

NATURE IN THE WORKS OF RUSKIN BOND

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Ruskin Bond holds a position of pre-eminence in Indian Literature. He shares an intimate bond with nature and claims a kinship with the wild flowers, trees and the mountains. He was born in Kasauli, Himachal Pradesh, in 1934 and grew up in Jamnagar (Gujarat), Dehradun and Shimla. The Sahitya Akademi Award winner (1992) for English Writing in India for his work *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra* has many works to his credit. Padma Shri was awarded to him in 1999 and Padma Bhushan in 2014. He has written over a hundred short stories, essays, novels, children's books and poems. He says that he wrote on varied topics as the mighty Himalayan region with its varied animals, wild flowers, insects, birds, ferns, streams, humble people and all the surroundings provided ample material for his works. Watching the antics of the birds, the play of the animals, the blooming flowers and blossoming trees; listening to the melodious songs of the birds, the lyrical music of the ever flowing streams is not only a treat to the senses of man but a redeemer that can fill the starving soul with ecstatic joy. The detailed description of the innumerable plants, trees, animals and birds of the Himalayas form a part of Bond's writings. He also expresses environmental concerns for the region which once lush and green is now being exploited by human beings for material pursuits. The present paper will focus on the themes of nature and environmental concern in the engrossing writings of Ruskin Bond.

In his essay "Mountains are Kind to Writers," he aptly puts his feelings into words: "... living in the hills was like living in the bosom of a strong, sometimes proud, but always comforting mother. And every time I went away, the homecoming would be more tender and precious. It became increasingly difficult for me to go away" (199). The Himalayas are replete with green forests of rhododendron, maple and oak. Bond enjoys their sight and also feasts his eyes on the convolvulus, wild begonia, periwinkles, wild geraniums, wild begonia, clover, dandelion sprinkling the hillside, the pink and blue primroses on the hill slopes and the wild sorrel that grows amongst the rocks. The pure pristine blue coloured commelina adorns the hillside for about two weeks after which it disappears until the following monsoon season and it is the beauty of this flower that takes Bond's breath away, who says: "So absorbed do I become in its delicate beauty that I begin to doubt the reality of everything else in the world" (233). Bond calls it worthwhile trampling through the forests as he can feast his eyes on the profundity of wild flowers and trees. He describes the Himalayan forest in these words: "... the foliage that sprang up in tropical profusion- soft, spongy moss; great stag fern on the trunks of the trees; mysterious and sometimes evil looking lilies and orchids, wild dahlias and the climbing convolvulus opening its purple secrets to the morning sun" (96).

Bond regrets that he has seen many green places and forests disappear but he says it is not too late to save the little that is left. Extensive commercial felling of trees in the Himalayan region has caused widespread destruction and social unrest. The Chipko movement was initiated by the village women in the Kumaun Himalayas to prevent 'outside' exploitation of mountain forest resources (Ives 67). This environmental concern inspired Bond to write a short poem which reads as follows:

Trees of God, we call them;
Planted here when the world was young,
The first trees
Their fingers pointing to the stars,
Older than the cedars of Lebanon.
They cut them down last spring
With swift efficient tools,
The sap was rising still.
The trees bled,
Slaughtered
To make furniture for fools. (123-24)

Ruskin Bond wishes that the environmentalists should "start by curbing the property developers who have been spreading their tentacles far and wide." Bond draws a contrast between the hill stations a few years ago and at present times. He calls the hill stations now as "rich men's playgrounds" and compares it to the time twenty five years ago when they were places where people of modest means lived and people walked around as there were very few cars (198). Bond, in a way draws a contrast with the present times where the roads are overcrowded with cars and other vehicles. Popular access to Garhwal Himalayas is causing a large increase in environmental pressure as a result of demand for recreation and adventure from people outside the mountain area (Ives 7). Ruskin Bond in "Notes by the Wayside" writes a poem entitled "Parts of Old Dehra" contrasting between the Dehra then now. He writes:

...Old bungalows
Gone to seed
And giving way
To concrete slabs...
Fields make way for factories,
The trees succumb
To real-estate,
The rivers plunge
Silt-laden
To our doom...

Do-gooders, don't despair!
Nature will repair
Her own, long after
We are dust. (178-79)

The abundance of deodars in the Himalayas also inspired Ruskin Bond to write poetry. In his essay, "Great Trees I have Known," Bond calls deodar his favourite tree which derives its name from the Sanskrit word *deva-daru* (meaning divine tree). He elaborates on the sacred aspect of this tree saying that its timber has always been used in temples for doors, windows, roofs and walls. Bond adores and worships the deodar for "in the beauty and majesty it represents Creation in its most noble aspect" (133). Ruskin Bond expresses his wrath as human beings are cutting down these "most godlike of Himalayan trees" (133). Bond also throws light on the Tehri region which he says has been a subject of great deal of controversy because of Tehri dam project. He says that this region has been labelled as 'eco-fragile' and though he says he is not an expert in these matters, he considers most of the earth to be 'eco-fragile.' Contemplating on the issues of environmental preservation and development of human civilization, Bond poses some questions to the readers. He asks: "Do we stop all development in the name of preserving the environment? Or do we move on regardless? Proceed with caution would be the rational person's answer. But are human beings really rational?"(236).

Ruskin Bond speaks of the pines growing on the hills- the chir, the Himalayan blue pine, the long leaved pine, the small blue pine. He is in absolute communion with nature and personifies the trees thereby, seeking their blessings. He writes: "...the sounds of the trees themselves, stretching their limbs in the dark, shifting a little, flexing their fingers. Great trees of the mountains, they know me well" (135). Bond elaborates upon the beneficial trees and plants like neem, St. John's Wort etc. He speaks of the benefits of neem. The neem pods that fall on the ground are crushed underfoot, thereby giving out a fresh aroma purifying the air as the neem gives out more oxygen than most trees. He further elaborates upon the medicinal qualities of the neem's leaves, bark and sap. He talks of St. John's Wort (wort meaning herb) that grows in April and May in Pari Tibba. This yellow flower known as a wild rose (by *pahari* people) has curing and beneficial effects. It is medicinal herb with antidepressant activity and potent anti-inflammatory properties (Web 2015). The big old mulberry at the Joshimath in Garhwal known as the 'wishing tree,' the kalp-vriksha is talked about by Bond who says that according to the legend "it is said to be the tree beneath which the great Sankaracharya often meditated during his sojourn in the Himalayas" (150). Ruskin Bond observes the purple stained lips of the school boys who scramble uphill side and eat small sweet and sour berries of *kingera*, which is a native Himalayan shrub similar to bilberry.

The myriad coloured splendid birds are a treat to the eyes of Bond. He talks of the innumerable birds like red crowned jay, the purple Himalayan whistling thrush, the black bulbul, the Himalayan cuckoo, the barbet, the spotted fork-tail, the black partridge, green

pigeons, the kokla bird of Garhwal, white capped redstart, Hodgson's grey headed flycatcher-warbler, grey winged ouzel of the Garhwal hills and the nightjars. In fact, Ruskin Bond has devoted a short essay to the birds entitled, "Birdsong heard in the Mountains." He says: "Birdsong is with you wherever you go in the Himalayas, from the foothills to the tree-line; and it is often easier to recognize a bird from its voice than from its colourful but brief appearance" (153). Ruskin Bond gives a beautiful and vivacious description of the whistling thrush:

The whistling thrush is here, bathing in the rain-water puddle beneath the window. He loves this spot...His bath finished, he perches on a branch of the walnut tree. His glossy blue-black wings glitter in the sunshine. At any moment he will start singing.

Here he goes! He tries out the tune, whistling to himself, and then, confident of the notes, sends his thrilling full-throated voice far over the forest. The song dies down, trembling, lingering in the air; starts again, joyfully, and then suddenly stops, as though the singer had forgotten the words of the tune. (5-6)

Bond refers to the *shah bulbul* (king of nightingales) that breaks into a sweet little song now and then. He says that mostly the bulbuls sing "several pleasant tinkling notes" but the song of the Himalayan black bulbul "is as musical as the bray of an ass" and the hill people have named it *ban bakra*, which means the 'jungle goat' (117).

Ruskin Bond completely engrosses the reader with the description of the refreshing natural beauty of the Himalayas that awakens one's senses. It transposes the reader far away from the mundane life making the reader feel the freshness of the Himalayas so rich in the flora and fauna. Bond, in describing the Himalayan region, does not only give a description of the region but shows his universalism in including the whole nature in the plethora of his writings. He says: "And when the shower passes and the clouds open up, the heavens are a deeper, darker blue. Truly magic casements these... for every time I see the sky I am aware of belonging to the universe rather than to just one corner of the earth" (204). His connection with nature fills him with gratitude and Bond thanks God for all the bounty in nature. He expresses his gratitude to the Maker in these words: "... I would thank my God for leaves and grass and the smell of things, the smell of mint and myrtle and bruised clover, and the touch of things, the touch of grass and air and sky, the touch of the sky's blueness" (96-97). A person residing in the lap of nature can feel such a spiritual union with nature as does Ruskin Bond. Truly has Kipling said: " 'Who goes to the hills, goes to the mother' " (199). Bond enjoys the divine beauty of the hills and one feels transported into the tranquillity of nature as Bond galvanises the senses and soul of man with his vibrant writings.

Works Cited

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