

Myth- History Interface in India: An Analysis by Naipaul

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Abstract: The historical sense, the sense of the timeless and the transient throws clear light not only on the past but illuminates the path to the mysterious future also. An adequate knowledge of history is the key to the proper understanding of the present and command on the future. Collective historical consciousness is the first requirement for an objective understanding the past for a nation.

I have sought to make a brief study, in this paper, of the presence or absence of historical sense in Indians, as pointed out by V. S. Naipaul and Nirad C. Chaudhuri, against the background of certain other civilizations having it in different degrees.

I have selected for this study V. S. Naipaul's Indian Travelogues in order to analyze his understanding of India's past and the tradition of historiography in this country. I shall try to analyze his views about the historical consciousness in Indians in this paper.

Keywords: Historical sense, ancient, Greece, Rome, China, medieval Muslim schools of history, Hindu, India, decay, defeat, KumbhMela, Baba, myths, ritualistic society.

The English word 'history' is derived from the Greek word "istoria" which means inquiry. The historical sense is the sense of the timeless and the transient. Stressing upon the need for general historical sense George Santayana in *The Life of Reason* states that "when experience is not retained, as among savages, infancy is perpetual. Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" (284).

Only the true understanding of the past can accurately explain everything that has ever existed. A more clear grasp of the present is provided by historical awareness, which also has the potential to serve as a light for a more promising future. A general awareness of history is not merely a meaningless study of past but it provides an insight to the right appreciation of everything that is happening in the present. In other words, without a sufficient understanding of history, the happenings of today are nothing more than random occurrences. Therefore, the precise and true recording of past events and conditions is of great importance for a conscious formation of future.

According to De Somogyi historical interest is one of "the oldest mental activities of mankind, which can be found even in the remotest periods of religious, national, or any other type of human society" (373-87). A keen sense of history has not been uniformly present amongst the people of different civilizations. The People of almost all the great civilizations of the world possessed historical sense though with varying degrees. According to E. Sreedharan, "ancient Greece and Rome as well as Judaism and Christianity have bequeathed to the European a strong sense of history. Ancient Chinese and medieval Muslim schools of history have been central elements in their civilizations. In comparison the historical sense of the Hindus of the ancient and medieval times was negligible" (Historiography, 4).

Israel, in the ancient world, was a nation with a sense of its history. It was a history rooted in a single and unforgettable event— the Exodus from Egypt under the dynamic leadership of Moses.

The first historian of any significance in Greece was Hecataeus of Miletus (550 BC – 476 BC), a native of Asia Minor. Another Greek researcher Herodotus of Halicarnassus (484 BC – c.429-420 BC) is believed to be the "Father of History" and is the first historian known to collect his materials systematically, test their accuracy to a certain extent and arrange them in a well-constructed and vivid narrative. Thucydides (460 BC – 395 BC) wrote the History of the Peloponnesian War which narrates the history of the wars fought between Athens and Sparta in the years 431 BC – 404 BC. He offers an in-depth analysis of the mechanisms of war. His description of the changing use of language has become a classic.

Polybius of Megalopolis (200 BC – 118 BC) was born at the moment when the Romans had defeated Carthage and turned their attention to Greece. His *The Historiæ* is one of the most important sources for the study of the rise of Rome.

China produced a mass of superb historical writings long unequalled by any other country until modern times. The most notable of ancient Chinese historian was Ssu-ma Chien or SimaQian(145 BC – 87 BC). His work *Shin chi or Records of the Grand Historian* is one of the most influential of Chinese histories. This was the first systematic Chinese historical text. The book covers the period from the time of the Yellow Emperor until the author's own time. Due to his highly admired work, SimaQian is often regarded as the father of Chinese historiography.

Like Judaism and Christianity, Islam too is solidly grounded in historical events. Historical traditions have been strong among the Muslims in general and Arabs in particular for many centuries. This is attested by the large number of historical works left to us. Muslim historical tradition first began developing from the earlier 7th century AD with the reconstruction of Muhammad's life following his death. The Arab historians were careful in dealing with their sources, even if all they wrote were essentially biographical sketches of famous personalities. Various methodologies were developed, during this process, such as the "science of biography", "science of habit" and "Sinead" (chain of transmission). Among the earliest historians of Islam is WahbIbnMunabbih (d. AD 728) a Yememnite author. He exerted an immense influence among his followers.

India has also been a great ancient civilization and we find no example of history writing in India like Kalhan's Rajatarangini, which contains a few chapters where the writer appears to be objective and accurate. But except this work we see no other work recording pure historical facts in the pre-Muslim era in India. History writing is called *Itihasa* in Sanskrit. This word can be split as Iti+ha+aasa, roughly translated as "This is how it happened." The key word is "how." The exact date of the events is insignificant. The immediate emphasis is on the "value" rather than the "fact" aspect. Historical sense which is very important for a nation to safely steer into the mysterious future is said to be absent in Indians and that is the reason why they don't have accurate historical records of their past. They have their myths and legends instead. Naturally, they haven't learnt lessons from their past.

Nirad C. Chaudhuri once said, "I do not know of any nation which is held so relentlessly in the clutches of the past and yet so incapable of contemplating and understanding it and consequently profiting by its lessons" (qtd. in Zakaria 238). In his travelogues on India Naipaul repeatedly says that Indians ignore history of their country which is full of defeat and squalor. They have retreated into fantasy and fatalism which gives them solace. He believes that a society which cannot examine its past with scholarly rigor is a society doomed to be stagnant and uncreative. It substitutes myths, legends, and barely understood rituals for a critical examination of its history. He fears that this weakness of Indians may invite further defeats.

It is generally stated that the colonial powers intentionally hyped this weakness of Indians in order to create a sort of inferiority complex in them. It must, however, be pointed out here that the Europeans in the 19th and in 20th century were not the first to notice this absence of historical sense in India. Alberuni, the Muslim historian of Iranian origin, also observed about one thousand years ago that the Hindus (the Indians) had no sense of history. "Unfortunately the Hindus, he claims, do not pay much attention to the historical order of things, they are very careless relating the chronological succession of their kings, and when they are pressed for information and are at a loss, not knowing what to say, they invariably take to tale telling" (Sachau 2: 10-11).

Many Indian thinkers like Swami Vivekanand believe that history writing is impossible without scientific temper. While at Alwar during his *parivrajaka* days, Swami Vivekananda happened to speak to a group of young men on the importance of the study and writing of history. He extolled the study of the western science in that meeting. He said, "Nevertheless the Europeans have shown us how to proceed in making research into our ancient history. Now it is for us to strike out an independent path of historical research for ourselves . . ." (His Eastern and Western Disciples 1: 271-72). The Swami exhorted Indians to "Study Sanskrit, but along with it study Western science as well. Learn accuracy, my boys" he said "Study and labour, so that the time will come when you can put our history on a scientific basis. Now, Indian history is disorganized. It has no chronological accuracy" (The Life of Swami, 1: 157). V. S. Naipaul effectively validates the need for sound historical scholarship in his non-fiction works for the inculcation of critical self-awareness in an individual as well as in a society or a nation. Time and again he lays stress on the need to understand the past. Nirad Chaudhuri is also aware of the habit of myth making in Indians which has overshadowed the culture of objective history writing amongst the Hindus. "Owing to the very inadequate development of the historical and scientific spirit among the Hindus, the greater part of their early historical traditions remains embedded only in myths" (The Continent, 210) writes Chaudhuri.

If a society engages itself in rigorous evaluation of its past, the possibility of its creativity and development will automatically open. Naipaul is shocked to see people in Srinagar who have forgotten their history and survive on legends. There is a late 16th century fort built by Akbar near Dal Lake which is popularly

believed to be “five thousand years” old (An Area of Darkness, 131). He is surprised to see that the Kashmiris retain no memory of their Hindu past. Naipaul observes that the Valley suffers from selective amnesia. He notes that the history of the people of the valley begins with the history of their conquerors. Even this history which they claim to know is full of myths. There are gardens and pavilions of the Mogul emperors, but “the builders have receded beyond history into legends.” There is a hair from the beard of the prophet Mohammed at the Hazratbal mosque and people enthusiastically narrate how that relic was brought there by a man, braving untold dangers on the way. Naipaul is stunned to know that nobody knows anything about ‘the man’. The relic is so potent according to them, that the birds never flew over the chapel where it is kept, and cows never sit with their backs to it. The Kashmiris, according to Naipaul, have a medieval mindset. They had Hindu forefathers before their conversion to Islam. They have forgotten everything about their past. Ridiculing their poor sense of history Naipaul further says, “Should another conversion now occur, should another law as complete be imposed, in a hundred years there would be no memory of Islam” (AD 137). There has grown up a generation who has learned about the British from their history books, and the British intervention is as remote to them as the Mogul glory.

Naipaul laments the fact that the Indians are not only abysmally ignorant of their history but they are utterly incurious also about it. They live in a world in which all the questions have already been answered and all the rituals perfected. He gives reasons behind the Indians’ ignorance about their history. Indian history is full of squalor and defeat. It generates anger and pain. Naipaul believes, “It is better to retreat into fantasy and fatalism, to trust to the stars in which the fortunes of all are written – there are lecturers in astrology in some universities – and to regard the progress of the rest of the world with the tired tolerance of one who has been through it all before” (AD 215).

Indians' lack of historical awareness has caused people to think that all the inventions and discoveries that are made now actually existed in ancient India. India in the 18th century was filthy. Therefore, it invited invasions. However, the self-absorbed Indians believe that their wealthy nation was on the verge of the industrial revolution before the British arrived. Naipaul is perturbed to learn that even so reputable a historian like K. M. Munshi believes that every Indian village had a school before the British came. Namrata Rathore Mahanta opines, “The past needs to be shaken out of its role of the psychological feel-good resort for bruised reality” (124). Indians’ interpretation of their history appears to be painful to Naipaul when he sees the earlier squalor still ubiquitous in modern India in the form of disputes about language, religion, caste and region. Disgusted with this perpetual Indian phenomenon of decay and defeat Naipaul ventures to predict: “India, it seems, will never cease to require the arbitration of a conqueror. A people with a sense of history might have ordered matters differently” (Area of Darkness, 216). However, he softens his stance in his third Indian travelogue *India: A Million Mutinies* where he terms “the disputes” as revolt of “non-brahmin against brahmin, the racial revolt of dark against fair, Dravidian against Aryan” (245). He views it as the release of “long-buried particularities” (4), as “many revolutions within that revolution” (7) of independence, as “rage and revolt,” and as “million little mutinies” (603).

According to Naipaul, the Indians might have avoided historical errors and averted major calamities if they had scientifically acquired a sense of history. According to Naipaul, there are a few causes behind Indians' lack of historical awareness. One of them is Indian intellectual decline as a result of foreign invasions. Another likely explanation is that the laws, customs, and taboos of their respective religions, castes, clans, and families always govern how they behave. Naipaul observes that there has been widespread intellectual depletion in modern India as a consequence of foreign conquests. With each onslaught, India's intellectual life became poorer, and people began to rely more on the romanticised myths of the past. He notices that Indians have become apathetic and they shirk responsibilities and action and since historical awareness presupposes intellectual dynamism, they have molded the philosophy of their scriptures to suit their own inclination in order to maintain the equilibrium of their idea of themselves.

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