

## SOCIO-CULTURAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE PROSE WORK OF NIRAD C. CHAUDHURI

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Nirad C. Chaudhuri (1897-1999) the Indian Faustus and English Don Quixote, is known for his love and hate relationship with the country of his origin. He is a well-known non-fiction prose writer of the twentieth century, highly acclaimed for his erudite scholarship, encyclopedic knowledge, controversial views, vitriolic criticism, hypothetical and cynical presentations of situations and events of his time and Anglo maniac colours of his imagination. He had many peers but a few equals like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru in the art of writing autobiography. In his contribution to literature he has narrated the events, socio-economic condition, personal feelings, emotions and attitudes to different situations and national events during his inward journey from childhood to maturity as a historian and socio-cultural investigator. His chief intention is to delineate the state of old society encroached upon by the western concept of nature personality, nationalism, and freedom through the agency of his self. As an anglophile he has analyzed India's past, present and future.

The present paper tries to bring out the Socio-cultural Consciousness from the Prose work of Nirad C. Chaudhuri the following prose are selected for study.

1. Autobiography of An Unknown Indian
2. The Continent of Circe.
3. To Live or Not to Live
4. Culture in The Vanity Bag, and
5. Three Horseman of the New Apocalypse.

The first prose work "The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian" deals with him as a sociologist. Not only Mr. Iyengar but most of the critics and scholars who have tried to assess Nirad Chaudhuri and his work admit that he is a keen observer of the social milieu of the

land. Mr. K. Raghavendra Rao, trying to classify the Autobiography of an Unknown Indian makes the following remark:

“ . . . His ‘Autobiography’ is a unique work and it defies classification. It is at once autobiography, history, sociology, anthropology, Indology, political analysis.”

We, too, if we analyze and enumerate the subject-matter of Nirad Chaudhuri's “The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian” and various articles published here and there, find that he fulfils quite a few requirements of a sociologist. As Comte, Spencer, Durkheim and Weber—the founders of sociology advocate, he makes a study of a wide range of institutions from the family to the state. Like them, he pays special attention to social acts and social relationships. He also analyses two different societies and explains why and wherein they are different or alike. If we take the text books on sociology, and the works and opinions of the current sociologists, to be the guide to the subject-matter of sociology, then too we cannot but admit that Mr. Chaudhuri's books are decidedly a contribution to the field of sociology. Some of the most popular subjects and topics dealt with by writers and text books on sociology and selected by sociologists (for their field of specialization) are personality in society, culture, human groups, population, caste and class, race, marriage and family, the community, ethnic and race relations. Most of these topics are covered by Mr. Chaudhuri. Taken together, his books make a fine study of society,—be it English or Indian, Bengali or Punjabi, Anglo-Indians or Anglicized Indians, Calcutta or Delhi. They inquire into the internal structure of a society, what are the internal problems faced by a society, what are the most common components found in most societies, how these societies typically allocate responsibility for various functions, what are the consequences of combining certain institutions. As a study of Institutions, his books explore the complex systems of institutions, the various features and symptoms—what features do different institutions have in common, what are the dimensions on which they are distinguishable, how do these dimensions vary when one compares institutions that perform different functions. Again, if we treat sociology as a study of social relationship, Mr. Chaudhuri's books prove true to the test. The family which is made up of many sets of relationships—man and woman, parent and child, grand-parents and grand-children, the complex relationships that make up a Hindu joint family, all are observed and analyzed. In this context, it would be worthwhile to go through the table laying down a general outline of the subject matter of sociology drawn up by Mr. Inkeles based on his wide study (Table 1 on page 41). The first three groups of items: Sociological Analysis, Primary Units of Social Life, Basic Social Institutions—contain quite a few topics dealt with by Mr. Chaudhuri Human culture and society, social acts and social relationships, class and ethnic groups, rural and urban communities, family and kinship, economic, political, religious, educational, recreational, welfare and aesthetic institutions, – all find a place in Mr. Chaudhuri's books.

His next work “The Continent of Circe” also has sociological perspectives. The third book of Chaudhuri is his *Crux Criticorum* one which establishes him as “modern India's most formidable and thorough-going dissenter.” Indeed, *The Continent* is such a highly controversial and ‘explosive’ book that it has won for Chaudhuri the reputation of being the

most hotly debated author of Indo-Anglian literature. Obviously, critical opinion is sharply divided with regard to this book. On the one hand, there are critics like Rama Murthy and S. Venkat Narayan, who welcome his heroic onslaught on Hindu faith, Indian tradition, culture and history as a self-therapy for a nation direly in need for its own bitter truth.

The sociological perspective of his study includes the whole south and its various determinants like caste system, the aboriginals, the Indianalemate, Indian philosophy, symbol of existence Acetum.

“Hindu society did not attempt to suppress the immense range of racial, social, cultural, and economic diversities which history, was creating for it in unending succession. On the contrary, it accepted them, gave to each its place and niche, and brought into existence a living association of human groups of all sorts, which was a federation of its parts, without ever trying to be any one thing. Caste system is the name given to this federation.”

Now, follow one argument after another in defense of the caste-system. Apart from the caste-system, there was no other way in which the Aryans could preserve their ethnic, social and cultural personality from being submerged in a conglomeration with the native Darks. However, since it remained elastic, it made easy the assimilation of foreign barbarians and promotion of the Darks to the Hindu status. The various charges made against the caste-system, Chaudhuri says, are totally unfounded. It neither creates diversity and disunity, nor does it interfere with economic freedom, nor bars the way to talent. After assigning to each element of society its proper function or status, the Hindu social system made adherence to these a sacred duty.

“For this reason the caste system may be described as a symbiosis in human life on the lines of the zoological. It canalized competitions and helped the co-existence of elements which otherwise would have been at war. It was a social system specially suited to a country like India, which history has made into a warehouse of civilizations, and a couloirs and cul-de-sac of diverse peoples and cultures.”

The next work brings out the humanitarian perspective through the essay ‘To live or not to Live’ To Live or Not to Live is an essay which shows Chaudhuri's attempt to understand, and account for the peculiar problems of the Indian society which make it difficult for a sensitive man to continue to live meaningfully in that society. Again the book need not be mistaken for a textbook of social psychology, as it is the embodiment of Chaudhuri's personal visions which is the result of the life-long observation and which may correspond to the impersonal vision of sociologists and psychologists. What makes his essay personal is the fact that his generalizations about the Indian society are based upon his personal experience with people, events and situations of the Indian society. His observations are a fortiori rather than a priori and hence assume an authenticity of individual vision as contrasted with that of scientific and hence universal vision.

His collection of articles, To Live or Not to Live, is subtitled “An Essay on Living Happily with Others.” A shrewd analysis of family and social life, it is intended to enable other Indians to achieve happiness, since “we Indians as a people possess a remarkable genius for being unhappy ourselves and making others unhappy” (p. 195). Chaudhuri sets out to trace

the causes of unhappiness and thereby help others avoid misery in India. The following passage is characteristic: "That [happi-ness] comes from realizing some great purpose or working for it to the best of one's ability. After that it comes from performing one's duties in life without flinching.... A man who is not happy with fellowmen and members of his family may find a com-pensating happiness in his vocation or in his duty, but he will never be fully happy" (p. 196).

Cultural consciousness is awakened through the prose work "Culture in the Vanity Bag." Perhaps no Indian writer has thought so seriously about the Indian clothes and the philosophy underlying them as Nirad Chaudhuri has. He is such a .keen .observer of life around him and such a minute scholar that he is amply qualified to relate his observation to his wide and historical scholarship and evolve a very interesting sartorial philosophy about Indians. One might easily say that Culture in the Vanity Bag is an Indian parallel to Carlyle's Sartor Resartus. Whereas Chaudhuri's book is historical in perspective and analytical in method and realistic in style, Carlyle's is romantic and synthetical in its overall approach to the problem. Chaudhuri's analysis is, as usual, tinged with satire and intellectual humor. The sophistry that he brings in the analysis and perspectivisation of the whole problem is indeed very admirable. The highlights of his arguments may be seen in the following paragraphs.

Chaudhuri, who has observed the Indian life very keenly, is able to show the connection between the Indian clothing and the Indian history. Clothes are, obviously, the external manifestations of the innermost cultural habits of men adapting themselves to the peculiar geographical, social, religious and even political phenom-ena around them. That is the reason why Chaudhuri says that "the evolution of clothing in India has been only a part of the historical evolution of the peoples of India, possessing similar features, fol-lowing similar lines, and producing similar results."(xi) Although the present India is a 'museum or warehouse of cultures' exhibiting a motley of clothing, having a group or individual autonomy, their origin and development could be traced to the historical movements which swept India' from the earliest times to the present.

Chaudhuri offers a taxonomical break-up of the evolutionary history of clothing in India. The first category of these, according to him, is the Mongoloid clothing which consists of two pieces of 'loom-woven clothes' "one of which is thrown around the shoul-ders and the other, the main piece, wrapped round the waist."(14) This type of clothing is used mainly by the Mongoloid peoples in the Himalayan regions.

The second category, according to Chaudhuri, is the aboriginal one which consists of one piece of cotton cloth, "anything between eight to fifteen feet in length and thirty to forty-five inches in width. With a slight difference in the design of the borders, it is worn by both men and women. Men wrap its middle section round the waist, pass-the left-half section between the legs and tuck it behind, while the right-hand portion is sometimes tied round the waist and sometimes folded and hung in front."(15) The women wear the same with a slight variation. This is the simplest and most basic costume worn by all the aboriginal peoples of the Central Indian plateau and the Deccan.

The Aryan costume, which forms the third category, is an elaborate form of the aboriginal costume. It consists of a long piece of cloth worn as the main garment by both men and women. It is known as dhoti when worn by men and as saree when used by women. "The dhoti is worn roughly in the same fashion as the cloth of the aboriginal man, but it is longer and wider, and is worn with so many folds gathers, and tucks that it gives the impression of much fuller draping. More especially, the gathers and folds in front are heavier and hang lower." (16) and then he continues to describe the various clothes worn by them.

Finally in the prose *Three Horsemen of the apocalypse* he talks about the civilized values in the society. It is a phenomenon, unique in literary history, that a writer remains creative with his coruscating intellect, photographic memory and relentless spirit of enquiry in the hundredth year of his life. Nirad C. Chaudhuri, noted scholar, critic and thinker, celebrated his hundredth birthday on 23rd November, 1997. At such an age most people, having passed through the inevitable process of physical and mental decline, wait in a feeble state for death. But Nirad Chaudhuri has ignored the burden of age and decided to write a treatise on the decline and fall of the contemporary civilization. His latest book, *Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse*, published by Oxford University Press in the centenary year of his birth, unquestionably proves that even in the twilight of life his intellect remains as formidable as before and that he still commands a refined and lively language to express his thoughts. In this respect, he is really nonpareil.

Briefly defined, the subject of *Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse* is 'decline and fall of Western civilization.' It may remind the readers of Spengler's celebrated work, *Decline of the West*. But Chaudhuri categorically states that his latest tour-de-force is not a 'refurbished version' of Spengler's book. The term 'west' has a different connotation in his work. As he explains:

Western civilization today is no longer exclusively Western. It has expanded all over the world, but in doing so it has not remained a whole one: it has two clearly marked divisions. There is the inner circle which is fully lighted and is occupied by peoples of European origins: around it is a very much larger circle which is the penumbra of the central sun and is occupied by diverse non-European peoples. (10)

It is with the decline of the 'inner circle' and its penumbral regions (in Asia and Africa) that the author is concerned.

The book, divided into three parts, explores the reasons and the historical perspectives of this decline. In part one, Chaudhuri informs the readers, briefly but precisely, of (a) the methods he consciously followed in writing this book; (b) his fundamental assumptions about human life and the universe on which the entire thesis of the book depends; and (c) the present state of his mind in which he views the world. In the second part, he considers the concepts of individualism, nationalism and democracy and their extant debased forms and arrives at the conclusion that these three are mainly responsible for the decadence of contemporary civilization. They are the 'three horsemen' of the 'new apocalypse.' In the third part, he presents a graphic but authentic picture of decadence in England, India and America. He

also refers, in connection with the elaboration of his arguments, to various autobiographical incidents and personal experiences which is a familiar style of his writing.

Hence through his prose work the writer succeeds in awakening socio-cultural consciousness in the society he lived. These qualities make Nirad C. Chaudhuri unique from his contemporaries.

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