

UPRETI, MOHAN. *Malushahi: the Ballad of Kumaon*. New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi, n.d. 73 pp., illustrations, Hindi and Kumaoni texts. Rs 30/-.

Malushahi: the Ballad of Kumaon is at the same time a charming and stimulating volume and a most frustrating one. Its considerable virtues derive from the author's intent—to record and make available in English a popular and complex regional epic, and through this to convey the flavor and vitality of Kumaoni folk culture—and from several striking aspects of the epic he documents. That it is such an interesting piece of folk literature also leads to frustration, as there is so much more the reader would like to learn, both about *Malushahi* itself and about Kumaoni culture.

Kumaon is the northernmost section of Uttar Pradesh, bordered on the east by Nepal and on the west by Tibet. It stretches from the edge of the Gangetic plain to the Himalayan ridgeline; most of the population lives in the foothills and river valleys. Kumaon is quite diverse culturally. The bulk of the population speaks Kumaoni, an Indo-European language, and practices Hinduism. Kumaoni-speakers include, however, three major sub-groups: the "aborigines" (p. 2), who now occupy the lower end of the local caste structure and include professional musicians who most frequently perform *Malushahi*; the *khasa*, upper caste Hindus claiming Aryan origins in central Asia; and more recent Rajput immigrants who began to enter Kumaon in the tenth century. Kumaoni-speakers come into frequent contact with Tibetan-speaking pastoralists and traders known locally as *shauka*, and all these groups are familiar through trading and raiding with inhabitants of the trans-Himalayan Tibetan plateau itself. Kumaon is a border region; its history reflects the importance of trade and the constant interaction among these varied groups.

The story of *Malushahi* is lengthy and complex; it better fits the usual generic criteria for epic than those of a ballad. Its central plot concerns the love of Malushahi, usually a prince of the Katyuria dynasty, and Rajula, the beautiful daughter of a *shauka* couple. Despite the early love of Rajula and Malushahi, and in some versions despite their parents' pledge that they would be married, Rajula's parents insist on her betrothal to a wealthy *huniya* (the local name for Tibetan). Much of the epic focuses upon her escape from the *huniya* and her successful flight to Malushahi. Her reunion with Malushahi does not end the story, however, as she insists that she will return to the *huniya* and that Malushahi must rescue her to prove his devotion as she had hers. Malushahi is somewhat less competent and controlled than she and is poisoned, either by her parents or by the *huniya*. He is magically resurrected and the lovers reunite for good. There is a large supporting cast of gurus, magicians, soldiers and magical animals. Although Malushahi is a Hindu prince, the epic is not religious in character; it is a secular romance with a great deal of magical practice tossed in for good measure.

Upreti does not provide a full text of the epic but rather records detailed outlines of three performers' versions. Two of the performers are low caste musicians, while the third is a high status Rajput. Upreti's outlines appear to represent a number of performances by each of the men, so it is difficult to assess individual consistency, but the differences among the three performers' versions are interesting and well explored. Upreti's comparisons extend beyond the texts themselves to include musical features as well.

We are given only the most general sense of what a performance of *Malushahi* is like. Upreti notes that the epic is performed at weddings, fairs, musical gatherings and on long winter evenings and that it does not require any sacred justification or

ritual preface. Most of the epic is sung; particularly dramatic passages may be reiterated in spoken prose for emphasis. The lead singer accompanies himself on the *hurka*, an adjustable tension hourglass drum. When he is improvising melodically, two male drone singers also join in.

Two aspects of the text itself are particularly interesting. First, the multiethnic character of life in Kumaon is central to the story. Malushahi is from a *khasa* family; his beloved is a *shauka*. Her parents wrongly betroth her to a Tibetan for economic and political gain. The playing out of notions of ethnic characteristics and practices is fascinating. The more striking feature, however, is the central and very active role which Rajula plays. She is an exceptionally intelligent and courageous heroine, a woman of considerable independence and initiative. Rajula is in fact much more competent than her lover. She stands in marked contrast to the human heroines of most plains Hindu epics, both sacred and secular, whose virtues are defined more by what they do not do than by their accomplishments. Potential relationships between such active notions of female heroism and the relatively less constrained roles of women in the Kumaon region would be well worth pursuing.

My principal criticisms of the volume are tied to the questions which it does not ask. The most significant gaps are in its descriptions of performers and the contexts in which they operate. How are singers trained? How do they decide to become performers? Are they paid? Do they perform only in their immediate neighborhood, or are they itinerant? Upreti notes that, despite the secular nature of the epic itself, members of the audience frequently go into trance. How do the Kumaonis interpret this? To what extent might it be a manifestation of regional beliefs—associated with the magical motifs of the story—in distinction to pan-Indian Hinduism? The photographs and drawings accompanying the text are interesting and often very attractive; nowhere, however, are captions provided.

On the whole *Malushahi: the Ballad of Kumaon* is a worthy book. It clearly meets the author's goal of helping to maintain and make available a central piece of Kumaoni oral tradition. Upreti never really strays very far from the narrative itself and does not reflect the broader range of concerns a more analytical folklorist would have. I would recommend the volume particularly to those interested in hill communities not only in Kumaon but in Garhwal and Nepal as well and to scholars concerned with questions of gender ideology in south Asia more generally; it is a provocative document.

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FUCHS, STEPHEN. *At the Bottom of Indian Society, The Harijan and Other Low Castes*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1981. viii+325 pp. Bibliography, indexes. Hardbound Rs 105.

There are nearly eighty million "Scheduled Caste" people and at least one hundred million "Untouchables" in India. Little attention, however, has been paid to them by anthropologists. The Rev. Stephen Fuchs has made a special study of the tribes, the Untouchables and the low castes since 1934, when he first came to India. He has published several important monographs concerning these groups based on his long-term field research. *The Children of Hari* (1951), on the Nimar Balahis of Madhya Pradesh, and *Rebellious Prophets* (1965), concerning the messianic (reform) movement, are the most important of these works.