

# Exploring Uttarakhand's Temples and Divine Paths



# Exploring Uttarakhand's Temples and Divine Paths:

## *Sacred Sanctuaries*

By

Vishwambhar Prasad Sati

**Cambridge  
Scholars  
Publishing**



Exploring Uttarakhand's Temples and Divine Paths: Sacred Sanctuaries

By Vishwambhar Prasad Sati

This book first published 2024

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-0364-0664-4

ISBN (13): 978-1-0364-0664-6

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## PREFACE

Temples hold a central place in Uttarakhand's religious landscape, serving as revered centers for worshipping folk deities. These ancient structures carry immense historical and cultural significance, with some even mentioned in ancient scriptures like the Ramayana and Mahabharata. The Kedarnath Temple, believed to have been constructed by the Pandavas, stands as a testament to this rich history, linking back to the aftermath of the famous Mahabharata war. Adi Shankaracharya, in the 9th century, played a pivotal role in unveiling the evidence of these temples during his cultural expeditions. His efforts included establishing and renovating various temples, such as Badrinath, Jageshwar, Bageshwar, and Adi Badri. The present form of these temples took shape during the medieval period under the reign of Katyuri and Chand rulers.

This book, "Exploring Uttarakhand's Temples and Divine Paths: Sacred Sanctuaries," is the culmination of three decades of my dedicated work on the Himalaya Region. Following the creation of a comprehensive book on 'Uttarakhand: Society, Culture, and Pilgrimages,' the idea of a concise yet thorough exploration of the region's temples emerged. The primary goal was to share information about these magnificent and culturally rich temples on a global scale. Gathering precise details proved challenging, prompting numerous visits to these temples. A deep understanding of Uttarakhand's history and culture, coupled with firsthand experiences, empowered the compilation of this book.

The book comprises nine chapters, including an introduction and conclusions. The other seven chapters delve into specific themes: Jyotirlinga, Shakti Peeths, and Siddha Peeths; Devalayas, Shivalayas, and Shakti Temples; Panch Badris, Panch Kedars, and Panch Prayags; Char Dhams; a spiritual tapestry along divine paths; cultural processions; and exploring cultural riches. These chapters offer a comprehensive exploration of the historical and cultural facets of Uttarakhand's temples.

The author acknowledges that knowledge acquisition is a continuous and never-ending process. This book is a sincere effort to share relevant knowledge gained over the years. Recognizing the challenges of gathering

precise information, the author's visits to numerous temples, coupled with a deep understanding of Uttarakhand's history and culture, facilitated the compilation of this unique work. The book aspires to be a valuable resource for academia, scholars, pilgrims, tourists, and all those interested in the rich tapestry of Uttarakhand's temples.

In a heartfelt gesture, the author dedicates this book to his parents, recognizing their unwavering support and encouragement throughout this profound journey. Happy reading!

Aizawl, India  
21 March, 2024  
Vishwambhar Prasad Sati, D.Litt.



# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

The Uttarakhand Himalaya constitutes a pivotal segment of the larger Himalayan range, positioned nearly at its center, earning it the moniker “Central Himalaya.” This region showcases three distinct vertical landscapes – the Lesser Himalaya, Middle Himalaya, and Greater Himalaya. The Greater Himalaya remains cloaked in perpetual snow, while the Lesser and Middle Himalayas host human settlements and agricultural expanses. Geographically, the area is further demarcated into two horizontal divisions – Garhwal and Kumaon Himalayas, collectively forming a diminutive mountainous state. Approximately 93% of the land is characterized as mountainous terrain.

Uttarakhand Himalaya is administratively divided into two regions – Garhwal and Kumaon, comprising thirteen districts: seven in Garhwal and six in Kumaon (Fig. 1.1). The population is thinly spread across the mountainous expanse, with higher density observed in river valleys and plains. The majority of the population adheres to Hinduism, although the region is home to people of diverse religious backgrounds (Sati 2023). Residents actively preserve the ancient culture, with a particular emphasis on the conservation of Uttarakhand’s temples. These temples dot the landscape, found along river valleys, at middle altitudes, and in the highlands. The Uttarakhand Himalaya not only boasts breathtaking natural vistas but also serves as a repository of rich cultural heritage.

Uttarakhand, often referred to as the “Dev Bhumi” or abode of Gods and Goddesses, particularly Lord Shiva, Shakti, and Vishnu is believed to host an impressive assembly of 33 crore (0.33 billion) deities. A local proverb aptly captures this divine presence: ‘Har Kankar main Shankar,’ signifying the omnipresence of Lord Shiva in every particle. Consequently, Uttarakhand boasts thousands of temples, scattered across diverse geographical domains and categorized as Devalaya, Shivalaya, and Shakti Temples. Additionally, numerous temples honor various folk deities, contributing to the rich cultural tapestry of the region.

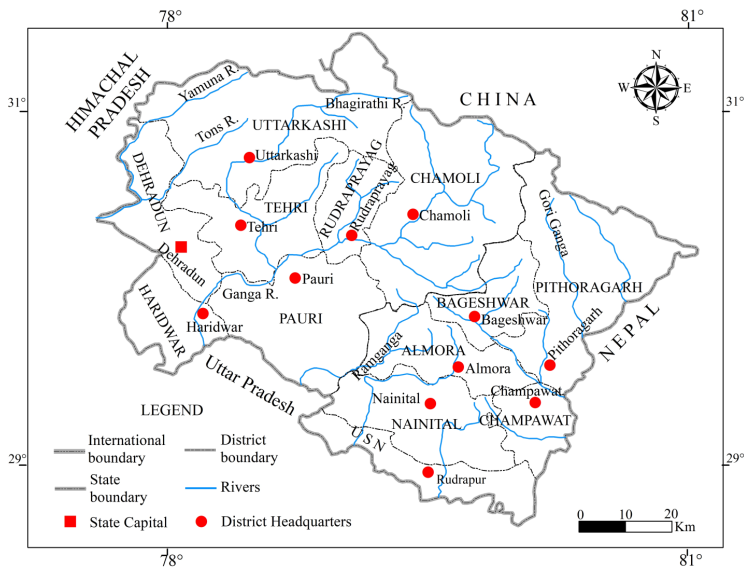


Fig. 1.1: Location map of Uttarakhand

Devalaya signifies the seat of Lord Vishnu, Shivalaya represents the abode of Lord Shiva, and Shakti Temples are dedicated to female deities. These temples, collectively known as major centers of worship and meditation, play a pivotal role in conserving the cultural and traditional heritage of Uttarakhand. Remarkably, the state stands out as one of India's significant temple-laden regions, boasting renowned pilgrimage sites such as Panch Badris, Panch Kedars, Panch Prayags, Jyotirlingas, Shakti Peeths, and Siddha Peeths. Culturally, Uttarakhand encompasses three major cultural realms – Kumaon, Garhwal, and Jaunsar and Bawar – each with distinct sub-cultural variations. Folk deities vary across these realms, with the Kumaon cultural realm emphasizing temples dedicated to ghosts and veers, while the Garhwal cultural realm features world-famous temples like Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri, and Yamunotri, collectively known as Char Dhams.

The architectural diversity of temples ranges from stone-built structures in the ancient temples of Kumaon and Garhwal, such as Kedarnath, Madhyamaheshwar, Tungnath, Rudranath, Adi Badri, Jageshwar, Bageshwar, and the Sun Temple of Katarmal, to wooden temples in the Jaunsar and Bawar region. Temples are often perched on hilltops, reachable through trekking, or situated on river banks and middle altitudes.



Each Uttarakhand temple narrates a compelling story, intertwining elements of Shiva, Shakti, folk deities, Rishis, and heroic figures. Ghosts, Yakshas, witches, and jungle deities also find a place in temple lore, worshipped on various occasions. Notable examples include the transformation of the Badrinath Temple from a dwelling of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati to its current status as a Vishnu Temple, and the association of the Kedarnath Temple with Lord Shiva and the Pandavas.

Some temples hold a special connection with Adi Shankaracharya, who is credited with their construction. Additionally, temples dedicated to Kal Bhairav, Maha Kali, Namdu, Garul, and Haru Heet carry significant spatial, temporal, and local importance in Uttarakhand's religious and cultural landscape. The temples in Uttarakhand are strategically situated across varied landscapes, spanning from river valleys to middle altitudes and highlands. Along river valleys, at confluences, and within towns, temples stand as architectural and spiritual landmarks. In middle altitudes, temples blend into forested areas and agricultural fields, while highland shrines grace alpine grasslands near the towering Greater Himalaya. Many highland temples, often accessible by trekking, offer not only cultural significance but also breathtaking natural vistas. The temples of Panch Badris and Panch Kedars, among others, carry ancient histories. Historical accounts indicate that the Badrinath and Kedarnath Temples trace their origins to the periods of Ramayana and Mahabharata, respectively. For instance, the Kedarnath Temple, believed to be constructed during the Dwapar Yuga by the Pandavas, stands as a testament to ancient craftsmanship. Another historical site is Lakhamandal, where the Lord Shiva Temple is located, associated with the construction of Lakshya Griha during the Mahabharata era.

In the broader historical context, Buddhist Mathas (Monasteries) proliferated in India post the advent of Buddhism, with Emperor Ashoka playing a pivotal role in its spread. While monasteries flourished in various Himalayan regions, Uttarakhand Himalaya lacks their presence. Preceding Adi Shankaracharya's influence, these ancient temples in Uttarakhand were not widely recognized. Born in the 8th century in Kaldi, Kerala, Adi Shankaracharya journeyed extensively, establishing Badrinath Temple as the fourth Dham and renovating the Kedarnath Temple. He also founded the renowned Jageshwar Dham and played a significant role in the construction of the temples at Adi Badri. Uttarakhand's temple construction history extends beyond Adi Shankaracharya's era. The Katyuris and Chands, rulers of Kumaon, along with the Panwar rulers in Garhwal, made significant contributions to temple construction. Their

legacy endures in the numerous temples dotting both the Kumaon and Garhwal Himalayas.

Hindus revere Adi Shankaracharya as the incarnation of Shiva, attributing to him the establishment of four temples in the country's four corners, known as Char Dhams. Uttarakhand held special significance for him, marking his last visit before attaining Nirvana. Adi Shankaracharya's prolific temple construction and renovation efforts, leading to the creation of renowned and globally recognized temples, evoke deep affection from the people of Uttarakhand. Numerous temples, both well-known and lesser-known, are believed to be associated with Adi Shankaracharya, connecting the region's history with his influential presence.

The temple construction in Uttarakhand also intertwines with the legend of the Pandavas, rulers of Hastinapur. According to popular lore, the Pandavas sought refuge in Uttarakhand during their exile and concealed themselves in the region during their Agyatvas. The famous Lord Shiva temple at Lakhamandal in Uttarkashi is believed to have been constructed by the Pandavas. Their sojourn in Uttarakhand, particularly during their transition to Sanyas Ashram, is associated with the construction of numerous temples, including the renowned Panch Kedars. Notably, temples like Karna Temple, Duryodhana Temple, and Pandavas Temple in Uttarakhand highlight this historical connection, with the attribution mainly falling on Bhima.

Historical records, such as those by Atkinson (1981), reveal the extensive presence of Vishnu and Shiva Temples in British Kumaon, while Nand and Kumar (1989) provide insights into the numerous Shiva Temples in the Garhwal region. Local deities gained prominence in Shaivism, with Lord Shiva becoming associated with goblins, demons, spirits, and other beings connected with aboriginal religions. The Goddess Durga, with 130 temples dedicated to her, represents the prevalent Shaktism in the Garhwal hills. Various destinations, such as Champawat, Pindar valley, Bageshwar Town, Haridwar, and Rishikesh, boast a rich array of Shiva, Shakti, and Vishnu temples. The Uttarakhand Himalayan temples exhibit unique opening and closing systems, dictated by weather conditions. While some remain open year-round, others, including Panch Badri and Panch Kedar, open during the summer months and close during winter due to heavy snowfall. Temples like Adi Badri remain open for 11 months, closing only in December. Special occasions dictate the opening of temples like Latu Dev (open on Chaitra Purnima, but no one is allowed inside the sanctoram) and Bansi Narayan (open on Raksha Bandhan).

Uttarakhand, also known as Dev Bhumi, has undergone various historical designations such as Uttaranchal, UP Hills, Uttarapath, Kedarkhand, and Manaskhand. Around 16% of its geographical area comprises the snow-capped Greater Himalaya. The Garhwal and Kumaon Himalayas represent distinct cultural and natural entities. The Himalaya, symbolizing Lord Shiva, is considered the abode of deities, with Goddess Parvati believed to be the daughter of Himalaya. This divine state, with its lesser-known temples alongside the iconic Char Dhams, reflects a rich cultural heritage, religious diversity, and harmonious coexistence. The temples, situated in highland alpine pasturelands, contribute to the spiritual and natural beauty of Uttarakhand, embodying the essence of religious tourism. Fig.1.2 showcases some of the important temples in this enchanting state.

The cultural and spiritual significance of temples has positioned Uttarakhand as a focal point for pilgrimage tourism, serving as centers of unwavering faith and deep-seated beliefs. Amidst the serene Himalayan landscape, these temples are not merely places of worship but are also believed to be inhabited by mystical entities such as witches, wandering souls, celestial nymphs, valiant fighters, and elusive ghosts. Their presence is often felt in the temple premises, particularly during the mystical hours before sunrise and after sunset, when they manifest in human forms, the open air, and amidst the trees. These mystical beings are said to roam the lofty snow-capped peaks of the Himalaya.

Every household in Uttarakhand boasts a temple dedicated to folk deities, namely Kul Dev/Devi and Isht Dev/Devi, fostering a deeply rooted connection to spiritual beliefs. Villages, on the other hand, feature temples devoted to Gram Dev and Bhumiya Dev, strategically situated on the outskirts. Deep within the forests, temples dedicated to Jungle Dev and Masan Dev add to the spiritual landscape. Masan Dev, in particular, is venerated by individuals and communities alike. Folk deity temples, including Bhairav, Namdu, Goril, Kali, Bhagawati, Gaura, and Latu, are scattered across hilltops, river valleys, and forested areas. These modest temples, often referred to as Dev/Devi Thans, house one or two statues of the respective folk deities.

Believers maintain that worshipping these folk deities brings continuous support, whether on an individual or collective level, contingent upon the manner in which the deities are revered. Bhairav and Namdu, as manifestations of Lord Shiva, find veneration on hilltops, with the Scheduled Caste community actively engaging in their worship. Bhairav, known as the benevolent God, is believed to fulfill the desires of all

devotees, prompting every family member to pay homage. However, the remoteness of Bhairav's temples, often situated in dense and eerie forest areas, adds an element of trepidation. Kal Bhairav and Kali, represented by substantial stones or a few stones adorned with hanging red-colored clothes beside a towering tree, become sacred worship sites in various regions.



Fig.1.2: Some important temples of Uttarakhand (a) Vishwanath Temple at Uttarkashi (b) Sun Temple at Katarmal (c) Jyotirlinga at Jageshwar (d) Lakshman Siddha Temple at Dehradun (e) Shakti Peeth at Surkanda (f) Shakti Temple at Mukhawa; Photo: By Author

Uttarakhand hosts a plethora of temples dedicated to revered Goddesses Bhagawati and Gaura, locally known as Dhyand, further enriching the spiritual landscape. The worship of folk deity Latu, revered as the God of Rain, becomes particularly crucial during times of drought, prompting communities to seek his blessings on his temple premises. Despite the prevailing caste systems, social harmony is evident in the collective effort to maintain and care for temples. Scheduled Caste communities take responsibility for temples devoted to Bhairav and Kali, while individuals from Rajput Castes actively oversee the upkeep of Lord Shiva Temples, exemplifying a harmonious coexistence in Uttarakhand society (Sati 2022).

Temples, regarded as fountains of cosmic energy, draw devoted pilgrims seeking spiritual nourishment. For various occasions, enthusiasts frequent temples dedicated to diverse folk deities. Shiva Temples, especially during the sacred month of Shravan, witness a surge in visitors who engage in rituals like Jalabhishek—offering a concoction of water, milk, Bailpatra, Doob, and local flowers. The faithful also prepare and serve a variety of food items as offerings to Lord Shiva, including Rotana (wheat flour mixed with sugar, roasted in ghee), Puri, pumpkin and pulses curry, rice, and locally crafted sweets, considering them as blessings from the deity. The worship of Shiva can be both a collective and individual endeavor.

Bhoj, a community feast prepared and served on auspicious occasions, becomes a regular practice on temple premises throughout the year. Dev/Devi Naach (ritualistic dance) and puja are integral components of various cultural celebrations, notably during Navratras in Chaitra and Ashwin. Devotees, often trekking through challenging terrains, visit hilltop Devi Temples to present offerings like fruits, vegetables, and cooked items to the deities. The tapestry of life's milestones is intricately woven with Samskaras, celebrated from birth to death. The Namkaran ceremony sees parents seeking blessings for their newborn at the temple. Yagna, a sacred fire ritual, becomes a common occurrence within the temple precincts during numerous occasions. A married woman, upon her initial return to her parental home after marriage, pays homage to Jungle Devta by offering a goat. In the forest temple of Jungle Devta, a puja is conducted for the well-being of family members, followed by the preparation and sharing of a diverse spread, which includes goat meat. These Jungle Devta Temples, often nestled in forested areas, are numerous and hold significance in the cultural fabric of Uttarakhand.

The primary objective of this study was to illuminate the historical and cultural significance of temples in Uttarakhand, intending to disseminate knowledge about their rich heritage. This qualitative research marks the first systematic study conducted on the temples of Uttarakhand. The temples were categorized based on their historical importance, leading to classifications such as Jyotirlingas, Shakti Peeths, and Siddha Peeths; Devalaya, Shivalaya, and Shakti Temples; Panch Badris, Panch Kedars, and Panch Prayags; and Char Dham Temples. A comprehensive map was created, depicting the various temple categories (Fig. 1.3). The descriptions of these temples are derived from observational insights, supported by on-site field visits and photographic documentation. Additionally, a thorough literature review was undertaken, supplemented by interviews with the knowledgeable priests, to enhance the depth and authenticity of the study.

An index was meticulously compiled to present a comprehensive list of temples categorized under various classifications (Fig. 1.4). Some temples exhibit multiple characteristics, exemplified by the Kedarnath Temple, revered as a Jyotirlinga, a Shivalaya, one of the Char Dhams, and one of the Panch Kedars. Similar multifaceted attributes are found in the Badrinath Temple, distinguished as a Devalaya, one of the Panch Badris, and one of the Char Dhams. Notably, the temples of Gangotri and Yamunotri possess dual distinctions as Char Dhams and Shakti Temples. Each Devi Temple is recognized as a Shakti Peeth, with a corresponding list detailing Shakti Temples. While Uttarakhand boasts numerous temples, this list highlights only the significant ones, offering a condensed glimpse into the diverse spiritual landscape of the region.

The book unfolds across nine chapters, each dedicated to a distinct aspect of the rich temple heritage in Uttarakhand. The introductory Chapter 1 delves into the historical and cultural significance of temples in the region. This section provides a foundational understanding of the subject matter, outlining the study's objectives, and detailing the methodology employed.

Chapter 2 delves into the celestial landscape, exploring the revered Jyotirlingas, Shakti Peeths, and Siddha Peeths that hold profound religious and cultural significance. The unique characteristics and spiritual importance of these sacred sites are expounded upon in this chapter.

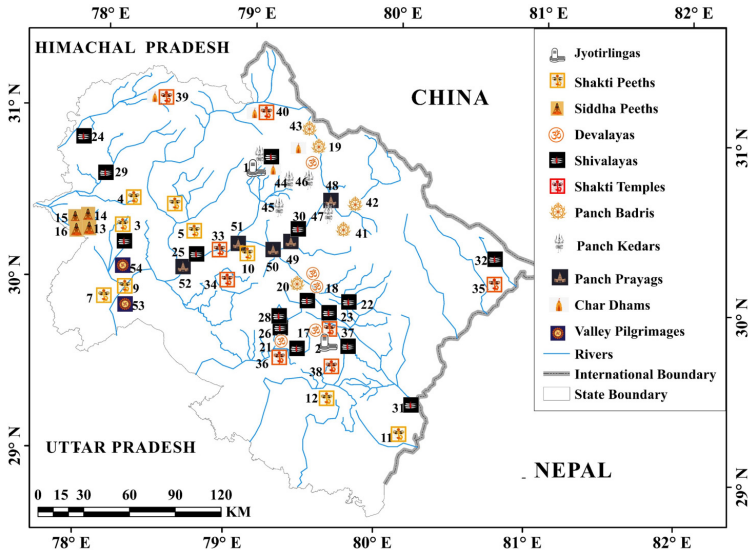


Fig. 1.3: Classification of temples and their location in the Uttarakhand Himalaya (Sati 2015)

JYOTIRLINGA	DEVALAYA	PANCH BADRI	PANCH PRAYAG
1. Kedarnath	17. Sun Temple	19. Badrinath	48. Vishnuprayag
2. Jageshwar	18. Narayan Temple	20. Adi Badri	49. Nandprayag
SHAKTI PEETH	19. Badrinath	41. Bridha Badri	50. Karnprayag
3. Kunjapuri	20. Adi Badri	42. Bhavishya Badri	51. Rudraprayag
4. Surkanda	21. Badrinath Temple	43. Yogdhyana Badri	52. Devprayag
5. Chandrabadani	SHIVALAYA	PANCH KEDAR	CHAR DHAM
6. Kalimath	1. Kedarnath	1. Kedarnath	1. Kedarnath
7. Mansa Devi	2. Jageshwar	44. Madhmaheshwar	19. Badrinath
8. Naina Devi	22. Baghnath	45. Tunganath	35. Gangotri
9. Chandi Devi	23. Baijnath	46. Rudranath	36. Yamunotri
10. Dhari Devi	24. Mahasudevtva	47. Kalpeshwar	VALLEY PILGRIMAGE
11. Purnagiri	25. Kamaleshwar	SHAKTI TEMPLE	53. Haridwar
12. Dunagiri	26. Binsar	33. Hariyali Devi	54. Rishikesh
SIDDHA PEETH	27. Tapkeshwar	34. Jalpa Devi	
13. Manak Siddha	28. Kobeshwar	35. Tripura Devi	
14. Laxman Siddha	29. Vishwanath	36. Kasar Devi	
15. Kalu Siddha	30. Mahadev Temple	37. Badhan Garhi	
16. Mandu Siddha	31. Panchakeshwar	39. Gangotri	
	32. Chhota Kailash	40. Yamunotri	

Fig. 1.4: A list of temples under different categories

The third chapter meticulously outlines the diverse array of temples in Uttarakhand, categorizing them into Devalayas, Shivalayas, and Shakti Temples. This comprehensive exploration offers insights into the distinct features and worship practices associated with each category.

In Chapter 4, the narrative shifts to the historical and cultural perspectives of Panch Badris, Panch Kedars, and Panch Prayags. This segment provides a deep dive into the multifaceted significance of these temple clusters, shedding light on their historical roots and cultural relevance.

The fifth chapter focuses on Char Dham temples, unravelling the spiritual essence and cultural importance of these revered pilgrimage sites. This section elucidates the distinct attributes of each Char Dham, offering a holistic understanding of their significance in Uttarakhand's religious landscape.

Chapter 6 unfolds the intricate cultural and divine paths traversed by the people of Uttarakhand. This segment provides a nuanced exploration of the various cultural and spiritual traditions embedded in the region, enhancing the reader's comprehension of the diverse religious fabric.

The seventh chapter elucidates the cultural processions that take place in every month, every season, and the whole year. The duration of cultural procession ranges from one-day to six months. The idol of folk deities, followed by priests and native people proceed from one village to another and one cultural realm to another. They sing folk songs renowned as Jagars to praise the folk deities. A variety of fruits and food items are also served. This chapter deals with a detailed description of these processions.

Chapter 8 deals with exploring the cultural riches and cultural realms. The culture and customs of the Central Himalaya is elaborated and the region is divided into three major cultural regions – Kumaon, Garhwal, and Jaunsar.

The final chapter, Chapter 9, serves as the conclusion, summarizing the key findings and insights gathered throughout the book. It encapsulates the essence of Uttarakhand's temple heritage, offering a comprehensive perspective on the region's rich cultural and religious tapestry.

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## CHAPTER 2

# JYOTIRLINGAS, SHAKTI PEETHS, AND SIDDHA PEETHS

### Introduction

India boasts a rich tapestry of sects and cults, with two prominent ones being Shaiv and Vaishnav. The temples in Uttarakhand are intricately linked to these beliefs, each serving as a sacred space for devotees. Jyotirlingas, revered as the radiant forms of Lord Shiva, are focal points of worship. Shakti Peeths, dedicated to Goddess Shakti, and Siddha Peeths, devoted to Yogis, further enrich the spiritual landscape.

India is adorned with 12 Jyotirlingas, radiant sanctuaries venerating Lord Shiva, strategically located across the country. From the sacred shores of Somnath in Gujarat to the tranquil terrain of Rameshwaram in Tamil Nadu, each Jyotirlinga holds profound significance in the spiritual tapestry of India. These divine centers include Mallikarjun in Andhra Pradesh, Mahakal in Ujjain, Omkareshwar in Madhya Pradesh, Kedarnath in Uttarakhand, Bhima Shankar in Maharashtra, Vishveshwar in Varanasi, Tryambakeshwar in Nasik, Vaidyanath in Maharashtra and Jharkhand, Nagesh in Maharashtra and Jageshwar in Uttarakhand, Rameshwaram in Tamil Nadu, and Ghrushneshwar in Aurangabad. Together, these sacred sites form a celestial connection between the terrestrial and divine realms, with the Pashupati Nath Jyotirlinga in Kathmandu, Nepal, standing as the revered head, symbolizing the harmonious unity of spirituality across borders.

Shakti Peeth, literally translating to ‘the Seat of Shakti,’ holds immense significance as the abode of eternal power (Sati, 2020). In Hindu mythology, Shakti Peeths are revered as sacred places, marking significant shrines and pilgrimage sites. According to our scriptures, Goddess Sati, the daughter of King Daksha Prajapati, was married to Lord Shiva. However, King Daksha was displeased with their union. In a pivotal event, King Daksha organized a grand Yagna and invited all gods, goddesses, Rishis, and sages except Goddess Sati and Lord Shiva. Undeterred, Sati and Shiva

attended the Yagna uninvited. Unfortunately, King Daksha showed disrespect to both of them, leading to a tragic turn of events. Feeling humiliated, Sati immolated herself in the fire pit of the Yagna and perished. Overwhelmed by grief and rage, Lord Shiva carried the burnt body of Sati.

The legend goes on to explain that the burnt remains of Sati fell in 51 locations across India and neighboring countries, and these places came to be known as Shakti Peeths. Several of these Shakti Peeths are situated in Uttarakhand. Let's briefly explore these revered sites. According to local traditions, it is believed that during the Treta Yuga, the divine trinity of Brahma, Vishnu, and Mahesh descended to Earth from heaven to test the penance of Maharishi Atri and Sati Anasuya. Impressed by the warm hospitality of the sages, the trinity expressed their desire to be born as their son, Dattatreya. Legend has it that Dattatreya, in turn, had 84 disciples who dispersed across India and established 84 Siddhapeeths. In the Dehradun city/valley, four such Siddhapeeths—Manak Siddha, Lakshman Siddha, Kalu Siddha, and Mandu Siddha—are said to be situated in the four corners. These Siddhapeeths are believed to be the oldest centers of worship, with Lord Shiva Temples located on the banks of small streams within the Raja Ji National Park. Though not widely recognized in mainstream Hindu scriptures, these Peeths are regarded with cultural and spiritual significance by the local community. It is believed that these Siddhapeeths play a protective role, ensuring the well-being of Dehradun against unforeseen circumstances (Sati, 2021).

## **Jyotirlingas**

Uttarakhand boasts two revered Jyotirlingas, namely Jageshwar and Kedarnath, each holding profound historical and cultural significance, as discussed in the preceding paragraphs. The renowned temples of Jageshwar are nestled on the left bank of the Jataganga River in the Almora district, within the Kumaon Himalaya, at an altitude of 1870 m (Fig. 2.1). Flowing perennially, the Jataganga is a tributary of the Kosi River. A 40-km road journey from Almora takes pilgrims through dense pine and coniferous forests to reach Jageshwar. Along this route, approximately 20 km from Almora, lies a well-known temple dedicated to the folk deity 'Golu Devta.' Jageshwar holds particular importance for those en route to Kailash Mansarovar. Pilgrims visiting Kailash Mansarovar often perform pujas at Jageshwar, seeking the blessings of Lord Shiva, making it a customary practice.

The landscape surrounding Jageshwar is both spectacular and sacred, with the Jataganga flowing through a deep valley surrounded by dense deodar forests. The winter season is marked by severe cold, with temperatures dropping to -0°C, leading to the freezing of water. Summers, on the other hand, are moderate. Despite the challenging weather conditions, thousands of pilgrims make the journey to Jageshwar Dham annually. Serving as both a small service center and a village, Jageshwar offers essential services to pilgrims, including a range of quality hotels and local food and beverages.

A group of 124 big and small temples and 174 sculptures, including stone idols of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati, lies within the complex of Jageshwar temples. The presiding deity is Jageshwar, dedicated to Lord Shiva. The high sanctity of Jageshwar temples has earned the Jataganga Valley the title 'Valley of Gods' since the 7th century AD, endowing the entire region with profound spiritual sanctity. The main temples within the complex include Jaganath (Jyotirlinga), Mrityunjaya Temple, Hanuman Temple, Surya Temple, and Neelkanth Temple. Additionally, there are Navgraha temples (temples dedicated to the nine planets): Pushti Mata Temple, Lakulisha Temple, Kedarnath Temple, Navdurga Temple, and Batuk Bhairav Temple. On the right bank of the Jataganga River, after crossing it, stands the Kuber Temple.

Near these temples, there is a Brahma Kunda (a water body named after Lord Brahma). Pilgrims traditionally take a holy bath in the Brahma Kunda before performing Puja and Darshanam. Subsequently, they visit the main Jyotirlingam, followed by Dakshin Mukhi Hanuman, Neelkanth Temple, Surya Temple, and Navgraha Temple. Notably, the Pushti Mata Temple is one of the Shakti Peeths within the temple complex. Pilgrims also pay homage to the Mritunjay Temple, the Hawan Kunda (where puja is performed with fire), Lakulisha Temple, Tarkeshwar Temple, Kedarnath Temple, and Navdurga Temple. Situated 5 km away from Jageshwar, the Pandukeshwar Temple is believed to have been constructed along with the famous Jageshwar temples.

Skanda and Linga Puranas mention that the worship of Lord Shiva began in Jageshwar when the 8th Shiva Jyotirlinga originated. In the 9th century AD, Adi Shankaracharya visited Jageshwar Dham, renovated the temples, and re-established many of them. Jageshwar is recognized as the Jyotirlinga (Astham Jyotirlingas – Nagesham Darukavane). Some original scriptures state that Jageshwar is revered as one of the twelve original Jyotirlingas, believed to have been constructed by Adi Shankaracharya. While

Jyotirlingas are generally devoted to Lord Shiva, in Jageshwar, both Shiva and Shakti are worshipped.

This region was the center of Lakulisha Shaivism. Saint Lakulisha, the “club-bearing Lord,” led a revivalist sect dedicated to worshipping Lord Shiva. As a wandering ascetic, he united different sects and revitalized the worship of Lord Pashupati, a manifestation of Lord Shiva. The two dynasties of southern and central India – Bharashiva and Vakataka – followed Lakulisha Shaivism. Pilgrims believe that Saint Lakulisha was the twenty-eighth incarnation of Lord Shiva, a fact also mentioned in the Puranas. Jageshwar has been declared a heritage site under the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). To enhance the cultural experience, ASI has set up a museum near the temple complex. Inside the museum, the main attraction is the image of Uma-Maheshwar with flying celestials. Another captivating sculpture depicts Surya, fully ornamented, holding a lotus in both hands. Additionally, a four-foot-high bronze statue of a local ruler named Pona Raja lies in the gallery.

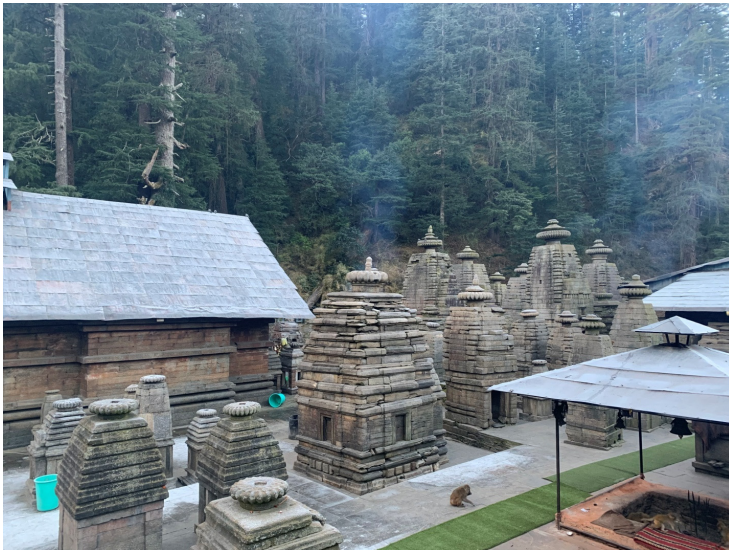


Fig. 2.1: Jageshwar Temples' premises on the bank of the Jataganga River;  
Photo: By Author

Kedarnath, one of the twelve Jyotirlingas, is nestled in the Rudraprayag district of the Uttarakhand Himalaya. Dedicated to Kedar, a manifestation of Lord Shiva, it is believed to represent the destructive aspect of the

divine. Kedarnath holds the esteemed status of being one of the four Dhams of Uttarakhand, alongside Badrinath, Gangotri, and Yamunotri. Additionally, it is part of the Panch Kedars, including Madhyamaheshwar, Tungnath, Rudranath, and Kalpeshwar. The sacred Kedarnath Temple is situated in the heart of the land of five rivers – Mandakini, Madhuganga, Kshirganga, Saraswati, and Swarnagauri. Enveloped by three majestic snow-capped mountain peaks, the temple offers a serene and spiritually charged atmosphere. While the Mandakini and the Saraswati Rivers still flow, the presence of the other three rivers has faded with time.

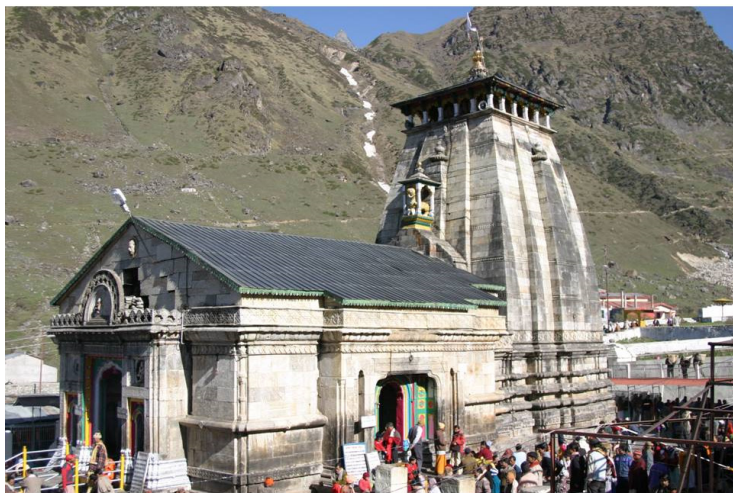


Fig. 2.2: The famous Kedarnath Temple is situated in the Rudraprayag District of the Uttarakhand Himalaya; Photo: By Author

The Kedarnath peak is situated at an elevation of 3,300 m (Fig. 2.2), with the Karchkund peak at 3,200 m, and Bharat Kund at an altitude of 3,400 m. The Mandakini River, originating from the Chaurabari Glacier, converges with the Alaknanda River at Rudraprayag. Scholars hold varying opinions regarding the construction of the Kedarnath temple. According to legend, the Pandavas erected the Kedarnath temple during the Dwapar Yuga. In the 9th century A.D., Adi Shankaracharya is believed to have renovated the temple. It is mentioned that he passed away at Bhairav Jap, a location near the Kedarnath Temple, and his idol is now installed upslope from the temple. Indian scholar Rahul Sankrityayan estimated the construction period of the Kedarnath Temple to be between the 10th and 12th centuries A.D. The temple's architecture resembles the