

The Famous Ramman Mask Festival of Uttarakhand: A Political Analytical Study of Material, Performance and Cultural Strength

Divya Nautiyal

Research Scholar

Nandlal Bose Subharti College of

Fine Arts & Fashion Design

Swami Vivekanand Subharti

University, Meerut

Email: divyabadwalnautiyal0188@gmail.com

Dr. Sonal Bhardwaj

Associate Professor

Nandlal Bose Subharti College of

Fine Arts & Fashion Design

Swami Vivekanand Subharti

University, Meerut

Abstract

The Ramman (also spelled Ramana or Ramman) ritual-theatre of the Garhwal Himalayas represents one of northern India's most distinctive masked performance traditions. Staged in the twin villages of Saloor–Dungra and their hamlets in Chamoli district, Uttarakhand, the festival integrates recitations of localized Ramayana narratives, ritual offerings to the village deity Bhumiyaal (or Bhumichetrapal), and a repertoire of masked dances and tableaux that together constitute a unique living heritage. The wooden masks employed in Ramman—meticulously carved, painted, and ritually consecrated—function simultaneously as artefacts, sacred icons, and agents within the ritual economy of the community. This paper explores the Ramman masks through four interrelated dimensions: their historical and ritual context, materials and production techniques, performative iconography, and the challenges of preservation in contemporary society. Drawing upon field reports, UNESCO documentation, and craft studies, it argues that these masks are central to both the ritual efficacy and cultural identity of the Saloor–Dungra communities, and that their continuity depends on community-driven conservation strategies which safeguard ritual protocols while enabling broader cultural transmission.

Keywords

Masks, Uttarakhand, Traditional, Village, Religious, Rituals



Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

Received: 30-01-26

Approved: 02-03-26

Divya Nautiyal

Dr. Sonal Bhardwaj

The Famous Ramman Mask Festival of Uttarakhand: A Political Analytical Study of Material, Performance and Cultural Strength

RJPP Oct.25-Mar.26,

Vol. XXIV, No. 1,

Article No. 10

Pg. 096-103

Similarity Check - 04%

Online available at:

<https://anubooks.com/journal-volume/rjpp-mar-2026-vol-xxiv-no1-270>

<https://doi.org/10.31995/rjpp.2026.v24i01.010>

Introduction

Across South and Southeast Asia, mask traditions often weave together sacred narratives, seasonal rhythms, and collective identity. In the Garhwal Himalayas, the Ramman festival exemplifies this synthesis. Celebrated annually after Baisakhi (mid-April), the festival typically spans 10–13 days and features dramatizations of episodes from the Ramayana interlaced with local legends, songs, and masked dances. The masks, known locally as mukhota, are crafted specifically for the Ramman and related hill jatra festivities. Far from being mere theatrical props, they are regarded as sacred vessels capable of embodying deities and mythic figures. In recognition of its cultural significance, UNESCO inscribed Ramman on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009, citing its complex interplay of ritual, performance, and community-based production. This study synthesizes existing documentation, craft analyses, and journalistic reporting to present a comprehensive account of Ramman masks: their historical evolution, methods of fabrication, symbolic functions in performance, and the contemporary pressures threatening their continuity. The analysis seeks to foreground the technical expertise inherent in mask-making, the symbolic grammar encoded in their forms and colours, and the community networks that sustain this intangible heritage in a rapidly transforming Himalayan context.

Historical and Ritual Context

The origins of Ramman extend back several centuries as a localized adaptation of the Ramayana into ritual theatre in the Chamoli region. Oral traditions and archival records suggest that the festival has been performed in Saloor–Dungra for nearly five hundred years, evolving into a central ritual offering to Bhumiya Devta for agricultural prosperity and communal well-being during the post-Baisakhi cycle. The festival is ritually announced by the village priest and is firmly anchored to the temple precincts and deity’s courtyard. Masks are first consecrated within the temple before being used in the festival sequence.



Unlike itinerant dramatic forms performed by traveling troupes, Ramman remains rooted in its village context. Ritual specialists, artisans, musicians, and performers are drawn from the local community, and the performance integrates seasonal obligations, collective feasting, and temple worship. This deep spatial and social embeddedness enhances the ritual gravitas of the masks. When donned during Ramman, the mask transforms the performer into the living embodiment of the represented deity or character, with the community observing strict protocols of reverence and behaviour.

Materials and Production Techniques

- *Wood and Carving:* Ramman masks are traditionally carved from locally available woods, particularly Himalayan birch (*Betula utilis*, locally known as Bhojpatra or “Bhoj”) and mulberry (*kemu/kelmu*). The choice of material is dictated by availability, grain quality, and durability, all of which influence carving detail and performance suitability. Skilled village artisans, often working within hereditary lines of apprenticeship, shape the masks, preserving stylistic conventions while incorporating individual craftsmanship.
- *Construction Techniques:* Production begins with selecting and roughly cutting a block of wood. The carver delineates the primary planes—forehead, nose, and cheekbones—before shaping the facial features. Some masks are designed as full-head coverings, while others are half-masks, each with implications for breathability, mobility, and voice projection. Once carved, the mask is smoothed, primed with substances such as limewash or clay, and painted with natural pigments. Traditionally, turmeric, mineral-based colours, and vegetable dyes were employed, bound with organic adhesives. Additional features such as wigs, beards, and textile or metallic adornments may be affixed, while some masks incorporate movable parts like hinged jaws to enhance dramatic effect.
- *Ritual Treatment of Materials:* Beyond their materiality, masks undergo consecration within the temple precinct before use. Strict ritual taboos govern who may carve, paint, handle, or wear them. Their ritualized status also influences their lifecycle: masks may be preserved and reused across years with periodic repainting, while others, once exhausted, are ritually cremated or interred, symbolically returning them to the sacred cycle of the village.

Iconography and Typology: The repertoire of Ramman masks spans divine figures such as Rama, Lakshmana, and Hanuman; antagonists such as rakshasas; local deities; and comic or didactic characters. A typical festival employs over a

dozen varieties of masks, blending pan-Hindu archetypes with regionally specific figures. The iconography relies on colour and stylization as semiotic codes. Yellow and saffron connote auspiciousness and divinity; red signifies vitality or aggression; black and green mark danger or alterity. Proportions and expressions further encode character: calm and noble deities are rendered with symmetrical features and composed expressions, while demonic figures exhibit exaggerated noses, bulging eyes, and fangs. These visual grammars are consistent across generations, enabling audiences to instantly decode character roles.

Performance Practice: Movement, Sound, and Embodiment

The choreographed masked dances of Ramman, though tightly structured, permit improvisation within ritual boundaries. Accompanied by drummers, trumpeters, and chorus singers, performers enter and circle the temple courtyard, interact with priests or unmasked narrators, and dramatize epic or local episodes. Because the masks may limit vision or airflow, performers adapt through stylized movement: exaggerated gestures, tilted head positions, and amplified voice projection (sometimes assisted by off-stage singers). The mask thus magnifies gesture and transforms the performer into a larger-than-life figure visible to all spectators.



Once a mask is donned within the consecrated space, the wearer is regarded by the community not as an actor but as the deity or character embodied. Ritual protocols require specific forms of deference, ornamentation, or symbolic feeding of the masked figure. Performers themselves often undertake ritual observances, including dietary or behavioural restrictions, underscoring the sacralization of the role.

Social and Cultural Significance

Ramman masks serve multiple overlapping functions:

1. Religious efficacy: As sacred instruments, the masks invoke the deity and ensure agricultural prosperity, sustaining cosmic order through ritual enactment.

2. Communal identity: The Ramman festival and its masks distinguish Saloor–Dungra from neighbouring communities, serving as emblems of local heritage and continuity.
3. Oral transmission: In the absence of textual codification, masks act as mnemonic anchors across generations, transmitting stories, choreography, and ritual forms.
4. Craft livelihoods: Mask production requires specialized skills—wood carving, painting, and tailoring—that sustain artisanal knowledge networks within the village, even if artisans are not always adequately compensated.

Threats, Change, and Conservation Responses

Despite UNESCO recognition, Ramman faces significant pressures:

- **Commercialization:** Demand from tourism and craft markets encourages the production of souvenir masks, risking the desacralization of ritual forms.
- **Outmigration:** Youth migration reduces the pool of artisans and ritual performers, threatening knowledge transmission.
- **Material scarcity:** Restrictions on forest resources and dwindling supplies of traditional woods force substitutions that may compromise authenticity.
- **Aesthetic shifts:** Media influences can encourage exaggerated or theatrical designs at odds with traditional iconography.

Conservation efforts include photographic and ethnographic documentation, state-supported cultural fairs, and NGO-led training initiatives. While such measures provide visibility and income, they must remain sensitive to ritual proprieties. Scholars caution that preservation efforts must prioritize the sacred logic that sustains the masks' meaning.

Case Studies and Recent Developments: Since UNESCO's 2009 inscription, Ramman has gained institutional visibility through exhibitions and cultural showcases. Recent media coverage highlights its dual reality: greater recognition has elevated the festival to regional and national platforms, yet demographic change and economic precarity continue to endanger its continuity. Local initiatives increasingly focus on training artisans, establishing ethical craft markets, and promoting the festival as both a cultural and ritual event.

Methodological Notes and Gaps: This study relies on secondary sources—UNESCO reports, craft studies, journalistic accounts, and cultural heritage databases. While these provide valuable descriptive data, they also highlight research gaps: technical analyses of carving tools and pigments, ethnographies of apprenticeship and knowledge transfer, and economic assessments of tourism's impact on artisans.

Future inquiry should prioritize collaborative, community-led fieldwork that integrates material study with socio-economic perspectives.

Discussion: Toward Responsible Stewardship

Safeguarding Ramman masks requires stewardship strategies that centre on local agency and ritual integrity. Recommended approaches include:

- Community-led documentation: Empower villagers to record techniques and rituals in formats they control.
- Apprenticeship incentives: Provide stipends to support young carvers and ritual specialists.
- Ethical market frameworks: Develop certification systems to distinguish ritual-grade masks from tourist souvenirs, ensuring equitable revenue-sharing.
- Sustainable materials: Collaborate with forestry authorities to secure access to traditional woods or appropriate substitutes.
- Educational outreach: Integrate Ramman into curricula and exhibitions, reinforcing its cultural value for younger generations.

Conclusion

The Ramman masks of Uttarakhand illustrate the deep interconnection of material culture, ritual performance, and communal life. Carved from local woods, painted with symbolic pigments, and animated in sacred space, the masks embody a tradition that is simultaneously artistic, devotional, and social. While UNESCO recognition has brought visibility, the long-term survival of the practice depends on community-centred strategies that reconcile economic opportunities with ritual proprieties. Sustaining Ramman requires not only preserving its physical artefacts but nurturing the living traditions of performance, memory, and communal identity that animate them.

References

1. UNESCO. Ramman — Religious Festival and Ritual Theatre of the Garhwal Himalayas (India). Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, 2009.
2. Wikipedia. “Ramman (festival).”
3. Google Arts & Culture. “Mukhota: Mask Making Craft.”
4. AsiaInCh. “Hill Jatra Mask Making of Uttarakhand.”
5. Garhwal Post and PioneerEdge. Reports on Ramman festival and mask traditions, 2024–2025.

6. “Ramman Utsav Uttarakhand – UNESCO Intangible World Heritage” – Lakshmi Sharath article (<https://lakshmisharath.com/ramman-utsav-uttarakhand/>)
7. “Ramman Mahotsav: Celebrating Garhwal’s Ancient Cultural Heritage” – NDTV album/feature (<https://swachhindia.ndtv.com/album-detail/ramman-mahotsav-celebrating-garhwals-ancient-cultural-heritage-109431/>)
8. “Ramman Festival Chamoli Uttarakhand- Recognition by UNESCO” – Uttarakhand Trip blog (<https://uttarakhandtrip.com/blog/ramman-festival-saloor-dungra-chamoli-uttarakhand-india>)
9. “Himalayan Village Celebrates Ramayana” – Hinduism Today article by Dev Raj Agarwal ,1st Oct 2023(<https://www.hinduismtoday.com/hindu-festivals/himalayan-village-celebrates-ramayana/>)
10. “Many Rammans in Uttarakhand: Jak and Bhumyal Renditions” – essay by Prateek (JHUP Theatre Journal) (<https://www.jhuptheatre.org/theatre-journal/online-content/issue/volume-76-issue-1-march-2024/many-rammans-uttarakhand-jak-and>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ISJ3Mnea0MU>)
11. Mukhota: Mask Making Craft — Google Arts & Culture” – Project FUEL& Uttarakhand Hand-loom & Handicraft Dev .Council (https://artsandculture.google.com/story/mukhota-mask-making-craft-project-fuel/UwUxZtP0_KKS3A?hl=en)
12. “AipanVR: A Virtual Reality Experience for Preserving Uttarakhand’s Traditional Art Form” – Nishant Chaudhary et al. (2024) — though about Aipan, useful for craft-preservation comparison (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/353325099_Aipan_VR_A_Virtual_Reality_Experience_for_Preserving_Uttarakhand's_Traditional_Art_Form)
13. “President Droupadi Murmu Honoured with Ramman Mask in Uttarakhand” – GS Times current affairs item ,4th Nov 2025 (<https://www.gstimes.in/president-droupadi-murmu-honoured-with-ramman-mask-in-uttarakhand/>)
14. Article: “Ramman Festival returns to Chamoli with grand celebration on April 30” – The Statesman (<https://www.msn.com/en-in/news/India/ramman-festival-returns-to-chamoli-with-grand-celebration-on-april-30/ar-AA1DQaGd?apiversion=v2&noservercache=1&domshim=1&renderwebcomponents=1&wcseo=1&batchservertelemetry=1&noservertelemetry=1>)
15. “The Ramman Festival – Recognition by UNESCO & Features” – CivilStaphimachal overview(<https://civilstaphimachal.com/current-affair/ramman-festival/>)

16. “Uttarakhand Saloor Dungra (twin) Villages: Ramman Religious Festival and Ritual Theatre of Garhwal”–EthnoFlorence blog(<https://ethnoflorence.wordpress.com/category/mask-uttarakhand-saloor-dungra-twin-villages-ramman-religious-festival-and-ritual-theatre-of-garhwal/>) (<https://www.parcours-des-mondes.com/> <https://www.facebook.com/ParcoursDesMondes>)
17. “Ramman Festival of Uttarakhand: A UNESCO-Recognised Folk Tradition” – Usthadian Academy article ,5th May 2025 (<https://www.usthadian.com/ramman-festival-of-uttarakhand-a-unesco-recognised-folk-tradition/>)
18. Documentation by IGNCA & Govt of India for ICH element — (Ramman dossier) Edited and Maintained by Prof. Molly Kaushal Janapada Sampada Division IGNCA (https://ignca.gov.in/ICH/ich_detail/ich00022.pdf)
19. (<https://www.tripoto.com/india/trips/ramman-the-intangible-cultural-heritage-of-humanity-574f204e84a5f>)
20. Cultural festivals list where Ramman appears – Civil stap Himachal commentary (<https://civilstaphimachal.com/current-affair/ramman-festival>)
21. Dr. Prateek ,Theatre Journal ,Volume 76, Issue 1, March 2024 Many Rammans in Uttarakhand: Jak and Bhumyal Renditions (<https://www.jhuptheatre.org/theatre-journal/online-content/issue/volume-76-issue-1-march-2024/many-rammans-uttarakhand-jak-and>)
22. Inscribed in 2009 on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (<https://indiaich-sna.in/ramman-religious-festival-and-ritual-theatre-of-the-garhwal-himalayas-india>)
23. Tourism/travel blog with cultural description of Ramman – UttarakhandTrip blog (<https://www.tripoto.com/india/trips/ramman-the-intangible-cultural-heritage-of-humanity-574f204e84a5f>)