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# *Pandava-Lila* as a folk performance in Garhwal: A study of Mahabharata traditions in Uttarakhand (India)

**Priyatosh Sharma & Ashish Rawat**

**Abstract:**

Epic traditions have always played a vital role in the dissemination of Indic traditions in the south Asia. Folk traditions have used both Epic and Puranic texts as a reference point, while weaving a complex world of popular beliefs, legends and stories. The process enabled many subaltern sections to have access to textual traditions in the forms of bards. *Pandava-lila* is one such tradition, which has created a complex world of socio-cultural orders enabling the participating communities a peep into the world of Gods through the medium of Pandavas- the epic Mahabharata's protagonists. *Pandava-lila* is not an annual fixed affair. It is often staged to offset a bad omen and seek blessings of the Pandavas for peace and prosperity. The participation of the Pandavas and other gods through human actors makes it an intense religious experience. Pandavas, in their quest to relive the glory of their past, bless the village which gave them a chance to re-enact the various scenes of Mahabharata. Bardic traditions, however, play a significant role in the enactment colouring the whole performance with a local fervor. Various enacted episodes have not been borrowed from the written text but evolved through bardic movement from one region to another. In the process, *Pandava-lila* has formulated social identities within the region connecting the same to Pan Indian Rajput identity.

**Keywords:** *Pandava-lila*, Garhwal, Mahabharata, Folk Traditions, Bards, Epics

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**Introduction**

Ideas play an important part in the evolution of human societies and how any given community might relate to the other groups or one's immediate temporal surroundings. Cultural beliefs have enabled humanity to become comprehensible to each other (Peterson xxx). Cultural myths, legends and stories play a significant role in constructing identities, both individual and collective. Ancient civilizations like India have been formulated in the web of such myths, legends and stories. At the same time, varied regional settings necessitated the movement of such ideas through assimilation of various local legends, myths and other sensibilities to make plots and narratives meaningful to the various communities. The process of interaction, interpolation and interaction which go hand in hand through both text and bards provided India a distinct cultural identity. Texts strove to provide uniformity to the central narrative while bards ensured its dissemination to the masses in their tone and understanding. In the process both forms strove to formulate historical consciousness in reference to immediate surroundings i.e. consisting of both flora and fauna (Sreedharan 266).Further, one must endeavor to assimilate the 'facts of social life', compared to mere ideas related to those facts (Hall, 1983). In India, distant regions have been brought into the uniform world of *shrutis* (Vedic literature) and *smritis* (Puranic and Epic literature) through the employment of various episodes, anecdotes and stories. In the process the regional beliefs and consciousness is tangled within Pan Indian Sanskrit traditions.

Indic texts have described the land between Himalayan and the sea as *Bharata*. According to Vishnu Purana (2, 3:1), 'the country that lies north of the ocean, and south of the snowy mountains, is called Bhárata....' (Wilson 174). Sacredness of the Himalayas, Vindhya mountain range and rivers like Ganga, Yamuna and many more acted as connecting linkages which made many sacred places interdependent on each other. Thus the subcontinent can be studied more within the realm of "a sacred" geography rather than mere political identity because:-

> Both mythology and geography provide for people and cultures the "maps" of their world. Myths…….those deeply true stories that anchor and orient people

> in the reality in which they live. Myths… tell the tale of cosmic creation, the birth of the earth, and the deeds of the gods and heroes. (Eck, 51).

Owing to the constant movement of people in new regions, the myths, all over India, were both contextualized and sanctified in specific regions. The process created a vast network of sacred centers which are known as *titrthas* (*lit.* meaning ford). *Tirtha* signifies a sacred place which acts as a crossing place over the mundane existence of the material world. Thus, in a way it is a meditative zone between the world of gods and the world of men. Apart from *tirthas*, there are places which are the dwelling places of Gods called *dhams* (abodes of the gods) in native language. Both *tirthas* and *dhams* are significant in giving birth to many myths, legends and local traditions in the land of *Bharat* (India).

**Research Problem:**

Among the various topographical areas of India, Himalayas is the abode of many indigenous cultures. Sometimes referred to as 'shatter zones' or zones of refuge where sustained effort to check state's aggrandizement is practiced through the enactment of various socio-cultural narratives and religious ideologies (Scott x). Away from the control of the agrarian plains, the central Himalayan region has evolved its own cosmology which made distinct meanings of their immediate surroundings. In India, Sanskrit traditions have created a huge corpus of literature, however this textual narrative kept evolving in regional popular traditions in face with varied geographical and cultural settings. The movement of the protagonist both in *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* enabled different cultures to create their own myths in which their interaction with legendary mythical heroes laid their claim to be part of a wider world of Sanskrit gods and goddesses.

To understand this process of amalgamation of classical traditions, folk traditions, and myths, Mahabharata is taken as a reference point, which is a famous Indian epic. The epic records the famous battle of Kurukshetra between Pandava and Kaurvas and participation of many other clans. With passage of time it has appropriated various traditions and has become a huge corpus of over one lakh *shlokhas* (hymns). However, at popular level, various communities have taken different parts of the story and interpolated it with their local cultural

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consciousness and identity. Mahabharata, thus, is alluded to while referring to many *tirthas* in the region, especially Gangadwar (*Haridwar*) and Badrinath (*Badri Vishal*). Besides, *Puranas* like *Skanda Purana* also records many *tirthas* in the Garhwal region which remains religiously very important even in the modern times (Atkinson 284). Mahatmya of Kedarkhand relates the entire area of Kedar as a sacred place, where the Ganga descent from heaven to earth, where the Pandavas roam in their later phase of life in search of Shiva to expunge the sins of killing their brethren (Nautiyal 142).[1]

In the present state of knowledge, it is not possible to say anything for certain about the origin of the Garhwali Mahabharata traditions as there are different versions of the epic, which is popular in the region through its performance on sacred occasions. Each performance is based on various episodes of Mahabharata. These performances have, however, displayed close bearing to the regional understanding of Mahabharata rather than textual recording. Orality has played an important role in it. However, fusion with various local stories has made it impossible to identify any single, original version of the performance. The present research paper thus attempts to study the region of Garhwal while taking two objectives in mind, i.e; an attempt to link the local settings with the pan subcontinent sacred geographical centers (*tirthas* or *dhams*) and access the role played by the performance of *Pandava-lila*, an adoption from Mahabharata in the process.

**Garhwal as a Sacred Region**

Garhwal region of the Central Himalayas is situated in Uttarakhand.[2] The history of the region is said to have started with Mahabharata. *Skanda Purana* provides a detailed description of the region. Its boundaries have been identified from Nanda Hill to Kaashtgiri or from Boddhachal in the East to Tamsa (Tons) river in the west; Gangadwar in the south to Shwet Hill in the north (Parmar 203). Recorded history of the region, however, comes to the light in the second century BCE when Kuninda Kingdom came to power. It was Katyuris in the early medieval period who, however, seemed to have brought the Sanskrit traditions in the region. Earlier, Buddhism might have remained dominant in early phases but with Katyuris, Sanskrit tradition started to hold sway. Visit of Adi Shankaracharya is also credited

in the period. Later the Chandra dynasty and Panwar dynasty further continued with this shift towards Sanskrit traditions linking many local places with epic traditions.

Redfield, while exploring the complex world of traditions, elaborate the importance of little traditions which involve the daily routine of the followers (Redfield 35, 89). Thus, one can demarcate this local practice at three levels in the region namely community, clan and individual. In such a scenario, the role of various *devtas* (*gram devtas, kuladevtas, and ishtadevta*) became significant. Whereas in community participation, one might require officiating priest, but various rituals of family (*kula*) do not require any mediating agency between the devotee and the deity. One must, however, remain aware that many a time distinction between *gram devta* (village god), *kuladevta*(clan god) and *ishtadevta* (preferred god) are obliterated because of the dynamic nature of ritualization. Thus many a time the *kuladevta* of dominant communities also evolved as *gram devtas*(Berreman 96).

Amidst this complex sacred cosmology, one also finds the presence of the Pandavas of Mahabharata who have emerged as *kuladevta*s of many communities in the region.[3]The geography of Mahabharata where Pandavas are moving into the forests and hills might have facilitated the movement of the legends in the region. It must be highlighted that Mahabharata and Ramayana traditions have created various connection in the hill regions of Himalaya, but Pandavas traditions remain strong in the Kumaon region (Leavitt 452).After renouncing the world, the five brothers with their wife Draupadi marched towards *Swargarohini*- a gateway to the *swaraga*(heaven). Only Yudhishtra, the elder brother, however managed to reach the gates of the *swaraga* while his other brothers namely Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sehdeva along with their wife Draupadi died on the way. Another record of Pandavas spending some time in the disguise of Brahmans in Ekacakranagari (Cakrata Dehradun) strengthened the assumption that the contributors of the epic were familiar with the geography of the region (Sharma 44). Popular legends of the region further identify Pandukeshwar (a temple above Joshimathenroute to Badrinath) as the birthplace of Pandavas. *Lakshgraha* (house of wax) where Kauravas conspired to burn all Pandavas is said to be Lakhamandal, in Jaunsar-Bawar valley in Garhwal. Other legends consider it a capital of Virat where Pandavas spent their exile. Famous valley of flowers is also brought into the

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geographical world of the epic when Draupadi is said to have been fascinated by a flower in a stream and Bhima followed the stream upward to find the valley of flowers.

According to SkandaPurana, GuptKashi came into existence because Lord Shiva resided in this place. When the Pandavas reached Kashi to redeem themselves of their sins of killing Brahmans and their relatives in the battle of Mahabharata, Shiva went away from Kashi. The Pandavas, in search of Lord Shiva, reached GuptKashi and held to Lord Shiva when the deity attempted to go into oblivion once again in the form of a bull. The body (of Lord Shiva) in the form bull (of Lord Shiva) is transformed, externalized and identified with various sacred places in the region. Hump is a site of Kedarnath, midsection remains Madhyamaheshavara, hands are Tungnath, face Rudranath, matted locks Kalpanath.[4]

***Pandava-lila*as a Ritual Performance:**

Lila (*lit.* performance) is a display which included both religious and non-religious performance. Nevertheless, ritual performance denotes religious adjectives based on the life of gods and their incarnations. *Ramlila* (based on the Ramayana) is a famous performance which continues for ten days before *Vijay-Dashmi* in which actors, performing the role of Rama, enact the scene of Ravana killing. Popular in north India, Ramlila attracts hordes of audience who gather to see various episodes performed based on the life of Rama. For devotees, participation in such religious performances allow them participate in the world of Gods making time circular for them. Repetitive enactment of the religious performances plays an important role in both creating and sustaining the relationship between the deity and devotees (Eliade 69). These relations, thus, played a significant part in formulating the socio-cultural conscience of both a community and individual. Thus, *Ramlila* acted as a strong medium of disseminating the ideals of Rama among the masses. Similarly, *Raslila*based on the life of Lord Krishna is another popular medium using anecdotes from the life of Krishna (especially his stay at Gokula). Both *Ramlila* and*Krishnalila* had expanded their region of influence under the influence of bhakti movement in medieval India and rising economic prosperity had further made these performances elaborate and a rich display for the devotees. Among such performances, one also comes across small performances deriving their

legitimacy from the epic traditions, but confined to smaller geographical regions. *Pandava-lila* in Garhwal region (Uttarakhand) is one such ritualistic performance which celebrates the characters of Mahabharata while creating complex iconography of both Ramayana and Mahabharata serving many purposes for the communities participating in the performance.

There is very limited academic literature available on *Pandava-lila*. Gairola asserts that bardic performances might have emerged by the end of the eighteenth century under the patronage of the rulers and as a bard to motivate the warriors on the battlefield (Gaborieau xvi). These legends and their reenactment through text or orality enable the performers and communities reconnect with their gods (Leavitt 444). It has been argued that a regional variation known as *Panduan* or *Pandavani* have also existed through 'oral versions' alongwith 'cult' association with the epic (Zoller 100). And awareness of text by the bards while singing folk rendition remains significant in case of south Asia (Leavitt 444). Mahabharata is also said to have 'convenient containers' to preserve text along with 'artistic self-conscious claim' towards the final completion of the epic (Fitzgerald 807). However, one needs to go back to understand the dissemination of *Pandava-lila*and its relevance in the region (Leavitt 470). *Pandava-lila*, despite variation in different villages, has uniformity in terms of its performance in case of these being recitative, musical and dramatic 'showings' or 'dancing' of the Mahabharata (Sax 276). Thus, oral traditions became the basis for the performances all over the Garhwal region. And because of these performances, Mahabharata enters into the cultural world of the region, village and an individual.

**Cultural World of *Pandava-lila***

Assimilation of varied regional cultural practices with Pan Indian 'dominant traditions' through Sanskritisation or parochialisation remains a dynamic process (Sharma 113). Enactment of *Pandava-lila* in the region of Garhwal encompass dynamic alignment of regional cultural notions within the Sanskrit world of the texts. Both epic literature and Puranas like Skanda Purana successfully brought the sacred places of Garhwal into the sacred geography of Puranic *tirthas*. The movement of Brahman into the region was facilitated with the presence of Puranic text eulogizing various sacred places with stipulated norms for ritual

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performance. The awareness of textual presentation in the form of Mahabharata and Purana however never disseminated in purity to the masses which had bards as the medium of such narration. Despite their awareness about the original texts, bardic traditions incorporated regional sensibilities interpolating various local legends, places and events in the narration of Mahabharata and movement of Pandavas in the region. The movement of mendicants (*jogis* and *naths*) might have played a role in transmission of Mahabharata devoid of originality pertaining to the Sanskrit (with Brahman as its custodians) text of Mahabharata (Zoller 100). The presence of Brahmin in the ritual and caste hierarchies have however failed to totally alter the village identities where the village remains a collective participant in the performance of *Pandava-lila*. Even the daughters who have married outside, do not lose their status as village members and they participate in village participation of *Pandava-lila* (Channa 71). Similarly, the role of Kunti (the mother of the Pandavas) remains reserved for the Rajput woman. The incorporation of other gods and goddesses ranging from Kali to village gods have made the whole performance multi-facet. The space provided to various participating communities through performance of *Pandava-lila*is fascinating. The Jad community in upper Garhwal have successfully taken the Rajput identity despite their cultural connection with Tibet Buddhism. They have laid their claim as the descendants of *Pandava* through their enactment of Mahabharata through *Pandava-lila* and declaring Pandava as their clan gods Thus *Pandava-lila* might have been playing multiple roles in the region. Locally, the *Pandava-lila* primarily sanctifies the superior lineage of certain households who have a tradition of participating in the roles of various gods in *Pandava-lila*in their families and making Pandava their ancestors as *kuladevta*. As descendants of the Pandavas, the Rajputs of the region as a whole lay claim to their special (*khas*) status. Finally, the tradition incorporates the whole region in the Pan Indian Sanskrit world reasserting their identities as Hindu and bringing various sacred places in the region in the sacred realm of Sanskrit Gods (Channa 84).

One can demarcate the symbiotic two-way interaction between Sanskrit and non-Sanskrit traditions in south Asia (Sharma 130). The *Pandava-lila* is not based on some concrete text. Bardic interpolation is decided by the elders without consulting the original text. One can take the example of some episodes enacted in *Pandava-lila* which are completely absent in

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the original text. An anecdote of *Pandavas* (except Kunti, Bhima and Draupadi), being abducted by a demon, to sacrifice them to Goddess Kali, had its antecedents in Rajasthan and Kullu but not in original text (Zoller 92). In the episode, Bhima, on his way to liberate his brothers, encountered Herma and Kherma (the younger sisters of the demon). Herman and Kherma addressed Bhima as their brother in law. Bhima ignored their address and killed both the sisters and their brother to liberate his family. Relation with Bhima as the brother in law might have been used in connection with his marriage to Hadimba (another demoness in Mahabharata and mother of Ghatotkatch who even played an important part in the battle of Mahabharata in protecting Arjuna). However, the original text has no such connotation while exploring *Pandava-Raskshasa* (demons) relationship. Secondly, it also points to the dissemination of traditions not merely from the texts to folk but also points to one folk tradition borrowing from another outside textual representations. Movement of communities i.e. bardic, mendicants, priests, Sanskrit polities from agrarian plains in face with Islamic invasions might have facilitated the movement of Epic traditions. The phenomenon might have provided a setting for integration of various local legends and stories into the cultural world of Mahabharata (Zoller, 94).

**Submissions**

Indic traditions, both textual and bardic, remains dynamic in its dissemination into new regions of its influence. Text, though conformed to the Sanskrit sensibilities, continued to undergo gradual transformation over a period of time. Late inclusion of various myths and legends in Epic and Puranic texts testify to this phenomenon. Srinivas argues that such inclusion conforms to the process of Sanskritisation where communities adopted Sanskrit tradition to experience adjustment or vertical rise in their social status (Srinivas 32). However in case of *Pandava-lila*, there are many practices which have no reference in Sanskritic texts and remained very regional in context. On the other hand, it is the regional myths and legends which had made their way into the performance which, in theory, reflect the descent of *Pandavas*in the material world for some time to re enact their tale of valor through *Pandava-lila*. In the process, they acted as the guarding deities and expect adherence to strict observance of various rituals which have roots both in Brahmanic texts (like lower caste are not allowed to contribute food) and local tradition (in the form of even married daughters to

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other villages coming back as daughters of the village to participate in the sacred performance). The meaning of *Pandava-lila* conforms not merely to strict ritualization but it also allows the dominant groups in the performance to lay their claim to act as certain characters. Kunti, being a Rajput woman, is one such practice. The performance thus not merely brings the village together as one collective unit but also enables the various groups to reassert their social position over a period of time. Beside the rise of Pandavas as the protectors of villages and communities in the region connects the region with the Pan Indic tradition of Mahabharata reasserting their superior status as Rajputs. It also enables the various local places connected to the wider world of the sacred places within the region and across south Asia. Finally, the performance also challenges the notion that it is the texts who have influenced the bardic and regional traditions. There are episodes in *Pandava-lila* which have no borrowing from the original text but passed through bards of one region to another. One can thus submit that *Pandava-lila*reflects the little traditions in the region of Garhwal which made more meaning to the locals whereas the Great Traditions in the form Brahmanic participation eulogizing the great war of Mahabharata has existed in conformity without creating much challenge to each other.

**Notes**

[1]Mahatmya as part of Puranic literature plays an important role in legitimizing the performative aspects of rituals and other norms of sacrality of a given place both as *tirtha* and *dham.*

[2]Modern state of Uttarakhand was created on 9th November 2000. The state can be further divided into two major zones namely Kumaun and Garhwal. Garhwal includes seven districts, whereas Kumaun has six districts. Garhwal houses most of the significant sacred places like Haridwar, Badrinath, Kedarnath, Devprayag, etc in the state.

[3]Karna, Kunti are also included in the list of Pandavas as*kuladevtas*.Tons valley in Dehradun. The people of Netwar village consider Karna as their king and build their lineages through him. He is served both as a king and as a god. Another interesting temple which is of Duryodhana, who was a Kaurava, is situated just a few kilometers above the temple of Karna at Jakholi village. Like Karan, he also has its own area of jurisdiction, as he is also served like a king, and people linked their lineages to him. But in recent years, the narrative has been changed, and the temple is considered as dedicated to Shiva as Someshwara.

[4]Another legend identified *Panshupathinath* as the head.

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