



## **AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN UNKNOWN INDIAN: A CRITIQUE OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Nirad C. Chaudhuri has always been accused by the critics for being defensive for the ways of the Britishers that they used during the British rule in India. This accusation has damaged his reputation as a literary writer in India. However, some other critics see the things from a wider perspective, and therefore, do not hesitate in releasing Chaudhuri from this accusation. These critics give their view that Chaudhuri's criticism of Indian social life emerges from his predilection for Western social life. Thus, in his autobiography, the author describes his personal experiences in detail which shaped his personality in a particular manner. It is an acknowledged fact that the personality of an individual depends on one's heredity and environment. Both the factors significantly affect one's attitude, intellectual set-up, and physique. The personality of an individual is likely to grow when he interacts with his environment. This personal interaction is what makes all his experiences unique. In his autobiography, he aptly portrays the picture of contemporary society. However, he narrates his life story of personal events, but his point-of-view is very objective as these events explicitly depict the actual image of contemporary society. Therefore, the present research paper attempts to deal with the depiction of contemporary society in Chaudhuri's Autobiography of an Unknown Indian.*

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## Introduction

Nirad Chandra Chaudhuri (1897-1999) was born in a small town named Kishorganj of East Bengal in pre-independence India. He has made a special niche for himself among other literary giants such as R. K. Narayan, Kamala Das and Mulk Raj Anand in the field of autobiography. His first book *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, published in 1951, made him famous in the whole literary and intellectual field. Chaudhuri decided to write down incidents and events which he had seen with his own eyes or had the first hand experience of those events. Therefore, he started writing his past experiences in the form of autobiography. In the words of Ian Jack:

Chaudhuri's power as a describer speaks for itself in the pages that follow and needs no elaboration; he is a fascinating, ground level witness and expositor of a vanished Indian way of life and of what British imperialism, then at its height, meant to its humble and not-so-humble subjects. The word "courage," however, deserves some context. In this book, Chaudhuri is courageous in two ways: in his literary ambition and in the open declaration of his political and historical beliefs. (AUI vi)

By reading this autobiography, the reader comes to know the poverty of the country, and infatuation of Indian people for England which they thought as a symbol of prosperity as each and every educated young man of India wanted to go and study in England. Thus, England has been a dream world for the author also and that influenced his sensibility since the beginning as he himself describes, "England evoked by imagination and enjoyed emotionally, has been as great an influence on me as any of the three places sensibly experienced" (AUI 1). On the contrary, his hometown, Kishoreganj, had nothing significant in comparison to England. He compares both:

Kishorganj, my birth place, I have called a country town, but this description, I am afraid will call up wholly wrong associations. The place had nothing of the English country town about it, if I am to judge by the illustrations I have seen and the description I have read, these being my only sources of knowledge about England, since I have never been there, nor in fact anywhere outside my own country. (AUI 3)

On the other hand, his home town Kishoreganj was only a normal specimen of its class with a collection of tin-and-mat huts or sheds, comprising courts, offices, schools, shops and residential dwellings, which British administration had raised up in the green and brown spaces of East Bengal for their own use. The description of his home town explicitly presents the picture of urban India at that time, and unfortunately, it was not different in any manner from rural India. Depicting the poverty-stricken living style of this town, he informs that the villagers used to drink water from the same river where they took bath along with the other animals like cow and elephant. They had to live in squalid conditions; moths, ants and centipedes were their constant companions. In rainy season they had to deal with flies, while in winter, mosquitoes made their life troublesome, and they did not have any preventive measures for such conditions. Whenever the children got the insect-bite, the only remedy they could get was a mixture of mustard oil and slaked lime which was worse than a disease in itself. They had to live in such unhygienic conditions that resulted in the disease like Cholera which was very frequent visitor in their life. Writing about Cholera, he says: "It was not by flowers alone that the season were marked for us at Kishoreganj. There was another visitor both at the beginning and end of the cold weather, but mostly at the beginning ... that being one of the regular sights of the cholera season" (AUI 22).

Among other problems of Indian society, the author describes one of the most severe problems that prevailed throughout Indian subcontinent i.e. the population explosion, which is becoming more and more dangerous day by day. It is so because population explosion also becomes the sole cause of many other challenges in Indian society such as lack of food, hospital facilities and jobs, and consequently the people have to live in very disappointing conditions. Gradually, this problem becomes even worse. The author too contemplates about this problem when he faces a huge crowd during the annual fair in his town. He says that the over population of a country gives birth to the problem of sanitation and many others. He observes that the problem of sanitation is one of other several problems in over-crowded cities throughout India in general and in the city like Calcutta in particular. The sewage system of these cities does not suffice the need of over population, and in the rainy season, the situation becomes worse. Further, due to the bad sewage system, the water is excessively blocked in many places, and becomes the cause of many diseases.

Further, the author also discusses the problem of gender-bias in the society. He is very conscious of all the problems and difficulties that a woman has to face in Indian society. When the matter of the status of women comes in context of the Indian society, it is considered no better than that of a mere object. They have no right to speak or do anything according to their own choice. They have always been exploited in the name of the pride of family or in the name of tradition. Same is the case with the family of the author. They are very conscious of their 'Blue Blood.' For instance, as the author describes that when his aunt became a widow at an early age, a marriage proposal came from the richest landlord of the town but he was considered rather inferior in status by author's family. The author expresses his grandfather's reply to that proposal: "I would sooner cut her up and feed the fishes of the Brahmaputra with the pieces" (AUI 60). It clearly shows the authority of male members of the family over female counterparts. The females of the family have no decision-making power when it comes to the question of saving the honour of the clan. Moreover, women have to face the discrimination in Indian society due to their complexion, especially at the time of marriage. The complexion of girls is rigorously scrutinized by the people from the boy's side. Whether or not the marriage will take place, depends on the fact that the girl have not the fair complexion. It becomes very humiliating situation for the girls. Besides, the author describes a shocking and common practice in Bengal to rub the face of the girl with a wet towel in order to know whether the girl's complexion is naturally fair or the result of makeup. Therefore, it is unfortunate to know that the life of dark marriageable girls was not easy in Bengal as they always have to face public humiliation just because of their complexion.

One of the several problems of society that the author deals in his autobiography is class consciousness. The class consciousness is explicitly revealed by the author when he describes about the customs of his family. It is told that the author's family always avoided having meal with those families who were inferior to them in status. For instance, one day, a member of the family named Kamal Narayan had to go on a boat excursion along with the members of other family that was considered below their rank. He was very late in returning that evening. That day the whole family was apprehensive of the question whether Kamal would have compromised his honour in taking food with that family or not. When Kamal returned, he replied: "He had indeed been trapped into a vile conspiracy but was not such a fool as to yield" (AUI 61). The incident

shows how much they were conscious of their class consciousness. Unfortunately, these anecdotes were always told by the elder members to younger ones of the family with a lot of pride, and therefore, created such an effect on young ones as they think this kind of behavior was very appropriate, and it became the part of their personality. He notes that it is a way of conditioning and transferring this tradition of older generation to younger generation.

In addition to this, the author deals with false moral conventions that prevailed in contemporary society. He makes satirical comments on the false moral conventions of people in traditional Indian society, where the moral conduct of a person is completely regulated by the traditional norms of orthodox society irrespective of their rationality to the current situation. The author does not hesitate to call these conventions as weird superstitions because these traditional norms do not emerged out of true religion but are the result of blind adherence to some illogical commandments. The author narrates an unfortunate incident where a person had to suffer at the hands of society because of these orthodox moral commandments. One day, this person's cow was strangled to death by the same rope with which the cow was tied. Due to this, the man had to undergo a severe atonement because the society considered him responsible for the death of the cow. He had to wear sack cloth and had to drink the urine of a cow. Further, he had to fast for the whole day. Also, he had to live and sleep for three days in that same open place where the cow had died. Besides, he had the permission to eat only rice, and that also he had to beg from his neighbours. He had to fulfill one more condition: he had to beg for his alms in the manner of bellowing like an ox. To add insult to injury, no man was permitted to speak with him during this whole period of three days of atonement.

The next issue that the author deals in his autobiography is that of Hindu-Muslim strife, which was the most heated issue during the 1950s in the contemporary Indian society. The author narrates the incidents, how they had to leave their place in order to save themselves during this Hindu-Muslim Strife. Then he explains that the Britishers were not the sole reason behind this catastrophic conflict, though as rulers of the country, they profited by this conflict. According to the author, the seed of this conflict was hidden in the past which was sown long ago in the history when the Muslims invaded this country and vanquished the Hindu kings, and afterwards ruled for a long time. Therefore, according to the author, the enmity between Hindu and Muslim was present there since the beginning.

In his autobiography, Chaudhuri also gives special attention to the problem of unemployment in Indian society. It is because one of the several other problems that a youth has to face is that of unemployment. In our society, it is not an easy task for young men or women to get job of their choice without any reference or recommendation, no matter what qualifications he or she possesses. Same is the case with the author, as he himself describes his quest of getting a respectable job. In a typical Indian society, a young educated person gets no respect from the society if he does not have a job. His education and qualification do not count if he is not able to get a job. Parents send their children to the school with the sole purpose of making them able to fit for a job, and not for making them educated or a better person in the society. Therefore, Chaudhuri also leaves his hometown in search of a job.

In his autobiography, the author also talks about the violence of the rulers against the people participating in the movement of non cooperation. Violence meted out to the innocent Indians is one such horrible incident that presents the brutal face of the British rule. The author describes in detail that how he was occupied with the idea of Non-Cooperation Movement that was pioneered by Mahatma Gandhi. The chief function and theme of this movement was to withdraw any kind of cooperation with the British administration in India so that the British rule in India be paralyzed. In order to achieve this aim, the Indians were directed to resign from their jobs and leave their study so that they could take part in this movement. Mahatma Gandhi announced that if the movement had remained constant with the given directions, the British would have been forced to leave the country ultimately.

In his autobiography, the author also portrays the problem of strike in contemporary Indian society. It is one such problem that has afflicted Indian society to the core. The common people have to suffer a lot due to continuous strikes. The author describes how the strike once made his journey from his home town Kishorganj to Calcutta the most unpleasant one in his whole lifetime when he was going to Calcutta in order to get a job. He explains that due to the strike new railway line was closed, so he had to go to the old railway station which was far away nearly of seventeen miles. Further, he had to spend the whole night in a very low, dirty and cheap hotel where he was not given a proper bed to sleep in. There the bed sheet and the pillow were very dirty and full of smell of oil and grease. At last he had to pass the night lying on his own trunk that was placed on the mud floor. On another occasion, when Mahatma Gandhi called

for a general strike to demonstrate the hostility of Indian towards the British rule at the time of the visit of English Prince to India on 17 November 1921, a common man has to face the difficulties during the strike. He knew that the call for strike by Mahatma Gandhi will be followed strictly by the Indian, but all the government offices were opened, and therefore, the author, being a Government employee, had to go to his office. So, the author at first decided to go to his office on foot. When he reached the main street, he saw the Congress and Khilafat volunteers sitting down in the street. They were asking the people to return as the street was closed due to the strike. The thing that roused the author's disgust for those volunteers was their aggressive nature as they were brandishing their whips at people.

The author also talks about the problem of corruption in society which has been a challenge since independence to the current day. The Calcutta Corporation had been passed into Bengali hands in 1924 and the corruption in the government offices of Calcutta has crossed all limits, and therefore the common folk started pronouncing derogatory names for Calcutta Corporation like 'Calcutta corruption'. Once the author listened an anecdote from Amal Babu about the corruption and greed of the counselors of the corporation. One day, Amal Babu was climbing the stairs of the corporation building in order to go to his room. On the way, he came across an old man who was stooping on the stairs and looking both ways for something. When Amal Babu asked him what he was looking for, he replied that it was nothing except a two-anna coin which had slipped from his hand on stairs. But what he muttered further was a very realistic image of the corruption in the corporation by the officials. It was a satire on the functioning of the corporation: "According to the old man, they had corrupted even the stairs so far by their example that these would not bear the weight of those who used them without a bribe" (AUI ii 379). The situation was the worst in the office that not only the profiteers of cooperation but also the Nationalist workers of Calcutta started to think that the corporation was a gold mine from where they could get the consolation of their sacrifices during the time of revolution against the British rule. For instance, one day a renowned leader of Congress went to the chairman of the corporation, C.R. Das and asked, "Sir, we have lost everything for the country. Now that you are master of this place, may we not expect some recompense? After all, we have to live" (AUI ii 380). Consequently, he got a handsome contract for supplying boots to the Corporation. According to the author, the Calcutta Corporation deserved a place in Guinness Book of World

Records for its corruption as the contracts after contracts were being given to the contractors for various supplies. However, the supply was not being fulfilled; yet the money was being paid to the contractors.

To conclude, it can be said that Chaudhuri presents a dark picture of contemporary society but it is not appropriate to criticize him for the same as it is the moral responsibility of literary artist to present the actual image of society which he has observed through his own eyes. Therefore, Basavaraj S. Naicar openly supports the critical tone of Chaudhuri's autobiography on the basis that his criticism has emerged from his concern for the people who have to live with all these problems in Indian society. In Naicar's words, "The bitterness and anger are the obverse side of Chaudhuri's love and concern for his countrymen" (71). Thus, it can be aptly said that Chaudhuri gives an actual portrayal of contemporary society.

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