

## Film Review

### Review of *Ek Tha Gaon* directed by Srishti Lakhera

India, 2021. 61 minutes. Garhwali and Hindi with English subtitles.

Reviewed by Vidushi Dobhal Naithani

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*Ek Tha Gaon*, a cinematic masterpiece by Srishti Lakhera, tells the story of Semla, the director's ancestral village in the Himalayan foothills of Uttarakhand. 50 families resided in the village that once bustled with life and prosperity. By 2016, when the documentary first started taking shape, only 7 inhabitants remained in the village. The rest had relocated to nearby cities for better opportunities and in search of a better quality of life. The documentary successfully captures the essence of the intersection of migration, environmental degradation, and socio-economic development through reminiscences and the lens of 80-year-old Leela Devi and 19-year-old Golu. Leela Devi and Golu are 2 of the 7 people left behind in the village.

Ever since Uttarakhand attained the status of a separate state in 2000, the intensity of out-migration has often been seen as an indicator of the level of development in the hilly regions of the state. Despite numerous policies initiated by the government over the years, the rate of migration from the rural areas of Garhwal and Kumaon hills in Uttarakhand has not come down. The irony surfaces since the need for a separate state emerged through a strong public movement from within Uttarakhand that demanded better and hill-specific development policies. In nearly 24 years of its existence, Uttarakhand has struggled for its identity and effective policies that could promise a better future for the hill folks.

Semla, a village in the Tehri District of Uttarakhand, has been officially designated as one of the 'ghost villages' of the state. Lakhera directs the documentary with utmost sensitivity and empathy. Coming back to her family home, she appears to be comfortable. She has established a cordial relationship with Leela Devi and Golu, as the old lady caringly offers her tea and Golu effortlessly discusses her future and aspirations with Lakhera. The film unfolds through a series of conversations between the director and the residents of the village, particularly Leela Devi and Golu. The director frequently switches between Hindi and Garhwali as a means of facilitating effective communication with the residents.

For the viewers who find their roots in the hills of Garhwal and Kumaon, Leela Devi's conversations in Garhwali attach a sense of belonging and sincerity to her narrations of courage and simplicity. The silent sequences speak for themselves the tale of rural abandonment and the enduring struggle for survival amidst the lonely landscape of the abandoned village.

Shot in natural light, the film helps the viewers relate to the harsh village life when Leela Devi lights a feeble lantern to pierce through the pitch-dark night that descends upon the mighty Himalayas. The atmospheric sounds make the overall experience of watching the film more immersive. The harrowing sounds of blasting that signal late-night construction activities near the village serve as a stark reminder of the verse penned down by famous poet Mahesh Chandra Punetha, "*ab pahuchi ho sadak tum gaaon, jab poora gaaon sheher jaa chuka hai*" ("Now that you have arrived, oh road, the entire village has already migrated to the city."). When Leela Devi struggles to access basic necessities like water and fuel and Golu has to travel to a nearby city to access education, the systemic deficiencies and infrastructural neglect make one question the narrative of development that has collectively been held on to for decades now.

As multiple issues faced by the hills unfold one after the other during the movie, one cannot help but contemplate the magnanimity of challenges faced by those residing in such a demanding terrain. The reality of the hills, as portrayed in the documentary, seems to be significantly different from the convenient reality of a city where fuel, electricity, and minimal human existence are not so challenging to find. Our endeavors to improve our lives through the use of technology and innovation appear insignificant when we observe the brutality of nature and a village that has existed too far back in the timeline of development and basic amenities. The ones who have migrated seem to have crossed over to the other side and transitioned into an alternate reality in pursuit of an improved existence.

As the residents share their experiences, the viewer is driven to reflect on the nuances of effective governance, inclusive policymaking, and how the absence of basic facilities has taken a toll on the emotional and psychological well-being of Semla's residents.

The narrative of Semla is a classic case that exemplifies the consequences of disparity of resources and opportunity. Those who have the resources migrate and aim to expedite progress and those who do not have the wealth to move to the city must wait for development to come to them. The seven inhabitants of Semla village, who are now left behind, are the folks who belong to the latter portion. In the documentary, they are seen referring to it as their destiny. In a certain instance, as mentioned in the documentary, caste disparities also seem to play a decisive role in the future of those left behind. The stark contrast in the life phases of Leela Devi and Golu shows the complete cycle of an individual's life through the documentary.

As Leela Devi recalls the times when she was younger and had come to the village as a teenage newlywed, she vividly talks of the friends she made, the daily lifestyle they followed, and the conversations the women had. As she sits outside her house on the barren, unkempt land, she juxtaposes the past and the present and vividly speaks of the communal harmony she had witnessed throughout her life. Golu, on the other hand, finds it hard to imagine a future for herself in the deserted village. She innocently, yet convincingly asserts that these villages will inevitably disappear over time.

While Leela Devi struggles with the challenges of old age that have impacted her day-to-day activities, Golu does not know how to channel her energy and utilize the time that is crucial for her development as an individual. Both individuals, at

different stages of their lives, cannot help but acknowledge the reality that manifests itself in the form of barren farmlands, encroaching development, and gradual disappearance of traditional livelihood, culture, and heritage of the village; all being witnessed through a profound sense of loneliness by the seven remaining inhabitants.

The documentary earlier qualified for the India Gold category of the Mumbai Academy of Moving Image (MAMI) Film Festival. At the 69<sup>th</sup> National Film Awards, the film received the national award in the best non-feature film category. The film has come to light at a crucial time in academia and policy-making when the conversation surrounding development has taken an interdisciplinary turn. The film can prove to be an authentic means of displaying the challenges of the residents of the Himalayas and help us identify the roadblocks in the long journey towards inclusive and need-based development for many *Golus* and *Leela Devis* who reside in the far-flung peaks across the mighty Himalayas.

*"Ek Tha Gaon, a cinematic masterpiece by Srishti Lakhera, tells the story of Semla, the director's ancestral village in the Himalayan foothills of Uttarakhand."*

- Vidushi D. Naithani on *Ek Tha Gaon*

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