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## **MIGRATION FROM UTTARAKHAND AND THE SUBSEQUENT CONTINUITY AND MODERN TRANSFORMATION OF JAGAR FOLK LIFE**

### ***Abstract***

*In the Garhwal and Kumaon divisions of Uttarakhand, a genre of ritual known as jagar is widely extant. Families and village communities express their dedication and devotion to folk deities by organizing this ritual. Music and dance acts form main parts of the age-old oral and performance tradition. However, decades of rampant migration from Uttarakhand has gravely affected the survival of its folklife. The severity of migration issue has immensely transformed folk cultures, even at instances, enfeebled the roots of cultural heritage. Correspondingly, phases of change and continuity aren't noticed in jagar. There is an expansion of jagar through manifesting beyond ritual condition and space. The paper discusses issue of migration of Uttarakhandi people from rural to urban areas (primarily to Delhi-NCR region, North India) and studies impact of relocation of community on transforming jagar folk life. The paper incorporates direct observation of jagar tradition within the Uttarakhandi community. Participation observation methods has been employed. And, the paper evaluates migration and modern developments in context of jagar from the explanatory framework of 'folkloric, psychoanalytic, symbolic, theatrical, memory, and diasporic' approach. Major focus is on critical themes of cultural memory, musical revival, and transformation of traditional aspects, diaspora's nostalgia and belongingness.*

**Keywords:** *Uttarakhand, Jagar, Migration, Folklife, Diaspora, Nostalgia*

We are part of a century that is marked with the sprawling presence of globalization and rapid human mobility from its onset. With it has increased communicative engagement and interdependencies beyond borders and across societal and other barriers which has given way to an unprecedented fervency in movement of people, and made more convenient the outreach to different places, information, ideologies, material goods, cultures, and resources. In this dramatically changing world, human life constantly encounters some kind of mobility which directly affects their people's indigenous knowledge systems

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and materiality. Likewise, there are traditions that have adopted change and incorporated new trends with time. Many oral traditions and different folkloric forms have shown signs of progress in the direction of forming a new impulse. In the contemporary situation, aspects of change and continuity are noticed around *jagar* folklife. Thus, the paper analyses the expression of *jagar* in new performance spaces. And asks, what is there to witness and understand when ritual music of *jagar* is transformed through modern means or digitalized and presented on stage? This question becomes central here and its noteworthy how people have taken their ritual music from the precinct of villages and brought it to be staged on cultural and religious gatherings organized by the diaspora community.

In Uttarakhand, *jagar* is an admixture of specific kind of dance, song, and music worship that instils enthusiasm, complex emotions, and spirituality in the performers and amongst devotees. Etymologically, *jagar* means the state of being awake, and is described as an all-night ritual ceremony. It is an intense ritual practice of spiritual awakening of folk gods alongside of those who partake in it, namely ritual specialists and devotees. It is organised every year, without any failure, since people like to follow religious duty as they believe that through rituals they can connect with their deities and receive apt guidance to lead most prosperous life. In both Garhwal and Kumaon regions of the state, *jagar* is widely extant. Folk music and possession dance form main parts of its oral and performance traditions. Which is why the word *jagaris* is a polyvalent term and is variously used in the regional contexts to define ritual as an event, ritual folk song (*jagar geet*) and ritual dance (*jagar nritya*). However, many variations are witnessed in the way it is performed as ritual in different areas of mountain villages.

Uttarakhand has primarily been a Hindu dominated state, where a folk variety of Hinduism is practiced for centuries. The American anthropologist Gerald D. Berreman who had traced distinctiveness of Hinduism followed in central Himalayas prefers to call it "Pahari Hinduism" (1964: 54). In the essay, he presents his empirical findings on the religion and argues that its distinctive nature in peculiar ways from the orthodox Hinduism followed in the Northern Indian plains. As noted through fieldwork, Hinduism in Uttarakhand exhibits enmeshed beliefs in multitude of gods and goddesses as well as in demonic spirits. People worship gods of Sanskrit tradition along with folk deities, spirits, demons, *eri* and *acchari* (fairies), natural objects, animals, birds, and numerous deified heroic figures. In a sense this folk religion functions in assimilation between orthodox and unorthodox traditions; it basically represents influences and textures of both Sanskrit tradition and local cults, albeit local tends to exert more potency through its distinct beliefs and ritual practices. An interaction between epic and local tradition in the Hinduism followed is seen here. If we look at the blended tradition, like the *pahadi* Hindu ritual practice that incorporates worshiping of Sanskrit gods with folk deities, we may find

that different ritual performers work together and coexist in a single religious space. Ritual roles are special roles, and not anyone can perform them. They are not mere jobs but a way of life for individuals who are skilled in them. These roles are strictly characterized by the knowledge of old ways, beliefs, values, rules, and regulations. The part of folklore or the oral texts preserved and practiced by ritual specialists are basically “esoteric” (Dundes 1980: 47) in nature. Meaning only experts are knowledgeable about them.

Ritual performers in *jagar* are classified into the following categories: (I) Priest: Presence of a priest is not obligatory in *jagar*, but in some cases he can perform invocation or chanting, and sometimes purification rites too. (II) Folk musicians (singer and instrumentalist): It is believed that *jagar* ritual music incite possession and encourages a medium to dance. *Jagri* and *Auji* are two types of music specialists in *jagar*. (III) *Dangariya* or the Medium: is a person endowed with spiritual and magical powers and who incarnate god in his/her body; a communion that is expressed in the form of dance acts (trance dance). This performance also includes illocutionary speech acts (oral conversational performance) by the dancing medium.

*Jagar* is basically centred on the influence of music on dancer, and referring to this practice Allen C. Fanger describes musical role of specialists (*jagri* and *auji*) who play instruments and sing to “persuade deities to come [onto the dancer] in order to dance, to hear their legends told, and to receive offerings. When the deities do come, it is believed that they enjoy *jagriya’s* music and that his offerings were satisfactory” (Fanger 1990: 178). Its ceremony is always preceded by playing of ritual instruments followed by *jagar* songs and together the musical piece has quality of spiritual expression. When instruments and religious songs are performed together the impact is directed towards lifting symbolic ritual behavior. According to the folk belief, a *jagar* musical segment has potential to cause possession in medium(s) and power to summon gods. Overall, an overriding purpose of this ritual music is to engage with gods, stimulate them to move and act, and to boost the atmosphere to reify folk ideas.



**Fig. 1. Ritual musicians playing dhol-damaun. Taken by the researcher on 22 June 2017.**

According to the Hindu belief system followed in Uttarakhand, sanctity of ritual instruments and songs are persistently emphasized, and equally highlighted is their potential to connect or even summon different gods in the host bodies. Ritual music in this sense denotes the interface between human and spiritual world. Andrew Alter makes an apt comment on such kind of musical relation and influence, he states that “belief systems that acknowledge the proximity of natural and supernatural worlds, as well as the inherent metaphysical nature of sound to communicate between the worlds, imbue music with considerable power” (Alter 2008: 22). The ritual drummers, *jagri* and *dauji*, who play ritual percussions *dhol-damaun* provide the music for possession dance (see fig 1.). Their music not only creates immanent auspiciousness and goodwill, but is embedded with powers to communicate, control and even influence the divine realm with sounds. This music culminates into spirit possession and shows stimulus effect not only on the medium, but sometimes even on the priest and susceptible bystanders. In an interview, one of the ritual participants Babita Negi deems that drum beats help the medium to reach hypnotic state. Further adds, that the power of *dhol*'s sound can be experienced in the body and through senses; it is felt as vibrations, a tactile effect experienced while standing close to the instrument. The mystical impact of sounds by *dhol-damaun* is reiterated at the time of ritual gatherings and ensured by their continuous playing. The auspicious aspect must be continuously evoked to avoid inauspiciousness moving into the ritual event. *Jagar* specialists to interact properly with spiritual realm should to be able play correct musical pattern. Through music they exercise authority of communicating and controlling the divinely possessed. This aspect is an outward manifestation of the power that is accredited to their music.

*Jagar* significantly denotes the content of folk epic. As a distinct folk song genre, the peculiar features of *jagar* song are its religious theme, specific style, the performance context and the long song verses. These songs are considered to be the voice of *pahadi* religious beliefs and they are known variously by names such as *jagar*, *jagar geet* (*jagar* songs), divine songs, *puja geet* (prayer songs) and *davik lok gathayen*, which is loosely translated as divine folk tales or deity folklore. Referring to vernacular terminology, Jitu Lakhera, a fellow Uttarakhandi in his 30s, stated that the sung narrative performed in the ritual is basically *lok gathas* (folk epics). *Jagar* songs belong to the subcategory of dance-songs since these are sung by a *jagrato* pacify deities who are summoned to perform the dance. During ritual, the drumming always coalesces with the singing of incantations.

But now, under the influence of changes in modern times, *jagar* music has acquired fluidity in the manner of its reproduction across technological and mass media platforms. For this transition, not only economic growth and modern development has played a role, but the incessant migration has been of critical importance. As A. k. Ramanujan fondly pointed out in reference to

India “People only begin to notice their folklore and want to collect and preserve it when they have become separated from it”(Claus & Korom 1991: 33). Due to displacement circumstances, *Uttarakhandi* diaspora has taken ritual music from the precincts of village and brought it to be represented on broadcast and digital media, as well as on stage as part of cultural and religious programs, which are mainly organized in the urban milieu of Delhi. As a result, ritual music of *jagar* has now grown out and developed in new musical contexts. Due to the issue of migration, the folk tradition of course faces loss, but at the same time, detachment from roots works like a force for cultural reconstruction of folklore in new inhabited location.

A rather partial view on folklore would be to stress only on the traditional factor and believe it never reciprocates to the tides of change in society. On the contrary, ideas of change and continuity in relation to folklore have always been intrinsic characteristics of all the cultures. Folklore, which is a dynamic product of society, is an integral part of the modern world too, and where due to its confluence with mass media it can be seen interacting in myriad ways so that it reaches a wide audience. The topic of the relationship between modernity and folklore has been discussed for a long time, and the main concern becomes to study the new functions and meanings acquired by folklore in the modern world. Due to the impact of modernization, many scholars believed in the idea of the death of folklore, or its unavoidable possibility. Traditional folklorists and many folklore students viewed the technological mass media as “destroyers of folklore”, and something that hampers its purity (Selberg 1999: 239). They basically interpreted it as loss of the folk culture. On the other hand, there were other theorists e.g., Linda Dégh (1994) and Jawaharlal Handoo (1999) who believed that the arrival of modernization, new inventions, and technology have paved the way for emergence of new traditions and varied mass-mediated folklore representations. Mass media realm turned out to become “a new carrier of folklore..... changing the temporal boundaries of folklore rather than destroying its content of purity” (Handoo & Kvideland 1999: 2). In the modern world, folklore as a dynamic cultural content emerges anew and evokes many variations. Therefore, in the folklore studies today, the question on folklore includes analysis of both past and present expressions, performances, materials, and contexts.

### **Jagar Ritual from Migration Context**

Migration (*palayan*) has plagued entire Uttarakhand since the time of its formation in year 2000 till today. Although, it started long before the creation of the state, the unprecedented large migration wave in the 1980s is said to be one of the main reasons that fuelled the movement for the separate statehood. The state was created on economic, developmental, agricultural, educational, and healthcare issues and to bring prosperity in the lives of people living in hilly areas, but all promises and aspirations were shattered in the years to

come. Many villages are now deserted. They are depopulated since a large number of families have permanently left, which has led to the emergence of abandoned houses. Situation has become so daunting that according to the estimation given in official reports hundreds of villages have gone virtually uninhabited while causing a major crisis of abandoned villages, which are now famously called ghost villages. Moreover, the region continues to witness mass exodus of its inhabitants, who are turning their backs from rural while choosing to move to urban areas in search of better employment opportunities, infrastructural facilities, and comfortable life.

People of this Himalayan region or be it any other close-knit community is innately socio-cultural centric and takes pride in the idea of social cooperation and cultural bonding. Whereas, a socio-economic issue like migration has widespread influence on the culture of a place which is left behind. The severity of the problem is so profound in hill villages that it has greatly affected their folk culture, traditional practices and caused rapid erosion of intangible aspects of village life. *Pahad* (meaning mountain is proverbial for Uttarakhand) is losing its culture and traditions due to the rampant migration, if things continue to move this way, then slowly there will be no one left in village spaces to follow them, said Sohan Singh Rawat (2020), a local from Hindolakhil village in Tehri Garhwal district who also migrated to Delhi-NCR. He further added that in search of new hope and better future we move away from our ancestral land, and all this come at the cost of losing our traditions and cultural identity. During the discussion, he spoke about the grave emotional effect of changes on people, and also emphasized an intense nostalgia that they develop thinking of old memories.

For a fact, no human grows in an empty space but as social actor is involved within community life. The culture in which we grow or we join controls our thinking, doing and decision making faculty. Such that land and cultural association is so deeply ingrained that separation from it causes an emotional experience of loss related e.g., land-relations, people, beliefs, social-support, social-network, traditions, and vernacular practices. Moving away from homeland and leaving the place always comes at a painful price. Primarily due to our strong dependency on culture, which deeply runs through our lives, the process of migration becomes difficult on many fronts, and naturally evokes feelings of cultural bereavement and isolation. Thus, the pain of loss and separation become a significant aspect of migrants' life in new setting. When people move away, they carry with them their indigenous knowledge and then attempt to re-enact past or adapt tradition attuned with new location, even in challenging circumstances. The ways of reassertion of one's cultural identity in a new space reflect contestation between continuity and change. In case of Uttarakhand, diasporic sense of detachment enables a nostalgic desire to move closer to tradition and negotiate with ways to express it. Apart from that many Uttarakhandi migrant families try to maintain relationship with their village

by paying a visit every now and then, especially on important occasions that demand their presence. Many people go back to village in holidays like my own family, so that the connectivity with our culture remains intact said Sohan Singh Rawat (2020), a young migrant. The ritual performance has a spatial significance according to which the local land is considered foremost where the ritual should be organized in an authentic way. This practice is intrinsically tied to village land, a belief that ensures the return of migrant families so that they get to perform the ritual with the whole community. Talking about belief Jitender Lakhera (2020), a migrant living in Delhi from Sella Talla village in Pauri district, said “*pitr apne sthan par hi atten hain*”, which means the deities and ancestors who are worshipped in *jagar* appear only in the village. Hence, any opportunity to participate in the village ritual is a way to assert their membership in a family or village community.

### **Jagar Music: Expansion from Folk music to Popular Music**

The difference between folk and popular music is that popular music belongs to some author(s) who produces it for commercial purposes and sells music as a commodity to a large viewership. Whereas folk music is commonly not linked with one creator because its origin remains unknown (anonymous), and it can exist in multiple versions; folk music in simple language is a cultural product which belongs to the entire community and not to any one person in particular. It is a community that shapes and gives voice to traditional music through a long practicing oral tradition. When it is passed from one generation to the next it gradually changes. On the other hand, popular music as we know belongs to professional musicians and performing it involves the use of technology and technical skills.



**Fig. 2. Preetam Bhartwan on jagar album cover. Taken from Source Jaagar Samraat Pritam Bhartwan.**

The technological advancement and commercialization in the world of music made possible the meeting between the two contrary concepts of folk and mass. Similar coexistence could be seen taking place in the folk music of

Uttarakhand. In the past decades, the vernacular music industry and entertainment sector have witnessed a rise of *jagar* music. With the advent of modern recording technology and rise of the regional music industry, many musicians started recording folk songs which created a huge market base of consumers amongst diasporic communities. In the past decades, there has been a revolutionary phase of rapid commercialization of folk music and different private music recording and cassette producing agencies or companies have joined the scene, out of which some prominent names are Rama Cassettes and T-Series. It was the dawn of a new media rise up which made possible the modern cultural (re)production of tunes, rhythms, and repertoires that reverberated only in the musical ecosystem of the native place but became part of the industrial process. With it, folk music turned into a mass-produced individualized commodity. The media culture that has prospered over many decades continues to capture the attention and imagination of people from Uttarakhand who are dispersed outside that state.

In the wake of its rise and spread, Uttarakhand's regional music industry made possible the confluence of folk culture with mass media, in a way which directly stimulated a resurgence of *jagar* music and gave impetus to its adaptation. For popularising *jagar* songs particularly among diasporic communities (Garhwali and Kumaoni), Preetam Bhartwan is one of the leading folk artists. He has been featured on many album covers (see fig. 1.). From Cassettes to VCDs to DVDs, they all have been prevalent till a few years back in their respective growth periods. Nowadays, people seldom buy such musical products. Moreover, internet has influenced by taking over the communication sector, in which YouTube has been a major game changer as it has become the primary source of music consumption today. In this intense digital age, most of the cultural contents constantly get expressed or posted in various online portals. As a result of that, music cassette and CDs culture, if maybe not totally vanished, have certainly disappeared from public attention.

Bharatwan's contribution in popularising the religious genre of the folk song has been very significant. He is often addressed with a respectable title of *jagar samraat*, which can be loosely translated as *jagar* expert. He belongs to the hereditary musician family and through his mass media production of *jagar* content over the years he has contributed in safeguarding a diminishing old tradition, and doing which he has attained mass popularity as a devoted *jagar* performer (both song and instrument player). Music albums are created in the technical atmosphere of a recording studio located in urban centres like Delhi and Dehradun. Popular *jagar* songs get composed, edited, packaged, and finally circulated in the form of musical commodities. This process is a modern example of coexistence between folklore and mass media resulting in giving new life to traditional music. The word *jagar sangeet* which back in the days was only recognized as a vital part of the ritual ceremony, is now an umbrella term for the spiritual and cultural heritage of Uttarakhand. The



ethnomusicologist Stefan Fiol in his book *Recasting Folk in the Himalayas: Indian Music, Media, and Social Mobility* comments on the renewed identity of *jagar* songs, he says “Jagar is today the banner under which the distinctive spirituality of Uttarakhand is marketed” (2017: 143). This revival of folk music has helped many migrants to relieve their nostalgic emotions generated after alienation in the city. Moreover, folk music has a cathartic quality that relieves tension of separation for those who’ve faced forced migration. Some get reminded of old memories of ritual in their village by repeatedly listening to the recorded *jagar* song.



**Fig. 3. Performance scenes from Bhairav *jagar* music video of Preetam Bhartwan. Taken from Hardik Films.**

Popular *jagar* music videos are picturized in a rural village setting and they depict scenes of music and possession being performed. To elevate the ritual aspect of *jagar* music, ritual elements e.g., ceremonial objects, devotees, dancing mediums, and instruments, are often highlighted in the video. Through such a portrayal, the music video appears more relevant and authentic to the viewers (see fig. 2.). In the commercial presentation, Bhartwan has used the music of non-native percussions in the soundtrack. Stefan Fiol writes about the unique style of commercialized *jagar* composition accommodated by Bhartwan, he says Bhartwan has modernized *jagar* songs by incorporating new techniques (2017: 143).

Due to the limited time-frame of a music video, a commercial *jagar* song is a short version of the long folk epic. The script of the song is produced

under the supervision of the singer who chooses suitable excerpts from the folk ballads. As per the contemporary scene, the composer works according to the standards of the music industry. For the music video, a pre-meditated *jagar* soundtrack is prepared by the musician who selects appealing portions from the folk legends. An album song of *jagar* is always based on one sung narrative about a local deity. Such recordings are a dramatized commercial creation of ritual music. In contemporary times, Bhartwan is identified as a traditional and a popular *jagar* performer, who has democratized this folk music. In the modern world, the dynamics of folk music production challenges a strict division between traditional folk music and mass-mediated popular music. In fact, the media is an integral part of folklore today, said Linda Dégh (1994: 24). At present, *jagar* music is linked to both ritualistic and modern musical processes. Due to its adaptation in a new musical space, it has become both local and global in its reach. Mass media not only helps in saving folklore from obliteration, but allows folk artists like Bhartwan to use media platforms to resurrect, reconstruct, maintain and creatively express folklore content for larger audiences. This has created new expressive modes for pahadi folklore, and helped in resuscitating the oral narratives through modern means. *Jagar* album songs are an example of music created from the mingling of mechanical and artisanal systems; in the region and outside such musical productions have carved out a strong consumer base, which has helped in taking out the dying folklore from oblivion and to be utilized for a broader cultural expression.

### Jagar Music Revival in City based Jagar events



Fig. 3. Scenes from city based *jagar* event organised in Delhi. Taken by the researcher on 24 November 2018.

In the contemporary scene, stage performance of *jagar* is in vogue, especially in a city like Delhi where a large population of Uttarakhand diaspora resides. The city-based *jagar* programmes are a dramatic expansion of their religious world and through which the most effective ritual music is presented on stage (see fig. 44.). Such performances take out the aspect of folk singing from its ritual context and place it on a public platform while retaining the religious fabric. Associating with mass-culture, folklore can be seen as traveling from its ritual context to a larger cultural domain. This signifies the importance of repetition of folklore in different locations. Linda Degh notes that “the repeated use of an item of folklore in multiple situations and forms which is

the best indicator that folklore processes are at work and that humans are fulfilling a traditional need by performing folklore” (1994: 32-33). The impact of technological advancement is such that city-based *jagar* has become a cultural and musical heritage, rather than just sacred music produced in ritual.



Fig. 4. Banner of a city based *jagar* program. Taken by the researcher on 20 November 2018.

*Jagar* music takes new form coming in contact with the metropolis culture. Interestingly, the stage singing by *jagri* is roughly based on the popular music videos/albums of *jagar* songs. For this programme, different modern means of presentation are employed e.g., a raised platform where the performance is given, microphones, speakers, and projection screens. It requires stage setting, actors, music accompanists, camera, technicians, stage production and a full array of native and modern musical instruments. The stage platform and technological equipment(s) make the performance more suitable for mass consumption. Many days before the actual event, news about the programme is circulated and advertised by pinning up posters and hoardings in areas around the venue (see fig. 4).

Such modified and urbanized *jagar* programs evoke ethos of a common heritage of Uttarakhand. Its performance connects diasporic devotees with the realm of folk deities. The loss of social networks due to migration is equally mended and re-established during such time when people meet, interact and exchange experiences. In city *jagar* people attempt to retrieve memories that were left behind and try to reinvigorate their lost connection. A spiritual and cultural experience is gained after listening to *jagar* songs being performed on stage. With it, the audience generates a feeling of one-ness. Such programs create a shared community space for the migrant population by helping them build new connections with other migrants in new social settings. The tradition of *jagar* thus has come a long way and has survived through many modern-day transformations through adapting and mingling with change.

### Notes

1. Negi, Babita. Interview by Ruchi Rana. Garhwal, June 15, 2021.
2. Lakhera, Jitender. Interview by Ruchi Rana. Delhi, Feb 23, 2020.

3. Rawat, Sohan Singh. Interview by Ruchi Rana. Delhi, Feb 22, 2020.
4. Rawat, Sohan Singh. Interview by Ruchi Rana. Delhi, Feb 22, 2020.
5. Lakhera, Jitender. Interview by Ruchi Rana. Delhi, Feb 23, 2020.

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