

Critique

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*Angwal*

*Film historian Lalit Mohan Joshi's poignant film "Angwal" explores the vibrant yet often overlooked culture of Kumaoni poetry'*

"Angwal," which translates to "embrace," is a documentary directed by Lalit Mohan Joshi that explores the vibrant yet often overlooked culture of Kumaoni poetry. A BBC journalist based in the UK and founder of the South Asian Cinema Foundation, Joshi returns to his roots in northern India's Kumaon region of the Himalayas to rediscover his cultural heritage, specifically through the lens of Kumaoni poetry. With well-known cinematographer Rangoli Agarwal, Joshi captures the region's breathtaking landscapes alongside the history and essence of its unique poetic tradition.

In this 74-minute film, Joshi speaks with various historians, cultural scholars, and poets to trace the history of Kumaoni poetry and the legacy of his family's contributions. As the documentary unfolds, viewers encounter poems that speak to the area's natural beauty, express nostalgia, and address social issues like migration, deforestation,

and even British colonial rule. Kumaoni poetry diverges from mainstream Urdu or Hindi verse by focusing less on romance and spirituality, instead drawing more deeply from the environment and social realities.

"Angwal" also explores the challenges of preserving a lesser-known regional language and its poetry in a world that increasingly favours mainstream, economically dominant languages like Hindi. The film's premiere at the British Film Institute in London received emotional responses, with many Kumaoni attendees feeling a sense of pride and guilt over the neglect of their heritage.

Despite setbacks, mainly due to the pandemic, Joshi completed the film, integrating music composed by Chandrasekhar Tiwari and Harish Pant and vocals by his daughter Uttara Sukanya Joshi. The documentary closes poignantly, with

scenes acknowledging the loss of some individuals featured in the film, accompanied by a melancholy song that underlines the cyclical nature of life.

Lalit Mohan Joshi's documentary "Angwal" is a personal journey and a cultural exploration that reveals the intricacies of Kumaoni poetry and identity. This film combines various themes—migration, ecological concerns, cultural preservation, and personal identity—delivered through an immersive experience in visual storytelling. The documentary uses the art of Kumaoni poetry to reflect on contemporary issues facing the region, showcasing Joshi's deep attachment to his homeland and his mission to celebrate its rich literary tradition. In his film *Angwal*, Lalit Mohan Joshi talks about seven significant themes. The theme of personal and cultural Identity is nicely depicted in "Angwal" as it demonstrates Joshi's quest to reconnect with his homeland, a universal exploration of identity, especially among diasporic communities.

In leaving his homeland for professional opportunities, Joshi embodies the experience of countless individuals whose relocation comes with a sense of cultural loss. The filmmaker's return highlights the complex bond between people and their place of origin, a relationship defined by both love and guilt. He expresses an underlying remorse for having abandoned Kumaon, much like the many who have migrated from the region for better economic prospects.

The Essence and its allied themes of Kumaoni Poetry, as presented in the documentary, are both grounded in and inspired by the unique landscapes and lifestyle of the Kumaon region. The poetry is

deeply rooted in nature, focusing on the mountains, rivers, and flora, and is less concerned with romantic themes common in Urdu poetry. Joshi's selection of poems highlights the region's beauty and struggles, such as ecological degradation and cultural erosion. This thematic focus adds depth to the poetry, as it speaks to the urgent need for environmental preservation and the sorrow accompanying population decline in these villages.

The Impact of Migration and Environmental Challenges emerges as one of the most poignant aspects of "Angwal" is its examination of the impact of migration on Kumaoni culture. The exodus of young people to urban areas has created "ghost villages" throughout Kumaon, and Joshi's film poignantly captures this emptiness. Migration's impact is evident in the poetry, with themes of loneliness, loss, and nostalgia woven through verses lamenting the region's fading human presence. Simultaneously, the documentary touches on deforestation and natural resource exploitation, which further threaten the delicate balance between tradition and modernity.

Director Lalit Mohan Joshi has worked efficiently to depict cultural preservation in the face of modernisation as "Angwal" presents Kumaoni poetry as a creative form and a vessel for preserving Kumaon's cultural identity. Joshi's work becomes an act of resistance against cultural assimilation as Hindi and other dominant languages increasingly overshadow local dialects. The film makes a powerful case for regional languages as repositories of unique cultural histories, suggesting that losing these languages would mean the erasure of diverse

perspectives, especially as they relate to environmental concerns and regional identity. Joshi's inclusion of contemporary poets and scholars allows the film to examine Kumaoni poetry's evolution over time, while his use of local voices and music brings authenticity to the preservation of this unique oral and written tradition.

The role of women in Kumaoni Poetry should be construed as an interesting facet of the documentary through its inclusion of women poets, whose work often addresses themes of sacrifice and loss, mainly through the lens of familial bonds. By highlighting female voices in a field traditionally dominated by men, Joshi enriches the documentary with a nuanced perspective on how Kumaoni's poetry reflects women's experiences. This inclusion demonstrates how poetry offers a space for Kumaoni women to express their grief and resilience, as seen in the mournful poems of mothers who have lost sons to war or migration.

The theme of cinematic Aesthetics and emotional Resonance has been deftly handled by Lalit Mohan Joshi as the visual beauty of Kumaon, captured by Agarwal's cinematography, plays a crucial role in enhancing the film's emotional appeal. The breathtaking scenery of the Himalayas complements the lyrical content of the poetry, creating a poetic experience for the audience. The film's musical choices, including Joshi's daughter's soulful renditions, blend with the natural landscape, allowing viewers to immerse themselves fully in the sensory world of Kumaoni poetry. This audio-visual blend amplifies the emotional resonance, especially in the film's concluding moments, where scenes of the deceased contributors

serve as a sombre reminder of life's transience.

Joshi's journey underscores the difficulties often faced by documentary filmmakers in India, especially those attempting to spotlight lesser-known subjects or regional cultures. "Angwal" faced financial constraints and a challenging production process exacerbated by the pandemic. Despite these obstacles, the film's eventual premiere at the British Film Institute and the positive reception from critics indicate a growing appreciation for films that explore India's regional identities and histories. Joshi's work brings forth the need for more excellent institutional support for documentary films in India, as they hold the potential to capture, preserve, and communicate the nation's diverse cultural heritage.

Lalit Mohan Joshi's "Angwal" is a heartfelt cinematic journey that pays homage to the Kumaoni culture through its poetry. The documentary invites viewers to consider the complexities of identity, migration, and cultural preservation by weaving together personal reflections, visual storytelling, and lyrical expressions. Joshi's exploration of Kumaoni poetry becomes a broader commentary on the need to recognise and celebrate India's regional languages and artistic expressions, often overshadowed by dominant narratives. "Angwal" stands as a testament to the beauty of Kumaoni poetry, its ties to the natural landscape, and the enduring significance of local cultures in a rapidly globalising world.

There is something in store for all those erudite cinéphiles who love to travel to explore unknown territories and appreciate documentary films. Numerous documentary

films have explored the Kumaon region, each focusing on different aspects of its cultural, environmental, and spiritual landscape. Some of the significant documentary films that have depicted the Kumaon region are :

Beyond the Known: Glimpses of Kumaon. This documentary was produced by Doordarshan, India's national broadcaster. It provides an in-depth look at Kumaon's natural beauty and cultural richness. It showcases the diverse landscapes, traditional Kumaoni lifestyle, folk dances, and festivals, providing a broad overview of the region.

Rajiv Mehrotra directed Voice of the Himalayas. This film explores the environmental and ecological challenges of the Himalayas, including Kumaon. It focuses on conservation efforts, highlighting how local communities strive to balance development with environmental preservation.

The Last Wilderness, directed by conservationist and filmmaker Rita Banerji, takes a close look at the human-wildlife relationship in the Uttarakhand region, which includes Kumaon. It highlights efforts to protect wildlife habitats while addressing the challenges local villagers face in coexisting with animals like leopards and elephants.

“Jageshwar: The Eternal Shiva” focuses on the famous Jageshwar temple complex in Kumaon, one of the oldest and most revered Shiva shrines in the Himalayas. It covers the temples' historical and spiritual significance, shedding light on Kumaon's deep-rooted religious traditions.

The documentary film “The Living Tradition: The Folk Music of Kumaon”

captures the unique folk music of Kumaon by presenting traditional musical forms and instruments that define the region's musical heritage. It seeks to preserve Kumaon's musical legacy for future generations by documenting folk songs and performances.

The documentary film “Kumaon: A Rediscovery” is produced by various travel and culture-focused networks. It comprehensively explores Kumaon's landscapes, from Nainital and Almora to remote villages and trekking routes. This series also includes interviews with local people, offering insights into Kumaoni culture and daily life.

“Seeds of Change” is a unique documentary film that focuses on environmental issues in Uttarakhand, includes sections on Kumaon. It looks at the impact of deforestation, overgrazing, and climate change on local communities and their efforts to implement sustainable agriculture practices.

“The Himalayas” (BBC Series). This film is integral to the BBC's documentary series on the Himalayas. Some of its episodes feature Kumaon as they explore the greater Himalayan region. The series highlights the area's natural beauty, biodiversity, and cultural tapestry, showing it in the context of the broader Himalayan range.

These eight documentaries are some of the documentary films made in recent times that bring out varied aspects of the Kumaon region. They contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of its significance in culture, nature, and spirituality.