

# The Criterion

September 2012

ISSN 0976-8165

Vol. III. Issue. III

An International Journal in English

Quarterly Refereed and Indexed Open Access Journal

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## Naipaul's *India : A Wounded Civilization* : A Political Perspective

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V.S Naipaul born in Trinidad to parents of Indian descent is an eminent writer known for novels and works of non-fiction which include essays and travel writings. Winner of Nobel Prize and numerous other literary prizes, he has focused time and again on the legacy of colonialism of the British Empire. The *New York Review of Books* celebrates him as “a master of modern English prose.” His book *India: A Wounded Civilization* gives a description of his journey to India in 1975. His main concern in this book is to portray the deficiencies in the Indian democracy. The present paper attempts to probe his appraisal of the politics of individuals or groups which pose serious threat to democratic institutions in India. Naipaul has depicted the control of government by individuals or groups from grass roots level to state or central government by means of autocratic methods rather than by popular mandate of the people. He describes how authoritarianism and communalism pose serious threat to Indian democratic polity. On the pretext of working for the welfare of the masses, the political leaders have their own ulterior motives to continue to remain in power. Naipaul is critical of illegitimate power enjoyed by such individuals or groups. In his *India: A Wounded Civilization*, he is critical of unbounded power enjoyed by men like Mr. Patel, the landlord, who are respected simply because they are financially strong. Naipaul is also critical of Mrs. Indira Gandhi's declaration of Emergency in India. At the same time, Shiv Sena's forming of 'Sena committees' is seen by Naipaul as an attempt at running parallel government in Maharashtra. He is critical of authoritarian tendencies of Mrs. Gandhi as well as of communal politics of the Shiv Sena. The paper makes an appraisal of the political perspective as presented by Naipaul in his commentary on India.

Indira Gandhi's declaration of Emergency was a political move which was claimed by her supporters to be a 'political necessity' to counter corruption, lawlessness, unemployment, poverty etc. Emergency however did not prove to be useful at making the lot of Indian society better, as Naipaul succinctly opines: “It established no new moral frame work for the society for a better regulated future ...” (45) Naipaul is also critical of imposing of censorship on newspapers by Mrs. Gandhi, a fact symptomatic of how political leaders use authoritarian political power to silence the Press which can create dissent among masses against the government. Naipaul observes how since the Emergency the government-for obvious reasons- has wished that newspapers should look away from politics and concentrate on social issues... (131).

Looking at the other extreme of the political spectrum, Naipaul critiques the role played by the Shiv Sena, the Hindu outfit that wielded more power than the elected representatives of the people in Maharashtra. The Sena had formed their own committees which were more powerful than the municipal committees. A sort of parallel government could be seen in Maharashtra. Naipaul rightly pinpoints this flaw in the Indian democratic set-up that allows communal outfits to have immense influence on administration. This, Naipaul believes has had serious implications for the Indian democracy. Naipaul describes the parallel power of Shiv Sena: “That

happened overnight, when the Sena gave a word; and the Sena's word was more than any government decree."(62)

The question then that needs to be pondered is why the illegitimate boundless power of communal and regional outfits comes to flourish in the country. As Naipaul demystifies, the Shiv Sena represented the Hindu community and any action against this outfit was feared by the political parties as having the potential of hurting the religious feelings of the Hindus. This as they feared, could dampen their political prospects. The main political parties at national level might have had apprehensions of losing Hindu votes which formed majority of populace in India. Rajni Kothari writes in his book *Communalism In Indian Politics*:

"The political structure that evolved in the first twenty years was very fragile. It was vulnerable in many spots and above all, produced an elite which slowly began to lose ideological discipline and a larger sense of purpose and, instead, started conceiving its interests in narrow mechanical terms which ultimately made it liable to fall prey to, or feel tempted to make use of, divisive tendencies."(16).

Kothari further argues that the ethnic division of Indian democracy "is not an aberration but something that is part of the system, a direct outcome of its inherent logic." Thus the communalization of politics is a product of the democratic system where ideology and idealism are sacrificed for surviving in politics and for continuing to remain in power.

In his book, *Naipaul's Truth: The Making of a Writer*, Lillian Feder enumerates as to what makes for wounds in *Naipaul's India: A Wounded Civilization*. These wounds, among other things, include poverty, India's obsession with their country's past, persistence of caste restrictions etc. which are summed up thus:

"... He [Nai[paul] is especially hard on Hinduism which, he says, "has exposed us to a thousand years of defeat and stagnation ... It has given men... no idea of the state. It has enslaved one quarter of the population and always left the whole fragmented and vulnerable," unable "to respond to challenge."(124 )

The subsequent arguments of Feder further suggest Naipaul's ambiguous acceptance of Shiv Sena in Bombay. The critic aptly notes the author's, more or less, the same kind of attitude towards the founder of the Self-respect Movement (from which the DMK descended), namely, Periyar.

Naipaul describes the power of Mr. Patel, the landlord of the village who is financially strong and the villagers are dependent on him for financial help at the time of their need. Financially sound people are politically and socially powerful. Though people like Patel are not elected representatives but parties need their backing. This is because the rural population is under their thumb. Being the downtrodden and financially weak, they are obligated to support the political party of the choice of men like Patel. Naipaul describes the prominence and power of Mr. Patel thus: "...the Patel was the landowner in the village. He owned fifty good acres; and though he didn't own people, the fate of whole families depended on the Patel. And to these people he was literally the master." (80) The benefits of democracy thus continue to elude the common people. Naipaul thus emphasizes the unholy nexus between money and political power in India.

The democratic institutions at the grass-roots level remain under threat as domination by custom, religion and consent continues even after independence. Mr. Patel could "frustrate the talk from Delhi about minimum wages, the abolition of untouchability, the rural indebtedness, How could the laws be enforced? Who would be the policeman in the village? The Patel was more than the biggest landowner. In that village where needs were still so basic, the Patel with

his house of grain ruled; and he ruled by custom and consent...” (86). Naipaul asserts that Democracy comes under threat even by the elected representatives of the people. The Sarpanch of the village is politically powerful and people respect him out of fear. He indulges in corrupt practices like mis-utilization of government funds, but there is hardly anyone to point a finger at him. Naipaul describes the misuse of political power by sarpanch thus:

“In the village it was accepted that the sarpanch was blessed: he was distrusted, feared and envied as prospering racketeer. Some years before, he had collected money for a cooperative irrigation scheme. That money had simply vanished; and there was nothing that anybody could do about it. Since then the Sarpanch’s power had if anything increased; and people had to be friendly with him, like the dusty little group scrambling after him now...” (79)

To grab power becomes the sole motive of the leaders. Unemployment, poverty, corruption and oppression of the downtrodden are the issues which remain unaddressed even after years of rule by Indian rulers after independence. Independence has no meaning when there is no rule of law and people are deprived of constitutional rights. The role of politicians is questionable. The colonizer plundered the country taking all the financial resources and exploited the Indians. This is true of modern Indian state as well. The political leaders use the government institutions for their own financial gains.

Naipaul’s description of the prevalent practice of child labor in Bihar indicates how laws continue to be flouted by the rich and the powerful. Even though child labor is against the law and constitution yet the landlords exploit the children. They have protection of the men in power, the so-called protectors of the rights of citizens who had taken the oath of working in accordance with the constitution. The plight of weaker and downtrodden sections also compels them to make their children work as laborers. Naipaul describes the exploitation of children in parts of Bihar “...child’s work: and children being cheaper than men were preferred...” (28). Also, through child labor, the common people are conditioned to accept their exploitation as ‘normal’ and sanctioned by God and tradition.

Naipaul’s analysis thus may be seen as validating what Vilfredo Pareto (listed in *Encyclopedia of Social Theory*: 545-46) theorizes in another context in his *Treatise* as, “[S]ociety is always governed by a small number of men, by an elite, even when it seems to have a completely democratic organization.” Pareto also believes that the elite, whom he calls ‘lions’ and ‘foxes’ take turns to rule over the masses or the ‘sheep’ with force and/or cunning. As Pareto puts it, “The world has always belonged to the strong...Men only respect those who make themselves respected. Whoever becomes a ‘lamb’ will find a ‘wolf’ to eat them.” The cycle thus continues. If however the common people threaten to disturb the prevailing political order, they are absorbed and/or eliminated—bought off or wiped out.

The Indian masses, especially the working class and the laborers lack political awareness and will to fight. The political leaders or the government then alone cannot be held solely responsible for their misery; the masses themselves are also responsible for their woes. Pareto’s theory of political elites thus may be seen as providing the necessary framework for understanding how power circulates between the strong and the cunning to keep the masses under control through absorption and/or elimination.

Namrata Mahanta Rathore describes how Naipaul “records his impressions of the farm-workers and laborers of North Bihar and Rajasthan in his book. Bihar, which was once “the cultural heartland” of India, remained filled with cruelty and poverty more than two decades after independence. The people did not question. They had resigned acceptance of suffering and

poverty...” (50, *The Indian Trilogy*). The corruption is also rooted in religious places which enjoy political patronage. Naipaul focuses on the corrupt practices of the religious institutions in India. He points to the ideas spread at an Ashram near Poona: “...you must go to that Ashram near Poona,’ the Parsi lady back for a holiday from Europe, said at lunch one day in Bombay. ‘They say you get a nice mix of East and West there.’...It is a terrible place, It’s full of American woman who go there to debauch...” (51)

Politicians remain silent on this kind of activities for fear of losing their vote bank. The answer to all questions regarding threat to democratic institutions is that the majority of Indian masses are bothered primarily about their own survival on day to day basis. Financially weak people cannot be expected to think about their own welfare or of the community or of the nation. The masses who are worried about their survival cannot be expected to fight for their constitutional rights. The needs for survival make the children of the downtrodden work as laborers. The fault lies with the system where there is disparity between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots. The mushrooming of political pressure groups in the name of religion, region etc. may be attributed to the ‘political necessity’ of regional and national parties to garner support in order to attain or maintain power. The parties are hardly bothered about the serious outcome of this kind of politics which is sure to kill the nationalistic spirit in the Indians. Can the elected representatives who claim to be harbingers of democracy and upholders of constitution justify their encouragement of illegal political activities of regional or religious outfits? The only thing which matter to the political leaders is deriving political power .The politics of unholy alliances has encouraged the formation of political groups in the name of religion or region in many states in India. Personality cult has always played an important role in Indian politics. Mrs. Gandhi was guilty of depriving constitutional rights of the Indians but “by implication she emerges as India’s possible savior, because Mohandas Gandhi and Gandhianism come out looking worse, for having imposed on India an allegedly archaic, retrospective set of values.” (Van Praagh 317). Indira Gandhi’s unconstitutional move of declaration of Emergency by which all civil rights were suspended should be seen in this context.

To conclude it can be said that communalism, commercialization and authoritarian tendencies in Indian politics is killing the spirit and legitimacy of democracy, thus dampening the functioning of democratic institutions. Communal and regional politics results in communal and regional fights which often lead to violence and loss of lives and property. Authoritarian policies of men in power kill the very purpose of democratic polity. Education of masses, eradication of poverty can make functioning of democracy in accordance with democratic principles and constitution possible; otherwise the capitalistic forces will continue to have their sway on the democratic institutions through legal or illegal, democratic or undemocratic means.

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