

Women of the Bhotiya Tribe in the Perspective of Himalayan Culture

(With Special Reference to the Kumaon Region of Uttarakhand)

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Abstract

The Bhotiya community of Uttarakhand holds a distinctive place among the ancient tribal cultures of the Indian Himalayas. Bhotiya women residing in the high-altitude valleys of Darma, Vyas, Chaundas, and Johar in the Kumaon region are not only the backbone of the local economy but also the carriers and preservers of Himalayan culture. This research paper presents a comparative study of the social, economic, religious, and cultural status of women in Darma and Johar valleys. The study reveals that while women of Darma are independent, self-reliant, and enjoy equal rights, women of Johar valley lead relatively restricted lives due to social constraints, the practice of purdah, and traditional norms.

1. Introduction

In Indian society, women have held a position of respect and honour since ancient times. Worship of feminine power in the form of goddesses Saraswati, Lakshmi, and Parvati forms the foundation of Indian culture. Historian A. S. Altekar wrote: “In all ancient civilizations of the world, the further we go into the past, the more pitiable the condition of women appears; but in Indian civilization, on the contrary, the further back we go, the higher the status of women.” In this context, the study of **Bhotiya women** assumes special significance. This community resides in the border regions of Kumaon in Uttarakhand, adjoining Nepal and Tibet. The four major valleys Darma, Chaundas, Vyas, and Johar form the core of Bhotiya cultural heritage.



Brief Introduction to Bhotiya Society

The Bhotiya community is a frontier tribe inhabiting the high Himalayan regions of Uttarakhand. Their language, attire, food, folk traditions, and social institutions reflect a blend of both Tibetan and Indian cultures. Traditionally, the Bhotiya were known as ‘Shauka,’ traders who conducted business with Tibet. After Indian independence and the closure of the India-China border, their livelihoods underwent significant changes. Today, the community is engaged in education, government service, and woollen industries.

Status of Women in Darma Valley

In Darma valley, Bhotiya women enjoy a respected and active role in society. There is no significant difference in rights between men and women. Women participate alongside men in agriculture, animal husbandry, trade, and textile production.

Economic Contribution and Self-Reliance

Women of Darma are economically self-reliant. They manage household livelihoods without depending on men. They produce woollen items such as sweaters, blankets, carpets, and other woollen textiles. These women are skilled in weaving, spinning, and dyeing. During winters, when outdoor work becomes challenging, they contribute significantly to family income through home-based industries.

Social Freedom and Behaviour

Women in Darma enjoy social freedom. There is no practice of purdah, and women can openly converse with their father-in-law, brother-in-law, or strangers. They participate equally with men in dances and musical performances during marriages. Women are considered free-spirited, cheerful, and confident members of society.



Marital Freedom and Rights

Girls in Darma have complete freedom to choose their life partners. Marriages occur with mutual consent, and social evils like dowry are absent. Women have the right to divorce and can remarry afterward.

Religious and Cultural Role

Darma women actively participate in religious rituals. They have the right to worship the household deity 'Nyugtham Devi.' They play a crucial role in funeral rites, leading the procession while carrying the white cloth called 'Amlhai' and performing cremation rites themselves. This tradition signifies their high social standing.

Concept of 'Min-Shiri' and the Dual Nature of Women

In Darma society, the term 'Min-Shiri' refers to women, meaning both mother and man. This dual concept indicates that women are considered symbols of maternal gentleness and masculine courage. In harsh geographical conditions, they have made themselves brave, farsighted, economical, and dutiful.

Education and Modern Progress

Women of Darma have also been pioneers in education. Between 1935 and 1945, many Bhotiya women began teaching. In modern times, women like Padma Shri Gangotri Garhyal, Arjuna awardee Chandraprabha Aitwal, and mountaineer Bachendri Pal have become national symbols of pride for this community.

Status of Women in Johar Valley

Johar valley, in Pithoragarh district, represents another Bhotiya region where social structures have traditionally been more conservative. With the establishment of society by Dham Singh and his descendants in the 16th century, Hindu traditions gained influence. Consequently, the purdah system and patriarchal social norms restricted women's lives.

Social Constraints and the Purdah System

Women in Johar were historically seen as 'weak' and, following Muslim influence, purdah became common. Women would remain veiled in the presence of their husband's elder brother (Jithan) or father-in-law. Physical contact required purification rituals. Husbands and wives did not openly address each other by name. Though this tradition formally persists, education has gradually transformed its practice.

Economic Role and Dependency

Women in Johar were primarily confined to household work caring for children, cooking, collecting firewood and grass, and making woollen clothes. Although rising demand for woollen items increased their economic significance, their earnings were still considered a symbol of 'modesty' by men.

Religious and Social Restrictions

Women were considered impure during menstruation or postpartum and had to stay outside and bathe in cold water for purification, affecting their health. Practices such as child marriage, prohibition of widow remarriage, and polygyny were prevalent.

Dowry and Marriage Practices

Earlier, marriages occurred without dowry, but in modern times, educated men increasingly demand dowry. Guardians of the bride view giving generous gifts as a matter of pride. Historically, some widows

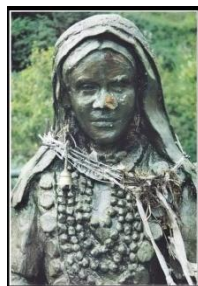
practiced sati after their husband's death. It's been going on like for a very long time after death of mother if she has jewelleries that rites given to her daughter. Among the tribes here, there is a tradition that if a mother possesses any ornaments or jewellery, they are considered to be the rightful property of her daughter alone, and this custom continues even today.

Education and Renaissance

The change in Johar began with Tulsi Rawat, daughter-in-law of Rai Bahadur Kishan Singh. She established girls' schools and promoted female education. Today, 90% of girls in Johar are educated, and many women lead in government service, woollen industries, and entrepreneurship. In 1987, Ganga Devi, a female weaver from Johar, received a national award from the Indian Ministry of Textiles, inspiring local women.

Symbol of Himalayan Culture and Maternal Power

Bhotiya women can be considered the soul of Himalayan culture. In the harsh conditions of mountain life, they symbolize patience, courage, and tolerance. The war dance performed by women during the 'Kandali Festival' not only demonstrates strength but also honours maternal power. Women like **Jasuli Budhi** Shaukyani from Darma valley have built 350 Dharmashalas for religious and social welfare, reflecting their foresight and generosity. Ratan Singh Raipa poetically described Bhotiya women: "O Shauka woman! You are the daughter of the Himalaya, Nanda. Your white attire is like snow-capped peaks, and your motherly Ganga is pure like water."



Conclusion

Bhotiya women are not only the axis of their families but also the lifeline of the entire Himalayan culture. While Darma women symbolize equality, self-reliance, and courage, Johar women, despite social constraints, are moving toward change. Education, self-reliance, and modern awareness have improved the status of women in both societies. Today, Bhotiya women showcase their talents nationally and internationally. Thus, it can be said: "Bhotiya women are not merely the caretakers of household life but the living spirit of the Himalayas a symbol of strength, labour, and compassion."

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