Chapter II

Sources of Chaudhuri’s Knowledge of England
Chapter II
Sources of Chaudhuri’s Knowledge of England

Before undertaking an inquiry into the nature and extent of Chaudhuri’s view on England, it is necessary to identify its sources. One dependable way to do so is on the basis of his first-hand experiences and personal observations. In his long centenarian life, Chaudhuri spent only about thirty years at a stretch in England since 1970 when he settled in Oxford. Much before that his most important book, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* was published in 1951, which has ample evidences of his “views” on England, which are in the main imaginary and derived from books. In addition, his second major publication *A Passage to England* (1959) is the fruit of only a five-week trip to England, which also for the most part, results from his previous notions about England. So, the true nature and extent of his knowledge of England cannot be ascertained only from his first-hand observations. It should rather be sought in the long chain of events of his life since his childhood -- on the ground of various impressions and influences gradually made on his mind. The early environment, parent’s influence, reading of books on England and English people, seeing pictures of European personalities, influence of enlightenment ideals like Indian renaissance and Bengali humanism, and his living in Oxford can be said to have concertedly contributed to the making of an iconoclast,
a non-conformist, and an imperialist in Chaudhuri. The prefatory note of *The Autobiography* gives a clear hint at the sources of his knowledge about England and India. He says:

Since it has been laid down as the basic principle of this book that environment shall have precedence over its product, I shall begin by describing three places—places which exerted the deepest influence on my boyhood, and form, so to say, the buried foundations of my later life. My first account will thus be of the little country town in which I was born and lived till my twelfth year; my second, of my ancestral village; and my third, of the village of my mother's folk. These three accounts will make up the first three chapters of this book; but as England, evoked by imagination and enjoyed emotionally, has been as great an influence on me as any of the three places sensibly experienced, I shall add a fourth chapter to complete the description of the early environment of my life. That chapter will contain a summary of my boyish notions about England. (1951)

K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar has cogently illustrated the influence of environment on Chaudhuri. In his words:

... the environment [was] given precedence over the product. The places that had an influence on Nirad’s boyhood, the family antecedents, the rural cultural milieu, the nationalist fervour in the wake of the Partition of Bengal, the cold war between the ruling and subject races, the city and the University of Calcutta, the coming of Gandhi and the eruption of the “new politics” of the twenties --these many environmental layers receive as much attention as the quirks and quiddities of Nirad’s own temperament or the vicissitudes of his childhood, boyhood and youth. (1962:591)

Chaudhuri himself writes in the opening para of his preface to *The Autobiography*: “This book describes the conditions in which an
Indian grew to manhood in the early decades of this century [20th] ...
(1951). Indeed, an emotional relationship existed between Chaudhuri and England since his childhood, which constitutes the core of his knowledge of England. So, an analysis of these four places (three real and one imaginary) in terms of Chaudhuri’s early environment accompanied by some other factors may help discover the true sources of his views on England.

The Autobiography begins with a contrast between Kishorganj, his birthplace and the English country town although until then he had not seen an English country town with his own eyes. Here he hints at the source of his knowledge of England. In his own words: “... if I am to judge by the illustrations I have seen and the descriptions I have read, these being my only sources of knowledge about England, since I have never been there, nor in fact anywhere outside my own country” (1951:1).

Chaudhuri’s early days were spent in the environment of Kishorganj, which comprised courts, offices, schools, shops, and residential dwellings raised up by the British administration. He gives descriptions of three places -- his birth place Kishorgonj, his ancestral village Bangram, and his mother's village Kalikutch, which constituted his boyhood’s actual environment. They also provide much evidence and many grounds that helped prepare his imaginary notion about England. William Walsh comments: “Each of the places Chaudhuri lived in has a particular meaning in his development -- not meaning in the sense of anything emblematic or mystical but, more straightforwardly, meaning as a special and precise twist in the shaping of his character” (1973:32). The town of
Kishorganj, which came into existence as a municipal township in the 1860s, was a constant in his family existence. Life there was plain, industrious, on occasions exciting, and sometimes perilous. Their family house was composed of an intricate collection of buildings and furnished with beds and chests, baskets, books, and trunks. The simplicity of furniture and the complexity of structure of the house corresponded to the life lived in it. The books contained in the shelf were among others, “Milton's poetical works... two volumes of Burk’s speeches on the impeachment of Warren Hastings, Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* and *Othello*” (Chuadhuri, 1951:28). The list of the books suggests that the family had a taste for English literature and thoughts. They had innumerable traditions and customs, a whole complex of habits, rituals, and disciplines but at the same time great simplicity and directness of feelings. The children of the family were educated in a rational way of life and encouraged in what were thought of as the English qualities of energy and self-reliance. It was a calm and regular life where the elders were absorbed in their profession and the children occupied in learning.

In Chaudhuri’s house at his ancestral village Bangram, we see a large gilt framed picture hung above the front door, which was full of small but richly dressed figures. The subject of the picture was the coronation of Edward VII. The preservation of this sort of picture shows a testimony to the family preference for British history and culture, which exerted deep influence on their children.

Life in Kishorganj made for a rational habit of Chaudhuri’s mind. It offered stability and then moral and intellectual
independence. Parental connections led back to the villages, the ancestral village of Bangram and the mother’s village of Kalikutch. Here the children’s experience came in touch with a rich emotional life. The rhythms of the country, the feeling for blood and family, the intimate connection of family life, and art deepened and refined the children’s feelings. William Walsh says: “Shillong, the paradisal Assam hill station, with its pure, cool air and pine trees, where the children visited an uncle who collected orchids, makes a natural bridge to another place which exercised a profound influence on Chaudhuri’s nature—England—for, it was in Shillong that the amazed children saw the English in the flesh, men and women and doll-like babies” (1973:34). The influence of Kishorganj, Bangram, Kalikutch, and imaginary England was so strong on Chaudhuri’s life that he himself admits:

Kishorganj, Bangram, and Kalikutch are interwoven with my being; so is the England of my imagination; they formed and shaped me; but when once torn up from my natural habitat I became liberated from the habitat altogether; my environment and I began to fall apart; and in the end the environment became wholly external, a thing to feel, observe, and measure, and a thing to act and react on, but never to absorb or be absorbed in. (1951:303)

Here in the statement can be found the very nature and extent of Chaudhuri’s understanding of England and his native country, which seems delicate and subtle.

As to the authenticity and credibility of Chaudhuri’s knowledge of England derived from the source of early environment
spread over three places, Chaudhuri himself gives an explanation.

To quote:

The story of our preoccupation with England may justifiably give rise to skepticism. I have described the three places, which constituted our boyhood's actual environment. If these descriptions have served their purpose, then with the sensation of that environment fresh in mind, one could question the presence in it, not only of any knowledge of England, but also of all means of knowledge. I too shall most readily admit that our means of knowing was as casual as our knowledge was extraordinarily uneven. If I may put it that way, the chiaroscuro of our knowledge of England was extremely sensational. It had intense highlights in certain places and deep unrelieved shadows in others, so that what we knew gripped us with immeasurably greater power than it would have done had we seen it in more diffused and, consequently, more realistic light. On the other hand, what we did not know was so dark that we could easily people the void with phantasms evoked out of our ignorance. (1951:115-116)

Chaudhuri gives a reference to a long line of names of English and European personalities, which he calls ‘Familiar Names’ but he cannot remember the time when he learned them. Most interestingly, he tells that he cannot remember any time when he did not know them. This proves how early he was introduced to these English and European personalities, which later on exercised a tremendous influence on his attitude to England, Europe, and the West. In other words, his earliest association with England and Europe dates back to his childhood when he learned the names of some outstanding European personalities such as Queen Victoria, Prince Albert, Napoleon, Shakespeare, and Raphael. The next series
comprises Milton, Burke, Warren Hastings, Wellington, King Edward VII, and Queen Alexandra is almost as nebulous in origin. "Lord Roberts, Lord Kitchener, General Buller, Lord Methuen, Botha, and Cronje entered early, thanks to the Boer war. Next in order came Mr Gladstone, Lord Rosebery, Martin Luther, Julius Caesar, and Osman Pasha" (Chaudhuri, 1951:116). Then he learned the names of Fox and Pitt, and Mirabeau, Robespierre, Dan Ton, Marat, Junat (Napoleon's marshal), and also George Washington. On the literary side, in addition to the names of Shakespeare and Milton, which he imbibed unconsciously, he came to know of Homer as soon as he began to read the Ramayana, and the Mahabharata, which was fairly early. Regarding the significance and the far-reaching effect of the names on him, Chaudhuri says:

Of course, these names were not just names to us. They possessed some meaning and much more of associations. These ideas and associations constituted what I may describe as the original capital of our intellectual and spiritual traffic with the West. As years went by the names acquired ever greater precision and ever greater significance for us, but the process never lost its incompleteness. It has not done so even to this day. (1951:116)

Side by side with the verbal descriptions of English life and society, Chaudhuri in his early days saw many beautiful pictures. These gave him the impression of a country of great beauty of aspect, a country, which possessed not only beautiful spots but also place-names, which sounded beautiful. Isle of Wight, Osborne House, Windsor, Grasmere, Balmoral, Holyrood palace, Arthur's Seat, Firth of Forth, Belfast were some of the names which attracted
the children. The picture of a cricket match, showing not only the batsman, the wicket-keeper, and some of the fielders, but also the pavilions in the background seen in a school textbook printed in England made a profound impression on Chaudhuri. Cricket was his favourite game. He regarded football as a game on a plebeian level, while cricket was as he thought, a game of refinement and aristocratic attributes. This attitude to a game, which was originated in England, has been developed in his early environment. Another picture, which immensely impressed Chaudhuri as a boy, was of a battleship. In Chaudhuri’s own words:

The coloured illustration fascinated me not only because I had an inborn liking for ships, but also because it gave me an impression of the seas being an appanage and projection of England. I could never think of England, as I thought of Bengal and of India, as a stretch of land alone. Combined visions of land and sea were always fleeting through my mind and before my eyes whenever I tried to think of England. (1951:131)

The characteristic vision of the physical aspect of England as half land and half sea was confirmed in Chaudhuri by his reading of English poetry. The first piece of English poetry, which he heard, was Colley Cibber’s “O say what is that thing call’d light” read out to him by his brother from his text-book. But it was illustrated with a picture showing a blind Indian boy and therefore called up no associations with English life. English life properly struck him with the full force of its romance when about a year later he saw in his brother’s new text book “a woodcut showing a high cliff, at its foot
the sea, at the edge of the narrow beach a boat, near the boat a boy and a girl, and above and below the picture the following eight lines:

Break, break, break,
On thy cold gray stones, O Sea!
And I would that my tongue could utter
The thoughts that arise in me.

O well for the fisherman's boy,
That he shouts with his sister at play!
O well for the sailor lad,
That he sings in his boat on the bay!"

(Chaudhuri, 1951:131-132)

Although he did not understand even half of it, but to him the lines distilled a yearning to which not even the magic casement of Keats, which he read later could stir him. In fact, English poetry was to him and his brother, even before they could understand it fully, the most wonderful reading in the world. Margery Sabin comments: “...Chaudhuri had as a child absorbed English literature into the fabric of his imagination--not only ideas and principles, but images, metaphors, sentence structures, narrative patterns, and a whole mental habit of thinking concretely…” (1994:29).

Kishorganj, Banagram, Kalikutch, Shillong, and the implied presence of England contributed to the pattern of influences, which inaugurated Chaudhuri’s fundamental sensibility and fixed the scale and organization of his interests. In addition, his parents also exercised profound influence on him in the shaping of the man.
Unlike a traditional joint family, the Chaudhuri family was a single family in the Western sense. It was absolutely independent and free from all unwelcome obtrusions of outside culture. Chaudhuri’s father and mother asserted their parental authority and responsibility so that their children were brought up by their guidance only. His father, who practised criminal law, gave the family its tone—serious, high-minded, and self-improving. He was physically robust, conscientious in his work in court and afterwards in business, liberal, intelligent, disinterested, and concerned to develop initiative and independence of his children. He was a non-conformist from whom Chaudhuri inherited his non-conformism and liberal humanism. The father’s life was paradigmatic for the sons. Imbued with the reformist’s zeal of his generation of educated Bengalis, he gave his children an early taste of a rational, enlightened, and progressive culture. The responsibility, he was primarily interested in, was the education of his children. He was disinterested in their worldly success and prosperity. On the contrary, he expected them to be better and earlier established in the world than others and the peculiar genius which the children developed as they grew older. It is a very distinctive matter that without coming into direct contact with the Bengali humanism movement, or being a highly educated man himself — he had almost intuitively imbibed the humanistic spirit, and tried to make it the spiritual heritage of his children. He was, as described by Chaudhuri, a liberal whose ideas on education and the teaching of English helped him and his brothers in their education both at school and college.
Because of this humanistic interest Chaudhuri’s father was curious about English language and literature. The vocabulary of the English language, its syntax, its idioms possessed a fascination for him. He started his life with the dictionary of Annandale, went from Annandale to Chamber’s *Twentieth Century Dictionary* and then to Fowler’s *Concise Oxford Dictionary*. He bought such well-known books as *Aesop’s Fables, Evenings at Home, Robinson Crusoe* or Smile’s *Self-help* and went through them and marked them throughout in red and blue for his own use as well as for his children. Chaudhuri as a boy of only eleven years went very carefully through the marked copy of *Evenings at Home* and considered that reading among the most profitable of his life. After reading Miss Mitford’s *Our Village* a few years later Chaudhuri says: “I could claim that I was attuning myself very successfully to the spirit of the English language and English life” (1951:172). Here is a clear evidence of Chaudhuri’s father’s influence on his developing reading habit and the spirit of Anglophilism. About Chaudhuri’s family, household, and his father, Edward Shils (in his Autumn 1988 article) gives a concrete description. He says:

Mr Chaudhuri was raised in a Bengali-speaking household, more rather than less observant of the Hindu piety and observance which had entered into the tradition of the Brahma-Samaj. His father was a sensible man, a solicitor, not highly educated, a good father to his family, careful about the education of his offspring, attentive to their well-being; he was neither an Anglophobe nor an Anglophile. Mr Chaudhuri’s family was, *mutatis mutandis*, a Victorian family, and the great achievements of English literature were esteemed in his home. In his childhood, Mr Chaudhuri learned the plays of Shakespeare and some of
the other chief works of English literature. His first love was English literature, and he became intimately familiar with English history. Later, as a result of his reading of English literature and history, he came to admire such British moral values as rectitude, bravery, straightforwardness, and public spiritedness. (560-561)

England had been a living existence in Chaudhuri’s imagination from his early days, partly because of his father’s care, partly through the books and pictures in the house, and partly through the poems he read and the history he studied. No educated person could have escaped the influence of England that came through the political and administrative system imposed on India by the British. Meenakshi Sharma rightly remarks: “...a generation brought up on an English system of education carries around with them a mental baggage of an “idea” of England and Englishness which is manifested in...representations of England and the English...”(Gupta, 2000:159). Chaudhuri is no exception.

His father took great care of his children’s English by tutors and himself. He also helped them choose their real aptitudes. In Chaudhuri’s own words:

...from my father I learned English without tears, although not without toil. But English was not the only thing in our education, which he actively fostered. Although his own interest was centred round language and literature he had enough instinctive soundness in matters of education to give us equal encouragement and facilities in other subjects, so that we might discover our real aptitudes. (1951:174)
In fact, his father was deeply moved by an ulterior motive as to the career and development of his children, which was not at all common and traditional. C. P. Verghese says: “A complete disregard for self, a total indifference to money, power, worldly possession and fame, a catholicity of mind, a love of books and ideas and a pioneering spirit characterized his father's life” (1973:20). M. K. Naik admits: “… he [Chaudhuri’s father] dwells upon several traits of Chaudhuri’s senior character including his…humanistic spirit, his high ideal of education…his faith in progress…” (1994:94). Chaudhuri writes: “My father was driven by a passion for creating a new type of human beings, a new breed, so that he might rise above his environment, have his revenge on it, not individually and episodically, but generically and for all time” (1951:183). His father has perhaps not failed. His passion comes true. Chaudhuri is a new type of human being, a new breed, who rises above his environment, has his revenge on it generically for all time.

Although in appearance, temperament, and outlook Chaudhuri’s mother was the reverse of his father, the couple were bound to each other by certain common principles and standards of conduct. Chaudhuri’s mother was ‘fiercely’ honest and emotionally grasping, at once intensely self-centred and cool and objective towards her children. Chaudhuri shows himself to have the courage, the ethical and intellectual values of his father, and the honesty and the impassioned egocentricity of his mother. The faults of character, she disliked most, were falsehood, dishonesty, moral cowardice, and meanness. Influence of the mother on Chaudhuri was very strong. He himself admits “I was perhaps the one among her children who
most resembled her in physical and mental traits” (1951:193). She also contributed to the building up of his taste for English literature. He had heard the stories of King Lear and Merchant of Venice of Shakespeare from his mother. Unlike his father, the mother knew no English but she too influenced him intellectually, introducing him to, among others, Shakespeare whom she had read in Bengali translation. On Chaudhuri’s parental influence, Cynthia Abrioux opines: “...the legacy of a half-mad mother and a fiery and ambitious father wishing to create a new type of human being to take his revenge on his environment was a serious weight for any son to carry” (1992:23). But Chaudhuri carried it.

It is very interesting to note that Chaudhuri’s childhood notion about the Englishman in the flesh was quite different from his ideas of their civilization. In fact, the children's ignorance of the Englishman remained quite unrelieved by their knowledge of English civilization. He has beautifully illustrated his attitude towards the Englishman in the flesh, which was derived from the unsophisticated Indian villager whose normal reaction in the face of an Englishman was headlong flight. In his own words:

I and my brother had been sent to buy some bananas from the bazaar and were returning with a bunch when we saw an Englishman coming up the road from the opposite direction.... As soon as we caught sight of him we hid ourselves in the ditch, because we had been told that Englishmen were as fond of bananas as any monkey could be and that they swooped on the fruit wherever and whenever they saw it. So we crouched in the ditch among the nettles until the Englishman had passed. (1951:135-136)
This incident took place when his brother was only learning his English alphabet and his sole source of knowledge about Englishmen was borrowed from the oral tradition. Chaudhuri was fully guided by his brother's example and shared equal feelings about the Englishman with him. He justifies their behaviour on that account which "may be called behaviour appropriate to a state of innocence untinctured by any taste of the fruit of knowledge" (1951:136). As he grew up, he changed this attitude to the Englishman and considered the prevalent attitude of Indian people towards Englishmen as irrational. Chaudhuri and his brothers were taught by their parents to live like Indian gentlemen and "to treat Englishmen as English gentlemen, no less, no more" (Chaudhuri, 1951:137).

Among the sources of Chaudhuri's knowledge of England and India, an important one is his being deeply influenced by what he calls "Indian Renaissance" and "Bengali Humanism". Chaudhuri says that all their ideas were the ideas propagated by the new cultural movement, mainly based on the formula of a synthesis of the values of the East and the West, which passes under the name of the Indian Renaissance. Although he, later on, was of the opinion that this comparison to the European cultural movement was not sound, but in early life he accepted it without question, as other educated Indians also did. Even up to the age of twelve, he had admittedly acquired all the intellectual, moral, and religious ideas under the influence of Indian Renaissance, which was considered very important at that time. This cultural movement began in the early part of the nineteenth century and reached its climax in about
one hundred years. Then it, as he thinks, began to break up in the years between 1916 and 1918. A central chapter of the Autobiography is devoted to the eulogy of the hybrid culture, which was formed when contact with the best in English civilization invigorated the Bengali mind in the nineteenth century. This chapter, titled "Torch Race of the Indian Renaissance" describes the rebirth of learning and the splendid efflorescence in Bengali literature, which gave birth to such writers and intellectuals as Rammohan Roy, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, and Rabindranath Tagore. Even Hinduism, which had remained stagnant for centuries together, was vitalized by its contact with Western learning and was experiencing a Reformation and a counter-Reformation as a sequel to the Renaissance. Chaudhuri sums up what he considers as the golden age of modern Indian history. Never before had the Hindu middle class "showed greater probity in public and private affairs, attained greater happiness in family and personal life, saw greater fulfillment of cultural aspirations, and put forth greater creativeness in every field, than the fifty years between 1860 and 1910" (Chaudhuri, 1951:258).

Chaudhuri was a perfect product of Bengali Renaissance which constituted the core of his sources of knowledge. He leaves his readers with the impression that he is the product of a last flowering of a unique culture. Under the sway of the ideals propagated by the major figures of the Indian Renaissance, and the first stirrings of nationalism in turn of the century in India, Chaudhuri had felt integrated with the cultural life he experienced. That is why he declares: "I am only a 'microcosm' in a
‘macrocosm’. My life is a tiny example of the whole Bengali life of an age” (1994:117, translation added). Dilip Chitre agrees, “Mr Chaudhuri, whatever his defects, is a product of this Enlightenment euphemistically known as the Indian renaissance and traced back to Raja Rammohun Roy” (1969:51). “Nirad C. Chaudhuri is ” also says Duncan Fallowel, “a liberal, a product of the Bengali humanism, which developed in the nineteenth century and faded in the twentieth, whose flower was Tagore” (1991:242). David Pryce-Jones shows how Chaudhuri was imbued with the spirit of enlightenment. To quote:

The youthful Nirad found models of enlightenment in Lytton Strachey, Middleton Muirry, Percy Lubbock, and others. In order to read Sorel or Aulard, as well as Rémy de Gourmont and above all Julien Benda, a free thinker like himself, he learned French. Next came German, for the sake of Bernheim's *Lehrbuch der historischen Methode* [Textbook on the Historical Method]. (1989:77)

Introduction of Bengali humanism to Chaudhuri’s early life is a very strong source of his knowledge of the East and the West. The new literary and humanistic movement in Bengal began with the founding of the famous Hindu college in 1817. The first students of the college used to take beef and drink and read Shakespeare, which was opposed to this cultural and religious legacy. Their practice of iconoclasm reached that much extent. Chaudhuri also was excited about the life of the Hindu college radical students and moved by the sense of iconoclasm, which he later on, expressed in his writings. Their introduction to Bengali humanism began very early in life, even before they had learnt to read. They saw the pictures of Toru
Dutt and Aru Dutt published in a Bengali magazine in 1901 in the late Victorian English dress and asked who they were. They learnt that they were Indian poetesses writing in English and despite their premature deaths they had established their reputation in England for poetry. Chaudhuri felt proud of it and so did his brothers and parents. The greatest exponent of Bengali humanism was Michael Madhusudan Dutt, a great scholar and the first great poet of modern Bengal. Chaudhuri was influenced by his humanistic outlook and idea of non-conformism and iconoclasm. Chaudhuri’s acquaintance with the Bengali humanism began with Madhusudan Dutt. He was the first Bengali poet to have deconstructed popular literary themes and introduced new poetic style, the blank verse in keeping with the great English epics. Dutt’s *Meghanadavadh Kavya* by its own style and allusions and more by its commentators’ remarks, reminds of the whole past history of the epic form. Being introduced to *Meghanadavadh Kavya* Chaudhuri most frequently came across the foreign names; Homer and his *Iliad*, Virgil and his *Aeneid*, Dante and his *Divine Comedy*, Tasso and his *Jerusalem Liberated*, and Milton and his *Paradise Lost*.

Chaudhuri gives an account of his school and college education in Calcutta. His life in Calcutta played a vital role in moulding his scholarly temperament. Calcutta in the 1920s and 1930s was a city of unusual intellectual vitality. It was the locus of a very lively cosmopolitan intellectual life. It had numerous excellent book shops where the latest European publications were available. There were a good number of Bengali literary and professional men who knew and loved not only Bengali literature but also English and
French literature. Edward Shils admits: "Calcutta was full of zealous readers of Bengali and European literature.... Some of these were intimates of Mr Chaudhuri" (1988:561). As regards the influence of Calcutta on Chaudhuri's intellectual life Shils further comments:

Chaudhuri was an impassioned bibliophile. It was the age of *triages numératés* and of books of the Nonesuch Press, and he bought many beautiful editions, often going far beyond his financial resources. He was also an assiduous reader at the Imperial Library. Anatole France, Pascal, Rochefoucauld and the other French *moralistes* Rémy de Gourmont, Francois Mauriac, Charles Maurras, Julien Benda, Henri Bergson, John Middleton Murry, Roger Fry, Bernard Berenson, and, of course, all the great English and French authors up to the end of the 19th century were read by him with great enthusiasm and with a marvellous gift of remembering what he read. He also studied Aulard, Albert Sorel, Lavisse, Seignobos, Eduard Meyer. (1988:65)

The boring employment as a clerk in the military accounts department, dependence upon his reluctantly willing brother, working as an assistant editor of the 'Modern Review', becoming the literary assistant to Dr. S.C. Law, being secretary to Sarat Chandra Bose, and concurrently becoming a commentator on the world political affairs at the Calcutta Station of All India Radio, and writing for Bengali and English papers and journals had brought him more and more into the greater world as an observer rather than as a participant.

The process of detachment from his early environment began with his arrival in Calcutta, which sharpened his power of perception. In fact, his stay in Calcutta opened up a new vista in his life. He learned much from libraries, museums, and even the shabby
buildings of Calcutta. He stepped into the lively, vast, and vigorous literary atmosphere of Calcutta. The greatest event of his school-life was his acquaintance with the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, which tremendously helped him in widening the horizon of his knowledge. He came to Calcutta quite early in life, i.e., in 1910, and as a growing boy, was deeply influenced by enlightenment ideals, which intensified his love-hate attitude towards the British Raj and their people and culture. The passing away of that culture in East Bengal, significantly coinciding with his arrival in Calcutta as a fourteen-year-old boy, was thus the beginning of a growing alienation from his contemporaries. With the move away from Kishorganj, it seemed to him as if his paradise had been lost. Chaudhuri and his early environment began to fall apart and he became wholly external. This was again the moment when the diasporic consciousness in him first began to assert itself. The events happening around him in Calcutta would ultimately lead him to choose a life of exile away from Bengal. He felt that he was experiencing in his Calcutta years the degradation of Bengal, which was of course a part of the larger process of the rebarbarization of the whole of India. He was so strongly preoccupied with this idea of doom that it worked as an important source of his knowledge of the world. Actually he had been harbouring this thought of decay since his boyhood. As he says: “When I read the *Mahabharata* in my boyhood... having seen the sequence of events, a sense of permanent fear about the future of the nation was born in my mind ... even in my boyhood, I considered *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* as cruel tragedies” (1994:142, translation added). He was obsessed with this idea of decadence
had also applied it to the case of British culture and Western culture as a whole. In commenting on these distressing developments in his works, his tone becomes either shrill and denunciatory or exasperated and despairing. He cannot remain indifferent to the scene before him and is convinced that he was fated to play the role of a Cassandra whose prophetic utterances would go unheeded. This is the source of his idea of decadence although it is not devoid of reality.

Another source of knowledge for Chaudhuri can be history, the branch of learning that most attracted the young seeker after universal knowledge in the Calcutta years. History and historiography have continued to be his primary loves. The two autobiographical volumes and *The Continent of Circe* (1965) are primarily works of historical imagination. Basing on a historiography compounded from Actonian ideals of objectivity, Darwinian principles of evolutionary biology, and Spenglerian postulates about the decline of civilizations, Chaudhuri develops his own historical viewpoint and analyses the history of Indian and Western civilizations.

As a student of European history, he had naturally knowledge of European wars and of the relations of the European states with each other. As an Indian, he was occupied with British imperial policy. Unlike his Indian fellow countrymen, he followed closely with utter disapproval, the rise of Fascism and National Socialism. This prepared him for the coming of the war, which he had foreseen with much anxiety. Shils has rightly said: “From this, as well as from his rejection of European and especially of British pacifism, he
was entirely on Churchill’s side in the debates about British rearmament in the 1930s"(1988:65).

The liberalism of England made an early impression on Chaudhuri and his brothers. The religious and political ideas of his parents had been already influenced by the liberal European thought. Their religious views did not conform to those of the orthodox Hindu; they believed in monotheism and followed the teachings of the Hindu reformers, Rammohan Roy and Keshub Chunder Sen. They admired the epoch-making struggles of the West: The Reformation, the Puritan Rebellion in England, the American War of Independence, and the French Revolution. They were liberals in religious, social, and political opinions. The Chaudhuris had profound respect for Burke, for, the latter had impeached Warren Hastings for his oppression of the Indian people. They held the liberal statesmen like Lord Salisbury, Balfour, Sir Henry Campbell, Bannerman, and Asquith in high esteem. Their stance on English liberalism impressed itself on Chaudhuri’s personality.

Chaudhuri’s upbringing prevented him from developing the ordinary Indian attitude towards Englishmen. This is quite evident in The Autobiography, which attempts to offer an account of India’s encounter with the West. Chaudhuri’s personal development, which forms the subject matter of his Autobiography has not been typical of a modern Indian of the twentieth century. He says: “It is certainly exceptional and may even be unique. But I do not believe that on this account the value of my narrative as historical testimony is impaired. Rather, the independence of environment which I have always been driven to assert by an irrepressible impulse within me

54
has given me a preternatural sensitiveness to it” (1951: X). This aspect of the autobiography makes it clear that “Chaudhuri’s role in the work as an autobiographer is not merely to tell the story of the growth and development of an ordinary Indian boy, but to relate the story of one whose mind took in impressions from his Indian environment and at the same time accepted a good deal from the West” (Verghese, 1973: 18-19).

As far as Chaudhuri’s moral awareness is concerned, we can gather that he was brought up in an atmosphere of moral consciousness and had a more thorough and systematic ethical education than a religious one. This was mainly because of the family’s having adopted the Brahmo system. Both Brahmoism and the new Hinduism instilled into Chaudhuri’s mind the spirit of moral enlightenment.

Chaudhuri and his brothers were also in their boyhood influenced by the nationalist movement, which gained momentum in the wake of the partition of Bengal. The spirit of Hindu revivalism appealed to them more than the liberal thoughts of the organizers of the Indian National Congress. The militant activities of the nationalists of Bengal and the drill and physical exercises imbued Chaudhuri with the spirit of nationalism as a schoolboy. This created in him a permanent interest in the study of military history and the art of warfare.

William Walsh gives an analytical assessment of Chaudhuri’s early life, his interaction with the environment, with natural and material objects, with socio-cultural atmosphere, with religious and political movements, and finally indicates his approach to men and
matters. Here underlies a chain of sources of Chaudhuri’s knowledge. In Walsh’s words:

The life of the places Chaudhuri lived in is revived with a kind of creative thoroughness. There is, to begin with, the fully pictured actuality of the town, the villages, the hill station, the city of Calcutta—everything in their physical presence from the quality of the dust and the shape of the trees, to the design of the houses, the material of the roof, the layout of the neighbourhood, the character of the rivers, and the configuration of the land; next, displayed with lucidity and warmth, there is the intense, enfolding family life with its routine, stresses and rituals; and then the complications of the social world outside the family with its severely functional divisions and its absolutely arranged organization; and all of these are supported and surrounded by a massive fund of anthropological and historical learning and penetrated by sensitively intelligent sociological speculation. This intricate treatment gives the reader a double insight. He has a sense of the young Chaudhuri’s life picking its way through a variety of densely detailed locations and assuming definition and individuality as it goes; and he catches, too, glimpses that steady into a vision of an extraordinary society, which combines something from the Victorian past of our own history, a high-minded, ethically serious, self-improving middle class with another universe as old and strange as Lear;.... (1973:31-32)

Significantly, Chaudhuri includes in the first half of his Autobiography, where he has been emphasizing the formative influences on his personality, a chapter on England. This may, at first glance, seem a quirky decision but it is very much to his point that England and English culture were also part of his heritage. As the case of his parents shows, a number of individuals in Bengal had been moulded by the Western values, which found their way into the Eastern civilization. Whether in remote Kishorganj or in the imperial
city of Calcutta, educated Indians could not escape the energizing influence of Western civilization. To them, it did not matter whether or not Englishmen in the flesh could be very arrogant and disagreeable. What was material to them was the ideas of a humane, dynamic, and reformatory world transmitted through European history and literature.

Chaudhuri moved to Delhi along with his family in 1942 and worked as a military analyst for the overseas service of All India Radio until 1952. He became part of the Hindu Bengali Diaspora when he left Calcutta for Delhi. He lived in the city until 1970, the year when he finally left India for England. Fakrul Alam opines:

Not surprisingly, it is in Delhi that Chaudhuri discovers his true vocation, that of prophet in print warning Bengalis of the hole they had been digging for themselves by their rejection of their enlightenment heritage. It was in this city that Chaudhuri’s bitterness and disillusionment at the road taken by his fellow Bengalis grew and made him Job-like in his pronouncements. The last straw for Chaudhuri was the partition of Bengal in 1947. That division meant that Chaudhuri’s entry into independent India would also be the moment of the utmost frustration for him. Now the only acts of arrival he could find solace in were those stored in his memory; the remembrances of scenes past stored in his consciousness would console him during this period and help him get through it. (Kain, 1997:55)

One thing is evident here that wherever Chaudhuri goes and whatever he does, when he is faced with hostile situation, his past-stored reminiscence works on him as a healing influence. Edward Shils gives an explanation of Chaudhuri’s Delhi life, which has added more dimensions to his consciousness. In his words:
It [Chaudhuri’s Delhi life] was a hard life of long periods of injurious poverty, social and intellectual isolation because of his determination not to run with the mob and to write only what he was convinced to be true, and living in an uncongenial Delhi for nearly two decades, away from the declining Bengal which he had not ceased to love, but he never swerved from his vocation. His unbroken attachment to the Indian liberalism of his youth aggravated his isolation. His harrowing but not self-pitying account of this phase of life calls to mind Gissing’s *New Grub Street*. However, unlike the ultimately defeated hero of Gissing’s sombre novel, Chaudhuri was fortified in his determination by his admirably loyal, patient and wise wife; thanks to her and his own brave character, he never crumbled. His difficult pursuit of his livelihood has never dulled his mind to the interestingness of the world, and he was enabled thereby to see things which others could not see. (1988:65)

These also work as a permanent source of his knowledge.

Chaudhuri undertook his final diasporic move from Delhi to England in 1970 although before that, he had already paid three brief visits to England -- first in 1955, second in 1967, and third in 1968. After he visited England in 1970 for the fourth time, he settled in Oxford. He has beautifully explained his tendency for movement to the west. “My life has always moved west, and once it has done so, its direction has never been reversed. For me too evolution has been irreversible” (1987:683). Really, Chaudhuri always moved to the west-- from East Bengal to West Bengal (Calcutta), from Calcutta to Delhi, and from Delhi to England. In the evolution of his movement from one place to another, he gathered various experiences, which too, added to his knowledge. As to England, it is interesting to note that before he came here first on a five-week visit, he had no first-hand experience about it. So after having visited England three times

58
and settled there finally, he developed his personal observation of English society and culture, which could also add considerably to the origin of his practical understanding of England.

As it is recorded in the book *A Passage to England* (1959), Chaudhuri in his first visit to the country, immediately saw England and the English as embodiments of the land and the people created in his mind by reading books and listening to stories about them. Amit Chaudhuri in his piece appeared in *The Hindu* (July 29, 2001) says: “Although Nirad Chaudhuri did not travel to England till he was 57 years old, his whole life, till then, had, in a sense, been a preparation for that journey. By the time he made it, he had already memorized the features of England and Europe from his reading”. Chaudhuri says:

> Of course, my mind was not a clean slate. On the contrary, it was burdened with an enormous load of book-derived notions, ... My earlier, and as I believe truer, ideas of England were all acquired from literature, history, and geography. Accumulated since childhood, these ideas, so far as they went, had built up a fairly comprehensive and homogeneous picture of the country and its people. On this was superimposed all the news of their political, social, and economic troubles that had been broadcast to the world in the previous forty years or so. (1959:11)

Thus, entering England, he compared the ‘authorized version’ of the England he already knew, with the makeshift version that was presented to him. These were the basic sources of Chaudhuri’s knowledge, which gave birth to his attitude to England that remained almost intact until 1970 when he settled in England permanently.
and then started growing critical of the British life and culture. Fakrul Alam agrees:

In 1955, it was easy for Chuadhuri, the wide-eyed and enthusiastic tourist to avoid looking at England negatively; by the 1980s it was impossible for the resident to ignore the tell-tale signs of decay in a country which is very different from the timeless England created by his reading ... he realizes with some misgivings that the "decadence" he had attempted to evade by quitting India was now all around him. In fact, the whole West is to him now a "moral swamp", ... and England, too, a prey to that foul fiend, Anarch.... Everywhere in contemporary England Chaudhuri sees signs of defeatism and corruption of the will. (Kain, 1997:50-51)

Duncan Fallowell has categorically distinguished between Chaudhuri's two different attitudes towards the same Britain. He says: "Of modern Britain he likes nothing. But there is a timeless Britain--landscape, country houses, claret, Shakespeare, cathedral towns, bespoke tailors, Oxford bells --which sustains him" (1991:245). So, this knowledge of England's decadence and corruption is an outcome of Chaudhuri's practical experiences, which gradually developed on his coming in close contact with British life and culture. Edward Shils has raised this point of difference of Chaudhuri's attitudes towards England and the West before he came to England and after he started living there permanently. In his own words:

Chaudhuri was always dominated by his appreciation of the great works of British and French literature, history, and philosophy. He also admired England and what he saw as the British virtues of
steadfastness, courage, courtesy, the capacities for hard work and honesty.... Nevertheless, since he has settled in England, he has become convinced that the British people—and, above all, the British intellectuals—have lost their sense of national greatness, and that British society and culture have fallen into decadence. (1988:67)

Chaudhuri sees the decadence in the present state of British life. Viewed from this standpoint, it can be said that his personal observations and first-hand experiences, gained by his permanent stay in England, can well be added to his sources of knowledge of England. His relation with England is as complicated as his relation with India. In both cases, deep attachments stand alongside unsparing criticism. From very early in his life, he took root in an England, which he never saw until 1955 and in which he finally settled in 1970. His mental make-up was essentially like that of a late Victorian Englishman. He assimilated as much of the intellectual culture, which England had inherited down to the 1920s, as any native-born Englishman could do. Although he was a small boy at the end of the Victorian age, the English culture, which he acquired during the reigns of Edward VII and George V, was the variant of Victorian culture. His participation in the English intellectual tradition was acquired for the most part from books, but that was also true to the case of the native-born Englishmen. In fact, there was no other way by which it could have been achieved.

England was as much the source of Chaudhuri's intellectual life as India was. Indian society and its relations with British or Western ideas and practices provided the objects for his curiosity, observation, and reflection. He gained little stimulus from any
intellectual community. His intimacy with English and the continental culture and his original views about India were more products of his own force of intellectual character than anybody else's stimulation, although in his early life he was influenced by many ideas and schools. In fact, he was never a usual sort of person. His entire life was made to be faced with numerous examinations and ordeals and he acquired his knowledge from these.

Chaudhuri’s feeling for England was a conscious attraction, which was more explicit than that of any English boy. It was added to a personality, which had the strongest natural affinity for English civilization. He saw it vaguely at first. But as he grew older, he perceived it more precisely as a necessary ideological penetration of the East by the West. He was perhaps the last man to be impressed by colonial insolence. The reason why he had this extraordinary understanding of and sympathy for English civilization is that, he discovered in it an essential corrective to certain Indian qualities. William Walsh says: “He was fascinated by the vitality and pragmatism of English character, by the genius for the concrete shown in English art, by the English capacity to give form and solidity to its insight, and by the English gift evident at every point and in all its production for the differentiated and particular” (1973:35).

Man is the product of his environment. But Chaudhuri was not simply the product of his contemporary social surroundings. His early environment in three places mentioned earlier, his family tradition, and the socio-cultural and political milieu have considerably contributed to his making in a different way. All this
turns him into a solitary, alienated, and controversial figure. Cynthia Abrioux has rightly explained:

...Chaudhuri's childhood is not an allegory of the development of his country but rather the inverse. It represents the path not taken, or the split and inevitable alienation of the exceptional child from an environment which was to become increasingly hostile because of its inherent natural, social, political and cultural contradictions. (1992:28)

So, he was not an average product of his environment as any lesser individual could have been. This is also the most striking aspect of his personality that among many of the same culture, he is one and perhaps the only one who understood it and reacted to it most rationally, most analytically. He is unique in his taste, temperament, and philosophy of life. He is the product of his tradition and his individual talent. So, while dealing with his association with his tradition and environment and his assertion of individual talent, we may be sometimes left with this mixed feeling that he is one of us and he is none of us. The sources of his knowledge of England are rooted in this tangled web of his personality developed through ages. Richard Cronin justly says: “Nirad Chaudhuri (b.1897) is one of that culture’s most distinguished products…”(Sturrock, 1997:205).