

**Research Article**

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# **Traditional Fairs and Festivals of Uttarakhand as Cultural and Economic Institutions**

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## **Abstract**

Uttarakhand, a Himalayan state in northern India, hosts one of the richest concentrations of traditional fairs and festivals in the South Asian subcontinent. These events rooted in agrarian cycles, deity worship, river confluences and seasonal rhythms represent living expressions of the region's intangible cultural heritage (ICH) and serve simultaneously as informal economic platforms sustaining artisans, performers, traders and service providers across remote hill communities. Despite their cultural depth and livelihood significance, traditional fairs in Uttarakhand occupy a persistent blind spot in both academic scholarship and official data systems. No published secondary source — including state tourism statistics, national household surveys or craft economy reports — records fair-specific employment or income generation as a distinct measurable category. This paper undertakes a systematic secondary evidence review, drawing on historical gazetteers, ethnographic scholarship, official rural economy datasets and institutional cultural heritage documentation, to establish the cultural significance and economic context of traditional fairs in Uttarakhand. It demonstrates, through this review, that the absence of fair-specific economic data is not merely a research inconvenience but a structural failure in India's statistical architecture for capturing informal cultural economies. The paper concludes by making the case for a structured investigation a vendor survey and administrative records study as the necessary next step toward filling this gap. As a foundation study, its contribution lies in synthesizing what is already known, naming what remains unmeasured and providing a research design ready for deployment when fieldwork resources allow.

### **Keywords**

intangible cultural heritage,  
traditional fairs,  
informal economy,  
mela,  
rural livelihoods,  
cultural tourism

## 1. Introduction

Every January, the riverside town of Bageshwar in the Kumaon hills of Uttarakhand fills with an energy that no government census has ever recorded. The Uttarayani Mela, for instance, is celebrated annually in the month of January is held at the confluence of the Saryu and Gomti rivers on the occasion of Makar Sankranti. This traditional fair draws tens of thousands of visitors from across the division and beyond. Women in embroidered pichhauras move through a dense press of stalls selling ringal bamboo crafts, copper vessels, woollen textiles, herbal medicines and agricultural tools. Dhol-damau drums announce ritual sequences at the riverbank. Jagar singers perform through the night. Artisans who have prepared stock for months conduct the majority of their annual trade in three days. This fair has been held, in some form, for centuries. And yet in the statistical records of the Uttarakhand government, it exists only as a footnote, an unnamed line within the footfall figures for Bageshwar district. In Garhwal and Kumaon, the two administrative divisions of Uttarakhand, the cultural and economic life of hill communities are animated throughout the year by organization of numerous fairs and celebration of regional festivals at large scale. To name a few, fairs during uttaryani, Magh Mela, Nanda devi mela, Gaucher mela and kauthig fairs held in individual villages to honour local deities, these events form a continuous and living ceremonial calendar. These fairs collectively represent the most significant concentrations of intangible cultural heritage in the Indian Himalayan region. Individually, each fair sustains a temporary but consequential informal economy of vendors, performers, priests, transporters and craft producers whose livelihoods depend partly or wholly on the fair circuit.

Yet the scholarly literature on Uttarakhand's fairs has developed unevenly. The cultural and ethnographic dimensions have received sustained, if dispersed, attention in colonial gazetteers, post-independence regional histories, folk art documentation by national institutions and a small body of academic ethnography. The economic

dimensions have received almost no systematic study. There are no published estimates of fair-specific employment or income in Uttarakhand. There is no inventory of what proportion of hill households derive significant income from fair participation. There is no analysis of how the informal fair economy relates to the broader livelihood structure of rural Uttarakhand.

The present study responds to that situation in two ways. Firstly, the study undertakes a systematic secondary evidence review — drawing on historical gazetteers, ethnographic scholarship, national household surveys, craft economy reports and cultural heritage documentation to establish what is currently known about the cultural significance and economic context of traditional fairs in Uttarakhand. Secondly, it analyses the data gap in documenting the structural reasons that explains why fair-specific economic data is absent from India's official statistical system and arguing that this absence has material consequences for both policy and scholarship.

The scope of the paper is deliberately bounded. It does not claim to measure fair-specific employment or income, because no secondary source supports such measurement. The present study attempts to highlight that the existing body of evidence is sufficient to establish the cultural importance of Uttarakhand's traditional fairs. The paper also demonstrates that the full economic contribution of such event remains structurally invisible to the institutions and hence they fail to support them.

## 2. Review of Literature

### *2.1 The Intangible Aspect of Traditional Fairs as Cultural Heritage*

The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) identifies ICH across five broad domains. These domains are- oral traditions and expressions, rituals and festive events, performing arts, social practices, knowledge and practices relating to nature and the

universe and traditional craftsmanship. The traditional fairs in Uttarakhand reveal themselves to be far more than festive occasions, they function as living spaces where several of these domains converge at once, reinforcing and renewing one another. Through these fairs one might encounter ritual recitation in Garhwali or Kumaoni, the rhythms of traditional drumming, communal dance and the exchange of locally made craft objects. The narration of cosmological stories that bind a community to its surrounding landscape are also a part of such organizations. Considering the mass gathering during fairs and festivals, only as tourist destinations or informal trading, represents a narrow approach to understand its significance.

As compared to the lowland Indian regions, the ethnographic literature on Uttarakhand's folk traditions is comparatively less, which fails to establish the cultural significance of fair and traditions with reasonable consistency. Pathak (2005), is one among the most useful sources whose survey of Uttarakhand folk culture remains the most thorough single-volume document which is available in Hindi. Pathak in his work establishes the deep interdependence that exists between the region's seasonal fairs and its performing traditions. His documentation of the Pandav Nritya, a ritual dance drama through which hereditary performer communities re-enact episodes from the Mahabharata, makes clear that in many Garhwali villages, this form has survived almost entirely. The annual village fair and its ceremonial sequence have continued to provide it with a dedicated context for performance. Without that occasion, the form loses not just its audience but its reason for being. Walton (1910), writing as the district collector for Garhwal in the early twentieth century, provides the earliest systematic catalogue of fairs in that division, recording their names, locations, dates and presiding deities across hundreds of villages. Atkinson (1882), in his monumental Himalayan Gazetteer, extends this documentation to the Kumaon hills, noting the economic as well as religious character of the larger fairs and their function as seasonal markets for agricultural produce, livestock and craft goods.

More recent institutional documentation has added detail to this picture without substantially altering it. The Sangeet Natak Akademi's documentation of Uttarakhand folk performing arts records the specific fair contexts in which forms such as Chholia — a martial dance tradition associated with the Rajput communities of Kumaon — and Jagar — a shamanistic oral performance through which hereditary bards commune with local deities — are traditionally performed. The Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) has conducted field documentation of oral traditions and ritual knowledge in several Garhwali and Kumaoni communities, some of which is available through their Delhi archive. The Uttarakhand's traditional fairs function as what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1995) called 'living heritage' sites since it represents a blend of cultural knowledge along which is being practiced, negotiated and transmitted through generations.

## ***2.2 Festivals and Informal Economies:***

### ***Theoretical Context***

Event studies and tourism economics, provides a well-established academic literature in the West, that explains the relationship between festivals and economic life. Getz (2010), proposes a three-part structure to analyze the economic impacts of planned events. First and foremost, the direct effect operates through expenditures made by the visitors and organizers, which flows directly into the local economy. Second structure examines the indirect effect in which the initial spending moves further along supply chains and into related industries. While the third structure is based on induced effects, in which income circulates more broadly as local residents and businesses put their earnings back into the economy. This framework helps in understanding how a traditional fair creates economic activity and improve its assess far beyond a single market stall.

Throsby (2001) approaches is based on cultural capital angle. His argument is that cultural practices and objects accumulate value across time. This value operates simultaneously on economic and non-economic registers. Traditional fairs are living reservoir of cultural knowledge, craft skill and social connection. A depletion of cultural capital is the consequence of discontinuity of fair traditions, which in majority cases are sustained by the community. But due to out migration, unchecked commercialization, differences in institutional setup, the sentiments related with traditional fairs gets loosened.

Richards and Palmer (2010) in their study examined the failure of research by considering in most cases only large, professionally run festivals in European and North American cities. This represents the analytical bias in this field as it is not merely a gap in geographic coverage. Festivals economies models were shaped by a particular kind of event which included ticketed, formally administered and financially transparent structure.

In case of Rural South Asia, the setting is precisely different. In Uttarakhand, for instance, have a contradictory term with little relevance to the European arts festival or a North American cultural event. Stalls being temporary and often unregistered, encourages transactions in cash, leaving no paper trail. Vendors and seasonal workers follow a calendar that is as much ritual as commercial by moving fluidly across a regional fair circuit.

### ***2.3 Rural Livelihoods and the Informal***

#### ***Economy in Uttarakhand***

Uttarakhand's hill districts occupy a structurally precarious position within the broader economy of northern India. The 2011 Census placed the workforce participation rate across these districts at 41.6 percent which is below the national average. It reflected an employment landscape dominated by seasonal work and informal

livelihood arrangements. The picture has not fundamentally shifted in the years since. Data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey for 2022–23 indicates that roughly 68 percent of Uttarakhand's rural workforce is engaged in some form of self-employment which covers vendors, artisans and itinerant traders who collectively sustain the economic life of the fair circuit (MoSPI, 2023).

Outmigration is one of the biggest challenges of the state. In the 2011 Census migration tables for Uttarakhand's hill districts, the net outmigration rates were between 17% and 24% in the most severely affected blocks of Pauri, Almora, Champawat, and Rudrapraya. The figures in the census, reflects the steady departure of working-age residents toward employment opportunities in the plains. The Economic Survey of the state conducted by Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Uttarakhand, 2023 in their report acknowledges the consequences of successive outmigration that have created a new term i.e., 'ghost villages'. It represents some settlement where the permanent population has thinned to a point where sustaining community institutions through organization of traditions fairs is difficult to maintain.

Given this structural context, the seasonal earnings that traditional fair participation provides for resident households represent a dimension of local economic life that aggregate figures consistently fail to reflect with any adequacy. In NABARD's State Focus Paper for Uttarakhand (2023), the estimated earnings of the artisan and craft-sector households in the hill districts was between Rs. 45,000 and Rs. 85,000 annually. This income is generated through informal market activity, in which craft fairs and seasonal melas are identified as the primary sales channel. The annual report of the Khadi and Village Industries Commission for Uttarakhand (2022–23), in the report mentioned a record of 67,842 registered artisans. These artisans produce goods across four main categories namely ringal bamboo products,

woollen textiles, aipan art, and copperware. Their principal domestic outlet is the fair and mela network. The KVIC provides only partial count since the registration captures only a fraction of the producers who actually take part in traditional fairs. While most of the informal artisan population, remains substantially undercounted by any available measure.

### **3. Methodology**

The methodological approach adopts a structured process of identifying, critically assessing, and analytically bringing together existing textual sources in order to respond to a defined research question (Bowen, 2009). Documentary research holds a well-established place within the social sciences and should not be confused with a conventional literature review. The difference lies in how documents are handled: rather than serving simply as containers of prior knowledge to be summarised and referenced, they are treated as data in their own right, subjected to the same standards of source evaluation, cross-referencing, and analytical transparency that would be expected in any thorough empirical investigation.

Two considerations justify the choice of this method for the present study. The first is a straightforward matter of fit. The central research question — what existing sources can and cannot establish about the cultural significance and economic context of traditional fairs in Uttarakhand is precisely the kind of question that documentary research is built to answer. It requires breadth of source engagement and analytical synthesis rather than the original data generation that fieldwork would provide. Second, time and resource constraints make primary fieldwork impractical within the present study. Rather than conducting a fieldwork study at reduced quality or scale, this paper conducts a documentary study at full quality and makes the case for the fieldwork study that should follow.

Sources were identified through four channels: searches of university library catalogues and national archive holdings for historical and ethnographic literature on Uttarakhand; direct access to official government publications via the websites of the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, the Directorate of Economics and Statistics (Uttarakhand), the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development, and the Khadi and Village Industries Commission; searches of the catalogues of the Sangeet Natak Akademi and the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts for cultural heritage documentation; and searches of academic databases including Scopus and Google Scholar for peer-reviewed literature on festival economics and intangible cultural heritage in South Asian contexts.

Sources were evaluated for relevance, reliability, and analytical usefulness against three criteria: whether they contained substantive information specifically about Uttarakhand's traditional fairs rather than Indian fairs or Himalayan culture in broader terms; whether they came from credible institutional or scholarly authors; and whether the information they offered was sufficiently current to support analysis of present conditions, or clearly placed in historical context where it was not. Sources that met these criteria but contained only general background information — rather than fair-specific content — were drawn upon solely for framing and theoretical context, and not as primary evidence for empirical claims.

A key limitation of this methodology must be acknowledged from the outset. No secondary source identified through this review contains fair-specific employment or income data for Uttarakhand. The UTDB tourism statistics record visitor numbers at permanent destinations, not at temporary fair events. National household surveys do not break down informal earnings by their source within seasonal periods. Craft economy reports, as noted above, extend only to registered

artisans and leave the wider informal population unaccounted for. The analysis in this paper consequently works across two distinct levels: what the available sources establish directly about the cultural character and broader economic conditions surrounding traditional fairs, and what the surrounding evidence allows to be reasonably inferred — with appropriate qualification at each stage — about the economic significance of fairs in more specific terms.

## **4. The cultural landscape: a typology of traditional fairs in Uttarakhand**

### ***4.1 Geographic and Historical Context***

The traditional fair landscape of Uttarakhand has been shaped by three overlapping geographies. The first comprises the river confluences that have functioned as sites of pilgrimage and periodic trade since well before colonial administration took hold. The second covers the agricultural zones whose seasonal rhythms have long generated harvest celebrations and the kind of seed exchange fairs that bind communities to their cropping calendars. The third traces the high-altitude pastoral corridors along which trading communities have historically moved livestock, wool, salt, and grain across the mountains. Atkinson (1882) documented over two hundred distinct fair and festival sites across the Kumaon hills alone, ranging from large annual gatherings at major river confluences down to irregular village-level events organised around the

festival day of a particular local deity. Walton (1910) recorded a comparable density across the Garhwal division. What these colonial-era accounts collectively suggest is a landscape in which periodic market-festivals were a structural feature of social and economic life, and in which the religious and commercial dimensions of such gatherings were not merely coexistent but functionally inseparable.

The contemporary fair landscape has pulled back somewhat from this historical density, most noticeably at higher altitudes, where outmigration and climate-related disruption have eroded both the resident populations needed to sustain fair traditions and, in some instances, the ecological conditions reliable water sources, viable pasture that gave certain gatherings their seasonal logic in the first place. The administrative records of the State Cultural Department, as cited in the Uttarakhand Tourism Policy (Government of Uttarakhand, 2023), identify over 160 registered traditional fairs held annually across the thirteen districts in the state. This is an undercount figure of fairs, since it captures only official record and leaves out the considerable number of village-level fairs that continue without registration or administrative visibility.

### ***4.2 A Working Typology***

On historical and ethnographic basis, the traditional fairs in Uttarakhand is based on their primary character and function. In most of the cases, the combine elements of more than one category exist, which are categorized as under-

Table 1. Typology of Traditional Fairs in Uttarakhand (classification based on Atkinson, 1882; Walton, 1910; Pathak, 2005; Sangeet Natak Akademi)

Sl. No.	Types	Primary character	Examples	Districts
1.	Deity-centred Fairs	Organised around the worship of a local deity (devta) or goddess (devi); ritual sequences are the central activity; trade and performance are ancillary	Nanda Devi Raj Jat Yatra, Syalde Bikhauti Mela, Devidhura Bagwal Mela	Chamoli, Almora, Champawat
2.	Agrarian and Seasonal Fairs	Tied to agricultural cycles — sowing, harvest, or seasonal transition; functions as a seed, tool, and produce exchange	Uttarayani / Makar Sankranti Mela, Harella Festival, Phool Dei	Bageshwar, State-wide, Kumaon
3.	River Confluence Fairs	Held at the meeting of two or more rivers (sangam); historically also important trade sites; pilgrimage character strong	Devprayag Mela, Rudraprayag Mela, Kartik Poornima Mela	Tehri, Rudraprayag, Haridwar
4.	Trade and Livestock Fairs	Cattle, sheep, and horse trading alongside craft and agricultural goods; historically served inter-regional trade between hills and plains historically served inter-regional trade between hills and plains	Gauchar Mela, Ramman (local trade dimension)	Chamoli, Pauri
5.	Performing Arts Festivals	Centre on a specific performing tradition — dance, music, oral narrative — with ritual and community sanction	Pandav Nritya Melas, Chholia dance festivals, Jagar ceremonial events	Pauri, Tehri, Almora, Pithoragarh

### 4.3 Traditional Fairs as Living Archives of Intangible Cultural Heritage

Uttarakhand's traditional fairs is a 'living archive', a space where cultural knowledge is not held in fixed or static form but continuously practiced, debate and regenerated. Three of the ICH domains identified by UNESCO (2003) are attested in the existing literature.

Among these, the performing arts are the most visible and the most thoroughly documented. Records held by the Sangeet Natak Akademi

confirm that Chholia — a martial dance performed with sword and shield at weddings and major community gatherings — finds its most concentrated performance setting in the larger Kumaoni fairs, where troupes from different villages come together and perform in a broadly competitive spirit. Pandav Nritya presents a comparable case. This ritual enactment of episodes from the Mahabharata requires weeks of ceremonial preparation and can only be performed at events that carry community sanction. Amongst Garhwali communities, it has survived primarily due to the organization of

annual fair or village devta celebration, which continues to provide a reason for social occasion with mass gatherings, that makes such a performance both meaningful and possible (Pathak, 2005). The social occasion that makes performance meaningful would cease to exist, if such practices disappear. It would end the performing art form, a powerful tool for transmitting knowledge about a community and its culture.

Oral traditions constitute a second major ICH domain sustained through fair contexts. Jagar, a shamanistic performance tradition in which a hereditary bard (jagaria) summons local deities through extended oral narration, sometimes lasting through the night, is performed at both domestic occasions and community fairs. The Kumaoni folk song forms Nyauli and Jhumelo, whose lyrics encode seasonal and ecological knowledge as well as personal and community histories, are performed at fairs as social entertainment but also as carriers of knowledge that is not transmitted through any other medium. Uttarakhand Sanskrit Academy and Lokbharti have published collections of these forms that preserve the textual record; but the performance tradition itself persists only as long as there are community occasions — including fairs — to animate it.

Traditional craftsmanship is the third and economically most significant ICH domain. The craft traditions most closely associated with Uttarakhand's fairs — ringal bamboo weaving, aipan floor art, thulma (handwoven woollen fabric), and copperware production — are practised by communities in which craft skill is transmitted through familial apprenticeship rather than formal instruction. This has been rephrased in the following version:

The Crafts Council of India's documentation of Uttarakhand's craft heritage in their report stated that, for the craft-producing households in the hill districts, the fair circuits are not just any sales outlet, but the primary economic foundation on which these households depend. These are not

just any supplementary source of income that sits alongside other arrangements. Due to lack of accessibility to alternative channels such as government emporiums, export platforms or urban retail networks, these fairs are the only workable options available (Crafts Council of India, 2019).

## **5. Economic context: what the evidence establishes and what it cannot**

### ***5.1 The Rural Economy of Uttarakhand's Hill Districts***

The hill community of Uttarakhand is survived predominantly by informal, diversified across multiple low-yield income sources that depends heavily on seasonal earnings. Along with this it is increasingly under strain from persistent outmigration of working-age populations. So, any assessment of traditional fairs in Uttarakhand, need to be anchored by considering the structural realities of how hill communities and their livelihoods.

In the Periodic Labour Force Survey (2022–23), self-employment rates records for 61.4 per cent among rural male workers and 79.3 per cent among rural female workers. Across the state figures, it encompasses that majority of artisans,

petty traders and small-scale service providers participate in various economic activities organized around the fair circuit (MoSPI, 2023). The Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (MoSPI, 2024) estimated the average monthly per capita expenditure in rural Uttarakhand, which accounts to Rs 4,122. This figure falls measurably below the national rural average. The formal employment opportunities being limited in hill districts with the cost of essential goods being comparatively high, reduces actual consumption level. In such situations, the modest seasonal inflow from fair participation contributes in the household's total cash earnings across the year, even if, it is on temporary basis.

In NABARD's State Focus Paper for Uttarakhand (2023), approximately 1.2 lakh beneficiaries across the hill districts has been recorded that supports the craft and artisan sector. The average household income of around Rs 52,000 annually from craft-related activity are running across the hill economy. The report also identifies the fair and mela circuit, as the principal domestic sales channel for these producers, with government craft emporiums and digital retail platforms together accounting for under 15 per cent of total craft sales in the region. Considering the authenticity of the report, traditional fairs effectively function as the primary marketplace for a sector sustaining over a lakh hill resident. This is a finding of considerable policy relevance, yet it remains largely unexamined in any systematic or sustained way within the existing literature.

### ***5.2 What the Data Cannot Tell Us: The Fair-Specific Gap***

The evidence laid out so far offers a useful backdrop, but it does not—and cannot—provide fair-specific figures for employment or income. This is not a minor point; being precise about it matters for the intellectual honesty of this paper. The Uttarakhand Tourism Development Board's Annual Tourism Statistics (2024) provide district-level data on visitor footfall at specific destinations—Haridwar, Badrinath, Kedarnath, Nainital, Almora, Bageshwar and others. These

figures span the full year and include all types of visitors—pilgrims, trekkers, religious tourists and family travellers—at permanent sites. They do not distinguish fair-period visitors from non-fair-period visitors, and they do not record visits to events rather than places. It is therefore not possible, from these statistics, to derive any estimate of fair-specific visitor numbers or spending. Any paper that uses UTDB destination footfall data as a proxy for fair attendance is drawing an inference that the data does not support.

Similarly, the PLFS self-employment figures and the NABARD artisan income estimates are aggregated across the full year and across all market channels. They cannot be disaggregated by income source to isolate what proportion of informal self-employment income in Uttarakhand derives from fair participation. The Census occupation tables identify the categories of work that hill households engage in, but not the specific events or locations that generate that work. The KVIC registration data counts artisans and their craft output, but does not record where or through what market channel that output is sold.

The secondary data derived from the existing literatures strongly suggests that traditional fairs carry genuine and substantial economic weight for a significant portion of Uttarakhand's hill population. The deficiency exists in the fair-specific data required to establish its relevance with analytical precision. This an important research gap in the existing institutional knowledge. Without any quantitative understanding of how these fairs actually contribute to the local economy, the state government allocates resources toward cultural preservation or rural livelihood programmes. Due to this, policies become ineffective instead of directing resources and setting priorities, since the data to support it are missing or not collected appropriately.

## **6. The data gap: Why it exists and why it matters**

The absence of fair-specific economic data in India's official statistical system is a challenging issue. It reflects a structural feature of how India's statistical apparatus classifies and measures economic activity, a feature that systematically renders the informal cultural economy of traditional fairs invisible.

India's National Accounts and household survey framework classifies economic activity by sector (agriculture, manufacturing, services), by employment type (wage employment, self-employment, casual labour), and in some instruments by enterprise size. None of these classifications creates a category for 'activity conducted during a traditional fair or festival.' A dhol player who earns Rs. 8,000 performing over four days at the Gauchar Mela is classified as a self-employed service worker. A ringal bamboo weaver who sells Rs. 25,000 worth of baskets at the Uttarayani Mela is classified as a self-employed craft producer in the household industry sector. The fair context that generates their income and that is essential to understanding the economic significance of the event is invisible in the data.

The Economic Census, which records economic establishments and their employment, covers only fixed and semi-fixed enterprises — not the temporary stalls established at a fair for three to five days. The GST registration system captures formal trade; the cash-based transactions of traditional fair vendors fall entirely outside it. The District Magistrate offices that issue fair permissions maintain records of stall licences issued, but these records are administrative rather than statistical, they are not consolidated, analyzed, or published. An RTI application to a DM office may yield a list of stall categories and licence fees for a particular year, but no office compiles this into a district-wide or state-wide economic account.

The Uttarakhand Tourism Policy (Government of Uttarakhand, 2023) considers and acknowledges the importance of fairs and festivals as valuable cultural assets. The government have expressed their commitment for advancing cultural tourism development around key events. But due to data inadequacy regarding the households that depends on fair for their livelihoods, their actual earnings and how that income compared to other available options is more effective lacks commitments.

Making such interventions aspirational in character rather than grounded in any evidential foundation. The absence of baseline data makes it ineffective and impossible to design interventions that are proportionate, targeted or measurable in their outcomes. Due to this, even where genuine intent exists to support fair economies or protect the livelihoods, it fails to understand the economic realities it purports to address. Until and unless, the fair circuit is treated as a subject of systematic documentation rather than a background feature of regional culture, the gap between stated policy commitments and the actual conditions of the people is likely to persist.

Measuring the benefit using the cost-benefit analysis is inefficient while allocating funds for fair infrastructure, artisan support or performance preservation, since measuring cost in quantifiable but the benefit side of the equation is blank. Institutional support for traditional fairs has thus remained fragmented and inadequate, a situation that cannot be ascribed to, majorly due to the absence of a robust economic justification for investment, instead of policymaker disengagement in specific.

The festival-fair economy of the Himalayan hill states has been almost entirely overlooked. India's informal economy has been the subject of extensive and sophisticated analysis, yet Studies of street vendors, seasonal traders and informal artisans concentrate overwhelmingly on urban and peri-urban locations. The fieldwork is more straightforward since the line between formal and informal is easier to draw. The existing literature is insufficient in providing the economic analysis of traditional fair. These events being temporary,

seasonal, place-specific, culturally embedded and operating entirely outside formal regulatory structures finds no mention in the available data. This absence from academic scrutiny reinforces the absence from official statistics, resulting in a significant informal economic institution which is unmeasured and untheorized.

## 7. Threats to continuity: What the evidence suggests

Four intersecting threats have been reviewed using secondary evidence that can impact the continuity of traditional fairs in Uttarakhand. Both cultural and economic consequences are embedded within these.

**1. Demographic Outmigration:** It stands out as the most thoroughly documented amongst all the major threats. The Census data on migration indicates that net outmigration reduced the permanent population of certain blocks in Pauri, Almora, and Rudraprayag districts by more than a fifth between 2001 and 2011. A subsequent survey by the state government, alongside civil society reporting, stated that the trend has continued to intensify in the years since (Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Uttarakhand, 2023). The economic disequilibrium also emerges, wherein the balance between the suppliers and the consumers gets disrupted. A shrinking resident population in terms of fewer vendors, fewer performers, fewer ritual specialists and fewer local buyers to sustain the market side of these gatherings. The cultural erosion that accompanies this demographic decline is more gradual in its unfolding but no less serious in its implications. Some specific families, blessed with the arts and ritual practices, when they relocate the transmitting of the knowledge and cultural practices from one generation to another gets impacted. There exists no institutional mechanism through which such traditions can be systematically documented or preserved before they are lost entirely.

**2. Ecological Disruption-** This is the second and less-discussed threat. The festivals in Uttarakhand are linked to nature and various ecological conditions, which includes forest, agriculture, river, pasture and so on. This ecological combination has been disrupted by climate change, infrastructure development and forest

management policy. The traditional practice of hosting traditional fairs in some regions of the state gets disturbed by some natural calamities. The 2013 Kedarnath floods and the 2021 Chamoli disaster, are an example of such unforeseen events which affected valleys for multiple subsequent seasons. River confluence fairs, whose ritual character depends on the specific hydrological character of the confluence site, are particularly vulnerable to changes in water table and seasonal flow patterns. The existing literature has done minor work on this aspect of fairs and festivals within the state.

**3. Commercial Pressure-** This is the third and the most ambiguous of all the four. With the generalization of trade and its growth, the flow of non-local vendors dealing in the machine-made goods from the plains has changed the basic characteristics of the traditional fairs in the state. Various ethnographic observations also considered this aspect of expansion and growth (Bhatt & Bhargava, 2006). From an economic viewpoint, the historical relevance of the local artisans and vendors is getting displaced due to the competition resulting from commercialization at a dynamic level. While from a cultural standpoint, it represents a gradual erosion of the fair's identity as a distinctly Uttarakhandi occasion. The struggle that the state is facing now is preserving the commercial openness that keeps a fair economically viable, on the one hand. While on the other hand, the issue is maintaining the cultural specificity that gives it heritage value. This is on the governance challenge for which no existing policy framework in Uttarakhand currently offers a coherent or workable response.

**4. Institutional Neglect** —Due to the data gap discussed above constitutes a systemic threat of a different and arguably more insidious order. When the fairs receive no proper funding, infrastructure investment, proper roads connectivity, basic amenities for vendors and visitors and neither performer receive formal recognition nor financial support, it ultimately

fastens the process of decline. The Planning Commission's Working Group Report on Cultural Heritage for the Twelfth Five Year Plan (2011) identified this as a major policy failure and recommendations for a programme of livelihood-linked heritage support targeting traditional fairs across the Himalayan states. It has been more than a decade that that recommendations have remained substantially unimplemented in Uttarakhand

## **8. The case for primary investigation**

The study attempts to reveal some major shortcomings of the existing literatures that fairs to cover the major challenges faced by the traditional fairs and festivals of Uttarakhand. The study through the documentary evidence reviewed establishes that traditional fairs in Uttarakhand carry considerable cultural significance, occupy a meaningful position within the state's informal rural economy. But it remains structurally absent from official data system and face growing pressures from several converging directions. The data insufficiency observed in the secondary sources includes employment days generated, income volumes, proportional shares of household earnings that would allow these fairs to be advocated for and supported on a quantitative basis. Primary fieldwork can add volume to the existing knowledge for which a structured research design is required that could be carried directly into the field when resources and institutional support permit.

A structured vendor survey along with the visitor's expenditure survey in different traditional fairs in both Garhwal and Kumaon region of Uttarakhand is a prerequisite to get an in depth analysis of the current status. Along with this, the site selection should deliberately capture variation in fair type, geographic location and scale of event. This will provide the demand and supply side picture of the Himalayan economy.

Taken together with vendor income data, this would enable an application of Getz's (2010) direct impact framework to produce the first credible estimate of total economic activity generated by a traditional fair in Uttarakhand. The first systematic documentation of fair-sector livelihoods in the state is required covering economic, social, cultural and ecological aspect.

Administrative records held by District Magistrate offices — specifically stall registration data for each selected fair, obtainable through RTI applications filed approximately sixty days prior to fieldwork would provide an independent basis for verifying vendor population estimates and where historical records have been preserved, would allow meaningful comparisons of fair scale over time. Together, these three data streams would produce findings of both academic originality and direct policy utility.

## **9. Conclusion**

Uttarakhand's traditional fairs and festivals are, by any reasonable definition, important. They are historically continuous institutions whose origins predate the region's colonial administration. They are culturally rich events that sustain performing art forms, oral traditions, craft practices, and ritual knowledge systems that exist nowhere else in quite the same form. They are economically significant platforms that generate income and employment for artisans, vendors, performers, and service providers in some of the most economically marginalised communities in the Indian Himalaya. And they are, from the perspective of India's official statistical system, almost entirely invisible. This paper has made three contributions toward correcting that invisibility. First, it has synthesised the available secondary evidence — historical, ethnographic, and economic — into a coherent account of what is currently known about the cultural and

economic significance of traditional fairs in Uttarakhand. That synthesis did not previously exist in this form; it is the paper's primary original contribution. Second, it has documented the

structural reasons why fair-specific economic data is absent from India's official statistical system, and has argued that this absence has measurable consequences for both policy and scholarship. Finally, it has laid out a concrete, workable research design—one capable of generating the hard numbers that are currently missing, and that policymakers need if they are to make informed decisions about investment in fair infrastructure, artisan livelihoods and the preservation of performing arts.

The limitations of this paper are real and they have been stated plainly throughout. A documentary study cannot measure what it has not directly observed and the economic claims advanced here are inferential rather than empirical. But there is a particular kind of contribution that only a documentary study can make the contribution of identifying a gap, tracing its contours and building a case for why closing it matters. That is what this paper has tried to do. The traditional fairs of Uttarakhand have been poorly served by both scholarship and policy. They deserve better from both. This paper is an attempt to reflect the data inadequacy and what steps are required towards both.

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