

Traditional Cultural Practices and its Changing Landscape in the Alaknanda Valley, Garhwal Himalaya

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Abstract

The Alaknanda Valley has a rich cultural heritage. It is home to the Panch Badris, Panch Kedars, and Panch Prayags. Additionally, it is renowned for the Dwadas Jyotirlinga and Shakti Peeth. Known as 'Dev Bhumi,' it is considered the land of Gods and Goddesses. People worship various forms of nature, including trees, water, and land, along with all folk deities. They celebrate fairs and festivals throughout the year, aligning with the changing seasons and the sun's position in the northern and southern hemispheres. This study illustrates the rich cultural heritage of the Alaknanda Valley and its evolving landscape. This is a field-based empirical and observational study, and the author employed a qualitative approach. He visited the entire Alaknanda valley, participated in numerous cultural events, and interviewed 10 priests and 100 local people, who are engaged in practicing culture and rituals. Data were also collected through literature review and secondary sources. The findings of this study indicate that the traditional cultural heritage of the Alaknanda Valley underwent significant decline during the 1980s. This situation persisted until 2010, after which efforts to restore cultural traditions began. At present, the region's rich cultural heritage has been largely revived to its pre-1980s state. Local people play a crucial role in preserving cultural practices by actively participating in the celebration of fairs and festivals every month. The culture of the Alaknanda Valley is deeply connected to nature and its conservation. Therefore, maintaining this rich cultural heritage requires its continued practice in traditional ways.

Keywords: Alaknanda Valley; Cultural practices; Changing landscape; Fairs and festivals.

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Introduction

Culture is a broad concept that encapsulates the traditions, artistic expressions, and social practices of people. It includes significant intellectual and creative works such as music, literature, visual arts, theatre, and film (Raymond, 1958; Stuart, 1997). Additionally, culture defines the distinctive ways individuals, families, and communities live their daily lives, influenced by factors like climate, seasons, landscape, and geography. It reflects people's everyday experiences and encompasses their beliefs, attitudes, languages, customs, and institutions (Grossberg, 1997). Culture also integrates elements such as religion, rituals, attire, cuisine, and communication styles, fostering social connections, mutual understanding, and a shared societal vision (Grossberg et al. 1992). Due to differences in environmental, historical, and social influences, cultural expressions vary across regions, resulting in a rich diversity of traditions and cultural landscapes worldwide (Tylor, 1971; Taylor, 1895; Kroeber, 1931).

The Himalaya has long captivated the interest of the Western diaspora. Rooted in traditional cultural practices, the region has gained prominence as a major pilgrimage destination (Bharati, 1970; Bakker, 1990; Jha, 1991; Sax, 1991; Messerschmidt, 1992). This vast mountain range boasts immense cultural diversity, which varies across the Western, Central, and Eastern Himalayas. Among the predominant cultural communities are Hindus, Tibetans, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Jains, each adding to the region's rich cultural tapestry (Hausner, 2007; Berreman, 1963). In the Jammu, Kashmir, and Ladakh

areas, a section of the population follows Islamic traditions. In contrast, the Eastern Himalaya is home to a significant number of Tibeto-Burmese ethnic groups, primarily tribal communities who have embraced Christianity (Census of India, 2011). Their languages, cuisines, customs, and rituals differ widely, shaping multiple cultural identities at macro, meso, and micro levels (Schwartzberg, 1978). The tribal communities in the Eastern Himalaya primarily consume meat, whereas Hindus in the Central and Western Himalayas predominantly follow vegetarian or vegan diets (Grotzbach, 1994). Additionally, certain groups in Arunachal Pradesh continue to practice animism.

The Garhwal Himalaya also referred to as the Indian Central Himalayan Region, are regarded as the sacred dwelling of Lord Shiva, Goddess Shakti, and numerous folk deities. This region is known for its deep-rooted cultural traditions and rich heritage. Geographically, it is divided into two main areas: the Kumaon and Garhwal Himalayas. However, culturally, it encompasses three distinct regions – Kumaon, Garhwal, and Jaunsar Babar – extending from east to west. Kumaon is traditionally called Manaskhand, while Garhwal is known as Kedarkhand, with Jaunsar Babar occupying the western part of Garhwal. The Kali River serves as a natural boundary between Kumaon and Nepal, giving rise to the name Kali Kumaon. Meanwhile, the Tons/Tamsa River marks the division between Garhwal and Himachal Pradesh (Gazetteer of India, 1909). Cultural traditions, rituals, and customs in these areas are shaped by influences from neighbouring regions, including Nepali culture from the east, Himachali culture from the west, and Tibetan culture from the north. The Bhotiya tribes, residing in the northern regions of Pithoragarh, Chamoli, and Uttarkashi districts, exhibit strong Tibetan cultural influences. Historically, there was active trade between Tibet and Garhwal, but this came to an end following the Chinese incursion of 1962, which led to the closure of the border.

The Garhwal Himalaya encompasses numerous sub-cultural regions, each corresponding to distinct micro-drainage basins and varying with altitude. Differences in language, cuisine, attire, and cultural customs can be observed both laterally across regions and vertically with shifts in elevation. The high-altitude areas experience harsh winters, leading inhabitants to wear woollen garments and consume meat, primarily sourced from goats, sheep, and lambs. In contrast, the river valleys have relatively mild winters and hot summers, influencing clothing choices—men commonly wear Kurta and Pajama, while women opt for Saris or other lightweight attire. Agricultural diversity is prominent, with over 20 types of vegetables, various pulses, and traditional food grains like Barahnaja being cultivated and consumed. The region also supports more than 10 varieties of fruits, spanning tropical, subtropical, and temperate zones (Pant & Samal, 1999). Additionally, wild fruits such as wild pear, Hansol, Kilmod, Ber, Kafal, Bhamore, Bedu, and Timli thrive in the area (Rana & Datt, 2008). Livestock rearing is an essential livelihood activity, with cows, buffaloes, and oxen predominantly raised in river valleys and mid-altitudes, whereas goats, lambs, sheep, and horses are more common in high-altitude regions.

The rich biodiversity of the region sustains a wide array of plant and animal species, each adapted to the varying climate and altitude. Traditional livelihood practices deeply shape the cultural customs, rituals, and beliefs of the people of Garhwal, creating a seamless integration of natural and cultural elements. The inhabitants revere food grains, animals, and trees through diverse forms of worship, which vary based on altitude and climatic conditions. Key cultural traditions include the observance of Samskaras, the performance of Dev/Devi Naach, veneration of nature and folk deities, and the celebration of fairs and festivals. Samskaras, a series of rites of passage, mark significant life events such as birth, growth, aging, and death. Nature worship, encompassing elements like water, land, trees, and animals, is a long-standing practice, alongside the ritualistic Dev/Devi Naach, a dance form dedicated to deities. Fairs and festivals are observed throughout the year, aligning with seasonal transitions and emphasizing the intrinsic bond between cultural traditions and the natural environment.

Over time, traditional cultural practices in the Garhwal Himalaya have undergone significant transformations, influenced by contemporary cultural trends from the Indian subcontinent and beyond. The expansion of various tourism sectors – including nature-based, adventure, and cultural tourism—has played a crucial role in these changes. The region is home to several pilgrimage sites, both in the high-altitude areas and along river valleys, drawing hundreds of thousands of devotees each year. In recent decades, mass tourism activities such as trekking, mountaineering, and river rafting have expanded, contributing to noticeable shifts in local traditions. The increasing preference for fast food over traditional cuisine among service providers catering to tourists is one such example. Additionally, traditional attire, local beverages, and indigenous languages are gradually evolving under external influences. Known for their simplicity and hospitality, the people of the Himalayas are particularly susceptible to embracing new cultural practices.

Numerous scholars have examined the economy, society, tourism, history, and geography of the Garhwal Himalaya such as Atkinson (1882), Walton (1910), Dabral (1968), and Sati (2004, 2015, 2018, 2019, 2021 a, 2023, 2023, 2023, 2023). These studies touched upon the region's culture along with other

socio-economic aspects. However, their discussions have generally been brief. The present study provides a detailed illustration of cultural practices and their relevance in the Alaknanda Valley. It aims to analyze these practices while highlighting the deep interconnections between people and nature. The research explores rituals such as *Samskaras*, the celebration of *Dev/Devi Naach*, and various fairs and festivals. Additionally, it examines how devotees venerate different elements of nature, including water bodies, forests, land, and folk deities. The study seeks to bridge existing knowledge gaps by offering a comprehensive and detailed exploration of cultural traditions in the Valley. The area remains a pivotal centre of cultural proliferation and paradigm shift from the traditional to modern cultures. It is due to the presence of many highland and valley pilgrimages, which make it culturally rich. This study is highly significant for the researchers, academics, students, pilgrims, and tourists. Further, it will be a base for conducting similar other studies.

Methods

This study primarily employs a qualitative approach. It is a field-based empirical and observational study. The author visited the entire Alaknanda Valley and participated in various fairs, festivals, and cultural events (processions). A total of 100 people engaged in cultural activities and 10 priests were interviewed. Questions were asked to understand past cultural practices and their changing nature in the present. Additional questions explored the factors influencing traditional cultural practices. An extensive literature review and the collection of archival material were also carried out. Illustrations of cultural events were taken by the author during field visits, and a map was carefully drawn to show the cultural destinations in the Alaknanda Valley.

Results and Discussion

The Alaknanda River Valley: Alkapuri Glacier to Devprayag Town

The Alaknanda River originates from the Bhagirathi Bank (Alkapuri glacier) at an altitude of 4,149 m in the Chamoli district of the Garhwal Himalaya (Nand & Kumar, 1989). Flowing about 8 km up to Mana, the first village of India, this part of the river is uninhabited. Mana village is located on the banks of the Alaknanda River and the Saraswati River, forming Keshav Prayag (3,148 m), the first Prayag of India. It is a seasonal dwelling of the Bhotiya tribes, a Tibeto-Mongoloid race. During winter, the village remains closed for six months. This village is very important in terms of its geo-strategic location, as it is situated very close to the Tibet border. Around 30 km from Mana towards the north, a famous glacial-fed lake, Satopant Lake, is located at the foot of the Swargarohini Mountain Peak. A world-famous waterfall named Vasudhara also forms on the Saraswati River. Three km downstream from Mana village, the Badrinath highland pilgrimage (3,105 m) is located on the right bank of the Alaknanda River. Badrinath Pilgrimage is the abode of Lord Vishnu; therefore, the Alaknanda River in Badrinath is known as Vishnu Ganga. The Badrinath pilgrimage remains closed for six months in winter, and during the six months of summer, pilgrims from all over India and the world visit Badrinath and perform puja. The river flows down, creating cascades, rivulets, and waterfalls. A small township on the bank of the Alaknanda River, known as Govind Ghat (1,718 m), is a famous highland pilgrimage site for the Sikhs. A trail bifurcates from Govind Ghat to the Valley of Flowers National Park and Hemkund Sahib. It is about a 20 km trail from Govind Ghat to Hemkund Sahib. Hemkund Sahib is a highland pilgrimage site of the Sikhs, located at an altitude of about 3,500 m (Sati, 2021 a).

Further downstream, a hydropower project, the 'Vishnu Prayag Project,' is located on the Alaknanda River, after which the famous Prayag, Vishnu Prayag (1,444 m), is situated below Joshimath town, where the Dhaulti Ganga joins the Alaknanda River. The Dhaulti Ganga originates from Vasudhara Tal (4,684 m) in the Joshimath Taluk at the India-Tibet border. Niti village and the Vishnu Gad Tapovan hydropower project are well known in this valley. The Alaknanda River continues downstream through Pipalkoti, Birahi, Chamoli, and Nand Prayag (859 m). The Mandakini River originates from the Nandaghunti Peak (4,654 m) and meets the Alaknanda River at Nand Prayag. Karnprayag is a town (761 m) where the Pindar River joins the Alaknanda River. The Pindar River originates from the Pindari Glacier (3,763 m) in the Bageshwar district and flows through Tharali and Karnprayag Taluks before joining the Alaknanda River. Another Prayag, Rudraprayag (641 m), is where the Mandakini River joins the Alaknanda River. The Mandakini River originates from the Chaurabari glaciers (4,204 m). The famous highland pilgrimage site Kedarnath is located on the banks of the Mandakini River. At Son Prayag (1,717 m), the Son River joins the Mandakini River. The last Prayag is Devprayag (462 m), where the Alaknanda River meets the Bhagirathi River and is thereafter called the Ganga (Mother Ganga).

Fig. 1 & Table 1 show that apart from the major tributaries of the Alaknanda River, it has numerous other rivers and streams. This river creates many natural landscapes, including waterfalls, rivulets, streams, cascades, potholes, V-shaped valleys, and gorges. It forms a total of five famous Prayags, and therefore, the region is called the land of Panch Prayags. However, two other Prayags also exist, making a total of seven Prayags. These Prayags are major cultural centers where, on several occasions, pilgrims and local people visit. Keshav Prayag situated at an altitude of 3148m which is highest whereas Devprayag situated at 462m which is lowest. These are the places where folk deities in their idols are brought during fairs and festivals, and devotees take holy dips.

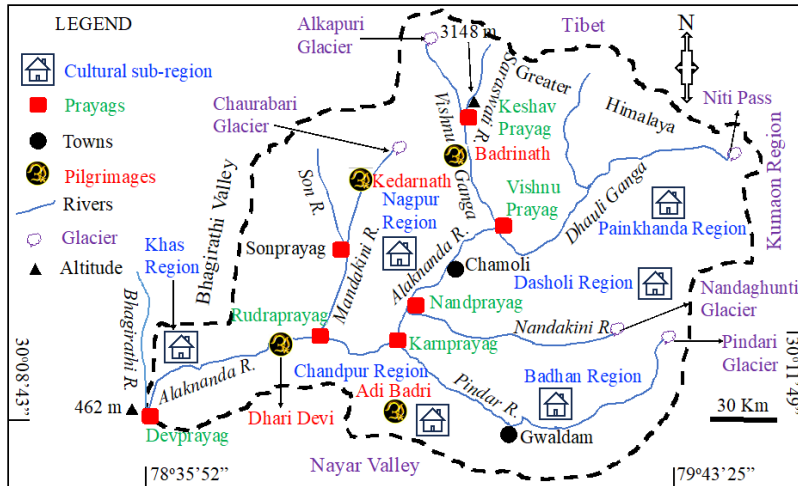


Figure.1. Location map of the Alaknanda Valley showing cultural sub-regions, Prayags, and Pilgrimages

Source: From the Survey of India Toposheet and constructed by Vishwambhar Prasad Sati

Table 1. Major Prayags, rivers, and altitude (m) in the Alaknanda Basin

Major Prayags	Rivers	Altitude (m)
Keshav Prayag	The Saraswati River joins the Alaknanda River at Mana village	3148
Vishnu Prayag	The Dhaul Ganga joins the Alaknanda River, below Joshimath town	1444
Nand Prayag	The Nandakini River joins the Alaknanda River near Nand Prayag town	859
Kamprayag	The Pindar River joins the Alaknanda River at Kamprayag town	761
Rudraprayag	The Mandakini River joins the Alaknanda River at Rudraprayag town	641
Son Prayag	The Son River joins the Mandakini River near Son Praya service centre	1717
Devprayag	The Alaknanda River joins the Bhagirathi River at Devprayag and after joining of these two rivers, it is called the 'Ganga'.	462

Note: A table showing the major Prayags (A place where two or more rivers meet) at various altitude

Major Highland Pilgrimages and their Cultural Significance

The Alaknanda basin is also home to the Panch Badris and Panch Kedar. The Panch Badris include Badrinath (also known as Badri Vishal), Bridha Badri, Yogdhyaana Badri, Bhavishya Badri, and Adi Badri. Similarly, the Panch Kedar consists of Kedarnath, Madhyamaheshwar, Rudranath, Tungnath, and Kalpeshwar (Singh, 2013).

Panch Badris

The Panch Badri temples are devoted to Lord Vishnu, one of the three principal deities in Hinduism. These temples are considered the seats of Lord Vishnu, where he resides. According to Hindu mythology, Vishnu is the preserver of the universe, responsible for maintaining balance and protecting all creatures. Among the Panch Badris, Badrinath is the most significant pilgrimage center, located on the banks of the Alaknanda River in Chamoli district. During summer, when the idol of Lord Vishnu is brought to Badrinath, millions of devotees visit to offer their prayers. In 2024, around 5 million pilgrims visited

Badrinath (UTDB 2024). Just 100 meters upstream, the temple of Bridha Badri is situated near Narad Kund, representing the older form of Vishnu. Yogdhyaana Badri, located in Pandukeshwar village near Govind Ghat on the banks of the Alaknanda, depicts Lord Vishnu in a meditative state. Bhavishya Badri, meaning "Future Badri," is believed to be the place where Lord Vishnu will reside once Badrinath is no longer accessible. It is located 17 km from Joshimath in the Dhauri Ganga Valley. The last of the Panch Badris, Adi Badri, is situated on the banks of the Ata Garh in Karnprayag Taluk of Chamoli. Some temples here remain incomplete, which is why it is known as Adi Badri. Notably, all Panch Badri temples are located in Chamoli district and are well connected by road.

Panch Kedars

Kedar is synonymous with Lord Shiva, and the Panch Kedar temples are dedicated to him. According to legend, different body parts of Lord Shiva are worshipped at these five temples: the hump at Kedarnath, the belly at Madhyamaheshwar, the arms at Tungnath, the face at Rudranath, and the hair at Kalpeshwar. Additionally, Lord Shiva's head is revered as a Shiva Lingam in Kathmandu, Nepal. Except for Kalpeshwar, the other four Kedars are situated above 3,000 meters in the high-altitude meadows of the Himalayas and remain closed for six months during winter. Pilgrimage tourism at these sites is active during the summer, while Kalpeshwar remains open year-round. The four highland pilgrimages can only be accessed by trekking routes ranging from 4 km to 20 km.

Kedarnath, one of the foremost Panch Kedars and the 12th Jyotirlinga, is located on the banks of the Mandakini River in Rudraprayag district, about 18 km from Gaurikund. Madhyamaheshwar is situated in the Madhyamaheshwar River basin, in an alpine meadow, and requires a trek of over 20 km. Tungnath, located 4 km uphill from the Chopta service center, lies just below Chandrashila. Rudranath, perched atop a hill, is 17 km from Gopeshwar and is a major highland pilgrimage site. Kalpeshwar, located in the Urgan Valley, is the most accessible among the Panch Kedars, just 2 km from the national highway connecting Rishikesh and Haridwar.

Panch Badris, Panch Kedars, and Panch Prayags have developed as major cultural centers in the Alaknanda River valley. These sacred sites are located within the periphery of the Alaknanda River valley and its tributaries, mainly the Dhauri Ganga, the Pindar River, and the Mandakini River. Due to their proximity, pilgrims often visit these sites in a single journey. To reach the highland pilgrimages of Kedarnath and Badrinath, travellers must pass through these cultural centers.

Shakti Peeths and Jyotirlinga

The Alaknanda Valley is known for its famous Shakti Peeth 'Dhari Devi'. Located on the bank of the Alaknanda River in Dhari village near Srinagar city on the way to Badrinath, this temple is ancient, visited by thousands of devotees every year. Devotees visit here to offer Puja to the Shakti Dhari Devi and are blessed by the goddess. Now, a new temple has been constructed on the water reservoir of dam, constructed on the Alaknanda River. This valley has a world famous Jyotirlinga 'Kedarnath' a highland pilgrimage, one of the mini Char Dhams, and an abode of Lord Shiva. These are the centers of belief for the followers of the Hindu religion. They are also believed to be the gateway to Moksha (liberation from the cycle of birth and death). Lord Shiva is regarded as the god of destruction and transformation. He is also considered the Lord of Lords in Hindu religious scriptures.

Advent of Adi Shankaracharya and Cultural Integration

The great Hindu sage Adi Shankaracharya visited Garhwal, particularly the Alaknanda Valley, in the 9th century. During his visit, he established the renowned temples of Badrinath and Kedarnath, which are significant highland pilgrimages. Additionally, he founded all the temples of Panch Badris and Panch Kedars. Adi Shankaracharya arrived in Garhwal at a time when Hindu society was facing disintegration, and many Hindus were converting to Buddhism. His mission was to reunite Hindu society and restore its traditions, leading him to establish four Dhams (pilgrimage sites) in the four corners of India, one of which was Badrinath Dham.

He visited Garhwal just before his death in his early life and, despite his brief stay, accomplished significant work. It is believed that he died at Bhairav Jaap near Kedarnath. While the temples of Badrinath and Kedarnath are ancient, it is believed that Adi Shankaracharya played a crucial role in their renovation. Furthermore, he is regarded as the pioneer of trekking-based pilgrimages in the Alaknanda Valley, which initiated the tradition of reaching Panch Badris and Panch Kedars on foot. Over time, these sacred sites attracted pilgrims from across the Indian subcontinent and beyond, fostering cultural integration in the Alaknanda Valley.

Cultural Practices: Customs, Rituals, Fairs, and Festivals

Table 2 below depicts though the Alaknanda Valley falls under the broader Garhwal Cultural Realm, it comprises several sub-cultural realms based on drainage basins and altitudes. Consequently,

cultural practices—including fairs, festivals, customs, and rituals—differ from one sub-cultural realm to another. There are a total of seven sub-cultural realms in the Alaknanda Valley, spanning from the upper Alaknanda Valley to the lower valley. Fairs and festivals are organized according to the months, while *Samskaras* (rites of passage) are performed based on the individual's age. The Alaknanda Valley boasts a rich cultural heritage, with traditions varying across drainage basins, from the river valleys to middle altitudes and highlands. A well-known proverb, “*Kos Kos Par Badale Paani, Chaar Kos Par Bani,*” highlights this diversity, meaning that water changes every mile and language every four miles.

Table 2. Major cultural sub-realms and the River Basins

No.	Cultural sub-regions	River valleys
1.	Painkhanda	Dhaulti Ganga and Vishnu Ganga, Joshimath Taluk, Chamoli district
2.	Dasholi	Nandakini Valley, Ghat taluk, Chamoli district
3.	Chandpur	Lower Pindar Basin, Karnprayag Taluk, Chamoli District
4.	Badhan	Upper Pindar Basin, Tharali Talik, Chamoli District
5.	Nagpur	The Alaknanda Valley, Nagnath Pokhari, Chamoli district
6.	Salan	The Middle Alaknanda Valley, Srinagar and Kirti Nagar Taluk, Pauri and Tehri Districts, respectively
7.	Khas Patti	The Lower Alaknanda Valley, Devprayag Taluk, Pauri and Tehri Districts.

Note: A Table showing cultural sub regions in the various districts of Alaknanda Valley

Cultures, customs, and rituals are intricately woven with nature and seasons. People worship trees, water, and land on various occasions. Among trees, Banyan, Pipal, and Oak are considered the most sacred. Married women tie a thread around the Pipal tree for the well-being of their family members. Newly married couples worship the source of water—Naula or Dhara—immediately after their marriage. Land is worshipped on both occasions—sowing the seeds and harvesting crops. Furthermore, the harvested crop is worshipped before its use. After harvesting wheat, people roast it, and it is called ‘Aumi.’ Similarly, after harvesting paddy, it is roasted and crushed, and this is called ‘Chuada.’ On various occasions, people take a holy dip along with folk deities in the rivers and at their confluence points. Some of the cultural places in the Alaknanda Valley where holy dips take place include the banks of the Vishnu Ganga in Badrinath, Vishnu Prayag, Nand Prayag, Karnprayag, Rudraprayag, Sonprayag, and Dev Prayag. Additionally, other places where holy dips occur include Kalimath, on the banks of the Kali and Saraswati Ganga, and Panti on the bank of the Pindar River.

The people of Dronagiri village in the Painkhanda region worship Dronagiri Mountain. They do not worship the folk deity Hanuman and do not perform Ram Leela. According to legend, during the Laxman Shakti episode (when Laxman fainted in the battle between Ram and Ravan), Lord Hanuman broke a part of Dronagiri Mountain in search of Sanjivani, a divine medicinal plant, and carried it to Sri Lanka to cure Lakshmana. The villagers live barefoot and do not cut green trees. They bury their dead instead of cremating them because they believe burning a dead body requires wood, which would lead to cutting down trees. They are nature lovers and conservationists; therefore, they protect the forest. The Painkhanda region is located close to the Greater Himalayas; as a result, it experiences extremely cold and frigid temperatures.

Fig. 2 in the below explains how people of this reign worship folk deities such as Isht Dev/Devi, Kul Dev/Devi, Gram Dev, and Bhumiya. Every family has an Isht Dev/Devi, every group of families with the same Gotra (Kutumb) has a Kul Dev/Devi, every village has a Gram Dev, and every cluster of villages has a Bhumiya Dev. The main folk deities are Lord Shiva and Shakti (Gaura/Nanda/Bhagwati). People also worship jungle deities and ghosts. When married women fall ill, they visit their mother's house and perform Puja in the jungle to cure the disease. Similarly, ghosts are worshipped in the jungle. In the past, goats and hens were sacrificed to appease folk deities; however, the custom of sacrificing goats and hens has been abolished. Kal Bhairav and Goddess Kali reside on large stones in open spaces, and people worship these stones. In the Badhan region, certain places practiced the tradition of sacrifices, such as Chausat, where 64 goats and male buffaloes were sacrificed. Other such places included Kaub, Chopta, and Chirkoon in the Pindar River basin.

Dev Devi Naach is performed as folk deities appear in the human body, and people dance in what is called Dev Avataran. It is mainly performed during the Navratris—Chaitra and Ashvini. Folk deities such as Bhairav (an incarnation of Lord Shiva), Bhagwati, and Gairul manifest in human bodies, and both men and women dance. These individuals are called Dev Pashva or Dankariya. Another season for Dev Devi

Naach is winter. The upper reaches of the Alaknanda Valley remain cold during December and January. A family or Kutumb organizes Dev Devi Naach for the well-being of family members. The main roles in the ritual are played by the Dev Pashva, drummers, a person who plays the Huduki, and another who plays the Thali. Jagars are sung to appease folk deities and demons. There are more than 500 Jagars sung in the Alaknanda Valley, primarily during festivals.

Fairs and festivals are celebrated every month in accordance with the climatic seasons. The Alaknanda Valley observes six climatic seasons. With the beginning of the new Hindu month, the first day of Chaitra marks the celebration of Sankranti, followed by the five-day-long Vaisakhi festival across the valley. The author participated in Vaisakhi celebrations at two locations—Panti in the Pindar Valley and Karnprayag at the confluence, where Vaisakhi is known as Bikhoti. Festivals are widely celebrated in the Alaknanda Valley, especially in June, when the region experiences drought. During this time, people worship Latu Dev (the God of Rain) to seek rainfall for their crops. A month-long festival called Harela is observed, beginning on Rai Sankranti, the first day of Shravan. The month of Shravan is also known for the Shravan Mela, held across different parts of the valley. People visit temples dedicated to Lord Shiva (Shivalayas) and offer water, milk, flowers, and Belpatra to Shiva and Shakti, a ritual known as Jalabhishek.



Figure 2. (a) People gathered in Nandakeshari (near Deval) waiting for the Nanda Devi Raaj Jaat (procession) on 22 August 2014 (b) A goat leading to cultural procession on 21 August 2014 (c) Dev Devi Naach performed during Vaisakhi in Panti village on 14 August 2023 (d) Dhari Devi Temple (Shakti Peeth) on the middle of the Alaknanda River on 2 Jan 2021.

Source: By Vishwambhar Prasad Sati.

Following this, Ghee Sankranti is celebrated. In alpine pasturelands, people play Holi with milk and butter, as this is the season when ample fodder is available, leading to increased milk production. To symbolize prosperity, farmers celebrate Ghee Sankranti. Raksha Bandhan is also observed, traditionally a festival for Brahmins and their Yajmans, where Brahmins visit their patrons' homes throughout Bhadra month, performing rituals for their well-being and receiving food grains and money in return. Over time, this festival has evolved into a celebration of the bond between brothers and sisters, as observed in the rest of India.

Ashvini Navratri is celebrated in the month of Asoj (September), followed by the performance of Dev Devi Naach. Kartik is known for Bagwal (Deepawali in other parts of India), celebrated over three days—Badi Bagwal, Majhali Bagwal, and Govardhan Puja. Govardhan Puja takes place on the 11th day of Majhali Bagwal. Traditional delicacies like Puri, Pakora, and sweets are prepared, and in the evening, villagers gather to play Bhaillo. On the dark night of Bagwal, people assemble in harvested fields, light bonfires, and run from one field to another. January marks the celebration of Makar Sankranti, signifying the beginning of the Magh month. Brahmins visit their Yajmans' homes, perform rituals, and share a meal of Khichadi made from rice and urad dal (black gram). Magh Mela is held along riverbanks at multiple locations in the Alaknanda Valley, where devotees take a holy dip at Sangam. Basant Panchami, celebrated in Falgun (February), marks the arrival of spring and is observed as a festival of colours. People wear yellow clothes, and young boys undergo the Yagyopaveet (sacred thread ceremony). Priests pierce children's ears for wearing gold or silver ornaments. This also marks the beginning of Chanchhedi, a

tradition where village women gather after dinner in a community space to sing and dance. Chanchhedi concludes during the Vaisakhi festival. Holi in the region is celebrated in two forms—Baithiki and Khadi—lasting for an entire month, unique and quite different from the other parts of India. During Khadi Holi, people wear white clothes, sing Holi songs, and dance, moving from one village to another daily for seven days. The last day of the Holi is served Bhoj to all villagers, cooked in a common place by Sarole Brahmins.

"People dancing to Nature's rhythm" is a well-known proverb in this region. The fairs, festivals, and folklore (including songs and dances) are deeply influenced by climate, altitude, and location. These celebrations vary from the river valleys to the highlands and across different seasons—winter, summer, and the monsoons. Cultural processions, known as *Deora*, are centuries-old traditions observed throughout the year in various parts of the Alaknanda Valley, which boasts a rich cultural heritage. During these processions, the idols of folk deities are carried by priests, devotees, and local villagers as they move from one village to another. The duration of these processions ranges from a single day to six months, covering distances between 5 km and 200 km. While processions occur throughout the year, they are most frequent during the winter season. As the procession moves, priests sing *Jagars*, and local residents dance alongside the idols of folk deities. After a day-long procession, the group halts in a village, where they are served specially prepared local food. The following morning, fresh and delicious food, along with fruits, is offered to the deities before the procession resumes its journey to another village. This cycle continues until the procession concludes. Migrants and married women (*Dhyan*) from these villages also return to participate in the festivities. Several significant cultural processions take place in the region, including the Nanda Devi Raj Jaat, Mahadev Procession, Naini Devi Deora Jatar, Bashudev Deora Jatar, Hill Jatar, Kailash-Mansarovar Jatar, Char Dham Jatar, and the processions during *Pandav Nritya*.

Social Structure and Caste Systems

Society in the Alaknanda Valley is woven from diverse castes and communities, including Brahmins, Rajputs, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes. The upper reaches of the valley are inhabited by the Bhotiya tribes, primarily in the Mana and Niti valleys near the Tibet border. The Bhotiyas belong to the Tibeto-Mongoloid ethnic group and traditionally maintain two dwellings. During summer, they migrate to highland areas (alpine pasturelands) with their livestock—mainly goats, sheep, lambs, and horses. In winter, when the highlands receive heavy snowfall, they return to lower valley regions where they have winter settlements. Historically, they engaged in trade with Tibetans, but this practice ended after the 1962 Sino-Indian conflict.

The Bhotiyas maintain a close connection with nature, produce local wine, and engage in small-scale weaving industries. They cultivate small agricultural plots in the river valleys along the Alaknanda River, practicing farming during winter. They follow Hindu traditions and celebrate all Hindu fairs and festivals, with *Johar* being their most significant festival. They are nature lovers, primarily non-vegetarian, and live in closely-knit, open communities.

The Scheduled Castes—such as Dom, Chamar, Kohli, and Bagchi—are among the indigenous communities of the Alaknanda Valley. Traditionally landless and socially marginalized, they have faced economic hardships. However, in recent years, government reservation policies have facilitated their education and increased their participation in the tertiary sector. Many have been allocated agricultural land, leading to an improvement in their economic conditions.

Culturally, many members of these communities are skilled drummers and dancers, actively performing during fairs and festivals. In several villages across the Alaknanda Valley, Scheduled Caste communities worship Goddess Kali and perform religious rituals. They are non-vegetarian and consume various types of meat.

Brahmins and Rajputs are migrants to the region and have multiple sub-castes. Brahmins are divided into four sub-castes: Sarole, Gangari, Nag Vansi, and Devpuriya. Primarily serving as priests, they also engage in agriculture. They perform pujas in temples, conduct rituals for various occasions, and play a vital role in religious and social life. As strict vegetarians and nature lovers, they adhere to traditional dietary customs. Among them, Sarole Brahmins, considered the highest-ranking group, primarily reside in highland areas and are known as 'Danda.' They consume only self-cooked food and prepare meals for other Brahmins during special occasions. Rajputs also have several sub-groups. Known for their bravery, many serve in the national army, while some are also involved in agriculture. Both Brahmins and Rajputs are regarded as upper-caste communities and hold a prominent reputation in society.

Food habits and clothing in this region differ from other parts of India and vary between the river valleys and highlands. The Bhotiyas and other communities residing in the cold regions of the High Himalayas wear handmade woollen garments. Women wear Pakhula, a black woollen cloth, while men wear long woollen coats to protect themselves from the harsh climate. In the middle-altitude and valley

regions, people wear lighter woollen traditional attire—women wear black chadar and blauj, while men wear Kurta Pajama. On auspicious occasions, men wear dhoti and kurta, and women wear sari and blauj. The food culture is unique and diverse, with a strong reliance on traditional cereals. Major traditional food items include Manduwa ki Roti, Manduwa ka Halwa, Jhangora ki Kheer, Chaunsa, Kapuli, Bhatwandi, Faunda, Alu ka Gutka, Chuye ki Sabji, Kandali ki Sabji, and Chhanchhoda. Among sweet dishes, Roont, Rotana, Arsa, Chua ka Ladoo, and Pua are prominent. These sweet items are typically offered to folk deities before consumption. In the highland areas, locals prepare homemade wine, which is consumed during various social and religious occasions, often in communal gatherings. Over time, the existing social structure and caste system in the Alaknanda Valley have evolved. Unlike in other parts of India, the caste system here is not as prominent, and people from all castes live harmoniously within society and in harmony with nature.

People belong to two sects—Shaivism, followers of Lord Shiva, and Vaishnavism, followers of Lord Vishnu. The Shaiva population is outnumbered, while the Vaishnava population is smaller. In the meantime, some people follow both Shaivism and Vaishnavism. The followers of Shaivism also worship Goddess Shakti, mainly Goddess Gaura, also known as Parvati, Bhagwati, and Nanda. However, Shaivism and Vaishnavism flourished together due to the presence of both Badrinath (the abode of Vishnu) and Kedarnath (the abode of Shiva). The followers of Shiva and Shakti are non-vegetarian, whereas the followers of Vishnu are strictly vegetarian. There are more than 100 Shiva and Shakti temples and a few Vishnu temples in the Alaknanda Valley.

Major Rituals Performed from Birth to Death

The Alaknanda Valley has a unique tradition of performing rituals. There are 16 life-cycle rituals (Samskaras) observed from birth to death, with six being particularly prominent: Namkaran (naming ceremony), Aksharambh (initiation into learning), Annaprasan (first solid food), Chudakaram (first haircut), Yagyopaveet (sacred thread ceremony), Vivah (marriage), and Antyeshti (cremation). On the eleventh day after birth, the Namkaran ceremony is performed. A priest names the child based on astrological calculations of the nine planets (Nav Grah) and stars, and a Janma Patri (horoscope) is prepared. The Nav Grah are worshiped, traditional food is cooked, and guests are invited. After six months, two significant ceremonies take place: Annaprasan, where the baby is fed solid food for the first time, and Aksharambh, where the priest whispers the sacred word "Om" into the child's ear while chanting Vedic hymns. Chudakaram, or the first haircut, is performed at this stage.

At the age of 16, the Yagyopaveet ceremony is held, where the boy wears the sacred thread (Janeu) around his neck. This ritual also includes Karna Chhedan (ear piercing), in which gold ornaments are worn. It is traditionally performed on Basant Panchami. Marriage (Vivah) ceremonies are distinctive. The groom, accompanied by a procession (Barat), goes to the bride's house. At an auspicious time, a priest recites Vedic hymns, and the couple takes seven rounds around the sacred fire (Saat Phere), vowing for a successful marriage. The bride's father performs Kanya Daan, Var Daan, and Gau Daan, symbolizing the giving away of the daughter, blessings to the groom, and gifting a cow. The next morning, the groom and bride return to the groom's house. The final ritual is Antyeshti (cremation). If the deceased is a child, cremation follows immediately. Adults are typically cremated on the riverbank. The family members shave their heads at the cremation site. The person performing the rituals undergoes strict observances, cooking and eating only once a day for 24 hours. On the thirteenth day (Terahvin), a final purification ceremony is held, after which family members can resume normal activities. After a year, Barsi is observed, where a feast (Bhoj) is served to the village. However, in modern times, this ceremony has been shortened to one month. The life-cycle rituals of the Alaknanda Valley are unique, deeply connected to nature, and distinct from those practiced in other parts of India.

Changing Cultural Landscape

The cultural landscape of the Alaknanda Valley has undergone significant transformations, which can be categorized into three phases: before the 1980s, from 1980 to 2010, and after 2010. Before the 1980s, the Alaknanda Valley retained its rich cultural heritage, with a strong integration between culture and society. People observed customs and rituals in their original form, closely associated with nature and human life. However, cultural performances were not widely popularized and remained confined to limited areas. This era can be considered the classic period of the valley's cultural traditions.

The decade of the 1980s was known for a paradigm shift in cultural practices. The Garhwal Himalaya was influenced by exodus migration due to several reasons. Many villages converted into ghost villages, and in many others, the population remained less than 50%, disintegrated culture. This was the time when television programs reached rural areas, and people, influenced by them, began adopting modern culture through television programs. The performance of traditional cultural practices was minimized. Food habits, clothing, and ritual performances changed drastically. Fast and junk foods

replaced traditional, nutritional food. People's participation in practicing culture lessened. Instead of practicing traditional culture, people adopted modern ones. For example, in marriage ceremonies, instead of playing drums—Dhol and Damau—people preferred playing DJ (modern musical instrument) and, rather than spending money on performing Puja, they spent large amounts on serving cocktails to guests. The priests were utterly discontent with this situation and gradually diminished their efforts to strengthen culture. Furthermore, the increasing number of pilgrims and tourists in natural and cultural centers, respectively, influenced the culture of the Alaknanda Valley. Many highland pilgrimages are located in the Alaknanda Valley, and a large number of pilgrims and tourists visit these highland pilgrimages. The mountain people are innocent, residing in remote areas. However, they are the most vulnerable to the adaptation of any waves of changing culture, which led to significant cultural changes. This period can be considered the dark age of cultural development.

There was tremendous development in social media after 2010, which changed the mindset of people. Everyone became involved in social media to popularize themselves. Making reels of important events became a trend for everyone, strengthening cultural practices. Local people and migrants started popularizing their culture. All cultural practices that had been dormant since the 1980s revived significantly. Migrants, with the help of local people, enthusiastically participated in celebrating fairs and festivals more intensely and wholeheartedly. They renovated their old houses for their summer dwellings and at the time of celebrating fairs and festivals. Homestay tourism also strengthened the traditional culture. The owners of homestay serve traditional food and beverages to tourists and pilgrims and perform folklores – songs and dances. The state government initiated campaigns to strengthen traditional culture. It renovated temples and constructed new temples in major cultural places, leading to a new era of cultural development. Millets, traditional cereals grown in the rural areas of the Alaknanda Valley, are being popularised, further leading to conservation of culture. Therefore, this period may be called a renaissance in cultural proliferation.

Conclusion

This paper provides a detailed illustration of the cultural richness of the Alaknanda Valley. It includes an in-depth description of the highland and river valley pilgrimages, Shakti Peeths and Jyotirlingas, the advent of Adi Shankaracharya and cultural integration, cultural practices, customs, rituals, fairs and festivals, social structure and caste systems, major rituals performed from birth to death, and the changing cultural landscape. The advent of Adi Shankaracharya in the Alaknanda Valley and the subsequent cultural integration were elaborated upon. Adi Shankaracharya established the world-famous temples of Badrinath and Kedarnath, along with several others, which played a significant role in unifying Hindu society. A note on the changing cultural landscape was also presented. It was observed that the Alaknanda Valley has undergone a phased transformation in terms of traditional culture. From the 1980s onward, cultural practices significantly declined. However, with the rise of social media, particularly after 2010, cultural reintegration has been observed, and people are now actively involved in reviving traditional wisdom.

This study is unique, as it is the first of its kind conducted both in scope and detail. The main objective was to elucidate the rich cultural heritage and the changing cultural landscape of the region. The study revealed that the Alaknanda Valley practices a vibrant culture, with diverse customs and rituals. However, these cultural traditions have been changing rapidly in recent years. The findings contribute to the understanding of social and cultural dynamics and will be significant for the region as well as other parts of the Himalaya.

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