



Culture and Modernization: Adaptation and Resilience of Bhutia Tribe of Uttarakhand

Prakash Chand Kandpal^{1*} • Prabhat Kumar¹

¹Centre for the Study of Law and Governance, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

*Corresponding Author: pcka120872@yahoo.com

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Abstract: The interplay between culture and modernization presents a dynamic narrative that underscores the resilience of tribal communities in the face of rapid societal changes. A tribal community with a rich cultural heritage is a testament to this resilience. Their journey through the tides of modernization offers valuable insights into the adaptation processes and the preservation of cultural identity. The incursion of modern values and lifestyles has led to a gradual erosion of traditional practices. Younger generations, exposed to urban lifestyles and global cultural trends, often find themselves at a crossroads, balancing the allure of modernity and preserving their ancestral heritage. This generational shift has raised concerns about resilience due to the potential loss of cultural practices, languages, and traditional knowledge systems. This paper delves into the intricate dynamics between the culture and modernization of the Bhutia tribe of Uttarakhand. It explores the historical context and cultural heritage of the Bhutia tribe, the impact of modernization on their traditional way of life, and the various adaptation strategies they have employed to navigate these changes. The paper highlights the tribe's resilience in preserving their cultural identity through cultural revitalization programs, community-based tourism, integration of traditional and modern education, and the utilization of digital platforms. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of supportive policies and collaborative efforts in ensuring the sustainability of the Bhutia culture amidst modernization.

Keywords: Culture • Modernization • Bhutia • Adaptation • Resilience • Uttarakhand

Introduction

Culture encompasses the collective beliefs, values, customs, behaviors and artifacts that characterize a particular group or society. It includes tangible elements, such as art, literature, music, and architecture, and intangible aspects, like norms, traditions, language, rituals, and social structures. Culture is defined as a social domain that encompasses practices, discourses, and material expressions, which, over time, articulate the continuities and discontinuities of shared social meaning within a community. (James et al. 2015). Culture shapes individuals' identities and influences their worldview, guiding their interactions within their community and with others. A person's identity results from socialization and customs that facilitate the maintenance of distinct cultural identities across generations (Assmann & Czaplicka 1995). Cultural identity constitutes the aggregate of material and spiritual assets humanity generates

through social and historical development (Jia 2019). Modernization refers to the process of transformation from a traditional or pre-modern society to a modern one. This transformation often involves social, economic, political, and cultural changes, typically driven by technological advancement, industrialization, and the adoption of modern values and practices. According to Lipset (1967), economic conditions are heavily determined by the cultural and social values present in that given society.

The Interplay between culture and Modernization

Culture and modernization influence and reshape each other in complex ways. Culture, encompassing a community's beliefs, practices, artifacts, and social norms, serves as a foundation for identity and continuity. Modernization, characterized by technological advancements, economic growth, and social changes, often presents challenges and opportunities for cultural preservation and adaptation. The interplay between



these forces is particularly pronounced in tribal communities, where traditional ways of life are intimately connected to historical and environmental contexts. Modernization can potentially improve living standards through enhanced rationality, industrialization, education, healthcare, and infrastructure. However, it can also lead to eroding cultural practices and languages, particularly among younger generations who may be drawn to contemporary lifestyles and global cultural trends. This dynamic has been observed in various indigenous communities worldwide, from the Sami in Scandinavia to the Māori in New Zealand, highlighting a universal struggle to maintain cultural identity amidst changing circumstances.

In India, as a tribal community with a rich cultural heritage, the Bhutias face the dual challenge of adapting to modernization while preserving their ancestral traditions. This paper delves into the adaptation strategies and resilience of the Bhutia

tribe, offering insights into the broader discourse on cultural identity and modernization. The research paper is based on the case study of the Bhutia tribe of Uttarakhand.

Bhutias of Uttarakhand

The term 'Bhotiya' (also spelled 'Bhutia,' 'Bhotia,' and 'Bhootia') became widely recognized during the British colonial expansion from Bengal through Nepal to the Western Himalayas in the 18th and 19th centuries (Brown 1987). The word Bhotiyas originated from the word Bod, the native name for Tibet. Indians called it Bhot, which has given rise to the word Bhotiya for the border tribes between the two countries (Sharma 2020). Predominantly residing in the high-altitude regions of Uttarakhand, the Bhutias trace their origins to the Tibetan Plateau. Their migration into the Indian subcontinent has contributed to a unique blend of Tibetan and Indian cultural elements, making their traditions and practices distinct.



Fig 1: The scene of departure on the journey to Tibet

Source: The photo was taken by authors at the 'Tribal Heritage Museum', Munsyari, Pithoragarh (Uttarakhand).

Their primary traditional livelihood centered around commerce along the Indo-Tibetan trade routes, supplemented by modest agricultural and pastoral pursuits (Chatterjee 1976). They engaged in reciprocal trade, exchanging commodities such as wool, salt, and spices for necessities like grains, utensils, and textiles.

Religious festivals stimulated local trade, as pilgrims from India traveled to the sacred Manasarovar Lake, bringing goods with them.

(Gill 2000). following China's annexation of Tibet, Bhutia's trade relations with the region ceased. Despite these disruptions, the Bhotias managed to sustain their cultural practices, adapting them to new economic realities (Prasad 1989). Recognizing the socio-economic challenges faced by the Bhutias, the Government of India has included them in the list of scheduled tribes, thereby granting them access to affirmative action programs and reservations aimed at fostering their



socio-economic upliftment. The Bhutias of Mana village (The first village at the India-China border, located on the banks of Saraswati River) of Chamoli district spend the summer season in the village. During this period, they indulge in weaving woolen clothes and selling them. During the winter season, they migrate to the Gopeshwar. They engage in commerce in the Himalayas, trading commodities such as cereals, wool, and salt. Currently, some are involved in agriculture, while others specialize in the trade of gems, stones, and medicinal herbs (Shrestha 2002). During the field visit, researchers observed that in agriculture, Bhutias are primarily engaged in producing beans and different types of vegetables. They are also involved in other modern economic activities, like tourism, and many Bhutias can be found in government offices.

The Bhutias are known for their traditional way of life, which includes weaving woolen clothes, pastoralism and trade with Tibetans. The Bhutia migrated across India following the closure of the Indo-Tibetan border in 1962. At present, they live in Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Ladakh, Jammu & Kashmir, Uttar Pradesh, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, and West Bengal. Their primary trade involved the exchange of local Tibetan merchandise both within India and across the Tibetan border. Historically, they were nomadic pastoralists who traded salt and wool between India and Tibet. Traveling with large caravans of yak and mules, they transported Indian goods to Tibet when the snow melted, bartering these goods for local Tibetan products to be sold in India. The historical trajectory of the Bhutia tribe is deeply interwoven with the geographical terrain and significant historical events of the Himalayan region. Originating from migratory movements across the Himalayas, the Bhutias settled in remote valleys and high-altitude regions, shaping their societal structures in response to the challenges posed by mountainous environments. Their interactions with neighboring communities and diverse cultures, encompassing Tibetans, Indians, and sub-groups of Bhutias (Shaukas of Munyari, Rang of Dharchula, Tolchhas and Marchhas of Niti

and Mana Valleys), have notably contributed to the cultural and social complexity of Bhutia society.

Currently, the Bhutia community primarily inhabits the districts of Pithoragarh, Uttarkashi, Chamoli, and Almora in Uttarakhand. Within Pithoragarh, Uttarkashi, and Chamoli districts, their settlements are predominantly concentrated in the seven principal river valleys. In the Garhwal region, their presence is characterized by the Jadh, Tolcha, and Marchha groups, while in Kumaon, they are delineated into the Johari-Shaukas residing in the Gori Valley, and the Rang-Shaukas residing in the Dharma, Byans, and Chaudans valleys (Bergmann et al. 2008). The latter subgroup is subdivided into distinct communities known as Byansi, Chaudansi, and Dharmani, delineated by their respective valley habitats.

Despite their rich cultural heritage (folk songs, dance, arts, language, customs and rituals), the Bhutias face significant challenges due to modernization and socio-economic changes. The introduction of modern education, healthcare, and infrastructure has brought about improvements in their quality of life but has also led to the erosion of traditional practices and languages. The younger generations are caught between the allure of modernity and the preservation of their ancestral heritage.

Cultural Practices and Traditions

The cultural identity of the Bhutia community is deeply intertwined with their religious beliefs, traditional festivals, and linguistic heritage. Their religious practices demonstrate a syncretic amalgamation of diverse influences, encompassing Hinduism and Tibetan Buddhism. Significant festivals such as '*Kandali*' hold paramount importance, serving as occasions for communal gatherings, religious observances, and cultural commemorations. Additionally, the Bhutia language, characterized by its unique dialectal variations and idiomatic expressions, is a vital link to their ancestral heritage, fostering a strong sense of identity and belonging among community members. In Johar valley of Pithoragarh district, Bhutias take care of the sacred forests; these



groves are associated with a presiding deity, e.g. Kalamuni (in the name of goddess Kali) forest, Thamri Kund, Maiser Kkund, Dana dhar, Kalia top, Martoli temple (Joshi and Pande 2017). Hoon (1996) emphasizes the resilience of the Bhotiya community in maintaining their distinct cultural values and subsistence strategies despite the challenges posed by modernization, historical changes, and political geography.

Religiously, the Bhutia community adheres to both Hinduism and Buddhism. The majority within the Bhutia community identifies with Hinduism, practicing rituals and traditions akin to mainstream Hindu practices while also venerating local deities. Followers of Hinduism observe major Hindu festivals as integral parts of their religious calendar. Conversely, adherents of Buddhism within the community commemorate significant Buddhist festivals as central facets of their religious observance.

Observations and Discussion

Impact of Modernization on the Bhutia Tribe of Uttarakhand

The Bhutia tribe of Uttarakhand is a Himalayan tribal community with a distinct cultural and historical identity. Modernization, characterized by technological advancements, economic development, and social changes, has profoundly impacted this community. Modernization has impacted the culture of the Bhutia community differently. It has changed the community, impacting their language, traditional lifestyle, cultural practices, and heritage. Modernization is one of the reasons the youth of the community are forgetting their culture. Bhutias are shifting towards the cities for better education and medical facilities. Youth feel more comfortable and entertained in the cities. They become habitual of modern practices, rituals, dance forms, music, poetry, and food, influenced by the media that focuses mainly on the culture of plain India. Movies and serials have a profound impact on the culture.

Modernization has brought significant healthcare, education, and infrastructure improvements to the

Bhutia community. Infrastructure development, such as roads and communication networks, has improved connectivity, facilitating more accessible access to markets, healthcare, and educational institutions. In the Mana village of Chamoli district, a woman said:

“In earlier days, when there was not a good mode of transportation, it used to take more than one day to come to the village from Gopeshwar. However, thanks to the development process, it's so easy to visit the village now” (fieldnotes, 04 June 2024).

A man from the same village said:

“Modernization has made life easy as it has brought electricity and new technologies” (fieldnotes, 04 June 2024).

Apart from positive impacts, there are some negative impacts. The influx of modern values and lifestyles has led to the gradual erosion of traditional Bhutia cultural practices. Younger generations, in particular, are more inclined towards modern ways of life, often at the expense of their ancestral traditions. The most popular languages among the Bhotia are Kumauni, Bhutia, Garhwali, Halam, Hindi, and Rongpa. Bhutia's traditional dialects and languages are under threat as younger members of the community increasingly adopt Hindi and English for broader communication and better economic prospects. The shift from traditional occupations to modern jobs can lead to a loss of traditional knowledge and skills integral to Bhutia's cultural identity. Conflicts can arise between generations and within the community as they navigate these changes. Introducing modern education and economic opportunities can sometimes create disparities within the community, leading to social stratification. We can see here the contradictory nature of cultural evolution from which lens we are seeing; from one lens, some cultural practices are in danger, but from another, these are evolving to adapt to modernization.

Talking to one of the Bhutias of Munsyari (Hari from Pithoragarh district), aged 50 years, he said:

“Western clothing, like jeans and T-shirts, is becoming more common, especially among the



youth, and the young generation is increasingly adopting Hindi or English instead of own native language” (fieldnotes, 26 October 2023).

A local shop owner from Munsyari said:

“There is a shift from traditional agricultural, weaving, and pastoral lifestyles to modern occupations like tourism and handicrafts. In terms of houses, modern construction methods are replacing traditional Bhutia architecture. In food, the introduction of new food habits, like preference of packed noodles are altering traditional staple diets, like Rice and Rajma” (fieldnotes, 27 October 2023).

A woman from the village Sooring (in Munsyari), aged around 65 years, said:

“Gharat was once a part of Bhutia culture, which is now distinct. This traditional water mill called gharats was once common across the Himalayas mountains and used to grind grain. Modernization,

technological advancements, rising temperatures, and reduced water flow in many rivers and streams have made gharats a thing of the past. Occasionally, abandoned mills can be spotted by what little is left of once-powerful watercourses. Climate change is one of the main factors affecting the community’s culture. Earlier, they used to plan and prepare better for migration. Now it rains when we expect it least and least rain and snowfall when we expect it the most. These unprecedented things make the journey of our community tougher. Unexpected early rainfall delays our journeys to the end of May and early June. Climate changes like this add to the strains on us, driving the loss of traditional culture in the valleys” (fieldnotes, 27 October 2023).



Fig 2: Gharat-Photo was taken from the 'Tribal Heritage Museum', Munsyari, Pithoragarh (Uttarakhand)

Adaptation & Resilience Strategies

Despite these challenges, the Bhutia community has shown resilience by adopting various strategies to balance modernization with cultural preservation. Initiatives aimed at reviving and promoting traditional arts, crafts, and festivals help

maintain cultural identity. Researchers visited the Mana village of Chamoli district (Uttarakhand) in the first week of June 2024, and they observed that the women of Mana village sell their handmade woolen clothes by wearing their traditional attire at their shops in the market.



Photo: 3 A Bhutia woman selling woollen clothes in her traditional attire at the market of Mana village, Chamoli, Uttarakhand. Source: Photo taken by the authors

A woman, aged 50 years, said:

“Wearing traditional attire at the shop in the market attracts tourists as well as it helps in keeping our traditional attire alive” (fieldnotes, 05 June 2024).

Cultural festivals are the milestones in preserving the culture. Every year, a big cultural event is organized in the Mana village, focusing on preserving their Bhutia culture, on the occasion of the door-opening ceremony of the temple of their beloved deity ‘*Ghantakaran Ji*’. Bhutia people from nearby villages also join. A young tourist guide, Suraj, from the Bhutia community, said:

“This festival is very important to us. The ceremony gives a chance to the younger generation to learn about our culture. They learn it and preserve it” (fieldnotes, 06 June 2024).

Similarly, but on a big scale, the *Kandali* festival is organized in every 12 years in the *Dharchula* of Pithoragarh district. The festival sees active participation from the Bhutia community. The last time it was celebrated was in the month of October 2023. Researchers visited Dharchula just 2 days after this great auspicious festival. They got the chance to talk to many Bhutias who came from different states and even from other countries to attend this festival. A 65-year-old person who came from Delhi only to attend this festival said:

“Joining this festival is mandatory for me. My family and I eagerly wait for 12 years to be a part of this festival. This festival gives us an opportunity to understand and follow our culture and meet our other Bhutia people” (fieldnotes, 27 October 2023).



Fig:4 Kandali festival banner at the entrance of a Bhutia village - 'Sosa', Dharchula, Pithoragarh (Uttarakhand) Source: Photo taken by authors



Bhutias wear their traditional attire, such as “Bakhu” (robe) and “Shambo” (cap), during festivals, maintaining their cultural dress code. Bhutias from Nepal also attend this event as many relatives of the Indian side live in Nepal. Despite some rituals being condensed, the core traditions and cultural expressions, such as traditional dances

and songs, are preserved. By organizing cultural events, elders and cultural organizations educate the younger generation about Bhutia traditions, songs, dances, and folklore. Traditional Bhutia dances, like Chachari dance, are performed while singing folklore at festivals and cultural events and just for their own happiness.



Fig 5: Bhutia women performing their traditional Chachari Dance (Mana village, Chamoli district, Uttarakhand) Source: Photo taken by the authors

Researchers visited Munsyari (Pithoragarh, Uttarakhand) in the month of October 2023. In Bhuita villages, they found women engaged in

making carpets/dann/rugs, and woolen clothes at their homes.



Fig 6: A Bhutia woman giving the final touch to the hand-woven carpet made by her at Home (Village - Sooring, Munsyari (Pithoragarh)) Source: Photo taken by the authors

Integrating traditional knowledge with modern education ensures that younger generations appreciate their cultural heritage while gaining the skills needed for contemporary society. Digital technology offers new ways to document and share

Bhutia cultural narratives, helping preserve their heritage for future generations. To make awareness about the Bhutia culture among his own people and to conserve it, local historian ‘Dr. Sher Singh Pangti’ went all out in the year 2000 to plant the



Bhutia culture, art, and sustenance flag at Munsyari of Pithoragarh district. In order to protect the community culture, he documented

things related to the Bhutia culture and established a Museum named ‘Tribal Heritage Museum’ in Munsyari, Pithoragarh (Uttarakhand).



Fig 7: Tribal Heritage Museum at Munsyari, Pithoragarh (Uttarakhand) Source: Photo taken by the author

Dr. Sher Singh Pangti’s culturally enlightening book *Johar ke Swar* is one of the pioneering works on the folk culture of the people from the Johar region. This region is recognized as the border area of Munsyari in Pithoragarh. The book comprises a collection of 63 folk songs, 13 folk tales, and 520 prominent idioms of the Johar regional language, accompanied by a concise dictionary. By documenting, preserving the culture, and making a museum for it, Pangti Ji tried to include traditional knowledge in the modern education system. To

spread awareness among youth regarding their native language, Bhutias use their native language in the home, and elders do storytelling in the native language to teach the Bhutia language to children, ensuring its preservation. In villages like Darkot, Sooring, Sosa villages of Pithoragarh district and Mana, Niti Valley villages of Chamoli district, Bhutia families continue traditional practices like weaving carpets and shawls, alongside engaging in tourism and other modern professions, blending the old with the new.



Fig 8: A Bhutia women weaving and selling woollen products at the market of Mana village, Chamoli, Uttarakhand) Source: Photo taken by the authors



Some families integrate traditional wooden carvings and stone masonry into modern buildings to preserve architectural heritage. Traditional dishes such as “Thukpa”, and “Tsampa” are still prepared during festivals and family gatherings, maintaining culinary traditions. To preserve the Bhutia culture, the Government of India has provided a GI (Geographical Indication) tag to the Bhutia Dann, a traditional hand-woven carpet made by the Bhutia community of Uttarakhand (Geographical Indications 2021-22). Munsyari, a Bhutias populated region, got GI tag for Munsyari Rajma (Geographical Indications 2021-22).

Modernization has impacted the culture of the Bhutia community differently. It has impacted their language, traditional lifestyle, cultural practices, and heritage. Youth are becoming habitual of modern practices, rituals, dance forms, music, poetry, languages, and food. Despite these challenges, the Bhutias have shown remarkable resilience and adaptability in preserving their culture. Like, In the Mana village, at least one member of the family visits their native land and stays there from April-May to September-October. After that they migrate to Gopeshwar. In the same way, Bhutias of Bagori village (earlier settlement Nelung and Jadung valley) come down to the Dunda village during extremely cold months from October to April. But they must visit their native land in the summer in order to preserve their culture and land. This keeps them connected with their cultural roots.

Concluding Observations

The historical narrative of the Bhutias of Uttarakhand exemplifies the resilience demonstrated by indigenous communities amidst significant historical disruptions and contemporary transformations. By delving into the intricate facets of their past, we glean invaluable insights into the multifaceted tapestry of Himalayan culture and heritage. As stewards of a rich and diverse legacy, it is paramount to safeguard the Bhutia community's cultural traditions, ecological resources, and socio-economic aspirations for the enduring benefit of successive generations.

The social organization and community dynamics of the Bhutia tribe offer valuable insights into the complexities caused by modernization. They provide a deeper understanding of the resilience, adaptability, and cultural richness inherent in the indigenous life of the Bhutia society. As custodians of this vibrant heritage, there is a responsibility to advocate for initiatives aimed at safeguarding Bhutia traditions, promoting social equity, and fostering sustainable development within the high-altitude communities of Uttarakhand. The swift pace of modernization and external influences present both prospects and challenges to the social organization of the Bhutia community. Disruptions to entrenched social systems, accompanied by socio-economic shifts and environmental pressures, pose significant risks to the cultural continuity and overall welfare of Bhutia societies. However, modernization has given them opportunities to connect with what other parts of the world are doing. Strategies aimed at resilience and adaptation must carefully navigate the preservation of cultural heritage alongside responses to the dynamic demands of contemporary change.

Safeguarding the vitality and resilience of Bhutia social structures demands concerted endeavors to uphold cultural traditions, promote social equity, and advance community well-being. Initiatives focused on enhancing local governance, revitalizing traditional knowledge systems, and empowering marginalized groups are pivotal for ensuring the enduring sustainability of Bhutia communities. Persistent research and interventions across domains such as education, healthcare, and sustainable development are essential for safeguarding cultural heritage and nurturing social resilience within the Bhutia populace. Good quality education and better health facilities should be provided at the local level in the residential areas of the Bhutia community. The impacts of modernization can be seen in contradictory ways, but the resolution of these contradictions can be termed as the emergence of new avenues and further evolution of the Bhutia tribe.



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