

A Historical study of the Spiti Valley: Tracing the footprints of Tibetan Buddhism and its early dissemination

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The Spiti valley, situated in the south-western corner of the Tibetan Plateau, is known to scholars of Tibetan studies due to its close association with Rinchen Zangpo (Lochen Rinchen sZangpo) and its early history. Rinchen Zangpo initiated a significant campaign to spread Buddhism in western Tibet during the late 10th century, a period referred to as the "Second Diffusion of Buddhism" in Tibetan Buddhist history.¹ Spiti, which was part of the newly established Guge Kingdom at that time, actively supported Rinchen Zangpo's endeavors by assisting in the construction of temples, monasteries, and other structures, as well as in the translation of Buddhist texts from Sanskrit to Tibetan. Among the key locations for these activities in Spiti was the ancient Tabo Monastery or Tabo Chos-Khor Monastery, which was built in 996 A.D.

Research into the rich Buddhist heritage of Spiti and its connection to the "Second dissemination of Buddhism" has provided insight into the region during that period. However, there has been a lack of focus on Spiti's earlier history, leading to limited knowledge of its past until the 10th century. Notable intellectuals from the area, such as Angrup Lahauli and Dngos grup garsha pa, have emphasized that Spiti's history can be traced back to the 10th century, with scarce reliable references to its earlier history in classical texts or inscriptions. Historians preceding my research have categorized the history of Spiti into three distinct phases.

1. A synthesis of four assumptions sourced from English, Hindi, and Tibetan references provides a logical framework for understanding the early history of Spiti, drawing on source documents and fieldwork.
2. As per the assertions in the sources, Spiti was under the rule of Hindu Sena monarchs during the 7th century, as documented by Hutchison & Vogel (1919; 1920a; 1933).
3. From the mid-seventh century to the mid-ninth century, Spiti operated under taxation system known as Khangchen, which mirrored the military administration structure of the preceding Tibetan Empire.

Socio-Cultural Background of Spiti

In 1846, the British asserted authority over Spiti and appointed a hereditary ruler. During that period 'The Nono' was entrusted with tax collection and adjustment of minor criminal cases. In 1941, Spiti merged with Lahaul to form a separate district, later becoming an independent district named Lahaul & Spiti in 1960. Locals pronounce Spiti as Piti, ehih translates to 'Middle Land' in Tibetan dialect. While linguistic studies have explored potential connections between the Spiti people and the Mundas of central India, the origin of the Spiti people remain uncertain. Records indicate the presence of Hindu monarchy as early as the seventh century AD. However, Buddhism

¹ Tashi Tsering, Spiti valley before 10th Century, p.523-526

gained prominence by the 11th century, leading to Guge's (a kingdom in western Tibet) political and cultural influence. In 1841, control of Spiti shifted to the Dogras under Jarowar Singh, followed by a Sikh incursion²

Spiti's geographical characteristics

The Spiti region's ecosystem can be comprehended by considering its geological past. Previously, Spiti lay beneath the Tethys Sea, acting as a division between the Asian mainland and the Gondawana continent. As the sea evaporated, the towering Himalayas emerged, resulting in the present arid conditions, making Spiti's landscape an ideal subject for geologists.³

Spiti's Climate and Vegetation

Spiti is a cold desert characterized by sparse vegetation, extending from the Ladakh valley into Tibetan autonomous territory. Consequently, a wide variety of plants can be found depending on the altitude. The region can be divided into three zones based on climate and vegetation:

1. The highest zone, covering approximately 2200 square kilometres at elevations above 5000 meters, remains snow-covered year-round, supporting limited growth such as moss and lichen.
2. The middle zone spans 4300 square kilometres with elevations ranging from 4000 to 5000 meters. This area has a rugged terrain and is populated by grasses like *Poa* and *Agropyron*, alongside flowering shrubs such as *Juniper*, *Birch*, and *Rhododendron*.
3. The lowest zone, ranging from 3000 to 4000 meters in altitude, allows for growth for up to six months annually. This 1000-square-kilometre area features dispersed grass and shrub growth on hill slopes and along the major river.

Spiti's Climate Condition:

In Spiti's climate, there are only two distinct seasons instead of the usual four: a short summer and an extended, harshly cold winter. Snowfall is expected from September to April, with temperatures plummeting to -20 degrees Celsius at the peak of winter. During heavy snowfall, temperatures may even dip below -30 degrees Celsius. The winter months are typically dry in the region.

The Administration of Spiti during the ancient period

Spiti has initially been split into several Kothis for tax and administrative purposes. Each Kothi was made up of many villages in a specific geographical region. The land-owning people of a village elect a head man (Gedpo), and these head men (Gedpo Chenmo) are further elected for the Council of Nono's. The Nono of Spiti was like the primary power's representative at the period, and they performed administrative and praise-collecting authorities through Gadpo Chenmos appointed under them.

² J.M. Balokhra, *The Wonderland Himachal Pradesh*, p.591-592

³ Gill, Manohar Singh, *Himalayan Wonderland: Travel in Lahaul Spiti* (Delhi 1972) p.7-13

The Britishers do not interfere much with this system because of the harsh climate conditions for several months. The Nono were appointed as Wazir of Spiti, with certain magisterial powers in addition to revenue and tax responsibilities. In contrast, the Gedpo Chenmo were appointed as nambardars of their respective Kothis, which their respective Detpos led.

Ancient Spiti's Economy and Social Structure:

Spiti's traditional economy, like that of most other pre-capitalist civilizations, was based on agriculture. Spiti's communities are clustered together beside a perennial glacier stream and were never huge with their clusters of dwellings.

Because the yearly precipitation in the form of rainfall in Spiti is less than 17 cm, this was critical. As a result, reliable irrigation is the essential basis for any farming even today. It is also true that snow cover may last for up to six months in populated regions of Spiti. As a result, the territorial and demographic expansion of Spiti is constrained by nature. When the eldest son reaches adulthood and starts a family, the primogeniture system in Spiti ensures that the eldest son receives the majority of the land holding (Khangchen).

Parents with younger sons can move to a subsistence holding (Khing Chung) or stay with the eldest son. It is entirely up to the parent's discretion and willingness to remain with whoever they like. The eldest daughter receives all the jewels when she marries, while younger brothers and sisters are supposed to join monks (Lama) and nuns (Jomos). These customary norms or criteria alter only when there are no children in the family or when the eldest son or daughter voluntarily withdraws from the assigned duty based on their own choice and commitment.⁴

The Trading activities in Spiti

Unlike its adjacent districts of Lahaul and Kinnaur, Spiti was never positioned on a major commercial route. The primary road from Ladakh to Kullu is via Lahaul, and the easy crossing from Tibet to Rampur and the plains beyond (Shipkila) is in Himachal Pradesh's Kinnaur district.⁵

This was due to many factors, including the isolation of Spiti, which was blocked off by high mountains. As a result, Spiti did not create a business community that dealt in money, nor did it have considerable interaction with the outside world. Spiti's only commercial commodity was some excess barley crop due to a lack of key mineral resources. They trade items with Changthang's, Rupshu's, and Tibet's nomadic herders. Wool, pashmina, Yaks, churpa (local cheese), and specific valuable stones are brought in by nomadic herdsmen across the treacherous Prangla pass in the north.

In exchange for the items delivered by the northern herders, they receive a few things from the lower districts of Rampur and Kullu and barley. Outside trade contact was forbidden except for one tiny deal transaction. Because of the settlement operation between 1911 and 1912, the land use pattern stayed unchanged for centuries. It was true that 989 hectares of land were farmed in the communities in five Kothis of Spiti, while 164 hectares were uncultivated, consisting of the

⁴ An Evaluation study of Lahaul & Spiti, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Himachal Pradesh, Shimla 1974.

⁵ Harcourt, A.F.E., *The Himalayan District of Kooloo, Lahaul and Spiti* (Lahore 1974), pp.31-35

water course, habitation, thrashing floors, and tiny trees groves, popular, and a few small lakes.

Only the fields near the villages were measured, which totaled slightly over 12 square kilometers. In contrast, the vast mountains, glaciers, and river beds, which make up most of Spiti's 7589 square kilometers, were deemed unsuitable for farming.

Spiti people never performed seasonal long-distance migratory herding as Kinnaur and Lahaul people do.

Maintaining livestock inside Spiti for the whole year set strict constraints on animal husbandry expansion, resulting in a significant scarcity of animal feed during the winters, which impacted population size.

The most fabulous views are from 4000 meters above sea level, right below the permanent snow line. On the snowline of a mountain or hill slope, eternal snow may be observed. However, any snow that falls below the line melts over the summer.

In Spiti, ancient rights define each village's pastureland regions, and a village's cattle-keeping capacity is determined by how well-supplied it is.

The communities of Pin Valley, which have hundreds of square kilometers of undulating alpine pasture, sustain many animals. Gaddis from Bharmour and grazers from Kullu district visit and travel along the Kunzam-Chandratal border with Lahaul.

Changes in Spiti society during the last few decades:

In the evolution of Spiti society, the latter half of the twentieth century has marked a period of profound transformation. The Sino-Indian conflict and the attainment of independence by the nation have underscored the importance of development and communication within Spiti. These events, accompanied by the influx of capital, manpower, and external influences, initiated a transformative process that has impacted every aspect of life in Spiti. The reinforcement of these novel directions has coincided with the closure of Tibet, severing Spiti society's traditional conduit of cultural influence.

The ancient irrigation system in Spiti

Spiti's unique contribution to farming is its irrigation system, which uses canals (Khuls/Ura) to transport water from the glacier to the hamlet. Khuls traverse great distances, with some khuls stretching nearly ten kilometers and lasting decades. Khul's critical location is at the glacier's head, which is being tapped. The khul goes to a circular tank in the settlement, which controls water flow. When there is a lack of water supply during irrigation, water is collected through the night via khul and discharged into the exit canal the following day.

The tank is nearly empty by the end of the day, and the exit is shut. Every day, the water cycle repeats. The success of the Khul system is due to the inhabitants of Spiti cooperating and sharing.

Irrigation culture is excellent in meeting the needs and capacities of cultivable land.⁶

One of the reasons why residents in Spiti aim to avoid splitting landholdings is the scarcity of water. As a result, the eldest son receives everything, including land, farm tools, the family home, and the family's water rights. His younger siblings either enter Buddhist monasteries as monks or nuns, or they work in the ordinary home.

As previously stated, the Spitian family is founded on primogeniture. After his marriage, the eldest son inherits all of the family's farms and residences, which he names Khangchen Chemgo (chemgo means eldest or head). The older brothers are taken to a nearby monastery as adults (There are five significant Buddhist monasteries in Spiti).

Tabo monastery, Gungri Monastery, Dhankar monastery, Sakya monastery (Kaza), and Kee monastery are the five largest and oldest monasteries in Spiti. It used to be nearly compulsory to send a younger child. However, many youngsters are attending school and can find work. Given the importance of education nowadays, some parents would rather pay the penalty to the individual monastery than have their children become Lams. Monasteries, on the other hand, are culturally significant in Spiti.

Water rights are still controlled by members of the Khangchen (Big households), who are descendants of the village's founders. Khangchen members irrigate their fields first during water shortages before allowing others to do so. This method ensures that labor demand is evenly distributed throughout the harvest season. Because the Khangchen crops ripen early, the other families are free to assist with the harvest. According to necessity, water sharing and distribution can be updated and changed every season.

However, the water share is not permitted to be leased or sold, as this limitation protects the Khangchen's position (Big houses).

The irrigation system in the Spiti has evolved over millennia as an inherent part of the region's cultural processes rather than as technological development.

The Social structure of Spiti:

Spiti and Pin valley residents have Mongoloid looks and are muscular and well-formed. Even women are powerful, and most of them are naturally hard workers. The inhabitants of Spiti are kind, social, happy, and skilled agriculturists and artisans. The caste system is simply a divide between wage earners such as craftsmen, agriculturists, musicians, etc.

As a result, the caste system is mostly absent in the Spiti valley, which is a very positive development. However, a caste divide runs from upper to lower castes, which prevents marriages between the castes indicated above. Nonos (traditional rajas or Wazirs), Khangchen (Big Houses), and the Khingchung are among the elite castes in the Spiti valley (small houses). 'Zo' (Blacksmiths) and 'Betas' (musicians) are two lesser castes in Spiti who claim dominance over one another.⁷

⁶ Bajpai, S.C., Lahaul-Spiti: a forbidden land in the Himalayas, p..132

⁷ Negi, T.S. Schedule Tribes of Himachal Pradesh: A profile (Meerut, 1976), p.113

According to the customary law of primogeniture in Spiti, the eldest son inherits both father and maternal property. Marriages between Khangchen households take place solely inside the Khangchen family. If there is no son in the family, the eldest daughter inherits the Khangchen family's inherent property. Similarly, the Nono family is superior to the Khangchen family. The Nono family likewise prefers to marry inside the Nonos clan, however, there are only five of them living. However, the grip of Nono is slipping in Spiti, and they are now marrying their daughters to good Khangchen families, even though they do not allow Khangchen daughters into their homes.

The low caste like Zoh (blacksmith) and Betas (musician) could take place only among their respective community.⁸ Likewise, the Khangchens usually marry a Khangchen families and Khingchungs marry Khingchung families. But sometimes Khangchens do match Khingchung, especially when it's a love marriage. In arranged marriages Khingchens only try to marry a Khangchen family. As mentioned, Khangchens could marry Khingchung but both Khangchen and Khingchung families strictly avoid getting maaaried to blacksmiths and musicians families as they are considered the lower caste in Spiti valley.

The rule of customary primogeniture law, which allows only the eldest son of a family to inherit the real family estate and marry accordingly, is the foundation of social structure in Spiti. This customary law is not practiced in the Kinnaur, but Spiti still follows it till today.

Spiti's Marriage and Divorce System:

Marriages in Spiti:

Arranged and khadum (akin to love marriage) weddings are the two most prevailing forms of marriage in Spiti.

a. Arranged Marriages in Spiti:

In Spiti's arranged marriages, when a boy's parents identify a suitable match, they consult an astrologer (known as Jowa) to ascertain the compatibility of the couple. Upon receiving the astrologer's blessing, the boy's father visits the girl's family, bearing Chang (liquor) and Khataks (traditional scarves) along with the marriage proposal. The engagement ceremony, called 'Migur Chang' (meaning "no back-off"), marks a commitment stage after multiple such visits and mutual agreement on the proposal. The term "Migur Chang" underscores the commitment of both parties, ensuring no withdrawal from the marriage arrangement thereafter. Traditional Spiti marriages involve elaborate ceremonies, which can be financially burdensome for landless castes, leading them to avoid such practices due to the high costs involved.

b. Khadun Marriage (Similar to love marriage):

In Spiti, the concept of khadum marriage resembles what we typically refer to as a love marriage, yet it carries distinct differences. In these unions, individuals sometimes wed partners of their own choice, defying parental expectations. Khadum marriages stand in contrast to the conventional marital norms of the region. One drawback of such marriages is the potential loss of inheritance rights to paternal property for the marrying individuals. However, with mutual agreement between

⁸ Bajpai, S, C., Lahaul-Spiti: A forbidden Land in the Himalayas, pp. 54-58

families, parents may choose to reinstate these rights and provide their children with their rightful share.⁹

In Spiti, the divorce system is as follows

Divorce after marriage is not as hard-hitting in Spiti as it is in the larger towns and the plains. The 'Kupachacha' or 'Tshud-Thwagtsi' rite, in which a woolen thread is tied to the little fingers of both lovers in the company of some elderly people, determines the divorce problem. A light is sometimes used to separate the woolen thread in this process. After clutching the ends of woolen thread, the spouses (husband and wife) sometimes say the following sentences:

"Our father and mother provided, while another father and mother took away; as it was not our destiny to agree, we parted with mutual kindness." Following this separation procedure, each person is free to remarry anywhere they desire.

Divorce is allowed in Spiti under the following conditions: adultery, incompatibility, sickness, barrenness, gambling habit (in the case of males), carelessness, and others. The amount of compensation that the divorce petitioner must give the other party is between Rs. 500 and Rs. 1500. If the husband files for divorce on his own, he must return the dowry and any other gifts provided to the bride by her parents during the marriage. Suppose both husband and wife agree to separate: In that case, a conference of significant and respective villagers is conducted, and the facts of separation are announced after a thorough examination of the facts and numbers presented by both parties.

The Spiti Valley's fairs and festivals

Fairs and festivals are observed and celebrated in the Spiti valley with dancing, singing, and merriment. Spiti people dress up in ancient and bizarre costumes like masks, horns, and elaborate skirts for some festivals, although these items have no religious meaning. The 'Ladarcha Fair' is the most significant fair of the year. This historic fair used to be held in Kibber village, but now it is held in Kaza (the administrative center of the Spiti valley) every year in August.¹⁰

The Sisu fair and the Patan valley's Phagli fair are two of the more important and well-known fairs in the Lahaul & Spiti region.

Among all the fairs, Ladarsha is the most well-known and significant in the Spiti valley, where traders from Ladakh, Lahaul, Bushar, and Spiti gather in August to exchange goods. However, due to the closure of commerce with Tibet, this trade has lost its value.

In Spiti, there are a variety of dances to choose from. The dancing audience is kept company by the peculiar music of Spiti. Men and women dance together with the majority of the time, but ladies never dance alone. Men, on the other hand, may dance alone. Nagars, Dholas, flutes, and a bronze thali are the most often utilized instruments.

⁹ Dr. Y. S. Parmar, *Paliandry in Himachal*, Delhi, 1975.

¹⁰ Negi, T.S., *Schedule Tribes of Himachal Pradesh*, pp. 112-114

Traditional dance is divided into Ghure, Shehni, and Garpi.

Ghure:

Dance is a type of dance in which the dancers are not allowed to join their arms. They create a group by moving in a circle and semi-circle. In this dancing form, no musical instruments will be played. Here, an older guy takes the lead, and footwork is a crucial consideration. The dancers will repeat the phrases sung by the dance's initiator. We could observe an example of combining dance and singing in this dance form.

Shehni:

Dance is a kind of dance in which men and women participate and dance together. It's similar to a couple's dance. The drums, nagaras, and flute will provide the music for this sort of dance, which is devoid of songs.¹¹

Garphi:

In Lahaul and Spiti, the dancing form is one of the oldest. The moves in this dancing genre are neither regular nor controlled. The dancer in this scene depicts the expression of joy and relief from suffering. Because the dancers are free to create their patterns and moves, this is the most basic dance style. Garphi dance is mainly performed when participants are inebriated with local liquor (Chang) and have little time to follow certain dance moves and formations.

Betas:

They are dancers who are members of the professional dance community. However, their financial situation is dire, and they are a small group. They do, however, execute seven various types of dances as necessary.

Dance Forms in Spiti:

There are seven dance forms in Spiti which are as follows:

1. Gar Dance: Gar dance is a slow-moving dance genre performed by males and girls separately. Music provided by Hessi accompany this dance.
2. Jabur: is a group dance style in which males and ladies perform together without the accompaniment of instruments. Hands are crossed over backs and joined to form a long chain of dancers while executing this sort of dance. The first half of the chain will be made up of males, while the second half will be made up of females. Whatever tune the men dancers sing, the female dancers will respond appropriately.
3. Bukum: is a dance form that Lamas solely perform. The Hessi provide the music and tunes here. Despite minor differences, this dance resembles a Gar dance form.
4. Devil is a religious dance performed exclusively during Guetor fairs by holy Lamas. The

¹¹ Ibid.p.113

dancers wear masks that resemble demon spirits and hold a Khukharis in their hands. As the name implies, it is not to be confused with a devil dance.

5. Ritual or Devil Dance (Chham): The Lamas execute a holy mask dance in front of enormous crowds in monasteries during some key festival occasions.

Although the dance genre is known as Ritual dance, it is also known as Devil dance since the performers wear devilish masks. All of these masks, like Tibetan art, are made by the Lamas themselves using their expertise. These masks are the monastery's property and are stored in excellent condition at the monastery's storeroom.

The Lamas, according to legend, wear these masks to fight evil spirits. The figures with demonic looks are also thought to be defenders of religion and represent Bodhisattvas' scary elements.¹²

In October, the Gutor festival is held in Kee monastery, Tabo monastery, Dhankar monastery, and Pin monastery, respectively. These festivals are held to protect the people of Spiti from illnesses and ensure good health, happiness, and overall prosperity in society.¹³

Role Played by the Monasteries and Lamas:

The Spiti valley has always been a Buddhist-dominated region with a population of 100 percent Buddhists. The Lochen Rinchen Zangpo founded the Tabo monastery in 996 CE, the first trace of Buddhism in Spiti.

The role played by the Monasteries:

Tabo Monastery:

Tabo monastery is a live representation of old Indo-Tibetan art. It has been visited by eminent scholars since Rev. Fracke made its significance known across the world in 1909. According to scholars, one of the inscriptions unearthed in the temple enabled researchers to determine the approximate year of the temple's creation. The monastery is supposed to have been established by king Chang-chub Od's forefathers in the ape year, forty-six years before the monastery was repaired.

As a result, according to Snellgrove, the monastery was built in 996 A.D. As a result, Tabo monastery has been and will continue to be a significant religious and cultural site for the people of Spiti, serving as the region's identity to the rest of the world.

Kee Monastery:

Kee monastery is another place of importance in Spiti that has garnered the attention of scholars and researchers. According to Harcourtin 1868, it was the greatest of all the monasteries in Spiti at the time of his field observation.

In Spiti, monasteries are the most important part of society, and their influence on the people is

¹² Bajpai, S.C., op.cit., pp.66-69

¹³ Handa, O.C., op.cit., p.15

palpable. People are very thankful to the lamas at the monastery because they do sTsipa (astrologer work) and execute numerous religious rites.

The importance of Lamas and Monasteries in Spiti:

Although, since ancient times, Lamas at the monastery have been of enormous importance to the people of Spiti. Lamas are still revered and adored by the people of Spiti. They do a lot of religious rituals.

Monasteries have made a significant contribution to society via their successes in the fields of education and culture. By popularising written language and literacy, they have contributed to the abolition of many primitive beliefs, superstitions, and morals.

Monasteries have made significant contributions to the development of arts and crafts. The contribution of monastery-schools is that the majority of people in Spiti and the western Himalaya can read and write Tibetan Language. It is crucial to mention that during ancient times, the considerable number of literates were monks and nuns, who played an important part in the local socio-cultural life of Spiti. The missionary enthusiasm of devout monks to teach youngsters in their individual communities that, even in the most distant areas, practically everyone can read and write Tibetan because of the presence of Lamas.

Monasteries gained worldly influence after the mid-14th century and took on economic functions like money lending, trade and commerce, banking, and so on. During times of food scarcity, for example, grain was given from the monastery's buffer supply. Beneficiaries, on the other hand, were compelled to refill the same item at the following harvest.

Monasteries financial holdings rose as a result of these methods, and residents were able to get food grains in times of need and scarcity. Although the monks' economic efforts may not have been of great use to the general public, they did provide psychological solace. As a result, people look to the monastery as a saviour who will assist them in their time of need.

With the growth of the Gelug tradition, monasteries were able to supplement their revenue by taking fees and charity for the lamas' religious services. Offerings, harvest alms, and other religious activities are included in these religious services. The financing of land was the monks' oldest and most essential source of wealth. The major endowment of the five monasteries in the Spiti valley is 'pun,' which consists of a specified percentage of the overall money generated from the specific 'Kothis.'

By luring young people away from society and into monastic life, the monastery has also robbed society of its most productive personnel. Many of those adolescents, if given the opportunity to serve the public good, might have made people's lives more affluent and comfortable. As a result, the deeply rooted effect of monastic principles has suppressed the people's desire for better living circumstances.¹⁴

But it is only because of the multipurpose nature of these monastic organisations, which they have maintained with the utmost piety, that people's interest in them has endured to this day. As a result,

¹⁴ Bajpai, S.C. Lahaul-Spiti: A Forbidden Land in the Himalayas, pp. 66-68

monasteries are unquestionably important and have greatly benefited people, therefore overcoming all of their flaws and bringing many benefits to the Spiti valley.¹⁵

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¹⁵ Ibid.