

Bengali Hindu pilgrims and travellers to the Himalayas from the late 19th to the late 20th century

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Abstract

Bengali travel narratives have a rich repertoire of works that focus on travel as pilgrimage undertaken to the Himalayas, especially to the famous holy shrines of Kedarnath and Badrinath and to Kailasa and Manas Sarovar. This paper focuses on the changing nature of Himalayan pilgrimage down the centuries. The first part discusses two lesser known pilgrimages to the Himalayas where two monks of the Ramakrishna Mission order, namely Swami Akhandananda and Swami Apurvananda undertake their journey in 1887 and 1939 respectively. Their travelogues were published many years later by Udbodhan Karyalaya, the official mouthpiece of the Mission. In both the narratives we get details of the travails of travelling in those times with very little financial security and material comfort. The second part of the paper discusses issues raised by Umaprasad Mukhopadhyay in his travelogue *Pancha Kedar* where he tells us how, with changing times, the manner of travelling to the same holy places have undergone remarkable changes. The discussion then focuses upon another observation by the famous writer Narayan Sanyal who in his book *Pather Mahaprasthan* laments the demise of the original trekking routes of the pilgrims. In 1986, Saroj Kumar Bandyopadhyay visited Kailasa and Manas Sarovar and his narrative describing his month long package trip vouches for the changes that both the pilgrim and the pilgrimage had undergone to the same places almost half a century later.

Keywords: pilgrimage, Himalayas, trek routes, multifarious observations, Kailasa, Kedarnath

Astyuttarasyam dishi devataatmaa Himalayo nama nagadhirajah

(In the north, there lie the Himalayas, the best of the mountains, a God by himself.)

-Kalidasa

Introduction

The ever snow-clad peaks of the Himalayas have attracted men with its heavenly splendour and mystic grandeur since ages. Indians have found out their abode of the gods, the land of Lord Shiva, in these snowy mountains. They have imagined their heaven somewhere in these inaccessible peaks. Yudhisthira, the renowned king of the epic *Mahabharata* went to heaven in person by the way to Manasarovar via Badrikashram; the holy river Ganges originates from Gomukha-Gangotri; the Mountain of Kailasa is the holy dwelling of Lord Shiva himself. So through several centuries, people always have been eager to travel through these inapproachable, serene mountains. Even when the scientific techniques and accessories of the modern age mountaineering were unavailable, they were no less enthusiastic. Since the nineteenth century, scores of pilgrims have defied the hardship of the journey to reach these holy places. The

depiction of the *paribrajak sadhu* or the traveller saint has adorned many such narratives. Famous among them are Jaladhar Sen's *Himalaya* (1900) and Swami Ramananda Bharati's *Himaranya* (1901-02) where he describes his experience of travelling to Kailasa and Manas Sarovar. They have been followed by several other Bengali travelogues written in later years by writers like Shanku Maharaj and Umaprasad Mukhopadhyay who among others popularised travel and expedition to the Himalayas in Bengali society and psyche.

This paper focuses on five selected Bengali travelogues to the Himalayas, beginning from the late nineteenth century to almost the end of the twentieth, to show how with the changing times, the spirit, point of view and nature of travel to the same religious places like Kedarnath, Kailasa and Manas Sarovar undergo a great change. It begins by studying two travel narratives of pilgrimage to the Himalayas undertaken by two monks, Swami Akhandananda and Swami Apurvananda, belonging to the Ramakrishna Mission order. It then focuses on *Pancha Kedar*, a travelogue by the well-known Bengali travel writer, Umaprasad Mukhopadhyay, who in his frequent trips to the Himalayas shows how travelling to the same place after several decades totally changes the nature of travel. The study then discusses an interesting narrative by Narayan Sanyal who in *Pather Mahaprasthan* actually laments on the disappearance of the original trek routes that pilgrims to the holy Himalayan pilgrimage sites had been following over the centuries. The last section narrates the experience of Saroj Kumar Bandyopadhyay who visited Kailasa and Manas Sarovar in 1986 in a month long package tour. In spite of better connectivity, the charm of pilgrimage to these holy Himalayan sites seems to have been lost forever.

I

Swami Akhandananda, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna Dev, travelled from Hrishikesh to Yamunotri and Gangotri and also to Kedarnath and Badrikashram in the year 1887. His ultimate goal was to visit Tibet which was quite difficult at that time. However, he travelled to Tibet and wanted to narrate his experiences in a travelogue. Unfortunately he could not complete it. The former part of his narration was published in 1939 by Udbodhana Karyalaya under the title *Tibbater Pathe Himalaye* (On the way to Tibet in the Himalayas).

The intense pleasure that Akhandanandaji experienced seeing the iridescent crystal white beauty of the snow-covered Himalayas is prominent in his description. It was nearly a hundred and thirty years ago. The pilgrims had to walk along the age-old spiral road through the mountains towards Kedarnath and Badrikashram. Akhandanandaji also followed that route. His master Sri Ramakrishna Dev used to say, "*Himalaya baa samudra naa dekhle ananter dharanaa hoy naa*" --'One cannot realise the concept of eternity unless he sees the Himalayas or the ocean'. So Akhandananda was very keen to visit the Himalayas. When for the first time he could see the snow-clad peaks of the Himalayan range on his journey from Mussouri hills towards Tehri, he was exhilarated:

Is this the union of Mother Nature, the daughter of the mountains with Mahadeva incarnated on the peaks of the Himalayas? Really, I was feeling as if I had arrived in some heavenly kingdom leaving behind the earthly region. My heart was very keen to enter into those endless masses of snow. (1939, p. 8)

The satisfaction of seeing the Himalayas charmed him so much that he did overcome all the problems and physical distress only with the help of his exceptional mental strength and travelled to his desired destination. To him the journey was not a mere tour, it was a pilgrimage. In these days one would not dare to even imagine that while travelling through Uttarakhand up to Tibet in the first year of his expedition, he walked barefoot. This was because at the very beginning of his

trip, on the way to Dehradun, he tried a pair of shoes but within a day or two, he got blisters and his feet were badly injured. So he was confined in Tehri for more than a week. After that a rich man presented him a new pair of shoes, but it was of no use to him. He thought that while walking through the steep mountain ridges covered with withered leaves he might slip and fall down with the shoes on and it would be better only if he carefully walked barefoot. In a village called Rajpur near Mussouri, he took an oath that he would travel the Uttarakhand, being “*ekaki nihsambal*” -- all alone by himself --and without having any resource: “I will not travel along with any other monk or a householder pilgrim and I will never save anything for future except for hunger.” (p 6) One has to remember that unlike well-equipped contemporary travellers, this was the viewpoint of a barefooted pilgrim who only had a robe on him and a torn rug as accompaniment.

Akhandananda ignored all sorts of suffering and he was really besieged by the captivating splendour of the Himalayan surroundings and by the magnificence of the lofty snowy peaks. He could find the manifestation of his desired god in the surrounding nature and he described it with exquisite poetic expressions:

During sunset the Himalayas truly appeared to be a golden mountain. There is no comparison to that magnificent landscape. One portion of the mountain was silvery, shining white like camphor and the other portion was extremely glittering. Seeing two different images in the same form I thought that was it the union of Hara (Shiva) and Gouri! (1939, p. 20)

After visiting Yamunotri, Akhandananda went to Gangotri via Uttarakashi. The route was through a forest region which was notorious for wild bears and other hilly animals. But the pilgrim’s maxim was *charaiveti*, to go ahead only. Near Uttarakashi, a Tibetan merchant advised him to go to Tibet from Joshimath by the way through Niti Pass as it would be nearer to the mountain of Kailasa and Mansarovar. However he went first to Gangotri after crossing Uttarkashi. Akhandananda enjoyed the splendid natural beauty of the route. His devotional mindset distinctly inspired his thoughts:

Bhagirathiⁱⁱ, who frees all the sinners, continually resounding ‘Hara Hara’ (a name of Lord Shiva) is descending downwards in a serpentine motion...The extremely white and pure waters of the holy Ganges, dancing vehemently with an intention to purify infinite creatures is coming down to the earth very hastily; it seems that she can never pause anywhere even for a moment....I completely lost myself within such exquisite splendour. (1939, p.31)

Ignoring the stones and the thorny bushes, the pilgrim had to travel a long hilly road through the forests, sometimes even without food. In those days there was no adequate arrangement for feeding the pilgrims in Gangotri dham. All that they received was a ball of rice as *prasada* from the temple in the afternoon. Also, there was no path from Gangotri to Gomukh at that time. Akhandananda came to know that the road by the side of the Ganges was very rigid and difficult to travel, so even after several attempts nobody could reach Gomukh, the source of the Ganges. People used to take bath in Gangotri instead. Returning from Gangotri, he visited Chandrabadani, a shrine of Shaktism on a lofty peak amidst a dense forest. He faced many difficulties, was lost in a forest, fell sick, fell rolling down a hill, but through his patience and tolerance he overcame all troubles. He could sense that he was being regularly protected by some unseen force which was his very own, nearer than his inner self.

Akhandananda started on his journey to Kedarnath from Srinagar in Garhwal. During his journey he felt that the attraction of this pilgrimage had made all the travellers equal, whether rich or poor, male or female; all the pilgrims willingly adjusted themselves with the unexpected difficulties of the road because of their keen interest to visit the shrine. The memoir also gives us an idea of how the journey was during that time. There used to be small inns (*chati*) by the side of the trek routes at an interval of two or three miles. Arrangement was made for the pilgrims to stay there and to prepare their food. Eatables like rice, pulses, flour, ghee, milk, potatoes were sold but everything used to be quite costly. During such a journey, householders as well as other ascetics were all willing to feed the ascetics/pilgrims as it was considered to be a pious deed. People would always extend a helping hand for others. We also get the information here that Rudraprayag, located at the confluence of Rivers Alakananda and Mandakini, then had only one or two temples and only one *chati* offshore Alakananda. There were no nearby villages. Neither was any one present except one or two priests. The busy and noisy Rudraprayag of these days was a far away imagination.

Akhandananda, although quite young at that time, was no less sensible and logical in his thoughts. He came in touch with the *Mahanta* (president) of Ukhi Math and could feel that in a large number of the monasteries and temples of Uttarakhand, the head priests mostly arranged for a routine worship of the idol and paid more attention to the honorarium paid by the pilgrims, especially the rich pilgrims. His rationality was not conflicted by any devotional emotion here. Akhandananda was overwhelmed with the glory of Gaurikunda as he remembered that it was the very place where Parvati (as daughter of the Himalayas) was practicing penance for winning Shiva's love. At the first sight of the sunlit Kedar peak at a distance, he felt as if he was seeing the all-white Mahadeva incarnate. Describing the scenic natural beauty of the way, he said that the best season there was from the end of *Asharh* to the end of *Shravana* (July/August) as lovely colourful flowers were in full bloom all around at that time.

His narration ended abruptly but in the very beginning of the book Akhandananda himself has informed us that as time goes on, *abasthaa bhede o paryabekshan-shaktir parimaan bhede* -- 'due to difference of situations and due to difference of power of observation' -- the description of the same place appears differently to different travellers. Those pilgrims who travelled to Badrikashram earlier than him by traversing very steep and difficult -to get- to hilly roads had termed their route as *manobhanga o chitbhanger raastaa*—'the road where people get their minds and hearts shattered'. At that time they had to cross the gorges with the help of trembling and fearful causeways made mostly by ropes. But in the year 1887/88, Akhandananda travelled over paved bridges or on paved roads. At the same time he could feel that the simple honest nature of the mountain people was slowly changing as an effect of regular contact with the people from the mainland. The tranquillity of the mountain region was inevitably being influenced by the change of time.

II

Another monk of Sri Ramakrishna Mission, Swami Apurvananda travelled to Kailasa and Manas Sarovar with a group of seven or eight persons in the summer of 1939 (Jaisthya 1346 BS) and his travelogue *Kailasa O Manastirtha* was published several decades later by Udbodhan Karyalaya in 1988--89. He made his journey from the Ramakrishna Mission of Shyamalatal in Uttarakhand. Fifty long years have passed in between. The journey route was also different. Again the arrangements made for the journey were in accordance to the rules of mountaineering. The luggage was being carried by twelve *banjara* horses. Some of his companions also rode horses, though Apurvananda himself walked the entire route by foot. Among the ten mountain passes to

enter Tibet from India, their trek route began from Tanakpur or Almora through Lipulekh Pass via Askot and Garbiang.

In his travelogue Apurvananda drew lively sketches of the villages, towns and hamlets, rivers, valleys, and hilly roads that they passed by with his easy language, simple and short sentences, and above all, his sensitive way of thinking. The descriptions capture our mind. They enjoyed the picturesque beauty of the upward slopes of the mountains. They had to cross the river near the confluence of Kalinganga and Dhauliganga by a hanging wooden causeway with great fear while hearing the fierce roar of the water below. Then they had to climb a stiff uphill path of five thousand feet within a span of three miles. Swamiji informs us humorously that the ascent was named *pangur charai* meaning uphill for a crippled one, as it would turn everyone crippled after climbing it. They almost had to crawl their way up. But upon reaching the top they found out something unique when they looked downwards -- over the blue riverbed of the Dhauliganga, the clouds were hitting each other besides the mountains with flashes of lightning and thunder along with heavy rains. But the travellers were standing in clear sunshine. Again they looked upwards and found there a cloudy sky with thunder and lightning in the upper level. They bowed down to God seeing such wonderful unforeseen scenes.

Along the course of River Kali the steep ascending and descending path led them to Dharchula, Sikhra, Garbyang, Malpaa day by day. The journey was quite tedious. They had to take shelter mostly in small, untidy, wayside huts or shops. Gradually biting cold was setting down; occasionally it was raining too. Near *Nizaan* waterfall, the leader of the porters died in a landslide. Still the pilgrims proceeded by panting heavily through dense forest routes in the mountain. Apurvananda noted down in his chronicle the account of the villages or small towns of Bhutan they were passing by -- the number of inhabitants, the height of the place from sea level, their business policy and merchandise, the methods adopted for cultivation etc very methodically. By that time the local people were already familiar with free hospitals and medicine donations by the monks of Ramakrishna Mission; so they eagerly came forward to visit those "*daktar-swamis*" - 'the doctor-monks'.

In this way, disregarding all the troubles and yet enjoying the splendour of nature, they reached a land covered with snow called Singyangchung Valley. The Lipulekh Pass lay in front. Spending the night in a transitory tent, everyone got ready by 4.30 a.m. for crossing the Pass. They felt almost frozen while trekking the rocky ascent: *paathare thukchhi, humri khaachhi, garte parchi, paatharer faanke paa aatke jachhe, aabaar chachhi* -- 'we were hitting against the stones, falling down into holes, our feet got stuck in the gaps between the stones, and again we resumed our journey'. Suddenly there came a gust of air and light snowfall. But all of them crossed the pass safely and were stunned to see the sun rising brilliantly.

At first they went to Taklakot and next day visited the Khocharnath Gumpa. Passing by the river Karnali, they found beside the way rows of residences carved like caves on the rocky surface. There would be only one small door in the front side of these houses and all other portions were inside the hills to evade the snowfall. With the help of the Tibetan guide Kichkhampa, Apurvananda and his companions visited the temple of the Gumpa; they found that in an underground hidden chamber of that temple Mahakali (mother goddess, consort of Shiva) was worshipped secretly; they visited that image also and were introduced to the chief Lama. Next they had to start for Kailasa through a dangerous rocky path. On the way, at the height of 14,500 feet in Chhirra, a cup of water was frozen at night. While approaching Yupchaa, ten or twelve Tibetans had a quarrel with the pilgrims and attacked them with swords in hand. But seeing a gun with one of the travellers they retreated. The group had to travel facing such adverse situations

which cannot even be imagined these days. Again there was severe water crisis in Yupchaa. But Apurvananda did not give up. Inspired with his diligence, his team dug up the dried out bed of a spring and finally found sufficient water.

The next day they had to climb an upward slope of sixteen to seventeen miles. From a mountain peak in the midway the white snowy peak of Kailasa was seen, just like a crystal tower of an enormous temple. Being so close to their destination they were besieged with emotion. Crossing the confluence of the rivers Tirthaapuri and Sutlej, the travellers had a queer experience. There was a white coloured barren field covering about half a mile. It was made of rocks that were soft and hollow like bread, and a number of hot water springs were flowing over there. But destiny had also some favours in store for them. At Selachakung they met *Garfphaan* (The Governor) of Tibet and were received cordially with earnest respect.

From Niandi off-shore La Chu River they began circumambulation of Kailasa. After reaching Dirifu, the nearest spot of Kailasa, they were taking rest in a tent when Apurvananda felt an irresistible desire to reach the peak and set out with his guide Kichkhampa. Like an infatuated person he went closest to the peak as far as possible, disregarding the snow and the rocks. The narration of such a rare and incomparable experience is outstanding -- his feet were dipping in soft snow but because of excitement he had no feeling of cold or of respiratory trouble; suddenly the swami heard a greatly solemn sound of OM. He felt that the sound encompassed the world and infested him with bliss. The base of the peak was covered with snow. At first they were disappointed but both of them dug the snow with their hands and the hill stick. After digging for almost two and a half feet they could touch the rock and touched their forehead there again and again to their heart's content. Again, in Gaurikunda at the height of 18,200 feet they dipped into the water of the *kund* after breaking the covering ice slabs of one or one and half feet thickness; their whole body was numbed with cold. Such an account makes us think that one can transform the impossible into possible with the help of mere determination and mental strength. Later when the writer was besieged with the blue oceanic beauty of Ravana Hrad(lake) and Manas Sarovar he thought that *durgam balei to sei biraater padatal eto mahimaamay* -- 'the refuge at the feet of that Great One is so magnificent just because it is so inaccessible'.(1988-89, p.127) At the end they returned to the plains being content after paying their homage to the God. Both Akhandananda and Apurvananda considered their travel to the Himalayas as a part of their religious adoration.

III

Umadas Mukhopadhyay is an earnest explorer of the Himalayas. Through his travel narratives the Bengali reader mentally travels again and again in the corners of the Himalayas. In *Pancha Kedar* (1986) he gives us a comparative description of the journey to Kedarnath in his earlier and later days. For the first time the writer went to Kedarnath in 1928 with a group as a companion to his mother. Starting from Hrishikesh they walked all the way. After visiting Kedarnath and Badrinath, they went down to Karnaprayag and by a different route came back to Ranikhet. The distance by walking was altogether four hundred miles and it took them a month to complete it. As he succinctly puts it, *takhano buser rajpath Himalayer andarmahale paunchaay ni* -- 'till then the royal route of buses did not reach the inner corners of the Himalayas'.(1986, p. 10)

Since 1928, the writer had been frequenting the route and after another visit in 1968, he informs us about the itinerary of the modern days, especially after the introduction of bus routes for pilgrims. If anyone started by bus from Hrishikesh, he would reach Guptakashi by that evening and then Kedarnath would be a walking distance of only two days. Again a bus could carry one directly to Badrinath and he could return by bus back to Hrishikesh. The whole

programme could be covered within a week. In a very simple and elegant language, Umapasrad tells us about those days when the pilgrims had to walk and would readily accept the hardship and adversities of the journey. Guided by the natural light of the sky, they would get prepared and begin their journey before the darkness of the night faded away. Starting late would mean suffering in the heat of the sun. At noon they took their bath, had meals and rested in a *chati* (wayside inn) and resumed the journey in the afternoon. Again they found out a new *chati* at night; it became full to the brim with the resonance of the travellers. (p.13)

The writer observes that people speaking different languages and wearing different costumes undertook the journey with the same view, to visit their god. They walked on uttering the same slogan, *Jai Kedarnath, Badribishal ki Jai* -- 'Hail Lord Kedara, Hail the great Lord Badrinath'. The inns extended their warm reception for the tired travellers. In the mud huts they were provided rugs on mats as beds. Travellers unknown to each other would spend the night together as if they belonged to the same family. The owner of the inn would not charge for the night stay but one had to pay for the food items, utensils etc. There were certainly also many disadvantages in the inns. During the hot days of summer, there would be lots of flies. These inns consisted of small food shops selling fried sweets like *jalebi*, tea, pure milk etc. Sometimes a traveller would fall sick by consuming stale food. The writer reminds us that in those days a person would almost bid farewell to his family while joining a pilgrimage, as safe return was uncertain. Still he thinks that though in recent times one can avail a carefree and brief journey by bus without having to go through the strain of walking or fear from diseases, still one will miss the thrills of covering the distance on foot, the pleasure of enjoying the beauty of surrounding nature or the chirping of birds.

In the earlier days, Devaprayag, located at the confluence of Bhagirathi and Alakananda, was regarded as a major holy place. The pilgrims would take rest there conveniently or would stay at night and enjoy the tranquil beauty of the place. But Umapasrad sadly says that nowadays it is merely a half an hour stoppage for the bus passengers. Some of them may click a few photographs from the higher altitude, but they do not have the leisure to enjoy the serene grandeur of the Himalayas. With his short and emotional sentences the writer draws sketches as if with simple strokes of a brush. Up to Rudraprayag, on the same bank of the river, the older pathway and the recent bus route run side by side besides the older, discarded inns. The writer felt that in the earlier days the pilgrims, while passing through these villages on foot, would have to suffer a lot but they could enjoy the care and affection from the villagers like their own relatives. Again the travellers would bring for the villagers small items like needle and thread, coins or *bindi* as those were much coveted by them. He realised that such giving and taking of trivial things was also a pleasant part of this journey. It was as if a householder would come back to his village on the occasion of Durga Puja with gifts for all the family members, which was mostly a norm. But when a bus crosses the road with a cloud of dust following it, bondage cannot develop between the villagers and the passengers in a hurried journey. But the writer accepts the fact that with the advancement of mechanical civilisation, a change is inevitable in the course of time. So, though earlier Umapasrad found Rudraprayag to be surrounded by huge hills and forests where swift streams of the Alakananda and the Mandakini broke through in a forlorn place on both sides, now the hilly rocks and the jungle have been removed and it has become a developed area crowded with big shops and hotels, college and hospitals etc.

The path to Kedarnath proceeds through the hills surpassing Chatoli, Mathchati, Agastaymuni and Kundchati. The steep slope of Guptakashi can be crossed easily in these days by boarding a bus. Ukhimath is left on the other side of the river Mandakini. The path proceeds

further. At a distance, the snowy white peak of the mountain where Badrikashram was situated is visible under the clear blue sky. Now the route is via Nalachati, Biyang Chati, the upward slope of Maikhanda, then Fata Chati ---it goes on through a forest. Crossing a bridge at Soneprayag the ascent to Kedarnath begins. After Gaurikunda there comes Ramwara chati. In the year 1928, the writer spent a night there. He remembers that there were only three or four small front open huts. Chunks of snow were scattered here and there. River Mandakini was flowing nearby. Right now that same Ramwara is crowded with bigger inns, brick built houses, dharamsalas etc. Kedarnath is only three miles away, but one has to climb more than three thousand feet to reach there. Umaprasad never gets tired of describing the picturesque beauty of this way. Deo-dekhni is the turning point of the road where one gets the first sight of Kedarnath peak at a distance and just before that is the temple. In 1928 Umaprasad found only eight or ten houses and no shops there. On seeing the lofty stone temple in the background of the snowy mountain, the writer imagined it to be a *yogin* in meditation sitting quietly at a remote corner of the Himalayas. But right now there were rows of shops and residences on both sides of the way to the temple. Later the writer also saw that a memorial for the burial of Shankaracharya had been built at a distance.

Umaprasad Mukhopadhyay was a connoisseur of Himalayan beauty and visiting Kedarnath temple was not his ultimate goal. In his different expeditions he went beyond the Kedarnath temple and enjoyed very difficult yet magnificent journey over the snow-covered paths to Chorabalaal (the source of the river Mandakini, recently name Gandhi Sarovar) or Basukitaal. He realised the magnificence of the Himalayas to his heart's content:

It is a superb enormous shrine of Nature herself. There at the horizon of the blue sky, rises the tower of that temple. The surrounding hills rising up to the sky are the outer walls of the temple. The Kedar peak covered with snow is the radiant icon of Lord Shiva. The stream of the Mandakini is like a garland of *parijata* flowers. It seems as if the temple of Kedar is an offering of a fully bloomed *brahmakamal* flower at the feet of the lord. (1986, p. 46)

IV

In 1964, the popular Bengali writer Narayan Sanyal, along with his family members, went with a well-known travel agency to visit Kedarnath and Badrinath. He considered this journey to be a special one as the road for transportation and communication was being readied swiftly by the Indian Military force and the great age-old trekking route (in his words *sahasraabdi par briddha mahapath*) was going to be abandoned soon. He wanted to experience the traditional journey by foot as he thought that if anyone wanted to savour some great experience sincerely, he should be prepared for doing so even within a minimum duration of time. The stress of the journey, the fellow feeling with other travellers, and above all the heavenly surroundings of the Himalayas would mentally prepare him for realising the magnificence of his desired pilgrimage. Such an experience could not be achieved by looking at the surroundings through the windows of a comfortable tourist car, *kaaran tirther pathe chalaar baro kathaataa tirtha nay, path ebong chala* -- 'as the prime matter of a pilgrimage is not just visiting the shrines but the path and the journey as well.' (1983, p.110) So he has named his diary as *Pather Mahaprasthan* --the great departure of the path.

As a skilled author, Sanyal, has framed his diary of three weeks in an interesting style of storytelling. We are fascinated by the activities and conversations of his co-travellers in the travel group. All the characters seem to be quite familiar and as the narrative advances, the readers also

become a part of the journey. The smile and tears of the travellers, their earnest eagerness to continue the journey in spite of all the fatigue and their sincere belief in god, can easily be shared through the sensitive narration of the writer. He observes “Have you ever seen the whole of India climbing up a hill? Panjab- Sindhu –Gujrat –Maratha-Dravir-Utkala- Banga!(There are all of them). Everyone is going there- staggering in a zig-zag motion. ...Everybody is uttering the same slogan, *Jai Kedar, Jai Kedar* -- Hail Lord Kedar.”

As a civil engineer by profession, Sanyal has raised several pertinent questions. He wonders that in the remote past when this Kedar temple did not exist, someone must have planned it. Be he a saint or a monk or anyone else, we should bow down and pay obeisance to him. India has millions of temples which are eminent for their planning, architecture or sculpture. But in the whole country, from the ocean to the Himalayas, who else could select such a site? Further, when the temple was not there, the approach road also was not present. Then how could that first schemer find out such a unique spot in a serene corner of the Himalayas? By which way did that first traveller come? How did he repeatedly cross the rivers Bhagirathi, Alakananda or Mandakini without any bridges or causeways? How could he go beyond all those mountain barriers? Again, on three sides of the small temple snow-peaked magnificent mountains stand as if in meditation. The temple can be accessed only from one side. The river Mandakini touches the feet of the temple. The writer pays his homage to the planner of this temple for his sense of proportion about its length, width and height, and for the relative measurement of the twin-roofed portion in front and the height and width of the tower at the back.

In Badrikashram, an aged member of the travel group was lacking all feelings due to some psychological impairment. He said that he could see nothing even on a sunlit noon so he would not go inside the temple. The writer and others tried to console him in vain. But after counselling done by a local saint, the old man was pacified and to the utter surprise of all, he had a clear *darshan*. Sanyal considered it as something beyond explanation.

V

After the independence of India a significant change was noticed in the journey to Kailasa and Manas Sarovar. An honest report can be found in the latter part of the book *Kailasa O Manasa Tirtha: Sekaal O Ekaal* written by Saroj Kumar Bandyopadhyay. As a devotee of the Ramkrishna Mission order, Bandyopadhyay was requested by the ashram authorities to pen down the memoir of his travel to Kailasa and Manas Sarovar in 1986. By including his narrative in the same book that contained the travel narrative of Swami Apurvananda in 1939, the discernible reader can therefore make a comparative study of a pilgrimage to the same place almost half a century later, (forty-seven years to be exact). The juxtaposition of *Sekaal* and *Ekaal* (Then and Now) in the title of the book also reiterates the differences in the travel method and ambience of the place visited.

In 1986 Bandyopadhyay got a chance to participate in a pilgrimage to Kailasa and Manas which is arranged annually by the Ministry of External Affairs of the Government of India. To participate in the journey one has to appear before a medical board of the government for checking his/her physical fitness. Moreover, they have to submit their passports and obtain visa as they have to cross the international border of Tibet controlled by China. Bandyopadhyay and his companions had to buy 450 US dollars each for their journey. They started from Delhi on 24th of July and returned on 24th August 1986. It was a well-planned journey. The group consisted of a medical professional and a liaison officer. Everything like food, accommodation or transport was pre-organised. As the pilgrimage went on, we come across familiar place names like Dharchula, Shirkha, Gipti, Malpo, and also the steep road along the side of Kaliganga and Garbyang which are

mentioned in the first part of the book by Swami Apurvananda. They had to proceed from Kalapani to Navidang being under the command of the Indo Tibetan Border Police.

On the way the writer witnessed a rare scene -- as if an OM was written with snow on a peak. Through Lipulekh Pass they entered the Chinese area and their onward journey was arranged by the Chinese Government. Each of them had to pay 350 US dollars for that. Again and again we are informed about the complications of the road. They had to travel riding yaks or horses. It was biting cold and the accommodation was not commendable, rather dirty. In Kailasa and Manas they had to cook meals for themselves which was not easy enough as grains or cereals would need four to five hours to be boiled properly. In spite of all these they enjoyed the beauty of the Himalayas and sincerely made their offerings to god to their hearts' content. However, they completed the circumambulation of Kailasa and Manas in spite of having many physical problems. On their way back they also visited Khocharnath monastery and did not forget to buy some souvenirs. The group was safely brought back to Delhi. This is a day-to-day chronicle recording all required information. Almost all possible safety measures were taken including the daily health check up for the travellers. But compared to the free and spontaneous outbursts of touching emotions narrated in the earlier travelogue, this journey is restricted by dos and don'ts of protocol. That was the need of the day.

Swami Akhandananda and Apurvananda were religious minded and contemplated on their spiritual views in their travelogues. Umaprasad Mukhopadhyay was a dedicated admirer of the serene Himalayan beauty. In his memoirs the Himalayas come alive with all its grandeur. Sanyal, as a humanist, has focused on the common people he met in the journey and the large changes that the rejection of the traditional path would bring to the social and economical life of those people. For Saroj Kumar Bandyopadhyay, the month-long pilgrimage was meticulously planned by external agencies and he did not have the opportunity for deviating from the chalked out itinerary.

We know that in 2013, a devastating flood of River Mandakini at Kedarnath washed away almost all the temples and buildings adjoining the Main temple, including the Bharat Sevashram Sangha and the Shankaracharya Memorial. Nowadays interested people can travel from Gaurikunda to Kedarnath by helicopters. It is only a three hour journey and their pilgrimage will be over. In a similar manner, a new 80 kilometre strategically crucial road was recently inaugurated on 8th of May, 2020 by Sri Rajnath Singh, the Defence Minister of India. Originating from Ghatiabagarh, this road connects Dharchula in Uttarakhand with the 17,060 feet high Lipulekh Pass along the border with China, which is the gateway to Kailasa and Manas Sarovar. Begun in 2008 with the target of completing it in 2013, several impediments delayed the project. But according to the minister, "pilgrims going to Kailash Mansarovar will now be able to complete their journey in one week instead of up to three weeks." He was also confident of enhanced business and economic development in the neighboring areas. Though this is encouraging news indeed, it also reinforces the demise of the arduous trek routes for the pilgrims and their unique experiences that this article focused upon. So these travelogues remain as priceless memoirs /souvenirs of a forgone period and a lost journey.

Notes

ⁱ All translations from the original Bengali texts are mine.

ⁱⁱ Bhagirathi is the holy River Ganges. King Bhagiratha, by his hard penance brought her down to earth from heaven to purify all sins, to restore sixty thousand dead sons of King Sagara to life. Hence the particular name is coined here by the author as she is flowing downwards.

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