

# Whitman's "Passage to India" and Yogananda's "My India": Complimentary to Each Other

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## Abstract

The present article aims to detail Whitman's "Passage to India" (1871) and Yogananda's "My India" (1929) and to show how the two poems depict India to the mutual benefits of both America and India. Yogananda was not born when Whitman died, yet the two poems bear the subject matter and the message remarkably the same.

Although America got its independence in 1776, during the time when Whitman began to write, America could not completely come out of the British colonial impact. So national sentiments are natural to be found in the writings of Whitman. "Passage to India" is no exception. The central idea of the "Passage to India" was conceived, according to Golden Arthur, in a Notebook of fourteen pages. The central objects jotted down were Columbus, the Union Pacific Railroad of May, 1869 and particularly India: "To the mystic wisdom-the lore of all old philosophy"(Arthur 1095). According to Gay Wilson Allen, "Passage to India" owes the Western scientific and technological developments to the origin – "Passage indeed O soul to primal thought" (Whitman 430), that is, India: "To reason's early paradise, /Back, back to wisdom's birth, to innocent intuitions, /Again with fair creation" (Whitman 430) Allen's remark aptly captures the theme America's India, India's America – "I hope that Walt Whitman's passage to India may become a two way cultural journey" (Allen 44)

M. Lynda Ely in the beginning of the essay "The Untold Want: Representation and Transformation Echoes of Walt Whitman's" Passage to India in Now, Voyager" says "In Walt Whitman's 1871 Passage to India, the poet claims to celebrate the related themes of scientific and technological achievement and spiritual transformation, the former physical "passages" making possible the latter "passage to primal thought" - the "Passage to more than India!" (Lynda 43)

"Passage to India" by Whitman is a "fuller expression" that "lurks in my writing, underneath every page, every line, everywhere." (Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, 1876 ed). Whitman starts his poem by declaring some of the famous achievements of his times: Suez Canal opening in 1869, establishment of intercontinental railway in America and the foundation of trans-Atlantic Cable: "the Suez canal, /The New by its mighty railroad spann'd,/The seas inlaid with eloquent, gentle wires..." (Whitman 423) These achievements have been contrasted with the wonders of the past: "the antique ponderous Seven outvied" (Whitman 423) He glorifies the past time in section one of the poem.: "The past! The Infinite greatness of the past!" (Whitman 423) In section 2, he mentions and praises India- "the myths Asiatic, the primitive fables." (Whitman 423) He praises India's literature and religion – "The deep diving bibles and legends;/The daring plots of the poets – the elder religions;" (Whitman 424) He praises India's temples – "You lofty and dazzling towers, pinnacled, red as roses, burnish'd with gold! /Towers of fables immortal, fashion'd from mortal dreams." (Whitman 424) Praising India again, Whitman searches for "God's purpose from the first" (Whitman 424). In wonderful terms he describes God's purpose in four

lines: “The earth to be spann’d, 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” (Whitman 424). He praises men of different professions here like the captains, voyagers, explorers, engineers, architects, mechanics and tradesmen. In section 3, in his passage to India he sees “tableaus twain” (Whitman 425): in the Suez Canal, “procession of steamships” (Whitman 425) of Empress Eugenie and many people working and in the other tableau, he sees the pan-America. In the first, he sees “gigantic dredging machines” (Whitman 425); in the second, he sees so many American landscapes. Here he also mentions Genoese, that is, Christopher Columbus who discovered America but mistook it as India. Section 4 mentions Vasco Da Gama, another explorer. He owes the origin of Adam and Eve to the “the gardens of Asia” (Whitman 427) from which all mankind emerged. Section 6 exclusively deals with India. To him, India is the oldest country, most populated country and the richest country: Lo soul, the retrospect brought forward, / The old, most populous, wealthiest of earth’s lands” (Whitman 428). He mentions two big rivers of India- Indus and Ganges. He mentions the story of Alexander the Great in India and also Bay of Bengal. He is mesmerised by the literatures, epics, religions, castes of India. He reverently mentions the Indian God of creation Brahma. He is delighted to mention Buddha of India. He does not forget to great Mughal kings Aurungzebe and his ancestor Tamerlane. The presence of many men in India such as “The traders, rulers, explorers, Moslems, Venetians, Byzantium, the Arabs, Portuguese/...Marco Polo, Batouta the Moor” (Whitman 429). Section 9 has mentions of “the Sanscrit and the Vedas” (Whitman 432). Finally, it becomes for Whitman a “Passage to more than India” (Whitman 433).

Stanley K Coffman, Jr. in his essay “Form and Meaning in Whitman’s Passage to India” reminds us that in *Democratic Vistas* Walt Whitman describes his poem as “image-making work”.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it is needless to say that in his poem “Passage to India” he has tried to do the same, that is, to make the image both of India and America. Coffman briefly outlines the theme of “Passage to India” in the following words.

...the theme of the poem is that knowledge leads inevitably to faith, and we find this idea developed through stages marked by a series of declamatory phrases, the repeated chant, "Passage to India!" The "passage" refers first to the actual or physical passage made possible by the transcontinental railroad, the transatlantic cable, and the Suez Canal, linking West to East in a communication network that Whitman celebrates as indicative of his age's scientific achievement (Coffman 338).

By this precise philosophical writing, first of all, he manages to establish a relationship with the world outside America such as India. But this phrase “passage to India” is not completely new to him either, as he faithfully records that many bravehearted men much before him chanted the same mantra “passage to India” in wonder. The passage that Whitman describes is not merely physical. It is intuitive. It is spiritual. It is scientific. It is knowledge-based. It is related to “primal thought” (Coffman 338). The passage is also about faith. Therefore, the passage remains not merely a passage to India but becomes more than a passage to India.

One thing that Whitman did in this poem that he started with material things and rolled over to spiritual things and to soul things – “O soul, repressless, I with thee and thou with me” (Whitman 430). In this context the observation by Coffman bears meaningful insight: “Whitman has caught some of the flowing of nature from lower to higher forms - it will be seen that, in one respect, the last passage is the highest - and has given a foundation for the emotion of joy and the sense of liberation that accompanies the process of natural or organic evolution” (Coffman 339). The final image that Whitman draws is the

glorification of the knowledge of “the Sanscrit and the Vedas” (Whitman 432) that India disseminate to the world.

The most essential part of the poem is the Section 8 of the poem that addresses God and is interlinked with Transcendental Philosophy developed by Immanuel Kant and embraced by Walt Whitman. God is seen as light. God is the origin. He is the endless supplier of everything. God is “the fibre and the breath”:

O Thou transcendent,  
Nameless, the fibre and the breath,  
Light of the light, shedding forth universes, thou centre of them,  
Thou mightier centre of the true, the good, the loving,  
Thou moral, spiritual fountain—affection’s source—thou reservoir...

America has a great crisis which is spiritual crisis and for this, Whitman looks up to India for inspiration. S.P.Sharma observes in his essay "Self, Soul, and God in “Passage to India”

The sailing of the steamships led by Empress Eugenie via the Suez Canal to India, its myths and mysteries, enacts for the reader, under the pleasing direction of soul, the symbolic voyaging of self as empirical ego through soul (atman) to God (Paramatman). Whitman's postulation of three entities, self (empirical ego), soul (atman), and God (Paramatman) shows that his vision of self is just about as sophisticated and complex as in Hindu metaphysics. (Sharma 394)

Self is transported to God via soul. Another concept that engrosses Whitman is that Brahman, the highest Self, the Godhead. God has no name and has the ability to transcend anything, time, space, and dimension.

Charles Stubblefield towards the end of his essay "The Great Circle: Whitman's" Passage to India" has summed up ““Passage O soul to India!" is both a summation and an inspiration.” Whitman is not merely concerned with the physical but also with the spiritual.

Thou pulse, - thou motive of the stars, suns, systems,  
That, circling, move in order, safe, harmonious,  
Athwart the shapeless vastnesses of space,  
How should I think, how breathe a single breath, how  
speak, if, out of myself,

I could not launch, to those, superior universes? (Stubble 30)

Whitman is a saintly figure in literature, a visionary. One great saint and visionary from India, Swami Vivekananda had the opportunity to meet Whitman during his lifetime. Perhaps this is called a historical coincidence. Another great saint from India, Paramahansa Yogananda went to the West with the message of India’s Yoga Philosophy. He is called “the pioneering father of Yoga in the West”<sup>2</sup> by Self Realization Fellowship He did not meet Whitman as he died much before his arrival to America, but the spirit of Whitman echoes in Yogananda. When Yogananda died in the year 1952, he had his self-composed verse “My India” in his lips. The poem matches Whitman’s “Passage to India” as both the poems glorify India in the same vein. Whitman in his poem deals with the soul-thing, so does Paramhansa Yogananda: “India now invades with love, /To conquer their souls.”<sup>3</sup> As envisioned by Yogananda, India is a land where happiness ever persists and there is no pretence of happiness. It is a land where darkness and fears remove themselves. It is a land of everlasting smile. India is a land of progress. In this land Yogananda would like to breathe his last. Terrible famine has the chance to devastate the body. But he wants to be reincarnated in the land of India. Hundreds of thousands of

illnesses may invade the failing body's properties. Fate may pour disastrous sadness. Nevertheless, he would want to reincarnate himself in India. If someone doubts his love to be a "blind sentiment", he is mistaken. In loving India, he has enough reason to do so. From his childhood, he has loved India. Some people always instruct to love transient and temporary things of life, including life itself, which is like a drop of water on the lotus leaf. But these are merely bubbles having no real existence. India on the other hand has taught him to love "The soul of deathless beauty in the dewdrop/ and the bubble" – the essential soul, not the brittle structures. India has many sages to her credit. They have always instructed to search "Self". This Self is lying in ignorance for thousands of incarnations. There are a great many countries in the world which are known for their might, their abundance, their knowledge of science and technology. He himself sometimes assumes the role of an oriental and an occidental, he who has roamed this end and that end of the world, only in search of his Self. He has not found his Self nowhere in the world, but only in the land of India. His love for India is immense and fathomless. If all homes and gold-coloured paddy fields of India are burnt down to ashes, he wants to have a sleep on the ashes dreaming deathlessness- "O India, I will be there!" India has many times been bombarded by the inventions of science and materialism, like the destructive weapons, but they could in no way subdue her spirit – "Yet she is unconquered. /Her soul is free evermore!" India's saints are India's strongholds, they are out there to teach love, empathy, wisdom to fight "bandits of hate, prejudice, and patriotic selfishness." These saints are out there to remove the partisan wall between God and his children. Calling the Western force like the British as "The Western brothers", he denounces their materialism, "matter's might", who kept India under siege. He observes India to be better than Heaven. He passionately expresses his love of India repeatedly – "I love Thee, O my India!" He wants to distribute India's love to every country whom he calls "brother nation". The earth is created by God, man creates mere confusion and boundaries. These boundaries are "fancy-frozen boundaries". He has found endless love in India, which he wants to stretch beyond India's border "into the world" Therefore, he calls India, like Whitman, "mother of religions, lotus, scenic beauty/And sages!" India always keeps her door unlocked for "God's true sons through all ages". India is the final land of his dream "Where Ganges, woods, Himalayan caves, and men dream God". His greatest achievement is that his body came in touch with India's soil.

There have been many similarities between an American's concept of India and an Indian's concept on India, albeit in spiritual line. In Whitman's poem, soul, soul thing, time, past, Asiatic myths, fables of eld, the elder religions, fables of immortal, Columbus, space death, the Ganges, the Bay of Bengal, Mughals, Moslems, Hindus, love, the nameless, Universe, Sanskrit, Vedas, joy, bliss freedom are mentioned in relation to India and passage to India. Therefore, it becomes a passage more to India, transcending its physical barriers to the dynamics of spirits. Yoganand's "My India" also talks of India's strength in spirituality. His poem mentions soul-thing, time, eternity, immortality, reincarnation, love, empathy, materialism of the West and liberation of the soul. So, the common interest lies in India becoming more materially prospering with America's help and on the other hand, America becoming more spiritually inclined with the help of India. In this respect the observation made by Gay Allen is apt. In this connection, it is interesting to recall that in one of his finest poems, 'Passage to India,' he (Whitman) envisioned the benefits to Western culture of a return to the origin (i.e., India) of 'primal thought'..." (Allen 43).

Gay Allen mentions Ananda Coomaraswamy who compared Whitman and Buddha in "Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism" (1916) (Allen 43). He also mentions Dorothy Frederica Mercer who quoted an Indian scholar in her PhD dissertation "Leaves of Grass and the Bhagavad Gita: A Comparative Study",

who that that the poet Whitman “must have studied *The Bhagavad Gita*, for in his *Leaves of Grass* one finds the teachings of Vedanta; the Song of Myself is but an echo of the sayings of Krishna” (Allen 43)

### Notes

1. Coffman quotes this from *Leaves of Grass and Selected Prose*, ed. Sculley Bradley (New York, 1949), p. 512.
2. <https://yogananda.org/>. This view is held by Self Realization Fellowship.
3. The text that has been followed is from <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/my-india-7>. (The summary has been done by me.)

### Work-Cited List

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