

## **PORTRAYAL OF RELIGIOUS ETHOS IN NIRAD C. CHAUDHURI'S *THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN UNKNOWN INDIAN***

**Dr. Manjunatha. S**

*Associate Professor of English, Government First Grade College, Thyamagondlu*

### **ABSTRACT**

*Religion has always occupied a central position in Indian social and cultural life. Indian literature, particularly autobiographical and reflective prose, frequently represents religion not merely as ritualistic practice but as an ethical and civilizational force shaping identity, culture, memory, and consciousness. The *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* by Nirad C. Chaudhuri stands as one of the most intellectually stimulating autobiographical works in Indian English literature. The text offers a profound exploration of Indian civilization, colonial consciousness, cultural transformation, and religious ethos in Bengal during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Chaudhuri's narrative presents religion as a deeply embedded social and psychological reality influencing everyday life, communal relationships, intellectual development, and national identity.*

*This research paper critically examines the portrayal of religious ethos in *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*. The study investigates how Chaudhuri represents Hindu religious traditions, rituals, festivals, spirituality, and philosophical thought within the broader framework of colonial modernity and cultural transition. The paper further analyzes the tensions between traditional religious beliefs and Western rationalism, highlighting Chaudhuri's complex attitude toward Indian spirituality and European intellectualism. Through autobiographical reflection, the author portrays religion as both a source of emotional belonging and a marker of civilizational continuity.*

*The research adopts a descriptive and analytical methodology based on textual analysis of the primary text along with scholarly criticism related to religion, colonial identity, and Indian English prose. The study reveals that Chaudhuri's writings preserve a vivid cultural memory of Hindu religious life while simultaneously critiquing dogmatism and social stagnation. His representation of religious ethos is neither blindly devotional nor aggressively secular; rather, it reflects a nuanced intellectual engagement with Indian traditions. The paper concludes that Chaudhuri's work contributes significantly to the understanding of religion as a cultural and historical force in Indian society.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Religious Ethos, Nirad C. Chaudhuri, Hindu Culture, Indian Civilization, Spirituality, Colonialism, Bengali Society, Indian English Literature, Cultural Identity, Autobiographical Narrative.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Religion has historically shaped the philosophical, ethical, and cultural foundations of Indian society. In India, religion extends beyond theological belief and functions as a way of life influencing social customs, festivals, morality, family structures, and collective identity. Indian literature often reflects this intimate relationship between religion and daily existence. Writers representing colonial and postcolonial India frequently explore how religious traditions interact with modernity, nationalism, and Western education.

Among Indian English writers, Nirad C. Chaudhuri occupies a unique position due to his intellectual independence, historical insight, and autobiographical style. His celebrated work, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, first published in 1951, presents a deeply personal yet culturally expansive account of Indian society under British colonial rule. The text examines the social, political, cultural, and religious conditions of Bengal while simultaneously documenting Chaudhuri's intellectual growth.

Religion constitutes one of the most important thematic dimensions of the autobiography. Chaudhuri vividly portrays Hindu rituals, temple practices, religious festivals, mythological consciousness, and domestic spirituality. The narrative reveals how religion shaped community life and emotional sensibility in Bengali society. At the same time, the author critically observes the limitations of orthodox traditions and examines the impact of Western rationalism on Indian religious consciousness.

The significance of Chaudhuri's religious portrayal lies in its complexity. Unlike purely devotional writers, Chaudhuri does not idealize religion uncritically. Similarly, unlike aggressive modernists, he does not reject religious traditions altogether. His writings reveal an intellectual struggle between reverence for Indian civilization and admiration for European modernity. This dual perspective makes his treatment of religion deeply analytical and historically meaningful.

This paper seeks to examine the portrayal of religious ethos in *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*. It analyzes how Chaudhuri represents Hindu spirituality, rituals, cultural memory, ethical values, and the coexistence of tradition and modernity. The paper also explores the influence of religion on individual identity and collective cultural consciousness in colonial India.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To analyze the portrayal of religious ethos in Chaudhuri's writings.
- To examine the representation of Hindu rituals, traditions, and spirituality in the autobiography.
- To study the relationship between religion and cultural identity in colonial Bengal.
- To investigate the tension between Western rationalism and Indian spirituality.
- To evaluate Chaudhuri's contribution to Indian English autobiographical literature.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present research employs a descriptive and analytical methodology. The study is primarily based on textual analysis of *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*. Secondary sources such as critical essays, books, journal articles, and scholarly interpretations have also been consulted to support the analysis. MLA 9th edition style has been followed for references and in-text citations.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nirad C. Chaudhuri was born in Kishoreganj in East Bengal in 1897. He emerged as one of the most controversial and intellectually provocative Indian English writers of the twentieth century. His works reflect deep historical knowledge, sharp cultural criticism, and profound engagement with both Indian and European civilizations.

Chaudhuri received traditional Bengali cultural exposure during childhood while simultaneously developing admiration for English literature and Western intellectual traditions. This dual influence shaped his worldview and literary expression. His writings often explore themes such as colonialism, nationalism, civilization, religion, and identity.

*The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* remains his most celebrated work. The autobiography not only narrates personal experiences but also documents the transformation of Indian society during British rule. Religion, culture, and civilization occupy central positions in his literary imagination.

## SUMMARY OF THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN UNKNOWN INDIAN

The *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* narrates the life experiences of Nirad C. Chaudhuri from his childhood in Bengal to his intellectual maturity during the colonial period. The autobiography combines personal memory with historical commentary and cultural analysis. The work is divided into four major sections dealing with childhood, adolescence, education, and intellectual development.

The narrative vividly describes Bengali domestic life, social customs, religious ceremonies, festivals, educational institutions, and political changes. Chaudhuri portrays the environment of traditional Hindu households where rituals, devotional songs, mythology, and temple worship formed integral aspects of daily life.

As the autobiography progresses, Chaudhuri examines the influence of British colonialism and Western education on Indian society. He reflects on the intellectual conflict between traditional Indian spirituality and European rational thought. His exposure to English literature and Western philosophy gradually transforms his worldview, yet he remains emotionally connected to Indian cultural traditions.

The autobiography ultimately becomes a meditation on civilization, identity, memory, and historical transformation. Religion functions as a recurring element connecting personal experience with broader cultural history.

## RELIGIOUS ETHOS IN CHAUDHURI'S WRITINGS

### Religion as Cultural Foundation

One of the most significant aspects of Chaudhuri's writings is his representation of religion as the foundation of Indian cultural life. Hindu traditions, festivals, and rituals are portrayed not merely as religious practices but as essential components of social identity and collective memory.

Chaudhuri vividly recalls the atmosphere of Bengali religious festivals such as Durga Puja, Kali Puja, and Saraswati Puja. These festivals are described as emotionally unifying events that connected individuals with family, community, and cultural heritage. He writes that religion was inseparable from the rhythm of domestic and social existence (Chaudhuri 47).

The author's detailed descriptions of rituals reveal his fascination with the aesthetic and emotional dimensions of Hindu culture. Religious ceremonies are presented as experiences involving music, fragrance, decoration, mythology, and collective participation.

### **Hindu Spirituality and Emotional Consciousness**

Chaudhuri's writings portray Hindu spirituality as deeply emotional and symbolic. He frequently refers to devotional songs, temple bells, sacred images, and mythological narratives that shaped his childhood imagination.

The author recalls how mythological stories from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* influenced moral understanding and emotional sensitivity during childhood (Chaudhuri 65). Religion functioned as a medium through which ethical values and cultural ideals were transmitted across generations.

At the same time, Chaudhuri's approach remains intellectual rather than devotional. He admires the philosophical richness of Hindu traditions while critically observing the social rigidity associated with religious orthodoxy.

### **Religious Rituals and Everyday Life**

Religion in Chaudhuri's autobiography appears closely connected with ordinary domestic practices. Daily worship, fasting, ritual purity, and seasonal festivals structured family life in Bengali households.

The author describes how women in the household performed rituals with devotion and discipline. These practices created a moral and spiritual atmosphere within the family environment. Religious observances reinforced collective identity and social cohesion.

Chaudhuri also emphasizes the sensory richness of religious experience. He describes incense, flowers, lamps, conch shells, and devotional chants as integral elements of Bengali cultural life (Chaudhuri 89). Such descriptions demonstrate the aesthetic dimension of religious ethos.

### **Conflict Between Tradition and Modernity**

A major theme in Chaudhuri's writings is the conflict between Indian religious traditions and Western rationalism. Colonial education exposed Indian youth to European philosophy, science, and liberal thought, creating intellectual tension with inherited religious beliefs.

Chaudhuri himself experienced this conflict deeply. While he admired Western intellectual discipline and scientific reasoning, he remained emotionally attached to Indian cultural traditions. He notes that English education encouraged skepticism toward religious orthodoxy but could not completely erase cultural memory (Chaudhuri 143).

This duality characterizes Chaudhuri's worldview. He neither fully rejects religion nor blindly accepts traditional beliefs. Instead, he approaches religion as a historical and civilizational phenomenon deserving critical respect.

### **Religion and National Identity**

Chaudhuri's writings also explore the relationship between religion and nationalism. During the colonial period, Hindu cultural revival played an important role in shaping nationalist consciousness in Bengal.

The author observes how religious symbolism influenced political imagination and anti-colonial sentiment. Religious festivals became occasions for expressing collective identity and cultural pride. However, Chaudhuri remained cautious about excessive emotional nationalism.

He critiques political movements that transformed religion into ideological fanaticism. For Chaudhuri, religion possessed cultural and ethical significance but should not become an instrument of irrational political mobilization.

### **Critique of Religious Orthodoxy**

Although Chaudhuri admired Indian civilization, he also criticized aspects of religious conservatism. He questioned caste rigidity, superstitious practices, and intellectual stagnation within orthodox Hindu society.

The autobiography reflects his belief that religion should encourage ethical and intellectual growth rather than blind conformity. He criticizes ritualism devoid of spiritual understanding and advocates rational engagement with tradition.

This critical perspective distinguishes Chaudhuri from purely traditionalist writers. His approach reflects a modern intellectual consciousness attempting to reconcile cultural inheritance with rational inquiry.

## **DISCUSSION**

The portrayal of religious ethos in *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* reveals the complexity of Indian cultural identity during colonial transformation. Religion in Chaudhuri's writings functions simultaneously as memory, emotion, ethics, philosophy, and civilization.

The autobiography demonstrates that religion was deeply integrated into everyday Bengali life. Festivals, rituals, mythology, and devotional practices shaped social relationships and emotional consciousness. Chaudhuri's detailed descriptions preserve a valuable cultural record of pre-independence Bengali society.

At the same time, the text reflects intellectual ambivalence toward tradition. Western education introduced skepticism and rationalism into colonial Indian society, creating conflict between inherited beliefs and modern intellectual frameworks. Chaudhuri's writings capture this tension with remarkable honesty.

His representation of religion is neither simplistic nor dogmatic. Religion is portrayed as culturally meaningful yet historically conditioned. The author values spiritual and aesthetic dimensions of Hindu civilization while criticizing social rigidity and irrationality.

The autobiographical form strengthens the authenticity of religious representation. Personal memories allow readers to experience religion as lived reality rather than abstract ideology. Chaudhuri's narrative voice combines emotional nostalgia with analytical distance, creating a balanced perspective on religious ethos.

## **FINDINGS**

- Religion occupies a central position in Chaudhuri's representation of Bengali cultural life.
- Hindu rituals and festivals are portrayed as collective cultural experiences rather than merely theological practices.
- Chaudhuri presents religion as a source of ethical and emotional formation.

- The autobiography reflects conflict between Western rationalism and Indian spirituality.
- Chaudhuri admires Indian religious traditions while criticizing orthodoxy and superstition.
- Religious ethos in the text contributes to cultural identity and historical continuity.
- The author's treatment of religion remains analytical, balanced, and historically informed.

## RESULTS

The study reveals that Nirad C. Chaudhuri portrays religion as an inseparable component of Indian civilization and cultural memory. His writings preserve detailed representations of Hindu domestic practices, rituals, festivals, and spiritual consciousness.

At the same time, the autobiography critically examines the limitations of orthodoxy and the impact of colonial modernity on religious identity. Chaudhuri's intellectual engagement with religion reflects the broader cultural tensions of colonial India.

The research establishes that religious ethos in Chaudhuri's writings functions not only as spiritual belief but also as historical consciousness and civilizational continuity.

## CONCLUSION

The *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* remains one of the most significant autobiographical texts in Indian English literature because of its rich exploration of culture, history, and religion. Through vivid recollections and intellectual reflection, Nirad C. Chaudhuri portrays the religious ethos of Bengali society with remarkable depth and complexity.

Religion in Chaudhuri's writings emerges as both personal experience and collective cultural inheritance. Hindu rituals, festivals, mythology, and devotional practices shape emotional consciousness and social identity. At the same time, the author critically evaluates religious orthodoxy through the lens of modern rationalism.

The tension between tradition and modernity constitutes a major dimension of Chaudhuri's literary vision. His writings neither glorify religion uncritically nor dismiss it entirely. Instead, they offer a nuanced understanding of religion as a civilizational force influencing ethics, aesthetics, memory, and identity.

Chaudhuri's contribution lies in his ability to combine autobiographical intimacy with historical analysis. His portrayal of religious ethos provides valuable insight into the cultural transformation of colonial India and remains relevant for contemporary discussions on religion, identity, and modernity.

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