

Chapter 8

Investigating the concept of religious pathways: A case of Nanda Devi Raj Jaat Yatra in Uttarakhand, India

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Introduction

Pilgrimage is one of the earliest and fundamental forms of population mobility known to human society (Collins-Kreiner, 2010). Regardless of the motivation – spiritual, healing, devotional, or personal- the movement toward the divine engages the pilgrim with a transformative journey, accompanied by interaction with surroundings on the way and reaching the destination. Eade and Stadler (2022) in their pioneering work on modern pilgrimages, debates from a relational point of view of pilgrimage sites. They acknowledge the relationship between humans and non-humans such as animals, plants, rocks, and things within a site, and their role in the establishing pilgrim's experience during their journey.

Oxford Dictionary defines pilgrimage as - "A journey to a sacred place as an act of religious devotion". This basic definition highlights the dynamic characteristic of a pilgrimage along with its deeply rooted religious significance. Brandon (1970) underscores three significant components of a pilgrimage i.e. a holy site, its attractiveness, and the pilgrim's aim to attain spiritual benefits. These components underscore the geographical attributes of pilgrimage routes along with their spatial characteristics. Similarly, in Hindu tradition, the term '*tirtha*' is widely used, meaning "crossing place", or a "ford", i.e. a place to cross over to the opposite shore of a river, which again brings forth the physical entity of a site. In Buddhism, Pilgrims go to places where Buddha had set his foot in the past to keep the "message" linked to that place alive (Kooij, 2011). This concept underscores the living heritage interconnected with the spatial characteristics of a pathway. A pilgrimage site is often a combination of mythical and historical significance, however, Crim (1981) believes in the diverse motivations that drive pilgrims towards a heritage site. A pilgrim can be attracted to a site due to varied reasons - spiritual, cultural, religious, and personal. Along with that, they may be captivated by a site due to its association with a saint, deity, or historical or mythological figure. However, fundamentally any route or pathway involves two 'points' connecting each other, accompanied by the 'movement' to create a 'relationship' with the destination and the landscape they pass through. These two 'points' are the known and unknown realms that are perceived in terms of spatial or temporal gaps and are connected through pilgrimage (Singh, 1995). In the pilgrimage routes context, the movement is accompanied by 'practices' of spiritual nature.

In the domain of Heritage Studies, 'Cultural Routes' represent a novel approach to the holistic understanding of Cultural Heritage. The definition and understanding of Cultural Routes have been expanding since 1984, when the Council of Europe initiated the Cultural Routes program, and subsequently in 1987, Santiago de Compostela was declared the first European Cultural route. In addition to the physical means of communication, it also integrates intangible values associated with a route, thereby representing a journey undertaken that contributes to the exchange of ideas. Similarly, the pilgrimage journey goes beyond the mere act of travel and movement. It encompasses the exchange of spiritual knowledge between the pilgrims and their associated landscape through the performance of rituals or other spiritual practices. An example of this can be seen in Buddhism, where traversing the pilgrimage route is considered meritorious on foot rather than horseback (Buffetrille, 2003), allowing pilgrims to engage with the landscape around them spiritually. Despite the similar geographical features and ethnicity along the routes, they are likely to be unique in certain aspects of their tangible and intangible associations with their cultural landscapes. Thus, this study aims to investigate

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the characteristics that transform a route into a pilgrimage/religious journey, by exploring tangible and intangible relationships within the setting of cultural landscapes. The research will employ a three-stage methodology: first, analyzing global and national pilgrimage/religious routes to identify spatial and non-spatial parameters and understand their cultural context; second, developing a conceptual framework based on the understanding of literature and various global and national pilgrimage sites; and finally, analyzing the case of Nanda Devi Raj Jaat Yatra in context of the designed conceptual framework and to understand the significant aspects of this pilgrimage route in terms of universally and academically accepted definitions of cultural routes.

The Theory of Pilgrimages and its associated Landscapes

There is vast literature on pilgrimages often discussing the interconnections between individuals and their environments. Alderman (2002) mentions the 'pilgrimage landscape' to highlight this relationship, stating that no place can be inherently sacred. He also mentions that pilgrimages and their associated landscape are 'social constructions.' Alderman's perspective recognizes the role of humans in the creation of spaces and places around them. In a similar manner, Rana's (1995) 'faithscape' consists of sacred places, time, meanings, and rituals. Authors Shiferaw, Hebo, and Senishaw (2023) refers to the term 'Spiritual Landscape', where certain natural archetypes extend beyond religious settings, for example, pathways, forests, trees, etc., and also places with negative influences such as those linked to cremation and military conflicts. Eck (2012) characterizes India as a huge network of pilgrimage places that forms a captivating polycentric landscape, which she refers to as a "sacred geography". Sinha's (2014) pragmatic approach underscores the role of myths and visual imagery in shaping pilgrimage sites. Her study of pilgrimage sites illustrates how sites are persistently reclaimed and reinterpreted following archetypal narratives surrounding them. This perspective is intrinsic to viewing the dynamic nature of pilgrimage routes, where the retelling of myths contributes to the living nature of pilgrimage sites.

Since time immemorial, pilgrimage and their pathways have been important to society. For instance, during the 4th millennium BC, ancient Mesopotamia was an important site where pilgrims traversed to sacred sites such as the temple of Enlil at Nippur, for spiritual upliftment (Rutherford, 2022). In ancient Egypt, pilgrims journeyed to sacred sites like the temples of Karnak and Luxor to pay homage to gods and pharaohs and participate in rituals. In ancient Indian Vedic literature, pilgrimage is not mentioned formally (Bharati, 1963). However, the merit of traveling itself is mentioned. As mentioned in *Aitareya Brahmana*, (taken from an English translation by Martin Haug (1922) Lord Indra says to Rohita (son of King Harishchandra) "There is no happiness for him who does not travel, Rohita! Living in the society of men, the best man often becomes a sinner by seduction, which is best avoided by wandering (travel) to places void of human dwellings; for Indra is surely the friend of the traveller. Therefore, wander!" (p. 317). This quote highlights the spiritual significance of travel in ancient Indian traditions.

During the classical era, figures like Gautam Buddha traversed the lands, spreading their teachings. In *Mahaparinibbana Sutta: Sutta 16*, Buddha declares that his body be cremated, and a stupa be raised at a crossroad keeping his ashes, around which circumambulation can occur (Walshe, 1995). During this time, sites such as Varanasi, Bodh Gaya, and Shraavanbelgola in India attracted huge pilgrims for spiritual enlightenment, accompanied by rituals and prayers. Whereas in Greece, Olympia served as an important destination for pilgrims for various cult practices.

During the medieval period in India dynasties such as Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire emerged. Mughals were responsible for patronizing the construction of grand mosques and tombs. These sites served as important pilgrimage centers, for example, Jama Masjid in Delhi and Dargah of Sufi saint Khawaja Moinuddin Chishti in Ajmer. Between 1562 and 1579, the Mughal emperor Akbar paid seventeen visits to the Sufi shrine of Muinuddin Chishti in Ajmer in western India (Nath, 2023). During this era, pilgrims visited Egyptian pyramids, took dips in the Dead Sea, and traveled along the river Nile (Chareyron, 2005). They also went to places with the association of Jesus Christ like Jerusalem. The route of Santiago de Compostela also has medieval origins, where the burial place of apostle James the Greater was discovered.

Reader (2007) writes that the practice of pilgrimage is embraced by the 'New Age' culture He points out that besides the spiritual devotion of people, commemorative events like those at Ground Zero in New York also become a site for pilgrimage. Moreover, in today's era, technology has taken over publicizing pilgrimages. It has become easier to connect with fellow pilgrims before meeting them through online communities. The historical timeline of pilgrimages highlights a persistent need of humans for spiritual fulfillment across various eras, which eventually leads to understanding the pattern of evolving devotion and faith.

Understanding Pilgrimage Typologies

The study of religious phenomena is not a new concept. Despite having more studies on Christianity and the Western world as compared to Asia in the religious context (Jimura, 2014), there are classifications conceptualized by various authors and scholars for religious sites, offering unique and diverse perspectives on

various attributes of religious sites in association with their landscapes. These classifications facilitate an easy understanding of the diverse range of pilgrimage routes, destinations, and experiences of travelers traversing through these geographies and traditions. These classifications are based on geographical features, travel distances, types of landscapes associated with a site, historic significance, and associated rituals. Some of these classifications done in literature studies have been compiled in Table 1.

Author	Classification Criteria	Classification Types
(Stoddard, 1997)	Geography and Travel Distance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scale • Frequency • Types of Routes : <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (i) Converging (Direct line paths) (ii) Prescribed Circular (Closed traverses) (iii) Prescribed Processional (site focused)
(Bhardwaj, 1997)	Archetype Associations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Jala tirtha</i> – River crossing • <i>Mandir Tirtha</i> – Temple/Shrine • <i>Ksetra</i> – Sacred area
(Turner & Turner, 1978)	Christian Pilgrimages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Archaic Pilgrimage • Prototypical Pilgrimage • Medieval Pilgrimage • Modern Pilgrimage
(Bhardwaj, 1998)	Islamic Pilgrimages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obligatory • Voluntary – Emotive or sentimental
<i>Brahma Purana</i> (70.19-19), (Singh & Rana, 2023)	Hindu Pilgrimages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Divine sites • Demonic sites • Sage-related sites • Human-perceived sites
<i>Rig Veda</i> , (Singh & Rana, 2023)	Meanings of <i>tirtha</i> (pilgrimage)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Route or Place • Sacred water body • Sacred site • Religious territory (<i>kshetra</i>)
(Singh & Rana, 2023)	Hindu Pilgrimages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Jala tirtha</i> – water site • <i>Sthan tirtha</i> – Temple/Shrine • <i>Punya Kshetra</i> – Sacred ground/territory
(Wall, 1997)	Spatial characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Point • Line • Area
(Shackley, 2001)	Geography & Spatial Associations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Single Node • Archaeological sites • Burial site • Detached temples/shrines • Towns • Shrine/ temple • 'Earth energy' sites • Mountains • Islands • Pilgrimage Foci • Secular Pilgrimage
(Singh & Rana, 2023)	Geographical scale	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pan-Indian • Supra-regional • Regional • Local spots
(Turner, 1973)	Pilgrimage of Mexico City	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National • Regional • District • Intervillage

(Bhardwaj, 1973)	Geographical scale	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local • Sub-regional • Regional • Supra-regional • Pan-Hindu
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Table 1. Classification of Pilgrimage Sites by various authors

The table provides a comprehensive study of classification criteria and types given by scholars around the world. It is interesting to note that several similarities can be seen among the classification types, despite the varying classification criteria. Authors like Stoddard (1997), have explored geography, and travel distances, while Bhardwaj's (1997) (1998) focus is seen on archetypes of landscapes, and Shackley (2001) seem to have explored spatial characteristics, underscoring significant factors within pilgrimage traditions. Bhardwaj (1973) and Singh & Rana (2023) have explored the pilgrimage sites based on the geographical scale. The table also constitutes some of the classifications mentioned in ancient Indian literature of *Rig Veda* and *Brahma Purana* which are based on Indian religious journeys. The classification given in *Brahma Purana* is based on phenomena related to sites, either through history or through people's perceptions. The study of pilgrimage routes helps in understanding the potential characteristics of the landscapes, and also the typologies related to these sites. These classifications also reflect the profound impulse of humans to seek the divine manifested through travels and journeys.

Material and Methods

This section provides a comparative analysis of some of the pilgrimage pathways in and around the world, which brings forth certain parameters that define a pilgrimage pathway, for example, types of movement, the scale of the movement of pilgrims, tangible attributes of the landscape a pilgrim passes through, the type of shrine one comes across, the temporal aspect of the pilgrimage journey, and intangible attributes associated with the journey as well as the site. The types of movements that have been observed through various case studies are:

- (i) Circumambulation – an act of moving around a sacred object, temple, or idol.
- (ii) Closed Circuit Path – The pilgrim's path begins and culminates at the same point.
- (iii) Linear Path – The pilgrim starts from his/her home and the religious journey culminates at the shrine/ temple itself.
- (iv) Ascending Path – The pilgrim starts his/her religious journey at the base of a mountain or hill, and concludes it at the summit, where the shrine or temple is situated.
- (v) Shrine to Shrine Path – The traditional pilgrimage starts from one shrine and culminates at another shrine.
- (vi) Festival-based Path – The pilgrimage movement happens only during the festival.
- (vii) Miscellaneous/ Other – A unique or special kind of religious pathway that does not fit any of the above.

These pilgrimage pathways, spanning across different regions and cultures, display some common characteristics ranging from physical features of the landscape such as water bodies, mountains, forests, etc. Many of the pilgrimage sites reflect characteristics that are unique to their own, especially Intangible cultural associations. The temporal aspects include annual, sextennial (occurring every 6 years), duodecennial (occurring every 12 years), and perennial occurrences, as well as festival-based occurrences, which highlight the enduring nature of these pilgrimage journeys. Also, intangible attributes such as mythology, folklore, historical legacy, procession, rituals, and art practices contribute to the spiritual richness and cultural significance of not only the pathways but also the people they belong. Table 2 helps analyze how each factor, whether spatial or non-spatial, contributes significantly to different pilgrimage pathways small or big. This analysis will further support generating the conceptual framework to comprehend the pilgrimage pathway.


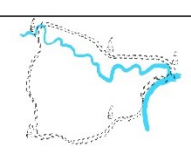
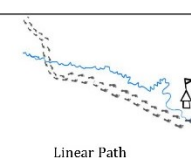
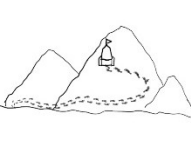
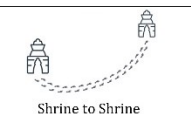
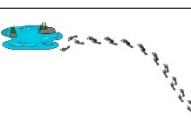
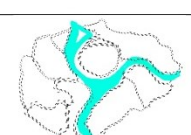
Pilgrimage Route	Type of Movement	Scale				Tangible Attributes of Landscape							Type of Shrine		Temporal					Intangible Attributes of Landscape																																			
		Local	Regional	National	Cross-Boundary	Water-Body	Mountain	Forest	Ghats	Temple/ Shrine	Burial Site	Archaeological remains	Natural	Man-made	Annual	Sixtemial	Duodecennial	Perennial	Festival Based	Mythology	Festival	Folkore	Historical Legacy	Procession	Rituals	Art Practices	Ecological Association																												
Govardhan Hill Parikrama, Braj, Uttar Pradesh, India	 Circumambulation	✓																																																					
Giripradakshina, Tiruvannamali, India		✓																																																					
Kailash Mansarovar Pilgrimage, Tibet or 'Kang Rinpoche' pilgrimage route						✓																																																	
Chaurasi Kos Parikrama or Braj Mandal Parikrama, Braj, India	 Closed Circuit Path		✓																																																				
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Pandharpur, Maharashtra, India	 Linear Path		✓																																																				
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Amarnath Yatra, Jammu & Kashmir																																																							
Shravanbelgola, Hassan District, Karnataka, India																																																							
Tirupati Balaji, Andhra Pradesh, India																																																							
Fushimi Inari Taisha, Kyoto																																																							
Char Dham, Uttarakhand (India)- Yamunotri, Gangotri, Kedarnath, and Badrinath																																																							
Rath Yatra, Puri, India	 Shrine to Shrine	✓																																																					
Via Francegia, Europe - From Canterbury, England to Rome, Italy																																																							
Rotella Panduga (Roti ki Eid), Nellore, Andhra Pradesh, India	 Festival based Path																																																						
Kanwar Yatra, India																																																							
Kumbh Mela, India • Prayagraj (Uttar Pradesh) • Haridwar (Uttarakhand) • Ujjain (Madhya Pradesh) • Nashil (Maharashtra)																																																							
Nabadwip Dham or Chaitanya Mahaprabhu Dham, West Bengal, India	 Other		✓																																																				

Table 2. Typologies of National & International Pilgrimage Pathways. Source: Author

Conceptual Framework

Routes like Santiago de Compostela have been recognized universally by international organizations for their historical significance. But there are also other routes, both globally and regionally, which possess rich tangible and intangible significance that make them living heritage routes. Each of the routes or pathways around the world with significant historical association possesses rich traditions that integrate deeply with its cultural landscape. To understand this, a conceptual framework has been designed for investigating the characteristics that transform a route into a pilgrimage/religious journey based on previous sections studied earlier.

A thorough investigation of these sections, including typologies and categorization of pilgrimage sites, along with theories of religious pathways has contributed to the development of the Conceptual Framework. This framework is designed to contemplate multifaceted factors contributing to pilgrimage sites. The framework aims to offer a holistic understanding of the pilgrimage pathways while reflecting the dynamic and interconnected nature of pilgrimage sites.

There are five core components of the framework: Natural and Manmade Tangible Cultural heritage, Types of Movement, Scale, Temporal component, and Intangible Cultural heritage. This way the framework covers all the spatial and non-spatial parameters of religious pathways and can provide cultural heritage professionals with a systematic classification, which can provide comparative analysis and better decision-making during heritage conservation and management, and with potential tourism management. This framework will further help evaluate the case of Nanda Devi Raj Jaat Yatra.

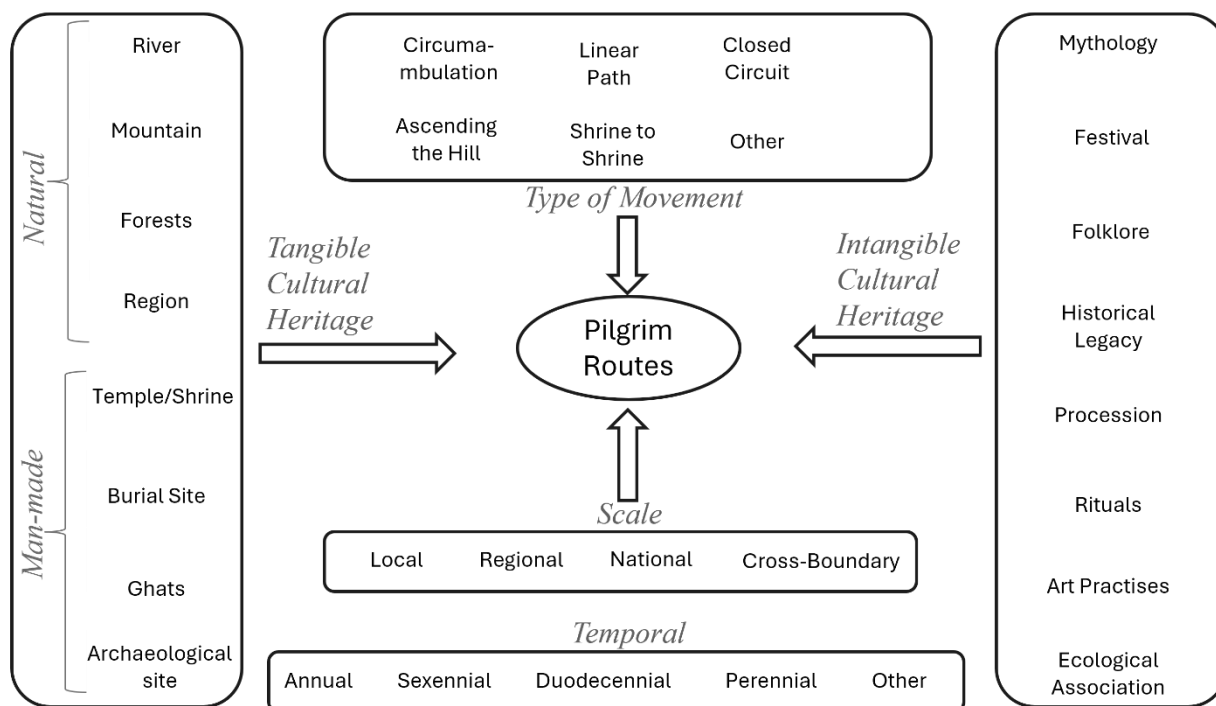


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of Pilgrim routes. Source: Author

The conceptual framework of pilgrim routes can offer a comprehensive tool for analyzing the multi-faceted dimensions of any pilgrimage route. The Himalayas, which encompass exceptional heterogeneity in terms of geography, are also varied in their ethnic populations and offer many varied cultural resources. This framework can help appreciate the one-of-a-kind pilgrimage route of the Himalayas i.e. Nanda Devi Raj Jaat Yatra. In the subsequent sections, we'll discuss the varied characteristics of Nanda Devi Raj Jaat Yatra and its surrounding cultural landscape.

Case Study – Nanda Devi Raj Jaat Yatra

Cultural Associations of Nanda Devi Parbat

This section sheds light on the rich heritage surrounding the Nanda Devi Parbat or Mountain region that constitutes the area where the Nanda Devi Raj Jaat Yatra is held. Understanding this heritage facilitates appreciation and a profound understanding of the local traditions and beliefs of the hill community. The Himalayan mountains are a rich repository of culture and ecological systems, which are intricately intertwined with the local beliefs and traditions of people. The Himalayas are home to traditional Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic civilizations and several other tribal and ethnic groups. The Himalayan rivers are revered as spiritual places,

where devout pilgrims visit their headwaters to pay homage and build religious structures. Taylor (2012) believes that human action only transforms a regular place into a sacred landscape by unifying diverse rituals to converge within a cohesive narrative framework. The tribal communities of the Himalayas find spirituality in their valleys, caves, forests, and rocky outcrops through their animistic traditions (Zurick, Julsun, Shreshtha, & Bajracharya, 2005). Here, the geographical placement of Nanda Devi Parbat at the core of the Himalayas is not only embedded with cultural significance but is also a wonder of nature. The patron Goddess of Uttarakhand Himalayas is Nanda Devi, who occupies a key position in local mythology and spiritual practices of the region. In mythological stories, *Nanda Devi* is believed to be the daughter of *Himanchal Rishi* (Himanchal i.e. Himalayas) (Atkinson, 1881; Pangtey, 2018) and was married to Lord Shiva in *Homkund* situated at the confluence of two streams Nandakini and Shila Samundar, which is situated below the peaks of *Nanda Ghugati* and Mount *Trishul* (Pangtey, 2018).

The surrounding Nanda Devi National Park is a designated UNESCO World Heritage Site inscribed in 1988. The presence of the National Park contributes to the importance of the relationship between nature and spirituality in the surroundings (UNESCO). Along with its richness in culture, this region is abundant in ethnobiological knowledge, biodiversity, and traditional knowledge systems. The region's unique biodiversity is reflected in its sustainable coexistence between humans and nature. The local communities are engaged in ancient traditional practices, including medicine, agriculture, and pastoral care, which have been transmitted through oral traditions (UNESCO - Man and the Biosphere Programme). Nanda Parbat is home to the holy *Brahma Kamal* flower, an important aspect for environmentalists. Before the *Nandashtami* festival, this holy flower is harvested by local priests, for a day or two, which ensures full ripening for the subsequent year's crop. The region is also home to big horn Himalayan sheep (*barhal*) and snow leopard (*thurru*).

Referred to as the 'Bliss-giving goddess', Nanda devi is the patron deity of the Kumaon and Garhwal regions of Uttarakhand, also mentioned in the tenth-century Sanskrit inscription found in *Pandukeshwar*: '*Nanda Bhagwati Charan kamal kamalas nath mirthab*' (Aitken, 1994). Festivals such as *Kangdali*, celebrated once every twelve years by the Rung tribe of Pithoragarh district, symbolize resilience and protection, echoing the mountain's enduring presence in local folklore and traditions. Similarly, *Nandashtami*, celebrated annually in the month of *Bhado* (Aug-Sept), commemorates the mythical hardships endured by Nanda Devi for the betterment of humanity. According to mythological records, Nanda Devi, renowned for vanquishing demon kings such as *Kansa*, *Shumbha-Nishumbha*, *Raktabeej*, and *Mahisasur* during *Dwapar yuga*, is venerated as a cherished deity by the inhabitants of the Himalayas. Oakley (1905) in his book 'Holy Himalaya: The Religion, Traditions, and Scenery of a Himalayan Province (Kumaun and Garhwal)' says- "Nanda Devi is a favorite goddess in Kumaun". The town of Ranihat, situated near Srinagar in Uttarakhand, once the capital of the Garhwal region, houses a temple dedicated to *Rajrajeshwari*, considered a manifestation of Nanda Devi, now recognized as a protected monument.

The Hindu sacred book of *Skanda Purana* mentions the geographical features of Nanda Devi Mountain associating it with mythology (Pangtey, 2018). There is a brief mention of the river *Pindarak* (Pindar) originating from the hair locks (*jata*) of Lord Shiva who resides in the High Himalayas. This river flows through the snow peaks of Mount Nanda Devi, finally merging with the Vishnu Ganga River in the town of Karnaprayag. Such kind of narratives build a strong and deep connection between people and their surrounding nature. The deep spiritual connection of the community with their environment gives rise to certain traditions, which reflect the spirit of conservation and stewardship rooted in traditional wisdom. This statement is further strengthened by an anecdote recounted by Negi (2013) where the elderly advised him against visiting Madhkeshwar forests in Uttarkashi District. This associated taboo emphasizes the need to respect and maintain distance from sacred forests, and also the significance of ecological conservation.

About Nanda Devi Raj Jaat Yatra

The Nanda Devi Raj Jaat Yatra is a one-of-a-kind pilgrimage rooted in the Uttarakhand state of India, which itself is rich in cultural, historical, and spiritual tapestry. This cyclical pilgrimage occurs every twelve years and holds profound significance for the communities of Kumaon and Garhwal, embodying centuries-old traditions and beliefs. A pilgrimage generally involves the pilgrim's movement towards a fixed shrine, in contrast, Nanda Devi Raj Jaat Yatra encompasses the revered goddess Nanda Devi journeying from her paternal home to her in-laws' abode of Lord Shiva in Homkund (a glacial lake in high Himalayas). Such kinds of *jaats* or *yatras* often culminate at remote locations like alpine meadows or glacial lakes (Maikhuri, Negi, Rao, & Nautiyal, 2002). The first recorded Raj jaat was in the year 1905. Nanda was believed to be the girl child of the ruling dynasties of Uttarakhand. She was married to Lord Shiva who resided in the high Himalayas. Every twelve years, she is believed to visit her parents' place and thus in observation of her departure to her in-laws' place, Raj-Jaat yatra is held. Nanda Devi's association with the royal families gave this event the name Raj-Jaat or the Royal pilgrimage.

Nanda devi Raj-Jaat yatra is the longest pilgrimage in Asia (Negi, 2013), and is performed every 12 years, commencing from and culminating at village Nauti village of Chamoli district. This 260 km long pilgrimage

lasting 19 days is one of the most arduous pilgrimages. Traditionally, pilgrims are not expected to wear footwear during the procession at high altitudes. They need to toil over harsh slopes and glaciers between altitudes ranging from 1050 meters to 5000 meters. The yatra commences from Nauti village (1260 meters AMSL) near Karnaprayag, passes through the mystery lake of Roopkund located at fifteen thousand feet and surrounded by hundreds of human skeletons and culminates at Homkund (4061 meters AMSL) – the base of Mount Trisuli – one of the peaks within the Nanda Devi Biosphere reserve. Other small processions from other regions of Uttarakhand join the main Raj-jaat procession at the village Nand Keshai in Tharali, Chamoli, which is situated at the south of the confluence of Pindar and *Kaliganga* rivers, and another procession from the Kumaon region at village Badhiyakot of Danpur region of Bageshwar district. The intermingling of these processions reflects the shared cultural heritage of the region.

Historical and Archaeological Associations

Despite being a favorite goddess of Kumaon (Oakley, 1905), the authority to claim a relationship with Nandadevi for thousands of years has been legitimated by many rulers of the Central Himalayan region (Sax, 1991). The nineteenth-century copper plate inscriptions from *Pandukeshwar* are some of the earliest epigraphic records that established the significance of goddess *Nanda Devi* among rulers of *Katyuri* dynasty (Pangtey, 2018; Sax, 1991). After *Katyuri*, the ruler *Shyama Saha* of *Panwar* dynasty ruled the region and commissioned the temple at *Thali* (Sax, 1991). He also revived an archaic tradition, as per author Ratudi (1980), wherein Tibetan chieftains from across the Greater Himalayas would send an annual tribute. This trip included a four-horned ram, one that leads the *Nanda Devi Raj jaat yatra* (Negi, 2013). The birth of Nanda Devi is associated with the astronomical event of the rising of planet Orion (*mrig-shira nakshyatra*) as mentioned in the holy book of "*Sangkshyipta Shivapuran*" (Pangtey, 2018). The numismatic evidence of *Nanda Devi* is evident in coins from *Kushana* rulers of the 2nd and 3rd century AD, which feature the name *Nana Devi*. As per Pangtey (2018), '*Nana Devi*' refers to *Nanda Devi* only confirmed by historian Acharaya Shiv Prasad in his book "*Uttarakhand ke Abhilek Evam Mudra*."



Figure 2. Pilgrims trekking through mountain during the procession.

Photograph by Mukesh Khugsal. Image source: Global Landscapes Forum. Accessed May 14, 2024.

URL: <https://archive.globallandscapesforum.org>

Ecological Associations

The Nanda Devi Raj Jaat yatra has a deep interconnection with its surrounding ecological systems, evident in people's practice of dedicating forests to deities, such as the sacred groves of *Abies Pindrow* (Negi, 2013), that carry profound spiritual significance for the people of Garhwal and Kumaon region. For the efficient utilization of resources, locals have associated various taboos followed along the route, for example, the prohibition of fetching fodder and cooking food during the procession. ET Atkinson (1881) in the Himalayan Gazetteer notes that activities like cooking food, gathering grass, cutting wood, or singing aloud are prohibited, as these acts are believed to cause heavy snow or bring calamity. Walking barefoot is an accustomed practice during many of the pilgrimage processions in India including Nanda Devi Raj Jaat Yatra. Such traditions contribute to ecological practices, for example, medicinal and other important herbs are protected from being crushed while walking. The Yatra also traverses through the *Bedni Bugyal*, an alpine meadow situated within a Reserve Forest area, serving as a crucial stop along the processional route. Notably, the route of the Raj Jaat Yatra procession is also home to herbs like *rhubarb*, white *anemones*, and *Brahma Kamal*. The diverse landscape and challenging route of Raj Jaat Yatra is also full of mysteries. The trek, when passing through *Roopkund* lake, skeletons within and lying around the lake are found. For this reason, *Rookund* lake is also known as the 'skeleton lake'. A forensic analysis report from 2004 puts down the theory of skeletons belonging to pilgrims during Nanda Devi Raj Jaat (Vallangi, 2021). However, many other studies done by the Anthropological Survey of India quite oppose the theory and give different verdicts. The *Roopkund* lake, however, still remains a mystery and reminds pilgrims of the harsh environment one has to go through to finish the pilgrimage. Unlike other pilgrimage routes, Nanda

Devi Raj Jaat is done in the anti-clockwise direction. It's believed that circumambulation in an anti-clockwise direction is prevalent in the ancient cult of tantra, which is known in Tibet as *Pon/Bon* (Pangtey, 2018).

Intangible Cultural Associations

Rituals are integral to every culture, serving as a medium for worshippers and pilgrims to interact with the religious site and its surrounding landscape which helps them manifest their goal of meeting the divine. These ritual enactments are deeply rooted in traditional beliefs, which are sometimes intertwined with environmental values. During the Raj Jaat yatra, pilgrims also follow certain rituals that assure their connection with the goddess. During the procession, the devotees carry *chhantoli* (parasols) crafted by artisans out of miniature bamboo called *ringal* and bark of birch tree, locally grown in the forests of higher hills. This parasol is decorated with colorful cloth, and silver and gold ornaments. Occasionally, the idol is carried in a *doli* or palanquin made of mango wood decorated with colorful clothes and ornaments. The palanquin, which four priests usually carry, is a reflection of traditional Indian marriage ceremonies, where brides are sent off to their in-laws' homes in palanquins. The procession is led by a four-horned sheep known as 'ram', or four-horned ram. It is locally known as *Chausingha Khaddu* or "*Mainda*" in the local dialect. As the procession progresses, the pilgrims alert villagers along the route about the arrival of the goddess by blowing a long windpipe. In the villages of Kumaon and Garhwal, the birth of a four-horned ram in Chandpur is taken to be the indication of the arrival of Nanda Devi to her parental home. Bellezza (2014) in his book 'The Dawn of Tibet: The Ancient Civilization on the Roof of the World', he mentions that the hill people strongly believe that the animal to be offered to the spirits must possess extraordinary size, strength, and unique physical traits like four horns. These rituals reflect local communities' cultural ethos and lifestyle. Singing folk songs and performing *Jagar* (nocturnal devotional singing) are important rituals of *Jaat*, as they depict the emotions of the goddess, mirrors the perilous life of hill women, along with significant tales related to the procession.



Figure 3. Nanda Devi Raj Jaat Yatra *Doli* in Uttarakhand.

Source: Stockvids (2014). Nanda Devi Raj Jaat Yatra *Doli* in Uttarakhand.

Retrieved from Shutterstock website: <https://www.shutterstock.com/>

Discussions and Conclusion

The unique characteristics of Nanda Devi Raj Jaat Yatra make it imperative to establish its significance as a pilgrimage route. The developed conceptual framework in the previous section can help identify the spatial and non-spatial parameters that play significant roles in the development of pilgrimage pathways. We can enhance our understanding of this case study within a broader, more academic context. For this purpose, the concept of cultural routes has been brought forth. Global organizations like UNESCO, ICOMOS, and the Council of Europe have played a major role in giving cultural routes a significant position among world heritage sites. It started in 1987 when the Council of Europe established its European Cultural Routes Program and justified how the diverse heritages of European countries contribute to a shared cultural heritage. The same year, it declared

Santiago de Compostela as the first European Cultural Route based on its tangible and intangible heritage. In 1993, UNESCO declared Santiago de Compostela a World Heritage Site for meeting the criterion of Interchange of Values (ii), significance in human history (iv), and heritage associated with events of universal significance (vi). The year 1994 called for the expert meeting by UNESCO on 'Routes as part of our Cultural Heritage' which emphasized the authenticity, exchange of spiritual goods along the route, and community development. This meeting also highlighted the term 'heritage route' which is defined by its tangible elements, and the cultural significance derived from exchanges and dialogue across regions (UNESCO, 1994). In 2008, a charter on Cultural Routes was declared by ICOMOS defining it as a communication path with a specific and well-defined purpose, characterized by historical associations, cultural continuity, natural heritage, and historical associations.

The above timeline helps us comprehend significant aspects that aid in recognizing a route as a 'cultural route' These significant aspects are utilized in the subsequent table to be reflected in the case study of Nanda Devi Raj Jaat Yatra. This facilitates a deeper understanding of the unique values of the case study. At the same time, some keywords are generated to create identities in the pilgrimage pathways, which can further help with academic research.

Significance Aspects in the Context of Definitions of Cultural Routes	Reflection in the case study – Nanda Devi Raj Jaat Yatra in association with Cultural Landscape	Keywords
Shared Cultural Heritage	Nanda devi raj jaat reflects a strong interconnection between people and the landscape as demonstrated in their ritual of walking barefoot during the pilgrimage at high altitudes ranging from 1000 to more than 4000 meters. These deeply rooted traditions of collective participation are the key to the shared identity of the region. Other small processions from the Kumaon region, like Raj Rajeshwari Nanda of Almora, join the main procession of the Garhwal region.	Interaction, interconnections, rituals, procession, Kumaon, shared identity, walking barefoot
Interchange of values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Mau-Dibbi</i> custom: This custom encompasses the sharing and donation of food for the pilgrims by the families of villages along the route. This custom exemplifies community support, cultural exchange, and mutual respect. • The performance of <i>Jagar</i> (devotional singing through the night) throughout the jaat not only personifies the greatness of the goddess but also epitomizes the ethics of conservation. This unique oral tradition intrinsic to Uttarakhand Himalayas acknowledges the modern ecological challenges and preserves the local tradition. 	Sharing, community support, cultural exchange, oral traditions
Specific and well-determined purpose	Nanda Devi is the presiding deity of Kumaon and Garhwal Himalayas. This cyclical pilgrimage occurring once every 12 years event serves as a cultural and social event that fosters community bonding, fosters cultural and religious continuity, and promotes environmental awareness.	Environmental awareness, cultural continuity, cyclical event, duodecennial, Garhwal
Tangible heritage along the route	Some of the significant temples, that are part of the Nanda Devi Raj Jaat yatra route: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raj Rajeshwari Temple, Nauti village • In the Sem village, the procession crosses Chandpur Fort, an ASI-protected monument • Temple at Nandkesari village, Dewal block, Chamoli • Latu Devata Temple, Wan village • Small shrine at Roop Kund Lake The procession also includes objects crafted locally by artisans like <i>Chhantoli</i> and <i>Doli</i> made of locally available bamboo.	Temple, shrine, monument, lake, protected, local crafts
Exchange of spiritual goods	The <i>Chousingha Meindha</i> (four-horned sheep) leads the whole procession from Nauti village to Homkund, where it is set free, symbolizing a spiritual exchange between the goddess's maternal and in-law's abode, situated at lower and higher altitudes	Procession, ancient practices,

	respectively. The saddlebags of the sheep are filled with offerings to the goddess believed to reach Mount Kailash.	continuity, offerings
Significance in human history	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Raj jaat yatra, despite being a duodecennial event, plays a significant role in preserving age-old traditions and cultural practices. The adverse weather conditions or the rugged terrain do not hinder the pilgrim's devotion to their goddess, and the pilgrimage proves to be a testament to the resilience and endurance of devotees' faith. This pilgrimage journey is indeed very special to hill women who see their reflection while bidding goodbye to Nanda Devi as these women can imagine the pain of separating from family, and further adhering to the rigorous life of high hills in the Himalayas. The mysterious lake of Roopkund with its skeletons exemplifies its spiritual significance despite its adverse consequences. 	Ancient traditions, rituals, spiritual heritage, hills
Natural Heritage along the Route	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The route passes through sacred groves of Raga – Abies pindrow. The temple of <i>Latu</i> deity in Wan village is located below the deodar tree – <i>Cedrus deodar</i>. Bedini Bugyal and Bedini <i>Kund</i> (pond) serve as significant stops along the route. A significant stretch of the route passes along <i>Nandakini</i> and <i>Pindar</i> rivers. Sila Samundar, an important halt before Homkund, is the alpine meadow dominated by rhubarb, white anemones, and <i>Brahma kamal</i>. The mysterious Roopkund lake with the hidden mass of skeletal remains dating to the fourteenth century AD. 	Sacred groves, trees, kund, rivers, meadows, Bugyal
Historical Associations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coinage and copper plate inscriptions of Nanda Devi from Ancient Period 	Inscriptions, Ancient period

Table 3. Significant aspects of Nanda Devi Raj Jaat Yatra

The following discussion examines the former section of the Conceptual framework in the context of the keywords generated through the study of significant aspects of the case study in Table 3. These keywords are crucial for deliberating the significance of Nanda Devi Raj Jaat Yatra, and to testify if the framework is relevant. As mentioned, the spatial and non-spatial attributes of the conceptual framework will be analyzed in relation to the case study.

Typology of Movement

The type of movement in the Conceptual framework reflects different forms of movement highlighting the significance of both physical and spiritual journeys. In the context of Nanda Devi yatra, keywords like procession, circumambulation, interaction, and cultural continuity symbolize the spiritual movement and exchange of spiritual goods, and walking barefoot across challenging terrains exemplifies the physical movement.

Tangible Cultural Heritage

The tangible cultural heritage can be of two types – man-made and natural, as discussed in conceptual framework. The case of Nanda Devi Raaj Jaat Yatra exemplifies temples, monuments, and inscriptions as manmade heritage. On the other hand, keywords like sacred groves, *kund*, lake, rivers, meadows, and *bugyal* correspond to natural tangible heritage.

Intangible Cultural Heritage

The conceptual framework suggests practices, rituals, traditions, etc. as intangible cultural heritage. The unique cultural traditions of Nanda Devi Raj Jaat Yatra emphasize similar keywords like rituals, oral traditions, local crafts, ancient practices, shared identity, and spiritual heritage, which underscores and fosters mutual respect for the heritage.

Temporal

The temporal association of a pilgrimage route focuses on the frequency or occurrences of a pilgrimage over certain periods of time as mentioned in the conceptual framework. Nanda devi raj jaat yatra, an event taking place after 12 years is evident through the keywords like cyclical occurrence and duodecennial. This association helps understand the continuity of a tradition over specific intervals.

Scale

The pilgrimage's scale spans from local to cross-boundaries across the nations, as mentioned in the conceptual framework. The case study of Nanda Devi Raj Jaat Yatra's regional scale is evident in its movement across villages through the Garhwal region and is also supported by keywords like Kumaon and Garhwal.

Employing the keywords extracted from the Nanda Devi Raj jaat Yatra in relation to all the spatial and non-spatial attributes of the conceptual framework of pilgrimage routes helped evaluate the framework comprehensively. Moreover, it offered a smooth understanding of the pilgrimage's multifaceted nature incorporating its tangible, intangible, temporal, and scalar aspects. This approach can also be relevant in terms of academic pedagogy by applying varied examples to the framework.

The key observations are developed with the integration of the conceptual framework and the keywords generated from the case study of Nanda Devi Raj Jaat Yatra. It is evident that spatial and non-spatial factors play a significant role in the pathway contributing to its cultural and spiritual significance. Unlike other routes of cultural and historic importance, pilgrimage pathways require distinctive attention and respect, as they are sensitive to people's spiritual and religious practices. The geography and spatial associations of the cultural landscape surrounding pilgrimage pathways hugely contribute to varied rituals and traditions combined with ecological factors, which can manifest in tangible and intangible factors like shrines, prayers, folklore, etc. As pilgrims advance in their sacred journey, they leave traces or marks of their presence. These traces alter the cultural landscapes permanently and become cultural markers. These cultural markers become paths (MARG मार्ग) for future generations, facilitating the preservation of legacy by future generations.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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