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# Historical and Contemporary Challenges to the Popularity and Preservation of Traditional Food in Uttarakhand

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## ABSTRACT

Uttarakhand is a hill state, situated in central Himalaya and can be differentiated from other areas based on topography, geographic features, flora and fauna, land use systems and socioeconomic conditions. Traditional cuisine from Uttarakhand—comprises of the unique food cultures of the Garhwal and Kumaon regions. Though being a symbol of rich nutritional value, sustainability, and cultural heritage, yet these food traditions remain largely invisible in mainstream Indian/Global cuisine map, especially from commercial and competence stand point. This research paper investigates the multiple factors contributing to the declining popularity of Uttarakhand's traditional foods. It explores issues including geographical constraints, socioeconomic changes, youth migration, commercialization failures, and shifting cultural perceptions. Drawing from qualitative interviews, field observations, and secondary literature, the paper argues that the neglect of Uttarakhand's food heritage stems from deeper structural and cultural disconnections. It further

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suggests interventions to preserve, promote, and revitalize this threatened culinary legacy.

**Keywords:** Traditional food, Uttarakhand, food culture, culinary heritage, migration, cultural identity.

## Introduction

Uttarakhand state was carved out of Himalayan districts of Uttar Pradesh on November 9, 2000 as the 27th state of Republic of India. Uttarakhand is situated at the foothills of Himalayan Mountain range. This beautiful state shares its international boundaries with China and Tibet in the north and Nepal in the east and national boundaries with Himanchal Pradesh lying on its northwest and Uttar Pradesh on south. Uttarakhand is stretched over a geographical area of 53,483 Square Kilometer, including the hill area of 46,035 Square Kilometer and a plain area of 7,448 Square Kilometer. Thus, it is blessed



Fig. 1: District Map of Uttarakhand, India  
(Source: www.mapsofindia.com)

with nature's bounty and is principally a hilly state with the forest cover of 34,651 Square Kilometer. (Uttarakhand at a Glance, 2014).

This Himalayan state in northern India is known for its rugged terrain, spiritual heritage, and biodiversity. It is also home to a vibrant culinary tradition rooted in local ingredients, seasonal rhythms, and ecological balance. Dishes like *Chainsoo* (Roasted Black Gram Curry), *Kafuli* (Leafy Green Curry), *Mandua ki Roti* (Finger Millet Bread), and *Jhangora ki kheer* (Barnyard Millet pudding) are emblematic of this heritage. Traditional foods consumed by the local people, since long play a significant role in consumer's local identity, their behavior, social, cultural, religious and economical domains which in the form of heritage passes on from generation to generation. (Agnihotri, 2021)

## Statement of the Problem

### The Disappearing Cuisine of the Hills

Traditional food systems offer a plethora of biodiversity for the diet and are good with respect to nutrition, positive dietary behaviors and other perspectives related with human being. It is unfortunate that despite the nutritive value worth combating present day's nutrition problems, authentic, diverse, and unique culinary heritage of Uttarakhand has lost its charm and is becoming unpopular & uncalled for or rather being replaced by several fancy cuisines. Modernization and ease of living has changed every aspect of human life, it has affected the life of a mountain dweller too, whose life has been harder than anyone else. As a result, several factors have changed common man's appreciation for age old, time tasted, sustainable traditional food system. (Bisht, 2024)

With homogenisation of various cultural groups due to outside forces and the effect of globalization, many traditional foods, as developed by various cultural groups, have been lost or on the verge of elimination. (Kala & Nautiyal, 2023).

Despite their nutritional richness and cultural significance, these foods are rarely seen in urban Indian restaurants, tourism menus, or televised cooking shows. This paper explores the reasons behind this disconnect. Why does traditional food from Uttarakhand remain underrepresented? What socio-economic and cultural factors have contributed to its marginalization? How can this decline be addressed? The following sections attempt to answer these questions through a multidisciplinary lens.

## Research Objective

The primary objective of this research is to—

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1. Investigate the causes behind the declining popularity and visibility of traditional food in Uttarakhand.
2. It aims to identify socio-cultural, economic, geographical, and policy-related barriers that hinder the preservation and promotion of the state's indigenous culinary heritage.
3. Additionally, the study seeks to recommend actionable strategies for their revival through tourism, education, and institutional support.

### **Review of Literature**

For the purpose of present study the review of literature is collected under 2 heads.

1. Cuisine and Historical Perspective
2. Role of Stakeholders in preserving Culinary Heritage.

#### **1. Cuisine and Historical Perspective**

A typical "*Pahari Meal*" is wholesome platter of comfort and goodness. The ethnic dishes of the region reflect a deep dialectical relationship between humans and their environment. **(Hidden gems from the Hills..Indian Culture Portal)** The historical perspective of agricultural production in the Himalayan region revealed that, in the past, rural communities in most traditional production landscapes were largely food self reliant but this trend changed over time and a large proportion of the rural population in now food insecure. Almost 40% household buying food from the market, 30% transfer from public programmes as food subsidies and food aid. **(Rana et.al. 2023)**.

Traditional foods are believed to be associated with a balanced diet and health, resilient agricultural systems and cultural integrity during the current climate changes scenario. **Deaconu, Mercille and Batal (2021)**. Such traditional foods, which are generally sourced from under- utilized crops are now being neglected. Many such crops have the potential to contribute to food and nutritional security at local and regional levels along with the environmental protection and by increasing the livelihood options for the locals **(Padulosi, Thompson and Rudebjer (2013)**. Worldwide human beings are moving away from the foods that are traditionally consumed by their generations. It is observed that they are replacing their diets that are excessive in Sugar, Sodium, Fat and Calories and this pattern is also percolating in rural areas. **Popkin, Adair & Ng (2012)**.

**Sharma & Bhatkoti (2025)** investigated factors contributing to the gradual extinction of Kumaoni cultural practices, reasons behind migrations and its

effect on traditions. The findings of their study suggest how migration, modernization and changing work culture due to technological advancements have led to cultural decline. Using the mixed method approach the study revealed the Kumaoni culture, rituals, folk beliefs, superstitions, cuisine, art, attire etc along with myriad challenges faced by it in this era of technological advancement.

**Bisht I.S. (2020)** Explored in their study beside eco-nutrition, local community-level economic incentives are also considered important for sustainability of traditional hill farming and food systems. Feasibility of integrating four local marketing initiatives to traditional hill farming, i) promoting community-supported organic/biodynamic agriculture (CSA), ii) linking traditional farming with school meal (MDM) programs, iii) enhanced market access and value chain development for local plant food resources, and iv) creating off-farm employment opportunity at community level for rural youths, among others.

**Balkrishna et al. (2024)** The Kumaoni people are utilizing their natural resources in preparing nutritious food for them in daily life. It would be even better if to a great extent this food is served to every tourist also so that they can deeply understand the rich cultural heritage of the region passed from one generation to another.

**Kumar et al.**, their research highlights how important it is for local communities to lead tourism development, especially since most of the state's population lives in rural areas. It explores the role of gastronomy tourism in empowering local communities and preserving indigenous knowledge. The study concludes by proposing strategies for sustainable growth that respect local cultures, support local economies, and contribute to responsible tourism practices in Himachal Pradesh.

## **2. Role of Stakeholders in preserving Culinary Heritage**

In recent years, Uttarakhand's state government has taken several affirmative steps to preserve and popularize traditional foods. The 2023, Millet Mission offers subsidies on seeds and bio-fertilizers, sets up collection and processing units across development blocks, and supports Mandua, Jhangora, Kauai, Cheena, and other. The mission also suggests, Millets into Public Distribution Systems, Mid-Day Meals, and Aganwadi Nutrition programs, and secures minimum support prices, encouraging both farmers and consumers. **(Department of Agriculture, Uttarkhand)**

The project "Relish Tradition Food" envisions promoting and preserving the rich culinary heritage of Uttarakhand, by offering traditional and authentic

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local dishes to both residents and tourists. This venture is designed as a micro and small investment project aligning with the cultural and gastronomic diversity of Uttarakhand. This project aims to attract tourists by providing them with an authentic taste of Uttarakhand, thereby boosting the state's tourism industry. It also supports local community by creating employment opportunities and by sourcing ingredients directly from local farmers and producers, fostering sustainable economic ecosystem.

Complementing this, events like the *Shri Anna Mahotsav* millet festival and the *Garh Bhoj* campaign actively promote regional dishes – including Mandua Halwa, Jhangora kheer, Gahat-based preparations – in schools, hospitals, police canteens, and state government guesthouses. Additionally, the concept of Culinary Tourism is also being actively promoted and adopted by the government as a means to showcase regional cuisines, support local food artisans and boost cultural and economic development through gastronomy.

These institutional efforts demonstrate a growing state-level commitment to culinary heritage, fostering supply chain infrastructure, market visibility and public awareness. However as the study shows, their long term success depend on sustained branding, scale up and integration with education and private sector engagement.

### **Methodology**

This research uses a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach. Primary data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with 200 participants. For the purpose of the present study, Chefs; Pop up Chefs, Elderly residents, Local farmers, Young students, Home makers and Natives from the four representative districts of Uttarakhand as Dehradun, Uttarkashi, Pithoragarh and Nainital were being contacted. Secondary sources include academic papers, newspaper reports, policy documents, and cookbooks. Observations were also made during visits to local markets, eateries, and homestays in both Garhwal and Kumaon regions. Data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns and key challenges.

### **Resultus and Discussion**

It is a well established that traditional Uttarakhand cuisine outperforms modern fast foods across most metrics, including Fiber, Calcium, Iron, and Glycemic Index (**Gupta & Harti 2025**). This presents a public health opportunity if traditional foods are integrated into institutional and urban food systems. The study also finds that a lack of policy coordination and weak branding efforts are major obstacles to popularizing these dishes. While

isolated initiatives such as millet promotion and food festivals exist, they lack scalability and continuity. Furthermore, the absence of formal documentation, recipe preservation, and culinary tourism infrastructure restricts visibility at national and global levels. The demand among tourists and young professionals for healthy and authentic regional foods further validates the viability of revitalizing Uttarakhand's culinary heritage.

The findings of this study reveal a complex interplay of cultural, economic, and infrastructural factors contributing to the declining popularity of traditional food in Uttarakhand. Interviews and observations indicate that while local communities acknowledge the nutritional and cultural value of these dishes, external influences—such as migration, urbanization, and media-driven food trends—have weakened their place in daily life.

The study underscores how modern fast food culture is increasingly perceived as aspirational, while indigenous food is relegated to ceremonial or nostalgic status. This interest can be leveraged through targeted education, storytelling, and support for food-based microenterprises. If traditional foods are positioned as both nutritious and culturally enriching, they could become a tool for sustainable development, local employment, and health awareness.

The COVID-19 pandemic also played an unexpected yet significant role in reshaping public attitudes toward traditional foods in Uttarakhand. During lockdown, when supply chains for processed and fast food were disrupted, many families returned to local, homegrown ingredients and ancestral cooking methods. This led to a renewed appreciation for the nutritional and immune-boosting properties of native grains, pulses, and greens. Social media also witnessed a surge in recipe sharing of traditional dishes, signaling a cultural revival from within. Post-pandemic, there has been a noticeable increase in local interest toward sustainable food practices and a modest resurgence in the consumption of traditional fare in both rural and semi-urban areas.

The study highlights following challenges that hinder the widespread popularity and long term preservation of the traditional food heritage of Uttarakhand.

### **Geographical and Infrastructural Barriers**

Many traditional ingredients in Uttarakhand are grown in high-altitude or remote locations. Limited access to markets, underdeveloped road networks, and lack of cold storage facilities reduce their availability and commercial viability. Certain grains, vegetables, and herbs are also seasonal, making them harder to mainstream in commercial food chains. This geographical isolation contributes to a lack of visibility and continuity in traditional food practices.

### **Urbanization, Migration, and Cultural Disconnect**

Over the past three decades, significant out-migration has occurred from hill villages to urban areas. As youth leave their native places for education and jobs, the transmission of culinary knowledge is interrupted. In urban settings, many families adopt standardized, pan-Indian or fast food diets for convenience and social status. Traditional dishes are thus increasingly viewed as “village food” and are prepared less frequently at home.

### **Lack of Commercialization and Culinary Representation**

Unlike cuisines from Punjab, Gujarat, or Kerala, Uttarakhand food lacks national visibility. Few restaurants or packaged food brands market dishes from this region. Efforts like millet-based snacks or state-run food festivals remain underfunded and lack outreach. The limited commercial appeal discourages local entrepreneurs and deters investment in food startups based on indigenous recipes.

### **Cultural Identity and Branding Challenges**

Traditional food from Uttarakhand suffers from weak identity formation. While Garhwali and Kumaoni dishes are regionally distinct, they are often lumped into generic “*Pahari Khana*” categories. Moreover, the absence of storytelling or branding around these foods—such as their ritual significance, ecological roots, or medicinal benefits—means they fail to connect emotionally or culturally with broader audiences.

### **Decline of Indigenous Crops and Food Habits**

Crops like Mandua (Finger Millet), *Jhangora* (Barnyard Millet), and *Bhatt* (Black Soybean) are in decline due to market disincentives. Government policies often favor Wheat and Rice over traditional grains. Farmers report that cultivating heritage crops is economically unviable without institutional support. As a result, local food systems lose both their biodiversity and culinary roots.

### **Perceptions, Prestige, and Food Choices**

Cultural attitudes also play a role in marginalizing traditional cuisine. Younger generations often perceive native dishes as “backward” or unappealing compared to cosmopolitan foods like pizza or Chinese noodles. Social media and advertising further glamorize non-native foods. The loss of culinary pride weakens intergenerational transmission and community support for traditional recipes.

### **Institutional Neglect and Policy Gaps**

While some state-level initiatives exist—like GI tagging of Agriculture produces or support for local millet festivals—these remain small in scale. Unlike neighboring states like Himachal Pradesh, which have invested in culinary tourism, Uttarakhand lacks a systematic approach to promote its food culture. The food heritage documentation project or curriculum integration in schools needs most attention.

### **Recommendations and Future Directions**

To revive and popularize Uttarakhand's traditional food, coordinated action is needed across multiple sectors:

- i. Culinary Tourism:** Promote food trails, homestays, and village kitchen experiences that highlight local dishes and traditions. Integrated approach for understanding relation among livelihood, tourism and regional foods need to be looked in more innovative and holistic way. (Agnihotri *et. al.* 2021)
- ii. Education:** Integrate local food knowledge into school curricula and meal programs like mid-day meals. In order to effectively preserve and promote the traditional food heritage, while also aligning it with contemporary market demands, it is essential to involve relevant Academic and Research Departments such as Food Science, Nutrition Science and Home Science. These departments can play a pivotal role in collaborative efforts aimed at developing value added products derived from traditional recipes. Through scientific research, nutritional analysis, innovation in food processing and adaptation to modern consumer preferences, this department can help transform traditional foods into market- ready offerings without compromising their cultural authenticity and nutritional value.
- iii. Media and Branding:** To enhance the visibility and appeal of Uttarakhand's traditional foods, it is crucial to develop storytelling-based branding campaigns that highlight the rich cultural heritage, local ingredients and unique preparation methods associated with the region. Additionally digital platforms and e-commerce portals can be effectively utilized to market and sell traditional food products to a broader audience, Influencer marketing, food blogs and regional hash tags can further amplify the reach and create a strong digital presence for Uttarakhand's culinary identity.
- iv. Policy Support & Urban Markets:** Provide subsidies and procurement schemes for traditional crops; support FPOs and SHGs focused on

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indigenous food processing. Create incentives for restaurants and caterers to include local dishes in their menus, possibly via tourism boards or food start-up incubators.

### Conclusion

The traditional cuisine of Uttarakhand is not lacking in *Taste* or *Nutrition*— it is lacking in attention, appeal, pride, and systemic support. Its underrepresentation in mainstream Indian food culture is the result of complex challenges involving migration, market dynamics, social perceptions, and policy failure. If these issues are not addressed, the region risks losing its culinary identity altogether. However, with conscious revival efforts, Uttarakhand has the potential to reclaim and re imagine its food heritage as a source of local pride, ecological sustainability, and cultural identity.

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