Chaudhuri attempts to capture the ethos of St. Cyril Road locality. Particularly, the fourth section titled ‘Community’ is fairly revealing in its description of the decline of Christian community in Bombay. The old Christian houses and bungalows now stand overshadowed by tall buildings and present a dismal scene:

…… as each timed bungalow’

Is emptied and Christians who lived behind those doors generations together, now old as weed, sell their land and property for drink. Their houses come down on all fours. In their place, the large buildings burgeon with neat rectangular gardens, I myself live in one.

(St. Cyril Road & other Poems: 12)

Chaudhuri tries to configure the seascape around Bombay in the poem ‘The steamer’ which brings into perspective ONGC, Bombay and the Gateway of India, confirming Chaudhuri’s preoccupation with spaces. The steamer itself turns into a metaphor of journey. And ‘Words for Music’ evokes a world of the fantasy of passionate love accompanied by a brief but focused look into the life of the villages: In the villages, the dwarfish, thatched huts hide a coolness and calm transience, like small churches in the heat….. (ibid, P. 20)

And the poem ‘Afternoon Raag’ is a commemorative poem composed ‘In memory of Pandit Govind Prasad Jaipurwale (1941-1988), Chaudhuri pays tribute to a doyen of classical music who enriched the
Indian culture with his remarkable services and performance. Chaudhuri arrests the very essence of the space, and music in progress:

> When the music teacher joins in intermittently, he shows
> What a strange thing the human voice is,
> The tiny instrument in the throat, with its hidden universe of notes, its delicate, inscrutable laws.

A raag, spacious as the mansion the rain builds, unfolds and
Sighs, like one of the elements.
Inside the great architecture of the raag, though the clear archway of notes world without humans,
two figures sit each alone

Unsurprisingly, the uncommon feature of Chaudhuri’s poems is to render the ordinary and common objects like a car into something extraordinary. The familiar Indian ritual at the purchase of a new vehicle or car is an evidence of the cultural rootedness of Indians and it is succinctly articulated in the poem Lemon’:

> The first day it rumbled in, we got
> A fat priest to bless it, we
> Inaugurated it half a grizzled coconut and holy
> Smiles, it stood like an unearthly goddess in armour

(St. Cyril Road & other Poems: P. 25-26)

For Chaudhuri, a car stands as a metaphor of closed space. ‘Going for a Drive’ sounds like a metonymic evocation of the poetic impulse about the space: When was I last with you in this car in this closed space?
Chaudhuri makes even ordinary objects like ‘Old spice’ after shave lotion into a remarkable poetic contemplation. His preoccupation with living spaces such as ‘Verandah’ organizes itself into the fabric of a poem in which he limens the city to a room with cloud’s ceiling. Darkness, windows, empty teacups and ‘The servants folded in rest like clothes’ conjure up a picture of the quotidian life which reflects the local culture of the city of Bombay. One may place as a parallel the poet’s observation on the city of Oxford in the poem ‘Martin Building Oxford wherein ‘The sun makes space, in which the bird/ unseen lives.’ (P. 36). What is more, Chaudhuri’s keen poetic insight captures some vital moments in the lives of unremarkable people like the cook and man servant. His poetic canvas allows space for abstract as well as concrete subjects and objects such as ‘poem’ and the ‘shape’ which betoken the broad expanse of the Indian cultural and philosophical tradition. A wooden instrument called ‘shape’ becomes an occasion for philosophical speculations and poetic exercise. The poem called ‘The Shape’ echoes the poet’s reflective mood with its remarkable precision and pointedness. Similarly, he evokes the vastness of kitchen through its limited space and wares. It becomes a place where ‘the gleaming hands/ working like music’ enchant the poet’s imagination.

In part three of St. Cyril Road and Other Poems, these are twenty-seven poems most of which are short poetic pieces celebrating various fragments of life. These poems also provide an insight into Chaudhuri’s involvement with literature and literary figures. ‘Rimbaud’ and ‘Nissin Ezekwel’ along with ‘Memorabilia’ conjure up the memory of poetic stalwarts such as Rimbaud, Ezekiel, Thom Gunn, T.S, Eliot, Ezra Pound, Bansil Bunting, Roy Campbell, Peter Porter, and a host of other literary figures who have influenced Chaudhuri in ways more than one. He feels
sad for Rimbaud’s exiled life and remembers having seen Ezekiel in Bombay when Chaudhuri was seventeen. ‘Memorabila’ can be taken as Chaudhuri’s poetic manifesto where he categorically speaks about his poetic identity and a sense of togetherness with poetic fraternity.

To want to be not an Indian or English
Poet, but simply a ‘poet’ like the others,
to be undivided from them by class and geography,
those other languages within languages,
as I believed them fundamentally
undivided from each other.
I’d begin a poem hoping to shape the first sentence
So that it sounded like Pound; the other like Larkin
Free from history and intention,
teased by the grave sound of voices.

(St. Cyril Road and Other Poems: 56)

Even an insect like wasp turns into a metaphor of cultural discourse: A wasp:/there must be a nest nearby (ibid: 58). The multi storeyed buildings and shortage of water have clear association with metropolitan culture of which the poet has been an eye-witness and active participant. Besides, there are poems like ‘The Fall of Baghdad’ and ‘Histories of Stone’ which bring to memory the historical and cultural aspects of modern life. Chaudhuri’s preoccupation with houses, windows, verandas and corridors appears as a fleeting glimpse in ‘The French windows shook’, while his memory of Taj Mahal which he had visited in 1970 with his parents. The poem ‘Histories of Stones’ opens with a memorable line: The Taj Mahal is not so much an elegy to the queen as to love. (St. Cyril Road and Other Poems: 73)
This slender volume of poems aptly ends with ‘Apples still come from Kashmir’ which brings into focus the poet’s ironic remark over terrorism in Kashmir. The poet seems to suggest that nature still retains its sweetness as opposed to human cruelty and violence manifest in terrorist activities. It may be taken as a message of peace and consolation which can sustain the humanity and can effect a change of heart for a better world which is free from hatred, violence, arson, killing and meaningless bloodshed.

Real Time and Other Stories (2002) is a specimen of Chaudhuri’s skill in story-telling. Out of the fifteen stories collected in this volume, two stories are retellings and, as Chaudhuri wrote in ‘note’ to the collection, quite personal interpretations of episodes from Hindu mythologies “An Infatuation” recounts the episode of Suparnakha’s visit to Panchwati where Ram, Sita and Lakshman had their temporary abode. Another story “The Wedding” is a retelling of the story of Lord Shiv’s wedding. Soon after its publication, this volume of stories received lots of critical acclaim and accolade from media. The inside and the backside covers of the book contain as many as fifteen comments most of which highlight and appreciate Chaudhuri’s narrative ability and craft, his mastery over the details in terms of precision and effect and above all his creative vigour in dealing with the realities of middle class Indian life and culture. These stories range across the astonishing face of the modern Indian subcontinent from a divorcee about to enter into an arranged marriage to a teenaged poet who develops a relationship with a lonely widower, from singing teachers to housewives to white collar businessmen, Chaudhuri deftly explores the juxtaposition of the old and new worlds in his native India.
Real Time: Stories and a Reminiscence opens with the story ‘Portrait of an Artist’ which charts the making of a poet in the literary and cultural climate of an anglicized Calcutta where middle – class Bengalis are shown as enthusiastic readers and critics of Anglo American poetry. The seventeen - year – old protagonist is a budding poet whose poems are published in the Illustrated Weekly of India. There is an autobiographical touch in the story as the protagonist, like Chaudhuri himself, recounts his experience of his early creative life alongside the cultural ambience of Calcutta which he counterpoints against London where he moves for higher studies. There are fond memories of his cousin Binoy whose English tutor Mastermoshai becomes the focal point of reference and guidance to the protagonist in his creative pursuit of poetic composition. Chaudhuri’s interest in the middle – class Bengali families and houses lead him to encapsulate the urban landscape of Calcutta during the Durga Puga, when

…..the balconies of the neighbouring houses would be lit with green and blue neon lights, and families would walk towards the end of the lane that curved to the right, and join the crowd that was either coming from or walking towards the goddess. Bank clerks, school teachers, small businessmen, with their wives and children, the boys in shorts and the girls in frocks, looking like the pictures of children on the covers of exercise books, formed that tireless crowd. On the other side of the lane, after one had crossed the main road, one came to a lake with spacious adjoining walks where couples strolled in the evening and children, accompanied by maidservants, came to play. Binoy and I would walk past the lake in the afternoon, where women washed saris or scoured utensils with ash on its steps, and the heat had just abbed into a cloudy, dream – like vacancy. (Real Time: 3-4)
When the protagonist met his cousin’s tutor Mastermoshai, he was sixteen years old and had a poem published in Youth Times. Prior to the meeting, while the protagonist was in Bombay, his cousin had shown the poem to Mastermoshai who was impressed by it. He recounts his first encounter with the tutor and draws a fairly convincing portrait of him: He had a very Bengali face, with short, slightly wavy hair, a forehead of medium breadth, spectacles that belonged to his face as much as his eyes did, deep lines around his mouth, and teeth that jutted out from under his lip, making his face belong to the pre-orthodontal days. His teeth were tobacco–stained; I was to find that he, like most Bengali men, smoked constantly. (Real Time: 5)

While recalling Mastermoshai’s habit of smoking, the protagonist associates his long pull on the cigarette ‘with anachronistic old – world atmosphere of Calcutta’. (ibid) for him, Mastermoshai represented a generation which had passed on a while ago. He reflects on the physical attractiveness of Mastermoshai with a retrospective glance on the older generation with its cultural norms and traditions.

One has only to see old Bengali films to realize that men were slighter and smaller in those days, but with a proportionate elegance and agility. (ibid)

In fact, Mastermoshai turns out to be a point of reference in the cultural discourse which foregrounds the protagonist’s passionate involvement with classical Indian music as well as a socio-cultural perspective on the city of Calcutta itself. Recital of Tagore’s poem further accentuates the Bengali cultural ethos. Despite the strained relations, the protagonist had a chance to meet Mastermoshai at his uncle’s house.
where, as he tells, he had put a record of Hindustani classical music on the gramophone:

…..and listening to it, I was waving one arm passionately in the air keeping time with the music. Unknown to me, mastermoshai came and stood behind me, waving his arms as well (Real Time: 12)

To the protagonist’s mind, literature is not only a valuable cultural production but also life – enhancing vehicle. He looks back to the period in which he knew mastermoshai as a transitional one ‘when, after having lost his wife and children, having seen through life, he returned to his youthful enthusiasms – Baudelaire Eliot – to temporarily regain his sanity.’ (ibid: 12) The train of memories spanning the period of the protagonist’s stay in London for higher studies opens up a fresh perspective on the city of Calcutta and Bengali culture therein. He distenetly recalls:

I realized that a strange connection between this small, cold island [England] and faraway Bengal had given rise to the small – town world of Calcutta, and even to mastermoshai: from a distance. I saw it gradually in perspective – a colonial small town, with its trams and taxis, unknown to, and cut off from, the rest of the world, full of love for the romance of literature that I have not found anywhere else and that is somehow a vivid part of small – town life. (Real Time: 13) Further, the memory of Calcutta subsumes his cousin Benoy who is settled there for good and ‘Calcutta is his universe, like a dewdrop, it holds within it the light and colours of the entire world.’ (Real Time: 14)

The third story in the collection, ‘The Man from Khurda District’ brings into focus the social realities of upper – middle class Bengali
households that employ servants. It brings out the ugly face of a cross-section of society which takes to criminal activities. Bishu, a poor fellow, works as a servant at Mr. Banerjee’s (a bhadralok Bengali) house and brings a man to stay at the servant—quarters. But this new incumbent from Khurda district eventually turns out to be a thief for whose act of theft, Bishu is expelled from the house and is doomed to seek another employment is this city of strangers. Chaudhuri deftly captures their sense of rootedness and then sudden uprooting caused by the treachery of their new acquaintance from Khurda. When Bishu and his wife Uma leave Mr. Banerjee’s place, they feel bewildered and lost with betrayal and a feeling of loss. Perhaps movement to uncertain destination was their destiny:

It was journey from the centre of the city, Ballygunge, with its tall buildings and shops, to what was much farther away and older. The room in the outhouse had not been much, but it had been something in an area where even the rich cannot afford a house, it had given Bishu and Uma a place to stay in proximity to the lives of well-off, to employment, and yet given them independence for the life of their small and new family. Now that phase of their lives, which, after all, was so relatively brief that they had hardly become used to it, was ending and another was about to begin. (Real Time: 43)

Once again the title story ‘Real Time’ brings about an ironic exposure of a cultural practice, shraddhra, especially in upper class Calcutta households: The hubbub common to shraddha ceremonies was absent: people welcoming others as they came in, even the sense, and the conciliatory looks, of bereavement, instead there was a sort of pointlessness, as people refused to acknowledge what did not quite have a
definition. (Real Time: 66) In the like manner, Chaudhuri exposes the banality of a second marriage with exclamatory remarks and questions: ‘A second marriage! What was marriage, after all ?’ (Real Time: 78)

though the background of the event finally comes to be Calcutta with its vivid socio-cultural features and familiar cityscape, Chaudhuri makes a dig at the artificiality of their gestures in the exercise of second marriage. The couple who decided to enter the second marriage were entirely ignorant of its purpose and significance. At its best, it was a matter of convenience to them, with no joy or enthusiasm accompanying it:

They had no idea, really, what it was all about: members of both sides of the family become like conspirators, and decided to keep the fact a secret till they had an inkling as to what the shape and features of a second marriage were (Real Time: 78)

Through the female protagonist of the story, Arpita, the author demonstrates the hollowness of a second marriage between the couples who carry the painful memories of their broken marriages. It was not be an everlasting bond between too individuals. As Arpita remembers her first marriage six years ago, she feels distraught, when these same people

…..had blessed her at the ashirbaad ceremony before her first marriage. Now they would have to be summoned again, like figures brought to life a second time from a wooden panel where they’d been frozen…. The embarrassment, the fatigue, of blessing a niece, or a grandniece, or a daughter, second time! (Real Time: 80)

Arpita stands as a prototype of traditional Indian woman with her fixed idea of the sanctity of first marriage. She notices among the people around her (family, friends and relations) an air of acceptance and
tentative experimentation rather than celebration. Their outlook towards marriage is provisional rather than final. In Arpita, especially, there was a deep sadness because she realized the marriage ceremony has only one incarnation. She reflect on marriage with the traditional cultural baggage:

…. It [marriage] has no second birth or afterlife that the fire cannot be lit again, consumed and charred as it had been by ghee, nor the garlands re-exchanged, except in memory, where it can be played again and again, like a videotape (Real Time: 81)

Thus, Arpita questions the very relevance and purpose of her marriage again. Everything seemed to be artificial and stage-managed to her and the participants including the pair, their family and relations behaved in an unreal way ‘like visitors from a remote planet who were studying the civilizations of this one from a book, and finding their habits increasingly difficult to put to use’. (ibid).

There are numerous references to food, clothes, houses and several other details of quotidian life in Calcutta and elsewhere in the stories. ‘The Party’ is a case in point where Chaudhuri describes the socio-cultural aspects of upper – middle class life in terms of throwing dinner parties. In White lies’, Chaudhuri takes up the life of a music teacher along with the details concerning the amateur and professional lovers and practitioners of music. At the centre of this story is Mrs. Chatterjee, wife of a business executive, who has a passion for singing. For this purpose, she continued to employ one music teacher after another and the young music teacher called ‘masterji’ was her latest employment. Devotional songs and bhajans were the choice of Ruma, better known as Mrs. Chatterjee. She used to change teachers every three or four years, when they began to dominate her too much, or when they became irregular. But
the new teacher (Mohan Lal) was much younger than she, and she had grown fond of him. Mohanji had increased his clientele in visiting this building and this area. Chaudhuricatalogues the residents of the building in terms of their panchant for music and singing:

In this building itself, there were other amateur singers on the seventh floor, Mrs Prem Raheja sang devotional songs..... for her, singing was less an aesthetic pastime (as it was for Mrs. Chatterjee) than a religious one; she was devoutly religious. Then there was Neha Kapur on the eleventh floor, who liked to sing ghazals. (Real Time: 131)

This story works out a critique of the traditional Indian culture with its emphasis on classical Hindustani music and devotional songs. The author suggests a symbolic decline of classical music through the deteriorating health of the music teacher whose pupils were largely well-to-do women. Musical evenings surfaced as a manifestation of marked cultural transition. This shift could be easily identified in Mohanji’s surprise at the rich people’s desire for what could not be theirs. The women of the rich families yearned to become singers without having the requisite talent or inclination for it. So, despite his poor health, Mohanji continued to give lessons both in bhajan and ghajal territories of music:

The ghazal was in boom: everyone wanted to sing songs about some imminent but unrealistic beloved. (Real Time: 150) Chaudhuri captures the cultural turn in the city of Bombay when he observes:

Bhajans, too, had become big business of late: women wore their best saris and diamonds and went to the concert hall to listen to the new singer. And somehow, everyone felt that they, too, could sing, and be singers, and be famous. (Real Time: 150)
Here Chaudhuri seems to offer a critique of the upper class life in Bombay as these women took up music as a thing of fashion. And teachers like Mohanji were obliged to adjust to their whims in order to keep the household running. This world of affluence infected classical artists such as Mohanji who was obliged to sing ghazals and bhajans for his survival. In course of time, music teachers like Mohanji become redundant in the era of internet and globalization which is a sure indication of the ascendency of mass culture.

In Real Time: Stories and a Reminiscence, we find people and places depicted with depth and accuracy. His touch on portraying people is deft. The cities of Calcutta and Bombay have a reality that is rare as Chaudhuri brings to wife the vivid socio-cultural backgrounds of these cities along with life – like characters. The contours of stark reality mark most of the stories which are by and large rooted in India.

Besides this collection of stories, Chaudhuri published a collection of essays titled ‘Clearing a Space: Reflections on India, Literature and Culture’ in 2008. This volume is neatly divided into two parts: Part one with subtitle ‘Towards a Poeties of the Indian Modern’ contains sixteen essays while part two with the title ‘Alternative Traditions, Alternative Readings’ incorporates nine essays on literature across the world.

Chaudhuri seems all the more remarkable because of his authorial concern with culture, modernity and the ordinariness which constitute a framework as well as a vehicle for clearing a space for himself. This collection of essays variously reflects his positioning in the overall literary, critical and cultural discourse. Clearing a Space brings together many of his best essays, written over a period of about fifteen years in such journals as the London Review of Books, and The Times Literary
supplement. This body of his work has seen widely praised and reveals a literary project of great value in understanding Indian and global modernity.

There remains little doubt about Chaudhuri’s preoccupation with modernity which forms part of his engagement with culture and his enthusiasm in mapping cultural spaces. Often beginning with the personal, Chaudhuri enquires into nature of the secular in India, into the history of such categories as the west, the foreign, the global, and the exotic; and into the frequently torn and self-divided nature of modern Indian identity. Indian popular culture and high culture, travel and location in Paris, Bombay, Dublin, Calcutta, and New York, empire and nationalism, music, Hollywood and Bollywood, and the place of the everyday in creativity are some of the subjects fascinatingly written about in this book.

Additionally, Chaudhuri also makes a powerful case for thinking about Indian literature and culture in a way that departs strikingly from the parameters created since the publication of Midnight’s Children and the consolidation of postcolonial studies. While his mode is broadly oppositional, it is also one of constant engagement with the positions he is arguing against. Many of these essays were originally published as reviews while a few of them were presented as paper at various conferences. The introductory piece, On Clearing a Space categorically states the author’s intention:

From the beginning, I have been concerned with clearing a space for a particular kind of discussion, and as I’ve become more and more aware of my own intentions, I’ve turned my gaze on the intentions
themselves, and made thinking about them part of my enquiry. (On Clearing a Space: 2008:11)

As an Indian writer of fiction in English, Chudhuri claims his position as angular and this angularity itself provides a common thread that runs through the essays, whether they are about modernity, humanism, or individual authors. He further observes that these essays are the work of a writer to whom the experience of marginality, and the significance of the minority vantage-point has been important, but who finds it difficult to adhere to, or accept, the post-colonial intellectual’s or author’s exclusive right in the present moment to define what the minority or marginal experience might be. In the prose – pieces Chaudhuri poses several questions about identity and language vis-à-vis the rationale of postcolonial theory.

Part of Chaudhuri’s project in the introduction is said to be his resistance not to a particular species of orthodoxy but to ‘the terms of the argument as they’re given to us today with the so-called ‘bhasha’ or Indian – language writers on the one side, and Rushdie and his putative progeny on the other, and that modernity rather than identity, authenticity, or language might be one way of shifting the focus, of remapping a history (Clearing a Space: 13). In his characteristic oppositional mode, Chaudhuri dismantles the binaries such as cosmopolitan, secular, east-west, high-culture – popular culture, national – vernacular literature. He dwells at length on Bengali humanism as a formative factor in the shaping of his own sensibility:

My own sensibility was formed, to a large extent by a Bengali humanism which has its provenance in Calcutta in the nineteenth century. There is no point in either making a secret of this fact or
advertising it, but understanding what it means in this instance; because one presumes that no two cases of cultural formation can be exactly alike. Even categories such as European and Indian culture have made themselves available to me, I now realize, at least partly through prism and filter of this humanism. And yet, as I didn’t grow up in Calcutta, it didn’t come to me via a pedagogic route, or from a source of authority; it wasn’t, in other words, a conscious and privileged context. (idid)

Chaudhuri goes on to explain his positioning in cultural terms. His individual identity has been shaped, among other things, by the ethos of elite pop culture in which he grew up in 1960s and 1970s Bombay. He views youthful absorption in European modernism and the consequent intellectual formation not so much a matter of cultural pride but as a point of entry into a discussion through which he might secure a place for himself as a writer. He says, for instance. If he writes about Tagore, it is not because he considers Tagore as a national icon but as mere poet. He further explains his stance an humanism that for him it is not less a matter of allegiance than a primary act of distancing:

In dwelling on ‘Indian’ or ‘Bengali’ humanism, I’m not trying to add to the knowledge of variants of humanism in the world, or issuing a corrective; nor am I interested in returning to a last, utopian paradigm of ‘high’ modernity. What I am interested in are the elisions that direct the binaries (East, West, high, low; native, foreign; fantasy, reality; elite, democratic) within which, by some subtle but inescapable default mechanism, we generally position ourselves in relation to our cultural
formation, binaries that, however, do not corroborate our experience of the world. (Clearing a Space: 14)

Among other things in the opening essay, Chaudhuri enquires into the nature of Bengali consciousness and its appropriation of ‘high culture’. He simultaneously takes issue with internationalism which, according to him, ‘is a way of reading, and not a demography of readership; and what we are witnessing is not the rise of internationalism, but its interruption and eclipse, and its replacement by a new mythology of travel, displacement, movement, and settlement, with, paradoxically, its new anxious awareness of the ‘other’, the foreign and the native. (Clearing a Space: 12)

Chaudhuri places vernacular literatures like Bengali as a counterpoint to the bestseller – culture famously phrased as internationalism. He argues in favour of a home – grown children’s literature, citing examples from the writing of Tagore and Satyajit Ray. Though he appreciates Bengali literary culture for assigning immense role to the moral and imaginative space of childhood, he takes into account their critiques of Bengali ‘bhadralok’ culture against the backdrop of rationality, progress and modernization. He also attempts to analyse and explain western concepts such as ‘secular’ and ‘globalisation’. The history of logos in Indian modernity is concomitant with, and inextricable from, the emergence of the human and the secular. He counterpoints ‘high’ culture and nationalism in India on the one hand and the secular and the global on the other.

Towards the close of the introductory essay, Chaudhuri gives three reasons for speaking about the notion of space: the first has to do with the persistent sense of deferral or absence one encounters in India
with regard to ‘high’ culture and modernity. His second reason for an interest in ‘space’ has to do with the idea of it being the domain of the ‘real’ in the secular world. This space consists of the problematic relationship between modernity, globalization and the ‘real’ in the specific context of India. The third and the final reason for his interest in ‘space’ relates to the narrative of the manner in which that ‘high’ cultural space was appropriated, reworked and argued by Indian, even non–western artists. The talk about English being ‘an Indian language’ signals our apparent but putative annexation of English language. This notion is situated in the vocabulary of free market globalization but remains fundamentally different from as well as an overturning of simultaneously rationalist and ‘high’ cultural preoccupations of modernity.

There are two essays in the volume in which Chaudhuri attempts a critique of culture. The first of these is. This is not Music: The Emergence of the Domain of Culture. Here, the author mentions a lively debate on the nature of the secular, with politics and religions as two poles of reference but he hastens to add that he found the notion of the role of culture missing from this enterprise. However, he was soon reminded of the Indian tendency to project culture in its political and religious guise, but rarely as culture in the secular and modern sense. Chaudhuri observes:

The history of the secularization of the west can’t be written without taking into account the separation, at a certain point in history, of religion and culture, so that they came to occupy two distinct, umbilical related, but oppositional spaces; and the emergence of the secular is concomitant with the rise of the notion of culture as a space
separate from religion. Something similar happened in India, and in Bengal, in the nineteenth century..... (Clearing a Space: 109-110)

Before embarking on the debate concerning culture in India Chaudhuri dwells on Europe for a while. He mentions two categories of religion in Europe: religion in the sphere of politics and community, and religion as a ‘spiritual’ practice. However, in the west, a second site of the ‘spiritual’, outside religion, came into existence with secularization: that site was culture. The forms of culture in secular western society that embodied and interrogated the ‘spiritual’ were, of course, the arts, music, painting, literature. These were activities that existed in the secular domain. Chaudhuri argues further:

I’ am using the word ‘culture’ here, of course, not as anthropologist might, to denote the sum total of the life – practices of a community, but in the problematic but influential Arnoldian sense; and the Arnoldian sense of culture, as a nonreligious but nobly creative domain, permeated the construction of the secular not only in post – industrial England, but also surely, in Bengal in the time of colonialism, more deeply perhaps than we can acknowledge and understand. (ibid)

While tracing the evolution of culture as a secular site and space, Chaudhuri admires Matthew Arnold who became the chief propagandist for the idea of culture, specifically literature, as a space both transcendentental and secular. Arnold also argued for poetry as a substitute for religion in an age in which faith had become a ‘melancholy’, long, with drawing roar’. He advocated that Bible should be read not as ‘dogma’ but as literature. T.S. Eliot, on the contrary, believed that nothing is a substitute for religion. Chaudhuri notices a
paradox in Eliot’s *Four Quartets* which is more a ‘work of art’ than an expression of religious faith. So he asserts: Four Quartets belongs, that is, not to the domain of religion, but to the domain of culture. This paradox itself redirects us to the ways in which, in the west, we inhabit the secular space of culture, and that space inhabits us. (Clearing a Space: 110)

Chaudhuri holds the view that much of the secular space occupied by western art and literature derives from mythology. To many of the great Romantics and modernists in the post industrial west, and to those on the cusp of Romanticism and modernism, like, Rilke, mythology became a great secular cultural inheritance. The author has revisited all this because he finds a similar pattern in India, in Bengal, in the nineteenth century. He notes that at a certain point of time, religion and culture came to occupy related but appositional spaces. The composition of *Meghnadbadhakabya* might be said to constitute an important moment, a moment when a poem with an overtly religious subject was transplanted from the domain of religion into the domain of culture…. (Clearing a Space: 111)

Chaudhuri consolidates his views on the domain of culture with the conviction that the domain of culture, like the domain of religion, belongs to the modern in a way that doesn’t pressure or demand allegiance or belief. In another essay titled ‘Travels in the Subculture of Modernity’; Chaudhuri discusses Indian English writing and ‘bhasha’ literatures in the context of modernity and argues in favour of ‘bhasa’ writers who ‘create an immense subculture, the subculture of modernity’, which becomes provides them with the ideas of the nation – state in addition to the notions of identity, movement, displacement
and literature and arts. The nation, for them is not a discourse but a network of state patronage and political positions. It must be added that nation is also a place to live, work and imagine.

Chaudhuri’s other works of non-fictional prose include *Calcutta: Two years in the City* (2013), *On Tagore: Reading the Poet Today* (2012) and *Telling Tales* (2013). Earlier, he had edited a collection of essays on Calcutta with the title,: *Writings on Calcutta*. Calcutta remains Chaudhuri’s place of birth and it has haunted his work in a multiplicity of forms. He has recorded his perceptions, experiences and memories in *Calcutta: Two years in the City*. The epigraphs at the beginning of the book highlight two things: dreams which are linked to human aspirations and the nature of modernity. The paradoxical pull between home and elsewhere forms the poignant tension at the heart of this book which combines memory with cultural discourse. Indeed, it is a conflict with which Chaudhuri has grappled throughout all of his work.

The second epigraph quoted from Charles Baudelaire’s ‘The Painter of Modern Life’ reads: “By ‘modernity’ I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable”. It sets the tone for the entire book on Calcutta which offers an account of Chaudhuri’s two years (2009-11) in the city. The narrative travels between the nineteenth century, when the city burst with a new vitality and the twenty-first century, when it underwent a thorough change and still seems to be on the verge of another turn. The book has nine chapters: A Purchase, Chandan Hotel, Names, The New Old Guard, Universal Suffrage, High Tea, Italians Abroad, Study Leave, A Visit. Through these chapters, Chaudhuri
evokes all that is most particular and extraordinary about the city ranging from its houses with their slatted windows to its effervescent cultural life. Simultaneously, he paints, too, an acute, often ironic picture of life in the city today- of its malls and restaurants, its fitful attempts to embrace globalization, its middle class who leave and then return reluctantly, its bygone aristocracy, and its poor,

Chaudhuri’s engagement with modernity is as vital as his attachment to Calcutta. In an interview given to the White Review, Chaudhuri responded to a question with regard to the exploration of modernity in his work:

One of the new book’s concerns is the nature of modernity. Although I was growing up in Bombay, Calcutta is the first place I encountered modernity and became addicted to it…. As I tried to say in the book, I felt I encountered the thrill of the modern. There are many ways of defining the modern but one is to say that an urban space, a man-made space, has some of the energy, wildness, unpredictability and randomness that we usually associate with nature. (The White Review: 2013:2)

While attempting to define modernity, Chaudhuri refers to a category of experience in which a person speaks about the urban, man-made and the industrial things in a way that they become organic and natural. Philip Larkin has made this kind of inversion in his poetry and that inversion in his poetry and that inversion is definitive of modernity and the response to modernity. And this is the experience characteristic of Calcutta: Two years in the City.
In Chaudhuri’s fascinating account of Calcutta, one can almost see, smell, taste and touch the life of the city’s streets and its inhabitants. This book explores beauty in urban space. ‘There is beauty for modernists in the dereliction of the industrial city but it’s important to record this history of response to Calcutta; because Calcutta is this so-called ‘third-world’ city, it will not be thought of by outsiders in this way. (The white Review: 2) The chaos and ugliness are marked by Indian ethos which makes a third-world city different from an European city.

To Chaudhuri, Calcutta epitomizes the contradiction of modernity. He finds that it is both derelict and alive and has made both those things energize each other. This is why Calcutta is a modern city. The author has gained the view-point of both an outsider and insider, a position which has enabled him to get beneath its skin. In the quoted interview, he explains:

I grew up in Bombay in a small nuclear family which was nevertheless very aware of its Bengali cultural heritage – that it was alive and engaged rather than reverent was important. My mother was a great singer of Tagore songs but her interpretation of Tagore songs was completely unique. That made me aware of inheritance as a living thing and not as a dead thing to be revered. That’s one side of it. Then there was physical way of being on the outside of it as I grew up in Bombay and Bombay shaped me as a person and allowed me to look at Calcutta and my own Bangaliness from the outside, in all its complexity. (The White Review:3)

It is fairly difficult to categorise Chaudhuri’s recorded experience in his book on Calcutta. But he is fascinated by the
complexity and strangeness of what he considers modernity. From his very first novel, *A Strange and Sublime Address*, he was becoming aware of the fact that it was reality rather than fantasy that interested him. By reality he did not mean naturalism, nineteenth-century realism, information fact, he meant the strange. This enables him to relive the experience of sublime again. He has put it more clearly and precisely:

The Calcutta I loved had that foreignness and strangeness for me. My uncle’s house was located in south Calcutta with its low houses red stone floors, each house being different but having these resemblances. It was that intrinsic foreignness of where I was that excited me. Reality for me is something foreign, strange and sublime. (The White Review: 6)

There is a lovely phrase in the book, ‘home and elsewhere were enmeshed intimately.’ Chaudhuri does write intimately about foreign places and foreignness, because home is enmeshed with the elsewhere. Home and elsewhere and the problematic relationship between two opposite but interlinked cultural sites become the metaphors of belonging and unbelonging. Chaudhuri has been a keen observer of, and a participant in, the life of Calcutta which he has known and understood from sixties to the first decade of the 21st century. Responding to a query about the nature of his relationship with the city of Calcutta over a long period of time, Chaudhuri said:

The period which began in the middle of the nineteenth century, in which the city seemed to come out of nowhere, the period which made it a central location in terms of ideas and culture – the phase had come to an end by the late’ 70s. having visited the city in the’ 60s and ‘70s impacted me in a big way. It made me seek out the city in the
other places I encountered. It made me understand what it was that most excited me about cities, which was not identify it to with its big buildings and shopping malls, it was a completely different thing that was exciting about cities- the ability to move from neighbourhood to neighbourhood and feel as if one were travelling from country to country. That sense of foreignness in unexpected places within the city itself. I think all of that was coming to an end by the late’ 70s. (The White Review:4)

Chaudhuri noticed both cultural and moral decline in the city of Calcutta towards the beginning of 90s. He has explained this turn with a focus on the middle class: After 1989 I began to spend more time in Calcutta when I would go back there from England. I noticed the city was at a low ebb culturally and morally, and I’m still making sense of that. By the time I moved there in 1999. I knew enough about the city to know I was an outsider there and would always be. The middle class that still lived there had remained. They were a closed circle. They spoke to each other in a code language comprising anecdotes to do with memories and if you didn’t know that code, you remained on the outside. I could see I would remain on the outside….. Then I began to see that these people might be worth looking at in terms of them being the milieu where I lived for most of the year. I began to see that my being there might also be a story worth exploring. (ibid)

Besides his wonderful book on Calcutta, Chaudhuri has published two more collections of essays: On Tagore: Reading the Poet Today (2012) and Telling Tales: Selected Writing 1993-2013. If Chaudhuri has succeeded brilliantly in making sense of a place in his book on Calcutta, approaching the city and its spaces from a range of
angles and thus giving the book great depth, his five essays on Tagore collected in a book form bear testimony to the width of his approach and acuteness of his perception. The essays included in the book on Tagore are: The Anniversary Begins; The Flute of Modernity; A Pact with Nature; Poetry as Polemic; and ‘Nothing but a Poet.’ In the prefatory note to this book, Chaudhuri tells that ‘The Flute of Modernity’ was the earliest piece, first published in the New Republic in 1998, while ‘An Anniversary Begins’ happens to be the latest essay, published in the Guardian in 2011. He goes about explaining the rationale for writing about Tagore:

My reasons for writing about Tagore are both personal and writerly. Writers don’t admire or think about other writers because they are famous or national icons, but because of affinities and concerns that excite and provoke them – or because, simply, one writer can’t escape another. (On Tagore: Reading the Poet Today: ix)

When Chaudhuri grew serious about literature in his late teens and early twenties, he resisted and even jettisoned Tagore and kept his intellectual distance from him. Yet he maintained a kind of relationship with him through his songs, by singing them, and by listening to them interpreted by mainly two artists, Subinoy Roy and his mother, Bijoyoa Chaudhuri. He felt that both singers projected Tagore in a way that allowed the real Tagore to appear in a new avatar, which revealed a new perspective away from usual context – celebrity. Tagore appeared as a writer and composer of subtlety. Chaudhuri appreciates Tagore as a great artist who enormously enriched the culture of Bengal through his music, art and literature:
Here was a poet who was a seeker after delight and who also wished to take words dangerously close to the condition of melody – not music but melody itself….. [Subinoy] Roy’s detachment of style sounded to me like a serene but unshakeable advocacy of Tagore’s aesthetic, and it brought to me a poet different from the one who was surrounded, in his life and posthumously, by such a furore, such on excess of emotion, and by those who constantly ‘say things….. by saying things’. I then had to make sense of who Tagore was, what had kept him from view, and why these attributes and qualities – subtlety, melodiousness, silence, equanimity might be important – generally, but also to the sort of writer I’d set out to be. (On Tagore: Reading the Poet Today: ix-xi)

Hence Chaudhuri shows in these remarkable and widely admired essays about Tagore and his milieu that Tagore’s secret concern was really with life, play and contingency, with the momentary as much as it was with the eternal. Chaudhuri undertakes to reveal and explore this unacknowledged strain of modernism in Tagore, offering a new perspective from which one can better understand and appreciate Tagore.

The earliest essay ‘The Flute of Modernity: Tagore and the Middle Class’ concludes with the observation that a proper and balanced assessment of Tagore is possible only by placing him in the context of modern Indian history, and more specifically in the context of an almost permanently interstitial Bengali middle – class culture. A further evidence of Chaudhuri’s high appraisal of Tagore’s achievement can be seen in his interview given to Prithvi Varatharajan.
Here is Chaudhuri’s response to a question about Tagore’s popularity as a national and cultural icon:

He’s best known in India – since you say India rather than Bengal – as being a national figure, on a par with the great political figures like Gandhi. So he’s only the cultural icon in that sense. But no one is very clear anywhere why he’s a great cultural icon…. Tagore is seen to be a great nationalist icon: iconic for a man who was always ambivalent about nationalism and what it meant. And the continuing reverence for Tagore in India and elsewhere is a disservice to him. Because it misreads him, misunderstands him, and doesn’t even begin to get to the kind of evolving and provocative and radical and interesting artist he really was.

In Bengal he’s known foremost as a composer of songs, and as a poet. And people know his poems, inasmuch as they know anybody’s poetry. And they of course know his songs, which have also been turned into very static things, rendered in very reverential and worshipful and lifeless ways. And again I think that’s a pity. Tagore’s is ripe for a radical reassessment. (http://www.asymptotejournal.com)

Thus, for Chaudhuri, Tagore is a great cultural icon who needs to be seen and studied from proper perspective. Telling Tales: Selected Writing 1993-2013 is Chaudhuri’s latest collection of short prose pieces and essays. The blurb of the book overflows with praise for the author: collected here for the first time, Telling Tales is a selection of Chaudhuri’s most enduring short non-fiction that showcases his sense of humor, his idiosyncratic capacity to transform the mundane, his political engagement, and his mastery of words….. these essays display
Chaudhuri’s ability to find meaning in every aspect of the physical and intellectual world.

**Telling Tales** is organized into four parts: One: Telling Tales: Two: The personal and the political: Three: Listening, writing, planning; Four: The unheroic. As the author states in ‘A Note on the Text’:

Most of the pieces in the first section, ‘Telling Tales’ come from the column of the same name which I wrote intermittently for the *Telegraph* in Calcutta. I haven’t included every piece I’ve composed for this column- how I came to write it, and why, are described in an essay called ‘In the Back of the Shop’. (Telling Tales: 2013:x)

The pieces in this section are not arranged chronologically except that the first piece, ‘Invitation to a Voyage’ is indeed the first thing he wrote for the column – in January 2000, and the last piece, ‘Hovering above’ is the latest addition to it. He adds further that one of the intentions of putting some of these short pieces together is to hint at the variety of stimuli surrounding him in Calcutta – the invisible milieu of the column – though oddly enough Calcutta is no longer the stimulating place it used to be. The other intention is to gesture towards a faith that informs his fiction. So he sees with hindsight these short essays as well that it is possible to write about anything. Of the forty short pieces included in the first section of the book, ‘In the Back of the Shop’ is significant for the fact that the author elaborates on the ‘why and ‘how’ of writing these pieces:

It quickly become clear that my subject matter should comprise things that did not fit anywhere else: in a novel, in a poem, or a story,
or even a critical essay. They would not be ‘true’ subjects, in a sense; they would not have existed greyly, neither significant nor insignificant and would have had the potential of becoming subjects suddenly conferred on them by the imminent existence of the column. (Telling Tales: 53)

In fact ‘the back of the shop’ refers to the French essayist, Montaigne with the romantic suggestion of the artistic private space defined against the bonds of society and family. Chaudhuri is concerned here with multiple kinds of spaces including the cultural ones too, and he makes it pretty clear:

The ‘back of the shop; is no longer a physical locale: it has truly become even in Calcutta a ‘region of the mind’. But it was really not that romantic space I desired when I thought of the column, it was a junkyard in which the floatsam aid jetsam of both the public and private worlds might congregate. (Telling Tales: 55)

In the second section of Telling Tales, Chaudhuri showcases his disagreement with the writers whom he has read with pleasure. These essays may be seen as a venture in the review of the culture of reading in India. He argues that we don’t, in India, live in the voluble but dull intellectual consensus that we often seem to. The tendency of disagreement points towards a culture which calls for unity in diverscity. Additionally, this section contains some political writing and reportage too. ‘Living in the Mohulla’ and Close Ups in Hindi films’ exemplify this. The latter piece brings out ‘the sweet contradictions of Indian emotive life’. (Telling Tales: 171)
The third section of the book comprises reflections on a variety of themes. Of special significance from the cultural perspective is the piece, ‘Interlude’, first published in the Dublin Review. It is about how Chaudhuri ended up being a novelist rather than a poet, as was his original intention. ‘Listening’, which appeared in the Guardian is about how the author ended up becoming a composer in experimental music. ‘Writing Calcutta’, also published in the Guardian, is about how the writer ended up writing his first non-fiction book about that city. He adds as a rejoinder that he has repeatedly used the term ‘ended up’ because none of these ventures was inevitable.

The fourth and the last section is a small selection of the literary journalism and critical writing Chaudhuri has done in the last twenty years. Chaudhuri has honestly admitted that neither this section nor the rest of the book has the overt critical purpose that the essays in Clearing a Space have. They do not engage critically either with post colonially or the Nation of modernity. In an interview given to Atul K. Thakur in 2014 published online in Warscapes, Chaudhuri has discussed his non-fiction work, Telling Tales, answering numerous questions raised in the book. He has candidly spoken about his stance on the confrontational relationship between literature and mass culture, on the future of Indian democracy, on the declining number of serious writers, responsive readers and dedicated publications in the context of the speedy rise of capitalism and globalization. He has given reasons for writing these short prose pieces:

The reasons for this were many, to prove that short, ephemeral pieces might have an unsuspected life and reward rereading: that their very brevity and seemingly ephemeral quality may be inviting; that the
transient nature of a column might lead to the opening up of the imagination, precisely because we sometimes convey our more interesting observations in our throwaway remarks. (Warscapes, August 26, 2014)

Again, responding to a question on his relationship with Calcutta with books on Calcutta and Tagore as evidence, Chaudhuri explained why he writes about Calcutta and other multiple themes in his latest book of non-fiction:

Telling Tales is not just about Calcutta but about various things. To answer your question, though – I suppose being an outsider in the city I was born in but never lived in, a city I knew from childhood but which had its greatest impact me when I was in exile from it rather than of it, gives me a curious relationship to this place – and to cities and places in general. (ibid)

Chaudhuri is very candid in his views on the fast shrinking space for the novel, a fate similar to that of poetry and stories. His comments on reading culture, publishing, market, media and music industry come about as a collective observation on literary culture. In the interview under reference, he categorically stated:

Our ideas of writing are going through a transition, everywhere, India included. The boom period of capitalism in the nineties and the early 2000s, which was also the boom period for the novel especially the novel of nation and history – is over. Even if the boom returns – booms are periodic and durational – we know better than before now the costs of embracing the market: to bookshops, books, the culture of reading.
But we also know the reasons for which the publishing and music industries began to self-destruct with the arrival of e-books, free downloads on the internet actually had some transformative consequences. The internet must have been one of the key instruments of free-market globalization; but it was also appropriated by ordinary users in the interests of creating a ‘commons’ a free public space of congregation.

Similarly, you notice the rise of independent publishers, and of small magazines on the net - what I’m saying is that we’re at a stage when the fluidity of the very market that made complex conversations about culture seem impossible is, in one of the habitual bouts of self-destruction, creating cracks through which those banished conversations are returning.

Chaudhuri defends *Telling Tales* with the caveat that the book inhabits one of those cracks. The small prose-pieces in this latest collection amply justify this claim. Moreover, these pieces also showcase the author’s position on a variety of issues. For instance, he attempts to highlight the merits of the vernacular literatures of India. He has done a remarkable job by focusing on the notable works of Arun Kolatkar and the contribution of the Bengali writer Jibananand Das. Responding to a question whether the personality cult of Tagore has been religiously accepted in Bengal and has overshadowed numerous contemporary authors, Chaudhuri contests the idolization of Tagore by the Bengalis:

We can’t blame poor Tagore for the neglect [or belated recognition] of Jibananand Das, nor for a whole constellation of astonishing Bengali writers and poets – but, yes we can certainly blame an increase in Tagore – worship for this neglect. Much of the focus on
Tagore comes from the narrowing of the contemporary Bengal’s cultural and political outlook, wherever he or she happens to be, in Calcutta or New Jersey or Atlanta city.

The narrower the Bengali’s cultural and intellectual concerns become, the greater the centrality given to Tagore – through a rather self-interested form of reverence. And it’s a narrowing that runs counter to the legacy of Tagore’s own eclectic and irreverent relationship with Indian and western culture.

It is evident from the foregoing discussion of Chaudhuri’s non-fictional works that his engagement with the everyday life of the people, especially middle class, along with his keen observation of the strangeness and beauty in the ordinary details and circumstances constitutes his concern with culture. Bengalis, Tagore and Calcutta form part of the spectrum which represents the cultural ethos of cities like Bombay, London and Sylhet. He renders the cultural life more beautiful by focusing on inner and outer, private and public spaces which embody the essence of cultural life, whether in Calcutta, Bombay. Oxford or London. The chapter that follows is given to the discussion and analysis of his first novel, A Strange and Sublime Address.