Higher and higher

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On the sixth day of photography workshop being organised jointly by International Photography Partnerships(IPP), Samhita and Centre for Sustainable Development we followed Bhutto Khan, another participant living still higher. Our morning started super early. We were gone by 6:30AM, past Chamba, then Sahoo and then to Parotha – a small village where the road ends and becomes kuchha at about 1200 meters. A local shopkeeper, the mother of one of our workshop student, invited us for morning tea. Soon we set off on foot up steep climbs along a village path that took us over 2500 mts, up into the clouds, via small chashmas (streams), cattle, sheep and local gujar people and lots of children. These children run up these long arduous steep climbs without even running out of breath let alone breaking a sweat. We saw a man herd two mules loaded with local slate stones cut into tiles for roofing up the path. Of course he was ahead of us in seconds, but later we learnt he does this hike three times a day. A climb that took us over 3 hours takes the locals only half the time or less. When we were more than half way we were told Bhuttu’s village is only a little bit more...and then a little bit more... and then just a little bit more. I guess the whole concept of a little bit was warped for us worn out and exhausted people. We went past traditional gujar homes with their buffalo chewing their cud. Another household had just lost an old lady who over a hundred years old; we saw numerous people walking from neighboring villages to her house. Slowly the ecosystem around us was changing to fewer trees, all of which looked severely lopped, more open flora, and we realized we were in the clouds. When the clouds opened we could see vultures and kites soaring beneth us. More climbing, took us through more maize fields. Across the valley at one point one could see the opposing mounting face with terraces all the way from the very bottom to the very top – every inch intricately carved and lusciously green. We were out of breath but the scenery alone could have been responsible for that. Then came the thickest cloud and right then Bhuttu pointed to his house. It looked like a dream, just a faint silhouette of a house up on the ridge. We had covered a distance of about 7 kilometers almost all of it vertical I’m sure. WOW! So delighted to have made the climb and to reach Bhuttu’s house, we were greeted warmly by his father and mother. Bhuttu is the eldest boy among 8 siblings.
His eldest sister never went to any school, his second eldest sister went up to 4th grade and then dropped. Bhuttu feels proud to be the first in his family to go to school. He is in 8th grade and does this long 3 hour hike every day from school to home. After 8th grade he will have to do an additional hike of 25 minutes to Sahoo village for high school. Of course he is looking forward to that. He has become familiar with that additional hike because of the photography workshop- 7 Km from his home to Parotha and then an additional 2-3 Km to Sahoo.

Bhuttu’s determination to walk to the workshop is unreal. He said he wants options in life through education, that his father and grandfather never got. He would rather become a school teacher or a shopkeeper than herd buffalos in this heavenly place. His parents was the same for him.

All the while we were there we saw his mother stirring a large kadhai (wok) of buffalo milk over a wood fire, tears streaming down her eyes from smoke. She started to heat this milk at 7AM and continued till about 2:30PM to end up with solidified milk called “khoya”. Gujjars are known for their buffalo milk, ghee and khoya. This family sells this rich “best milk in the world” to shops in Parotha for Rs 15 a kilo. Khoya goes for Rs100 a kilo.

One of the daughters of
Nawabdeen rushed to grind corn to make some fresh corn bread (makki ki roti) that we ate with boiling hot buffalo milk. Tom relished mashing corn bread in milk and just gulped it down. It recharged our energy for our 2 hour descent to Parotha.

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