

## FROM RITUAL TO INSTALLATION: A CONTEMPORARY ART LENS

**Aaditya Bijalwan**

Assistant Professor

Department of Fine Arts, School of Art and Architecture, Sushant University

**Dr. Himadri Shekhar Dey**

Associate Professor

Department of Planning, School of Art and Architecture, Sushant University

**Dr. Sachin Datt**

Associate Professor

School of Design, Sushant University

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### ABSTRACT

Uttarakhand is famous for its vibrant, rich cultural traditions and is also known for its vibrant fairs and festivals such as Pandav Nritya, Bagwal, Raman, and Ghughutiya. These festivals are not just festivals they are manifestations of mythology, ecological consciousness, and community identity. But due to today's modern life, urban migration, and globalisation, these traditions are slowly diminishing. Keeping this challenge in mind, an art exhibition was organised in which traditional culture was combined with modern visual art. Through paintings and site-specific installations, local festivals were showcased in a creative way and people were given an opportunity to connect with the heritage of Uttarakhand. This study shows how traditional and modern art can help keep a culture alive. Its central idea is that heritage is something that does not stop but changes with time. This research, done with local communities, artists and cultural experts, shows that art – especially installation art – can create both an emotional experience and a record. Interactive and multimedia techniques show how art can preserve cultural stories, create new meanings and pass them on to new generations. These creative methods increase pride, education, and social understanding within communities. This research shows that art is a powerful tool that helps preserve, change, and think in new ways about traditional culture in a fast-changing world – so that this culture remains relevant in the future.

### INTRODUCTION

Uttarakhand, a state located at the foothills of the Himalayas, is known for rich culture, more often realized through its festivals and fairs. Festival and fairs combine a multitude of meanings and in ways: religious, cyclical or agrarian. Festivals and fairs are nuances of our collective memory, social values, artistic practices, etc. Cultural practices namely Pandav Nritya, Raman, *Ghughutiya*, *Bagwal* and symbolic representation of Nissan and Bhumiya Devta, are not just performances, but cultural texts that present ways of community resilience, myths/interpretations of myths, and ecological consciousness. However, with the urgent pace of modernity and urban migration for example, many of the challenges around these practices are visibility, continuity, and relevance in contemporary contexts.

This research arises out of an experience-based art exhibition that tried to bridge cultural expressions with contemporary visual practices. Through a gesture of paintings and site-specific installations, the exhibition presented the aforementioned festivals and offered the public an active and critical experience of Uttarakhand's intangible heritage. The hope was to

create conditions for public dialogue, community pride, and relocation the folklores in horizontal modes of today's artistic practices. The desire to integrate traditional and contemporary art practices is based on the premise of heritage as a dynamic, rather than static proposition. It is a continued conversation between past and present.

The decision to combine traditional and contemporary arts comes from viewing heritage as an evolving discussion between the past and present. As such, this paper explores the possibilities of visual art, particularly site-based installations as an archive and as an experience. In working with local communities, artists and cultural practitioners, the research explores the relationship between authenticity and innovation, and how art can be a conduit for cultural preservation, education, and social observations.

As these narratives, when interpreted by creative and participatory means, can traverse generations and reclaim their place in the region's cultural fabric, and thereby are engaging in Dialogue for the metabolization of ideas Within local communities; art practitioners' and collaborations in the broader cultural context. The inclusion of contemporary approaches, such as multimedia, interactivity, and conceptual re-interpretations can open new ways to engage audiences, provoke critical inquiry, and reframing narratives, within their locale of a globally-situated, rapidly-transformative world. As such, this study affirms the impetus of contemporary artistic practices to maintain and re-contextualize intangible heritage for future cultural researchers and artist citations.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Many scholars have studied the cultural heritage of Uttarakhand, mainly its traditional festivals, folklore and social engagement. This study highlights the significance of the fast and festival practices celebrated in Uttarakhand and provides detailed information regarding the tradition and festival rituals aiding in understanding cultural practices. (Ruwali, 2016). To examine the fairs and festivals of Uttarakhand and their social impact, also highlighting the religious and cultural significance of Garhwali and Kumaoni while categorizing them (Sharma, 2014). This study focuses on the symbolic importance of Diwali traditions giving prosperity and safeguarding and document the ritual and tradition of Diwali such as lighting and worshipping Lakshmi (Sharma, 2015). This study explain the agricultural origin of festivals, which is essential for understanding the tradition of Uttarakhand's festival and highlights the importance of traditional food, kite flying, and fairs as a component of Makar Sankranti festival ( Rawat, 2016). Raman is a community-centered Ramayana play which is performed in saloor dungra village of Chamoli, integrates elements of folk dance, music and localized mythology. Raman is a combination of religious as well as expression of art through traditional practices. it is believed that Raman is a festival celebrated for 10 to 15 days and is a traditional ritual for worshipping the bhumiya devta. (Gairola, 1935) Ghughutiya (Kale Kauwa Festival) is a festival which is celebrated in Kumaon region of Uttarakhand and also celebrated in Gharwal with a different name called makar Sankranti or Uttraini it is a festival which is celebrated as a mark to the arrival of spring and the feeding of birds, symbolizing harmony with nature (Joshi, 2014). Harela plays an important role in raising awareness towards the environment. This festival is celebrated as a traditional and local environmental festival, which teaches us to take care of trees, living creatures, and the environment. Today's contemporary artists and cultural traditions are also using Harela as a subject and expressing it by understanding in a new way for sustaining the cultural and environmental of Uttarakhand (Joshi & et.al, 2017).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This method adopts a mixed-methods approach where the primary data was collected through ethnographic research by fieldwork, interviews with local artists and historians, and art-making as part of the research. The process included field tours of places like Almora, Chamoli, Chandrabadni, and Tehri Garhwal were conducted where observations and documentation of festivals took place. Making sketches of costumes, masks, and rituals, taking photographs, and collecting their patterns were also done. Through this research, an attempt was made to understand the cultural thinking of local artists, temple priests, and school children by discussing with them. Mixed-media paintings and site-specific installations were created that show things found in the field from a visual art perspective. The secondary data were collected from the research paper, articles, books, journals, and web sources etc.

## TRADITIONAL PRACTICES OF CELEBRATING FESTIVALS

The fairs and festivals of Uttarakhand demonstrate the region's rich cultural tradition, religious fundamentals all and community life. Though the fairs and festivals take place in both the hilly and the plain areas and are celebrated with much enthusiasm and devotion, all occasions show a sense of abundance and devotion in harmony with the change of season, fresh life, folk tales, and the local ways of life. From religious festivals like Kumbh Mela and Nanda Devi Raj Jat Yatra to local fairs like Purnagiri Mela, Jageshwar Mela, and Uttarkashi Magh Mela, each one has its special significance. Festivals such as Ghee Sankranti, Phool Dei, Harela, and Basant Panchami are linked to nature and agricultural time. These festivals not only give a glimpse of the spiritual and cultural life of Uttarakhand but also become a medium of community unity, economic give and take and preservation of old traditions. Through culture, music, customs, and colourful clothes, the people of Uttarakhand keep their heritage alive and enthusiastic every year. Some of the major traditional festivals are discussed below.

Harela is a traditional festival primarily celebrated in the Kumaon region of Uttarakhand. Harela marks the beginning of the monsoon season and is celebrated in honour of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati. Harela is a celebration of nature's fertility and abundance of agricultural produce. The word Harela translates to "day of green" (Harela comes from "harit" meaning green). On Harela, people plant seeds of five or seven types of seeds- wheat, maize, barley, mustard etc for 10 days, prior to the festival and harvest the green with shoots to present as blessings. The green shoots are placed on the heads of younger members of the family as a blessing for prosperity, health and good fortune. Harela also includes traditional songs, dances, and rituals and uses various forms of art to convey environmental messages and relationships around us. Harela has become a part of the modern vernacular around the wider theme of pro-environmental behavior in Uttarakhand (state), with institutes across the state and schools arranging tree planting drives and learning events for the festival.



Figure 1: Harela

Source <https://daajupahadi.com/harela-a-celebration-of-nature-and-culture-in-uttarakhand/>

Pandav Nritya is a ritual artistic folk performance that popularly happens in winter months from October to January, after the time of harvest, during the fairs (melas) and local festivals and shows. The performance is conducted by the participating artists of the village, dressed as the Pandavas, Draupadi, Krisna and other characters of the epic, who act out a number of episodes from their life. The dance is also accompanied by traditional folk instruments; dhol, damau, and turri, and is considered not simply as entertainment but a sacred ritual that invites the blessings of the divine. The villagers hold the belief that, as a result of their performances, the Pandavas descend and bless their country and residents. This often neglected Pandav Nritya is seated in an important way to preserve oral traditions, while fulfilling its colourful manifestations in Uttarakhand and conveying its long list of mythological and cultural history.



Figure 2: Pandav Nritya

Source: Author

Ghughutiya, also called the Kale Kauwa Festival represents an agricultural festival unique to the northern Indian region of Kumaon, in Uttarakhand. Traditionally observed during January and marking the transition from winter and approaching spring, Ghughutiya consist of making sweetened dough in the shape of small birds. The dough birds are hung around the yard and offered to crows and other birds as a practice of balancing with the earth. The dough bird represents, in essence, the acceptance of some biodiversity within the agrarian community and the various relations that exist between humans and animals. Major studies provide an interesting conceptualization of Ghughutiya by understanding it as a ritual that affirms ecological balance and community identity through its participatory mode of being. On the surface level, Ghughutiya may appear simple, but the layered meanings reveal a close relationship between folk traditions and environmental ethics; an area contemporary artists are dealing with using creative expressive forms, such as installations and community-based art, to re-conceptualize the significance of Ghughutiya for modern-day purposes.



Figure 3: Ghughutiya

Source: <https://www.outlooktraveller.com/explore/culture/a-mountain-festival-to-thank-the-crows>

Ramman is a type of traditional Indian theatre that originated in the Garhwal region of Uttarakhand. In the Chamoli district's Saloor-Kot village, a religious and ritualistic performance is held every year in late April. Ramman features scenes from the epic Ramayana and is devoted to the Hindu god Lord Rama. Every cast of the village has their role in this colorful festival. The Bhandari, who represent individuals of the Kshatriya caste, are the only ones permitted to wear one of the most sacred masks, that of the half-man, half-lion Hindu deity Narasimha. The Brahmans conduct the prayers and perform the rituals. The family that hosts Bhumiya Devta over a year must stick to a very strict schedule every day. Ramman is a cross-cultural event meaning it draws on aspects from theatre, songs, historical recreations, and oral and written traditional narratives, in order to embody both the community's environmental, spiritual, and cultural aspect of itself and recounting its origin myths and increasing their sense of self-esteem. The primary purposes of the community have been to promote its transmission and raise awareness about it outside its area of practice to maintain sustainability. (UNESCO - Ramman, Religious Festival and Ritual Theatre of the Garhwal Himalayas, India, n.d.)



Figure 4

Source: Author



Figure 5

Source: Author



Figure 6

Source: Author

### Contemporary art approaches in celebrating these festivals

The traditional festivals and fairs, as well as cultural symbols of the state, have been explored by creating the visual narratives through painting site-specific installations, and the religious symbols, such as Nissan, have been mimicked with artistic representation. The essence of

Uttarakhand's folk culture has been created on canvas; these moments are illustrated in a vibrant watercolour effect background, where every brush stroke smoothly appreciates earthy browns, warm ochres, and eloquent blues. On the first canvas, the central image of a man, dynamic dancing is referred to as a form of Bheem, the second elder brother in Pandavas, the overwhelming energy is symbolized by the realistic depiction, Stokes the victory of good over evil. The Pandav Nritya is being depicted very realistically as well as mythologically rich with cultural and traditional balance. The second canvas with a water colour effect background has a central image of a man dressed in traditional white attire balancing a smoky lamp of incense, the rising smokiness, gentle swaying, calmly reflecting the spirituality of this religious rite offered to the gods.



Figure 7

Source: Author

The next canvas depicts the scene of a man playing a Traditional drum called Dhol in Gharwal, dressed in traditional attire with a hat, the movement of the man beating a drum is realistically denoted in the painting. The fourth canvas depicts a man dressed in a black traditional dress with a black mask, and the movements are shown with a realistic approach. The mask dance, also called Raman, is shown in the painting. Traditionally, the mask dance is done on the last day of the Raman festival, where the Bhuimyal devta is worshipped by recreating the scenes of the epic Ramayana. The mask has exaggerated features with an elaborate shape of eyes and nose.



Figure 8

Source: Author

Around these canvases, Bhumiyal Devta Nishaan is established with wooden sticks wrapped in coloured cloths of white, green, black, blue, red, yellow, with a trident at the top, a flower garland, and a sacred thread indicating the blessings and protection of Bhumiyal Devta.

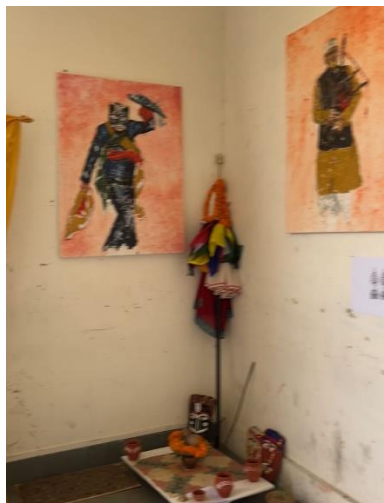


Figure 9

Source: Author

These marks are being honored, their fabric whipping in the wind, when the marks seem to fly like prayers, up into the sky.



Figure 10

Source: Author

In Uttarakhand, Makar Sankranti is called ghughutiya or khichdi Sankranti. In Khichdi Sankranti, khichdi of black lentils is made. A garland was made in which ghughutiya was attached with an auspicious thread. In the ghughutiya festival, people make bird-shaped ghughutiyas from kneaded flour with jaggery water, and dry fruit with sesame seeds, and later the mother makes her children wear a garland for blessing them for long life while singing a song 'kaale kawē kale ghuguti mala kha le'.



Figure 10

Source: Author

There is also a site-specific installation for Harela, the festival of greenery, a corner adorned with small plants, sprouts of maize and barley, marigold flowers, and sacred threads, representing the nature's relationship and the cycle of crops. The symbolic sculpture of lord shiva and his family, including Goddess Parvati, Kartikeya, and Ganesha, is also made in the center with Harela. The installation of Doli Jaat, a wooden doli decorated with colorful cloth and little bells, is also part of the scene, located on a platform decorated with marigolds, signifying the community engaged in and welcoming all gods and goddesses in celebration of the festival. The life-size paintings and the theatrical installations created an environment that felt like a living example of everyday Uttarakhand folk culture with all of the pieces Bheem's lively dance, the devotional smoke lamp, the rhythmic beat of the drum, the mystical

Ramman mask, sacred Nishaan, and Gugutia Mala representing a lively celebration in homage to the tradition of local festivals and fairs. The piece contains the artist's uncanny sensitivity and intentional cultural bias, welcoming the viewer into a space where art and tradition combine in honour of the celebratory cultures of Uttarakhand.

## CONCLUSION

This study focused on the fairs and festivals occurring in Uttarakhand, including Pandav Nritya, Raman, Ghughutiya, and Bagwal, which explore contemporary visual practices and site-based installations. The focus of this research was to utilize and reframe traditional modes of artistic expression and adopt contemporary methods of interpretation, aiming not only at the documentation and preservation of intangible heritage but also for future generations. The fieldwork, community engagement, and methodological process suggested that festivals in Uttarakhand represent much more than a performed ritual, they showcase living, active expressions of collective memory, eco-consciousness, and social identity from the region. The exhibition's mixing of traditional and contemporary art practices showed how storytelling could be a transformative act. The exhibition's paintings were influenced by indigenous motifs and the installations were using digital media and participatory experiences all ways to communicate conceptually with the audience. This allowed the audience to connect emotionally and intellectually with the heritage of Uttarakhand in a manner that created a deeper appreciation for the cultural and ecological knowledge around all those festivals. The artist brought up the relevant point of cultural accuracy/ respect through a collaborative process.

In a period where globalization and urbanization threaten indigenous knowledge, this research demonstrates how contemporary art can be a way to connect to the past in the present. By using immersive or conceptual frameworks to reimagine festivals like Ghughutiya or Bagwal, art can be a source of education and continuity regarding culture while extending ideas across larger scales of identity, sustainability, and belonging.

This project reinforces that art is not simply an aesthetic activity; it is a powerful means of preserving heritage or generating new cultural forms. By situating the development of Uttarakhand's festivals within an interrelated framework of traditional knowledge and contemporary art, these festivals will remain living gifts to our humanity, histories, and futures.

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