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Kaleidoscopic Vision of the Himalayas in Ruskin Bond's *Book of Nature*

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Ruskin Bond, an eminent and prolific writer, an ardent worshipper of Nature, is regarded as Uttarakhand's 'very own resident Wordsworth in prose'. India Today (Bond, *Book of Nature*, Cover). As such, Nature and Bond are inseparable.

Presently residing in Landour, Mussoorie, Bond is enamoured by the charms of the Himalayas which constitute the locale of his writings. Overwhelmed by the beauty, and ethos of the region in, and around the Himalayas, Bond has ascribed divinity to Nature.

His communion with Nature invigorates him, and rejuvenates him to confront the challenges of life with a positive outlook. His reverence for Nature in the poem 'Raindrop',

This leaf, so complete in itself,
Is only part of the tree,
And this tree, so complete in itself,
Is only part of the forest.
And the forest runs down from the hill to the sea,
And the sea, so complete in itself,
Rests like a raindrop,
In the hand of God, (Bond, "Raindrop")

unravels his mystical being.

In the words of Bond,

If life becomes too pressing and the word is too much upon me, a walk in the woods and communion with nature helps. I like being with myself and taking a walk in the unspoilt surroundings and commune if not with God, with myself. I believe being close to nature is a spiritual experience. (Bond " God is in nature....")

A walk down memory lane reminds Bond of his childhood association with Dehradun (a valley in the lap of the Himalayas), a place he was familiar with in the 1940s. At that time, Dehradun was sparsely populated, a small town with sprawling bungalows, with vast gardens in the front, and beautiful orchards at the backyard. It was an idyllic world of nature! Trees were in overabundance namely litchi, jackfruit, sal, shisham, deodars, and fragrant pines. They were home to countless varieties of birds, butterflies, squirrels, insects, and reptiles, cohabitating with the sparse human population. Trees have always played a significant role in Bond's life. He states that even at Landour ' the trees stand watch over my day-to-day life. They are the guardians of my conscience. I have no one else to answer to, so I live and work under the generous but highly principled supervision of the trees – especially the deodars, who stand on guard, unbending, on the slope above the cottage.' (Bond 121)

In his childhood, Bond was in awe of the Banyan tree standing tall in his grandfather's compound reverberating with melodious voices during the spring season. Then it was 'the noisiest place on the road.' (Bond 4) Birds of all species would flock to its branches, like 'the red-bottomed bulbul, cheerful and greedy; gossiping rosy – pastors; and parrots and crows, squabbling with each other all the time,' (Bond 4) presenting a lively picture.

In fact his grandfather's house resembled a mini zoo with an elephant, a tiger cub, a python, a parrot, a cassowary and also Bond's priceless possessions – a squirrel, and an owlet. Bond recalls how most of them were once taken to Lucknow via train with a whole berth reserved for Timothy, the tiger cub!

At that time the bond between man and nature was quite sacred and intense as exemplified in the watering of the plants by Bond's aunt even during the rainy season. She would dotingly say – "The rain comes from above.... This is from me. They expect me at this time..." (Bond 34)

For Bond every plant in nature has its own significance. He confesses that this ivy covered cottage at Landour is protected from landslides as the hillside just above his cottage is 'well-knit, knotted and netted, by bilberry and raspberry, wild jasmine, dog-rose and bramble, and other shrubs, vines and creepers.' (Bond 42)

Even streams and rivulets or water with its tendency to penetrate everywhere making 'its way through various strata of rock, zigzagging, back-tracking, finding space, cunningly discovering faults and fissures in the mountain, and sometimes travelling underground for great distances before emerging into the open," (Bond 66) has its own fascination for Bond.

It is quite amazing and amusing, how a litterateur can enlist innumerable names of animals, plants, trees, birds and even insects! Even the medicinal value of certain plants is highlighted to mark their preeminence. Reference has also been made to 'kalp-vriksha', an enormous old mulberry tree at Joshimath in Garhwal as well as to 'three giant Michelias' growing besides an abandoned temple of Shiva in Guptkashi a little distance above the banks of the Mandakini river. Flowers such as the jasmine, daisies, dandelions, marigolds, shrubs of wild roses etc. with their variegated colours spread their fragrance throughout the book. Beautiful birds like the koel, the Himalayan whistling-thrush, shah bulbuls etc. make the picture perfect.

Here Bond presents a panoramic view of the prolific flora, and fauna of the Northern Himalayas. The wild life of the Garhwal region is a feast for the eyes. Mesmerised by the commelina flower, his veneration for the same is expressed in such philosophical words – 'I stand dumb before it; and the world stands still while I worship. It makes me doubt the reality of everything in the world.' (Bond 100)

Along with the kaleidoscopic representation of the natural beauty on the banks of the Ganga where it emerges from the Himalayan foothills the writer registers his anguish against the hunters and bamboo cutters who have wrecked havoc in that region. Animal habitats have been encroached upon and 'they are being denied the right to live.' (Bond 209) Instances of elephants causing extensive destruction in the suburbs of Hardwar have increased manifold. The elephants have moved further into the forest but it is a matter of time when 'men would appear again, with tractors, bulldozers and dynamite' (Bond 209) making them homeless yet again!

The loneliness of an old tiger on the banks of the Ganga is poignantly represented in a tale. For the past five, to six years it had no mate. The tigress 'had been shot by the trophy hunters,

and her two cubs had been trapped by men who do trade in wild animals.’ (Bond 218) The old tiger was forced to attack the livestock of the villagers after forest fires drove smaller animals to safer haven. This enraged the villagers who shot him and saw him being swept away by the Ganga. Initially there were rejoicings in the village but soon

the men began to feel that something had gone out of their lives, out of the life of the forest; they began to feel that the forest was no longer a forest. It had been shrinking year by year, but, as long as the tiger had been there and the villagers had heard it roar at night, they had known that they were still secure from the intruders and new-comers who came to fell the trees and eat up the land and let the flood waters into the village. But, now that the tiger had gone, it was as though a protector had gone, leaving the forest open and vulnerable, easily destroyable. And, once the forest was destroyed, they too would be in danger. (Bond 243-44)

With his loss was associated the loss of ‘a thing that was being lost everywhere-- something called ‘nobility’.’ (Bond 244) One of the village boy Ramu remembered what his grandfather had forewarned – “The tiger is the very soul of India, and when the last tiger has gone, so will the soul of the country” (Bond 244)

Bond, a witness to the ravaging onslaughts of modern civilization in the name of development then talks about the mindless felling of trees in and around Dehradun and Mussoorie. Where there were innumerable canopies of trees there are numberless stumps and remains of the mercilessly slaughtered trees. As Bond recalls, Dehradun ‘about hundred and fifty years ago, was chiefly noted for its clusters and avenues of large bamboos.... They must have died out, or been cut down to make way for buildings in an ever-expanding city; today there are only a few corners where these great bamboos can still be seen.’ (Bond 115-116)

Bond also refers to the superstitions prevalent in the Garhwal region when he mentions the Gazetteer of Jaunsar wherein it has been stated that the people of Chijal village, ‘afflicted with small pox, burnt down four hundred deodar trees as a sacrifice’ (Bond 279) to appease the evil spirits.

In the concluding part of the book Bond is reminded of a chilling account of an earthquake which struck Bengal and Assam on 12th June 1897 as recorded by his Grandfather and the widespread devastation that ensued. There was immense loss of life and many people were rendered homeless.

Nature's fury is unleashed upon the mountains in Bond's reference to a thunderstorm in Mussoorie and how the hills 'tremble[d] when thunder rumble[d] and boom[ed] in the valley.' (Bond 256) The thunderstorm blew away the roof of Bond's house and everything was drenched. Snowfall followed which provided a halo to all the ordinary things lying scattered around.

Raging forest fires are at the backdrop in the story of a boy, Romi. Stampede of the animals averting the danger and the all consuming forest fires gorging upon vast tracts of the forest land present a heart rending sight.

So along with the enthralling beauty of Nature, Bond has also picturised the pent up fury of Nature which when unleashed proves catastrophic. This is also true in the case of Uttarakhand.

The heavenly Uttarakhand, a fragile ecological zone, prone to earthquakes is marred by extensive land degradation, water scarcity, forced migration for employment etc. The rapid and unplanned pace of development has taken a toll on this Paradise. Human dallying with the ecosystem, rapid increase in population and man's greed impelled by consumerism have resulted in wide spread destruction and degradation. It has been further aggravated by encroachment of forests, reckless felling of trees, mass scale deforestation, air pollution, soil erosion, disposal of industrial waste into the river systems, indiscriminate and extensive grazing, etc. Even expansion of settlement zones have added to the woes with high rise buildings cropping up everywhere. The fragile mountains have accelerated landslides resulting in enormous loss of human life and property.

Even Bond's Paradise has been intruded upon, a walnut tree known to Bond for the past ten years being the first casualty of the PWD! The rampages of the PWD have also annihilated a young Deodar tree. It reminds Bond of losing his younger brother to a road accident in Delhi. Both, the lives had been snuffed out in their youth, and were victims of the road – 'The tree killed by the PWD: my brother by a truck.' (Bond 280) A similar fate awaits thousands of trees lining various areas marked for road expansion projects. Now, instead of the melodious voice of the whistling thrush would be audible the shrill noise of trucks, grinding of the gears, the blaring of motor horns, and the deafening explosions continually shattering 'the silence of the mountains, as thousand-year-old rocks are dynamited.' (Bond 281) All this has driven the

birds in to a frenzy, and they have left for safer havens and even ‘the bold langurs haven’t shown their faces for over a fortnight.’ (Bond 281)

The captivating beauty of the emerald green hills after the monsoons, the singing of the birds and the insects, the blooming of flowers and ferns is a breathtaking sight which impels Bond to forget the world. But, it is only momentary. He is jolted back to reality by ‘the blare of truck’s horn’ (Bond 289) and ‘a cloud of dust and a blast of diesel fumes’ (Bond 289). Even the beautiful Commelina ‘seems to shrink from the onslaught’ (Bond 289). Bond heaves a sigh of relief and takes solace that it is still there and leaves the main road to take a road less trodden. He is confident that at least the weeds which ‘flourish in the most unlikely and even hostile places, putting up with exhaust fumes, trampling feet, traffic, bulldozers, roadside tenements, grazing cattle and goats,’ (Bond 287) give ‘one hope that not all the world’s plant life will be extinct by the end of the century.’ (Bond 287)

Works Cited

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