

Cultural Expressions and Environmental Awareness through Folklores of Uttarakhand: An Insightful Study of Himalayan Heritage

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Abstract

Oral narratives have been always the strongest platform of communication in Indian culture. India is a land of multiculturalism but each culture is different from one another due to some specific characteristics. The prominent message is to impart devotion, emotion, peace and humanity in all through the Folklores, and religious narratives. Every state celebrates its own festivals as Ganesh Chaturthi in Maharashtra, Onam in Kerala, Bihu in Assam same as Nanda Devi Raj Jat Yatra in Uttarakhand that is known as Himalayan Maha Kumbh, Golu Devta, God of Justice and Dhari Devi (Supreme Power of Uttarakhand). Uttarakhand, a northern Indian state nestled in the Himalayas, is rich in cultural expressions, storytelling, and environmental awareness, all of which are deeply embedded in its folklore. These traditions offer an insightful window into the values, beliefs, and ecological consciousness of the region's diverse communities. India's land of cultural heritage has diversified myths, legends, and old tales. Myths, legends, and folklores encapsulate those cultural and historical values that hold a community together. Uttarakhand is known as Dev Bhoomi as it is assumed to be the *abode of God*. The importance of folk literature in Indian culture is profound, multifaceted and relevant.

Key Words: Protector, Procession, Pilgrimage, Dynasty, Meda

Introduction:

Folklore is the traditional belief, customs, stories, and practices passed down through generations, typically by word of mouth. Its history is deeply rooted in human culture and has evolved over centuries, often influenced by a community's environment, social structures, and historical experiences. Folklore dates back to ancient societies when stories, rituals, and customs were oral traditions. Before written languages emerged, people relied on spoken word to preserve knowledge, cultural identities, and moral lessons. These stories often had a moral or cautionary element and were used to teach young generations about societal values, norms, and history. Indian folklore is an intricate and diverse collection of traditions, myths, legends, and beliefs that have been passed down through generations across the vast and culturally rich subcontinent. The history of Indian folklore is intertwined with its ancient civilizations, diverse ethnic groups, religions, and regional variations, making it one of the richest folklore traditions in the world.

History of Indian Folklore

Indian folklore has roots in the ancient civilizations of the Indus Valley (circa 3300–1300 BCE), but much of its early history is difficult to trace since it was primarily transmitted orally. The early forms of Indian folklore included folk tales, stories, and rituals that were used to explain natural phenomena, convey moral lessons, and preserve cultural traditions. The blending of myths, religious practices, and social norms formed the foundation of these traditions. The earliest written records of Indian culture and folklore are found in the *Vedas* (the oldest scriptures of Hinduism, dating back to around 1500 BCE). These texts contain hymns, myths, and legends that formed part of the spiritual and ritualistic practices of the Vedic people. These myths describe the gods, the creation of the universe, cosmic struggles, and other spiritual concepts, some of which later became central to Indian folklore.

The *Mahabharata* (an epic, dating from around 400 BCE–400 CE) and *Ramayana* (an ancient Indian epic) are foundational texts in Indian culture.

These epics are deeply woven into the fabric of Indian folklore, with the heroic tales of characters like Lord Rama and Lord Krishna, gods and demons, and mythological creatures forming the basis of countless regional folk narratives, songs, dances, and festivals.

With the spread of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism across India, folklore began to take more regional and religious forms, merging with local beliefs, deities, and customs. As dynasties rose and fell, various regions developed their unique folk traditions, many of which were influenced by local customs, languages, and geography. Indian folklore is especially known for its vast array of folktales and legends. These stories often feature animals, supernatural beings, and heroes who perform daring feats to overcome villains or restore balance. These tales are told in different languages and dialects, with variations based on region, caste, and religion.

Some notable examples include:

- **Panchatantra** (a collection of animal fables meant to teach moral lessons) and **Hitopadesha**.
- **Jataka Tales** (stories of the Buddha's past lives) are an important part of Indian Buddhist folklore.
- **Kalpavriksha** (the mythological "wish-fulfilling tree") is also a prominent motif in Indian folklore, signifying the link between desires and supernatural powers.
- **Local spirits and deities:** Indian folklore often includes stories about spirits, demons, and local deities who protect or harm people depending on the context, like the *Churels* of North India or *Bhoots* in Maharashtra.

Folklores of Uttarakhand: The Cultural Representation

Uttarakhand, a state located in the northern part of India, is rich in folklore, rooted deeply in its mountains, rivers, forests, and religious traditions. The cultural heritage of Uttarakhand is a blend of Hindu, Buddhist, and local animist influences. The folklore here reflects the state's unique geography, its rural traditions, and the diverse communities that inhabit it. The stories from Uttarakhand often include elements of nature, gods, spirits, supernatural beings, and historical events, offering both entertainment and moral teachings.

Here's an overview of the folklore of Uttarakhand:

Uttarakhand, often referred to as "Devbhoomi" (Land of the Gods), is considered sacred due to its connection to several important Hindu temples and pilgrimage sites, particularly in the Garhwal and Kumaon regions. Many of the legends and folklore are linked to the gods and goddesses worshipped in these areas. The Kedarnath and Badrinath temples, located in the Garhwal region, are two of the most famous pilgrimage sites in Uttarakhand. According to legend, Lord Shiva chose Kedarnath as his seat and turned into a bull to protect the region. The story of Lord Vishnu establishing the Badrinath temple as a place of worship for devotees also forms an essential part of the folklore.

Nanda Devi Raj Jat Yatra

Nanda Devi Raj Jat Yatra in Uttarakhand that is known as Himalayan Maha Kumbh. It is an amalgamation of Garhwal and Kumaon culture. Nanda Devi is the Folk goddess, protector of Uttarakhand. She is worshipped as goddess in India with multiple names like Parwati, Uma and Sunanda but in Uttarakhand, she is worshipped as a married daughter. Nanda Devi Raj Jat Yatra is the most sacred yatra of Uttarakhand. This procession is organized by Garhwal Dynasty, Raja Ajay Pal of Chandgarh in 15th century. It is a religious procession that takes place every twelve years in honor of Mata Nanda Devi, astrological calculations the exact date of Nanda Devi Raj Jat Yatra. Usually, the Yatra takes place in August or September. This sacred Raj Yatra is associated to the spiritual welfare of the humanity and it also symbolizes great faith in Hinduism.

It is religious farewell of Mata Nanda in which she has been departed from her paternal home (mait) Nauti village near Karan Prayag to her martial home in Hem Kund and from there Mata Nanda goes to Kailash. Nanda Devi Raj Jat Yatra is the most difficult pilgrimages because it is a barefoot procession of 280 km that is completed within 18 days. The procession is led by four horned sheep called Chausingya - Meda in Garhwal. The aim of this research paper is to connect Indian cultural with religious narratives because women are always represented as Shakti and worshipped in Indian society in form of goddess Parvati, Laxmi, Durga and Sita.

Golu Devta historical God of the Kumaun

Lord Golu is the legendary mythological and historical God of the Kumaun region who is believed to be an incarnation of Gaur Bhairav (Shiva) and regarded as the dispenser of justice. There are four different temples of Golu Devta in the Uttarakhand region the oldest being in Champawat, a district in Kumaon and others at Chitai, Ghorakhal and Chamarkhan (Almora) contributing to building the cultural and religious background and adding on to the various literary art forms of the community. All these temples have their lore and legend about the Golu Devta- God of Justice. C.M. Agarwal in his seminal book *Golu Devata* (1992) says that:

The story of Golu even today plays an important role in para-psychology (treatment of diseases by means of *Jagar*, *Jaga* and prayers to gods). The story of Golu is connected with the religious traditions of the region. He is remembered as a spiritual ruler and protector of the people there. He is also considered to be the human incarnation of God Shiva. This myth has always had a very important position in human psychology and the society of Uttarakhand as it has been a primitive religious narrative. This becomes even more important because the psychoanalytical approaches to criticism have made it possible to evaluate the concept of the myth of Golu Devta afresh. The origin of the myth of Golu Devta varies from place to place. However, two widely accepted stories talk about the origin and development of the legend. The local records and narratives tell that Jhalkari was the ruler of Katyuri and had seven spouses who lived together agreeably. Though the lord was honored with everything, he wanted to have a boy who could acquire his position after him. For securing a child he revered different deities, followed a wide range of manauti (appeasement), and performed charity and yajnas yet none ended up being productive. He brought extraordinary astrologers and pandits and lastly, after going through his horoscope he was proposed to get married again as his eighth wife would yield him a progeny that would not be any typical human yet a renowned and illustrious avatar. The following night he longed for a supernaturally delightful young lady sitting on the pinnacle of Neelkanth and incredibly the young lady presented herself by the name of Kalinka. The lord was hypnotized by her magnificence and went mad for Kalinka in his fantasy. The following morning, he gathered every one of his retainers and talked about his fantasy and from there on continued towards the heavenly locale of Neelkanth with a colossal armed force. He crossed many forests, waterways and mountains and endured brutal climatic conditions for quite a long time. Finally, he arrived at where Kalinka was occupied with extreme compensation. He met her and presented himself as the ruler of Dhauri Dhumakot and his fantasy succession. The ruler admitted his adoration for herself as well as his craving to wed her. He likewise stood up to the fact that the stargazers directed him the way to Neelkanth and that he was married and had seven spouses yet none could satisfy his interest in bringing forth a son. Kalinka being a temperate young lady requested that the ruler ask the sages to give him consent to wed her. On hearing the state of the ruler, sages felt sorry for him and happily allowed the king to marry Kalinka as his eighth spouse.

Dhari Devi, Protector of Uttarakhand

Dhari Devi is one of the most revered and significant deities in Uttarakhand, often considered a protector and guardian of the region. She is primarily worshiped in the **Garhwal** region, and her temple, located near Karnaprayag, is a major pilgrimage site. Dhari Devi is believed to safeguard the state and its people, especially the pilgrims who travel through the region to visit important shrines like Badrinath and Kedarnath. The origin and story of Dhari Devi are deeply rooted in the spiritual traditions of Uttarakhand. According to local legends, Dhari Devi was once a powerful goddess who had the ability to protect the land and its people. She is believed to have been a protector of the Kedarnath and Badrinath pilgrimage routes, which are sacred to Hindus.

One of the most widely told legends of Dhari Devi is that she was once a divine woman who lived in the forests of Uttarakhand and was very dedicated to Lord Shiva. Lord Shiva, pleased with her devotion, bestowed upon her the power to protect the region from evil forces. She was seen as a symbol of divine feminine power, purity, and protection. Dhari Devi is often regarded as the "Kailashvasi" (resident of the Himalayas) who watches over the land of Uttarakhand. She is believed to be a guardian spirit of the region, ensuring the safety and well-being of the people who live there, particularly during times of natural calamities and disasters. Her role as a protector extends beyond just the people—she is also said to safeguard the land and its natural resources. Local folklore suggests that when Uttarakhand faces calamities like floods, earthquakes, or other natural disasters, it is Dhari Devi's divine power that intervenes to restore balance and harmony in the region. In particular, Dhari Devi is said to have played a crucial role in protecting Yamuntri, Gangotri, Kedarnath the Char Dham Yatra (pilgrimage to the four holy shrines of, and Badrinath) from untoward incidents. Pilgrims often pray to her for safe passage on their spiritual journeys. The Dhari Devi Temple, located on the banks of the Alaknanda River in Karnaprayag, is the most significant shrine dedicated to her. The temple is located at a high altitude and offers stunning views of the surrounding mountains and valleys. It is believed that the temple's idol is made of a sacred wooden structure that has supernatural powers. The statue of Dhari Devi is unique in that it is said to be a mysterious wooden image, which has a distinct feature: the head of the idol is separate from the body and is believed to move naturally in response to the shifting natural elements around it.

The legend goes that the goddess's idol was originally housed in a different location, but due to rising waters of the Alaknanda River, it was relocated to its present site. Devotees believe that the goddess's constant presence in the area protects the entire region from natural disasters and misfortunes. The temple is also an essential stop for pilgrims traveling to Kedarnath and Badrinath, as many people offer prayers to Dhari Devi for blessings, protection, and safe travels. The idol of Dhari Devi is dressed in vibrant traditional garments and is adorned with flowers and jewellery, symbolizing her status as a revered deity.

Dhari Devi and the 2013 Uttarakhand Floods:

The 2013 Uttarakhand floods were a major natural disaster that devastated the region, particularly affecting the Kedarnath and Badrinath pilgrimage routes. Many people believed that the floods were a result of the goddess's displeasure

because of the construction of the Alaknanda Hydro Power Project, which was near the temple site and was seen as a violation of the sacred land. There was a strong belief among locals that the displacement of the temple's idol (which was temporarily relocated during the construction) angered the goddess, leading to the disaster. This incident sparked debates about the importance of respecting the spiritual sanctity of natural sites and led to calls for preserving and safeguarding the sanctity of holy places like the Dhari Devi Temple.

Despite the tragedy, the temple itself and its rituals remained a source of faith and resilience for the people of Uttarakhand. In the aftermath of the floods, many people sought solace and protection from the goddess, reaffirming their belief in her power to shield and protect the land from such catastrophes.

Scope and Objectives of the Paper:

The scope of this paper is to provide a comprehensive exploration of Folk Literature in Indian culture and specially the in Uttarakhand. It examines its various forms. Themes, regional variations and societal roles. The objectives of the papers are to examine the various forms of Folk literature. It explores regional and Societal variations. By addressing these objectives, the paper aims to contribute to a holistic understanding of the significance of folk literature in Indian languages and its enduring relevance in contemporary times. Through its comprehensive analysis and insights, the paper seeks to foster greater appreciation and recognition of India's rich and diverse folk literary heritage.

Data and Methodology

The data collection for this type of study would involve both qualitative and quantitative methods, focusing on gathering authentic folklore materials, community knowledge, and environmental narratives.

Conclusions

In conclusion, Indian folk literature stands as a rich tapestry of cultural heritage, embodying the collective wisdom, creativity, and resilience of diverse communities across the Indian subcontinent. T cultural values, preserving traditional knowledge, and fostering social cohesion. Despite facing challenges from globalization, cultural appropriation, and the decline of oral tradition, efforts in documentation, technology, and community engagement offer promising opportunities for the preservation and revitalization of Indian folk literature. By sustaining folk literature, we honour the diversity of Indian cultural expression, celebrate the richness of our collective heritage, and ensure that future generations inherit a world enriched by the wisdom and beauty of traditional storytelling, music, and art. Through collaborative endeavours and a renewed commitment to cultural preservation, we can ensure that Indian folk literature continues to inspire, educate, and unite people across generations and borders. throughout history, folk tales, songs, myths, and rituals have served as vital conduits for transmitting

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Conflicts of interest

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