

V. S. Naipaul's Observations on the Hindu Caste System in his Indian Travelogues

Dr. Mayank Rohitasva Garg

Associate Professor (Department of English)
Babu Shobha Ram Govt. Arts College, Alwar (Raj.)

Abstract: V. S. Naipaul's observations about the Hindu caste system in India occupy a major portion in his Indian travelogues. He is somewhat critical about this phenomenon in India which is in line with the long tradition of Indological accounts put forward by various travellers to India. Naipaul, a descendent of Hindu indentured servant in a sugar plantation in the British crown colony of Trinidad and Tobago, states that this practice is purely of India which is approved by the Hindu religious scriptures.

Keywords: Caste system, varna duties, karma, dharma, service, religion, rituals, survival.

V. S. Naipaul focuses on the Indian caste system in the chapter "Degree" in the part one of his first Indian travelogue. It is pertinent to note that Naipaul's attack on the caste system is in line with the long tradition of Indological accounts in which this unique phenomenon of Indian society emerges as the prominent issue. Initially, the caste system was slightly different from the varna system, but gradually, it got so intertwined with the varna system that a layman today can't distinguish between the two. The caste system has been such an important feature in the Indian tradition that it determines a community's background, its clan lineages, culture, faith, place of origin, financial status and most importantly profession of an individual. A caste was allotted a niche in the existing social hierarchy by being inducted into any of the four varnas depending on its profession. Caste governs the Indian society by assigning a strictly defined function to each individual. The "Indian practice is purely of India" (AD 45) approved by the Gita, the religious scripture of the Hindus in which Lord Krishna says:

Chatur varnyam mayaa srishtam guna karma vibhagashaha
Tasya kartaram api maam viddhi akartaram avyayam. (Srimad, 4. 13).

(The four-fold *Varna* system has been created by Me according to the differentiation of qualities and actions). The Geeta extols the virtues of following *sva-dharma* literally "one's own duties". "And do thy duty even if it be humble, rather than another's, even if it be great" (AD 45). At another place says the Gita:

Shreyaan swadharmo vigunah paradharmaat swanushthithaat
Swadharme nidhanam shreyah paradharmo bhayaavahah. (Srimad, 3. 35).

Naipaul translates this statement also to point out that the caste system has been sanctified by Hindu religious scriptures as: "And do thy duty, even if it be humble," says the Aryan Gita, "rather than another's, even if it be great. To die in one's duty is life: to live in another's is death" (IWC 170). It suggests that death in the course of performing one's own duty is preferable to engaging in another's duties, for to follow another's path is dangerous. The Gita, one of the most revered religious scriptures of the Hindus, has made such a tremendous impact on the Hindu mindset that as Naipaul puts it, "Every man is an island; each man to his function, his private contract with God. This is the realization of the Gita's selfless action. This is caste" (AD 79). The concept of *Karma* has also engendered a distressing acceptance of social injustice in Indian society. Naipaul calls *Karma* "the Hindu killer, the Hindu calm, which tells us that we pay in this life for what we have done in the past lives: so that everything we see is just and balanced, and the distress we see is to be relished as religious theatre, a reminder of our duty to ourselves, our future lives" (IWC 25). Caste denies the vast population of India any prospect of social and economic advancements. Western civilization, in contrast, promises an abundance of such opportunities. According to Swami Vivekananda, the Indian caste system is more a trade guild than a religious institution. A newspaper *Brooklyn Standard Union* reported on April 8, 1895:

A special meeting of the Brooklyn Ethical Association with an address by Swami Vivekananda, the Hindu monk as the main feature, was held at the Pouch Gallery, of Clinton Avenue, last night. "Some customs of the Hindus what they mean, and how they are misinterpreted," was the subject treated. . . . Swami Vivekananda's

talk on caste was most comprehensive and interesting. He said it was not a granted [graded] system of classes, but that each caste thought itself to be superior to all the others. He said it was a trade guild and not a religious institution. . . . In explaining the defects of caste, the speaker said that in preventing competition it produced stagnation, and completely blocked the progress of the people.

The caste system in India imprisons a person in his function. Since there is no reward, duties and responsibilities are irrelevant. Swami Vivekanand's statement, therefore, is perfectly logical because class division of a society makes people competitive and dynamic. It is based on merit and reward. A lower class person can rise to the upper class status by sheer talent and hard work and vice versa. Caste, on the other hand, can immovably fix a person in a niche from where he can neither rise nor fall. No merit can raise him higher and no weakness can bring him down.

The term caste is believed to have been first used by Portuguese travellers who came to India in the 16th century as discussed in the first chapter of this thesis. It is derived from the Portuguese word "casta" meaning "race", "lineage" or "pure". It is estimated that there are around 3000 castes and 25000 sub castes (people use the word *Gotra or lineage* when speaking of the sub-castes that exist in practice) associated with specific occupations in India (Elliott). Social stratification or *Varna Vyavastha* which developed into caste system later on is a unique Indian way of defining social groups and their occupations. The history of caste system is multifaceted and complex. The Varna system of Vedic period is believed to have developed into caste hierarchy at different stages of Indian history. The earliest references to Varna system can be found in one of India's vast body of religious scripture known as the Vedas, which are thought to have been compiled between 1500 and 1000 BC, although the time of their composition is under debate. These works are considered to be the source of ancient Indian philosophy, religion and literature. Historians claim that the *Purusha Sukta* is the oldest extant text that mentions the four Varnas of Hindu society, and it is the only hymn in the *Rigveda* that mentions them. These four Varnas are: *Brahmins*, or priests; *Kshatriyas*, or warriors; *Vaisyas*, or tradesmen; and *Sudras*, or servants and laborers. The 12th verse of *Purush Sukta* in the 10th book (Mandal) of the *Rigveda* says:

*brahmanosya mukhamasit
bahu rajanyah kritaha
uru tadasya yadvaishyaha
padhyagam shudro ajayata*

From His face (or the mouth) came the Brahmins. From His two arms came the Rajanya (the Kshatriyas). From His two thighs came the Vaishyas. From His two feet came the Shudras.

Thus, the varna system which further developed into the caste system is inter-linked with creation, lending itself a great deal of reverence and validity and ensuring its survival at least for several millennia. In this way the status of Shudras with their lowly origin continued to decline with the passage of time till they became untouchables in the age of *Smritis* and they still remain at the lowest strata of Indian society. Blasting the verse Veeramani, Periyar's philosophical heir, used to ask in his speeches as to how "could someone not a woman give birth to people from so many parts of the body from which birth couldn't take place?" (IMMN 314).

The untouchables occupy a place that is not clearly defined by boundaries. Their jobs (such as toilet cleaning and garbage removal) cause them to be considered impure and thus 'untouchable'. The pariahs and the scavengers among others belong to this category and they lived at the far end of the village in pre-independence India. The persons who belong to caste groups associated with cleaning and sweeping have a low status in the social hierarchy. Historically, the untouchables were not allowed to enter temples and other public places. Naipaul calls "rural untouchability as serfdom, maintained by terror and sometimes by deliberate starvation" (IWC 47). Untouchability "was cruel and horribly violent" according to him. "This violence had remained untouched by foreign rule and had survived Gandhi" (47). The hardened form of caste system denotes corruption of mind in Hindu society, reinforced by years of caste based social order. The order despises manual work so much so that it considers the chanting by a *purohit* holy and the work of sweeping the street by a sweeper lowly.

Sweeping and sanitation related other activities carry a stigma because of their associations with caste. Naipaul observes, "Sweepers, the lowest of the low: their very existence, and their acceptance of their function, the especial curse of India, reinforcing the Indian conviction . . . that it was unclean to clean . . ." (IWC 67). Naipaul notices that people in India are totally dependent on the sweepers for the cleaning of the public places. He narrates one such incident. There was dirt and filth everywhere because it was Sunday and the municipal sweeper hadn't been there:

Through these sections we walked without speaking, picking our way between squirts and butts and twists of human excrement. It was unclean to clean; it was unclean even to notice. It was the business of the sweepers to

remove excrement, and until the sweepers came, people were content to live in the midst of their own excrement.” (IWC 66)

The phrase ‘sweeping the floor’ in Indian languages has acquired metaphorical value implying total subjugation, surrender, submissiveness and modesty. This may be because one has to stoop or kneel down in order to perform the task of sweeping. If one has been stooping for countless generations then one’s submissiveness and surrender is out of question. Such metaphors are being profusely used by Indian politicians who have little concern for the feelings of those who are associated with this kind of work. A news report published in *the Hindu* reads: “Chhattisgarh Congress chief Charan Das Mahant has said he will ‘sweep the party office with a broom’ if asked by Congress president Sonia Gandhi” (Ready to Sweep). The politicians use such terms to show their allegiance to the party high command.

Even in modern India Dalit students are constantly reminded of their status by their teachers. In his famous autobiographical work *Government Brahmana* the Kannada writer Arvinda Malagatti notes how cleaning a classroom was a duty assigned to Dalit students. Their turns would be notified on the blackboard by the class teacher. They were invariably seated in the last row on the floor unlike others who were accommodated on wooden benches. Similar sentiment is echoed when in an interview to Naipaul the well known Dalit poet Namdeo Dhasal recalls:

Even at the school . . . the scheduled caste boys would have to sit outside the school-room. They weren’t allowed to touch any source of water; water had to be poured into their cupped hands. A teacher couldn’t touch a scheduled-caste child. When a teacher wanted to punish a child from one of those castes, he threw things at the child. (IMMN 132)

This is the state of affairs in the public sphere where the caste Hindus have to be cruel because they are expected to behave according to the group norms. What about private life? Are they more sober, more compassionate in the privacy of their homes? No! Pravas, an engineer, a Brahmin, while narrating some rituals regarding meals, reveals the obsession of the Brahmins with purity when he says, “So it was a serious matter if the shadow of a lower-caste person fell on your food. If it happened while you were eating, that was that. You stopped eating. The food became impure” (IMMN 194). In Sugar’s house who is another Brahmin, the keen observer Naipaul notices a maid clearing up and sweeping the space between the temple and the kitchen of the house “both of which places would have been barred to her, since she would not have been a brahmin” (284). There might have been revolutions and mutinies outside as Naipaul remarks, “But in the little space that was still Sugar’s the old world seemed to continue” (284).

Service is not an Indian concept’ writes Naipaul. Even in the ‘selfless action’ of the Gita we find an emphasis on ‘varna’ duties. “The Gita’s selfless action is a call to self-fulfilment and at the same time a restatement of degree; it is the opposite of service which Gandhi, the Indian revolutionary, is putting forward as a practicable day-to-day ideal” (AD 75). Naipaul is of the opinion that even the concept of caste does not have the concept of service, now. It may have been a useful division of labour in the beginning but now “it has decayed and ossified with the society” (79). The useful division has become ‘caste’ which has divorced function from social obligation. Now “bravery, the willingness to risk one’s life, is the function of the soldier and no one else” (79). “The function of the businessman is to make money” (77). Such an opinion by Naipaul reminds one of the similar views by Nirad C. Chaudhuri who says, “Besides, one concession must be made to the *Baniya* order. Making money is their *dharma* and, as all Hindus know or should know, one’s own *dharma*, even if leads to death, is preferable to another’s *dharma*, which is to be feared. This concept of *dharma*, enjoining overriding loyalty to it, is absolutely central to the Hindu view of life” (To Live or not to Live 11).

Countless reformers have attempted to abolish or reform the caste system in India. However, these reform movements have had little effect. The intellectuals and social reformers in India including Gandhi, in his zeal against untouchability, went to the extent of saying, as Naipaul quotes Gandhi: “The moment untouchability goes the caste system will be purified” (AD 82). Naipaul believes that such a notion is dangerous because it implies faith in the caste system sans untouchability. Naipaul is of the view that “it is the system that has to be regenerated, the psychology of caste that has to be destroyed” (82). This is the reason why, according to Naipaul, Gandhi concentrated on the filth and excrement, on the dignity of latrine-cleaning and the spirit of service. Seeing no end to the tribulations of the Dalits or the untouchables Dr. Ambedkar, a philosopher, anthropologist, historian, economist and independent India’s first law minister, encouraged them to abandon Hinduism, which had enslaved them, and to turn to Buddhism.

The only positive thing that Naipaul finds in the age-old caste-ridden modern Indian society is that now people have begun to accept work outside the realm of their caste skill. But this does not prove that the attitude of Indians is changing. They do it only for monetary reasons. They have not forgotten their degree. The successful business persons who do *unclean business* of making leather goods don’t wish their children to enter

into the same business for the fear of “caste contamination”. Indian society may appear to be changing to a superficial observer but to Naipaul the underlying stagnation is easily discernible.

The caste system has proved to be disastrous to the spirit of individuality among people also. It cripples the creativity and adventurousness of those who could otherwise have become artists or scientists. Because of the security of caste identity individual perception and judgement are relinquished as burdens. Naipaul observes:

Indians have made some contribution to science in this century; but— with a few notable exceptions— their work has been done abroad . . . It is a cause of concern to the Indian scientific community . . . that many of those men who are so daring and original abroad should, when they are lured back to India, collapse into ordinariness and yet remain content, become people who seem unaware of their former worth, and seem to have been brilliant by accident. (IWC 170)

Naipaul cites the example of a scientist Har Gobind Khorana, the Nobel laureate, who belonged to India but was an American citizen. He was invited to India and hero-worshipped but his “work, the labour, the assessment of the labour: it was expected that somehow that would occur elsewhere, outside India” (170).

In the comforts of ritualised life and security of caste identity the world becomes more simplified to “the scientist returning to India.” He “sheds the individuality he acquired during his time abroad” and becomes a unit in the herd. The caste system imposes overall obedience and ready-made satisfactions which in turn diminish adventurousness, and push away from men their individuality and the possibility of excellence. Naipaul narrates an anecdote which he heard in Delhi. A foreign businessman, finding his untouchable servant intelligent, arranges for his formal education and places him in a better job before leaving the country.

Some years later the businessman returned to India. He found that his untouchable was a latrine-cleaner again. He had been boycotted by his clan for breaking away from them; he was barred from the evening smoking group. There was no other group he could join, no woman he could marry. His solitariness was insupportable, and he had returned to his duty, his *dharma*; he had learned to obey.

Obedience: it is all that India requires of men, and it is what men willingly give. The family has its rules; the caste has its rules. (IWC 171-2)

Indians have been living in the cosy comforts of their groups, clans or castes since times immemorial following the rules of family and community. “Men knew what they were born to. Every man knew his caste, his place; each group lived in its own immemorially defined area . . . Nothing had changed or seemed likely to change” (IWC 28). Naipaul feels that the Hindu world may appear to be stable and firm from outside but it is weak and fragile from within. It appears to be a calm and secure world with “everything fixed, sanctified, everyone secure” even “in the midst of world change” (36). India like a sleepwalker moves without disturbance between her two opposed worlds (36). The apparent stability and security of Hindu society is maintained by caste system and rituals. “Ritual marked the passage of each day, ritual marked every stage of a man’s life” (32). The Hindu world has shrunk. Men have “retreated to their last, impregnable defenses: their knowledge of who they were, their caste, their *karma*, their unshakable place in the scheme of things” (32).

Naipaul notices a new development in the caste oriented Indian society. New hierarchies and inequalities have developed in the Indian bureaucratic system which breeds inefficiency. The rule of degree has made its way into other spheres also like stock markets, labour relations, advertisements etc. Indians seem to be not at all concerned in works allotted to other fellow beings at work places even if they have to suffer for it. One clerk would not do the work of another clerk. The few Indians like Malik and Malhotra who are educated abroad and who do not recognise official hierarchy strive to reject “the badges of dress and food and function, rejecting degree, they find themselves rejected.” (AD 54). “The knowledge of degree is in the bones and no Indian is far from his origin” (54). The Indian tendency to always walk on the trodden path dampens the spirit of adventure. People go on doing their work mechanically. A sweeper sweeps the roads but he is not required to *clean* it. The primary part of a sweeper is to be a sweeper, a degraded being. “It is enough in India that the sweepers attend” (76). Cleaning is the subsidiary part. The age-old caste system plagued people of India have easily succumbed to its new version in offices and other spheres of life.

Naipaul calls Indian civilization “declined into an apparatus of survival, turning away from the mind . . . and creativity . . . stripping itself down, like all decaying civilizations, to its magical practices and imprisoning social reforms” (IWC 169).

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