
UNIT I PASSAGES TO INDIA

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this unit is to offer a point of entry into the novel *A Passage to India* by looking at the causes, the route, and the consequences of journeys in history and in fiction undertaken to reach India. Forster's understanding of various colonialisms will be considered so as to lead up to the novel itself.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

It is a commonplace in nineteenth century European writing to assume that a passage made from England to India entails a complete revolution in cultural codes and values. Such a journey made in a P. and O., or a Peninsular and Oriental liner is loaded with a sense that the English voyager who makes it will feel a severance from the only civilised world known to him/her at Port Said, at the head of the Suez Canal. It is a journey with many resonances which are frequently contradictory. To begin with, the trip is heavy with a sense of loss. The known world has to be given up for the unknown and of course — so goes the common assumption — that which is known has to be superior to that which is unknown.

At the same time, political and moral imperatives make such a passage to India not only necessary but wholly admirable. **The business of empire involves not only the political governance of the conquered country, and the economic control of its markets, but the education and enlightenment of its subject peoples.** Hence the idea of the civilising mission to the colonised develops at this time, and its best-known expression of course comes in Rudyard Kipling's 1899 poem, 'The White Man's Burden'.

Take up the White Man's burden
Send forth the best ye breed
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives' need;
To wait in heavy harness,
On fluttered folk and wild

Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half-devil and half-child.

All the premises on which this writing rests can and must be interrogated. **First** why are the colonised never granted the status of their own human individuality? They are described as wild beasts (who have been captured with difficulty) who are either demonic or immature. In no case are they seen as adults capable of deciding their own political and cultural destinies. **Next** why is only one value-system — that cherished by Caucasians — seen as possessing cultural superiority? There is no sense that the subject-peoples might have developed competing systems of their own which possess equal validity. **Then** why is Empire-building so entirely perceived as being a male activity? It remains debatable as to whether women are not worthy of being involved in this task, or whether such a task is not worthy of women. **Finally** why is it that when those who carry the White Man's burden are said to have gained the moral high ground, no mention is made of the political and economic gains that accrue to them? The use of the word 'burden' suggests that Empire entails moral advantages and practical disadvantages. In fact as our century has shown, the reverse is true.

I make these points not to demolish Kipling who is an incredibly complicated writer but to suggest that — writing as he does at the high noon of Empire — it is useful to pick up notes on which Forster — who writes in the twilight of Empire — sounds variations. The complexities that surround a journey out of England to India are handled in an 1890 poem by Kipling, 'The Exiles Line' which sets out the dynamics of the P. & O. voyage:

Linked in the chain of Empire one by one,
Flushed with long leave or tanned with many a sun,
The Exiles' Line brings out the exiles' line,
And ships them homeward when their work is done.

Bound in the wheel of Empire, one by one,
The chain-gangs of the East from sire to son,
The Exiles' Line takes out the exiles' line
And ships them homeward when their work is done.

The Exiles' Line is of course the Peninsular and Oriental Shipping Company whose passengers, the exiles line or the generations of Englishmen who serve their country while stationed in India, no doubt shoulder the white man's burden. But look at the complex little eddies of meaning here. Isn't there somewhere the notion that Empire-building is vaguely a criminal activity? Else why would Empire-builders be bound on the wheel, or indeed be part of chain-gangs, serving their sentence? The 'chain of Empire', the 'wheel of Empire' and 'the chain-gangs' all evoke a world of crime and punishment. Most of all, a passage to India is fraught with a sense of misery contingent on the exile from the known, the familiar, and the loved world that it entails.

Simultaneously however there is sometimes a sense of liberation that is the result of such a journey. The unacceptable face of Empire has what appears to be its most infamous expression in lines like these from Kipling's poem 'Mandalay': 'Ship me somewhere east of Suez where the best is like the worst, Where there aren't no Ten Commandments and a man can raise a thirst'. Here the suggestion seems to be that people like the speaker — who is socially and economically challenged — might find love and comfort more easily 'East of Suez' (in other words, on the Indian subcontinent) than in England because of the relaxation in social and moral codes that characterises South Asia. The question that remains is, does this sense of liberation — that is one result of a journey to India — have an acceptable face as well?

1.2 TITLE OF THE TEXT

1.2.1 Whitman's Poem as Source

As to the question we took up in at the end of the previous section, the answer is: Apparently it does. The more philosophically acceptable face of such a voyage may be seen in Walt Whitman's poem 'Passage to India' which in turn was a part of his epic *Leaves of Grass*. I give below an extended quotation so that its meaning may come across

Passage to India !

Lo, soul, seest thou not God's purpose from the first ?
The earth to be spanned, connected by network,
The races, neighbours, to marry and be given in marriage,
The oceans to be crossed, the distant brought near,
The lands to be welded together.

Then not your deeds only O Voyagers, O scientists and inventors, shall be justified,
All these hearts as of fretted children shall be soothed,
All affection shall be fully responded to, the secret shall be told.
All these separations and gaps shall be taken up and hook'd and link'd together,
The whole earth, this cold, impassive, voiceless earth, shall be completely justified.
Nature and man shall be disjoined and diffused no more,
The true Son of God shall absolutely fuse them.
(O pensive soul of mine — O thirst unsatisfied — waitest not there ?
Waitest not haply for us somewhere there the Comrade perfect ?)

Initially this kind of writing seems both to exalt India and to exult in India as well. India appears to be at the centre of a grand providential design, and seems to stand forth as a miraculously synthesising one at that. The synthesis which is hymned here is prophesied as working on many levels. Personal union between individuals is crowned in marriage. International and inter-racial harmony is celebrated as well. Explorers and scientists join hands in this cosmic dance so that no field of human activity is omitted. All alienations characteristic of life here on earth will be healed. Human and nonhuman worlds too shall come together. No voyage can be more evocative at once of both mystical promise and mystical fulfillment than this passage to India.

Nonetheless several questions are raised by this poem. First it offers an essentialist reading. How is it that the poem does not mention even one particularising feature of India, whether political, social or economic ? It would seem that the poet's engagement is only with a never-never-land of his creation which has nothing whatever to do with the sociological and cultural realities of the subcontinent. It is as if India has no right to any existence or reality of its own and exists only as a territory to be colonised and governed by the poet's imagination. Next India is shown not to be peopled by its own citizens with their aspirations and challenges but by an amalgam of abstractions — races, voyages, scientists and achievers. Again no attempt is made to engage with specificities such as class, caste, gender, religion that may be used to describe a multicultural society. Then the hectic certitudes of mysticism — union among all peoples, union among all life-forms, and ultimately union with the divine, follow quickly upon each other. What are the predicates of this triumphalism, and what has this triumphalism to do with India ? Finally who is the 'Comrade perfect' for whom the soul waits, out of all time and space ?

These are to my mind some of the questions raised by Whitman's poem which is the source for the title of Forster's own novel. Some of these questions are answered, and others are side-stepped in Forster's adaptation of the first line quoted above for his title. To this title we may now turn.

1.2.2 Forster's Adaptation

At first glance the distinction between Whitman's opening line and Forster's title seems trivial. All Forster seems to do is to slip in the indefinite article before Whitman's phrase so that it now reads '*A Passage to India*'. In reality though he accomplishes a good deal through this apparently insignificant gesture. Tentativeness takes the place of certainty. 'A' passage suggests there may be many more passages than the one taken by the writer or indeed by any one or all the characters. This sense of competing routes also helps decentre the notion of the supremacy of the writer. If no one route is superior to the other, his own imagination can no longer claim hegemony over his territory. We do not then as readers have the passive role of map-readers. You and I might, if we wish, claim the right and indeed the duty of cartographers or map-makers since the writer does not claim he has discovered the only, or even the best route to India. Against Whitman's sense of self-generated and self-sustained romanticism then, it seems to me that this is a more self-examining and self-critical **Modernism**. This does not suggest the death of **Romanticism** though, for the title is still built around the ideal of an open-ended journey. At the same time its tentativeness suggests that the title questions its own primacy.

Looking still at the title, it isn't possible for me to say whether Forster himself considers the predicates of race, class and gender which I criticised Whitman for ignoring. I would like though to indicate a few slight parallels between the two writers. Both wrote during the aftermath of wars that revolutionised their societies. Whitman wrote after the American Civil war that ultimately brought the industrialised North and the agrarian south together in the federation that we know today as the United States of America. More than a century down the road the position of Civil Rights in such a society — one of the stated war-aims of the Union — is continually debated. Yet Whitman's own enthusiasm for this democracy led him to write an epic for it, *Leaves of Grass*, of which 'Passage to India' is a part. Forster began writing *A Passage to India* before the First World War and before its publication witnessed both the formation and the emasculation of the League of Nations (the predecessor to the UNO) the decline of the British empire after the war, and the rise of Gandhi. His tentativeness thus is explicable. Thus there are continuities and discontinuities in their attitudes but I'm not sure this argument can be pushed much further. Instead I'd like to look at Forster's attitude to earlier passages to India and to earlier colonialisms and colonists. To illustrate my argument I will use Forster's writings around the time of the publication of *A Passage to India*.

1.3 EARLIER PASSAGES TO INDIA

1.3.1 Babar

In terms of the chronology of conquest the first invader of India whom Forster discusses at any length is Babar, the founder of the Mughal dynasty. At first Forster treats Babar's aggressive foreign policy as being pretty much a practical application of Machiavelli's theory of statecraft. Forster's introduction of Babar though is surprisingly disarming: 'At the time that Machiavelli was collecting materials for *The Prince*, a robber boy, sorely in need of advice, was scuttling over the highlands of Central Asia'. Indeed this seems at first disquieting. Why should the fact of foreign conquest, based only on force and with the sole purpose of pillage and loot be trivialised in this way? I suspect that Forster's sneaking admiration of Babar's love of life, of friends, and also Forster's enjoyment of Babar's prose-style (as seen in the latter's autobiography) have something to do with it. Had this been Forster's only response to an earlier invasion of India, it would have been immature and insignificant.

But Forster's position is more complicated than this. He goes on to use Babar's disparaging account of India as an early model of the antipathy between the conqueror

and the conquered. At first he seems to get a good deal of mileage out of this comparison and to be in agreement himself with Babar's lack of sympathy for India and also with the British residents in India (the **Anglo-Indians** as he calls them) who subscribe to this account: 'His description of Hindustan is unfavourable and has often been quoted with gusto by Anglo-Indians. "The people," he complains, "are not handsome, have no idea of the charm of friendly society, of frankly mixing together ... no good fruits, no ice or cold water, no good food or bread in their bazars, no baths or colleges ...' He has small patience with a race which has never found either aesthetic or moral excellence by focussing upon details. Just as Forster seems to agree with these conquerors — both of time past and of time present — he stands aside from their criticism. He does this not because he suddenly finds some hitherto unsuspected virtues in India. Quite the contrary. He does this because he locates a surprising virtue in Babar that he does not find in the British. This is the ability Babar shows to respond to a value which according to Forster is central to all Indian cultures, the value of renunciation. Babar gives up his life so that his son Humayun might live.

Nothing in [Babar's] life was Indian, except, possibly, the leaving of it. Then, indeed, at the supreme moment, a strange ghost visits him, a highly unexpected symptom occurs — renunciation. Humayun, his son, lay sick at Agra, and was not expected to recover. Babar, apprised that some sacrifice was necessary, decided ... that it must be self-sacrifice. He walked ceremonially three times round the bed, then cried, 'I have borne it away'. From that moment...[Babar] ceased to exist ... like the smoke from the burning ghats that disappears into the sky.

I find this remarkable for what it tells me of Forster's understanding of the relationship between a ruler and his subjects. First it suggests that Forster's concern is not with governance as an end in itself but with the way in which the governance of a culture is impossible without an identification between the conqueror and the core-values of the conquered. What makes Babar a sympathetic figure for Forster is his grasping — accidentally or deliberately — of the Indian value of renunciation. I realise that this lays Forster open to the charge of essentialism. Why should he write as if there is only one cultural value-system in India, and why should he so arbitrarily place renunciation within it? Is Forster not guilty of continuing the cliché of the 'spiritual' East? Still, I find the passage worthwhile because it shows how Forster goes along with the mainstream culture of his time — that of the British ruling class — **only** upto a point. **First** he shares the criticism of India they make using Babar's own words. **Next** he goes on to show that Babar developed beyond this point and that he values Babar's later position of appreciation at least as much if not more than his earlier depreciation of Indian culture. **Then** the episode suggests Forster's own sympathy with the mainstream not of an early coloniser (Babar) nor of a contemporary coloniser (the British) but of the colonised. **Finally** the simile of the burning ghats shows how the expansion of Forster's political and cultural sympathies translate directly into an increase in the resources of his prose-style.

1.3.2 The East India Company

What happens then when Forster examines the cultural sympathies of the British? For a start he makes the point that as a nation and also as a colonial power the chief vice of the British people is their hypocrisy. By this he means that, as he explains, the British are guilty not of conscious wrongdoing but of what he calls 'unconscious deceit' which has led them to be thought of as '... the island of hypocrites, the people who have built up an Empire with a Bible in one hand, a pistol in the other, and financial concessions in both pockets' (*Abinger Harvest*, 20). Yet again Forster's criticism seems to be directed at the attitude of the coloniser rather than against the political and cultural realities of colonisation. He objects to the unhealthy nexus between empire, religion and commerce. earlier in this set of 'Notes on the English Character' Forster has already drawn attention to the strong commercial instincts in the British national character which have led to the description of the British as 'a nation of shopkeepers'. The empire was essentially a

commercial proposition with the colonies providing the colonial power with free markets, cheap human resources, raw materials and opportunities for employment. And as Forster explains elsewhere in the essay, religion becomes of significance to him only to the extent that it brings humanity into direct contact with the divine, When it functions only as another manifestation of imperialism and entails the demolition of other faiths, it becomes meaningless.

It is exactly this spirit of commercial aggrandisement based on force that characterises the establishment of the East India Company. Despite opposition for the Portuguese who had already come out as traders, the Company established factories at Surat (1612), Madras (1639), Bombay (1661) and Calcutta (1690). The Company however had been granted its original charter — giving it the right to trade — by Elizabeth I in 1600. This is the way in which Forster condemns the Elizabethan age: 'The Elizabethans, even the greatest of them ... increased our [i.e., Britains'] political power and glorified our race and are rightly commended on public occasions. But they were at once too violent and too hazy to contribute much towards the development of the human mind' [Advani, 173]. I do not suggest this is a fair comment on the Elizabethan age. But I offer it as a development of Forster's views about an empire built on commerce. Concerning the earlier essay I'd suggested the factors that annoyed Forster by their presence in a colonial situation, namely trade and religion. To my mind this later essay suggests the factor that annoys Forster by its absence from a colonial situation, namely philosophy. He indicates that colonialism in India — as carried out by the East India Company — prevented any adventure of the mind. In this sense Forster believes, since it blocked out thought, the Empire as founded by the company could only be temporary.

1.3.3 Government by the Crown

However unphilosophical Forster might find the colonialism of the company though, he finds the colonialism of his day and age even more dispiriting, as the imperial imagination grows increasingly mean-minded and alienated from Indian cultural realities.

After the Mutiny and the transference from John Company to the Crown the change began. The new type of official ... was harder worked, less independent and less in touch with the Indian socially So it followed that our conceptions of the land grew more sterile. The glamour of the nawabs and missionaries had gone, the kindly light of Tod and Sleeman had gone also. Our guides now were often Anglo-Indian ladies and their theme the disaster of intermarriage; that disaster obsessed and obsesses then, and the novels that exhibit it read as though written on an elephant's back, high above the actualities of the bazaar. We were assured that there was no religion in the country, no literature, no architecture Official enthusiasm had petered out (Das, 1).

I don't quite see the point that Forster makes here as regards his specific examples. James Tod and William Sleeman wrote about the history of Rajasthan and the suppression of the Thugs in Central India respectively during the time of the same Company Raj which (I suggested earlier) Forster criticises sharply. Forster's general point however is well taken. Colonialism, when it leads to an alienation of the rulers from the ruled, does make any form of art impossible. Religion, literature and architecture are alike enfeebled because there is no dialogue between the ruled and the rulers. As a result while Company rule had used commerce to demolish thought, Forster condemns its successor, the direct rule of the Crown even more strongly. For under the Crown the imaginations of both the colonisers and the colonised were vitiated, as the former trivialised the artistic achievements of the latter. 'Enthusiasm petered out' precisely because it was official enthusiasm. And this official apathy is precisely the reverse of the sentiments of Babar as Forster interprets these. Babar, according to Forster, attacks the daily realities of Indian life and yet remained in touch with the realities of the Indian spirit. The Civil Service on the contrary, which administers India on behalf of the Crown ignores the daily realities of Indian life and is therefore ignorant of realities of the Indian spirit. Forster's attitudes to

the three colonialisms he examines, those of Babar, the East India company and the British government thus vary considerably. In general though Forster's attitude to a particular colonialism depends on the attitude it shows to the colonised territory, India.

1.4 FORSTER'S ATTITUDE BEFORE HIS FIRST PASSAGE TO INDIA

1.4.1 As an Individual

What then was Forster's own attitude to India before he came out on his first trip to this country in 1912? To begin with, he stressed the unofficial character of his visit. I suggested a little earlier that Forster believed that the official stand on Indian achievements was one of sterile apathy. In contrast he insisted on the personal aspect of his journey, at least in part because his feeling for India was coloured by two friends, Syed Ross Masood whom he had tutored briefly and Malcolm Darling, a college-mate who had gone on to the Indian Civil Service. Of Masood Forster wrote: 'My own debt to him is incalculable. He woke me up out of my suburban and academic life, showed me new horizons and a new civilisation, and helped me towards the understanding of a continent. Until I met him, India was a vague jumble of rajahs, sahibs, babus and elephants, and I was not interested in such a jumble, who could be? He made everything real and exciting as soon as he began to talk' (*A Passage to India* 7-8. Hereafter, *API*). I find this interesting because — whether or not Forster is to be believed here — the extract links India with a sense of liberation that earlier writers [see 1.1 and 1.2.1] had also noticed. The extent to which Forster rises above the jumble of clichés of which he writes here is of course debatable. The very fact though that he recognises such a jumble suggests the level of self-awareness of his personal response to India. This accent on individuality was valuable to Forster for another reason too. Throughout his career as a novelist he insisted on the need of an artist to engage with people rather than with faceless groups saying 'I am a novelist and my business lies with individuals not with classifications'. The significance of India to him, he insists, rests on the basis of a personal friendship.

My connection with India is peculiar and personal. It started because I made friends with an Indian, but for him I might never have gone to his country or written about it

It is on the basis of personal relationship that my connection with this strange country rests. I didn't go there to govern it or to make money or to improve people. I went there to see a friend. [Ganguly, 299]

I have some questions concerning Forster's attitude to India as expressed in these extracts. First, of what value is the response of an individual to the problems generated by a system, in this case the system of imperialism? A personal response alone is unlikely to bring about significant political or cultural change. Forster's remarks are typical of the retreat of liberalism into its own personal world when confronted by a political challenge too large for it to handle. Next, India is not necessarily stranger than any person or nation who describes it in this way. All too often the strange is either dismissed as inferior or worthy only of being ruled. Yet I believe there is some value in Forster's position. First he dissociates himself from the empire-commerce-religion nexus he has criticised elsewhere [see 1.3.2]. He stands aside from empire ('I didn't go there to govern') from commerce ('or to make money') and from religion ('to improve people'). To stand aside may empower him to criticise these forces more freely.

1.4.2 As a Novelist

Curiously enough this emphasis on personal relationships helped set Forster's next goal as a novelist. For Masood was the first person to urge Forster to write a novel on India.

He believed in Forster's ability to sympathetically feel for a situation even while analysing it. In 1911, a year before Forster's visit to India Masood wrote to make a suggestion: 'You know my great wish is to get you to write a book on IndiaIn you I see an oriental with an oriental view of life on most things Go on improving your imagination and with it your power of physically feeling the difficulties of another. That is what we call *tarass*' (Furbank, I,194). Again I find the assumption that race determines attitude disturbing. But it suggests yet again the way in which personal and novelistic pressures, so to speak, fuel each other to influence Forster's attitude before he embarked on his journey to India.

1.5 LET US SUM UP

A passage or journey from England to India as seen by an earlier writer like Kipling is complex. It denies Indians — the colonised — their right to their own political and cultural destinies. It upholds British culture over non-British cultures, marginalises women and morally exalts imperialists. Imperialism in turn carries contrary implications of exile, guilt and liberation. Simultaneously India is seen in Whitman's poem 'Passage to India' as the symbol of mystical fulfillment, which has both positive and negative results. While it exalts India it does not analyse it in terms of race, class and gender specificities. Forster's adaptation of Whitman's phrase for the title of his novel suggests a greater self-examination and a move from Romanticism to Modernism. It allows the reader her own point of view and requires her to make her own journey through the text. Forster wrote about three colonial regimes before the publication of *A Passage to India*. These were the governments of Babar, the East India Company and the Crown. His attitude to any colonising power is shaped in turn by what he regards as its attitude to its colony, India. So his approval of them declines accordingly in descending order. Finally Forster's own attitude to India was shaped by his personal relationships and his goal as a novelist. His close friend Syed Ross Masood suggested he write a novel about India, while praising Forster's quality of *tarass* or imaginative sympathy.

1.6 GLOSSARY

Anglo-Indians

Forster uses this term to denote British people who lived in India. Please do not confuse this with current usages

Cliche

A stereotyped hackneyed phrase.

Essentialism

A critical approach which suggests there are truths of universal accuracy and application.

Imperatives

Urgent, commanding requirements.

Interrogated

Questioned.

Modernism

A movement in the arts at the start of the twentieth century which uses devices such as multiple narratives, and points of view to offer a psychologically convincing presentation of reality. James Joyce and Virginia Woolf are among the modernists.

Romanticism

A movement in the arts at the beginning of the nineteenth century which suggests that subjective reality (the landscape of the mind) shapes objective reality (the external landscape). Wordsworth and Coleridge are among the early Romantics.

1.7 QUESTIONS

- Q 1. Outline the connotations of a passage to India in late nineteenth century writing. What are the positives and the negatives of such a passage ?
- Q 2. What is your understanding of the phrase, 'the White Man's burden' ? Analyse its implications.
- Q 3. Indicate the possible advantages and disadvantages in Forster's insistence on the personal quality of his response to India.

1.8. SUGGESTED READING

Primary material

E.M. Forster. *Abinger Harvest.* 1936, repr. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1974

Secondary material

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