

**Dr Somali Gupta**  
**Professor of English**  
**Govt VYTPG Autonomous College**  
**Drug. C.G.**

### **Chaudhuri's Personality as formed by the East- West Encounter**

Hundreds of Indians imbibed the Western culture that came to India with the British rule, but Chaudhuri believed that his Westernization was different from that of his fellow countrymen. He did not want to be considered merely as one of the many Westernized Indians because he had absorbed the influences of the West at a much deeper level and his interaction with the West was mainly concerned with the realm of a higher order of images. While he proudly claimed to have imbibed the best of both the cultures, in *The Autobiography* he made it a point to inform his readers that his distinctiveness from his countrymen was significant.

As I see the matter, the generalization of my countrymen is unconscious or subconscious, while I flatter myself that I have arrived at mine after labourious and deliberate enquiry. In any case they are consciously held and I am fully aware of their implications.( 475)

Chaudhuri has described the process of gradual assimilation of the Western culture. It started from early childhood with the impressions produced by the English objects of superior material culture. The steam-powered boat of Mr. Stapleton the Inspector of Schools, made him gape in wonder and the locomotives appeared unbelievably fantastic. His family took pride in their possession of English steel trunks and pursued catalogues of British departmental stores to look for items of comfort and luxury. This eager acceptance of material goods signified the beginning of total anglicization. He once wrote:

What is denounced as my pro-British treachery to India is really my loyalty to English life and civilization by which I was formed. It had as its penumbra my adherence to the values created by European civilization. European cultural influences began to beat upon me from my childhood, when I was living in a small town of East Bengal in a house with mud floors, mat walls, and tin roofs. I cannot remember, even though the material setting of my life was such, any time in which I did not know the names of Shakespeare or Raphael, not to speak of others.(Archives 138)

Real acculturation followed with the Chaudhuri children imbibing literary classics of the West, learning Homer along with Indian epics, reciting Shakespeare by the age of ten and taking immense pride in being able to speak correct English. Chaudhuri began to idealize England as he started to read the English classics. Its flawless image captivated him and by comparison his own country India seemed ordinary and uninteresting. It also made him apply the most rigorous and uncompromising standards to test his own culture and society. That India failed to meet his standards is evident from his books. Richard Cronin comments:

Chaudhuri's self assertiveness is abrasive, sometimes brutal, and just occasionally, a little vulgar as if it feels it necessary to bolster his sense of own dignity by demeaning his country, and their leaders.(4)

This had often led to Chaudhuri being criticized as an Anglophile. His initial rejection of everything Indian and conscious and complete assimilation of the customs and mannerisms of the West are not seen by critics as mere pretence and sycophancy. He dressed up as an Englishman and adored the country for its art culture and literature. His lament was that they too became debased when they reached the land of Circe. What ever their intention was of coming to India they ended up giving more than they intended; of this Chaudhuri never had any doubt.

The British might have intended through their education system to create a breed of native clerks for the purpose of administrative work but as the writings of Chaudhuri testify created many other things as well and loke the railways opened unsuspected springs of experience even in the remotest area of colonial India. As Amit Chaudhary says:

It has to be said that it is very doubtful whether an Indian small town like Kishorganj could produce a Chaudhuri today; there might be satellite television in the villages, but relatively little education and intellectual influence penetrates them now. (6)

Chaudhuri's role as an autobiographer is of great importance. He followed the distinctive Western tradition of writing an autobiography with the dual purpose of writing the history of India and describing his extraordinary life. This form of literary endeavour was one of the most significant results of contact with the West, as it incorporated self-analysis and descriptive study. Naipaul called it "one great book to have come out of the Indo- English encounter."<sup>7</sup>

Yet Chaudhuri remained a Bengali and a Hindu who had not aped the West uncritically. Remaining true to the bhadrakok tradition he personified the Bengali high culture-" a happy marriage between the traditionalism of England and the traditionalism of Bengal."<sup>8</sup> The conflict between the two was only in the eyes of those who were "either deracinated or avant garde."<sup>9</sup>

Chaudhuri was one of the greatest representative of the cultural intermingling that created the modern Bengali culture; the secular Indian middle class; the modern Indian nation state, and ironically the demise of colonialism itself in India. The physical and material world of Chaudhuri's youth and middle age may have decayed or changed but the intellectual and cultural world he preferred to inhabit in had certainly vanished. His three horse men – Individualism, nationalism and Democracy had acquired debased meanings in the contemporary world. Analysing the Indian image through his Western exposure and evaluating the European norms against Indian values, Chaudhuri assumed a rare stance of an involved insider and a concerned outsider at the same time with both the cultures. The analysis of Indian culture is relatively less complex in the case of foreign observers whose position at best can be only that of an involved outsider. But complexity increases when we consider Chaudhuri's texts. He seemed on occasion to articulate with an uncanny semblance the conclusions of Western observers on India- putting himself in a position whereby the land of his birth is as much of an 'other' to him as to Western writers. But at the same time a different process was taking place, in which Europe was functioning as the imaginary other, a backdrop for a protracted and mainly negative transference, while England stood for the desired other, the site of positive emotional projection. He criticized India as an outsider but his criticism came from his being an insider. A complex formulation of an insider- outsider in relation to both the East and the West gave him a rare stance to judge both the cultures objectively.

Chaudhuri's philosophy evolved from his personality, which was molded by his deep understanding of the universal values and his simultaneous alienation from his cultural milieu. He teased his critics and detractors by calling himself a Hindu and an Englishman and his readers found it difficult to analyze his complex identity. Swapan Dasgupta offers the best explanation to this complexity that arises due to the lack of knowledge regarding the Bengali culture, in the following words:

...the traditional Bengali, since Raja Ram Mohan Roy, has straddled the worlds of Bengaliness and Englishness with remarkable ease and without any apparent sense of conflict. He may be fastidious about his Western apparel, particularly the cut of his suits, the knot of his tie and the make of his shoes- as Nirad Babu quite certainly is. He may even know about the streets of London and the shrines of England without ever having been there as Nirad Babu did. But he would rather stay at home than attend a Bengali marriage or Durga Puja celebrations in anything other than a dhoti- preferably pleated- and a punjabi- preferably crimped. 1)

Thus Chaudhuri became a high priest of the Bengali culture that was perfect amalgam of the Western and Eastern traditionalism. Scholastically speaking he was self educated to be choice product of the European Enlightenment. But at the same time, he had not totally extricated and alienated himself from his aboriginal Indianness. India was his first love and Indianness remained a rare passion in him. He always cherished the idea of seeing the illiterate and ignorant masses of India rising up to be the choice and enlightened citizens of the world- a brave new world which alone could conclude the entire universe into a humanistic whole. For that purpose, he believed, that the Western enlightenment should invariably be coupled with Eastern wisdom.

Dr Albert Schweitzer, in this regard, once said:

Western and Indian philosophies must not contend in the spirit that aims at the one proving itself right in opposition to the other. Both must be moving towards a way of thinking which shall...eventually be shared in common by all mankind.2

As Chaudhuri's ideas and ideologies grew beyond the boundaries of nations he was able to see the peculiarities of each culture clearly , 'like a map, with everything in its location.'  
Thm 24

He chose for himself the untrodden and uncommon path when he began to see the world and the events around him in a different way. Under the influence of his parents he developed and independent and original attitude towards religion, culture and social customs, defying general beliefs. In *The Autobiography*, he admitted that his personal development was in no way typical of the modern Indian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The independence of the environment in which he grew up gave him preternatural sensitiveness to it. Intellectual alienation from his society and an irritable impatience with the changes taking place in it hardened his resolve to rebel. He wanted to transform the world by getting rid of the degradation he witnessed in the existing nations. He wanted to build upon rock what was written upon the waters with the aim to transform, hence he hit out at the inconsistencies existing in the society through his writings.

When he saw that there could be no salvation for this vast land unless and until it left its duplicity and double standards and assumed upon itself the right values of humanism as confectioned by the European traditions, he took it as his sacred mission to make people aware of the need to reassess their pre- existing values. He tried to teach the people the most

important lessons of restraint and renunciation coupled with duty as propagated by the Indian philosophers and metaphysicians. It is with this choice aim in mind that he wrote *Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse*. According to Chaudhuri the three horsemen that have guided and misguided the modern world were Individualism, Nationalism and Democracy and these three were the products of the European Renaissance. These were the concepts that in their original forms were constituted for the supreme development of man and nation. For a nation to be functioning as a Democratic nation its citizens had to be intellectually active and vibrant, logically sound, self aware, spiritually elevated with an enhanced sensitivity. Yet over the period of years these three choice 'horsemen' developed internal decay. Chaudhuri has lamented in his last book how Individualism that was a once the product of humanism and led to great philosophical thinking had now degenerated into mere self preservation with little respect for mankind. Nationalism is no longer confined to the growth of a nation but has lost its value and Democracy has fallen into the hands of uneducated, people who cannot think logically or rationally. Having been a spectator of this fall Chaudhuri found solace in his faith.

Standing on the threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> century , Chaudhuri saw a strong but gradual assimilation of the European ways once again. He had never believed that when the British left India, it was the end of the Indo- European Culture and had prophesized that the time will come when the civilization of India will become the provincial addition of the civilization of Europe. In *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, published in 1947 he wrote :

I expect either the United States singly or a combination of the United States and the British Commonwealth to re-establish and rejuvenate the foreign domination of India.(600)

He dispensed off the idea of India becoming a Post – Colonial nation long before any of the theories of postcolonialism came up. His understanding of the dynamics of power and rule, of suppression and suppressed, master and slave gave him a clear view of the future of the nations once colonised by the Empire. But his concern was bigger. With the advent of the age of technology he saw a wave of new emergent forces that would lead the nations more and more into a decadent state. Nowhere were they helping the nations to become immune to decadence but actually co-exist with it.

But Chaudhuri had a Cassandra curse on him. So while he tried to warn the world around him with what he saw, he found himself , ousted, relegated and almost written off by the country of his birth. But he did not let that deter him. He carried his Cassandra curse and continued to talk about the lack of balance in the world around him till his hundredth year.