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The Magic of the Himalaya: Mystique and Allure

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My personal journeys to the Himalaya began in 1972 when I was eleven years old, and my father took us to Kashmir for the only family holiday I recollect. Back in 1972, Kashmir was truly the Paradise on Earth that Jahangir described: "Gar firdaus bar-rue zamin ast, hami asto, hami asto, hami asto," which translates as, "If there be Paradise on Earth, it is here, it is here, it is here". The placid waters of the Dal Lake, in the lap of the immensity of the mountains with its gliding shikaras, had a postcard picturesqueness that lingers in the memory so many decades later. The rippling stream in Pahalgam, the snow-blanketed slopes of Sonmarg, and the manicured golf course in Gulmarg made up the typical tourist trajectory we took, but that first Kashmir idyll ignited a visceral and emotional connection with mountains that has stayed with me to this day.

Then, in 1983, a visit to Uttarakhand's Kumaon division—with its tortoise-shell gentle contours—and the more awesome and craggy heights of Garhwal, with rivers of milky foam like the Alaknanda or placid jade like the Mandakini, held me spellbound. I returned to Uttarakhand again in 1999 and have gone back every year until recently. More recently, in 2015, on a trip to Kalpa in Kinnaur and subsequent visits to Tirthan Valley, Jibhi and Jalori Pass, McLeod Ganj and Dharamshala, Dalhousie, Kangra, and finally Chail and Sarahan (the home of Bhimakali), the wonders of Himachal unfolded before me. I was smitten with this state's warm hospitality, its apple orchards, and its Buddhist monasteries so conducive to silence and inner tranquility.

After twenty-five years of journeys and sojourns in the Himalaya, as well as in the Nilgiri and Palani hills of South India, I often ask myself what it is that beckons me again and again to hills and valleys. Ruskin Bond quotes Kipling regarding woodsmoke: "That is the true smell of the Himalayas, and if once it creeps into the blood of a man, that man will at the last, forgetting all else, return to the hills to die". I often try to fathom the lure of the mountains when all of nature is beautiful, whether in the plains or the coastal regions. Is it the immensity of the mountains with all their grandeur that appeals? The immensity of the sea, I re-

mind myself, is also grand. Is it the challenge that mountain terrain poses, defying the human spirit with its inaccessibility? That challenge may provoke the mountaineering spirit, but I am no mountaineer.

The lure of the mountains is a mystery that the rational mind cannot unravel. What I can think of as a reason for my unconditional sense of joy in the mountains is the attitude of the worshipper with which I approach the Himalaya. Its grandeur fills me with joy, and its undulating ambience—with its unique flora and fauna, fertile river valleys, and terraced slopes—evokes an enchantment; no place stirs the heart and spirit within me as much as the Himalaya. No doubt the wonders of nature cannot be strictly categorized under a hierarchy; yet, to some of us, the sea coast beckons, and to many like me, it is the circuitous routes of the hills.

Be that as it may, travel literature throws ample light on how the hills impact us. Writing in his characteristic baroque tenor, Bill Aitken, the Scottish travel writer domiciled in Mussoorie, notes:

We make the effort to reach the Himalaya because it unlocks the treasures of our inner being. Our lives are touched and altered by walking among these peaks and breathing willy-nilly becomes more purposeful…. Just the act of walking in the middle ranges is a source of joyous discovery.... (Aitken, Footloose 10)

My own experiences only reflect those of mountain lovers like Ruskin Bond and Bill Aitken. The relative freshness of the air and the silence, the abundance of thick woods, and the simpler modes of life speak abundantly of what life could be like for those of us who battle traffic jams—apart from the inner jams of acquisitiveness and competition, of egotism and selfishness, as indeed of cramped spaces, smog, pollution, and ill health. For the city-bred individual, the relatively peaceful and salubrious air of the mountains becomes a tonic, a blessed respite filling him with a sense of well-being. Sadly, this now receives a jolting when he sees two-lane highways made out of blasting the hills and felling thousands of trees.

On my way to Shimla only two months ago, I was appalled to see a flyover coming up. News of the state government's agenda of opening helipads in every district of this beautiful state only makes me shudder at the desecration of an ecology that is fragile and in need of far-sighted policies for conservation. But that is a subject I will come to later. Suffice it to say that despite the huge influx of tourists and all the pollution that vehicles are causing, with subsequent climate change, there is yet a sense of relief and respite in the Himalaya that we need to cherish and preserve with an urgency that can yet stem the tide of ecological degradation, if not undo it.

To return to and affirm my own thoughts on the simple pleasure of walking through the Himalaya, Aitken writes, "The tonic effect of the Himalaya is as hard to define as India herself: both have the daunting prospect of size, a baffling variety of scene and a complex sociology to be assimilated" (Aitken, Footloose 10). In fact, with whatever there is left of forest cover in India, the Himalaya is the last refuge for nature lovers. Its sheer magnificence enchants, and the idea of "conquering" it by scaling its inhospitable terrain is vanity. As Aitken writes in his preface to Footloose in the Himalaya, "Perhaps the Himalaya is more important for the peak experiences it delivers than the peaks themselves" (10). This is in contrast with the obsession with conquering the peaks, which leads to expeditions from all parts of the world in the Himalaya or the Alps.

In a brilliantly written essay, "A Lateral View of the Himalaya," published in a collection of essays entitled Touching Upon the Himalaya, Aitken writes: "The most vital statistic about a mountain from the lateral point of view is not its height but its inspirational impact on our heart. The top is not the central reality of a mountain's persona any more than a high IQ is the mark of an enlightened person" (Aitken, Touching 134). But apart from its wonders for the nature lover, the Himalaya is also a grand yet aloof repository of mythical, religious, and spiritual life. Being inaccessible and enchantingly beautiful, it takes the seeker away from the feverishness of worldly life while putting him to the test with its natural ambience. The beauty of the Himalaya is itself a source of attachment, with the exception that it does not bind the seeker with the lure of bodily pleasure, lucre, or fame, but rather offers him a different kind of joy and sublimity: that of pristine nature.

The fact is that the Himalaya symbolizes the religious and spiritual life with its hundreds of temples dedicated primarily to the Hindu deities Lord Shiva and Goddess Durga. It is also the seat of major sacred pilgrimages like the Char Dham, and the relatively silent refuge it offers to nameless wandering ascetics makes it the ideal ground for renunciation from the trappings of worldly life. Western adventurism and colonial enterprise have led to a perception of these iconic ranges as a playground for testing the mettle of man, which is also an enterprise of the spirit, but one that is tied up with vanity. For as Aitken underlines in his travel narratives, the worshipper of the Himalaya humbly and willfully gets conquered rather than aspiring for any conquest. He writes:

India characteristically has regarded the Himalaya as the source of her civilizational inspiration and still venerates the timeless figures of the Rishi Munis above those who wave ephemeral flags atop Everest. Greatness in India (until

very recent times) was always defined by control of inner rather than outer forces. (Aitken, Footloose 10)

Most of Bill Aitken's narratives describe the pleasures of trekking in mid or lower ranges with their luxuriant spread of diverse flora, the sedate grandeur of the deodars, the lush blossoming of rhododendron, and the shady spread of the oak with its sinuous, moss-coated branches.

These lower ranges constitute a landscape that is rewarding if the sense of vanity does not overwhelm you, leading you to seek only the snow-laden upper ranges. It is because of their spiritual significance that the Himalaya is also the site of several pilgrimages and of a rich Hindu mythology replete in its different locations. While most pilgrims know of the Char Dham, few may know that Tungnath is the highest shrine at 12,106 ft. It is one of the five manifestations of Shiva, who concealed himself as a bull because he was angry at the bloodshed of which the Pandavas were guilty. He wanted to deprive them of the opportunity of penance by worshipping him. Thus, the five manifestations, or Panch Kedar, are the hair revealed at Kalpeshwar, the face showing at Rudranath, the hump showing at Kedarnath, the hands at Tungnath, and the navel and stomach at Madhyamaheshwar.

I was fortunate to trek to Tungnath in 2001 from Chopta, from where the ascent is about 4,000 ft to the shrine. The trekking route passes through some of the most pastoral scenes imaginable in any pilgrimage, with rolling meadows or buggiyals as they are called in Garhwal. I must affirm here that my own motivation was as much the adventure of the trek as the traditional idea of a darshan, but it is one of the charms of the Himalaya that it blurs the margins of an agnostic sensibility with that of the faithful pilgrim's aspiration. Every pilgrim climbing a mountain is physically a trekker, while every trekker fulfills his arduous endeavour primarily for witnessing the sublimity of the landscape unfolding around him, but also for the good bonus of a darshan. The aura of the Himalaya is such that it negates watertight categories.

Yet another fascinating pilgrimage in Uttarakhand is that of the Nanda Devi Raj Jat or Raj Yatra, when Nanda Devi—the hill manifestation of Shiva's consort Parvati—is carried in a palanquin to Shiva's abode on a four-horned ram. William Sax, in his insightful article "Village Daughter, Village Goddess: Residence, Gender and Politics in a Himalayan Pilgrimage," mentions this three-week-long pilgrimage covering 164 miles, passing through the mystery lake of Roopkund, an ice-bound pond at a height of 15,000 feet containing the skeletons of people who perished in it. This pilgrimage of the goddess's departure to the abode of her husband, undertaken exclusively by male pilgrims, is so arduous that it was suc-

cessfully completed only in 1927, 1968, and 1987, though it is performed like the Kumbh every twelve years.

Stephen Alter, who is as much a worshipper of the mountain goddess as Bill Aitken, describes Nanda Devi—once thought to be the highest mountain in India—in lyrical terms: "The mountain stands out from the rest, not only because of her altitude but through a natural symmetry that suggests perfection. Daubed with vermilion at sunset, she is an uncarved image, the raw shape in stone that a sculptor sees before chiselling a face, the hidden idol awaiting discovery beneath the surface of the rock" (Alter, Becoming 64). In Bill Aitken's words, "There was something commanding in the Devi's beauty as she lay essentially royal and feminine. All the cliches about Nanda as a queen surrounded by courtiers was appropriate for she towered above the rest with a regal detachment, the centre piece of a priceless necklace" (Aitken, Nanda Devi 7). As mentioned earlier, Uttarakhand deserves its status as "Dev Bhumi" not just because of the sacred sites of the Char Dham but also because of the hundreds of temples dotting the hill state and the mythology associated with them.

In Himachal, as in Sikkim, it is the origins and spread of Buddhism that interest me. I think Himachal's greater diversity compared to Uttarakhand lies in the rich blend of its temple architecture, which is a fusion of Hindu and Buddhist styles with intricately carved wooden structures and pagodas. Buddhism in Himachal goes back to the immigration of Tibetans to Lahaul-Spiti and, more recently, to the asylum of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama in 1959, when he secretly fled Tibet with an entourage of select courtiers. The Dalai Lama is the spiritual head of Tibetan Buddhists and has made McLeod Ganj his home, so this settlement overlooking Dharamshala is a Little Tibet or a Little Lhasa with its hundreds of Tibetan immigrants. It is believed that Padmasambhava, the legendary Lotus-born Guru of the 7th century, meditated in the lake town of Rewalsar in what is today the District of Mandi. Rinchen Zangpo in the 10th century built 108 monasteries across Himachal Pradesh, out of which only a few remain. Tabo, a 10th-century monastery, dates back to 996 AD.

Examples of religious synthesis or acculturation can be found elsewhere. Stephen Alter in Wild Himalaya describes a pilgrimage to Muktinath in Nepal where Buddhist and Hindu worship mingle seamlessly. Alter writes:

As I enter the main temple, a Hindu priest anoints my forehead with a vermilion tilak but when I approach the inner sanctum, a young Buddhist monk in ochre robes is lighting incense in front of Hindu idols. The caretakers of both religions seem to share ritual duties without compromising or contesting each other's beliefs. (Alter, Wild 69)

Alter also writes, quoting Swami Pranavananda on Kailash Mansarovar, "that followers of every religion, including the 'wandering minds' of atheists and agnostics, can feel 'vibrations' that emanate from this sacred landscape, just as 'particles of iron' are attracted to a magnet" (Alter, Wild 74).

The fact is that the snow-laden ranges, though pristine in their chill aloofness, are not so snow-laden any longer. There is a whole winter season, such as the winter of 2023, when I heard Shimla received no snowfall. The conundrum is that the fast pace of environmental damage to the Himalaya will never see a resolution if every tourist feels a sense of entitlement in visiting the Himalaya while pointing fingers at the other. The crises of increasing vehicular pollution, traffic jams, and desecration of trees and terrain for building more resorts are here to stay. Forest fires, rising temperatures, melting glaciers, the accumulation of garbage in hill towns, and the pressure on available land for farming or business have led to a catastrophic degradation of the ecology of the Himalaya and the chilling prognosis of a seismic upheaval.

The state government and its more powerful counterpart, the Central government, need to learn lessons from disasters such as occurred in 2013 in Uttarakhand, which may well be a disaster waiting to happen again. One wonders what vision the Ministries of Environment have for sustainable development, what policies for ecological conservation are in place, and to what extent and how effectively they are implemented. There should be a regulated cap, for example, on the number of vehicles being allowed per day to enter the state. How a policy regarding this can be implemented is difficult to imagine, though not impossible; but as it is, it is a free-for-all, just as it seems there is no regulatory mechanism for the haphazard building of resorts and tourist rest houses. The apparent signs, as I mentioned in the earlier part of this presentation, do not bode well, and it is quite obvious that lessons are not being learnt by the government.

Be that as it may, there is such a thing as responsible tourism, which is a matter of individual choice. In this context, may I once again quote Aitken. He writes, "I have always responded to the village view that we are here as mehman, guests of the Gods, visitors on this planet, not proprietors" (Aitken, Footloose 15). Sadly, we think and act like proprietors everywhere, whether in the mountains, forests, valleys, national parks, or even in the towns and cities we live in. Even a unique biosphere like the Nanda Devi Sanctuary is not inviolate. By bribing the forest guards, shepherds have let in packs of goats for grazing, thereby causing desecration of the sanctuary's flora. The statistics of such illegal entries are mind-boggling. When the shepherds threaten the forest guards for allowing their sheep in,

the guard files a report that 4,000 goats and sheep have been forcefully allowed into the park in the year 1982, the year the biosphere was declared a park.

Stephen Alter writes in his seminal book Becoming a Mountain that in 1993, "a joint expedition of the Indian Army Corps of Engineers and naturalists from the Wildlife Institute of India undertook an environmental survey of the sanctuary and removed more than a ton of garbage from the area near base camp. Following their report of widespread pollution, poaching and destruction of juniper, yew and birch forests, the sanctuary remains closed to trekkers, mountaineers and shepherds" (Alter, Becoming 68). So much for rules and regulations about the environment. It is time to introspect, though there isn't much time for that luxury either, since the imperative need is to act and salvage what is left after the desecration.

Yet another case in point is the Tehri Dam, which has submerged a whole city with all its age-old buildings and the culture associated with it. The dam, as Aitken points out in his essay "Tehri: For Whom the Bell Tolls," is posited on a kaccha hillside and is based on a scheme on which, as he says, "it is clear that the planners have not done their homework" (Aitken, Mountain 71). He points out that not only is the range kaccha, but it lies in a seismic zone and the "Bhagirathi over which the dam is to be built is one of the most forceful torrents in Uttarakhand" (71). Aitken points out that smaller dams would be far more in place than large dams like that of Tehri, but "having sunk so many crores in the project, any government is bound on considerations of prestige to go ahead and drown the town and the culture of Tehri as planned" (74).

Another significant issue is that of livelihood and employment opportunities both inside the Himalayan states and outside. The Himalaya looks heavenly to the outsider, jaded as he is with the degradation of his plains landscape as well as the stress, noise, and crowds of the city. While the hills offer a reprieve to this outsider, we need to be sensitive also to the perception that the local inhabitants have of their place in the world. Taking into account this paradox of the Himalaya, Aitken writes, "The art of beholding the Himalaya lies in accepting the paradox of aesthetic wealth alongside economic poverty, of reconciling the glory of aliveness with the evenly poised mischance of death" (Aitken, Footloose 11). In the essay referred to earlier, "A Lateral Approach to the Himalaya," Aitken writes:

The hillman's life is unremittingly hard and all efforts to better his condition are frustrated by the hostile terrain. Your potatoes are dug up by the porcupine; your grain is stripped clean by rats; bears steal your plums and maize,…leopards snatch your dogs, and landslides sweep away your sheep and cattle. The heartbreak of living in the Himalaya needs to be remembered when expedition leaders haggle

over payments to porters. The villagers are desperate and have nowhere to go. (Aitken, Touching 136)

On a personal note, when I shared with a local in Ukhimath (the winter abode of Kedarnath in Garhwal) my feeling that I thought the Himalaya a heaven (a swarg, as I said), I clearly remember him responding, "What is the value of such a heaven if it cannot give you a livelihood."

Yet another Himalayan dimension—along with travel narratives on the region, the significance of pilgrimage, and the state of environment—is the status of women in the hills. In my over two decades of travelling in the Himalaya, it is more than evident that while the women are beasts of burden, the men have a leisurely life: while the women go to get water or collect fodder or wood, the men are seen in tea shops gossiping, reading the newspapers, or whiling away time playing cards. Men are not partners with women in household chores or in other tasks that necessitate chores outdoors, and this impacts not just the lives of women but keeps productivity to a bare minimum—unless, of course, the man holds a job, opportunities for which have been traditionally scarce though now perhaps they may be growing. In unflinching censure of the hard life of hill women, Bill Aitken writes, "The seasonal miseries of the female lot have great bearing on the Nanda Devi lore for though she is viewed as a royal princess in both Kumaon and Garhwal, the Goddess remains an ordinary hill woman who must work the treadmill of dismal custom honoured by the theory of traditional respect but abused in the everyday expression of it" (Aitken, Nanda Devi 36).

It would be grossly amiss not to emphasize that the Himalaya as we know it since the last nearly two centuries—with its many hill stations where hundreds of India's public go to enjoy the cool and salubrious climate from the searing heat of the plains, much as the Sahibs and Memsahibs of yore did during the British Raj—is quite entirely the discovery of British surveyors, cartographers, explorers, botanists, and forest officers. Apart from Lt. Rose, who discovered Shimla in 1819, Captain James Young who discovered Mussoorie in 1824, and Peter Barron who discovered Nainital in 1841, there are innumerable other locations that were discovered or explored by the British, such as Frank Smythe's discovery of the Valley of Flowers or the Eric Shipton and Bill Tilman exploration of the Nanda Devi in 1934. Each hill station, big or small, was developed like a retreat with its churches, administrative buildings, municipal halls, civil or missionary hospitals, and elite missionary schools, all built on English patterns of architecture, whether the stone Gothic church, public Gothic buildings, or a hill variation of the typical English cottage.

Indeed, these hill stations were like the army cantonments; the oases within the rush and congestion of the city. The hill towns were micro-oases within the macro-oases of the Himalaya. No doubt these idyllic stations were a furtherance of the agenda of Empire to develop small villages into towns with their indigenous flora and hills and lakes very much like English county towns. However, contrary to popular belief, the contribution of Indians has been cleverly erased to highlight the colonial enterprise. A case in point is that of Mount Everest, named after the British Surveyor General, Sir George Everest. Yet few Indians would know that the credit for the measurement of Everest lies with his right-hand man, his Bengali assistant Radhanath Sikdar, who undertook the painstaking task of a computer.

Sikdar, after his laborious task under the aegis of the Trigonometrical Survey of India, announced to Francis Younghusband that he had discovered the highest mountain of the world. Aitken writes how, "Later British surveyors dismissed the story as fantasy. However researches by Bengali mountaineering historian Shambhu Nath Das reveal certain inconsistencies in the survey attitude to its Indian computers. It was a well established fact that George Everest leaned heavily on Radhanath Sikdar because of his mathematical prowess.... This Bengali assistant even wrote a manual for survey but mysteriously after the fallout of the 'Mutiny' his name was removed and credit for its authorship taken by a senior British officer" (Aitken, Mountain 115). Similarly, stalwarts like Pandit Nain Singh Rawat and Sarat Chandra Das were used by the Empire for espionage, but their names hardly ring a bell in the consciousness of most Indians. Pandit Nain Singh Rawat was born in Johar Bhattkura in 1830 in a remote part of northeastern Kumaon. He was self-taught to read and write and had no formal education.

He became a teacher and headmaster, but word of his enterprising travels and surveys got around, and he was employed by the Royal Geographical Society of London to explore Tibet and map its topography, mark Tibet's streams and rivers, and, in the words of Stephen Alter, to study "the customs of the men he met, the authority and dictates of local governors, what crops were planted...means and methods of taxation, forms of official and private communication" (Alter, Wild 291). Pandit Nain Singh Rawat was an extraordinary geographer with a keen and astute eye, listening carefully to the "conversations of fellow travellers" while being in disguise as a Buddhist lama. Similarly, Sarat Chandra Das, an erudite Bengali schoolmaster in Darjeeling, was employed for the purposes of exploration and espionage in Tibet, and he wrote A Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet, a record of his exploration of Tibet. Nain Singh was honoured with the Order of Companion of the Indian Empire by Queen Victoria. A compilation of his biog-

raphy written by Professor Shekhar Pathak and Uma Bhatt entitled Asia ke Peeth Par, along with Rawat's own writings on Tibet, remain to date the seminal Indian travel narratives on Tibet.

In one of the most outstanding books on mountains in recent years, Becoming a Mountain, published in 2014, Stephen Alter writes, "We appreciate mountains largely as a projection of personal dreams and aspirations, objects that render meaning only within the echo chambers of our imaginations" (38). Thus mountains reflect something exalted and sublime within ourselves, a certain invincibility and grandeur stimulating the witness to awe and the climber to challenge. Alter writes, "Instead of defining a mountain in human terms we must allow ourselves to be defined by the mountain" (Alter, Becoming 38). This anthropomorphic perception of the mountain as endowed with qualities that we can relate to—or which help us to understand our own limitations or strength—is something which we can attribute to other elements of nature, like the flowing water of the river or sea which symbolizes the flux of life, or the sense of retreat that the forest induces in us, thereby leading to the ideal of Vanaprasthashram. Much in the spirit of Aitken, Alter writes, "Rather than conquering a summit, or becoming the first to leave our footprints in the snow we must absorb the lofty knowledge of a mountain's presence while at the same time allowing ourselves to be absorbed into a greater awareness of what it may or not represent" (42). In a lyrical description, Alter writes:

Despite our doubts and disbelief, the spiritual radiance of a mountain flows off its glaciers and shines like a beacon of eternity. The sublime magnitude of the Himalayas leaves us with profound feelings of reverence as well as trepidation. We reconcile ourselves to this greater power only when we surrender to the mountains with humility and compassion, accepting our place amongst them. Climbing those staircases of ice and rock, our burdens fall away. Our bodies and souls vanish into a bottomless crevasse, even as we continue to seek the summit. (Alter, Becoming 212)

Writing of Himalayan rivers, Stephen Alter notes, "While the Indus and the Brahmaputra provide parenthetical limits of the Himalaya, dozens of other major rivers channel through the mountains. In the west are the great arteries of the Punjab—the Chenab, Ravi, Sutlej and Beas—all of which join the Indus before draining into the Arabian sea. The Yamuna and its tributary, the Tons mark the divide where waters flow eastward into the Ganga and on to the Bay of Bengal" (Alter, Wild 76). The Brahmaputra (known to the Tibetans as Tsang Po) and the Mansarovar (known as Mapham Tso), as well as the Sutlej and Karnali, all originate

from Tibet. But the Indian side of the Himalaya has the Kosi, Pindar, Alaknanda, Mandakini, Goriganga, Tirthan, and of course the Sutlej and Beas. This flow of water and the innumerable waterfalls that are such a scenic part of the Himalayan landscape are as sacred elements of nature as the mountains themselves.

In Wild Himalaya, Alter also documents Himalayan flora; he shows us the evolution of Himalayan flora from the glacial age when many varieties either vanished or thrived at lower and warmer altitudes. The first species to return to life in the warmer climate at higher altitudes were lichens, liverworts, and mosses. With monsoons becoming an annual feature, there was a profusion of mosses, bryophytes, and ferns which grow in profusion in the Himalaya and are really the joy of trekking. Joseph Dalton Hooker, a botanist, was a pioneer in the study of Himalayan species. Hooker is credited with having identified thirty-six varieties of Rhododendron, many of which were named after friends, like Rhododendron falconeri after Hugh Falconer, one of the famous naturalists of his time, and Rhododendron thomsonii named after the surgeon Dr. Thomas Thomson. Apart from his Himalayan Journals, Hooker wrote his monumental seven-volume Flora of British India and Rhododendrons of Sikkim Himalaya.

When it comes to lower forms of wildlife like butterflies and birds, Peter Smetacek, originally from Czechoslovakia, follows in his father Frederick Smetacek's footsteps. His home in Bhimtal, Uttarakhand, an old tea planter's bungalow, houses a Butterfly Research Centre and has an extensive collection of butterflies and moths. He has authored a number of field guides, including A Naturalist's Guide to the Butterflies of India and Butterflies on the Roof of the World. Similarly, the Bombay-based ornithologist Salim Ali, who travelled on foot to Mount Kailash from Tibet, is a pioneer in exploring and studying the various species of Himalayan birds. He was to become one of the most illustrious presidents of the Bombay Natural History Society. For mammals, George Schaller's Mountain Monarchs and Peter Matthiessen's The Snow Leopard stand as works specific to a single animal species, apart from a host of other books on Himalayan wildlife. The fact is that the Himalaya is home to a variety of animal species which contribute with plants, flowers, and trees to its amazing biodiversity.

Yet another much loved and popular writer domiciled in the erstwhile queen of hill stations, Mussoorie, is Ruskin Bond. Brought up in the foothills of Dehradun, Bond made Mussoorie his home, and Maplewood Cottage, his first home, still stands beside a lonely road in the midst of dense woods. Writing in Rain in the Mountains: Notes from the Himalayas, he describes his childhood love of the hills far away from England: "I had grown up amongst those great blue and brown

mountains; they had nourished my blood; and though I was separated from them by thousands of miles of ocean, plain and desert, I could not rid them from my system. It is always the same with mountains. Once you have lived for any length of time, you belong to them. There is no escape" (Bond 92). Like Aitken, Bond is a nature lover who has no aspiration to scale mountains but rather prefers to revel and luxuriate in his walks. He writes:

Like J. Krishnamurti, I believe that the journey is more important than the destination. But then, I have never really had a destination. The glory that comes from conquering the Himalayan peaks is not for me. My greatest pleasure lies in taking a path—any path will do—and following it until it leads me to a forest glade or village or stream or windy hilltop. (Bond 119)

Writing a prose as clear as a flowing mountain stream, Ruskin Bond's earthy love of the Himalaya is a quality which endears him to thousands of readers.

While there are scores of travel narratives on Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh, we would do well to remind ourselves that the Himalaya is an extended topographical arc that extends from Arunachal Pradesh to Kashmir, spanning a distance of 2,400 kms in India, and that it encompasses other countries like Bhutan and Nepal and extends in the Northwest to the Hindu Kush in Afghanistan. There are several travelogues on these regions, but it is beyond the scope of this address to delve into them; but mention must be made of Barbara Crosette's seminal book So Close to Heaven: The Vanishing Buddhist Kingdoms of the Himalayas, which contains detailed accounts of Ladakh, Nepal, Bhutan, and Sikkim.

On Himachal Pradesh, two post-colonial narratives in my reading experience that stand out for this hill state are Penelope Chetwode's Kulu: The End of the Habitable World and Christina Noble's Over the High Passes: A Year in the Himalayas with the Migratory Gaddi Shepherds. Chetwode's Kulu is a unique travelogue in that the journey is made by her on a mule in an India that is independent, while earlier she had covered the same route in 1931 during the Raj as the privileged daughter of Philip Chetwode, Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army. Apart from documenting the unique temple architecture of Himachal, Chetwode visits Nikolai Roerich's estate in Naggar. She also traces the history of apple cultivation in Kulu to Captain Lee, who brought the apple seeds from England, while Captain Bannon extended the apple orchards. The second book, Christina Noble's Over the High Passes, is a fascinating account of a pastoral migration from Kangra to Lahaul in the spring season and from there down to Kulu and then to Kangra in the autumn. Noble accompanies the Gaddis in this cyclical trajectory in search of green pasture. The main vocation of the Gaddis is selling wool and

meat, and though they are best suited for their own vocation, their earnings are such that they can manage to survive but are far from prosperous. In fact, their traditional grazing lands are cordoned off, and while timber contractors bribe forest guards with money and liquor, it is the Gaddis who get the blame. As one Gaddi confesses to Christina Noble, "We eat bad food, drink bad water and sometimes must camp in bad places" (Noble 80).

While this paper has so far focused primarily on contemporary writers, the fact is that colonial writing on the Himalaya is immensely prolific and constitutes a whole genre of mountain writing. Combining adventure, exploration, and profound descriptions of nature, there are scores of writers enraptured by the magic of the Himalaya. Andrew Wilson's Abode of Snow, Francis Younghusband's Heart of Nature, Frank Smythe's The Valley of Flowers, James Baillie Fraser's Journal of a Tour, Thomas Thomson's Western Himalaya and Tibet, and William Moorcroft and George Trebeck's Travels in the Himalayan Provinces of Hindustan and the Panjab to name a few.

Describing the dense forests of Sikkim in his book Heart of Nature, Francis Younghusband writes of ferns and orchids, of which there are 450 varieties. He writes, "Of the flowers, the orchids are naturally the first to attract us. They shine out as real gems in the greenery around them" (Younghusband 23). He writes of Rhododendrons, "Out of the thirty species which are found in Sikkim, all the most beautiful have been introduced—chiefly by Sir Joseph Hooker—into England, and are grown in many parks and gardens as well as at Kew" (29). Describing Lepchas, the forest inhabitants of Sikkim, he writes, "Their alertness, their capacity to glide through the forest almost as stealthily as any animal, their keenness of sight, their acute sense of hearing, their knowledge of jungle lore and of the habits of animals, and their ability to stand long and hard physical strain, are the envy of us civilized men when we find ourselves among them" (51). Describing the sublime view of Kanchenjunga that the traveller witnesses, he writes:

Through the rent in the fleecy veil he sees clear and clean against the intense blue sky the snowy summit of the Kanchenjunga, the culminating peak of lesser heights converging upward to it and all ethereal as spirit, white and pure in the sunshine, yet suffused with the delicatest hues of blue, mauve and pink. It is a vision of colour and warmth and light—a heaven of beauty, love and truth. (Younghusband 90)

Lt. Colonel Francis Younghusband is an ardent nature worshipper, although he was a military man who served the interests of the Empire in the Great Game, the conflict of interests between Britain and Russia over Central Asia, Tibet, Afghan-

istan, and Persia (now known as Iran). As a man who was actively involved in military and political strategies, his writing reveals a remarkably discerning eye for the colours and shapes of mountain landscapes, for flora, and the forests. He writes of the affect that mountains have on man, "He is not overawed or overcome by them. His soul goes out most lovingly to them because they have aroused in him all the greatness in his soul and purified it—even if only for a time—of all its dross and despicableness. And he loves them for that. He does not go cringing along, feeling himself a worm in comparison with them. There is warm kinship between him and them" (96). Whether it is his book Wonders of the Himalaya or Heart of Nature, Younghusband's writing is imbued with that lyrical and romantic spirit which perceives in the shapes and hues of mountains and forests a spirit utterly sublime and Wordsworthian.

Frank Smythe, explorer and naturalist, describes his profound sense of revelation at discovering the Valley of Flowers:

At first I could see nothing but rocks, then suddenly my wandering gaze was arrested by a slash of blue, and beyond it were other splashes of blue, a blue so intense it seemed to light the hillside. As Holdsworth wrote: 'All of a sudden I realized that I was simply surrounded by primulas.' At once the day seemed to brighten perceptibly. Forgotten were all pains and cold and lost porters. And what a primula it was…. All over the little shelves and terraces it grew, often with roots in running water. (Smythe x)

And in yet another colourful description: "Next day we descended to lush meadows. Here our camp was embowered amidst flowers: snow-white drifts of anemones, golden, lily like nomocharis, marigolds, globe flowers, delphiniums, violets,…blue corydalis, wild roses, flowering shrubs and rhododendrons…" (Smythe x).

On leaving the Valley of Flowers, Smythe feels "almost depressed." He writes, "There are many virtues in wandering about the Himalayas, but to me the ideal life will always be a flowerful country where I can pitch my camp and settle down to observe all that happens about me. To the botanist there is a realm of interest and potential exploration in half a mile of hillside" (147). In lines that are inspiring and mystic and carry a message so profound that it is as if Smythe is speaking for all kindred souls who love mountains, he writes:

All about me was the great peacefulness of the hills, a peacefulness so perfect that something within me seemed to strain upwards as though to catch the notes of an immortal harmony. There seemed in this peace and quietitude some Presence, some all pervading beauty separated from me only by my own muddy vesture of

decay. The stars and the hills beneath the stars, the flowers at my feet were part of a supreme purpose which I myself must struggle to fulfil.... Surely the hills were made that we should appreciate our strengths and frailties? ... So we go to seek beauty on a hill, the beauty that lifts us to a high window of our fleshy prison whence we may see a little further over the dry and dusty plains to the blue ranges and the eternal snows. So we climb the hills, pitting our strength against difficulty, enduring hardship, discomfort and danger that through a subjugation of the body we may perceive beauty and discover a contentment of spirit beyond all earthly imaginings and through beauty and contentment we gain peace. (Smythe 259-60)

In a severe indictment of the way human beings desecrate nature, Smythe comes down heavily on the profit-ridden world we have created, so that we have the urge to escape from the world we have ourselves created. This is one of the most descriptive and timeless passages delineating our motive to seek the mountains. It seems almost like the voice of an environmentalist messiah speaking for our own time:

It is the ugliness man creates that leads to discontentment and war; the ugliness of greed, and the ugliness that greed begets; a vast ocean of ugliness in which he perishes miserably. It is because men are beginning to realise that they long to escape from an environment of mechanical noises, of noisome fumes and hideous arrangement of bricks and steel into the beauty and quietitude of the countryside, to carry themselves naturally on their legs and not artificially on wheels, to travel at God's pace, to listen to the song of Nature, the birds, the streams and the breeze….to look upon beautiful things, flowers and meadow lands and hilltops, to live for a time simply and rhythmically in airs untainted by factory smoke, to discover the virtues of simplicity and goodwill. (Smythe 260)

Mountains, with their undulating terrain and valleys, lush forests, and snow-clad peaks, exist at the intersections of folklore, mythology, religion, anthropology, fiction, travel literature, cinema, history, and the natural sciences. If we take travel literature alone, the repertoire of narratives that exist on the Himalaya and Tibet exceeds the accounts of any other part of the world. This remarkable conference is unique for the fact that since the early 80s, while we in academia have been debating issues like post-colonialism and more recently eco-criticism without much grass-root relevance to such a vital part of the Indian subcontinent, the time has come to celebrate the mountains and salvage and preserve what is left of them to cherish.

I think if there is any message that conferences like this one ought to send out to the immediate community, to the policy makers in our governments, and in-

deed to the wider world at large, it is this: the time has come for us to distinguish between models of development in the plains and the larger metropolitan cities from that of development in the fragile ecology of the hills, be they hills in the Western Himalaya, the Northeast, South India, or in any other mountainous part of the world. Development in the mountains does not mean ubiquitous multi-lane highways or multi-storeyed malls. Nor does tourism mean that we destroy the old-world charm and ambience of our hill stations for the sake of plush, high-end facilities for which the tourist can always go to Singapore or Dubai.

Tourism in the Himalaya, in particular and indeed everywhere, means sustainable development. In the name of development, you do not degrade what the tourist comes from far and wide to feel, see, and cherish. When we cut down trees and build dams indiscriminately, we pose a grave threat not just to tourists but to local inhabitants. By cutting down trees, we increase the possibility of soil erosion and landslides and loss of human life and homes. By building dams, we may generate hydro-electricity and increase irrigation for farming, but we also increase the chances of floods and displacement of local communities. May I, however, conclude on a note of hope with a quote from the military mystic Lt. Colonel Francis Younghusband:

As we look at the Himalaya from such distance that we can see things whole and in their just proportion, the pain and disorder and strife vanish into insignificance. We know that they are there and we know that they are real. But we know also that more important and just as real, is the Power which out of evil is ever making good to come…[This] is the true secret of the Himalaya. (Younghusband 92)

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