

## Three Snap Shots: Scanning of Indian Rural Landscapes In the travel writings of William Dalrymple

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### **Abstract**

*This research paper focuses on the representation of the rural issues as capturing the attention of the foreign writers who visit India with or without certain predetermined design and thereafter documenting their visits to the world outside their impressions about India as well as the pattern of the issues arresting their attentions and their latent motives behind capturing such issues in general, and William Dalrymple's representation of certain issues of the Indian Countryside in his travel book *The Age of Kali* in particular.*

*This study focuses on how the Indian landscape; more particularly the Rural Regions, is captured in the travel writings of William Dalrymple, a Scotsman, who has made India his second home. The study would also focus on to what extent "the common knowledge that the life in Post-Colonial India is marked by Internal clashes among people, especially inter-communal hatreds, jealousies, rivalries, struggle for power and survival, selfish motives masquerading as political service" is justified from the literary and historic perspectives. About 60-70 percent of Indian population lives in villages, finds no effective facelift and the plight of the villages remains the same even after six to seven decades of Independence. The issues as they are presented in the chapter 'In Rajasthan' in the travel book of William Dalrymple 'The Age of Kali'; are those extreme ones that they gained the stature of National Debate and all the national and international media came forward and provided a platform to discuss the validity of such occurrences at the time juncture when the claims of modernization and advancement at all fronts of social life are sounded with great pomp and gong.*

### **Key Words**

*Travel writing, caste wars, sati, child marriages.*

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“No country in the world furnishes such dramatic and thrilling news paper material as India.... [a place where] the greatest human drama of the world is being enacted.”

-Edward Holton James (I Tell Everything: The Book on India)

(Geneva: Imprimerie Kundig, 1931) 9-11, 94

India's diverse religious cultural and political climate has provided the India-observers with a formidable range of issues to absorb. India, being the land of villages, and the stress on the recording the life-styles of simpler people before the changes in the wake of Industrial, administrative and missionary largely ushered in through the colonial rule, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, many anthropologists and travelers from the Western World came as outsiders and stayed for more than a year in the Rural Habitats with some renewing visits. And their interest in the villages was on the grounds that the village was a reflection of the regional peculiarities and a part of Indian tradition.

People visiting India from Western World find great fascination for the diversified Indian culture. For them the diversified issues of the Indian traditional life appeal as “the Shifting sets of a Kaleidoscope”. The social issues like 'Child-Marriages', 'Poverty', 'Racism', 'Caste-Issues', attract their attentions and some writers focus with softer critical gaze on such tough issues; others try to expose them in the name of atrocious handlings of the human rights and in some others try to emboss them vehemently with prejudiced practices that it seems there is a deliberation of making right the historic wrongs. This study focuses on how the Indian landscape; more particularly the Rural Regions, is captured in the travel writings of William Dalrymple, a Scotsman, who has made India his second home.

The study would also concentrate the focus on to what extent “the common knowledge that the life in Post-Colonial India is marked by Internal clashes among people, especially inter-communal hatreds, jealousies, rivalries, struggle for power and survival, selfish motives masquerading as political service” is justified from the literary and historic perspectives. The village life and culture, as about 60-70 percent of Indian population lives in villages, finds no effective facelift and the plight of the villages remains the same even after six to seven decades of Independence. The issues as they are presented in the chapter 'In Rajasthan' in the travel book of William Dalrymple 'The Age of Kali'; are those extreme ones that they gained the stature of National Debate and all the national and international media came forward and provided the platform to discuss the validity of such occurrences at the time juncture when the claims of modernization and advancement at all fronts of social life are sounded with great pomp and gong.

India and Indian Culture has remained a point of curiosity for the world outside, and as the consequences of such magnetic allurements many a sailors left their shores in order to embrace the Indian soil. These activities have continued from time ancient. Even it would not be exaggeration in pointing out that the seeds of Western-Colonialism might be traced deep into these attractions. From the time ancient, many traders, philosophers, backpackers, travelers and political invaders have made India their fond destination. During the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, whole of European Dynasties made it an untold competition among themselves to make India their colony. These attractions and incessant efforts from the European colonizers India came under their clutch and it added many chapters in the history of India and world at large. .

In the introduction William Dalrymple announces 'The Age of Kali' is "a collection of peripatetic essays, a distillation of ten year's travel around the Indian subcontinent." These essays and encounters have been, as he himself states at the very outset, conceived during working on his second book 'City of Djinns'. Being a traveler, journalist and Historian- the varied and eerie things about this part of the globe attracts him. And the outcome of his toil on the socio-political conditions of these Asian nations is –this collection of essays.

The title of the book bears the reference to the Hindu mythological reference of labeling of the four different epochs of time. In the introduction- Dalrymple tells the tale of his selection of the title. Explaining his point he notes:

*"The book's title is a reference to the concept in ancient Hindu cosmology that time is divided into four great epochs. Each age (or yug) is named after one of the four throws, from best to worst, in a traditional Indian game of dice; accordingly, each successive age represents a period of increasing moral and social deterioration. The ancient mythological Golden Age, named after the highest throw of dice, is known as the Krita Yug, or the age of Perfection. As I was told again and again on my travels around the subcontinent, India is now in throes of the Kali yug, the Age of Kali, the lowest possible throw, an epoch of strife, corruption, darkness and disintegration."* (Dalrymple, xi)

On witnessing the bloodshed violence spread throughout the subcontinent, he states, he feels convinced that the Age of Kali has in reality cuffed the human race here, and made them thirsty of each other's blood- no matter whatever is the ground. Be it social, political or the religious, or on the grounds of morality, status or family feuds, the human race seems on the dagger drawing stance. Tolerance and broad-mindedness are no longer in the index of human virtues, rather they are considered to be the attributes of weakness in the social arena. Man finds himself entangled with his own fellow people and he feels he

has to struggle hard to get what, he thinks, is essential for his well-being and happiness. The weakest points of Democracy have got surfaced and the reins of power have been grabbed by the persons with criminal backgrounds....

What captures Dalrymple's attention are the grounds gravely fixed on the stark reality of commonplace life. He describes how caste, crime, money and muscle power have a stranglehold on rural north Indian society, particularly Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan where women are raped, and caste based militias kill each other with impunity. The agencies of administration and police are often in collusion with the criminals. He also tries to understand the leagues of the convicted murderers to win the elections, the student unions' fascination for the power game of politics for that their use of guns and grenades when actually books and journals should be their concerns. On the whole, it is all about what William comes across during his travels across the Indian subcontinent.

William's travels in the Rajasthan State bring him at the close quarters of the unique socio-political traditions of this Land of the Kings. Quite different from that of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, but the issues based on the same line of caste-wars and higher-lower division of society-- capture his attention and the essays voice the great drift between the modernistic developing India and the rural sociological forces that struggle to keep hold of what has remained in prominent existence for centuries in the name of conventions.

The title '*In Rajasthan*', the second one on the Index, presents three articles. '*The Sad Tale of Bahveri*' presents the painful case of Bahveridevi. She was raped by the socially and politically privileged person and his men of her own village only at the fault of her that they doubted she provided information to the government machinery about the child-marriage in the said man's family. Not only was she raped in her farm in front of her husband, but was boycotted by the whole village on the grounds that she was a 'prostitute' herself and by lodging complaint against village's reputed people on the allegation of rape, she had brought shame on their village. '*Caste Wars*' presents another grave picture of society of Rajasthan. It documents that even at the end of the twentieth century/turn of twenty first century – still the society is segregated on the grounds of caste in some regions of Rajasthan.' '*Sati Mata*' looks into the debated case of 'Sati' at Deorala village near Jaipur. Here, the ancient Hindu practice of 'Sati'- i.e. ritually burning the widow of the dead person to death in the cremation pyre was attempted to be revived. He sincerely tries to investigate whether the issue involved the voluntary selection of the lady to embrace death through the ancient tradition or was it the case of honour killing in which the lady was compelled against her will to die in the name of tradition?

### **The Sad Tale of Bahveri Devi**

The sad tale of Bahveri Devi is William's close following of an atrocious incident with a poor lower caste lady in the village called Batteri. Having come to know about the incident through the news paper reporting, William visits the village personally and witnesses the real hostile treatment to the victim by the entire village community. He also observes the near wreckage spirits of the victim's family, and brings forth the facts of the whole matter in journalistic way.

The village of destination, Batteri falls some fifty kilometres away from the nearest city Jodhpur. William sets out in the company of Sanjiv, a journalist from Jaipur.... Though he is going there to have a close look at the case of Bahaveri Devi, his gaze never misses the to view and narrate the landscape outside as the car travels from the urban to country side of Rajasthan. And the same narration also stands symbolic to the mental landscape of the Bahveri Devi.

*"For a while the country is green and fertile. Sometimes you turn a corner and the fields ahead blaze bright yellow with ripening crop of spring mustard. But the further you drive, the drier and drier it becomes. Winter wheat gives way to drooping sunflowers; dust-devils circle; melon beds tangle amid the sand flats of the scrub. Turning right off the tarmac road and across a level crossing, you pass for miles amid mile along the narrowing dirt tracks the settlements grow poorer; the camel throne closes in. The colour drains away, but for the odd flash of red sari as a woman winds her way to well."(Dalrymple,99)*

The village appears *"a silent, half deserted and strangely sinister place"*; and the first responses to their inquiry about Bahaveri's address make them aware about Bahveri and her family's plight. She is openly addressed with insulting terms 'bitch', 'liar' etc, and held responsible for bringing shame on their village.

Since from all sides Bahveri was considered the root of all the troubles in the village and had brought the outside agencies to intervene into the matters which could have been easily resolved within the village by their own panchayat...she and her family were thrown out of all the social circles and they led the lives of total boycott.

The real trouble stood at the issue of child marriages at Badri's place. Badri Gujjar was the local serpanch and the political leader of the district's dominant caste, the Gujjars; whereas Bahveri was the 'sathin' (a lady social as well as medical worker who instruments awareness among the ladies of the local area). As per her responsibility, Bahveri tried to prevent Badri from marrying his one year old granddaughter as he

infringed the law by doing so. Badri's political and social status helped him and the marriages went on despite Bahveri's repeated warnings. But Bahveri's, a lower caste ladies' intervention in his family affairs seemed a sort of dent to his social prestige', Badri publicly vowed to teach Bahveri a lesson.

In his rage to avenge his insult, Badri and his associates captured Bahveri and beat her husband and raped her. By doing this they wanted to show her her place and position. Badri was sure that his political background was strong enough to subdue any possible reactionary steps by Bahveri.

In fact, Badri was right. Initially there was no support and sympathy from any side that considered Bahveri's pains as any matter of consideration. On the contrary, Bahveri became the butt of shame for the village whose lies incurred a great damage to the village's reputation.

William here pin points the social as well as the political dominance and arrogance of the upper castes that the lower caste society member is not even supported by the other fellow beings of his/her own caste; and there is a total boycott. Even, the legal proceedings were kept deliberately slow and lazy that ultimately helped to paralyze the case.

William finds entirely another version of the story at Badri Gujjar's place. Even the claim was Badri and his son were not even present in the village when there was a tussle between Bahveri's husband and the village priest over the issue of a cow's ownership. And the rape issue was Bahveri's invention just as a woman of a mean and base character could do nothing else than this.

William too felt the same when he heard the police officer confirming Bahveri's being type of a base character and might be lying in order to avenge her insult...and on this grounds, as he claims, he lost all his interests in the case and dropped the idea to consider it with any seriousness.

But the development in the case after the entry of Kavitha Srivastav, changed the whole course of the event. Being the trainer of Bahveri, she had full trust on Bahveri and her second motive was not just to secure justice to Bahveri but also to set an example in the society that law was sovereign, otherwise she knew the social awakening that had started taking place in the comparatively highly conventional rural areas of Rajasthan through the system of '*sathins*' would meet an utter failure.

Kavitha's efforts reaped good fruits for Bahveri and ultimately justice N. M. Tibrewal, the High Court Judge made severe comments on the 'highly dubious' role of the police in the entire legal investigation and imprisoned the accused.

On getting the news of Bahveri's triumph, with revived interests in the case, Dalrymple once again visits Batteri. He notes on this second visit the villagers' attitude towards Bahveri was greatly changed, Bahveri herself too appeared relaxed with a sense of satisfaction generated through having received the justice. The plight at the Badri's place was now weaker, Dalrymple notes, as all the working males had been imprisoned; there was no body to take charge of the agriculture activities and the things became hard on their part.

### **Caste Wars** **Jodhpur, Rajasthan, 1990**

In this essay, the focus concentrates upon the atrocious attack on Dr. Tyagi's dispensary set up at Gdadi village near Jodhpur. As per, Dr. Tyagi about three truck loads of high-caste Rajput youth raided his campus and turned everything into ashes---*"everything we had built up over seven years."*

The reason why the high upper caste Rajput hates the mission and the activities of Dr. Tyagi is simple and linear. Dr. Tyagi's institution tries to literate and educate the 'Harijans' or 'the so called untouchables'. Dr. Tyagi feels that because of his welfare courses for the downtrodden, the upper castes are getting deprived of their traditional stock of 'labourers' and the 'doers of their dirty jobs'. And this aggravates them towards his activities.

But, Dr. Tyagi's logic is really impressive when he says:

*"An institution like ours needs such incidents if it is to regenerate forward. It highlights the injustice the Harijans are facing." And very strikingly makes a point to Dalrymple, "You yourself wouldn't have come here if this had not happened." (Dalrymple, 112.)*

Dalrymple brings out many facts regarding the rigid caste system in the Hindu society especially in the villages of Rajasthan. He aptly observes:

*"In West, as everywhere in the world, there is a caste system of sorts, and dress is an important element of it: a pin stripe suit and tie places the wearer in one caste, a workman's dirty overalls in another. What is different about the Indian model is its rigidity and its central place in Hindu philosophy."*

*In much of rural India, caste still defines not only what you wear, but where you live, what tread you follow, whom you marry, even the colour you paint your home. Every detail of life in the traditional Indian village, where eighty percent of Indians still live, is regulated.”*  
(Dalrymple , 115)

Not only this, Dalrymple drives his point home by bringing into the span of discussion the fact that such deep rooted 'caste-system' can create a political and social havoc and a movement, massacres and murders throughout the whole Indian sub-continent. He brings into discussion the issue of the 'Mandal Commission's provisions for the Reservation of posts in Government jobs for Dalits'. These provisions made the upper caste youth perceive that their rights to have government jobs are shrinking and they literary opened agitation against the Government. In one such event of expression of the protest against the provision of Mandal Commission, Rajiv Goswami, a young man from a middle class Punjabi Brahmin family, set himself ablaze and died. Rajiv's death proved catalytic agent and added fuel to the protests movement.

The caste system is so deeply rooted in the Indian society that the upper castes feel the increased ratio of reservation quota would turn the hierarchy upside down and the persons of the lower castes would begin to enjoy more success and power in the time to come. But, William also puts the case of the Dalit making success on their own by citing the case of Gadvada village near Jodhpur. Here the 'Harijans' have obtained great economical success in their leather work business, and set a grand example of upward progress.

Still in the majority cases the 'harijans' find their place at the lowest and be the butt of hatred with no apparent crime on their part. And, Dalrymple ends his discussion that with this kind of situations being prevalent, especially in the rural regions of Rajasthan, one can just hope for the removal of the stigma of the caste system in the course of time and with the better fruits of spread of education.

### **Sati Mata**

In this essay Dalrymple picks up the most debated issue of reviving the age old tradition of Sati.

As per the incident, in the Deorala village, on 4 September 1987 Roop Kamwar, a young and '*exceptionally beautiful*' 18 year old girl mounted her late husband's pyre and was bernt to death. Roop's husband had died after a brief illness. Since they belonged to the higher Rajput caste, there was no possibility of re-marriage of this childless eighteen year



old and 'exceptionally beautiful' widow. And as per the incident narrated by the family members of her in-laws,

*"The following morning, (she) the young widow appeared at the door of the family's eighteen-century haveli. She was dressed in her finest wedding sari, decked in jewelry, with her hands brightly painted with bridal henna....."*

*"They say she firmly resisted al attempts, by both her in-laws and the village Brahmins, to dissuade her from becoming a Sati."*

*"They say she smiled beautifully from the pyre as the flames danced around her." (Dalrymple, 125)*

What interests and rather puzzles Dalrymple is the multifaceted stories being weaved around the whole incident. Even the media industry, the most responsible social enterprises go on reporting the news in unauthentic baseless vein.

Dalrymple makes it clear from his study of the whole incident and after having done his personal investigations that on this issue there are two forking streams of the Indian society:

*"The issue highlights a national divide in India, showing the growing mental gulf that now separates the towns from the villages of the sub-continent, a gulf into which all discussion of the Deorala sati has become lost. Most secular urban Indians, and especially the feminist lobby, have started from the assumption that in the late twentieth century no educated woman could possibly commit sati, and that Roop Kanwar's sati could only have been forced. The villagers of Rajasthan, male and female, have very different perspective "...in rural Rajasthan the villagers are quite unrepentant, and continue piously to revere past satis." (Dalrymple, 128-129)*

Even the fact that over 750,000 people turning up at the site of sati at Deorala village and four hundred turning up to worship sati mata everyday even after seven months of the incident demonstrates the huge drift in the perspective.

Article 17 of the Indian Constitution reads:

"'Untouchability' is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of 'Untouchability' shall be an offence in accordance with law."

Bhavari was gang raped on September 22, 1992 in retaliation for her activities, and then faced hostile police machinery that refused to register the case, and a male doctor at the

primary health center refused to conduct a medical examination. The medical examination was finally conducted after 52 hours, leading effectively to the destruction of evidence of rape. The trial at the sessions court began only in October 1994 and the judgment which was passed chose to disregard the evidence of Bhavari Devi and her husband Mohan (who had witnessed the rape) and to give undue weight to the medical evidence. In passing his judgment, the judge commented that:

“The court is of the opinion that Indian culture has not fallen to such low depths; that someone who is brought up in it, an innocent, a rustic man, will turn into a man of evil conduct who disregards caste and age differences and becomes animal enough to assault a woman.” [Rajagopal and Dutta, 28]

Thus, the statements in the judgment itself contradict the above quoted Article 17. And what is more alarming is the trial judge’s acquittal of the accused on the grounds that “rape is usually committed by the teenagers, and since the accused are middle-aged and therefore respectable, they could not have committed the crime. *An upper caste man could not have defiled himself by raping a lower-caste woman.*”

In the caste and political power games of the issue, a new dimension that is illuminated is the issue of poverty. As Aruna Roy aptly pin points: “Bhanwari Devi’s valiant battle in Rajasthan has taught us the importance of looking at violence against women in poverty debate. Here, again, poverty has been a critical factor---for Bavari Devi to fight her battle, she has to be able to afford the fees of a lawyer. “

The root cause of the whole Bhanwari issue is the evil of child marriages still prevalent in the rural regions. Mahatma Gandhi denounced this system from all the perspectives. He expressed his views against this evil at every possible opportunity, and in *Young India*, he mentions under the title “Curse of Child Marriages” that the practice of child marriage is not only weakening and harmful to the young age girls who become mothers owing to such marriages but the generation thus delivered face severe problems. And even after seven decades, the same issue causes troubles draws attention to the needs of social awakening.

The same concern may be expressed for the ‘Sati’ issues. As for Darymple’s attractions and interests in the issue of Sati , a nice explanation is found when John Staton Hawley confesses “ Modern research confirms what traditional Brahminical treatises imply—that ‘sati’ has always been very much exception rather than the rule in Hindu life. Yet, from the time of Marco Polo until well into Nineteenth century (Sati was officially abolished in Bengal in 1929), Westerners publishing dairies of their travels in India always included a chapter on Sati they had witnessed.

Thus, capturing of these three issues bring on the surface and make the point of debate how on one front India's infrastructural development is claimed with pomp and gong, the issues of upper –lower caste disseminations, caste issues and the attempts or the claims to revive the superstitious traditions like Sati show much work still remains to be done at the rural regions of the nation.

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