

STORIED LANDSCAPES: A STUDY OF THE ECOLOGICAL NARRATIVES OF THE BHOTIYAS (TOLCHAS, MARCHAS AND JADS) OF UTTARAKHAND

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Summary

Himalaya is still young and growing; the formation of Himalayan ranges is still going on. Vast terrain, unstable stretches, extreme climatic conditions and other potential hazards are major challenges for the inhabitants of the area. Humans have survived all such challenges since ages, it is a story of settlers survival and sustainability. The story of survival narrates the suitability of the wise traditional practices and sustainable community based approach. This process follows the lessons learnt from trials and errors, cultural assimilation and devoted observations. This is reflected in socio-cultural spheres, technological understanding and institutional structure of local Bhotiya (Jads, Tolcha, Marcha) society.

It is important to understand the Himalayan settlers historically, the cultural practices of inhabitants helps us in understanding the background, origin and nature of local traditions. Jads, Tolchas and Marchas are such ethnic groups from Uttarakhand who evolved and settled in Himalayan region over a course of time. They follow different cultural traits, livelihood practices and hold different socio-political and religious affiliations. They inhabit the northern and upper ranges of Himalayas. The blend of Tibetan Buddhism and Hinduism is reflected from their culture and nomadic lifestyle. Since very old time the Middle Himalayan region of Garhwal and Kumaun have been under the influence of Hinduism. Puranas and Hindu epics mentions about the associations with the region in great detail. Along with the Indo-Tibetan trade which got disrupted post-1962 war, the practices of subsistent farming, animal husbandry etc. have passed on from one generation to another. The farming practices developed extensively with the arrival of migrants (most of them Rajputs) who fled from the plains in 14th century due to the Muslim invasion. For coping up with the extreme climatic conditions they adopted the route of seasonal migration.

Settlers survived the hazards of hilly terrain like landslides, earthquakes and flash floods. The sustained in the region, because of rich natural resources and water availability. The hilly architecture, selection of residential areas, management of natural resources and local safeguarding techniques supported them in growing and evolving with time. Several traditions developed over generations as a cultural response to the daily challenges, it was thus successful in making a niche in the ecological diversity and lifestyle of the people.

Scholars from environmental science, humanities and social sciences are trying to establish, explore or experiment with ideal ways through which living beings engage with their surroundings. Vehement interactions with other living and non-living beings (both tangible and intangible elements) provide insight regarding accountabilities, relationships, involvement and understandings of an individual with the external world. It often reflects the source and direction of an individual's immersion and involvement with the material world. The work though focused on the Bhotiyas (Tolchas, Marchas and Jads) of Uttarakhand, works along the field of multispecies studies (Dooren, Kirksey, and Munster, 2016). Exploring the various arenas of the species world, the research explores multiple dynamics associated with categorizing, classifying and combining the diverse ways of life that constitute the everyday chores of the Bhotiyas (Tolchas, Marchas and Jads) world.

Bhotiyas have evolved in reaction to external stimuli. Being a borderland community living near India's dragon neighbour China, Bhotiyas (Tolchas, Marchas and Jads) changed over time, giving rise to different modes and skills for survival. Paying attention to several human and non-human entities like the forest, rivers, traditional knowledge, festivals, etc., multiple forms of potential connections and understanding open up, representing that the Bhotiyas (Tolchas, Marchas and Jads) have multiplied their forms and associations. Such changes or transformations or multiplications have characterized the present association of Bhotiyas (Tolchas, Marchas and Jads) with the physical and non-physical world.

A plethora of arguments have been contested, inquired and followed in this work. The various modes of immersion, perceptions, imaginations, living realities, social customs, and folklores are explored during the fieldwork tenure. Engagement with the Bhotiyas (Tolchas, Marchas and Jads) of Uttarkashi and Chamoli districts includes farmers, activists, artists, unclaimed hunters and forest dwellers; ground and guide the research. Such diverse interactions help in generating a dynamic form of ethological and ethnographic inquiry.

Along with the vibrant context of multispecies studies, the influence of state and forest laws on Bhotiyas (Tolchas, Marchas and Jads) lifestyle is considered during the research. The work showcases ethics, epistemology, environment, culture and politics revolving around Bhotiyas (Tolchas, Marchas and Jads).