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Living in a High Mountain Border Region: the Case of the 'Bhotiyas' of the Indo-Chinese Border Region

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Abstract: This article introduces one of South Asia's most important border regions into academic discourse, namely, the Central Himalayan mountain rim separating India and the Tibetan Autonomous Region (People's Republic of China). What makes this border region so interesting is a tangled interplay of changing environmental, cultural, and political forms to which the local populations constantly have to adapt in order to make a living there. We focused on the so-called 'Bhotiyas' of Uttarakhand, former trans-Himalayan traders whose ethnicity and livelihood was traditionally associated with the Indo-Chinese border that was sealed as a result of the India-China war in 1962. Drawing on the work of borderland scholarship, we identified the key processes and developments that changed the perspective of this area. Competing political aspirations as well as the 'Bhotiyas' countervailing strategies were considered equally important for understanding local livelihoods and identities within the dynamics of a 'high mountain border region'. Through an exemplary analysis of historical differences of power in one 'Bhotiya' valley, we further explored the ways in which shifting socio-spatial constellations are creatively re-interpreted by the borderlanders.

Keywords: Uttarakhand; trans-Himalayan trade; Bhotiyas; borderland study

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Introduction

While anthropologists have investigated social boundaries for some time (Barth 1969), national borders have recently attracted wider scholarly attention (Alvarez 1995, Gupta & Ferguson 1992, Sturgeon 2004, Schendel 2005). In the course of this steadily growing interest, it has been argued that borders and border regions are a 'crucial key' for understanding the cultural predicaments of the 21st century (Wendl & Rösler 1999: 1), and even, as Rumford (2006: 155) puts it, "to understand the nature of the social". By relying on a 'perspective from the periphery', borderland scholarship shows that the processes of territorial restructuration largely depend upon negotiations over resources and socio-spatial arrangements. Significantly, these negotiations are influenced as much by state politics as by the livelihood strategies of local communities (Baud & Schendel 1997, Anderson & O'dowd 1999). While states rely heavily on the augmentation of bureaucratic and infrastructural interventions to foster a lasting influence at their peripheries (Vandergeest & Peluso 1995, Walker 1999), these efforts intermingle and are contested with borderlanders' aspirations, giving rise to interwoven webs of relations (Sturgon 2004).

This is especially true of one of South Asia's most important borders, namely, the Central Himalayan mountain rim separating India and the Tibetan Autonomous Region (People's Republic of

China). This border marked an effective barrier to state territorial expansion of both the British colonial power and Chinese empires, a situation that later culminated in serious border tensions between India and China. In 1962 the war between these two states led to a sealing of the contested dividing line (Kreutzmann 2007). Nevertheless, there were passages across this border, and corridors linking local Buddhist and Hindu populations of the Tibetan Plateau to the Lesser Himalayas, resulting in hybrid practices. This is illustrated by an extensive trade network reaching through the transversal valleys and over high passes within the High and Tibetan Himalayas. To understand local livelihoods and identities the adjoining border regions have to be considered neither as passive nor as pre-given. Instead they are constantly being transformed through the interactions and negotiations of borderland agents, including state authorities.

We propose the term 'high mountain border region' to conceive the historically occurring and diversifying webs of relations that distinguish this area and develop environmental, socio-cultural and political forms. Our focus is on the so-called 'Bhotiyas', former trans-Himalayan traders, who reside in high valleys of the Indian federal state Uttarakhand. The paper analyzes how they have negotiated their livelihood and identity in light of shifting socio-spatial constellations. The first part outlines how the 'Bhotiyas' have strategically countervailed the shifting state aspirations from the coming of the British until the demise of the trans-Himalayan trade attendant to the border closure. In the second part the historically arisen differences of power in the Gori Valley are traced to discuss resulting consequences for their livelihood.

1 Methods

This study is based upon field research conducted between 2004 and 2007 as well as an evaluation of primary and secondary material related to the 'high mountain border region' of Uttarakhand. Data assessment included participant observation and semi-structured interviews with 'Bhotiyas', other key persons of village communities and government authorities. In October 2007, a survey in the regional archive in Nainital was conducted.

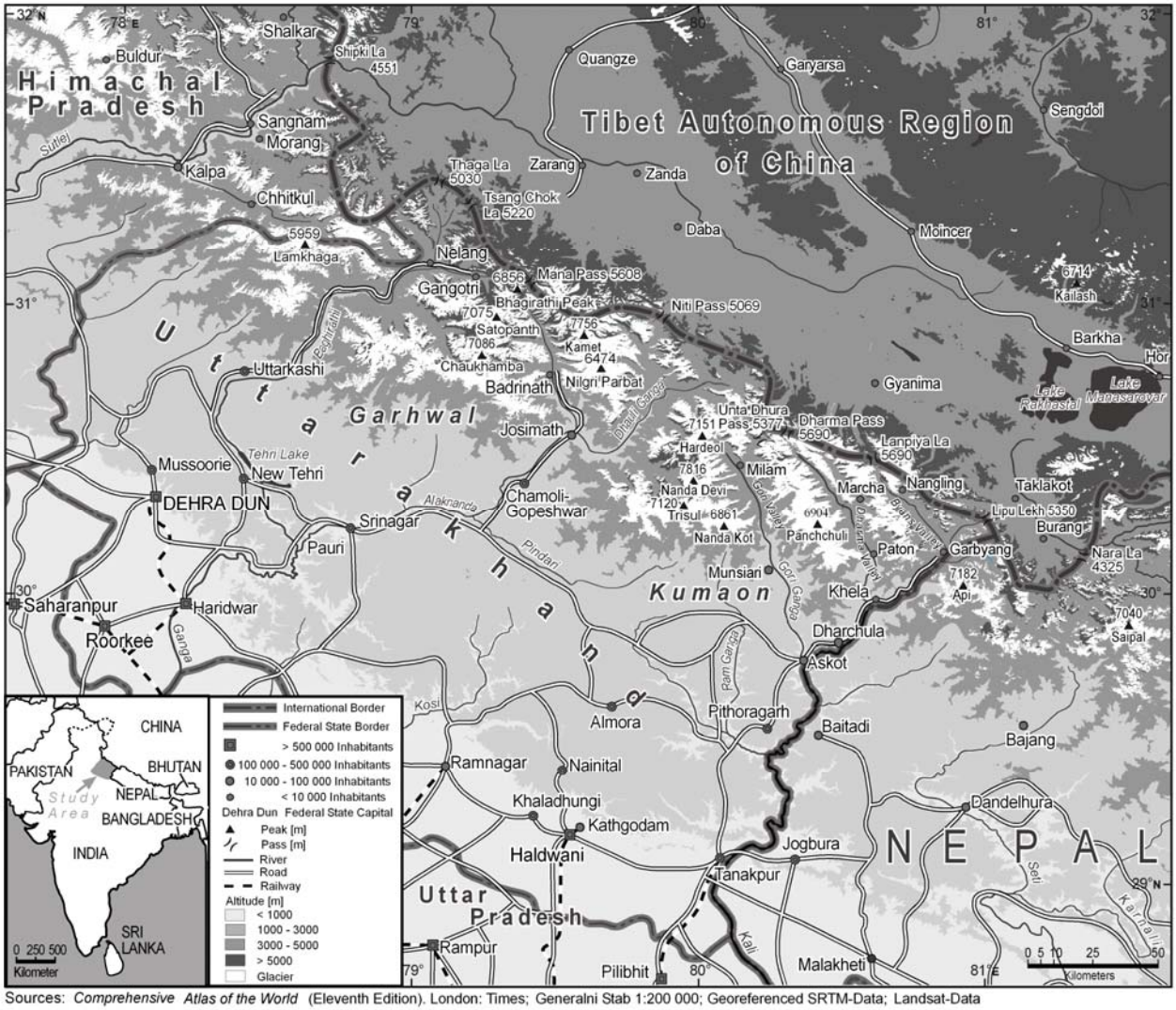
2 Who are the 'Bhotiyas'?

'Bhot' is an old Sanskrit word that was frequently used for the Tibetan region from medieval times onwards. However, the popularization of the indigenous group designation 'Bhotiya' (also 'Bhotia' and 'Bhootia') was connected to British expansion from Bengal past Nepal to the Western Himalayas in the 18th and 19th centuries (Brown 1987). Especially its application for Buddhist groups in Nepal played a crucial role in establishing the association with this religion, although ultimately the British applied it to a great variety of groups involved in the trans-Himalayan trade and living along the Indo-Tibetan border. Subsequently, administrators, scholars and explorers widely adopted this local term for the populations situated at the northernmost spheres of colonial influence to delimit them from both residents of Tibet and the major local Hindu hill population, the so-called *Paharis* (Traill 1832, Sherring 1906). While the geographical origin of the 'Bhotiyas' is disputed (Saklani 1998), they describe themselves as descendants of high-caste Hindus immigrated from the Indian plains. Although most writers still rely on the term 'Bhotiya', some of them have become highly critical of it, both for historical reasons (Brown 1991~1992) and because the 'Bhotiyas' themselves associate this term with pejorative connotations through other ethno-linguistic groups (Nawa 2000).

The 'Bhotiyas' inhabit eight high mountain valleys, all of which are very close to international borders in Garhwal and Kumaon, the two administrative divisions and former kingdoms of Uttarakhand, the 27th Indian federal state (a former part of Uttar Pradesh, after independence temporarily known as Uttaranchal from 2000 to 2006). Their traditional land use system is characterized by animal husbandry, crop cultivation and forest use in different altitudinal belts, all of which are interdependently linked through seasonal migrations and energy flows. The particular mobility pattern of the 'Bhotiyas' takes place between the lowlands and foothills of the Lesser Himalayas and the high altitude grazing

grounds of the High and Tibetan Himalayas. Grazing and fodder resources of different altitudinal belts (e.g. grasslands, forests and crop remnants from harvested fields) are available at different times of the year (Nüsser 2006). Until the closure of the border as a result of the war between India and China in 1962, their seasonal migration facilitated intensive trade relations with residents of the Tibetan highland. Sugar, grain and wool products from India were exchanged for salt, raw wool, animals and borax from Tibet (Pant 1935). After 1962, agriculture and the use of forest and grassland products became even more important for their livelihood security.

The 'Bhotiyas' are neither ethnically nor culturally homogenous. The groups in Garhwal consist of the *Jadh*, *Tolcha* and *Maarcha*, while those of Kumaon are divided into the *Johari-Shaukas* of the Gori Valley and the *Rang-Shaukas* in the valleys of Dharma, Byans and Chaudans (Figure 1). The latter are split into further subdivisions that are named according to the valleys they inhabit, namely, the *Byansi*, *Chaudansi* and *Dharmani*. Our focus rests on the groups residing in Kumaon. The languages spoken in this area are classified by Grierson (1909) as belonging to the eastern subgroup of the complex pronominalised Himalayan languages of the



Sources: *Comprehensive Atlas of the World* (Eleventh Edition). London: Times; Generalni Stab 1:200 000; Georeferenced SRTM-Data; Landsat-Data
Draft and Cartography: M. Gerwin, M. Nüsser, N. Harm

Figure 1 The High Mountain Border Region of Uttarakhand

Tibeto-Burman family. Sharma (1990) classifies all local *Shauka* dialects as 'Rangkas'. However, most *Shaukas* are multilingual and speak Hindi, Nepali and Tibetan in addition to their mother tongue.

3 Negotiating Livelihood and Forging Identity

3.1 Competing forms of power

Competing forms of power, which at various times aimed to extend their influence into the 'high mountain border region', have fuelled its dynamic configurations. Before the onset of British colonial rule in this area, interactions between the local kings of Garhwal and Kumaon, as well as with Nepal, created a regionally arranged power-geometry (Brown 1984, Joshi & Brown 1987). Control over the trans-Himalayan trade was a focus of special attention, both to regulate the cross-border movements of people and goods, and to absorb some sorts of surplus through taxation. At least since the invasion of Kumaon and most parts of Garhwal by the Gorkhas in 1790, the area increasingly came to the fore of British strategic calculations (Figure 2). The defeat of the Gorkhas in 1815 gave the British their first direct access to the Indo-Tibetan border (Gill 2000). At that time the 'Bhotiya' trade was delimited to the barter of locally needed products, such as grain, salt, cloth and wool (Raper 1812, Moorcroft 1818), while the more lucrative long distance trade of pashmina wool, a raw material for Kashmir shawls, was exclusively traded through middle men in Ladakh (Lamb 1986). Until the middle of the 19th century,

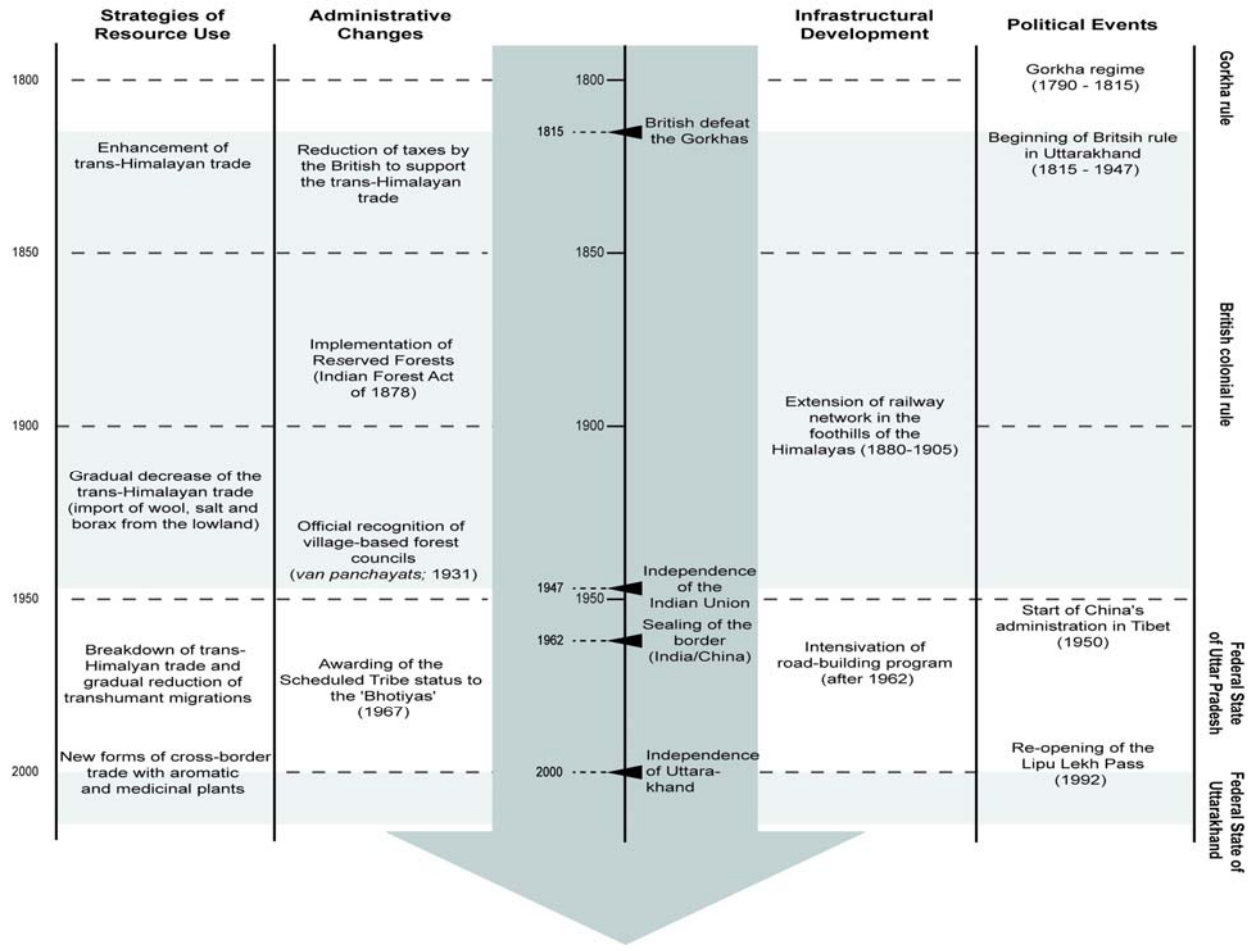


Figure 2 Main Historical Developments and Changes

the primary aim of the British administration was to increase their geopolitical influence and to establish alternative trade routes into Tibet and Central Asia (Moorcroft & Trebeck 1837, Rizvi 1999). The integraton of Ladakh by the *Dogras* of Jammu, British rivals allied with the *Sikh* kingdom, in 1834 initiated an eastward shift of trade so that the routes monopolized by the 'Bhotiyas' became more important (Spengen 2000). The reduction of taxes and transit duties by the British as well as the onset of mechanized wool production in the Indian plains pushed the trade volume through the 'Bhotiya' valleys to its highest rate towards the end of the nineteenth century (Atkinson 1882, Sherring 1906).

However, at this time the British had already changed their politics in the region as biotic resources, especially forest products, increasingly gained importance. Simultaneously, the building of administrative structures was emphasized more strongly, which imposed numerous restrictions on local strategies of resource use. These restrictions directly interfered with the traditional transhumance patterns of the 'Bhotiyas'. Examples include the assignment of certain market and halting places during migration as well as of winter habitations. Furthermore, these changes included an increase in taxation not only of trade products, but also of grazing grounds and agricultural land. Demarcations of government land, such as Reserved Forests or village boundaries for revenue purposes, were also initiated (Atkinson 1882, Forest Department 1905), which delineate the contemporary access rights to forests and grasslands to some extent. But it was not only the British who accounted for administrative outcomes, local rulers were also important actors during this time. In Kumaon, for instance, the *Rang-Shaukas* had to deal not only with the interventions of the British, but also with restrictions placed on them by the *Rajwars* of Askot. These local aristocrats held proprietary rights in village land in lower parts of the valley and they exercised power through taxations and exclusions of particular user groups (Political Department 1895). As a result, even today the *Rang-Shaukas* possess less agricultural land in their winter settlements than other 'Bhotiya' groups living further west, since the latter have not been affected by these restrictions. We were told during field work that the *Rajwars* forbade the Dharmanis to have any agricultural land in the lower altitudes; therefore they must bring all their winter food down from their summer settlements (in dried form), or else trade other products for it.

The existing trade patterns in general and the wool-related trade in particular declined from the 1920s onwards. This was caused by new roads that directly connected the existing railheads in the lowlands within the Lesser Himalayas. These infrastructural developments were associated with increasing imports of cheaper wool products from Europe and (sea-) salt from the plains (Walton 1910, Fürer-Haimendorf 1975). Additionally, due to an altering demand of wool in the North Indian plains (Roy 2003) and through the discovery of new natural deposits of borax in other parts of the world as well as artificial substitutions for this mineral, the products traded and manufactured by the 'Bhotiyas' became less competitive (Spengen 2000).

The most important factor leading to the complete breakdown of trade was the sealing of the border due to war between India and China in 1962. However, an outbreak of animal diseases in the 1940s and the political disputes in Tibet accompanied by interruptions of the traditional modes of trade in the 1950s are further trade-reducing factors that were already present before the closure of border (KBPF 1947, Patterson 1962). After the border war between India and China, both nations continued to foster their presence in the contested regions. The Indian government realized further land reforms, building of schools, and an implementation of a decentralized administrative structure in the area (Reeves 1991, Nautiyal et al. 2003). One of the gravest forms of Indian state intervention was a large military road-building program, which opened up the lower parts of all the 'Bhotiya' valleys in Uttarakhand (Rawat & Sharma 1997).

3.2 Countervailing strategies

The 'Bhotiyas' are positioned in an area that has not only been overshadowed by competing forms of power, but is also at the interstice of Tibetan Buddhist and Hindu cultural influences. As trans-Himalayan traders they had to adroitly move in and out of these webs. While the trade

potential itself was created through unequal environmental conditions on both sides of the border and heavily influenced by shifting power aspirations of the ruling authorities, the 'Bhotiyas' actively 'performed' their location, local knowledge and ethnicity – including their Tibetan-like physical appearance – by acting as cultural brokers.

Although numerous *Paharis* had been involved as customers, distributors and suppliers of trade products (Walton 1910), the Tibetan markets and the transport routes over the high passes were closed to them. This can be attributed to the performative character of resource use, which distinguishes the various trade practices the 'Bhotiyas' maintained with their Tibetan partners, especially the so called *mitra*- and *sarji*-systems (Prasad 1989). Through these systems, enduring trade partnerships were established and regulated. They were grounded in ritualized practices that ignored the important Hindu matter of touch-pollution. The 'Bhotiyas' made use of these rituals to assure their lucrative trade monopoly, since they also popularized the half-truth that the Tibetans regarded commensal relations as a necessary requirement for trade (Srivastava 1966). Besides the difficulties and dangers of traveling and transporting goods over the mountain passes, and the problems resulting from the different languages – both of which the 'Bhotiyas' were able to speak – this effectively kept away possible competitors (Brown 1984).

At the same time, these ritualized modes of trade were at the centre of state attention, which might be a reason for the existence of similar practices among other trans-Himalayan trading groups in Nepal (Fürer-Haimendorf 1975, Messerschmidt 1976). The Tibetan authorities relied on them to articulate their territorial and fiscal power. On the one hand the *Sarjis* were sent as delegates on behalf of the Tibetan administration. They had to control the border passes in order to prevent the spread of political conflict and human or animal diseases. They further collected taxes demanded by the Tibetan authorities from the 'Bhotiyas' before they ritually declared the inception of the trade season and opened up the border passes. On the other hand the Tibetans utilized the *mitra*-system for directing the different 'Bhotiya'-groups to particular markets and to secure advantageous exchange rates. When the British tried to intervene in these traditional modes of trade to establish their own economic machinery, this resulted in overt border tensions and even temporary closures of an important border pass (Lipu Lekh) by the Tibetan rulers in Uttarakhand at the end of the 19th century (Political Department 1899).

At the time commercial activities with the Tibetans began for the reasons outlined above to dry up even before the closure of the border, the 'Bhotiyas' actively re-negotiated their livelihood strategies. In 1947 the 'Kumaon Bhotiya People's Federation' was founded as a political organ through which the 'Bhotiyas' articulated their claims for governmental support and their ideas for possible re-orientations of their trade-centered economy (KBPF 1947). The possibility of having unrestricted access to forests and grasslands was one of their elementary aspirations. But calculations regarding their self-presentation also informed the negotiations, since the 'Bhotiyas' knew that access to natural, political and educational resources would be determined by their officially acknowledged ethnicity. Anthropologists have discussed these negotiations in terms of Hinduisation (Srivastava 1966), i.e., an acculturative process involving the 'Bhotiyas' assertion of a high-caste Hindu identity, despite the pervasive perception that they are actually 'crypto-Buddhists'. However, the term 'crypto-Buddhist' itself implies not only a barrier to Hinduisation, but also a practical strategy employed earlier by the 'Bhotiyas' to secure a lucrative trade monopoly, and later to gain special governmental treatment, for which the identification and performance of distinguishing socio-cultural resources was crucial. This is exemplified in strategic modifications in, and even the abandoning of certain rituals whose performance aroused suspicion among the local Hindu population (Srivastava 1953, Das & Raha 1981). The official awarding of Scheduled Tribe status (ST) in 1967 marks an important achievement, since it guaranteed them employment in government service, admission to universities, reserved seats in the legislature and other privileges.

By turning away from trade, the 'Bhotiyas' managed to adjust to the new socio-spatial arrangements resulting from the border's

increasing impermeability. The rise in alternative occupations, such as shop-keeping or government employment, as well as in out-migration (Prasad 1989, Hoon 1996) and an intensified (often illegal) extraction of biotic resources, have to be seen in the context of these developments. Yet, what is now officially accounted as 'Bhotiya' describes not a homogeneous group but is instead characterized by internal differentiations that set limitations to the livelihood strategies employed.

4 The Gori Valley: Tracing a Heterogeneous Picture

As has been reported for other parts of Uttarakhand (Nandy & Rao, 2001), the Gori Valley has recently undergone massive population growth. While Pant (1935) states that 15,629 people lived there during the 1930s, and the 'Kumaon Bhotiya People Federation' counted 9,000 'Bhotiyas' alone in 1940 (KBPF 1947), the population reached 45,546 in 2001, of which 7,268 are registered as members of scheduled tribes (GOI 2003). This trend has to be seen in light of the border-induced developments and reflects a shifting socio-spatial configuration.

On the one hand the 'Bhotiyas' are no longer the numerically dominant group in the Gori Valley. According to recent estimates, about three quarters of the *Johari-Shaukas* have re-settled in other areas of Uttarakhand or the Indian plains (Pangtey Sep. 2006 oral information). Moreover, most villages in the upper valley have progressively been abandoned. Milam, for instance, which was the most important summer settlement during the flourishing time of trade (see Figure 1), only counted 18 families in 2005 (Nüsser 2006). Also the slow onset decline of trade can be depicted when looking at this settlement: from 600 families in the 1930s (Pant 1935) only 300 were left in 1950 (Murray 1951). On the other hand, Munsiari, a former winter settlement and trade depot, gradually became the central municipality and headquarter of the Gori Valley during the 20th century. Especially infrastructural investments and funds in administration by the Indian Government, such as for school building or in public management, have enforced this growing significance. Nowadays, Munsiari exhibits numerous non-farm employments, such as shop-keeping and government occupations.

The *Johari-Shaukas* of the Gori Valley are regularly portrayed as being the most successful and progressive 'Bhotiya' group. Before the arrival of the British they had negotiated various rights, which were granted to them by both Kumaoni kings and rulers of Tibet. Most importantly, they were the only group not restricted to an appointed market in Tibet and responsible for taxation affairs in their region (Atkinson 1882, Brown 1984). This meant that they were free to visit various markets, and it is said that they sometimes acted as agents in certain Tibetan markets for other Bhotiya groups unable to directly trade there. According to clan and lineage associations, the *Rawats* and closely associated *Pangteys* from Milam were the most influential groups. Especially the former dominated the cross-border trade, and the resulting prosperity made them the main landholders of the valley. While this advantageous position is underpinned by the region's mythology, which describes them as early rulers of the valley, the British heavily influenced its persistence. This is exemplified by the proceedings in Milam. Here, the British raised the fiscal and juridical power of these groups to foster their administrative control over trade, especially because the counterpart and contact person of the Tibetan-*sarji* was always a *Rawat* from Milam (cf. Political Department 1898). Moreover, the British offered them access to educational institutions and appointed them as responsible persons for handling administrative affairs of the valley (Srivastava 1966). After India's independence, the official recognition as ST (Scheduled Tribe) as well as the associated development of a bureaucracy and non-agricultural employments further encouraged the dominance of the Rawats and Pangteys. Nowadays, many of them have permanently settled in Munsiari and belong to the valley's politically and economically most successful families.

Within this municipality of approximately 15 villages, however, seasonal migration and animal husbandry, as well as crop farming within the upper parts of the valley are still practiced, giving rise to the coexistence of different livelihood strategies. In order to understand the complexity of resource management and land use change in the Gori Valley, it is necessary to address the

impact of local Village Forest Councils (*Van Panchayats*), elected bodies, which manage the forest in the village commons. The British had introduced them in present Uttarakhand in 1931 (Agrawal 2005). While the first council of the Gori Valley was founded in 1947, most of them were established during the 1960s and early 1970s, a time when the Indian state radically increased its presence in the area. Since the 'Bhotiyas' became widely engaged within these institutional frameworks, we nowadays find a situation that local populations and state authorities are active partners in adjusting the daily practices of biotic resource use employed in this high mountain border region.

Furthermore, the upper parts of the valley exhibit new income sources. Beyond tourism enterprises, the (illegal) extraction and legal farming of aromatic and medicinal plants has to be considered (Silori & Badola 2000, Olson & Bhattarai 2005, Nüsser 2006). Especially *Cordyceps sinensis*, a fungus grown on a caterpillar larva, is of particular interest to gatherers. One kilo of this species fetched Rs. 95,000 in 2006. This commercial intensification can be related to demand-oriented changes and new market channels in China. This gives raise to new forms of cross-border trade.

5 Conclusions

As inhabitants of high mountain border regions are situated in a peripheral landscape, and at the same time integrated within larger socio-spatial arrangements, the understanding of local livelihood negotiations requires an approach that takes into account the dynamic environmental and socio-cultural constellations, which had always been overshadowed by competing forms of power. The historical and contemporary strategies employed by the 'Bhotiyas' for managing and exploring their border niche most effectively demonstrate how the multifaceted repertoires of identities, practices, and forms of knowledge that arise from their interstitial position constitute a 'borderland advantage' (Flynn 1997). However, the actual use of this advantage is dependent on the shifting and interacting webs of relations to which some have access and others are excluded. The extents to which both 'natural' and 'socio-cultural' resources of high mountain border regions are employed for making a living thereby remains a major research challenge to be uncovered by further interdisciplinary and comparative research.

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