

**V.S. Naipaul's, India: A Wounded Civilization
Calling a spade a spade**

Reviews by Ramlal Agarwal

V.S. Naipaul had a curious relationship with India. It was a country of his ancestors who settled in Trinidad as indentured labourers. He had grown up in Trinidad among a sizeable community of Indians who practised Hindu ways of life. Later, when he moved to London and took to Western ways of life, he developed an aversion to Hindi beliefs and philosophy. Yet he was drawn to India and came to visit it not once or twice but three times, and each time came out with a book of his stay here. These books are: *An Area of Darkness* (1964), *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1976), and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990). These books are non-fiction books and a penetrating inquiry into the Indian philosophy and beliefs that are ingrained into the Indian psyche and are the causes of India's subjection to foreign rule and its acceptance of defeat and humiliation.

They offer valuable insights into the mindset as reflected in Indian literature. He starts *India: A Wounded Civilization* with a reference to "India will go on, a statement R.K. Narayan made during his meeting with Naipaul in London. Naipaul thinks this simple statement says it all. It runs up Indian philosophy and beliefs. It means one needn't worry about India. It will survive all vicissitudes of time. It expresses an unshakable belief that everything is preordained and nothing can be changed. Narayan delineates fully in his novel *Mr. Sampat*.

Shrinivas, the hero of *Mr. Sampat*, is married and thirty-seven years old. He is interested in religion and reads religious books and scriptures. He has no job or occupation and is completely dependent on his elder brother. One day his brother asks him what he wants to do in his life.? Shrinivas tells him that he wants to read the Upanishads and decides to start a weekly paper to start Malgudi. He rents a squalid room in a crowded lane and finds an office for his paper in a garret. Soon his printer, Mr. Sampat, pulls the shutter, and Shrinivas has to close his paper. Mr. Sampat gets busy with film production. Shrinivas joins him as a scriptwriter. The film is abandoned because the printer Mr. Sampat and the artist fall in love with the heroine. The heroine prefers the printer, and the artist is severely rebuked and goes mad. A magician who suggests beating the artist and leaving him alone near the temple outside the town is called to treat him.

Shrinivas decides that it does not matter whether the artist is looked after or not during that time, whether he lives or dies. Existence asserts itself. Shrinivas translates Gandhi's nonviolence as a means of securing an undisturbed calm, which is non-doing, non-interference, and social indifference.

His philosophical speculations are to absolve himself of any responsibility. Narayan wrote about the thirties, and Vijay Tendulkar about the seventies. His plays are about individualism, morality, caste, and violence. He was awarded a Nehru fellowship for a book on violence in society. He went to West Bengal, Bihar, and Telangana. The Naxalite movement soon degenerated into rural terrorism and was crushed by the government. In

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his meeting with Naipaul, Tendulkar told him that he was horrified by what he saw in Bihar and the peace he experienced while boating in the holy waters of Ganga, and he would speak about it rather than the horrors on the bank.

Naipaul notices the same yearning in Tendulkar that had seized Shrinivas and Jagan, the vendor of sweets: the longing to run away from challenges. Naipaul delves into the causes of the failure of the Naxalite movement. He says that the movement's aims had stirred the best young men in India. The best left the universities and went far away to fight for the landless and oppressed justice. They went to a battle they knew little about. They knew the solutions better than they knew the problems, better than they knew the country. India remains so little known to Indians. People don't have the information. History, social inquiry, and habits of analysis that go with these disciplines too far outside the Indian tradition.

Naipaul observes that self-absorption characterises Indians. He cites Gandhi's behaviour during his first visit to England. Gandhi, in his autobiography *My Experiments with Truth*, says he did not mix with his shipmates or share food with them during his travels to England. He wore flannels when he stepped ashore in Southampton. Unaware of British customs, he was insulated from the excitement of arriving in a new country, its weather, and its architecture. He only remembers his stay in England when he passed his exam, was called to the bar, and sailed for India.

Naipaul recognises Gandhi's contribution to the Indian struggle for independence, ingenuity, and leadership, but he does not hesitate to say that his spirituality spoils it all. He also does not hesitate to discuss the rigidities and inflexibility of Hinduism. He cites Anant Murthy's famous novel *Samskara*.

The central figure in the novel is Acharya, the spiritual head of a brotherhood of Brahmins. Acharya believes he is "a man of goodness" by birth because of his karma. He marries a twelve-year-old girl, challenged in more ways than one, and attends to her needs. He is highly regarded. He follows the Hindu code and books for his guidance. One Brahmin of the brotherhood breaks the Hindu code, and the brotherhood wants to declare him an outcast. A plague breaks out in the area and claims the life of an errant Brahmin. His death raises a storm in the brotherhood. The brotherhood cannot decide whether it should cremate the body or not. The Acharya too is undecided because there is no guidance in the sacred books. Finally, he decides to leave the matter to the gods. Even gods do not give him a direction. While he was returning to the brotherhood, he met the errant Brahmin mistress and had sex with her. Now he too is fallen, and, in his anguish, he turns away from the brotherhood and goes to a nearby village where he is exposed to all the vices strictly forbidden for Brahmins. The Acharya wants to clean up his transgressions, but one wonders whether the Acharya can return to the brotherhood.

Naipaul argues that the Hindu concepts of dharma and karma and living in the glory of the past have stunted growth and led to the decay and defeat of Indian civilisation. His comments are harsh, but they are made out of his love for the country of his ancestors.