



KIPLING'S THE MIRACLE OF PURUNBHAGATIS A STORY OF REVERENCE TO INDIAN SPIRITUAL ETHOS: A CRITICAL INSIGHT

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Abstract

*Writing on and about India by the western writers has a long tradition. However, writing creative literature on Indian milieu is relatively new and the practice concurs with European presence on the Indian soil. Unfortunately, Rudyard Kipling has very often been labelled as an imperialist author, and his "East is East, and West is West" is often used as a benchmark to evaluate his contribution to literature. But he is probably the only European author of his time who could penetrate into Anglo-Indian life accurately. His stories are rarely found to be affected by racial prejudice and they are always dominant with human point of view. The short story under review, *The Miracle of PurunBhagat*, is about a man's journey from his material success to his spiritual rebirth. Though the story initially hails the benefits of English rule and education in India, it culminates into a reverence for Hinduism and Indian spiritual ethos. The present paper is an attempt to highlight how *The Miracle of PurunBhagat* is Kipling's most explicit attempt to express his homage to Indian Spiritual Tradition.*

Key Words: *East, West, Anglo-Indian, Material Progress, Spiritual Rebirth, Indian Spiritual Tradition, Sanyasi, Bhagat*

Writing on and about India by the western writers has a long tradition. However, writing creative literature on Indian milieu is relatively new and the practice concurs with European presence on the Indian soil. Greenberger observes: "Although there were earlier works of fiction which dealt with India, it was only after the great success of Kipling that novels and stories set in the sub-continent were published in larger number. Hailing right

from the time of Kipling's to the present, the British public has been deluged by a vast amount of writing on the subject of India." Unfortunately, Rudyard Kipling has very often been labelled as an imperialist author, and his "East is East, and West is West" is often used as a benchmark to evaluate his contribution to literature. But he is probably the only European author of his time who could penetrate into Anglo-Indian life accurately. His stories are rarely found to be affected by racial prejudice and they are always dominant with human point of view. The short story under review, *The Miracle of PurunBhagat*, is about a man's journey from his material success to his spiritual rebirth. Though the story initially hails the benefits of English rule and education in India, it culminates into a reverence for Hinduism and Indian culture. The present paper is an attempt to highlight how this story is Kipling's most explicit attempt to emphasize the possibility of co-existence of the East and the West without racial conflicts.

Rudyard Kipling (30th December, 1865 -) wrote *The Miracle of PurunBhagat* in May 1894 while he was on holiday from Vermont, living near his parents at Tisbury, Wiltshire. It was first published in the Pall Mall Gazette and the Pall Mall Budget on 18th October 1894 and in the New York World on 14th October, 1894 with the title *A Miracle of the Present Day*. It was collected in *The Second Jungle Book* in 1895. In writing this story, Kipling was to a degree influenced by his experience of America. Andrew Lycett observes:

Rudyard writes approvingly of the enlightened Sir PurunDass's priorities: he has worked and tried to improve the world, before seeing to his religious duties. Rudyard's observation of American society helped bring about this change of perspective: his revulsion against the excesses of raw capitalism encouraged a new-found respect for India's ways - but only if mitigated with a British sense of values (259).

The story is a tribute to the gentle stoic, generous, self-effacing, spiritual and hard-working Indian. It is a tribute to India, Indians, and the Hindu religion, so it should not be read as an anti-Indian manifesto. Kipling often quoted rather misquoted line 'East is East and West is West' is erroneously used to brand him as the representative of the West with imperialist attitude who looked at India with superiority of the west. The line quoted above is part of the refrain of his poem *The Ballad of the East and West*. The line is often quoted out of the context and those who quote him often overlook the third and the fourth line in the

refrain which contains the line in contention. To get to the intended meaning, it is essential to quote the whole refrain which opens and closes the poem.

Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment Seat;
But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face, though they come
from the ends of the earth! (Kipling in Stedman, Lines 1-4, 93-96).

If we read the above stanza as a whole, the implication of the 'never the twain shall meet' is that east and west being two different geographic points on the compass, they shall never meet in this life. To get to the intended meaning one must read the last line of the stanza, 'when two strong men stand face to face'. This line clarifies Kipling's position on the East and West and implies that the East and the West are on equal footing although they are located on opposing geographical poles. In other words Kipling is implying that both the Asians and the Europeans are equals and they shall never meet because they stand on two different geographical extremes. Hence, one needs to read entire stanza of the poem to get to the intended meaning. Considering this the paper brings out Kipling's understanding of India in general and his reverence toward the Indian spiritual tradition through *The Miracle of PurunBhagat*.

Kipling's *The Miracle of PurunBhagat*, is the story of a man named PurunDass (later PurunBhagat). Purun reaches at the peak of material success by acquiring wealth and power and fame. He at once renounces all his material possession for his spiritual quest. The story is set in northern India. Kipling voices his reverence for Indian spiritual heritage through the character of Purun who renounces the marital world and is spiritually reborn as a holy man who eventually dies for a noble cause, saving the whole village from impending disaster. *The Miracle of PurunBhagat*, *The Bridge-Builders*, and much of *Kim* show Hinduism with sympathy and understanding..'(Mason, 49)

In the beginning of the story, we are introduced to Purun basking in the glory of his social success, making 'millions of money'. He is very famous and is bagging honorary degree as a mark of respect to his social position. He has been portrayed as finely Englished Gentleman. Kipling uses the knowledge of both East and West in portraying Purun who

symbolizes the aspirations of an average Indian in the pre-independent India. With all his riches around him, Purun is not happy. There is constant aching pain of dissatisfaction. Breaking free from the shackles of material life, he sets forth on a personal pilgrimage, a journey of self-discovery where no paved roads follow, where "position, palace, and power" amounts to nothing. He renounces all that he had and chooses a *Sanyasi's* life. He happily breaks his ties from 'the affairs of the world'. An average Indian reader would be immediately reminded of *Budhha's* renunciation. The flickering reflections of *Budhha* cannot be ignored because just like *Budhha*, Purun renounces from abundance of wealth and power. According to Indian spiritual ethos renunciation presupposes the possession, material wealth and power. Strictly limiting to the definition, if a person renounces wealth and power, he will be considered a *Sanyasi*. On the contrary, if a bagger chooses to renounce, he will be considered a coward because the renunciation is not a choice but more of a compulsion. Moreover, he will be considered a coward because he has chosen to remain dormant to struggle; he has refused to fight against the circumstances.

Kipling acquainting the readers with his comprehensive knowledge about inner working of socio-cultural dynamics of India society refers to deep rooted caste system in the story which as old as Vedic Period. This is something a non-Indian will not easily get an access to. Interestingly, unlike many other western writers, he is not critical of caste system. He refers to it to prove as a high caste Purun renounces. Kipling notes that PurunBhagat was of "So high caste that caste ceased to have any particular meaning for him (Kipling, 191)".

Kipling seems to be in the full knowledge of the Indian spiritual tradition in the depiction of the renunciation of Purun. More important it is to note that he reverses the renunciation of Purun. Considering Kipling's reverence to *Sanyasis*, Mark Paffard states, "...The knighted Indian Prime Minister who takes up a begging bowl and becomes a pilgrim - a 'sannyasi' as laid down by Hindu custom, is an idealised subject...(112). It is very fascinating to read the depiction of Purun who trades his finest clothing for the 'ochre-coloured dress of a Sannyasi' selflessly wandering about in the Himalayan Mountains barefoot, poor in material terms but rich in spirituality. He survives on the generosity of kind-hearted villagers and other *Sanyasies* willing to share their sustenance. He sleeps on an antelope skin. In this way he humbly becomes PurunBhagat from Purun; from a rich, powerful, successful man to a *Sanyasia* houseless, wandering mendicant. An average western reader will be bewildered as to

how would he survive? Kipling is quick to explain his western readers that such mendicants could depend on the people in vicinity for their daily bread. He explains "And so long as there is a morsel to divide in India, neither priest nor a beggar starves"(Kipling, 193). Undoubtedly the picture perfect portrayal of *Sanyasileaves* the Indian readers at a sense of bemusement regarding Kipling's precise knowledge of India Spirituality.

But the relationship is not one-sided. Even when people expect nothing in return to their generosity, PurunDass recognizes their debt. His gratefulness is obvious when he saves them from a landslide. He does it because, "They have given good food daily since – since I came – and if I am not swift, tomorrow there will not be one mouth in the valley" (Jungle Books204) So, the act can be seen as a moral obligation. Again, Kipling refers to the typical Indian ideology which is protecting the life and interests of the persons who feed them. It is a wonderful example of mutual understanding where no one demands anything. It's just a matter of 'give and take' in India. And that is what makes Indian culture so rich.

Purunseems to have lived his enviable life of financial and social successes and power. But Purunhas voluntarily decided to renounce his throne. And as Kipling puts it he "let those things go, as a man drops the cloak he no longer needs (190)." The metaphor of cloak is very popularly used in the Indian spiritual discourse. It is often associated with physical body in the Indian context. Kipling here employs it for material wealth and riches and its removal implies the dismissal of riches to the perfunctory removal of a cloak or sweater in excess heat. Purun is not comfortable with the cloak and 'drops the cloak' all together.

As the story progresses, Purun stays as a hermit in hermitage in the abode of the nature on the side of a mountain that overlooks a small village. Kipling places everything in story to perfectly fit the Indian spiritual tradition. In the spiritual history of Hinduism, every divine soul who has renounced has invariably taken shelter in the Himalayas to be one Supreme Being. There are endless examples including Lord Rama and the great Pandavas who set out for Himalayas after performing their divine duties to embrace salvation. According to Hindu tradition Himalayas have been considered the abode of *Sanyasies* from the time immemorial because the greatest of *Sanyasies*, the God of Gods, Lord Shiva is seen on the great Kailash. Himalayas is considered as the end of one's spiritual quest for achieving the Salvation. Kipling is in full knowledge of entire spiritual tradition while writing this story. In

the story he not only flawlessly depicts the Indian spiritual tradition but in one way pays a homage even after being a representative of Ruling West.

‘The Miracle of the PurunBhagat has been hailed as Kipling's tribute both to educated India and to the Hindu way of life (123).’ Kipling further surprises the reader when he gives an account of the Ashrama System in the Hindu Spiritual Tradition. According to Vedic Philosophy like all things terrestrial, man's life thus divides into four periods - the four stages of life. One goes through different seasons like springtime, summer, autumn, and winter, just as experiencing morning, noon, evening, and night. These four periods of life are put as "the four stages of action": the four ashramas namely :1. The First Stage of Life: The quest for knowledge (Brahmacharya) - the student, 2. The Second Stage of Life: Family Life (Grihastha) - dedicated to domestic affairs. 3. The Third Stage of Life: Retreat into the Forest - (Vana-Prastha) - devote to study and reflection. 4. The Fourth Stage of Life: Renunciation (Sanyasa) - Renunciation from all attachments, the spiritual and physical preparation for death. (Sorman, 122).

In the *The Miracle of PurunBhagat*, Kipling very methodically describes all of these four stages of life that a man has to undergo during his journey of life. After enjoying family life and material wealth at a mature stage a man has to abandon the material life and become a *Sanyasi* - a holy man. The same thing happens to Rudyard Kipling's PurunBhagat. PurunBhagat gives up the life of riches and power because. "He had been, as old law recommends, twenty years a youth, twenty years a fighter and twenty years head of a household" (Jungle Books 193).

Again the image of Purun happily living with 'wild things' (animals) that come to visit Purun and his ability to communicate with them via a "love that knows but cannot understand" is very commonly associated with Sanyasies in India from *Vedic* times onwards. His amiable coexistence with wild animals is directly in sync with Hindu philosophy of Ahimsa, positive cosmic force of interconnection. It is his nobility of his soul which harmoniously binds Purun and the forest's animals. It is appealing for an Indian reader to witness PurunBhagat being friends with monkeys, deers, and even bears. He shares everything from food, fire, to bed with them. The animals are more his companions than the villagers who silently bring up food in turns. The story is part of *Jungle book II* which is meant for kids.

The miracle of PurunBhatat stands out from the rest because it sounds more like a story for adult readershipialing Indian spiritual ethos.

“Apart from its excellence as a story, the most curious feature of "The Miracle of PurunBhagat", to me, is how Kipling's verbal picture of the Hindu holy man talking with the beasts in his cell,It is perhaps just a little too delicately beautiful to stand beside Kipling's other tributes to the Indian natural scene where the fierce roughness of life always shows through. Is this perhaps why he incorporated a story of such adult concern in a book on the surface intended for "juveniles"(Wilson, 123).

Towards the end of the story, the readers come across white-haired PurunBhagat fitting perfectly in the image of a typical Indian *Rishi* who with his divine intuition and superhuman ability to communicate and understand animals, saves the whole village from an impending disaster in the form of mud-slide which only the animals' "instincts" can detect. Indians have been worshipping these super human abilities of *Sanyasies* from ancient times. There are innumerable mythical stories of holy men with super human qualities that have altered disasters from happening or have saved people from the impending disasters.

The readers look at PurunBhagat with reverence for his noble act of saving the villagers without thinking about his own life. He elevates himself to a *Sanyasi* by putting improbable physical effort, to very quickly warn the villagers and help them escape to a safer place on the other side of the mountain. He does this noble act risking his life to save the villagers who have compassionately taken care of him. He did not hesitate risking his life to save theirs. The physical effort that went into notifying villagers in time was too much to endure. Once the villagers move to safety, Purunleaves his body in the company of ‘four-legged animal’ the ones ‘held in tender esteem’ and becomes the part of supreme soul in the fulfilment of his spiritual quest. The posture in which he dies is again very symbolic. In Indian spiritual tradition it is known as Samadhi. Kipling writes, “Sitting cross-legged, his back against a tree, his crutch under his armpit, and his face turned to the north-east” (195) Purun's physical death could no more kill PurunBhagat, in fact he is immortalized by his connection to animals and man. The harmony he obtained, simply too beautiful to merely end in death, affected too many villagers, through multiple generations, to ever be forgotten.

After Purun's death the villagers build a shrine in his memory and worship him. Kipling once again doesn't miss an opportunity to prove that he has very intimately studied the Hindu way of life. He is aware of the fact that India is a country of demigods and goddesses. That is why he ends the story with the construction of the temple of Purun after his death. Such instances of constructing shrines and temples of demigods are very common in India. Every village and town has more than one demigod whom they very devotionally worship. This is perhaps why we in India have examples of temples of living demigod like a superstar of a south Indian movies, Rajanikant and greatest of playback singer, Lata Mangeshkar. We would find plenty of such stories of shrines and temples of living demigods in India. Most of these shrines are in south India especially as intense expression of Dravidian tendency to hero-worship. Kipling as if trying to bring all aspect of Indian spiritual philosophy in the story don't miss the chance to refer to reincarnation when he says towards the end that nobody knew that he was Sir PurunDass in the previous life.

Considering the above it clearly emerges that the story *The Miracles of PurunBhagat* almost appears like an encyclopaedia of India Hindu spiritual tradition. Kipling has very dextrously interwoven the events of Purun's life with different aspects of spiritual traditions which are devotionally hailed in India. His depiction of the spiritual traditions is so complete that it goes on to prove that he has studied these traditions with researches, diligence and depth. If one reads the story without author's name, he will easily be persuaded to believe that the story is written by an Indian who is not only devoted to spirituality but also reveres at it. He very skilfully elevates the character of Purun a height that his renunciation is very much in line with the Indian spiritual ethos. Moreover, he also talks about four stage of life according to Hindu philosophy and Purun renounces at proper time and from proper social position according to Hindu Philosophy. To add to this, Purun's choice of Himalayas as hermitage, his interconnection with nature and wild life, his survival on the food given by the villagers, his super human ability to communicate with animals, his supernatural physical ability to quickly reach the villagers, his risking of his life to save others, his Samadhi posture while dying, his shrine and his being a reincarnation, all this put together proves that Kipling was not only in the complete knowledge of Hindu Indian spiritual ethos but he look at it with **sense reverence**.

GLOSSARY:

Sanyasi: One who renounces from the material life and set out on spiritual quest. He lives without any possession and survives on the food given by people.

Bhagat: The word is generally used to refer to a devotee. The word is also used for Sanyasi and a demigod.

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