

Mapping Nirad C Chaudhuri's Ideological Position: A Critical Analysis of *The Continent of Circe*

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As Chaudhuri defines the book, *The Continent of Circe* as an "essay" on the people of India. It is an effort by the author to understand and explain India and its people. His purpose in writing the book "... is to describe the peoples of India in their natural groupings, both ethnic and cultural, and analyze their collective personality in the light of the historical evolution which has formed it" (Chaudhuri 38). As an essay, the book mixes the subjective and the empirical, though the former happens to be predominant.

The title of the book itself reveals Chaudhuri's ideological position vis-à-vis his object. Circe is the name given to a demoness who controls the minds of her victims and turns them into beasts. In Homer's *Odyssey*, she is described as living in a mansion in the middle of dense forests. The mansion is surrounded by crawling creatures, the victims of her witchcraft. Actually, these creatures are the crew of Odysseus. They were invited by her to a feast, but treacherously she turned them into beasts. Odysseus sets out to rescue his men ("Circe" 1-2). Chaudhuri believes that India is a continent which is under the control of Circe. He suggests that the people coming to India become her victims and lose control over their minds, submitting themselves to her spell and giving up their rationality and freedom. He admits that he is also the son of her ancient victims but claims that he has rescued himself from the prevailing swinishness of the Hindus who have been turned into beasts by Circe. Chaudhuri is of the opinion that the Hindus have descended from the Europeans. Hence he warns that "there is no future for us Hindus unless we can recover at least our old European spirit, even if not the European body and pride of flesh" (373). He calls upon the Hindus to affirm their ancient origins and save their essential European spirit. He expresses his anxieties about them and sees himself as their savior by stating "I would save the fellow beast. They do not, however, listen to me. They honk, neigh, bellow, bleat, or grunt, and scamper away to their scrub, stable, byre, pen, and sty" (376). Writing with an essentialising impulse, he thus states the purpose of his book, which is to save the Hindus and Hinduism. It may also be noted that his description of India as a demoness alludes to the idealist-mystical view of India as a mother figure, for example as Mother India in Sri Aurobindo's words¹.

The preface, titled "In Gratitude" (1-8), records Chaudhuri's acknowledgements to his friends, including Khushwant Singh, Cyrus, Ruth Jhabvala and others². He expresses resentment over the lack of his official recognition in India; he says that he has never been honored by the Indian Government because only the rich and influential persons receive honor and recognition in India. He adds that the West has given him greater recognition. The reader can clearly see that Chaudhuri, with all his frankness, is motivated by a sense of injured merit. The section titled "Note on the Text" (9-10) even voices his strained relationship with the late Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Chaudhuri states that he has written several things which were critical of Nehru but which have now been removed since Nehru is no longer there to respond to his criticism.³

In the introduction titled "The World's Knowledge of India Since 1947" (11-26), Chaudhuri writes about the intellectuals' failure to understand the complex life of India, in spite of their keen sense of observation. The Western correspondents, economists, and the diplomats are not able to grasp the real idea of India; their knowledge about India is very meagre. The book is, hence, intended to fill a gap and is meant for the non-Indians primarily. He recommends to these readers a certain way to understand India. He further adds that the novelists and other writers are also not able to correctly write about India because of their limited knowledge and also due to the problem of language. The Indian novelists writing in English can do no better because they write mainly to impress the Western reader. In his opinion, "the world's knowledge about India today is obtained overwhelmingly at one remove from people belonging to the Westernized and urban upper middle-class, who have become the heirs of British rule" (21). It may be noted that Chaudhuri not only intends to correct the prevailing view of India among the non-Indian readers but also claims to have a better knowledge of India because he represents the Indian people and not the ruling class of westernized and urban middle class Indians. Laying down the conditions for a writer who can represent Indian people, he states that "... a man who can not endure dirt, dust, stench, noise, ugliness, disorder, heat, and cold has no right to live in India" (22). Thus, he counters the romantic and idealistic view of India held by some of the nationalists, including Aurobindo and Nehru. He states that it is hard to understand India and Indian life without experiencing directly the life which the common Indian people live. As he states, "... the necessity to be psychologically proof against filth is the first condition of understanding our life" (23-24). He warns foreigners to be fully armed to understand the real Indian life. He declares that "the genii who guard the secrets of our country, life, and civilization put us to the same test before they will allow us to see real India" (25).

Chaudhuri claims to look at India from a pragmatic and rational point of view as against a romantic and idealistic point of view, which is ill-suited to the country because it lends itself either to sub-rational or supra-rational interpretations. Divorcing the word 'Hindu' from any sectarian connotations, he states in the chapter titled "From the Word to the Eye" (27-38) that the Hindu "mean[s] 'an inhabitant of the region of the river Indus' (in Sanskrit - *Sindhu*), but [is] extended to the people of the whole continent. Thus, in its primary meaning, the word 'Hindu' stands for the same thing as 'Indian'" (27-28). He further adds that when European Orientalists began to study the religions of India, they found that there was no other name than *Sanatana Dharma* for the Hindus' complex religion. So, "[s]trictly speaking, the term Hindu is like 'American' or 'European'" (29). Talking about the meaning of 'Indian', he states that it bears only one or the other of the two following senses:

1. An inhabitant of the geographical continent of India, which for practical purposes is India as it was constituted politically in the last decade of British rule.
2. A legally recognized citizen of the new sovereign State called the Republic and Union of India, it being clearly understood that I do not consider that all the citizens of this State belong to one nation. In their case, *de jure* nationality is not the same as *de facto* nationality. (30)

Chaudhuri rejects the claims to authenticity often made by several Indian politicians, officials and academics. He warns all foreigners who are interested in India that they should be vigilant when listening to these persons. He states that these persons pretend to be the guides of people but they actually always misguide them. He talks about the old tradition of *Guru* (teacher) and *Chela* (disciple) in India. The spiritual guides used to initiate their disciples into the use of drugs. The secular gurus have given up this tradition but the modern gurus have adopted it to "destroy the faculties of thinking and observing" of their disciples and followers (30). He calls this harmful dose "logosane, a meaningless, tasteless but intellectually asphyxiating substance, turned out from the only really efficient mass-production factory established in India since independence, namely, the [n]ationalized factory of words" (30-31). It is notable that he is alert about the politics of language. He also directs foreigners not to follow the texts about India written by prejudiced and compromised scholars, and warns them to be "[b]eware of words in India" (34). He exhorts them to observe India first hand instead of depending on secondary sources.

Chaudhuri then proceeds to trace the ethnic history of India. According to him, there are only three physical types in India: the Blacks, the Browns and the Yellows (31). The terminology amply indicates that he has a layman's notion of ethnography, not a professional ethnographer's. In the subsequent chapter titled "The Deposits of Time" (38-65), he tries to prove his worth as a historian by tracing the history of different communities living in India. Ironically, he does not refer to any historical studies to prove the authenticity of his thesis. The chapter moves around his argument that the "Hindus are of European stock, immigrant Aryans from Mitannian-Mesopotamia, who colonized the Indo-Gangetic plains and certain areas of south India" (Sinha 111). He writes:

They called themselves as 'Arya' (Aryan), which signified 'nobly born', and the pre-existing people 'Anarya' (not Aryan) and they made the boundary line between the two absolutely impassable in theory, and very difficult to cross in practice. The notion of racial superiority, which was present in this distinction from the outset, was later widened to include that of moral superiority. . . . Any dishonorable act or conduct was described as being unworthy of an Aryan, or be fitting only a non-Aryan. (Chaudhuri 40)

Contesting Chaudhuri's version, Tara Sinha points out that there are different opinions regarding the origin of the Aryans: as the westerners view them as immigrants from outside but the orthodox traditional Indian view treats them as natives of the India. Chaudhuri holds the view that they came from the Danube-Dnieper basin while, scholars like Lasson, Grimm, Max Mueller and Schelegal generally state that they came from Central Asia (113). Chaudhuri also fails to mention the exact historical period of the arrival of Aryans in India, casually stating:

. . . they moved into the Punjab around 1000 B.C., if not even a century or two later. But whatever the date, it was the confrontation of the Aryans, the first civilized people to settle in India proper, with the dark primitives that set in motion the continuous ethnic history of India. (41)

He further argues the superiority of the Aryans by stating that they were organized people while aboriginals, the so-called non-Aryans, were not organized. His view

about the latter remains unsubstantiated; the non-Aryans are widely known in history as organized people who achieved progress in construction of buildings and cities; the evidence is provided by the Harappa and Mohenjodaro (Mookerji 57). Once again, Chaudhuri's unprofessional treatment of history is to blame for his opinion.

He attempts to explain the social hierarchy of the caste by arguing that it was the requirement of the time. The later invasions made it necessary for Hindus to struggle against external "barbarous or semi-barbarous nomads" as well as against primitive Darks (Chaudhuri 55). He suggests that the system of caste was probably instituted by the aliens to preserve their racial purity; as such caste and race are intertwined in his discourse. However, his views on the caste system are not supported by any evidence. He rejects the usual criticism levelled against the caste system, holding instead the view that it has kept the society organized. He describes caste "as a social organization which contributes to order, stability, and regulation of competition" (62). His defence of caste system should be viewed alongside Aurobindo's denunciation of it as a dangerous relic. Chaudhuri indirectly admits the irrelevance of caste even on his own terms, particularly when he acknowledges that the institution of caste failed to deal with the consequences of Islamic and British invasions.

Chapter after chapter, Chaudhuri unravels his opinion that Aryans were Europeans who came to India and even after centuries they remain alien to the continent. However, he offers no ground for such a notion. Writing about the various Muslim invasions, Chaudhuri states that they established a parallel society to the Hindus. But he prejudicially remarks about the Hindu-Muslim relationship that "no adjustment between these two societies took place except in minor matters" and the Hindus completely lost "whatever assimilating power and adaptability they had" (62). But history shows that both communities have lived in peace and harmony despite differences (Sinha 121). In Chaudhuri's opinion, the development of the Westernized Hindu upper middle-class is a result of the British invasion in India. It is worth remarking that Chaudhuri does not regard this section of the Hindus with any respect. The other, he has great dislike for it. However, since he himself adopts the subject position of a westernized Hindu upper middle class person, his treatment of this section remains ambivalent.

In the chapter titled "The Children of Circe" (66-91), Chaudhuri writes in favor of poor and ill-treated children of the "demoness" - the aboriginals. He states that those who suffered the most because of the invasions throughout history were the aboriginals. However, after the invasion of the British a new Westernized Hindu class emerged; this is the greatest threat to the aboriginals, according to him. Import of democracy from the West brought degradation to them⁴. However, there are major contradictions in Chaudhuri's discourse. According to Tara Sinha:

On the one hand he shows his anxiety for these Hindus' threat to the cultural and ethnic identity of the children of Circe, and, on the other, he shows his indignation at their being put on display at the annual folk dance in Delhi. The Hindus' zeal for industrialization will modernize the aboriginals; and thus, will destroy their culture, he says. We can not help thinking that this kind of sympathy for the aboriginals is quite misplaced as it is neither going to help those whose cause Chaudhuri is advocating, nor will it benefit the nation as a whole. (123)

In the chapters titled "On Understanding the Hindus" (91-105) and "Janus and His Two Faces" (106-135), Chaudhuri questions the idealistic-mystical vision of Hindu nationalists, on the ground that in it theory and practice are wrongly mixed up. According to him, a wide gulf separates practice from the theory of Hinduism. Hindus are expected to live according to the spiritual message given in sacred texts, such as *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, and *Bhagavadgita*; in practice however they behave as stark materialists, according to him. The Hinduism is thus Janus faced; his term for the Hindu personality is "Janus Multifrons": "[e]very Hindu is divided against himself and it would seem throughout his historical existence he has been" (106). He states that Hindus are supposed to be peace-loving and non-violent people and Gandhism fortifies this belief. However, he counters the reality is that the political history of India "is made up of blood-stained pages" (107). The war of Mahabharata is the supreme example of violence-filled Hindu life. Citing the recent Indo-China conflict of 1962, he comments that India is supposed to be a secular state, but fought the war in the name of *Dharma* (125). His discussions about "Hindu Character" and "Hindu Life" exemplify a dangerously reactionary essentialising impulse. He argues that Hindu life has no place for the three cardinal European principles: reason, order and measure (102). He even blames the Indian climate for the lapses and failures of the English people in India. As Basavaraj Naikar points out, Chaudhuri distrusts everything Indian because; according to him the Indians seek Europe's approval for everything. The reason is, "the Indian[s'] lack of confidence in themselves as a nation" (50). One can say that Chaudhuri's essentialism verges on fascism even as it tries to conceal itself behind a façade of scientific reason. His discussion of Indian life ultimately perpetuates casteism, racism, and religious fascism.

Writing in this vein, in the chapters titled "Victims of Circe" (135-50) and "Nostalgia for the Forgotten Home" (151-74), Chaudhuri voices the "sufferings" endured by Aryans in India. He has a very sympathetic view of the Aryans as a European community. He even blames the Indian climate and environment, which he finds unfavorable to Aryans whose original home is Europe. He argues that "even after living in the country for thousands of years the Hindus have not got used to the heat" (156) and "the physique of the people has not also adapted itself to the climate of a monsoon country" (160).

Chaudhuri has a rather poor opinion of Indian philosophy. In many parts of the book, he makes sweeping and unfounded generalizations. He describes the Hindus as "unphilosophical" (174). He declares Buddha's renunciation as a failure of courage. He wrongly defines the term 'Nirvana' as extinction⁵. Chaudhuri believes that only the ancient Greeks had developed proper thinking whereas the Indians have never been able to do so:

... there is no such thing as thinking properly so called among the Hindus, for it is a faculty of the mind developed only in Greece, and exercised only by the heirs of Greeks. A very large part of what is called Hindu thinking is wooly speculation or just mush. (Chaudhuri 174)

It appears that he is here contesting Nehru's view of Indian philosophy. For Nehru, philosophy in India is

. . . an essential part of the religion of the masses; . . . it [is] for some deep and intricate attempt to know the causes and laws of all phenomena, the search for the ultimate purpose of life, and the attempt to find an organic unity in life's many contradictions. (80-81)

In the chapter titled "Auld Lang Syne" (174-210), Chaudhuri attempts a so called history of Hinduism. His aim is to demonstrate the indiscipline, contradictions, and hypocritical life of the Hindus. According to him, there are four loyalties of the Hindus, and he assails them one by one. He states that *Vedas* are supposed to be the highest authority for the Hindus, but it is wrong, according to him, to term these as the voice of God because they are prayers addressed to God. He also claims that *Vedas* were brought to India by ancient Aryans, but he fails to substantiate the claim. Further, he explains the Hindus' preference for fair complexion as an internalized expression of loyalty to the white Aryan race. The third loyalty, according to him, is river-worship. He attacks the Indians' attitude to nude bathing as it smacks of hypocrisy: they view the Westerners on the sea beaches as an offensive site, while Indian women taking a public bath during religious festivals are not regarded as obscene. The fourth loyalty, according to him, is cow worship. Speculating on the rationale for cow worship, he writes that "[a]lien domination has also affiliated the Hindu worship of the cow and opposition to cow-killing with the anti-Muslim and anti-British nationalism" (198). His attempt is to see cow worship as an issue only in modern India; the ancient Indians, according to him, thought differently. To support his argument he says that there are numerous references to beef eating in Hindu scriptures. However, Sinha finds his reasoning to be deeply flawed:

He cites incidents and dialogues from *Mahabharata* and Bhavabhuti's *Uttara Rama Charita* in support of his statements, and goes even to the length of saying that in Rigveda, too, one can find authentic references to such a practice. In this connection, I would like to point out that the word used in Rigveda for a cow is 'Aghanya' meaning 'one not to be killed'. There are verses in which it is specifically mentioned that one who eats flesh of man or horse, one who kills cows and deprives other people of their milk deserves to be beheaded if he can not be persuaded by any other means to desist from such sin. In *Mahabharata*, also, it is pointed out that in Vedic fire sacrifices, only grains should be offered as oblation. (145-46)

In the chapter titled "The Anodyne" (219-266), Chaudhuri writes about the Hindu attitude to sex. He declares that the discussion in this chapter is mainly focused on ancient Hindu attitude towards carnal pleasures and can be stated thus: "[M]an is a creature devoted to the penis and the belly" (221). Chaudhuri speculates that the physical sufferings of the Aryans probably turned them to sexual pleasures. Most of the Hindu classical texts deal with sex, according to Chaudhuri. Talking about the sexual life of the Hindu gods and sages, he writes:

Even more significant than the lechery of the Hindu Gods is the full an active sexual life attributed to the sages or Rishis. When they were alone they became extremely excitable, somewhat in the manner of rogue elephants living their solitary life away from the herds. Then the mere sight of naked or semi-naked women made them forget themselves, and even brought about involuntary emissions. (226-27)

He terms the sculptures of Khajuraho and Konark as symbols of carnal pleasures. However, he entirely overlooks the element of art. As a result, he is unable to see the aesthetic and spiritual aspects of the Indian art. For him

... the seekers of enlightenment in India do not know that the Hindus do not even possess a word of their own for spirituality, and seekers of sexual potency do not know that the greatest shadow that hangs over the very private life of modern Hindus is the fear of impotence of all kinds. (256-57)

Sinha, however, dismisses Chaudhuri's speculation entirely, remarking that "[n]owhere is there any evidence in ancient texts that the Aryans took wholly to sex as a release from physical pain inflicted on them by the Indian clime" (150).

Chaudhuri's one sided view of art shapes and distorts his understanding of the place of religion in the life of Indians. He states that ancient Hindu scriptures do not exhort people to go to pilgrimages. He actually sees such places as commercial spots only; "... even now the places of pilgrimage and religious fairs are looked upon by prostitutes as particularly profitable centres for their profession" (262).

The chapter titled "The Hindu Acedia" (266-81) describes Hindus as inactive and degraded people in their daily life. On the "nature" of the Hindus, Chaudhuri comments that they are always quarrelling over minor issues; they abuse each other openly but, after some time relapse into a friendly relationship. They have a habit of backbiting, according to him. He compares the Indians with the Japanese people who, according to him, are generally very calm (272). This is nothing more than a typical, unfounded claim of Chaudhuri.

He discusses the question of minorities in India in the three chapters, titled "The Least of the Minorities" (281-304), "The Half-Caste Minorities - Genetic and Cultural", (304-37) and "The Dominant Minority" (338-64). The Muslims are "the least" of the minorities; the Eurasians and the Indian-Christians are half-caste minorities; the Anglicized Hindus are the dominant minority, according to him.

Chaudhuri expresses his sympathy for the Muslims in both Pakistan and India. He states that the small but "brave country" (292) Pakistan is always under the threat of India and other countries, and the Muslims in India are also treated badly. He declares that if he were a Muslim, he would never have cared to live in India. He holds the view that partition was an act perpetrated by selfish politicians. In his criticism, he neither spares Gandhi nor Nehru nor Jinnah. According to him, Jinnah "had no deep faith in Islam as a religion, but treated it as a form of nationalism" (292). In addition, Chaudhuri holds the British responsible for the partition:

[a]fter inciting Muslim separatism in every way for more than half a century and making a substantial contribution to the impossible situation which led to the partition of India, the British statesmen thought that their duty to Pakistan was fulfilled. . . (293).

Criticizing the politics of the time, he states that "[t]he creation of an independent state for the Muslims of India, or at all events for a majority of them, was the greatest achievement of the double-faced policy" (302).

The Genetic and Cultural Half-Caste Minorities are called the “underdogs of Indian society” (304) by Chaudhuri. According to him, the first group includes “the communities in which there is an actual intermixture of European and pre-existing blood, mostly Hindu” (306) and the second group includes “the converts into Christianity” (309). He does not write sympathetically about these groups. He writes about the preference of the Hindus’ for Eurasian sex workers, which is responsible for the stereotyping of these women as having loose morals. He also doubts the competence of the teachers belonging to these groups; they cannot exercise any moral, cultural or intellectual leadership over their students. Chaudhuri’s views are obviously inspired by some personal bias and have no possible justification.

Chaudhuri explodes with bitterness when he writes about the Anglicized upper middle-class Indians. He calls them “the dominant minority” which very cleverly controls the masses and is in the front ranks in every field. He calls them “self-hybridized” (338), because of their personal affiliations with Europe. According to him, this selfish class uses the innocent people of the country, and the western countries manipulate this class to implement their policies in the country. Chaudhuri, however also remarks that this class of the Indians has not assimilated the western scientific spirit but only imitates the western sartorial and culinary styles to show off their false modernity. He is very unhappy with this Anglicized class, which has no authentic relationship with their culture. He divides them into four groups: 1. The officers of the armed forces 2. The bureaucratic and professional elite 3. The technicians and 4. The youth in schools and colleges (340-41). According to him, these are the four groups, through which this Anglicized class rules over the country, and Nehru, according to him was the prominent figure among these Anglicized Indians. In fact he even states that the existence of this rude and snobbish group is due to the support of Nehru, and it will automatically disappear after his death. Chaudhuri’s extremely poor sense of history is in evidence in his attempt to relate the perpetuation or disappearance of a whole social class to a single individual. Although he correctly exposes the hypocrisy of this class yet there is a strong tone of personal resentment in his argument.

In the Epilogue titled “Circe’s Triumph” (372-76), Chaudhuri repeats that India is the continent of the demoness called Circe:

[n]o invader who has come into her great continent has been able to resist her spell, and the British who broke it ultimately and went home without first hearing the spirits of their dead heroes are still longing after her with the docility of cattle.
(372)

According to him, Circe is happy today to see “the completeness of her handiwork” (376). Although Circe is happy, he offers himself as the rescuer to the Hindus from her spell. It is ironic that he wishes to rescue the Hindus while taking recourse to an ancient western myth. His attempt to rewrite history is, moreover, framed within a myth: this probably explains his treatment of history. He invents and improvises with abandon without the least regard for the properties of historiography.

It is significant that *The Continent of Circe* was an important but controversial book about India to come out in the 1960s. It was markedly different from the kind of books that had been written earlier, particularly in the years before independence. As we

have noted in the papers presented earlier, Aurobindo and Nehru offered a glorifying and romanticizing vision of India. The 1960s, with the crisis of Nehruvian socialism, afforded a different ideological position for an author to reflect on India. That position, combined with Chaudhuri's subjective experiences of disillusionment and resentment, produced the ambivalence which characterizes Chaudhuri's treatment of the Indian society, politics, culture and history. The author situates himself at once in India and outside India. He is an authentic "Hindu"/Indian exactly because he is grounded in, as he believes, the European culture. The authentic Indian is an Aryan of European descent, according to him. Neither the westernized upper middle class of the Indians nor the western scholars on India can give a correct account of India, according to Chaudhuri, something which he can do because of his dual position. However, one can see that there is a potential for fascism in Chaudhuri's discourse, which moves violently between the apparent objectivity of scientific reason on the one hand and the angry cynicism of a 'disinherited' Indian intellectual on the other.

Footnotes :

- ¹ "Mother India is not a piece of earth; she is a power, a Goddess" ("Sri Aurobindo on Mother India" 1).
- ² Khushwant Singh praises Chaudhuri in one of his interviews, whereas Chaudhuri here praises Khushwant Singh for lending him a typing machine and later presenting him with a brand new portable one (1-2).
- ³ Nehru had passed away in 1964, a year before the publication of the book.
- ⁴ It would be interesting to view the continuing alienation and marginalization of the tribes/adivasis in India, in the light of Chaudhuri's idea of this old conflict.
- ⁵ Tara Sinha has pointed out that "[t]he Buddhists recognized that the final realization of the process of Karma is to be found in the ultimate dissolution called 'Nirvana' but nowhere do they say that this dissolution is extinction" (138-39).

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