

essay

Recalling a well-known UnIndian

by Salahuddin Akbar

NIRAD Chaudhuri Dead — the heading in the Short Takes column of a local English Daily gave me quite a jolt. I began looking for other Dailies (Newspapers scrutiny is a little part of my job too). No, there was no such news in other newspapers. Our Newspapers owners also got in unison to take a posthumous act on him! His obituary, editorials on his death were believed to be ready-made drafts that needed only a few insertions to up-date the event, and his death news was to be carried by all the newspapers on their front page box columns. I didn't lose my credence in the treatment of our News Editors. Thus I consoled myself — "The news must have landed pretty late". A little while later when I excitedly drew the attention of the fact to one of my colleagues, he retorted with an insipid face: "What could be the fate for a snob who called so-called Bangladesh, Mahapundit (Great intellectual), anti-Mussalman man...!"

The following morning proved his fate to be a different altogether. Amidst all agency reports and editorials that appeared distinct to me was the condolence message by Indian President KR Narayan (some justice done to his similar name bearer writer R K Narayan) — the tersely written message should be a unique example of its kind. Since then true to our hearts content there has been going on a continuous write-up on Swargiya Nirad Babu that are appearing in our Newspapers.

For the past few years I had been giving a jocular comment on certain aspect of fate of my life. When any new acquaintance, on seeing my extra knowledge and my innate over enthusiasm over the geography, would ask me — How many times you've been to London (or America)? Or my old acquaintances

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living in those places on the similar account would heave a sigh: Oh, you should have come here 20 years ago!

I try to calm them down with a distant note of optimism: you know the encyclopedia of knowledge Nirad Chaudhuri knew all lanes and by-lanes, locations of all the places of interests over there in his teens and twenties, and when he first made his voyage to London, he was 57!

I would try to reassure them with a sardonic smile. I see my fate of journey running parallel to Nirad Babu! In my care — probably being on LPR at 57 (if the govt. doesn't drag it to 60) I'll meet the same fate which at least give me one thing to boast of — drawing a reference to Nirad Chaudhuri!

However until my recent effort and critical observation of his writings, my interest and reading of Nirad Chaudhuri was like most of us. Hardly seen his books and dismissed him instantly. While it is usually acknowledged Nirad Chaudhuri was widely misunderstood and mostly a misread person; his significance has been increasing steadily. As a towering figure (contrary to his diminutive figure — no more than 5 feet)

he stand as one of the remarkable products of the encounter between India and European culture.

But he was self-consciously a Bengali who later described himself as an example of the "Survival of the unfittest", for he was a sickly child and remained in poor health for a long time. Yet his twelve hours study and making notes everyday made his encyclopedic knowledge created anecdotes, gossips and speculations. At a party Narad was offered Sherry. Just to be sure if it was worth drinking he wanted to know what kind of Sherry it was. Then he asked one of his sons who were also brought in there, to taste it and tell him exactly. The 13-year old lad took a sip, rolled it about his tongue and after a thoughtful pause he replied, "Must be a Oloroso 1947." True or contrived but this anecdote can convince others about his own statement that he lived in London with the alluring idea of getting excellent vintage wine. Mr AKM Jalauddin, our former Ambassador to Nepal, once showed me a book that carried an autograph of Nirad Chaudhuri. Mr. Jalal was developing Parkinson disease and was trying a treatment in London where

he had the chance to drop in and meet Nirad Chaudhuri who gave him an half an hour lecture on the nature and treatment of Parkinson disease.

Being mostly vilified by critics, a ban on him by the government, then only a grudging recognition for his scholarship, getting his readers flummoxed — all combined together to get him denied the honour he deserved. Some historians justify that Persian invader Nadir Shah had some reasons to invade India as he was invited and betrayed by the last Mughal Emperor. A modest Nirad Babu too had his reasons to turn immodest and rude to his relatives — thus finding him settled in Oxford in 1970 where he reported to have cultivated an extra-western style of dress and life to match the outlook he propagated in his books — an extraordinary compound of acute intelligence, learning, egocentricity, and dotiness.

Although views have been various on The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian (1951), yet the remarkably the historical value of the book, equally remarkable is the account of his experience of his being caught up in the Bengali version of the nationalist move-

ment, his candour that may condone his abrasive tongue. So his dedication of his book ought not to catch one by surprise although somehow it does — "to the memory of the British empire in India... all that was good and living within us made, shaped and quickened by the same British rule." The very dedication courted controversy and I assume a large portion of our intellectuals and readers have not read beyond the inscription, or even into its hints of mockery and mischief. With an extra effort and avoidance of fixed idea and prejudice against him — they would not miss the tender evocation of Nirad Babu's village childhood and the account of his intellectual growth and finally the magisterial conclusion that can somehow give solace now to his mourners. Being born into a family that belonged to Brahma samaj his outlook received a formative influence by an idealisation of Bengali intelligentsia of the later part 19th century and the first decade of this century. For such period they absorbed British culture and in 1905 began to repudiate the imperial rule which they served and which in turn did protect them.

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Most of his life Nirad Chaudhuri remained predominantly well-known for his darting energy, flowing erudition, flaunted elegance, a poseur, fond of velvet jackets, vintage wines and patrician ideas. But that kind of view and dogmatic opinion about him was changing in recent years. To many of his critics and towards their scathing remarks and unjust denouncement of his writings by certain section of our readers Nirad Chaudhuri replied: "When people say nasty things about my books without really understanding what I have written, I feel like a father who sees a drukard make an obscene pass at his daughter. I want to chastise him." Finding out his books, (afresh or dusty!) from the book shelves or borrowing them, reading, re-reading him and thus forming our opinions in the best possible accuracy without bias would be a simple tribute to perhaps the greatest reader with encyclopedic knowledge and the scholar extra ordinary of his century.

The writer is an official of the External Publicity Wing of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

opinion

Rivers and Reason

by Pulapre Balakrishnan

FOR some time now, Ms. Arundhati Roy has written and spoken on the singular theme of development. She has proposed that the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP) must be subjected to a credible review during which time all work must cease. She has argued that the oft-painted picture of the over-stretched Indian state struggling ceaselessly and against all odds to eradicate poverty and deprivation is the very obverse of the reality, and she has queried the model wherein the government charts the destiny of this country.

The original conception of the SSP is in deep waters. It is not just that it is of human interest, what with the displacement that it must cause when it comes to full fruition, as it were. On the contrary, there are severe doubts about its economic value per se, quite independently of the environmental implications. Even as the project outlay from public funds is immense, the expected outcomes are uncertain. Of course, this nature of the relation between outlay and outcome is not unique to the SSP. It is after all the stuff of enterprise. And it is precisely from this vantage point that the demand for a fresh review of the project not only makes eminently good sense, it is also timely if one objects to throwing good money after bad. Indeed, it is of a crop of the utterly mundane arguments for good governance. I use "good governance" in a sense far re-

moved from its use in agreements between national governments and the international lending agencies. In these encounters, good governance is confined to the maintenance of certain targets for macro-economic indicators. This would hardly do when it comes to democracy where the process by which decisions are arrived at — the essence of governance — is of paramount interest.

With the dam, there can be no quarrel over so reasonable a proposal as a review while building has come to a halt. After all, there were studies by independent persons of the economic aspects of the Bhakra Nangal project. How is the SSP any different? Indeed it is such a review that would be in the spirit of scientific inquiry rather than some oracular vision that sees, as if in a trance, large dams as "the temples of modern India". Surely, modernity comes with at least a little mundaneness? If we are not happy with the World Bank-appointed, though independent, Commission's negative verdict on the project, let us have the Government of India appoint an independent commission comprising professionals and persons in public life. And if we are to maximise the chances for good decisions to emerge through disinterested advice, it would be a shame if non-Indians are kept out on principle, if principle could ever be made to extend to such exclusion. At a much earlier stage of the Indian republic, we had had Le Corbus-

ier design Chandigarh and Nicky Kaldor advise the Planning Commission. I have gone out of my way to say this for I was recently astounded to hear the argument, if one it is, that the Narmada activists "take foreign money". We have not allowed such squeamishness to dampen our enthusiasm for expatriate Indian academics bringing 'home' international prizes.

A cost-benefit analysis is the professional economists' answer to the complement of questions posed by projects such as the SSP. They would also be the first to caution against treating the exercise as a magic bullet. There are problems of valuation of the tangible ones themselves, leave alone the intangible costs and benefits. However, one can hardly avoid going through this at a minimum, and making the results public. For a Government to refuse to accede to this demand is unacceptable as governance and not credible as a signal of the extent of professionalism involved. For not only are the benefits uncertain, even in a world of certainty there are, after all, competing uses of the moneys. This is the notion of economic cost, the principle underlying the somewhat hyped, but nevertheless useful, idea of economic value added currently swishing over the international corporate world. In a setting far removed from the Narmada valley, we see yet another game involving gov-

ernments and people playing out. The only difference is that there is a more upfront appearance of the profits involved. On the banks of the Chaliyar river at Mavoor in Kozhikode, a public agitation of varying intensity has been going on for over three decades against the pollution caused by the Grasim Industries' plant. This originated in 1958 when the Kerala Government signed an agreement with the management, including for raw materials made over almost free. The implications of the agreement for the original inhabitants of the forest parallel those of the forest policy of the colonial government of Malabar. Statistics on resource use are mind-boggling too, such as the estimates of the volume of water used daily by the plant in relation to that used by the townspeople of Kozhikode. And mention has not even been made of the consequences for the rural population strung out along the river. It is not a matter of struggling for some quaint "way of life".

Some have had kith and kin who have actually lost life itself. A figure of over 200 dead from cancer or respiratory ailment due to pollutant discharge in the Mavoor and Vazhakkad panchayats is mentioned. This is difficult to verify let alone establishing beyond doubt. However, even if we settle for half the estimate, it would be an unacceptable price to pay for the untrammelled pursuit of private profit. The Kerala

Government has stonewalled all representation on behalf of the people of the Chaliyar basin. It is perhaps unknown that the Chaliyar Samara Samiti, constituted largely by citizens who are not beneficiaries of the plant and campaigning for the closure of the Grasim unit at Mavoor, has called for the rehabilitation of workers prior to the provision of compensation for the victims of pollution. Of course, even so conservative a discourse as Welfare Economics allows for gainers to compensating the losers. It would be ironical to term the victims of a long drawn-out environmental disaster "gainers", but say that we do and we find that these are more like the wretched of the earth with no wherewithal to compensate anyone. Thus, if the factory were to be closed, the workers would have to be compensated from public funds. It is unlikely that, when informed, the people of Kerala would object to such an arrangement. However, the details of the scheme must recognise that it cannot be deemed just that individuals possess rights in perpetuity to profits and wages from an economic activity that is injurious to one's fellow citizens. To speak of red herring from the Chaliyar would be black humour considering that there is little life left in the river, but 'red herring' abounds in the knee-jerk responses to the suggestion that there be an open debate on the question.

Actually, to propose the textbook

version of cost-benefit analysis is perhaps overly generous in a context where private profits are involved. A cost-benefit analysis is usually recommended for proposed public projects. At Mavoor, for over 40 years we have seen the failure of the government regulatory environment apart from its privileging, even excluding the capitalists, of the rights of one set of players over that of the other. It is really too late for a cost-benefit analysis! Nothing short of a review of all aspects, especially the damage done to the livelihood and habitat of the excluded, will do. During this time production must be stayed by public order. If we are to participate in the modernist project of modernity then we had better bring along with ourselves the mundane box of tools that are the checks and balances to backward rule.

Low credibility attaches itself to a politics where the state is supremely unaccountable. There is something farcical yet in the electoral drill that yields only the repeated capture of the state apparatus in turn by rival parties. Someone somewhere saw authentic politics as "the public actions of a free people". Some of the mobilisation against developmental adventurism and narrowly partisan governance such as we see in the Narmada Valley and at Mavoor respectively answers this description. Slowly, it seems we are damming the river of our reason.

poems

Tribute to a Friend

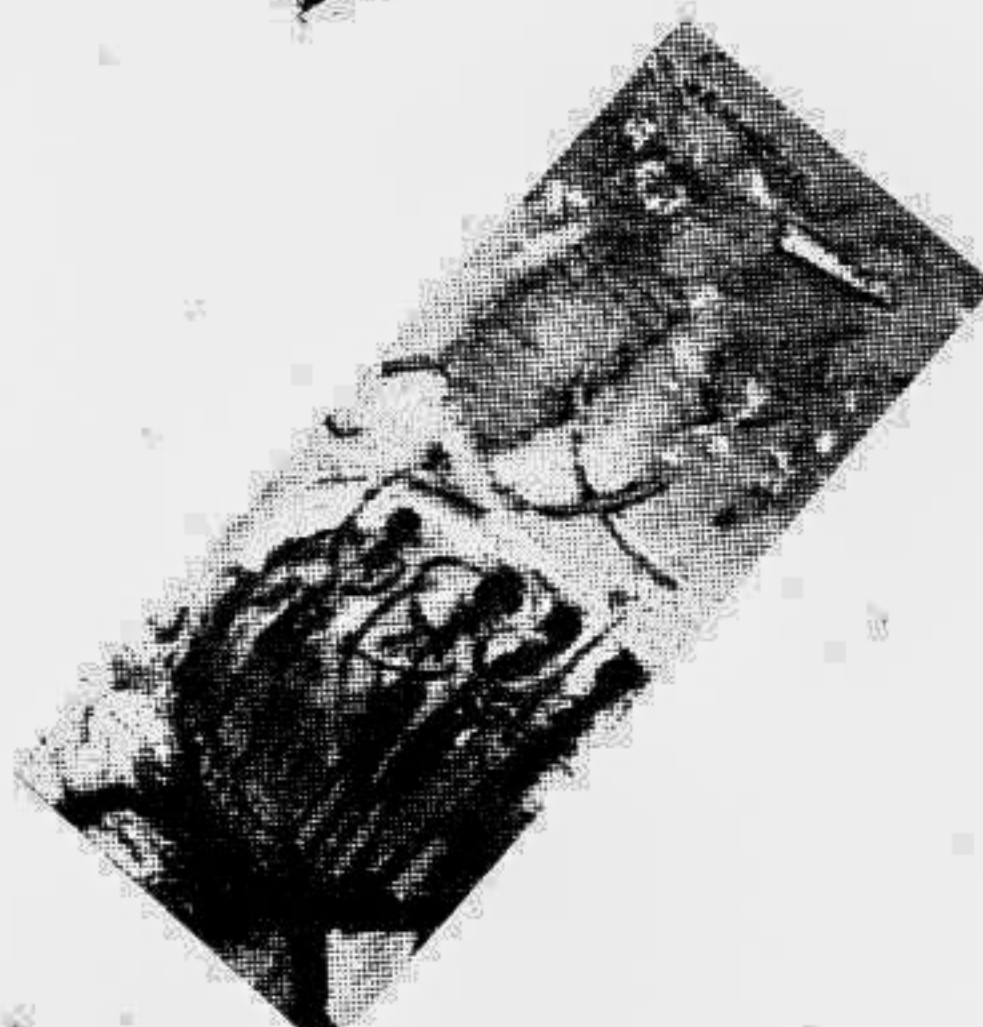
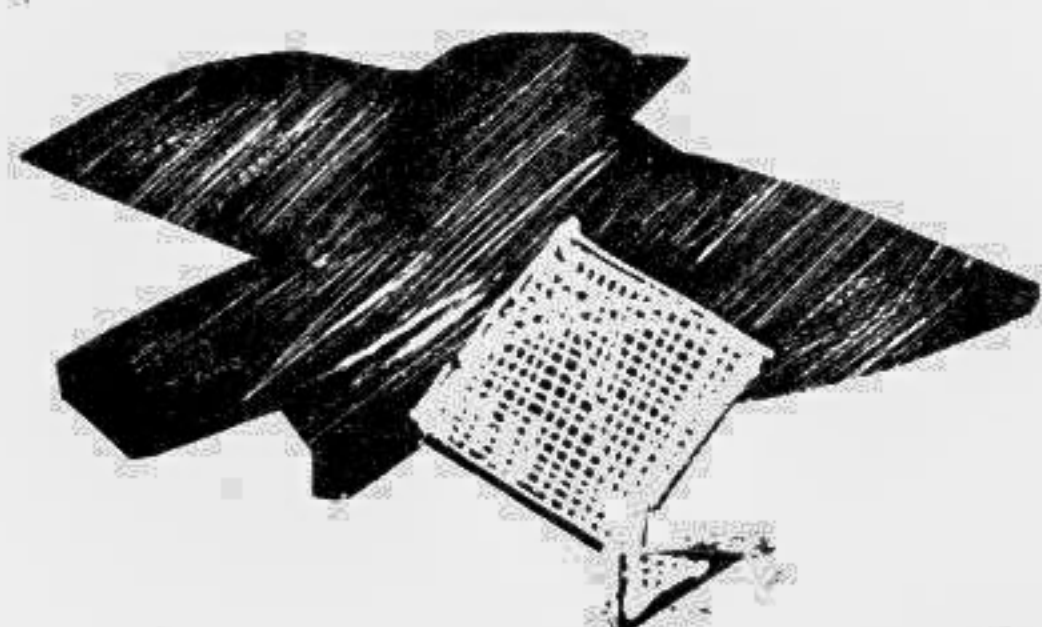
by Sabrina Islam

[In memory of a friend, Shawkat Ali, who passed away in the early hours of 12th August 1999]

I bet you thought this morning
"This is the last sunrise and sunset I will see
With this monster inside
Eating away my share of
The beauty around me."

But dear friend, God fooled you,
As a special gift he sent
Two Sunrises and two Sunsets!
The last solar eclipse of the millennium, for you.

Only to make the day more memorable,
more cherished
So that we can all say
See what a day
For Shawkat to go away!



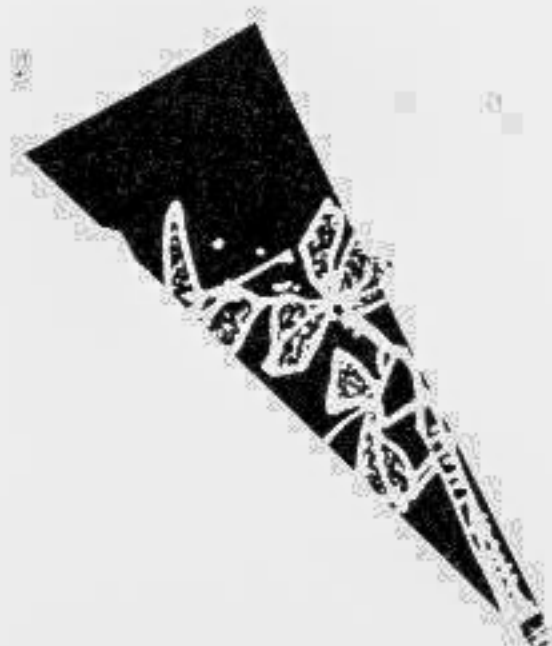
From you we learnt the art of living
To hold in our palms each moment
Like a liquid jewel
To live every moment like it's the last
And to truly feel
Life is beautiful.

I Will Not Say Remember Me

by Sikander Abu Jafar

I will not say remember me
On a special day of the year
coming to my grave
with the stale smell of a
handful of picked up flowers
in my reminiscence
to close the tearful eyes
I will not say remember me.

One day the heart-felt pain, I know,



wipes out in the heart
New lightning flashes
again in the night-blind eyes
I will therefore not say
the words which sound like the weeping
in failure
I am not the fragrance of the nocturnal-
flowers
I will not be finished
even with the departure of night,
Like a storm
I will not blow up in my hands
the forceful life
I am entangled with the stream of life
in thousands of its bindings
I am scattered among the ageless
human's
endless endeavour to win the death
I am deep into the eternal life's
ambrosia
oozing out of the frenzy of humming
bees
I will therefore not say —
I will not say remember me.

Translated by Tito Chowdhury
(My tributes to poet Sikander Abu Jafar
on the auspicious occasion of his 24th
death anniversary.— Translator)