

# TRADITION AND TRANSFORMATION: EXAMINING THE HISTORICAL AND SOCIO-CULTURAL IMPORTANCE OF UTTARAKHAND'S FAIRS IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION

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## Abstract

*The state of Uttarakhand is renowned for its distinctive cultures and varying beliefs. Various fairs and festivals are celebrated throughout the year in the Garhwal and Kumaon regions of the state, such as Uttaraini mela, Devidhura mela, Maun mela, Vishu mela, Jauljibi mela, Gauchar mela, Thal mela. These fairs hold religious, socio-cultural, and economic significance in people's lives. These fairs and their festivities are related to the land, soil, crop harvesting, and seasonal changes. They are considered auspicious by the people and serve various purposes for the people who come from distant places to visit them. These fairs are important trading centres as people come to sell their products in these fairs. Also, many folk songs and dances are alive today because these fairs are essential centres for social gatherings. This paper's study area is the Garhwal and Kumaon regions of Uttarakhand. The paper discusses the historical background of some of these fairs and their socio-cultural and economic importance. It also discusses the impact of modernization and globalization on these fairs and the efforts that can be made toward their preservation.*

**Keywords:** fairs, festivals, folk traditions, globalisation, modernisation, kumaon, garhwal.

## Introduction

In the history of humankind, the feeling of enjoyment and recreation has perhaps existed since the early days of his life. The life of primitive humans was one filled with struggles. He would have found an occasion to escape his mundane daily life, forget his troubles, dance, and sing joyfully. These occasions could be his victory over his opponent, his success in hunting, or the arrival of a new season. When he transitioned from his nomadic life as a hunter-gatherer to a sedentary lifestyle where agriculture and animal husbandry became indispensable, he learned to express gratitude to some unknown supernatural powers or visible god-like rain, sunshine, and moonlight. When he saw his flourishing crops, he would bow to these powers and express his gratitude by singing and dancing. These occasions of joy would gradually become the basis of festivals and fairs organized today. As civilization developed, these festivals and fairs also underwent

several changes in their forms. When we look into the historical background of various religious, agricultural, and commercial fairs and festivals, we find that they have experienced several stages of historical development before reaching their present forms. (Sharma, 2008).

A mela, or fair, is a gathering where individuals assemble at a culturally significant time and location. Fairs usually occur at the junction of trade routes, riverbanks, or confluences. Most fairs are connected to a specific festival. A festival venue transforms into a fair when it attracts enough large-scale outside visitors. The fair's timing is determined by the positions of celestial objects like the sun, moon, planets, and stars, following one of India's many solar and lunar calendars. Melas are organized for various purposes but usually incorporate three objectives—*dharma*, *artha*, and *kama*—as defined by ancient Indian philosophers, as they simultaneously serve as religious, commercial, and recreational events (Kurin,

1985). Melas are the sites that bring together participants from various religious, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. In fact, "mil," the Sanskrit origin of the word "mela," means the act of gathering and mixing. At a fair, mixing and meetings happen on a grand scale; it is a meeting place for people from different villages, towns, and regions. (Tribhuwan, 2003).

In Indian history, we find that since the time of the Harappan civilization, people have used various entertainment methods, including terracotta toys and dancing. However, no evidence exists of social gatherings like festivals or fairs organized in the form we know today. During the Vedic Period, people participated in chariot racing, dicing, music, and dance. Later Vedic books and the Rigveda refer to flute players, conch blowers, drummers, and musical instruments. Samana, a social event attended by thousands of people, was most likely a fair. Scholars have compared it with the Greek Olympic Games. Kumbh Mela is one of the largest gatherings of people in the world. Some scholars have traced the earliest written reference to the Kumbh in the account of the Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang, who visited India in the seventh century AD during the reign of King Harshavardhana. Holi, Basant Panchami, Dussehra, Diwali, Shivratri, and Sankranti Festivals were celebrated during the medieval period, and large numbers of people participated in these festivals (Pearson, 1984).

### **Understanding the Socio-Cultural and Geographical Context of Fairs in Uttarakhand**

The state of Uttarakhand is known for its diverse array of fairs and festivals, contributing to the region's vibrant cultural landscape. Throughout the year, various festivals and fairs are celebrated across different regions. These celebrations persist, in one form or another, commencing with the Phuldei festival of the new year in the month of Chaitra and culminating with the Holi festival in Phalgun (Sharma, 2008). In Uttarakhand, several terms are used for fairs and festivals, such as *thaul*, *ausar*, *mela*, and *kauthig*. The Sanskrit word *sthal* (place or temple) is the root of the word *thaul* and the Sanskrit word *vatsar* (new year) is the root of the word *ausar* (occasion). The Sanskrit word "kautuk" (curiosity for spectacle) seems to be the origin of terms like "kautik" and "kauthig" (Purohit, 2008).

When we look at festivals and fairs held in different parts of Uttarakhand, we see various driving forces for the hill people to hold these fairs and festivals at different times of the year. In the myths of every village, we find that every hillock, rivulet, stone, tree, and cultivation is attributed to Shiva, Shakti, Sita, Gaura (Nanda), Naga or any other folk deity. It is widely believed that every river and stream originates from the grace of gods and goddesses residing on the mountaintops. So, a feeling of gratitude exists in peoples' hearts towards the natural forces; it is out of this sense of gratefulness and respect that they annually offer *thaul* (festival and related ritual) to the patron god of a village or a group of villages, called *Bhumyal*. Similarly, the deities associated with rain, hailstorm, forest, wind, justice, cattle, and those from the Pan-Indian pantheon are honoured with a *thaul* to rejuvenate their strength and, thus, guarantee the safety and welfare of the community.

Villages are geographically distanced from one other in the mountainous regions of Uttarakhand. Historically, when contemporary transport methods were scarce and inadequate road infrastructure, such occasions allowed individuals to reunite with their loved ones. They held particular importance in the life of married women (*dhiyans* in local dialects) who worked hard in their in-laws' households and had minimal time away from their everyday responsibilities associated with agriculture, animal husbandry, and other domestic tasks. These holiday occasions allowed them to reunite with family members from her *maït* (natal home). Historically, due to the rugged and inaccessible terrain of Uttarakhand, fairs, or melas, often took the form of religious and commercial gatherings. Many fairs are timed to coincide with sacred occasions, such as *Purnimas* or *Sankrantis*. The more significant fairs typically occur during the winter, a relatively slow season for agricultural activities in the region. (Nand & Kumar, 1989). Some festivals are celebrated in this region as the seasons change, demonstrating the harmony between the human heart and the natural world. Baisaakhi (Bissu in Jaunsar), Shivratri, Vasant Panchami, Maun (a fishing activity held in June), Gindi Ka Mela, and so forth are all manifestations of this impulse of celebrating the seasonal changes. (Purohit, 2008).

### Some Important Fairs of Uttarakhand

The Uttarayani fair is associated with the astronomical phenomenon of Uttarayan. The term "Uttarayana" is derived from two Sanskrit words: *Uttara*, meaning "north," and *Ayana*, meaning "movement" or "path" (Goyal, 2019). It signifies when the Sun begins its apparent movement away from the southern latitudes, from the Tropic of Capricorn to the Northern Hemisphere (Sharma, 2024). The fair celebrates the Makar Sankranti festival of northern India, locally known as 'Ghughitia Tyar' (Pandey, 1935). The Uttaraini fair held in Bageshwar, located at the confluence of the Gomati and Saryu rivers, holds great significance from religious, cultural, commercial, historical, and political perspectives. The name "Bageshwar" is derived from the ancient temple dedicated to Lord Bagnath (Shiva), which was established by Raja Lakshmi Chand around 1450 AD. Here, the temples of Bagnath, Bhairavanath, and Daternath draw thousands of devotees annually during the Uttarayini fair (Nag, 1999). Atkinson refers to how this fair was a great mart for exchanging Tibetan products between the Bhotias and merchants from Almora and its surrounding regions (Sharma, 2008). Historically, the fair has served as a vital trade hub, particularly for the Bhotia breed of dogs, which has been associated with the fair since the days of Tibetan trade. Recent observations from traders reveal a continuity of this trade, with prices for dogs ranging significantly based on lineage and demand and a notable decline in the fair's overall vibrancy. This shift reflects broader economic trends and societal changes, providing a rich context for studying the evolution of traditional fairs in contemporary society (ETV, 2023).

Historically, the Uttarayani Fair in Bageshwar is a reminder of the Kuli Begar system, a practice of forced labour imposed on the local populations by the colonial government due to inadequate transportation options in the mountainous regions of Uttarakhand. The Kuli Begar movement emerged in response to this oppressive practice (Pathak, 1991). The people of Uttarakhand had been raising their voices against forced labour for many years. When the British government did not pay any attention to their demands, people expressed their anger against the government on 14 January 1921, the day of Uttarayani fair held in Bageshwar, and threw all the

documents related to forced labour into the Saryu River (Pandey, 1937). Mahatma Gandhi's appeal for non-violent resistance bolstered the movement's momentum. (ETV, 2023). This movement, which marked its 101st anniversary in 2022, is crucial for understanding the socio-political landscape of early 20th-century India. The fair has historically served as a vital platform for political engagement in the region, with the tradition of political parties setting up distinct pavilions playing a significant role in this dynamic, which continues to be so even now (Prasad, 2023). Traditionally, this renowned fair lasted seven days. For visitors to the Uttarayani Fair, Bhotia Bazaar continues to be a significant attraction. Despite changes in the nature of the fair, locals and outsiders still regard the products from Bhotia Bazaar as reliable. The market has successfully maintained its reputation over the years. However, the fair no longer holds the same commercial and economic significance as it once did.

The Devidhura Mela is organized within the premises of the Varahi Devi Temple in Devidhura, Champavat district, on Raksha Bandhan on Purnima of the Sravan. Devidhura is located at the junction of Almora, Pithoragarh, and Nainital districts. Mela is renowned for its captivating dance performances, folk songs, and the traditional religious ceremony known as Bagwal. Bagwal (lit. fight with stones), also known as the Stone War, involves opposing groups engaged in a battle, hurling stones at each other while utilizing roof-like shields made of wood (Farra) for self-protection. In Bagwal, people from four clans (Khams) —Chamyal, Gahadwal, Lamgadiya, and Walig—along with fighters from seven other groups (Thoks) participate (Sharma, 2008). The priest's conch shell-blowing initiates the Bagwal, and the combat ceases promptly upon the priest's intervention, facilitating reconciliation between the two sides. Those who sustain injuries while playing Bagwal feel joyful, believing the goddess has blessed them. People also find that their wishes are fulfilled at this temple (Pandit, 2022). In the past, human sacrifice (*Narbali*) was purportedly offered to appease the Mother Goddess. According to the legend, when the time came for a village elder's son to be sacrificed, she prayed to the goddess, who revealed that instead of a human sacrifice, there should be bloodshed equivalent to one person.

According to a folk proverb, "*das dasein bees bagwal, kalikumu phuli bhandav*," Bagwal was traditionally celebrated in twenty locations throughout Kali Kumaon. Historical accounts indicate that prior to its observance in Devidhura, Bagwal festivities were held at various sites, including Chamaldev in the Patti Gumdes, Ramgad in Patti Ramgad, the Narayani temple in Shilauti-Chakhata, and Bhimtal during the Hariyale festival (Atkinsion, 2002). However, many of these celebrations have either ceased altogether or have diminished to mere formalities, losing much of their original cultural vibrancy. However, Bagwal at Devidhura fair still draws large crowds from distant areas. According to estimates, more than one lakh people from Nepal, Kumaon and other places participate in the Bagwal fair. It showcases a mix of tradition and modernity. When public sacrifice and violence were banned in the entire state, the format of this fair also changed. The administration directed that the game of Bagwal would be played with fruits and flowers instead of stones. However, the excitement of the fair does not stop people from using stones. The event celebrates the region's historical heritage and plays a significant role in shaping the identity of the people, making it an essential aspect of this cultural landscape (Rawat, 2015).

Thal, a town on the banks of the Ramaganga River in the Pithoragarh district, holds a fair on the occasion of Baisakhi, known as the Thal fair (Sharma, 2008). Thal is a pilgrimage site, owing to the *Gangasnan* (bathing in the Ganges) performed here and the presence of the Baleshwar Shiva temple. Previously, local traders referred to as "Shauk," used to import woollen goods from Tibet. One of the notable aspects of this fair was the hookahs (a device used to heat and vaporize tobacco for inhalation) manufactured in Thal. The area became well-known for its hookah-making trade. These products were so sought after that people from Tibet, Nepal, and the Terai would purchase these hookahs at the fair to sell in their regions. However, this industry has disappeared entirely (Kafal Tree, 2022). Over time, due to the cessation of India-Tibet trade and other contributing factors, the commercial nature of the fair diminished. The presence of outside traders has almost come to an end, and fewer local vendors attend. However, artisans continue to showcase their products, like *ringal* baskets, ropes, agricultural tools, copper

utensils, and woollen garments. While the fair may not have the same lively atmosphere as before, its religious importance persists. It continues to reflect the local culture today. Thal Fair, initially lasting fifteen to twenty days, has now been reduced to three to four days. This reduction can be attributed to improved transportation and the increased availability of goods in even the most remote areas (Sharma, 2008).

The Gauchar fair, held in Gauchar, Chamoli district, is primarily a commercial fair for a week starting from 14<sup>th</sup> November every year (Nand & Kumar, 1989). The area now known as Gauchar was once a prosperous agricultural region (Sharma D. D., 2008). The fair was first held in November 1943, during the tenure of then deputy commissioner, Mr. Barnedi. In the past, Tibetan traders from various places such as Dapa, Dipu, Gyaing, and Tholing used to come here to sell a variety of goods, including wool, *suhaga* (Borax), musk, *shilajit*, rock salt, and herbs. However, following the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1962, this interaction between traders stopped (Nand & Kumar, 1989). At present, the fair still attracts a large number of local people, traders and merchants. Cottage industry products such as carpets, shawls, *pankhi* and other woollen products are available for purchase. Women attending the fair don vibrant attire and adorn themselves with jewellery (Bisht, 1994). The fair is also a major cultural venue, as folk artists are invited to perform in the fair, and some pavilions showcase the state's rich cultural heritage. The fair has seen specific changes recently as the state government tries to promote the fair by incorporating adventure sports like rafting. Such efforts help generate employment opportunities for the local people, curb migration from the hills, and keep the overall significance of the fair alive, as these fairs help preserve folk culture and traditions (Baghel, 2023).

### **Impact of Globalization and Modernization on Fairs of Uttarakhand**

The significance of these fairs in people's lives is diminishing with the ever-increasing pace of modernization and globalisation in Uttarakhand. As efficient means of transportation reach the remotest of the villages now, facilitating the establishment of shops there and modern forms of entertainment become accessible with ease,

people, especially the younger generation, are losing interest in folk songs and folk dances which used to be an essential part of fairs and festivals in the past. The trend is visible in the gradual decline of the presence of folk artists and a relative decline in religious beliefs associated with the festivals.

The convergence of various Aryan and non-Aryan cultures of the past resulted in the emergence of local fairs and related festivities in Uttarakhand, and they have undergone a tremendous amount of transformation before reaching their current form. Many of them have completely vanished without leaving any trace. In the folktales of Uttarakhand, we find accounts of numerous such festivals. For instance, in the tale of Tilu Rauteli in Garhwal, it is mentioned that a renowned historical fair occurred at a location called Khatli ka kanta two centuries ago. By referring to Hamilton's "Description of Hindustan," Dr S.P. Dabral asserts that in medieval Garhwal, a fair of Devdasis used to be held at Ranihat, Srinagar (Sharma, 2008).

Similarly, numerous local festivals exist in the Kumaon region that were once celebrated with grandeur and extravagance for extended durations until the previous century. However, these festivals have either vanished entirely or have been diminished to a mere one or two-day event to fulfil formalities. D.D. Sharma highlights the Dhanlek fair of Askot and the Ganesh Chaturthi fair of Dhawajpatishwar as examples of such festivals. Additionally, the commercial fairs of Chaiti in Kashipur and Jauljivi in Ascot, which were once commemorated for several days, have now become nothing more than a mere name, lacking the grandiosity and spectacle of earlier times.

## Conclusion

Uttarakhand's fairs and festivals provide a window to look back into the past; they act as a bridge between the present and the past. While globalization has the potential to bring economic benefits, there is also a risk of dilution of cultural and traditional elements, which makes these fairs and festivals unique. There is a need to balance the progress that is supposed to occur with the arrival of modernization and preserving the cultural heritage. Community involvement; documentation of history, rituals, and unique aspects of each fair; promotion of traditional

crafts; cultural awareness programs; active government support; inter-generational transfer of knowledge; integration of sustainable practices into the organization of fairs are some of the steps which will help us in striking a balance between preserving the originality of local fairs in Uttarakhand and allowing them to evolve sustainably. The role that these fairs and festivals play in conserving the folk customs and traditions of Uttarakhand, in providing the collective identity to the people of this region, in promoting social cohesiveness through shared rituals, folk performances, and the role they play in economic upliftment of the people involved, their study becomes important in an increasingly globalized world.

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