Kipling's Pilgrimage to India: *Kim*

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Reading a classic is a multiple gain all at once. Different readers find different aspects valuable, according to one's sensibilities. This is why classics never go out of demand or usefulness for humanity. New generations of readers, all over the world, find something for each of them in a classic book. Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901) is one of those classics, having rich material not only for a kind reader, but for students of literature, history, sociology, religion, ethnography, and imperial politics also. In fact, there is a strand of pilgrimage throughout the book.

Through the orphan kid, but street smart, hero Kim and his Tibetan *guru*, Teshoo Lama, the author, with all empathy at his disposal, has also mapped a pilgrims' progress. A number of information about the Indian society of the late 19th century and its assessment, even though in snippets, are also recorded in addition. The book was written nearly a hundred and thirty years ago, a time when neither political compulsions nor pressure of political correctness could weigh upon the author. Therefore, the whole presentation of various groups, individuals, events, creeds, and ideas can be taken as what Kipling found to be correct.

Presently, our focus is on how India and her native people appear in *Kim*. As is fairly known, Kipling wrote all his India stories based on real incidents and real characters. *Kim*, too, was not an entirely imaginary story. Thus, it is fair to assume that the places and people narrated have a core in reality.

Kim, a Sahib grown as native

With a nickname 'Little friend of all the World', the hero of the novel is an unforgettable character. A British boy, 12 years old, orphan, living on errands and begging, but sharp, witty, confident, fearless, fluent in native Urdu-Hindi interspersed with tasty abuses in response to situations, knowing enough English language too, moving around local *sarais* (inns) and bazar of Lahore, dresses like a low-caste Hindu, speaks like a Mussalman, and 'could lie like an Oriental'. That is Kim.

One day, the opening of the novel, while sitting idle under the *Zam-Zammah* (big gun fixed as public show piece) outside the Lahore Museum he notices a curious but kindly person and instantly marks him as his possession. This was soon to be his self-chosen *guru*, the lama. The lama has come to search for a legendary River, said to be originated from the arrow of Lord Buddha himself when he was young. (p. 12, *Kim*, London: Vintage Classics edition, 2010. All references henceforth from this book). He explains it to the knowledgeable British Curator of the Museum. Kim listens it all surreptitious;y, through the door crack, and makes up his mind to go with his journey. His character defies brief narration; the whole book, aptly named, is about him. One has to read it entirely to know. Some glimpse are noted here.

At one place in the story Kim asks Mahbub Ali, his benefactor, a horse trader and a secret British agent in the Great Game (between Britain and Russia, at the northern frontiers of India), a subtext of the novel: "What am I? Mussalman, Hindu, Jain, or Buddhist? That is a hard knot." The answer: "Thou art beyond question an unbeliever, and therefore thoust wilt be damned. So says my Law – or I think it does. But thou art also my Little Friend of all the World, and I love thee. So says my heart." (p. 153)

Kim is intelligent, too, in a profound way. He knows the value of language, and comparative worth of various persons. On one occasion reflecting: "No man could be a fool who knew the language so intimately, who moved so gently and silently, and whose eyes were so different from the dull fat eyes of other Sahibs." (p. 126)

He is fearless to any extent, as several incidents show. Deep later in the story, in a life-risking incident he jumps

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at an armed French-Russian duo in high forest as they insulted his guru, and makes them total destitute in the circumstances. Kipling indicates the traits in Kim through his feeling at the moment: "The humour of the situation tickled the Irish and the Orient in his soul. Here were the emissaries of the great Power of the North [Russia], very possibly as great in their own land as Mahbub or Colonel Creighton, suddenly smitten helpless." (p. 263). Even early on in the story, during the journey Kim frightens away a police constable with choice abuses, as he was trying to filch some money from the lama. Then he boasting tells the amazed lama, "All earth would have picked thy bones within ten miles of Lahore city if I had not guarded thee." (p. 66).

As the story moves on, after completing his three years schooling at the most prestigious St Xavier's, Kim re-joins the Lama's search for the River. In this journey, listening again to his *guru*, his adoration constantly grows. Kipling records the process, "Bit by bit, disconnectedly, each tale called up by some wayside thing, he [the lama] spoke of all his wanderings up and down Hind; till Kim, who has loved him without reason, now loved him for fifty good reasons. So they enjoyed themselves in high felicity, abstaining, as the [Buddhist] Rule demands, from evil words, covetous desires; not over-eating, not lying on high beds, nor wearing rich clothes." (p. 226). He feels the divine presence in Himalayas, near 'Kedarnath and Badrinath – kings of that wilderness' and exclaims: " 'Surely the Gods live here!' said Kim, beaten down by the silence and the appalling sweep and dispersal of the cloud-shadows after rain. 'This is no place for men!'" (pp. 245, 249)

His love for the *guru* and desire to help him in his poor physical condition is extraordinary. Kipling compares him to Ananda, the great disciple of Lord Buddha:

> It was never more than a couple of miles a day now, and Kim's shoulders bore all the weight of it—the burden of an old man, the burden of the heavy food-bag with the locked books, the load of the writings on his heart, and the details of the daily routine. He begged in the dawn, set blankets for the lama's meditation, held the weary head on his lap through the noon-day heats, fanning away the flies till his wrist ached, begged again in the evenings, and rubbed the lama's feet, who rewarded him with promise of Freedom—to-day, to-morrow, or, at furthest, the next day.
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> "Never was such a *chela*. I doubt at times whether Ananda more faithfully nursed Our Lord. And thou art a Sahib? When I was a man—a long time ago—I forgot that. Now I look upon thee often, and every time I remember that thou art a Sahib. It is strange."
>
> "Thou hast said there is neither black nor white. Why plague me with this talk, Holy One? Let me rub the other foot. It vexes me. I am not a Sahib. I am thy *chela*, and my head is heavy on my shoulders."
>
> "Patience a little! We reach Freedom together. Then thou and I, upon the far bank of the River, will look back upon our lives as in the Hills we saw our days' marches laid out behind us. Perhaps I was once a Sahib." (p. 286)

And yet Kim feels wretchedly insufficient in serving his *guru*. In the same scene, ahead, he cries bitterly:

> Holy One, my heart is very heavy for my many carelessnesses towards thee." An hysterical catch rose in his throat. "I have walked thee too far; I have not picked good food always for thee; I have not considered the heat; I have talked to people on the road and left thee alone…. I have –I have… *Hai mai*! But I love thee… and it is all too late…. I was a child…. Oh why was I not a man!…" Overborne by strain, fatigue, and the weight beyond his years, Kim broke down and sobbed at the lama's feet. (pp. 287-88)

Further, in the scene, the comforted *chela*: "With a laugh across his tears, Kim kissed the lama's feet, and set about tea-making." (p. 289)

Kipling describes Kim having attained liberation, too, at the end of the journey, and the story. Remarkably, it happens in a truly pagan way:

> The ground was good clean dust—no new herbage that, living, is halfway to death already, but the hopeful dust that holds the seed of all life. He felt it between his toes, patted it with his palms, and joint by joint, sighing luxuriously, laid him down full length along in the shadow of the wooden-pinned cart. And Mother Earth was as faithful as the Sahiba. She breathed through him to restore the poise he had lost lying so long on a cot cut off from her good currents. His head lay powerless upon her breast, and his opened hands surrendered to her strength. The many-rooted tree above him, and even the dead man-handled wood beside, knew what he sought, as he himself did not know. Hour upon hour he lay deeper than sleep. (pp. 299-300)

Kim was loved by all: " 'The Sahiba is a heart of gold,' said the lama earnestly. 'She looks upon him as her son.' 'Hmph! Half Hind seems that-way disposed." replied Sahiba. (p. 300)

India: a river of life, the land of pilgrims

In a quiet, but sure way, Kipling has recorded his observations about 'great, grey, formless' India and its people of the time (p. 102). In the very beginning he observes that the son of a rich Hindu merchant is customarily playing with all kind of kids, poor, beggars, orphans, irrespective of their caste or creed. This was Lahore of 1880s as Kipling saw intimately for fairly long. Hence the observation: "… shrilled little Chota Lal in his gilt-embroidered cap. His father as worth perhaps half a million sterling, but India is the only democratic country in the world." (p. 6). Kids in Lahore freely abuse

each other in retort, but have a perfect understanding of equality and goodwill as playmates.

At the start of the journey of Kim and Teshoo Lama, the *chela* and *guru*, Kipling says, "a wandering lama with a low-caste boy-servant might attract a moment's interest as they wander about India, the land of pilgrims, but no one will suspect them or, what is more to the point, rob." (p. 26). Such observations recur again and again in the novel, sometimes full with emotion. Some instances:

"The gentle, tolerant folk looked on reverently. All India is full of holy men stammering gospels in strange tongues; shaken and consumed in the fires of their own zeal; dreamers, babblers, and visionaries: as it has been from the beginning and will continue to the end." (p. 35). Then, further ahead on journey, "And truly the Grand Trunk road is a wonderful spectacle. It runs straight, bearing without crowding India's traffic for fifteen hundred mile – such a river of life as nowhere else exists in the world" (p. 62)

"This broad, smiling river of life, he [Kim] considered, was a vast improvement on the cramped and crowded Lahore streets. There were new people and new sights at every stride – castes he knew and castes that were altogether out of his experience." (p. 66). This consideration of caste of a person by the people, including the hero Kim, is found everywhere in the novel. But, notably, it nowhere carries any negativity or humiliation, but just a descriptive fact, like age, sex, occupation, etc. of any one. Incidentally, it indicates that the caste affairs in India have not been such an ugly phenomena as presented in imagined stereotypes in current academics.

Kipling duly records a scene on the road, how a group of untouchables travels, and why: "They met a troop of long-haired, strong-scented Sansis with baskets of lizards and other unclean food on their backs, their lean dogs sniffing at their heals. These people kept their own side of the road, moving at a quick, furtive jog-trot, and all other castes gave them ample room; for the Sansi is deep pollution." (p. 66) That their choice of food was the main reason for their separate enclave in Indian cities and villages was also recorded centuries ago by foreign observers, such as Hiuen Tsang, 7th century, and some others.

Describing another scene, Kipling records a significant social habit of common Indians, both Hindus and Muslims: "… to make a prayer before one of the wayside shrines – sometimes Hindu, sometimes Mussalman – which the low-caste of both creeds share with beautiful impartiality" (p. 67). On the same road, same moment, he also noted the appearance of 'an Akali, a wild-eyed, wild-haired Sikh devotee' to whom "Kim was careful not to irritate that man; for the Akali's temper is short and his arm quick."

But, in general, Kim affirms, "This country is full of good folks." (p. 69). He feels so homely, that at any place, without hesitation, he "dived into the happy Asiatic disorder which, if you only allow time, will bring you everything that a simple man needs." (pp. 69-70). To savour the full import of such observations, a reader has to read the novel. A description of dawn, as our hero wakes up one morning on his journey:

> The diamond-bright dawn woke men and crows and bullocks together. Kim sat up and yawned, shook himself, and thrilled with delight. This was seeing the world in real truth; this was life as he would have it— bustling and shouting, the buckling of belts, and beating of bullocks and creaking of wheels, lighting of fires and cooking of food, and new sights at every turn of the approving eye. The morning mist swept off in a whorl of silver, the parrots shot away to some distant river in shrieking green hosts: all the well-wheels within earshot went to work. India was awake, and Kim was in the middle of it, more awake and more excited than any one, chewing on a twig that he would presently use as a toothbrush; for he borrowed right – and left-handedly from all the customs of the country he knew and loved. There was no need to worry about food – no need to spend a cowrie at the crowded stalls. He was the disciple of a holy man annexed by a strong-willed old lady. All things would be prepared for them, and when they were respectfully invited so to do they would sit and eat. For the rest – Kim giggled here as he cleaned his teeth – his hostess would rather heighten the enjoyment of the road. He inspected her bullocks critically, as they came up grunting and blowing under the yokes.(p. 79)

In another scene, an interesting encounter and banter between an English police officer and a native woman shows another facet of life in British India. That it was not always merely rulers and the ruled, or the White man and black folks. They had rather varied interactions. Kipling has described a happenchance on the road:

> A dark, sallowish District Superintendent of Police, faultlessly uniformed, an Englishman, trotted by on a tired horse, and, seeing from her retinue what manner of person she was, chaffed her.
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> "O mother," he cried, "do they do this in the zenanas? Suppose an Englishman came by and saw that thou hadst no nose?"
>
> "What?" she shrilled back. "Thy own mother has no nose? Why say so, then, on the open road?"
>
> It was a fair counter. The Englishman threw up his hand with the gesture of a man hit at sword-play. She laughed and nodded. (p. 81)

A curious side is noted also about the relations of masters and servants in India. Kipling notes, in a different scene, about the well-to-do lady mentioned earlier: "The old lady had retreated behind her curtains, but mixed most freely in the talk, her servants arguing with and

contradicting her as servants do throughout the East." (p. 83)

On yet another plain, a comparison of the British and Indian social milieu, through the feelings of Kim, when he begins living among the British: "The indifference of native crowds he was used to; but this strong loneliness among white men preyed on him." (p. 110)

Interestingly, the Anglo-Indian boys, off-springs of British and Indian parents, despised the native people, which was not the case with pure British folks. In fact, the British officials strictly discouraged such feelings towards the natives. Colonel Creighton advises Kim: "There is a good spirit in thee. Do not let it be blunted at St Xavier's. There are many boys there who despise the black men." But his protégé, Kim, was already secured. He assured the Colonel, in his typical rustic lingo: " 'Their mothers are bazar-women,' said Kim, He knew well that there is no hatred like that of the half-caste for his brother-in-law/" (p. 127) Still, Colonel reminds him again and again on this point: "True; but thou art a Sahib and the son of a Sahib. Therefore, do not at any time be led to contemn the black men."

There was no need to remind Kim, as he was in love with India wholeheartedly. He expressed his feelings, frequently, such as: " 'This great and beautiful land,' said Kim, waving his paw round the little clay-walled room where the oil-lamp in its niche burned heavily through the tobacco-smoke." (p. 145). Another place, he says ecstatically: " 'A fair land – a most beautiful land is this of Hind – and the land of the Five Rivers is fairer than all,' Kim half chanted." (p. 156). The feeling is shared by his *guru*, the lama: "From one end to another of Hind have I travelled afoot and in *te-rain*. A great and wonderful land! But here [a Jain temple in Benares], when I put in, is as though I were in my own Bhotiyal." (p.203)

During their return from the Himalayan areas back to the plains, in every village the *guru* and *chela* were "made welcome, either by priest or headman, after the custom of the kindly East." (p.224). Not just formal respect to the duo, but "They were lords of the villages of Aminabad, Sahaigunge, Arkola of the Ford, and little Phulesa, where Kim gave the soulless woman a blessing." (p. 226). At another stage, a well-to-do village lady assures them, "Ye will find charity throughout – it is not denied to the well looking." (p. 241)

Later, Kipling himself observes at one point: "The Plains – kindly and gentle – had treated the lama as a holy man among the holy men. But the hills worshipped him as one in the confidence of all their devils. Theirs was an almost obliterated Buddhism, overlaid with a nature-worship…" (p. 246). The common folks are mostly described as 'kindly villagers' (p. 284), irrespective of the context in the story.

As to the socio-economic life, the reputation of Indian traders was remarkable. As a British Colonel assures an English chaplain: "At any rate, the old man has sent the money. Gobind Sahai's notes of hand are good from here to China." (p. 119)

Buddhism: a storehouse of wisdom

The character of Teshoo Lama, whom Kim adopted as his *guru*, guarding him and serving by all means, voluntarily, untiringly and happily, keeps unfolding throughout the book. Mostly through his own narrations and comments. Kipling presented it verbatim, with his tacit approval. Which is not so about other characters, including Kim. The author is now and then mocking many characters, both native and British, including Chaplains and Padre, in the story. But the Buddhist Lama is never presented so even slightly. The Curator of the Lahore Museum, a British, receives him brotherly and treats with all reverence, as he "saw that his guest was no mere bead-telling mendicant, but a scholar of parts." (p.19). After a long talk, the Lama comes out of the museum, Kim awaiting for him. He goes begging food for the Lama, seeing him hungry and helpless, brings a bowl of rice, curry, fried cake, clarified butter. They eat together, then Lama 'drops into the easy sleep of age' and Kim goes to play far and around. Lama slept till into evening, and found again bewildered when he did not see Kim around. He started wailing and, upon questioned by someone, detailed his sorrow that his *chela* (disciple) is gone away. He narrated everything truthfully. Kim listened it stealthily being in a corner nearby, and "stood amazed at this, because he had overheard the talk in Museum, and knew that the old man was speaking the truth, which is a thing a native on the road seldom presents to a stranger." (p.18) He took pity, and decided to be his *chela* for his search, "I have never seen anyone like to thee in all this my life. I go with thee to Benares. And, too, I think that so old a man as thou, speaking the truth to chance-met people at dusk, is in great need of a disciple." (p. 19)

Kipling has presented Buddhism, too, in neutrally positive way through long descriptions or comments of the Lama. Someone asks about his *chela*, "His country - his race – his village? Mussalman – Sikh – Hindu – Jain – low caste or high?". The Lama replies, "Why should I ask? There is neither high nor low in the Middle Way [Buddhism]. If he is my *chela* – does – will – can anyone take him from me? for, look you, without him I shall not find my River." (pp. 22-23).

Further, much ahead into the story, at a critical moment when his *chela* is being snatched away from him by Kim's father's British regiment, the Lama speaks to him in the presence of two British chaplains, one Anglican another

Catholic. Kipling always lets the Lama speak in detail: "'And I am a Follower of the Way' he said bitterly. 'The sin is mine and the punishment is mine. I made believe to myself – for now I see it was but make-belief – that thou wast sent to me to aid in the Search. So my heart went out to thee for thy charity and thy courtesy and the wisdom of thy little years. But those who follow the Way must permit not the fire of any desire and attachment, for that is all Illusion. … " (p. 99). Kipling has presented numerous observations of the Lama, for its philosophical and practical merit. For the same reason the Jains, too, are presented approvingly, who "officially recognise all the Gods of the Hindu creed, as well as Lingam and Snake. They wear the Brahaminical thread; they adhere to every claim of Hindu caste-law" (p. 207). As if a positive attitude to the Lama is itself a merit for others also.

A high British official comment about the Lama, "Look here, Padre, I don't pretend to know much about natives, but if he says he'll pay, he'll pay – dead or alive. I mean, his heirs will assume the debt." (p. 120). The lama had undertaken to finance the costly education of Kim at St Xavier's at Lucknow, the best in then India, for whole three years. The lama notes its importance in a letter to the Padre, "Education is greatest blessing if of best sorts. Otherwise no earthly use." So, he decided to bear the cost for the education of his *chela*.

Later, the Lama explains to Kim: "I acquire merit in that I help thee, my *chela*, to wisdom." (p. 130), and also "A good deed does not die." (p. 302) . This is a classic Indian thought, that a teacher is fulfilled himself by teaching his disciples. No other reward is necessary. Finally, he says to his *chela*, while parting as he is entering into the gate of the St Xavier's school in Lucknow, "Do not weap; for, look you, all Desire is Illusion and a new binding upon the Wheel. Go up to the Gates of Learning. Let me see thee go … Dost thou love me? Then go, or my hearts cracks…" (p. 131).

Much later into the story, as moving among the high Himalayan areas, the Lama observes: "These are indeed my hills. Thus should a man abide, perched above the world, separated from delights, considering vast matters." (p. 267). Then, explaining the Wheel, the cycle of *Karma*, and feeling for all sentient beings, "'Oh, Just is the Wheel!' He blessed them in detail – the great glaciers, the naked rocks, the piled moraines and tumbled shale; dry upland, hidden salt-lake, age-old timer, and fruitful water-shot valley one after the other, as a dying man blesses his folk; and Kim marvelled at his passion." (p. 274). In a moment of sorrow, feeling his own lapses, acknowledging, "'More than once I remember' – he rested his cheek dolefully on his hand – 'I sought thy praise and the *hakim's* for the mere strength of my legs. Thus evil followed evil till the cup was full. Just is the Wheel! All Hind for three years did me all honour." (p. 276).

Finally, concluding about the way out, "Who can read the Cause of an act is halfway to Freedom!" (p. 277). Thus, at every point in the story, and the pilgrimage, Kipling gave the Lama an affirmative command. Frequently adding his own views on the matter. Readers can feel it comparing the descriptions of other characters in the novel.

As to the philosophy of Hindus and Buddhism, Kipling seems to lend his empathy wholeheartedly, as he begins the fourteenth chapter of the book with the verses of great saint poet, Kabir:

My brother kneels (so saith Kabir)
To stone and brass in heathen-wise,
But in my brother's voice I hear
My own unanswered agonies.
His God is as his Fates assign –
His prayer is all the world's – and mine.

The prayer (p. 266)

Though it can be claimed as a reformed Christian thought, too, empathising with one's brother and neighbour. However, in the next chapter, in similar vein, Kipling describes the lama comforting his distressed *chela* who rues that he could not serve him well: "And he petted and comforted Kim with wise saws and grave texts on that little-understood beast, our Body, who being but a delusion, insists on posing as the Soul, to the darkening of the Way, and the immense multiplication of unnecessary devils." (p. 288). It is a pure Vedantic and Buddhist view that Kipling records approvingly.

To compare, how Kipling presented a Chaplain and his creed: "Bennett looked at him with the triple-ringed uninterest of the creed that lumps nine-tenths of the world under the title of 'heathen'." (p. 94)

The Indian character

Descriptions and comments at many places also give some glimpse of the Indian, esp. Hindu character. For instance, Indians in general try to conceal their financial assets: "One does not own to the possession of money in India." (p. 210).

An interesting trait of Hindus is recorded, perhaps unwittingly, as fearing insult & humiliation, but not death. It is described about Haree babu, a Bengali and medium level but important official under a secret branch of the British government. At one point Haree babu seeks Kim's unofficial cooperation, that he should come along and remain around as Haree is about to pursue two foreign spies, Russian and French, in bordering

Himalayan areas. Kim knows Haree babu is talented and resourceful enough, so asks why he needs Kim:

"Then what is to fear from them?"

"By Jove, they are not black people. I can do all sorts of things with black people, of course. They are Russians, and highly unscrupulous people. I – I do not want to consort with them without a witness."

"Will they kill thee?"

"Oah, thatt is nothing. I am good enough Herbert Spencerian, I trust, to meet little thing like death, which is all in my fate, you know. But – but they may beat me." (p. 237)

This is a curious trait, still noted, and used, by adversaries of Hindus, in India and abroad. For example, some happenings in Bangladesh and bordering Indian areas, report time to time that Islamists tell their recruits that to subdue Hindus, 'don't kill them, but humiliate,' Because that is a weak point of Hindus. One is reminded of it, reading Kipling's narrative about Haree babu.

Another snippet is about the treatment of natives by the natives. It is recorded through the feeling of the native coolies, when they were cajoled by Haree babu to continue work for the foreign duo. The coolies, "Used to comprehensive ill-treatment from their own colour, they suspected a trap somewhere, and stood by to run if occasion offered." (p.253). A similar observation is found in the Kipling story 'The Enlightenments of Pagett, MP' (in *Under the Deodars*). That native litigants always wanted their case in courts be heard and decided by a British magistrate, not a native one. They trusted more a British judge for being impartial, while a judge native could be bribed by the opposite party in the case. In fact, such feelings can still be found among Hindus in certain parts of India who are generally apprehensive of their own stock and trusting others in various matters.

In all, reading the book closely, gives enrichment for various reasons. Apart from providing sociological, ethnographical, political glimpses joined in a humane story, it also offers a lot of wisdom to discerning readers through a pilgrimage to the late 19th century India. Thus, *Kim*, is justly rated as a classic in world literature.