

Tribes of Uttarakhand: A Comprehensive Study with Special Reference to the Bhotiya Tribe

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a comprehensive study of the tribal communities of Uttarakhand, with a special focus on the Bhotiya tribe. It examines their spatial distribution, demographic patterns, and socio-economic characteristics using secondary data from census reports, government publications, and academic studies. The Bhotiya tribe, primarily inhabiting the high-altitude districts of Pithoragarh, Chamoli, and Uttarkashi, is historically known for its trans-Himalayan trade, transhumant pastoralism, and wool-based crafts. The study highlights their uneven spatial concentration, with Pithoragarh and Chamoli accounting for the largest share of the population. Demographic analysis shows a favorable sex ratio (1,040 females per 1,000 males) and a predominantly young population structure, reflecting high birth rates and occupational mobility. The paper also contextualizes the Bhotiya tribe within the broader tribal framework of Uttarakhand, including the Tharu, Buksa, Jaunsari, and Raji communities, emphasizing their unique cultural and economic adaptations to the mountainous environment.

Keywords: Bhotiya Tribe, Socio-cultural Practices, Uttarakhand

INTRODUCTION

The term tribe refers to a social group or community that shares common language, customs, culture, race, religion, blood ties, and usually lives within a defined geographical area under the leadership of a recognized group leader who guides decisions for the welfare of the group (OED, 2018). The Dictionary of Anthropology describes a tribe as a social formation characterized by cultural homogeneity, distinct dialect, territorial identity, and a unified social organization where decisions are made collectively under the authority of a leader. The International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 169 defines tribes as groups that maintain a traditional lifestyle, possess unique socio-cultural and economic structures, and are distinguishable from mainstream society (ILO, 1989). Tribal communities generally engage in collective activities, whether economic, cultural, or ceremonial, and their socio-political structures are rooted in strong kinship bonds.

In the Indian context, the term tribe was first officially used during the Census of India 1891, where communities practicing Animism were categorized separately. Later, in the 1931 Census, under the guidance of Dr. J.H. Hutton, tribal religions were distinguished from mainstream religions such as Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, and the term primitive tribe replaced forest tribe (Census of India, 1931). After independence, the Indian Constitution recognized Scheduled Tribes under Article 342, where a group is declared a tribe by the President of India, based on recommendations from the Governor of the respective state. The criteria include isolation, socio-economic backwardness, distinctive culture, technological underdevelopment, and collective behavior marked by shyness (Government of India, 1950 a&b).

Uttarakhand, a predominantly mountainous state in northern India, with about 86 per cent of its geographical area classified as hilly terrain, has provided a natural setting for the evolution of various tribal communities

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(Government of Uttarakhand, 2011). The difficult topography, harsh climatic conditions, and remoteness have contributed to the persistence of distinct tribal identities in the region. The tribal communities of Uttarakhand, such as the Bhotiya, Tharu, Buksa, Raji, and Jaunsari, inhabit areas often characterized by isolation and limited agricultural potential, leading to the development of unique livelihoods including transhumance, animal husbandry, forest-based activities, and small-scale agriculture (Negi, 2002; Nautiyal, 2015).

Among these, the Bhotiya tribe holds significant historical and cultural importance. The Bhotiya are traditionally known for their pastoral and trading activities, particularly their involvement in trans-Himalayan trade, which has shaped their socio-economic and cultural practices over centuries. Their settlements are mainly concentrated in the higher reaches of districts such as Pithoragarh, Chamoli, and Uttarkashi, where they have maintained a distinct identity through their language, dress, customs, and religious beliefs (Pant and Pant, 2010). This paper aims to provide a comprehensive study of the tribal communities of Uttarakhand, with a special focus on the Bhotiya tribe. The analysis includes spatial distribution using Location Quotients and the Index of Concentration, along with district-wise sex composition and age structure.

METHODOLOGY

This research mainly uses secondary data gathered from multiple sources, such as the 2011 Census, to provide a spatial analysis of women's higher education across various socioeconomic segments. Simple tabular forms and statistical techniques like percentages and ratios are used in the methodology. The official website of the Census of India, the District Census Handbook, and the District Statistical Handbook are the sources of the secondary data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Distribution of Tribal Communities in Uttarakhand:

The Bhotiya tribe is mainly concentrated in the high-altitude districts of Pithoragarh, Chamoli, and Uttarkashi. They inhabit the trans-Himalayan valleys at elevations above 3,000 metres, including the Johar, Darma, and Byans valleys in Pithoragarh, the Niti and Mana valleys in Chamoli, and the upper regions of Uttarkashi. Traditionally, the Bhotiya were pastoral nomads and

traders, practicing transhumance by moving seasonally with their herds of sheep and goats. They were also engaged in trans-Himalayan trade across the Indo-Tibetan border, which significantly shaped their economy and culture (Pant and Pant, 2010). However, after the closure of the border trade in 1962, many Bhotiya became partially sedentarized, though they continue to depend on animal husbandry and agriculture for their livelihoods. The Tharu community is primarily found in the Terai belt of Udham Singh Nagar and parts of Champawat and Nainital districts. They inhabit the fertile plains of the Terai and Bhabhar regions, generally below 1,000 metres elevation. The Tharu are traditional agriculturists, cultivating crops such as paddy, wheat, sugarcane, and vegetables. They also rely on fishing and the collection of minor forest produce for sustenance (Nautiyal, 2015). The Tharu have retained distinct cultural practices, including unique festivals, colorful traditional attire, and dialects influenced by their close proximity to Nepal. The Buksa tribe is distributed across Udham Singh Nagar, Nainital, and parts of Pauri Garhwal districts. Similar to the Tharu, they reside in the Terai and lower Bhabhar zones. Agriculture forms the mainstay of their economy, though many Buksa are marginal farmers. They often supplement their income through wage labor and forest-based activities such as collecting fuelwood and minor forest produce. The Jaunsari tribe inhabits the Jaunsar-Bawar region of Dehradun district, particularly concentrated in Chakrata tehsil. They reside in the mid-hill areas between 1,500 and 2,500 metres elevation, a region marked by steep valleys, terraced fields, and dense forests. The Jaunsari community traditionally depends on agriculture, animal husbandry, and forest resources for their livelihoods. The Raji tribe, considered one of India's smallest and most endangered tribal groups, is found in small pockets of Pithoragarh, Champawat, and Udham Singh Nagar districts. They traditionally inhabited the forest fringes in the foothill regions. The Raji were originally hunter-gatherers, relying on forest produce, hunting, and fishing. However, due to restrictions on forest access and changing socio-economic conditions, they have gradually transitioned towards settled agriculture and wage labor to sustain their livelihoods.

The district-wise distribution of major tribal communities in Uttarakhand based on the Census of India 2011. The total tribal population of the state is 273,839, comprising five prominent tribes: Bhotia, Buksa, Jaunsari, Raji, and Tharu, which have distinct geographical

Table 1 : District-wise distribution of Tribal communities in Uttarakhand

Sr. No.	Tribal Communities	Population	Percentage	Major Areas of Concentration
1.	Bhotia	39106	14.28	Uttarkashi, Chamoli, Dehradun, Pithoragarh, Bageshwar, Almora, Nainital
2.	Buksa	54037	19.73	Haridwar, Dehradun, Garhwal, Nainital, Udham Singh Nagar
3.	Jaunsari	88664	32.37	Dehradun and Uttarkashi
4.	Raji	690	0.25	Pithoragarh and Champawat
5.	Tharu	91342	33.35	Udham Singh Nagar, Nainital, Champawat
Total		273839	100	

Source: Compiled from the Census of India 2011

concentrations and cultural characteristics. The Tharu tribe is the largest, comprising 33.35% (91,342 individuals), mainly inhabiting the Tarai and Bhabar regions of Udham Singh Nagar, Nainital, and Champawat. The Jaunsari tribe, forming 32.37% (88,664 individuals), is concentrated in Dehradun (Jaunsar-Bawar region) and Uttarkashi, known for their unique cultural practices and traditional agriculture. The Buksa tribe accounts for 19.73% (54,037 individuals), residing mostly in the foothill districts of Haridwar, Dehradun, Nainital, Garhwal, and Udham Singh Nagar. The Bhotia tribe, constituting 14.28% (39,106 individuals), is primarily found in high-altitude districts such as Uttarkashi, Chamoli, Pithoragarh, and Bageshwar, and is associated with transhumance and wool-based crafts. The Raji tribe, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), represents only 0.25% (690 individuals) of the tribal population, inhabiting Pithoragarh and Champawat districts. This distribution highlights the socio-cultural diversity and regional concentration of tribal communities across Uttarakhand.

Bhotiya Tribe:

The Bhotiya of Uttarakhand, locally known by valley-specific ethnonyms such as Shauka/Johari (Johar valley, Munsiri region), Tolchha and Marchha (Niti-Mana valleys of Chamoli), and Byansi (Darma-Byans-Chaudas valleys of Pithoragarh), are a high-altitude, trans-Himalayan people officially recognized as a Scheduled Tribe under the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950, as amended for the state (now) of Uttarakhand. Historically positioned along the old Indo-Tibetan trade corridors, they developed a mixed mountain livelihood system that combined trans-Himalayan trade, transhumant pastoralism (sheep, goat, yak/dzo), alpine agriculture (millets, buckwheat, barley, potatoes), and specialized wool-based crafts such as weaving of carpets, thulmas, and pattu. Their seasonal mobility, moving between winter settlements in lower altitudes and summer

pastures and villages in the high valleys (bugyals, alpine meadows), was central to how they managed scarce ecological niches, social obligations, and cross-border commercial ties with Tibet (now the Tibet Autonomous Region of China). The closure of the border after the 1962 Sino-Indian conflict profoundly disrupted these circuits of mobility and exchange, accelerating occupational diversification, state-mediated rehabilitation, migration to foothill towns and the plains, and the monetization of the local economy. Limited, policy-regulated border trade through the Lipulekh Pass (Pithoragarh district) was formally revived in the 1990s, but volumes are modest and the social meaning of trade has changed the pre-1962 caravan economy, with many Bhotiya households today depending more on government employment, horticulture, tourism/trekking services, petty commerce, and wage labor than on long-distance barter (Atkinson, 1882; Singh, 2005; Census of India, 2011). Culturally, the Bhotiya people follow a mix of religious traditions. Their main belief system is Hinduism, and they also retain traces of Tibetan Buddhism due to their long interaction with Tibetan culture (Singh, 2005). Ecologically, Bhotiya communities possess rich traditional knowledge of alpine landscapes, such as pasture rotation, use of wild plants, and snow-weather indicators, vital for caravan travel and livestock care. However, the creation of protected areas has altered their customary access to these resources.

Locational Distribution of the Bhotiya Community in Uttarakhand:

Location Quotients:

The location quotient offers a good measure of relative variation between the concentration pattern at the aggregate level and at the level of component spatial units (Raza and Ahmed, 1990).

$$LQ = \frac{e_k / EK}{P_t / P}$$

Table 2 : Location Quotients of Bhotiya Tribe in Uttarakhand 2011

District	Area in (sq.km)	Total Population	Bhotiya Population	Location Quotient
Uttarkashi	8016	330,086	2061	1.612
Chamoli	8,030	391,605	10219	6.741
Rudraprayag	1984	242,285	134	0.142
Tehri Garhwal	3642	618931	107	0.043
Dehradun	3088	1696699	2123	0.322
Garhwal	5,329	697078	241	0.087
Pithoragarh	7090	483,439	18115	9.682
Bageshwar	2241	2,59,898	1553	1.542
Almora	3144	622,506	939	0.387
Champawat	1766	259,648	295	0.291
Nainital	4251	582,871	2271	1.005
Udham Singh Nagar	2542	1648902	853	0.131
Haridwar	2360	1,890,422	195	0.025
Total	53483	10086292	39106	

Source: Compiled from the Census of India 2011.

Table 3 : Number of Districts according to the categories of location quotients

Location Quotient Categories	Districts fall under the category	Number of districts fall under the category
9 – 10	Pithoragarh	1
9 – 8	0	
8 – 7	0	
7 – 6	Chamoli	1
6 – 5	0	
5 – 4	0	
4 – 3	0	
3 – 2	0	
2 – 1	Uttarkashi, Bageshwar, Nainital	3
Below 1	Rudraprayag, Tehri Garhwal, Dehradun, Garhwal, Almora, Champawat, Haridwar, Udham Singh Nagar	8

Where, e_k = Total tribal population in Kth district, E_K = Total population in Kth district, P_t = Total tribal population of the country, P = Total population of the country.

Index of Concentration:

The Index of Concentration represents the proportion of a district's population in relation to the total Bhotiya tribal population of the state, highlighting the regional variations and spatial clustering of the Bhotiya community. It is calculated using the following formula: (Bhotiya population in a district ÷ Total Bhotiya population in the state) × 100. This index is useful for identifying districts with a high or low share of the Bhotiya population, thereby revealing the areas of maximum concentration and settlement patterns. Higher values indicate strong clustering of the Bhotiya tribe in specific districts such as Pithoragarh and Chamoli, while lower values reflect

their limited presence in districts like Haridwar or Tehri Garhwal.

The concentration index of the Bhotiya population

Table 4 : District-wise Population Concentration of Bhotiya Tribe

District	Population	Concentration
Uttarkashi	2061	5.27
Chamoli	10219	26.13
Rudraprayag	134	0.34
Tehri Garhwal	107	0.27
Dehradun	2123	5.42
Garhwal	241	0.61
Pithoragarh	18115	46.32
Bageshwar	1553	3.97
Almora	939	2.40
Champawat	295	0.75
Nainital	2271	5.80
Udham Singh Nagar	853	2.18
Haridwar	195	0.49

Table 5: Number of districts fall under the categories of Concentration Index

Percentage	Districts fall under the category	Number of districts fall under the category
50-40	Pithoragarh	1
40-30	0	0
30-20	Chamoli	1
20-10	0	0
10-0.1	Uttarkashi, Rudraprayag, Tehri Garhwal, Dehradun, Garhwal, Bageshwar, Almora, Champawat, Nainital, Udham Singh Nagar, Haridwar	11
Nil	0	0

in Uttarakhand reveals a highly uneven distribution across the state, with a significant clustering in certain high-altitude districts. Pithoragarh district accounts for the largest share, housing 18,115 individuals, which constitutes 46.32% of the total Bhotiya population and falls in the 50–40% concentration range, indicating its prominence as the primary settlement area of the tribe. Chamoli district ranks second with 10,219 individuals (26.13%), falling under the 30–20% range, making it another key hub for the community. In contrast, districts such as Nainital (5.80%), Dehradun (5.42%), and Uttarkashi (5.27%) have moderate concentrations, while Bageshwar (3.97%), Almora (2.40%), Udham Singh Nagar (2.18%), and Champawat (0.75%) show a much smaller presence. The lowest concentrations are recorded in Rudraprayag (0.34%), Tehri Garhwal (0.27%), and Haridwar (0.49%), indicating negligible settlements in these regions. Eleven districts fall within the 10–0.1% range, and none are found in the 40–30% or 20–10% categories, reflecting the marginal and scattered nature of the Bhotiya population outside their traditional hubs. This pattern underscores the tribe's historical association with high-altitude border areas like Pithoragarh and Chamoli, where their transhumant lifestyle, pastoral activities, and trade practices have traditionally thrived, while their presence in other districts is largely due to migration, trade, or livelihood diversification.

The table shows the district-wise sex composition of the Bhotiya tribe in Uttarakhand as per the Census of India 2011. The total Bhotiya population across all districts is 39,106, comprising 19,168 males and 19,938 females, resulting in an overall sex ratio of 1,040 females per 1,000 males, which is higher than the state average of 963. Among all districts, Pithoragarh has the highest Bhotiya population (8,804 males and 9,311 females) with a sex ratio of 1,057, followed by Chamoli (4,941 males and 5,278 females) with a sex ratio of 1,068. Bageshwar records the highest sex ratio (1,098), indicating a higher proportion

Table 6 : District-wise sex composition of Bhotiya Tribe 2011

District	Male Population	Female Population	Sex Ratio
Uttarkashi	1012	1049	1036
Chamoli	4941	5278	1068
Rudraprayag	77	57	740
Tehri Garhwal	55	52	945
Dehradun	1085	1038	956
Garhwal	132	109	825
Pithoragarh	8804	9311	1057
Bageshwar	740	813	1098
Almora	482	457	948
Champawat	167	128	766
Nainital	1130	1141	1009
Udham Singh Nagar	447	406	908
Haridwar	96	99	1031
Total	19168	19938	1040

Source: Census of India 2011

of females. On the other hand, Rudraprayag (740) and Champawat (766) have the lowest sex ratios, suggesting gender imbalance. The Bhotiya population is largely concentrated in the high-altitude districts of Pithoragarh, Chamoli, and Bageshwar, which are traditional habitats of this tribe.

The age structure of the Bhotiya tribe, as shown in Table 7, indicates a youthful population with a noticeable proportion of individuals in the younger age groups. The 0–9 age group constitutes the largest share (15.64%) of the total population, with a slightly higher proportion of males (16.80%) compared to females (14.52%). The subsequent age groups of 10–14 (9.04%) and 15–19 (9.25%) also have significant shares, suggesting a relatively high birth rate and a young demographic profile. The proportion of population gradually decreases in the middle age groups, ranging from 9.37% (20–24 years) to 5.49% (45–49 years). This decline reflects the transition from youth to adulthood and the impact of out-migration or occupational mobility, which is common among the

Table 7 : Age structure of Bhotiya tribe

Age- group	Total population	Male	Female
0-9	15.64	16.80	14.52
10-14	9.04	9.75	8.36
15-19	9.25	9.80	8.72
20-24	9.37	9.13	9.60
25-29	8.72	8.23	9.19
30-34	7.77	7.80	7.74
35-39	6.83	6.88	6.79
40-44	5.98	5.81	6.14
45-49	5.49	5.18	5.79
50-54	4.93	4.59	5.26
55-59	4.13	3.67	4.57
60-64	4.27	4.04	4.48
65-69	3.02	2.85	3.18
70-74	2.38	2.36	2.39
75-79	1.38	1.42	1.34
80+	1.59	1.48	1.70
All ages	100	100	100

Source: Compiled from the Census of India 2011

Bhotiya community due to trade and livelihood practices. In the older age groups, the percentage continues to decline, with 4.93% (50–54 years), 4.27% (60–64 years), and just 1.59% in the 80+ category, indicating a relatively smaller elderly population. Female representation is slightly higher than males in the older age brackets (e.g., 50+), reflecting greater female longevity. Overall, the age structure suggests a population dominated by younger and working-age individuals, with a relatively small elderly population. This structure has important implications for labor availability, economic activities like agriculture and trade, and the socio-cultural dynamics of the Bhotiya tribe.

Conclusion:

According to the 2011 Census, the total Scheduled Tribe (ST) population of Uttarakhand was 2,73,839, which accounts for approximately 2.9 per cent of the state's total population. The tribal communities are scattered across different regions and directions of the state, reflecting a diverse demographic distribution. Among these communities, the Tharu constitute the largest tribal group, comprising 33.35 per cent of the total ST population. The Bhotiya community follows, contributing 14.28 percent. The study reveals that the Bhotiya population is not evenly spread throughout the state; rather, it shows a marked concentration in the high-altitude border districts such as Pithoragarh and Chamoli. In these geographically remote areas, the Bhotiya people have

managed to retain much of their traditional lifestyle, cultural identity, and indigenous practices. This pattern suggests that geographic isolation has played a significant role in the preservation of their cultural heritage.

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