

# ISAS Brief

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## Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul: A Complex Relationship with India

*Nobel laureate Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul died on 11 August 2018. This paper analyses Naipaul's views on India and his complicated relationship with the land of his ancestors by examining three of his non-fiction books – *An Area of Darkness* (1962), *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977) and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990).*

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Nobel laureate Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul's relationship to India was as complicated as the man himself. Naipaul, who died on 11 August 2018, had written three non-fiction books on India, each separated by roughly a decade. The titles of the books – *An Area of Darkness* (1962), *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977) and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990) – are a good indication of Naipaul's attitudes towards the country, from where his grandfather had migrated as an indentured labourer to Trinidad in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Though to Naipaul, growing up in Trinidad, his ancestral homeland was present through his extended family and physical objects, the real India was, in his own words, an “area of darkness”.<sup>2</sup> However, in a letter written to his sister Kamla, who was then studying in

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<sup>2</sup> V S Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness* (London: Penguin, 1970), 30.

university in India, a 17-year-old Naipaul would foreshadow the vitriol that he would spew on India later, “I am planning to write a book about these damned people [Indians] and the wretched country of theirs, exposing their detestable traits.”<sup>3</sup>

When Naipaul did visit India for the first time in 1962, it overwhelmed him. In one of the more famous passages from *An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul wrote, “India is the poorest country in the world...I had seen Indian villages, the narrow broken lanes with green slime in the gutters, the choked back-to-back mud houses, the jumble of filth and food and animals and people, the baby in the dust, swollen-bellied, black with flies, but wearing its good-luck amulet. I had seen the starved child defecating at the roadside while the mangy dog waited to eat the excrement. I had seen the physique of the people of Andhra [a province in southern India], which had suggested the possibility of an evolution downwards, wasted body to wasted body, Nature mocking herself, incapable of remission. Compassion and pity did not answer; they were refinements of hope. Fear was what I felt.”<sup>4</sup> Naipaul’s loathing and even fear of India’s physical reality – the “real country” as opposed to an “area of imagination”<sup>5</sup> – that shines through in this passage is a recurrent theme of *An Area of Darkness*. He is no different in that sense from many Western observers of India, the only difference being that he wrote far more eloquently than most. His quest to connect with his Indian past too was an utter failure, and he admitted, “In all the striking detail of India there was nothing which I could link with my own experience of India in a small town in Trinidad.”

Naipaul was vexed by another feature of India – civilizational decay – which he saw symbolised in Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi and India’s reverence for him. Naipaul conceded that Gandhi had correctly identified some of the problems afflicting India because he was “in part a colonial”, having spent 20 years in South Africa. However, Naipaul abhorred what he saw as the Hindu revivalist and spiritual elements of Gandhi. He wrote of Gandhi’s reception in India, “The mahatma has been absorbed into the formless spirituality and decayed pragmatism of India. The revolutionary became a god and his message was thereby lost.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Patrick French, *The World Is What It Is: The Authorized Biography of V.S. Naipaul* (London: Picador, 2008), 220.

<sup>4</sup> Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness*, op. cit., p 45.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p 41.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p 82.

While Naipaul might have entirely missed the radical potential of Gandhian thinking and action, the persistence of what he called Gandhianism obsessed him. The theme of the decay of Indian civilisation, particularly Hindu society, and Gandhianism would recur in *India: A Wounded Civilization*. He wrote with repugnance about the persistence of Gandhianism in India long after its use-by date, “Now of Gandhianism there remained only the emblems and energy; and the energy had turned malignant. India needed a new code, but it had none.”<sup>7</sup> One of the main grouses that Naipaul had with Gandhi was what he saw as the glorification of poverty and making it the “basis of all truth”. This was not a new charge. The Indian nationalist leader and poet, Sarojini Naidu, had once joked that it cost India a fortune to keep Gandhi in poverty.

What irked Naipaul about India was not just its obsession with Gandhi but its inability to regenerate and come up with original ideas. He wrote, “India is old, and India continues. But all the disciplines and skills that India now seeks to exercise are borrowed. Even the ideas Indians have of the achievements of their civilization are essentially ideas given by European scholars in the nineteenth century.”

If *An Area of Darkness* and *India: A Wounded Civilization* were scathing and negative portrayals of India, there was a marked change in tone in Naipaul’s last book. In *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, Naipaul pushed himself to the background and let the people that he interviewed take centre stage. Diverse voices, from an activist of the Shiv Sena (the nativist party from Maharashtra) and a former Bengali Naxalite (or Maoist) to a journalist working for a women’s magazine, found space in the book. Indeed, his views on the Shiv Sena possibly presaged his professed sympathy for the Hindu nationalists. He wrote in *Wounded Civilization*, “The Shiv Sena, as it is today, is of India, independent India...It is a part of the reworking of the Hindu system. Men do not accept chaos; they ceaselessly seek to remake their world; they reach out for such ideas as are accessible and fit their need.”<sup>8</sup> In contrast, he wrote of Naxalism that it was an “intellectual tragedy, a tragedy of idealism, ignorance, and mimicry”.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> V S Naipaul, *India: A Wounded Civilization* (London: Penguin, 1980), 46.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 62-63.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p 93.

Naipaul recalled in *A Million Mutinies Now* that when he first visited the country in 1962, the India of his “fantasy and heart was something lost and irrevocable”. However, now he admitted that there was in India “a national idea”, “The Indian Union was greater than the sum of its parts; and many of these movements of excess strengthened the Indian state, defining it as the source of law and civility and reasonableness...What the mutinies were also helping to define was the strength of the general intellectual life, and the wholeness and humanism of the values to which all Indians felt they could appeal.”<sup>10</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Naipaul’s early views did not make him popular in India. The book was unofficially banned in India after its publication. In a long review on *An Area of Darkness* essay titled ‘Naipaul’s India and Mine’, the poet Nissim Ezekiel noted that he greatly admired and enjoyed Naipaul’s novels. He, however, took serious issue with Naipaul’s “excess” in describing India. Ezekiel concluded that Naipaul’s criticism of India was “heavily flawed in detail”.<sup>11</sup> Many years later, Naipaul said he was only being true to the “visual facts”.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, there is little doubt that Naipaul influenced a host of prominent Indian writers. The novelist Amitav Ghosh wrote, after Naipaul won the Nobel Prize in 2001, that his first two books on India “created a sensation because of its tone of derision and outrage”. However, he added that, on careful reading, “it is not hard to see that the target of Naipaul’s rage is none other than himself and his own past. His derision stems not from what he sees in India but rather from his disillusionment with the myths of his uprooted ancestors”.<sup>13</sup>

If Naipaul’s books caused a stir, some of his statements post winning the Nobel caused controversy in India. A decade after the destruction in 1992 of the Babri Masjid, a mosque in north Indian city of Ayodhya, by Hindu militants, Naipaul reportedly said, “Ayodhya is a sort of passion. Any passion is to be encouraged. Passion leads to creativity.”<sup>14</sup> Some saw it of a piece with Naipaul’s anti-Islam views expressed in many of his works.

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<sup>10</sup> V S Naipaul, *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (Calcutta: Rupa, 1990), 518.

<sup>11</sup> Nissim Ezekiel, ‘Naipaul’s India and Mine,’ *Journal of South Asian Literature*, Volume 11, No. 3/4.

<sup>12</sup> “Blast from the past: When Sir VS Naipaul enthralled the Zee Jaipur Lit Fest crowd”, Gargi Gupta, DNA, 12 August 2018. <https://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-sir-vs-naipaul-had-the-crowds-at-zee-jaipur-lit-fest-hanging-on-to-his-every-word-2055417>. Accessed on 27 August 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Amitav Ghosh, ‘Naipaul and the Nobel,’ <https://www.amitavghosh.com/essays/naipaul.html>.

<sup>14</sup> “V.S. Naipaul, and his conflicted relationship with India”, Vivek Menezes, *Livemint*, 14 August 2018. <https://www.livemint.com/Leisure/8kQpatxp2CADNvZIyaMMIP/Vs-Naipaul-and-his-conflicted-relationship-with-India.html>. Accessed on 26 August 2018.

In 2012, the Indian playwright and actor, Girish Karnad, spoke out against Naipual after he had been given a lifetime achievement award in India. He said that while Naipaul’s books on India were “brilliantly written”, they were characterised by a “rabid antipathy towards Indian Muslims”.<sup>15</sup>

Though Naipaul never fully got over his status as an “insider-outsider” in India, as his biographer Patrick French put it, over time, he became much more accepted and feted in his ancestral land. In the 2015 Jaipur literary festival, a wheelchair-bound Naipaul had a public reconciliation with his disciple-turned-critic Paul Theroux and broke down into tears in front of an admiring audience.<sup>16</sup>

At the twilight of his life, Naipaul and India had seemingly made peace with each other’s quirks, oddities and extremes.

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<sup>15</sup> “Why has Naipaul been Honoured?”, Girish Karnad, *Outlook*, 2 November 2012. <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/why-has-naipaul-been-honoured/282853>. Accessed on 25 August 2018.

<sup>16</sup> “V.S Naipaul and Paul Theroux in emotional Jaipur Literature Festival reunion”, Dean Nelson, *The Telegraph*, 21 January 2015. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/india/11361208/V.S-Naipaul-and-Paul-Theroux-in-emotional-Jaipur-Literature-Festival-reunion.html>. Accessed on 25 August 2018.