



## Customs and Traditions of Bodh Tribe with Special Reference to Lahaul and Spiti - Himachal Pradesh (India)

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**ABSTRACT:** The present study is related to Bodh tribe of districts of Lahaul and Spiti. Lahaul-Spiti one of the frontier districts of India in Himachal, has a very difficult terrain with ice fields, snow covered peaks and most inhospitable climate. The tribal culture of Lahaul and Spiti and their traditions and practices pervade almost all of the aspects of Indian culture and civilization. The distinctiveness of the Bodh tribes of Lahaul and Spiti lies their rituals, cultures, beliefs and above all the harmony in which they survive in unison with nature.

**Keywords:** rituals, cultures, beliefs, civilization, pervade

### I. INTRODUCTION

Culture, tradition and customs play a significant role for a civilization and character of its citizens and society. It helps in striking the equilibrium with Mother Nature, conservation of natural resources and respecting each other. Geographical spread, seasons, weather and type of agriculture produce are the basic pillars for any culture that reflects its diversity as well. This is the way to integrate our resources for food, clothing and shelter becomes our culture. This will help us to teach our generations about the way of living. This helps us to follow some set of rules, principles, policies or laws which becomes customs. Therefore without our culture, traditions and customs we are completely disconnected with our soul. Although, we are living in mixed society where in different cultures amalgamate and we should respect and accommodate all but the tribal populations are yet separate and isolated in most parts of the country.

culturally, the tradition of growing a particular crop like lentil, grain, fruit or vegetable has unique importance and is related to certain customs in tribal populations like the very first harvest is to be offered to the local deity. This practice gives them a sense of religion and people follow few basic rules that help them to achieve some sort of harmony. Therefore, the objective of the present study is to study the customs and traditions of tribal population of Bodh tribe with special reference to Lahaul and Spiti.

#### A. Geographical and demographical status of Lahaul and Spiti

Lahaul and Spiti, the two different geographical units beyond Rohtang and Kunzum passes in India and Tibet border were put together to form a new district of Himachal Pradesh, India in 1960. Prior to the formation of the new district this region was the part of Kangra district of Punjab. This district in the western Himalayas is situated between 31° 44' 57" and 32° 59' 57" north latitude and between 76° 46' 29" and 78° 41' 34" east longitude. The total area of the district is 13835 sq. km, and the population is 33,224. The average density of the population per square kilometre is 2 only [1]. The small province of Lahaul is known by three different names viz. Lahaul, Garzha and Swangla. Lahaul name is used most widely today among all the three names.

A Cunningham is of the view that this name was given by the Tibetans to denote their southern district (Lho-Yul). Rahul Sankrityayan means by it the country of God (Lha-Yul). In this manner another meaning of the word could be suggested as the 'country of passes' (Lha-Yul). This would be in fact, the most appropriate meaning [2].

Spiti in comparison to Lahaul is higher in elevation. Spiti. Si – means 'Mani', Piti – means place. Spiti – the place of Mani. Spiti also called "Piti" a veritable Shangri la is a cold mountain desert, located on the Tibetan border and

flanked on the south east by district of Kinnaur, North –east by Tibet, north by Ladkhakh, west by Lahul and south by district Kullu.

Spiti has four distinct regions. The two main valleys are Spiti and Pin. The two high mountain regions are located in the north and in the east of Spiti tehsil, above the river Spiti valley and west of Lingti river. Most of the people live in the valley [3].

There are several scheduled tribes reside in Lahaul –Spiti district. It is difficult to Lazard a guess whether it was the adventurous Zeal or force of circumstances which led people to establish themselves in these remote and inhospitable valleys of Pattan (Chandra-Bhaga), Gara (Bhaga), Rangoli (Chandra), pin and Spiti. Swanglas, Thakurs, Kanets, Bhot along with several scheduled caste communities of Chahans, Dombas, Hassis, Lohars, etc. are the inhabitant of the district of Lahaul-Spiti [2].

The Bodh, Bhot or Chazang, as they are called are primarily distributed in the Spiti valley of Lahaul and Spiti district. They are a scheduled tribe and have been enumerated along with Jad, Lamba and Khampa. The total population of Bodh according to 2001 census is 75,859, which is 1.2 percent. The Buddhist male population is 39,066 and female population is 36,793. The percentage of Buddhist population is 58.8 percent of the total population of Lahaul Spiti district.

Though the history of Bodh tribe is not available, yet according to an account by the natives, those people of Tibet who came and settled here in the past i.e. prior to 1962 are called as Bodh or Bhot, whereas those who came after 1962 are known as Tibetans. According to another more plausible view the people are the followers of Buddhist faith and hence are called Bodh live in an inhospitable terrain with little vegetation as the area falls in the arid zone. Bhoti is the dialect spoken by the Bodhs among themselves and their script is also Bhoti but with outsider they speak in broken Hindustani and the literate among them can also converse in English. Some of them can write in Devanagri and English scripts [3-4].

Bodh is a generic term and is applied to people of the Buddhist faith. They are divided into six classes, viz lama (the priest), Nono (the ruling class), Kharpan (the Wazir of the king), chazhang (Rajput Bodh the agriculturist class), Zo (blacksmiths) and Hesi or Beta (Goldsmith and Musicians). This division is on the basis of occupational specialization. In the entire valley there are only five house of Nono and only two houses of Kharpan. The majority of the Bodh calling themselves as Rajputs are agriculturists and constitute the bulk of population.

Lahaul –Spiti Kanets or Bhots are divided in eight to fourteen clans (gotras). Except the Brahmin who inhabit in Pattan (Chandra Bhaga) valley of the region the gentry in other valleys are mostly Bhots or Kanets. There are four landlord families in Lahaul region called Wazirs and one in spiti known as Nono. Most of the land used to belong to these landlords [5].

The society of Bodh Community is divided in three main classes. Thakurs, who were the rulers of Lahaul in historical period and considered themselves as Rajput. The middle class “Kanets”, who are agriculturist. Lower class or menial class included “Sipis”, “Hesis” (Chan in pattan valley), and “Lahora”. “Gotra” system is followed most strictly by Thakur and Bodh but not by menial class. In contrast to Lahaul region, Spiti is divided into upper and lower classes, which did includes society classification as per Hindu Caste System. Upper class is formed by the families who were once part of local nobility and lower class includes “carpenters (Shing-Zopa)”, “Smith (Zo)” and “Musician (Beta)”.

#### *B. Customs and traditions of Lahual and Spiti*

The descendents of intercaste marriages are called Garu and status is considered below than the Bodh and Swangla community. For example, it is believed that if a “Garu” boy marries a Swangla girl continue till three generation, his family will become pure “Swangla”. Like this if a Garu boy marries a Bodh girl continue till three generations, his family will become pure Bodh. It shows that there is great influence of the upper class society on the “Garu” and their individual values. Inter caste marriage is also prohibited in Bodh society [3].

The caste system and class rigidity is observed to a lesser extent in Spiti region as compared to Lahaul region. Bodh community in Lahaul and Spiti shares common prohibitory restriction on inter dining and inter marriages among upper and lower classes. Three types of marriages prevails in Lahaul region. Mothebiah or “Moupeah Biah” (Badi Shadi) is a form where marriage is settled by parents after consultation of Lama and performed with huge show. The “Kawanchi Biah” (Chhoti Shadi) is a marriage settled by parents with consultancy of Lama and performed very briefly, than the “Moupiah Biah”. Marriage by elopement is called “Kuzzi” or “Kunchi Biah”. In Spiti region two types of marriages are prevailed, arranged marriage and “Khandum” marriage. In arranged marriage parents of boy find suitable marriageable girl and consult (Lama) astrologer about the suitability of the union of the boy and the girl. The boys and girls marriage each other against the wishes of their families, the marriage is termed as “Khandum” marriage. As a consequence boy and girl lose their rights to a father property. In some cases parents decide to bless the marriage and rehabilitate their right to property [4].

Marriage customs are unique in both regions. In Spiti region, marriage procession in traditional arranged marriage is not led by bridegroom instead it is lead by maternal uncle or uncle of bridegroom or God brother of bride. Bridegroom does not go to the house of bride with marriage party. The person leading the procession is called "Patita". A wooden staff called "Chu" will be held by the Patita when it visits the house of bride. The bride is touched by this "Chu" by "Patita". Lama will tie the corner of dress of bride to the "Chu" of the "Patita". Then "Patita" will lead the girl to the house of bridegroom. Lama will observe due rituals in the house of bridegroom and the marriage is completed. Bride and bridegroom are gifted and congratulated by the people present on the occasion. In Lahaul region the role of "Patita" is performed by the person is called "Vaaktrip". This type of custom of arranged marriages are prevailed in Kelong and Darcha area of Lahaul region and some area in Spiti region. But nowadays bridegroom have started to accompany their own marriage parties in maximum parts of Lahaul and Spiti. This has been due to the influence of modernity and increasing interaction with outside world. Researcher observed one more interesting events of arrange marriage is performed after the rituals of the marriage called "maula". In this ceremony a speaker announced all the gifts, money and articles given to the newly wed couple by all relatives and friends. All invitees, natives, relatives and friends keep deep excitement towards maula to know about these gifts, money and articles and their givers. "Maula" ceremony is a important part of arranged marriage in Spiti region [1,3,5].

It has been a long established tradition in Spiti region according to which only the eldest boy and girl of the family are married and the remaining boy and girl are sent to the monastery to become monk and zomo respectively. While in Lahaul region there is no such tradition but interested boy and girl can go to the monastery to become monk and zomo.

The dowry system in Bodh community is based on mutual understanding. It depends on the parents of girl that how much they can afford. The dowry is given at the time of marriage and sometimes a few years after in Bodh society. In Spiti region mother gives all her ornaments and dresses to her eldest daughter only. This system is called "zwan". As a result of modernization and awareness dowry system have changed its facet and traditional dowry is replaced by gifts and other articles of material use.

Widow remarriage is also acceptable in Bodh society. The place of widow in Bodh community is respectable because she can remarry a suitable person of her choice, if there is no younger brother of her passed husband. This is the tradition in Lahaul region. In Spiti region after the death of her husband the eldest younger brother of her passed husband leaves the monastery to live with her, but if he is not ready to do so and the remaining younger brothers also denying to marry with her, than she is free to marry any other person of her choice. She is not looked down by relatives and natives in both regions of Lahaul and Spiti.

The divorce system in Lahaul and Spiti regions is same. In the custom of divorce husband and wife pull a thread and break it in the middle in the presence of both families and some wise persons of both sides or biradari panchayats. Divorce may take due to several reasons like infertility, adultery, gambling, illness etc. The seeker of the divorce has to pay the fine to her/his partner already decided by the both families and biradari panchayats. This custom of divorce in Lahaul region is known as "Kupachacha" and in Spiti region is "Thakchathay". Now-a-days, very few people of Bodh community has started to take divorce through court also.

After the birth of a child in Bodh community, for two to four days or for a week the members of the family cook their food outside the house and sometime they take it at their neighbours, because they consider this duration as unclean. Lama is called from the monastery to purify the house. After the purification of the house they start cooking and eating inside the house. After a year they celebrate the birthday of the eldest son or daughter only, and this festival is called "Gotsi" in Lahaul region. In Spiti region the same function is organized only at the birthday of the eldest son or daughter called "Bhingri". At present the people of Bodh community has started to celebrate the birthdays of every male and female child according to their economic capacity.

The cremation system of Bodh community in both region of Lahaul and Spiti is almost same. When a Bodh person dies his dead body is covered with the piece of cloth and no one can touch the dead body till the Lama arrives. On the call of the family member or other village members Lama comes and whispers some sacred words in the ears of the "corpse". This ritual is called "Phowa". They believed that after this ritual "Phowa" the soul of the corpse is gone to the heaven. According to their tradition, cremation of the dead body is held on the next day in the presence of Lama and "Beta" (lower caste community play the drums). They collect the little pieces of bones and ashes after the day of cremation. The bones and ashes are offered to the river Chandrabhaga at "Tandi". In Spiti the tradition is to cut the dead body into little pieces and than throw on the hills for wild birds and animals now-a-days does not prevails. The mourning is observed for 49 days in both regions Lahaul and Spiti. The worship performed by the Lama from the cremation day onwards may three to nine days in Lahaul and three to seven days in Spiti region. It depends on the mourning family that how many days they can afford. At 49<sup>th</sup> day a simple worship is performed by the Lama and all invitees, natives and relatives take simple meal of "Sattu".

### *C. Traditional dresses and folklore of Bodh tribe of Lahaul and Spiti*

Bodh people mostly use thick woolen cloth throughout the year, because the climate of the area is quite chilled. There is not much varieties in their dresses. Mostly they wear their traditional dresses in winter. Bodh male wear trousers called “Khang” and long shirt called “Katar” only white colour and thick coat called “Chhuba” made of wool. They use a long woolen girdle to tie the coat at the waist called “sash”. Bodh women of Lahaul wear a shirt called “Katar” with different types of colours and ladies gown called “Dupa” and tight fitting Pyzami called “Sutna” and a long woolen girdle to tie the “Dupa” at the waist like men called “sash”. They use cotton clothes in summers and woolen cloth in winter. Men and women both use socks of cotton and woolen called “Babcha” and shoes called “Pula” made of sheepskin [6].

Bodh male people of Spiti area wear long shirt called “Kosen” and trousers called “reghoay” and a coat called “charlock” or “kobe”. The clothes are made of both cotton and woolen. Men also take knife called “dri” at their waist. They also wear different types of caps mainly “Gilgit” or Ladhakhi cap. Bodh women of Spiti wear shirt called “hoozuk”, wear loose frock called “tochay” and woolen coat called “Sulma”. The shawl they wear is called “Lingchay”, a pin called “Dikra” is used to close both the ends of shawl at the breast. They also wear cap called “lokpa” in summer and cap called “shamo” in winter. Bodh men and women both wear shoes called “Lam” made of sheepskin and Yakskin also.

Bodh women of Lahaul wear different types of ornaments. Their nose ornament is called “phuli”, “dungkitsi” is worn at the waist, “Poshal” is worn on “forehead”, “Nyagthang” is a silver chain worn on breast, “Kirkisti” is worn over head and “pirak” is worn over the head also. Bodh men also worn different ornament like gold ear ring called “murki” and a necklace called “Kyanti”. The younger generation of Bodh tribes wear chain with Jantras [7].

Bodh men and women of Spiti region both wear a specific necklace called “Ultik” and bangle called “dugu”. Women wear ear-ring called “kanta”, necklace called “Kanti”, “Kirkisti” is wear at back of head. “Poshal” is worn on the forehead. All Bodh Spitians wear specific ornament like Jantra with chain called “Srungwa”. Now-a-days awareness and accessibility of both Lahaul and Spiti region has increased and its direct effects can be seen on the dressing and ornamental habits of the people. In both the regions, although traditional dresses and ornaments are common among elder generation people but younger generation prefer to wear branded clothes, jeans and t-shirt as well as jackets, ornaments from branded companies. Use of traditional dresses and ornaments has become restricted to special occasion and extreme winters only.

Bodh people of Lahaul use woolen carpets called “Thultan” to sleep on the ground. In winter they also use the big skin pieces of goat and sheep for bedding. Spitian people use woolen carpet called “Subden” and they also use the goat and sheep skin pieces to keep the bed warm. The Bodh people of both region do not use cot or quilt for bedding. Woolen blankets called “Thobies” are used to cover the body on bed.

Utensils used by the people of these region are made of wood, stone, iron, Aluminium, brass and copper. In present scenario and changing time the use of modern equipment like pressure cooker sewing machine, washing machine and other different types of kitchen items are common. Cot, quilt, plastic chair table and cotton blankets of different colours are finding their way into houses of Bodh community in both Lahaul and Spiti regions.

Like songs there are different types of dances. “Garphi” is a oldest dance of this region and considered a free dance. After taking the “chhang” or “arak” in a sufficient quantity, they enjoy the Garphi dance mainly in a free and relax way. “Shehni” is a chain dance of men and women. This dance is popular in marriages, fairs and festivals. “Ghure” is a form of dance in which men and women dance in circle and semicircle without making any chain. “Ghure” dance is a indoor dance performed by the dancer mainly in winter. “Chhan” is a devil dance performed by the Lamas in monasteries with different types of masks worn on their faces and heads.

Like, any other community Bodh people also organize and celebrate fairs and festivals. “Holda” or “Losar” is celebrated in the region of Lahaul as a “New Year” festival in the month of January. In this festival one, two or three person from each house come out with burning sticks and gather in the pre-decided place by Lama out of village residence area. At that place every person throw one stick to keep away the bad evils and another one for God to save them from devils and calamities throughout the year. After returning to their homes they worship their deities and take meal and drinks. The festival running two or three days and then people meet and congratulate each other and wish Happy New Year. “Phagli” is celebrated in the last week of January or in the first week of February. People worship the Lord Shiva, Naga and Goddess Hidimba at midnight. Younger generation also worship their elder in which first of all they worships the eldest person of the village and got their blessing. “Bumkhor” is a festival related to agriculture. It is believed that if the religious book is taken to the fields than there will be a bumper crops. Lama called from the monastery with the religious book and all villagers follow him to take the round of their fields. After this they gather in the middle of the village and Lama worships the deity and then all people take meal with Chhang either together or in their own houses. “Nainey” is the festival of birthday of Lama “Chan Rizzi” and it is held in the 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> of the first Bhoti month “Balh”. “Danchan” festival is celebrated by only men, it continues

for six days in the month of February. In this festival a healthy and young boy to drive or shoot an arrow towards the river for victory over all the evils and devils as well as on diseases. On the occasion of harvesting of new crop in the month of September, they celebrate the festival “Namgan” in which a horse race is organized. In Spiti “Gyalto” festival is celebrated continue three days as a Happy New Year festival. This festival is celebrated in the last week of November or first week of December. Like Bodh people of Lahaul, Spitian also celebrate this festival on a pre-decided venue and than they congratulate each other with Chhang and Sattu. “Chhishu” festival celebrate every month on the date decided by the Lama. In this festival they worship their deity to save them from evils and calamities.

## II. CONCLUSION

Lahaul and Spiti - Himachal Pradesh (India) has traditionally been the home of different cultures and people. Unity in diversity is one of the most prominent features in the tribal's of Lahaul and Spiti. Among the diversified population a significant portion is comprised of the tribal people, the original inhabitants of the land. The tribal culture of Lahaul and Spiti and their traditions and practices pervade almost all of the aspects of Indian culture and civilization. The distinctiveness of the Bodh tribes of Lahaul and Spiti lies their rituals, cultures, beliefs and above all the harmony in which they survive in unison with nature. Their living perfectly depicts a well balanced give and take procedure that in no way disrupts the ecological balance.

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