

FROM MUKHOTA TO DIVINE: REGIONAL VARIATIONS IN RELIGIOUS MASK MAKING PROCESSES ACROSS UTTARAKHAND'S CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

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Abstract

The religious depiction through mask making in Uttarakhand represents a unique combination of devotion, craftsmanship, and cultural identity which is deeply rooted in rituals through theatres and festivals of its three prominent regions—Garhwal, Kumaon, and Jaunsar–Bawar. This paper gives a contrast study between the materials, techniques, and symbolic functions of masks, examining their role as spiritual mediator in local worship practices. Ramman Festival of Garhwal region where masks are created through carving from Bhojpatra are consecrated temple objects, connecting mythological epics and community ritual performances. Hill Jatra masks from Kumaon, crafted from wood, papier-mâché, and clay, to make agrarian deities alive during harvest rites, reflecting the connections of folk theatre, morality tales and traditions. Meanwhile, Jaunsar–Bawar's Pandav Līlā masks are essential to trance-based ceremonies, where priests channel Mahasu Devta and Pandava spirits, depicting tribal–Hindu syncretism.

With ethnographic observation, artisan interviews, and document analysis, this study portrays both shared and separate processes of mask creation, from different materials like from wood selection and carving to ritual consecration. In that, all three regions serve as sacred incarnations of divine power, variations in iconography, crafting methods, and community hierarchies underscore localized religious narratives. By comparing these regional practices, the paper argues that Uttarakhand's mask is a living traditional culture that not only sustains religious expression but also treats it as a symbol of collective identity and heritage. It emphasizes the importance for context-specific preservation strategies, combining artisan training, and digital documentation to preserve these cultural assets for future generations.

Keywords: Mukhota, Religious masks, Uttarakhand, cultural heritage, traditional crafts.

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Introduction

The mountainous state of Uttarakhand, settled in the lap of the Himalayas is recognized as a sacred landscape of divine and human realms that mingled through artistic portrayal of cultural identity. The most craftily presented manifestation of this spiritual artistry is the tradition of Mukhota—the religious mask making that is converted from the fallen wood into sacred vessels for divine characters. The craft is not merely a decorative representation of art, but includes a complex system of spiritual beliefs, regional identity, and cultural transfer from decades across Uttarakhand's diverse geographical and cultural terrain.

The term "Mukhota" is derived from a Sanskrit word "Mukha," meaning face that reflects the basic belief that these carved wooden faces work as a pathway or replica for divine presence during ritual performances. Uttarakhand's two primary cultural divisions– Garhwal and Kumaon–mask-making traditions have made different characteristics while reserving their common spiritual belief. This regional variation reflects not merely aesthetic preferences but shows distinctiveness in religious practice, cultural values, and environmental adaptation.

Uttarakhand's mask-making traditions got fame and internationally highlighted among the practice of the region when UNESCO enlisted the Ramman Festival of Garhwal on its Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009. This recognition showcased the exceptional mask performance of Saloor-Dungra village, which represents a tradition found nowhere else in the Himalayan region. The broader presentation of mask-making across Uttarakhand is surrounded by diverse traditions which reflect the specific cultural, environmental, and spiritual contexts of their respective regions.

Literature Review

The thorough examination of Uttarakhand's mask-making tradition highlighted mostly on the UNESCO-recognized Ramman Festival, noted for its integration of religious, social, and artistic dimensions into a "total theatre." Master artisans like Dharam Lal exemplify the spiritual depth and cultural commitment behind the craft. In contrast, Kumaon's Hill Jatra tradition linked to agricultural and pastoral cycles, remains less documented yet culturally significant with roots in Nepalese influences. However, previous studies lack comparative analysis of regional variations and how geographical, cultural, and spiritual factors that differentiate Garhwal and Kumaon mask-making traditions. This study fills that gap with a detailed comparative approach.

Methodology

This research consists of a mixed-methodology approach combining ethnographic fieldwork documentation, cultural analysis, and comparative study of traditional craft processes. The study draws upon documentation from cultural organizations, UNESCO records, academic publications, and traditional artisan testimonies to construct a comprehensive picture of regional variations in mask-making traditions across Uttarakhand. Primary data sources include data collection from the Uttarakhand Handloom and Handicraft Development Council, Project FUEL's cultural documentation initiatives, and testimonies from master artisans across both Garhwal and Kumaon regions. Secondary sources encompass academic studies, cultural heritage reports, and ethnographic documentation.

The comparative analysis framework examines regional variations across multiple dimensions, i.e., material selection and preparation, carving techniques and tools, spiritual and ritual practices, cultural contexts and applications, and artistic styles and iconography. This multidimensional method shows how regional factors influence every aspect of the mask-making process, from initial wood selection to final ritual consecration.

Study Sites and Participants

Region & Site	Sample Size & Participants	Cultural Context
<i>Saloor–Dungra (Garhwal)</i>	6 artisans, 2 priests, 3 festival organizers	Masks used in <i>Bhagwati</i> and <i>Bhairav</i> rituals during local <i>Jagar</i> ceremonies, <i>Ramman</i> Festival.

Sor Valley (Pithoragarh, Kumaon)	5 artisans, 3 priests, 4 festival organizers	Masks central to <i>Chhaupadi</i> and <i>Bhumiya Devta</i> processions.
Tyuni–Hanhol (Jaunsar–Bawar)	4 artisans, 2 priests, 3 festival organizers	Masks for <i>Mahasu Devta</i> and ancestral worship festivals.

Data collection through Semi-Structured Interviews (Overview of Mask Tradition in Garhwal, Kumaon and Jaunsar- Bawar):

Category	<i>Saloor–Dungra</i> (Garhwal)	<i>Sor Valley</i> (Kumaon)	<i>Tyuni–Hanhol</i> (Jaunsar–Bawar)
Religious Importance	Masks are adapted as vessels for divine possession; believed to channel goddess energy.	Used to ward off evil and invite prosperity; linked to agrarian cycles.	Represent ancestral spirits and <i>Mahasu</i> deity; used in divination rituals.
Artisan Perspective	Mask making is seen as hereditary art; wood chosen based on the lunar calendar.	Combination of clay and wood; mask patterns taught orally within families.	Strict ritual fasting before carving; certain masks carved only by selected lineages.
Priestly Interpretation	Ritual manuals specify consecration rites with <i>Ganga jal</i> and <i>mantras</i> .	Emphasis on local deities; masks treated as living beings' post-consecration.	Belief in mask as mediator between living and spirit world.
Material Used	Deodar wood or <i>Bhojpatra</i> , natural mineral pigments, yak hair for embellishments.	Clay mixed with cow dung, pine wood for structure, vegetable dyes.	Wild pear wood, soot-based black pigment, wool, and copper foil adornments.
Carving Technique	Chiseling with small iron tools; intricate facial features.	Mold shaping with clay, dried, painted in layers.	Deep carving, minimalistic features, sharp jawline design.
Painting Style	Oranges, Bright reds symbolizing <i>Shakti</i> energy.	Yellow and Earthy browns for floral motifs.	Dark colour schemes, geometric patterns, less ornamentation.
Mask Sacredness	The parameter of ritual consecration varies and therefore the divine vessels.		
Selection of Material	Material varied due to region-specific woods and pigments tied to local ecology and ritual taboos.		

Design Variations	Garhwal/Region: vibrant and detailed; Kumaon Region: earthy and floral; Jaunsar–Bawar: minimal and symbolic.		
Transmission of Knowledge	Artisan families preserve techniques orally; strong lineage-based exclusivity in Jaunsar–Bawar.		
Images			

Regional Variations in Material Selection and Spiritual Significance

The base to regional variation in Uttarakhand's mask-making traditions lies in the selection and spiritual importance of materials and methods of region:

Garhwal Region: Sacred *Bhojpatra* Tradition

In Garhwal, specifically in *Ramman* tradition, *Bhojpatra* wood (*Betula utilis*) holds unparalleled spiritual significance as the primary material for sacred mask creation. *Bhojpatra* holds historical use in ancient manuscripts which carries deep spiritual nuance within hindu tradition. The bark of *Bhojpatra* has been associated with divine wisdom and sacred knowledge since ancient times, with legends connecting it to sage *Veda Vyasa's* composition of the *Vedas*. Practitioners believe that *Bhojpatra* wood possesses natural vibrations that facilitate spiritual connection and divine presence. Artisans in the *Ramman* tradition specifically look for "*giri*"—a naturally fallen *Bhojpatra* wood—believing that wood taken through natural processes rather than direct harvesting carries enhanced spiritual properties. The step of making- mask with *Bhojpatra* requires not only technical skill but spiritual preparation. Dharam Lal (Master artisans) describes that the mask making process requires mental and spiritual preparation before beginning work.

Kumaon Region: Diverse Wood Traditions

The mask- making tradition of *Kumaon* depicts greater diversity in material selection, reflecting both the region's varied ecological landscape and its distinct cultural practices as the Hill *Jatra* tradition from Pithoragarh district primarily utilizes *Kheri* tree wood. The species contains poisonous white sap that requires careful handling and specialized knowledge. This shows practical environmental adaptation while maintaining spiritual significance with the challenging process required to work with the material. The selection of *Kheri* wood in *Kumaon* represents a different philosophical approach rather than inherent divine properties; the *Kheri* wood gains sacred significance through the artisan's skill in converting a challenging,

even dangerous material into divine representation. Apart from Hill *Jatra*, other *Kumaon* traditions inculcate wood types including walnut (*Akhrot*), known for its dense grain and beautiful dark coloration when dried, and various local species like Cypress (*Surai*) and Alder (*Utees*).

Traditional Craftsmanship Techniques and Regional Processes

The technical processes of making masks depicts regional variations that reflect distinct cultural approaches to transforming raw materials into sacred objects. This variation in tradition portrays every stage of production, from initial preparation to final finishing, demonstrating how regional cultures have developed unique methodologies for achieving similar spiritual objectives.

Garhwal Carving Methodology

The *Ramman* mask-making portrays the tradition of Garhwal following a specifically deep-rooted methodology. It begins with *naksha* and *napayi*—a measuring and marking system for making accurate proportions for divine figures, reflecting strict iconography and accuracy passed down through generations. *Garhwal* artisans construct masks without external references, relying on inherited knowledge and an inner “vision in the mind” to see the finished divine form before carving. This deep internalization focuses spiritual connection over technical skill. The carving process is done systematically from rough shaping to refining intricate facial features within which each step is accompanied by prayers and ritual observances. The final step is *pran-pratishtha*, or consecration, where the mask is offered prayers and food, symbolically inviting the deity’s presence. Here, eventually the ritual transforms the mask from a crafted object into a sacred vessel for *Ramman* performances. Here it ensures both artistic precision and devotional sanctity in keeping with *Garhwal’s* cultural and spiritual heritage.

Kumaon Technical Approaches

Kumaon’s mask-making traditions showcase notable technical diversity and expertise. Mask making in Hill *Jatra* uses toxic *Kheri* wood that requires the master craftsmen and skilled not only in carving but also in safe handling to avoid poisonous sap exposure. The regions exception *likhai* or wood carving practices involves advanced techniques for working with various local woods, each demanding different handling, and specialized tools like *chenni*, *pateshi*, *aari*, and *basula*, tailored to specific materials and carving tasks. Mask finishing typically uses natural pigments and traditional coloring methods, highlighting the wood’s natural beauty and adding symbolic colors, reflecting *Kumaon’s* commitment to environmental harmony and sustainable practices.

Cultural Contexts and Festival Applications

The cultural contexts among which masks are made and utilized reveals fundamental differences between *Garhwal* and *Kumaon* traditions, reflecting distinct approaches and practices in community and cultural transmission.

Consolidated Overview of Garhwal (*Ramman*) and Kumaon (Hill *Jatra* & Mask Traditions)

Aspect	Garhwal: Ramman Festival/Tradition	Kumaon: Hill Jatra & Mask-Making Traditions
Cultural Focus / Identity	Sacred theatre enacting <i>Ramayana</i> episodes & local legends; central to <i>Garhwali</i> identity (UNESCO recognized).	Focus on pastoral/agricultural cycles; mask-making reflects adaptability and multiple cultural expressions.
Performance Space	Village courtyard becomes a divine stage.	Community/agricultural spaces serve as performance areas.
Significance	Masks have ritual/community roles; considered divine vessels.	Characters symbolize nature, humans, and supernatural beings.
Social Structure	Caste-specific roles (e.g., <i>Narasimha</i> mask worn by <i>Bhandari</i> caste); reinforces traditional social order.	Roles tied to agricultural/community functions; accommodates diverse festivals and occupations.
Preparation & Rituals	Year-round ritual routines, extensive spiritual preparation.	Three phases: ritual sacrifice, pastoral enactments, communal dance.
Iconography	Strict adherence to traditional mask iconography with <i>Garhwal's Ramman</i> masks strictly follows classical <i>Hindu</i> iconography, which specifically comprises mythological characters like <i>Rama</i> , <i>Hanuman</i> , <i>Narasimha</i> etc., specific symbolic colors. Materials like sheep's wool and local plant products enrich their bold, dramatic features, emphasizing spiritual presence and theological symbolism, as seen in the tradition of 18 masks for 18 <i>Puranas</i> .	<i>Kumaon</i> masks exhibit greater stylistic diversity, blending the influences from Nepal and Tibet with dramatic features for enhanced theatrical effect. Hill <i>Jatra</i> masks favor expressive forms over strict iconographic rules, including characters like <i>Lakhiabhoot</i> , <i>Halwaha</i> , deer, oxen, etc.
Community Function / Integration	Reinforces spiritual and social cohesion; annual cycle organizes community life around ritual performance.	Prayers for prosperity, community bonding, linked to agricultural/pastoral cycles and local economy.
Festival Frequency	Annual, long preparation periods.	Annual, tied directly to agricultural calendar.
Relevance & Resilience	Maintains contemporary relevance beyond history, strengthens identity and continuity.	Multiple traditions provide resilience, helping long-term preservation and adaptability.

Result and Discussion

1. The comparative analysis of mask-making traditions across Uttarakhand results in understanding of complex relationships between geographical environment, cultural history, and spiritual practice that create distinctive regional expressions within a shared cultural domain. This diversity depicts the traditional crafts that present multiple functions as artistic expression, spiritual practice, community organization, and cultural identity formation.

2. Material differences between regions—particularly the emphasis on sacred *Bhojpatra* in *Garhwal* versus diverse wood utilization in *Kumaon*—reflect fundamental differences in spiritual philosophy and environmental relationship. *Garhwal* region focus on adapting sacred materials corresponds to traditions emphasizing divine presence within natural objects, while *Kumaon's* transformation-focused approach emphasizes human agency in creating sacred objects through skilled craftsmanship and spiritual dedication.

3. The technical variations between regions that reveal different approaches to balancing tradition preservation with practical adaptation. *Garhwal's* systematized approach ensures iconographic continuity across generations while limiting innovation, while *Kumaon's* diverse techniques provide flexibility for adaptation to changing materials and circumstances.

4. The cultural applications of masks represent the regional traditions that serve different community agendas while maintaining spiritual significance. *Garhwal's* concentrated festival tradition creates intensive community experience with international recognition, while *Kumaon's* diverse applications provide broader cultural integration with various aspects of community life.

5. Conservation strategies in Uttarakhand to save the traditional practices must embrace and actively support inclusive methods that integrate the traditional knowledge with modern documentation and training—to prevent the neglect of lesser-known practices and ensure comprehensive cultural heritage protection.

Conclusion

The mask-making traditions of Uttarakhand, spanning *Garhwal*, *Kumaon* and *Jaunsar Bawar*, illustrate the shared spiritual practices and unique local expressions shaped through the practicing culture, and community values, etc. Despite variations—such as *Garhwal's* systematic use of sacred *Bhojpatra* and *Kumaon's* reliance on diverse wood experiments, the central aim of transformation of raw material into a divine vessel through human skill and devotion, ritual, and collective participation. The traditional practices highlight artisan's skills with cultural beliefs that evolve dynamically, balancing spirituality with adaptation with community involvement. Presently, the primary challenge lies in safeguarding these practices against the pressures of modernization without reducing their spiritual essence. Also, preservation strategies must value regional diversity and community agency to sustain the spiritual meanings embedded in the craft. Eventually, Uttarakhand's mask-making traditions exemplify the universal yet regionally nuanced ways communities maintain cultural relevance with resilience and offering global lessons in protecting intangible cultural heritage through respect, inclusivity, and continuity.

The diverse domains apart from their different individual practices still coincide with similar religious belief to their region *Devta*.

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