



COUNTERPOINT

What Sir Vidia Actually Said

The encounter at the exit got the headlines, but not what transpired at the meeting ... Did he still condemn the killings in Gujarat? Was it an endorsement of the BJP? Does he approve of the attempt to demolish the Babri Masjid? Can a person of foreign origin be Prime Minister of this country?

FARRUKH DHONDY

A friend from Delhi called. He had spotted me on TV standing behind V S Naipaul and whispering in his ear as he was being barracked by the national press after a closed meeting with the cultural wing of the Bharatiya Janata Party.

"What were you saying to him?" the friend asks. "I was telling him to come away. The tenor of the questions was hostile. Stitch-up time."

"Why did he endorse the fascists?" my friend asks. "How can he be on the board of *Tehelka* and maintain support for the BJP? What about Gujarat? And didn't he say America doesn't allow people of foreign origin to stand for the Presidency, opposing Sonia of course? If Steinbeck had tea with Hitler..."

Three good questions and one questionable implication. (Didn't Subhash Chandra Bose have tea with Hitler — or was it mishti-doi?) Stitch-up it was.

The meeting itself, from which the press was excluded, was of enduring interest and I shall say why. The encounter at the exit got the headlines.

There was a scrum of reporters and cameras poised. Twenty-five microphones were thrust into Vidia's face as he emerged with Nadira. Questions came like paint at Holi:

Sir Vidia, do you still condemn the killings in Gujarat? Then why are you having tea with these people?

Is this visit an endorsement of the BJP? Do you approve of the attempt to demolish the Babri Masjid? Can a person of foreign origin be Prime Minister of this country?

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Vidia had unequivocally condemned riot and murder in Gujarat. He was a writer and would go where curiosity took him and would follow up an invitation from, say, the Congress Party to discuss what he was interested in.

Yes he approved of the attempt to demolish the Babri Masjid. It was a symbolic act and he had talked about it before and didn't have the time to repeat the arguments here. Bulls may have seen red rags before, but the three women reporters in the front line of the stockade charged in with fiercer questions.

Vidia went on matter-of-factly. The question of people of foreign origin taking political power was a good thing to discuss as other democracies such as America had rules governing candidature....

And this was when I sensed he was being stitched up and, exceeding my brief of strictly silent observer, leaned over to ask him to withdraw, this wasn't the appropriate forum for any reason.

journalists left.

It could work for politicians on the stump or for Madonna at Cannes, but not for a thinker and writer to enunciate arguments which are *sui generis* complex. We would wait inside with tea and samosas till the sound-bite seekers, the cliché-snack

I got Vidia by the elbow. He was enjoying himself. Nadira was furious. We withdrew, back into the reception room.

Compared to any corporate building, the BJP compound in Ashoka Road, New Delhi, is a ramshackle affair and looks undernourished through a scarcity of funds and taste.

There are the undistinguished cars in the crowded park, the hundreds of petitioners or hangers-on beside the security gates, making a mockery of surveillance, the drab furniture in the sparse rooms — creaking hardboard external doors, trestle tables — in fact exactly what the headquarters of a democratic party in India, whose headquarters need not be shining, should be.

Vidia was invited to speak to the 'Cultural wing' of the Bharatiya Janata Party.

He accepted the invitation out of curiosity, out of the writer's essential openness to discussion and discovery and in line with his assessment: that the BJP is the political expression of a profound movement in the country's psyche and that it ought not to be judged and shunned but rather persuaded to temper its passions with intellect to take the country forward.

He and Nadira, Lady Naipaul, want me to go with them as a silent observer, for a reason. Neither of them know what form the interchange with the cultural cell is to take. They've been assured that the press will be kept out of it.

On a previous occasion, two years ago now, Vidia spoke to some members of the BJP high command and soon after Salman Rushdie wrote in the *New York Times* that this was a disgrace, that Naipaul had supported if not advocated the killing of Muslims and that the Nobel should be withdrawn from said writer.

Rushdie, an honourable man, must have been grievously misinformed. When the record was put straight, I am sure he wrote to NYT to recant, but alas the conniving Americans, with their divide and rule imperial policies towards the brotherhood of non-white writers, never published it.

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There was to be no such misunderstanding this time. I was to tag along and be a fly on the whitewashed wall. Actually I sat in a plastic chair together with 500 people who were possibly members, possibly invitees of the party's cultural cell.

Even after we drove in and Vidia and Nadira were welcomed by Law Minister Arun Jaitley and D P Sinha, a boss of the cultural department, the form and content of the encounter remained a mystery.

Not for long. V S was escorted from the reception room to a hall with a phalanx of 50 photographers, each, like the Hindu god of photojournalism, with four elbows.

Arun Jaitley asked them to take their photographs and leave, in honourable accordance with the agreements made at talks about talks.

V S said he wanted to hear from the people present rather than give a speech and during the exchange he would answer questions but he'd like to start with one. He wanted to know what the row about textbooks was.

An outspoken lady immediately took the floor and introduced her sister, one Dr Jain who then proceeded to tell us that she was a specialist historian and had written one of the texts over which there was controversy.

She had undertaken this work as a corrective to the work of people she persistently characterised as 'Marxist' historians. It was a word from her demonology.

Her contention was that the history of the cultural, religious and political movements that built the Jagannath temple and sculpted Khajuraho had been neglected and she had written a monologue addressing this history.

Another university lecturer came at the question from a different angle while Nadira whispered to her neighbour on the platform to dispatch someone to stop the persistent, loud and disruptive banging noise that seemed to come from beyond the hall.

The lecturer in English made the point that there was what he referred to as a 'civil war' between the old historians and 'intellectuals' and a new, as yet undefined, formation which was unwilling to ignore some realities of India's past.

The emissary did his work and the banging ceased. V S picked up on the English lecturer's code. He complimented the Party on being precisely that — the political expression of a new phase in Indian history through which a great mass of the population were discovering a self-confidence.

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He was directly saying that he felt that religion ought to be left to the individual and not manipulated for political purposes. He was asking for a brave new discovery of history.

Even so, he added, one must understand the intellectual enterprise that speakers from the floor were indiscriminately calling 'Marxist history' as the project of the nationalist movement to present a history through which Muslim and Hindu could feel themselves united against British imperial rule.

With India pining for Independence, that was an understandable precaution but should not be taken as the tradition of truth.

The resurgence movement could not hope to recreate the past. There was no going back to the modalities of some glorious Hindu era of a thousand or two thousand years ago. All civilisations had to look forward.

The glory of Classical Greece and Imperial Rome had faded and no enterprise could bring them back. India too would have to find a modern lustre.

That would be the purpose of the debate. And in the search for it there had to be the acknowledgement that several of the useful instruments and institutions that formed the present and future were bequeathed to us by Imperial British rule. Britain

had brought us into modalities of European progress.

A lady in red objected to this statement. She was given the floor and wanted Vidia to condemn the British as historically evil for perpetrating "Apartheid" and for wiping out African civilisation.

Her diatribe followed a predictable pattern. Standard third-hand fare about colonialism, exploitation, slavery and no doubt other bad things and good causes.

The answer was a characteristic V S dismissal. "That's a tedious argument. It is repeated over and over again and means nothing. Try and understand the British too had a very difficult history. After the Roman conquerors left (he gives a date), they were invaded by Scandinavians, Anglo Saxons and then the Normans. Repeated waves of invasion and cruelty. They had a hard history. And we must acknowledge what they brought us. If the British hadn't colonised this country we would have ground each other into dust."

It wasn't a popular view in the hall. An angry and impatient man called for the microphone. He made a speech in Doordarshan Hindi about the flaws in the text of the Koran.

From what I gathered he was asking for a second edition of it with material to which he objected expurgated. Sinha translated for V S who shook his head and waved his hand dismissively. He had nothing to say about that.

It wouldn't have been a BJP meeting if at least one person hadn't asked him about 'the clash of civilisations'. In fact two people did and V S took it to mean what they intended: Islam vs the rest. But he wasn't taking the bait.

A Brahmin in the second row asked if V S approved of the events of a certain December, 12 years ago. V S made a quick calculation. The man meant the march and assault on the Babri Masjid.

Vidia's sound bite answers to snapped questions are a tease, but it is a serious tease with deadly conviction behind it. He believes that the awakening of the lower orders through their caste or religious identity is a historical phase rather than a reactionary aberration. He will engage with it, understand it, and prompt it.

"Babar came to India as an invader. He was aware of the religious associations of Ayodhya. Building a mosque on the spot was an act of hubris, a symbolic assault on the sensibilities of the population. If people attempt to remove that blot, redress the insult, then there's nothing wrong in that. About demolishing it and building a temple? I have nothing to say about that."

There was a lot of argy-bargy about history and why it wasn't a popular pursuit. V S got a murmur of disapproval when he said Indians weren't interested in history. Our writers in English had failed to explore its import and impact. They were writing for a foreign market and were not doing much more than boasting about their families.

Which inspired other 'writers' to think it was easy, they too could write about their mamaji and chachaji and win a fat advance.

In sharp contrast to these writers was Nirad Chaudhuri's *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*. It would demonstrate to sceptics the positive effects of the British Raj.

It wouldn't have been a BJP meeting if at least one person hadn't asked him about 'the clash of civilisations'. In fact two people did and V S took it to mean what they intended: Islam vs the rest.

But he wasn't taking the bait. "I don't think there is a clash of civilisations. The world lives more and more in one civilisation." He pointed to the microphones into which he was speaking. "These things." A mobile phone rang in the front row. "And those things," V S said. A senior cultural cadre, possessor of the phone, blithely answered it and loudly told his caller where he was and what he was doing.

The *Tehelka* question wasn't really asked, as it would surely have been in another sort of gathering, but V S volunteered the opinion that he saw no contradiction in his own stance: He supported the democratic movement from below which he thought the BJP was a manifestation of and he supported the intellectual, investigative and critical step forward in journalism that *Tehelka* represented.

That the powers of one had persecuted the editors of the other is, though V S didn't say it, a nasty paradox which can only be resolved when the cultural wing of a ruling party adopts the freedom of the press as an overriding aim. Overriding even the necessity to protect its own government's members from being fingered. Too much to ask?

On the way out Vidia asks if I thought it a success. I know the question that will be asked when news of such an encounter leaks.

Is V.S. Naipaul trying to ride a beast that will stubbornly take him in its own direction? Will anything he says rein it in and make it tread the path of tolerance, inclusiveness and progress?

Some in the room obviously thought that it already does. The vociferous questioners outside don't believe it does or can.

Vidia's sound bite answers to their snapped questions are a tease, but it is a serious tease with deadly conviction behind it. V.S. Naipaul believes that the awakening of the lower orders through their caste or religious identity is a historical phase rather than a reactionary aberration. He will engage with it, understand it, and prompt it.

Opposing such a conviction with accusations of 'fascism' is trivial and deserves the tease.

Farrukh Dhondy wrote this piece for *Mid Day*, Bombay, where it first appeared under the title, 'Of Clashes And Civilisations'.

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