

Representation of Khas Practices on the Fairs and Festivals of Western Garhwal

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Abstract: Throughout the historical period, India has not been an isolated place, there were many incursions through Khyber and Bolan passes and many travellers, Human groups, Races, and invaders reached India for Knowledge, Wealth, and for Inhabitation. Among these Khas/khos were the oldest human groups to reach India. They were the first inhabitant of Kashmir and through Kashmir they reached Himachal and Uttarakhand. As they were the new comers in the Western Garhwal they had to invade older human groups like *Kol*, *Kiratas* and *Naga* and due to this invasion, they left cultural and social impact on Western Garhwal and their representation can be seen through various Fairs and Festivals like *Deewali/Bagwal (Rwain and Jaunsar)*, *Bissu*, *Maun*, *Hindoda*, *Nunayi* and *Atthan* and these festivals have specific customs and traditions that can be associated with *Khasas* Tradition. These festivals include *Sathi* and *Pansai* tradition which are associated to *Khasas* human group and associated with khasas family who fought for kuarvas and still being an important part of festivals. The fairs and festival of western Garhwal is incomplete without *khunda/khund*, who are widespread around the Himachal and western Garhwal, they are considered as subgroup of khasas and their presence in every fair and festival show how khasas traditions are still living in fairs and festival. This study employed the qualitative research method with Primary and secondary data were used. The study reveals that the *Khasas* culture and traditions are an important part of fairs and festivals and their representation can be traced out by different customs and rituals performed in Fairs and festivals. By the influence of Hindu pantheon gods most of *Khasas* traditions are being associated with Hindu god and goddess but *Khasas* identity in Western Garhwal is prominent features of Local people and their fair and festivals.

Keywords: Khasas, Khund, Representation of Khasas, Sathi and Pansai

Introduction

After centuries of evolution and linguistic transformation, the word 'Khas' has gracefully emerged, shedding its earlier variations of 'Kakes,' 'Kakas,' or 'Kas,' to attain a uniquely special and perfect form (Kshetri,2013). There are many theories regarding the *Khasas* migration from Caucasus Mountain to different part of the world and finally entered in India through Himalayas. *Khasas* or *Khasiyas* are the lineal descendants of a wave of immigrants probably pre-Vedic in date but Aryan in race. (Joshi,1929)

Khasas engulfed the whole of cis-Himalayas from Kashmir to Nepal and turned *Kinnar*,*Kirat* and *Naga* land into the Khasa land. (Saklani,1998)

Some scholars believe that they are one of waves of Vedic Aryans but It appears that *khasas* did not follow the Vedic rituals and they were lean towards Animistic and Naturalistic rituals. Which is questionable with the Aryans connection.

The Khasas, in prehistoric times, most probably occupied various parts of northern India, and there is some truth in the statement that they were in possession of large areas from Kashmir to Nepal. The fact that the Khasas are described in the Mahabharata (Drona Parva) as having arrived from diverse realms corroborates the above hypothesis. (Majumdar,1960)

The khasas came to India from Central Asia as a Pastoral community and afterwards spreads to Jammu-Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Garhwal and Kumaon. The khasa people are prominently mentioned in the history of Kumaon and Garhwal and a sizable population of this region is a remnant of the Khasa tribe. (Saklani,1998)

It is very clear that *khasas* are one of the oldest human groups in Uttarakhand and their precursor were *Kol*,*Kiratas* and *Nag*. *Khasas* defeated all of them and became master of the Himalayas. The word *khasiya/khos/khas* has been taken derogatory in Uttarakhand. Which used to make fun of the Rajput of Uttarakhand, this practice of taking khas roots as derogatory give a sense that we are tracing our history from other origin, but in a nutshell our roots relate to Khasas lineage. Whom valour and warrior like sprit shaped the topography, culture, and ritual practices of Uttarakhand. Khasas were the first settlers who shaped Uttarakhand's mountains into Stepped field and made agriculture suitable for mountains. We cannot escape the khasas identity and this identity is still represented in our Fairs and festivals, which are unique from the rest of the country.

In the western Garhwal there are various festivals and fairs which are clear depiction of khasas tradition and they are of somewhere of same cultural milieu like *Rawain* and *Jaunsar*. *Rawain* and *Jaunsar* share borders with each other and they are part of Uttarkashi and Dehradun district, they not only share border but they share culture with each other, both are famous for their age-old preserved culture and people of *Jaunsar* and *Rawain* proudly flaunt their culture. *Bissu*,*Devlang*,*hindoda*,*atthan* and *maun* are the festival which are incomplete without *Sathi* and *Pansai thok*, which are mentioned in various sources as Khasas progeny, this tradition of *Sathi* and *Pansai* still being followed in *Jaunsar* and *Rawain*.

Khasas are the predominant people in the Himalayas. They figure prominently in its rituals and festivals. There is hardly a fair or a ritual, secular or religious, that does not demand their active involvement. (Kashyap,2010)

In western Garhwal fair and festivals have important practices of involvement of *Sathi* and *Pansai* and the *Khund/khunda*, they are the drivers of the fair and festivals and they trace their

descends from *Khasas*. *Sathi* and *Pansai* associated with *Khasas* family who fought for *kuarvas* are still being important part of festivals. (Sharma,1965)

Whereas *Khunds* are subgroup of *khasas* and Acc to Dr. Prayag Joshi *khund* were the lower *thakur* segregated by *kashiya* thakur *Rajput* and he also mentioned prominence of *Khunds* in Ramasirya mond mela. (Joshi,2021), A khund is a warrior and a fighter, someone who is willing to spill blood – either his own, or that of his enemies – in defence of his divine king and territory (Sax,2024)

Khasas identity can be seen through practice of looting enemy animals. In Rajtarangani, it is mentioned that khas had a practice of looting and plundering enemy areas. (Sharma,1929), This same practice of Animal rustling had been prevalent in western Garhwal.

As khasas were mainly pastoral, they were close to their folk deity and they had practice of offering goats to their folk deity. In western Garhwal there are festival dedicated for shepherds when they return from Pasture land (Bugyal), they offered goats to folk deity and as Khas were mainly pastoral, they also followed this practice, same festival also celebrated in *Pali* known as *Atthan*, where goats revolve around the temple and after that eight goats were slain in the name of the deity. This same practice is followed at Jakhhol village.

Review of Literature

Significant work has been done by many historians in past on Khasas and their tradition.

P.C Kashyap has done significant work in his book *Living Pre-Rigvedic and Early Rigvedic Traditions of Himalayas* (2000) has mentioned khasas and their fair and festival and through his book we get to know about Khasas festival like *bissu* and *Bhunda Utsav* in western Garhwal. Another important work has been done by D.N Saklani (1998) in, “Ancient Tribes of The Himalayas”, in his work he mentioned Khasas fairs and festivals which are celebrated till now. Banshi Ram Sharma (1985) in his significant work “Uttarakhand ki Puranic Janjatiya”, has given wide description of Khasas, from the Mahabharata period to contemporary period. Prayag Joshi (2021) in his work “Uttarakhand ki Lokgathaye ek Vivechan”, talk about Maun festival and their connection with Khasas festivals. Willam Sax (2024) in his significant work “In the Valley of Kaurvas”, has given vivid description of Rawain Valley Folk deities and their conflict with each other, in his book he mentioned folk festivals of Pastoral community. D.N Majumdar (1960), in his significant work “Himalayan Polyandry”, is wide work on Jaunsari community and he mentioned Jaunsari community as Khasas and their fairs and festivals are also representation of khasas tradition, he mentioned *Toda Ka Nirtya* as khasas practice.

Methodology

The present study employs a Qualitative research design and primary and secondary data were used to explore various rituals and customs in Fair and festivals, which are related to Khasas. Primary data was collected through Structured interviews with open ended and close ended questions were asked, which involved priest, local villagers, Tradition bearers and with consent of these participants Audio-visual recording was done for later analysis.

Secondary data was collected through Books, magazines, research papers and PhD thesis.

Objectives

1. To highlight Khasas fair and festival of western garhwal.
2. To showcase the representation of khasas tradition is still reflected on the fair and festival of western garhwal.
3. To highlight specific customs and rituals, which are connected to khasas culture.

Findings and Discussion

This research paper tries to discuss representation of Khas practises on fair and festivals of western Garhwal and One can easily differentiate Khas influenced fairs and festivals with other pan-india celebrated fairs and festivals. Above the mentioned fair and festival have different rituals and customs with special dances like *Tandi* and *Natti* and using Axes, Bow and arrow are prominent in these festivals.

The representation of Khas practices can be trace out by Tracing customs and rituals of the following Fairs and Festivals in western Garhwal-

Sathi and Pansai Dominated fairs and festivals

Western Garhwal is coloured with unique practice of *Sathi* and *Pansai*, as earlier mentioned these two groups were participant in *Mahabharata* war and they are of Khasas lineage. There are many festivals and fair in Western Garhwal in which *Sathi* and *Pansai Thok* are the main attraction.

Bissu Festival- Bissu is essentially a pan-Himalayan secular fair, usually held in the month of *Baisakh* (April/May) heralding the on-set of Summer, ripening of crops and beginning of the year. (Kashyap,). This festival is celebrated in Khas dominated area of *Jaunsar-Bawar* and *Rawain*. In the Yamuna basin, Bishu, however is exclusively a Khasas affair, With *Thoda-ka-khel*, bow and arrow sport, being the prime attraction. (Kashyap,2000)

The centre of attraction of the festivals is Archery game, in which main participant are *khunds*. Who belongs to *Sathi* and *Pansai* group. According to *Dronaprava*, Khasas participated in the Battle of Mahabharata by the side of Duryodhana (Dronaprava,121/42-48). Both *Sathi* and *Pansai* make claim over fighting the Mahabharata war on opposite side, and as *Sathi* and *Pansai* are of Khasas lineage this festival gives us representation of Himalayan version of Mahabharata war in which khasas own culture and rituals governs this battle.

The popular *Thoda* folkdance is a type of Archery fight in which two group *Pasha*(five) and *Shata* i.e. *Pandava* and *Kaurvas* belong to the Khasas group. (Sharma,1985)

The involvement of *Sathi* and *Pansai* khunds in *thoda*, clearly represent the khasas tradition of battling relentlessly throughout their life and to showcase their fighting spirit in battle ground. This khasas affair still practice in *Jaunsar* and *Rawain* valley in which Local people participate in great number and carrying this khasas tradition for coming generations.

Bagwal/Devlang- *Mangsheer* (November) ki *Bagwal* is a Himalayan Deewali, usually celebrated in Uttarkashi, Tehri, and Jaunsar. When the Nation celebrates Deewali, These Himalayan districts involve in Agricultural work at that time and when they get leisure time they celebrate *Mangsheer ki Bagwal*. But in *Rawain* Valley people Celebrate *Devlang*, in which whole of the

Banal Patti is bifurcated into Sathi and pansai thok. In Banal patti, there is tradition of Burning of Cedar tree at the premises of Rajaraghunath at gair village. For this festival whole of the Banal patti of Rawain participate and earlier there was a tradition of Goat sacrifice on the roof of Temple, which was slain by Khund and if the head of goat falls to left side, then *Devlang* is celebrated in pujeli (Temple of Rajaraghunath) and if it falls in right side then *Devlang* is celebrated in Gair (Temple where Devlang celebrated) (Interview-Gairola, Dec-2024). The involvement of Khund in this festival gives representation of carrying khasas tradition. This festival is confluence of Folksongs, folkdance, Ritualistic and carrying the khasas tradition of looting in the *Sathi* and *Pansai* territory. The uses of axes in Folkdance are also unique tradition, which somewhat gives glimpses of khasas armoury, Khasas equipped with axes and bow and arrow, which still uses in fair and festival of Western Garhwal. Devlang is a festival of conflict, to show supremacy of power by the mean of direct conflict of looting practices, which rajtarangani mentioned about khasas had a tradition of looting enemy territory. (Sharma,1998), But as of modern society of *Rawain* people does not associate this festival as conflict of power, they now regard this festival as festival of harmony and tranquillity, but we cannot escape our roots, we should be proud of our past and conserve our past as it is.

Maun of Rawain- *Ramasirya*, *kamalsirai* and *Mungarsanti* are one of the eighteen pattis of *Rawain* Valley. It is celebrated in the month of *Jyestha* (May-June). Whole of the territory is divided into sathi and pansai thok in which each village is given responsibility to bring *maun*¹ in different quantity. The festival of buffalo and sheep (jhootha and khadu) fighting is celebrated every year in different parts of Tehri district and the approval to celebrate Maun Mela mainly remained in Mungarsanti Patti, Kamalsirai and Ramasirai of Rawain Pargana, In the month of Jyestha (May-June) after taking permission from the Thokdars of Munragarh, Khaladi, Kumola and Gudiat villages. (Uniyal,2020), We found a Harul, the existence of four Garhpatis in a group of eighteen villages of the Ramasirai Patti, who had references to the *Khasas Khunds* under the control of the powerful Khashas Thakurs. The Khunds were a lower category of the Khasas. (Joshi,2021). Through this reference of khasas' khund and Bifurcation of territory into *Sathi* and *Pansai* give a clear picture of carrying Khasas tradition in *Rawain* Valley.

Hindoda Mela- (Ball game festival)- Traditionally, various events are seen throughout this area. In which Karna Maharaj's palanquin arrives with the entire army. He blesses the devotees gathered at the fair. The most important fair of Karna Maharaj is 'Hindoda.' Which is celebrated on 1st day of Magh at a place called Devra. Which was organized on the day of Makar Sankranti

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1. Maun is a famous folk festival of the region in Purola and Mori development blocks of Rawain region, it is organized on 20th Jyestha in the scorching sun on Kamal River and Kedar river in Mori. Preparations for the Maun Mela start a week in advance. For the Maun fair, all the villagers bring Timaru seeds from their respective villages, which is called "Maun". Everyone gathers on the banks of the river, singing and dancing with the drums. Then the curiosity of the silent fair begins. The people brought from homes are crushed with sticks and thrown into the flowing water of the river while dancing and singing. Which works as a natural insecticide and flows far away with the river water Timaru is a natural insecticide that it kills the harmful insects present in the water and the fish also become unconscious and start wandering here and there. Who are caught dancing collectively by the people present at the Maun fair.

in a thok² named 'Ausali' of village Devra, the main place of Karna Maharaj. This fair is also called 'Gendula fair'. The rumour is that a few days before the fair. A calf among the animals of the 'Agrate' family of the former village dies. These people take out its skin and make a ball out of it and fill it with colour. The Ball is worshiped for a whole week. Which is taken to the grounds of Ausali on the day of Makar Sankranti and thrown among the people of Sathi and Pansai. Everyone throws it here and there i.e. plays football with it. There is a popular belief that the person on whom the colour inside the ball falls while playing is considered lucky. It is also believed that that person gets the desired results, Locals relates this fair to the incident of Mahabharata period and says that it is related to Ghatotkacha.

Such battles between two moiety-like groups are also found elsewhere in Garhwal. sometime the groups hurl rocks at each other, elsewhere they meet on opposite sides of the river at a particular place and time, fish are poisoned using a local herb, and there is a competition to see who can take the most fish home. Ball games like fair celebrated in district Pauri, including Bhagavaan near Devi Dhura (Sax,2024), Similarly According to D.P Saklani the khasas appeared in the army of Duryodhan and, armed with swords and lances, fought with stones against Satyaki. Fighting with stones was well-known in these hills and survival of inter-clan fights with stones in Bagwali or stone slinging festivals at Chaur and Silangi in Garhwal, Bhimtal, Devi Dhura and Many other places in Almora and Nainital. (Saklani,1998)

These inter-Clan fights give a clear picture of fighting nature of local people and khasas had a tendency to fight as they were warrior of the Himalayas, same warrior like spirit is represented in this Ball game (Hindoda) with bifurcating of territory into Sathi and Pansai territory and domination of these groups shows how fairs and festivals of this region have longstanding history of carrying generational fights with each-other.

Pastoral community Festivals

Khasas economy relied on pastoralism and agriculture and in Rajataragni it is mentioned that khasas had a practice of looting animals and it can be corroborated from Westen Garhwal looting practice known as *Dhada* (Animal Rustling). Animal rustling had been prevalent in this area and earlier there were festival dedicated to this looting tradition and festivals on pastoral community moving towards lowland from Pasture land.

Atthan of Pali Village-

Pali village located in *Rawain* Pargana, 35 Km from Barkot Tehsil of Uttarkashi district, a beautiful village surrounded by lofty mountains and whole tract of lush green nature, *Jakh Someshwar* is folk deity of this village and Someshwar is one of the prominent deities of Uttarkashi district from

2. Thok means a family of family tree members or Mudit. The head or eldest member of thok is called Thokdar. From administrative point of view, Thokdar means the head of village. Thokdar position was dynasty base system but the Kingdom or its administrators could change Thokdar and could appoint new Thokdar or could add new Thokdar. Thokdar had a couple of synonymic names as-
 Salan- in Salan, Thokdar was also called as 'Kamin'.
 North Garhwal- in North Garhwal, Thokdar was called as 'Sayana'. The Thokdars used to report to Pargana in charge of the Kingdom

Rawain to *Taknor patti* of Uttarkashi, this divine power holds its supreme power in this area. In Pali village *Atthan* festival has been celebrated since ages, there is no definite time frame in which we can put these festivals. *Atthan* literally means eight sheep. It is related to *dhada* practice of *Rawain* Valley, earlier there is a tradition that if *Dhada* is practice over the enemy territory then the eight sheep's is dedicated to folk deity. From this practice this festival is named *atthan*. (Interview-Shanti prasad Nautiyal, age-65)

There is a famous folksong that is sung during this festival and some lines of this song is -

Unna Ki Katira
Unna ki Katira
Jakh Someshwar, unna ki katirira
Bheda loye, Atthana ki jatira

This folksong gives information about Sheep as centre of attraction in this festival and sheep were slain for folk deity Jakh Someshwar.

Earlier tradition of *Dhada* has been abundant by locals, so practice of Cutting eight sheep also has been left but Now at the time of *Atthan* festival, sheep runs around the premises of Folk deity and this is how new tradition take over the earlier one. (Interview- Hardev singh rana, Age-57)

Someshwar is well known for its *Dhada*³(Animal rustling practice) and as khasas was believer in their folk deity and economic base was Agro-pasto and animals were the main source of Income, so one who has greater number of animals get more social prestige, so khasas had been looting practice and same practice can be seen through *Atthan* festival.

Nunayi Festival- It is celebrated in *Rawain* and *Jaunsar* and it is a festival of shepherds, in *Rawain*, On the day shepherds brought their flocks down from high pastures, they would drive a circle around the local divine king" temple, Sacrifice several of them, and shear them all. (Sax,2024)

Pastoralism is one of the main economic activities in *Rawain* and Pasture lands (Taal) are the main centre of pastoralism; these high lands are lush green throughout the summers and in winter these covered with thick snow. Khasas had the main occupation as Pastoralism and earlier mentioned that they had a practice of looting enemy animals and sacrificing few of them in the name of their folk deity.

Same practices are still prevalent in *Rawain*, where pastoralism is one of the main occupation and people of *Rawain* celebrate this economic activity in the name of *Nunayi* and this festival is reflection of Khasas tradition where *Khunds* from different villages come and slain goats.

Whole of the western Garhwal is coloured with practice of Sathi and Pansai, which have connection with khasas group. Along with Sathi and Pansai, *Khunds* dominate Western Garhwal and one of the important parts of Fair and festival, without them fair and festivals are incomplete

3. *Dhada* literally means Rustling (Looting) and it was prominent in Himachal and Utrakhand, this practice involved folk deity and its warrior known as *khund* and it has following types-

1. abduction of woman
2. Stealing of Folk deity
3. Looting of Animals
4. Stealing of water resources
5. Head hunting

and as they are the subgroup of khasas family. These things show how the western Garhwal has been carrying the khasas tradition and rituals in their fairs and festivals.

Conclusion

The present research explores the deep-rooted legacy of the Khasas in the cultural, ritualistic, and socio-economic fabric of Western Garhwal, particularly in the Rawain and Jaunsar regions. Khasas were the prominent people of Himalaya and their Rituals and customs still living in Western Garhwal and their representation can be seen through different Fairs and festivals. Khasas one of the oldest people of Himalaya and inhabitant of Himachal and Uttarakhand, left a huge impact on culture and tradition of these regions. They not only impacted our cultural and social life but their impact can be seen in our economic life. Khasas representation can be seen in our fair and festival which are easily seen through the way of unique customs and rituals performed in festivals. The prevalent traditions of *Sathi* and *Pansai thok*, *Khund* warriors, ritual sacrifices, animal rustling (*Dhada*), *Thoda* archery dance, and territorial bifurcations in fairs like *Bissu*, *Devlang*, *Maun*, and *Hindoda*, highlights the continuity of Khasa traditions that have survived through oral histories, symbolic rituals, and folk performances. These festivals serve not just as occasions of celebration but as martial *Khasas* culture, offering a unique Himalayan counter-narrative to mainstream Indian religious and cultural practices. The fairs and festivals of Western Garhwal are not merely seasonal events, but are profound expressions of *Khasas* heritage. These customs reflect the valor, resilience, pastoral economy, and spiritual life of a people who have, for centuries, shaped the physical and cultural landscape of Uttarakhand.

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