

# Reviving Naulas, The Ancient Water Temples Of The Kumaon Himalayas

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[The stillness in the air suggests a warm day to come, but it's still cool this early in the morning. Bina Devi has just put a kettle on. There's enough firewood to keep the fire going a while, and the cows need to be fed first.](#)

When dawn breaks, she'll make the trudge to a nearby spring. Piped water supply really can't be relied upon during these hot summer months, and the spring has already reduced to a slow trickle. Another few weeks, and it'll be an even longer walk to the next water source.

[The Himalayas are rightly called the water towers of Asia. With greater snow and ice cover than any other region on Earth, barring the North and South Poles, the glaciers and rivers that originate here provide water for over a billion people downstream.](#)

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[Even then, the Himalayas are fast becoming water scarce. One out of five villages in Uttarakhand face a water shortage in summer, and it is not uncommon for a woman to walk 10 km to fetch water for her household's daily needs, says Sheeba Sen, founder of the social enterprise Alaap. According to Sen, the desertification of the Himalayas has become a very real issue. The aamas and bubus \(grandmothers and grandfathers\) of Uttarakhand's Kumaon echo these sentiments, as they note how the local dhara-naulas \(springs and reservoirs\) are drying up.](#)

[Conserving culture](#)

[Uttarakhand is known for its traditional water-management practices. Rural communities here have historically been dependent on the area's natural resources. Glaciers replenish their rivers, and thick oak forests help recharge groundwater. All of that is under threat today, and so is the culture that once helped maintain water security and keep their springs flowing. Similar to the baolis or stepwells found elsewhere in the country, naulas are uniquely designed to fit local culture, climate and vegetation. Man-made structures, they have been providing local communities an almost-perennial source of clean drinking water for centuries; the oldest naula found in Uttarakhand dates back to 7 BCE. In Kumaon, natural springs can emerge anywhere based on sub-surface water flows. A naula is built around a dhara by digging a hole to harvest its water and constructing stone walls around it for protection. Naulas are fine examples of dry-masonry, stone architecture as well as the art and science of water purification. While the roof and walls are built using local stone, the floor is kept natural or lined with small pieces of stone to allow filtration. Deeper naulas have steps to allow people to enter, and interestingly, you will always find they have an odd number of steps, either 3, 5 or 7.](#)

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[Naulas are emblematic of the region's rich culture. The four-sided roof resembles a temple, and many naulas house idols, carvings, and sculptures of gods and goddesses as well as lamps to guide thirsty souls at night. Families who don't have a shrine at home often visit a naula, say their prayers, light a lamp and leave behind their offerings. According to Bhupendra Singh Bisht, a resident of Chhatola in Mukteshwar, naulas have long been the lifeline of Kumaoni communities and represent their culture. They were considered so auspicious that newly-wed brides were taken to the local naula before even setting foot in their new homes. In the past, this would ensure that people preserved the cleanliness and sanctity of these structures. In some naulas, you can still see signs that request people to refrain from using soap or dirtying the water. Others have their own dedicated buckets or jugs so that people don't use their own vessels. The health and permanence of naulas is highly dependent on the health of the forests around them. Traditionally, communities have planted trees around these structures to ensure a sustained supply of water, reflecting an age-old understanding of the connection between forests and water. Need of the hour But in recent years, changing lifestyles have begun to push people away from these traditional customs, says Champawat district chief development officer Shailendra Singh Bisht. The deforestation of native and water-harvesting tree species such as Grey Oak, Brown Oak, Alder, Willow and Weeping Willow has played its part. This loss in native vegetation has led to declining water levels at most local naulas and many are now seasonal. The regular cleaning and maintenance that was once followed religiously is no longer the norm. Cement use for recent repair or reconstruction has further hampered water flow. A number of local organisations and communities have begun to recognise the need to act. In Uttarakhand's Chamoli district, the women of 30 villages came together to build small ponds or jal talaiyas to capture and store rainwater. These ponds have helped revive local dharas and naulas in the area, and the women are happy to now have potable water close to their homes. Alaap works to revive the native forests of the Himalayas, and Sen talks about how water conservation fits into Alaap's forestry agenda. Bringing back broad-leaved oak and mixed forests with deep root systems can help recharge naulas, dharas and the region's rainfed rivers. Photo: Aadya Singh Others are attempting to preserve the dying art of building naulas. Few Kumaoni people have seen a naula being built, the ones that stand today were built many, many generations ago. Chicu Lokgariwar and Usha Dewani recently \*\*documented the craft for India Water Portal\*\*, when they interviewed the sole remaining builder of naulas in Chhatola. Uttarakhand has a rich history of community-based environmentalism. Its Van Panchayats or forest councils are unique, and it's where the Chipko movement was born. With so many villages in Uttarakhand facing a dire water crisis today, there is merit in revisiting these ancient naulas and remembering why they were built in the first place. Perhaps then, the mountains will once again reverberate with that old Kumaoni song: \*Thando re thando, mere pahad ki hawa thandi, paani thando\* \(Cool, oh cool - the air of my mountains is cool, and the water of my mountains is cool\). First published by \*\*India Times\*\* on Sep. 04, 2018 \[Read an article of a similar initiative -\]\(#\)](#)

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