



REJOINER

## Does Willy Get It Wilfully Wrong?

Or is it willy nilly? In any case, William Dalrymple's political project, his vaunted **correction of V.S. Naipaul**, is one within continuing Nehru 'secularism'. He is the Sonia Gandhi of Indian writing—an outsider, a generation too late, who makes desperate gestures to be accepted.

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**A**n article has been following me. I first saw it in the Indian weekly *Outlook* which I picked up at a Mumbai railway station. It was an attack by William Dalrymple on V.S. Naipaul, challenging his credentials as a historian. Dalrymple sees it as his duty to correct what he says V.S.

Naipaul "gets badly wrong".

Soon after, on returning to England, I find the same article published in *The Guardian*. It pops up on the web as an attachment to e-mails sent by some electronic mind convinced that I'd be interested in several copies of it. I junk the rest, read one of them and wonder whether to report it as more computer 'spam'.

Dalrymple loftily, somewhat embarrassingly, acknowledges that "few would dispute Sir Vidia's status as probably the greatest living writer of Indian origin; indeed many would go further..." V.S.

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Naipaul will no doubt be thankful for the probability.

But still, these 'few's and 'many's conceal an insidious dishonesty in the whole approach:

The article begins with:

"There was some surprise when Sir Vidia and Lady Naipaul turned up at the BJP office last week and gave what many in the press took to be a pre-election endorsement not just of the party but the entire Sangh Parivar programme"

He doesn't say who was surprised. I wasn't. I was at the meeting as a reporter. "The many in the press" weren't present as one of the conditions of the meeting was that the press be excluded.

I wrote about the meeting between VS and the 'cultural wing' (sic) of the BJP at length in Mumbai's *Midday* [republished [here](#)]. V.S.

Naipaul made no endorsement of the BJP, or of any article of, leave aside 'the entire', programme of the Sangh Parivar. To say so is either nasty conjecture, bad second-hand reportage or a mischievous lie.

**...And they weren't concerned with maintaining a separate identity. No, they frequented Shiv temples, became good Hindus and stopped eating meat, yes?**

The exclusion of the press must account for Dalrymple's conjectures about what was said. Hence the lack of a single accurate quotation and the reliance on 'few's, 'many's and 'allegedly's. The article goes on to state Dalrymple's own historical points which need to be addressed but it begins with the presumption the meeting was a 'pre-election endorsement'. For the record Naipaul did say to reporters outside the meeting that he would accept any invitation from the Congress party to exchange views if he was invited. He was there as a curious writer. I don't think he was unaware that the press was treating his presence as considerably more than that, but an endorsement is perhaps not only too strong, it's quite mistaken.

The meeting was entirely given over to VS asking the questions, receiving various answers and making some singular points himself. Some of the comments from the floor were interesting and informative, others went off the rails and were treated by VS with the contempt they deserved. A fellow stood up and, unbidden, proposed that the Koran be revised, that the parts which can be interpreted as inspiring hatred be expunged. VS said he had nothing to say about that.

When he was asked for his opinion of the BJP's progress, he repeatedly said that to him the party seemed to be the political expression of a new and welcome passion and confidence in sections of the population which were beginning to democratically express themselves.

It was his view that the party ought to keep passion in its place and do some hard thinking.

It was up to the party now to generate and field informed ideas and guide the movement with programmes and policies for the development of India, its culture, its wealth and its civilised progress. He very specifically said that as far as he was concerned, religion ought to be kept out of politics.

**Dalrymple's project is to deny and hide the disjuncture in Indian history in order to endorse the ideology of the Nehru era as though it were**

**D**alrymple then slides from the imagined content of this meeting to V.S. Naipaul's general historical views which he sees as his duty to challenge. He quotes Naipaul's statement that the Mughal invasion of India, by Zahiruddin Mohammad Babar in the sixteenth century "left a deep wound". There follow other quotations from Naipaul's writings and interviews:

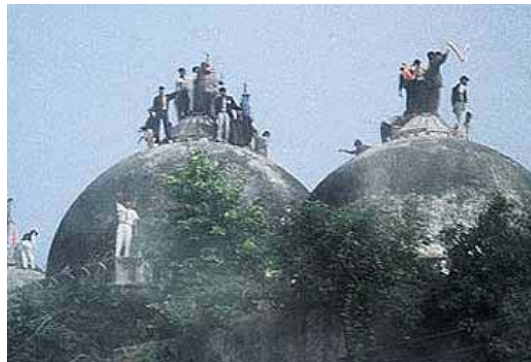
"I think when you see so many Hindu temples of the tenth century or earlier disfigured, defaced, you realise that something terrible happened. I feel the civilisation of that closed world was mortally wounded by those invasions... the old world is destroyed. That has to be understood. Ancient Hindu India was destroyed."

eternal truth.

A glance at the quotations and a smattering of Indian history should indicate that Naipaul is not saying that Babar single-handedly destroyed Hindu civilisation.

Does Thapar really not understand what's going on here? Or is this bland and rote narration the best our historians, the ones Dalrymple reads and admires, can do?

The destruction went on over centuries with invasions of Muslim raiders from Arabia in Sindh, from Muslim Persia into the whole Indo-Gangetic plain, from Afghanistan and Central Asia--wave upon wave of conquerors, raiders, marauders, killers, looters, destroyers of temples and pilers-up of mountains of skulls to spread terror and to warn the infidels.



What Naipaul did say about this sixteenth century invasion, at the misreported meeting and elsewhere, was that Babar knew very well what Ayodhya meant to the Hindus.

In an act of hubris and religious vandalism he built a mosque on the spot where the population had pitched a legend. Did Naipaul believe that a temple lay underneath? No, he didn't have any opinion of any such thing and he wasn't interested in speculating about it. But he would only say that despite the passage of time, there were events that still aroused passions.

He was asked whether he supported the demolition of the Babri mosque and the building of a Ram temple in its place and he said he had nothing to say about that.

Surely D knows that religion does generate passion and often subsists on it. Hassan and Hussein were martyred at Karbala fourteen hundred years ago. It is not sensible or even possible to tell the Shia Muslims to forget it. The US soldiers in Iraq or indeed Dalrymple can have a go. He can attempt to tell them that they are being manipulated by Ayatollah politicians and isn't that a shame etcetera.

Dalrymple quotes Philip B. Wagoner to inform us that the Hindu kings of Vijayanagar wore Muslim court dress in public. Really? And the Jews of Warsaw adopted the frock coats, brimmed black hats and curly locks of the anti-semitic Polish aristocracy, did they not? Therefore there was no ghetto and no pogroms in Poland?

The substance of Dalrymple's article is an attack on Naipaul's contention in *India: A Wounded Civilisation* (1975) that the ruins of Vijayanagar, the South Indian Hindu kingdom destroyed and laid waste by a coalition of neighbouring Muslim rulers, are testimony to the fact that Hinduism had stagnated, that it was weak and having declined, was heading for that fall. Somehow Dalrymple, though he quotes the very words Naipaul uses to say this, contrives to think that

"For Naipaul, the fall of Vijayanagar is a paradigmatic wound on the psyche of India, part of a long series of failures that he believes still bruises the country's self-confidence."

A bit of spin that can be hit for a six there.

Naipaul's contention is surely not that Vijayanagar was the last bastion of Hindu sweetness and light to fall to the barbarians.

Perhaps Dalrymple, the Sufi murid, doesn't realise that Sufism's most striking and representative survivor is not the qawwali musical form or the ill-kept shrines of Muslim missionaries, where ignorant people go to beg divine favours, but the Sikh religion.

Naipaul undoubtedly sees ancient 'Hindu' India as one of the centres of civilisational evolution, to compare with Greece, Rome, Zoroastrian Persia and China. The Indian civilisational influence flourished and spread to South East Asia: to Thailand, Cambodia and Indonesia.

He is talking about the erosion of centuries, the effects of invasion after invasion, destruction, slaughter, conversion by the sword, the defeat and virtual erasure of kingdom after kingdom in northern and southern India. Vijayanagar is a whole city, not just a temple or a tomb, whose ruins testify to the end of this historical process. Vijayanagar was not simply annexed by the neighbouring disputants. It was demolished, wiped out, and its inhabitants put to death or taken in slavery.

The Muslim conquests were motivated not, as one may deduce through reading Dalrymple, by an urge to merge the menus of daal and rice with those of naan and kebab, or in fact to give us tombs decorated in an amalgam of Muslim and Hindu motifs.

What then motivates Dalrymple to challenge this view? He gives us a clue:

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

He then progresses to junk the work on Vijayanagar of someone called Robert Sewell.

Sikhism began in Sufism and was forced into militant opposition to the tyranny of the

Sewell is no doubt a sitting duck for the modern and anti-imperial British sniper, but what the hell has that got to do with V. S. Naipaul?

He has never read, leave aside quoted or used Sewell's work in evidence. The only sources V.S. Naipaul has ever quoted for his contentions are the original sources. In *Among the Believers* he quotes Ibn Batuta the fourteenth century Moroccan traveller. In *Reading and Writing* Naipaul quotes the *Chachnama*, an account of the invasions of Sindh by Arabian marauders written in the dark Indian ages. He quotes Bernier, the French traveller to India during the time of Shah Jahan. Naipaul's history is constructed from the original sources and from the evidence of what is left. Dalrymple's contentions seem to rest on essays by someone called Richard Eaton, an American Sanskrit scholar called Phillip B. Wagoner and

same Muslim zealot emperor Aurangzeb. Sufism, with all its philosophical monotony and beauty, is as important to India as the flower children are to capitalist, Christian America.

the art historian Mark Zebrowski. All these, no doubt, great writers, he treats with respect. Then he comes to an Indian historian called Meenakshi Jain and he labels her "an obscure college lecturer". Goodman the Wagoner, badman the Jain?

Using these American and foreign sources (irony intentional), Dalrymple goes on at great length to seek to prove that the fall of Vijayanagar was part of the hurly-burly of Hindu-Muslim friendships and enmities. He quotes Philip B. Wagoner to inform us that the Hindu kings of Vijayanagar wore Muslim court dress in public. Really? And the Jews of Warsaw adopted the frock coats, brimmed black hats and curly locks of the anti-semitic Polish aristocracy, did they not? Therefore there was no ghetto and no pogroms in Poland?

And the art historian Mark Zebrowski's contribution to an understanding of Indian history? That the art of the Muslim Bijapuri court depicts "girls as voluptuous as the nudes of South Indian sculpture." Er... yes, very nice, Willy! And who isn't partial to a bit of Islamototy if it's as good as the Hindu original, eh?

The single quote from one book should not represent V.S. Naipaul's view of Indian history, especially when the object is to 'challenge' it. Taken as a whole it may even be said that V.S. Naipaul's perspective on Indian history is profound, committed and revolutionary. As with all history, its ultimate accuracy and its power and effect as an idea will have to be the subject of detailed scrutiny and debate. It doesn't merit the silly treatment that Dalrymple, for reasons best known to himself, fastening on the fabricated content of a meeting he didn't attend, gives it.

**N**aipaul is essentially a writer of discovery. He tries on occasion to look into the past through the evidence of the present. That's what he did in writing about the ruins of Vijayanagar in *India: A Wounded Civilisation*. He is not a professional historian, but his insights and perspectives on Indian history are unique and as startling in their accuracy as the observations of his travel.

He undoubtedly sees ancient 'Hindu' India as one of the centres of civilisational evolution, to compare with Greece, Rome, Zoroastrian Persia and China. The Indian civilisational influence flourished and spread to South East Asia: to Thailand, Cambodia and Indonesia. It was a dominant force in the world. Its dominance and its edifices and practices are described respectfully, even beautifully by Alberuni (born 973) who travels through India before the fall. The splendour then comes to an abrupt end. Its development is truncated by the militant spread of Islam. Its fault: that it hadn't developed cannon and cavalry and new ways of killing. It was militarily weak.

Arab armies raided Sindh eleven times, looting it, slaughtering or enslaving its populations and reducing the Hindu population to subservience and degradation. And this not from any 'Victorian historian', but from the *Chachnamah*, the book of conquest written by the celebrants of the victorious side.

The destruction wrought by the Muslim raids and invasions left the civilisation headless, wounded, truncated in its development. The Muslim conquests were motivated not, as one may deduce through reading Dalrymple, by an urge to merge the menus of daal and rice with those of naan and kebab, or in fact to give us tombs (endless tombs, no universities, no ashrams, no hospitals, no cities with organised plans, just fortresses and pleasure gardens for the conquerors) decorated in an amalgam of Muslim and Hindu motifs. The invaders were motivated by greed for gold and slaves.

Any reference to the original sources will testify.

Ibn Batuta, a venal and ignorant Arab traveller gives us an account of his sojourn in India in the 14th century. The land is ruled by foreigners with Arab names and offices. They are the conquerors and occupiers and remind the native population, reduced to silence or invisibility, of it every day. Batuta is given Hindu slave girls to do with as he will. In Delhi he sees the daily slaughter of decapitated and mutilated bodies strewn at the door of the palace of the 'Sultan' to deter others from transgressing his will. They were dark ages indeed. There was brutality in Europe in medieval times too, but there is no group of 'historians' and fellow-travellers setting out to deny it.

Yet today in Europe and America there is a nasty school of denial--not of the Indian equivalent, but of recent European history. A group of 'historians' has set out, through propaganda on American campuses and by writing books, to deny the truths of the Nazi holocaust. David Irving, Henry Pogue and Bradley Smith admit in their works that there were labour camps for enemies of the Third Reich but deny the occurrence of the 'final solution' and of the systematic elimination of Jews from Germany and Nazi occupied Europe. These 'historians', dubbed the 'holocaust deniers' have been comprehensively refuted. Their motives are vicious. They consciously aim to assist neo-Nazi movements in Europe and America.

The motives of people like Dalrymple, those who wilfully set out to deny the facts of the destruction of the Hindu civilisation of India, are the opposite. Their denial of the large-scale destruction and denigration of Hindu religion and culture by the Muslim raiders, invaders and conquerors of India is motivated by the deep-seated political aim of the independence movement to brook no divide between Hindu and Muslim. It was for its time and for all time a noble aim. That was one of the things V.S. Naipaul said to the BJP gathering--that the project of Nehru and Gandhi to avoid going into the import of that history was in itself positively motivated. There is never any justification for one community in India to conduct a pogrom against another. Not then, not now.

But surely the construction of history should be truthful. Suppression can only exacerbate the anger.

**T**here was a time when only Englishmen had the right to write Indian history. But now that these obscure college lecturers are presuming to move in on their patch, we get a different perspective. The perspective of the essential outsider is being challenged and replaced. Winners usually write history, unless the descendants of the losers write it for them. Witness **Romila Thapar**, who writes:

"The assimilation of Islam in south India was a smoother process than in the north, since the Arabs were traders and not contestants for political power and consequently were not concerned with maintaining a separate identity."

"Smoother?" From whose point of view? It's like a communication from an SS officer to the Fuhrer: "Dear Herr Hitler, the final solution has been much smoother in Poland than it was in Berlin...." And the Arabs were 'contestants for political power' in the north, were they? They came and stood for elections, did they? And counted their 'vote-banks' after offering a programme of secularism, no doubt. And they weren't concerned with maintaining a separate identity. No, they frequented Shiv temples, became good Hindus and stopped eating meat, yes?

The destruction deniers will not acknowledge that there are deep divisions between Hindu and Muslim in the subcontinent and they are not the result of British manipulation. Partition had its roots in historical events and sentiment, in deep-seated antagonisms which politicians could then exploit.

These same deniers of the destruction wrought by the Islamic conquerors of India would not dare today to deny the cruelty of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. Some of their best friends are South African academics or black studies experts from the USA. They would positively embrace the cause of anti-apartheid in South Africa. They would never accept that Elvis Presley's adoption of gospel music meant that no cruelty had accompanied slavery. That's the sort of absurd argument that Dalrymple supplies.

His project is to deny and hide the disjuncture in Indian history in order to endorse the ideology of the Nehru era as though it were eternal truth.

**D**alrymple doesn't quote any original source but falls back on historians such as Thapar. VS is quite wrong to call Thapar a Marxist. Old Karl may not be turning in his grave at the attribution, but the mud in Highgate cemetery will certainly suffer some shifting trickles. Thapar is not so much a Marxist as a national ubiquitous. She sees history not as an Indian but from a lofty point of view. What does she say about the founding of Vijayanagar, since she is one of D's sources? This from her *A History of India 1* (Penguin 1966):

"In the course of its campaign in Warangal, the army of the Sultanate took prisoner two local princes Harihara and Bukka, and brought them back to Delhi, where they were converted to Islam and later sent back to the south to restore the authority of the Sultanate. In this the two princes succeeded, but the temptation to found their own kingdom proved irresistible. In 1336, Harihara was crowned king of Hastinavati, the nucleus of what was to become the Vijayanagara kingdom. In addition the two brothers took the most unusual step of reverting to Hinduism..."

Here's a paragraph out of which a Shakespeare would have made three chronicle plays. These boys were taken to Delhi and converted? Smoothly, no doubt. Then they were 'sent back' -- smoothly, one hopes. Were they good Muslims all the while or did they just feel that their lives were under threat? Did they live a lie as Muslims and ironically return home on a pretence of representing the Sultan and using his powers to get back to where they belonged? Is it at all surprising that once they were protected against the tyranny of their capture and conversion they declared themselves Hindu again? Does Thapar really not understand what's going on here? Or is this bland and rote narration the best our historians, the ones Dalrymple reads and admires, can do?

Indian democracy is undergoing a profound change and the understanding of Indian history will have to accompany it. This does not mean that history should be written to accommodate any political project, but it ought to discover the greater truths. India may not be shining, but it progresses. We have the evidence of our eyes and of statistics. People who weren't eating or working or had no hope forty years ago now have the confidence to form political parties and put members of their caste and class in parliament.

Of course an outsider can't understand such a movement. Sufi tombs, funereal architecture, American historians' accounts of the costumes of Indian kings, cities of djinns and other superstitious superficialities are the stuff in trade of the dilettante. Naipaul's books on India attempt to get at the root. Dalrymple is the optimistic observer of what he, quoting Salman Rushdie, calls the 'chutnification' of Indian culture--as though Hinduism and Islam were ginger and garlic. Hasn't V.S. Naipaul heard of Sufism and the amalgamation of Hindu and Muslim art? he pompously asks. Dalrymple is going to tell him about it and lecture us in the process. What about those shrines of Muslim saints to which Hindus go? What about Sufism? Hasn't Naipaul heard of Dara Shikoh? (I don't know why Dalrymple brings him into the argument as he was brutally defeated, forced to ride near naked on a donkey and executed by his brother Aurangzeb whose political deeds against the Hindus and Sikhs even Willy can't deny or disguise as good amalgamated cuisine).

Perhaps Dalrymple, the Sufi *murid*, doesn't realise that Sufism's most striking and representative survivor is not the qawwali musical form or the ill-kept shrines of Muslim missionaries, where ignorant people go to beg divine favours, but the Sikh religion. The religion began in Sufism and was forced into militant opposition to the tyranny of the same Muslim zealot emperor Aurangzeb. Sufism, with all its philosophical monotony and beauty, is as important to India as the flower children are to capitalist, Christian America.

Even so, let's give Willy his due. He is motivated in his attack by good and generous sentiments dedicated to the civilised survival of India. He is on the side of 'secularism'. He doesn't approve of innocent Muslims being slaughtered in pogroms by Hindu mobs in Ahmedabad while the police, under instructions from a BJP state government, stand by and let it happen. Of course he disapproves. Is his mealy-mouthed statement about V.S. Naipaul endorsing the 'entire programme' of the Sangh Parivar intended to imply that VS is on the other side and endorses such slaughter? (Come on Willy, get a ball transplant and say so, if that's what you and your Indian dilettante circuit think. VS won't read it or bother, but his agent will see you in court, in India *and* Vilayat, my dear!)

Willy's political project, his vaunted correction of V.S. Naipaul, is one within continuing Nehru 'secularism'. Willy is the Sonia Gandhi of Indian writing--an outsider, a generation too late, who makes desperate gestures to be accepted. As far as this comparison goes, Sonia has the advantage. In politics, you can say almost anything about your opponent. For history which makes an impact, you require accuracy, insight, vision and, what Naipaul distinctly has, a fresh and compelling overview.

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This piece first appeared in *Tehelka* dated April 24, 2004

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**Also See:**

**On Vijayanagara :** Sanjay Subrahmanyam's [The Golden Age Hallucinations](#)

**On Richard Eaton:** Koenaard Elst's [Vandalism Sanctified By Scripture](#)

**On Beyond Turk And Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia :** Balbir Punj's [Mughlai Parathas](#)

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