WRITING SAMPLE 1 | SKAND RAWAT

This excerpt comes from my MA dissertation, The Living Epics of the Central Himalaya: A Critical Dissertation on the Mahabharat Theatre of Uttarakhand (Sparsh Himalaya University, 2026). The dissertation studies the village traditions of Garhwal that perform the Mahabharat, from the Pandav Lila, a community dance-drama that can run for weeks, to the Temple Mahabharat, an epic sung over sixty-two days. The sections below, from Chapters 5, 7, 11 and 12, look at how these traditions work as theatre and what they ask of theatre-makers like me. Cuts are marked [...], and I have edited some passages for clarity.

CHAPTER 5: PANDAV LILA, THE COMMUNITY DANCE-DRAMA

5.1 The Founding Myth: Why the Pandavas Are in Garhwal

The Pandav Lila is the community dance-drama within which the Gainda and Vyooh traditions are performed. It is based on a local myth about what happened to the Pandavas after the war. [...]

After the war, on their final journey towards heaven on the slopes of Swargarohini, the Pandavas died one by one. Before his own death, Arjuna gathered the weapons of all five brothers onto a single arrow and shot it into the Kedar valley. He promised that whenever the people called them, their spirits would return. This story is the religious basis of the Pandav Lila. The weapons are treated as the Pandavas' icons, and the performance is the act of calling them back.

5.2 Distribution and Scale

The Pandav Lila is performed in about two thousand villages across the Garhwal division of Uttarakhand. A performance can last from a few days to several weeks, and in some villages it continues for ninety days. The main season runs from November to February, when the harvest is over and the high-altitude fields are resting. Traditionally the season begins on Haribodini Ekadashi, the day when Lord Vishnu is believed to wake from his cosmic sleep. [...]

5.3 The Performance Structure

The Pandav Lila begins in the Pandav Chauk, the village square that is used as the performance space. The sacred weapons are brought out in a procession, and the two drums of the tradition, the dhol (a large double-headed drum) and the damau (a smaller kettledrum), start to play. The drums are more than accompaniment. Particular rhythms are used to call the Pandav spirits, and each hero has his own beat. The characters (Yudhishthira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, Sahadeva and Draupadi) can each be recognised by their colour, costume and way of moving.

The performance has three broad parts. In the first, the performers playing the Pandavas dance without weapons and establish their characters. In the second, the circle opens to the community. Villagers enter the dance as learners rather than spectators, and this is how future performers are trained. In the third part, the Pandav dancers come back with their weapons for the most intense episodes.

Evening performances are different from afternoon ones, and the intensity grows as night falls. This is when possession happens most often, when the Gainda episode is performed, and when the most sacred episodes of the Mahabharat (the ones about death, recognition and the presence of ancestors) are enacted.

5.4 The Paswa: Embodiment, Not Acting

The central religious figure of the Pandav Lila is the paswa (sometimes written pachwa), the person through whom a Pandav hero enters the human world. The paswa is not acting. The tradition does not ask the paswa to represent or imitate a Pandav hero. In the tradition’s own understanding, the paswa is genuinely possessed, and the hero is really there in the human body, acting through it.

Everyone present can see the signs of possession. A possessed paswa may roll naked on the ground (this is called ganna), hit themselves with thorny branches, lick sword blades, hold live snakes in their mouth, drink milk straight from a vessel on the floor, or roll through fire. For the community, these actions are neither theatrical technique nor self-harm. They are the signs people read to confirm that the possession is real. When

the community recognises them, it responds by offering milk, incense and protection to the possessed person. This meeting between the community and the deity, through the body of the paswa, is the spiritual centre of the whole tradition.

William S. Sax's *Dancing the Self* (Oxford, 2002) gives the most careful theoretical account of this side of the tradition that I have found. Sax suggests that the Pandav Lila is not a 'performance' in the modern theatrical sense, where skilled artists represent something for an audience that watches. It is closer to a 'ritual' in the anthropological sense, meaning an event that everyone present, performers and audience alike, carries out together as one shared sacred act.

5.5 Social Function: Holding the Community Together

The Pandav Lila also has a social function that academic accounts often miss. Taking part is not optional. Quarrels in the village, whether between neighbours, families or brothers, have to be set aside for as long as the ritual lasts. People who are not on speaking terms find themselves dancing in the same circle, sharing food and carrying out the same ritual duties. In this sense, the Pandav Lila is also a way of forcing the village to make peace. When Dr. D. R. Purohit, a senior scholar of these traditions, was asked how the performances bind communities together, his answer was simple: if you have a ninety-day ritual to hold together, you cannot afford your quarrels.

CHAPTER 7: VYOOH (MILITARY FORMATION) PERFORMANCES

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7.2 The Chakravyuh: A Formation with No Way Out

Of all the Vyooh performances, the Chakravyuh is the most elaborately staged and the most widely performed. In the epic, the Chakravyuh is a battle formation in the shape of a spiral that turns like a wheel. It was designed by the great military teacher Dronacharya. Its main feature is that there is a way in but no way out. A soldier who enters without knowing how to leave is trapped.

Arjuna was the only warrior who knew how to enter the Chakravyuh and how to leave it. He had told his son Abhimanyu how to enter it while Abhimanyu was still in his mother’s womb, but the story goes that Subhadra fell asleep before Arjuna reached the part about the exit. So Abhimanyu knew how to get in, but not how to get out. At the seventh ring he was surrounded on all sides by Kaurava commanders, among them Dronacharya, Karna, Kripacharya and Ashvatthama. His chariot was destroyed and his weapons were taken, and in the end he fought with only a chariot wheel. He was not killed in a fair fight but by several warriors attacking him at the same time, which broke the laws of war. It is one of the most morally disturbing episodes in the Mahabharat.

7.3 The Chakravyuh as Staged Performance

In Chamoli district, the Chakravyuh is staged on a very large scale. Seven rings of coloured cloth (red, yellow, orange, green, white and other colours) are set up in a large open field as a tight spiral that winds inwards. Seen from above, the structure looks like a spinning wheel or a snail shell. The performers show Abhimanyu entering through the outer rings, fighting the guardians of each ring, and finally dying at the centre, trapped and attacked by many opponents at once.

The audience, which can be fifteen thousand people or more at the largest sites, surrounds the whole structure. As Abhimanyu moves deeper into the spiral, the crowd becomes more and more emotionally involved. The shape of the space shows his fate. The further in he goes, the further he is from safety, and there is no way back. Here the staging itself carries the meaning of the story.

[...]

CHAPTER 11: CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE AND THE URBAN-RURAL DIVIDE

11.1 Modern Adaptations and Innovations

In recent years there have been several attempts to bring the Mahabharat theatre of Uttarakhand into dialogue with contemporary performance. The 2011 Jaya Utsav of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts in Delhi brought village troupes such as the Sarnaul ensemble to a national audience, and it was an important

moment in this dialogue. Documentary films, academic recordings and other audio-visual projects have also made these traditions visible beyond the communities they come from.

Some practitioners have tried to create hybrid forms that put elements of the Pandav Lila into a more conventional theatrical frame, with proscenium staging, directed blocking and scripted dialogue alongside the traditional possession and music. The results are mixed. The village tradition is strong because it belongs to a particular community and landscape, and it grows out of beliefs that everyone there shares. These things do not move easily into a theatre building in Dehradun or Delhi. The Chakravyuh can be staged on a proscenium [...], but something is lost when an audience of fifteen thousand becomes an audience of three hundred.

11.2 Who Practises the Tradition?

A useful question for theatre in Uttarakhand today is who actually practises the Mahabharat theatre tradition, and where. The answer shows a clear gap. The people who keep the tradition going are mostly rural: farmers, shepherds, retired government workers, village heads, and hereditary drummers and singers. The professional theatre world in the cities hardly sees them. On the other side, most people in urban theatre, whether they trained at the National School of Drama, at Sparsh Himalaya University or in the workshop traditions of Delhi and Mumbai, think of these village traditions as ‘folk performance’ rather than ‘real theatre’. In my view, this division is artificial, and it damages the culture of the region.

The Mahabharat theatre of Uttarakhand does not need to be rescued by urban practitioners. In the villages where it is most alive, it does not need direction, script development or lighting design. What it needs is recognition, respect, and serious attention from scholars and critics, the kind of attention usually given to theatre forms that have international reputations and academic supporters. It takes place in mountain clearings instead of on proscenium stages, and its performers are farmers, not conservatory graduates. Neither fact makes it less theatre, or less sophisticated.

11.3 What Contemporary Theatre Can Learn

The question can also be turned around. Instead of asking what urban theatre can do for the village tradition, we can ask what the village tradition can teach theatre-makers today. I see four lessons. First, the Pandav Lila shows that a performance can be communal in its structure, not only in its themes. Second, it shows that length does not have to tire an audience. Up to ninety days of performance can deepen people's connection to the material instead of wearing them out. Third, the Temple Mahabharat shows that an oral tradition can carry much more complexity than the usual prejudice against 'non-literate' cultures allows. Finally, the Chakravyuh shows that spectacle can be serious in its religious and moral meaning, and that large scale and moral weight can go together.

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CHAPTER 12: COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

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12.4 Peter Brook's *Mahabharata* and the Question of Adaptation

Peter Brook's nine-hour production of *The Mahabharata* (1985) is the best-known adaptation of the epic in modern theatre, and in many ways it is the opposite of the Pandav Lila. Brook's production was fully professional. It was directed, designed and scripted, and it was performed by trained actors for a paying international audience. Its approach to the epic was interpretive. It used the Mahabharat as material for a contemporary theatrical exploration of fate, dharma and civilisational conflict.

The comparison is useful. Brook made theatre about the Mahabharat, while the Pandav Lila is theatre as the Mahabharat, an enactment that is still going on rather than an interpretation of it. I do not think one is better than the other. But seeing the difference helps us understand what is unique about the Uttarakhand tradition. For the people who perform it, the Mahabharat is not finished or in the past, and it is not material for adaptation. It is still happening, in their valley and in their own bodies.

References: Purohit, D. R. ‘Mahabharat Traditions in Uttarakhand.’ Lecture, 2021; Sax, William S. *Dancing the Self: Personhood and Performance in the Pandav Lila of Garhwal*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.