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The Mystic Mountains: Biodiversity in the Himalayas, Environment Changes and the Importance of Sustainable Development as Reflected in the Works of Some Famous Writers

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Abstract:

The age of the Earth is about 4.54 billion years and life on Earth dates back at least 3.5 billion years ago. Biodiversity generally refers to the existence of a large number of different kinds of animals and plants which make a balanced environment. It includes a variety of ecosystems such as those that occur in deserts, forests, wetlands, mountains, lakes, rivers, and agricultural landscapes. In each ecosystem, living creatures, including humans, form a community, interacting with one another and with the environment thus changing and affecting the biodiversity and making Earth a habitable place for humans. The biodiversity we see today is the result of billions of years of evolution, natural processes and the influence of humans. It is important for the sustenance of life on earth.

Since life began on Earth, five major mass extinctions—the Ordovician-Silurian mass extinction, the Late Devonian mass extinction, the Permian mass extinction, the Triassic-Jurassic mass extinction, the Cretaceous-Tertiary mass extinction and several minor events have led to large and sudden drops in biodiversity. It is believed that rapid environmental changes typically cause mass extinctions. The period since the emergence of humans has displayed an ongoing biodiversity reduction called the Holocene extinction. This reduction is caused mainly by the impact of humans on the environment – environmental degradation, in particular habitat destruction.

People who have become aware of the irreplaceable damage we have already done to Mother Earth have started making efforts to reduce it. Sustainable development, that is, development of humans without disturbing and destroying the natural systems, is the life line that many are looking at to offset the problem. But the rich, powerful and greedy still continue to exploit Mother Nature at a rapid pace. We are taking away from nature more than we can give and in most cases something that we can never give and replenish because we are not Gods. We somehow fail to understand that by degrading our environment we are placing ourselves at the point of extinction.

This research paper seeks to highlight the biodiversity in the Himalayan region and the environmental changes that are adversely affecting it as depicted in the works of some famous writers. It also speaks of the ways in which we can live in harmony with nature without disturbing the delicate ecological balance.

Keywords: Biodiversity, rapid environmental changes, mass extinctions, environmental degradation, sustainable development.

Biodiversity generally refers to the existence of a large number of different kinds of animals and plants which make a balanced environment. It is not evenly distributed and it varies greatly because it depends on temperature, precipitation, altitude, soils, geography and the presence of other species. Biodiversity inspires musicians, painters, sculptors, writers and other artists, popular activities such as gardening, fishkeeping and specimen collecting and enriches leisure activities such as hiking, birdwatching or natural history study. According to Klaus Topfer, the executive director of UNEP (the United Nations Environment Programme):

The 20th century saw a fourfold increase in human numbers and an eighteen-fold growth in world economic output. With these came unsustainable patterns of consumption and the use of environmentally unsound technologies. There are now more than six billion of us and we are placing unprecedented strains on the planet's ability to cope. Worse, the fruits of this growth are extremely unequally divided. Whilst some enjoy better standards of living than at any time in history, nearly half the world's population is unjustifiably poor, making do on less than \$2 a day. Worse still, the poor suffer disproportionately from the damage done to the environment.(Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity i)

The Secretariat of the Convention on Biodiversity made the following observations in their booklet, *Sustaining Life on Earth* published in April 2000. From the dawn of agriculture up to the Industrial Revolution of the past three centuries, we have reshaped our landscapes on an ever-larger and lasting scale. We have changed our old ways of doing things to new ones to gain more abundant food, better shelter, sanitation, and health care, but these gains have led to increasing environmental degradation.

Forests which house much of the known terrestrial biodiversity are dwindling rapidly. About 45 per cent of the Earth's original forests are gone. Up to 10 per cent of coral reefs which are among the richest ecosystems have been destroyed, and one third of the remainder face extinction over the next 10 to 20 years. Coastal mangroves, an important habitat for innumerable species, are half already gone. In the past rapid environmental changes have caused mass extinctions. The period since the emergence of humans has displayed an ongoing biodiversity reduction that has been caused primarily by human impacts. If we do not stop now we will be placing ourselves at the point of extinction. Changes in the global atmosphere such as ozone depletion and climate change are a serious threat. Global warming is already changing habitats and the distribution of species. Scientists warn that a rapid one-degree increase in the average global temperature will push many species over the brink.

It is reckless if not downright dangerous to keep chipping away at our life support system. It is unethical to drive other forms of life to extinction, and thereby deprive

present and future generations of options for their survival and development.
(Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity 6)

These threats have become known and though governments and individuals have started acting to protect the environment the rate at which progress is being made is still slow compared to the rate at which the environment is being degraded. The WWF believes in a shared sustainable development vision and is therefore working towards realizing it. In Bhutan the government, local communities, WWF and others are working to prevent the Thorthormi Tsho glacial lake from bursting.

The Himalayan region is very rich in biodiversity and is known for its varied landscape, vegetation and wildlife. The Himalayas is the highest and one of the youngest mountain ranges in the world which extends from west to east for about 2,500 km in a curve. Its origin can be traced in the Jurassic Era, which is about 80 million years ago. The Main Himalayan Ranges are: Pir Panjal Range, Dhauladhar Range, Zaskar Range, Ladakh Range and East Korakoram Range. Known as “the Water Towers of Asia,” they are the source of many glaciers and important rivers of Asia. The five main rivers of the Himalayas the Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Beas, and Sutlej are the main source of life in this area as they help in the formation of the forest belt and the irrigation process.

The Himalayas is considered to be one of the world's most sensitive hotspots to global climate change. The impacts of climate change in the Himalayas-melting glaciers, erratic and unpredictable weather conditions, changing rainfall patterns, increasing temperatures and major changes in freshwater flows - are affecting the people and wildlife of the region. According to the WWF this situation is predicted to become worse in the coming years, with serious impacts on food, water, fresh water use, energy security, human lives, livelihoods, biodiversity and species loss, not just in the Himalayas, but throughout Asia. The Himalayan glaciers are the source of many of the world's great rivers: The Yangtze, the Ganges, the Indus and the Mekong. Climate change in the Himalayas poses a serious threat to the source of these great rivers.

All great works of art and literature are born out of life and the artists' or the writers' need to express himself or herself. The writers who dwell in the Himalayas or have at some point of time experienced life and adventure in them, the beauty and serenity of these great ancient mountains, have offered different hues of the Himalayas to their readers. Their work reflects the biodiversity in the Himalayan region, changes in the environment that are taking place and the need for man to limit his demands on nature to stop environment degradation.

Writing on the Himalayas and transferring the beauty and divinity of these majestic peaks to the readers requires love and skill on the part of writers and poets so that their works do not read as dull exercises devoid of feeling. Among the few who have achieved this are Bill Aitken, Ruskin Bond, Rabindranath Tagore, Mark Twain and Frank S. Smythe. Like most

famous writers, poets, sages, artists who had made walking an indispensable part of their lives – Aristotle, William Wordsworth, Charles Dickens, Henry David Thoreau and Ludwig Van Beethoven to name a few- they also understand that in order to know the mountains one must consciously walk through them. Bill Aitken in Chapter One, *The Call of the mountains* asserts, “To walk is probably the best way to soak in the full beauty of the Himalaya because it leaves you open to the unexpected and elemental”(3). According to him walking through these majestic peaks alerts ones senses and makes one realize the oneness of life. “The mountains are not only requisite, as William Penn put it, for the growth of piety. In the garb of the Himalaya they reflect the purnananda of the soul reunited briefly with the architect of the universe”(Aitken 18). Living in the hills, near nature and walking through the great forests has given Ruskin Bond unforgettable experiences. “When we walk close to nature, we come to a better understanding of life; for, it is from the natural world that we first emerged and to which we still belong” (Bond, *Book of Nature* 60). Ruskin believes he is no mountaineer who aims to glorify himself by climbing and reaching the Himalayan peaks. “My greatest pleasure lies in taking path – any old path will do – and following it until it leads me to a forest glade or village or stream or windy hilltop”(Bond, *Book of Nature* 85) Tramping through the hills fills him with ecstatic joy which he feels no other of his pursuits give. Walking to nowhere specific helps him to meet new people, strike new friendships; discover new springs, streams and waterfalls; find rare plants, flowers and birds. “In the hills, a new vista opens up at every bend in the road. That is what makes me a compulsive walker – new vistas, and the charm of the unexpected” (Bond, *Book of Nature* 88).

Mark Twain’s journey to Darjeeling and his experiences in Darjeeling are recorded in *Following the Equator: A Journey Round The World* (1897).

The railway journey up the mountain is forty miles, and it takes eight hours to make it. It is so wild and interesting and exciting and enchanting that it ought to take a week. As for the vegetation, it is a museum. The jungle seemed to contain samples of every rare and curious tree and bush that we had ever seen or heard of. It is from that museum, I think, that the globe must have been supplied with the trees and vines and shrubs that it holds precious. (*Himalaya* 65)

Rabindranath Tagore recollects his childhood experience in the Himalayas in his memoirs. He could not wait to reach Dalhousie after spending a month of his vacation in Amritsar, “the call of the Himalayas” was so strong upon him (*Himalaya* 330). The terraced hills aflame with the spring flowers gave rise to an unquenchable thirst in him which always kept him awake and alert lest he should miss something.

Whenever, at a turn of the road into a gorge, the great forest trees were found clustering closer, and from underneath their shade a little waterfall trickling out, like a little daughter of the hermitage playing at the feet of hoary sages rapt in meditation, babbling its way over the black moss – covered rocks, . . . Why, oh why, had we to

leave such spots behind, cried my thirsting heart, why could we not stay on there forever? (*Himalaya* 330)

The house at Bakrota where he stayed with his father was on the highest hill-top. Lying on his bed he could see the distant snowy peaks from his window. His father allowed him to wander off in the hills on his own. Walking into the wilderness in the thickly wooded Deodars Tagore realized how small he was among these huge trees.

These lordly forest trees, with their huge shadows, towering there like so many giants –what immense lives had they lived through the centuries! . . . I seemed to feel a presence, the moment I stepped into their shade, as of the solid coolness of some old-world saurian, and the checkered light and shade on the leafy mould seemed like its scales. (*Himalaya* 331)

Equally interesting to read is the account of the five day trek by Frank S. Smythe, Wangdi, Pasang and Nurbu, the flowers they come across, the legend of the snowman and their close encounter with the snowman. Many flowers had sprung up on the hills. These included Pedicularis, dwarf geraniums, saussurea, the Gentians – *Gentiana aprica*, *G. venusta*, *G. acaulis*, *Primula reptans*, *Primula minutissima* and *Primula denticulata*. Smythe found it remarkable that a plant which lies asleep for six months under a covering of snow is able to grow once the snow has melted. On their way they come across imprints of huge naked feet which they suspect to be of a snowman. The legend of the Snowman is known in Tibet, Sikkim, and parts of Nepal including the Sola Khumbu valley, the home of Sherpas on the south side of the Himalayas. According to them the snowman is a large, dangerous carnivorous being which is white, black or brown in colour. It eats yaks and men. The snowwoman is less fierce than the snowman. So while the others refused to follow the tracks in search of the snowman as it is believed that anyone who sees it will fall dead, Smythe decided to continue the search on his own. The tracks made him conclude that whatever it was it lived in the Bhyundar valley. He did not venture further but returned with the porters to the base camp. After his photographs were developed it was concluded that the marks were made by a bear, *Ursus arctos isabellinus* which was common in the western and central Himalayas. But Smythe hopes that maybe a snowman family dwells in the Himalayas. “In this murky age of materialism, human beings have to struggle hard to find the romantic, . . .” (*Himalaya* 79-80).

“Himalaya on a Pushcart,” an essay excerpted and translated from *Thele Par Himalaya* (1968) by Dharamvir Bharati is about the longing for the eternal Himalayan snow. The essay describes the writer’s trip to Kausani which is situated to the north of Someshwar Valley. When the bus stopped and they got down the writer could not take eyes off the place.

This was the gloriously colourful Katyur valley which the Kausani range had shielded from our view; surely only demigods and the glorious Kinner people of legend made

their home here. The valley was tens of kilometers wide and spread over with fields like green muslin carpets; it was crisscrossed with ochre pathways lined with white stones and by rivers which were like vines that grow and double back upon themselves until they are inextricably intertwined. . . .

We had been transported to a new world altogether. So ethereal, so beautiful, so exquisitely adorned and blemishless . . . I felt I must take my shoes off and wipe my feet before even setting a single step upon that earth. (*Himalaya* 176; 2nd ellipsis in original)

Fate brought Bill Aitken a scot to India and to the great Himalayas. In his book, *Footloose in the Himalaya* he writes in Chapter One: The Call of the Mountains: “Mountains have always mattered deeply to me. I was born and brought up at the foot of the Ochil Hills in Scotland and was daily ravished by their green and craggy grandeur. I longed to live among such exalted beauty . . .”(1). When he took abode in a house called Oakless in Mussoorie, he felt that his cherished childhood dream had changed into reality. He loves his pastoral life – growing, harvesting, grinding, wheat; growing fruit trees; making jam, butter, cream, ghee and cutting grass for cows. *Footloose in the Himalaya* is a recollection of his contact with, walks through and experiences in the Himalayas, that bring out their timeless sublimity. According to him the Himalayas being “agents of the divine” have the ability to communicate with the human soul and arouse the innate sense of nobility which though present in every human being at the time of birth is lost when it comes in contact with the world (Aitken 10). He writes about old houses and residents, his walks in and around Mussoorie, his treks to Nag Tibba, Binsar, Kausani, Pinnath, Butkot, Mirtola, Kilar, Ladhak, Stok Kangri, Lahaul, Darcha, Padum and Zaskar range through the Sarichan La approach and his visit to the cultural divider of Rangdum Gompa above which is the Pensi La. Eastwards from this pass Buddhism is practiced, westwards Islam and southwards Hinduism holds its sway. Walking eastwards into a thick oak jungle and across the ravine to thickly wooded slopes of the Woodstock School estate he notes that in the 1960s the entire place was green. “Now new settlements are nibbling at their roots and each year a copse canopied forest falls to the axe of encroachment” (Aitken 20). But he feels Nature triumphs over humanity and the broad boundaries of the hill station still remain the same as they were in the 1960s. As he comes near the Maplewood Lodge where Ruskin Bond used to live he remembers that Ruskin had to leave the place when a Mussoorie bypass was built to allow heavy machinery to reach the Tehri Dam project. However the trucks never came down the road and it is believed that the road was only built to help politicians and contractors make money out of the timber from the trees they felled during the construction of the road. Aitken does not like commercializing nature. He is strongly against the modern climbing of peaks for commercial gains and petty rewards. He is disturbed by the rubbish dumped by the dhabas and the people in the forest. He feels:

Responsible Trekking involves keeping our eyes open to every aspect of environmental health and treading with a respect for the ecosystem and the cultural traditions that have grown out of it. Trekker and mountain are both growing together and a sense of this living relationship is what Himalayan travel ideally ought to inspire.(Aitken 249)

Bill Aitken observes that after the Chinese scare in 1962 the government panicked and carved out innumerable routes. So much timber was felled that some experts feel that Kumaun is now doomed to become a drought – prone state in the future. Aitken mentions that the Gangotri glacier is melting at an alarming rate. Twenty years ago when he first went there it was receding at the rate of 30 feet a year and now 30 metres a year. He fears by 2050 the glacier may not exist. It is possible that Badri once had forests but the trees were felled to meet the demand of fuel for the pilgrims. The word Badri is believed to have come from *beru* or wild fig. Lord Vishnu is believed to have survived on it while doing penance in the valley. Twenty years ago at Bhojbhas birch trees were in plenty but due to pilgrim pressure thanks to the motorable bridge to Gangotri all of them have been cut. Ukhimath to Chopta has some of the best forests to be seen in Garhwal. The musk deer which were found at 8000 feet till the independence were forced to move up to the tree line due to the pressure of population. Further they were hunted for musk pods by traders and poachers.

Trees are dear to him. “To my mind trees are one of the chief beauties of the Himalaya and many of my favourite treks have involved pleasant days spent below the tree line, in the subalpine belt that stretches from around 5000-10000ft. The higher one goes the more stately the trees grow”(Aitken 35). Among the flowers the wild geranium is his favourite. At Muni purple geraniums grow in abundance. He writes “The range and resilience of this species is astonishing. In Mirtola on the cold northern side of the hill it flourishes and yields a wonderfully delicate mauve flower after the rains. In Mussoorie the wonder increases in winter when the superbly reticuled leaf turns brilliant red”(Aitken 230-31). The Himalayas according to him house extremes of weather, terrain and ecology. One moment the sky is a clear blue, the other moment it becomes cloudy and shows a range of colours – blue, golden, pink, orange, brown and grey. With glory and inspiration they also offer the pitiable condition of the people who live at high altitudes. For four years he experienced all the hazards that the villager in the Himalayas had to cope with. Crops are sown with great labour and have to be protected from foul weather and animals. Among the crops grown are jumbu (an onion), the wild shallot and other herbs. However the villagers who are devoid of the mad sick hurry of the town people are more kind and helpful. They depend on and live according to the natural cycle. According to him they are more self reliant than the urban people. Honey has an important place in the hills. Many species of wasp are abundant in the hills. The biggest species of hornet is two inches long and has a deadly sting. The ibex can be seen ascending from one place to another as experienced acrobats. Only the snow pigeon can be seen flying energetically in the mountains.

Ruskin Bond, who has nearly spent half of his life in the Himalayan foothills has also been inspired by them. His short stories and essays are enlivened by life from the mountains. In most of his stories Ruskin Bond tries to recreate the original ambience of a small, isolated Himalayan town or village with its natural beauty and inherited qualities of patience, peace, honesty, trust, benevolence and faith. Each and every facet of the Himalayas, its biodiversity is expressed in them. It could be the wind as in the short story “The Wind on Haunted Hill” or the wild flowers blooming in the forest or on crumbling walls of the ruins; or bushes or trees like the oaks, deodars, pine, wild plum, guava, jackfruit, peepal and cherry trees; or animals and birds like tigers, leopards, mountain goats, whistling thrushes, the green and blue tits, barbets, bulbuls, scarlet minivets, nightjars, bats, crickets and cicadas; or the seasons and the flora and fauna; or the hill people; or the ghosts nothing escapes his observant eyes.

Ruskin feels the mountains are like a kind mother to him and the Himalayas are indestructible. In the story “Mother Hill” Ruskin writes:

Time passes, and yet it doesn't pass; people come and go, the mountains remain. Mountains are permanent things. They are stubborn, they refuse to move. You can blast holes out of them for their mineral wealth, strip them of their trees and foliage, or dam their streams and divert their currents. You can make tunnels and roads and bridges; but no matter how hard they try, humans cannot actually get rid of the mountains. That's what I like about them; they are here to stay.

I like to think that I have become a part of these mountains, this particular range, and that by living here for so long, I am able to claim a relationship with the trees, wild flowers, and even the rocks that are an integral part of it. (*Himalayan Tales* 10-11)

Ruskin Bond not only describes the trees, plants, flowers, animals, birds, insects, people, the mountains, rivers, streams in a superficial way but endows to them the dignity and respect that all living beings should have, being creations of God. “The tree sums up nature's perfection which can be seen in every leaf, flower, seed, and creatures great and small. We do not stop learning from the natural world. The earth, the seas, the heavens have still so much to tell us. Nature's notebook is never closed” (Bond, *Book of Nature* 274).

Ruskin Bond's Book of Nature contains essays and stories that depict Ruskin Bond's relationship with the natural world around him which he feels has kept him alive and inspired him, a relationship which has grown stronger and more meaningful over the years. He recognizes, accepts and appreciates both sides of Nature.

Nature doesn't promise you anything – an after life, rewards for good behaviour, protection from enemies, wealth, happiness, progeny, all the things that humans desire and pray for. No, Nature does not promise these things. Nature is a reward in itself.

It is there, to be appreciated, to be understood, to be lived and loved. And in its way it gives us everything – the bounty and goodness of the earth, the sea, the sky. Food, water, the air we breathe. All the things we take for granted.

And sometimes, when we take it too much for granted, or misuse its generosity, it turns against us and unleashes forces that overwhelm us – earthquake, tidal wave, typhoon, flood, drought. But then, Nature settles down and resumes its generous ways.....

Nature gives. And takes away. And gives again. (Bond, *Book of Nature* viii-ix)

Nature has the power to renew life something Man can never do or equal.

“Foothill to Treeline” the fourth section of the book educates the reader about the various species of flora in the Himalayas. The flora changes with the altitude. “At every thousand feet you will find a difference in the trees, shrubs and wild flowers that clothe the hills. And with them a difference in the kind of birds, animals, insects and other creatures that depend on the flora” (Bond, *Book of Nature* 90).

The essay, “Trekking up the Himalayas” acquaints the reader with a few representative species of plant life.

India, still rich in flora, is nowhere so prolific as in the eastern and western Himalayas. The mountain slopes and valleys present remarkable contrasts in elevation, humidity and temperature.

All the year round, the hills are steeped in a tangle of blossom and verdure. The valleys, winding down from snowy heights, and carrying streams from the snows to the scorching foothills, are full of vegetation which seldom loses its vivid green. (Bond, *Book of Nature* 91)

In the lower foothills, most of the trees are deciduous and they bloom in spring. Higher up one finds oaks, pine and fir trees “fanning out like armies on the move but preferring the company of their own kith and kin” (Bond, *Book of Nature* 92). Few trees excel the exquisitely coloured red silk cotton (*Bombax malabaficum*). “Straight as a temple shaft, and clothed in clustering crimson chalices, these trees welcome every creature who, by sipping of the abundant and intoxicating nectar, carries the pollen from flower to flower – thus assisting in the great scheme of species salvation” (Bond, *Book of Nature* 92). The tree is visited by mynas, rosy pastors and other birds who come in search of nectar from its flowers. The tree is believed to possess divine powers and is frequented by devotees. The Dhak (*Eiythrina*) promises a sheet of scarlet when in bloom, the sacred Palas or Flame of the Forest (*Butea Frondosa*) a patch of orange, the Bauhinia Tree scatters its pink, white or purple blossoms, the Cassias – its brilliant gold, the Chalta (*Dillenia indices*) its lovely white and the Kadam

(*Nauclea Cadumba*) its golden balls throughout the forest. “The dainty verdure of the sisoo (*Dalbergia*), and the tender pink of new-born peepal foliage, fill all the intervening space” (Bond, *Book of Nature* 93). Many kinds of creepers like the *Beaumontiagrandiflora* and *Bauhinia vahlii* attach themselves to the trees. *Wightea Gigantea* has the ability to stifle the tree it embraces except for its higher branches. Its wood is used to make images. *Thunbergiagrandiflora* decorates the tallest trees with lilac flowers and the *Spatholobus roxburghii* adorns trees with reddish blooms. The undergrowth consists of *Mimosa Pudica* and *Calotropis* or *madar* which is traditionally used in the treatment of leprosy. The forest in eastern Himalayas provides a home to many orchids like *Vanda teres*, *Arundina*, *Aerides* and *Vanda roxburghii*. *Sal* or *Shorearobusta* grows well here in loose water transmitting rich soil sometimes reaching a height of 100 to 150 feet. *Sal* is considered to be the most important tree of the Himalayan foothills. Its wood is used for making railway sleepers in India. The flowers of the tree in some places are collected in baskets and distributed to women as emblems of motherhood. Buddhists revere the tree because Lord Buddha passed away beneath a *sal* tree. The Palm or Phoenix *Humilis* tree’s long leaves are made into mats or brooms. The monsoon winds carry and spread its seeds far and wide throughout the forest. *Calamus Rotang* is used for making strong cane bridges and *Colocasia Antiquorum* provides fleshy tubers for food and its leaves for parasols. In the *sal* forest grow *Cycas Revotula*, a palm like plant with rigid leaves and flowers in large strange smelling cones; *Lagerstroemia* with huge starry white flowers; *Loranthus Longiflorus*, a parasite with orange flowers and *Vitis Latifolia*.

Beyond the *sal* forests the undergrowth becomes thin and one finds the screw pine or *Pandanus Furcatus*, a palm called *Caryota Urens*, beautiful ferns like *Hemitelia* and the *Michelias*. “Approaching Guptkashi, in Garhwal, my attention was caught by three giant *Michelias* growing beside an abandoned temple a little distance above the banks of the Mandakini river” (Bond, *Book of Nature* 98). The *Michelia* have dark green shining leaves, fragrant flowers which are offered at temples and it is among the first true flowering plants that appears in the geological record. The *Michelia* which in the past had a wide geographical distribution survives now only in the Himalayas and some parts of America. The *Schizandra Grandiflora*, locally called *champa*, is a shrub with drooping white flowers.

The birch, a crooked tree grows in the northwest Himalayas. The branches of the birch, *Tagpa*, of the Chenab river are used to make bridges on mountain rivers and streams. The thin white bark of the *Betula* birch is used for making umbrellas, to write on when paper is not available, and for lining a hookah. The prevalent poplar tree which belongs to the witch – hazel family is an ornamental tree with broad, heart-shaped, delicate leaves.

On the eastern Himalayas grow *Clyptomaria*, a beautiful cedar tree which can withstand all kinds of weather. It was introduced around 1920 from Japan.

At an elevation of four to seven thousand feet all the herbal flora of temperate Europe is found : violets, buttercups, cowslips, barberry, primrose, St. John's wort, dandelion, stonecrop, periwinkle, commelina, meadow sage, wood sorrel, blackberry, dog rose, sorrel, balsam, poppies, anemones, wild carrot, clover, nettles, wild geranium, nightshade, saxifrage, and alpine rock cress, to list only a few of the many hundreds of wildflowers found at these altitudes from Kashmir in the west to Arunachal Pradesh in the east. (Bond, *Book of Nature* 100)

The commelina is a pristine blue flower that grows on the hills in the monsoons. Many varieties of balsam grow between seven and nine thousand feet. They are also called Impatiens because the ripe pod explodes to reveal the seed at the slightest touch. Frank Smythe in *Valley of Flowers* describes balsam growing as tall as eight feet in the Bhyunder valley and nearby areas of Garhwal Himalayas. At eleven thousand feet in Garhwal the anemone and alpine rock cress grow on the steep meadows below Tungnath. Buttercups and wild strawberries are to be found in cool moist areas throughout Kumaon Garhwal, Himachal. On the bare southern slopes of Mussoorie, a pink crocus called a thunder lily by some blooms for a few days and then disappears. In Kashmir Crocus Sativus or the Saffron Crocus is grown for its saffron. Throughout the Himalayas grow different species of primula and saxifrage. In May the hills around Chakrata are covered with dog roses and wild daisies.

Wild yellow roses grow in Kashmir, Lahaul and Tibet. Travellers in the past have also seen double yellow roses at eleven thousand feet in Ladakh. *Rosa macrophylla*, phulian or ban – gulab also called the great red rose tree grows over a wide range from 4500 to 10500 feet in the northwestern Himalayas. Its flowers are as large as the palm of the hand and its fruit is delicious when black and overripe. It too is not as common as it used to be. *Rosa sericea* or white rose is abundant in southern Sikkim. It has four petals instead of five. *Rosa webbiana* or kugina mainly found in the arid tracts of the Himalayas from five thousand to nine thousand or thirteen thousand five hundred feet has a fruit that can be eaten. In parts of Spiti the stems are used for fuel.

Hill children while walking from home to school and back like to eat the barbery or kingora berries and raspberry or hissa. The rhododendron petals make a good jam or chutney.

A tiny blue and white iris called Pumila grows in the Garhwal hills. Worshipped by ancient Greeks as a messenger between God and man, it has two hundred wild species spread around the northern hemisphere. The iris is found in different shades. Throughout the western Himalayas from two thousand five hundred to nine thousand five hundred feet one finds a broad leaved species of iris. The Kashmir iris blooms over graves and earth daubed rooftops.

Wild cinnamon grows throughout the hills.

The young shoots of the tree are often a dark crimson, a provision of nature for the absorption of the solar rays so that the life – giving green granules of the leaf may be

preserved until a leathery protective epidermis is formed. The flowers are incomplete, as there are no petals. The bark and leaves are full of an aromatic oil which is well known in commerce. (Bond, *Book of Nature* 103-04)

Begonias are found in the Bablang pass in the Sikkim Himalayas. They are foliage plants and their juicy stalks are used to make sauce.

Orchids are also abundant in the hills. There are over forty species of orchids.

Strange Cirrhopetalums hold little brown wings over their backs or form a flower one inch in length trailing appendages two to three feet long. Spider – like Arachnanthe opens a flower of yellow so evenly striped with transverse bands of brown that it has earned for itself the local name of bagh- chanira (leopard flower).

Delicate Cynibidiums fasten themselves to branches with thick, spongy roots and trail long sprays of elegant flowers, some very fragrant, others positively unpleasant.

Cypripediums (orchids of the ladies slipper species) fairly widespread in the Himalayas, both east and west, swing up a flaunting beauty from the ground in which they lie concealed until the monsoon rains bring them to life. Then, in green, purple, or white arrangements, they display the slipper – like development of one of the petals – one of the most cunning blandishments in Nature’s workshop for securing the assistance of insects in fertilization. (Bond, *Book of Nature* 104-05)

However he notes that many rare orchids in the eastern Himalayas are on the brink of extinction because of the pressures of population and cultivation and illegal exports.

Higher up the Himalayas the trees are huge and have mosses, orchids, Usneabarbata, lichen and other parasitic giants called banda (slaves) by the hill folk hanging on them. Viscum and Loranthus prey on their hosts.

Many varieties of oak are found from five to nine thousand feet on the eastern Himalayas. These include the *Quercus lamellosa*, the Bak which is found in the Himachal forest; *Q. pachyphylla*, barakatus; *Q. Spicata* and *Q. acuminata* which is found on Birch Hill Darjeeling. Beyond nine thousand feet in Sikkim the oaks are replaced by a species of hazel (*Corylus*). In northwestern Himalayas *Q. semecarpifolia*, the common hoary oak or karsu is found. Other oaks found throughout the Himachal, Kumaon and Garhwal regions are *Q. incana*, ban or banj and *Q. dilatata* or moru.

The most common of the Conifers are *Pinus longifolia* (chil or thanea) that grow from three to seven thousand feet. They can bear the hot and humid temperatures well. *Pinus excelsa* or chir is found in Garhwal, Simla, Sirmour, Bhutan and Nepal. *Pinus Gerardiana* (chilgoza, neoza) is found in the northern and drier slopes of the Himalayas. It produces large cones that contain edible nuts which can be stored for winter.

The deodar (*Cedrus deodarus*) the Himalayan Cedar, is called deva-daru in Garhwal and Kumaon and kelu or kelon in the Jaunsar Bawar district of Garhwal and in Himachal. The deodar, he feels is the noblest and most godlike of all Himalayan trees as it can withstand wind, rain and snow. Considered a divine tree its timber is used for making doors, walls and roofs of temples. It is also used for building houses, boats, railway sleepers and bridges. The deodar bridges in Srinagar and the pillars of the great mosque built by Aurangzeb at Srinagar (Kashmir) have withstood the vagaries of time.

The average girth of the larger deodars is about fifteen to twenty feet, but isolated trees often attain a greater size. One giant deodar (measured by Madden in the last century) was two hundred and fifty feet high, twenty feet in girth at the base, and more than five hundred and fifty years old. Such giants are rare today, most of them having fallen to the axe in the 1950s, a decade when India, and in particular the Indian Himalayas, suffered greatly from deforestation. (Bond, *Book of Nature* 108)

The horse chestnut remains bare in winter. During March it is covered with leaf buds and during April it is full of pale pink blossoms that attract bees and small birds. In May and June it provides shelter from the scorching sun. The ripe chestnuts are enjoyed by boys who play with them and langurs who eat them.

The *C. trifuloides* provides wood that is used for making big pestles and mortars and its fruit is loved by Lepchas. *C. argentea* is a huge tree with edible nuts.

The maples are easily distinguished even from a distance because of their golden red colour and reddish brown fruit. The different species of maples are *A. hookerii*, *A. sikkimensis* and *A. oblongum*.

Juglans regia or the nuts of Jove, the walnut tree grows in the Himalayas. In the Golden Age the reader is told the nuts were kept as food for the Gods. According to folklore the walnut is good for the brain. This has been scientifically acknowledged now.

The Chini valley in the month of August is full of fruit trees- Peaches, pears, plums, apricots, apples, grapes. Ramgarh, in Kumaon is white with apple blossoms at the time. About two hundred varieties of apple grow here.

On a trek to the Pindari Glacier one comes across rhododendrons, walnuts, chestnuts, oaks, dutch clover, honeysuckle, wild thyme, blue sage, larkspur and blue primroses. In Sikkim alone twenty four kinds of rhododendrons grow. Some of the species are *Rh. argenteum*, *Rh. nivale*, *Rh. wallichii*, *Rh. aucklandi* *Rh. maddenii*, *Rh. Dalhousie* and *Rh. edgeworthii*. In the Tonglo mountains in Sikkim grow *Rh. arborcum*, *Rh. barbatum*, and *Rh. falconeri*. *Rh. campanulatum* grows in the Sulej valley and on the mountains in Kashmir.

Three varieties of Magnolia – Magnolia excelsa, M. cambelii and Michelialanuginosa exist here.

Bamboos that are abundant in the hills are used to make drinking vessels, roofs and to float heavy logs. Few people know that about hundred and fifty years ago Dehra Dun had clusters of bamboo trees. They either died out or were cut down for buildings.

In September the hillside is covered with wild ginger, clematis, yarrow, lady's mantle, Dasturastramonium, wild woodbine and Arisoema.

The section of the book on trees has essays and stories like "The Gentle Banyan" which describes the banyan tree and its importance, "Garden of a thousand trees" which describes the mango trees and their importance to humans, plants and animals, "The Silk- Cotton Tree" which describes the beautiful and brilliant semul or silk cotton tree and "The Tree of Wisdom" which describes the peepal tree and gives the important message that we must earn the blessings of future generations by planting all kinds of trees.

"From Small Beginnings" is about the pine knoll which Ruskin considers his "place of peace and power," and the warm welcome he receives from his tree friends on returning home from the plains after several months (*Book of Nature* 142). In "Sacred Trees" he writes:

Explore the history and mythology of almost any Indian tree, and you will find that at some period of our civilization it has held an important place in the minds and hearts of the people of this land. (Bond, *Book of Nature* 144)

He describes trees like the neem, mahua, champa, dhak or palas, babul or keekar, mango, an old mulberry tree called Kalp- vriksha and talks about the folklore attached to them. He says:

To early man they were objects of awe and wonder. The mystery of their growth, the movement of their leaves and branches, the way they seemed to die and then come to life again in spring, the sudden growth of the plant from the seed, all these happenings appeared as miracles – as indeed they are! And because of the wonderful growth of a tree, people began to suppose that it was occupied by spirits, and devotion to a tree became devotion to the spirit or tree – god who occupied it. (Bond, *Book of Nature* 145-46)

During ancient times he says that whole forests were thought to be sacred like the one in Berar and the sacred groves near Mathura where no one would dare to cut trees. But now it is sad to see that even these are disappearing to meet the needs of an ever increasing population.

Flowers of the Himalayas serve as a reminder "that life has its beautiful moments" (Bond, *Book of Nature* 152). "What's in a name" is an amusing account of how misleading the names of flowers can be. For example the winter jasmine in the Himalayas blooms in spring, the basant or spring flowers bloom in winter. "Flowers Wild and Tame" is about wild flowers like

the simple yet perfect cosmos and commelina and the tamed ones that are named after botanists who found them. “Thus, the dahlia is named after Mr. Dahl, a Swede; the rudbeckia after Rudbeck, a Dutchman; the zinnia after Dr. Zinn, a German; and the lobelia after Monsieur Lobel, a Flemish physician”(Bond, *Book of Nature* 160). “Some Plants Become Friends” gives an account of his true plant friends who have not deserted him even during adversity. These include the variegated ivy that spreads all over his bedroom wall. He has earned the reputation of a “plant doctor” because he has rescued and brought back to life other people’s dying or sick plants (Bond, *Book of Nature* 162). The sick that were rescued include a dying asparagus fern from the Savoy Hotel and Maya Banerjee’s sick geranium. The reward he gets for nurturing, encouraging and loving them is that they sooth him. In “My Flower of the Month” the dandelion, the white poppy and the geranium are the flowers of different months for him. He notices that the unseasonal showers that are common these days give the poppies a bedraggled look. The fragrance of various flowers and plants – the rose, snapdragon, carnations, honeysuckle, petunias, calendula, lemon, geranium, the grass, clover, violets, buttercups and strawberry flowers is wafted across in “The Scent of the Snapdragon.” Ruskin has written haikus on the poinsettia, ferns, jasmine, geranium, rose of Harsil, begonia, snapdragon, petunias and rose of Tibet.

He has written “Garhwal Himalaya,” a poem on the mountains, and a poem on the maiden hair fern. The fern teaches patience to the author, the ability to grow and survive during difficult times as it thrives on a rock while all around her the water chatters and quickly disappears. He has even written poems on trees like the walnut tree, the banyan tree and the deodar.

The deodars inspired him to write the following lines of poetry:

Trees of God, we call them;
 Planted here when the world was young,
 The first trees
 Their fingers pointing to the stars,
 Older than the cedars of Lebanon.

When they were cut down he wrote:

They cut them down last spring
 With swift efficient tools,
 The sap was rising still.
 The trees bled,

Slaughtered

To make furniture for fools. (Bond, *Rain in the Mountains* 123 – 24)

In “A Bush at Hand is Good for Many a Bird” he explains that a bush can grow sideways in size but it always is approachable as it never rises above a man’s height. “This means that I can be on intimate terms with it, know its qualities –of leaf, bud, flower, and fruit – and also its inhabitants, be they insects, birds, small mammals, or reptiles”(Bond, *Book of Nature* 42). Bushes are as important as trees as they bind the earth. “Every monsoon I witness landslides all about me, but I know the hillside just above my cottage is well – knit, knotted and netted, by bilberry and raspberry, wild jasmine, dog- rose and bramble, and other shrubs, vines, and creepers”(Bond, *Book of Nature* 42). All year round the sparrows, whistling thrushes and buntings frequent the bushes. During the summer, when the berries are ripe a pair of rare green pigeons scramble over the branches of a hawthorn bush to eat the berries. The raspberry bush is visited by finches and bulbuls. The kingora, a native Himalayan shrub is frequented by school children who enjoy eating its sweet and sour berries. The bushes are also home to the skink, a small lizard like reptile. Flowering shrubs like dog-roses, the wild yellow jasmine, buddleia and mayflowers also flourish in the area. The grass too is a home for insects and other small creatures. He feels, “Their presence adds sweetness to my life” (Bond, *Book of Nature* 45). In “A Mountain Stream” Ruskin writes about the grass.

Early in summer the grass on the hills is still a pale yellowish green, tinged with brown, and that is how it remains until the monsoon rains bring new life to everything that subsists on the stony Himalayan soil. And then, for four months, the greens are deep, dark and emerald bright. (*Book of Nature* 65)

Ruskin Bond’s beautiful and exact description of the place transports us to it and the reader too is made to experience the same. In “From the Pool to the Glacier – My Boyhood Pool” he vividly describes the weather and place. The third part of the story, “From the Pool to the Glacier – To the Hills” tells us about the fifty-four miles trek to the Pindari Glacier that the three friends Anil, Kamal and Rusty take and the adventure they have. They take a bus to Kapkote. The bus takes them on a winding road and up the mountain from where they can see the valley and their town below. The weather is pleasant at Kapkote. At one of their stops, a dak bungalow they see a black Himalayan bear ambling across the slope carrying a ripe pumpkin in its paws. They see birds like the red – crowned jay, the paradise flycatcher and the purple whistling thrush. They hear stories of the ghosts who live in the mountains, stories about the Yeti and Lidini and the Sagpa and Sagpani. The last seven miles to the glacier leads them through short grass, little blue and pink alpine flowers, waterfalls, wild strawberries and a small cave. They see guals or mountain goats, a snow leopard and a bear.

The hill fell away, and there, confronting us, was a great white field of snow and ice, cradled between two peaks that could only have been the abode of the gods. We were

speechless for several minutes. Kamal took my hand and held on to it for reassurance; perhaps he was not sure that what he saw was real. Anil's mouth hung open. Bisnu's eyes glittered with excitement. (Bond, *Himalayan Tales* 53)

When they are trapped on their way back it is Bisnu, a hill boy and their Sherpa who helps them get back to the bungalow by finding an alternate path. "He had brought us over mountain and glacier with all the skill and confidence of a boy who had the Himalayas in his blood"(Bond, *Himalayan Tales* 58).

Birds, animals and insects common in the Himalayas enter his writings. The Himalayan Whistling Thrush called Kastura or Kaljit by hill men has a poem, "The Whistling Schoolboy" and a story "Song of the Whistling Thrush" devoted to him. Ruskin Bond describes the bird, his habitat, his sweet song and the legend attached to him. In the story he writes, "He was a deep, glistening purple, his shoulders flecked with white; he had sturdy black legs and a strong yellow beak; rather a dapper fellow, who could have looked well in a top hat dancing with Fred Astaire"(Bond, *Himalayan Tales* 15). Ruskin likes to keep his windows open to let in fresh air and welcomes the denizens of the forest into his humble abode when they seek shelter, "When mist fills the Himalayan valleys, and heavy monsoon rain sweeps across the hills, . . ." (*Himalayan Tales* 126). In "Visitors from the Forest" and "The Beetle Who Blundered In" he tells the reader that the visitors include a bamboo beetle, a deep purple whistling thrush, a squirrel, an emerald – green praying mantis, a tiny bat of a rare species discovered in 1884 near Mussoorie by Captain Hutton on the Southern range of Hills at 5,500 feet. In various essays and stories like "Birds of the Night," "Birdsong in the Mountains," and "At the Bird Bath" he has written about the barbet, the blue jay, the bulbul, the Horsefield night jar, the Himalayan whistling thrush, scops owl, the spotted owlet, the hawk –cuckoo or the brain fever bird, the willow warblers, Hodgson's grey – headed flycatcher, warbler, green – backed tits, red headed tits, grey tits, grey – winged ouzel, the babblers, yellow – backed sunbird, flycatchers, paradise flycatcher and a rare bat etc. Among the animals the tiger, the leopard, the langurs, the fox, the bears, the panthers, the snakes, the buffaloes, the elephants appear in "Romance Still Rides the Nine- Fifteen," "Good Day to You, Uncle." "The Snake" is a poem devoted to the snake and "May There Always Be Tigers" to the tiger. On another of his usual walks through the forest he sometimes hears the cry of the barking deer, disturbs parties of Kaleej pheasants, sees pine martins, a red fox, the footprints of a bear and langurs in the oak and rhododendron trees. He meets a leopard too. The leopard's movements, its habits and whereabouts are realistically depicted in "The Leopard." Among the insects the beetle, the crickets- the mole cricket, *Brachytrypesportentosus*, the cicadas, the grasshoppers, the firefly, the praying mantis and the cone- headed Kattydids – explore the pages in "Our Insect Musicians," and "Monsoon Visitors."

We experience the night and its charm in Landour in "Zone for Dancing." Walking home at midnight in Landour he can feel the life in the surrounding trees and bushes.

I have smelt a leopard without seeing it. I have seen jackals on the prowl. I have watched foxes dance in the moonlight. I have seen flying squirrels flit from one treetop to another. I have observed pine martens on their nocturnal journeys, and listened to the calls of nightjars and owls and other birds who live by night. (Bond, *Book of Nature* 46)

The Horsfield nightjar is the species most found in Mussoorie. He feels its call resembles the sound made by hitting a plank with a hammer. Other night birds include the little jungle owlet, the scops owl and the spotted owlet.

No one could have written a more befitting tribute to the Himalayas and its people. "A Walk through Garhwal" is set in ManjariTali village near Nayarriver in Garhwal.

No wonder then, that the people who live on the mountain slopes in the mist-filled valleys of Garhwal, have long since learned humility, patience and a quiet resignation. Deep in the crouching mist lie their villages, while climbing the mountain slopes are forests of rhododendron, spruce and deodar, sighing in the wind from the ice-bound passes. Pale women plough, they laugh at the thunder as their men go down to the plains for work; for little grows on the beautiful mountains in the north wind.

When I think of Manjari village in Garhwal I see a small river, a tributary of the Ganga, rushing along the bottom of a steep, rocky valley. On the banks of the river and on the terraced hills above, there are small fields of corn, barley, mustard, potatoes and onions. A few fruit trees grow near the village. Some hillsides are rugged and bare, just masses of quartz or granite. On hills exposed to wind, only grass and small shrubs are able to obtain a foothold. (Bond, *Himalayan Tales* 70)

On their way to school if the children get hungry they can eat the purple berries of the thorny bilberry bushes that ripen in May and June or wild strawberries that ripen during monsoons and small sour cherries and medlars that ripen in the winter. There is no hospital or dispensary in the village and so home remedies and bed rest are the only ways to heal the sick. The life of a Garhwali is difficult especially if he lives in a high altitude village which remains snowbound for four months in a year and he has to rely on food gathered and stored during the summer months. Fortunately nature, the clear mountain air and a simple diet keep the Garhwalis away from most diseases and help them to recover quickly from common ailments. At times during celebrations the Garhwalis gather at night and while passing the hookah they tell each other stories of ghosts, demons and legends of ancient kings and heroes. During the winter the brown and black Himalayan bears come down from snow covered high mountains to lower altitudes in search of food. They are short sighted and are only aggressive when accompanied by their cubs. Another such story that captures life in a village in the hills is "A Long Walk for Bina." Bina and her younger brother, Sonu live in the village of Koli on the side of a mountain. As their village only has a primary school, they have to walk several miles

to the high school at Nauti village. Prakash their neighbour in Koli accompanies them on their walks. On their long walks to school and home again they sometimes meet a leopard. They discover that April is the month when trees grow new leaves and shed the old ones. The oak dons bright green leaves that are silver from beneath and that ripple in the breeze like clouds of silvery green. White butterflies flit across the stream. The dam which is being constructed in Tehri finds a supporter in Miss Ramola, their class teacher who feels that it would bring electric power and water for irrigation to large areas of the country. On the other hand Mr. Mani another teacher thinks it would be a menace in an earthquake zone. A whole mountain was blasted for this and a wide tunnel had been bored through the mountain to divert the river into another channel.

Bina questions her teacher about the dam. Miss Ramola tries to reason out that the old town will have to be submerged – the clock tower, the old palace, the bazaar, the temples, the schools, the prison, hundreds of houses and all the people will have to go in order to benefit the millions of people who live across the plains. However she too has no answers when Bina asks her why does it not matter what happens to this place, a town that has been here for hundreds of years; the local people were quite happy without the dam so what was the need of it. Bina then thinks about her place and feels reassured that there is only a small stream near her village and so no one would be able to destroy her village.

To be uprooted like this – a town and hundreds of villages- and put down somewhere on the hot dusty plains – seemed to her unbearable.

‘Well, I’m glad I don’t live in Tehri,’ she said.

She did not know it, but all the animals and most of the birds had already left the area. The leopard had been among them. (Bond, *Himalayan Tales* 101).

When the children see the leopard with her cubs they are happy. Bina feels there is plenty of room on the earth for man and animal to survive and is hopeful that even when the dam is ready there will still be enough space for leopards and humans to co-exist.

One of the usual occupations in the hills is truck driving. In “The Last Truck Ride” Pritam Singh, a fifty year old Sikh driver and Nathu, his cleaner boy everyday make two trips on the narrow mountainous roads to limestone quarries carrying truckloads of limestone back to the depot at the bottom of the hill. Nathu has to do this work because last year during the summer there had been no rains and so the potato crop had failed. Only onions and artichokes had survived the drought. There was no money for buying salt, sugar, soap and flour. So Nathu had to leave his village in the hills and come down to the town in search of work. Someone tells him about the limestone quarries where Pritam Singh employs him to clean and look after his truck. As this range is rich in limestone, quarrying leaves the hills bare and dry and much of the forest disappears.

Nathu watched in awe as shrubs and small trees were flung into the air. It always frightened him – not so much the sight of the rocks bursting asunder, but the trees being flung aside and destroyed. He thought of his own trees at home – the walnut, the pines – and wondered if one day they would suffer the same fate, and whether the mountains would all become a desert like this particular range. No trees, no grass, no water – only the choking dust of the limestone quarries. (Bond, *Himalayan Tales* 64)

When the truck goes over the edge of the hill it gets stuck against the trunk of a scraggy old oak tree. The tree saves Pritam Singh's life and they both decide to leave such a job. Nathu says, "I'll work on the land. It's better to grow things on the land than to blast things out of it" (Bond, *Himalayan Tales* 68).

Ruskin Bond is fond of gardens but he likes the rather unkempt ones. He has used the few square feet of rocky hillside and planted daises on it. On the cracked walls of his cottage wild sorrels, dandelions, thorn apples and nettles flourish. "I wouldn't go so far as to say that a garden is the answer to all problems, but it's amazing how a little digging and friendly dialogue with the good earth can help reactivate us when we grow sluggish" (Bond, *Book of Nature* 34).

Ruskin's fictive world is the real world of the Himalayan region where there is harmony between nature and man and man is found protected in the lap of nature away from the bad influences of cities. It is a fearless life, a life of friendship and ancient human values not corrupted by modern human values based solely on gain. Ruskin's world of love, sharing, enjoyment and kindness is like a breath of fresh air which goads us also to be humane and good. Above all his writing is a tribute to the mountains, a befitting tribute to the Land Of The Gods.

Some Night Thoughts:

The mountain is my mother,
My father is the sea,
This river is the fountain
Of all that life can be.
Swift river from the mountain,
Deep river to the sea,
Take all my words and leave them
Where the trade winds set them free.

Oh, piper on the lonely hill,
Play no sad songs for me.
The day has gone, the night comes on,
Its darkness helps me see. (Bond, *Landour Days* 140 - 41)

Changes in the environment being brought about by man are degrading the environment and leading to the extinction of many species.

Species have been disappearing at 50-100 times the natural rate, and this is predicted to rise dramatically. Based on current trends, an estimated 34,000 plant and 5,200 animal species – including one in eight of the world's bird species – face extinction. (Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity 5)

Contemporary writers who have witnessed the ill effects of rapid environment changes have voiced their concerns in their works. Ruskin Bond feels that man's interference in the lives of the denizens of the forests is not good. Sooner or later Nature will find it difficult to forgive and forget man's atrocities against its silent creatures.

One day, I thought, if we trouble these great creatures too much, and hack away at them and destroy their young, they will simply uproot themselves and march away, whole forests on the move, over the next range and next, far from the haunts of man. I have seen many forests and green places dwindle and disappear. (Bond, *Himalayan Tales* 11)

I read a recent article in the *Hindustan Times* about a survey conducted by a team on five hundred local people who would be affected by the Chardham road project. Under this project a 889 km road network will be built in eight districts; a tunnel, 15 big flyovers, 101 small bridges, 3,596 culverts and 12 bypass roads are to be reconstructed. Further the roads are to be widened. The local people are concerned that this would lead to excessive felling of trees including deodar and rhododendron and would adversely affect the fragile ecosystem. They are looking at it as unscientific and unplanned. "Several hundreds of trees are already chopped which the people feel will adversely affect animals dependent on the local vegetation. Additionally, the locals fear more simian attacks as monkeys will be driven to human inhabited areas" (Sharma, "Survey flags concerns of people to be affected" 03+).

Another ill effect of environment change is the man – animal conflict which is on the rise these days because man is rapidly destroying the habitat of animals. We are very protective about our own homes but we never think about the homes of these animals and birds. Animals do not attack us unless we give them a reason to do so. Swami Vivekananda has written about a time when he travelled in the Himalayas as a sannyasi in "Travels in India as an Unknown Sannyasin," in his book *Swami Vivekananda on Himself*. He used to meditate in the

Himalayas and beg for food. Seeing the poor hill people who had barely any food to eat and who yet had the generosity to feed him he felt useless. He stopped begging for food and two days passed in this manner. He went into the forest and sat on a stone to meditate. Suddenly he became aware of the presence of a tiger who was looking at him. He thought that at last his life would be of some use to someone – the tiger would eat him and satisfy his hunger. But the tiger did not attack him. He left him. “I was sorry for it and then smiled, for I knew it was the Master who was saving me till his work be done” (*Himalaya*184). Ruskin Bond has himself had close encounters with animals like leopards. He writes about them in stories like “The Leopard” and “A Long Walk for Bina,” The children are not afraid of the leopard and her cubs. Bina reasons out that there would always be enough space for leopards and humans to co-exist. Bill Aitken comes face to face with a ghooral or mountain goat during one of his treks but the ghooral simply changes its track. It does not attack the writer and the writer too continues on his way. On other treks he met a lion and a leopard.

All these famous personalities through their way of life and their writings inspire us to live in harmony with nature without disturbing, altering or destroying her – to live in a way in which we continue to use natural resources without destroying the ability and power of natural systems to provide us with these resources. When the writers can walk through the hills everyday surely we can give up some comfort and substitute walking or riding a bicycle. Instead of building concrete structures and tall buildings to show off our status we can maintain gardens in our houses. We can grow plants and trees and let them flourish in our gardens. We can care for plants and animals around us. Destroying Nature just for our selfish comforts – clearing forests, blasting the mountains for the sake of building tunnels, roadways and dams, using these holy places just as tourist attractions to mint money will only lead to our spiritual downfall.

Our knowledge no matter how highly qualified we are will always be limited. Only God knows what is best for all life forms. Constant interference by man may destroy God’s bounty which would be lost forever and great writers, sensitive artistic souls, would have nothing to write about. Literature would lose its soul. Furthermore biodiversity is important for sustaining life on earth and if it is lost man himself would sooner or later become extinct.

The Himalayas – make us marvel at God’s creations and make us one with the Creator. The least we can do is to let it remain that way.

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