Preface

Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipual’s works and ideas embodied in them caused tremendous reaction in the literary circles throughout the world. While in the West his books were well received for their Nirad Chaudharian vein, in the East they sent shock waves generating hot controversies. Most of the readers of the Eastern world began to contest what they called his half notions. Many of them went on to condemn his controversial views and strange ways to express them. Subsequently, there ensued sharp debates which became all the more pronounced after Naipaul won 2001 Nobel Prize for literature. Interestingly, it was for this controversial vein that the highest prize of literature was awarded to him. As the citation clearly states that the prize was awarded, “for having united perceptive narrative and incorruptible scrutiny in works that compel us to see the presence of suppressed histories” (*Press Release* 11 Oct. 2001).

Naipaul’s treatment of “suppressed histories” is something startling and unprecedented. He identifies “suppressed histories” with the vanquished societies or the histories of the societies living in Asia, Africa, and Americas. These societies are in fact the religious groups adhering to different religions like Hinduism, Islam, and even Christianity. Naipaul persistently evaluates, and reviews the condition of these societies in relation to the developed societies of the West. While the suppressed societies invariably represent colonial people, the developed societies represent their masters of the colonial era. These masters have developed a “universal civilization” which is “living” and “creative” as against the
"contradictory" and "self destructive" civilization of the suppressed societies. Evidently, Naipaul has assumed the role of the chronicler of only suppressed societies. Even though his views on their suppression were acknowledged by the Nobel Committee, they cannot be accepted for that reason, without scrutiny. One of the areas of experience which Naipaul included in his discussion of the suppressed societies is religion. Although a professed atheist, Naipaul discusses various aspects of religion and develops a religious vision which he unfolds in his books especially in his Trinidadian novels and travel books, describing his journey to India, Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Southern States.

Naipaul does not begin with a well defined religious vision, but only with a blue-print. At the outset he dallies with only his Brahminic upbringing, his impatience with rites and rituals, facilitation with Christianity and a prejudice against Muslims. However, he gives a concrete shape to his vision, after meeting Indian Hindus, converted Muslims, and the American Christians. It is during his journeys Naipaul gives final shape to his religious vision. He now interprets religion in a much wider context. He is no longer concerned merely with rituals, festivals, and forms of worship but is also attentive to political and social activities. He goes on to relate religion to the history of the country as well as of the race.

Obviously, Naipaul is not preoccupied merely with Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity as exclusive religions. He had something more in his mind something like an idea of composite religion, although faint and a little playful. Nevertheless, its value can be hardly denied. In Naipaul’s works, we find the pervasive presence
of characters like Ganesh and Linus who have developed a liking for other religions as well. Besides, we find the description of a community, which rever the holy books of other religions, celebrate their festivals, and participate in their rituals. One can easily surmise that Naipaul’s religious vision, though a little controversial, is a step towards the emergence of a universal religion, the religion of the generations to come.

This dissertation is an attempt to trace the development of Naipaul’s religious vision. The study is based on the analysis of fiction, and non-fiction of Naipaul, dealing with his Hindu, Muslims, and Christian’s experiences. It also takes into account the views of the critics. The work is only exploratory in nature. Nevertheless, it is a genuine attempt to deal with almost an obscure area of Naipaul’s experience.