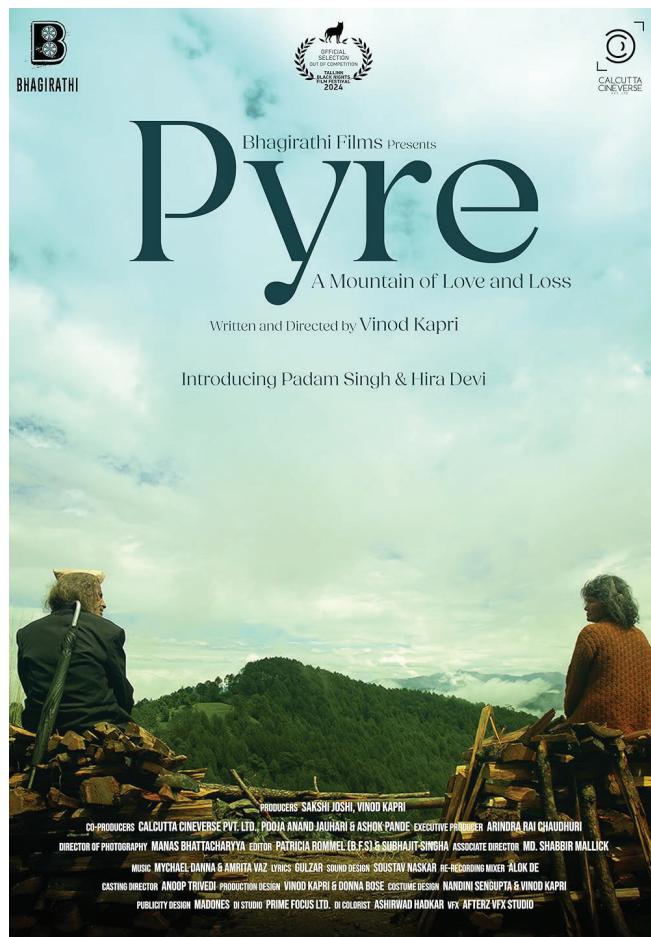


Book Review

Review of *Pyre* (चिता) directed by Vinod Kapri

Prince Tomar

Tallinn University

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Building on the motif of last rites, the film *Pyre* poignantly captures the lived experiences of rapidly disappearing Himalayan communities, weaving their unique cultural spirit and the essence of mountain life into a deeply emotive narrative. Here, pyre refers to the funeral pyre used for cremation in Hindu and related traditions. The review proposes that fictionalized real stories from the Himalaya deserve recognition within broader cinematic practices, as this offers significant contributions to Himalayan studies by bridging academic inquiry with forms that engage and influence a wider audience.

The story is set in Kumaon, Uttarakhand state's administrative and revenue division. Embraced by Tibet to the north and Nepal to the East, the region is the eastern heart of the state in India. With the pine trees (*Pinus roxburghii*) blanketing the slopes in the background, the story unfolds as a critique of distant urbanization in India. It tells the fictional story of an elderly couple, Tulsi (played by Hira Devi) and Padam Singh (played by Padam Singh). They live out their days in the routines of rural life, with humorous familial squabbles and deep communal bonds. Their equilibrium is disrupted by a letter from their long-absent son, which rekindles their hope for reunion. Yet, as they await their son's arrival, the village empties. They plead and offer goats in their efforts to persuade the villagers to stay, yet only return to counting their days. "One month to live, two months to die," Padam Singh remarks as departures loom, and the question of who will light their pyre remains unanswered. Their son's arrival letter tragically tests their emotional resilience as the reality of life in an empty village descends. *Pyre* serves as a fitting title that effectively captures the spirit of a story about the end of Himalayan life.

However, in Hindu tradition, the pyre, through cremation, also connects the departed with those who stay behind. Death is a prominent theme, but the symbol of the pyre poses a more profound question: How will Himalaya continue? The film unfolds like a eulogy, as if penned by the Himalaya itself. Through the telling of pain, laughter,

hope, and enduring intermarital disputes, it chronicles the uprooting of life in the rural Himalaya.

Marc Augé's concept of "non-place" provides a compelling framework for analyzing Himalayan outmigration. *Pyre* depicts the Himalaya—a center of countless Indian mythologies and a source of the sacred rivers—transitioning from an "anthropological place" that is a locus of history, identity, and collective social life, into a "non-place" that embodies transience, a lack of relationality, and a loss of rooted identity (Augé 1995). The film visualizes this transience through moving shots of empty houses, sealed windows, and locked doors, marking their passage from what is becoming history. Viewers thus confront the actual cost of our modern urban centers, which absorb displaced youth and centuries-old cultures in the name of opportunity and development. As Gagné observes this in the context of Ladakh, "For many, the pursuit of aspirations often entails physical departure, sometimes partial, sometimes complete, from a unit (Ladakhi household) that not so long ago was the only means of survival in this region" (2019).

As the Himalaya empties, grass will reclaim the long winding paths etched by generations of footsteps; when roads arrive, they will stand only as symbols of hollowed-out, impersonal transit. Yet, these same locked doors and empty houses also symbolize resilience—a quality the film captures in the ending through Tulsi, the village's lone survivor. After cremating her husband, she decides to stay behind for the Himalaya. This emphasis on the traces of resilience highlights a crucial tension: contrary to Augé's definition of non-places as anonymous and transient, such spaces can be made (and kept) relational through human interaction. This is captured most poignantly in the scene where Tulsi moves from house to house, knocking on doors and calling for her neighbors who have long departed, not unbeknownst to her. Alone, surrounded by the fading material traces of a Himalayan life that once was, yet insisting on relation in the face of abandonment.

Director Vinod Kapri, renowned for his nuanced portrayal of social issues, is the recipient of numerous film awards, including the prestigious National Award for his 2014 documentary on rural sanitation, *Can't Take This Shit Anymore*. In *Pyre*, he juxtaposes the vast, serene landscape of the Himalaya with empty houses and cultural loss—a scene familiar to inhabitants and to tourists in transit. A native of Uttarakhand, Kapri's direction is marked by empathy and an authentic commitment to socially relevant storytelling. This extends to the film casting: both his protagonists are natives of the Himalayan state, and non-professional actors; however, their soulful performances belie that.

Pyre advances Himalayan studies through its emotionally charged retelling of lived experiences. It crosses cinematic boundaries by merging documentary authenticity—achieved through non-professional actors and unfiltered realism—with the narrative freedom of fiction. This docu-fictional approach seamlessly binds true stories of neglect and cultural loss (Naithani 2024) into a compelling feature-film framework. Viewers recognize the shots of dense pine forests, the melodious flute in the background, and the thick fog cloaking the hilltops as a mirror reflection of one's long-held urban desires for Himalayan tourism. The film critiques this tendency to romanticize the region as a utopia while immersing viewers in the agency of the mountains (*Pahad*) and their dwellers (*Pahadi*).

The film lacks the glamorous pan-national presence of a mainstream Indian film or Bollywood production. It nonetheless deserves a broader reach for its honest, wholesome, and socially relevant portrayal of Himalayan life. Blockbusters like *3 Idiots* (dir. Rajkumar Hirani, 2009), *Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani* (dir. Ayan Mukerji, 2013), and *Highway* (dir. Imtiaz Ali, 2014) fleetingly capture the Himalaya's allure for urban youth, using the landscape to underscore their emotional and psychological journey. By offering a framework for genuine regional representation that challenges current cinematic trends, *Pyre* distinguishes

itself through its endogenous gaze, moving away from a focus on urban visitors experiencing Himalayan remoteness to the local community's own experience of place. Yet the film overlooks crucial ecological nuance, mirroring a trend that reduces the Himalaya to mere remoteness and infrastructural void. Against urgent debates about the "delusion" of infrastructure and reckless development in fragile ecosystems ("The world must escape" 2025), this narrow framing feels disconnected. Future films must deepen this alignment with perspectives on ecology.

The film frames the Himalaya as a space where the struggle between tradition and modernity is rendered visible through the visceral experiences of isolation and displacement. Within this, the funeral pyre emerges as a potent counter-site, embodying both an end and a beginning. This symbolism begs the question: in our pursuit of modern development, have we consigned ancient traditions and cultures to their own pyre? In a Hindu cremation ceremony, mourners gather to witness and honor the transition of the departed. Yet, as the Himalayan life itself faces erasure, who remains to mourn its passing?

Through its raw portrayal of Himalayan life and a humorous take on existential reflections, *Pyre* will appeal to audiences seeking contemplative, socially conscious films. It offers timely lessons that illuminate urgent socio-environmental challenges of our times, inspiring viewers to reflect, discuss, and mobilize for meaningful change. For academics, such works are a call to engagement. We both gain from such a role and carry the obligation to be at the forefront of the conversation they ignite.

Prince Tomar is a doctoral researcher at the Centre for Landscape and Culture, Tallinn University, Estonia. He works with borderland communities in the Himalaya, with a particular focus on the socio-cultural dynamics of road development. His work traces the subtle interplay between infrastructure, territorialization, and the region's intricate dance of history, geopolitics, and terrain.

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