

Dalit Self-assertion in India: V. S. Naipaul's Observations

Dr. Mayank Rohitasva Garg

Assistant Professor

Department of English

BabuShobha Ram Govt. Arts College, Alwar (Raj.)

Abstract: During his 1988 visit to India VS Naipaul observed that the postcolonial pattern of Dalit self-assertion was emerging in India noticeably. He links this awareness of self and community identity amongst the marginalized sections of society to the increased wealth of the people. He witnessed this phenomenon first in the state of Maharashtra and later in Tamilnadu and other states in India. Naipaul believes that the people belonging to the so called upper castes have become defensive nowadays as a result of the rise of self identity in the marginalized castes.

Keywords: Dalit, downtrodden, regeneration, confidence, identities, particularities.

The postcolonial pattern of belonging or the rise in identity politics in India fails to attract Naipaul's attention during his previous visits to this country but it preoccupies his mind during his 1988 visit. He finds it in those sections of Indian society where regeneration and growth have begun. Naipaul perceives a sea change in the living standard of the people in India. He repeatedly links the increasing awareness of self or group identity to the increased wealth of the people: "The increased wealth showed; the new confidence of people once poor showed. One aspect of that confidence was the freeing of new particularities, new identities, which were as unsettling to Indians as the identities of caste and clan and region had been to me in 1962. . ." (India: A Million Mutinies Now10).

Naipaul first witnessed this sort of awareness amongst those in whom he could expect it the least i.e. in the Dalits. The lower castes or the Dalits, as they prefer to be called, have always been marginalized by the upper castes, who have forced Dalits to remain within the confines of their lowly birth-based occupations. After independence "India had changed; it was not the good and stable country it had once been" (IMMN 4). There has been a visible upsurge in the assertion of Dalit identity and self-respect in post-independence He states:

"But a certain amount of money had come to the people once known as harijans, a certain amount of education, and with that there had also come the group sense and political consciousness. . . They had become people stressing their own particularity, just as better off groups in India stressed their particularities" (5).

When Naipaul was "some way into the city from the airport" he saw a great crowd on the Bombay roads, on the pavements, everywhere. The people who seemed peaceable and content were going, as he was told later by a friend of his, to celebrate the birthday of Dr.Ambedkar "the great leader of the people once known in India as the untouchables" (3). Dr.Ambedkar was almost like their deity. He was the man whom they honoured above all others. "Dalits will sacrifice anything and everything for Ambedkar. He is not an extra god for them. He is God. They would slaughter their wife. Anything for Ambedkar" (126-127). It was Dr.Ambedkar who created the sense of identity and the feeling of self-respect in the Dalit community of India. Namdeo, a Dalit poet pays his obeisance to Dr.Ambedkar in these words: "There was a time when we were treated like animals. Now we live like human beings. It's all because of Ambedkar" (139). Dalits in Maharashtra may be indignant against the discrimination they have endured for centuries but the other social or political groups in the same region are either neutral or against Dalit movements.

In the post-colonial India the Dalit identity has strengthened so much that even the illiterate Dalits give utmost respect to their leaders with the belief that in this way they give respect to their whole community and to themselves. This proclamation of pride was new in this country where caste stability had been taken for granted by the status quoits middle-class man who might "in a reflex of anxiety, feel that the country was going from

bad to worse” (10). It is this sense of pride, according to Naipaul, for which Gandhi and many others worked, and which could be said to be “a vindication of the freedom movement” (10).

Dalit or downtrodden is a term which was first used by Jyotirao Phule in the nineteenth century, in the context of the oppression faced by the erstwhile “untouchable” castes and other lower sections in the social hierarchy. According to Victor Premasagar the term expresses their “weakness, poverty and humiliation at the hands of the upper castes in the Indian society” (qtd. in *Rawat*). “The word was also used by B. R. Ambedkar in his Marathi speeches” (Webster 11). The term has gained acceptance in the post-independence India because the Dalits find other denominations humiliating. The contemporary use of Dalit is centered on the idea that as a people they may have been broken by oppression but they survive and even thrive by finding meaning in their struggle for existence towards human dignity. It is now a political identity similar to the way African-Americans in the U.S. moved away from the use of Negro to the use of Black or even African-American.

Untouchability has always been considered as social evil and efforts have been made to eradicate it. Ancient religious and social reformers like Buddha and Mahaveer rejected the varna system and preached equality of all human beings. The Bhakti movement actively encouraged the participation and inclusion of the Dalits during the Muslim period of Indian history. In fact, the Bhakti movement stood for the transformation of Hindu society and used religious resources to push forward its basic ideology that all persons were equal before God. Ramanuja, Ramanand, Kabir, Nanak, Chaitanya, Ravidas, Tukaram, Ghasidas and others, rejected untouchability and caste system. But there was no political, social or literary movement before the establishment and consolidation of the British Raj in India which could radically change the political and social fabric of this country. In the 19th century the BrahmoSamaj, the AryaSamaj, and the Ramakrishna Mission did much to secure social, religious and cultural equality for the Dalits by means of propaganda, education, and also practical measures. The role of Mahatma Phule, Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Ambedkar cannot be overlooked in this long chain of thinkers who actively worked for the uplift of the Dalits. They focused on the issues of Dalits through their works and writings. This started a new trend in the form of Dalit writing in modern India which inspired many Dalits to come forth with their writings in Marathi, Hindi, Tamil and Punjabi. Dalit literature saw a fresh crop of new writers during the 1960s.

Namdeo Laxman Dhasal is one such writer who, following the example of African American revolutionary Black Panther Movement, founded the militant Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra along with his friends in 1972. He is also a pioneer of the Dalit literature movement known as an expression of Dalit miseries and humiliations. He published his first volume of poems *Golpithain* 1973 which was followed by other volumes. He received the Nehru award for his book ‘*Golpitha*’. He was also honoured with the prestigious Sahitya Akademi award for his contribution to literature in 2004. Dhasal has written columns for the Marathi daily the *Saamana* which is a Marathi-language newspaper owned by the Shiv Sena, a political party in Maharashtra. Naipaul finds passion and crudeness in Namdeo’s poems. They are like assaults: “Namdeo put passion into his politics and the Dalit Panthers” (IMMN, 113). In a reminiscent mood Namdeo narrates the routine humiliating situations of caste discrimination he faced in his native village and school during his childhood. “This was the way the caste system worked when it was still strong, before 1955”, he says but he also admits that it began to breakdown after that. Before Ambedkar there was no question of complaining. “You were a Mahar and you did your duties, and that was that” (IMMN 135). The situation changed a little during and after the 1950s. “Ambedkar was powerful at that time; and Mahars and other scheduled-castes people began to make political demands” (133-134). The hitherto marginalised and ignored Dalits, “the prisoners of Indian past” now keenly wanted to break out and reject the restrictions which had been imposed upon them for centuries by the caste Hindus in the name of karma. They became aware of their rights and started fighting for them. Their anger is reflected in Namdeo’s words who says, “I was full of anger and ready to fight at the slightest provocation” (137). They expressed their desire to break away from their lowly existence through literature and politics. Namdeo makes it clear to Naipaul, “I am against caste system. I express it in my politics and in my poems. Poetry is a political act. Politics is part of my poetry” (136). Naipaul calls Namdeo “a prisoner of India, with its multiplicity of movements and desperate needs” (136).

Resentment against Hindi, North, and Brahmins had been simmering in the far south of India which culminated into the victory of the *DMK* or *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (lit. "Dravidian Progressive Movement") in 1967 state legislative assembly elections. With this victory came true the dream of the rising of the downtrodden Dravids against the Brahmin dominance as often outlined in his English journal “Revolt” by the Tamil activist Periyar. It was “the revolt of South against North, non-brahmin against brahmin, the racial revolt of dark against fair, Dravidian against Aryan” (IMMN 245). With this victory of the anti-caste radicals was overthrown “the culture, which had appeared whole and mysterious and ancient” to Naipaul. The social movement, which developed into a political movement and then into a political party leading to its victory in the elections, is

termed by Naipaul as “an immense local revolution, which . . . had taken on the characteristics of a little war” (319).

The Dravidian political party the DMK which was founded by C. N. Annadurai, who had been a follower of Periyar’s earlier, “emerged as a political wing out of a social movement and began to involve itself in the political life of the state” of Tamil Nadu and the union territory Puducherry and entered the electoral fray rather unsuccessfully in 1957. This party was a breakaway faction from the DravidarKazgham (DK) which was a Dravidian movement started by Periyar, earlier known as Justice Party– also headed by Periyar till 1944. The DMK flag which is red and black represents revolution and Dravida cause. Palani, a weaver caste dark man of 63 says, “From being a secessionist movement, the DMK had become a party looking for regional autonomy” (IMMN 272).

Periyar is a Tamil name meaning “a sage or a wise man”. Periyar E. V. RamasamyNaicker was born into a family belonging to a Telugu caste of traders and cultivators in Erode district of Tamil Nadu in 1879. He was an atheist and a rationalist. Periyar was the precursor of non-Brahmin politics in Tamil Nadu. Namdeo Dhasal failed in his mission because he wanted to include other downtrodden classes into the umbrella of his movement but Periyar succeeded because he included other castes, classes and religions into the umbrella of his movement. He helped fashion the non-Brahmin public sphere through his articles. He would often invite people of different groups through his articles published in *KudiArasu* and *Revolt*. The latter was Self-Respect Movement’s first English weekly. It was published from 1928 to 1930. Periyar lays out the term “Dravidian” in clear terms in his journal *kudiArasu*: “Muslims, Christians, the depressed classes of people, those non-Brahmin Hindus who do not call themselves Aryans can all be classified as Dravidians”¹ (qtd. in Anaimuthu 2: 655).

It was hard to believe for Naipaul that something so blunt and bitter was being accepted in a part of India. Periyar’s role in shaping the radical non-Brahmin identity in Tamil Nadu cannot be underestimated. Periyar succeeded because the circumstances of those times favoured him. There was an unprecedented rise in the living standard of the middle class, Brahmins as well as non-Brahmins, towards the end of the 19th century and afterwards with the growth of the economy of the province. Especially, “with all the economic and intellectual growth that had come to independent India” (IMMN 319) “the antique brahmin caste restrictions would not have been easy to maintain. What Periyar did was to take this mood of rejection to the non-brahmin masses” (260). Giving voice to the discontent in the South Periyar demanded a southern, Dravidian, non-brahmin state called *Dravidisthan*. He set out to break a large number of idols of Hindu gods.

The Self-Respect Movement appealed especially to the Dalits because Periyar had been constantly drawing the attention of the people towards the pathetic condition of Dalits by writing in *KudiArasu* and *Revolt*. His articles carried strong arguments against Brahminic culture. Writing about the Dalits Periyar comments:

They are refused the very common privileges that are accorded even to pigs and other nasty beings of the animal kingdom. They are humiliated in thousand and one ways; they are not admitted to use the common roads, tanks, temples and other public places. . . . The ‘Brahmin cobras’ are fed by the Government with the food of the people themselves. That is merely improving the poison of the cobras to enable them to bite the innocent millions of the land (Geetha, V. and S. V. Rajadurai 318-19).

The effect of Periyar’s writings on the people’s minds was overwhelming. The middle and lower class non-Brahmins started thinking and questioning for the first time. They came to know how Brahmins had been ignoring and insulting them. They were filled with anger. Mr. Gopalakrishnan tells Naipaul, “Now, I ignore the Hindu religion. I don’t waste my time discussing it. I never did any ritual for my mother when she died” (IMMN 266). Periyar attracted people towards the movement through direct contact. Educated volunteers would go to the public with some newspapers in their hand and read them aloud and interpret the news items according to the Movement ideology. The Movement’s “political offshoot” the DMK still follows this method of direct contact between the party cadre and the people. Naipaul recalls that he himself witnessed one such incident in the 1960s.

Self-Respect Movement was dedicated to the goal of giving non-Brahmins a sense of pride based on their Dravidian past. The anti-Brahmin movement of Tamil Nadu also contained the idea of Tamil glory, past and present. This movement associated itself with historical figures especially with the non-Brahmin Chola emperors of the 8th to 10th century. Looking at the success of the movement the political parties of other states in India also try to tread the same path by associating their regional identity with historical figures. The Shiv Sena occasionally launches drives to paint out Hindi signboards in Mumbai in the same manner as was done in the far south by Periyar. The supremos of different regional political parties like the Shiv Sena and the

BahujanSamaj Party have also started using large decorated thrones to instil the sense of pride in their poor followers.

In the process of fashioning a non-Brahmin identity Mr.Karunanithi, the DMK chief minister, introduced a law that non-Brahmins should be entitled to become priests. It could not become, though, a law after Supreme Court ruling on the grounds that “Hindu law as it is today required priests to be brahmins” (IMMN 274). As a consequence of all this the Brahmins of Tamil Nadu turned on the defensive, “though they were still the musicians and dancers, still the cooks, still the priests in the temples” (320). Naipaul considers “the flight and transformation of the brahmins – as part of a more general movement forward.” Sadanand, a Brahmin, tells Naipaul that to the new government, temples which used to be social institutions having schools, hospitals, stalls for cows, facilities for large-scale water-storage etc. became the symbols of oppression of a certain sort.

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