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Nirad C Chaudhuri

The Man, The Scholar

I have nothing to declare but my genius.

- G.B. Shaw

Nirad Babu could say that for himself. Not only is his erudition unmatched by any Indian, past or present; his intellect is always paramount and fearless. This makes it difficult for the common run of clever intellectuals in this country to read his writings, let alone understand much of what he says. Part of the difficulty is generated by Chaudhuri himself, modeling himself on the great scholars of Europe. He liberally uses many European languages which we do not generally know. (Sarkar 4)

Learning was a matter of perpetual and perennial discernment for Chaudhuri and he pursued it with the satisfaction of a philosopher who churns things with the ultimate purpose of gaining the true intellectual's vision of seeing things as they are. In his efforts he was astoundingly scholastic. But he did not accumulate knowledge, ideas and ideologies for the sake of showing off or impressing people. The true criteria of Chaudhuri's intensity towards scholarship can be found in his manner of examining the problems in hand with a profound and unending curiosity. One might suspect that it came from his unacknowledged ambition to attain the versatility of the Renaissance masters. The only four men he considered truly learned were Mommsen, Wilamowitz-Mollendorf, Harnack and Eduard Meyer. He wrote in *The Continent of Circe*:

When I was young and immature I cherished the ambition of being the fifth in that series. So I could not have been very modest but a standard is a standard. (p7)

The standard that Chaudhuri set for himself was definitely high. What he ultimately achieved for himself was no mean feat either. It should not be forgotten that all the knowledge he acquired was done against a "background of financial worries at home". Says R. K. Kaul:

He had to battle with poverty for the first forty years of his life. He frequently sought help from his father and brother for sheer survival. Still he refused to give up his expensive (some would call it extravagant) tastes in books and paintings. He is a self-confessed bibliophile, collecting rare editions of obscure books, savouring the quality of paper,

printing, binding and illustrations, like the hero of Anatole Francis' famous novel the crime of 'Sylvestre Bonnard' (Kaul 47)

Financial worries did not deter Chaudhuri and he remained one of those rare intellectuals who like Bacon had taken up all knowledge as his province. Over long years of sweat and toil he had built up for himself a grand empire of cosmic knowledge. History, philosophy, religion, literature all fell within his scholarly pursuits and all his writings are fine examples of his extended scholarship. Learning in itself interested Chaudhuri for early in his life he became conscious of the inter-relatedness between personality and scholarship. He rightly said in *The Autobiography* that "... scholarship itself is a product of personal temperament and what it brings to personality is only temperament returned to temperament in the form of embodied activity (385)

He had learnt from Lord Moreley's essays, that the product of study was not the book but the man and that gave him a understanding towards the purpose of learning. His personality was thus moulded by all that he had learnt and acquired since childhood. In his early days as a student he had a conflict in his mind as to whether to be a specialist or a generalist. His early ambition was to fashion himself on the patterns of Leibnitz or Goethe. With an ambition to create a great work by combining the work of the great historians his key formula was "synthesis". In *The Autobiography* he wrote about his reverence for the great medievalists like Stubbs, Round, Vinogradoff, Maitland of England, Quicherat, Fustel De, Coulanges, Monod, Luchaire, Camille of France, and Waitz of Germany and also about his fascination for subjects like Paleography and Textual Criticism. His deep interest in the history and methodology of every branch of learning was remarkable. As a student he could pass from Physics to Sanskrit literature or from novels to Astronomy with an agility which seemed like volatility to those who did not know him. He thought historically, because he believed that "... nothing was either complete or intelligible at one particular point of time without a reference to its past, ... its duration or history(399) His unshakable faith in historical integrity came from his education. The European Enlightenment which brought to India a great revival of learning through the British educational system exposed Chaudhuri to the great works of the greatest writers of the world. Once he fell in love with history he read all the great works in history including the Constitutional History of Stubbs, Green's Short History of English People and Mommsen's History of Rome. While he was only twenty he wrote a remarkable essay on The Objective Method of History, which was later included in *The Autobiography*. Though he was not able to fulfil his "insane ambition" of combining Mabillon, Muratori, and Tillemont with Gibbon due to frail health, Gibbon's influence remained with him all his life. His dream to be India's Mommsen and produce a historical work that would at once be a miracle of painstaking analysis and a stupendous synthesis remained unfulfilled.

He was a historian who created history with his unconventional viewpoints. It was not just a mere subject for him it was a passion and a way of living. He never forgave the British for losing their sense of History. For him it was the most obvious cause and effect of their decadence.

Chaudhuri's process of learning did not stop with history, rather it started with it. Under the influence of European Enlightenment he had learnt to adopt a positive attitude towards knowledge and thus developed an interest in universal knowledge with different types of knowledge. Encyclopedic knowledge suited his temperament and an urge to become an epitome of universal knowledge became his driving force. His friend Khushwant Singh wrote about him :

There is little doubt that Nirad can talk on any subject under the sun. There is not a bird, tree, butterfly, or insect whose name he does not know in Latin, Hindi, Sanskrit and

Bengali. Long before he went to London, he not only knew where the important monuments and museums were but also the locations of many famous restaurants. I heard him contradict a lady who had lived six years in Rome about the name of the street leading from the coliseum- and prove his contention. I have heard him discuss stars with astronomers, recite lines from an obscure fifteenth poet to a professor of French literature, advise a wine dealer on the best vintages from Burgundy. At a small function in the honour of Laxness, the Icelandic winner of Nobel Prize for Literature, heard Nirad lecture him on Icelandic literature.(Singh 29)

Aldous Huxley's essays created in Chaudhuri a deep interest in evolutionary biology. He learnt that no particular form of life could be marked off from other forms in an absolutely clear-cut manner. What was true for evolutionary biology was also true to Chaudhuri regarding acquisition of knowledge. The eleventh edition of Encyclopedia Britannica became his mainstay in the absorption and exploration of inter-relatedness of all knowledge. Along with the knowledge of co-relation he also acquired the flair of compiling bibliographies on subjects that interested him. Bibliographies were important to Chaudhuri because they provided the essential preliminary knowledge of the important books on a particular subject. He owed most of his scholarship to the Imperial library of Calcutta which became a 'true university' to him. The most curious part of his intellectual growth was that as a student he was influenced even by books he had not read but read about from the Encyclopedia Britannica like Beloch's *Griechische Geschichte* and Busolt's work with the same title. His lust for learning was so great that he wanted to learn German to read Bernheim's *Lehrbuch der historischen Methode und der Geschichtsphilosophie*.

Chaudhuri's learning was not confined only through books. People like Mr Bipin Gupta and Mr. T.R.Grover influenced him with their scholarship in history, which in turn got him interested in History, specially the history of Rome. His last book Three Horsemen which deals with the fall of the Western civilization, is similar to Gibbon's book on the fall of Rome. All his writings are profound examples of his scholarship. The *Continent of Circe* is about the cultural background of India. His book *Hinduism* is an extensive thesis on the origin and development of the religion. Even his autobiographies are not only personal but also historical documents of the Indian National Movement.

Chaudhuri's scholarship did not include only reading, initiation, assimilation and expression. Through his learning he had been able to formulate for himself an attitude towards life, which did not grow out of the system of values acquired earlier. Even during the Indian National Movement his learning and attitude compelled him to see what others could not, which was completely in opposition to the prevailing super nationalistic ideas and emotions. He also developed a better understanding of the conflicts like Negro-White, Hindu-Muslim, Hindu-Sikh, Irish-English, Black-White in South Africa, and Tamil-Singhala through the in-depth perspective on racial conflicts. For example, what Julian Benda said in his famous book *'La Trahison des Clercs'* regarding the political passions in the modern world helped Chaudhuri to understand the Hindu-Muslim relations in India.

Chaudhuri had never been able to conceal his delight in learning or in himself. People who visited him "risk(ed) perpetual bombardment by heavy cultural artillery" that used to be a "numbing as well as a stimulating experience." Ian Jack candidly points out that many people did not return for more and conformed that he was hopelessly flawed by bombast, showmanship and outrageous snobbery."But there is something almost touching in his lack of self-consciousness about these aspects of his character which seem always to have existed." (Jack 44)

For a person who demonstrated his profound faculties of insight and depth of learning through his writings there was nothing lighthearted in his projects. "He combines in himself the reason of Descartes, the passion of Pascal, the wisdom and austerity of ancient Hindu sages" says K. Natwar Singh. It was Mathew Arnold who talked of high seriousness in matters concerning social and cultural analysis. Chaudhuri took upon himself this faculty of high seriousness and projected himself as a teacher. The province of his teachings lay in evolving absolute balance between sense and sensibilities. Seasoned perception, clear analysis and profound logic were the qualities that Chaudhuri developed through his learning and they became his real winning properties as a writer.

Regarding his art of writing Khushwant Singh once said

"At last India had produced a writer who did not cash on native Indianisms but could write the English language as it should be written- and as few, if any, living Englishmen could write." (Singh 30)

Singh acknowledges him as the best Indian writer of English prose and also commends him for lavishing more care on his prose than most Indian writers do on their poetry. About his fondness of putting his scholarship in display, Prof K.R.S. Iyengar wrote:

His amazing Scholarship no doubt gives ballast to the craft of his wayward sensibility, and the Latin tags, French quotations, German titles and Sanskrit citations sometimes introduce an element of the agreeably exotic and extraneous. (Iyengar 600-601)

Chaudhuri mastered many areas of knowledge and revealed his learning through his prose works. He used German, French, Latin quotations and though his use of non English words has often been criticized one has to understand that he did not do so to show off his knowledge. On the contrary, he resorted to this method in order to achieve brevity, exactitude and local colour. They are, in fact, an evidence of his extraordinary learning. He used his knowledge of Geology to explain History, or Physiology to explain the deteriorating standards of university education in India or a metaphor from Physics to explain satirically the fact that the intellectual stature of a person in India is in direct proportion to the official position he occupies. Chaudhuri's encyclopedic knowledge supported his panoramic vision. He employed a passionate and grand style like Nietzsche both in writing eloquent prose and launching a bitter attack on something. Sometimes his language hurt, for his approach was not mild but aggressive, skeptical and critical. In *The Continent of Circe* he wrote:

I have recovered my ariel's body from Sycorax, the terrible and malevolent hag who stands behind Circe in India. So I can and should ignore the Yahoos. But I would save the fellow beasts. They do not however listen to me. They honk, neigh, bellow, bleat, or grunt and scamper away to their scrub, stable, byre, pen, and sty. (376)

The harshness in the language was intentional, for Chaudhuri wanted to shake the Indians out of their complacency and lethargy in order to make them aware of their shortcomings which he thought was driving the entire nation towards degeneration.

It is not that everyone found Chaudhuri's eloquent language apt and co relating to the content. Chetan Karnani said "His pomposity and his egotism make him indulge in too frequent anecdote-riding and stylistic self-celebration. This appears overdone when he deliberately displays his verbal pyrotechnics." Karnani 124

The fact is that Chaudhuri being a comprehensive thinker took up large issues of life in an elaborate fashion. The language he used to deal with such ideas was bound to be strewn with similes and

metaphors for he wanted to convince the readers about the particular aspect of his topic. The similes and metaphors contribute much to the reader's understanding as to the beauty of his prose. His force and grace of language is so gripping that readers often find it difficult to dismiss even the most personally and ideologically irritating paragraphs due to the sheer attraction of the craftsmanship displayed. In *The Continent of Circe* there are portions where he, elaborating the central argument that Indians are displaced Europeans, described a Bengali girl setting the evening lamp in the cowshed :

A very faint voice, borne on the darkness, which is piercing only because it is pain. It says from ever so far away:" Daughter! Come back to me from your dread Hades. Come where you like- to snow covered Russia, pine covered Germany or corn covered Sicily. Only come back, Presephone, Presephone, Presephone! (209)

There is a shadow on the girls face," a soft shadow cast by the sorrow of a Persephone who does not know who she is , for a Demeter she has forgotten. "209

Such lines of Chaudhuri are almost poetic. In *The Autobiography of the Unknown Indian* one can feel that Keatsian sensuousness in the description of the East Bengal landscapes and the "arcid smell of cattle" in the water.

His frequent use of non-English words as quotations are weaved in so closely with his thoughts that they impact the overall pattern of the essay. His quotations either support his argument or refute an idea or ideology that runs to counter his. He also gave a 'Chaudhurian' twist by changing a word or two to well known quotations. He also made fresh observations and original comments about life, persons and situations. That is why many of his statements have the status of epigrams. For example." In Hindu society, so long as appearances are saved, nothing is wrong."

The use of lively anecdotes, striking analogies, trenchant epigrams and apt metaphors make his prose delightful reading. In *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!*, he illustrates the traditional inhibitions of Bengali society by recounting in graphic detail the story of how Ramanand Chatterjee once encountered his middle aged son smoking a cigarette and the comic embarrassment to both that ensued.

Chaudhuri used his wide range of vocabulary with precision thus proving his point that language belongs to anyone who is willing to work hard with it and that patience and perseverance can overcome all environmental disabilities. About his method he wrote:

My own practice is rather rigorous. After writing a book, I go very carefully over it, examining the diction and vocabulary, and if I find that I have used some fashionable words or jargon, I weed them out, unless there is some special reason to keep them. As a rule, I remove all words, which have been good English for at least two hundred years. As I have found from experience, this pays (ii 78-79)

His confidence regarding his own learning and language emerged from his hard work , knowledge and conviction. In the Preface of his last book *Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse* he has written unabashedly and haughtily:

The very first thing I have to tell to those who will read this book is that it is being written by a man in his ninety ninth year. I have never read or heard of any author, however great of productive in his hey day doing that. This confession alone is enough to make the reader

expect only senile babbling from me. It is not for me, however, to reassure him. He must be his own judge.

With his kaleidoscopic vision, supported by his encyclopedic knowledge, Chaudhuri analysed everything in terms of psychology, ethnology, sociology, anthropology and history. His prose can be therefore labeled as analytical and expository. While describing the Bengali customs, fairs and festivals, he tried to describe them analytically and ethnologically. When he saw the Hindu-Muslim riot in Calcutta he analysed it in the light of his historical knowledge. When he observed the lethargy of Indians, he analysed it in geographical-historical-sociological terms. When he noticed the purity mania he analysed them in terms of psychology of religion. Thus his personal experiences were presented through the prism of his scholarship. He was able to connect the isolated incidents as a part of the universal phenomenon. He is also a creative writer comparable to the great essayist like Addison, Steele, J.S. Mill and Bertrand Russell. Chaudhuri's remarkable craftsmanship, intensity of vision, and forcefulness of expression commanded admiration even from his critics. His passionate and prophetic utterances reminded Dilip Chitre of the prose style of Nietzsche. He says

Mr. Chaudhuri's impassioned rhetoric whether he is writing eloquent praise or launching a bitter invective against something, reminds one of writers like Nietzsche. (Chitre 44)

Chaudhuri went back to writing in English although he had shown remarkable promise of becoming a great writer in Bengali. The Bengali society had become less receptive and less tolerant towards his new ideas and was also, according to him, less ready to face facts. Right from his early childhood his intellectual passion was to understand the world, to appreciate the great and beautiful things in it and to write in clear and concise English exactly what he saw with his own eyes and with his mind's eye and all that he saw and appreciated. Pain, poverty and humiliation could not distract him from his concentration. There were periods when he was almost paralyzingly enfeebled by lack of self-confidence and ill health, yet he never stayed that way for long. Once he gave up his academic ambition, the idea of becoming a writer dominated his life. Still, until he was in his early fifties, he had little to show except his extraordinary knowledge of philosophy, history and literature. He had persisted in his long-held desire to produce a work of historical scholarship, but it made no progress for he would not seek anything below the highest standard. He eventually wrote his magnum opus *Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse* which he published in his hundredth year and took Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, and Alexis de Tocqueville as his models.

Because he employed a passionate and grand style he often appeared like a romantic historian and a religious prophet. Chetan Karnani once wrote about him

Chaudhuri is remarkable for his craftsmanship, intensity of vision, and forcefulness of expression. From this point of view, he is Flaubert and Walter Pater of Indo-Anglian literature. Through toil and tears, he has consciously evolved a style which is peculiarly his own. He is a dedicated scholar who has the native gift of grace in writing. However, one may disagree with what Chaudhuri says, one cannot but admire the way he says it. Some of his outrageous utterances have made him the most popular writer in the West. But because of his unique style, even in India he commands admiration. (Karnani 126)

It would not be an exaggeration to say that Chaudhuri's grammatical perfection and his rhetorical expertise are as perfect as they are to the native British-born scholar. His being born a Bengali did not come in the way of his achieving perfection; and this was possible only because of his innate love for the language. It was as though he had metamorphosed into a "pukka Englishman" with his hat

, coat and stick. As a 'scholar extraordinary' he remained a voyager and a seeker of truth .Sunanda K. Dutta Ray sums up Chaudhuri in the following way:

...Chaudhuri, of whom it might be said as it was the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy, that he is a gentleman at an angle to the universe. But whereas Cavafy was voluptuary, Chaudhuri was a voyeur. He is an elitist who was never himself a part of an elite, a renaissance man who lived after and outside the synthesis of the Indian and British culture that was the Bengal Renaissance, an imperial subject who glories in imperialism. His insight into politics was gained not as a practitioner but as a private secretary to a nationalist barrister, his deep understanding of military science was acquired from reading. (Ray 29)

For Chaudhuri there had to be a purpose of life and existence on earth, and seeking that purpose was one of the vocations that he pursued earnestly. He gathered knowledge from every branch of studies and used it to formulate his own philosophy of life.

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