



VISUAL AND CULTURAL DOCUMENTATION OF THE GAMARA FESTIVAL AT WADDA, PITHORAGARH IN UTTARAKHAND

Author: Upasana Chand

Student, MFA

Department of Fine Arts,

Graphic Era Hill University, Dehradun, Uttarakhand

Co-Author: Dr. Anirban Dhar

Assistant Professor

Department of Fine Arts,

Graphic Era Hill University, Dehradun Campus, Uttarakhand

Abstract

This paper presented an ethnographic study of the Gamara festival as observed in Wadda village, located in the Pithoragarh district of Uttarakhand, India. This paper examined the Gamara locally known as Satu-Aathu festival of Kumaon (Uttarakhand) as a living assemblage of ritual, gendered performance, material culture and visual practice. Based on a field visit conducted at the end of August, the study adopted a day wise narrative approach to document ritual practices, gendered participation and the intricate process of idol making associated with Gaura and Maheshwar. Through participant observation and interviews with the local women of that place the paper tried to find out how ritual actions, material practices, and collective performances create sacred meaning within a cultural framework. Certain attention is given to the transformation of natural materials into divine representations emphasizing the role of craft in ritual embodiment. The result indicates that the Gamara festival operates as a site where cosmology, ecology, and social relations intersect. This documentation relatively underrepresented Himalayan tradition; the study adds its voice to broader discussions in anthropology, material religion, and folklore studies.

Key words : Gamara festival, Kumaon, idol making, folk art and ritual art.

Introduction

Kumaon is a cultural region in the state of Uttarakhand and it includes the districts of Almora, Bageshwar, Champawat, Nainital, and Pithoragarh. The culture of Kumaon is a blend of oral traditions with ritual practices, folk songs, festivals, and folk art that have been handed down through generations. The Gamara festival is deeply rooted with the Himalayan region.

This festival is popularly known as Gaura, Gamara, Gaura parva and satu-aathu in Kumaon region of Uttarakhand and Nepal. It is dedicated to celebrate the divine union of Lord Shiva and goddess Gaura. Gamara festival is celebrated in some areas of Kumaon in Uttarakhand and stands as an example where all three things- domestic ritual, agricultural symbolism, and collective participation come together: Unlike every other Hindu festivals Gamara primarily is a community driven and women centred festival where ritual practices unfolds across multiple days and conclude in the symbolic marriage of goddess Gaura with Maheshwar (Shiva).

The process of idol making in the Gamara festival represents a unique interection between ritual practice and visual arts. In contrast to institutionalized forms of religious sculpture, the idols created during this festival are temporary, handcrafted objects deeply embedded within local cultural practices. These idols represent lord Shiva (Maheshwar) and goddess Gaura are made from natural materials and shaped through collective participation particularly local women.

This research study documents the Gamara festival as observed in Wadda village of Pithoragarh district. It seeks to analyze the festival not merely as a sequence of rituals but rather to perceive it as a dynamic cultural process through which sacredness can be constructed, negotiated and experienced. The central focus for this study is idol-making wherein everyday materials from nature plants, soil, grass and cloth—have been transformed into embodiments of divine presence.

The paper engaged with key questions: How do ritual practices produce sacred meaning? What are the roles materials and rituals play as bridge between the human and the divine? How a gender is connected in the performance and transmission of ritual knowledge? By addressing these questions the study positions Gamara within broader discussions on ritual, growth, materiality, and community.

Literature Review

Awasthi,(2024) highlights Satu-Aathu as not merely a religious event but a living tradition that connects culture, environment and gender roles. This cultural and ritual practices helps to maintain a connection with nature, preserve traditional knowledge and building a community identity. However, it is challenged by modernization and rapid migration. Documentation about the locality and preservation of heritage are very needed, particularly in relation to the festival's unique version as observed in Uttarakhand.

Research conducted by Kalauni,(2024) indicated that the cultural continuity of what has been known traditionally as “Manas Khand” through Gamara celebration in Uttarakhand describes a political entity that has been divided but still shares common practices, rituals, and values. Literature highlighted the

significant role played by women who serve as cultural protectors during this festival. It further demonstrated how the particular festival enhances cultural identity and consciousness about environmental issues via its rituals using natural materials and seasonal rhythms. Kalauni also listed urban migration, disinterest among the youth, and cultural dilution as challenges to the transfer of traditional knowledge. This study suggested documentation efforts, community participation, and infrastructure development for preserving and promoting the festival in both Nepal and India.

Grieve,(2003) discusses how Hindu idols function not merely as symbolic objects but as medium between devotees and the divine. He argues that sacred images in Hindu traditions is good example of spiritual presence through ritual interaction and cultural belief. The perspective is significant in understanding of the Gamara idols of Gaura and Maheshwar where the natural materials such as plants, grains, cloth, and soil are transformed into sacred embodiments through ritual processes.

Similarly Purcaru,(2013) inspects the connection between aesthetics and religious expression. The study highlights how visuals and material forms a devotional and emotional response among all worshippers. This idea becomes apropos in the context of Gamara where the decoration, colour and idols are contributed to their sacred and emotional significance within believers.

Methodology

This research study was conducted as descriptive fieldwork during the Gamara festival in late August 2025 at Wadda village of Pithoragarh. The research used a qualitative approach that intensified participant observation, interviews with local artisans, and informal interactions with locals..

Qualitative field research

The main method used was qualitative field research which allowed a close engagement sessions for ritual practices taking place over several days. This included observing rituals, community gatherings and the idol-making process.

Informal Interviews

Informal conversations were conducted with local women, who are the primary ritual practitioners. These interactions provided insights into local interpretations, beliefs and variations in practice.

Field Notes

Detailed field notes were maintained, documenting: Day-wise ritual sequences, material practices, songs and performances, observed variations and interpretations

Analytical Approach

This study was conducted using descriptive qualitative research and interpretive analysis. Although the day-wise narrative preserves the proximity in field experience, these observations are discussed within conceptual frameworks like ritual theory and symbolic anthropology.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws a multiple theoretical perspectives to shed light on the Gamara festival. Émile Durkheim's concept of the sacred and secular helps in explain how ordinary materials becomes sacred through ritual process. Material religion theory emphasizes how physical objects and substances mediate religious experience. Symbolic anthropology, particularly the work of Clifford Geertz informs the expounding of rituals as systems of meaning. Victor Turner's Ritual process theory is useful in understanding the collective and performative angle of the festival. By merging these perspectives the study approaches Gamara as a lived, personifies and materially rooted with religious practice.

Day-wise Documentation

Day 1:

Birud Panchami

The Gamara festival begins on Birud Panchami, marking the initiation of ritual activities.

The day starts with having a ritual bath following the participant's preparation of offerings within their household temples. This traditional offering includes five seasonal fruits, a one-rupee coin and five different types of grains. A central ritual object prepared on this day is the tola, which is a vessel for sacred activity. The outer corner of the vessel is smeared with cow dung in small portion; cow dung has been considered purifying in rural Hindu settings. It is then decorated with dub grass by sticking it on cow dung applied in 3-4 small portion which was applied around outer part of tola, symbolizing fertility and auspiciousness. Roli a red sacred thread is tied around its mouth, and a tilak is applied to the tola.

Finally, the five types of grains particularly- wheat, horse gram, chickpea, gurus, black gram and sometimes kidney beans are soaked in water inside the vessel. This act of soaking initiates a process of transformation as the grains absorb water and symbolically embody growth and fertility.

Fasting practices vary among participants. Some women eat after performing the ritual while others keep a fast; this shows flexibility within the ritual framework for individual or familial interpretations.



Fig.1 Tola

<https://share.google/tA9I2UIrbXI29qWIC>

Fig.2 Cooked Birude

<https://share.google/2QKk5ywirzOmfLdcl>

Day 2:

Purification, Song and Agricultural Connection

On the second day the soaked grains (*birude*) are carried by women to a *nola* which is a natural water source considered sacred in Uttarakhand. The grains are washed five times, emphasizing ritual purification and repetition as a form of sanctification and then they are measured again with water and placed near the temple. During this rituals women sing traditional songs such as “*Ubji Ubji Lauri Gamara*” creating a rhythmic and communal atmosphere. These songs serve not just as a show of love but also carry cultural memory. The water that was used to wash the grains goes into fields. This act shows a direct connection between ritual practice and farming. The water, now filled with sacredness, is thought to improve fertility and productivity.



Fig.3 Nola from outside

<https://share.google/K7kWNUzTTrRPK6tT9>

Fig.4 Nola

<https://share.google/9OccDPN1En49IplgR>

Evening Ritual: Making an idol and doing it together

The evening marks a shift from preparatory rituals to the creation of divine embodiments. A direction is ritually chosen to determine the field for idol-making ritual indicating the importance of spatial orientation in ritual practice. Women collectively proceed to the selected field, carrying materials required for constructing the idols of Gaura and Maheshwar. In some places both idols are made on the same day while in other places Gaura's idol is made on the first day and Mahesh's idol on the second days howing the same relevant event where Gaura returns to her parental home then Maheshwar also went after her to bring his wife back ,where he wins her back and they return each other.



Fig.5 preparing base for Gamara

Idol-Making as Sacred Craft

Maheshwar Idol

The idol of Maheshwar is constructed using three types of plants: sesame (*til*), *bal* and sau. These plants are uprooted along with their roots and placed in a basket (*daliya*). Notably, excess soil is not removed, ensuring that the plants remain stable and upright. The plants are arranged and braided into three sections just like we divide hair for braids. The central portion forms the face and the side portions to form both the arms while the lower part remains is body. Binding it with materials such as grass, thread or cloth are used to secure the structure. Traditionally the face was crafted from carved wood or drawn on cloth. However, contemporary practices sometimes incorporate with artificial faces. Five seasonal fruits are placed in the basket serving both as offerings and as a structural support. The idol is then adorned with yellow cloth, garlands and a crown as shringar.

Gaura Idol

The idol of Gaura is constructed using five types of plants including *hisalu*, *sau*, paddy (*dhan*), *bal* and sesame. The use of five plants opposed to three plants use in Maheshwar's idol to build basic form. However the technique of building the base of idol is same where the plants are arranged and braided into three sections just like braids. The central portion forms the face and the side portions for both the arms while the lower part remains as body. The basic structure is bind with materials such as grass, thread or cloth to secure the structure. The idol then dressed up with red or pink cloth these colours that are typically linked to femininity, fertility, and auspiciousness. Then the ornaments and necklaces are added along with a red scarf/veil and a crown to enhance her goddess identity sometimes "pahadi pichoda" is also use for the beautification of idol. The face is either drawn on cloth or artificial face is used. Five seasonal fruits are placed in the basket both as offerings and as a structural support.



Fig.6 Idol of Goddess Gaura



Fig.7 Idol of Lord Maheshwar



Fig.8 Marriage of Gaura and Maheshwar

Symbolic Interpretation

The idol-making practice shows how natural things are changed into holy shapes. Keeping roots and dirt shows a link with the ground, making ties to nature stronger. The temporary idols also point out a key part of Hindu worship the making and breaking of godly figures. Sacredness does not come from the materials but is created by ritual acts, beliefs, group taking part, and symbolic framing. After the idols are made, they go to the main temple where they get worship and join in group activities. A traditional dance called *khel* happens next which helps build more group taking part. A *kund* (water pit) is prepared and its water is used for breaking fasts and for purification rituals. Women wear a yellow sacred thread (*satu ka dhaga*) marking their participation and commitment to the ritual process. This thread is as sacred as the “*janeu*” for men in hindu tradition. This day at evening, many delicious traditional dishes are prepared as offering for god and feast for family.

The festival has a clear gendered division, with women taking on key roles as ritual performers, singers, and keepers of tradition. This emphasizes their vital role in maintaining and passing down cultural knowledge.

Day 3:**Fasting, Marriage Ritual and Completion**

The third day is marked by strict fasting where all the married women observe a fast. Women consume *aglipaak* (food prepared without fire) and fruits avoiding heat in all forms. They do not even bathe with hot water. This abstinence reflects discipline and ritual purity.

On this day the idol of Gaura is brought to the temple by unmarried girls, symbolizing youth, purity and transition. This idol is carried to the nearest or selected temple by unmarried girls.

Continuation of Day 3 –**Marriage Ritual and breaking the Fast**

The symbolic marriage of Gaura and Maheshwar forms the climax of the festival. Rituals include everything that a normal hindu marriage includes like Seven pheras, sangeet ceremonies and even baraat. Recitation of a religious narrative (katha) is read and listened to during the ceremony. the idols also take seven sacred rounds (pheras). During the wedding rituals head worship (sir puja) is done using five types of grains (birude). Once the marriage ceremony is done these birude are then placed on the head of family members by the elder women of house for blessing and growth. Women balance the idols on their heads and perform ritual dances such as khel in circle and semi-circle embodying devotion through movement.

A cloth sheet is spread, holding offerings of fruits and grains, which are tossed into the air five times. Women catch them in their scarves (jholi) and then break their fast. A widely held belief is that unmarried girls who participate in these rituals may soon be married to good man, indicating the integration of personal aspirations within ritual practice. On this day, the women wear a red sacred thread called the “*Aathu wala laal dub dhaga*”. It is similar to a sacred thread (janeu) worn around neck. With this ritual, the fast and the festival rituals are completed.

Completion and Visarjan

The festival concludes with the immersion (visarjan) of the idols at an appropriate time (muhurat) .This signifies the act of divine forms back to the nature and thus brings the ritual cycle to a close.

Discussion

The Gamara festival shows how rituals can turn things into special ones when people work together. The festival includes farming, nature and people of genders making it a complex cultural event. The integration of agricultural elements, ecological symbolism and gendered participation creates a multi-

layered cultural system. This also reflects the concept of ritual practice where artistic creation and devotional performance become inseparable.

Further, this festival emphasizes the significance of temporality and process in ritual life.

Conclusion

This study spotlights the Gamara festival as a rich site of cultural expression where craft as well as community intersect with rituals. By documenting its practices and meanings this research study contributes towards preservation plus academic understanding regarding Himalayan ritual traditions.

References

1. Awasthi,P.(2024). Celebration of Nature and Culture through Gaura Parba: An Interdisciplinary Study of Environmental Stewardship and Cultural Sustainability . ResearchGate. Retrieved from
2. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/383728721_Celebration_of_Nature_and_Culture_through_Gaura_Parba_An_Interdisciplinary_Study_of_Environmental_Stewardship_and_Cultural_Sustainability
3. Kalauni,M.(2024). Cross-cultural Significance and Impact of the Gaura Festival: A Comparative Study between SudurpashchimProvince (Nepal) and Uttarakhand (India). ResearchGate. Retrieved from
4. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/388854226_Cross-cultural_Significance_and_Impact_of_the_Gaura_Festival_A_Comparative_Study_between_Sudurpashchim_Province_Nepal_and_Uttarakhand_India
5. Grieve,G.(2003). *Symbol, idol and murti: Hindu god-images and the politics of mediation*. Retrieved from https://www.academia.edu/18933264/Symbol_Idol_and_Murti_Hindu_God_images_and_the_Politics_of_Mediation
6. Purcaru,R.(2013). *Idol or icon? An aesthetic response to a religious question: An analysis of the aesthetic and religious experience*. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/270848930_Idol_or_Icon_An_Aesthetic_Response_to_a_Religious_Question_an_Analysis_of_the_Esthetic_and_Religious_Experience
7. Ambade,D.(2024). *Glorifying my gods: Cultural politics of statue making, Hindu symbolism, and power iconography*. Retrieved from https://www.academia.edu/145247666/Glorifying_my_gods_cultural_politics_of_statue_making_Hindu_symbolism_and_power_iconography
8. Olalere,F.E.(2022).*The spiritual language of colour: A case study of colour symbolism in Hindu community in South Africa*. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/359170006_The_Spiritual_Language_of_Colour_A_Case_Study_of_Colour_Symbolism_in_Hindu_Community_in_South_Africa
9. Dani,R.(2022). *Manifestation of Shakti: Symbolism, spirituality and abstraction*. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/362348611_Manifestation_of_Shakti_Symbolism_Spirituality_and_Abstraction
10. Vermander,B.(2016). *Wheat and religions*. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/352164587_Wheat_And_Religions
11. Bhuyan,M.(2024).*An anthropological exploration of the rituals associated with a sacred grain. Library Progress International*. Retrieved from <https://bpsjournals.com/library-science/index.php/journal/article/view/3833>