

Bias and slander in book reviews

Any author striving to publish a book puts in his best efforts before submitting it to any press. In most cases the manuscripts are reviewed before publication. Thus, reviewing a book is a serious business, requiring unbiased objectivity and an honest approach. A reviewer's job is onerous. Like an examiner who has to evaluate the answer according to the requirement of the question, a reviewer must not look beyond the stated purpose of a book. Limiting the purpose of a book is the prerogative of authors and not a reviewer. A reviewer should read the Preface to know the scope and aim of the book, meticulously go through all the chapters and evaluate their contents critically, pointing out the good points and also the inadequacies. While summing up he may, within the defined framework of the book, comment whether the book fulfils the aim specified in the Preface/Introduction. He may also offer his concluding critical comments. These well-laid steps, unfortunately were not followed in the review of *Geomorphology and Landforms: Illustration from the Himachal Himalaya*¹. As the title indicates, the book aims to illustrate various landforms with explanations about the agencies that created and controlled them. The book according to the Preface is for naturalists, environmentalists and to some extent undergraduates and also the layman. It was written inspired by the theme of International Year of Planet Earth trying to bring earth sciences to society. The reviewer unfortunately did not appreciate the spirit behind writing a popular as well as technical illustrated book based on 42 years of field work by three geologists in all remote and even hazardous corners of Himachal Himalaya, nor did he comment on the contents of the book which contained many unpublished data on Himachal glaciers and also some geomorphologic changes during the Quaternary. He did not say if the book justifies the aims as defined under the Preface. His suggestions that the authors should have discussed the evolution of the Himalaya and relate the geomorphology with climate are irrelevant. This was never the

aim of the book. Moreover, the landforms are dealt under river, glaciers, lakes etc. and obviously tell what controlled their formation. The geomorphology as we see it today is remodelled by the present climate. The reviewer's suggestions are like commenting on a book on modern Indian history and saying it does not deal with the story of the *Mahabharata*!

This review in a journal as important as *Current Science* will mislead the readers to believe our book is worthless. Had the book's senior author not been a preeminent Himalayan geologist, with universally acknowledged merit and reputation, the review could have even shaken the confidence of the authors as well as most readers. Subsequently, the book was reviewed by three more geologists, two from India and one from USA: (i) *Kashmir Times* (Saturday, 13 August 2011); (ii) *Journal of Geological Society of India* (2011, **79**, 278) and *Proceedings of Indian National Science Academy* (2012, **78**, 233–234). All three unanimously praised the book. Comments critical or complements are always welcome but deliberate distortions and designed slander for a book are painful, especially if these come from a veteran who could not be ignorant of the tenets of reviewing a publication. The bias is transparent and also unfortunate. Worth quoting are comments of the Louisiana University, geologist Alex Webb: 'A recent book – *Geology and Landforms: Illustrations from the Himachal Himalaya* – offers Earth's stories with captivating simplicity by building from a broad base of accessible observations: carefully arranged series of field photographs. Accompanying concise text and diagrammatic explanations offer guidance and background information. The direct access to well curated data allows the reader, novice and professional alike, to enjoy discovery. Therefore this book is fantastic for sharing the wonder of Earth's natural processes with friends and introductory students. It is not out of place as a textbook, but may be even better suited to the coffee table; and how many books can claim both?' In contrast to the *Cur-*

rent Science reviewer, he goes on to write: 'The series of photographs are meticulously ordered, beginning with active examples of the geomorphic system (e.g. merging glaciers, snout glaciers, terminal moraines) and moving gradually to increasingly relict signatures of such systems (e.g. from U-shaped valleys filled with active glaciers to cirques and remnant U-shaped valleys, glacial striations, and the last remnants of a lateral moraine in a landscape otherwise dominated by more recent river erosion). This approach gently leads the novice reader from the vision of a lay-person to the insight of the geoscientist.' '... Quotations from Tennyson, Shelley, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Browning and the Vedas introduce different chapters throughout the book, highlighting that for the authors, this book is an expression of romance. Ahluwalia is an established leader in both science and science outreach; Kumbkarni is both a Quaternary geologist and an award-winning photographer; Bhargava is nothing less than the most accomplished living Himalayan geologist in India. Their combined talents and their dedicated intent to communicate the wonders of Himalayan geomorphology have produced a masterpiece of geological outreach literature.'

The present practice in almost all the journals is to ask the authors to name the referees who may be inimical to them and who may be avoided from reviewing manuscripts. No such provision exists in the case of book reviews. A reviewer may kill even a well-written book. It is, therefore, suggested that the authors of the books should also be asked to name the reviewers who could be biased and should be excluded.

1. Tandon, S. K., *Curr. Sci.*, 2011, **100**, 559.

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