

Area of Enigma: V.S. Naipaul and the East Indian Revival in Trinidad

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“It is hard to think of a writer more fundamentally exilic, carrying so many clashing fading worlds inside him.”

—Pankaj Mishra, xv

“We cannot understand all the traits we have inherited. Sometimes we can be strangers to ourselves.”

—V.S. Naipaul, *A Way in the World* 11

On March 29, 1949, V.S. Naipaul was front-page news in the *Trinidad Guardian*. “Special ‘Schol’ Urged for QRC Student,” the headline stated, and beneath was a photo of a quietly smiling teenage Naipaul, looking studious and benign in a pair of large black-rimmed glasses (“Special”). Naipaul, the article reports, had earned marks of distinction in Spanish and French on the Cambridge Higher School Certificate Examination, but was not eligible for a Colonial Scholarship to study in England owing to a recently-introduced technicality. Through no fault of his own he had not completed all of the requisite course work to qualify for competition. In response the Trinidadian Education Board unanimously voted that an additional scholarship be created specially for him. This scholarship allowed Naipaul to take a degree in English from Oxford in 1954, and embark on his illustrious career as a writer of fiction and travel journalism.

Curiously, nowhere in Naipaul’s extensive autobiographical ruminations are readers given reason to suspect that his leaving Trinidad was such a touch-and-go affair. On the contrary, although competition for Colonial Scholarships was fierce, Naipaul treats the matter of his winning one almost as a manifest destiny. “When I was in the fourth form,” he recalls in *The Middle Passage* (published in 1962), “I wrote a vow in the endpaper of my Kennedy’s *Revised Latin Primer* to leave the island

within five years. I left after six” (41). A scholarship meant escape, and Naipaul was apparently determined to escape. “I didn’t want the degree; I wanted only to get away,” he would later startlingly claim in his 1984 “Prologue to an Autobiography” (45). It was for this purpose, “mainly to get away,” as he repeats in *Reading and Writing* (published in 2000), that he devoted himself to “years of cramming”—a “labor” so intensive that half a century and more afterward it “still hurts to think about” (21).

There is certainly an enigmatic quality about this young man who was so specially treated, yet still so desperate to get away, and then so uncharacteristically quiet for decades after about what must have been an extremely anxious period of his early life. His peculiar reticence regarding the scholarship scare—an event only recently acknowledged in the 2008 authorized biography *The World is What It Is* by Patrick French—is especially striking. For if ever there were an author who has seemingly preempted the need for in-depth biographical sleuthing it is Naipaul, who has monopolized the task of revealing and interpreting the significant events of his own life. Time and again, in personal essays and novels, in interviews and even in his Nobel lecture, he returns to the subject of his own artistic formation.

On close inspection, however, it may be noted that even those texts in which Naipaul casts a spotlight on the broad sweep of his childhood (such as “Prologue to an Autobiography” and “Two Worlds”: the Nobel lecture) tend to be relatively sparse in their presentation of particulars. This level of engagement contrasts markedly with that displayed in such voluminous autobiographical explorations as *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987) and *A Way in the World* (1994), yet in *The Enigma of Arrival* Naipaul extends the scope of his detailed reminiscences only back to the moment he left Trinidad in August of 1950, and in *A Way in the World* he looks back only one year farther, to the year immediately prior to his departure. The French biography is more revealing, but still follows the basic pattern: relatively cursory coverage of Naipaul’s formative years, leading into a much more dense nucleus of narrative surrounding Naipaul’s departure from Trinidad and his early evolution as a writer.

Furthermore, in their representations of his leaving Trinidad even Naipaul’s in-depth autobiographical accounts display a puzzling tonal

inconsistency. In *A Way in the World* Naipaul details the year he worked as a second-class clerk in the Trinidad Registrar-General's Department before he left the island on scholarship in August of 1950 (13). He recounts that he was able to get this "filling-in job" once he turned seventeen in August of 1949, pointing out how being a scholarship winner temporarily engaged in civil service gave him a certain status in the capital city of Port-of-Spain. Focused as it is on these glowing achievements, Naipaul's tone in this narrative is fittingly sanguine, even cheerful. He recalls his final year in Trinidad as "one of the most hopeful times in my life" (13).

In *The Enigma of Arrival*, however, the same year is remembered very differently. At the outset of a long narrative segment elaborating the various stages of his journey to England—first by plane to New York via Puerto Rico, then by ship to Southampton—Naipaul notes almost parenthetically that this was "a journey which—for a year—I feared I would never be allowed to make. So that even before the journey I lived with anxiety about it" (97–111). No specific source for his anxiety is named. It would seem not to have derived in any direct way from the confusion initially surrounding his eligibility for a scholarship, however, as that matter had been satisfactorily resolved early in the spring of 1949, some four months before his final year in Trinidad began. Perhaps Naipaul's peculiar reticence on that subject is indicative of the event's personal significance; perhaps, for the man who to this day is pained by the memory of teenage cramming, the recollection of this particular uncertainty remained for decades a subject too sensitive or private to address. As he himself has suggested, "Certain things can never become material" ("Foreword," *Adventures of Gurudeva* 18). Whatever the reality of Naipaul's motivations, if both of the cited narratives are to be credited, it would appear that amid great hopefulness in his final year in Trinidad, gnawing anxiety lingered. Rationally or not, Naipaul continued to fear that the all-important journey away was one he might never be *allowed* to make—that some further twist of colonial fate might yet rise up and make a chimera of his cherished plans.

At the confluence of these colliding narratives a story emerges whose complexity would seem to exceed Naipaul's intention and perhaps even

his own understanding, a story along whose fault lines can be sensed the shadowy presence of other vital events which, like the scholarship scare, took place in those largely obscure years of growth when Naipaul's extraordinarily intense desire to quit his native island first formed. In fairness it must be emphasized that this area of darkness in the author's personal past would seem not to be the product of any deliberate obfuscation, but rather an ironic byproduct of the very forces that have led Naipaul so often to return to the subject of his own life.

Reading his several autobiographical narratives leaves the pronounced impression that what is and always has been germane to Naipaul is that which relates to the nascence and eventual realization of his ambition to become a world-renowned writer. This preoccupation seems to have operated as a kind of filter, leading him, for instance, to return repeatedly in his autobiographical prose to that pivotal day at the BBC in the mid-1950s when a couple of lines of dialogue inspired his first successful work: the inaugural *Miguel Street* story, "Bogart" ("Prologue" 17–19, *Reading and Writing* 25). In this same vein, large portions of *The Enigma of Arrival* and *A Way in the World* detail Naipaul's preliminary struggles with form, genre, and material during his final year in Trinidad and throughout his university years. Further congruent with this model is the one event from his childhood which is given considerable attention in his autobiographical texts—the moment when, inspired by his father's example at age eleven Naipaul first determined that he would some day become a writer ("Prologue" 43–4, *Reading & Writing* 3). In the wake of this determination the next "real" event in the life of the young colonial artist was his departure from Trinidad and the scholarship that enabled it.

What mattered to Naipaul, then and for many years after, was attaining the dream of a cosmopolitan literary life. Leaving Trinidad on scholarship was like a second birth. "In Trinidad, feeling myself far away," he muses in *The Enigma of Arrival*, "I had held myself back, as it were, for life at the centre of things" (120). He is like his fictional protagonist Mohun Biswas in *A House for Mr. Biswas*, who persistently feels that "real life, and its especial sweetness" awaits him "soon, and elsewhere" (292, 140). This underlying message likewise resounds in the telling

simplicity of the self-penned flyleaf bio that has accompanied Naipaul's books with only slight alteration for fifty years: "V.S. Naipaul was born in Trinidad in 1932. He went to England on scholarship in 1950. After four years at Oxford he began to write, and since then he has followed no other profession."

So encapsulated, Naipaul's life appears to be a clear-cut fulfillment of a powerful early ambition. This ambition itself, however, is perhaps only the most conspicuous manifestation of a general mind set. The forces that prompted his twelve-year-old self's vow to quit Trinidad were likely the same that inspired his mostly symbolic choice of a future career at age eleven. And by age fourteen, if his reckoning and self-appraisal from "Prologue to an Autobiography" are accepted, Naipaul's "childhood was over," and he was "fully made" (45). Since winning a colonial scholarship was a necessary precondition for the realization of all that he aspired to in his precociously formed world view, it is little wonder that in looking back on his youth Naipaul makes this quest the focus of his personal narratives. The trouble is that this focus (which borders on an obsession, really) has acted not merely as a filter, but also as a sort of autobiographical red herring, wherein the multithreaded, intertwining milieu of Naipaul's self-told tales creates an illusion of exhaustive self-scrutiny. Comparably little has been revealed of the local environment that not only contributed to his ambition to become a writer in the first place, but forever shaped his writerly sensibilities.

This article aims to examine the social milieu in which Naipaul spent the first two decades of his life—not only in hopes of discovering additional motives for his ambition to leave Trinidad and become a writer, but more particularly as a means of illuminating the sort of writer that he has become. Put another way, the aim is to begin to demystify the enigma of personality that many readers and critics alike have perceived Naipaul to be. "V.S. vs the Rest: The Fierce and Enigmatic V.S. Naipaul Grants a Rare Interview in London," James Atlas heads a 1987 piece for *Vanity Fair*. *The Enigma of V.S. Naipaul*, Helen Hayward titles a 2002 scholarly critique. "V.S. Naipaul: The Enigmatic Outsider," Diana Adams labels a 2001 news feature highlighting the unconventional juxtaposition of literary merit and troublesome politics that factored into

Naipaul's winning of the Nobel. With curious frequency the word itself, *enigmatic*, has been applied. And with virtual ubiquity the characteristic is described. Even Naipaul has encouraged the perception with the title of his 1987 autobiographical "novel" *The Enigma of Arrival*.

Though clearly owing much to his often politically incorrect and famously volatile persona, the real aura of enigma surrounding Naipaul has its roots in his writing. As demonstrated in the earlier brief comparison of parallel passages from *The Enigma of Arrival* and *A Way in the World*, even when focused on the same life moments, the tenor of Naipaul's writing can vary dramatically. This effect is merely compounded if one attempts to consider his written work as a whole. Ranging from the overtly venomous to the comically absurd, Naipaul's apparently unsparring—but arguably also sympathetic—caricatures, especially of people like those of his native West Indies, evince a bewildering melange of tonal inconsistency.¹

Yet perhaps as readers and critics we have been too quick to assume that Naipaul's paradoxical blend of personal parts is utterly idiosyncratic, the product of a unique familial experience or simply of an eccentric mind. For as Stuart Hall presciently reminds us, "identity" is "not just anything," but rather "comes out of very specific historical formations, out of very specific histories and cultural repertoires of enunciation" (502). And from Raymond Williams comes the parallel insight that much lived experience which initially seems to be "private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating" is discovered "in analysis (though rarely otherwise)" to have its "emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics": to be, in other words, a recognizable iteration of a larger social "structure of feeling" (132).

The East Indian Trinidadian community into which Vidyadhar Surajprasad Naipaul was born in 1932 was neither a united community nor a class as such. At the very least it would have been unimaginable as either to young "Vido" Naipaul, as V.S. was known among his family and peers (French 14). The community was sharply divided and in the midst of a major social transition. There were many who, like V.S. Naipaul's father, Seepersad Naipaul, wanted big things out of life. Yet for most East Indians living in Chaguanas, the rural agricultural com-

munity in the island's fertile west-central plain where V.S. was born, being East Indian meant being poor, undernourished, uneducated, Hindu, and a manual labourer for life.

The vast majority of Naipaul's ethnic kin were agricultural labourers employed in the sugar and cocoa industries. Many could not speak English, and most were illiterate in any language. This state of affairs had its roots in the indentureship system, under which approximately 143,000 East Indians immigrated to Trinidad between 1845 and 1917 (Samaroo, "Presbyterian" 41). First-generation East Indian immigrants tended to regard themselves as temporary residents, and preferred to see their children earn what little income they could to supplement the family's earnings rather than go to school (Singh 33, 49; Niehoff 77). The aim was to get money and return to the motherland in grandeur. Life in India was what mattered, and this diasporic vision lingered, especially among first generation immigrants. As Naipaul recalls in a rare far backward glance in *The Enigma of Arrival*, "the older people in our Asian-Indian community in Trinidad—especially the poor ones, who could never manage English or get used to the strange races—looked back to an India that became more and more golden in their memory" (120). There was also considerable fear among Trinidadian Indians that sending their children to government schools would expose them to racial prejudices from the Afro-Trinidadian majority, and to western values, religious ridicule, and pressures to convert from their predominantly Christian schoolmasters (Campbell 117; Singh 50; Malik 15; Ryan, *Pathways* xxi; Seesaran 99-102). It was not until the Canadian Presbyterian Mission embarked on a dedicated campaign of proselytizing Trinidadian East Indians through education that the climate altered.

Beginning in 1868 Presbyterian missionaries made significant inroads into East Indian education in Trinidad by establishing schools exclusively for East Indians, with classes taught in Hindi and no fees required. Uniforms and even shoes were also often supplied gratis. There was encouragement but not overbearing pressure to convert (Seesaran 73, 107; Niehoff 79). The Presbyterian effort was widespread and sustained over time—many schools still operate today. Especially for those East Indian families who were determined to remain in Trinidad, the missionary

education option offered tantalizing possibilities for upward mobility. Many of the Brahmin caste especially sought out and were eagerly welcomed into the new schools, and over time a “Presbyterian elite” emerged as an important East Indian sub-minority (Seesaran 115–7, 225). This coincided with developments in the colony at large, as education and the relative wealth that it spawned became the distinguishing feature of a new “high caste” made up of whites, wealthy blacks and Chinese, and all educated Indians (Seesaran 225).

Such was the social environment V.S. Naipaul entered in 1932. In the Indian segment of society, especially, literacy was a social marker. As Marianne Ramesar cites in *Calcutta to Caroni: The East Indians of Trinidad*, “in 1931, more than 50 per cent of Christian Indians could read and write, but only 17 per cent of non-Christians” (149). The contrast was stark, and this was a very self-conscious society. In the decades leading up to the 1930s dozens of Literary and Debating Clubs or Societies had sprung up all over Trinidad. As Carl Campbell notes, “A list of Indian Debating Clubs reads like a list of the major concentrations of Indians in the country,” and such organizations were “continually multiplying in the 1920s” (120). Debates were staged in English, and typical contested issues included such questions as: “Is representative government beneficial to Trinidad?” (Chaguanas Literary and Debating Club, October 1924), and: “Should East Indians in Trinidad adopt western habits and customs?” (Trinidad East Indian Literary League, July 1924) (Campbell 120). As Ramesar encapsulates, the “dilemma” was one of “change versus tradition” in the wake of the ending of the indenture system (150). For “by the 1920s the relative ‘backwardness’ of the group had been acknowledged as disadvantageous in the likelihood of power-sharing with other ethnic groups, or the introduction of a more representative form of government. At the same time Indians were encouraged by the example of the Nationalists in India to remedy this ‘backwardness’” (Ramesar 150). Accordingly, “in the newspapers and debating groups which sprang up during the 1920s–1930s, articulate Indians, most of them products of the Christian schools, urged their fellows to take advantage of opportunities for education and upward mobility, even if this meant a down-playing of traditions” (Ramesar 150).

Naipaul's natal environment was one that seemed to offer only stark either-or choices: either distance yourself from the "backwardness" of your traditional past (typically by assimilating into the alien religion and culture of the politically dominant whites), or dutifully resign yourself to a life of severely limited opportunity.

The pressure to adapt only increased in the years of Naipaul's early childhood. For around 1928 to 1930, as Campbell pinpoints, a second phase of social transition began to unfold in which progressive organizations like the Literary and Debating Societies were joined by "more overtly religious organizations" (119–20). Organizations like the Sanatan Dharma Association of Trinidad and the Kabir Panth Association, both formally launched in V.S. Naipaul's birth year of 1932, were nationalist *and* traditionalist in character: they lobbied for increased democratic power in order to establish Hinduism on a par with Western culture and Christianity (119). In their advent the Literary and Debating Societies "lost a little of their glamour," and "an era of heightened splits and factionalism" ensued (119). Put in Williams's terms, the social-political push for modernization exercised by the Literary and Debating Societies became "residual" in the 1930s, but only in the sense that "the residual, by definition, has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present" (122). This led, as Williams's theory would have presupposed, to "contradiction, fracture, or mutation within a class" (134)—in this case, within the Trinidadian East Indian community of the 1930s and 1940s.

The standard way of life remained traditional: Hindu orthodoxy, coupled with a dogged pursuit of agrarian labour. This life path was staunchly upheld by a coterie of powerful men who had attained relative wealth and status among their peers, and had banded together in traditionalist organizations "which continued to fear the eroding of the Indian way of life by the predominantly Western creole culture" (Singh 51; Samaroo, "Politics" 83). But in the years of Naipaul's early childhood these orthodox factions were vigorously challenged from within by both the emergent Presbyterian elite and emergent Hindu nationalist reformers. These two emergent subsets of the East Indian population

were continually pulling the larger community in new directions—both arguably progressive—and ever more urgently Indians were also being pushed from below by intense economic pressures.

The stakes in the East Indian culture wars were particularly high because in Trinidad in the 1930s rural populations in virtually all industries were plunged into desperate economic straits. Contrary to what might be supposed, conditions generally deteriorated rather than improved after the banning of indentureship in 1917, as planters were no longer bound to the payment of minimum wages, or required to provide medical assistance or housing accommodations, and workers could no longer turn in their extremity to a colonially-appointed Protector of Immigrants (Singh 47; Ryan, *Race and Nationalism* 52). Living and working conditions for rural Trinidadians spiraled downward rapidly, even as double-digit dividends were announced to company shareholders abroad (Ryan, *Race and Nationalism* 61–2). To cite just one of many telling indicators of the rural situation, a water sample taken in the agricultural community of Penal in 1930 “showed 20 per cent tadpoles, 30 percent water and 50 per cent liquid earth” (Samaroo, “Politics” 86). Economically-based social tensions reached a fevered pitch in 1937, when riots broke out among labour elements all across the island.

Resulting in a dozen civilian and two police deaths (Forster 107), these riots prompted extensive discussion in the British House of Commons concerning the colonial enterprise generally, and the desperate circumstances in Trinidad particularly (*Parliamentary Debates* 334–8, 766–858). The Forster Report of 1938, prepared by an investigative commission sent to evaluate the root causes of these riots, credits “a combination of circumstances—e.g., diseases, malnutrition, overcrowding and bad housing” (33). The system of “what are termed ‘barrack’ dwellings,” dating back to the earliest years of the indenture era and continuing after that system’s demise, is particularly noted as: “it is hardly too much to say that on some of the sugar estates the accommodation provided is in a state of extreme disrepair, and thoroughly unhygienic” (36). In typical understated fashion the report concludes that “the claim of the workpeople for the common decencies of home life”

has led to “justifiable discontent” (37–8). To escape such circumstances, many would go to great lengths.

Illuminated by this historical snapshot, the early fictional narratives of V.S. Naipaul become much more readily recognizable as reflections of local Trinidadian history. The prospects of the young Mohun Biswas in Naipaul’s *A House for Mr. Biswas*, for instance, emerge as typical. “It was to be the grass-gang for Mr. Biswas,” readers are told (23). “Later he would move to the cane fields, to weed and clean and plant and reap; he would be paid by the task and his tasks would be measured out by a driver with a long bamboo rod. And there he would remain” (23). This narration reflects the observation of historian E. B. Rosabelle Seesaran that it was often the lot of “young male children to join the ‘paragrass gang’, earning 5¢ or 10¢ a day to augment the family’s savings” (101). Furthermore, directly in line with Ramesar’s assessment of the vital role of literacy (149–50), this grass-gang and cane field life was to be Mohun Biswas’s fate “because he wouldn’t be able to read” (Naipaul, *A House* 23). Poverty and ignorance, rooted in illiteracy, in turn rooted in ethnicity, were to be Mohun’s destiny, which in fact was nothing more or less than the destiny of nearly all real Trinidadian East Indians in the early to mid-twentieth century.

What saves Mohun Biswas, tellingly, is admittance into a “Canadian Mission school” run by a man named Lal, who “had been converted to Presbyterianism from a low Hindu caste and held all unconverted Hindus in contempt” (40–1). As in Naipaul’s actual natal society, education offered at least a localized escape from work on an estate. Through his education and conversion Lal has secured employment as a teacher, and now holds the sort of westernized world views that were being trumpeted by participants in literary and debating societies in V.S. Naipaul’s childhood days. In *Biswas* Lal embodies the Christian alternative.

Intriguingly, this situation mirrors not only history in general, but V.S. Naipaul’s particular literary introduction to his own local history which came through his father’s fiction. According to V.S. Naipaul, his father’s short stories about East Indian Trinidadian life “created my background for me” (Naipaul, “Foreword” 15). In Seepersad Naipaul’s

Gurudeva stories, first published as *Gurudeva and Other Indian Tales* in Trinidad in 1943 and later republished by V.S. Naipaul as *The Adventures of Gurudeva* in England in 1976, the title character, Gurudeva, and his traditionally-minded father, Jaimungal, are repeatedly contrasted with Gurudeva's Presbyterian school master, Mr. Sohun. In the opening scene of the story collection Jaimungal appears at Mr. Sohun's school to remove Gurudeva, age fourteen, for him to be married. "Taken aback," Mr. Sohun protests that "the boy is only in the third standard. Besides, he is absurdly young for marrying" (26). Mr. Sohun appeals to Jaimungal's pride of status and ambition, suggesting that Gurudeva might be given "a chance," for Jaimungal is "one of the biggest cane-farmers this side of the Colony," and could "afford giving the boy a good education—perhaps possibly a profession" (26–7). Jaimungal is wealthy, but his financial success has only compounded his attachment to religious traditionalism.

The ideological opposition between orthodoxy and modernism at work in this situation is clearly evidenced in Jaimungal's interior response: "'This,' thought Jaimungal, 'is what comes of sending one's children to school. Always they want you to conform to practices outside your religion'" (27). Satisfied with his traditions, Jaimungal engages Mr. Sohun from the beginning "a shade obsequiously" (26), and responds outwardly to Mr. Sohun's protests merely with "a half deprecating, half patronizing smile" and a dismissive "short flourish of his hand" (27). "That is orright, Schoolmaster," he enjoins, "'He know 'nough. He could read. He could write a letter. He could even write a receipt. What mo' he want?" (27). Seeing the futility of the situation, Mr. Sohun gives up. The lines are drawn. World views collide, but to no effect. The balance of the *Gurudeva* narrative depicts the ludicrous efforts of the dutiful protagonist to forge a meaningful identity for himself within the confines of his culturally-mandated position.

Gurudeva and his extended family emerge as Seepersad Naipaul's cultural anti-heroes, characters who predict the traditionalist Tulsi family in V.S. Naipaul's *Biswas*. In *Biswas*, of course, the Tulsis' backwardness contrasts markedly with the progressiveness of others such as Tara and Ajodha, Mr. Biswas's maternal aunt and uncle. "The Tulsis, who

did *puja* every day and celebrated every Hindu festival,” as readers are told, “regarded Ajodha as a man who pursued wealth and comfort and modernity and had alienated himself from the faith. Ajodha and Tara simply thought the Tulsis squalid” (233). Clearly V.S. Naipaul had internalized, through his own lived experiences and his father’s fiction, the central division of his natal community.

Interestingly, however, the Christian alternative in both Seepersad Naipaul’s stories and especially in V.S. Naipaul’s novel is represented ambiguously at best. In the end of Seepersad’s *Gurudeva* stories, for instance, it would seem that Mr. Sohun’s life path is validated, yet this conclusion is cleverly undercut. Mr. Sohun reappears in conversation with an adult Gurudeva, who after minimal training in Hindi and scripture has self-styled himself a pundit. In their exchange Mr. Sohun shows himself much more knowledgeable than his former pupil not only in Western education topics but in Hindu doctrine and cultural practices, and Gurudeva comically displays his ignorance by mixing up Mr. Sohun’s insightful observations when he later relates them to his followers (91–6). Gurudeva, like his father before him, comes across as a comic philistine, but Mr. Sohun fares little better, as the self-satisfied Gurudeva defends Mr. Sohun’s decision to convert by pronouncing that he had merely “turned Christian for his *roti*,” or in other words for his bread, his livelihood (99). This explanation stands as reason sufficient for Gurudeva and all his listeners. It is a cause which apparently they can all respect, but which readers outside the community are likely to look upon rather narrowly.

A fundamental pragmatism pervades the community. Wealthy traditionalists like Jaimungal and Gurudeva are unwilling to make religious and cultural compromises in the pursuit of that pragmatism, but this is chiefly because they can afford not to. Notably, as Victor Ramraj has demonstrated, as in the work of Seepersad Naipaul, conversion to Christianity in the fictional narratives of several other early East Indian Trinidadian authors, including Sam Selvon, Harold Sonny Ladoo, and Clyde Hosein, “is basically a matter of expediency” (“Pragmatic” 92). Certainly V.S. Naipaul interprets his father’s stories in this way, for in his forward to the 1976 reprinting of *Gurudeva* he opines regarding

Mr. Sohun that “it is hinted—he hints himself; my father makes him talk too much—that he is of a low caste. His Presbyterianism is more than an escape from this; it is, as Gurudeva says with *sly compassion*, Mr. Sohun’s bread and butter, a condition of his employment as a teacher in the Canadian Mission school” (“Foreword” 21).

V.S. Naipaul’s interpretation of his father’s stories is reflected in his own rather curiously critical representation of Lal in *Biswas*. For unlike Mr. Sohun and many—probably most—actual members of the Presbyterian elite in Trinidad, Lal (who is not even accorded the dignity of the title “Mr.”) does not display any sophistication that would make him enviable. “He believed in thoroughness,” readers are informed, in “discipline and what he delighted to call stick-to-it-iveness, virtues he felt unconverted Hindus particularly lacked” (43). Yet these principles become ironic in view of the “broken English” Lal has acquired in place of his native Hindi, and his dogged reverence for colonially-instituted paperwork seen in his insistence that each incoming student present a proper “buth sutificate” (41, 43). “You people don’t even know how to born, it look like,” he tells Mohun’s mother when she confesses she has no such documentation of the existence of her children. Yet it is Lal who seems not only persistently backward (despite his relatively expansive knowledge of things beyond his island experience), but oblivious to his own absurdity. He teaches his students such things as “the Lord’s Prayer in Hindi, . . . many English poems,” and a host of scientific facts they “never really believed, about geysers, rift valleys, watersheds, the Gulf Stream, and a number of deserts” (44-5). His students’ endemic ignorance combines with his own to suggest that desire alone is insufficient to effect a legitimate mimicry of the colonizer—that the relative enlightenment possible within this generally benighted environment is minimal.

To better understand this perspective it is necessary to follow V.S. Naipaul and his family to the Trinidadian capital of Port-of-Spain, where they moved in 1938 (French 30). By his own admission V.S. Naipaul was immediately drawn to the city. “Only a country boy could have loved the town as I did when I came to it,” he relates in *A Way in the World* (13). But in the capital the Naipauls would have been minor-

ity citizens—quite unlike in Chaguanas. For in Trinidad, as Naipaul helpfully explains, it was “the Indian countryside, the African town,” and the “well-defined racial division” that the city exemplified in a “hostile feeling . . . focused on the Indians” (*Way in the World* 35). In town, V.S. would have been persecuted. Arnold Rampersad, like Naipaul born and reared in Trinidad, affirms “the ever-present campaign of humiliation and demoralization and threats of violence aimed at Indians that [Naipaul] would have encountered as a youth in the capital, Port of Spain, in the late 1940s” (45–6). Closer to home, Naipaul’s cousin Rudranath Capildeo, whose educational track was roughly a decade ahead of V. S.’s, had been taunted and bullied during his school days by the predominantly black students at Queen’s Royal College, who looked on him merely as “the little Coolie boy from Chaguanas” (Oxaal 162). Rudranath was constantly in fights, and “even his teachers made occasional sport of his backwardness,” especially on religious grounds (162). It was Rudranath’s great victory that he was able against all odds to win an island scholarship to study medicine abroad (French 29). This event in Naipaul’s extended family took place in 1938, the very year that his immediate family came to Port-of-Spain. Rudranath’s example must have inspired V. S., even as he shared at least to some degree in his cousin’s traumas.

On that score, it appears that V.S. Naipaul was fortunate in being largely accepted by his peers at the schools he attended, both in the capital and previously in Chaguanas. Before ever moving to Port-of-Spain he had attended a government school in Chaguanas, where his Afro-Trinidadian teacher, Miss Hotaing, had apparently been very kind to him, and where he had relished the learning of new words and ideas (French 16). In the capital he went first for a term to the Woodbrook Canadian Mission School—his own experience of Presbyterian Christian education. Then in 1939 he transferred to a top-notch government school: Tranquility Boys’ Intermediate School (French 31). In an exclusive interview given to biographer Patrick French in 2002 Naipaul claimed that at Tranquility he was “an object of great curiosity,” but was not ill-treated. In fact “they couldn’t have been nicer,” he recalls (32). “There were few Indians, almost no Indians in the school. It was

the first time we were coming out [of the countryside]. If I had gone to a rough place, it might have been different” (32). In his memory, at least, this school experience was a pleasant one—a contrast to the general anti-Indian atmosphere of the town.

School, then, seems to have created an antithesis to the uncertainty and desperation that still surrounded Naipaul. But the essential structure of feeling he had encountered in Chaguanas still prevailed, just in a slightly expanded sphere. For whereas being illiterate had carried heavy consequences in the countryside, being “country” and Indian also carried a stigma in Port-of-Spain. And Naipaul experienced this prejudice personally as, after just two years short years of relative separation from their rural roots, his family was reabsorbed into the Capildeo household, which had moved en masse to Petit Valley (the “Shorthills” of *A House for Mr. Biswas*), a relatively rural region just north of the capital. The effect was to reintroduce a “country” element into the lives of the children. As readers are shown in *Biswas*, Savi and Anand “were a little frightened of living with the Tulsis again,” but “above all, they did not want to be referred to as ‘country pupils’ at school; the advantages—being released fifteen minutes earlier in the afternoon—could not make up for the shame” (377). To escape ridicule, urban Indians had to escape the association of their rural backgrounds. This necessity was underscored in the city by the presence of those who were unable to assimilate.

Outside of school, too, reminders of the alternatives to education and professional success were still starkly before Naipaul’s eyes. The Forster Report notes the abundance of “‘barrack’ dwellings in Port-of-Spain which are ‘indescribable in their lack of elementary needs of decency’” (Forster 36). Furthermore, as Naipaul recalls in *A Way in the World*, and as Seeseran historically confirms (218), it was to Port-of-Spain that homeless Indians congregated. “Many of them would have been indentured immigrants from India who had served out their indentures on the sugar estates and then for one reason or another . . . had found themselves with nowhere to live” (Naipaul, *Way in the World* 21). “These people were without money, job, without anything like a family,” he explains, and most of all they were “without the English language.” In the country illiteracy and lack of fluency in English were not uncom-

mon, and mostly translated to a life of drudgery; in the city these were even more damning and debilitating faults, and homeless Indians “were tormented by the people of the town” literally into extinction (21).

The pressure to distance himself from his rural, Hindu roots would not just have continued but increased for Naipaul after he won an exhibition scholarship in 1942 and entered the prestigious Queen’s Royal College, where his Uncle Rudranath had also studied (French 39–40). At QRC, as it was known, Naipaul was recognized for his brilliance, but his Indianness remained a liability (French 40–1). On this point, readers familiar with Naipaul’s early fiction will recall that the character of Ganesh in Naipaul’s first published novel, *The Mystic Masseur*, attends—and feels profoundly alienated—at QRC. “Ganesh never lost his awkwardness,” the narrator of the novel informs readers, “he was so ashamed of his Indian name that for a while he spread a story that he was really called Gareth. This did him little good. He continued to dress badly, he didn’t play games, and his accent remained too clearly that of the Indian from the country” (20).

Here again the notion of being an Indian from the country comes up. V.S. Naipaul was brilliant, and proud, but he could never fully belong—even if, as appears to be the case, his nearly complete assimilation made him outwardly popular. He could not escape the double consciousness of his precarious position and the ongoing necessity to conform. Once formal recognition of his ability finally did come—for instance in the form of the special scholarship created in his behalf—it was too late. His attitude of being on the outside, ever needing to distance himself from his roots and wonder if he would be allowed to escape from perceived backwardness, was fixed.

What this attitude apparently did was make V.S. Naipaul doubt everything local—even when his personal experiences seemed to fulfill some promise of the “real life” that he had learned about in books. This is brilliantly demonstrated in a final passage from *Biswas*. Near the end of the novel Mr. Biswas and his family are unexpectedly given the opportunity to spend a week long holiday at a cottage on the beach. Mr. Biswas, readers are told, “was overwhelmed. He had regarded his holidays simply as days on which he did not go to work; he had never

thought that he might use the time to take his family to some resort: the thing was beyond ambition” (479). It was not, however, beyond the imagination of his better-educated children. Once the secret was out of “the laden hamper, the car, the drive to the seaside: it was something they know too well” (480). They had read about such things not once but many times in their schoolbooks, and Anand had written a top-scoring English composition on the topic (342–3). His composition had ended unconventionally with the death by drowning of his main character, and a “denunciation of the sea” (343), but now the family was to embark on the real thing: a British-style holiday. As they actually set off on their holiday “they were, Anand reflected, driving with hampers—laden hampers—to the sea. The English composition had come true” (483).

And in fact the holiday, after some initial shyness and hesitancy (484), is a success. They do all of the sorts of things that an English family might have done in their place. They “went to deserted beaches, ... they made excursions to the places with French names: Blanchisseuse, Matelot, ... they picked almonds ... [and] bright red cashew nuts, sucked the fruit and took the nuts to the house and roasted them. The days were long” (485). It is a proper holiday in accord with all the children have read. But it does not last. “And then the Buick came for them,” readers are told, and “as they drove back to Port-of-Spain the new shy pleasure they had found in being alone was forgotten” (485). They are returned to their old house, which “seemed lower, darker, suffocating” (486). Soon the entire escape begins to seem unreal: “did the wilderness really exist? Was the house still at the top of the hill? ... They fell asleep with the roar of the wind and sea in their heads. In the morning they woke to the humming house” (486). There seems to be no genuine possibility of escape from the confines of their lives. Even when the possibility arises, it passes, and quickly disappears with all the finality of a dream.

In both Naipaul’s fiction and his lived experience, only a scholarship seems capable of permanently altering this reality. It is fascinating that the closest Naipaul comes to representing the precariousness of the situation he found himself in when he was disqualified from competing for an island scholarship is found in the closing story of the *Miguel Street*

collection, in which the boy narrator obtains a scholarship after his mother bribes a government official (218–9). There is no reason to suspect that Naipaul's scholarship was tainted by such illicit machinations, but the uncertainty reflected in the story may betray more than a hint of trepidation at the memory of how close he came to seeing his ambition dashed on a mere technicality. One senses that for Naipaul this would have been a personal catastrophe. His wish to leave is less unique in substance than in degree. The intensity of emotion surrounding the eleventh-hour uncertainty of his scholarship situation may illuminate much of the skepticism and vitriol leveled at the developing world in his fiction and travel journalism of the ensuing half century.

There is a pattern—almost a ritual—in Naipaul studies of stressing from the outset two things: first, that Naipaul is an undeniably fine writer, and second, that he is extraordinarily controversial, though his motives are ambiguous.² Naipaul is an enigma, a persistent mystery. Yet in his fiction especially one can find the evidence of larger forces at work that do much to explain his views and re-frame them as examples of larger societal structures of feeling. Naipaul once emphasized to an interviewer, speaking on the subject of his origins, that “the barbarity was double: the barbarity of my family and the barbarity outside” (“V.S. Naipaul: A Perpetual Voyager” 93). And in a 1975 conference address delivered in Trinidad on the topic of “East Indians in the Caribbean” Naipaul pointedly reminded his local listeners of the great debates that took place between “Orthodox” and “Reformist” factions in the East Indian community in Trinidad in the 1920s and 1930s, concluding that “these battles were never known outside the Hindu community, and today I think they are forgotten by everybody” (“Introduction,” *East Indians in the Caribbean* 4).

Indeed little has been done in the literary field to explore the particulars of this largely unknown and now most forgotten social movement Naipaul is talking about. Yet such social undercurrents, the residual and emergent structures of feeling that defined the lived experience of Naipaul and other East Indians in Trinidad at the time, cannot be forgotten if readers wish to engage Naipaul's work in its contemporary contexts. The debates over education, Westernization,

the place of Hinduism in the lives of modern Trinidadians, all factored into the general ferment of daily life as it was experienced by Naipaul, born in 1932 in an almost exclusively Indian and predominantly Hindu village in central Trinidad, and later educated at some of the finest colonial educational facilities in the Trinidadian capital of Port-of-Spain.

“I think at quite an early age,” he suggests in a 1977 interview, “I understood that what was very important about a person in the world was not really his individual quality, but his political status” (“It’s Every Man” 41). Naipaul remembers “I come from a very small community in a rather backward part of the world. And I wanted to join the big world” (41). Naipaul sounds very much like both Ganesh and Mohun Biswas here, and he conveys that this perspective is not individual but societal and cultural: “I have picked up on the Indian message—it’s every man for himself, and his family” (41). Whether this cultural principle has its genesis in India, the Caribbean at large, the East Indian community of mid-twentieth-century Trinidad particularly, or merely in Naipaul’s own mind, is the bottom-line question of this essay. Too often, I think, critics have opted for the easy answer, the last one, effectively annulling the significance of Naipaul’s complexity by labeling him—and largely dismissing him—as an “enigma.” On the contrary, the evidence gathered here suggests that he is a predictable product of very particular lived local experiences and their attendant structures of feeling. In his own words in the recently published *A Writer’s People: Ways of Looking and Feeling*, “small places with simple economies bred small people with simple destinies” (17). The East Indian revival of the 1930s imparted to Naipaul an ideological apparatus which appears to be idiosyncratic chiefly because Naipaul much more than any other has emerged to voice its views on the world stage.

Notes

- 1 As I have described elsewhere, Naipaul’s position is difficult to judge. Speaking for himself, Naipaul has claimed that he is “*desperately* concerned” about the places he visits and the people he writes about (“The Dark Visions of V.S. Naipaul” 70), and that his admittedly “brutal analysis” grows out of a spirit of “concern” rather than “contempt” (“V.S. Naipaul: A *Transition* Interview” 59,

“A Conversation with V.S. Naipaul” 20). The real “condescension,” he insists, “is in those who don’t notice . . . the obscure, the expendable, the unmourned” (Atlas 104). “You’ve got to be awfully liberal,” he concludes, “not to be moved by distress.” This tough love stance sounds reasonable until one recalls or is made aware of some of the particular sorts of statements that lie at the root of the controversy. As fellow Caribbean writer Caryl Phillips, for instance, took a moment to remind people in the wake of Naipaul’s Nobel, his open “hostility toward the Caribbean” began quite early, when in 1958 he labeled his native Trinidad a “simple, colonial, philistine society” (Phillips). In 1980 he followed this up by calling his Caribbean compatriots monkeys with “a capital M,” people whose lives he found “contemptible,” and “only interesting to chaps in universities who want to do compassionate studies about brutes” (Phillips). This traitorous hostility he has since spread across the globe in select passages of works such as *An Area of Darkness* (about India), “The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro” (about Africa), *A Turn in the South* (about the American South), and *Among the Believers* and *Beyond Belief* (about Islamic nations). As a sort of side show he has lately made a practice in interviews of deriding the work of iconic writers including Thomas Hardy, Earnest Hemingway, Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, and James Joyce (“Naipaul Attacks”).

- 2 Despite his criticism of Naipaul’s politics, for instance, Caryl Phillips lauds his “sublime English” (Phillips), and Derek Walcott goes a step further, proclaiming Naipaul “our finest writer of the English sentence” (Walcott 126). Yet Naipaul has a “gift for provoking [both] extreme admiration or equally pronounced indignation,” as Rob Nixon avers (3). His writings are “simultaneously celebrated and castigated” (Mustafa 1), and he is personally both “acclaimed” and “excoriated” (Feder 1).

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V. S. Naipaul and the East Indian Revival in Trinidad

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