

A Critical Look At Ancient Indian Architecture In India: A Wounded Civilization

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Abstract

Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul is a Nobel-Award winning author of repute whose works lay a special emphasis on the problems faced by immigrants in foreign countries, who go there in the hope of a bright future and a happy life. The present paper revolves around the interest and love shown by Naipaul in the novel titled India: A Wounded Civilization, towards the ancient Indian architecture and monuments that suffered the scourge of foreign invasions. The author laments at the pathetic state of affairs of the buildings related to the great Vijayanagar empire and the fort of Boondi that belonged to the Rajput kings. Historical monuments and places of heritage are an integral part of a nation's self-esteem and therefore, special care combined with attention must be given to them. In this novel, Naipaul describes his visit to India that he made with the purpose of exploring the rich cultural heritage of India and to closely examine his Indian identity. India: A Wounded Civilization reflects the deep observations made by V.S. Naipaul about his ancestral roots and the culture of the country of his origin.

Keywords: Immigrants, Architecture, Monuments, Scourge, Heritage, Self-esteem

Introduction

"Monuments are the grappling irons that bind one generation to another", said the famous French essayist Joseph Joubert. It is quite important to highlight that historical buildings and places form an integral part of a country's prestige and act as a joining force between two generations. The architecture of India is known all over the world for its unmatched beauty and perfection and hence, draws a large number of tourists. Historical monuments display the hard work and determination of our forefathers which inspires the younger generation in a great deal. In the novel titled India: A Wounded Civilization, Naipaul talks about the famous Vijayanagar empire and the forts of Rajasthan that were owned by the Rajput kings. India was home to ace craftsmen and artisans who spent days and nights inventing novel methods of sculpting and painting. Naipaul throws light on the ancient city of Vijayanagar in the following

lines: "To the pilgrims Vijayanagar is its surviving temple. The surrounding destruction is like proof of the virtue of old magic; just as the fantasy of past splendor is accommodated within an acceptance of present squalor. That once glorious avenue-not a national monument, still permitted to live-is a slum. Its surface, where unpaved is a green-black slurry of mud and excrement, through which the sandaled pilgrims unheedingly pad to the food stalls and squatter with their starved animals in the ruins, the broken stone facades patched up with mud and rocks, the doorways stripped of the sculptures which existed until recently. Life goes on, the past continues. After conquest and destruction, the past simply reasserts itself" (5) [6].

Naipaul further puts forth his views on the pathetic state of affairs of the Vijayanagar empire in the following lines: "If Vijayanagar

is now only its name and as a kingdom, is so little remembered (there are university students in Bangalore, two hundred miles away, who haven't even heard of it), it isn't only because it was so completely wiped out, but also because it contributed so little; it was itself a reassertion of the past" (5) [6]. Naipaul is very straightforward in expressing his views on incidents that occurred in the past and has the unique quality of presenting a realistic portrait of ancient kingdoms.

The author further elaborates the foundation of the Vijayanagar empire in the following lines: "The kingdom of Vijayanagar was founded in 1336 by a local Hindu prince who, after defeat by the Moslems, had been taken to Delhi, converted to Islam, and then sent back to South as a representative of the Moslem power. There in the South, far from Delhi, the converted prince had re-established his independence and, unusually, in defiance of Hindu caste rules, had declared himself a Hindu again, a representative on earth of the local Hindu god. In this unlikely way the great Hindu kingdom of the South was founded" (6) [6]. Eminent author S.R. Ramanujan, in the book titled *The Never to be Forgotten Empire*, highlights the significance of the great Vijayanagar empire in the following words: "Physical ruins are monuments which have their own value and which no doubt testify silently but eloquently to the grandeur of the hands which raised them into existence" (1-4) [11].

Naipaul also asserts that the Vijayanagar kingdom aimed at protecting the values and traditions of Hindu religion and in the following lines, expresses his thoughts: "It lasted two hundred years, but during that time it never ceased to be embattled. It was committed from the start to the preservation of a Hinduism that had already been violated, and culturally and artistically it preserved and repeated; it hardly innovated. Its bronze sculptures are like those of five hundred years before; its architecture, even at the time, and certainly to the surrounding Moslems, must have seemed heavy and archaic. And its ruins today, in that

unfriendly landscape of rock and boulders of strange shapes, look older than they are, like they are, like the ruins of a long-superseded civilization" (6) [6]. The rulers of Vijayanagar left no stone unturned in safeguarding the sacred values of Hindu Dharma from foreign invasions and therefore, stood apart from the Northern Hindu rulers who were unable to protect their kingdoms from foreign attacks [12].

Naipaul also sheds some light on the lost glory of Rajput culture when he talks about the beauty of old forts such as that of Bundi. The following lines from the book contain his thoughts on the old wars and castles of the Rajput kings: "Old wars, bravely fought; but little more had been at stake other than the honor and local glory of one particular prince. The fortifications were now useless, the palace was empty. One dark dusty room had old photographs and remnants of bric-a-brac. The small formal garden in the courtyard was in decay; and the mechanical, decorative nineteenth-century Bundi murals around the courtyard had faded into blues and yellows and greens. In the inner rooms, hidden from the sun, the brighter colors survived, and some panels were exquisite. But it all awaited ruin. The monsoon damp was rotting away plaster; water dipped through green-black cracks in underground arches; and the sharp smell of bat dung was everywhere. All vitality had been sucked up into that place on the hillside below the palace; it showed in the rundown town just sixty miles away, less amenable to the commissioner's ideas, and more full of complaints. They complained because they felt it was expected of them. Their mock aggressiveness and mock desperation held little of real despair or rebellion. It was a ritual show of deference to authority, a demonstration of their complete dependence on authority. The commissioner smiled and listened and heard them all; and their passion faded" (21-22) [6]. The meticulously painted walls of Boondi are yet another feather in the cap of Rajasthani architecture which attract tourists from around the world [8]. The brave

king and writer Maharaja Jaswant I of Jodhpur played a crucial role in encouraging the masses to protect the priceless cultural heritage of Rajasthan. He eulogized the great Rajasthani culture and architecture through his immortal writings [10].

The author throws light on the lost glory of Rajput kings in the following lines: “All the chivalry of Rajasthan had been reduced here to nothing. The palace was empty; the petty wars of princes had been absorbed into legend and could no longer be dated. All that remained was what the visitor could see: small, poor fields, ragged men, huts, monsoon mud. But in that very abjectness lay security. Where the world had shrunk, and ideas of human possibility had become extinct, the world could be seen complete. Men had retreated to their last, impregnable defences: their knowledge of who they were, their caste, their karma, their unshakable place in the scheme of things; and this knowledge was like their knowledge of the seasons. Rituals marked the passage of each day, rituals marked every stage of a man’s life. Life itself had been turned to ritual; and everything beyond this complete and sanctified world-where fulfilment came so easily to a man or to a woman-was vain and phantasmal” (22) [6].

The destruction and desecration of historical monuments has also been discussed by noted historian Dr. Purushottam Nagesh Oak, who in his important work titled *Bharat mein Muslim Sultan*, quite vividly describes how Indian temples were annihilated by invaders such as Mohammad Bin Qasim and the plundering of the Somnath temple, a priceless masterpiece of ancient architecture [4]. The precious Kohinoor diamond from Golconda mines was forcibly taken away by the Sultan of Delhi Alauddin Khalji and was later acquired by the Britishers. V.S. Naipaul in his famous book titled *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted Peoples* [7] puts forth his thoughts on how foreign invasions led to the decline of Hindu faith and rituals. Many incidents related to the destruction of Indian temples and places

of historical importance have either been totally forgotten or deliberately neglected by certain historians [9].

Postcolonialism is a literary theory that closely examines the themes revolving around power, economics, politics, religion and culture. The writers belonging to postcolonialism focus on nationhood and patriotism. The prefix “post” in “postcolonial” is an issue of disagreement among important scholars and historians. Despite this contention, a large section of scholars accept that the word “postcolonial” refers to an era that began after the end of colonization. Some important works related to Postcolonial theory are Edward Said’s book titled *Orientalism* (1978) [5], *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) [1] by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, Homi K. Bhabha’s *Nation and Narration* (1990) [3] and *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* (1998) [2] by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. Postcolonialism concentrates on thorough analysis of History, literature and values of the Third World countries in Africa, Asia, South America and the Caribbean islands. The constant conflict between cultures and intersection of cultures which gives birth to multiculturalism is a subject that holds great importance for Postcolonial critics. These critics analyze the metaphysical, ethical and political concerns about cultural identity, gender, nationality, race, ethnicity, subjectivity, language and power.

India: A Wounded Civilization is an important novel authored by the Nobel Laureate V.S. Naipaul. The author quite vividly describes how India was made to suffer cultural destruction during the British rule and the dilapidated condition of ancient Indian monuments during the post independent period. In this work, readers come across the fact that even after three decades of independence, India could not free herself from the colonial mindset and way of living. The author is deeply pained while he says that India has lost her original identity because of foreign rule. India has forgotten the sense of pride that she used to

enjoy prior to becoming slave to foreign powers. The author puts forth the view in the novel that the technology that India has borrowed from the West is not geo-based and that a large section of the Indian masses may not like this technology. The very intellect of India is damaged because of brain-drain. Naipaul presents this view of his in the following lines: "India is old, and India continues. But all the disciplines and skills that India now seeks to exercise are borrowed. Even the ideas Indians have of achievements of their civilization are essentially the ideas given to them by the European scholars in the nineteenth century. Its past was too much with it, was still being lived out in the ritual, the laws, the magic-the complex instinctive life that muffles response and buries even the idea of inquiry. Indian painting now has its scholars in India, but the approach to painting, even among educated people, is still generally, iconographic, the recognition of deities and themes. A recently dead tradition, an unchanging belief: the creative loss passes unnoticed. India blindly swallows its past. To understand that past, it has had to borrow alien academic disciplines; and, as with the technology, their foreign origin shows. Much historical research has been done; but European methods of historical inquiry, arising out of one kind of civilization, with its own developing ideas of the human condition, cannot be applied to Indian civilization; they miss too much. Political or dynastic events, economic life, cultural trends: the European approach elucidates little, has the effect of an unsuccessful attempt to equate India with Europe, and makes non-sense of the stops and starts of Indian civilization, the brief flowerings, the long periods of sterility, men forever claimed by the instinctive life, continuity turning into barbarism" (116-117) [6]. This shows the impact of colonialism on Indian masses and the slave mentality which according to the author, is the chief reason behind India's poverty, backwardness and illiteracy.

According to Naipaul, one of the causes that led to the downfall of ancient Indian culture was the surrendering nature of some Indian kings. The Rajpoot kings lost a large amount of power and wealth due to infighting and vested interests. Again, this is remotely connected to the rise of colonial powers. Following the decline of Hindu Rajpoot kings, the reins of administration went into the hands of Muslim rulers and then the Mughal era began. But the later Mughals were not as efficient as their predecessors and as a result of their ineptness, the British took control of India. Naipaul says that two hundred years of British rule had crippled the Indians from inside and as a result of that, they were not able to come out of slave mentality. Naipaul further says that the Britishers are not the only ones who did harm to the Indian intellect, but also the Indians themselves are also responsible for their intellectual decay. They have not been able to develop their thinking in an ideal manner and instead of nurturing an ideology of regeneration, Indians are indulged in blind mimicry of the West. Naipaul attributes setbacks such as sterility, stagnation and unproductivity to Hinduism, which are preventing Indians from progressing scientifically and intellectually. The author argues that the Hindu society that Gandhi envisaged during the freedom struggle had begun to perish because of the rebirth and growth that had arrived along with independence.

According to the author, another important reason behind India's confusion was the colonial inferiority that grew during the British period, which made them directionless and caused a severe dent in the Indian civilization. India suffered a lot because of the unjust and biased policies of the English colonizers who ruthlessly exploited the country in all forms. Although India gained independence, the hangover of the British regime held a tight grip on the minds of Indians. The Britishers imposed the use of English language for furthering their political and economic interests which

adversely impacted the Indian languages. British missionaries began converting the uneducated strata of Indians to Christianity and therefore, Hinduism had to face serious challenges. Most of the wealthy Indian families started sending their children to England and other European countries for higher education which laid the foundation of brain drain in India. Regarding the chaos and confusion that hindered independent India's path of progress, Naipaul presents the following thoughts: "With independence and growth, chaos and a loss of faith, India was awakening to its distress and the cruelties that had always lain below its apparent stability, its capacity simply for going on. Not everyone now was content simply to have his being, the old equilibrium had gone, and at the moment all was chaos. But out of this chaos, out of the crumbling of the old Hindu system, and the spirit of rejection, India was learning new ways of seeing and feeling" (38) [6].

India: A Wounded Civilization showcases the author's quest for self-identity and an undying desire for finding his roots in his country of birth. The novel throws light on the ill-effects of colonialism and slave-mentality. Naipaul laments at the intellectual loss of the people of his country and at the same time, also displays his love and concern for the poor condition of ancient Indian monuments. Naipaul was greatly taken aback on finding that Bihar, which used to be the land that witnessed the great rule of the Mauryans and the golden rule of the Guptas, besides being the birthplace of Gautam Buddha, has now become a land that is notorious for ransom, murder, dacoity and extortion. Social evils such as child-labour, illiteracy and school-dropouts plague the state of Bihar. He also severely objects to the lackadaisical attitude of the government in tackling these vices. The great Nalanda University, which used to be the hub of education in the world, suffered severely at the hands of foreign invaders and lost its precious glory. Naipaul asserts that instead of making Bihar the educational and cultural laboratory of the country, politicians made it a

'political laboratory'. It is a crucial point that needs to be taken into account that in the book, the real cause behind Naipaul's tirade at the state of affairs in India is his love for India, not hatred.

Conclusion

India: A Wounded Civilization is a novel that vividly portrays V.S. Naipaul's close observation and his sympathy towards the ancient Indian architecture. India lost her precious historical structures and monuments because of foreign invasions that occurred due to the infighting of Indian kings. The Indian civilization underwent a long period of slavery of a thousand years and as a result of which, it suffered cultural decay, religious conversion, intellectual degradation and destruction of places of worship. The author underlines mimicry of Western culture as a crucial cause for India's backwardness as well as a characteristic of slave-mentality. The pathetic state of education and administration is something that inflicts deep injuries on Naipaul. He makes a visit to India in order to establish a strong connection with his roots. Famous structures from the ancient Vijayanagar empire fascinate him the most. Thus, the novel renders a blend of various shades, ranging from ancient Indian architecture to problems such as pathetic condition of education and the brain-drain that consequently arises out of that.

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