

## KIPLING, RAILWAYS, AND THE *GREAT GAME*

Abdul Hamid Khan\* & Salman Hamid Khan\*\*

### Abstract

*The paper explores Rudyard Kipling's perspective on the importance of railways in India which is the theme of some of his poetic and prose work. Coupled with this, an overview of the importance of railways and its military, economic and social aspects in Central Asia, in the backdrop of the Great Game of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century between Russia and Britain is also offered. This study attempts to correlate the significance of the Trans-Caspian Railway (TCR), founded in 1879 and the North Western State Railway in British India formed seven years later in 1886. It also takes into account the railways' cultural importance for the people of Central Asia. The most important aspect of the subject under assessment is how the construction of railway lines worked as a device and a tool to strengthen the hold of both the colonizing powers. It is in this context that the poet and novelist Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) glorified the benefits of Indian railways as a stabilizing factor for the strength of the Raj. The paper attempts to establish that railways not only strengthened colonial rule in both Central Asia and India but brought significant social and economic changes in the lives of the people living on both sides of the border. The perspective here is a post-colonial one that offers insights on the effects of colonization, most importantly the modernizing agenda or the enlightenment package attached to the great design of imperialism and empire-building. But the picture that appears after the passing of colonization is hazy when looked at the hybridized and ambivalent view that Kipling held, and also taking into account the hegemony, control, and the politics of aesthetics.*

**Keywords:** Great Game, Trans-Caspian Railway, Rudyard Kipling, British India, Indian Railways

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\* Assistant Professor & Head of Department of English, Linguistics and Literature, Qurtuba University, Peshawar, Pakistan. Email: [a.h.k.aries@gmail.com](mailto:a.h.k.aries@gmail.com)

\*\* Lecturer in English, Govt. College Hayatabad and Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Qurtuba University, Peshawar. Email: [salmanhamidkhan1@gmail.com](mailto:salmanhamidkhan1@gmail.com)

During the nineteenth century political struggle between Czarist Russia and Victorian Britain ensued with both vying with each other for control in Asia. British India was well-established but had a difficult time controlling Afghanistan. Imperial Russia, on the other hand, was colonizing the Central Asia Khanate whose political and economic order was not strong enough to resist Russian involvement in Afghanistan. The bitter experience of the First Anglo-Afghan War of 1839-42 and the Second Anglo-Afghan War fought between 1878 and 1890 was another important factor. The British feared a Russian invasion of Afghanistan, which they considered their exclusive sphere of influence. The political, military and diplomatic struggle between the two rival empires culminated in the so-called *Great Game*, which began with the first Anglo-Afghan War and ended in the signing of the Anglo-Russian Convention in 1907. During this period a number of policy paradigms were seen in action by both the contestants. The Russian government began construction of the Trans-Caspian Railway (TCR), as one of the important military moves to control the Central Asian borders, which famous Russophobes like Kipling saw as an alarming situation fearing encroachment upon India. In response to the Russian initiative, the British too worked out a plan to construct a railway line to Torkham via the Khyber Pass and another one further south to the Iranian border through the Bolan Pass.

The TCR venture was a very ambitious project and aside from its military and strategic importance, particularly with reference to the power-play between Russia and Great Britain, it contributed to the modernization of Central Asia. Similarly, the Indian railways had the very same purpose which was to help maintain control of India and to glorify it as an agent of change. Kipling, in this context with works like *007*, *Among the Railway Folk* and *The Bridge Builders* and to some extent, *Kim*, refers to the benefits of railways in India.

*007* is an interesting short story telling of a particular locomotive, namely 007, in a railway workshop. It had some extraordinary qualities which none of the others of its type had. It was the product of Kipling's own imagination as no such ideal machine existed. However, he, with his love of machines, technology, and artifacts, created 007 with futuristic qualities.

Kipling's enthusiasm for all things related to railways could be judged by the fact that he gave human traits to the machines and sang praises to it. 007 was an eight-wheeled "American" loco, slightly different from others of its type, and was worth ten thousand dollars on the Company's books.<sup>1</sup>

The fascination of the writer with the prospects of an important project like the Indian Railway could not be exaggerated as this short work symbolized the romance of the British Empire, which for Kipling remained a lifelong obsession. The onomatopoeic device, the sound sequence of the

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<sup>1</sup> [www.kipling.org.007.html](http://www.kipling.org.007.html), pp 2-3 (accessed 17.03.2011).

moving locomotive is his idealism, which he sees in the overall framework of the so-called civilizing mission.

### **The Bridge Builders (1898)**

Kipling's short story *The Bridge Builders* is yet another example of his interests in railways as well as his glorification of colonial builders in India. Here one particular railway bridge crossing the River Ganges at Varanasi, the Kashi Bridge, the present-day Pandit Malvia Bridge, is the Centre of the story. In the story the Bridge was threatened by the flooding of the river. It contains a description of the ordeal, and of its Chief Engineer Findlay, his son Hitchcock, and Perro, the most impressive character in the story; a native 'Lascar, a Kharva from Bulsar familiar with every port between Rockhampton and London,'<sup>2</sup> face heroically and help avert a possible calamity. Two things are significant given the writer's praise of the British modernization agenda in India. One is the critical role the railways play in the sustenance of imperial power and the second is the benefits it brought to the local people. In this work too, the commitment of the British engineer is highlighted. Interestingly, however, the master-servant binary could also be seen working when Peeru, risking his own life, much like Ganga-Din, in the renowned eponymous poem of 1890 about a native water carrier who dies while taking water to the wounded and dying British soldiers on the battlefield.

### **Kim (1901)**

Rudyard Kipling's masterpiece *Kim* relates the story of the *Great Game* in a romanticized narrative. The main characters, Kim and an aged Tibetan lama, travel by railway. In order to glorify the success of the British colonization of India, the writer put words in the mouths of travelers as well as those of the main characters, praising Indian railways in all its glory. In a dramatic moment in the novel, Kipling vividly paints a picture to the readers when the protagonists enter the railway station, "They entered the fort-like railway station, black in the end of night; the electrics sizzling over the goods yard where they handle the heavy Northern grain-traffic."<sup>3</sup>

On the way to Umbala on an espionage mission, Kim and the lama board the train where people from different social and religious backgrounds travel. But it is the lama who is overawed by the sight of the railway station and the train which he, for the first time boards. "This is the work of devils! said the lama, recoiling from the hollow echoing darkness, the glimmer of rails between the masonry platforms, and the maze of girders above."<sup>4</sup>

Not content with the praise the writer bestows on the benefits of the Indian railways, he made the local passengers certify his claim of its

<sup>2</sup>Rudyard Kipling, *Short story*, "The Bridge Builder," Retrieved from <http://www.readbookonline.net/readOnline/2356>, accessed on 19.04.2011.

<sup>3</sup>Rudyard Kipling, *Kim*, (London: Macmillan, 1925).

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

magnificence. "Great is the speed of the train," said the banker, with a patronising grin. "We have gone farther since Lahore than thou couldst walk in two days: at evening, we shall enter Umballa."<sup>5</sup>

### ***THE WHITE MAN'S GAME***

"Warehouses, railway-sidings, and such are only counters in the White Man's Game, which can be swept up and re-dealt as the play varies."<sup>6</sup>

### ***Among the Railway Folk***<sup>7</sup>

Kipling's work, *Among the Railway Folk* (1899), is like a hymn praising the hardworking British colonial officials, busy running the Indian railways. Here he idealizes the life of a British railway settlement at Jamalpur, Bihar. These are people with a mission. The settlement is painted as a certain kind of *Shangri-la* where all things work under a system; a plan, perfect in all its aspects. "From St. Mary's Church to the railway station, and from the buildings where they print daily about half a lakh of tickets, to the ringing, roaring, rattling workshops, everything has the air of having been cleaned up at ten that very morning and put under a glass case."<sup>8</sup>

*Among the Railway Folks* is Kipling's ideal society where the white colonist lives in harmony with the natives with no signs of conflict, friction, or tension between them. The railway company is portrayed as an organization which patronized and felt duty-bound to care for its workers: "The 'Company,' who gives grants to the schools and builds the institute and throws the shadow of its protection all over the place, might help this scheme forward."<sup>9</sup>

Kipling was appreciative of the cooperation, of the natives who, hand in hand, made the railway initiative in India a great success. His bias, however, is too explicit to be ignored, "But one flying sentence goes straight to the heart. It is the cry of Humanity over the Task of Life, done into unrefined English."<sup>10</sup> "It was found anywhere you please between Howrah and Hoti Mardan; and here it is that the entire world may admire a prudent and far-sighted Board of Directors."<sup>11</sup>

It appeared an all-seeing vigilant micro chasm, where each part and particle worked in harmony and coordination that to the writer seems

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Kipling, Rudyard, *Letters of Travel 1892-1913*, Part 3,"The Fortunate Town", p.2 (accessed 17.10.2008).

<sup>7</sup>Kipling, Rudyard, *Among the Railway Folk* (orig., 1900). Retrieved from [www.ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/k/kipling/rudyard/railway/](http://www.ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/k/kipling/rudyard/railway/), accessed on 12.02.2011.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., Ch:2, p.1.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., Ch: 3, p. 1.

unparalleled. Notwithstanding the obvious praise for the so-called civilizing mission, the artist's representation succeeded in bringing home the healthy and constructive environment of this particular colonial settlement. Where ideally nothing appears to be impossible, "The Company does everything, and knows everything." The British administrators at Jamalpur, were benign and kindly and went out of the way to help the workers, not only supporting them financially by employing them, but also helping inculcate the spirit of hard work, which they otherwise lacked, "Let us go down southward to the big Giridih collieries and see the coal that feeds the furnace that smelts the iron that makes the sleeper that bears the loco that pulls the carriage that holds the freight that comes from the country that is made richer by the Great Company Bahadur, the East Indian Railway."<sup>12</sup>

### **The Trans-Caspian Railways<sup>13</sup>**

The idea to construct the Trans-Caspian Railway line was initiated by Czarist military strategists in Turkestan as part of their plan to connect the Turkmen towns of Ahal and Merv with Russia. The suggestion was put forward by Konstantin Petrovich von Kaufman (1818-82), the Governor-General of Russian Turkestan (1867-82), to the authorities in St. Petersburg in the 1870s. Various routes suggested by different officials were considered. Finally, the Panjdeh Incident of 1885, which brought Russia and Britain to the brink of war in Central Asia when Russia captured an Afghan border fort which the British thought presented a threat to British India but both sides backed down and war was avoided through diplomatic talks. As a result, however, Russia decided to extend the Trans-Caspian Railways eastwards from Kizil-Arvast.

The TCR reached Samarkand via Bukhara in 1888, where it halted for ten years, until it was extended to Tashkent and Andijan in 1898. The Tashkent Railway connecting the Trans-Caspian Military Railway with the network of other Russian and European railways was completed in 1906.<sup>14</sup> To journalist and historian Peter Hopkirk (1930-2014), who worked on Central Asia, particularly writing about the interesting episodes of the spy wars between Russia and Britain, are of special relevance. He also emphasized the crucial role the TCR was played in the *Great Game*, given its strategic and military dimensions. By the middle of 1888, it had reached Bokhara and Samarkand, and work on the final leg of its journey to Tashkent began.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> The Silk Road is the name of road network used for trade among the countries of Asia, Africa, and Europe. The name comes from the fact that this route was used for the silk trade with China.

<sup>14</sup> Retrieved from: [http://www.srilankaholidayhotels.com/wiki-Central Asian Railway](http://www.srilankaholidayhotels.com/wiki-Central_Asian_Railway) , accessed on 09.02.2011.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 438-39.

The author, while referring to the encounter of Czarist's Russia with the Central Asian Muslims Khanates, of the view that the interaction of the rising Russian Empire with the decaying socio-econo-mo-political system of Central Asia in the nineteenth century, resulted in reformation of the state and society. In this connection, he situated the crucial phase in the history of the Muslim states as the historical junction when Russia began to construct the Trans-Caspian Railways line through a treaty with Amir Muzaffar of Bukhara. (r. 1860-85). "A new era in Russia's relations with Bukhara began after the imperial government's decision to build a Central Asia railroad. The idea to construct a Trans-Caspian railway line was initiated by Czarist military strategists in Turkistan as part of their plan to connect the Turkmen towns of Ahal and Merv with Russia. The suggestion was put forwarded by Kaufman, the Governor General of Turkistan, to the authorities in St. Petersburg in the 1870s."<sup>16</sup> But the author noted that, "Because the primary purpose of the Trans-Caspian Railroad was to facilitate the military subjugation of the Turkmens and not primarily to promote trade, the line proved unsatisfactory as a major artery for Russian Central Asian commerce."<sup>17</sup>

The social and cultural impact of the TCR in the lives of the people of the Central Asian Khanate is an interesting aspect of the power struggle between the two Empires. Since it was a robust modernizing factor, these far-reaching aspects were highlighted by the historian of Russia, Ian Murray Matley, in his article "Industrialization" in Edward Allworth's edited work, "*Central Asia: A Century of Russian Rule.*" Russian intervention in modernizing the colony, particularly its agriculture, was more focused on increasing acreage for cotton production. "[O]ne of the main centers supplying cotton to Russia became the Farghana oblast [province] when the area sworn to cotton there rose 14 percent of the land farmed in 1885 to 44 percent in 1915."<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the industry that existed in India before British colonization was not "anything more than a rudimentary handicraft industry, with carpet and rug-making."<sup>19</sup> Though these developments continued even after 1907 when the rivalry between the two imperial powers formally ended, the impetus had been provided by an ambitious mega-project, namely the TCR. In the case of the Indian railways, which Kipling frequently travelled on and wrote about, it was also a catalytic element, even before their unrealized plan to lay a railway track up to Kabul.

## The Frontier Railways

<sup>16</sup> Sarfraz Khan, *Muslim Reformist Political Thought: Revivalists, Modernists and Free Will*, (London: Routledge, 2003): 223.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 327.

<sup>18</sup> Murray, Ian Matley, "Industrialization" in Edward A. Allworth, ed., *130 Years of Russian Domination: A Historical Overview*, (Raleigh, NC: Duke University Press, 1994): 309.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

In order to respond to the challenge posed by the construction of the Trans-Caspian Railway line, the British authorities in India began to plan a line to reach the border with Afghanistan and Iran. In 1857 Sir William Patrick Andrew (1806-87), Chairman of the Scinde, Punjab and Delhi Railway Company, founded in 1870, suggested that railway lines to the Bolan and Khyber passes would play a strategic role in responding to any Russian threat. Orders were given that a railway should be built to Quetta, near the Afghan border. This developed into a scheme for the line to eventually reach Kandahar.<sup>20</sup>

“The glaring inadequacy of India’s frontier communications, particularly its roads and railways, was now beginning to dawn on Calcutta and London.”<sup>21</sup> “In response to this threat Britain restarted work on the railway to Afghanistan. Over 320 kilometers long, the line reached Quetta in March 1887, through barren mountains inhabited by armed tribesmen.<sup>22</sup> Though not as effective in a military or a commercial context, the Indian railway project to reach the borders was not a modest effort. Writing on the threat posed by the Russian railway, Hopkirk quoted the popular General Frederick Roberts (1832-1914) affectionately known as “Bobs”, “There are no better civilizers than roads and railways.”<sup>23</sup> Based on the report by different intelligence sources, but most importantly, by George Nathaniel Curzon (1859-1925) in his famous book, *Russia in Central Asia in 1889, and the Anglo-Russian Question* (1889), the British authorities in London as well as in Calcutta were greatly alarmed and perturbed by the Russian advance in Central Asia. This resulted in planning for a railway track to be laid to the Indian border with Afghanistan, with the hope that it would be extended to Kabul.

### **The Afghan Emirite and the British Railway Initiative**

The history of the relations between British India and Afghanistan is a sad story of mistrust, betrayal, and suspicion. It ultimately resulted in three bloody wars which not only seriously questioned the ability of the British to control Afghanistan, but also unsuccessfully countered Russian influence. In this respect the story is not as fascinating and as romantic as the likes of Kipling would have liked to have imagined.

Amir Abdul Rahman (1840-1901), ruler of Afghanistan between 1880 and 1901, banned railways and the telegraph from entering Afghanistan in case they would be used in any British or Russian invasion of the country. Rehman commented that, “there will be a railway in Afghanistan when the

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<sup>20</sup> *Railway of Afghanistan: Afghan railroads, past, present and future*, Retrieved from <http://www.andrewgrantham.co.uk/afghanistan/railways/the-great-game>, p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> Hopkirk, Peter, *The Great Game: The Struggle for Empire in Central Asia*, (New York: Kodansha International, 1992): 438.

<sup>22</sup> *Railway of Afghanistan*, *ibid.* p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Hopkirk, *ibid.*, pp.439-440.

Afghans are able to make it themselves,” and, “as long as Afghanistan has not arms enough to fight against any great attacking power, it would be folly to allow railways to be laid throughout the country.” Rehman also forbade his subjects from travelling on the British line to Chaman,<sup>24</sup> the construction of which he described as “just like pushing a knife into my vitals.”<sup>25</sup>

The reaction on the part of British India to counter the Russian challenge in the shape of the TCR was two-pronged: to lay a railway line up to the Khyber Pass, and onward to Kabul if the Abdur Rahman gave his permission. Another line to the Bolan Pass planned to be extended to Kandahar in southern Afghanistan. Not only was the Emir opposed to the plan but so too were the local Afridi and Mohmand tribesmen. They later were induced to change tack in a meeting with Sir George Roos-Keppel (1866-1921), the Chief Commissioner of the North-West Frontier Province (1908-19), who facilitated the laying of the planned railway line. But due to the signing of the Anglo-Russian Convention on August 31, 1907, the rivalry in Central Asia between two countries came to a close.

The main purpose of both empires to construct railway lines was strategic: to counter each other in the context of control in Central Asia and in their respective colonies. As an important initiative, railway lines and other communication infrastructure was the bedrock for colonial control especially as it facilitated the exploitation and transportation of natural resources. In addition, the TCR was constructed to reach the borders of the Russian Empire in order to subjugate the colonized and secure the borders. It was this aspect that alarmed the likes of Kipling who warned, “There is no truce with Adam-zad, the Bear that looks like a Man!”<sup>26</sup> Victorian England in its bid to counter the Russians, planned to reach the border with Afghanistan through the Khyber Pass and extend to Kabul, if an agreement with the Emir could be reached, and to construct another line into Afghanistan via the Bolan Pass.

### **Social Change and the Railway War**

The irony of the situation was that in the process of constructing the railroads in Central Asia and India, the colonized subject, rotting under old, decadent orders, received some benefits, although only as byproducts. In this respect, not only was trade boosted and jobs generated, but a new element of modernization came into play: new technological and architecture appeared on the otherwise dilapidated ruins that the locals dwelt in, “The old ways of transportation, mainly by mules, donkeys and carts was replaced by TCR

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<sup>24</sup> Muhammad Khan, ed., *The Life of Abdur Rahman, Amir of Afghanistan*, (Chestnut Hill, MA: Adamant Media, 2001), orig., (London: John Murray, 1901).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 159.

<sup>26</sup> Rudyard Kipling, *The Five Nations, Garden City*, (NY: Doubleday, 1916, orig., London: Methuen, 1903).



and even navigation on Sir Darya [Syr Sea or Syr River] and Amu Darya [the Oxus River] were rendered ineffective.”<sup>27</sup>

An interesting aspect of this whole enterprise in Central Asia, has been highlighted in an article by ethnomusicologist Johanna Spector (1915-2008) who, while referring to the tradition of music and art of the Central Asian people, noted, “with the Trans-Caspian Railroad in operation, communication to Samarkand, and later on to Tashkent was greatly facilitated, so that many visiting artists, as well as entire opera companies poured into the Central Asian cities.”<sup>28</sup>

The old caravans were replaced by railways in Central Asia, giving impetus to trade which became more organized and quicker, “[N]ew trades, especially in cotton and karakul, replaced the old caravan merchants. Goods-transporting firms, trade counters, postal and telegraph offices and printing press also appeared.”<sup>29</sup> Dilating on the social changes that appeared on the landscape of Central Asia with the commencement of the railways, experts of the day highlighted the developmental process, in contrast to the existing reality, “The railway line also had great cultural effect, since it ended Bukhara’s physical isolation, brought an influx of outsiders and enabled European civilization to enter what was still virtually a medieval state. Railway stations, with their neat, painted buildings, uniformed staff and European-type Russian settlement ... emerged in the emirates.”<sup>30</sup>

## Conclusion

During the imperial struggle of the nineteenth century between Victorian England and Czarist Russia, railways as a military, political, economic, and social force, played an important role in transforming on-the-ground realities in Central Asia and India. In addition to strategic gains, the TCR brought significant social change to the Central Asian Khanates. The grand design of the TCR, and the jittery response by British India, were significant modernizing agents, though benefitting the rival empires more than actually transforming the lives of the colonized. Not only was trade fostered and transportation networks developed, but the railway war did bring about social and cultural change in the respective colonies. In case of India, Kipling’s spirited tribute to the Indian railway and its benevolent role, in improving the life of the wretched and the poor, is a key aspect of his politics of imaginative literature. Similarly, the TCR impacted the social order of Central Asia, resulting in the construction of schools, houses, hospitals, and movie theatres, as well as other elements of modernization. The interesting aspect of the *Great Game*, however, was that it increased control on the lives and resources of the colonies, as well as secured their

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<sup>27</sup> Allworth, *ibid.*, p. 327.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Sarfraz Khan, *ibid.*, pp. 43-45.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

respective empires from encroachment. The irony of the situation is that, although colonization is about control, subjugation, and hegemony, its benefit to the colonial space—its people and culture—could not be dismissed or brushed aside. This was the state of affairs that this paper attempted to highlight in the backdrop to the so-called *Great Game*.

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