

# Peoples among the Bhotia

## The Himalayas, Nepal

**Nepal is like a rich sandwich filling between Tibet and India, its has a great variety peoples as well as an awe-inspiring landscape. The country is divided topographically and ethnically into three zones running along its length. The Terai are the jungle covered, but increasingly cultivated, hot plains near the Indian border and have peoples close to those of India. Down the centre of the country are the highlands having the peoples who dominate Nepal with a mixture of Tibetan and Indian origins. They are also Hindu and contribute most to the Nepalese identity and nationalism. All along the Himalayas are the Bhotia peoples who originated in Tibet and still consider themselves Tibetan. Some have been in Nepal for centuries, while others like the Drokpa are recent arrivals.**

**BHOTIA** is Hindi or Nepali for Tibetans, derived from their own name for Tibet, Bod. However, in Nepal it tends to have a derogatory meaning implying hillbilly. 400,000 live in the border regions of high Himalayas in north Nepal. There are also 65,119 Bhotia in India. They have come to Nepal at various times to avoid persecution, but have tended to suffer discrimination and attacks on their culture in Nepal. Because of the difficult terrain, they live in widely separated valleys and have formed a number of separated societies. There are at least twenty of these small communities of a few thousand people, each like a little country of its own. Each speaks its own Tibetan dialect and they still observe some of the older forms of Tibetan religion, because Buddhism has undergone reforms since they left Tibet.

They are or have been traditionally Yak herders, shepherds and farmers in the Himalayas in summer and trade in yak products with the lowland peoples for grain in winter. They live in villages of stone two-storey houses stepped up the mountain side, with terraced fields adjoining, linked together by mountain trails. Because the pasture is too scarce in the Himalayas for nomadism, they have developed a semi-sedentary lifestyle living in a permanent village, but moving to temporary villages lower or higher on the mountains for seasonal grazing. However, nomadism is part of their culture and they have successfully kept their culture distinct from the Nepali and remained Tibetan Buddhists.

One village may have pastures scattered over an area of 200 sq. mls. A few villages have more fertile fields nearby giving all-round-the-year grazing. In these cases the herders spend their nights in caves or temporary stone huts. The family herds vary between 100 to 5 yaks, but they are grazed together, both to save work and to share the meagre pasture equally between herds.

The herds are moved according to a monthly cycle. While the men look after the yaks, the women and children look after the sheep and goats, which have to be grazed separately from the yaks.

Foreigners need permits from the Nepali government to visit border areas. Each unique people needs Christians to befriend and help them spiritually and materially. Aid given to improve their cultivation has not reached them. Nepalese policies and the education system are undermining the Tibetan culture, even changing their names, to the Hindu oriented, Nepalese culture. We give here four examples involved in nomadism of different forms, moving from west to east: **Humli-khyampa, Dolpo-pa, Manangba** and **Sherpas**.

**Humli-khyampa** are a 1,000 strong community in the Humla region, in Far Western Nepal. They are one of a number of groups in Nepal and India that call themselves *Khyampa*, meaning wanderer. The Nepalis consider them one of the Bhotia. They transport and trade in salt and rice carried on sheep and goats in the Kuwari, Kurna and Buriganga valleys travelling through four districts in Far Western Nepal. All of their 170 "households" live in tents all the year and migrate together. Their domestic goods are carried by cows or their few horses. Their trade route reaches from Purang in Tibet to near the Indian border. The Drokpa nomads in Tibet used to exchange salt for rice in August each year, bartering Tibetan salt for Nepalese rice. The Humli-khyampa then travelled south as far as Sanpe. The exchange between rice and salt of course increased in favour of salt the further the distance was from Tibet.

However, after the 1930s Indian sea-salt was available at the Indian border which reduced the value of the Tibetan supply. Then in 1962 the Nepalese government began to control the trade and from 1964 the Chinese have controlled the trade in Tibet. Also some of the farmers in the Sanpe area began to travel to the south for Indian imports, including salt, for themselves.

The Humli-khyampa responded to this challenge by extending their winter migration further south than Sanpe to barter rice for Indian salt in the Terai, the southern lowlands of Nepal. The Indian salt has to be paid for in Nepalese currency obtained by selling blankets they make from their own sheeps' wool to the Nepali villagers near Dhangadi and Chaumahal. The Khyampa disperse into groups of four to six tents, those with less animals have to go further and do four round trips to gather the Indian salt. Those families with more animals need to make only two trips, and so they establish a permanent camp for their women, children and elderly to spend the winter. When the caravans return with Indian salt they use the camps as a base and trade the salt in the villages around the area. The villagers not only exchange rice for the salt, but allow the traders' sheep and goats to manure the farmers' fields and exchange vegetables and other goods. Both sides form a "brotherhood" of trade with a feast, and persuade their relatives also to trade with the same customers.

In March they start to move north, collecting the stored rice that was exchanged for the salt. The brief summer of course is the only possible time for trade over the Tibetan border as it is both an arduous journey for the sheep and the tracks are closed by snow most of the year. When they arrive in Purang in August, as much of the rice as possible is exchanged for Tibetan salt trying to realise the highest price. The return southwards journey starts in September. Two of their families live permanently in Gömpa where they trade the Tibetan salt with the other Bhotia farmers who have land for the local barley and wheat. The barley is used both for themselves during the summer and some one of the men transport the surplus to Purang for trade. This way they save as much rice as possible to exchange for either Indian or Tibetan salt. In Banjur District south of Gömpa about half of the families also have their own small fields.

On both the spring and autumn migrations the sheep are shorn and the short wool washed, spun and woven into blankets. The wool is short because the flock carries loads much of the time. Their sheep and goats tend to compliment each other because the sheep graze well in summer and autumn in the mountain pastures and are therefore stronger at that time, while goats, without the leaves of bushes in the mountains, browse better foraging in the Terai. The average flock size is about 50-80 animals. As far as is known these people have no Christian contact.

**Dolpo Pa** are agricultural traders with yak herds, living in the Dolpo, north of Juphal and west of Mustang in the northern part of Western Nepal. They have their own language and are about 5,000 in number. Most of them are subsistence farmers, living in mountain villages of stone houses. Their terraced fields are irrigated by mountain streams, but are so arid that they yield only a meagre harvest. For this reason the Dolpo-pa must purchase their supplies by the caravaning, using their yaks as carriers. The caravans are a strange sight with some 2,000 yaks in groups of 50 to 150 animals winding their way over the mountains. They go north into Tibet in July to trade with Drok-pa nomads in Kyata Chongra, exchanging their grain for Tibetan salt. They also carry potatoes, cheese, and even imported radios and watches from Nepal. In turn besides the salt the Dolpo-pa can gain sheep, fabrics and Chinese tea from Tibet. The Chinese now control the exchange rates to the disadvantage of the Dolpo-pa.

On the return journey, they offload some of the salt in their own villages and then travel on further south in October to Chuma in Nepal, to exchange the remaining salt for grain. They trade the Tibetan salt with the Rong-Pa, valley dwelling Nepali farmers who are Hindus. They also take the opportunity to feed their yaks on the stubble of the more fertile fields of the Rong-pa in the valleys. The Rong-pa continue the trade route southwards into central Nepal, carrying red beans and salt and using their sheep as pack animals. The round journey takes the Dolpo-pa six months. The families on the journey sleep in the open behind a windbreak of baggage. The route involves passes at over 5,000 m. (16,500 ft.). Some of the women stay in the village to tend the fields while the men are away caravaning. The women wear a characteristic headdress of the region, called *tik-pu*, consisting of silver and brass plates bound with leather thongs. Children will take responsibility for the animals from four years old.

The **Rong-pa** shepherds have an arduous route to continue their trade farther south into Nepal. Each owner can recognise his animals even without markings. Even in this microcosm of pastoralism, the farmers can refuse to allow the Dolpo-pa's yaks to graze on the valley fields in winter and can force them to accept a poor rate of exchange for their salt. The Dolpo-pa are Lamaistic Buddhists and their contacts with the Rong-pa brings Tibetan and Indian culture in contact with each other.

No known Christian contact with either of these peoples and they are considered very resistant to spiritual change.

**Manang-pa**, Nepal, are the Bhote inhabitants of Manang, in upper Maryangdi valley, north of Pokara and south-east of Mustang. This is beyond the Annapurna Range that cuts off most of the rain and makes the valley very arid. The people live in three villages and grow limited crops so that the people hardly grow enough to support themselves. They also herd sheep, yak and dzos. They claim to be Gurungs, but this is disputed by the latter.

They have turned to trading for which they were given special royal privileges, so that their nomadism is as international traders. The men walk to the Indian border and take the train to Calcutta and then a ship to Burma or Singapore. They are supposed to have started the trade with cheap beads passed off as semi-precious stones, but their business has developed into bringing stones and silks into India on the return trip. Today they deal in gold, silk and electronic goods, and allegedly drugs, and some have become rich and live in Kathmandu and have invested in land there.

**Sherpas** number 35,000, they are Tibetan *Shar-pa*, or eastern people, that is originally from Kham, and now form a group of the Bhotia people in Solu, Pharak and

Khumbu, eastern Nepal. They are Tibetan Buddhists and use either a *gompa* or temple, or a *mani*, a house with a giant prayer-wheel. As herders, they use *gunsa* and *yorsa*, that is winter and summer pasturing places respectively. But dealing with tourism and trekking has taken the men from the herding, and in fact most of this work they now “sub-contract” to others including the Drok-pa. The introduction of the potato as a successful crop has increased the population that can be supported in Khumbu, according to Haimendorf. There are 39,700 Sherpas in India.

**Tibetans** and **Khambas**, recent refugees or migrants now live in the territory of the *Bhotia*, in Nepal. There are camps of **Drokpa**, nomads from Western Tibet, living permanently in tents and paying a fee to the Bhotia for their grazing. They also do trading among the permanently resident Bhotia. They are recent refugees from Central and Eastern areas of Tibet, fleeing from collectivisation and the Chinese theft of their flocks, so that many work as farm labourers, etc. for the Bhotia. The **Khambas** for a time settled in Mustang among the Bhotia and some intermarried with them, but being more anti-Chinese the Nepali government moved them further into Nepal.

The situation of these peoples needs intercession even when no news is available, creatively using the little information to identify with them.  
Pray that Christians might be challenged and called to help these peoples.  
Pray that it might be possible to approach them with the message of Christ.  
Pray for their material welfare, health and educational needs.  
Pray that many of them might be transformed in their minds and hearts to accept Christ.  
Pray that the occult and moral problems in their religious life might be reversed.  
Pray that policies might be adopted that maintain their distinctive culture while being part of Nepali society.

**Further Reading:** Windsor Chorlton: *Cloud-Dwellers of the Himalayas-The Bhotia*, Amsterdam: Time-Life 1982. Jim Carrier: “Gatekeepers of the Himalaya”, *National Geographic* Dec. 1992, p. 79. Eric Valli & Diane Summers: “Himalayan Caravans”, *National Geographic* Dec 1993, pp. 5-35; C. von Furer-Haimendorf: *The Sherpas Transformed*, New Delhi: Sterling Publishers 1984 and *Himalayan Traders*, London, 1975. David Snellgrove: *Himalayan Pilgrimage, a study of Tibetan Religion*, Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1961. Hanna Rauber-Schweizer: “Trade in Far West Nepal: The Economic Adaptation of the Peripatetic Humli-Khyampa” in *The Other Nomads* pp. 65-87. Hanna Rauber has written other books of these people. Andrew Hall: “Himalayan Exodus: Nepalese Migrant Groups”, *Asian Affairs*, XXVII-2, June 1996, pp.131-141. FMC for Himalayan Peoples have produced a People Profile. *Unreached Peoples '81* p. 173. Tshewang Lama: “Who Cares for Humla . . .”, *Himal*, Sept-Oct 1993, pp. 16-18.