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Folk Medicine And Traditional Food Habits Of The *Bhotiya* Tribe Of Uttarakhand

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Abstract

The *Bhotia* tribe inhabits the border regions of *Garhwal* and *Kumaon* in *Uttarakhand*. The word *Bhotia* is believed to be derived from the word *Bhot*, which refers to Tibet. Thus, the word *Bhotia* reflects their close connection to Tibet¹. However, many questions remain unanswered regarding which tribes migrated to the *Uttarakhand* region in the past, and which castes and tribes intermingled here during different historical periods. Scholars have offered answers based on their own interpretations. The *Bhotiya* tribe has historically been a trading community, forming the basis of trade between India and Tibet. The *Bhotiya* tribe possesses unique and distinctive customs, folk medicine practices, and traditional food (dietary) habits. Their traditional healing methods and dietary practices are a testament to their long history and their ability to survive in challenging environments. This tribe is distinctly different from other communities in *Uttarakhand*. It is classified into several sub-groups. These sub-groups are found in three districts of *Uttarakhand*: *Uttarkashi*, *Chamoli*, and *Pithoragarh*. Before the advent of modern medicine, every community used various types of traditional medicines and folk remedies to treat illnesses, and each community had its own traditional herbalist or folk healers. Illnesses were generally treated with these folk remedies. Different formulas were used for different diseases. These formulas were developed by the early generations of the community during its heyday and passed down through subsequent generations. The plants that grow in different geographical locations and the dietary practices of a community are deeply connected to its health and medical practices. This is clearly evident in the folk medicine of the *Bhotiya* tribe. Before the advent of modern medicine, folk remedies and dietary practices were the only effective forms of treatment, and these traditional methods were passed down from one generation to the next. However, due to several factors disrupting the community's lifestyle in recent times, the process of transmitting this valuable knowledge from previous generations to the present and future generations has been interrupted. As a result, centuries-old traditional knowledge is on the verge of extinction. This research paper presents a historical study of the folk medicine and traditional food habits of the *Bhotiya* tribe. The research area is primarily focused on the villages of the *Bhotiya* tribe in *Pithoragarh* district.

Key Words: Folk medicine, Traditional food, *Bhotiya*, Tribe, Indigenous Knowledge, *Kirat*, Mongoloid.

Introduction

The Indian Himalayan region is home to approximately 18.5% of India's total tribal population. More than 171 of India's 705 officially recognized Scheduled Tribes reside in the Indian Himalayan region. Several tribal communities inhabit the Central Indian Himalayas, including the Jaunsari, *Bhotia*, *Tharu*, *Buxa*, and *Raji* or *Raj-Kirat*, who have deep historical roots in the region.

The *Bhotia* are actually a group of six independent and distinct subgroups—*Shauka*, *Johari*, *Darmi*, *Tolcha*, *Marcha*, and *Jad*²—who primarily inhabit the border areas adjacent to Tibet. They are a loosely connected tribal community with permanent settlements in seven river valleys: *Bhagirathi-Jahnavi-Ganga* in *Uttarkashi* district; *Alaknanda* and *Dhauliganga* in *Chamoli*; and *Kali* and *Kuti Yangti* in

Pithoragarh district, spread across three districts of Uttarakhand—Uttarkashi, Chamoli, and Pithoragarh.

The *Bhotia* people are of short to medium stature. They have fair skin, straight brown hair, high cheekbones, and epicanthic folds. All these characteristics point to their resemblance to the Mongoloid race. European scholars used the term "*Bhot*" for these people. *Bhot* means Tibet, and *Bhotia* means Tibetan. *Sherring* is of the opinion that the *Bhotia* people arrived in this region long before the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet³.

It is noteworthy that the term "*Bhotiya*" is not used for these people in the dialects of Kumaon, Garhwal, and Himachal, nor in the folk literature and traditions of these regions. In these dialects, "*Bhot*" is used for Tibet, and Tibetan goods and Tibetan dogs are referred to as *Bhotiya* goods and *Bhotiya* dogs, respectively. In his travelogue, Nain Singh used the term "*Bhotiya*" for Tibetans. *Rahul Sankrityayan* and *Shiv Prasad Dabral* have used the term "*Bhotantik*" in the context of geographical boundaries for these tribes⁴. These people are more commonly known as *Shauka* in Kumaon. Generally, the *Shauka* dialects are classified under the Sino-Tibetan or Tibeto-Burman language families. Older *Shauka* people also know Tibetan, Nepali, *Kumaoni*, and *Garhwali* dialects⁵.

The *Bhotiya* people, residing in the India-Tibet border region, exhibit close racial and cultural similarities with Tibet. Perhaps due to this striking resemblance, the *Bhotiya* region is often referred to as "Bod" or "*Bhot*" by most Western scholars and some Indians, a term also used as a synonym for Tibet. Because of their long-standing contact and interaction with Tibet, the *Bhotiya* people have adopted many cultural and social characteristics of the Tibetans, more so than their Indian neighbours. In the *Uttarkashi* district, the *Bhotiya* people are known as *Jad*, in *Chamoli* as *Marcha* and *Tolcha*, while in *Pithoragarh*, they are known as *Johari* and *Shauka*, Rang. This unique tribe, historically inhabiting the high Himalayan regions of Tibet and Nepal, is a trans-Himalayan community that has been shaped by interactions with diverse cultures and challenging environments over thousands of years (Sharma, 2020). Their history, which includes seasonal migration (transhumance) and trade along difficult mountain routes, has given them a unique cultural identity. The *Bhotiya* tribe has been living in the Himalayan regions of Uttarakhand since ancient times. Over this long period, this community has developed many traditions, such as food habits, folk medicine, customs, beliefs, and social practices. The folk medicine and dietary habits of a community are part of its indigenous knowledge. Indigenous knowledge is the heritage of ancient communities who have developed, preserved, and passed it down from generation to generation since antiquity. Such knowledge is unique because it develops around the specific environmental conditions of the people of a particular geographical region.

Origen of the *Bhotiya* Tribe

Different theories have been proposed regarding the origin of the *Bhotiya* people. However, the *Bhotiya* themselves believe they are originally Hindu and claim to be of Rajput descent. Tibetan and Chinese historians mention *Rajput* settlements in Tibet in ancient times, but *Sherring* (1906)⁶ expresses doubt about their Hindu origins. *Weber* (1963)⁷ states that they are "one of those branches of the Huns who were pushed southward by other Tatar tribes, and were undoubtedly stopped by the Himalayas, and, preferring a wild and nomadic life, have since lived in that difficult region." *Spath* (1964) shares this view and states that "*Bhotia*, *Bhot*, *Bhotiya*, etc., are all Tibetan and are used for different tribes from Punjab to Bhutan." In contrast, *Walton* (1910) believes that, "the *Bhotias* are in no way like the present-day Tibetans, although their physical appearance is certainly of the Tartar type."

Some information about the tribal populations living in the mountainous regions of Uttarakhand can be gleaned from Vedic literature, as well as from the Ramayana and Mahabharata. Ancient records mention various non-Aryan tribes inhabiting the Himalayan region during prehistoric times, giving them names such as *Kinnara*, *Gandharva*, *Asura*, *Tangana*, *Kol*, and *Yaksha*. The *Kirata*, *Tangana*, and *Kol* were among the principal inhabitants of this region in ancient times. The *Kiratas* were of indigenous origin and were considered barbaric due to their primitive lifestyle (*Sorensen*, 1904)⁸. They were perhaps among the first inhabitants of this region. Evidence from texts like the *Yajurveda* and *Atharvaveda* confirms their presence around 1000 BCE. The *Kiratas* are also mentioned repeatedly in almost all ancient Indian literature, including the Mahabharata. *Sankrityayan* (1958), like other scholars, believes that the *Kiratas* gradually spread throughout the lower Himalayan region and later occupied almost the entire Himalayan range⁹.

The inhabitants of the upper *Alaknanda* region are still called *Tangani* today. Based on ancient references, scholars have identified *Tanganadesha*, the homeland of the *Tangana* tribe, with the *Painkhanda* region near *Joshimath* in *Garhwal*¹⁰. The Mahabharata also mentions the *Tangana* people. They were traders and may have had connections with the *Kirata* and *Khasa* peoples. The Mahabharata states that the *Tangana* people traded borax and gold dust with Tibet and also brought *Lepcha* salt from Tibet to India, a practice that was common among the *Bhotiya* people until recently. The Mahabharata also states that during *Yudhishtira's Rajasuya Yagna* (Vedic sacrifice), the *Tangana* people of the northern *Kurudesh* brought gold dust, beautiful *chauris* (yak tails), Himalayan honey, precious stones for garlands, and sacred water and *Mahavala* medicine of Mount Kailash¹¹. It is often mentioned in mythological and religious texts that tribes such as the *Kirat*, *Bhill*, and *Tangan* lived in the Himalayas. These trading practices bear a strong resemblance to the trading methods of the Bhotia people with Tibet and parts of northern India. Based on literary evidence, trading traditions, and similarities in economic and social practices between the ancient *Tangans* and the present-day *Bhotiya* people, it may be reasonable to trace their origin to the *Kirat* people¹².

In fact, since prehistoric times, the Himalayan region has been associated with people such as the *Yakshas*, *Kinnaras*, and *Kiratas*. The *Kulindas* and *Tangans* also inhabited this region. They had a particularly strong presence in *Kumaon*, where their coins have been found. The spread of the *Kiratas* in the Himalayan valleys is confirmed by historical records. It is said that when *Ashoka* went to Nepal, a *Kirata* kingdom existed there. In ancient times, the pastoral *Bhill-Kirata* tribe entered the region from the east, settling on the slopes of the Lower Himalayas. Before the arrival of the Aryans, the *Dardic* people began to move eastward through Iran, Afghanistan, and Kashmir. Spreading across the slopes of the Lesser Himalayas, this group exerted continuous pressure on the *Bhill-Kirat* tribes of the region, forcing them to retreat. The present-day descendants of these *Bhill-Kirat* groups who retreated to the southern slopes can be identified as the *Vanraji* or *Vanrawat* and the *Tharu*. Over time, these *Kirat* people also came into contact with other groups. Around 170 BCE, a nomadic tribe from the northwest, the *Yuezhi*, exerted constant pressure on a tribe living north of the *Sar* River, forcing them to move south. Due to the influence of the *Shakas*, who advanced into India through various routes, the Greek and *Parthian* kingdoms that had been established on the borders after the decline of the *Mauryan* Empire gradually disappeared, and by 128 BCE, the *Shakas* had fully established themselves in India. The *Kushanas* were a branch of the *Yuezhi* tribe. In the first century, the *Kunindas* accepted the suzerainty of the *Kushanas*. Tibetan-Chinese groups with Mongoloid features, who moved westward through the hills of Assam, also came into contact with the *Kirata* tribe. Thus, the original *Bhill-Kirata* tribe, through contact with the *Khasa*, *Shabar-Munda*, Tibetan-Chinese, and Mongol tribes, and the resulting intermingling of bloodlines, underwent significant changes in their facial features, physical build, and language, eventually becoming the ancestors of the present-day *Bhotiya* tribe¹³.

Objective: To study of Folk medicine and traditional food habits of the *Bhotiya* tribe.

Methodology: The research is based on both literature review and field study. In this study used research field work, interviews with local people and government reports as primary sources. Various research papers and literary evidence have been used as secondary sources.

Study

Folk medicine

The *Bhotiya* community has developed its own indigenous social, economic, cultural, and healthcare systems over centuries. They have developed three types of healthcare systems. The first relies on supernatural elements, which can be both benevolent and malevolent and can cause numerous health problems, among other issues. Such problems or illnesses are called "*kasht*" (afflictions) and can be cured by performing rituals to appease or satisfy supernatural entities such as local deities, as well as ghosts, demons, and fairies. The second approach to healthcare among the *Bhotiya* people relies on natural elements. Here, illnesses are treated with herbal medicines. Medicinal plants, grasses, roots, flowers, and seeds are used to cure such ailments. Living in close proximity to nature, they have acquired extensive knowledge of the medicinal properties of the surrounding flora since ancient times. The third method of treating illnesses relies on spices and other food items that are used daily and are part of the basic diet. The indigenous medical system or folk medicine developed by the *Bhotiya* community over centuries is based on traditional knowledge derived from the rich experience of many generations. It is a very important part of the *Bhotiya* community's indigenous knowledge, being highly affordable, effective, and

based solely on natural resources. Some of the treatment methods used by the *Bhotiya* tribe are as follows (herbal medicines and home remedies):

- **Jaur (Fever):** Normally in fever roasted cumin seeds is chewed followed by hot water. Sometimes the powder of half roasted cumin is dissolved into hot water and taken by the patient¹⁴. The roots and stems of *Kutki* (*Picrorhizakurrooa*) and *Atis* (*Aconitum heterophyllum*) are dipped into cold water for three-four hours, so that the extract of the herbs and roots can be taken. This extract is given to the patients only if fever is low. In case of high fever, the roots and stems of both herbs are grinded in equal proportion and the powder thus prepared is dissolved into water and given to the patient. The tuber of *Atis* (*Aconitum heterophyllum*), *Kutki* (*Picrorhizakurrooa*) is used to treat fever. *Khyak Jadi* (*Aconigonumramicifolium*) is used for meningitis¹⁵. If the fever is high and not subsiding with the above measures, then powder of *Tulsi* leaves (*Oscimum sanctum*), *Harda* (*Terminalia chebula*), *Bahera* (*Terminalia bellirica*), cumin seeds, black cumin seeds, *Kutki* (*Picrorhizakurrooa*), *Chirayata* (*Swertia angusti folia*), and *Atis* (*Aconitum heterophyllum*) is prepared and given to the patient with hot water.
- **Dokh (Headache):** For curing headache following medication is undertaken¹⁶. - An ointment by mixing mustard oil with water is prepared which is called *Timartimalham*. This ointment is applied on the forehead of the patient. Cumin, *Kutki* (*Picrorhizakurrooa*) and black cumin seeds in equal proportion, grinded and the powder thus prepared is consumed by the patient with cold water. Headache in summer is cured by a paste of *Brahmi* leaves.
- **Chayammpa (Influenza)**¹⁷– Cold is cured by consuming *Tulsi* (*Oscimum sanctum*) leaves with boiled Tea. Roasted ginger is chewed. Black millet is burnt and smoke is produced to cure cough and cold of children. Locally produced wine called *Chnang* is also consumed by elders and kids as they believe that it prevents the infection.
- **Dhar dukhan (Stomach Ache/ colic):** In the local language, stomach ache is also called *Khauchdau*. If the stomach ache occurs during the winter, black pepper powder is taken with warm water or tea. *Picrorhizakurrooa*, *Aconitum heterophyllum*, and black pepper powder are taken with cold or warm water. During a stomach ache, dried cannabis leaves are taken with sugar or jaggery. The juice of the *Koot* (*Saussureacostus*) root is consumed for abdominal colic and intestinal pain¹⁸.
- **Naldaul (Intestinal disorder):** In case of dislocation or disorder of intestines, extract of the leaves of *Neelkanthi* is taken while empty stomach. This is supposed to be very effective medicine. Jaggery is also used as medicine. After Jaggery, cold water is taken and this also is taken while empty stomach¹⁹.
- **Upshvansa (Asthma):** Maize is burnt and mixing the ashes with honey is considered one of the best remedies. This paste is taken regularly. In winter, patients regularly consume dried ginger powder with honey. *Ganjeri* (*Chaerophyllumvillosum*) is also used for respiratory ailments.
- **Charar (Dysentery):** Dried *haritaki* (*Terminalia chebula*), *baheda* (*Terminalia bellirica*), and *bael* (*Aegle marmelos*) are ground together to make a powder, which is consumed with honey. The seeds of *Ban Mundu* (*Bistortaamplexicaulis*) are roasted and consumed²⁰.
- **Uchal (Vomiting):** In case of vomiting onion, mint, and half roasted cumin seeds are grinded to make a paste. Honey in little quantity is mixed into it and consumed with cold water.
- **Shakdau (Toothache)**²¹: Tobacco is put at the aching tooth. Lepcha salt (solid) is kept at the aching tooth which leads to the production of saliva. People believe that with the production of saliva pain also decreases. Clove or clove oil is also used in toothache. The branches and bark of *Timru* (*Zanthoxylum arna*) are used.
- **Typhoid:** In case of typhoid *Kutki* (*Picrorhizakurrooa*), and *Chirayata* (*Swertia angusti folia*) proportionately mixed; grinded into powder and taken with Luke warm water.
- **Kawapitti (Pneumonia) :** In case of pneumonia, the best traditional remedy is the gall bladder of crow. The crow is killed, its gall bladder taken out and dried. Usually people keep dried gallbladder of crow in their homes. The dried gall bladder is dissolved into hot water and given to the patient²².
- **Akhain (Eye flue):** In case of eye flue the following course of medication is adopted. The roots of *Kingor* (*Barberries*) are boiled with water. The water when and as turns yellow the drops of such water are dropped into eyes. It gives immediate relief. The eyes are washed with this water from outside also. This eye drop not only minimizes the pain but also reduces swelling.
- **Luto/Khazai (Itching):** In case of itching and skin problem bark of Deodar tree is boiled with hot water and the extraction thus got cures the disease. The leaves of *Kunja* (wild rose) are crushed, turned into paste and applied at the affected part. Raw turmeric paste mixed into cow milk is applied at the affected part which reduces the itching and inflammation of the skin.

Traditional food habits

In the *Shauka* dialect, the word for food was originally 'ja', which was later replaced by the word 'dukalan'. 'Du' and 'kalan' refer to food prepared in liquid form. When this tribe arrived in this region, the climate likely forced them to consume 'du' and 'kalan'. Today, these specific dishes are less common, but the word 'dukalan' is still frequently used to refer to food in general²³.

The traditional food habits of the *Bhotiya* tribe are deeply intertwined with their mountainous environment, transhumance (seasonal migration), animal husbandry, border trade, and Tibetan culture. The dietary traditions of the *Bhotiya* tribe are a result of environmental adaptation, economic necessities, and cultural contact. Their diet also reflects a balanced relationship between humans and nature within the Himalayan ecosystem. In the high Himalayan regions, where the climate is harsh and cold, the *Bhotiya* community cultivates crops such as barley, finger millet, barnyard millet, buckwheat, and high-altitude wheat. Seasonal vegetables like potatoes, peas, spinach, and mustard greens are also grown by them. Livestock constitute a central pillar of the *Bhotiya* economy. Milk, ghee, butter, and other dairy products are also part of their traditional diet. The *Bhotiya* are omnivores. They consume the meat of sheep and goats, as well as fish. The influence of Tibetan culture is clearly reflected in *Bhotiya* cuisine. Dishes such as *Jya* (salty butter tea), *sattu*, *Chhippi* or *Chhurpi* (dried cheese) are examples of this Tibetan influence.

Traditionally, they preserved dried meat and vegetables using natural preservation methods, drying them in the sun or in cool air. These preserved foods did not spoil in the cold weather and could last for a long time. The *Bhotiya* lifestyle was based on seasonal migration, and foods like *sattu* (roasted barley flour), *khaja* (roasted grains), and *chhipi* (dried cheese) were useful during these seasonal migrations because they could be eaten without cooking.

The Indo-Tibetan border trade has also influenced their food culture. *Jya* (salty butter tea), a staple of *Bhotiya* culture, is a contribution from the Tibetans. It is a suitable beverage for the cold climate of the region. This tea is consumed with *sattu* (made from roasted barley, millet, or finger millet flour) and *bari* (a type of cake) as a morning and evening snack. While *Jya* may have become popular among this tribe through contact with Tibet, *sattu* is their traditional food, which has been consumed since ancient times. This is evident from the fact that *sattu* cakes (*Dhaln*) are offered during the worship of local deities. The *Bhotiya* people prepare various meat dishes, each with its own specific preparation method. *Gima* and *Arji* are some of their traditional meat dishes, prepared with local spices²⁴.

The traditional food habits of the *Bhotiya* tribe are based on the judicious use of Himalayan flora, local plants, and vegetation. This tribe did not separate food and medicine but developed both as an integrated system of ecological knowledge. The high Himalayan region is rich in biodiversity, but resource availability is seasonal and limited. The *Bhotiya* community has based its diet on the plants obtained from local forests, alpine meadows, and river valleys. This tribe uses many wild fruits, plants, and herbs in its cuisine. Wild fruits and herbs found along the trails have been a staple part of their diet during seasonal migrations.

Alcoholic beverages are an important part of the traditional *Bhotiya* diet. Whether it's a wedding or a religious ceremony, alcohol is sprinkled as a good omen. The *Bhotiya* community possesses extensive knowledge of making alcoholic beverages that help them survive in harsh conditions. *Jaan* and *Kacchi*, two alcoholic beverages, are integral to the socio-economic life of the *Bhotiya* tribes. *Jaan* is a rice beer with a low alcohol content, while *Kacchi* is a distilled liquor with a higher alcohol content. *Jan* is a soft drink (local beer) prepared by fermenting boiled rice with a traditionally prepared starter culture called *balam*. *Kacchi*, on the other hand, is a distilled beverage prepared by fermenting boiled barley grains and then distilling the fermented mash²⁵.

These beverages are not only popular among the *Bhotiya* tribe but are also considered pure and are consumed by *Bhotiya* women during various festivals and ceremonies. Serving these beverages to guests and relatives is a tradition. These types of fermented foods provide bio-nutrients and minerals and are rich in bioactive compounds, which enhance flavor and aroma and provide beneficial substances that promote health²⁶.

Conclusion

The above analysis of the traditional food habits and folk medicine of the *Bhotiya* community clearly shows that this tribe has developed a rich tradition of indigenous knowledge. Their survival in the challenging Himalayan regions for centuries has been significantly aided by the food practices and folk medicine they have developed. Currently, the lifestyle of this tribe has undergone significant changes compared to the past. These changes are clearly visible in their traditional food habits as well as their folk medical practices. The knowledge of folk medicine is gradually disappearing among the younger generations. Although some conscious individuals, such as *Sher Singh Pangti* (*Johar Gyan Kosh*, 2010), have attempted to document it, much of this knowledge is still being lost.

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