



Mountains, Humanity And Literature: Shanku Maharaj's Himalayan Journeys

Dr. Mahadev Das

Research Scholar, Department of Bengali,
University of Kalyani, Kalyani, Nadia, West Bengal, India

ABSTRACT:

Shanku Maharaj's travel writings transcend the boundaries of conventional travelogues, evolving into a unique blend of literature, philosophy, and cultural documentation. With nearly fifty Himalayan-centered works, his narratives capture not only the grandeur and peril of mountain landscapes but also the human spirit encountered along the way. His journeys were driven not by religious merit but by an irrepressible desire to see, know, and connect with people across diverse terrains. Through vivid descriptions of nature's transformations, compassionate portrayals of mountain folk, and reflections on unity beyond caste, class, and creed, Maharaj's works embody both scholarly rigor and lyrical beauty. His accounts of places such as Gangotri, Yamunotri, Siniolchu, Ladakh, and Meghalaya reveal a deep engagement with history, geography, and human relationships, while his meticulous documentation of mountaineering records underscores his commitment to preserving knowledge. Ultimately, Shanku Maharaj's travel literature stands as a testament to the transformative power of journeying—where landscapes become living experiences, strangers become kin, and the pursuit of beauty and humanity becomes inseparable.

KEY WORDS:

Shanku Maharaj, Himalayan Travel Literature, Philosophical Vision, Human Compassion, Nature and Landscape, Pilgrimage and Culture.

Shanku Maharaj, known in personal life as Jyotirmoy Ghosh Dastidar, is a distinguished figure in modern Bengali literature, particularly celebrated for his travelogues. His finest creations are centered on the Himalayas, where his writing captures both grandeur and intimacy. Beyond his literary achievements, he was also a skilled mountaineer, actively participating in numerous Himalayan expeditions and treks. This rare blend of literary artistry and firsthand mountaineering experience makes his Himalayan narratives uniquely authentic and deeply engaging.

In Shanku Maharaj's Himalayan travel narratives, the satisfaction of the eyes, the mind, and knowledge occurs simultaneously. The Himalaya itself is a great encyclopedia of wisdom—full of diversity and grandeur, overflowing with sweetness and terror alike. That Himalayan world is vividly inscribed in Shanku Maharaj's writings. His compositions are “precise in fact, and truly beautiful in thought.”¹

Alongside his visually striking descriptions, he is masterful in intellectually enriched presentations. He can effortlessly bring to life many unknown details of history. He is not a solitary traveler absorbed in lonely Himalayan paths; rather, he is accustomed to journeying together with many companions:

“Thus his travelogues are never mere tales of destinations; they become the living stream of a journey in motion.”²

In his descriptions of Himalayan tourist sites, Shanku Maharaj has not only earned renown but also offered readers a taste of adventure interwoven with historical and geographical consciousness. Just as he has presented travel narratives like *Uttarasyām Dishi*, so too has he recorded accounts of mountaineering, such as in *Neel-Durgam*. His portrayal of the pride and sorrow mingled in the conquest of the Nilgiri peaks undoubtedly demonstrates his literary talent.

The number of Himalayan-centered works by Shanku Maharaj is nearly fifty. Some of the notable ones are: *Bigalita-Karunā Jāhnabī-Yamunā* (1961), *Nīl Durgam* (1963), *Pañca Prayāg* (1964), *Gahana Giri Kandare* (1966), *Girikāntāra* (1967), *Uttarsyān Diśi* (1968), *Garō Pahārer Pāñcālī* (1968), *Caturāṅgīr Aṅgane* (1969), *Līlābhūmi Lāhul* (1971), *Trilokanātha Mandira* (1971), *Māyāmaya Meghālaya* (1971), *Gaṅgā Yamunār Deśa* (1972), *Tamasār Tīre Tīre* (1974), *Amarābatī Āsām* (1976), *Puṇyatīrtha Prabhāsa* (1976), *Mānālīr Mālañce* (1977), *Amaratīrtha Amaranātha* (1978), *Caraibeti* (1978), *Tuṣāratīrtha Amaranātha* (1980), *Vaiṣṇodebīr Darabāre* (1981), *Himatīrtha Himācala* (1981), *Lādākher Pathe* (1982), *Himālaya: Gomukhī o Rūpakunḍa Parva* (1982), *Himālaya: Cāmba Kulu o Lāhul Parva* (1983), *Himālaya: Sikkim Siniyalchu o Kāśmīra Parva* (1993), *Alakāpurī Āsām* (1994), and others.

Shanku Maharaj’s journeys, filled with the lively chatter of companions and the warmth of turning strangers into kin along the way, easily transform into narrative. His travel writing attains the dignity of literature. Beyond external description and imagination, his tendency to collect and organize information for documentation astonishes us with its scholarly rigor.

Though the Himalayas drew him repeatedly, he never approached them merely as a passenger or adventurer scaling peaks. Rather, it was through “the fearful yet beautiful paths of mysterious, distant mountain summits, where he gathered a wealth of experiences in success and failure with unknown friends”³ that his triumph as a writer began. The resonant footsteps of that journey echo throughout the volumes of his *Himalaya* collection:

“On the road, beauty greets at every turn, while danger extends its invitation step by step. With these blue-and-red threads of Himalayan travel, the writers of travel literature weave their tales. Those who dismiss the inaccessibility of certain regions, disregard the steepness of summits, and overlook the impenetrability of glaciers do more than leave us breathless in fleeting moments—they unsettle the narrow monotony of our comfortable domestic lives, disturb our contented days and nights, crack the walls around us to let in the call of the road, and teach us to recognize humanity beyond the confines of caste, class, prejudice, and religious illusion.”⁴

Through his personal Himalayan experiences and the ‘nectar churned from the ocean of forgetfulness’, Shanku Maharaj created the narrative backdrop of *Bigalita-Karunā Jāhnabī-Yamunā*. His journeys were not undertaken with the intention of accumulating religious merit, but rather driven by an irrepensible desire to see with his own eyes. That urge carried him into ever more inaccessible regions in search of the sources of the Ganga and Yamuna:

“I did not come here to perform pilgrimage. I came to satisfy the longing of my eyes and ears. And to behold, to know, and to make my own the hundreds of pilgrims who, enduring inhuman suffering, have gathered here from different corners of the earth.”⁵

Leaving home behind, Shanku Maharaj expressed a deep compassion for the poor, homeless mountain folk. He offered shelter to orphaned women. He portrayed the village of Tilwari, which had once revealed its patriotic spirit by participating in Gandhi’s Civil Disobedience Movement, showing both love

for the motherland and the consciousness of citizenship. He also depicted the Tehri Valley, whose people earned a place in history by fighting against British power.

Within the narrative, the solemn young man Karl voices an extraordinary feeling—one that reflects the writer's own philosophical realization from repeated Himalayan journeys:

“Every mountain in the world is alike. There is a strange harmony among mountainous lands. Mountains, seas, and skies awaken in man a sense of oneness.”⁶

In Karl's story, the romance with Munna adds a tender touch. Remarkably, neither of them knows the other's language, yet they face no difficulty in expressing love. The language of affection becomes eloquent through varied sounds, it shines through the gaze of the eyes, and in the touch of hands it finds voice in a world beyond words.

The lifeless glacier unfolds into a living stream. Heaven's immovable line stirs with longing to unite with earth. From east to west rushes the restless, turbulent, slender current of the Yamuna. The primal austerity of the Yamuna's nature mirrors the primal simplicity of the indigenous people here. Near the Kali-Kamali dharmashala lie five or six hot springs. To escape the grip of cold and bodily pain, the author and his companions advanced to bathe in the Yamunotri springs. Meanwhile, mountain folk began arriving at the site. The sight of young mountain women bathing, as captured by the author's eyes, could halt the pace of civilized humanity in an instant—a living film of the mythic age, standing in the twentieth century! Shanku Maharaj's detached description and striking vision hold the power to leave even ordinary readers speechless:

“Upon stepping onto the bridge, it trembled. Not only the bridge—sky, mountain, river, temple. The whole world before our eyes trembled. Our civilized minds trembled. Only our feet did not. The lifeless glacier blossoms into a living spring. Heaven's immovable boundary stirs with its yearning to unite with earth. From east to west rushes the restless, turbulent, slender stream of the Yamuna. The austere, primal nature of the Yamuna bears a profound resemblance to the primal simplicity of the indigenous people here. Near the Kali-Kamali dharmashala lie five or six hot springs. To escape the grip of cold and bodily pain, the author and his companions advanced to bathe in the Yamunotri springs. Meanwhile, mountain folk began arriving at the site.

On the banks stood ten or fifteen young mountain women, casting off their garments. Naked, they leapt one by one into the waters with a splash. The play of water began. The pool surged into storm, and so did our minds. The very foundations of education seemed ready to shatter. We gazed into the pool, where their cloud-dark hair spread loose, where their wax-soft bodies rose and danced, sank and floated. The full moon descended—rhythm of youth. The human body—fashioned by Vishwakarma with all the sweetness of the mind—nurtured and blossomed in nature's lap. In the prison of education and civilization, its free growth had been hindered. For such bodies, golden Lanka was reduced to ashes, Troy became a cremation ground, kings were dethroned, men turned into beasts, householders became ascetics. That eternal human body floated in the warm waters of the spring. Not delusion, not corruption—man beheld man. The Yamuna beheld man. We beheld man.”⁷

Shanku Maharaj's journey from Gangotri to Gomukh was not driven by the allure of sacred land or the desire to accumulate merit, but by the irresistible call of nature's vast generosity. Unable to resist that summons, he—like many others—set out toward the Himalayas. Suddenly, danger thickened. The stones beneath his feet slipped away. The rock he tried to grasp rolled down as well. Small fragments struck his feet, yet no firm stone was within reach. Just another minute or two, and the roaring Ganga would have swallowed him. In that moment, the author felt how suddenly and intensely love for life can surge. At the brink of unconsciousness, a counterforce pulled him upward. Murali Dhar and Ranjan dragged him back from the jaws of death. From such an event, his heart gave birth to a new truth:

“All this time I believed people came to pilgrimage drawn by God’s attraction. Today I learned that people may come to pilgrimage out of human need as well. I believed that it is by loving life that man loves man. Today I learned that by loving man, one may even risk life itself.”⁸

He ultimately realized that for mountain climbing, the climber must be fearless, strict in duty, and unwavering in determination. One must also be prepared for every kind of danger and accident.

Depicting the extraordinary and incomparable images of nature through language is no easy task. Yet in this book Shanku Maharaj demonstrates remarkable skill in such portrayal. For example:

1. “The sun speeds toward the western horizon. On the edge of the sky, vermilion patterns unfold. Clouds, in frenzied emotion, play Holi with the heavens.”⁹

2. “The sky is restless—sometimes veiled in clouds. Through the cracks, hundreds of sunrays paint the mountains in countless colors. On some peaks the light reflects, on others it refracts. Just above the mountain-tops, colors dance across the sky. Sunrays falling on snow give birth to clouds. A trembling stream of white vapor merges with the sky. Refracted rays create a rainbow spanning the heavens, embracing even the Ganga.”¹⁰

3. “Every moment nature changes her form. The brilliance of white waxes and wanes. Clusters of sunrays hide, then shift direction. The scenery transforms instantly. A moment ago the horizon was red, now it is flooded with blue. The blue slowly turns green. It feels as though we stand before a vast stage, where sky, air, clouds, mountains, and the Ganga are actors and actresses.”¹¹

In *Sundarer Abhisare* Shanku Maharaj prepared a documentary-style account of the attempt to climb Mount Siniolchu. For this, his deep study, concentrated reflection, and dedicated commitment to gathering information were especially necessary. He dedicated the book ‘with reverence to his respected elder and beloved pioneer’ Prabodh Kumar Sanyal, placing it in his hands.

At first sight he fell in love with beautiful Sikkim. His descriptions of Gangtok’s charm and of Chungthang, the birthplace of the Teesta River, are presented in a delightful manner. The rushing song of the Teesta became the background music of the arduous and difficult paths, blending seamlessly with the author’s own enchantment of spirit. Such heavenly beauty, he felt, was not to be enjoyed alone, but to be shared with all:

“In the last light of day I gaze all around. A rare beauty, a wondrous silence, a heavenly peace has taken form all around me.”¹²

Due to the shortage of Sherpas, the author continued his mountain expedition with porters alone. This was in the year 1980. The attempt to climb Siniolchu, the sacred seat of forest beauty, became especially captivating through the remarkable documentary quality of his narration:

“I have seen such abundance of gold and silver spread across the snowy Himalayas before. But what I had never seen was Siniolchu. Its peak, its ridges, its form—unique. The summit seems like a metro design pinnacle crafted by human hands. One side rises step by step upward, while another bends downward like a bow. Not only beautiful, but novel as well. The ridge truly resembles a drawn, curved sword. And the snow formations, the structure? It feels as though thousands of architects, using the world’s finest gems, have created this incomparable beauty over centuries. I have no power to describe such beauty.”¹³

In the eleventh chapter of the book, Shanku Maharaj presents his unforgettable experience of beholding Siniolchu. The glaciers and golden mountain ranges seemed to line his vision with magical kohl. Snow, like pearls, gathered in the corners of tents and crevices of rocks, filling his heart with delight. After quoting Smythe’s words and descriptions, he candidly admits his own inability to capture such beauty in language. The world-renowned mountaineer Frank Smythe, upon seeing the extraordinary form of the

peak, felt content simply to behold it. He had no desire to climb Siniolchu. In Smythe's words, Siniolchu was the 'Embodiment of Inaccessibility'.

But Shanku Maharaj had come with mountaineers, who wished to plant India's national flag upon its summit. For him, beholding Siniolchu felt like the fulfillment of a dream he had carried for eighteen years. Like Smythe, he too realized with his whole being that Siniolchu is beautiful—yet its beauty lies beyond description:

"I gaze upon it, I gaze with both eyes, and I gaze again. There is no end to this seeing. The Himalaya is beautiful, Siniolchu more beautiful still. Does beauty ever grow old? Perhaps that is why, even when the pursuit of beauty is fulfilled, the heart remains incomplete."¹⁴

At the very end of the book, Shanku Maharaj devotes five full pages to a *Sikkim-Himalaya mountaineering register* (covering peaks up to 20,000 feet). In this detailed record, he notes which climber first ascended each peak, the date of that ascent, the first Indian climber to achieve it, and the names of the supporting organizers involved. This meticulous documentation makes clear how strong his passion for collecting information was, alongside his philosophical vision and love of theory. It also reveals his deep sense of responsibility as a writer: not only to capture the grandeur of the Himalayas in words, but also to preserve the factual history of mountaineering for posterity.

In *Māyāmaya Meghālaya*, Shanku Maharaj took his son Gautam to travel through the Garo Hills of Meghalaya. He was deeply moved by the genuine love and warmth of the people. Despite his vast experiences of traveling across India—and nearly fifty works centered on the Himalayas—this book begins with his reflections on Assam and Meghalaya. He writes:

"What is the greatest desire in the world? Wealth, knowledge, fame, or love? My answer is—love. I am a beggar for love. And if anyone asks me where in India I have received the most love, I will answer without hesitation: in Assam and Meghalaya—in my Amarābatī Āsām and Māyāmaya Meghālaya."¹⁵

In *Māyāmaya Meghālaya*, Shanku Maharaj not only describes the natural scenery of the Garo Hills and the details of his journey, but also provides a comprehensive account of the society, culture, and history of the Garos and Khasis. More precisely, the book becomes a vivid portrait of the life of the Garo tribe in Meghalaya. In fact, people take precedence over mountains here, so the work bears more resemblance to a social novel than to conventional travel literature.

Another significant Himalayan-centered book by Shanku Maharaj is *Lādākher Pathe (On the Road to Ladakh)*. In this work, he captures the diverse landscapes of Ladakh with precision, while also attempting to highlight historical accounts of the arrival of Jesus Christ in the region. Nature follows its own whims, but the nature of the Himalayas is especially capricious—more unpredictable than elsewhere.

At the very beginning of the book, the author conveys this hint:

"The nature of the Himalayas does not care for rules; it moves according to its own whims. And upon coming to the Himalayas, man has no choice but to accept this capriciousness of nature."¹⁶

In *Lādākher Pathe*, Shanku Maharaj presents a fascinating blend of history, geography, and personal travel narrative. He recounts the belief that after the crucifixion, Jesus survived and secretly journeyed toward Ladakh, where he became known as Yuz Asaf. His profound wisdom and boundless love drew people to him in large numbers. One of the strongest arguments supporting this tradition is that until the third century, the Christian world did not depict Jesus as crucified; only later, perhaps to gain sympathy and support, did the image of the crucifixion become widespread. According to this account, Jesus spent the rest of his life in Kashmir, and Shanku Maharaj himself claims to have seen his burial site in Ladakh.

Ladakh, India's last frontier, is described as an extremely arid mountainous region. Because the Himalayan barrier prevents the passage of maritime moisture, Ladakh has no clouds, no rain, and no thunderstorms. It experiences only brief summers and long, harsh winters. The author visited the Minamarg

Valley, reached Dras and Kargil, and observed the blending of Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, and Christian cultures. He walked through the Sindhu Valley near the Karakoram and, pausing his travelogue, poured forth history and geography with ease.

Amidst all this, Shanku Maharaj often became meditative when confronted with the sheer diversity of nature. His pen overflowed with wonder and emotion, turning his travelogue into something more than description—it became a living experience. Through his words, the cold mountainous expanses of Ladakh rose vividly before the reader's eyes, shimmering with silence, majesty, and spiritual depth:

“Across the river, there are mountains too. One after another, colorful ranges—some red, some yellow, some purple, some gray, some black, and on some, white patches over black. It is not only the splendor of colors, but also the diversity of forms. The distant mountains seem like wave-patterned designs, while the nearer ones appear like living watercolor paintings. This variety of color and form is the true feature of mountainous Ladakh. Since morning we have been gazing with full eyes, watching as we walk along the path.”¹⁷

In *Baiṣṇodebīr Darbāre*, Shanku Maharaj felt the inner call of pilgrimage. Yet he was not seeking merit, nor was he driven by fear of hell or desire for heaven. He had no personal petitions to place before the deities of the pilgrimage. Rather, he explained that his longing for pilgrimage arose because he came not only to see the sacred sites, but also to see the pilgrims themselves.

For him, these people had no separate caste or distinction—they were simply pilgrims. Differences of language, appearance, education, age, or gender could not erase their shared identity as travelers to the holy places. They endured hardship and suffering side by side, walking together toward their destination. Across the paths of India's many pilgrimages, Shanku Maharaj observed their footsteps and grew to love them deeply. That is why he returned again and again, moving from one pilgrimage to another.

As the chief reason for his irresistible attraction to pilgrimage, he declared:

“I am an Indian. The pull of pilgrimage is in the blood. In this land, it belongs not to any particular age, but to the whole of life. The rich and the poor, the learned and the ignorant, the Brahmin and the Shudra—all are equally stirred by the call of pilgrimage. I have seen the lame weeping in the cave of Amarnath, and the blind pouring water upon the head of Kashi Vishwanath.”¹⁸

Although Vaishno Devi may be somewhat unfamiliar to Bengalis, in North India—especially in Delhi, Punjab, Haryana, and Jammu—she is revered as the merciful, forgiving, and wealth-bestowing *Jagrata Devī*. Vaishno Devi is a Vaishnavite pilgrimage site.

On this pilgrimage, Shanku Maharaj was accompanied by about forty travelers, including Barun Roy, grandson of the renowned painter and Himalayan expert Mani Sen, and his friend Swapan Saha.

At the very beginning of the book, the author presents the mythological story of Vaishno Devi, where she is revealed as the great power of the Kalki incarnation. Amidst the crowds of ordinary people, Shanku Maharaj felt no irritation. Standing in the temple of Vaishno Devi, he could reflect upon Kolkata and the Bengalis:

“This crowd of people pleases me. It only reminds me of Kolkata during Mahashtami. Yet today there is no annual festival here. Perhaps at Vaishno Devi, there is celebration throughout all twelve months. For Vaishno Devi is a mother's pilgrimage. Does a child need to look at dates and stars to come to the mother? It saddens me to think that Vaishno Devi has not yet become well known among Bengalis. And yet so many Bengalis come to Kashmir!”¹⁹

Shanku Maharaj reflects that he does not know whether Mother Vaishno Devi will fulfill the wishes of her devotees. Yet their reliance, devotion, and faith fill his heart. He listens to them attentively and gazes upon them with wonder. For him, this faith itself is the greatest treasure of pilgrimage.

In *Baiṣṇodebīr Darbāre*, he also mentions the exceptional form of *prasād* offered at Vaishno Devi—nakuldānā, dry fruits, and a few coins. It is as though the Mother grants her children not only sacred offerings but also a symbolic ‘tax’ or financial blessing. Such a practice of receiving monetary benediction at a pilgrimage site is indeed rare in India.

At the conclusion of the book, the prayer voiced by Shanku Maharaj as a devotee of pilgrimage resonates with the universal prayers of all great humanists—seeking love, compassion, and unity among people rather than personal gain:

“My whole being is bathed in heavenly peace, my entire mind filled with an indescribable, otherworldly joy. I feel only that I am blessed, my life is blessed—for I have received the Mother’s grace. Mother Vaishno Devi is not only merciful, forgiving, and bountiful, she is also the giver of supreme bliss and peace. Therefore I invoke her once again in this mortal world as the embodiment of peace. I say—Mother, may you reappear in this restless earth. May all unrest in the universe be dispelled.”²⁰

Although Shanku Maharaj had the fortune of traveling across vast regions of India—from Darjeeling to Kashmir, from Waltair to Okha—the Himalayan enthusiast and avid traveler was deeply moved during his first journey to Assam. On this trip he was accompanied by Dakshinaranjan Basu, poet and novelist Sunil Gangopadhyay, poet Samarendra Sengupta, and singer Sunil Ghosh. A few days later, the arrival of singer Purnadas Baul was also expected.

The author begins by recounting the tragic history of Burmese oppression across Assam. He then vividly describes the Assamese folk festival of Bihu, which they witnessed. His Assamese reader Pragati had invited him through a letter, which served as an inspiration for the journey, though the main impetus came from the invitation of the Sahitya Basar Reception Committee. At Pragati’s home, even without meeting her directly, the writers were deeply impressed by the hospitality of her family. As guests during the Bihu season, they were honored with handwoven Bihu Phulam Gamochas—the highest mark of respect in Assamese social life. This image of Amravati Assam meeting Rupasi Bengal was indeed a sweet one.

The first part of the book contains detailed accounts of the Sahitya Basar, including who spoke and what they said. This section became rather serious and deviated somewhat from the usual flow of travel literature. Yet, because it preserves the words and conversations of eminent figures from Bengali literature and music, the book gained immense historical value. In the latter half, however, the sketches of the Assam journey shine with far greater brilliance, capturing the essence of travel writing.

Uttarsyān Diśi is in fact a combined form of two earlier works—*Himatīrtha Himāchal* and *Mānālīr Mālanchē*. In this book, Shanku Maharaj depicts his journeys through Dalhousie, Khajjiar, Chamba, Manimahesh, Ratang, Giribartma, Kullu, Manali, Nagar, Manikaran, and Jogindar Nagar.

The narrative unfolds through conversations between the author and one of his dearest readers, Mansi. Though a reader, Mansi is portrayed as a Himalayan devotee, repeatedly drawn to its call. For her, the Himalayas are not merely sacred or beautiful, but a sanctuary of peace and a remover of all sorrows.

Through the traveler’s eyes, the beauty of Kullu appears enchanting, as if lined with kohl. The winding, smooth downhill paths, with houses, fields, and forests on either side of the road, create a vivid picture of Himalayan charm:

“Far away, against the blue sky, lies the silvery outline of the Himalayas. A little closer, the dark ridges of mountains. And by the edge of the forest, green hills. All around, a scattering of colors. It is for these colors that the Kullu Valley is so beautiful. Whoever has come here has been enchanted by the hues of Kullu.”²¹

Those who go to the mountains do not fear the difficult paths; rather, crossing such rugged trails gives them a unique sense of fulfillment. During his travels in Manali, the author experienced exactly this:

“Though weary, my enthusiasm for walking does not fade. The path itself is so beautiful. And even more beautiful than the path is that mountain river—not a river, but a blue cascade. So, as I sit to rest, I gaze at it endlessly. All fatigue disappears. And then I begin walking again.”²²

Beauty is always fleeting. The footsteps of the traveler along the Himalayan paths are also transient. Yet in the innermost chamber of his mind, the exquisite experiences of those few days will never fade; they will remain in eternal beauty.

It was during such wanderings in Manali that the devoted reader Mansi encountered her beloved author. To him, she became the true *Mansi*. Time and again she wished to hear his experiences of Manimahesh, to know about the journey from Durgethi to Varmau. One of the distinctive features of this book lies here: while describing one enchanting province of the Himalayas, the narrative repeatedly returns to the unspoiled beauty of another. The comparisons between the two regions are rendered with rare finesse. Gradually, Mansi was able to color the author’s inner world with the hues of affection. Thus, reality and imagination blended together in this work.

Budhdhal carried the *charanāmrita* of Manimahesh and offered it to the river Iravati. Like a river descending from heaven, Budhdhal was both rugged and beautiful. The pain of leaving the Iravati and the joy of Budhdhal’s enchanting beauty left the traveler deeply unsettled. In his eyes, Budhdhal became “the ever-awake servant of heaven, the tireless pilgrim of earth.”²³ Here the stern law of worldly life was felt clearly: no one remains by our side forever. One day, inevitably, we must bid eternal farewell to those we love.

The extraordinary beauty of the real world captivates the author’s mind, yet within mythological contexts he discovers himself and enriches his readers. Beyond Manikaran, along the mountain paths, one reaches the confluence of the Dharmaganga and Parvati rivers. Nearby, on the banks of Kheer Ganga, Lord Shiva and Parvati are said to have performed penance. This Parvati Valley is steeped in the sacred memories of the Pandavas, who even cultivated the land here. With proud warmth, Mansi objects to the saying ‘*Dhan bhānte Shiber gīt*’ (‘While husking rice, Shiva’s song’), but to us it does not seem inappropriate.

Because of the author’s illness, the journey to the temple of Bijli Mahadev had to be abandoned. Through the night, Mansi cared for him with devotion. Their companions assumed Mansi to be his wife, yet the truth remained veiled in mystery. There are people in this world who come to the Himalayas precisely to forget the sorrows of life. Mansi becomes their representative. She is not content merely to see the beauty before her eyes; she listens intently to further accounts and experiences.

Her words to the author sound like the lament of a Himalayan devotee, a heart weary of worldly life, crying out in longing:

“The days I come to the Himalayas to forget—those sorrowful days of my past—today they have once again stood before me. Drive them away, make me forget that past. Speak to me of the Himalayas, help me to go on living.”²⁴

The rugged reality of mountain paths and the difficult journey through past experiences together create a unique atmosphere of adventure in this book. Alongside descriptions of Khajjiar’s natural beauty, the author shares his admiration for the dedication of the schoolchildren there. Interwoven with this are the poignant tale of Princess Champavati and the account of the journey to Chamba, both rendered with remarkable depth.

From the narrative thread of *Uttarsyān Diśi* emerges *Lilābhūmi Lāhul*. This book begins with a letter written to Mansi. It was Mansi who wished to hear about Lahul, and through that request the author unfolds vivid accounts of Lahul, Rohtang, Giribartma, the Spiti Valley, and the pilgrimage to Triloknath.

The treeless, rugged, arid valleys of Lahaul are undoubtedly ‘supremely beautiful’. That beauty shines through its own distinctive features. Every part of the Himalayas has its own unique character, yet

there are certain similarities among them. According to the author, however, the beauty of Lahaul-Spiti does not resemble that of other Himalayan regions. This province is entirely independent in its charm. It is this distinctiveness that makes it so enchanting. Drawn by the desire to witness this divine playground, lovers of the Himalayas have, through the ages, journeyed to Lahaul-Spiti. In keeping with the author's habit, vivid portraits of the common people here are captured in this leaf-filled travelogue. While presenting the exceptional form of the Himalayas, Shanku Maharaj has written:

"I stand gazing ahead in astonished wonder. I have seen the Himalayas in many places—seen them in Kashmir, in Garhwal and Kumaon, in Chamba, Kullu, and Sikkim. Yet nowhere have I witnessed such a strangely beautiful form. It seems like a world apart. Here it is meditative, silent, barren, and stripped of everything. There is no greenery anywhere. Rows upon rows of mountains in shades of brown and grey. Upon their summits rest crowns of silver."²⁵

The reader Mansi perhaps became the Mansi of the author's heart without his conscious awareness. Almost every chapter is a letter addressed to her. The language of those salutations reveals that the fellow-traveler Mansi of *Manali's Malancho* has here transformed into the companion of his inner journey. In several letters, the address is 'My Mansi.' The author evokes the romantic backdrop through reminiscences:

"That day at Pathankot station you insisted on taking leave of me. You said that the acquaintance of the road must end upon the road itself. Lest I return to Calcutta and, through that bond of acquaintance, attempt to establish contact with you, you did not even give me your address that day. ... Just as a writer wishes to live on in the hearts of his readers, so too do I wish to live on in the mind of my Mansi."²⁶

In the book *Nil Durgam*, the travel-loving writer Shanku Maharaj presents an account of the journey to the Nilgiri peaks. Colonel Edmund Smyth was the first to describe that flower-filled valley, and the author has attempted to portray the floral abundance of that 'Nandankanan' in this work.

The Nilgiri expedition team consisted of 12 adventurers, 6 Sherpas, 2 assistants, and 1 botanist. At Srirampur station, the public gathered to bid them farewell at the start of their journey. As planned, the explorers reached Srinagar via Haridwar, Rishikesh, Joshimath, and Devprayag. Before Vishnuprayag, a landslide over a hundred feet of road caused considerable difficulty in the first stage of the journey. Yet Himalayan travelers must always move forward with such countless dangers as companions. At Joshimath, the early morning temperature dropped to minus 23 degrees. Water brought from Nandavati froze into ice before reaching the top. Even mustard oil solidified. Such weather was extremely harsh. The Nilgiri journey became enchanting with both joy and sorrow.

In this book, the author did not confine himself solely to travel descriptions. At times, he concentrated on analysis of theories and facts like an essayist. As a result, the presentation of this Himalayan travelogue gained variety. He interpreted the Himalayas as the very foundation of the land of India. Alongside this, he expressed his deep aspiration for human love:

"Our country is vast, and vaster still are its frontiers. Along the entire northern boundary stretches Giriraj Himalaya. For ages it has stood as our guardian of the frontier. Not merely a guardian, but the bearer of India's religion and culture. In the Rigveda, written three thousand years ago, the Himalaya was first called Giriraj. In the Upanishads, Uma was imagined as the daughter of the Himalaya. The Ganga became the sister of the Himalaya. Shiva was manifested upon the Himalaya-clad peaks. Mount Meru was conceived as the center of the world. Century after century, countless seer-sages adorned the Himalaya with their visions. In it they found the symbol of their thoughts, hopes, and aspirations.

Through eternity the Himalaya has given us much. In the temple-abode Himalaya stand innumerable shrines and countless pilgrimages—without which India would be without Shiva, without religion. From the melting glaciers of the Himalaya have sprung rivers—without which India would be without water. In the Himalaya lies Kubera's treasury, an abundance of natural wealth. If this wealth is not

harnessed, India will become impoverished. In the Himalaya dwell millions of people, and if their lives are not uplifted, all of India's plans for progress will fail."²⁷

After the narrative of the book concludes, there are eight pages containing a list of ascents of the highest Himalayan peaks. That list includes the name of each peak, its height, the region where it is located, the names of the first climbers to set foot on it, and the organization that arranged the successful expedition. Such a list proves very useful to interested readers, researchers, and travelers. The author's passion for collecting information and his enterprising spirit are particularly noteworthy.

Shanku Maharaj dedicated his book *Panchaprayag* to 'Prayag-loving Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru'. At the beginning of the book, the author quotes a statement by Nehru, in which he expressed that after his death his ashes should be scattered in the waters of the Ganga at Prayag. He clarified that he did not say this out of religious sentiment or ceremonial significance. For ages, countless traditions, histories, songs, stories, and myths have merged into this flowing stream. Having felt a lifelong spiritual unity with that current of the Ganga and Yamuna, Nehru wished at the end of his life to merge with it.

The similarity between this statement and the author's own outlook on life is striking. He too does not wander from one end of the Himalaya to the other out of greed for merit or merely for pilgrimage. It is his insatiable curiosity to behold and his boundless love for humanity that drive him onward. Nevertheless, Shanku Maharaj's reverence for the sacred pilgrimage sites lends a unique distinction to his writings.

The travel narrative of *Panchaprayag* is presented by the author under five distinct headings: 1. Devabhumi Devaprayag 2. Rudra-dominated Rudraprayag 3. Karna-blessed Karnaprayag 4. Nanda-king's Nandaprayag 5. Vishnu-tirtha Vishnuprayag

In addition, there are two other titled travel accounts in the book *Panchaprayag*: 1. Compassionate Kedarnath 2. Venerable Badrinath

At the very beginning of *Panchaprayag*, he depicts Devaprayag. Right at the outset, he clearly states that the chief attractions of Devaprayag are its exquisite beauty and its untainted tranquility:

"It is Devaprayag that still draws me. Not because it is a sacred land, nor for divine grace, but for its exquisite beauty and unblemished tranquility. Whenever I get the chance, I come here. ... Below flows the Bhagirathi—impatient, restless. Rushing forward in blind passion—to unite with the Alakananda. Thus shall be born the Ganga—the Mother of India."²⁸

During his travels through Panchaprayag, Kedarnath, and Badrinath, as he beheld the incomparable beauty of the Himalayas, the author felt a deep emotion to gather all that beauty together within the innermost chamber of his heart:

"What I see is itself unparalleled. I feel the urge—to take this path, these mountains, waterfalls, and the sky, everything, and store them in the treasury of my mind. Nature, you are blessed; Himalaya, you are blessed; traveler, you are blessed—for you have been enjoying this unique beauty through eternity."²⁹

The author, moved by the plight of the Himalayan porters, felt deep sorrow at their suffering. They are the helpers of the Himalayan travelers. Pilgrims come to the Himalayas to lessen the burden of their sins, while the porters continue to carry their loads. Yet in their lives there is a great lack of wealth and respect. The inhuman labor they perform is rewarded with only a meager wage, which is nothing in comparison. Every year, millions of pilgrims come to the Himalayas. Though they take the porters' help at every step, they never once think of them. Just as India's geographical form would be incomplete without the Himalayas, so too Indian society remains incomplete without these porters. Speaking of those 'fortunate' children of the Himalayas, the author writes:

"The Himalaya has given its children health but not wealth, courage but not opportunity, honesty but not respect."³⁰

The Himalaya is not merely a mountain range—it is a subject in itself. Thus, there is immense scope for research on the Himalaya and the people who live upon its slopes. The value of composing the life-epic of these simple Himalayan children is by no means small. In the section *Varaṇṣya Badrinath*, Shanku Maharaj portrays with deep sympathy the lives of four porters—Ratan Singh, Bachan Singh, Muchra, and Ishir.

In his works *Gahan-giri-kandare*, *Chaturangīr Aṅgane*, and *Giri-kāntar*, Shanku Maharaj records the travel narratives of the Gomukh and Gangotri glacier regions, as well as Kailas-Manasarovar, Rupkund, and almost the entire Kumaon Himalaya.

In *Gahan-giri-kandare*, the travelers went to Ranikhet to behold the snow-clad Himalaya directly and clearly. After tea at the hotel, they set out in hope of that vision. The sunlight had not yet reached Ranikhet. Yet, touched by the rays, the Himalaya had already turned crimson in the early dawn:

“Sunlight has not yet reached here. But that snowy Himalaya has already received the crimson touch of the sun. There, nature’s festival of colors has begun. One after another they are being dyed in the red glow. It is filling our hearts too with a passion for color.”³¹

In this intoxication of colors, the hearts of all lovers of the Himalaya are stirred. It is this very enchantment that drives them to rush into the embrace of the Himalaya, enduring every hardship and dismissing its immense difficulties with ease. The author notes that those who wish to witness the restless beauty of the otherwise immovable Himalaya will find autumn the best season. After the monsoon, the deep blue sky and the pure white Himalaya never disappoint. All day long, the play of light clouds enhances the mountain’s beauty even more.

The Himalaya does not display its immense wealth for hurried travelers. In truth, its beauty cannot be grasped merely by sight—it must be felt with the heart. For that feeling, leisure is essential. Here there is the sky, and if leisure blends with it, then it is a blessing upon blessing. Ranikhet is the perfect place to experience the eternal beauty of the Queen of Mountains. In the author’s eyes, the Himalaya is a ‘temple’, a ‘bearer of Indian culture’, and a ‘great assembly of nations’.

The same perspective is expressed in his book *Giri-kāntar*. According to Shanku Maharaj, the Himalaya is at once myth, philosophy, poetry, novel, story, and essay. In his vision, the Himalaya is holier than myth, truer than philosophy, and more musical than poetry:

“For ages the Himalaya has carefully nurtured India’s religion and tradition, literature and culture. The story of the Himalaya is the very essence of India.”³²

To be a traveler on the Himalayan paths, one must always preserve physical strength and mental resilience. Without power, without fearlessness, one cannot be a pilgrim of these trails. The Himalaya shows no weakness toward the weak. Only those who can disregard every danger and advance with unstoppable force are granted a vision of its true form; to them the Himalaya places a garland of victory upon their voices.

In the harsh climate of the Himalaya lies immense vital energy. This strength can give sight to the blind, speed to the lame, and health to the sick. A few minutes of rest can erase the fatigue of hours of walking. This life-force becomes the sustenance of the Himalayan traveler, drawing him onward from one difficulty to another, compelling him to rush forward, disregarding life itself, in pursuit of the Himalaya’s boundless beauty.

Many who gladly undertake pilgrimage or Himalayan journeys do so to escape the torment of urban life. The author deeply felt this truth. Rising above the complexities of daily existence, they seek to behold beauty, to find peace within the realm of the heart. Their Himalayan quest thus becomes arduous, yet in that difficult expedition there is endless joy.

In addition to travel descriptions, this book also presents the geographical identity and classification of the Himalaya, along with accounts of foreign expeditions. The stories of George Everest, the life and work of Radhanath Sikdar, and Sarat Chandra Das's Himalayan journeys—all these recollections and analyses of significant Himalayan historical events lend the work a distinctive dimension. The book even includes information on Himalayan wildlife, minerals, and forest resources. The sorrows and poverty of the common people of the Kumaon and Garhwal regions are also depicted with sympathy.

In the conclusion, Shanku Maharaj remarks that in our own time we have handed over the Motherland to foreign merchants, embraced idleness and envy, and abandoned true courage. The Himalaya was never truly unfamiliar to us:

“Leaving aside the Mahabharata or the Kedarkhanda, there is no doubt that the great poet Kalidasa wandered along the paths of the Himalaya. Yet how far apart are Ujjayini and Pandukeshwar. History too reverently acknowledges that the eleven-year-old Shankaracharya came from the Deccan to Joshimath.”³³

From ordinary people to many scholars, artists, and writers, it is widely believed that everything in life has its appointed time. By whose command this occurs, we do not know. Yet whoever it may be, it is not a human being. Man and the events of his life are but occasions. Unseen, that power alone determines the time and outcome of human actions. Without the right time, no work can ever be fulfilled.

The Himalayan-loving writer Shanku Maharaj observed exceptions to this law of destiny in the realm of travel. He has testified that he experienced such proof many times. During his journey to Ladakh, he encountered this truth once again. In 1962, after spending a month in the Kashmir Valley, despite many attempts he could not reach Amarnath. He had to return home, carrying the pain of not being able to behold Amarnath. Year after year he made plans, but the pilgrimage never materialized. He felt that the time for visiting the sacred Amarnath had not yet come, that the deity of that shrine had not summoned him. In 1978, even after arranging everything, he did not receive permission to go to Ladakh:

“Unseen, someone else fixes the time of human actions. Without the right time, nothing can be accomplished. ... The one who sits beyond all human sight, arranging everything, did not approve my plan. Therefore, the time for Ladakh had not yet come for me. I returned home once again.”³⁴

In Shanku Maharaj's writings, humanism and love for humanity are repeatedly expressed with depth. During his pilgrimage to Vaishnodevi, his spiritual feelings were revealed in the form of human love:

“In this world we are all beggars—some knowingly, some unknowingly. Some beg for wealth, some for fame, and some for love. Mother, I wish only to live in your world as a beggar for love. And that is why the call of pilgrimage stirs me so intensely.”³⁵

In Shanku Maharaj's Himalayan-centered writings, the beauty beyond the Himalayas, the artistry of the literary creator, and the profound expression of humanism and love for humanity are repeatedly and unmistakably revealed.

REFERENCES:

1. Basu, Arun Kumar. *Introduction. Himalaya*, Vol. 5, by Shanku Maharaj. Mitra & Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, First ed., 1397 (Bengali year), p. 3
2. Maharaj, Shanku. *Introduction. Himalaya: Sikkim Siniolchu and Kashmir Himalaya Section*. Mitra & Ghosh Publishers, Calcutta, First ed., 1960
3. Maharaj, Shanku, *Himalaya*, Volume IV, Dhauliganga, Chandrabhaga River and Tamasa Section, Mitra & Ghosh Publishers, Calcutta, First Edition, 1967, Introduction, p. 1
4. Ibid., p. 4
5. Maharaj, Shanku, *Melting Compassion: Jahnvi–Yamuna*, Mitra & Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, First Edition, 1366 (Bengali year), p. 112
6. Ibid., p. 91
7. Ibid., p. 106
8. Ibid., p. 205
9. Ibid., p. 227
10. Ibid., p. 218
11. Ibid., p. 219
12. Maharaj, Shanku, *Himalaya*, Volume III, Mitra & Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, First Edition, 1391 (Bengali year), p. 88
13. Ibid., p. 105
14. Ibid., p. 117
15. Maharaj, Shanku, *Enchanting Meghalaya*, Nath Brothers, Calcutta, First Edition, 1366 (Bengali year), p. 1
16. Maharaj, Shanku, *Himalaya*, Volume III, Mitra & Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, First Edition, 1391 (Bengali year), p. 179
17. Ibid., p. 230
18. Ibid., p. 338
19. Ibid., p. 388
20. Ibid., p. 416
21. Maharaj, Shanku, *Himalaya*, Volume II, Mitra & Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, First Edition, 1387 (Bengali year), p. 88
22. Ibid., p. 84
23. Ibid., p. 84
24. Ibid., p. 115
25. Ibid., p. 216
26. Ibid., p. 293
27. Maharaj, Shanku, *Neel-Durgam*, Mitra & Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, First Edition, 1370 (Bengali year), p. 135
28. Maharaj, Shanku, *Panchaprayag*, Mitra & Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, First Edition, 1367 (Bengali year), p. 5
29. Ibid., p. 32
30. Ibid., p. 116
31. Maharaj, Shanku, *In the Deep Mountain Caves*, Himalaya, Volume I, Mitra & Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, First Edition, 1385 (Bengali year), p. 187
32. Maharaj, Shanku, *Girikanthar*, Himalaya, Ibid., p. 265
33. Ibid., p. 376
34. Maharaj, Shanku. *Himalaya*. Vol. 3. Mitra & Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, First ed., 1391 (Bengali year), p. 177
35. Ibid., p. 396