

# Lore, Legends, and Landscape of Uttarakhand: Exploring the Socio- Religious Significance of Golu Devta- God of Justice

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## **Abstract**

The present paper primarily points out the shifts in mythical stories by highlighting an old religious tale of one of the supreme regional deities of Uttarakhand especially the Kumaon and Garhwal region called Golu Devta, considered as the God of justice. Although the state has a fair amount of cities that are plush with all state-of-the-art amenities and crowds from other parts of the country, this could not take the people of Uttarakhand away from their roots and traditional values. There are different myths, legends and beliefs associated with Golu Devta regarding his birth, incarnation, ruling period and even of his death. The story has adapted unique forms as it went through places, beliefs, cultures and generations. This paper studies the variation of folk narratives of Golu Devta prevailing in Uttarakhand and looks forward to bringing into light the needs and reasons behind the shifts and adaptations across cultures and communities.

**Keywords:** Golu Devta, Legend, Folklore, Myth

Legends and folklores are captivating narratives passed down through generations, rich in cultural and historical significance. These tales, often rooted in a blend of fact and fiction, hold a special place in society, serving various essential roles. They are age-old stories that have endured the test of time, transcending boundaries and connecting people across generations and cultures. They come in many forms, from folktales and myths to urban legends and historical accounts embellished with time. What sets legends apart from other forms of storytelling is their profound significance within society. They often convey moral and ethical lessons, guiding how to navigate life's complexities. These stories offer insights into the consequences of one's actions, fostering empathy and ethical decision-making among individuals. Legends serve as moral compasses, reinforcing societal norms and values. According to Theodore H. Gaster:

Folklore is the part of a people's culture which is preserved consciously or unconsciously, in beliefs and practices, customs or observations of general currency, in myths, legends and tales of common acceptance, and in arts and crafts which expresses the temper and genius of a group rather than of an individual. (258)

Legends entertain and engage audiences whether around a campfire, in a book, or on-screen, Legends have the power to captivate the imagination and provide an escape from reality. They create a shared cultural experience, bringing people together through storytelling. They play a pivotal role in forging a sense of identity and belonging within a community. They offer individuals a connection to

their roots and a feeling of continuity with their ancestors. Legends can foster a strong sense of belonging, uniting people who share these stories as part of their cultural heritage. Legends often reflect universal themes and emotions, making them relatable across diverse societies. These stories explore human struggles, triumphs, fears, and aspirations, enabling individuals to find common ground and empathize with others. They frequently feature heroic figures and extraordinary feats, inspiring individuals to strive for greatness.

Uttarakhand, a region nestled in the Himalayas of northern India, has legends holding immense significance within the rich tapestry of its folk culture. The 27th state of the Republic of India, Devbhoomi Uttarakhand was shaped in the year 2000 after being separated from the huge territory of Uttar Pradesh, is a location to explore the wealth of Indian culture, history, and magnificence. The state that borders Tibet toward the north; Nepal toward the east; Uttar Pradesh toward the south; and Himachal Pradesh toward the west and northwest, is divided into areas, Garhwal and Kumaon, which further break into 13 sections. The state also finds its citation in history as a part of the 'Kuru' and the 'Panchal' fiefdoms (mahajanpads) during the Vedic age. In Hindu tradition, Uttarakhand has been honored as a part of the celebrated Kedarkhand (now Garhwal) and Manaskhand (Kumaon). It is also believed the famous sage Vyas composed the epic Mahabharata in Uttarakhand. Vedic scriptures clearly show that Shaivism in Uttarakhand has been practiced since ancient times along with Buddhism and Folk Shamanic religion also had its roots in the state.

People are divided into regions and are thus better recognized as Kumaoni (inhabitants of Kumaon Region) and Garhwali (inhabitants of Garhwal Region). Apart from these two major geographical groups, Uttarakhand is also home to ethnic groups like Bhotias, Jaunsaries, Tharus, Bokshas, and Rajis. Although the major part of the region is seen speaking native languages like Kumaoni [an Indo-Aryan language] and Garhwali [an Indo-Aryan language of the Central Pahari subgroup] other than these two Hindi, Urdu, and Punjabi are also widely spoken in the region. Various tribal communities are both nomadic and those hailing from Indo-Aryan descent are part of the ethnicity of Uttarakhand. Constituting Proto-Australoid, Mongoloid, Nordic races and the Dravidians, the state is amongst one of the most historically affluent places in India. Ethnic groups like Jaunsari and Bhotias are further divided into small groups that corroborate the diverse population and culture in Uttarakhand.

The people of Uttarakhand indulge in vivid celebrations and performing rituals around the year due to their deep-rooted connection with nature and divinity. Like their simple lifestyle, the festivals and fairs in Uttarakhand are also simple yet vivid and culturally rich. Each season is welcomed with *Pahari* rituals, hearty folk songs and dance and so are the agricultural periods. The ancestor spirit worship is exclusive to the region, *Jaagar*, as it is locally called in which *Jagariya* (ballad singers) sing to invoke the Gods and the local deities up from their inactive stage to solve their problems and shower on their many blessings. Dances like *Barada Nati*, *Bhotiya Dance*, *Chancheri*, *Chhapeli*, *Choliya Dance*, *Jagars*, *Jhora*, *Langvir Nritya*, *Pandav Nritya*, *Ramola*, *Shotiya*, *Thali-Jadda*, and *Jhainta* are performed on various occasions and gatherings in Uttarakhand. The primary role of women is seen during the time of festivals as they are involved in preparing traditional cuisine and singing ritual/folk songs. Dressed traditionally in *Ghagra-Choli* with a *Rangwali* (veil), these women look beautiful and their beauty is further enhanced by the big *Nath* (nose rings) that are made of gold. Every day in Uttarakhand is a day of the jubilee; the noble and humble people take immense delight in celebrating indeed a small success with a thankful heart.

The cultural and historical heritage of Uttarakhand is deeply intertwined with numerous myths and legends, and they play several crucial roles within this unique mountainous society. Legends in Uttarakhand reinforce the region's distinct cultural identity. They narrate the stories of local heroes, deities, and historical figures that have shaped the identity and traditions of the local people. These legends serve as a source of pride, connecting individuals to their roots and fostering a strong sense of belonging. Uttarakhand is known as the Land of the Gods due to its numerous sacred sites and temples. Legends often revolve around the divine, featuring gods and goddesses who are believed to reside in the region's pristine landscapes. These stories not only reflect the spiritual beliefs of the people but also serve as a guide for religious practices and rituals. Many legends in Uttarakhand emphasize the importance of respecting and preserving the natural environment. With its breathtaking Himalayan landscapes, these legends often include tales of spirits and deities associated with mountains, rivers, and forests. These stories promote ecological awareness and sustainable practices, fostering a harmonious relationship between humans and nature.

In many remote areas of Uttarakhand, oral tradition is the primary means of passing down knowledge and stories. Legends are orally transmitted from generation to generation, helping to preserve local history, customs, and language. This oral tradition strengthens the bonds within families and communities. Uttarakhand's legends have attracted tourists and cultural enthusiasts from around the world. Visitors are drawn to the region's folklore, which adds depth and meaning to their exploration of the area. This exchange of cultures and ideas benefits the local economy and promotes cross-cultural understanding. Legends in Uttarakhand often involve community heroes and heroines who exemplify qualities like courage, resilience, and unity. These stories inspire community members to work together in times of adversity and to maintain the social fabric that has sustained them in the challenging Himalayan environment. The folklore of Uttarakhand has provided opportunities for artists, storytellers, and cultural performers. Folk music, dance, and art inspired by these legends are not only a source of income but also a means of preserving and celebrating the culture. In Uttarakhand's folk culture, legends are not merely stories; they are the threads that bind communities, connect people to their spiritual roots, and impart wisdom about living in harmony with the awe-inspiring natural environment. These tales continue to be cherished and play a vital role in shaping the unique identity and heritage of Uttarakhand.

Golu Devta or Lord Golu is the legendary mythological and historical God of the Kumaun region who is believed to be an incarnation of Gaur Bhairav (Shiva) and regarded as the dispenser of justice. There are four different temples of Golu Devta in the Uttarakhand region the oldest being in Champawat, a district in Kumaon and others at Chitai, Ghorakhal and Chamarkhan (Almora) contributing to building the cultural and religious background and adding on to the various literary art forms of the community. All these temples have their lore and legend about the Golu Devta- God of Justice. C.M. Agarwal in his seminal book *Golu Devata* (1992) says that:

The story of Golu even today plays an important role in para-psychology (treatment of diseases by means of *Jagar*, *Jaga* and prayers to gods). The story of Golu is connected with the religious traditions of the region. He is remembered as a spiritual ruler and protector of the people there. (26)

The myths associated with Golu Devta are the traditional anonymous narratives and tales that are religious. These myths originate from *jagars*, a traditional ritual of Uttarakhand more precisely preserved in the Kumaon and Garhwal regions. The story of Golu Devta is supposed to have originated somewhere around the tenth century A.D. and Champawat is considered to be his birthplace. He is also considered

to be the human incarnation of God Shiva. This myth has always had a very important position in human psychology and the society of Uttarakhand as it has been a primitive religious narrative. This becomes even more important because the psychoanalytical approaches to criticism have made it possible to evaluate the concept of the myth of Golu Devta afresh.

This paper talks about all four temples of Golu Devta at four different places studying all these regional temples, their history, their importance, rituals performed at the temple. Though the deity is one, it has four different places where he is worshipped and thus all the locals come up with their version of the same old story and believe it to be true and more relatable. The same story of the same deity is different for the locals of Champawat, Chittai and Ghodakhal. One cannot accept the specific one and discard the other because all the versions of the myths are somewhere interlinked and each of them has its significance in culture. These different versions of the same story had developed depending on the needs of the society, changes in the norms of the locals, modernization of the generations, situations of the society and the beliefs of the community. These differences hold the roots and essence of the culture years back. The expertise of myth lies in its interchangeable form, its flexibility, relatability and accommodating nature. These differences make it richer and earn more attention through the time passing and time.

The origin of the myth of Golu Devta varies from place to place. However, two widely accepted stories talk about the origin and development of the legend. The local records and narratives tell that Jhalkari was the ruler of Katyuri and had seven spouses who lived together agreeably. Though the lord was honored with everything, he wanted to have a boy who could acquire his position after him. For securing a child he revered different deities, followed a wide range of manauti (appeasement), and performed charity and yajnas yet none ended up being productive. He brought extraordinary astrologers and pandits and lastly, after going through his horoscope he was proposed to get married again as his eighth wife would yield him a progeny that would not be any typical human yet a renowned and illustrious avatar. The following night he longed for a supernaturally delightful young lady sitting on the pinnacle of Neelkanth and incredibly the young lady presented herself by the name of Kalinka. The lord was hypnotized by her magnificence and went mad for Kalinka in his fantasy. The following morning, he gathered every one of his retainers and talked about his fantasy and from there on continued towards the heavenly locale of Neelkanth with a colossal armed force. He crossed many forests, waterways and mountains and endured brutal climatic conditions for quite a long time. Finally, he arrived at where Kalinka was occupied with extreme compensation. He met her and presented himself as the ruler of Dhauri Dhumakot and his fantasy succession. The ruler admitted his adoration for herself as well as his craving to wed her. He likewise stood up to the fact that the stargazers directed him the way to Neelkanth and that he was married and had seven spouses yet none could satisfy his interest in bringing forth a son. Kalinka being a temperate young lady requested that the ruler ask the sages to give him consent to wed her. On hearing the state of the ruler, sages felt sorry for him and happily allowed the king to marry Kalinka as his eighth spouse.

There is one more form of the account of Kalinka and Jhalkari getting married. When Jhalkari went to chase in the forest close to stream Kali, being awful and depleted he made a beeline for the town of Dubachaur where he saw two bison battling. He attempted to isolate them yet fizzled because he was at that point extremely exhausted. Being parched he sent one of his workers to get some water yet shockingly the worker returned with nothing. Drained and disappointed, he then sent one more worker looking for water. While looking for water, the worker heard a cascade close by. Following the cascade,

he showed up at a little garden joined to a hermitage which he needed to go through to bring even a single drop of water. There, he saw a wonderful lady meditating and drenched in reflection and to draw her attention the servant requested to know her name in an extremely high tone. Her name was Kali and she told the worker to go from there and not cast his shadow upon her, subsequently upsetting her contemplation. The servant then applauded the king and illuminated her concerning his duty. At the point when he began to get the water from the cascade in the container, a few drops of water poured out over the lady who, being irritated by the act, shamed the ruler and ridiculed his failure and wretchedness for not having the ability to try and separate two battling buffaloes. To her comment, the servant told her to go with him to the king and separate the bison herself. Kali arrived at the spot and isolated two battling bison just by holding onto each by their horns. The king was stunned by her power and magnificence and succumbed to her. He then chose to wed Kali and visited her uncle to achieve consent for the same. At long last, Kali was married to the King and lived cheerfully thereafter.

Both stories meet with the common outcome of the other seven wives of the king being jealous of Kalinka. They were afraid that if the prophecy went to be true then Kalinka would give birth to a special boy and he would be the centre of great love and affection leading to the loss of their ego and reputation. The king ordered Kalinka to ring the bell attached to her girdle if the child was born in his absence so that he could come and visit her immediately. Hereafter begins various stories telling how much Kalinka suffered and was mistreated by the other seven wives that vary from Kumaun to Garwal and other nearby regions. The seven queens further planned to kill the unborn child in the womb but none of their plans succeeded so they finally thought of delivering the child themselves. Some of the stories mention that Kalinka was made unconscious at the time of delivery some assert that she was blindfolded and some say that the child was born at midnight and Kalinka was in deep sleep at the time of delivery. When the child was born, the seven queens dropped the newborn on the floor to the *goth* (place to keep cows, goats and other pets. They placed a blood-smeared *sil-batta* (stone slab and muller) before Kalinka and informed her with all fake sympathy that she had delivered the stone instead of a child. After that, all the queens went to the goth to check upon the child expecting him to be killed by the animals by then. But they were shocked to see the child safe and sound, feeding on a cow's breast. This story also has slight variations in different areas of Uttarakhand. Some of them tell about the seven queens throwing the newly born child in the heap of *sinna* (scorpion grass).

Another myth runs in parallel that the child survived after he was put in and covered in a heap of salt and it was the power of the god or the incarnated child that the salt turned into sweet sugar. The same incidents are interpreted near Garhwal as when the child was born he was thrown to the place where buffaloes and goats are kept, so that the child may be harmed, but the goat named Lakha bore the child on his back and the child also fed on its milk and grew stronger. Another story tells that they procured a heavy iron box lined with a heap of salt inside placed the child in it and threw it into river Kali but instead of sinking, it flowed for seven days and seven nights to reach the banks of Gorighat, where it was stuck in the net of a fisherman named Bhana. Bhana had no child after twelve years of marriage and he doubted that the child was of royal blood so he decided to keep the child with himself and named him Golu. Golu was brought up by Bhana and his wife. He grew up as an intelligent, wise and fearless young boy. It is believed that one night Golu had a dream about his mother Kalinka, capital Dhauri Dhumakot and his father Jhalkari. Different tales tell that Golu left Bhana and his wife after the realization of the truth. Some stories tell that Bhana went to Dhauri Dhumakot to enquire about Golu's birth.

One day Golu demanded a horse from Bhana but due to their acute poverty, Bhana designed a wooden horse for Golu. Golu once took the horse to the bank of the river and made him drink water to which the seven queens present there mocked him for believing that the wooden horse can drink water. Golu replied that if a woman could deliver a sil-batta certainly the wooden horse can drink water. The queens were horrified if their conspiracy was hatched out. It is said that Jhalkari summoned Golu for offending the queens but instead was astonished by the vigour of a young boy and how he narrated the whole scenario of the deeds he and his mother suffered before and after his birth. The king accepted Golu as his son and he was crowned as the prince of Dhaulī Dhumakot at that time when Champawat was the capital of Kali Kumaun. People respected Golu as a god as he carried on the administration with honesty and foresight.

However, another version of the *jagar* says that Golu was not inclined to be a king and rejected his father's offer and joined the company of the devotees of Gorakhnath and he became gradually famous for his acts of kindness. His fame as the saviour of people spread far and wide and people began to worship him like a god. Another story runs that Kalua and Harua were produced from the *sil-batta*, both were loved by Golu as his brother and were appointed as diwan. Another version of *jagar* tells that Golu told her mother that *the sil-batta* placed before her at the time of delivery had turned into deities named Ragatkalu, Tagatkalu and Bhairavakalu and from them, the warriors like Naupana Narsingh and Supana Bhairavas were born.

The other version of the myth is very different with all the different characters in different timelines. It says that Golu Devta was the General in the army of Raja Baz Bahadur Chand (1638-1678) and also one of the royal advisers in the court of the king and his dearest friend. Golu was a fearless warrior, well-trained and expert in sword fighting and the leader in every war. Besides being a warrior, Golu was also a man of great intelligence and fair principles. He was a wise administrator and held a high position in the court of King Bajbahadur Chand. The story further proceeds that Golu was martyred in one of the wars and sacrificed his life to protect the king from the sword that rose on him. In respect of Golu's friendship and his devotion towards the nation, Bajbahadur Chand ordered a temple at Champawat dedicated to Golu. It is believed that people loved Golu and continued to visit his temple to pay him respect. Sometimes the king used to carry all his paperwork and court petitions to the temple to work in a peaceful environment. Gradually people started to visit the temple and cry out their sufferings, they shared the injustice done to them. One day after the king left the temple for his fort, some of his documents were left behind in the temple. To the surprise, the next day the cases of some locals were passed with judgment and the culprits were punished and forced to pay for their deed overnight. When the king noticed that these were the same people whose petitions were unknowingly left at the temple, he purposely left some of the unresolved documents of the pending petition to confirm his doubts and again the judgment was passed and the culprit was found guilty overnight. The king repeated the scenario for a long time and concluded that instant justice was done over the cases that were left in the temple.

One more version of the story runs in parallel to it and talks of a farmer belonging to a lower caste who noticed that Golu Devta appeared on his white horse in the temple collected the petitions and vanished. The incident was widespread and people started visiting the temple and worshipped him as the god of justice. Another variation of the same story tells that Golu devta used to possess the body of the culprit and through the medium of the human body he used to announce the deeds of the person himself and he even paid for his wrongdoings. The body of the culprit was then freed from the possession.

There are many versions of the legend which tell of the death incidence of Golu Devta or the end of his human *avatar*. It is said that Golu left his throne and wandered around his territory and delivered swift justice wherever required and one night he attained *samadhi* while riding over his horse. Another famous story is about the battle of Soraghati, which was fought between Veer Singh Bhandari and Golu Devta. Golu as the king lost this battle but people were highly inspired by his personality for being brave, fearless, fair and respectful. They considered Golu as the human incarnation of Lord Shiva and worshipped him. Thereafter the battle of Soraghati Golu Devta was named Bhandari. Soraghati at that time is known as Pithoragarh at present. Many locals discarded this story and contradicted that it is not the story of Golu Devta but only created for the martyrs who lost their lives in the battle at Soraghati.

In Uttarakhand, the legendary stories of Golu Devta have been circulated and delivered down the generations through the process of oral narration. This custom of narrating the myths of gods is celebrated in the form of a divine ritual called *jagars*. The concept of *jagars* has already been discussed in the paper. It is a ritual that is originally conducted to call upon the spirits of the ancestors and to invoke the regional deity - the Bhoomi Devta, the Isht Devta, the Kuldevta and more. As the name suggests, *jagar* means to evoke or to call. It is conducted at the small level where the descendants of a particular family take part in the invocation ceremony within a community level or a village. Natives call upon the *jagariya* (people who play *hudka*, *tal*, *chimta*, *dhammu* and other ancient musical instruments along with singing the mythical stories in the form of folk songs to summon the deity at *jagars*). These rituals are performed and connected to the idea of divine justice and the urge to seek justice for the spirits. It is also an art form in which music is the medium to evoke deities. It can be compared to the ballad of Gods in allusions to great epics like Ramayana or Mahabharata which employ the deeds and adventures of the incarnated God. *Jagar* remains an oral art form but holds importance in passing on the myths and beliefs from region to region and from one generation to another.

The legend of Golu Devta in Uttarakhand is a multifaceted narrative deeply rooted in the region's cultural, historical, and religious heritage. This paper has explored the variations in the mythical stories surrounding Golu Devta, highlighting how this old religious tale has evolved over time and across different communities in Uttarakhand, especially in the Kumaon and Garhwal regions. The diverse versions of the Golu Devta legend, whether stemming from the myth of Kalinka and Jhalkari or the historical accounts of Golu as a warrior and advisor to King Bajbahadur Chand, all contribute to the cultural tapestry of Uttarakhand. These legends serve as a reflection of the society's values, beliefs, and aspirations and they have played a crucial role in shaping the identity of the local communities. Furthermore, this paper has delved into the significance of legends in Uttarakhand's folk culture, highlighting their role in reinforcing cultural identity, preserving traditions, promoting ecological awareness, and fostering a sense of belonging. The oral tradition of passing down these legends, the role of *jagars* in invoking deities, and the cultural exchange facilitated by these stories have all been discussed in detail.

The legend of Golu Devta stands as a testament to the enduring power of storytelling and its profound impact on the cultural and societal fabric of Uttarakhand. These legends continue to shape the identity of the region, providing both a sense of continuity with the past and a source of inspiration for the future, making them an integral part of Uttarakhand's rich cultural heritage.

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