

Indian Culture and Hinduism: A Study of Jim Corbett's Work

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Abstract

Jim Corbett's exposure to Indian culture and Hinduism left a lasting impression on him which finds expression in his writing. He goes to the fundamental spirituality and philosophy of Hindu religion; observed and followed the basic concept of Hinduism. He completely surrenders to the religious spirit of the Indian legends with a sense of devotion. He believed and observed the mysticism of Hindu religion and presents India with the touch of a master, artistically depicting the rich culture of an ancient civilization.

Keywords: Indian writing in English, Indian Culture, Hinduism, Spirituality, Colonial

Human subsistence depends to a great extent on religious ideas as an organized assembly of a system of culture and views that relate to human existence. "Religion and the attitude to religion has been a strong strand in fiction, for religion intrudes into every sphere of life: learning, worship, rituals, birth, marriage and death, as well as the workplace, the social system, and the caste attitudes." (Jindal 252) Ethnicities and cultural heritage create cultural identity of a society. The colonists' excluded ethnic identity of the innate civilization. The imperial description of Indian culture has a strong tone of foreignness and peculiarity, yet it is an important part of colonial fascination. The unique ethnicity and social design attracted and engaged the non-native imperials, but a partial insolence did not give them a rational perception of the Indian culture. Rudyard Kipling, E.M. Forster and Jim Corbett through their work presents a different image of imperialistic writers. Rudyard Kipling's response to India is divided in two approaches. On one hand, he reinforced the cause of kingdom, and the other was devoted to the unfamiliar and multifaceted Indian culture. Maria Couto points out that, "Kipling's art creates an enthralling adventure story with loveable and credible Indian characters while endorsing imperial rule Kipling's sense of being at home in India merges with his imperial rule" (81). E.M. Forster's was an intermediate phase, from colonial to post-colonial. Indian freedom movement became more hostile and writers like E.M. Forster sensed the ineffectiveness of Kingdom. A passage

to India is actually a passage to post-colonial period. Born and brought up in India, among the local Hindus, Jim Corbett assimilated an in-depth knowledge of Hinduism and its spirituality. Corbett house sternly followed the Christian beliefs but his adventures kept him busy and gave an exposure to Hindu religion. As a child, he listened the Hindu mythological stories from the native servants and villagers. Jim Corbett differs from Kipling and Forster in their perception of Hindu religion. Panwar analyses the different colonial approaches towards Hinduism and Islam: "Forster was typical of many British India hands that preferred Muslims because the monotheistic concept of Islam can be easily understood by a European. Whereas, Hinduism with its variations and diversity seems diffuse and far too complicated" (71). Depiction of native culture by the imperials has always been a debated issue and being a domiciled Englishman, Corbett's exposure to Indian culture and Hinduism left a lasting impression on him which finds expression in his writing. This paper is a descriptive work and is an attempt to answer the question: how and to what extent Indian culture and Hinduism is portrayed in the various stories written by Jim Corbett.

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

In the tradition of adventure stories and prose writing on wild life, Jim Corbett arises as the most famous writer of shikar literature. His popularity is simply confirmed from the fact that his books are still sold worldwide. The fact that *The Man-Eaters of Kumaon* is translated into many languages of the world put a stamp on his extraordinary popularity. These books form a separate literary category; a jungle version of detective fiction that convey an explicit message of nature conservation and artistically delineates the various shades of prevalent Indian society. Jim Corbett absorbed detail information of all the rituals and customs of Hindu religion. He was a regular visitor to Naini-Devi

temple situated on the bank of Naini Lake and always offered prayers at numerous temples. He transcends the image of a coloniser, who gets lost in the flamboyant ceremonial perception of native culture. He goes to the fundamental spirituality and philosophy of Hindu religion and silently observed and followed the basic concept of Hinduism: the more you suffer in this life the better for next birth. The present world is a maya, an illusion and the real life is the life-after-death. When Hindus take pilgrimage to the holy shrine of Badrinath on foot, they undergo tremendous amount of physical strain as he points out:

Times there will be a many, when, gasping for breath, you toil up the face of steep mountain on feet torn and bleeding when you will question whether the prospective reward you seek is worth the present price you pay in suffering; but being a good Hindu, you will toil on, comforting yourself with the thought that merit is not gained without suffering, and the greater the suffering in this world, the greater the reward in the next. (Corbett, The Jim Corbett Omnibus 431-32)

The imperial writers presented inherent Indian culture with a sense of strangeness and unfamiliarity. They failed to reach to the philosophy of Hinduism. On the contrary Jim Corbett presents a perfect picture of a good Hindu and his belief in the Hindu philosophy promoting suffering in this material and illusionary world and the rewards it seeks in the next world. Martin Booth, the biographer points that "He understood the basis of the religion and the philosophy of the Indian hill folk and was to become more familiar with and sympathetic to Hinduism than ever he was to Christianity. Hinduism was deep rooted in his heart and mind" (20). He shows a deep insight in the mindset of country folks and remarks that especially the poor folks are fatalist and very superstitious. They are God fearing and surrenders everything to God. They attribute every occurrence in their life to God and can go to any extent. In the story "Mothi" he observes, how people suffer under the burden of certain religious beliefs. He brings out their vulnerability of common man under the burden of certain customs. Mothi accidentally committed the greatest crime as a Hindu can. He killed a cow. He went to Haridwar for the atonement of the sin and got punished with a penance. The description has an undertone of skepticism when he highlights futility of such religious traditions and brings out the susceptibility of a poor man, who with a little bit of practical approach could have resolved the circumstances.

In The Temple Tiger and More Man-eaters of Kumaon, he

comments on the status of superstition in the region of Himalayas. The scarcely populated region certainly has a stronghold of superstition on the mindset of people. The arresting factor is that the educated people also have their own superstitions. He distinguishes between the native people's perception of superstition and the beliefs of the educated ones in the following passage: "The dividing line between the superstition of simple uneducated people who live on high mountains, and the beliefs of sophisticated educated people who live at lesser heights, is so faint that it is difficult to determine where the one ends and the other begins. (Corbett, The Jim Corbett Omnibus 243) All his life, he adhered to his own superstitions, a phenomenon common to many hunters of his time. He always first killed a snake before hunting a man-eater. In India, especially in Hindu religion, Himalayas have many religious connotations. He does not doubt the supernatural or mystical qualities established in the surrounding environment. He writes about the legend of the sacred Choti Kailash and the myth surrounding the mountain with great conviction in the following lines, "The gods do not favour the killing of birds or beast on this sacred hill of Choti Kailash.... (Corbett, The Second Jim Corbett omnibus 10).

Jim Corbett completely surrenders to the religious spirit of the legend with a sense of devotion. He believed and observed the mysticism of Hindu religion. Jim Corbett is still a legend in the Kumaon region for his hunting skills in shooting man-eaters. People of the region believed that he was blessed with supernatural power, which protected him during his expeditions. He was called a white Sadhu: a saint who could fight with the evil spirit in the form of a man-eater because he had the blessings of God. The Himalayan folk considered a man-eater as an evil spirit as is evident in the following lines, "... for it is not tiger but an evil spirit, who, when it craves for human flesh and blood, takes on for a little while the semblance of a tiger. (Corbett, The Jim Corbett Omnibus 77). According to Hinduism, saints are celibate. They spent their life amidst nature and are humanistic in their behavior. Jim Corbett remained a bachelor all his life, spent most of his time amidst nature and risked his own life to save the people. As the legend goes, he possessed certain supernatural powers hence he was able to hunt the twelve man-eaters: "But they say you are a Sadhu, sahib, and the spirit that guard sadhus are more powerful than the evil spirit." (Corbett, The Jim Corbett Omnibus 77) It was a common belief in the Garhwal region that man-eaters are some sort of an evil spirit, which was beyond the power of a bullet shot. This belief is expressed in the words of the packman in The Man-eating Leopard of Rudraprayag

"The evil spirit that is responsible for all the human deaths in this area is not an animal, as you think it is, that can be killed by ball or shot..." (Corbett, *The Jim Corbett Omnibus* 444) The picture of India that emerges from Jim Corbett's writing is certainly of a country that seems to still struggle in the darkness of superstition. However, the feature that differentiates him from the bearing of a coloniser is the fact that he himself is a part of the events. His tone is neither satirical nor strange. His perspective of India is marked by a tone of familiarity. He projects India and the Indians with persuasion and at certain points become one of them.

Indian Mythology

The great Indian epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata consist of moral, spiritual and ethical value system. They characterise Indian mode of life and a view of personal and social structure. These epics represent an outline of ancient Indian culture and traditions which are still being supported by Indians. They give us intellectual and spiritual strength and dignity in difficult times. Religion has always been the life force of Indians. Jim Corbett's observations of the great epics of Mahabharata, Skanda-Purana and other aspects of Indian culture are not deliberate pondering of a colonial attraction towards the mystical Indian culture. He writes about the Nanda-Kot which has reference to Mahabharata and Pancha-chuli as the five cooking places used by the Pandavas while on their way to Kailash in Tibet. His familiarity of Hindu mythology is ostensible in the description of the lake situated in Nainital as he writes, "Hindu legend, however, give the credit of the lake to three sages, Atri, Pulastya and Pulaha.... dug a hole at the foot of the hill and siphoned water into it from Mansorowara, the sacred lake in Tibet. (Corbett, *The Second Jim Corbett Omnibus* 7). The description of Hindu mythology is honest and sincere with no element of irony. He went beyond the superficial aspects to understand the deeper philosophy of Indian life. He tried to understand the various dimensions in the concept of Hinduism and the life of a Hindu as he writes in "The Champawat Man-eater": "Pitifully little as these remains were, they would suffice for the cremation ceremony which would ensure the ashes of the high-caste woman reaching mother Ganges." (Corbett, *The Jim Corbett Omnibus* 22) In the above quotation, the remark 'Mother Ganges' is typically Indian. The Hindus consider the Ganges River as their mother, which will wash all the sins and will carry them to the heaven after death. Jim Corbett's descriptions of Indian culture and religion are quite authentic. He retains authenticity as he produces the scene with minute details, which may sound irrelevant, but are crucial in an Indian context.

Kenneth Anderson: A Comparison

Kenneth Anderson is also a prominent writer of shikar literature. The image of India that emerges from Anderson's work is similar to Jim Corbett's perception. He too laments at the fatalist nature of poor Indians, who suffers at the will of fate. He is more vocal about the current issues of Independent India and the changing world of the poor Indians. Anderson is more interested in occult and supernatural. He elaborates the occult in Indian society, especially the southern India with elaborate diagrams, mantras and detailed proceedings of the rituals of black magic. He elaborates as to how superstition has surpassed all boundaries of religion and has intermingled. Jim Corbett writes about the supernatural elements prevalent in the Indian society, but he does not elaborate it. He simply mentions and leaves it to the readers to decide its credibility.

Nature and adventure are an important theme in Jim Corbett's work, but he doesn't stop here. He reaches out at the nucleus of Indian spirituality, absorbs it and observes in his life. He covers India with the touch of a master artistically depicting the rich culture of an ancient civilization and provides credibility to Indian custom and traditions, whereas Anderson seems to add information about the occult to impart a zest to his writing. He spent his life amongst the Indians and shows a deep insight into their mindset, their beliefs and superstitions.

Culture and traditions create cultural identity of a society. The colonial description of Indian culture has a strong tone of unfamiliarity and strangeness, yet it is an important part of colonial fascination. The colonial literature expresses an unusual blend of appreciation and irrelevance for the native culture. The colonials were fascinated by the glorious Indian culture however this delighted experience of a new and captivating culture is dented by a sense of ethnic dominance. Jim Corbett's writing is a collection of wildlife stories, which carry a memorandum of environment conservation to the world. His work can be viewed as non-fictional narratives of his own jungle adventures. The quality that distinguishes Jim Corbett from other colonial writers is the cultural identity he gives to the natives. The colonial attitude to downcast the Indian customs and traditions is absent in his writing, rather he presents Indian culture with the conviction of a native. Jim Corbett, no doubt, is an adventure writer of hunting stories, but details of India, her culture, society and people add new dimensions to his work. He presents India in all her vibrant colours: the spirituality of Hinduism, social fabric, the village-life and the people of India. He understood the native culture in

totality. He exhibits respect for Indian heritage that retained some of its ancient glory and of which he himself is a part. He absorbed the essence of this nation with sensitivity and depth of understanding.

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