

INFLUENCE OF MODERNITY ON THE MASK-MAKING CRAFT OF THE RAMMAN FESTIVAL AND AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF THE CONDITION, CHALLENGES, AND CONSERVATION OF THE ARTISANS

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Abstract

Known as the Land of the Gods, Uttarakhand, a region nestled in the majestic Himalayas, boasts a cultural landscape as diverse as it is beautiful. The state's geographical diversity—including lofty mountain peaks, deep valleys, dense forests, high plains, glacier-fed rivers, and remote settlements—has historically created a unique cultural environment in which tradition and nature coexist. This environmental diversity has given rise to an equally rich range of folk arts, customs, spoken traditions, and performance styles, which together form the basis of Uttarakhand's distinctive cultural heritage. Within this vast cultural landscape, festivals play an essential role in social organization, collective memory, and artistic continuity. Among the many customs deeply embedded in the region's divine cultural environment, the Ramman festival holds a special place. Celebrated with deep devotion every year in Salur-Dungra, two villages in the Pankhanda Valley of Chamoli district in Uttarakhand, this festival is not just a religious event, but a living example of people's collective thinking, combined efforts, and a vision of beauty. Every year, villagers come together to participate in this festival. Festivals and rituals, which are part of the Himalayan cultural traditions, bring people together to reconnect with their traditions. To do this, they actively participate in the elaborate rituals, performances, and creative processes of Ramman. What sets this festival apart from many other Himalayan traditions is that it incorporates a full range of rituals, folk plays, music, dance, spoken word, and, most importantly, intricately crafted ceremonial masks. This makes this remote village celebration one of Uttarakhand's most artistically significant cultural events.

The making of wooden masks for the Ramman festival is a centuries-old tradition, a practice that is not merely technical but deeply rooted in religious symbols, folklore, and the community's intertwined creative memories, which are also hereditary. These masks are not just for drama but also for ritual, carrying the essence of religion and tradition. They serve as sacred symbols, carrying the significance of age-old beliefs, customs, and rituals. In Uttarakhand, mask-making, especially

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for Ramman, is considered both a sacred task and a unique art, carefully passed down from generation to generation through oral teaching, training, and experiential learning. Traditionally made from special wood, reinforced with layers of birch bark, and colored with natural pigments derived from minerals and herbs, these masks are some of the finest examples of Himalayan craftsmanship. Each mask depicts new stories and symbols, and villagers believe that wearing them transforms the artist into a god.

Keywords

Masks, Ritual, Festival, Folk Tradition, Deities, Ramman, Uttarakhand, Theatre, Culture, History, Folk Art, Himalayan Tradition

Introduction

The cultural landscape of Uttarakhand, a region nestled in the lap of the majestic Himalayas, is as diverse in its expressions as it is vibrant in its spirit. The state's geographical multiplicity—comprising soaring mountain peaks, deep valleys, dense forests, high-altitude meadows, glacial rivers, and remote settlements—has historically shaped a unique cultural environment in which tradition and nature coexist in inseparable harmony. This environmental diversity has given rise to an equally rich spectrum of folk arts, ritual practices, oral traditions, and performative expressions that together form the bedrock of Uttarakhand's intangible cultural heritage. Within this larger cultural constellation, festivals serve as crucial nodes of social organisation, collective memory, and artistic continuity. Among the numerous ritual traditions deeply embedded in the cultural ethos of the region, the Ramman Festival occupies an especially distinguished place. Celebrated annually with profound devotion in the twin villages of Saloor-Dungra in the Painkhanda valley of Chamoli district, this festival stands not merely as a religious event but as a living embodiment of the collective consciousness, communal labour, and aesthetic imagination of the local inhabitants. Every year, the villagers come together to renew their connection with their ancestral traditions by actively participating in the elaborate rituals, performances, and creative processes that constitute Ramman. What sets this festival apart from many other Himalayan traditions is the manner in which it holistically integrates ritual worship, folk theatre, music, dance, oral narration, and most significantly, the use of intricately crafted ritual masks, transforming an otherwise remote village celebration into one of the most artistically significant cultural events of Uttarakhand.



Ramman Dance/ photo source- Divya Nautiyal / Time 10:32 PM./Date -
Wednesday 29 April/ Place- Saloor Dungra

At the very heart of the Ramman Festival lies the age-old tradition of ritual mask-making, a craft that is not merely technical in nature but deeply embedded in religious symbolism, folk mythology, and the collective creative memory of the community. These masks are far more than theatrical accessories; they function as sacred symbols that carry centuries of accumulated belief, practices, and ritual significance. Mask-making in Uttarakhand, particularly for Ramman, is considered both a sacred duty and an artistic privilege, passed meticulously from one generation of artisans to the next through oral instruction, apprenticeship, and experiential learning. Traditionally crafted from specific types of wood, strengthened with layers of bhojpatra, and coloured using natural pigments sourced from minerals and herbs, these masks represent some of the most refined expressions of Himalayan craftsmanship. Each mask is imbued with symbolism—Narasimha embodies divine protection and the triumph of dharma, Hanuman represents devotion and energy, Ravana signifies ego and destructive power, Kalbhairav depicts the fierce aspect of Shiva, while Rama and Lakshmana signify righteousness and virtue. The artisans responsible for creating these masks are respected custodians of an invaluable cultural legacy, yet they often work under challenging socio-economic conditions. In contemporary times, the craft has been significantly affected by modernity, industrialisation, availability of synthetic materials, and the growing market orientation of cultural art forms. This research seeks to examine how these contemporary influences are reshaping the craft, altering traditional practices, and affecting the socio-economic lives of artisans who form the foundational pillar of this cultural tradition. By doing so, it highlights not only the artistic importance of the masks but also the urgent need for safeguarding this intangible heritage.

Although the exact historical origins of the Ramman Festival remain undocumented in textual history, its antiquity is widely acknowledged within oral traditions and community memory. It is believed that the festival emerged through a gradual synthesis of indigenous deity worship and the narrative traditions associated with the Ramayana, giving rise to a distinctive form of ritual theatre. The term Ramman itself is derived from “Ram,” suggesting the performative and theatrical enactment of divine stories. Its evolution reveals how Himalayan communities have historically absorbed broader Indian mythological narratives into their local ritual structures while retaining their distinct regional identity. The festival is dedicated primarily to Bhumiya Devta, the presiding deity of Saloor-Dungra, who is revered as the protector of land, agriculture, and community well-being. Held annually in the month of Baisakh (April–May), the festival spans nearly ten to twelve days, during which the entire village transforms into a stage where daily life and ritual

performance merge seamlessly. Preparations begin well in advance, with every household contributing to the arrangements in accordance with its traditional role. The musical framework of the festival is provided by traditional instruments such as the dhol, damau, and ritual chanting called jagar, accompanied by folk melodies preserved through oral transmission. The villagers engage in carefully structured roles assigned according to caste and lineage: Brahmins perform ritual worship and recitations; members of the Bhandari community wear the sacred masks and execute the ritual dances; carpenters, blacksmiths, and painters craft the masks and ritual objects; while drummers and musicians produce the rhythmic atmosphere that sustains the performances. This intricate, interdependent structure reinforces a system of social cohesion rooted in shared responsibility, respect, and communal reverence. The festival narrates episodes from local mythology, regional histories, and epic traditions, weaving together ancestral memory with contemporary communal identity.

The cultural value of the Ramman Festival extends far beyond the geographical boundaries of Painkhanda Valley. In recognition of its exceptional artistic, religious, and social significance, UNESCO declared Ramman a part of the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009. This international recognition underscores how even a small, remote village tradition can achieve global prominence when it embodies collective devotion, cultural continuity, and artistic integrity. UNESCO's acknowledgment has also drawn scholarly and touristic attention to the festival and highlighted the unique role of masks as the core aesthetic and ritualistic element of the celebration. The Ramman Festival represents a remarkable synthesis where religious values merge with performative art, social organisation, and community-driven creativity. The symbolic richness of the masks, the rhythmic intensity of the folk music, the disciplined choreography of the ritual dances, and the elaborate rituals dedicated to Bhumiya Devta together create an artistic experience that transcends the boundaries of mere entertainment. Instead, Ramman becomes an enactment of sacred cosmology, a performative dialogue between the human and the divine, and an annual reaffirmation of the village's commitment to its ancestral identity. Despite the pervasive influence of modernity, globalisation, consumer culture, and shifting socio-economic priorities, the Ramman tradition remains resilient. The community continues to preserve its rituals with dedication, adapting certain elements without compromising the festival's spiritual core. The persistent vitality of Ramman demonstrates that cultural traditions can survive modern pressures when they are rooted in collective memory, shared values, and a deeply internalised sense of belonging. It also illustrates that modernity need not be antagonistic to tradition; with conscious community effort, the two can coexist in productive harmony.



Ramman Mask/ Photo source- Divya Nautiyal / Time 11:48 PM./Date -
Wednesday 30 April/ Place- Saloor Dungra

In contemporary times, however, festivals like Ramman face significant challenges—from migration of youth, economic instability of artisans, declining interest in traditional crafts, scarcity of natural materials, and increasing reliance on synthetic substitutes. The mask-making tradition, once upheld through generational continuity and cultural commitment, is now at a critical juncture where traditional knowledge risks dilution or disappearance. This makes systematic academic research not only relevant but essential. This study investigates in depth how modernity has impacted traditional mask-making practices, the extent to which industrialisation and market influences have altered materials and aesthetics, and how changing socio-economic conditions affect the artisans who sustain this tradition. It also evaluates the broader cultural consequences of these changes and identifies practical measures for conservation. By foregrounding the artisans' lived experiences, this research draws attention to the human dimension of heritage preservation, emphasising that safeguarding intangible culture is not merely about conserving objects or rituals but about supporting communities, livelihoods, and ancestral identity systems. The Ramman Festival, when viewed holistically, emerges as far more than a ritual performance; it is a living cultural institution that encapsulates the simplicity, spirituality, and artistic soul of Himalayan life. Its preservation is not only a matter of cultural pride for Uttarakhand but a vital contribution to the world's diverse heritage traditions. The endurance of Ramman in the face of rapid cultural transformation underscores the power of community agency, the resilience of folk traditions, and the dynamic interplay between continuity and change. Ultimately, the festival stands as a compelling example of how small communities—through devotion, cooperation, and creativity—can sustain a cultural legacy that speaks meaningfully to both local identity and global heritage discourse.

Historical Evolution of the Ramman Festival

Although the Ramman Festival is widely understood as a ritual dedication to Bhumiya Devta, its historical roots are far more layered. Uttarakhand has long

been a cradle of ritual theatre traditions, where religious worship, folk performance, and communal responsibility blend into a singular cultural expression. The Ramman tradition is believed to have emerged from a convergence of several sources:

1. Ancient Himalayan Devta Tradition – The worship of village protector deities (Gram Devta) predates major scriptural religions in the Himalayan region. Bhumiya Devta, associated with land, fertility, and protection, forms the spiritual nucleus of the festival.
2. Influence of the Ramayana Narrative – Over time, the stories of Ramayana were adopted and adapted into local ritual formats. The term “Ramman” essentially denotes the enactment of episodes associated with Lord Rama, though the festival is not limited to Ramayana characters alone.
3. Kumaoni and Garhwali Folk Theatre Lineage – The region has strong traditions like Pandav Lila, Chholiya, and Jagar. These likely contributed stylistic elements—rhythmic movements, invocation chants, percussive patterns, and communal participation—to Ramman.
4. Medieval Socio-political Structures – During the Katyuri and Chand dynasties, the arts flourished in Uttarakhand. Traditional artisans—mask-makers, woodcarvers, painters, metalsmiths—were integrated into ritual systems. Crafts were sustained not by markets but by communal need.



Research student- Divya Nautiyal interviewing a Ramman Artist/ Time 9:25 AM./
Date -Wednesday 30 April/ Place- Saloor Dungra

Thus, Ramman is not a festival created at a single moment but a cultural organism that grew organically through centuries of religious practice, folk artistry, and evolving social dynamics.

Unlike classical Indian dance-theatre forms which possess codified texts, Ramman is a living, oral tradition sustained through memory, imitation, and community transmission. Its historical continuity reflects the villagers’ commitment to preserving ancestral practices despite changing times.

Mask-Making Tradition: Materials, Symbolism, and Craftsmanship

1. Ritual Significance of the Masks

Masks (mukhota) are the spiritual and aesthetic heart of the Ramman Festival. To the community, a mask is more than a crafted object—it becomes pran- pratishthit, an embodiment of divine presence once it enters the ritual space. Its sanctity is such that:

- No mask is touched without ritual permission.
- The wearer undergoes purification practices.
- Certain masks, especially of Narasimha and Bhairava, are believed to possess latent spiritual force.

Thus, mask-making is regarded as both craft and sacred duty.

2. Traditional Materials

Historically, masks were crafted using:

- Carved wood from specific trees such as kaiser, tun, or darun, chosen for their lightweight and workable nature.
- Bhojpatra (birch bark) for layering and strengthening.
- Natural pigments derived from minerals, stones, herbs, and soot. Organic adhesives, prepared from tree resins or flour pastes.

The use of organic materials ensured that masks aged naturally and were periodically renewed, symbolizing continuity and rebirth.

3. Crafting Process

The mask-making process traditionally followed a sequential method:

1. Wood Selection – Carpenters assess grain, moisture, and texture.
2. Initial Carving – Basic facial structure is shaped with chisels.
3. Detailing – Lines, features, ornamental motifs, and deity-specific attributes are added.
4. Smoothing and Layering – Camphor or oil is sometimes applied to prevent cracking.
5. Painting Colors – are applied symbolically:
 - Red signifies strength and auspiciousness
 - Black for power and fearlessness
 - Yellow for divinity
6. Drying and Ritual Preparation – Finished masks are kept in the Devri (sacred space).

4. Types of Masks

The festival employs nearly 20–25 varieties of masks. Prominent among them are:

- Narasimha – ferocity, courage, protection
- Hanuman – devotion, energy
- Ravana – ego, worldly ambition
- Kalbhairav – destruction of evil
- Shiva – tranquility and cosmic power
- Rama & Lakshmana – virtue and righteousness
- Devkanya – purity and auspicious presence



Ramman Dance/ Photo source- Divya Nautiyal / Time 11:29 AM./Date -
Wednesday 30 April/ Place- Saloor Dungra

Each mask carries symbolic meaning understood deeply by performers and villagers.

Impact of Modernity on Mask-Making and Festival Culture

Modernity influences cultural practices in multiple ways—materially, socially, economically, and aesthetically. The Ramman Festival, though deeply rooted in tradition, is not untouched by these forces.

1. Shift from Natural to Synthetic Materials

Due to increased accessibility and affordability, traditional materials are being replaced:

- Acrylic and oil paints instead of mineral pigments
- Synthetic adhesives instead of organic pastes
- Machine-cut wood or plywood instead of hand-selected timber
- Fabric substitutes for bhojpatra

While these materials save time and reduce labour, they also reduce:

- Authenticity

- Durability of symbolic values
- Aesthetic integrity of traditional craftsmanship

2. Changing Aesthetic Preferences

Younger artisans, influenced by:

- Mass media,
- Modern design trends,
- Exposure to global visual culture, have begun altering mask proportions, colours, and expressions. Masks are sometimes made more “realistic” or “attractive,” deviating from the symbolic stylization that defines traditional Himalayan ritual art.

3. Decline in Community-based Learning

Traditional learning was oral and hereditary, passed from artisan families. Modern education, migration for jobs, and reduced interest among younger generations have resulted in:

- A shrinking pool of skilled artisans
- Reduced intergenerational transmission
- Fragmentation of communal roles

4. Commercialization and Tourism

The UNESCO recognition (2009) generated curiosity, but not a sustainable economic support system. Some artisans began producing masks as souvenirs:

- Smaller sizes
- Decorative versions
- Non-ritual replicas

While this supports income, it creates artistic tension between ritual sanctity and commercial production.

5. Migration and Urban Influence

Economic hardship compels youth to seek jobs in cities, making it difficult to maintain:

- Year-long artistic preparation
- Ritual commitments
- Community-based

The festival depends on the presence of specific caste groups; migration disrupts these structures.

6. Influence of Technology

Social media documentation, photography, and digital archiving help preserve visibility, but also lead to:

- Overexposure of sacred elements
- Possible dilution of ritual privacy
- A shift in audience from internal (village) to external (tourists, scholars)

Thus, modernity offers opportunities but also threatens cultural integrity.

Socio-economic Condition of Artisans

The artisans behind Ramman masks often remain unrecognized and economically unstable. Their role is indispensable to the festival, yet their livelihood is insecure.

1. Limited Financial Returns

Mask-making takes considerable time, but artisans receive:

- Minimal payment
- Irregular compensation
- Occasional donations from the community

Because it is considered a seva (service), artisans rarely demand payment, further suppressing their economic rights.

2. Lack of Institutional Support

Despite UNESCO recognition, artisans face:

- Absence of government-backed training programs
- Limited grants or subsidies
- Neglect in state-level cultural schemes
- No dedicated marketing platforms for their craft

3. Seasonal Nature of the Craft

Masks are made primarily before the annual festival.

This seasonality leaves artisans without year-round income.

4. Decline of Traditional Artisan Communities

Younger generations hesitate to continue due to:

- Low income
- Labour-intensive work
- Lack of modern market exposure
- Greater appeal of salaried jobs

5. Social Status and Identity

Artisans hold a respected but subdued social position.

Their identity is tied to ritual responsibility, yet:

- They lack cultural leadership roles
- They remain outside economic empowerment processes

Challenges to the Preservation of Mask-Making Tradition

1. Disappearance of Natural Resources

- Bhojpatra trees are declining due to climate change.
- Traditional pigment sources (e.g., specific stones or herbs) are no longer accessible.
- Wood harvesting is restricted in forest-protected zones.

These limitations force artisans to adopt synthetic materials.

2. Lack of Documentation

The tradition is primarily oral.

No standard documentation exists on:

- Techniques
- Symbolic meanings
- Design lineage
- Artistic philosophy

Loss of a single master craftsman can lead to the disappearance of rare skills.

3. Cultural Amnesia Among Youth

Modern entertainment mediums overshadow traditional performance arts. Youth often perceive the mask-making craft as:

- Outdated
- Financially unviable
- Less prestigious than modern professions

4. Climate and Environmental Changes

The Himalayan region faces rapid ecological shifts.

Erratic temperature and humidity affect:

- Wood quality
- Drying time
- Mask preservation
- Storage conditions

5. Inadequate Institutional Collaboration

There is limited engagement between:

- Universities
- Museums
- Government departments
- Cultural NGOs
- Local communities

This lack of partnership reduces possibilities for innovation and support.

Preservation and Conservation Measures

To sustain the mask-making heritage, a multifaceted strategy is required.

1. Documentation and Archival Work

- Photographic and video recording of mask-making processes
- Interviews with master artisans
- Cataloguing existing masks and their symbolic meanings
- Creating a digital repository accessible to scholars

Universities like Subharti University can lead such projects.

2. Revival of Traditional Materials

- Cultivation programs for bhojpatra
- Research on natural pigments
- Government-supported wood access for artisans

This sustains ecological as well as cultural continuity.

3. Artisan Training Workshops

Workshops can train:

- Local youth
- Art students
- New apprentices

Regular training ensures generational continuity.

4. Economic Empowerment

- Establishing cooperative societies
- Fixing minimum remuneration for festival masks
- Creating product lines for galleries, craft fairs, and online platforms
- Government grants for artisans under handicraft schemes

5. Integrating Craft into Education

Schools and colleges can include:

- Courses on Himalayan folk arts
- Mask-making modules
- Field trips to Saloor-Dungra

This builds youth engagement and respect for heritage.

6. Community-Led Conservation

Local committees can monitor:

- Proper rituals

- Storage of masks
- Maintenance of traditional processes

Community ownership ensures authenticity.

7. Controlled Cultural Tourism

Tourism, if managed ethically, can support artisans by:

- Creating cultural festivals
- Providing exhibition spaces
- Offering live demonstrations
- Developing homestay-based cultural experiences

It must, however, avoid commercialization of sacred rituals.

8. Collaboration with Cultural Institutions

Museums, heritage organizations, and universities should:

- Host exhibitions
- Publish research
- Provide design mentorship
- Facilitate craft residencies

This expands scope for cultural visibility.



Ramman Dance/ Photo source- Divya Nautiyal / Time 10:45 AM./Date -Wednesday 29 April/ Place- Saloor Dungra

Conclusion

The Ramman Festival stands as a remarkable testament to the resilience and depth of Uttarakhand's cultural heritage, embodying a delicate interplay between devotion, performance, community coherence, and environmental consciousness. Its mask-making tradition, which forms the visual and symbolic heart of the festival, is far more than an artistic craft. It is a sacred, community-driven process grounded

in inherited ritual protocols, intergenerational learning, and an intimate understanding of local ecology and mythology. These masks do not merely represent characters; they manifest divine presence, carrying forward stories, values, and ethical teachings that have shaped the social fabric of the Himalayas for centuries. The process of their creation—from selecting the wood, carving the contours, applying natural pigments, and performing consecration rituals—reveals the harmonious integration of religion, material culture, and folk aesthetics. This holistic worldview reflects a philosophy in which art is inseparable from spirituality and where performance becomes a medium through which collective memory is preserved.

However, the complexities of the present era present mounting challenges that cannot be overlooked. Declining artisan participation, caused by migration, reduced economic viability, and lack of institutional recognition, threatens the continuity of this knowledge system. Traditional resources—particularly specific local woods, organic pigments, and ritual ingredients—are becoming difficult to procure due to environmental changes and shifting livelihoods. The absence of proper documentation further exacerbates the fragility of the tradition, as much of the knowledge remains orally transmitted and vulnerable to disruptions in generational transfer. Economic pressures encourage the use of cheaper industrial materials, changing the aesthetic and ritual authenticity of the masks. These shifts raise important questions: How can the Ramman tradition adapt without losing its core philosophical and cultural grounding? How can communities embrace supportive aspects of modernity while resisting homogenising forces that threaten their artistic integrity?

The future of this tradition depends not on rejecting change but on cultivating a balanced approach—one that neither isolates it from the modern world nor allows contemporary pressures to dilute its essence. Preservation efforts must therefore operate at multiple levels. At the local level, empowering artisans through incentives, training programmes, and sustainable resource access can strengthen the cultural ecosystem. At the institutional level, academic documentation, museum collaborations, and heritage-based economic models can enhance visibility and viability. At the policy level, recognising the Ramman mask-making tradition as a specialised folk art deserving financial, infrastructural, and educational support can provide long-term stability. Such integrated efforts can ensure that the tradition evolves organically, allowing the community to retain ownership of its cultural narrative.

Ultimately, the Ramman Festival is more than a ritual; it is a living cultural inheritance that affirms the Himalayan worldview of interconnectedness between humans, nature, ancestors, and deities. Safeguarding its mask-making tradition is

not only an artistic responsibility but also a commitment to preserving the cultural identity, emotional unity, and ecological ethos of the region. In its continuity lies the assurance that future generations will not merely witness a festival but experience a profound cultural conversation—one that has shaped the lives, beliefs, and values of the people of Uttarakhand for centuries. Protecting this heritage thus becomes a reaffirmation of cultural continuity and a testament to the enduring power of community in sustaining the intangible treasures of human civilisation.

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