

# Himalayan Folk Culture and Customs: An Exploration of Ruskin Bond's Literary Works

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## Abstract

Ruskin Bond is one of the eminent Indian English writers with the outstanding position in the field of Indian English writing. He is especially known as a short story writer, poet, writer of novellas and travelogues and he has written six novellas, over two hundred short stories, thirty-five books for children, four volumes of autobiography, about four hundred newspaper articles, five collection of essays, four poetry collections and so on. He has not only contributed in the development of English literature in India but also he has won Sahitya Akademi Award and Padma Bhushan Award. It is evident that his literary works, highlight the lifestyles of the Himalayan region, festivals, its ravishing peaks, rivers, gorges, ravines, lakes & shrines that his name mainly famous for showing himalayan folk culture, rituals and its customs.

He was grew up in the foothill of Himalayas, Dehradun; so his most literary works are influenced by the human life in the hill stations at the foothills of the Himalayas. His first semi-autobiographical novel, *The Room on the Roof*, partly based on his childhood experiences at Dehradun, in his small rented room on the roof, and his friends and reflect his Anglo-Indian experiences and the changing political, social and cultural aspects of India, having been through colonial, postcolonial and post-independence phases of India. Most of his stories always visualise the sights, sounds and flavours of garhwal himalaya around Dehradun and the Mussoorie Hills, where he has spent all his adult life.

This research paper is an attempt to explore the himalayan folk culture, rituals, social customs, religious deities and visual description of green and snowcapped mountains in his literary works.

**Keywords:** Indianness, rituals, festivals, magnificence

## 1. Introduction

Ruskin Bond, one of most renowned exemplary novelists in Indian English literature; lives amidst of snow-capped peaks, hills, green valleys and flora and fauna of Dehradun where he resides wholeheartedly. In his most works, he has expressed his true spirit of the 'Indianness' and attachment towards himalayan folk culture of Uttarakhand with enthusiasm and true spirit of its cultural and social differences. In his literature works, it is very noteworthy to find beautiful and lively description of the Jalebis, Deodar tree, Tunganath temple and the festival of Holi etc. In spite of the British blood, Ruskin Bond seems an Indian through his thoughts and expression towards garhwal Himalayas. The great Himalayas symbolize eternity, divine illumination, universal belongingness and accord with nature. In the Himalayas lies the real India. Giving a pen-portrait of the contours of the mighty Himalayas, Bond

comments very aptly: “One of the remarkable features of the Himalayas is the abruptness with which they rise from the plains, and this gives them a verdure that is totally different from that of the plains.”(Ruskin Bond, *Ganga Descends*, 26)

In spite of a Christian by birth, he is very attached with Indian social customs and traditions. His literary life started from foreign soil, New Jersey but due to his nostalgia towards Himalayas, India incessantly, he left the foreign land and came back to his home, India where his heart and soul resides. He acknowledges his passion for the mountains in the following words:

It was while I was living in England, in the jostle and drizzle of London that I remembered the Himalayas at their most vivid. I had grown up amongst those great blue and brown mountains; they had nourished my blood: and though I was separated from them by thousands of miles of ocean, plain and desert, I could not rid them from my system. It is always the same with the mountains. Once you have lived with them for any length of time, you belong to them. There is no escape. (*Rain in the Mountain*, 92)

His literary creations are pure gems and bring us real India through his descriptions of himalayan 'native town' to local 'Bazaars' and home of common peoples. He has penned the beauty of Himalayan hills and finds himself very ease to express Indianess comprehensively. After his father's death and remarriage of his mother to an Indian, gave him new experiences among garhwal Himalayas children, language, culture, customs, manners, rituals and festivals. It is very interesting to see his profound love for himalayas in his heart reflected through his literary works. Once he was in Delhi for a few years, felt intense yearning for mountains gripped him and became restless and felt that the hills were calling him. In that juncture, he was not able to take interest in writing felt that he had to get closer to nature, to forests and mountain streams. In *Notes From The Small Room*, he wrote: “. . . and if the words were to come with the old fluency I needed a magic mountain.”(95). In the same book, he asked himself a question, “What else do I love and remember of the Himalayas?”(115). At last replied himself and wrote and recalled most “. . . the smell of fallen pine needles, cow-dung smoke, spring rain, bruised grass. The pure water of mountain streams, the depth and blueness of the sky-enchanted things that are common to mountains almost everywhere.””(115)

Ruskin Bond has also depicted social customary of India how a funeral procession passes on the road regardless of the religion, caste, creed, of the deceased the people who meet on the way and pay homage to the dead. In *Delhi is not Far*, he has depicted a funeral procession that is on its way to the cremation ground and focused on a minor issue of raging, disturbing noise of loud speakers in Indian marriages, family functions and gatherings as well as religious gatherings especially in rural areas or small towns, often it destroy many people's health and sleep at night. In this matter of expression, he does not want to criticise the social system but describes the real picture of the society.

As residing in Mussoorie hills, Ruskin Bond also discusses the Indian custom of piercing nose and ears of Indian women. In the novel, *A Flight of Pigeons* which was also made into a film *Junoon*. On different occasion, personal or religious, Indian women wear different kind kind of jewellery. He has also noticed their customary thing of a husband or wife not supposedly calling each other by name. In this context Lala Ramji Lal's domestic affairs are discussed:

Lala's wife was a young woman, short in stature with a fair complexion. We didn't know her name, because it is not customary for husband or wife to call the other by name; but her mother-in-law would address her as *dulhan* or *bride*. (561)

In Indian religion and rituals, cow is considered as a sacred figure, termed as '*mata*' and many occasions, worshipped. Ruskin Bond has also mentioned it in his story how Hindu community pays huge respect to the animal and does not harm the cow. In *The Blue Umbrella* he has depicted different colours of cows and affectionately calls them *Neelu* and *Gori*.

*Neelu*—Blue—was the name of the blue-grey cow. The other cow, which was white, was called *Gori*, meaning the Fair One. They were fond of wandering off on their own, down to the stream or into the pine forest.... The cows preferred having *Biniya* with them, because she let them wander. *Bijju* pulled them by their tails if they went too far. (784)

Though belonging to the British descent Ruskin Bond has deeply observed Indian folk culture and immense regard in his heart for Indian festivals and gods. Many novels of his depict all details of the mythological tales related to Indian gods and deities. In his foremost novel *The Room on the Roof*, Ruskin Bond delineates the importance of *Holi* - the festival of colours. Ruskin Bond has thoroughly explained the spirit of the festival of *Holi* through the mouthpiece of the character *Ranbir*. *Ranbir* describes significance of *holi* to *Rusty*, the protagonist of the story :

You do not know about *Holi*! it is the Hindu festival of colours! it is the day on which we celebrate the coming of spring, when we throw colour on each other and shout and sing and forget the misery, for the colours mean the rebirth of spring and the new life in our hearts. I am surprised you do not know of it. (81)

From his everyday experiences, Ruskin Bond learnt to make sense of the baffling, painful and enjoyable moment of life. The first tale in the collection, *Rusty Plays Holi*, it is really an interesting episode from *The Room on the Roof*. At last, his attitude changed regarding the significance of the festival and he adds:

he was exhausted now, but he was happy. He wanted this to go on forever, this day of feverish emotion, this life in another world. He did not want to leave the forest; it was safe, its earth soothed him, gathered him in so that the pain of his body became a pleasure.... He did not want to go home.

In another celebrated novel *Delhi is Not Far*, he depicts the beautiful and mesmerizing description of well-known festival *Janmashtami* celebrated on account of Lord Krishna's birthday. When Lord Krishna was born there was tremendous rain and storm. As Bond described: it was Lord Krishna's birthday and the rain came down as early as it must have been on day when Krishna was born in *Vrindavan*." (867-68)

In *A Flight of Pigeons*, he describes monsoon festival especially celebrated in North India by women during rainy season named as *Teej* when many women put on their best clothes and colourful dresses and the swings on the trees mark the festivities and the happiness of the festival.

It was the day of the monsoon festival observed throughout northern India by the women folk, who put on their most colourful costumes, and relax on innumerable swings, giving release of feeling of joy and abandon.(65)

Ruskin Bond has also highlighted the festival of Raksha Bandhan and which is considered to be a symbol of love and affection between brother and sister. On this auspicious day, sisters tie the Rakhi to their brothers' wrists and promise to protect them and the brothers give them gifts as a symbol of his love to their sisters. In the novel *Delhi Is Not Far* Sita ties Rakhi to Arun and Suraj as she has adopted them as her brothers.

While exploring the mountains, particularly the Himalayan range, Bond finds out that Himalayas are the dwellings of God that is why most of the rivers, rocks, trees and vegetation play their part in mythology. He is more close to pantheism as he considers nature his religion. He admires nature in all its manifestations, flora, fauna, mountains, rivers, sea. Writing about nature was never a conscious effort on his part, his inclination grew towards it as he has always lived close to nature. In the prologue to his Memoir, *Scenes From A Writer's Life*, Bond truthfully records his deep feelings and his sense of gratitude towards India in general, and its mountainous region in particular:

And as I grew out of my teens I began to love the country that I had, till then, taken for granted- to love it through the friends I made and through the mountains, valleys, fields and forests which had made an indelible impression on my mind (for India is an atmosphere as much as it is a land)- with the result that, no sooner had I set foot on the West, than I wanted to return to India and to all that I had known and loved. (97)

Bond has depicted the pictorial beauty and mystical significance of Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri, Yamunotri, Tungnath and other places of pilgrimage in the Himalayan range. He has described Mussoorie and the top of a local peak called "Gun Hill", from which one could have a view of the greater Himalayas. Describing another contour of the landscape, i.e. the journey through the Siwaliks to Dehradun, Bond remarks that it really begins at the Mohand Pass.

In a nutshell, it is evident that Ruskin Bond, as an Indian English writer has depicted Himalayas part of his life. He fully agrees with Kipling's words that "who goes to the hills, goes to his mother."(Rain in the Mountain,199) He believes that human life in the hills is like living in the bosom of a strong, sometimes proud, but always comforting mother. It shows his attachment towards garhwal Himalayas.

Undoubtedly Ruskin Bond presents Indian culture in the most colourful manner. His style of description of scenes is convincing and acceptable by any Indian. These descriptions are a testimony that Bond loves India to the core and considered himself as a true Indian; not a single soul can challenge his devotion and unconditional love towards India. Indian food and cuisine Whenever you read about the mouth watering jalebis, gulgappa, Chaat papdi and Imarti in the novels of Ruskin Bond, instantly we forget the fact that by birth Ruskin Bond is of English blood. The discussion of various savouring dishes at length epitomize his love for India.

In his literary works, Ruskin Bond has discussed the significance and importance of Neem trees and the Tulsi plants. In Indian culture, the Tulsi plant is considered as the plant full of purity and medicinal

qualities. Indian women also worship and think tulsi plant protect their family from various diseases and bring bliss in their lives. In the folklore of Garhwal, from the ancient time Neem tree is considered to be a wish fulfilling tree. He has also mentioned sacred tree in the mountainous region as Deodar, Jackfruit tree in his different stories as the pleasures of boyhood and the playing hide and seek.

He developed natural familiarity with the region as he had always been a part of it and the result was the detailed descriptions of ravines, slopes, valleys, brooks and forests with great geographical accuracy. His many stories and write-ups describe the heavenly beauty of Garhwal Himalayas graphically. While lives in a high altitude, sometimes feel loneliness with nature, as the windows of his cottage opened onto the forest. In the Introduction to *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra*, he writes that it was a 'timeless sort of a place' and that he felt emotional attachment natural aura around the cottage. He further adds:

There were two large windows, and when I pushed the first of these open, the forest seemed to rush upon me. The maples, oaks, rhododendrons, and an old walnut, moved closer, out of curiosity perhaps. A branch tapped against the window-panes, while from below, from the ravine, the deep-throated song of the whistling thrush burst upon me. (10)

Bond once wrote that it's hard to realize that he has been there all these years- forty-eight summers and monsoons and winters and Himalayan springs- because, when he looks back to the time of his first coming here, it does seem like yesterday:

That probably sums it all up. Time passes and yet it does not pass; people come and go, the mountains remain. Mountains are permanent things. They are stubborn, they refuse to move. You can blast holes out of them for their mineral wealth; or strip them of their trees and foliage or dam their streams and divert their currents; or make tunnels and roads and bridges; but no matter how hard they try, humans can't actually get rid of their mountains. That's what I like about them; they are here to stay. (Rain in the Mountain, 197).

His stories portray the struggles and simplicity of the people of the Garhwal Himalayas, his adopted home. *A Gathering of Friends* is a collection of his short stories written over a period of more than 50 years. 'That's what it's coming to.' Other than the episodes from Fosterganj, the novel also sees some adventurous turns, like the earthquake of Uttarakashi when he goes for catching big lizards for extracting oil with Sunil, the pickpocket.

Bond strongly reflects the spirit of diversity of faith in Indian culture, the remarkable authenticity with which Bond paints the interiors of an Indian village house; photo frame of Lord Ganesh, a string cot, a clock - the most prominent corner of the house brings forth Bond as the writer who definitely truly belongs to India with 'Indianness' running all over his veins. Bond has portrayed real Indian society in most of his works. In his literary works, he has portrayed Indian local Bazaar, railway platform, streets, gardens, theatre and cinema hall even cremation grounds. He has painted the Indian folk cultural life in varied colours. Ruskin Bond excels in this area.

He has beautifully depicted interesting men and women from all social classes with smiling faces in their hardships. In his book *The Tales of Fostergung* he has amazingly delineated the description of his Dinner With Foster, who tries to sell gladioli bulbs to the writer:

I grow gladioli, sir, and sell the bulbs to good people like you. My name's Foster. I own the lands all the way down to the waterfall.' "For a landowner, he did not look very prosperous. But his name intrigued me. 'Isn't this area called Fosterganj?' I asked. 'That's right. My grandfather was the first to settle here. He was a grandson of Bonnie Prince Charlie who fought the British at Bannockburn. I'm the last Foster of Fosterganj. Are you sure you won't buy my daffodil bulbs?' 'I thought you said they were gladioli.'" "Some gladioli, some daffodils.

Therefore, one can conclude that his literary works touches various aspects of Indian culture and its rich heritage, rituals, and socio-religious beliefs. The Himalayas spread serenity and spiritual feelings into innocent hearts of the people. The depiction of Indian culture and love for Himalayas, trees, festivals serve as a powerful background in his stories and plots. Manish D. Bhatt aptly remarks: "His writings largely revolves around the Himalayas, the Doon Valley and the other places in today's Uttarakhand. He portrays this nature in terms of its relationship with humans." (Manish D. Bhatt, *Ruskin Bond As a Short Story Writer: A Critical Study*, XII) In his stories and novels, he amazingly delineates Indian customs and festivals, folk culture, religious deities and worshipping gods without any kind of prejudice.

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