



## INDIAN HISTORY AND CIVILIZATION IN NIRAD C. CHAUDHURI'S *A PASSAGE TO ENGLAND*

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### ABSTRACT

*Nirad C. Chaudhuri, the most controversial writer of India, is a product of Indian Renaissance, which according to him is "a synthesis of the values of the East and the West." (186) An uncompromising intellectual and rationalist, he has aroused a good deal of controversy by expressing his odd and eccentric theories on race and religion. Nurtured in an anglicised environment, Chaudhuri had a predilection for Western thought and literature from his early boyhood. Everything Western fascinated him and, hence, he emerges as an inveterate anglophile in his writings. Endowed with "the emotion of scholarship," Chaudhuri affect pedantry and his books and articles are overloaded with references and French and Latin quotation. However, he is a conscious stylist, who shows meticulous care in polishing and refining his style.*

**Key words:** History, Culture, Society, India and England.

### INTRODUCTION

Chaudhuri started his career as a writer in 1951 with the publication of *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*. In it, he describes the conditions in which an Indian grew to manhood in the early decades of the twentieth century. It is on account of his idiosyncratic theories and attitudes towards Indian history." (Preface, IX) It is dedicated "to the memory of the British Empire in India." It basically differs from Mahatma Gandhi's *The Story of My Experiments With Truth* and Pt. Nehru's *An Autobiography*. Mahatma Gandhi's and Pt. Nehru's autobiographies are concerned with the development of human personality and are suffused with abiding personal interest. The social, political and other important events are described



only in relation to their influence on human souls. They do not contain anything superfluous and are pregnant with frankness, intimacy, and the warmth of personal touch.

Nirad C. Chaudhuri is one of the greatest intellectuals and writers in modern India. Summing up his place in literature K.R.S Iyengar remarks:

*We all caveats have been made, however, Nirad Chaudhuri remains the Grand Solitary, the mainster of a process style that has after a fascinating spidery quality, a writer and a thinker and a universal Momus who stands apart from the muddy mainstream. His great merit as intellectual is that he isn't ever too laxy to avoid doing his own thinking or too timid to hesitate to give outspoken expression to his views. Above all, he has the supreme faith of the moral man in an amoral (if not immoral) society to make the great categorical affirmation. "Whatever clever people might say in defence of unscrupulousness in politics, and about its success there is some power in the universe which sees to it that such cynicism does not pay, and that nothing but what is inherently right even succeeds."*

A prolific and versatile writer, Chaudhuri has written, besides a large number of essays and articles, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian, Thy Hand, Great Monarch both autobiographies, Intellectual in India, The Continent of Circe, A Passage to England, A Travelogue, To Live or not to Live and Hinduism*. As a writer, Chaudhuri is the most controversial due to his works is rare intellectual brilliance, subtle irony and originality both in thoughts and expression.

Chaudhuri's *A Passage to England* is a series of impressions about his visit to Britain in 1955. His five weeks visit to England, he had intensely longed to see, since his boyhood, occasioned the writing of his book. According to Chaudhuri it records the

*"sensations (to be carefully distinguished from emotions) of what I experienced." He did not consult diary or notes for writing A Passage to England. He deftly used "the process recalling the sensations in tranquility."*

After reading *A Passage to a England* a dispassionate reader is inclined to think that Chaudhuri's love for Europe is "as pathological as his hate" for India. He fails to realize that he is comparing two absolutely dissimilar countries and their people by applying the norms and standards of one to the study of the other. Moreover, he confuses the England of the past with that of the present, and by comparing the England of the past with the India of the present and vice-versa, he fails to achieve the goal he set before him right in the beginning of the book- that of setting the Timeless England against the Timeless India. He writes: "What



my senses were dealing with and striving hard to grasp was the reality I would call Timeless England, which I was seeing for the first time and which I was inevitably led to set against the timeless India in which I had been steeped all my life.” Had Chaudhuri stuck to his original plan, he might have been able to convey through *A Passage to England* “a little of the beauty of the permanence and anti-thesis of India and England.” Indeed, it is an eloquent expression of Chaudhuri’s boundless love for Anglicism. He has blind reverence for the English way of life. He fails to observe even the prominent faults and blemishes of the English character. C. Paul Verghese writes in this connection:

*“Apart from the impropriety of comparing two absolutely dissimilar countries and their peoples, Chaudhuri makes the very serious mistake of confusing the England of past with that of the present and of comparing the England of the past with the India of the present as well as that of the past... Chaudhuri writes from the point of view of his temperamental alienation from India and our people. But the temperament is not universal, not even widely distributed; Chaudhuri can escape from the community, but most other Indians can only escape into it. To forget this is to be wholly subjective, wholly self-righteous. And it is this self-righteous tone of the book that is more objectionable than his commendatory judgements and sweeping generalizations.”*

Chaudhuri also compares the public behaviour of English people with that of Indians. He intentionally but shamelessly tries to whitewash the inhuman and offensive behaviour of English people towards India by praising highly their geniality and kindness. Indians do not distinguish between private and public affairs. Indians do not distinguish between private and public affairs. Indians demonstrate more heartiness and geniality in public intercourse than in private relations. Indians are noisy by nature. Englishmen love silence. Englishmen are used to keep their position in the world. In Indian society a man is not recognized by his individual worth but by what his designation makes him.

Indians have an inordinate passion for money. Englishmen are undemonstrative to the attraction of money. In monetary transactions Englishmen believe in honesty, smoothness and regularity. In Indian society “the willingness to pay decreases at the capacity to pay increases.” Commercial honesty is conspicuous by its absence in Indian society. Englishmen deliberately spend money in a planned manner of the good things of life. Indians feel pleasure in hoarding money. Even when they spend it, they have no planned and deliberate manner.

Chaudhuri’s main concern has been to describe Timeless England. He admires the British parliamentary form of democracy. He found that the “Welfare state was a reality” in England. In India there is no welfare state. The Welfare state in England “is a state of the English



conscience rather than of the English economy.” The existence of the welfare state in England “made me take a roseate view of their contemporary existence and future.”

Englishmen are falling back on their historic civilization to regain happiness which is vanishing from modern life. Their historic civilization is steady and cheerful in situations which are full of disappointments and anxieties.

Thus Chaudhuri enjoyed phenomenal success as a writer and thinker. He went to an England which valued tradition and sanity but the decline of values and empire disillusioned him in England. If he has an oddity in Nehru’s India, he became a relic in England-the loss of empire and the ravages of high-tax socialism had transformed England into a very different island from the England that Chaudhuri idolized.

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