

From the time of the Mahabharata, the Mahasu Temple at Hanol in Uttarakhand

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Abstract

Jaunsar Bawar, in Central Himalaya has been a Khas dominated region where Devshahi rules. The Mahasu Devta Temple is situated at Hanol village on the eastern bank of the Tons river which is regarded as the most significant spiritual center for the Jaunsar Bawar, Sirmour and Shimla and being connected to Mahabharata period, this area is referred to as the Sathi-Pashi region. The political, social, and cultural life of this hilly region has been impacted by Mahasu, often known as the "lord of justice". The peripheral influences of the Buddhist and Brahmanic cultures had also been infiltrating into Jaunsar since remote times. Mahasu, who is very popular in Jaunsar Bawar and the adjoining Himachal area due to his amazing medicinal qualities and is known as a healer or Vaidya, has had an impact on the political, social, and cultural life of this hilly region. The temple collects the revenue as per the budget of the farmers in form of cash and kind which is used by the temple authority for the people's welfare during the time of adversity like famine etc. Mahasu is a great healer whose presence can be felt in his deity dom and Malis are his representatives. The rivalry between Sathi and Panshi led to the creation of the myths around Mahasu. This temple predates Mahasu's visit Mahasu temple, in fact, is a Vishnu temple was built by Pandavas.

Keyword: Mahasu, Jaunsar Bawar, folklore, Hanol, Sathi-Pashi, Tons, faith healing, folk medicine, Central Himalaya

Research Methodology : The study is based on qualitative and quantitative research design. Surveys, interviews, purposive snowball sampling, and epistemological reflexivity are the methods utilized to collect data.

Objectives : This ethnographical study makes an effort to investigate and comprehend the historical facets of the several cults and customs associated with the Hanol Mahasu temple.

Introduction

Culture is like a massive tree that has developed over many years, of which just a few branches are now fully visible; the network of connections that comprise the roots of the enormous tree, was shaped by the everyday activities and way of life of our ancestors. Built in Nagar style during ninth and tenth century, Mahasu Devta Temple is regarded as the most significant spiritual center of the Jaunsar Bawar.¹ Mahasu is the monarch, the pivot, the conceptual center, and the source of sovereign. Mahasu authority is not only in the region of Jaunsar Bawar and Garhwal in Uttarakhand but also Sirmour and Shimla in Himachal Pradesh. This divine king takes on multiple guises, including that of a god or divinity king, a figurehead providing protection, a healer, a rainmaker, an adjudicator, or even a despot who, upon offending someone, brings disaster upon people.² Since the Mahasu Devta is the subject of numerous cults and traditions, it is crucial to have a basic understanding of the sociocultural context of the region where these cults and traditions are centered before exploring into the deity's impact.³ In actuality, the idea of the Devta has changed from pre-Vedic to modern times. As a result of the battle and the adoption of both organized and disorganized panthic movements from the East and the West, it has absorbed ethnic, diffusionist, and acculturative strain in its continuity and evolution. Derived from the Sanskrit root div, dev is understood as an expression of the all-pervading, cosmically lit Energy. Devta is a widely accepted idea among several ethnic communities in India.⁴

Because ophiolatry originated from fear psychosis in prehistoric times, this innate fear persisted in this region's social psychology over the years and into the present. Of course, the inhabitants of the region should be more in awe of the Naga as the magnificent god than they are of their devotion and have been redefined as the local manifestations of Shiva. The people believe that these deities have the ability to control rabid animals, poisonous reptiles, and the local monarchy. The Brahmanic enthusiasts, who were occasionally supported by the local hierarchy, expertly misrepresented the traditional identities of numerous indigenous

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Naga deities by crafting stories and legends about their origins, which ignorant and innocent native people readily embraced as the unchanging truth. It was difficult for them to see the pantheistic shift and how it affected the conventional belief system.⁵

Impact of Buddhism

The peripheral influences of the Buddhist and Brahmanic cultures had also been infiltrating into Jaunsar since remote times.⁶ It seems that the impact of Buddhism extended farther throughout the region during the reign of Asoka in the third century BC. There still exists Asokan inscription on a white granite stone at Kalsi on the entrance of Jaunsar region from Vikasnagar, Dehradun. The Buddha's preachings have been written on this inscription in Brahmi. Kalsi should have been an important place for religio – political activity up to the days of Harshvardhana, which fact is revealed from the existence of three paved platform meant for the Yaznashala at village Jagatigram located not far away from Kalsi proper. Shila Varman may be another name for Harshavardhan, who has been addressed as Shiladitya also.⁷ The influence of Buddhism had been so deeper in Jaunsar area of Uttarakhand till 9th-10th century⁸ that it was known Budhhanchal.⁹

The area of Hanol is known as Tandu which covers fifteen square kilometer area and the temple is located at the centre. The main complex of the temple is quite open area and is a marvelous example of outstanding intricate woodcraft. Though the efforts of Sankaracharya in Uttarakhand in 7th century AD could be successful to a limit to establish a modern form of Sanatan in Uttarakhand yet the Hanol temple complex resembles to Buddhist monastery. The temple exhibits the Buddhist traditions' influence, as evidenced by the Botha Mahasu in the Bhumisparsh Mudra. The entrance wall has beautiful depiction of various folklore related to Mahasu has been done besides the mythological characters. The wooden figures have been painted in vibrant hues enhancing the wall décor of the entrance. The temple complex is divided into five sections as Garbhgriha, Kalipurn, Chandipurn, Dhanori and Dakeri. The entrance of the temple is with arched shaped wooden door at with Dakeri which is the Bajgi room, for musicians. They have to participate in the daily puja rituals as part of their primary duty. Rituals are a feature of all human society, large and small. They are an important part of the way that any social group celebrates and maintains. Bajgi (musicians) play traditional instruments in the temple where the Dhol is the most crucial member of their squad. Furthermore, the Bajgis have significant archives of cultural knowledge. Then comes Thanori, the sitting area for staff of temple like Thani, Sayane, Bhandari, Pujari, Vajir of the temple. The women devotees are allowed to sit with Dakeri during the Pooja while men devotees may sit at Thanori. The idols of Botha, Vashik, Passik and Chalda Mahasu are kept at Garbhgriha. Each Garbhgriha has been designed with octagonal roof. The Botha Mahasu's idol is in Bhumisparsh Mudra is there in Garbhgriha along with it and the mark sign of other gods are also kept there.¹⁰ The singers of Pandvani narrates that Pandavas made this Garbhgriha. Kalipurn is the dark or blackroom next to Garbhgriha. The region behind the blackness is caused by the carbon of wooden stick lamp which is obtained from the Devdar tree. According to Pandit Madan Nautiyal, the temple's darkness in the Garbhgriha represents the supreme energy. Chandipurna or Silver door is the room where the Pujari, stands on duty. The rules for the on duty Pujari are very strict in the temple. From sunrise to dusk, the Poojari has to stand at the door of Chandipuran to attend the devotees. He fasts for the entire day and doesn't have even the water, and has only one meal after the evening pooja at Rawaripand, the kitchen of the temple where the food is prepared for the Poojari and temple staff members.¹¹ The ration for the kitchen comes from the granary of the temple which is collected as the kind tax from local peasants a part of local tradition. Each devotee has to pay some fixed amount to Pujari on duty for the pooja ritual which is for the maintenance of the temple staff and other activities.¹²

The Mahasu Temple's various Pooja rituals may have originated from the peculiarities of the steep topography. There are eight departments into which the Mahasu Pooja network and rituals can be divided. These include daily pooja rituals, rites of passage, social differentiation rituals, Devta's diffusion, sovereignty, and grace bestowing rituals, festive cycle rituals, periodic distinctive pooja (Yajna) rituals, rituals to ward off Mahasu's wrath (i.e., dosh, offense against Mahasu), and sacrifice rituals. To win Mahasu's favor and secure wealth and well-being for people, the community, and humanity are their two goals. They also strive for a healing touch somewhere. The extential demands of existence appear to be closer to Mahasu pooja. If Mahasu Pooja is done at a temple, it is a team effort, whether it is done publicly or privately. The team is led by the Nayab Vazirs, who stand in for the political elites of the Mahasu cult, the majority of whom are Brahmins and Rajputs.

The temple's daily operations are overseen by the Nayab Vazirs. The Pujari on duty, who is always a Brahmin, leads the group of functionaries. The Bagji perform as singers, drummers, and dancers. A Brahmin must be the Mahasu's pujari, and only certain communities are permitted to serve in this capacity.¹³ The majority of Brahmins were farmers, and they had traditionally been priests. Here, right of worship is given to Joshi, Nautiyal, and the Semwal family. They have a set time frame of three months plus a few days. The family's eldest brother assumes the role of Pujari. Pujari needs to abide by certain regulations, such as not eating meat or drinking alcohol, preparing his own meals while on duty, consuming food and water for after pooja, and not touching ladies, among other things. He learns the Sandhya Mantra by rote and practice, but Pujari refused to reveal it. After taking a morning bath as a sign of purification, the Pooja starts his duties.¹⁴

Daily Pooja is performed thrice in a day. There are three separate steps of every day Pooja which are Patri pooja (offering leaves and flowers: Patram Pushpam), Akshat pooja (offering rice: Chaval Japna), and Dhoop Dena (offering of incense). The Patri pooja begins with offering seasonal leaves of Chhamra and Panja (Prunus cerasoides), marigold and Nargis flowers which grow in abundance in the Kungwari (garden) of the Mahasu. Offering the Patri is subject to seasonal variation. Chhamra grows like a grass in fields and fallow land and is available plenty. To collect and wash the patri (leaves and flowers) is the duty of Poojari on duty. In place of Diya (an oil lamp), the burning Chhiluka (a stick of pinewood) is used for the Pooja. The doors of Grabhgriha get closed in between while the various rituals are done, with water, rice and ghee. An incense holder is also rotated while pooja, where incense is prepared with the local herbs. The music of Bajgi gets higher and higher while Pooja. The Pooja ends up with the distribution of Prasad of soaked rice in ghee which are first offered to Bajgis then to the temple staff sitting at Thanori and last to the other devotees. Burning Chhiluka is kept on a plate and also touched by the devotees and on the same plate leaves and rice soaked in ghee are there as prasad which is taken on fist and put on the forehead in place of crimson kumkum. Rice Ghee tilak is the main especial ritual of this temple. After pooja springling of holy water is done by Poojari with leaves of the Prunus cerasoides commonly known as Paja or Pahhiya and Padam. This plant is regarded as sacred and is conserved for religious purposes. The plant is reputed to possess a high therapeutic value and is prescribed for the management of skin diseases. It helps in improving skin complexion due to its Pitta balancing nature.¹⁵ Only the white Nargis (Narcissus poeticus) flowers, which have a pleasant scent, are offered to Mahasu. These flowers are mainly collected from the mini garden of temple compound. It was originally customary for the wild pigs to visit this location during the rainy season on an annual basis in order to root the soil. Unfortunately, the Devta cursed a Rajput family member who killed the pig. Every monsoon season since then, the Rajput family has been plowing here with music, and all of the temple's members take part in this.¹⁶

In its societal existence and in relation to its believers, a Devta tends to be multidimensional and multifaceted. Mahasu, too is one but many. Like Lord Ram, Mahasu too has four brothers - Bashik, Pavasik, Botha and Chalda. But, Mahasu brothers are uterines (Sahodar in Hindi). Not only, conceptually, Mahasu carries many but divergent facets. These facets are symbolized by epithets, with each epithet meaningfully indicating sacred and/or profane aspects of Mahasu. Two Bajgi brothers Lal Das and Madan Das who have dictated and published a booklet titled Char Masu. They refer Mahasu is Masu and Masu means eater of flesh (mas in Hindi) Mahasus are Masus who ate the flesh (mas) of the demons (Rakshas) they killed. Mahasu is thus a combial Devta. On the other hand Mahasu can be derived as 'Maha' means great in Sanskrit and Hindi + 'Su' means devta in Kinnauri. This signifies Mahasu's antiquity which peeps out through the confluence of ethnography, ethanology and linguistic paleontology.¹⁷ The Jaunsari, who give the most importance to the culturally built supernatural world, think that the Devta is protecting them and their main goal is to uphold Dharma. They are invisible in their surroundings, in meadows, streams, woods, shrines—everywhere. The idea of Hawa (air) provides an explanation for Devta's existence. The vigilant nature of the Devta makes them omnipresent; they keep a continual watch over humans, but they also have a tendency to sleep during the night, when bad forces rule the planet. Mahasu Devta observes not only what people do, but also their reasons, ideas, and intentions.¹⁸

As per the folklore, Mahasu Devta has four aspects, described as four brothers. The most important form of Mahasu Devta is located in Hanol (Botha Mahasu); the other three incarnations of Pabasi, Basik, and Chalda Mahasu are moved throughout the region in cycles of six months, six years, and twelve years respectively. Five villages, Chattra, Puttarh, Nenus, Baaghi, and Maindrath, which are near the Mahasu temple

at Hanol, were once given to Mahasu by the Raja of Sirmaur. A custom that built hierarchical connections between sovereigns was the exchange of gifts between kings, much like the offering and receiving of hospitality. Following custom, land records for the gifted towns were immediately destroyed because keeping track of gifts handed away would have been equivalent to holding out the possibility of future claims. Mahasu did not like the idea of a claim like that, even if it came from several generations later, and it might even incite his wrath. In a desperate attempt to unite his shattered kingdom, the Raja of Tehri began to claim the settlements as part of his domain as the villages were handed as a dowry to the Sirmour Raja's by his ancestors. They had been given to Mahasu by the Sirmaur monarchs.¹⁹

Mahasus are not the only devtas though they are dominant like Raja. The Devtas of all India pantheon like Parashuram, Ganesh and Shiv are in a way caste free, though they are mainly worshipped by higher castes.²⁰ The Mahasu empire is divided into two halves by mountain rivers, such as the Tons, with the Pandavas making up the upstream part and the Kauravas making up the downstream half.²¹ The area's folklore has strong ties to the Mahabharata era and continues to have an impact on the high altitude region's culture. The close ties the locals have to the Mahabharata mythology are among the fascinating aspects of their sociocultural existence. The villagers hold the belief that the brave Pandavas of Mahabharata lived out their covert banishment in this area, forming amorous and antagonistic bonds with the locals. The name Sathi-Pashi, where Sathi is the word for Kaurav and Pashi is the word for Pandav, refers to this region. Those who were friendly with the Pandavas became known as Panshi, while those who were antagonistic against them were referred to as Shathi.²² For about twelve years, the moiety Sathi and Pansi get to welcome and host their divine monarch. During this time, the divine king either makes his way through the moieties' territory or holds court in this temple. Similar to Hanol on the bank of Tons, Mahasu temples are typically found where these subdistricts or land divisions converge because both are easily accessible from there.²³ The Panshi Vazir, in the Mahasu kingdom, is a Panwar Rajput. Panwar Vazir from Panshi received help from Tehri, a neighboring human kingdom, since Tehri's kings are also Panwars. On the other side of the Tons river, the Rana of Sathi shared political affinities with the rulers of Sirmour. On opposing sides of the Tons, the two human kingdoms offered assistance to Mahasu Vazirs. According to legend, Una Bhat, a Brahman priest tasked with obtaining the Mahasu from Kashmir, was engaged by the ruling Ranas of Sathi. However, Vishnu, a god who had been tricked into leaving his palace, was the one who was served by the Panwars. Una Bhat asked the four Mahasu brothers to take against the demon Kirmir, who resided in the middle of Tons, close to the village of Maindrath. After eliminating the demon's fear from the area and claiming their right to control it, Mahasu discovered that the Maindrath domain was insufficient. They were guided by Una Bhat to Vishnu's neighboring domain, which is ruled from Hanol.²⁴

The colonial archives show that in 1829, Major Fredrick Young visited the Hanol temple of Mahasu in an attempt to resolve a protracted land dispute between the human kings of Tehri state and their chieftains. More doubtful about divine kingship than his predecessor by a century, W.H. Emerson, the administrator of the Shimla hill states in 1911, felt compelled to address matters of revenue and temple construction with the divine king personally.²⁵

Mahasu temple a centre of faith healing

Illness is the most unpredictable human state. Every culture has its own methods for classifying and diagnosing illnesses, providing remedies or reducing suffering and predicting how the illnesses will likely turn out. Disease and illness are personal biological reactions that are primarily influenced by cultural concepts that people acquire through socialization. Like the rest of the globe, medical beliefs and practices are significant to every culture. This is also true in India. Human culture has developed a flexible approach to combat illness. A large complex of knowledge, beliefs, procedures, roles, norms, values, ideologies, attitude, customs, rituals, and symbols that integrate to form a mutually reinforcing and supporting system have been acquired by men in their quest to discover how to treat disease.²⁶ Mahasu, who is very popular in Jaunsar Bawar and the adjoining Himachal area due to his amazing medicinal qualities and is known as a healer or Vaidya, has had an impact on the political, social, and cultural life of this hilly region. Mali of the Mahasu is the way to reach directly to the Devta and he can predict the past present and future with rice and have power to sort out the health and social issues of the people. Childless couples get Beej (rice seeds) by the Mali and their wish of child is fulfilled. Many childless couples come here, according to Madan Nautiyal, and wish is fulfilled. For an extended period, his family has been employed here, and one of his city-dwelling cousins had no issue and this couple sought out the

greatest tests, medical care, and other support as a result, but to no avail. Four years before they went to the Mahasu, they were fortunate to have a boy child, adds Pt. Madan Nautiyal.²⁷

In particular, every society has a theory of disease and an effective treatment for it. This is carried out by a medical system, which is essentially the art of society. The collection of medicines is made up of these cultural practices, methods, techniques, and substances embedded in a matrix of values, traditions, beliefs, and patterns of ecological adaptation that provide a means of maintaining health and preventing or ameliorating disease and injury in its members. Of the many medical systems that are available, ethano medicine is one that is widely used by different cultures, whether they are Adivasis or members of other social groups. Ethano medicine deals with indigenous medical contributions and is commonly referred to as folk medicine, popular medicine, etc. Its native characteristics include a wide range of folk taxonomy of diseases, magic, religion, and various remedies. the function of ethnomedical specialists and the connection between medical occurrences and sociocultural context. Even though they are powerful, these Devta cannot dwell in human form, which is a lower order existence in terms of purity. However, they do express themselves through the Mali media. The Mali stands in for the Mahasu Devta are carefully chosen people who likewise take care to maintain their purity in order to prevent the reigning Devta from becoming defiled. Mali are one of the healers of the Jaunsari community. Therefore, the Mali are also known as the Dor, or vehicle of the Devta, who chooses a vehicle for a person who is capable of inducing the spirit of the Devta within themselves when necessary. The Devta then incarnates over the Mali, causing them to enter a state of altered consciousness known as divination. Any person who is undergoing incarnation is referred to as the divine form and is said to be the Devta in person.²⁸

The temple dedicated to Narayan or Lord Vishnu

The seated Botha Mahasu, the celestial King devoted to the Hanol temple, rules both the Sathi and the Pashi regions. The moments the four brothers spend with their different spending zones construct a mental mandala in which the King is the core of existence. Palanquin construction and the rail layout, which centres around the Hanol temple, are two instances of the pattern's appearance at various scales. As a result, Hanol continues to be Mahasus' major agency. This central axis has two factions on either side that host the celestial king alternately. This temple predates Mahasu's visit. In a Harul of Una Bhat (Harul means a long song which comes close to the ballad) also describes Mahasu as Raja and a form of Narayan. Narayan is a prominent Devta of Mahabharata Katha. Narain, as Devta, has tended to persist and has to persist and has diffused almost all over India and worshipped in many forms and religions. This associates with Mahasu with prominently dominant ancient Narain cult. But Mahsu is also believed in and worshipped as Ragunath (an epithet of Ram) and as Thakur (Lord, owner).²⁹ Nag cult has been since antiquity on this region and the Naga deities were renamed as Narayan. It is thought that these Naga Devta have certain mystic magical tendencies. Many of the indigenous Naga deities have undergone transformation and lost their traditional identities. Under the extraneous influences, Budhhist and Brahmanic, the traditional cultic system has been completely shaken and disturbed in this area. Mahasu's evolution from Su to Mahasu and Mahashiva, along with his epithets of Narain, Raghunath, Deva and Thakur indicate that the epic of Mahasu, probably composed somewhere in medieval period, is overlaid with Mahasu's valour and expression of Bhakti towards Mahasu as Raja Devta.³⁰ The Mahasu temple is dedicated to Narayan (Vishnu) was built by the Pandavas during Mahabharata period and the mythical figure of Vishnu was none other than Lord Vishnu himself, claims Madan Nautiyal. Since the Pandavas were usually accompanied by Lord Krishna, this is the Panshi-Sathi region. This temple is a Sidhhapeeth because, if the Pandavas had built it, their mentor Lord Krishna would have undoubtedly stepped here, he further adds.³¹

Conclusion

The original Naga or Narayan cult system in this pargana has been severely skillfully distorted the traditional identities of many of the Naga deities by weaving Brahmanic stories and legends about their origin upended and upset by outside forces, in Brahmanic and Buddhist dominance. The temple existed here before Mahasu or since the Mahabharata period and devoted to Narayan and Vishnu. Narayan cult was the cult of elite class while the Shaiv and Buddhism was popular among the common people. Both the Buddhist and the Shaivites were never comfortable with the Narayan cult. In his divinity, Mahasu rules supremely over the many native gods and goddesses in addition to serving as the solitary arbitrator over humans. The temple collects the revenue as per the budget of the farmers in form of cash and kind which is used by the temple authority for the

people's welfare during the time of adversity like famine etc.. Mahasu is a great healer whose presence can be felt in his deity dom and Malis are his representatives. If we relate its narrative to legend, Lord Shiva never had four brothers the only Lord Vishnu had four brothers. This spiritual and healing centre is basically Ayodhya of Central Himalaya where four brothers in various form of Mahasu govern the hilly area. Mahasu temple, in fact, is a Vishnu temple was built by Pandavas. The rivalry between Sathi and Panshi led to the creation of the myths around Mahasu. The supremacy of Lord Vishnu was not undisputed in the region as Lord Krishna was in favour of Pandvas. Later in the sixth century, it was highly influenced by the Mahayan. Mahasu's sovereign dominates in his periphery of Jaunsar, Sirmaur and Shimla. Mahasu's deep reverence and trustworthiness contribute to his increasing reputation as a champion of justice for the general good.

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