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Subrat Sharma and H.C. Rikhari

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The Bhotias: the disruption in lifestyle of a nomadic community in the Indian central Himalayas

Subrat Sharma and H. C. Rikhari

The international frontier between India and Tibet is marked by the Himalayan ranges, in which two distinct watershed systems arise. One flows northwards into Tibet, the other southwards into the Indian Himalayan region. The valleys of the seven rivers (Bhagirathi, Alaknanda, Dhauliganga, Goriganga, Darma, Kali, and Kuti Yankti) to the north of the Indian central Himalayan region constitute the homeland of the Bhotia community. Previously known as Bhot Pradesh the area is now divided for purposes of administration into the three districts of Chamoli, Uttarkashi and Pithoragarh. *Bhot Pradesh* means the "province of the Bhot" or Bhotia, who are divided according to location into a number of subgroups. The term "Bhotia" is an exonym for this basically Hindu community, which is divided into numerous subgroups, all of whose members speak a language specific to themselves. Trade combined with pastoralism has marked the entire Himalayan region for centuries (e.g. Fisher 1986, Rauber 1987, Rauber-Schweizer 1987, Rizvi 1983) and the Bhotias are no exception (Nand and Kumar 1989: 204ff.). They too are basically traders and pastoralists, and till 1962 trade between India and Tibet was their primary occupation (Purohit 1983, Joshi *et al.* 1983). Since the closure of the trans-border trade they are facing several problems. This paper attempts to focus

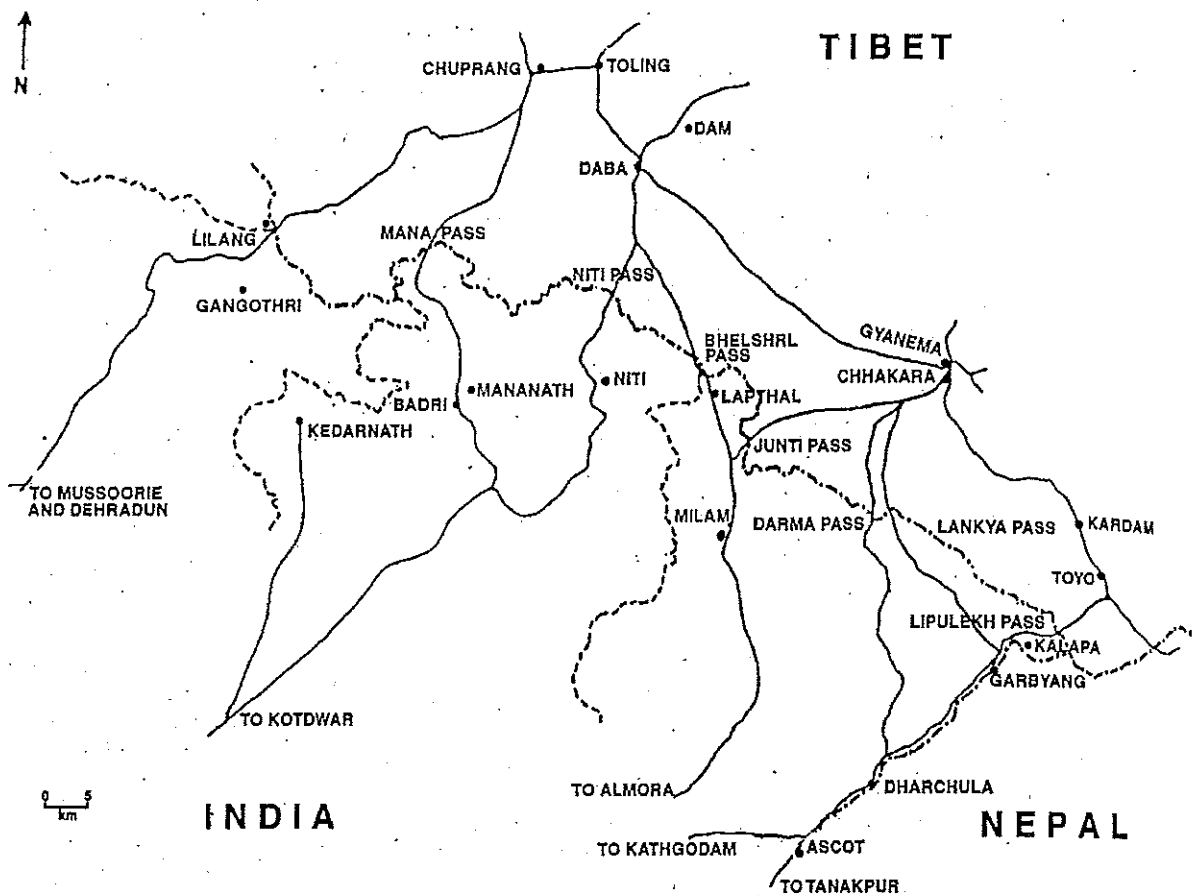
on some of their recent problems and their impact on the Bhotia community.

The Environmental Context

Climate

The central Himalayas have a monsoon climate. The slopes to the south of the main ranges are marked by comparatively little differences of temperature within an annual cycle; there is high rainfall in summer, great humidity throughout the year, and moderate temperature in winter. Despite the region's continental location, its climate resembles a maritime one (Sakai and Malla 1981). The average total rainfall from May to September (in 1988 and 1989) was 1557mm at 3500m elevation, and 2400mm throughout the year at 1200m elevation – *i.e.* at and around the Bhotias' summer and winter dwellings respectively. At 3500m elevation the average mean monthly temperature in the open over the two years 1988 and 1989 ranged from 6.50°C in May to 13.70°C in June, and was markedly lower than at 1200m elevation, where the monthly mean temperature ranged from 5.00°C in January to 28.00°C in June. Thus the precipitation effectiveness is relatively higher and conditions are more mesic at summer dwellings than at winter quarters with similar

Fig. 1. The main centres of Tibetan commerce and the trade route of the Bhotias. Mana, Niti, and Milam are their summer areas.



precipitation. Further, the snowmelt during April-May at 3500m elevation renders the soil moist, whereas at the lower elevation the pre-monsoon summer is dry. Cloud and drizzling mist are regular features of the summer area during the snow free period, *i.e.* from April to October.

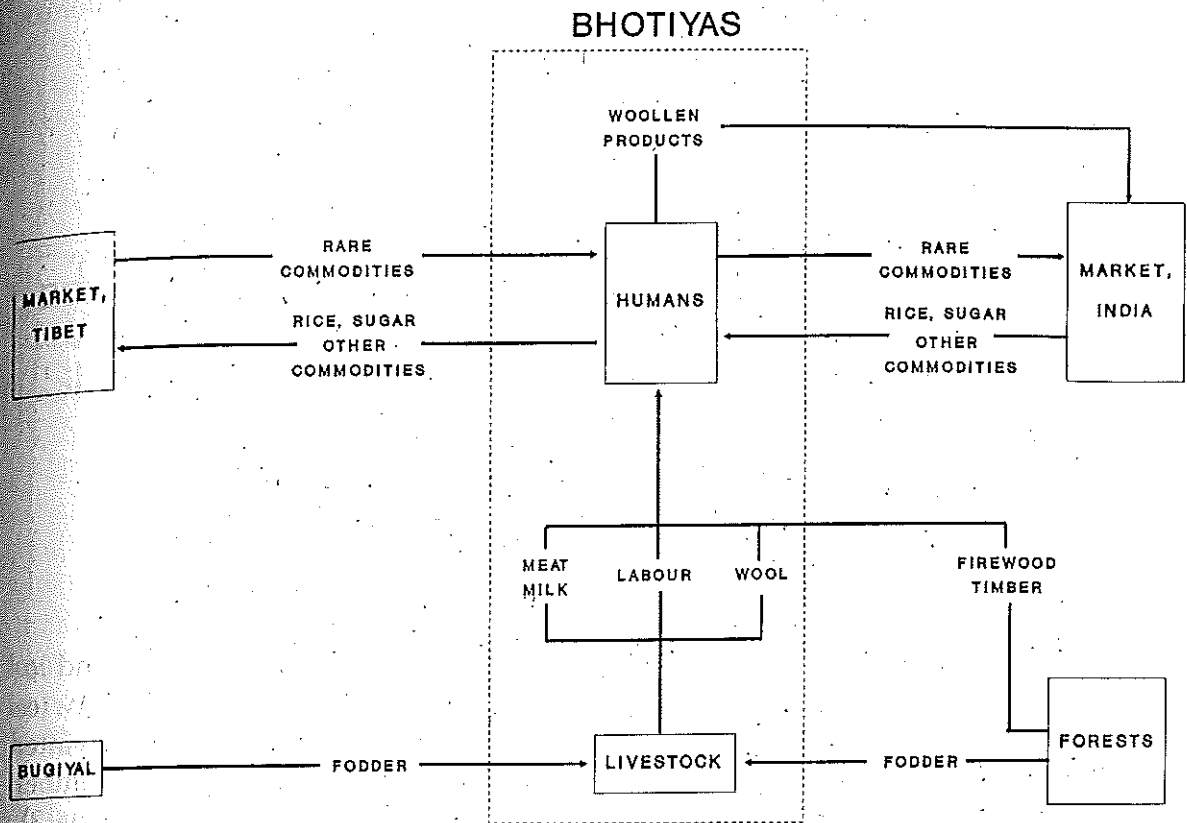
The Study Area

Four prominent groups of Bhotias – the Jad, Tolcha, Marchha, and Johris – are settled in the seven river valleys (Negi 1982). Each valley has mountain passes to Tibet and the Bhotia settlements in the neighbourhood of these passes provided the main link to the trade route till 1962 (Fig. 1).

Village Mana, taken up for this study is situated at an altitude of about 3100m towards Mana pass near the Alaknanda

river in district Chamoli. It is nearly 3km from the Hindu shrine of Badrinath. The road up to Mana was constructed after the Indo-China war of 1962 to meet Indian defence requirements. The forest at 9-10 km from the village provides firewood, mainly from the shrub *Juniperous sp.*. Traditionally this species has been burnt and cut periodically to prevent its extension into adjoining pastures, but currently it is under tremendous pressure of over exploitation. Roughly 250 Bhotia households spend the summers in Mana and maintain a second set of winter dwellings at and around Gopeshwar (at an elevation of about 1200m) in district Chamoli, while their herds go to the forested foothills in the districts of Dehra Dun and Naini Tal. At both sets of quarters they have permanent establishments, occupied season-

Fig. 2. Linkages of the Bhotia community before the 1962 Sino-Indian war.



ally. From late May to late September the herds move from Mana towards the high altitude grazing lands (Bughiyal). These grazing lands at Gastoli and Basudhara are nearly 8-10 km distant from their summer dwellings.

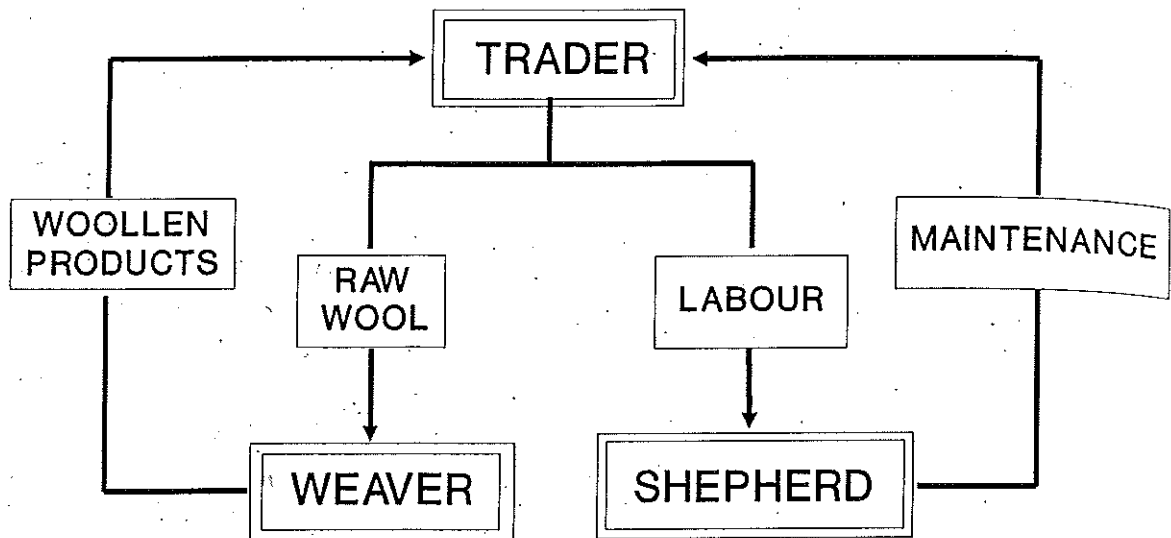
The alpine grazing lands generally have a mosaic of grass, sedges and forb communities with an annual above ground net primary production of 112-400 g/m² (Mani 1978, Rikhari *et al.* 1992). Various parts of the nutrient-rich species of flowers, leaves and stems are consumed by sheep and goats whose daily individual intake is 0.74kg and 0.70kg dry weight respectively (Singh 1991). The soil of these grazing lands is deep brown to black in colour, silty loam in texture, and rich in organic carbon with acidic nature (Rikhari *et al.* 1992). Every year bare areas are created due to the night halt of sheep and goats, but these get revegetated within 2-3 years by tall forbs such as *Rumex nepalensis* and *Cirsium*

wallichii and reach the original vegetation level in about 30 years in flat areas and in roughly 40 years on gentle slopes (Rikhari *et al.* 1993).

Trends prior to 1962

Before 1962 trade relations between Tibet and this region were well established, and wool and other rare commodities were often bought by the Bhotias and sold in the urban markets of the Tarai and Bhabar of North India; from the same markets they took back rice, sugar and other commodities for Tibet (Fig. 2). This trade was the backbone of Bhotia economy. Sheep and goats were the chief components of their herds, and during the upward migration they usually carried food grains in traditional bags (*phankcha*). A few traders also used yaks, mules, and ponies for transporting heavy materials, such as brass ware. Usually

Fig. 3. Occupational symbiosis within the community, before the war. "Shepherd" indicates those persons who maintained the herd of a trader.



two trips to Tibet were undertaken. The first was over by the end of July, when the herds returned with wool, rugs and skin. This wool was brought to the summer dwelling to be cleaned and spun. The second trip usually was completed by the end of August or early September. At the end of September or towards the beginning of October the downward migration started, and after reaching their winter dwellings the traders undertook trips to the markets in the plains of India, referred to earlier.

Trends after 1962

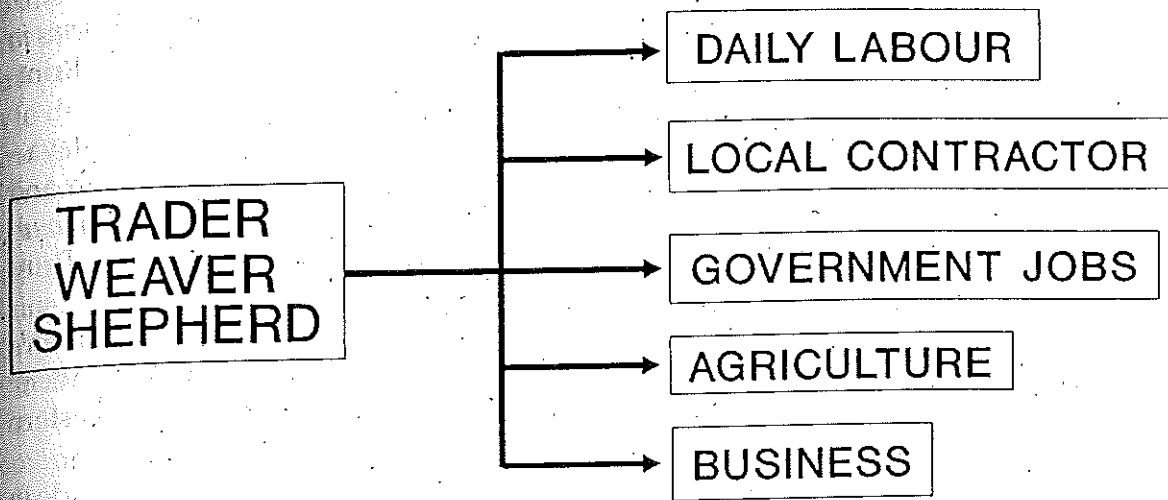
After the 1962 Sino-Indian war trade with Tibet collapsed, and the Bhotias faced problems of grazing lands. This resulted in a drastic decrease in the number of shepherd families. Nearly 90% families have abandoned their seminomadic life and the youth does not like to adopt this pattern. Nearly one fourth of the families are permanently settled at and around their winter dwellings and have started marginal agriculture. Only eleven families now practice their traditional occupation, and as a result the pro-

duction of wool (both imported and locally produced) which is shorn twice each year (once in March-April at winter quarters and again in August-September in the summer area) is also low (Fig. 3). All this has led to a breakdown in the traditional economy and lifestyle of the community and they are increasingly taking up a variety of new occupations (Fig. 4). Those who still maintain their traditional wool industry, import Tibetan wool from Nepal through Pithoragarh district, *via* a route of approximately 300 km. In recent years a little agriculture has also been introduced in the summer area, on land varying between 0.04-0.36 ha per family. The only summer crop is potato (*Solanum tuberosum*), which is sown in April-May and harvested in August-September. The yield per ha is 30-35 quintals, and this cash crop does not meet their requirements. For their food needs these families now depend on the market located at lower altitudes.

Changes and current problems

Since 1962 the Bhotia community in the area has thus been facing several prob-

Fig. 4. Diversification of occupations after the breakdown of the traditional economy.



lems, of which the following are the most important:

1. Due to the war trade, which was the backbone of the economy, has collapsed.
2. Grazing has been banned in some high altitude alpine pastures, such as Bugiyal, partly for reasons of Indian military defence and partly because some grazing lands have been converted into national parks and biosphere reserves. This has severely affected the livestock population, which has decreased drastically over the last ten to fifteen years. With the reduction in the number of shepherd families, herd sizes per family have dropped from about 400 head of smallstock to 200 or even less. Individual families can not afford large herds, since the costs of upkeep have risen due to fodder shortage.
3. Reduction in herd size has led to decreased production of wool, and most families can not afford the expenses of importing wool from Nepal. Hence, they are taking to new occupations, such as those of porter, local contractor, etc. Wealthy families have sedentarized at low altitudes, between

- 800m and 1200m, around the main areas of their former winter quarters.
4. Children are now going to school, and increasingly the majority of school leavers are looking for government jobs. After the 1962 war, the establishment of the *Indo-Tibet Border Police* force has played a significant role in providing jobs for many of these youth. Yet there is a considerable amount of emigration of young men from the area, and this has increased the work load of the women, who in addition to weaving, spinning and domestic activities now also have to care for the livestock and till the land. This added burden of work has contributed not only to a further reduction in wool production, but also to tremendous changes in the wool products now made; thus for example, the old dragon designs which were common in their woven goods are now rarely found.
5. In some of the forests in the foothills grazing is now limited by forest legislation and because of afforestation programmes, and grazing permits are too expensive for most. Herd owners are increasingly exposed to theft of

stock, which the local inhabitants at these lower elevations have been frequently indulging in.

The brief description given in this paper indicates clearly that a balanced system is collapsing, and that environmental degradation and over exploitation of forests due to road construction and extreme pressure on the limited sources of fodder and fuel are hastening this process. It indicates that this centuries old viable culture is dying, and will probably soon become extinct. An integrated, multidisciplinary approach is urgently required to understand the present plight of the Bhotias, and to formulate strategies for the revival of their life support systems. If the present trends were to continue unchecked, they will lead to the collapse of the Bhotia civilization.

Acknowledgements

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Résumé

Dans cette étude les auteurs passent en revue les nombreux changements économiques et sociaux qui ont eu lieu dans la vie des Bhotiya de l'Himalaya central indien, depuis la guerre de 1962 entre l'Inde et la Chine. Habitants à une altitude d'environ 3000 m, les Bhotiya, éleveurs de moutons, faisaient le commerce de la laine, des céréales, et de nombreux autres produits comestibles entre le Tibet et l'Inde. A la suite de la guerre les Bhotiya ne pouvaient plus traverser la frontière comme jadis et de ce fait ils ne pouvaient plus faire de commerce. Depuis, le déboisement de la région leur a fait perdre leurs pâturages et ils se voient obligés de réduire leurs troupeaux. Les auteurs plaident pour une approche interdisciplinaire ayant pour but d'aider les Bhotiyas à trouver des stratégies qui pourraient sauver leur culture et leur mode de vie.

Resumen

Los Bhotias del Himalaya Central de la India habitan la región de los valles de los siete-ríos que se encuentra en distritos aledaños al Tibet a unos 3000 m.s.n.m. Estos grupos semi-nómades de pastores de ovejas mantenían antes un intercambio económico tanto con pueblos de las tierras altas del Tibet como de las llanuras en la India. Tradicionalmente obtenían lana ovina de sus propios animales o del Tibet. Vendían esta lana en las llanuras, para poder comprar así cereales y otros bienes que a su vez comercializaban hacia las tierras altas. Sin embargo, la guerra entre India y China en el año 1962 y la extensiva deforestación y degradación resultante de las tierras de pastoreo modificaron dramáticamente el estilo de vida de los Bhotias. Los que no encontraron empleo en otros lados fueron obligados a practicar una agricultura marginal y a reducir sus rebaños. Causa de esto fueron la disminución de bosques y pasturas, prohibiciones sobre las tierras de pastoreo que habían quedado y la desarticulación general del sistema de mercado. Se requiere de un enfoque multidisciplinario para un mejor entendimiento de su situación precaria actual. Esto permitiría también poder formular estrategia de revitalización de los sistemas de subsistencia, ya que una agudización de la tendencia actual llevaría a un colapso de toda la civilización Bhotia.

Subrat Sharma and H. C. Rikhari are both at the G.B.Pant Institute of Himalayan Environment and Development, Kosi-Kotarmal, Almora - 263 643 India.