

TRADING ACROSS INDO-TIBET BORDER AND ITS IMPACT ON THE TRIBES OF THE HIMALAYAN BORDERS

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ABSTRACT

The concept of tribes in South Asia has been informed by several criteria but all having one aspect in common, that those considered as tribes are viewed as the 'Other' from the point of view of the mainstream populations of India, following the major religions of the sub-continent. These communities are also regarded as ethnically (read racially) distinct and having cultures that set them apart from the dominant Hindu majority. In this paper the discussion will focus on the border tribes of the upper Himalayas, the Bhotiyas and Kinnauries, both pastoral communities engaged in the erstwhile lucrative trans-border trade with Tibet (now China).

For centuries Tibet had been at the center of the Tibetan Salt trade that dominated the lives of the communities living on the borders of this specific cold plateau region that was the source of rock salt for all the neighbouring areas constituted by the upper Himalayan regions of India as well as Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim (now part of India). Not only salt but also pashmina, borax, rice and wool were among many coveted items that formed the part of the active trade across the borders with Tibet as the pivot. There has been constant movement of people across the borders and cultural and religious exchanges have taken place over centuries the most important of which has been the travel of Buddhism from India to Tibet and consequently its travel back with Dalai Lama after 1958. Tibetan artisans and even labour crossed borders into areas of Kinnaur and upper Garhwal even as Bhotiya communities and even the Gosains of Bengal and various other interested parties moved to and fro from Tibet on a regular basis. The cultural and political influence of Tibet has been immense and its remnants can be seen even after the closure of the borders after the Indo-China war and the annexation of Tibet. The influence of Buddhism has in fact intensified with the migration of the Dalai Lama along with his followers in 1958. But in the present times the symbolic association with Tibet is causing unease among the tribal border communities on the Indian side of the border. In this paper I shall briefly sketch the historical outline of the political shifts along the border and how the influence of Tibet and its culture and religion has varied over time and what is its present status. The focus is on how the tribes construct their identity and how it differs radically from the identity that is created for and about them by those who hold the keys to power.

Keywords: *Himalayan tribes, Bhotiyas, Cross-border trade, Tibet, identity.*

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INTRODUCTION

The government of India has a Schedule or list of people who are considered as tribes and consequently referred to as Scheduled Tribes (ST) to be considered for various policies of positive discrimination and welfare programs. The rationale for these policies is rooted in the Indian Constitution's commitment to social justice and development for sections of the Indian society considered as suffering from historical marginalization and therefore backward. The term primitive, with its pejorative connotation, was used for some of them till recent times. There is a general cognitive perception by both rural and urban people, that the tribes are backward, 'not civilized' and qualitatively situated on a lower rung of development than the non-tribals. Using this lens, the people known as Bhotiyas and also the Kinnauries of the upper regions of the Central Himalayas, belonging to the Indian states of Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh, are classified as tribes along with all the pejorative connotations that this term evokes.

The designation of Bhotiyas as a tribe, from the point of view of the officials, being, firstly, based on the fact that they are pastoral communities characterized by movement and not settled like peasant cultivators of the same region. Their gender relationships seem different from conservative Hindu society (the Kinnauries have polyandry) and their sexual norms are viewed as lax. They follow a religion that is viewed as similar to Buddhism (the Bhotiyas are classified as Buddhists in the official records). They are similar in appearance and lifestyle to the Tibetans (read racially different) and are generally considered dirty, not following Hindu norms of purity and pollution and not worshipping mainstream Hindu deities and having food and liquor not permissible in Brahmanical Hinduism.

The data for this paper is based on the field work that I had done among the Bhotias of Uttarkashi known as Jad Bhotiyas and the Kinnauries in the upper ranges of Himachal Pradesh (Channa 2013). My interaction with people from the plains, including the army personnel deployed in these regions, made clear that most of them referred to the Bhotiyas as Tibetan and the Kinnauries too as something akin to Tibetans. Yet the Bhotiyas do not consider their own selves to be anywhere near being Tibetan although they have had sustained interaction with them and many of the older generation speak fluent Tibetan and Chinese. Let us examine how these people came to be associated with Tibet. It is not an accidental association but the result of a long drawn political and trade based drama where the various political and social entities on the borders have been negotiating and renegotiating with each other.

THE ROLE OF TIBET ON THE HIMALAYAN BORDERS

Tibet has occupied a key position in the lives of the communities on the Indo-Tibet border in terms of its crucial political, economic and as well as culturally symbolic role in the lives of the tribal communities such as the Bhotiyas and the Kinnauries. Furer-Haimendorf (1978) has used the term Bhotiya as a generic usage for these small enclaves of cross-border trading and pastoral communities that dot the Himalayan borders, not only on the Indian side but also in Nepal and Bhutan. We see a major transformation after the annexation of Tibet by China in 1958 and the closure of the borders with India after the Indo-China war of 1962.

While for centuries the traders and travelers have been moving to and fro, with the changes in the political equation leading to permanent migration of large numbers of Tibetans along with their spiritual lead, H. H. The Dalai Lama, the relationship with Tibet and Tibetans has undergone a major transformation. While the impact of Buddhism has become stronger, there is at present a mixed reaction to the presence of Tibetan refugees settlers known as Khampas, in this region. To understand this changed relationship of the local tribal communities with Tibet and Tibetans, one needs to understand a little of the geo-political and economic backdrop against which population migrations have been taking place in this region.

The Himalayan frontier has been both a unique ecological zone as well as a region whose political identity had changed many faces and is still to be exact, in a state of flux. The snow covered mountains and the treacherous passes had seen the movement of armies and kingdoms being made and unmade (Cammann, 1951). Prior to British entry, interference and conquest, in that sequence, the countries on the borders of the Himalayan high peaks were feudal centers of power, the borders between Tibet, Garhwal (India) and Nepal were porous and guided by notions of nationality rather than statehood. In fact the usual closure that accompanies the creation of nation states was absent between the three regions and there was free movement of population from one part to the other. Time and again like all feudal states there had been attempts to expand territories. The presence of Tibeto – Burman populations on the borders has been attributed to ancient migrations from China, Burma and Tibet although there is no conclusive evidence except for the movement of the Tibetans (Crook 1995, Khosa *et al* 1992). The open border between Tibet and India allowed Buddhism to enter directly into Tibet from India and where it is still flourishing after historical ouster from India. In the present times Buddhism has become cognitively associated with the Tibetans and by extension to all people who are ethnically similar including the Jads. The physical appearance and the linguistic affinity with the Tibetans makes outsiders club them with the Tibetans. During my fieldwork, the army personnel and tourists from the plains often referred to them as Tibetans.

Although the Tibet border was formally closed on the Indian side after Tibet was annexed by China, the Nepal border is still open to citizens of both the

countries. Although both have assumed the status of nation-states, no passport or visa is required to cross over from India to Nepal and vice-versa. A very large number of Nepalis live and work in India and generally no one regards them as foreigners. Tibet too is considered as the backyard of India and the large number of refugees who fled with the Dalai Lama have set up their camps in India and blended sufficiently with the local populations to not merit any attention by their presence. The Tibetans however retain their separate ethnic identity a little more than the Nepali. It is a familiar sight in many parts of India to see enterprising Tibetan women setting up stalls for woollens and knit ware and also selling *momos*. There are many settlements of Tibetans in various parts of India but although they have a lively economic relationship with Indians, they keep their ethnic identity separate and distinct.

As described by Gellner (1997: 3–4), the modern state of Nepal was created by Prithvi Narayan Shah in the second half of the eighteenth century, who expanded his kingdom as far as Sikkim in the East and Kangra in the west, after conquering the small principalities (*desa*) that constituted the Kathmandu valley. Under the leadership of Prithvi Narayan Shah, Nepal conquered Kumaon in 1790 and Garhwal in 1804. Later, when the Anglo-Gurkha wars culminated in the treaty of 1815, the East India Company annexed both Kumaon and Garhwal. However while the British retained Kumaon and eastern or Pauri Garhwal (Kumaon division), western or Tehri Garhwal was returned to the traditional ruler. Guha (1989:11) writes with respect to this treaty, “The boundaries of the treaty of 1815 were fixed with a view to controlling the route to Tibet and the passes used for trade. It was the prospect of a commercial intercourse with Tibet, and not considerations for revenue, that induced Lord Hastings to embark on the hill campaign. While Kumaon bordered Nepal in the east, both Northern Almora and British Garhwal had important trade routes to Tibet. Its location, strategic from the viewpoints of both defensive security and trade, played an important part in the evolution of British land policy in Kumaon”¹.

The Tibetan plateau, situated at an altitude of 11,000–13,000 feet above sea level comprises of rugged stony mountains with little capacity for food production. However this area produces large quantities of salt, which was unavailable in the adjoining areas of Nepal and the upper terrains of India, situated far away from the only other source of salt, namely the sea. Nepal and Indian valleys such as Dehradun produced food grains but had no land for pasturage thus requiring wool and woollen products, which Tibet produced, in large quantities. The Tibetan salt, wool, pashmina and mountain goats, yaks, horses and dogs became the center of a flourishing trade between Nepal, India and Tibet. Traditionally the movements of

¹ Hastings sent his emissary Bogle to Tibet, where he was formally appointed as a representative of the British on May 13th, 1774. A very interesting diary was maintained by him that can be read in the work of Markham (1879), *Narratives of the Mission of George Bogle to Tibet and the Journey of Thomas Manning to Lhasa*.

goods largely transferred salt from the highlands and rice and food grains from the low lands of the Himalayas, mainly from the temperate hills of Uttaranchal in India and the terrace cultivations of Nepal. Yet salt was not the only item that was coveted and shawl wool, known as *pashm* played a key role and also Borax. And although the local economy was concentrated on subsistence items with only a few luxury items like silver and precious stones thrown in, the outside interest, namely that of the local kings and the colonial traders, was triggered more by the shawl wool and Borax.

In the nineteenth century, the Europeans entered this territory and even the Sikhs and the Dogras, combined fought a war (1841-1882), for the sake of shawl wool. The local communities including the Bhotiyas were not much interested in wool as they produced their own and the barter trade with the Tibetans was guided by social and cultural norms invested in the institution of *Mitra*, by which age old trade partnerships based on clan membership, existed between the Bhotiyas and the Tibetans. The partners in the *Mitra* relationship would come and stay in each other's house and were treated as family members. In the Jad village where I worked, people would often show me beautiful handcrafted items in silver and wood that had been made by their *Mitra* partners.

In fact all attempts by outsiders, including Hindu traders on the Indian side and the Sikhs and the British failed, as they could not break the *Mitra* ties into a practice of free trade successfully. In fact as Brown (1990) concedes, the British would have fostered the Bhotiya identity to facilitate trade that in the early days was largely based on Borax and shawl wool, commercial items that introduced Tibet to the international market. The fluency of the Bhotiyas in the Tibetan language and their close cultural ties with Tibet even now confuses people, who identify them as Tibetans, but this as we shall see presently is not true and they have always maintained a social and conceptual distance from the Tibetans regarding them only as trade partners.²

Atkinson (1980 reprint) in his *Himalayan Gazeteer* writes that the native name Bod of Tibet was corrupted by the people of India into Bhot and the name Bhotiya was given to the tribes between the two countries. Most of these people are pastoral groups trading across the Indo-Tibet border. The term has several associations and at least one of them is situated in their local history that derives mainly from their Tibetan affinity, real or presumed. Because of this Tibetan affinity there is also an assumption that they are Buddhists thereby making it a kind of ethnic identity? A number of scholars have commented on this Tibetan connection citing various reasons. Naithani (1986: 180) mentions the main cause of the inter-relationship with Tibet being the Kailasa-Manasa pilgrimage for which the route was through the two main mountain passes, Niti and Mana, both being

² A field work conducted in Kinnaur, nearby, where too the cross border trade was carried on with Tibetans, showed a similar attitude where the people on Indian side of the border regarded the Tibetans as 'inferior' or certainly not 'like us'.

home to the Bhotiyas. The Bhotiyas also provided transport and served as guides to the pilgrims coming from Tibet via the Garhwal route to Kailasa.

Another link between Tibet and India was considered to be Buddhism. Buddhism made an entry into Tibet from the high mountain passes and also through Ladakh. Historian Khosa (1992) is of the opinion that the area of Kinnaur, which is inhabited by Bhotiyas with close kinship to the Jads, was connected with Tibet by events which took place in the seventh century A.D. although the proper Tibetanization of Kinnaur and other regions such as Ladakh, Zaskar, Lahaul-Spiti was not achieved until the ninth or tenth centuries. In the beginning of the tenth century, Kinnaur and the upper ridges of Tehri-Garhwal were annexed into Western Tibetan Empire. Thus the entire western fringe of the Himalayas was bound together by the bond of Buddhism. Even today the Jads of Uttarkashi consider the Kinnaurites to be closer to them than the Bhotiya's of Kumaoun region. Also as pointed out by Camman (1951: 7) the links between Tibetan Buddhism and India was very close, "the alphabet invented for transcribing the Buddhist scriptures into Tibetan was based on an Indian script, although the Tibetan language is like Chinese".

According to Jha (1986) the consolidation of Indo-Tibet scholarly collaboration began with the travel of Acharya Padmasambha to Tibet in the ninth century. However the Buddhism that is found among the Bhotiyas and the rural populations on both sides of the Indo-Tibet and Indo-Nepal border is more of a mixture of ancient tribal beliefs mixed with Hinduism and Buddhism than any pure form of any religion. The religion associated with the Bhotiyas and other tribal populations of the higher Himalayas is "Bon"-a pre-Buddhist ancient religious belief. Ramble (1997: 381) quotes Stein (1972:31) to say that 'Bon' is believed to have come from Zhang-zhung, which was annexed to Tibet in the seventh century. The word Bon itself may be cognatic with Bod, meaning Tibet". Further " 'Bon', as it is used here, has little to do with the Lamaist religion of that name -is in, effect, a residual term to denote whatever is left when everything that is demonstrably Buddhist has been subtracted".

In fact as my data on the Jads indicates the second part of what Ramble has to say regarding the Bhotiyas or the Tibetanid groups of Nepal is applicable. Thus Ramble (ibid: 398) says "... the unity provided by Buddhism ... was opposed by a close attachment to a limited territory that found expression in cults of local gods. I believe that it is in terms of the cult gods of place that the identity of Nepal's Tibetanid enclaves in modern times is clearly understood. The people of these regions are certainly Buddhist, at least in name, but the influence of these religions has generally not been strong enough that it could shift people's primary allegiance way from an identity determined by locality to one based on more abstract religious ideals".

The most interesting point mentioned by Brown (1990) is the fact that the Bhotiyas at least on the Indian side were not Buddhists but Hindus and claimed a

Rajput status. This self – proclaimed status was not recognized by the surrounding Hindu population who assumed that the Bhotiyas are more closely connected by descent or kinship with the Tibetans. Also because of reasons of trade and their *Mitra* system, they were sharing food with the Tibetans, who, not being Hindus, were considered ‘untouchable’ by the upper caste Rajput and Brahmin Garhwalis. Thus Brown quotes from Traill (1851) to say “In spite of their claim to Rajput status and internal rules of food sharing and endogamy, the surrounding Hindu population still regarded the ‘Bhotiyas’ as of lower status because of such habits” (Brown 1990: 164). The Bhotiyas were stigmatized because they shared food and had *Mitra* (trade partnership) relations with the Tibetans³. The Hindus suspected that they also ate beef and did not follow the purity pollution norms of the caste Hindus.

However this claim to Hindu and a Rajput status is not universal for all Bhotiyas but limited only to the Uttarakhand and Himachal parts of the Himalayan region may be because of its location within a dominant Hindu environment surrounded by Hindu sacred sites. One does not find such claims to Hindu identity being made by the Bhotiyas of North-East, Sikkim and Nepal. At the same time the Bhotiyas who do claim upper caste Hindu identity, do not perceive it as being at variance with their tribal identity of which also they are proud. This only indicates that communities in different part of India and especially tribal India have quite different worldview from the dominant majority. These observations also raise important questions regarding the tribe/caste identities about which there has been much discourse among Indian scholars. Thus the identities in this region have always had a fluid character, based not on just cultural/ethnic allegiance but informed by the pragmatic reasons of trade, livelihood and ecology. These relationships also changed in response to the dynamic political relationships between the various nations which share the Himalayan frontiers.

THE TRANSFORMING POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC SCENARIO

During the colonial period Garhwal saw both kinds of state rule, a formal secular one by the British, in the Kumaon division and the traditional one based upon sacred kingship of the ruler of Tehri. As is well known the rajah of Tehri even as of today is referred to as Bolanda Badri, or the Badri who speaks; thereby designating him as the living embodiment of the deity Badrinath, whose shrine is

³ Details of such trade and their political implications can be found in Charles W Brown 1983 “Salt, Barley, Pashmina and Tincal- Contexts of being Bhotiya in Traill’s Kumaon” In *The Himalaya: Nature, Man and Culture*, O.P Singh (ed). New Delhi: Rajesh Publications. And BROWN, C.W., 1994. “What we call ‘Bhotiyas’ are in reality not Bhotiyas”. In M. P. Joshi *et al* eds. *Himalaya: Past and Present*, Vol. II, Almora: Shree Almora Book Depot, pp. 147–172. And also Schuyler Cammen 1951 *Trade through the Himalayas: The Early British attempts to open Tibet*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press.

located in Uttaranchal. The Jads, as a pastoral community owe their most critical resource, namely access to grazing grounds to the rajah of Tehri. Even today he is the only authority they recognize and the concept of the nation state, embodied in the government being run from New Delhi, is still very far for most of them who yet do not comprehend what it really means. To them they owe their livelihood to the rajah, who is still regarded more or less as a god in this part of the world.

Although after 1947, all erstwhile princely states were annexed into the Indian republic, the impact of this transition became visible to the Jads only after the war with China in 1962, when the border was closed for trade and the army moved in. Major transformations took place in the lives of the Bhotiyas and they were pushed more and more towards the Hindu mainstream as roads and communication with the Indian mainland improved. More and more people from the plains began to move up into the hills mostly as pilgrims and tourists. There was a major presence of the army that built roads and improved communication in this region. There is also a contingent of the Indo-Tibet border police. Some of the Jads too became kind of refugees in their own villages and two of their primary villages, Neilang and Jadung, on the Indo-Tibet border was relocated in a single village near Harsil, called Bhagori. Even today the villagers distinguish between the original inhabitants and those whom they call the Chongsa Rongpas, Chongsa designated an uprooted person and Rongpa is the name that they use for themselves.

In the absence of their trade with Tibet, the Bhotiyas diversified into more intensive trade with in-land people. The state began to take an active interest in them as frontier people who needed to be integrated more into the mainstream for safeguarding the national identity. Ever since the conception of the Indian nation state, it has been facing trouble at its borders with people who suddenly woke up to find that they were part of a state with which they had little cognitive assimilation. With the trouble in Kashmir and the North-eastern tribal states, the Indian central government has become especially sensitive to the demands of the border people, especially those like the Bhotiyas, who have been ethnically, culturally and socially marginal to the imagined national identity. In the late 1990s, the village Bhagori was identified as an Ambedkar village and given special grants. The tiny village of some seven hundred persons has several internal divisions. Apart from the Rongpas or Jads they also have some households of Tibetan refugees known locally as Khampas and some Hindu scheduled castes called Kolis, who are primarily weavers, attached to the sheep herding Bhotiyas in a traditional caste like relationship. The Jads claim the highest status among these groups because of their traditional claim to high caste Rajput status that had become diluted because of the trade with Tibetans. Now-a-days they are trying hard to shed off this association and reclaim their high caste status within the Hindu fold. Paradoxically they never use this upper caste Hindu identity to question their tribal status, that is also accepted as a given and they happily accept the perks that come with this identity.

CONTESTING IDENTITIES

The outside people, especially the officials and the people coming up from the plains are not cognizant of the self-identity of these people, but continue to believe them to be either Tibetans or like them. But in view of their fresh claim to the high caste Hindu Rajput status, the Bhotiyas are themselves in a denial mode of their earlier Tibetan identity. At the time when they had willingly sacrificed their upper caste Hindu identity to associate with the Tibetans, they were engaged in a lucrative trade with them. They were their friends whose homes they shared and who also came to live with them. Today the only Tibetans around are the Khampas or the Tibetan refugees, who, as refugees in general, hold a lower social position and although the Bhotiyas at level identify with them, at other level they do not want to be *identified with them*. The point of identification is the ritual dimensions of life, in which the Bhotiyas are still guided by the Buddhist lamas, who perform their birth and death rituals as well as protect them from the evil eye and other misfortunes. The Jads celebrate the Buddhist New Year, namely Losar and also pay allegiance to the Buddhist monastery in their village. A number of younger people have actually professed their faith in Buddhism and even become nuns. This is a comparatively new development.

A majority of Jads however now prefer to call themselves Hindus and Rajputs. They have changed their Thok⁴ names, used by them earlier and have begun to use the Garhwali Rajput clan names like Bhandari, Negi, Rawat etc. In their personal appearance they are moving away from the Tibeto-Burman style of dressing and personal names to wearing clothes like urban Indians (jeans, shirts and *salwar kameez*) and even to wearing a *saree* on a special occasion although the way in which they wear these clothes are in their own style and convenience; like they wrap the *dupatta* around their heads and wear a waist band for climbing up and down the hills called as *paagri*. Since the Jads are not a homogenous community they carry the native dresses of the places they come from like Kinnaur, Chamoli, Nit and Mana etc.

But what is universal for all of them is the move away from the Tibetan way of doing things to being more like their Garhwali neighbours. The key symbol of Tibet for them has been replaced by a pan Garhwali identity; consolidated by the emergence of Uttarakhand as a distinct political identity. Interestingly this identity has also led them to dissociate themselves from the neighbouring mountain state of Himachal Pradesh. Today if you ask a Jad woman about the Tibetan women, they look down and say “Of those women have no ritual status. They do not wear *sindoor* or a nose ring like us”, they are outsiders, dirty also. Incidentally most Jad women also do not put *sindoor* or wear a nose ring, but they yet use these symbolically to create a barrier between themselves and the Tibetans.

⁴ Thok is equivalent to a descent group on patrilineal lines but not very clearly defined. It has the connotation of blood descent that is more conceptual than actual.

Their eating habits too have not changed much but they do not eat beef and very little of meat. The Jads do not kill their animals for food, but only eat them if they die a natural death. This is also practice that is similar to the Buddhist Tibetans. In their ritual practices however while retaining the core of the life cycle rituals that they consider important like birth and death; they are trying to imitate the Hindu rituals.

In Kinnaur I saw another interesting phenomenon; the Tibetan identity is also causing an internal hierarchy within them. The closer the villages are to the Indo-Tibet border, they are considered as 'inferior'. One young man who was my guide on one such occasion told me "we do not like to marry people from these villages as their language is like the Tibetans". At the same time another very interesting analogy⁵ was made as one old man told me: "We do not like the Tibetans. They are untouchables as they are Muslims!" The latter being an obvious outcome of the influence of the BJP government on them. Since the Kinnauries have no actual experience of the Muslims, who are constantly being presented as the "Other" by the Hindu fundamentalists, they have created their own 'Other' in terms of the Tibetans. The emphasis on the distance from the untouchable Tibetans is obviously to emphasize their own Hindu and upper caste identity, although both in Uttarakhand and Kinnaur, the practice of Hinduism is primarily according to its local version especially as the Brahmins are conspicuously absent from these areas. Even if they are invited as once I met a Brahmin priest from Mukhpa, the village that supplies the priests to the Gangorti temple in Bhagori; who told me "I never touch food and water in the houses of these people. But since they invite me I come". The real reason of course being that he got lavish gifts of shawls from them.

Thus the shift of identity is still an incomplete process, the upper caste Hindus only grudgingly allowing them the Hindu identity, and very reluctant about the Rajput identity. The primary reason being that no matter how much they deny the Tibetan association, the very term Bhotiya used for them connotes as association with Tibet; from the word 'Bod' meaning Tibet. Secondly their Tibeto-Burman language and also appearance sets them apart from the Garhwali Hindus as also does their association with pastoral activities, which the Hindu agricultural castes consider as lowly; stereotypes about them as being '*junglee*' (uncivilized) abounds and even in government records they are mentioned as Buddhists. The Hindu mainstream identity that has built itself up historically to represent India to the world has not only pushed out the non-Hindus but also constructed a particular version of Hinduism that is far from the varieties of rituals and beliefs practiced by numerous communities on the ground level in India who would also say that 'we are Hindus', as many Jads do, even though they bear little resemblance to mainstream constructs of Hinduism.

⁵ The BJP stands for the Bharatiya Janata Party that is a Hindu Nationalist Right Wing Political Party.

To what extent they are able to transcend this association is a matter of the future. But the historical association with Tibet still persists and some of the younger generations of Jads are also developing an ambivalent attitude especially about their Hindu identity. Some think that since Hindus do not accept them any way, they may as well opt for the Buddhist identity. Identity politics here as anywhere else is both contested and negotiated and subject to a multiplicity of complex factors.

From the above discussion one finds that the identity of being tribal, is both fluid and means different things to different people at different times. These border communities are happy to be considered tribal, as they get benefits of positive discrimination from the state of India. Yet they make claim to high caste and even core Hindu identity at the same time rejecting Brahmins and Brahmanical Hinduism. They are also uncomfortable to be equated with the Tibetans as the Tibetans no longer enjoy the position of power that they once did. Thus the label of tribe is assigned on arbitrary grounds and often as in the case of the Bhotiyas, on the basis of their perceived difference from the stereotype of being a Hindu as well as their so-called 'mongoloid' looks. The label tribe does not tally with any self-perception, especially for such people as these situated quite literally both on a physical and on a cognitive border.

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