

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 9 : 1 February 2009

ISSN 1930-2940

Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.

Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.

B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.

A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.

Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.

K. Karunakaran, Ph.D.

Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.

Naipaul's Perception of India

Manimozhi Sayee Kumar, M.A., M.Phil.

NAIPAUL'S PERCEPTION OF INDIA

Manimozhi Sayee Kumar, M.A., M.Phil.

Tradition and Modernity: Story of India

India is widely known for its traditional cultural heritage. Many Indians feel proud that India will become a super economic power soon. Tradition and modernity are sought after by the elitist classes in India. 'Modernity is for economic power and reformed traditions are for social purposes' appear to be the goal of the new generation in India. In this process, the reality of the situation may be denied; especially the physical unhealthy conditions in which millions of people live in big cities will not be accepted as an important factor to measure the greatness of modern India.

On the other hand, V. S. Naipaul believes that India is dark, its civilization is wounded and the country is quite known for its unclean atmosphere. People dirty the places all over, they will not bother about any shelter; civic sense is less compared to other countries and so on. V. S. Naipaul's works such as *An Area of Darkness*, and *India: A wounded Civilization* abounds in criticism of Indian ways of life.

Historical Indian Diaspora – How Do They React to India and What Do They Look for?

Overseas Indian Diaspora is at least two-fold: early migrants and later migrants of the latter half of the 20th century. Early migrants to foreign lands went as plantation labor, small businessmen and domestic help, etc. This population of the 18th and 19th centuries is now prosperous in their own right. They have been exposed to a variety of economic, social, cultural, political and religious situations. They are impacted by western education and western values, etc. While the early generations of this group had a different view of their motherland, India, as a sweet home of pilgrimage, eatables, and so on, the later generations of this group are still attracted to India, but they are also greatly disappointed with the state of social, economic and environmental conditions of modern India. But in their hearts they really wish India to prosper and quickly so that their Indian heritage may be prominently and proudly displayed. V. S. Naipaul comes from this part of the early migrants group. He is pre-occupied with India as his ancestral home, but he is also heavily disturbed to the point of downgrading India in every aspect of its modern living.

Naipaul's Perception of India

Naipaul is a distinguished writer of fiction, short stories and travelogues. He received the Nobel Prize for literature in 2001. His comments on diverse subjects receive good publicity and great

attention in the English speaking world. He has accomplished much in his life. He is a distinguished member of the Indian Diaspora, living in almost every nation in the world. As a person of Indian ancestry, his comments must be taken seriously as good counsel, but, then, there have been serious criticism of his views as ill-informed.

Seeking Popularity?

Perhaps Naipaul's critical (negative?) approach to life in India paved the way for his writings to be more popular. The unusual and startling views on various subjects, people, and nations presented through stylish expressions have made his travelogues most interesting. He is of the opinion that no civilization is created in the West Indies. After his visit to India in 1961 he in an exciting encounter with the country published an account of his experience in *An Area of Darkness*. A reading of this will give us an idea that Naipaul came away from India with an overwhelmingly critical attitude towards the homeland of his ancestors.

Some of his comments after his second visit are recorded in *The Overcrowded Baracoon*. He records his vision of modern India. He expresses opinions and impressions similar to those which continue to be portrayed in the western popular media about India.

In the Trilogy he has freed himself from the nature of experiment and exploration. He has come to deal with experience and encounters which he records with greater liberty. He documents his own views, observations and they appear very much astonishing and controversial.

In the first visit he has taken a personal record of Trinidadian Naipaul who comes to his parents' homeland to see an India of his own dream. He moves from place to place, comes close to people, closely notes down the workings of people and observes various rites, rituals and he makes several visits to the temple to record the performance of rites. He makes a long stay in Srinagar, goes on a traditional pilgrimage to Amarnath a holy place which has a five feet high ice-lingam which usually forms in summer. The lingam is actually the symbol of Shiva, but for Naipaul it is the symbol of India itself. He records:

and in the cave the God the massive ice phallus. Hindu speculation soared so high; its ritual remained so elemental. Between the conception of the world as illusion and the veneration of the phallus there was no link. They derived from different starts of responses .But Hinduism discarded nothing; and it was doubly the symbol of India.¹

He undertakes pilgrimage with other pilgrims, but is hardly devotional; his main idea is for documenting the Indian societies, their religion, their castes, creeds and their ways of living.

Though he hails from a Brahmin family his opinions are different. He says:

I came of a family that abounded with pundits. But I had been born an unbeliever. I took no pleasure in religious ceremonies. They were too long and the food was

served at the end. I did not understand the language – it was our ancestors expected that our understanding would be instinctive and no one explained the prayers or the rituals.².

When examining the Hindu beliefs and rituals, Naipaul discusses the concepts of Karma, Dharma and Moksha. He traces the Hindu's internalizing of these concepts through his connected study of Indian history, politics, literature and social life.

In his study of Karma, Naipaul appears to have made a strong reaction as he regards it as paralyzing, defeatist philosophy which prevents Western style individual self realization process.

The Influence of Karma

In his analysis of the various Hindu failings and shortcomings, which he documents in *An Area of Darkness*, he attributed these failings of the Indian people to the influence of Karma.

According to Naipaul, it is Karma that keeps sweepers as sweepers in that position, insuring “degrees of degradation” through its emphasis on the fundamental justice of the caste system. It is karma that reinforces the inequities of post independence society by implying that they are part of the divinely ordained scheme of things, not exactly the best of all possible worlds, but rather the only possible world. It is Karma that leaves Hindus discussing abstract metaphysical issues as Chinese invade the Northern part of the country. Wherever Naipaul turns he seems to be able to detect the same attitude of cosmic conservatism.

Analysis of Gandhi and Gandhism

Naipaul comes to analyse persons and personalities from religion and religious philosophies. His study of Gandhism also is very much important, his shifting of positions as “insider” “outsider” shows clearly that he has got different attitudes. *In an Area of Darkness*, he says, “India undid him, he became a Mahatma Gandhi.” He shows us two different Gandhis in his work, one is the radical south African Gandhi and the other one who became Mahatma in India.

Naipaul regards South Africa as a critical point in moulding Gandhi's identity in a positive fashion. According to him, South Africa has given him the outsider's eye.

He (Gandhi) settled finally in India when he was 46, after spending 20 years in South Africa. There he had seen an Indian community removed from the setting of India; contrast made for clarity and discrimination for self analysis . He emerged a colonial blend of East and west ,Hindu and ChristianGandhi never loses the critical , comparing South African eye.³.

The author makes skeptical remarks like this about Gandhi's activities.

Western Assumptions?

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

9 : 2 February 2009

Naipaul's Perception of India

Manimozhi Sayee Kumar, M.A., M.Phil.

Naipaul's vision of India is based on too much of the Western assumption and criteria; it is coloured, defined very much by the same assumption; he is a traveler, visiting India through a transitional period. So, unable to project correct insights into India, Naipaul says,

“It was only now as my experience of India defined itself properly my own homelessness, that I saw how close in the past year I had been to the total Indian negation, how it had become the basis of thought and feeling, and already with this awareness, in a world where illusion could only be a concept and not something felt in the bones, it was slipping away from me. I felt it as something true which I could never adequately express and never seize again.”⁴

Darker Side of Indian Environmental Living

It is this disturbed vision of India, which leads Naipaul to express certain views. That was taken as his attack or criticism of India and Indians by other critics. The hierarchical division of labour mentioned by the caste system, the Indians' lack of sense of history and the conflict between Hindu tenets on cleanliness and the excremental reality are all particular objects of his sardonic irony, which is revealed in remarks as follows :

It is well that Indians are unable to look at their country directly, for the distress they would see, would drive them mad. Indians defecate everywhere; they defecate mostly beside the railway tracks. But they also defecate on the river banks; they defecate on the streets; they never look over for cover.⁵

An Irritated Traveler!

Throughout the *Area of Darkness* he himself reveals to be an irritable and hypersensitive traveler. He has not spared even the Amarnath yatra. When he sees a young American, who is enthusing about the yatra, he reacts as:

No, I said, I was not thrilled by the yatra I thought the yatri had no idea of sanitation; they polluted every river we came to. I wished they would follow Gandhi's advice about the need for the little space.⁶

Such views and his attitudes towards sadhus and Gandhi and others have raised questions about his attitudes towards India. Nissim Ezekiel, C. D. Narasimaiah and many other critics take him to task for his expressions about India in *An Area of Darkness*.

Anger of Indian Critics Against Naipaul

Critics feel that Naipaul generalizes from specific events that lead to misinterpretation. However, we should also note that the examples given by Naipaul are easily seen everywhere in India. We cannot deny the fact. Indians themselves are irritated at such practices, but they seem to be helpless. The question is whether a nation should be judged by such things, or by other virtues,

especially India is a nation of a billion people, with at least half of these people existing in substandard living quarters.

Many of the critics say that Naipaul sees India from a great distance with a sense of an expatriate, but they (the critics) see India from very close quarters with Indian sensibility. Their argument is that Naipaul's vision is so blinkered that he is unable to see much else. He is focusing his attention mainly on the one particular side which, indeed is a darker side, totally neglecting the other virtues.

A Wounded Civilization

Naipaul's another work of art *India: A Wounded Civilization* is based on his fourth visit to his ancestral land. He painfully observes the wounded civilization in his ancestor's homeland. Here also he takes up problems like Hinduism, Gandhian philosophy and other aspects. According Naipaul, the real "emergency" of India (referring to the National Emergency promulgated in mid-1970s) is not political but psychological, because the stumbling block that prevents progress in the post-independence period is the acceptance of the Hindu doctrine of Karma.

".....the Hindu Killer, the Hindu calm, which tells us that we pay in this life for what we have done in the past lives; so that everything we see is just and balanced and the distress we see is to be relished as religious theatre, a reminder of our duty to ourselves our future lives."7

Karma underlies a great deal of Indian behaviour in *An Area of Darkness*. Naipaul detects the influence of Karma everywhere in India during his visits. Karma arrests all the growth and guarantees the wounded civilization, which is slowly destroying itself:

The turbulence in India this time hasn't come from foreign invasion or conquest; it has been generated from within. India can't respond in the old way, by a further retreat into archaism.8

Naipaul makes all necessary attempts to justify his criticism of Gandhi's political philosophy and his practice of mixing religious sentiments with politics. He appears almost right in his opinion that many of Gandhian principle and ideals have lost their relevance in present day India. He reacts sharply to the Gandhian attitude to poverty which is treated as holy and sacred.

Obsession with India's Poverty, Karma and Caste System

Naipaul is obsessed with India's poverty. He is shocked by the dirt and squalor of India. He lashes at the society for the cruelties of its caste system. That the caste system is deeply embedded in every part of the multidimensional nature of Indian civilization, in all religions practiced in India, does not receive much attention in his writing.

There is no excuse whatsoever to condone the cruelties of the caste system. However, the knowledge that societies everywhere are hierarchically organized should help one to see the caste system in its historical perspective. Abolition of social inequities is not achieved in any continent through the enforcement of law only. Generations provided with opportunities to improve their lot will ultimately remove social inequities. Industrialization and the emergence of capitalism coupled with revolutionary ideas have helped western societies to a large extent in this process.

Eager to See the Best in One's Ancestral Home: Diaspora Pursuit, Shock and Disappointment

Naipaul's criticism should be seen in the background of his Indian ancestry. He wishes India well, in his heart. But his writing comes with such heavy criticism it almost sound destructive and imbalanced.

As we pointed out earlier, Naipaul's vision of India that he had in his childhood is shattered when he actually encounters the real India after so many years. As such the vision gets blurred all the more in his further visits; it becomes all the more frightening, appalling and negative. Naipaul is unable to tear himself from his strong sense of self and highly intellectual bent of mind based on western education and environment. Although India is an ancient culture, nation is still in the making, and the Indian material civilization is still in various stages of development. It is hard to accept reality.

Naipaul is unable to see any greatness in the spiritual, metaphysical, and cultural heritage of India. Instead he sees the dark and dismal aspects of India, and makes some grim generalizations. He is influenced by his quest for identity and is greatly disappointed in this pursuit.

References

1. V.S Naipaul, An area of Darkness(London: Andre Deutsch, 1964), 164 – 165.
 2. Ibid, 32.
 3. Ibid, 73.
 4. Ibid, 266-67.
 5. Ibid, 74.
 6. Ibid, 171.
 7. V.S.Naipaul, India: A wounded civilization(London: Andre Deutsch, 1977), 25.
 8. Ibid, 16-17.
 9. C.D.Narasimhaiah, "Naipaul A case of bizarre reputation", The function of criticism in India, 144 – 145.
 10. V.S.Naipaul, An Area of Darkness, 30.
 11. V.S.Naipaul, India: A wounded civilization, 10
-
-

Manimozhi Sayee Kumar, M.A., M.Phil.
Department of English
Bharath University
Agaram Road
Selaiyur
Chennai
Tamilnadu, India
manisayee2006@yahoo.co.in