



MAHASU CULT OF JAUNSAR-BAWAR AREA, UTTARAKHAND (INDIA) AND NARGIS PLANT (*NARCISSUS TAZETTA* L.)

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ABSTRACT

Uttarakhand (India) is considered the abode of gods or Devbhumi. Mahasu is one of the superintending deities of the Jaunsar-Bawar area of Uttarakhand. In the Jaunsar-Bawar, Mahasu is considered not only the deity but also worshiped as the administrative lord. As per the folklores, it is believed that the deity came from Kashmir, India, centuries ago. This study is aimed to document the plants and plant parts used in the different rituals of the Mahasu deity. Another objective of the study is to find a connection between the history of the botanical expansion of the Nargis plant and the migration theory of the Mahasu brothers. There are 20 plant species that are used in the different rituals of the deity. *Narcissus tazetta* is considered one of the sacred species among the community. The botanical history of the expansion of *Narcissus tazetta* in the Indian Himalaya and Uttarakhand supports the claim of the community that the deity Mahasu arrived in the Jaunsar-Bawar area from the Kashmir region of India. People use mostly local plant products in the different rituals of the deity. The study interconnects and supports the narratives of the folklores with the botanical information. Thus, provide a novel approach to understanding folk knowledge pertaining to the migration of a deity or community by tracing the migration of plant and animal species mentioned in the legends.

Keywords: Char Mahasu, Folk tradition, Jaunsari culture, Traditional rituals, Tribal deity

INTRODUCTION

Uttarakhand is one of the mountainous states of India. The state encompasses diverse geographical locations and houses people of different ethnic community. Jaunsari tribe is one of the tribe inhabited in the state. The Jaunsari people reside in the Jaunsar-Bawar area of district Dehradun. Jaunsar-Bawar area is bordered on the south by the Dehradun valley, on the west by the Himachal Pradesh and on the north and east by the Tehri Garhwal and Uttarkashi districts. River Yamuna make boundary of this area with Doon valley and Tehri Garhwal district, river Tons separate the area from Uttarkashi district and Himachal Pradesh. Jaunsar-Bawar area has hilly terrain with elevation ranges from 550–2500 m. Agriculture is main source of livelihood the people. Apart from traditional agriculture of rice, wheat, pulses etc. the people of the area now shifted to the cultivation of the cash crops as apple, tomato, zinger, pea etc. The area is known for unique customs and cultural practices (Singh 1997; Chantia 2003; Thapliyal 2003; Rana 2011).

Peoples of the Jaunsar-Bawar area follow the Hindu tradition and the area fall under schedule tribe category. Mahasu is the superintendent deity of the Jaunsar-Bawar and considered as the ruler of the area. As per the folk tradition, Mahasu are four brothers *i.e.* Botha, Pabasi, Bashik and Chalda and hence the area is ruled by the four Mahasu (*Char Mahasu*). Hanol is epicenter of the Mahasu cult and situated at the right bank of the river Tons. Temple of Botha Mahasu is situated at Hanol (Fig. 1. a). People from the Jaunsar-Bhawar and nearby areas of Uttarkashi district and Himachal Pradesh visit Hanol to pay homage to the deity. Temple of Hanol is built in Kushana layout pattern. Mahasu cult is unique entangled association of Shaivism, legends of Mahabharata and indigenous customs. Before the influence of the Shaivism, this locality was considered a centre of the Vajrayan Buddhist tradition (Nand and Kumar 1989; Jaina 1995; Hāṇḍā 2001; Shalev 2015; Ohri 2021). As per the folklores, it is believed that the Mahasu brothers came to the Jaunsar-Bawar area from the Kashmir, India. Some people also believe that Nargis plant (*Narcissus tazetta* L.) also played a pivotal role in this

folk legend. Aim of the present study is to find the connection of botanical history of Nargis plant and migration theory of the Mahasu brothers. The study is also focused on to document information about the plants and plant parts being used in the different rituals of deities, Mahasu brothers.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study area

Field survey was conducted in the Juansar-Bawar area of Uttarakhand (India). The study area is rural tribal. For the present study, temples of Hanol, Maindrath, Thadiyar, Daseu, Raigi, Anu, Bhoot etc. was visited from February 2022-July 2025. Semi-structured interviews of priests, their associates and other old persons of the villages were conducted to document data about origin of Mahasu cult, folklores, traditional rituals, uses of different plant in the rituals and other associated traditional knowledge. 100 people were interviewed for the study 70 people are of more than 50 age group including 50 males and 20 females. Priests and their associated are males hence more males were favored in the study. But females are also interviewed to access their version of the folk legend. The study further includes, 20 people of 30 to 50 age group (including 15 males and 5 females); 10

people of 15 to 30 age group (including 5 males and 5 females). Old people are more aware about their traditional and cultural practices hence; more old age persons are included in the study. Before interviewing the informants, oral prior consent has been taken from participants.

Data analysis

Information provided by informant was cross verified with information recorded from other inhabitants. On the basis of this, common information was documented and variation accepted by small majority is also highlighted in the parenthesis. For textual information related to the Mahasu cult, Nand and Kumar (1989), Jaina (1995), Hāṇḍā (2001), Thapiyal (2003), Rana (2011), Shalev (2015), Ohri (2021) were also referred. Plant of the *Narcissus tazetta* collected from the garden of Maindrath Temple Complex (Fig. 1. b, d). This garden is considered as cradle site of Mahasu brothers. Plants species was identified as per Ji, and Meerow (2000), Straley and Utech (2003), Wunderlin (2025) and regional flora by Agarwal (2017). For the correct scientific names of the species POWO (2025) was followed.



Figure 1. a. Hanol temple complex; b. Maindrath Temple; c. Plant of Nargis; d. Field considered as cradle of the Mahasu ; e. Flower of Nargis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Origin of Mahasu:

There are various folklores associated with the origin of the Mahasu cult. One major folk stated that once upon a time, there was a priest named Huna Bhat resides in the Maindrath village of Jaunsar-Bawar along with his family. Huna Bhat had only son



(some legends believe he had seven sons and the story is about the last son). A demon called Kirmir or Kirmar used to devour and harass the people of the area. In order to protect the people from the wrath of Kirmir, all villagers agreed to send a person everyday from each house to pacify hunger of Kirmir. Once there was turn of the Huna Bhat family, to send a person to the Kirmir. In that fine morning, Huna Bhat and his wife (Kirtaka (some says Kailawati)) visited the nearby river Tamasa (presently known as Tons) to take bath and fetch water. Kirmir attacked them and said, offer their son to him. Kirtaka murmured the name of the Mahasu for the help. After hearing name of the Mahasu, a local deity Sherkudia (one of the minister of the Mahasu) appeared and freed couple from the Kirmir. Sherkudia then advised the Huna Bhat to visit Kashmir and request Mahasu for their help. Huna Bhat visited the Kashmir and performed penance to please Mahasu. In Kashmir, Huna Bhat got to know that Mahasu is association of four deities. All four Mahasu were pleased with the penance of the Huna Bhat and granted him boon that they will arrive in the Jaunsar-Bawar. Mahasu also gave him a basket of propagules of nargis plant (*Narcissus tazetta* L.). After performing the rituals (*Yajyan*) the propagules were to be shown in the field with golden plough in the forenoon (04 am) of next seventh day (some people says on the seventh sunday).

Huna Bhat couldn't wait for 04 am and ploughed the field before 04 am (some people says he ploughed the field on the 6th day/sunday). This mistake eclipsed the venture of the four Mahasu. Out of the four Mahasu brothers, three *i.e.* Botha, Basik and Pabasi were injured by blade of plough at nee, eye and ear respectively and became lame, blind and deaf. The fourth brother Chalda Mahasu ploughed at right time and had normal physique. Subsequently, all four brothers along with their mother Devladi, killed the demon Kirmir and established their rule over Jaunsar-Bawar and nearby areas. Hanol was the capital of Mahasu. Since then, the inhabitants of area worship Mahasu as their lord and Jaunsar-Bawar administered by Mahasu rule.

Nargis plant (*Narcissus tazetta* L.) and origin of Mahasu

The story of origin of Mahasu was intriguing to me being a student of botany, because plant Nargis (*Narcissus tazetta* L.) is also one of the characters of

the story. Interestingly, in the field which is considered cradle site of Mahasu brothers the Nargis plant (locally known as Nagras) is still grown. Every year, in the second week of August (27th day of the Shravan month) people perform a ritual called Ropani, to sow the bulbs of the Nargis from same field in the same field. Local people say, they are cultivating this plant since generation from the old propagules present there. In the particular day when Ropani is being done, the people do not eat anything throughout the day. Being a sacred plant, no one is allowed to visit the garden, pluck the flower or bulb of the plant. The plant blooms in the month of November-February and flowers are offered to deity and thereafter distributed among the devotees as *Prasad*.

Narcissus tazetta is bulbous geophyte belongs to the Amaryllidaceae family of Angiosperms. The species is considered native to Canary Islands, Mediterranean, Pakistan, South-East China to Japan. In the Himalaya, this species is believed to be introduced (POWO, 2025). This species is considered to be originated in the Iberian Peninsula and the adjacent areas of present-day North Africa, from there with the eastward movement of the man the species was distributed in the nearby areas. In India (especially in Kashmir) this species is believed to be introduced by Mughals. Though, Ain-i Akbari of Abu L-Fazil mentioned the name of the flower; hence, it is also postulated that the species had been arrived Kashmir before arrival of the Mughals. *N. tazetta* var. *chinensis* is common variety of the species found in the Kashmir contains 30 chromosomes (triploid, X=10) similar to the variety found in the China (Sacred Chinese Lily), Japan and Uzbekistan. It further suggest alternated introduction route of the species from China or central Asia. During Mughal realm this species was famous for its scented flowers (Willis, 2012). Straley and Utech (2003) mentioned that the species is naturalized in Kashmir. Whether introduced or native, the species is flourishing well in the Kashmir since centuries and also developed substantial genetic diversity (Mohammed et al. 2020). Over period of time, the species moved eastward in the Himalaya. It has been reported growing naturally in some places of Himachal Pradesh (Chandel et al. 2010). Thus; Himachal Pradesh is the eastern limit of natural population of this species in the Himalaya. In the Uttarakhand, this species is grown as an

ornamental plant that has been popularized in the last few decades and not mentioned in the regional flora by Agarwal (2017). Historicity of Mahasu story that the deity came from Kashmir can have some ground by the presence of the Nargis plant in Jaunsar area. Though, genetic study of the plants for genetic diversity and lineage history is needed for the further confirmation

Botanical Description of the *Narcissus tazetta*

Bulbs ovoid. Leaves linear, shiny, 20–45 cm × 6–15(–20) mm, apex obtuse. Flower solitary or 4–5 flowered umbellate, involucre membranous, flowering stem equal to or shorter than leaves. Flowers fragrant, pedicels unequal, perianth 6, 2–4 cm wide; perianth tube 1.5–2 cm, white, linear-ovate to oblanceolate, 1–2 × 0.5–1 cm, apex acute; corona yellow, cup-shaped, 3–5 × 5–10 mm, apex crenulate to crispate. Stamen 06 (03 small up to 1 cm, staminode), (03 large 1.5–2 cm fertile) not exerted. Style slightly exerted into mouth of corona (Fig. 1 c, e).

Rituals of the Mahasu

Mahasu cult followed unique reverence procedure of deity. In the temples of the other Hindu deities prayer (arti) is usually offered twice; one before dawn (brahm Muhurta, 04:00 am onwards) and other after dusk (sandhya Kal, 06:00 to 07:00 pm). While in the temples of the Mahasu cult, everyday prayer (arti) is offered only once at evening (04-05 pm); apart from this priests offer prayer called Sandaul around 10:00-10:30 pm and temple closed for the night. In the morning, priests light the lamp (deepak) around 05:00-06:00 am, clean the idols and palanquin of the deity and the process is called prabhat. All the subordinates of the priest *i.e* bhandari's assists the priest while *Bajgi's* plays the drums (dhool). During whole rituals of the deity, priests chant the traditional hymns in local language (jaunsari). These hymns are orally passing from generations among the families of the priests. The plants based products used in the daily rituals or special rituals of the deities are summarized in the Table 1. Apart from these plant species *i.e* various seasonal flowers (marigold, dahlia, roses, etc.) and fruits/grains (apple, peach, pear, plum, walnut, rice etc.) are offered to the deity.

Table 1. Plants based products used in the daily rituals or special rituals of the Mahasu

Botanical name	Common name	Plant name	Parts used	Remark
<i>Triticum aestivum</i> L.	Gehun	Wheat	Grain flour	Grain flour is roasted in clarified butter to make <i>Churma</i> . It is offered to deity after <i>Arti</i> . In some temples <i>Halwa</i> from the roasted flour is also prepared and offered to the deity.
<i>Oryza sativa</i> L.	Chawal	Rice	Whole grain	Whole grain is dipped into the clarified butter and offered to deity. Same also applied to the forehead of the devotees after prayer. Gains are also used by the oracles (<i>Mali</i>) for suggesting the advices to the devotees. Seedlings of the plants (<i>Loong</i>) are offered to the Mahasu before their plantation in the field.
<i>Artemisia vulgaris</i> L.	Pati, Chhamra	Mugwort	Leaves, twig	Leaves have some unique fragrance and offered to deity during prayer (<i>Arti</i>). Leaves are then distributed to the devotees. Fresh leaves are mixed with clarified butter and used for aroma (<i>Dhoop</i>). Fibers from the fresh leaves are used as alternative of cotton to lighten the lamp (<i>Deepak</i>) on certain day for <i>Sherkudia maharaj</i> .
<i>Cocos nucifera</i> L.	Nariyal	Coconut	Fruit	Usually dried fruit is offered to deity by devotees.
<i>Santalum album</i> L.	Chandan	Sandalwood	Wood powder	Paste of the wood is applied to the idols and other symbols of the deity. Same is applied to the forehead of the devotees.
<i>Narcissus tazetta</i> L.	Nagras	Nargis	Flower	Flowers are offered to the deity. This plant is linked to the story of origin of the deity; hence,



				has special status in the Mahasu Cult. Flowers are also decorated on the traditional hat.
<i>Rhododendron arboreum</i> Sm.	Burans	Rhodo dendron	Inflorescence	Inflorescence of the plant is offered to the <i>Chalda Mahasu</i> (Kuna temple) on the occasion of <i>Bishu mela</i>
<i>Hordeum vulgare</i> L.	Jau	Barley	Grain	Whole grain mixed with seed of sesame in the clarified butter and used to offer oblations in the sacrifices.
<i>Sesamum indicum</i> L.	Til	Sesame	Seeds	Seeds mixed with grains of barley in the clarified butter and used to offer oblations in the sacrifices.
<i>Mangifera indica</i> L.	Aam	Mango	Leaves, wood	Leaves are considered auspicious and used to sprinkle sacred water during the movement of symbols of deities. Wood is used as fuel (<i>Samwidha</i>) in the sacrifices.
<i>Ficus religiosa</i> L.	Peepal	Peepal	Leaves	Leaves are considered auspicious and used to sprinkle sacred water during the movement of symbols of deities.
<i>Prinsepia utilis</i> Royle	Bhikal	Himalayan Cherry Prinsepia	Twigs	Twigs are considered auspicious and used to sprinkle sacred water during the movement of symbols of deities. Dried twigs are also kept in the grain storage for prosperity
<i>Prunus cerasoides</i> Buch.-Ham. ex D.Don	Phaja	Wild Himalayan Cherry	Leaves, Twigs, Wood	Fresh leaves are mixed with clarified butter and used for aroma (<i>Dhoop</i>). Wood is used as fuel (<i>Samwidha</i>) in the sacrifices. Twigs are also considered auspicious.
<i>Zanthoxylum armatum</i> DC.	Teemur	Winged Prickly Ash	Stem, Twigs	Stem and Twigs used in different rituals. After invocation considered symbol of the deity.
<i>Pinus roxburghii</i> Sarg.	Chir	Pinus	Wood	Wood is used to ignite as a lamp locally known as <i>chida</i> in the nights of the <i>Bhadrpada</i> month. Bundles of the wood are ignited as a lamp on the occasion of the <i>Budi Deepawali</i> .
<i>Juglans regia</i> L.	Akhrot	Walnut	Fruit	Whole fruit or kernel of fruit mixed with other grains and offered to deity especially on the occasion of the <i>Budi Deepawali</i> and in the month of <i>Magha</i> .
<i>Vigna mungo</i> (L.) Hepper	Mas, Kali Dal	Urad bean	Seed	Seeds mixed with the rice grains or other grains used in different rituals.
<i>Cucurbita maxima</i> Duchesne	Kaddu	Pumpkin	Fruit	In some rituals the fruit is used as alternative of animal sacrifice
<i>Cynodon dactylon</i> (L.) Pers.	Dub	Common Lawn Grass	Stem	Leaves are considered auspicious and used to sprinkle sacred water
<i>Curcuma longa</i> L.	Haldi	Turmeric	Rhizome	Paste of the Rhizome applied to the deity

CONCLUSION

Mahasu is superintendent deity of the Janusar-Bhawar. The locals revered deity with the local

available plant resources. Among the 20 plants species mentioned for ritualistic practices only chandan and nariyal are of non-native origin and

imported from southern parts of India. On the basis of the folklores, it is believed that the deity Mahasu came to Jaunsar-Bhawar area from the locality of Kashmir, India. Presence of the *Narcissus tazetta* in the shrines and importance of the plant in the rituals set up some ground for this claim.

Main contribution of this study is to link the botanical knowledge with the folk legends and thereby supporting the traditional knowledge. Though, this study has certain limitations regarding precision of time related to the migration of the deity or the plant species. Those limitations can be addressed by further Anthropogenic studies and genetic studies of mentioned plant species.

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