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**Himalayan Travelogues and their Connectedness with Ecological Concerns**

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**Abstract**

The quest for knowing the world and the self has led humanity to travel to distant lands. Quest for procuring a deeper meaning of life regardless of their affiliation to a particular religion has made humans embark on a journey of thousands of kilometers in the desert lands or the freezing Himalayan mountains, as religion and faith are two different aspects of the same coin. The metaphor of travel has existed since pre-historic times; whether one picks *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, or the tales of Islamic journeys in the form of *Hajj*, the traces of finding solace in the pilgrimage have always been there in front of humans. Until now, humans have been making journeys to those same landscapes in search of reconciliation and meaning. The present paper focuses on the ongoing changes in the mode of pilgrimage journeys made by people in the age of blogging, vlogs, and journey recordings. The paper also tries to seek out the influence of ancient pilgrimages on the people of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, who are heavily influenced and overloaded with the abundant amount of data available just a click away to influence and initiate a journey that has deeper meanings than the availability and convenience of travel as compared to ancient times.

**Keywords:** travel, journey, culture, pilgrimage, ecological concerns, reconciliation, Himalaya

**Introduction**

Humans have traveled since pre-historic times for various purposes, including geographic expansions, diplomatic and business purposes, better opportunities, pilgrimage, and missionary work. However, the quest to know faraway places has always existed in the human mind, knowing the external and internal worlds. Humanity often took aid from religion and cultural avenues. Did satiate the quest of knowing that different cultures and religions have distinct beliefs and mythological stories, which help them connect them with their inner being and provide them with a sense of belonging and reconciliation. A collected consciousness of traveling to sacred mountains fills people's hearts with the hope of reconciliation and a sense of fulfilling a duty towards themselves and their ancestors.

Whether it is Hinduism or Islam, Christianity or Buddhism, or Sikhism, all of them have heavily influenced humanity and provided them with needed comfort, reassurance, and affiliation, which further helped them to build a community of like-minded people. People show gratitude to the affiliated religion and spiritual practices by offering them the prescribed spiritual travels as a pilgrimage, which replenishes and cleanses their souls. Mass tourism contributes to the travel places' economy but costs heavily on the ecological aspect of sensitive places like the Himalayas.

### **New Age Pilgrimage**

It is widely seen in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that people are traveling to religious places in the form of pilgrimage even more than before, which seems like people have perceived a new collective consciousness. Char Dham Yatra in India has been the most popular form of pilgrimage since ancient times. The Yatra has changed a lot since the progression of civilization. As travel writer Stephen Alter states,

“The ultimate destination remains the same, but the spirit and objectives of this pilgrimage have changed. Whereas the Char Dham Yatra used to involve a demanding commitment of time and energy, it now costs little more than the price of a bus ticket. What has been lost is the slow progress of a spiritual journey, the physical challenge of the walking trail, and the many opportunities for reflection a pilgrim encounters in the forests and mountains of Uttarakhand.”

Journeys are not slow and steady, as thousands of cars and automobiles march towards the mountains, and it can be easily configured what thousands of automobiles and people on an everyday basis would do to the Himalayan ecosystem. Everyday news regarding the Himalayas is seen as not being in the best interest of the ecology and biodiversity of the mountains. In ancient times, when people traveled to sacred places, they followed the strict rules of *tirthayatra* and visited the mountains, such as not speaking loudly, not wearing bright colors, and not whistling around the mighty mountains. Journalist Rahul Kotiyal says that as the Kedarnath temple's door opened for ordinary people, people crossed all the limits with a historical number of tourists, which seems historic. However, it's a loud announcement of destroying the mountains' serene, sensitive, and fragile ecosystem. He presses on the point that the people capable of making such a grand temple in the mountains a thousand years ago were equally capable of making houses. They did not make houses there because they wanted to keep the temple, cultural and religious heritage sacred and untouched, piously, so the temple and the mountain ecology could be preserved unblemished. The biodiversity of the Himalayan region can easily be called the nervous system of the Himalayas; therefore, it becomes crucial for people to preserve the traditions of their ancestors in the same manner as they did. As per the current scenario of global warming, rising temperature, and melting glaciers, it becomes imperative for government bodies to regulate mountain travel strictly.

The current changes in the *tirtha yatra* resulted in several demeaning factors, as the recordings, vlogs, and blog generation have been trying to turn the sacred into the mundane. The mass pilgrimage of many people traveling to sacred places and shrines of gods is a phenomenon that has never been seen, but it has come into existence with its repercussions. The present socio-political arena of the nation has played an exponential role in the

inclination of youth and the whole generation of the 21<sup>st</sup> century into a new age Bhakti Movement with mobile phones in their hands recording everything and then presenting that over social media, which has further resulted in mass travelers hugely affecting the sensitive areas. Many travel writers have shown these environmental concerns decades before, Bill Aitken considers himself a traveler first and then a writer. On the environmental challenges Himalayan ecology is facing, Aitken writes,

"Responsible trekking involves keeping our eyes open to every aspect of environmental health and treading with respect for the ecosystem and the cultural traditions that have grown out of it."(Aitken 249) For him, preserving Himalayan ecology is as imperative as vanquishing the peaks is for the aggressive mountaineer for whom the mountains are a challenge to the ego as pilgrimage is a source of energy, faith, and inner quest to receive the revelations of the earth's offerings. Hazrat Inayat Khan (1948) describes this beautifully: "God slept in the realm of minerals. He dreamed in the realm of plants. He awakes in the animal kingdom and becomes aware of himself in man." Environmental pollution and the ecological degradation of the pilgrimage sites and sacred places are menaces to the pilgrimage sites, which further cause them to lose the whole meaning of the cleansing process and reflect upon themselves. The theological interpretation of this problem is advocated by Thomas Berry (1992: 128): "If the earth does grow inhospitable toward human presence, it is primarily because we have lost our sense of courtesy toward the earth and its inhabitants, our sense of gratitude, our willingness to recognize the sacred character of habitat, our capacity for the awesome, for the numinous quality of every earthly reality." Thomas Berry's concern for the earth's well-being is more than befitting because sacred places are the only places where one can recognize the sacrosanct power of the mighty earth.

In the travel tradition, travel for religious purposes has generally coincided with pilgrimages, usually to sites where "a miracle is believed to have occurred or is expected to occur in the future, with the religious goal," as noted by Timothy and Boyd (2003), "of obtaining forgiveness for sins, praying or seeking a cure for illness" through the act of pilgrimage. Religious tourism currently faces four significant challenges: the preservation of religious sites, respect for local traditions, and developing a sustainable local economy. The pilgrim is both rooted and mobile. It is a status defined by performing a journey or ritualized practices at places associated with sacred or supernatural events or with historical/cultural activities. For religious people, it is worship-seeking blessings, while secular pilgrimages involve a search for a connection with a force, person, or community. Enactments facilitate a spiritual/emotional journey through which the participants have a meaningful experience. Finally, the pilgrim's journey is both personal and social. Fulfillment of ancestral, social, and community duty is one aspect of the pilgrimage while keeping the piousness of the sacred place is another utmost aspect of the *tirtha yatra*. Travel writers Stephen Alter and Bill Aitken have shown similar concerns regarding mass tourism. Stephen Alter shows immense respect for the Char Dham Yatra, and leaving for the Yatra, he says, "For the duration of this journey, I will forsake the pleasures of alcohol, tobacco, sex, and meat. From childhood, the mythology of Garhwal has been a part of my imagination; though I would never claim to be a Hindu, I see myself as a pilgrim who does not follow the prescribed tenets of any particular faith but seeks to find the subtle, mysterious connections between human experience,

mythological narratives, and natural history." (Alter 8)

In his book *Sacred Waters*, Stephen Alter says, "Unlike mountaineers, who engage in mortal combat with Himalayan peaks, pilgrims attempt to become one with this terrain. The Hindu concept of Tapasya is difficult to translate but essentially involves austerity, meditation, and a process of surrendering to the land. The pilgrim performing Tapasya retreats to the mountains to reflect upon God and nature." (Alter 307)

Bill Aitken, a renowned travel writer and inhabitant of the Himalayas who, after the age of twenty-five, devoted all his life to exploring the Himalayan mountains, is an environmentally conscious writer. He believes that more tourism harms the Himalayan ecology and biodiversity equally. For him, preserving Himalayan ecology is as imperative as conquering the mountain by a young, aggressive mountaineer. Ecological preservation is as crucial as man's spiritual and physical satisfaction. Without the adequate thriving of nature, no man can survive, and no journeys can be made. As environmentalist Judi Bari, "Nature does not exist to serve humans. Rather, humans are a part of nature, one species among many. All species have the right to exist for their own sake, regardless of their usefulness to humans." (Church of deep ecology, n.d., What is deep ecology, para.2). Environmentally conscious people have tried to awaken people through their writings and campaigns that traveling and pilgrimage are internal factors of any person, however, keeping the mountain ecology and well-being of the region must be the utmost priority of any religion and community.

**Conclusion:**

The present paper finds that the current state of travel, tourism, and pilgrimage is certainly opening new avenues for the young and upcoming generation. Along with this factor come various challenges, and conserving religious and spiritual heritage sites is the most important. The current number of people visiting the northern states of India has increased multi-folds, and the results are already visible. The visiting people certainly help the local economy and help people establish their seasonal businesses. However, along with that, the government has to manage and build better infrastructure for that, causing great harm and destruction to nature. There is a scope for limiting the visits and the respectful conduct of pilgrimage sites; people must refrain from considering sacred sites as another tourist place where they can do adventure and whatever they wish to, for centuries sacred and religious sites have provided humans with a reconciliation, an experience outside the marginals of material gains. These are some prominent factors that must be taken into consideration. The social, spiritual, and religious aspects of a person give him multifaceted faith, strength, and, most importantly, a religiously sanctioned reconciliation, which becomes an anchoring factor for any person. However, environmental and ecological concerns must be the topmost priority of any community, religion, and state.

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