

‘MY SAVIOUR IN THE HILLS’

Malabika Sengupta

[Presentation (in first person) below of Malabika Sengupta’s own experience of a difficult journey on foot towards a high altitude Himalayan centre of pilgrimage was prepared, by her elder brother Subhas Chandra Ganguly on the basis of what her sister Malabika told him sometime after her return from the journey. Her experience, as recipient of life-saving love and compassion from the member(s) of a deprived community in the service of pilgrims for centuries was felt to be worth sharing, with inevitable inadequacy of words in communicating a moving experience, in public. And so here it is. The story, in all likelihood, sends an oft forgotten societal message of deep and broad human significance, somewhat outside the arena of prevailing political/ideological/organizational discourses/debates—important as they are in their own right].

Before very long, I saw my team mates gradually vanishing around the hills up and above, leaving me below and far behind. This was truly in the tradition of the great Pandavas, on their way to the noble, famous and final exit (Maha-prasthan), when with their gaze fixed firmly ahead, they walked on without looking behind, though their family members fell one by one on the wayside. The path approximately follows the legend, viz. path towards Kedarnath Temple, the Himalayan centre of pilgrimage, situated 3564 meters above sea-level, which remains inaccessibly snow-bound from October to April. Days have changed of course. We were in no mood to leave our earthly abodes down in the plains for good. My team mates, in fact, use such occasions for twin purposes of travel and a little, neat business. They buy woolen garments cheap—very cheap—on the way up there and sell it down here at a premium. They took a novice (in hill trekking) like me under their aegis to cover up a part of the expenses of their own journey. So, in terms of quality of boarding and lodging, I got far worse than I deserved, considering the amount I was charged. All these I understood only after the journey had begun. I had been unsure of my ability to undertake this hazardous journey. But the leader, a very able woman, had assured me that she would be always by my side. All the same, she and her other companions left me on the way.

Starting from a mofussil town Ashokenagar (around forty kilometers from Kolkata) we were on the last and the most difficult part of our journey - from Gourie Kunda (where motorable road on the hills ends) to the Kedarnath temple it was a winding continuous ascent, sometimes quite steep, for about fourteen kilometers at a stretch, to be covered only on foot or on the back of animal or other human beings.

We started walking in the small hours in the morning. I was foolish enough to ignore the pain at my ankles that I had been having from the very beginning of the journey. An ill-fitted pair of shoes increased that pain manifold. So from the very start, I was limping. By the time the wisdom dawned on me that I should have chosen to go on horseback, it was too late. Horses can be hired only at the two ends of the journey and not on the way. So, there I was, with limps in my legs, slowly dragging my bulky body up the hills. Every step was becoming more and more an agony. With overhanging cliff on one side and sharp fall going hundreds of meters below on the other, the path was far from wide. Surfaces were rough with crest and trough at almost every step. Energetic pilgrims on foot were passing me by. So did the less able travelers

on human or animal transport. I, a slugger looked on them vacantly. A number of times I was pushed aside by the horses with travelers on their back. So, I had to be careful to keep close to the side of hanging cliff. Every few kilometers there would be cluster of small inn (called *Chatī*). I would rest at each and would pull myself up and start again after sometime against a strong desire to sit there forever.

Far above, people were looking like moving dolls. I shuddered to think that I would have to reach up there and still higher. My whole being cried out silently "I cannot, I cannot". Upto Ramwara *Chatī* I had at least my wits about me. From then on my steps became more and more unstable, almost like a drunkard. The luggage (a bag and a raincoat) on my shoulder seemed heavier and heavier. I was moving like an automaton almost without any awareness of where I was going. Various other physical discomforts like breathing trouble, churning in the stomach, began to appear. My brain became foggy. I passed the last inn *Gadur Chatī*. A little distance after that—two to three kilometers from the destination—suddenly my head went into a spin. I slumped down on the road and began to vomit. By this time, darkness had begun to descend all around the hills. With my few luggage scattered around, I sat motionless in a daze. Dark hills were merging with dark sky. Clouds were gathering around hilltops. Soon it began to rain. The water was ice-cold. Bereft of all strength, I did not have the energy to pick up the raincoat and cover myself. So, I got wet through and through and began to shiver. Pilgrims and travelers had reached their destination long ago. Not a soul in sight. I felt hollow in the depth of my being. This is the end. Mou (my daughter-in-law) and Baban (my son) would not even know. Hill people would simply push my unidentified body down below into the roaring Mandakini, which sounded eerie in that enveloping darkness and rain. So be it.

Suddenly, "Maiji" (meaning 'respected mother') a soft voice sounded near my ear. My reverie broke up. A young man of the hills with a basket on his back stood there. He was telling something in Hindi, mixed up with his native tongue, most of which I could not follow, in my state of stupor and extreme astonishment. But so caressing was his voice that it was very clear that he was offering help to me. A veritable angel in the form of a hill porter had suddenly materialized as if from nowhere! Life flowed back in me. He persuaded me first to sit in his basket to be carried on his back. But he could hardly carry my weight. So, I got down. Holding my hand he literally led me through rest of the path. With infinite patience he kept pace with my extremely slow steps and maintained the balance whenever I faltered. Walking through darkness and rain in that unfamiliar terrain and carrying some cash with me, I felt insecure. He sensed my feeling, and without my saying anything to that effect, would intermittently assure me that there was nothing to fear and that I would reach my destination safe and secure. He did not leave me till reaching my destination after what seemed like ages. I searched out my team mates in one among many lodges. Though he was evidently happy with the amount I paid him, in my broken state I could not communicate to him properly my immense feeling of gratitude nor did I ask him his name and I feel deeply remorseful for such lapses. This write up is to pay this anonymous benefactor of mine—a benefactor, who bestowed his life-saving benefaction without waiting for being asked for the same and just in a matter of fact manner—

my small tribute publicly, though he himself is unlikely to know it ever, and share with my readers this humbling experience of civility and deep compassion from a fellow citizen, coming from a community, looked upon more with condescension than with respect because of their poverty and illiteracy.

Heard of or not, I know that this cannot be the first story of its kind, nor would it be the last. But such stories, even if heard of earlier beyond my knowledge, bear repetition. In fact, during my return journey, this time on horseback, I saw the same courtesy and helpfulness without any trace of servility, reflecting an innate sense of dignity and humanism, before which we all bow. How appropriate is it to call these people 'backward' (not to be confused with a deprived region being appropriately depicted so) instead of calling them simply 'deprived'? May we not consider such attributes as revealed above as the hall-mark of such an advanced level of culture and civilization, which perhaps is not to be found everywhere and/or always? □□□

Postscript : It may be of some interest to indulge in an idle speculation on an impossible cultural/social scenario/ambience, where in the world of mainstream media, contrary to the current practices, true stories/news of the analogous social import (there would be plenty across the land) rather than the news on self-righteous and acrimonious power struggles (violent or not) and scams in political/corporate arena, and sensational news about various sorts of human degradations/brutalities among populace would get higher priority in hugging press headlines (no suggestion to suppress the latter kind is being hinted at)! In that case "... the very existence of the today's newspapers, server of the commerce and industry and patronized/maintained by political parties will be at stake" (English translation of the original in Bengali**), as the well known late litterateur (in Bengali and English) Budhadeb Bose (much maligned by 'left' camp during his lifetime), commented in a Bengali article ('Saangbaadikataa, itihās, sahitā', meaning 'journalism, history and literature') back in 1947 in a slightly different but closely similar context. Bose was no stranger to mainstream media, nor was he a propagandist, in loud tirade against the same. In fact, literary section of vernacular press often contained his writings (poems, novels, stories, essays) though it is difficult to imagine that the essay above found its way in the pages of the big media.

—Subhas Chandra Ganguly

¶ To be more precise, the mythological legend is woven around another, looked upon as almost twin, Himalayan centre of pilgrimage, viz., Badri Temple. Travelers/pilgrims, visiting Kedar, almost without exception, simultaneously go to Badri also. They pronounce two places together- Kedar-Badri, giving, to the uninitiated, the false impression of the two places being one and the same.

¶¶ Relevant Bengali quotation in full can be found by going to the Web Link <http://scienceandsocietvinbob.com/patrika-33/bbasu-on-media.pdf>