
PORTRAYAL OF SOCIO-CULTURAL ETHOS OF INDIA IN CHAUDHURI'S WRITINGS

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Nirad C. Chaudhuri's 'The Autobiography of An Unknown Indian, is an immensely erudite analysis of his own attitude against the background of the Hindu ethos. It is full of superfluous descriptions, which contribute little to the evolution of his Indian heritage and unscrupulously exhibits his fondness for the evolution of his erudition, lacks in the warmth of personal touch. It displays Chaudhuri's lack of openness and vision and want of understanding Indian culture and way of life. The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian deals subjectively with Chaudhuri's destroyed and anglicized version of Indian history and culture from the Aryan conquest down to his own age.

Chaudhuri is biased to his Indian heritage and unscrupulously exhibits his fondness for the European way of life. Indeed, he wrote his Autobiography not for Indian readers but for academic circles in the west under whose influence he grew up and to whom he owed all his intellectual and academic attainments. Chaudhuri unnecessarily glorifies the British rule and its influence on India: In this connection, C.P. Varghese points out: "The essential difference between Nehru and Chaudhuri is that, Nehru even when he is subjective does not interpret history to suit his fancy or to justify any pet notion or prejudice, whereas Chaudhuri, while professing to be objective and detached, is in fact subjective. Besides, Chaudhuri practices knowingly or unknowingly, a kind of suppression, a suggestive falsie in his treatment of history.

Chaudhuri cannot imagine of an integrated India. He unduly highlights the rich and varied group consciousness and ignores the Indian consciousness. According to him a Hindu is not a Musalman, a Musalman is not a Hindu, and a Sikh is neither a Hindu nor a Musalman. The true definition of a Hindu in contemporary India is that, he is a non-Muslim and that of a Muslim that his is a non-Hindu.

Chaudhuri denigrates the role of Mahatma Gandhi in the freedom movement and his influence in post-independent India. To him Mahatma was 'a faddist', a man with a bee in his bonnet. Gandhi according to him did nothing to uproot the British rule from India. He attempts to show that the seeds of destruction of British rule lay elsewhere. According to Chaudhuri,

"The Mahatma brought about the simplification and transformation of the nationalism of his country, and by doing so; he was able to convert it into mass movement."

Hindu nationality, according to Chaudhuri, is characterized by xenophobia and exclusiveness. In a forthright condemnation of the common people's attitude to Gandhism, Chaudhuri writes

"In truth and in the sphere of politics, the people of India, taken in the mass and including the intelligentsia, never accepted Gandhism as Mahatma Gandhi understood it: They accepted only their own version of Gandhism and made it serve their own ends. When it went against their inclinations and interests, which always were retrograde, they rejected it as completely as they rejected the civilization of the west and of ancient India. Towards the end of his life Mahatma Gandhi seemed to have become suddenly aware of this fact, of the repudiation by his countrymen. That disillusionment made him wish for death, which came with merciful swiftness from the pistol the sacred weapon of Indian nationalism of a Hindu fanatic. I speak of merciful swiftness, because,

if he had lived, he would have sufficient tortures, infinitely more cruel and excruciating than death. For, the real assassin at large was not a single individual, nor a group of conspirators, nor even a reactionary minority of his people, it was an entire geographical environment, a society, a tradition acting in unison and arrayed as a colossal, nescient murderous force against his principles and teachings."

About Nehru Government, Chaudhuri feels that India under the Nehru government was like 'castles in Spain resting on kitchens, if not sewers. He anticipates that this unnatural government, with the power of an Anglicized Indian would disappear with Nehru's death. But his assumption did not prove to be correct. The dictatorship of Nehru dynasty continued with short interruptions, which were like the 'accidentals in a musical composition. The normal key was quickly restored.

Chaudhuri did not believe in Indira Gandhi's candidature for the Prime Minister's post in India, after Nehru's death. In this context he writes:

"It's restoration as intended by those who brought in the new government in 1967 was to install a figure-head to their government. Instead, it produced the opposite result. In making Indira Gandhi, the swift and gracious daughter of Nehru, Prime Minister of India, they caught a Tartar. The position brought about a transformation in Mrs. Gandhi's character paralleled only by the promising Ivan Romanov's becoming Ivan the Terrible. The Indian Boyars were routed."

Chaudhuri assesses Mrs. Indira Gandhi's personality as:

"Mrs. Gandhi's sole pre-occupation was to remain in office and in power by fooling the Hydra-headed opposition to her in a faction-ridden political world. This made her resort to such unscrupulous yet impudent maneuvers that she was murdered by agents of the fanatical Akali Sikhs. The inevitable consequences of the disappearance of personal rule in Indian political life have been seen to be ruled by a faction of an opportunistic combination of many factions."

Chaudhuri strongly feels that, the present government in India is dominantly the government by politicians from the Deccan. The north as a whole is the opposition today. This has brought about an ideological division in the government of India. In this context, Chaudhuri says:

"The north, standing for Hindu nationalism. and the south, for what is represented as secular and liberal government. This distinction has in turn made the government in office a replica, of British government in India in its last three decades, and the politicians of North India a contemporary Indian National Congress. So, just as in the last decades of British rule, Indian politics was a contest between British rule and the nationalists; at present it is an opposition between a government in office which is exactly like the British government in India and an opposition which is the old Congress in its latest form."

'The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian' is not merely the life of history of an Indian citizen, but of the whole nation. It is a record of India's literacy, social, political, religious, educational and cultural history in the present times.

The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian concentrates more on political events than the social or cultural or religious ones. It gives priority to politics over things. That is why it refers elaborately to the passive resistance of 1919, the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930, the Self-Government or Home Rule, the role of Congress, the First World War and politics in India, growth of nationalism, conspiratorial and revolutionary activities, Hindu-Muslim discord and riots, etc. Besides politics, it also reflects on the College and University life in Calcutta, the Urban life of Calcutta and its citizens, political decoities and assassinations and last of all, decadence and death of the old anti-thesis and synthesis,

The descriptions of the Durga Pooja are given at the end of the first book "My Ancestral Village"; reveal the whole background, rituals and scene of Durga Pooja, which is so common among the Bengali Hindus.

While talking about the dinginess of the people of Calcutta, Chaudhuri writes:

"To this morphological dinginess, the Bengali parts of Calcutta added the ebbs and flows of a functional dinginess: the first day, the second seasonal, and the third yearly. The Bengalis wash (i.e., rinse in plain un-soaped water) their cotton dhotis and saris at home everyday, and Bengalis of Calcutta are even more fond of this daily washing than other Bengalis. Actually, the afternoon toilet of Calcutta women passes under the name of 'washing' in thoroughbred circles. Thus, at least twice a day, and sometimes more often, an immense amount of washing has to Chaudhuri describes the Durga Pooja, as he saw it. The Image of the goddess was pleasant enough despite her ten arms and ten different weapons in each of the hands, despite the grimacing lion on which she stood, and despite the villainous demon who kneeled at her feet in a defiant posture. The goddess had the beaten-gold complexion, slanting eyes and the amygdaloidal facial outlines of the goddess of northern Buddhism. On her two sides were Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity and Saraswati, the goddess of learning, both of whom were of her type, except that Saraswati, following concentration had a dead-white complexion. Next to Lakshmi and Saraswati, which form the outermost wings of the group were the Elephant-headed God 'Ganesh' and the human Kartikeya on his peacock. Both the Gods were the sons of Durga. The elephant-headed one was the god of success, while the other supposed to be the general of the Hindu Pantheon.

All the figures had draperies, Kartikeya and Ganesh had actual dhotis and Chadars of the Bengali gentleman, but the goddess was dressed in tinsel coloured pith and gliding, laid on clay. The festival lasted for five days, of which the first, a day of the sixth phase of the moon, was only the prologue, and the last was the day of immersion and farewell. The regular worship was conducted for the middle three days. The immersion day was very important.

The day of regular worship began with a tune played the Indian oboe to the accompaniment of a simple pipe and timbrel and with the taking out of the sacrificial goats for feeding on jack fruit leaves by the boys. These animals were of special significance. The priest carried on some preliminary worship before the actual sacrifice had taken place.

The goat sacrifice was preceded by the beating of drums and cymbals and gongs and the hustle and bustle of the ladies of the house who were in silk saris. The goat being sacrificed, the priest offered some spurting blood to the pleasure and victory of Mother Durga. It went on like this; one goat followed another, till blood flowed in a trickle down the slope of the yard. It was nothing compared to Mathkala where the blood actually ran into tank.

The buffalo sacrifice was a grander affair. The heaviest and the sharpest buffaloes were chosen, not only was a new wooden sacrificial frame of impressive size erected, but also a special priest the festival was over, the image of Durga was taken out of the worship hall: carried in a procession to tank, and thrown into it." Thus, Nirad C. Chaudhuri had given a very clear and accurate picture of Durga Pooja as it is celebrated in Bengal.

In his 'The Continent of Circe, Chaudhuri not only rationalizes his prejudices but attempts to give them a historical veneer. It is not an objective analysis or appraisal of the history of a nation, but a formidable attack on all things Indian.

Chaudhuri is critical of those Indians who write in English for the benefit of westerners. He wanted them first to de-Indianize themselves substantially before writing novels in English. His implication here is that, the Indian novelist in English distorts the Image of India, for the ready consumption of his novel in the western market.

Chaudhuri is quite critical about the people belonging to the westernized and upper middle-class who have stepped into the shoes of British rulers. He feels that, they are so complete in their imitation of the

west, dependent on the English literature written by foreigners about their own country and are ignorant about the original sources of knowledge. The whole traditional and rural India remains outside their comprehension, because of their urban upbringing. The two things in India they ignore most are Hinduism and Agriculture.

Chaudhuri, while commenting on the use of English by Indians, condemns Jawaharlal Nehru for not defending English forcefully enough; and the Indian parents desiring to send their children to Anglo-Indian schools. Chaudhuri does not like the Anglo-Indians as a community and feels that Anglo-Indian teachers of Hindu children are like the Greek teachers who were employed by their Roman masters. These holy-castes do not know the English language and try to expose the weakness of their own Anglicism.

Chaudhuri divides the Anglicized Hindus into classes "Those who have been abroad and those who have not been". He divides them further on the basis of their means of livelihood and their vocations as: The officers of the Armed Forces; The Bureaucratic, Managerial and Professional elite; the technicians and the youth in schools and colleges. Chaudhuri finds the Anglicism of the first group as artificial and counterfeit, of the second group as less complete and less obvious.

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