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Manifestations of Social Darwinism in Colonial Reflections: A Study of the Writings of Sahibs, Memsahibs and Others

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Abstract

The Orient has always conjured up images of an exotic land, mystic practices, of snake charmers and tight rope walkers. Contemporary fiction reinforced these images. However, the literature of the Raj is not confined to the writers of fiction alone. A vast body of literature which is largely unexplored yet exists. This comprises the writings of the Sahibs, the Memsahibs, the missionaries and other sundry visitors to India. The present paper explores these myriad images to ascertain the designs and patterns of writings on India. The paper also attempts to explore the motives if any behind the emerging frameworks of these diverse writings.

[**Key Words:** Social Darwinism, Orientalism, Occidental, Imperialism, Indologists, Colonialism]

The European Renaissance ushered in a spirit of enquiry and exploration. Geographical discoveries, scientific inventions, growth and appreciation of the arts were some of its essential features. Kings and nobles vied with each other to patronize the arts and learning for which one of the prerequisites was of course large quantities of money. Colonies represented power and pelf, while the search for and acquisition of colonies also satisfied the spirit of enquiry and exploration. And so Europe went about acquiring colonies across the globe, principally in Africa and Asia. The first dictum of Colonialism of course was that the colonies existed for the good of the mother country and the second, that the natives were an inferior people. However, the European Renaissance also swept in the spirit

of humanism, which mandated dignity of man as man. Britain in particular prided itself on its spirit of justice and fair play. The dilemma therefore was how to reconcile the imperialistic motives with humanistic ideas. Kipling makes a sardonic interpretation of the dilemma by calling it 'the white man's burden'.

Of all the colonies of the far flung British Empire, India was deemed the jewel in the crown. England gloried in the material prosperity and strategic advantage that India brought to it. India always had porous borders, and myriad visitors kept pouring into India from times immemorial. Some of them chose to make their home here. Those who went back carried with them tales of splendor and glorious riches, of magical land and exotic

peoples. This in turn attracted the traders who came to India with gifts and entreaties, requesting permission to trade. The embassies of Captain William Hawkins and Thomas Roe are significant landmarks. It was the pioneering work of these gentlemen that subsequently led to the colonization of India.

The British arrival in India marked the beginning of a new kind of literature - depicting an exotic land, alien culture and inferior people. Edward Said says that the Orient was an invention of the West, whereby the West judged, studied or disciplined the East, depending upon the perspective of the viewer/ writer. For example, the image of India has been captured by 3 broad categories of writers: the writers of fiction, the reports and observations of the Sahibs (administrators), and finally, the writings of lay visitors such as the Memsahibs (wives of Sahibs), other members of the families of officials serving in India, the missionaries, etc.

The Man - Portrayal of the Indian Character

Some of the most celebrated books on India penned by the British are Foster's *A Passage to India*, Kipling's *Kim*, Paul Scott's *Jewel in the Crown*, etc. Foster's protagonist, Aziz, is meant to represent the typical Indian - emotional, susceptible to kindness, generous, but mean, and having a way with truth. The character of Godbole is even more of an enigma. Foster does not even attempt to decipher him. It is as if Godbole is purposefully created to baffle and defy the Western understanding of Eastern character.

Another defining character in the British fiction on India is that of Kim, the protagonist in the eponymous work of Rudyard Kipling. Kipling's Kim grew up a street urchin, and is familiar with every nook and corner of the city of Lahore. This helps him in carrying out his nefarious tasks - passing on messages, espionage and the like - typically sly,

underhand things that an imperialist would expect a native to do. The Tibetan Lama in *Kim* is akin to Foster's Godbole - a mystic - unearthly and unrealistic. These images of Indians are recurring- either a morally less evolved, devious, unscrupulous, lying brute, or an inscrutable mystic, communing with his pagan gods and immersed in his Eastern spirituality.

Images of a similar nature are again echoed in the observations of the Administrators. These Administrators - the successive Governor Generals, Governors, District Magistrates and the like, people who ruled over the natives and came into a day to day contact with them, have a similar tale to tell. Tara Chand (Chand 235) opines that no Governor General from Cornwallis to Canning had a favourable opinion of the native. Bentinck said, "cursed from one end to the other by vice, the ignorance, the oppression, the despotism, the barbarous and cruel customs that have seen the growth of ages under every description of Asiatic misrule".ⁱ Similarly, Cornwallis did not think even one Indian fit to be a part of the steel frame of the British empire and therefore completely shut the doors of office to them. As for Macaulay, he despised the Indian character almost as much as he despised Eastern learning and literature. His opinion of the Hindu race was that it had been completely debased by 3000 years of despotism, combined as it was by priestcraft, slavery and superstitions.

Several of these administrators wrote memoirs, reports, letters, maintained journals and diaries. Herein, they recorded anecdotes and incidents that corroborate these views - for example, Sleeman (1915) writes in *Rambles and Recollections* of how he got robbed within moments of setting up camp in Gwalior, "when I cantered upto my tent door, a *sipahi* of my guard came up and reported that as the day began to dawn, a gang of thieves had stolen one of my best carpets, all the brass brackets of my tent poles and the brass bell with which the sentries on duty sounded the

hour, all Lieutenant Thomas' cooking utensils and many other things several of which they had found" (Sleeman web). F J Shore was of the opinion that the Englishman's estimate of Indians was that they were, "a low degraded people who possessed few good qualities and whose institutions, customs and government were bad" (Shore 4). *The Friend of India* (1858), an Anglo-Indian newspaper, is quoted in Tara Chand as saying, "(Indians) were a little better than wild beasts and the only way to rule them was to abandon the paternal methods of the company and rule them henceforward with a rod of iron" (Chand 479).

Just as was done with the officers, travel advice was shared with the wives and families before they embarked upon a journey to India. One can presume that most could not have had an unbiased view of this country. Fiction writers prepared them for a land of fantasy, of untold riches, opulent courts and majestic maharajahs while the letters home and diary and journal entries of serving officers told of a morally inferior race that needed to be educated in all aspects of culture and civilization. And so with the inherent white man's pride and a good measure of prejudice arrived in India a stream of visitors who in turn left vivid accounts of their sojourn in this country.

Principal raconteur among such casual visitors to India during the Raj was Fanny Parks, the wife of a District Magistrate, who has left behind a detailed account of contemporary India in her book *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque* (1850). By and large, a fair and just woman, Fanny Parks still finds the native as less evolved than the white people. She writes of the dishonesty, lies, stealth, indolence, lower intelligence of the natives - but all without rancor. She talks at length of how the ice got stolen on the way back from the bazaar, and how iron chests were melted to procure the silver within or how her servants slept the day away. She also talks of how during a storm, she had to address, motivate and inspire grown men to

not give up hope but fight to survive. Physically, the native was to her akin to what she had imagined a cannibal must be like:

So vile and strange looking their long black shaggy hair matted over their heads and hanging down to their shoulders; their bodies are dark brown, entirely naked, with the exception of a cloth round the waist which passes between the limbs. They jump overboard and swim ashore with a rope between their teeth and their toeing - stick in one hand just like dogs, river dogs" (Parks I web). In an advice manual of 1864, one memsahib wrote: "where it is possible to cheat, [Indian servants] will generally do so. A friend of mine firmly believes a native speaker never speaks the truth except by accident... one of the most disagreeable feelings in India is that of constant suspicion indeed of the native character" (Chaudhury 554-555).

In fact, they frequently linked the native to animals. Nupur Chaudhury (1994) remarks that

In the 1860s and 1870s Memsahibs for the first time referred to the Indians as monkeys reflecting the influence of Social Darwinism into their discourse. Mrs Gutherie described her *ayah* as very small and very black and as she sat in her low chair or on the ground with her skinny arms round the fair child, she looked exactly like a monkey wrapped up in white muslin. Another Memsahib wrote that 'a great majority of Indian merchants have arms, legs and body bare and squat upon their shop boards or their doorsteps in attitudes strongly reminding one of the monkey tribes (Chaudhury 558).

The opinion of the missionaries did not differ much. They firmly believed that the natives were misguided, misinformed and misdirected due to their false religion and their unholy practices. A French Catholic missionary sums this up, "where (India) every prospect pleaseth and man alone is vile" (Chand 237).

Qualities like valour, loyalty and patience of the natives do find mention, but only incidentally. No panegyrics to the effect have been recorded. Col. Todd explored the history of the brave Rajputana in *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* and while he found the Rajputs incredibly brave, he also found them foolhardy.

The Milieu- Portrayal of the Land and Culture

The native character may have been found depraved, subservient, morally inferior and physically wanting, but there seems to be a dichotomy in the perception of land that was India. The conformists were outraged by every aspect of Indian culture, art, architecture, literature, religion. The explorers and writers were intrigued and fascinated by the exotic, tantalizing, bewildering East.

In fact, writers of fiction have almost a palpable design to create an exotic east. To quote Said, “the Orient was a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (Said 1), and hence emerges the India of snake charmers and tight rope walkers, of pagan worshippers and naked saints. The Raj literature abounds in tales of Maharajas and their opulent lifestyles, vivid descriptions of Indian festivals, stories of ‘sati’ and ‘thugee’, and the ‘nautch’ girls and the prostitutes. The most lingering image of India from Julius Verne’s *Around the World in Eighty Days* is that of Sati. Meadows Taylor successfully romanticized the character of Amir Ali Thug - a man who robbed and killed for his living, simply by associating mystic practices and rituals with robbery/ thugee. *The Far Pavilions* by MM Kaye similarly recaptures the palace intrigues, the allure of the eastern women, the chivalry of the West among other things.

Some of the British officers and administrators were so fascinated by India that they initiated a separate branch of study - Indology. Foremost among the Indologists

was William Jones who admired the wonderful structure (of Sanskrit), “more perfect than the Greek, more copious than Latin and more exquisitely refined than either” (Jones 28). Jones founded the Asiatic Society of Bengal to further translate the unparalleled works of Sanskrit, such as Shakuntala, Manusamhita, Hitopdisha, etc., and make them available to European readers. John Marshall undertook the supervision of excavations at Mohanjodaro and Harappa and brought to light the glories of the Indus valley civilization. He found unparalleled merit in both the layout and design of the cities as also in the workmanship and creativity of the artists and artisans of the civilization. Other Indologists of significance were Charles Wilkins, James Mill, James Princep, Alexander Cunningham etc. In fact, James Mill’s *History of India* (1817) played a major role in reshaping the English policy and attitudes in India throughout the 19th Century. Eminent scholar and one of the greatest authorities on architecture, Percy Brown has this to say on the Taj:

But all these architectural experiences, beautiful though some of the results undoubtedly were, recede into background when compared with that materialized vision of loveliness known as the Taj Mahal, a monument which marks the ‘perfect moment’ in the evolution of architecture during the Mughal Period” (Brown 107).

Similarly, the ruins of the Vijayanagar Empire, the exquisite craftsmanship of sundry artisans, metallurgists and sculptors draw praise and admiration from these students of Indian culture and civilization. However it is germane to mention here that the very same pieces of art and architecture were looked down upon with disdain by the larger body of the British in India. The conformists comprehensively condemned the Indian culture. Macaulay summed up the opinion of this school in Indian Learning in his oft quoted remark ‘... a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and

Arabia” (Macaulay web). Religion, especially Hinduism, was dismissed as base and primitive. One Rev A Hume wrote, “The Christian naturally supposed the popular Hinduism which he saw to be the whole of Hinduism, a system of many gods, of idols, of puerile and sometimes immoral mythologies, of mechanical and endless rites, of thorough-going caste, and often cruel caste” (Hume 1271). According to Mill, “Hindu religion was a mass of horrible penances, useless and harmful ceremonies, and Hindu learning, wholly devoid of rational thought” (Chand 237). And it must have been the conformists who thought the Taj Mahal valuable only for the marble it possessed and so decreed to auction it.

Conclusion

Clearly there is no single picture of India that emerges from the Raj literature- either in terms of man or the milieu. As far as the occidental reading of the character of the Native is concerned, he (the Indian) was found either vile and contemptible or inscrutable and enigmatic. Either way no concerted effort seems to have been made by the myriad visitors to genuinely understand the Native. The very superficial interactions led the ruling class to conclude that the Indian simply did not measure upto his own clearly established western virtues and hence were summarily dismissed. The Indian milieu came in for a more exhaustive treatment. The Indologists were completely bowled over while the conformists remained irreconcilably alienated. All things in India were comprehensively condemned by this school. It is thought provoking because these conformists were products of the Renaissance Europe where Renaissance primarily meant a revival of interest in the classical Greek & Roman art and culture. But when these very same people came across even those specimens of art and culture in India which were heavily influenced by Greco-Roman

style, they were not impressed (the westerners had arrived in India around the 6th century BC with Alexander and had made India their home. In consequence was born the Gandhar School of Art, a school that was, “evidently influenced by the art of the Roman Empire as some of its craftsmen may have been Westerners” (Basham 368).

On the face of it the low opinion of India and Indians could be because of the systemic existential differences not only in physicality, but also in values, ethics and morals. Hence the universal image that emerges from the writings of Officers and the lay visitors is that of the (i) vile Indian or the enigmatic Indian and (ii) an alien landscape – ugly and hostile. The Indologists it is true were fascinated by things Indian but then their subject of study was the India that once was and no longer existed. The tributes paid were largely to erstwhile practices and achievements and not to the then contemporary India. As for the writers of fiction, they too created a land of fantasy that once again emphasized the ‘otherness of India’.

All these schools of thought looked at both the man and the milieu through the lens of their own schema leading to the emergence of contrarian imagery. However it would appear that all these images converged at one focal point – Imperialism. “This aspect of imperialism cancelled most of the benefits claimed by most of its apologists and admirers. This phase of imperialism presented ugly features- economic exploitation, impoverishment of the masses, dwarfing of the moral structure and the dignity of the subject people. Imperialist Britain treated India as a dependent satellite whose main function was to sweeten labour for the master, to subserve its economy and to enhance the glory and prestige of the empire (Chand 474). So the one commonality in the three kinds of images is that of the establishment of the essential differences between the east and the west. The east was perceived as not only alien but also inferior because unless the inferiority

was established how could the West conscientiously justify its prolonged presence in India. If not to carry out the 'White man's burden', what was the *raison'd être* for their extended stay? The native had to be perceived as inferior to enable the west to justifiably stay on and rule over the heathen country- to educate and civilize them. Any image contrary to this would have been completely untenable.

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