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Naipaul's Distorted Understanding of Indian Socio-Political and Cultural Aspects in *India: A Wounded Civilization*

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Abstract:

The present paper attempts to put forth how V. S. Naipaul's evaluation of Indian culture in his second travel book on India, *India: A Wounded Civilization* is distorted. The present book takes the readers into the past of our country and explores Indian cultural history in a limited and negative way, which is unacceptable. It seems that he has formulated his opinion from individual, particular incidents and made a general commentary about cultural aspects of India. Therefore, the present paper aims to show Naipaul's misrepresentation of Indian culture and tries to showcase how India has emerged as one nation with its multi-religious population, which has developed intellectually, socially and politically.

Keywords: Travelogues, Naipaul, Indian culture, insider, outsider, nation.

I. Introduction:

The present paper tries to illuminate V. S. Naipaul's distorted understanding of Indian culture and socio-political life as narrated in *India: A Wounded Civilization*. Published in 1977, this travelogue documents Naipaul's second visit to India in 1975. It is the second travel book in the series of famous trilogy written by Naipaul. The first travelogue *India: An Area of Darkness* was published in 1964 and *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, third travel book in this series, was published in 1990. Like other two, the present travelogue appears to be an ordered and organized search through Indian culture, history, sociology, politics and literature in his

sojourn in India. Naipaul's observations about history, sociology, politics and literature in this book are debatable and this paper attempts to show how Naipaul has not understood Indian culture completely. Simultaneously, the paper tries to find out how Naipaul's representation of Indian culture is distorted and based on his 'insider-outsider' perspective. Naipaul tried to make a detailed analysis of the culture and tradition of Indian society through his travels. The knowledge that he gained of such an inquiry could be seen as entirely contradictory from the glory of which India could boast of. Therefore, the present paper is an attempt to critically analyze these observations of Naipaul on cultural and socio-political aspects of India.

An eminent critic Suman Gupta, opines, "The thesis of *India: A Wounded Civilization* is twofold: that the essential India, the old world India, is purely Hindu and that a typically Hindu psyche and Hindu attitudes to life are pervasive in modern India; and that the integral and purely Hindu India was conquered and dominated first by Islam and later by the British, which has resulted in a stultification of the intellectual development and creativity of the essentially Hindu India". (Gupta, 2010, 83) This comment suggests that the present book takes the readers into the past of our country and explores Indian cultural history. One finds it difficult to agree with Naipaul's observations because during the colonial and post-colonial period, India has emerged as one nation with its multi-religious population, which has developed intellectually, socially and politically. It is necessary, first to see what case Naipaul makes up to support his arguments and present India through his travelogue.

II. Discussion

II 1. Naipaul's distorted evaluation of the socio-political life of India:

Naipaul travelled to India in 1975 and stayed for 18 months. During this sojourn, he visited most parts of the country and documented his observations. During his visit to the Kingdom of Vijaynagar in the first part titled 'An Old Equilibrium'; Naipaul says, it is a permanent loss of human talent and intellectual capacity and systematic destruction of this great kingdom. To some extent, his comments are correct because all the terrible memories of violence were forgotten, and today, people talk about the glory of the past more than the act of destruction of this royal kingdom. Naipaul has used the term 'Cultural chaos' to portray the decay of Indian civilization and calls it a significant backdrop.

He says that each time India was attacked; it lost its intellectual life and survived on legends of the past. A repeated process like this, made India 'archaic' because knowledge and talent was continually lost. Naipaul says, "The turbulence in India this time hasn't come from foreign invasion or conquests; it has been generated from within....The crisis in India is not only political or economic. The larger crisis is of a wounded old civilization that has finally become aware of its inadequacies and is without the intellectual means to move ahead". (Naipaul. 1977, 8) He also opines that the Kingdom of Vijaynagar is the only representative place in India because the same process took place all over the country. Naipaul sees the crisis in India as the beginning of the loss of an old equilibrium. He thinks that such a situation is a kind of loss of history, of creative expertise and of human energy.

II 2. India will go on

In the next chapter, 'The Shattering World', Naipaul begins by quoting R. K. Narayan-"India will go on" (Naipaul, 1977, 9), and finds that even in the face of a crisis like the Emergency, the illusion of the old equilibrium survived. Simultaneously, he says that the Emergency was also the symptom of the problem of the dismantling of the old world. It was proof that the society had broken down. Unfortunately, in India, it was seen as only a political crisis "which it was in the power of Mrs. Gandhi or the opposition to resolve". (Naipaul, 1977, 35) He feels that the Emergency did not set the things right. It made a show of terror but "established no new moral frame, it held out no promise for a better regulated future. It reinforced, if anything, the need to hide and hoard." (Naipaul, 1977, 35) He thinks that problem needed more profound resolution. Naipaul traces the chaos of the Emergency to the blunders that had followed Independence of India. He cites an example of one sweet vender, Jagan who believes in Gandhian philosophy and participated in freedom struggle and went to jail. Now the same Jagan is not paying taxes and try to escape from paying it. The commitments of the people like Jagan helped India to gain freedom, it became directionless after Independence. They did not have any idea of the responsibility of freedom, so they became self-centered as before. They forgot that the government would not function smoothly without the contribution of every individual in the society. In the first place, Jagan has no idea of what Independence or self-governance means. He cheats the very same government for whose sake he had bravely taken beatings during the British Rule. Hence

Naipaul quotes Narayan's statement, 'India will go on', and he does not see this shattering as unfavorable and negative, for him it was a positive beginning.

The second part of the book 'A New Claim on the Land' describes the undercurrent of the middle and the lower middle classes of India. This section consists of two chapters capturing the movement of the village population towards the metropolis and the creation of the new working class. The first chapter, entitled 'The Skyscrapers and the Chawls', draws a contrast between the advancement of industrial Bombay and the contradiction of un-accommodated workforce that makes its industries run. On one hand these industries need this workforce as labour and on the other hand the city is not ready to accommodate this force. Hence the workforce that comes from nearby villages spills on the streets and pavements at night. Naipaul observes, "The poor are needed as hands, as labour. But the city was not built to accommodate them". (Naipaul. 1977, 48) He says that glamorous skyscrapers offer majestic sights at night. In their shadows live the chawl and pavement dwellers.

Naipaul, thus, observes that Independence had brought development but that development had touched the people unequally. The old pattern of the landed masters and landless labourers continued. Democracy and Panchayati Raj became toys in the hands of traditional power-wielders. Officials, politicians and administrators were sucked into the pattern of the ruler and the ruled. Worse still, the instruments of democracy could easily be turned into instruments of more organized oppression. Naipaul has explained the incessant flow of people towards the cities in this context.

While travelling the north-eastern part, Naipaul comments on Naxalite movement and says, "Naxalism was an intellectual tragedy, a tragedy of idealism, ignorance and mimicry: middle-class India, after the Gandhian upheaval, incapable of generating ideas and institutions of its own, constantly needing in the modern world to be inducted into the art, science and ideas of other civilizations, not always understanding the consequences, and this time borrowing something deadly, somebody else's idea of revolution". (Naipaul, 1977, 82) Naipaul looks at it as another form of escape from oppression. He feels that the tragedy of the Naxalbari movement was that it could not explain its ideology to a people. This ideology degenerated into the idea of the enemy and was lost.

The chapter 'Paradise Lost' takes us in the post-emergency period of India. It records people's reaction to the emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi. The opening line of this chapter is "We are like zoo" (Naipaul, 1977, 122), spoken by a middle-class lady in Delhi. It suggests people's disappointment with the political situation in the capital, reaction all over the country was no more different than this. This chapter also highlights the confused agenda of the opposition and an even more confusing line of action. In the opinion of Naipaul political sterility is complete. There was neither *Swaraj* nor *Ramrajya*. After almost thirty years of Independence, Gandhianism was reduced to a show of *khadi* and long impassioned speeches. Nevertheless, the people simply waited for things to take care of themselves. This is not true. Naipaul forgets how people rose against mortal grasp of congress and gave it a crushing defeat. Later history has shown a great many changes in the political structures of India.

III. Naipaul's distorted evaluation of Indian culture:

While commenting on the social and historical aspects of India, 'culture' is one of the significant aspects that Naipaul focuses through his narratives. In the 'Foreword' to this book, Naipaul comments, "India continues imitative and insecure, as a glance at the advertisements and illustrations of any Indian magazine will show. India, without its own living traditions, has lost the ability to incorporate and adapt: what it borrows it seeks to swallow whole. For all its appearance of cultural continuity, for all the liveliness of its arts of dance, music and cinema, India is incomplete: a whole creative side has died". (Naipaul, 1977, 113) Complete copying of the culture of 'other' nations is seen as a drawback for India, according to Naipaul. However, it seems that Naipaul does not take into account good aspects of Indian culture. Manjit Inder Singh, comments on Naipaul's inability to see qualities Indian culture gained by assimilating foreign ideas. He explains, "While the revolutionary-political jingoism of race, tribe, and culture and region gathers momentum every passing year, the slippage of fixed, older form of identity presided over by cosmopolitan forces and professional opportunities have increased the entry of one race, nationality and culture into another beyond imagination. No one is purely one person or one thing. The dubious result of the imperialist consolidation of mixture of cultures and identities

on a global scale reflect a dissolved amorphous life in unlikely landscapes and settings". (Manjit, 1998, 134)

This idea brought by Manjit Inder Singh shows that India need not be blamed for borrowing foreign culture. This comment contrasts Naipaul's idea of India being a homogeneous identity derived from its past. Even though Naipaul claims that European ideologies should not be used as yardsticks for assessing India; it seems that, he consciously or unconsciously does the same. Bruce King observes that Naipaul's views of India that were mixed up with his Western ideologies. He explains, "V. S. Naipaul is a rationalist, secular, a strong believer in Western individualism and skepticism, although emotionally attracted towards Indian fatalism, passivity and philosophical notions of the world as illusion. Both world views are together, competing in his writings". (King, 1993, 5) It suggests that Naipaul's 'passivity' towards India and his attraction towards the West are due to the competing world views that he had. He criticizes Indian culture and traditions from the Western mindset.

According to Naipaul, what India lacked was the 'broader identity' and the 'racial sense' What the Indians lost was a sense of togetherness. He comments on it thus, "The racial sense is alien to Indians. Race is something they detect about others, but among themselves they know only the sub caste or caste, the clan, the language group. Beyond that they cannot go: they do not see themselves as belonging to an Indian race: the words have no meaning. Historically, this absence of cohesiveness has been the calamity of India". (Naipaul, 1977, 141) From this comment, it is seen that Indian culture lacked collective consciousness or the feeling of belonging to one race. Indians are so obsessed with their caste and religious system that the feeling of being a single race was slowly wiped away from their culture. A common shared set of ideology is what the country lacked. Naipaul is trying through his narrative to make the people aware of their lacking of belonging to one race. Thinking of his intention in a positive sense, and the readers expected to read his narratives are Indians, he could mean that India could progress in future. This narration is obviously addressed to the Indians. The reformation that the writer aims in the society could be seen in *V. S. Naipaul: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*, where he remarks, "You had two battles: one to cleanse the country of foreign rule and the other to cleanse oneself. One looked outward: the other inward. I see no reason why the two cannot be combined. If this is not done then ten years later people will

say: “Why did not you tell us? Look at the mess we are in now?” (Panwar, 2003, 60) This had created a negative identity of the civilization and had invited much criticism even from his admirers. If Indians try to become aware of who they are, it is not wrong. His generalization that the Indians do nothing as they take retreat to their ‘karma’ is a patently false generalization. Had it been so, there would not have been uprising and rebellions 1857 onwards. India needed one concerted effort and viable program, which Gandhiji provided and they did act on it.

Naipaul might have misrepresented the behavioral patterns of the Indians which have resulted in making his narrative more a fiction than a representation of reality. This is the point where the objective of writing serious a travel narrative often fails in Naipaul. He had to be conscious of the fact that an individual’s own set of behavior need not be the same behavioral pattern of the whole civilization. It should be seen as purely individual and personal.

IV. Naipaul’s Preconceived Notions of India:

This book begins with ‘Foreword’ in which we notice the preconceived notion of Naipaul about India. He says: “India for me is a difficult country. It isn’t my home and cannot be my home; and yet I cannot reject it or be indifferent to it; I cannot travel only for the sights. I am at once too close and too far”. (Naipaul, 1977, X-XI) From this ‘Foreword’, it is likely that the method of enquiry in this book hinges upon Naipaul’s understanding of the history, society and literature of India. It is necessarily different from the understanding of many Indians. Naipaul’s personal background is closely connected with his observations of India. An eminent critic Suvir Kaul opines, “There are burdens Naipaul brought to India when he visited it; added to them was the special weight of his cultural inheritance, his sense that the ‘Indian’ aspect of his Trinidadian sensibility could be explained, or discovered perhaps in some form of originary plenitude, in the land of his maternal grandfather”. (Mehrotra, 2003, 235) It appears that he considers himself an ‘outsider’ in India, but his background, his family history, though a hundred years estranged from India, are indelibly the part of his life. He tries to read India from the outsider’s point of view. As the title suggests, he considers Indian civilization to be the victim of hundreds of years of invasions, first of the Muslims, then of the British. Naipaul begins his second book with this thought of

India, which really sets the tone of the rest of the narration. The comment suggests that India, the land of his ancestors really attracts him continually. However, he is also aware of the fact that he can never identify himself as an 'Indian' in this country, at the same time he cannot detach himself entirely from this land of his ancestors.

It appears that 'strangeness' that the writer felt with India was mainly due to his Trinidadian identity and his hundred years' estrangement from India. Naipaul's travel narratives could be seen as presenting the writer as distanced from his homeland. His Indian travel narratives are likely to be an outcome of a purely objective vision of India by the writer without much enquiry into the country's past. Pratap Bhanu Mehta talks about Naipaul's vision of India and observes, "In texts such as *India: A Wounded Civilization*, he sees Indian culture as having become one that endlessly repeats its own truisms: even the glorious Vijayanagara was a facile imitation of something that had gone before. Nothing new was possible, because the old was not properly understood. The first thing that strikes most writers on India: its multicultural *mélange*, its free appropriations, its simultaneous motion in many different directions is of little interest to Naipaul". (Panwar, 2007, 45) Pratap Bhanu Mehta focuses purely on the objective vision that Naipaul had in his travel narrative. Naipaul does not see any significance in the past glory of India. Naipaul's unawareness of the natural glory of India could be seen as a complete detachment from the reality of Indian culture.

The Indian concepts of family, caste and clan are indigestible to the writer as he was unaccustomed to all these. Naipaul tries to assess India's progress during various time periods when the country underwent social and political changes. His travels were the attempts to understand more about his ancestry and the culture to which he belongs. A scholar Peter Hulme writes, "Subsequently, in no fewer than three travel books, of increasing complexity, Naipaul has written about India, a country he returns to at least in part for complex reasons of personal heritage." (Hulme, 2000, 89) Personal reasons also inspired Naipaul's travel to India. India, according to him, remained as a symbol of a shattered culture to the external world, even though the country had gained new freedom. This comment shows the subjective position that Naipaul had taken in narrating about India.

The 'individual identity' of Naipaul as a traveller, visiting India itself is an area of interrogation as he is psychologically detached from India due to the Trinidadian cultural baggage that he carried and is physically attached with India but affected by a 'culture

shock'. Still there remains a question about whether Naipaul is the right person to talk about India? This question arises due to his dual Indo-Trinidadian identity. Dileep Padgoankar, comments on the genuineness of Naipaul's narration, even though he has a dual cultural identity, by citing the examples from Culture and Imperialism, as evident in *V. S. Naipaul: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*: "In Culture and Imperialism, Edward Said enlarges upon the idea that the identity of a nation depends on new and different kinds of visions, nations are defined also by their natives who live in exile, the political figure between domains, between homes, and between languages." (Panwar, 2007, 58) This comment emphasizes that Naipaul has the right to narrate about India as he claims to have understanding about the two cultural domains to which he belongs. 'Attitude' of the writer, while documenting his experiences, hence has a vital role in the vision of India. It stresses the idea that one's personal opinions of a particular place that he/she visits need not be the viewpoint of the indigenous people in the country. However, 'attitude' of the writer about the people and place, has only restricted relevance.

Manjit Inder Singh, comments on the strangeness that Naipaul felt in India, and says, "Naipaul goes on to elaborate his sides as a man sympathetic to the ways of his family and community, yet internally unwilling to participate in its rituals, sceptical and distrustful of other communal groupings". (Singh, 1998, 190) It suggests that Naipaul does distance himself from India knowingly or unknowingly and does not share the beliefs of his family and take part in their religious activities even though his tone of narrative is sympathetic towards the people. The reason for this distancing was the feeling of alienation he felt through a hundred years of separation of his family from India.

A noteworthy point at this juncture is that for all the disillusionment that Naipaul has presented in his travel narratives, India stands as a platform that the writer had already set. This narrative strategy employed by the writer to present social and cultural decay of India through his travel narratives. The visions of Naipaul can be seen as purely Westernized and unsentimental towards the people he is presenting. Perhaps, physical and mental distancing that Naipaul tried to maintain in his mind during his narration of India was to make his views on India unbiased. The psychological unfamiliarity that the writer felt with India cannot be fully discarded in this context. Bruce King comments, in *Modern Novelists: V. S. Naipaul*, on the unfamiliarity that Naipaul felt when he visited India, "Although he claims that writing

does not come easily to him, except during a few very brief periods he has had no other employment. For his first twenty years in England he never felt at home and is still aware of himself as an outsider". (King, 1993, 1) This comment shows that there existed a clash between the two 'cultural identities' that the writer had. This has led him to live a discontented life in India as well as in Trinidad. This is the reason why Naipaul could be seen as a disillusioned writer. The overlap of the Indo-Trinidadian identity has made changes in Naipaul's perception of India. The Indian travel narratives were written amidst the culture chaos that the writer felt in India, even though the Indians lived a peaceful life after the Independence.

Through the representation of the attitude of a small section of people, it seems Naipaul is misrepresenting the Indian civilization as a whole. This is purely a Western attitude that the writer had. Billie Melman, remarks, "Real orientals are denied humanity, history and the authority to speak about and represent themselves, an authority which Orientalist travel writing reserves for occidentals." (Melman, 2002, 107) 'Denied humanity' could be seen from the documentation of Naipaul about Indians. Indians do not 'represent themselves' in Naipaul's narratives, but are represented according to the writer's intentions.

Naipaul characterizes post-independent India as another *Kal Yug*. He appears to think nothing of India's march towards progress through her five-year plans, green revolutions, activities, welfare of state, education etc. He appears to be completely unaware of resurgent Indian economy, the growing self-awareness among people. Naipaul's presentation of India in his travel narratives is a land of diverse beliefs and customs. Religious beliefs of the people are emphasized in his travel narratives. According to him, a life without religious beliefs would make the people feel lost. Every object that he saw in India was interpreted by him in his own preconception of India. They were charged with the blind beliefs of the people. Naipaul gives an example of the religious belief in Bengal, "The truth is frightening, as I learned only recently near the end of the book. The pumpkin, in Bengal and adjoining areas, is a vegetable substitute for a living sacrifice: the male hand was therefore necessary". (Naipaul, 1977, XII)

Naipaul emphasizes on the religious beliefs of the Indians is a theme that the writer is obsessed with throughout his travel narratives. It is seen by Naipaul as a hindrance to the progress of Indian culture as he could not find any significance for these beliefs. He says:

“the memories of that India, which lived on into my childhood in Trinidad, are like trapdoors into a bottomless past.” (Naipaul, 1977, XII) The imagery that the writer employs while referring to the religious beliefs of the Indians as ‘trapdoors’ that lead to a ‘bottomless past’ indirectly conveys to the readers the discontent that Naipaul had with the blind beliefs. Naipaul’s opinions on India were based on the way in which he perceived Indian culture.

V. Conclusion

The atmosphere prevailing in the narrative of the present travelogue is that of disillusionment and discontent due to the ‘culture shock’ that he experienced due to his conflicting identities. Therefore, it appears to be distorted and away from reality of India. He could be seen as leading the readers to view only those aspects that he felt had created ‘cultural decay’ in India. He does not appear to understand the point of view of the people of India. He presents India from his own personal point of view of a westernized Indian and thinks of India as a land of ‘cultural decay’. His narrative appears to lack objectivity because his own Indian family origin and his western upbringing forbid him to take any objective point of view.

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