Contesting Antiquity and Development: A Report on the Rock Art Preservation in Spiti Valley, Himachal Pradesh

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Introduction

New overcomes the old - Complex over-ruled the simple Social, Economic and Cultural practices evolve through time and space - meanwhile, a consistent effort has been put towards the preservation of archaic and ruined. Each year a remarkable sum of government money is channelled for research and conservation, with specialized agencies devoted for locating and identifying ancient sites and monuments throughout India. In direct conflict, however, projects of 'national importance' have posed consistent and accelerating threat to the overall existence of these historical sites. In the Spiti Valley, recent economic development has led to the construction of new roads, bridges and dams, all of which affect the territories heritage especially the rock art sites of the region.

The present paper is an output of a ten-day field work to the various rock art sites of the Spiti Valley in October 2015. Two of the authors conducted the survey on behalf of the I.G.N.C.A. (Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts), New Delhi.

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Fig. 1 — View of the Spiti Valley. Photograph by Ekta Singh (2016).

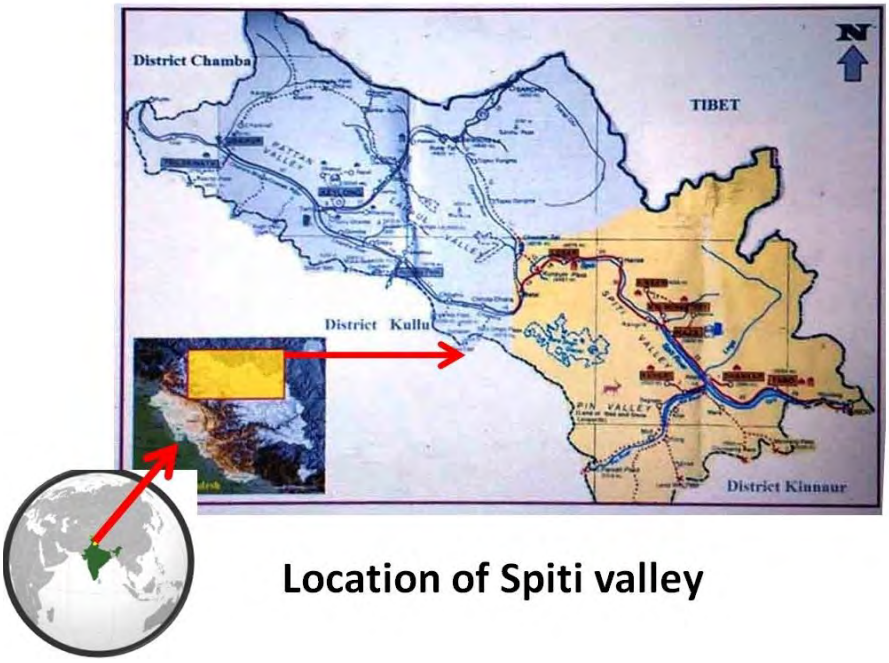

Fig. 2 — Location of Spiti Valley. Map Edited by Nagender Rawat (2016).

Rock Art Sites in the Spiti Valley

In the Western Himalayas of India, the regions of Ladakh and Spiti have been the centres of many significant rock art findings, however despite the important presence of Rock Art in Spiti, these finds have not been investigated thoroughly from an archaeological perspective.[1] The term 'petroglyph' refers to an image created by removing part of a surface by incising, pecking, carving, or abrading. Scholars often use terms such as 'carving' or 'engraving'. Pictographs, however, refers to paintings of early time usually found in caves or rock shelters. The recent documentation by IGNCA in Spiti reveals rock shelter sites along with pictographs. Petroglyphs, on the other hand, are rather found in open air galleries located along the banks of the Spiti River or hilltops. That said some of the local historians have also reported numerous high altitude and inaccessible sites rich with petroglyphs and rock paintings (pictographs). Francke was the first scholar who reported rock carvings from the south slopes of the Kunzum Pass. Later, Tucci, Handa, and Laxman Thakur also reported many petroglyphs from the lower Spiti Valley. Recently some pictograph sites have been identified from the rock shelter near Kibber by John Bellezza. Beyond these fleeting notes and general surveys, as far as Spiti rock art is concerned, the valley remains mostly unexplored lacking detailed studies; subsequently, personal attempts have been made by two scholars namely Dr. Tsering Norbu and Mr. Michael Dowad to locate and to identify the petroglyphic and pictographic sites in Spiti Valley from Kunzum Pass to Sumdo. They located petroglyphic sites near the Kunzum pass, at Tak Tse, Dhungma Dhansi, Phaldhar Thang, Yidse Phuk, Ngangmarang, Pohlingthang, Nynmadonmo, Tapo (Tabo), Ang la, Lari Dokpo, Lari, Tip-ta, Xahal Thang, Gyar-tse, Dakto-kiri, Hurling, Kyurmo, Shel-La tse, Xama Thang and Sumdo. They have also indentified pictographic sites at places that are locally known as Sringmo-Khadang, Nimaloksa, Tashigang, mondasa phuk Srag-Phuk and Sumdo-Phuk. These archaeologically important caves are located near the villages of Chichim, Sumling, Rangrik, Mondasa, Hikkim and Sumdo, respectively.

[1] See Bellezza 2017 in the present volume.

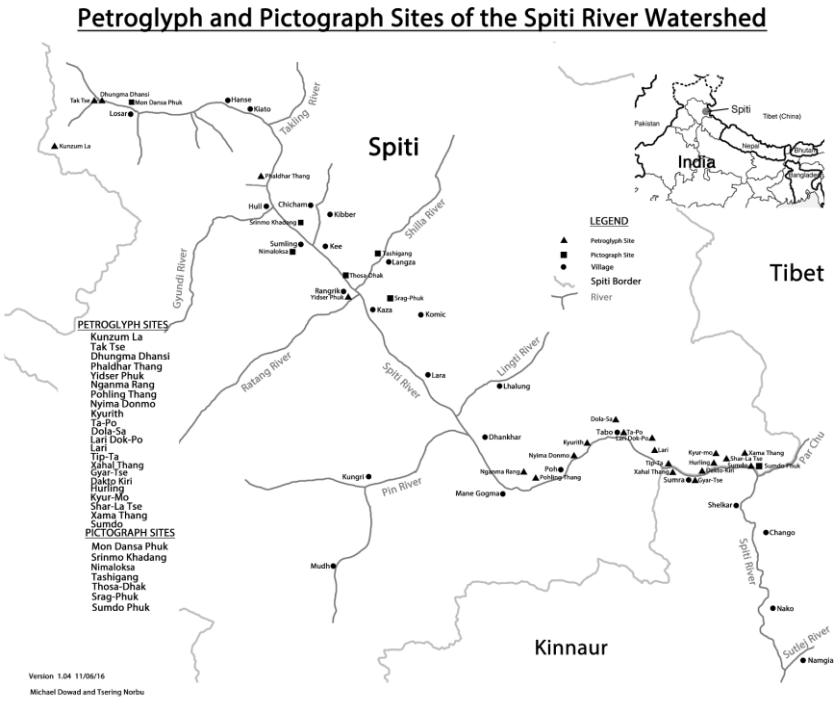

Fig. 3 — Map of Spiti Rock Art Sites sourced from Michael Dowad and Tsering Norbu (2016).

Most of the Petroglyphs documented are engraved on stone boulders and blocks fallen from the adjacent hills. The boulders chosen for carvings are much larger in size and are embedded in-to the ground at varied depths. The figures depicted on the boulders are human and animal figurines, abstracts and geometrical figures (circles, squares, triangles and rectangles), human with weapons holding rope, horse-riders, ibexes, deer, dogs, tortoise, swamp deer, scorpions, a horse, cup marks, Sun, stupas, decorative and geometric motifs, double spirals, yaks, tigers and dancing figurines, etc. Also spotted a few miscellaneous figures such as dots forming triangles, arrows, trees, swastikas, cross motifs, concentric circles, and circles with dots in the centre etc. Tibetan inscriptions in few boulders, some modern graffiti and super-impositions can also be traced. In one of

the stone blocks on cliff of hill, locally known as Do lhatse contain inscriptions in Tibetan script mentioning Ta-po.[2]

On stylistic grounds, these engravings can be classified into three groups. The first group includes subjects engraved deep into the rock surface with the help of sharp pointed tools as evidenced by fine lines of varying thickness. The carvings depict hunting scenes showing individual or a group of hunters holding bows, arrows or spears targeting animals. The animals shown can be identified as blue sheep with bulky body and short legs, while dogs are seen in smaller sizes. Second group comprises human figures with triangular heads and bodies, and stretched hands and legs. The third group consists of crude representations carved superficially into the rock surface. The team also visited rock-shelters at Sringmo khadang, which is 3-kilometer hike from Chichim village, Nimaloksa, 2.5 km straight climb from Sumling, Srag Phuk near Hikkim and Tashigang. The depictions found in these rock-shelters include human and animal figurines, hunting scenes with spears, bows and arrows, wild yaks, blue sheep, leopards, deer, birds, swastikas, sun motifs, spiked disc trees. The colour used in the paintings is red ochre, while dark red was also observed at one site. As far as the dating of these engravings and rock paintings is concerned, it is too premature to state anything conclusive without comparative studies with the neighbouring regions, particularly Ladakh, Tibet, and Zanskar.

Threats on the rock art of Spiti

The rock art of Spiti is currently threated by both natural and manmade hazards. Natural threats are due to weathering process, exposure to sunlight, precipitation, and dust. As such signs of flaking, cracking, blasting, and accumulation of microbiological growths can be seen on the surfaces of these boulders. Manmade threats are basically desecration, graffiti making, and destruction of boulders for construction purposes. In the last few years, numerous sites have been partially or completely destroyed. Vandalism and new construction technique using stones rather than mud-bricks are additional threats.

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2 The inscription at Do lha tse mentions Tabo as Ta-po, confirmed by Tsering Norbu.

Fig. 4 — Destructed boulder in an apple orchard. Photograph by Ekta Singh (2016).

Fig. 5 — A petroglyph boulder with graffiti. Photograph by Ekta Singh (2016).

Fig. 7 — A petroglyph bearing boulder broken for construction purpose. Photograph by Ekta Singh (2016).

Fig. 8 — Some biological growth on petroglyph boulder. Photograph by Ekta Singh (2016).

Fig. 9 — Boulder cut down into pieces which have petroglyphs on it. Photograph by Ekta Singh (2016).

Fig. 10 — Wall built on a boulder which contains petroglyph. Photograph by Ekta Singh (2016).

Fig. 11 — A petroglyph boulder on the verge of breakdown naturally. Photograph by Ekta Singh (2016).

Recently, a hydroelectric power project in the state of Himachal Pradesh has been extended and threatens to encroach on the lower part of the Spiti Valley. This project poses a set of new problems and has given birth to social protest groups. It is contested that the projects might pose serious threat to the fragile ecology and terrain, thereby affecting the collective economy and livelihood. Within all the contestations, a firm and rational call for the conservation of the ancient rock art sites has thrown strong impressions. A hydro project is an advanced form of all the pre-assessed threat perceptions put together, involving new roads, broadening of existing roads, as well as new residential and commercial constructions. Additionally, there would be transmission lines, influx of work force, traffic increase, pollution, blasting, tunnelling, drilling, and destruction of rock boulders at larger scale. This is the estimated damage to be put down by a single hydro project venture. At present a proposal for 6 hydraulic power stations in the Spiti basin was put forward, with an installed capacity of 274 MW. This series of bumper to bumper project has been planned at Kulling-Lara (40 MW), Lara- Sumta (104 MW), Sumta-Kathang(130 MW), Mane-Nadang (70 MW), Chango-Yangthang (140 MW) and Yangthang-Khab (261 MW). The Lara, Sumte and Kathang projects have been awarded to Reliance Power

limited. The constellation of hydro projects would allow a negligible part of free flowing Spiti to keep flowing on its natural course, while a majority of the river would be diverted into tunnels. Another source claims that a total of 14 hydro projects to be constructed from Losar to Sumdo are under consideration. However, in the present paper we have come up with the minimalist assumption that 6 hydro projects might turn out to take shape in the near future, as confirmed by multiple sources (www.sandrp.in). A representative plan illustrates the distributive capacity of the hydro projects in the Sutlej basin. Those marked in yellow represent the Spiti River basin. As discussed earlier the Spiti River basin houses the mostly unexplored ancient rock art sites. Hence, a large scale destruction of early settlements and rock art sites is on the cards.

A hydro project in the Western Himalayas seizes tremendous potential for energy generation, but on the other hand may also cause havoc onto the socio-economic lives of the people inhabiting these hill regions (Asher 2015, Himdhara 2015). Safeguarding the community from incessant threats and abrupt challenges, the hill people interpret the socio-economic changes as a consequence of 'modernization'. The nearest available antonym for 'modern' being 'tradition', 'culture', 'ancient'. Hence, a popular narrative has emerged delving the mountain community towards culture, ecological and site specific *andolan* (revolution).

Speaking on the approach of these *andolans*, most of the slogans stress on 'Save'; be it the river valley or the community. Rather than sending SOS petitions to outer agencies it is recommended to raise slogans of 'preservation' and 'conservation' within the community circles. Ancient art and architecture along with the ancient means of sustenance shall compose a culture worth striving for. It is a fundamental obligation of the citizenry to check and oppose malpractice in relation to ecological biodiversity. However, challenging modern projects for the sake of saving one's convenient lifestyle is not a progressive strategy. It is hence recommended that a due consideration be diverted towards the deteriorating status of the ancient art and heritage in the rural ecologies.

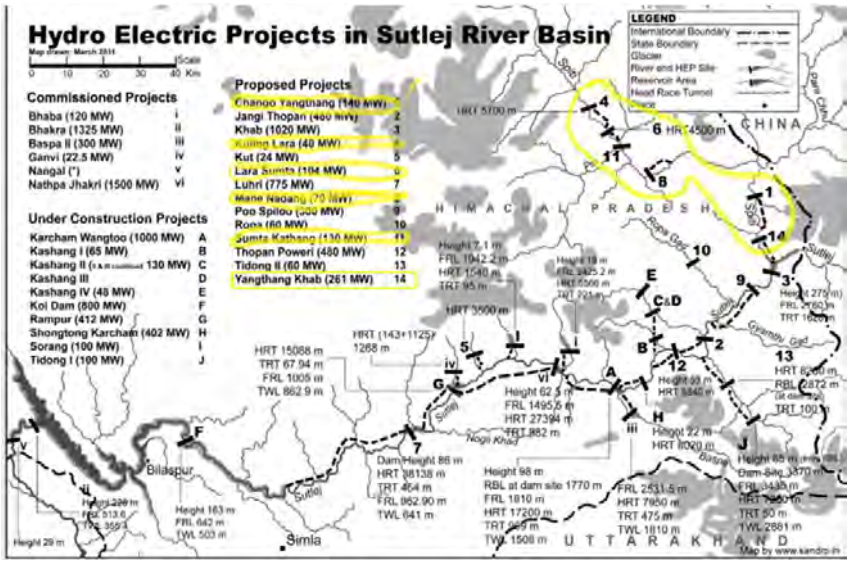

Fig. 12 — Map sourced from www.sandrp.in. Edited by Vijay Bodh (2016).

The construction of hydro projects in the valley would also pose threat to the existing rock art distribution in the valley. A recent survey reveals newer sites having petroglyphs and cave art in the valley. There is a great possibility of locating more findings in the valley. A majority of the rock art boulders are situated near the State highway while others are distributed in remote locations. The rock art boulders have been facing the challenges of expanding economic growth, broadening of roads, graffiti, weathering, defacement and destruction. The local administration along with nodal agencies is working on preservation and conservation works. Paradoxically, the allotment of hydroelectric projects in the fragile and culture rich valley poses serious threat to the existing and unidentified artefacts.

Other than a reservoir for water storage a hydroelectric project also requires a complex network of head race tunnel, end race tunnel, powerhouse, dams, transmission towers and network, power house, bridges and residential complex. It would also involve heavy construction and logistics. In case a hydro project overlaps a rock art site, it could lead to the immediate damage of the site. The heavy construction work and additional anthropogenic movements would amplify the negative consequences. These are often built in the surroundings of raw material; as a result of which virgin rocks or

those bearing images are equally smashed to be used as building material.

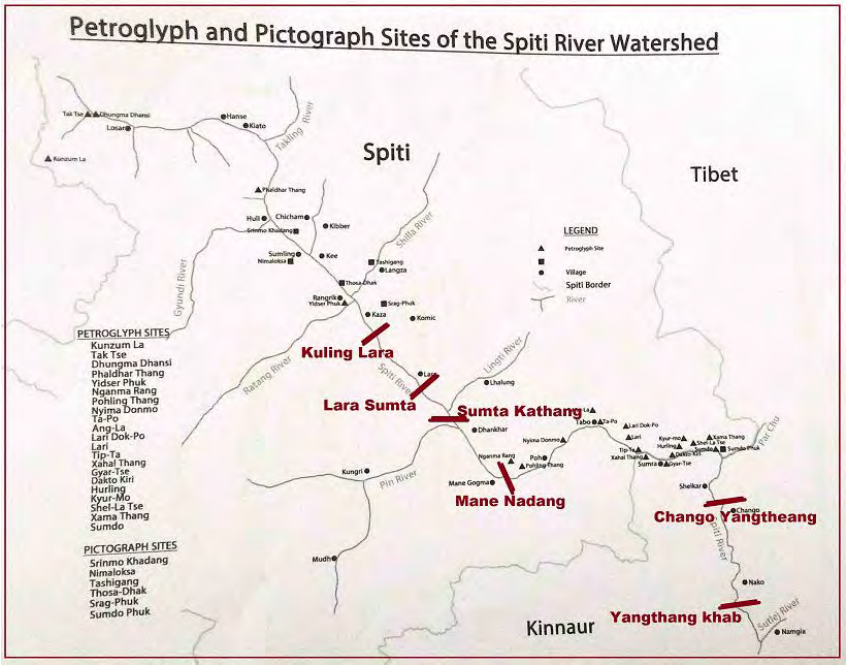

Fig. 13 — Map Sourced from Michael Dowad and Tsering Norbu. Edited by Ekta Singh (2016).

There is a possibility of locating more new sites and boulders. At this stage, when Spiti is on the verge of reclaiming its antiquity back to more than one thousand years, a loss of one or two boulders could prevent us from a better understanding of the social and cultural settings of the past. The Shukla committee report (2009), has strictly warned against constructing hydro projects in altitude higher to 7000 feet (2133m). It is even more critical in Spiti where the average altitude is around 3000m.

A Thought on Preservation

Rock art faces survival threats due to expanding modernity and with time it can be seen on the verge of disappearance. Lack of proper preservation of ancient rock art can be seen in many Afro-Asian countries. European Countries like France and Spain has closed

original site of their rock art to prevent further damage on the site, only research scholars are allowed to visit these sites with special reference (Joshi, 1999). In the Western Himalayas, limited rock art sites are subject to conservation programmes. Consequently, leaving them exposed will result in damage to those rock art boulders and shelters, with the risk of loss of features, and, in some cases, the complete disappearance due to climatic or anthropogenic agents. Alarmingly, it is difficult to even identify the lost petroglyphs sites today. There is little knowledge amongst the people about the richness of the contents or subject of rock art and its surviving traditions in rural India. Adequate attempts on preservation and documentation, developing conservation methodology, and environmental preservation is obligatory. Also, a proper identification and safeguarding the rock art sites for future references shall require systematic compilation, a detailed and illustrated inventory of the rock art sites. Barricading and fencing such exposed sites should be executed on urgent basis. Information boards and 'no trespassing' signs should be placed adequately for petroglyph and pictograph sites. It is mandatory for the State authorities to take appropriate actions for declaring these sites as heritage sites. The rock boulders should be systematically numbered and recorded in official database. Owners of private orchards ought to be made aware regarding the importance and conservation of the rock carvings. Ideally, petroglyphs should be preserved in their original setting. But when the destruction of a site is inevitable, the most important images should be moved to a dedicated location, after a careful recording of their original position. A rock art sanctuary can be a good place to store and display them. If the rock images cannot be protected *in situ*, or moved to a safe place because of their size or inaccessible location, the only answer is to reproduce them, using photography, plastic sheet reproduction, or laser and 3D Scanning. Due to its quantity and quality, rock art is nowadays the most important archaeological material that will enables us to form an idea of Spiti's early past.

Many rock art associations, most notably in the New World and Australia, have played and continue to play an invaluable role in this crusade. And the passionate enthusiasm of the local school children of Portugal's Coa Valley in 1995 for the cause of saving 'their' engravings from the dam project was a remarkable and inspiring sign of hope for the future (Bahn, 1998).

Programs on awareness and database maintenance are to be undertaken by different organization like government bodies, universities, state department and various local bodies. There is a dire need for more documentation and publications on the available data and the sites in Spiti. Overhanging mass of rock on the upper part which can collapse any time due to adverse natural factor, it can be considered most dangerous; it also includes human vandalism particularly blasting of boulders in the vicinity of site for their constructional requirements. Attempt of filling of the cracks make the cavern watertight by using cement or something else depending on the nature of the boulder. Periodic removal of undesirable vegetation is advisable. Structures could be raised over the boulders to arrest decay. For chemical treatment proper scientific investigations of the boulders are necessary, proper test should be done in relation to its applicability to see its positive or negative reaction there on. To maintain natural conditions and environment of the rock art sites, vehicular movements ought to be controlled. In region like Spiti where there is no museum, a museum should be developed or an idea of establishing a rock art sanctuary in the area, following the example of Domkhar rock art sanctuary in Ladakh.

Fig. 14 — Dhomkar rock art sanctuary. Photograph by Rahul Dobhal (2016).

People should be encouraged to study the diverse heritage of rock art in those museums. This can create awareness among the natives of the area as well as among the travellers visiting the area.

Exhibition could be organized in nearby cities like in Manali, Reckong peo and Shimla as well as in Delhi to spread awareness. This will inspire the locals, especially the school children to learn about rock art and the cultural heritage of their area. Management duties should be awarded to members of local agencies such as Zila Parishad, Municipal boards, Panchayat, NGOs or local volunteers. In some cases there is no choice other than carrying out rescue archaeology but whenever possible rock art sites need to be preserved. Rock art is a common heritage and everyone should be concerned about its preservation, i.e. competent authorities, villagers and tourists. It is the responsibility of everyone to preserve the precious and irreplaceable heritage of Spiti.

Recommendations

- Identification of rock art sites in Spiti Valley followed by an official inventory of the same.
- Scientific numbering and naming of the sites and rock boulders, invite intervention by Archaeological Survey of India.
- Ensure minimal transport and removal of rock art boulders from the original site; *in situ* art forms carry more research value than the transported ones.
- Scrap Hydro-electric developments in the vicinity of art sites, if possible
- Earmark no trespassing zones, in case hydro projects are to be commissioned somehow.
- Include participatory rural appraisals methods to ensure local participation in preservation.
- A formulation of a 'Rock Art Sanctuary' in Spiti shall be the last resort.

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