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The Portrayal of Middle-Class Indian Society in the Novels of R. K. Narayan

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Abstract

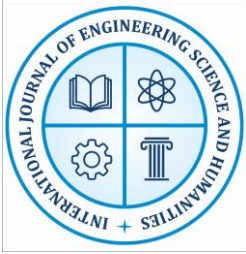
This paper examines the portrayal of middle-class Indian society in the fiction of R. K. Narayan, one of the foundational figures of Indian writing in English. Working almost entirely within the imagined South Indian town of Malgudi, Narayan built an enduring literary universe out of the ordinary lives of clerks, schoolteachers, printers, small traders, students, and housewives. His novels do not chase grand historical events or heroic destinies; instead they linger patiently over the domestic anxieties, professional frustrations, and quiet moral dilemmas of the ordinary Indian household. This study argues that Narayan's abiding significance lies precisely in this concentration on the middle class as a social category poised between tradition and modernity, between inherited custom and the pressures of a changing economic order.

Drawing on novels such as *Swami and Friends*, *The Bachelor of Arts*, *The English Teacher*, *Mr. Sampath*, *The Financial Expert*, *Waiting for the Mahatma*, *The Guide*, *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, *The Vendor of Sweets*, and *The Painter of Signs*, the paper analyses how Narayan represents family life, education, employment, social status, and economic aspiration. It further considers the recurring social themes of tradition versus modernity, marriage and gender relations, and generational conflict, before turning to Narayan's distinctive narrative technique, marked by understated characterisation, gentle humour, and pervasive irony. The paper concludes that Narayan offers a sympathetic yet clear-eyed portrait of the Indian middle class, neither idealising nor condemning it, and that his vision retains considerable relevance for understanding the social textures of contemporary India.

Keywords: R. K. Narayan; Middle-Class Indian Society; Indian English Literature; Social Realism; Cultural Identity

1. Introduction

Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayan, universally known as R. K. Narayan, occupies a central place in the history of Indian literature in English. Alongside Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao, he belongs to the first generation of Indian novelists who established that the English language could carry the rhythms, textures, and moral concerns of Indian life. Where Anand foregrounded social protest and Rao pursued philosophical and spiritual depth, Narayan chose a quieter path: the faithful, humane, and gently ironic chronicling of the everyday. His chosen subject was the ordinary



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middle-class citizen of small-town South India, and his chosen stage was the fictional town of Malgudi, which he populated across more than a dozen novels and numerous short stories.

The middle class occupies a peculiarly revealing position in any society. It is neither so wealthy that it can insulate itself from economic pressure nor so poor that survival crowds out all other concerns. It is precisely the class in which the tension between aspiration and constraint, between the desire for respectability and the fear of losing it, is most acutely felt. In colonial and post-independence India, the middle class was also the primary site where Western education, new professions, and modern values encountered inherited religious belief, caste custom, and joint-family obligation. Narayan's fiction is a sustained meditation on this encounter, rendered not through argument but through the small dramas of individual lives.

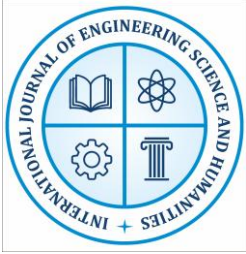
1.1 Background of the Study

Narayan began publishing in the 1930s, at a time when Indian writing in English was still seeking legitimacy both at home and abroad. His first novel, *Swami and Friends* (1935), was championed by Graham Greene, who helped secure its publication in England and who remained a lifelong advocate of Narayan's work. Over the following five decades Narayan produced a remarkably consistent body of fiction, all anchored in Malgudi and all concerned with the same broad social world. His reputation grew steadily, culminating in wide international recognition and numerous honours, and he came to be regarded as one of the finest storytellers in the English language.

Much critical attention has been paid to Narayan's craftsmanship, his humour, and his creation of Malgudi as a self-contained fictional universe. Yet the sociological dimension of his work, its detailed and cumulative portrait of a particular social class, deserves close and systematic study. Narayan is not a documentary realist in the manner of the great nineteenth-century European novelists, but his fiction nonetheless preserves an extraordinarily rich record of middle-class Indian life, its economic conditions, its domestic arrangements, its values and its anxieties. This study takes that record as its central concern.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The principal objective of this study is to analyse how R. K. Narayan portrays middle-class Indian society across his major novels. Within this broad aim, the study pursues several connected objectives. First, it seeks to identify the defining features of the middle-class world that Narayan represents, including its family structures, occupational patterns, and economic circumstances. Second, it examines the major social themes that arise from this world, particularly the confrontation between tradition and modernity, the negotiation of marriage and gender roles, and the friction between generations. Third, it considers the literary techniques through which Narayan achieves his effects, especially his methods of characterisation and his use of humour and irony. Finally, the study offers a critical assessment of Narayan's attitude towards middle-class values and reflects on the continuing relevance of his vision.



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1.3 Scope of the Study

This study concentrates on Narayan's novels rather than his short stories, essays, or mythological retellings, although occasional reference is made to the wider body of his work where it illuminates the argument. The analysis is thematic and interpretive rather than exhaustively comprehensive; it draws representative examples from across Narayan's career to establish patterns rather than attempting a complete survey of every text. The focus throughout is on the social content of the fiction, that is, on what Narayan's novels reveal about the life, values, and predicament of the Indian middle class, and on the narrative art through which that revelation is accomplished. Questions of biography and literary influence are addressed only insofar as they bear directly on this central concern.

2. R. K. Narayan: Life and Literary Contribution

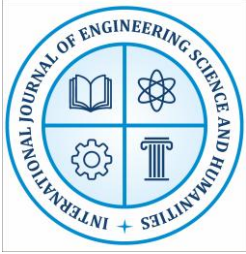
2.1 Life and Major Works

R. K. Narayan was born in 1906 in Madras and spent much of his youth in Mysore, the South Indian city whose atmosphere would later feed his fictional Malgudi. His early life was shaped by the middle-class conditions he would go on to portray: a household attentive to education and respectability, the presence of extended family, and the everyday negotiations of modest financial means. After an unremarkable academic career, Narayan turned to writing, an unusual and financially precarious choice at a time when Indian authorship in English promised little security. His decision to persist, despite early hardship and repeated rejection, testifies to a quiet determination that mirrors the persistence of many of his own characters.

Narayan's major novels span more than fifty years and together constitute the Malgudi saga. *Swami and Friends* (1935) introduced the town through the eyes of a schoolboy. *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937) followed a young graduate through romantic disappointment and spiritual restlessness into eventual conformity. *The English Teacher* (1945), among his most personal works, moves from domestic contentment through bereavement towards a search for meaning beyond ordinary life. *Mr. Sampath* (1949) and *The Financial Expert* (1952) explore ambition and its collapse in the worlds of printing, film, and money-lending. *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955) sets a personal love story against the backdrop of the freedom movement. *The Guide* (1958), perhaps his best-known novel, traces the transformation of a tourist guide into a reluctant holy man. *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961), *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967), and *The Painter of Signs* (1976) continued to mine the same social terrain with undiminished insight.

2.2 Narayan as an Indian English Novelist

Narayan's contribution to Indian writing in English is inseparable from his distinctive handling of the language itself. He wrote a plain, lucid, unforced English, free of ornament and untroubled by the anxiety of proving that Indians could master the colonial tongue. His prose absorbs Indian speech rhythms and cultural assumptions so naturally that the reader rarely notices the linguistic



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feat being performed. Where some of his contemporaries strained to indigenise English or to load it with philosophical weight, Narayan simply used it as a transparent medium for storytelling, trusting the reader to enter Malgudi on its own terms.

This apparent simplicity has sometimes led to the mistaken impression that Narayan is a minor or merely charming writer. In fact his restraint is a considered artistic strategy. By refusing rhetorical emphasis and political stridency, Narayan allows the social realities of middle-class India to emerge through observation rather than assertion. His achievement was to demonstrate that Indian English fiction need not announce its significance; it could earn attention through the depth and honesty of its engagement with ordinary life.

2.3 Malgudi as a Literary Space

Malgudi is Narayan's most celebrated invention, a fictional town somewhere in South India that acquires, across his novels, the density and consistency of a real place. Its streets, the Sarayu river, Market Road, the Albert Mission College, the printing presses and sweet shops and temples recur from book to book until readers come to know the town as intimately as its inhabitants do. Malgudi is not a utopia or an allegory; it is an ordinary provincial town, small enough for its citizens to know one another and large enough to feel the tremors of national change.

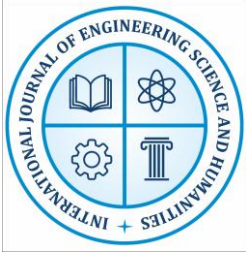
As a literary space, Malgudi performs an important function: it concentrates and localises the social forces that Narayan wishes to examine. Because the town is enclosed and self-contained, the arrival of a new idea, a new technology, or a disruptive outsider produces visible ripples. The tension between the settled traditional order and the incursions of modernity becomes legible precisely because Malgudi is small. In this sense Malgudi is the ideal stage for the study of middle-class life, a microcosm in which the negotiations between old and new can be observed at close range.

3. Portrayal of Middle-Class Indian Society

3.1 Family and Domestic Life

The family stands at the very centre of Narayan's fictional world. His novels are, before anything else, domestic novels, attentive to the daily rhythms of the household: meals prepared and shared, the authority of elders, the obligations owed to relatives, the small rituals through which family life is sustained. The joint family, or its lingering influence, provides the framework within which his characters live, love, quarrel, and reconcile. Domestic space in Narayan is rarely idealised, but it is always meaningful; it is the place where the deepest attachments and the sharpest frictions of middle-class life are worked out.

In *The English Teacher*, the tender portrait of Krishna's marriage and the devastation of his wife's death show how completely the domestic sphere can constitute a person's world. In *The Vendor of Sweets*, the ageing sweet-seller Jagan's relationship with his Westernised son becomes the emotional core of the novel, a study in the loving incomprehension that can arise between parent and child. Across the fiction, the household is both refuge and constraint, a source of identity and



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belonging as well as of pressure and expectation. Narayan's attentiveness to these domestic textures is one of the surest signs of his sociological accuracy, for it is in the family that the values of the middle class are transmitted, contested, and preserved.

3.2 Education and Employment

Education and employment are recurring preoccupations in Narayan's fiction, reflecting their central importance to middle-class identity. For the class Narayan portrays, education is the principal avenue of respectability and advancement, and yet it is often experienced as an ordeal rather than an enlightenment. *Swami and Friends* captures the anxieties of the schoolboy, hemmed in by examinations, stern teachers, and parental expectation. The Bachelor of Arts follows a young graduate whose degree secures neither purpose nor employment, exposing the gap between educational aspiration and economic reality.

The occupations Narayan depicts are characteristically modest and unheroic: the schoolteacher, the clerk, the printer, the small trader, the tourist guide, the sign-painter, the money-lender. These are the trades of the lower middle class, offering a precarious respectability rather than wealth. Narayan treats work with unsentimental realism, showing both the dignity it confers and the tedium and insecurity it entails. The Financial Expert dramatises the allure and danger of financial ambition through Margayya, whose rise and fall in the world of money-lending traces the perilous boundary between respectable striving and ruinous greed. Through such figures Narayan illuminates the economic anxieties that underlie middle-class respectability.

3.3 Social Status and Economic Conditions

The middle class in Narayan's fiction is acutely conscious of social status, and much of the drama of his novels arises from the effort to secure, defend, or advance one's position. Status is measured in familiar currencies: education, occupation, caste standing, the respectability of one's family, and the visible markers of modest prosperity. Because the margin between respectability and its loss is narrow, Narayan's characters are perpetually vigilant about appearances and reputations. This vigilance produces both comedy and pathos, as characters expend enormous energy on the maintenance of a social face.

Economic conditions in Malgudi are those of genuine but limited means. Narayan's characters are rarely destitute, but they are rarely secure; a failed venture, an unexpected expense, or a reversal of fortune can threaten the fragile equilibrium of the household. This economic precariousness shapes their choices, their fears, and their moral compromises. Narayan neither romanticises poverty nor celebrates wealth; he observes, with quiet exactness, the everyday financial calculations through which the middle class negotiates its survival and its self-respect. In this careful attention to money and status, his fiction preserves an unusually detailed record of middle-class economic life.



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4. Major Social Themes in Narayan's Novels

4.1 Tradition and Modernity

The confrontation between tradition and modernity is perhaps the master theme of Narayan's fiction. His Malgudi is a town in transition, where inherited beliefs and customs meet the pressures of a modernising world: new professions, new technologies, new ideas about the self and society. The middle class stands at the fault line of this encounter, for it is educated enough to be exposed to modern influences yet rooted enough to feel the pull of tradition. Narayan's characters live within this tension, sometimes embracing change, sometimes resisting it, more often muddling through a compromise between the two.

The Vendor of Sweets offers a vivid instance of this theme in the clash between Jagan, the tradition-minded father steeped in Gandhian frugality and religious observance, and his son Mali, who returns from America with modern ambitions and alien manners. Neither is simply right; Narayan withholds judgement, presenting the conflict as a genuine and unresolved dilemma of modern Indian life. Elsewhere, the intrusion of film in Mr. Sampath and of consumerist novelty throughout the later novels registers the same slow, ambivalent transformation. Narayan's genius lies in refusing to reduce this transformation to a simple opposition; he shows tradition and modernity as tangled, mutually compromised, and irreducibly human.

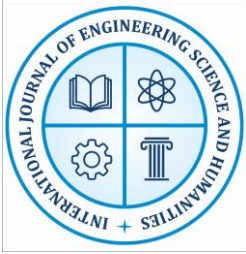
4.2 Marriage and Gender Relations

Marriage is a central institution in Narayan's social world, and his treatment of it reveals much about middle-class gender relations. Marriages in Malgudi are typically arranged within the bounds of caste and family expectation, and they carry heavy social and economic significance. Yet Narayan is alert to the emotional realities within these arrangements, portraying tenderness, misunderstanding, longing, and grief with equal sensitivity. The marriage in *The English Teacher* is depicted with a warmth that makes the ensuing loss all the more affecting, while other novels examine the frustrations and negotiations of domestic partnership.

Narayan's women are often confined to the domestic sphere, in keeping with the conventions of the society he portrays, yet they are rarely mere ciphers. Figures such as Rosie in *The Guide* and Daisy in *The Painter of Signs* display a striking independence and force of will, unsettling the men around them and challenging conventional expectations of feminine submission. Rosie's pursuit of a dancing career against the constraints of a stifling marriage, and Daisy's fierce commitment to her work over domestic ties, register the stirrings of a new consciousness among women. Narayan does not resolve the tensions these figures introduce, but his willingness to represent them reflects a real and honest engagement with the shifting gender relations of the middle class.

4.3 Generational Conflict

Closely related to the theme of tradition and modernity is the recurring conflict between generations. In novel after novel, parents and children find themselves separated by differing



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values, expectations, and understandings of the world. The older generation, formed by tradition, custom, and religious observance, struggles to comprehend the aspirations and choices of the young, who are drawn towards new ideas, new freedoms, and new forms of self-assertion. This generational friction is one of the most humanly resonant aspects of Narayan's fiction, for it dramatises change not as an abstract social process but as an intimate rupture within the family.

The relationship between Jagan and Mali in *The Vendor of Sweets* is the fullest expression of this theme, but versions of it recur throughout the fiction, wherever the settled expectations of elders meet the restless energies of youth. Narayan treats these conflicts with characteristic balance, refusing to side wholly with either generation. He understands the bewilderment of parents who feel their world slipping away and the impatience of children who chafe against inherited constraint. In dramatising this generational divide, Narayan captures one of the defining experiences of the twentieth-century Indian middle class, caught between an inherited past and an uncertain future.

5. Social Realism and Narrative Technique

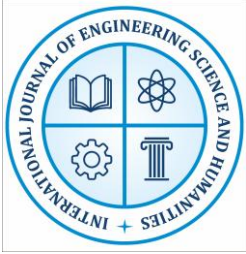
5.1 Characterisation

Narayan's characterisation is one of the chief instruments of his social realism. His characters are ordinary people rendered with extraordinary precision: the anxious schoolboy, the aimless graduate, the ambitious money-lender, the bewildered father, the willful woman. He builds them not through elaborate psychological analysis but through the accumulation of small, revealing details, gestures, habits of speech, and characteristic reactions. The result is a gallery of figures who feel entirely credible, recognisable as types of middle-class Indian life yet individualised enough to command sympathy and interest.

A distinctive feature of Narayan's characterisation is its lack of heroism. His protagonists are neither exceptionally virtuous nor especially wicked; they are fallible, self-deceiving, and ordinary, moved by vanity, fear, love, and the desire for respectability. This refusal of the heroic is central to his realism, for it allows him to represent human nature as it actually appears in the middle-class world, compromised and mixed. By granting dignity and interest to unremarkable people, Narayan affirms the significance of ordinary life, which is perhaps the deepest ethical commitment of his fiction.

5.2 Humour and Irony

Humour and irony pervade Narayan's fiction and constitute the most distinctive features of his narrative voice. His humour is gentle rather than savage, arising from the incongruities of ordinary life, the gap between a character's self-image and his actual situation, the absurdities of social convention, and the small vanities of the middle-class world. Narayan rarely mocks his characters cruelly; his comedy is affectionate, springing from an underlying sympathy with human frailty. This tone allows him to expose folly without descending into contempt.



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Irony is the deeper structural principle of his art. Again and again, Narayan's characters pursue their ambitions with intense seriousness, only to find their plans undone by chance, circumstance, or their own limitations. Margayya's financial empire collapses; the reluctant guide is mistaken for a saint; ambitious schemes dissolve into anticlimax. Through this pervasive irony Narayan gently deflates the pretensions of his characters while suggesting a larger view of human striving as inherently precarious. The irony is never bitter; it is the smiling wisdom of a writer who sees the comedy and pathos of ordinary ambition with unusual clarity.

5.3 Realistic Representation of Everyday Life

The foundation of Narayan's art is the realistic representation of everyday life. His novels are dense with the concrete particulars of middle-class existence: the layout of streets and shops, the routines of work and worship, the negotiations of the marketplace, the rituals of the household. This attention to the ordinary is not incidental but central; it is through the faithful rendering of the everyday that Narayan builds his portrait of a social world. Malgudi feels real because Narayan records its daily life with such patient exactness.

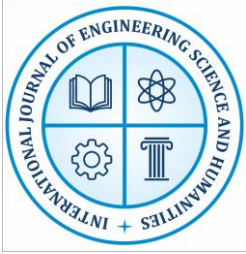
Yet Narayan's realism is not merely photographic. It is selective, shaped by his comic vision and his interest in the moral and social dilemmas of his characters. He renders the surface of ordinary life so convincingly that the reader accepts Malgudi as an authentic world, and within that world he stages the deeper conflicts of value and aspiration that constitute his real subject. This combination of surface fidelity and thematic depth is the achievement of his social realism, which preserves the texture of middle-class Indian life while illuminating its inner tensions.

6. Critical Discussion

6.1 Narayan's View of Middle-Class Values

Narayan's attitude towards the middle-class values he portrays is complex and finely balanced. He is neither an uncritical celebrant nor a hostile critic of the class whose life he chronicles. He clearly cherishes many aspects of the traditional middle-class world, its warmth, its rootedness, its sense of continuity and belonging, and his fiction preserves these qualities with evident affection. At the same time he observes, with an ironist's clear sight, the narrowness, the timidity, the excessive concern with respectability, and the moral compromises that also characterise this world.

This balance is what saves Narayan's fiction from both sentimentality and cynicism. He does not idealise the middle class into a repository of virtue, nor does he condemn it as a nest of hypocrisy. Instead he presents it with a mature acceptance of its mingled qualities, its capacity for tenderness and pettiness, generosity and calculation, wisdom and folly. This even-handed view reflects a deep humanism, a willingness to see people as they are, and it lends his social portrait an enduring credibility. Narayan's fiction thus offers not a verdict on the middle class but an understanding of it.



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6.2 Individual and Society

A central concern running through Narayan's fiction is the relationship between the individual and the society that surrounds and shapes him. His protagonists are frequently caught between their private desires and the expectations of their community, between the impulse towards self-assertion and the pull of social conformity. Many of his novels trace an arc in which a character ventures beyond the bounds of convention, only to be drawn back into the settled order of Malgudi, chastened but reintegrated. This pattern suggests Narayan's characteristic sense that the individual can never wholly escape the social world that defines him.

Yet Narayan is no simple apologist for conformity. He registers the real cost of social constraint, the frustration of thwarted aspiration, the suppression of individuality beneath the weight of custom. His women in particular, such as Rosie and Daisy, embody the struggle of the individual against confining social roles. What emerges from his fiction is a nuanced vision of the individual and society as mutually necessary and perpetually in tension, neither able to dispense with the other. This tension, worked out in the lives of ordinary middle-class characters, gives his novels their quiet moral seriousness.

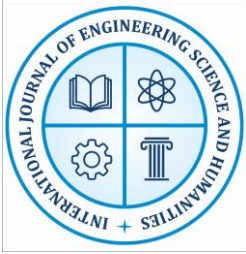
6.3 Contemporary Relevance

Although Narayan wrote about a particular time and place, the concerns of his fiction remain strikingly relevant to contemporary India. The tension between tradition and modernity that he dramatised has, if anything, intensified in an era of rapid economic change, globalisation, and cultural transformation. The generational conflicts, the anxieties of aspiration and status, the negotiation of gender roles, and the pressures of a competitive economic order that shaped his characters continue to shape the lives of the Indian middle class today, in altered but recognisable forms.

Narayan's fiction thus offers not merely a historical record but a lens through which to understand the enduring dilemmas of middle-class life. His refusal of ideological simplification, his humane attention to the ordinary, and his ironic awareness of human limitation give his work a lasting value that transcends its period setting. As the Indian middle class continues to expand and to grapple with the same fundamental tensions Narayan identified, his novels retain their power to illuminate, to move, and to instruct. In this sense Narayan is not a writer confined to the past but a continuing presence in the understanding of Indian society.

7. Conclusion

R. K. Narayan's achievement is the creation of a complete and convincing fictional world, the town of Malgudi, through which he offers one of the most searching and sympathetic portraits of middle-class Indian society in all of Indian literature in English. Across more than a dozen novels, he chronicled the family life, education, work, aspirations, and anxieties of ordinary middle-class citizens, capturing with unmatched fidelity the texture of their daily existence. He explored the



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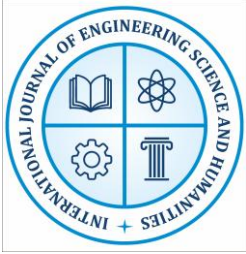
great social themes of his time, the confrontation of tradition and modernity, the negotiation of marriage and gender, and the conflict between generations, not through polemic but through the intimate dramas of individual lives.

His narrative art, marked by understated characterisation, gentle humour, and pervasive irony, enabled him to represent this world with both realism and depth, exposing its follies while honouring its humanity. His view of the middle class was balanced and mature, neither idealising nor condemning, and his fiction consistently affirmed the significance of ordinary life. Above all, Narayan understood the perennial tension between the individual and society, and he rendered it with a quiet wisdom that continues to speak to readers today.

The enduring relevance of his work lies in the fact that the dilemmas he portrayed have not disappeared but merely changed their form. The Indian middle class remains caught between inherited tradition and the pressures of modernity, and Narayan's novels continue to illuminate that predicament with clarity and compassion. In creating Malgudi, R. K. Narayan created a mirror in which the middle-class Indian could recognise himself, and in doing so he secured for his fiction a permanent place in the literature of his nation. His gentle, ironic, and deeply humane vision remains one of the finest records of a society in the slow process of becoming modern.

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