

A photograph of a person in mid-air, diving into a river. The person is wearing red shorts and is positioned horizontally in the upper left quadrant. To the right, a large, ancient stone structure with multiple columns and a tiered base is visible. The water is brownish and turbulent. The sky is a clear, pale blue. A semi-transparent light green box with a thin blue border is centered over the image, containing the title and author information.

**THE
AUTOBIOGRAPHY
OF AN UNKNOWN
INDIAN**

**NIRAD C.
CHAUDHURI**

**INTRODUCTION BY
IAN JACK**

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS
CLASSICS

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN UNKNOWN INDIAN

NIRAD C. CHAUDHURI (1897–1999) was born in the town of Kishorganj in East Bengal in the year of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. His first book, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, was published in 1951 and was followed by many others, including *The Continent of Circe*, for which he won the Duff Cooper Memorial Prize, and *Thy Hand Great Anarch!*, a second volume of memoirs. Chaudhuri moved to England in 1970. In 1992 Queen Elizabeth II conferred upon him the title of Honorary Commander of the British Empire.

IAN JACK began his career in journalism in Scotland in the 1960s. For many years he was a reporter, editor, feature writer, and foreign correspondent for the London *Sunday Times*, mainly in the Indian Subcontinent. He was cofounder and later editor of the *Independent on Sunday* and has edited *Granta* magazine since 1995.

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New York

This is a New York Review Book
Published by The New York Review of Books
1755 Broadway, New York, NY 10019, USA

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Chaudhuri, Nirad C., 1897–
The autobiography of an unknown Indian / Nirad C. Chaudhuri ;
introduction by Ian Jack.
p. cm.

Originally published: London : Macmillan, 1951.

ISBN 0-940322-82-X (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Chaudhuri, Nirad C., 1897–2. Bengal (India)—Civilization. 3.
India—Civilization—1765–1947. 4. Historians—India—Biography. I.
Title.

DS435.7.C5 A3 2001

954'.14031'092—dc21

2001004271

ISBN 0-940322-82-X

Cover photo: Raghbir Singh, *Man Diving and Swimmers, Banaras*, 1985 (detail)

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Cover design: Katy Homans

Book design by Lizzie Scott

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

1 0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

October 2001

www.nybooks.com

INTRODUCTION

NIRAD CHANDRA CHAUDHURI lived for a very long time and witnessed the decline of an empire—completely, the whole run of the clockface, from imperial high noon to postcolonial midnight. When he died, in Oxford, England, in August 1999, he was three months away from his 102nd birthday. He had published his last book only two years before.

I knew him during his last two decades, as many others knew him at that time, as a deeply mischievous and superbly entertaining egoist. It is impossible to exaggerate these aspects of his character, which are also fully present in his writing. The word “ego” held no shame or fear for him. As he sometimes said, it was the brute power of his ego that had driven him onwards and upwards. How else would he have lived so long and productively? His physique had nothing to do with it. He was always frail, with the bustling energy of a small bird, and never stood much more than five feet tall or weighed more than ninety-five pounds. His early circumstances were not promising. Birth and childhood in an obscure deltaic town in Bengal usually guaranteed the opposite of Western standards of longevity, nor did they offer any obvious route to a literary career in the English language. “I am a striking illustration of the survival of the unfittest,” Chaudhuri would say. “It comes from self-assertion through writing. Otherwise I should be dead, or living on a clerk’s pension in some foul Calcutta slum.” Instead, and quite late in an average life span, he became India’s most majestic and pungent writer of English prose, possibly the finest Indian writer of English in the whole of the twentieth century (as one of his obituarists claimed), and certainly the finest in the first three quarters of it—before the burst of Indian writing in English that followed the publication of Salman Rushdie’s

Midnight's Children. (This is setting aside the artfully simple fiction of R. K. Narayan, which Chaudhuri had no time for—an antagonism which was gently reciprocated by the almost equally long-lived South Indian novelist.)

The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian was Chaudhuri's first book and also his best. He wrote a dozen more: polemical histories and biographies, an account of his first visit to Britain (*A Passage to England*, 1959), and a second volume of autobiography (*Thy Hand Great Anarch!*, 1987). All of them have their brilliant rewards, but only in passages do they match the lively courage and descriptive strength of this book, in which many of his later themes are introduced.

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. When he began to write *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, in 1947, he had no models. The autobiographical form had almost no tradition in India and tended to be the preserve of the famous; only two other Indians of his era, Nehru and Gandhi, had tried it with any success. Chaudhuri was then quite genuinely an unknown Indian, living modestly in Delhi and knocking out scripts for All India Radio during its transition from British to Indian control. He was also suffering the crisis of male middle age. He was nearly fifty years old. He had wanted to be a historian. He considered himself a failure. He would die—quite soon, he thought—without any achievement apart from his children. Forty years later, in *Thy Hand Great Anarch!*, Chaudhuri describes how the idea for the book came to him:

It came in this manner. As I lay awake on in the night of May 4–5, 1947, an idea suddenly flashed into my mind. Why, instead of merely regretting the work of history you cannot write, I asked myself, do you not write the history you have passed through and seen enacted before your

eyes, and which would not call for research? The answer too was instantaneous: I will. I also decided to give it the form of an autobiography. Quietened by this decision I fell asleep. Fortunately, this idea was not nullified by the deplorable lack of energy which was habitual with me. The very next morning I sat down to my typewriter and drafted a few paragraphs.

The first pages took some time to write, but once Chaudhuri had fixed his “key and tonality” he was producing 2,500 words a day before and after his short two-hour shifts at the radio station. By the spring of 1949, the book was finished; Chaudhuri reckoned that the total number of days spent writing it came to nine months. He later wrote that this “exercise of will” was helped by the “intoxication” of recalling from half a century before his early life in East Bengal—a place he hadn’t seen for twenty years. But the book was also helped, or, more accurately, its mood somberly informed, by the large events that were shaking India while Chaudhuri sat before his typewriter and re-created his life from 1897 to 1921. The British Raj ended at midnight on August 14–15, 1947, when the Subcontinent was partitioned into an independent but shrunken India and a new state, Pakistan, the boundaries between them decided by the religious majority, Hindu or Muslim, within adjacent territories. East Bengal became the eastern wing of Pakistan (now Bangladesh), so that the Hindu Chaudhuri’s ancestral home suddenly lay in a foreign and predominantly Muslim country (he never went there again). With Partition there came waves of homeless refugees and savagery—mass murder, rioting, and looting, some of it in the streets of Delhi outside the writer’s window. Mahatma Gandhi, of whose followers Chaudhuri took a skeptical view, was assassinated in the city on January 30, 1948. And there sat Chaudhuri tapping away at his book as his country was convulsed and transformed, writing “with the consciousness of decay and destruction all around me.”

The turmoil of India in 1947–48 doesn’t wholly explain his theme of decay, however. Chaudhuri was an upper-caste Bengali, born the son of a lawyer in the town of Kishorganj in the district of Mymensingh in the year of Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee,

1897. The British had a longer and deeper and more socially complicated impact on Bengal than on any other part of India. Their first Indian capital, Calcutta, was located there; since the early years of steam navigation, their steamboats had paddled up and down the great delta formed by the Ganges and the Brahmaputra; coal mines were sunk and tea plantations established in the higher ground; out of the lower came the cash crops of indigo, opium, jute, and rice. A new kind of Indian arose: urban, professional or entrepreneurial, newspaper-reading, Anglophile, and almost invariably high-caste Hindu—the components of what has been called the first middle class in Asia. Out of this class, from the 1820s onwards, came religious and social reform movements and a cultural phenomenon known as the Bengali Renaissance, which produced painters, musicians, writers, and scholars. The first Indian novel was a Bengali novel; the first Indian scientists were Bengali scientists; the first Asian to win a Nobel Prize (Rabindranath Tagore) wrote in Bengali. Calcutta, which had been little more than a stockade at the beginning of the eighteenth century, grew to become the largest city in Asia by the end of the nineteenth. Bengalis could look in the mirror and consider themselves the most educated, sophisticated people in India—"the French of India"—as some of them still do.

But with education and aspiration came nationalist agitation, and the British reaction to it. Bengal was divided by the British into eastern (mainly Muslim) and western (mainly Hindu) provinces in 1905. The division, which prefigured the later partition of India and Pakistan, turned out to be temporary: Bengal was united again in 1911. But in 1912 the British moved their administrative headquarters to Delhi and Calcutta ceased to be a capital. As British power waned in India, so did Bengali enterprise; not because Bengalis were imperial lackeys—Bengal produced some of India's fiercest and most violent nationalists—but because the economic fortunes of Britain and Bengal were so intertwined and because they were both essentially Victorian societies, and past their peak. When the final partition came to Bengal in 1947, Calcutta lost its great riverine hinterland to the east, the home of so much jute and rice and of so many Hindu mansions, and never subsequently recovered. Bengal's decay, at least in Chaudhuri's view, became complete.

It is in his analysis of this history and its connection to the wider history of India that Chaudhuri is politically brave. *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* took some time to find a publisher in London: both Faber and Hamish Hamilton turned it down. When it was eventually published, by Macmillan in 1951, self-governing India was only four years old. Its new elite, in fact most of India, took the conventional nationalist and anticolonial view of history: India had been conquered by the British, ruthlessly exploited by them, cunningly ruled by them by the strategy of alienating its religious communities from each other ("divide and rule"), until a bitterly fought struggle for freedom eventually drove them out. The undeveloped and poor condition of India could be blamed squarely on imperialism; now that epoch was over, India could look forward to a future of freedom, equality, and prosperity.

Chaudhuri disagreed on almost every count. His arguments are provocative, and there is sometimes the underlying feeling of the scene in Monty Python's *Life of Brian* where a New Testament Palestinian asks rhetorically: "What have the Romans ever done for us?" ("Roads?" says a voice from the back of the crowd. "Schools?" says another. "Aqueducts?" wonders a third). But time has proved at least some of his prognostications right. "Gandhism" was indeed rejected by the "very people for whom it was intended"; India became a large industrial and military power, no more pacifist or spiritually directed than any other nation-state, a democracy certainly (which should never be forgotten), but prone to intercommunal rivalry and cruelty and political assassination. Political independence did not put a stop to Western influence, or the thirst for non-Indian things. Almost fifty years before Bill Gates became a recognizable name, sometimes almost a household god, in the further reaches of rural India, Chaudhuri wrote: "What Indians in the mass want is nationalism, which does not, however, preclude a wholesale and uncritical acceptance, or to be more accurate, crude imitation, of Western habits of living and economic technique." The sentiment is unremarkable now, but it was an early denial of the new and different road that idealists in India thought their country could take. Few people in India then welcomed his suggestion that—to put it much more crudely than he

does—the complex, underlying nature of India might ultimately bear more responsibility for the Indian condition than British imperialism. Or that the British quit out of their own weakness rather than Indian strength. The book's dedication to the British Empire (to which its Indian subjects owed "all that was good and living" within them) brought outrage in India, as Chaudhuri almost certainly knew it would (and perhaps helped make it a favorite book of a great opponent of Indian independence, Winston Churchill).

The shame of this was that it encouraged Chaudhuri in his later life to be a dedicated controversialist and tended to obscure his greatest gift, the intimate writing of his own history. In this book, a far corner of an old empire is made real, from the rare vantage point of the ruled rather than ruler. It pays testimony to the transforming power of a distant culture and, via Chaudhuri's abiding love of exactness, reveals the richness that lies in the everyday and the specific. In nonfiction, no other Indian writer had done this for twentieth-century India; the foreign writers who tried were hampered by all the usual obstacles to the outsider: ignorance, language, the comedy of the little understood, the distortions of the downward glance. Fiction was different. Stories that gave insight into India were published in Indian languages—Bengali, Hindi, Tamil, and so on—but they remained largely unknown outside their separate linguistic audiences. A friend of Chaudhuri's, the Bengali writer Bibhuti Banerji, wrote one of the most famous, *Pather Panchali*, about a village childhood. A few years after *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* was published, another Bengali, Satyajit Ray, took Banerji's story as the subject for his first film, the first great film to come out of India, the first to show what India was like. This book is of that film's stature, and, at its best, of the same humanity. V.S. Naipaul called it "the one great book to have come out of the Indo-English encounter."

Chaudhuri knew very few English people and had never seen England when he wrote *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*. He moved to Oxford from Delhi in 1970 at the age of seventy-three, and there, for the next twenty-nine years, cheerfully found evidence at the old empire's heart of a rich new seam of decay.

Once he told me at his Oxford flat: "I am what I am on account of British rule in India. And have I shown myself to be worthless? My kind of human being was created. Doesn't that show the nobility of the project?"

We were having lunch—roast beef prepared by his Bengali wife, Amiya. The Chaudhuris were far from rich, but a splendid effort had been made. Different glasses for the red and white wine, for the water, for the cognac. I gripped one of them by the bowl. A small Bengali hand, created far away in Kishorganj in 1897, reached across the table and slapped me on the wrist. Chaudhuri scowled. "Don't you know that one always grips a hock glass by the stem? What a nation of illiterate and unmannerly creatures Britain has become."

—IAN JACK