

GEOGRAPHICAL REALITIES OF HIMALAYAN REGION IN TRAVEL WRITINGS: A REVIEW OF TWO BENGALI TRAVELOGUES

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Abstract

As far as the etymology of ‘travelogue’—that is, ‘a piece of Writing about travel’—is concerned, the first usage of the word can be noticed as late as in 1903 in the essays of the American traveller Burton Holmes(1870-1958). ‘Travelogue’, as delineated by Holmes, can be divided into different subcategories like ‘travel literature’, ‘travel writing’, ‘travel journal’, ‘travel documentary’, and ‘travelogue- film’. However, most important to decide before the beginning of composition of travelogues is whether the writing is intended to be narrative, descriptive, or instructive.

Swami Ramananda Bharati started his journey to Kailash and Mansorovar as a pilgrim in 1898 and he wrote his travel experiences with sacred view during 1900-1901. As a pilgrim Ramananda accomplished his long journey by foot and riding animal because more than hundred years ago modern transport was unavailable there. If we go through his book it is evident that his outlook or perspective was religious but the geographical facts and realities are present throughout his writings. His writings cover physiography, drainage, flora and fauna, local economy, settlement, society and culture of the time.

Umprasad Mukhopadhyaya, well-acquainted in Himalayan travel wrote the book ‘Sherpader Deshe’.It is a book on the travel of Nepal-Himalayas. The writer travelled twice (1966 & 1975) in this region. In the first time he started his journey from Kathmandu towards Mt. Everest. After fourteen day’s walk he reached the destination. Mainly, exciting experience of his journey has got a footing in his book. His travelogue

has become a wonderful blending of amazing and multifarious description of nature together with the lives of local people. He has been able to give the vivid description of every halt of his travel route (as its location, altitude etc.). Thus, his travelogue has reached the status of a geographical record.

Key words: *Himalaya, Travelogues, Geographical reality*

Introduction

In ancient and medieval period travelogues were considered as an important source of geographical information of a region. Apparently, Himalaya appears as a 'Natural Wall' of Indian subcontinent but in reality it has a spiritual connection with Indian culture also. So many travelogues on Himalayan region particularly, in Bengali have been written during the last century. Here, two travelogues, 'Himaranya' by Swami Ramananda Bharati and 'Sherpader Deshe' by Umoprasad Mukhopadhyaya are taken into consideration.

Swami Ramananda Bharati started his journey to Kailash and Mansarovar as a pilgrim in 1898 and he wrote his travel experiences with sacred view in 1900-1901. On the other hand Umoprasad Mukhopadhyaya travelled twice (1966 & 1975) in this region.

Objectives

The objectives of the paper are---

- a) To study the Bengal Travelogues on Himalayan region as a tool to understand the physical geography (i.e. land forms, geology, climate, drainage, flora, fauna etc.)
- b) To study the habitat, economy and society of the two places according to the travelogues.
- c) To study the myths, beliefs and culture of the aforesaid region described in the travelogues.
- d) Changing scenario of physical landscape to cultural landscapes in temporal variation.
- e) To study man-environment relationship of the locals as well as the travellers according to the travelogues.

Methodology

This is a descriptive or analytical paper. The use of literary tool and its geographical criticism is the major topic of discussion.

Existence of “Absolute” and “Relative” space

The first book was written by a pilgrim and the second one is by a traveller. But both of them have depicted geographical realities of the respective places. Even not always systematically, but pictures of ‘absolute’ and ‘relative’ space at time have been drawn.

➤ Physical geography in travel writings

Swami Ramananda Bharati described the physiography in the context of mythological background. So the name of the most places are Puranic and not similar at present. In his way to ‘Tratapuri’ the author found a hot spring near Sutlej which was described as ‘Bhasmachal’(p-54). The continuous upward slope in the way to ‘Gaurikuda’ was a permafrost extending five to six miles. For the Hindus a ‘Shva-linga’ shaped mount has almost 22028ft altitude from M.S.L (p-81). In ‘Ravana Hrad’ (a lake) there was a hilly island with snow peak. Mountains are located in the northern part of ‘Khujrunath’ and in South there was a mountain stream(p-62, 80, 85). The author described ‘Selsel Pass’ which is almost 16390ft in height. In upper part of this pass boulders, pebbles and cobbles are deposited as dome. In Southern part of the river Dhauli, ‘Donagiri’ mountain is situated which is described as ‘Gandhamadan’ in ancient Hindu myth. The peaks are snow covered and the highest peak is 23181ft in altitude(p- 27).

Umadas Mukhopadhyaya has given a detail account of physiography of his journey route from Kathmandu to Thianguochi (Kunda). The author consciously mentioned the geographical terms like ‘Pass’, ‘Col’, ‘Avalanches’ etc to describe physiographic features. The another significance of his writing is to note down of the spot-height of various places and peaks laying his travel route.

In his way to ‘Tretapuri’ the author Ramananda Bharati found a meeting place of seven rivers which are known as ‘Donchu’. Nourished by Sutlej and other two rivers a

lake is created. The River of the 'Lion Mouth' is in the North, the River of the 'Horse Mouth' to the East, the River of the 'Peacock Mouth' to the South and the River of the 'Elephant Mouth' to the West(p- 64).

In Nepali 'Khola' means streams or small rivers. In his way 'Those', the author was surprised to watch the vast sand-bars on a small river. He also found a depressed zone encircled by high mountain peaks. It seems like a dry big pond which is actually the meeting place of several rivers. (p- 56)

➤ **Vegetation:**

As a conscious traveller, Umaprasad Mukhopadhyay's outlook was not merely romantic but scientific also. He mentioned the scientific names of the trees and gave a geographical explanation of the growth and distribution of the vegetation.

➤ **Settlement:**

In his way to 'Niti' Swami Ramananda Bharati² found that most of the houses were two-storied and few of them one storied. The ground floor was made of stone and mud and the first floor was structured by wood. He noticed most of the two-storied houses were situated in linear pattern. The ground floor of the two storied houses were generally used to keep the cattle like sheep, goat, cow etc. and the upper part was used as a room (p- 27).

Near 'Khenglung' two and three storied buildings were constructed carving the mountain but the poor local people would have lived in numerous caves in both sides of it (p- 51).The temples were completely made of stone instead of brick. Soil and stone-dust would have been used as the substitute of brick-dust which was so hard than the stone (p- 54).

Ramananda mentioned how did the hilly people adapt to the local environment. Most of the people of Darchin used to live in tents which were made of fur of yak. So, inner part of the tents remains warmer than the outside in winter season. As snowfall

occurs frequently in winter, so there might be the possibility to collapse the roof. For this reason except the rich people no one was able to construct the roof. The people had to clear the ice on roof regularly in winter. (p- 67).

➤ **Economy:**

Traditionally there was a commercial linkage between India and Tibet. In spite of a pilgrim Ramananda Bharati didn't overlook the economic scenario of the region. Major occupations of the people who live near Tibet-India (at present border of Himachal Pradesh and Uttrakhand) border are agriculture and trade. They gather near 'Niti' Pass during the first of June and wait until to open the pass. Most of the male and female members of the families start to migrate seasonally and come back home before winter. More than hundred years ago, trade with Tibet was carried on by exchange of goods (barter system). The people of many villages near Niti Pass used to export rice, wheat, molasses, sugar candy and coloured pieces clothes and to import salt, borax and wool. Sheep, 'Jhabbu' and goat were the only medium in continuous upward and downward slope of Himalaya. Only cloths and wool were sold and bought in cash. At that time market price of wool of two sheep or goats was rupees one only. Local hilly people were the main buyer of wool who used to make winter garments from it and they would export to Lahore, Kanpur etc in undivided India (p- 25).

➤ **Society and Culture:**

Umamprasad heard the story of life and society of the Sherpa's from his porter Girmi. The author has given a racial distinction between the original Sherpa and 'Tamang' Sherpa. Actually the Tamangs are not aboriginal community of Nepal. Their ancestors were Tibetan. They were Buddhist but married local Nepali woman. Thus a clan named as 'Tamang' was originated. Now they have lost their ancestor's socio-cultural tradition. They worship Lord Buddha and at the same time preserve Hindu's festive occasion (p- 12). So the author has consciously touched upon the anthropogenic and racial backgrounds of the locals.

➤ Sacred geography:

Geography is an interdisciplinary subject and its novel branch Sacred Geography has emerged where interrelationship between 'Religion' and 'space' has been exhibited. Sacred Spaces evoke a feeling of a sacredness of space and time, where Heaven seems to touch Earth and we find ourselves aware of the Holy, and filled with the Spirit. A higher energy resides in a sacred space, a power beyond human control which is a part of the feeling of "awe". To find ourselves in the midst of a great natural beauty is an awakening into moments of heightened spiritual consciousness.

The author Ramananda Bharati in his travelogue describes both 'Sacred' route and 'Travel' route. To visit holy Mansarovar from 'Jugumpha' the following sacred routes must be followed. First 'Jugumpha' to Nangmuna Moth; Nangmuna to Ghigimp; Ghigimp to Sarlang to Bondi; Bondi to Yangu; Yango to Thokor, Thokor to Khuchur. In all the places there was a Moth and a place for taking rest for the travellers. Distance from one Moth to another is atleast ten to twelve miles which indicates that total periphery of Mansarovar is almost eighty to eighty five km (p -86) .

Though his description is scattered yet there are some myth also. While going to Tretapuri from Khenglung he noticed a mountain emission smoke which was mythologically called as 'Bhasmachal'. It is said that 'Bhasmasur' (mythological demon) was burnt into ashes here. Lord Sankar lived here and then in conspiracy of Vishnu when Bhasmasur was burnt into ashes then Lord Sankar departed Kailash. So like Kailash it is also a great and holy pilgrimage. Then he came to Tretapuri where Lord Shiva (Sankar) lived here with Uma (Devi Durga) in Treta Yuga (a Puranic era). (pp—53 & 54)

He heard a story of discovery of Kailash from some of old Lama. There are the stories of 'Gipchun' and 'Naropa'. They were the prophets of the Lamas. Among them the first one was the worshiper of Lord Shiva and second one was the worshiper of Buddha, i.e. atheist. In his travelogue their myth and stories have occupied a significant place but he didn't express his own feelings. But after having permission from a local

king to travel Kailash-Mansarovar the author as an ordinary pilgrim couldn't suppress his emotion. He believes "except God's blessings nobody without any obstruction can visit Kailash and taking bath in the water of Mansarovar..... I departed the place offering 'pronams' to tutelary God." (pp- 70)

➤ Environmental consciousness:

Umaprasad Mukhopadhyay never perceived Himalaya as a mere traveller. He has consciously pointed out the negative aspect of the growing tourism industry at the hill stations of Nepal. For example, in 1974 total number of tourists in Khumbu region was almost 4000 where at the same time total local people of the concerned area were 3300. This high rate of tourist flow and number of expedition to mountain peaks not only lead to deforestation and environmental pollution but also destroy the eternal calm-quiet spiritual environment of Himalaya. When he second time visited this region he found a heap of garbage like plastic, tear-paper, rags, empty packet etc scattered about here and there.

➤ In concluding statement:

Finally it can be stated that the travelogue on various aspects like pilgrimage, exploration, politics, travel and tourism, etc may be evaluated in the perspective of Geographical realities and ultimately a systematic Methodology can be developed in future.

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