

CARVING IDENTITY: CASTE, ART AND CULTURAL PRESERVATION IN UPPER SHIMLA, HIMACHAL PRADESH

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ABSTRACT

In the culturally rich and mesmerizing hilly landscape of the Upper Shimla area of Himachal Pradesh where folk traditions, artisanal practices and the region's vibrant deity culture are deeply intertwined with social and religious structures, caste plays a significant role in shaping local artistic communities. This paper delves into the enduring influence of caste in traditional practices such as temple woodwork and folk music, which are integral to the cultural identity of the region. The study tries to reveal the fact that caste not only delineates social roles within these crafts but also reinforces a unique sense of heritage and belonging among artisans. The paper sheds light on how caste structures have historically defined access to certain art forms in Upper Shimla, influencing both creative expression and economic opportunity. It provides insight into the complex relationship between social hierarchy and cultural identity, underscoring the importance of these traditions to Upper Shimla's collective heritage. Moreover, the paper argues that an understanding of these caste-linked practices is essential for the preservation of the region's artistic legacy. As modern influences challenge traditional structures, recognizing the value of caste-based contributions is crucial for ensuring that these art forms continue to thrive. Through this lens, the paper highlights not only the history of Upper Shimla but also the resilience and cultural significance embedded in art communities. The paper offers a compelling narrative about the interplay between caste, craft and cultural identity in the region, providing a foundation for future preservation efforts and fostering a deeper appreciation for this unique cultural landscape.

Keywords: Artisans, Caste, Cultural Heritage, Folk Music, Upper Shimla.

Introduction

Upper Shimla, located in the Western Himalayas of Himachal Pradesh, encompasses high-altitude regions like Rohru, Jubbal-Kotkhai, Rampur, Kumarsain, Theog, and Chaupal. Renowned for its apple cultivation, natural beauty, and cultural heritage, this area boasts dense forests, snow-capped peaks, traditional temples, folk arts, and customs. Its socio-economic fabric is shaped by geographical isolation and historical influences, contributing to its unique identity (Singh 1).

The region has a rich history of art and culture, including wood carving, folk music, and textile weaving. These crafts are closely tied to local deity worship and community practices, playing a vital role in daily life (Bhardwaj 18). The caste system significantly influences the social structure and the division of artistic labor. Certain crafts, such as playing folk instruments in temples, woodcarving, and weaving, have traditionally been practiced by specific castes like odd, lohar, and thavi, with skills passed down through generations via oral tradition and apprenticeship (Census of India 1961).

However, younger generations are increasingly pursuing education and modern careers, posing a threat to the survival of these traditional crafts. This shift endangers the preservation of the region's cultural identity, rooted in its art and community traditions.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach to explore the representation of identity, caste, art, and culture in the Upper Shimla region of Himachal Pradesh. Primary data was gathered through semi-structured questionnaires, interviews, and observations, while secondary data was sourced from books, general gazetteers, and census reports. The use of content analysis and historical methods enabled an in-depth examination of various societal aspects, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of caste, art, and culture in the region.

Demography of Upper Shimla/ Kumarsain

Shimla district of Himachal Pradesh, located between 77°00' and 78°19' east longitude and 30°45' and 31°44' north latitude, is bordered by Mandi and Kullu to the north, Kinnaur to the east, Uttarakhand to the south, and Sirmaur to

the west. It was formed on September 1, 1972, following the reorganization of districts. Hinduism is the predominant religion, with Hindi and Pahari as the main languages. Horticulture is the primary source of income. The region was historically divided into 12 and 18 thakurais, leading to the development of distinct cultural patterns, reflected in temple art and the unique Devta belief system (Bhardwaj 1).

Kumarsain Tehsil of Shimla district has a total population of 43,062 as per the Census 2011. Out of which 21,888 are males while 21,174 are females. In 2011 a total of 10,346 families were residing in Kumarsain Tehsil. The Average Sex Ratio of Kumarsain Tehsil is 967. The total literacy rate of Kumarsain Tehsil is 84.31 %.

The paper offers a compelling narrative about the interplay between caste, craft and cultural identity in the region, providing a foundation for future preservation efforts and fostering a deeper appreciation for this unique cultural landscape.

Table 1: SC / ST Population – Kumarsain Tehsil

Category	Total	Male	Female
SC	12,956	6495	6461
ST	209	104	105

Source: Census of India 2011

Table 2: Religion-wise Population - Kumarsain Tehsil

Religion	Total	Male	Female
Hindu	42,646	21,663	20,983
Muslim	189	111	78
Christian	105	51	54
Sikh	29	17	12
Buddhist	79	40	39
Jain	1	1	0
Other	0	0	0
Not specified	13	5	8

Source: Census of India 2011

Role and Importance of Devta Culture in Upper Shimla

Devi and devta institutions in Himachal Pradesh hold significant importance, with each village or group of villages having a presiding deity regarded as both protector and family member (Bhagat et al. 511). Village temples serve not only as worship sites but also as social and cultural hubs for gatherings, celebrations, and discussions on significant matters (517). People seek the deity's blessings before major events like marriages, festivals, or agricultural activities, reflecting their faith in the deity's power to protect, guide, or discipline (518). Festivals such as jaagra and zaatar unite diverse caste groups through shared rituals, processions, and traditional music, fostering social cohesion (Harnot 188).

Local artisans view their work—be it temple woodwork, idol crafting, or folk music—as an act of devotion. They see their skills as divine gifts and strive to honor their deities through their craft. Folk musicians, integral to deity worship, play traditional instruments to specific taals, particularly during rituals like bed or bel, enhancing the spiritual experience (Thakur 251). Deity worship unifies the community, preserving traditional arts despite modern influences. Documenting and supporting these cultural practices ensure the survival of this rich heritage while allowing it to adapt to contemporary times (255).

Devta Culture in Kumarsain

Scholars like S.R. Harnot and O.C. Handa have documented the history of the deity Koteshwar Mahadev in Kumarsain. According to them, Koteshwar Mahadev, the presiding deity of the Kumarsain area, was the supreme deity during the rule of the ranas in the region (Singh 84). The temple is located in Madholi village near NH 05. It

is believed the deity originated in Kedarnath, stayed briefly in Hatkoti, and was brought to Kumarsain by two Brahmin brothers, Obdu and Shobdu, in a tumbdi (bottle gourd). They intended to release the divine power into the Satluj River, but the tumbdi slipped at Paroi Beel, where the power settled in the bhekhal (*Prinsepia utilis*) shrubs (Handa 297).

Over time, the divine power revealed itself mysteriously. Cattle sent to the area returned without milk, which was being sucked by a snake. A Brahmin from Batawara village, upon investigating, discovered the snake and invoked its divine nature, bringing the power to his home. The deity instructed the Brahmin in a dream to worship it in a grain box (khaandaa) for 12 years, after which it transformed into a mohra (metallic face). A temple was later built in Madholi, while the older temple, the mool sthan, remains in Batawara village, whose residents are considered the deity's family. The deity even participates in their rituals.

Koteshwar Mahadev was both the religious and political authority of the region before the establishment of a kingdom. Around 1000 AD, Kirat Singh, fleeing Gaya, sought the deity's permission to rule, which was granted. Since then, the deity emerges from the temple in a palanquin every four years to bless its devotees during the grand Mela Chaar Saala, also known as Koti Madholi Zaatar (Handa 299).

Traditional Folk Music Instruments Used in Kumarsain

The Kumarsain region of Himachal has a rich tradition of folk musical instruments closely linked to its cultural and spiritual heritage. Scholars like Molu Ram Thakur, Sudarshan Vashisht, Ehud Halperin, Asaf Sharabi and others have documented these instruments, highlighting their role in religious rituals and cultural events. Below is an overview of some traditional instruments:

- **Rannsingha** - One of the oldest instruments, the rannsingha was historically used in battle to signal the start of war. Shaped like the letter "S" it is made of brass, copper, or silver. Played by blowing air with full force, it is typically associated with Brahmin or Rajput castes but is not exclusive to them (Bhatia 156).
- **Karnaal** - As the name suggests, kar (hand) and naal (pipe), the karnaal is a hand-played pipe made of silver, brass, or copper. (Shandilya 131). It consists of two parts, dhyaana and thaunkroo, and is commonly found in temples (Bhatia 154).
- **Nagadda** - Also called naggara, this is one of the oldest percussion instruments in existence (Swami 51). Similar to bheri and dhundubhi, is made of silver, brass, or copper. It was traditionally used in battle and holds cultural significance in rituals (Bhatia 121).
- **Dhol** - Made of wood and covered with leather on both sides, the dhol is played with a wooden stick called bainne on one side and the hand on the other. Its playing style varies—hung around the neck during deity processions or played while seated during folk dances like naati (131).
- **Bhaanna** - A bronze (kaansa) plate with a string attached, it is played with a wooden stick, producing a distinct tunn-tunn sound (144).
- **Shehnai** - Played by the Hessi community, the shehnai has six holes and a pihpi (reed). It is essential during deity worship, processions, and ceremonial songs when the deity dances on the shoulders of its followers (151).
- **Gujju** - Similar to the damru, the gujju is played by rubbing a bainne (stick) along its sides to produce vibrations. Its unique sound is less common today due to a decline in skilled players (131).

Bajantri Community

According to the Census of India (1961), the culture of Kumarsain is profoundly reflected in its folk art, particularly music. Musical instruments have played a vital role in expressing human emotions and shaping the social, religious, and economic life of the region. Since ancient times, these instruments have gone beyond artistic expression to touch every aspect of life, embodying the essence of the region's culture and civilization.

In Himachal Pradesh, folk instruments are deeply intertwined with daily life, much like water mixing with milk. They are integral to every celebration, festival, and religious activity. Festivals, fairs, and rituals are incomplete without the rhythms and melodies of these instruments. The chariots of deities, for example, cannot move without the accompaniment of folk music, making musicians indispensable to activities such as worship and deity processions (Thakur 251).

Musicians in the region come from various communities, including Brahmins, Rajputs, Hessi, blacksmiths, and Kolis. Their roles are deeply tied to specific instruments and rituals. For instance:

- **Brahmins and Rajputs:** Often priests, they play the rannsingha, ring bells, and blow conch shells during worship. They also use the dhudchh/dhanaira (incense holder) while singing aartis and mantras (36).
- **Blacksmiths, Odd, and Thavi Communities:** These skilled musicians play the dhol, nagadda, and karnaal, requiring expertise to master.
- **Hessi Community:** Known for their expertise in playing the shehnai, their presence is mandatory during all devkarya (deity-related rituals) and daily prayers (37).

Before any performance, both the instruments and musicians are ritually worshipped and adorned with holy tilaks. This practice underscores the sacred status of music in the region, connecting the divine with human expression (Sharma 23).



Source: Photos are taken by the researcher himself.

Art and Craft: The Bajantri's Dual Legacy in Music and Woodwork

The Bajantri community in the region has been engaged in woodworking and wood crafting for generations. However, as this is not a full-time profession, they often pursue other livelihoods, particularly in Kumarsain. During the field study, Ram¹, a 70-year-old resident of Kumarsain village, shared² insights about the rich folk music and his family's traditional occupation: -

“I belong to the Thavi clan, and my family has been engaged in building wooden houses, agriculture, and animal husbandry for generations. We have also played dhol, Bhaanna and other musical instruments for the village deity while constructing temples for many generations. However, modernity and youth migration to cities for better opportunities have led to a decline in interest in this tradition. Despite this,

1 All names have been changed to protect privacy.

2 During the fieldwork, interviews were conducted in the local language and later translated into English by the researcher.

we are striving to preserve this unique art to safeguard the heritage and prosperity of our region for future generations.”

According to Ram's assertion, in the Kumarsain area of Upper Shimla, the Bajantri community holds a dual identity that is related to both spiritual music traditions and woodworking craftsmanship, each playing a vital role in sustaining their livelihoods.

The Bajantris, traditional keepers of folk music, perform during major festivals and deity processions. However, as their musical role is largely seasonal, they have diversified into carpentry and woodworking, crafts deeply rooted in Kumarsain's heritage.

Kumarsain is renowned for its intricately carved wooden temples, such as those dedicated to Koteswar Mahadev, which highlight the sophisticated craftsmanship of local artisans. Many of these artisans belong to the Bajantri community, linking their dual roles as musicians and woodworkers. Beyond temple construction, the Bajantris also craft and maintain the musical instruments they use, such as the dhol and nagadda, ensuring the quality and authenticity of their performances.

The hereditary nature of music and woodworking within the community reflects traditional caste-based labor divisions in Himachal Pradesh. Historically associated with lower castes, the Bajantris have been integral to spiritual and social life in Kumarsain, constructing temples, participating in deity festivals, and maintaining sacred structures. Despite their indispensable roles, their caste continues to define their social and economic opportunities.

Carpentry provides a stable income during off-seasons, with work ranging from private home construction to crafting household items and repairing temples. Their contributions not only sustain their livelihoods but also preserve the region's architectural and cultural heritage, ensuring that Kumarsain's rich traditions endure for future generations.

Challenges Faced by Traditional Art and Music

- **Decline in Patronage:** With the advent of modernization, younger generations are increasingly disinterested in traditional crafts and music, opting for contemporary professions and government jobs.
- **Economic Struggles:** Folk musicians often lack financial stability; as traditional skills are no longer economically viable in many cases.
- **Globalization and Modernization:** The influx of modern culture has led to a diminishing respect and relevance for indigenous art forms in the area.
- **Migration:** Many practitioners migrate to cities like Shimla and Chandigarh for better opportunities, leaving behind their craft.
- **Lack of Awareness:** The younger population often views traditional arts as outdated and old-fashioned, leading to a loss of continuity.

Government Efforts to Protect Traditional Arts

- **Cultural Festivals:** Events such as the Shimla Summer Festival, Shimla Winter Carnival and other fairs showcase traditional music and crafts.
- **Financial Support:** Subsidies and grants are provided for artisans and musicians to sustain their crafts which are increased from time to time.
- **Documentation and Promotion:** Efforts are underway to document traditional art and music, ensuring they are passed on to future generations.

How the New Generation Deals with It?

- **Blending Tradition with Modernity:** Many young artists are experimenting by blending traditional music with contemporary styles to make it appealing to modern audiences.

- **Social Media Platforms:** Some use platforms like Instagram, Facebook and YouTube to promote their cultural heritage and showcase performances.
- **Limited Interest:** While some youths are actively involved, many still see traditional art as less lucrative compared to other professions.
- **Relearning Initiatives:** Youth from cultural families are showing renewed interest through community-driven programs and mentorship.

Conclusion

The artistic traditions of Upper Shimla, particularly within the Bajantri community, highlight the intersection of caste and craftsmanship. Specializing in folk music and woodworking, the hereditary nature of these professions has preserved their skills over generations, ensuring the continuity of both music and temple woodcarving. The Bajantris' contributions to deity festivals and religious practices underscore their importance in maintaining the region's cultural heritage.

While caste-based labor divisions have preserved these traditions, modernization, urban migration, and declining demand for traditional crafts now threaten their survival. Younger generations are moving away from these occupations, and cheaper alternatives are replacing handcrafted items. To safeguard these art forms, efforts must focus on economic incentives, cultural education, and tourism integration. By adapting to modern realities while preserving its essence, Upper Shimla's artistic legacy can endure for future generations.

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