



## REDISCOVERING THE SPIRIT OF INDIA: A STUDY OF MANOJ DAS'S MY LITTLE INDIA

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I have deliberately chosen this topic to draw the attention of the scholars and critics and all the lovers of literature to the unique travel narrative which is neither altogether a fiction, nor a completely factual travelogue. It's a canvas where fact and fiction, the real and the imaginary play hide and seek with each other like sun and shade. It is Manoj Das' twilight of double vision.

Attempting to express some of my feelings on Manoj Das's *My Little India*, I am reminded of the famous lines of John Keats (1795-1821) in "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer".

Much have I travelled in the realms of gold,  
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;  
Round many Western Islands have I been,  
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold. (web 483)

This famous sonnet, written by the poet in October 1816, tells of his astonishment while reading the works of the ancient Greek poet Homer as freely translated by the Elizabethan playwright George Chapman. The poem has become an oft-quoted classic, cited to demonstrate the emotional power of a great work of art and the ability of great art to create an epiphany in its beholder.

While travelling across the length and breadth of this land through the villages and cities, from the confluence of three oceans to the towering Himalayas, exploring its rivers and cliffs, temples and caves, experiencing the joys and sorrows of fellow men as a humble son of Mother India, Manoj Das must have had the contagious epiphanic experience, which, I believe, any sensitive and sensible reader will have while going through his *My little India*. In the preface of the book, the author writes –

"There are many ways to look at India – rather many visions through which to experience the phenomenon that is India. Born and brought up in a village inaccessible even for the bullock cart, and educated in village schools till his early teens, this author's vision of India has been often, if not always, coloured by his rustic emotions and nostalgia. May he suggest that he be spared of any scrutiny with any yard stick of history, for this work is an invitation to share, if you are in a leisurely mood, the author's impressions of places and people, as his mind and imagination recorded them over the years". (Manoj Das: *My Little India*. Vii).

We all are travelers as life itself is a travel, not merely from birth to death, but from darkness to light, from non-being to true being, from unconsciousness to super consciousness. India's glorious spiritual philosophy as propounded in the Vedas, Upanishads and Puranas repeatedly claims that we are children of God. From Him we have come and to Him we shall return, though in an apparently longwinded way. The journey has started since time immemorial, since the genesis of first living cell on earth or even before that and will continue till we have reunited with our source, the Divine. This is the prolonged and progressive journey of evolution on earth. Each life adds some experience to our **consciousness**, which is the real traveller, the ever-inquisitive, unappeased one that goes on and on in search of Truth, Knowledge, freedom and Immortality. In his magnum opus, *The Life Divine*, Sri Aurobindo says –

"The earliest preoccupation of man in his awakened thoughts and, as it seems, his inevitable and ultimate preoccupation,--- for it survives the longest period of skepticism and returns after every banishment, --- is also the highest which his thought can envisage. It manifests itself in the Divination of Godhead, the impulse towards perfection, the search after pure Truth and unmixed Bliss, the serve of a secret immortality. The ancient dawns of human knowledge has left us their witness to **this constant aspiration**; today we see a humanity satiated but not satisfied by victorious analysis of the externalities of Nature preparing to return to its primeval longings. The earliest formula of wisdom promises to be its last, --- God, Light, Freedom, and Immortality." (*The Life Divine* 1).

This indomitable spirit of "Quest" manifests itself in various forms in life, and one of them is 'travel', in the comprehensive sense of the term. However, the journey may be either **without** or **within**. In case of the later, it is purely a personal experience of the traveller and cannot be shared unless the reader also has undergone the same or similar experiences. For example, in Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri*, Savitri plunges into her inner consciousness and makes a journey within in order to explore the mystery of death (Book-VII, Canto-III: The Entry into the Inner Countries). The reward of such a journey is an



exploration and transformation of 'self'. Vast and intensive study (of classics, scriptures, etc) leading to enlightenment (eg. The Story— "The Bet" by Anton Chekhov) is also a kind of travel and if recorded, may also be a part of travel literature.

Over the centuries, travel literature has preoccupied literary critics and historians alike, and more than once, these theorists have questioned the literary value of such as enterprise as travelogue. The holy scriptures of all religions include epics which cover large expanses of time and space. Attempts have been made at including such imaginary ancient epics – Like Homer's *Odyssey* or the Mesopotamian Epic of *Gilgamesh*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Thomas Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller*, or Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* – in the category of imaginary travel literature. In fact, all literatures, of all times, use journey as a metaphor.

According to Carl Thomson, to travel is to make a journey, a movement through space and time. It may be in epic scale, taking the traveller to the other side of the world, across a continent or up a mountain; or it may be modest or limited in scope, within the traveller's own country or region, or even just their immediate locality. All journeys, however, are a confrontation with, or more optimistically a negotiation of differences and **otherness**, what is sometimes termed as **alterity**. In any form of travel, therefore, there must be a complex interplay between alterity and identity, difference and similarity.

As travelogue reveals the traveller's motivation for traveling as well as his way of looking at the world around him, some critics equal it to "the autobiography of the traveller", autobiography being used in its dictionary sense: "an account of a person's life written by that person". Travel literature therefore presents a juxtaposition of objective reality and subjective vision or revelation. That his work cannot be judged with historical parameters, Manoj Das has made it clear from the very beginning. Therefore it cannot be called a travelogue in the narrow sense. But its uniqueness as travel literature or narrative lies in the fact that each article not only presents the author's impression of the place along with the myth, legend or folklore behind it, but also his visions and imagination. The author further declares in the preface-

Visions could also intersperse with one another while looking at India, as it happens in Mark Twain's summary of the country even though made in the nineties of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: 'This is indeed India! The land of dreams and romance, of fabulous wealth and fabulous poverty, of splendour and rags, of palaces and hovels, of famine and pestilence, of genii and giants and Aladin lamps, of tigers and elephants, the cobra and the jungle, the country of a hundred nations and a hundred tongues, of a thousand religions and two million gods, cradle of the human race, birthplace of human speech, mother of history, grandmother of legend, great-grandmother of Tradition,...the one land that *all* men desire to see, and having seen once, by even a glimpse, would not give that glimpse for shows of all the rest of the globe combined.' (*More Tramps Abroad*; 1897)

While the first few articles, on the Andamans are factual, 'dreams and romance' dominate the pieces on Rajasthan and the rest are a fusion of objective experiences and subjective reactions. (viii)

The author, being a son of soil, a humanist to the core and a lover of mother India, visited the places not as an outsider with a colonial or magisterial gaze, but with the eye of a humble seeker, as a compassionate Indian. Wherever he went he identified himself with the places and people and with the subtle vibration or aura around the place. **In an attempt to rediscover the spirit of India**, he travelled back in his vision to the events which are believed to have taken place and presented them with almost vividness and lucidity.

This lyrical travel narrative has captured the attention of readers at home and abroad as it is splashed with legends, episodes from history and lights on unforgettable characters, old and new. It takes the readers on a unique journey through India, offering them a rare glimpse of a resplendent psyche. Here tradition and modernity jostle for space heedless of the passage of time. Cities trace their genesis to the early twilights of time with myths and legends peeping from several niches of daily life. Yet the work documents the flashes of history and records the changes wrought on the façade of the land.

The limited space of this project/paper does not allow the researcher to present even the substantial view of all the articles contained in the book. Hence it has been attempted to focus on the last article, "The Legend And An Illumination" where the author has not only presented the myth and legend behind Kanya kumari, the Presiding deity of the land's end, but also its symbolic significance that was revealed to him as an epiphany. To quote a few passages from the author's account - It was still dark, I stood splashed by blasts of breeze— of a cold December dawn at that— but never before had I felt so indulgently tolerant towards that hazard as on that serene dawn. Standing beneath the sparsely starry sky I enjoyed the sound of the breaking waves on my three sides. They sounded like incantations directed towards Kanya Kumari, the presiding deity of the Land's End. I realized how profoundly significant it was for the founding fathers of the nation-whoever they were-to



commence the habitation of the land with an invocation to the Goddess. It was not for nothing that the mighty monarchs of the past did not come forward to build a palace on that elevated spot. Any human construction between the shrine and the three seas would have defeated the purpose of the deity's presence there in the eyes of those who believed in occult realities behind the gross physical realities. She and she alone had the authority to dwell there; she and she alone could ensure the inviolability of the land just as she herself stood inviolable, destroying the arrogant hostile demon that tried to violate her. (*My Little India* 254).

Then, in the most enchanting manner, the author narrates the legend behind Goddess, the substance of which is attempted below. Goddess *Kanya Kumari* – the name by which she came to be known later – an incarnation of the Divine Mother, was born to the king of the region in response to the prayers of the seers and the others who were tortured by Vanasura, a terrible demon. As she grew up, she became of her identity and the truth that she would marry none other than Lord Shiva. So, she invoked Shiva in prayer and the Great God consented to her seeking. As advised by the princess, the king announced the date and time of wedding ceremony. But the seers were pensive at the prospect of Shiva leading his consort to his Himalayan abode. Who would then kill Vanasura? Then Narada came to their rescue. He inspired a cock to shriek out from a bush. Shiva, being in the environment of the mortals, was confused and thought that the auspicious hour of marriage had passed. He sat down on the rock in deep meditation.

Meanwhile, Vanasura rushed into the palace to take the princess away. But the princess beheaded him with a single stroke of the sword. All the people of the kingdom heaved a sigh of relief. But where was the bridegroom? How could anyone else but the goddess know that He was on the way, lost in meditation for a few seconds? But a few seconds for the gods equal ages for the earthly creatures. Hence, in the words of the author –

The Virgin Princess -- *Kanya Kumari* -- still stands there waiting for another propitious hour to come some day in the calendar of the future, her gaze fixed on the eastern horizon, a sign of optimism. I have rarely seen an image combining in its human form such a divine grace.

'Mother India is not a piece of earth; she is a power, godhead,' said Sri Aurobindo in one of his earliest writings. The dawn at *Kanya Kumari* woke me up to its significance. At the summit of the land – the physical form of a Consciousness – remains *Shiva*; at the bottom stands *Shakti*, invoking his presence. A day will come when they will be united; Meanwhile-

*Amid the work of darker Powers She is here  
To heal the evils and mistakes of Space  
And change the tragedy of the ignorant world  
Into a Divine comedy of joy. (Sri Aurobindo: Collected Poems 105 )*

(*My Little India* 256)

Thus the symbolic significance behind the legend was revealed to the author in a state of trance. He became conscious of the fact that India was not merely a geographical entity, but a living consciousness. At the summit of that consciousness symbolized by Mount Kailash, the union of Shiva and Shakti is eternized. But at the bottom level, it is just a far and bright possibility. However, an illumination of hope fills us with joy and intense gratitude that the Divine Mother is unceasingly at work to actualize the union at the earliest.

Such enlightenment and transformation of consciousness that the real traveller (the author) as well as the reader-traveller experience are rewards invaluable that make this travelogue worth reading. To quote the author from the preface of his "*Myths, Legends, Concepts and Literary Antiquities of India*"—

To be interested in the heritage of Indian myths, legends and Faiths amounts to responding to the call of horizon – magnificent but ever-expanding, what emerges in the process of our exploration however petite, is a sense of optimism, a confidence that there is purpose in life and there is a future for the wonderful adventure in consciousness that is the human journey. (xv)

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