

Ideas of Nirad C. Chaudhuri on Civilization are Abreast of Times - A Discussion

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Abstract

It is a well known fact in the universe that there is always a constant change. It is very difficult to understand why it occurs as well, it gives the impression that it is inevitable. The present paper discusses in a way the ideas of Nirad C. Chaudhuri on civilization, which are really prophetic and compelling to believe without any room for reasoning. Virtually, he is popularly known as enigmatic personality with hair splitting ideas and arguments. Of course, they may appear contradictory at large, the writer focuses on his magnum opus The Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse, which deals primarily with the rise and fall of civilizations in the law of universe. It also elucidates three potential ideas of Individualism, Nationalism and Democracy. Holistically speaking, the paper outshines creative and scientific observations of Chaudhuri in terms of Philosophical undercurrent. Hence, the views that are to be discussed are with the special reference to his book The Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse.

Key Words: - Universe, Constant Change, Inevitable, Civilizations, Prophetic, Enigmatic, Hair-splitting, Elucidates, Philosophical, Undercurrent.

Introduction:-

The Apocalyptic literature primarily deals with coming dangers and disasters in any sphere of existence. According to the *Bible*, it is a kind of revelation about the imminent end – Christian apocalyptic is thoroughly frightening for the sadistic. Chaudhuri in his book *Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse* (1965) mainly focuses on the decline of Indian and Western Civilizations. The three horsemen of the new apocalypse are Individualism, Nationalism and Democracy. To quote to the context, the other apocalyptic writers who influenced Chaudhuri are Machiavelli (*The Prince* 1532), Thomas Hobbes (*The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic* 1640) and Alexis de Tocqueville (*Democracy in America* 1835).

Chaudhuri says that decadence in India began 200 years before the Muslim conquest at the end of the 12th Century and in 18th Century after the death of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. As a result, the decadence brought about extinction of ancient Hindu civilization and the second Indo-Islamic Civilization. The western civilization also witnessed a decadence in national politics, social and economic life, education and culture. Even some of the European countries like Greece, Rome and Egypt are believed to be almost on the verge of disappearance. For this, he attributed the reason with the age of a human being which decays in passage of time. So also the great empires which enjoyed glory in the past have vanished in the course of time. However, Chaudhuri, is a unique phenomenon in literary history, that a writer remains creative with his radiating intellect, photographic memory and relentless spirit of enquiry even in the hundredth year of his life. 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 and uncreative state for death. But, Chaudhuri has ignored the burden of age and decided to write a treatise on the decline and fall of the contemporary civilization. His last book *Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse*, published by Oxford University Press in the centenary year of his birth (1997), 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.

Chaudhuri has always shown an exceptional concern for decadence and decay. Indeed, decadence has become an obsession of this eminent writer and he has returned to the subject in untiring repetition even at the risk of being unpopular. In *Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse*, he brings to bear the accumulated wisdom of a life spent in dispassionate pursuit of knowledge, on his central concern and the worldwide disintegration of civilized life.

The book reveals his phenomenal erudition, profound historical sense and highly individualistic world-view. 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* (1918-23) or Gibbon's *Decline and fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-79). But, Chaudhuri categorically states that his latest masterpiece 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

(*Thy Hand, Great Anarch* P.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 is divided into three parts and each part explores the reasons and the historical perspectives of this decline. In part one, Chaudhuri informs the readers briefly and precisely about (a) the methods that he has consciously followed in writing this book (b) his fundamental assumptions about human life and the universe on which the entire book depends and (c) the present state of his mind in which he views the world.

Of course, the book has been divided into three parts. The key concern of this paper starts from the second part, which critiques the contemporary 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.

Individualism: In the view of Chaudhuri, individualism literally means "belief in the individual's supreme worth and importance, as well as in his right to act as he pleases" (*The Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse* P.27), is a nineteenth century concept. Individualism is a recent expression, which has been brought into existence by a new idea. Our fathers knew only egoism. In fact, the first citation of the word in *The Oxford English Dictionary* dates from the first half of the nineteenth century. But, in course of time, the term came to signify an extreme assertion of individual freedom and a revolt against authoritarianism. This kind of individualism came from America, where the term is used to mean that:

An individual has the right to pursue self-interest in the form of acquisition of money and fulfilment of all desires, good or bad, also amenities of life, without external constraints

(The Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse P.29).

The term individualism is embodied in the American Declaration of Independence. The domination of authoritarian doctrines and absolutist regimes in Europe, France, Germany and Russia in particular, from the middle of the nineteenth century is responsible for making individualism a driving force of the process of decadence in Western civilization. Individualism, as it is understood today, is “just unrestrained self-indulgence, more especially in regard to money and sexual relations” (*The Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse* P.44). This notion of individualism is primarily an American ideology, but it has spread to all countries of the world, and is continuing to spread relentlessly, and has proved to be a formidable agent of disintegration.

In respect of contraception, there is a view that it is a revolt against biology and repudiation of ethics. During the present age it has become a demographic necessity. But Chaudhuri doesn't accept it. He further points out that Individualism can be understood only in the light of man's life on earth, but in order to do so he gets round the religious view of it which is against to the biological view. Whereas, on the concept of individual and death, the individual's life cycle is predetermined by biology. It is at first growth, from birth to middle age and decline, ending in death. Since a human being is basically an animal like all other animals, his existence is confined within the limits of animal life. But no religion admits that man is an animal, all religions regard him as a special creation. Chaudhuri observes that death is imminent, which is the last act in the life cycle. So, he suggests to earn fame, which is not an exclusive possession of the individual. It should be earned in the lifetime, as it belongs to him only as a life interest. So, on his death, it reverts to the giver, cosmos, which gave it to him with a definite purpose of its own.

Nationalism: After dealing with the concept of individualism, Chaudhuri takes up his view of Nationalism in a critical perspective. Hence, the second horseman taken for discussion is Nationalism. *The Webster International Dictionary* gives six meanings for this word as ‘devotion to, or advocacy of national interests or national unity and independence’ and ‘zealous adherence to one's own nation or to its principles. ‘Patriotism’ this word, since it came into use in the middle ages has undergone a bewildering expansion and diversity of meanings. But, for the present discussion Chaudhuri takes only the modern meaning which is relevant. Here it is:

A people connected by supposed ties of blood generally manifested by community of language, religion, and customs and by a sense of common interest and interrelation

(The Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse P.52).

Chaudhuri is of the view that the definition of the word 'nation' has created a confusion because of its synonyms in *Webster's Dictionary* are Race, Nation and People. They are frequently used interchangeably as they denote one of the great divisions of mankind. In present technical use, the terms are commonly differentiated in meaning. The word *Race* is an anthropological and ethnological term, *Nation* is a political term and *People* designate an aggregate of persons irrespective of their racial origins but have common culture, interest and ideas.

It is only from the end of 18th century the wars have become connected with nationalism. Before that wars were waged by monarchs or states and the masses of the belligerent countries remained unconcerned. Thus wars were only pursued through military means and never brought about by the collective hatred of one nation for another. This transformation of the nature of wars was brought about by the American war of Independence (1775-83) *(The Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse P.56).*

Chaudhuri observes that nationalism becomes imperialism especially when a nation becomes so powerful, that it seeks to bring other nations under its domination. No great Indian thinkers of the 19th century, beginning with Ram Mohan Roy and ending with Bankim Chandra Chatterji regarded British Rule in India as an evil thing. They regretted the subject status of themselves, "but they asserted that the British Rule in India had been good for India" *(The Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse P.57).*

Nationalism, too, has acquired a degenerate form in the present century. Nationalism, as it is understood now, is totally different from historic nationalism. In the past, the main inspiration of nationalism came from the desire to free a subject nation from foreign domination. At present there is no direct foreign rule in any country of the world. No country today, however powerful and aggressive it may be, is able to think of occupying another country and imposing its rule on it. Even if any such attempt is made, it will be foiled by other free nations. [The gulf war over the Iraqi aggression against Kuwait is an example.] An altogether different form of nationalism has appeared in the place of historic nationalism. Chaudhuri calls it "new Nationalism". It is "a self-sufficient and disinterested passion." *(The Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse P59)* and it receives its strongest urge from national pride.

The new nationalism has generated a strong sense of national identity for each nation which results in xenophobia. The neo-nationalism in its typical form is now found among those people who have been emancipated from European imperialism. The colonial experience and “the extensive transformation of the societies of nationalistic peoples” (*The Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse* P.60) have added a new colour to their sense of national pride. It has become a “nationalistic inferiority complex” (*The Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse* P.60). These people constantly suffer from a feeling of being confronted by inimical forces and nurture unending grievances. This, in turn, breeds an “impotent hatred” (*The Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse* P.60) in them. This vitiate form of nationalism is the main source of wars and conflicts, extensive military preparations and terrorism in the present-day world. “The mental life of the mankind of our times,” remarks Chaudhuri, “has one overriding emotion: hatred generated by conflicts of every kind, personal and social” (*The Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse* P 61). And this pervasive hatred has accelerated the decline of human civilization.

Democracy: The third horseman according to Chaudhuri is democracy. Democracy, which literally means the rule of the people, is, in the opinion of Chaudhuri, “the domination (for some the tyranny) of the majority” (*The Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse* P.62) over the whole society. It was recognized and described as a form of government by Plato and Aristotle. Before democracy, governments everywhere were Monarchic and were accepted as the rule of a person or a dynasty. Later, different forms of government appeared after the abolition of monarchy. It was Plato, who first discussed the character of Democracy and he was against it. He judged that:

Adoption of democracy would be to handover the government of the city (state) to the least educated, least cultured, least steady and most whimsical element in its population

(*The Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse* P.62).

Chaudhuri points out that in Athens, democracy did not mean government by the entire body of its inhabitants. It was a right of the ‘citizens’ only and the working population was almost wholly slaves, who could not be citizens. The Greek notion and practice of democracy did not create the modern democracies in the West.

Modern democracy as it is practiced all over the world, is in fact the American form of democracy. Its fundamental doctrine (‘government of the people, by the people, and for the people’) was asserted by Abraham Lincoln in 1863. He had previously expressed his confidence in the judgment of a people taken as whole in these famous words:

You can fool all the people some of the time, and some people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all of the time (*The Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse* P.63).

Chaudhuri feels that it is the reiteration of the old saying: *Vox populi, Vox Dei* (the voice of the people is the voice of God) and of the Islamic dogma that *ijma* (collective opinion) of the whole people cannot be wrong (*The Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse* P.63). So, Chaudhuri sarcastically says that Lincoln could not foresee the power of the television to fool all the people all the time.

A new democratic ideology, which is at once assertive and aggressive, has appeared in recent times. Chaudhuri calls it “total democracy.” It seeks to assert its power not only over the political realm but over all aspects of life - economic, social, cultural and educational. The supporters of ‘total democracy’ want to give all these aspects of life and the form desired by the majority of the people. They totally disregard the quality and praise only the quantity. Democracy has thus become the same as egalitarianism. Chaudhuri points out a ‘glaring inconsistency’ (*The Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse* P.67) in the present form of egalitarianism, which reveals its true character and which is immensely harmful for the civilization.

Conclusion: It is drawn from the above discussion that Chaudhuri though he has propounded his own choice of theories and conceptions, while explaining the three horsemen namely Individualism, Nationalism and Democracy, its relevance can be felt strikingly in the present day civilized countries, which are on the verge of deplorable down fall in every aspect. Of course, his perceptions and observations may appear contradictory in one sense but his realistic view point has validity and significance. Hence, it is justifiable to comment that in one way he is abreast of times as his ideas are truly experienced by several nations in the present global scenario.

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