

From Tribe to Social Integration: Bhoksa Youth and the Challenges of Transformation

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to focus upon the constructive role played by the youth of a 'scheduled tribe' in India viz. the Bhoksa¹, in ameliorating the problems of their people through their incorporation into development efforts. 'Scheduled tribe' in the Indian context is an administrative and legal term whose purpose is to label specific groups – based on their socio-economic status, religious and cultural customs – in order to provide them with special attention as mandated by the country's constitution (Dash Sharma, 2006: x). The Bhoksa mainly inhabit the Tarai and Bhabar areas of the Uttaranchal state in the north of India. Tarai Bahbhar is a long strip of land at the foothills of the Himalayas stretching from Dehradun in the north-west to Assam in the north. Their places of habitation include Dehradun, Nainital, Bijnor and Pauri Garhwal districts of Uttaranchal. According to the 2001 census (source: Office of the Registrar General, India) their population is 46,771. They were secluded from the rest of the Indian society by virtue of their geographical conditions, confining them to their own '*biradari*' (social fold). Bhoksa territory remained a Partially Excluded Area under the Government of India Act 1935 until independence from the British in 1947 (Saxena, 1998: 105).

Research for this paper is based on fieldwork that was carried out between 1997 and 2005 in villages prevalent with Bhoksa population – situated in the district of Nainital in the state of Uttar Pradesh. These villages included Peepalsana, Lalpuri, Lambardarpuri, Peepalsana, Beria, Thari, Lalitpur, Karailpuri, Rajpur, Veerpur Tara, Veerpur Lachchi and Kandla. Data collection included observations, interviews, case studies, and use of a still camera to take photographs. Secondary sources such as the Government Gazetteers, books and journals were also consulted. One of the early observations in the course of fieldwork, and which became the focus for this study, was the fine line drawn by the Bhoksa youth between integrating with the

mainstream society and maintaining their identity as a Scheduled Tribe. The attempt here was to understand the mindset of the youth while they work to maintain a balance between incorporation into mainstream society and their respective identity. India is a country that still has a large number of people who are classified as "tribal" and who make up nearly 8% of its total population. According to the different indicators that reflect the quality of life and development in the Constitution of India, there are those that are relatively more sophisticated while there are others that are less so, caging them into the category of 'Primitive Tribal Groups'. Indeed, while the concept 'tribe' does have a pejorative connotation with implications of 'primitivity' attached to it, constitutional jargon such as Primitive Tribal Groups (PTGs) are generally reference to people that reflect one of three tendencies viz. where the technology used for agricultural pursuits is rather rudimentary and inhibitive of any surplus production; where the literacy rate is either low or non-existent; and where the population is showing visible signs of a gradual decrease. There are 84 PTGs in India, including the Bhoksa.

The Bhoksas impoverishment dates back to the 1940s when outsiders entered the Tarai district and began claiming land without due legal process. The Bhoksas have been living in the fertile tracts of Tarai from the ancient past and claim a connection to the sons of an ancestor named Raja (King) Jagatdeo of Rajasthan. Raja Jagatdeo had two sons – Chittaur and Nandhaur (Hasan 1979). Tharus (a neighboring tribe) consider themselves as the descendents of Chittaur while the Bhoksa see themselves as the descendents of Nandhaur. Raja Jagatdeo and his followers migrated to Tarai to seek shelter from the Mughals after suffering a defeat by them. The Tarai was generally harsh territory that was difficult to live in. Being swampy and densely forested, it became notorious for its unhealthy malarial climate and was a home for tigers, rendering the area almost unsuitable for human habitation and agriculture. The first intrusion into the Tarai was during British

rule when efforts were made to colonize the area for agricultural purposes – but to no avail. Colonial retreat from the area once again freed the space for the Bhoksa to exploit the territory as they pleased. As shifting cultivators' they occupied, cultivated and left the land whenever they deemed it appropriate to relocate.

EARLY CAUSES OF BHOKSA DISPLACEMENT

The loss of Bhoksa autonomy over their main resource viz. land, began at the dawn of India's independence from British rule in 1947. Scarcity of food caused by the Second World War, as well as by the colonists and their Indian cronies, compelled the Central Government to embark on a strategic plan to increase the production of staple food grains. The shifting cultivator and subsistence practices of the Bhoksa were of little concern to a government that put national interests before local interests. Herein began the seeds of Bhoksa displacement from Tarai – an area well known for its fertile soil. Banking upon the reputation of Punjabis as good agriculturalists, the Uttar Pradesh State Government² negotiated with the Punjab Government to encourage peasants, landless cultivators and refugees from Pakistan to settle in Tarai. Many from the agriculturally successful plains of Punjab province availed themselves to this privilege. The cultivators were liberally apportioned land by the superintendent in charge of Tarai and Bhabhar government estate in accordance with the provisions of the U. P. (Uttar Pradesh) Tenancy Act, 1939³. By early 1948, with the help of the World Health Organization (WHO), the state government began clearing the dense jungles in Tarai to build roads, simultaneously aiming to combat malaria - one of the major causes of death in the area. These initiatives encouraged refugees from Pakistan, the Rai Sikhs and the Hindu Punjabis, to enter this area.

Increased settlement by these groups brought about a new interface that began radically altering the dynamics of the Bhoksa routine lifestyle. Renowned for their militancy, the Rai Sikhs and the Hindu Punjabis went beyond what was allocated to them by using force to occupy more Bhoksa land. Their aggression enforced a relocation of the Bhoksa to poorly developed villages where the land was generally infertile. While the Central Government turned a blind eye

to this catastrophe, the U.P. State Government willingly formalized their forced acquisition of this land. As pointed out in the Integrated Buksa Tribal Area Development Project UP 1983 (Saxena 1998.106), it is "clear that the policy of State Government merely based on the recommendations of local officers, has all along been to regularize trespass. Even for the chronic trespassers, the maximum punishment which could be thought of was the imposition of a fine. The objective was full defeated in view of easy money flowing in the Tarai Area and it remained a mere wishful thinking that the penalty imposed would prove a deterrent."

PROCESSIONAL DECEIT

Usurpation of Bhoksa land was the key factor in the emergence of Rai Sikhs and Punjabis as the newfound political elites and leaders in Tarai. Alongside their aggressive front, was the introduction of alcohol to the Bhoksa as a way of ensuring that their dispossession did not give rise to a militant reclamation and uprising for their basic resource. Once unknown to them, the older generation Bhoksas blame the Rai Sikhs and the Punjabis for using alcohol as a tool in their campaign of dispossession. The Rai Sikhs provided cheap liquor to the Bhoksas and arranged frequent liquor feasts for them – giving rise to an increased addiction to liquor. Examples abound where Bhoksas were coerced into states of intoxication and made to provide thumbprints on agreements that they could not read because of their illiteracy – forcing them to part with their land to their newfound invaders.

Money lending has been another common reason for the problem of alienation of the Bhoksa land. In the past (until about two decades ago), in the mundane life of the Bhoksas the only source of entertainment were the various rituals and festivals around which their life revolved. Among the Bhoksas the rituals connected to marriage are elaborate and continue for up to ten days, each day requiring the performance of numerous ceremonies. Marriage in a Bhoksa village is tantamount to a fair that attracts all the villagers. The concerned family i.e. in, which the marriage is taking place, spends lavishly on the ceremonies connected to this event. Bhoksas are renowned for spending beyond their means on life cycle rituals such as birth, marriage and death. The Bhoksas have been in the habit of spending

lavishly in village fairs like "*kashipur ki Devi Ka mela*" (in honor of the Goddess of Kashipur) and "*Chaiti ka mela*" (in honor of Goddess Chaiti) among others.

Since banks do not advance loans to anybody for non-productive purposes the Bhoksa rely upon their Rai Sikh and Punjabi adversaries for loans. Moreover, as illiterate people, the Bhoksas find the application process through filling in of forms too cumbersome and intimidating. The thumb print approach with their private lenders was more appealing but equally insidious in that they often used their land as collateral to borrow money. Widespread inability to repay these loans has led to rapid dispossession of their land. The irony of this situation is that while Rai Sikh and Hindu Punjabi occupation of Bhoksa land was initiated through a process that began through collaboration of two state governments, it was devoid of any legal process. Yet the thumb print agreement appears to serve as an acceptable legal document that apparently formalizes the forced takeover of individually owned Bhoksa land. Evidence on these issues continues to demonstrate that this is not true.

This processual deceit forced them into their impoverishment and into a quasi-state as landless labourers for the very people that usurped their property. While the state of India demonstrated public knowledge and sympathy for the Bhoksa after independence in 1947, by introducing laws such as the Zamindari Abolition and Land Reform Act of 1969 to stop their alienation from their land, legal loopholes and questionable implementation led to further losses of land. This was convincingly repeated once again, at least a decade ago by one of many researchers: "The most prevalent mode was to acquire land through unregistered mortgage deeds in the face of the provision in the above mentioned act, which states that tribals can sell land only after obtaining permission from the district collector. This mortgage deed in reality is a camouflage for deceit and for giving a legal colour to the forgery. In the deed, the loan recorded is twice or thrice of the amount actually given and with the accrued interest it is impossible for the tribal to repay it. The land ultimately passes into the possession of the money lender and never reverts to the original owner, though in revenue records, it would still be in the name of the tribal" (Rawat, 1998: 63). This calls into question the validity of the U. P. Landless Agricultural Labourers Debt

Relief Act of 1975 and U.P. Land Laws (Amendment) Ordinance 1981, later incorporated into the Zamindari Abolition and Land Reforms Act - which has the power to evict unauthorized occupants of land held by members of a Scheduled Tribe. The former enactment provides relief to landless agricultural labourers as well as members of Scheduled Tribes from illegal and unregistered debt. However, this Act does not cover the Tharus and the Bhoksas because on paper they are still the legal owners.

However, economic strength translates into a source of political strength when success gives rise to the kind of affluence that the Sikhs and the Punjabis currently demonstrate. Despite being a minority when compared against the Bhoksa population, they continue to win elections for the office of the Gaon Pradhan - the Chairman of the Gaon Panchayat (the executive committee elected by the villagers every five years). The economically dominant groups have a reputation for strategically conniving with and coercing their victims into accepting their leadership by buying off their confidence in them⁴. But the present mindset that prevails among the Bhoksas has left them with a feeling of hopelessness - in that their loss of land and grass roots level corruption through manipulation of their senior members has forced them to succumb to a status of second class citizenship. Their integration into mainstream Indian society is by no means a linear process of the modernism preached by nineteenth century social scientists. Instead, it is increasingly convincing their youth about the values of their past, bringing them to reinvent a nostalgia that is intended to recreate their society with symbolisms of the past.

BHOKSA YOUTH AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Earlier works on the Bhoksas by writers such as Hasan (1979) and Rawat (1998) has resonance with issues that have been discussed up to this point. During fieldwork for this project it has been observed that the pace of change within Bhoksa society has increased - due largely to the more open-minded and challenging attitudes by their youth. One visible way in which change among them is noticed is through their dressing. The Bhoksa youth have taken to attiring themselves in very urbanized and trendy costumes such as jeans, shirts and shoes, while the ir elders continue to dress casually in

traditional clothes – made mainly out of cotton loin cloth viz. *Kurta* (long full sleeved shirts) and *Pajama* (loose trouser like pants).

The mindset of the youth finds expression in the way they relate to the Rai Sikhs and the Punjabis and in rather subtle ways they are trying to reinstate their identity without overt challenges to them. While the Bhoksas have opted to remain on friendly terms with them, both communities realize the usefulness of good neighbourliness. This has assisted in significant measure in humbling the Sikhs and Punjabis, especially by way of their visible acceptance and appreciation of the transformation that is taking place among Bhoksa youth. This represents an equally significant transformation among the Sikhs and Punjabis themselves – who entered as colonizers but are demonstrating signs of growing acknowledgement of those that have been subdued through dispossession. The Bhoksa youths swift rise in education and social integration is somewhat enforcing a need to place them on an equal status with the youth of their detractors. As one of the interviewees assertively responded once to a question: "*Hum janjati hain. Pichre hain, par sarkar ne hume bhi suvidhaye di hain toh hum aage parh rahen hain (We are a tribe. We're backward but the Government has given us privileges so we are doing further studies.*" Another responded more gently: "*Hum kheti bhi karte hain aur parhai bhi karte hain. Duniya mein Nikalna hai*" (*We practice agriculture and we also study. We want to move out in the world*). Fefferman's (2007) work among the youth also focuses upon the increasing awareness that is entrenching itself, bringing about a growing need among them to establish a sense of solidarity around their impoverished statuses and their need for a distinct identity.

The changes that are taking place among the Bhoksa youth can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, their proximity to the villages under the Ramnagar Block, in the district of Nainital, lies in a fertile belt that is of significance to the economic interests of Uttaranchal. Their contribution to these agricultural efforts has brought them to realize its importance in terms of food production, the capital that it generates and the need for them to engage in market related production. This is drastic move away from the subsistence oriented economy that they practiced prior to Sikh and Punjabi encroachment unto their property. Secondly, Nainital is a popular hill station, with generally pleasant weather conditions that attract

national and international tourists throughout the year. The Bhoksa villages, being well connected to the nearby towns of Nainital, Kashipur and Ramnagar, provide them with exposure to the outside world in ways that continue to influence the mindset of their youth. Thirdly, the increasing use of television, radio and VCRs (Video Cassette Recorder) are serving the Bhoksas in ways that are more than entertainment – in that it is fast becoming an agency for information, conscientisation and mobilisation (Chouhan, 2007). Some affluent Bhoksa now subscribe to cable networks that are evidently more powerful in their dissemination of news and entertainment than local stations. It is now not uncommon for Bhoksa youth to be watching television in various communal settings – where community spirited people avail this asset to their entire neighbourhood – especially in the evenings.

TOWARDS SELF-EMPOWERMENT

The point of interaction with tourists and others whose influence is being increasingly grasped by the Bhoksa youth is the local tea stop or restaurant. Imparting their information on tourist viewpoints and overnight destinations often develop into conversations that are informative and challenging. These moments are being wisely translated into actions of empowerment that help their confidence levels, communication skills and knowledge about their local areas. For instance, for the first time Bhoksa youth have begun questioning the lavishness associated with extensive weddings ceremonies and other life cycle rituals. They have encouraged many to reduce such occasions to one-day affairs – especially because they entail huge amounts of borrowing from local money lenders with ulterior motives such as not wanting to receive repayment in order to attach their land. This has further extended itself into campaigns for Bhoksa elders and other illiterate members of their society to borrow money from banks instead of borrowing from the local money-lenders. Literate youth are ready to assist in filling in the forms for them and ensuring that a fair and just process is endorsed between both parties.

Recognizing this gradual shift towards growing awareness among them, the Rai Sikhs and the Punjabis have adopted a policy of appeasement towards the Bhoksa youth for quite another reason viz. they constitute a strong united vote bank during local political elections.

Ironically, instead of direct confrontation they tend to support the Rai Sikh or Punjabi contestants for election to the Gaon Panchayat (the political and administrative body in the villages), in return for several benefits. However, their benefits are more communal rather than individual and self-centred. For example, a team of highly conscientised and community spirited Bhoksa youth, who were among the first to reach up to the tenth grade in school in their community, worked around a virtually abandoned school that was not operational from the day that it was built, for almost twenty years. Realizing the need to make trade-offs with the Panchayat, they craftily negotiated with success to get the school opened in their village, Lalitpur. This hard-won exercise took place in an atmosphere of publicity by the Central Government of India to uplift marginalized communities through education opportunities. This gave confidence to local parents who earlier refrained from sending their children to a school that was functional in a neighbouring village - because the poor conditions of the roads during the rainy season made it too dangerous for them. Four of the sample of youth (all males) at the time of research, were studying in a Degree College in Kashipur. However, girls did not receive the same priority as boys in the growing tendency towards formal education. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that schools in the areas of research were attended by children of all backgrounds i.e. tribal and non-tribal, and teachers were entirely of upper-caste background. It was clear that integration in these schools did not mean acceptance of all the children on equal terms. Discrimination against tribal children by their Sikh and Punjabi colleagues as well as by teachers' was rampant and children were often intimidated enough not to return to school.

But the youth also have their way about getting back against their covert system of unpleasantness. They mustered up the courage to approach the Inspector of schools in their area to inform him about the irregularities taking place - such as tribal children being denied scholarships and their mid-day meals, and the frequent absenteeism of their teachers. Their determination to challenge these irregularities have brought about an awareness within state circles that tribal groups such as the Bhoksa cannot only not be taken for granted, but that they are willing to expose unacceptable practice when it occurs. In many ways they have recognized the value of publicity and the usefulness of public outcries

against unjust treatments. Their vigilance has forced state officials into carrying out their duties with greater accountability than they used to, bringing about a sense of duty that was hardly prevalent before such challenges occurred.

While the different levels of government, as well as academics and researchers, accept the term 'tribe' over preference for a concept such as 'indigenous', its continuous use has turned into a pejorative reference to people such as the Bhoksa. Responses from the youth suggested that they have to live under continuous pre-tension against the discrimination that they experience from people who perceive themselves to be superior to them. It requires a development of a steely exterior and an ability to ignore or appear light hearted about the ongoing taunting to avoid aggression against them. The word tribe has by now stigmatized the Bhoksa in schools and their surroundings, exacerbated by subtly condescending attitudes towards them by their teachers. Despite such odds, Bhoksa children have demonstrated levels of perseverance and endurance that are hallmarks of people who are renowned for their tremendous degrees of tolerance against such ongoing humiliation.

A case in point about a youngster who transcended such humiliation to be admitted into one of India's premier centres of tertiary education provides hope for other Bhoksa youth with such ambition in mind. Pratap Singh one among several to complete his twelfth grade at school, succeeded in his application for admission to do engineering in Indian Institute of Technology (IIT). Pratap Singh was from the Peepalsana village (under Ramnagar block, district Nainital). He studied in the primary and secondary schools against all of the animosity of the kind in his village, but kept to his determination to ensure a place for himself in IIT. His father still owned land in their village and agriculture was their means of survival. While studying in the town of Kashipur Pratap Singh remained in regular contact with other students preparing for the engineering examination. This helped him to prepare for the exam in a more organized way. His success inspired his younger brother, who followed suit and joined the same IIT as him. Other youth from their generation opted to join the Indian Army - another institution which offer security of employment and benefits that they would otherwise not acquire. Interestingly, while the Bhoksa have been categorized as 'tribal', their claim to joining the military stems from their epic

stories about who they descended from, justifying a role as a part of the warrior caste and as protectors of society. The successes that they have experienced so far in terms of social integration, educational achievements and becoming a part of the Indian army, has motivated them to inspire theirs and the up and coming generations to move beyond the limits that the stigmatization of tribal imposes upon them. They do so by way of regular meetings, isolating individuals who demonstrate talent in particular areas and woo the community to encourage them to do better in what they show a talent for. Their regular community meetings and talks by individuals', who were successful in whatever they chose to do, demonstrate a potential for greater mobilization and achievements.

Many Bhoksa youth have sought employment in the neighbouring industrial complex as both skilled and unskilled workers. At least three training centres have become renowned for imparting skills to many of the youth and disempowered people in the area. For instance, the Regional Training Centre at Kaladhungi imparts training in various cottage industry trades. Their trades include spinning, weaving, bee keeping, carpentry, and fruit preservation. The other two include the Industrial Training Centre and the Jan Vidyapeetha, Haldwani - which imparts training to the youth in electronics, electrical work, watch repairing, automobile repairing, tailoring and handloom. However it has been noticed that living in the towns is not preferred by them. They wish to continue to live in their own villages. They are of the opinion that the world outside is not easy to live in and is full of struggle. However they do not desire to detach themselves from their roots. Having seen the world outside, the Bhoksa youth feel more alienated there than their own culture and area. A major reason for this is the work pattern outside where they are bound by the tasks of their job in the factory. Having lived in the lap of nature amidst fields and huts, town life is not a preference for them. Moreover the desire to uplift their lot and take pride in its culture has increased. This is due to the fact that having come into contact with the people in the towns they realize that life in towns is more about individualism, the 'I' before the 'us', where cut throat competition and one up man ship seems to be the rule in order to survive. It can be drawn from their mindset that they realize the need to integrate with the mainstream society so that they are able to keep pace with the 'others' and contribute to as well as enjoy the fruits of

national development. They understand that they need to adjust and find semblance with the 'other cultures' (John Beattie) in order to break the hegemony of the dominant Rai Sikhs and Punjabis in their area. Yet the Bhoksa youth who stay in towns keep in regular touch with their villages. They miss the warmth and the genuine concern of their people while living in towns where they fell lost. Such experiences have aroused in them the spirit of championing the cause of their tribe and to work towards its betterment. It was observed that the Bhoksa youth are winning the trust and confidence of the other Bhoksas. They look up to the former as the 'right' representatives of their community. When the researcher inquired about the developmental works being run by the Government in the area the Bhoksas pointing towards a young man said, "Usko bulao. Woh batayega (Call him. He will tell properly).

CONCLUSION

Information in this paper illustrate that the Bhoksa as a 'scheduled tribe' is not as protected as the Indian Constitution conveys to the public and outside world. While there is a portrayal of care and seriousness with which previously disadvantaged groups should be treated the reality is that despite evidence of deliberate manipulation by privileged groups such as Rai Sikhs and Punjabi Hindus, to dispossess the Bhoksa of their land, nothing is being done about it. At present, the Bhoksa youth understand that their loss of land and the lack of political will to redress the situation is a contradiction that they have to live with. They have chosen a path that is less confrontational yet challenging by virtue of their determination to extricate themselves from an inhibitive tribal categorization to a more contemporary one. Their approach of gradual education of their illiterate elders, especially not to fall prey to unscrupulous money-lenders, and encouragement of the younger generation to improve their educational levels, are indications of how they wish to eventually change the society from which they come. The acts of encouraging elderly folk to apply to the banks for loans and standing by to assist them in their purchase of animals, fodder, machines and other requirements is an overt demonstration of their willingness to ensure that proper procedures are followed. However, against the background of their enthusiasm to engage with change, they are equally keen to ensure survival of their identity, which they believe is

distinct from their neighbouring groups. This is an aspect that information in this paper suggests will be of some value in future research exercises.

NOTES

1. The word 'Bhoksa' (Singh K.S, 1994; Hasnain, 1991; Mann, 1998) has been varignly spelt, like 'Buxa' (Hasan, 1979; Bhisht, 1999), 'Bhoxsa' (Hasan, 1971), 'Bhuksa' (Singh L.R., 1998) and 'Buksa' (Kumar K and Taragi, 1998)." The present study is based on field work undertaken in the Bhoksa village falling under the Ramnagar block, district Nainital.
2. At this stage Tarai was a part of Uttar Pradesh, which of late sub-divided to form the province of Uttaranchal.
3. Tarai and Bhabhar Kham (Kham being the term of denote administration of the Tarai-Terms No. 5687/1B-121B/1947, dated 30.04.1948, quoted in Rawat, 1998: 204).
4. The relationship between the Bhoksa and their dominant neighbours is fraught with contradiction and ambivalence-which is speculatively warding of any form of violent confrontation between the groups.
5. A feature common among the Bhoksa is that they all have the same surname - 'Singh'. It is an upper caste surname of people who belong to the warrior caste (Kshatriya, Thakur). The Bhoksa claim to be the descendants of the Kshatriyas from the female side.

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ABSTRACT Research for this paper began in the latter part of the 1990s, among a Scheduled tribe viz the Bhoksa, in the province of Uttaranchal. Interest lay mainly with the youth of this tribe and the ways in which they were confronting change. The paper briefly captures some of their recent history, particularly in the 21st century, and the impact that its events had on them. They were largely victims of encroachment by more the dominant and militant Rai Sikhs and Punjabi-Hindus, who usurped their land through means that were unlawful and hideous. The discussion below demonstrates ambivalence and ambiguity by the Bhoksa youth who deal with their problems of marginalization in generally positive ways, especially through education, to overcome the indignities that they suffer by an internal migrant population that has colonised their land and relegated them to a secondary status.

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