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Pahari

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“Pahari” is the name of the Indo-Aryan people living in Uttarakhand, India, on the foothills of the Himalayas. I adore this photo not only because it captures the sense of serenity and liberating simplicity I felt when I was living in rural India, but also because it encapsulates the absolute love that my good friend and translator, Tulsi, exudes for her home and her animals.

Tulsi is a true Pahari. She was born and raised in the rural village of Kumaon in Uttarakhand, and served as the bridge between my outsider-ness—as I was merely a fresh-faced intern for a local rural development NGO for the summer—and local village life. Her parents are farmers, and their daily lives consist of fetching water, cooking, sowing seeds, harvesting vegetables, collecting fodder, and looking after their cows. At the age of 22, one would expect that she would already have been married off with one or two children like many young women in Kumaon. Instead, she is a Master’s student in English Literature, a fluent Kumaoni-Hindi-English translator, a camper and trekker, a tutor, an activist who believes strongly in women’s rights and empowerment, and a de facto professional henna artist. Whenever she returns home from university, she is also a humble daughter who helps around with household chores, which may involve hoeing potatoes or carrying boxes of apples on her head across steep hill paths, while also continuing her studies.

I am absolutely awed by all that she does. I especially admire how her education has empowered her. But it is the fact that she remains a modest Pahari—one who loves the animals and nature around her yet remains grounded in her community—that makes me take an intense liking to her. With every path we took, we came across someone who recognized her and wanted to chat—young men on scooters, the momo-maker (Tibetan dumplings), the lady pharmacist in Bhatelia, women in saris carrying fodder along the road... Whenever we visited mothers’ or healers’ homes for my health project, Tulsi’s bubbly personality opened up these people’s hearts to me—the foreigner—and my questions.

Tulsi was my entry point into the everyday lives of the Kumaoni men and women, enabling me to understand the culture so much more than I ever would have otherwise. Although I was an intern looking to help the community, I know that if anyone can make change in this community from the inside-out, it would be her. I consider myself a plain foreigner who took away more than I could give to the people here. But I also know that people like Tulsi deserve the opportunity to travel and volunteer in other countries as well, including the United States, so they can learn and continue to be that bridge between their communities and the world outside of their villages.

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