

**BOOK REVIEW**  
**MOUNTAIN TRAVELOGUES ON THE HIMALAYAS AND TIBET**  
**BY PROF V.P SINGH.**

Suprisingly when travelling has become so common because of the globalisation, travel literature as a genre has suffered a decline. Once a popular genre, travelogue has now become a path less trodden by.

*Mountain Travelogue* by Prof V.P Singh is a recreation of the magic of the mountains. Inspired by the awe inspiring beauty of the Himalayas, Singh undertakes a soulful journey to the hills. His childhood fascination with the Himalayas and frequent visits to the hills lay foundation for this book. Six years of exhaustive research into the book is part of his mission and an earnest plea in conservation of the Himalyan ecology.

The narrative is infused with the Wordsworthian romanticism, Singh clarifies in the introduction that his book is not an anthropological survey of the Himalayas but rather a traveller's account of the society, culture, history, myths and the politics of the region. Singh draws his understanding of the travelogue in the words of the Italian travel writer Fosco Maraini as "There are two ways of travelling. One is to cover a long distance in a short time, taking in the general outline of mountain and valley and the most obvious characteristics of the people. The other is to stop, go deeper, strike root to some extent, and try to imbibe from the soil the invisible spiritual sap which nourishes the inhabitants of the place"

Undeniably, the book *Mountain Travelogue* arrest the readers interest in the Himalyan territory not only with the exquisite account of its myriad flora and fauna and picturesque serene landscape but the symphonies and echoes of the mystical and ethereal spirituality especially the chantings of *Om Mani Padme Hum*, inscribed on the stones.

Singh neatly divides the book into two parts . The first part which is titled as 'Romancing the Spirit', is a challenging review of the existing Himalyan Travelogues and the second part is 'The Roof of the World' which isa critical insight into various perspectives on Tibet.

The first part invokes H. D. Thoreau's *Walden* as Singh poetically traverse, halts and ponders over the curves and crevices of the hill. Extrapolating a rich and varied scholarship on the Himalyan landscape, Singh presents a critical appraisal of the existing travel accounts of the region. Their success and failures in depicting the Himalyan sojourn becomes Singh's main concern. Among many travel writers, the one who shaped Singh's pristine love for the summit is Bill Aitkens. Singh indentifies with the Aitkens's spirit of a devout and not a mountaineer's zeal of conquering the summit. Singh uses Aitkens's *Footloose in the Himalyas* and *The Nanda Devi Affair* as a guiding light to his exploration of the Himalayan region. Situating the travelogue in the geographical, historical and cultural ethos of the Himalyas, Singh delineates a rich travel scholarship like Hebers's *Himalyan Tibet and Ladakh*, Janet Rizvi's *Ladakh Crossroads of High Asia*, Andrew Harvey's *A Journey in Ladakh*, Percy Brown's *Picturesque Nepal* to name a few. Unencumbered with theoretical framework, the book focuses on the lived experience of the people. Singhs notes minute gastronomical details in the preparation of tea "with fresh butter added to a well boiled infusion and is kept hot in copper pot". The large intake of tea amounting to thirty to forty cups a day in the Mountains is a daily source of "warmth and naurishment"

At one place, Singh describes the practice of Polyandry in Ladakh as “sharing the wife means a collective paternity that ensures a small family” in the face of limited resources and livelihood, polyandry is a practical strategy of limiting the family size also limits patriarchy by providing more options to the women, as Singh quotes Ladhaki women chuckles “I am never a widow”.

As a cultural historian, Singh recounts various myths and rituals that are deeply embedded in the Mountains. The ritual of the Oracle with the elaborate performance of the one who is being possessed for the prognostication is described by earlier travelogues as “bonechilling spectacle” is contextualised by Singh as ancient hindu feminine energy which is often misinterpreted by the western travellers’s in their travelogue as frightful. Singh reveals another peculiar ritual common in the Bapsa Valley of Himachal Pradesh where Devi is honoured when the harvest is good but is also punished when the harvest turns bad by locking the idol in the tower. The book is interspersed with such unknown and intriguing myths and rituals. Gara Devi legend in Kullu, where a thakur, impressed by a mason’s work granted his wish of marrying his beautiful daughter Gara, while Gara dutifully agreed, later not happy in her marriage made a jal samadhi, and hence elevated to a Goddess with a temple and a beautiful pahari style carved statue. Singh also explains in detail the Gaddi occupation of sheep rearing and shearing as part of folk culture and tradition and makes a passionate case to preserve these historically culturally and ethnically rich groups.

The book will appeal to any traveller, nature lover and students of travelogue literature. It is an indispensable account for researchers in the Himalyan region and also a timely contribution to the eco criticism, making a clarion call for action in preserving the fragile ecosystem of the Himalyan region. Implicit in the book is the deep faith and longing for the unadulterated nature. Despite his spiritual approach parallel to a devotee searching for inner peace, Singh cannot be accused of platitudes as he brings out the contradictions and the existing anomalies in his analysis. Nepal, a confluence of Hinduism and Buddhism, practice some of the most brutal slaughtering of animals like buffaloes as part of religious rituals, according to Singh, it deserves condemnation rather than reverence. Also Singh highlights the problem of stray dogs in Bhutan where as per the Buddhist philosophy, taking life of any sentient being is prohibited, yet in the contemporary Bhutan, stray dogs are kicked and beaten routinely. The paradox remains, while maimed and sick stray dogs are not allowed euthanasia because Buddhism prohibits taking of life, they are made to die slow painful death.

Second part of the book entitled *The Roof of the world: Perspectives on Tibet*, focuses on historical, cultural and political life of Tibet. Singh assiduously divides his account of Tibet between the pre 1950 Chinese occupation of Tibet as old remote and idyllic past and post 1950, as the land mired with war and bloodshed along with rampant materialism.

Singh analysis of Montgomery McGovern’s *To Lhasa in Disguise/A Secret Expedition through Mysterious Tibet* explores Tibet as a cultural centre with their unique customs and rituals. Singh revels in small details about the food and meticulous tea culture and its elaborate servings in the monasteries where tea is kept warm under the clothes. Singh conscientiously debunks the utopic image of Tibet as how it is often projected in many travelogues and critically examine various rituals and practice like death ritual where the dead body is hacked methodically and fed to vultures, despite its altruistic purpose of being useful in death to vultures, yet the unseemly sight appears bizarre and irreverent. Adding to this ritual is another, “post mortem cannibalism” where its an act of censecration to eat of the corpse of spiritually elevated person. Widely prevalent practice like *rolang*, amouth to mouth resuscitation of the corpse until it gets

animated and rises indicative of the hidden and macabre aspect of Buddhist rituals and beliefs. And Monks are not just ascetic, apostles of compassion and tolerance but can be capable of violence and hatred as observed by Singh and also works as moneylenders with high rates of interest akin to the clergy of the middle ages in Europe. The latter narrative on Tibet takes a form of political critique as Singh enumerates the devastation and large scale destruction caused by Chinese aggression in Tibet through account of living cannibalism and poignant personal stories. Singh says “Any claim of China that Tibet is culturally a part of China is their untenable and only a convenient argument to justify its occupation of Tibet”

Far from the land of mystics, after the flight of the XIV Dalai Lama from Tibet to India, under China’s hegemony, Tibet’s cultural and spiritual life is fast dwindling and is now reduced to tourist consumption. In what Singh describes as “cultural genocide” is crass commercialisation and rampant modernisation where many Tibetan women are systematically employed in prostitution. Singh laments the materialistic hegemony of China which has subsumed the spiritual and cultural life of Tibet.

From an exotic Shangri la to a vulnerable land of trauma under constant threat of annihilation, Singh critically delineates the multilayered perspectives on Tibet and its rich legacy. Just as Singh begins the book with a dedication to the XIV Dalai Lama, it closes with his quote forming a circle of life. The book remains a laudable effort in bringing the forgotten Tibet back into focus.

Although not the scope of the book, with such vast knowledge and lived experience of the terrain and people, we do expect Singh to suggest probable solutions at ground level as well as at the level of planning to preserve the fragile ecology and vanishing culture.

(Amina Hussain is a Visiting Faculty with Khwaja Moinuddin Urdu Arabi Farsi University, Lucknow)