Chapter IV

Naipaul and India’s Islamic History: An Assessment

In the previous chapters of this thesis a critique has been made in relation to Naipaul’s writings on Islam and his concept of “the rage Islam”. Following colonial and critical discourse theory I have argued that in the political atmosphere of the late twentieth century Naipaul’s depiction of “Islam” as antagonistic to the Western civilization has functioned as a contemporary version of the nineteenth century colonial discourse which was informed by the Orientalist clichés and ideas about Islam and Muslims in particular and Arabs in general. Those Orientalist images, as Said has shown in *Orientalism*, were a part of the cultural forms, and also informed the imperial and neoimperial policies of the Euro-American colonial powers. I have maintained that during the second half of the twentieth century certain very important political conflicts between US-Israeli imperial actions and some Muslim countries brought the old Orientalist images, ideas, stereotypes and rhetoric back to the general cultural discourse about Muslims in the Western world. Media commentators and mainstream ‘experts’ on Islam began to explain “the Muslim and Arab mind” to the Western audiences and readership. Orientalists like Bernard Lewis the theories of “rage”, “revolt”, and “return” of Islam. They portrayed the resistance movements of Muslims, which drew on Islam as a source of revolutionary ideology, as “Islamic fundamentalism” and claimed a “Clash of civilization” involving “open” and “rational” West on one side and “closed” and “primitive” Islam on the other side of the divide. I have argued in the previous chapters that Naipaul too contributed to this demonization of Islam by his own theses of “rage” and “revival” of Islam. His nonfiction writings and Islamic travelogues helped give new steam to the old Orientalist dichotomy between “progressive” West and “primitive” Islam. His concept of “our universal civilization” excluded Islam from it; instead, it associated ideas like “neurosis”, “rage”, and “parasitism” with Muslims and their faith. My theoretical intervention has been that in order to better appreciate Naipaul’s Islamic
travelogues we cannot discount the overarching neoimperial and settler colonialism which has shaped and circumscribed the debates around Islam and Muslims. In order to do that I have situated Naipaul ‘excursions among converted peoples’ within the late twentieth century historical and political juncture characterized by neoimperial reconfiguration which is headed by the only world super power, US.

This chapter will focus on V. S. Naipaul’s views on Islam in India and India’s Islamic past. I argue that Naipaul’s attitude towards India’s Islamic past was shaped by his upbringing in a Brahman family which had very rigid and biased opinions about Islamic presence in India. As I have mentioned in chapter third of this thesis that one must “never forget that he is a Brahmin” (qtd. in French 396). His family held Islam responsible for the “poverty” of India. Like his mother and sister, his father also distrusted Muslims. His father would accept “decent” person of any religion as his son-in-law except a Muslim: “If a fellow is a decent India, it doesn’t matter if he is a Christian; but he should never be a Mohammedan (qtd in French 110). His family could not “forgive” Muslims and Islam for numerous “invasions of India and for forcing the partition of the subcontinent” (28). This family background, dominated by deep seated prejudices about Islam and its presence in India, coupled with his colonial education shaped his perception of India’s Islamic past. His understanding of Islamic India was deeply informed by the nineteenth century colonial historiography of the Raj. This colonial education coupled with his Brahmanic family background influenced his attitudes to Islam. It is in this context that Patrick French writes that “his attitudes and outlook had been formed by his family background, his colonial education and his experiences in Britain and beyond in the 1950s and 1960s; his instincts and prejudices were intact, but his eyes were wide open, missing nothing” (279).

This chapter will try to show that Naipaul’s treatment of Islam far from being objective is based on Orientalist historiographies of the Victorian England. It has been argued that Naipaul’s attitude to India’s Islamic history is based on
preconceptions and presumptions derived from the history written by the historians of the Raj and conditioned by his sympathies towards BJP and the Hindutva ideology of RSS. This chapter looks at Naipaul’s treatment of the Third World and the Muslim countries in order to render bare the ideology that underpins his engagement with Islam and India’s Islamic history.

Colonial Historiography of India and it Ideology

The nineteenth century colonial trifurcation of Indian history into Hindu, Muslim and British periods because of its racial, religious and colonial presumptions largely casted Muslim rule of India in a bad light. The colonial historiography was steeped in the nineteenth century Orientalist formulations about Islam and Muslims. The historians of the Raj narrowed the identities of Indians to the single one of religion and interpreted the Indian history from the perspective of religion to create a divide between Hindus and Muslims so as to bolster the British rule in India. The colonial historians, with focus on a single monolithic religious identity of Indian people, created theories of India’s pre-British past which spoke of Hindu – Muslim relations only in antagonistic terms. Romila Thapar in her essay “Somnatha: Narratives of a History”, on the theme of supposedly temple desecration of India by Muslims, has argued that this image of Muslims as destroyers of India’s Hindu civilization was “constructed at a particular point in time and for a particular function . . . by the British for reasons of colonial politics. The British were successful in their political intention is proved by Somnatha having now become an icon of antagonism between Hindus and Muslims” (Thapar 92). She maintains that the colonial perceptions of India society had always been an antagonistic duality of Hindu and Muslim. Colonial educators and policy makers, for the reasons of Raj, made the religious identities of Indian rulers as a dominant category to explain India’s past. They portrayed Islamic rule as a long night of darkness in India. They were the first to state that Muslim rule had created a trauma in India consciousness. For example, the historians of the Raj often focused on the “loot” and “destruction” of the
Somnatha temple at the hands of King Mahmud Gauri to give credence to their theory of “Islamic loot” of India. They created around this story a “simplistic historical theory that the raid of Mahmud created a trauma in the Hindu consciousness which has been at the root of Hindu-Muslim relations ever since” (Thapar 85). The influence of this colonial construction of Muslim rule in India can be gauged from the fact that, referring to Somnathan and the Hindus, K. M. Munshi wrote in 1951 that, “For a thousand years Mahmud’s destruction of the shrine has been burnt into the collective subconscious of the race as an unforgettable national disaster” (Munshi 58). In this context Thapar argues that

Interestingly what appears to be the earliest mention of a “Hindu trauma” in connection with Mahmud’s raid on Somnatha, comes from the debate in the British Parliament in London in 1843, on the question of the gates of Somnatha temple. . . It was claimed that the intention was to return what was looted from India, an act which symbolized British control over Afghanistan despite their poor showing in the Anglo-Afghan wars. It was also presented as an attempt to reverse Indian subjugation to Afghanistan in the pre-British period. (Thapar 86).

This colonial discourse which presented Muslim rulers of India as cruel and temple destroyers was given a strong ideological foundation by James Mill through his periodization of Indian history into Hindu civilization, Muslim civilization and the British period. The very terminology he used to divide Indian history reveals his ideological exigencies. Thapar writes that

In his hegemonic History of British Indi, published in the early nineteenth century and extensively read, Mill insists not only on the innate hostility of Hindu and Muslim, but also on the tyranny of the Muslim over the Hindu and the oppression of the Hindu by the Muslim. Mill had neither visited India nor read anything substantial on India history. The colonial interest in emphasizing this view is
clearly stated in the Introduction to Elliot and Dowson’s *History of India as Told by its Own Historians*, where it is said that the Hindus have to recognize that British rule is far superior for them than the rule of the Muslims. (Thapar 87)

These historians were keen to contrast what they understood as the justice and efficiency of British rule with the cruelty and despotism of the Muslim rulers who had preceded the British. They were not sympathetic to the Muslim rule. Their sole purpose in denigrating the Muslim rulers was to bolster their claims of just and enlightened rule of the Britishers. They were creating an ideological understanding of history that would reverberate even after the independence of India from the British rule. Sir Henry Elliot wrote in his original preface to *The History of India as told by its Own Historians*:

> The common people must have been plunged into the lowest depths of wretchedness and despondency. The few glimpses we have, even among the short Extracts in this volume, of Hindus slain for disputing with Muhammadans, of general prohibitions against processions, worship, and ablutions, and of other intolerant measures, of idols mutilated, of temples razed, of forcible conversions and marriages, of proscriptions and confiscations, of murders and massacres, and of the sensuality and drunkenness of the tyrants who enjoined them, shows us that this picture is not overcharged. (Elliot xxi)

This picture of Muslim rule in India served the Britishers well in creating the dichotomy between the Hindus and the Muslims of India. It served two purposes at the same time: one, it delegitimized Muslim rule and provided an ideological justification for the new British rule; and second, it helped the British colonial policy of divide and rule in India. Against this negative picture of Muslim rule in India Elliot constructed a positive picture of the progressive nature of the British rule in India. With the advent of the British rule, Elliot says, “a more
stirring and eventful era of India’s History commences; and when the full light of European truth and discernment begins to shed its beam upon the obscurity of the past” (Elliot xvi). He claimed that the British colonial rule freed the India from “the tyranny of its former masters, and allowed to express itself in the natural language of heart, without constraint and without adulation” (xxii). He argued that his published translations “will make our native subjects more sensible of the immense advantages accruing to them under the mildness and equity of our rule” (xxii). This description of Muslim rule in India as “tyranny” and the British rule as “mild” and “equal” will have serious consequences in the future of Indian politics. It shaped not only the British attitudes towards India but also those of Hindus towards Muslims. This theme of temple desecration would continue to haunt India even after independence in 1947. It still is a very polarizing force in India polity. And it is this colonial interpretation of India’s past that I argue has shaped V.S. Naipaul’s attitudes towards India’s Islamic past.

Islam, India and Naipaul’s ‘Darkness’

Naipaul’s keen observatory power, photographic description of the things, persons, places and events has been cited during Nobel Prize ceremony of 2001 when Naipaul received much coveted and long awaited prestigious award. The Swedish academy maintained that the prize has been awarded to him purely on literary grounds and artistic merits. The academy lauded Naipaul for the perceptive narrative and incorruptible scrutiny he brings to his subjects and denied that they had considered anything but literary merits in awarding the prize. But looking at the provocative and often derogatory views and statements made by Naipaul about third world countries in general and about Muslim world in particular, and keeping in view the context in which Nobel prize has been awarded to him, many critics and academicians have maintained that so Naipaul has “attacked Islam and so won this year’s Nobel Prize for literature” (Judith Gabriel ‘Circumnavigating Islam’). Similarly, the Islamic, Educational, scientific and Cultural Organization reacted against awarding Nobel to Naipaul and protested
that Naipaul has distorted the realities of Islamic history and society in order to bolster his claim that “Islam” has been a very negative force in the histories of Muslim nations. Many writers including Derek Walcott, Nissim Ezekiel, and William Dalrymple have also resented Naipaul’s views about the Third World and Islam.

Though Naipaul has dealt with a range of social, political and ethnic themes, his main preoccupation in his non-fictional travel narratives and journalistic writings has been the ‘failure and fantasy’ of postcolonial societies and of Islam a ‘faith’. *The killings in Trinidad, The Loss of Eldorado* (1969), *The Overcrowded Baracoon* (1972), *The Middle Passage* (1962), deal with the Caribbean realities and that of the Africa. About Trinidad Naipaul said, “I knew Trinidad to be unimportant, uncreative and cynical”. He concludes with Orientalist triumph that the Third World countries “are half-made societies doomed to remain half-made” and “Africa has no future”. In *A Bend in the River* (1979) Naipaul expresses his racist attitude towards slaves when he says, “Slave peoples are physically wretched, half-men in everything except in their capacity to breed the next generation”. Such views about the people of former colonies do not take into account the overwhelming accounts of the destruction that the European colonizers caused in their colonies. They betray an ideological bias in favor of the Western civilization. The similar kind of prejudiced ideas and stereotypes are repeated in the Indian trilogy: *An Area of Darkness* (1964); *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977); *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990). Indian is an “area of darkness” to which he travelled in 1962. But here he finds nothing other than what he has already known or read: “world’s largest slum” (Naipaul, *An Area* 126). In India people “defecate everywhere. They defecate, mostly, besides the railway tracks” (70). The scorn with which he speaks about poor people of India is apparent when he finds “Indian sleepers on an Indian railway station” (84). My point here is not that such things are merely fictitious. My argument is that no description of any former colony be considered ‘objective’ until it takes into consideration the colonial and neocolonial realities of those societies. This is all
the more important when writers like Naipaul use such descriptions to hail the Euro-American civilization for its “openness”, “progress” and “modernity”. Instead, I argue that no account of Western ‘modernity’ is complete without the recognition of the historical fact that the same period of “progress” was experienced as a disaster by countries like India, regions like Africa, and Middle East. In this context, I maintain, that Naipaul’s failure to recognize and accept this stark reality reveals his ideological bias towards what he calls “Our Universal Civilization”. So far introducing Western institutions in colonies is concerned, Lord Macaulay’s “The Minutes on Education” is an important document that throws light on colonial policy towards colonies. It shows the colonial attitude towards colonized culture and civilization. It sheds light on the British government’s colonial policy to destroy the indigenous languages, culture, history, and literature on the one hand, and, on the other, to introduce Western institutions and education that would have served to legitimize the colonial rule in India. Similarly, in India: A Wounded Civilization Naipaul calls India a wounded civilization- “wounded” by Muslim invasions. Without any regard for historical analysis and research, Naipaul’s anti-Islamic bias makes him conclude that Islam has “wounded” Indian civilization beyond repair. This creation of a very stereotypical image of Muslim rule as “tyranny” will be dealt with in the sections of this chapter. It is pertinent here to say what Meena Kandasamy has said regarding Naipaul’s image of India as constructed in his India travelogues bout: “Sir Vidyadhar Surajprasad Naipaul has spat on us. Spat too much on India that we are actually stinking from his spitting expeditions” (Kandasamy ‘Casteist, Communalist, Racist’). According to her, Naipaul’s disgust for the deprived is very clear. She believes that he is a casteist, communalist and a racist. Like someone said of him: a colonial among colonials.

Naipaul has created a storm in the Muslim intellectual and academic world by his provocative and, what writers such as William Dalrymple calls, his “jaundiced” and “anti-Islamic views” so far as his treatment of India’s Islamic past is concerned. He has been severely criticized by William Dalrymple for his
treatment of Islam and Islamic history. Even those who call him the greatest writer of English prose doubt his knowledge of historical facts. “Naipaul’s credentials as a historian, however, are less secure”, writes Dalrymple in “Trapped in the Ruins” (2004). According to Dalrymple, Naipaul’s criticism of Islam and his “entirely negative understanding of India’s Islamic history has its roots firmly in the mainstream imperial historiography of Victorian Britain” (Dalrymple ‘Trapped in Ruins’). Naipaul’s social and political commentary on the Third World has been seen as reflecting what the western academics wanted from him and “the politics of Naipaul” has thus earned him the title “a colonial among the colonials” (Kandasamy ‘Casteist, Communalist, Racist’). His negative image of Islam becomes clear to us when we put that in the context of his commitment to the Hindutva ideology of Rastriya Samsawka Sangh. Not only the mainstream historiography of Victorian Britain but also his allegiance to anti-Islamic Hindu chauvinistic ideology and political thought of Sangh Parivar has played a tremendously important role in forming and expressing the negative views about Islam. His allegiance to Sangh Parivar and its ideology is confirmed beyond doubt by his visit to “the office of India’s ruling Hindu nationalist party, the Bartiya Janata Party, and gave what many in the Indian press took to be a pre-election endorsement not just of the party but of the entire far right-wing revivalist program” (Dalrymple ‘Trapped in Ruins’). He had maintained that India was surging forward under the Hindutva ideology represented and upheld by the political wing of the Sangh Parivar, Bartiya Janta Party. He had “declared himself happy” at having being “appropriated” by the party (khadmeul Islam ‘Naipaul’s Rage’). BJP and the entire Sangh Parivar, along with its lesser cultural wings, have always been seen expressing and propagating anti-Islamic views. It has become notorious not only in India but throughout the world for its prejudice Islam and Muslims of India. Sangh Parivar’s main ideology is that India is basically a Hindu nation; the invasions of India by Muslim rulers have been a long period of destruction and plunder, and therefore the right place for Muslims is either in Pakistan or in the grave. Naipaul’s Hindu prejudices against Islam and Muslim rule in India can be understood from the statements he made about the
destruction of Babura Masjid, an event that led to the death of thousands of Muslims in India. When world’s and India’s historians and intellectuals were lamenting the loss of secular credentials of India, Naipaul “decided it represented evidence of regeneration. He gave an interview to the Times of India which suggested in guarded terms that he approved of what had happened.

One needs to understand the passion that took them on top of the domes. The jeans and the T-shirts are superficial. The passion alone is real. You can’t dismiss it . . . The movement is now from below . . . Wise men should understand it and ensure that it does not remain in the hands of fanatics. Rather they should use it for the intellectual transformation of India . . . For the poor of India to identify something like this, pulling down the first Mughal emperor’s tomb, is a marvelous idea. I think in years to come it will be seen as a great moment, and it will probably become a public holiday. It would be a historical statement of India striving to regain her soul . . . What puzzled me and outraged me was the attitude that it was wrong, that one mustn’t undo the (Muslim) conquest. I think it is the attitude of a slave population. (qtd in Patrick French 460)

Naipaul’s Hindu biases against Islam and Muslims would abundantly become clear if one compares this with his ideas about the denial of history on part of the Muslims of Indonesia and Malaysia, his opinions about the faith of Islam being against history (with which I dealt with in the previous chapters of this book). In this context Patrick French comments:

Hindu nationalists planned to excavate beneath the mosque in order to find the birthplace of the deity Ram; but Ram was a mythological figure. It was a mystical view of history, lacking vigor, choosing pieces of evidence that supported the idea of undoing the past . . . The political fragmentation and the hundreds
of deaths in the rioting that followed the destruction of the Babri Masjid were not his concern: ‘I didn’t kill them myself. What was I doing in 1992? That was a very bad year. That was the year when I could barely walk. I had surgery on my spine’. (460)

If one compares this endorsement of Hindutva anti-Muslim policies with what Naipaul says about “the revival of Islam”, which according to him is “neurosis” and “nihilism”, one would be left with no doubt about the politics of Naipaul subscribes to. In Naipaul’s scheme of things Hindu religious fundamentalism is “India striving to regain her soul”, but “Islamic fundamentalism” is “a fantasy. Perhaps only shut-away tribal communities can have strong and simple ideas of who they are. The rest of us are for the most part culturally mixed, in varying degrees, and everyone lives in his own way with his complexity” (Naipaul, Beyond Belief 59). No luxury for Muslims to “regain” their soul. The underlying assumption of Naipaul’s endorsement of the Babri Masjid demolition is that the “Islam” had killed India’s civilizational vigor. It had put a break on the civilizational progress of “Hindu” India; Islam had thrown India into a dark night of pillage and destruction. Islam had “wounded” the “Hindu” Indian civilization. As compared to the “marvelous idea” of “regaining” the “lost” soul of India’s Hindu civilization, “revival of Islam”, according to Naipaul, “in the modern world was a dangerous fantasy. At its simplest it was a wish for security; it also contained an idea of exclusivity… In many ways it was a dream of a society ethnically cleansed” (145). Criticizing Hindutva fundamentalism is “attitude of a slave population” while the critique of “rage” of Islam is the intellectual vocation given by Western “universal civilization”. Western civilization is “universal”, Hindutva fundamentalism is “striving for soul” and a “marvelous idea”; “Islamic fundamentalism” is “rage” and “nihilism”. Islamic fundamentalists were “insecure, with their unhistorical view, feared contamination. But fundamentalism offered nothing. It pushed men to an unappeasable faith. It offered a political desert” (Naipaul Among the Believers 178).
I argue that this double standard regarding the world religious fundamentalist movements reveals Naipaul’s biases against Islam in general and India’s Islamic history in particular. Naipaul’s comments in an interview summarize it all:

To say that India has a secular character is being historically unsound. Dangerous or not, Hindu militancy is a corrective to the history to the history I have been talking about. It is a creative force and will be so. Islam cannot reconcile with it”. (November 15, 1999, *Outlook*)

Indian writers like Meena Kandasamy have argued that Naipaul’s opinions on India’s history are a “distortion of history” in the Sangh Parivar style “to produce a saffron history with a sacred thread” (Kandasamy ‘Casteist, Communalist, Racist’). She calls Naipaul a “highly prejudiced Hindutva torchbearer” who, in his travel works on India and the Muslim world, is constructing Sangh Parivar’s version of history, thereby willfully distorting facts and figures. For example, Meena questions Naipaul’s account of the Brahmanic concept of fasting. Naipaul believed that in the ancient days Brahmanic priestly caste was supported by the Hindu temples, and because of Muslim invasion, the temples became poorer and the Brahman priests were caught in a web of poverty. This poverty led to the practice of fasting among the priestly class of Hindus. That is, Naipaul’s point is that Muslim “invasions” are responsible for the destruction of the economic life of the Hindu’s of India, and it forced them to adopt certain practices which they did not have before. This is Naipaul’s version of self-denial. Instead of “Islamic invasions” forcing Brahmans to fast, it was the Brahmnic code enshrined in the Manusmiriti that established the practice of fasting as a penance for sins. This law-book was composed even before the birth of Christ, not to talk of Prophet Mohammad. There were no Islamic invasions and conversions at that time. To blame the Brahmanic concept of fasting on Islamic invasions is a “highly crooked way of interpreting and representing history” (Kandasamy ‘Casteist, Communalist, Racist’). This interpretation of history according to which
the Hindus of India suffered at the hands of Muslims is more in tune with the Hindutva propaganda about “Islamic barbarism” than an objective analysis of the past of India.

The Muslim rule in India has always been Naipaul’s preoccupation. He considered Islam’s presence in India a negative historical force. He has dealt with it in An Area of Darkness, India: A Wounded Civilization and Among the Believers. Throughout his travelogues he attempted to resurrect what according to him is the “correct history” of Sind and Muslim India. Therefore, in “Killing History”, a section in Among the Believers, Naipaul talks about the Chachnama, a book which was written five hundred years after the conquest of Sind by Muslim rulers, and which according to him provides the correct version of the India history. He refers to Chachnama and maintains that “Hijaj has issued precise instructions for this first victory: the residents of Debal are not to be spared. The Arab army has to slaughter for three days: this is what Bin Quasim tells the people of Debal” (Naipaul, Among the Believers 138). Naipaul presents this as a story of slaughter and barbarism: Muslims came here to loot. In this context Meena Kandasamy has written that Naipaul indulges in selective representation of history of India to substantiate his anti-Islamic bias. She writes that Naipaul has plainly not mentioned the woes of the oppressed caste majorities during these periods of Brahmin tyranny. Or the glaring truth that the Buddhist majority and oppressed castes converted willingly to Islam to escape their sufferings. Or that Mohammad Bin Qasim invaded Sind to release Muslim women who were held hostage in a captured ship. This too has been chronicled in the Chachnama but Naipaul chose not to deal with this aspect of history because it undercuts the neat narrative of Muslim tyranny and misrule. T. N. Madan in Modern Myths, Locked Minds (2009) also reiterates the same opinion that Mohammad Bin Qasim invaded Sind because the king of Sind denied Qasim’s request to protect ships of Arab traders from pirates. But Naipaul’s account of Chachnama makes no mention of it.
I maintain that Naipaul’s treatment of Muslim rule in India is compatible with and serves the Hindutva right wing revisionists who present Muslim rule as a long and dark night of ignorance and destruction. He says in the Beyond Belief that the Muslim period was a “force looting the temples of Hindustan and imposing the faith upon the infidel” (Naipaul, Beyond Belief 247). Naipaul’s statements such as his remarks that the first Mughal emperor Babur’s invasion of India “left a deep wound” are consistent with the ideas he has been propagating for many years now. In 1998 he told the Hindu newspaper:

I think when you see so many Hindu temples of 10th century or earlier disfigured, defaced, you realize that something terrible happened. I feel that the civilization 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”. (Naipaul in The Hindu1998)

This line of thought has been consistent in Naipaul from An Area of Darkness (1964) to Beyond Belief. In India: A Wounded Civilization (1975) he surveys the shattered ruins of the great medieval Hindu capital of Vijayanagar and goes on to lament the fall of this “great center of Hindu civilization”, then one of the greatest cities of the world. He believes that it was destroyed in 1565 “by an alliance of Muslim principalities and the work of destruction took five months; some people say a year” (Naipaul, India: A Wounded 77). He thought that “Vijayanagar was committed from the start to the preservation of a Hinduism that had already been violated. . .” (79), and therefore, he believed that it had failed to develop military means to challenge the aggressive Muslims sultanates that surrounded it.

For Naipaul the fall of Vijayanagar is the paradigmatic wound on the psyche of India, part of a long series of failures that he believes still bruises India’s self-confidence. The wound, according to him, was created by a fatal combination of Islamic aggression and Hindu weakness. Throughout his oeuvre
Naipaul talks about Vijayanagar as the empire of Hinduism that was later “defeated and physically laid waste by a combination of Muslim rulers; almost at the same time, in the north, the Mogul power was entering its time of glory” (143). This is Naipaul’s account of India’s Islamic history: a tale of destruction and devastation. However, as the foremost historian of Mughal India, William Dalrymple, has argued, “Naipaul’s entirely negative understanding of India’s Islamic history has its roots firmly in the mainstream imperial historiography of Victorian Britain” (Dalrymple ‘Trapped in Ruins’). The Muslim invasions of India tended to be seen by the colonial historians of the Raj as a long brutal sequence of pillage in stark contrast to the law and order selflessly brought about by the Britishers. Similarly, art historian Catherine Asher and the historian Cynthia Talbot in their book *India Before Europe* document the same views. The authors record that it were the British scholars who, in their antipathy to Muslims, said that Asian society was fundamentally divided along religious lines and that Muslim rulers were harsh to non-Muslim subjects. This conviction was not only expressed in British modes of thinking about south Asia’s people but also in their politics to ward them. This colonial historical discourse about the tyranny of Muslim rule would later on influence Indian nationalists and Sangh Parivar ideologues to cast the Muslims of India as similar to the colonial British in being alien invaders and oppressors. Praising the British rule as compared to Muslim rule, Naipaul wrote that “finally through the unlikely British presence in India, a Hindu India had grown again, more complete and unified than any India in the past” (Naipaul, *India: A Wounded* 143). Again, Naipaul maintains that the “British period . . . was a time of regeneration”. Such and other views of Naipaul about the ‘destructive’ rule of Muslims and the regeneration of Hindus under British colonialism are seen by the serious historian so India as a willful distortion of India’s past. *India Before Europe* documents that the British scholars presented the rulers of Vijayanagar “not as kings who promoted a cosmopolitan culture that valued Islamicate traditions, but rather as the champions of Hinduism against predatory Muslims” simply to give credence to their own rule and pit Hindus
against Muslims to make their own task easy. Critiquing this representation of Vijayanagar as a fortress against Muslim barbarism, Richard Eaton writes that

Such disjunctures between the rhetoric and the practice of royal sovereignty also appear, of course, with respect to the founding of non-Muslim states. We know, for example, that Brahman ideologues, writing in chaste Sanskrit, spun elaborate tales of how warriors and sages founded the Vijayanagara state by combining forces for a common defense for dharma from assaults by barbaric (mleccha) Turkic outsiders. His is the Vijayanagara of rhetoric, a familiar story. But the Vijayanagara of practical politics rested on very different foundations, which included the adoption of the titles, the dress, the military organization, the ruling ideology, the architecture, and the political economy of the contemporary Islamicate world. As with Indo-Muslim states, we hear of such practices mainly from outsiders – merchants, diplomats, travelers – and not from Brahman chroniclers and ideologues. (Eaton 121, italics in original)

These professional historians of India have argued that this distortion of history, earlier by the British colonial historians and later, after independence by Sangh Parivar ideologues, has served to obscure the rich composite culture of south Asia which started to come into being after 1200 and fully matured during the Mughal era. A G Noorani in “Story of Synthesis”, a review of the book India Before Europe, writes that the book is the study of Indian history and culture from 1200 to 1750, and it reveals the fruitful cross-cultural interaction between Islamic and Hindu civilization. According to Noorani, the “Muslim scholars, mystics and institutions enriched the already pluralistic human landscape of south Asia and, over time, a composite culture developed that drew on both the Indic and Perso- Islamic tradition” (Noorani ‘Story of Synthesis). Historians of India do not accept the label Muslim that was applied to the period 1200-1750 in histories
of south Asia written during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Historians object to the use of the religious affiliation to characterize the set of rulers who ruled the subcontinent during this period. According to Eaton

Contemporary Sanskrit inscriptions never identified Indo-Muslim invaders in terms of their religion, as Muslims, but most generally in terms of their linguistic affiliation (most typically as Turk,’ turushka’). That is, they were construed as but one ethnic community in India amidst many others. (Eaton 122)

Historians have argued that the era from 1200 to 1750 is the foundation for the highly pluralistic human landscape of modern south Asia, with its composite culture that draws on both Indic and Islamic high traditions in many and rich regional variants. This composite culture came under threat after the Partition from the votaries of Hindutva who are known notoriously for their anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim sentiments and policies.

The tradition, practiced by V. S. Naipaul to present Vijayanagar as the custodian of Hinduism, which, according to his was destroyed by Muslim invasions, was started by the historians of the Raj and later on was perpetuated by ideologues of the Sangh Parivar. The fall of Vijayanagar was written up in elegiac terms by Robert Sewel whose book Vijayanagar: A Forgotten Empire first characterized the kingdom as a Hindu bulwark against Mohammadan conquests, a single brave but doomed attempt at resistance to Islamic aggression. The problem is that such ideas rest on a set of mistaken and Islamophobic assumptions that recent scholarship has done much to undermine. Phillip Wagoner wrote an essay entitled “A Sultan Among Hindu Kings” in 1996. The essay falsifies the claim that in the realm of cultural policy Vijayanagar strived to contain the spread of Islam and to preserve Hindu purity in the southern peninsula. It rejects the view that Vijayanagar was insulated from the broader cultural influences of neighboring Muslim dynasties and that Vijayanagar was destroyed by a combination of Muslim rulers. Contrary to Naipaul’s formulations it is now widely recognized
that the actual patterns of political conflicts and wars in South India between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries cannot be understood in terms of a simple Hindu-Muslim conflict because in South India “both Hindu and Muslim states fought among themselves as much as they did against one another” (Wagoner 852). Contrary to the Hindu - Muslim conflict envisaged by Naipaul, Wagoner argues that

. . . the Hindu culture in Vijayanagar was in fact deeply transformed by its interaction with Islamic culture” and that “this transformation, far from being the result of mere changes in taste of fashion, was a deliberately calculated act on the part of Vijayanagar’s courtly elite, and that it was integrally related to changes in the political culture of the court” (854).

The Islamic- inspired forms and practices altered the courtly life and cultural manifestations of the Vijayanagar period in such diverse areas as military technology and strategy, political and administrative institutions. The transformations in the material culture of the court were a direct result of nearly two centuries of intense and creative interaction with the Islamic world. In order to highlight the cultural influences of Islam on the Vijayanagara cultural life Wagoner argues that the Hindu kings of Vijayanagar appeared in public audience not bare chested, as has been a tradition in Hindu India, but dressed in quasi-Islamic court costume - the Islamic inspired kafayi, a long-sleeved tunic derived from Arabic qaba, symbolic, according to Wagoner, of their participation in the more universal culture of Islam. Vijayanagar underwent what Wagoner calls “Islamicization” - a dynamic and creative process of cultural, political, economic and military technological change, a process that has nothing to do with religious conversion or syncretism. Thus the Islamicate culture of Vijayanagar was not a result of some inevitable consequences of the onslaught of Islam, but quite the opposite as the result of conscious and deliberately calculated acts of creative individual’s seeking to maximize their opportunities in an ever-widening world.
Wagoner also maintains that the indigenous Indic sources in the Vijayanagar period do not speak of Islam or Muslims, but identify the bearers of Islamicate civilization in the Deccan in the ethnic terms, speaking inevitably of Turks.

Naipaul’s account of India’s Islamic history and therefore, his treatment of Islam, are highly erroneous. Accurate or inaccurate, Naipaul’s account of Islam in India only talks about the rulers and their “devastating” invasions. He gives no room to Sufis in his historiography. In spreading Islam in India, Sufis were the main force, and any account of Indian Islamic history cannot be considered objective or accurate that does not give ample space to them. As William Dalrymple has written that “it is widely known, for example, that Islam in India was spread much less by sword than by Sufis and yet Sufism, clearly central to any discussion of medieval India barely makes any appearance in Naipaul’s work” (Dalrymple ‘Trapped in Ruins’). Sufism with its holy men, visions, and miracles and its emphasis on the individuals search for union with God has always born remarkable similarities to the mystical side of Hinduism. And it was under Sufi influence that the two religions almost fused into one, with Hindus visiting Sufi graves, while “Muslim villagers would leave offerings at temples to ensure the birth of children and good harvest” (Dalrymple, Seven Lives 109). Although in India communalist feelings loom large now, still Sufi Dargas attract as many Hindu, Sikh and Christian pilgrims as they do Muslims. The history of Indian Sufism abounds in attempts by mystics to overcome the gap between the two great traditions and to seek God not through sectarian rituals but through the wider gateway of the human heart. Also notably absent in Naipaul’s work is any mention of the remarkable religious tolerance of the Mughals. Neither Akbar nor Dara Shukh makes any sort of appearance in Naipaul’s writing on India’s Islamic past, and his readers will learn nothing of the former’s enthusiastic patronage of Hindu temples of latter’s work translating the Gita into Persian. Naipaul makes no mention of Dara Shukh’s book The Mingling of Oceans, a study of Hinduism and Islam which emphasizes the perfect compatibility of the two faiths and speculates that the Upanishads were the source of monotheism.
In this chapter I have argued that Naipaul’s understanding of India’s Islamic history is based on nineteenth century colonial histories of Raj. British historians like Elliot and Mills were the first to portray Muslims as cruel and in terms of purely religious terms. They did so not only to delegitimize the pre-British rule of Muslim rulers, but also to give ideological justification for the British colonial policies in India. This colonial education coupled with Naipaul's predominantly Hindu background colored his perceptions of Muslim rule in India, and he portrayed it as long history of ‘darkness’.
Works Cited


