

The Last Builder of Naulas in Chatola, Nainital

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Ratan Singh Bisht is one of the few people today who constructs naulas

No temple is as venerated in Uttarakhand as the little unassuming naulas. These small hut-like structures dot the mountains and hold within them a great treasure--water. Usually made of stone masonry with pyramid-like slate roofs, every naula represents within it a residing spirit which can range from a simple stone piece to an ornately carved statue. Often, there is also an alcove big enough for a lamp. Inside, the naulas are shaped like a step-well. The number of steps--always odd in count--are usually 3, 5, 7 or more. Steeped in folklore and essential for daily life, naulas bridge the gap between fact and fiction, and the present and the past. These simple structures record Uttarakhand's history. The oldest functioning Naula is the Badrinathji-ka-naula which dates back to 7 BCE. According to Ravi Chopra, author of 'Survival Lessons', "A basic factor for the longevity of the Kumaoni naulas appears to be their maintenance by the local communities." He says in his book, "Sanskrit (precepts and rites), sanskriti (culture and customary practices) and niti (state policy and administration) were the bases of water harvesting traditions and their longevity." Sadly, these traditional naulas are falling by the wayside as people increasingly turn towards the convenience of piped water supply. Urbanisation, with its concentrated construction and transient populations, has a role in the loss of the naula as has post-colonial alienation from natural resources. [It is believed](#) that Almora's naulas have diminished in number from an original 360 functioning structures to just 60 today. What worries people more than the decline of the structures themselves is the loss of the knowledge of constructing and maintaining them. Surendra Pal Singh of CHIRAG says, "I have lived here all my life, but never seen a naula being built. All the ones here are ancient. Maybe my forefathers saw it, but now there is no one left. Even the village elders do not know these techniques any more." We spoke with one of the few people living today who knows how to construct a naula right from the site selection to its maintenance. Ratan Singh Bisht (62) combines traditional lore with scientific understanding to construct naulas in and around his village Chatola in Nainital, Uttarakhand.

How did you start building naulas?

25 years ago, I was experiencing a water shortage. There was a spring near my house which had water in the monsoons but would run dry in October-November. I planted some madeera trees there. The next year, towards the end of February, I dug a small hole and watched it. Initially there was a small trickle of water in that hole which would dry in the summer. It was only after three years that the hole would remain full in the summer. Now there is still water in it, though we don't use it regularly since we have another spring that we use for drinking water. If we run short of water, then we clean up that spring I restored and use it again. That is where I first restored a spring. Otherwise, I have not studied it anywhere, and not received any training.

How would you define a naula?

A spring ([srot](#)) forms where water accumulates, but a naula only comes into existence when it is built. So a naula is the small structure with a roof and a porous floor which houses a spring. There are many ways of building a naula; you can use rough cut stones and a stone roof or you can use fine-dressed stone. Earlier, naulas would be like a first-class house with a slate roof.

How do you decide where a naula can be built?

First look at the water. How deep does it go? Does it stay there throughout the year? Like I did with the first spring, we need to observe the spot for at least one year. Situations where water oozes out of the soil are straightforward. If the water is deep, the naula needs to be ladder-like and big. Similarly, if the water dries up in the summer, then we need to build a deep naula. So it is only in the summer that you can decide what type of naula you can build.

How can we conserve the water in a naula?

Trees are important for conserving water. There are some trees that attract water to them more than others. I have told you of how I planted the *madeera* trees and water began to stay in my naula. Other trees that do the same are *banj*, *funiyad*, *Kharsu*, *bains*, *majna*, and *utees*. With the cutting of oak trees, the naulas start drying up but pine is bad for water since it makes a naula dry.

The main thing to remember is that no cement or other mortar is to be used so that water will continue to seep into the naula. At the source you should never use cement. There, you can only build a naula with dry masonry (without mortar). Sometimes water rises from below, which is why it is important to not have a stone floor. If you do want one, make sure that it is made of small pieces of stone so that the water can come up through the cracks.

How can we keep the naula clean?

To keep water clean, we should keep the surroundings of the naula clean. Surface water should not be allowed to enter the naula. If it is coming in, then it should be diverted by making a channel. The naula itself should be cleaned often. If we allow months to go before we clean it, then of course it will become dirty. Every day, when you go to collect water, you should make sure to remove any floating leaves or other rubbish. Otherwise they will rot and make the water unclean. Also, once a month or so, you should remove all the water, scrub it, and allow it to fill again.

Earlier, a small vessel would be kept there always. People would come with their pots and use that vessel to fill their containers. That way, dirty vessels would not be dipped into the naula. Nowadays no one does that. They come with their buckets and straightaway dip them into the naula. Many people also build their latrine soakpits on the slopes near the naula. Because of that too, the naulas become polluted. We should make sure that our soakpits are not directly above the naula.

What are the customs and traditions around a naula?

People would worship Krishna at the Naula. They consider water to be Vishnu, so people worship Vishnu there. That is why the naula has a roof sloping on all 4 sides like a temple, and not on two sides like a house. On the top of the roof, a round stone is placed and considered to be an idol of Vishnu. Not everyone has an idol in their house, so they come here to worship Vishnu. Women first bathe, and then offer water to Vishnu. My wife has kept a stone near the temple which she worships as Shiva. Some light lamps, some light agarbatis but this practice is also on the decline now. Now people have more money and less time. That is why these practices are dying out.

Is it possible to prevent the practice of building and using naulas from dying out?

For the craft of naula building to be continued, it is important that the community support it. If they don't, if they prefer tanks, then the craft is bound to die out. We can't force it on anyone.

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