CHAPTER – 2
SOCIAL AWARENESS
Chaudhari's conception of social life is based on the interpersonal relationship of people within a given society. In *To Live or Not to Live*, he writes:

My conception of social life is modest, for it makes no demands on what we have, though it does make some on what we are. Interest, wonder, sympathy and love, the first two leading to the last two, are the psychological prerequisites for social life; and the need for the first two must not be understated (TLNL 55)

But he failed to find the ideal kind of social life not only in Calcutta and Delhi but also in London. In his writings Chaudhari has attacked the social life and the various social systems prevalent both in India and the West. But while the English took in the criticism with grace accepting their shortcomings, the Indians raged and bellowed in anger. Unlike the Indians, the British did not label him as anti-British. Chaudhari observes:

They do not, because they know that criticism is a necessary function of patriotism; if patriotism is not identified with the pursuit of class interest in terms of money. The European mind is still subscribing to Plato's dictum and the uncriticized life is not worth living. (Archives 141)
Chaudhuri always laid great emphasis on self criticism. According to him, self criticism keeps the society healthy and progressive saving it from decay and degeneration. To him, criticism does not imply rejection of established institutions and ideas, it only insists on a searching and continuous examination to bring about revalidation. It has to be welcomed, even if it is destructive. All great Western thinkers have attacked conformity and authoritarianism but the Indians, Chaudhuri finds, ignore Plato's dictum. The Hindu way of life has always been based on tradition and authority. Chaudhuri quotes from Alberuni who calls it the habit of 'jurare in verba magistri' i.e. swearing by the words of a master. The respect for authority transformed into admiration for life based on authority. He finds the Hindu superiority nothing but stupid vanity. The uncritical spirit of ancient Hindu civilization took the path to degeneration. With the coming of the Western influences in the nineteenth century, a genuine and vigorous habit of self criticism grew up among the Indians. In Bengal it led to the development of an innovated modern culture. But over the past fifty years, Chaudhuri finds the faculty of self criticism decaying and the old uncritical spirit of national vanity reviving.

Indian Social Life:

When Chaudhuri speaks about India, its geographical conditions and its climate along with the habits and behaviour of the people his tone is filled with disgust and contempt. He finds India dirty and full of squalor
and that the Indians are indifferent to that squalor. In *The Continent of Circe*, he writes:

...I declare every day that a man who cannot endure dirt, dust, stench, noise, ugliness, disorder, heat, and cold has no right to live in India.

(CC 22)

By his persistent pre-occupation with fundamental values and basic attitudes, Chaudhuri provides a brilliant criticism of the Hindu society. He is sharply observant, lively and thoughtful and has raised many Indian’s consciousness through his writings. But there are also times when he is angry, skeptical and sarcastic. Anger and exasperation are common to many and have in fact come to be recognised as the occupational diseases of the critic of the Indian society. But rarely are they allied to a wide range of knowledge, depth of scholarship or originality of observation. Chaudhuri can hardly be dismissed as an angry old man, though he was both old and angry when he wrote *The Continent of Circe*, his extended essay on the Indian people. Prof. Anjaneyulu points out:

There is no undoubtedly much anger there, but no sign of senility of the mind. But there is much else besides — a wealth of miscellaneous learning that speak of a well stocked mind, a flair for trotting out original theories, and infectious gusto in letting the sparks of ‘obiter dicta’ fly
from the anvil of personal experience and a Shavian knack of setting the harsh truth on the head of an equally irrepressible propensity to stand himself on his head and kick his legs in the air to attract attention. (1)

The anger mellowed down when he compiled his articles on Indian family and social life in To Live or Not to Live. Here he described social life as an outflow and meeting of personality though the basic question regarding its existence remained in his mind.

Chaudhuri's concern with the urban conditions in India – the forms and occasions as well as the spirit and content of social life, marriage, the extended family in India, working and non-working women, post-independence Indian youth, the relations between the sexes, and Indians' attitude to work, money, status, religion, food etc. can be seen in his writings. His concern emerges from his observations which makes him realise that most Indians do not live, they merely exist. Some aspire for money while others care only for their survival, but no one really lives. He writes:

I can get only two versions of living. Those who have done well in the worldly sense say that they have so much money or property; and those who have not, say that they have contrived to remain alive. One group mistakes acquisition for living, and they other surviving for living. Beyond that, their conception of life does not reach out. (TLNL 8)
Chaudhuri lived a lonely life both in Calcutta and Delhi. Here he realised the truth in the Greek saying 'a great city is a great desert', for in no other period of his life was he more solitary and isolated from the company of his fellow men than in these big cities though from ancient times, polite manners and pleasant social life have been connected with cities. In Sanskrit the word 'nagarika' stands not only for a person from city but also for a cultured and sociable person. The Hindi word 'ga(n)war' stands not for a villager but for a boor as well, so does the Bengali word 'chasha'. Yet neither in Calcutta nor in Delhi he found the ideal social life. Delhi's growth and expansion to him was more demographic than social, wherein the sole life blood was provided by the motive of making money most often by illegal and dishonest means. In Calcutta he found life rent by hatred and the entire Bengali society disintegrating and decomposing.

True social life according to Chaudhuri is:

...an outflow and meeting of personality, which means that its end is the meeting of character, temperament, and sensibility, in which our thoughts and feelings and sense perceptions are brought into play at their lightest yet keenest. (TLNL 54)

Chaudhuri argues that the reason why there is no social life in India is because there is no interest in individual personality. According to him life is to be lived in accordance with one's inner necessities and one's
... every individual has to be dull, and thus cease to be individual, in order to enable the collective entity called Hindu Society to survive, and to do so as a fossilized community. (TLNL 54)

According to Chaudhuri, another reason for the lack of social life may be found in the sex segregation in the Indian society. In a gathering, one is not allowed to look at the faces of women so that one can only guess their personalities. In his autobiography, Chaudhuri narrates how villagers used to react naively to women. They used to guess the identity of women by saying "Look that slim one in the red sari is the wife of so and so", and again pointing to another, "that plump one in the green is the wife of so and so." He points out that the Hindus cannot think that men and women can meet for purposes other than sex. But in the interest of social life, Chaudhuri is willing to permit some adultery so that the Hindus can have a full life. To make a modest beginning, he started "the Baroque habit of kissing the hands of countrywomen" (TLNL74) He is of the opinion that Indian women can revitalize social life in India. In this context, Prof Kaul writes.
It is worth remarking that on man-women relationship, Chaudhuri views are both sane and balanced. He approves of complete freedom of association between the sexes. What is more, his attitude towards women has certain delicacy and sensitiveness. His outlook has been conditioned by English romantic poetry and the Victorian ethos as might be expected of one born in 1897.(2)

Though most of Chaudhuri’s views are based on the European culture, his views on the working women are quite contrary to the ones prevalent in the Western world.

I regard the emergence of the working women, unmarried as well as married, as the greatest threat to the family in every country and society, and even as a greater threat in India and Indian society (TLNL120)

In-spite of having deep regards for the women in general, he regards the working women as symbols of decadence and cheap imitation of the West. He sees them as the product of that European movement called Feminism, whose emergence is a proof that the society is moving towards the fag end of its life. He goes to the extent of giving examples of aristocratic women who did not work professionally but yet made substantial contribution to the Indian culture. It is true that Chaudhuri’s views are orthodox but his aim is not to degrade the position of women but to ensure that there is peace and harmony within the family life. Prof. Kaul observes:
Being progressive in his outlook, westernized in his tastes, a professed admirer of Nehru, Chaudhuri should have supported the cause of modernity in social matters. But he opposed the attempt of middle class women to seek employment which would have liberated them from the tyranny of the joint family. (3).

It comes as a surprise to many people that a humanist like Chaudhuri is against the liberation of women but Chaudhuri’s argument is that the jobs are limited in India and hence men should work and women should look after the home. He ignores the fact that with added income often, family lives are happier. But to a person who never equated living with livelihood, such arguments are futile.

In India everything is ultimately connected to religion. Indians have a tendency to sanctify everything, because they feel sanctification will make up for their thinking and action. In To Live or Not to Live he makes a bitter and jocular remark that in India a man would not hesitate to murder another man if it was said to him that it is a part of his religion. Analysing the reasons as to why does religion affect all aspects of Indian life, Chaudhuri writes:

The Hindus discovered quite early in their existence in India that they could not preserve any delicate sensibility without making it a part of piety, nor could they keep up effort without making it a religious duty. To make things secular in this country is to make them weak, vulgar, and eroded (CC207)
Chaudhuri finds that sometimes, within the realm of religion itself, the contradictions are likely to reach absurd extremities. He illustrates the extremity of purity mania with an example of a woman of his acquaintance who used to wash her bed clothes quilts and mattresses everyday. Yet a mystical indifference to filth and squalor is observable in all the religious places.

On the spiritual conduct of the traditional Indian, Chaudhuri has this to say:

The idea that the Hindus had great love and reverence for philosophy and respect for philosophers is a figment of the European mind. What we respect are the sadhus, possessors of occult power, not philosophers who prefer to possess only knowledge and that is useless in our eyes. (CCTT)

Chaudhuri finds that the sadhus and swamis, the godmen and miracle workers have the large vogue now among us, next only to that of film stars. He cuts at the root of the Hindu reputation for a spiritual bent of mind and a philosophical approach to life. The hackneyed theme of spiritual India and materialistic Europe is faded and needs to be reshuffled.

Experiences which made Chaudhuri draw a dark picture of the Indian social life also revealed to him the existence of elements with
which an attractive social life could be built up provided there was both energy and courage. Chaudhuri’s hopes are based on three discoveries, that there are individuals who possess considerable social capability; that our women can be brought into our general social life so as to remove its greatest shortcoming; and that conversation which as a social grace is virtually absent amongst us, can be created.

Social Behaviour:

Chaudhuri in one of his articles had observed:

Hindu society is basically genetic in its outlook, and looks upon social life only as an extension of the family clan or tribe. It is very difficult for us to get out of this mould of social life, which is really tribalism and to acquire genuinely social behaviour. (4)

Chaudhuri always complained that the Indians lack the sophistication in the social behaviour, which is so easily observable in the European society. The Indian society is marked by its extreme gregariousness.

While Chaudhuri’s Autobiography portrays Calcutta and the Bengali way of life, his essays in To Live or Not to Live provide a brilliant description of the social life in Delhi. In his first book Chaudhuri points out that after reading McDougall’s ‘Social Psychology’ he found out the
difference between sociability and gregariousness. He says that the Bengalis of the Calcutta possess gregariousness without sociability. He writes:

The man of Calcutta found the company he needed so badly and continuously and readily assembled without any effort on his part, in his office, or in his bar library or in his college, which were no less places for endless idle gossip than for work. (AUI456)

He also comments that, what he found applicable to the Indian society as a whole was more applicable to the Bengali society of Calcutta.

Chaudhuri finds the behaviour of the Indians in public places extraordinarily quarrelsome. Tempers are lost at the most trifling provocation. He recalls an incident in The Continent of Circe when his hand accidentally brushed against that of a fellow pedestrian who immediately retaliated in anger. Quarrels are such common sights in all Indian cities that everybody takes them as natural. Chaudhuri finds that just as the fight between conductors and passengers as well as passengers and passengers in buses, between customers and shopkeepers in markets are easily observable, in homes too quarrelsomeness is universal and persistent. The fault lies in the atmosphere of the Hindu homes. He writes:
The general atmosphere of a Hindu home is one of heavy and listless
dullness, which drives the inmates out into the street at all times of the
day .... Staying quietly at home in an evening is not therefore one of the
pleasures of life in Hindu society ... (CC 273)

But surprisingly Chaudhuri finds that when a change comes it is
not welcomed. It usually takes the form of personal clashes and bickering
and the conditions become worse. Chaudhuri also finds that dwelling on
and sorrowing for conditions which cannot be helped is as common in the
Indian society as is the want itself. It never occurs to the people that the
best way to deal with financial troubles about which nothing can be done
for the time being is not to talk about them. On the contrary, if a family is
seen cheerful in poverty and try to put a brave face on hard times, it is put
down not to courage or fortitude, but to a secret possession of money
combined with hypocritical pretence of poverty which is taken as a
heartless mockery of real poverty. Chaudhuri recalls his own days of
poverty when he was criticized for indulging in silk curtains.

While Chaudhuri found social life lacking in Calcutta, in Delhi he
felt that the people knew only how to eat and dress well. Here people
lacked social sense, came at odd hours in the afternoon and disturbed his
afternoon siesta. He concludes that big cities like Delhi and Calcutta are
"unfavourable to kindly human relations, or any human relations at all." (TLNL 19) The only social life Chaudhuri found existing in Delhi was in
relations between the foreigners and more specially the western residence of Delhi and their Indian friends and acquaintances.

This lack of sensibility among Indians can be observed in their social behaviour when they visit patients who need rest and isolation. They go there merely to gossip making illness "as frivolous a social gathering as a cocktail party in New Delhi." (TLNL 50)

In contrast Chaudhuri found great sincerity and pleasantness in the European social life, although apparently some Indians misused this social life for their own selfish ends. He cites example of an Indian who phoned a foreigner and offered to attend a party to which he had not received an invitation.

Chaudhuri also found the Indians unusually money minded and materialistic. The Hindu spirituality is a mere window dressing. All religious functions are marked by the show of wealth. According to him, Hindus are more worldly than spiritual in their attitude to life; rather they make no distinction between the two promoting the worldly all the time in the name of the spiritual. As a glaring example, he draws attention to the sanctification of worldliness in the cult of Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth and Prosperity, who is depicted as the embodiment of all grace and beauty.
Some Social Systems

Caste System:

When everyone else is speaking against the caste system, Chaudhuri supports it. According to Chaudhuri, the federation of the human groups in ancient India or the caste system was more of a method than a system. Chaudhuri has some very unusual and disturbing views about it. To him the caste system is an extension of the zoological pattern – it has also posed limits of heredity on the individuals' free choice of a human function. He does not oppose this function and says that very few want to decide this question on their own and that very few actually are free to make their choice. He does consider this peculiar to Hindu culture because he has found all human communities trying to stabilise social and cultural differences.

This is a natural compensation for man's convergent zoological evolution and divergent psychological evolution. (CC 58-59)

The Aryans went to the extreme point in enforcing the system to preserve their ethnic, social and cultural identity. Chaudhuri sees this as human nature and explains that when one is confronted by a menace such as the Aryans did due to the invasions, one develops a conviction of the sanctity of birth and blood. Chaudhuri has refuted almost all the charges made against the caste system in his essay 'The Deposits of
Time' in The Continent of Circe. He says, at no time and at no place did it have a norm — it was elastic and has continued to evolve. Physical skill, strength or worldly power enabled a barbarian or a Dark to be included in the Hindu society and there was a rule fixed for this change. Chaudhuri also believes that caste system did not create disunity and diversity. He believes it had only organized the disparities created by historical forces and movements. According to him, this has been advantageous, because it has reduced the competition of the diversities by the limits it has set. It has given each element of society its proper function and status and it has made adherence to these a sacred duty. For this reason, Chaudhuri calls it a symbiosis in human life. He finds it quite suitable for a country like India where the different elements would have been at work but for the competition canalized by a system. The caste system does not interfere with the economic freedom for it does not come in the way of a choice of livelihood. He gives several examples from history when Brahmins have been kings and priests, warriors, traders, statesmen and sudras have been kings. The system also does not bar the way to talent. Chaudhuri says that to believe otherwise would only be on the basis of one's imagination. The system has also been accused of causing social immobility but Chaudhuri believes immobility was due to stagnation, which in turn was created by the Pax Britannica.

Chaudhuri agrees that at one point of time caste system based on heredity compelled the shudras to embrace Islam or Christianity. But he
also points out that these conversions in India added to the socio-economic problems and psychological dilemmas. He points out:

It was seen that as soon as the aboriginal accepted Christianity, he became a different man. He lost his free spirit, and acquired the mental caste of a Hindu of the depressed classes. He began on one hand to nurse grievances, on the other to depend more and more on his foreign Christian patron. He feel a prey to the inferiority complex, something which he had never done before with all the hostility of the Hindus arrayed against his. (CC88)

The only blame Chaudhuri accepts for the system is that it suppressed ambition unrelated to ability or the lack of it. Chaudhuri sees some advantage also in this limitation. He goes so far as to say that a little more of the caste system is necessary to put worthless adventurers in their place:

If the system suppressed anything it was only ambition unrelated to ability and watching the mischief from this kind of ambition in India today I would say that we could do with a little more of the caste system in order to put worthless adventurers in their place. (CC 62)

He concludes that the system as a whole is a social organisation which contributes to order and stability and to a regulation of competition. Chaudhuri ridicules the foreign reformers of Hindu society and their Hindu imitators who do not understand the system and its advantages to a
society which is very loosely held together. He is convinced that the Hindu society needs the regularising control of the caste system.

Chaudhuri’s views on the caste system of India have been considered nothing less than shocking by most critics. It is evident that they do not understand that he is talking about the original caste system, which was based on ability and did not have a norm or any finality.

The Joint Family System:

Chaudhuri defines family life as “the life of a human unit consisting of a man his wife and his minor sons.” (TLNL 85) This leads many critics to believe that his views about family life are derived from European examples. Chaudhuri admits to his admiration for the European family life as it was before the present break-up began, but his perception of a nuclear family emerges from his own family antecedents. In The Autobiography, he has expressed his dissatisfaction with the extended family system which he in turn had imbibed from his father. Historically, the extended family in India has been associated with early marriage and economic security and necessitated by the agrarian culture. But Chaudhuri calls it the ‘co-operative society based on blood-tie.’ (TLNL88) He finds that the evils in the system are the absence of individuality and lack of initiative in the members of the family. It erodes and undermines all spirit of adventure and self help in the young men born in these
families. Examining the patriarchal aspect of the extended family, he observes that the father becomes a symbol of authority who dominates his children even when they have grown up. The worst defect comes out when it affects the husband-wife relationship. The recurring quarrels between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law often cause much misery and the poor son is caught between the two loyalties because he does not know whom to support – his mother or his wife. The malice within the joint family hurts everyone. Chaudhuri's mother had been so bitterly cursed by her mother-in-law that she did not recover from its harmful effect for the whole of her life.

Most of Chaudhuri's critics points out that he overlooks the necessity of the joint family and the conditions under which it was conceived and developed. For the Indians, who have an agrarian background the joint family was a necessity. The society too was a creation of a concurring people who had to survive in a hostile geographical and human environment. This could be done only by living together in one family and by rigid disciplining of its members. Chaudhuri agrees to all this but also points out that "the disciplining continues though the highest values have long since disappeared." (TLNL 100) In the modern Indian society the situation has changed and the people are no longer dependent only on agriculture. Hence, he concludes that the joint family system has outlived its utility and thus should be rejected. He pleads
What is called for an abandonment of the whole idea of joint family, large or small, in principle and in practice. If family life is to be established on a proper basis in India, this must be done. (TLNL119)

Giving greater importance to family life than to social life for the attainment of happiness, Chaudhuri advocates the nuclear family system. In such families not only do children imbibe the culture of their parents, the pressures of the in-laws are also not there.

Chaudhuri finds that most of the Hindu joint families develop and retain chronic maladjustment of three kinds; (i) monetary clashes which take place between fathers and sons, brothers and brothers, mothers and sons etc.; (ii) clashes of power - mostly seen between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law and, (iii) the emotional stresses and explosions which are confined to mothers and sons and husbands and wives. Chaudhuri finds that in these quarrels all the parties get equally mauled. But even after such abnormal mutual relations have become permanent, Chaudhuri finds that the relatives live together always treading on smoldering volcanoes, which erupt from time to time in smoke, fire and brimstone. Chaudhuri sarcastically adds that:

Somehow an alkali is always present with the acid of Hindu life, it is marvelous and boundless tolerance of bad language and blows, which is some sort of condition reflex of forgiveness. (CC 278)
He calls it the faculty of ‘callous charity’ (CC 276). Among the other
drawbacks that he observed was the absence of natural parental
relationship between the young fathers and mothers and their children.
The children are usually taken away from their mothers by the
grandmothers, who apart from feeding hardly ever show any willingness
to surrender the babies to their daughters-in-law. The assumption in the-
se families is that the children belong to the family and not the parents
and also that the young mothers know nothing about bringing up children.
Among the other aspects of joint family, Chaudhuri observed from his
personal experiences is that there was a keen competition in the women
in the family for feeling unhappy and trying to prove that one is the most
unhappy of all. There was also an insatiable craving for sympathy even
from strangers and sometimes mostly from strangers. But the most
serious gloom which he observed within the family, which gradually grew
into a habit of one of the members of the family, generally a wife, was to
injure herself by neglecting her health in every conceivable way, out of an
imaginary grievance that nobody cared for her. Chaudhuri blames the
Indians that they by their own behaviour have made the situation tragic.
He writes:

Deadened by their slow, dull, and benumbed palsy of suffering, they
have become unheroic and their absorption in self-pity has made them
incapable of analysing their sorrow. They have become even more
incapable of perceiving and admitting that any action of theirs might be
responsible for it. They will always throw the blame on others. (CC 280)
Because of such drawbacks in the joint family which effect the character of the Indians, Chaudhuri says that in order to improve our national character it is important that we change our living system first.

Social occasions:

Chaudhuri observes that the social occasions that are evident in big cities, mostly are the ones, which are deeply embedded in our traditions. Blood and marriage mostly impose them on us. Weddings and shradh ceremonies are the most common. Mutual visiting and entertaining among relatives, friends are practically non-existent in today's society. Personally he found the visits by curious and officious relatives as depressing and questioning one's individuality.

Chaudhuri married at the age of thirty-four in the orthodox Hindu style and saw his bride only after marriage. In spite of having a successful marriage himself, he blames the fast deteriorating institution of marriage in India on the faulty system of arranged marriage. The worst aspect of such marriages is that they do not treat love as the basis of marriage. Chaudhuri suggests some fundamental changes in the Indian society in order to avoid unhappy marriages. One such suggestion includes meeting of the prospecting bride and groom before marriage to know each other. He writes:
Without seeing there is no loving, and no man can love a woman if the geometrical properties of her body do not tally with his geometrical pre-dispositions which will control his aesthetic and amorous inclinations. (TLNL 139)

But he fiercely criticises the marketing of brides through newspaper advertisements. He finds it a clear evidence of Hindu de-generation. This does not mean that he advocates the Western system of marriage. He finds it frivolous and condemns the system of divorce. On the contrary, the Hindu system of marriage gets unqualified praise from him.

We are often told by our Western friends that they just cannot understand our system of marriage. Most of us do not understand theirs either. In any case, countless millions have found happiness in our system and it is not to be spoken of lightly. (APE 120)

But Chaudhuri does not like the way the Indian weddings take place. The long procession of the bridegroom's party gives the impression that the members are going to conquer the bride literally. The accompaniment of noise at the wedding feast makes any true socialising impossible. The elaborate cooking preparations and show of wealth he witnessed both in Bengal and Delhi repelled him.

Another occasion of the Indian social life is the death ceremony where as in the marriage ceremonies people seldom know the person
who has died and come with a total lack of awareness that death is the perpetual companion of life. The shraddh ceremony, which follows the death, becomes a means of advertising one’s wealth and position.

European Society:

The present day British society pleased Chaudhuri as little as did the contemporary Indian public life. He found the social conditions in Great Britain in a state of decadence and foresaw no reversal of the trend. Edward Shils writes:

More painful than Mr. Chaudhuri’s exile is his conviction that Europe is decadent and Great Britain not the least. All his life he opposed those anti-European, anti-British Indian nationalists who proclaimed the failure and the bankruptcy of European civilizations. (5)

The revelation must have been painful for he had hoped to find in England an appreciation of values that he had found lacking in India. But the England he saw was not the England of the great empire. He saw it as the enemy and destroyer of the England he admired and loved. For him, there were two Englands. One of the civilized men and women, the other of unspeakable savages. In his later works he mentioned the cases of murder and violence he read about but saw that such cases did not arouse public fury, nor did they touch the conscience of the humanitarians.
of the media. Swapan Dasgupta writes the following about Chaudhuri's attitude towards the present western society:

The West, he argues, has regressed to where it was in the eighth century A.D., between the final collapse of the Greco-Roman civilization and its subsequent Christian reinvigoration. Nirad Babu is uncertain as to who or what will emerge as the new Saint Augustine, but he has little hesitation in identifying the source of the civilizational AIDS. "All that is prenicious and decadent in the West today ... emanates from across the Atlantic." (6)

Chaudhuri despised the lack of self-respect in the powerful which is why he regarded the Welfare State as a decadent. He writes:

I regard the Welfare State as a decadent state because I hold the considered view that mere welfare of the mass of people of a state can never restore the greatness of a people. It has been seen in respect of every country in history that its greatness as a power has had no relation with the economic prosperity or even sufficiency in the life of the majority of its people. (THM 94)

His admiration for builders and rulers of empires and great generals is actually the admiration of virtues which are necessary for the acquisition and exercise of power. He esteems the courage which leads to great achievements and the pride in such achievements — individual and collective, intellectual, political and military. Chaudhuri admired the
tradition of self-criticism in the West. He found them attacking conformity and authoritarianism. He gives examples of Matthew Arnold whose conception of literature is as a criticism of life and Jean Paul Sartre who rejected the coveted Noble prize because of his conviction that a writer must be a non-conformist.

Chaudhuri saw the decadence of Great Britain in the present state of British manners and speech; the frivolity of public amusements, the triviality of interest and indecorous conduct. This last intellectual advocate of British imperialism who once said that even British cats were superior to Indian cats became one of the severest critics of decadence in British life and its fallen values. In *The Three Horseman*, he wrote:

There is not a single aspect of British life to which decadence is not spreading and deepening its invasion. (THM 78)

Though Swapan Das Gupta finds some of the instances chosen to illustrate decadence “admittedly trivial and outrageously funny” (p ix). Chaudhuri’s observation regarding marriage, family and Welfare State cannot be ignored. He finds the institution of marriage in shambles. The destruction of the traditional family with its traditional functions has led to the disappearance of the authority of the parents over their children. Parents can longer control the behaviour and activities of the children. Chaudhuri with his Brahmo background and Victorian outlook could not
accept the over demonstrative behaviour of the British in love. In this regard, he states that the "Hindu society and the Western society stand at opposite poles". (TLNL 108) Chaudhuri finds that the excessive openness in love making, observable in the parks and roadsides of England is undesirable. A strong promoter of restraint in behaviour, Chaudhuri was unable to accept such over demonstrative behaviour.

Chaudhuri is equally critical about the dreariness of the behaviour of the English people in public. In A Passage to England, he recalls a meeting with a stranger at a Delhi bus stop and the conversation which sprung up between the two ended with the stranger wanting to send him a basket of mangoes. Chaudhuri finds this kind of spontaneous warmth alien in Western culture. He writes:

It is this comedie humane this large hearted wiping out of the distinction between public and private affairs, this craving for sympathy in widest commonality spread that makes us recoil from the dreariness of the public behaviour of the English people. (TLNL 84)

In A Passage to England Chaudhuri left no opportunity to contrast every aspect of English life with that of Indian life. The code of dressing, the silence of the crowds, and the public behaviour of the English were all appreciated by him. But that was his first visit. A closer look from close contact brought forth their drawbacks glaringly. He was forced to accept that the European society like the American society was surely
degenerating in-spite of technological progress. Regarding America, Chaudhuri claims to have been “charmed by the education, humanity and culture of individual Americans.” (EEWW 62) But at the same time he writes:

Yet anything more degenerate than the collective democratic personality of the United States cannot be conceived of. It is not only corrupting the whole world outside the communist block, but is also completely nullifying the great and awful power of the United States, which could have been used for the good of the American people as well as of other nations. (EEWW 62)

Chaudhuri blames the technological aids to living as one of the instruments responsible for the deteriorating social values. He quotes from Tocqueville who observed that the love for material enjoyments set the Americans on a course of invention which they considered imperative. He wrote:

Love of the materials enjoyments of life has become a national and dominant inclination: the strong current of a human passion leads them in that direction; it drags them in its course. (THM 132)

The pride and comfort of these technological aids to living have made not only the Americans but the people world over immune to decadence. Chaudhuri says that “the new style of living created by technology is co-existent with decadence.” (THM 133)
Chaudhuri might be right about the decadence of the Europe and the Western civilization or he might be wrong; it does not lighten the tragedy of the man who, while remaining an Indian assimilated so much of the best European civilization. His reputation in India has been badly besmirched by his devotion to the West, who towards the end of his life, had come to think what he did about the Western civilization. This tragedy does not, however, diminish the grandeur of his own achievements.

To many critics Chaudhuri’s deep dissatisfaction with the Indian social life arises from the fact that his norms are borrowed from Western social life. Mr. Nissim Ezekiel points out:

Mr. Chaudhuri in his rage is not expressing a surface exasperation but a profound concern and involvement. His point of view has deep roots in a positive philosophy which is derived from the Western intellectual, cultural, social and artistic tradition. (7)

Critics wrongly presume that much of Chaudhuri’s criticism of India arises from purely personal reasons. Chaudhuri is able to view the Indian social life, objectively for his relation to the Indian society is like an aeroplane in relation to earth. He writes:
In relation to the modern Indian society, I am like an aeroplane in relation to the earth. It can never rise so high as to be able to sever its terrestrial connection, but its flight enables it to obtain a better view of the lie of the land. (AI x)

The stress is on the lie of the land and not the life of the land. There is no salvation to this vast land unless and until it leaves its duplicity and double standards. In the Autobiography, Chaudhuri has tried to study the entire Indian society in relation to himself. Hence at times, he swings between the description of his own life and that of the history of his country. While describing his own life, Chaudhuri has provided an intimate picture of the Bengali household, the various social functions and their social life. In short, the entire Bengali culture is clearly depicted in the book. There is no doubt that Chaudhuri’s journalistic background and training have influenced his way of seeing and saying things in a provocative and hard hitting manner and the more sensational and provocative the truth, the better for him. Hence, even the most common event or the most trivial and common place household affair is seen by Chaudhuri from a vantage point which is different from ours. L Radhakrishnan Murthy compares him to Shaw and observes that Chaudhuri too like Shaw has the penchant for saying the unusual, doing the unexpected and compelling our attention. “He would rather say the shocking thing and become conspicuous than conform to the standard and be lost in the crowd.” (8) But Chaudhuri does not say the shocking thing to become conspicuous himself. On the contrary his main purpose
is to draw attention of the readers towards such events that are important but are usually ignored. His attempt to draw attention towards them stems from his concern for society and humanity. His views on working women, joint family system, and other events stem from this very concern.

Critical opinion is sharply divided regarding Chaudhuri's views on Indian social life. Critics who approve of his "onslaught on Hindu faith, Indian tradition, culture and history welcome it as 'katharsis', a self-therapy for a nation direly in need of its own bitter truth." (9) His admirers are swept of their feet by the apparent conviction in his tone, the sweeping periods of his style and the "impressive osmosis of his erudition." (10) On the other hand, there are critics who are extremely hostile towards his views and consider him eccentric, and ego-centric megalomaniac. They say:

There is something wrong with the man that has a bundle of contraries and dualities in his character. He cries from housetops that he loves India but all that he does is to malign, undermine and denigrate every aspect of Indian life and that too very unjustly. Invective, sarcasm, subtle irony, vituperation, down right abuse and gross vilification, he pours forth on the people and the land. It is a relentless and unrelieved onslaught. (11)
There is no doubt that Chaudhuri is harsh in his approach towards the Indian social scenario. Though he claims to have "freed his soul from the clutches of Circe", he is extremely sensitive towards the way the Indians live. Calling it a Hamletian dilemma, Naikar Basavaraj writes:

No man with a keen sense of observation of life around him and a deliberate analysis of the observed phenomena can escape the Hamletian dilemma which presupposes an awareness of the contradiction between appearance and reality, between falsification of the traditionally sanctioned values and the simultaneous inevitability of a given phenomenon. A man who is caught in the strange context such as this cannot help responding to it as Chaudhuri does. Nirad Chaudhuri has the courage to see the problem in the face and try to understand and analyse it however ugly and unsolvable it may be. (12).

Just like Milton and Charles Dickens attacked the seventeenth century and nineteenth century England respectively Chaudhuri attacks the dichotomy existing between the Indian ideals and Indian practice.
Notes and References


11. Ibid, p. 145