

# *British and Indian Images of India*

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MR GREENBERGER'S book<sup>1</sup> is on the image of India as it would be if it were exclusively derived from English novels about India. As such, it is a pretty depressing cavalcade. Mr Greenberger has divided the period into three sections, the Era of Confidence from 1880-1910, the Era of Doubt from 1910 to 1935, and the nostalgic aftermath, the Era of Melancholy from 1935-60. As he very rightly points out, these divisions are not arbitrary and a book like *The Old Missionary* by Sir William Hunter which was published in 1889 expresses a disillusion which would perhaps have been more appropriate if it had been published after 1910. Nevertheless, it had a very large circulation and does express the underlying uneasiness one senses in all the novels about India. I suspect that Mr Greenberger has taken his cue from the popularity of Kipling in the first period, and the acceptance of E. M. Forster's *Passage to India* in the second, the latter epitomizing the doubts, frustrations, ignorance and club-centred self-sufficiency of a number of English officials and their wives in a remote Indian town. But it is doubtful whether it is possible or advisable to categorize so neatly life in India as reflected in the novelists. More than half of the novelists quoted in this book were civil servants, army officers or their wives. As such their view of India was limited by the professional creed of British officials and this was based on an inculcated aloofness from the civilization they administered. If one reads between the lines in Kipling one finds, despite his proclamation of the superiority of the British to the Indians, a nagging consciousness of the gulf between the British and the Indians which

<sup>1</sup> Allen J. Greenberger, *The British Image of India*, Oxford University Press, 1969. 45s. Also reviewed in this article is Mulk Raj Anand, *Private Life of an Indian Prince* Introduction by Saros Cowasjee. Bodley Head, 1970. 30s.

he seems to have tried to bridge by the very crude political philosophy in his novel, *Kim*.

Another of the disadvantages in a book like this is that all novelists are lumped together as equally valid paints for the Anglo-Indian palette. E. M. Dell's *The Way of an Eagle*, B. M. Croker's novels, Maud Diver's *Captain Desmond V.C.*, and Flora Annie Steel are spread out here on the same level and given the same consideration as Forster or Kipling. From them one can take any number of references which will reinforce the author's thesis. This begins with the description of the British idea of the superiority of the British race, its contempt for inter-marriage as well as its products, its maintenance in India of the British way of life, its contempt for all Indians except those in the northwest like the Pathans, the Sikhs, the Gurkhas, and some of the Rajputs, who had distinguished themselves in battle against the British, and the sense that the British were in India to administer without fear or favour a vast sub-continent most of whose inhabitants were afflicted with the traditional Eastern vices of tergiversation, trickery, dishonesty, lechery, fecklessness and inefficiency. None of the novelists mentioned by Mr Greenberger ever seems to have met an Indian scholar. Yet there were plenty of them — Radhakrishnan the late President was one, for instance — yet none seems to have suspected that there were scores of Indians who were their intellectual superiors, or if they did so, they avoided them. Instead we have the figure of Babboo Jabberjee, B.A. by F. M. Anstey who, incidentally, had never been in India, or Hurree Chunder Mookerjee, whom Kipling treats with the affection of a Cedric in *Ivanhoe* for his pet fool Wamba.

Even E. M. Forster makes Dr Godbole out to be a laughable eccentric, and, in general, one could conclude that Hindus unless they are amiable mystics are not to be trusted, whereas the Moslem peoples of the north are reliable, loyal and to be respected for their integrity.

It is clear, however, from Mr Greenberger's analysis that after 1910 the English novelists seem to have recognized the fact that there was a very large part of India of which they knew nothing, and there were tentative approaches to the south and attempts to

understand the nationalist movement, though without approving it. As Mr Greenberger very rightly says, novelists like E. M. Thompson saw both sides, but found both sides wanting.

While it is impossible not to regret the inability to understand India, it might be argued that, for most of the writers quoted here, their position as part of the administrative structure made such an understanding except on a purely official level difficult if not impossible, and this was aggravated especially before the first world war by the sense of isolation, and the constant irritation of decisions taken at the top without much consultation of the officials who had to carry them out. There are frequent references to this, from Kipling's *Tod's Amendment* to the bitterly satirical dedication in Flora Annie Steel's *Harvest*, which reveal how the introduction of the right of alienation to hereditary landholdings played into the hands of the moneylenders and injured the very people it was designed to benefit. In short, the land policy of the Raj in India was one of its weakest points.

But though a number of these novelists criticize the administration there runs through all of them the conviction that you cannot understand these people. It would almost seem as though British rule in India was bedevilled from the beginning by a jaunty self-confidence fading off into the realization that with the growing nationalist movement their days were numbered; and even the most sympathetic of these novelists like Edward Thompson, who approves of nationalism in the abstract, finds it difficult, if not impossible, to come to terms with it when he sees it in action. In all this there is a curious analogy with the English administration of Ireland, the same Viceregal pomp, the same landowning aristocracy who supported the Raj in India, the same District Magistrates, the same rebellious intelligentsia and the same mass of peasant farmers. The British Image of Ireland has very close affinities with the British Image of India. The difference is that despite everything the Indian Image of the British is a good deal more favourable than the Irish one, because (as I once heard an Indian say in an impassioned disagreement with an American lecturer who said that he couldn't understand why the Indians were still so sympathetic to England which he said was 'finished, played out, done'), the British, by setting up a

Civil Service, by imposing certain standards of administrative efficiency, by creating a national network of railways, had supplied independent India with a sense of unity, which had successfully weathered the strain of the separation of Pakistan.

It is a pity that Mr Greenberger did not write an introduction to his book dealing with the Anglo-Indian novel before 1880. Apart from the gloomy pessimism of W. D. Arnold's book, *Oakfield*, which denounces the English no less than the Indians, there are some books like *The Chronicles of Budgepore* by Illtudus Prichard and the *Chronicles of Dustypore* by Sir H. S. Cunningham, which contradict Mr Greenberger's statement that humour is 'lacking from the image of India at all times'. Prichard in particular, treats the Europeans as slaves of red tape with no initiative and the Indians, though untrustworthy, are clever in making fools of their Europeans. Prichard's satire however, is good-humoured and tolerant even while exposing the contradictions of provincial administrations. He is particularly good on what he calls the Indian disease of the 'blistering tongue', which made scandal the prop and the bane of Anglo-Indian society and which Kipling brilliantly pilloried in *Plain Tales from the Hills*. In these earlier novels also, there seems to be a more tolerant attitude to the Eurasians, certainly nothing like the massed contempt or, at the best, deprecation one finds in the later novels. The reason for this is probably the influx of English wives after the Mutiny, and certainly the quotations from Forster, Thompson, Candler and Kincaid seem to support the theory that one of the worst mistakes of the British in India was the way their women acted. Curiously enough, none of the ten women novelists Greenberger quotes from seem to have been aware of this or, if they were, they ignored it because they themselves were eminently conscientious and hardworking.

But despite the broadening of outlook which followed independence, the old attitudes and the old despair continue, though now they are centred chiefly on the lack of communication on the human level and the blurring of the former record by so many conflicting and confusing voices.

Mr Greenberger's book is useful for the quotations that it gives from writers who have now been forgotten, and those who

appeared after Bhopal Singh's *Survey of Anglo-Indian Fiction (1934)*. That earlier survey, however, has the advantage that, written chronologically and treating each writer separately, it gives a clearer view of Anglo-Indian fiction as a whole than does Mr Greenberger's. It is a pity someone does not carry Bhopal Singh's book on to the present day, including and contrasting not only the English writers but also the Indians who have written in English.

One of the most prolific of the latter is Mulk Raj Anand, whose first novel, *Untouchable*, appeared in 1935 and who is still writing. Anand gives one the other side of the picture and in this book and *Coolie*, he deals with levels of Indian society which are hardly touched on by the English novelists, and treated with a sympathy and understanding which remind one of Maxim Gorki.

In *Private Life of an Indian Prince* he turned to a very different environment which had already been used by English novelists like Kipling in his part of the *Naulakha*, by Kincaid in *Durbar*, and by Philip Mason in his novel about the imaginary *Island of Chamba* in 1950. Anand's novel was published in 1953 and has been out of print until the present edition, which has an illuminating introduction by Saros Cowasjee. It appears from this introduction that Mulk Raj Anand, who had been in England for twenty years before he went back to India in 1948, got involved in an affair with a woman in Bombay and, after she left him, had a nervous breakdown very much like the one he attributes to the Prince in his novel, who is finally persuaded to submit himself to the mental doctor at a Poona hospital.

But apart from the personal aspect of the novel, which was apparently inspired by Anand's own condition, the book itself is a fascinating account of the impact of Independence on the Indian state of Shampur. The situation in Shampur is very like that described in the *Naulakha*, where the Raja has a son by his very orthodox Hindu wife, but whose passion is for a gypsy woman who, having also had a son by him, naturally tries to poison or get rid of the legal heir. A similar situation develops in *Private Life of an Indian Prince*. Victor, the Maharajah, is in love with a Brahman woman, Ganga Dasi, whom he cannot get away from despite her infidelities, the emotional crises she creates, and

her unabashed grasping greed. He confides his dilemma to his personal doctor, Hari Shankar, who tells the story with the disillusioned matter-of-factness of the sympathetic but cynical observer.

Victor, by virtue of his upbringing, cannot keep his hands off women. The novel, appropriate enough, begins with an attempt at seducing Bunti Russell, the daughter of an army captain in Simla, and ends with the seduction of an English girl in London where Victor, accompanied by his A.D.C., a brainless but cheerful oaf of a Sikh called Partap Singh, and the doctor, has gone for an enforced rest-cure from the strain placed on him by the long-suffering orthodoxy of his first wife, the tantrums of Gangi, and the frantic attempts he has made to avoid signing the deed of accession which was presented to the Indian princes on the eve of India's independence. The way in which Anand handles his complicated plot is impressive, and it develops with an unflagging and convincing control of narrative speed, realization of character, situation and environment. Victor being what he is, his mistress being what she is, the story is a series of vehement emotional explosions, which are recorded faithfully by the doctor who is present at most of them.

There is also a sense of the infinitely intricate relations of an Indian prince who is encouraged in his vagaries by the power he exercises within his state, and reduced to an impotent acquiescence when he is summoned to Delhi to sign the deed of accession. In the novel two scenes stand out. One is the tiger hunt organized by Victor for the American diplomats in the hope that America may stand by him in his protest against accession. The hunt itself is a beautifully ironic comment on the efficacy of what the British seem to have used as one of the functions which partly justified the maintenance of the princes in their states. Secondly, there is the account of Victor's meeting with Vallabhai Patel, the Congress Minister who was chiefly responsible for the implementation of the Act of Accession.

Anand is very successful in communicating the atmosphere of the various scenes of the story. The doctor contrasts the impressively solid outward appearance of the palace at Shampur with the confusion that reigns within, and:

the influence of the jungle in this atmosphere because . . . the silly association of ideas which the many tiger skins and other trophies of the hunt, that hung from the walls or lay about the floor . . . confused me with unknown fears. And this confusion was worse confounded by the irritations set up . . . of an incongruous array of mechanical birds which used once to twitter when they were wound up but now stood in two large cages on the verandah, silent because their inner springs had broken, mocking at the droves of beautiful green parrots which flew from tree to tree, shrieking . . . across the ochre-coloured building.

The doctor has thus a premonition of the sordid bazar confusion of Victor's emotional and official life. Even in the jungle itself 'while the light filtered, a greenish blue, through the dense bushes and the interlaced boughs . . . the water hyacinths and the deathly yellow sponge-like bells which hung down from the trees' there is a kind of dementia, which even when Victor and his retinue have joined the Americans in the relatively open country round the hunting lodge, affects the shooting party, and turns it into an ironic fiasco.

Finally, there is the arrival of the party from Shampur at the bungalow of Patel in Delhi at five in the morning, the mist-covered foliage, the eerie silence, and the coldness which anticipates their reception by Patel, who treats Victor as an irresponsible malingerer, and wears down his half-hearted resistance by sheer force of personality conscious of its power.

The novel is mainly an analysis of Victor's character by the doctor who appears to combine a clinical interest in his patient with a cynical enumeration of his idiosyncrasies. At one point Victor recites in a 'peculiarly passionate sing-song manner' twenty of the most famous lines from *Epipsychidion*, which causes the doctor to ruminate that 'Victor's intelligence seemed to have run riot through the large gaps in his education and experience'. The doctor himself, however, when he is handed a letter from a man who has been imprisoned and tortured in one of the local jails for heading a demonstration against illegal taxes, seems to muffle his good intentions by an indefinite postponement. It could all be seen as part of the corroding apathy of an Indian state.

But the main figure is Victor himself who, in the dissolution of his hereditary power, finds his own confusion and turbulence repeated in the confusion and turbulence of his own family and state, and whose only reaction is a whining self-pity coupled with a callous indifference to anyone else's sufferings.

The novel derives its interest today from this analysis of the character of Victor, which was made more convincing by the experience referred to in the introduction and gave Anand's account an actuality it would might otherwise have lacked. But the character of the doctor also contributes to this as a foil and confidant to both Victor and his concubine, Gangi Dasi. After the nervous collapse which leads to the departure for London, some of the glamour goes out of the novel, yet this too is appropriate, because the collapse of the Indian princes ended, for most of them, not in a bang but a whimper. Victor, in Anand's novel, symbolizes this collapse by bringing out the abject human reality beneath the pomp and circumstance which dazzled for so long the uncritical observer.

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