CHAPTER - IV

A RECORD OF A GENIUS
Nirad C. Chaudhuri, in his youth, was attracted towards History, among all other subjects. He desired to be "an epitome of universal knowledge".¹ Though historical knowledge fascinated him and he longed to become a professor of History he failed to pass M.A. History owing to ill-health. He himself says about his love of the History subject:

In the three months of summer vacation of 1917, I read every nineteenth Century and early twentieth Century Classic of history and made myself perfectly familiar with in the history of historical writing.²

Perhaps this love of history would have prompted Chaudhuri besides his veneration for a great scholar and thinker of the nineteenth century, Max Muller, to write the biography of quality" Scholar Extraordinary- The Life of Friedrich Max Muller". Muller's role in making the people of the world understand the Indians in general and the whole humanity in particular is not only significant but also Universally relevant in history which fact too would have impressed Chaudhuri to write Muller's biography. Chaudhuri wanted to rediscover ancient India to modern Indians and Muller also worked with the same intention all through his life. Max Muller, in his autobiography says:
I felt satisfied when my work led me to a new discovery whether it was the discovery of a new continent or thought, or of the smallest desert island in the ocean of truth.³

Such scholarly trait of Muller equalled with that of his biographer, Nirad C. Chaudhuri. This quality also enticed Chaudhuri to write Muller's biography though there was no separate need to write one for the reading public. However, Chaudhuri had a reason which he himself stated clearly in his introduction to the biography.

Whether Max Muller deserves a new biography......cannot be discussed without taking note of two indisputable facts: the first, that he is almost completely forgotten today: and the second, that when he died in 1900 and for thirty years before that he was a world figure. Both of these have to be considered, more especially his great contemporaneous reputation.⁴

Chaudhuri is precise in description of the particulars of experience. In the selection of persons and situations he may sound personal, but usually he does not betray his personal feelings and emotions in the descriptions. Chaudhuri observes the life around him minutely and records meticulously. That is why his descriptions are realistic and present naturalistic picture of atmosphere. For example, describing his
native village, Kishoreganj in East Bengal (now Bangladesh) in his "AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN UNKNOWN INDIAN" (1973) he says:

...... the town did not mark too hard a block in the soft countryside. Besides, the huts were flimsy. They creaked at almost every wind. One strong cyclone was enough to obliterate the distinction between country and town. I myself, arriving home one dark night from cyclone of 1919, had very great difficulty in finding the town among the fallen trees. (p36).

This is a photographic kind of picture evoking the local colour of Bengal. The features of Chaudhuri's personality are: detached and objective observation, scientific approach, clear analysis, and stable originality. Though Chaudhuri does not have poetic sensibility he has rationalistic bent of mind. He may not express himself in an elaborate style of writing, but he does definitely do so in his precise and facilitating language.

Chaudhuri, while collecting useful information for writing SCHOLAR EXTRAORDINARY had a mass of material to draw upon. The biographical form of a book would usually impose restraint and obligation on the author. However, Chaudhuri made judicious use of Muller's autobiography, the biography of Muller's wife, journals, letters and other contemporary accounts. After reading Chaudhuri's SCHOLAR EXTRAORDINARY one may feel that it is all about the trails and
tribulations Max Muller underwent in building up his career. Perhaps, Muller was aware of the financial and social advantages of his high position and academic office in the Oxford University. Though Chaudhuri tried his best to show Muller as a scholar-thinker whose firm determination and intellect rose him to fame one may still feel that Chaudhuri could not effectively present Muller as a Universal type. Prof. Y.V. Kantak says:

"It cannot be said, however, that the Central drive of Max Muller's life, his passion for Oriental learning and for the Rig Veda as an Aryan and a human document, really comes alive. What is conveyed is rather the fruits of scholarly labour, not the inward feeling, the soul's affiliation. There seems to be a failure of sympathy - the kind of deficiency that can prove stultifying into a biography. When Chaudhuri touches on the most intimate experience as he does, for instance, while discussing Muller's courtship of his future wife, Beata Georgina, the reader's reaction might well be 'How pedestrian the writing when it comes to love.'\(^5\)

This biography was written by Chaudhuri after a thorough research. The subject chosen by him lacks immediacy though the book arrests the attention of the reader for the writer's profound appreciation of the aspirations and sufferings of Max Muller. Chaudhuri proves himself
to be the most original writer as he lays bare the truth about the role played by Muller in establishing that Indian languages and the European languages belonged to the same family and his basic intellectual interest in human thought. Chaudhuri's historical agility, analytical skills and firm confidence of understanding of facts can be seen in his comparison of Muller's work on the Rig Veda to the experiments carried out by Charles Darwin, a theoretical physicist of the nineteenth Century. (chapter No:3 of part-II of “SCHOLAR EXTRAORDINARY”)

Dr. M.K. Naik, a critic of reputation, sees a yawning gap between Chaudhuri's confirmed views of ancient Hindu culture and Muller's attitude to the same phenomenon and feels that Life of Max Muller is a failure. Reviewing this Biography M.K. Naik says:

Chaudhuri's 'Hindu-baiting' is as notorious as Max Muller's veneration for ancient Hindu thought is famous. It is thus a capital stroke of irony that a modern Indian anglophile should write the life of a European who once sanskritized his name as "Moksha Mullara". A further complication arises because while Chaudhuri occasionally indulges in his favourite past-time of Hindu denigration here also, he has, at the same time genuine respect and admiration for Max Muller as a scholar and a man. The upshot is a peculiar ambivalence which ultimately makes the biography rather colourless.6
In the very first of the lectures Max Muller delivered at Cambridge in 1882 entitled "India What Can It Teach Us?" he said:

If I were asked under what sky the human mind has most fully developed some of its choicest gifts, has most deeply pondered on the greatest problems of life, and has found solutions of some of them which well deserve the attention even of those who have studied Plato and Kant - I should point to India. And if I were to ask myself from what literature, we, here in Europe, we who have been nurtured almost exclusively on the thoughts of Greeks and Romans, and of one Semitic race, the Jewish, may draw the corrective which is most wanted in order to make our inner life more perfect, more comprehensive, more Universal, in fact more truly human, a life, not for this life only, but a transfigured and eternal life ___ again I should point to India.7

The above was the favourable and friendly idea about India which Muller had in mind in the days when Britishers considered Indians to be liers and dishonest and nurtured hostility against Indians. He set himself to fight against this unfair vilification and eliminate misunderstanding in Indo-British relations during the days of British rule in India. He always defended Indians against the Britishers' idea that India was "a sink of moral deprivity, an ant's nest of lies......"8
However, Chaudhuri, in his SCHOLAR EXTRAORDINARY - THE LIFE OF FRIEDRICH MAX MULLER, presents successfully the deeper levels of Muller's religious experiences, his defence of Indians, their character, outlook and their religion as complement to that of the European. Chaudhuri balances deftly the private and public aspects of Muller's life.

Max Muller was undoubtedly a great scholar - thinker and his contribution to Indology was outstanding. Indians remember him even today because Muller was a great admirer of Hindu civilization and spirituality. Baron C.K.J Von Bunsen, Prussian Minister in London, introduced Muller to the glory of the Vedas. It was with his support that Muller completed the translation of the Rig Veda. Muller hoped that his edition of the Rig Veda would have a beneficial effect on the practical life of the Hindus. His discoveries in comparative philology gave rise to the idea of nationalism in India.

What is surprising in Muller's life and thought, as presented by Chaudhuri, is that he regarded the ancient Indian civilization as the best in the whole world and, at the same time he wanted to use his popularity as a Sanskrit scholar for spreading Christianity in India.

Chaudhuri's juxtaposition of these two controversial qualities in Muller are quite fascinating. The English men were hostile to the Indians
and the religion of India in those days. Though a lover of India and Hinduism, Max Muller seems to nurture greater love in his heart for England and Christianity and desired for the spread of his religion in India. Towards the end of his life Muller tried to persuade that section of the Hindu monotheists who owed their inspiration and zeal largely to Christianity, or to Christ, to declare themselves formally as Christian. That was none other than the branch of Brahmos led by Keshab Chunder Sen, a good friend of Max Muller. Of course, Sen in his reply to Muller said:

There is hardly a syllable in your last epistle which I should hesitate to endorse ...... I have always disclaimed the Christian name and will not identify myself with the Christian Church for I set my face completely against the popular doctrine of Christ's divinity.9

Eighteen years later Muller raised the question of the affiliation of the Brahmo movement with Christianity. In 1899 Muller made an appeal, from Ems in Germany, to Pratap Chander Mazoomdar to declare formally his community as Christian. He closed his long letter with the following exhortation:

From my point of view, India, atleast the best part of it, is already converted to Christianity. You want no persuasion to become a follower
unite your flock and put up a few folds to hold them together, and to prevent them from straying. step boldly forward. Mozoomdar then gave a public rejoinder:

What disconcerts me is the half-expressed contempt which the Christian leaders, even of the liberal school, seem to have of the Hindu ideal and spirituality. When I express my ardent love for Christ and Christianity, they are kindly in sympathy, but the moment I say that Christ and his religion will have to be interpreted in India through Indian antecedents and the Indian medium of thought, I am suspected of trying to bend Christianity down to heathenism.

Mozoomdar then rejected Muller's suggestion for a wholesale acceptance of Christian name by the Brahma Samaj. But Muller insisted that the Brahmos owed much to Christianity and Christ as their movement would not exist without Christianity and that, in gratitude, Brahmos should declare themselves in favour of Christian Brahmos or Christian Aryas. In his another letter written on March 11, 1900, just a few months before his death, to Mozoomdar, Muller stated that he was not trying to convert him to Christianity. He requested that without joining any Christian Church or sect Mozoomdar was to give honour to the name of Christ to whom he owed the best part of his religion.
Though Muller maintained a highly rationalistic approach to Vedas still he regarded Christianity greater than Hinduism. He was very critical of Indians, like Swami Dayananda Saraswati, who had reverence for the Vedas and believed that most of the scientific knowledge was to be found in the Vedas. Muller disbelieved that the Vedas had a divine origin.

Chaudhuri seems to have sympathy for Muller as the later was poor and struggled a lot in the early days of life. Chaudhuri also had similar experiences. His weakness of hero-worship would have subdued Chaudhuri's innovative and fact-finding nature from realizing or conducting through research on the authenticity of Muller's translation of the Rig Veda.

Boden Sanskrit Professorship at Oxford was endowed by Liet. Colonel Joseph Boden of the East India Company's service. Boden bequeathed all his property, £ 25000, to found a professorship of the Sanskrit Language. The salary for the occupant of that post was £ 900 to £ 1000 a year. It was a lucrative post. Muller had his eyes on this post as the culmination of his career at Oxford and also as a secure means of pursuing his vocation of studying Sanskrit. Unfortunately he could not compete with Minier Williams, another aspirant for the post, and failed in the elections conducted for it for many reasons. The purpose of the institution of this professorship by Boden was cunning and motivated.
Boden was "of the opinion that a more general knowledge and critical knowledge of the Sanskrit language will be a means of enabling his countrymen to proceed in the conversion of the natives of India to the Christian religion, by disseminating a knowledge of the sacred scriptures amongst them, more effectively than all other means whatever."\textsuperscript{13}

Whatever might be the intention of Muller in coveting the Boden Professorship he still loved Sanskrit language and considered it the very life - spring of the thoughts of Indians, their faith, their feelings and prejudices.\textsuperscript{14}

Muller wished that the English parliament should declare that a study of the native dialects in general and Sanskrit in particular shall be obligatory on every candidate for the Indian civil or military services to govern the Indians and to again their confidence and good will.\textsuperscript{15}

Chaudhuri ardently felt that Muller wholeheartedly championed the cause of Hinduism and Indian culture among the westerners. According to Chaudhuri, Muller expected a regeneration of the life of the Hindus by bringing their own cultural heritage to their knowledge .......... he showed the most humane side of the English scholarly interest in India by becoming not only an apologist but a very vigorous champion of the Hindu culture, and telling Englishmen how much they had to learn from India."\textsuperscript{16}
Chaudhuri's Hindu-baiting is as well-known as that of Muller's veneration for Indian culture and Hinduism. The biographer is a staunch supporter of the English customs and manners and he wrote the life of Max Muller, a westerner. It may be because of Chaudhuri's veneration for Max Muller, the scholar and writer.

Though Chaudhuri's biography of Max Muller lacks immediacy still it is a record of a great genius of the west. Chaudhuri's scholarship can be enjoyed in every page of the book which is an outcome of prodigious labour over a six-year period. It is a painstaking piece of research.

M.K.Naik has rightly said:

SCHOLAR EXTRAORDINARY gives an unmistakable impression of tight-rope walking. It is certainly a scholarly but by no means extraordinarily unsuccessful biography.17
NOTES

2. I bid, P - 14.

4. I bid, P.


8. I bid, P.287
12. I bid, P.316.
13. I bid, P.211-212
15. I bid, P.176
17. Book reviews - Journal of the Karnataka University - Humanities, p.335.