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Kumauni Culture: An Awadhi Point of View

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How is a point of view constructed? One may take the example of Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" where the lady weaves a magic web confined in a tower, a symbol of isolation, and looks at the outside world through a mirror. The moment she looks directly out of the window at Sir Lancelot, whom she finds quite irresistible, the mirror cracks indicating that the curse of death has come on her. Similarly, when we look at a culture other than the one we are brought up in, the 'us-they' dichotomy comes into play, although with results not as disastrous as with the Lady of Shalott. We look through the mirror of our culture, the point of view of the outsider, and judge the other culture but the moment the process of integration, though partial, begins, the point of view undergoes a change. Such was my case when, born, educated and brought up in Lucknow (the capital of Uttar Pradesh and situated in the erstwhile Awadh region), I encountered the culture of the Kumaun region of Uttarakhand while living in its cultural capital Almora.

Let me first talk about the much hyped '*Lakhnavi tehzeeb*', also labeled as '*Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb*' of Awadh. The origin of Lucknow, according to Abdul Halim Sharar, dates back to the

time when Lord Ram returned from his exile in the forest (*banvas*) and became the king of Ayodhya. He gave this area as *jagir* (estate) to his brother Lakshman who built his abode on a patch of elevated ground which came to be known as Lakshman Teela (*teela* means elevated ground). Later a mosque was built here during the reign of Aurangzeb known as Teele Wali Masjid, which still exists. The name Lucknow is either based on the name of the architect Lakhna or is an aberration of Lakshmanpur (Sharar 12-14). Lucknow came into its own in 1775, when Nawab Asif ud daula shifted the capital of Awadh from Faizabad (now Ayodhya) to Lucknow. He not only constructed the famous Bada Imambara, but also encouraged literature and music. This continued till the end of the Nawabi era in 1856, when the British banished Nawab Wajid Ali Shah to Kolkata and annexed Awadh. This period saw the birth of the Lucknow School of Urdu Poetry, which according to Carla Rae Petievich, is “sensual, frivolous, abstruse, flashy, even decadent” as compared to the Delhi School, which has mystical concerns and straightforward, melancholy poetic diction. This she attributed to Lucknow’s ‘prosperous, even opulent economic and social climate’ during that period (Abstract). Out of such a climate was born the ‘*Lakhnawi tehzeeb*’ (*tehzeeb* means culture, refined manners) which is characterized by *nafasat* (exquisiteness), *nazakat* (elegance), *takalluf* (*pehle aap* or after you) and extreme politeness. But we must not overlook the fact that Awadhi was the language of the inhabitants of Awadh, later considered a dialect of Hindi, but was and is spoken by both the rural and urban people. It is the language in which the *Ramcharitmanas* was written by Tulsidas and that perhaps accounts for its popularity. It is ironical that Urdu, which had its origin in the Turkish ‘*Ordu*’ meaning ‘army camp’ and was a mixture of Persian, Hindi, Arabic and Turkish, written in the Persian script although following the rules of Hindi grammar, became in Awadh, especially in Lucknow, the language of the ruling elite. It became the vehicle for the expression of what is known as ‘*Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb*’, from ‘*Doab*’ or two rivers, Ganga and Yamuna and the culture that developed around them. In common parlance it means Hindu-Muslim brotherhood, built up and encouraged by the Shia Muslim Nawabs (‘nawab’ means deputy) of Awadh. There is little that is common between Islam and Hinduism, but because Urdu was the language of the Court and the ruling elite, the language and the culture associated with it was adopted, to some extent, by the Hindus as well, although it goes to the credit of the rulers that they never indulged in communal violence and bloodshed, but tried to bring the two communities together. They gave administrative posts to Hindus and encouraged participation in each other’s festivals; at the same time both the communities helped build each

other's places of worship. It reached its zenith during the reign of the last ruler, Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, who played the role of Lord Krishna in "*Radha Kanhaiya ka Qissa*" written by him. However, most of the '*thumris*' and '*dadras*' (semi-classical music) were and are written in Awadhi which includes the famous "*Babul mora naihar chooto hi jaye*" by Wajid Ali Shah. However, the emphasis on Urdu at the expense of Awadhi in Lucknow and education in missionary schools in the middle of the twentieth century, cut off people like me from Awadhi and from the entire folk tradition of Awadh.

When I joined my services at the Department of English, Kumaun University Campus, Almora, I looked at the city from the point of view of an outsider who was on the way to discover something interesting and different:

No turbulence,
just a soft flow
The languid air
makes one stop, ponder,
change focus.
Even the Mahatama squats, cross-legged,
his hands shielding his loins.
(Hamid 40)

Almora is known as the cultural capital of the Kumaun, but it is its spiritual capital as well and is one of the oldest cities of the State of Uttarakhand, dating back to pre-historic times:

The great ancient texts of India mention Almora region as Vishnukhestra. In Manaskhanda of Skanda Purana the place is named as Ramkhestra; therein Slokas eight to twelve of fifty second canto describe the event of Lord Rama on his way to the eternal abode Baikuntha, seated on a stone platform and performed Tarpana rites to gods, forefathers, sages and human beings. The sacred stone hailed as Ramashila is now worshipped in a temple situated in Malla Mahal, the kutchery campus of Almora. Till present day on the occasion of Ramanavami devotees surge to offer their obeisance to the stone sanctified by the touch of Lord Rama.

The archaeological findings of the region have made historians authentically establish human settlement in the region dating back to prehistoric times. At the beginning of the last millennium

the place was subject of the Kuninda kings who were contemporary of the Gupta dynasty. With the passage of time the region fell to the dominion of the Katyuri rulers. The sixteenth century saw the advent of Chand rulers; owing to the geographical centrality, land and forest resources and availability of clean water, and also backed by a sense of vanity and love of spectacle, during the second half of the century Chand rulers shifted their capital from Champavat to Almora. Subsequently after being ruled for twenty five years since 1790 by the Gurkha rulers of Nepal, in 1815 Almora came under the British Raj till its independence with India in 1947. (Bhatt 35-36)

Almora is adorned with temples of *Nav Durga* or nine goddesses and *Astha Bhairava* or emanations of Lord Shiva (see note in works cited). In addition to these temples, there is also the famous Jageswar Dham and the temple of one of the most revered local deities, *Golu Devta*, the God of Justice. Almora is also deeply associated with Swami Vivekananda, who visited Almora thrice, in 1890, 1897 and 1898. The city contains several landmarks of his visits, the places he stayed in or meditated and the places where he delivered his sermons/speeches including the Govt. Inter College where he delivered his first speech in Hindi in 1897. It was in this city that he blessed Margaret Elizabeth Noble and gave her the name Sister Nivedita. The city has a record of various spiritual seekers, writers, philosophers and prominent personalities from all over the world, who visited or stayed at Almora especially in the area near Kasar Devi Temple popularly known as Crank's Ridge. These included Alfred Sorensen, Walter Evans-Wentz, Lama Angarika Govinda, Timothy Leary, R. D. Laing, Allen Ginsberg, George Harrison and Bob Dylan, to name a few. In 1930, Ronald Henry Nixon, Head of the Department of English, Lucknow University, took *sanyas* and along with Yashoda Mai, founded the Mirtola Ashram, 20 km from Almora city in 1930. He was succeeded by Swami Madhav Ashish (born Alexander Phipps) who was awarded the Padma Shri for his contribution to agriculture in 1992. I also had the good fortune of meeting him in his ashram in 1991.

Kumaun has a rich folk tradition, which includes the medieval love story *Rajula Malushahi*, and a host of folk songs mainly connected with the seasons. Awadhi also has a rich folk tradition which includes Malik Mohammad Jayasi's *Padmavat*, as well as folk songs based on the seasons, for weddings and other occasions. Most of *thumris* and *dadras* are written in Awadhi which have been sung by noted singers like Begum Akhtar, Shobha Gurtu and others. In the present scenario, Malini Awasthi has brought about a revival of Awadhi folk songs, as the

Kumauni folk songs have been revived by contemporary singers like Basanti Bisht. The most popular song is '*Bedu pako baro masa*' which was written by Brijendra Lal Sah and put to music by Mohan Upreti of Almora in the middle of the twentieth century. It is also the official regiment song of the Kumaun Regiment of the Indian Army.

The two cities, Lucknow and Almora, known for their distinct culture, however, have an essential cultural difference if we take into account T. S. Eliot's intrinsic relation between culture and religion (Notes Towards the Definition of Culture) where he asserts that, in addition to other factors, culture is the product of the religion or the religion the product of the culture. In India, where a large number of religions exist which are at times in conflict with each other and where religion is an important aspect of individual identity, this factor must be taken into account. Awadh was under Muslim rule for a long time and the culture of Lucknow and its much touted '*Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb*' is the product of the Nawabi era that flourished in Awadh from 1722 to 1856 and in Lucknow from 1775, when it became the capital. The landscape of Lucknow which is crowded with *Imambaras*, *durgahs* and mosques provides enough evidence of the Muslim influence in the region. The elaborate *tehzeeb* or code of conduct, which finds its expression through Urdu, has a definite feudal, Muslim impact. The Hindu population toed the line of the dominant culture while keeping their religious identity intact and often actively participated in festivals, especially the observance of Mohurrum. The city continues to have a Nawabi-complex, the Lucknow version of the Oedipus complex, and most books written during the last 50 years on Awadh history provide ample evidence of this fact. It appears from a reading of these books that there was nothing in Awadh before or after the Nawabi era. The present so-called cultural elite only talk about the monuments and of preserving the feudal culture 76 years after Independence, seemingly oblivious of the fact that culture is not static. It's a sad state of affairs.

Kumaun (and the hills of Uttarakhand) had never been under Muslim rule, but came directly under British rule in 1815 after the oppressive rule of the Gorkhas. The dominant culture remained Hindu which is evident from the landscape of this *Devbhoomi* or abode of the Gods crowded with Temples. The Muslims of Almora, found in a small minority, most of them being migrants from Rohilkhand more than two centuries ago, maintain their religious identity but have attempted to forge congenial relations with the Hindus by participating activities like making of

an effigy of the family of *Ravana* which becomes part of a large number of effigies taken out in a procession on *Dussehra*. The procession is nothing short of a spectacle and is something unique to Almora. A remarkable feature of the people of Almora is that they are modest and soft-spoken and at the same time worldly-wise, often clever. In a travelogue published in 1901, written perhaps an Englishman under the pseudonym 'V', an interesting description is there about the people of Almora:

Heber, in 1824, found Almora "a small but very curious and interesting town." It would appear to have changed little since his visit, but one can hardly say the same of the character of the inhabitants of the country whom the good bishop described as being "a modest, gentle, respectful people, honest in their dealings, and remarkable for their love of truth." Too much praise is good for no man, and the modest, gentle Kumaoni has, I fear long since recognized the difficulty of living up to their impassioned conception of him, and adverted to a rule of lifewhich, while falling considerably short of the episcopal counsel of perfection, provides him with a standard of ethic at once more familiar, more easily reached, and more consistently maintained. (V 3)

The most striking feature of Almora is that the people are fiercely protective of their cultural and religious identity, but this doesn't mean that they harbor communal feelings against people of other religions. In this town with total literacy, the level of tolerance is quite high. I could measure it in the University Campus as well as in the city. After Kumaun University was established in 1973 when Uttarakhand was part of Uttar Pradesh, a considerable number of teachers appointed were non-Kumauni. These teachers, unfortunately, formed a 'plains lobby' and looked down upon the local teachers and people, but the students never showed any ill will towards them and gave them the same respect they gave to their Kumauni teachers. These teachers of the 'plains lobby' considered themselves superior to the local people and by and large kept themselves aloof from the local people and their activities. That the fact they could not get employment in what they considered some 'big' university in the plains spoke volumes about their so-called superiority. My experience was different; whenever I faced any problem in the University, it was a Kumauni who came to my rescue which also included finding a house on rent or buying land to build a house for my family. In Almora, there is a tradition of singing Holi songs based on Indian classical ragas and whenever I attended these sittings (*baithki Holi*) or a Holi procession (*khadi Holi*), which was often, they would make it a point to sing "*Ho mubarak manjari phoolon bhari/Aisi Holi khelen Janab-e-Aali*" composed by the last Nawab of Awadh, Wajid Ali Shah and many of them would embrace me too. Many of the local people were familiar with the culture of Lucknow having

studied in Lucknow University or they often visited their relatives in Lucknow, where a considerable number of Uttarakhandis live. It was in Almora that I could find the confidence of publishing my poetry and discovering my qualities as a teacher. The city's cultural and spiritual aura attracted me towards Indian philosophy and spiritualism and my visits to various Temples in Uttarakhand, including the Badrinath Temple, helped me imbibe the spirit of Indianness, so has my recent association with Ramakrishna Kutir. The Kumaunis are gentle and law-abiding people with a remarkable degree of tolerance, but acceptability to outsiders comes slowly to them. Obviously, I cannot become a total insider because the city of my birth forms a part of me, but so does Almora (and Kumaun), which has, slowly become a part of me. If I took two steps towards the Kumaunis, they also did the same, and we met mid-way. That's what true integration (never total, at least for more than two generations) is all about.

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Note:

Nav Durga: Patal Devi, Yakshini Devi, Rajrajeshwari Devi, Tripura Devi, Nanda Devi, Ulka Devi, Shitla Devi, Kot Kalika and Durga Ratneshwari.

Astha Bhairava: Kal Bhairav, Batuk Bhairav, Shah (Shai) Bhairav, Garhi Bhairav, Gaur Bhairav, Anand Bhairav, Bal Bhairav and Khutkuniya Bhairav.

(Bhatt 37)

About the Author

S. A. Hamid retired as Professor of English from Kumaun University, Almora Campus, Uttarakhand after holding posts of the Head of the Department and the Dean, Faculty of Arts. In addition to research publications, he has published five books of poetry, the latest being *The Alchemy of Ageing* (2021). His poems have also appeared in journals and anthologies and his translations of poetry from English into Urdu/Hindi and vice versa have appeared in various journals, while his Urdu translation of Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* was awarded by the Uttar Pradesh Urdu Academy. 69 years of age, Prof. Hamid currently lives in Almora and can be reached at syedali.hamid2@gmail.com