

## DALRYMPLE'S THE AGE OF KALI: A POIGNANT ACCOUNT

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### ABSTRACT

India is usually regarded as one of the most spiritual and culturally diverse countries on the earth, with its myriad religions, traditions, long history and colorful rituals. This has endeared the country to the Scottish-born writer, William Dalrymple. This book records his travels and experiences across India from early to mid-nineties. He is reported to have observed that if he were to be given five lives, he would like to be born an Indian in all of them. Despite his love for the country and its glorious past, he could only find deterioration of political values and rising moral corruption. The pictures he has drawn are depressing. Only the phrase 'the Kaliyug' in the Indian scriptures could adequately describe the scenario.

**KEYWORDS:** Kaliyug, Political Corruption, Moral Deterioration & Poignancy

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### INTRODUCTION

Dalrymple, the Scottish-born writer treats India as his second home. His wide travels across the subcontinent in the recent years have gained him insights into the social and cultural changes in the country. His book *The Age of Kali* is a collection of 19 essays on places and people from almost ten years of the writer's travels in and around the subcontinent in the 1990s. The dark side of the Indian reality dominates in his works. 'The Age of Kali' sums up the content of the work which depicts the collapse of the moral order, deterioration of the political values and loss of the grace and glory of the past. Lonely Planet's Guide to India has this to say: "The Age of Kali by celebrated travel writer William Dalrymple is a superb compilation of insights gleaned from a decade of travelling the subcontinent."

### The Varied Manifestations of Kali

Dalrymple chooses to study the internal reality of India's aspirations to become a global player in politics, economy, science and technology. Dalrymple begins the work with the piece that gives the book its title. *The Age of Kali* describes caste politics in Bihar 'which was much more famous for its violence, corruption and endemic caste-warfare' (Dalrymple, 2004 p3). Casteism has taken a different form in one of the northern states of the country Bihar. The lower castes and the underprivileged have gained political power and use it to take revenge on the upper castes. Even the then Chief Minister, a self-styled leader of 'Backward Castes' is not free from this mindset. This is another form of Casteism. A total breakdown of law and order is borne out by the lynching of a magistrate by the goons of a local MP. The official's offence is that he speaks about his inability to control crime in the area of his new posting. A similar situation prevails in another state, Uttar Pradesh. As a former MP says 'The new breed of Indian politician has no ideas and no principles. In most cases they are just common criminals,

in it for what they can plunder' (Dalrymple, 2004 p46).

The scene of political corruption shifts to the lost splendor of the North. Dalrymple's attention is focused next on Lucknow. The grandeur and posh life of the Nawabs, their sense of aesthetics, courtly graces and refinement are contrasted with the ruins after 30 years of Indian Partition. They are shorn off all their glory. The present deterioration of the Nawabs and Begums after the partition, their predicament and their poverty are carefully recorded. The Urdu language which was once refined and pure also disappeared.

In Lucknow language was not just a tool of communication: it was a projection of the culture - very florid and subtle. But now the language has changed the old refined Urdu of Lucknow is now hardly spoken. Few are left who can understand it - fewer still who speak it.'(Dalrymple, 2004 p39).

As the author suggests, 'lumpenisation' has taken a heavy toll on culture.

Dalrymple presents a different picture of India in 1990s. It accounts of 'the city of the widows' - Vrindavan, the traditional refuge of the Hindu widows. For the people within and outside India, Vrindavan is a beautiful place associated with mythology. The reality is not like that. The age-old ritual of sending old widows to Vrindavan is painfully narrated.

For in traditional Hindu society, a woman loses all her status the minute her husband dies. She is forbidden to wear colours or jewellery or to eat meat. She is forbidden to remarry (at least if she is of reasonably high caste; low-caste and Untouchable women can do what they want) and she is forbidden to own property. She may no longer be expected to commit sati and throw herself on her husband's funeral pyre, but in many traditional communities, particularly in the more remote villages, she is still expected to shave her head and live like an ascetic, sleeping on the ground, living only to fast and pray for her departed spouse. [Dalrymple, 2004 p50]

As Kanaklatha, a widow in Vrindavan, says,

'This is not life,'... We all died the day our husbands died. How can anyone describe our pain? Our hearts are all on fire with sorrow. Now we just wait for the day when all this will end' (Dalrymple, 2004 p59). It is clear how much pain and agony they are undergoing. This custom of sending widows still prevails in certain states of India. Amidst their sufferings, certain businessmen try to take advantage of this situation. 'They would give donations to their ashrams and receive receipts stating that they had given much larger amounts, which would be written off against tax' (Dalrymple, 2004 p59).

Poverty thus is exploited for profit but there is something more shocking and agonizing. As the landlord of one of the ashrams where the widows reside observes,

'Many of the ashrams are now run by criminal elements. Even some of the sadhus are involved. They lure young girls in, then sell them to local landowners. When the landowners are finished with them, they can sell them to the brothels in Delhi. They pay the police off, so they don't intervene' (Dalrymple, 2004 p56).

These situations are unknown to the rest of the country. This makes Dalrymple a different travel writer from others.

Dalrymple's narration represents not only the moving and heart touching lives of the widows. He selects his characters from all the walks of life. After the touching narration of the widows, Dalrymple turns his attention towards the mystical and quixotic Queen of Gwalior - the Rajmata Vijayaraje Scindia. The very two different facets of the Queen are

presented. The dual attitude of the queen- as a caring and kind Queen and a person who supports killing of the people in the name of religion is portrayed well. The tradition of feeding and decorating the dead queen's statue is contrasted with the starving of the widows of Vrindavan.

In *The Age of Kali*, Dalrymple exposes the social evils which continue to prevail in India during his visit. He, without any bias, presents the society which is still living in the primitive world of caste and *Sati*. Dalrymple provides another example to show how deeply caste is written to the Indian psyche through the sad tale of Bahveri Devi. She was a low caste woman living near Jaipur, Rajasthan, who was gang raped by the high caste men when she tried to stop a child marriage. Not only the whole village stood against her, but also the policemen closed their eyes to the sad plight of this woman. She was declared an outcaste by the village and she was left with nothing. Her husband was brutally assaulted by the high caste men. It is with great difficulty she won the case and the accused were punished. It is clear that child marriage is still prevailing in Indian society. People are still ignorant about child marriages. Dowry also plays a major role in aggravating this situation.

Untouchability is still followed in the interior parts of the country. If a woman from a Harijan family wishes to take water from the public well, a person of high caste must come and provide it. The Untouchable cannot touch the bucket. In the village tea-house, the cups for the Harijans are kept separately and at a distance from the cups of the other castes. If there is a public meeting, the Harijans cannot share the same carpet as the Rajputs. If Harijan children are admitted to the primary school, then they must sit on the floor. 'In Rajasthan caste was an open book which could be read as soon as you knew the local visual dialect' (Dalrymple, 2004 p114).

Even laws could not stop these people. They remain only on papers.

'The laws they pass in the Lok Sabha [Indian Parliament] make little difference in these villages. Out here it will take much more than a change in the law to alleviate the lot of the Dalits [the oppressed castes, ie. the former Untouchables]' [Dalrymple, 2004 p112].

As said earlier, casteism is under going a change. The lower castes have begun to assert themselves. In this context, job reservations for the lower castes are introduced in India. This polarised the society further. There are suicides to stop reservations for jobs and education. The issue is still simmering.

Controversial subject such as *Sati* is also dealt with. The story of RoopKanwar from Deorala, Rajasthan, is one of a violent and forceful murder which is fabricated as '*Sati*' by the villagers. When speaking about '*Sati*', Dalrymple writes:

*Sati* is still deeply engrained in the culture of many parts of rural India, and no where more so than in Rajasthan, which is now the centre of the cult of the goddess *Sati Mata*. a memorial put up to mark the place where a living, breathing widow chose to climb atop her husband's burning funeral pyre, sacrificing herself to ensure her husband's successful rebirth. In this way she is believed to join her soul with the goddess *Sati Mata* and to bring good luck to her family and her village for seven generations [Dalrymple, 2004 p122].

The pathetic death/ *Sati* of RoopKanwar shows that still in India, age old customs are followed with awe and fear. They remain as the hang overs of that part of India's past which is regressive. Dalrymple says:

In daily usage the word *sati* simply means 'a good woman', and Rajasthani women, particularly those from the Rajput caste, are brought up to see *satis* as the paradigm of the ideal woman and the perfect wife. In most

Rajasthani villages the goddess Sati Mata is actively venerated, and the sati stones which litter the Rajasthani countryside are annually adorned with vermilion and silver foil, and are visited by every family after a birth or before a marriage. [Dalrymple, 2004 p128]

Dalrymple's attention next focuses on the metropolitan cities which are trying to adopt the way of living of the Western world. The rural India is transforming and the urban India is trying to catch the fastest pace. Commerce and economic growth of Bombay, and the elite world of rock stars and writers, the changing phase of India in cities like Bombay is presented vividly. Bombay's elite world and the growth in economy show a modern phase of the Indian scenario. Dalrymple presents a new and developing India on one side and the cities which lost their ethnic beauty because of modernism on the other side. Dalrymple cites cities such as Lucknow and Hyderabad as examples of India's past glory, in the essays "In the Kingdom of Avadh" and "Under the Char-Minar." He compares these cities, advancing a notion of universal decline:

'Once Lucknow was known as the Garden of India. There were palms and gardens and greenery everywhere. Now so much of it is eaten up by concrete, and the rest has become a slum. [Dalrymple, 2004 p28]

In the case of Vrindavan also, a similar situation prevails.

"The town used to be very beautiful. But now it has expanded and become very dirty and polluted. Before, people came here and they found peace. Now they just find corruption and mental pollution." [Dalrymple, 2004 p56]

The writer notes in the book, some of the negative effects of modernization on the Indian culture and social order is evident in cities, such as Bangalore, which was once "remarkable for its botanical gardens, cool climate and excellent racetrack" (Dalrymple, 2004 p168). However, Dalrymple portrays that such great cities of India, though modernized, are set to collapse. In fact, the cities create anxiety about the future of its fast-growing population due to unemployment, health risks, lawlessness, moral decay, and lack of social amenities like water and electricity (Dalrymple, 2004 p168). The pain of India in struggling to accommodate the modernity in the 1990s is elucidated through the attack of KFC in Bangalore.

## CONCLUSIONS

Rebecca Dorgelo rightly points out "Throughout *The Age of Kali*, Dalrymple advances a comparison between the troubles of modern India (represented as stemming from partition, independence, and cultural issues such as caste) and the beauty and sophistication of its past (which is represented as somehow untroubled by caste and other inequalities)" (Dorgelo, R 2013 p242). As Dalrymple puts forth, "India, far from being a tiger is in fact a lumbering great elephant a huge country and it moves very slowly and ponderously." (Dalrymple, 2004 p161). The author employs diverse-approach in which both positive heritage of India is discussed alongside the regressive cultural practices. Dalrymple portrays social and cultural tensions, obsessive religious followers, violence and corrupt practices. Dalrymple's India, particularly India of 1990s is well depicted. Dalrymple has managed to touch on almost all aspects of Indian people and culture and presents a mixed approach based on his travels and encounters. In this context, it is noteworthy to refer to Jerry Brotten's editorial review :

Dalrymple's love for the subcontinent, and his feel for its diverse cultural identity, comes across in every page, which makes its chronicles of political corruption, ethnic violence, and social disintegration all the more poignant.

*The Age of Kali*, is Dalrymple's ten years travelling experiences in India. It depicts the pain and distress of the people in Indian society. It is about a set of people who are bound by religious and culture, bondage, who never tries to come out of the clutches. In the novel, the author presents people who are trying to cling on the outdated traditions and customs. Killing has become common sight in the name of superiority. The chosen representatives of the people are themselves corrupted. There are people who bemoan their past glory and their present lives. People who are reluctant to change to modernity are presented in the novel. The middle-class people are trying to compete with the changes of the economy. These depressing pictures of India makes Dalrymple believe that it is the *Kali Yug*- the age of deterioration.

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