

## NAIPAUL AND INDIANNESS

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### ABSTRACT

MY PAPER WILL PRESENT, AS THE TITLE STATES, THE CONCEPT OF INDIANNESS AND THE AUTHOR VS NAIPAUL. I CHOSE TO PRESENT THIS CONCEPT BECAUSE IT OCCUPIES A SIGNIFICANT PART IN VS NAIPAUL'S LITERARY ACTIVITY. FOR A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THIS CONCEPT AND ALSO OF NAIPAUL'S WORK, IT IS NECESSARY TO START WITH A PRESENTATION OF THE BRITISH WRITER'S INDIANNESS AND TO CONTINUE WITH A DETAILED EXPLANATION OF THE EXTENT OF NAIPAUL'S INDIANNESS.

AN IMPORTANT PART OF THIS PAPER' INTRODUCTION EXPLAINS HOW INDIANNESS JUSTIFIES THE AUTHOR'S OFTEN UNFAVORABLE COMMENTS ON THE COUNTRY OF HIS ANCESTORS. I ALSO CONSIDERED NECESSARY TO PRESENT SOME DEFINITIONS OF THIS CONCEPT AND ALSO ITS DIMENSIONS.

THE CONTENT WILL PRESENT A HISTORICAL PRESENTATION OF THE INDIAN NATION AND WILL BE ACCOMPANIED BY SOME PHOTOS PLACED IN THIS PAPER WITH THE PRECISE PURPOSE OF UNDERLINING THE EXPLANATIONS. I ALSO PRESENTED SOME MAJOR TRAITS OF THIS CONCEPT SUCH AS LANGUAGE, RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AND HARD WORK.

ANOTHER PART OF THE CONTENT PRESENTS THE RELATION BETWEEN NAIPAUL'S LITERARY ACTIVITY AND THE CONCEPT OF INDIANNESS. HERE I SELECTED SOME OF NAIPAUL'S BOOKS, THE FAMOUS INDIAN TRILOGY AND ALSO ARTICLES, BOOKS AND ON-LINE SOURCES RELATED TO THIS SUBJECT SO MANY OTHER POINTS OF VIEW TO BE EMPHASIZED.

FINALLY THE CONCLUSIONS ROUND UP THIS PRESENTATION OF THE CONCEPT AND THE AUTHOR.

**KEY WORDS:** SIR VIDYADHAR SURAJPRASAD NAIPAUL, INDIANNESS, INDIAN TRAVELOGUES, TOLERANCE AND SACRIFICE

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of my paper is to answer the following **three questions**:

*How much of an Indian is the Trinidad-born Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, a subject of the British crown?*

*What is the extent of Naipaul's Indianness?*

*Does it justify his often unfavorable comments on the country of his ancestors?*

Referring to the Indian presence in locations other than India, Thomas Hylland Eriksen comments on the fallacy of simply viewing the Indians living in “a poly-ethnic society outside of India” as Indians, due to their particular situation of having been embedded “in a particular historical and socio-cultural context, and this fact is an

inextricable part of their life – even those aspects of their life which pertain to their very Indianness.” (Eriksen, 1992)

*Indianness* will be viewed as a **two-dimensional concept: (1) as a geographical identity, and (2) as a state of being.** It is noteworthy that Indians in the Caribbean islands continue to identify themselves as *Indian*, although their ancestors migrated from India years before the establishment of the Indian nation-state in 1947. Indian identity is often assumed to be a homogenous identity, derivative of India with its histories and traditions. Also, *Indianness* is a state of being attuned to certain philosophical beliefs and values that are distinctly unique from what the Western world has dictated. Some conclusions of a study devoted to the Indian community in South Africa may be easily applied to the West Indians. Thus, according to **John-Naidu (2005), “recreations of Indianness can be seen in a number of themes identifiable within the discourse of essentialist *Indianness*” and identifications are being made (or at least called for) in terms of these six themes: (1) A Romanticised Past; (2) Eternal/Timeless Essence; (3) Charitable Nature; (4) Mahatma Gandhi Influence and Resistance; (5) Morality; and (6) Industrious/Hard Working.**

#### CONTENT

Before considering Naipaul’s Indian travel writings along these lines, it is necessary to develop on the Indian presence in the Caribbean Archipelago. The economic conditions in the British colonies changed dramatically after the abolition of slavery in 1838. Cheap labour was needed and, due the inefficiency of the European laborers who could not stand the tropical climate, the solution was India: the first ship – the *Fatel Rozack* – arrived from India in 1845, bringing the first 231 Indians, after a voyage of 103 days. The process continued until 1917. The Europeans called them *East Indian*, not be confused with the Native Americans, called *American Indians*. According to their contracts, the *coolies* worked on the sugar plantations in the central and southern counties of Trinidad. The first East Indian immigrants – originally from Calcutta, Bihar, the United Provinces, and Bengal – employed in these areas, were meant to replace the former slaves of African ancestry who were leaving the sugar cane coffee, coconut and cocoa plantations after the Emancipation Act of 1833. Their descendants continue to live there nowadays. (See Fig. 6-8)



**Fig. 6:**  
Indentured workers from North India



**Fig. 7:**  
East Indians in Trinidad



**Fig. 8:**  
Newly arrived indentured Indians in Trinidad

The three pictures above are documents which testify to the ethnical strength of the Indians' presence in Trinidad, who brought with them their traditions, religion, and culture.

A further element that adds to their *Indianness* is the language spoken: most of them spoke languages belonging to the Indic group, and not so many were conversant in Tamil. By the 1950s, English became their common language, and Hindi was being taught in schools. The Hindus still use Sanskrit during religious ceremonies, while the Muslims use Arabic to understand the Koran and perform the Muslim rites.

Being hard-working and efficient, the Indians were offered the chance of a plot of land and the possibility to start a new life in Trinidad. Although many of them returned to India after the completion of the five year indentureship, the descendants of those who decided to stay preserved their Indian heritage – traditions and language – and the East Indian culture is a major component of the national culture of Trinidad. One interesting aspect is that – far from homogenous – the background of the Indian population of Trinidad is extremely varied. First of all, they came from different parts of India, bringing

with them the caste system, the religious diversity – Hinduism and Islam with their different sects – and customs regulating the family life. Secondly, not all of them came from India. Some originated from the other British colonies in the Caribbean – Grenada, British Guiana, Martinique – while some others received new contracts in Trinidad after having completed their indentureship in South Africa.

All these elements are to be found in Naipaul’s fiction and non-fiction, and he referred to his Indian background in his Nobel lecture. There are a few details worth considering. Some of the Indian indentured laborers in Trinidad were Muslims, but most of them were Hindus, but Muslims and Hindus alike, they all came from the villages of India. They observed their rural traditions, but the complicated matters of faith belong to the priests, scarce as they were. They found themselves far away from native India, and unaware of the numerous changings taking place back there. The practicing Hindus limited their religious actions to temple and shrines offerings to guardian spirits and diverse Hindu divinities. Also, they continued observing some of the holidays back home: the Diwali festival of lights, or the Holi spring festival of play and singing. Moreover, the *puja* ceremonies – which included prayers, offerings, and a feast – were organized to give thanks for their good fortune. All of these are present in many of Naipaul’s autobiographical writings.

Though the great majority of the Hindu and Muslim East Indians maintained their ancestral religious practices, some of them were converted by missionaries to the Christian faith, in its different denominations and they became Catholic and Presbyterian. As a consequence of the Canadian Mission (Presbyterian) policy of building schools in the new Indian settlements, some of them joined their faith.

One interesting characteristic of the mid-20th century is the revival of the main Hindu religious organization in Trinidad, the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha, and other religious sects of Indian extraction, such as the Divine Life Society, which knew the growing influence of followers of the Swami and accepted the Bangalore holy man Sathya, Sai Baba as divinity incarnated. On the other hand, several influential Muslim organizations advocated strict observance of the rules stipulated by the Koran and encouraged the building of mosques, while the Hindus built their own temples. Naipaul himself mentions the presence of both Hindu and Muslim neighbours, with a special mention of the Brahman priests and the observance of the Brahman rules by the East Indian population.

In *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, Naipaul refers to the poor Indians of Port of Spain, Trinidad, and comments on their unusual condition: isolation, no one to appeal to, people without representation, transported out of the ‘abjectness of India’. All those people sleeping in the public spaces in Port of Spain – now destitute and abandoned by the community they presumably belonged to – had once completed their indenture contract, without being offered the chance of a voyage back to India. Their language further isolated them from the other inhabitants of Port of Spain, and they would end their life on the streets. Here is Naipaul’s bitter comment:

“The idea came to me, when I was quite young, seeing those destitutes, that *we were people with no one to appeal to. We had been transported out of the abjectness of India, and were without representation.* The idea of the external enemy wasn’t enough to explain what had happened to us. I found myself at an early age looking inwards, and wondering whatever the culture – the difficult but personal religion, the taboos, the social ideas – which in one way supported and enriched some of us, and gave us solidity, wasn’t perhaps the very thing that had exposed us to defeat.” (*India: A Million Mutinies Now*, emphasis added)

The close reading of Naipaul’s Indian travelogues, or of any other books of the kind, favors the elaboration of a kind of hermeneutics of travel, an appropriate modality of coming into contact with the country visited. By refusing any simple gratuitous contemplation, I am asking myself: how can one “learn” a country? Is it only by visiting it? Is it by finding information and conclusions in other people’s writings? Or only from literature as an infallible instrument of knowledge? Hermeneutics seems to be the favourable formula, a cultural interpretation projected into the direct experience, an organized experience, corrected and integrated into a system of cultural references. But, before developing on the hermeneutics of travel, we should consider those traits that qualify or disqualify Naipaul’s Indian travel books – *India: A Wounded Civilization*, *An Area of Darkness* and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* – as writings that testify to Naipaul’s *Indianness*. In his books, Naipaul has documented the social and religious complexity of a country whose mythic attraction to a generation of hippies and soul seekers masked the dysfunctions of an ancient civilization unable to take its people into the modern age. According to Rachael Kohn, Naipaul’s India is “a country where religion locks everything into place, where the individual is never alone but is tied to a complex apparatus of rules, rituals, and taboos.” (Rachael Kohn, 1986)

Naipaul’s Indian travelogues reveal his intimate and profound relationship with the land of his ancestors. They also reveal Naipaul’s individual sense of identity as a member of a minority colonial community, and to the complexities of his relationship to India. This sense of identity is also revealed in *The Enigma of Arrival*. The narrator of the novel is a stranger in England just as Naipaul is a stranger in India, with a similarly complex relationship to it. He feels that he does not belong there – at one point he notes that his presence in the manor cottage on the neglected and declining estate of Waldenshaw in Wiltshire in the postcolonial period is “a little unlikely” (*Enigma of Arrival*, 55). Yet, at the same time, he argues that there is “a clear historical line” in the “series of accidents” which have brought him there, that is, in his ancestors’ migration from India to Trinidad, his colonial, English-language education, and his ambition to be a writer.

“To be an Indian from Trinidad is [...] to be the embodiment of an old verbal ambiguity. For this word “Indian” has been abused as no other word in the language; almost every time it is used it has to be qualified. There was a time in Europe when everything Oriental or everything a little unusual was judged to come from Turkey or India. So Indian ink is really Chinese ink and India paper first came from China. When in 1492 Columbus landed on the island of Guanahani he thought he had got to Cathay. He ought therefore to have called the people Chinese. But East was East. He called them Indians, and Indians they remained, walking Indian file through the Indian corn. And so, too, that American bird which to English-speaking people is the turkey is to the French le dindon, the bird of India.” (*Literary Occasions*)

What is, then, the purpose of *Indianness*? What does it all mean? Sam Chacko, of Rutgers University, in his *Defining Indianness*, posits the same question, which he finds rather difficult to answer, due to India’s amazing ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity. A coherent Indian identity is almost impossible to construct, “as it requires including elements that are vastly contradictory (for example, the Aryan and Dravidian elements) and diverse” (Chacko, 2010).

The key words in the title of an essay on Indian partition fiction are: “the essentials of Indianness: tolerance and sacrifice”. According to Basudeh Chakraborti,

“*tolerance* and *sacrifice* are the essential foundations of Indian culture and civilization. Hindu religion from time immemorial inspires men and women to follow the principle of

tolerance and sacrifice. Belief in the divine in all living organism is an important creed of the Vedanta philosophy. Soul that is indestructible is Brahma” (Chackrabarti, 2009).

Indian newspapers have been equally interested in defining the concept of *Indianness*. Thus, the *Deccan Herald* has recently published an insider’s comments on the matter<sup>[1]</sup>, which I will summarize below.

Considering India’s tremendous diversity – a subcontinent comprising many different, ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups – defining *Indianness* comes as a difficult task as, giving this notion a certain ethnic, religious, or linguistic dimension we might be in the position of excluding millions of people who do not belong to that particular religious, ethnic, or linguistic group we are considering, by calling them *Indian*. On the other hand, there are attempts “to define *Indianness* along one particular ethnic, religious, or linguistic line.” The example of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu – where the local language is Tamil – is relevant: the official declaration of Hindi as the state national language in 1951 was followed by violent riots which testified to the Indian government’s failure at a linguistic union of India. But the importance of defining *Indianness* increases with the separatist movements all over the country. It is, actually, a reaction to and a sort of protest against the New Delhi centralized leadership. There is an attempt at defining *Indianness* “in a way that brings these vastly different peoples together.” A pan-Indian identity may be constructed along two lines: religious and linguistic.

For a European unaccustomed to the immensity and diversity – be it linguistic or religious – of the Indian subcontinent, the pan-Indian slogan “India belongs to the Hindus, it is Hindustan” may sound unusual. Nevertheless, considering the ever increasing population of India, such a politically separatist movement will exclude – out of a total of over one billion people – as many as almost two hundred million Muslims, 24 million Christians, 25 million Sikhs, Jains and Budhists, and others. On the other hand, the so-called Hindi-Wallahs strongly support the idea of Hindi as an all-India common language which should be understood and spoken by each and every citizen of the country. All in all, *Indianness* might suppose a need of supporting the diversity of India, without excluding the presence of Muslims and other religious and ethnic groups, regardless of their Aryan origin.

Literature-wise, starting with the Independence of 1947, the literature published since the coming into being of the Commonwealth of Nations

“...reproduces the aspirations and cultural heritage of the developing nations. The fusion of cultures that characterizes Commonwealth literature is – to a certain extent – undermined by the language problem: most of these countries (and India is no exception) have their own languages and English is not their mother tongue...” (Basudeh, 2009)

A defining trait of Naipaul’s writing is his unfavourable reaction towards the continuous presence of Indian literature in English, which he sees as “mimicry of the West” and an act self-violation:

“Indian attempts at the novel further reveal the Indian confusion. The novel is of the West. It is part of the Western concern with the condition of men, a response to the here and now. In India thoughtful men have preferred to turn their backs on the here and now and to satisfy what President Radhakrishnan calls ‘the basic human hunger for the unseen’. It is not a good qualification for the writing and reading of novels. A basic hunger for the unseen makes many Indians vulnerable to novels like *The Razor’s Edge* and *The Devil’s Advocate*, whose value as devotional literature is plain. [...] It is part of the mimicry of the West, the Indian self-violation.” (AD, 230)

*The Mystic Masseur* abounds in a Trinidadian version of colloquial, broken English spoken by the East Indians. Ganesh, the protagonist of the novel suffers an unexpected metamorphosis. The primary school teacher decides to become a healer, then a writer, involves in politics and finally becomes a statesman, and we follow his progress from “Pundit Ganesh Ramsumair” to “G. Ramsay Muir.” At a closer look, there are no differences in human aspirations, irrespective of the geographical location, and the mimicry of the West is obvious.

One question is frequently asked: What does the *Indianness* of the Indo-Anglian writings consist of? Two definitions given by Indian scholars serve our purpose: (1) “The *Indianness* of Indian writing consists in the writer’s intense awareness of his entire culture” and (2) “*Indianness* lies in the choice of subject, in the texture of thought and play of sentiment, in the organization of material and the creative use of language.”[2] The two definitions complete each other.

Commenting on Narayan’s novel *The Vendor of Sweets* and Jagan, its protagonist, Naipaul has the following to say:

“*The Vendor of Sweets*, which is so elegiac and simplistic, exalting purity and old virtue in the figure of Jagan, is a confused book; and its confusion holds much of the Indian confusion today. [...] Jagan’s is the ultimate Hindu retreat, because it is a retreat from a world that is known to have broken down at last. It is a retreat, literally, to a wilderness where ‘the edge of reality itself was beginning to blur’: not a return to a purer Aryan past, as Jagan might imagine, but *a retreat from civilization and creativity, from rebirth and growth, to magic and incantation... It is the death of a civilization, the final corruption of Hinduism.*” (WC, 32, 33, emphasis added)

Both in India and in England Naipaul feels “Other” to/than himself and to the country he is in. Naipaul sees this “Otherness” as both an asset (when he talks about his “difference” as a defining characteristic of his identity) and a disadvantage (when he sees his difference as part of a colonial condition of the inferiority of the periphery to the centre). In relation to India, it seems that Naipaul is able to overcome his “nerves” when he accepts that his family past puts him in a particularly difficult relationship to India. In the case of England, the “nerves” are “soothed” (*Enigma of Arrival*, p. 56) and “done away with” (*Enigma of Arrival*, p. 54) by solitude and by the combination of his meditations on writing with the record of his own fantasized relation to England, its imperial past, and its literary present. In his writings on India, the hysteria of many of the reactions to the country in *An Area of Darkness* and the general rejection of it in *India: A Wounded Civilization* as “a wounded old civilization that has at last become aware of its inadequacies and is without the intellectual means to move ahead” (*Wounded Civilization*, p. 18) finally gives way to the more distanced and sympathetic portrait in *India: A Million Mutinies Now*.

## CONCLUSIONS

We shall round up this chapter with Naipaul’s vision of India in his own Indian trilogy: the Trinidadian author’s India is a subcontinent torn by post-independence uncertainties and inner struggles. There is both hope and reassurance for the country of his ancestors after having travelled all the way from the *area of darkness* facing the tragedy of the ancient *wounded civilization* and – facing and overcoming its *million mutinies* – looking forward optimistically to the future.

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