

Sir VS Naipaul's misconstruction of Sikh History

To Embellish is to taint

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Part I

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When I heard of V.S. Naipaul winning the Nobel prize for Literature I decided to get re-acquainted with his work. I had met him once briefly in the early sixties, during a short work stint in the West Indies. At that time he was a budding writer who was making a name for himself in the Islands. The center of his narrative was his birthplace, Trinidad. He was yet to gain a wider notice with his travelogue on India ("*An Area of Darkness – An Experience of India*", Andre Deutsch, September 1964). This was a prelude to the odysseys he recorded from other parts of the world, culminating in his two celebrated books on Islam that many claim earned him the Nobel prize.

During festive holidays, ideal for inviting friends for dinner, a couple of my Guyanese friends discussed Naipaul over cocktails. The Nobel award leavened the discussion. Aware of my interest in Sikhism, one of them wondered what I thought of Naipaul's take on Sikhs in his book "*A Million Mutinies Now*" (Viking, 1990). Sikhs were in one of the chapters.

My interest aroused, I borrowed the book from my local public library to read over the holidays. Thumbing over to the index, I saw chapter eight: "**The Shadow of the Guru**" was what my friends had talked about. That Naipaul relied heavily on a handful of persons for his exposition on Sikhism became quite evident. It was obvious that he had drawn heavily on Gurtej Singh for a big chunk of what he had to say. Before I discuss the chapter I find it useful to see what Naipaul intended and how Gurtej Singh had embellished his narrative.

In "*An Area of Darkness*", Naipaul was unforgiving of India. He paints a country mired in filth, poverty and corruption where its people long to capture the glory of a long lost past. He saw no redeeming feature. Nothing strange. Most, East Indians, in the Caribbean have **total emotional dissociation** from the land of their ancestors; an alienation largely self-induced. Much as they try, they cannot live down in their minds the fact that they are the offspring of indentured laborers. Indenture to them smacked of slavery. This widely shared perception may help explain why Naipaul distanced himself from the land of his forefathers.

In the 1960's Naipaul established his home in England. He was to write two other books on India, each a little less critical. First came "*India, A Wounded Civilization*". Notwithstanding his caveat that unlike his ancestors, he does not belong to India, he writes as an insider grudgingly showering praise on what he believes is good. Then came "*A Million Mutinies Now*". This time around he draws a portrait of his ancestral land in considerable depth and color. In a quarter of a century he has shifted from complete dissociation to admitting unbroken ties with India. This

change in attitude may result from his coming to grips with his Brahmin roots in his adopted land, England, where Indians are routinely seen as inferior. And it is the Brahmin in him who was to study the anatomy of Sikh alienation.

Naipaul is a gifted interlocutor and an interrogator. His skills in observing and describing things in an uncommonly striking manner are unparalleled. He hires paid researchers; tapes his interviews; is a meticulous note-keeper to insure integrity of collected data. But, in the end, his use of data will be influenced by his own bent of mind, which he readily admits under acknowledgments. His assessments in his writing, therefore, are personal and only as good as will hold up in the wash.

What was Naipaul after? He saw India as a country wherein "every group thought itself unique in its awakening"; and, of one such group, the Sikhs, he hoped to understand their alienation by examining Sikh militancy of the 1980's in juxtaposition with Sikh religious history.

That Naipaul relies on Gurtej Singh for his understanding of Sikhism is obvious at once. Gurtej Singh "on his card, described himself as 'Professor of Sikhism'". Naipaul had a skeletal knowledge of Punjab and Sikhs and had Gurtej Singh put the flesh on it. Gurtej Singh's inputs, as we will see later, are pregnant with errors. Cognizant of Naipaul's literary fame and given his several interviews with the author, Gurtej Singh should have waited anxiously for the release of the book to see how Naipaul portrayed Sikhs and Sikhism. No such thing. There is no public record of Gurtej Singh straightening out Naipaul's disturbing portraiture of Sikhism in his book that was published over twelve years ago.

Lapse of time notwithstanding, any and all misconstructions of Sikh history and religion require vigorous prosecution. After all, Naipaul is the foremost writer of English prose with a large readership in the English-speaking world. His word is likely to be taken on the face of it, more so now that he is a Nobel laureate.

Naipaul was to learn the importance and significance of taking *amrit* (baptism of the sword) from several sources. "The baptism", according to Sikh historian, Khushwant Singh, "symbolized a rebirth". The initiate renounces his past, joins the new fraternity and must hold up to a strict code of conduct, *rehatnama* meaning the true path.

Sant Randhir Singh preached that God lay hidden within every one and revealed only to those who took the *amrit*. Squadron-Leader Ram Singh, who now wore the mantle of Sant Randhir Singh, stressed that "without *amrit* one just couldn't reach God" (Page 451). The idea was one of creating a society of pure Sikhs, the *Khalsa*. He also added that an *amritdhari* Sikh, one who has taken *amrit*, must not eat food not cooked by one of their brethren. The notion that food prepared by a non-*amritdahari* Sikh is somehow unclean is at best a blind belief.

Gurtej Singh describes his 1974 initiation at the ceremony of *Khande-de-Pahul* at Anandpur Sahib in some detail (page 438). Gurtej proudly discloses, "The *amrit* was stirred with the sword of Ali". Naipaul wonders if it is the "Ali of the Muslim Shias, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammed", and Gurtej blurts out, "The Caliph". Gurtej then adds that the sword was a

gift made to Guru Gobind Singh by the Moghul Emperor Bahadur Shah. This account flies in the face of known facts.

The death of the Moghul emperor Aurangzeb, on March 2, 1707, triggered the battle for succession to the throne. Muazzam (Shah Alam), the eldest son of the emperor defeated his younger brother Azam Shah on June 8, 1707 at the battlefield at Jajau; and, at his coronation took the name Bahadur Shah. Guru Gobind Singh had sent a Sikh squad under the command of Dharam Singh to back up Muazzam's claim to the throne in a *quid pro quo*. Years earlier, Prince Muazzam was ordered by the Emperor to neutralize the rising power of hill rajahs and Guru Gobind Singh; but, he was so taken with the spirituality of the Guru that he disregarded his orders and left the Guru unharmed.

Bahadur Shah was to thank Guru Gobind Singh for helping him win his throne. He invited the Guru to Agra and the two met in person on July 23, 1707. It was to be their only meeting. At the meeting Emperor Bahadur Shah presented the Guru with "a *khil'at*, including a jeweled scarf, a *dhukhdhukhi*, and an aigrette, or *kalghi*", according to Prof. Harbans Singh. In his writing, Satbir Singh mentions giving of four gifts, namely *dhukhdhuki*, *sarai parda*, *khaima* and *nigara* ("Purakh Bhagwant").

There is no mention of the sword of Ali or any other sword in the list of gifts. So, how could the sword of Ali, a likely treasured Muslim religious relic, albeit a Shia relic, escape notice of being given as gift. Gurtej Singh's account, therefore, is suspect.

Daulat Rai had people such as Gurtej Singh in mind when he warned that, "majority of the people know so little about this great hero (Guru Gobind Singh) that many unscrupulous people have tried to gain their selfish ends by saying many wrong and undesirable things about the Guru, his life and teachings" ("*Sahibe Kamal Guru Gobind Singh*").

When challenged recently, in an informal setting, Gurtej Singh trots out an article by Kapur Singh titled "An Islamic Sacred Heirloom at the Keshgarh Takht". First he impresses upon us Kapur Singh's bloodline: "son of a well connected Udasi (who) was married into the family of Sodhis of Anandpur Sahib" - bear in mind that the last of the five Gurus were all Sodhis. Then he furnishes a personal testimonial for Kapur Singh: "a researcher and a truthful man"; and, insists that we must accept Kapur Singh's testimony "until he is proven wrong".

I should add, at this juncture, that I have a high regard for Kapur Singh's contribution to our understanding of Sikhism and the distinctive Sikh identity. But I do wish to analyze how some of his work may have been misapplied, possibly unwittingly, and therefore may have become the very basis for a distortion which, in my mind, is clearly contradictory to *Sikhi*.

In fairness, let us examine Kapur Singh's claims. He describes a sword "with gold arabesque and Arabic lettering", which according to him, "the keepers of the sacred heirlooms, at the Takht, (say) belongs to Hadrat Ali, the grandson of Prophet Mohammed". The sword was presented to Guru Gobind Singh at the coronation of Bahadur Shah on July 23, 1707, at Agra. The Guru then entrusted the sword to his messenger, along with a proclamation (*Hukumnama* dated October 2, 1707), to be presented to the congregation at Dhau. Next, the sword came into the possession of

an Udasi ascetic, Gurbaksh Dass, from whom it was wrested by a Sodhi elder related to the Guru. The sword finally ends up at Keshgarh Sahib.

Breaks in the concatenation of custody of the sword are fairly obvious and are a factor that begs doubt. For another, how come an important sacred relic entrusted to the Guru could be so casually handled? We are required to do lot of believing. How the sword made its way from Dhaul into the hands of the Udasi; when and why it was wrested from the Udasi by a Sodhi elder; how, when and by whom it was brought to Keshgarh Sahib are all brushed aside.

The actual sword, *dhu'l faqar* or the 'cleaver of vertebrae', according to Kapur Singh, was part of the booty captured by Prophet Mohammed at the battle of Badar to which he took "a strong fancy", and was "inherited by Hadrat Ali' after the demise of the Prophet. Kapur Singh believes "that more than one copies were made of this sword and on each were engraved words to some such effect, as a rule, 'No sword can match the Cleaver and no young Knight can match Ali' (before its) passing into the hands of Abbasid Caliphs." It follows, therefore, that the inscription on the real sword, if it had any, will have been about its first owner, and only its copies will have had the said embossment. The sword presented to Guru Gobind Singh that made its way to Keshgarh Sahib is, therefore, a copy and not the real thing.

When they first met, Gurtej Singh was bent upon airing Punjab's political grievances whereas Naipaul wanted to know what role religion played in prompting "fundamentalism and alienation". Naipaul artfully steered the dialogue towards "ideas of (Sikh) religion", wondering how religious ideas first reach and sway young minds. From early childhood Gurtej was determined to stay "in touch with my land, my culture, my people"; he read poems, ballads and Sikh history. From age eighteen he was to get his schooling in Sikhism from his mentor Kapur Singh.

Of Guru Nanak, Gurtej Singh said, "He's not a reformer, he's not a philosopher, he's not a poet – though he expressed himself in poetry. He's a prophet of God." (Page 431). At another point in their conversations Naipaul states, "Sikhism in (Gurtej Singh's) interpretation, was a religion of prophecy and revelation" (Page 475).

Howsoever the word 'prophet' is used in common parlance, the word in religious lexicon means "one instructed by god to speak in his name and announce future events". The word and the concept first appear in the Judaic faith. The Old Testament speaks of sixteen prophets (among them Jonah, Isaiah, Daniel, Moses) whose prophecies form part of the canon. As the Christian and the Muslim religions are rooted in the Judaic history they, too, borrowed the word.

Naipaul admits that the idea of prophet is "not held by every Sikh" (Page 431). Guru Nanak defined himself as a teacher and a guide "but not a prophet" ("*History of Sikhs*" (Vol. I), Khushwant Singh, page 41). In his footnote Khushwant Singh provides an excerpt from a dialogue between Guru Nanak and Mian Mitha, wherein Guru Nanak said, "At God's gate there is no room for a prophet, God alone dwells there". Guru Gobind Singh, too, fearing his followers may bestow divinity on him wrote in *Bicitra Natak*:

But whosoever regards me as Lord

Shall be damned and destroyed

I am – and of this let there be no doubt –

I am but the slave of God, as other men are,

A beholder of the wonders of creation.

The ideas of prophet and revelation may have first come to Gurtej Singh at his boarding school. The Irish Catholic School at Dehra Dun which "was run by the Irish Brothers, the order of St. Patrick" (page 441). Naipaul believes that "in his solitude over those ten years (at school, that) some wish to touch his own faith with this non-Indian magic, might have come to Gurtej". Later, these ideas were to be reinforced by his mentor Kapur Singh.

Kapur Singh was senior to Gurtej Singh by 35 years. For the most part their lives mirrored one another, uncannily. Both were the first from a farming family to receive a university education. Both served in the coveted Administrative Service. Both left the service around age 35 under a cloud. Both felt undone by state authorities and "thrown from pillar to post". The younger man idolized the elderly Kapur Singh.

Gurtej Singh met Kapur Singh in 1965 at the impressionable age of 18. They were to remain in close touch with one another until the demise of the latter in 1986(?). Much of what he was to convey to Naipaul on Sikhism had been tempered by the personal suffering, thoughts and writings of Kapur Singh. Naipaul believes Kapur Singh "opened Gurtej's eyes to the position of Sikhs in India", and, additionally, motivated him to take *amrit*. Although Gurtej followed "all the tenets of the religion", it was not until 1974 that he was to take *amrit* as an affirmation of his commitment to his faith. The votary in him chose Anandpur Sahib for the formal ceremony, the place where "Guru Gobind Singh had performed the first baptism of Sikhs in 1699" (page 438).

Naipaul's observations - ferreted out from his several interviews with a handful of persons - are in essence what the chapter "The Shadow of the Guru" is based upon. However, his interviews with Gurtej Singh are the nucleus. Gurtej Singh came highly recommended; he was educated and articulate; he had written several papers and articles on Sikhism, some for the *Encyclopaedia of Sikhism*. It was the killing of Bhindranwale's followers by Nirankaris, in April 1978, which was the wake up call for Gurtej to take up "political work". In addition, he was well acquainted with Bhindranwale, major-general Shabeg Singh, Sant Longowal and the top brass of Akali leadership.

Naipaul shows only a passing interest in Sikhism, the faith. He was convinced that the genesis of Sikh rage lay in ancient grudges: chiefly, Hindu betrayal of the Sikh empire of Maharajah Ranjit Singh leading to its annexation by the British. To drive home the point he uses the imagery of barbarity at the siege of Lucknow, during the 1857 mutiny, whereat the Sikh soldiers, fighting alongside the Scottish highlanders, fought with ferocity only consonant with "a wish to get even with the 'Pandies' who had helped to defeat them less than 10 years before" (page 421).

He banks on eyewitness account of an obscure British correspondent, one William Howard Russell, who portrays the Sikhs not only turning against their fellowmen but also a people to whom brutality and mutilation "might have been no more than their practice". Russell hinted that siding with the British in 1857 made the Sikhs traitors; Hindu zealots believe that raging against India in the 1980's made Sikhs anti-nationalists. Today, this idea of continuum of Sikh disloyalty is perpetuated *ad nauseam* by Hindutva radicals. By embracing the notion without question, Naipaul shows his gullibility, or else he indulged in intellectual dishonesty. He ignored the fact that the mutiny that had its genesis in military grievances had been hijacked by special interest group intent upon restoring Bahadur Shah to the Moghul throne. Would he have us believe that India will have been better off under a restored Moghul rule?

This settling of score with "Pandies" (colloquial for Brahmin) is Naipaul's refrain; one of the 'million mutinies' that he has in mind. In his very opening words, he infers that vengeance was the rage to which Sikhs awakened in Punjab in the 1980's. Vengeance presumes an anterior wrong, hurt or injustice requiring remedial action. Mutiny is one such action that involves resistance to lawful authority. Yet, Naipaul makes mention nowhere about any insurgency.

He glosses over the litany of Punjab's grievances that gave rise to the 'mutiny'. Instead, he discounts the 'mutiny' to the level of communal violence, mainly Sikh upon Hindu violence. What drove the Sikhs, enjoined from childhood to serve mankind ('*kar seva*'), to engage in the killings of fellowmen? Rather than find an answer, Naipaul concludes: "the good and poetic concepts of Sikhism were twisted (and) when terror became an expression of the faith, the idea of *seva* altered" (page 446). His blaming the faith for giving expression to terror is an outrage, a Brahmin mindset.

The scope of violence widened as Sikh turned upon Sikh, enemies of the cause. The Sikh militant got transformed into a killing machine that "lived now only for murder, the idea of the enemy and the traitor, grudge and complaint, like a complete expression of their faith" (page 452). In depicting Sikhs as bloodthirsty Naipaul mimics William Howard Russell. Worse still, he tarnishes the Sikh faith, once again, for promoting the terror.

Next to the Sikh faith, Naipaul's quarry was Bhindranwale. He wanted to find out how an ordinarily simple man with no worldly knowledge; who, from memory was able to recite chapter and verse from the scriptures, and, who had Sikh history down pat, was plucked from his seminary to become the voice of disgruntled Sikhs. More than that, he hoped to unravel how "the country's best-off group (who) was among the leaders in every field" went into backslide by letting their latent sectarian and clannish politics to become "confounded with a Sikh fundamentalism preached by a young man of a simple village background" (page 423). Naipaul believes that the answers lie in "some intellectual or emotional flaw in the community (wherefrom) developed a lack of balance between their material achievement and their internal life" (page 424).

Flaws that skewed the balance, in the Sikhs, between their well-to-do way of life and spirituality became Naipaul's quest. For the inquest, Naipaul - imagine him as the Coroner - was to rely on the autopsy findings of a pathologist (Gurtej Singh) and a handful of other key witnesses (Ram Singh, Joga, Buta Singh, Amrinder Singh (Patiala), Dalip and Kuldip among others).

Naipaul sees an in-house rebellion "against Brahmin orthodoxy" taking place in India *longo intervallo*. Two thousand years after Buddha rebelled, "Guru Nanak, the first Guru of the Sikhs, had rebelled" (Page 423). **Guru Nanak's break away from Hinduism was based on his rejection of polytheism, rigid caste structure and rituals that were so much a part of the daily lives of Hindus. Naipaul, on the other hand, pins it on "the anguish caused by Muslim persecution of Hindus that the Sikh religion had risen", making one wonder if this misconstruction was willful or mistaken.**

That the distortion was willful becomes evident as Naipaul continues to misconstrue other Sikh Gurus. For example, he distills the philosophy and religion of Guru Gobind Singh, the last in line of the Gurus of the Sikhs, as one of "gesture and symbol (which) came more easily than the philosophy and poetry of the first Guru" (Page 450). Guru Gobind Singh introduced the concept of *dharma yudh* (fighting on the side of righteousness); he abolished the institution of *masands*; he brought into being a new fraternity to restore self-esteem and pride in his followers; he was to repose guruship in Sri Guru Granth Sahib and end wrangling over succession; he was a mystic and a poet extraordinaire. All these qualities and accomplishments go unnoticed by Naipaul.

Misconstructions of religion apart, Naipaul misrenders the carnage of November 1984 when a river of Hindu mobs snaked through the lanes and byways of various towns and cities to butcher all Sikh males and gang rape their womenfolk. He describes the carnage in two terse sentences: "There were riots after the murder. The most dreadful were in Delhi; where hundreds died" (Page 424). **Calling the slaughter "riots" is the favoured argot of the authorities. A riot is defined by the political lexicon as a "disturbance of the peace by a crowd", usually in protest to some injustice. Yet in Delhi and other towns there were no signs of civil protest or disturbance; instead, organized gangs led in some instances by Cabinet ranking ministers were on a rampage to kill, rape and loot Sikhs; and, the slaughter went on for days. Putting numbers killed at "hundreds" when several thousands died is another misstatement.**

Worse still, Naipaul blames the Sikhs who he claims "had brought this tragedy on themselves, manufacturing grievances out of their great success in independent India". In assessing blame he is uncharacteristically ambiguous. For instance, does he justify punishing the entire Sikh community for the crimes of two of their members who killed Mrs Gandhi in a tit-for-tat; if so, how would he explain the absence of reprisal against Marathas when one of them assassinated Mahatma Gandhi, or lack of vengefulness against Tamils when one of them blew up Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi? He ignored the underlining communal differential: Sikhs are one of "them" and not one of "us", which will explain the battle cry "teach the Sikhs a lesson" resonating in the streets of Delhi and other metropolitan cities, in November 1984, as Hindu Mobs hunted down their Sikh victims.

Grievances are normally the product of perceived unfairness, dissatisfaction with current state of affairs or a need unmet. Unresolved complaints turn into a protest and become part of the overall struggle. From the dawn of independence Sikhs have been treated unfairly compared to other states of the Union. Their beefs, real and legitimate, are catalogued in the Anandpur Sahib Resolutions. To characterize them as manufactured is a measure of prejudice in Naipaul.

However, Naipaul's understanding of the politics of Sikhs came from none other than Sikhs themselves, his interviewees. Gurtej Singh was the principal source. He was in the prime of his career, aged 35, when he resigned from IAS. He feels he was made to resign because of his "religious activities" (Page 440), chiefly writing. For example, a paper written by him called "Genesis of the Sikh Problem in India" advances the twin themes that Punjab was "geographically and culturally more a part of Middle East than India; and, that the great enemy of Sikhism has been Brahminsim". He had run afoul of the authorities and was to suffer a fate similar to Kapur Singh, his poster hero and religious guide.

Kapur Singh, a Cantabrigian, was dismissed from the elitist Indian civil service over "some trouble about money". He, too, was in his mid-thirties at the time. Kapur Singh was someone Gurtej knew who carried the cross and whose trials and tribulations he describes in great detail. Kapur Singh's personal ordeal at the hands of the authorities, the Indians, was juxtaposed with the history of hurts and torture of Sikhs at the hands of authorities of the past, the Moghuls, to show that suffering was part of Sikh experience.

Thus, Gurtej Singh sees everything from the prism of pain and suffering, be it individual or collective. He accuses the Union government for giving the shortest of shrift to Sikhs. So, when they first meet Gurtej wants to discuss the "water problem"; Naipaul wants to understand "Sikh alienation". Still, Gurtej Singh succeeds in furnishing an inventory of Sikh grievances bit by bit. Unattended grievances, we deduce, add to suffering. Frequently, Gurtej Singh digs deep into Sikh history to demonstrate the continuum of suffering: the martyrdom of Guru Arjun Dev and Guru Tegh Bahadur; adversities that plagued Guru Gobind Singh; bricking alive infant sons of Guru Gobind; the brutal and bestial manner of hacking to death of Banda Bahadur and his men, and so on. Sikhs, Gurtej feels, are fated to suffer.

- End of Part I

[To be continued]

