

# Mythical Aspects of Hill Jaatra of Kumaur

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**Abstract:** "Hill Jaatra" is basically a ritual exercise in the form of processional theatre. It is a unique processional theatre enacted at the time of rainy season when the Earth is mud-spattered and soggy. It acquires its name thus as this annual processional festival is celebrated with a pomp and show in the month of 'Bhadrapad' which is essentially a rainy season in Uttarakhand. This festival-ritual-theatrical exercise reflects the folk's passionate urge to bring about immense prosperity in their agriculture centered economic activities. The present paper tries to investigate mythical aspects related to this exercise.

**Key Words:** *Saantu-Aanthu, Hal, Rudraksha, Brahmin, Kshatriya, Kot, Chanwar, Daas, Dhol, Damaun, Gana, Gharat, Katara, banj, Akshat, Roli, Bhadrapad, Ordh, Geru, Naali*

Every state has its special folklores which become the identity of native people's pride due to its being the important part of the culture of that particular region. Although the folk life of each and every region is often more or less the same but there may be differences in cuisine, costume, living and life style of the people which affect the folk beliefs as well.

"Hill Jaatra" is a folk festival celebrated in Sore valley (adjoining region of Pithoragarh) of Kumaun of Uttarakhand. 'Hill Jaatra' is made of two words-'Hill' and 'Jaatra'. In local Kumauni dialect, 'Hill' means 'mud', 'wet' and 'Jaatra' means 'procession'.

It means a folk festival celebration at the advent of rainy season. The wetness symbolizes emotional enthusiasm, rapture, exuberance and jubilation of the people. These processions have been very vital part of folk culture since time immemorial and it has still managed to retain its touch, significance and relevance. These processions, reflecting the belief systems, faiths of the people; unite the society emotionally, playing a crucial role in generating mental energy among them. This is the reason that different processions keep taking place in different forms in different regions of the country throughout the year.

‘Hill Jaatra’, some people think, is a distortion of ‘*Hal* (plough) *Jaatra*’. According to them, it simply means the adoration of plough which is the fundamental agricultural instrument used to furrow the land. “Hill Jaatra”, being the symbol of agrarian culture, makes the farmers and labourers energetic filling into them the feeling of enthusiasm, exuberance and faith and thereby motivating them to go on the path of hard work. Presently, this folk festival is celebrated in the villages like Bajethi, Jakhpuran, khwakot, Kanalichhina, etc. apart from Kumaur village of Pithoragarh district of Uttarakhand, India. “Hill Jaatra” is celebrated after the immersion of the sculptures of Gaura Maheshwar and Bal Ganesh on the completion of the fasting during traditional folk festival *Saantu-Aaanthu* in *Bhadrapad* month of Kumaun region. In *Saantu-Aaanthu*, the sculpture of Gaura Maheshwar made of five or seven kinds of grains is restored and worshipped and then it is immersed in either pond or under any green tree on either third, or fifth or seventh day.

“Hill Jaatra” theatre is also enacted through gestures and mime during this festival. Generally, the actors practice very hard before any play is staged but there is no tradition of pre practice or rehearsal in this theatre. This theatre is a ritual exercise attached with the faiths and beliefs of the villagers. On the day of the enactment of this theatre, the carpenters start keeping themselves engaged with the traditional preparation, painting and cleaning of different wooden masks since morning. After the makeup of the actors, the local deities are worshipped and Veerbhadra (a disciple of Lord Shiva) is invoked on the beating of *Dhol* and *Nagaras* (Drums) by *Daas* (a person of low social status).

The incarnation of the God on the actor infuses into him amazing power and the possessed actor comes out of the house tossing and jumping and taking *Chanwar* (A handle with a bunch of long hairs of cow) in his both hands, he proceeds through crowd. For keeping the right direction, the other actor controls him through a rope fastened around the possessed actor's waist.

The main attraction of Hill Jaatra is *Lakhiya Bhoot*. The people of the village and nearby areas gather in large numbers to see *Lakhiya Bhoot* and touch the *Chanwar*. The tradition and folk belief has it that touching of *Chanwar* of Lakhiya Bhoot will keep them away from the curses of evil spirits. Generally, it looks like folk or mask theatre but it has become the part of Kumaun's folk culture due to its connection with the faiths and belief systems of the natives of Pithoragarh district. The tradition of the worshipping **Lord Shiva** (the great god of the Hindu trinity that includes Brahma and Vishnu) in such a way reached to Nepal from Tibet and then to India from Nepal. In Hill Jaatra, Lord Shiva's *Gana* (disciple) *Lakhiya Bhoot* is worshipped for getting his favour and blessings. This theatre is enacted making the use of different wooden masks and agrarian tools. Before the coming of *Lakhiya Bhoot* in the middle of the ground, the audiences get entertained with mimes and gestures of the actors representing the life events of the villagers- 'A Harnessed Oxen Pair' and 'The Ploughman', 'The Hukkawala' (the man with smoking pipe), 'A group of ploughing men and women', 'The Dahiwala' (the curd seller), 'The Barber', 'The Burhiya' (an old woman), etc. Besides this, the scenes of men and women dancing to the tune of the agriculture related songs and traditional musical instruments cheerfully present astounding pageant of the culture of this agrarian society.

The arrangement of "Hill Jaatra" reminds us of the primeval society which had very few means of entertainment. The study of the development of human society testifies the significance of folk dances, folk plays, folk songs, etc. as not only the means of entertainment of these people but also to be the strong medium of expression. The seed of literature would have sprouted from the folklores based on oral tradition handed down from generation to generation. For these people, oxen pair, land, agrarian tools and activities like sowing, planting, ploughing, harvesting, etc. were definitely very important parts of their lives.

These entertainments would have reenergized, refreshed relieved them from weariness, fatigue particularly in the season of less or no farming activities.

The Myth/ legend has it that after being very impressed by the chivalry of Kunwar Singh Mahar, Chanchal Singh Mahar, Chehach Singh Mahar, and Jakh Singh Mahar (all natives of Kumaur village); King of Nepal happily granted the sacred Mask of *Lakhiya Bhoot* to these Mahar brothers. These four **Mahar** brothers brought the Mask to Pithoragarh. Ever since then, the people believe that this *Lakhiya Bhoot* has been the saviour of the family and the society. These *Mahar* brothers are credited to have organized 'Hill Jaatra' at Kumaur village of Pithoragarh district for the first time. The people of adjoining villages also embraced this tradition after that. The natives of Kumaur village have strong belief that the village may face dangers like epidemic, drought etc. at the resentment of *Lakhiya Bhoot*. So, they keep *Lakhiya Bhoot* pleased by organizing "Hill Jaatra" annually with the objective of bringing about prosperity to the village. Some people believe *Lakhiya Bhoot* to be the incarnation of Lord Shiva, some to be that of Lord Shiva Veerbhadra while other ones regard him to be his disciple. On the day of the procession, the people throng in large numbers till noon in front of 150 years old cradle at the historical ground of Kumaur.

The local actors related to this theatre wearing different wooden masks start appearing one by one in different disguises of "The Hukkawala", "The Barber", "The Dahiwala", "A Harnessed Oxen Pair", The Burhiya", etc. and entertain the audience through mimes and gestures. They entertain the audience by presenting different episodes.

According to ***Shiv Puran*** (a religious scripture), the main attraction of "Hill Jaatra" *Lakhiya Bhoot* is supposed to be the twelfth incarnation of Lord Shiva. The sagas of his gallantry, valour and agility are still prevalent in the regions of Kumaun and Nepal. *Lakhiya Bhoot* wearing black attire with the rosary of ***Rudraksh*** (a seed traditionally used as a prayer bead in Hinduism) around the neck and thick rope around the waist, taking *Chanwar* in both hands appears to be incarnated like Lord Shiva in very angry, agitated form. All people reverently try to pacify the anger of him by praying with the folded hands.

They pray to Lakhiya Bhoot for their happiness and prosperity and in return he blesses all of them by touching *Chanwar* to their heads and backs and makes dignifying return. For most of the people, this ritualistic exercise is for reverence while other ones take it as the source of entertainment.

The main seat of “Hill Jaatra” is Kumaur of Pithoragarh district resided by *Mahar* people. That’s why, it is called “Maharon ka gaon” (The village of Mahars). Some people regard Mahars to be related to *Kshatriya* (One of the four *varnas*, social orders of Hindu society and the second highest caste) lineage that came from Nepal while other people suppose their origin to be Rajasthan of India itself. The tradition has it that after migrating from Nepal, *Mahar* people resided at Mourebunga village for a short period of time and thence they reached Pithoragarh.

According to a folklore, the ancestors of Mahars migrated from Chittorgarh of Rajasthan, India and reached to Champawat and started residing there. On one occasion, four *Mahar* brothers were on the visit of Pithoragarh and at the time of utter darkness late in evening reached Eaincholi village situated in the dense forest. The people would close their doors for the fear of wild animals at that time. They requested an old woman for one night shelter but she declined owing to native people’s belief, “**Gaas Diya, Vaas Jhhan Diya**” (Give food but not shelter). Then, they requested her, “If not possible in the home, kindly allow us to live in your *Gharat* (Water Mill) for the night.” The old woman informed them about the terror of a cruel, voracious man-eater tiger who had killed many people and suggested them to go to another village as *Gharat* was not a safe place. She also informed them about the handsome bounty on the head of this beast announced by King Uday Singh. Somehow they managed to get her permission to pass the night in the *Gharat* but inadequate space and the impending danger of the tiger was not allowing them to sleep. The night was intensifying, making it very difficult for these exhausted brothers to keep their eyelids open when they instantaneously smelt danger. They heard the sound of crackling of leaves which seemed to be increasing. The treading, growling and roaring of the beast put these fatigued brothers on alert. There started long struggle for life then. Riding high on gallantry, velocity, and quickness, they overpowered the beast and killed it. They kept the strip of hair of moustache and nails of the beast for the proof and left the place before the daybreak without informing anyone.

The people came to know about the elimination of the menace of the tiger many days later. It so happened that the man who saw the dead beast first directly went to the court of the King taking the dead body to claim the bounty. The King became extremely pleased to see the dead beast and asked the man to demand whatever he wanted. The people, out of curiosity, also started to rush in a large number to the court to see the dead tiger. The moment the king endeavored to give award to the claimant, the queen objected, "My Lord! It's true that the beast had been killed but what is the proof that this man killed him. He should give the proof of his chivalry. If he had really killed the beast, he must have possessed the strip of hair of moustache and nails of him and he must show that." The king showed his happiness over the queen's reasonable objection. The king asked the man to show the proof but how could he do so we know. Then, the king announced, "Whoever shows the proof will be rewarded handsomely with what he/she wants." Just after this announcement, four brothers appeared, came forward and showed the required proofs. As was promised, the king offered them to demand whatever they wanted. They replied, "My Lord! We have neither home nor the land to construct the home. If you want to give something then give us the land which appears from this peak of Udaypur." Impressed king granted them the desired land, a vast area of land in fact.

In such a way, the four gallant Mahar brothers started to inhabit in Pithoragarh district. In the meantime, they divided the land into four parts: Chainsar region went to the eldest brother, Malli Jakhani to the second one, Talli Jakhani to the third one, and the youngest brother Kuru Mahar got the land which was later named after him-**Kumaur**.

After some days, the four brothers were on the visit of Nepal where the preparation of the celebration "**Indra Jaatra**" was going on with grandiosity. The rituals of 'Indra Jaatra' festival were to begin with a sacrifice of a *Katara* (he-buffalo) at the outset. But hacking the he-buffalo became impossible owing to its long horns curled upon its neck and the beginning of the festival was held up until the he-buffalo was hacked in a single stroke. The situation grew critical with the passing of each second. The fleeting emotions of uncertainties and doubts crept up in the minds of the assembled people, making them absolutely restless. It so happened that the *Mahar* brothers were present there on the invitation of the King. Eventually, they took up the challenge. They made use of an intelligent trick on the suggestion of the youngest brother **Kuru Mahar**.

One of the *Mahar* brothers reached to the elevated place and tempted the he-buffalo towards soft green grass held by the former. As the he-buffalo raised his head to eat the green grass, his horns slanted below the neck. Instantly, another *Mahar* brother grabbed the opportunity and in no time cut the neck in a single stroke, much to the relief of worried people including the King himself. Already overwhelmed, the King became ecstatic to watch valour coupled with intelligence of the *Mahar* brothers and asked them to live in Nepal. The ‘Mahar’ brothers had become very impressed by the way the mask dance drama of Nepal ‘Indra Jaatra’ had brought the spirit of enthusiasm, cheerfulness and brotherhood among the people of Nepal. They wanted the same for their people as well. They humbly refused the offer but requested the King to grant them certain masks, chiefly that of *Lakhe (Lakhiya)* to celebrate the same festival in their respective villages. The King was more than happy to not only grant them permission but also to generously provide them masks essential for the festival.

Considering this folklore, it appears that these four brothers would have returned to Kumaur at the time of rainy season during which there is supposed to be no or less workload on the farmers particularly after the completion of the plantation. They wisely and sensibly decided this time period to be the most appropriate occasion for organizing the ritualistic festival of “Hill Jaatra”. Ever since then, this tradition is on. The people finish their most of the agrarian works before the commencement of rainy season. As the domestic cattle are significant part of their lives, they collect the green grass and soft leaves of **Banj** oak tree (*Quercus leucotrichophora*) too from the forest. This is the reason that the village women appear to be working very hard by cutting green grass and soft leaves of the tress with sickle. In such scenario, the festival provides them with some moments of entertainment and they enthusiastically participate along with family members and relatives.

The painting of the wooden masks begins one week prior to the ritualistic festival of “Hill Jaatra”. On the day of the festival, the actors wear these sacred masks after **Brahmin** (the priest) worships them with prayer and **Akshat** (rice grain) and **Roli** (vermilion). Out of these masks, one is of “*Lakhiya Bhoot*”, one of “*Bari Haul*” (grown up pair of oxen), one of “*Nepali Haul*” (the ox of Nepal) which is without horns, one of *Nani Haul* (a pair of calves), and the last but not the least is one of “*Galya Bald*” (sleeping lazy ox), the most entertaining one.

The legend has it that earlier the actors who played the part of *Lakhiya Bhoot* on different occasions would meet the early fatalities and it was regularly happening. Hence, there started the tradition of putting the Mask of *Lakhiya Bhoot* in the *Kot* where a goat sacrifice is made to propitiate him. Ever since then, there is no incidence of the actors' unexpected casualty. The *Kot* is a fort where *Mahar* brothers are supposed to have lived, the remains of which are still present at Kumaur. This is the place where the mask of *Lakhiya Bhoot* is housed safely nowadays.

A long time ago, Hill Jaatra could not be organized for 14 long consecutive years due to its main organizer Subedar Major Hoshiyar Singh's physical inability. Consequently, the people started to come across early demise and 39 people died, out of which most of the people belonged to the same *thakur* clan. For saving the people from this misfortune, the senior citizen of the village Bahadur Singh Mahar organized the recitation of *Akhand Ramayan* (a religious scripture) in the *Kot* but to no avail. The people became more frightened as one more man died the very next day of the recitation ceremony. The natives were having very tough time those days. One day, Bahadur Singh Mahar overheard people talking, "*Lakhiya Bhoot* is creating problems and troubling the people of Kumaur as they've ceased to celebrate the festival of Hill Jaatra." Bahadur Singh Mahar, realizing his mistake, proposed the beginning of the ritualistic festivity yet again to his people who wholeheartedly gave their approval. Consequently, "Hill Jaatra" once again started to be celebrated annually without fail, relieving the people from the adversity and hard times and bringing happiness and prosperity in their lives. Nowadays, the people rush in a large number from the village and nearby areas to observe this ritualistic festivity. Surprising it may appear in this modern time of electronic and digital revolution, but this is the fact that "Hill Jaatra" is still celebrated and the people participate in it enthusiastically and devotedly to please the deities to avert famine, draught, epidemic and any other kind of untoward incidence.

The people belonging to *Mahar* clan have been still carrying out the tradition; likewise, *Ordhs* (Carpenters) have also been traditionally preparing agrarian tools and wooden masks related to this ritualistic exercise. Earlier, the wooden masks were painted with natural white clay, *Geru* (red clay), and coal but now the artificial colours are bought from the market and used.

After the completion of the festival, these masks are safely put into the box by *Ordhs* till the next year where they remain completely invisible from the eyes of the people. The masks are not kept in open with the belief that it may bring catastrophe, adversity to the residents. The carpenters are doing yeoman's service in carrying the tradition forward and also contributing in making and taking care of the masks.

Nowadays, the festival is organized in very limited space as the people have constructed their homes at the organizing place which had earlier 20 *Naali* (a measurement unit) land. Earlier actors were presented in a plain manner but now presentation, make up, etc have turned out to be very ostentatious but nonetheless attractive. The actors are selected from the village but the actor supposed to be playing the part of *Lakhiya Bhoot* needs to be physically very strong, sturdy, and muscular because of the traditional belief of the *Bhoot* (Ghost) haunting him. The tradition of invoking *Lakhiya Bhoot*, observing rituals with the help of prayers and beating of *Dhol* and *Damau* (Drums) still lives, thrives, and continues.

#### Notes and References

The present research paper is based on the conversations with the youngsters, old people, carpenters, local actors, audiences, and devotees of Kumaur village and adjoining areas of Pithoragarh District of Uttarakhand, India. List includes:

Late Bahadur Singh Mahar

Late Umed Singh Mahar

Mr. Bheem Ram Vishwakarma

Mr. Yashawant Singh Mahar

Mr. Deepak Mahar

Mrs. Gobindi

Mrs. Radhika

Mrs. Basanti Devi

Mrs. Devaki Mahar

Mrs. Manju Vishwakarma

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