



THE BHOTIYAS OF KUMAON

The Bhotiyas are a tribal people who live in Bhot, a region of highland valleys bordering Tibet situated in the Kumaon Himalayas of Northern India. The Bhot valleys follow the initial courses of the rivers Kali and Gori, which have their sources amidst glaciers at seventeen thousand feet. Beyond these glaciers are the high passes of Untadhura and Lipu La which lead to the plateau of Kailash-Manasarovar in Western Tibet.

In centuries, the Bhotiyas lived a nomadic life, travelling with their large flocks of pack goats, sheep and ponies from the trade posts of Gartok and Gyanima in Tibet, across the innumerable ridges and valleys of Kumaon into the Gangetic plains. The annual migrations of their caravans took place along established trade routes, for the Bhotiyas were legendary traders and trans-Himalayan trade partnerships with nomadic Tibetan Khampas and Dokpas were formed and nurtured over generations, until China invaded Tibet and the subsequent Indo-China war in 1962 caused trade to be stopped completely.

This caused great upheaval in the lives of the Bhotiyas. Nomadic trade was in their blood, and they maintained vast flocks of pack animals for the sole purpose of transporting costly goods over the hundreds of difficult miles which separate Tibet from the cities in the plains of India. At Gartok, in late August, the Bhotiya caravans would be loaded with valuable Tibetan wool, gold dust, borax and rock salt and begin the descent over the passes into India in early September. After celebrating the mid-September festival of Nandashtami (in honour of the goddess Nanda Devi whose abode is on the twenty five thousand foot high peak of the same name in the Bhot valley of Johar) in their villages, the traders travelled down the mountains to the plains as far as Varanasi to purchase silks, spices and jaggery. In mid March the caravans ascended the mountains and crossed once again into Tibet by June. During this time, the women would remain their villages, surrounded by high peaks and alpine pastures rich in medicinal herbs and covered with sweet grass and beautiful flowers. The journey from Johar to Tibet was the most hazardous and bad weather on the frozen heights of the windswept passes caused many men and animals to perish.

At times, Bhotiya women accompanied the caravans to Tibet, in order to undertake the holiest of Hindu pilgrimages, to the sacred Mount Kailash, abode of Lord Shiva, and to Manasarovar, the lake of supreme consciousness. It was by observing and befriending nomadic Khampa women there, who wove beautiful carpets, shawls, fabric, saddle rugs and blankets, that the Bhotiya women brought back with them the art of weaving, and caused it to flourish as a vibrant and profitable cottage industry. The entire process of dyeing, carding, spinning and weaving wool was done exclusively by women on homemade spindles and looms, using vegetable

dyes. Original Tibetan patterns and motifs were refined and altered to create a typical style of Bhotiya weaving. It was not surprising, therefore, that these highland communities were prosperous and cultured. Although they have always worshipped the Hindu deities Shiva and Shakti, who are believed to dwell on the Himalayan peaks Mt. Kailash and Nanda Devi, many cultural and religious aspects of Bhotiya society were influenced by Tibetan Buddhism. The Bhotiyas had formed strong social and cultural bonds with the Tibetans which passed from one generation to another.

When trade, the vital link between the two countries, was cut off all of a sudden, the Bhotiyas faced a very uncertain future. Their huge flocks, once a primary asset, were rendered useless as there were no more goods to transport. Moreover, the forests of Kumaon, once abundant and rich in grazing, had been steadily depleted not so much by the local population as by large scale commercial exploitation. As wool ceased to be supplied from Tibet, the cottage industry of weaving also came to a virtual standstill, and the Bhotiya community struggled to survive and to find a place in the new order of life.

Some time later, the government of India notified the Bhotiyas under the Scheduled Tribes Act which enabled those of the younger generation to avail of formal education and subsequent job reservations. The trade depot of Munsyari, situated at the foot of the Panchachuli range about fifty miles South of the Tibetan frontier, evolved into a town with government schools, colleges and administrative centres. Nearly all the Bhotiyas abandoned their highland villages, once strategically close to Tibet but now remote and cutoff from the mainstream, and settled close to Munsyari. Young Bhotiya men availed of job reservations given to them by the government and migrated permanently to cities in the plains, taking their families with them.

Meanwhile, those who remained out of necessity or choice in the mountains faced a difficult future. Many shepherds sold their entire flocks to meat markets and those who did not found it increasingly difficult to sustain their animals with the limited grazing available in depleted forests. For it was during the seventies and eighties that maximum damage was done to the natural resources of Kumaon as more and more timber was required to feed paper mills and other factories in the plains. The women, not only of the Bhotiya tribe but of all the hill communities, suffered the most as fuelwood and fodder became scarce and water sources dried up.

As part of the development programme for the region, the government did eventually supply Bhotiya women with wool. Unfortunately, the wool was of a very poor quality, mill spun and dyed in awful chemical colours like shocking pink and canary yellow, and was brought up from Punjab and Delhi. This arrangement created an ideal setting for middlemen of all kinds to exploit the weavers. Policy makers ignored the fact that a good marketing system was also required, as a result of which the same middlemen who sold the weavers woolen yarn on cash basis collected the finished products from them on credit basis. The women felt they were being thoroughly exploited, and gradually lost interest in their craft to such an extent that by the nineties only few women still knew and practiced traditional methods of dyeing and weaving.

On the other hand, in order to bring in cash, the Bhotiya men used their guns, once meant solely to protect their caravans from dacoits and predators, to kill rare musk deer, snow leopard, black bear and other species. The musk, and pelts sold at

large profits on the black market. (To make matters worse, bored army personnel who were stationed near the Tibetan frontiers shot Blue Sheep and Thar, a sort of Ibex, at random for meat and sport). Similarly, highland forests of cedar and spruce were also depleted and the valuable timber sold.

In an unexpected turn of events, an agreement was signed between the governments of India and China two years ago and the re-opening of the Lipu la pass for trans-Himalayan trade was a part of that accord. For the Bhotiyas of the older generation, returning to Tibet after a gap of almost thirty five years was an emotional event. Although they were shocked to see that the great monastery of Purang and smaller Gompas around Mt. Kailash had been razed to the ground by the Chinese army, some Bhotiyas were fortunate enough to be reunited with their old trade partners at Gartok and Gyanima. They returned to India with some quantities of Tibetan goat pashmina, (the fine undercoat of high altitude animals) renowned for its warmth and softness, Bactrian camel wool, and fine Tibetan sheep wool. Although rock salt, borax, gold dust and turquoise had been replaced by cheap electronic and plastic goods made in China, wool was still available from the Khampa and Dokpa nomads. Last year, Nescafe was taken in large quantities from India and exchanged for wool and the trans-Himalayan trade was to some extent revived at the Trade fair of Purang in Tibet, situated at the foot of the massive, swastika-based Mandhata mountain, fifteen miles from the Lipu La pass.

Over the years, the Bhotiya community has expanded, migrated, and readapted to present day life. Rapid modernization, almost feverish in its haste and devoid of sound planning and vision, has brought a curious mixture of development and destruction to the mountains. In this fast changing world, the ancient trade routes across the alpine pastures, swift flowing rivers and glacial rubble of Johar, over the desolate, austere passes and into the great plains of Tibet with its turquoise lakes and cobalt sky, remain eternal, unchanging. Perhaps it is time to pause and reflect upon the wisdom and skills of the traditions of the tribal people and turn this knowledge to the advantage of the Bhotiya community. For the time is not far when the tranquil highlands of Kumaon will be flooded by mass tourism. This will open avenues for further exploitation of the natural and man made resources of the Bhotiyas by a new set of middlemen.

Before this happens, it is imperative that these resources are put firmly in the control of the indigenous communities, and such traditional skills as weaving and growing up medicinal plants can help to make the Bhotiyas economically self-sufficient without damaging the environment on both a long and short term basis. The high Himalayas are rich in resources and though they seem inhospitable and desolate to the uninitiated, they support an amazing variety of plant and animal life and have sustained communities such as the Bhotiyas of Kumaon in innumerable valleys from Kashmir to Bhutan, across the length of Northern India and Nepal. The re-opening of trans-Himalayan trade provides many opportunities to the Bhotiyas to return to a traditional way of life which can be made economically, socially and environmentally relevant and profitable. The next section of this paper attempts to outline the work of the Panchachuli Weavers' guild and the Jan Jagaran Samiti during the past three years towards achieving this goal.