

The Practice of Open Defecation in India: A Critique of V. S. Naipaul's Observations

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Abstract: V. S. Naipaul notices the age-old practice of open defecation in India during all the major tours to this country. He believes that most Indians are blind to this widespread ugly practice in the country. He calls it a mass denial. Nothing has been written about it. It is a social activity which the people of this country enjoy very much. They chatter with each other while squatting and defecating in groups in the fields. Only those who have lived or studied abroad can notice this phenomenon.

Keywords: defecation, squatting, latrines, toilets, mass denial, blindness.

In his Indian travelogues Naipaul points out the selective blindness of Indians not only towards history or surroundings but to their social issues also. They are blind to the ugly practice of open defecation which is so conspicuous to the outsiders. In fact, they don't consider it to be a problem at all. He comes upon people squatting and defecating in fields, streets, along sea beaches, river banks, roadsides, and railway tracks. He is surprised to see that nobody notices them in this country. He recalls:

In Madras the bus station near the High Court is one of the more popular latrines. The traveller arrives; to pass the time he raises his Dhoti, defecates in the gutter. The bus arrives; he boards it; the woman sweeper cleans up after him...It is a popular evening walk, this Marina; but no one looks, no face is averted in embarrassment. (An Area of Darkness, 70).

What is more shocking to him is the common sight of people openly defecating in groups. This is "a social activity; they squat close to one another; they chatter". This does not happen in Madras alone. This is the story of the whole country. In Goa:

...as far as you can see, there is a line, like a wavering tidewrack, of squatters...When they are done they advance, trousers still down, backside bare, into the water to wash themselves. They climb back onto the avenue, jump on their cycles, or get into their cars, and go away...no one notices. (Darkness, 70).

Indians not only squat everywhere in open spaces they can squat at any place even in the closed cubicles. The briefest glimpse of the lavatories at New Delhi's international airport is sufficient. Indians defecate everywhere, on floors, in urinals for men ... Fearing contamination, they squat rather than sit, and every lavatory cubicle carries marks of their misses. No one notices. (72-3)

Naipaul repeatedly uses the words like "nobody notices" or "no one looks" to point out that this is a common sight and everyone turns a blind eye to it. Indians are not only blind to this ubiquitous phenomenon but they even deny the existence of these squatting figures. Commenting on the mass denial regarding open defecation he says, "...they are never spoken of; they are never written about; they are never mentioned in novels and stories; they do not appear in feature films and documentaries" (71). Naipaul tries to analyse this tendency of mass denial amongst Indians and concludes that it is "a collective blindness arising out of the Indian fear of pollution and the resulting conviction that Indians are the cleanest people in the world" (71).

On account of the efforts made by individuals, groups, NGOs, governments, World Bank, and other world organisations like the UNICEF and WHO the enormity of this evil practice has undergone a slight amelioration. Yet, it cannot be said that India, an aspirant to the status of a superpower is now free from the practice open defecation. Accurate statistics regarding open defecation in India are not available so far but if we rely on joint UNICEF and WHO estimates for 2010, around 15 per cent of people in the world, and 19 percent of people in developing countries, defecate in the open without using any toilet or latrine. According to a report published in *The Hindu* it was stated that "Sixty per cent of the "global total" who do not have access to toilets live in India, and hence are forced to defecate in the open. In actual numbers, sixty per cent translates to 626 million. This makes India the number one country in the world where open defecation is practised" (Prasad). The statistics elsewhere are strikingly small; 14 million in China and half that number in Brazil. Census 2011 threw up a malodorous statistic: people in 49.8 per cent of households in India have no toilet facilities and defecate in the open. In contrast, 63.2 per cent of households have a telephone connection, of which 52.3 per cent have cell phones; as for televisions, almost half of the country's households possess one.

The gravity of this problem has been pointed out by Sunita Narayan, Director General of the Centre for Science and Environment in the June 14, 2012 issue of *Nature*. She writes, “Rapidly-modernising India is drowning in its own excreta”. An article in *the Hindu* reports, “According to Census 2011, 80 per cent of Rajasthan’s rural households defecate in the open... Ninety-three per cent of the rural population in Tonk[district of Rajasthan] defecates in the open” (Brara). This is the grim picture of the 21st century India which is far more advanced than what it was at the time of Naipaul’s first visit to India in 1962. The governments in order to show their concern increase the amount of money to be spent for household toilets in rural areas and expect the number of squatters to decrease but of no avail because the problem lies elsewhere. The intelligentsia in India thinks that the increased amount will act like magic pill in solving the malaise of open defecation. Naipaul, the minute observer of human nature, understood what the Indian intelligentsia could not, regarding the problem of open defecation. It has no relation with poverty. The mind-set, the habits and the unconscious fear of pollution lie hidden at the root of this problem. They are averse to the idea of defecating in closed places like toilets and latrines. Manmohan ‘Moni’ Malhautra recalls:

We went to a village where some communal lavatories had been constructed. Vidya wanted to know whether they were being used and all these young people said, no, we don’t use them. He said, why not? And they said, in a very matter of fact way, the air is fresher outside. (qtd. in French 231).

Naipaul recounts his encounter with a young Muslim boy ‘elegantly dressed in the style of Mr. Nehru’. He seeks the boy’s explanation on this strange habit of the Indians and the boy replies that Indians are poetic people and lovers of nature and nothing is as poetic as squatting on a river bank at dawn (Darkness, 71). Whether Indians are poetic or unpoetic, lovers of nature or indifferent to its beauty it may be a matter of debate but Naipaul is most poetic when he writes about open defecation in India. He narrates his experiences amongst beautiful snow capped mountains when he travelled along the blue shining Lidder River on the way to Amarnath in the following words:

The camp was a chaos of tents and guy-ropes and cooking stones and pilgrims defecating behind every bush. The woods were already littered with uncovered excrement; hanks and twists of excrement crowned every accessible boulder of the Lidder River, beside which we had camped. (Darkness, 169).

Naipaul’s poetic prose is not confined to the description of open defecation only. He writes about the dirt and squalor in this country in an eloquent moving prose. He narrates his experiences at a railway station in plaintive notes:

The platforms were like mortuaries. In the dim light prostrate men showed as shrunken white bundles out of which protruded bony Indian arms, shining stringy legs, collapsed grey-stubbled faces. Men slept; dogs slept; and among them, like emanations risen from the senseless bodies, over which they appeared to trample, other men and other dogs moved. Silent third class carriages turned out to be packed with dark waiting, sweating faces...” (Darkness, 243).

Writing about poverty in India Naipaul says that it has become a part of Hindu lifestyle because Hindus are not focused on materialistic aspects of life. They have almost romanticised poverty into something worth adulation. He writes long paragraphs describing the ever-present horrific poverty in India. He writes about the starved people, the dirt, squalor, and about young children working in order to earn money. It is noteworthy here that he does not do so for the sake of condemning the Indian society or rejecting it. He simply tries to point out to Indians that they overlook poverty because it has religious connotations. It is considered holy in India. The blindness to open defecation may have other reasons behind it. It is a matter of habit which has nothing to with poverty.

Open defecation is not only the most displeasing sight to the persons of aesthetic sense but it is also the most unhygienic practice. Writing about child stunting and malnutrition in Indian children Dean Spears says: Indian children are among the shortest in the world. One answer that I explore in a recent research paper⁵ is widespread open defecation, without using a toilet or latrine. Faeces contain germs that, when released into the environment, make their way onto children’s fingers and feet, into their food and water, and wherever flies take them. Exposure to these germs not only gives children diarrhoea, but over the long term, also can cause changes in the tissues of their intestines that prevent the absorption and use of nutrients in food, even when the child does not seem sick.

Looking at the enormity of the problem the Indian government realised that merely increasing the budget would not solve the problem, so they launched Total Sanitation Campaign in 1999 in which the emphasis was on information, education and communication. This community-led total sanitation programme is not focused on building infrastructure, but on preventing open defecation through peer pressure and shame. It focuses on igniting a change in sanitation behaviour. It does this through a process of social awakening that is stimulated by facilitators from within or outside the community. It is based on the premise that a community can become open defecation free only when all its members genuinely feel a need for sanitary toilets and are not pressurised

to do so. The first condition to bring social change is that the people of that society should learn to see. They should learn to acknowledge that there is something wrong with their social behaviour. Indians were not ready to see this problem at the time of Naipaul's first visit that is why his remarks about open defecation created huge uproar in India. Naipaul was to write in Trinidad Guardian later - "I begin to feel that I coined the word and devised the act" (qtd. in French 224).

It was Gandhi who pointed out 'the atrocious sanitary habits of doctors, lawyers and journalists' (Darkness, 74). He could look at the root of the problem in a society which had become static and decadent because of 'the Indian callousness, the Indian refusal to see' (74). Gandhi's initial ideas were deeply influenced by Western sensibilities which enabled him to see in India those obvious things which an average Indian could not or would not see. Naipaul is of the view that Gandhi's direct vision was revolutionary. He looked at this problem directly because 'he has now declared his foreign inspiration' in this regard. Gandhi suggested in *Young India*, "The one thing which we can learn and must learn from the West is the science of municipal sanitation" (Darkness, 72).

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