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Enlightenment Confined or Dissipating through the Audience: A Critique of Kipling's "The Enlightenments of Pagett, M. P."

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Abstract:

Unlike the Liberal politicians at Home, the British administrators were lukewarm in acknowledging the impact Congress was slowly creating among the masses. Pagett, a newly arrived M. P. from Britain, came to learn the diversity of race, class and creed in India with the realization that political right or freedom was still a distant dream.

Keywords: Kipling, colonial India, enlightenment, race, class.

Widely regarded as the mouthpiece of the Empire Joseph Rudyard Kipling also earned a bad name for his apparently negative attitude towards the spread of western education in India. In stories like "The Head of the District" (1890), poems like "What Happened" (1888) and in the novel *Kim* (1901) Kipling good-humouredly criticized the westernized Indians who are found either wanting in executing their duties entrusted to them or simply failed. As the ruler the British thought it appropriate to implement western education in India which in due time would usher western industrial civilization and democratic values. But all these desired outcomes require reasonable time and certainly can not be expected within a few decades. Given the essentially heterogeneous racial, political and social fabric of India the British could only wait and help the slow initiation of modern age in India. Any over-enthusiasm to propagate the values of modern civilization on the part of either the ruler or the ruled is bound to face with bitter reality. Only a more tolerant and balanced approach by both parties can yield satisfactory result in the end. The modest object of the present article is to examine this hypothesis with respect to Kipling's narrative "The Enlightenments of Pagett, M. P." (1890)[1].

As this is not a too frequently read and discussed story by Kipling it would not be improper to sketch a brief outline of the narrative. Pagett, a member of the British Parliament and of liberal temperament, comes to visit India at the invitation of Orde, a civil servant and the former's pal. After breakfast they take to the verandah and continue their discussion regarding the activities of the Indian National Congress. But he finds that his host Orde had no encouraging words for the country's first indigenous political wing and the commotion it was creating among the masses. During their conversation Pagett is introduced to several Indian, British and American visitors from various walks of life. But apart from Dina Nath, a young college student groomed in English education, no one seems to be bothered a bit about the activities of Congress. At the end of all their conversations Pagett comes to realize that these people are merely reflecting their own self and class interests. The influence of Congress, it can best be described as limited to the university educated upper and upper middle class youths. This section has almost no or very little sway over the masses, for whom terms like 'political awareness' or 'right' are still a far cry. A reader familiar with Kipling's works and his far right political leanings can not miss the irony implied in the title of this story: true enlightenment can not be found in the academic curriculum and ideologies taught at Home but can be effectively achieved by one's own experience in a foreign land.

Given the fact that the story was published in 1890, only five years after the establishment of the Indian National Congress, it was perhaps too early for the author to pass judgment on the limitations of Congress. But at the same time this can not be overlooked that this attack is not so much on the Congress as on their British patrons and sympathizers ─ people like Allan Octavian Hume, Eardley John Norton, William Digby and of course the fictional M. P. Pagett[2], freshly arrived from England. For this inexperienced and perhaps too curious Liberal politician Orde/Kipling takes the responsibility to disillusion him about the radical change in India's socio-cultural and political sphere. It appears that at this stage Indians need not be politically conscious or aware but they should at least, identify and try to overcome the various racial and social strifes prevalent in the country. In fact this racial hatred may and eventually become the greatest obstacle in forming a national identity for all Indians, irrespective of race, class and creed. Orde's and hence Kipling's words sound prophetic when he utters this possibility:

> Pride of race, which also means race-hatred, is the plague and curse of India and it spreads far,…the Afghan,…as a highlander…he despises all the dwellers in

> Hindoostan ─ with the exception of the Sikh, whom he hates as cordially as the Sikh hates him. The Hindu loathes Sikh and Afghan, and the Rajput…has a strong objection, to put it mildly, to the Maratha who, by the way, poisonously hates the Afghan…The Sindhi hates everybody…The cultivator of Northern India domineers over the man in the next province, and the Behari of the Northwest ridicules the Bengali. They are all at one on that point (*UD* 198-199).

These words are in unison with Kipling's letter to Margaret Burne-Jones on 28 November, 1885:

> There is no such thing as the natives of India, any more than there is the "People of India"…if we didn't hold the land in six months it would be one big cock pit of conflicting princelets…the English as a rule feel the welfare of the natives much at heart…For what else do the best men of the Commission die from overwork, and disease, if not to keep the people alive in the first place and healthy in the second. We spend our best men on the country like water and if ever a foreign country was made better through "the blood of the martyrs" India is that country (Pinney 98).

Viewed from this perspective the role of the English, as it appears, is that of enlightened autocrats. This autocrat must stay away from the commoners and while executing imperial responsibilities must maintain a revered distance from them. Before probing into the drawbacks of this notion and the never-ending Indian problem of Britain, I will try to illustrate further Kipling's views of the caste system and how it adds to the already soaring administrative troubles of the British.

It will perhaps be unfair to expect from Kipling a detailed sketch of the plight and pathos tolerated by lower caste people. Irrespective of castes nearly all his Indian acquaintances, somehow or other, were related to imperial services. Quite naturally Kipling's experience of the Indian caste system was gathered, to a large extent, from the natives who have to interact with civil/military administration. In the present story one such native is Bishen Sing who requests Orde to intervene and appoint an English judge to settle dispute between himself and his brother instead of a native judge. Having no prejudice against the neutrality of a native judge Orde has only scorn for him and reflects after the plaintiff's departure thus:

> …he wants his case to be tried by an English judge ─ they all do that ─ but when he began to hint that the other side were in improper relations with the native judge I had to shut him up. Gunga Ram, the man he wanted to make insinuations about, may not be very bright; but he's as honest as daylight on the bench. But that's just what one can't get a native to believe (*UD* 200-201).

On the whole such incidents cast a very bad impression about the general temperament of the natives upon European mind. To put it short, this mentality to demean one's own race only heightens the European conviction in the 'White Man's Burden'. Thus, people like Bishen Sing, Jelbo and Rasul Ali Khan, who pay visit to Orde, were not inexperienced and dilettanti in their personal and professional lives, but they are not simply prepared to accept the superiority of any person belonging to their race. This would lead them, almost with no exception, to seek an intervention from the colonial authority to bury the hatchet with their own relatives. Kipling's dexterity lies in the fact that he chose people from different social status ─ Bishen Sing a woodcarver, Jelbo a farmer and Rasul Ali Khan a landowner ─ to trace their essentially parochial and ingratiating frame of mind. No wonder the British, as a ruling race, will take the role of natural hegemon and will ward off any possibility to make any White man appear as a convict before any native judge. James Silk Buckingham recalls an incident where a certain Mr. Arnot was sent back England from India for trial and punishment presumably in the regime of the East India Company (II 444). Although the sympathy of the author lies with the convict it is clear that the news of hearing and retribution of an Englishman in India will create sensation and seriously impair the image of the ruling race.

It is but natural that the Indian National Congress, although led by the moderates at this early stage, will slowly but surely take the government to task for any racial discrimination and injustice in India. However prejudiced Kipling may be against the educated Indians, he can not but acknowledge the positive aspect of the Congress movement along with its deficiencies:

> The native side of the movement is the work of a limited class, a microscopic minority…when compared with the people proper, but still a very interesting class, seeing that it is of our own creation. It is composed almost entirely of those of the literary or clerkly castes who have received an English education…at all events,

> *this literary class represents the natural aspirations and wishes of the people at large, though it may not exactly lead them,*…(*UD* 191-192, italics mine).

The problem with the Congress leadership, thus, is obvious: its words/aspirations do not match its ability. Mere command over language may help preaching things from pulpit but can not ensure the sermon be heeded by masses. Put it in other words the first audience of the oration of these leaders will be the government itself. If it condescends to address and alleviate some of the grievances voiced by them only then the leaders may expect some foothold among the masses. All these criteria make Kipling quite categorical about the deficiencies of this emergent political establishment but with an acknowledgement that the credibility of these leaders in administrative sphere remained untested:

> …they have no social weight in this topsy-turvy land, and though they have been employed in clerical work for generations they have no practical knowledge of affairs. A ship's clerk is a useful person, but he is scarcely the captain; and an orderly-room writer, however smart he may be, is not the colonel…*the writer class in India has never till now aspired to anything like command. It wasn't allowed to* (191-192, italics mine).

One may read in the last section of the above excerpt a somewhat hidden acknowledgement of the wrongdoing of the ruling race, a possibility of overcoming the present shortcomings by the native leaders in due time. This act of 'rising above' the position of the insecure and playing a second fiddle to the British and reaching a position of command will be in accordance with India's glorious past when the country used to beacon light to the world. The author is quite frank to concede to this historical phenomenon:

> When Europe was a jungle half Asia flocked to the canonical conferences of Buddhism; and for centuries the people have gathered at Puri, Hurdwar, Trimbak, and Benares in immense numbers. A great meeting, what you call a mass meeting, is really one of the oldest and most popular of Indian institutions. In the case of the Congress meetings, the only notable fact is that the priests of the altar are British, not Buddhist, Jain or Brahmanical, and that the whole thing is a British contrivance kept alive by the efforts of Messrs. Hume, Eardley, Norton, and Digby (190).

Thus, although apparently dismissive of the Indian National Congress and its ways, Kipling appreciates almost in spite of himself, how the political institution is slowly working to set India back on the path of enlightenment.

A very important aspect of the enlightenment of the nineteenth century Bengal and India at large is social reformation for the betterment of women. It is true that abolition of 'Sati' custom (1829), legalization of Hindu widows' remarriage (1856) and abolition of child marriage (1891) reformed the condition of Indian women to a great extent. But still many women were suffering from these ill practices with various other patriarchal abuses. Through the mouth of Dr. Eva Lathrop, chief of the Women's Hospital, Kipling chooses to enlighten Pagett in this regard:

> The average [marriage] age is seven, but thousands [of girls] are married still earlier. One result is that girls of twelve and thirteen have to bear the burden of wifehood and motherhood, and, as might be expected, the rate of mortality both for mothers and children is terrible. Pauperism, domestic unhappiness, and a low state of health are only a few of the consequences of this…the boy-husband dies prematurely, his widow is condemned to worse than death. She may not re-marry, must live a secluded and despised life, a life so unnatural, that she sometimes prefers suicide…words as 'infant-marriage, baby-wife, girl-mother, and virgin-widow' mean…unspeakable horrors here (228).

Quite justifiably, she identifies the problems of India are not "the least political" and without having remedies for these social maladies "the country can't advance a step" (227-228). This particular aspect till date is seriously impeding the progress of the country and therefore is equally relevant after the lapse of one hundred and thirty years since the first appearance of this story.

Another serious concern which will affect the country's progress for long, notes Kipling, is the visible reluctance shown by educated middle class towards technical education and trade. People belonging to this class, but for a handful of exceptions, prepare themselves for a job at the end of their education in public or private enterprises. Back in the 1890s both sectors were few in India and many were yet to be born. So for the middle class the obvious outcome will be unemployment and frustration. But still many of them can not imagine to engage in trade or take

industrial initiative as these are held in contempt. After the departure of young Dina Nath, whom I have mentioned in the initial section of this paper, Kipling vents his loathing against the literary class thus:

> [Dina Nath] wants to begin at the top, for manual labor is held to be discreditable, and he would never defile his hands by the apprenticeship which the architects, engineers, and manufacturers of England cheerfully undergo; and he would be aghast to learn that the leading names of industrial enterprise in England belonged…to men who wrought with their own hands. And, *though he talks glibly of manufacturers, he refuses to see that the Indian manufacturer of the future will be the despised workman of the present* (218, italics mine).

The last sentence bears evidence to Kipling's nearly prophetic gift who can clearly visualize that bereft of these stated qualities the educated and literary class would not be able to steer the country in the long run. After the lapse of a few decades when the Congress finally starts freedom movement against the British the corporate and entrepreneurs of the then India aligned themselves with the non-violent section of the party instead of supporting the university educated radical youths bubbling with enthusiasm and ideas. Thus, the capitalist section of India rightfully identifies in which section of the Congress their interest would be best served and throws their weight carefully behind it. The best manifestation of this assertion can be seen in the resignation of Subhas Chandra Bose from the presidentship of Congress in 1939 even after winning election against a relatively minor Pattabhi Sitaramayya who was able to garner Gandhi's and therefore the support from the non-violent segment of party. This resignation not only ensured the extinction of all Leftist and radical elements from the top echelon of the party but paved the way for the eventual transfer of power in 1947 to the section having the blessing from Mahatma.

Last but not least important concern is Kipling's apprehension about the reaction of the minorities, Muslims, towards the political demands of Congress. Although the nature of the party was secular its members were almost overwhelmingly Hindu. Especially at its early years it made little appeal to the Muslim community from which only a few members were enlisted. Despite the efforts especially made by the Muslim leaders like Badruddin Tyyabji (first Muslim president of the party in 1887) and Rahimtulla Mahomed Sayani (presided in 1896) the party could not make much headway among the common Muslims who remained sceptical about the intention of

Congress. The initial demands of Congress which included more appointment of Indians in administrative services and inclusion of elected Indian members to the legislative council raised eyebrows among the educated Muslims. They knew that very few Muslims would be able to perform those roles owing to lack of western education among commoners of this community. Put it in other words Muslims will have only a few or almost no representation in law making bodies or administration. Orde voices this concern in the following words:

> When you are sure of a majority, election is a fine system; but you can scarcely expect the Mohammedans, the most masterful and powerful minority in the country, to contemplate their own extinction with joy. The worst of it is that he and his co-religionists, who are many, and the landed proprietors…are frightened and put out by this election business and by the importance we have bestowed on lawyers, pleaders, writers, and the like….They say little, but after all they are the most important fagots in the great bundle of communities, and all the glib bunkum in the world would not pay for their estrangement. They have controlled the land (202-203).

Only a decade and a half after the publication of this story the birth of All India Muslim League in 1906 testifies to Kipling's apprehension regarding the tense and communal politics which was to emerge later. It was also this desire to control the land/administration which sowed the seed of partition.

In fine it may be said that the process of enlightening the newcomer M. P. Pagett is slow but assumes the shape of a revelation to readers who are biased in one way or the other. Traditional British and Anglo-Indian readers of Kipling will find little delight in the passages where Kipling acknowledged the merit of the ancient Indian civilization in comparison to the barbarity in contemporary Europe and also in the honesty of Indians employed in as important a post as a judge. Likewise readers across the globe who are prone to find fault with Kipling may reshape their opinion if they take into account Kipling's knowledge about the complex racial, social and political situation of contemporary India.

Notes:

1. The story was first published in *The Pioneer* on 11 and 12 September (1890) and was subsequently anthologized in the post 1888 edition of *Under the Deodars*, mentioned as *UD* in this article.
2. The character of M. P. Pagett was modelled after, notes Roger Ayers, the real-life William Sproston Caine (1842-1903), a friend of A. O. Hume and Digby. He visited India twice before the composition of the story and was acquainted with Lockwood Kipling (27-28).

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