

Indian Journeys: The Enigma of Exile

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The two most civilised autobiographies of the first half of the last barbaric century are M.K. Gandhi's *An Autobiography: The Story of my Experiments with Truth* (1929) and Jawaharlal Nehru's *An Autobiography* (1936) written entirely in prison from June 1934 - February 1935.

While many autobiographies become literary records of human evolution in individuality, the two works I consider here are more than that. The former depicts fulfilment of the individual soul through ethical life in the service to the political independence of more than India. Gandhi's is a story of his experiments in truth through the actions, thoughts and silent strength of the spirit. It is a re-remembering of the past. It is not just the *intifada* of the imagination; it is the *satyagraha* of the soul. It is not just the renewal and revaluation of a memory, it is the reawakening of the spirit of a civilisation defined by a humanity that is inherent in the individual and the possibilities of remaking oneself until one attains *moksha* in the garb of a *karmayogi*. It is a journey into the spirit of the self. Imagine this alternative man whose contemporaries were men like Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin and Mao.

Nehru's *An Autobiography* is the quest of one individual for freedom but also an insight into the making of the mind of India shaped by forces within and outside India, a luminous man's writings reflecting the radiance of his spirit. It is an exceptional rediscovery of the self by an extraordinary and exceptional man. Together these two remarkable books reveal to us what Sunil Khilnani in his splendid book-essay has termed 'the idea of India' at the heart of which lies politics: a society once structured by fixed, feudal and ancient hierarchies, 'India is today the most intensely political society in the world'.

This conception of the self, politics and writing is most profoundly explored and constructed into protean narratives in the two autobiographies. In a variety of ways they define for us India, Indianness and India's unfinished humanity of innumerable journeys like the rivers in its landscape flowing from the glinting snow-peaked mountains to the glittering blues waves of the ocean.

The 'self' in autobiographies is an evolving concept. Origins of the modern meanings of *self*, as a 'category of the human spirit', date back to the seventeenth century. The components of autobiography are a trinity: auto/bio/graphy: auto 'self', bio 'life', and graphy 'writing'. These three elements are central to Gandhi and Nehru's autobiographies. The creative association of self, life and writing, with each component in dynamic reflexive relationship to the other to extend the boundaries of perceptions of freedom and truth: freedom for Nehru, truth for Gandhi. If Gandhi's recollections are a remembering of quotidian and political acts leading to truth, Nehru's work is a reflection of civilizational connections - nothing that is human is alien to me - through the magnetic prism of an individual personality.

Five years after Gandhi's book, H.G. Wells publishes his *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934) and confines it to an enquiry into the future of fiction. Gandhi's is a story of his experiments in truth where remembering and writing become an instrument of self-knowledge and a knowledge of the other - the imperial forces as well as the masses of India. The poetics of a single life is coalesced in the politics of more than a sub-continent: in fact, it explores the shared subconsciousness of the subjugated world and deconstructs the largest imperial empire through a single conscience.

But I want to begin by suggesting that Gandhi's vision and experiment in writing had a lot to do with exile. As Louis Fischer writes:

The Gandhis apparently got into trouble often. Political intrigues forced grandfather Uttamchand out of the Prime Ministership of Porbandar and into exile in the nearby little state of Junagadh.

Gandhi's own three year exile and excommunication in England during his most formative years had doubtless deepened his knowledge of the life of the Buddha, Rama and Krishna and the Pandavas - the two great epics where exile is a major theme and where the banality of exile becomes a battle between good and evil. Exile becomes the precondition for the remaking of

the self; his writings, collected in 100 volumes, must have been a kind of homecoming for the pilgrim soul. One may note in passing that the word India itself is of a foreign origin and the river after which both the religion and the state are named is no longer in India: echoes of exilic voyages in alien landscapes.

But more importantly I wish to explore Gandhi's thirty-year sojourn in South Africa that made the Mahatma. Gandhi in 1893 had gone to Natal for a year on legal business for the Indian merchants but remained in South Africa for twenty years because, on the eve of his departure, he encountered Balasundaram, a coolie. This is how he described the fateful encounter in his *Autobiography*: The chapter is entitled 'Balasundaram':

Although the members of the Natal Indian Congress included the Colonial-born Indians and the clerical class, the unskilled wage earners and indentured labourers were still outside its pale. The Congress was not yet theirs. They could not afford to belong to it by paying the subscription and becoming its members. The Congress could win their attachment only by serving them. An opportunity offered itself when neither the Congress nor I was really ready for it. I had put in scarcely three or four months' practice, and the Congress also was still in its infancy, when a Tamil man in tattered clothes, head-gear in hand, two front teeth broken and his mouth bleeding, stood before me trembling and weeping. He had been heavily belaboured by his master. I learnt all about him from my clerk, who was Tamilian. Balasundaram - as that was the visitor's name - was serving his indenture under a well-known European resident of Durban. The master, getting angry with him, had lost self-control, and had beaten Balasundaram severely, breaking two of his teeth. I sent him to a doctor. In those days only white doctors were available. I wanted a certificate from the doctor about the nature of the injury Balasundaram had sustained. I secured the certificate, and straightway took the injured man to the magistrate to whom I submitted his affidavit. The magistrate was indignant when he read it, and issued a summons against the employer.

It was far from my desire to get the employer punished. I simply wanted Balasundaram to be released from him. I read the law about indentured labour. If an ordinary servant left ser-

vice without giving notice, he was liable to be sued by his master in a civil court. With the indentured labour the case was entirely different. He was liable, in similar circumstances, to be proceeded against in the criminal court and be imprisoned on conviction. That is why Sir William Hunter called the indenture system almost as bad as slavery. Like the slave the indentured labourer was the property of his master.

There were only two ways of releasing Balasundaram; either by getting the Protector of indentured labourers to cancel his indenture or transfer him to someone else, or by getting Balasundaram's employer to release him. I called on the latter and said to him: 'I do not want to proceed against you and get you punished. I think you realise that you have severely beaten the man, I shall be satisfied if you will transfer the indenture to someone else.' To this he readily agreed. I next saw the Protector. He also agreed, on condition that I found a new employer.

So I went off in search of an employer. He had to be European, as no Indians could employ indentured labour. At that time I knew very few Europeans. I met one of them. He very kindly agreed to take on Balasundaram. I gratefully acknowledged his kindness. The magistrate convicted Balasundaram's employer, and recorded that he had undertaken to transfer the indenture to someone else. Balasundaram's case reached the ears of every indentured labourer and I came to be regarded as their friend. I hailed this connection with delight. A regular stream of indentured labourers began to pour into my office, and I got the best opportunity of learning their joys and sorrows.

The echoes of Balasundaram's case were heard in far off Madras. Labourers from different parts of the province, who went to Natal on indenture, came to know of this case through their indentured brethren.

There was nothing extraordinary in the case itself, but the fact that there was someone in Natal to espouse their cause and publicly work for them gave the indentured labourers a joyful surprise and inspired them with hope.

I have said that Balasundaram entered my office, head-gear in hand. There was a particular pathos about the situation which also showed our humiliation. I have already narrated the incident when I was asked to take off my turban. A practice had been forced on every indentured labourer and every Indian stranger to take off his headgear when visiting a European, whether the head-gear was a cap, a turban, a scarf wrapped around the head, a salute even with both hands was not sufficient. Balasundaram thought that he should follow the practice even with me. This was the first case in my experience. I felt humiliated and asked him to tie up his scarf. He did so not without a certain hesitation, but I could perceive the pleasure on his face.

It has always been a mystery to me how men can feel themselves honoured by the humiliation of their fellow-beings.

It is my contention that it's Gandhi's South African experience, particularly with the indentured Indians, that shaped his life's mission. In South Africa his self-awareness was that of an alien Indian; in India he became increasingly a Hindu and was finally killed by another Hindu in a rich Hindu's courtyard. Indeed, if he hadn't been among the indentured Indians, he would probably have been an immensely successful Gujarati lawyer, with bania miscalculations, and might have ended up with a knighthood or two, supporting the British Raj. Besides, the details of Balasundaram's beatings, the taking off the headgear in one's hand is the indignity that Gandhi recognises with the sharpness of a noncitizen's humiliation. More than racial or colonial indignity is contested as the last sentence indicates.

But there's no doubt that the exilic nature of his existence heightens the sense of being an Indian. It is, incidentally, the last sentence that compelled Richard Attenborough to make the film *Gandhi* after twenty years of ruminations. Coming as I do from the Australia-Pacific region, it is significant to us that the great Oz writer Patrick White should have used a Gandhi quote as an epigraph to his first novel published in 1939: 'It is impossible to do away with the law of suffering, which is one indispensable condition of our being. Progress is to be measured by the amount of suffering undergone the purer the suffering, the greater is the progress.'

There's little dignity without suffering, Gandhi's life seems to illuminate; one must become worthy of one's suffering.

Anthony J. Perel in his Introduction to M. K. Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* underscores the point:

Gandhi entered the world historical stage not in India but in South Africa. A grasp of the significance of this fact is absolutely essential for a full understanding of the teachings of *Hind Swaraj*. In the first place, it was in South Africa, not in India, that he first acquired his vision of Indian nationalism, a fact which differentiates his nationalism, from that of the other Indian nationalists. His idea of nationalism does not start with the locality and then gradually extends itself to the province and finally the nation. Quite the reverse. He was first an Indian, then a Gujarati, and only then a Kathiavadi. And South Africa has a lot to do with this. Secondly, it is in the politics of the Transvaal, not Champaran or Bardoli, that he first developed his unique political philosophy and political techniques.

Indian indentured emigration was started soon after the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1833. Colonial governments in the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean, Africa, and the Pacific turned to India for sources of cheap labour supply. Mauritius, in 1834, was the first colony to import Indian indentured labour, followed by British Guyana in 1838; Trinidad and Jamaica in 1845; small West Indian colonies such as St Kitts, St Lucia, St. Vincent and Granada in the 1850s; Natal in 1860; Surinam in 1873; and Fiji in 1879. During almost one hundred years of servitude of indentured emigration, over one million Indians were introduced into these colonies. Large numbers of contract labourers were also imported into Malaya, Sri Lanka, and Burma, but under a slightly different contract. Thus Indians became ubiquitous in the empire; these were Indians from India, not Red Indians.

Hugh Tinker has given a comprehensive picture of this colonial dispersal of the Indians in many parts of the world in his informative books *A New System of Slavery: the Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830-1920* (1974), *Separate and Unequal: India and the Indians in the British Commonwealth 1920-1950* (1976), *The Banyan Tree: Overseas Emigrants from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh* (1977). Rabindranath Tagore understood its importance to the Indian experience:

To study a banyan tree, wrote Tagore, you not only must know its main stem in its own soil, but also must trace the growth of its greatness in the further soil, for then you can know the true

nature of its vitality. The civilisation of India, like the banyan tree, has shed its beneficent shade away from its own birth-place...India can live and grow by spreading abroad - not the political India, but the ideal India.

But the idea of the ideal is always fragile, vulnerable and exilic. New maps of the mind and memory have to be re-imagined from the ashes of history and the wishes of people in power. This exile into the indenture experience was of course heightened by Gandhi's first study trip to London. (In all Gandhi made five visits to London beginning with his first night in London on September 29, 1888.) London, of which one of his compatriots, wrote:

With all its unattractiveness, London is still a Mecca for the traveller in search of truth, a Medina of rest for the persecuted or the perplexed in spirit. Though centre of perpetual motion, it is still the Persepolis of human grandeur in repose. To the searcher after enlightenment it is Budh-Gaya; a Benares for the sinner in search of emancipation. Damp, dirty, noisy London, thou art verily a Jerusalem for the weary soldier of faith.

Gandhi's encounter with London, comments James Hunt, was one of the truly shaping events of his career. During the two years and eight months as a student, he gained considerable understanding of British life, a love for the English people, and a deep attachment to the city itself. London was for him the place of his professional training, and where he began his intellectual awakening, his moral maturation, and the opening of his spiritual questions. He also understood the essence of the law of the land.

But it is not the physical location of the individual that shapes him in exile, it is really his readings and remembrances of mainly western texts such as Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, *What is Art?*, *The Story of Our Times*; two books by John Ruskin *Unto this Last* and *A Joy for Ever*; Thoreau's *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*; Plato's dialogues on *The Death and Defence of Socrates*; Mazzini's *The Duties of Man* and Edward Carpenter's *Civilisation: Its Cause and Cure*. These, besides his readings on law and vegetarianism.

What these show is that Gandhi was shaped in his exilic existence by the power of the pen wielded by a variety of minds and men. It is this that makes 'his never-ending concern for maintaining common ground with those he must oppose'. This interconnection with the spiritual uni-

verse of the west later became for the Mahatma, within the Indian religious world, the source of his own eclectic and pluralist morality.

But it is Nehru, as Sunil Khilnani points out in his chapter *Who is an Indian?*, who discovers for India 'a basis for unity both in a shared historical past of cultural mixing, and a future project of common development.' Through writing, both Gandhi and Nehru search and create the identity of the unimaginable community and their own sense of being Indian. 'After all, before the nineteenth century no residents of the sub-continent would have identified themselves as Indian.'

II

In her Introduction to the two-volume *Selected Writings of Nehru*, Dorothy Norman comments:

The time: January, 1950. The month during which the newly liberated Republic of India was to be formally inaugurated. Exhilarating excitement in the air. Indians massing. Visitors gathering from the far corners of the world to join in celebration of the auspicious occasion.

The scene: New Delhi. The resident of Jawaharlal Nehru, first Prime Minister of Free India.

As the Prime Minister walked away from a group of guests he concealed his amusement with difficulty. A woman with whom he has just spoken, who had only recently arrived in India, and whom he had never met before, had informed him that what he had been saying had so impressed her, she wondered whether he had ever written anything. The world-renowned author smiled his shy, fleeting smile.

As Nehru spoke, I realized that, despite my own long-standing interest in his writings, it had not occurred to me to inquire during just that period whether he happened to be working on some new publication. I asked him whether he was. My question aroused still further laughter: "How could I be? I've not been in jail of late."

As I smiled in response, I was startled to discover that I had myself temporarily forgotten - before even the birth of the Indian Republic - that the major writings of this extraordinarily gifted and courageous man had come into being precisely

during those long and lonely, wearying terms of imprisonment, suffered for no other crime than the sincere and passionate desire to see colonial India liberated from foreign rule.

I was also moved by the gentle humour and exemplary lack of bitterness displayed, both so clearly stemming from a generous ability to ignore already past issues, in order to concentrate upon more pressing problems involving the future fate of over three hundred million fellow-countrymen.

The Delhi incident continued to haunt me.

Of course one talks about Nehru's writings, seventy years after India's independence, not only because his importance lies in how his thinking remains an element to be reckoned with in appreciating the continuing evolution of India. It was Nehru's scientific vision that had laid the foundation of modern India and gave it a unique sense of nationalism without simplifying the definition of Indianness. 'For all the political vexations visited upon it...India, an ungainly, unlikely, inelegant concatenation of differences, after fifty years, still exists as a single political unit. This would be unimaginable without Nehru's improvisation.' Writing becomes a maestro's virtuoso performance on a sitar. I'd like to suggest that this vision of India comes to Nehru through his writing. Just as Christ comes to the most compassionate judgement about 'a woman taken in adultery'. Jesus stooped down and wrote on the ground and then said: 'He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her'. The very act of writing gives him the insight which transcends what was carved in stone.

Nehru's works are in several volumes. The remarkable gift of the man was that no matter what the subject, the touch of his mind lifted it above the mundane and made the utterance inspiring and memorable. He wrote and read prolifically. Among his works that I've enjoyed are: *A Bunch of Old Letters*, *An Autobiography*, and *The Discovery of India* which is really Nehru's odyssey into his spiritual thoughtscape. *Discovery* has become a foundational text of Indian studies and in India's postcolonial rediscovery of her essence and of others.

A Bunch of Old Letters shows Nehru's varied and evolving relationships with the leading men and women of his generation. People who were involved in changing, shaping and building a new world from the remnants of the collapsing colonial bungalows and beyond. Nehru himself is often sharp and unsparing in his comments about the actions and words of his colleagues. Letters to Nehru are equally devastating in their comments about him. But it is a correspondence between equals where

the generosity of mind is always present unlike the petty and petulant reactions of some of our contemporary public men. The volume reflects his human relationships in the midst of great political turmoil and personal tragedies. After all, Nehru spent more than thirteen years in jail, lost a father, a wife and a son. In reading his letters, one sees why Churchill, who was his implacable political adversary and the arch supporter of the Empire, said: 'Nehru was one leader who had conquered hatred, fear and, above all, bitterness.'

Even his conflict with Gandhi - they were two revolutionaries who initially spoke in different idioms and espoused different ideologies - is given full expression in the letters. They disagree deeply but they never become disagreeable. And in their differences it is always the personal loss that is stressed. Nehru writes to Gandhi: 'I had a sudden and intense feeling that something broke inside me, a bond that I had valued greatly had snapped. I felt terribly lonely.' One can understand why this unique relationship survived so many political haemorrhages. It was always sustained by a personal bond of respect, trust and an ever evolving relationship. For what can be more creative than human relationships that require the daring of an explorer or that of a visionary?

On another occasion when Nehru threatens to resign from the Congress Working Committee because of his colleagues, Gandhi writes: 'Why should it be so difficult for you to get on with those with whom you have worked without a jar for years? If they are guilty of intolerance you have more than your share of it. The country should not be made to suffer for your mutual intolerance.' And once again frankness fortified their friendship and the cause of the nation is put first before personal rivalries. In the *Letters*, rarely does one come across a pious platitude or a shonky sentiment so common among politicians; nor does one find the pious clichés about revolution and radicalism of many academics and Chardon-nay socialists. So *Letters* throws light not only on some critical moments in history but it is a reflection of a man and his myriad relationships with ideas and people who went into his making by acting and reacting in their relationships with him.

But the best journey to make is inward. It is in Nehru's *An Autobiography* that you perceive his many-layered existence. The autobiography is not a traditional art-form in India, because the Indians, at least the sensible ones who had personality, believed in the extinction of personality while an autobiography is often an exposition of the cult of narcissism or auto-glorification. Nehru's book is full of fascinating details about his environment, education, family relationships, people and events that had decisive influences on his life. The personal and the political are seam-

lessly merged. The natural world has its charms, too. Here is a man discovering himself: his struggles, his survival but never at the expense of others for he never saw any person as expendable.

Writing about oneself becomes the mode of being and becoming. It clarifies one's vision of oneself; it keeps one from insanity; from suicide in the isolation of gaol, or the betrayal of friends or failure of causes. Besides it makes one look at oneself objectively: nothing is more penetrating than the cold implacable print staring back at one with the detachment of a judge who not long ago was one's intimate friend. 'It was' as S. Gopal wrote, 'an essential document of the period, a key to the ideas and politics of a whole new world...in the language of modernity and reason...whom, unlike Gandhi, the West could understand....'

So Nehru writes about himself: the interior calls and from the political precipices one turns and holds on to the ledges of one's memories. One is amazed by the man's capacity to read and remember so much: quotations from obscure poets, ordinary experiences given immense significance and value in the loneliness of a gaol. A bare tree in winter and the first stirring of leaves in spring, a squirrel building a nest in the corner of the room, the lack of women's voices and children's laughter that one misses in jail, even the barking of dogs is missed amidst his preoccupations on Indian freedom, war and peace.

The autobiography becomes the mirror of many mirrors but all effortlessly repeating the writer's reflections until finally there is only one integrated image: the life of a man - no more, no less. And it contains multitudes. And yet the 'autobiography' becomes the subterranean text of almost all his writings: the person and the persona of the author are inseparable; indeed they are deepened by the politics of the birth of a nation and a world of imperialism inexorably going to meet its nemesis.

For Nehru was too great a mind to be obsessed by his own sense of destiny or identity. Indeed he must be the only statesman who wrote a blistering essay against himself under a pseudonym. And when the essay was published, Nehru's supporters were so outraged that they wanted to burn down the office of the magazine in which it was published! But Nehru sees India's freedom as part of the larger revolution of history. And so he begins to create this sense of history in his daughter and through her in the youth of India. His letters to Indira are published as *Glimpses of World History*, a highly praised book. He possessed that Shakespearean historical imagination of which Eliot said: 'He acquired more essential history from Plutarch than most men could from the whole of the British Museum.'

We see here both Nehru's historical consciousness and his creative understanding of history. One can only conjecture how much of the father's interpretation of history affected Indira Gandhi's own perception of people and forces during her most formative period. He picks up the most telling episodes, currents and personalities in history and makes them glow with brilliance rarely glimpsed. Reading these illuminations of civilisations, one can imagine how his daughter's curiosity must have been aroused. What a gift of international values it was to give to a thirteen-year old girl! He writes in one place: 'I talk of Asia and Europe. But they are just geographical expressions and the problems that face us are not Asiatic or European problems but world problems'. At another place we find: 'Nationalism is good in its place, but it is an unreliable friend and an unsafe historian. It blinds us to weaknesses especially when it concerns our own country. So we have to be wary when considering the recent history of India lest we cast the blame for all our misfortunes on the British'.

So having looked at people, himself and the world, he gives us his vision of India itself in *The Discovery of India*. It is a compelling voyage and India is close to his bones. To restore in his people the trampled self-esteem he has to rediscover the country of the spirit and show how a civilisation decays from inner failure rather than from external pressures. But first it is to remove from the face of India all the dust and dirt of ages that have covered her up and hidden her inner beauty and significance, the excrescences and abortions that have twisted and petrified her spirit, set in rigid frames and stunted her growth. Today perhaps *The Discovery of India* is read more widely than any history of India.

He sets out on this journey to give some inner resources to his people. He traces with intimacy the continuity of spiritual unity and the historical reality of India: some core that has remained untarnished despite cataclysms of all sorts. He shows how the Indian people, in times of crisis, have delved into their national soul to search for strength, solace and inspiration from the lives and traditions rooted in the much-lived soil. He reminds the readers, particularly Indians and Hindus, that India is made up of the civilisations of the Greeks, Scythians, Huns, Turks, Afghans, Persians, Moguls and Christians. That is a rich and diverse inheritance. But it must be enriched further. The sea never overflows: only the tidal waves change.

But *The Discovery* is not only about an ancient culture and the birth of a new vision, it is about people. Take for instance someone like Ramanujam, a clerk, whose mathematical genius was discovered by accident and who worked with the great mathematician, Professor Harding of Cambridge and whom Sir Julian Huxley called the 'great mathematician

of the century'. Ramanujam died at 33, but Nehru remembers him and uses his name to make a poignant point: 'Ramanujam's brief life and death are symbolic of conditions in India. Of our millions how few get any education at all; of even those who get some education and have nothing to look forward to but a clerkship -if life opened its gates to them, how many among these millions would be eminent scientists, educationists, scholars, writers and artists hoping to build a new India and a new world?'

So personal history is used to create a sense of urgency and immediacy. Nehru himself lays the foundations of that vision when he becomes the Prime Minister. Nehru's attempt is a synthesis of art and life, the best in the East with the best in the West, of the living past and the pulsating tomorrow all contributing to the present. He makes us feel that we are heirs to all that humanity has thought and felt and in his writings we see his healing touch and the charities of his imagination - qualities all too rare among many of us.

The first paragraph of his speech on the momentous midnight of 15 August 1947 tells us all. It shows and sums up an intensely personal vision, his abundant love for his country, his sense of history, his forward looking attitudes, a faith in a new beginning, his capacity to inspire others, his concern not only for India, but the later cause of humanity and all in a language that creates what it conveys where every word lights up with the miraculous touch of the intensity of thought and feeling that illuminates the collective consciousness of a country so deeply wounded by colonialism and communalism:

Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. At the stroke of midnight hour when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom. A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of the nation long suppressed, finds utterance. It is fitting at this solemn moment we take the pledge of dedication to service of India and her people and to the still larger cause of humanity...

III

The first selected work in the anthology, *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing (1947-1997)* edited by Salman Rushdie, is Nehru's 'A Tryst With Destiny' and in the Introduction the celebrated and controversial author notes:

One of the most important voices in the story of modern literature, V.S. Naipaul, is regrettably absent from this book, not by our choice, but by his own. His three non-fiction books on India, *An Area of Darkness*, *India: A Wounded Civilisation* and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* are key texts. Many Indian critics have taken issue with the harshness of his responses. Some have fairly-mindedly conceded that he does attack things worth attacking. 'I'm anti-Naipaul when I visit the West,' one leading south Indian novelist told me, 'but I'm often pro-Naipaul back home.'

The absence of Naipaul from this volume hints of a deeper absence of the indentured migrants of India from India. India is most poignantly remembered in the cutting of the umbilical cord like Kunti's Karna, her most gifted son's son. And yet both Gandhi and Nehru were concerned with the fate of the '*prawasi bharitya*'. Vidya Naipaul is important in a special way. He, of all the diasporic writers, analyses Gandhi's autobiography in some detail in his *India: A Wounded Civilisation*.

The journey to London at the age of 19, the two fateful decades in South Africa, recalled in his mother tongue, amaze Naipaul for their lack of details and wonderment. The London of 1890s, then the Capital of the World, doesn't overwhelm a young man from a small Indian town. Landscape, buildings, the natives of Britain or South Africa scarcely merit a mention. But Gandhi is not a novelist; his writing has to do with his inward journey. Perhaps this is what Eliot meant by the extinction of personality: the unique Indian sense of self-abnegation is a technique of re-making the self. Every act becomes a rite of passage into the self..

Nevertheless, Naipaul's comments are relevant and insightful from the perspective of a diasporic Indian. It is when one is truly exiled from one's roots that the reality of the lost world becomes part of the interior inheritance of one's imagination. Gandhi in that sense never left the Indian world though like Rama he left India. Nehru, while in India, suffered more from this sense of an inner exile. Naipaul's Indian writing tell us that he's the pre-eminent writer of what Amitav Gosh has termed 'the

modern Indian Diaspora' - the huge migration from the subcontinent that began in the mid-nineteenth century - is not merely one of the most important demographic dislocations of modern times: it now represents an important force in world culture.'

But, for me, more meaningfully, Naipaul's writing is infused with the psychic dislocation of the Indians and West Indian history and within it the deep disjunction of the girmitee people from Mother India, a kind of severing of the umbilical cord. In fact much of Vidiya Naipaul's writing is rooted in this deracinating experience. The Brahminic detachment and distancing that some British critics see in his *oeuvre* and in which Naipaul revels sometimes is possibly due to their ignorance of the indenture, termed by Lord John Russell as 'a new system of slavery'. Gandhi called them *girmitees*, from the pidgin distortion of the word 'agreement' - or what I've termed the girmitee people. They are the subalterns of the subalterns of the subcontinent: twice banished, thrice betrayed.

How does then a diasporic Indian reconstitute and reclaim his sense of identity. In his famous essay 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', Stuart Hall tells of 'an act of imaginary unification'. Crucially, such images offer a way of imposing an imaginary coherence on the experience of dispossession and fragmentation, which is the history of all enforced diasporas, '...Such texts restore an imaginary fullness or plenitude, to set against the broken rubric of our past.'

Naipaul, however, does not see India of his imagination or reality in those terms. Indeed it is another view that Hall has defined as:

There is, however, a second, related but different view of cultural identity. This second position recognises that, as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute 'what we really are'; or rather - since history has intervened - 'what we have become'. We cannot speak for very long, with an exactness, about 'one experience, one identity', without acknowledging its other side - the ruptures and discontinuities which constitute, precisely, the Caribbean's 'uniqueness'. Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past they are subject to the continu-

ous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.

It is only from this second position that we can properly understand the traumatic character of 'the colonial experience'.

From May 14, 1987, the diaspora in its psychological, cultural, political and narrative nature has suddenly acquired a special immediacy in my own paradise, Fiji. People are being emotionally expelled from their homeland or condemned to live in it as second class citizens. Indeed the diasporic cycle has come full circle in the ancient land of Palestine where so many have become the exiles' exiles; the archetypal has become the typical. And the last garden of Eden in the South Pacific has shadows of a satanic place where the colonised are now colonising the children of the 'coolies'.

That this fate should have befallen the grandchildren of indentured labourers is both tragic and ironic: tragic because they are the victims of the brutality of indigeneity: ironic because of all migrant peoples they did most to preserve the indigenous way of life on the islands, a dispossessed people who prevented the dispossession of the islanders. They might even have a great deal in common with the Convicts, the Kooris, the Kanaks, the *Kaisis* if only we made the connections. I'm, however, more concerned here with the 'coolie experience' of colonialism and its psychic wounds and political configurations. How this Indian diaspora within a new system of slavery became a sentence of history? And how the struggles of Gandhi and Nehru in their life and writing continues to inspire generations outside India.

That is why, I feel, perhaps in modern literature no one has understood this phenomenon more subtly and sharply than V.S. Naipaul, the grandson of an indentured labourer. It is this experience that is at the heart of his writing, of which he has written so compellingly, and occasionally even with searing clarity, in a variety of narratives: novels, travelogues, essays. The twice-born Vidiya Naipaul makes the twice-banished Indian into a considerable figure in the post-modernist culture - he has made the central image of the unaccommodated the protean metaphor of our condition reflecting Adorno's dictum: 'it is part of morality not to be home in one's home'. In short, it has become Naipaul's not only the

enigma of survival but a way into the world, a mandala; writing is the only home possible.

The fatwa on Salman Rushdie only underscores this extreme position in our lifetime; it, too, is a terrible sentence of the hatred of history. Consciousness of these peasants, who were embarking from 'the unending nullity of the peasant-serf countryside', on a voyage across the seven seas, crossing the *kala pani* at so many levels of their consciousness. The consequences were both subterranean and subversive for caste and colonialism were the two sides of the same corroded coin of men's dominance over other men.

The European imagination, over the centuries, had been shaped by the trinity of obsessions: India as the fabled land; El Dorado of the golden sands; and the South Pacific as the last garden of Eden on earth. Add to these imaginings of noble savages, colonial exploration-exploitation, evangelical Christianity in its full fundamental fervour, and you have quite a complex cultural crucible, without the nuclear droppings of the French. Stuff of an epic as David Dabydeen's *Coolie Odyssey* indicates.

It is, therefore, with the epical imagination that the Indian diaspora is most closely related. In that sense it is an epical relationship, as Amitav Ghosh has so perceptively defined it - an epic without text, he calls it. But this remarkable relationship, I think, is not without the epics. For both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* continue to exercise a creative hold on the Indian cultural imagination. I mean Indian, not just Hindu. One might say the two epics are the vowels and the consonants of the Indian mythical expression. For many of us, the figures of Gandhi and Nehru stand out as Ram and Krishna.

The crucial reason for their hold on the Indian imagination is not that they proclaim a civilisational unity of an image called India, nor because they are colonial narratives *par excellence* but more, I feel, because banishment and exile are the twin themes of the two epics. They mirror our lives: in Rama's banishment we see the fate of our girmint grandparents; in the civil war of the Kauravas and Pandavas we fear the imagined fatal fratricidal conflict in Fiji, the paradise of the Pacific. This gives a deeper resonance to echoes from many parts of our wounded world, including the India's freedom struggle and the fatal partition.

It is plausible that the story of Rama's banishment might have made bearable the Indian labourer's ten-year indenture. Rama had crossed via Kanyakumari to Sri Lanka; the indentured Indian via Calcutta to the *ramneek dweep* - Fiji, which many thought was in the Bay of Bengal. One can imagine the sense of geography of the Indian villagers who had scarcely ever ventured outside their ancestral *habitus* - 'that amalgam of

practices linking habit with inhabitation'. The stories of the epics might even have been 'the gifts of exile' within an ethically contained universe; the world of dharma. Exile and reconciliation were integral to the epics. But even the complex concept of dharma has to be re-examined, as Naipual puts it in the concluding pages of *India: The Wounded Civilization*: 'Yet dharma, as expressed in the Indian social system, is too shot through with injustice and cruelty, based on such a limited view of man ...while dharma is honoured above the simple rights of men'.

The indentured peasant from Indian villages, however, was journeying into a colonially ruptured world; this sense of estrangement from his impoverished but structured world had profound effects on his life; there was in this experience not only the tyranny of distance but the more painful one of the tyranny difference. It denied him the dignity of a person, the identity of a people, the embrace of a place. Australia's CSR company, which transported and transplanted them on its sugar estates, had no place for them in Australia. So they developed an Indian identity even as an India receded from their consciousness, while their subconsciousness was saturated with shards of India.

Rama returned to Ayodhya; the girmitya carried his ancestral villages in his moth-eaten *gathris*. Derek Walcott saw this as the breaking of a vase: but it was more - the pieces had to be carried and put together again but the marks of a cracked mirror would remain as scars, some pieces lost forever in the journey. The lands had been separated by the sea and the history of the oceans: nothing much is writ on water. Epics are part of settled societies; the colonial coolie experience was about unsettling, unexplored worlds over which they didn't have any control. Their destination was determined by the British agents; their destiny by the Australian overseers. And *adharna* was the *dharma* of the times. Exile became a way of living.

The concept of exile is a more complex one than the idea of banishment. Even in that wonderful legend, *The Wound and the Bow*, Philoctetes finds a role, an act of final redemption. In modern exile, there's no such consolation. Like debris, you can be left adrift, not only shipwrecked, but without a sense of your sea. Only the ocean of the imagination then connects you to the original continent or island. And if one is involved in one's landscape and literature, one's poetry and politics, in the cultivation of fields and the fertilisation of the interior landscape of the mind, then exile is the amputation of the self, a mutilation of the wholeness of being, a separation of the Siamese twins - something has to die. One then has to understand the crippling sorrow of a chopped limb. This sense of loss and longing then permeates life like blood in the body -

ubiquitous, invisible and real but it bleeds at every cut, every bit of news from home, every postcard received from friends scattered around the globe. Then the broken roots of the banyan tree bleed and one begins to hear, in one's particular condition, a larger cry, not of wholeness but separation. It is not the voluntary exile of a businessman, or of an academic or a writer; their exilic existence often can be quite idyllic.

It is, as Edward Said puts it, 'terrible to experience. It is unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted.' Or as William H. Gass in his essay on 'Exile' expresses it: to be in exile 'is not to be flung out of any door, but out of your own door; it is to lose your home, where home suggests close emotional belonging and the gnarled roots of one's daily identity'. In that sense many modern writers like Joyce, Hemingway are not really exiles. Exile for them was a luxury, a precondition for original perception. It gave them a distance not dislocation; it made them members of an elite without a dismemberment of home.

Or to come back to the other Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*. If the *Ramayana* is about banishment, the *Mahabharata* is the classic of exile. The consequences are the fratricidal civil war - the first detailed description of a holocaust for a piece of land. But before it, a celestial poem is born: the *Gita* is revealed by Krishna when Arjuna's distress is overwhelming and he sinks to the earth sick at heart abandoning his bow Gandiva. But even this, at best, is a consolation, a solace to a holocaust imminent in its birth of death. It is this book I often think of when I think of Fiji.

For the Fiji Indians exile is like death without death's final grace. Its poignancy is heightened by the unexpectedness of it and he became one before he could belong; homeless in a heartless world. To belong is to be aware of the loss that is inherent in belongingness. The Fiji Indians hadn't achieved that for he/she, more than most, didn't know other worlds. That his attempts to belong, to be part of the national policy led to the coups of 1987. Suddenly he became homeless in his home. You wake up to the harrowing fact that you were excluded from the imagination of the nation, not only from the QANTAS ads. The condition had now gone beyond history and geography: it had seeped into the loneliness of the spirit where the spatial became the spiritual. The so-called *bhumiputras* had forced one from one's *matrabhumi*.

What then is the strategy for survival? Initially it is outrage at this betrayal. But that's not enough for one becomes aware of more horrendous fates of people elsewhere. One is dislocated from one world: but one

is also connected to so many others. Suddenly they become closer to one's own. The writer then tries to find new ways of being human, new ways of redefining his humanity, infinite ways of remembering and re-editing memory for the past is the infinite sea.

One is no longer searching for the identity of a rooted tree. Identity and home and more fluid, more uncertain. Perhaps this is why the diasporic Indian's attachment to Mother India is like islands to a continent, or on *India* - with its assonance and association with a river; its ancient invention, its image of ever-renewing, ever-changing, ever-flowing - perhaps that is what Heraclitus meant when he said you never step in the same river twice - give the diasporic Indian an edge of awareness. Maybe if one travelled deeper one might discover that the indigenous and the Indian roots have been watered by the same spring. As Naipaul writes in *A Way in the World*:

Most of us know the parents and grandparents we come from. But we go back and back, forever; we go back all of us to the very beginning; in our blood and bone and brain we carry the memories of thousands of beings...Sometimes we can be strangers to ourselves.'

Or be strangers in paradise.

But we go back to the writings of Gandhi and Nehru, particularly to their autobiographies, because the twin texts provide us the making of the self in exile, in prison but through the marvellous acts of reading, writing and reflections. No matter where the diasporan Indian is, these two lives give him hope and a love for life like the two ancient epics his great grandparents carried in their *gathris*. For, after all, the diaspora of a divided India is far more poignant than those of the overseas Indians.

If Gandhi and Nehru from their different and often differing angles of vision wrestle with Indian identity in their writings, I believe it is in the acts of writing, especially their autobiographies for what could be more intimate exploration of the self for such courageous public men, that they acquire a sense of Indianness that remains elusive to many yet irreducible in the face of so many challenges and explosions.

In that sense the two books available in English will, I feel, continue to inspire generations wherever men and women are enchained, imprisoned and denied the daily dignity of being human. The two writers were more than the makers of English - although English had gone in their making - they were indeed making us by remaking themselves through

words, thoughts and deeds. The identity of a self is measured by the 'selves' it contains within itself. And the journey is always inward towards self-knowledge wherein you may discover:

It is never **I** ; it is always **We**.

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