




## Hrishikesh: A Poem on Corrupted Landscape

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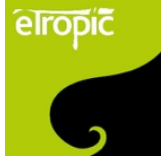
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### Abstract

This poem on the pilgrimage center of Hrishikesh set in a humid subtropical niche of the scenic Uttarakhand state, aims to capture the corruption of its cultural, religious and natural landscapes. Here, modernity — with its concomitant technologism — jostles for space with Hindu leitmotifs and traditions, causing pollution, ecological damage and environmental degradation. These are outcomes not just of distorted economic policies and skewed technological and developmental paradigms, but also the residuum of religious rituals, pollutants and garbage dumped into the holy Ganges.

Named after a form of the Hindu deity Vishnu, Hrishikesh, in Sanskrit, means “Lord of the Senses”. Nowadays, the town is more popularly known as Rishikesh (which means “the hair of a sage or ascetic”). This name, though etymologically erroneous, is not grammatically incorrect; it is, however, yet another pointer to the degeneration of the region’s pristinity. Here, not only is the natural environment under threat, but the rich traditions of Hinduism, too, are under assault from popular culture and mass consumerism. Such corruption is partly caused by the global yoga movement and the draw of international tourists who smoke cannabis on sacred riverbanks.

**Keywords:** Uttarakhand, Hinduism, environmental pollution, cultural degradation, landscape poetry



## Hrishikesh

**S**moke and pollution,  
 acrid and poisonous incense—  
 wafting up from the censers  
 in the valley's bowl,

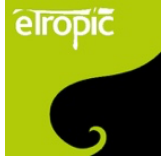
the tremulous homage  
 of puking factory chimneys  
 and farting trucks and buses  
 climbing to the edges of the sky.

The moon, its face scarred  
 by tears of acid rain,  
 wrinkles its nose in disgust  
 at the noxious fumes,  
 at the effluvium of civilization.

Wood axe and chainsaw  
 have denuded the hillsides  
 of their timber trees;  
 teak, rosewood, red cotton  
 have turned into  
 gnarled mishappen stumps.

With the impossible convolutions  
 of their yogic postures,  
 they lift amputated limbs  
 like leprous beggars and mendicants,  
 beseeching the gods high above.

The yellowed leaves of the *sal* trees,  
 such a favorite of Vishnu—  
 shed by the decrepit branches,  
 they flutter down like frayed parchments  
 of sepia shastra texts  
 into the gorges, into abysses  
 of despair and forgetting.



The inscrutable Himalayas, hulking  
in serrated outline  
against the snowy white northern sky,  
look on impassively

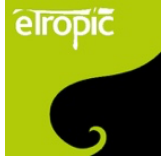
as their morainic faces are hazed  
with *ganja* and hashish smoke—  
cirrus wisps drifting across  
the tarns, pools and lakes,  
wreathing the ridges and escarpments.

Glazed with psychedelic dissonance,  
indifference and oblivion,  
the eyes of the yoga tourists,  
devotees, pilgrims and local guides  
stare unseeingly into the glacial distances.

Atop the jagged mountain ranges,  
a migraine of dark clouds  
presses down heavy fingers  
on the temples of Shiva,  
streaked with the sunset's  
vermilion and ash.

Tangled deodars, poplars, pines  
let down their matted hair  
from the deity's creased forehead  
where the divine river  
comes down to earth  
from the Milky Way.

The sins of millions collect here,  
transmuted by wind and sun,  
into boulders and scree  
over the eons—  
this, the rubble of time,  
on the bed of the Ganga.




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**Srinjay Chakravarti** is a writer, editor and translator based in Salt Lake City, Calcutta, India. He was educated at St Xavier's College, Calcutta and at universities based in Calcutta and New Delhi and holds a B.Sc. (Economics with Honors) and an M.A. (English). A former journalist with The *Financial Times* Group, he has worked on the editorial staff of an international online financial news service. Srinjay's creative writing, including poetry, short fiction and translations, has appeared in over 150 publications in 30-odd countries. These include journals and reviews of 25 colleges and universities. His first book of poems *Occam's Razor* (Writers Workshop, Calcutta: 1994) received the Salt Literary Award from Salt, the Australian literary and publishing organization headed by writer and academic John Kinsella, in 1995. He has won one of the top prizes (US \$7,500) in the Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Memorial Poetry Competition 2007–08. Website: [www.srinjaychakravarti.com](http://www.srinjaychakravarti.com)