

## NAIPAUL ISLAM INDIA AND THE BJP

### Naipaul's Rage Against Islam: A Reassessment

KHADEMUL ISLAM

In January of this year I was in Delhi and decided to go see Jama Masjid. It was a most disagreeable experience. The long path leading to the masjid proper is filthy, reeking of urine and excreta, with garbage floating in the stagnant shallow waterway. Not even the humblest of mosques in Bangladesh presents its visitors with that kind of a sight. The mosque structure itself, the gate, that magnificent courtyard, look stained and neglected. The dome of the Sikh temple in the distance, on the other hand, sparkled. I learnt that part of the reason is its location in old Delhi, with its press of humanity and peeling walls. Another is Imam Bukhari, who now apparently is senile and irresponsible. And the third reason is the BJP's Hindu allies (the Hindu Vishwa Parishad, the RSS, the Shiv Sena), who view Muslim monuments in India, especially mosques, with unreserved hostility and do not encourage state expenditure on their upkeep.

A few days later I went to see Fatehpur Sikri, Akbar's imperial court from 1571-85. Expanses of brilliant light and air gorgeously framed by red sandstone and roofed with a turquoise sky. Noticing more excavations going on outside the complex's boundary wall I drifted over there to watch. The contractor in charge of the labourers digging the earth pointed out the ancient hukimkhan, the extended kitchen, the tiers of terraces and connecting passageways now emerging. He was from Gujarat, with grey-brown eyes. Suddenly he said, 'You know, it is a lie that Akbar built all this. He may have built that mosque,' here he flipped a hand in the direction of Buland Darwaza, 'but the rest was built by the local thakurs.'

Perhaps because I spoke Urdu without a Bengali accent, he had taken me for an Indian..

'What do you mean?'

'Akbar didn't build this,' he insisted, this time pointing in the direction of Jodh Bai's palace, 'the thakurs did. We have been finding proof they lived over there.' He pointed at a spot about a quarter mile off, at what looked like small walls beyond a dirt road, speckled with green

bushes. Though he had spoken in Hindi he had used the English word 'proof.'

'But the history books say it was Akbar,' I protested.

'English language history,' he spat out. 'Do you know that history books in Indian languages tell a very different story? All Akbar did was fight and destroy.'

'But the ruins of Akbar's Ibadat Khana is inside. He wanted the people to follow his Din-I-Ilahi.'

During this little exchange he had been looking down at the excavation pit, at the toy town of Fatehpur Sikri cradled in the sunlit valley below. Now something in my voice made him turn and look into my face. We stared at each other for a few moments, facing off, and I could see those grey-brown eyes re-assessing me.

'Din-I-Ilahi,' he finally said, softly, sarcastically.

I walked away. What the hell was this, I thought. Who was this guy spinning this recidivist, communalized history at the Fatehpur Sikri complex? Surely he didn't mean it. Surely all this magnificence was as much his as it was mine! But it was not, because Fatehpur Sikri no longer was Indian glory to him; it was instead a hateful symbol of Islamic-Mughal glory, proof of Hindu servitude, something against which plots had to be hatched. To this man, nothing could be pan-Indian anymore, it had to be either Muslim or Hindu. And if it was 'Muslim,' it had to be erased or changed.

Suddenly the January air felt far more chill. It was the word 'proof' that had done it, a poisonous, loaded word in the context of historical digs in India. I was reminded of the Indian historian Irfan Habib's words to The Indian Express:

'Once the destruction of the Babri Masjid had taken place, it began to be justified by the Sangh Parivar on various grounds, including that they possessed 'evidence'. Before one studies this 'evidence', it is important to note that the securing of such evidence by the act of destruction was very much in the mind of the BJP and Sangh Parivar, much before the final act of vandalism. There was, till then, no acceptable proof that the Babri

Masjid had been built at the site of a Hindu temple. They then turned to archeology and to Professor B.B. Lal, who had dug near the Babri Masjid. In 1990, in an article in the RSS mouthpiece *Manthan*, Lal said some 'pillar bases' he had found had supported pillars of the extension of the original temple that the Babri Masjid had been built on. It was a sheer piece of speculation.'

Welcome to BJP's 'shining India,' I thought, to the India of Advani's Rath Yatra.

Another shock awaited me when I came back to Dhaka. A few short weeks later, V.S. Naipaul along with his wife Nadira--well, I guess I should say 'Lady Nadira' since he's 'Sir Vidya'--invited by the BJP's cultural cell, went to their offices and declared himself "happy" at having been "appropriated" by the party. Naipaul has long been one of the most savage of critics of Islam, of Islamic fundamentalism (he has always lumped the two together, perhaps intentionally, with the consequent result that the failure of intellect in the latter is pinned on the former), of Islam's role in India, but I had always given him latitude for two reasons. One was the right of free speech, a right that cannot but remain inviolable. And the other was his prose, those lovely, sometimes exquisite, lines of English prose that he wrote. Especially the unsurpassable fiction of his earlier years, books such as *Miguel Street, A House for Mr. Biswas, Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion*. Naipaul is a Nobel Prize winner, a heavyweight figure, a writer who is read widely and seriously, somebody whose books are a fixture on Western college campuses, somebody I myself had read avidly, and here he was lending his name, his authority and his prestige to some of the most reactionary and rabid elements of the Indian polity. It felt like a betrayal of sorts now, his endorsement not just the BJP but its extreme, Hindu chauvinist right wing.

Something beyond the pale.

But perhaps I should not have been taken by surprise. Many writers and critics had been warning me about Naipaul, and perhaps it was

only my fault that I had not listened to them. Edward Said wrote that by the 1980s, European colonial history began to be re-appraised, that it began to be thought that, given the appalling economic and political conditions after independence in the ex-colonies, it had not been all that bad. And a figure crucial to this re-assessment, which subsequently resulted in Western intellectuals and academics being apologists for a resurgent American neo-imperialism, was none other than our very own Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul. "In the 1960s" Said noted, "V.S. Naipaul began, disquietingly, to systematise the revisionist view of empire. A disciple and wilful misreader of Conrad, he gave Third Worldism, as it came to be known in France and elsewhere, a bad name." And within this half-civilized Third World universe, the central malignant cancer, according to Naipaul, was Islam. Or in Said's words, "In his opinion it was principally Islam that plumb the truly ghastly depths to which the 'liberated' peoples of Africa and Asia would sink."

Naipaul travelled to the Islamic countries, to countries with substantial Muslim populations, talked with people, copiously recorded their views, then fashioned his inimitable prose around them. And out of it emerged a gruesome picture of Islamic societies where only barbarity, debauchery and an absence of intellect (always an important point with Naipaul, fanaticism linked to the absence of the thinking mind) reigned. Just as books began to reach a global audience came the fatwa against Salman Rushdie, and for the first time Europeans actually saw people previously hidden in the shadows, migrants from Islamic countries, pour out on to their streets, their nice, clean, civilized streets, and burn books and threaten translators and editors. Soon there was no going back. Islam became raging mobs, Kalashnikovs, book burnings, fatwas, the Taliban, women not allowed to go to school, women mutilated, women not allowed to write, medieval dogma, mullahs, robot-like chanting of 'Allah Allah.' Never the truth, which is

nihilism," i.e. rage, that favourite Naipaulian term for Islam. Since Islam practiced the "most uncompromising kind of imperialism" by stripping people of their past, their sacred places and their native attachments, it was readily seen as a conquering force "looting the temples of Hindustan and imposing the faith on the infidel." What Naipaul wrote years ago gels perfectly with the party line of the Hindu rightwing revisionists, with its saffron-robed screams in the humid night. It is a distortion of history to claim that religion alone was responsible for the new political order in India a thousand years back, rather than economic greed and quest for political hegemony. By the same logic one would then have to say that British rule in India was a result of the imperialist nature of Christianity. And in contrast to Islam the destroyer in Naipaul's books, British colonialism is essentially benign. Why? Because "the British period...was a time of Hindu regeneration. The Hindus, especially in Bengal, welcomed the New Learning of Europe and the institutions the British brought." To which one can only say that there were also many Bengali Hindu anticolonial fighters who would

Fatehpur Sikri



Fatehpur Sikri

have gladly knocked off Naipaul's head for that particular statement!

Reviewing the book in 1998 Ian Buruma wrote that while "there was truth to these views" -- for example, Muslims faking Arab bloodlines or looking to Arabia as their spiritual homeland-- yet the book was undeniably coloured by "a Hindu rage" and by Naipaul's own "set of preoccupations." And what were those preoccupations? Those engendered by being "a Hindu in Trinidad" for whom "the sacred soil, the spiritual center, the ancestral land lies elsewhere." That "elsewhere" (which Naipaul movingly wrote were "our sacred world--the sanctities that had been handed down to us as children by our families, the sacred places of our childhood, sacred because we had seen them as children and had filled them with wonder," where "had been aboriginal people once who had been killed or made to die away") we know today to be a fantasy of some lost, organic, holistic Hindu world. A fantasy which is destructive in today's milieu and context, since it means the erasure and removal of everything in India which is non-Hindu.

Naipaul's views on Islamic societies used to be defended as a relevant critique of the failure of democracy in those countries, as ultimately not so much a rage against fundamentalist Islam as much as against all fundamentalism, of the way zealous stopped people from seeing things clearly. Not any more. That view should go the way of dinosaurs. With Naipaul clearly aligning himself with zealots and fundamentalists of a not very different stripe, he himself has ripped apart that line of defence. Christopher Hitchens wrote last year in *The Atlantic* that Naipaul has "spoken warmly of the emergence of a thoroughgoing sectarian and ancestral politics, which essentially regards the Muslim citizens of India as interlopers," that he has "been insufficiently criticized in the West for his role as an apologist for the Hindu nationalist movement in India." That now, "I frankly do not trust Naipaul, even as an eyewitness."

It is a judgement that I think ultimately will prevail.

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### Trapped in the ruins

WILLIAM DALRYMPLE

(The following is an excerpt from an article that appeared in the March 20, 2004 issue of The Guardian.)

HERE was some surprise last month (February 2004) when Sir Vidya and Lady Naipaul turned up at the office of India's ruling Hindu nationalist party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and gave what many in the Indian press took to be a pre-election endorsement not just of the party but of the entire far right-wing Hindu revivalist programme. India was indeed surging forward under the BJP; the Nobel Laureate was quoted as saying, and yes, he was quite happy being "appropriated" by the party.

More striking still was the quote attributed to Naipaul about the destruction of the Babri Masjid, Babur's mosque, in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, a decade ago: "Ayodhya is a sort of passion," he said. "Any passion is to be encouraged. Passion leads to creativity." For a man whose work contains many eloquent warnings of the dangers of misplaced political passions - the Islamic Revolution in Iran to take just one example - this might appear to be a surprising volte face, especially when one considers the horrific anti-Muslim pogroms that followed Ayodhya, when BJP mobs went on the rampage across India and Muslims were hunted down by armed thugs, burned alive in their homes, scalped by acid bombs or knifed in the streets. By the time the army was brought in, at least 1,400 people had been slaughtered in Bombay alone.

Yet Naipaul's earlier statements, especially his remarks that the first Mughal emperor Babur's invasion of India "left a deep wound", are consistent with ideas Naipaul has been airing for many years now. In 1998, for example, he told *The Hindu* newspaper: "I think when you see so many Hindu temples of the 10th century or earlier disfigured, defaced, you realise that something terrible happened. I feel that the civilisation of that closed world was mortally wounded by those invasions... The Old World is destroyed. That has to be understood. Ancient Hindu India was destroyed." Such attitudes form a consistent line of thought in Naipaul's writing from *An Area of Darkness* in 1964 through to the present.

Few would dispute Naipaul's status as probably the greatest living writer of Indian origin; indeed some would go further and argue that he is the greatest living writer of English prose. For good reason his views are taken very seriously. He is a writer whose fiction and non-fiction written over half a century forms a body of work of great brilliance, something the Nobel committee recognised in 2001 when it awarded him literature's highest honour, and singled out his analysis of the Islamic world in his prize citation.

Naipaul's credentials as a historian are, however, less secure.

There is a celebrated opening sequence to Naipaul's masterpiece, India: A Wounded Civilization. It is 1975 - a full quarter century before he won the Nobel - and Naipaul is surveying the shattered ruins of the great medieval Hindu capital of Vijayanagar, the City of Victory.

Naipaul leads the reader through the remains of the once mighty city, its 24 miles of walls winding through the "brown plateau of rock and gigantic boulders". These days, he explains, this part of south India is just a "peasant wilderness", but look carefully and you can see scattered everywhere the crumbling wreck age of former greatness:



Naipaul and wife Nadira at a Delhi press conference

"Palaces and stables, a royal bath... the leaning granite pillars of what must have been a bridge across the river." Over the bridge, there is more: "A long and very wide avenue, with a great statue of the bull of Shiva at one end, and at the other end a miracle: a temple that for some reason was spared destruction, and is still used for worship."

Naipaul goes on to lament the fall of this "great centre of Hindu civilisation," "then one of the greatest [cities] in the world". It was pillaged in 1565 "by an alliance of Muslim principalities - and the work of destruction took five months; some people say a year." It fell, according to Naipaul, because already the Hindu world it embodied had become backward looking and stagnant: it had failed to develop, and in particular had failed to develop the military means to challenge the aggressive Muslim sultanates that surrounded it. Instead, Vijayanagar was "committed from the start to the preservation of a Hinduism that had already been violated, and culturally and artistically it [only] preserved and repeated; it hardly innovated... The Hinduism of Vijayanagar proclaimed had already reached a dead end."

For Naipaul, the fall of Vijayanagar is a paradigmatic wound on the psyche of India, a long series of failures that he believes still bruises the country's self-confidence. The wound was created by a fatal combination of Islamic aggression and Hindu weakness - the tendency to "retreat", to withdraw in the face of defeat.

Naipaul first developed the theme in *An Area of Darkness*. The great Hindu ruins of the south, he writes there, represent "the continuity and flow of Hindu India, ever shrinking". But the ruins of the north - the monuments of the Great Mughals - only "speak of waste and failure". Even the Taj and the magnificent garden tombs of the Mughals speak only of "personal plunder, and a country with an infinite capacity for being plundered". In a recent interview, Naipaul maintained that "the Taj is so wasteful, so decadent and in the end so

cruel that it is painful to be there for very long. This is an extravagance that speaks of the blood of the people."

Naipaul's entirely negative understanding of India's Islamic history has its roots firmly in the mainstream imperial historiography of Victorian Britain.

The Muslim invasions of India tended to be seen by historians of the Raj as a long, brutal sequence of pillage, in stark contrast - so 19th-century British historians liked to believe - to the law and order selflessly brought by their own "civilising mission". In this context, the fall of Vijayanagar was written up in elegiac terms by Robert Sewell, whose 1900 book *Vijayanagar: A Forgotten Empire*, first characterized the kingdom as "a Hindu bulwark against Muhammadan conquests", a single brave but doomed attempt at resistance to Islamic aggression. This idea was eagerly elaborated by Hindu nationalists, who wrote of Vijayanagar as a Hindu state dedicated to the preservation of the traditional, peaceful and "pure" Hindu culture of southern India.

It is a simple and seductive vision, and one that at first sight looks plausible. The problem is that such ideas rest on a set of mistaken and Islamophobic assumptions that recent scholarship has done much to undermine.

A brilliant essay published in 1996 by the respected American Sanskrit scholar, Philip B. Wagoner, was an important landmark in this process. Entitled "A Sultan Among Hindu Kings" - a reference to the title by which the kings of Vijayanagar referred to themselves - pointed out the degree to which the elite culture of Vijayanagar was heavily Islamicised by the 16th century, its civilisation "deeply transformed through nearly two centuries of intense and creative interaction with the Islamic world". By this period, for example, the Hindu kings of Vijayanagar appeared in public audience, not bare-chested, as had been the tradition in Hindu India, but dressed in quasi-Islamic court costume - the Islamic inspired kabayi, a long-sleeved tunic derived from the Arabic qaba, symbolic, according to Wagoner, of "their participation in the more universal culture of Islam". Far from being the stagnant, backward-looking bastion of Hindu resistance imagined by Naipaul, Vijayanagar had in fact developed in all sorts of unexpected ways, adapting many of the administrative, tax collecting and military methods of the Muslim sultanates that surrounded it - notably stirrups, horse-shoes, horse armour and a new type of saddle, all of which allowed Vijayanagar to put into the field an army of horse archers who could hold at bay the Delhi Sultanate, then the most powerful force in India.

A comprehensive survey of Vijayanagar's monuments and archaeology by George Michell over the past 20 years has come to the same conclusion as Wagoner. The survey has emphasised the degree to which the buildings of 16th-century Vijayanagar were inspired by the architecture of the nearby Muslim sultanates, mixing the traditional trabeate architecture of the Hindu south with the arch and dome of the Islamicate north. Indeed some of the most famous buildings at Vijayanagar, such as the gorgeous 15th-century Lotus Mahal, are almost entirely Islamic in style. Moreover, this fruitful interaction between Hindu- and Muslim-ruled states was very much a two-way process. Just as Hindu Vijayanagar was absorbing Islamic influences, so a similar process of hybridity was transforming the

nominally Islamic Sultanate of Bijapur. This was a city dominated by an atmosphere of heterodox inquiry, whose libraries swelled with esoteric texts produced on the philosophical frontier between Islam and Hinduism. One Bijapur production of the period, for example, was the Bangab Nama, or the Book of the Pot Smoker: written by Mahmud Bahri - a sort of medieval Indian Allen Ginsberg - it is a long panegyric to the joys of cannabis.

"Smoke your pot and be happy - Be a dervish and put your heart at peace. Lose your life imbibing this exhilaration."

In the course of this book, Bahri writes: "God's knowledge has no limit... and there is not just one path to him. Anyone from any community can find him." This certainly seems to have been the view of Bijapur's ruler, Ibrahim Adil Shah II. Early in his reign Ibrahim gave up wearing jewels and adopted instead the rudraksha rosary of the sadhu. In his songs he used highly Sanskritised language to shower equal praise upon Sarasvati, the Hindu goddess of learning, the Prophet Muhammad, and the Sufi saint Gesudaraz.

Perhaps the most surprising passage occurs in the 56th song where the Sultan more or less describes himself as a Hindu god: "He is robed in saffron dress, his teeth are black, the nails are red... and he loves all. Ibrahim, whose father is Ganesh, whose mother is Sarasvati, has a rosary of crystal round his neck... and an elephant as his vehicle." According to the art historian Mark Zebrowski: "It is hard to label Ibrahim either a Muslim or a Hindu; rather he had an aesthetic admiration for the beauty of both cultures." The same spirit also animates Bijapur art, whose nominally Islamic miniature portraits show "girls as voluptuous as the nudes of south Indian sculpture".

This creative coexistence finally fell victim, not to a concerted communal campaign by Muslim states intent on eradicating Hinduism, but to the shifting alliances of Deccani diplomacy. In 1558, only seven years before the Deccani sultanates turned on Vijayanagar, the empire had been a prominent part of an alliance of mainly Muslim armies that had sacked the Sultanate of Ahmadnagar. That year, Vijayanagar's armies stabled their horses in the mosques of the plundered city. It was only in 1562, when Rama Raya plundered and seized not just districts belonging to Ahmadnagar and its ally Golconda, but also those belonging to his own ally Bijapur, that the different sultanates finally united against their unruly neighbour.

The fall of Vijayanagar is a subject Naipaul keeps returning to: in an interview shortly after being awarded the Nobel Prize in 2001, he talked about how the destruction of the city meant an end to its traditions: "When Vijayanagar was laid low, all the creative talent would also have been destroyed. The current has been broken."

Yet there is considerable documentary and artistic evidence that the very opposite was true...

William Dalrymple's White Mughals recently won the Wolfson Prize for History