

Understanding and Clarifying the term ‘Bhutia’

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Abstract

This study closely explores to understand and clarify the term ‘Bhutia’. Bhutias are given the status of Scheduled Tribe in India. Scheduled Tribes in India have emanated from five language families: Andamanese, Austro-Asiatic, Dravidian, Indo-Aryan and Tibeto-Burman (Linton, 1936, p. 231). The Bhutias form the fifth group and are mostly found in the Indian Himalayan Region. There are around 200,000 Bhutia population known by different names in India. The nomenclature they carry are Bhotia, Bhutia, Bhote, Bhuti, Buddha who are migrated from Tibet or are the descendants of the migrated Tibetans in India. In India, Bhutia is an assortment of different tribes descended from migrated Tibetans like: Ladaki Bhutias, Arunachali Bhutias, Bhutanese Bhutias (Dukpa or Drukpas), the Sikkimese Bhutias (Denzongpa or Lho-po, the term ‘Lhopo’ refers to Bhutias who migrated from southern Tibet and has Tibetan ancestry). The study also presents a detailed insight on the Bhutias of Sikkim. It appears that the Bhutias, though different nomenclature, have a resemblance and close similarities in their socio-cultural system, religion, traditions, practices, customs and costumes.

Key words: *Bhutia, Scheduled Tribe, Tibetans, India.*

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Tribes are regarded as subgroups within a larger cultural group in a society with same *culture, traditions and language*. The term ‘Tribe’ has received different meanings and nomenclatures from different scholars. It is sometimes described as ‘aboriginals’ or ‘depressed classes’, and to most of the people, it refers to a group of people or families professing the primitive religion known as ‘Animism’, living in some isolated area following primitive way of living and having some common name, dialect, culture and traditions (Desai, ed.1989, p.223). According to Oxford Dictionary, ‘Tribe’ is “a group of people who live in the same area and share same language, culture and history”. In the Indian context, ‘Ethnic Tribe’ means a primitive homogeneous group identified with rich culture and tradition (Majumdar & Madan, 1970).

According to Ministry of Tribal Affairs Statistics Division, Government of India (GOI), 2013, India is the country with largest tribal communities in the world. It accounts to around sixty eight million of tribal population. In total, the tribal population is divided into 227 different ethnic groups and 573 of tribal communities live in diverse geographical regions in the country. Many of the tribal groups have been recognised as Scheduled Tribes (ST) by Article 366 (25) of the Indian Constitution by the President of India through the amendment of the Act of Parliament. Total Scheduled Tribes notified in India is 705 (Ministry of Tribal Affairs Statistics Division GOI, 2013). Some special provisions have been provided for the socio-economic development of these groups. The tribal groups are safeguarded through various constitutional reservations in the field of education, cultural, social, economic, political and service sectors.

Furthermore, some special articles like; Article 342 (provisions for statutory recognition), Articles 330 and 332 (proportionate representation in Parliament and state legislatures), Article 19(5) (restrictions on the right of the ordinary citizen in their free movement, settlement and acquire any property in any particular areas) and Article 29 (conservation of one’s language, dialects and culture) have protected the tribal groups. The Indian constitution further entrusted the State governments to make provision of seat reservations in jobs for these groups (Article 16(4)) (Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, January 2014, pp.4-5).

The Scheduled Tribe population in India since Census 1961 has increased from 30.1 million in 1961 to 104.3 million in 2011. As per the population census 2011, the proportion of ST population in India is 8.6% where 11.3% are in rural areas and 2.8% in urban areas. According to Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Statistics Division, Government of India, Scheduled Tribes in India are located in two distinct geographical area: Central India and North- Eastern Area. Large number of Scheduled Tribes are concentrated in Central India, mainly in Madhya Pradesh (14.69%), Chhattisgarh (7.5%), Jharkhand (8.29%), Andhra Pradesh (5.7%), Maharashtra (10.08%), Orissa (9.2%), Gujarat (8.55%) and Rajasthan (8.86%). The states like Assam, Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur, Meghalaya, Tripura, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh forms the ST population of North East Area.

Scheduled Tribes in India have emanated from five language families: 1) Andamanese, 2) Austro-Asiatic, 3) Dravidian, 4) Indo-Aryan and 5) Tibeto-Burman (Linton, 1936, p. 231). The Bhutias form the fifth group and

are mostly found in the Indian Himalayan Region. The Indian Himalayan Region represents nearly 18.5% of the total tribal population of India. The distribution of Bhotia/Bhutia population shows that around 200,000 are in India.

Bhotias are generally known by different names. The nomenclature they carry are Bhotia, Bhutia, Bhote, Bhuti, Buddha etc. The Bhotia/Bhutia/Bhotey as they are called are either directly migrated from Tibet or are the descendants of the migrated Tibetans. The name Bhotia/Bhutia/Bhotey is derived from the Sanskrit word 'Bhotah' which means Tibet in Tibetan language. Bhutia is therefore, referred to as Tibetan. In India, Bhutia is an assortment of different tribes descended from migrated Tibetans like: Ladaki Bhutias, Arunachali Bhutias, Bhutanese Bhutias (Dukpa or Drukpas), the Sikkimese Bhutias (Denzongpa or Lho-po, the term 'Lhopo' refers to Bhutias who migrated from southern Tibet and has Tibetan ancestry) and the Tibetan refugees who have migrated after 1959. Hence, Bhotia/ Bhutia/Bhotiya are Tibetans migrated from Tibet with mongoloid characteristics.

According to historians, altogether three important migrations took place from Tibet; migration during the 7th century; migration during the 10th-11th century; and migration between 14th -16th century. The migration that took place in the third stage are settled in the central and eastern regions of the country. The constitution of India refers Bhutias to the Tibetan speaking inhabitants in the country (Ghosh, 2007).

Thus, the Bhutias are mostly based in the Himalayan region bordering Tibet and have close connection with the Tibetans. Tibetans are commonly called as 'Bhot' and apparently this may be the reason for calling these people with Tibetan connection as Bhutias.

The Bhutia community are mostly settled in the highland zone of the country. Occupationally, they have been involved in trade in the Himalayan borders in items like rock-salt, borax, raw wool, woollen cloth, sheep, horses etc. from Tibet and they also exported cereals, sugar, implements, utensils, mill made woollen and cotton cloths and articles of daily use from India to Tibet. Besides this, they also worked as guides and porters to the pilgrims visiting Kailash Mansarovar. Above this, they were also involved in agricultural activities, handicraft, pastoralism etc. Pastoralism is close to Bhutias economic activity. Sheep, goat, ponies, yak and jibus are the most used animals by them (Bhatt, Joshi & Tiwari, 2009).

The changed bilateral relations between India and China since 1960's however, restricted their trading activities in the cross border areas of Tibet and compelled them to be on the look out for other jobs and occupations. Bhutias received support from the Indian government which declared them as Scheduled Tribe in 1967. Job reservations in the administration, army, paramilitary and police forces were arranged for this group (Chatterjee, 1996, p.162).

As per the Linguistic Survey of India (LSI) conducted by Sir George Abraham Grierson, Bhutias belong to Tibeto – Burman family. According to the survey Bhutias includes Tibetans, Bhutias of Sikkim, Sherpa, a branch of Bhutia tribe, Drukpa (Bhotia of Bhutan), Ladakhi (Bhotia of Ladakh, Murmi or Tamang, Lahuli (Bhotia of Lahul), Balti (Bhotia of Baltistan), Bhotia of Spiti and Bhotia of Purik (Grierson 1909 : pp. 14 – 15 & 1927: pp. 54 – 55).

However, some study shows difference in their nomenclature and origin. According to studies, Bhutias in India do not have common origin. According to S.K Chaterjee, the origin of Bhotiyas of Uttarakhand of all the seven river valleys is very uncommon. According to RamRahul, "..... the Jods, the Bhotias of Uttarkashi affirm that they have migrated from Kinnaur in Himachal Pradesh. The Bhotias of the regions bordering Tibet, including the Jads of Uttarkashi, are commonly called Johari Shaukas. The Bhotias of Uttarakhand who have settled in the seven river valleys have derived their name as Darmisa, Chaundasis (in Kumaun), Marchhas, Joharis, Vyansis, Tolchhas and Joda (in Garhwal) (Chatterjee, 1996, p.162). Similarly, the Bhutias of Sikkim have different origin and are called Denzongpas, residents of Denzong, meaning, Valley of rice.

The study on Bhutias of the Indian Himalayas further presents some social, cultural and religious differences. Variation in the religion is seen among the Bhutia community as a whole. In the Central Himalayas, the Jad Bhutia practice Buddhism, while other Bhutia groups profess Hinduism or the religion is a mixture of Lamaistic Buddhism, Hinduism, and Animism. The study by S. K. Chatterjee, (1996) in his work '*Scheduled Castes in India*', (p.162) elicits that the Johari Bhutia are Hindus and use the services of Brahmans. The Bhutias of Sikkim, Bhutan, Arunachal Pradesh, Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri of West Bengal and many inhabitants of Eastern Himalayas mostly profess Mahayana Buddhism in the form of Tantrik Buddhism that exists in Tibet (Ghosh, 2007).

The Bhutias of Sikkim

As per the constitution (Sikkim) Scheduled Tribes Order, 1978, Bhutia groups of Sikkim includes Chumbipa, Dophthapa, Kagatey, Sherpa, Tibetan, Tromopa and Yolmo. All these groups are of Tibetan origin and use Tibetan script though they may differ in dialects. Once settled in Sikkim, slowly they got conglomerated within the Bhutia group. It appears that these groups have come from one or the other part of Tibet, mainly south-east Tibet.

Tibetans are the migrated Bhote people from U and Tsang districts of Tibet after the era of formation of Chogyal rule in Sikkim. The migration of Tibetans into Sikkim may be categorised into two stages: Tibetans migrated before 1959 and Tibetans migrated after 1959. The Tibetans are grouped into smaller clans like *Thomowa, Drobthaba, Khampa, Lhasawa, Tsongpa and Andowa*; named after the places in Tibet they have migrated from. They are generally identified as “*Bhote*” in Sikkim and are mostly concentrated in East district of Sikkim.

Thus, on the whole, Bhutias are descendants of Tibetans who migrated a few hundred years ago to Sikkim and finally established their rule in Sikkim. Bhutias are considered as different from that of Bhotia (Tibetan). After their migration and establishment of Namgyal dynasty in Sikkim in 1642, the migrated Tibetans, especially the descendants of Khey-Bumsa namely: Zhantarpa or Sandarpa, TshegyuTarpa, Nyungyepa and Guru Tashepa and the eight Tibetan families known as the *hBeps-m Tshan-bGyad* that migrated along with them call themselves as Bhutias, Sikkimese or Denzongpas and they prefer to maintain their separate identity as different from Tibetans in Sikkim. They are also called the '*Lhorees*' (Risley, 1894). Tibetan customs and traditions are found in the Bhutias but with some modifications and alterations. Tibetans are basically the followers of 'Gelupa' sect of Mahayana Buddhism while the Sikkimese Bhutias mostly belong to 'Nyingmapa' sect of Mahanaya Buddhism. The Tibetan script is followed by them, however, with some difference in their dialects. Bhutias form one of the prominent ethnic tribes of Sikkim, the other two being the Lepchas and the Nepalese.

Topas or Tromo-pas are group of Bhutia tribes that have come from Paro and Ha in Bhutan after the installation of Bhutia kingdom in Sikkim. This group of Bhutias are considered to be inferior to the 12 Bhutia tribes. Topas or Tromo are further subdivided into: *To- Lhagopa, To- Jamyangpa and To- Chu- Khapas*.

Chumbipas are Tibetans from Kham in Tibet, migrated to Hah in Bhutan and settled towards the lower region of the Mochu near Chumbi valley. Hence, they are called Chumbipas. The Chumbipas are found to be divided into six sub-groups: *Lhamodar, Genynputso, Agon, Athub- Putsos, Dozho-pa and Khyim-Pharpa* (Risley, 1894, p. 29). *Tromo-pas* and *Chumbipas* are the Bhutia groups that have migrated to Sikkim in after the foundation of Bhutia rule. Initially, they moved from Tibet to Bhutan and then to Sikkim.

Among the Bhutia group there also exist some lower or minor caste groups named after their place of origin (Namgyal and Dolma, 1908, p. 8) and *Dotrapas/ Dophthapas* are one of them. They are the inhabitants of Dhopta in south Tibet from where they have migrated to Sikkim. The Sherpas originally are said to have come from Kham in eastern Tibet. The Sherpas are found in northeast part of Nepal called Solukhumbu and in Sikkim. The migration of Sherpas took place from 1530 onwards which continued till 1850 (Subba, 2011, p 279). In Sikkim, Sherpas are mostly settled in Ribdi, Bharang, Okharey, Upper Thambong, Begha, Upper Bermiok, Siribadam, Singling and Buriakhop in west Sikkim. Since its recognition as, Scheduled Tribe in 1978 as one of the subgroups of Bhutia tribe, Sherpas share one seat from among the 12 Bhutia Lepcha (BL) seats in the state legislature of Sikkim.

Like Sherpas, Yolmos (also known as Kagetey) have migrated from eastern Tibet. The name Kagetey has been derived from Nepali word '*Kagaj*' which means paper which is allied with the ancient practice of paper making (Gurung, 2011, p. 139), but this group prefers to be identified as Yolmos rather than as Kagateys. Though this group use Tibetan script and speak Kagatey language, they are more inclined towards Nepali culture and traditions. This is why they are more considered to be Nepalese sub-group by Bhutia organisations in Sikkim.

On the whole, it appears that the Bhutias of different regions in India despite their claim to have different origins, share close similarities in their socio-cultural system. Their beliefs, religion, traditions, practices, customs, and costumes have common resemblance. However, after migration, influence of Indian culture and religion has brought some changes and alteration in their actual practice and beliefs.

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