CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION
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Nirad Chandra Chaudhuri, rationalist and an Anglophile was born on 23rd November 1897 in an aristocratic family in Kishoreganj in the Mymensingh district of East Bengal, the present Bangladesh. His father Upendra Narayan Chaudhuri, a lawyer by profession, was a humanist and an individualist. His mother, Sushila Sundari, was a pious religious-minded woman who disliked falsehood, dishonesty, moral cowardice and meanness. His father did his best to impart the spirit of humanism and free thought to his children. Chaudhuri was never given any systematic religious education and so he never developed a true spiritual or religious life. As his parents were partly Deists, partly Hindu monotheists and partly rationalists they had no faith in old conventions and traditions. As a boy Chaudhuri imbibed the spirit of his father and the influence of his mother was profound on him.

Chaudhuri spent the first twelve years of his life in Kishoreganj and he occasionally visited his ancestral village, Banagram, and his mother’s village, Kashikutch. He was brought up and nurtured in an atmosphere of urbanity in Kishoreganj and his visits to his ancestral village created in him an awareness of blood kinship and family traditions and relations as he expressed in TO LIVE OR NOT TO LIVE.
Chaudhuri lived in Calcutta for thirty two years from 1910-1942 and the city had considerable influence in moulding his personality during the formative years of his life. He says that he was a semi-savage when he came to Calcutta. The city polished off the rough edges but could not break the rustic core. The school life in Calcutta was a great disappointment. The students were indisciplined and had little regard for their teachers. They also lacked intellectual brilliance. But the literary atmosphere was more lively and Chaudhuri was much excited by the literary societies and activities. Besides, the English teacher was a man of literary tastes, a poet and critic. It was his influence and inspiration which made Nirad, a writer. Apart from this Encyclopaedia Britannica was a great source of knowledge and inspiration.

Chaudhuri had a scholarly temperament and so he studied every branch of learning - literature, diplomacy and history and a number of other subjects. He had a special passion for the study of history. His goal in life was to become a Professor of history. His history teacher, Prof. Bipin Gupta deeply influenced him. He was also influenced by Prof. T.R.Glover and listened attentively to his lectures on Christianity and the Roman Empire. He felt attracted towards specialized scholarship and its methodology. The Imperial Library (now National Library of Calcutta) also stimulated his interest in history. There he mastered a
number of classics of history. He acquired the requisite historic attitude and historic integrity. Chaudhuri could do well in B.A. Honours in History in 1917 and was placed in the 1st Division. But his great ambition of becoming a Professor in History was not fulfilled and it remained a dream for him all his life as he failed to pass M.A. History due to his ill-health and depression of spirits.

Chaudhuri was married in a respectable family in Shillong in 1932. For sometime he worked in the military department as a clerk and he also served as secretary to Sarat Chandra Bose for four years. In his student life Chaudhuri cultivated a taste for military history and art of warfare which enabled him to earn his living as a commentator on the operations of Second World War. The life of a clerk in the military accounts department did not suit him and it was most distasteful for him. He gave up his job, suffered great poverty and humiliation and gradually drifted to journalism.

Chaudhuri left Calcutta and came to Delhi in 1942. He worked as a Commentator in All India Radio on the operations of the Second World War. He made his mark with the publication of **AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN UNKNOWN INDIAN**, in 1951. The book shot him to name and fame, glory and recognition. In 1955 he paid a short visit to England that he had longed to see since his boyhood. His
experiences and observations of England find an eloquent expression in his famous book, \textit{A PASSAGE TO ENGLAND} published in 1959. He was awarded the Duff Cooper Memorial Prize for his book, \textit{THE CONTINENT OF CIRCE}. His two books \textit{THE INTELLECTUAL IN INDIA} and \textit{TO LIVE OR NOT TO LIVE} appeared in 1967 and 1970 respectively. In 1974 appeared his famous book, \textit{SCHOLAR EXTRAORDINARY}, a biography of Frederick Max Muller, a German scholar.

Chaudhuri is a prolific writer. His short statured nature of the body would have become a boon in his old age. At the ripe age of 90 he published \textit{THY HAND, GREAT MONARCH}. He turned centenarian in 1997 and passed away on August 1, 1999 living for 102 years. Chaudhuri is a great scholar and a voracious reader. He has devoted all his life to the pursuit of knowledge and has carved a niche for himself in Indo – Anglian Literature.

Chaudhuri has been thoroughly branded as an Anglophile with the publication of his travelogue, \textit{A PASSAGE TO ENGLAND} in 1959. It is a record of 'the range and intensity of the experiences' At the age of fifty seven, Chaudhuri went on a "Short visit of five weeks to England followed by two weeks in Paris and one in Rome" \footnote{1}. Many
things that he saw during this tour were those that he had longed to see since his childhood.

Under the influence of his father he has acquired early in life a love for English language and literature. The love for England embedded in the form of a seed in his father has grown into a mighty and graceful tree in Chaudhuri. His admiration for the English and English literature has been transformed into an adoration and then into an infatuation.

The infatuation that he has developed towards England is also due to the reading of the works of major English literary figures, and he has visualized so frequently the beauty and the nature of her people. To visit England and see the country of his dreams at first hand has become the burning desire of his life. For him England imagined is far greater and sweeter than India experienced. Imagination to Chaudhuri like to any one was much sweeter than action. So, he was trying to transform his dreams into realities and his imagination into a practical vision. He wants to make a difference between the mental graphic pictures that he had formed in his brain racks through the reading of literary works and the real beauty of the landscape of England which is a fairy land for him. Thus England has become the centre of attraction, an apple of the eye with its powerful magnetic force, irresistibly, drawing the intellectual in Chaudhuri towards her. This great burning desire was fulfilled in 1955
when he visited England and France. ‘A PASSAGE TO ENGLAND’ is a testament of Chaudhuri’s Anglomania.

Nirad C. Chaudhuri’s third book, ‘THE CONTINENT OF CIRCE’ sub-titled AN ESSAY ON THE PEOPLES OF INDIA was published in 1966. It is a denunciation of the Hindu society. If Chaudhuri’s second book A PASSAGE TO ENGLAND is written with total fascination for England; THE CONTINENT OF CIRCE expresses his complete disillusionment with India. In his passage to England he turns a pro-British but in CIRCE he seems to be an anti-Indian. His already pre-conceived and well established ideas have come to their logical conclusion in CIRCE. The main purpose of the book is to describe the people of India in their natural grouping, both ethnic and cultural and analyze their collective personality in the light of the historical evolution which has formed it.

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

Chaudhuri expresses his conviction strongly: "Life long observation has convinced me that there is a streak of insanity in the Hindu and that nobody will arrive at a normal personality...... In all Hindu activities, especially in the public sphere, can be detected clear signs of either a feebleness of mental faculties or perversion of them". Chaudhuri is thus right in designating his work as an essay because his main intention is to endeavour and to understand the mysterious and puzzling country of which he himself is a native.

There seems to be no connection between India's tall talk and the squeamish and ugly existence. Chaudhuri's anger, bitterness and concern are expressed in his words. "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".

Chaudhuri's wisdom enables him to identify three European principles violated by Hindu life - reason, order and measure. The negation takes place through a terrible dichotomy, "an extreme renunciation with greed; an unnatural insistence of chastity accompanied by a sex-obsession and sensuality in personal life; a morbid respect for
animal life go hand in hand with beastly cruelty to living creatures, and in
moral sphere contradictions that make them mix up sexual experience
with the spiritual.”

The terrible dichotomy in the Hindu mind makes Chaudhuri
take the Roman God Janus as the symbol of the Hindu character. The
only difference is that Janus is attributed with just two faces but the
Hindu mind has many. So the Hindu personality is not even ‘Janus
Quadrifrons’, but ‘Janus Multifrons’. Every Hindu is divided against
himself and it is seen throughout his historical existence as he has been.

Among the large number of antithetical, though connected
traits which shape Hindu behaviour, are: “A sense of Hindu solidarity
with an uncontrollable tendency towards disunity within the Hindu order;
collective megalomania with self-abasement; extreme xenophobia with
an object xenolotry, authoritarianism with anarchic individualism;
vviolence with non-violence; militarism with pacifism possessiveness with
carelessness about property owned; courage with cowardice; cleverness
with stupidity.

The geographical setting pervades the book influencing all
the incoming people, for which reason the author has called India the
continent of Circe. It has enervated and enfeebled the natives as well as
the foreigners with her cruel and inimical environment by casting her everlasting spell. With its tropical climate it affected the brave and kindly people-the English. Even the best type of the English man could not escape being denatured by his stay in the country. He lost his sense of proposition, usual kindliness and equability; became a sexual pervert, deteriorated in collective behaviour and became extremely offensive.

As an ardent Anglophile Chaudhuri puts forward his elaborate argument to defend the atrocious behaviour of the English Imperialists towards the weak Indians during the British rule. He admits that "the British in India lost all sense of right and wrong, truth and falsehood, charity and malice and paraded a racial arrogance. He defends their racial pride and sense of superiority and their aggressive suppression and ill-treatment of the indigenous population."

The title of the book is symbolic that the vast continent of India is identified with Circe, the demonness and sorceress in Greek mythology under whose magical spell people became dehumanized and turned into swine. One cannot help observing that this is the "accumulated anger of seventy years" bursting "like a bombshell on a land that has been and is stifling to him"
Indeed, THE CONTINENT OF CIRCE is such a highly controversial and explosive book that it has won Chaudhuri not only Duff Cooper Memorial Award but the reputation of being the most hotly debated author of Indo-Anglian literature.

We may not agree with his idiosyncratic theories on race and religion, his present, hard-hitting criticism and his irritating opinions on India and her people, but the originality, brilliance, straightforwardness, rationality and intellectuality which characterize all his writings compel our admiration. The book mirrors the Indian character and reflects the Hindu society which needs to be repaired of the ravages made by the time.

SCHOLAR EXTRAORDINARY published in 1974 is the biography of Max Muller, the German Scholar who had his literary pursuits at Oxford and made a remarkable contribution to the study of Sanskrit literature. Chaudhuri being an extraordinary scholar, there is nothing unusual, in showing interest in a scholar extraordinary in Max Muller who had merged the western and eastern literary horizons.

Muller was an intellectual, scholar and thinker playing a vital role in the mental history of his times by creating an awareness among the people of new ideas extending their views to new horizons.
His life would show that ideas do travel from the scholar’s study influencing the wide world of the mind. In the introduction to his book Chaudhuri says “.......... it was he who was responsible for building up the reputation of the Germans as the most admiring, sympathetic and profound interpreters of Hindu civilization and spirituality.”

Further Chaudhuri cites the tribute paid to Max Muller by Swami Vivekananda the preacher of Neo-Hinduism ‘There are a number of great souls in the West’, he wrote in Bengali – ‘who undoubtedly are well-wishers of India, but I am not aware of one in Europe who is a greater well-wisher. He is not only a well-wisher, but also a deep believer in Indian philosophy and religion......... Though all through life he has lived with and steeped himself in ancient Sanskrit literature the India of the Professor’s imagination is not simply that which resounded with the chanting of the Vedas and from which sacrificial smoke rose to the sky.....

Chaudhuri feels saddened that Muller, a world figure for thirty years before his demise in 1900 is almost completely forgotten today. He makes a contrast between Muller’s contemporaneous fame and its posthumous decline. As an ardent admirer of Muller Chaudhuri wants to re-establish his lost glory against the background of his great contemporaneous reputation by bringing his biography to the world.
There are several reasons why Chaudhuri’s biography makes such a fascinating reading. First, like his biographer, Muller was also a poverty-stricken scholar with slight aristocratic connections. Chaudhuri, who had undergone the ups and downs of life identifies himself in many ways with Muller. He says, He could struggle with poverty but he saw no end to it and was troubled by doubts whether the vocation he has chosen of scholar was likely to lead anywhere. Second, both Muller and Chaudhuri have shown a rare sense of dedication to the chosen vocation of a scholar. Both of them have undertaken a long mental voyage which is free from any dogma and which is characterized by a disinterested pursuit of knowledge. Like Muller Chaudhuri has a passion for making a substantial contribution to the commonly shared general intellectual culture. But inspite of their dedication to the life of scholarship, both intellectuals have a sneaking admiration for worldly success. For all these reasons, Chaudhuri’s biography of Muller makes a fascinating reading.

Chaudhuri excels himself in this difficult task of writing biography. There is neither any concealment nor glorification. It is characterised by truth and exactness of factual knowledge. C.D. Narasimhaiah rightly remarks that, “Mr. Chaudhuri has made ample amends for his poor and
irresponsible writing by contributing an excellent work of scholarship in his recent book on Max Muller, SCHOLAR EXTRAORDINARY”.

With hindsight many of his critics will agree that he was misunderstood, and that he spoke out at a time when India brooked no criticism. He moved to Great Britain in 1970, settling in Oxford, where he has lived for the last twenty seven years.

A prolific writer Chaudhuri has written nineteen books in English and in Bengali. Apart from his AUTOBIOGRAPHY his other better known book is a sequel, THY HAND GREAT MONARCH. Many of the books of non-fictional prose have gushed from his pen. They are TO LIVE OR NOT TO LIVE, THE INTELLECTUAL IN INDIA, CLIVE OF INDIA, CULTURE IN THE VANITY BAG, HINDUISM, THE EAST IS EAST AND THE WEST IS WEST, THREE HORSEMEN OF THE NEW APOCALYPSE, FROM THE ARCHIVES OF A CENTENARIAN. The first fifty years of his life is spent in accumulation of knowledge and the later part is dedicated for his creative work. Chaudhuri is perhaps, the only centenarian writer who has published a work of his own and has celebrated his 100th birth day living for 102 years.
One of the interesting and noteworthy features of Chaudhuri's writings is their sociological aspect. As a scholar and a very keen observer of the society he presents very vivid and revealing pictures of different societies namely the Hindu, the English, the one of East Bengal, Calcutta, Delhi the Punjab, Anglicized Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Anglo-Indians. He views these societies, from the perspectives of history, ethnology, sociology and philosophy, and makes some very illuminating comments on their culture; social, political, religious and economic institutions, their customs and rituals. He analyses the different aspects of these societies – their men and morals, ethnic and race relations, caste and class, their institutions like the marriage and the family with a sociologist's critical faculty. In this process, he sometimes assumes the role of a social moralist and preacher; at other times he is essentially a social critic bitterly criticizing these societies for their lapses, and on still other occasions, he becomes a sociologist formulating and laying down some very individualistic and original, sociological theories.

Thus, having placed Nirad C.Chaudhuri against the background of Indo-Anglian tradition in general, and Indo-Anglian prose writing in particular, it would be merely a step further to pass on to an assessment of
Nirad Chaudhuri as a sociologist, or rather, 'a social thinker', because of the heavy weight of social content in the body of his writings.

Chaudhuri is often described by his critics as, THE LITTLE BIG MAN and THE ANGRY OLD MAN. He is short – statured, tiny and delicately built, with a large head, out of proportion with the rest of his body, and bald, therefore closely resembling a caricature. But his works bristle with information and opinions, illumine with thought – provoking ideas and sparkle with elegant epigrams. He not only enlightens and entertains in the best of neoclassical tradition, but also enrages his readers often. Some times he gets a malicious delight out of annoying people, pushing them to the end of their tether. He is angry and aggressive, hot and acrid for the benefit of the world. His wit is sharp, his analysis brilliant, his point of view original – yet, the taste it leaves in the mouth is mostly bitter – sour.

Nirad C Chaudhuri stands in the first rank of the writers of English prose. He was an erudite scholar. He had a well-stocked library and made full use of it. Early in life he got familiar with the works of a number of English writers like Shakespeare, Milton, Shelley and many others. He read avidly the Encyclopaedia Britannica and history in the Imperial Library, Calcutta.
NOTES:


4. Ibid, p.98.


10. Ibid, p.10.