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Gyanganj: Unraveling the Mysteries of the Himalayan Enclave, By Eishan Tiwari, Independently Published, 2023. ISBN-13: 979-8863057088. pp. 170. Rs. 2,747.

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A scholarly book on Gyanganj in English remains long-awaited. Especially since the myth is becoming increasingly popular in our times. Already, two English novels based on it have been published. These are Chandan Kumar Pathak's *The Beckoning of Gyanganj* (2014), and Divyank Rastogi's *The Gyanganj Legacy* (2021). However, despite the growing interest in Gyanganj, not much is available in print which may satisfy the curiosity of common readers. No academic study on Gyanganj has been published till now. The materials, which are at all available, are diffuse and lack scholarly analysis. What makes it even more inconvenient to many readers is the scarcity of English writings on the topic. Avadhoota Nandananda's *Autobiography of an Avadhoota* (part 1) is the only original book in English which describes Gyanganj. Other works on Gyanganj were all written in Indian languages like Bengali and Hindi. Most of these remain untranslated so far. This prevents foreign readers, as well as readers from other parts of India, from learning more about this topic. To my knowledge, only two English translations of writings on Gyanganj have been published so far. Incidentally, both are translations of Bengali texts. Gautam Chatterjee's *Jñānaganja: A Space for timeless divinity* (2014) was the first to appear. This a translation of the famous scholar Mahamahopadhyaya Pandit Gopinath Kaviraj's book *Jñānaganja*. Recently, in 2018, the eminent geneticist Dr. Debojyoti Chakraborty has published a translation of the Hindu ascetic Shrimat Shankar Swami's 2015 Bengali book on the topic. Chakraborty's translation is titled as *The Mystic Yoga of Tibet and the Surreal Gyanganj*. Both works suffer from some limitations. Chatterjee capriciously excises portions of the original text, without providing his reasons for doing so. His work is full of stylistic and grammatical errors. Moreover, Kaviraj's original narrative is itself anfractuous and, at times, downright confusing. The abstruse religious discussions, which he introduces every now and then, further challenge the readers' comprehension. In comparison

with Chatterjee's work, Chakraborty's translation is impeccable. But only a small portion of Shankar Swami's book is actually about Gyanganj. The rest of it focuses on the author's other numinous experiences. Both these books thus fail to provide a seamless narrative. These thereby become incapable of fully satiating the readers' curiosity about Gyanganj.

Given the dearth of English writings on Gyanganj, Eishan Tiwari had a great opportunity before him. Here is a yet little-known topic, which is receiving a burgeoning interest over the past few years. The lack of academic writings on it gives an author the much sought after chance of presenting a ground breaking study. For the uninitiated, Gyanganj is believed to be a secret site in the Himalayas which is only accessible to high-level spiritual adepts - like expert *yogis* and *tantriks*. By most accounts, it is located somewhere in Tibet. It is usually envisioned as a sort of educational institution which imparts occult and spiritual knowledges to deserving aspirants. Gyanganj is also reputed to be a home to elite ascetics, seers and holy men - some of who are reportedly hundreds, and even thousands, of years old. A few writers even claim that it is not an earthly location at all but exists in a different plane beyond ordinary space and time. For instance, Shankar Swami asserts that it exists in the fourth dimension (Shankar Swami 11). Leaving aside the fantastic and the otherworldly which cannot be rationally explained, Gyanganj puts forward several questions for a researcher's consideration. Like, how, when and why did the myth of Gyanganj come into existence? Who were its main exponents? To what extent did their accounts of Gyanganj differ from each other? Answers to these questions become called for, given the growing popularity of the Gyanganj myth.

Eishan Tiwari's *Gyanganj: Unraveling the Mysteries of the Himalayan Enclave* holds the distinction of being the first English book which is entirely devoted to Gyanganj. If only it was as well-researched! The book only reiterates vague generalizations and banal stories about Gyanganj, without trying to probe into the myth. It thus adds nothing new to existing knowledge. Even the uninitiated readers are unlikely to profit much from it.

In his "Note to Readers" at the very beginning of the book, Tiwari promises to "delve into the legends, geography, inhabitants, and spiritual practices associated with Gyanganj" (2).ⁱ The twenty chapters which follow, along with the "Introduction" and the "Conclusion", try to fulfil this promise. The very first thing which strikes an observant reader is that Tiwari does not acknowledge his sources anywhere in the book. It lacks a proper bibliography. Acknowledging the sources was in order, as the author does not write from his own

experiences. He is entirely indebted to others for his information on Gyanganj. It is true that the second appendix at the end of the book claims to provide a “curated list” of resources on Gyanganj – reading materials, movies, web resources and the like. But a quick glance through these is enough to show that most of these have nothing to do with Gyanganj. The author even commits a mistake here, when he claims that the novel *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse “explores the spiritual journey of Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha” (164). In reality, though the Buddha does appear as one of the characters in the novel, the novel is not about his spiritual experiences. It is about the experiences of the eponymous character who just happens to be the Buddha’s namesake. On top of that, the novel has nothing to do with Gyanganj and does not even name it. Ironically, the books which do refer to Gyanganj, like the ones mentioned in this review, are not cited at all. This debunks the author’s claim of probing into the available materials on Gyanganj.

A brief description of the chapters is in order here. The “Introduction” acquaints the readers with Gyanganj, which is described as “a place that transcends the boundaries of the ordinary world” (Tiwari 9). Curiously, the author claims that the Tibetan Buddhist teacher Padmasambhava had visited Gyanganj (*sic passim*). He does not cite his source/s, and, to my knowledge, no such tale exists at all. Perhaps, the writer’s assumption in this matter is born out of his identification of Gyanganj with the Tibetan Shambhala. However, one first needs to prove with proper evidence that Shambhala and Gyanganj are the one and the same. The author fails to do this. Moreover, he himself admits in the second chapter that many believe that these two places are altogether different realms (24). The first chapter, titled “Legends and Lore”, claims that the *Vedas* and the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* refer to Gyanganj. Again, this claim is left unsubstantiated. The author ought to have cited the specific verses from these texts to prove his point. He claims that stories about Gyanganj are orally circulated in remote Himalayan villages, without citing a single one of these! Chapter two “Geographical Conundrums” mentions the Russian mystic, traveler, and writer Nicholas Roerich’s search for Gyanganj. But Roerich was not interested in, and probably did not even know about, a place called Gyanganj. He was interested in Shambhala. In Roerich’s book *Shambhala*, the word “Gyanganj” does not appear at all. Again, the author does not cite the source of his information on Roerich. The third chapter “The Ethereal Inhabitants” promises to investigate the legends about the ‘immortal’ inhabitants of Gyanganj. However, Tiwari does not look into any of the primary sources on Gyanganj. This invalidates his stated objective. All he offers are vague generalizations. Chapter four “The Spiritual Technology” describes the spiritual and psychic powers of the inhabitants

of Gyanganj. Conspicuous by absence here are the Bengali miracle worker Vishuddhananda Paramahansa (1853 – 1937) and his fabled ‘solar science’, which he had allegedly learned from Gyanganj and which he employed to perform his frequent miracles. Chapters five to seven offer vague generalizations and do not merit analysis. Chapter eight “Scientific Investigations” offers to reveal ‘scientific’ researches conducted on Gyanganj so far. In effect, it says nothing worthwhile and no actual research is cited. Chapters nine to sixteen promise to probe into diverse topics like legends of Gyanganj, the Himalayas – its healing properties, art and architecture, sacred sites, and recent expeditions to Gyanganj. However, no primary source is consulted anywhere. Nor is there any analysis. The title of chapter seventeen “Gyanganj in Pop Culture” appears promising. However, no actual work is either mentioned or analyzed – including the two novels mentioned in this review. The remaining chapters, eighteen to twenty, again add little to existing knowledge. Chapter twenty “Reflections and Meditations” teaches some meditation techniques, though it is not clear whether these techniques are the author’s own invention or whether he is indebted to any source. The “Conclusion” ends by presenting Gyanganj as a symbol of spiritual quest. “Appendix A” provides the glossary, while “Appendix B” provides a list of resources on Gyanganj. As already mentioned, no actual primary source on Gyanganj has been mentioned here at all.

So far, we have considered only the weaknesses of the book. But it must be admitted that the book is important, if only because it is the first book of its kind. While it really does not tell us much about Gyanganj, by bringing it to the attention of ordinary readers the book does them a service. One must also acknowledge that the picturesque photographs which appear throughout the book add to its beauty.

The mysteries of Gyanganj remain to be unraveled. While the book fails to keep its promise of doing this, it at least acquaints us with the topic. One may hope that this will eventually inspire more studies on the subject.

Endnotes

ⁱ All citations are from the Kindle edition.

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