ENGLAND A ROMANTIC DREAMLAND

Nirad C. Chaudhuri’s Second Book is A PASSAGE TO ENGLAND. In 1955 Chaudhuri went to England for five weeks to give talks for the overseas service of the B.B.C. This book is a record of the “the range and intensity of the experiences” Chaudhuri went through during his short visit to England. He states that the things he saw during his tour were those that he longed to see since his boyhood. He does not intend this book to be “informative, edifying, hortatory or even serious” and he simply wants “to be myself in whatever I should write about my visit” in this book which is only a record of his “sensations (to be carefully distinguished from emotions) of what I experienced …….”¹. He has not recorded his experiences in a diary nor kept notes as it would not only weaken the experience and convert living into cramming for examinations or writing a doctoral thesis. For Chaudhuri writing this book was a process of “recalling the sensations in tranquility”. He does not hesitate to take the blame if this book tastes like muddy port for his mixing sensations with ‘ratiocinative sediment’.

A PASSAGE TO ENGLAND is a travelogue, like those of V.S.Naipaul’s AN AREA OF DARKNESS, Dom Moraes’ GONE AWAY and Ved Mehta’s PORTRAIT OF INDIA, though with some unusualness about it. While the other Indian travelogues are rich with the
local colour of the country Chaudhuri holds back from losing himself in the surroundings of England. Perhaps this is due to his basic assumption that England is different from India. He says:

> What my senses were dealing with and stringing hard to grasp was the reality I would call Timeless England, which I was seeing for the first time, and which I was inevitably set against the Timeless India in which I had been steeped all my life. ...... In fact, I do not think I had any conscious theory at all: my senses worked below the conscious level in such a manner that one – half of my perception of England was the perception of something not India.²

As such this book is more a passage to India than to England. Chaudhuri is obsessed with the thought of East-West confrontation, against his usual love to contrast the East with the West, and this obsession would have prompted him to name his travelogue A PASSAGE TO ENGLAND after E.M. Forster’s famous novel A PASSAGE TO INDIA.
It is perhaps this fact of East–West confrontation in his mind that made him call his book 'A PASSAGE TO ENGLAND' after E.M. Forster's famous novel 'A PASSAGE TO INDIA'.

It is unfortunate that Chaudhuri preferred to see England against the background of India. It is equally a sorrowful feature that some other Indian writers in English also have developed in themselves deep-set bias against their own mother-land, that too, after having settled down in the West. Chaudhuri's statement, at the end of his 'Pleas For The Book' (A PASSAGE TO ENGLAND): "Time has made the face of my country stark, chastened and sad, and it remains so in spite of the lipstick that is being put on it by the hand of the spiritual half-castes. The face of England remains smiling". – is not only pungent, unkind, but also biased and ante-Indian. The very purpose of Chaudhuri's book is to assert the contrast between the two faces of England and India, their timelessness and their religious beliefs.

Chaudhiri's deep study of English Literature made him nurture "a fairly comprehensive and homogeneous picture of the country (England) and its people". When he went to England he was full of notions about England, history and geography. Beneath the surface of the political,
social and economic troubles of the English people Chaudhuri could recognize old England – the England of his reading and imagining. He says: “To be frank, I thought today’s England was very much like the England of history and perfectly consistent with it”.5

In A PASSAGE TO ENGLAND Chaudhuri makes a comparative study of the social scenes of India and of England. This is both strength and weakness of A PASSAGE TO ENGLAND – strength, because it gives “a piquancy and edge to his writing” 6 and weakness, because “he is determined to compare Hindu Society to its disadvantage with a Western one”.7 It has become impossible for Chaudhuri to bring about a synthesis of Eastern and Western cultures due to their respective geographical settings and climates.

Chaudhuri starts his book on England with a Hindu belief in rebirth. According to him the Hindus love money because they feel that they continue to use it in their after-life. It means the Indians can expect a welfare state like the one enjoyed in England only in their life-after-death. It is true that the Hindus believe that this world is an illusion and yet they continue to cling to mundane things. Indians usually attach less importance to the luxurious life owing to their belief in life-after – death and also poverty. The climate of a country reflects itself pretty clearly in the temper, habits and general surroundings of the people.
Chaudhuri pours abundant praise in his description of the English people but for an occasional adverse comment on their system of divorce. Chaudhuri went to England with some fixed notions about the class distinctions among the Britishers. From the beginning of his arrival in England he has begun his search for the class-characteristics of the highly stratified English society. It is from a study of the English clothes that Chaudhuri discovers that there have been no foreign invasions in England. His keen observation shows him that the profession contributed to the external appearance and behaviour of the English people. Chaudhuri feels that the differences between one professional group and another in England have fallen short of those in India.

I could see that professions did contribute to the external appearance and behaviour, and that a civil servant was not quite like a don........ Yet all the differences that I was able to detect, and which are great by Western standards fell far short of what I was used to in my own country, where the variety needs no observation but literally Saute aux yenx.8
Chaudhuri thinks that the descendants of all foreign invaders, like Aryans, the Scythians, the Hindus, the Muslims and the British have created great sartorial variety in India. He explains the differences in dress in India in philosophical terms:

Thus we Hindus who have propounded the philosophical system of the Vedanta, which denies changes and bids us to seek salvation only in the formless Absolute, are driven in our actions to proliferate variations in the most patently biological manner, but the Westerners who have put forward the theory of evolution have to do everything in their power to approach the undifferentiated Brahma.

Chaudhuri forgets that the economic differences among the English men are not so sharp as they are among the Indians. That is why most Europeans dress alike. One may recall all the pilgrims dressed according to their status and profession in Chaucer's PROLOGUE TO THE CANTERBURY TALES. Chaudhuri refuses to accept the explanation (for the sartorial differences in India) that India is more a continent than a country with a huge conglomeration of languages and regional cultures. He argues that there is a wide range of variety in the dress of Indians within one culture – group within one province. He firmly says that it is
not merely the size of the country which has brought about this heterogeneity in the appearance of the people of India. He emphasizes that, besides the philosophical system of the ‘Vedanta’ that denies changes, the climate and the weather of the tropics also cause this heterogeneity as the ‘theory of evolution’ and ‘cold weather’ have conditioned the European mind and dress.

Chaudhuri argues:

It would seem that climate and weather have shaped modes of exercising individual liberty in the East and West. Living in the tropics we like to relax, lose control of our appearance and behaviour, and thus create differences through our failure to keep to the track. The people of the West are braced up by the cold to exercise greater will-power in casting themselves in a uniform mould.

On the theories of Chaudhuri Paul C. Verghese rightly comments:

Chaudhuri here seems to forget that the variety of dress one witnesses in different parts of
India, say Kerala and Uttera Pradesh, is primarily due to the difference in climate.11

Chaudhuri contrasts the public behaviour of the English people with that of the Indians. While in England, Chaudhuri was frightened by "the eternal silence of these infinite crowds". This is in staggering contrast to the Indian behaviour where noise is an invariable concomitant of all social intercourse. It is surprising that even the traditional standoffishness of the Englishman is considered a virtue by Chaudhuri. He says:

Our forte being talking we do not readily perceive that the silence of the English people reserves their energies for work, and that to judge their real power of self-expression we have to see what they do and not simply hear what they say.12

Chaudhuri notes, in contrast, that in a bus in India, people not only talk about their personal matters to him but also twist to see the time from his watch even they are not personally not known to him. He seems to bump into irresponsible Indians most of the time. The Englishman's expression of himself in work and not in talk is a national characteristic
which the climate of his country has given him. Chaudhuri himself says:

"...... the weather has very largely entered into the formation of the Englishman’s mind, and the training of his sensibilities".\textsuperscript{13} Thus weather is a great deciding factor in the Englishman’s mental make-up and Chaudhuri argues:

After experiencing the English weather, I had no difficulty in understanding why Englishmen became so offensive in India, losing their usual kindliness and equability in human relations.\textsuperscript{14}

This is an instance of Chaudhuri’s attempt to smoothen the Englishman’s offensive and unkind behaviour towards Indians in the days of the British rule in India. Even the negative virtues of Englishmen are praised by Chaudhuri. An English labourer has refused to talk to him in a café and Chaudhuri does not mind it seriously. Besides he mentions that incident in a lighter vein. He seems to have been so much pleased by the welcome he received in England that Chaudhuri responds favourably even to the English cats and comments:

At Canterbury, when I was walking among the ruins of St. Augustine’s Abbey, a cat came up and rolled on the path before me, in order to be picked up and tickled under the chin. When I did so it purred...
until I was ready to cry, thinking of the cordial state of Indo-British friendship in which I had never believed.\textsuperscript{15}

Perhaps the expressive potential of the Canterbury cats is greater than that of the Enlishmen. Chaudhuri considers the Englishmen’s reticence a good quality in them. In an underdeveloped country like India one may not be noticed unless one puts on all one’s wares on display and one’s achievement is not acknowledged until one boasts of it. It is unfortunate that this characteristic is considered a negative quality among the Indians. Nevertheless, Chaudhuri approves of the Englishman’s love-making half-heartedly. Here he sounds a Puritan as he thinks the Englishman’s serious attitude to love-making is Europe’s special contribution to the mankind’s life of passion. The English woman does not hesitate to divorce her husband within one year after her ardent love to and marriage with him. Chaudhuri’s comment on such fragile love and marital relationship shows that he is quite conservative in his attitude to love though he is unorthodox in his political views. He is right in his belief that the Western Society unhesitatingly sacrifices many human values in the name of love. The Indians forster the notion of detachment deeply and love is not an essential prerequisite for marriage and they consider the union of man and woman is only for procreation and fulfillment of ‘Dharma’.
Chaudhuri looks for the traditional John Bull, in his survey of England, who treats others with authoritarian solitude, icy snobbishness and loud and berserker bad temper. But surprisingly he finds the Englishmen behave normally in their natural environment and climate. Chaudhuri says that the Englishman’s dictum is --- ‘work is worship’ and his physical labour is utilitarian. To him the Hindu has no emotional or ethical ties with anything he does in his life. According to Chaudhuri the Hindu treats physical exertion a spiritual catharsis. He is unkind in his opinion of the Hindu’s workmanship and hard work and his explanation of the Hindu’s physical exertion is a quite misinterpretation of the Hindu tradition of Yoga. It seems Chaudhuri cannot stand the things Indian and this is, perhaps, due to the Indian’s lack of love for things English.

Chaudhuri, in his trip to Europe, shows a lot of interest in European civilization. For him civilization means antiques, old books, second hand furniture and, above all, preservation of them. Contrasting the Indian sense of civilization with that of the European he observes:

As for those Indians who have imbibed the notion of civilization from the Western education, their ancient culture is a thing to throw at the heads of foreigners, never to be carried on their own shoulders, where it is felt as a burden. Our men of culture
practice it in the abstract, as modernist painters
practice abstract art. Their cultural consciousness is a
part of their nationalism.16

But, Chaudhuri fails to understand that an average Indian has no
means and academic background to appreciate art and literature of India's
past. In fact Chaudhuri’s life is also influenced and conditioned by the
past to which he belongs and the fact that the circumstances are
responsible for a common Indian’s inadequacy in preserving Chaudhuri’s
notion of civilization is comfortably ignored by him. The lives of the
Indians are also as much tradition-bound as those of the English people.
But lack of means prevents them to give a tangible expression to it.
Verghese appropriately says:

....... the average Indian has neither
the means nor the educational background for the
appreciation of the art and literature of India’s
past. It is, therefore, not fair on the part of
Chaudhuri to take them to task for an inadequacy
which has arisen out of their circumstances.17

The cultural life of Europe has exercised a great influence on
Chaudhuri. He is impressed to see lines of people to buy tickets for a
Shakespeare performance in Stratford – upon – Avon and a Racine performance in Paris. He ventures to state that the people live on Shakespeare whereas nobody flourishes on Kalidasa in India. His argument is not convincing. Because, Kaidas’s classical Sanskrit age is unaccessible as a cultural commodity. We don't find people thriving on even the ancient Greek writers. It may be observed that the Englishmen were savages when ancient Indian culture and civilization flourished. If Chaudhuri’s mind finds the Indian culture or civilization reduced to an inert psychological environment or the Indians living as fish in water, the reason is due to the imperialistic exploitation to a large extent. Chaudhuri feels Hindu religion is a materialistic one. Due to his pro-Christian stance he feels like becoming a Christian at the King’s College Chapel while attending the service there ---- “The next day was Easter Sunday and I again went to the Chapel. ...., I said to myself that if anywhere I , a Hindu, could think or becoming a Christian it was in such a Place”.18

One may say that among varieties of religions all over the world and if the English one appears to be superior to Chaudhuri it must be a reflection of his mind’s mirror dominated fully with the anti-Indian views. It is a blind denial of the spirituality of India to say that the Hindu prayer is selfish and that the Hindu religion is materialistic. Chaudhuri would have said thus only to propitiate the subjects of his host-country.
Chaudhuri finds fault with the way of worship of the Hindus in their temples, performance of rituals, propitiation of gods through offerings, sacrifices and incantations. While the 'collective worship' of the Christians inspires him the worship of the 'Gods' in Hinduism, for him, serves to infuse a glow of spirituality into worldly prosperity and happiness. Chaudhuri ignores the fact that the Hinduism is a way of life and not an organized religion like Christianity to hold collective worship by a disciplined group of people. To hold the view that only the Hindus and not the Christians pray for personal favours and material prosperity is to insult and credit the average believer in God and religions with something more than he ever bargains for. Hinduism is also flexible enough to absorb alien faiths and cultures to progress towards a brighter synthesis. Misrepresentation of Hindu faith, tradition and culture, truths, as done by Chaudhuri in his A PASSAGE TO ENGLAND, displays only a motivated intention of pro-Christian and ante-Indian people.

Like Literature and Art the political institutions and economic conditions of a country form an integral part of the culture of its society. While in England Chaudhuri was greatly impressed by the welfare state and surprised that the people, other than the professional politicians, showed little interest in politics. For Chaudhuri India represents a lower
state of civilization and that is the reason, he believes, politics is kept alive in India. He says:

There is also suffering and discontent enough to make it necessary for a government which calls itself parliamentary democracy to have recourse to shooting and gassing as a matter of regular administrative routine more often than in any other independent country in the contemporary world.¹⁹

There is absolutely no need for Chaudhuri to denigrate India as a country of strife only just to show that political system works well in England. He could have as well analysed the English and the Indian situations with a more appropriate comparison than trying to apply criteria for the English situation to the Indian one. Similarly Chaudhuri takes an objection to the Russians holding on to their empire, but responds positively to the Englishmen in their imperialistic acts. He fails to see that the Russian imperialism has a different economic relationship between her and her colonies than the outright exploitation of the British imperialism.

Chaudhuri finds ‘welfare state’ a reality in England. He thinks he saw in England a government trying to promote the welfare of the people
and a general state of welfare that might not be due to government and its agencies. He feels that illness in India is a most harrowing experience as free treatment in the public hospitals is unsympathetic and humiliating and good treatment is expensive. He is convinced that the National Health Service in England is a reality of the Welfare State.

Chaudhuri admits that the Britishers' building effort is the second thing that has proved the existence of the welfare state in England. He finds no resemblance of the English slums, the dwellings of workmen, to the slums of Calcutta and Delhi. He writes:

Even in those parts of the East End of London where the old working men's dwellings had survived, as for instance, in Bethnal Green, I saw prams at the doors, and curtains in the windows, which instead of suggesting slums suggested to me the quarters of high civil servants of the Government of India.\(^\text{20}\)

Inspite of his affliction with Anglomania Chaudhuri sounds correct in his contrast of the Indian slums to the English scene, though India is in want and distress. Neither the politicians nor the administrators ever care for the poor slum-dwellers. Shabby, dirty, insufficient and tattered clothing of the poor Indians and the presence of the diseased, deformed
and underfed persons everywhere in India must have created mental
distress in a sensitive man like Chaudhuri. Similarly it is heartening to
note that Chaudhuri has not approved of England in so far as her attitude
to war is concerned. He observes that the Englishmen also suffer from
contradictions as is evident from their double-talk:

..... there is nothing from which the English
people shrink with greater horror than the mere idea
of war, yet they are having to spend more money on
armaments than at any other time in their long and
warlike history. They denounce the H-bomb every
day and still cannot refrain from making it. They are
determined not to go to war, and yet they allow a
foreign nation to have military bases on their own
soil.21

Except this defect among the Englishmen Chaudhuri finds all other
things alright with England. There is housing, food and clothing for
every one and the National Health Service works efficiently. However,
one may fear that comparing everything English with everything Indian
may not sound well. India is a vast country with a lot of poverty and over
population. It does not mean that India is dead or that the stamp of death
is already printed on her. Discontent, disorder, and sporadic outbursts of
violence may lead to decay, but it should be remembered that life grows out of death and resurgence is a sure sign of decay. The rumbles of discontent should not be mistaken for the groans of death. All may not be well in England as food, wine, art, music, scents and silks are not within the reach of everybody even there. Chaudhuri’s concept of a welfare state seems to be biased. He firmly believes that the Welfare State can ensure happiness only when it is not stagnant and all people should do away with the caste-system to achieve equality in life. He laments that the modern democracy has been preventing a good Sudra remain a good Sudra by giving him training and education. It has destroyed his folk-civilization in many countries and made a half-caste of him as a result of which the Sudra is bringing everybody down to his level. But, Chaudhuri’s argument may not be true as any society would progress slowly through a sensible revolt against an established tradition. In due course of time one may cease to be an eternal Sudra.

However, Chaudhuri’s Anglicism is seen not merely in his adulation of the English way of life and in the sympathy with which he glosses over the faults of the English people, but also in his determined malicious comparison of the Hindu society to its disadvantage with the Western. His love for the European is as pathological as is his hatred for the Indian. One may be inclined to remark that A PASSAGE TO
ENGLAND is in fact a passage to India as its author argues, often with malicious and pointless comparisons with India, as if India were a defective sort of England. Even the ironical remarks of the critics in their reviews of the Book “Mr. Chaudhuri does not appear to be seeing (England) for the first time, but returning after years of exile” also seem to have been ignored by him while nurturing his love for all the things English.

Chaudhuri, in his Book, has compared two absolutely dissimilar countries and their people by applying the theories, principles and standards of one to the study of the other. He also fails thoroughly to achieve the goal he has set before him, at the beginning of the book, to set “Timeless England” against the “Timeless India” because of his futile comparison of the England of the Past with the India of the present and vice versa. He could perhaps have effectively conveyed the beauty of the permanence of India and England had he stuck to his original plan. In the absence of adherence to the proposed plan A PASSAGE TO ENGLAND, no doubt, seems to be yet another travel book though an unusual one. It is unfortunate that Chaudhuri has preferred self-interest to national interest and tried to please the Englishmen with his Book A PASSAGE TO ENGLAND and his ambition that the reading of it in India too would fetch him some foreign exchange would have angered the Nationalist.
Indian, Mr. Sham Lal, the distinguishing editor of THE TIMES OF INDIA, so much as to provoke him to subtitle the review of A PASSAGE TO ENGLAND as WAGGING THE TAIL. Nehru’s remark “The intellectuals have failed India” is proved true with Nirad C. Chauduri’s A PASSAGE TO ENGLAND.
NOTES

1. Nirad C. Chaudhury, A PASSAGE TO ENGLAND, Orient Paperbacks, Delhi, 1998, p.10

2. Ibid, p.11


5. Ibid, p.12


9. Ibid, p.73

10. Ibid, p. 73


13. Ibid, p. 96


15. Ibid, p. 85

16. Ibid, p. 146


18. Nirad C. Chaudhuri, A PASSAGE TO ENGLAND, Orient Paperbacks, Delhi, 1973

19. Ibid, p. 178

20. Ibid, p. 185