

Festivals of Uttarakhand, Major List, Traditions, Religious Importance

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The festivals of Uttarakhand reflect the state's agrarian traditions, Himalayan ecology, religious beliefs, folk culture and tribal heritage. Major festivals are closely linked to seasonal changes, agricultural activities, local deities and the cultural traditions of different regions and communities.

List of Major Festivals of Uttarakhand

Major festivals of Uttarakhand are closely associated with its seasonal cycle, agriculture, local deities, tribal traditions and regional history. The important festivals and fairs of the state are given below.

Seasonal and Agricultural Festivals of Uttarakhand

These festivals are linked to the arrival of seasons, agricultural activities, harvest cycles and traditional community practices of the Himalayan region.

Harela

- Harela is an **important agricultural festival**, particularly associated with the **Kumaon region**.
- It is celebrated during the **monsoon season**, especially in the month of **Shravan**, and symbolises greenery, prosperity and a good harvest.
- Five or seven varieties of seeds are sown in small containers of soil. The green shoots that emerge are known as **Harela**. These shoots are traditionally placed on the head or behind the ears as a symbol of prosperity and well-being.
- The festival is also associated with the **worship of Lord Shiva** and **Goddess Parvati**.
- Its agricultural and ecological significance is reflected in contemporary tree-plantation activities associated with the festival.

Phool Dei

- Phool Dei marks the **arrival of spring** and is **celebrated on the first day of the month of Chaitra**.
- Children, particularly young girls known as **Phoolyaris**, visit homes and place seasonal flowers, rice and other auspicious items at the doorsteps.
- The festival is associated with wishes for prosperity, happiness and well-being.

Ghughutia (Kale Kauva)

- Ghughutia, also known as **Kale Kauva**, is a traditional festival of the Kumaon region celebrated around **Makar Sankranti**.
- Children wear garlands made of **Ghughute**, specially prepared deep-fried sweet dough items made from wheat flour and jaggery. The sweetmeats are shaped into forms such as birds, knots and spindles.
- Some of these sweets are offered to crows while children sing traditional songs.
- The festival is associated with the broader celebration of **Uttarayani**, marking the Sun's northward movement.

Igas Bagwal

- Igas Bagwal, also called **Budhi Diwali**, is traditionally celebrated in the Garhwal region on the eleventh day after Diwali.
- According to local tradition, news of Lord Rama's return to Ayodhya reached the remote hill villages late, leading them to celebrate Diwali after the usual date.
- The festival is marked by the spinning and twirling of **Bhailo**, a traditional lighted torch made of dry wood tied with ropes.
- Traditional folk dances such as **Thadya** and **Chauphula** are also performed.
- The festival represents the preservation of regional folk traditions and community memory.

Religious Festivals and Pilgrimages

The religious festivals of Uttarakhand are closely associated with local deities, sacred rivers, pilgrimage traditions and important religious sites of the state.

Nanda Devi Raj Jat

- Nanda Devi Raj Jat is a major high-altitude pilgrimage associated with **Goddess Nanda Devi**.
- It is **held approximately once every twelve years** and covers nearly 280 km through the Himalayan region.
- The pilgrimage traditionally begins from Nauti village in Chamoli district and proceeds towards the high-altitude Himalayan areas.
- A four-horned ram, known as **Chausingha Khadu**, traditionally accompanies the procession.
- The yatra represents the symbolic journey of Goddess Nanda Devi from her parental home to her marital home and is an important expression of Himalayan religious and folk traditions.

Nanda Devi Mela

- Nanda Devi Mela is an annual festival celebrated mainly in the Kumaon region, particularly at places such as Almora and Nainital.
- It is associated with **Nandashtami** and the **worship of Goddess Nanda Devi**.
- The tradition is historically associated with the **Chand rulers of Kumaon**.

Kumbh Mela, Haridwar

- Haridwar is one of the four major sites of the **Kumbh Mela**, along with Prayagraj, Nashik and Ujjain.
- The festival is centred on ritual bathing in the **Ganga**, particularly at Har Ki Pauri.
- It is one of the largest religious congregations in the world and is an important part of India's intangible cultural heritage.

Ganga Dussehra

- Ganga Dussehra **commemorates the descent of the River Ganga to Earth**.
- It is particularly significant in Haridwar and Rishikesh, where devotees participate in ritual bathing and religious ceremonies along the Ganga.

Folk, Tribal and Regional Festivals

These festivals highlight Uttarakhand's folk traditions, tribal culture, agricultural practices and pastoral life.

Kandali Festival

- Kandali Festival is associated with the **Shauka (Rung) community** of the **Chaundas Valley** in Pithoragarh district.
- It is linked to the flowering of the **Kandali plant (Strobilanthes wallichii)**, which blooms approximately once every twelve years.
- The festival reflects the community's relationship with the unique ecological cycle of the Himalayan region.
- Local traditions also associate it with the historical resistance of local women against invading forces.

Hilljatra

- Hilljatra is a traditional **monsoon festival** of the Sor Valley in Pithoragarh.

- It is associated with the agricultural cycle, particularly **paddy transplantation**.
- The festival features masked folk performances and processions.
- **Lakhia Bhoot**, regarded as a divine follower (Gan) of Lord Shiva, is a prominent character in the traditional performance.

Bissu Mela

- Bissu Mela is celebrated by the **Jaunsari tribal community** of the Jaunsar-Bawar region of Dehradun district.
- It is associated with the **local New Year** and is marked by traditional cultural performances, including the Harul dance.

Anduri Utsav

- Anduri Utsav, also known as the **Butter Festival**, is celebrated at Dayara Bugyal in Uttarkashi district.
- It is associated with the traditional pastoral culture of the high-altitude Himalayan meadows.
- The festival reflects the importance of cattle-rearing and alpine pasture-based livelihoods in the region.

Important Fairs and Cultural Festivals of Uttarakhand

Uttarakhand's fairs and cultural festivals reflect its regional history, religious traditions, folk practices and historical trade networks. Several of these events also preserve the memory of important social movements and traditional cultural practices.

Uttarayani Mela, Bageshwar

- The Uttarayani Mela is held at Bageshwar, **near the confluence of the Saryu and Gomti rivers**, during Makar Sankranti.
- It is an important religious, cultural and traditional trade fair of the Kumaon region.
- The fair has historical significance because the **1921 Coolie-Begar Movement** against forced labour gained decisive momentum at Bageshwar.

Devidhura Bagwal Mela

- Devidhura Bagwal Mela is **held at the Varahi Devi Temple** in Devidhura, Champawat district, on the occasion of **Raksha Bandhan**.
- The traditional Bagwal involved a ritual contest between four traditional groups or **Khams**, with participants using wooden shields for protection.
- The ritual is associated with the traditional memory of practices involving the sacrifice of human life and the subsequent substitution of such practices.
- In recent years, measures have been encouraged to reduce injuries, including the use of flowers and fruits in place of stones in some forms of the ritual.

Syalde-Bikhauti Mela

- Syalde-Bikhauti Mela is an **important annual fair** held at Dwarahat in Almora district around Vishuvat Sankranti (Vaisakhi).
- The celebrations are associated with places including **Vimandeshwar Temple and the Dwarahat market**.
- A distinctive ritual associated with the fair is **Oda Bhetna**, involving the symbolic striking of a stone with sticks.

Jauljibi Mela

- Jauljibi Mela is held annually in Pithoragarh district at the confluence of the **Kali and Gori rivers**.
- It has historically served as a centre of trade and cultural exchange among communities from India, Nepal and the trans-Himalayan region.
- The fair is particularly associated with the **Shauka (Bhotiya) community** and reflects the historical importance of trans-Himalayan trade routes.

Festivals of Uttarakhand Significance

The festivals of Uttarakhand are important because they preserve the state’s distinct cultural traditions while reflecting its close relationship with agriculture, ecology, tribal communities and regional history.

- **Agricultural significance:** Harela, Phool Dei and Hilljatra are closely linked to seasonal changes, sowing, paddy transplantation and the agricultural cycle.
- **Ecological significance:** Harela reflects the importance of greenery and plantation, while the Kandali Festival is linked to the unique 12-year flowering cycle of Strobilanthes wallichii.
- **Cultural significance:** Festivals such as Ghughutia, Igas Bagwal and Hilljatra preserve traditional songs, dances, rituals and folk performances.
- **Tribal significance:** Kandali, Bissu Mela and Jauljibi Mela preserve the cultural traditions and historical identity of communities such as the Shauka and Jaunsari tribes.
- **Religious significance:** Nanda Devi Raj Jat, Kumbh Mela and Ganga Dussehra highlight Uttarakhand’s importance as a major centre of pilgrimage and religious traditions.
- **Historical significance:** The Uttarayani Mela at Bageshwar is associated with the 1921 Coolie-Begar Movement, while fairs such as Syalde-Bikhauti preserve regional historical traditions.
- **Economic significance:** Fairs such as Jauljibi Mela historically promoted trade and cultural exchange across the India-Nepal-trans-Himalayan region, while major festivals also support local tourism and livelihoods.

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