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Kumaon and Garhwal: Unveiling the stories behind historical naming

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ABSTRACT

The historical designation of locations frequently illustrates a multifaceted interaction among cultural, geographical, linguistic, and socio-political factors. Place names, or toponyms, act as indicators of human engagement with the surrounding environment, encapsulating stories of settlement, conquest, commerce, and cultural legacy. These names may originate from natural landmarks, such as rivers or mountains, or may honor historical figures, significant events, or indigenous languages. Over time, many place names undergo transformations, shaped by linguistic evolution, colonization, or political rebranding. For instance, during colonization, indigenous names might be supplanted or modified to align with the language or ideology of the colonizers, whereas contemporary nations may seek to reclaim ancestral names to reinforce cultural identity and heritage. Additionally, religious beliefs, folklore, and mythology significantly contribute to the origins of place names.

Examining place names offers critical insights into the historical context, migration trends, and cultural shifts within societies. By analyzing the origins and transformations of these names, historians and linguists reveal layers of significance that highlight the evolving relationship between communities and their environments throughout history.

KEY WORDS: historical naming, Kumauon, Garhwal, Uttarakhand.

Introduction:

Unraveling the origins of names of some of the oldest known places is an exciting task that often reveals an intricate peddle of their historical, linguistic and cultural associations. Such titles were not given without proper thought; they usually captured a specific characteristic of the area such as:

1. **Significant Natural Features:** A lot of Ancient names were derived from important landforms such as rivers, mountains, forests and even plains. For example, the

Greek term "Neilos" translates to Nile, which was very useful to ancient Egyptians.

2. **Cultural And Religious Significance:** A lot of the ancient names reflected the culture or religion of the people residing there. A named region can be after a god, a mythical figure or even a revered animal. A case in point is, Athens is the name of the city while its patron goddess, the Greek goddess of wisdom is Athena.
3. **Ethnic or Tribal Associations:** Often, areas were designated after the tribes or ethnicities that settled within those localities. For example, in ancient Europe the area

called "Gaul" was named after the Gauls, a group of Celtic tribes.

4. **Linguistic Transformation Expansion:** With the passage of time, the meaning of some names transformed with the advent of calling and invasion or exchange of trade, as languages developed. Even though the actual significance of some names might be concealed, prospective research into the linguistics ought to be able to trace the origins of the names.
5. **Economic and Historical Context:** Some place names are associated with economic activities or important events in the region. For example, cities such as Babylon (from Babilu, meaning "gate of the gods") emphasize their historical significance and religion.

"Stories Behind the Names: Kumaon and Garhwal's Legacy"

Shiv Prasad Dabral outlines the intricate challenge of documenting Uttarakhand's history, highlighting the inherent complexities that arise when delving into the past of this culturally rich region. For many individuals, particularly those who hold a deep reverence for their ancestry, there exists an inherent desire to see their forebears' triumphs immortalized in the annals of history. This sentiment is often juxtaposed with a tendency to gloss over any imperfections or shortcomings, irrespective of their historical significance. Within the modern landscape of Uttarakhand, a geographical mosaic teeming with diverse linguistic and ethnic nuances, the region has served as a cradle of myriad cultures from time immemorial. Over the course of different historical epochs, Uttarakhand's territorial boundaries have ebbed and flowed in tandem with the rise and fall of various dynasties, each imprinting its unique mark on the region's narrative tapestry. Through the vicissitudes of time, Uttarakhand has worn different appellations and garnered diverse epithets, underscoring its dynamic evolution across the ages. Nestled between the latitudinal coordinates of 28.043° to 31.027° north and longitudinal coordinates of 77.034° to 81.002° east, Uttarakhand occupies a distinctive niche in the panoramic expanse of the northwestern Himalayan terrain. Encompassing a total area spanning 53,483 square kilometers, accounting for a modest 1.63 percent of the nation's geographical expanse, the state is characterized by a landscape that oscillates between rugged mountainous terrain spanning 47,325 square kilometers and fertile plains covering 61.58 square kilometers. Stretching 358 kilometers from east to west and 320 kilometers from north to south, Uttarakhand ranks as the 11th largest state among its Himalayan counterparts, with its topographic diversity encapsulated within its two divisions of Kumaon and Garhwal. Presently, the state is demarcated into 13 administrative districts, with 7 nestled within the Garhwal division and the remaining 6 embraced by the Kumaon division. Illuminating the demographic fabric of the state, the 2011 census reveals a populace of 10,086,292 individuals, comprising 5,439,773 men and 4,948,519 women, each adding a unique hue to the vibrant canvas of Uttarakhand's social panorama.

"In terms of climate, if India can be referred to as a miniature version of the world, Kumaon can similarly be regarded as a miniature version of India, as it encompasses every type of weather from polar regions to equatorial zones. Here, you can find the majestic, snow-capped eternal glaciers of the Great Himalayas alongside the oppressive humidity of the low-lying Gadarapur area, grasslands reminiscent of savannas, mountain ranges with limestone caves like the Pyrenees, and regions with picturesque ponds like Westmorland. Nevertheless, most of Kumaon is mountainous. Geographically, this area can be divided into five parts: the Great Himalayan zone, the Middle Himalayan zone, the Shivalik range, the Bhabar region, and the Terai plains." "Most historians who write

about Uttarakhand derive the name from the Skanda Purana, connecting it with the Kedarkhand. However, the primary source of Uttarakhand is the Padma Purana. Among the eighteen Mahapuranas, the Padma Purana is second in antiquity following the Brahma Purana, and it is naturally older than all eighteen Upapuranas. Subsequently, the names Uttarakhand and Kedarkhand have been corroborated by the Skanda Purana."³

"In relation to the antiquity of the Himalayas, Lord Shiva states in the Kedarkhand: 'As I am ancient, so is this Kedarkhand the most ancient. Now I, assuming the form of Brahma, began the process of creation, and in this very place, I first created.' According to current geologists, the first ancestor of humanity arose in this part of the Himalayas."⁴

Numerous references related to Uttarakhand can be found in the Mahabharata and Puranas. According to Dabral, "The sections related to these can be considered as compositions ranging from the 6th century BCE to the 3rd century BCE. In this, the portrayal of Uttarakhand mostly appears in the tales of ascetic sages near the banks of the Ganges and Yamuna and in accounts of the descent of the Yamuna and Ganges, the Sati funeral, the burning of Kamadeva, the marriage of Parvati, the birth of Ganesh and Kartikeya, divine glories, etc. Alongside these, some rivers and pilgrimages are also mentioned, providing geographical insights that are corroborated by other sources. Additionally, references to certain individuals, kings, dynasties, and ashrams are also included."⁵

"The early history of Kumaon is quite mysterious. The evolution of the name Kumaon is very intriguing, and the origin of its early royal dynasty being present-day Joshimath is equally fascinating. According to legends, the origin of the name Kumaon is linked to the mythological Kurma Parvat, and if this legend is true, the quest for Kumaon's history is not just difficult but impossible, as this history takes us back to a primordial time when neither mythological nor scientific accounts existed."⁶

"One theory regarding the origin of the term Kumaon is provided by Jodh Singh Negi. In his book 'Himalayan Travels,' he offers two explanations for the origin of this word. The first suggests that the area was named Kumaon after its king, Kaloo Tadagi. The second asserts that the term Kumaon is derived from 'Kamau' meaning those who cultivate or earn wealth. It is possible that the name arose due to their influence."⁷

"The name Kumaon is very ancient. Until the 16th century CE, it referred to the region around Champawat. During the Gorkha rule (1790-1815), the eastern boundary of the Kumaon state extended from the source of the Sharda (Kali) River to Khatima. To the west, the boundaries included Nanda Devi, the western Trishul, the eastern Pindar River, Gwaldam, and the Panuakhali Mehalchari. This situation remained unchanged until the arrival of the British."⁸

A group of scholars believes that the name "Kumaon" originated during the medieval period, specifically during the reign of the Mughal Emperor Akbar. They suggest that the name Kumaon is a derivative of its earlier name, "Kamos," "Kamau," or "Kamush," which Akbar incorporated into his empire. Writers of Arabic and Persian, especially historians like Farishta, referred to it as "Kamayun," which has evolved over time into "Kumaon." A historical belief holds that the area surrounding the Kali River valley was known as "Kalikama," which was referred to as "Kamayun" in Persian language and by Farishta.⁹

This name gradually became popular among the people as "Kumaon." The British adapted this name to "Kumaon," similarly to

how "Tehri" became "Tiri" in local usage. Today, it is commonly referred to as "Kumaon."¹⁰ There is a legend regarding the origin of the word "Kumaon" which states that on the Kanadev hill in the Champawat tehsil of Pithoragarh district, Lord Vishnu took the form of a tortoise (Kurma) and performed penance for three thousand years. The deities Hahaha and Huhoo, along with sages like Narada, praised him. Due to standing in one place for such an extended period, the footprints of Lord Kurma were imprinted in the stone, which still exist today. Since then, this mountain has been called "Kurmanchal"—meaning "the place where Kurma remained steadfast."¹¹

According to ancient Sanskrit literature, the term "Kumaon" is derived from "Kurmanchal." It is one of the five major regions of the central and western Himalayas. It is also believed that "Kumaon" is a distorted local term referring to the Himalayan region located between the Ramganga River in the west and the Kali River in the east, bordered by Tibet to the north, Nepal to the east, Garhwal to the west, and the Terai region to the south.¹²

The name "Kurmanchal" became popular after the twelfth century. Based on this, it can be said that the word "Kumaon" eventually originated from "Kurmanchal." It is also likely that the word "Kurma" was commonly used between the names "Kurmanchal" and "Kumaon," as linguistically, it seems more logical for "Kumaon" to develop from "Kurma" than from "Kurmanchal."¹³

The term "Garhwal" is a compound word meaning "the place of forts." This designation refers to the numerous hill forts found atop mountain peaks. In ancient times, these forts were held by small Thakuri kings, chieftains, and landlords, with each ruler's territory bearing its own distinct name, now known as parganas and pattis. When Maharaja Ajaypal of the Pawar dynasty conquered all the Thakuri kings and chieftains of Garhwal and united their kingdoms, the region was named Garhwal due to its many forts.¹⁴

According to Shivprasad Dabral, the Baghad community inhabited the Himachal Pradesh region in ancient times, and their land is still known by the names Baghad and Baghal. When this community migrated eastward to the source regions of the Yamuna and Ganges, the area began to be referred to as Baghadwal and eventually Garhwal.¹⁵

Some scholars suggest that the region was named Garhwal due to its rugged terrain, first referred to as Ghadwal, then Gharwal, and subsequently Garhwal. Garhwal, the sacred abode of the Ganges and Yamuna, and the divine face of the Himalayan mountains, is a unique geographical location in India. Surrounded to the north by Tibet, to the northwest by Himachal Pradesh, and to the east and south by Kumaon and Dehradun district, this mountainous region is a distinct and vibrant world. Its name, possibly derived from the prevalence of feudal fortresses during the medieval period, may have originated from the Gorkhas.¹⁶

Regarding the name "Kedarkhand" or "Himvant Pradesh," the writer Dr. Haridatt Bhatt 'Shailesh' believes that this region has countless small and large streams, referred to as "Gad" and "Gad." These terms are derived from Vedic Sanskrit. No other mountainous region, including Kashmir, Kumaon, Himachal Pradesh, or Nepal, has such an abundance of streams. Therefore, "Gadwal," meaning the region of small rivers, came to be known as Garhwal over time. Furthermore, the two major rivers of Garhwal were initially called "Dhaijyuli Gad" (Western Nayar) and "Siyunsi" or "Kainur Gad" (Eastern Nayar).¹⁷

Based on the word "Garhwal" used in the Pati Ram Sankalp Puja, it

is believed that the term originated from "Garhpal." It is said that the name Garhwal for this mountainous region emerged during the twelfth century.¹⁸ Due to the rugged terrain and inaccessibility of the mountains, many regional rulers coexisted in Uttarakhand at the same time, as evidenced by the 52 Ganpaties present in Garhwal until the 16th century.¹⁹

The Puranas describe the creation of Siddha, Gandharva, Yaksha, and Kinnar communities in this sacred northern Himalaya, with Kubera identified as their king, under whose patronage sages performed penance in this holy land. The Puranas also indicate that when Lord Ramchandra left for the forest at the behest of his father and King Dasharath passed away, his guru Vashistha, along with his wife Arundhati, resided in a cave on the Himadav mountain until Ramchandra returned to Ayodhya. They lived for a long time among the Kirata people, adopting their ways while dressed in blankets.²⁰

Conclusion:

The past and word origin of Uttarakhand, especially in the areas of Uttarakhand, Kumaon, Garhwal, and Kedarkhand, are deeply connected with ancient texts and myths. The names Uttarakhand and Kedarkhand originate from the Skanda Purana, while the Padma Purana is the main source for understanding Uttarakhand's name and its historical context. These scriptures highlight the age of these regions, mentioning the emergence of humanity and the presence of ascetic sages alongside the sacred Ganges and Yamuna rivers. Present-day geologists assert that the first ancestors of humankind emerged in this part of the Himalayas, adding a scientific layer to the historical and mythical importance of the area. The development of the name Kumaon from ancient to medieval times is a topic of scholarly debate, with hypotheses ranging from its connection to King Kaloo Tadagi to its association with the mythic Kurma Parvat. In a similar vein, the name Garhwal is thought to have come from the many feudal fortresses and rugged landscapes, while Kedarkhand is linked to the abundance of streams, both small and large, in the area. The intricate nature of Uttarakhand's historical narrative is apparent through the diverse interpretations and rich cultural heritage embedded within the region. Shiv Prasad Dabral highlights the difficulty of balancing the wish to celebrate ancestral accomplishments with the acknowledgment of historical flaws. Located in the western-central Himalayas, Uttarakhand's elaborate tapestry includes various geographical zones, lively cultures, and notable changes throughout its dynastic past. The term 'Kumaon' has multiple origin points, connecting it to both mythological and historical narratives, while 'Garhwal' reflects its many fortresses and feudal traditions. The differing climates within Kumaon exemplify the region's distinct quality as a miniature representation of India itself. References within ancient writings, such as the Mahabharata and the Puranas, provide insights into the early history and myths of Uttarakhand, while archaeological and geological evidence supports these stories. The coexistence of various regional rulers, particularly in Garhwal, reveals a dynamic sociopolitical environment influenced by the rugged landscape and cultural factors. Together, these elements underscore the complex relationship between mythology, geography, and history, making the examination of Uttarakhand both fascinating and complicated for historians and scholars. Ultimately, the historical narratives and the evolution of language in these areas reflect Uttarakhand's rich cultural and mythical legacy, providing meaningful perspectives on its ancient history and geographical importance, which continue to shape its identity and essence today.

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