



The Homecoming of the Gods: '*Devta Laana*' Among '*Jaunsaris*' of Dehradun

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The Himalayas in India is the abode of several tribes. One of the most chivalorous tribes i.e. the Jaunsaris who live in Dehradun district of Uttarakhand state is known for its exotic religion, supernatural powers, and magic. The tribals are Hindus and the main deity worshipped is called '*Mahasu devta*'. Mahsus are four brothers who are believed to have come from Kashmir region of India. The present paper explains one of the important religious ceremonies held in the area called '*Devta Laana*'. Whenever the people construct a new house or prosper in life, or their wish is fulfilled or a *dosh* occurs they go and invite the *devta* to their house to bless them. On a pre-decided day the ceremony begins from the temple of the *devta* on foot. The entire procession must follow certain rules and regulations. On reaching home there is a series of rituals and customs which are followed. There are certain taboos to be observed during the duration of stay of the *Devta* in the house. The departure from the house depends on the will of the *devta*. During the stay of the *devta* there is celebration and feasting. The entire ritual has been focussed upon and explained in the paper. The data has been collected through empirical study. The researcher was a participant in the ceremony and witnessed the events at a village called Kuwanoo in subdivision Chakrata of district Dehradun. It is indeed a unique and unbelievable, a hair-raising ritual experience which needs to be seen to be believed. One cannot rationalise such religious encounters just keep them for memoirs.

The area and the people

The Jaunsar-Bawar region, which is the home of Jaunsari tribe, spreads over 1002 km² and 400 villages, between 77.45' and 78.7'20" East to 30.31' and 31.3'3" North. It is defined in the east, by the river Yamuna and by river Tons in the west, the northern part

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comprises Uttarkashi district, and some parts of Himachal Pradesh, Vikasnagar subdivision of District Dehradun forms its southern periphery.

The Jaunsaris are one of scheduled tribes of Uttarakhand. Their population according to the recent census 2011 is approximately (1.5 lakhs.) The tribe has a rigid caste system. The Jaunsaris comprise of the *Khasas* (Rajputs) and Brahmins at the top, *Lohar*, *Bajgi*, *Mistri*, *Nath* make up the middle group and the *Dom*, *Chamar* and *Koltas* are at the bottom of this hierarchical structure. The Rajput and Brahmins are the landowners. The *Lohars* are the ironsmiths as well as the goldsmith. The *Bajgi* play different kinds of musical instruments. The *Kolta* are landless labourer and they work for the *Khasa* people. The *Koltas*, *Dom* and *Chamars* are regarded as untouchables and are not allowed to enter the houses of the higher castes. The *Khasas* are not only landowners but they also play a leading role in the society socially and politically. The Jaunsari tribe has a distinct culture neighbouring Garhwali culture, though there is close resemblance with the culture of Sirmour region of Himachal Pradesh. The tribe practiced polyandry in the past but slowly education, social awareness and economic progress is resulting in eradication of such practices.

Religion in Jaunsar Bavar

One of the most striking features of Jaunsar Bavar is the religion. It is Hinduism with a difference. The Jaunsari people are idol worshippers. They believe in ghosts and spirits. Their methods of praying are extremely different from the Greater Traditions of the Hindus. Their life-cycle rituals are conducted very differently. They have their own set of beliefs, calendar and list of festivals. There is a very rigid caste system. The notions of purity and pollution are observed strictly. It is this reason why D.N. Majumdar called their religion as the 'wonder world.'¹

The entire region of Jaunsar Bavar is the Kingdom of Mahasu. He rules the life, words and actions of the people. He acts as a judge, and the people follow his commands with awe and reverence. There are four Mahasu brothers Botha Mahasu, Chalda Mahasu, Bashik Mahasu and Pabashik Mahasu. Each brother's geographical territory is defined. The population of each region follows the respective Mahasu. The four brothers have absolute authority in their own regions and do not interfere in their functioning. But the most powerful one is the Botha Mahasu who is also the eldest of all. All the brothers obey him. Madhu Jain² has argued that Mahasu is the same as Shiva but that does not seem to be correct according to my ethnographic explorations.

Besides Mahasu's Mother Deolarhi Ma there are Birs of Mahasu (who are his guards), some ghosts and spirits are worshipped. They also worship their ancestors. Each village has their own deity also. The *Kaali* is also worshipped throughout Jaunsar Bavar.

All the Mahasu brothers travel across their region. They do so in a *palgi* (i.e. a palanquin) or their *doria* (a measuring vessel called the *thaap*, made of silver and is carved) or sometimes the *jot* (sacred flame) is brought. The *devta* may move in his territory on a routine basis (the cycle of his movement and the route is fixed) or when a devotee invites him specially to visit his house.

'All the *devtas* have their *palgi* but the Botha Mahasu is a static one so he does not go outside the temple at Hanol. However his *doria* has the same divine power and is symbolic of his supernatural, religious and legal authority. *Doria* stands for a bowl, (of medium size), *palgi* (derived from *palaki*) for palanquin / litter and *Jot* (*Joyti*) for light (flame). The last term *Jot* is highly abstracted in the Indian philosophical system. And, the local meaning is not different from that. At that level, it symbolizes the Light of devta which radiates, moves from *devta* to other objects. It can be carried (*Jot Lena*). It is always prone to radiate and diffuse. For, it pervades all. It can be ritually taken from Hanol's or any other Mahasu and can be installed at another place in a Mahasu temple.'³

Why is the *Devta* invited ?

The *devta* may be invited in two conditions, either there is an extraordinary achievement and the people are extremely happy and wish to express their gratitude or when there is some untoward occurrence like the death of a young family member or an epidemic or an accident. In the later case it is said that a *dosh* has inflicted upon the family in other words a sin may have been committed knowingly or unknowingly. In such a case the *devta* shall recognise it and suggest the solution or the corrective method and eliminate the wrong done. It is also seen that sometimes the *devta* himself visits a person to bless him.

Bhatt says that '*Dosh* is a fault, blame, blemish, error, mistake, noxious behaviour with detrimental effects. In brief ,it is an offence against *devta*, Nature and social norms. Offence and noxious behaviour cause imbalance in the existence of life and *devta*.

Dosh and *pap* are akin but with a subtle difference. *Pap* is sin or sinful behaviour. It is evil, wicked, vicious, destructive and accursed. *Pap* karm (sinful act) leads to inauspicious and bad consequences. *Pap* is ethically dressed whereas *dosh* carries a causative definition. Being consequential *Pap* can become *Dosh* as well.'⁴

The *devta* moves with his officials- the *Maali* (speaker), *Vazir* (minister), *Bhandari* (treasurer), *Thani* (keeps the entire cleanliness, maintenance and cooks)

When is the *devta* invited?

The *devta* cannot be invited casually. One has to go to Hanol and meet the *vazir* of the *devta* and seek time. Secondly he can be invited only in the pious months of *margshish*, (November-December) *paush*, (December-January) or in *baisakh* (April)

'Mahasu's *Doria* enters the house of Rajputs and Brahmins only. The members of other castes have to keep out of the house in which the *devta* has entered. The *Harijan* can neither touch nor carry it, nor can they come near it. They offer *dhal* from a respectable distance. After the *Doria* has been taken inside the house of the host (Rajput or Brahman) entry of the *Nath* and *Bajgi* into that house is barred though otherwise, ordinarily, they enter the house but only up to the outer verandah. If a host to *Doria* can afford, he invites his *dai-bhai*, relations (*rishtedar*) and friends for the occasion. Then *Doria's* visit turns into a grand ceremonial festival affair'⁵

How is the date decided?

The eldest male member or the eldest son goes to the *Vazir* (minister) and *Maali* (the speaker) and makes a request for appointment. 'The *Maali* is neither an interpreter nor a go-between. When possessed the *Maali* is incarnate. *Devta* is supposed to descend in the *Mali*.'⁶ It is called *devta utarna* or *Devta khelta hai*. The *Mali* sees the *saait* (auspicious time). The person gives a one rupee coin (*Rupaya chodna*)

And says *aapne hathon ke jindau de de* (rice is given by mali which is kept safely and shall be delivered when the *devta* will reach the house of the person). 'Rice is regarded as *jindal*, /*jindau*/ *jindaul* which means the existential substance of life'⁷

The Event

On the predetermined date the host goes to the temple with his male relatives and friends. It is to be made sure that no females can be part of this procession. The holy Symbol (*doriya*, or *Palgi*) is given to the person who invited him. From this time the person has to move only bare feet. He has to maintain purity and he cannot put the holy symbol on the ground. If he wishes to go for natural call he will give it in the hands of his companions. The *wazir*, *Maali* , *Thani*, *Bhandari*, *pujari* of the *devta* move on with them in a royal procession accompanied by the ceremonial musical instruments- *ransingha*, *dhol* ,*damanna*, and *karnai*.

On the way if it becomes dark they have to place the *doriya* on a tree .It cannot be taken to any temple. The journey shall continue the next morning. On their way home people of other villages can try to stop them and take the holy symbol first, a kind of mock fight takes place (in olden days it was a fierce fight). However the *devtas* never stops nor does he change his route and goes to the predetermined host's house.

Sometime the people are adamant and they forcibly do so. In such a case they have to pay *dand* (compensation) and the *devta* can curse them too.

The preparations at the Host's house

The notions of purification are observed very strictly. The *devta* prefers to stay in the wooden devadar houses to the modern houses of concrete. So it is those that are cleaned up specially. The entire house is purified with *gaut* (a mixture of milk, cow's urine, *gangajal*, and honey)

On this occasion taboos (ritual prohibitions) are observed. It is to be ensured that no low caste person/or people of other religion is supposed to enter the house. (It is to be noted that the low caste people and the women are not allowed to enter the inner sanctorum of the temple at Hanol.)

Secondly menstruating women should not come in the house where the *devta* has come. When the date is being decided the host makes sure that no women in the house would be menstruating or else the date would have to be changed or the woman should not remain in that house where the *devta* is supposed to come.

The people must not use any leather objects such as belts, purses or shoes nor should they be present in that house.

The host also is required to make sacrificial preparations. At least three to four *bakras* (he-goat), and two *Pathi* (female lamb) are kept ready. Besides the *Prasad* (food offering) for the *devta* is prepared.

The devta arrives

The ladies, men, and children of the village go to the the boundary of the village to receive him. The ladies sprinkle *gaut* (a mixture of milk, cow's urine, *gangajal*, and honey) with twigs of *shwina* (local holy leaves) on the path in their traditional attire.

The traditional instruments like *dhol*, *damanu*, and *ransingha* is played by the *bajgis* or *dhakis* (traditional castes who play them)

The girls are possessed by the goddess *kali* (it is believed that *Mahasu* moves along with *kali*.) They all dance in trance around the *doria* of the *devta* until the *mali* sprinkles rice on their forehead after reading some mysterious mantras.

The *devta* enters the village and stops at the *kaali* temple. The *doriya* is kept on the tree until further *saait* (Sacred time) for entering the house is decided by the *maali*.

The devta enters the house

On the sacred time schedule he moves towards the house. On reaching the house he does not enter through the door like ordinary human beings but through the *Tanak* (the balcony.) He goes to the north east corner of the house. Then the *doria* of the *devta* is kept on a wooden box on which a cloth measuring about one meter is laid out then rice is spread out on it. Thereafter the people and relatives do *Dhal* (Salute), make offerings of silver *chattar*, or 1 rupee. A lamp of cow's ghee is burnt (*Akhand deep*) it should burn continuously for duration of stay of *devta* .Then the *puja* is done . After that the *pudi-halva* *prasad* is distributed .The people dance and celebrate his arrival. Then *one bakra* is sacrificed in the name of the

devta, it is cooked and served late in the night. The people will keep awake and do *jagra* till the holy bell is rung (*namti bajti hai*)

Early in the morning again the puja is done and people of the family do *dhal*. Now the *maali* and the *pujari* sit with family members. The *devta* possesses the *maali* and the family heads ask whether the *devta* is happy. Then the *devta* dicusses about the problems of the family members. The *maali* makes predictions and gives solutions to them. The *pujari* plays the role of facilitator in communicating with the *devta*

The *devta* departs

The *devta* decides upon the time of departure through his *maali* and *wazir*. Again he comes out through the balcony or the roof of the house. Now he takes a round of the house (*gharo barori ki ritai*). At first the sacrificial goat is held in hand, behind him the *Maali* moves with the *doriya*. Again he goes to the *kaali* temple and the people go behind him and leave him till the boundary of the village. One of the male members of the house accompanies him to the next village of invitation.

Analysis

If one analyses the entire movement and manner in which the *devta* is invited and the way he talks, expresses his emotions and gives judgements, there is a treatment of the *devta* as a superhuman who wields supernatural powers. He is a king with his own team of officials. There is a anthropomorphism of the deity which is an amazing fact. 'In religion and mythology, anthropomorphism refers to the perception of a divine being or beings in human form, or the recognition of human qualities in these beings.

Ancient mythologies frequently represented the divine as deities with human forms and qualities. They resemble human beings not only in appearance and personality; they exhibited many human behaviors that were used to explain natural phenomena, creation, and historical events. The deities fell in love, married, had children, fought battles, wielded weapons, and rode horses and chariots. They feasted on special foods, and sometimes required sacrifices of food, beverage, and sacred objects to be made by human beings. Some anthropomorphic deities represented specific human concepts, such as love, war, fertility, beauty, or the seasons. Anthropomorphic deities exhibited human qualities such as beauty, wisdom, and power, and sometimes human weaknesses such as greed, hatred, jealousy, and uncontrollable anger. Greek deities such as Zeus and Apollo often were depicted in human form exhibiting both commendable and despicable human traits.'⁸

The way in which he traverses the entire region one by one it is a Socio-spatial reaffirmation of the *devta's* authority. Wherever he goes people gather for his blessings, no matter how important job they have. The entire distance travelled from Hanol Temple to this village is about seventy kilometre kilometres. When the procession moves it is well received in the villages it passes. Thus the people of the region help each other and share goodwill and bonding.

If the *devta* is coming to any house, the people of the entire *khat* (local administrative unit) make it a point to visit that person's house. This obviously requires very large scale preparations which calls for community action and labour. Thus it also helps in strengthening of kinship bonds and maintaining social solidarity.

The power and authority of the deity was transmitted into a ceremonial *doria*. This symbolism in religious ceremonies is not uncommon.

However one can also see that certain castes are restricted socially from participating directly in the ceremony or from coming near the *doria* or touching it on this occasion. This

shows the rigidity of the caste system which still exists in the minds of the people in spite of the legal ban on such discrimination.

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⁸ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthropomorphism> {accessed on 16.2.15}