

Enriching Unification through Ethnicity: a Quest through the Culture and Tradition of Mana Village

Hyma Santhosh, Beena S Nair



Abstract: *Ethnicity has always been an aspect of multiculturalism that can destroy as well as unify any nation or community. But when ethnicity unifies, it creates a silver lining even to the most rough and topographical region. Mana Village, also known as the 'Last Village of India' is a perfect example for this as this is a land where culture and tradition bridges the gap between the conflicting lifestyle and beliefs. Mana is a village located in the Chamoli district of Uttarakhand. Mana is a land where the natives resemble more to the Tibetan and Chinese people rather than Indians. This paper tries to explore how the unifying power of religion merges with the culture (clothing, construction, body physic) of another nation. The paper will aim to trace the various traditions and practices of Mana people. The paper also explores how India as a nation of multitude of cultures maintains balance and unity amongst its citizens. The diversity of India has always made the onlookers awe stricken. The paper tries to establish ethnicity as a unifying factor than a destructive one by concentrating on aspects like multiculturalism, religion, mythology and nature by reflecting it through the life of the inhabitants. Mana also serves as a region of cultural identity and a hub of Hindu culture through the famous places like Vyas Gufa, Ganesh Gufa, Badrinath etc. On the whole, the paper is a journey through the greatness of a not much popular Himalayan Valley.*

Keywords : *Ethnicity, multiculturalism, religion, mythology, cultural identity*

I. INTRODUCTION

The Great Indian Sub-Continent can be called a wide mosaic of multitudes of cultures, traditions, rituals, beliefs, religions, and practices that not only provide a rainbow canvas to the land, but also merges many differences that make India a land of diversity. This multiculturalism and ethnicity has added to Indian uniqueness. Each state of India is a treasure house of knowledge and cultural relevance of

which the tribes play a major role. The tribal societies of India exhibit a variety of folk knowledge that gets transferred from one generation to another. Uttarakhand, a naturally enthralling state of Northern India is nestled in the lap of Himalayas that makes it not only physically magical but also spiritually illuminating. Uttarakhand is a home for five ethnolinguistics tribal communities i.e. Raji, Buxa, Bhotia, Tharu and Jaunsari which are some of the most ancient Himalayan tribes. The tribal heritage of this region is so diverse and rich that it adds to the charm of this place.

Mana Village, also known as the 'Last Village of India' is located in the Chamoli district of Uttarakhand is known for its mesmerizing vistas and mythological significances. Located at about 4.4km away from Badrinath, it is a hamlet inhabited by the Bhotia tribe in the Indo-Tibetan border. The Bhotia can be called a kind of Indo-Mongolian tribe that has been believed to have migrated from different parts of Tibet to India in the 8th and 9th century. Cleansed by the holy water of River Saraswati and embraced by the mighty Himalayas, Mana village cherishes its customs, practices and serenity with full reference and as a result it still exists as a virgin land away from the evil clutches of modernity.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Atkinson, the northern most part of Uttarakhand (Garhwal and Kumaun) is also known as *Bhot* region (1989). Fuchs in his work *The aboriginals tribes of India* believes that *Bhotias* are a transhumant community of semi-mongoloid people of Tibetan origin (1982). These tribes have to adjust in high weather conditions as it is closer to the Great Himalayas. As per Srivastava in his work *Rang-Bang in the changing Bhotia Life* says that they show close racial and cultural affinity to the Tibetans and probably for this similarity the Bhotia region is called as *Bod* or *Bhot* which is a corrupt form of *Bod*, which means *Follower of Buddhism* (1952-53). But even though they are of Tibetan ancestry, the Tibetans refer to them as *Mons* or *Monpa* which means 'others' (Hoon,1996). Very less has been written about Mana village and it's inhabitants. As the 'last village of India' and the topographical issues, this village and the tribes have been remained not much noticed by the people of the outer world and as a result of this the place and the tribes remain pure and serene untouched by the evil forces of humanity.

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They are people who still conserve all their traditions and rituals without compromising their Tibetan ancestry and their native land of India. This is what makes them different from the other tribes of India.

METHODOLOGY: AN ANALYSIS OF THE WAY OF LIFE OF THE TRIBES IN MANA

The mythology adopted is by studying the different aspects in Mana lifestyle that is a mixture of both old Tibetan and also Indian way of life. For this the habitat, architecture of houses, food, traditional attire etc. is analyzed along with its ethnicity.

a. Transhumance

Bhoti's follow an old traditional nomadic way of living that makes them trans-nomadic people. The vivacity of the tribe is such that it contains about 13 sub sects of which 6 are recognizable. The Bhotia people living in the Mana and Niti Valley call themselves as the Marcha. What makes it more surprising is that in the surrounding villages of Mana and Niti Valley there is no trace of the Bhotia community. Transhumance is one of the unique features that the Bhotia community exhibit. This tribe migrates to lower altitudes during the winter season after ceiling their houses due to heavy winter. They migrate along with their families, essential materials and livestock to a lower region where they would have already setup a temporary habitat. Due to this movement they are also called trans-migrant. They live in these lower areas from November to April and return back to the Mana around the month of May.

b. Architecture

As it is a tribe with Tibetan origin, we can see them exhibiting a kind of Tibetan lifestyle rather than an Indian one. Even the construction of houses adapts a kind of Tibetan architecture that is not much common in India. The Bhotia as they are mountainous people, use stones to build their houses. The roofs of the houses are made with long stone slabs or stone plates which gives it a unique appearance.

c. Food

Most of the houses have a backside garden in which they cultivate vegetables like potato, spinach, radish etc. They even dry and store food materials like vegetables and meat for the winter season due to their nomadic nature. They even consume a variety of wild plants and wild flowers. They enjoy delicacies like momos, buckwheat, meat soups etc are even similar to the Tibetan people.

d. Traditional Dress

The costume that any tribe wears decides their homogeneity and the topography on which they reside. The Bhotia women are particularly known for their weaving skills whereas men rare the cattle and do trade. The women of this tribe wear *honja*, *chhua* and *pangdin*. The *honja* is a kind of blouse that is commonly wore by the Bhotia's women. *Chhua* is a long dress or gown which comes to the length of the ankle usually in a single colour. The *pangdin* is more like an apron worn by the married women of this tribe above their traditional dress. They also wear *chuba* a kind of wollen coat above all these. The women weave clothes needed in their

household. The men wear *bakhu* and *chhuba*. The *bakhu* is a kind of long cloak which is tied at the waist area with a silk or cotton belt. This resembles a sleeveless version of the *bakhu* worn by the Tibetan people. The *chhuba* is made of wool and is a very long coat with full sleeves and length up to the floor. The traditional costumes of the Bhotia have a sharp resemblance to the traditional wear of Tibet. The women also love to wear heavy gold and silver ornaments. Like the typical mountainous they use dark colours like black and brown in their outfits.

III. BHOTIA AS THE HEALERS AND THEIR OWN ETHNO-MEDICINE FROM NATURE

Tribal people from time immemorial are widely known for their ethno-medicines. Bhotia also have their own medical formulas that they make with the help of natural products. Due to the lack of medical facilities in this region, the ethno-medicine of this tribe plays an importance role in curing diseases. The elders of this tribe knows about the folk medicines, the spiritual and manual practices for curing diseases but they never forcefully transfer this knowledge to the younger community. The matter of fact is that there is no professional practitioner of folk medicine in this village and as a result they now consult allopathic doctors. If they feel that the disease still persists, they take the victim to a sacred priest known as the *Puchher*. The Bhotia's are very superstitious people and they believe that the *Puchher* are messengers of God who can only cure the disease. This concept is very similar to the Shamans in Tibet followed by the Buddhist monks which is a kind of healing technique.

IV. OBSERVATIONS

All these characteristic features of the Bhotia tribe point towards the idea that they are more or less the Tibetans themselves. Even though they exhibit a wide variety of multiculturalism and ethnic diversity, their clothing, food, ethnic medicine, house construction, cuisines all resemble to a land outside India. Then the real question arises: 'What makes them Indians?' and 'What creates unity between India and Mana village?'

The mythological significance of Mana village cannot be excluded when one talks about this land. It is a religious hub for many sacred locations like the Bheem Pul, Vyas Gufa, Ganesh Gufa etc. The Bheem Pul is believed to be a bridge created by the most powerful Pandava Bheema with a huge rock for his wife Draupathi to cross the Saraswati River during their path to heaven or Swargaroh. People believe that it is from this place that Saraswati River originates. Opposite of Bheem Pul is the Vyas Gufa. According to Hindu mythology, the ancient poet Vyasa composed the great epic Mahabharata sitting in this cave and Lord Ganesha penned the Mahabharata in the Ganesh Gufa. Usually the Bhotia tribe due to its Tibetan origin follow Buddhism but in contrary to this the Bhotias in the Mana village follow Hindu religion. The great traveller Santhosh George Kulanada says that, 'what surprised me is that when we enter any house in the Mana village with the Tibetan architecture, we can see the elder man of the house sitting and reading the sacred texts of the Mahabharata or the Ramayana'.

The Bhotias even celebrate all the Hindu festivals like Holi, Diwali, Dussehra etc. with all ceremonies and rituals. They worship all the Hindu deities along the Goddess of nature. And thus religion works as a binding factor in Mana village thus unifying the ethnic diversity and instead of Buddhism which is the religion of Tibet; they follow Hindu philosophy, rituals, mythology etc. Alcohol is a forbidden drink to the Bhotias but they use marijuana and hash as it is believed to be used by Lord Shiva. They even believe in a lot of *pooja* and rituals to keep the evil spirit away from them. Like any other tribal community, Bhotia is known for animal sacrifices. They believe that the soul of a dead man enters a goat after death and killing or sacrificing the goat is necessary for the soul to attain moksha. Thus they believe in the Hindu concept of 'moksha' rather than the Buddhist concept of 'nirvana'. These tribes perform their traditional Bhotia dance i.e. the dhurang during death ceremonies when they sacrifice the goat to the deities.

All these religious customs, habitat, food, dressing, architecture and healing methods followed by the Bhotia tribe clearly represents that the people here follow almost all the best aspects of both Tibetan and Indian culture rather than denying any of these cultures (one their ancestry and the other their motherland). They are followers of both the cultures and are able to create a balance between both the cultures.

V. CONCLUSION

In a land of diversities like India, there always will be a unifying factor that binds the differences to core of the nation thus creating a multicultural union. The Bhotia tribe of Uttarakhand can be considered the best example as it preserves most of characteristics of their Tibetan origin but still merges their diversity to the land they inhabit through their belief in the Hindu beliefs rather than the Buddhist ones. The most prominent factor to note is that, usually tribes don't have a specific 'religion' as we call it; they just embrace a form of living based on their oral traditions and beliefs. The Bhotias of Mana village is no different, instead of becoming a Hindu, they willfully accepted the Hindu way of living rather than labelling themselves 'Hindu' and this is how diversities can be assimilated into any space of life. This is best explained through the Sanskrit shloka:

*Aikyam balam samajasya tadbhave sa durbalah/
Tasmath dritam rashtram hitaishinah//*

This means that 'the strength of any society is unity and without it any society becomes weak, hence those who wish the good of the nation strongly praise unity'.

Every tribe has an amazing story to tell that can evoke wonder in the minds of people. When native cultures are erased or wiped off, it is not only a native group but a culture that is being destroyed. Every native culture has a lot to teach and offer to civilizations and these native knowledge has to be preserved and treasured. Mana Village can be called perfect example of cultural ethnicity that has within it the unifying power to balance two different cultures under the same umbrella.

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