

Great Tribal Diversity of Uttarakhand

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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.

Habitats :

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 despoiled 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 % ! If there was a community at the extreme end of backwardness, it would be hands down our Buxa brothers and sisters. It is not as if funds are not available for their all round upliftment, as being a PTG any assistant for the Buxas is provided on 100% grant basis. What clearly is lacking is lack of dedicated leadership from amongst the ranks of the Buxas themselves, who alone have the capacity to take them out of the present day morass.

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 land-holdings 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 mid-ground 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'. 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 was 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.* As is well, known, these communities should actually be addressed properly as the Marchas, Tolchas, Johari Saukas, Darmians, Chaudansis and Byansis, moving from far west to the eastern-most part of Pargana Darma.

Population :

Population frequency of the tribal communities is no less diverse than their habitat. Here again the habitat they occupy has something to do with their numbers. One must here also add the factor of the mode of Census operations, when we make an attempt to know their precise numbers; their head-count is undertaken decennially in a non-synchronous way i.e. dates of house-hold enumeration and actual head-count being different from the rest of the country; months in advance for the snow-bound villages of the 'Bhotias' of Garhwal, Bageshwar, Almora and Pithoragarh districts. There is a need to be conscious of the ill-effects of being under-counted at the decennial Census as it adversely affects the eligibility of funds for development of villages and poor families.

As against the all India average of 8.2% (8.433 crores ST in a total of 102.861 crores : 2001) percentage of STs in Uttarakhand is just 3% (2.56 lakhs ST out of a total population of 84.89 lakhs : 2001). Out of their total population of 2,56,129 the intra-ST community-wise population, in descending order, is the (i) Tharus (82,390), (ii) Jaunsaris (74,656), (iii) Buxas (57,995), (iv) Bhotia (40,407) and (v) Ban Rajis (680). Of these five tribes as transhumance practice was restricted to the various communities among the so-called Bhotias, who had two to three stations as a part of this practice with the highest being snow-bound, one could assume slight under-estimation of their actual numbers. The present inconsistency in their numbers, first brought out as early as in the revenue assessment report of Johar Pargana in 1902 (previous population of Malla Johar of 4,200 returned as 827, a decrease of 80.31% inside a decade !) is now being somewhat addressed. *Inhospitable habitats kick start a process of regressive development and the same require to be addressed through some affirmative action and not just by a mindless application of moribund rules crafted in a geographically heterogeneous Uttar Pradesh.*

Ethnicity :

Ethnicity is a noun derived from the expression *ethnic* which means 'of or relating to a group of people having a common national or cultural tradition', as also 'denoting origin by birth or descent rather than by present nationality'. In the similar vein an '*ethnic minority*' implies 'a sub-group within a community which differs ethnically from the main population'. *Ethnography*, 'the scientific description of peoples and cultures with reference to their particular customs and characteristics' and *ethnology*, 'the study of the characteristics of different peoples and the differences and relationships between them', further sharpen the concept of *Ethnicity* amongst various Scheduled Tribes, as understood in the above sense. Similarly admission of existence of '*ethnic minorities*' amongst the Scheduled Tribes; are the essential elements which have been accepted and incorporated in India, when it comes to the process of Scheduling a community as a Scheduled Tribe, under Article 342 of the Constitution of India.

Thus the criteria generally adopted for specification of a community as a Scheduled Tribe are : (a) indications of a primitive traits; (b) distinctive culture; (c) shyness of contact with the community at large; and (d) geographical isolation i.e. backwardness.

Understood in the above context there exists a substantial diversity, ethnically speaking, among the five Scheduled Tribes for Uttarakhand state. Much of it is, of course, obvious to the eye or any outsider or any visitor not belonging to any of the ethnic groups, preserved in their own local traditions, and now recorded even in some 'regional histories' authored by their very own writers. Uttarakhand's just five tribes appear a very small number compared to an all India ST count of more than 700 tribes. Of these, the so-called Bhotias would easily account for the maximum number of what has been described as the ethnic minorities, closely followed by the Jaunsaris, the Tharus, and the Buxas, in

that order. However, this assumption is based on the existing descriptions which are available, more particularly by the authors belonging to the tribal communities themselves. These observations deserve to be backed by evidence-based ethnographic evidences and ethnological data-base. In this age of g-nome mapping the same should not be an insuperable task. The Chinese, according to a recent study, are said to have succeeded the Indians, evolution-wise !

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. Physio- and socio-cultural habitats have moulded the present frame-work of the tribal communities. 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, is 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 !

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 favour of the Johar route, and this also resulted in the Bhotias purchasing land in the southern parganas, 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. The double jeopardy of cessation of trans-Himalayan trade in 1959 and application of KUZA Act in the hilly tracts, dealt a near death blow to the tribal communities exclusively dependent on the trade with Tibet, and lately whatever extra income, mostly in kind, these tribes were able to recover from their tenants in the lower reaches, directly impacting on their very survival. Inclusion of the Jads and the Bhotias, triggered by the Chinese aggression in the north-east, preceded by total cessation of land trade since 1959, further compounded by the application of KUZA Act in early 1960s, as two of the five tribes Scheduled to the Constitution, served as the veritable life-line to the Bhotias and Jads

communities in 1967. Prior to this some of the tribal youth from communities were absorbed in the various service opportunities which appeared for the service in the para military forces, like the PAC, SPF etc. It was in the early 1970s that the job or service opportunities became really available to the educated youth of the Bhotia and Jad communities. Four decades have seen many a tribal families laid prostrate by the double shocks of 1959/1964 recovering some what. Services sector since then has been the main-stay of these two tribal communities.

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.

Excellence in wool-based handicraft has also been a product of both, the habitat i.e. wool-producing region and extremely cold climate requiring woolen products of domestic and personal use, and the opportunity available to the old and women folk, who lived behind in the villages while the able and men busied themselves in the trans-Himalayan trade, by way of spare time. 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 actions 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. Being most populous and concentrated in agriculturally prosperous pockets has also helped them politically, which in turn has helped them take decisions locally, which are economically uplifting.

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.

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 Tolchs-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 paragana, 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.