

# (Uni) Forming Youth: The Scout Movement and Imperialist Ideology

Dr. Biju. RI

Assistant Professor, Department of History, M.S.M. College, Kayamkulam, India

**Abstract:** *The Scout Movement aimed to create a wider schedule for national efficiency, citizenship training, civics and social service through intensive training, camps, rallies, etc. It had a uniform of its own, a pledge, a motto, a promise and a flag. Scouts were given special names such as cubs, wolves, foxes, lions, etc. – all symbols with a wild element. Scout stories also told of wild characters and their activities. There was an ideological undercurrent of imperialism in Baden Powell's movement this point is dissected in this article.*

**Keywords:** Scouting, Boy Scout, Girl Guide, Camping, Hiking, Imperialism

## 1. Introduction

The colonial rule was responsible for the birth of several youth organisations in the Asian and African colonies during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Among them the scouting was one of the biggest movements that the British initiated at the beginning of the twentieth century in their colonies. Britain as a colonial master believed that the scouting message of obedience, camping, hiking, social service and discipline would inculcate a sense of loyalty in the youth and lead to their acceptance of colonial domination. Through this mechanization actually they redefined the body and mind of the youth benevolent to the colonial rule. Foucault remarks that “the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs (Michel Foucault, 1995, p.139). Foucault uses the language of “investing” and “marking” to emphasize the way in which power affects the body from the outside. Power in this sense functions beyond the control and comprehension of the individual who participates within the milieu.

The Scout Movement was launched in the defensive atmosphere of the Empire in the Edwardian period, under the guidance of Robert Stephenson Smyth Baden-Powell. The movement was related to the wider movement for national efficiency, civics and citizenship training, social service and public spirit (Allen Warren, 1986, p.238). At the same time, there were many overlapping themes in this movement and all of which drew on public school culture. Baden-Powell was a product of Charter House, a well-known public school (E.E. Reynolds, 1943, p.7). This public school culture put particular emphasis on developing character in youth. Once the empire was established, the public school sustained it. For example, in India, many former public school students were in the Indian Civil Service (ICS), other Indian services, and the military and there were a great many who worked as missionaries too (Ronald Hyam, 2002, p.12). Baden-Powell was a product of this system and served the empire within India and South Africa. Thus, there were plenty of imperial and military themes in the Scout Movement.

The term ‘scouting’ has come to mean a system of training in citizenship through games for boys and girls. According to Baden-Powell, “Scouting is a natural evolution of many ideas reduced to a system, the main point about it being to recognise the basic needs of the nation and to have an elastic system where through to encourage the individual future citizen to develop in himself the qualities that are wanted.” (Robert Baden Powell, 1923, p.26). A large number of British scholars have examined the entire aspect of the scout movement. Eric Hobsbawm rightly visualized that where a ‘tradition’ deliberately invented and constructed by a single initiator, as for the Boy Scouts by Baden Powell (Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Renger (eds), 1983, p.4). J.R. Gillis, observed that scouting is the British attempt to carry down into the working class the aristocratic and the middle class compromise established by the public school system (J. R Gillis, 1973, p.249). John Springhall pointed out that ‘the ideology underpinning scouting was a combination of Baden-Powell’s own personalised brand of social imperialism, an omnipresent social Darwinism and the Edwardian cult of national efficiency’ (John Springhall, 1971, p.126). Springhall indeed feels that the youth movements in Britain were agencies of protest manipulated in the interest of social groups led by the old and middle aged against the absence of compulsory military service for boys (John Springhall, 1971, p.127). However, the term scout denotes a person sent ahead to get information about the enemy’s position, strength, etc. Thus, through the establishment of the Scout Movement, Baden-Powell tried to build an outstanding youth-oriented army of soldiers for the future protection of imperialism.

## 2. The Materialization and Dissemination of the Movement

The genesis of the scout movement in 1907 was not accidentally happen or a historical fate. It was the culmination of a process in Baden-Powell’s own personal experiences as a military officer in colonial nations of India and Africa in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In 1893-94, while serving with his regiment, the 13<sup>th</sup> Hussars, Robert Baden-Powell realised that the ordinary peace training of soldiers for service in the field was not sufficiently practical. Therefore, he conducted training sessions in his squadron for the men individually in scouting and camping (E.E.

Reynolds, 1944, p.32). In 1897-98, having been transferred to command the Fifth Dragoon Guards, he carried on similar training, but on improved lines, with a view to developing character as well as field efficiency (Robert Baden-Powell, 1908, p.41). During the South African War (1899-1900), Baden-Powell organised the boys of Mafeking as a corps for general utility on scout lines rather than those of cadets. The experiment was a complete success, with the help of the local youth power he won the battle and hailed as a hero and popularly known as the hero of Mafeking. Britain greeted him with a promotion from Colonel to Major-General in British army and his first home posting in over twenty years as Inspector General of Cavalry.

His term as Inspector General of Cavalry was the longest period that he had spent in England since he joined the army in 1876. His tours throughout the United Kingdom would have been an education in any event, but as a widely recognised public figure, this was doubly so since organisations wished to link his name with their own. Even before his return to England he realized the problems of the youth, they were indolent, lazy and drunkards were not associated with the empire. So a number of clubs made approaches to seek his public approval. Thus, in 1900, there were amongst others, the B-P League, the B-P Boys of Greenock, the B-P Anti-cigarette League and the B-P Brigade (Allen Warren, 1987, p.385). At first, Baden-Powell's messages to such groups reflected a man little versed in contemporary affairs – the basic theme tended simply to be 'do your duty and don't smoke' (Allen Warren, 1987, p.386). Gradually, the content of Baden-Powell's speeches and messages begin to acquire a greater depth as his social experience widened. From 1906, the pattern began to change as he linked his ideas on cavalry training with those of boy training. Just as the new role of the cavalry required the essentially individualistic skills of a scouting and reconnaissance, so training in observation, tracking, map reading, camping and pioneering could be seen as assisting individual character development for both cavalry men and boys alike. Encouraged by William Smith of the Boys' Brigade (John Springhall, 1971, p.128). Baden-Powell began to develop his ideas on cavalry training for the boys in their field work.

He seems, for instance, to have been particularly impressed in May 1906 when inspecting a volunteer regiment in Lancashire he saw corps of volunteer scouts lined to the regiment. Other elements also contributed to this growing awareness that scouting could have more than a strictly regimental value. In late 1906 he met Ernest Thompson Seton, the naturalist and the Red Indian enthusiast who was attempting, rather unsuccessfully, to establish a woodcraft organisation in Britain based on Red Indian symbolism and ceremonial, and the two men corresponded briefly (John Springhall, 1987, p.939). Finally, Baden-Powell appears to have read and absorbed Elliot Mills' doom-laden work '*The Decline and Fall of the British Empire*', with its leading themes of internal, social and moral decay.

The result of all these contacts was that Baden-Powell agreed to run an experimental camp for boys on Brown Sea Island in Poole Harbour, on 29th July 1907, with twenty boys from different strata of society, where the organisation

and programme would be based on scout training (Tim Jeal, 1989, p.18). At the camp, the twenty boys were divided into four patrols of five each. A boy leader of each patrol was given the full responsibility for all activities such as games, hikes, tracking, stalking, observation, first aid, etc. Baden-Powell was very satisfied with the results of the experimental camp. It was a tremendous success; moreover it was the beginning of the Scout Movement. Encouraged by the Brown Sea Island success, the Scout Movement officially started in 1908. The Movement drafted the scout principles such as the Scout Law and the Scout Promise. The scout unit was mainly classified into three sections, the Wolf Cubs between the ages of seven and twelve, the Boy Scouts between eleven and eighteen and the Rover Scouts, from the age of seventeen. Thus if a boy at the age of seven joined scouting, he would grow in a scouting ambience and emerges as a future warrior fully equipped to protect the empire at the age of eighteen. Scouts and Guides were equated with wild animals viz; wolves, lions, tigers, pythons, cubs and blue birds which symbolised the keenness and the sense of cleanliness of the wolves, the firmness and chivalry of tigers and lions, the bonding power of the python and the swiftness and accuracy of the birds, etc. The British nation required youth with such qualities which could be achieved through scouting. The rapid progress of the Scout Movement led to the launch of a sister organisation, the Girl Guide Association in 1910, precisely with similar lines and principles of scout movement. The Bible of the movement, *Scouting for Boys*, was published in 1908, *Scouting for Boys* was a hotchpotch of ideas, training devices, games and stories all centred on the idea of scouting.

Scouting emphasised outdoor activities such as camping, hiking and sports both in nature and on the open road, and satisfied a boy's desire for new experiences, while the use of uniforms, merit badges and ranks helped him in getting social recognition. All these were strong stimuli for the youth to join scouting. Baden-Powell observed that scouting returns to nature to overcome the effects of our "over civilization" and to "restore to the British nation its moral and physical robustness and its vitality." (Robert Baden-Powell, 1908, p.36). The rapid growth of the young Boy Scout movement in England was due, in part at least, to the outstanding leadership qualities of Baden-Powell, who in 1910 decided to leave the army and devote all his time to the newly created organisation.

### 3. Imperial constituent in the Movement

Imperialism became a central part of the ideology of the British governing classes from after the early 1890s until the 1950s. Imperialism became a distinctive part of English nationalism (John M. Mackenzie (ed.,) 1989, p.237). In many ways, Baden-Powell is an excellent case study of the popular impact of the various strands which made up the imperial enthusiasm in the years following the Boer War. After a fairly routine military career from the late 1870s, largely in colonial and Indian postings, Powell was suddenly projected into the public eye by the Siege of Mafeking between 1899 and 1900. This experience made him an almost exemplary imperial hero, a worthy successor of Havelock and Gordon (John M. Mackenzie (ed., ), 1989, p.12). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century,

Britain followed the imperialist way of thinking very attentively in different ways. So there were deeper ideological underpinnings between the scouts and imperialism as well. Eric Stokes highlighted how pre-capitalist, feudal residues existed alongside modern, bourgeois capitalist elements in late nineteenth and twentieth century imperialism (Eric Stokes, 1960, p.27).

Many aspects of character, for instance, were derived from a pre-capitalist code which esteemed duty, valour, heroism and chivalry. This 'mystique of pre-capitalist society being projected on a modern world' has particular appeal to sections of the middle classes connected to the military and colonial administration (Eric Stokes, 1960, p.30). There was a strong attachment to the soil and land, an affinity for the rural over a debilitating urban modernity, and a distrust of modern society and mass democracy. After the Boer War of 1899-1900, the empire was increasingly equated with open skies, fresh air and the healthy, invigorating frontier which allowed for the full blossoming of 'character.' The ideal was the unreflecting and inarticulate citizen, without mind or voice, who was able to get the job done for the country and Empire while suffering and sacrificing in silence. These conservative imperial ideas were apparent in Baden-Powell's scout programme. At the same time, it was not in the same degree as with Rudyard Kipling and Milner.

The social aspects of the imperial frame of mind that prompted a few developments in the years before 1914 seem to exemplify more clearly the popular face of imperialism than the twin creations of the defender of Mafeking and the Scouting and Guiding Movements. The content of Baden-Powell's handbook, *Scouting for Boys* and his later collaborative work with his sister Agnes, *The Handbook for Girl Guides or How Girls can help build the Empire* seem to fully confirm the impression of an essentially defensive domestic ideology underpinning of both these organisations for children and young people. Undoubtedly, elements of a defensive domestic imperialism can be found in the early writings of Baden-Powell and in some of the social sentiments which responded to his ideas about the need for boy training. But as with other aspects of popular imperialism, historical attention tended to concentrate rather exclusively upon the years before 1914 and upon Great Britain itself. This had the effect of obscuring the variety of imperial sentiment and opinion. In addition, too close attention to the earliest writings of Baden-Powell ignores the fact that his own opinions, imperial or otherwise, were not static but proved to be capable of evolution and development in response to changing perceptions about the purpose of Scouts and Guides. The organisations that survived the reactions against popular patriotism which followed the First World War, the Guide Movement in particular, experienced a rapid expansion both at home and abroad throughout the 1920s (John M. Mackenzie, 1989, p.232). In fact, the Scout and Guide Movements were in many ways at their imperial features between 1920 and 1955. This suggested that their ideological underpinnings may be a little more complex than they have seemed to those who have confined their attention to the years before 1914.

The Boy Scouts were not simply conceived by Baden-Powell as 'a happy idea'. Rather, they were a youth training

scheme intended to counter two interlinked fears that he had been made aware of upon while returning from South Africa in March 1903. The first was the perceived threat in German invasion which reached its height in the 1906-1908 period, i.e., the same period as the take-off of the movement (Sam Pryke, 1998, p.311). The second fear was that the youth of England were indolent and they were not aware that they belonged to a vast Empire. The cover of *Scouting for Boys* which was initially published between January and April 1908, had an illustration of a boy on the lookout for enemy ships upon the horizon. The next year, King Edward VII sent a written message to scouts at the first national rally at Crystal Palace. In it he declared his support for the organisation on the grounds that the patriotic responsibility and habits of discipline it was teaching them would enable them to do their duty as men, should any danger threaten the Empire. Baden-Powell stated in the preface to the 1916 edition of *Scouting for Boys* that the war and the Boy Scouts' response to it had justified his warning in previous editions that 'We as a people should BE PREPARED'

A recurring theme in the early scout leaders' writings is the analogy between the fall of Rome and the potential implosion of the British Empire. Baden-Powell was much influenced by the book *The Decline and Fall of Rome*. The basic message he and others extracted from the book was that the Roman Empire had succumbed to invasion due to weakness at home, its inhabitants having grown indolent and too prone to easy living. Baden-Powell thought that similar evils were evident in Great Britain (Sam Pryke, 1998, p.313). At this juncture, he was greatly influenced in 1907 by Elliot Mills' anonymously published book *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire* which served as the basis for much of what he wrote on patriotic instruction in Scouting for Boys with all its simple-minded concentration on healthy attitudes as the basis of national strength.

Another interesting point related to the imperialist ideology was that it was from his military experience of reconnaissance and scouting that Baden-Powell developed his hostility to uniform drill-based instructions and mass methods of education, onto which he grafted an essentially popularised idea of character training for boys (Allen Warren, 1987, p.949). Despite his belief in social corporatism, Baden-Powell always remained hostile to rote learning whether in the schoolroom, army class or youth brigade. In his scheme of things, instruction took place in small groups or patrols with individual personal attention given to each scout either by his patrol leader or his scout master who had to have a natural sympathy with the young if they were to be effective in bringing out each child's talent. Individual character had to be developed to encourage initiative and self-reliance, eschewing charity or state support. Baden-Powell had little use of social explanations of personal inadequacy or for political remedies for social ills, relying on more familiar mid-Victorian ideas of self-help and personal independence. Despite this later traditionalism, the fundamental individualism of Baden-Powell's methods gave his approach a highly progressive and innovatory gloss in the years which followed 1910.

Baden-Powell's own personal imperial commitment was expressed through Scouting and Guiding and remained

largely free standing. He rarely committed himself to other imperial organisations such as his support for the Empire Marketing Board and the Tudor Rose League in 1931 and 1932 (John M. Mackenzie, 1989, p.240). In particular, he was always known to associate the royal family with the Scout and Guide Movement. Each Scout and Guide in their Promise committed themselves to serve the King who was presented as the exemplar of the imperial ideal. In its turn the royal family willingly accepted this association. Almost all of the children of George V were connected in one way or another with Scouting and Guiding movements, most notably the Prince of Wales and Princess Mary.

On the return from his imperial tour of 1922, the Prince of Wales was greeted by a posse of 60, 000 scouts. This occasion enabled the Prince as Chief Scout of Wales to appear in Scout uniform for the first time (George R.L., 1933, p.24). In the same way, Princess Mary visibly identified herself with the Guide movement in the 1920s, frequently attending Guide rallies and meetings as the Association's President. In the middle years of the First World War, the Girl Guides remained a small patriotic and imperial organisation having strong links with the Primrose League and the Girls' Patriotic League. The early covers of the Girl Guide Gazette bore the motto 'King, God and Empire' and the annual celebration of Empire Day gave the Guides more in common with the Junior Associates of the Victoria League than with the Scouts.

The Imperial Headquarters was the central policy-making body. It exercised a necessarily loose-reigned control as the two movements strove to accommodate the variety of local circumstances throughout the Empire. The imperial role lived out by Baden-Powell in his later years was continued by his successors as Chief Scout. At the same time, in colonial countries such as India and Africa, the Scout Movement was purely with the principles and directions of the Imperial Headquarters of Scouting in London and under the official body of British Government (Robert Baden Powell, 1924, p.53).

Baden-Powell was not particularly a fervent Christian. Religion was utilised to justify racial superiority. In an early edition of *The Scout*, for example, Baden-Powell states that though they are one great family, the whites are God (*The Scout*, Vol. IV, no. 8, 1910, p. 3). But Baden-Powell never seemed to have attempted to explain or justify white rule within the Empire in anything approaching a systematic fashion. Rather, the implication was that as their valiant forefathers began the Empire, the British had an unquestioned right to it and should retain it. His usual concerns were practical ones. 'One fifth of the world's population is ours to use or abuse....It is a magnificent Empire which the Union Jack flies over, but it is still at the beginning of its development. The white population amounts to only a quarter of our crowded island.'*(The Scout*, Vol. IV, no. 8, 1910, p. 4).

The obvious solution was therefore emigration: 'British blood is greatly needed to correct superior because of their knowledge and love of the influx of alien breeds of all kinds who want to reap the fruit which the British colonialists have sown (Sam Pryke, 1998, p.317) As regards the relationship

between colonialists and natives a regular nigger hater conceived it as akin to that between a parent and a naughty child.

The Scouts' ideology was not a pastoral patriotism so much as an imperial nationalism. It is important finally to note that it would be wrong to cast Baden-Powell as a complete bigot, incapable of recognising qualities in other nationalities. Though an orientalist (in the sense given by Edward Said) in his depiction of colonial peoples, he genuinely admired groups like the Zulus and the Red Indians. Moreover, his admiration was not simply a drawing-room romanticisation, but one central to his conception of masculine virtue. Secondly during his extensive foreign travels, Baden-Powell often remarked upon the warmth, friendliness and virtues, such as courage, of the various people with whom he came into contact.

Imperialism is reflected in the nationalist appeal as expressed in the Scout Promise, the Scout Law and Boy Scout publications. They specifically mentioned that a scout should do his duty to God, King-Emperor and his country and be loyal to the King and his country.

The appeal of Scouting for Boys undoubtedly showed Baden-Powell's knack of putting things across. In the first pages of *Scouting for Boys* there is a section which begins like this. 'I suppose every British boy wants to do something for his country. One way he can do this is by becoming a Boy Scout.'*(Robert Baden-Powell, 1908, p.278)* In those days they were proud of their country and the patriotic bit was quite a real one for boys. Of course, the unconventional nature of the uniform and the position of Baden-Powell as a war hero helped them to make the organisation to hefty heights.

The first step for a boy who entered the Boy Scout movement was to accept the scout promise and scout law. The scout law was framed on the basis of colonial interest: A scout's honour is to be trusted, a scout is loyal to God, King and Country and a brother to every other scout, no matter what social class the other may be in. The scout law makes it clear that when a boy became the member of the scout troop, he became the integral part of the King and his Country, the king was the British and the country belongs to the colonial empire of Britain.

No doubt there was considerable variation between different troops. But virtually all troops would have raised and saluted the British flag at meetings, and most would have spent some time on drill and parade (the scouts took part in Empire Day parades in 1909 and 1912) and been told of the Empire and of the importance of national service during the meetings(Sam Pryke, 1998, p.318). In *Scouting for Boy's* Baden-Powell advises scoutmasters to buy a map of the British Empire to show boys at the local meetings and to get them to find out the sites of local national importance. This also helped the youth to come closer to the Empire.

In his *Scouting for Boys in India*, the chapter on Patriotism, Baden Powell expresses his sentiments thus: 'The preservation of the Empire will largely depend upon you, the younger generation of Britons that are now growing up to be

the men of the Empire' (Robert Baden –Powell, 1923, p.264) And he calls upon them to keep themselves “fit to step into the place of those who have gone before” and not to be “disgraced like young Romans who lost the Empire of their forefathers.” (Robert Baden –Powell, 1923, p.264). This was the sound advice given to the boy scouts. Statement like these increases the lurking suspicion that the aim of scouting in British colonies was to make their boys patriotic citizens of the land. The scout organisation in India was not conducive to the development of Indian boys on true national lines as it was a part of the imperial environment.

#### 4. Conclusion

Robert Stephenson Smith Baden Powell, a British military officer and the architect of the Scout Movement formulated it to protect British hegemony in the world and particularly in the colonies, in a sound imperialistic framework. It focused on mobilizing the youth in schools and colleges. A native youth was to begin his scouting career with the acceptance of scout principles. These principles clearly mentioned that a scout should obey the aims, motto and ideas of the movement. Obedience always meant allegiance of the highest order. A boy studied the principles of scouting with the help of Rudyard Kipling's stories, games, camping, hiking, physical exercises and rallies the native body of the youth gradually became entrenched in the imperialist framework. In this manner scouts also played a vital role to strengthen and sustained the colonial rule in Asia and Africa.

#### References

- [1] Baden Powell Robert, *Scouting For Boys*, C Arthur Pearson Ltd, London, 1908.
- [2] Baden Powell Robert., *Scouting and Youth Movements*, Benn's Sixpenny, New York, 1929.
- [3] Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, New York, 1995.
- [4] Hobsbawm, Eric, j. Terence, O. Ranger, (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983.
- [5] Jeal, Tim, *Baden-Powell*, Amazon Publishers, London, 1989.
- [6] MacDonald, H. Robert., *Boys of the Empire*, University of Toronto Press, 1993.
- [7] Mackenzie, M. John, (ed.) *Imperialism and Popular Culture*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1986.
- [8] Mill, Eliot, *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire*, National School of Japan, Tokyo, 2005.
- [9] Pryke, Sam, 'The Popularity of Nationalism in the early British Boy Scout Movement' in *Social History*, Vol. 23, 1998.
- [10] Reynolds, E.E, *B-P: The Story of His Life*, Oxford University Press, London, 1942.
- [11] Reynolds, E.E, *Boy Scouts*, Oxford University Press, London, 1950.
- [12] Rosenthal, Michael, *Character Factory*, London, 1986,
- [13] Springhall, John, 'Debate Baden Powell and the Scout Movement Before 1920: Citizen Training or Soldiers of the Future' in *English Historical Review*, Vol. C11, 1987.

- [14] Stokes, Eric, *The Political Ideas of English Imperialism*, Oxford University Press, London, 1960.
- [15] Warren, Allen, 'Baden-Powell: a Final Comment' in *English Historical Review*, Vol. C11, 1987
- [16] *The Boy Scouts Association Year Book*, Boy Scout Association India, New Delhi, from 1912 to 1940.
- [17] *The Scout*, Vol. XIII. 1918.