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Kipling's advocacy of Buddhism in *Kim*

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Abstract

Indian Religion is one of the significant themes of the novel *Kim* by Rudyard Kipling. India has been a home for Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs and people from many other religions in the world, but Hinduism has been the religion of majority of people in India for centuries. In this context, usually, one does expect a priest from Hinduism to represent Indian Religion in a novel like *Kim*, which is purely about India. Ironically, Kipling opted for a Tibetan Lama to be the spiritual teacher in *Kim*. This paper investigates into motivations behind selection of a Buddhist Monk as the religious teacher in *Kim* to represent Indian Religion.

Keywords: *India, Religion, Salvation, Buddhism, Dhamma, Morality, Eight-fold Path*

Introduction

Kim is said to be the text in which Kipling's concern for Indian religion is most plainly revealed. According to Noel Annan, "Kipling...implied that the Indians were as superior to the British in matters of religion as the British were to them in material power" (Rutherford 109). Religion in India is one of the major themes of *Kim*. Though *Kim* has abundant features of an adventure book for boys, with a youngster as its central figure, the novel has a spiritual aspect as well which distinguishes it from a usual boy's tale. Davie quotes the words of T.S. Eliot about Kipling's view of religion:

Kipling can accept all faiths: that of the Moslem, that of the Hindu, that of the Buddhist, Parsee or Jain, even (through the historical imagination) that of Mithra: if his understanding of Christianity is less affectionate, that is due to his Anglo-Saxon background—and no doubt he saw enough in India of clergy such as Mr. Bennett in *Kim*. (p. 34)

Kipling realized that the East had in many ways a better religion than the West. It was for this reason that he strongly opposed Christian missionary work in India. He possibly shared Mahbub Ali's

attitude to religion when the horse-dealer says to Kim: "This matter of creeds is like horseflesh...Therefore I say in my heart the Faiths are like the horses. Each has merit in its own country" (162-63). The British Kim shows greater respect for the faith of the lama, when in the same book Kipling speaks disrespectfully of the protestant clergyman, Bennett, who calls non-Christians "heathen" (99).

As a matter of fact, India has been a Hindu nation for centuries and *Kim* is all about India, but Kipling denied Hindu priest to be a religious teacher in *Kim*. Surprisingly, he chose a Tibetan Lama to be a spiritual *guru*. The beauty of *Kim* significantly depends on the presence of the lama. The lama is literally the centre of every action in the book. He is compassionate, courteous, humble and clean of heart, but a man of authority at his place. He, being holy, stands for the highest human values. Kim understands dissimilarities among castes and realizes that the lama is "the most holy of holy men" (76) because he is "above all castes" (76). Lama's character is drawn with immense gracefulness. He is Kipling's final comment on Buddhist Asia. Martin Fido considered the lama as "one of Kipling's major artistic triumphs [and that] he is the most successful representative of holiness in English literature" (120).

About Kipling's preference to Buddhism in *Kim*, K. Jamiluddin points out that "Buddhism is a very strange choice of religion to represent India, from which it has been absent for centuries" (Wilson 132). Kipling was earnestly in search of a religion which is practical and spiritual as well. Kipling was very much impressed with the virtues of simplicity and purity found in Buddhism. Kipling's choice of Buddhism helped *Kim* gain universal appeal. There is no vigour in the argument that Buddhism is a non-Indian religion since India is the homeland of it. This paper probes into supposed motivations behind selection of a Buddhist monk than a Hindu priest or a priest of some other religion to represent Indian Religion in *Kim*. For denying a Christian priest to be a spiritual teacher in *Kim*, we do not have to argue much because Christianity has never been one of the major religions of India. But one cannot ignore the presence of Hindu religion, which is the most popular of all religions in India.

Kipling's experiences in childhood and youth are partly responsible for the choice of Buddhism in *Kim*. Kipling's birth took place in 1865 at Bombay, India which was under British colonial rule then. At the time of his birth, his parents John Lockwood Kipling and Alice just then arrived in India as part of the British Empire. Being an artist, John took up the position as the head of the Department of Architectural Sculpture at the Jeejeebhoy School of Art in Bombay. For the child Kipling, India was an extremely wonderful place. This is manifested in his autobiography *Something of Myself for My Friends Known and Unknown*, in which Chapter I begins with a plea "Give me the first six years of a child's life and you can have the rest" (1). It was such a precious time in life which

he could recall even in his ripe age. He came in contact with people from all major religions in India at a very young age: Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists etc. When he was five years old, he left for England for studies. In 1878, Kipling was admitted to the United Services College at Westward Ho!, Devon, a school founded a few years earlier to prepare English boys for the army. This was the school where he was introduced to Buddha's philosophy of life first time. While at the United Services College where he studied between 1878 and 1882, he read Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia* or *The Great Renunciation* (1879). His curiosity for the Gandhara sculptures at the Lahore Museum contained this early interest. His father, Lockwood Kipling also helped him in this effort. Kipling worked as a journalist in India between 1882 and 1889. During this period, he acquired thorough knowledge of practices of different religions in India. Being a Christian, it did not require him to learn anything more separately about Christianity. He left India in 1889, not to return forever. From then, it took more than twelve years for him to bring out *Kim* in 1901.

Kipling's insightful understanding of Buddhism is one of the reasons for choosing it in *Kim*. *Kim* reveals his profound knowledge and appreciation of the philosophic aspects of Buddhism. In *Kim*, Kipling evokes the world of Buddhism by mentioning some of its illustrious symbols. The most noted is the *Bharacakramudra* of Wheel of life. Here is how Kipling explains the Wheel, rich in oriental philosophic symbolism:

He [the lama] drew from under the table a sheet of strangely scented yellow Chinese paper, the brushes, and the slab of India ink. In cleanest, severest outline he had traced the Great Wheel with its six spokes, whose centre is the conjoined Hog, Snake, and Dove (Ignorance, Anger, and Lust), and whose compartments are all the heavens and hell, and all the chances of human life. Men say that the Bodhisat Himself first drew it with grains of rice upon dust, to teach His disciples the cause of things. Many ages have crystalized it into a most wonderful convention crowded with hundreds of little figures whose every line carries a meaning. (p. 219)

The Eight-fold Golden Path of Buddhism is well demonstrated by the lama in *Kim*. The River of the Arrow is only a symbol. It stands for the lama's aspiration to reach the Reality behind the *maya* which means illusion. With this aim the lama comes to India where he is helped by the English curator of the Lahore Museum who gives the lama a map indicative of the wanderings of Buddha. With determination, the lama is going to discover the steps of Buddha in order to attain enlightenment. Ultimately, he gives up his physical search for the River of the Arrow. In doing so, the lama follows the last of the Eight-fold Path i.e. Right Concentration. And now he sees the reality behind the illusion, which leads him to his salvation: "For the merit that I have acquired, the River of the Arrow is here. It breaks forth at our feet, as I have said" (328).

The Buddhist faith is subdivided into two sects, the Hinayana and the Mahayana. The lama, being a Tibetan, belongs to the Mahayana group to whom two ways are open to gain *nirvana* i.e. salvation: one is *Sutra*, the exoteric way, and the other *Tantra*, the esoteric course. The esoteric course is mainly concerned with matters of ritual, mystical and magic ways of acquiring occult powers, the use and meaning of formulas and enchantments, the use of letters of the alphabet, esoteric diagrams and talismans, and the symbolism of gestures. The lama in *Kim*, as K. Bhaskara Rao points out, has followed the esoteric course and his search for the River of the Arrow is a “mystical and magic way of attaining salvation” (146).

M. Hiriyanna in *Outlines of Indian Philosophy* says, “Buddha’s theory strikes a mean between two extreme courses, e.g. believing neither in Being nor in non-Being, but in Becoming; believing neither in chance nor in necessity exclusively, but in conditioned happening...Success lies in a middle course” (Belliappa 107). Kipling found in Buddhism a course of action that is not extreme. The life of pleasure and the life of mortification, neither of them are suggested for the good of the human beings. Buddha himself advised his disciples to follow the middle way which illuminates the mind and guides to enlightenment, knowledge and salvation. The lama is a follower of the Middle Way, living in the quiet atmosphere of his lamasery and wished to see the Four Holy Places before his death.

Kipling’s lack of good opinion about the priests of different religions in India and many shortcomings of Hinduism might have motivated him to select Buddhism in *Kim*. He is critical of the Indian religion and its practitioners in particular for various reasons. Priests are greedy. Their commitment is poor. In the name of religion, they exploit people in several ways. They demand large sums in exchange for ineffective prayers and charms. They are prepared even to go to an extent of robbing other priests. India is not only a country priest-ridden but also seen as unable to do anything about it: “All India is full of holy men stammering gospels in strange tongues; shaken and consumed in the fire of their own zeal; dreamers, babblers and visionaries: as it has been from the beginning and will continue to the end” (36). A common trait of religion in India is the lack of prudence of its practitioners. Benares is a microcosm of this:

Benares struck him [Kim] as a peculiarly filthy city, though it was pleasant to see how his cloth was respected. At least one-third of the population prays eternally to some group or other of the many million deities, and so reveres every sort of holy man. (p. 212)

Coexistence to this discretion is lack of adherence to one’s own religion. Kipling might disapprove Christianity but the thought of a white man converting himself into a Hindu or Buddhist, particularly

for the sake of money, cannot be assimilated. Quoting a proverb, Kim tells Mahbub Ali: "I will change my faith and my bedding, but *thou* must pay for it" (148).

Most of the Indians have very bad habit of linking every event of their lives with the will of unseen god. In addition, all Indians are seen as awfully superstitious and evermore gullible in matters of religion. The Jat farmer, whose child Kim cures, is a good example. He believes not only that Kim can transform a trader from one part of the country into a religious mendicant from another, but also that if he dares to speak of what he has seen, his house, fields, cattle and crops will all be destroyed. Even Huree Babu who has had good Western-style education cannot help convincing himself vainly of the unreality of what he is witnessing when Huneefa performs the rituals of protection for the British Kim. Babu trembles with fear while watching the ceremony.

Caste system is one aspect in Hinduism which defamed India's reputation as a nation. Though theories propounded in Vedas do not have any base, they should not be questioned as they are treated sacred. The most detrimental thing in Vedas is to divide society into four classes, based on occupation of the people. Irony here is Vedas themselves decided who should do which job. The four classes of people according to this ideal society are- 1. Brahmins 2. Kshatriyas 3. Vaishyas and 4. Shudras. Among all the classes, Brahmins are put at the top and they alone are eligible for all rights and privileges. This division shows graded inequality among people. Vedas do not allow people to transgress this division of the society although they cannot provide any logic why that division should not be violated. Because of this division, there are still many people suffering at the hands of upper caste people and are unable to enjoy any rights and privileges. It is Buddha who vehemently opposed this kind of division and proposed equality in the society. He was very angry at the dominance of Brahmins in the society for no valid reason. With proper education, anybody in the society can become like a Brahmin, but Brahmins did not want this to happen somehow so that they would remain superior forever in the society. Buddha also opposed the view that sacrificing of animals would bring salvation for the soul. During the times of Buddha, the opponents of sacrifices used to ridicule Brahmins by saying: "If one can go to heaven by sacrificing an animal why should not one sacrifice one's own father. That would be a quicker way of going to heaven" (Dr. B.R. 84). The Buddha wholeheartedly agreed with this view. Buddha was also against the view that Agnihotra done by Brahmins and Baptism in Christianity can cleanse a man of his sins. If there is such a provision to get sins washed away in this manner, anybody can commit any number of crimes, taking it for granted.

Most of the religions in India are based on mere speculation or belief i.e. one cannot prove what is told in scriptures. Unlike the theories of other religions, theories of Buddhism are practicable, natural and rational. There is a lot of difference between practices and beliefs of Buddhism and other

religions. While practices and beliefs of Buddhism look rational, the same look very irrational in other religions. This aspect also might have prompted Kipling to opt for Buddhism in *Kim*. Buddha didn't believe in the existence of God, Soul and Rebirth. For Buddha, belief in God was the most dangerous thing. "For belief in God gave rise to belief in the efficacy of worship and prayer and the efficacy of worship and prayer gave rise to the office of the priest and the priest was the evil genius who created all superstition and thereby destroyed the growth of *Samma Ditthi*" (Dr. B.R. 188). Except Buddhism, most other religions in India advocated the existence of Soul. In view of Buddha, it is not the soul that exists but mind. Moreover, the common goal of most of the religions in the world today is to take the soul of a devotee to heaven after death. For Buddha, what we are today is more important than what happens after death. According to Buddha, purpose of a religion should be to reconstruct the world, but not to gain a profit after death. In his opinion, the belief in the existence of a soul is far more dangerous than the belief in God. "For not only does it create a priesthood, not only is it the origin of all superstition but it gives the priesthood complete control over man from birth to death" (Dr. B.R. 191). Besides advocating the concept of soul, certain religions are propagating that there will rebirth or reincarnation. When there is a thing like 'rebirth', who will go to heaven or hell? This is how we cannot see any logic behind most of the doctrines of many religions. Although these doctrines are illogical, one is forced to believe them and obey their scriptures unquestioningly. Buddha did not believe in Past Karma having effect on Future Life. The worth of a man according to Brahmins was based on birth and on nothing else. It was Buddha's doctrine that worth and not birth was the measure of man. What is important is high ideals and not noble birth.

Different religions have different means of attaining salvation. Jesus claimed that he was the son of God and Mohammad, the Prophet of Islam, claimed that he was a Prophet sent by God. Prerequisite for attainment of salvation in Christianity is one should accept Jesus as the son of God and in Islam one should accept Mohammad as a prophet sent by God. Krishna claimed that he was God himself and Gita was his own word. But Buddha did not attribute any kind of divinity either for himself or for his word. He even refused to appoint a successor. Instead, he said, "The Dhamma must be its own successor, principle must live by itself, and not by the authority of man" (Dr. B.R. 163). Buddha's message to the world is based on universal human experience. He said that it was open to anyone to question it, test it and find what truth it contained. No founder has so fully thrown open his religion to such a challenge. Most of the religions in the world are revelations and promised salvation for the soul, but Buddha did not make any such promise because his Dhamma or religion is a discovery. With Buddha, Salvation means Nibbana which denotes control of passions.

Most of the religions in the world failed to bring happiness to the man. Meantime, Buddha came into the world and paved a way for happy life on this earth for man. In other religions, man has

to propitiate external beings to bring happiness into his own life. But in Buddhism, happiness lies within. Man does not have to search for it elsewhere nor does he have to waste his time performing certain rituals to please some god or spirit. Buddha succeeded, through his teachings, in making people realise that one is responsible for one's own destiny. Whatever taught by Buddha is absolutely feasible. This practical approach towards life proposed by Buddha compelled Kipling to promote Buddhism in *Kim*.

Buddha is termed as the dispeller of sorrows of life and bringer of happiness into the world. Buddha's teachings revolve around two problems as he understood the life. The first problem that he recognised was that there is suffering in the world and the second problem was how to remove this suffering and make mankind happy. Buddha emphasised that no external factor can bring happiness to mankind, including rituals performed for pleasing gods. Mr. E.G. Taylor, in his "Buddhism and Modern Thought," says: "Man has been ruled by external authority long enough. If he is to be truly civilised, he must learn to be ruled by his own principles. Buddhism is the earliest ethical system where man is called upon to himself governed by himself" (Dr. B.R. 390). Buddha was actually a humanist and probably the first moral teacher. It was his aim to establish the Kingdom of Righteousness on this earth and he strove for it until he died. We can see in his Dhamma morality occupying the place of God. In Buddha's view, elevation of morality alone can remove suffering and make man happy. To achieve this objective, he proposed noble Eight-Fold Path (of right outlook, right aims, right speech, right action, right means of livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration), Middle Way (which denies two extremes of life of pleasure and life of self-mortification) and Nibbana (enough control over passions such as lust, infatuation, greed, hatred, anger, vexation or repugnance, delusion, dullness and stupidity).

Buddhism is not a religion but it is a way of life. For the most part, Buddha's teaching revolves around the betterment of life of humankind on EARTH. His teaching has nothing to do with past life and life after death. Buddha never taught what cannot be practicable for leading a successful life. He taught non-violence, peace, justice, love, liberty, equality, fraternity. Buddha's Dhamma is rather social. It emphasises right relationships between man and man in all spheres of life. In his view, our actions decide the kind of life we lead, in other words, we reap what we sow. Buddha made mind responsible for every action we do because it is possible to train the mind in whatever direction one chooses. If our thoughts are good, that will result in our actions and thereby life will be good. Good thoughts are important for good life, so one has to keep an eye on workings of the mind. In his view, one has to exhibit true superiority of conduct and the exercise of reason.

Kipling was quite aware of drawbacks of each and every religion in India, particularly of Hinduism. He could see a wide gulf between Buddhism and other religions with respect to many

aspects of our lives. For Kipling, Buddhism seemed to be offering more practical solutions for the problems mankind is facing today. Buddhism can be practised by anybody anywhere in the world. One does not have to believe anything blindly in Buddhism. Buddhism helps us to develop rational and scientific outlook, which is very essential for leading a flourishing life on this earth. The best thing in Buddhism is it is truly connected to real world, real people and real life. Buddhism paves way for individuals to grow morally as much as possible and teaches humanity how to live morally without God. Today's world is in deficiency of peace. Except Buddhism, no other religion can bring peace into the world. With this realisation, most of the intellectuals in the world today started accepting Buddhism. Although he was a Christian by birth, Kipling was very much attracted towards merits of Buddhism and they compelled him to advocate Buddhism in *Kim*, rejecting all other religions in India.

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