The Mobility of Mahasu Devta: Representation and Ritual Process

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ABSTRACT
The deities are usually represented in form of Anthropomorphic idols in temples. The people who believe in these deities go to the temple to worship them in normal course. In the hill regions there are geographical barriers and the terrain is extremely difficult. So, in spite of the development of roads and transport facilities not many people are able to do Darshan (divine procedure of seeing the god and worshipping) of these deities. So there are mobile idols of the deities or other divine symbols which are taken in form of procession to various far off destinations in the hill. The present paper deals with ritual of bringing the Mahasudevta home, through the symbolic representation called the doria in JaunsarBavar region of Dehradun district in the state of Uttarakhand. This enables the common man in the mountains to catch a glimpse of the Devta and feel blessed. At the same time it is a procedure to reaffirm the authority of the devta in the region.

The Himalayas in India is the abode of several tribes. One of the most chivalrous 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 ‘Mahasudevta’. 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 ‘DevtaLaana’. 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 focused 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 rationalize 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 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 Kolts 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 Kota are landless labourer and they work for the Khasapeople. The Kolts, 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 is 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 JaunsarBavar**

One of the most striking features of JaunsarBavar 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.’

The entire region of JaunsarBavar 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, ChaldaMahasu, BashikMahasu and PabashikMahasu. 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 Jain’ 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 DeolarhiMa 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 JaunsarBavar.

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 for *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.’

**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.'
The devta moves with his officials- the Maali (speaker), Vazir (minister), Bhandari (treasurer), Thani (keeps the entire cleanliness, maintainence 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 Baggi 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 devtautarna or Devtakheltahai. The Mali sees the saait (auspicious time). The person gives a one rupee coin (Rupayachodna).

And says saapnehathonke 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 (doria, 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 vazir, Maali, Thani, Bhandari, pujari of the devtamanoe 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 dorivaan 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 urines, 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 devtais 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 shwine (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 themaali.

**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 (Akhanddeep) 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. Thenone bakrais sacrificed in the name of the devta, it is cooked and served late in the night. The people will keep awake and do jagrat till the holy bell is rung (namabhajitai)

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 discusses 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 (gharobarorikiritai). 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 devtais 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 an 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.’

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 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 inspite of the legal ban on such discrimination.

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