

Himalaya Ki Vadiyon Mein

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Till the 1960s-70s good publishers used to publish travelogues with great interest. Not only written by big names such as Rabindranath Tagore, Rahul Sankrityayan, Walter Sullivan, Sachchidananda Vatsyayan, or Shivani, but even unknown writers' travel stories were published with relish. Some book catalogues had a separate section under this genre. Even a President of India and a Governor of state happily endorsed or wrote the Preface of a travelogue by someone as little known as Krishna Narayan Gosavi. That was then. The reason could be that earlier, undertaking travels to obscure places or harsh terrain was difficult and hazardous. So, common readers used to explore and enjoy many great places through the travelogues written by courageous travellers. But presently tour and travels are a popular activity and an established industry worldwide. Anybody with some means and time can travel to various kind of places. Therefore, the genre travelogue is much less important today.

Is it the reason that an excellent book¹, a travelogue written by Prof. Sukhanandan Singh has not earned the respect it deserves? Prof. Singh is an academic faculty in Journalism at the Dev Samskriti Vishvavidyalaya, Haridwar and an UGC-Associate at the IAS, Shimla. But first and foremost he is a born traveller. This is his first book, rich in details, descriptions, pictures and written with loving care. The travels described in it are not by some flying tourist, or an outsider coming to see exotic places just out of curiosity. This travelogue is by a son of the Himalayas itself, and about places travelled by him many a times with deep feelings and concern for everything observed. Thus, many places along with its rivers, rivulets, flora & fauna, and people, are described with his minute and comparative observations, laterally and historically. Many observations are also about the

social, cultural and economic situations of the people of an area travelled. The author has visited some places many a times, which enriched his understanding, shared in this book. It also contains 57 pictures, some of them very perceptive. Thus, the book is not only an interesting read about the journeys undertaken but also a pot of knowledge about places and people. It is a good educational book, too, especially for the young Indians.

The dedication itself of the book, written in an artless poetic manner, indicates the class of the material ahead. The author has dedicated it to the Himalayas: 'To that godly Himalaya in whose lap spent my childhood, in whose valleys saw the golden moments of my youth, and who, like a self-contained, unwavering monk, is encouraging me at the spreading evening of life to constantly explore the inner riches of the Himalayas.' Since his young age, the author mentions, he has felt a tender pulse for the Himalayas. Later, he was taught by elders to know it also as 'godly' (*devatma*) which is not just a mass of soil and stones, but a monumental career of some spiritual consciousness. That is the reason the entire Himalayan habitat is called *devbhoomi*, the abode of gods.

This is his first travelogue with details of some areas of Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand. Yet, or perhaps because of it, he filled it abundantly with his observations and reflections. He has been travelling those terrains for the last three decades, no less. This gives an inkling of his experienced findings and perceptions about the places he described. He knows closely, not only the flora and fauna of the travelled range, but also some specific characteristics of many animals and creatures. For instance, what delicacies monkeys or langoors like to have, or how an animal relates to a particular vegetation, etc. In Rishikesh, from Ramjhula en route to Neelkantha, langoors are described as friends: "'hese peaceful and kind creatures are habitual to eat from the hands of the travellers. They live in groups. If one is not afraid, then he can amply enjoy in their company.'" (p. 33)

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Some worthy readers may perceive rawness in the descriptions, but perhaps it is more a quality than a shortcoming. It contains plain feelings of the observer and covers the inadequacy of editing of the text, sometimes repetitive. The traveller is also conscious that he is travelling on the very paths earlier trodden by great teachers and saints, such as Guru Gobind Singh, Swami Vivekannada, Swami Shivananda, Swami Satyananda, and others. In their turn, those greats themselves were following thousands years old tradition of moving and meditating in Himalayas. Therefore, a conscious and meditative traveller can have similar perceptions the past travellers might have acquired there. In a way, the book has this underlying message for the readers and potential travellers.

The book contains descriptions of altogether thirty-six travels into the Himalayas. These include places in and around Kumaon, Garhwal, Shimla, Mandi, Manalis, Kullu and Lahoul valleys. Reading about them one can know features and significance of various temples, rivers, lakes, mountains, valleys, forests, villages, resting places, etc. Sometimes a picturesque account, such as describing the landscape of the Malini river: 'Farmers are cultivating at one place, at another fishermen are catching fish, somewhere washing clothes is going on, and this side sheeps, goats, cows, horses are grazing. Few tents are standing on the banks, there a resort, and some tourist camp running. On some places whole villages are thriving on its banks.' (p. 18) On this riverbank is situated the Siddhabali Temple of Hanuman ji, where devotees offer bhandaras, free meals to people. The importance of the place can be gauged from the fact, the author informs, that the advanced booking for future bhandaras has been made for next ten years.

There is much technical information, incidental in some descriptions but useful for new travellers. Such as, what kind of facilities are available in a place, what particular difficulty one may face at a certain point, etc. This way it may help as a guide to young travellers who might be planning to go to such places. For example, a description about Lansdowne includes: 'Tip-n-Top. From here above on the top is a great view to the valley in distance. Below is a dense forest of oak, devadar, and buransh. Travelling through it is so fulfilling and complete satisfaction for spending one's money and time for it. On the way there is a Church where one can park the vehicle and simply walk around. Deep in forest into the Church one may like to pray for few moments.' (p. 19). Or walking leisurely in Haridwar the author provides tips about the Mohan puriwale, Prakashlok lassi, and a nice *Gujarati* dhaba near Trimurti. Likewise, descriptions about Shimla have detailed information about little known tracking trails there. (p. 144-48)

Along with the spiritual and tourist details, the author has frequently observed about the high and low of some social, agricultural, and economic situations at some locations; what kind of social evils or habits are creeping into the otherwise beautiful and simple villages, etc. He has also made comparisons of different hill areas, how it was earlier and the situation at present. Describing further from Almora, he writes: 'Despite having water resources along the road, people are confined to field cultivation only. With fertile land in this hill area my gardener friend could see big possibilities of growing fruits and vegetables. At these heights pears, plum, peach, pomegranate, and japani fruit can be richly obtained. Some special varieties of apples can also be tried. In vegetables, peas, tomato, shimlamirch (capsicum), and various medicinal plants, flowers, garlic, onion, cauliflower can be cultivated as cash crops. If local youth could concentrate upon it, there may not be any exodus to distant towns and cities.' (p. 3). Although the author is modest about his wisdom, his observations reflect sound knowledge and insights: 'Villagers say that there is never any scarcity of water here, even during very hot weather. Actually, the oak trees are the reason for it, because its roots release water and conserve it. I thought if the villagers plant mixed trees in abundance along with the oaks, the receding water resources might become recharged.' (p. 4)

Descriptions about Shimla and its environs are given in great detail (p. 136-61), along with every important information and pictures of beautiful locations, significant temples, famous educational and academic institutions, special tracking paths and trails. Some travel experiences are with his student-teams, as the author had gone on specific educational training or mountaineering expeditions in Manali, Solang valley and Gulaba forests (pp. 218-36). These descriptions are quite interesting and can be of good use for aspirant travellers and adventurers.

Apparently, one may read the book in between from anywhere, as they are separate short and long descriptions of different places in Himalayas. Even few pages reading in any section impresses a reader about the author's observant, caring and contemplative attitude. Most of all his social and dharmic concern about our land and people is noticeable. At times he makes philosophic conclusions as well: 'If one concentrates on the task at hand then there is no way fear can intimidate him.' This comment is made about travelling on risky trails, but equally valid about various difficult and hazardous duties one is compelled or inclined to undertake in life.

In short, this book by Prof. Sukhanandan Singh is a distinct contribution to the traditional travelogues. Nevertheless, it can be made better with smart editing. Narrations would be more interesting if the time or year could be added to each travel described. Some

repetitions and banal photographs may be better removed for a shorter, student edition of the book. Such a book can be very educative as well as interesting for our young readers. They will get meaningful knowledge and perspective about the Himalayan parts of our country. Such a read always helps in cultivation of social and cultural sense and also imagination. Something the

current course studies in our schools and universities fail to instil in our youth.

Note

1. 'Himalaya ki vadiyon mein', Prof. Sukhanandan Singh (Bilaspur: Evincepub, 2021, pp. 243, Rs. 399)