Introduction

In the year 1951, two very different autobiographies appeared in English. The first was *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, written by the Indian who is the subject of this book. The second was entitled *Speak, Memory*, and was written by the Russian author Vladmir Nabokov. It is unclear (and unlikely) that either writer knew of the other at the time. Both autobiographies were written in the fluent second tongue of their authors; both recounted childhoods from which they were subsequently exiled – Nabokov recollecting prerevolutionary St Petersburg in New York, Chaudhuri turn-of-the-century Bengal in New Delhi; both writers professed various versions of anti-populism, even anti-communism during their lives and cultivated a fondness for aristocracy and the forgotten charm of defunct empires.

This last point requires a qualification: Nabokov rued the demise of an empire he was very much part of (his grandfather had been the Minister for Justice under two Tsars[1]); Chaudhuri lamented the vanquishing of an empire which had ruled over him. Nabokov would have felt at home, racially and culturally, amongst the Tsarist elites who ruled the Russia he fondly remembers from his childhood; Chaudhuri, on the other hand, would not have been allowed to enter the 'European-only' clubs (such as the Bengal Club in Calcutta) which could be found in the urban centres of British India. When Chaudhuri finally visited England for the first time, at the age of fifty-seven, a child playing in the street tells him he's from Africa.

A great deal has been written about Nirad C. Chaudhuri. Serious intellectuals have called his memoirs 'one of the great books of the twentieth century', 'probably the greatest autobiography written in the English language in the twentieth century'[2]; others have called him a pseudo-sociologist, an Anglophile, a charlatan, a dog, a frustrated man, a tool of Empire, a sexually repressed Victorian, a self-hating Indian, a sexually repressed Edwardian, a mediocre stylist and a failed scholar. As a consequence, it should be stressed at the outset that this book is neither a celebration of Chaudhuri nor a condemnation of him. There are

already enough defenders of Empire today (both past and present) to render the task of vindicating Chaudhuri's love of British rule sadly superfluous. The Harvard historian Niall Ferguson has not only made a career out of repackaging imperialism as 'exported modernity' (my paraphrasing, not his) with a series of commercially successful books, but is now advising the British government how to teach this version of history in their high schools.[3] On the other hand, the negative aura around Nirad Chaudhuri's name, especially for many Indian readers, is still intense enough to render the task of further demonizing him equally superfluous.

Then why write, let alone read, a book on Nirad Chaudhuri? Not because of his main ideas – ideas which he reiterated tirelessly throughout his long life and which few progressively minded people will take very seriously: his immediate pessimism concerning all things Indian, his attempts to 'explain' various problems in Indian society with reference to climate or the Indian character or a three-thousand-year-old *Volkswanderung*, his views on sexuality and social class which grew increasingly conservative as time went on. Chaudhuri's originality as an intellectual thinker did not lie in these theories, many of which he acquired from reading Ibn Khaldun, Spengler, Benda, Gibbon and Pascal, but rather in the way he expressed them, in the kind of intellectual he became through the act of expressing them. An immense store of erudition, largely Western when displayed, an enormous underground lake of German philology, French biography and English letters fed the drawing-well of Chaudhuri's reference-peppered prose. In Chaudhuri we encounter a Bengali who has not simply read the biography of Napoleon, but also that of his valet; one who can describe the village communities and practices of Mymensingh in terms borrowed from classical Greek – *polis, nomos, metoikoi.* And hidden beneath all the references to Bernheim's *Lehrbuch* and Zola's *La Terre* lies the subaltern voice of Chaudhuri's East Bengali, speaking the language almost completely excluded from the *Autobiography*, a language not even conceded the tradesman's entrance of a footnote or a parenthesis.

A second reason to be interested in Chaudhuri is his presence in modern Indian literature. Almost every Indian writer and thinker of any significance has had something to say about Nirad C. Chaudhuri. Salman Rushdie praised the *Autobiography* as the 'masterpiece' of an 'erudite, contrary and mischievous presence'[4]; Khushwant Singh called him 'the most outstanding intellectual I had the privilege of befriending'.[5] Even an otherwise critical observer like the great novelist Mulk Raj Anand acknowledged the 'brilliant style' of an 'odd genius'.[6] Contemporary writers such as Pankaj Mishra and Amit Chaudhuri call him 'a connoisseur of cultures and civilisations' and an 'astonishing and intractable

writer'.[7] Poets such as Kaiser Haq have written of Chaudhuri's 'apocalyptic sensibility', literary critics such as Meenakshi Mukherjee have declared their 'special admiration' for Chaudhuri's transit between cultures,[8] whilst Harish Trivedi has acknowledged 'the crucial importance of Chaudhuri's hard-won style because it was the man himself'.[9] Historians and sociologists averse to his work grudgingly acknowledge the contours of his shore, even in passing it: Partha Chatterjee begins his *Present History of West Bengal* by distancing himself from Nirad Chaudhuri's 'decline of Bengal' thesis[10]; in his classic work *The Intimate Enemy*, Ashis Nandy castigates 'the Nirad C. Chaudhuris and the V. S. Naipauls' for being 'inverted modern gurus'[11]; at several points throughout his *Provincializing Europe*, Dipesh Chakrabarty uses Chaudhuri as an example of the semi-repressed 'colonial Victorian prejudices' lurking within Bengal's babu culture.[12] If we include the Indo-Caribbean figure of V. S. Naipaul in this category of Indian writers, then his oft-quoted description of the *Autobiography* as 'the one great book to come out of the Indo-British encounter' supplies the very apex of recognition, grudging or not.[13]

The third reason to return to Nirad Chaudhuri's work is that it illustrates, contributes to and undermines a series of ongoing debates both inside and outside postcolonial studies. As we rotate the multiply faceted crystal of Chaudhuri's persona under a number of spotlights – Islam, melancholy, the idea of the archive, the concept of Empire – a number of different implications flash out in several directions. Chaudhuri's various and at times conflicting responses to Muslim culture make us reflect not only on Edward Said's arguments concerning systematic misrepresentation of the Other, but also on Bakhtin's notion of a multiply-voiced self, and the extent to which the archive formed but also fractured Chaudhuri's notions of history and identity has implications for Bhabha's celebration of hybridity, not to mention Gauri Viswanathan's analysis of secularism and the colonial education system. The central role that an idea of loss plays in Chaudhuri's work (loss of British rule, loss of Bengal) contains within it some ramifications not just for the burgeoning field of 'Sadness studies' and the relationship between melancholy and identity, but also for the possibility of a profounder relationship between melancholy and political conservatism.

In many ways, this final point leads us to one of the questions which lie at the heart of this book: how does power convince people to love, respect and even defend cultures they don't belong to? When a Bengali intellectual, born in a village in the provinces of present-day Bangladesh towards the end of the nineteenth century, decides to see himself racially as a displaced European – what factors are involved in this process? Even allowing for Althusser's concept of 'overdetermination' – the simultaneity

of political/psychological/physical/economic factors in accounting for a phenomenon[14] – exactly how does this apparatus work, and how many partners are involved in its operation? One of the ironies of Turkish nationalism is that its foremost intellectual and architect, Ziya Gökalp, was a Kurd; a gifted writer and thinker who saw himself as a Turk, and whose positive essentialization and celebration of the Turkish race and Turkish culture was a central component of Atatürk's nation-building project, Gökalp's Kurdishness-in-denial offers an eerie comment on the internalization of ideology.[15] The enigma behind Chaudhuri's own insistence that he was more English than the English, in this respect, will be one of the basic questions of this book.

Chaudhuri was born in 1897 in a small town in East Bengal. His background was modest and provincial – his father was a *mukhtar* (a pleader who worked in a legal court), and certainly the earliest part of his childhood was spent in a rural, village setting. Visitors looking for the house today in Bangladesh will be disappointed – the ancestral home of Chaudhuri's childhood is gone, although the absence of any buildings in the surrounding area gives a realistic idea of how it would have looked around 1900: palm trees; ponds (*pukur*); rice fields; raised, people-dotted paths stretching out to and from the horizon. Chaudhuri and his family moved to Calcutta for his high school and university education (which he received at the famous Scottish Church College) but, after failing to attain his master's degree, he moved into a career in journalism. In the years that followed – right up until the age of forty-five – he would remain for the most part in Calcutta, editing several famous magazines and contributing to many more on a regular basis. During his time in Calcutta (the formative and most significant period of his life), he became friends with a number of famous Bengali writers: the poet Mohitlal Majumdari, the writer and journalist Pramatha Chaudhuri and the gifted fiction writer Bibhutibhushan Banerji, with whom he shared a house on Mirzapore Street. Chaudhuri, it is important to note, was a provincial intellectual moving in an urban environment he did not belong to (in the *Autobiography*, he details the kind of attitudes Calcuttans had towards East Bengalis). The point helps to illuminate the abiding sense of dislocation – both intellectual as well as geographical – he would feel throughout his life.

In 1942, after having worked for three years as a secretary to some of the foremost figures in the Indian nationalist movement, he took up a job with All India Radio and moved to Delhi. It was in Delhi, during the partition riots of 1947, that Chaudhuri began writing the memoirs that would bring him international fame. The point is a crucial one: when Chaudhuri finally received the attention he felt had been due to him, he was well

into his fifties. A dedication in the memoirs to the British Empire earned him hatred in his own country and – Chaudhuri's critics rightly note – a great deal of international esteem, particularly from a postwar British audience eager to have the massacres of Partition 'explained' to them as a consequence of decolonization. Further publications – most notably, *The Continent of Circe* – created an increasingly hostile environment for Chaudhuri, culminating in his decision (at the age of seventy-three) to leave India and permanently relocate to England. A house in Oxford was found for him, and he stayed there for the remaining thirty years of his long life.

Contexts

Scholars working on Chaudhuri often provide two contexts for his work. The first is the phenomenon referred to as the 'Bengal Renaissance', a period of time stretching from the early nineteenth century to the opening decades of the twentieth. Often seen uncritically by Western scholars as an extended phase of 'Western influence' upon Bengalis, a more accurate gesture would be to see the moment as a kind of space in which a variety of ideas and cultures – European, Hindu, Islamic – reacted with one another to produce something quite new. There is no doubt that the encounter with Western ideas – Newton, Locke, Carlyle – was a significant factor in this phenomenon, but it was certainly not the only one. Chaudhuri was born in the closing years of this period, and its most significant figures had a profound influence upon him. The assertive presence of Bankimchandra Chatterjee and his vehement criticisms of Bengal and Bengali character are definitely to be found in many of Chaudhuri's stances; Rammohan Roy's position as a cultural mediator and Indian corrector of English misrepresentations of India certainly has echoes in Chaudhuri's work. In addition to Roy, Chaudhuri's astonishing erudition is also reminiscent of figures such as the poet Michael Madhusudhan Dutt, whose classical proclivities anticipate Chaudhuri's own Graeco-Latin flourishes. Finally Tagore, and the faintly Oedipal relationship not only Chaudhuri but many Bengali intellectuals nursed towards the grand old man of Bengali letters, is a crucial component in any attempt to understand the kind of writer Chaudhuri was and the context he was writing in. The extent to which Chaudhuri identified himself with Tagore as a public figure, outcast by the Bengal he was devoted to, underlines the deeply ambivalent feelings (a mixture of Cassandra- and Judas-complexes) Chaudhuri would nurture towards his own Bengali identity.

Apart from chronology, two other things separated Chaudhuri from many of the figures affiliated with the 'Bengal Renaissance'. The first was

his admiration for the British – although poets such as Tagore were criticized for being politically tepid about the independence struggle, Bankimchandra and Sri Aurobindo were noted nationalists. Secondly, Chaudhuri operated most comfortably in English as his language of expression (his first book in Bengali would only come out in 1968). Although this is also true of a number of figures in nineteenth-century Bengal (Rammohan Roy is sometimes still called the father of Indian English, whilst Chaudhuri himself observes how poorly Aurobindo spoke Hindi and Bengali), Bankimchandra, Dutt and Tagore were undisputed masters of Bengali whose experiments in English rivalled nothing they produced in their mother tongue.

For this reason, Chaudhuri is sometimes placed in the context of what was once called 'Indo-Anglian' writers – the Indian writers of English who made their names around and after India's independence: R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand. All kinds of problems arise with this understandable emphasis on the linguistic kinship of texts such as *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* with works written by other Anglophone writers. In contrast to Narayan, Anand and Rao, Chaudhuri wrote no fiction. Nor did he share any of the political pro-Indian sympathies inherent in, for example, all three writers' profound admiration of Gandhi. The fact that the publication of Chaudhuri's *Autobiography* is seen as a landmark in the 'rebirth' of Indian writing in English,[16] appearing in the midst of other significant texts such as Anand's *Private Life of an Indian Prince* (1953) and Narayan's *Mr. Sampath* (1948), appears to be enough for some critics to place Chaudhuri alongside such substantially different writers.

One of the aims of this book, however, is to suggest a third, somewhat more international context for Chaudhuri – that of the 'native informant' or comprador thinker. The context is intended to be neither reductive nor rigorously definable, certainly not incontestable: the precise way Chaudhuri was a 'native informant' is far from clear. One vein of this book, however, will try to understand the significance of Chaudhuri's work in the presence of other writers and thinkers sometimes labelled comprador: Fouad Ajami (Lebanese), Alexander Crummell (African American), Ziya Gökalp (Kurdish/Turkish), He Qi and Hu Liyuan (Chinese), Ahmad S. Khalidi (Palestinian), Enrique Krauze (Mexican), V. S. Naipaul (Trinidadian/Indian), Azar Nafisi (Iranian), Richard Rodriguez (US/Mexican), Salman Rushdie (Indian), Mario Vargas Llosa (Peruvian) and Fareed Zakaria (Indian).[17] A negative essentialization of the 'native' culture concerned, a relentless cynicism towards any form of self-government, an admiration for foreign power and foreign cultures accompanied by an equally benign historical perspective on the

history of that foreign power's 'interventions' – such motifs run through the works of these thinkers. Hamid Dabashi notes the difference between the positive and negative versions of the diasporic intellectual – between what Malcolm X famously referred to as the 'House Negro' or 'native informer', and Edward Said's exilic intellectual, a 'locus of dissent at the heart of the empire'.[18] Chaudhuri provides an unusually interesting example of a cross between the two types.

The terms 'native informant' and 'comprador thinker' themselves overlap to some degree but are different enough to merit distinction. The word 'comprador' comes from the Portuguese for 'buyer' and originally signified an intermediary agent who worked between two cultures to facilitate exchange (Chinese merchants, for example, who worked with European traders and governments to manage colonial-era trade). 'Native informant', on the other hand, provides a more metaphorical version of this activity – the 'reliable' native who provides the colonizer with all of the necessary information about the target culture. *La Malinche* – the much-maligned interpreter/lover of the Spaniard Cortés, who translated for the conquistadores as they gradually took over the Aztec polities – is perhaps one of the earliest and most notorious examples of native informancy. Cortés's female interpreter suggests a link between epistemological and sexual intimacy with a culture, one which strengthens the already powerful allegation of betrayal. Unsurprisingly, in Western texts, the term was seen as neutral, even positive: as late as 1949, a high school teacher in a pedagogical journal could advocate the advantages of bringing in a Mexican 'native informant' to help the American class improve their Spanish.[19] From a critical perspective, however, the native informant has come to be seen as (in Malcolm X's words) a 'house Negro', one who stays loyal to his or her master and tells him what the 'field Negro' is up to. Most recently, postcolonial writers such as Bharati Mukherjee, Azar Nafisi and Elif Safak have all been accused, rightly or wrongly, of such a function. One of the aims of this book will be to understand the circumstances under which Chaudhuri was able to perform this role – and what repercussions there were for the rest of his work when he did.

Indian responses to British rule

Because the British Empire is one of the central themes in Chaudhuri's work, it might be useful to give a wider sense of how other Indian intellectuals responded to and wrote about the British presence in India. Although some of the more extreme moments of Chaudhuri's Anglophilia give the impression that he was unique amongst Indian thinkers (an impression he himself gladly cultivated), the truth about Indian responses to an Empire

which could be as brutal as it was innovative is complex – and as complex as a nation of three hundred million souls and forty major languages would suggest. Although British atrocities such as General Dyer's massacre of more than four hundred protesters in Amritsar produced largely uniform responses of outrage, there was little uniformity about what figures such as Tilak, Tagore, Bankimchandra and Keshub Chunder Sen thought of the British in general – or indeed, the best way their oppression should be confronted. Even within the mind of a single intellectual such as Tagore or Vivekananda, we can discern a sequence of different views at different times.

Popular responses to British rule and its increasing disfavour began to rise from the middle of the nineteenth century. For many Hindus, in particular, the British were seen as a spiritual enemy of Hinduism, and representations of the colonial power were often invoked within Hindu contexts using language from the Vedas and the Puranas. In most of the Congress party meetings and rallies of the early 1930s, for example, the relationship between India and Britain was cast in terms of the hero–villain couplet of the Hindu epics. The British were 'Ravan', the demon King of the *Ramayana* who tries to snatch away the wife of Ram.[20] Or they were 'Yavanas' or *mleccha*, both Sanskritic terms referring to non-Hindus. Congress leaders frequently referred to the British as cow-slaughterers[21] or even compared them (usually unfavourably) with the Moghuls. In 1931, in Mirzapur district, one Congress speaker said the English were even worse than Aurangzeb.[22] Others insisted that the British had taught the Muslims how to slaughter cows.[23] Although Iqbal had once quipped (half-ironically) that the British Empire was a 'Muhammadan Empire',[24] the association of the British with their colonial predecessors was one many Hindus were willing to make (later on, we shall see, Chaudhuri himself played with this idea). The popular invocation of Shivaji (the seventeenth-century Hindu warrior who fought against the Moghuls) in the Independence struggle encouraged this Moghulizing of the British in the popular Hindu mind. Organizations such as the Arya Samaj provided explicitly Vedic reasons for resisting the British – Vidya Vrat of Dehra Dun insisted the Vedas forbade the use of foreign cloth and the recognition of foreign kings.[25] The whole purpose of such populist discourses was to completely underline the alienness of British rule as a foreign entity.

As far as intellectual discourse went, the range of registers employed to describe British rule was somewhat more varied – and more nuanced. Rammohan Roy is probably the earliest figure of interest; writing more than fifty years before Chaudhuri was born, Rammohan was a gifted scholar and reformist. Well-versed in three religious

traditions – Sanskritic, Islamic and Christian – Roy was the first Indian scholar to most effectively formulate a definition of British imperialism as moral/spiritual self-betrayal. Committed to Empire as 'the guardian of our lives, property and religion',[26] Roy would exemplify the kind of Indian voice which would attempt to curb British rule from the inside – through constant appeal to its own precepts, morals and laws. This is physically evident in Roy's own biography – in the last years of his life, he travelled to England, bringing with him parliamentary recommendations for the improvement of government in India.[27] It was a trip which many Indian intellectuals took – Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Surendranath Banerjea, to name but two – and whose metaphorical significance and futility it would be easy to mock. Writing thirty years before the Indian Mutiny of 1857 (and Britain's brutal repression of it), Roy genuinely believed in the positive potential of the British presence in India to bring about an effective transformation of society. One of his very last texts, 'Remarks on the Settlement in India by Europeans' (1832), lists with almost comic objectivity the advantages and disadvantages of European settlement in India. Amongst the positives, Roy notes, lie the conversations Indians would have with Europeans, which 'would gradually deliver their [Indian] minds from the superstitions and prejudices which have subverted the great body of the Indian people'.[28] Such a hope was no naïve product of an uncritical optimism – in the list of various ills Europeans have brought to India, Roy was articulately aware of the arrogance, cruelty, ignorance and greed the English community displayed in India. And yet Roy believed (and Chaudhuri shared this with him) that deep down, beneath all the commercial profit and military reinforcements, there was a fundamental British *will* to change. One only had to push the right buttons in the machine, and it would happen: 'The mixed community of India ... so long as they are treated liberally, and governed in an Enlightened manner, will feel no disposition to cut off its connexion with England, which may be preserved with so much mutual benefit to both countries'.[29] Such positions would be far from uncommon as the nineteenth century progressed.

In the aftermath of the Indian Mutiny of 1857 and the violent measures brought in its wake, a growing desire for some form of self-government could be perceived across a wide spectrum of Indian intellectuals, from radicals to reformists. The most moderate of these were Indians who, like Roy, couched their urgent calls for reform within the language and sensibilities of the colonizing culture they were appealing to. The Indian Christian Keshub Chunder Sen, for example, writing in the final quarter of the nineteenth century, evokes a loyalty to Empire very similar to Chaudhuri in his call for progress:

Who can deny that Victoria is an instrument in the hands of Providence to elevate this degraded country in the scale of nations . . .

The more loyal we are, the more we shall advance with the aid of our rulers in the path of moral, social, and political reformation. India in her present fallen condition seems destined to sit at the feet of England for many long years, to learn Western art and science. And, on the other hand, behold England sits at the feet of hoary-headed India to study the ancient literature of this country.[30]

The idea of a mutual exchange of wisdom and science between East and West was far from new (Leibniz had proposed the same thing for Europe and China almost two hundred years earlier). The strikingly reactionary description of British rule as 'providential' is tempered, however, by the fact that the colonizer also has something to learn from the colonized in this equation. There is a native reiteration of the 'civilizing mission' mantra here – it would be foolish to deny it – but in Keshub Chunder Sen, we also have a figure whose expressed (and cringe-worthy) devotion to Queen Victoria powerfully inflects his desire for greater local autonomy, his calls for an Indian National Church and his beliefs in an 'Asiatic Christ' and a common (racial, Aryan) origin for English and Indians alike.[31]

Whether such Anglophile moderates were part of the problem or the solution remains debatable. Surendranath Banerjea would be another figure who, like Keshub Chunder Sen, trusted in the 'justice and generosity of the British people and . . . their representatives in parliament'[32] to replicate in India the same values and ideals the English paid lip service to in their own country. A moderate who nevertheless spent time in jail for criticizing the British magistrates, Banerjea famously believed constitutional means were the best route to the 'political enfranchisement of our people'.[33] In this, he was typical of many moderates who rejected both non-violent as well as violent forms of radicalism. Perhaps a key feature of such moderates was the constantly England-centred approach of their discourses: any improvement in the conditions of their fellow Indians had to involve British endorsement and was inconceivable as such without it. By the time of Chaudhuri's birth, many Indians had lost patience with such appeals to British colonial benevolence.

Rabindranath Tagore, one of modern India's greatest writers, was one such soul. A member of Calcutta's *bhadralok* or Westernized, educated upper class, Tagore was a good example of an Indian thinker whose early ambivalences about nationalism and the anti-British struggle were to be clarified by the increasing violence the British used against it. Like Surendranath and Keshub Chunder Sen, Tagore too felt a bond with the 'liberal humanity in the character of the English' and 'their mighty literature'.[34] Unlike them, this bond gradually gave way to a 'graceless