



essay

In Memory of Nirad C Chaudhuri

by Fakrul Alam

You were silly like us: your gift survived it all:
physical decay.
Yourself; mad Ireland hurt you into poetry.
—W. H. Auden, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats"

NIRAD C. Chaudhuri died in Oxford on August 1, 1999. He was 101 years old, and had been recovering from a stroke he had suffered in July. According to Padu Mylvagum, the man who was looking after him recently, his death was peaceful, but the obituary notices that followed indicated that he would continue to be considered controversial after death as in life. The agency report in The Daily Star on August 3 thus described him "as a man born in the wrong country in the wrong century" and noted his eccentricities, such as walking to work in post-independence New Delhi in "a natty western suit and bowler hat" and meeting visitors at his English home in a dhoti. The report went on to remind us that Chaudhuri "was controversial from the very first words of his first book in English where he declared himself to be a 'British citizen' eternally grateful for British rule" and where he lamented that the English had "conferred subjecthood upon us, but withheld citizenship." India's President K. R. Narayan remembered Chaudhuri in a gracious and thoughtful message, but he too reminded us of his "dialectical fencing" and "intellectual sallies." In its editorial piece titled "Incomparable Nirad" on August 4, the Daily Star noted his achievements as "a mind exerciser of the superb kind" but reminded us regretfully of the controversy he had caused in our country a few years ago by his "light-hearted remark" about "so-called Bangladesh."

Certainly, Nirad C. Chaudhuri has always been a controversial figure in Bangladesh as well as West Bengal. While he does have a few admirers amidst us, and while his English and Bengali books are easily and always available in our bookshops, he is more often seen either as an embarrassment, like a mad relative one would prefer not to talk about, or an acquaintance who had been bitten by a pariah dog, had now turned rabid, and should be shot. A distinguished Bangladeshi Marxist I know, for example, refuses to talk about him in any forum. In my own university I have heard a colleague whose literary judgment I respect call him "a scoundrel." In Calcutta (how he would have hated the linguistic nationalism that would make the city Kolkata!) too I have met academics who would rather talk about Kipling or Forster but would deny that Chaudhuri deserved any discussion time.

That Chaudhuri should provoke such anger or dismissive silence in people who have read his works should come as no surprise to anyone who knows his pugnacious or intolerant moods (I have a feeling he himself would have jostled with them intellectually or ignored them contemptuously). But what I have often found distressing is the response of a lot of people who have heard of him as a Bengali boot-licker of the English or as a brown sahib or "God's last Englishman" only by hearsay. I have heard these people denounce him as an

opportunist or a tout without reading a line of his work. I have also encountered a thick fog of incomprehension when I tried to explain to such people that at the very least Chaudhuri should be read before being denounced.

A thorough reading of Chaudhuri's work could have quickly dispelled notions that he was a heretic dedicated to the spreading of Englishness at the expense of Bengali culture. In fact, it is not too much to say that Chaudhuri is intensely Bengali, the quintessential Bengali babu or bhadroluk. Far from being a renegade who had deserted his country and had been boasting till his death of the good life to be lived in England while denigrating Bengalis and their culture, he had spent a lifetime trying to show how the Bengalis had a renaissance comparable to other great cultures which had peaked majestically in Rabinranath Tagore. Far from admiring Englishmen uncritically, he had been pointing out loudly the decadence and enervation that he saw everywhere in Britain and had been lamenting till his death what he saw as a sickening spectacle of a nation which had stopped believing in itself. Far from being opposed to Indian nationalism and supportive of British imperialism throughout his life, he had gone through a nationalistic phase where he had even contemplated hurling a bomb at Englishman. In fact, he had condemned loudly "the blind and unintelligent hatred of India nationalism" displayed by the British towards the end of the Raj. And far from forgetting the land of his birth, he had been remembering it with love, and treasuring the beauty of the land and the rivers in his writing and conversation, till the end.

Indeed, Nirad C. Chaudhuri often wrote contemptuously of his hatred for the English people he had come across in India during British rule, for "the Englishman in the flesh" as he put it, while expressing his unqualified admiration for the greats of English history



In remembering Nirad C. Chaudhuri let us also not forget the considerable achievements of the writer of *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (1951), that brilliant record of the coming of age of an unusual, even if, unknown man, as well of a way of life. As a testament of an epoch in the sub-continent's history and as an analysis of the rise and decline of the Bengali renaissance and the impact of nationalism it probably has no rival. Also, the structure of the work and Chaudhuri's 'literary' prose are impressive in themselves. The sequel to *The Autobiography*, *Thy Hand Great Anarch*, (1987), is as weighty in its content as it is massive in size. *A Passage to England*, the record of a short visit to England and France in the nineteen-fifties is also a memorable work. The literary journalism collected in volumes such as *The East is East and the West is West* (1996) is worth treasuring. Finally, the outpourings of the books in Bengali throughout the nineties are remarkable not only as emanations from a nonagenarian (he would publish as a centurion too!), but also as evidence of the clarity of his thoughts and the sparkling quality of his mind.

and culture in everything he wrote.

On the other hand, in most of his writings he celebrated the glorydays of the Bengal renaissance when the region saw the birth of a culture that seemed for a while to produce literary masterpieces endlessly. Till his death, he was proud to be part of a people who had produced giants such as Modhusudhan, Bonkim, and Rabindranath.

How, then, to explain the hostility with which most Bengalis have greeted Chaudhuri's work? I can only offer a few reasons why he has generated such intensely negative feelings amongst his own people: a) Chaudhuri is a literary

gadfly, someone who loves an argument and delights in stinging (in a delightful documentary aired the night after he died on Doordarshan, where we get to see Chaudhuri in his "natty suit" as well as his starched dhoti and encounter his irrepressible, unforgettable personality, he declares gleefully that he uses his encounters with people as a kind of "intellectual target practice"). In other words, he is intentionally trying to annoy Bengalis and provoke them into wondering if they were doing the right thing by turning their faces away precipitously from the civilization which produced the Bengal renaissance, that is

to say western, particularly enlightenment values, in the name of nationalism or, in their enthusiasm for various isms; b) Chaudhuri is instinctively a poseur (but I am not using the word in a derogative manner), someone who takes a position which will attract attention, and sometimes even admiration, and thus the flamboyance: the bowler hats, the pin-striped suits, the display of his knowledge of fine wines, etc., as well as his dhoti! c) he is the kind of man who loves to ride his hobbyhorses and would rather be perceived as wacky and perverse than have us live with our unexamined assumptions and enthusiasms;

d) he has a fondness for paradoxes and a penchant for turning a thing on its head or seeing it from a unique angle which can be unsettling, especially if we think we are seeing things clearly and as a whole just because we have the majority with us; d) he has a fondness for the grand sweep of history and for theories of the rise and fall of civilizations which can be quite off-putting for people who would rather take their history in small doses, get their information in dribbles or soundbites, and feel smug about the progress of their civilization; e) he always knew that the end of the British empire was inevitable, but was convinced that independence was staged with indecent haste, with "mirth in funeral and dirge in marriage," f) he can be silly at times, no question, overdoing things, and showing off his learning and his suits, but then, as Auden perceived, don't we all! Besides, and also as Auden suggested of Yeats, the follies of his countrymen hurt him into print; g) he was endowed with the very untranslatable Bengali emotion of abhiman, and therefore turned away his eyes from a country which had not only consented to a kind of internal hemorrhaging which led to partition, but had also turned on him for pointing this out. Hence his refusal to return to Bengal except in his imagination, where it would remain unspoiled and a whole. Hence too his use of the epithet "so-called" in referring to Bangladesh. Finally, we have to acknowledge that as a race we tend to be thin-skinned, do not have a rich tradition of satire, and cannot stand too much criticism, and therefore respond intolerantly or dismissively when someone seems to take perverse delight in mocking us for our follies.

I do not, however, want to give the feeling that Nirad C. Chaudhuri did not have major shortcomings and that all the contradictions in him can be explained away. While his death should occasion many tributes, let us also re-

member his blindspots. For a Bangladeshi deconstructing Chaudhuri's work, for instance, a cause of dismay is the discovery that while he is professedly secular and quite objective in discussing Hindu-Muslim relationships, to him a 'Bengali' always seems to mean "the Hindu Bengali." Nowhere in his work does he seem to admit the Muslim Bengali into his consciousness or talk about the renaissance that they too witnessed in their lives and letters after being exposed to enlightenment culture. Another major problem with Chaudhuri is that he had stopped growing intellectually after a time. In-

deed, he never publicly acknowledged the very considerable achievements of post-Tagore Bengali culture. His dismissive silence on Kazi Nazrul Islam, Jibanananda Das, and the other great writers of Bengali modernism is surely a major failure in a man who professes to be a student of the era. We can even say that he appears to be trapped in a timezone that prevents his from taking in anything that happened in Bengal after the nineteen thirties--no doubt another reason for his choice of the epithet "so-called" in talking about Bangladesh.

But in the end we will surely have to acknowledge that Nirad C. Chaudhuri's immense gifts will survive his shortcomings and will make his blindspots seem relatively insignificant in the course of history. After all, who can deny the truth of his major thesis that the supreme achievements of modern Bengali culture would have been impossible without the coming of the introduction of their language and the exposure to enlightenment values in the nineteenth century? Surely, the state of our education now, enervated as it has been by the linguistic nationalism of the nineteen seventies and the eighties, underscores the importance of not turning away from English and compels us to recognize his claim that we ignore the language at our peril.

In remembering Nirad C. Chaudhuri let us also not forget the considerable achievements of the writer of *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (1951), that brilliant record of the coming of age of an unusual, even if, unknown man, as well of a way of life. As a testament of an epoch in the sub-continent's history and as an analysis of the rise and decline of the Bengali renaissance and the impact of nationalism it probably has no rival. Also, the structure of the work and Chaudhuri's 'literary' prose are impressive in themselves. The sequel to *The Autobiography*, *Thy Hand Great Anarch*, (1987), is as weighty in its content as it is massive in size. *A Passage to England*, the record of a short visit to England and France in the nineteen-fifties is also a memorable work. The literary journalism collected in volumes such as *The East is East and the West is West* (1996) is worth treasuring. Finally, the outpourings of the books in Bengali throughout the nineties are remarkable not only as emanations from a nonagenarian (he would publish as a centurion too!), but also as evidence of the clarity of his thoughts and the sparkling quality of his mind.

In his moving elegy in memory of W. B. Yeats, W. H. Auden remembers how controversial the Irish poet was, especially towards the end of his career, because of his antidemocratic political views. Auden insists nevertheless that Yeats be honoured and indicates that time will teach us to pardon him and other reactionary writers for 'writing well.' In life Nirad C. Chaudhuri, too, was mostly derided for holding what struck many as extreme and reactionary views. Hopefully, all of us will also learn to honour Chaudhuri for the sparkle of his writing and be able to see past his stance and recognize the extent and value of his genius.

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reflection

Nirad Chaudhuri: In Memoriam

by Syed Muhammad Hussain

NIRAD C. Chaudhuri, the famed author of *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (published in 1951) and several other equally controversial publications over the years since, passed away on 1 August, 1999 at Oxford. He died in the fullness of years being almost 102. But whether he realised the fullness of his undoubted potentials will perhaps be debated for quite sometime. Mr. Chaudhuri chose to die (if that would be an appropriate expression) when Britain basked in a spell of glorious sunshine with top temperature at 91 F., being the highest in the past twenty odd years. Nirad Chaudhuri was born Indian, in fact he was born at a quiet hamlet of Kishorganj, then East Bengal, now Bangladesh on 23 November, 1897, but he became British, by force of his conviction that "... all that was good and living within us was made, shaped and quickened by the same British rule" (in the dedication of the *Autobiography*...). His conviction over the years became a compulsion, if not an obsession, to become an Englishman, albeit of Indian origin, in thoughts, habits and civilised values, as he intensely believed that the

I had had the good fortune to have met Mr. Nirad Chaudhuri on a visit to Oxford in 1989, while I was serving in London. About an hour or so that I had spent with him at his semi-detached house in Oxford, was the most rewarding in terms of having an insight into his amazing personality. As a Bangladeshi, I thought I got a special treatment. At 92, his frail but sprightly presence made me wonder what should become of me 44 years hence. It is unfortunate that he could not visit his birthplace since his Calcutta days and he was very nostalgic about his homeland. He reminisced about his Delhi days with All India Radio, his close encounters with the Indian political leaders and his occasional remorse of not being given the recognition due to him both in his land of birth and in the country where he chose to live till his death.

British empire in India was even greater than that of Rome and passionately recognised that the heritage of Britain would remain the dominating cultural beacon in its former Empire. Not much has been written in terms of evaluating the real reasons that could lead a fairly ordinary rooted Indian to out-British the British, even when he did not see the British isles before he was 57 years of age. The power of books and writings and of information w! as indeed enormous in case of Nirad Chaudhuri's life long passion for England and what was more important, perhaps for him, was all things English. In 1954 he was invited by the British Council and the BBC on a 5-week visit to England. A Passage

to England, his book published 1959, contained a series of evocative essays about his experience as a well-read, sceptical brown man who sought-and found-"the reality of Timeless England" (Obituary in the Daily Telegraph, 2 Aug'99). Very few non-Englishmen could pen a more remarkable tribute to a colonial master. But in Nirad Chaudhuri it was the reality. I had had the good fortune to have met Mr. Nirad Chaudhuri on a visit to Oxford in 1989, while I was serving in London. About an hour or so that I had spent with him at his semi-detached house in Oxford, was the most rewarding in terms of having an insight into his amazing personality. As a Bangladeshi, I thought I

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towards the end of his monologue, he became alive to the fact that his guest had been in silence for all this while. I asked him whether 38 years after his *Autobiography* came out he still fully subscribed to his belief expressed in its dedication and whether he genuinely believed in his oftquoted statement that "Britain's abandonment of India in 1947 was the most shameful act in its history." I could have argued, as indeed many of his peers must have done, about the wind of freedom and independence that not only blew over India, but over many colonies in Asia and Africa. I could have asked him whether it was the action of British withdrawal from India per se or its timing, he was so ve-

hemently opposed to, Mr. Nirad Chaudhuri looked at me with a fixed stare through his powered glasses and responded "What do you think, young man? Another couple of decades would have led India to greater glory and that would have been a greater reward for the delayed fire! edom! But then we could only wish as mortals, it is for the! gods to shape the history of nations!" I came away lost in the thought of possible scenarios of various scale of time in human affairs. Nirad Chaudhuri was not a prolific writer, but he certainly continued to be a controversial one. His publications in English, include *The Continent of Circe*(1965), *Life of Max Mueller*(1974), *Clive of India*(1975), *Thy Hand, Great Anarch*(1988), and *Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse*(1997). Mr. Nirad Chaudhuri had a vision, apparently falling short of a global one, perhaps due to his obsession as an Anglophile. His one regret would be that he still remained a brown Englishman, despite his being true to what he believed in. The subcontinent would be the poorer though, with Nirad Chaudhuri's voice of protest for ever silenced.

The writer is a former Ambassador of Bangladesh