Book Review

Kipling in India: India in Kipling

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The volume 'Kipling in India: India in Kipling'[1] is a collection of essays, written by eighteen scholars from four continents. The first draft of the essays was presented at a conference held in April 2016 at the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies (IIAS), Shimla in collaboration with the Kipling Society, UK. Kipling enthusiasts from all over the world—the UK, the USA, France, Canada, New Zealand, Japan, and India—came together to discuss various facets of Rudyard Kipling's writings. The book is a result of that collaborative effort.

The editors of the volume rightly noted, 'history passes but literature remains.' The British rule in India ended seventy-five years ago, but great British writers born in India, such as Kipling and Orwell, are quite alive with us. Reading them, we experience a reflective sensation, as if seeing live many events that they saw more than a century ago. The life and time of that bygone era become tangible to a perceptive reader. There were many Viceroys in India during that long period, but the name of Rudyard Kipling, a writer, has a distinct place above all of them. There is a good reason for it. Even a large section of the British people themselves became interested about the life and situations of the Anglo-Indians through Kipling's powerful stories, based mostly on his direct observations and experiences.

This collection of essays generates in readers, a keen interest in Rudyard Kipling, his background, his family, and especially his writings. The book is arranged in three sections. First, on Kipling and his parents' interaction with India as an artist and a journalist. Second, on Kipling's Indian poetry and fiction. Third, on different aspects of *The Jungle Book*, so far, the most famous work of Kipling.

In the first section we learn that Rudyard Kipling received art and writing as a family inheritance. His father was an artist-curator and his mother a journalist-socialite. The very first essay 'Alice Kipling as journalist' by Barbara Bryant, is very interesting. Alice Rudyard's mother. Her letters from Shimla were published in two newspapers, *Bombay Gazette* and *Civil and Military Gazette*. Additionally, the *Pioneer*, Allahabad, then a powerful publication, had also published some of her social letters. The letters were appreciated with great interest by the Anglo-Indian society. This was her first regular journalistic venture while she first visited Shimla in 1881. Some of those writings were collected in a private family collection 'Simla season 1892', along with sketches by John Lockwood Kipling, Rudyard's father. Alice also acted in amateur theatricals, a most significant feature of life for the Anglo-Indians in Simla. The Gaiety Theatre, still functional at its original place, was rebuilt and opened in 1887. Alice reported about its activities, though noted that 'a Simla audience is not altogether a pleasant one to act before.' Alice's daughter, and Rudyard's sister, Trix also acted in some plays. Her independent scrutiny of the Simla society, irrespective of the positions of its members, has a tone similar to young Rudyard's charming writings. John Lockwood Kipling, too, was a writer, of which very little is known. His 'The Elephant in the Temple' is a great collection of his thoughtful descriptions, reflections, and artistic drawings about Indian life and beliefs. Thus, Rudyard had a remarkable parental legacy in writing and art.

Despite being in a humble situation, Alice Kipling earned the friendship of Lord Dufferin who was the Viceroy during 1884-88. She was so vivacious that once he famously said, 'Dullness and Mrs Kipling were never in the same room together.' Kiplings were in the Government List for events at the Viceregal Lodge at Simla, newly built in 1888 on the Observatory Hill (presently the IIAS premises).

Jill Didur's, 'Kipling in Simla' induces a reader to go directly to the writings of Rudyard. His first collection of stories 'Plain tales from the hills' provided, for the first time, a range of authentic narrations about the inner life of

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the Anglo-Indians, i.e., British officials and their families in India. It contains, apart from the real Anglo-Indian and native stories of those days, many a psychological and social insights of human life, valid even today. It was also the first flush of a great writer, then merely an 18 years old lad and working as a rookie journalist for the Lahore *Civil and Military Gazette*. The situation gave him access to every sphere of British rule in India. At the same time, he took keen interest in the native's (Indian) life and acquired a good knowledge of Indians as well. He loved the native language, a mix of Urdu-Hindi, spoken from Lahore to Allahabad. He used a large number of native words and phrases as it is, in English, without translating or giving its English equivalent. Such as *kismet, pahar, garri, Bandar, bairagi, darwaja band*, *bundobust*, *vah-vah*, *kia hai*, *koi hai*, *band karo, pukka*, *jawab*, *jaldi*, *choop*, *bahut*, *bemar*, *pagal, salaam*, *batcha*, *khitmadgar*, *chaprasi*, *pahari*, *bara khana*, *jutee, kal, gaddi*, *panka,* etc. He learnt a lot of native proverbs and expressions, using it at numerous places with due importance in his early works. Clearly, he somehow got a feel of the Hindi-Urdu terms that he tried to retain by putting them as it is in Roman script in his stories, letters, and even in his poems. Only first-rate writers have such a keen sense of words and their meanings.

Although, some critics credit it all to his being born and bred in India for the first six years of his life. But such a view is hardly supported by Rudyard's own observations. One of the missing sections of this volume is the private letters of Kipling. His letters provide a special insight into the great observer's innate feelings and understanding about a range of issues in his life and times. In two hefty volumes, edited by Thomas Pinney (Macmillan, 1990) the letters are a great treasure for Kipling enthusiasts. Written liberally, almost on a daily basis from the very beginning, at least during his India stint as a young lively journalist at Lahore and Simla, Kipling has recorded even his most minute observations about events, persons, and situations with his own candid views.

Much later, at the mature age of 70, Rudyard wrote about his life, experiences, and recollections in a book *Something of Myself* (1937). He duly starts from his earliest memories. The very first persons in his memory are an unnamed Portuguese Catholic *ayah* and his Hindu bearer Meeta, who 'would sometimes go into little Hindu temples where I held his hand and looked at the dimly-seen friendly Gods.' Later on, as a mature man and famed author, Rudyard Kipling kept the figure of the Hindu god Ganesha as auspicious. His first story in his first story collection 'Plain tales…' is about an Indian hill girl, Lispeth. Set around Simla, it portrays the poignant story of this Hindu girl who, having lost her parents shortly after her birth, was baptized and raised by the local Kotgarh Christian Mission. The girl, Elizabeth, grows up as a tall beautiful girl, educated, British mannered, and well-versed in English. Per chance she falls in love with a British traveler whose life she had saved single handedly after an accident. Had she not seen the unknown person lying unconscious in a forest she used to go to for her long walks, and had she not brought him to the town on her shoulder, he might have died unseen. He gets timely medical care and nursing for weeks, thanks to Lispeth. But he thoughtlessly and unnecessarily cheats her, conveying untrue emotional impressions from the beginning, and then departs to England after falsely promising her to be back, which he never intended. Though the Mother superior of the Christian Mission knows the reality, she also does not tell Lispeth. When, after a period of time, Lispeth comes to know the reality, she returns to her native people and religion as ''the daughter of a *pahari* and the servant of *Tarka Devi*. You are all liars, you English.' The story ends on a sympathetic note, portraying her as quite an independent character.

In Kipling's writings we find many such matter-of-fact portrayals of the natives, and of the British, and of life & work situations in which the writer's sympathies are not always with the British. However, from all the writings and observations of Kipling, it seems farfetched to call him an 'Indianized Westerner who hated the West within him' (xii). His numerous descriptions and reflections, even early on in a number of personal letters, leave no doubt that he considered the Western civilization as way superior and identified himself with it. Even as a young journalist in Lahore and Simla, he was impatient to go back 'Home.' His journalist job at the *C&M Gazzette*, Lahore and for the *Pioneer*, Allahabad were also to earn enough money to buy a passage ticket back Home. In none of his writings, not even in his many letters, did he ever indicate the eagerly awaited journey to Home as a mere vacation, it was to be for good. He was then just 22 years old. When he left India, in 1889, at the age of 24, he never came back.

In any case, Kipling's observations about the Indians and the British in India reflect a dispassionate standpoint. More like a scientist, as great writers have been universally. Writing about an event as it comes to the fore, calling a spade a spade, and so on. His letters as well as his stories and descriptions, based on real events in Simla, Lahore, and other places like Calcutta, Jamalpur, Giridih, etc. never reflect undue bias, moral relativism, or superciliousness. British officials or native Indians appear in his depictions without favour or prejudice. An interesting long story in this regard is 'The Enlightenment of Pagett, MP,' in which an experienced British Indian officer in Punjab tries to cool the heightened enthusiasm of a visiting liberal British MP about the newly formed Indian National Congress. (The story is indeed enlightening, not only about the then

visiting British politician but also for us to understand the genesis and development of the Congress and the native response to it.) In cultural comparison, plainly as well as imperceptibly, Kipling's sympathies were definitely with the West. Yet, in all his writings about India and the British Indian affairs, during his time in India from 1882 to1888, his approach remained that of an independent and humane observer. Free from any baggage or ideological attachments. His story collections 'Plain tales from the Hills,' 'Under the Deodars,' 'The eyes of Asia,' and others show it from various perspectives. His letters, written in great details to different persons, mostly to Edmonia Hill, provide even more details about his views and sympathies right from the beginning.

Although, it is true, as a recent biographer of Kipling wrote, 'India was where Rudyard Kipling was happiest, where he learnt his craft, where he rediscovered himself through his writings and came of age as a writer. India made him, charged his imagination, and after he left India in March 1889 at the age of twenty-three, he was most completely himself as an artist…" (p. 3)

It is true. But read with his parental inheritance and the great artistic talent shown in his earliest writings, one should give the credit above all else to the artist himself. More so, as Rudyard Kipling is not only the best, as George Orwell observed, but almost the only source to know about the social and internal life, its happy, unhappy and brutal shades, of the British Indians in the late nineteenth century. This collection of essays generates an interest in the great writer, and it is a good achievement.

Note

1. Harish Trivedi, Janet Montefiore (eds.), London and NY: Routledge, Shimla: IIAS, 2021, p. 251.