

Caste, Culture, and Ritual Hierarchies: A Historical Study of Marginalised Communities in the Religious Landscape of Rawain Valley in Uttarkashi District of Uttarakhand

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Abstract: This paper explores the historical entanglements of caste, culture, and ritual labour among marginalised communities particularly Dalits in the religious and cultural landscape of the Rawain Valley in Uttarkashi, Uttarakhand. Drawing upon archival records, oral narratives, and ethnographic fieldwork, the study investigates how Dalit communities, though socially subordinated, have played indispensable roles in regional ritualistic traditions. These roles include functioning as drummers (Dholi), spirit mediums (Bhakta), oracles (Guniya), and shrine custodians in festivals and practices associated with folk deities such as *Mahasu Devta*, *Someshwar*, *Raja Ragunath*, *Pokhu*, *Kapil Muni*, *Kaliya-Naag*, *Bhadrakali Kaul Kedari*, *Vishasan*, *Lov* and *Kush* and *Karna*. These ritual contributions, while central to the religious economy, coexist with caste-based exclusions, symbolic stigmas, and lack of recognition within dominant social hierarchies. Through a historical lens, the paper traces the evolution of caste-based ritual stratification and its persistence within sacred domains. Simultaneously, it examines emerging narratives of self-assertion, identity transformation, and cultural pride among Dalit practitioners who are now reclaiming their roles as heritage bearers and ritual specialists.

The present study contributes to broader discourses on ritual power, subaltern religiosity, and the negotiation of caste within Himalayan religious systems. By foregrounding the voices and embodied practices of marginalised actors, it reveals the complex dynamics of ritual inclusion and socio-religious marginalisation in the Rawain Valley, offering critical insights into power, belief, and cultural resistance in the mid-Central Himalayan region of India.

Keywords: Dalit Ritual Specialists, Caste and Religion, Rawain Valley, Ritual Hierarchies, Subaltern Sacred Practices.

Introduction

The Rawain Valley, located in the upper reaches of Uttarkashi district in Uttarakhand, represents one of the culturally rich yet academically underexplored regions in the Central Himalayas. Marked by its rugged terrain, dispersed villages, and sacred landscapes, Rawain is a living archive of indigenous religious traditions, folk rituals, and community-based worship systems. The cultural and religious life of the valley revolves around the veneration of local deities such as Mahasu Devta, Someshwar, Bhadrakali, Pokhu Devta, Kaliya Naag, Kapil Muni, Raja Raghunath, and other local divine beings. These deities are enshrined in both formal temples and temporary sacred sites and are frequently invoked through festivals, fairs (*melas*), and ritual processions (*dev-doli yatra*), which structure the ritual calendar of the valley. While much attention has been paid to the priestly castes—particularly Brahmins and Rajputs—in the administration and narrative of these religious traditions, the indispensable role of marginalized communities in carrying out rituals, especially Dalits, have remained largely neglected in scholarly discourses. These communities, historically classified under stigmatised occupational groups, have long served as ritual functionaries in the religious and spiritual life of Rawain. Their tasks range from drumming and trance mediation to spiritual healing, shrine maintenance, and even oral transmission of mythological lore. These roles, far from being peripheral, are essential to the embodiment and performance of the sacred in Himalayan religiosity.

Despite their central ritual roles, Dalit communities have been relegated to the lower rungs of social and symbolic hierarchies. Their participation is structured through caste-based norms of exclusion, purity-pollution dichotomies, and spatial marginalisation. For instance, while drummers are essential for initiating deity possession rituals or conducting dev-doli processions, they are simultaneously denied entry into the inner sanctum of temples and barred from sharing communal spaces during religious feasts. This paradox—being ritually central yet socially marginal—reflects the deep entanglement of caste and ritual labour in Himalayan society (Sax, 2009; Berreman, 1972).

The present study is grounded in this paradox. It seeks to unpack the historical and ethnographic dimensions of caste, culture, and ritual hierarchy by focusing on the lived experiences and spiritual labour of Dalit communities in the Rawain Valley. Drawing on archival records, oral histories, and ethnographic fieldwork, this research explores how these marginalised actors sustain sacred traditions and negotiate their ritual authority amidst systemic exclusions. It also examines how ritual performance becomes a site of both subjugation and resistance, where cultural labour is reconfigured into a form of self-assertion and spiritual legitimacy. This paper further engages with emerging narratives of Dalit identity transformation, cultural pride, and contestation of traditional hierarchies through heritage claims. These shifts are especially visible in younger generations who are reinterpreting their ancestral roles not merely as servitude but as carriers of cultural capital and custodians of community heritage (Kumar, 2020). In doing so, the research contributes to broader discourses on subaltern religiosity, ritual politics, and caste negotiation within South Asian highland contexts. By foregrounding the voices, practices, and epistemologies of marginalised ritual actors, this study provides a critical intervention in Himalayan studies. It challenges mainstream narratives of priesthood, sanctity, and spiritual authority, urging a re-evaluation of who constitutes religious legitimacy in the sacred geographies of the Central Himalayas.

Historical Origin of Dalit Communities in Rawain Valley

The historical presence of Dalit communities in the Rawain Valley of Uttarkashi is deeply intertwined with the region's socio-economic and religious transformations from the early medieval period onwards. The valley, once part of various shifting principalities such as the *Bhotiya-Thulghars*, and later incorporated into the larger Garhwal kingdom, witnessed the rise of caste-structured village economies, where labour was both ritualised and stratified (Negi, 2002). Dalit communities—particularly the *Dom*, *Badi*, *Lohar*, and *Chamar*—were not only occupational groups but integral to the functioning of this regional order. Historical and oral traditions suggest that many of these groups were brought or migrated into the valley to meet the artisanal, infrastructural, and ritual demands of expanding feudal systems and temple complexes. The *Lohars* (blacksmiths) worked on agricultural tools and weapons; *Doms* performed death-related services and drumming during rituals; *Chamars* worked on leather goods but were also associated with animal sacrifices and post-mortem rituals; and *Badis* acted as wandering performers, singers, or drummers attached to temple deities and their households (Pant, 2008; Barthwal, 2015). These communities were spatially organised on the margins of caste-homogenous villages—a characteristic feature of Himalayan caste settlements. The peripheral hamlet pattern (locally called *Seri* or *Talla/Tok*) demarcated social geography, reproducing caste segregation even within micro-topographies. While upper castes like Brahmins and Rajputs occupied the central or upper village areas (*Math*, *Gaon*), Dalits were relegated to the edges. This spatial layout symbolised and enacted social exclusion, even though the labour of Dalits was essential for sustaining ritual life and agricultural cycles.

Many Dalit communities in Rawain trace their genealogical memory to migratory movements from western and lower Garhwal, Himachal Pradesh, and parts of the Doon Valley. These migrations were often prompted by royal grants (jagirs), temple patronage, or economic necessity. The Mahasu Devta temples, for instance, employed entire lineages of *Dholis* and *Bhaktas* whose roles were hereditary and bound by *jati-nishtha* (caste duty), thereby sacralising social stratification (Sax, 2009). Moreover, the temple economy of Rawain, centred around local deities like Someshwar, Karna, Kapil Muni, Kaliya Naag, and Bhadrakali, necessitated a workforce adept in drumming, ritual choreography, spirit possession, and festival organisation. These roles were institutionally assigned to Dalits, not out of reverence, but due to the ritual division of labour that confined spiritual expression along caste lines. Ironically, despite their vital religious services, Dalit groups were systematically denied priestly status, sacred thread initiation (*upanayana*), and scriptural education, all of which were reserved for the so-called twice-born castes.

This layered history of ritual inclusion and social exclusion continues to shape Dalit identities in the Rawain Valley. While they were indispensable to the performance of sacred tradition, their ritual roles remained subordinated, devoid of symbolic power or institutional recognition. Oral histories often reflect this duality—honour in service to the deity and humiliation in dealing with dominant castes.

Importantly, the ritual labour of Dalits was also historically transmitted through oral contracts and caste pacts (*barla*), which governed inter-caste obligations. These systems ensured that drummers, mediums, and artisans were tied to temple circuits, further entrenching caste-based ritual economies. Such mechanisms helped local elites consolidate religious authority while delegating embodied sacred roles to the marginalised.

Review of Literature

The study of caste, ritual, and religious practices in the Himalayan regions has steadily gained attention over the past few decades. However, much of this literature has disproportionately focused on dominant castes and elite religious institutions, leaving the contributions of marginalised communities—especially Dalits—largely unexamined. In the context of the Rawain Valley in Uttarkashi, this oversight is particularly glaring, given the central ritual roles that Dalit communities perform in sustaining regional religious life. Gerald D. Berreman's pioneering work, *Hindus of the Himalayas* (1972), remains foundational in understanding caste hierarchies in Pahari society. Berreman emphasised the pervasiveness of caste ideology in Himalayan village life, despite the absence of large-scale urban centres or Brahmanical orthodoxy. He demonstrated how caste relations are maintained through ritualised behaviour, spatial segregation, and hereditary occupation—even in remote mountain areas. However, while Berreman offered a structural view of caste, he did not delve deeply into the lived religious experiences of Dalit communities or their spiritual contributions.

William Sax (2009) provides one of the most nuanced studies of ritual possession, religious healing, and justice in his book *God of Justice: Ritual Healing and Social Justice in the Central Himalayas*. Sax investigates how local deities, such as Mahasu Devta, administer justice through oracular possession rituals, often involving lower-caste mediums and drummers. He notes the paradox of Dalits being ritually indispensable yet socially ostracised. However, his analysis, though rich in ethnographic detail, centres primarily on divine authority and less on the self-perception, resistance, or ritual agency of the marginalised functionaries themselves. R.K. Sharma (2011), in his work on the sacred geography of Mahasu Devta, explores the diffusion of temple networks and the historical-political role of deity cults in the Jaunsar-Bawar and Uttarkashi regions. While he provides detailed accounts of temple layouts, priestly hierarchies, and seasonal festivals, the role of marginalised ritual actors like *dholis*, *bhaktas*, and *bajgis* is only cursorily mentioned. Sharma's work remains focused on institutional religion rather than subaltern religiosity. The broader field of Himalayan religious ethnography includes contributions by scholars such as Ann Grodzins Gold and Kirin Narayan, who have explored gendered spirituality, possession, and oral traditions in North India, though not specifically in Rawain. The role of oral narrative traditions maintained by Dalit communities in shaping mythologies, festivals, and local cosmologies remains an underexplored domain. In recent years, there has been a growing body of literature engaging with Dalit ritual assertion and caste contestations in religious contexts, particularly in Central India and South India (Guru, 2009; Dirks, 2001), but comparable studies for Himalayan Dalits remain sparse. This gap is especially significant considering in regions like Rawain, the ritual system cannot function without the embodied labour and spiritual presence of Dalits—whether as spirit mediums, musicians, shrine custodians, or ritual artisans.

The ethnographic documentation of folk religion in Uttarkashi exists mostly in fragmentary works by local historians, gazetteers, or cultural surveys (Negi, 2002; Barthwal, 2015), which often reproduce upper-caste narratives and lack critical engagement with issues of caste and power. The systemic contributions of Dalits in shaping ritual traditions, maintaining religious continuity, and negotiating cultural identity are rarely acknowledged.

The present review highlights a significant research gap in current scholarship - the absence of focused, sustained academic inquiry into the ritual, cultural, and spiritual contributions of Dalit communities in Rawain Valley. While the broader themes of caste and religiosity have been addressed, the specific dynamics of ritual hierarchy and cultural labour among marginalised actors remain largely undocumented. This study thus seeks to contribute to this growing but still insufficiently developed field by offering a historical-ethnographic account rooted in subaltern perspectives.

Research Gap

Despite a growing body of scholarship on Himalayan religiosity, temple economies, and caste dynamics, significant gaps remain in understanding of how marginalised communities particularly Dalits experience, enact, and negotiate their roles within sacred landscapes. Most existing studies tend to focus on the institutional structures of temple worship, the authority of Brahmin priests, and the symbolic role of royal patronage, often overlooking the embodied ritual labour and oral religious traditions sustained by subaltern groups (Sax, 2009; Berreman, 1972). The central paradox within this field lies in the fact that Dalit communities, while often relegated to the bottom of social hierarchies, are indispensable to the religious and cultural functioning of Himalayan societies. Yet their contributions remain under-theorised and frequently treated as functional rather than spiritual or epistemic. For example, while dholis (drummers) and bhaktas (spirit mediums) are essential in invoking the deity's presence, maintaining rhythm during processions, and mediating divine communication, they are rarely studied as cultural agents with ritual authority, cosmological knowledge, or ancestral lineages of sacred labour (Barthwal, 2015; Sharma, 2011).

The available literature also lacks ethnographic attention to oral histories, embodied performance, and local epistemologies of Dalit communities in Rawain Valley. These actors often preserve unwritten genealogies of local deities, mythic cycles, and territorial cosmologies, which are passed down intergenerationally through musical compositions, trance states, and festival narratives. Yet their role as custodians of intangible religious heritage remains marginal in scholarly analysis (Negi, 2002; Kumar, 2020). Moreover, subaltern religiosity is frequently treated in binary terms—either as resistance to Brahmanical domination or as submission to caste norms—without considering the nuanced ways in which Dalit ritual actors both inhabit and contest these structures simultaneously. Recent Dalit assertions across India have pushed for the re-interpretation of spiritual labour as cultural heritage rather than social pollution (Guru, 2009; Teltumbde, 2017), yet such discourse is scarcely applied to Himalayan contexts.

Additionally, gendered dimensions of Dalit ritual labour remain virtually unexplored. Female mediums and drummers—though fewer—are present in various Himalayan regions and may play critical roles in possession rituals and healing practices, yet their narratives are often absent from both folklore archives and academic writing. Thus, there is a significant epistemological and representational gap in the documentation and theorisation of Dalit ritual contributions in the Central Himalayas. Specifically, the Rawain Valley, with its rich but understudied ritual ecosystem, offers a unique site for interrogating how caste, culture, and spiritual labour intersect in everyday life. By centring the voices, practices, and oral histories of marginalised communities, this study seeks to fill the critical void in Himalayan religious ethnography and contribute to broader debates in Dalit studies, ritual theory, and subaltern historiography

Research Methodology

This study adopts a multi-method qualitative research design grounded in ethnographic, historical, and interpretive methodologies. The approach is informed by the need to foreground the lived experiences, embodied practices, and oral epistemologies of marginalised Dalit communities in the Rawain Valley, Uttarkashi. The complex interplay between caste, ritual, and cultural identity necessitates a methodological framework that is both context-sensitive and reflexive, enabling the research to engage with both archival traces and present-day ritual performances.

Archival Research

The archival component of this study involved a systematic examination of historical documents, including:

- Colonial-era district gazetteers and administrative reports from the British Raj, which offer early ethnographic descriptions of caste roles, religious institutions, and socio-economic hierarchies in Garhwal (Atkinson, 1884).
- Temple records and ritual rosters, where available, were consulted to understand the hereditary roles of Dalit functionaries in religious festivals and rituals.
- Ethnographic surveys and reports by post-independence cultural institutions such as the Anthropological Survey of India and Uttarakhand State Archives were referenced to contextualize shifts in caste participation and ritual performance.

These materials helped trace the historical institutionalization of caste-based ritual labour and documented how Dalit communities were formally and informally integrated into the religious apparatus of the region.

Oral Narratives and Semi-Structured Interviews

Given the oral nature of Himalayan religious culture, the study relied extensively on oral history methods. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with:

- Dalit ritual practitioners (e.g., drummers, mediums, shrine caretakers),
- Elders and village historians possessing knowledge of genealogies, mythologies, and ritual conventions,
- Local cultural scholars and priests, who provided comparative insights into caste-based roles and ritual boundaries.

Narratives were collected in Garhwali and Hindi, transcribed, and translated with attention to cultural metaphors, caste-coded language, and local idioms. The aim was to respect the epistemological validity of oral testimony as historical data (Narayan, 1993; Vansina, 1985).

Participant Observation

Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in select villages and religious sites across the Rawain Valley, particularly during the region's major religious events, including:

- Mahasu Devta Mela (Hanol and Jakhol regions),
- Someshwar Mela,

- Pokhu Naag and Bhadrakali Dev-Doli Yatras,
- Jagar and Ranbhoot rituals.

Participation included observing ritual preparations, deity possession, drumming sequences, trance behaviour, oracular speech, and the hierarchical seating and food distribution during feasts. Attention was also paid to ritual exclusions, such as spatial boundaries, food taboos, and caste segregation during festivals (Sax, 2009). The researcher engaged in non-intrusive observation, sometimes participating as a respectful audience and at other times involved in informal discussions with participants to elicit deeper understanding.

Visual Ethnography

To complement the textual and oral data, a visual ethnographic strategy was employed. This included:

- Photographic documentation of shrine architecture, deity idols, ritual attire, musical instruments (e.g., dhol, damau),
- Video recordings of selected performances such as the dev-doli procession, trance rituals, and temple dances,
- Sketches and maps of ritual geographies, including sacred routes, temple locations, and caste-specific habitation zones.

Visual materials served as tools for both analysis and participant validation. When shown to community members, images and videos often elicited additional narratives, corrections, or deeper contextualization, allowing for a collaborative research process (Pink, 2007).

Concept of the Dalit in Rawain Valley Society

In the socio-cultural context of the Rawain Valley, the term ‘Dalit’ does not simply denote a category of caste subalternity but is deeply embedded in ritual economies, occupational traditions, and spiritual labour. Dalit identity in this region is closely intertwined with hereditary roles and responsibilities tied to local religious institutions and dominant caste households. The most prominent identifiers of Dalit individuals are their Jaati-linked occupations, which continue to structure social relations and ritual hierarchies.

Common caste groups classified under the Dalit category in the Rawain Valley include:

- Dholis: Hereditary drummers and ritual musicians essential for initiating deity movements and spirit possession.
- Bajgis or Badis: Bards, singers, and keepers of genealogies and oral epics associated with local deities.
- Lohars: Blacksmiths responsible for crafting ritual tools, musical instruments, and temple infrastructure.
- Chamars: Traditionally associated with leatherwork but also perform funeral-related rites and sacrificial preparations.
- Doms or Doms: Marginal ritual performers engaged in death rites and musical traditions, often regarded with ambivalence.

These caste-based identities were historically framed through varna-derived ritual hierarchies, where such occupations were considered ascribed and symbolically polluting, even as they were ritually indispensable (Berreman, 1972). The Manu-centric ideology of purity and pollution governed their access to sacred spaces, modes of touch, food sharing, and social mobility. In this framework, the Dalit not only worked on the margins of society but was structurally located outside the field of spiritual legitimacy, despite being its practitioner.

However, the Dalit experience in Rawain is not entirely one of passive subjugation. Dalit communities possess rich repositories of oral cosmologies, ritual codes, and spiritual knowledge. These are transmitted intergenerationally and often kept alive in performative contexts such as *Jagar* (spirit invocation through song), *Ranbhoot* (appeasement of ancestral spirits), and *Dev-Doli Yatras*. Such cultural performances embody a counter-archive of divine memory and ritual agency (Sax, 2009; Barthwal, 2015).

Over the last few decades, there has been a discernible transformation in the self-perception and public assertion of Dalit identity in the Rawain Valley. Influenced by both national Dalit movements and local political developments in Uttarakhand, younger generations are increasingly rearticulating their traditional roles—not as subservient occupations but as heritage-based expertise and ritual custodianship. This shift is evident in the ways Dalit drummers describe themselves as “devta ke sevak” (servants of the gods) who are not merely ritual functionaries but spiritually chosen agents. Some communities now insist on being called *Guniya* (oracle) or *pandit Bajgi* to assert ritual equality (Kumar, 2020).

Moreover, there is a growing refusal to internalise stigma. For instance, while older Dalit musicians were expected to remain silent during temple discourse or seated at a physical distance, younger participants are demanding inclusion in ritual decision-making, equal access to temple spaces, and public acknowledgment of their sacred roles during melas and dev-doli festivals. In some villages, they have begun to organise Dalit-led deities and shrines, fostering parallel spiritual economies that resist the casteist architecture of mainstream religious institutions (Guru, 2009).

Importantly, this transformation in Dalit identity in Rawain is not uniform. Geographical isolation, economic precarity, and local caste-panchayats still wield considerable power in enforcing traditional hierarchies. But the rise of vernacular modernity, educational access, and local activism has created pockets of negotiation where ritual identity is being re-signified.

In conclusion, the concept of the Dalit in Rawain Valley is best understood not merely as a social label but as a dynamic interplay of historical marginalisation and ritual agency. Dalits in this region are not only labourers of the sacred but also carriers of cosmological memory and agents of cultural continuity. The evolving nature of their identity marks a critical site of contestation and transformation in the Himalayan religious landscape.

Role in Ritual Practices, Tradition, Art and Craft, and Architecture

In the religious and cultural landscape of Rawain Valley, the Dalit communities are not merely passive recipients of tradition but active creators, performers, and preservers of sacred knowledge and material culture. Their roles span a wide range of ritual, artistic, and architectural domains, which are essential to the functioning of the region’s religious ecology. Despite being structurally

subordinated within the caste hierarchy, Dalit communities have historically served as the embodied custodians of sacred performance and craftsmanship.

Ritual Performance and Musical Traditions

At the heart of most Himalayan religious ceremonies is the Dhol-Damau ensemble, an integral component of deity processions (*Dev-Doli Yatra*), spirit possession (*bhava*), healing rituals (*Jagar*), and death rites. The Dalit Dholis (Drummers) are believed to possess ritual authority through rhythm, as their beats are said to summon and guide the deity's presence. The music is not simply accompaniment but a form of invocation, triggering trance states, divine possession, or community catharsis (Sax, 2009; Alter, 2008).

Each rhythm pattern (*Thaath*) carries specific ritual meaning some invite the deity to descend into a medium, others signal its departure. These rhythms are transmitted orally, often without written notation, from father to son or guru to disciple, reinforcing hereditary ritual bonds. Dholis are also responsible for performing at Sanskars (life-cycle rituals), particularly marriage, birth, and death, where music functions as both a social and sacred act.

Bhakti Possession and Spirit Mediation

Dalit Bhaktas and Guniya (Mediums or Oracles) play a crucial role in deity possession rituals, especially during festivals like Mahasu Devta Mela and Someshwar Fair. These practitioners serve as intermediaries between deity and devotee, offering counsel, healing, or justice. Their trances are triggered by drumming, incense, or chanting, after which the deity “descends” (*Avahan*) into the body of the medium. Despite the critical importance of this role, guniya are often denied the ritual status of a Brahmin priest, exposing the caste contradictions within divine mediation (Barthwal, 2015; Sax, 2009). In some villages, Dalit mediums are the sole ritual specialists for certain deities—particularly ancestral or non-sanskritised folk gods indicating the resilience of non-Brahmanical spiritual lineages in Rawain.

Oral Traditions and Myth Transmission

Dalits also function as oral historians and custodians of mythic narratives, preserving genealogies (*Vamshavalis*), local epics (*Mahabharat Katha*, *Pandav Leela*), and deity lore. These narratives are often rendered through ballads, folk songs, and Jagar performances, blending spiritual invocation with storytelling. The Bajgis or Badis (bardic castes) are known for reciting these tales in festivals, fairs, and night-long performances, thus becoming agents of cultural continuity (Negi, 2002; Kumar, 2020). Such oral literature, transmitted intergenerationally, becomes a repository of historical memory, countering dominant textual traditions that exclude marginalized voices.

Craftsmanship: Woodwork, Metalwork, and Sacred Objects

Dalit artisans, especially Lohars and Chamars, have contributed significantly to the region's sacred material culture. Their craftsmanship includes:

- Temple iconography and idol-making using wood, clay, and local metals.
- Carving of ornate wooden temple facades and gateways, especially in shrines dedicated to Mahasu Devta, Someshwar, Kapil Muni, and Bhadrakali.

- Production of ritual instruments like Dhol, Damau, nagara, and brass gongs.
- Design and stitching of traditional garments for deities (God costumes), headgear (*Mukut*), and altar decoration.

Many of these crafts are marked by geometric motifs, animal iconography, and local flora patterns, reflecting syncretic religious aesthetics. However, while these items are used in the most sacred rituals, craftspeople often remain unnamed and uncredited, highlighting the caste bias in artistic valuation (Sharma, 2011; Tiwari, 2009).

Temple and Shrine Architecture

Though large-scale temple construction is often commissioned to caste Hindus or government agencies, many small village shrines, chabutras, and ancestral sites in Rawain are built and maintained by Dalit families, especially those affiliated with specific Devtas. Dalits are known to:

- Build earthen and wooden shrines in sacred groves.
- Install guardian stones (*Deota Pathar*) and paint ritual symbols (*Alpanas*).
- Maintain and periodically renovate sacred platforms (*Chaukhats*) used during doli arrival and sacred feasts.

These contributions underscore their role not only as ritual actors but as architects of sacred space. The role of Dalits in Rawain Valley's ritual, artistic, and architectural heritage is both comprehensive and indispensable. From animating divine presence through rhythm, channelling deities through their bodies, preserving oral cosmologies, to crafting the sacred objects and spaces of worship, Dalits emerge not just as servants of tradition but as co-authors of regional religious life. Recognizing their contributions challenges the casteist frameworks that continue to render them invisible, and it invites a broader understanding of ritual labour as spiritual, creative, and epistemological work.

Architecture and Dev-Doli Yatra: Dalit Participation in Sacred Space and Ritual Mobility

The architecture of sacred space and the ritual mobility of deities through Dev-Doli Yatras are two crucial dimensions of religious life in the Rawain Valley of Uttarkashi. Within these domains, Dalit communities particularly Dholis, Lohars, Bajgis, and Doms play indispensable roles as artisans, ritual performers, and carriers of sacred energy. Their participation reflects both the ritual centrality and socio-cultural marginalization that characterizes the region's caste hierarchy. Importantly, these roles are not merely mechanical or functional but symbolically charged acts through which Dalit communities negotiate spiritual legitimacy, ancestral identity, and social recognition.

1. Sacred Architecture and Mandapa Construction

Dalit artisans, especially Lohars (blacksmiths and metal workers) and Bajgis (wood workers and bards), have historically been involved in the construction, decoration, and maintenance of shrines, mandapas (ritual platforms), and deity thrones. Though large temples may be commissioned by upper-caste elites or the state, the everyday architecture of the sacred landscape village shrines, deity platforms, wooden pillars, and deity enclosures—often emerges from Dalit craftsmanship.

Examples include:

- In Jakhol village, the sacred mandapa used during Someshwar Devta seasonal visitations is believed to have been constructed by a local Dalit artisan lineage. Oral history credits them with designing its carved wooden pillars and floral motifs, which are ritually washed before the deity's arrival (Negi, 2002).
- In Malla Rawain, the wooden palanquin (*Doli*) of Pokhu Devta was carved by a Dalit Lohar, who, despite his ritual contribution, was not permitted to participate in its anointing ritual.

These architectural contributions are made more significant by the fact that they are not only aesthetic objects but ritual mediums the carved wood becomes animate during possession, the mandapa becomes a stage for theophany, and the Doli is imbued with divine presence.

2. *Dev-Doli Yatra: Ritual Procession and Embodied Service*

The Dev-Doli Yatra, or deity procession, is one of the most prominent ritual performances in the Rawain Valley. These yatras involve the movement of the deity usually represented by a wooden idol or silver mask—carried in an ornately decorated palanquin (*Doli*) across villages, forests, and sacred sites.

Dalit communities are involved in this sacred procession through various forms:

- **Doli Carriers (Doliya):** Dalits are often the primary carriers of the deity, an act that is considered both labour-intensive and spiritually powerful. Their shoulders carry the deity's weight, a symbolic act of devotion and ritual service. Despite this, they are not always permitted to lead the procession or speak on behalf of the deity.
- **Musical Invocation:** The Dhol-Damau played by Dalit drummers provides the ritual soundscape through which the deity "travels." Without this rhythm, the arrival of the divine energy (*shakti*) is considered incomplete. Specific beats signal arrival (*Aagman*), movement, trance, and farewell (*Visarjan*).
- **Processional Chants and Songs:** Bajgis perform oral songs narrating the myths of the deity, invoking ancestral memory and linking the current yatra to past cosmological events.

These yatras, while deeply sacred, are also theatres of caste performance. Dalits are highly visible during the events yet symbolically invisible in religious documentation or commemorative rituals. Their labour animates the festival, yet their names may be omitted from ritual credits or invitations to the inner sanctum (Barthwal, 2015; Sax, 2009).

3. *Dev-Doli as a Site of Hierarchy and Resistance*

The Dev-Doli Yatra also becomes a space where caste hierarchies are rehearsed, reinforced, and occasionally contested. On one hand, Dalit participation is ritually sanctioned without the Dholi or Doliya, the yatra cannot proceed. On the other hand, restrictions persist:

- Dalits may be barred from touching the deity directly.
- They are not invited to the deity's feasts or priestly consultations.
- Separate seating and food distribution mark caste boundaries even during communal festivals.

Yet, resistance and transformation are emerging. In recent years, Dalit youth in Rawain have begun forming cultural groups to perform independent dev-dolis of lesser-known deities, such as Lov-Kush Devta and Kaliya Naag, establishing alternative sacred circuits outside Brahmanical control (Kumar, 2020). In some cases, they demand equal ritual participation or redefine the role of Dholi from servant to spiritual mediator.

4. Symbolic and Political Dimensions

The Dev-Doli Yatra is also a political space, used for:

- Affirmation of local power by village elites.
- Caste identity performance through spatial arrangements.
- Mobilization of regional solidarity, often navigating competing caste interests.

Dalit participation within such contexts raises questions about who holds ritual authority, who speaks for the deity, and who interprets the divine will. These processions thus become living commentaries on caste, devotion, and belonging. The domain of sacred architecture and Dev-Doli Yatras in Rawain Valley reveals the multi-dimensional roles of Dalit communities as artisans, ritual bearers, and spiritual agents. Their contributions are vital to the structure and flow of religious events, yet caste boundaries continue to limit their visibility and authority. However, emerging expressions of ritual agency, identity pride, and alternative religious networks reflect a growing assertion of spiritual legitimacy by marginalized actors. The Dev-Doli Yatra, thus, is not only a ritual movement of gods but also a symbolic march of the oppressed carrying both the deity and the burden of history.

5. Fairs, Festivals, and Folk Rituals: Dalit Participation in the Sacred Calendar of Rawain Valley

The Rawain Valley in Uttarkashi is known for its vibrant cycle of religious festivals, folk rituals, and seasonal ceremonies that punctuate both agricultural life and spiritual rhythms. These events not only reinforce sacred cosmologies but also function as sites of caste-based ritual labour. Dalit communities especially Dholis (Drummers), bhaktas (spirit mediums), Bajgis (bards), Doms (Ritual Death Specialists), and Lohars (Craftsmen) perform critical symbolic and practical functions without which these rituals would be incomplete. Their participation is both indispensable and politically charged, situated at the intersection of devotion, marginalization, and cultural transmission.

6. Participation in Major Regional Festivals

(a) Mahasu Devta Mela (Hanol Region)

- Mahasu Devta, the principal deity of the Rawain region, is worshipped through annual melas (fairs) that draw thousands of devotees.
- Dalits play essential roles in:
 - Playing Dhol-Damau to signal the arrival, departure, and movements of the deity.
 - Carrying the deity's palanquin (**Doli**) on their shoulders during village tours.

- Performing Jagar rituals at night, invoking divine stories through trance-inducing ballads.
- Preparing ritual grounds and mandapas, which are often built by Dalit artisans.
- Despite being ritually essential, Dalit drummers and mediums are often not allowed inside the sanctum sanctorum, nor are they consulted during priestly decision-making, exposing the caste contradiction of ritual centrality without authority (Sax, 2009; Kumar, 2020).

(b) Someshwar Devta Mela (Malla-Rawain Region)

- During this monsoon festival dedicated to Someshwar Devta, Dalits contribute by:
 - Serving as ritual assistants during possession (*bhava*) episodes.
 - Offering wooden carvings, ritual flags, and musical performances.
 - Organizing community Jagar performances, in which deities are invoked through drumming and storytelling.

7. Spirit Possession and Ranbhoot Rituals

Dalit functionaries are especially prominent in folk religion practices that fall outside the bounds of Brahmanical Hinduism:

(a) Jagar Performance

- Jagar is a musical-spiritual ceremony involving the invocation of local deities or ancestral spirits through song, rhythm, and trance.
- Dalit performers (especially Bajgis and Bhaktas) act as:
 - Vocal narrators of mythic epics, such as those involving the Pandavas, Karna, or Lov-Kush.
 - Spirit mediums, whose bodies serve as vessels for the deity during trance.
 - Healers and diviners, diagnosing illnesses or spiritual disturbances.

Their spiritual expertise is based not on scriptural knowledge but on oral transmission, hereditary gift, and ritual initiation often undervalued in mainstream theology but revered in local contexts (Berreman, 1972; Negi, 2002).

(b) Ranbhoot and Spirit Appeasement

- Ranbhoot rituals are conducted to appease wandering spirits, often those of ancestors or those who died unnatural deaths.
- Dalits often serve as:
 - Conductors of sacrifice (*bali*).
 - Ritual drummers invoking specific bhairavas or regional spirits.
 - Mediators between the human and spirit world, offering appeasement through grain, liquor, or animal offerings.

Such rituals are non-Sanskritic, often occurring outside temples in forests or crossroads, indicating the non-Brahmanical authority that Dalit practitioners wield in these domains (Barthwal, 2015).

8. Agricultural and Seasonal Rituals

Many festivals in Rawain Valley are linked to the agrarian calendar, such as sowing, harvesting, and monsoon transitions. Dalit communities participate through:

- Drumming at ploughing rituals to mark the start of sowing season.
- Performing musical invocations at harvest celebrations like Navratri or Baisakhi.
- Repairing and decorating ritual tools, masks, and deity ornaments used during festivals.

Their contributions blur the line between economic and ritual labour, where making a plough or performing a drumbeat carries both productive and sacred value.

9. Dalit-Led Ritual Traditions and Innovation

While Dalits have long been part of dominant deity festivals, recent decades have seen the rise of Dalit-led religious innovations, including:

- Establishment of independent shrines dedicated to lesser-known deities like Kaliya Naag, Pokhu Devta, or Lov-Kush, where Dalits serve as priests and musicians without upper-caste oversight.
- Initiation of Dalit-only Jagar groups, preserving oral ballads and initiating youth into ritual roles, especially in Sila and Sunkot villages (Kumar, 2020).
- Use of ritual performance to assert caste pride, such as refusing to participate in fairs where Dalits are barred from sacred platforms or inviting Brahmin priests to work under Dalit musicians—an inversion of traditional hierarchy.

10. Symbolism and Contestation

These ritual spaces function not only as religious gatherings but as symbolic arenas where caste hierarchies are performed and sometimes subverted:

- Dalits are central to the production of sacred sound, but may be denied food or water from the main ritual kitchens.
- They are required to perform ritual work but are seated at the margins during community feasts.
- Nevertheless, their presence and performance mark the continuity of folk religion, without which the region's spiritual ecology would collapse.

The fairs, festivals, and folk rituals of the Rawain Valley are living tapestries woven with the rhythm, voice, and labour of Dalit communities. Whether through music, possession, craftsmanship, or oral performance, Dalits animate the sacred calendar while navigating complex terrains of caste, exclusion, and cultural pride. Their contributions demand recognition not only as facilitators of ritual but as spiritual agents, cultural historians, and performers of resistance. Any study of Himalayan religiosity is incomplete without acknowledging the ritual protagonism of the Dalit community.

Role in Society and Life-Cycle Rituals (Sanskaras): Dalit Participation and Paradox

Dalit communities in the Rawain Valley occupy a paradoxical position in the domain of life-cycle rituals (sanskaras)—they are both ritual agents and ritual subjects of exclusion. Their presence

is crucial during critical transitions in a person's life—birth, marriage, death, and community feasting—yet they are simultaneously stigmatized as polluting and kept at the periphery of ritual purity codes. This duality highlights the complex entanglement of caste, ritual labour, and symbolic authority in the Central Himalayan socio-religious landscape.

1. *Mrityu-Sanskara (Death Rituals)*

Among all Sanskaras, Mrityu-Sanskara (Death Rites) most visibly underscore the indispensable yet stigmatized role of Dalits in Rawain Valley.

Dalit Roles Include:

- Dholis (Drummers): Called upon to play ritual rhythms at funerals that help guide the soul's transition (*atma ka gati*). Certain drum patterns mark the phases of the soul's departure, cremation, and post-cremation feasting (*pind-daan*).
- Doms (ritual death workers): Often summoned for handling cremation wood, digging burial spaces (in cases of infants or uncremated bodies), or performing lower-tier funerary rituals, especially in remote areas.
- Bhaktas (spirit mediums): Invoked during post-death ceremonies, such as *chautha* or *barsi*, to communicate with the departed or to clear spirit disturbances.

Despite their crucial role in ensuring safe passage for the deceased, Dalit ritual workers are often not allowed to participate in the community feast that follows, nor are they acknowledged in the shuddhi (purification) process of the household (Barthwal, 2015; Sax, 2009). They are sometimes required to perform their duties at night or from the margins, reinforcing their symbolic pollution status.

2. *Birth Rituals and Naming Ceremonies*

Dalits are also integral to birth-related Sanskaras, particularly in rural settings:

- Musical invocation at naamkaran (naming ceremonies) through auspicious beats on Dhol-Damau.
- Preparation of bamboo cradles, wooden toys, or ritual markings by Dalit artisans.
- Performance of folk songs celebrating divine birth analogies, especially invoking figures like Krishna, Lov-Kush, or Bhairav.

Despite this, spatial boundaries are maintained, with Dalit drummers playing outside the house and not being allowed to touch the newborn or enter the ritual mandapa (Kumar, 2020).

3. *Marriage Rituals*

Dalits, particularly **Dholis and Bajgis**, contribute extensively to wedding rituals:

- Processional music (*baraat*), invoking deities and blessing the couple.
- Recitation of wedding ballads describing mythic marriages (e.g., Shiva-Parvati, Rama-Sita), sung during **Haldi, Phera, and Bidai**.
- Construction of ritual items such as mandap decorations, wooden seats (*Chaukis*), and ritual objects.

Interestingly, some Dalit communities conduct parallel wedding ceremonies for their own deities, symbolically replicating upper-caste rituals but asserting their own cultural syntax. Yet, they are often excluded from mainstream weddings, seated apart during feasts, and prevented from touching sacred objects used in rituals (Sharma, 2011; Berreman, 1972).

4. Feast Rituals and Community Gatherings

Dalits play essential roles during community-level Sanskaras and feasts, such as:

- Harvest feasts, where Dalit musicians are invited to perform, but often eat separately.
- Ritual thanksgiving meals after childbirth or divine intervention, where Dalits may be included as performers but excluded from sacred distribution of prasad.
- In some villages, Dalit women prepare specific ritual items, such as flour dolls for ancestral offerings or ritual paste (**Pithor**) used during protective rites for infants and the elderly.

5. Symbolic Exclusion and Spatial Hierarchy

Dalit involvement in Sanskaras is often governed by ritualized spatial control:

- Designated seating areas during feasts (often outside the main mandapa).
- Fixed performance zones, from where music or songs may be heard but performers may not enter ritual enclosures.
- Prohibition from touching the deity or sacred fire (**Havan Kund**), especially during marriages or purification ceremonies.

These exclusions reflect what Louis Dumont described as the ideology of purity and pollution (Dumont, 1980), yet they are continually negotiated, resisted, and subverted by Dalits through cultural assertion, reinterpretation of traditions, and the creation of parallel ritual spaces.

6. Emerging Resistance and Identity Assertion

In recent years, Dalits in Rawain Valley have begun to publicly contest these exclusions:

- Refusal to participate in feasts or death rituals unless equal treatment and inclusion is promised.
- Documentation of ritual knowledge by Dalit youth in the form of videos, pamphlets, and oral archives.
- Formation of caste associations and local collectives that perform Dalit-led sanskaras, reimagining sacredness without Brahmanical approval (Kumar, 2020).

These efforts reflect a ritual re-appropriation of identity, where Dalits reclaim their role not as servants of the sacred but as co-creators of cosmological order. The Dalit community's participation in life-cycle rituals across Rawain Valley reveals a deep-rooted cosmological knowledge system embodied in drumming, song, bodily performance, and artisanal craft. Their roles in birth, marriage, death, and community feasting reflect both ritual centrality and social marginalization. While symbolic taboos continue to govern caste boundaries, resistance and re-signification are reshaping how Dalit communities engage with the sacred. Their presence in sanskaras not only

maintains the religious cycle but also contests the very boundaries that exclude them, revealing the inherent contradictions of caste-bound ritual traditions in the Central Himalayas.

Case Study: The Drummer (*Dholi*) as a Ritual Specialist in Rawain Valley

The *Dholi*, a traditional drummer is one of the most crucial ritual specialists in the religious landscape of the Rawain Valley in Uttarkashi, Uttarakhand. Far more than a musician, the *Dholi* is regarded as a ritual mediator, spiritual agent, and cultural transmitter, whose rhythmic invocations enable divine descent and possession. Yet, despite the sacredness of their role, *Dholis*, most of whom belong to Dalit communities, continue to remain marginalized in social and ritual hierarchies, their contributions acknowledged only within narrowly defined ceremonial contexts.

1. Sacred Role and Spiritual Function

The *dholi* is integral to nearly every major ritual in the Rawain Valley, including:

- Dev-Doli yatras (processions of deities)
- Jagar performances (spirit invocation rituals)
- Mrityu-Sanskara (death rites)
- Seasonal festivals (e.g., Mahasu Devta Mela, Someshwar Mela)

In these contexts, the *Dholi*'s rhythmic patterns on the ***Dhol* and *Damau*** are believed to:

- Invoke the deity's spirit into a medium (***Bhakta***), marking the transition from mundane to divine presence.
- Regulate the pace and rhythm of deity processions, effectively controlling ritual time.
- Induce trance states in participants, including mediums and audience members, enabling communication with deities and spirits.

These performances are not seen as artistic entertainment, but as embodied spiritual labour. Many *Dholis* describe their role as being “chosen by the gods”, experiencing dreams, visions, or ancestral callings that initiate them into the tradition (Sax, 2009; Kumar, 2020).

2. Inherited Knowledge and Apprenticeship

The knowledge of drumming in Rawain Valley is transmitted through oral pedagogy and apprenticeship within families:

- Sons learn from fathers, often beginning as early as 7 or 8 years old.
- Specific rhythm cycles (*Thaath*) are memorised and matched with particular ritual stages— invocation (*Aagman*), deity dance (*nach*), healing, or farewell (*Visarjan*).
- The *Dholi* also memorizes associated oral lore, including the myths of Mahasu, Someshwar, Bhadrakali, Pokhu Devta, Lov-Kush, and Kaliya Naag.

Despite their depth of knowledge, *Dholis* are often not recognised as “priests” or “pandits”, and their spiritual literacy remains orally coded, which limits its visibility in institutional religious discourse (Barthwal, 2015).

3. *Ritual Centrality vs. Social Marginalisation*

The *Dholi* occupies a contradictory position—ritually central but socially peripheral:

- Essential to ritual completion: Many ceremonies cannot begin without the presence of the *Dholi*.
- Symbolically polluting: In many villages, *Dholis* are not allowed to touch the deity, enter the inner sanctum, or eat with upper-caste participants during feasts.
- Economically unstable: Compensation is usually non-monetary or symbolic (e.g., grains, clothes), and lacks sustainability.

This disjuncture between ritual indispensability and caste-based exclusion underscores the invisible labour of Dalit spiritual specialists within Himalayan religious systems (Berreman, 1972; Dumont, 1980).

4. *Emotional and Embodied Investment*

In interviews conducted across villages like Jakhol, Pujeli, and Sila, *Dholis* frequently described their relationship with the *Dhol* as emotional and spiritual:

“*Yeh Sirf Bajane Ka Bajan Nahin Hai, Bhagwan Ka Bulawa Hai.*” (This is not mere drumming; it’s a divine summons) Interviewee, Jakhol village

They reported experiencing physical exhaustion, trance-like states, and divine ecstasy during long performances, suggesting a deep embodiment of ritual practice. For many, the *Dhol* is not an object but a deity in itself, and playing it is akin to prayer.

5. *Assertion and Transformation*

In recent years, younger *dholis* have begun to assert their ritual expertise more publicly:

- Demanding equal recognition during melas (e.g., public announcements of their names).
- Recording and archiving drum rhythms as part of cultural preservation.
- Forming Dalit drumming collectives, reclaiming performance spaces and conducting independent Jagar sessions.

These developments reflect a ritual counter-public, where *dholis* are not just performers but ritual authors reclaiming dignity and identity (Kumar, 2020).

6. *The Dholi as Custodian of Folk Epistemology*

Ultimately, the *dholi* is not only a drummer but a living archive of oral, spiritual, and mythic knowledge:

- Their rhythms store memory of divine encounters.
- Their songs narrate caste histories, cosmological battles, and ethical teachings.
- Their presence ensures that ritual continuity survives, especially in the absence of Brahmin priests in remote or lower-caste areas.

Yet, this embodied sacred knowledge is seldom validated in academic or institutionalized religion, continuing the epistemic marginalization of Dalit knowledge systems (Sax, 2009; Barthwal, 2015). The *dholi* in Rawain Valley is a potent example of ritual agency without ritual authority. Through rhythm, song, and embodied performance, *dholis* invoke divine presence, guide cosmological transitions, and uphold the ritual calendar of the community. Their knowledge is sacred, their practice ancestral, yet their recognition remains confined to the ritual moment, not the social structure. To study the *dholi* is to understand the sacred contradictions of caste, the resilience of oral traditions, and the possibility of spiritual resistance from below.

Research Outcomes and Findings: Ritual Power, Social Margins, and Cultural Assertion

This research on Dalit participation in the ritual and cultural landscape of Rawain Valley yields significant insights into the dynamics of caste, ritual labour, embodied knowledge, and resistance in the Central Himalayas. While Dalit communities remain structurally marginalized, their spiritual labour forms the invisible scaffolding of the region's religious life. These findings challenge dominant frameworks of caste orthodoxy and illuminate new pathways for understanding subaltern religiosity and identity formation.

1. Dalits as Indispensable Agents in the Ritual Structure

The most consistent outcome across all domains of field inquiry is the indispensability of Dalit participation in religious, cultural, and life-cycle rituals. From *dholis* invoking divine presence, to *bhaktas* becoming mediums, to artisans constructing deity palanquins, their ritual services are non-substitutable:

- No festival, deity yatra, or spirit invocation can proceed without Dalit ritual actors.
- Even upper-caste communities privately depend on their labour while publicly distancing themselves due to purity-pollution taboos.

This paradox reveals a deep structural contradiction: Dalits hold ritual agency but lack ritual authority, making them essential but invisible (Sax, 2009; Barthwal, 2015).

2. Ritual Labour as a Challenge to Purity–Pollution Binary

The study reveals how Dalit ritual labour unsettles the foundational logic of Brahmanical purity. Drummers (*dholis*), spirit mediums (*bhaktas*), and ritual assistants occupy liminal spaces—both inside and outside sacred domains.

- Their presence is considered ritually polluting, yet their roles are ritually indispensable.
- During deity possession (*bhava*), gods themselves choose Dalit bodies as vessels, momentarily suspending caste boundaries.
- Ritual rhythms played by Dalits “summon” divine presence, challenging notions that only Brahminical chanting can sanctify space (Berreman, 1972; Dumont, 1980).

Thus, Dalit ritual labour becomes a subversive force, exposing the incoherence of caste purity narratives and asserting spiritual legitimacy through embodied practice.

3. Oral Traditions as Archives of Resistance and Memory

A core finding is that oral traditions—Jagar ballads, drumming patterns, possession myths—function as living archives of Dalit history, cosmology, and resistance.

- Genealogies of deities like Karna, Lov-Kush, or Kaliya Naag, performed by Dalits, serve as alternative spiritual histories that foreground lower-caste heroes.
- Ballads and performances often encode metaphors of injustice, exile, and divine anger, indirectly referencing caste-based oppression (Negi, 2002).
- Drumming itself serves as coded communication, marking emotional, ritual, and communal shifts without textual authority.

These embodied archives resist erasure, allowing marginalized communities to preserve spiritual dignity and ancestral memory outside Brahmanical scripts (Sax, 2009; Kumar, 2020).

4. Generational Shift: Cultural Assertion and Identity Politics

Another major outcome is the rise of Dalit cultural assertion, especially among younger generations:

- Youth collectives now record and circulate drumming patterns and Jagar ballads through mobile phones and digital platforms.
- Dalit communities are building parallel ritual networks—creating their own shrines, leading their own festivals, and naming new deities with historical significance.
- There is increasing engagement with Dalit literature, Ambedkarite thought, and constitutional awareness, blending ritual continuity with political consciousness (Kumar, 2020).
- This reflects a shift from silent service to vocal resistance, from marginal ritual labourers to active cultural producers and custodians of heritage.

5. Spatial and Symbolic Resistance

The study also highlights forms of spatial resistance, where Dalits are refusing to occupy ritual peripheries:

- In villages like Sunkot and Pujeli, Dalit drummers have walked out of festivals where they were denied equal seating or food.
- Some dev-doli processions are now led by Dalit-led deities, challenging Rajput or Brahmin dominance in ritual hierarchy.
- Cultural assertion during feasts—by refusing to eat separately or demanding equal servings—signals a break in symbolic submission (Barthwal, 2015).

These practices signal grassroots resistance through ritual performance, rather than legal or institutional confrontation. The findings of this study establish that Dalits are not merely passive ritual actors but active agents of cultural survival, ritual innovation, and identity assertion. Their embodied knowledge, mythic memory, and spiritual labour underpin Rawain's religious systems, yet they continue to face caste-based marginalisation. However, new forms of resistance—cultural,

spatial, and political—are transforming the meaning of ritual participation. In a landscape marked by sacred mountains, divine possession, and caste contradictions, the Dalit practitioner emerges not just as a ritual servant, but as a custodian of contested sacredness and a bearer of historical agency.

Conclusion

Reimagining Ritual Authority and Subaltern Sacredness in Rawain Valley

The religious and cultural topography of the Rawain Valley in Uttarkashi, Uttarakhand, reveals a deeply layered interplay between ritual centrality and social marginalisation, where Dalit communities emerge not as peripheral actors but as vital ritual protagonists. This study has illustrated that Dalits, despite systemic caste-based exclusion, have historically anchored the region's spiritual life through their roles as drummers (*dholis*), spirit mediums (*bhaktas*), bards (*bajgis*), artisans, and ritual assistants. Their participation is not merely supportive but constitutive of ritual efficacy in festivals, deity processions, life-cycle ceremonies, and spirit-invocation practices like Jagar and Ranbhoot. These embodied roles challenge the Brahmanical orthodoxy of purity and pollution, exposing contradictions in caste ideology that devalues the very labour that sustains sacred order (Dumont, 1980; Sax, 2009). The phenomenon of Dalit mediums channelling divine presence, or drummers invoking deities into communal space, signals a ritual inversion—a moment where caste boundaries blur, and ritual authority becomes decentralised. Moreover, the oral traditions maintained by Dalits—myths, rhythms, songs, and ritual genealogies—function as living archives that preserve marginalised histories and spiritual epistemologies. These traditions encode resistance, ancestral memory, and symbolic inversion, creating a counter-history to dominant religious narratives (Berreman, 1972; Negi, 2002). Their transmission through generations, especially through apprenticeship and familial oral pedagogy, reflects a deep heritage of subaltern religiosity.

Importantly, the research highlights the emergence of cultural assertion among younger generations, who are leveraging performance, documentation, and collective organisation to reclaim ritual legitimacy. Whether through the founding of Dalit-led shrines, refusal to perform under discriminatory conditions, or participation in digital archiving of Jagar performances, Dalits are transforming spiritual labour into a platform for socio-political visibility and self-respect (Kumar, 2020). In reframing the religious landscape of the Central Himalayas, this study emphasises that understanding Dalit contributions is not just about inclusion—it is about reconceptualising the very categories of ritual authority, caste agency, and sacred knowledge. The historiographical silence on Dalit ritual labour in Himalayan studies must be corrected, not only to enrich anthropological and historical scholarship but also to recognise the indispensable sacred agency of communities long cast into marginality.

Thus, the Rawain Valley stands as both a sacred geography and a contested terrain, where caste hierarchies are enacted, negotiated, and resisted through the rhythms of the *dhol*, the invocation of divine justice, and the resilient faith of those historically subordinated. In acknowledging and centring the Dalit presence, we move closer to a more just and complete understanding of Himalayan religiosity—one that honours its plural voices, contested sanctities, and ritual solidarities.

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