

Tribes in Uttarakhand: Status and diversity

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Abstract

Tribes of Uttarakhand mainly comprise five major groups namely Jaunsari tribe, Tharu tribe, Raji tribe, Buksa tribe and Bhotiyas. In terms of population Jaunsari tribe is the largest tribal group of the state. Tribes of Uttarakhand represent the ethnic groups residing in the state. Every district of Uttarakhand has more or less a moderate percentage of tribal population. In the state of Uttarakhand, the main concentration of tribal population is in the rural areas. As per records, around 94.50 percent of total tribal population resides in rural areas and the remaining percentage of tribal population lives in urban centers. It is said that officially Uttarakhand is the home of around five tribes. These tribes of Uttarakhand have been scheduled in the Constitution of India. Historical records suggest that the tribes of Uttarakhand are earliest settlers of this region of North India. In the past, their main concentrations were confined to remote hilly and forested areas. The tribes of Uttarakhand have retained their age old traditional ways of living. They represent the distinctive culture and traits of a primitive life. Their traditional norms and socio-cultural practices determine their ethnicity. Officially Uttarakhand is home to as many as five tribes which have been scheduled in the Constitution of India, more than four decades back in 1967. I have often wondered at the bewildering diversity one witnesses in the habitat, population, ethnicity, socio-cultural norms and practices, modes of livelihoods, languages and dialects and their interactions both with each other and the rest of the inhabitants in their neighborhoods.

Keywords: Uttarakhand, Tribes, livelihoods, ethnicity, language, diversity, socio-cultural practices

1. Introduction

The Scheduled Tribes (STs) are official designations given to various groups of historically disadvantaged indigenous people in India. The terms are recognized in the Constitution of India and the various groups are designated in one or other of the categories. During the period of British rule in the Indian subcontinent, they were known as the Depressed Classes. In modern literature, Scheduled Tribes is used as an official term for Adivasis. The Scheduled Tribes comprise about 8.6 percent, respectively, of India's population (according to the 2011 census). and the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950 lists 744 tribes across 22 states in its First Schedule. Since independence, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes were given Reservation status, guaranteeing political representation. The Constitution lays down the general principles of affirmative action for SCs and STs. Officially Uttarakhand is home to as many as five tribes which have been scheduled in the Constitution of India, more than four decades back in 1967. I have often wondered at the bewildering diversity one witnesses in the habitat, population, ethnicity, socio-cultural norms and practices, modes of livelihoods, languages and dialects and their interactions both with each other and the rest of the inhabitants in their neighborhoods. Lest I am mistaken, or misread, led me hasten to add, that this is precisely the trait which reinforces their so-called 'tribal' characteristics and potential of survival, not in the Darwinian sense! of the last, they are arguably the fittest, of the homo sapiens inhabiting these parts of our country. The Jaunsaris, are the only ST Community which occupy the mid ground between the Turai –Bhabar, on the one hand, and the High Himalayas, at the other. The Jads and the High

Himalayas, at the other. The Jads and the so-called Bhotias, geographically what was once called 'Bhot' in British official documents, and from which they seemingly drew their present nomenclature. Bhot, the land along the Kali in the east, and the triangular shaped land straddling the High Himalayas has since time immemorial occupied by the various ethnic communities, today jointly known as the 'Bhotias'. The appellation Bhotias is a misnomer and not liked by the various communities to whom it is applied is a well known fact and an attempt which made by the Ministry of Home Affairs (SC&BCD Division) around late seventies was later dropped as it was feared that such a move might open a Pandora's box and frustrate the main objective. It might be noticed, however, that, the various communities presently covered under the rubric of 'Bhotia' have indeed suffered being addressed mistakenly purely on account of their habitat, viz was called 'Bhot' by the early British administrators.

Tribes of Uttarakhand represent the ethnic groups residing in the state. Every district of Uttarakhand has more or less a moderate percentage of tribal population. In the state of Uttarakhand, the main concentration of tribal population is in the rural areas. As per records, around 94.50 percent of total tribal population resides in rural areas and the remaining percentage of tribal population lives in urban centres. It is said that officially Uttarakhand is the home of around five tribes. These tribes of Uttarakhand have been scheduled in the Constitution of India. Historical records suggest that the tribes of Uttarakhand are earliest settlers of this region of North India. In the past, their main concentrations were confined to remote hilly and forested areas. The tribes of Uttarakhand have retained their age old traditional ways of living. They

represent the distinctive culture and traits of a primitive life. Jaunsari is the largest tribal group in terms of population. But in terms of literacy rate the Bhotiyas stand first followed by Jaunsari tribe, Tharu tribe, Buksa tribe and Raji tribe. It is believed that numerically Uttarakhand has only 0.16 percent of the total tribal population of India. Tribes of Uttarakhand are found in almost all parts of the state. They lead the agrarian-pastoral way of life. Some are traders and migrate to distant places for earning a livelihood. Jaunsari tribe is the largest tribal group of Uttarakhand with more than 38.78 percent of the total population. The entire population of the state is scattered throughout the state with over 356 villages. Second largest tribal group of the state is the Tharu tribe. It accounts for around 32.50 percent of the total population of the state. They are scattered over 141 villages. Further, Bhotiyas also constitute a considerable portion of the state's total population. They are mostly found in Almora district, Chamoli district, Pithoragarh district and Uttarkashi district of the state. That are scattered over 291 villages. Next prominent tribal group of Uttarakhand is Buksa tribe. This tribal group constitutes around 13.67 percent of the total population. They are spread over 173 villages of mainly Nainital and Dehradun district. However, the main concentration of the Buksa tribe is found in Gadarpur, Ramnagar, Bajpur and Kashipur regions. Lastly, Raji tribe is the smallest tribal group of Uttarakhand. This tribal group constitutes around 0.27 percent of the total tribal population of the state. They are mostly confined in eight villages.

1.1 Status

Since the 1850s these communities were loosely referred to as Depressed Classes, with the Scheduled Tribes also being known as Adivasi ("original inhabitants"). The early 20th century saw a flurry of activity in the Raj assessing the feasibility of responsible self-government for India. The Morley–Minto Reforms Report, Montagu–Chelmsford Reforms Report and the Simon Commission were several initiatives in this context. A highly contested issue in the proposed reforms was the reservation of seats for representation of the Depressed Classes in provincial and central legislatures. In 1935, Parliament passed the Government of India Act 1935, designed to give Indian provinces greater self-rule and set up a national federal structure. The reservation of seats for the Depressed Classes was incorporated into the act, which came into force in 1937. The Act introduced the term "Scheduled Castes", defining the group as "such castes, races or tribes or parts of groups within castes, races or tribes, which appear to His Majesty in Council to correspond to the classes of persons formerly known as the 'Depressed Classes', as His Majesty in Council may prefer". This discretionary definition was clarified in The Government of India (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1936, which contained a list (or Schedule) of castes throughout the British-administered provinces.

After independence the Constituent Assembly continued the prevailing definition of Scheduled Castes and Tribes, giving (via articles 341 and 342) the president of India and governors of the states a mandate to compile a full listing of castes and tribes (with the power to edit it later, as required). The complete list of castes and tribes was made via two orders: The Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order,

1950 and The Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950, respectively.

1.2 Modes of Livelihoods

No criterion of diversity amongst the tribal groups of Uttarakhand surpasses what is reflected by the modes of livelihood followed by them. From pure pristine living off-the-forests, followed by the Ban Rajis, in the Saryu-Kali region, on the one extreme to the yearly 'transportation of goods' on the small-backs of goats and sheep, over the most difficult passes of High Himalayas, says it all. While the ups and downs of the 'trade through the land routes' have been extensively recorded in the Annual Reports of the British and post independence period, amazing exchanges of the surpluses of India with the surpluses of the western Tibet, have been recorded in various Revenue Assessment reports, the agrarian modes of livelihoods, of the tribes like Jaunsaris and Tharus are part of the mainland district reports. Land-based livelihoods suffered the onslaught of clearings of forests and dispossession of Tharus, mostly through the background of their relative backwardness and absence of any back-up to their exclusive dependence on land and forests. Forest clearings and reservation of forest tracts for the so-called public goods resulted in their deep economic distress, first leading to the inclusion as a Scheduled Castes, at one stage, and on their protests, later as a Scheduled Tribe of UP. Their exclusive dependence on land and forests is reflected in their highly developed skills in handicrafts / craftsmanship, angling and of late, agriculture. Monopoly of 'transportation' and ownership of the mode of transportation, viz. goats and sheep, over a unique land route negotiating various High Himalayan passes, as also the long acquaintance with the communities inhabiting the trans-Himalayan villages, remained the major source of livelihood for the main ethnic groups called the Bhotias and their support groups, who constituted the minority ethnic groups amongst them. Even amongst the Bhotias there existed two major sub-groups, the ones who engaged themselves in this trade and those who did not practice trade, but were classified as the 'agriculturist', the static and agrarian tribal groups, e.g. the Tolchas in the Niti valley and the Barpatias and others in the Johar valley. This so-called lucrative trade with Tibet was, as is well documented, a trade of sufferance i.e. if permitted by the government across the Himalayas. Opening of the Himalayas, especially after nearly four decades of British rule, say in post 1860s, on one hand the quantum and quality of this trans Himalayan transactions started evening up, being skewed in favor of the Johar route, and this also resulted in the Bhotias purchasing land in the southern pagans, thus gaining agrarian taste in livelihood. The nature of trade also indebted a large segment of the Bhotia traders and improvement in communication facilities also broad-banded the range of commodities. Jaunsaris have always been agriculturists par excellence, at least in the context of mountain agriculture. It has been little appreciated how advanced the Jaunsari tribal communities have been at agriculture and allied sectors like animal husbandry. Jaunsaris, their socio-cultural traditions, truly reflect their exclusive dependence on agriculture. They have, of course, also embraced services as a major source of livelihood, after their inclusion as one of the five Scheduled tribes in 1967. A whole range of woolen-products, produced almost in every house-hold and the skill being passed on from

generation to generation, became yet another source of livelihood in the Bhotia villages, especially those located in the higher reaches. Imported wool from Tibet contributed significantly to sustaining and constantly improving this line of livelihood. The range of wool –quality used, ranged from a very coarse Belchi end-cuttings to the finest, in the shape of pushmina wool. Further, it made every member of the Bhotia tribal community, male and female, young and old, engaged in one economic activity or the other. This kind of division of labour, sharing of labour, ensured not only the maximum deployment of human man-power, but also in skilling of both men and women in wool-based handicrafts, from sheep-rearing through to value addition to wool so produced locally or imported from Tibet. This broad-based and near universal existence of a skill, wool production to spinning, combing, carding, weaving was no small help, to hundreds of families during the worst economic distress period, i.e. 1959-1970s. For the Tharus and Buxas the various measures taken by way of protecting the environment, ever stricter forest enactments, brought in untold miseries, while the various land reform measures, like consolidation of holdings etc mostly remained on paper. However, various positive affirmative action's meant for the Scheduled Tribe, in the field of education, poverty alleviation; Tribal Sub-plan came handy and opening of the Tharu dominant areas have allowed them improving their economic condition. Ban Rajis and the Buxas, besides being the PTG, are as much monochromatic in their range of livelihoods as has been the case of their socio-cultural customs and practices. There is a clearly a nexus between the two.

1.3 Habits

They are, as it were, omnipresent. The Buxas, who along with the Tharus, populated the thick malarial forests of Turai Bhabar, suffered the brunt of 'development', right from the East India Company days, and they continue to be desolated and dispossessed of their habitat almost two hundred years later, now at the hands of the Uttarakhandis, including ironically the other well-to-do tribals. What a pity. Next to the Ban Rajis, I think, it is the Buxas who deserve the top most attention of our Government. Their human development indices are the worst and it is no wonder that the Government of India have included them as one of Primitive Tribes Group (PTG), as their population is diminishing very fast. Two distinct memories of my close encounter with them persists. First, when I visited one of their villages, majority of them could not suggest any development suggestion which could help them except to say that all they need is some kind of daily wage employment. Next, a village barely 15 kms away from Dehradun, consisting of Muslims and Buxa families, with a "illiteracy", not literacy, rate of more than 95 percent. Tharus, co-inhabitants of the Turai-Bhabar jungle tracts of yore, fell victim to their backwardness during the early days of the clearings and opening of the Turai jungles, eastward march by the enterprising Sikh farmers from the neighbouring Punjab, exploitation by some well to do class of UP feudal castes, retired ex-servicemen belonging to Almora and Naini Tal districts; and not the least to their own unfortunate habit of consuming spirits, an associated evil of backwardness, often touted and as a typical 'tribal trait' (strongly contested by many today). Most of the land so lost physically, though not legally, as no mutation post-1967, could be legally

executed, the problem of dispossession of Tharu lands in Udham Singh Nagar remains, a problem, a veritable thorn in the neck of any Government of the day. Consolidation of landholdings in the Kumaon Turai, a rapid land reform process, has remained stalled for the same reason. Taken together the dispossession and legal restoration of Tharu tribal land continues to remain a major political cum administrative problem of Uttarakhand Government. Tharus, have now become politically very strong and now it is up to their educated youth, to take the Tharu community forward. I was very happy to see a very impressive Tharu Vikas Bhawan at Khatima, during my recent visit to the place. Ban Rajis, are the other PTG, very small in number, spread over a few villages along the Kali and Gori confluence. They do now have a political representation in the State Assembly, thanks to an ironic twist of political reservation tangle for the Scheduled Tribes of Pithoragarh. Post 2012, when the fourth Assembly ST seat vanishes, the Ban Rajis stare back at their past situation. They also seem to lack an enlightened leadership from their own ranks, the only remedy for tribal populations' march towards development. The Jaunsaris, are the only ST community which occupy the midground between the Turai-Bhabar, on the one hand, and the High Himalayas, at the other. The Jads and the so-called Bhotias, occupy geographically what was once called 'Bhot' in British official documents, and from which they seemingly drew their present nomenclature. Bhot, the land along the Kali in the east, and the triangular shaped land straddling the High Himalayas has since time immemorial occupied by the various ethnic communities, today jointly known as the 'Bhotias'.

1.4 Socio-Cultural Norms and Practices

Socio-cultural practices and norms are obviously a factor of 'ethnicity', physical and socio-cultural habitat past and present mode of living of the tribal community under consideration. Ethnic back ground relates to the past history of evolution of the tribe and its subsequent journey through various geographical regions and its most abiding current traits often betray those experiences. On one extreme we have the most populous Tharus who believe in their migrations from the mainland of west-central India and subsequent mixture with the Indo-Nepal Turais, as they inhabit most of the Indo-Tibetan Turai, right from Tanakpur Khatima to the belt moving eastward; their stretched period of Holi celebrations recall those associations. On the other extreme are the various ethnic sub-groups put under the common rubric 'Bhotia', with most of their past associations stretching the regions beyond the High Himalayan passes, moulded and shaped by their common practice of transhumance and trans Himalayan trade. Quite distinct from the Huniyas or the Tibetans inhabiting the Satluj river-shed, the various ethnic minorities got forged, quite strongly so, by the harshest of climates humans could ever conceive of surmounting and surviving, their diversity is an eloquent testimony of social harmonization and social engineering. Several socio-cultural norms, observed in the various valleys (Ghatas) of Kumaon-Garhwal 'Bhot', indeed are indicative of their hoary associations, dating back to the pre-Buddhist period of western Tibet, or migrations from the erstwhile principalities or Kumaon-Garhwal or Western Nepal. Many past and current social practices and norms are an admixture of the

social customs and practices of the communities they came in contact with during their course of their existence through times. However, their most abiding socio-cultural customs and practices are, interestingly enough, their very own, not finding parallels in the regions which lie to their north or the south. These customs and social norms have evolved gradually and locally, compelled and driven by the harsh and remote habitats they were destined to inhabit and the mode of livelihood they were driven to assume for their very survival, over a period of a few generations. The socio-cultural practices of the second most populated tribal community, the Jaunsaris, are truly reflective of the kaleidoscopic heritage of the region, the Jaunsar-Bawur. The strongest of community led social practice and customary management, the Khat, has not only no parallel in the entire Uttarakhand, but has survived the evolution of a so-called modern panchayati raj. Many a social practices, gradually losing ground, like the joint –family system, polyandry hark back to the only historic period of our ancient history, the Mahabharat period. More importantly these practices are either present or were present in most of the mountainous communities, making tremendous economic sense in agriculturally deficient mountain regions. Culturally speaking studies have established that the Jaunsari culture truly represents the entire religious spectrum through which western India passed through. The Buxas, the Jads and the Ban Rajis appear to possess the minimal socio-cultural diversity witnessed in any tribal group. It is however, hoped that the two ‘vanishing’ tribal groups of Ban Rajis and Buxas, will soon have individuals from amongst their communities who will be in a position to share whatever diversity exists in these two groups. Nevertheless even this feature of their near monochromatic ‘diversity’ highlights and underscore the amazing diversity displayed by the five tribal groups of Uttarakhand.

1.5 Languages

To any outsider the languages and dialects used by the various tribal groups represent the most distinguishing and obvious characteristic of their amazing diversity. It is more intense in close quarters as we move upwards and the geographical divide heightens this diversity, both horizontally and vertically. After the first Linguistic Survey of India, completed by Dr. G.A. Grierson in 1905, it is only now after more than a century that we have authoritative insights into the tribal languages and dialects. Charles A. Sherring in 1907, drawing parallelly from Dr. Grierson’s Survey provide additional inputs on the Rangkas or Saukiya Khun (614), Byansi (1585), Chaudansi (1485), Darmiya (1781) and Bhotia or Huniya (820). Sherring’s account of 1907, differentiating the dialect of the Jethra’s of Goriphat and Malla Danpur, Tolchas of Niti-Mana, Marchas and Rawats of Johar were kept in one group whereas Darma-Byans and Chaudans were categorized in the second group. Rangkas or Saukiya Khun was used in Goriphat and some parts of Malla Johar. Writers have pointed out that Harkot of Goriphat, Namik of Talla Johar, Khaljhuni, Harkot, Kilpara and people inhabiting Chura gaon, were also found to speak a dialect different from the one used by the Barpatias, the aborigines of Goriphat. Even by 1907 the Tolchas-Marchas of Garhwal and Rawats of Johar had forgotten their original language and used simple Pahari. It has also been noticed that even the current Johari dialect has clear impact of Kumaoni and it includes words

drawn from Hindi, Tibetan, Nepali, English and even Urdu. Modern writers have also brought to notice that the Badi Mirasi and Natbhan consist of one sub-group of Kumaon-Garhwal, who practiced dancing and singing and moved with the Joharis spoke a language which was again distinct from Kumaoni, Tibetan, Darmi-Byansi or even Rangkas! Interesting and extremely valuable linguistic insights have recently been added with the publication of ‘Rung-Lwu’ or the dialect of Rung. Rung-Lwu, categorized under the Tibeto - Burmese family and a sub-group of Kirati is said to be used in both sides of the Himalayas, has a very rich literature and as it has no script it is a spoken language. A Dictionary of ‘Rung-Lwu’ (as spoken in Darma paragan, has words in ‘Darma Lwu’ which have been explained in Hindi, with their synonyms in ‘Vyankho Lwu’ or Byansi and ‘Bamba Lwu’ or Chaudansi dialect. Even a single language ‘Rung Lwu’, with its three streams of ‘Darma Lwu’, ‘Vyankho Lwu’ and ‘Bamba Lwu’ underscores both the richness and diversity of the linguistic spectrum displayed in extremely small pockets of tribal valleys. Similar detailed studies on the languages and dialects of Jaunsaris, Buxas, Ban Rajis one day, by some scholar from amongst these tribals groups, are bound to further enrich the already spectacular rainbow we have of the tribal dialects and languages. It goes without saying that this diversity has survived to the present times because of the relative inaccessibility of the various regions, which protected these dialects and languages. And as these languages and dialects preserve the origins and subsequent interactions with other groups with whom these tribal groups came into contact, the need to take immediate steps to document and preserve these diverse remains becomes as important as the need to retain and restore these tribal communities back to their pristine good –health. The bewildering diversity amongst the tribal groups of Uttarakhand is a heritage which has to be preserved at any cost and this is best done by the enlightened people emerging from amongst these groups. Tribal groups must nurture their conscientious leaders and they must promote the Gen Next to take over this onerous responsibility. There is no other alternative.

2. Conclusion

In Uttarakhand, there is sizeable population of tribals and the scheduled tribes. Here are Buxas, Bhotias, Tharus Jaunsaries and Rajis. These are spread over all the districts of Uttaranchal, but their major concentrations (94% population) are in district Udham Singh Nagar, Nainital and Dehradun. (Srivastava *et al.* 1997). There are different views about their origin and history. One view about their history is that they migrated from Rajasthan during prosecution of and settled in Tarai areas. There is another view that Buxas come from Mongolid stock and have nothing in common with people of up or Rajasthan. In appearance they are dwarf in stature, their face is very broad across the cheeks and their nose is depressed. Their eyes are small, the openings of eyelids being narrow linear and horizontal. The features of women are similar to horizontal those of men but they are more shapely. The complexion of both men and women is wheatish to dark wheatish. The religious belief of Buxas are basically Hindu. Uttarakhand is a state with tremendous traditional and cultural values. Apart of this it has also the strategic importance too. Tribal people suffer predominantly from the phenomenon of poverty induced migration, also known as forced migration.

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