

Nirad C Chaudhuri – A Hindu To The Core

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Abstract

It is quite obvious to say that Nirad C Chaudhuri is an epitome of conflicts. He looks at every object in a contradictory way to puzzle the readers. In his creative journey Nirad C Chaudhuri touched upon Hinduism to the extent possible not as a proponent of particular concept but scans it and dissects it in a different way. The Vedas, The Puranas and The Hindu culture appear to him so differently in nature though others perceive it with much purity and sensitivity. For example, he deals with the great epics- The Ramayana and The Mahabharata. But, no where he exposes Rama as a divine being but tries to ignore the fact. The Mahabharata, he ironically says not a book to keep as a holy text but attributes a negative source for the readers as it emanates conflicts in domestic life. So, the present paper focuses on the different aspects of Nirad C Chaudhuri's perceptions on Hinduism and however at the end he is proved to the core a Hindu in every sense of the term.

Keywords: Proponent, scans, dissects, perceive, purity, sensitivity, divine, attributes, emanates, perceptions.

One of the subjects dear to the heart of Nirad C. Chaudhuri is Hinduism and Hindu society. This is a topic on which he can justly speak with authority. His mastery of the sources is enviable. He seems to have quotations from the Rigveda, the Mahabharata, Kalidas, Bhavabhuti, the love poetry of the classical age and numerous other texts at his fingertips. Although observations and analyses of the Hindus and the Hindu religion are scattered all over his works, there are two books specifically on the subject viz. *The Continent of Circe* (1965) and *Hinduism: A Religion to live by* (1978). The biography of Max Muller is also largely an interpretation of the Vedic religion. The present paper aims at justifying Chaudhuri to the core a Hindu in true sense of the term. Though conflicts may surface but beneath love for religion is very much perceived in between the lines.

Chaudhuri is a strong advocate of the caste system. He remarks “I would say that we could do with a little more of the caste system in order to put worthless adventures in their place. Taking the system as a whole I would describe it as a social organization which contributes to order, stability, and regulation of competition, and I would close the digression with a piece of advice to the foreign reformers of Hindu society, and their Hindu imitators: Please keep your tongues and pens off the caste system....’Please do not pulverize a society which has no other force of cohesion, into amorphous dust’. (*Quest* Page No: 62)

The very origin of the caste system as traced by Chaudhuri, can be refuted with the help of the Vedic scriptures and the learned theories of eminent historians. In the first place it was neither the desire of the Aryans to preserve their ethnic, social and cultural personality from being submerged in a conglomeration with the native Darks, nor to give a defined status to each individual that gave birth to the caste-system. Division of the Aryan society in four classes – ‘Brahmana’, ‘Kshatriya’, ‘Vaisliya’ and ‘Sudra’ was an attempt at the social organization of different races, a rationalization of the facts as they existed at the time”. (*The Discovery of India* p.87)

In the Rig Veda and the Manusmriti, we are told that the ‘four-class’ society came into existence as a result of god causing the Brahmana, the Kshatriya, the Vaisya and the Sudra to proceed from His mouth, His arms, His thighs and His feet respectively. In the *Gita* too, we find Lord Krishna referring to the law that determines the caste of a man. It was the division of labour which was the main inspiration behind this kind of classification to which the label caste system is attached today. Caste divisions are based on individual temperament, which is not immutable. In the beginning there was only one caste. We were all Brahmans or all Sudras. A *Smriti* text says that one is born a Sudra and through purification he becomes a Brahmin.

Chaudhuri believes that the Aryans came from the Danube-Bnieper basin (which he evidently seems to have got from Stuart Pigot) (*Prehistoric India* p.248) is to be doubted, for the majority of scholars now hold that they came from the Steppes of Central Asia.

His approach is derived from a long line of western orientalis, notably William Jones, who was passionately devoted to oriental learning. He achieved mastery of Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit in addition to the numerous ancient and modern European languages. His love of Sanskrit began after his arrival in India and ended with his translations of the *Hitopadesa*, the *Institutes of Hindu Law* and above all *Sakuntala* and the *Lost Ring*. It was the last which influenced the German poets including Goethe. Towards the end of his short life (of forty eight years) he began to identify himself whole heartedly with Sanskrit culture, composing original poems in the language. In "*A Hymn to Surya*" he apologized for not being

sprung from Brahma (i.e., a Brahmin by birth). He said that he was nevertheless presuming to lisp in the celestial tongue (Sanskrit).

Chaudhuri's attitude towards the Indians and especially the Hindus follows the "example of the English Orientalists like Jones, H.J. Colebrooke (1765-1837), H.H. Wilson (1786-1860) and James Prinsep (1799-1840). Chaudhuri also draws a sharp distinction between the Aryans who composed the Vedas and the epics and contemporary Hindu. For the latter he has nothing but contempt. Infact, he traces their decline to the so-called "classical age". The erotic poetry of the period from the 4th century A.D to the 10th century A.D reveals a decadence which is different from the healthy animality of the *Rig Veda* or *Mahabharata*, Chaudhuri does not give the dates of the poets whose poems he quotes from to illustrate the decadence of Hindu culture. The present writer has found confirmation of his view in the anthology compiled by Vidyakara in the 11th century and translated by D.H.H. Ingalls. Even Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* (12th century) usually "hailed as masterpiece exhibits decadence. All the biting and scratching of the erogenous zones of the mistress are to be found in it.

Thus far there is no denying the validity of Chaudhuri's thesis. But there are two flaws in his approach to the entire subject. All his conclusions are derived from the extant literature. Much of the literature must have perished. The use of paper was not known to the ancient Indians. Besides the transmission was oral. Hence, the preponderance of sacred books. Secular literature would not be memorized by the professional pundits. There were no scribes in ancient India. Besides, Chaudhuri does not take the non-literary source into account. It seems somewhat rash to draw such sweeping generalizations about the Aryans from the *Rig Veda* alone. In Chaudhuri, there is no reference to the pottery or the coins. These together with the architecture and other archaeological remains should corroborate the conclusions based on the hymns. If the only Hebrew book extant had been the Psalms of David, we should have been chary of generalizing about ancient Jewish culture. Luckily, however, the other books of the Old Testament and Josephus the historian give us a more balanced account of the ancient Jews. Besides, there are the writings of contemporary Greeks and Romans. But so far as the Aryans are concerned sources to fall back upon except myths and rituals.

Chaudhuri singles out four characteristics of the Hindu way of life viz. the sanctity of the Vedas, respect for the rivers, admiration of the fair complexion and respect for cattle. Of these, admiration of the fair complexion can hardly be taken seriously. It has no religious sanction, nor is it peculiar to the Hindus. It plays a part in the choice of brides, as Chaudhuri observes, but it cannot be considered a part of the religious beliefs of the Hindus.

Respect for the Vedas is certainly professed in every religious or theological book of the Hindus. A revival of the Vedic cult began when the Hindus were called upon to meet the challenge of Islam and Christianity. The Hindus discovered that their only answer to the *Quran* and the Bible could be the Vedas. But the parallel is misleading. No Hindu, as far I

know possesses a copy of the Vedas. Most Hindus, except for a few teachers of Sanskrit or professional priests would be unable to chant any of the mantras orally. The only sacred book which may be found in the homes of literate Hindus is the *Bhagvad Gita*, either in the original or in the regional language. Since, the *Gita* itself invokes the authority of the Vedas and the *Upanishads*, no doubt theoretically Chaudhuri is right. In practice, however, except for the god Visnu, the other gods of the Vedic hymns, Varuna, Mitra, Indra and Rudra are only names. Nobody worships them any longer. Over the years the properties of Rudra have been transferred to Siva. The god Agni is invoked only during religious ceremonies. He is never called upon to rescue any Hindu in distress as Rama and Krishna are.

As for the epics, it is inauspicious to possess of the *Mahabharata*, because there is danger to domestic peace. The Valmiki Ramayana is possessed by some Sanskrit scholars but the Hindi version of Tulsidas is the backbone of the Hindus of the Indo-Gangetic plains. Perhaps the Tamil version of Kampan and comparable versions in Bengali and other regional languages are just as popular.

Because Chaudhuri comes from Bengal, he overrates the position of Durga or Kali and underrates the position of Rama and Hanuman, whom he does not even mention. Similarly, he is not aware of the central place of Ganesa in the west and south of India. The only cults shared by Hindus all over India are perhaps those of Siva and Krishna. Chaudhuri is undoubtedly right about the Krishna cult. This god is the darling of every Hindu lady, the subject matter of most classical music and shares with Siva, the central place in classical dance. The *Bhagavat Purana* is the favourite reading of many middle class Hindu ladies. One paradox, however, is unaccounted for. The word Krishna (and its equivalents used in popular songs) means black, how does Chaudhuri reconcile the Hindu love of the fair complexion with their devotion to the black god, the archetypical lover?

About the sanctity of the rivers and cows, there cannot be any two opinions. The Kumbha festival and the ban on cow slaughter are reminders of those features of Hinduism. Chaudhuri's sketch of Hinduism, however, takes no notice of the traditional definition of Hinduism as the Varna-Ashrama dharma.

The Hindu mind, according to Chaudhuri, is Janus-faced, revealed in political behaviour. It consists of antithetical traits:

A sense of Hindu solidarity with an uncontrollable tendency towards disunity within the Hindu order; collective megalomania with self-abasement; extreme xenophobia with an abject xenolatry; authoritarianism with anarchic individualism; violence with non violence; militarism with pacifism; possessiveness with carelessness about property owned; courage with cowardice; cleverness with stupidity; (Continent 106-7)

Such a formidable cluster of paradoxes reveals Chaudhuri's capacity for turning out epigrams. Its value is scarcely more than that of some of the epigrammatic utterances in Bernard Shaw's plays. Consider the following well known indictment of the English:

There is nothing so bad or so good that you will not find Englishmen doing it; but you will never find an English man in the wrong. He does everything on principle. He fights you on patriotic principles; he enslaves you on imperial principles; he bullies you on manly principles; he supports his king on royal principles and cuts off his king's head on republican principles.

As a matter of fact Shaw's indictment is more plausible because of the references to well-known historical events, while Chaudhuri's indictment is a string of assertions without any factual backing.

In spite of the fact that Chaudhuri is an anglophile but he moulds history objectively and philosophically to generate keen interest. His own account of Hindu religion is depicted to the utmost satisfaction of Hindus freely without any qualms of conscience and justifies himself that he is Hindu to the core.

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Notes:

1. The adjective "classical" is a misnomer because it suggests comparison with ancient Greece and Rome. John Brough prefers to compare this period of Sanskrit literature with the Hellenistic or Alexandrine period of Graeco-Roman history. See John Brough poems from the Sanskrit, Penguin, 1968.
2. Sanskrit poetry from Vidyakara's 'Treasury', Cambridge Mass., Harvard University Press, 1968.
3. See D.D. Kosambi, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1975, p.110.

4. The prejudice against black colour can be traced back to the Biblical tradition according to which the peoples of Africa are descended from Ham.
5. The Man of Destiny (1896). This speech by Napoleon occurs towards the end of the play.