

INTERVIEW

Ten days with Naipaul: Encounters of a different kind

Parsa Venkateshwar Rao Jr recalls the time he spent with the literary genius in Hyderabad, and watched at close quarters the writer at work



V.S. Naipaul: A memorable meeting

SIR Vidiadhar Naipaul was as familiar as all writers are to their readers. You seem to know them rather closely through their books. It is something which people experience all the time with all celebrities - writers, artists, film stars and yes, even, political leaders.

So when Naipaul came to the *tehelka* office last November for the first meeting of the Board of Directors of the company, along with Amitabh Bachchan and Khushwant Singh, I was just curious to talk to him. I asked Tarun Tejpal to arrange a meeting for him with the editorial staff. I did not expect it to happen. But it did. There was an informal meeting with the editors in Tarun's room, with lunch thrown in. All that Naipaul ate was the south Indian lemon rice and *idli*, watched over by his wife Nadira.

And he was listening to all that we had to say. And some of us readily got into an argument and a discussion with him. He was patient with our forwardness, and tried to explain his viewpoint. And like in all lunch-time discussions, it was about many things, including a critique of modernism and ancient values.

For those of us who had read his *India: A Million Mutinies*, we expected that somewhere he would take a soft line about ancient values because it was in that book that he, for the first time, adopted a sympathetic approach towards the myriad forms of Hinduism he saw all around him, and especially in his portrait of the Brahmin priest in metropolitan Mumbai.

But he showed a surprisingly critical attitude towards the ancient value system. He said, and of course there was a bit of stoicism in his tone, that the ancient world is dead, and that it cannot be revived. He recalled that long after the classical period of the Graeco-Roman world had passed its zenith, many of the people living in the twilight of that period began to write and live in the ancient manner. Naipaul pointed out that "imitation of ancient mode" is fake, not authentic. And some ancient names - which were literally Greek and Latin to many of us - came up. Among them were Aristotle, Plutarch, Tacitus.

At the end of an hour, he shook hands with all us, and said he enjoyed the conversation, which thrilled all of us.

We knew that he was going to Hyderabad. I told Tarun that I could give names and telephone numbers of some people there who could be of help to him. A day later, Geetan, wife of Tarun and one of the editors at *tehelka.com*, suggested that it would be better if I could accompany Naipaul to Hyderabad.

It seemed an interesting prospect, although I was told that all that I had to do was to help him when he wanted, and that for rest of the time I could be on my own. It seemed a sensible arrangement because it seemed that he would be as friendly as he was at the lunch because it was known that he was going to Hyderabad to meet people for a book he was working on.

well-being, economic well-being. And he was always looking for those details.

He was quite unhappy one evening when Srinivas Reddy took him to a rich friend's house for an evening drink. The next day he told me that he would have liked to visit Srinivas Reddy's own small house rather than the palatial house of his friends. There was something very genuine in his admiration for people who were themselves.

On our journeys, we would discuss history. I told him about the principles of Islam, the life of Prophet Muhammad, and some of the basic principles of tolerance that emerge from the Prophet's life. He would listen to me with patience, and talk about the destruction wrought by the Muslim invaders.

One evening, as we were sitting in the coffee bar, he wanted to know whether it was possible to get some experts to write about people like Ananda Coomaraswamy, the Sri Lankan-born art historian, critic and philosopher.

He gave me a few tips about writing that evening. He said that I should write simple sentences, avoid using big words and adjectives, and that I should always prefer concrete images for descriptions, and avoid abstract nouns. He asked me to practise writing in simple English every day for six months, and that at the end of it I could become a writer. When I told Tarun about this on my return, he said "You have been instructed by a great writer of the language. You are fortunate."

He wanted to know what were the books to be read about Tantra. I mentioned that there was an English High Court judge in Calcutta called Sir John Woodroffe, who had written extensively and authoritatively on the subject, and that his books were published by Natesan and Company of Chennai (Madras). He remembered that there was much tantric ritual at home during his childhood.

The mention of the publisher's name struck a bell, and he recalled that his father used to order books from Natesan and Company, and that he saw those books in his house when he was growing up. He said that his father was always reading books from India, which included those of the philosopher, S Radhakrishnan. And he wondered whether the publishing house still existed in Chennai.

On the last day of our stay in Hyderabad, I offered him a south Indian vegetarian meal. He liked the *oothappams*, and said that there was a lot of subtlety in the cuisine. And I told him what I felt I had to. I told him that his anti-Islamic stance was quite disturbing, and that he should look at the other aspects of Islamic history as well. He heard me and then said that while what I knew about Islam was from the books, he had travelled through Muslim countries, and that he wrote what he saw.

After we returned to Delhi, we did not interact again. He left for England the next day.

It turned out that he was fond of those who did not belong to the same social class as he did - especially people who did not share his British sense of propriety, or whose command of English was minimal. He became a warm friend of Srinivas Reddy, the reporter from *The Hindu* in Hyderabad, who took Naipaul to some of the villages in Karimnagar.

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