Traveller's Nostalgia to Rewrite History of the Lost Land: Reading M. G. Vassanji's *A Place Within: Rediscovering India*

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Abstract

Indian history writing owes a lot to a number of keen travellers and envoys since ancient times that came here to seek knowledge, learning and customs and fell in love with diverse Indian traditions and cultures (unlike the European travellers who came in robes of businessmen, but later colonized the nation). A list of such important explorers of ancient and medieval India consists of the travel records of Megasthenes (302-298 BC)[1], Fa-Hien (405-411 AD)[2], Hiuen-Tsang (630-645 AD)[3], I-tsing (671-695 AD)[4], Al-Masudi (957 AD)[5], Al-beruni (1024-1030 AD)[6] , Macro Polo (1292-1294 AD)[7], Ibn Batuta (1333-1347 AD)[8], Shihabuddin al-Umari (1348 AD)[9], Nicolo Conti (1420-1421 AD)[10], Abdur Razzaq (1443-1444 AD)[11], and Athanasius Nikitin (1470-1474 AD)[12]. Later a category of European travellers came to India, mostly for business purposes, whose documentation helped them to raise the empire. This category may include Ralph Fitch (1583-91), the first traveller from England, gave written accounts about India and created interest among the English to start trade with India; William Hawkins (1608-1611 AD) and Sir Thomas Roe (British) (1615-1619 AD) ambassadors of British King James I, who were sent to the court of Jahangir the Mughal Emperor (1609); Fransciso Palsaert (1620-1627 AD); a Foreign Envoy from Dutch, who lived in Agra and gave a comprehensive account of flourishing trade at Ahmadabad, Surat, Broach Bombay, Multan, Lahore etc.; Peter Mundy (1630-34 AD) an Italian tourist, who gave a vivid account of the living conditions of the people in the reign of *Shahjahan* and so on. The growing knowledge of India's past glory under the colonial rule inspired another category of spiritual seekers to travel India. The list of such travel writers includes spiritual seekers like Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, 12 August [O.S. 31 July] 1831 – 8 May 1891), a Russian-German occultist, philosopher, author, and co-founder of the Theosophical Society in 1875, who wrote memories about living in India which were published in the book *From the Caves and Jungles of Hindustan* and Paul Brunton (21 October 1898 – 27 July 1981), a British theosophist and spiritualist, best known as one of the early popularizers of Neo-Hindu spiritualism in western esotericism, notably via his bestselling *A Search in Secret India* (1934). There is another category of travellers to India who, routed through the generations of migration and hyphenated identities, undertook sojourn in the post colonial India to find their ancestral roots. Unlike other travel writers, whose outside positioning keep them free of the anxiety to search the 'home', the inside/outside relational position of such diasporic travellers is fraught with the indisputable problem of 'home'. Avtar Brah significantly points out that how 'home' generates an indisputable problem in the discourse of the Indian diaspora.

> …the 'referent' of 'home'… [is] qualitatively different … 'home' in the form of a simultaneously floating and rooted signifier. It is an invocation of narratives of 'the nation'. In racialised or nationalist discourses this signifier can become the basis of claims…that a group settled 'in' a place is not necessarily 'of' it. (3)

This 'floating and rooted signifier' has always prompted Indian diasporic writers to invoke, discover and explore the 'narrative of 'the nation'' through their exploration and recreation of history. The travel writings from Indian diasporic writers, which give broader dimensions to understanding of their complex relationship with India are no exception to it. *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990) and *A Place Within: Rediscovering India* (2008) written by V. S. Naipaul and M.G. Vassanji respectively are

examples of nostalgic self encounters with the 'nation' while reconnecting with India after a multi-generational gap intensified by multiple migrations. These reconnections with the nation reconnect them with the history and memory of the nation as well as with their respective communities. The present paper engages with the award-winning travel memoir of M. G. Vassanji *A Place Within: Rediscovering India* (this book bagged highest literary honour of Canada- *The Governor-General's Award* in 2009), whose conflicting positions of "familiar and yet so alien; so frustrating and yet so enlightening and humbling" (2008 xiii) function both as subjects and as tools of a meta-textual enquiry into and past and the present of the nation. With a deep penetrating eyes of a historian and with an awareness of the epic proportion of the quest, this Indo-African-Canadian writer is not just a wayward tourist, but is bent on deciphering everything which comes in his ways; be it myths, stories, legends, history, family narratives, unforgettable characters, geographical conditions, riots, politics, religious discourses and finally question of identity. For him history is addiction.

Key Words : Diaspora, colonial rule, history, nostalgia, exile, positioning, the in-between world, cultural identites

I

M.G. Vassanji, whose forefathers migrated from India under indenture system[13] in colonial rule, was born in Nairobi, Kenya in 1950. His family left for Dar es Salaam in Tanzania at the end of the Mau Mau period. The United Republic of Tanzania came into being in 1964. Those were the times of economical setback and political unrest of the entire African continent. The indigenous Africans had a very hostile attitude towards Indians whose situation was like a "colonial sandwich", with the European at the top and Africans at the bottom. Amid increasing resentment of the Africans many Indians fled to England, Europe and North America to avoid racial and political discriminations. Vassanji, at the age of 19, left the University of Nairobi on a scholarship to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. After earning a doctorate in Physics from the University of Pennsylvania and working as a writer- in-residence at the University of Iowa in the International Writing Program, he migrated to Canada and worked at the Chalk River Power Station for some time. Finally he came to Toronto in 1980 and accepted Canadian Citizenship in 1983. In 1989 his first novel *The Gunny Sack* was published. That year he, with his wife Nurjehan Aziz founded and edited the first issue of *The Toronto South Asian Review* (TSAR). Apart from *The Gunny Sack* Vassanji has penned six more novels; *No New Land* (1991), *The Book of Secrets* (1994) (which won the very first Scotiabank Giller Prize), *Amriika* (1999) , *In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003) (which also received the Scotiabank Giller Prize), *The Assassin's Song* (2007) and *The Magic of Saida* (2012) and *Nostalgia* (2016). His other acclaimed works are his travelogue-cum-memoir on India *A Place Within: Rediscovering India* (2008) and childhood memoir of East Africa *And Home Was Kariakoo: A Memoir of East Africa* (2012). He has also penned two story collections *Uhuru streets* (1990) and *When She Was Queen* (2005) and edited *A meeting of Streams: South Asian Canadian Literature* (2009).

The consciousness of always being in exile, estrangement that we belong but no longer do and a compulsion to return to the point of origin (which proves to be

chimera) shape the fictional and non-fictional worlds of M.G. Vassanji. Through his writings he returns to his past. The reason is twofold: one is the search for home and another is to define his religious identity of his community (Indian Muslims of the esoteric Shamsi sect) which is a minority within minority. Both are complex and major factors in deciding identity. His works have been deeply affected by two experiences: the psychic tremors of indenture, a kind of banishment from India and later his exilic existence in Canada. His works, whether fiction or non-fiction, are "metafictional time-travelling vehicles that carry a sense of belonging across divides of time and place and generate empathy. Meta-texts convey a sense of the transient status of identity or closure." (Vera Alexander 222)

Writing from a diasporic positioning which is constructed of a shared sense of loss, exile, dispossession and otherness, as Stuart Hall opines that "Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence, but a *positioning*" (395), Vassanji resists to be an essentialist and yet he is in search of the essence. His variegated identity of an Indo-African-Canadian reconstructs as well as deconstructs the notion of a common "We" of Indian Diasporas. It is because, as Arjun Appadurai puts, culture is "a volatile form of difference," rather than an "inert, local substance" (60) that is distinctive modern fact. In such a volatile cultural positioning a diasporic writer is more interested in, what Salman Rushdie would say in his famous essay on "imaginary homelands", the creative, re-creative power of "imagination," rather than the contingencies of an actual "homeland" (1991). Vassanji turns to his actual "homeland", for which he had a "youthful romance" and he returns his "homeland" "after three generations" ((*A Place Within* xi).

II

A Place within is Vassanji's nostalgic and intense account of India over the period of decade as seen and felt by him. Long harboured a desire to visit India, Vassanji from the very beginning of his sojourn is conscious of his inside/outside positioning and is cautious enough to unearth and represent the past of his real spiritual home: "on one hand I receive the confidences and treatments due to an insider, one of them; then I become the outsider, someone who doesn't know and has to be protected, someone who hasn't lived close to the fire and felt the heat." (10) His youthful romance with India here is balanced with his diasporic dislocations and hyphenated identities. In an interview with Anna Rohleder when he was asked the reasons of his obsession with past (his every work is haunted by past) and on the importance of history Vassanji replies,

> When you go away from where you were brought up, you find that you lose everything, especially for communities like ours in Africa. The idea of India was distant and local history was almost non-existent. Once I got to the US and Canada, I started to wonder where I had come from, and the historical one is the only sense of belonging that remained.
>
> Also there is the question of finding out and not being able to find out—there are many things you cannot know, especially in a case like ours. What you cannot

know you imagine; you create a new mythology with which you are comfortable. (Vassanji Feb 2016)

Further the childhood stories of the migrations of his ancestors, parents, and community from India to East African countries compel this sensitive author to discover not only the nation, "the ancestral mythical memory of India" which had strong bearings on his forefathers and on his own identity, but also to mythical land of his community, "the Gujarati Khojas", which has a syncretic "a happy combination of mystical and devotional Hinduism and Islam" (*A Place Within* ix). History for him is "addictive, is an obsession" and that is because, he concludes, "that it reflects the deep dissatisfaction of unfinished, incomplete migrations a perpetual homelessness in my life". (46)

Part memoir and confession, part travelogue and history, *A Place Within: Rediscovering India* is the result of Vassanji's visits to India over the period of decade beginning 1993. His visits, that are organized geographically rather than chronologically, change his notion for India as a distant land which was related to him by way of family narratives, films and history books. Returning on behalf of his family "after seventy, eighty, a hundred years" (3) his African identity and sense of belongingness is pleasingly shocked to find India strikingly familiar with a deep sense of connection. Though the incidents of the mind-jarring violence of the Hindu-Muslim communal riots in 1993 in distant Bombay and Surat after the 1992 demolition of Babri Mosque create an alienation from the motherland and shatters his neophyte fascination only to jolt him out of the pristine scenario promising his much awaited union with the lost homeland, he feels at home with the hospitality, warmth, welcome, and friendliness of people that he experiences. Even in this situation he is not sarcastic of India as Naipaul is. The "combination of mystical and devotional Hinduism and Islam" in him does not allow him to be unsympathetic like Naipaul. André Alexis in his review "Portrait of the writer as a subcontinent" in *The Globe and Mail* makes an interesting comparison of these two writers:

> Where Naipaul's irony is bracing and sometimes amusing, it excoriates others, giving us sneering portraits of, for instance, small-town teachers and functionaries. Vassanji's irony is as bracing and often as amusing, but he doesn't look down on the people around him. He is always guided by a sympathy Naipaul sometimes lacks. The reader feels part of India's predicament, never above it. In fact, it is at times as if Vassanji were writing a corrective to Naipaul, admitting the absurdities, pettiness and ignominious behaviour of some of his subjects without grinding them beneath his new leather boots. ("Portrait of the Writer as a Subcontinent")

The homesick expatriate in Vassanji takes a stance like an insider. Quite disturbed with the shattered image of Gujarat, the place of his community (a peaceful union of both the faiths) and the land of Mahatma Gandhi, Vassanji accounts his emotional and intellectual bewilderment and communicates the nuances of politics of hatred with a sting of the pain in his heart:

> . . . the violence unleashed in Gujarat during the so-called communal riots is so giddyingly intense and horrific that the country simply shakes its head and watches and waits for it to spend itself and subside like some natural disaster. But natural

> disaster it is not, for it is inspired and fuelled regularly and systematically by the politics of hateful bigotry. (202)

Commenting about the Indian policy of reservation which "rewards mediocrity in the name of equality" and the cast system where "castes competing as to which is the more backward" he makes a descent into the self-confessed "messiness" (*A Place Within* 168) of origins, divisions, and various forms of nationalisms and yet the romantic heart of nation impresses him. Facing a range of contemporary issues along with the historian in him confronts history in bits and pieces.

A Place Within is divided into six parts (though the content page is willingly omitted from the book). The first part "The First Visit: This is India. Where Is It", introduces readers with his first experience of twenty eight days, which coincides with Gujarat riots. This sojourn is marked by his experience of Indian railways especially in his travel from New Delhi to Bhubaneswar and from Bhubaneswar to Coimbatore. He shows his engagement with the people, their customs, faiths and habits, with the problems he faces as an insider, his experience of always finding a way (getting tickets confirmed through the Governor's Quota), traffic and the romantic impulse of the nation. He makes an interesting observation while listening to a song in a mushaira,

> This is still a land of romance, I tell myself, of song and love. Hearts are still given and taken away. It's a place of signals, with looks, and handkerchiefs and small gestures. A place of laughter. How well do I recognize these, how utterly have I lost them. The cynicism is reserved for politicians, among this middle-class crowd, the irony for foreign consumption. (*A Place Within* 12–13)

At a place he gives the story of how Islam spread in Kerala, while at another place he makes an accurate observation of the Calcutta intellectuals that "They do not yearn for trips abroad. They are well informed….They can quote freely from Bengali writings (as well as Derrida and Foucault)…. And there is genuine sympathy for the oppressed". (27) As an historian Vassanji is quite reasonable to base his inductive inferences. It is really amazing to find his potentiality of inter- and trans-disciplinary involvement with history. This potentiality is quite evident in his selective and discontinuous history of Delhi in the second section "Delhi: The Burden of History". This section is further divided into six sub-sections, 'Enigmas to Uncover', 'The Sultan and the Sufi', 'They Walked with Loud Lamentations', 'The City of Poets: Old Delhi', 'Punjabi Delhi', and 'Postscript: Night Through Delhi'. The historian here is more interested in the traditional Delhi, "a monument to a ruler's ambition, a lesson in the transience of empire and dynasty", which "evokes the mystique of history, and old poetry, reminders of empires rising and falling; it carries images of wars and marauding of armies, echoes dimly with fresh clash of steel, the roll of canon, the thunder of horses" (39-40). He feels compelled to rewrite history, not in a dry tone of a historian, but as a story teller. 1192 A.D., the turning point of Indian History, is a suitable point for Vassanji to begin the search of history when the "Rajput kingdom of the north, fell to the armies of Muhammad of Ghur" (49). He sees this battle fought between two warrior classes, the Turkes and the Rajputs. This battle changes the fate of India and, as Vassanji rightly concludes like a dexterous historian, is the very genesis of Hindu-Muslim division; "the seed of resentment and division was sown on the subcontinent to last to the present day. The partition of 1947 was not a resolution; it simply amplified the

resentments." (53) His analysis is not limited to historical events only, but is extended from the study of monuments that "tell a story, reflect a mindset" (81), to the tradition of mystics, travelers and writers like Nizamuddin Auliya (a mystic and a disciple of Sufi baba Fariduddin Ganj-e-Shakar, who belonged to Chishti order), Khusro (a disciple of Nizamuddin Auliya and a famous poet-historian), Ziyauddin Barani (known for composing the *Tarikh-i-Firuz Shahi*,), Ibn Batuta (who "gives us the man on the road" 75), Alberuni (who (produced an invaluable record, but he does not reveal himself so openly" 75)), Ghalib (his place in "Urdu letters somewhat akin to Pushkin in Russia" 88), Ahmed Ali, Attia Hosain, Krishna Sobti (the last three are discussed for their nostalgic accounts of Delhi in their respective novels *Twilight in Delhi*, *Sunlight on a Broken Column* and *Dil-o-Danish*), the journalists whom he met Khushwant Singh and M. J. Akhbar and the historian Ranchandra Guha. His itinerary continues to record not only important events and rise and fall of several dynasties and the British Raj, but also making and unmaking of Delhi from Qila Rai Pithora to Shahjahanbad (Old Delhi) till the Lutyens Delhi. Sometimes historian in him is left back and the renowned Canadian academic and writer intervenes to make some very subjective and academic statements, for examples: "Thus the ghosts haunting Delhi's ruins, a cast of characters seen as through a mist, mystifying, awe-inspiring, ultimately too alien. A Shakespeare might have infused life into these shades, made them speak and feel", (58) and "In our imagination, as the macabre denouement of his [Alauddin's] life unfolds, it is as if Fellini had collaborated with Shakespeare to write the script" (63). He also feels the impulse of the refuge culture of the city. Traveling through the many Delhis; Delhi of Rajputs, Delhi of Muslim invaders, Delhi of Shahjahan, Delhi of poets and shayars and Lutyens' Delhi , he arrives at Punjabi Delhi, peopled with Punjabi refugees of 1947 partition. In between history we get some autobiographical snippets of Vassanji, which makes the work more interesting with a flavor of dramatic release. As every travel literature breaks the monotony of reading a lengthy novel so the Vassanji's. He makes a confession about his love for cricket, but not as an obsession as in India: "I love cricket. In Toronto I have sat up nights to watch it, as have others I know, from South Asia, South Africa, the West Indies. But here it is an obsession to dwarf all obsessions. Every series is analyzed in excruciating detail, as if a war, the Mahabharata, has been fought."(127)

Vassanji confronts the 'thrilling call' in an after empire stage and is reconciled with the nuances of past and present of the nation. The story teller in him easily migrates from history to fantasy as is quite at work in his next section "Shimla: A Spell in the Mountains".

Vassanji's is mesmerized by the pristine beauty of Shimla and the architecture of the *Indian Institute of Advanced Studies* (formerly the Viceregal Lodge) during his fourth month stay as an *Indian Institute of Advanced Studies* fellow. He finds small and quaint Shimla, his childhood dream from the distant Africa, at once captivating, with which he was acquainted through Bollywood movies. (134)

The memoir of Shimla is aptly balanced by the history of the long British presence in the place, after the place was discovered by the Gurkhas of Nepal between 1814 to 1815. He gives a detailed history of the 'Summer Capital' of British India and the beautiful description of the former Viceregal Lodge and now *IIAS*. Not only the

topography and the eco-system and the places like Mall road, but also his meeting with local people and great personalities like Bhishm Sahni and his wife Sheila, makes his stay an unforgettable one. Sometimes he lapses into fantasy in his account of the gothic architecture and about being haunted by the supernatural presence of Lady Curzon ('England still haunts the place, from a distance' (145)) and of fictional ghosts.

This memoir is marked by his observation of the monkey episode and the legend of Jakhoo Temple, during his visit to the temple. What is remarkable is that he is quite at ease at the places of Hindu as well as Muslim worship. We witness a range of intellectual academic discussion on topics like reservation policy, Hindu nationalism, Hindu-Muslim divide, on *Tamas* and on writers like Saddat Hasan Manto and Tagore and their contribution to literature and humanity at large. Vassanji also makes a visit to Amritsar to which his father-in law belonged. His meeting with people, memory and pain of partition, and the silent doors of the locked and abandoned house make this trip very emotional. Fulfilling the expectation of his father-in-law he goes to Bombay to meet the renowned writer Mulk Raj Anand (Uncle Mulk), who was distant relative of Vassanji from his father-in-law's side. This can be rightly said to be centre-point of the book, a culmination of his quest "to meet an Alter Ego, a living monument, a fellow novelist who not only precedes him in the field" (Vera Alexander) of Indian writing in English, but an Ishmaili like him and a distant relative; a stunning revelation to him. The trace of his ancestral stemmata of the Khoja community (a community representative of the Sufi faith, embodying religious tolerance and liberalism of Hindu convictions and Islamic beliefs) which belongs to the Kathiawar part of Gujarat is focalized in the next section "Gujarat: Down Ancestral Roads, Fearfully".

This section is divided in eight parts. Along with a brief description of the history of Gujarat, the homeland of the author, starting from the lord Krishna, to Rajput Kingdom, origin of Jainism and Buddhism, Mughal accession and later British Raj, this section presents a noteworthy documentation of the history and evolution of the myth and legend of Khoja tradition. The religious tradition and idiosyncrasies of the community which believes in some Islamic teachings and relies on the worship of Lord Vishnu have a very strong bearing on Vassanji.

> I was brought up in an Indian mystical or bhakti, tradition. Every day, we went to a prayer house, called the khano, where we sat on mats and sang two hymns, called ginans, in an archaic language that was mostly an old Guajarati, but sometimes Sindhi. … Many of them were about personal salvation of a mystical sort, or about Krishna-devotion, or those of any number of India's devotional saints. (250)

Vassanji elucidates the kernel theme of ginans; the invocation of spiritual love and especially encomiums on the eleven avatars of Vishnu (the "tenth avatar according to this list, is 'Muhammad dur rasoolilah', the Islamic prophet" (259)) through the verses authored by a line of Persian Ismaili Pirs (mostly born in India) and great religious leaders. Vassanji gives an account of the most prominent and prolific of these pirs, Sadardeen (also known as Guru Sahdev and Satguru), Imamshah, Sahaji Sawai etc and raises a question, more for readers than for himself that "Were we Hindu or Muslim? I believe both; some would say neither" (250). Vassanji does not give a dry account of history but engages the reader. The inclusiveness of both the religious traditions is what defines his identity and he makes an important disclaimer that "I

find the labels 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' discomforting, because they are exclusive. They have not defined people for me in Africa… in the United States … or in Canada." (204)

One cannot miss the acute emotional sense of belonging which Vassanji forms while visiting several places related to his community. He has an irresistible urge of identifying himself with the people, places, anecdotes, mysticism, and current as well as historical issues and especially with his community. While visiting the shrine of Immashah, a pilgrimage of his community, he meets the Kaka, 'the head of the shrine' and before leaving he "cannot resist telling the Kaka", that he is a Khoja. (254)

There are also some snippets of the Rajput history of Solanki and Vaghela dynasties. Dismantling history of the Rajputs he also reconstructs the controversial story of Deval Devi and consequently draws a significant conclusion "that the thirteen-century story of Rajput defeat and humiliation festers in the mind, writ large as a chapter in the continuing saga of Hindu-Muslim enmity, … A Rajput-Turk war becomes one pitting Hinduism against Islam." (2008 2010) Surely Vassanji is at pains to excavate the very genesis of the Hindu-Muslim enmity. What is most impressing is his keen historical approach while evaluating Rajputs:

> The Rajput kingdoms of India are renowned for their civilization and culture, their patronage of the arts and learning. They are also the subject of a great deal of legend and folklore describing the honour and courage displayed by their noble warriors who set off from their forts to do battle, especially in the tragic and climatic confrontations against the Muslim hordes from the north. It is said that when defeat was inevitable, the Rajput womenfolk, rather than face dishonour at the hands of the enemy, collectively immolated themselves in a fire, in a practice called jauhar, before their men set off to fight the enemy to the death. This practice, highly romanticized, not to politicized in the Hindu-Muslim context, was not universal; and the Rajput kingdoms, of course, had been constantly at war against each, and later allied themselves when necessary with Muslim armies. (205)

This reminds me of Colonel Todd who, quite fascinated with the valor, pride, honesty, chivalry and love for art and culture, combined his official role and his amateur interests to recreate history of Rajputs in *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* (1920).

The next section "Kerala; The Goddess' Footprint" leads readers to the captivating beauty and civilization of Kerala. This trip is marked by seeking pleasure in the lap of nature and meeting with extraordinary people like Thakazai Sivasankara Pillai, a celebrated Kerala poet and writer, who leads an amazingly humble and modest life. What pleases Vassanji is the lack of communal clashes (alas how drastically things has changed now!) in Kerala. He also makes a visit to Lord Ayappa (born of gods Shiva and Vishnu) and describes in detail the pilgrimage and the faith of people. The most satisfying of his sojourn, in the end, is his visit to Kanyakumari temple;

> More satisfying for me is the visit to the temple of Kanyakumari, the Goddess. The temple is reputed to be three thousand years old and you enter it bare-chested along with the crowd that has been waiting for the door to open, having left your shirt and other belongings at the stand outside. If one wants a god and goddess, they had better be ancient and distant. (*A Place Within* 358)

Finally he completes his sojourn with his visit to Dharamsala in the last section "To Finish: Back on the Himalayans Foothills". Pleased with the harmonious life there he admits that he could not traverse the rich culture and the country entire land "there is more to discover, there will be more, the journey is endless" (361).

III

Like his novels *A Place Within* eventually asserts Vassanji's identity. To some theorists of diaspora his nostalgic of return and emotional involvement in a specific space might seem outdated, but Vassanji is a consistent character in creating emotional, religious, intellectual, social as well as transnational bond with people whom he meets and places where he goes. Khushwant Singh has rightly remarked in *The Telegraph*

> The great merit of Vassanji's travelogue is that Indian readers would also be able to rediscover their own country. He tells us about the people of India, their history, customs, and their peculiarities. His characters come alive; his depictions of rural landscapes, congested cities and squalor become personal experiences. *A Place Within: Rediscovering India* makes more absorbing reading than Jawaharlal Nehru's *Discovery of India* because it is, in fact, a rediscovery, and written by one who wields a gifted pen.

This book is not just a rediscovery of "the nation" but also of the self, which is almost as varied and multiple as the India he depicts. Commenting on this trend of Vassanji's writing Asma Sayed aptly remarks that he is currently "one of the very few authors, if not the only one, treading the complex and intertwined territory of India, Africa, and Canada" ("Writing History" 5). As novels of Vassanji demonstrates a deep involvement to recreate history, according to which he supplies authentic characters, here too in this travelogue on India he creates and recreates history and characters. Anjum Khan and S. Kalamani opine that Vassanji through the "synthesis of actualities and inferences . . . of memory, fiction and history" ascertains "the vicissitudes in personal lives of a community". (194-95)

Vassanji's sojourn to India compels him not just to trace missing links of history and to write a memoir, but his comments and observations go far beyond the strict scope of a travelogue or a record of history. For example he compares the fate of Raziya Sultana and Indira Gandhi, "The only queen to occupy the Delhi throne was Raziya Sultana … And next queen to rule Delhi, so to speak, was Indira Gandhi, also killed…" (*A Place Within* 109-10)

Vassanji makes a compulsory evaluation of local, national and international issues without being pungent. The disagreeability and disenchantment of Naipaul with his roots is missing here and we find a sympathetic and curios observer. Unlike a haughty returnee Naipaul, who reluctantly approaches a country framed by the 'abjectness and defeat and shame' (*A Million Mutinies Now* 516) of his family's indenture past, Vassanji finds a deep rooted nostalgia to rediscover the roots and finds India 'within'. The deep communion that he felt with his roots leaves him with desire and promise of return because "In my mind, I imagine a map with large swath of not-yet-visited India." He reaches exactly where he was.

Notes

1. He was the ambassador of Selecus Nikator, who visited the court of Chandragupta Maurya and wrote an interesting book *Indica.*
2. He came to India during the reign of Chandragupta II Vikramaditya and wrote extensively about social and religious life on India.
3. Hiuen-Tsang visited India during the reign of King Harshavardhana, wrote a detailed description of India during the reign of Harsha in his book ***Si-yu-ki.***
4. He was a Chinese traveller, who visited India in connection with Buddhism and left a unique record *A Record of the Buddhist Religion sent Home from the Southern Sea.*
5. Al-Masudi , the Arab traveller, has given an extensive account of India in his work *Muruj-ul-Zehab.*
6. He came to India along with Mahmud of Ghazni and wrote a book *Tahqiq-i-Hind.*
7. Macro Polo was a Venetian traveller. He gives an account of the economic history of India his work *The Book of Sir Marco Polo.*
8. Batuta was a Moorish traveller, whose book *Rehla* (the Travelogue) throws light on the reign of Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq and the geographical, economic and social conditions of that time.
9. He came from Damascus and he gave a vivid account of India in his book, *Masalik albsar fi-mamalik al-amsar*.
10. Conti, a Venetian traveller, gave a comprehensive account of the Hindu kingdom of Vijaynagar.
11. He was a Persian traveller, who came to India and stayed at the court of the Zamorin at Calicut and has given a vivid account of the Vijaynagar empire.
12. Nikitin, a Russian merchant, described the condition of the Bahmani kingdom under Muhammad III (1463-82).
13. Frank Birbalsingh gives a very authentic account of the condition of indenture:

> The physical condition of indenture... induced disorienting feeling of insecurity, fear and panic. Herded like cattle on so-called "coolie ships," the immigrants were little better than human merchandise, as indeed their predecessors were, the African slaves who were also transported in ships across the Atlantic during the infamous Middle Passage. … But not by its length alone was the voyage disorienting: it enforced loss of caste and custom, and cut the immigrants adrift from all that they knew and cherished in their homeland. The term "jahaji bhai," Hindi or Urdu for ship brother was invented as a designation of the new relationships which immigrants had forged with shipmates in their attempt to compensate for broken ties with family and friends they had left behind in India. (2000 x-xi)

Flogging by white overseer was a daily occurrence. The condition of these labourers was the same in every colony. This indenture system almost worked as a form of pseudo slavery. Official discrimination of these labourers was a usual phenomenon. They also faced different problems in different colonies.

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