

RELIGION IN THE NON-FICTIONS OF V. S. NAIPAUL

Amar Nath Prasad *
Professor & Head
Department of English
Jagdam College (J. P. University)
Chapra (Bihar)
&
Daisy Kumari
Mahaveer Sthan
Katahari Bag, Chapra (Bihar)

Abstract

Our lovely country India is a country of various people, religions, castes and colours. It is the microcosm of the whole world in the field of religion. Here people of different sects and beliefs live together. So in order to write anything about the Hindu religion or the other religions, one should be fully versed with the various aspects of religion. V.S.Naipaul was very much interested to visit his parental homeland, that is India. Consequently he paid three visits to India and whatever he saw and felt in his visit, he wrote some classical works in the form of travelogues. In his famous book An Area of Darkness which is in the form of a travelogue, Naipaul describes the plights of the eastern world including India and Africa. While living in London he was in the habit of seeing the beautiful London but when he paid his first visit to India he finds the Indian scenario unbearable. In the very opening of the book we find his bitter experiences at Bombay Dock in the office of Customs. The mismanagement of the officials of the customs perturbed his concept of India.

Keywords: Religion, Non-Fiction, Indian People, Culture, Civilization

This paper focuses on the history of Indian religion, people and culture. V. S. Naipaul presents a scathing attack on various notions of the Hindu Religion. He thinks that one of these notions which made Indians miserable. He is of the opinion that the fear of the notion of Karma has created the main slave tendency and submissive sense. He observes:

The system is as old as life itself...In the country itself, the practice of slavery had attained (such) sophistication that the victim themselves were made to feel a moral obligation to remain in slavery. Karma! (*India : A Wounded Civilization*, 48)

* Corresponding Author: Amar Nath Prasad

Email: amarnathprasad67@gmail.com

Received 05 April. 2025; Accepted 20 April 2025. Available online: 30 April 2025.

Published by SAFE. (Society for Academic Facilitation and Extension)

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It is interesting to note that V.S.Naipaul was born in a religious family. Both his father and mother were very much devoted to the Hindu religion. They also wanted to inculcate religious feelings in the mind of V.S.Naipaul. But V.S.Naipaul was much more fascinated towards Western London culture than Indian religion. In his famous book *An Area of Darkness*, in the chapter 'A Resting Place for the Imagination', he expresses his sense of religion in the following lines:

To me this luck was touched with fraudulence. I came of a family that abounded with pundits. But I have been born an unbeliever. I took no pleasure in religious ceremonies. They were too long, and the food came only at the end. I did not understand the language—it was as if our elders expected that our understanding would be instinctive—and no one explained the prayers or the rituals. (*An Area of Darkness*, 27)

Naipaul thinks that Indians live in their past. Indians seek pleasure and pride not in present but in their glorious past. Here people are conservative. It is a charge against the Indians that they refuse to change with the changing world. The culture and religion play more important role in their life. The culture and religion, as Naipaul writes in his book, is their very breath, a way of living. Indians can not survive without religion and it can not be equated with the concept of religion of the western countries. Naipaul is surprised to see that Indians only think every time to save the 'Dharma'. They agitate to save their religion. Naipaul describes his own experiences about this in the following lines:

But how can the imported system assume its dynamic role in India? The difficulty, the contradiction, lies in that very concept of dharma, the dharma of which Mrs. Gandhi speaks is a complex word : it can mean the faith, piety, everything which is felt to be right and religious and sanctioned. Law must serve dharma or at least not run counter to it; and that seems fair enough. Yet dharma, as expressed in the Indian social system, is so shot through with injustice and cruelty, based on such a limited view of man. It can accommodate bonded labour as, once, it accommodated widow-burning. Dharma can resist the idea of equality. Law in India can at times appear a forensic game, avoiding collision with the abuses it should be remedying; and it is hard to see how any system of law can do otherwise while the Indian dharama is honoured above the simple rights of men. (*India : A Wounded Civilization*, 132)

Naipaul, as it is known, was born in a religious family. He had critical experiences about this and especially about Hinduism. He, in his book, *India: A Wounded Civilization*, puts forth his critical analysis on the contradiction of law with 'Dharma'.

The law avoids the collision with dharma. Yet it is this dharma that the law must grapple with it, the law is to have a 'dynamic role'. That is the difficulty : to cope with the new pressures. India

has, in some ways, to undermine itself, to lose its old security. Borrowed institutions can no longer function simply as borrowed institutions, a tribute to modernity. Naipaul says:

Indians say that their gift is for synthesis. It might be said, rather, that for too long, as a conquered people, they have been intellectually parasitic on other civilizations. To survive in subjection, they have preserved their sanctuary of the instinctive, uncreative life, converting that into a religious ideal; at a more worldly level, they have deepended on others for the ideas and institutions that make a country work. The Emergency—coming so soon after Independence—dramatizes India’s creative incapacity, its intellectual depletion, its defenselessness, the inadequacy of every Indian’s idea of India. (*India : A Wounded Civilization*, 134)

It is interesting to note that Naipaul in his first visit to India presented a very dark and dismal picture of India in 1962. He has presented the dark aspects of Indian religion, people and culture. He also flings irony on the thread ceremony of the Brahman in India. He gives the epithet ‘theatre’ to this ceremony. As a matter of fact he was unable to present a very truthful picture of Indian tradition and religion. With his untraditional and atheistic temperament he fails in rendering perfect and satisfactory picture of India. In this regard Amod Kumar Rai is right when he observes:

An Area of Darkness is a record of impression of the stay of V. S. Naipaul in India during his first visit. This book presents his disillusionment and recognition that he was now a homeless product of colonialism. He presents his view about east which are totally negative. He says that the people of India lacks in the practical approach of religion. In other words to him, the Hindu are theoretically very strong but practically they are very superfluous. He is also of the opinion that the east is full of dirt, disease and various social maladies. In the prologue of the book he makes clear that he could not be happy in this country. He also finds the rigid caste system in India. He thinks that in India, there is no sanitation arrangement. In this book he also says about Sikhism. In Punjab, he met a Sikh who told him that Sikhism began to decline since Ranjit Singh and since partition. Naipaul says that the Sikhs, feel themselves isolated from the Hindu religion. In this respect he associates himself with the Sikhs because he also feels himself isolated from the Indian religion and culture. The last lines of the book *An Area of Darkness* are very remarkable. Naipaul says:

The world is illusion, the Hindu says we talk of despair...my experience of India defined itself more properly against my own homelessness, that I saw how close is the past years I had been to the total negation, how much it had become the basis of thought and feelings...illustration could only be a concept

and not something felt in the bones..I could never adequately express and never seize again. (*An Area of Darkness*, 266-67)

The second important travelogue, *India: A Wounded Civilization* is one of the most authentic travel account of V. S. Naipaul. This travelogue was written during the period of emergency in 1975. At that time he was in India. He visited many cities and states of India. During the emergency period, the democratic values of the nation were decreasing day-by-day. The ritual and religion was losing aroma and the people in India were in the deep distress. At the same time the book also depicts the regionalism and the naxalism which were gaining ground at that time. At the same time in this book Naipaul did not find any merit in Gandhi. According to Naipaul Gandhi's political thoughts and Indian economy have serious limitations. As a matter of fact through this book V. S. Naipaul wants to say that India must realize her weakness to recovery herself.

According to V. S. Naipaul, in India, religion plays a very vital role. But at the same time he also finds lacuna in Indian religion. Here, the role of religion is not to give solution but to make life more complex. In this respect he refers the famous novel 'Samskara' by U.R. Anantmurthy in which he shows the hypocrisy of the Hinduism. The 'Acharya' of the book was known for his ideal character and sacrifice. He became famous for his Vedic scholarship. But the critical situation came to his life. When he failed to take decision concerning his fellow Brahmin who has deviated from Brahminical rules. Later on we see that the deviated Brahmin died. But he was not given cremation immediately. Here Anantamurthy has presented a negative aspect of Indian religion. Our sacred book the Geeta, observes that it is the body that dies and not the soul. So at the time of cremation no differences should be made. Here Naipaul supports the religious concept of U. R. Anantmurthy. In this regard Rabi Kumar Jha rightly observes:

Naipaul mocks at Hindu religion. He considers that the Hindu religion teaches the escapist attitude of life. If the problem comes to a Hindu, the religious thought failed to give strength to fight against it. Though such kind of thoughts are not deeply embedded in Hindu religion. Naipaul further gives the miniature of two most pathetic states of India. He had visited Bihar and Rajasthan. Both these two states are important in Naipaul's narration of this travelogue. (Jha, Rabi Kumar, 98)

V.S.Naipaul also visited the Vijayanagar Empire where he found that the Hinduism has already been violated there. He finds that in this Empire its bronze sculptures are like those of 500 years before. The surrounding Muslims must have become heavy and archaic. At the same time its ruins of rocks are having strange shapes and so they look older than they are. According to

V.S.Naipaul ‘Vijay nagar Empire’ was dominated by the priest of the contemporary time. Perhaps this is why Vijayanagar have its slave markets and temple prostitutes. Naipaul observes :

It encouraged the holy practice of ‘suttee’, whereby a widow burned herself on the funeral pyre of her husband, to achieve virtue, to secure the honour of her husband’s family and to cleanse that family of the sins of three generations. And Vijay Nagar dealt in human sacrifice. Once, when there was some trouble with the construction of a big reservoir, the great king of Vijay Nagar, Krishna Deva Raya (1509-1529), ordered the sacrifice of some prisoners. (*India : A Wounded Civilization*, 06)

It is interesting to note here that some of the critical comments seem to be very ludicrous and unintelligible. Naipaul never dives deep into the rich heritage and culture of India particularly its religious concept, rather he describes the religion superfluously with lopsided attitude. His description of Kalimata in *India: A Wounded Civilization* is a glaring example. Naipaul observes:

Kali, the black one, the coal black aboriginal goddess surviving in Hinduism as the emblem of female destructiveness, garlanded with human skulls, tongue forever out for fresh blood eternally sacrificed to but insatiable. (*India : A Wounded Civilization*, 78)

Here Naipaul’s description of Goddess Kali seems to be narrow and biased. We all know that according to *Shiva Puran* and *Shakti Puran* goddess Kali’ was the embodiment of victory over death and darkness. She is the symbol of truth over untruth or good over bad. At the same time, her tongue is not out for fresh blood but because of her blunder on walking the chest of Lord Shiva. Lord Shiva wanted to pacify her rage and anger and so he laid down on the path. We also know that our holy scriptures say that Devi Durga or Kali wears the garland, of the heads of the demons and the devils and not the ‘human skulls which V. S. Naipaul says.

India: A Wounded Civilization also presents a very acrid and bitter criticism of the culture, concept and religion of Binoba Bhave. He says that the people of India seldom know the meaning of spirituality. According to Naipaul, people of India boast up their rich past and civilization but generally they know little about it. Bhave, in the *Vanity of His Spiritual Perfection*, is more than a decadent Gandhian. He also thinks that the religion of Binoba Bhave is a kind of Barbarism because it tries to return men to the bush and forest.

In this book, *India: A Wounded Civilization* Naipaul has given much stress on the role of communalism and regionalism which has created great bumps and hurdles in the path of national progress. In this regard Naipaul gives reference to Shiv Sena of Maharashtra which was gaining its ground because of its political strength which is related to the religious and regional issues. Naipaul also found the Zamindari, System which was still in force in free India. The rulers who

claimed them to the real representatives of the people proved unsuccessful in their attempt to remove the shortcomings of the political system.

Naipaul feels that the various religions of India pose great threat to the smooth running of democracy and Indian constitution. He also believes that Indians lack the spirit of nationalism because India is based on various castes, religions and regions. The people of India are narrow minded because of illiteracy, lack of awareness and various other conventions and superstitions. Yet Naipaul rightly feels that before independence, India had the spirit of nationalism under the guidance of various leaders especially Mahatma Gandhi.

It is interesting to note that V. S. Naipaul was bred and brought up mostly on the Western land and so he has a very rare sentiments attached to the Indian culture and religion. His parents were highly devoted to Indian culture and civilization particularly the great Hindu religion because they were bred and brought up in India. R. K. Jha rightly observes:

His ancestors had their roots in India but he failed to fathom the depth of Hindu philosophy. The Hindu philosophy begins with human and ends with humanity. The overdose of British love and the western thoughts had changed the vision of Naipaul to see the Indian philosophy. The failure of Jagan is only because of his material love. Had he been true mascot of Hindu religion he would have followed the state of 'Aparigraha', the stage of non-collection of wealth. It is the oldest religion of the world. (Jha, Rabi Kumar, 32)

India: A Wounded Civilization shows the decaying condition of religion due to the political and regional issues. Naipaul thinks that the people of India are divided on the issues of class, caste, creed, colour, language, religion and ethnicity. These people have drawbacks and limitations but self-realization of Indian philosophy has spiritual elevation. He is also of the opinion that the constitution of India has been always the matter of great discussion among the lawyers but the truth is that the self-realization of the Hindu religion is beyond this worldly affairs. We know that after the emergency which was clamped by Smt. Indra Gandhi, the then PM of India there was strong revolt against her administration under the leadership of Jai Prakash Narayan. Consequently after the election, Indira Gandhi fail to secure her position because the people of North India supported Jai Prakash Narayan. So Naipaul thinks that the whole situation of India of that time was wounded — wounded by different views and visions, political ideals and religious frictions. Actually India is dominated not by the Indian nationalist leaders but the regional leaders, caste leaders and communal leaders. And we know that all these leaders have their limited vision and they are very much guided by their vested interest rather than the problem of

the nation. Naipaul observes a very debilitating and unhealthy situation at that time and so he observes:

Hindu society, which Gandhi had appeared to ennoble during the struggle for Independence, had begun to disintegrate with the rebirth and growth that had come with independence. (*India : A Wounded Civilization*, 45)

India: A Wounded Civilization shows the initial shock to the imaginative romantic image of India of V. S. Naipaul. This book also shows his acute sense of shame because his ancestors had to leave the country as indentured labourers. Perhaps this is why in this book Naipaul believes less on the memory and the stranger's eye. But his personal history still remains the foundation on which he builds his book. Here this book came into being out of some chance encounters with people and random interview who he does not know enough. Thus this book is much more thoughtful and reflective than *An Area of Darkness*. He looks at the history of India and observes that various foreign attacks and assaults on Indian civilization resulted in uncountable wounds and so India remained a wounded civilization. Yashoda Bhatt observes:

Perhaps he cannot also relate emotionally to any soil or any country. Expatriacy as a state of mind appears to be congenial to him. It looks as though he is at home in expatriacy. Naipaul's inability to accept any country as his home, in spite of his struggle to do so is due to causes which need a deeper exploration and understanding. The fact relates to his own sensibility, the complex sensibility, which developed out of his stay in Trinidad as an immigrant, then in London, again, as an immigrant. His attitude towards India can be understood better if it is remembered that three sociological influences worked on him and created peculiar psychological conditions. Living in Trinidad as an immigrant with a strong, nostalgic Hindu foundation, he lives in England as an expatriate and when he comes to India, his 'expatriate sensibility' is twice removed from the country of his origin. (Bhat, Yashoda, 121)

India : A Million Mutinies Now is the third and the last book in the 'Triology' published in the year 1990. This book deals with the observations of a modern rebellious India. The book contains a number of chapters dealing with the agitation, revolt, rage and communal riot after independence India. During his visit to India Naipaul meets a number of people to whom he made several interviews which are the central theme of this book. In other words, the book is an account of meetings, interviews and discourses of the modern India. Naipaul meets some people of the Dalit community and also some people belonging to Shiv Sena. He finds that Shiv Sena was emerging as a powerful movement in India. Though the 'Sena' was originally a political organisation, but later it worked for social, religious and cultural causes. The most important reason of its rise was the growing crime of underworld mafia dons. One of the members of Shiv Sena Mr. Patil tells Naipaul:

I have contempt for Gandhi. He believed in turning the other cheek. I believe that if someone slaps you, you must have the power to ask him why he slapped you, or you must slap him back. I hate the idea of non-violence. (*India : A Million mutinies Now*, 24)

In the conversation with Mr. Patil, V.S. Naipaul came to know that Maharashtra was dominated by the spirit and energy of religion. He also says that they strongly believed in the idol worshipping of Lord Ganapati. Naipaul says that every year a true Marathi gets a new image of Ganapati from the image maker and keeps the image at home for as long as he wants. But at the end of the festival, he has to immerse the image. Patil says that it was the tradition of his family to keep the image for one day and half and then they took it to a lake and immerse the idol of Ganpati.

In his third visit to India V.S. Naipaul also criticizes the various religious ceremonies performed by a Hindu in the presence of priest. Naipaul flings irony on the priesthood particularly on these priests who cheat the people. He says that in Hindu communities on the 14th day after a person died you have to perform ceremonies where you have to prepare all kind of food in addition to the dishes. The dead person liked. After the Puja, people put all the dishes on the leaf and leave it out in the open with the expectation that the crow will come and peck at what is laid out on the leaf and these crows are the symbol of soul merging with the infinite. Naipaul also thinks that the people of India are so much rooted in their belief and religion that they can not do anything without performing a puja, but in the Puja the priests are generally seen cheating the common folks which reminds us of the famous statement of John Milton about the priest in his famous poem Lycidas. Naipaul rightly thinks:

In recent times the perjuries have been taking shortcuts, especially with the marriage ceremony. They think a six hour ceremony is too long. He didn't like the shortcuts. There is no meaning to it. I feel that once you start taking shortcuts, it all goes down the drain. (P.94)

V.S. Naipaul, who was a great novelist with thought provoking themes and techniques is also a great traveller, who has presented his realistic vision of life with the help of his art and technique, images and symbols. He never presents the cultural, social and religious theme in a dry and monotonous way rather he takes the help of several tools of poetic excellences including the various conversations and interviews with the common people. He is right when he observes:

I think religion is the greatest curse of mankind. It has killed more people, destroyed more property, than any other thing. Even today Northern Ireland, the Middle East Hindu, Muslims, Sikhas all fighting each other in India. The oldest profession is not prostitution. It is the priesthood. (*Million Mutinies*, 488)

V. S. Naipaul has also presented anti Brahmin prayer and Dravidian movement in the South. He found that the whole South India was culturally, religiously and historically different from North, India. Periyar, in the South found that a kind of regionalism and anti Brahmin approach is gaining ground by leaps and bounds in around Chennai. Periyar Ramashwamy was a very radical leader who started an agitation against the age old Brahminical culture. When Naipaul went to a place in Madras he found the statue of Periyar under which there was a message written in praise. The message was: Periyar, the prophet of the new age, the Socrates of South East Asia, Father of the Social Movement and Arch Enemy of Ignorance; Superstitions, Meaningless customs and Baseless Manners”. In the other words, Periyar did not believe in God. He says that one who worships God is a barbarian. He was a starch leader of radical thought who did not believe in any rituals, ceremony or superstitions. He was very harsh and merciless protestor. Naipaul thinks that he was just the opposite of Gandhi:

Gandhi was a vegetarian. Periyar made a point of eating beef. Gandhi struggled to control the sense. Periyar ate enormous quantizes of food, and was enormously fat. One of prayer’s admirers told me, he was a glutton, And in this reversal of values, the word was intended as praise. He always had a biriyani rice and mutton, beef, pork. He was never fussy about food : Gandhi was always fussy about his food. (*A Million Mutinies Now*, 218)

In his third visit to India Naipaul also find a regional movement raising its head high under the leadership of Bhindarwale. In his conversation with Kuldip, a Sikh fellow, Naipaul finds that Kuldeep was one of those who had been with Bhindayrwale, He had been in hiding places for 5 years. He was also active in the All India Sikh Federation Union. This group was meant for its violent inclination, and the prominent people of this group are students. He told Naipaul that so many people were with him. They had been tortured to death and killed, 100 had been killed in false encounter. Kuldeep was of the opinion that she Sikh movement was intended to undo the political and social injustice of the world.

Thus, the three books of travelogue by V. S. Naipaul are the truthful mirror of the religions, culture, customs and social behaviors of the people of India. Naipaul’s observation is harsh but truthful. At some occasion Naipaul has presented the religions of India in a very dark and decimal way which is not altogether correct. A deep and profound study is needed; particularly the study of great language Sanskrit, only then one can understand the true nature of Indian religion in the true sense of the term. So Naipaul’s observation on the Hindu gods and goddesses, rituals and conventions are not totally up to the mark. They need modifications.

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