Chapter III

PHYSICAL FEATURES AND SOCIO-CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF SPITI VALLEY

The name Spiti is locally pronounced as ‘Piti,’ meaning a middle province in Tibetan dialect. During the past, it remained as a chief of the overbearing neighbouring clans, including Tibet. In 1846, the British took possession of Spiti and a hereditary chieftain, ‘The Nona’ was entrusted with the powers of revenue collection and trial of minor criminal cases. In 1941, Spiti with Lahaul, was made a separate Tehsil and then a district in the year 1960.¹

Physical Features

Spiti covers 7,589 sq.kms. of area and lies between latitude 31° 42’ and 33 North longitude 77° 37’ and 78° 35’ east, bordered by Ladakh on the north, Tibet on the east, Kinnaur and Kullu on the South and Lahaul on the West. Lying on the leeward side of the greater Himalayan ranges, the lack of precipitation and minimum elevations of over 3350 meters, combine to produce in Spiti a bleak, awe inspiring terrain, seemingly devoid of vegetative cover and one of the most harshest climates in the world.²

² Ibid., p.5.
The upper Spiti valley called Tud consists largely of high mountainous terrain breaking sharply near the river valley into gently sloping terraces which end in cliff faces along the river, flowing at over 13000ft. The middle region, identifiable with the area called Bhar, opens out somewhat with the river side terraces gaining in extent and on the left the rocky escarpments frowning 2000ft. A little lower down, the river Pin, the largest tributary of the Spiti meets its parent from the south. This valley forms the third region. Famous for its Chamurti horses and herb wealth, Pin valley's terraces and pastures bear a similarity to the Zanskar area of Ladakh. The lowest region of Spiti called Sham stretches from the boundaries of Bhar to Sumdo, where the Parechu river coming down from Tibet joins the Spiti and marks the boundary with district Kinnaur. Gradually lower in altitude, Sham even permits the growth of fruit trees and the terraced quality of the riverside terrain gradually giving way to the steep rocky gorge, through which the Spiti runs hereafter till it empties into the Sutluj.

Geological Background

Spiti’s environment must be understood in the context of its geological history. The present location of Spiti was in pre-historic times the bed of the Tethys sea, separating the Asian mainland from the Gondwara continent. As the latter moved towards the former, the tectonic plates rubbed against each other, and the movements

4 Ibid - p.11.
of the earth’s crust pushed up the intermediate ground of the Tethys sea. Over time the sea dried up, the greater Himalayas rose to create the arid climate of today and Spiti’s landscape became a geologist’s paradise. Its exposed terrain, over altitudinal variations reflects chronologically distinct geological age from the pre-cambrian to the recent in pristine formations. The old sedimentary deposits forming the river valleys, are easily erodable and the glacial movements of the Pliestocene era have left a deep impact. Now all major streams meander over wide beds of sand, gravel and stone leaving steep sided high terraces on one bank or the other, and rush through rocky gorges at the end of their course.

Vegetation

Like all deserts, Spiti is not completely lacking in vegetation and quite a few range of flora is found depending on altitude. From the climatically and the vegetative point of view, the region can be divided into three zones. Covering an area of about 2200 sq.kms, a zone with an altitude of over 5000 meters, whose most part in under perpetual snow cover and permits only a limited growth of moss and lichen. The middle zone covering 4300 sq. kms. with an altutude ranging from 4000 to 5000 meters has an alpine character and is rich in grasses like Poa and Agropyron with a scattered bush growth of Juniper, brich and rhododendron. The lowest zone with an altutude from 3000 to 4000 meters permits growth up to six months a year. Grass and shrub growth is scattered sparsely, over both hill sides and along the main river, in the 1000 sq. kms. covered by this zone. Tree growth also make an

---

6 Ibid.p  
7 Ibid.
appearance along water courses and near villages and scattered growth of salix willow, poplar and juniper macroponda can be seen.\textsuperscript{8}

In terms of area, the cold desert of Spiti may be too tiny as compared so four major deserts of the world e.g. deserts of western and south-western North America, Patagonica, Turkistan and the Gobi. But in terms of its high mountains, extreme climate and poor economic conditions of the people, it is one of the worst scourged areas on earth. The condition of ladakh, yet another mountain desert in its neighbourhood, is however, different. Apart from its other bounties of nature in Ladakh, valleys are laden with fruit and its lush meadows are a heaven for the animal wealth.

Climate

Spiti has only two seasons - a shortlived summer and a long freezing winter.\textsuperscript{9} Snow may fall from September to April. During the peak winter season, the mercury dips down to \(-20^\circ\text{c}\). During heavy snowfall temperature recorded in \(-30^\circ\text{c}\). The snow surface becomes hard and while walking, the feet do not sink into snow.

There is practically no help from the skies during summer months. The rain bearing clouds beat against the great mountains, dissipating their strength in vain. The months are invariably dry.


The origin of the Spiti people is uncertain although some linguistic research has tried to trace links with the central Indian Munda. First known references are from the seventh century AD and show the existence of a Hindu kingdom. However by the eleventh century Buddhism clearly established as the dominant religion, following the political and cultural supremacy established over this area by Guge (Western Tibet). In 1841, are Dogras under Jorawar Singh, took over Spiti followed by a marauding raid by the Sikhs. In 1846 following the first Anglo-Sikh war, Spiti was among the areas made over to the Dogras but in the same year the British exchanged it for other territory and it became part of British India till independence.10

Administrative Structure: A Traditional Set-up

Spiti was traditionally divided into number of Kohis for administrative and revenue arrangements.11 Each Kothi had a number of villages in a given geographical area. The land owning members of a village would elect a head man (gadpo chungam) and these head man would in turn elect a Kothi representative (gadpochenmo) for the Nono's Council. The Nono of Spiti were perhaps the representative of the paramount power and exercised administrative and tribute collecting functions through the gadpochenmo. Given the distance and extremes of weather prevailing for many months, the Britishers interfared little with this system. The gadpochenmos became lambardars for their respective Kohis and the Nons was


designated as Wazir of Spiti with some magisterial powers in addition to his duties with regard to revenue.

Social Structure and Economy - Traditional

Traditional Spitian economy was like most pre-capitalist modes based on agriculture. Villages were never large and consisted of clusters of houses, grouped close together near a spring or perennial glacial stream. This was essential since Spiti’s annual precipitation in the form of rainfall is less than 17 cm and assured irrigation is the only basis for any cultivation. This combined with the fact that snow cover on land can exceed six months even in inhabited areas, of Spiti, there is cultivation of a single crop. Nature puts limit on the spatial and demographic expansion. Spiti’s traditional response to ensure an equilibrium, between population and the environmental resources available, was the evolution of a system of primogeniture. The eldest son inherits the major portion of the land holding (Khangchen) on attaining maturity and acquiring a family. The parents with any younger siblings move to a subsistence holding (Khin Jung). The eldest daughter on marriage inherits all the jewellery and younger brothers and sisters are expected to become celibate monks (lamas) and Nuns (chomos). These conditions would change only where there were no children, or the eldest voluntarily relinquished the assigned role.

---


Isolation and Limited Trading Activity

Unlike its neighbouring areas of Kinnaur and Lahaul, Spiti was never located on an important trade route. The easiest pass from Tibet to Rampur and the plains beyond (Shipkila) lay in Kinnaur and the main route from Ladakh to Kulu passed through Lahaul.\textsuperscript{14} This fact had a number of fallouts. Isolated, cut-off by high ranges, Spiti neither developed a mercantile community dealing in money, nor any extensive knowledge or contact with outside people. Lacking in any important mineral resources, Spiti’s only tradeable commodity was some surplus in the produce of barley. This was bartened with the nomadic herdsmen of Changthang, Rupshu and Tibet coming over the relatively difficult Prangla Pass in the North for wool, pashmina, Yaks, Churpe (local cheese), and some semi-precious stones. Along with the barley went a few goods from the lower areas of Rampur and Kullu in exchange for the commodities brought by the northern herdsmen. Except for this marginal trade the only other outside contact was a limited annual labour migration to Bushahr from Pin valley. The settlement operation of 1911-12 probably reflected a land utilisation pattern undisturbed for centuries. It showed that in five koths of Spiti a total of 989 hectares were cultivated lands in the villages and 164 hectares were uncultivated consisting of habitation, water courses, thrashing floors, small tree groves of willow and poplar and few small the lakes. Lands only in the immediate environs of the villages were measured consisting of just over 12 sq.km. and the vast pastures, mountains, glaciers and river beds constituting the bulk of Spiti’s 7589 sq.km. were not considered worth for cultivation.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{14} A.F.P. Harchourt, \textit{op. cit.}, pp.31-32.

\textsuperscript{15} Census report of 1883 by Sir Denzil Ibbeston, vol.III, L-Z (Lahore 1911), p.11.
In terms of animal husbandry practices the other major difference with Kinnaur and to a lesser extent Lahaul is that Spiti never practiced the seasonal long distance transhumance of flocks. The practice of holding stock within Spiti round the year, imposed definite limits to expansion in animal husbandry (given the extreme scarcity of fodder in winter) and in turn affected population size also.\(^\text{16}\)

The best summer pastures are at heights of 4000 mts. just below permanent snow line. The snowline on a mountain or hill slope which represents the lower limit of perpetual snow; below the line, any snow which falls is melted during the summer. It is not a sharply defined line, for towards the margin of perpetual snow the covering becomes patchy and irregular, until finally it disappears altogether. The altitude of snowline varies considerably in different regions, and in general falls from the tropics to the polar region. Here the melting snows supply moisture for the longest period and provide ideal conditions for nutritious alpine grasses. In winter any area free of snow or with shrub growth constitutes pasture.

In Spiti age old rights define the pasture areas of each village and the livestock holding capacity of a particular village obviously depends on how well endowed it is. Thus the villages of Pin valley and the upper areas of the Bhar, which possess literally hundreds of sq. kms. of rolling alpine pasture in close proximity to villages, support large numbers of livestock, specially of heavier milch and draught animals. On the border with Lahaul in the Kunzum-Chandratal area gaddis visit from Bharmour and graziers from Kulu. Down the valley near Gue, graziers from the Spillo area of Kinnaur, and in the vast upper reaches of the Pin valley

\(^{16}\) Himachal District Gazetteers: Lahaul and Spiti (Simla 1975), p.128.
across the Bhaba and other passes, come numerous flocks from the Pandrabis area of Kinnaur.

**Traditional Balance with Environment**

Given the fragile nature of the ecological set-up in Spiti, it requires a careful balance between the demands made on it and the requirements of regeneration for its maintenance. The efforts of scholars and development agencies are presently concentrated on the physical aspects of the environmental crisis affecting the Himalayas. Apart from the effect of natural, God-caused disasters it is man himself who is seen as the cause of a crisis which has already affected millions of people inhabiting the Himalayas. Particularly, the sudden growth in the population of the region is thought to have led not only to massive deforestation, but also to a colossal human exodus.  

The system of social organization for population control adopted in Spiti kept this balance reasonably well. The isolation and difficult conditions of existence foreclosed any major in-migration and a steady population estimate of four to five thousand for centuries, achieved a harmonious equilibrium with the physical environment.

**Changes in Last Few Decades in Spitian Society**

The second half of the 20th century has brought considerable change. Independence and the Sino-Indian conflict have brought an increased stress on

---

development and means of communication bringing with them money, men and outside influences which have set in motion an irreversible process altering every facet of existence in Spiti. Reinforcing these new directions has been the closure of Tibet, cutting off the traditional source of cultural influence on Spitian society. 18

**Irrigation**

Spiti’s unique contribution to farming is an irrigation system that utilises khuls (channels) to carry water from glacier to village. The khuls often span long distances, running down precipitations mountain slopes and across crags and crevices. Some Kuls are 10 kms long and have existed for centuries. The crucial position of a Kul is its head at the glaciers that is being tapped. In the village, the Kul leads to a circular tank from which the flow of water can be regulated. For instance, when there is need to irrigate, water is let out of the tank in a trickle. Water from the kul is collected throughout the night and released into exit channel in the morning. By evening, the tank is practically empty, and the exit is closed. The cycle is repeated daily. The Kul system succeeds because Spiti residents co-operate and share. The culture also is instrumental in maintaining the carrying capacity of the surrounding cultivable land. 19

Because of the limited water availability, inheritance laws in Spiti traditionally seek to prevent fragmentation of landholdings. The eldest son inherits not only the land, but also the farm implements, the family house and the family’s water rights.

18 Hindustan Times, 12 August, 1985: Lahaul and Spiti Looking Ahead.

His siblings either serve in the common household or more likely become monks or nuns in Buddhist monasteries. Thus a sort of population control has been evolved which serves to stave off pressure on the landholdings.

As started earlier, the Spitian family is based on primogeniture. After the marriage the eldest son inherits all the family fields and houses and proudly designates himself as ‘Khan-Ch’en’ (big house / baraghar). The parents retire to ‘Khin-Jung’ (small house / chota ghar) and receive a small piece of land for livelihood. The adult younger brothers are sent to the nearby monastery (there are five in Spiti) where they undergo training for attaining Lamahood under the strict discipline of Lamas. Earlier, refusal to join the monastery was termed as an act of eternal damnation. But now, to be able to avail of employment opportunities, more and more children are going to schools. Only one son may go to the monastery. Some of the parents are preferring to pay a penalty to the monastery instead of sending their children to ‘gompas’. However the monasteries are centres of rich cultural heritage. Gradually, the old set of norms regarding sending children to the monasteries (gompas) is undergoing substantial change, which has its fall back on the social and ecological setting of the Spiti valley.20

Water rights are owned exclusively by members of the ‘Bada Ghars’ (big houses), who are descendents of the original settlers or founders of the village. This system establishes the pre-eminence of the Bada Ghars in the local social hierarchy. The greater the share of a family’s water rights, the more land it controls. When a good snowfall assures abundant water, kul water is freely dispensed, but when water

is scarce, equality gives way to a preferential system. During a water shortage, Bada Ghar members irrigate their fields first, and others get water only later in the season. This practice has the advantage of ensuring that the labour demand is spread over the entire harvest season, because the ‘Bada Ghars’ crops ripen early, and other families are free to help in harvesting. This spacing-out of labour does away with demand peaking at the same time throughout the valley and provides a firm basis for community labour. Water shares can be renewed and adjusted every season according to need, but a share can not be lent, sold or disposed of in perpetuity. This restriction preserves the position of the Bada-Ghar families.

The irrigation system of the Spiti has evolved over centuries not merely as a technological innovation, rather as an inextricable part of its cultural processes. Tuned to Spiti’s agrarian rhythms and ecological limits, the traditional irrigation system has essential to its working a complex hierarchy of access and usage. The ‘Bada-Ghars’ or the initial settlers by controlling access to water in periods of scarcity comprised the peasant elites. These elites also articulated mechanisms of control through religious practices and rituals. The ‘Bada Ghars’ with their larger agricultural surpluses funded monasteries and usually took the initiative in regulating and maintaining the elaborate rituals.

Caste, Class, Marriage and Social Stratification

The people of Spiti and Pin valleys are having completely Mangoloid features, but are stout and well built. Women are also very strong and mostly of hard working nature. The Spiti peasant is good natured cheerful and sociable, and competent both
as an agriculturist and artisan. The caste system is more or less non-existent in the Spiti valley. There is only class distinction between the agriculturists and artisans, musicians and others who live by wages. This class distinction prevents marriages between these classes.\(^\text{21}\) This class distinction stems from high castes and low castes. High castes include ‘khangchen’ (Big House), ‘KhingJung’ (Small house) and ‘Nonos’ (traditional Rajas or Wazirs). In lower castes are included ‘Betas Hesi) and ‘Zows’ (Blacksmiths) who claim superiority over each other. According to customary law of primogeniture which is prevalent there, the paternal and maternal property is inherited by the eldest son, or in his absence by the daughter. Generally Khangchen marriage alliances are made within Khangchen community. ‘Nono’ community prefer marriages within ‘Nonos’, but sadly there are only five ‘Nonos’ family left. This is a vanishing nobility in Spiti, and therefore they give their daughters in marriages to good khangchang families but do not accept their daughters in their families. But there are few exceptional instances where Nono boys have accepted Khangchang girls, and marriages both ways between ‘Khangchen’ and ‘Khangchang’ communities are performed. Among the low caste of ‘Betas’ (musicians) and ‘Zows’ (Blacksmiths) marriages take place within their respective classes.\(^\text{22}\)

The rule of primogeniture is the basis of social stratification in Spiti, which allows only eldest male issue of a household to marry and inherit the real family estate. Parents retire to a separate household with their unmarried daughters. The rest brothers are supposed neither to marry nor to attain the status of social fatherhood. They normally share their eldest brother’s wife. The head of a Khangchen is

\(^{21}\) Negi, T.S. Scheduled Tribes of Himachal Pradesh: A profile (Meerut, 1976), p.113.

\(^{22}\) Bajpai, S.C., op. cit., pp.54-55.
responsible for providing maintenance to 'Khinjung' and to the monastery (gompa). The core of a Khinjung household unit consists of two spouses. After the death of either of the two, the separate identity of Khinjung is lost and the surviving spouses rejoins Kangchen.

The process of stratification in Spiti started with the introduction and implementation of anti-polyandry acts in the early forties of this century. Soon afterwards fissures appeared in the polyandrous arrangements of Kangchen. Younger brothers, who were not allowed to marry or inherit property, started asserting their rights of marriage and property, by establishing separate households. Such households are said to be 'hinjung'. Interestingly, a few Lamas, who could not stand to rigorous monastic life, also started marrying and establishing neolocal households thereby joining and strengthening the ranks of hinjung.

The political superiority of Kangchen stems from the law of primogeniture. Like family estate, ruler's title (nonship) also runs in the line of eldest male issue. The nonos in return, appoint their revenue collectors in each village from the Kangchen. These revenue collectors are known as 'lumbardar'. After inception of statutory village council (Panchayat), the lumbardar becomes its head (Sarpanch) and two other villagers also belonging to Kangchen become its members. Being the inheritors of the family estate, the Kangchen holds an absolute sway over economic

---


24 Ibid.
resources and forces the hinjung to accept a subordinate economic status of labourers. The Khangchen normally does not allow the hinjung to cultivate their self-acquired land till the sowing in former's filed is completed. Like wise, the hinjung are allowed to collect fuel wood only when the Khangchen have sufficient stock of the same. The Kul (Canal) bringing precious water to the village, is under the absolute control of village council mainly represented by the Khangchen. Hence, hinjung fields remain dry where as the Khangchen have surplus water which they use as a tool to exploit hinjung labour. Likewise, family estate, the family deity and family name is also in the line of eldest male issue. This helps Khangchen to attain a superiority over the hinjung on ritual level also, thus pushing them to the bottom rung of the hierarchical ladder. Hence, the Khangchen hold the top rung and Khinjung gets an intermediate status and hinjung comes to the lower rung by the above stated social customs. Thus, one can say that the fission and fusion of household in Spiti occur in the three stages.

In Spiti there are generally two types of marriages - arranged and khadum. In arranged marriage, the parents of a marriageable boy spot a particular girl and consult a Jhoya (astrologer) about the suitability of the union of the boy and the girl. If the consent of the astrologer is obtained, the father of the boy visits the parents of the girl with a proposal along with Chhang and Khataks (liquor and etables). This process of visits, continue for several times till it is finally accepted. When a proposal is accepted, the engagement ceremony takes place which is known as 'Migeor Chhang'. This means that after this no one will back out of the marriage proposal. On this occasion, huge quantity of Chhang and Arak (liquor) is consumed
by the relatives of the boy and the girl along with the villagers. A complete marriage in Spiti involves a lot of expenditure in several complicated rituals, and therefore, the landless classes generally avoid it. But sometimes other classes also postpone it to be celebrated at the convenience of the parents of the boys. In the intervening period the girl is taken after the Migeor Chhang to the house of the boy and lives there as a wedded wife. The marriage party, which is neither accompanied by the boy nor his father, is led by an important person of the village (Nyervon) selected for his qualities of wit and humour, songs and repertoire. It is never necessary that only a relative of the boy or the family should be selected. The well-dressed marriage party which starts eating and drinking in the evening leaves the boy’s house early in the morning for the house of the girl. It carries two arrows along and one of these is given to the mother of the girl as a Souvenir when the girl is formally taken over. The historical tradition with respect to the arrow is deep rooted in Tibetan mythology.

**Khadum marriage**

Sometimes boys marry the girls of their choice against the wishes of their parents. This system, which is contrary to the system of arranged marriages, is known as ‘Khadum’ marriage. Under the khadum marriage, the boy or the girl loose all the rights to the property of the father. However, in some cases the parents decide to bless the marriage and rehabilitate their son or daughter and restore their right to the property.

---


26 Dr. Y.S. Parmar, Polyandry in Himalayas, Delhi, 1975.
The Socio-economic and Cultural role of Monastery

In a folksong of kinnaur, which is supposed to be of ancient origin, it is said that when the Gods of kinnaur divided the territories among themselves, 'Spiti' area or 'Spiti Nala' fell in the share of one of the eighteen gods, which points to the ancient relations between the two states.²⁷

At present Buddhism is the only religion practised in Spiti. Establishment of Tabo monastery in the tenth-eleventh century by Rinchen Zangpo is the earliest evidence of existence of Buddhism in Spiti.²⁸

Tabo Monastery

Tabo monastery is the living symbol of ancient Inod-Tibetan art. The Monastery has been visited by eminent scholars, since its importance was known to the world by Rev. Francke in 1909. This spread the name of Spiti to far places. The importance of Tabo in the world of art can be appreciated best in the words of D.L. Snellgrove.²⁹

"Sections of the ceilings at the Tabo are decorated with motifs which recalled at once the caves of Ajanta, graceful forms, flowers and birds

and twisting garlands. If such exquisite work was being done in Western Tibet in the eleventh and succeeding centuries how much beauty of just this kind must have existed in India of the preceding centuries."

One of the inscriptions found in the temple has enabled the scholars to fix the approximate date of foundation of the temple of Tabo. It said that the temple was founded by the ancestor of king Chang-chub 'Od in the ape year, forty-six years before the repair of the temple was carried out. Thus Snellgrove says that the temple must have been founded in A.D. 996 or 1008. \(^\text{30}\) Hence, throughout the time Tabo monastery remained an important religious-cultural place.

**Kye Monastery** - Kye monastery is another site of interest in Spiti which has attracted the attention of Scholars and researchers. Harcourt observed in 1868 that it was the largest of the temples in Spiti and there resided 200-300 monks. Mere size of the temple complex impressed the scholars so much as to equate it in antiquity with the Tabo. \(^\text{31}\)

In Spiti, where the monasteries are to a greater extent the arbiters of religio-spiritual dispensation in the society, their impact on the people has been profound in every sphere. The lamas there perform all the religious rites for their lay patrons. The lama in the astrologer (rtsis-pa) for them and perform various religions ceremonies.

---

\(^\text{30}\) Ibid., p.84.

But surprisingly, lamas do not play any role in marriage ceremonies. The reason for this may be that the lama would not be a party to the establishment of a household as a result of restrictions imposed on them.

The contribution of monasteries in the field of education and culture has been one of its remarkable achievements, transcending all socio-religious barriers and ensuring it a universally revered status. These have helped in dispelling many primitive beliefs, superstitions and dogmas by popularizing the written language and literacy. A more pragmatic and ethical and less superstitious method of education was introduced by them on a well tried Indian system of study, which not only included scriptural education but also covered literature, medicine, art, craft, philosophy, astrology. 32

There has been immense contribution of monasteries in the development of arts and crafts. These institutions served as scriptoria for illustrating and copying manuscripts and as workshops for casting images, painting murals and thangkas (old-paintings on silk fabric). The contribution of the monastery-schools in Spiti and Western Himalaya as a whole can be assessed from the fact that most of the people there can read and write Tibetan and are far more intelligent than their Southern non-Lamaistic counterparts. 33

It is important to note that the majority of literates in the Lamaistic interior are the monks and nuns (Chomos) who play a significant role in the local socio-

32 Handa, O.C., op. cit., pp.105-106.

33 Ibid., pp.106-107.
cultural life. The monks and nuns in the monasteries are assigned the job of education to the fellow illiterate monks. It is the responsibility of the resident lama to teach children of that particular village. It is due to this missionary zeal of the devoted monk that even in the remotest Lamaist Villages and the settlements of the nomadic Shepherds, men and women passes the rudiments of education and can read and write Tibetan. There has been a system called ‘btsun-gral’. Under this system, lay children are regularly inducted at a tender age into the cultural environment of the monastery where they learn the higher values of life. Hence, we see the monastic culture is grass rooted, catching the tender age baby for cultural refinement. The monasteries has a dominant socio-psychological role to play, which is significant and purposeful. These institutions have inspired people since long, a sense of confidence to stand courageously and contentedly in one of the harshest climatic conditions on earth, where nothing but faith can sustain them.

In the remote Lamaist society of the Spiti, people entirely depended upon the lama doctors in the monasteries and for their natural medicines. The monasteries there by not only assumed the role of ‘Spiritual-healer’, but also provided better medical facilities. The hold of monasteries is further lightened by the custom of ‘btsun-gral’, which directs that one of the sons, preferably the eldest one should become a celibate monk. This has its impact on the socio-economic life. This practice has been altered to the elder brother’s advantage under the system of primogeniture in Spiti, where the elder brother inherits the family property and lives a householder’s life. So, while the elder brother enjoys the worldly affairs,

the younger brothers are obliged to retire into monasteries. The system of primogeniture coupled with monogamy, which is typical of Spiti has caused a surplus unmarried girls who also have to join the monasteries as 'Nuns' (Cho-mo) and remain celibate. But this particular system at present is not as firm, as it used to be earlier.

The monasteries were chiefly for the propagation of the religio-spiritual teaching. Even after the mid-fourteenth century when these institutions were turned into centres of the religio-political authority of Lamadom, there was no change in their professed objectives and tenets. But in the primitive society where Lamaism established itself, there was no other organized agency which could take care of the people in economic distress, famine, drought and so on. The monasteries therefore imposed on themselves certain mundane responsibilities, which were totally divergent from monastic tenets.35

The monasteries were built on the established trade routes, so the devotees are benefited. The merchants on their orduous missions across the Himalayas would halt and make liberal donations to the monasteries. Thus, in the course of time, those theological centres developed into nuclei of the socio-cultural life of the valley. In that period, those establishments largely subsisted on donations from traders and merchants, alms from the common people and income from the land bestowed on them by the rulers and by the collection of taxes and land revenue therefrom.

But after the mid 14th century, monasteries assumed temporal power and undertook economic functions as well, like moneylending, trade and commerce, bartering and banking etc. Grain was distributed from the buffer stock of monasteries at the time of food crisis. However, the beneficiaries were required to replenish the stock at the next harvest. By means of these facilities, people could obtain food grains in the time of need and monasteries grew richer in their pecuniary assets. Richer monasteries embarked to enlarge their establishments by construction, the casting of magnificent images and the execution of murals and thangkas for which skilled craftsmen and artists were recruited from the common people. This created employment opportunities. More. in effect, those economic activities of the monasteries, may not have been of much use to the people at large but assured psychological relief to them. The very feeling that monastery would come to their rescue during the hours of crisis, further cemented faith in the sacredotal institutions. 36

With the rise of Gelugpa regime, these establishments also started claiming a fixed share from the gross land revenue of each revenue division called ‘kothi’ in the Spiti valley. Besides, the monasteries also augmented their income by receiving fees and alms for the religious services rendered by the lamas, which included funeral offerings, harvest alms etc. The endowments of land have been the oldest and single most important source of income for the monasteries. The principal endowment of the five monasteries in Spiti valley consists of ‘pun’, a specified share of the total revenue collected from the assigned ‘kothis’. But such functions monasteries have made towards society in the employment avenues to the common people and

36 Handa, O.C., op. cit., p.106. 99
occasionally giving aid in cash and kind, are radically disproportionate to the harm that these institutions have done to the people. The monasteries have driven away youths from society into the dull life of the monasteries, thereby depriving society of its most productive manpower. Which, if diverted towards public benefit, could have made people for more prosperous and life more comfortable. The deeply entrenched influence of monastic values has suppressed the very urge of the people to better living conditions.

But it is the multifunctional character of these institutions, which they have been keeping up with the utmost religiosiy that has sustained the interest of the people in them even today, thereby by-passing their demerits.

**Divorce**

In the Spiti valley, divorce is not difficult as in the case in the plains. Here, a simple Woolen thread which is tied to the little fingers of both the companions in pulled apart in the presence of some elderly persons, and this decides the issue. This ritual is called 'kupachacha' or Tshud-Thwagsti. In this ritual sometimes a light is also used to separate the woollen thread. Occasionally husband and wife after holding the ends of woollen thread repeat the following sentence, "our father and mother gave, another father and mother took away; as it was not our fate to agree, we separate with mutual goodwill." After separation each one becomes free to marry again.\(^{37}\)

---

Divorce is allowed on several conditions or on any of these such as barrenness, adultery, illness, incompatibility, negligence, habit of gambling etc. The seeker of the divorce has to pay the other party compensation ranging from rupees five hundred to fifteen hundred. If it is the husband who initiates the divorce proceedings, the dowry or presents given to the bride by her parents is required to be returned to her. If both husband and wife agrees to separate, a meeting of the prominent and respectable villagers is called and the facts of separation declared; a husband can obtain a divorce by providing proof of unfaithfulness of his wife before such a meeting. Similarly a wife may also obtain a divorce if the meeting holds that the husband has grossly neglected her and has developed the habit of gambling and opium eating etc. In the latter case the wife is entitled to a suitable maintenance and a separate shelter.38

Fairs and Festivals - a vision of community life

Fairs and festival days are observed with singing, dancing and merry-making. At some festivals, people of Spiti valley dress themselves in queer costumes like masks with horns and fancy dress and amuse themselves, but no magico religious importance is attached to these masks. Among the fairs, the most important fair is an annual fair called ‘Ladarcha Fair’ which previously used to take place at kibber village in Spiti. But, now the venue of the fair has been fixed at Kaza, which is head quarter of the Spiti Valley.39

38 Ibid.

39 Courtesy, Office of the Desert Development Programme, Kaza at Spiti.
Sissu Fair is a common fair celebrated all over the Buddhist Himalayas. This fair is celebrated on different dates at different places. At Sussur Gompa (Monastery) it is held in June, at Gemur Gompa in July and at Mani Gompa of Jodhla in the month of August. Phagli or Kunh is a fair of Pattan Valley which is held on the last day of the dark fortnight (Amavasya) of the month of February. Among all, Ladarcha is the most important fair and traders from Ladakh, Lahaul, Bushahr and Spiti meet in the month of July for bartering their products. However, due to closure of trade with Tibet this fair has lost most of the trade value.40

There are more than a dozen forms of dances prevalent in and Spiti. Musicians give company to the dancing crowd. Men and Women dance together. Men may dance alone, but women never dances alone. The instruments generally used are flutes, the Nagaras, Dhola and a Thali made of bronze. Broadly speaking there are three traditional dance forms - Shehni, Ghure and Garphi.

Shehni - In this form men and women both take part in dancing together. Either men and women are alternately arranged or the men are on one side and the women on the other. Drummers start with slow and simple steps and with the gradual increase of tempo, the dancers also show more vigour. There is marked rapidly of pace and exactness and regularity of movements. Shehni dance is without songs. Music is played on the drums, Nagaras and the flute.41

Ghure - In this dance there is no arm-linking by the dancers. While forming a group, they move in circle and semi-circle. No musical instruments are played in

40 Ibid.

this dance. An elderly man gives the lead, the foot work comes into operation and the dancers repeat the lines sung by the leader. This dance is meant for all festive occasions which generally fall in the winter. Ghure, infact, is a denomination both for the dance and songs merging into one.\footnote{Ibid., p.113.} The mythological stories from the epics of Ramayana, Mahabharata and the Puranas from the main forte of these songs and dances. Marriage of Shiva also figures in this type of songs. It also dwells on some folk tales.

**Garphi** - This is supposed to be the oldest form of dance in Lahaul-Spiti. In this dance the movements are neither regular nor regulated. What the dancer exhibits is spontaneity of a wild are carefree life, expression of Joy and leisu. This is the most simple dance and dancers can make their own formations, foot work and hand gestures. Garphi generally takes place when people get intoxicated after taking quite a good quantity of home distilled liquor and are hardly left to follow any specific patterns.

**Betas** - Betas are the community of professional dancers. However they are very few in number and with precarious economic conditions.\footnote{Ibid., p.114.} Seven different forms of dances are performed by them. They are Gar, Jabru, Muknar, Bukum, Shon, Bhuchar and Devil dance.

**Gar** - This dance is performed by males or females separately with slow pacing. The dance is accompanied by music which is given by Hessis.
**Jabur** - This is a group dance by males and females without music or musicians. In this dance the hands are crossed over the backs and thus linked to form a long chain. First half of this chain consists of men and the other half of ladies. The gents sing a line of the song which is answered by the ladies, just like Punjabi Boliyan.

**Bukum** - This dance is performed by the Lamas alone. The music and songs are given by the Hessis. The dance is almost like Gar dance with little variations.

**Devil Dance** - This is religious dance done by the holy Lamas on the occasions of Gruthor fairs only. The dancers wear the masks resembling some devil spirits and dance with Khukharis. It is not a devil dance as the name indicates.

**Ritual or Devil Dance Chham** - A sacred marked dance is done by the Lamas in the monasteries before a large gathering of spectators on certain festive occasion. Since masks are more or less those of the devils, it is also called the devil dance. These masks are prepared by the Lamas themselves and like the Tibetan paintings and sculptures. These masks are the property of the monastery and kept carefully stored in a room under the charge of a Kendan (keeper).

According to one belief the object of putting on masks of grotesque appearance is to give an idea to the spectators of the types of dreadful monasters who are met by the soul after it quits the earthly plane. The departed soul is frightened and perplexed by these terrifying figures and then the Lama or some saint appears to protect it and guide it to a safe end. The theory obviously is an attempt to establish
the supremacy of priesthood over temporal power and command allegiance from simple god fearing common men.\textsuperscript{44} Another belief is that the Lamas put on these masks to combat malignant spirits. The figures with demonic appearances are the terrifying defenders of religion or righteousness and also stand for the horrifying aspects of Bodhisattvas.\textsuperscript{45}

In the Spiti region at Thang-Jyal monastery a religious festival called Jig-Jed takes place in the month of October, and a month later a similar festival called Gutor is held at the monasteries at Kee, Tabo, Dhankar and Pin. The purpose of these festivals is to protect people from diseases and epidemics and ensure health, happiness and all round prosperity.\textsuperscript{46}

Dancing, singing and drinking are must in every festival of Spiti valley. Festivals are held during long winter months when people are confined indoors. This shows that the Spitians has a strong sense of community feeling which gets reflected through combination of culture and festivals.

\textsuperscript{44} Bajpai, S.C., \textit{op.cit.}, pp.66-67.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{46} Handa, O.C., \textit{op.cit.}, p.105.