

Rudyard Kipling's Image of India

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Abstract

This paper projects Kipling's interest in India and his extended vision of religion hovered between Christianity and the mysticism of the East. This paper also throws light upon the stories, myths, legends, and contemporary life situations constituting the social image of India.

Keywords: Rudyard Kipling, Image of India, myths, legends, contemporary life situations, social image of India.

While speaking about the image of India or any other country one naturally has in mind, the culture, tradition, and heritage of that country. In this respect, Rudyard Kipling has caught the image of India successfully in his short stories and *Kim*. Kipling's image of India is a life-like picture of India during the 19th century when India was under the British rule. No doubt, in his works, one can find portraits of India, teeming with millions of people, their customs and manners, beliefs and superstitions. His identification with the image of India is very much obvious in his works. One can find portraits of India, fencing with nations of people, their customs and manners, beliefs, and superstitions. His identification with the image of India as a land of gold and jewels, magic, and marvels and 'the glory that was Ind' had fired Kipling's imagination. As a poet, storyteller and novelist, Kipling has caught and reproduced the picturesqueness of India. As S.T. Sharma has put it, "Deeply influenced by the national character of India, Kipling identifies himself with the various aspects of Indian life" (P 55).

Kipling's interest in India is not that of a critical Westerner but that of one who has a sense of belonging to the country of his choice. "obviously Kipling spent most of his time in India and for that matter, a good deal of his life, eagerly picking up little pieces of knowledge" (Edward 42). Hence, Kipling's short stories and novels present authentic glimpses of Indian society. While his short stories and novels portray the India of the British Raj, his image of India is "life like" for he creates an impression of "real" India. He is so popular that the English and the Indians read him alike because his works are nothing but a record of the image of India.

Having established himself as a great force in Anglo-Indian Literature, Kipling was hailed as a realist with a romantic – stuffing, a spokesman of militant Imperialism, a mouthpiece of classes and types and the young seer in India. It is generally held that like Meadows Taylor and Joseph Conrad, Kipling wrote from direct observation. Born as the son of the versatile John Lockwood Kipling in Bombay in 1865, Kipling is said to have enjoyed India rather freely as a child till the age of six. In his own words, “I have loved the voices of might-winds through palm or banana leaves, and the song of the tree-fogs” (Kipling 2). Those happy carefree days and his journalistic career in India between 1882-87 formed the backcloth of his short stories and novels. Even while he was entrusted to a Roman Catholic Ayah from Portuguese Goa in his boyhood, he had neither any pre-conceived views on religion nor any deep feeling for one particular faith. Daily familiarity with the two forms of religious observance, Christianity and Oriental mysticism helped him to develop his open-minded attitude to spiritual matters. In the words of Bonamy Dobree, “Kipling was always tender to those of any religion who needed the support of faith” (P 9).

No doubt, his extended vision of religion hovered between the Christianity of the West and the mysticism of the East. His is an attitude of comprehensive tolerance. He is not an unbeliever. On the contrary, he is the one accepting all faiths that of the Moslem, that of the Hindu, that of the Buddhist, Parsee or Jain. He lived by a curious religion of his own not only developing an attitude to be tender to any faith but also imbibing the spirit of India by being always in the company of the children of the native servants. When Kipling came to India, he discovered that he had a proprietary and hereditary claim to the Indian soil. He remarked, “my English years fell away, nor even I think came back in full strength” (Wilson 96). In order to understand Kipling’s images, one should know of India herself. When Kipling arrived in India in 1882, its political condition was complex. “The world he entered was very different from the world we live in now”, says Somerset Maugham (P vii).

There were two major forces at work. There was the pressure of the Indians towards national unification and self-government and an equal pressure of the English national conscience towards more efficient and beneficent government of the Indians. Kipling was exposed to a land with its bewildering variety of people, rich cultural traditions, social organizations, intellectual achievements, speculative thoughts, emotional and aesthetic sensibility in art forms. Above all, there were the metaphysical truths of Indian philosophy stamped on the general mind of the people. He realized the potential value of British India as a subject for fiction and wrote about the society that he knew best. His love for India is reflected in a series of his short stories which earned him a good reputation in the Anglo-Indian community. The literary experiments Kipling started at the age of twelve and the publication of *The School boy Lyrics* in 1877 reached its culmination in 1907. When he was honoured with the Nobel Prize for literature at the age of forty two. What gives him universal value is his insatiable curiosity about ordinary men and common things in India. Everywhere in India, in the bazaars, on the slope of the Himalayas and in the native states, he met the creditable diversity of creatures who go to make up the social image of India.

Even at the age of seventeen, at the Lahore club, he eagerly listened to men discussing their work-a-day jobs. "He met the army officers, engineers, and railway men and civilian officials" (Clarke 26) and he came to know barrack life, the married quarters, gossip and night life. At Simla, he was quite enthralled at seeing the jobs from a different point of view. In both the places, he met the idle gossip of social intercourse and realized its boredom and its excitements, its pretty bitterness and its heroism. The political image which revolves round Kim is a peep in the "Great Game". The religious image which is represented by the Tibetan lama illustrates the universal brotherhood. Hence it would not be out of place to think of Kipling as a director of the integration of India.

In the short stories, Kipling has projected many faces of India in all their beauty, power, and truth. His short stories are a record of his vision of the Anglo-Indian Empire. In 1865, when Kipling was born in India, the political unification of India under British rule was taking shape. Sweeping reforms in India were designed to encourage moral progress and social advancement. Though the rural existence was untouched by progress, Madras, Bombay, Lahore and Calcutta were being transformed into modern cities. "With the slow decline of native culture and the gradual breakdown of the caste system there emerged in the cities an intellectual middle class, no longer restricted by local taboos which chose to adopt the lifestyle of the British Raj". They read Shakespeare, Dickens, played polo and Hockey, attended garden parties, and took afternoon tea. The new middle class expanded, swelled by graduates from Universities and acquired an intellectual quality. Macaulay described them as Indians in blood and skin colour, but English in taste, opinions, morality, and intelligence.

The social vision of India that Kipling projected in the short stories is not a prejudiced or narrow vision of an Englishman in India. Kipling presents a larger vision of a greater India, the vision of a country with its age old mountains, rivers, cities, highways, multi-racial and multi-religious Indians who have their roots in a very ancient past. It is the vision of a storyteller, who looks at the world around him through Indian eyes rather than with the Western eyes and whose sensibility too is more Indian than Western" (Ramamurthi 34). This is because Kipling was intrinsically connected with India by his birth. In *Something of Myself* written in his seventeenth year, Kipling recollected India of his early days as:

My first impression is of daybreak, light and colour and golden and purple fruits at the level of my shoulder. This would be the memory of early morning walks to the Bombay fruit market with my ayah and later with my sister in her perambulator, and of our returns with our purchases piled high on the bows of it. (P1)

The short stories are the young man's discovery of India. Louis L. Cornell observes:

As an artist, he continued to aim at verisimilitude, at the portrayal of a 'real' India free from the obscurities of ignorance, timidity and sham romanticism, as a journalist, he saw India with the personal and discriminating vision that we associate with writer of fiction. (P 141)

Thus, almost all the short stories have a genius Indian atmosphere about them for they are nothing but the product of a vividly realised personal experience, shrewd observation, and intimate acquaintance with India. Seeing India with his own eyes, he realised the potential value of British India as a fit subject for fiction. He describes India with its dark forests, the fierce animals which inhabit them and also the people of India. "He made it interesting to a large public who had never before given it serious attention" (Sampson 739)

The writings of Kipling are a faithful mirror of the spirit of the age. According to Henry James, "a novel is in its broadest definition, a personal, a direct impression of life" (P 389). Kipling saw life around him and transforms this life into art with his analytical criticism of man's activities. He does not merely a fairy world, as perfect and useless and beautiful as a soap bubble". He was affected by the actual conditions of life around him. He is no doubt, a realist, in picturing men and matters. As a realist, he is found to be projecting the social vision of India. In the words of M.H. Abrams,

The realist is deliberately selective in his material and prefers the average, the common place, and the everyday over the rarer aspects of the contemporary scene. (P 141)

The distinguishing trait of Kipling's short stories and novels from the beginning has been 'realism'. To attest to this fact, Sir Walter Besant rightly holds:

The first essential is fiction is reality. The story must be real; the figures must be real; the dialogue must be real; the action must spring naturally from the situation. So real is the story, with such an air of reality does the (Kipling) present it, that we see it as we see the moving pictures with the new photography throws upon the canvas. (P252)

Kipling has made his short stories realistic by using Anglo-Indian phrases and scraps of native dialects. As George Orwell has put it, "Kipling is the only English writer of our times who has added phrases to the language" (P109). He has used the slang of the people who describe dining as "mangling garbage" "they play tennis with the 7th Commandment. With the help of native dialects, Kipling "makes us regard the continent... as an enchanted land, full of marvels and magic which were real". (P71) Kipling's social vision penetrates through India's majestic mountain sides and wide reverse, Sandy deserts and fallow lands. The Indian Landscape with its White roads and gnarled knotted trees, its scented gardens beautifying the palaces of by gone Kings comes alive in his pages. He paints Indian scene with its veteran contrasts in vivid colours. K.R.S. Iyengar says, "There are Sadhus in India, authentic Sadhus

and bogus ones as well. There are snakes in India, deadly snakes and innocuous ones as well” (P74).

The little Indian village is set amid wolf-infested jungle or at the foot of a precipitous hill or fringing a river with the history of unpredictable fledge. A gold sunset is followed by a strong which uproots trees or causes a land slide. In “False Dawn” Kipling describes a dust storm vividly. Four couples, one triplet and the narrator were moving ahead happily enjoying a moonlight picnic. Despite all the amusements related to the picnic, the narrator says:

I had felt that the air was growing hotter and hotter; but nobody seemed to notice it until the moon went out and a burning hot wind began lashing the orange-trees with a sound like the noise of the sea... the air was heavy with dust and sand from the bed of the river, that filled booths and pockets and drifted down necks, and coated eye brows and moustaches..... with the thunder chattering overhead and lightening spurting water from a sluice, all ways at once. (PP 46-47)

The rattling of the hills, the howling of the wind, the splitting tremendous lightening, the dust clouds, the glimmer of the moon, the heat of the Indian day, the torrential rains and the consequent floods gives Kipling’s short stories a typically Indian climate. Landslide is one of the common natural disasters in the British India. Whether at night or day the land slides unexpectedly, perishing numerous lives and demolishing villages.

India herself remains Kipling’s great subject. He knew well about the rich tradition of India. Elephants are associated with the tradition of India. It has religious associations for the Hindus. People hunt elephants and train them to do work. The unwieldy elephant is a symbol of assurance and strength just as the plumed serpent is a sign of beauty and mystery. “Moti Guj” is the story of an elephant’s loyalty to its mahout. Palanquins and chariots are royal conveyance in India. The Queen travels usually and unveiled and decorated palanquins carried by the native footmen. In “The Incarnation of Krishna Mulvaney”, Mulvaney having planned the palanquin of some princess, finds himself introduced into a temple in Banaras during a big queen’s praying. “The tradition of retirement from the world for study and meditation was already long established in India, when Prince Siddharth re-announced wife and child and all worldly ties” (P 69). The tradition is an unbroken one. Puran Bhagat is nothing but a modern illustration of this living tradition.

Kipling had an uncanny insight into immemorial truths of Indian actuality which have eluded thousands of intellectuals and has presented men and women in India with their unique likes and dislikes. These people are inclusive in the social vision of India. In “Yoked with an unbeliever, “Miss Agnes Laiter was weeping to part from her lover Phil Garron because he was going out to India to the tea plantation near Darjeeling” and India, as everyone knows, is divided equally between jungle, tigers, cobras, cholera and sepoy” (P 35). India is an abode of all religious. People are free to worship their own gods. There are occasional breaches and

disloyalties. The festivals of the Hindus and the Muslims, the pilgrimages undertaken by thousands, the marriages and funerals, the worshipping of god-all these go to paint the religious aspect in India. The riot between the Hindus and Muslims was a regular feature in the pre-partition India. Kipling shows the enmity and the hatred between these two people in “His chance in Life”.

People in India are highly superstitious. The various kinds of superstitions in India are adequate to fill or colour the stories of Kipling, “The Return of Imray” shows how the servant is superstitious of the touch of the Whiteman. “The Mark of the Beast” illustrates the idea that a man who desecrates, a temple would receive heaven’s punishment. There are numerous stories about witches and ghost.” A churl is the peculiarly malignant ghost of a woman who has died in child-bed. She haunts lonely roads, her feet are turned backward, on the ankles, and she leads men to torment” (Kim 130). Charming against all devils and dangers is very common in India. The Finest Story in the world is a tale in which Charlie Mears, a twenty year old bank clerk, cherishing literary ambitions, remembers his previous forms of existence as a Viking and a Phoenician slave. His story of a ship contains a matter of “vividness and authenticity inexplicable except on the assumption that his mind ... has direct access to the experience of men who have manned ships in several ages of the remote past.” (Steward 256)

The Anglo Indian society in holiday mood, its feeling of racial arrogance and its duty in India are painted with the master hand of Kipling. “The storyteller tears aside the veil that hides Anglo-Indian life from the average Englishman and makes him realize its struggles, its failures, its glories and its shame” (Rickett 669). Kipling gives a true picture of the Anglo-Indian society in the 19th century. The critical Heritage states:

The very scenes strange, scenes of Anglo-Indian life; of the life of half castes and Eurasians. The writer presents with unusual vivacity, and freshness, wit and knowledge of things little known – the dreams of opium smokers, the ideas of private soldiers, the passions of Pathans and wild border tribes, the magic which is yet a living course in India, the love of secluded native widows, the habit of damsels whose house like Rahab’s is on the city wall – nothing but these qualities keep the English reader awake and excited. (Green 47)

Kipling’s social vision includes the snobberies, frivolities, fashions, and customs of the Anglo-Indians. This is because he travelled extensively in the Empire recording for his paper the lives of English men and women in India. The India of the 1860’s was an abode for the Englishmen generally known as the Sahib. “The Sahibs never go old. They dance and they play like children when they are grandfathers. A strong-backed breed” (Kim 236). Kipling’s images in *Kim* fill up and complete one’s partial knowledge of things Indian by that flash of recognition which both instruct and delight. Familiar objects are revealed in a new light and the unfamiliar suddenly become real. In this sense, “Kim is about the infinite and joyous variety of India for him who has eyes to see it and the heart to rejoice” (Shanks 215).

Kipling takes the images from the common aspects of life. The various incidents and episodes in *Kim* are blended into a wonderful unity by the social, political and religious images. The “red bull on a green field”, a significant image in the political background is a vision of Kim’s sacrifice of his Indian ways and growth as a Sahib in St. Xavier’s. The religious image “water” is ambivalent as it has destructive and purifying properties. The realistic representation of daily life, scenes of nature and people give a touch of universality. All these three heterogeneous images, social, political, and religious are blended into a harmonious whole so that *Kim* ends in a note of hope. The great strength of *Kim* is not in the story proper but the pulsating background of India. It is Kipling’s recollection of an image of India in his early childhood.

The images are drawn with the richness of a painter’s brush. Kipling had the unfaltering touch and the observant eye of a meticulous painter. He has arranged the three images as effectively as the Japanese arrange flowers. Through these images, Kipling creates a strange atmosphere of oriental life dealing with the spirit of wild adventure, the bravery and courage of Kim and the glamour and strangeness of a distant world foreign to the English consciousness and experience. Ernest A. Baker observes:

Kim is a panorama of the Indian world, a procession of the different aspects of that multitudinous life passing one after the other before the eyes of Kim and the wise old Lama. (P 122)

The events of Kim’s strange tale, picaresque wandering and spy adventure are set in a background of India. Left as an orphan in an early age, Kim was brought up in the town of Lahore nominally by a native woman of no character. Receiving a late education, Kim acquired considerable knowledge of men and their ways. He met a Lama from Tibet on pilgrimage in search of the River of the Arrow, a river, “whose bathes in it washes away all taint and speckle of sin” (16). In his desperate attempt to free himself from the wheel of things, he had left his monastery and came to India. Kim, “the Little friend of all the world” became his “Chele”. Both the lama and Kim set off, one in quest of peace and the other in quest of the red bull in a green field. “if it is our fate to find those things, we shall find them-thou, thy River; and I, my Bull” Their travels “provide the author with an excuse to describe India” (43). Its mountains, rivers, merchants, the natives with their customs and conventions constituting the social image of India.

The image of the landscape, the inhabitants of India, the cities and the pastoral setting help in forming the social image in *Kim*. The Indian landscape is inseparable from the image of India in *Kim*. The novel abounds in descriptions of the Indian landscape with its age old tall cliffs, beautiful valleys with its sunrise and sunset its moon-blanching roads and dew-drenched fields Kipling describes:

By this time, the sun was driving broad golden spokes through the lower branches of the mango-trees; parakeets and doves were coming home in their hundreds; the chattering grey-backed seven sister, talking over the day's adventure walked back and forth in twos and threes.

Through the image of morning, Kipling brings to one's mind's eye the strange sights and sounds in India, "Golden, Nose, Saffron, and pink, the morning mists Smoked away across the flat green levels" (P 39). Kipling portrays vividly the physical sensation connected with the night:

Then the night fall, changing the touch of the air, drawing a low, even haze, like a gossamer veil of blue, across the face of the country and bring our, keen and distinct, the smell of woo-smoke and cattle and the good scent of wheaten cakes cooked on ashes (P 74).

The glorious scene in the Himalayas is something unforgettable. The young hero Kim and the Tibetan lama encounter a cobra, glimpse a squirrel, parrots, parakeets, doves and bats, all integral elements in the image of the Indian language. Through the image of the landscape, Kipling harmonizes the moods of man. The beautiful landscape is always a background for reflecting some human emotion. In depicting the moods of indolence. Of sorrow, of love, he chooses such scenic background to accentuate these moods. The constant journey of the lama and his discipline through the landscape and the township of India is suggestive of man's life, ever changing like the seasons ,its ups and downs like mountains, miseries and sorrows like clouds and aspirations and ambitions like the tall cliffs. Ramamurthi rightly points out that:

It is the teeming landscape, townscapes and cityscapes of India which really educate Kim and make him grow, grow at two levels almost on a parallel, at the plane of action and materialistic reality and at the plane of contemplation and moral and spiritual idealism (P 33).

It is against this background that the teeming population of India lives its daily life. Cities and villages are occupied by the millions of Indians. Their cultural heritage, their sense of devotions for their country, their inimitable Indian ways while travelling along the Grand Trunk road or in the crowded trains are associated with the social image in *Kim*.

Thus, the stories, myths legends and contemporary life situations jostle and all weave their threads into that inevitable mosaic in which is found the image of Kipling's India.

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