



Naipaul's portrayal of the Punjab Problem in *India: A Million Mutinies Now*

INDERPREET

Assistant Professor

Post Graduate Studies Department, Punjabi University Regional Centre, Bathinda, Punjab, India.

Abstract: V.S. Naipaul is one of the prominent travel writers and a novelist in English. In his book *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990), he attempts to highlight the issues of religion, region, class, caste, and language that lead to division and infighting in Indian society. The major national parties try to win over the majority communities on their side, and as such, they lose the support of the minorities. Injustices and discriminations meted out by the minorities lead to the formation of regional parties, organizations, and religious outfits that aim at fighting for the rights of their states, religion, and language. Naipaul has rightly portrayed the minorities facing political and social problems in democratic India. Naipaul's portrayal of discrimination by the men at the helm of affairs against the minorities, leading to the violent movements, depicts that not all is well in the country that claims to possess a secular character.

Key words: Sikhs, Guru, Discrimination.

V.S. Naipaul is one of the prominent travel writers and a novelist in English. His travelogues deal with the problems and issues of Third World societies. In his book *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990), he attempts to highlight the issues of religion, region, class, caste, and language that lead to division and infighting in Indian society. The major national parties try to win over the majority communities on their side, and as such, they lose the support of the minorities. Injustices and discriminations meted out by the minorities lead to the formation of regional parties, organizations, and religious outfits that aim at fighting for the rights of their states, religion, and language. The regional parties' politics aim at promoting the interests of the states. The present paper attempts to portray the Punjab problem as described by Naipaul in the chapter 'The Shadow of the Guru' in his book *India: A Million Mutinies Now*. He describes how the movement started by Akali Dal on the S.Y.L. takes a serious turn as Damdami Taksal, led by Sant Jarnail Singh Bhinderanwale, joined the movement. The movement aimed to raise the issues related to Punjab and the Sikh religion later took the form of a secessionist movement.

In the chapter titled 'The Shadow of the Guru', Naipaul describes how the violence serves as a tool to achieve the political targets. Naipaul gives a detailed description of the secessionist movement in Punjab through Gurtej Singh (retired I.A.S). The terrorists killed the innocent people in Punjab, and the police killed the terrorists in fake encounters. He gives an account of the time Sant Jarnail Singh Bhinderanwale led the violent movement from the Golden Temple, the highest place of worship of the Sikhs. He declared war against the state. After the Blue Star Operation and the death of Bhinderanwale, the movement continued till the early nineties. This period of terror and lawlessness can be attributed to the lack of political vision and will on the part of the leaders of Punjab as well as of India. The Akali Dal, though it believed in democratic means but did not have the courage to oppose the terrorists' acts; rather, they even gave a nod to the terrorists' activities. Naipaul talks about the secular ideology of the Sikh gurus, of whom the militant outfits claimed to be followers. Guru Nanak, the first Guru, blended all faiths. Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru, fought against the oppressions of the Mogul rulers. He gave a separate identity to the Sikhs by imparting 'Amrit' to his followers. Naipaul also writes about Maharaja Ranjit Singh's regime and his secular approach during his rule. Naipaul's observation is that the militants' claim of following their Guru's philosophy is false.

Naipaul describes the fundamentalist movement of the late seventies led by Bhinderawale, who was an ordinary preacher of the Sikhs. Punjab witnessed a sort of parallel government, which affected the functioning of the democratically elected government. Naipaul describes that the movement was at its height when the government at the center decided to attack the terrorists led by Bhinderanwale. The Operation Blue Star resulted in the deaths of hundreds of devotees, terrorists, and army personnel. The Sikh community was enraged on the attack on their highest place of worship. After a few months of the 'Blue Star', the Sikh bodyguards murdered Indira Gandhi, and her murder was followed by riots in New Delhi and other parts of the country in which thousands of Sikhs were mercilessly murdered. To Naipaul, it seems that the Sikhs are themselves to blame for this tragedy.

From the outside, it seemed that the Sikhs had brought this tragedy on themselves, manufacturing grievances out of their great success in independent India. It was as if there was some intellectual or emotional flaw in the community, as if in their fast, unbroken rise over the last century there had developed lack of balance between their material achievement and their internal life, so that, though in one way so adventurous and forward-looking, in another way remained close to their tribal and country origins.(424)

In this regard, it may be argued that the politics of the Congress government at the center and the directionless movement of the Akali Dal were responsible for the tragic incidents that took place during the period of militancy. In the book titled *Fighting for Faith and Nation: Dialogues with Sikh Militants* (1996), Cynthia Keppley Mahmood writes that nearly "every academic and media source on the rise of Bhinderanwale notes his apparent ties to the congress party" (Mahmood 80). In her book titled *Military Intervention and Succession in South Asia*, Anne Noronha Das Santos writes that Bhinderanwale was initially "encouraged by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to weaken the Akali Dal, the Sikh political party that posed threat to her congress (I) party (Santos 90). In her book entitled *Sikhism: A Very Short Introduction*, Eleanor Nesbitt also holds similar views. According to Nesbitt, the main motive of the Congress was "to divide the majority of Sikh voters in Punjab who did not support the congress" (Nesbitt 82). Santos points out that Bhinderanwale started inculcating his "ideas of Punjabi secession from India in the minds of his followers. Ironically he had turned against the government that had supported his rise to power (Santos 97).

In the text, Naipaul describes how he gained ample knowledge about the Khalistan movement by meeting various Sikh leaders who were connected with this Movement in Punjab. He makes an observation that the people of Punjab, especially the Sikhs, are more affiliated to their community and, as such, have not matured enough to become a collective part of Indian identity. After the interviews with Bhinderanwale and other Sikh leaders, Naipaul observes that the people who led the Khalistan movement lacked political exposure. Naipaul feels that they failed to understand the concept of the state. Regarding the observation made by Naipaul that the Sikhs lack political exposure, it may be argued that after the independence in 1947, the Sikhs felt alienated in the newly independent nation. It remains a fact that minorities did not find favourable conditions for their communities and culture to flourish. In his book *Communalism in Indian Politics*, Rajni Kothari writes:

The political structure that evolved in the first twenty years was very fragile. It was vulnerable in many spots and above all, produced elite which slowly began to lose ideological discipline and a larger sense of purpose and, instead, started conceiving its interests in narrow mechanical terms which ultimately made it liable to fall prey to, or feel tempted to make use of, divisive tendencies. (Kothari 16)

Kothari further argues that the ethnic division of Indian democracy "is not an aberration but something that is part of the system, a direct outcome of its inherent logic." (15) Thus, the communalization of politics is the product of the democratic system where idealism and ideology are sacrificed for surviving in politics or for continuing to remain in power. In his book titled *The Sikh Diaspora: The Search for Statehood* Darshan Singh Tatla, writes:

The rise (and fall) of Sikh ethnic nationalism must be situated within the context of postcolonial Indian state formation, which has engendered and confronted it. The Sikh demand for the linguistic region, and then for a regeneration of center-state relations were indistinguishable from similar demands by other regions (Tatla 22).

Tatla is of the view that the Indian polity “faces enormous tasks in moulding its many nations into a “nation state” through homogenizing ideologies and repression in forging such a nation state” (Tatla 25).

In his article entitled “Multicultural Democracy: Can it work?” Pierre Van Den Berghe shows how India “has become a vast cacophony of groups” that clamours for “state recognition, and organizing for the achievement of special rights and the defence of collective interests” (Van Den Berghe 101). Another writer, Harnik Deol observes that India’s “complex and variegated social structure comprises large and distinctive religious, linguistic, regional, tribal and caste groups” (Deol 1). Deol further writes that it “is natural for these diverse ethnic groups to assert their cultural identity (Deol 1).

In view of this situation, it is quite evident that the emergence of the movements of diverse cultural, regional, or linguistic groups is but natural. So it may be argued that Naipaul’s blame on the people of Punjab or one particular community for the movement or uprising in Punjab cannot be justified. For the fact remains that movements in the name of ethnicity, language, or region are a common feature of Indian politics. Though it may be said that Naipaul is justified in condemning the violence in Punjab during the dark days of militancy. The killing of innocent persons for achieving political targets kills the very purpose of the democratic polity. Nor are the fake encounters to kill the militants justifiable, as they disrupt the established norms and laws of the democratic state. Naipaul shows Gurtej Singh as a representative of Sikh alienation. He was a staunch supporter of and a man of the inner circle of Bhinderanwale. He gives a detailed description of discrimination by the central government against the Sikhs. He talks about the water dispute between Haryana and Punjab, which proved fatal. ‘Dharam yudh’ agitation started from the Golden Temple was, in fact, a continuation of the agitation which started from Kapuri village in Patiala district in Punjab. The movement was to stop the S.Y.L. canal construction, though it is another point of discussion that Akalis raised the water issue to garner the support of the Punjabi farming community to derive political power. Naipaul portrays Gurtej Singh as a man rooted in his culture, history, and religion. He talks about the oppressions of the Mughal rulers on Guru Tegh Bahadur and his aides. Gurtej Singh justifies his being a staunch supporter of the Movement in Punjab.

Consciously or unconsciously, a Sikh is all the time trying to avert a situation like this’. Religious persecution. ‘And this is what made me support this agitation for justice in Punjab. It was more of an emotional identification with my people - in the days of Punjabi Suba , 1957 to 1960. (429-30)

This shows that Gurtej Singh was emotionally tied to his community and supported the movement aimed at fighting for justice for the Sikh community.

Nawab Kapur Singh, the mentor of Gurtej Singh, had his own grudges against the central government. He was an I.C.S. at the time India got independence. He was dismissed from the service on the alleged misutilization of funds meant for the rehabilitation of the refugees. Kapur Singh blamed the government’s discriminatory policy for his dismissal. Kapur Singh talks about his political battle as a fight between good and evil. He cites Maharaja Ranjit Singh as an ideal Sikh ruler. There was no hanging of anyone during his forty-year rule. Kapur Singh sees his persecution as “the destiny of a Sikh in consequence of power into Hindu hands” (434). Kapur Singh shows how his being the minority community leads to discrimination even in a democratic nation. Kapur Singh was able to become a member of the state assembly and a Member of Parliament as a representative of the Sikhs who fought against the injustices against the Sikhs.

Gurtej Singh wrote a paper entitled “The Genesis of The Sikh Problem in India” for a seminar at a university. The paper highlights the Sikhs as a separate community having a separate identity and not a part of the race. Gurtej Singh justifies his association with Bhinderanwale as he was fed up working as an I.A.S. officer in the unjust political system.

Naipaul observes how the intellectuals like Gurtej Singh were wooed by Bhinderanwale on his side, though Sant himself did not possess much formal education. Eleanor Nesbith terms Bhinderanwale as a charismatic “leader of the Damdami Taksal” (Nesbith 81). Cynthia Keppley Mahmood, in the chapter entitled “Blue Star,” writes that the “interesting thing about the growing extremism of Bhinderanwale and others was that it was supported by a wide range of people in significant government and particularly, police and military posts”(Mahmood 81). This shows how Bhinderanwale was able to touch the sentiments of the police and military personnel who were actually supposed to perform the duty of repressing the movement. Naipaul comes to know from Gurtej Singh

about the real cause of the movement in Punjab. Naipaul describes how the educated youth, like Dalip, joined the movement without any passion. He gives unemployment as the main reason, which resulted in frustration among the young people. Gurtej sees the sufferings of Sikhs as a result of the unrest among the Sikhs, especially the youth, and he says:

‘This world is an unhappy place for many, and it [unhappiness] has to be eliminated. There are only two ways. Either you make somebody suffer, or you suffer.’ (488)

To conclude, it may be said that Naipaul’s observations on the militant movement in Punjab are based on his interviews with the men associated with the movement and his brief knowledge about the Sikh religion. Naipaul has rightly portrayed the minorities facing political and social problems in democratic India. Naipaul's portrayal of discrimination by the men at the helm of affairs against the minorities, leading to the violent movements, depicts that not all is well in the country that claims to possess a secular character. Naipaul observes that lack of education and unemployment also become instrumental in the directionless movements.

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