

Political Issues in V. S. Naipaul's *The Mystic Masseur*: A Study

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Politics, which is the widest and most comprehensive sphere of active life, becomes the parameter of Naipaul's narrative. His narrative reveals the awakening to the reality of a political society: "Politics is part of man's history and it is men who make history. It, therefore, remains to be the privilege of the writer as man to decide upon the extent to which he may participate or stay away from the political goings on around him" (Bhatnagar 8). Naipaul's novels deal with the political issues of Trinidad just before and after independence. Moreover, politics is the challenge as well as the trap for the Trinidadian. The people are unable to impress their existence on the sophisticated political consciousness of the West.

Political reality as the setting which regulates the structure of Naipaul's novels enables him to present a fresh perspective on the function of time and place. Naipaul views the global political situation, especially the clash between belief and unbelief in post-colonial societies. His approach to the political set-up in the post independence phase in Caribbean is decisively pessimistic. He finds a little hope in the Caribbean transition from slavery to independence: "Naipaul is consistently hostile toward mobilization for political change is believed by the evidence in various political movements, observation of competition, brutality, and tribal hostilities" (Bala 25).

Naipaul has enjoyed his life in the century which is marked by the political upheaval, colonization, mass migration and revolution. He states that the political power is a personification of the colonizer's dream of power, possession and self-realisation. He uses images and symbols to intensify the political horrors. Like Naipaul, other Indian writers, "MulK Raj Anand, Arundhati Roy presents politics as a very complex force, operative at different levels, beginning with home, and manipulated by different people for different ends" (Das 208).

Naipaul's first novel, *The Mystic Masseur* (MM) narrates an account of life in Trinidad at the time of the first general election in 1946. Shashi Kamra points out, "*The Mystic Masseur* is a very

exact expression of the narrator's views on the contemporary Trinidadian hero – the politician" (59). Naipaul exposes an opportunistic politics and he identifies the fate of the country with the personality of the slowly emerging political leader, Ganesh. The narrator says, "The history of Ganesh is, in a way, the history of our times; and there may be people who will welcome this imperfect account of the man Ganesh Ramsumair, masseur, mystic, and since 1953, M.B.E." (MM 8). This description, no doubt, announces "the mock-heroic dimension of the novel's political fable" (Mustafa 45).

Through Ganesh, Naipaul expresses his views on the contemporary politician and portrays the political fight between Ganesh and Narayan. Ganesh cultivates all the political qualities through which he can keep the attributes of the Trinidadian society, which tend to victimize and enslave the people. Therefore, the people would vote evaluating personalities, without bothering for issues raised by them.

Ganesh's ambition to power and reputation gravitates to politics as the supreme possibility of success. His spiritual aspect makes him rule over the minds of the Trinidadian people. He had a feeling that he is noteworthy and is meant for creating something larger than what is available for the society. His conversation with Beharry, the oil-shop owner shows that he had all the cunningness essential for political achievement. He articulates, "I go make Trinidad hold it head and bawl" (MM 83). He is significant enough to be an exceptional person in his society.

Ganesh's sound judgment and his way of dealing with the things on the rational level is a surprising one. His goodness, energy, sincerity and holiness inspire him to make a sound decision even in critical moments. Preparing for the 1946 election Ganesh says, "I ain't burning to be one of those damn crooks who does go up for elections" (MM 154). He hears from Beharry that Narayan was going to form a party called "Hindu Association", which was nothing but an election stunt.

Ganesh had faced formidable criticism from Narayan, which was reported in *The Hindu* in its gossip column titled "A Little Bird Tells Us". Narayan calls Ganesh a "religious visionary", and a "deceiving mystic" implying that Ganesh is really a quack and fraud. The attacks of Narayan went on increasing and came in a varied and unexpected form: "One month Ganesh was accused of being anti-Hindu; another month of being racist; later he was a dangerous atheist; and so on" (MM 145). However, Ganesh did not take it seriously; he thought over the problem for some time and asked himself a question, "What would Mahatma Gandhi do in a situation like this?" (MM 146). Gandhi would have done nothing except writing. This shows that Ganesh believed in Gandhian thoughts.

To defeat Narayan, Ganesh planned to bring an item of news in a local daily, *Trinidad Sentinel*: "Planning the formation of a representative assembly of Trinidad Hindus to be known as Hindu League" (MM 173). He had formed the "Hindu League" to work against the moves of Narayan's "Hindu Association". But Narayan claimed that, the Hindu Association, in which he was the Chairperson, was the only association representing the Hindus in Trinidad. Ganesh makes an intelligent announcement concerning the Inaugural meeting of the proposed "Hindu League". This is his first step towards politics. Narayan was campaigning against Ganesh, and accused him of being an anti-Hindu and racial-minded atheist. Leela, Ganesh's wife, insists that, Narayan needs a horse-

whipping. Ganesh decides to write against Narayan's criticism. He does so: "He worked hard at his book, sitting up late at night after treating clients all day" (MM 146). The book, *The Guide to Trinidad*, a big volume, is a counter-attack on Narayan. It is distributed free to American soldiers and attracts five thousand of them to Ganesh's home in Fuente Grove, to see the stone elephants in the temple, and to receive spiritual advice from him.

At the first general meeting of the *Hindu Association* Narayan was elected as a President. The following members were also elected: "four Assistant-Presidents, two Vice-Presidents, four Assistant Vice-Presidents; many Treasurers; one Secretary-in-Chief, six Secretaries, twelve Assistant-Secretaries" and then Narayan foolishly sends, "cables to India, to Mahatma Gandhi, Pundit Nehru and the All-India Congress; in addition to anniversary cables of all sorts: he noted centenaries, bicentenaries, tercentenaries. And every time he sent a cable the news was reported in the *Trinidad Sentinel*" (MM 154). Meanwhile, an important matter was announced in the *Trinidad Sentinel* that a Hindu industrialist in India had offered thirty thousand dollars for the upliftment of Trinidad Hindus. The money was being kept in a trust by the Trinidad Government, "until it could be handed over to a competent Hindu body" (MM 173). Both Ganesh and Narayan planned to get the money.

In the second General Meeting of the Hindu Association, Indarsingh, the childhood friend of Ganesh quotes, "He [Narayan] was ashamed of the corruption in the Hindu Association" (MM 183). Narayan felt ashamed and he declares, "I withdraw from public life. I do not want to be re-elected President of the Hindu Association of Trinidad, of which I am a founder member and President". And then, "Ganesh was the only candidate for the Presidency and was elected without any fuss at all" (MM 184). At first, Ganesh thinks Indarsingh is the suitable person for the election, he asked his wife's advice. She advises, "But you have to go up. You are not going to sit down and let that boy fool the people? . . . Too much of this education is a bad bad thing. You remain here, educate yourself, and yet you is a bigger man than Indarsingh for all the Oxford he say he go to" (MM 186-87). Not only his wife and aunt, even Beharry, Swami and others persuaded him to participate in the election. On the result of their encouragement, Ganesh jumped into the politics of Trinidad for his foreseeable future.

In politics Ganesh is the hero as well as the villain. He slowly turns the religious followers into votes. He did not have to do any serious campaign like in *The Suffrage of Elvira*:

He held no election meetings, but Swami and Partap arranged many prayer-meetings for him. He worked hard to expand his *Road to Happiness* lectures; three or even four taxis had to take the books he required. Quite casually, in the middle of a lecture, he would say in Hindi, 'It may interest one or two of you in this gathering tonight to hear that I am a candidate for the elections next month. I can promise nothing. In everything I shall consult God and my conscience, even at the risk of displeasing you . . .' (MM 187)

The rise of Ganesh is "a constant remaking and renaming of the world and of individual lives through simultaneous processes of displacement and accumulation" (Gourevitch 29). He can communicate successfully; he is aware of his environment; he has the ability to mould public opinion

and to foresee failure, to move out in time. He could talk on almost any subject, for instance he had views about Hitler and other leaders. N. Rama Devi rightly comments, “Ganesh as such is not a political leader though he has the natural talent for it” (32). During the world war, Ganesh and Beharry discussed about it, “Beharry was full of quotations from the Gita, and Ganesh read again, with fuller appreciation, the dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna on the field of battle” (MM 102).

In reality, Ganesh fought the most simple and subtle type of election. His electioneering posters emphasize his ability, goodness, energy and sincerity as a politician. Harithar Rath and Kartik Chandra Mishra allude, “The poster[s], for Ganesh electioneering apart from emphasizing his ability, goodness, energy and sincerity, underscores holiness as his last but not the least quality as a politician” (24). His campaign slogans are considered as heart-to-heart contact: “Ganesh will do what he can, a vote for ganesh is a vote for god . . . Ganesh will win and ganesh is a man of good and god” (MM 187).

Ganesh’s selfless talks give him a clear way for winning the election. He becomes very famous as an M.L.C. (Member of Legislative Council) and was constantly photographed by the local daily. After winning the election, he moves to Port of Spain with his wife. In Port of Spain, “he had become more and more absorbed in politics” (MM 199). He makes a pledge to fight against communism in Trinidad and the rest of the free world. His final awakening to the possible meaning of politics is suppressed. He works out a new political theory with Indarsingh, “socialinduism. Socialism-cum-Hinduism” (MM 200), but it does not receive the necessary public support.

Ganesh is not in favour of violence, but he can be very tough, when it is necessary. He deals with Narayan confidently when he was out to create trouble. All the time, he feels that there is some power hidden in his personality by which he can handle every difficult situation in the world. Whatever role provided to him, he plays it very carefully. However, he does not forget to take the benefit of every opportunity. He elevates himself from M.L.C to M.B.E (Member of British Empire).

In the end of *The Mystic Masseur*, Naipaul makes it clear that political power is ultimately an embodiment of the colonised’s dream of power, possession and self-realisation. However, the narrative identifies the destiny of the country with the personality of the gradually emerging political leaders like Ganesh.

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