

Festivals and Traditional Foods of Uttarakhand and Its Nutritional Significance

Kiran Pant, A. K. Sharma and Bijeta

ICAR-Krishi Vigyan Kendra, G B P U A & T, Dehradun

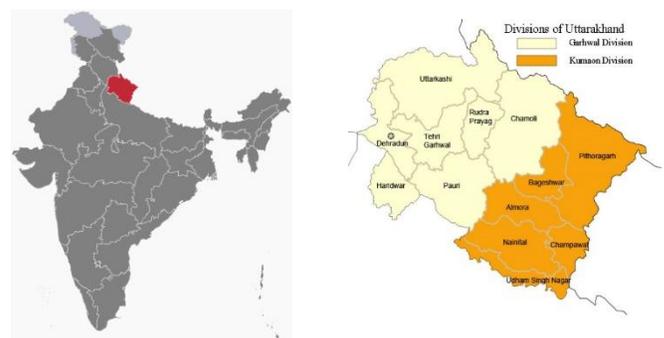
Uttarakhand, a Himalayan state in northern India, is widely known for its scenic beauty, sacred sites, and vibrant cultural traditions. Beyond these, the state also possesses a rich and distinctive food culture that is deeply rooted in its agricultural practices, ecology, and festival traditions. Festival-related culinary customs are not just expressions of taste but living reflections of agrarian life, seasonal cycles, and sustainable ways of living. In recent years, these traditions have gained importance as a foundation for agro-food tourism, offering visitors meaningful experiences that link farms, festivals, and local cuisine.

Traditional festivals of Uttarakhand—such as Harella, Phool Dei, Igas, Olgia (Ghee Sankranti), Nanda Devi Raj Jat, and Makar Sankranti—are closely connected to sowing, harvesting, and seasonal transitions. The foods prepared during these occasions rely mainly on locally grown millets (mandua, jhangora), pulses (gahat, bhatt), oilseeds, wild greens, seasonal vegetables, and forest produce. Dishes like Kafuli, Phaanu, Chainsoo, Jhangora ki kheer, Arsa, and Baadi are nutritionally rich and reflect climate-resilient, low-input farming systems that have sustained hill communities for generations. These festival foods reflect a profound understanding of local ecology and nutrition. Ingredients are seasonal, minimally processed, and often sourced from household farms or nearby forests, ensuring freshness and sustainability. The collective preparation and sharing of food during festivals strengthens social bonds, reinforces community participation, and ensures the intergenerational transfer of culinary knowledge. Thus, food becomes a medium through which cultural identity, environmental stewardship, and social harmony are preserved.

The food of Uttarakhand also reflects its culture, geography and lifestyle. The traditional delicious dishes here are nutritious and full of taste, in which organically grown ingredients are used by the local people. The culinary practices associated with the cultural festivals of Uttarakhand are far more than festive indulgences. They are a holistic expression of the state’s agrarian wisdom, ecological balance, and cultural continuity.

Uttarakhand’s traditional festivals are deeply interwoven with its agrarian lifestyle, ecological conditions, and nutritional wisdom evolved over centuries. The food prepared and offered during these festivals is not incidental; rather, it is scientifically aligned with The food of any place isn't just about sustenance; it's a living reflection of the region's cultural practices, rural lifestyle, and collective bonds. The traditional cuisine plays a very important role in many areas such as:

- **Reflection of Culture & Identity:** Traditional cuisine plays a vital role in the festivals of Uttarakhand, serving as a powerful reflection of the region’s cultural identity, ecological harmony, and communal values. The use of seasonal and locally sourced ingredients—such as finger millet (mandua), barnyard millet (jhangora), and native vegetables—not only reflects the state’s agrarian roots but also sustains its deep connection with nature. Dishes like Kafuli, Phaanu, and Bal Mithai are not only unique in flavor but also emblematic of regional pride and tradition.
- **Reinforcing Communal Ties:** Food acts as a strong social connector during festivals, with shared meals reinforcing family and community bonds. Special festive dishes like Roat and Dubuk are prepared on specific occasions, adding meaning and joy to celebrations. Moreover, food traditions are closely aligned with ecological rhythms; harvest festivals like Harella and Bhitauli honor the abundance of nature, with symbolic dishes such as ‘dei’ and the sharing of sprouted greens representing prosperity and gratitude
- **Honoring Ecological Cycles:** Seasonal variations in diet also reflect a deep-rooted respect for environmental cycles. Importantly, traditional cooking practices—such as slow cooking in iron vessels or using sal leaves to wrap sweets like Singori—are passed down through generations, helping preserve Uttarakhand’s rich culinary legacy. In many festivals, food is not merely a form of sustenance but a sacred ritual, reinforcing cultural continuity and a shared sense of identity



Source:

1. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uttarakhand#/media/File:IN-UT.svg>

2. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/2b/Kumaon_Garhwal.jpg

Throughout the year, people in both Garhwal and Kumaon, as well as the Jaunsar-Bawar region, engage in a variety of food-centric festivals that do more than just satisfy

the palate—they reinforce social bonds, pass down traditional knowledge, and celebrate the harmony between humans and nature. Here are some of the most prominent food-related festivals of Uttarakhand and the unique culinary traditions associated with them:

Ghughutiya/ Ghee Sankranti /Sankranti / Makar Sankranti:

Seasonal Significance: Ghughutia is celebrated during Makar Sankranti, marking the end of the harsh winter period and the sun’s northward journey (*Uttarayan*). It symbolizes the gradual lengthening of days and approach of spring, bringing hope for warmth, renewal, and prosperity



Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghughutiya_Festiva

Time: January (Peak winter)

Special Foods: Ghughuti (wheat flour and jaggery sweet), Til (sesame) laddoos, Kheer, Stuffed Bread with Black gram Dal with pure butter (Ghee)

Ghughutiya is celebrated on the auspicious occasion of Makar Sankranti, which falls somewhere in mid-January, marking the sun’s transition into the zodiac sign of Capricorn—a time of renewal and harvest. Traditionally, this festival was observed when the granaries were full and livestock were well-fed. In Kumaon, this day is especially joyful for children, who are at the heart of the festival customs. It is one of the rare festivals where ghee (clarified butter) becomes the central culinary symbol. The highlight of Ghughutiya is the preparation of “Ghughutis”—sweet, ring-shaped dumplings made from wheat flour, Sesame seed, Ghee and jaggery. These are deep-fried, strung into garlands, and worn by children around their necks. The children sing local songs and offer sweets to crows, who are affectionately regarded as messengers of ancestors. Dishes rich in ghee are prepared and consumed, such as the roti smeared with ghee, urad dal pakoras, and seasonal greens cooked with ghee and local spices.

Nutritional Significance

Sesame seeds are rich in calcium, iron, healthy fats, and antioxidants, essential for joint health and warmth in cold weather. Jaggery improves circulation and immunity. These foods provide high caloric energy needed during winter. Black gram consumed with wheat bread or in Pakora form along

with ghee is very high in calcium, and protein. Purified form of butter (ghee) is good source of energy during winter season.

Magh Maroj:

Time: Around January, starting with the Sankranti festival (Paush Parv).

Seasonal Significance: The festival also signifies the gradual transition toward spring and the coming New Year, welcoming longer and warmer days.

Special Foods: Rus-Bhat, Lesu Roti, Bhang ki Chutney. Baanhi (Dried Meat), Ghee



Source: <https://uttarakhandmagazine.com/>

and Jaggery (Gur), Sesame Seeds (Til): Til-based sweets, Local Grains and Tubers, Gahat (Horse Gram) Soup/Dal

The Magh Maroj festival, celebrated in the mid-winter month of Magh, is among the most awaited and unique folk festivals in Jaunsar-Bawar, a culturally distinct region in Uttarakhand’s Dehradun district. The festivities begin at the Kaylu Maharaj Temple in Hanol, where a ritualistic goat sacrifice is performed—a symbolic act marking the start of celebrations across villages.

The cuisine of Uttarakhand is known for its simple yet nutritious ingredients, often sourced locally from forests, rivers, and terraced fields. In the harsh terrain of the hills, communities have developed unique ways to preserve food, use seasonal produce, and minimize waste, while still creating meals that are both flavorful and symbolic.



Source: <https://uttarakhandmagazine.com/>

Baanthi – More Than Just Meat is after the ceremonial sacrifice, the goat meat is cut into thin strips, traditionally sun-dried, and distributed among the villagers. This preserved meat, known as Baanthi (बांठी), becomes the central element of shared feasts and family

gatherings throughout the month. Each household not only offers goats to the deity but also prepares dried meat dishes that can withstand the harsh winters, a practice born out of necessity that has evolved into a celebratory culinary art. Married daughters are especially invited back home for these feasts, reinforcing family bonds and ancestral connections. If unable to visit, families ensure that Baanthi reaches them—a gesture that keeps cultural roots alive, even across distances.

Nutritional Significance: During Maroj, food practices are closely linked to survival, nutrition, and ritual significance in the harsh winter conditions. A central component of the festival is Baanthi, or dried goat meat, which is obtained from animals sacrificed at the village deity's temple and then equitably distributed among households. The meat is traditionally sun-dried and stored, ensuring a reliable source of protein during periods of heavy snowfall when fresh food becomes scarce. Alongside this, ghee is consumed in generous quantities to provide concentrated fats that help maintain body warmth, while jaggery (gur) is valued for its iron content and ability to supply quick energy in cold weather. Sesame seeds (til) also play an important role, commonly prepared as sweets like laddus, offering essential oils, minerals, and vitamins that help counter dryness and nutritional stress during winter. In addition, meals often include local grains and tubers such as yams and sweet potatoes, which are rich in carbohydrates and dietary fiber, making the festive diet both nourishing and well suited to the climatic challenges of the region.

Phool Dei (Spring Festival):

Time: Chaitra month (March–April)

Seasonal Significance: Transition from winter to spring

Special Foods: Dei (sweet dish made from rice, jaggery, coconut), Traditional jaggery-based sweets



Source:(<https://curlytales.com/phool-dei-festival>)

Phool Dei is a very popular festival which is celebrated somewhere in spring time that comes in the month of mid-March, in Kumaon and Garhwal. Springtime is a beautiful time when the flora blooms with new flowers, specifically one flower which is known as “Fuli”. This reflects renewal, hope, and the blossoming of life. This festival is quite significant for people in the hills as it brings forward their connection with nature and as a community. People come together to sing, dance, and eat together. Young girls pluck flowers together and scatter them around their homes and those of people in town as a sign to welcome spring. This festival is primarily celebrated by young girls, who visit homes in their village with baskets full of freshly picked flowers and sprinkle them at thresholds while singing traditional blessings for prosperity and happiness. The most popular one is, “Phool Dei, Chamma Dei, Deno Dwar, Bhur Bhakar, Vo Dei Sei Namashkar, Puje Dwar.” It means they wish that your Dei will be filled with flowers, good luck, prosperity, and filled with food. It means the Dei means the place from where you enter any house, remain full of happiness, your granaries remain full of food, and may you all remain happy and healthy always. The people, in turn, give them rice, which is a symbol of food, sweets, and money, as a token of gratitude for their good wishes

A special dish called “Sei” is prepared, made from rice, jaggery, ghee(purified butter), and curd. The simplicity of the dish reflects the purity of intention behind the festival. Sei is then offered to the girls, sisters, and the relatives as a token of love and the household gods. The emphasis on flowers, children, and home-made food represents the deep cultural value placed on nurturing, renewal, and gratitude.

Nutritional Significance: Rice provides quick energy, while jaggery acts as a natural iron supplement and improves digestion. Coconut contributes healthy fats and electrolytes, aiding hydration and vitality during seasonal change. The festival emphasizes freshness, renewal, and balanced nutrition.

Bissu Mela:

Time: Around Baisakhi (mid-April), lasting about a week.

Seasonal Significance: Exchanging seeds, reaffirming tribal alliances, and performing rituals to bless the land before sowing.

Special Foods: local meat dishes, grains, and beverages

Bissu Mela is one of the most colorful and community-driven festivals of the Jaunsari tribe. Held at the beginning of the agricultural cycle in the month of April, it brings together people from various villages for a week-long celebration filled with music, dance, and traditional food. The celebration also marks a successful harvest season, symbolizing prosperity, abundance, and collective happiness for the community. Cultural expressions form a vibrant part of the festivities, with energetic folk music, traditional dances like Jhaeta.



Source: (<https://uttarakhandmagazine.com/>)

and Rasau, and participants dressed in colorful traditional attire adding to the visual and rhythmic appeal. The festival is believed to trace its origins back to the Pandava era, lending it historical depth and linking present-day celebrations with ancient epics and oral traditions.

The culinary aspect of Bissu Mela involves preparing and sharing local meat dishes, grains, and beverages Baadi, prepared by cooking local finger millet (ragi) flour in boiling water and often enriched with ghee, is a staple food of Uttarakhand. The cuisine also features a variety of nutritious local pulses and lentils, such as Chainsoo, made from roasted black gram, and Faanu, a wholesome mix of lentils, both valued for their high protein content. Gahat (horse gram) is commonly used to prepare nourishing stuffed chapatis, while bhang ki chutney, made from locally sourced cannabis seeds, adds a distinctive tangy flavor along with high nutritional value. Kafuli, a thick and healthy spinach-based curry, remains a cornerstone of everyday meals. Festive occasions are marked with traditional sweets like arsa, prepared from rice flour and jaggery, and are often complemented by locally fermented beverages such as soor, which form an integral part of the region's culinary tradition. The festival acts as a cultural anchor, preserving the oral traditions, rituals, and indigenous agricultural knowledge of the Jaunsari people. It reinforces the idea that food, land, and community are inseparable.

Nutritional Significance: Traditional staples made from local grains such as Mandua (finger millet) and Jhangora

(barnyard millet) provide complex carbohydrates and high dietary fiber, ensuring long-lasting energy, while pulses like Bhatt (black soybean) contribute valuable plant protein. Many ingredients used in these dishes also possess medicinal properties, including Bhangjeera (*Perilla frutescens*) and locally foraged herbs such as nettle leaves (*Kandalee ka saag*), which are traditionally valued for their therapeutic benefits. The generous use of leafy greens and indigenous ferns like Lengda further enriches the diet with essential minerals, particularly iron and calcium, supporting strength and vitality. Additionally, the inclusion of ghee and mustard oil supplies healthy fats and concentrated calories, making the festive food both wholesome and well suited to the physically demanding nature of the celebrations

Bikhoti / Baisakhi / Vishuvat Sankranti, or Syalde Bikhoti. (Agricultural New Year)

Seasonal Significance: Bikhoti marks the solar New Year and the sun's movement into Mesha Rashi (Aries), signaling the end of winter and the onset of warmer days.

Time: April

Special Foods: Millet-based meals, Fresh dairy products.



Source: <https://www.himantar.com/syalde-bakhoti-fair-folk>

Bikhoti, which coincides with Baisakhi (Vaisakhi) in mid-April, marks the beginning of the first month of the Hindu calendar, Vaisakha. The festival

celebrates the harvesting of Rabi crops, particularly wheat, symbolizing prosperity and the onset of a new agricultural year. It also represents spring, renewal, and rejuvenation after winter, a transition that is reflected in dietary practices emphasizing lighter, seasonal foods and purification, signifying a fresh and healthy beginning.

Nutritional Significance

Millets support digestive health and metabolic balance, while dairy products supply calcium and proteins, strengthening the body at the beginning of the agricultural year.

Harela (Monsoon–Agricultural Festival):

Time: Shraavan month (July–August)

Seasonal Significance: Beginning of Kharif sowing

Special Foods: Sweet dish Pua and singal made with wheat flour, purified butter (Ghee) and sugar, Mandua (finger millet) roti Gahat (horse gram) dal Rai.



Source: (<https://uttarakhandmagazine.com/>)

palak, chaulai and other leafy greens Harela, which means “greenery,” is a monsoon festival which is celebrated during the onset of monsoon in the month of July that marks the beginning of the sowing season. Celebrated with great passion by farming communities, Harela is both agrarian and spiritual in nature. Before the festival, seeds of five or seven types of Grains (such as barley, wheat, gram, and millet) are sown in small containers inside homes in a sacred place. After 9–10 days, the sprouted seedlings—called Harela—are harvested and placed on the heads of family members as a blessing. This also reflects an ancient practice of seed germination testing, which was used to assess the germination performance of seeds before sowing. Culinary celebrations include preparing seasonal dishes made from locally available pulses, grains, and leafy greens. The food served reminds people of their connection with the earth, the importance of sustainable farming, and gratitude toward nature.

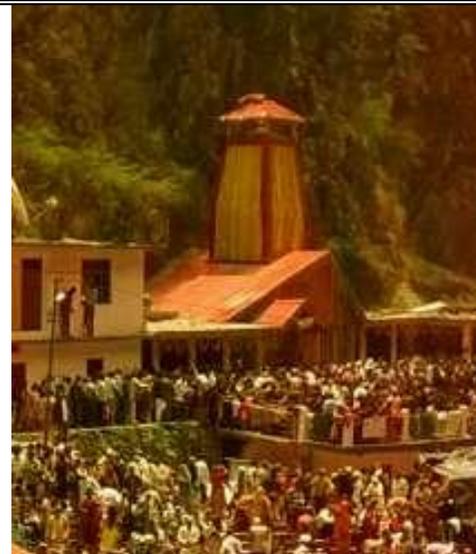
Nutritional Significance: Mandua is rich in calcium, iron, fiber, and complex carbohydrates, essential for bone strength and sustained energy. Gahat dal is high in protein and iron, improves digestion, and boosts immunity during the monsoon when infections are prevalent. Leafy greens supply micronutrients and antioxidants, supporting detoxification and metabolic health. Wheat flour, sugar and ghee help in providing instant energy.

Olgia / Ghee Sankranti

Time: August (Post-monsoon) Celebrated on the first day of Bhado, usually in mid-August

Seasonal Significance: Sun enters **Karka Rashi (Cancer)**, marking the **arrival of the monsoon season** and a noticeable change in weather. It signifies a time of **abundant greenery, healthy livestock, and increased milk production**, which is why ghee and dairy products are central to the festival.

Special Foods: Ghee-based Source, Chapatis with fresh butter and ghee, Pulses and seasonal vegetables.



Source:

<https://www.google.com/search?q=Olgia+festival>

Olgia, popularly known as Ghee Sankranti, is an important harvest festival of Uttarakhand, celebrated on the first day of the Hindu month of Bhado (mid-August). The festival symbolizes agricultural abundance, verdant fields, and the well-being of livestock. Traditional practices include applying ghee to the body, preparing and consuming ghee-rich foods such as urad dal chapatis, and exchanging gifts, all as expressions of gratitude for nature’s bounty and a prosperous farming season. The farming communities presented freshly harvested produce to the royal court, a custom known as Olag, symbolizing the success and abundance of the season

Nutritional Significance: Ghee contains fat-soluble vitamins (A, D, E, K), supports digestion, cognitive health, and immunity. Consumption of ghee helps restore energy lost during monsoon stress and improves nutrient absorption.

Igas / Budhi Diwali:



Seasonal Significance: Onset of winter in the Himalayan region, and Igas is celebrated after Diwali, marking the deepening of winter and shorter days. It signifies a period when harvest work is completed and agricultural activity slows down. Lighting lamps during Igas symbolizes warmth, protection, and community bonding as people prepare for colder months. Seasonally, the festival reflects gratitude for

the harvest, rest after labor, and readiness for winter, emphasizing resilience and togetherness in a harsh climate.

Time: November (Post-harvest) It falls on the eleventh day (Ekadashi) of the bright half of the Kartik month (Kartik Shukla Ekadashi).

Special Foods: Arsa (rice flour and jaggery sweet), Traditional rice-based dishes Arsa, Urad Dal Pakode (Daal Fritters), Swala, A puffed, savory, fried flatbread, often paired with ghee, Chainsoo & Phaanu, Protein-rich, traditional Garhwali dishes made from roasted and ground black gram (urad) or other lentils, Kafuli, A nutritious green curry made from spinach and fenugreek leaves, a staple dish, Jhangora Ki Kheer: A sweet pudding made from barnyard millet, which is a nutritious grain Gahat (Kulath) Soup: A, nutritious horse gram preparation that is popular for its high nutritional value and is believed to have medicinal properties, Mandua Roti: Roti made from finger millet (ragi), which is highly nutritious, Bhang Ki Chutney: A tangy, traditional chutney made with hemp seeds, Gulgula: A traditional sweet snack made from suji (Semolina, Curd, Ghee and Jaggery).

Budhi Diwali, popularly known as Igas Bagwal, is an important folk festival of Uttarakhand, observed eleven days after the main Diwali on Kartik Shukla Ekadashi. The festival is associated with the late arrival of news about Lord Ram's return to Ayodhya or, according to another belief, it commemorates the victory of the Garhwal warrior Madho Singh Bhandari. Celebrations are marked by the lighting of community bonfires known as Bhilona, along with traditional songs, dances, and rituals involving livestock, symbolizing gratitude, togetherness, and communal harmony.

Nutritional Significance: The traditional foods are nutritionally well balanced, with proteins supplied by lentils such as urad (used in chainsoo), gahat (horse gram), and bhatt (black soybean). Energy requirements are met through the use of jaggery, particularly in sweets like arsa, and healthy fats such as ghee, commonly used in dishes like swala. Essential minerals, especially iron, are provided by millet-based preparations such as mandua roti and jhangora kheer. Additionally, the use of mustard oil and locally grown spices imparts warming properties to the food, helping the body combat cold climatic conditions.

Nanda Devi Raj Jat and Devi Temple Festivals

Time: Periodic (12-year cycle and annual temple fairs)

Seasonal

Significance: This festival is held during the late monsoon to early autumn period, when mountain paths are accessible and nature is at its most fertile. A time of



abundant greenery, post-monsoon renewal, and agricultural prosperity. Seasonally, the rituals seek the blessings of the goddess for crop protection, community well-being, and balance between humans and nature.

Special Foods: Kheer, halwa, baadi, Phaanu (mixed lentil preparation). The Nanda Devi Raj Jat is a grand pilgrimage of Uttarakhand held once every twelve years to honor Goddess Nanda Devi, symbolizing her ceremonial journey to her divine abode with Lord Shiva. This extraordinary yatra covers nearly 280 km, beginning from Nauti village and culminating at Homkund, and is traditionally led by a sacred four-horned sheep believed to be divinely chosen. The pilgrimage is deeply rooted in cultural rituals, folk songs, dances, and strong community participation, reflecting collective faith and social bonding. Alongside this major event, annual Nanda Devi fairs are celebrated across Kumaon and Garhwal, particularly in Almora and Nainital, where local life, traditional crafts, and cultural practices are showcased, symbolizing prosperity and the enduring presence of the goddess in the Himalayan region.

Nutritional Significance: The Nanda Devi Raj Jat and the associated temple festivals of Uttarakhand carry important nutritional significance through their emphasis on local, seasonal, and traditional foods, which symbolize regional abundance and prosperity. Millets and pulses provide slow-release energy, protein, and minerals, essential for long pilgrimages and rituals at high altitudes. The satvik nature of food promotes physical endurance and mental calm. At the same time, shared food practices and collective participation promote community health and social cohesion. However, growing ecological concerns underline the need to balance cultural continuity with sustainable food systems to protect both the environment and traditional livelihoods.

The traditional festivals of Uttarakhand vividly illustrate the deep interconnection between seasonality, agriculture, and food culture in the Himalayan region. Celebrated in harmony with climatic transitions and agricultural cycles, these festivals promote the consumption of locally available, nutrient-dense foods that support health and resilience during extreme seasonal conditions, particularly in winter. Ingredients such as sesame seeds, jaggery, black gram, wheat, and ghee are not chosen merely for ritual value but for their high energy, calcium, protein, and immunity-enhancing properties, essential for sustaining life in cold environments.

These food traditions reflect indigenous knowledge systems that emphasize sustainability, climate adaptability, and nutritional security. Traditional recipes prepared from locally available food grains and other plant species important in Kumaoni culture (Acharya Balkrishna, 2024) Preserving and promoting such festival-based culinary practices not only safeguards Uttarakhand's cultural heritage but also strengthens pathways for sustainable diets, rural livelihoods, and agro-food tourism. In an era of changing climates and

food systems, the seasonal wisdom embedded in Uttarakhand's festivals offers valuable lessons for nutrition, sustainability, and cultural continuity.

References

Acharya Balkrishna,(Traditional food systems of Kumaon region (Uttarakhand): A blend of taste with medicinal attributes,
<https://www.multisubjectjournal.com/archives/2024.v6.i4.B.4121>.

Ghughutiya Festival. (n.d.). In Wikipedia. Retrieved January 25, 2026, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghughutiya_Festiva

Uttarakhand Magazine. (n.d.). Traditional foods and cultural stories from Uttarakhand. Retrieved January 25, 2026, from <https://uttarakhandmagazine.com/>

CurlyTales. (n.d.). Phool Dei Festival: <https://curlytales.com/phool-dei-festival>

Wikipedia contributors. (n.d.). File: IN-UT.svg [Map]. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uttarakhand#/media/File:IN-UT.svg4>

Wikipedia contributors. (n.d.). Kumaon-Garhwal.jpg [Photograph]. In Wikimedia Commons. Retrieved January 25, 2026, from https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/2b/Kumaon_Garhwal.jpg

Wikipedia contributors. (n.d.). Nanda Devi Raj Jat. In Wikipedia. Retrieved January 25, 2026, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nanda_Devi_Raj_Ja

<https://kafaltree.com/syalde-bikhauti-mela-dwarahat>
