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V.S. Naipaul's *India: A Million Mutinies Now*: Stories of India's Marginalized.

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Abstract

V.S. Naipaul's travelogue *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990) stands testimony to the aspirations and struggles of India's ordinary people, for a life of dignity and progress: the marginalized aspiring to reach the Centre. The book brings them centre stage as they tell their stories and inscribe these in the great India story – of modernization, stubborn orthodoxies, rigid colonial attitudes as well as failures and successes. Often criticized as an Outsider's view, the travelogue is a notable example of Naipaul's method of "Direct looking", adhering to truth alone. The brahmanical bias and neglect of systemic and structural flaws while observing people stand out as noticeable limitations of the book.

Key Words: Identity, Struggle, Assertion, Interview, Caste, Oppression, Journey, Society, Dynamic.

Naipaul's first travelogue, his first book of non-fiction *The Middle Passage* (1962) was a study of Caribbean societies where he found himself a "colonial among colonials" and the colonial habits of "dependence" and "mimicry" which he was to discover later during his first visit to India described in *An Area of Darkness*. Instead of a buoyant post-colonial country full of possibilities that Naipaul had assumed it to be, he met 'colonial self-distrust' and 'a spirit of plunder'. According to Sharada Iyer "The unique mingling of social enquiry and autobiography that marks Naipaul's later works first occurs in *An Area of Darkness*. The second visit produced *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977), which was still a slave to its old ways and attitudes, caught in a time warp. But in *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990). Naipaul witnessed a changing India, willing to struggle and quit its stagnant ways for its tryst with destiny in the modern world.

No novel can really capture the different textures of life there. But *India : A Million Mutinies Now* does an excellent job of describing the lives, the hopes and aspirations and frustrations of a diverse cast of Indians..... Naipaul's himself is very much a figure in the background He just lets people speak."

Pankaj Mishra

In the above quote, Mishra sums up the core concerns foregrounded by V.S. Naipaul. In his third India travelogue *India : A Million Mutinies Now*. It's publication in 1990 was a defining moment in Naipaul's engagement with India, the land of his forefathers. *Mutinies* is a not a perfect but mature and balanced view of India. In 1962, out of his first visit came the travelogue *An Area of Darkness* which still shocks Indian sensibilities, though truth of most things described in this book cannot be denied. The provocative title was followed by yet another provocative title of Naipaul's second India travelogue in 1977 – *India : A Wounded Civilization*. It seemed to suggest that India was a civilization in decline and it's days of glory were certainly over. From 1977 to 1990, a period of tumultuous developments in India – from end of national emergency followed by a new government with a different political programme proved short lived; fresh elections resulted in a return of the old political dispensation whose decision to allow army to enter the extremist infested Golden temple led to assassination of the Prime Minister. But such political events were accompanied by socio-economic churning in the Indian society. It is largely these churnings and symptoms and results thereof that Naipaul foregrounds in *A Million Mutinies Now*.

It is almost forty years since the publication of Naipaul's *India : A Million Mutinies Now* and it's relevance has only grown, not lessened. The "million mutinies" of the title are still happening as India, the most populous nation on planet earth, tries to grapple with the conflicts, the struggles the assertions of it's people to realize their aspirations. Underpinning all such gropings in the semi-dark of the Indian reality, is the desire of individuals and groups to define and re-define themselves; the endless desire to reach above and beyond their inheritance. So it is, that dalits, women, entrepreneurs, activists, ordinary people all find space in this book through interviews, stories they tell themselves, long narratives running parallel.

Pankaj Mishra comments about the book, "A nuanced picture of the many different personal and political journeys since 1947."

The complex narrative of the book, the many stories can be better understood through the lens of identity theory. Identity is, as James Joyce would say the "Whatness" of a person. But in the evolving modern Indian nation it is not fixed and is dynamic. An individual has multiple identities which are continually negotiated and reconstructed. In *Mutinies* individuals challenge their inherited identities bringing in social change. For example, the Dalits challenge the caste system through education and employment; women challenge patriarchy by working outside their homes and seeking financial independence; entrepreneurs venturing into new businesses rejecting family occupations: all acts of assertion constituting the "mutinies" Naipaul mentions in the title of the book.

The most radical illustration of Identity Theory in *A Million Mutinies* is treatment of Caste, which is traditionally inherited in India. This inherited 'Caste' is rejected by the Dalit activists. India being a country of diverse religions and cults, people assert their identity by

striking a balance between adhering to their cultural identity and simultaneously adapting to ways of modern India. Thus religious identity keeps evolving in the new India of ‘a million mutinies’.

Women too choose to redefine their identity and roles in society. For them the struggle is not only economic but also existential. Identity theory sums up this change as a transition from prescribed gender roles to self-defined identities.

Thus, caste identity, modern versus traditional identity, regional identity are major tropes dealt with by Naipaul in *A Million Mutinies*. He has portrayed with empathy the lives of India’s underprivileged, the marginalized, the workers, the migrants. With remarkable perception and skill, he tries to decode the complicated workings of individual and group consciousnesses.

A major and different kind of mutiny, a struggle for survival and aspiration to prove and define oneself is waged everyday in India’s major cities like Mumbai. Galloping urbanization in post-independence India has helped people forge a new identity - the urban identity, where migrants coming from distant, small places find traditional ties of religion, custom and caste weakening; instead there are new ties of occupation and modern living that fashion a new identity for them. And the change percolates.

National identity is a problematic issue in India. Though being an Indian is a matter of pride, yet the diverse and complex matrix of the country does not lend itself easily to an essentialist view of national identity. No single, fixed definition can be given and it is an ongoing discourse among its peoples.

Another major area explored by Naipaul is Individual identity. In all the eight chapters, there are individuals narrating their life stories and these stories define who they are. These stories reveal individuals defining themselves through work, education, migration, political participation, always evolving.

A major aspect of identity formation, according to Naipaul is resistance: the struggle of lower castes for equality and women resisting zero identity of a housewife to work outside their homes, entrepreneurs resisting government restrictions on free flow of goods; minorities asserting cultural recognition. A discussion of the Identity Theory as applied to Naipaul’s *India : A Million Mutinies Now* would be incomplete without a mention of postcolonial identity. Identity of Indians disrupted and fractured by colonialism is being re-constructed and re-shaped after independence. After a period of mimicry of former colonizers and in-betweenness (in Homi K. Bhabha’s terms) the Indians are set to re-construct their identities. But it is a tough task as they negotiate tradition and modernity, east and west, religion and secularism and local and national identities. Amidst so many tropes, the postcolonial identity remains fluid. People carry multiple identities; for example a person may simultaneously be a Dalit; a Hindu; an activist, a shopkeeper; a migrant but

never be only one of these. And this is conveyed by him telling his own story and in the process attempting to define himself. Multiple acts, multiple roles, all acts of assertion to construct an identity. These different identities often intersect and may sometimes be in a situation of conflict.

Mishra writes again about *Mutinies*, “The closest thing you can get to a good book of fiction about India”.

The Identity Theory is reinforced in *A Million Mutinies* by the narrative method used by Naipaul. Instead of Naipaul’s authorial voice imposing itself his several interviewees speak in their individual voices and such personal narratives project their identity. Naipaul’s voice is restrained and observational. Brandon Robshaw comments “most of the book is told in the words of the Indians he meets.... It’s really a huge slice of oral history” (*The Independent*)

Identity Theory applied to *A Million Mutinies* is relevant as

- The million mutinies referred to in the title are assertions for recognition by India’s millions. (now billions)
- The mutinies of 1990 are happening even today, after forty years, as acts of violence in different parts of India are calls for recognition.
- A universal, essentialist notion of identity is dysfunctional in India. Regions, religions, cultures, castes vociferously demand recognition and is actually India’s strength as a nation.
- Identity is a dynamic and socio-economic, political construct as borne out by the stories of struggle and achievement.
- Individual journeys and achievements represent wider socio-economic change.

But there are certain limitations too to the Identity Theory.

- Because of focus on identity issues, economic and structural inequalities that shape the struggles to assert identity are neglected.
- Naipaul seems to focus on divisive policies rather than on solidarity or unifying forces.

India: A Million Mutinies Now is not simply a travel narrative, but an exploration of how the millions of Indians, define and re-define their identity. The book also gives a glimpse of individual consciousness. The book gives a detailed analysis of how identity is shaped by religion, gender, class, migration and national history. The mutinies are therefore acts of self-assertion through which the marginalized and ordinary people claim agency, dignity and recognition.

According to Patrick French, Naipaul's biographer

During his months of travel for *India : A Million Mutinies Now*, Vibia opened himself to a new vision of the country..... he saw beyond the corruption and violence to something original and redemptive. (p.453)

French quotes Naipaul's close friend Paul Theroux about *A Million Mutinies* "literally the last word on India today witness within witness, a chain of voices --- from the so-called Untouchable, the Dalit, to the maharajah.

.... 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 ceased to be abstractions. They had begun to do things for themselves. They had become people stressing their own particularity, just as better off groups in India stressed their particularities.(p.453)

Independence had come to India like a kind of revolution; now there were many revolutions within that revolution. Naipaul concludes that India's, greatest strength lies in its people's desire for self-improvement. Every individual struggle – whether against caste, poverty, gender disparity or economic exclusion – is a "mutiny" an act of self-assertion.

The title *India: A Million Mutinies Now* also suggests the core of his argument that India is a nation on the move. Old anomalies, Irritants and attitudes continue but the desire to progress dominates all. Naipaul catches the aspirational bull called India by its horns and in a series of interviews, descriptions, discontinuous narrative he very nearly succeeds in understanding what makes India a potentially global force.

Very appropriately, Naipaul's selects Bombay as the primary symbol of the change that is happening across India. The first chapter titled Bombay Theatre explores the lives of individuals who have grown and progressed in the city.

To awaken to history was to cease to live instinctively. It was to begin to see oneself and one's group the way the outside world saw one; and it was to know a kind of rage. India was now full of this rage. There had been a general awakening. (p. 426)

Papu-the Jain stock broker, a Shiv Sena office bearer are examples of the mutinous millions. The book progresses in the form of interviews of these people where they freely share their aspirations, journeys, achievements and disappointments with the writer. The writer Naipaul chooses to remain detached and lets people speak. Through their stories, the writer foregrounds the changes happening in Indian society. The story of Papu is also the story of Bombay or Mumbai as the financial nerve centre of India, calling all Indian to realize their dreams. The parallel narratives run like a documentary and at places become a philosophical exploration of the crests and troughs of history; He describes the

colonization of Goa by the Portuguese, who, despite ruling the place for four hundred years left few significant traces of their rule.

In the first chapter titled, “Bombay Theatre”, Naipaul gives the reader a glimpse into the rise of Shiv Sena, as a political force in Bombay, its early days under Bal Thackeray (a cartoonist) and its success in setting the narrative of sons of the soil Marathi Manush – deprived of jobs and other opportunities by outsiders working in Bombay which captured the imagination of the masses in Maharashtra.

The ‘theatre’ in the title stands for Bombay as the scene for social, political, religious, economic dramas, unfolding simultaneously. The narrative is discontinuous and unfolds as a series of stones of different people, making a social collage. The discontinuous narrative injects credibility to their stones and becomes a documentation of their lives. The choice of Bombay as the setting of the very first chapter is also apt because it is a cosmopolitan city where differences of caste, class, religion and language will eventually be resolved, even obliterated before the economic juggernaut.

A notable feature of *A Million Mutinies* is that the writer seldom intrudes into the narrative. There are extended passages in direct speech. Unlike earlier India travelogues, where Naipaul’s impressions and observations of India pushed the narrative, in *A Million Mutinies*, people confide to the writer in great detail, their life’s journey, often in interviews. Thus ordinary people acquire agency as the omniscient narrator recedes to the background. As people tell their stones, social, economic and political changes happening across the country unfold before the reader. But the change driving all changes is economic, which gives to people a confidence in their abilities to realize their aspirations. According to Mallikarjun Patil, “ Naipaul’s travelogues are descriptive, interesting, truthful and provocative.”

Naipaul makes significant contribution to documentation of social history by tracing the rise of Dalit consciousness through a portrait of the Dalit poet – Namdeo Dhasal. The veracity of his portrait is established through personal details shared by his wife with the writer and at places by Dhasal himself. Naipaul subtly underlines the union of literature and activism as powerful tool for social reform. He portrays Dhasal as the voice of dalit political and cultural assertion.

Besides individual portraits, Naipaul’s observant eye does not miss the details. In almost every interview the housing crisis in Bombay, the dehumanizing living conditions in *chawls* and slums – with people leading a camp-like existence. But their desire to be educated, to prosper, overcomes all the obstacles. The writer effectively conveys the beauty and pathos of common lives, people with admirable family values : individuals working hard and educating their siblings but sacrificing their own aspirations.

If rise of the Dalit consciousness is an important mutiny taking place, the emergence of the Indian working woman is the mutiny that has forever changed the face of Indian society. She is foregrounded as the crucial agent driving the Indian economy.

Naipaul also touches upon the changing face of Indian politics through interviews of politicians. Politics is now a lucrative career and homespun which was once symbol of sacrifice and service during freedom struggle now stands for power. Naipaul observes, “With industrialization and economic growth people hand forgotten old reverences. Men honoured only money now. With money, “.... Disruptive, lesser loyalties of region, caste and clan-now played on the surface of Indian life.”

Change had come in the caste system also with the rise of Dalit consciousness. Naipaul writes further that “Independence had come to India like a kind of revolution; now there were many revolutions within that revolution. (p. 21)

And these “many revolutions”, the acts of assertion by individuals and groups are what the writer means by “million mutinies” in the title. If urbanization and economic mobility are the core theme of chapter one, in chapter two titled “The Secretary’s Tale : Glimpses of the Indian Century” Naipaul calls new century, the Indian century. Through a series of interviews with industrialists, traders and businessmen, Naipaul establishes capitalism as the powerful agent of social transformation. Besides capitalism, democracy and education have helped transform India from stagnant, moribund society into a dynamic nation

Chapter three titled “Breaking Out” is a meditation on the countless conflicts that plague India-regional, social and caste politics. But, these are not divisive forces; they are assertions of identity, Naipaul says. Chapter four, title “After the battle” talks about the consequences of conflicts as riots and extremism on the lives of the ordinary people who suffer loss of life as well property but act with remarkable resilience, continue and look towards the future. So, the onward momentum is never lost.

Chapter seven titled “Woman’s Era” explores the most powerful change with the deepest and widest impact on Indian society. This change which is a change brought by women as they pursue careers as professionals, writers, activists. In their journey is inherent a challenge to patriarchy which has established roles for women within the home. Naipaul regards this as one of the most significant mutinies.

The “million mutinies” of the title also refers to the daily struggle of ordinary people leading submerged lives, deprived of recognition and dignity. These are women asserting independence; religious minorities demanding recognition; entrepreneurs challenging poverty; regional communities seeking autonomy; young Indians redefining their identities. Naipaul interprets these as signs of modernization – India like Lord Hanuman realizing it’s strength, a giant waking up, what Pandit Nehru phrased as India waking up after a long sleep in his book *Discovery of India*.

The many mutinies or acts of assertion and rebellion could take place and eventually accepted and accommodated because of the democratic experiment India had dared to venture into on the eve of Independence from British rule. During the freedom struggle India had been demanding progressively broader representation in each Government of India Act passed by the British Parliament since 1909. In 1950, the Constitution affirmed Indian people's resolve to make India a sovereign, democratic republic. This was a challenging task, given the complexity and diversity of the country, but also it's greatest strength through wars and droughts. Naipaul bemoans the corruption, bureaucratic red tape, inefficiency, political opportunism that plagues democracy in India.

All this is brought to light in discontinuous, parallel narratives through interviews and histories. Consequently multiple voices exist and narrative becomes polyphonic or dialogic, forging together a credible history of post-Independence Indian society and nation. In fact the narrative technique becomes one of the greatest strengths of *India :A Million Mutinies Now*. It is a blend of travel writing, interviews, journalism, memoir, oral history and social history. In an interview to Mel Gusrow, Naipaul observes;

You've got to (put) some sort of distance between yourself and your experience- in order to use it well. I can write about a place only when I am away from it. The experience must be complete and I must be able to look back. (*New York Times*).

Naipaul's blends journalistic observations with great psychological insight. While individual stories crystallize socio-historic developments, the writer gives a glimpse of changes in collective consciousness. The individual's struggles to forge independent identity leading to clash between tradition and modernity is a key motif in *A Million Mutinies*. In fact, Naipaul seems to underline that a post-independence, modernizing India will be riven by opposite pulls and it's progress lay in this direction. In this great churning the poison came with the nectar. The phenomenon of women working outside brought economic benefits and freedom but also weakened old certainties. Naipaul observes that India of the "million mutinies" is neither traditional nor completely modern and this is beautifully as well as powerfully brought out in the chapter titled "Woman's Era" in which the magazine titled *Woman's Era* is first dismissed as poor, even shoddy journalism and upscale magazine titled *Eve's Weekly* given credit. But his view of *Woman's Era* is upgraded after a conversation with a woman editor who explains to him that *Woman's Era* captured the imagination of the Indian woman who was walking the tight rope between home and outside world. She was earning but continued to do the household chores as earlier. She was a pioneer and the *Woman's Era* addressed the simplest queries and issues she might have. She is traditional, yet her horizons have widened. She is half the world and makes Indian society and fashion and not the daily struggles of the Indian working woman straddling home and career.*

Finally Naipaul appreciates *Woman's Era* as a wonderful initiative, providing momentum to the great revolution beginning within the family – the prime agent of all lasting change. *A Million Mutinies*, like other works by Naipaul, has been accused of adopting Orientalist perspective – seeing India with a western gaze.

Another point of criticism is his alacrity in rejecting the Indian scene – the untidiness of surroundings, the shoddiness of goods, the sweeping aside of radicalism howsoever justified, and the most obvious brahmanical bias. Little space is given to non-Brahmin castes or their point of view, except when they have been popular or successful. Examples are the Shivsena official and the Dalit poet Namdeo Dhasal.

The book also suffers from sweeping generalizations like one man representing an entire and complex society; the changes in individual fortunes depicted as changes in group, community and society.

This critical surveys of *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, observes that the book is both a celebration and a critique of modern India. It presents the Indian nation and society in constant negotiation with its past where millions of ordinary people challenge inherited structures of caste, religion, gender and class. Naipaul's documentary style, psychological insight and nuanced portrayal of society make the book a landmark in travel writing and postcolonial literature. About *A Million Mutinies* Ian Burnima writes in *New York Review* "The extraordinary achievement of Naipaul's latest book is that we can see his characters; more than that, we can see how they see, and how they, in turn, are seen by the author.... Whatever his literary form Naipaul is a master". Natwar Singh has aptly summed up his achievement, "With this book he may well have written his own enduring monument, in prose at once stirring and intensely personal, distinguished both by style and critical acumen."

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