


Nirad C. Chaudhuri

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The blue plaque for Nirad Chaudhuri in Lathbury Road, North Oxford. ^[1]	
Born	November 23, 1897 Kishoreganj, Mymensingh, British India (now Bangladesh)
Died	August 1, 1999 (aged 101) Lathbury Road, Oxford, England
Pen name	Balahak Nandi, <i>Sonibarar Cithi</i> Outsider, <i>Now</i>
Occupation	writer and commentator on culture
Nationality	Indian
Period	1930s-1999
Genres	literature, culture, politics, war strategy, winery

Nirad C. Chaudhuri (Bengali: নীরদ চন্দ্র চৌধুরী *Nirod Chôndro Choudhuri*) (23 November 1897 – 1 August 1999) was a Bengali–English writer and cultural commentator. He was born in 1897 in Kishoreganj, which today is part of Bangladesh but at that time was part of Bengal, a region of British India. He is known for his hostility to Islam and Hindu extremist ideology.

He was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award, in 1975 for his biography on Max Müller called *Scholar Extraordinary*, by the Sahitya Akademi, India's national academy of letters.^[1] In 1992, he was honoured by Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom with the title of Commander of Order of the British Empire (CBE). His 1965 work *The Continent of Circe* earned him the Duff Cooper Memorial Award, becoming the first and only Indian to be selected for the prize.

Biography

Chaudhuri was educated in Kishoreganj and Kolkata (then known as Calcutta). For his FA (school leaving) course he attended the Ripon College in Calcutta along with the famous Bengali writer Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay. Following this, he attended the prestigious Scottish Church College, Calcutta, where he studied history as his undergraduate major. He graduated with honors in history and topped the University of Calcutta merit list. At **Scottish Church College**, he attended the seminars of renowned historian Professor Kalidas Nag. After graduation, he enrolled for the M.A. level course at the University of Calcutta. However, he did not attend all of his final exams of the M.A. programme, and therefore did not earn his M.A. degree.

He started his career as a clerk in the Accounting Department of the Indian Army. At the same time, he started contributing articles to popular magazines. His first article on Bharat Chandra (a famous Bengali poet of the 18th century) appeared in the most prestigious English magazine of the time, *Modern Review*.

Chaudhuri left the job in the Accounting Department shortly after, and started a new career as a journalist and editor. During this period he was a boarder in Mirzapur Street near College Square, Kolkata, living together with the writers

Bibhuti Bhushan Banerjee and Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumder. He was involved in the editing of the then well-known English and Bengali magazines *Modern Review*, *Prabasi* and *Sonibarar Chithi*. In addition, he also founded two short-lived but highly esteemed Bengali magazines, *Samasamayik* and *Notun Patrika*. He married Amiya Dhar, a well-known writer herself, in 1932, and the couple had three sons.

In 1938, Chaudhuri obtained a job as secretary to Sarat Chandra Bose, a political leader from the freedom movement in India. As a result he was able to interact with the political leaders of India - Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and the more famous brother of Sarat Chandra Bose - Subhas Chandra Bose, the future Netaji. This familiarity with the workings of the inner circle of Indian politics led him to be skeptical about its eventual progress, and he became progressively disillusioned about the ability of Indian political leadership.

Apart from his career as a secretary, Chaudhuri continued to contribute articles in Bengali and English to newspapers and magazines. He was also appointed as a political commentator on the Kolkata branch of the All India Radio. In 1941, he started working for the Delhi Branch of the All India Radio.

Chaudhuri was a prolific writer even in the very last years of his life, publishing his last work at the age of 99. His wife Amiya Chaudhuri died in 1994 in Oxford, England. He too died in Oxford, two months short of his 102nd birthday, in 1999. He lived at 20 Lathbury Road[□] from 1982 until his death and a blue plaque was installed by the Oxfordshire Blue Plaques Board in 2008.[□]

Major works

His masterpiece, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (ISBN 0-201-15576-1), published in 1951, put him on the short list of great Indian writers. He courted controversy in the newly independent India due to the dedication of the book, which ran thus:

“ To the memory of the British Empire in India,
Which conferred subjecthood upon us,
But withheld citizenship.
To which yet every one of us threw out the
challenge:
"Civis Britannicus sum"
Because all that was good and living within us
Was made, shaped and quickened
By the same British rule.



20 Lathbury Road, the former home of Nirad Chaudhuri, with its blue plaque.[□]

The dedication, which was actually a mock-imperial rhetoric, infuriated many Indians, particularly the political and bureaucratic establishment. "*The wogs took the bait and having read only dedication sent up howls of protest*", commented Chaudhuri's friend, the editor, historian and novelist Khushwant Singh.^[citation needed] Chaudhuri was hounded out of government service, deprived of his pension, blacklisted as a writer in India and forced to live a life of penury. Furthermore, he had to give up his job as a political commentator in All India Radio as the Government of India promulgated a law that prohibited employees from publishing memoirs. Chaudhuri commented later that he had been misunderstood. "*The dedication was really a condemnation of the British rulers for not treating us as equals*", he wrote in the *Granta* article.^[citation needed] Typically, to demonstrate what exactly he had been trying to say, he drew on a parallel with Ancient Rome. The book's dedication, he said "was an imitation of what Cicero said about the conduct of Verres, a Roman proconsul of Sicily who oppressed Sicilian Roman citizens, who in their desperation cried out: "*Civis romanus sum*".

In 1955, the British Council and the BBC jointly made arrangements to take Chaudhuri to England for eight weeks. He was asked to contribute lectures to the BBC. He contributed eight lectures on British life. Later these lectures are

collected in the *Passage to England* modified and edited. E. M. Forster reviewed it in *The Times Literary Supplement*. His 1965 work *The Continent of Circe* earned him the Duff Cooper Memorial Award, becoming the first and only Indian to be selected for the prize. In 1972, he was the subject of a Merchant Ivory documentary, *Adventures of a Brown Man in Search of Civilization*. He published a sequel to his autobiography entitled *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!* in 1988. In 1992, he was honoured by Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom with the title of Commander of Order of the British Empire (CBE). In 1997, at 100 years of age, he published his last book *Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse*.

Social views and writing style

Although he was highly critical of the post-independence Congress party establishment, Chaudhuri was more sympathetic to the right-wing Hindu nationalist movement in India. He refused to criticise the destruction of mosques: "“Muslims do not have the slightest right to complain about the desecration of one mosque in Ayodhya. From 1000 AD every temple from Kathiawar to Bihar, from the Himalayas to the Vindhya has been sacked and ruined. Not one temple was left standing all over northern India. They escaped destruction only where Muslim power did not gain access to them for reasons such as dense forests. Otherwise, it was a continuous spell of vandalism. No nation with any self-respect will forgive this. What happened in Ayodhya would not have happened had the Muslims acknowledged this historical argument even once.”"^[2]

Chaudhuri was also deeply distressed by what he saw as the deep hypocrisy in Bengali social life and in particular those that resulted from class and caste distinctions. His historical research revealed to him that the rigid Victorianesque morality of middle class Bengali women was a socially enforced construct, that had less to do with religion, choice and judgment, but more to do with upbringing, social acceptance and intergenerational transference of values.

His prose was highly influenced by Sanskrit and the older version of the Bengali language, the *Shadhubhasha* (সাধুভাষা). He had little respect for the proletarian language, *Choltibhasha* (চলতিভাষা) or *Cholitobhasha* (চলতিভাষা), which he regarded as being common in taste and scope. He avoided the use of words and expressions originating from Arabic, Urdu and Persian that are very common in modern Bengali (though not as common as in Hindi).

Controversies

Nirad C Chaudhuri is accused of being in secret connivance with the British and leaked information about the whereabouts of Sarat Ch. Bose. This led to arrest of Sarat Bose during the Independence struggle. .^[3]

Honours

- Sahitya Akademi award in 1975.
- DLitt from Oxford University in 1990.^[4]

Books

Chaudhuri wrote the following books in English:

- *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (1951)
- *A Passage to England* (1959)
- *The Continent of Circe* (1965)
- *The Intellectual in India* (1967)
- *To Live or Not to Live* (1971)
- *Scholar Extraordinary, The Life of Professor the Right Honourable Friedrich Max Muller, P.C.* (1974)
- *Culture in the Vanity Bag* (1976)

- *Clive of India* (1975)
- *Hinduism: A Religion to Live by* (1979)
- *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!* (1987)
- *Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse* (1997)
- *The East is East and West is West* (collection of pre-published essays)
- *From the Archives of a Centenarian* (collection of pre-published essays)
- *Why I Mourn for England* (collection of pre-published essays)

He also wrote the following books in Bengali:

- *Bangali Jibane Ramani* (Role of Woman in Bengali Life)
- *Atmaghati Bangali* (Suicidal Bengalee)
- *Atmaghati Rabindranath* (Suicidal Rabindranath)
- *Amar Debottar Sampatti* (My Bequeathed Property)
- *Nirbachita Prabandha* (Selected Essays)
- *Aji Hote Satabarsha Age* (Before a Hundred Years) (A Hundred years ago)

References

[2] Ram ki Nagri, once again (<http://www.dailypioneer.com/287210/Ram-ki-Nagri-once-again.html>) Daily Pioneer - October 3, 2010

External links

- Chadhuri's Blue Plaque (<http://www.oxfordshireblueplaques.org.uk/plaques/chaudhuri.html>) at Lathbury Road in North Oxford
- Naras page (<http://www-stat.stanford.edu/~naras/ncc/>)
- Pictures at age 93 (http://www.parabaas.com/PB30/LEKHA/gNirad_english.html)
- From Banglapedia (http://banglapedia.search.com.bd/HT/C_0159.htm)
- Merchant Ivory documentary (<http://www.merchantivory.com/adventures.html>)

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