



# A PILOT FIELD STUDY

OF

## ROCK ART OF SPITI VALLEY

(HIMACHAL PRADESH)

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INDIRA GANDHI NATIONAL CENTRE FOR THE ARTS  
NEW DELHI



# Spiti Valley

Spiti is a cold desert valley located high in the Himalayan Mountains in the north-eastern part of Himachal Pradesh. The name "Spiti" means "The Middle Land", i.e. the land between Tibet and India.

This area covers the Himalayan tribal belt of India inhabited by the people belonging to 'Bhot' tribal community. It possesses a distinctive Buddhist culture similar to that found in the nearby Tibet and Ladakh region of India. The sub-divisional headquarters (capital) is Kaza, Himachal Pradesh which is situated along the Spiti River at an elevation of about 12,500 feet (3,800 m) above mean sea level.

Spiti is surrounded by high mountain ranges. The valley is cut off from the north up to eight months of the year by heavy snowfalls and thick icing conditions. A southern route to India proper is periodically closed for brief periods in the winter storms of November through June, but road access is usually restored a few days after storms end via Shimla and the Sutlej in the Kinnaur district.

As no significant work has been done on the rock art of Spiti valley so far, the IGNCA in collaboration with local administration (Additional Distt.Magistrate), Spiti at Kaza initiated this daunting task to systematically document the rock art sites in the valley. In this regard a Pilot Field Study of the rock art sites of the region was initiated on the invitation of local administration. Dr. B.L. Malla, Project Director and Sh. Jigmet Namgyal, Project Asst. Rock Art Department, IGNCA, New Delhi along with two resource persons Sh. Tsering Norboo and Mr. Michael Dowad (Canada) participated in the Pilot Field Study from 07-13<sup>th</sup> July, 2015.

The rock art of Spiti valley comprises mainly of petroglyphs on limestone and granitic boulders. Besides, some rock shelters with paintings have also been found in the valley. Most of the rock art sites are located towards south-southeast along the Spiti river where villages and patches of agricultural land lie. Most of these villages are situated on the trade route linking Spiti with Ladakh and Lahaul to the west and Western Tibet to the east.

During the course of its ten days Pilot Field Study trip the following Rock art sites in the Spiti valley were visited.

## Taktse Rock Art: A New Discovery

On our way for the Field trip from Manali to Kaza along with Sh. Norboo, the local resource person at Spiti valley, we discovered a new boulder with Rock art at Taktse, a place 85 kms from Kaza. The boulder is located  $32^{\circ}26'52''$  N and Longitude:  $77^{\circ}41'34.3''$  E by the side of the road and it has several engravings of animal figures like ibexes and some buddhist inscriptions. The engravings on this boulder is very similar to the ones found in the rock art of Ladakh.



**Newly discovered boulder with petroglyphs at Taktse, Kaza**

## Poh Rock Art

Few sites are located at a distance of almost 40 kms from Kaza. The team visited Poh village. Two sites were located near the village. More than two hundred boulders with petroglyphs were found at this site located on  $32^{\circ}02'50.6''$  N and Longitude:  $78^{\circ}18'11.2''$  along the left banks of the Spiti river, a tributary of Satluj. Animal and human engravings are found on these granite boulders.



**Boulders with engravings (above) and a general view of the site at Poh village**

## Tabo Rock Art

After that the team moved towards Tabo village, a distance of 50 kms from Kaza. The village is also known for its world famous Tabo monastery. The rock art site at Tabo is located  $32^{\circ} 05'38.4'' N$  and *Longitude:  $78^{\circ} 23'17.1'' E$* . It is a large area of land with more than two hundred boulders with petroglyphs. The area is protected by Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education, Dehradun under Himalaya Forest Research Institute, Shimla, Govt. of India. Most of the boulders has engravings of animals, humans and some religious motifs like the Swastikas and Stupas etc., few abstract motifs and a number of geometric symbols can be seen on these boulders at the site.



**Boulders with engravings (above) and a general view of the site at Tabo**

## Lari Rock Art

While continuing our journey along the Spiti river we moved towards the east from Tabo village to Lari village. En route towards Lari, a site by the name of Palari was located. It has two boulders on each side of the motorable road. A significant feature of the site is that it has a boulder with human , animal figures and some concentric circles, while the second boulder has few cup marks (Cupules?) on it.

The main rock art site is located on  $32^{\circ}05'09.7''$  N and Longitude:  $78^{\circ}24'31.1''$  E at the end of the village. This site is spread over a large area and enclosed with stone walls on all sides. There are large numbers of boulders with engravings of human and animal figures. Ibexes and mountain goats are the typical features on boulders at the site, while few hunting scenes and abstract motifs are also visible. There are more than 800 boulders with engravings inside the compound according to Mr. Michael Dowad and Sh. Norboo.



**Boulders with engravings (above) and a general view of the site at Lari**

## Thosa-Dhak Rock Art

The site is at a distance of about 25 kms from Kaza on Kaza-Manali road. This site has two rock shelters with some paintings in red colour. It is located  $32^{\circ} 15'34.1'' N$  and *Longitude:  $78^{\circ} 02'20.2'' E$*  on the left bank of the Spiti river. A village named Rangrik is located on a hilltop opposite these shelters. The first shelter at the site has paintings of human figures holding a sword and shield and some religious symbols like swastika and sun symbols. Shelter no. 2 located few meters below towards the left has paintings in dark red and ochre and the paintings in this shelter mainly depicts the astronomical symbols like the sun, a half moon, a star and a human figure in between.



Rock shelter with paintings at Thosa-Dhak, Spiti valley

## Sumdo Rock Art

On the last day of our pilot field study we continued our journey along the Spiti river and visited the Sumdo village. A large boulder with petroglyphs was located on  $32^{\circ} 03'39.3''$  N and *Longitude:  $78^{\circ} 36'19.7''$  E* along the left banks of the Spiti river. This granite boulder is engraved with figures of animals from deer family. Ibexes and mountain goats are also visible, a bird, probably an eagle(?) has also been engraved on the boulder. Besides, the team also found some blocks of granite with engravings of Buddhist inscriptions and stupas near the site. Some of the boulders at the site has multiple engravings, these may be the later superimpositions.



A big boulder along the Spiti river (above) and blocks of rock with engravings at Sumdo

The local administration, Spiti at Kaza is taking a keen interest in the documentation of rock art sites of this region. Besides the above mentioned sites, Sh. Tsering Norboo (Kaza) and Mr. Michael Dowad (Canada) has explored several other sites with paintings and engravings in the region, namely; Dhungma Dhansi, Paldhar Thang, Rongtong, Sumra(Kinnaur), Hurling, Chicham Cave, Nimaloksa, Tashigang, Tangyud and Sumdo.

### **Urgent need for Documentation and Conservation**

A meeting was held on 10/07/2015 under the chairmanship of Sh. Sunil Sharma, Additional Distt, Magistrate (ADM), Spiti at Kaza, Sh. Jagan Thakur, SDM, Sh. Sonam Andui, CDPO and other representatives from different Govt. departments of the region which included officials from Forest deptt. and Revenue deptt. The meeting was also attended by Sh. Tsering Norboo and Mr. Michael Dowad two resource persons of the area and Sh. Jigmet Namgyal from IGNCA.

The meeting was significant in a way that Dr. Malla, Project Director, broadly highlighted the agenda of the project to the officials present. Dr. Malla also made suggestions and proposed guidelines for the documentation and conservation of rock art sites in the Spiti valley. From the preservation point of view he also suggested to convert two major rock art sites at Lari and Poh villages into Rock Art Parks. While looking into the miserable status of other rock art sites in the valley it was suggested that the documentation of the area may be taken up at the earliest.

