Popular writings – elucidating natural history – hold mesmerizing forte over the scientific writing of the same cluttered with innumerable references and cross references. As writer re-explores his sphere of freedom with judgments and travelogue, words started revealing the portrayals of novel. All the same, an autobiography, Peter Smetacek’s BUTTERFLIES ON THE ROOF OF THE WORLD: A MEMOIR possesses same passionate clutch. It is the story of a boy hailed from the foothills of Himalaya, laden with divine beauty of elders and oaks, grassy meadows and hill-side ravines; brought with observing the splendor of ‘Orange Oakleafs’ in Bhimtal.

Though the theme tune of butterfly was his grandfather’s legacy, it actually got brushed-up by his parents. Peter’s father shared his interest on a common ground. He had huge collections on Lepidoptera and mother who was shocked to know that her child was crying for getting those scientific names. They never discouraged to the little eight years’ to walk four kilometers away from home into the forests with returning safety. White screens, mercury vapor lamps and a bowl with rotten fruits were the requisites of their evening entertainment. In 1983, after completing the schools, Peter started rebuilding the collections over the next three decades and celebrated his career in the subject butterflies. Today he has Butterfly Research Center in Bhimtal. He is the first post-independence Indian to describe a new taxon of butterfly in 2004 and has fourth largest collection of butterflies and moths (with 12,000 specimens) in India.

Peter’s writing possesses glory of keenness which is rather exception in Indian authorship. The story starts from MY FIRST BUTTERFLIES in Nainital. He made vivid reflection on history and art of collecting butterflies in OF COLLECTIONS AND COLLECTORS since 17th century. Readers also come across THE NAMING OF BUTTERFLIES, their identification, seasonal forms and mimics. And interpreted about “…butterfly can think”. During NIGHTS IN THE HIMALAYAN FORESTS, author give exquisite accounts on snakes, geckos, owls, beetles, spiders, mantises, dragonflies and… what not!

MOTHS ON THE MEADOWS enlightened the interrelationship between Lepidoptera fauna and bats. Readers would get surprised to know that honey of Himalayan Rock Bee could be poisonous! They would also encounter origin of the word butterfly, an unsound corruption of Flutter bye. MEN OF SCIENCE describes the lore of Lepidopterists along with stumble-strives of many butterfly enthusiasts. A certain species of moth – the Ghost – gets infected with a fungus and costs quite high as gold in the market flagging off a GOLDEN RUSH FOR THE GHOST. Other STRANGE TALES FROM THE HILLS are equally astonishing. Peter humorously tells how an off-road ride for HUNTING THE BLACK PRINCE which turned into an ordeal on the road. On this trip, he got entrapped in a Nepali euphemism associate with the phrase ‘butterfly hunters’. Cattle grazing has an overlooked effect on the existence of butterfly community. Author is quite certain regarding butterflies as weather prophets and reassuring their assistance to monitor our forests. Misfortunately, the entire population of the world’s largest butterfly, the Queen Alexandra’s Birdwing, restricted in an area roughly around hundred square kilometer and suffering survival threats. Meanwhile, “...we have failed to accept our place in the natural hierarchy” is fairly unobjectionable.

Above all, Peter’s writing has an untouched melody of graphic descriptions. Indeed, ‘lives of fortnights’ are at the heart of his entire life. Whenever, one reads natural history, he does not get perfect knowledge of the authors’ progeny. But combination amongst autobiography and natural history get this book a genuine blend and marked it as perfect ‘memoir’! Many authors have tried to describe such type of memoirs. Nevertheless, readers at large in India are still become habitual to sense such writings.

Of ‘memories of butterflies’, no doubt, they had already chaired in your Reading landscapes!

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