CHAPTER - III

A POST-MORTEM ON INDIAN SOCIETY
A POST-MORTEM ON INDIAN SOCIETY

Nirad C. Chaudhuri’s third book, THE CONTINENT OF CIRCE, was published in 1966. The author applies historical method and discovers a continuing, dynamic and an explosive process within which history and geography have worked to create endless conflicts and dissimilar communities. The account links all historic events from Aryan migration up to Nehru’s death in a coherent, though shifting perspective, which also reveals that the grip of established tradition on all communities has not relaxed.

THE CONTINENT OF CIRCE is sub-titled “An Essay On The Peoples of India”. But, Chaudhuri makes only a formidable attack on all things Indian instead of making an objective analyses of the Indian history. Inspite of his tall claim to have “a full - fledged epistemology”, a theory of knowledge, an essential prerequisite to understand India, Chaudhuri has launched a bitter diatribe against the Hindus in this book. Chaudhuri believes that India is a defective kind of Europe. This book deals mainly with the influence of the Indian environment on the Hindu character. It is full of geographical explanations and climatological philosophy. Chaudhuri’s assertion is that the Hindus are the descendants of a European race _______ the Aryans __________ who lost their
glorious heritage because of the awful climate of this subcontinent. He says:

The Hindu is the European distorted, corrupted and made degenerate by the cruel torried environment and by the hostility, both real and imagined, of the true sons of the soil. (p.131)*

It is surprising that Chaudhuri learns about his European origin only after his visit to England in 1955 at the age of fifty seven. He has slowly recovered his original soul from a state of misery, caused by a spell of Circe on him, by forming the European habits. This is clear from his own words: “I have rescued my European soul from Circe to whom it was a kind of happiness to be in thrall”. (p.309). He feels assured that he has saved himself from the prevailing swinishness while other Hindus continue to suffer on the Continent of Circe. It is clear that

Chaudhuri has a European soul in him though he is a Hindu. Though he makes a conscious effort to absorb the phenomenal world through his senses and looks at the world with an extreme alertness, he also attempts to rationalize and give a historical veneer to his prejudices and mercilessly attacks all things Indian.

All reference in parenthesis are from The Continent of Circe Jaico : Bombay 1974.
THE CONTINENT OF CIRCE stands for the vast continent of India. In Greek mythology Circe is a great sorceress known for her black magic and venomous herbs. She has murdered her husband to obtain his kingdom. Any one who drinks from her cup turns into a pig. She has detained Ulysses and changed all his companions into filthy swine. Chaudhuri’s metaphorical choice of the title of the book is that ‘India is the sorceress, people who make it their home, in the course of time, become dehumanized and turn into swine.

Critical opinion is divided with regard to the book. On the one hand critics, like Rama Murthy and S.Venkata Narayana¹, welcome Chaudhuri’s onslaught on Hindu faith, Indian tradition, culture and history as a self-therapy for a nation directly in need for its own bitter truth:

In the Continent of Circe Mr. Chaudhuri expands his earlier views to their logical conclusion. The majesty and solemnity of the Autobiography passes here into a tumultuous turbulence of a spirit vexed by the growing stupidity and inhumanity of a nation that is still beloved to his heart.

Taking note of the intensely personal and passionate quality of Chaudhuri’s doctrine some other critics declare that the main thesis of the author in THE CONTINENT OF CIRCE” takes the form of a diabolic
vision: the Indians are swine". Radhakrishna Murthy dismisses Chaudhuri’s so-called truth as “Soporific distortion of fact” and calls him a lunatic, an eccentric and megalomaniac.

According to Chaudhuri the world’s knowledge of secretive India since 1947 is vitiated by contemporary requirements of international friendship and the consequent timidity. Chaudhuri blames Indo-Anglian novelists for the world’s inaccurate knowledge of India:

The Novelists, too conscious of the demand, and keen to meet it, go about the country note-book in hand, collect local colour and turns of speech, record snatches of conversation, with special reference to such slips in English as lend themselves to caricature, and then three quarters is ponderous solemnity, and quarter in cold-blooded self-seeking malice, they turn out works which are no more fiction than blue-books are fables. (p.23).

But, Chaudhuri is not accurate. India has been depicted more effectively in the Indo-Anglian novels only. Chaudhuri may be right in feeling that a cultural gap creates a translation handicap and poses a problem of adequate and precise verbal device when the Indian writers in
English “try to see their country and society in the way Englishmen or Americans do and write about India in the jargon of the same masters”. But one may feel that Chaudhuri fails to give an example of artificial themes. Any literary critic impartially admits that the best Indo-Anglian writing does reflect both thematic authenticity and technical excellence. For example, R.K.Narayan’s THE ENGLISH TEACHER provides a wonderful microcosm of the Indian culture. Raja Rao, in his expatriate’s idealization of India, provides an interesting counterpoint to Chaudhuri’s heretical portrait of his own country. G.V. Desani, in ALL ABOUT H- HATTERR, presents a much better picture of a confused Eurasian than does Chaudhuri in his AUTOBIOGRAPHY. So Chaudhuri is not correct in assuming that the Indian Writer in English has to bear the difficult double burden of creating “an adequate Western idiom” (p.14) and writing genuine Indian themes. Chitre aptly observes:

It is not picture-postcard Indianness he objects to: he only wants better picture-postcards. He will perhaps accuse any modern, self-conscious and highly individualistic Indian creative writer of being un-Indian. He seems to expect all Indian novelists in English to write in a naturalistic, realistic or documentary
vien. That amounts to forcibly pushing them backward into the nineteenth century.  

Due to his pessimistic attitude to India Chaudhuri advises foreigners not to work too hard in India: “Count, you Europeans take too much on yourselves in our tropical country.............In India, that is not doing one’s duty, but committing suicide” (p.18) Chaudhiri’s unflinching sense of realism reaches disproportionate dimensions when he says ----- ‘................. a man who can not endure dirt, dust, stench, noise, ugliness, disorder, heat and cold has no right to live in India”.  

If in matters of public hygiene and sanitation, India is far behind of them of the western World. It is due to the dire poverty of Indians which is the important legacy of the British empire in India.  

In the next two chapters, “From The Word To The Eye” and “Deposits of Time” Chaudhuri discusses the ethnic situation in India. The word ‘Hindu’ does not have a religious connotation for him and he prefers to equate the term ‘Hindu’ with the term ‘Indian’.  

It needs very little Greek to discover that the words ‘Hindu’ and ‘Indian’ are etymologically the same 

............. The definition originally meant ‘an inhabitant
of the region of the river Indus (in Sanskrit --Sindhu), but was extended to the people of the whole continent. Thus, in its primary meaning, the word 'Hindu' stands for the same thing as Indian ...........

Chaudhuri does not accept any kind of religious association with the word 'Hindu'. He also refuses even to think that we are Hindus because we have a religion called 'Hinduism' and the word is comparable to 'Christian' or 'Muslim'. According to Chaudhuri the European Orientalists found that "............... the Hindus had no other name for the whole complex of their religious beliefs and practices except the phrase 'Sanatana Dharma' or the Eternal Way; they did not even have a word of their own for religion in the European sense; and so the Orientalists coined the word 'Hinduism' to describe that complex of religion. Actually we Hindus are not Hindus because we have a religion called or understood as Hindus; our religion has been given the very imprecise label of 'Hinduism', because it is the jumble of the creeds and rituals of a people known as Hindus after their country. On this analogy, the Greek religion might be called Hellenism, and even Graecism".

Jawaharlal Nehru, in THE DISCOVERY OF INDIA, interprets the word 'Hindu':
The word ‘Hindu’ does not occur at all in our ancient literature. The first reference to it in an Indian book is, I am told, in a Tantrik work of the eighth century A.D., where ‘Hindu’ means a people and not the followers of a particular religion. But it is clear that the word is a very old one, as it occurs in the Avesta and in old Persian. It was used then and for a thousand years or more later by the peoples of Western and Central Asia for India, or rather for the people living on the either side of the Indus river. The word is clearly derived from Sindhu, the old, as well as the present, Indian name for the Indus. From this Sindhu came the words Hindus and Hindusthan, as well as Indus or India.10

Nehru, discussing the religious connotation of the word ‘Hindu’, remarks that though Buddhism and Jainism arose in India and remained the integral parts of the Indian life, culture and philosophy certainly did not belong to Hinduism or the Vedic dharma. Nehru strongly desires that Indian culture should not be referred to as Hindu culture. For Nehru Hinduism, as a faith, is vague, amorphous, many-sided and it is difficult to say definitely whether it is a religion or not in the usual sense of the word. That is why he considers it incorrect to use the term ‘Hindu’ or
'Hinduism' for Indian culture even with reference to the distant past, although the various aspects of thought, as embodied in ancient writings, were the dominant expression of that culture.

Dr. S. Radhkrishnan believes that the Hindu civilization is so called, since its original founders or earliest followers occupied the territory drained by the Sindhu (the Indus) river system corresponding to the North-West Frontier provinces and the Punjab. He also feels that as this civilization extended over the whole of India it suffered many changes, but still kept up its continuity with the old Vedic type developed on the banks of Sindhu. He states:

The term 'Hindu' had originally a territorial and not a credal significance. It implied residence in a well-defined geographical area. Aboriginal tribes, savage and half-civilized people, the cultural Dravidians and the Vedic Aryans were all Hindus as they were the sons of the same mother.  

K.V. Rangaswami Iyengar opines that the word 'Hindu' is derived from Pahlavi Hendu, the name given by the Persians to the river the Sindhu. According to him it is possible that it was also due to a racial distinction from the rest of the people of the Persian Empire the name
was applied to the Indians as the word ‘Hindu’ meant ‘dark’ in Pahlavi. In Sanskrit the word ‘Hindu’ stands for ‘Arya’. So, K.V. Rangaswami Iyengar says: “the word ‘Hindu’ is thus not an extremely religious term; it denotes also a country (Aryavarta or Bharatavarsa), and to a certain extent also a race. It has geographical, spiritual and ethnic bases. When a man claims to be a Hindu, he should strictly qualify for three tests: religion, parentage and country”.

Chaudhuri now describes in detail the physical characteristics of the main ethnic groups and the conflicts among them. He classifies Indians into three groups —--------- the Dark, the Yellow, and the Brown. This classification is derived from Herbert Risley’s THE PEOPLE OF INDIA. The Darks, with their sharp and modelled faces, lived in the hilly and wooded areas of Central India and the Deccan; the Yellow Mongoloids confined themselves to the Himalayan regions and the hills of Assam; and the sharp featured Browns lived in the plains. The Darks and the Yellows are the aboriginals. The Browns are the Aryans, the Hindus. The Muslims of India can be distinguished from the Hindus by their dress, speech, manners, features and expression. Chaudhuri, in the book, proposes to describe people of India in their natural groupings, both ethnic and cultural, and analyses their collective personality in the light of the historical evolution which has formed it”.

In this book the chief
doctrine of Chaudhuri is that the Hindus are of European stock, immigrant Aryans from Mitannaian --- Mesopotamia, who colonized the Indo- Gangetic plains and certain area of South India.

Chaudhuri is very orthodox as far as his classification of race is concerned, but he is unorthodox in his views about the caste system. When everyone else speaks against the caste-system Chaudhuri champions in favour of this institution. He says that only a strong dose of casteism prevents undeserving people from obtaining the high offices. Chaudhuri asserts:

If the system suppressed anything it was only ambition unrelated to ability, and watching the mischief from this kind of ambition in India today I would say that we could do with a little more of the caste system in order to put worthless adventures in their place.\(^{14}\)

Most of the people may not be convinced with this typical attitude of Chaudhuri. For him various charges made against the caste – system are unfounded. It neither creates diversity and disunity, nor does it interfere with economic freedom nor bars the way to talent. There was no other way, apart from the caste – system, in which the Aryans could
preserve their ethnic, social and cultural personality from being submerged into a conglomeration with native Darks. The elasticity of this system would have facilitated the assimilation of foreign barbarians and the promotion of the Dark to the Hindu status. But Chaudhuri is not correct in his tracing the origin of the caste-system in India. It was not 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.

Taking the caste-system as a whole Chaudhuri describes it "as a social organization which contributes to order, stability and regulation of competition" and advises the foreign reformers of the Hindu society and their Hindu imitators: "Please keep your tongues and pens off the caste-system .......... 'Please do no pulverize a society which has no other force of cohesion, into amorphous dust'.15

One understands from these remarks that Chaudhuri's "view against an egalitarian society is born out of a kind of misplaced prejudice".16 The caste originally meant the division of function and responsibility in the agrarian society of the Hindus. People were divided into different castes according to social needs and individual action. Division of labour is the main inspiration behind the fourfold caste
system. In the Vedic society this system had a noble beginning, but, in due course of time, many evils crept into it. As the caste system has no utility one feels that Chaudhuri should not have supported it.

Chaudhuri further points out that the caste system failed to cope with the Islamic invasion and the British expansion which created cultural and genetic cleavages in a society already split apart into Aryan and aboriginal. He feels that the Hindus lost their power to assimilate and adapt themselves to the new cults. The true ethnic relationship has got completely broken by a new cultural and social association. Chaudhuri wants to prove that the Hindus have become aliens in India without their knowledge due to Muslim conquests and the British or European expansion. Just to formulate his theory and apply the legend of Circe it would have become essential for him to say that the Hindus have remained aliens in India. But, Chaudhuri fails to realize the fact that the historical evidence he presents to support his thesis holds no ground as they are the result of a subjective analyses of the historical facts. As such he seems to contradict his own view that a historian must be objective.

The Sorceress Circe has filled Chaudhuri’s heart with compassion for her unfortunate and poor children — the aboriginals. He bemoans the fact that the aboriginals are used as a cultural commodity and no genuine affection is shown to them. He fears that the industrialization
will unnecessarily Europeanize them and makes them run away from their pastoral surroundings. One may fail to understand why Chaudhuri wants the children of Circe to remain innocent for ever and to be conscious of their environment. Verghese very aptly remarks:

One wonders why Chaudhuri wants them to remain innocent for ever ............... That the tribal people and the aboriginal should continue to exist in their natural state unsullied by industrialization is a bee in Chaudhiri’s bonnet which of course in enormous enough to accommodate such bees as the caste-system and class-distinctions. Perhaps he prefers an unschooled Caliban to a schooled one. There is no doubt that Chaudhuri’s sympathy for ‘the Children of Circe is quite misplaced.17

Chaudhuri believes the Englishmen did not behave properly in India because they could not adjust to the Indian climate. Chaudhuri could understand the causes of the British behaviour in India only after his visit to England. He puts forward elaborate arguments to defend and justify the atrocious behaviour of the English Imperialists towards the Indians during the British rule. Chaudhuri attributes all the vices of the British character and their evil administration in India to the Indian climate. But, all his criticism of the Indian climate’s influence on the
Englishmen is highly imaginary and too far-fetched to convince the reader.

Now Chaudhuri calls the Hindus a war-mongering people. He asserts that on one hand the Hindus preach non-violence, which is only a rationalization of their cowardice, and on the other hand, they are vehemently militaristic in their outlook. According to him the Hindus are a peace-loving and non-violent people is a fallacy. Examples are cited from the pages of Indian history, Sanskrit literature, Hindu epics and Hindu mythology. References are also made to the Indian National Movement, the Gandhian doctrine of non-violence and the Chinese invasion. He believes that Ashoka’s inscriptions have misled us about the Hindu non-violence and that Ashoka took to non-violence only when there was nothing left to conquer. Actually Ashoka could have proceeded to conquer Burma or China or Afghanistan or Iran. The thirteenth rock edict clearly shows that he desisted from further warfare because of the misery and carnage caused by the Kalinga battle. Chaudhuri conveniently ignores these facts. He says that Bhima’s kicking the dying Duryodhana in the MAHABHARATA demonstrates the callous act of the Hindus, but deliberately avoids mentioning the fact that Bhima’s undignified, callous act is condemned in that epic. References to the Jats’ killing a number of Muslim women and the Marathas’ war-cry ‘Har Har
Mahadeo' are made by him only to show the Hindus' aggressiveness and their love of war. In quoting these instances Chaudhuri fails to see that similar conditions prevail all over the world, including Greece, Rome, Europe and the U.S.A. R.K. Kaul rightly says:

       ....... One does not have to go to the remote past to find Hindu militarism.... .... The history of Europe and America is stained with violence, and ironically the worst exhibitions of violence form the Spanish inquisition to Belsen and Auschwitz took place either in the name of Christ or by exploiting the un-Christian sentiments against the Jews.18

Chaudhuri's version of India's war with China is strange for an Indian as he distorts the facts. He attributes that the war with China was a windfall for the government and that a deep-seated and genuine militarism produced a readiness in the Hindus to part with money. He accuses Nehru and Dr. S.Radakrishnan also of militarism. But, EVERY PATRIOT IN India would remember the great deceit of China to India's proposition of 'Panch Sheela' and her attack of India. Unfortunately Chaudhuri blames India for the Indo-China War.
Chaudhuri rightly says that the British understood the Hindu mind only in so far as it served their interest "The Hindu spirituality of which the West spoke was the creation of a Western spiritual necessity......."19. The European idealists lost all faith in Indian spirituality when they came into contact with the reality. Chaudhuri feels that the Westerners applied the renaissance norms of reason, order and measure to Hindu behaviour and found them missing. In the Hindu life he finds only paradoxes Hindu fast and then overeat; they suffer from washing mania and still remain unclean, they seem indifferent to money but try to earn and hoard more. Though Chaudhuri is right to some extent in pointing out the contradictions among the Hindus, he is partial and biased in his portrayal of the collective Hindu personality.

Chaudhuri considers Vedas as non-devotional Books. It is an extremely negative attitude of him to say that the Hindus are unable to cultivate any critical spirit because of their treatment of the Vedas as the repository of all learning. But, if the influence of the Vedas is limited even in the case of the six schools of Indian philosophy, it is much less so in Indian thought in general. Chaudhuri ignores the scholarly tradition that has prevailed through the ages in India. Chaudhuri believes that the Hindus love fair complexion. Of course, the love of white skin is a universal phenomenon. Chaudhuri fails to see that the negros also have
The Hindus worship their rivers as they believe that their waters wash away all the sins. Chaudhuri considers river-worship irrational. Indians are at the mercy of the monsoons. Water or river is usually loved in a hot country. The Hindus love cows also and Chaudhuri's thought that the Hindus hate the British and the Muslims as they eat beef is also not correct.

The Hindu attitude to sex is discussed. Chaudhuri maintains that the physical suffering of the Aryans by the Indian climate made them turn to sexual enjoyment a lot. But, nowhere in any Indian writing of considerable standard is to be found evidence of a general onrush of the Aryans towards sex as a release from physical suffering. Chaudhuri finds fault with the erotic figures on the Indian temples and says that the Westerners go to Khajuraho and Konark longing to see Indian art and religion. The application of religious formula to the erotic temple art is irrelevant. Because, the Indians donot look up to the gods in the Christian or the Roman or the Greek sense. The whole liturgy of worship in temples is a ministration of the daily needs and life of a divine kind. Gods to Hindus are supernatural kings in the image of the earthly kings. "The Khajuraho and the Konark sculptures are too intense, too integrated
in form and feeling to be independent of religion on temple walls". 

Chaudhuri condemns the Hindu erotic manuals as “one of the diseases of civilization”. One should not forget that the Hindus always put a lot of emphasis over moral, sensual and economic aspects of sex. They do not consider sex to be the best of all pleasures. From the Vedic period onwards the fundamental aspect of the Hindu faith has been that this universe is the outcome of the cosmic union between the male and the female.

The minority of the Indian population, according to Chaudhuri, is made up of three main genetic and cultural groups (a) the Muslims, the least of the Minorities; (b) the Eurasians or Anglo-Indians and the Indian Christians, Half-Caste Minorities and (c) the Anglicized Hindus, labelled the Dominant Minority. Chaudhuri traces the whole history of Muslims' nationalism sympathises with them. He believes that, with the creation of Pakistan, Indian Muslims are lost between two worlds - one dead and the other powerless to be born. The Indian Muslims still feel a loyalty to Pakistan. Their earlier role in siding with the British and their pan-Islamic sympathy are the reasons for the Hindu disfavour to them. The Genetic and the Cultural Half-Caste Minorities are the “underdogs of Indian Society”. Chaudhuri maintains that the half-castes of India are neither the possessors of a composite culture nor
natural and healthy hybrids racially or culturally. His dislike for the Indian Christians is caused by the fact that they were close to the British when they were ruling India. He would have been happy if the Goan Christians had remained from the main stream of Indian life. He is unhappy at the merger of Goa with India because he thinks that the Continent of Circe has its degrading influence on the gay life symbolized by the Calungute and Colva beaches. Chaudhuri sneers more at the Anglicised upper middle -class Indians whom he labels as ‘the dominant minority’. The Anglicised Hindus are (i) the officers of the Armed Forces, (ii) the bureaucratic, managerial and professional elite, (iii) the technicians and (iv) the youth in schools and colleges. Chaudhuri exposes their hypocrisy. His bitterness about this class is mainly due to some personal grievances. He feels that this upper middle –class people donot accord to him the respect which he is entitled to. This shows Chaudhuri’s status –consciousness.

In the ‘Epilogue’ Chaudhuri claims that he has rescued himself from the prevailing swinishness of the Hindus who were long ago turned into beasts by Circe. He abandons his countrymen to their degradation. But he calls upon them to realize their ancient Aryan racial origins and recover their original European spirit. Nowhere does he ask them to recognize their human potential and individual identity. Chaudhuri’s
thoughts and ideas in “THE CONTINENT OF CIRCE” seem to be the aggressive gestures of a deeply insecure man. Though the intention of this book appears to be a study of the Hindu character and its disintegration it cannot be considered an authentic history of the Hindus or the Indians. Chaudhuri’s hatred and abuse donot seem to have any noble purpose behind them. Violent and destructive criticism against any system is unethical. Chaudhuri’s view on D.H.Lawrence doesnot sound sensible though it may apply to LADY CHATTERLEY’S LOVER to some extent. But, he praises Lawrence for his intuition and denigrates Vatsyanana for his cerebration and this shows Chaudhuri’s dual nature. His hatred and criticism of Hindu philosophy, Hindu asceticism and other systems of Hindus are perhaps the result of an acute sense of insecurity in himself, in his society and also of his craving for a status and acceptance among the elite. Chaudhuri could have conquered the environment even with a position and soft attitude to it instead of defying his native country and her people. However, Chaudhuri’s THE CONTINENT OF CIRCE serves as a work of propaganda for the Hindu middle class.
NOTES


15. Ibid, p.58.


17. Ibid, p.84

