
Kumaoni Language and Literature

Author(s): Trepan Singh Chauhan and Purabi Panwar

Source: *Indian Literature*, March–April, 2002, Vol. 46, No. 2 (208) (March–April, 2002), pp. 108–113

Published by: Sahitya Akademi

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23345725>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Indian Literature*

JSTOR

Kumaoni Language and Literature

Trepan Singh Chauhan

Literature is a mirror of life and folklore its sustaining spirit. The oral as well as written articulation of what lies in the peoples' mind is a very potent segment of literature. Folklore is a collection of oral and traditionally carried on popular expressions, in the language of the people or its dialect, enriched by and enlivened with experiences, charged and fulfilled by emotions as well as strengthened by objectivity.

The Kumaoni language of Uttarakhand has a special significance. It has a definite presence in the world of Hindi literature. Even the British used Kumaoni words liberally in their law courts. A literary work that is rooted in the time, place and circumstances of its creation, is soon adopted by the people as their own. Women and Dalits in Kumaon have played a significant role in contributing to and keeping alive this literary tradition.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that women are the main composers of songs in the mountains. They are the ones who put up with all the hardships and sorrows of life on the mountains, missing daughters married and sent away to distant villages, marrying out of caste, carrying on despite saas-bahu conflicts, pining away in the absence of husbands gone away to the city to work, in short, bearing the burden of everything from natural calamities to political upheavals. All this grief has seeped into the songs sung by women. Even when no solution could be found in reality, they tried to look for it in their songs, so that there would be something to live for. So, a woman sings and laughs away her blues in her songs, weeps and feels lighter. And she continues with her work all the while.

In her in-law's place she is oppressed by the burden of work as well as by her mother-in-law. A girl married off to a distant village is haunted constantly by memories of her parental home. So they

sent message through songs sung to birds, striking up a relationship with the wind and the clouds. To make the elements one's own and express one's grief to them has emerged as a traditional mode in the folk songs of the region. Sad songs sung in the forest have come to be known as Nyoli. A nyoli is actually a female bird, jet black in colour. It is said to fly around in deep forests in search of its mate. Of course modern linguists have left no stones unturned in their attempts to analyze the word "nyoli" to get to its roots. Altogether the overwhelming presence of the feeling of grief and separation in folk tradition and imagination are behind the naming of these poems. The word "nyoli" has come to connote the feelings of the women of the region—love as well as grief at being separated from one's beloved, to a great extent.

Songs sung during different seasons and on different occasions have found a place in the Kumaoni folk tradition. The uniqueness of nyoli is presenting a complete range of emotions in just two lines. Some people try to dismiss it as light-hearted verse with no depth but that is an incorrect assessment. A poem that succeeds in conveying all that it has to say, in two lines, succeeds in leaving a deep impact on the mind of the reader. The nyoli expresses a deep sense of grief at being separated from the loved one, an urge for reunion, lighter moments when the lovers are together and exchange pleasantries.... The range of the nyoli goes beyond love and lovers. It extends to the plight of the newly married woman in her in-law's house, her brothers and sisters, friends, even the village of her parents with its streets and other familiar landmarks.

Chanchari is a folk song which is generally accompanied by dancing. This is a very typical Kumaoni style of dancing which is also known as jhoda or bhaini in different places. These are sung in fairs, festivals and on other auspicious occasions. These folk songs are filled with fun and romance, interwoven with tales of love, often when the lovers are separated from each other. Sometimes the themes of their songs are poetic expressions, interwoven with strands of shringar, religiosity, folk beliefs, and other contemporary ideas, blended and expressed lyrically. Some chancharis take up the light-hearted aspects of relationships between devar and bhabhi, sali and jeeja and are full of witty repartees.

Both men and women take part in chanchari. They stand in a circle with folded hands. Men and women stand in different parts of the circle. The main singer (or singers) known as chancheria or duheria stand in the middle, along with the musicians, the hudka and the dholak player. They accompany the singing, changing their beats in keeping with the tempo of the singing.

Trepan Singh Chauhan / 109

Jod is another musical mode in Kumaoni folk lore. Like the nyoli, it is a poetic blend of love, descriptions of beauty, descriptions of reunion. It can be sung independently or along with other types of folk songs. Like the nyoli, it encapsulates the entire range of feelings in just two lines.

Chapeli is another form of folk music that is sung along with dancing during auspicious occasions that call for celebrations. There is a singer and a group of dancers. Both have to be well-versed in music. Earlier the singer used to be a woman, but problems cropped up with changing social patterns or norms and now a male dancer in a woman's attire enacts the role. The main singer has to be a skilful "hudka" player too, along with the other musicians. As the song is sung to the accompaniment of music, the dancers enact the moods and feelings in it through their mudras. Most of these songs have themes related to love. Two singers posing as the lover and his beloved, sing to each other, pining for each other's company. Descriptions of beauty, expressions of deep reconciliation and togetherness find a place along with more general descriptions— of family life, of the environs, in short, of anything that might stand out. All this is expressed lucidly in these songs.

Bair is a poetic duel that provides lively entertainment. It is carried on between two groups of singers who try very hard to outdo each other. Singers themselves organize these events at fairs and on festive occasions. People assemble in large numbers to watch the fun and see who wins. One of the singers starts off and poses questions to the other team through his songs. Some of the singers sit in the audience, standing up and answering the questions asked, then posing their own. This goes on uninterruptedly, for days and the listeners sit there spell-bound. The questions are symbolically posed and have a great deal of depth. The singing ends with an exchange of good wishes.

History, Puranas, social issues, nature—in other words, anything related to the lives of people in that region, contribute to the themes of these songs. Since they are verbal duels, wit, repartee and presence of mind of the singers come in full play.

Phaag songs, also known as sanskar songs, are generally sung by women on special occasions like birth of a son, the chhati puja on the sixth day of birth, naming ceremony, folk festivals, marriages and the like. They also play a significant role during religious functions, and are often part of devotional songs. Awadhi and Braj dialects are a major influence in the language of these songs. Some of these shagun (auspicious) songs are sung in the Kumaoni language as well and the difference is mainly that of form not content. Two

or more women sing these songs, tinged with the sweetness of their voices as well as the poignancy of the contents. These songs start with an invocation to gods and goddesses and elemental forces like the sky and the earth. There are different songs for different occasions—birth, ceremonies related to naming and the sacred thread, marriage as well as other religious functions.

Songs sung at the naming ceremony and those sung on other occasions right up to the vidai songs sung when the newlywed bride leaves her parental home, are in the Shringar mood, sometimes tinged with the feeling of pain that comes with separation, also a feeling of compassion. These songs depict the mountain women in different moods.

Kumaoni folk lore has not been given literary due recognition yet. This despite the fact that the region has produced scholars of national and international fame along with renowned poets like Sumitra Nandan Pant. Most of them, however have preferred to write in English or Hindi rather than in Kumaoni. From the time of Lok Ratan Gumani known as the Valmiki of Kumaon to this day, the number of serious writers in the Kumaoni tongue does not cross fifty. This is an insignificant number in the span of three centuries and a matter of grave concern for any regional language.

Lok Ratan Gumani deserves the credit for bringing Kumaoni writing to the domain of written literature. He achieved this in the early years of the nineteenth century. After him, writers like Krishna Pande, Shivdutt, Gaurda, Shyamacharan Dutt Pant, Kaviraj Ramdutt Pant, Shri Narottam Pande "Dear", Pitambar Pande, enriched Kumaoni literature with their contributions. At that time religious and social circumstances of the region were major concerns of the creative writer.

Those who gave a new direction to the Kumaoni language and helped to enrich its literature through their creativity were Shailesh Matiani, Charu Chandra Pande, Brijendra Lal Shah, Parvati Upreti, Pur Singh Negi, Vanshidhar Pathak, Sher Singh "Anpadh," Gopal Bhatt and Girish Tiwari "Girda."

The popular Kumaoni ethos has a rich history of resistance movements. It goes back to organized movements against the tyranny of kings to those against the suppressive and oppressive acts along with other atrocities committed by the Gorkhali kings, culminating in the nationwide agitation against the British. Most of the songs and poems written during this period have an element of protest in them. Gauri Dutt "Gaurda" is regarded as the father of protest songs in this region. His composition "Aaj Himat" is still sung on any occasion when there is an anti-establishment agitation in Uttarakhand.

Trepan Singh Chauhan / 111

This literary tradition initiated by Gaurda was carried on by Girish Tiwari "Girda." "Aaj Himal" a poem written in the mid 1920s by Gaurda, focuses on the pain suffered by trees when they are ill-treated by man. With the passage of time it emerged as a song that became the cultural idiom of the region. With efforts put in by Girda it has attained epic dimensions.

After Gaurda, Girda composed many songs of protest. Some popular songs have emerged as folk songs and are echoed in the entire region. "Bedu Pako Bar Masa" set to music by the late Mohan Upreti, "Girda"s composition "Tutak ni laga udekh" has travelled down to the plains and become popular all over the country. It alerts the masses against exploitation and arouses hopes of its elimination. The well-known scholar Shekhar Pathak who has done serious work on Kumaoni literature in his book *Kavita ke Aakhar*, has had a major role in enhancing its popular appeal.

Like any other regional language Kumaoni has been influenced by modernity. Every home has an audio-cassette recorder and this has resulted in a boom in audio cassettes in Kumaoni. Gopal Babu Goswami composed popular songs about the entire Uttarakhand region, but he could not keep it up because of the growing influence of Bombay films on him at a later stage. Other singers have not composed anything outstanding apart from songs on hackneyed themes. Even then, Kumaonis who live outside the region, don't forget to carry back cassettes of Kumaoni music when they return to their far away work places, though they might show a preference for Hindi songs as well. Incidentally, this is limited to the middle class. The upper classes consider it a sign of progress to speak English in their homes.

Some films were also made in the Kumaoni language. The first one was *Megha Aa*. A lot of people went to see it with great expectations but found nothing of the hill culture or socio-cultural heritage in it. It failed miserably, predictably as it seemed a risky venture.

In more ways than one, the affluent middle-class of Kumaon has cut off all connections with the language of the region. The upper classes have, instead, have established a close relationship with the English language. It is a matter of grave concern that the Kumaoni language is being ignored by a large section of those who speak it.

In the field of literature a new group of Kumaoni writers have emerged who write in Hindi. These writers do not attach much importance to Kumaoni as writing in Hindi makes them accessible to a wider readership, and consequently, a greater fame. With regional

language publishers, the problem of marketing and promotion is also there. Still, there is a group of writers who continue to write in Kumaoni despite all these problems. The Kumaoni language has a cultural richness, a variety which attracts these people. The language has a geographic rootedness, a potent expression that can be related to its locale. It is a documentation of changing life-style in the region. This gives the language a distinct identity which in turn gives it a special significance and sets it apart from other regional languages.

Selected Reading

Hamari Kavita ke Aakhar: Edited by Shekhar Pathak and Girish Tiwari "Girda"
Kumaoni Lok Sahitya: Devi Singh Potharia and D.D. Tiwari
Shikharon ke Swar: Durgesh Pant and Girish Tiwari

Translated from Hindi by Purabi Panwar



Trepan Singh Chauhan / 113