



# NIRAD C. CHAUDHURI AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND ITS SOCIO CULTURAL ESSENCE

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## ABSTRACT

Autobiography is one's own account of their life. A formal book-length autobiography might range from the personal writings done during life that were not necessarily meant for publication (such as letters, diaries, journals, memoirs, and reminiscences). Formal autobiographies provide a unique form of biographical truth: a life that has been changed by memory, complete with all of memory's conscious and unconscious omissions and distortions. An autobiography is only "a sort of life" because of this, according to novelist Graham Greene, who adopted this statement as the subtitle for his own autobiography in 1971.

## KEYWORDS

AUTOBIOGRAPHY, CONTEMPORARY HISTORY, MANHOOD, NATIONALISM, SOCIAL LIFE

The autobiography of Chaudhuri goes beyond the bounds of the personal narrative and transforms into a history of the Bengali race and its interactions with "other races," such as the Muslim and the British. Instead of painting an isolated figure, Chaudhuri seeks to situate him among the historical and cultural influences that have shaped his culture. To be more specific, Chaudhuri states in the introduction that he sought to depict the tale of a civilisation against a difficult environment, a fight that was inevitably entwined with the future of British rule in India. His primary goal was therefore historical, and because he wrote the report honestly and accurately to the best of his ability, his objective in writing it became mixed with the hope that it would be considered as a contribution to modern

history (2005: 326). The majority of Indian critics have analysed, assessed, and critically analysed The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian.

Because the 'Unknown' Indian turns out to be an incredibly odd Indian, The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian stands out as one of the most extraordinary examples of this genre in Indian English writing (1984: 86). The circumstances under which an Indian developed into a man in the early years of this century are described in this book. It demonstrates Chaudhuri's broad scholarly interests as well as his bravery and determination. Because he disregarded the conventional notion that an autobiography is "the story of one's life, written by oneself," it differs from the autobiographies of Gandhi, Nehru, and Prakash Tandon. In contrast to the conventional viewpoint, it doesn't reflect his personality. It does not thoroughly detail Chaudhuri's life. The goal of Chaudhuri's book is not to showcase all of the elements of his personality. However, this book's overarching goal can be historical.

Chapter "Enter Nationalism" of Chaudhuri's book recounts his experiences during the Swadeshi Movement in what is now Bangladesh's Eastern Bengal region. He recalls that Lord Curzon, the Governor General of British India, once visited Mymensingh and discussed the division of Bengal, which the locals did not warmly receive. He took this opportunity to make a caustic remark on the Bengalees' double standards. He claimed that whereas Bengalis were fervently in favour of nullifying the division in 1905, they were unequivocally in favour of it in 1947. He will never forget how Bengalis felt on the first anniversary of the Bengal partition. A man came

to their home that day bearing a bundle of Rakhis, which are a type of cotton strip tied around the wrist as a sign of brotherhood. Additionally, Chaudhuri highlights how enthusiastic educated people of the day were about the background of modern political movements. The beliefs of Burke and Mill, as well as those of Gladstone and Lincoln, inspired and had an impact on them. The ideology of Rousseau and Mazzini also emotionally awoke them. The leaders of the American Revolution, Italy's Unification hero Garibaldi, and the Irish Nationalists all provided ideas for political activity that inspired the younger age as a whole.

"The Social Life of Calcutta" is the focus of the following chapter. Since he moved to Calcutta in his early teens, it had a significant impact on how his personality developed. Due to the concentration of the industrial establishment there during the British Raj, Calcutta rose to prominence. It was crucial for the communication of the shipping transports through its port from a navigational perspective. Additionally, the extensive hinterland in its vicinity was utilised for the production of profitable crops including jute, tea, and coal. The cultures of the East and the West came together there. From this point on, English schooling also began. As a result, a middle-class group with an English education first appeared in Calcutta and later led the rest of the subcontinent. As a result, Calcutta was designated the nation of India's cultural centre. Despite having a political interest, he avoided political gatherings. His city life was so self-centred that he never felt the need to attend any of the Indian National Congress meetings held in Calcutta in 1917, 1920, or 1928. In his memoirs, he writes that he only ever had a brief glimpse of Surendranath Bannerjea at the entrance to Ripon College but never heard him deliver his renowned oration.

The movements in pre-partition India are covered in the chapter "Political Movements and Crises." Chaudhuri seeks to provide a thorough explanation of the British exodus from India. He believed that since he had firsthand knowledge of the circumstance, he owed it to others to leave a record of it. He thinks that from 1921 and 1947, there was a lot of political energy and activity, and the period came to a dramatic conclusion that was crucial for both world history and politics. The result of many people's contributions was the Indian National Movement. Congress, the major political party, served as the negotiating representative, but the Indian population as a

whole served as the executive body. To the fullest extent possible, they were influenced by militant nationalists, revolutionaries, Gandhi Satyagrahis and struggles, Khilafatists, Communists, the INA, peasant organisations, Sikhs through their Gurdwara Reform Movement, etc. The majority of the men and women who took part in the Indian national movement were just regular people from all socioeconomic strata and regions of the nation. We witness them being executed by firing squad or hanging from a scaffold, being imprisoned, and having their property taken away, all for the same goal: the abolition of British control and the independence of the nation to which they belonged.

The viewpoint of Chaudhuri about Bengali literature and culture between 1921 and 1930 is the subject of the following chapter. According to Chaudhuri, human civilization progresses through three cyclical phases: ascent, peak, and decay. Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay (1876–1938), two of Bengal's best writers, were at the height of their creative powers during this period, thus he shares the same sentiments about Bengali literature. Since the apex has already been reached, Chaudhuri believes that no further advancement in this subject is anticipated. He was not drawn to the writings of the new generation. He described the writings produced after Tagore at the period as "crude and shallow." The Bengalees achieved the fullness of human existence through the connection of life and literature, which was only made possible by a "free and abundant play of emotion, feeling, and imagination." In Bengal, the library culture first emerged.

The next chapter discusses the anti-British revolutionary movements that began in 1905 and persisted until 1934. Although it was centred on Bengal, its echoes could also be heard in a few other British-Indian provinces, including Bombay and Punjab.

In a clear explanation, Chaudhuri explains why he opposes political killing. He uses an illustration to support his opinions about militarism. He claims that in 1929, he had a conversation with a soldier who had served in Mesopotamia with the Indian army's 41 Dogra Regiment. He displayed a hand injury he sustained while stumbling out of his trench to save his British opponent. In response, Chaudhuri shouted that he might have ended up losing his life. He was informed by the soldier that it was his obligation as a surviving soldier to aid his colleague in times of need. He compared them

to "possessed men," who from the start of their teens formed an anti-British attitude and remained vengeful over the years. They only needed to acquire weapons and bombs before they could begin the murder of an Englishman. From 1930 on, Chaudhuri detested Bengali girls' participation in the revolutionary movement. According to Chaudhuri, the Bengalis gave the Chittagong episode an excessive amount of praise. According to him, Bengali influence in Indian National politics started to wane after 1920 and almost completely vanished by 1930, save for this "terrorism." Bengalees hence like exalting this incident.

Nirad C. Chaudhuri observes the beginning of independence from his personal experience in a different chapter. He, too, attests to the 1946 and 1947 mass massacres of Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus against one another. He also thinks that the political figures who caused much of the mayhem that accompanied the Partition could not have predicted such a bloodbath. It was also true that they were powerless to stop it because the circumstances were beyond their control.

The "Torch of the Indian Renaissance" (Autobiography, 200), which primarily relates to the "Bengal Renaissance," is another topic Chaudhuri addresses. A strong enthusiasm for the transformation of their society and religion awakened the educated elite group during this time. Italia's Renaissance and the Indian Renaissance, which began in Bengal, are frequently contrasted. Scholars from the past and the present have frequently argued about whether doing so made sense from a variety of perspectives, including social, political, and particularly cultural ones. David Kopf equated the renaissance with a social and cultural "revitalization" process that marked a note of liberation from certain historical eras or cultures. He continues by saying that it is relevant to all cultures and historical eras. The renaissance element was present in Bengal in the 19th century and from the 14th to the 17th century, according to Bengali historian Tapan Raychaudhuri. Many equate the Bengal Renaissance to the heyday of the European Renaissance since it later swept throughout all of India.

Chaudhuri addresses the religious reformations of this era in his memoirs as well. He too affirms the ongoing theological disputes that began when Rammohan Roy settled in Calcutta in 1814 and persisted till the end of the century. He also highlights the Hindu counter-reformation groups

that emerged about 1860 and the 1828 founding of the Brahma Samaj by Roy. The heightened theological struggle between the factions throughout the course of the following 40 years, from 1860 to 1900, was well-reported by Chaudhuri. Chaudhuri makes a statement about a popular trend at the time: the endeavour to rationalise every taboo and habit associated with Hinduism. "At times, even the then-new science of bacteriology was mentioned. It was alleged that a Hindu's pigtail served simply as an electromagnetic coil and that the reason he took a dip in the Ganges was because an unnamed European (preferably German) scientist had shown that the water in the Ganges instantly eradicated microorganisms. Aware of this mindset, Chaudhuri quotes Bankim Chandra Chatterji and claims that, while being a devout Hindu, Chatterji discouraged such interpretations.

Regarding his own family, it was neither pantheism nor monotheism, according to Chaudhuri. It would appear that part of his family's beliefs were New Hindu in nature. We previously looked into Ramkrishna Paramhansa's beliefs as a supporter of Hindu revivalism and discovered that he believed both routes to be legitimate. It relied on how well the person could reflect.

Additionally, Chaudhuri describes his family's religious activities. Many households in those days strongly upheld their religious rituals. He mentions Vivekananda, claiming that he placed great emphasis on the necessity of a tight regimen, daily exercise, and a structured daily schedule. He continues by saying that although his family was particularly committed to Brahmoism, as he grew older, he morally embraced many of the New Hindu beliefs. But as he grew older, he lost all faith in religion and experienced a spiritual crisis because it looked like he had nothing to replace this world with. His autobiography makes it clear that the main elements of the Bengal Renaissance, particularly the socio-religious reformation in all spheres of society, had an influence on his work. He centred his attention on the social context's current religious conditions and recorded some of the Young Bengal's peculiarly progressive ideas. Michael Madhusudan Dutt was one of the heroes of Bengali literature in his eyes, and he had a lot of sympathy for his somewhat unfortunate life. He also admired Bankim Chandra Chatterji, who was the first writer in India to stir up nationalist sentiment.

The moral teachings of Brahmoism and modern Hinduism, according to Chaudhuri, were not only legitimate but also effective. He asserted that the fifty years between 1860 and 1910, which were dominated by the moral ideals of Brahmo and new Hinduism, may have been the only time in the last two hundred years of the history of the Hindu middle class during which it demonstrated greater involvement in public and private affairs, attained greater happiness in family and personal life, enjoyed greater fulfilment of cultural aspirations, and contributed greater creativity in every field.

The author paints a detailed portrait of a middle-class Bengali family in Calcutta. He claims that the residences in the middle class were compact, sometimes measuring just 25 square feet. He gave an explanation of Calcutta's social scene. Although the sanitation service of the Calcutta municipality was extremely effective, he criticises the absence of civic sense among the city's residents. By six in the morning, the roads and dustbins had been cleaned. However, from half past six to three in the afternoon, domestic helpers and others dumped their trash on the streets. Waste goods accumulated in a heap as a result. In-depth and unique observations made by Chaudhuri about Calcutta's social life during the British Raj have the potential to spark both literary discussions and academic research on the development of sociopolitical and cultural events on both sides of Bengal.

According to Chaudhuri, the social gatherings that are prevalent in large cities are typically those that are ingrained in our customs. They are usually imposed on us via blood and marriage. The most typical rites are marriage and burial. In today's society, reciprocal visiting and socialising among family and friends is essentially non-existent. He personally thought it was unpleasant and made one question their identity when interested and intrusive relatives came to visit.

Chaudhuri endeavoured to explore not only Bengali society but also all of Indian society in relation to himself in his autobiography. As a result, he occasionally switches between describing his own life and the history of his nation. Chaudhuri has given an intimate portrait of the Bengali household, the many social gatherings, and their social life while recounting his own life. In other words, the book accurately portrays the entirety of Bengali culture. It is undeniable that Chaudhuri's training and past as a journalist have shaped the way he views and communicates, and the more sensational and

hard-hitting the reality, the better for him. As a result, Chaudhuri observes even the most routine event or the most banal and everyday home activity from a viewpoint that differs from our own.

Regarding Chaudhuri's perspectives on Indian social life, the critics' opinions are incredibly varied. His "onslaught on Hindu faith, Indian tradition, culture, and history" is praised by detractors as "katharsis," or "self-therapy," for a country that is desperately in need of its own painful reality. His followers are astounded by the apparent conviction in his tone, the expansive phases of his style, and the "impressive osmosis of his erudition." On the other hand, some of his detractors are quite antagonistic to his viewpoints and perceive him as an eccentric, narcissistic megalomaniac. Without a question, Chaudhuri's criticism of the Indian social system is scathing. Despite his assertion that he has "liberated his soul from Circe's grasp," he is very sensitive to both Bengali and Indian culture.