

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **Challenges faced by the Bhotias for their livelihood and preservation of culture**

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**We frequently hear about the significance of cultural heritage. And while discussing humanitarian efforts, we might hear the phrase "cultural preservation." The term encompasses several activities surrounding maintaining ancient cultures from large nations all the way down to small indigenous tribes. However, the meaning of cultural heritage and its preservation needs to be ascertained. Heritage is an asset, something that is inherited or passed down from preceding generations and it does not consist of money or property, but of culture, values and traditions. Cultural heritage implies a shared bond and our belonging to a community which represents our history and identity; our bond to the past, to our present, and the future. While cultural preservation includes documenting and studying languages, preserving and restoring historic relics is significant to a culture or heritage; along with encouraging the preservation and use of indigenous or tribal languages and rituals. It has been evident that tribes play an indispensable role in preserving our rich and diversified cultural heritage which due to lack of awareness is dying day by day and if not being taken care of on immediate note, would become a notable loss for human beings. So, with the motto to save our culture from a gradual extinction, it is urgently necessary to overcome the challenges that come in the way of these tribes.**

**Key words:** Bhotia tribe, culture preservation, heritage.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Bhotiya or Bhotia are an occupational caste of shepherds involved in rearing of sheep's, goats and yak etc. Numbering around 120,000 people, they mainly live in the northern states of Uttarakhand, Ladakh (now a Union Territory), Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Tripura, Sikkim, Jammu & Kashmir, West Bengal and Arunachal Pradesh. The tribal people who are identified as Bhotias of U.P have their permanent home or 'Maits' in the upper reaches of seven different river valleys falling within the Uttarakhand division. The seven river valleys

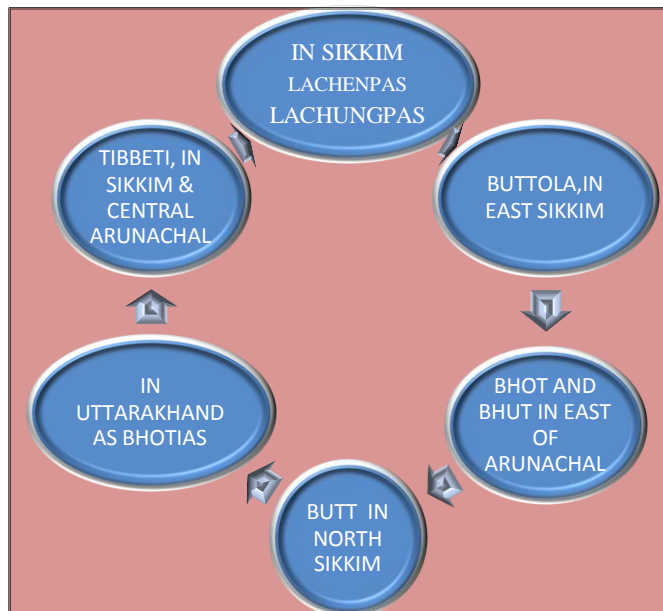
forming the homeland of the seven different tribal groups, are all called Bhotias (Figure 1).

### **Who are they?**

Their face features resembles the Mongolian people (Image 1) and they are called with the title 'Pahari' or 'Hill people'. Different authors and people in general gave different explanations for the etymology of the term Bhotia.

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**Figure 1.** Bhotias are known with different names in different areas.



**Image 1.** A typical Bhotia woman.

Regarding Bhotias, Atkinson, 1973<sup>1</sup> mentioned that when we pass to north of the great snowy peaks, we get among a different people, the Bhotiyas. “Bod” the native name for Tibet, corrupted by the people of India into “Bhot”, has given rise to the name “Bhotiya” for the border tribes between the two countries. Basically, the term „Bhotiya” refers to a territorial group dwelling in the

“Bhot” tract. The earliest scholars like Shering, Smith, and Pant (1935) etc. agreed that, “If a straight line is drawn between Askot and Kapkot, the area to the north of this line will constitute the region locally known as the “Bhot” or the Bhotiya tract which is entirely distinct from the remaining Southeastern portion of the rest. But this delineation excludes the Mana and Niti groups”. In fact, “the term “Bhotiya” stands for a generic term of several distinct ethnic groups, which share many features in

<sup>1</sup> Atkinson ET. Op. Cit. 368

**Table 1.** Population and proportion of Bhotia as per 2011 Census.

<b>Name of schedule tribe</b>	<b>Total population (2011)</b>
Bhotias	1214 (771 Male, 483 Female)

common, at the same time, each group also exhibits certain sets of distinctive features which may be unique for one or more groups but not shared by the rest<sup>2</sup>.

### **Origin**

The Bhotia's moved across into India when in 1962 the Indo-Tibetan border was closed. Their main trade was to sell local Tibetan merchandise to India and inside Tibetan border as well. They were basically the nomadic pastoralists who traded salt and wool between India and Tibet. With large caravans of yak and mules they travelled to Tibet with Indian goods when the snow melted and bartered the goods for local Tibetan merchandise to be sold in India.

Their name Bhotia is derived from the word bhot which means Buddha. They are also called with different name as Bot, Bhotiya and Butia.

### **Distinct characteristics**

#### **Population size and distribution**

According to the 2011 Census, a total of 39,106 Bhotia population with Scheduled Tribe status has been recorded (Table 1). Out of the total population, 37,873 were Hindu and 1,100 were Buddhist. The most popular languages among the Bhotia are Kumauni (13,150 speakers), Bhotia (7,592), Garhwali (5,765), Halam (5,300) Hindi (5,809), and Rongpa (481). There were a total of 510 births in 2010, corresponding to a birth rate of 13.04 per 1,000 (2001)<sup>2</sup>. Before the partition of the State of Uttar Pradesh in Uttaranchal and U.P in Year 2000, the Bhotias were given special status.

#### **Language**

The Bhotias have been seen speaking different dialects in the states they reside in. For instance, in Sikkim they speak Boti, Rongba in Uttarakhand and Almora in Kumaon.

#### **General occupation**

The Bhotias are shepherds, goat herders and farmers.

They card and spin the wool for weavers to make into blankets, shawls, caps, socks and sweaters etc. At home the women knit jumpers, gloves, hats and socks for males and females with different designs which they sell locally. Some are involved in selling gems (coral and turquoise) and herbs. They also sell the products listed below.

Products mostly sold by the community are:

- (i) Herbal medicines.
- (ii) Fragrance based herbs for tea (Image 3).
- (iii) Thawe (kala jeera or caraway seeds).
- (iv) Hand woven Woolens.
- (v) Kwacho (Sakwa): Another wild herb, which grows abundantly in the lands of Bhotia. This is also used in dal and with fried vegetables.

Image 4 shows the researcher herself observing the selling of the Bhotia products.

#### **Staple cereals**

Rice, wheat and maize are their staple cereals which are eaten with the meat, usually sheep, pork, goat and poultry. Alcohol is prohibited but marijuana and hash is commonly used. Marijuana or Bhang as it is called locally grows wild in the region and is used as a readily available intoxicant. Bhang in Hindu mythology is associated with Lord Shiva who uses it to keep the world safe from his anger.

During Holi and Mahashivratri festivals, bhang (a mixture of ground marijuana leaves in milk) is distributed to everyone. Butter tea, a drink made by them from fermented barley or millets is served in religious ceremonies and social occasions.

#### **Literacy levels**

The level of literacy is very low in both rural and urban areas. Most of the Bhotia family cannot afford to send their children to school and require their help at home, with the goats and sheep or in the family business. The medical facilities are not available especially in the remote hilly regions of Uttaranchal and Himachal, and where available, they use both indigenous and modern medicines. Bhotias are quite open to family planning provided at least one son is born in the family.

<sup>2</sup> Uttaranchal. Data Highlights: The Scheduled Tribes. Census of India 2001.



**Image 2.** Traditional Bhotia home.



**Image 3.** Bhotia fragrance based herbs for tea.

### ***Housing***

A traditional Bhotia home is rectangular in shape, although they also make a triangular slope over the

house to save it from rain and snowfall (Image 2). For offering prayers to the deities they have stone shrines outside their houses where they burn incense made of pine and dried scented leaves of rhododendron that grow



**Image 4.** The researcher personally observing the selling of the Bhotia local products.

in the region.

### **Family structure**

As part of their family structure, the Bhotias live in both joint and nuclear families. The paternal property in their culture is inherited by the sons equally. The eldest son succeeds the late father as the Karta, that is, head of the family. Bhotia women enjoy lower status than men. The lower status of women in comparison to men shows prevalence of 'Patriarchal Family' system in Bhotia Community. The women attend to all household tasks including, as in rural areas collecting fuel and fodder and fetching of water. They also card wool, spin yarn, do beautiful embroidery, knitting and weaving and actively participate in social and religious ceremonies. But, now by seeing more of the Silver Generation<sup>3</sup> existence in Mana, it is evident that the younger generation is migrated permanently due to lack of job availability in the region. Only Silver Generation is shouldering the responsibility of cultural perseverance.

### **Customs**

Marriages are arranged by negotiation between parents and other elders of the two families. Practice of dowry is prevalent in Bhotias but in goods only. They have rich oral tradition of folk songs, dances and tales that they

often share with other communities. "Chhura" is a popular dance in which an experienced old young man teaches a young shepherd the secrets of doing trade effectively. But due to migration this culture of Bhotia is also on the verge of decline.

### **Culture**

The Bhotia worship all the major gods and goddesses of Hinduism as well as various regional, village and family deities. In Uttarakhand, the Bhotia have a mix of beliefs including superstition, amulets for good luck, curses, ghosts and witchcraft. To save them from the evil powers, the females used to wear a necklace with teeth of wild pigs and Yak moulded under silver pendant. And as a part of their culture, mother-in-law used to give it to their daughter-in-laws. Bhawani Devi (Mother of the World) is especially revered in Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh. The community lives daily in the fear of their gods and to overcome the fear they constantly strive to appease them with religious chants, rituals, and sacrifices. Pigs and goats are sacrificed to Goddess Bhawani and eaten by the devotees. Vishwakarma, the god of architecture is worshipped during the monsoons around August to September as well as Dussehra which celebrates Hindu god Rama's victory over the demon king Ravana and the triumph of good over evil and Diwali (Festival of Lights). The main god of the Bhotias is Ghantakarna who occupies the place of watchman in the Badrinath temple. And so the Bhotias can only be the traditional watchman

<sup>3</sup> The writer denotes old age generation as Silver Generation.





**Image 5.** The Yak treated by the Bhotias as the holy animal. Picture Credit- Shikher Sharma (Showing the author thankfully acknowledging the support by the Bhotia community during the interview).

of the shrine (Jha, 1996). They also worship Yak and treat it as the holy Animal (Image 5).

All major festivals like Mahashivratri, Holi, Durga Puja and Diwali are celebrated by the Hindu Bhotia. The dead are cremated and the ashes immersed in a river – preferably the Ganges River which is considered holy in Bhotia community. Both birth and death pollution for specific periods is observed. Ancestor worship is also prevalent. They call their ancestors ‘Pitr’.

### Objectives of the study

In a view to understanding the challenges faced by the Bhotia community, the study focuses on the following objective(s):

- i) To study the challenges faced by Bhotias in the last Indian village, that is, Mana.
- ii) To study factors affecting cultural perseverance of the community.
- iii) To suggest solutions for the given challenges.

### Significance of the study

The rich tribal culture of Bhotia community needs to be preserved because these are our indigenous cultures and traditions. If the issue of their migration and extinction is not addressed immediately, then life that was once an integral part of everyday life would be lost.

### Limitation of the study

- i) It is seen that most of the people of Bhotia community

have migrated to cities in search of jobs to meet their economic needs. So, a very small sample size was taken by the researcher for deriving inferences.

- ii) The unavailability of the data related to their population census and their actual rate of migration are one of the major hindrances in drawing conclusions. Data pre and post 2011 census is not available.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the last century, the population of Bhotia's is declining which is mainly associated with the decline in the agricultural land, much of which has been lost of due to forestation. Their art, craft and traditions are also facing a slow death due to their decreasing population. If their arts and artifacts, unique embroidery etc, are not preserved, it would not take long for these to be lost forever.

The Toda Tribe is also an extremely closed community who is hardly connected and allied to the rest of the world. This tribe is also deprived of the opportunities which connectivity offers. Todas are not the only tribe who is leading marginalized and excluded lives; we have other tribes who may also be in the same condition. According to the 2011 Census, the overall population of scheduled tribes in India is 8.6% of total population. In the last half century, India has lost nearly 250 languages and 196 languages have been declared endangered by UNESCO. The given status of languages is even more disappointing for us. In the North-East region, as many as 120 of these languages spoken by tribes and lacking a script, has been particularly difficult to be preserved. But, due to intervention of many institutions concerned about preservation of languages, this challenge has been

largely tackled. However, the role of digital media is also imperative as it allows for their documentation in audio-visual formats now. The recording of audio or video of folk songs/folk tales in different languages can help in the preservation of not just the language and dialect but also the folk culture. Performances of tribal folk songs and dances in the state fairs can also help in preservation of their culture.

Similarly, the traditional knowledge as regards sustainable living, farming techniques, architecture and medicines that tribals store in their memories can also be documented for preservation and communicated to others (Manzar, 2017).

In Uttarkashi District, Ravai Valley, "Chodda - a local folk song" sung by the local community is on the verge of extinction. It is also seen that from Garhwal area, it is totally extinct; however, it has to be preserved (Dainik, 2019).

"Markets, fairs, and dance and music performances are part of the rich tribal culture and heritage, and are also major forms of their livelihood. Hence, it is important to preserve and promote these cultures to uplift the quality of tribal lives ([https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/46243545.cms?from=mdr&utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/46243545.cms?from=mdr&utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst)).

Not only are the results those of the past, cultural heritage are also a set of cultural objects. It is also the outcome of a selection process: a route of memory and oblivion that describes every human society on regular basis, whosoever is engaged in choosing—for both cultural and political reasons—what can be worthy of being conserved for future generations and what is not.

International conventions on the protection of cultural heritage and to promote intercultural understanding while stressing the importance of international cooperation, was adopted by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) in November 1972. Under the given convention, protection of cultural and natural heritage at national level was recommended.

Under United Nation's *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948), the right of people to enjoy the arts and to participate in the cultural life of community is incorporated (UNESCO, 1948).

Priorities identified for promotion and preservation of tribal culture through the Organizations/Central Schemes of the Ministry that are likely to be covered under TSP are – a) Anthropological Survey of India, Kolkata; b) Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya, Bhopal; c) Raja Rammohun Roy Library Foundation, Kolkata; d) Zonal Culture Centres; (e) Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, Sikkim, Gangtok; (f) Central Institute of Cultural Himalayan Studies, Dahung, Arunachal Pradesh; g) National School of Drama; (h) Centre for Cultural Resources and Training; i) Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts; (j) Central Scheme of the Ministry (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2012)

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Primary sources

#### *In-depth interview and observation*

**Content of questions raised during interview:** To understand the challenges faced by Bhotia community for their livelihood and preservation of culture, the researcher has raised questions related to their education, their source of earning, health facilities available to them, any kind of government support for their development. Questions related to cultural aspects like, their fashion, food, religion, occupation, etc., were also raised with a view to knowing how they manage their lives by selling certain products earlier mentioned the specific challenges they are facing in the Mana village, their shift from Mana to the lower belts, and also their expectations from the government, NGOs and Society in general for preserving their rich and diversified culture.

### Secondary sources

The researcher has also derived inferences from the secondary sources available in books, Internet etc.

### Interview details of Mana Village

In Mana Village, a total of 20 persons (9 Men and 11 women) were interviewed using the convenience sampling technique.

## DATA FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Possible challenges in preserving the culture

The Bhotia are a hardy community who live and work in remote inaccessible and very cold regions. Their existence is caught up in the daily struggle of making a living in unstable and difficult conditions. The researcher has made given recommendations and suggestions for their upliftment and perseverance of culture.

1) Better health facilities: As told by the respondents during interview and the observations made by the researcher, it was gathered that in case of any medical emergency, the community is solely dependent on their own ways and means of cure and treatment. But in case the health of a patient does not go well then the only option left to them are the medical facilities available in Badrinath region which is sometimes not adequate enough to cure the problem.

2) Better housing facilities: During interview, most of the respondents told that Government intervention is needed for proper construction and safety of their houses. They want regular visit of government officials to their place so that they can interact with them and let them know of the poor housing conditions.

3) Better education facilities: Though schooling facilities from May to mid-November is available to their children, their shift from mid-November to first week of May, and from Mana (hilly area) to lower belts of the region leads

to disturbance in educational graph of the students. So the government should make efforts to admit students in the plains of Chamoli or other districts of Uttarakhand as per the movement of Bhotias. And consider education of them as completion of full one academic year with children's promotion to further class.

4) Marketing of products: It was also inferred during interview that they sell their products via personal selling only. So, efforts are needed for providing proper 'Market Place' for the sale of the same. Their products did not find proper marketing: they have numerous products which are mentioned earlier. But these products are sold by themselves; their products should be marketed at national and international level.

5) Migration: According to the respondents, lack of educational and job avenues are the main reasons of their migration from Mana and the lower belts of Chamoli.

6) It is also found that not only tangible heritage (movable/immovable) like archives, objects, archaeology, buildings, landscape and heritage sites etc, but intangible heritage like identity, memory and unique crafts, stories etc, would also get extinct soon, if the issue is not promptly addressed.

7) It was also found that there is no government scheme available for their welfare and development.

## SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1) Proper medical services should be made available to them, and proper audits of the dispensaries and hospitals should be done by the CMO's of the concerned area to ensure meeting of expected standards.

2) Better education should be made available to them in the Chamoli district only. So that the tendency of migration of the Bhotias from the district is stopped. Further, more qualitative/technical/outcome based education can be given to them to make the children at par with those studying in plains of Uttarakhand.

3) Local fairs for 2-3 months can be facilitated for them, so that they can directly sell their produce during such. Moreover efforts to get Geographical Indication Tag for the "Shyama Tulsi" fragrance leaves and "Kedar Kadvi" can be made.

4) NGO's and Organizations working in the field of development of tribal communities like TRIFED (Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India Limited), Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2012), Government of India NCST (National Commission Of Schedule Tribes), etc should look into the issue of extinction of a well-established culture and their struggle for the livelihood.

5) As part of preservation of culture, the name "Mana", that is, the last Indian village has to be forwarded for "Cultural heritage tag by UNESCO".

6) Similar to 'Wadi' Project in Chhatisgarh, NABARD should also take up projects for the upliftment of Bhotias (Deshlahara, 2011).

7) There is an urgent need to conduct population census in the Mana Village to have an idea of exact number of people living and those who have migrated to other areas. Also, further preventive steps should be taken to address the problems faced by them.

8) The government should introduce schemes for their development and have regular audit of same for getting desired results.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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