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The Socio-Economic, Cultural and Ecological Dynamics of Pre-colonial Uttarakhand in the Central Himalayan Region: A Critical Review

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the socio-economic, cultural, and ecological dynamics shaping pre-colonial Uttarakhand in the Central Himalayan region. By analysing settlement patterns, dynastic rule, and religious practices, this study explores how local governance models, environmental factors, and cultural traditions contributed to the region's distinct historical identity. Drawing on archaeological evidence, historical texts, and contributions from regional scholars, this paper highlights Uttarakhand's early socio-political transitions, economic structures, and community life before British colonial rule. In particular, it emphasizes the transformative impact of dynastic governance on local socio-economic structures and cultural practices, particularly in temple architecture and trans-Himalayan trade networks. Additionally, it underscores the role of religious institutions as centres of learning and political control, along with adaptive resource management practices. This inquiry thus provides insights into the complex interplay of Uttarakhand's geography and its socio-political systems, revealing how environmental practices and local traditions supported both continuity and change in early development. It contributes to a nuanced understanding of Uttarakhand's unique historical trajectory and underscores the importance of further research into the experiences and contributions of marginalized communities within its historical narrative.

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Introduction

The pre-colonial period of Uttarakhand, located in the Central Himalayan region, presents a complex interplay of socio-

political, ecological, religious, and cultural forces. This paper critically examines these dynamics, focusing on how local governance models, religious practices, and ecological factors shaped the region's development over time. By analysing the

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socio-economic structures, dynastic rule, and community life, this study aims to uncover the factors that contributed to the distinct socio-historical trajectory of the Uttarakhand region before and during the early Common Era (B.C.E. and C.E.). Drawing on archaeological evidence, historical texts, and the works of regional historians, this paper explores the remnants of early civilisations, including settlement patterns, the economic and power dynamics of various dynasties, and the influence of local governance. In particular, it highlights how shifts in local power relations shaped Uttarakhand's ecological, cultural, and spiritual dimensions. Contributions from regional historians and excavated archaeological sites provide insight into temple art, architecture, and cultural norms and practices, which played a critical role in shaping Uttarakhand's identity. These temple spaces also served dual purposes, functioning both as major religious and educational centres. The ruling elites used these learning sites to consolidate power and privilege certain cultural norms across the population.

Uttarakhand's geography and topographic diversity have also been critical factors in its historical development. The two modern administrative divisions—Garhwal and Kumaon—reflect the region's rich and intricate history of ancient civilisation. While literature on the medieval period remains limited, the ancient period of Uttarakhand is well documented, spanning thousands of years before British colonial rule. This paper aims to understand the continuity and transformation of religious, cultural, socio-political, and economic structures, with a particular focus on the region's pre-colonial era. Uttarakhand's historical trajectory maintained what Joshi (1990, p. 7) termed an “independent historical character” through various socio-political phases, religious practices, and economic activities long before the advent of Gurkha occupation and British colonisation. The central research question guiding this study is: How did the socio-economic, ecological, religious, and cultural dynamics of pre-colonial Uttarakhand contribute to the formation of its distinct historical identity? The paper is structured thematically, exploring early settlement patterns and the establishment of dynastic rule, which laid the foundation for Uttarakhand's socio-economic structures and cultural practices. It then examines the evolution of the political landscape, showing how economic and cultural activities were deeply linked with governance. In particular, it examines how religious traditions and cultural norms shaped the intellectual and cultural identity of the Uttarakhand region. Finally, the discussion integrates environmental and geographical aspects, focusing on how ecological practices shaped governance and culture in the pre-colonial era. This inquiry thus emphasises how these elements of change and continuity contributed significantly to shaping the region's earliest development and broader historical processes.

This historical study is based on primary and secondary literature, including archaeological evidence, historical documents, and scholarly writings on the region's pre-colonial history. Although the early history of Uttarakhand has been the subject of various academic inquiries, existing scholarship often grapples with limited archival sources and fragmented historical records. In writing the early social history of the Central Himalayan region, including Himachal, Uttarakhand,

and Nepal, there is no common consensus among historians regarding the beginning of the Common Era due to limited archival sources, uncharted historical sites, the impact of natural causes on sites, and fragmented or vague records. Nevertheless, the scholarly writings of historians such as Atkinson, Pande, Nautiyal, Dabral, Joshi, Handa, Handa and Jain, and Sharma draw on ancient literary sources, travellers' accounts, and archival records, offering a rich but fragmented understanding of the region's history and development (Atkinson, 1973; Dabral, 1968; Handa, 2002; Handa & Jain, 2009; Joshi, 1990; Nautiyal, 1969; Pande, 1990; Sharma, 2009).

Numismatic, iconographic, and epigraphical studies, corroborated by archival sources from the Indian Archaeological Reports, outline early communities and their social life, religion, political forces, and trade economy. Meanwhile, comprehensive archaeological work by the Archaeological Survey of India, Dehradun Circle, across different periods and excavations conducted at different sites continues to provide new insights into Uttarakhand's ancient history. This paper critically engages with these scholarly contributions and identifies the gaps and debates that shape the understanding of pre-colonial Uttarakhand and its distinct identity. By examining these historical phases, this paper aims to provide new insights into how this particular Central Himalayan region evolved under different socio-political influences. This systematic study will contribute to a deeper academic understanding of Uttarakhand's pre-colonial history.

Earliest Civilization and Settlement Patterns

The earliest evidence of settlement in Uttarakhand reflects a continuous interaction between the region's rugged geography, complex topography, and human adaptability. Archaeological findings have uncovered traces of Stone Age tools, painted rock shelters, and other remnants that suggest the region was inhabited long before the advent of dynastic rule. For instance, archaeological evidence from the site ‘Lakhu-Udyara’, located in the Almora region of Uttarakhand, detailed by Singh and Joshi, reveals a variety of megalithic burial practices and structures (Joshi, 1990, p. 8).

Such discoveries also in the form of ‘house burials/chambers’ indicate the complexity of cultural and spiritual practices during the prehistoric and protohistoric periods. In addition, artistic expressions and religious symbolism at such ‘megalithic-painted rock shelters’ feature depictions of human figures in dancing poses, group activities, animals, and reptiles representing the ancient communities' reverence for natural elements (Singh, 2009; Joshi, 1990).

The evidence of Painted Grey Ware (P.G.W.) and Northern Black Polished Ware (N.B.P.W.) culture across the Kumaon and Garhwal regions further illustrates the expansion of settlement patterns. According to historians, sites located in Kashipur, Thapli, and Purola have yielded significant P.G.W. culture artefacts and N.B.P.W. ceramics, suggesting that these communities were part of a larger cultural network that extended into the Gangetic plains (Joshi, 1990; Singh, 2009). Such sites further increased interaction and trade between the

Central Himalayan region and other parts of South Asia, connecting the mountainous settlements to the broader urbanisation processes of the time. In addition, the development of iron technology during the Iron Age significantly transformed these ancient communities' settlement patterns and economic practices. Iron-smelting sites, such as those discovered at Uleni in Almora, suggest that local communities developed advanced metallurgical techniques as early as the first millennium B.C.E. (Agrawal & Kharakwal, 1988; Atkinson, 1973).

These advancements in iron and copper smelting were instrumental in transitioning the Northern Plain and Hill region from a predominantly nomadic society to one characterised by settled agriculture, craft specialisation, and complex social hierarchies (Singh, 2009). Such widespread use of iron tools during the P.G.W. and N.B.P.W. phases played a crucial role in shaping the socio-cultural and economic landscape of the region.

Ancient communities: Regional historians assumed that before the epoch of any dominant dynasty, the ancient socio-political set-up of the Kumaon and Garhwal region was largely formed by small chieftains and ancient communities (Joshi, 1990; Handa, 2002, 2007; Sharma, 2009). These regions experienced fluid territorial boundaries and shifting political forces until the eleventh century, when Kumaon and Garhwal emerged as two distinct principalities, each ruled by various dynasties up until the advent of imperial rule (Handa, 2002).

Nandy (1998) remarks that, based on a wide circulation of ideas, people, texts, materials, and ancient traditions of “cosmopolitanism,” there existed a ‘symbiotic’ relationship between the Western/Central Himalaya region and the plains of North India facilitated by migration, trade routes, resources, and pilgrimage centres.

The remnants of early civilisation and the settlement pattern in Uttarakhand suggest that the dynamic interplay of Indigenous/local communities (tribals, rulers) and migrants from the plains was critical in the establishment of social structures, political institutions, and economic activities in the region (Alam, 2007; Singh, 2018). They also emphasise the adaptive strategies of the region's inhabitants to its natural environment and geography, with over-reliance on nomadic pastoralism and transhumance. The earliest settlers were believed to have been inhabited by the ancient communities of the Kols, Kiratas, Doms, and Khasas (Handa, 2002; Pande, 1990).

As claimed by historians, the superior socio-political forces of the Khasas (also known as Khasiya or Khasi) ousted other ancient settlers such as the Kols, Kiratas, and Doms in the hill region long before the Common Era (Atkinson, 1973; Joshi, 1990; Handa & Jain, 2009). Predominantly tribal, these communities, according to Joshi (1990), established several petty chieftainships in the interiors of Himalayan territories that functioned on kin-dominated “tribal democracies” and “supernaturalism” (as cited in Sharma, 2009; Berreman, 1972), against which the region came to be known as

Khasmandala or Khas-des. They adopted a certain settled and autonomous way of living with their means of production essentially characterised by cultivation patterns, rearing livestock, utilisation of agricultural tools, hunting, and forestland.

These discoveries, particularly in Garhwal and Kumaon, indicate that the early inhabitants engaged in pastoralism and hunting, with a gradual shift towards settled agriculture as they adapted to the diverse mountainous terrain. As Handa and Jain (2009) argue, the practice of transhumance, that is, seasonal migration between different altitudes, remained a core aspect of life for Himalayan communities well into the modern period among tribal and ethnic communities in the upper hills. This adaptability to the harsh environment allowed these ancient populations to thrive in one of the most challenging ecological zones of the subcontinent. Such ancient communities and their settlement patterns transitioned from nomadic lifestyles to more settled forms of agriculture, metallurgical advancements, and craft production, laying the foundation for the dynastic rule that would follow. This reveals a complex interplay between geography, Indigenous livelihood patterns, agricultural production, utilisation of natural and mineral resources, and socio-cultural organisation.

Regional scholars emphasise that well-established settlements and urban centres existed several centuries before the Common Era (Nautiyal, 1969; Pande, 2018). These early developments, shaped by both environmental challenges and technological innovations, contributed to the region's unique socio-economic structure, which continued to evolve through the protohistoric and early historic periods. However, this relationship is overlooked in the literature, where early settlement patterns are framed as static. Scholars have often addressed the dynamic relationship between human communities and their environment in the Himalayan region, particularly the critical role of geographical and environmental influences in shaping ancient settlement patterns and social life (Atkinson, 1973; Joshi, 1990; Sharma, 2009). The river valleys, steep forested slopes, and the need for resource management led to distinctive settlement practices, as communities balanced between nomadic lifestyles and permanent agricultural settlements. As the population grew, settlements likely became more permanent and complex, laying the socio-cultural and economic foundations for the dynastic rulers that later dominated the region.

Emergence of Dynastic Rule in Kumaon and Garhwal

The establishment of dynastic rule in the Kumaon and Garhwal regions marked a significant political shift in Uttarakhand's history. Early historical accounts, as per Handa and Jain (2009), suggest that the Kunindas were among the first known dynasties in the Central Himalayan region, ruling from the foothills during the Mauryan period until the sixth century CE. Their regional dominance is supported by numismatic evidence, particularly through the development of a coinage system and the issue of various coin types (such as silver, base silver mixed with lead, and copper), which contributed to the economy and trade practices (Joshi, 1989;

Sharma, 2009). Their reign also reflects the socio-political transitions of the early historical period in Uttarakhand. These coins, discovered throughout Garhwal, Kumaon, and the Terai-Bhabar areas, form part of what is often termed the “tribal coinage system” (Cunningham, 1878–1879, as cited in Joshi, 1990). Although little remains of written records about their governance, their control over trade routes and political organisation has been established through both numismatic and archaeological evidence (Handa & Jain, 2009). However, as noted by scholars, with the emergence of the Imperial Gupta Empire in the fourth century CE, the Kunindas lost political influence, leading to the gradual disintegration of their power (Joshi, 1990; Singh, 2009). One significant historical marker in Uttarakhand’s political history is the presence of Ashoka’s Rock Edict. The edict inscriptions and the archaeological findings around the Kalsi region suggest a well-organised socio-political structure and society (Handa & Jain, 2009). However, Uttarakhand’s political history in the post-Gupta period remains obscure, with few historical sources documenting that period. Historians suggest that with the decline of the Gupta Empire, some politically weaker communities from the plains, who were overpowered by stronger forces, may have sought refuge in the rugged hilly regions for protection. Another contributing factor could be ecological challenges, including natural disasters and frequent flooding in the plains. These volatile environmental conditions likely forced communities to relocate to the more secure hill valleys to ensure stability (Joshi, 1990).

By the sixth century CE, a new ruling dynasty emerged, the Paurava-Varmans, who are credited with the construction of the first-ever copperplate land grants, namely the Taleshvar copper plates (Handa & Jain, 2009). The copperplates provide valuable insights into the genealogy of rulers, their governance, and religious activities. The Paurava-Varmans were believed to be responsible for integrating local populations into a monarchical state system, supported by administrative and military structures. The archaeological remains and epigraphic evidence by Cunningham also suggest that several monarchical kingdoms, such as Brahmapura (Po-lo-hi-mo-pu-lo) and Govisana (Ku-pi-shang-na), rose and fell during the ancient and early medieval period, as cited in the literary accounts of Hiuen Tsang (Cunningham, 1963). Yet, in writing the early social history of the region, scholars have grappled with the elusive outline of this period due to limited and fragmented records (Joshi, 1990; Handa, 2002).

According to Joshi (1990), the rise of prominent rulers, particularly the Katyuris, whose kingdom flourished from the eighth to the eleventh century CE, represents a key period in the region’s social history. The Katyuris, who ruled from the Katyur Valley, as mentioned by Atkinson (1973), controlled vast territories that included the entirety of present-day Uttarakhand and parts of western Nepal. Under their reign, the region saw significant economic and cultural growth, largely driven by agriculture and trade. They maintained a decentralised governance model, allowing local communities considerable autonomy in matters such as land use and justice. The inscriptional records on copper plates and stone slabs concerning land grants to temples indicate that during this

period a sizeable number of migrants, plausibly Brahmans, settled in the region (Joshi, 1990; Sanwal, 1976). According to regional historians, during the Katyuri reign significant temple complexes, such as those at Jageshwar and Baijnath, were constructed to develop and promote Brahmanical traditions, serving as religious centres and symbols of political legitimacy (Pande, 2013; Sharma, 2009). As noted, these ancient communities strategically consolidated political power and Brahmanical religious traditions to reinforce and validate their authority over local populations. However, their power began to decline toward the end of the eleventh century when the Mallas of western Nepal ousted them from Kumaon. The fall of the Katyuri period led to the rise of several small independent principalities, eventually paving the way for the emergence of two dominant powers: the Chand dynasty in Kumaon and the Parmar dynasty in Garhwal.

The socio-political history of the Uttarakhand, Kumaon and Garhwal regions, for more than five centuries before the advent of colonial rule, was shaped largely by the Chand and Parmar rulers. The geographical landscape and environment played a crucial role in the political formation of these principalities, influencing both governance structures and territorial control. The Chand dynasty rose to prominence in the Kumaon region during the mid-thirteenth century after the region fragmented into several principalities (Saklani, 1998; Joshi, 1990; Handa, 2002; Handa & Jain, 2009). The scion Raja Som Chand successfully unified the Kumaon territory, establishing the capital at Champawat, which in the sixteenth century CE shifted to Almora to better manage territorial expansion. In its establishment, the Joshi Brahmans are particularly noted as a community significant in the formation of the Kumaon region and its sub-regional history (Rawat, 2002). The epigraphic evidence suggests that the Chands continued the administrative structure and cultural traditions of their predecessors, the Katyuris, throughout the Kumaon region and consolidated powerful socio-political control and economic development for over five centuries (Rawat, 2002; Mittal, 1986). One of the key factors in their success was the region’s fertile valleys and trade commodities, which provided the economic base to maintain political dominance and support local communities. In the Garhwal region, the Parmar dynasty also emerged following the collapse of the Katyuris. During the second half of the fourteenth century, the formation of Garhwal into a single kingdom through the unification of fifty-two petty principalities is mostly credited to its founder, Raja Ajay Pal (Pande, 1990). The rulers shifted the earlier capital from Chandpur Garhi to Srinagar, which became the political and cultural centre of Garhwal. However, due to its rugged mountainous terrain and comparatively less fertile landscape, this region did not witness the same degree of political expansion as Kumaon. In addition, limited archaeological records and epigraphic evidence for this period have made it difficult for scholars to reconstruct the sub-regional history of Garhwal. Nevertheless, oral histories, traditions, folklore, and fragmented records provide valuable insights into the Parmar dynasty and its subsequent rulers.

The records on the emergence of dynastic rule in Kumaon and Garhwal significantly shaped the region’s socio-political and

cultural landscape (Joshi, 1990). Dynasties such as the Kunindas, Katyuris, Chands, and Parmars consolidated power through territorial expansion, trade practices, religious institutions, and governance. The political history of Kumaon and Garhwal during dynastic rule, though marked by frequent territorial conflicts and dynastic rivalries, laid the foundation for the region's socio-political structures that persisted until the arrival of British rule. However, archaeological evidence and historical records often focus on elite structures, reflecting the strategies used by rulers to strengthen their control over trade routes, resource management, and religious institutions. Such narratives frequently overlook the interaction between local governance and central authority, as well as the role of environmental factors in shaping political strategies, which remains an underexplored area in developing a nuanced social history.

Socio-Economic and Cultural Structures in Pre-Colonial Uttarakhand

Socio-Economic Practices and Dynastic Influence

The socio-economic structures of pre-colonial Uttarakhand were profoundly shaped by the region's mountainous geography, which influenced its agricultural systems, resource management, and trade networks. Situated in the Central Himalayan region, Uttarakhand's topography necessitated reliance on subsistence farming, animal husbandry, and resource extraction. These practices not only defined the livelihoods of its people but also influenced the development of socio-political hierarchies under various dynastic rules. Agriculture formed the backbone of Uttarakhand's economy, with communities primarily engaged in cultivating staple crops and rearing livestock. The introduction of iron and metallurgical advancements marked a significant transformation, as the extensive extraction of metals such as copper, iron, and lead advanced economic surplus. According to Joshi (1990), this surplus was central to the region's prosperity, especially under the Kuninda dynasty (second–third century BCE), which issued various coins (silver, base silver, and copper), promoting an internal and external trade system. This period also indicates a well-organised economy driven by agricultural production and utilisation of natural resources (Cunningham, 1878–1879, as cited in Joshi, 1990), an important phase in Uttarakhand's socio-economic history. The issuance of coins, combined with a thriving salt-grain trade, positioned the region as a key player in the Himalayan trade networks. The numismatic evidence suggests the period of the Kunindas was crucial for the expansion of trade routes and connections with neighbouring regions (Joshi, 1990; Handa & Jain, 2009).

However, the role of coinage in the economy declined during the phases of subsequent dynasties. According to Joshi and Brown (1987), during the Katyuri dynasty (seventh–eleventh century CE), due to limited evidence of coin usage, it indicates a return to a barter-based economy, which particularly grew under the Jajmani system (Berreman, 1972), where goods and services were exchanged among different castes.

During the Katyuri period, the region underwent a significant socio-political transformation with the establishment of an administrative system. As Atkinson (1973) points out, they established a complex administrative structure, with territorial

units known as *mandals*, each governed by local officials. In addition, inscriptional records of the pre-modern period have revealed that the agrarian structure was governed by certain political arrangements under the control of Brahmins and other state functionaries (Nautiyal et al., 1974, as cited in Sharma, 2009). This system allowed the rulers to manage resources efficiently and collect taxes from agricultural production. Nautiyal (1969) describes this period as a “golden epoch” in the region's history, marked by political stability, cultural renaissance, and economic growth. The Katyuris' ability to harness the region's natural wealth was critical to their economic success, as they facilitated the trade of Himalayan natural resources such as metals, wool, and grains with neighbouring plains and Tibet.

The region's economic structures were not solely agrarian. As noted by Joshi (1990), several silver and copper coins associated with the Mughal reign were found in Kumaon during the Chand rule. Such a system reflected the region's socio-political structures, which relied heavily on community-based resource management and trade practices.

The Kumaon-Garhwal Central Himalayan region was long dependent on the trade economy with neighbouring regions during the pre-British period. Worth mentioning is the phase of Indo-Tibetan trade that flourished in the region after the Katyuri period. Uttarakhand's geo-strategic location along ancient trade routes facilitated long-distance trade dynamics, particularly with Tibet. The archaeological evidence and scholarly literary accounts provide elaborative information on the ancient Indo-Tibetan trade-based practices throughout the Himalayan region, particularly the salt-grain trade since the Mauryan period. In addition, Tibet largely depended on importing food products from the adjoining region (Kumaon in India and Nepal), where the state of Kuninda served as a middle agency in the exchange of these items. Such trade practices later flourished during the Katyuri and Chand dynasties, with metals such as iron being key export items together with copper, gold, silver, lead, limestone, crystal, and slate (Joshi & Brown, 1987).

As noted by Joshi and Brown (1987), the Bhotiyas, a semi-nomadic trading community, played a crucial role in trade practices, facilitating the exchange of Himalayan goods with Tibetan and Indian traders. These interactions not only sustained the region's economy but also promoted cultural exchanges, particularly through the pilgrimage routes to the sacred Lake Manasarovar and Mount Kailash sites. The transhumance practices of nomadic pastoralists further opened communication and trade routes, linking the region to the broader Central Asian trade networks.

Economic activity in Uttarakhand was closely tied to the political power of its ruling dynasties. Both the Katyuris and the later Chand and Parmar dynasties relied on agricultural surplus and trade revenues to maintain their authority. According to Rawat (2002), in Garhwal, the Parmar rulers were highly revered with supreme religious authority similar to deities by the local communities. Even though land revenue was the primary source of income for these ruling authorities, it was supplemented by other sources through taxes on livestock, agricultural produce, grains, and artisanal products. The Chands, for example, as mentioned by Atkinson (1973), imposed taxes on local production and trade, particularly on

essential commodities such as ghee, honey, and pulses, while artisans were required to supply specific products to the royal court. Similarly, the Parmars structured their economy around agriculture and trade, with additional revenue derived from gold washing in riverbeds, a practice that was critical to both the state's economy and its religious institutions. The several pilgrimage trade routes and donations at religious sites further contributed to the economy.

Religious patronage was another significant aspect of the region's socio-economic structures. The rulers of Kumaon and Garhwal made substantial donations to temples, often in the form of land grants. While these donations reinforced the political authority of the ruling dynasties, they also contributed to their eventual decline. According to scholars, the revenue administration of the Chands in Kumaon held a unique record of civil administration untainted by any foreign admixture (Atkinson, 1973). Since a large portion of revenue was diverted to religious institutions towards temple maintenance, Pande (1990) indicated that it was difficult for the state to maintain control over its territories. The decline of the Chand dynasty can be partly attributed to its practice of land grants and religious endowments to temples, which resulted in the loss of state resources, economic revenue, and weakened political power (Atkinson, 1973).

Despite these challenges, trade with Tibet remained a vital source of economic stability for Uttarakhand. The Bhotiyas trading community continued to dominate the Indo-Tibetan trade well into the pre-colonial period, exchanging goods such as wool, borax, and salt for Indian grains, textiles, and metal products. The importance of trade practices in the region is well underscored in several Mughal and colonial documents. As noted by Tolia (1994) and Atkinson (1973), British Commissioner G. W. Traill, in *Statistical Sketch of Kumaon*, provided a list of trade items exchanged between the plains of India and Tibet through the Kumaon-Garhwal region. In addition, the Mughals highlighted the export of Himalayan products such as gold dust, musk, and medicinal herbs to the plains (Habib et al., 1982, as cited in Joshi, 1990). This long-standing trade network not only sustained the Central Himalayan economy but also facilitated cultural exchanges that enriched the region's religious and social life.

This brief account of the economic and administrative history of pre-colonial Uttarakhand characterises a delicate balance between geography, political power, and economic activity. The dynasties over several centuries mostly relied on their control over natural resources, trade routes, and religious institutions to maintain their authority. In addition, the geo-political position of the region as a trade hub, particularly with Tibet, ensured that its cultural and economic exchanges continued to shape the region well into the colonial period.

Art, Architecture, and Religious Practices

The cultural history of pre-colonial Uttarakhand, according to historians, is profoundly marked by its temple architecture, art, and religious practices, which were central to the socio-political landscape of the region (Sharma, 2009; Handa & Jain, 2009). These cultural expressions not only reflected the religious importance of the time but also served as powerful tools for political legitimacy and control. From the seventh century CE onwards, temple architecture became a defining

feature of the cultural identity of Kumaon and Garhwal. The Katyuri dynastic patronage, known for its emphasis on temple construction in the Western and Central Himalayan region, led to the establishment of renowned temples such as Lakhamandal, Jageshwar, Baijnath, Champawat, and the rebuilding of the sacred shrines of Badrinath and Kedarnath in Uttarakhand. In addition, these temple architectures were the result of advanced stone masonry techniques, which marked a significant transition from earlier brick structures to more durable stone temples, facilitated by the use of heavy iron tools (Joshi, 1990; Handa & Jain, 2009; Chanchani, 2019). For instance, the colossal iron trident at Gopeshwar (Chamoli district) and the brass trident at Barahat (Uttarkashi district), both associated with Lord Shiva, stand as testaments to the advanced state of metallurgy for the production of religious art forms (such as sculptures, colossal tridents, copper plates, finials of temples, and clamps) in the region. Similarly, advanced architectural structures in the form of covered water springs (*Naula*), found in the hills, were water sources for the inhabitants. These metalworks, crafted by local artisans, not only had religious significance but also reflected the technological advancements of the time (Sharma, 2009). In addition, the information inscribed on the walls of temples, colossal tridents, and copperplates during the pre-modern period provided a wealth of knowledge about the religious and cultural life in early Uttarakhand.

While the Katyuri period is credited for the cultural renaissance in the Himalayan region, the contributions of the Chands and Parmars were relatively minimal, as they focused on territorial expansion, consolidation of authority, and state welfare activities. However, they were responsible for the restoration of ancient temples and the construction of ornate buildings known for wooden carvings on doors and windows. This suggests the significance of temple art and architecture of that period in shaping Uttarakhand's cultural identity (Joshi, 1990). Revered as *Dev Bhumi* (Land of Gods), this region's religious significance also contributed to its strategic importance. Temples not only served as spiritual centres but also functioned as educational and cultural hubs. Pilgrims across India travelled to the region's holy sites (Badrinath and Kedarnath), which were well-established pilgrimage routes connected along the Alaknanda and Ganga rivers. These routes, along with sacred river confluences (the five *Prayagas*—Devprayag, Rudraprayag, Karnaprayag, Nandaprayag, and Vishnuprayag), played a central role in both religious and socio-economic expansion by facilitating pilgrimage and trade practices. As mentioned by Joshi (1990), religion and politics were deeply intertwined in the region, with rulers using religious patronage as a means of reinforcing their power. The Katyuris, for instance, extended substantial patronage and material support to Brahmanical institutions, funding the maintenance and construction of temples dedicated to deities such as Shiva and Vishnu (Atkinson, 1973). This patronage, together with the popularisation of religious sites, temples, and *dharamshalas*, contributed to the spread of Brahmanical culture in the region, which had already taken root during the Paurava period. The shift in political power from Vaishnavite to Shaivite rulers, such as during the Katyuri dynasty, further intensified the religious landscape,

with temple construction serving as a public demonstration of political and spiritual authority (Joshi, 1990).

Significantly, the earliest socio-cultural landscape of the region was shaped by the arrival of influential religious figures such as Adi Shankaracharya, who played a crucial role in re-establishing Brahmanical orthodoxy in the ninth century CE (Sharma, 2009). As noted by regional scholars, his efforts to reduce the spread of Buddhism in the Central Himalayan region and revive Brahmanical Hindu practices left a lasting impact on the religious and cultural life of the Kumaon and Garhwal region (Atkinson, 1973; Sharma, 2009). Although Buddhism had gained a foothold in the region during the Mauryan and Gupta periods, as evidenced by the epigraphical records of Ashoka's Major Rock Edicts at Kalsi, the revivalist mission of Shankaracharya significantly reduced its influence (Sharma, 2009). The Kalsi Rock Edicts site, situated at the confluence of two rivers, is revered for its inscriptions where Ashoka recorded the *Dhamma* policy. Significantly, the excavation activities of the Archaeological Survey of India (Dehradun Circle) further support the remains of a Buddhist monastery, including a stupa and antiquities of that period (Saklani, 1998; Handa, 2002).

Centres of Learning, Art, and Culture

Uttarakhand's cultural history is also marked by its role as a centre for education and learning. From ancient times, the region was recognised as a stronghold of Vedic culture and Sanskrit scholarship. Temples and monasteries functioned as educational institutions where both religious and secular knowledge was imparted. Joshi (1990) writes that the Badrikashrama, associated with the study of Vedic scriptures, was a significant centre of learning, attracting scholars and seekers from across India. The tradition of education under the Katyuris and Chands was largely dominated by Brahmanical scholars and their teachings on Sanskrit grammar, astrology, mathematics, and law. As recorded by British administrator Traill, the royal courts employed these scholars not only as advisers but also as educators for the children of the elite (Traill, 1828, as cited in Joshi, 1990).

Despite the dominance of Brahmanical education, Buddhist monasteries continued to enrich the cultural landscape of the Himalayan region. The travel accounts of Hiuen Tsang, including those published by Watters (1904), suggest that Buddhism retained influence even after the decline of imperial patronage. These monasteries were not only religious institutions but also centres of learning, contributing to the intellectual and cultural diversity of the region.

Traditions, customs, and rituals governed a major part of local community life. During the late medieval period, the region's cultural vibrancy was further developed through artistic traditions. Famous for the Garhwali School of Painting, founded in the seventeenth century under the patronage of the Parmar dynasty, this school, as noted by Handa (2002), blended Mughal and Rajput styles, creating a distinct Pahari aesthetic that flourished in the region. The school's founder and noted scholar Mola Ram is considered one of the most influential painters of the period, whose work represents a unique fusion of local cultural motifs and broader artistic trends. Other art forms, such as clay and metal sculpture, also flourished during this period, further contributing to the region's rich cultural heritage.

Thus, the art, architecture, and religious practices of pre-colonial Uttarakhand were not merely reflections of the spiritual life and values of the ruling elites but also powerful instruments for sustaining political control and cultural identity. The ruling elites consolidated and privileged certain cultural norms to reinforce their power and maintain social order. By promoting Brahmanical religious practices, constructing temples, supporting pilgrimage sites, pilgrimage routes, and educational centres, rulers legitimised their authority as divinely sanctioned (Rawat, 2002). By controlling cultural expressions and privileging these religious practices, they were able to assert their authority, embedded through temple rituals and festivals, which created a unified religious identity, fostering social cohesion and reinforcing hierarchical structures. Such dominance of norms upheld the political interests of these rulers while controlling the religious framework of society. Gaps in scholarly accounts marginalised alternative ideologies and ancient traditions, such as those of Buddhism, ancient tribal communities, and the Bhotiyas, from historical narratives. Yet, the legacy of traditional knowledge, art forms, and the role of religious dynamism along the age-old pilgrimage routes—Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri, and Yamunotri—continues to shape the region's intellectual and cultural identity. Therefore, the experiences of marginalised groups and their relationship with the region remain unexplored in the broader pre-colonial literature.

Ecological and Environmental Aspects of Pre-Colonial Uttarakhand

The ecological history of pre-colonial Uttarakhand is deeply intertwined with its geography, environment, and the socio-economic practices of its inhabitants. The region's diverse landscape, which ranges from tropical forests in the lower altitudes to alpine meadows and glaciers in the upper reaches of the Central Himalayan region, has profoundly shaped human activity. Human habitation in the region was shaped by the challenges posed by the natural landscape, including the need for shelter, food cultivation, and the management of resources. Early communities mostly relied on local resources such as rocks for shelter and forests for sustenance. Sharma (2009) mentions that the inhabitants gradually learned to adapt to the geographical and climatic conditions, developing agricultural practices such as irrigation, food cultivation, and cattle rearing to suit the mountainous environment. The harsh environment forced early inhabitants to develop ways to adjust their lifestyles to survive. The interplay between the environment and human societies fostered a sustainable, though challenging, relationship with nature, as evident in agricultural practices, natural resource management, customs, and norms. Understanding the ecological dynamics of pre-colonial Uttarakhand provides key insights into how Himalayan societies adapted to their environment long before the advent of British colonisation and industrialisation.

Uttarakhand's geographical landscape, mountainous terrain, diverse flora and fauna, and river systems played a crucial role in shaping the inhabitants' socio-economic and cultural life. The region's rugged geography limited large-scale urbanisation and centralised political power but fostered self-sustained systems such as access to forests and mobilisation of

natural resources, which governed the social life of local communities. Forests, which were abundant in natural and mineral resources such as timber and medicinal plants, were vital to the economy, supplying essential resources for construction, fuel, and local medicinal practices. Pande (2018) further mentions that the terraced farming system, adapted to the steep slopes of the Himalayas, exemplified sustainable agricultural practices. Traditional irrigation methods, such as the use of *guls* (water channels), harnessed mountain streams for agriculture, ensuring efficient water use (Rawat & Sah, 2009). These systems not only supported subsistence farming but also facilitated trade, particularly in goods such as grains, herbs, and wool, with neighbouring regions such as Tibet and Nepal (Prakash, 2015).

Geographical Challenges, Spiritual Interaction and Cultural Adaptation

The unique geographical and environmental conditions in this hill region not only influenced the livelihood of its people but also shaped their social customs and religious practices. According to Sharma (2009), early communities adapted their way of life to meet the geographical challenges posed by the difficult terrain. These adaptations were not only practical, such as adjusting food production and housing to suit the environment, but also spiritual, with geographical features such as rivers and mountains being revered as sacred entities. The archaeological ruins reveal specifically what relationship existed between these ancient communities and the local ecologies. They suggest that this region supported a rich biodiversity and a deep spiritual connection between humans and their natural environment, as reflected in local traditions, oral histories, folklore, religious beliefs, and cultural practices. For instance, sacred groves or forest patches (*devban*) and rivers such as the Ganga and Yamuna became central to religious beliefs and ecological conservation practices that prevented further exploitation of these vulnerable sites. This association of religion with ecosystem management is “interwoven in the symbiotic network” of the Himalayan communities (Singh et al., 2014, as cited in Singh et al., 2014; Negi, 2010). Such reverence for nature fostered a sense of “environmental stewardship” and sustainability, where the protection of natural resources was seen as a religious duty towards conservation.

In addition, the isolation provided by the mountains, rugged terrain, climate, and defensible valleys allowed communities to maintain distinct cultural practices, such as the ancient Khasa family law, which governed local social organisation. This isolation contributed to the long-term preservation of customs and tribal laws and helped sustain unique socio-cultural practices despite external influences and changes in neighbouring regions. This integration of spiritual beliefs with environmental practices further reinforced the relationship between geography and culture in society (Sharma, 2009).

Despite the traditional ecological learnings embedded in local practices, the region faced several environmental challenges during different periods. Landslides, floods, and forest fires were frequent threats in this fragile environment, especially in the higher altitudes of the Himalayas. While forest management systems existed, the clearing of forests for agriculture and settlement expansion contributed to soil erosion and increased the likelihood of landslides. Over time,

deforestation for timber and fuel began to strain the ecosystem, while pastoralism and overgrazing posed significant ecological risks. The transhumance pastoral economy, adapted to the alpine environment, also had its limits. For instance, overgrazing, especially in *bugyals* (alpine meadows), threatened the regeneration of vegetation. However, pastoralists were aware of these risks, and local traditions imposed restrictions on grazing areas during certain seasons to allow grasslands to recover. These adaptive strategies, as Singh (2018) notes, highlight the balance between human activity and ecological preservation.

Cultural Adaptation to Environmental Conditions

Religious practices in Uttarakhand were also shaped by the environment. Sects such as the Vaisnavas, Saivas, and Buddhists had to modify their rituals and dietary customs to accommodate the region's harsh climate. For instance, the Vaisnavas, who traditionally observed strict vegetarianism, adapted their food habits to include non-vegetarian diets due to the limited availability of agricultural produce in the high-altitude regions (Sharma, 2009). The use of religious symbols, beliefs, and rituals also evolved to adapt to the local environment, reflecting a dynamic relationship between religion and ecology. Festivals such as Harela, which celebrates the onset of the monsoon, are closely tied to agricultural cycles and involve environmental awareness through tree planting and prayers for a good harvest as cultural traditions (Singh et al., 2014; Negi, 2010). These practices further highlight the deep-rooted connection between environmental conservation and cultural identity.

In addition, the integration of environmental sustainability into political and cultural life enabled the ruling elites to consolidate their control over resources and reinforce their authoritative legitimacy. Due to this interrelationship of religion, governance, and natural resource management, the rulers of pre-colonial Kumaon and Garhwal were able to create a system that ensured both environmental conservation and political stability. Therefore, in pre-colonial Uttarakhand, the environmental and geographical context of the region played a key role in shaping the local population's religious, political, and socio-cultural life. While much of the literature focuses on spiritual and environmental interactions, there remains a gap in understanding how adaptive practices influenced local agricultural patterns, governance, and the everyday social life of the communities.

Conclusion

The review of the available literature indicates that the socio-economic, cultural, and ecological history of pre-colonial Uttarakhand was shaped by the interaction of geography, political authority, religious institutions, and local communities. Historical evidence demonstrates that the region evolved through successive phases of settlement, dynastic rule, trade expansion, and cultural development, resulting in distinctive social and political structures. Agriculture, pastoralism, metallurgy, and Indo-Tibetan trade formed the economic foundation of the region, while temple institutions, pilgrimage networks, and Brahmanical patronage played a central role in legitimising political authority and shaping cultural identity.

The review also highlights that the mountainous environment significantly influenced patterns of settlement, governance,

livelihood practices, and resource management. Communities continuously adapted to ecological conditions through terraced agriculture, transhumance, traditional irrigation systems, and locally developed conservation practices. These interactions between people and their environment contributed to the formation of a distinctive Himalayan socio-cultural landscape.

However, the existing literature remains largely centred on dynastic histories, political developments, religious institutions, and elite narratives. Comparatively limited attention has been given to the everyday experiences of ordinary communities, Indigenous populations, women, pastoral groups, artisan communities, and other marginalised sections of society. Likewise, the interaction between environmental conditions, local governance, social organisation, and lived experiences remains insufficiently explored.

Furthermore, many historical accounts rely heavily on archaeological evidence, inscriptions, royal chronicles, and colonial interpretations, which provide only a partial understanding of the region's broader social history. Consequently, there is a need for more comprehensive historical inquiry that incorporates social, cultural, environmental, and subaltern perspectives to develop a more balanced understanding of pre-colonial Uttarakhand.

Overall, the available evidence demonstrates that pre-colonial Uttarakhand possessed a complex and dynamic socio-economic, cultural, and ecological system. A more integrated examination of these dimensions can contribute to a deeper understanding of the historical development of the Central Himalayan region while addressing the significant gaps that remain in the existing literature.

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