

## **Kumaoni Traditions in Transition : A Cultural Journey**

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*This research paper explores the time-honored traditions and their evolution in the face of modernization in Kumaon. Beginning with the 'Bhitali' ritual, symbolizing the cherished bond between siblings, which has adapted to digital exchanges in contemporary times, it unfolds 'HudakiyaBaul', a fusion of labour and music rooted in mountain farming now facing extinction as agriculture gives way to modernization. 'Aipan', an old art form, continues to thrive, finding new expressions in various aspects of modern Kumaoni life. Amidst the changing landscape, marriage rituals like 'AnchalVivah' persevere, though older customs like 'Ratyali' and 'Dur Koon' fade into memory. The paper also delves into enduring folk beliefs and superstitions, which continue to shape daily life, prompting a delicate balancing act between tradition and equality. As Kumaon marches toward a more equitable future, biased social rituals against women gradually yield to*

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*a spirit of gender equity, revealing the resilience of Kumaon's culture amidst the winds of change.*

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## 1. Introduction

“Kumaoni Traditions in Transition : A Cultural Journey” embarks on an illuminating odyssey into the heart of Kumaon, unearthing the captivating evolution of its age-old traditions in the midst of modernization. From the digital adaptation of the cherished *Bhitauli* ritual, symbolizing sibling bonds, to the endangered fusion of labour and music in *HudakiyaBaul*, once deeply rooted in mountain farming, this article unveils how Kumaon's cultural tapestry is adapting to the currents of change. *Aipan*, an ancient art form, thrives in new expressions, while marriage customs persist, even as older traditions fade into memory. Exploring enduring folk beliefs and superstitions, the article reflects the delicate balance between tradition and equality as Kumaon journeys towards a more equitable future, shedding light on the resilience of its culture amid shifting paradigms.

## 2. Bhitauli

The mountains become more accessible in the month of Chaitra, which coincides with the blooming of new flowers on trees and plants. During this delightful season of nature, the Kumaon region observes the traditional ritual known as *Bhitauli*.

A brother makes a journey to the residence of his wedded sister, bearing gifts that encompass a selection of dishes. Among these gifts are a pair of garments for his sister and a sweet *Khjoor* made of milk. In the gracious reception of her brother, the sister diligently prepares an array of delectable treats, including *savory Puris* made of *Maas dal*, delectable dishes made from rice flour, and a delectable serving of sweet *kheer*. Upon departing from his sister's abode, the brother tenderly places a sum of money into her hand as a token of his affection. Gift from brother is called *Bhitauli*. Sisters distribute *Bhitauli* in their neighbourhood.

After marriage, the first *Bhitauli* was given to the girl in the month of Baisakh or Phagun, and then from the next time it was given in the month of *Chaitra*.

There is a very interesting and tragic saga prevalent in this regard, which is recited as *Ritugan* in the beginning of *Chaitra* month by the Das, Dholi and Mirasis of this place. This saga of Goridhana is recited as *Ritugan* (Sharma, 2018).

In these old days, people used to walk for two to three days to meet their married daughters. After the daughter's marriage, these traditions were the only way to get the news of her. It was not very easy for girls to come to their maternal home after marriage, so daughters used to get the news about their maternal home through this tradition.

The advent of modern transportation, communication, and technology has exerted a notable influence on these time-honored traditions. In contemporary times, brothers have adopted new practices; they no longer make physical visits to their sisters' homes for *Bhitauli*. Instead, they choose to transmit tokens of affection through digital methods or alternative means. Nonetheless, this cherished tradition of brother-sister love, which has persevered throughout generations in Kumaon, persists vibrantly, even in the face of substantial transformation in its methods.

### **3. HudakiyaBaul**

In times gone by, agriculture reigned supreme as the primary source of income for the people of Kumaon. It's recounted that one family member would labour solely to secure the necessities of salt and clothing, while the remainder of the household toiled in the village fields, cultivating their crops. Farming in the challenging mountain terrain demanded relentless physical effort. To alleviate the strain of this demanding labour, the mountain dwellers turned to the solace of music. The tradition of HudakiyaBaul during the rice trans-plantation season stands as an unparalleled fusion of labour and musical artistry.

Hudki Baul is made up of two words, Hudki and Baul. Hudki is a special instrument whose shape is like the mouth of a cow. The word Baul means labour. Hudki Baul means the melodious songs sung while labouring with the Hudka (*Pokhariya, Kumauni Lok Saahitya Evam Kumauni Sahitya*, 1994.)

HudkiyaBaul commences with a prayer to God, unfolds stories of bravery in the midst, and concludes with heartfelt wishes for the well-being of all. These stories serve as a wellspring of inspiration for

those engaged in strenuous toil. Regrettably, the songs harmonized to the rhythmic cadence of the local musical instrument known as the 'Hudka', have become increasingly scarce in contemporary times.

The main singer of HudakiyaBaul predominantly hailing from the Shilpkar caste were relegated to the status of untouchables. However, the propagation of education among this Shilpkar caste awakened them to their rights, subsequently dissuading future generations from embracing this vocation. Additionally, the allure of monetary pursuits and the quest for an improved standard of living led to an uptick in migration to the mountains, thereby shifting the local economy from an agrarian to one based on Money order.

With the decline of agriculture, the tradition of HudkiyaBaul waned as well. Presently, this age-old tradition of singing HudkiyaBaul can still be glimpsed in certain pockets of Kumaon during the rice transplantation season. In this evolving milieu, individuals from diverse castes have also been seen participating in the rendition of HudkiyaBaul songs.

#### 4. Aipan

*Aipan*, a beautiful art form deeply rooted in the Kumaoni Alpina tradition, holds a place of utmost significance in the hearts of the people of Kumaon. As girls grow up in this enchanting region, they embrace the art of creating *Aipan* as a cherished legacy passed down through generations. *Aipan* may be considered as the carpet of the common man, spread to welcome the god and goddess (Mathpal, 1998).

The womenfolk of Kumaon have played quite a role in perpetuating the tradition of folk art (Shah, 1981), who skillfully design geometric patterns and depict figures of gods, goddesses, and elements from nature. *Aipan* comes to life through the deft use of locally known materials : *Geru* (red soil) and *biswar* (rice paste), showcasing the deep connection between culture and nature.

In traditional Kumaoni households, women lovingly adorn the floors and walls with *Aipan*, using the last three fingers of their right hand. It's a practice that has transcended generations and continues to be a part of various auspicious occasions.

Religious *Chowki*, such as the *DhuliArghyaChowki*, *Saraswati-Chowki*, *Chamunda Hast Chowki*, and *JaneyuChowki*, are some of the popular platforms where *Aipan* finds its expression.

Additionally, *Aipan* decorates *Lakshmi Yantra*, *JyotiPatta*, and *DurgaThapa*, infusing spirituality into everyday life.

Even in modern homes, the tradition of *Aipan* endures. Nowadays individuals have begun affixing *Aipan* stickers to the entrances of their homes. Some people continue to create *Aipan* patterns on their doorsteps, albeit with a modern twist - using red and white oil paints. The new generation has found innovative ways to incorporate *Aipan* into their lives, using it as decorative patterns on doorways, bookmarks, cards, cushion covers, tablecloths, and even T-shirts.

In essence, *Aipan* has evolved from being solely a part of religious rituals to becoming a form of decoration and expression, reflecting the enduring cultural significance and adaptability of this beautiful art form in Kumaoni culture.

## 5. Marriage Rituals

Kumaon is steeped in a rich tapestry of marriage rituals and customs, each bearing its unique significance. Many types of marriage practices have been prevalent in the Kumaoni society, among which Sarol marriage, Damtaro marriage, Danti marriage, Tekuva marriage, kidnapping marriage etc. are prominent (Bisht, 2009).

It should be noted that all forms of marriage are equally legitimate, and there can be no question of one being more or less legitimate than the other (Lal, 1920).

The most renowned and widely practiced is *AnchalVivah*, gracing the majority of weddings in the Kumaon division. This tradition is embellished with a series of essential customs, including *AbdevPurvang*, *Ganesh Pujan*, *SuwalPathai*, *Haldi*, *Dhuliarghya*, *GaduvekiDhar*, *Kanyadaan*, and *Saptapadi*, among others.

Before the nuptials, the '*Ganesh Puja*' ritual is performed in the homes of both the groom and the bride. '*SualPathai*' unfolds, accompanied by the harmonious strains of *Shagun* and *Mangal* songs. During the wedding day festivities, the groom dons a meticulously crafted crown atop his head, while his visage is adorned with white drops of rice flour from forehead to ears. Before the groom boards the *Doli* or the horse, the mother and the women of the family perform the ritual of '*AkshatParkhana*' around the groom's head, in which they offer water and grains of rice in all four directions. *Mangal* singers offer reminders to the groom of the cherished value of

mother's milk. The procession commences from the groom's residence, accompanied by the rhythmic beats of drums and the exquisite attire of Choliya dancers.

In days of yore, a unique tradition was upheld where a massive red-colored flag led the procession en route to the bride's house. The red flag bearer was followed by the instrumentalist, groom, *Barati*, and finally, the white flag bearer. However, this tradition is now a rarity in Kumaon weddings.

Historically, the wedding procession would arrive at the bride's residence in the evening. '*Dhuliarghya*' is the first ritual, at the bride's abode. Subsequently, as per the auspicious ascendant, other marriage rituals such as *Kanyadaan*, *Saptapadi*, and *DhruvataraDarshan* would be performed on a pavilion crafted from branches of the *Padma* tree. Before departing, the bride would pay homage to her family's threshold and the village temple threshold with *Akshatas*. As a farewell gesture, a '*Pitha*' (*Tilak*) would be applied to the wedding procession. Upon reaching the groom's house, the '*Gharpains*' rituals, marking the entry into the house, would take place, followed by the narration of the story of *Satyanarayan*. Traditionally, there was also a practice known as '*Durkoon*' a few days after the marriage.

In times past, wedding ceremonies would span two days. When the wedding procession reached the bride's house, women would organize a delightful event known as '*Ratyali*' at the groom's residence. Here, women would sing songs like *Jhoda*, *Chanchari*, and create various '*swangs*' or melodious compositions. However, due to better travel resources and modern life style, weddings are now typically arranged within a single day. One of the primary reasons behind this change was to minimize night-time altercations often fueled by alcohol consumption. Today, photographers hold a pivotal role in Kumaon weddings, with ceremonies becoming increasingly reliant on their choice of time. Traditions like '*Ratyali*', '*Dur Koon*', and '*DhruvataraDarshan*' have become names and memories of a bygone era.

In Kumaon, married women adhere to a tradition of wearing distinct marital symbols. Women have to compulsorily wear *Charayu* (black beads rosary) around their neck as a symbol of good luck, When it is broken, is it prohibited to consume food and water even swallow one's own spit (Sharma, 2018).

In the past, there existed a custom that may sound unusual today: if a couple had twenty-two children, it was deemed necessary for them to remarry.

In the end, Kumaon's marriage rituals are more than ceremonies; they are a living testament to the region's heritage. As these customs continue to evolve alongside modern life, they remain a cherished link between the past and the future, reminding us that traditions, like love, can be both timeless and adaptable.

## **6. Folk Beliefs and Superstition**

Folk beliefs encompass a wide array of perspectives, customs, and conduct within an individual or society. These encompass views on what is considered auspicious or inauspicious, conduct pertaining to both men and women, guidelines for travel, daily routines, understanding the structure and functions of different body parts, and practices associated with various elements of agriculture and everyday life. These traditions extend to encompass aspects related to vegetation, trees, domesticated and wild animals, birds, rituals, and social customs, as well as food habits, lifestyles, and even interpretations of dreams and thoughts. Here are some examples of such folk beliefs and superstition :

In the Kumaon region, people adhered closely to traditional beliefs related to *Tithi* and *Vaar* when venturing out of their homes or visiting relatives. It was believed that certain directions and days held auspicious or inauspicious significance. Mondays, Sundays, Wednesdays, and Fridays were considered auspicious days for visiting friends and relatives. Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday are considered suitable days to go to express condolences on death (Bisht, 2009).

Activities such as cutting hair, shaving, and trimming nails were discouraged on Tuesday and Thursday.

Superstitions also surrounded daily routines, such as avoiding the sight of an inverted pan, broom, or encountering barren or widowed women in the morning. Inauspicious activities included sweeping, bathing, or combing women's hair in the evening. Women were advised against walking with long strides and watching confrontations between two women.

Certain physical traits were also associated with superstitions; women with thick black eyebrows, thin legs, long necks, and body hair were considered inauspicious. Twitching in the left body parts of

men and the right body parts of women was also considered inauspicious. Additionally, there was a belief that individuals with dimples in their cheeks would experience a shorter lifespan.

Numerous folk beliefs deeply influence the daily life of the Kumaoni people, shaped by the perceived necessity and significance of trees, plants, and vegetation. Certain flora, such as Mango, Banana, Belpatra, Tulsi, Amla, Kush-Kans, Barley, Sesame, Dadim, Peepal, and their seeds and fruits, hold a sacred and auspicious status. Conversely, bushy or thorny vegetation is deemed inauspicious, as is the presence of a tall tree, like a Tun, in front of one's home. To ward off malevolent forces and lightning, Hawthorn plants, and flint stones find their place atop house roofs. When traveling with young children, a thorny sprig of nettle or asparagus is clutched in hand as a protective talisman.

Within homes, it is considered auspicious to host hives of bees, swallows, and *surmali* (an insect) (Pokhariya, *Uttarakhand Lok Sanskriti Aur Sahitya*, 2011), birth of children in the field by creatures like *Ghughut* (mountain dove), cow, horse, dog, or in a molehill is deemed propitious. Conversely, certain occurrences, such as snake fights, cat battles, and jackal calls three times in the night are seen as omens of impending evil or misfortune. Soil collected from a place cast under the shadow of a flying eagle is believed to subjugate an individual. Abnormal behaviour exhibited by animals and birds can serve as harbingers of earthquakes or natural disasters.

Traditional beliefs also extend to pregnancy. It is believed that if the fetus resides on the left side of the mother's stomach, a son will be born; if on the right, a daughter is anticipated. After birth, the baby's umbilical cord is placed over the door. Custom dictates that anyone entering a house after evening should touch the fire for purity.

Prohibitions against bathing naked, looking into a broken mirror, accompanying a pregnant woman's husband in a funeral procession, visiting a pregnant lady before *Pachaul* (a five-day bath ritual), sleeping with the head towards the door, and wearing clothes inside out. carrying leather articles into temples, cooking, eating food, and engaging in sexual intercourse during solar and lunar eclipses, among other practices considered taboo. Sadly certain restrictions also apply to women and scheduled castes when entering temples.



Dreams hold significant meaning in Kumaoni culture. A dream featuring a wedding scene is believed to portend an impending death. Conversely, witnessing someone's death in a dream is seen as a protective sign that prolongs their life. People hold that dreams experienced in the fourth quarter of the night often prove true and are not to be shared. A variety of activities in dreams, such as filling water, plucking green grass and flowers, flying in the sky, planting trees, encountering animals, saints, or auspicious individuals, observing the deceased, cutting dry grass or wood, seeing buffaloes, lions, snakes, or wearing new clothes, are associated with inauspiciousness and superstition.

In the evolving landscape of changing times and the spread of education, certain modifications have occurred in these traditional beliefs and superstitions. However, it is evident that many of these age-old customs, particularly those associated with women and Scheduled Caste individuals, continue to persist. There remains a pressing need to steer the new generation away from these entrenched folk beliefs and superstitions, as they can inadvertently perpetuate caste and gender discrimination.

## **7. Biased social Rituals for Women**

In Kumaon, a long-standing tradition concerning cremation and funeral processions dictates that the husband or wife of the deceased should abstain from participating in their spouse's final rites (Sharma, 2018). This age-old custom deems it taboo for the married couple to witness the smoke rising from each other's funeral pyres.

Beyond this, Kumaon has harboured customs that not only contribute to increasing gender inequality but also seem inhumane. For instance, after the fifth month of pregnancy, it was considered inauspicious for a pregnant woman to offer water and food to men wearing *Yagyopavit* (sacred thread) and elderly women. Perhaps the initial intent behind this tradition was to provide rest for the expectant mother, but over time, it evolved into a practice that marginalized and stigmatized women, rendering them like untouchables within their own households.

In a patriarchal society, these biases don't end there. Women are often regarded as untouchable during menstruation and prohibited from entering the kitchen and touching drinking water. Menstruating women were even confined to the cowshed for five

days, only reentering the house after a cleansing bath on the fifth day. Although the practice of relegating women to the cowshed has largely faded, regrettably, many women are still denied the right to worship during these five days in their own homes.

Similarly, in accordance with traditional Kumaoni customs, women were barred from participating in funeral processions. This rule was rigidly upheld until the last decade, but now signs of change are emerging. Women are increasingly asserting their right to participate in funeral processions according to their wishes, challenging the long-held norms that denied them this role in bidding farewell to their loved ones.

In Kumaon, a region steeped in tradition, cultural norms held that the elder brother was strictly forbidden from catching even a fleeting glimpse of his younger brother's spouse. These customs were deeply ingrained, to the extent that a younger brother's wife would respectfully bow down to her husband's elder brother from a distance, adhering to these age-old protocols. The essence of this custom is encapsulated in a well-known Kumaoni proverb : *"BwariJaaiGaad Bagan Lagi Bhai ToKoJethiKoBwari"*, which essentially implies that when someone's life is at risk or in danger, one should prioritize the preservation of life over adherence to social traditions.

This proverb showcases the inherent flexibility within Kumaoni culture, indicating a willingness to embrace change. As Kumaon continues to evolve, these customs are gradually losing their grip, making way for a more inclusive and equitable society. The people of Kumaon are not merely bound by tradition; they are also forging a path toward a future where gender bias and discrimination have no place.

## 8. Conclusion

"Kumaoni Traditions in Transition : A Cultural Journey" takes us on a captivating exploration of the rich and diverse cultural tapestry of Kumaon, a region deeply rooted in tradition yet evolving in the face of modernization. The article showcases the resilience of Kumaon's traditions as they adapt to the winds of change, revealing a culture that is both timeless and adaptable.

In the face of modernization and changing times, Kumaon's cultural journey is a testament to the enduring spirit of its people and their determination to preserve their heritage while embracing the

opportunities of the future. The traditions of Kumaon, as depicted in this article, serve as a shining example of how a culture can evolve without losing its identity, making the transition from the past to the present with grace and resilience.

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