



## CAR FESTIVALS (RELIGIOUS YATRAS) IN INDIA: A DIMENSION OF LEISURE TOURISM (A CASE OF 'NANDA DEVI RAJ- JAT YATRA' IN UTTARAKHAND, INDIA)

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### Abstract

This paper is about the car festivals (Religious Yatras) organized in different parts of India and their impact on the quality of life of its participants. This paper has analyzed that how these car festivals provide leisure to its participants which further improve quality of their life through relaxation and happiness. Jagannath Puri Rath Yatra (Orissa, India), Mysore Rath Mahotsav Yatra (Karnataka, India), and Nanda Devi Raj-Jat Yatra (Uttarakhand, India) etc. are some of the famous religious car festivals in India. Thousands of people participate in these religious car festivals to get relaxed from day to day stress. Nanda Devi Raj- Jat Yatra is one of the most celebrated car festivals of Uttarakhand in India, taking place once in every 12 years during August- September for 20 days. During Yatra, trek of 280 km remains crowded to experience nature, culture and glimpse of the Uttarakhand Himalayas. Last car festival was celebrated in the year 2014. According to news paper's reports more than 1,00,000 people took part in this car festival.

Well established indicators of quality of life are used to explain the results in this study. Simple participatory tools are used to analyze the information and data gathered from different primary and secondary sources. Case studies are also prepared to explain the experiences of the participants of festival.

Findings of the study reveal that leisure tourism enhances quality of life by increasing feelings of competency and relaxation, distracting from difficulties, as well as enhancing social inclusiveness and support. Leisure tourism also results in improved mental wellbeing through associated meaningful engagement, self-expression and creativity. According to respondents- "Participation in it is considered as a life time experience. This experience not only provides leisure during the event but also provide happiness in memories".

**Keywords:** Car Festival, Leisure, Quality of Life, Mental Wellbeing and Uttarakhand Himalaya.

### INTRODUCTION

Like many other festivals, car festivals are also important celebration in India. Car festivals are the celebrations in which people worship their beloved Gods and Goddesses and carry their emblems from one place to another in the chariots or Palanquin. In India car festivals are commonly known as 'Yatra'.

Many car festivals are celebrated in India some of them are *Jagannath Puri Rath Yatra* (Orissa, India), *Mysore Rath Mahotsav Yatra*, (Karnataka, India), and *Nanda Devi Raj-Jat Yatra* (Uttarakhand, India) etc. Car festival like *Jagannath Puri Rath Yatra* is celebrated every year but *Nanda Devi Raj-Jat Yatra* is celebrated after every 12 years in the month of August and September. *Nanda Devi Raj Jat's* history dates back to 9th Century AD when it was called *Nanda Jat* and celebrated each year at different places by the local people. In local language Jat means religious journey. Later on 15th Century AD, King Ajay Pal (Shesh Pal) of Chandragarhi combined all the *Jat* into one royal pilgrimage and started celebrating the *Yatra* once in 12 years. Shesh Pal added the word *Raj* (royal) in *Nanda Jat* and announced the participation of royal family and royal priest in the *Yatra*. Since then the *Yatra* is organized by the successors of royal family. Though the *Yatra* is to be held once each 12 years, the records show it is not regular. As per the record, *Nanda Devi Raj Jat* had been held in 1820, 1843, 1863, 1886, 1905, 1925, 1951, 1968, 1987 and 2000 (Pokhariyal, 2008). In the year 2000 during *Nanda Devi Raj-Jat Yatra*, around 1,00,000 people participated in the Yatra (PAHAR, 2000). After 12 years interval, earlier it was scheduled to be held in 2012 but due to natural calamity as flood disaster in Uttarakhand it was postponed, and organized in the year 2014 from 18 August to 6 September ([www.uttarakhandtourism.gov.in](http://www.uttarakhandtourism.gov.in)). Months of August and September are not only climatically suitable for trekking in Himalayan region but also leisure time for the people living in mountains of Uttarakhand. During Yatra the Goddess Nanda Devi is worshipped. Nanda Devi is considered as the main deity in Himalayan region of Uttarakhand. The legend behind this festival is that by this *Yatra*, Nanda Devi, Lord Shiva's wife went away from the easy life of her parents' home to the tough geographical situations in her husband home at *Kailash* (Himalaya). During *Yatra* people bid Goddess Nanda as a daughter from the core of their heart and provide free boarding and lodging facilities to the participants who join the *Yatra* from other places (PAHAR, 2000). When the *Yatra* starts, heavy rain is expected as it is believed that the tears of Goddess Nanda rolls down in the form of rainfall. *Nanda Devi Raj-Jat Yatra* is known as the *Mahakumbha*<sup>1</sup> of Himalaya (Pokhariyal, 2008).

<sup>1</sup> MahaKumbh is considered the world's biggest holy gathering of humanity occurs every 12 years in the different parts of India.

This Yatra comprises a long route of 280 Km. that takes 20 days for completion. People travel all the way by trekking. This Yatra is a difficult one because of the difficult terrain it goes through.

It passes through the Garhwal Himalaya region of Uttarakhand. *Yatra* started from Nauti village of Chamoli District in Uttarakhand (1575 meters above from sea level) and reaches to Homkund at 5200 meters height from sea level via village Wan (2450 mt.), Bedini meadow (3000 mt.) and Shila Samundra (3645 mt.). As *Nanda Devi Raj-Jat Yatra* is the destination of religious tourism for domestic and international tourists; state government of Uttarakhand organizes the whole event with great care. To organize *Raj-Jat Yatra* successfully, *Nanda Devi Raj-Jat Yatra* Committee is setup by the state government of Uttarakhand. *Nanda Devi Raj-Jat Yatra* Committee with the help of Uttarakhand Tourism Development Board organizes the event ([www.uttarakhandtourism.gov.in](http://www.uttarakhandtourism.gov.in)).

The declaration of *Nanda Devi Raj-Jat Yatra* begins from the birth of *Chausingha Khadu* (four horned Ram). After his birth, the *Kunwars* (scion of King) of Kansua village in Uttarakhand used to bring *Ringal ki Chantoli*<sup>2</sup>, to cover the seat of Goddess Nanda. A Golden statue of Nanda Devi is positioned under this *Chantoli* in the palanquin and it is worshipped along with four horned ram. Right from the moment when the Yatra begins, thousands of pilgrims walk with the four horned ram and palanquin of Goddess Nanda in the direction of Homkund (Pokhariyal, 2008). On the way, more and more devotees join with the *Ringal Chantoli*. More than 110 *Chantoli* and emblems of different Gods are included in the *Raj-Jat Yatra*. The Yatra finally reaches at Homkund in Chamoli district of Uttarakhand, a scenic region between Nanda Ghunti and Trishul Peaks of Himalaya. Here, the four horned ram is set free to proceed towards *Kailash* (Himalaya) as it is said that the four horned ram accompanies Nanda Devi till the mountain of *Kailash*. All the remaining rites and rituals are completed in Homkund and all the participants return to Nauti village after completing the rituals (Pokhariyal, 2008).

As it was mentioned earlier that *Nanda Devi Raj-Jat Yatra* held once in after every twelve years. Participants wait eagerly to take part in the Yatra either to address their need of emotions or for spiritual peace (Pokhariyal, 2008). Thus this work aims to make a twofold contribution to sociological knowledge on leisure. First this research explores that whether car festivals should be seen as a dimension of leisure. Second it will examine how the participants of car festivals get mental wellbeing and happiness from this event.

## CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

Now a days', people work longer hours, perceive themselves as having less free time, and with the accumulation of other aspects of life, people are perceiving themselves as being more stressed (Robinson & Godbey, 1997). With the impact of stress being so pervasive in peoples' lifestyles, it is essential that they understand how to manage the stressors in their lives. Stress is a state of anxiety that is produced when events and responsibilities exceed one's coping abilities (Seaward, 1999). Stress is a mind-body arousal (Girdano, Everly, & Dusek, 2005); it is a reaction of the body and mind to change (Gregson, 2000a). The word stress is used to describe external events and internal responses to it (Donatelle, Snow, & Wilcox, 1999). Stress is caused by stressors, which vary according to individuals' life circumstances. Girdano et al. stated that "stressors can be physical, emotional, intellectual, social, economic, or spiritual" (p. 1). Stress can be caused by numerous factors that include family, work, personal relationships, and money, to name a few. These factors are everyday things that affect most people. Professionals in the field of leisure behavior argue that leisure is important because it is used as a tool for people to restore health and minimize stress (Edington, Hudson, & Ford, 1999).

Leisure is a broad concept. It has been defined generally according to what people do (i.e. leisure behavior) and what people feel and think (i.e. leisure experience; Kelly, 1999; Mannell & Kleiber, 1997). When leisure is defined as behavior focus is the type of activity in which they participate (e.g. sport, social, cultural) and /or the quantity of participation (e.g. frequency of participation, time duration). The definition of leisure as behavior is also based on the setting or environment in which leisure activities take place (e.g. fitness, wilderness). On the other hand when leisure is defined as experience; researchers have focused on: (a) mental experience; and (b) Psychological function; mechanisms or meaning.

Leisure can be defined, negatively, as the spare time remaining after the time taken up by primary activities (e.g. sleep, food, bathing) and secondary activities (e.g. preparation to go out), transportation and employment (Deffner, 2002: 5). However, there can be a more positive approach: the definition of leisure through specific types of activities, the target of which is pleasure, regaining power, recreation, sociability, escape from everyday life and physical or mental recreation (Glyptis, 1993: 3-4). In current academic debates, leisure is increasingly defined as a discursive construction originating both from the specific meanings created by individuals, and the institutionalizing processes that legitimate certain experiences and their

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<sup>2</sup> *Ringal Ki Chantoli* is a specially prepared umbrella of *Ringal* (a local species of bamboo) for *Nanda Raj- Jat Yatra*

spatial-temporal conditions as "leisure" (Modi & Modi, 2013). These concepts will assist in analyzing this study and drawing results of this research work. Through this case study it is analyzed that how people perceive car festivals as a leisure activity along with religious and spiritual tourism and whether participants of these car festivals get relaxed and feel happiness during and after the event.

## DATA AND METHODS

### Data

The data used in this research are collected from the people who took part in *Nanda Devi Raj Jat Yatra* ever. People wait for twelve years to take part in this *Yatra*. To get deep insight of the issues a rigorous field work and analysis is required. To conduct deep and rigorous field work it was decided to take a sample size of 50 respondents for the study. *Yatra* route is 280 kilometer long. All the villages situated on this route celebrate it as a festival. Randomly 25 respondents are selected from these villages in the following manner:

Table -1

S. No.	Name of Village	Number of Respondents
1	Nauti	5
2	Kansuwa	5
3	Nand Kesari	5
4	Faldiya	5
5	Wan	5
<b>Total Respondents</b>		<b>25</b>

In that way out of fifty respondents 25 respondents are selected from the villages located in *yatra* route. Other 25 respondents who joined *Yatra* from other places are selected by snowball sampling method.

### Methods

It is basically a case study. Objective is to understand impact of car festivals as a leisure activity on its participant's life. Most of the information collected during field study is qualitative. While applying the research design, some essentials which are supposed to be followed with qualitative data for the success of the study were considered. For the collection of the reliable first hand information unstructured interviews were conducted. Author himself took part in *Nanda Raj Jat Yatra* in the year 2014. The review of the pertinent literature was carried out. The relevant books, research journals, public document etc. were the main source of the secondary information. Lastly the information, thus collected were classified and analyzed as to reach to some conclusion.

## ANALYSIS, FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

*Nanda Raj- Jat Yatra* is a cultural event. It is unique in the world in the sense that it organizes at 1575 meters to 5200 meters above from the sea level (PAHAR, 2000). People, participated in this event, seemed very happy while sharing their experiences in personal interviews. All the respondents told that it was a memorable experience for them. They always feel excited in telling the stories of *Yatra* to others, it gives them great pleasure and internal happiness. Gathered data is analyzed in two sections to understand the results.

### Responses by the villagers

*Nanda Devi Raj Jat Yatra* is considered as one of the most vivacious and bright festivals in the area. All the respondents come under this section told that they have deep religious feelings about *Nanda Raj-Jat Yatra*. They further told, "We love Goddess Nanda as our daughter. There is no reason to stay away from this *Yatra*. We wait for it for 12 years. Participation in it fulfills our need of emotion. We feel happy and relaxed during the event. And after *Yatra* memory of this event is the gift to us from Goddess Nanda.

There is another aspect also. The geo-physical constraints faced by people living in mountainous regions across the world, especially those living in the Hind Kush Himalaya, have traditionally been push factors in migration. The hill state of Uttarakhand in the north-western part of India is no exception, with Chamoli, Tehri, Pauri, and Almora districts experiencing outmigration since the 1870s (Singh 1990). 72 percent respondents told that members of their family live far away from the families mainly to earn their livelihood. They come to their home during the *Yatra* and take part in it. Relatives are specially invited on this occasion. It is the time of get-to-gather for the family. It is a leisure time for them. In that way also they feel happy and social inclusiveness. Relaxed mind and sense of security is the outcome of this environment. It further restores mental wellbeing.

Mr. Narendra Singh Chakar is the resident of Adibadri (Chamoli district in Uttarakhand). He is 55 years old. He participated two times in *Nanda Devi Raj- Jat Yatra*. He said that it is not only leisure but also *Jat* means religious journey and faith on the Goddess Nanda. He expressed during personal interview:

'I enjoyed the *Yatra*. Participation in this event gives me great spiritual peace and happiness. There are many factors which motivate me to join again and again *Nanda Devi Raj-Jat Yatra*. It was divine experience for me. The journey not only provides me sense of security from unknown fear and unpredicted incidents which may come in the future on the way of my life but also remind me my social and religious responsibilities. During *Yatra* I do not do any other job. I enjoy it and perceive it as a social and religious duty'.

Above statement reveals that for Mr. Chakar *Nanda Devi Raj-Jat Yatra* holds extreme significance.

Above statements provide enough support to draw the result that *Nanda Raj Jat Yatra* must be seen as a dimension of leisure but definitely along with spiritual and religious event.

#### **Responses by others**

Under this section respondents from other than the villages situated in *Yatra* route were interviewed. All the respondents felt that The *Nanda Devi Raj Jat Yatra* was an unmatched experience for them, 52 percent respondents told that firstly it is a religious and emotional event but definitely they also perceive it as leisure tourism. Other 48 percent respondents see it completely as leisure tourism. They said that they have an interest to know about religious traditions and the local culture of Uttarakhand.

All the respondents told that participation in the *Yatra* gives happiness. They further told, "We feel relaxation from day to day stress during the participation in the *Yatra*".

It is come out from the interviews that people from the different parts of the world meet during the *Yatra* and new relations are built. It can be said that this event not only provides leisure but also provides platform to develop relations; in future these relations offer mental wellbeing in many ways. One of the participants of *Yatra* from outside India said that it was an amazing experience and one can experience it only in India. He further said, 'it gives spiritual peace and a feeling of inclusion.'

Findings of the study reveal that, along with the religious ceremony *Nanda Raj- Jat Yatra* is considered as leisure tourism by the participants of the *Yatra*. It enhances quality of life by increasing feelings of competency and relaxation, distracting from difficulties, as well as enhancing social inclusiveness and support. Leisure tourism also results in improved mental wellbeing through associated meaningful engagement, self-expression and creativity.

Mr. Nand Kishor Hatwal is a resident of Tapon village in district Chamoli- Uttarakhand. However he is the resident of Chamoli district but his village is far from the trek of *Nanda Raj- Jat Yatra*. By profession he is a writer, and painter. He took part in the *Yatra* in the year 2000. He shared his experiences in a book named 'PAHAR' (Century Edition: 2000). He wrote that it was a life time experience for him. He further wrote, 'It was an amazing journey. Here you feel a relation with nature and society. It gives you great feeling of inclusiveness. It fills you with abundant creativity. Your creativity gets wings here'. For every individual *Nanda Raj- Jat Yatra* weaves different meanings. Its horizon is very vast. It depends upon the individual how she/ he perceive it.

However *Nanda Devi Raj- Jat Yatra* is completely a religious and spiritual procession but the findings from the analysis provide evidential support to conclude that the car festivals specially *Nanda Devi Raj- Jat Yatra* is a leisure activity for its participants. It increases solidarity and humanity among the villagers and other participants. New social relations have been built. It provides relaxation, happiness and mental peace to its participants, which further nourishes for mental wellbeing. Participants of the *Yatra* consider it as a life time experience. This experience not only provides leisure during the event but also gifts happiness in memories.



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