



SELA PARV, 2025

ABSTRACT

Sela Parv 2025 was a ten-day monsoon festival of the Van Gujjar community, held from 20-30 July across Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, and Himachal Pradesh. Rooted in cultural tradition and ecological stewardship, the festival combined tree plantation, traditional rituals, and community dialogue. This year's celebration was especially significant, inaugurated by the Chief Justice of Uttarakhand, whose presence turned the opening day into a Forest Rights Act consultation. With over 2,000 participants and more than 500 native saplings planted, Sela Parv stood out as both a cultural festival and a platform for rights, recognition, and conservation.

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Introduction

The **Van Gujjar community** is a forest-dwelling, semi-nomadic pastoralist group living across Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, and Himachal Pradesh. Practising transhumance, they migrate with their livestock to the Himalayan meadows in the summer and to the Terai forests in the winter. Despite continuous threats of eviction, the community continues to celebrate its relationship with the forest through *Sela Parv*, a cultural festival of tree plantation and renewal.

In the Gojri dialect, *Sela* means “green.” *Sela Parv* is therefore a tree plantation festival, where the community gathers to plant native saplings and endemic species. It is celebrated in July during the monsoon, when rains bring regeneration to forests and pastures. One of the main attractions of the festival is the chanting of *Bainths*- traditional songs in Gojri that express the Van Gujjars’ bond with cattle, mountains, rivers, forests, and biodiversity. These oral traditions have been passed down for generations and were revived by the Van Gujjar Tribal Yuva Sangathan (VGTYS).

In 2025, with support from Kalpavriksh and other organisations, VGTYS organised a 10-day festival from 20-30 July across Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, and Himachal Pradesh. This year’s festival was grand and historic, inaugurated in Kumaon by Hon’ble Justice Manoj Kumar Tiwari of the Uttarakhand High Court. His presence transformed the first day into a Forest Rights Act (FRA) consultation, where genuine dialogue took place between departments and the community.

Cultural Significance and Rituals

The festival began with traditional rituals:

- Churning of the Mathani (wooden churn used for butter and buttermilk).
- Installation of the Nedhi (wooden support fixed into the ground to brace the Mathani).

These acts, performed by senior community members, symbolised the revival of *Sela Parv*. They are mainly carried out during festivals or other auspicious occasions, as the lives of the Van Gujjars revolve around their cattle, and these rituals reflect that deep connection.

Chief Guest also released a booklet showcasing the Van Gujjars’ way of life, their relationship with nature, and the indigenous Gojri buffalo.

The presence of the Tharu tribe, another indigenous community of Uttarakhand, added to the spirit of solidarity. Together, these communities demonstrated that *Sela Parv* is not only a Van Gujjar tradition but also a shared indigenous ecological movement.

Festival Journey and Activities (20-30 July 2025)

20 July, 2025: Ghodakhatta, Kumaon (Inaugural Day)

- **Hon'ble Justice Manoj Kumar Tiwari** of Uttarakhand High Court, who was invited as the Chief guest. His presence turned the day into a formal Forest Rights Act (FRA) consultation.
- Around **1,500 participants** attended.

Community observations:

- The community noted a change in the usual dynamic: senior officials, including the Range Officer, Sub-Divisional Officer (SDO), Divisional Forest Officer (DFO), and Sub-Divisional Magistrate (SDM), were present and attentive because of the District Judge's participation.
- This created a sense among community members that their concerns were being taken seriously at a higher level.
- In routine matters such as grazing or lopping, the community often feels burdened by departmental processes. During the programme, however, they experienced direct engagement from the District Judge, who asked substantive questions.
- The Judge's spouse also interacted with community women, which was appreciated as a gesture of inclusion.
- Overall, the community felt respected and involved in discussions about their rights.

During the programme:

- In front of approximately 1,500 participants, the District Judge asked the Forest Department why rights under the Forest Rights Act (FRA) had not been granted. Officials responded affirmatively, indicating willingness to act.
- When the Judge asked the Chief Development Officer about electricity, the response was that a committee would be formed to address the issue.
- Observing these exchanges, the community felt reassured that their concerns were being acknowledged.
- Many expressed that this was the first time they had seen officials respond positively to their requests.
- Even after the programme, the VGTYS team received messages from community members across the region appreciating the event.

Judge's speech:

- The District Judge emphasised: *"We cannot say no to education even after freedom. If we are not getting education and electricity, then what is the use?"*
- When shown a single solar panel serving six families, the Chief Justice remarked that this was insufficient.

- The community welcomed his direct engagement with departmental representatives on these issues.
- The Chief Justice instructed his Secretariat to ensure that paralegal volunteers meet with the Van Gujjar community every three months to brief on genuine concerns.
- He directed that meetings should cover education, primary health services, and Anganwadi centres under the FRA, and asked why such measures had not been implemented since 2006.
- He requested monthly briefings on progress.



Fig.1. Hon'ble Justice Manoj Kumar Tiwari, inaugurating the Sela Parv

21-22 July- Tilpuri Khatta, Kumaon and villages near Ghodakhatta

- Community members planted **45 saplings**.
- Outreach continued in neighbouring villages.

24 July- Shivpuri, Narendra Nagar, Tehri Garhwal

- Community members from Kharrasot, Shivpuri, and Narendra Nagar were present.
- Rafi ji (Adhyaksh of FRC in Kusrela) and Gami ji (President of that FRC) invited the Gram Pradhan and the Forest Minister of Uttarakhand.
- The Forest Minister showed interest and attended the programme.

Observations by the VGTYS team:

- In many nurseries in Rishikesh, non-native species such as eucalyptus, teak (*sagon*), and kanji papdi are common.
- The Anusandhan nursery, however, maintained a wide variety of native plants.
- For *Sela Parv*, saplings were collected from two nurseries with diverse species.

- After clarification, the DFO instructed staff to provide saplings to the community.
- **90 saplings** were provided that day.

Plantation in Shivpuri:

- Holes had been dug the previous day in preparation.
- When the Minister arrived, community members explained the cultural significance of Sela Parv.
- **The Forest Minister, Subodh Uniyal ji**, acknowledged this and noted that plantation targets exist both in forest areas and cities.
- He asked why fruit trees were not being planted. The VGTYS team explained that while fruit trees are suitable for homes and cities, in forest areas, they prioritise species that provide fodder for cattle and benefit wildlife.
- The Minister appreciated this perspective and agreed that plantation in forests should be planned in consultation with communities.
- Officials present included the Range Officer, Deputy Ranger, Forest Guard, and Gram Panchayat representatives.
- 100-120 participants (50 women, 70-80 men) plus 40+ accompanying the Minister.
- Total: approximately **200 participants**.
- **90 saplings were planted.**



Fig.2. Shri Subodh Uniyal with the community members

25 July- Lacchiwala, Dehradun (Barkot Range, Bhaniyawala)

- The **Legal Services Authority** provided saplings requested by the community.

- In the evening, tree guards were placed.
- The Authority also sent law students, legal advocates, volunteers, and staff.
- A total of **40+ participants from their side joined**, as the personnel from the Legal Services Authority wanted them to experience the festival.

Community practices:

- Each day during Sela Parv, the community began with traditional food: ghee, bhoora (sugar), dal, rice, and kheer.
- Plantation activities followed the meal.

Follow-up from the previous year:

- Participants visited the site where saplings had been planted in 2024 by the personnel from the Legal Services Authority.
- They observed that 20-25 plants had grown successfully.
- Community members: **55-60**, including **15-16 women**

26 July- Chaturwala, Uttar Pradesh

- Community members, villagers, and Kaudiya Range officials planted **55-56 saplings**.

27 July- Kusrela, Tehri Garhwal

- Celebration with Sub-Divisional Level Committee (SDLC) support.
- Law students, NGO representatives, and community members participated.
- Many attendees were familiar with Harela but not Sela Parv. They reflected positively on learning about Van Gujjar traditions and appreciated the cultural exchange.
- The programme concluded with traditional food, reinforcing the community's hospitality and cultural practices.

30 July- Shivalik, Saharanpur, Uttar Pradesh

- In Shivalik, where approximately 1,800 Van Gujjar families reside, **250-300 community members participated**.
- Representatives from the Azad Samaj Party, young forest officers, and other stakeholders joined the event.
- The community explained how traditional water ponds play a vital role in supporting wildlife and conserving water.
- **90-100 saplings were planted**, and 60-65 saplings were taken home by families for plantation at their own kholas (settlements).
- Army personnel and political representatives appreciated the festival and expressed willingness to support the community.
- Women and youth actively participated, highlighting inclusive engagement.
- The Shivalik Van Gujjar community resolved to continue planting saplings at their respective kholas on 31 July.



Fig.3. Participants from the National Youth Climate Champion celebrating Sela Parv

31 July- Bhotanpur, Himachal Pradesh (Closing Day)

- The concluding programme involved the Forest Department, community members, villagers, Gram Pradhan, and NGOs.
- Local representatives expressed appreciation for the conservation practices of the Van Gujjar community.
- Around **60-65 native saplings were planted**.
- Discussions included Forest Rights Act (FRA) provisions, particularly Community Forest Resource Management rights.
- The festival closed with the sharing of traditional food, marking the conclusion of Sela Parv in Sirmaur, Himachal Pradesh.

Key Outcomes

- **Cultural Revival:** Rituals, Bainths, and solidarity with the Tharu tribe reaffirmed Van Gujjar traditions.
- **Policy Dialogue:** Justice Tiwari's presence transformed the festival into a platform for FRA consultation.

- **Community Empowerment:** Over **2,000 participants** engaged directly with officials, breaking barriers of fear and hierarchy.
- **Conservation Impact:** More than **500 saplings** planted across diverse sites, prioritising native species.
- **Youth and Women's Participation:** Active involvement strengthened intergenerational continuity and pride.
- **Visibility:** Engagement with ministers, judges, forest officers, NGOs, and political representatives elevated the festival's profile.

Reflection

Sela Parv 2025 demonstrated how cultural traditions can evolve into **ecological movements**. What began as a tree plantation festival became a platform for rights, recognition, and solidarity.

For the Van Gujjar community, celebrating in July during the monsoon symbolised renewal and resilience. The chants of *bainths*, the rituals of Mathani and Nedhi, and the planting of native saplings reaffirmed their ancestral bond with forests.

The festival also illustrates the transformative potential of cultural revival. Support enabled a process where tradition met policy, where conservation was linked with rights, and where communities gained confidence to engage with governance structures.

In the face of eviction threats, institutional support is essential. The presence of Justice Tiwari and other officials was hailed as a step toward recognition of forest rights. As the festival grows, so does the recognition that sustaining forests requires the wisdom of those who have lived in an intimate relationship with them.

Sela Parv is no longer just a cultural gathering- it is an ecological movement, a celebration of identity, and a call for justice.