

# Role of Elites in the Development of the Bhoksa Tribe

By

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## Abstract

The paper deals with the occurrence of exploitation of the Bhoksa tribe by elite groups. The Bhoksas are enlisted as one of the Primitive Tribal Groups of India (PTG). The paper reflects how money power coupled with muscle power forms the pedestal for the elites to emerge as the reign holders of Bhoksa society, and how the common Bhoksas are surviving under its yoke. Interestingly, the category of elites include both, the Bhoksas as well as non-Bhoksas.

**B**hoksa tribe inhabits the Tarai areas of Dehradun, Nainital, Bijnore and Tehri Garhwal districts<sup>1</sup>. At present this tribe is included in the category of Primitive Tribal Groups (P.T.G.) because it is poverty stricken, a community where agriculture is the mainstay but the technology applied for agricultural pursuits is inferior. With Tuberculosis found rampant in this tribe apart from other health problems, it's population is diminishing and one can apprehend that the not so distant future may witness the complete extinction of this tribe. As anthropological research reveals this gloomy picture of the Bhoksa tribe it becomes imperative to talk about its development.

Talking about development attention automatically shifts to the hands, which hold the reign of power as well as those who have some

'say' in this community. Whether they are the crowned ('Panchas' of the Gaon Panchayat) or uncrowned kings, the feature common to all are that they are the elites - the class, the comparative few, the conspicuously affluent. How money power coupled with muscle power forms the pedestal for the elites to emerge as the reign holders of the Bhoksa society and how the Bhoksas are surviving in its yoke - these aspects have been reflected in the present paper. The category of elites includes both the Bhoksa elites as well as the non Bhoksa elites living in the Bhoksa villages as the neighbours of the Bhoksas. These non Bhoksa elites are mostly the Rai Sikhs who had infiltrated into the tarai area inhabited by the Bhoksas after 1947. One needs to go back in history to understand the factors responsible for making of these elites - tribal as well as non tribal.

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Prior to 1947, tarai, the main habitat of the Bhoksa was one of the most inhospitable tracts. "No outsider dared to live in the land of malaria and marshes<sup>2</sup>". The Bhoksas were the sole masters of this area. The British administrations attitude towards the Bhoksa was that of indifference and non intervention. It was this period which saw the beginning of leadership at the village level in the egalitarian, homogeneous community of Bhoksas. Dr. Amir Hasan writes that popular Bhoksas were appointed Padhans by the Kham administration (Kham: term to denote Tarai administration setup by the British). He was allotted land which inturn he allotted to the individual Bhoksa and charged rent from them, which he deposited with the Kham Superintendent<sup>3</sup>.

The Bhoksa Padhan emerged as the Bhoksa village headman. Being wise, prudent, intelligent and possessing the mannerisms required speaking to the British officials, the Bhoksa looked up to him as their leader, a champion of their woes. They sought his counsel for the redressal of their grievances.

According to eminent anthropologist Dr. K. S. Singh, the Bhoksas had their traditional community council known as the *Biradari Panchayat*<sup>4</sup>. The Biradari Panchayat decided the cases of murder, assault, adultery. Its jurisdiction extended over some villages. It was headed by the official whose title was *Takhat*. He was followed by the *Munsif*, the *Daroga* and the *Sipahi*<sup>5</sup>. These offices were hereditary. The Takhat sat majestically smoking the 'Hukkah' (Hubble bubble) while the hearing of the case was in process. He was also known as the 'Raja' and the *Takhat-I-Nashin*. The Bhoksa remained in awe of these officials particularly the Takhat. The Biradari Panchayat's decision was never questioned.

The position of these tribal elites - the Padhan and the four officials of the Biradari Panchayat did not remain the same after India gained independence from the British rule. The Bhoksas could no longer remain an isolated group

after 1947. Mr. H. S. Saxena opines that in view of high productivity of land in Tarai, various committees made some recommendations for its development. As a result the provincial government decided to develop Tarai and attract outsiders to settle here<sup>6</sup>. Soon after the partition, the refugees from Pakistan - particularly the Rai Sikhs settled in the Tarai and started occupying the Bhoksa land<sup>7</sup>. "Some of the Sikhs belonged to an ex-criminal tribe called Rai Sikh, a tough and ruthless people<sup>8</sup>". The state government went all the way to appease the trespassers and land grabbers by regularization of their illegal possession<sup>9</sup>.

In 1968 the U.P. Zamindari Abolition and Land Reforms Act, 1950 was amended to impose restrictions on the transfer of land by the Scheduled Tribes but by the time these measures came most of the lands which could be grabbed or alienated had already changed hands<sup>10</sup>. Moreover the amended law could not be properly enforced mainly due to stiff opposition and enormous political pressure from the influential land grabbers. By now the Rai Sikhs and the Punjabis had permanently settled in the originally only Bhoksa populated area. *Bhoksas' loss of land and its gain by the Rai Sikhs and the Punjabis is the instrumental factor in the making of the non-Bhoksa elites.*

These Rai Sikhs are hardworking as well as shrewd men. These outsiders occupied the Bhoksa land by adopting various tactics. They encouraged the Bhoksas to take to alcoholism and offered them free liquor which was, otherwise difficult for the Bhoksas to procure. They very cleverly took the thumb impression while they were in a state of intoxication. Today a large number of Bhoksas are working as landless labourers on the land they once owned.

The implementation of Panchayati Raj brought about certain changes in the Bhoksa political organization. Money power supported by political power paved the way for the making of more elites. With the enactment of the U.P. Kshetra Samiti's and Zila Panchayat's Act, 1961, Panchayati Raj was ushered in Uttar Pradesh. As

stated by D. D. Basu Panchayati Raj envisages democratic decentralization of power in three tiers - Zila Parishad at the district level, Kshetra Samiti at the Block level and Gaon Panchayat at the level of the villages<sup>11</sup>.

The main aim of Panchayati Raj is to involve people in rural areas in their self-development through their own efforts with minimum governmental interference, but by providing all possible financial, technical and administrative assistance through these three democratic institutions.

Now in the Bhoksa villages, the Bhoksa Padhan was not the only political leader. The villagers of one *Gaon Sabha*. (some villagers grouped together on the basis of population under the Uttar Pradesh, Panchayati Raj Act) elect their Executive Committee known as the Gaon panchayat. The non Bhoksas (mainly the Sikhs and the Punjabis) on account of being the permanent residents of the Bhoksa villages can also contest the election for the office of the *Sabhapati* the chairman of the statutory Gaon Panchayat.

After the introduction of this new system the Padhans contested the election for the office of the Sabhapati and won. However this trend did not remain the same in the coming years. At present over most of the villages having Bhoksa majority and a few Sikhs the Sabhapati is a Sikh. The Sabhapati is vested with statutory power to administer and develop the area under his jurisdiction.

Today the elites in the Bhoksa inhabited area are the Sabhapati (who could be a Bhoksa or a non Bhoksa), Rai Sikhs and very few Bhoksas. The number of Rai Sikhs elites is far more than their Bhoksa counterparts although these Rai Sikh elites form a very small fraction of the total Bhoksa population in the tarai.

*The development of the Bhoksas and the role of the elites in this are two issues linked together.* The nexus between the elites as well as their factions play a determining role in the usage of the developmental measures catered for the

upliftment of the poor Bhoksas. There is no dearth of poverty alleviation and other developmental schemes made solely for the Bhoksas but they do not fully reach the beneficiaries. This calls for the study of the role of the elites who, as fieldwork in this area reveals, are the chosen one, the decision makers regarding who should be the beneficiary of the developmental funds.

The word 'nexus' needs to be explained in this light. Today the impoverishment of the Bhoksas is largely due to the existence of deep rooted corruption. The non-Bhoksa elites are virtually the 'King Makers' in this area, not to say that they themselves get crowned as Kings ['Kings' here means the Sabhapati and other members of the Gaon Panchayat] with money power at their disposal. They buy Bhoksa votes for their friend, the contestant who is also a non Bhoksa. The Bhoksas are addicted to liquor. Despite being poverty stricken they spend lavishly on their innumerable festivals and life cycle rituals. Their affluent Rai Sikhs neighbours welcome them with open arms, offer them free liquor and easy cash and buy their votes. If it is not the election time then there is no major change in this routine except that now all that the Bhoksa needs to do is put his thumb impression on a page without bothering to know about its contents (simply because he cannot read). Soon he learns that he has lost his land as he could not repay the debt. Addiction to liquor, a lazy attitude, and lack of ambition are factors which have reduced the Bhoksas to a pitiable lot.

This is how the reign of political power is resting in non-Bhoksa hands today. Even if the Sabhapati is a Bhoksa, the Rai Sikhs try to keep him in good humour by sending gifts of grains and fruits in gunny bags and at times he too develops a 'soft corner' for them. The intimacy between these privileged few in this area gets expressed in the distribution of developmental funds. The funds under *Indira Awas Yojna*, *Jawahar Rozgar Yojna*, *Nirbal Awas Yojna* etc are meant for betterment of the Bhoksas living below the poverty line. However in reality the picture is rather an ugly one. These funds seldom go to the real beneficiaries. The sabhapati particularly if

he is a non-Bhoksa prefers obliging his 'friends' – the already well-off folks. The poor Bhoksas are terrorized of dire consequences incase they opened their mouth to protest. Moreover the cursory visits by the officials from the Block help in no way. The 'nexus' party religiously attempts to entertain these guests from the block and after a few more visits these official guests become informal friends and start looking down upon the Bhoksas as worthless, incipient people.

It is significant to point out here that if the Sabhapati is a Bhoksa then the situation in his area of jurisdiction is not so sorry. The Bhoksas despite their laid back' attitude are people who strongly adhere to their culture, their customs and traditions which are Bhoksa specific and still by and large held together by "we - feeling". In most of the Gaon Panchayats headed by a Bhoksa Sabhapati the condition of poor Bhoksas is much better than otherwise. The Bhoksa Sabhapatis are one of their own community people and make attempts for the overall development of their community. Yet their number is very less. Simplicity, honesty implicit in Bhoksa men answers the question as to why the Bhoksa Sabhapati's do not become rich during their tenure.

It is the rich Rai Sikhs and Punjabis in this area today who have a stronghold over the political power and government funds.

Today the Bhoksa elites are those who have their own land a concrete house, several buffalos, electricity connection in their house, are able to send their children in the Perumadara school (considered the best) and not in the "useless" school in their village.

The tribal elites of yesteryears - the Padhan for instance, is no longer an elite today if he lacks these prerequisites. The Padhanship is hereditary

so each Bhoksa village still has a Padhan. But if this Padhan lives in a mud hut, is poor, he is not the elite. He is no doubt revered as a Bhoksa elder, a symbol of traditional Bhoksa culture but he is not the elite. The Biradri Panchayat as pointed out by Dr. K. S. Singh has been relegated into background and is no longer functioning.

After doing extensive fieldwork in the area inhabited by the Bhoksas, one realises that some alteration is needed in the Government's approach to democratic decentralization. At the outset the scheme is very noble. However area specific study as in this case reveals the fact that the Bhoksas' quality of life could be made better if they are given some degree of isolation combined with some degree of autonomy because it is well evident that the developmental funds, selection of beneficiaries under various schemes - these are getting manipulated by the Rai Sikh elites living in this area.

There is a need to counsel the Bhoksas to help them do away with their bad habits such as alcoholism. The elites whether Bhoksa or non Bhoksa can play an instrumental role in the development of the Bhoksas and others living in this area. What is suggested is some official stronghold over them.

Need for terms like transparency, honesty may sounds dished but they are 'the' words which if put into practice can change the life of the Bhoksas for better.

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