

# BOOK REVIEW

## *Kipling Sahib The Raj Patriot*

by  
Subash Chopra

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Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936), Noble laureate, writer, poet, journalist, who wrote – “Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet”, and ‘White Man’s Burden – carry on white Man, yours is a mission beyond any earthly reward”, also wrote the Jungle Book, the Mowgli Stories about an Indian

wolf-boy, that has been made into a Walt Disney movie, and is ever remembered by children, is a complex character, full of contradictions, foibles, even prejudices, and not so easy to analyse or judge. But Subash Chopra, veteran journalist and writer, who has had a long spell at ‘The Times’, London, who is himself an NRI, visits India every year, has taken upon himself to analyse Kipling’s life and work. The title is interesting and conveys a message-that Kipling was a Sahib, as Britishers were called in India, being the rulers, but also a Raj Patriot. Raj – is the general term given to British Rule in India and when the patriot is added, means that he was a true patriot of British empire. The writer gives a brief resume of his life, birth, education, short spell of work in India as an editor of Civil and Military Gazette and later work in England and America. But in order to decipher his personality, he had to take up different aspects of his life and work separately, his views about Indians, and his attitude towards people then, his conservative views about the role of the British rulers, ideas about white Man’s Burden (or mission), his poetry,

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fiction, and children's literature – Jungle book. That 'Kipling's mind was supply closed to anything good in the East is clear from his observation, "To Orientalists, the two national epics (Mahabharata and Ramayana) have their special value, but the working world of today has no place for these ponderous records of nothingness". On ground level, Kipling like other Sahibs stuck to the high pedestal, betraying a kind of ignorance or carelessness. Mr. Subash Chopra begins with an analysis, not assessment of his poetry, and quotes eminent writers, like T. S. Eliot and George Orwell. T. S. Eliot had in his introduction to a selection of Kipling's poetry without trying to make any value judgment, called it "great verse not poetry". Eliot to rescue Kipling, whose verse had been condemned too simple, too crude, too popular, indeed too near the doggerel of the music hall song, which could earn only disclaim from a critic, by saying that it was not true. But Subhash Chopra sums up by saying that "Kipling may be very legitimately hailed as a versifier and cockney balladeer". Nevertheless, George Orwell, made a blunt statement that Kipling was 'good bad poet.' Kipling's poetry or verse is important here, not because of its literary worth or otherwise, but because it contained his ideas/views about imperialism, white man's supremacy, and rightly

the author has titled the chapter as "Bard of the White Man's Burden". As rightly pointed out by author, Kipling gives equality a chance but only if it is accompanied with a separatist identity; for Kipling 'east-West separatism is perennial, equality is occasional'. Kipling's white man straight away assumes an unquestioned superiority. He urges on his American brethren to go for expansion and start carving out an empire. "He urges, "White Man to take up empire building as an evangelical mission in full acceptance of the costs and sacrifices involved". As Kipling says "carry on White Man, yours is a mission beyond any earthly reward".

The writer then discusses Kipling's fiction writing 'Naulakha' and 'Kim', are two of his best known works. Both works are essentially East-West encounters. "Naulakha heavily tilted towards west, which emerges as the superior side, and the work was a joint venture with American co-author Wolcot Balestier. Kim, is Kipling's single-handed work and may be called as an East-Meets-West story.

Naulakha is the story of Kate, who wants to go to India, inspite of persuasion by her lover, Tarvin, who tells her that 'land is not fit for rats, and it was no place for white women'. But Kate answers her call and goes to

Rajputana and against all odds sets up her own hospital. But finds it a hopeless task and is rescued by Tarvin, who has been following her. Kim, is a superior and more absorbing work of fiction, and woven round two characters – Kim and Lama. Kim – embodiment of East-West meeting of minds, Lama, embodiment of East. Though Ruskin Bond called it a celebration of India and Nirad Chaudhary called it a great novel, yet some would say it is a celebration of white sahibs. The writer says the story is littered with asides, belittling Asians and branding them heathens. Very succinctly Subash Chopra has put it – “every thing good or efficient that Kim represents belongs to his white origin, whole his love for squalor and occasional dishonesty is traced to his Ariatic half. Kim is never allowed to forget his European identity – ‘once a sahib, always sahib’ is the accepted credo. Subash Chopra then moves on to talk about Kipling’s contribution to shorter fiction i.e. stories. As a young journalist arriving in his late teens, he cast his eye on the trials, tribulations and loves and foibles of fellow Sahibs. “Plain Tales From the Hills’, was his blockbuster collection of stories, first published in Lahore’s Civil And Military Gazette” “The shorter fiction reflects three broad strands, separatist and supremacist, bitterly critical of liberals among

Britons, and didactic”, says the author, and explains with the help of examples from his writing. But then he moves to talk about “The Jungle Book’, the most famous of Kipling’s writing, the Jungle Book, the story of Indian wolf-boy Mowgli and his adventures in the forest for which he continues to be remembered by children. The saving of Mowgli from Sheirkhan, the tiger, his admission to the wolf pack on the recommendations of Baloo, the Bear and Baghera, the Black Panther, his relationship with the lone wolf and leader of the pack, Akela, his adventure with Bandra log – monkey people, his rescue by Kaa, the Python, his killing of Sheri Khan, the tiger as he had pledged, and then his voyage to manhood, are the main stories. This book entered the realm of popular entertainment in the Disney film adaptation of Jungle Book, a 1967 animated musical lovely based on the original has now been released as a live action movie and directed of Jon Favreau, and vocal talents of Idris Elba, Sir Ben Kingsley, Scarlett Johnson etc.

The author has included some very pertinent extracts from different works, to supplement and endorse his averments, that include – extracts from i) Something of Myself, the autobiographical work, the extract describes his seven years in India ii)

excerpts from George Orwell's essay from the collected poems of Rudyard Kipling iii) Kipling's tribute to Gen. Reginald Dyer, 'the butcher' of Jallianwala Bagh massacre, 'the man who saved India' or as Kipling says, 'he did his duty as he saw it' iv) 'excerpts from Kipling's letter to President Theodore Roosevelt, in which he urges him to have permanent control over Philippines (1898). These excerpts endorse the writer's views or opinions about certain events and persons. At the same time, the reader can feel that the views expressed or comments made, are not prejudiced or based on bias. I would say that the author has refrained from being judgmental. He has put the record straight, calling a spade a spade. Though the author has a close association with Britain, an 'abiding' relationship with the English people because he has been

living and working there for so long, yet he has not strayed from the truth. His hard work and impassioned viewpoint/comments are worth appreciation. Like the great Anglo-phile Nirad Chowdhary, he has not kept his one-eye closed. In his earlier book "India and Britannia – An Abiding Affair", Mr. Subash Chopra concludes his analysis in these words. "Notwithstanding trade imbalance, political and diplomatic bickering, the abiding message is that of a love affair-tiffs et. al-across two cultures"

As a reader of books I would say Subash Chopra's book provides a delightful reading and I would recommend to all compatriots. It gives you an insight into the working of human mind in different situations, and evolving of human character. ■