SONGS OF KUMAON

Mohan Upreti

"Seasons will continue changing; bees will continue flying in this land of Kumaon" — thus sings the folk-poet of Kumaon, expressing his deep delight at the ever-changing phenomena of Nature. This note of optimism is not all that finds expression in his melodies. They are expressions of varied emotions depicted in different shades and colours. Deeply responsive to the changing mood of the seasons, he has moulded and coloured his songs accordingly. In them the emotions of many centuries live an eternal life in forms polished to perfection.

The region of Kumaon and Garhwal extends about a hundred miles east to west and one-hundred-and-ten miles north to south along the southern slopes of the Himalayas, beyond which lies the land of Tibet, from which the region is separated by the snowy ranges. In this part of the range, there are several peaks exceeding 20,000 feet in height. The whole region consists of an intricate maze of mountains and glens, through which flow several rivers and innumerable streams, all tributaries, either directly or indirectly of the Ganges. The hilly ranges of this sub-Himalayan region vary in height from 8,000 to 5,000 feet, the valleys often descending to a level of only 2,000 or 3,000 feet above sea level. Towards the south the higher ranges of hills abruptly descend, being succeeded by a narrow stretch of low broken country called the Bhabar and then by a gradual slope towards the great plain of upper India, which is named the Tarai. This lower belt is from 2 to 15 miles broad, and is part of the region, having always been much in use by the hill people, who drive their herds of cattle thither for forage during the dry months.

Kumaon and Garhwal may generally be called forest-land. After and during the rains, the grass-covered slopes and verdant valleys are a lovely sight. The landscape is distinguished more especially by its vastness; range after range of mountains fade away into the blue distance, crowned towards the north by the towering Himalayas, with their well-
defined peaks of Nanda Devi, Pancha Chule, Trisul and Badri Nath. The mingled charms of forest, cliff, glen and distant snowy peaks combine to form landscapes of singular beauty.

**The People**

The population of the region presents great variety as regards caste and origin. The aborigines are short and somewhat dark in appearance. They have for centuries been in a state of subjection to the caste Hindus. They are chiefly employed as carpenters, masons, blacksmiths, and day-labourers of various kinds. Most of the professional singers and dancers belong to this caste. They have now adopted Hinduism, though they still worship their own deity under the name of Nirkar the Formless. They have a tradition that they were the original inhabitants of the country and that they were employed by Mahadeo as drummers on the joyful occasion when he adopted the Himalaya mountain as his residence.

Next to come to the country were the *Khasas* whose descendants form the principal part of the population. They were an Aryan race hailing from Central Asia and at one time widely spread over Northern India. They now form a separate race or caste only in Kumaon and Garhwal. They are distinctly Aryan in features, and are the main cultivators of the soil.

The third class of inhabitants may be included under the general designation of immigrants from the plains of India. It is related that a certain Raja named Kanakpal belonging to the Lunar Race visited Garhwal in the 7th century with his followers on a pilgrimage to the sacred shrines of Kedar Nath and Badri Nath, and afterwards conquered the country. At that time, Kumaon was broken up into a number of warring petty Khasa Kingdoms, until a dynasty was founded in the 10th century by Som Chand, said to be a scion of a Royal family residing at Jhansi.

The Chand dynasty attracted many Brahmin families from the plains who settled in Kumaon, and have multiplied exceedingly so that this region contains an unusually large proportion of the Brahmin caste. This dynasty reigned in the country till the end of the 18th century, when the Gorkhalies of Nepal invaded the country and established their rule in Kumaon. In 1816 the British took possession of the region. Kumaon and Garhwal were included in the general administrative system, while Tehri-Garhwal was allowed to be ruled by a local dynasty which continued to rule it till the amalgamation of the princely States in the Indian Union.

Besides the three races, mentioned above, *Bhotiyas* inhabit the northern parts of the region. They used to carry on trade between Tibet and India, conveying borax and other commodities on the backs of their sheep and goats over the high passes of the snow range from Tibet. Another industry
which they practise is that of weaving carpets and blankets, which they also bring down to the markets of Bageshwar and Almora.

The Music

The coming of spring is a matter of joy to every one. In Kumaon it is announced by traditional bards, who, roaming from place to place, sing songs dedicated to its beauty and charm. Characterised by long melodic lilts, archaic note patterns and a slow tempo, these songs express sentiments of love. No young heart can remain unaffected for long while listening to the bard’s singing of such lines as, “Oh my bee, Oh my beloved, Spring has surreptitiously crept in. Quickly take me to the valley of flowers where we will play Phag together.”

The blazing red of the rhododendron flowers is symbolic of that excitement and warmth which spring brings in its wake. It is the same riot of colour which inspired Sumitra Nandan Pant in his younger days to compose the following lines,

The lightning dwells in clouds,
the red rhododendron flowers,

have set the forest ablaze; as
you have my heart.

The Holi festival comes as a fitting climax to this mood of gaiety and abandonment. Forgetting their worries and their hard struggle for daily bread, the entire people join in festivity which lasts in Kumaon for over a month. During this period hundreds of songs both of semi-classical as well as folk variety are sung by both men and women, to the accompaniment of harmonium, tabla, dholak and manzira (cymbal). The last six days are marked by intensive singing and revelry which continues day and night.

The theme as well as the music of all these Holi songs is quite unlike the one prevalent in the folk songs of that region. The language chosen is Brij and Khari Boli, and the ragas of the Indian classical music form the basis of the melodic structures.

Spring fades into long lazy summer days. A deep stillness pervades the atmosphere. The monotony of the season is typified in the sad desultory notes of a wind instrument, called algoja. Made of two flutes joined together, its music has a haunting quality. It is a languorous music often heard in deep forests, lonely hill tops and deserted valleys.

This monotony is, however, broken by the beats of drums and shrill intonations of the wind instruments called turi and ransingha which are heard when marriage processions thread their way across the hills.
Although the ritual followed in a marriage ceremony differs from caste to caste, it is invariably accompanied by songs. Among the Brahmans, particularly these songs are sung in the manner of a running commentary to the entire ritual, sung in chorus by the ladies of the family and the neighbourhood. They express a whole gamut of feelings associated with the occasion. Remaining strictly confined within the ritualistic bounds the music is sombre and sublime, without any instrumental accompaniment whatsoever. Among the Bhotiyas, however, men do the singing instead of women.

Seasonal Songs

Soon the rains come, and with them a period of intense agricultural activity. Among other operations, the transplanting of paddy is accompanied by songs. Heroic deeds performed by ancient heroes are recalled. Stories of love, great feats of valour and wisdom are sung in a vigorous style with a view to accelerating the tempo of work. Hurkia-Baul is the traditional name given to this form of singing which is performed in the fields of every farmer by turns. A small drum called hurka is the only accompanying instrument. The other purport of this singing is to propitiate the god of earth locally called Bhumiya or Bhumiyal.

Rains are followed by a period of respite. It is again time for merry-making and revelry. People assemble in a temple courtyard, or in open field and sing and dance for sheer pleasure. It is a free-for-all in these fairs when emotions are freely expressed without any restraining power of traditions. The tunes are gay, brisk and colourful and are sung with great verve and abandon. Flexibility and variability characterise the tunes as well as the texts of these songs. Romantic themes are mostly chosen and there is full freedom to improvise. In the famous Nandavi fair of Almora, this singing and dancing continues for three consecutive days and nights.

Among the forms of singing widely prevalent in these fairs, Bair is, however, the most typical. It is a poetic contest in which singers gifted with the power of improvising verses alone can participate. The contest takes the form of questions and answers with wit and repartee as the main weapons. It is a continuous duel, lasting for the whole day and night. There is no instrumental accompaniment in this type of singing. The poet-singer is assisted by two persons who join him in the melodic refrain. It helps the singer in regaining his breath and keeping up the continuity. In every form of recitational singing prevalent in Kumaon, the singer is always assisted by his two assistants, locally called heniwars.

Jhora and Chhapeli are the other two forms widely sung and danced in these fairs. Jhora is a community dance always accompanied by songs sung by men and women in the form of a duet to the beats of the hurka and
clang of cymbals. Except the main refrain there is no fixed text to these songs. The body of the song grows as it is sung, the leading singer providing the next line which he improvises on the spot. A regular time-cycle is maintained.

Chhapeli is perhaps the most popular variety of Kumaon folk songs. In every fair one can see a number of Chhapeli song-groups spread out in the field or the temple courtyard vying with each other in winning listeners who cluster around their favourite singers and listen to them with wrapt attention.

The Chhapeli tune is gay, brisk and bright. Hurka, manzeera and flute are the accompanying instruments. The bagpipe, introduced by the British Army sometime ago, has also become a part of the instrumental repertoire. It can be heard in these fairs with its characteristic drone. The refrain of the song is sung in chorus while the solo part, through which the song is developed, is performed by three or four leading singers who compete with each other in the art of improvising romantic verses. The tempo combined with a romantic content accounts for the appeal and popularity of Chhapeli songs. Chhapeli may or may not be accompanied by a dance.

Autumn comes to this region with its brilliant moonlit nights. There is a mellowness in the atmosphere, a sense of fulfilment in the human heart. This time of the year is perhaps best symbolised in the reposing notes of a small string instrument called binai. Holding it between his teeth, the player softly plucks at a small copper flap attached to the head of this instrument with his fingers, breathing in and out at the same time. Though it has a limited tonal range, the intonations are characterised by a soft and delicate drone.

**Operatic Drama**

The chief attraction of this season, however, is Ramleela—the enactment of the story of the epic, Ramayana—which is staged at a number of places in Kumaon. Performed in an operatic form, it runs through ten consecutive nights attracting large audiences. This form of its presentation is unique to Kumaon. There are more than four hundred songs and recitations set to semi-classical modes of singing. The entire melodic and rhythmic material, although extraneous to Kumaon, has been distinctly re-shaped to suit the needs of this opera. Tunes have mostly been borrowed from the old Parsee Theatre music, and other folk plays such as Nautanki and Maach. Introduced in Kumaon some eighty years ago, it has now become an integral part of its musical tradition, interfering in no way with its original stock of melodies and rhythms. Harmonium and tabla are the main accompanying instruments.
Autumn gives place to winter which is a season of chilly winds, biting frost and snow. People gather round well-lit fires and listen to the singing of folk-ballads, epics and legends sung by some of their most capable singers. These legends, epics and ballads contain the most ancient elements of the folk music of this region. There are different styles to their singing, each style differing from the other in matters of text, rendition of the melody, rhythmic patterns and instrumental accompaniment.

Ballad-forms

From the point of view of theme and occasion of their singing, the legends and ballads may broadly be divided into three categories — heroic, romantic and religious. The first type is sung during the agricultural operations while the second and third types are mainly sung during the long winter nights. The religious ones are called Jagars and are connected with certain exorcist ritualistic practice prevalent in that region.

Life stories of indigenous gods and goddesses, ghosts and fairies are sung and their spirits invoked. Through recitational singing punctuated by exotic drum-beats and the shrill sound of the thali (bronze plate) the musical crescendo is built up, throwing the more devout into a state of trance. In a fit of ecstasy they leap, shout, tremble and jump, tearing off their clothes sometimes. At the end the main singer called the das bids farewell to the invoked spirit and sends it back to its abode in the Himalayas, and thus the ritual ends. A big drum (dhol) a smaller drum (damua), hurkas and thali are the accompanying instruments.

The most popular romantic ballad is Malushahi which describes the love story of a prince named Malushahi and Rajula, a girl from the borderland. Among the Kumaon ballads, it has got the most variegated melodic and rhythmic patterns. Hurka and thali are the accompanying instruments.

Thus spending their days amidst joys and sorrows, labour and leisure the people of Kumaon sing and dance, always hoping for a richer and fuller life. The day of fulfilment might still be distant, and hazards to prosperity seemingly insurmountable, yet the dream always finds its expression in their enchanting melodies and rhythms.

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