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Bhotiyas Of The Himalayas: Caught Between Cultural Heritae, Ecology, And Modern Pressures

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Abstract-

The Himalayas, with their immense geographical presence, have long been a crucial part of the cultural, social, and environmental fabric of the regions they span, transcending national borders. These mountains, revered in mythical stories and contemporary narratives alike, have profoundly influenced the lives of those living in their shadow. The people of the Himalayas, much like the mountains themselves, are resilient yet vulnerable to radical changes.

This article explores the intricate relationship between History and ecology in the Himalayan context, focusing on the Bhotiyas and other indigenous tribes residing along national borders. Historically, these tribes were nomadic-agropastoral traders who understood, survived, and even thrived by utilising the region's ecology. They maintained a careful balance, often monopolising and protecting their environment from external influences.

However, after the Indo-Tibet border ceased, trade and tourism decreased through passes, and later, the advent of modernisation disrupted these ancient practices. Social media-driven tourism, religious pilgrimages, and the surge in cross-border trade of Cordyceps (caterpillar fungus) are significantly altering these tribes' traditional ways of life and the ecological balance of the region. The overexploitation of Cordyceps, the unregulated influx of tourists, and the lack of infrastructure to manage these changes are placing immense pressure on the higher ranges and alpine pastures. Additionally, the overexploitation of the region's flora and fauna further threatens the delicate ecosystems that these tribes have historically protected.

Given the global significance of the Himalayas as a source of major rivers and a regulator of climate, Himalayan sustainability is not only the responsibility of people residing in its lap but a collective one. The issues faced by these border tribes have far-reaching implications. Understanding their adaptive strategies and challenges offers valuable insights into broader environmental and cultural sustainability.

As these tribes navigate the challenges posed by modernity, their cultural identity and traditional knowledge are at risk of being eroded. This study aims to document these invaluable aspects, ensuring that the wisdom of these communities is preserved for future generations. The author seeks to delve deeper into both regional and broader aspects of these issues by examining the experiences of border tribes like the Bhotiyas. Within the larger framework of cross-border trade and the impacts of unmanaged tourism and overexploitation of flora and fauna, this study highlights the pressing need for sustainable practices. The ecological balance of the Himalayas has far-reaching implications not just for the local environment but for global ecosystems. Preserving the delicate ecological balance and cultural heritage of the Himalayas is essential for maintaining the well-being of these resilient communities and the environment they inhabit.

Keywords: Himalayas, Bhotiyas, cordyceps, caterpillar fungus, Ecology

Introduction-

Himalayan people have always been guardians of their way of life throughout history, especially in the case of tribes who fiercely protected their monopoly and independence in their region, managing to do so even during the colonial period. However, they are now slowly succumbing to modernizing forces and the desire to earn more, gradually becoming capitalistic. They still maintain a sense of exclusivity in the regions they inhabit, particularly the borderland areas. Yet, in the face of these changing circumstances, they suffer from a wilful and selective amnesia regarding their past. This paper focuses on one such tribal community of the Uttarakhand Himalayas, the Bhotiyas, who reside in the river valleys near mountain passes linking India and Tibet and their newly found interest in the gold rush of Yaragumba and tourism driven by social media and pilgrimage. Alongside these tribes live caste Hindus, mostly from scheduled castes, and in some places, Pahadi Rajputs, locally referred to as Khasas who too have similar interests and similar lifestyle.

The Bhotiya community is composed of various subgroups, each residing in different river valleys. Historically, these groups were nomadic pastoralist traders who practiced transhumance, moving with the seasons to make efficient use of resources without harming the environment. However, they have largely forgotten the ecological balance that once underpinned their barter economy and trade, which thrived until the closure of the Indo-China border in 1962.

The trading acumen of these tribes has never been questioned, but in the past, it was characterized by the judicious use of resources in a smaller area without harming the environment. What was once a matter of survival and earning a livelihood has now been overtaken by the drive to accumulate more wealth and extract more natural resources. This shift is happening without consideration for the fact that the land they depend on is young, volatile, and sensitive, with its geographical features not fully understood. Their

ancestors, without formal knowledge of environmental texts or theories, were inherently aware of these dynamics because they lived as part of the ecology, constantly interacting with the land. In contrast, the new generations return to these ranges only seasonally, driven by modern economic opportunities such as medicinal plant harvesting and tourism activities. This returning population also includes cast Hindus who resided with Bhotiyas and who have legal access to this region.

The Historical Significance of the Himalayas

The historical significance of the Himalayas is vast and multifaceted. These mountains have been the backdrop for countless stories, legends, literature, cultural traditions and are deeply embedded in the psyche of various regional religions, where they are revered as sacred. The Himalayas feature prominently in travelogues of pilgrims, the Ithihasa-Purana traditions, and even in fictional works.

Throughout history, the Himalayas have acted as natural barriers, shaping climate, migration, settlement patterns, interactions, and ultimately entire civilizations. The mountains have also been centres of spiritual and religious importance, with numerous temples, monasteries, and sacred sites nestled within their ranges. Trade routes through the Himalayas fostered cultural exchange and economic interaction between diverse regions, contributing to the rich tapestry of history in the region.

The Himalayas determine the fate of hundreds of millions of people living in the Indo-Gangetic plains. Historically, the impact of modernization, commercialization, and capitalism became visible in the Himalayan region with the arrival of colonial rulers, who introduced numerous acts, rules, and regulations governing the forests of the Himalayas. These policies brought about profound changes in the lives of the people and their surroundings, deeply influencing how the hills were perceived by outsiders and reshaping the self-image of the local population. With each new tool and method of the modern world, the forests and their people began to lose their identity, starting with the exploitation of resources like timber.

When discussing the Himalayas, it is impossible to ignore their environmental history. Ecological history, too, remains incomplete without acknowledging this vast, natural structure. Although the study of the environment became a topic of scholarly concern in India with the rise of subaltern studies, the relationship between the people and the environment in the Himalayas has long been an integral part of life in the region. Newspapers from the colonial period, such as the *Garhwali*, published in Dehradun, are filled with accounts of deforestation and restrictive policies that governed the people's use of forest resources—resources they once viewed as communal property.

A Region of Uncertainties: The Evolving Challenges of the Himalayas

The Himalayas, with their complex geology, remain not fully understood by many of those involved in their development and management. It is a region frequently exposed to natural hazards like intense precipitation, landslides, earthquakes, forest fires, flash floods and cloud bursts, which are increasing day by day; this is the area which is a most visible marker of climate change at a global level and can not be ignored. In a region full of uncertainties, the problem with the kind of capitalistic pursuits that are now on

the rise with the absence of the necessary infrastructure to handle the obstacle, checks and balances, the conditions are becoming very drastic. The region is being burdened by such pursuits of high extraction of its resources and an influx of a large number of tourists without restrictions, which it can accommodate and does not have this much-carrying capacity.

Altered Traditions: Transhumance and Migration

Historically, transhumance and internal migration have been the norm in the hills, not only for tribal populations but also for villages in the valley regions. Transhumance was practised based on seasonal agricultural activities, and internal migration was common, with people relocating based on changed economic conditions. These practices were never exclusive to tribal borderland regions, but over time, valley people abandoned transhumance, leaving it as a practice only for a few tribal groups.

Migration within the state has always been a natural part of life in the hilly tracts as people keep seeking better opportunities. Among caste Hindus involved in agriculture-based activities, migration from the villages in the hills to the villages in valleys and then further towards the plains has created many semi-urban spaces—places not fully urban but equipped with many modern amenities. Those who move to these areas often return to their rural lands if these lands continue to generate some form of income. For the younger generation, these rural areas have become mere sources of income, while for the older generation, they held much deeper value as ancestral lands, worked upon for generations.

A similar pattern can be seen among the borderland tribal groups, who historically engaged in a trade-based economy. The younger generation, involved in the extraction of high-value resources such as medicinal plants and seasonal tourism activities, no longer shares the deep understanding of the hills that their ancestors possessed. For them, the mountains represent an opportunity for profit, and they only sell an image of an exotic hill region to tourists—an image shaped by stories from their elders, much like the way foreign tourists are shown other parts of India as exotic and mysterious land.

The practices now being followed in the shadow of the Himalayas are a blend of transhumance and internal migration, but the motivations behind them have entirely changed. Those who engage in these practices no longer see themselves as part of the geography—they live in cities and return to their ancestral villages solely for seasonal income. Upon deeper analysis, it becomes clear that they have lost their attachment to the land, ecology, and ancestral homelands.

One major catalyst driving these altered movements is the search for **Yarshagumbu**—the prized medicinal fungus—which has sparked a seasonal gold rush, leading to a reverse migration pattern in pursuit of high earnings.

Life and Livelihood in the Himalayas

Life in the Himalayas has historically been characterized by a semi-pastoral, semi-agrarian lifestyle and, for some communities, a semi-nomadic existence. Although nomadism was once a common practice among various groups, including caste Hindus, it has gradually diminished and is now largely confined to tribal communities.

Over time, the economy of the Himalayas evolved into what is often referred to as a money-order economy. This transformation occurred primarily because the region faced limited employment opportunities, and agriculture proved challenging due to harsh climatic conditions and low productivity. As a result, the population residing in the hills became heavily reliant on remittances sent by their sons, husbands, and fathers who sought better employment prospects outside the region.

While this money-order economy provided some financial support, it was often insufficient to sustain families, leading women to supplement their incomes through the collection of natural forest and agriculture-based products, animal rearing and selling handicrafts.

We are now witnessing a gradual transition from a natural economy to various forms of market economy in the hilly tracts, driven by the demand for products previously unfamiliar to the local population. Historically, the environment shaped livelihood practices in the region; however, the current livelihood methods are beginning to impact the environment that once sustained them. Despite being harsh, natural resources were enough to sustain the small population.

The hilly regions are losing their traditional sustainable livelihoods based on natural resources, which once formed the backbone of their economy.

Burden of Pilgrimage and Social Media-Based Tourism

The Himalayas have long been an integral part of the cultural and religious imagination of the region. Ancient texts and religious literature inspired pilgrimages to these sacred mountains, which, for centuries, were sustainable and did not place excessive pressure on the environment or state resources. In ancient times, religious texts and books acted as the media, offering limited access and appealing to a select group of devoted pilgrims.

Today, however, the landscape of tourism has drastically changed with the advent of the internet and social media. Social media platforms, in particular, with their vast reach, have amplified the appeal of the Himalayas to a global audience. Popular pilgrimage sites like Kedarnath, Badrinath, Gangotri, Yamunotri, Chota Kailash, and Hemkund Sahib, which were once manageable in terms of visitor numbers, now face overwhelming crowds. This surge is especially notable during the May-June period, when both pilgrims and tourists seek refuge from the hot plains, leading to overcrowding.

In addition to these famous shrines, social media has also popularized numerous "hidden gems"—remote and previously lesser-known locations. When influencers post about these places, they quickly become hotspots for tourists who flock there without understanding the environmental or infrastructural limitations

of these regions. In popular tourist destinations like Nainital, Mussoorie, and Rishikesh, weekend crowds and vehicular traffic have become overwhelming, creating what can now be called "over-tourism"—where the influx of visitors exceeds the capacity of these places, leading to negative environmental and social consequences.

Tourism, of course, provides a vital source of income for the people living in the hills, but the problem lies in the scale of tourism—the sheer number of visitors and the methods by which they arrive. While places like Nainital and Rishikesh have developed some infrastructure to accommodate tourists, the regions newly popularized by social media lack such facilities. This issue becomes even more critical when tourism is promoted in tribal areas, where regulations and permits may exist, but are not always sufficient to limit the number of visitors. The real problem for the Himalayan region is not the influx of people but the scale and intensity of that influx.

However, there are examples of successful efforts to manage tourism sustainably. One such case is the Bhotiya tribal communities residing in the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve (NDBR). These communities have embraced the concept of eco-tourism, which integrates cultural values, ethics, education, sustainability, and community beliefs. Through their efforts, a delicate balance has been maintained between tourism and environmental conservation, with strict limits on the number of tourists allowed. The NDBR model, supported by UNESCO, is an exception, and its success is due to the cooperation of local communities, the Forest Department, and international organizations. The 2001 Nanda Devi Biodiversity and Ecotourism Declaration serves as a guiding text for the Bhotiyas, helping them align their practices with environmental justice principles.

This collaboration wasn't easy to establish. In fact, it took initial conflicts and their resolution to get the cooperation between the Bhotiyas, the Forest Department, and the UN to work. For instance, in 1998, the Bhotiyas led a small-scale movement called "Jhapto-Cheeno" (Grab-Snatch), in which they entered the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve to protect their rights to graze livestock and collect medicinal herbs in the core zone. While NDBR has garnered significant attention since 1982, many other Himalayan sites face similar challenges but remain overlooked.

The politics of the Himalayas is all about scale—both in terms of size and magnitude—and the need to address the unique challenges posed by this region is undeniable. The cooperation of local communities like the Bhotiyas is crucial for the conservation of the environment, the development of the region, and the governance of the border areas.

What Changed from Past to Present

Before the arrival of the British, borders were essentially frontiers—porous and flexible. Even during the colonial period, borders remained relatively open, allowing for trade, cultural exchange, and interactions between people in the borderlands without much state intervention. The state's primary role was to collect taxes on border trade, and it rarely interfered in how people lived.

The involvement of government in the everyday interactions between people and their environment is a legacy we inherited from the British. This system has persisted for so long that people have largely forgotten what life was like before colonial rule. It was the European science or, in many cases, pseudo science of forestry, ethnicity, and plantation, along with the emphasis on the hill-plain binary, that reshaped how people viewed themselves and their relationship with their surroundings. With the increasing studies in Britain about Scientific forestry, pseudo science of Eurocentric notion of civilisation, racial superiority and change of power from company rule to crown rule, Notion of British administration towards Transhumant communities changed too. Mobility was seen as backward and uncivilised leading to restriction. ***Modernity consigned human mobility to the dusty dark corners of archives that document the hegemonic space of national territorialism***[1]Numerous restrictions were imposed on the traders' mobility patterns, strategies of resource use and land tenure customs, which placed emphasis on settled ways of life. There was fixture of stopping and halting points (Parao) for the traders in between 1910 and 1920. However, Bhotiya traders still managed to get their way out and were able to negotiate their terms of trade because ultimately the Colonial regime was most concerned with benefits only then the facade of the civilizer of Indian societies. This trade kept going on after independence in similar manner till 1962 that is the time period till the Indo-china war. The trade though was focused on barter of woolen handicrafts like Dan, Kaleen, pankhi ,chutka, grains and borax. Now there is a complete shift being observed in the items that are being traded as compared to earlier products which did not have any negative impact on the environment and ecology whereas the product these days are completely natural resources.

Cross Border trade –

In the Himalayan regions where borders are shared between countries, trans-Himalayan trade was once the norm, facilitated by porous and flexible borders. Historically, this trade was based on mutual ties of friendship, shared folk tales, and the exchange of ideas. However, it now hinges on the bureaucratic strategies of administrators and the shifting dynamics between two powerful Asiatic nations vying for dominance in the subcontinent.

The establishment of modern national boundaries has drastically altered these cross-border relationships. What was once a barter system—where goods unavailable on either side were exchanged based on mutual needs and accommodation—has transformed into something entirely different.

One notable example is the trade in Yarsagumba, a product that was once of little value to the locals. Initially, its discovery presented a valuable opportunity for rural populations to capitalize on their natural resources and drive socio-economic change. In earlier periods, the border regions, while always volatile and uncertain, provided a stable trade environment, with exchanges that were not solely focused on natural and forest products. The trade was diverse, involving handmade goods, agriculture-based items, and local

[1] Ludden, David. "Presidential address: Maps in the mind and the mobility of Asia." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 62.4 (2003): 1057-1078.

culinary products, all balanced by the needs of communities on both sides of the border, fostering friendly traditional relations.

Today, however, the new form of cross-border trade is dominated by the extraction of medicinal plants, particularly Yarsagumba, which is contributing to growing uncertainties around livelihood sustainability. The extraction of such resources is impacting the delicate ecosystem of alpine meadows, and many of those involved in this trade no longer reside in the area year-round. Instead, they live in cities or suburban areas and return only for the season, with little attachment to the land or its ecology, viewing it as something foreign and detached from their everyday lives.

Yarshagumba (Caterpillar Fungus) and the Gold Rush

Yarshagumba, also known as caterpillar fungus (Kida Jadi), is a unique parasitic plant-fungus combination found in the high-altitude meadows of the Himalayas, thriving between 3,000 and 5,000 meters above sea level. For centuries, this fungus went largely unnoticed and was of little economic value to the people of the region. However, in recent years, its reputation has skyrocketed due to its supposed medicinal properties, particularly in traditional Chinese medicine, where it is believed to enhance vitality and treat various ailments. This sudden demand has transformed Yarshagumba into one of the most sought-after commodities in the region, drastically altering local economies and ways of life.

What was once an overlooked natural product has triggered what locals call a "gold rush," with many youngsters mobilizing towards their villages during harvesting in pursuit of quick cash. The extraction season, which runs from late May to June after the snow begins to melt, sees a massive influx of harvesters venturing into the dangerous alpine terrain. They endure freezing temperatures, thin air, and hazardous conditions just to collect small quantities of this valuable fungus. For many, Yarshagumba has become synonymous with financial opportunity, and in the early years of its commercialization, it provided much-needed income for rural populations. It helped alleviate poverty, especially in remote border areas where employment options are scarce.

The allure of quick money, however, has led to unintended consequences. Many young people in these regions, instead of seeking stable, long-term employment or pursuing education, have begun to rely solely on Yarshagumba harvesting for their livelihoods. With each successful harvest, some individuals earn substantial sums, often reaching into the lakhs, but they subsequently remain idle for the rest of the year. This dependency on seasonal income has created a cycle where short-term financial gains take precedence over long-term socio-economic development, leaving many youth uninterested in further opportunities for growth or education. As a result, entire communities that once balanced subsistence agriculture, animal husbandry, and local trade have shifted their focus entirely toward this precarious source of income.

The situation has now reached a saturation point. The number of people engaging in Yarshagumba harvesting has dramatically increased, leading to overexploitation of this natural resource. Environmental concerns have also emerged, as the high-altitude meadows where Yarshagumba grows are delicate ecosystems that are not equipped to handle the increasing pressure from human activity. Unregulated

harvesting practices, coupled with the sheer volume of harvesters, have led to the degradation of these fragile landscapes. The very terrain that once provided a bounty is now showing signs of strain, raising concerns about the long-term sustainability of both the fungus and the communities that depend on it.

The Yarshagumba phenomenon, while initially seen as a solution to unemployment in the region, has inadvertently created a generation of individuals who are caught between the allure of easy money and the long-term challenges posed by overreliance on a single, seasonal resource. The broader impacts of this shift, including ecological degradation and socio-economic imbalance, are beginning to be felt across the region. The question now is whether this model of resource extraction can be sustained or whether alternative, more sustainable livelihoods will need to be developed to ensure the survival of both the ecosystem and the communities that depend on it.

How do we perceive the realities of the Himalayas?

Himalayas are often seen with the lenses of larger geopolitical dimensions often ignoring and neglecting the local impacts. Ecologically, the Himalayas are one of the most diverse and fragile ecosystems in the world. The region supports a wide range of flora and fauna, many of which are endemic and endangered. The unique climatic conditions and altitudinal variations create distinct ecological zones, from lush forests to alpine meadows. The people living in the Himalayas have historically adapted to these ecological conditions, developing sustainable practices and lifestyles that are closely aligned with the natural environment.

In contemporary times, the relationship between the Himalayas' History and ecology is facing significant challenges. Modernisation, globalisation, and climate change are exerting unprecedented pressures on the region. The Bhotiyas, for example, once shepherds of the alpine pastures with a deep understanding of the local ecology, are now grappling with the impacts of modernisation. The surge in cross-border trade of Cordyceps (caterpillar fungus) has led to overexploitation, threatening the ecological balance of the alpine and higher snow-covered ranges.

Bhotiya Tribe: Region of Study and an Understanding

The Bhotiya tribe, a community inhabiting the high-altitude regions of the Himalayas, particularly above 2500 meters, is historically renowned for its deep understanding of geography, traditional knowledge, and sustainable practices. For generations, they have been the first to observe, experience, and adapt to the changes occurring in the natural harmony of their surroundings. This paper examines how the Bhotiya people have evolved, been impacted by, and contributed to the transformations in their environment. Are they still the same people who once traversed these mountains for trade, pilgrimage, and surveys, or have they undergone profound changes? What has shifted in their ways of life? And most importantly, why and how did these changes occur?

While the older practices may have made them appear backwards by modern standards, they also helped maintain the ecological balance of the region. In contrast, the newer practices, influenced by modernization and economic incentives, are increasingly disrupting the natural equilibrium of the area. Older generations of Bhotiya, along with other native communities in the Himalayan borderlands, had an intimate understanding of the vulnerabilities, climatic variability, and ecology of their region. They lived in harmony with the land, adapting to its rhythms and sustaining their livelihood through knowledge passed down over centuries. However, the younger generation, including the descendants of Bhotiya communities, often does not share this same relationship with the land.

Shepherds of the higher Himalayan ranges, for example, have long been witnesses to the impact of climate change. They are among the first to notice the changes in alpine meadows. Even the availability of **Ophiocordyceps sinensis** (caterpillar fungus), known locally as Yarshagumba is a result of such changes.The unsustainable exploitation of Yarshagumba highlights the larger issue: although the resource is becoming scarcer and more unpredictable, the pressure to extract it intensifies with each passing season.

Other Groups in the Border Region sharing space of dependence with Bhotiyas

Historically, the Bhotiya held a monopoly over Himalayan trade, which made them more well-known for such activities. However, they were not the only ones engaged in these forms of exchange and subsistence. Cast Hindu communities living in these regions have historically shared many similarities with the Bhotiya in terms of lifestyle and adaptation to the mountainous environment. However, they often distanced themselves from the Bhotiya, identifying instead with Rajput status to avoid being grouped with what they saw as a tribal community.

In 1967, the Bhotiya were granted Scheduled Tribe status, which significantly altered the socio-economic landscape of the region. The benefits that followed—such as access to government schemes, educational quotas, and other forms of support—provided a significant boost to the Bhotiya's socio-economic standing. In contrast, cast Hindu communities, who had distanced themselves from the Bhotiya identity, were left behind in the first wave of regional development. After the formation of Uttarakhand as a state in 2000, they began to realize the extent to which they had been marginalized in comparison to the Bhotiya groups. Today, many of these communities are striving for economic stability and progress, much like the Bhotiya, but they are doing so in a vastly altered environment, where the challenges are not just about catching up economically but also about navigating the changing ecological and political realities of the Himalayan borderlands.

To be in the race they were once left behind, they, too, think Yarshagumba can act as a ladder for economic upliftment.

Conclusion

The Himalayas are a testament to the enduring relationship between History and ecology. The region's past and present are deeply connected through the ways in which people have adapted to and influenced their natural surroundings. To ensure a sustainable future for the Himalayas, it is essential to bridge the gap between historical understanding and ecological stewardship, fostering a holistic approach that respects both the cultural heritage and the environmental integrity of this majestic mountain range. Climate change, which is a global issue, is most visible in these higher ranges of the world. There is a need for a better understanding of the resources being extracted and supplied in national and international markets from the Himalayas and for checking the gold rush for these products. There is a need for better infrastructure for a large number of tourists arriving in this very small, highly volatile region before promoting social media lead and pilgrimage-based tourism.

This paper has tried to analyse and trace the practices in the Himalayan border region in the context of historical changes in socioeconomic status based on the surroundings and environment and the factors responsible for them. The short seasonal occupations based on tourism and medicinal plants are driving a mad race of increasing populace in a small region. These practices were very beneficial for the rural economy as long as they were done at a small scale, but now there is pressure to increase in scale, but resources remain limited, and the number of people involved has increased.

Many earlier papers have seen these practices as poverty-alleviating methods, but at the ground level, these practices are only generating people who are becoming more and more capitalistic and idolised. The example of NDBR can be taken as an example for other regions of Bhotiya residents to involve people in ecotourism and environmental conservation. NDBR is a success story because of the involvement of international organisations, but other sites in the Himalayan region to demand attention such that livelihood, environmental sustainability and development of the region can take place simultaneously and effectively.

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