

## **Postcolonial India: Mutinies and their Outcomes**

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### **Abstract**

V.S. Naipaul's upbringing as a adherent of the minority community has an impact on his outlook of the minority communities of India. In his final book of the Indian travelogue trilogy, he interacts with a number of minority groups in India and tries to develop an insight into their existence. This paper tries to explore this experience with an objective of studying the childhood experiences of a member of the Hindu community in Trinidad and their role in building his attitude in the perception of the Indian minorities. The Muslim community dwelling in the ghetto area of Mumbai and the Sikh Community have been taken up and assessed according to the description of Naipaul.

**Keywords-** Mutinies, Minorities, Postcolonial Discourse, Identities, Caste, Fundamentalism, Alienation

### **Introduction**

There have been accusations on Naipaul over his Colonial stand since the writing of his travelogues. In India, he faced stiff criticism over *Area of Darkness* (1964) that marked his first confrontation of India. The first visit provided so many stimuli to Naipaul that he had to suffer a psychosis as he saw the distress of the country. This was an India he surely knew, but it was one that forced his ancestors to quit in search of employment. Here he was also afraid of being lost into the similitude of the Indian multitudes. In London, he was perceived with the exotic uniqueness of an outsider, while in India he was only another Indian.

After this initial perception, he discovered that in India being an Indian was not important. One had to cling to various identities of caste and religion to be of importance in the society but on

occasions since the publication of *An Area of Darkness*, he has demonstrated that he is truly anxious about India and its heritage that he wishes to be restored in the present. In this, he seems to be creating a Post Colonial discourse of its own kind. As Helen Gilbert puts it:

The term *post-colonialism*—according to a too-rigid etymology—is frequently misunderstood as a temporal concept, meaning the time after colonialism has ceased, or the time following the politically determined Independence Day on which a country breaks away from its governance by another state. Not a naïve teleological sequence, which supersedes colonialism, *post-colonialism* is, rather, an engagement with, and contestation of, colonialism's discourses, power structures, and social hierarchies. *Post-Colonial Drama* (1996).

In this tradition one can place Naipaul's third book on India, *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990), his most ambitious book on the country till date. Compared to *An Area of Darkness* and *India: A Wounded Civilization*, the title of the latest book is less negative. But the use of the word 'mutinies' indicates that Naipaul's writings still have strains of the colonial discourse, though by and large they can be considered as the works of a post-colonial writer. At the same time, one wonders whether Naipaul's use of the word 'mutinies' was deliberate and whether he hinted at the attitude of a central government that acts as a colonial regime in putting down assertions of identity by the numerous socio-ethnic/religious/political groups in India.

The Muslim area that Naipaul visited in Bombay was packed with people and full of pollution. At several places in *India: A Million Mutinies Now* Naipaul has commented on congestion. He has compared the dwellers of the slums to caged chickens that get used to the cramped conditions and half run and half fly even when they are set free. He has also carefully observed the life-style of the people of the Bombay chawls who get disturbed when they are moved to the privacy of flats. Naipaul remarks that the vociferous Muslim slogans that are raised in the area arise out of a need to demonstrate their unity to the outside groups such as Shiv Sena, and not because they are religious people:

It was dreadfully crowded, with every kind of smell and noise. The brown-black smoke from cars using kerosene-adulterated fuel was like a hot fog in the sunlight. It burned the skin and felt jagged in the lungs. It was part of the general feeling of oppression; and the slogan about Islam, seen through this smoke, had the effect of a scream. It wasn't for the people of the ghetto; it was for the people outside, people like the Shiv-Sena, who might think of making trouble. (Naipaul 28)

Naipaul got to learn about Anwar, a frail Muslim of a Bombay ghetto area who was small and weak with some congenital disability. But this weakness was compensated by the fact that he was a devout

Muslim, a God abiding man. He also spoke to Anwar's father, a lean old man. With an eye for detail, Naipaul noticed the old man's assertion of his identity through his well-groomed beard and deduced that Anwar's father's spade-shaped beard was a Muslim beard.

Naipaul's conversation with Anwar and his father revealed the immense pressure they lived under and he understood the complications of the paradoxical life that Anwar and others like him had to lead. Anwar disapproved of their brothers calling them "Goondas" (Naipaul 33) and lamented the lack of education among Muslims in the ghetto. He accepted that there were very few sensible people within his community (this fact appears to be true for any community) and was of the belief that educated people will never prefer being involved in activities such as fighting.

While he was in Trinidad, Naipaul himself belonged to a minority community of Hindus amidst the majority of the African population in the island. He has enough understanding of the minority life in the region and because of this experience, he is well aware of the pain that the minorities have to face in a country. It allows him to sympathize with minorities in any part of the world:

I felt that if I had been in their position, confined to Bombay, to that area, to that row, I too would have been a passionate Muslim. I had grown up in Trinidad as a member of the Indian community, a member of the minority, and I knew that if you felt your community was small, you could never walk away from it; the grimmer things became, the more you insisted on what you were. (Naipaul 31)

While his visit to India, he meets several minority communities and deeply considers their problems. Sikhs belong to one of such groups that attract Naipaul's attention and he writes at length about the predicament of the community, and the calamities that have occurred to them since the inception of their religion.

The establishing of a Sikh identity was a recurring Sikh need. Religion was the base of this identity; religion provided the emotional charge. But that also meant that the Sikh cause had been entrusted to people who were not representative of the Sikh achievement, were a generation or so behind. (Naipaul 448)

While Naipaul's analysis of Muslim fundamentalism in India is based on a visit to a ghetto and conversations with the inhabitants, his assessment of Sikh alienation is based on his talks with people from different strata of society that include political leaders, journalists, bureaucrats and so on. After going through Russell's Diaries, he comes to know that like all other Indians, the British Government was inconsiderate towards the Sikhs as well. This piece of literature infuses a sense of Post Colonial regret over the destruction of Sikhs and other Indian Communities at the hands of the British Army.

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The British, at the height of their empire, had a general disregard for all Indians. Even in 1858, while the mutiny was going on, Russell noticed this slighting attitude towards the Sikh soldiers who were fighting on the British side... (Naipaul 492)

Naipaul observes that in spite of several blows to the Sikh Community such as the defeat of their empire at the hands of the British and the Partition riot they were able to rise again. After the Partition, millions of Sikhs were forced to leave their flourishing settlements in Pakistan but this did not stop them from prospering again. Then again they had to face the problem of Sikh fundamentalism:

And then in the late 70's in their politics, always sectarian and clannish and cantankerous, became confounded with a Sikh fundamentalism preached by a young man of a simple village background... There began then the train of events which were to lead to the daily budget of terrorist news in the newspapers. (Naipaul 422-23)

Naipaul spoke at length about Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale (1948-1984), preacher turned militant leader in Punjab, his rise and his various confrontations, on the basis of discussions with journalists who had actually met Bhindranwale. His account of politicization of religion in Punjab that led to Sikh fundamentalism is rounded off with an account of operation Bluestar. Sikh Fundamentalism was illogical but the action taken to counter it was even more illogical. There was no synergy between the army and the intelligence that led to a loss of lives on both the sides. The time that was chosen to catch Bhindranwale was not appropriate and it resulted into a kind of failure as Bhindranwale was not even caught alive. The right time to use force was when Bhindranwale's men murdered a high rank police official and his body remained lying on the streets for hours. The silence at that crucial moment boosted the confidence of the leader:

Bluestar itself was not shocking to me. What was shocking was the manner in which it was done. It was a very bad operation. I thought Bhindranwale and his men could have been caught without bloodshed. I felt sorry for the 93 soldiers who were killed. They chose such a bad day to catch Bhindranwale. And they did not even catch him. (Naipaul 483)

Naipaul remarks that there was some emotional and intellectual flaw in the community that originated because of a lack of balance between their material and spiritual life which was developed only in the last century.

It was as if there was some intellectual or emotional flaw in the community, as if in their fast unbroken rise over the last century there had developed a lack of balance between their material achievement and their internal life, so that, though in, one way so adventurous and forward looking, in another way they remained close to their tribal and country origins. (Naipaul 424)

Naipaul's reading of Russell's diaries suggests that the Sikhs were a violent community who bayoneted and burnt the defenders of the Lucknow in a manner that led Russell to infer that the Indians were barbarous people who butchered their own brethren. Perhaps this violent instinct in Sikhs was because of the conditions in which Sikh religion was born, out of a need to meet the violence of the Mughals under Aurangzeb.

Naipaul's assessment of the Muslim and Sikh communities exhibits Naipaul's perception of India which he views as a compilation of mutinous communities. While there are several real and imagined factors that divide the nation, still the common element that observers have hesitated to mention is the common culture that even the Muslims accept as their own. The truth that the origin of all Indians is from common ancestors and there was a time when they had a common religion cannot be negated forever. But on the other hand, it is also true that the races in India have fought each other from time to time and Indians are themselves responsible for their losses.

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