4.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit is meant to introduce you to the art of travel writing through an excerpt from a travel narrative in Bangla. Yet another form of non-fictional prose, Manimahesh gives you a graphic account of Manimahesh which is both a peak and a lake in the Chamba district of Himachal Pradesh. It will hopefully not only engage your interest but also whet your taste for travel accounts.

4.1 UMAPRASAD MUKHOPADHYAYA: AN INTRODUCTION

Son of Sir Ashutosh Mukhopadhyay and Smt. Jogmaya Devi, Umaprasad was born on 12 October 1902 in Bhowanipur, Kolkata. He studied English for his bachelor’s degree but chose Ancient Indian history as his subject for his
master’s degree. He also did his L.L.B. He won many academic laurels throughout. After teaching in the university for sometime, he practiced at the Bar. In 1958, he gave up legal practice, in pursuit of wanderlust, and a spiritual quest for peace, human values and the true meaning of life. This started in the Himalayas, and throughout his life, he was attracted to the Himalayas repeatedly. His passion for travel was an upshot of his restless spirit that was not content to be stationed in one place, and his genuine love of nature. He has written prolifically about his travels, capturing the ambience of the locale and sensitive to everything around. He was associated with the Bangabasi Patrika throughout his literary career. His minute observations and the authentic historicity of his narration in his book Manimahesh (1969) won him the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1971.

The wealth of Mukhopadhyay’s travel descriptions provide hours of happy reading and urge us to read on. Yet there is no imaginary romance or storytelling in it. It is not only the genre that he used or his distinctive stance that makes his travelogues so popular. He also makes the places he journeys to, their natural surroundings and human beings familiar and holds them as a mirror before the reader. The reader happily wanders with him in the inaccessible reaches of the Himalayas, in Vaishno Devi in Kashmir, in the Parashuram Kund in a forest-covered area in Nefā, in the North East Frontier Provinces, in Khyber pass, at the source of the Kaveri in the South, sometimes outside India on a Buddhist pilgrimage in Simhala, or near some primitive brook in a hazardous and lonely forest path. The descriptions of the innumerable diversities of nature and myriad human societies in his travelogues has opened up a new horizon to scholars of Bangla literature. He died in 1998.

The Travel Writings of the Author

Umaprasad Mukhopadhyay’s travelogues are available in Bengali in five volumes called Bhraman Omnibus, published by Mitra & Ghosh between 1983 and 1993. However, listed below are some of his major travel writings, although he has also written biographies, essays on the freedom movement and two volumes of autobiographical reminiscences:
Himalayer Pathe Pathe (On the tracks of the Himalayas) — 1962
Gangabantaran (Circling the Ganga) — 1966
Kuyari Giripathe (On the Mountainous Paths of Kuyari) — 1967
Manimahesh — 1969
Triloknather Pathe (On Route to Triloknath) — 1971
Gupteshwar (Secret Deity) — 1974
Sherpa-der Deshe (In the Land of the Sherpas) — 1974
Mukthinath Panchkadedar — 1975
Kailash o Manas Sarobar (Kailash and Mansarover) — 1977
Afridi Muliuke (In the Kingdom of the Africans) — 1976
Kaberi Kahini (The Story of Kaveri) — 1979
Baishnodebi o Anyanya Kahini (Vaishnodevi and Other Stories) — 1979
Alochhayan Pathe (A Passage Through Light and Shadows) — 1985
Dui Diganta (Two Horizons) — 1986
Jaljatra (Travels through Waterways) — 1989
Arabsagarer Tirey (On the Banks of the Arabian Sea) — 1992

4.2 TRAVEL WRITING

4.2.1 Its Popularity

Some kind of travel writing within narratives in other genres has existed from Classical times. In our own epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, the self-imposed exile or banishment of the protagonists from their legitimate kingdoms provides the basis for their wanderings and explorations over different kinds of terrain as well as opportunities for encounters with exotic, sometimes strange creatures very unlike themselves. In Classical Greece, Homer’s The Odyssey describes the amazing adventures of the epic hero on his voyage home from the Trojan wars. Warrior heroes have always been known to move from place to place in quest of extending their kingdoms as well as a kind of self-fulfillment. During the Renaissance, when voyages of discovery proliferated all over Europe, stretching to all parts of the world, travel once again percolated into the literature of the time. Often, tales about travelling would be fictitious and fantastic, like in the English classics Robinson Crusoe and Gulliver’s Travels. They have, however, been followed by very true-to-life children’s stories about extraordinary journeys and trips, like R.L. Stevenson’s Treasure Island and Jules Verne’s Around the World in Eighty Days. It is, therefore, a genre with multifarious possibilities.

Despite all this, the genre has gained respectability on its own merit only over the last few decades. Travel writing has come to be recognized as a popular genre that is no longer considered as just a recreation for the lay reader but an important part of mainstream literature. It is a literary field that increasingly continues to interest the scholar and the critic, and there is a substantial corpus of academic discourses on the subject. Though always part of popular literature, it was hitherto hardly ever taken seriously by scholars and academics. With the growth of New Historicist criticism over the last two decades, there has been a far-reaching widening of the literary domain, and texts that were once considered outside the mainstream have now come to be accepted as part of the canon. Receiving more and more critical attention, it is a great cultural resource that contributes to interdisciplinary studies combining history, literature, and anthropology, among other subjects. There are
prestigious journals like *Studies in Travel Writing*, and academic courses on travel writing are now available in British and American universities.

### 4.2.2 What is Interesting about Travel?

If we are going to look at the text as a travel narrative, we must first address ourselves to certain questions: what is it about travel that rouses/stimulates/awakens/stirs the curiosity of the common reader? Is it only a thirst for information and data one could just as well get from travel brochures and guide books? Or is it the hope of being able to participate in a vicarious pleasure by reading about the writer’s experiences of lands and peoples one has never visited? Could that fantasy be fulfilled by any writer who has visited that particular region? Would they all have the same homogenized account to narrate about the place? Or does one expect each travel writer to have his/her unique experiences, and a special manner of recounting a journey or a stay in a place that is not one’s home, adding to the description a distinctive colour and flavour? This is usually the case, for a travel narrative is not a catalogue of objective facts. In fact, a travel narrative has other dimensions — it often posits the writer’s engagement with the self. It, therefore, warrants classification not only as ‘non-fictional prose’ but can also be included within the broad category of ‘autobiographical writing’. But we will get back to that later.

When common people make some special effort to go for a holiday or undertake a trip to a far-flung or even a nearby place, why do they do it? It is usually to escape the monotony and the regimen of home and work, and to relax in a congenial ambience. Some extras that are thrown in are nature in the form of countryside greenery or sun-drenched sea beaches, art and architecture associated with a rich cultural heritage, and the sense of adventure in trekking through high altitude mountains or river rafting. More generally, it is to partake of a rhythm of life that is different from the tedious routine of the place one lives in with its stressful demands on one’s body and mind. The last bit is particularly true of people living in the metropolises with high profile professional images to sustain. However, going on a vacation is perhaps equally necessary for those people who, enervated/drained by the drudgery at home and work can barely make ends meet. But in India and in a third-world context, their finances do not permit them to take a break, which is a luxury/prerogative that only the rich can afford.

### 4.2.3 The Inexhaustible Variety of Travel

The exotic and the inaccessible has always fascinated the human imagination. It is exciting to read about far away places where the geographical terrain, as well as the ethno-cultural communities which inhabit that terrain, are totally different from what we see all around us. In India, our landscape, linguistic and cultural groups are so diverse that one need not venture beyond the country’s frontiers to encounter new and stimulating experiences. Within the national boundary of India, one could potentially go on travelling forever without exhausting one’s list of where to go. The writer of this piece, Umprasad Mukhopadhyay, is one such traveller who does not tire of undertaking journeys to various parts of India. At times, he self-confessedly claims to have visited the same place two or three times, and since his
experience is widely different each time, he even writes about them twice or three times over.

Umaprasad Mukhopadhyay has specifically written about the Himalayan region in many of his travel accounts. There is virtually no fictitious element in his reminiscences, and aspects of folklore are acknowledged to be as such. He underscores and collates all the mythological, historical as well as socio-anthropological information related to the places and people he visits. While he mostly finds hilly people friendly and contented with their lot, the romantically alluring mountains, rivers and forests of the Himalayas inspire him to write a kind of poetic prose.

4.3 TRAVEL LITERATURE IN INDIA

In India, travel writing as a separate genre actually started in the nineteenth century, and shows a sporadic trajectory despite an abundant output in the twentieth century. Travel writings can be classified under two categories — the first dealing with visits abroad, mainly England, and the other with journeys within the country. Two travel accounts — K.M. Munshi’s Mari Binjabab dar Kahini and Kaka Kalekar’s Himalayano Pravas represent both the categories. In Assamese, the only travelogue worth considering was Bilator Cithi, an account of a trip to England. In Sindhi, there is N.R. Malkani’s Kashmir jo Sair (1925) and M.K. Khilnani’s Hind jo Sair (1925). In Punjabi, there is Lal Singh Kamla Akali’s Mera Valati Safarnama (1936). In Tamil, the only mentionable work is A.K. Chettiyar’s Ulakam Currum Tamilan (1940), which literally means the Tamilian who goes round the world. In Telugu, the earliest travel account dates back to 1938, with Kasi Yatra Carita. In Marathi, Pandita Ramabai’s works on England and America were published in 1833 and 1836 respectively. The first important Gujarati travelogue was Inglolandno Pravas by Mahipatram Nilkantha in 1862. In the twentieth century, the noted travel writers were Vishnubat Godse, N.C. Kelkar, Anant Kanekar, Kaka Kalelkar, Mahadeo Shastri Joshi, Gangadhar Gadgil, R.B. Joshi and P.L. Deshpande. Travel writing in Oriya emerged fully in the middle of the century, although some travel writing appeared in the journal Sambada Bahika and Naha Sambada (1886-87) and in the works of Fakirmohan. Travelogue writing started in Kannada with K. Venkataraman Sastri’s Dakshina Bharat Yatri. V. Seetharamaiah’s Pampa Yatri (1925) was followed by V.K. Gokak’s Samudradaceyindu and important writers like Sivaram Karanth and A.N. Moorthi Rao. In Malayalam, the first work in the genre is Varthamanappusthamak or Roma Yatra by P. Thoma Kathanar (1736-99). In the twentieth century, K.P. Kesava Menon’s Bilathi Visesam (1916), N.J. Nair’s Bhupradakshina Vrantam (1938) and Kuttan Nair’s Jhana Kanda Europe (1936) are worth mentioning. After independence, A. K. Gopal’s Non Oru Puthiyi Lokam Kentu (1954), K.M. Pannikar’s Apalkaramayan Yatra (1944), Rantu Chainayil (1956) and Joseph Mundasser’s Chaina Munnottu are works on travels through Russia and China. S. K. Pottekkat was the most prolific travel writer who wrote some 2700 pages. Two other figures who can compare with him are Rahul Sankritayan and Ramnath Biswas.

Most of the travel writing mentioned above is about Indians visiting England, European countries, China, Russia or Japan. But the evolution of travel
writing in various Indian languages that deal with Indian cities and villages, pilgrim centres, places of historical interest and natural habitats were part of a nationalist agenda. To begin with, travel accounts mostly covered the Himalayas and Kashmir, and pilgrimages. Gradually, travel writing developed into something that bordered on fiction or was a part of fiction.

4.3.1 Bengali Travel Writing

The Bengali is popularly believed to be the incorrigible traveller. The foremost name in Bengali travel literature is no other than Rabindranath Tagore. He published his travel accounts of Europe in the nineteenth century. This was followed by his experiences in Japan, Japan Yatri (1919), Persia, Parsa (1936), Russia, Rasyar Cithi (1930). They document an “Indian understanding of different civilizations and socio-political systems,” as S.K. Das says in A History of Indian literature 1911-1956. Annada Shankar Ray’s account of European experience in Patha Prabase (1931) is one the most representative works of literature on Indo-European relations. Prabodh Kumar Sanyal’s Mahaprasthuner Patha (1933), a narrative on the Himalayas, marks the beginning of a travelogue that is also a fictional narrative. The later part of the century saw the genre of travel writing flourish in Bengal.

4.4 INTRODUCING MANIMAHESH

The excerpt in your course is about travelling through the Chamba region of Himachal Pradesh. It is a creative piece on travel from a book-length travelogue which was not originally written in English but Bengali, and is
therefore significant as a translated text also. The translation is by Sanjukta Das Gupta. The full travelogue is in three parts, and deals with the author’s trek over the Himalayas. The first part has 14 sub-sections, of which sections 8, 9, 10 and 11 are in your course. The first part describes the journey from Pathankot to the foot of Manimahesh by the side of a picturesue lake. The second part describes the journey from Khara Pathar towards Chakrata, a high cantonment area over the Jumna valley. The third part has him starting from Masobra on the outskirts of Simla and after passing through some legendary mountain villages, he reaches the foot of the 22,000 high Kinnor Kailas, resembling the phallic image of Lord Shiva.

To specifically acquaint you with the portion in your course, the eighth section of the first part has the writer and Himadri walking from Kharamukh, and reaching the village of Lahul. They encounter a schoolmaster, and a shopkeeper who initially refuses to part with the bhutta growing outside his shop in fear of a local superstition. They reach Varmore, the gateway to Manimahesh, where the reader’s curiosity is tantalized by the description of a sadhu who is supervising the repair of a farmland, and yet is not conscious of the power he wields. Section 9 describes their meeting with the Range officer Sood, who invites them to sleep for the night in his bungalow instead of carrying on to the Forest bungalow. He introduces them to the local doctor Chatterjee, who lives a reclusive and enigmatic existence. They interact with the doctor about common landmarks in Calcutta as well as shared historical signposts. Section 10 narrates well-known stories about the Sadhu, Naga Baba, which have become part of the local lore. The doctor tells them some uncanny happenings centred around Manimahesh and its history that defy rational explanation. Section 11 further explores the history, myth and legend surrounding the hallowed site of Manimahesh. The Map will help you to imagine and identify the route to Manimahesh.

4.4.1 Questions to ask

Keep certain questions in mind while following the text. What is Mukhopadhyay’s motive behind the travel? It is neither religious pilgrimage (as he specifies), study, trade, diplomacy, flight, migration nor empire building and consolidation. What, as a very ordinary but itinerant spirit, entices him to undertake the hazardous journey?

Also, keep your eyes open, during the course of reading the narrative, what it is about the place that continues to interest him, and what issues he wants to discuss. Is it the history, the topography, the myths and legends surrounding it, or more everyday observations like their food, dress, religion, local beliefs and ethno-cultural traits?

What are the nuances and very small details that make the narrative interesting? Does the narrative have an autobiographical voice that is clearly audible? Can you, for instance, guess the age of the writer, or is there any hint about it in the narrative? Is there anything else about his personal self that we learn from the excerpt?

From his short-term travel, is the author able to arrive at any in-depth understanding of the land and its people, both in their present cultural milieu and whatever he can recuperate about them from oral narratives that have been passed on from generation to generation? Is he appreciative or critical of
Non-Fictional Prose

4.5 THE TEXT: AN ANALYSIS

4.5.1 Geographical Location

Trying to locate the site of Manimahesh, there is something that you need to alert yourselves to as we journey along with the author through Himachal Pradesh. At the beginning of the first part itself (which is not in your course), the author makes it clear that the five rivers of Punjab have classical, Sanskrit names like Chandrabhaga, Bitasta, Irawati, Bipasha and Shatadru, apart from the more colloquial names that we are used to hearing, like Chenab, Jhelum, Ravi, Beas and Sutlej. The name ‘Irawati’ might sound confusing to the reader/student, because it is well-known that Irawati is one of the six rivers of central India that run across the Vindhyas plateau. But it is clear from the description of the place that Irawati is also the authentic name of the river Ravi, running through Punjab and Himachal Pradesh. The place Manimahesh, therefore, is situated in a precise geographical location in the Chamba valley, and should not be confused with any other part of India.

4.5.2 Situating Manimahesh

In the very first paragraph of the excerpt that is your text, the landscape surrounding Manimahesh has been addressed by many other names. The area of Goderan and Varmore has been called ‘the strange land of the Gaddis’, a nomadic tribe that migrated from Central Asia some two thousand years ago. It is also called ‘Shivbhumi’, a land associated with Shiva, the god of creation and destruction, so it is obviously a place of religious sanctity. We are then told that the precise sacrosanct space is none other than Manimahesh, ‘the snow mountain’ that is also ‘Chamba’s small Kailash’, which helps us to assess its position in the natural landscape of India. Within a few phrases, therefore, this introductory paragraph tells us about the geographical location of Manimahesh, its resemblance and justifiable comparison to the majestic Kailash range of the Himalayas, and one of its striking physical attributes — that it is a snow-covered mountain. It also evokes religious associations that immediately help us to identify its people as Hindus who are devotees of Shiv. With an economy of expression, the travel writer draws us immediately into the world and environment of Manimahesh and its surrounding areas. The reader, therefore, is easily carried along with him in his descriptions of his journey, the topography, and his interactions with the local people. A travel writer really accomplishes the task of recording his/her journey in a reader-friendly manner when s/he can make his readers believe themselves to be vicariously involved in the entire experience.

4.5.3 Autobiographical Elements

A travelogue is a non-fictional account, and by and large true. In Manimahesh, the travel writer articulates himself in a manner that divulges his sincere love of adventure and devotion to the mountains. In the December 1990 issue of Desh, the leading Bengali weekly, he had said in an interview with Sallii Dutta that he was satisfied with minimal comforts while travelling. Forever eager to be away from the madding crowd, he had always been passionate about the
silent sun-kissed Himalayan peaks, and completely absorbed in them as if in deep meditation. The writing in a travelogue is always autobiographical to some extent, which means it reports the writer’s experiences in the first person, and is coloured by the writer’s prioritization of certain episodes and encounters over others, although they may be insignificant in the eyes of most people. I quote below from the nineteenth century travel writer Alexander William Kinglake’s classic travel text *Eothen* (1844) to explain the travel writer’s preoccupation with the self:

His [the travel writer’s] very selfishness — his habit of referring the whole external world to his own sensations, compels him, as it were, in his writings, to observe the laws of perspective; he tells you of objects, not as he knows them to be, but as they seemed to him. The people, and the things that most concern him personally, however mean and insignificant, take large proportions in his picture because they stand so near to him. He shows you his Dragoman, and the gaunt features of his Arabs, his tent, his kneeling camels, his baggage strewn upon the sand; but the proper wonders of the land — the cities, the mighty ruins and mountains of bygone ages, he throws back faintly into the distance. You may listen to him forever without learning much in the way of Statistics...

In *Manimahesh*, however, the objective facts like the ‘mighty ruins and mountains of bygone ages’ are not thrown into the distance. All that the travel writer narrates, therefore, is not subjective, but is greatly intermingled with his personal observations. In this travelogue, the narrator’s meetings with Masterji, the ranger Mr. Sood, Doctor Sahib and others have the flavour of a singular interaction that only he is equipped to reconstruct.

### 4.5.4 Dialogue

That brings us to a second very important aspect of modern day travel writing, and that is dialogue. There are instances of many such dialogues in the text under consideration, which help us to chart the writer’s views on life, religion, regional superstitions etc. For instance, in para 10, they first come across a shop in the village of Lahul. Even without resorting to direct speech, the author is able to convey a sense of the rapport struck between them and the shopkeeper on the basis of the shopkeeper’s claiming to have visited some well-known spots in Calcutta.

At the ranger’s house, they meet a kindred and cheerful spirit in Mr. Sood, who will not let them stay in the bungalow, but would rather have them stay with him because he is so deprived of human company. Thus having made the initial gesture of friendship, he generously introduces them to Chatterjee Saheb, the doctor, so that they can carry out some conversation in Bengali. Both are very happy at the fortuitous meeting in the remote Himalayas, and they exchange notes about their background. They find that they lived very near each other in Bhawanipore in Calcutta.

Writing about late twentieth century travel writing, Susan Bassnett says:

Though the I — narrator still occupies a dominant position, the increasing use of dialogue in travel writing has ... [made]
the travel text resemble the novel much more closely. The protagonist engages in conversations that introduce a range of other characters into the narrative, and the reader is expected to believe that such conversations which apparently transcend any language barrier are recorded rather than invented.

Could you pick out examples of dialogues that seem significant in the context of the portion that is in your syllabus?

4.5.5 Social Commentary

Travel writing in the twentieth century tends to focus on the relationship between the individual and the societies through which the writer passes. Depending on the interest of the writer, s/he writes about the ethno-cultural traits, the socio-economic conditions, the educational opportunities, the proportion of locals versus migrants or anything else. For instance, using dialogue cleverly, the writer describes how his companion Himadri demolishes in one fell swoop the local superstition of the people about not allowing corn cobs to be plucked from their farm before undertaking a festive ritual heralding the new crop. By pointing out that bears have eaten some of the corn cobs already, Himadri convinces the shopkeeper to imagine that the bears have likewise eaten the same corn cobs that he would give to them.

To keep alive our ethnographic interest, it is essential that the author present the local and tribal people as they are. The description of the tribal people, the Gaddis, does not abound in this part of the narrative, although we are told on page 4 of the travels that “They had the same [Italics mine] cords around their waists” and that “They were smoking hookahs”. This is so inadequate that it does not help in speculating the form, physique and embellishments of a Gaddi, in the way that an urban mind would like to visualize a person from a remote area, belonging to a rare tribal community. The Gaddis have actually already been described in Part 7 of the travels, which is not in your course (see glossary).

4.5.6 Humour

Certain incidents, like the one about the corn cobs, contribute to humour in more ways than one. The author and Himadri are tempted by the bhuttas in the farm — when they are denied those, their insistence virtually shows them to be greedy and so desperately desirous of the succulent, mouthwatering bhuttas that they will not let go of an opportunity to eat them. However, in the process, a serious subject like the local superstition about when to eat a bhutta is taken up, and the superstition debunked by Himadri’s irrefutable logic that if the bears could have taken away some bhuttas before the ceremony, surely it could be assumed that the bears have also taken the ones that they are going to be offered. The humour is also created out of the juxtaposition of the rationality of Himadri’s mind as contrasted to that of the shopkeeper, which is imbibed/entrenched in local old wives’ tales.

In part 11, after narrating the story of the Brahmini Devi who had to be appeased before doing almost anything that is within her ambit or sphere of influence, the author tells us that he has heard that the plentiful water in Varmore will now be used to generate electricity. Hearing of this, Himadri
asks Sood in a tongue-in-cheek manner, "Has the Devi's permission been taken?" This remark undercuts the traditional belief in the power of the Brahmini Devi. Can you point out what is so incongruous and out-of-context about this question and how it adds a dash of spice to the story?

Unconventional characters also account for much of the humour in a travel narrative, which brings you to another major preoccupation of a modern day travel text.

4.5.7 Characters

A work of fiction necessarily entails some interaction among various characters in the narrative. But a non-fictional work like a travel tale may or may not have unique ‘characters’ to liven up its atmosphere or to weave together a story line. This travel account, you will notice, has some very interesting characters who colour the narrative, and they are both locals as well as those who have migrated to Varmore. To begin with, there is the genial Masterji who coaxes the shopkeeper to give the travellers some bhutta from the farm, although according to the custom of the place, it can only be plucked after appropriately auspicious rituals and ceremonies. The Doctor Saheb is somebody with whom the author and Himadri gain a longer and deeper acquaintance. He turns out to be a mysterious character from Bengal who seems to be alone in the world and yet claims that he has a family whom he never visits and who never visit him. At one point, he even starts explaining why it is difficult for him and his family to meet, but he quickly changes the subject, showing that there is something about it which he does not want to divulge. This puzzle is not solved till the end of Part 11, and thus remains a matter of unrelieved suspense. He does not socialise with the people in his neighbourhood, although he is perfectly amiable when he meets them. Part 10 ends with Doctor Saheb’s visit to the ranger Sood’s house, but refusing dinner, which he had promised to have with them. Such eccentricities in a character make the human interactions in the narrative worth reading about, although they are not explained or worked out to a logical culmination as they usually are in a work of fiction.

At the end of part 8, the writer and Himadri see a Sadhu in saffron clothes, overseeing and sometimes participating in repairing the damaged portion of a farmland that had crumbled due to the impact of a strong waterfall. He is referred to as an “embodied inspiration”, a kind of “inspiration personified”, and in part 10, they are actually taken for a ‘darshan’ of the Naga Baba, who seems to be older than the stones and the trees. Not even a blade of grass, it seems, grows there without his instructions. He is responsible for restoration of old temples, construction of roads, opening of schools, building of hospitals and maintenance of dhamasalas. The narrative continues with many stories about the Naga Baba, particularly the one about how he prevented an English commissioner from opening a liquor store in the vicinity of the market and temples. He has no political clout or economic power that makes him so revered among the people, yet the doctor says that he is like a Raja, because the value system of the place is different from that of towns and cities. Throughout his life, although Umprasad Mukhopadhyay met and interacted with such a wide variety of people belonging to a colourful range of places, he philosophically said to Salil Dutta that one cannot get a greater companion than oneself in this life.
Can you point out some of the oddities, foibles, mysteries and admirable traits of the characters in this excerpt? Yet how are these ‘characters’ different from the characters in a work of fiction? Do they evolve in the course of the narrative?

4.5.8 Nature

In traversing a mountainous region, descriptions of nature are an integral part of the text. The excerpt in your course only has parts 8-11, and it therefore does not cover the really thrilling glimpse of Manimahesh, earned after a laboured climb through breathtakingly beautiful, majestic and inaccessible terrain. However, even as they are going towards Godar and Varmore through the Bhudol valley, the mountain and the river, which is a tributary of the river Irawati, are described in vivid detail. They seem to come alive with the physical attributes of a human being or an animate creature. In para 7, the author tries to draw a contrast between the two banks of the river:

The road was on the left of the river cut alongside the steep mountain. Black rocks. These were black rocks which looked as if hooded snakes were hanging over our heads. It seemed as we were walking through a tunnel. There was a moist darkness all around. On the other downward side too, the steep walls of the mountain could be seen. The gorge of the river lay in the middle. But the upper areas of the mountain opposite did not seem all that steep, those seemed to have risen more gently. On that side there were a few clusters of trees, green grass and the surroundings were without the overhanging shadows. It looked bright in the morning sun. The two banks of the same river were so dissimilar.

It is through word-pictures like the one above that the reader can familiarize himself/herself with the mountainous panorama.

In Part II, the village of Varmore, nestling amidst the forest, is described in the following words:

Along the slope of the mountain houses stood in terraced formations. Built of wood and stones. The terrace was covered with slate rocks. Down there, everything was entirely different. A wide table land in the lap of the mountain, 7007 ft. above sea level. A calm and quiet environment. The gigantic deodars had created a dense shadowy canopy. In that half-light, one could see temples scattered here and there. They bore the evidences of the architectural artistry of olden times.

In the Bengali version, the compound word for ‘half-light’ is ‘alo-chhaya’, which means a more complex and subtle intermingling of ‘light’ and ‘shade’ than ‘half-light’, and conjures up a visual feast that can be imagined photographically.

Although it is a description that combines heterogeneous facets of a rural habitat like living abodes, temples, and the canopy of deodar trees, the reader
can holistically visualize the picture perfect plateau that accommodates all these.

4.5.9 History and Myth

Any place one visits, quite apart from having a climate and natural environ that is in some way different from where one actually lives, is also steeped in history, even if it is not an earth-shattering one that changed the map of the world. In section 8 itself, in para 5, when they reach Kharamukh, Himadri says “So this must be the same Kharamukh, where according to the myth, Rajkumar Jayastambha had been met by the Saint Agrachari”. The author does not respond to this statement, but hurries him on, and the historical background of the place is only taken up in the last section (part 11) of the excerpt in your course. Although that also does not take up the story of the meeting between Rajkumar Jayastambha and the saint Agrachari, this sentence of Himadri’s arouses the reader’s curiosity and creates an aura of suspense about the history of the place — both mythical and authentic. If the site has also salvaged interesting archaeological relics, architectural marvels, art and sculpture conserved over centuries, there is so much to write about. However, even if it is not very renowned for its history, there are still legends and folklore that contribute to its character. And that is what has been discussed in Part 11 of the travel tale.

Part 11 of the narrative blends history and legend, reality and myth in an intertwining narrative, in which the interface between the two are often blurred and it is difficult to distinguish between the two. It would be useful for our purpose to try and retrieve the truth from the hearsay and fictional accounts in this seamless account of fact and folklore.

The stone carvings on the Chamba temples chronicle the rule of a dynasty that goes back 1500 years in time. They weave together various historical as well as fictionalized accounts of the reign of kings like Aditya Burman, Meru Burman, Ajiya Burman, Lakshmi Burman and Mushan Burman. Of these, the details of how a ban on the killing of rats was imposed contribute to an interesting narrative in the text. Let us try to reconstruct its events in sequence:

i) Lakshmi Burman was killed and his kingdom was taken over by the Kiras (foreign aggressors).

ii) His wife was being carried in a palanquin to a safer place by the Wazir and the Raj Purohit.

iii) Tormented by labour pain, the Rani gave birth to a child in a cave, and in fear, abandoned the child and joined her escorts.

iv) When they went back to the cave, they found that the infant was being guarded by rats. That is how he attained the name Mushan Burman, for ‘mushik’ means ‘rat’ in Sanskrit.

v) The queen and the infant took shelter in a Brahmin’s house, and later when their royal identity was discovered, they were sent to the palace of the King of Suket.

vi) Mushan Burman was married to the princess of Suket.
vii) He organized a regiment of soldiers and won back the kingdom of Brahmapur.

He imposed a ban on the killing of rats in his kingdom. The author then cites another example of a place which has a ban on the killing of rats, and wonders if there is any connection between the two.

What is the moral of the Mushan Burman story?

Similarly, the story of a unique relationship between Sahil Burman and a yogi called Charpatnath is told towards the end. What illustrations do you find in it of the king's reverence and commemoration of the yogi?

The tale of how a kund was fashioned by Ganesh and named Ardha Gaya in order to appease Parvati when Shiva refused to take her to Gaya for a holy dip is also an intrinsic part of Hindu folklore that sanctifies the kund for visitors. Why does this story get retold here and does it have any connection with the history of the place?

The story behind the Brahmini Devi's temple is obviously one that has filtered down through generations, but the actual temple and the 84 surrounding ones, which are supposed to have come into existence when the 84 followers of Shiva who had encroached on the Brahmini Devi's area, were petrified into lingas. That is why the place is called Chowrashi. This, along with, Shiva's decree that pilgrims to Manimahesh must bathe in the Brahmini fall and pray in the Brahmini temple before proceeding to Manimahesh, is something that a sceptic might find hard to believe. The name Brahmapur, which was later changed to Varmore, was also supposed to have been derived from the Brahmini Devi.

Which of the above stories do you think are historically authentic, and which are part of their local legends? Can you think of other places in India which are named after legendary characters?

4.5.10 Religion

Most of the legends about the place are Hindu in origin, for the folklore and myths of a particular locale are usually a part of the religious beliefs of the people of the place. Although the writer and his friend are going on a pilgrimage to what is considered by the Hindus a holy place, and when he sees the Sadhu in saffron, he thinks of it as an auspicious omen, they are not besotted by superstition. This is amply demonstrated in the episode of the corncocks, in which they override the local superstition about not eating bhutta before a proper ceremony. Also, they choose to go to Manimahesh somewhat later than the propitious time for pilgrimages, because they do not like crowds and want to imbibe the natural ambience of the place in relative seclusion.

4.5.11 Food

The multi-faceted episode of the bhutta is also a guide to the eating habits of the place. We are told that “All over Chamba corn was the staple food”. The ripe corn, spread out to dry over rooftops “as if the roofs were covered with golden sheets” is another use of simile, but it is not a natural object or
phenomenon that is compared to the human body. Most travelogues are replete with descriptions of local food, which, unlike travel brochures, deploy descriptions and illustrations of food to advertise eating places, lets people who have never ventured into that territory savour its cuisine imaginatively. In Vikram Seth’s ‘From Heaven Lake’, another travel fragment that is in your course (MEG-7, Indian English Literature), for instance, the narrative is punctuated by the writer’s stopping at the most unexpected of places for a refill — either a snack or a meal, and each of them is a unique gastronomical experience in itself.

4.6 LANGUAGE

4.6.1 Figures of Speech and Style

We are told that a snowy lake nestles in the lap of Manimahesh. This is a metaphorical way of describing the way the mountain and the lake, which are configured in a geographical interlocking with each other, the lake positioned within the mountain. It also personifies them, for the mountain and the lake are visualized as archetypal images of mother and child, and humanizes them to that extent. It would help you to look out for other such figures of speech all along the travels — particularly metaphors. In the second paragraph itself, the author describes a wide valley of the river with the mountains far apart, `as if Irawati had stretched her limbs and was relaxing.’ The figurative description of a woman’s body continues here, this time not as a maternal icon, but as a woman in indolent repose.

A little later (para 7), the road which is ‘cut alongside the steep mountains’ is actually described in the original Bangla version as ‘having been carved out of the mass of the body of the mountains’. Metaphors and similes of the human body lend themselves very graciously to the outlining of a mountainous region with a river between its two ranges. In para 8, we are told that the mountains seemed to be smeared with snow as they raised their heads towards the sky’. On page 4, where the travellers see the ravages of a huge landslide in Cheld Ghar, “it seemed as if someone had clawed off a huge portion of the mountain face”. Now, the phrase ‘mountain face’ can be used independently of any resonances of the human face, but when it suggests that part of it has got ‘clawed off’, the resemblance with a human face becomes very obvious in the description of violence that human bodies are sometimes subjected to. The sense of the mountain having undergone some devastation continues in the sentence “Amidst the green trees all around, the mountain stood, with severe wounds on its body”.

To come back to para 7, there is a description of black rocks in the Varmore or Bhudol valley, which look “as if hooded snakes were hanging over our heads”. Here, unlike some of the earlier descriptions, the two objects of comparison are linked by ‘like’, ‘as if’ or ‘as though’, and these are, therefore, similes. The difference between a simile and a metaphor, of course, is that while in a simile, the two objects are merely compared on the basis of a likeness, in a metaphor, one object is equated to the other. A metaphor is, therefore, much more of a superimposition, more complex and needs to be understood with greater care. The point of alerting you to these metaphors, similes and personifications is to sensitize you to such figures of speech all along the way. Keep your eyes open for locating any more such uses of
language. For instance, Part II opens with a comparison of the village centre of Varmore to a very precious stone hidden within the depths of the forest by a Brahmini. In the next paragraph, the temples, with their head erect, perennially silent, look “like monks in meditation in the sacred woods”.

In the same part, describing the experience of looking around the temples which had stone carvings that told their story, the author says that the experience was like looking at an ancient manuscript in the archives of Indian culture that had been preserved with great care. What is being compared to what? Can you find any more examples of such similes and metaphors?

The memoir, as we can judge from the excerpt in the course, is written in a diary form. It was perhaps originally written to just keep brief notes of the author’s trip, and some of it has been retained as such. Apart from elaborations like the ones pointed out above, there are many instances where staccato phrases or terse sentences are all that the reader has to guide him through the terrain of Varmore, Bhudol Valley, Lahul and Manimahesh. The second and the third paras, which describe the valley with some embellishments, also sometimes just record some functional information. “Wide valley”. Or “Wooden bridge”. Or even “We advanced happily”. But depending on whether the situation demands it, the author gets into detailed conversation or lavish natural descriptions. Are there any other stylistic devices you can think of that make this work distinctive?

4.7 LET US SUM UP

This Unit has, I am sure, given you a fascinating glimpse of the writer’s travel to Manimahesh in all its aspects, and the people he has met and also the brush with history and myth he has had on his travel.

4.8 THE TEXT AS A TRANSLATION

While we are on the subject of language and style, it is imperative to remember that this narration it is only a translation from Bengali and not an original piece. We are therefore talking about language at one remove from the original language in which the narrative was written. A translation can never be an exact replica of the text in the source language, particularly if it is a translation from an Indian language to English. Therefore, those of us who can read the original, should not expect that it will communicate without any distortion all the colloquial expressions, ethnic words, uses of proverbs and descriptions of customs and traditions that are there in the source language. However, what is written in the target language should read smoothly and convey the sense of what has been written in the source language. This is something that Sanjukta Dasgupta’s translation (Sahitya Akademi, 2006) has perhaps been able to do.

Having read the text both in Bengali and English, however, I cannot help pointing out a few somewhat inappropriately transcribed words and phrases. In the second para, ‘the road followed the curves of the river’, it says, and yet
the Bengali word used for ‘curves’ is ‘dhara’, which means ‘torrent’ or ‘current’ or ‘flow’. In para 8, the *slim* course of the river is not a very happy expression to describe a river when it is at its narrowest. In the next para, the last sentence is “The village was named Lahu”. Reading it, one senses almost as if the writer is talking about a time when the name Lahu was actually given to the village, whereas all that he needs to say is “The village was called Lahu” or “The name of the village was Lahu”. On the next page, when the shopkeeper says very ‘seriously’ that it is not permitted to pluck corn from the farmland yet, what the Bengali version conveys is ‘grimly’ or ‘solemnly’.

There are some informal, conversational bits that have been transcribed to very formal English. When the Bengali text says something like “Travelling on that route has stopped for this year”, the English rendition says “there was no permission for anyone to travel on that route”. Again, when the shopkeeper says something like “It will not do to pluck corn from the farmland yet”, the English translation reads “it is not permitted to pluck corn from the farmland yet”. In both instances, the word ‘permission’ or ‘permitted’ is an interpolation that could easily have been done without. Similarly, something that is said in the passive voice, possibly with an intention of distancing, has been changed to active — e.g. “you cannot get them now” to “I cannot give them to you now”. Likewise, in part 9, “all arrangements for our journey would be made” has been changed to “he would make all arrangements for our journey”.

There are other expressions that I found were not close to the original. When the writer and Himadri ask if they can go to the forest bungalow and ‘rest’, the actual Bengali version asks something like “Can’t we go there and settle down?” A little earlier, a sentence that reads “This secluded, inaccessible area of the Himalayas seemed ideal for establishing a capital town” is, in the Bengali version, something akin to “The ambience of this secluded, inaccessible area of the Himalayas was so beautiful that one could establish a capital town there”. Again, the word ‘ideal’ has been interpolated. A sentence in the English version reads “Now then we sat down without further anxiety weighing on our minds and formal introductions began”. It could have been shortened a great deal to “Relieved, we sat down, and formal introductions began”, because the Bengali version also only uses the word ‘nishchinta’ for ‘relieved’.

At times, however, an easy shortcut by substituting a word for a phrase has not done justice to the phrase. In part 11, after the description of Varmore village, in the next para, it says “Brahmini Devi was enraged to find strangers in her territory”. However, the Bangla text says that she was enraged to see this *unauthorised encroachment* into her territory. Look at the sentence “This was like catching a glimpse of an ancient invaluable, many splendidised manuscript that had been treasured with great care”. The Bengali text reads something like this: “This was like catching a glimpse of an invaluable illustrated document that had been brought down from the shelves (kulangi) of a library of ancient Indian culture”. The sense of the original is certainly there in the translation, but there are a few flaws. The adjective ‘ancient’ has been used for Indian culture, but the translation seems to ascribe the adjective ‘ancient’ to the so-called ‘book’. Also, the word ‘library’, which makes the description so graphic, is missing. “Inscriptions on slabs of stone, and a wooden temple hand-carved by a skilled artiste” has been translated to the passive voice as “Words had been chiselled into the hand carved stone walls”.
In a later passage, it is said about Sahil Burman that he was the most famous king in the history of Chamba. The English translation has bypassed this sentence altogether. This could have been an unintentional slip, but should not have missed the editor's eye.

Going over some of these minute details of translation is not to find evidence to the effect that the translation is inadequate. Sanjukta Dasgupta's translation is competent. Pointing out some finer items that needed a more careful handling is only to initiate you into always taking translation with a pinch of salt, particularly if it is from a regional language that you are literate in and which you have some access to. It, however, entails a serious and close reading of both the texts.

4.9 GLOSSARY

2 a)  
Proliferated:  
flowered  
Discourse:  
a formal discussion of a topic in speech or writing  
Canon:  
Body of texts that has been privileged over the popular and the commonplace, a set of literary or artistic works considered to be permanently established as being of the highest quality.

Corpus:  
body  

b)  
Vicarious:  
at one remove, second hand  
Homogenized:  
made uniform or identical  
Posits:  
proposes, states  
Regimen:  
routine  
Congenial:  
amicable  

c)  
Underscores:  
highlights  
Ethno-cultural:  
belonging to a subgroup within a larger national group, that is culturally similar to the larger group, and yet has its distinctive traits  
Collates:  
puts together  
Socio-anthropological: related to a comparative study of human societies and cultures  

3.  
Sporadic:  
random, uneven, irregular  
Trajectory:  
direction  

5.  
Ambience:  
atmosphere  
Historicity:  
historical authenticity
Tantalize: tease, titillate
Enigmatic: puzzling, mysterious
Reclusive: leading a solitary life
Hallowed: consecrated, revered, believed as holy

8.

Nuances: subtle differences in shades of meaning
Milieu: social environment
Re recuperate: recover

9. (b)

Varmore: sub-teshil of Chamba district, seat of the Gaddis, originating from the name Brahmapore. Another name of the place is Gaderam or Goderan.
Sanctity: piety, holiness
Sacrosanct: too important to be interfered with
Topography: geographical terrain

9. (c)

Sensitize: make one sensitive to
Prioritization: giving precedence over others

9. (d)

Fortuitous: opportune, fortunate

9. (e)

Demolishes: destroys
Ethnographic: related to the study of people and their cultures
Cords: a forty to sixty yards belt made of wool around the waist, weighing 2-3 kgs, which is a trademark of the Gaddis. In the Bengali narrative, it is called a ‘dora’, and in the 7th part, a detailed description is given. Even women wear it, and use it to tie sheep and goats, pitch tents, and to pull up animals who have fallen off the mountains. The ropes are so strong that they can be tied to rocks and trees and one can climb up with their support. These ‘dora’s are also called ‘Shiv ji ki jata’ because these people are all devotees of Shiv. Varmore is also called Shivbhumi.

Gaddi: An ancient tribe of Varmore, which is also called Shivbhumi. This area is also called Shiv’s ‘gaddi’ or seat, and that is how the tribe has acquired its name. They do not look Pahari. Their ancestors were Shakas, akin to Aryas. They used to roam about with horses and sheep, but when the Huns attacked them, they fled in all directions with their animals. Some of them travelled
southwards, towards India. Some of their branches went to the plains and even established little kingdoms there. But those who still tamed animals are still in the Himalayas. Their blood is nomadic. Some roam in the Bushahr and Tehri regions of the Himalayas with buffaloes. They are called ‘Gujjars’, and have embraced Islam. Others wander around Chamba, Mandi, Lahul etc. They are called ‘Gaddi’. They tame sheep and goats. In emulation of Vasudev, the grandson of the Shaka king Kanishka, they adopted the Hindu religion. They are also agricultural people, build huts, and have their separate land and social life.

**Embellishments:**

adornments, ornaments

9(f)

- **Succulent:** juicy
- **Debunked:** exposed, ridiculed
- **Imbued:** entrenched, steeped
- **Tongue-in-cheek:** in an ironical manner, jokingly although apparently seriously
- **Juxtaposed:** placed side by side
- **Undercut:** undermine, damage, subvert
- **Ambit:** range
- **Incongruous:** incompatible, inappropriate

9(g)

**Eccentricities:** peculiarities

9(h)

- **Familiarize:** acquaint
- **Panorama:** vista, scene, spectacle
- **Heterogeneous:** complex, of a wide variety
- **Holistically:** using an approach where the parts are interconnected to the whole

9 (i)

- **Salvaged:** excavated, dug up
- **Intertwining:** overlapping, woven together
- **Interface:** meeting point
- **Seamless:** a whole without stitches or joints
- **Petrified:** turned into stone
- **Sceptic:** non-believer, cynic

9 (j)

- **Besotted:** overwhelmed
- **Override:** overrule
- **Propitious:** auspicious, favourable
Deployed: marshalled, assembled
Savour: relish, taste
Cuisine: food with its local flavour and specialities
Gastronomical: related to food

9(I)
Configured: shaped, put together or arranged in a particular form
Archetypal: like a recurrent symbol or motif in literature
Icon: image, symbol
Resonances: echoes, reminders

9. (I b)
Staccato: short, detached style, usually used for music, but can be applied to speech or writing as well
Distinctive: special

9. (I c)
Transcribed: translated
Rendition: version, rendering
Interpolation: insertion

4.10 QUESTIONS

1. Elaborate the myth surrounding the origin of the name of Brahmapur or Varmore.
2. What does the writer say about the Naga Baba? What is his attitude towards him?
3. Discuss the stylistic aspects of this essay.
4. What do you learn about the history of the territory surrounding Brahmapur from the excerpt in your course?
5. In what way is Manimahesh a personal memoir rather than an objective travelers' guide to the land and its people?
6. Manimahesh tells us about the religion, customs, staple food and culture of its people. Discuss.
7. Manimahesh is about a site of immense natural beauty, and yet that beauty is punctuated by other vibrant happenings in a way that it does not pall. Do you agree? Discuss.
8. Discuss how the writer creates humour in the text, both by descriptions of the society of the place and the individuals who live in it.
9. Enumerate some of the historical legends and myths about the valley surrounding Manimahesh.
10. Evaluate the place of this text within the genre of travel writing in India, emphasizing its salient features.

4.11 SUGGESTED READINGS


Literature of Travel and Exploration An Encyclopaedia. A three volume set by Routledge.


Encyclopaedia of Indian Writers: Akademi Laurels Vol. 2. New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi.