

**Rudyard Kipling – A Stern Realist
Envisioning the Image of India in His Short Story**

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Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936)

Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rudyard_Kipling

Abstract

This paper throws light on Kipling's social vision of India. He presents a larger vision of a greater India in his short stories, and he projects multi-racial and multi-religious Indians. Through the works of Kipling, one can see India with his own eyes and realise the potential value of India. This article examines how he brought about the picture of India from three angles – social, realistic and natural.

Keywords: Rudyard Kipling, superstition, religion, vision of India, customs of Anglo-Indians.

Culture, Tradition and Heritage – Life-like Picture of India

It is generally agreed that when one speaks of 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. Kipling's image of India is a life-like picture of India during the nineteenth century, when India was under the British rule. In his works, either short stories or fiction, one can find rich portraits of India, teeming with millions of people, their

customs and manners, beliefs and superstitions. Not only does Kipling transcend all barriers and beliefs in the oneness of humanity, but his works also show his tendency towards national integration.

Imagery of Magical India

Kipling's social vision in his works reveals an imagery of magical India for readers all over the world. His view of the world was inexorably conditioned by the land and the people amongst whom he had grown to maturity. His technique in the short stories is unique in the sense that the social vision is presented through the medium of a narrator, who forms part of Kipling's imagination. The narrator reveals an ability to analyse the problems of the characters in the short stories and is able to suggest solution not perceptible to the average man. The images of India are from three angles – social, realistic and natural. 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. No doubt, as a poet, story teller and novelist, Kipling has caught and reproduced the picturesqueness of India. In the words of S.T. Sharma, “Deeply influenced by the national character of India, Kipling identifies himself with the various aspects of Indian life” (P 55)

Not a Critical Westerner

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 life, eagerly picking up little pieces of knowledge” (Shanks 42). Hence, not only do his novels but also his short stories present authentic glimpses of Indian society. Having established himself as a great force in Anglo-Indian literature, he has proved himself to be a realist with a romantic stuff, almost as a mouth piece of classes and types and even the young seer in 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. His short stories do significantly portray the Images of the British and his image of India is “life-like”. He does effectively convey an impression of “real” India.

From Direct Observation

Kipling, like Meadows Taylor and Joseph Conrad, is said to have written from direct observation and experience. Ernest A. Baker rightly observes:

“It seemed as if he must have been born mature, so infallible were eye, judgement and pen, the reason being that he had learned assurance and swiftness in the school of journalism” (P 105)

Rudyard Kipling's Stories

Born in Bombay in 1865 as the son of the versatile John Lockwood Kipling, Kipling enjoyed India rather freely as a child till the age of six. He himself said:

“I have loved the voices of night winds
through palm or banana leaves, and
the song of the tree-fogs” (Something of Myself 2)

Those happy and carefree days and his journalistic career in India between 1882 and 1887 formed the black cloth of his short stories. He had no pre-conceived views on religion nor any deep feeling for one particular faith. “Kipling was always tender to those of any religion who needed the support of faith” (Dobree 9). His extended vision of religion hovered between the Christianity of the

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west and the mysticism of the East. It is an attitude of comprehensive tolerance. He is not an unbeliever on the contrary, he can accept all faiths: that of the Moslem, that of the Hindu, that of the Buddhist, Parsee or Jain. In India, Kipling not only developed an attitude to be tender to any faith but also imbibed, the spirit of India by being always in the company of the children of the native servants. The numerous stories and legends that the natives knew by heart and narrated in such a vivid language kept him spell-bound. “It was a pleasant way of life for a child, and Kipling returned to it nostalgically in several of his stories” (Cornell 2).

Kipling’s Images

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”. 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 organisations, 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 realised the potential value of British India as the subject source for his works and wrote about the society best known to him. A series of his short stories published weekly soon earned him a good reputation in the Anglo-Indian community. “These delightful stories, full of action and local colour, were collected in 1888 and published as *Plain Tales from the Hills*” (Giants of Literature 14).

Curiosity about Ordinary Man

What gave Kipling’s works universal value is his insatiable curiosity about ordinary man and common things in India. Everywhere in India, in the bazaars, on the slope of the Himalayas and in the native status, he met the creditable diversity of creatures which go to make up the social image of India. In the short stories, Kipling has presented the many faces of India in all their beauty, power and truth.

“This great and beautiful land” as Kipling described India, is not the India of today. The “real” India of Kipling’s short stories is the old pre-partition India about the 1880’s when the English were ruling over the natives of India. His short stories are a record of his vision of the Anglo-Indian Empire.

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 story teller “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.

Something of Myself

In *Something of Myself* written in his seventieth year, Kipling recollected India of his early days thus:

“My first impression is of daybreak,
light and colour and golden and
purple fruits at the level of my shoulder.

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This would be the memory of early morning walks to 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” (Kipling in *Something of Myself* 1)

Young Kipling’s Discovery of India

The short stories are the young man’s discovery of India. As Louis L.Cornell puts it, “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 writers of fiction” (P 141). All his short stories have a genuine Indian atmosphere about them. They are the product of a vividly realised personal experience, shrewd observation and intimate acquaintance with India. W. Somerset Maugham observes:

“It is true that Kipling seems to have been intimately acquainted with the north-west. Like any other sensible writer, he placed the scene of his short stories in the region he knew best” (P 5)

While travelling far and wide, Kipling gathered materials for his short stories seeing India with his own eyes and realised the potential value of British India as a fitting subject for fiction. In his story world, Kipling 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 general public who had never before given it serious attention” (Sampson 739). The distinguishing trait of Kipling’s short stories and novels from the beginning has been realism. C.S.Lewis defines realism as “... the art of bringing something close to us, making it palpable and vivid, by sharply observed or sharply imagined detail” so doubt, Kipling’s short stories have caught and fixed for ever the atmosphere of the latter half of the 19th century India, for he has made his short stories realistic by using Anglo-Indian phrases and scraps of native dialects. According to George Orwell, “Kipling is the only English writer of our times who has added phrases to the language” (P 109). 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” (Green 71).

Social Vision

Kipling’s social vision penetrates through India’s majestic mountain sides and wide rivers, sandy deserts and follow lands. The Indian landscape with its white roads and gnarled knotted trees, its scented gardens beautifying the palaces of bygone kings comes alive in his pages. He paints the Indian scene with its eternal contrasts in vivid colours. The little Indian village is set in the midst of a wolf-infested jungle or at the foot of a precipitous hill or fringing a river with a history of unpredictable floods. A gold sun set is followed by a storm which uproots trees or causes a landslide. In “False Dawn”, Kipling describes a dust storm vividly. Four couples, one triplet and the narrator were moving ahead happily enjoying a moonlight picnic. In spite of all the amusements related to the picnic, the narrator says:

“I had felt that the air was growing hotter

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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 boots and pockets and
drifted down necks and coated eyebrows and
moustaches.... with the thunder chattering
overhead and the lightening spurting like
water from a sluice, all ways at once” (False Dawn 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 give Kipling’s short stories a typically Indian climate. Kipling is very successful in his truly lurid vision and indication of what Indian heat can be and its effect on the minds and bodies of the Europeans who have to suffer it. The Englishmen in England seem to take it for granted that India is hot, but scarcely one of them makes any attempt to realise what that heat really means. Phil Garron who went to work in a plantation in India between Darjeeling and Kangra found the climate to be good and “it really did not seem to him that there was any reason to return to England” (Plain Tales 39). On the contrary, “At the End of the Passage”, one finds the strains endured by the Englishmen during the vigours of an Indian summer. “There was neither sky, sun, nor horizon-nothing but a brown purple haze of heat” (A choice of Kipling’s Prose 69).

India herself remains Kipling’s great subject, because the bewildering profusion of his newspaper writings reflects the delivery of the land. He knew well about the rich tradition of India. Elephants are associated with the tradition of India. It has religious associations for the Hindus. Elephants are used to carry twelve hundred pounds weight of tent in upper India. Kipling said: “Elephants are very strictly preserved by the Indian Government” (Toomai of the Elephants 7) people hunt elephants and train them to do work. “My Lord, the Elephant” tells how Mulvaney restrained and quieted an elephant which has become enraged through being required to work in an elephant battery. 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 conveyances in India. The Queen travels usually in veiled and decorated palanquins carried by the native footman. In “The Incarnation of Krishna Mulvaney,” Mulvaney having purloined 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 Siddhartha renounced wife and child and all worldly ties” (Iyengar 79). The tradition is an unbroken one. Puran Bhagat is but a modern illustration of this living tradition.

Immemorial Modes of Living

Kipling is said to have had an uncanny insight into immemorial modes of living and grasped the quiet essential truths of Indian actuality which have eluded thousands of intellectuals. Kipling is found presenting 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 plantations near Darjeeling, “and

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India, as everyone knows, is divided equally between jungle, tigers, cobras, cholera and sepoy” (Plain Tales 35). India is an abode of all religions. 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”. Tisabu was a place occupied by a few Orissa Mohammedans. They despised the Hindu-subjuge and arranged to start a little Mohurrum riot. “But the Hindus turned out and broke their heads: when findings lawlessness pleasant, Hindus and Mohammedans together raised an aimless sort of Donnybrook just to see how far they could go. They looted each other’s shops and paid off private grudges in the regular way” (81). “On the city well” Presents Wali Dad, the young Moslem and through him Kipling generalises the bitter feelings of the Muslims towards the Hindus. Kipling had real sympathy for hills girls. His social vision includes the beauty of hill girls. Kipling describes Lispeth, the daughter of Sonoo and Jadeh:

“When a Hill-girl grows lovely, she is worth travelling fifty miles over bad ground to look upon. Lispeth had a Greek face – one of those faces people paint so often, and see so seldom. She was a pale, ivory, colour, and for her race, extremely tall. Also, she possessed eyes that were wonderful; and, had she not been dressed in the abominable print cloths affected by Missions, you would, meeting her on the hill side unexpectedly, have thought her the original Diana of the Romans going out to stay” (Lispeth 2)

Dunmaya, the girl whom Phil met in yoked with an unbeliever”, “had a strain of Hill blood in her and like the Hill-women, was not a purdah – nashin or woman who lives behind the veil” (Plain Tales 38). People in India are highly superstitious. The various 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” does illustrate the idea that a man who desecrates, a temple would receive heaven’s punishment. Allied with the superstitions is the belief in Metempsychosis. It is an involuntary experience in which the spirit of a person passes into other bodies. He dreams his previous forms of existence. No one could have travelled in India without discovering how deep-rooted is the belief is, not only among the uneducated but among men of culture and of experience in world affairs. “The Finest story in the world” is a tale in which Charlie means, 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 matter of “vividness and authenticity inexplicable except on the assumption that his mind in composition has direct access to the experience of man who have manned ships in several ages of the remote past” (Steward 256) His love for a lower class girl mars his remembrance of the past proving the Indian proverb, “a good man married is a good man marred”. Kipling expresses the same feeling of the proverb in a single line, “He travels the fastest who travels alone”. It is true that one hears in conversation or reads in the papers, of men who claim to remember something of their past lives. There is no doubt about Kipling’s nodding acquaintance with Hindu thought. In “Wireless” a chemist’s assistant dying of tuberculosis, remembers his past life as John Keats. In “The Tomb of His Ancestors”, the Bhils, the mountain tribes believe that the young subaltern is a reincarnation of his grandfather. Thus, the hard-hearted realist transports the readers to a world of fantasy.

Use of Supernaturalism

Supernaturalism is intrinsically connected with metempsychosis. “They” is the story of commerce with the dead. The children are elusive, and they are more heard than seen. “The Mark of the Beast” deals with the possessed man who develops the characteristics of a wolf.” “The strange Ride of Morrowbie Jukes” is an experience of Jukes near the burning ghat of the Hindus. Kipling shared a profound appreciation of the values and the ideals of India’s old civilization. “Thus, in Kipling’s stories, the supernatural – one manifestation of the unempirical – often intrudes as that which is incomprehensible to empirical man” (Karma 10).

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. In the words of Arthur Compton Rickett, “The story teller tears aside the veil that hides Anglo-Indian life from the average Englishman and makes him realise its struggles, its failures, its glories and its shame” (P 669). Kipling gives a true picture of the Anglo-Indian society in the 19th century. The critical Heritage comments:

“The very scenes are strange, scenes of Anglo-Indian life; military and official; of native life; of the life of half-castes and Eurasians. The writer presents with unusual vivacity, 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 force in India, the loves of scheduled native widows, the habits of damsels whose house like Rahab’s is on the city wall-nothing but these qualities keep the English reader awake and excited” (P 47).

Snobberies, Frivolities, Fashions and Customs

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 Englishmen and women in India. The Anglo-Indian society is a happy frivolous world where the English are among themselves and the natives hover somewhere in the distance playing minor roles. “They are a good and lovable people ..., but we never seem to come to a true and thorough knowledge of them” (Buckland 139). The India of the 1860’s was an abode for the Englishmen generally known as the sahib”. In most big cities, the natives will tell you of two or three Sahibs, generally low-caste, who have turned Hindu or Mussalman and who live more or less as such” (Steward 241). As the gap between the Sahib and the natives is widened by the English women, the Sahib lives in a cyst isolated from the natives he had conquered. “Holding themselves from the life of India, the British found themselves neither mere visitors nor bona fide residents” (Cornell 77). The exclusion of the native Indian from their social sphere brought about exclusiveness in their art of living. After the split, the Sahib built his home and cultivated his garden as he would have done in Dorset or Surrey. “The attempt to form a little England in India is one of the several means used to battle against the terrifying reality of alienation that the British feel in India.” Simla, Dehra Dun, Nainital and Darjeeling became household names of the English in India. Here the Sahib with his family could live English lives, undisturbed and secluded from the masses and the hot plains below.

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To Conclude

To conclude, it may be said that Kipling's purpose in his short stories is not to "glorify the British Empire, he was always its sternest critic – but to interpret it to the English make them, indeed, aware of its existence, and of their responsibilities towards it" (Dobree 25). He was not a man to lay bare his feelings. As Angus Wilson has put it, "he had a reluctance to turn his beams inwards. "The whole Anglo-Indian situation is studied with a certain objectivity", but through the social vision, Kipling is found projecting an image of India in which he is ambivalent on Indo-British relationships and his ironic scrutiny of the Raj and its image.

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