

**Text: Nirad C Chaudhuri : *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian***

This e-content is for

**B.A. Hons. (English ), Sem-V Class**

It contains material for the Paper. Unit and Text as indicated below.

**Paper IV: Indian Writing in English (Code: Eng- 504)**  
**Unit-IV Prose**

**Nirad C Chaudhuri : *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian***

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**Lecture Fifteen**

**1.12.20**

**Paper IV: Indian Writing in English (Code: Eng- 504)**

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**Nirad C Chaudhuri : *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian***

**(Published in 1951)**

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Nirad C Chaudhuri's book is for non-detailed study only. In this unit only *In Naini Prison* is for detailed study. You should prepare to answer the long question on either *In Naini Prison* or on one of the two essays by Amitav Ghosh. However, I'm providing you enough material on Chaudhuri's book also, in case you want to answer a question on him.

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## **Biography of Nirad C Chaudhuri**

Nirad C Chaudhuri was born on the 23rd November 1897 at Kishorganj in the Mymensingh district in East Bengal, now Bangladesh and died on 1st August 1999 after an eventful life of a hundred and one years.

His writing life is impressive, extending so far over seventy- one years from 1925 to 1996, perhaps the longest in history.

In its course, he had written fourteen books in English as well as Bengali, and poured out hundreds of articles and broadcasts.

He had his early schooling at Kishanganj where his father was a lawyer. He recalls that his father had taught him the use of the English language which he learnt "without tears but with toil".

In 1918 he took his BA degree with Honours in History at Scottish Church College, Calcutta and was placed in the 1st division. But somehow, he could not complete his MA in History from Calcutta University which sadly brought an end to his dream of becoming a Professor in History.

In 1921, he took up the position of a clerk in the Accounts Department of the Indian Army. That was the time when he began his writing career contributing articles for newspapers and magazines in Bengali and English.

He got tired of his job in the Account Department and resigned his position there to start a career in journalism and editing.

In 1938, he obtained a job as secretary to Sarat Chandra Bose the brother of Subhash Chandra Bose as a result of which he was able to interact with eminent political leaders of India and from it he also gained knowledge of their ways, which he could never have otherwise.

In an article on “The Gandhian Congress”, he relates his experiences of his meeting with Gandhi when the great man stayed as a guest for several weeks in Sarat Chandra Bose’s house.

However, in 1941, he left Calcutta and moved to Delhi. In Delhi, he worked as a commentator for All India Radio. But more than that, it was in Delhi that his writing career flourished with the publication of his first book *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* in 1951.

In 1955, he received an invitation from the British Council and the BBC for a five week visit to England, rounding it off with two weeks in Paris and one in Rome.

He had presented a series of talks in the BBC of his experiences England and to Europe which came out in book form *A Passage to England* Published in 1959.

Among his books *The Continent of Circe* received the Daft Cooper Award, a very prestigious literary award. He was the only Indian so far to have received the award.

Another book *Scholar Extraordinary* received the Sahitya Academy Award in 1975.

England too gave him due honours. He was honoured by the University of Oxford with the Degree of D.Litt. in 1990. But the honour that was close to Nirad C Chaudhuri’s heart was the honour conferred on him by Queen Elizabeth II in 1992. He was made a CBE, commander of the order of the British Empire. It is an award given in Britain to some people for a special achievement.

Moreover, he was awarded a Fellow of the Royal Literary Society.

He stayed on in Oxford, living out a dream. Though over the years, he became more and more disillusioned with England. He died on the 1st of August 1999 barely two months short of his one hundred and second birthday.

## Brief Summary of Major Works

Nirad C Chaudhuri was a prolific writer, writing both in English and in Bengali. He began publishing articles, in both these languages as early as the nineteen twenties when he was working in the Accounts Department of the Indian Army.

Since then, he had been writing and had established his reputation as an ardent anglophile. His well known and much criticised dedication in *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* was held as a Proof of his love for the British people and British Culture.

He had dedicated his *Autobiography*

*To the memory of The British Empire.... because all that was good and living within us was made, shaped and quickened by the same British Rule.*

Instead, attempt has been made to introduce you to the first six books through brief reviews of each of these books.

He had written altogether seven books in Bengali:

1. *Bangla Jeabone Ramoni* (1968)
2. *Atmaghati Bangali* (1988)
3. *Atmaghati Rabindranath-I* (1992)
4. *Amar Devotwar Sampati* (1994)
5. *Atmaghati Rabindranath-II* (1996)
6. *Amar Desh Amar Shatak* (1996)

Nirad C Chaudhuri received international fame as a thinker and scholar mainly because of his books in English. Some of them are-

### ***The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian (1951)***

The first Monumental book *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* brought Nirad C Chaudhuri to instant fame. The book is dedicated to ‘the memory of the British Empire which conferred subjecthood on us but without citizenship to which yet every one of us threw out the challenge...’

The book describes the conditions in which India grew to manhood in the early decades of the 20th century. Though it is supposed to be an autobiography, the book turns out to be less of a personal story and more of a national history.

Divided into four books, the first book “Early Environment” deals with the impressions formed in Chaudhuri’s boyhood days of his birthplace Kishorganj, his ancestral village, his mother’s village and England as gleaned from books and pictures that he come across.

The second book covers the “First twelve years” of his life till his family left Kishorganj.

Book III covers his education in Calcutta, his experiences of adolescence till his initiation into scholarship.

On the other hand, Book IV brings him “into the world” Indeed *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* is an extraordinary and penetrating study of the complex of social, political, racial and religious stresses of 20th Century India as seen through the eyes of Mr Chaudhuri.

## **2. *A Passage to England* (1959)**

The second book written by Chaudhuri is a collection of a series of impressions about his visit to Britain in 1955.

This book divides into four parts beginning with “The English scene”, followed by ‘The English People’, “Cultural Life” and lastly “State of the Nation”.

A keen observer, Chaudhuri contrasts various perspectives of India ranging from its colours, culture and sensibility with those of the West.

Naturally, a lover of everything that is British, Chaudhuri thinks highly of the different aspects of social behaviour of the English people. He is full of praise for the culture consciousness of the English people and equally sore at his countrymen’s lack of it. Similarly, he is full of praise for the English welfare state and laments that modern democracy in India has overlooked these vital issues.

On the whole, the book is a perspective of the author’s impression of the west vis-a-vis the East.

## **3. *The Continent of Circe* (1965):**

Chaudhuri’s third book *The Continent of Circe* is sub-titled “an essay on the people of India”.

The book which the author calls an essay consists of 376 pages. Besides an Introduction and an epilogue, the book is made up of fourteen chapters and two Appendices.

The book is about the author’s reflections on various issues related to India notably ethnicity and Hinduism.

He presents his understanding of Indian life in which the Hindus figure as the singular character. In different chapters he deals with different aspects of Hindu life which he traces from the arrival of the Aryans to the sub-continent thousands of years ago from the West.

He quotes extensively from the Vedas and the great Indian epics *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* to support his thesis on the different aspects of Hindu way of life- the man-woman relationships through the centuries with the rise and fall of civilisation.

Controversy apart, this is a very interesting book making enjoyable reading. This is the only book by an Indian author to receive the Duff Cooper Award.

#### **4. *The Intellectual in India* (1967)**

This is Nirad C Chaudhuri's fourth book in which the author deals with the contemporary situation in India.

As is obvious from the title of the book, the author first examines and describes the current conditions of intellectual activities and the situation facing the intellectuals in India. He observes that authoritarianism which runs deep in politics and social life, hostility to intellectual activities, the precarious economic situation makes the intellectual feel frustrated if not wholly paralysed. He traces the history of three intellectual traditions— The Hindu, the Islamic and the Westernised traditions which formed part of a larger movement – the Indian Renaissance.

Chaudhuri feels that the intellectual efforts of modern India had contributed towards the expansion in academic life, popularising of professions like medicine, law and teaching.

He suggests the need for financial security of the intellectual and should produce at least half a dozen books during his active professional life so that he can settle down to live by his proper work.

He suggests the importance of publishing in English. Besides one must write on such things on which the author feels deeply and sincerely. These suggestions make the book enjoyable.

#### **5. *To Live or Not to Live* (1970)**

This is Nirad C Chaudhuri's fifth book.

It deals with how we can have a happy social and family life under the conditions in which we are born in this country.

This central theme of the book is presented in two parts: Part I dealing with Social life and Part II with Family life.

The author recalls that when he first came to Delhi in 1942, the city consisted of two dominant elements: the Muslim traders and artisans and the Hindus of the trader "Bania" class who were segregated in separate mohallas and were equally important socially.

The author analyses the problems of a social life to thrive in such a heterogeneous society. He suggests that social life survives through communication between life minds.

Chaudhuri then moves on the role of the family in a happy life which constitutes part II of his book. He suggests that the joint family system must be swept aside both in theory and practice if any genuine satisfactory family life is to be built up in our society.

He is prejudiced against the working women in the context of happy family life. What inspires the author here is a genuine concern for his countrymen, how they can be happy with others in their social and family life.

## **6. *Scholar Extraordinary* (1974):**

*Scholar Extraordinary* is a biography on Fredrich Max Muller who was a German Scholar and a thinker who made remarkable contribution to the study of Sanskrit and Sanskrit literature in Germany. The book had been the author's pain-staking labour stretching four years; but indeed, it was to him a labour of love.

The author himself records in the book that it had been a memorable experience for him and not merely a task.

While introducing Max Muller, the author throws light on different aspects of the life of this celebrated Indologist who was a scholar and thinker.

His prestige and profound scholarship has been acknowledged throughout the length and breadth of the globe. When he died on the 28th October 1900 messages of condolence began to power in from all over the world while writing the biography of such a celebrity, Mr Chaudhuri feels that a life of Max Muller is justified if it can show what the scholarly life and the scholar's personally really are.

C.D. Narasimhaiah had considered this work of Chaudhuri an excellent work of scholarship.

Chaudhuri's other scholarly works include *Hinduism* (1979) in which he projects a number of his original ideas on Hinduism from a rationalistic parent of view.

In 1987 he brought a post- script to his *Autobiography* is his *The Hand, Great Anarch!*, tracing the course of his life from 1921 when he was in search of a job and ends with an account of the writing and reception of his *Autobiography*. His *Clive of India* (1975), *Culture in a Vanity Bag* (1976), *The East is East and the West is West* (1996), *Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse* (1997) and *From the Archives of a Centenarian* (1997) are other contributions to scholarship.

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