

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 7. Issue.3. 2020 (July-Sept)

ISSN  
INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF RELIGION AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE IN INDIA IN  
V.S. NAIPAUL'S TRILOGY

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Article information

Received:30/07/2020

Accepted: 27/08/2020

Published online: 06/09/2020

doi: [10.33329/ijelr.7.3.162](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.7.3.162)

ABSTRACT

V S Naipaul is one of the most distinguished and prolific contemporary writers. Most of his representative works are relative to the construction of cultural, religious, social structure, poverty conditions in India and cultural confrontation which is significant in the postcolonial study. This paper attempts to explore the religion, social conditions and caste system in India in his trilogical works in *An Area of Darkness*, *India: A Wounded Civilization* and *India: A Million Mutinies Now*. Moreover V S Naipaul's devotes his deepest interest towards Mahatma Gandhi, the most significant and reputable spiritual leader and very famous representative of Hinduism as well as the author's positive description on Gandhi. On the contrary, Naipaul blames Gandhi for having a "defect of vision" and Naipaul's concept on the "underdevelopment ego" which is the reason why Indian people are so difficult to be understood by the rest of the world. V S Naipaul broadly describes the Dravidian movement which is against the Brahmins and their traditions initiated by Periyar.

**Keywords:** Religion, Social structure, caste system, poverty, Hinduism.

Introduction

V.S. Naipaul (Sir VidiadharSurajprasad Naipaul) was born on August 17, 1932, at Chaguanas, Trinidad and Tobago and died on August 11, 2018. His forefathers hailed as indentured laborers from India. Naipaul's upbringing familiarized him with every sort of deprivation, material and cultural. He got a scholarship from Oxford University and thus came to England. It was at Oxford that V.S. Naipaul discovered the writer in him. V.S. Naipaul traveled extensively in India and Africa. At that time decolonization was taking place and Sir V.S. Naipaul noticed from close quarters the resulting turmoil of emotions. These observations were reflected in his writings. V.S. Naipaul wrote about slavery, revolution, guerrillas, corrupt politicians, the poor and the oppressed, interpreting the rages so deeply rooted in our societies. V.S. Naipaul has discussed Islam in several of his books and he has been criticized for harping on negative aspects of Islam. V.S. Naipaul's support for Hindutva has also been controversial. He has quoted describing the destruction of the Babri Masque as a "creative passion", and the invasion of Babur in the 16th century as a "mortal wound." V.S. Naipaul has won many awards and honors for his writings. In 1971, Naipaul received the Booker Prize for his book "In a Free

State" and became the first person of Indian origin do so. He accomplished the Jerusalem Prize in 1983 and Nobel Prize for Literature in 2001.

His travels to India provide him an opportunity not only to put to test his concepts formed but also having the first-hand experience of religious practices in birth place of these religions.

Furthermore, his travelling enables him to enlarge his fund of religious knowledge. In this connection we can mention Naipaul's travels to India, which go a long way to develop his vision especially his vision of Hinduism. The experience of his three tours to India in 1962,1975,and 1989 provide him with the material to his great works, *An Area of Darkness*(1964), *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977) and *India: A Million Mutinies Now*(1990).

According to R N Sarkar, Naipaul's vision is blurred by his Western modernism. His "approach to India is basically from the outside, as from an outsider." It is in sharp contrast to the approach of R.K. Narayan who renders an inner view of Indian society. India remains for Naipaul an outside experience. Likewise his vision of Hindu religion is also defective, since he visualizes it not with the eyes of faith but of scepticism. As Sarkar observes, "Naipaul overviews Indian Hinduism in sharp contrast with western modernism which does not count even Christianity as the basic infrastructure of their achievement".

### **Religion and Social Structure in an Area of Darkness:**

The substance of the Indian character lies in the deeply rooted Hindu tradition and the caste system, which determines the social structure in India. Hinduism is the most important and significant Indian religion apart from Buddhism and Islam. The Hindu-Muslim conflict is many times aroused in the trilogy. The rattles and the mutual misunderstandings between the devotees of the two religious groups are usually shown on the way people are living. Naipaul marks about the Muslim ghettos placed out of the rest of the Hindu society. V.S. Naipaul acts, as a representative of Hindu, with Azis, a representative of Muslim, we can trace a considerable misunderstanding between those two religions. Naipaul himself confesses that despite the fact that his relationship to Azis was more or less warm and on friendly terms, there occurred some moments of misapprehension. Naipaul comprehends that Muslims "were somewhat more different than others", because "they were not to be trusted; they would always do you down" (Rai 16).

However the author does not prominence on these relations that much as he focuses on Hinduism itself. It stands at the background to every characteristic of life portrayed in his books. Naipaul himself has a very ambiguous position in terms of religious relationship. Though he clearly states that he is not a believer that he "remained almost totally ignorant of Hinduism" (*Darkness* 1987:32) and that his Hindu upbringing evoked only "that sense of the difference of people, [...], a vaguer sense of caste, and a horror of the unclean" (*Darkness* 1987:32-33), there was evidently "Hindu-traditional, Brahmin side of him" (Rai 10). It appears in the way he is accepting the people practising their rituals, in the way he is sympathizing with the Brahmin family and their eating habits and in his aptitude to "separate the pleasant from the unpleasant" (*Darkness* 1987:45).

The individual spiritual raise is superior to the prosperity of the whole nation. The only thing that matters in terms of Hindu lifestyle is caste, clan and family. This deeply conventionalised social structure is the base of the Indian social hierarchy. Everyone is predetermined by birth to play a definite role in his life. There is no acceptance of social mobility within caste system. Caste is what primarily describes each person within the society.

"Class is a system of rewards. Caste imprisons a man in his function. From this it follows, since there are no rewards, that duties and responsibilities become irrelevant to position. A man is his proclaimed function. There is little subtlety to India. The poor are thin; the rich are fat". (*Darkness* 1987:75).

Naipaul dedicates his deepest interest to Mahatma Gandhi, the most significant and reputable Indian spiritual leader and famous representative of Hinduism. Gandhi has a very prominent role in *An Area of Darkness*, because of his western experience. The author uses Gandhi to show the contrast of western vision of India and

the Indian perception of reality. Like Naipaul, Gandhi developed a capability to see India with a western eye through his long residence abroad. The whole Indian society is centred on Gandhi.

The observer and the unsuccessful reformer, is of course Mohandas Gandhi. Mahatma, great-souled, father of the nation, deified, his name is given to streets and parks and squares, honoured everywhere by statues and *mandaps* [...], he is nevertheless the least Indian of Indian leaders. (*Darkness* 1987:73).

In *An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul's portrayal of Gandhi is mostly positive. He sees him as the greatest Indian reformer, who, having gained a western experience, could objectively perceive the reality in India and who felt a strong need for a change. The first and foremost thing Gandhi noticed is the obscurity all around India. He was not blind to the poverty and dirt like any other Indian people. He asserts that

"Instead of having elegant hamlets dotting the land, we have dung-heaps. [...] By our bad habits we indulge our sacred river banks and furnish excellent breeding grounds for flies. [...] Separation of night-soil, cleaning the nose, or spitting on the road is a sin against God as well as humanity, and betrays a sad want of consideration for others. The man who does not cover his waste deserves a heavy punishment even if he lives in a forest". (*Darkness* 1987:71).

### Religion and Social Structure in India: A Wounded Civilization

Naipaul emphasizes again that the traditional Hindu attitudes "subvert the cause of progress" (Nightingale 197). The Hindu principles work on the individual's withdrawal into his inner world; meditation and non-violence are the only ways of resistance. "The outer world matters only so far as it affects the inner." (*Wounded Civilization* 1979:101). It is the Hindu way of protection and the way of coping with the difficulties of outer world. They believe that to stay passive and to withdraw into their inner world every time when some trouble occurs is the best thing to do to be able to survive. This is exactly what Indians do instead of facing the discrepancies in their own country. Instead of trying to find the reasonable solution, they shut away in their inner world.

While his world holds and he is secure, the Indian is a man simply having his being; and he is surrounded by other people having their being. But when the props of family, clan, and caste go, chaos and blankness come. (*Wounded Civilization* 1979:103).

India is not a nation; it is the country of personalities. For Indian being an Indian does not have the same meaning as for Americans being Americans or for British being British. 'Indian' is just an unoccupied word. What matters in India is the caste, family or clan. People's identities are shaped by these smaller units; Indians do not perceive themselves as being the members of some larger entity on the basis of the whole nation. Naipaul calls this phenomenon the "underdeveloped ego". It is "created by the detailed social organization" (*Wounded Civilization* 1979:102).

Caste and clan are more than brotherhoods; they define the individual completely. The individual is never on his own; he is always fundamentally a member of his group, with a complex apparatus of rules, rituals and taboos. (*Wounded Civilization* 1979:102).

The concept of the "underdeveloped ego" is the reason why Indian people are so difficult to be understood by the rest of the world. Their mental and intellectual capacities operate in a way that is absolutely incomprehensible for 'outsiders'. This is the reason why Indians look at India from a different perspective, why they are blind to many aspects that are striking for many non-Indians and why their behaviour in some particular situations is regarded, to say the least, bizarre. They are simply being misunderstood.

In *India: A Wounded Civilization* Naipaul's attitude towards the doctrine of Mahatma Gandhi and his role in the forming of the modern Indian nation considerably changes. The author no more sees Gandhi as overall positive. He is more critical about Gandhi's actions and reforms and finally, he regards Gandhi's influence in India as a complete failure. As far as Naipaul's attitude is concerned, it almost seems that *India: A Wounded Civilization* stands in straight contrast to *An Area of Darkness*. Whereas in *An Area of Darkness* Naipaul praises Gandhi for his ability to see India and Indian people from a European point of view and

evaluates his aptitude of proper judgements, in *India: A Wounded Civilization* this idea is not applied any more. On the contrary, Naipaul blames Gandhi for having a “defect of vision” (*Wounded Civilization* 1979:97). Moreover, Naipaul claims that Gandhi completely failed to understand the needs of India and that he led India to an even much greater retreat.

### Religion and Social Structure in India: A Million Mutinies Now

As Indian society is deeply religious, Hinduism cannot be considered merely as a religion in India, it is rather a lifestyle. It determines and transfuses into every aspect of Indian life and, in its traditional form, it has put an obstacle on the Indian way to progress. Therefore, as I have already stated earlier, the traditional religious and social principles of the Indian society have gone through radical changes. Although Hindu religion cannot be completely diminished, which is not even necessary, it becomes more fitted to the needs of the contemporary economic development of the Indian society. Everybody tries to change things to suit himself. [...] [The rituals] were being adapted all the time (*Million Mutinies* 1998:56). Some of the old traditions and rituals perished and those, which survived, were transformed to better serve the needs of the individuals. From the previous two books it is clear that most of the rituals practised in India are not fully understood by Indians themselves and with every new generation they are losing their meaning.

[...] it might have seemed then that Hindu India was on the verge of extinction, something to be divided between Christian Europe and the Muslim world, and all its religious symbols and difficult theology rendered as meaningless as the Aztec gods in Mexico, or the symbolism of Hindu Angkor.

But it hadn't been like that. [...] a Hindu India has grown again, more complete and unified than any India in the past. (*Million Mutinies* 1998:143)

The caste system as a social order in India is still prevailing, but, as in the case of religion, in its reduced forms. Many protests run through the whole country and the new attitudes are shaped. Naipaul broadly describes the Dravidian movement against Brahmins and their traditions initiated by Periyar:

[...] other middle castes began to produce their own prominent personalities. Many of these middle-caste people were well-to-do [...] many were landlords; some could send their sons to Oxford and Cambridge. As soon as such people had emerged from the middle castes, the antique brahmin caste restrictions would not have been easy to maintain. What Periyar did was to take this mood of rejection to the non-brahmin masses. (*Million Mutinies* 1998:223).

This movement had taken form of “braking idols, cutting of brahmins' churkis and sacred threads, and rubbing of the religious marks on the forehead” (*Milion Mutinies* 1998:253). Vegetarian restaurants were known as “brahmin hotels”, whereas non-brahmin restaurants were called “military hotels”. The Brahmin side of Naipaul is revealed when he indicates that in the “military hotels” the conditions are very poor and unclean.

Caste system is still defining people's position in the country. Indians are not able to completely withdraw from their long ago established caste system. It became too much part of their identity. Though, the approach of individuals slightly changed, caste is still determining for certain positions and functions.

Caste [...] was the first thing of importance. A man looking for office or a political career would have to be of a suitable caste. That meant belonging to the dominant caste of the area. He would also, of course, have to be someone who could get the support of his caste; that meant he would have to be of some standing in the community, well connected and well known. (*Million Mutinies* 1998:187).

Yet there appears a remarkable shift in their caste system organization. Middle-class people grow in importance not only economically, but intellectually as well, while, the members of the highest castes are consequently losing their established position in the Indian society. The new stratification of the society is evident from Naipaul's interviews. The new Indian elite springs out of these transformations.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the author remarked that the ideas which he mentioned in *An Area of Darkness* form the concept for Naipaul's further works *India: A Wounded Civilization* and *India: A Million Mutinies Now*. The author deals with the same ideologies in all three books, but with different perspectives, which are formed through his own experience. The Indian trilogy wonderfully explains the journey through darkness, caused by the death of the old wounded civilization and through million mutinies resulting in the birth of a new nation.

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