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### Life and the World Around: Theme of Subjugation of the Downtrodden and Approaches in Indian culture as Revealed in My India

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#### Abstract

This paper is a descriptive work and is an attempt to study Jim Corbett's approach, as an Indo-Anglian writer, towards the theme of caste related subjugation in the colonial era. Jim Corbett is one of the few Anglo-Indian writers, who through his non-fictional narrative reveals minute observation of the customs, traditions and rituals of Indian culture. Short stories based on real-life characters offer, as one of the major themes, a glimpse of the suffering and subjugation and taboo associated with the life of the untouchables. He understands the role of caste system in India and is aware of its relevance in shaping the destiny of a person. Corbett's concern is not only class and caste conscious, but also socially relevant and the delineation of the anguish of the underprivileged is poignant and significant.

He is sensitive towards their struggle and gives the message of equality and humanity. He is a moralist, who preaches the lesson of humanity.

**Keywords:** Imperialism, Indian culture, Downtrodden, Subjugation

### **Introduction**

An introduction to the literature of British India entails some understanding of the themes of the genre. A number of fictional and non-fictional books are written about India, and a majority presents the social and political Indian themes through the interaction between the British community and the Indians. The British administrative class of highest intellectual order wrote a number of biographies and memoirs. Some of the earliest Indian novels published in England go back as far as the 1780s...and 1888 saw the publication of Rudyard Kipling's *Plain Tales from the Hills*. (Buda) However, the political upheaval and post-colonial outrage at the 'imperialist' writing forced many Anglo-Indian writers in literary obliviousness. The literary virtues of *A Passage to India* are remarkable but, it stands convicted for its imprecise depictions of both communities. Indian identity is defined by the colonials on the parameters of caste, language and culture, hence the colonial literature is also about "assertion of human rights, self-pride, revolt against social injustice, chronicles of personal and collective suffering, and hopes and aspirations for a new society devoid of discrimination." (Oza 2) The present paper aims to study Jim Corbett's approach as an Anglo-Indian writer towards the theme of caste related subjugation in Indian culture during the colonial era as depicted through the various stories in *My India*.

### **Methodology**

This study is based on Primary and Secondary sources. Published research papers in various journals, articles of newspapers, magazines and books are used as secondary sources. A comprehensive analysis of the available literature was undertaken by using both printed and internet sources.

### **Jim Corbett's India: A Colonial Perspective**

Jim Corbett himself is the center of his stories, hence they reveal the person he was, thought process and partly the history of his time. He lived in India, except for the last eight years of his life. An eventful life exposed him to various issues in the contemporary India and Indians: a *jungle* childhood, *shikar* experiences, work-life with the railways, sojourn in armed forces, the man-eater expeditions and the most important his conservationist efforts. However, the issues of contemporary political turmoil and colonial rule hardly appear in his work. A direct commentary on the ongoing freedom struggle is conspicuously evaded. In *My India*, he makes it quite clear that his work does not discuss the current political scene, "If you are looking for a history of India, or for an account of the rise and fall of the British raj, or for the reasons for the cleaving of the subcontinent into two mutually antagonistic parts.... you will not find it in these pages.... (Corbett, Dedication). During colonial era, some domiciled British officers lived in remote villages of India, ruled their respective regions, oblivious about the ongoing political turmoil. Corbett was one of the brood of officers, who

had accepted the land they ruled, as their home. Their loyalties were divided between the native, whom they loved and lived with, and the Union Jack; whom they represented. The conflict of loyalty is apparent, when he sympathises with the poor Indians and also felt honoured to answer the call of the Queen. Corbett admits that an impartial perspective of the political scenario was not possible, as he was a part of events, and intimately associated with the actors. On the contrary, the intimacy and association with the poor hardworking Indians has a sense of pride, who imparted their fullest loyalty to the *white sahibs*. His writing pleads to take a renewed look at India and her people: “In my India, the India I know, there are four hundred million people, ninety percent of whom are simple, honest, brave, loyal, hard-working souls.... among whom I have lived and whom I love, that I shall Endeavour to tell.” (Corbett, Dedication). The success of imperial rule is attributed to the loyal, simple, hardworking poor Indians, “.... the Indians whose loyalty and devotion alone made it possible for a handful of men to administer, for close on two hundred years, a vast subcontinent with its teeming millions” (Corbett 154).

Maddison claims that “As far as the mass of the population was concerned, colonial rule brought few significant changes. The British educational efforts were limited. There were no major changes in village society, in the caste system, the position of untouchables, the joint family system, or in production techniques in agriculture” (2). British impact on mass economy and social development was limited, however a few domiciled British took efforts to study the social structure of Indian society and Jim Corbett is one of the few Anglo-Indian writers, who through his non-fictional narrative reveals minute observation of the customs, traditions and rituals of Indian culture like: the various threads of inner social structure, the caste hierarchy, life of the downtrodden, the status and life of women, the poverty of villagers and accords a cultural and social identity to the natives and strives to work for the betterment of the downtrodden.

### **Theme of Subjugation of the Downtrodden and Approaches**

A Dalit in Indian caste system is an anthropologically nurtured practice “Dalit hood is a kind of life condition that characterise the exploitation, suppression and marginalization of Dalit people by the social, economic, cultural and political domination of the upper castes' Brahmanical ideology.” (Oza 3) Dalit politics of identity is a product of colonial modernity.... The Dalit movement characterises “.... the entire history of the Dalits as a tale of humiliation and violence, both physical and mental” (Satyanarayana, 10). Untouchability is not a singular experience. They have been exposed to exclusion of varying degrees and rejection of identity. (Agrawal 166) Corbett understands the role of caste system in India and is aware of its relevance in shaping the destiny of a person. Caste in India is decided by birth, ancestry and is unalterable. The ruling power automatically passes on to the higher caste people and the lower-class suffer under the burden of poverty. Untouchability was conspicuously more widespread in pre-independent era. The theme of subjugation of the downtrodden in the real-life based stories depict the social evils in the prevalent Indian society as, “The four hundred million people of India are divided horizontally by race, tribe and caste into a far greater diversity than exists in Europe, and they are cleft vertically by

religious differences fully as deep as those which sunder any one nation from another” (Corbett, 5).

*My India*, a collection of short stories based on real-life characters and offer a glimpse of the suffering and subjugation and taboo associated with the life of the untouchables. The narratives “Buddhu”, “Chamari”, “Life at Mokameh Ghat”, and “The Law of the Jungle” deliberates the life status of the marginalised poor Indians and Corbett’s efforts to help them, either by offering a job or financial assistance. He appointed a number of men and women of the suppressed class at his workforce. The characters Buddhu and Chamari are the representatives of the Dalit of Indian society, who had suffered a great deal under the burden of caste system. In the story “Buddhu”, the suffering and hardship of the life of an untouchable are expressed as, “Budhu was a man of the depressed class, and during all the years I knew him I never saw him smile: his life had been too hard and the iron had entered deep into his very soul” (Corbett 155). Buddhu worked in his agony for months together, without a complaint. There were many workers like Buddhu, who worked in tremendous physical hardship and pain to earn their livelihood. Corbett’s concern is not only class and caste conscious, but also socially relevant. Millions of non-existent bonded labours in the prevalent India find a voice and identity through the character of Buddhu. Illiteracy and poverty forced people in the trap of bonded labour. Corbett’s efforts to release Buddhu from the controls of the greedy *bania*, by bearing the expenses to pay off the debt, highlights his sensitivity towards this social evil and empathy for the underprivileged class.

The story “Chamari” preach the canon of equality and humanity. Corbett appointed Chamarias the headman of one of his work gang at Mokameh Ghat, where he worked as a Railway Transship Manager. Corbett recognises the ability of Chamarias he writes, “A humble man, who one short hour earlier had labored under all the disqualifications of his lowly birth walked out of my office with a book tucked under him arm, a pencil behind his ear and, for the first time in his life, his head in the air” (Corbett 169). The caste hierarchy always pushed the downtrodden into the poverty and monetary exploitation which forced them to live a hard life as expressed with the examples of Kunthi and Harkwar in the story; “The Law of The Jungle”:

For her bundle of grass weighing anything up to eighty pounds and which necessitated a walk from ten to fourteen miles up and down steep hills, Kunthi and Harkwar received four *annas*, one *anna* of which was taken by the man who held the government contract for the sale of grass in the bazaar. (Corbett 73). These downtrodden people never grumble about the hardship of their life and accept all difficulties of life with courage and patience. The following lines effectively describe the hardship of a poor man’s life, “A shovel in the hands of a novice, working for his bread and the bread of his children, is a cruel tool.” (Corbett 155-156). The delineation of the anguish of the underprivileged is poignant and sensitively describe their hardship and struggle. Colonial approach distinctly rejects individuality of the native, but Corbett identifies and appreciates the bravery and courage of individuals in the story “The Brothers”. He admires the bravery and courage of Haria and Narwa, the untouchable basket makers. He considers Narwa’s rescue by Haria, as the greatest

act of bravery and wished to honour them, but red-tape proved too much for him. He regrets that this extraordinary act of bravery went unrecognised

The rules and regulations for these underprivileged were decided by the upper cast and were binding on them. They were not allowed to enter a temple and it was considered a crime for a high caste person to touch them. He brings out the misfortunes of the life of an untouchable, “And here at Kaladhungi, every time they passed the temple that their low caste did not permit them to enter, they had never failed to raise their hands clasped in supplication” (Corbett 79). His criticism of the untouchability stands far above the cynical attitude of an imperialist, who considered the natives a little better than savages. Through the story “Chamari” he gives the message of equality. It teaches the principle that spirituality and humanity is not decided by birth or caste, but by work and faith. Caste cannot be a qualification. Chamari belonged to the depressed class of society, but became a heathen according to Christian belief and commanded a great respect from all sections of society for his humanity and helping nature. Having experienced poverty and hunger, Chamari made it mandatory to feed the hungry and help the needy. Corbett describes the humanity of Chamari in his portrayal of the low caste man. At the death of Chamari, a priest from the Vishnu temple of Kashi arrived and paid his obeisance on behalf of the head priest of Kashi. An untouchable, the lowest in the Indian caste hierarchy, he broke all the barriers of caste and creed by serving humanity.

Corbett’s social concern encompasses all marginalised sections of Indian society including the children and women. He criticises the custom of child marriage as described in “The Law of the Jungles”. His exposure to the social fabric of Indian culture shaped his perception and he considers the social rituals as the prime cause of monetary exploitation of the downtrodden. His association with the downtrodden section of Indian society gave an opportunity to observe their life minutely: daily routine, the problems and difficulties of life and poverty. He considers poverty as one of the main reasons for crimes in the society. There are some tribal in India who were classified criminals. Sultana belonged to one such tribe. Corbett commiserates with these tribes because he considers poverty and population as the main reasons for crime. In the story “Sultana: India’s Robin Hood”, he deliberates in detail the background of crime and criminals. He remarks, “In a country as vast as India... with its teeming population chronically on the verge of starvation, it is easy to understand the temptations to embark on a life of crime...” (Corbett 94). The story of sultana revolves around the life of a criminal, who eluded the government agencies for many years. The image of sultana that emerges from the story is not all wicked, but of a man, who was considerate and always helped the poor. Corbett did not favour the government policy of branding a whole tribe as criminals. He laments, “... the wrongs of classing a tribe as ‘criminal’ and confining it within the four walls of the Najibabad Fort...” (Corbett 102) and his sympathies are undoubtedly with Sultana. He expresses a deep faith in the goodness of the common Indians. In *Man Eating Leopard of Rudraprayag*, he places the responsibility of building a great nation on the shoulders of the poor Indians, no matter what their caste or creed. Corbett’s vision was profound and humane in essence. He predicted a promising future for

the newly born country, India. He had foreseen a communal harmony among the various castes and religions and believes in the basic goodness of human nature. The poor common people of India have no enmity against each other:

When I hear of the labour unrest, strikes, and communal disorders that are rife today, I am thankful that my men and I served India at a time when the interest of one was the interest of all, and when Hindu, Mohammedan, Depressed class, and Christian could live, work and play together in perfect harmony. As could be done today if agitators were eliminated, for the poor of India have no enmity against each other. (Corbett 192).

While working at Mokameh Ghat for Indian Railways, Corbett united hundreds of workmen, cutting across the manacles of caste, creed and religion. He carried out his plans, maintaining the sanctity of every section of society. He believed in equal opportunity. All his life, he strived hard for the betterment of the suppressed section of Indian society, but he never denounced the caste hierarchy and shows an equal amount of respect for the high class as well. He never questioned the authority and looked for a middle path, where all sections of society could walk together and progress keeping intact their respective identities. He went out of his way to help the depressed caste men, but at the same time he showed an equal amount of respect for the upper class. Kenneth Anderson, a writer of the jungle adventures, slightly differs from Corbett, when it comes to the Indian caste system. Corbett accepts it as a source of variety and works silently for the betterment of underprivileged, but Anderson looks at it as a curse of Indian society and criticises high caste people for exploiting and torturing the low caste. He appreciated the efforts undertaken by the government of Independent India to eradicate the evil of caste system.

### **Conclusion**

Corbett is profoundly acquainted with the intricacies of castes in India and the issues involved in them. The theme of subjugation of the downtrodden is conspicuously deliberated in real-life character based short stories. The description of the hardship and suppression of the life of the underprivileged is considerate and replicates writer's efforts to help them. The concern for the social equality and betterment of the subjugated is moralist in nature and preach the lessons of humanity. Corbett seems to be influenced by the Christian theology of sharing, helping the needy, love, and kindness for the poor and suffering. However, these representatives of underprivileged caste communities do not voice their identities, rights and expectations.

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