

Bhangali: The Non-Tribal Tribe of Himachal Pradesh



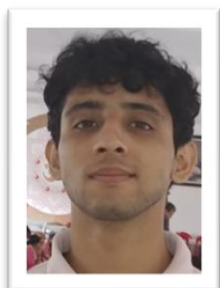
Sujit Kumar

Associate Professor,
Deptt. of Sociology,
Govt Post Graduate College,
Palampur, (H.P) India



Anita Surroch

Associate Professor,
Deptt. of Sociology,
Govt Post Graduate College,
Bainath (H.P) India
(Corresponding Author)



Nishant Surroch

Student
Deptt of Geography
Shaheed Bhagat Singh College
Delhi University, New Delhi
India

Abstract

Bara Bhangali Community nestled in a mountain locked tiny valley around turbulent Ravi River in the Western Himalayas is one of the least studied communities in India. Empirical study of this community to know its geographical location unraveled startling facts about it. The Bara Bhangal is connected by sketchy pathways through cliffy terrains, steep hilly tracks of seventy-eighty degrees slopes where every alternate step endeavors to search a spot to place safe foot, glacial paths and active shooting stones on the way. At least a couple of days' of arduous trekking takes a researcher to Bara Bhangal from any of the directions i.e. the East, the West, the North and the South. Using an interview schedule on a sample of 100 respondents, undertaking several Case & Work Studies and Focused Group Discussions it was discernible while endeavoring to know about the socio-economic life of Bhangalis that the community cradles common culture since time immemorial. Strong vibrant political organization and endogamy facilitate in preservation of cohesiveness in this society. Immense reverence for nature, solidarity with fellow beings, adherence to the norms & values, ethos & eidos and prevalence of age old adage '*atithi Devo Bhav*' meaning thereby 'guest is god' which is displayed in hospitality for outsiders coupled with crimelessness among the peace-loving residents make it a distinct community worth studying. In fact the community is endowed with most of the tribal features but it continues to be a non-scheduled tribal. All such distinct least explained features of the Bhangalis call for its study using scientific method to unveil its obscurity and to suggest measures that need to be taken to ameliorate its condition.

Keywords: Bhangali, Cliffy terrains, Endogamy, Crimelessness.

Introduction

Unveiling obscurity of Bhangali Community necessitates empirical investigation eliciting primary information from the residents of Bara Bhangal inhabiting mountain locked tiny valley along the Ravi River. However, cliffy terrains, active shooting stones on the way, on foot journey through steep hilly track on seventy-eighty degrees slope for couple of days where every alternate step endeavors to search a spot to place safe foot and glacial paths connect Bara Bhangal region from the East, West, North and South. Traversing arduous journey to explore solitary community which remains cut off from rest of the world for almost half of the year is the risk worth taking explore and unveil the realism about Bhangalis.

Objectives of Study

Main objectives of the study are given below:

1. To know about geographical location of Bara Bhangal
2. To know about socio-economic life of Bhangalis
3. To examine tribal features in Bhangali Community

Research Methodology

Sample

Deciding about sample of study for a small community like Bhangali comprising of 152 odd households is a tough job. However it was decided to undertake an intensive study and to take almost every two of the three households. Therefore, a total of 100 respondents were taken as sample of study.

Collection of Data

Portrayal of realism about the secluded Bhangali society requires eliciting intensive, reliable and verifiable information about its important attributes. Therefore, an interview schedule was designed and information was personally collected from the respondents. Besides, ten Focused Group Discussions, five each with men and women were held to substantiate and corroborate information. Apart from it, ten Case Studies

and Case Works were also done which enabled us to peep deep into structural-functional dimensions of this society.

Unit of Study

Bhangali being a patriarchal, patrilineal, patrilocal and patrinyimic society, it was decided to take men as a unit of study. Hence information was collected from male members, preferably heads of family.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Analysis of data elicited mainly from primary sources and would lay a foundation of body of knowledge about solitude Bhangali Community. It would portray a clearer picture of the community. It requires logical and coherent interpretation of information under different headings as given below;

Isolated Location

The Bara Bhangal is the remotest village which is located in Kangra district in the state of Himachal Pradesh in India. The village is a part of inner Himalayas. It comprises of two sub-villages named Lower Bhangal and Upper Bhangal. The village is connected by sketchy pathways. Two to three days of arduous trekking takes a trekker to Bara Bhangal from different Steep sketchy path to Bara Bhangal on cliffy Route to Bara Bhangal under glacier Terrain. Ravi River flows just below the track directions. Bir in Kangra District (South), Naya Gran-Holi in Chamba District (West), Solang Nullha-Manali in Kullu District (East) and Tandi-Lahoul Spiti are four gateways from four directions to this village hidden from the world. The village is located at the confluence of River Ravi and Kalihani rivulet. The confluence makes a valley spanning about one and a half kilometers long and two to three hundred meters wide. The village although is located at 2575 meters from the average sea level but being surrounded by mountains from all the four directions, remains cut off from rest of the world due to heavy snowfall in this region for almost half the year.

A trudge on the time-worn routes of Bara and Chota Bhangal taxes one physically; although, at the same time it rewards the journeying soul with jaw dropping landscapes, bleak unique outposts and sense of timelessness. River Ravi, originating at the foot of Bara Bhangal village keep nurturing the valley's life since time immemorial. For thousands of years, the dodgy, perilous routes from here to central Asia crossed over the massive Dhauladhar and Pirpanjal mountain ranges, enabling the region's trade and cultural exchange (Ravi Sharma). The village wrapped in legend, sandwiched between the Kalihani (4,800 meters) and Thamsar (4,766 meters) Passes, protected by impregnable mountains on the third side and the raging Ravi River on the fourth (Sridhar 2016). Thus Bhangalis cradle in the laps of mountains and reach other parts of inhabited regions traversing glacial and zigzag cliffy terrains.



Steep sketchy path to Bara Bhangal on cliffy terrains.
Ravi river flow just below the track.



Route to Bara Bhangal under glacier
Territorial Contiguity

The Bara Bhangal occupies a mountain locked region. However, the Bhangali inhabit a smaller portion of its territory. The residential area is located in about five hundred meters long and one hundred meters wide valley. However its land ownership is spread all around the village. The land is

primarily used for agricultural activities and grazing of animals. The region is surrounded by lush green cover of Deodar trees, sparsely grassy hills extending into snow laden more than 4000-5000 meters high mountains.

Common Name

All the residents of Bara Bhangal are known as Bhangali. Almost all of them take pride in being called as Bhangalis. This name distinguishes them from all other communities of the district, state and the country.

Common Culture

Culture is complex whole of folkways, mores, customs, traditions, rules & regulations, beliefs & rituals, etiquettes, morals, architecture, knowledge and language (Sujit Surroch & Anita Surroch). Such common culture cradles among Bhangalis which make it a distinct community distinguishable from other communities. Almost all the informants emphatically informed that theirs was a crime free community. Here the cases of crime like theft, physical assault, quarrels and eves teasing etc. are non-existent. The Bhangalis voluntarily follow a code of conduct and abide by rules and regulations. It's a peace loving community maintaining harmonious relations with fellow residents. The members of the community follow common folkways and customs. They tend to be ardent believers in powers of nature which they believe exercise control on human life.

The Bhangali Dialect

Geographical barriers like snow laden mountains surrounding Bara Bhangal and turbulent Ravi river keeps the region aloof and cut off from rest part of the world for majority of months. Further, non-connectivity by roadway or railway and connectivity of the region through sketchy pathways which too remain close for half of the year do not allow free movements of the local residents or interaction of people from neighboring and other regions. Therefore, the Bhangalis have developed their own distinct Bhangali dialect. The Bhangalis while moving outside Bara Bhangal come in contact with the residents of Bharmour (a Tribal area), Chamba, Kangra, Kullu and Lahoul (A tribal area) have adopted sizeable number of words of Bharmouri, Chambiali, Kangri, Kulluvi and Lahouli dialects from these adjoining linguistic regions (Census 2011). However the Bhangali, a typical dialect with distinct words, folk tones and folk tales is spoken here. This dialect is a part of Hindi language for all practical purposes.

Housing

The Bara Bhangal comprises of 152 households. Each house in the village takes the onlookers to a bygone era. Architecturally speaking almost each house has a front towards the East and has a ground floor and a mezzanine. The walls are made of stones and supported by massive trunks of oaks trees. Mud is used to cement the holes and gaps between wooden logs and stones. Cow dung is traditionally used to decorate floors of the houses and also to purify the sacred areas like kitchen in the house. Two to three layers of flattened logs are laid on the top of the house to save it from the vagaries of nature.

Thus Cow dung is the substitute of paint, polish, distemper and white wash. Mud is conventionally used the way cement is used in the modern houses. It makes amply clear that local resources are optimally used for constructing houses.

Cattle Sheds

Parts of ground floors are used as cattle sheds by overwhelming majority of the subjects. Upstairs from outside the house connect upper story of the houses. Such an arrangement has evolved over a period of time because of convenient approach to the cowsheds.

Animal Husbandry

The data unearthed that majority of the residents keep cattle. Cows, bulls, Sheep, goats and mules are main types of the cattle which are kept by the Bhangalis. Owing to heavy snowfall during winters, several feet thick layer of ice surrounds and covers houses-cum- cattle sheds. Therefore the owners have to keep the animals inside the cattle sheds for more than a couple of months. It makes rearing of cattle is a herculean task. They are fed inside the shed. Weather permitting snow is removed from some parts of the courtyards. It allows residents and cattle to have Sunbath and also to have some respite from the freezing cold.

Endogamous and Exogamous Group

Endogamy refers to marriage to someone from inside one's own group or caste or tribe. Exogamy is a marriage outside one's own social unit (Frazer, James-2006). The Bhangali Community is an endogamous and exogamous group. Its members marry within the caste and community but outside own Gotra. It has seven Gotras. Members of one Gotra are allowed to tie nuptial knot with the members of any of other six Gotras. All the informants stressed on the fact that marriage is allowed to be solemnized with the members of this community and not side the community. The endogamy and exogamy are among sacrosanct practices by the Bhangali community.

Marriage Ceremony

Marriage among Bhangalis is a simple affair. Auspicious day and time is finalized by the Priest who has been performing such rituals for the Bhangalis from generation to generation for centuries. They solemnize marriage strictly in accordance with Hindu traditions. However following points came forth during the process of collection of information from the respondents;

1. There is absolutely no dowry system whatsoever. Bride party is not supposed to give gifts to the bridegroom or his parents of his kins and kiths.
2. Girl/bride, her family members, any other person or group of persons on her behalf is not supposed to host feast to the boy/bridegroom, his family members or his relatives and friends.
3. No special jewellery or bridal dresses are required by the girl before, during and after solemnization of marriage.
4. Simple feasts are hosted by bridegroom.
5. The whole expenses on marriage to be incurred by the bridegroom and his family run into a score thousands.

6. No pump and show or extravaganza is done either from bride or bridegroom side.

Significance of Kinship

Consanguineous and affinal relations create and strong bond of web of relations among Bhangalis. Blood and marriage relations are sacrosanct for them. Substantial number of subjects held opinion that for them blood is thicker than water. But such strong bonds of relations do not stand in the way of their harmonious ties with non-kinship members. They hold all members of their community in high esteem.

Distinct Political Organization

The Bhangali community has a time tested strong political organization which continues to be functionally vibrant. The organization comprises of 15 members. It is headed by a *Mukhiya* (Head) who is elected by seven members. These members represent one Gotra/sub-caste each of Bhangali. Apart from them a Pradhan, an Up-Pradhan, and all the 5 Ward Panch of Village Panchayat elected through adult franchise in accordance with constitutional and legislative provisions are ex-officio members of the organization.

Minor issues are decided by this body of fifteen members. The members assemble at one place on being requested by an aggrieved party and decide the issue(s) in hand consensually. However in case of a major issue, all the adult men of Bhangali Community assemble, discuss the matter threadbare in an open house under chairmanship of *Mukhiya*. Women are not allowed to participate in such assembly. The aggrieved party as well as the accused presents their respective cases before the open house. After hearing the case decision is taken on the issue.

Occupation

Bhangali is primarily an agrarian society. Agriculture continues to be the main occupation of this community. Nature allows them to plough their fields and harvest their crop only during May-November. The Bhangalis reels in wintry conditions and remain under blanket of snow during winters. Some of the Bhangalis keep mules to transport goods from one place to the other. Apart from it, substantial number of workforce work as labourers. However owing to inhospitable climatic conditions, geographical barriers, low level of educational accomplishments, lack of skilled knowhow and weak economy they live a life of hardships.

Dependence on Money Lenders

Utter lack of health facilities and sources of regular income push Bhangali to the clutches of money lenders even to meet their basic needs food, shelter, clothing and health. In fact the money lenders charge exorbitantly high rate of interest i.e. @ 5% per month/60% per annum informed significant number of informants. Money lending pushes needy Bhangalis into debt trap.

Sense of Unity

The Bhangali community displays extraordinary sense of unity on several occasions some of which are listed below on the basis of information collected from the respondents;

1. In facing vagaries of nature. The bridges on Ravi River are often washed away in flash floods and rainy seasons. The members of the community work together to reconstruct such damaged bridges so that connectivity of the local residents with other parts of the region is restored.
2. In performing rituals and worshipping local deities.
3. In redressing common problems being faced by the members of community.
4. In solemnization of marriage and managing mega affairs
5. In organizing fairs and festivals.
6. In facing human and non-human beings jeopardizing interests of the Bhangalis.

Main Findings

Following points are discernible from the exploratory study of Bhangali Community;

Hidden Community

The obscurity and approach to the Bara Bhangal through cliffy terrains and treacherous turbulent mighty Ravi River have cast a veil on the Bhangalis- one of the most hidden community in India.

A Small Secret Kingdom

Demographically the Bhangali may appear to be a small community but it is a secret kingdom at the headwater of Ravi in lap of mountains rising well above 4000 meters all around.

Hurdles in Mobility

The routes through glacial caves, cliffy terrains, land sliding hills, mountains with active shooting stones and turbulent river stand in the way of mobility of the Bhangali.

No Fertilizer Region

The Bara Bhangal region has a host of virgin unnamed peaks, healthy and active glaciers, dancing fountains, snow covered meadows, sparkling rivulets, lakes, fertile land which has never seen fertilizers, insecticides and pesticides.

A Tiny Valley

The confluence of Ravi River and Kalihani rivulet contribute in creating tiny valley in Bara Bhangal, the abode of Bhangalis.

Political Organization

A strong Political Organization in vogue since time immemorial and headed by a *Mukhiya* plays significant role in the structural-functional systems of the Bhangali.

Endogamous & Exogamous Grouping

Bhangali continues to be an endogamous and exogamous community.

Marriage a Simple Ceremony

Marriage for Bhangalis is a sacred and simple ceremony requiring a few thousands of rupees to solemnize the entire function.

Money Lending

Low income, utter lack of modern amenities and weak economic infrastructure make the Bhangalis dependent on money lenders who charge exorbitantly high rate of interest.

Unity

Social solidarity, cohesiveness, harmonious relations, and strong sense of unity are distinctive features of the community.

Crimelessness

Strict adherence to the norms & values and rules & regulations is part of the ethos of the Bhangali.

Harmony with Nature

Mutual respect for members of community, peaceful co-existence, harmony with nature and need not greed govern their relations with nature, members of community and also with those who arrive in the Bara Bhangal region.

Conclusion

The discussion in the foregoing paras preceding empirical research unearths the fact that Bhangali Community inhabiting in mountain locked region nestled between Dhauladhar and Pir Panjal mountain ranges in the Western Himalayas has most of such socio-economic and geo- cultural attributes which are key features of tribes in India. The Bhangali continues to live in a tribal state but is a non-tribal community. It calls for an urgent need to undertake a thorough survey of the community, ameliorate its conditions, connect it by pathways and roadway

formulating a long term plans for its sustainable development so that social, economic and political justice is done to the residents of Bara Bhangalis. Such communities also needed to be highlighted for their crimelessness particularly when deviant behavior is on the rise in different parts of Indian Society.

References

- Census of India, 2011. Accessed 7 November 2018.*
- Edition.cnn.com/travel/article/bara-bangal-remote-himalayan-village/index.html. Retrieved on 10 May 2019.*
- Frazer, James (2006) Totemism and Exogamy: A Treatise on Certain Early Forms of Superstition and Society. Kessinger Publishing, ISBN 142599244.*
- Raobharata.Files.Wordpress.com. Accessed on 9 April 2019.*
- Sharma, Ravi. The gifted mountain-man from Jagatsukh. Retrieved on 4 April 2019*
- Sridhar, Sankar (2016) Bara Bangal: A Himalayan village on the path of Alexander the Great, for CNN.*
- Surroch, Sujit & Surroch, Anita (2013), Fundamentals of Sociology, Modern Publishers. P-179.*