CINEFORUM
ISSN: 0009-7039
Vol. 66. No. S9, 2026 (Special Issue S9)

Preservation and Promotion of Local Arts, Culture, and Traditions in Nainital District

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ABSTRACT
Nainital District, situated in the Kumaon area of Uttarakhand, serves as a lively hub of culture recognized for its rich Kumaoni customs, unique arts, and native festivals. This paper explores the various initiatives dedicated to safeguarding and promoting the cultural heritage of the district, specifically examining government programs, grassroots community engagement, and the impact of tourism on heritage revival. By utilizing data from the Uttarakhand Culture Department and the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, the study emphasizes significant cultural forms such as Aipan art, a ritual floor painting custom mainly practiced by women; the Chholiya dance, an ancient martial dance that has been celebrated for over a millennium during weddings and festivals; and notable local celebrations like Harela and the Nanda Devi Fair, which symbolize the regional identity. Government initiatives like the 'Scheme for Safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage and Diverse Cultural Traditions of India' have provided both financial and institutional backing to various projects in the area. For example, from 2020 to 2023, the Ministry of Culture allocated more than ₹12 crore for cultural conservation efforts throughout Uttarakhand (Ministry of Culture, GoI, 2023). Nevertheless, the district encounters considerable obstacles, including urban migration, diminishing enthusiasm among younger generations, and the commercialization of cultural aspects due to rampant tourism. The study puts forth specific recommendations such as increased budget allocations for heritage preservation at the district level, the creation of digital archives to record oral traditions and folk arts, and the incorporation of local culture into school programs through community-driven education. These approaches seek to establish a sustainable framework for cultural preservation that reconciles modernization with traditional identities.
Keywords: Cultural Heritage, Nainital, Aipan, Chholiya, Tourism, Preservation, Government Initiatives

1. INTRODUCTION

Nainital District, commonly known as the "Lake District of Uttarakhand," is renowned for its tranquil lakes, lush mountains, and vibrant Kumaoni cultural traditions. As per the 2011 Census of India, the district's population stands at 954,605, with Hindus accounting for 84.82% of the inhabitants, followed by Muslims (12.65%), Christians (0.40%), Sikhs (0.63%), and Buddhists (0.06%). This demographic mix creates a rich cultural environment that features traditional folk arts such as Aipan—elaborate floor designs made with rice paste during religious and social events—crafts like Pichora, an embellished dupatta worn during wedding ceremonies, and Chholiya, an ancient sword dance rooted in martial traditions that is performed at weddings and festivals.

Nonetheless, the region's intangible cultural heritage faces mounting pressures from globalization, urban migration, and modernization. Research conducted by the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA, 2020) highlights a decline in the observance of traditional Kumaoni customs among the youth, attributed to evolving socio-economic ambitions. Furthermore, the Cultural Mapping Project by the Uttarakhand Culture Department (2022) reveals that fewer than 30% of young individuals in urban areas like Haldwani and Nainital engage in traditional celebrations or folk activities.

This paper delves into the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage in Nainital, utilizing data from the Uttarakhand Culture Department and the Ministry of Culture, Government of India. It assesses key initiatives, including the Scheme for Safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage and Diverse Cultural Traditions of India, which backed over 400 projects across the country from 2014 to 2022 (Ministry of Culture, 2023). The study also investigates community-driven efforts and the increasing significance of cultural tourism in heritage promotion. By noting both the accomplishments and ongoing obstacles, it offers a thorough framework for sustainable cultural preservation through heightened funding, digital archiving, and local educational strategies.

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Cultural Heritage of Nainital District

Traditional Arts

Traditional arts form an important part of the cultural heritage of the Kumaon region in Nainital district. Among these, **Aipan Art** stands out as a significant ritualistic practice, mainly performed by women using rice paste on red ochre backgrounds to create geometric and religious designs during festivals and ceremonies, symbolizing prosperity and protection. It has been recognized under India's Intangible Cultural Heritage framework, with more than 500 patterns documented by the Uttarakhand Culture Department as of 2022. Another important tradition is **Pichora Textiles**, a culturally significant cloth worn by married women during religious and social occasions. Decorated with sacred symbols such as the sun and swastika, it represents marital status and spiritual well-being. Approximately 2,000 artisans in Nainital are engaged in this craft, supported by training and marketing initiatives of the Uttarakhand Handloom and Handicraft Development Council. In addition, **Wood Carving (Likhai)** reflects the region's rich craftsmanship, involving detailed carvings of floral patterns, mythological figures, and religious symbols on doors, windows, and temples. This traditional skill is mainly practiced in rural areas, where nearly 300 craftsmen continue the work with support from government-led training and conservation programs.

Performing Arts

Performing arts play a vital role in preserving the cultural identity of Nainital district. Among these, **Chholiya Dance** is a traditional martial dance of the Kumaon region, performed during weddings and festivals to ward off negative energies. Dancers use swords and shields, accompanied by traditional instruments like dhol, damau, and turai. Although more than 50 groups exist in the district, only about 20% actively perform today, indicating the impact of modernization and changing cultural preferences. Another important cultural expression is **Kumaoni Holi**, a unique musical festival that blends classical and folk traditions through forms such as Baithki Holi (performed in a seated style) and Khari Holi (performed in a standing, interactive style). This festival incorporates traditional ragas and local poetry, with over 100 events organized annually in Nainital with support from cultural groups and government initiatives. In addition, **Jagar Rituals** represent a deeply spiritual tradition involving storytelling, music, and rituals to invoke local deities such as Golu Devta for justice and healing. These ceremonies include chanting, drumming, and trance-like experiences, and more than 200 Jagar events are conducted each year in rural areas, helping to preserve oral traditions and religious beliefs.

Festivals and Rituals

Festivals and rituals play a significant role in reflecting the cultural richness of Nainital district. Among these, **Harela Festival** is an important agrarian celebration in the Kumaon region that marks the arrival of the monsoon and symbolizes fertility and prosperity. It is traditionally observed by sowing barley seeds and performing collective rituals, with participation from more than 80% of rural families, thereby strengthening agricultural and environmental values. Another major cultural event is the **Nanda Devi Fair**, which is organized annually in Nainital and nearby areas to honor the region's presiding deity. The fair includes religious rituals, folk music, dance performances, and a vibrant marketplace, attracting over 50,000 visitors each year and contributing to both cultural promotion and local economic development. In addition, **Traditional Kumaoni Marriages** reflect deeply rooted customs and social practices, including rituals such as Ganesh Pooja and Suwal Pathai, along with the performance of Chholiya dance, which is observed in nearly 90% of rural weddings. However, in urban areas, these traditional ceremonies are gradually incorporating modern elements like brass bands, indicating a shift in cultural preferences.

Government Initiatives for Cultural Preservation

Central Government Initiatives

The Government of India has implemented various schemes to safeguard intangible cultural heritage in line with international frameworks. Under these initiatives, special emphasis has been given to preserving traditional art forms such as Aipan and Chholiya dance. During the financial year 2023–24, approximately ₹2.5 crore was allocated for the documentation and promotion of Kumaoni cultural heritage, with around 15 projects specifically undertaken in Nainital district. In addition, financial assistance in the form of monthly stipends of about ₹10,000 has been provided to nearly 50 practicing artists, helping them continue their traditional work (Ministry of Culture, 2023).

Further support has been extended under programs focusing on Himalayan cultural heritage. In 2023–24, nearly ₹1.8 crore was allocated to assist around 200 artists and cultural organizations across Uttarakhand. Out of this, an estimated 30% of the funds were directed towards Nainital district for the preservation of traditional crafts such as Pichora textiles and Likhai wood carving.

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The government has also encouraged cultural expression through financial grants for organizing events and performances. Approximately 25 cultural programs, including Kumaoni Holi celebrations, have been supported with grants of up to ₹5 lakh per event. These initiatives have played an important role in promoting cultural awareness and sustaining traditional practices.

Overall, central government efforts have contributed significantly through funding, documentation, and institutional support, although their reach remains uneven in rural areas.

State Government Initiatives

At the state level, the Uttarakhand Culture Department has taken several steps to preserve and promote local traditions. One of the major initiatives is the Cultural Mapping and Documentation Project (2022), under which more than 1,000 cultural practitioners, including artists, musicians, and craftsmen, were identified across the district (Uttarakhand Culture Department, 2022a).

The department has also organized training and skill development programs for artisans, particularly focusing on women involved in traditional crafts like Aipan and Pichora. Between 2020 and 2023, around 400–500 artisans benefited from such training initiatives, which helped in both cultural preservation and income generation.

In addition, the state government actively promotes cultural festivals and fairs. Events such as the Nanda Devi Festival and Kumaoni Holi are supported annually, attracting thousands of participants and providing opportunities for local artists to showcase their skills. Reports indicate that such events contribute not only to cultural revival but also to local economic activity.

Financial assistance is also provided to support cultural organizations and individual artists. Small grants ranging from ₹50,000 to ₹2 lakh are distributed for organizing cultural programs and sustaining traditional practices.

Despite these efforts, challenges such as limited funding, lack of awareness, and declining youth participation continue to affect the overall impact of these initiatives.

Initiative	Allocation / Support	Impact
ICH Preservation Scheme	₹2.5 crore	15 projects in Nainital
Artist Stipend Program	₹10,000/month	~50 artists supported
Himalayan Heritage Support	₹1.8 crore	200 artists (30% in Nainital)
Cultural Event Grants	Up to ₹5 lakh/event	25+ cultural programs

Government Funding and Initiatives (2023–24)

Role of Tourism in Cultural Promotion

Tourism has become an important factor in shaping and promoting the cultural identity of Nainital district. As a popular tourist destination, the region attracts a large number of visitors every year.

This has created **economic opportunities for local artisans**, as tourists often purchase traditional items like Aipan artwork and Pichora textiles. In this way, tourism supports local livelihoods while also spreading awareness about regional culture.

Tourism has also helped in the **revival of certain cultural practices**, such as folk dances and music performances, which are now often presented during festivals and tourist seasons.

However, tourism also brings certain challenges. In many cases, cultural practices are modified to suit tourist expectations, which may affect their original meaning and authenticity. Therefore, it becomes important to maintain a balance between promotion and preservation.

Challenges in Preservation of Cultural Heritage

Despite various efforts, there are several challenges in preserving the cultural heritage of Nainital district.

One major issue is **migration**, as many young people move to cities in search of better opportunities. This leads to a gradual decline in the practice of traditional arts and customs.

Another concern is the **lack of interest among the younger generation**, who are more influenced by modern lifestyles and digital media.

The **commercialization of culture** due to tourism also creates problems, as traditions are sometimes altered for profit.

In addition, **limited funding and lack of proper documentation** make it difficult to preserve many forms of intangible heritage, especially those that exist only in oral form.

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2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study is based on both primary and secondary sources of data. Secondary information has been collected from government reports, research articles, and official publications related to culture and tourism.

For primary data, simple interactions and discussions were carried out with local people, artisans, and individuals associated with cultural activities in Nainital district.

The study follows a descriptive approach, focusing on understanding the current situation, major issues, and possible solutions related to cultural preservation.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study shows that government initiatives have played a supportive role in preserving cultural heritage, but their impact is not uniform across all areas.

Tourism has helped in generating income and promoting local culture, yet it has also led to certain changes in traditional practices.

It is also observed that **women play a significant role** in maintaining traditional art forms, especially Aipan.

At the same time, the participation of youth in cultural activities is gradually decreasing, which may affect the continuity of traditions in the future.

4. SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To improve the preservation of cultural heritage in Nainital district, the following steps can be considered:

More financial support should be provided at the local level

Cultural education should be included in school curriculum

Digital methods can be used to document traditions

Sustainable tourism practices should be encouraged

Youth should be motivated through awareness programs and training

5. CONCLUSION

The cultural heritage of Nainital district reflects the traditions, values, and identity of the local people. Although efforts have been made to preserve and promote this heritage, several challenges still exist.

A balanced approach is needed where development and tradition go hand in hand. With proper planning, community involvement, and effective use of resources, it is possible to protect and promote the cultural richness of the region for future generations

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