UNIT 1 NAIPAOU AND HIS CRITICS

1.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of this unit are to provide information about the life of V.S. Naipaul so that the complex influences that shaped his thinking as a writer are understood, and to examine in detail some of his other works besides A House for Mr. Biswas. This would give you a further insight into the different phases of his creativity. Finally it is also my endeavour to provide an overview of the indenture or 'ginnit' system, which will serve as a backdrop against which you are to study A House for Mr. Biswas.

1.1 A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Sir Vidiadhar Surajpershad Naipaul (b. 1932) has been awarded almost every international literary prize except the Nobel for which he has been shortlisted many times. Despite controversial attitudes and statements, some of which he shrugs off contemptuously like his alleged support of Hindutva in a newspaper interview, he remains one of the best writers of our times. His concern with the quality of his work comes out in a recent interview-based feature published in Indian Today Plus. To quote: “I spend a lot of time writing in my head when I am working on a book” (p.57) Only when he is satisfied with the way the day’s writing has taken shape, does he put it on the computer. The result is predictable and in Naipaul’s own words, “I have never written an unconsidered sentence. I have never even put an unconsidered punctuation mark.” (p.57) For him writing is a liberating experience as one of his letters, written in 1987, suggests.

I wanted to be a writer because I wanted to be famous; because I wanted to be free... The contemplation that goes with writing, and the clarity it requires, make for calm. It is for me the equivalent of religion.

(Naipaul Archives)

Before we get on to some of the biographical details that provide a background against which A House for Mr Biswas should be studied, a basic question has to be answered. Why did V.S. Naipaul decide to live and write in England? Naipaul has answered this question himself in his acceptance speech on being awarded the first David Cohen British Literature Prize in 1993 for a ‘lifetime of achievement’:

Writing is more than a matter of spirit. A book is a physical commercial object. It requires a well-organised society. If you are going to make a living...
as a writer you need publishers, reviewers, bookshops, libraries, a public
looking for new work: a book trade.

When I was starting in the mid 1950s, there was no other place where I could
have set up as an English-language writer, and found encouragement. It is, of
course, different now. So as a writer I was separated, and sometimes deeply
separated, from my background – if you take Trinidad as my ancestral
background.

The concluding sentence of the passage cited is significant as it provides a valuable
cue to the persona of exile that Naipaul assumed at the outset of his writing career
and which has since been associated with his creativity. This can be linked with his
ancestry of indentured labour, his brahmanic upbringing (which he tries to subvert
but which surfaces time and again in his writings) and his colonial education in
Trinidad and England, all of which combined to breed an exclusivity, an impelling
desire to assert and retain one’s individuality. So all his writing is done in his
Wiltshire cottage where he gets the silence and solitude needed for his concentrated
work.

In his early writing, namely A House for Mr Biswas the novel under study, Naipaul
draws upon his life and experiences in Trinidad, especially the relationship with his
own father Seepersad Naipaul. However, he does not talk about his ancestry or his
early life till much later. Finding the Centre: Two Narrative (Andre Deutsch, 1984)
is made up of two “personal” pieces, “Prologue to an Autobiography” and “The
Crocodiles of Yamousoukro”. Of these, the first attempts to trace the beginnings of
Naipaul’s literary career. To quote him: “It is an account of something less easily
seized: my literary beginnings and the imaginative promptings of my many-sided
background.” (p.9)

“Our own past was, like our idea of India, a dream.” (p.61) says Naipaul in Finding
the Centre. This is true not only of the descendants of indentured workers in
Trinidad but most of those in Mauritius, Fiji and other former colonies where they
had gone towards the end of the nineteenth century and early years of the twentieth
century to work on the plantations. While the third section of this unit will be devoted
to a detailed discussion of this category of immigrants, it is sufficient to say that most
of them were poor and illiterate, venturing out of their village for the first time in the
hope of earning a better livelihood or at times to ward off starvation or disgrace. Very
few of them preserved any letters or records pertaining to their lives in India and over
the years, the tenuous links snapped.

However, Naipaul has some idea of the region from where his ancestors had migrated
though he does not know much about them as this remark suggests. “Of my mother’s
father, so important to our family and my father’s childhood I knew almost nothing.
My father’s father had died when my father was a baby.” (p.61)

Naipaul’s great grandmother on his father’s side, migrated to Trinidad towards the
end of the nineteenth century. According to Naipaul, she was in dire circumstances.

About 1880, in the ancient town of Ayodhya in the United Provinces in India,
a young girl of the Parray clan gave birth to a son. She must have been
deeply disgraced, because she was willing to go alone with her baby to a far-
off island to which other people of the region were going. That was how the
Parray woman came to Trinidad. She intended her son to be a pundit; and in
the district of Diego Martin she found a good pundit who was willing to take
her son in and instruct him. (There was no hint, in the tale I heard, of sugar
estates and barracks and contract labour.)

The years passed. The boy went out into the world and began to do pundit’s
work. He also dealt, in a small way, in the goods Hindus used in religious
cere monies. His mother began to look for a bride for him. . . . It happened that three brothers of a suitable clan had made the journey from India together, and it happened that one of these brothers had seven daughters.

The Parray boy married one of these daughters. They had three children, a girl and two boys. They lived in the village of Cunupia, not far from Chaguanas, in a house with a galvanized-iron roof. Quite suddenly, when the youngest child, a boy, was only two, the young Parray fell ill and died. Somehow all the gold coins he had hoarded disappeared; and the aunts and uncles thought the children and their mother be sent back to India. Arrangements were made but then at the last moment the youngest child didn’t want to go. He ran away and hid in a latrine, and the ship sailed without them. (Ibid p.65-66)

The “Parray” woman who took such a bold step to ensure her son’s happiness in surroundings where no one would know about the circumstance of his birth, was Naipaul’s great grandmother. The young boy who did not want to go back to India was Naipaul’s father Seepersad Naipaul. He was later sent to school and not made to work in the sugar cane plantation as was customary so that he might become a pundit and carry on the traditional vocation of the family.

The word “Parray” is sure to make the Indian student curious. One can safely assume that it is a derivative of “Pande”, a brahmin surname quite common in that region. It is significant that Naipaul’s father wanted to become a writer, though he came from a background with little education and equally little knowledge of English, in a small agricultural society where writing was considered an indulgence. Evidently there was a creative impulse which got transmitted to the son and found fulfillment. As Naipaul puts it, “The ambition to become a writer was given me by my father.” (p.33) The relationship between Mr Mohun Biswas and his son Anand in the novel, which will be analyzed in later units, draws on this aspect of Naipaul’s relationship with his own father.

Like Naipaul’s paternal great grandmother, his mother’s father had travelled out of India as an indentured immigrant at the turn of the century. He appeared to have done well as the description of the family house in Chaguanas, a little market town in the Indian area of Trinidad, indicates:

My mother’s family house in Chaguanas was a well-known local ‘big house’. It was built in the North Indian style. It had balustraded roof terraces, and the main terrace was decorated at either end with a statue of a rampant lion.

(“Finding the Centre, 35)

Though Naipaul says, “I didn’t like or dislike living there; it was all I knew”(“Finding the Centre, 35) it is clear that the house provided a kind of security that Naipaul’s father with his poor agricultural labour background and inability to find a stable job, could not offer independently. When Naipaul was born, his father was the Guardian staff correspondent in Chaguanas, a job he quit two years or so later. After that he picked up odd jobs here and there, sometimes for his wife’s family, sometimes for an uncle by marriage, “a rich man, founder and part owner of the biggest bus company in the island.”(“Finding the Centre, p. 34)

Naipaul realized as an adult what he might have sensed as a child that his father “dangled all his life in a half-dependence and half-esteem between these two powerful families” (“Finding the Centre, p. 34). This has been fictionally represented in A House for Mr Biswas.

It took Naipaul a long time to be able to talk about his childhood. He could do it only in 1984 when he was an established writer himself, having got over the financial as
A House for Mr. Biswas

well as emotional insecurities of his early years. Even then he chooses to blur the temporal sequence of events in his childhood. To quote him:

Disorder within, disorder without. Only my school life was ordered; anything that had happened there I could date at once. But my family life—my life at home, in the street—was jumbled, without sequence. The sequence I have given it here has come to me only with the writing of this piece.  
(Finding the Centre, p.41)

In 1950 Naipaul won a Trinidad Government Scholarship. The basic purpose of such scholarships which could last for seven years was to help with the student’s education till he had a profession. Naipaul’s scholarship enabled his study in English at Oxford, not because he wanted to be an academic but because he thought it would help him to get away from Trinidad and become a writer in England. He imagined that in his three or four scholarship years at Oxford, his talents would be recognized and “....the books would start writing themselves.” (Ibid p. 46)

That was not the way it worked out. In England Naipaul realized that he had no understanding of societies other than his own in Trinidad, and his life and reading in England did not provide him with material for a book. In 1955, five years after leaving Trinidad, he realized while working for the BBC as a freelance that the material for his writing had to be gleaned from his own experiences. He generalizes, “To become a writer, that noble thing, I had thought it necessary to leave. Actually to write, it was necessary to go back. It was the beginning of my self-knowledge.” (Finding the Centre, p. 47)

So, after two failed attempts, Naipaul sat at the typewriter in the room in the Langham Hotel, sifting his Caribbean or more specially Port of Spain memories, settling finally on the image of Bogart whose father had travelled together with Naipaul’s maternal grandfather as an indentured immigrant on the same ship. Some time during the long and frightening voyage they had sworn a bond of brotherhood which was honoured by their descendants.

The story of Bogart was highly appreciated by Naipaul’s three colleagues in the freelancers’ room, an Englishman named John Stockbridge, a Jamaican named Andrew Salkey who also wanted to be a writer and Gordon Woolford from British Guiana. This story, later included in Miguel Street, Naipaul’s first work (though not the first to be published), led to many others. As Naipaul puts it:

Over the next few days the street grew. Its complexities didn’t need to be pointed; they simply became apparent. People who had only been names in one story got dialogue in the next, then became personalities; and old personalities became more familiar. Memory provided the material city folklore as well, and city songs… My narrator consumed material and he seemed to be able to process every kind of material. (Finding the Centre, p.28-9)

Naipaul finished writing the story in five or six weeks but found no takers. He went on to write a second work, a novel titled The Mystic Masseur which was the first to be published. He was still very anxious and insecure but did not let these feelings blur his ambitions.

In the next section I will discuss briefly Naipaul’s works of fiction and non-fiction, other than those to be taken up in detail in conjunction with the novel under study, so as to give you a comprehensive idea about the different phases in his creativity. This would help you to place A House for Mr Biswas in the right perspective.

A detailed study of A House for Mr Biswas should be preceded by a brief look at some of his other works in order to put him in perspective and in tracing some of the different phases in his creativity. This would include a look at his early works, namely those three which preceded A House for Mr Biswas. Naipaul’s complex relationship with India started with initial sharp first impressions which have mellowed over the years. Therefore it is necessary to know something about his three books on India in order to comprehend A House for Mr Biswas better. A brief look at his two books based in England (Mr Stone and the Knights Companion and The Enigma of Arrival) and his latest book, is in order for a comprehensive outlook on Naipaul. Taken together this would provide a useful backdrop to one’s reading of A House For Mr Biswas.

Caribbean history records a long period of colonization. Whether the colonial masters were British, French or Dutch did not really make a difference to the subject people. What mattered was its total impact which intensified over the years. In the words of a critic, “The history of the region . . . carries the burden of a profound erasure, the traces of which haunt the area with a memory but no recognition of an autochthonous cultural base. What remains startling about Caribbean history . . . is the stark transparency of its European manufacture: of its populations, social structures, political organizations, and the outside orchestration of the region’s participation in the events of the larger world.” (Mustafa, 30)

Naipaul’s early novels should be considered against the backdrop of this multiple colonialism. The choice of the East Indian Trinidadian community into which he was born and was familiar with, is natural. (This community consisted largely of indentured immigrants working as agricultural labour, who were relative newcomers in Trinidad. Also they carried with them their experiences and mainly insular outlook from the remote villages in British India from where they had been recruited. They clung to their cultural roots that often manifested themselves in rituals and traditions as a form of security which the new environs did not offer them.) Over a period of time Trinidad’s Indian community like any diaspora, “developed idiosyncrasies and cultural changes in their efforts to maintain their customs and traditions. . . The adherence to categories of caste, and their kinship patterns all transmuted to the colonial setting of Trinidad’s already stratified society. . . . eventually their insularity only deepened their rigidity to custom as it had been practised in India at the time of their initial emigration.” (Mustafa, 31-32)

While The Mystic Masseur is Naipaul’s first published work, and The Suffrage of Elvira his second novel to be published, Miguel Street with its seventeen episodic sketches of characters and events loosely held together by a young boy narrator who leaves home for study abroad, was the first to be written. This departure can be read as a symbol of transience or a continued migratory process that one finds in a number
of Naipaul’s later works. Also the mode of discourse allows the narrative to fluctuate between a mature voice recollecting the impressions of childhood and the child’s own vision which is much more limited. In the words of a critic:

“Miguel Street...lays the foundations for Naipaul’s increasingly more concentrated examinations of the colonized condition. In both The Mystic Masseur and The Suffrage of Elvira, Miguel Street’s communal space is reworked into a more overt “national” framework, and the domesticity of its Dickensian “characters” into a sophisticated allegory of colonialism in A House for Mr Biswas.” (Mustafa, 44)

In The Mystic Masseur and The Suffrage of Elvira, Naipaul concerns himself with his version of the political reality of Trinidad, before and after the country became independent. Naipaul’s colonial perspective gave his writing a pro-white bias. He looked at post independence indigenous entrepreneurship and related activities in Trinidad in an ironical manner. Ganesh, the protagonist of The Mystic Masseur, is the stereotypical upwardly mobile first generation colonial entrepreneur who capitalized on the political opportunities that came his way. The recurring reference to him in Miguel Street, The Suffrage of Elvira, A House for Mr Biswas and certain stories in A Flag on the Island is an early example of Naipaul’s “...inter textual unfolding whereby he is able to create an internal narrative authority premised upon recognition and familiarity.”(Mustafa, 45)

The Suffrage of Elvira continues the political themes dealt with in The Mystic Masseur. It is the story of the election campaign in one district called Elvira by the candidate called Surujput Harbans. Both novels satirize a national political process after making the reader aware of a long tradition of political brokering and polarization characteristic of Trinidad’s ethnic and class divisions. This has been challenged by George Lamming who denounces Naipaul’s position as wholly Eurocentric. To quote him, “When such a writer is colonial, ashamed of his colonial background and striving like mad to prove himself through promotion to the peaks of a ‘superior’ culture whose values are gravely in doubt, then satire, like the charge of philistinism, is for me nothing more than a refuge.”(Lamming, The Pleasures of Exile, cited by Mustafa, 56-57). We will discuss these three books in greater detail in the last section when we relate them to A House for Mr Biswas.

Naipaul’s three books on India trace the growth of Naipaul’s attitude towards India and Indians from sharp impressions and disappointments of the first visit as expressed in An Area of Darkness to a perception of India, in India: A Wounded Civilization, as a decadent civilization which needs to make a clean break with the past in order to progress. There is a gradual resignation to all that he sees in India and he attempts to interpret current situations and issues to his largely western readership in India: A Million Mutinies Now.

Naipaul’s quest for India, a country that aroused his curiosity and which he had reconstructed in his mind from bits and pieces gleaned from racial memory and a childhood in a Brahmin household in Trinidad, started even before he first visited it in 1962. The first visit itself, ostensibly undertaken as a quest for his roots in the country of his grandparent’s origin, was not a happy experience. It took him some time to get used to the vast physicality of India which threatened to submerge his identity.

Later, as Naipaul gave up his search for his “imaginary homeland”, he became more responsive to the India that he visited in the seventies and eighties. He realized that while India was not and could not be his home, he could not reject it or visit the country as a casual tourist. The complexity of this relationship is suggested in a comment he makes in India: A Wounded Civilization: “I cannot travel only for the sights. I am at once too close and too far” (p.8-9). This spirit of acceptance can be related with the absence of anxiety, which indicates a shift from the outsider, colonial position he had taken earlier. Even the title is less negative, and Naipaul attempts to
transcend his itinerary and understand some of the issues and problems confronting India in the seventies.

This process is continued in *India: A Million Mutinies Now*. The deliberate colonial slant of the title can be simplistically interpreted as an indicator of the colonial bias in Naipaul's writing. It would be wiser to read it as the author's hint at the imperialistic attitude of a central government viewed as a neocolonial power, suppressing assertions of identity by the numerous socioethnic/religious/political groups in India which had till then been marginalized. Economic progress and political clout have combined to strengthen them, giving them a voice which they raise in their march to the centre from the peripheries. However, the approach remains journalistic and Naipaul's attempts to study the problems of separatism in India are remembered as vignettes that stand out for their brilliant style (perfected over the years) rather than insightful observations.

One can juxtapose Naipaul's books on India with those based in England only to find a similar sense of alienation, an attitude that located the author somewhere between the country of his origin and the country of his adoption, in a state of permanent self-imposed exile. This could be linked up with the fact that *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion*, Naipaul's first "English" novel, was written in Kashmir, a place that calmed his hysterical response to the overpowering impressions of India. Kashmir had an idyllic insularity when Naipaul first visited it in 1962. The "English" character can be read as another of Naipaul's explorations of states of alienation. As a critic puts it, "Mr. Stone's Prufrockian disaffection does suggest that life in the metropole, so fantasized about by distant colonials, houses its own varieties of rootlessness and frustrations."(Mustafa, 91)

"Prologue to an Autobiography" which is one of the two narratives in *Finding the Centre* and *The Enigma of Arrival* are possibly the most autobiographical of Naipaul's writings. The former has been used to substantiate facts from Naipaul's life and his development as a writer in the first section of this unit. The latter, an autobiographical work, is based in rural England, in Wiltshire where Naipaul has a cottage to which he often retreats. The novel is an acknowledgement of the narrator's imaginary England, especially the English countryside which is much more peaceful than the Caribbean Island or India. Also, the metaphor of the journey which recurs in Naipaul's works, gains prominence. "The protagonist knows that the journey he undertakes into the Wiltshire countryside is different from all previous journeys - it is an arrival with a difference... This arrival ... is a new life because he comes here having faced the final annulment - the deaths of those he has valued... And so this stranger in a new land has arrived in many ways."(Kamra, 170-1)

Naipaul's recent book *A Way in the World* starts by reiterating what he had taken up in *The Enigma of Arrival*, namely his own experience of racial politics in Trinidad in the late 50s. Characteristically, he is not interested in exploring the socio-economic reasons behind this. Possibly, Naipaul's own uprooted Indian identity, especially the idea of Hindutva which he has been partial to and argued for, is instrumental in distancing him from black politics in the Caribbeans. At the same time exploring Caribbean history through reminiscences and historical fiction is Naipaul's way of coming to terms with his own personal history. At the same time a discriminating reader can make out that his alienation stems from personal vanity and not just from cultural difference.

It would be difficult to place the book generically. At best it is formed of complicated, discontinuous but carefully arranged narrative fragments, oscillating in time, assimilating Naipaul's own experience as well as the experiences of Sir Walter Raleigh the explorer and Francisco Miranda, the nineteenth century Venezuelan revolutionary. What makes the book stand out is Naipaul's awareness of the fact that he cannot find what he is looking for, something that gives the book a sense of disquieting ambiguity which generally characterizes diasporic writing.
Naipaul's latest book *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted People* based on five months of travel in four non-Arab Muslim countries—Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan and Malaysia—shows a similar ambivalence and fragmented perception of Islam. The basic idea developed in this book is that all non-Arab Muslims have to reject their own history and heritage and adopt the Arab heritage. As this may be a perception that disturbs the existing society and sows the seeds for fundamentalism, it has been challenged and refuted by non Arab Muslims all over the world as a distorted view.

### 1.3 THE ‘GIRMIT’ PEOPLE

Documentary evidence shows that overseas migration was rare in pre-colonial India though within the country the mobility rate among Indian villagers was fairly high. Kings often spent a large share of the state revenue on their armies which consisted of professional as well as peasant soldiers. Since no single employer could provide them full security and adequate wages, they often shifted their loyalties and hence travelled from one region to another.

While this pattern of migration has been an ongoing process from the medieval times, nineteenth century overseas migration was an offshoot of colonialism. The migration from India, mainly as unskilled labour to work on plantations in Mauritius, the Caribbeans, and Fiji, began in the 1830’s. European imperialist expansion in the nineteenth century with its new industrial and commercial ventures, especially plantations, created the initial milieu for large scale migration which generated expanding demands for labour. In most cases, the colonial governments and planters, working in tandem, did not consider it economically or politically correct to recruit the indigenous people.

With progressive prohibition of African slavery in the first half of the nineteenth century, India and China became the main alternative sources of labour. This was the main “pull” factor. Also, European colonialism had created severe economic and social disturbances among the peasants of these two countries. The officers or labour recruiters or ‘arkathis’ went to remote villages in the interiors of the country which were stricken by drought or famine (often artificially created, as the colonizers shipped out foodgrain from India to their own armies fighting somewhere) or during a season when those working as tenant farmers or agricultural labour were unemployed.

In other words, the offers of arkathis in most cases were not accepted because they were tempting but because they were the only way out in a difficult situation. Not much is known about the cause of emigration from Gujarat. So far as emigration from eastern and southern India is concerned, it was mainly caused by financial loss. Fragmentation of the Mughal empire and administrative reorganization that the British colonizers introduced was greatly responsible for impoverishment. Often landowners became tenants at short notice and were not able to exercise their hereditary rights or fulfill their customary duties. This loss of status, and not just poverty induced many to leave the country despite traditional aversion to crossing the seas or *Kala pani*. This was the ‘push’ factor.

Also, the development of colonial economies created several commercial though low-level industrial opportunities at these points where the western capitalist economy interacted with the indigenous rural economy in the areas of retail trade and in the manufacture of goods needed by the increasingly cash conscious peasantry. Since native populations lacked entrepreneurs who could tap these limited but lucrative opportunities, India and China provided the risk takers.
Thus, there were two kinds of Indian and Chinese emigrants to the colonies: unskilled labourers and small-scale entrepreneurs. Among Indians the distinction between the kind of emigrants was largely (though not absolutely) region-based. The unskilled labourers came mainly from eastern Uttar Pradesh, Western Bihar, and provinces in Tamil Nadu then known as Madras. The entrepreneurs were largely from the northern district of Bombay province (now part of Maharashtra), Gujarat and Sind (now in Pakistan). As mentioned earlier this regional distinction is not absolute; for example both unskilled labourers and chettiar entrepreneurs came from Madras. However, in countries where the two types of emigrants or their descendants coexist, the distinction between them is a characteristic of intragroup relations in the Indian community.

Three main types of emigration and settlement stand out from others, a) the kangani system in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and Malaya (now Malaysia) b) indentured labour in the Caribbean, Mauritius and Fiji and c) free emigration to East Africa. In the kangani system, the migrants were recruited by headmen known as kangani. Each kangani recruited a group of men belonging mainly to his caste and kin group, and from the turn of the century migration by families became quite common. Sometimes a number of emigrant bands, each with its own leader, combined under the direction of a high-caste head kangani. Often, the kangani, a man of means, lent his followers money to travel to settle down in a plantation. He negotiated with planters on wages and work conditions and could remove members of his group to another plantation if not satisfied with either. Each group occupied makeshift barracks known as ‘lines’ and pooled resources to meet common expenses. Even outside the workplace the kangani had considerable influence over the lives of his band of workers, establishing and exercising a kind of patronage over them. Within the system there were variations but one need not go into them.

Migration to the West Indies was organized by the indenture system introduced in the nineteenth century but discontinued in 1917, when the Government of India placed an embargo on indentured emigration. Emigration to Trinidad started in 1845, to Mauritius in 1834, to Fiji in 1878, to Guyana in 1838. Most of these emigrants did not return to the countries of adoption after completing their terms of indenture, something that can be linked with the reasons that made them emigrate, which has been discussed earlier. Significantly free emigration to these countries took place simultaneously but increased considerably only after 1917.

Indenture was basically a contract by which the emigrant agreed to work for a given employer for a period of five years for a specified wage. At the end of five years, the emigrant was free to reindenture or to work elsewhere in the same colony; at the end of ten years he was entitled to a subsidized air passage. The fulfillment of the contract was governed by an Immigration Ordinance enacted in the country of destination. Prospective emigrants testified before a magistrate in India that they understood the terms of the contract. On making such a deposition they were housed in a depot in Calcutta until a ship was ready to take them to their place of work.

In order to avoid cut throat competition, the Governments of Jamaica, Trinidad, Mauritius and Fiji maintained an emigration agency jointly in Calcutta. The agency issued licenses to subagents who were paid a commission on each satisfactory recruit. These hired recruiters or arkhathis went round market towns, pilgrimage centres or wherever they were likely to find people desperate to get away from their present environs. The only qualifications required were physical fitness and experience of agricultural work. Initially almost all these recruits were male, later a quota of 40 percent females for every shipload was imposed by the colonial governments. Generally emigrants volunteered as individuals, emigration by family units, or caste groups or village communities were rare.
Most indentured emigrants were unrelated to one another and found themselves among strangers during the voyage and on the plantations where they were made to work. In the absence of any real kinship or family bonds, the establishment of a bond of brotherhood known as jahazi or jahazi bhai among individuals who had befriended each other during the long voyages, was instituted. The jahazis often got themselves assigned to the same plantation and the same barracks, regarded each other as real brothers, and treated each other’s children as close kin. Marriage between the children of jahazi bhai was considered incestuous. In Naipaul’s *Finding the Centre* there is a mention of Bogart whose ancestors from Punjab travelled with Naipaul’s grandfather on the same ship and developed the jahazi bhai kinship. As Naipaul weaves the various strands of his Trinidad memories into his early fiction, Bogart comes to occupy a significant position.

Life in the colonies was hard. The indentured immigrants lived an isolated and insulated life, little better than slaves. Any contact with the outside world was mediated by the plantation manager, the magistrate, the police and the immigration department. Desertion laws limited their freedom of movement. The indenture contract which the emigrants called the ‘girmit’, an obvious distortion of ‘agreement’, placed them under complete control of their employers. The manager or his deputy herded the emigrants together each morning, assigned tasks, judged performance, gave some permission to report sick, and chastised others for feigning sickness. Those found guilty of indiscipline were sent to the magistrate’s courts to be punished for breach of ordinance.

On completing indenture, some immigrants stayed on at the plantations, others moved out into the rural areas. In West Indian colonies the bulk of the population was of immigrant origin. So, the society as a whole, bore the strong imprint of the plantation system, its structures deeply influenced by the institution in which almost everyone and his immediate forbears had participated. Large numbers of Indians moved into villages and towns after completing their indenture, settling on the periphery of black villages, combining subsistence farming with wage labour. Indians seldom combined to form villages on their own and wherever exclusively or predominantly Indian villages were found, it was under government sponsorship.

In these old settled overseas Indian communities there were no agencies of social control comparable to panchayats in rural India. Religion, on the other hand, was used as a means to organize and orient their lives. However, rigours of plantation life, uncertainties of an alien environment and competition from Christian missionaries, changed the form and content of religious activities. In this social set up, the brahmin pundits in Trinidad came to acquire considerable status, wealth and power in the community as compared to their counter-parts in India. Hinduism in India is a way of life whereas among the overseas Indians religion is formalized. Organizations of *vyagra*, the sponsoring of *pujas and satsangs* were forms of religious activities which became more and more frequent. Festivals like Diwali, Id etc., were celebrated with great pomp and show and participation extended to Hindus as well as Muslims. In this ambience Tulsi Das’s *Ramcharitmanas* acquired a new significance as the indentured emigrants visualized themselves banished from their familiar surroundings like Rama and undergoing great hardship. Along with this, *bhajans*, *kirtans* and readings from the *Bhagvad Gita* was part of the immigrant’s socio-cultural life apart from giving them a spiritual sustenance.

In conclusion I would like to tell you briefly about yet another kind of emigration which took place along with the kinds that have been discussed. This is free emigration of traders and skilled artisans who were under no social or financial constraint to emigrate but did so to try their luck in a new country. They did not settle on the land as farmers or labourers. This emigration was not entirely unorganized as those who established themselves brought over their fellow villagers, kin and others belonging to the same caste. In that sense there is a basic similarity between free emigration and the *kangani* system. Free emigration prevailed largely
in East Africa, a desired destination to a large number of entrepreneurs from Sind and Gujarat. To an extent this kind of emigration can be compared with twentieth century emigration of entrepreneurs and professionals to the Gulf region, Europe, America and Australia as a) there are no compulsions to emigrate and b) they often sponsor their immediate family members.

A study of diasporic Indian writing needs to be accompanied by a brief discussion of the various kinds of emigration as that would help to put our study of Naipaul’s *A House for Mr Biswas* in perspective.

### 1.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit I gave you a complete overview of the indenture or ‘girmit’ system. You will have to keep this in mind when you read the text *A House for Mr Biswas*. This will serve as a backdrop against which you will make a textual analysis.

Apart from this I also discussed some of Naipaul’s other fiction and non-fiction so as to give you a comprehensive idea about the different phases in his creativity. This too will help you to place *A House for Mr Biswas* in the right perspective.

Last but not the least I provided an introductory note to Naipaul’s life and works.

### 1.5 GLOSSARY

**Temporal sequence**: A sequence or chronological order based on actual time of occurrence of events.

**Autochthonous**: Found in the place of origin.

### 1.6 QUESTIONS

1. Write a note on V.S. Naipaul’s early life in Trinidad and London, substantiating it with comments made by him in his books.

2. Write a brief note on nineteenth century migration with special reference to indentured immigrants in Trinidad.

### 1.7 SUGGESTED READINGS


