



## **Crossing the Boundaries: The Traditions of Kumaon and Nepal in Kumaoni Literature**

**Gayatri Berry, Research Scholar**  
*Department of English, University of Delhi*

### **Abstract**

Kumaon is a region located at the foothills of the Himalayas in Uttarakhand. It shares not only a boundary with Nepal but also a long cultural history that dates to the Doti kingdom. The paper proposes to look at the history of their shared traditions and the current changing environment of the region due to the immense rate of out-migration leading to the formation of several ‘ghost villages’ (i.e. villages with zero population) and its literary representation. The primary cause of migration is economic deprivation in the hills due to lack of employment. In tandem with the economic deprivation, the agrarian economy of the region is also faltering due to the climactic changes. Deeply embedded in Kumaoni and Nepali culture is the love and reverence towards nature. However, various factors like ill-planned construction of dams are disturbing the ecological and cultural balance. Agriculture depends upon rainfall that has become quite irregular due to the recent ecological imbalance, which is also driving wild animals out of their habitat and becoming a threat for human beings. Since Nepali-Kumaoni culture is centred on community, a community not just of humans but both human and non-human, the non-human does not stay untouched by the effect of migration and unplanned development. Thus, the cultural loss does not entail only the human’s way of living but also the loss of flora and fauna. Through Neil Evernden’s idea of “interrelatedness” and Christopher Manes’ idea of nature as a speaking subject, I argue that the ecocentric Nepali-Kumaoni culture is a part of the “self” of the Kumaonis and Nepalis which is suffering from dissociation.

**Keywords:** *Borderland literature, ecocentrism, liminality, orality, migration, Kumaoni-Nepali culture, collective memory, and anthropocene*

### **Introduction**

Much work has been done on the cultural unity of Kumaon and Garhwal prior to the formation of the independent state of Uttarakhand in 2000. However, the cultural unity of Kumaon and Nepal has eluded scholarly attention. The paper explores the transnational phenomenon of cultural amalgamation in the Uttarakhand-Sudurpashchim border and its literary representation in Kumaoni literature. The paper traces the history of the Katyuri kingdom, throwing light on Kumaon-Doti relationship, racticee on their shared culture. This will be done through the analysis of oral and written narratives indicating a shared

collective memory. Along with shared culture and tradition, these regions along the border also face similar predicaments. The environmental impact of migration and (ill)development plans is looming on the Himalayan region. The 'money order economy' of this hilly region is not only distancing its inhabitants from their homeland but also from their culture causing a schism in their sense of self.

### **Historiographic Analysis:**

While exploring Kumaon-Nepal as a single cultural unit, the paper first lays down the definition of the term "culture." The term 'culture' has a widespread use in our quotidian life. It is hurled as a slang to call someone "uncultured" or a biological sense of cultivation of bacteria or as a heritage that one needs to preserve through cultural heritage programmes or as a lifestyle of a particular group, for example, "It's in their culture to bow before an elder." Raymond Williams investigates the etymology of the term "culture" in his essay "'Culture' and 'Masses'" where he proposes that "The fw is cultura, L, from rw colere, L. Colere had a range of meanings: inhabit, cultivate, protect, honour with worship" (Williams 1). The primary connotation of the term "cultura" is cultivation or tending. It is a noun of process, a process of tending crops or animals. Later the meaning of tending extended from the natural growth to a process of human development. Currently there are primarily three broad usages of the term "culture." The first is an abstract independent noun which describes a general process of intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic development. The second is an independent noun that indicates a particular way of life of a group (be it a group of people or a period.) The third usage of the term culture is again an abstract independent noun which describes the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity. The third usage is the most widespread use of the term culture that connotes music, literature, painting, sculpture, theatre, and film. The meaning of the word "culture" is still evolving. Like the active history of the word "culture," the term "culture" itself is evolving in nature. In this paper, Kumaoni-Nepali culture denotes an amalgamation of the given three usages of the term. Kumaoni-Nepali culture is a particular way of living in the hills. It is also a process of intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic development. The most obvious among all is the Kumaoni and Nepali works of art like Kumaoni and Nepali music, folk performances that entails Kumaoni and Nepali folklore, folk dance, and folk spiritual practices, Kumaoni and Nepali literature etc.

A culture is shaped by the socio-political and geographical realities of the region. Thus, a study of the political history of Kumaon and Sudurpashim region becomes necessary to this research. The Kuninda dynasty of the Indo-Aryan region sought domination in the Central Himalaya circa 500 BC. They ruled for several centuries Kuninda dynasty becoming a socio-political entity. As quoted by M.P. Joshi "According to Carneiro, due to demographic pressures, the people within such an area struggle for limited land and/or resources which leads to competition, mutual defence, and cooperation. Ultimately a governing body is formed which keeps peace and allocates resources" (22). The history of Kunindas is in oblivion from the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. Kuninda power declined with the rise of the Imperial Guptas. Sometimes in the mid-4<sup>th</sup> century AD, Karttripur (Kuninda's chiefdom) acknowledged the suzerainty of Samudragupta as evidenced in the Allahabad Pillar inscription. For some time, Paurava Varmans ruled the region. However, towards the latter half of the 7<sup>th</sup> Century, when the Paurava-Varmanas lost power, the Kunindas regained political ground and recovered as the new ruling dynasty first from Joshimath and later from Katyur, hence came to be called Katyuris. Therefore, we can infer from this historiographical analysis that Katyuris are lineal descendents of the Kunindas. During its zenith, the

Katyuri dynasty in Kumaon stretched from the eastern region of Nepal to the western reaches of Kabul, Afghanistan. However, it eventually disintegrated into various smaller principalities by the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Doti was formed after this disintegration around the 13<sup>th</sup> century. It was one of the eight princely states Katyuri kingdom was divided into for their eight princes and became a different independent kingdom. Niranjana Malla Dev was the founder of Doti kingdom. During the period of Gorkha expansion in 1790, the Doti Kingdom was defeated. The Gorkhas were defeated by the East India company in Anglo-Nepalese war and were forced to cede Kumaon to the British as part of the Treaty of Sugauli in 1816 and remained a sovereign country. Therefore, one can glean from the facts that the far western Nepal (Sudurpashchim) and Uttarakhand has been a single political and cultural unit time and again in history.

### **Narrative(s) analysis:**

After a historiographic analysis, the research seeks to understand the cultural spectrum of Kumaoni -Nepali interaction through oral and written narratives. Orality being one of the primary characteristics of this culture, the paper looks at the folktales of “Maula/Jiya Rani” and “Brahma Deo and Birma Dotiali.” These oral narratives not only show a connection between Kumaon and Doti region but also highlights the importance of context which shapes one event in different ways elucidating the significance of orality in catering to the socio-political and moral fabric of a society. The narratives highlight the particularities of the regions besides the universality of the Kumaoni-Doti culture. Even though the whole region has similar traditions and beliefs, the particularities of the socio-political contexts add a different finishing touch to the story of Maula/Jiya Rani.

The folk legend of “Brahmadeo and Birma Dotiyali” illustrates the marriage ties between Kumaoni and Dotiyali families which persist to this date. Marriage ties prove the depth of the cultural unity of the region as marriage is a marker of the culture of a society. Since the society has similar traditions and beliefs, marriages between the families of the given region are considered socially acceptable. In the legend, Gambhirdeo, the king of Katyurgarh engages his son Brahmadeo with the daughter of a Dotiyali chief, Iswaru, who is called Birma Dotiyali. However, due to ill health and death scare, Gambhirdeo marries his son Brahmdeo to the sister of the princes of Kalunikot, Bijora. He begets seven daughters with Bijora. Meanwhile, Birma comes of age and is asked for her hand in marriage with the son of the king of Champawatgarh, Raja Nirmal Chandra. However, Bijora sends a message to Brahmadeo to come and take her away which he does with the help of his magic and various disguises. After the army of Raja Nirmal Chandra regains consciousness, they come after the couple to which Brahmadeo shows indifference and condemns his seven daughters for not being a son and fighting off the army. However, the daughters pray to their family Goddess and fight against the army valiantly, killing almost most of them and go for rest. Raja Nirmal Chandra comes back with the leftover soldiers and kills them like “wild guards.” Brahmadeo then kills Nirmal Chandra and performs the funeral rites of his daughters. Apart from showcasing the obvious marriage ties between the region, the story also highlights the strength of women for which Pahari women are still known. The naturalistic imagery of “wild guards” echoes the vicinity of the culture with nature which will be discussed in the next part of the paper. Religion is a major common factor binding the region today with a blend of Hinduism and folk spiritual practices. Family deities are found common in both the regions.

The two versions of the next story of Maula/Jiya Rani narrate the event of the capture of the queen of a Katyuri king. The settings, characters and circumstances however cater to the specific socio-

political aspects of the regions after the disintegration of Katyuri kingdom by 12<sup>th</sup> century AD. The Bharat (legend in Doti region) of Maula represents Pirthamadeo as the king of Ajaimiryakota (Far western Nepal) and the king who captures Maula is a Kumaoni chief. The Jagar of Jiya Rani is sung in Kumaoni districts of Nainital, Almora and Bageshwar in which the queen, Jiya Rani is captured by Turki/Pathana which connotes a Muslim king. As Joshi quotes Atkinson:

It invariably situates the event in the context of Jiyā Rānī's capture by the Turkī /Paṭhāna (i.e. Muslims) at Chitraśilā (Ranibagh-Kathgodam) and their encounter with the Katyūrīs. Interestingly, available evidence from the works of contemporary Muslim historians coupled with local traditions clearly shows that the Muslim inroads into the Kumaon hills from this region took place when the Chandras were ruling in Kumaon and the Paṛivāras in Garhwal (Atkinson 1884: 520-29, 537-39, 543-49, 561-65 and 581-90, Zaidī 1997: in passim, Joshi 2012). Therefore, the Muslim encounter with the Katyūrīs is a fiction. (Joshi 17)

Both the versions are also performed for different purposes. The Bharat is sung to entertain people and the Jagara of Jiya Rani is performed in spirit possession rituals. However, both the narratives are based on a shared history that has bequeathed a collective memory to the inhabitants of the region.

Even after the disintegration of the glorious Katyuri kingdom, the memory of their valour and concomitant reverence for it did not end in the region that includes both the current Nepali and Kumaoni region. The collective memory shared by its people lived in oral narratives sung in the region. As oral culture is prominently revisionist, it shapes the narratives according to contemporary beliefs and values. After the decline of the Katyuri kingdom and the rise of the Chandra dynasty in Kumaon, the political rivalry between the Raikas who were the "Later Katyuris of Doti" and Kumaoni kings of the Chandra dynasty intensified which resulted in prolonged war. Therefore, in the Bharat of Maula, the capture of the queen is representative of the antagonism between the two kingdoms and the return of Maula to king Pirthamdeo of Doti is representative of a reconciliation between them. Whereas, in the case of the Jagara of Jiya Rani, the capturer being a Turki/Pathana (meaning a Muslim) is representative of the Rohela (Muslim community of Rohilkhand) invasion of Kumaon and their subsequent defeat. The Rohelas seized Almora, the capital of Kumaon and were eventually defeated by King Kalyana Chandra of the Chandra dynasty around 1743-45 AD. As mentioned above, the Muslim invasion of Kumaon was only post Katyuri period. However, the folklore singers were performing in Kumaon region where the Katyuris were esteemed by everyone greatly. Therefore, to warn the people of Kumaon and Garhwal of the imminent dangers of Muslim inroads into the hills, the performers used Katyuri characters as they were respected equally by the people of Kumaon and Garhwal as their rulers before the rise of the two factions. As quoted by Kregel:

The protection of territory and keeping it free from guilt and the intrusion of evil is relevant for both, house- and dhūni-jāgars. In both contexts, actively dancing and speaking supernaturals are linked to a mythological past. The deceased kings who were the original owners and protectors of the land form the core of the mythological past. Their sufferings and struggles as well as their authority are present today and are kept virtually alive through the rich folklore presented in the first part of the jāgar. These legends are an indispensable part of every jāgar and they contain a message in their own right. They strengthen the territorial identification of

the listeners, although these deified kings are not bound to one place. (Spirit Possession in the Central Himalayas)

Therefore, the collective memory of the rule of Katyuri dynasty is kept alive through such rich folk narratives shaped according to the socio-political condition of the region.

The research paper aims to study the effects of the ongoing unprecedented rate of migration on the ecocentric Kumaoni-Nepali culture. One of the chief aspects of Kumaoni-Doti culture is its oral nature that needs to be studied through writing and reading. The study aims to shift from the palace paradigm as termed by Jawaharlal Handoo to consider oral discourse as important as written literature to create a non-hegemonic view of Kumaoni-Doti culture. However, the paper also addresses a chirographic short-story collection 'Bhauji' that deals with the effects of migration on the psyche and culture of Kumaonis. Indeed, the written text incorporates elements of orality as it is impossible to have a purely written text. Therefore, the objective of the study is to maintain a balance of oral and written components without creating a hierarchy between them. Walter J. Ong argues for the inevitable destiny of orality to result in writing in "Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word."

Oral cultures indeed produce powerful and beautiful verbal performances of high artistic and human worth, which are no longer even possible once writing has taken possession of the psyche. Nevertheless, without writing, human consciousness cannot achieve its fuller potentials, cannot produce other beautiful and powerful creations. In this sense, orality needs to produce and is destined to produce writing. (14)

The push-pull theory explains lack of employment as one of the greatest reasons for out-migration from Kumaon and Sudurpashim. This phenomenon is depicted in Mahara's short story 'Devta' where all the three sons of Bhavaan Singh migrate to other cities like Mumbai, Delhi and Haldwani for better education, better employment, and an overall better standard of living. Sandhya AS also throws light on migration brokerage becoming an institution in Nepal. "The study argues that the interaction between the state and the recruitment industry presents both opportunities and vulnerabilities for Nepalese migrant workers" (AS 2). The transformation caused by migration from the hilly villages is aptly described through the term "Money order economy." Kumaon and Sudurpashim were primarily an agriculture-based economy. However, due to the out migration caused by the employment opportunities outside the hilly regions, it came to be known as a money order economy where the migrants send money back home for their livelihood. Pokhariya writes, "इन सब आर्थिक श्रोतों के बावजूद पहाड़ की अर्थव्यवस्था "मनी ऑर्डर इकॉनमी" कही जा सकती है। जब तक मेहनत-मजदूरी करते व्यक्ति का मनी-ऑर्डर नहीं आता, तब तक घर में नमक-तेल या लत्ते-कपड़े का जुगाड़ भी मुश्किल हो जाता है।" (8). (Despite these financial sources, the economy of hills can be called "Money order economy." Till the money order does not come from the labour of the migrant hill resident, the arrangement of basic necessities of food and clothes also become difficult; my trans.: 8).

The title of Mahara's short story 'Pahadi Babu (Clerk from the hills)' becomes significant in depicting the joblessness in the hills that push people like Pahadi Babu to migrate to cities like Bombay to work in big firms. The word "Babu" signifies the attraction of job opportunities outside the hills of Kumaon whereas the word "Pahadi (hilly)" signifies the spectral identity that leaves its traces in various Kumaoni and Nepali migrants like Pahadi Babu. The migrants are not only pulled towards the job

opportunities offered by the cities but also pushed by the depletion of the traditional jobs offered earlier by these hilly villages of Kumaon. The tribulations of grappling with the decline of the demand for jobs inherited from the traditional culture is presented in Mahara's short story 'Sheruva.' Sheruva is a traditional folk artist who is adept in the "Chhalti" dance. Chhalti or Chholiya dance (known as Hudkya in Doteli and Hudkeli in Nepali) is a traditional folk-dance form originated in the Kumaon-Doti region. It is a sword dance accompanying a marriage procession but now it is performed on many auspicious occasions. Due to the changing cultural dynamic of the village, Sheruva finds it hard to earn a decent living through his traditionally inherited profession. Sheruva's party was once flourishing in the village even when they had various competitors but now his profession is on the verge of death. "एक समय था जब पूरे इलाके में ४-५ पार्टीयाँ थी तो उनको काम की कोई कमी न थी और आज इलाके भर में उसकी इकलौती पार्टी होने पर भी आधा महीना चले गया पर कोई काम मिलने का नाम नहीं था..... सोचते हुए शेरुवा अपनी बूढ़ी लाश को भीतर ले जाने वाला ही था कि अपने घर को आने वाले रास्ते में उसे दो लोग दिखाये दियो शेरुवा की आंखे चमक उठी...." (Mahara 35). (There was a time when there were 4-5 parties in the whole region who never had to face the deprivation of work. And now there is only one party in the whole region who is still not getting any work when half of the month has gone..... thinking this, Sheruva was about to drag his old corpse inside when he saw two people coming on the way to his home. His eyes started shining..."; my trans.; 35). The phrase "बूढ़ी लाश (old corpse)" signifies not only the ageing body of Sheruva burdened with the crisis of demand crunch for his art which was once much in demand but also the ageing corpse of the dying traditional folk arts. Sheruva can sense the dwindling respect paid to his art and his party which is also ridiculed by the younger generation.

### Ecological Perspective

As established earlier in the paper, Kumaon-Doti is a single culture unit. Thus, it faces similar challenges of migration from the region. As the culture of this region is based on a community of humans and non-humans, the effect of migration on the environment is consequential for this research. The culture of the hills suffers from an ecological change brought about by the introduction of modernity with the onset of migration. The reverence for nature also declines with the decline of animism practice by the inhabitants. Various factors like ill-planned construction of dams and practices are disturbing the ecological and cultural balance of the region. It has disturbed the habitat of wild animals which results in the wandering of these wild animals in the area where farming is done. The changing dynamics of ecology brought about by migration have bolstered out-migration further. These erratic changes in the ecology of the region have deeper causes that lie at the intersection of industrialization, practice, and cultural diminishment. Bora mourns the loss of the natural environment in his poem 'बाँज कुडकि पहरू (The caretaker of the Deserted House).'

यो खन्यारै खन्यार  
 यो बाँजै-बाँज  
 यो खौड़ - खौड़, खडियारै खडियार,  
 यो खुमै-खुम  
 देखीनई, जाँ-जाँ नजर पुजाँ

पैरै-पैर, मै जथकै चाँ । (बाँजि कुडकि पहरु 18)

(These endless ruins

These barren lands

These trunk of deforested trees

Are the only things that you can see

As far as your eye can reach

Only feet (of the trees) are all I can see!; my trans.; 18)

The elegiac tone of the poem describes the condition of ghost villages (villages abandoned by the migrants) where the poet has become a caretaker of those deserted lands. He correlates the deforestation of the villages with the phenomenon of migration. As more and more people leave their land and never come back, their houses turn into ruins and the fields become wastelands. The cutting of trees indicates the exploitation of the natural resources of the hills which causes further ecological imbalance leading to irregular rainfall and climate change. Therefore, the desire to desert their land to move to a city for a better lifestyle comes at the cost of severe consequences for the environment of hills.

At this juncture, the paper argues that the environment of the hills and the individuals inhabiting the hills are not separate entities. As can be learned from the community-based culture of Kumaon and Nepal, everything is a part of a single unit or community. Therefore, the idea of “interrelatedness” proposed by Neil Evernden can be observed in his quote “the question of the role of the environment in the life of the individual is now transformed. Rather than thinking of an individual spaceman who must slurp up chunks of the world — “resources” — into his separate compartment, we must deal instead with the individual in-environment, the individual as a component of, not something distinct from, the rest of the environment” (Evernden 18). Christopher Manes’ idea of “nature as a speaking subject” also becomes significant in the discourse of the eco-centric culture of the hills of Uttarakhand and Nepal. In Bora’s anthology of poetry ‘बाँजि कुडकि पहरु (*The Caretaker of the Deserted House*),’ the poet throws light on the voice of the nature of hills screaming its agony of abandonment by one of the parts of its body. The poetic voice of the caretaker is merging with the voice of the hills in some stanzas of the poem. Their voice is resonating with each other because they are practiced. The non-human hills are not silent and speak for themselves instead of a human speaking for them.

## Conclusion

Migration is a common universal phenomenon. However, migration in the hills of Kumaon and Sudurpaschim is burgeoning in the last few decades. Such an unprecedented rate of migration has a drastic impact on the culture of Kumaon and Sudurpaschim. On one hand, migration is disturbing the ecological balance of the villages of Kumaon and Sudurpaschim, on the other hand, it is also beneficial for the deprived villagers. As the culture is transforming immensely due to migration, the hill people are also in constant negotiation with it to form their identities. Both the individual and collective identity are situated at the liminal space between tradition and modernity.

The psychological impact of outmigration reaches on both sides. The people who are left behind feel an emotion of loneliness. The ghost villages suffer from ecological imbalance where nature feels

deserted. The Kumaoni and Nepali migrants feel a different kind of loneliness which stems from a confusion in their collective identity. Certainly, a feeling of fragmentation is felt by the whole region that leads to the loss of a sense of collective belonging and a fractured collective identity. As the ecological balance is disturbed, the anthropomorphic sense of self of the migrants is also disturbed. Due to a separation of human from non-human, the migrants are suffering from a schism in their sense of self. The paper establishes Kumaon and Sudurpaschim as a single cultural entity which is facing the challenge of ecological crisis. Due to interrelatedness, the ecological crisis is triggering an identity crisis in the self of the migrants. Therefore, we can conclude that Nature cannot be divided by anthropomorphic borders. Nature transcends such boundaries and the geographical unity urges the region to make collaborative efforts to mitigate the problem of immense rate of out migration and concomitant environmental damage.

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