

The Late Mr. Nirad C. Chaudhuri, C.B.E. (Hony.), and the Twilight of Empire

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to examine the philosophy of history expounded by Nirad C. Chaudhuri, and relate it to the apocalyptic temper of modernism. It argues that the sense of impending apocalypse in modern Bengali culture had more to do with the decline of the British Empire than with events like the First World War, which was the most significant historical landmark in the evolution of Western modernist apocalypticism. The paper ends with a cursory look at the apocalyptic note in modern Bengali poetry and suggests that further exploration of the subject will enhance our understanding of what Partha Chatterjee has dubbed the 'colonial modern'.

The first thought that strikes me as I sit down to ponder the late Mr. Nirad Chaudhuri's relation to history is that the gentleman is dead. The reader is likely to think that I am being irresponsibly facetious, indecorous or, to resort to American slang, plain corny. Actually, underlying the bald and seemingly outrageous statement is the rather serious notion that a writer is perceived differently after his death. As W. H. Auden memorably put it in his elegy on Yeats, "The words of a dead man/ Are modified in the guts of the living." Jean-Paul Sartre just as memorably declared that literature, like bananas, is best tasted in situ, which implies that dead writers, whether or not white and male, do not possess the same relevance to our situation as our living authors. If one may rise to a philosophical register, there is an ontological difference between a dead writer and a living one; and between a living writer and his posthumous career.

If one may now descend to empirically verifiable details, this is what happens when a writer dies: after the obituaries and memorial meetings the writer's fortunes go into a slump; his books go out of print; then, after a while, new editions make a tentative appearance and try their luck on a new generation of readers, along with hitherto unpublished work if there is any. The writer is now seen as part of literary history. It is the realization that Nirad Chaudhuri's writerly fortunes have already undergone this process that prompted my opening observation. For some years after his death in 1999 he became inconspicuous on the shelves of booksellers, with only the classic *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* consistently visible. Literary commentators ignored him, for death had put paid to his career as an acerbic controversialist. Then, in 2008 India's Jaico

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Publishing House reissued Chaudhuri's most rebarbative book, *The Continent of Circe: Being an Essay on the People's of India*, first published in 1965, under a new title and subtitle: *The Heart of India: On the Nature of Things Indian – from the Aryan Migration to the Birth of Independent India*. The original title sported a Latin superscription, "De Rerum Indicarum Natura: Exempla Gentium et Seditioinum," i.e. "On the nature of things Indian: concerning the nation and its troubles." The first half, that is, has gone into the new subtitle. The oracular epigraph in the earlier editions, from the Old Testament (Joel 2:28), has been dropped. The overall intention behind the repackaging is obviously to give the book a kindlier title; "The heart of India," I notice, is a phrase that occurs in Edmund Gosse's introduction to Sarojini Naidu's *The Bird of Time: Songs of Love, Death and the Spring* (London: Heinemann, 1912). Gosse advised Naidu, and by extension all Indian writers in English, to provide "some revelation of the heart of India, some sincere penetrating analysis of native passion, of the principles of antique religion and of such mysterious intimations as stirred the soul of the East." This, in a sense, Chaudhuri does achieve in his book. In 2009 Jaico reissued Chaudhuri's *Culture in the Vanity Bag*, an engaging collection of essays first published in 1976. I am sure it will not be long before all of Chaudhuri is in print again, perhaps in a uniform edition. Scholarly attention too is being directed at him; just a few months back an English academic now teaching in the USA (Ian Almond, author of several highly interesting anti-Orientalist and comparativist studies) got in touch with me before visiting Kishoreganj and the village of Banagram. He wished to have first-hand experience of Chaudhuri's hometown and ancestral village as preparation for writing a monograph on Chaudhuri's work.

New generations of readers, however, will not know Chaudhuri the way his earlier readers – my generation and my father's generation – knew him. To us Chaudhuri was as much a personality, a "character," as he was a writer: erudite, provocative, idiosyncratic, reactionary, and remarkable for the exquisite *recherché* flavour of his prose. To us Chaudhuri was someone it was possible to meet. I never did, though during a week spent at Corpus Christi, Oxford, I toyed with the idea before deciding it was better to know him only through his works. I like to think our literary "acquaintance" has been memorialized in a photograph taken at the Commonwealth Institute in London and published in the Kolkata periodical *Desh*: Chaudhuri is posed in front of a display of books, one of which is clearly visible – *A Little Ado* by yours truly.

Two friends of mine did meet Chaudhuri. Professor Syed Manzoorul Islam, who had gone to a seminar at Oxford, looked up the telephone directory, rang Chaudhuri, and to his surprise was asked to dinner the following day. At one point of their conversation, in which Chaudhuri, unsurprisingly, went on about the erosion of literacy in our time, Professor Islam's attention was directed towards an edition of Victor Hugo's poetry shelved high against the wall. He was

asked to take it down, open it at a certain page and follow the French text while Chaudhuri recited from memory, not making a single slip even though he hadn't read it in many years. Another friend, an Indian diplomat, made an appointment to call on Chaudhuri at the latter's Oxford home. As he entered through the garden gate he noticed that his host, who had been hovering at a window, turned around sharply and vanished from sight. Moments later the rich notes of music from a player reached his ears. He rang the bell, which was answered by Chaudhuri. As soon as greetings were over Chaudhuri asked his visitor if he could identify the music. "It's Western classical music," his visitor replied, and was at once corrected: "No, not classical; it's Baroque."

Both these amusing anecdotes reveal one aspect of Chaudhuri: the show-off. Complementary to showing off is putting down; and Chaudhuri delighted in it. Harish Trivedi quotes him talking of "my sharp and biting tongue" and his penchant for "making barbed observations" (Trivedi 132). Those put down were the people who ruled the roost, and a reactionary egotism underlies all of Chaudhuri: the world was going to the dogs while he remained one of the few who were truly educated and cultured. The standards he set himself can be gauged from the formidable quartet of role models he names in *The Continent of Circe/The Heart of India*: Theodor Mommsen, Nobel laureate for 1902; Ulrich Friedrich Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (1848-1931), who married the former's daughter; Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930); and Eduard Meyer (1855-1930). V. S. Naipaul has recalled that one of the names was utterly unfamiliar to him. They are all historians, and all Germans. Like his English masters Chaudhuri had the highest respect and admiration for German scholarship. The inclusion of Wilamowitz-Moellendorff deserves a critical observation. This great scholar is perhaps best known today as the rather pedantic critic who lambasted Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, an incident that has been described as a scandal in German intellectual history. Chaudhuri as a scholar and intellectual has more in common with Nietzsche than his critic. Both Nietzsche and Chaudhuri are given to imaginative flights rather than the meticulous documentation that we find in professional historians. The two are also akin in their ethical outlooks; both admire aristocratic values and are hyper-critical of resentment, or *ressentiment*, the French word favoured by Nietzsche because of its connotative richness.

Though Chaudhuri did not become a professional historian, he did formulate a philosophy of history in *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*; the portion of the book least commented on is the last chapter, "An Essay on the Course of Indian History," a dense, theoretically elaborate concoction offering an apocalyptic view that naturally begs to be historicized. After the vivid personal and social observations that precede it, the essay may appear to be an odd addendum, but it is actually an important conspectus of the author's worldview. Nor is this device without precedent. *The Education of Henry Adams* (1918) too ends with a disquisition on the nature of modern history; and the writers of both books had

ambitions to become great historians and ended up being great autobiographers.

Chaudhuri's summation of Indian history begins with the sketching of a rather conventional periodization: (i) Pre-historic civilization: Mohenjodaro and Harappa, of which he says next to nothing, for lack of reliable historical information. (ii) The Aryan Cycle: from about 1000 BC till the twelfth century AD. (iii) Moslem Rule: twelfth century AD to the Battle of Plassey. (iv) British Rule: 1757-1947. I will leave it to professional historians to quibble over the details with which Chaudhuri fleshes out the periods, and instead move on to his account of the dynamics of Indian history. The basic premise is that Indian history is the creation of foreigners; this is curiously in harmony with Marx's division of societies into historical and ahistorical ones (only a few European ones being historical) even though Marxism is anathema to Chaudhuri.

"The cycles of Indian history," comments Chaudhuri, "are really the periods of India's successive affiliations with some of the greatest movements in world history, and the cyclical changes have taken place only when one affiliation has yielded place to another. In other words, India has been drawn into or annexed by certain extra-Indian historical movements to become one of the areas of their operation, and in course of time Indian versions have been created of civilizations and social orders which are in their origin and character foreign, or at all events which range over areas very much larger than India. The greatest paradox connected with India is that for a country geographically so well marked from the rest of the world and so self-contained, its history is inextricably interwoven with the strands of universal history" (*Autobiography* 464).

In the first cycle India was a part of the greater Aryan world, which included ancient Greece and ancient Rome; in the second of the pan-Islamic civilization; in the third, which Chaudhuri thinks is still continuing, "India has merged in the stream of European expansion, and forms part of those portions of the world which constitute a greater Europe, which, as I see it, will ultimately come to mean the whole world" (*Autobiography* 467). This of course is the view of a host of European thinkers (and non-thinkers!), among them Nietzsche, most notably in "The Wanderer and His Shadow," which rounds off the book *Human, All Too Human*. Chaudhuri believed that the Europeanization of the world would be achieved through the imposition of Euro-American hegemony.

The movement from one phase of Indian history to the next creates what Chaudhuri rather curiously dubs the "internal proletariat"; it comprises all Indians other than the dominant foreign group at a particular moment. "At the height of vigour of one of the cycles of foreign political and cultural domination of India," comments Chaudhuri, "the internal proletariat is divisible into three classes." These are: (i) "pure recessives, the unadaptive remnants of an old dominant order which are incapable not only of acquiring new values but also of any further development of the old"; (ii) "pure dominants who, rising from the

most adaptive part of the proletariat, join the new order"; (iii) the largest group, "composed of what may be called false dominants, who breed both recessives and dominants according to circumstances. The character and behaviour of this group depend entirely on the power and energy of the foreign dominant order" (*Autobiography* 489-490).

When an order collapses, new recessives are created, e.g. the Moslems after the collapse of the Mughal Empire. Next, "the false dominants" partly breed recessives, but most "go wild" and become rebarbarized, and when a new order emerges jump on the bandwagon, e.g. the Bengali babus who welcomed the Raj. With each successive epoch, the internal proletariat keeps growing, becoming "more heterogeneous" and "more rancorous"; the number of those who can be civilized decreases and the number of pariahs increases. This is in stark contrast to those societies in which foreign influences are absorbed and become an organic part of the native order. In India the absence of foreign domination means anomie, barbarism. In Chaudhuri's pessimistic reading of Indian history, there has been cultural degeneration counterpointing an improvement in political organization.

I would like to suggest that Chaudhuri has provided a theory of social entropy that may not be wholly implausible, and may be brought into line with Foucauldian thinking. In societies where foreign influences are smoothly assimilated we have a robust knowledge/power system at work, but not in the rest of the world. It might be possible to extrapolate from here a theory of universal civilizational entropy that could be applied to the present state of the globe.

The study of history made Chaudhuri aware of the mutability of all earthly things, including great empires, and gave him a nose for decay. "I was consumed by the morbid curiosity to watch a sick and dying civilization or political order," he confesses. "My curiosity has had its fill" (*Autobiography* 460). Faced with the inevitability of destruction the individual may react with Promethean defiance, as Chaudhuri did in youth, or submit gracefully, as he does at the end of his *Autobiography*. He affirms his oneness with the universe; every manifestation of his existence, "intellectual, moral, and spiritual, as well as physical" is part of the universe. "I have believed in order to understand," he declares, translating Augustine's phrase "*Credo ut intelligam*," which is used as the title to the quasi-mystical coda to *Thy Hand, Great Anarch*. "I shall be content to be nothing forever after death in the ecstasy of having lived and been alive for a moment," he declares, echoing the famous Paterian passage that was a great favourite of his and others of his generation; curiously, he brings a Victorian high seriousness to the experience of aestheticist delight.

Chaudhuri's apocalyptic sensibility is modern, though not modernist; the latter is inseparable from an aesthetic avant gardeism that was alien to his temperament. In the decades leading up to independence it took the form of unease and lament

at the imminent demise of the Empire, which distinguishes it from the apocalypticism of modernists like Yeats or Eliot or Lawrence. The Western modernist imagination latched onto the First World War as an apocalyptic landmark. To me Thomas Mann best indicates its significance when he states in the Foreword to *The Magic Mountain* that his story is set "in the old days of the world before the Great War, with whose beginning so many things began whose beginnings, it seems, have not yet ceased" (xii). No Indian modernist could have expressed such a sentiment.

The highly talented Bengali modernist poets among Chaudhuri's younger contemporaries turned away from Tagorean Romanticism and sought inspiration in Western poets like Baudelaire, Yeats, Eliot and others of their ilk. But their apocalyptic view of history may well have had much in common with Chaudhuri's awareness of the decline of Empire. The subject deserves extensive treatment, something beyond the scope of this essay, but a few tentative observations may be made here.

Malcolm Muggeridge, who as editor of *The Statesman* was a professional observer of the Indian scene in the 1930s, struck up a close friendship with the Anglophone poet-critic Shahid Suhrawardy and Sudhindranath Datta, the most magisterial presence among the Bengali modernists. In the second volume of his autobiography, *Chronicles of Wasted Time: the Infernal Grove* (27-29), Muggeridge finds a dichotomy in his friends ("all nationalists," but "completely Anglicised"), and ambivalence towards the Raj: they "looked forward to Indian independence, but also...consciously or unconsciously, dreaded it." In his *Diaries* Muggeridge notes, after dinner with members of the Indian elite, "it was Twilight of Empire all right, a quite peculiar sort of degeneracy" (106).

In 1956 Sudhindranath Datta wrote in an article, "The Legacy of the Raj," that "the last years of the British Raj were basically so chaotic that nobody in his senses can regret that it has ended," and adds in what is seemingly an echo of Chaudhuri's notorious dedication to the Autobiography, "But much of what is really worthwhile in India today can be derived, even if in a roundabout way, from the days of British rule" (Datta 2008, 230-231).

Significantly, the only poem Datta wrote originally in English is "Independence Day." Dated 21 August 1947, just a week after the transfer of power, it annotates that momentous cusp thus:

Suns

Have set before, and will again decline;
And here, as elsewhere, glory will depart
From power that will then corrupt, until
The stricken hand must let the scepter pass
To others' grasp, without assaying worth.

There is no cause for grief or joy in these
 Rotations. When, however, midnight strikes
 Once more, and squalor is restored in place
 Of splendour, memory will turn away
 From incidentals of eternal flux,
 And, seeking consolation, contemplate
 An old man's legendary faith.

(Datta 1970, 291)

One thing is clear: there is a significant connection between the "Twilight of Empire" and what Partha Chatterji has dubbed the "colonial modern"; but further research is necessary to arrive at a comprehensive view.

After independence, Chaudhuri's career as a connoisseur of apocalypse receives a boost. He moves to Delhi and publishes his *Autobiography*, to wide critical acclaim. Two more books follow, and then he moves to Oxford, which becomes his domicile till his death. He is made an honorary Commander of the British Empire (CBE), but finds little to celebrate on the sceptred isle. He savours the decline of Britain in the essays collected in *Why I Mourn for England*, does some scholarly hack work (biographies of Clive and Max Muller; an introduction to Hinduism), and in 1987 publishes the magnum opus of his late years, *Thy Hand, Great Anarch: India : 1921-1952*. It extends the personal and historical account of the *Autobiography* and rounds off the quasi-mystical appendix by "globalizing" the author's perception of decadence. He notes an intellectual and moral failure in the Western refusal to accept the fact of decadence "due to the pride induced by the technological progress." Hubris is "at its most arrogant among the Americans, who are the best *Homo faber* and the worst *Homo sapiens* in the present-day world. They have even forgotten that all their technological power comes from the laws of nature, and that they are so powerless against nature that even though they can send a rocket past Neptune by obeying it, they cannot prevent it from wrecking their homes through hurricanes. Yet they think that as regards human life they can interfere with nature's laws regarding birth and death" (962-963). Chaudhuri's lucubrations on decadence continue in his last book in English, *Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse*, published in 1997, his centenary year. Within two years he is dead, but his apocalyptic vision will remain relevant as long as there are empires, even if they do not own up to being so.

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