

Social issues in Autobiography of an Unknown Indian.

Niradbabu criticises the Hindus' preoccupation with skin colour in Autobiography of an Unknown Indian. When not thinking about his foreign conquerors, and wallowing in self-pity for it: a Hindu is obsessed with skin colour. This exhibits itself most clearly during marriage negotiations. At the time of the inspection of girls for marriage, their claim to fair complexion is subjected to rigorous scrutiny. Niradbabu says; 'In West Bengal until recently it was not uncommon to rub apparently fair-looking girls with a wet towel to find out whether their complexion was natural or made up.'(p. 136) The life of a dark marriageable girl in Bengal used to be one of unending private and public humiliation. Her mother would be perpetually reproaching her that she would never be married: and remain as a burden on her father. Prospective bridegrooms' families coming to inspect her would look at her significantly. In this atmosphere of disgrace for them, dark girls would hide themselves or keep to the background even when ordinary visitors came. At the same time, fair girls showed themselves off. This torture did not end even with marriage. The mother-in-law would give a scream if the bride on her arrival at her in-law's, turned out to be dark-complexioned. Sometimes, this ended in real tragedy. One of Niradbabu's uncles, a fair man himself, found after his marriage his bride was dark. He never saw her face again, and this abandoned aunt had to live a widow's life.

In the late 1920s Niradbabu was requested by one of his friends to accompany him for the inspection of a girl from whose father a marriage proposal had come for him. Niradbabu uses the term "inspection" deliberately. Because these expeditions were nothing but an exhaustive examination of all the data furnished by the girl. From these examinations gynaecological details were exempted for the sake of bare decency. The convention was if the young man to be married goes on such expeditions, he is supposed to remain dumb, but would indecorously stare at the girl constantly. Now it happened at this particular inspection on behalf of his friend, the girl was freckled and tanned: but not dark. Her father tried to assure the young man she would become fair within three months of her marriage. At this absurd proposition, Niradbabu's friend became rightly furious and said what if she did not become so.

Niradbabu describes his own marriage. After it had been settled, an old friend of the family offered him what he considered a timely advice. He said that Niradbabu had committed a folly in giving up Government service and settling for the struggling journalist's job. Now he was going to commit the second folly by marrying a dark girl. The consequence of this union would be a brood of daughters who would inherit the father's poverty and the mother's dark complexion. And thus in consequence, they would be unmarriageable. At first, Niradbabu felt inclined to be amused rather than angry at this long view he took of the outcomes of his marriage.

Autobiography of an Unknown Indian is the 1951 autobiography of the Bengali intellectual, Nirad C. Chaudhuri. By reading the autobiography, the readers come to know about the poverty-stricken condition of the Indian subcontinent. His birthplace, Kishorganj, was merely a normal specimen of an Indian rural town. It comprised of courts (where the author's father worked), offices, residential dwellings, schools and shops. Depicting the poverty-stricken condition of Kishorganj, he describes how the people bathed in and drank the water of the small river flowing through the town.

Cattle and an elephant belonging to a 'near neighbour' of the Chaudhuris, named Joyka, were bathed in the river. Though they drank its water: it was so filthy, they could not see the bottom of it. They had to live in dirty, filthy condition: ants, centipedes and moths were their constant companions. In rainy season, they had to deal with flies, frogs and leeches. When the season transitioned from rainy, wet monsoons to dry winter: big, poisonous red ants appeared. At these seasonal transitions, the boys entered caves into the jute-stem stacks which they made after the jute fiber was cut off. For this, they were punished by caterpillars. These were hairy huge caterpillars; which caused blisters on the most sensitive parts of their bodies. This caused them intense pain. They had to apply a mixture of mustard oil and slaked lime. They had to live in such unhygienic condition that both at the beginning and end of winter, cholera epidemic broke out.

Among other problems of Indian society, Niradbabu describes one of the major problems facing the entire Indian subcontinent. This was population explosion. During the Jhulan-jatra fair (Car Festival) Niradbabu felt suffocated by the crowd: 'Growing up in a region which was adding to its population at a remarkable rate I had some evidence before my eyes of the fecundity of man as procreator' (pp. 36-37). Naturally, population explosion will be most evident during a fair. Population explosion brings many other problems with it in Indian society. These are: lack of food, lack of hospital facilities and jobs. Consequently, people have to live in a very uncomfortable position. Population explosion is the snowballing problem: it gets even worse gradually.

Further, the author also discusses the issue of gender-bias in society. He is very conscious of the difficulties and problems women face in the society. We have already discussed the issue of complexion at the time of a girl's marriage. When the matter of the social status of women in the Indian social context comes to be discussed, they are not regarded as anything more than mere objects. They have no right to speak or do anything according to their own choice. They have always been exploited in the name of family honour or tradition. Same is the case with the family of the author. They are very conscious of their 'blue blood': their aristocracy. Niradbabu says that at Banagram, he was aware of this caste superiority. He adds; 'the blue blood of a Chaudhuri of Banagram was acknowledged as readily at Kishorganj and elsewhere as it was taken for granted at Banagram.' The author describes when one of his paternal aunts became a widow at a marriageable age: she was much sought after in marriage. A marriage proposal came from the richest landlord of the village: but he was inferior to the Chaudhuris because he belonged to a lower caste. The author describes his grandfather's reaction to the proposal; "I would sooner cut her up and feed the fishes of the Brahmaputra with the pieces." (p. 60) It clearly shows the authority of the male members of the family over their female counterparts.

One of the several social issues Niradbabu deals with in Autobiography of an Unknown Indian is class-consciousness. This is explicitly revealed when the author describes his own family customs. It is described how Niradbabu's family always avoided sharing their meals with those families who were below them in social status. For example, one day one of the author's family members, named Kamal Narayan, was taken on a boat ride by a neighbouring family. Now, this family was regarded as much below Niradbabu's family regarding social status. Kamal Narayan was very late in returning home that night. That evening, the whole family was apprehensive whether the weak-willed Kamal Narayan would compromise family honour by

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sharing food with the below-status family. When Kamal Narayan returned at night, 'He said that he had indeed been trapped into a vile conspiracy but was not such a fool as to yield.' (p. 61) This incident shows how much class-superiority Niradbabu's family enjoyed. These are the social issues discussed in the chapters prescribed in our syllabus. There are many other social issues Niradbabu describes in his whole autobiography. But they lie beyond our scope.