

Hill Jaatra in the Light of Brechtian Theories and Practices

Deepshikha Dhiman¹

Research Assistant, Pt. L.M.S. University Campus, Rishikesh

Prof. Hemant Kumar Shukla²

Professor of English, Pt. L.M.S. University Campus, Rishikesh

Prof. Pramod Kumar Kukreti³

Professor & Head, Dept. of English, Pt. L.M.S. University Campus, Rishikesh

Article Received: 02/09/2026

Article Accepted:03/10/2026

Published Online:04/10/2026

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.10.15

Abstract:

Uttarakhand is a culturally diverse state, characterized by the distinct traditions, festivals, and rituals of the Kumaun, Garhwal, and Jaunsar regions. Some of these cultural practices and festivals share similarities with those of neighbouring states and countries. One such festival is *Hill Jaatra*, celebrated in the Pithoragarh region, which reflects the state's centuries-old cultural connections with Nepal. This paper examines the *Hill Jaatra* festival of the Kumaun region in relation to Bertolt Brecht's principles and techniques of theatre. The various episodes of the *Hill Jaatra* performance reveal several practices and techniques associated with Brechtian theatre, making the festival both engaging and distinctive.

Keywords: *Hill Jaatra*, Uttarakhand, Mask Theatre, Nepal, Culture, Brecht, Epic Theatre

Introduction:

Uttarakhand is the land of Gods and the land of various ethnic festivals, cultures, and appearances, which make it unique but also similar to the adjacent countries and states. One can see a folk dress of the Jaunsari tribe is similar to Himachal Pradesh's border districts Sirmaur and Shimla; not only Himachal, Uttarakhand's rituals are also somewhat similar to Buddhism; festivals are similar to Nepal, and so on. Sometimes, the culture also involves the festivals of the adjacent country, for instance, Nepal. Nepal is the closest neighbouring country to Uttarakhand, separated only by the Kali River. For centuries, the people of Pithoragarh and Champawat districts have engaged in trade with Nepal, a practice that continues even today.

Hill Jaatra of the Pithoragarh region is one such festival of Uttarakhand that reflects the strengthening relations of state with Nepal. "The Pithoragarh region is witness to...mask

tradition through its historical folktales that the ancestors of this region had close relations with the Soar valley of west Nepal, where the *Indra Jaatra* festival was celebrated, and they introduced that tradition in the form of *Hill Jaatra* in Kumor village of the Sor valley”. (Pooja and Kushwaha 235).

Indra Jaatra (Yenya Punhi), a religious mask festival of Nepal, is celebrated every year in the month of September during the rainy season. This festival is devoted to lord *Indra*, commonly known as the God of rain in Hinduism. The *Indra Jaatra* is filled with religious and godly characters, and one of them is *Majipa Lakhiye*, a demon worshipped during the festival who is believed to protect the forest and the people. A few centuries ago, the four Mehar brothers of Pithoragarh visited Nepal to see the festival of *Indra Jaatra*. In the festival, there was a buffalo that had to be sacrificed, but being a tall and ruthless animal, it was becoming impossible for the native people to kill it. With Mehar brothers’ intelligence and valour, the brothers killed the buffalo in one strike. The king, happy to see the bravery of the brothers, asked for the reward. The four brothers, impressed by the culture and festival of Nepal, asked for permission for the festival to be held in their homeland as well. Through which the king happily agreed and gave them some masks as a gift, including the major mask of *Lakhiya Bhoot*. Soon, it became a part of the mask culture of the vibrant Kumauni culture and folk traditions. In fact, in 2024, the festival *Hill Jaatra* was declared a state fair by the Chief Minister of Uttarakhand, Pushkar Singh Dhami.

“*Hill Jaatra* is made of two words- ‘Hill’ and ‘Jaatra’. In the local dialect, ‘Hill’ means ‘mud’, ‘wet’ and ‘Jaatra’ means ‘procession’. ‘*Hill Jaatra*’, some people think, is a distortion of ‘*Hal* (Plough) Jaatra’.... [It] is a unique processional theatre enacted at the time of rainy season when the earth is mud-spattered and soggy” (Shukla 145). It is a festival related to agriculture. As already mentioned, the fair occurs in the rainy season in the month of *Bhadrapad* “reflects the folk’s passionate urge to bring about immense prosperity in their agriculture centered economic activities” (Shukla 145).

This festival is also celebrated in other villages like Satgarh, Bajeti, Askot, Kanalichhena, Didihaat, and many more of the Pithoragarh district, but the most famous is that of Kumaur, due to the deity *Lakhiya Bhoot* or *Lakhiya Baba*, who is believed to carry supernatural energy.

Bertolt Brecht’s Epic Theatre

Bertolt Brecht, a German playwright, introduced Epic theatre in the genre of theatre in the 20th century. He became the most influential playwright and thinker in the field of theatre, who revolutionised 20th-century drama. His thoughts and approaches were totally opposite to the Aristotelian drama and the naturalistic theatre.

Aristotelian drama is a theory based on Aristotle’s approach to tragedy in his work, *The Poetics*. According to Aristotle, the best form of drama is tragedy,

whose primary purpose or aim is to evoke the emotions of pity and fear in the spectators, which eventually leads to catharsis- a cleansing and strengthening effect in the audience. He defines tragedy as “an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found on separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions” (“The Definition of Tragedy”). Naturalistic theatre, on the other hand, is a late 19th-century and early 20th-century movement in which the illusion of reality is portrayed on the stage without any artifice. This movement shows reality on stage with everyday dialogues, natural setting, everyday costumes, authentic acting, deals with difficult social issues, and also follows the social unities of Aristotle to create a more authentic, genuine and realistic approach in the play. “Epic theatre used techniques like the alienation effect, episodic structure, and multimedia elements to create distance between the audience and the performance” (Fiveable 6.2). Brecht wanted his spectators to look at the play intellectually and objectively rather than emotionally and subjectively. He showcases the societal issues and political awareness in his play, and demands that the audience think critically about these issues.

Principle of *Verfremdungseffekt* and Episodic Way of Presentation in Hill Jaatra

The major principle of Epic theatre is *Verfremdungseffekt*, which is one of Brecht’s most notorious notions, translated as alienation effect, also called V-effect or A-effect. It simply means to alienate the audience from the performance by breaking the emotional inclusivity in the play. The word *Verfremdungseffekt* literally means ‘making strange effects’ in an unusual way. “Brecht believed that the theatre should be a tool for social and political change, exposing the contradictions and injustices of society and inspiring of society the audience to take action” (Fiveable 6.3). Several techniques that create an alienation effect are: talking directly to the audience, which breaks the imaginary fourth wall; an Idiosyncratic style that uses non-realistic scenery or pictures or props that make the audience objective or alienate. For instance, placards, signboards, visual captions, and scene titles are used to break the flow of the plot, which helps create a critical review of the audience. “The construction of the play of the ‘epic theatre’, which rejects the logically knit, well-made play, is free from the need of creating suspense, loosely knit and episodic. Instead of mounting to a dynamic climax, the story unfolds in a number of separate situations, each rounded and complete in itself” (Shukla 20).

Hill Jaatra consists of several episodes and, as mentioned before, is a festival celebrating agriculture while highlighting the beauty and struggles of mountain life, which is reflected in the performances. Each performance has its own individuality, whether it features *Budhiya*, *Hiran Chittal*, or *Lakhiya Baba*.

In *Hill Jaatra*, while *Lakhiya Bhoot* is the main character, the other characters also play significant roles in adding entertainment to the processional stage. These characters include *Ghodiya* (post rider), who announces that the *Hill Jaatra* is about to start. He is presented in a very comic way. The *Ghodiya*’s tail is deliberately made of stinging

nettle to scare away the crowd. Then come *Machware* (fishermen), played by children, all come in a group with the fishing net. After them arrives *Pultariyan* (young girls) who reflect how young girls used to go to the deep forest to collect grass to feed the cattle and sing in their native language as they go. Then enter *Poriya Bald*, *Nepali Bald* (who comes straight from Nepal to this festival), and *Badi Haul*, along with their *Haliya* (Ploughman), *Budhiya* (an old woman) reflect how old women used to plant in the field. Slowly, one by one, other characters appear like *Lakdi*, *Jharuwala*, *Dahiwala*, the Bear, as well as *Hiran-Cheetal*, and lastly enter *Galiya Bald* and *Lakhiya Bhoot*. All these characters are interconnected, yet one can also observe a distancing or alienation effect in the performances.

Spectators typically view each act for entertainment, except for the *Lakhiya Baba* character, who is regarded as a deity. People have faith in him, revere him, worship him, and seek blessings from him. In other villages too, other characters have their own individuality, villagers have improvised their characters in a much better way and more entertaining. Hence, brings out the episodic effects that stand alone even in the plot, as the epic theatre principles suggest.

Principle of Acting and comedy over tragedy in Hill Jaatra

Another principle of Epic theatre is acting. The epic theatre is created for the people of a scientific age, and in the scientific age, the technique of art of acting has also changed. The aim of acting in epic theatre is that the artists' objects appear strange and even surprising to the audience. "He achieves this by looking strangely at himself and his work. As a result, everything put forward by him has a touch of amazing" (Shukla 33). Actors also deliver dialogue in third-person narrative even when the character is standing right there. When it comes to conveying the subject matter of the play, the spectator should not be sent off down the path of empathy- instead, a sort of communication takes place between the spectator and the actors, and ultimately, while maintaining a sense of distance and otherness, the actors address themselves directly to the spectator. In doing so, the actors should tell the spectator more about the characters they are playing that 'what it says in their part'. They must, of course, adopt the attitude necessary for this process to be easily accomplished (Silberman et al. 85).

In *Hill Jaatra*, the actors perform similarly; they do not fully immerse themselves in the character, and their own individuality can be seen in the performance. Like the characters *Jharuwala*, *Dahiwala*, *Ghodiya*, *Pultariyan*, and many more. All these characters are for entertainment purposes, and their playful nature and extempore gestures bring laughter to the crowd. "Brecht deliberately preferred comedies over tragedies. The tragedies are prone to create empathy among the audience. In these episodes, there is no place for empathy at all. The audiences aren't carried with the actors' performance. Most of the characters are performed in a humorous way" (Purohit and Shukla 291).

Hill Jaatra not only celebrates a good harvest but also reflects the life of villagers in the field. For instance, *Bald* and *Haliya* best demonstrate the life of farmers in the field and the

challenges they face in a comic manner. Brecht prefers comedy over tragedy, because catastrophe brings empathy among the audience. Most of the characters in the festival are performed in a humorous way. Villagers showcase three types of pairs of oxen: young, adult, and old. The young pair of oxen, also called in the local language *Poriya Bald*, is full of energy and playful, making it easy for them to tire out the ploughman while they remain lively. The second pair consist of adult oxen, who work efficiently and without complaint, leading to a happy and content ploughman. The last pair is of old oxen, who are tired and lethargic. They often sit idle and spend most of their time resting. As a result, they struggle to complete their work, making it difficult for the ploughman to plough the field on time. However, the festival showcases the struggles of life in the field in a very comic and entertaining manner. A young pair of oxen is often seen as kicking the spectators, reflecting their playful nature, and the old pair of oxen sit and sometimes lie on the field (where the performance is taken), reflecting their indolent demeanour.

Hiran-cheetal (spotted deer) is another important character in the festival. The character is portrayed by two or more actors. The actors line up in a queue; the first person stands upright while the others bend forward, holding onto the waist of the person in front of them. A long cloth, golden with black spots, is placed over them, with a tail attached, creating the appearance of a deer. The standing performer wears a deer mask. Together, they dance in harmony that resembles a graceful and divine deer.

Budhiya has a story too. It is believed that when the King offered the land to Mehar brothers, that, as far as their eyes went, the land belonged to them. But in the middle of the land, there was a house which belonged to *Budhiya*, and she requested the king to leave her house and her share of land as a gift to the Mehar brothers. Other characters in the *Hill Jaatra* are also related to agricultural life, whether it is *Machware*, *Pultariya*, or *Jharuwala*.

All the characters in the festival are for entertainment purposes, except the *Lakhiya Bhoot/Baba* and *Galiya Bald*. Earlier, there were no televisions, social media, mobile phones, digital games, and so on to spend time on. People were busy with farming, grazing, and other domestic chores. These festivals were like a break for them from their mundane life. It was like a holiday, where people performed to entertain as well as to depict the lives of people in a very comic way.

Principle of Music in *Hill Jaatra*

Music plays an important role in Brechtian theatre. “Brecht was no trained musician, but far more than most writers he had musical ideas at the back of his mind, and his work is full of musical implications... More than most playwrights, more even than the majority of poets, he has become known by the musical settings of his works” (Willet 125). In epic theatre, music communicates, and it interprets the libretto rather than intensifying it. In fact, opera is right there on the stage, lyrics are projected to read, highlighting the distancing effect, breaking the illusion through which spectators become engaged or open in argument.

Hill Jaatra festival has three types of musical instruments: *Dena* (Nagara), *Dammu* (Bayaan), and *Turhai* (Bhagwan Ram). When researchers watched the Hill Jaatra performance in situ at Kumor, Pithoragarh, these instruments were played by Bhagwan Ram and his team. The head of the music team was Bhagwan Ram, who took part all day like other characters who performed.

According to Mr. Bhagwan Ram, the festival features four types of music (*Taal*). As the epic theatre suggests that music should be communicative and interactive, in the same way, *Hill Jaatra* music is performed and it instructs. The four types of music or *taal*, along with the message they convey, are as follows:

1. *Chayanti* – Music performed to invoke a deity.
2. *Nagara Taal* – Music played to prepare and energise.
3. *Hill Jaatra Baaja* (also known as *Lakhiya Baba Baaja*) – Music specifically dedicated to Lakhiya Baba.
4. *Hawan Music* – Music used during rituals and worship. (Bhagwan Ram)

The music instruments go along with the characters in *Hill Jaatra*. They are not behind or hidden, but walk with the characters while the characters act, because “introduction of music meant a certain break with the dramatic conventions of the time: the drama was...lightened, made more elegant; the theatre’s offerings took on a virtuoso character” (Silberman et. al 148). The additional music in the festival creates a libretto in Uttarakhand theatre like Brecht’s Epic theatre.

Conclusion

Hill Jaatra is a festival of agriculture, a carnival of masks, a ceremony of faith and devotion, is full of entertainment and enjoyment. The Extempore acting and gestures, the celebration in folk dance and the devotion in folk music bring so much liveness to this fair, which brings many people together to witness this beautiful mask theatre of *Hill Jaatra* in Pithoragarh district, which has become the cultural identity of the Kumaun region. It's also a celebration of the valour of the great Maher brothers, it's also a symbol of Nepal and Uttarakhand relations, it's an emotion for several villages of the Sor valley, and it's a reverence for centuries-old deities.

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