



**Vidhyayana - ISSN 2454-8596**

An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal

[www.j.vidhyayanaejournal.org](http://www.j.vidhyayanaejournal.org)

Indexed in: ROAD & Google Scholar

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**A Critique of History, Religion and Social Issues in**

**Nirad C. Chaudhuri's *The Continent of Circe***

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## ABSTRACT

Nirad Chaudhuri has been a celebrated social commentator on issues related to Indian history and social norms. A controversial figure for most of his life, he, in his unique sarcastic and scholarly manner holds a mirror to the contemporary society. Present research paper aims at tracing these debatable arguments made by him in select non-fiction works. Unlike writers of his age, he is not sympathetic about the conditions and miseries of Indian society but rather mockery and sarcasm are his favourite tools, of course, dipped in thorough researches available to him in his times. The thorough inclination for a pro-Anglican life style and detestation for Indian life can be observed in all of his works.

**Keywords:** *India, Social Issues, Hinduism, Buddhism, Aryan*



## Continent of Circe: An Outline of Indian History through a Sceptical Eye

'*The Continent of Circe*' or subtitled as '*An Essay on the People of India*' is written with a purpose to describe the people of India in their natural groupings both ethnic and cultural. The essay is an attempt to analyse their (Indians) collective personality, in the light of the historical evolution.

Circe, it should be noted, is the name of a fabled enchantress from Greek mythology who transformed Odysseus' mariners into pigs during the Odyssey. He warns that Indians wield a violent influence over all approaching persons in the manner of the mythological Circe, and that they must be avoided. He hopes to demonstrate through this study that the Hindus who live in India are in fact descended from the European race, although one that has been distorted and damaged by a hostile atmosphere. The writer Nirad Chaudhuri stands out among individuals from this subcontinent who write in English. Aware of his intellectual calling, Nirad Chaudhuri writes with daring and passion about issues that are far removed from his home country of India. Many readers will find his generalisations both irritating and amusing. However, he cannot be overlooked as a writer because, despite his flaws, he is clever and original in his writing. He sees Indian cultural values and traditions as a corrupted version of European culture and way of life, and he despises it. He prefers British authority in India to Indian self-rule and views Hinduism as a solely materialistic religion, which he considers to be wrong. He considers Mahatma Gandhi to be an advocate of a primitive vision of life, and he wishes for modern India to follow the democratic and development models that have been developed in the West. According to K. R. Srinivas Iyengar.

"The truth about Mr. Chaudhuri seems to be that he is at once more Indian than most Indians and more English than most Englishmen; with his gift of double vision, he achieves insights, denied to many, but he also isolates himself from the crowd." (Iyengar 133)

Chaudhuri portrays the collision between both the eastern and western cultures and civilizations in this work. The author's principal claim is that, so as the Greek enchantress used to transform human beings into livestock and animals such as cows, goats, pigs, and other such creatures, the author can do the same with humans. Each and every one of India's inhabitants is degraded to a dehumanised level by the country's hot, humid atmosphere; it enervates them and makes them angry, unstable, and even psychotic. They, the Aryans, who arrived in India from the colder parts of central Europe, between the Danube and the Volga, and their successors have never been able to shake off their longing for their ancestral homeland, where the Rhine and the Rhone run, which is now part of France. They resemble Europeans in exile in that they are perpetually homesick and unaccustomed to their environment. As a result,



neither they nor others will be able to extract the best performance from them. He is much more mindful of the humped animals, which he claims are not native to India but were brought there by the early Aryan immigrants from the parched Middle East and have been well cared for since then. The timeless loveliness of our humped cow has been immortalised in our sacred texts for all of time to come. However, the elegance of movement that it demonstrates is no less enthralling. In Sanskrit, dusk is referred to as "*Godhuli*" and it is a spectacle of extraordinary beauty to witness the cows returning to their pastures. In this context, it is only then and only in this context that soil of India is transformed into something lovable. The 'dominant minority', as represented by the power elite of Anglicized Hindus, who committed to Prime Minister Nehru for inspiration is also part of his argument. However, he suggests with a remark on their prospective roles.

"I should really have described the Anglicized Hindus of India in all their categories as a recessive and not a dominant minority. And recessive they will become enough ever as soon as the man, who has given them their present position, but who is also 73, will have disappeared from the scene."

(Chaudhuri *The Continent* 22)

From a historical perspective, Chaudhuri represents the social situation in India following independence from British rule. He discovers a vibrant or even violent process that has been ongoing for centuries, wherein geography and history have worked together to create continuous conflict and diametrically opposed societies. Chaudhuri shows the situation of the nation as a result of Nehru's demise in recent days and the falling off of historical events as a result of the Aryan immigration in a cohesive fashion in the style of a motion picture. He demonstrates that their established customs continue to exert a tight grip on all of the communities in which they live.

Aryans who migrated to India in prehistoric times were ethnically related to the Hurrians of higher Mesopotamia, according to him, and they felt themselves higher to the natives of that country. Compared to them, the natives were dark skinned, lazy, and stupid, but then they were white skinned, lively, and clever. As a direct consequence, they ascended to the position of rulers over the land, using the natives as servants. Thus, the ethnic structure of India was shaped by the conflict between a civilised Aryan population and a primitive group of aborigines, which resulted in the formation of an ethnic pattern. In later years, the Mohammedans, the Europeans, and the Indo-Anglicans all joined the fray in an attempt to turn the country into a battleground for religious differences. Since each conquering civilization was weakened by India's tropical atmosphere after a while, the Aryans, Mohammedans, and Europeans came in waves to conquer the nation one after the other. Chaudhuri further claims that the Aryans who arrived in India during prehistoric times practised Hinduism, a polytheistic



religion that gave them complete right to worship any pantheon of gods of their choosing. He says:

"The Rig Vedic Aryans had their one God, who had two aspects or it might even be sold, two persons or states as to individuality but he was no slayer of other gods." (Chaudhuri *The Continent* 180)

The gods of the Aryans may coexist at different levels, and the ultimate divinity was no more exclusionary than the other gods. The majority of Aryans in Iran, sensing that they were on their way to constructing an inflexible single Deity who did not accept it, fled to India, taking their Divinities and the hymns that they had written in worship of these gods with them, so that they may be free to preserve their cattle. However, Chaudhuri argues that Hinduism urged its members to pray for worldly power and riches, which he believes was the case. They understand that the world is a deluding illusion. As a result, they prefer a materialistic and libertarian religion. As a result, he asserts and seeks to demonstrate that Hindus residing in India are in fact descended from European races that have been perverted and distorted by a harsh environment. It demonstrates Chaudhuri's anti-Indian point of view on life.

Historian P. Giles believes that the Aryans' ancestral homeland must have been in Europe, which today includes Hungary, Austria, and Bohemia. The orthodox traditional Indian viewpoint, on the other hand, sees them as if they were indigenous to India. Some historians and scientists, such as Max Muller and Schelegal, believe that they originated in Central Asia. Nirad C. Chaudhuri, on the other hand, goes against all of the historical facts that have been given above. The Danube-Dnepr basin, according to him, is where they originated from. Aryans were the dominant ethnic group in the Punjab, followed by black explorers in the major regions and then agrarian people in the Punjab. There were three ethnocultural zones at the time. Because each of these groups resided in its own zone and location, they were able to exist independently of one another. Nirad states unequivocally that the original occupants of India, the so-called non-Aryans, were not a well-organized group of individuals. Contrary to his beliefs, historical evidence demonstrates that non-Aryans were not a disorganised people who achieved significant advances in architecture and sculpture. In the remains of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, you can still find evidence of Aryan culture dating back thousands of years.



## Caste System:

As Nirad C. Chaudhuri points out, there is no opposition to the partition caste-system since there was no other means for the Aryans to prevent their cultural identities from being immersed with the Primitive Darks—native Indians—from being immersed with them. As a result, he justifies the development of the caste system during the historical period. However, he has complaints against today's caste system because it is completely dependent on economic level. Nirad also believes that the many charges and accusations levelled against the caste system are completely unfounded. It does not foster variety and division, nor does it interfere with economic liberty, nor does it obstruct the advancement of talent. He claims that it aided in the coexistence of elements that would otherwise have been at odds with one another. As a result, Nirad considers it to be an essential system, one that is ideally conducive to a nation like India. At the very minimum, it refers to the improvement of social order, stability, and control within a civilization and group of people.

Nirad further argues in the essay that the Aryans had no wish to prevent their sociocultural identities someone from being drowned or mingled with the Primitive Darks, and that this was supported by historical evidence. They were unwilling to assign a specific rank to each individual, which resulted in the establishment of the caste system. The partition of Aryan society into four classes, referred to as '*Brahmana*', '*Kshatriya*', '*Vaisya*', and '*Sudra*', was an attempt to organise the social lives of distinct races through division. From God's lips, His arms, His thighs, and His feet, according to the Vedas and *Manusmiriti*, the four-class system came into being, and the four classes are represented by the four limbs of God's body. Chaudhuri also uses the story of '*The Bhagavat Gita*' as an example. He discovers this in the characters of Sita and Krishna, which is a reference to the code that establishes the category of a person thus according their distribution of work.

In this way, people of that time were classified into several castes based on their social demands, societal framework, and individual activity. In Hinduism, the Brahmins are priests who must work for the sake of religion and devotion, while the Kshatriyas are rulers, the Vaisyas are merchants and artisans, and the Sudras are the mundane workers and physical labourers. Those who belong to these caste groupings are selected from among the community's cultural, political, economic, and industrial segments. Rather than by birth, people were categorised based on their profession and education. People who offer their effort and energy to the welfare of society are referred to as Sudras, regardless of their birth. Depending on their training and career, they may be referred to as Brahmins or Kshatriya. The term '*Sudra*' can be applied to anyone in this context. *Sudra* did not originally refer to depressed people, scheduled castes, or untouchables in the way that we understand the term today, as it does today. As a result, throughout Vedic society, this categorization of individuals had a noble connotation to



it. It was only afterwards that evil entered the picture, as time progressed. Because of the problems of the caste system, many socio-political reformers despise it. They have not yet condemned the divisionist structure of Vedic society's organisation.

Nirad Chaudhuri justifies the caste system out of his own historical and social perspective, but this defence has no useful properties or validity at the present time; on the contrary, it has caused greater suffering than any other societal ill.

Furthermore, Nirad explains how the caste structure failed to protect the Aryans from the Islamic and British invasions, resulting in the Aryans splitting apart as a result of their subjugation. Hindus and Muslims have been at odds for centuries as a result of the Muslims' aggressive culture, which they have cultivated. As Nirad says:

"Here is a case of true ethnic relationship being completely broken by a new cultural and social association. And, there emerged four new communities, like Mestizo, Anglo-Indians, Indian Christians and the westernized Hindu upper middle class." (Chaudhuri *The Continent* 88)

Nirad also makes some extremely biased observations about the Hindu-Muslim relationship in this thought-provoking essay, which is worth reading. According to him, following several necessary modifications among these two groups, the Hindus lost their ability to assimilate and adapt, while the Muslims remained primitive and unaltered in their beliefs and practises. In this context, Nirad remarks that they had a significant influence on one another and that they were able to peacefully coexist and live in harmony despite their theological differences because of this influence. It is never the case that they were unable to integrate themselves into one another. Hindu literature, philosophy, and faith are highly developed and hold a high level of veneration among a large number of people worldwide. Hinduism has assimilated all of the protestant groups that have risen and flourished on Indian soil over the centuries. The Hindu - Caste has the ability to adjust to changing situations and to accept people who share the same religious or conceptual heritage with decent will and solidarity, as the two groups have coexisted for hundreds of years with mutual respect and understanding.

## **Ethnic Situation in India: A Critique on Hinduism**

In *The Continent of Circe*, at least in two chapters like 'From the world to the Eye' and 'Deposits of Time', he draws a true picture of the ethnic situation in India. According to him:

"Hinduism is an imported 'ism'. It has an Indo-European character...neither the concepts of Hinduism north vocabulary used could have come from some cold region." (Chaudhuri *The Continent* 232)



This demonstrates that his Hindu beliefs and practises have been influenced by the Greeks, Celts, Germans, and Romans, among other cultures. He makes an excellent case for the term Hindu in his discussion. That the label Hindu has little to do with religion is something he must say. Originally, it meant "a person who lives in the region of the river Indus, also known as the Sindhu river." After that, the Aryan people were spread throughout the entire continent. In our religion, the title or label "Hinduism" is not accurate because it corresponds to a jumble of belief systems and rites of the people who are known as Hindus after the primary domain in which they are practised.

Nirad C. Chaudhuri, a scholar, looked for the word 'Hindu' in Sanskrit literature, but was unable to locate its origins there, according to him. His explanation is that it is taken from Pahlavi *Hendu*, which is the name given by the Persians to a river Sindhu (Indus). A racial differentiation as from rest of the inhabitants of the Persian Empire is implied by the word "*Hendu*," which literally means "black" As a result, in Sanskrit, what we currently refer to as 'Hindu' is actually referred to as 'Arya'. The region where the Aryans dwelt was known as 'Aryavrata,' and the Aryan race was known as the 'Arya' race. It was a region dominated by Hindus, often known as 'Aryans.' As a result, it has geographic, cultural, spiritual, and regional or ethnic foundations to stand on.

According to Nirad C. Chaudhuri, any guy who claims to be a Hindu must pass the three standards of religion, parentage, and country before he can be considered to be one. In the following passage, Chaudhuri considers the characteristics of the major ethnic groupings in India, which he describes in detail. He goes into great length on their physical qualities, as well as their complexion. They were divided into two ethnic groups: the Darks, who had sharp faces and generally lived in mountainous and forested areas of central and southern India, and the Mongoloid-race, who lived in the Himalayan regions and the hills of Assam, respectively. The aborigines are represented by the darks and yellows, whilst the browns represent the Aryans, or Hindus. Chaudhuri also made a distinction between Muslims and Hindus. The Mohameddians of India can indeed be distinguished - distinguished by their clothes, speech, manners, appearance, and expression, among other characteristics.

The historical examples that Nirad uses to demonstrate his thesis about the cluster centres (both racial and cultural) are taken from his research. His theory is that Hindus are immigrant Aryans who arrived from Mesopotamia and dwelt mostly on banks of the Ganga and in southern portions of the continent, as well as in northern and western India. The title 'Arya' directly means as 'nobly born,' which is a compliment. It is possible to deduce that the word 'Arya' comes from the stem 'Ri,' which can be rendered as either "to move ahead" or "to nurture.





"This is yet another way of explaining the phrase. The original immigrants - the Aryans - were always on the move, pursuing their intellectual and literary interests at the same time. As a result, they were happy to describe themselves as "kids of Mother Earth" and "children of the Lord of Heaven," as well as "friends of God." among other things. (Chaudhuri *The Continent* 167)

Nirad Chaudhuri's '*Essay on the People of India*' concludes with the observation that, despite India's incredible variety, 'Hinduism' remains a difficult concept to grasp and explain adequately. Scholars, historians, and anthropologists have discovered that 'Hinduism' does not have a single founder, does not have a single prophet, does not have a single holy book, does not have a firm dogma, and does not have a doctrine. Hindus, on the other hand, have a limitless capacity for faith. They have faith in the object's uniqueness as a whole. As a result, it is extremely difficult to describe or convey the exact essence of Hinduism. Hence, it is necessary to look into the shastra-philosophy term "Neti," which translates as "not this, not this." Instead of becoming a sympathiser or supporter of Hinduism, Nirad Chaudhuri, who is himself a Hindu, turns into a vehement critic of the religion.

As a skeptic, he expresses his opinions on Hinduism and Hindu without expressing any preconceptions or animosity towards it. He claims in this essay that his interpretation of Indian civilization and Hinduism has become fully skewed and entirely untrue, despite the fact that it is composed of highly educated individuals.

Despite his solely academic approach to life, he appears to have travelled a significant distance to learn about Indian philosophy and Hinduism, which he appears to have done in order to criticise Hindu settlement. He establishes a connection between the Hindu intellectual system and his thesis of the severity of the Aryans' suffering as a result of the adverse climate. Buddhism, Vedanta, and other Hindu philosophical systems are apathetic toward the things that exist in the world - the lives of people. There is no single philosophy that can be applied to the question of "What is life?" In order to make his case more clearly, he used Buddhism as an indication of bodily suffering that prompted the Hindu psyche to adopt a negative philosophical outlook.

## **Nirad C Chaudhuri on Buddhism:**

As a result of some bad philosophical points of Hinduism, such as those of Buddha and Nirad, we are forced to raise the issue of a query. "Isn't Indian philosophy based entirely on negation?" According to a large number of Indian saints, intellectuals, and rishis, "Human life is a general drama of pain" As a result of the lack of enjoyment in our lives, everyone was searching for ways to alleviate their misery. It is via our worldly experiences that we are born into sadness. "Sorrow is the ultimate truth of life." Our knowledge can, at times, become the



source of our misery. For a wise man, a saint, or a sage, what appears to be tolerable and joyful to the average person is agonising and debilitating. Increased awareness of grief and discontent with the knowledge of the world is accompanied with an increase in sensitivity to these emotions. Life is a passing state of affairs. It brings with it grief, death, and deluding deception. Only the superior ethical transcendence may lift a person out of his or her state of sadness and suffering. As a result, the ancient Indian philosophy of 'Samkhya-darshan' educates and emphasises more on the concept of 'Purify oneself,' because when the mind is cleansed, the conscience (soul) emerges in its real light. In the words of Nirad Chaudhuri, it is the "negation of all senses". When man achieves the highest truth about himself - his mission of birth, living, dying, and being in relation to the cosmos - he transcends the limitations of his physical body and transcends into the essence of the universe. He is transformed into an unlimited and immortal being. All of his desires are rebuffed there. In the process of realising the ultimate truth of himself, he embarks on a voyage of the soul, and eventually arrives at a state that cannot be expressed by the use of material and ordinary notions. Pure intelligence, divinity, and tranquillity are attained by man at the pinnacle of his development. Swami Vivekananda refers to it as "Mukti," which means "liberation." "'Mumuksha avastha' is the state in which Mumuksha lives. This kind of exalted and delightful condition is the ultimate objective of Indian philosophy, and it is what everyone strives for. So, Nirad Chaudhuri does not believe it to be a negative approach in the least bit. Further, Chaudhuri, using a scholarly approach, discusses the term "Nirvana" in the context of Buddhism, as well as a subdivision of Indian philosophy. Indian philosophy emphasises the concept of "Mukti," in which the soul is free of all ties. Bondages are only associated with the physical body. Because the physical body is mortal, it is Maya - it is ephemeral. It is not going to last. According to Nirad Chaudhuri, the word "Nirvana" literally means "extinction." Although Buddhists are unable to define "what Nirvana is in words," he believes that "Nirvana" is a state of reality that is free of all pain and change. When a man achieves 'Nirvana,' he experiences calm and ecstasy, as well as an unending pleasure in contemplating and experiencing the elements – Maya.

The same way, Nirad Chaudhuri condemns our respect-giving manners toward Sadhus rather than philosophers. He claims that it is evident that Hinduism today has devolved into a hodgepodge of doctrines and different faiths, providing a haven for imposters such as phoney Sadhus and counterfeit Fakirs. However, it is impossible to say that we have completely lost our affection and respect for philosophers and philosophy. It is possible to have great spiritual leaders and manifestations - spiritualists and philosophers like Shri Aurobindo and Swami Vivekananda, for example, or Dr. S. Radhakrishnan - in our lives.



## Conclusion:

Scholar, writer, and critic in Indian history and philosophy, Nirad C. Choudhuri has earned a reputation as a contentious figure in the field. Because of his anti-Indian and pro-English attitudes to life, which he portrayed through his writings, he has emerged as the most notorious Indo-Anglican writer of the contemporary era. The Indian culture and civilisation, according to him, is a corrupted version of western society and civilization, as evidenced by his writings. *The Continent of Circe* is a one-of-a-kind work that includes autobiography, history, sociology, anthropology, ideology, and criticism of liberal Hinduism. He believes in humanism first, and then he believes in religion second. "*The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*", "*The Continent of Circe*" and "*Hinduism*" are three of his most important writings, in which he conveys his beliefs on 'Hinduism,' a Hindu race, in his own words. He perceives and critiques Hinduism from a rationalist perspective, and he continues to be a vocal opponent of Indian religion as it is practised today. Mr. Nirad Chaudhuri is one of a few of Indian writers who write in English and who are more commonly misunderstood in this nation than Mr. Nirad Chaudhuri. Since the publication of his first literary 'magnum opus,' "*The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*" (1951), Chaudhuri has been a divisive figure in Indian society. However, Nirad C. Chaudhuri is a scholar who believes in impartiality and has a great deal of experience with subjective subjects and issues. He describes himself as a "radical non-conformist" who believes in the caste system and cow worship.



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