



A Report

On

The Field Documentation of Rock Art sites in Spiti Valley

Himachal Pradesh (Phase-I)

(03-12 October, 2015)



**INDIRA GANDHI NATIONAL CENTRE FOR THE ARTS
NEW DELHI**



Rock art in Spiti Valley: A Brief Report

In continuation of the Pilot field study in the area conducted in the month of July, 2015, a field documentation of Rock art sites in Spiti valley (Phase-I) was initiated by IGNCa in collaboration with the District administration, Spiti at Kaza from 03rd-12th October, 2015.

During this period, exploration and documentation of rock art sites in the valley was conducted on an intensive scale and an Awareness Campaign on the Rock Art of the valley was also organised.

The multidisciplinary team members comprising; Shri. Jigmet Namgyal from IGNCa, New Delhi; Shri. Tsering Norbu and Mr. Michael Dowad from Spiti; Shri. Chhering Dorje, former Joint DG, ASI (Retd.); Shri. Vijay Bodh, Research Scholar (Anthropology) from Panjab University, Chandigarh; Ms. Ekta Singh (Independent Researcher), Shri. Thubtan, Videographer and Shri. Manu Thakur, Photographer from Manali started the field work and documentation of rock art sites in Spiti Valley from 3rd-11th October, 2015 with their base camps at Tabo and Kaza.



The Multidisciplinary team at *Srinmo-khadang* rock shelter (4700 meters).

Exploration and documentation of Rock Art sites:

Spiti valley, located in the north-eastern part of Himachal Pradesh is a cold desert area in the Himalayas. The valley and its surrounding area is one of the least populated region in India and is the getaway to the northernmost reaches of the nation. The area covers the himalayan tribal belt of india inhabited by the people belonging to 'Bhotiya' tribe who follows the distinctive Tibetan Buddhism.

The valley is primarily drained by the Spiti river originating from the foot of glacial peak and flows approximately 160 kilometers in a south-easterly direction upto its confluence with *Pare Chu* at Sumdo. Rock faces in the valley are veritable storehouses of the geological history of the Himalayas, dating back to 500 million years.

The prehistory of the Spiti valley is very scanty due to limited studies and research work in the area, but the region has preserved a wide array of archaeological heritage in the form of monastic complexes, sculptures, stupas, Mani/stone walls, rock arts; in the form of petroglyphs as well as pictographs, inscriptions, ritual objects and manuscripts etc.

Spiti valley has a very rich repository of rock art, primarily consisting of petroglyphs on boulders and stone blocks. There are few earlier references of findings of rock engravings by A. H Francke and G. Tucci in their scholarly research publications. The later researchers, particularly O.C.Handa and Tobdan have also quoted the same findings. Laxman S. Thakur has elaborated some of the engravings located at Tabo and Lari in his research article.

The rock art sites documented by the team are at Tak-tse, Dhungma-Dhansi, Phaldhar-Thang, Yidse-Phuk, Ngangmarang, Pohlingthang, Nimaloksa, Tabo, Lari Dokpo, Lari, Zama-thang, Dakto-kiri, Hurling, Kyurmo, Shel-La tse, Sumdo, Sringmo-Khadang, Tashigang, Srag-Phuk and Sumdo. As the rock arts in the area has neither been fully explored nor proper studies have been undertaken earlier. Therefore, IGNCA initiated on this daunting task of systemically documenting the rock art sites in the valley.



General view of Spiti Valley.

Rock Art sites:

1. Sumdo

Sumdo is the last village in the Lahaul and Spiti district. A huge boulder outcrop (32°03'41.4"; 78°36'16.5") with petroglyphs lies on the left bank of Spiti river en route the Sumdo village. This boulder contains figures of animals like ibex, dog, tiger, *Dong* (wild yak), blue sheep and birds. Some other prominent figures are the tiger with stripes or a dog?, *Khyung*, a mythical bird in Tibetan Buddhism is also represented. Towards the extreme right of the boulder is a figure of a horse rider, a beautiful engraving of a *khyung* can be seen and it is considered to be the lone symbol in the petroglyphs of Spiti valley. A cluster of symbols including swastika, bird, sun, moon, a tiger and a reindeer with few indeterminate motifs can be seen clearly. The boulder has been damaged by modern graffittis.

At a distance of few meters from this boulder, by the side of the road, a small rock shelter with paintings in red has been found, it has a temple motif, a tree in railing and a swastika in red ochre. The panel measures almost 90 x 150 cm and the temple motif on it measures 45 (L) x 50 (H) cm. While documenting this shelter, the team discovered a new petroglyph of a horse on a rock panel located adjacent to this shelter.



Rock Art on *Sumdo* boulders (left), a newly discovered petroglyph.

2. Zamathang (Land of Pots)

This site is a plain area located (33° 04'11.7"; 78° 35'44.8) on a hillock on the right bank of *Giu Nalla*, one reaches this site after a climb of almost 70 meters from the main road towards Sumdo.

Four boulders with carvings are found on this site depicting human and animal figurines, horse rider, trees, hunting scenes, swastikas, ibex and blue sheeps etc. A boulder with multiple double swastikas with dots and grooves is quite unique to this site. Another boulder at a distance has a man riding on the back of a horse in standing position is quite interesting, and multiple engravings of ibexes can also be found on the same boulder. Some hundred meters above the large boulder at Zamathang, a sandstone boulder with engravings is located on the

hilltop that has engravings of 2 stupas, swastikas, a lotus symbol and an engraved 'Om' motif in Tibetan script. *Dong* (wild Yak) can be seen engraved along with some incomplete stupa motifs. Swastikas in both obverse and reverse forms are found.



Engraved swastikas (left) and the boulder with petroglyphs at *Zamathang*.

3. BRO Camp (*Palari*)

This site is so named as the stone block with petroglyphs is located adjacent to a Border Roads Organisation Camp (32° 05'10.2"; 78° 33' 56.2") located at a distance of almost 3 km from Tabo village on the left bank of the Spiti river. A big sandstone boulder with multiple symbols is located near to a Mani/stone wall at the site. The boulder is broken on all sides and images are found on its glazed upper portion. This boulder is quite unique in a way that most of the engravings are primarily of animals like ibexes and blue sheeps with geometric patterns like concentric circles and spirals, some human figures and hunting scenes are also engraved.

A few meters opposite this site on the other side of the road, we located a huge sandstone boulder broken into three parts. It has engravings of animals and some hunting scenes which are poorly depicted.

An intriguing feature of this site is that, here, we found two stone blocks on the ground with cluster of cup marks or cupules on them. These blocks have almost 40 cup marks on it.



A general view of the site (left) and the stone block with cupules at *Palari*.

4. Lari

This site is named after the village by the same name and is situated (32° 4' 27"; 78° 25'50) at a distance of almost 6 km from Tabo on Kaza –Sumdo State Highway. Here, a vast area of land has been converted into orchards by the villagers and by the Horticulture and Forest Departments of the State Govt.

It is a very large site with fields and orchards containing petroglyphs. More than 900 boulders with petroglyphs are reported from this site but due to constraint of time and space, the team concentrated on detailed documentation of a few selected boulders at this site. A large number of boulders contain the usual human and animal figures, the animal figures consist of blue sheeps, ibexes, horses, birds and some indeterminate motifs. The human figures are depicted with bows and arrows, wielding weapons and riding on animals. Few human figures dancing in a group is a rare one at the site.

On a small granitic boulder we found a round figure like a human face with linear patterns inside, this one looks like a mascoid or mask?, this type of petroglyphs has been found prominently in Ladakh and some parts of Central Asia also. The finding of a mascoid engraving is quite significant as such motif has not been found in this area so far.

A vast site named Lari 2 is located (32°04'23.7"; 78°25'55.4") adjacent to the site, walled on all four sides, it has few orchards inside the compound. More than 300 boulders with petroglyphs are reported from this site. A beautiful engraving of an ibex, depicted with its head raised up in linear profile is represented aesthetically. This figure measures almost 10 cm in length. Engravings of multiple scrolls, swastikas; both obverse and reverse and double swastikas are quite peculiar to the site.

Besides, animal figures like blue sheeps, ibexes, horses etc. astronomical symbols such as sun, moon, stars, religious motifs like stupas and inscriptions in tibetan and human figures in different postures are depicted on boulders at this site.



Boulders with petroglyphs at Lari.

5. Nganma-rang (old hillock)

This site is located (32° 02'19.8"; 78° 16' 16.3") on a mountain top between the villages of Tabo and Dhankar. It is located at an altitude of 3660 meters with Spiti river lying to its right, the site can be approached by climbing through an un-metallic road from Pohling-thang. We located four boulders at the site. On a boulder outcrop a beautiful inscription in Tibetan is depicted, this boulder has few animal figures and three swastikas on it. Some eroded geometric patterns can also be seen.

On the second boulder, an engraving of a large concentric circle that looks like a dart is visible; it is surrounded by 3 animal figures of ibex and blue sheeps. An 'Om' in Tibetan character is engraved in the centre, which has been engraved later. At this site some Mani/stone walls with inscribed stone slabs and pebbles have been located along the ancient route leading towards Dhankar Village.



Boulders with engravings at Nganmarang.

6. Dola-sa (Tabo)

This site is located (32° 06'06.9" ; 78° 22'26.5") on a hill side at an altitude of almost 3740 meters and 2 km north-west of Tabo village. One reaches here after an arduous climb of 2 hours. Eight boulders were located at this site with engravings primarily of animals and inscriptions in Tibetan script. One boulder contains a Tibetan script mentioning the name of the village as 'Ta-po'. The petroglyphs on the remaining boulders contain figures like, spoked wheel, sun motif, hunting scenes, ibex, blue sheep and flower designs etc. The inscriptions in Tibetan found on these boulders can be dated safely to the historical period or later.



The boulder with the inscription 'Ta-po' (left).

7. Pohling-thang

The site is located (32° 06'06.9";78° 22'26.5") on the left bank of Spiti river towards west of Poh village. This site is strewn with boulder outcrops and stone blocks with petroglyphs in large numbers. The engravings found are human and animal figures, hunting scenes with bow and arrows, stupas, swastikas, ibex, blue sheeps, *dong* (wild yak), tridents, geometric motifs, dancing scenes, sun motifs and some indeterminate figures etc.

Polingthang-II, another site adjacent to Polingthang. The site is interspersed with boulders depicting primarily anthropomorphs and hunting scenes which are found in large numbers. A granitic boulder has multiple symbols on its glazed surface consisting of engraved pattern within a circle, two human figures wielding weapons, a flower like design and few animal engravings of blue sheeps.

A lone boulder near the bank of the river has an interesting assemblage of engravings depicting multiple ithyphallic human dancing figures with a swastika and chess board pattern design. In all 11 human figures are found each measuring almost 10 cm and the panel measures 75 x 36 cm.



Boulders and stone blocks with engravings at *Pohling-thang*.

8. Tabo

Tabo is situated on the left bank of Spiti river, flanked on either side by high hills. It is one of the main religious centers in the Himalayas known for the world famous Tabo monastery. Petroglyphs are located at various sites in the village:

I. Horticulture University orchards (32°05'32; 78°23'09.02")

This site is located a few meters away from the main monastery, on the left bank of Spiti River. It is a large apple orchard under the Horticulture Department. Govt of Himachal Pradesh. A large boulder at this site has multiple engravings including blue sheeps, ibex, birds, man with bow and arrow, few geometric designs, an ithyphallic blue sheep is depicted prominently. The boulder has a glazed shiny surface and the engravings are heavily patinated.

II. Field Research Institute (32°05'40.08'; 78°23'09.09")

The second site at Tabo village is located adjacent to the village high school, a large number of boulders with petroglyphs are distributed inside the compound. The figures consist mainly of animal and human figures, religious motifs like stupas of Buddhist creed, Tibetan inscriptions and swastikas, human figures, fish, birds, tigers, deers and astronomical symbols like sun, moon etc. are found.

Besides these boulders, petroglyphs are also found in some private orchards inside the village.



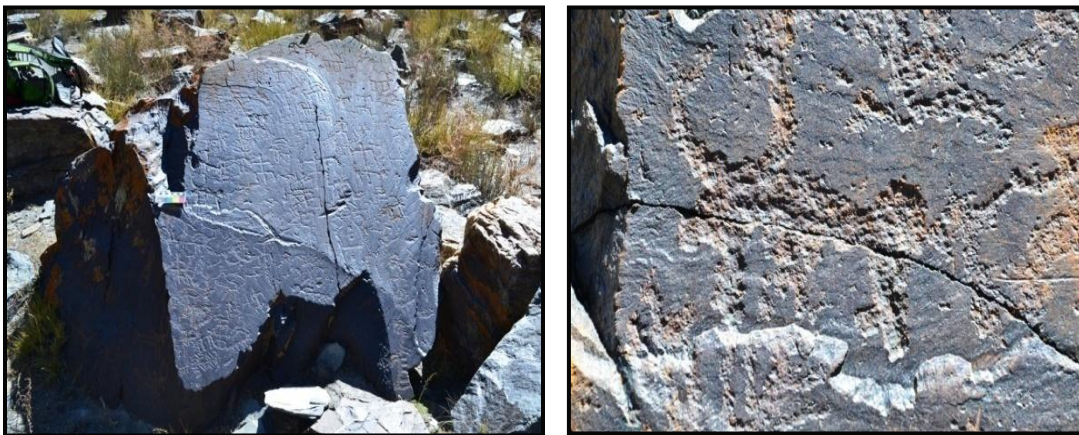
Rock engravings at Tabo (above), and a general view of the site.

9. Kyurmo

The site is located (32° 04'02.4"; 78° 32' 01") on a hillock near Hurling village, towards south-east of Tabo. One reaches the site after an arduous climb of almost 300 meters along hurling *nalla*. Here, we located a single but rare boulder measuring 140 x 120 cm. This boulder is unique in a way that such boulder has not been found anywhere else in the Spiti valley so far. It has a glazed shiny surface which has been used as a canvas for a varied assemblage of petroglyphs.

The boulder is facing North-west and multiple images of animals and humans are depicted. The animal figures consist mainly of blue sheeps, ibexes and reindeers etc. The human figures are depicted ithyphallic and in dancing postures, some are depicted with open arms, two *dongs* (wild yaks) are also depicted. More than 12 human figures are engraved and one swastika can be seen. Few masks ? like images can also be seen.

Ample evidence at the site suggest that it used to be inhabited by the *Dogpas* or community shepherds as few stone circles (stone built structures) is found at the site.



A lone boulder engraved with petroglyphs at *Kyurmo*.

10. Srinmo-Khadang (Demoness' open mouth)

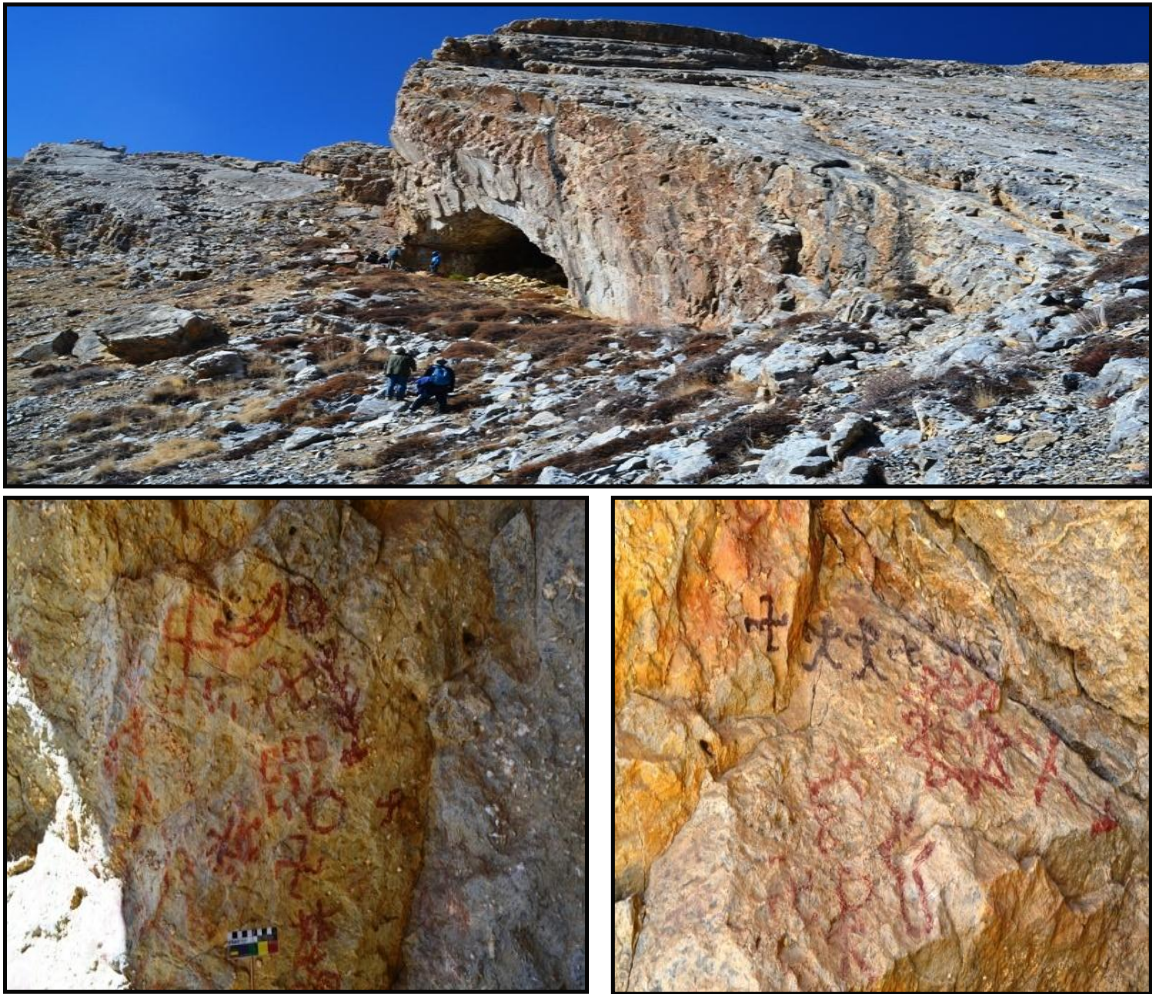
A pictographic site located in the Chichim village, 52 km from Kaza. The village is located at a height of 4200 meters in a valley surrounded by mountains. Towards the north of this village is found the ancient route to Ladakh, this route is still frequented by trekkers.

The site, Srinmo-khadang (locally, open mouth of a demoness) is located (32° 19'24.2"; 77° 58'55.4") at almost 4700 meters. After an arduous trek of almost 3 km, one reaches this rock shelter site. It is a tunnel shaped shelter with openings from the east and to the south-east. The distance through the tunnel from east to south-east is almost 24 meters in length. Entry to the rock shelter is only from the eastern side and paintings are found on the south-eastern side.

The paintings on the panel comprises of swastikas, dancing human figures, depiction of a *Khyung* (mythical bird), sun motifs , crescent moon, trees, a human figure hunting ibex, and

geometric designs in red ochre. At the top right of the panel is depicted two dancing human figures in dark red between two swastikas. The painted panel of the shelter measures 330 x 240 cm (L x H).

The site seems to be a place of religious rituals as some unbaked Buddhist votive stupas are found as offerings. This indicates that this shelter is still used by people for ritual purposes.



A general view of the rock shelter (above) and paintings on its wall at *Srinmo-khadang*.

11. Nima-loksa (The land of the returning sun)

Nima-loksa, a natural rock cave with paintings is located ($32^{\circ} 17' 08.1''$; $77^{\circ} 58' 14.2''$) at a 3.5 km climb from the Sumling village at an altitude of almost 4350m.

It is a limestone cave with paintings in red on its wall. From here, one can have a beautiful view of the famous Kee monastery. This shelter faces South-east and the paintings comprises of human figures and some religious motifs. Two human figures in dancing or running (?) position is depicted on the top of the panel and a small sun and half crescent moon is painted at the right with some tree motifs. An ithyphallic human figure wielding weapons in both his hands is quite unique at the site.

The majority of the motifs comprises of swastikas and human figures. Two colors; dark red and ochre are used for these paintings. A total of 24 motifs are found painted on the walls.

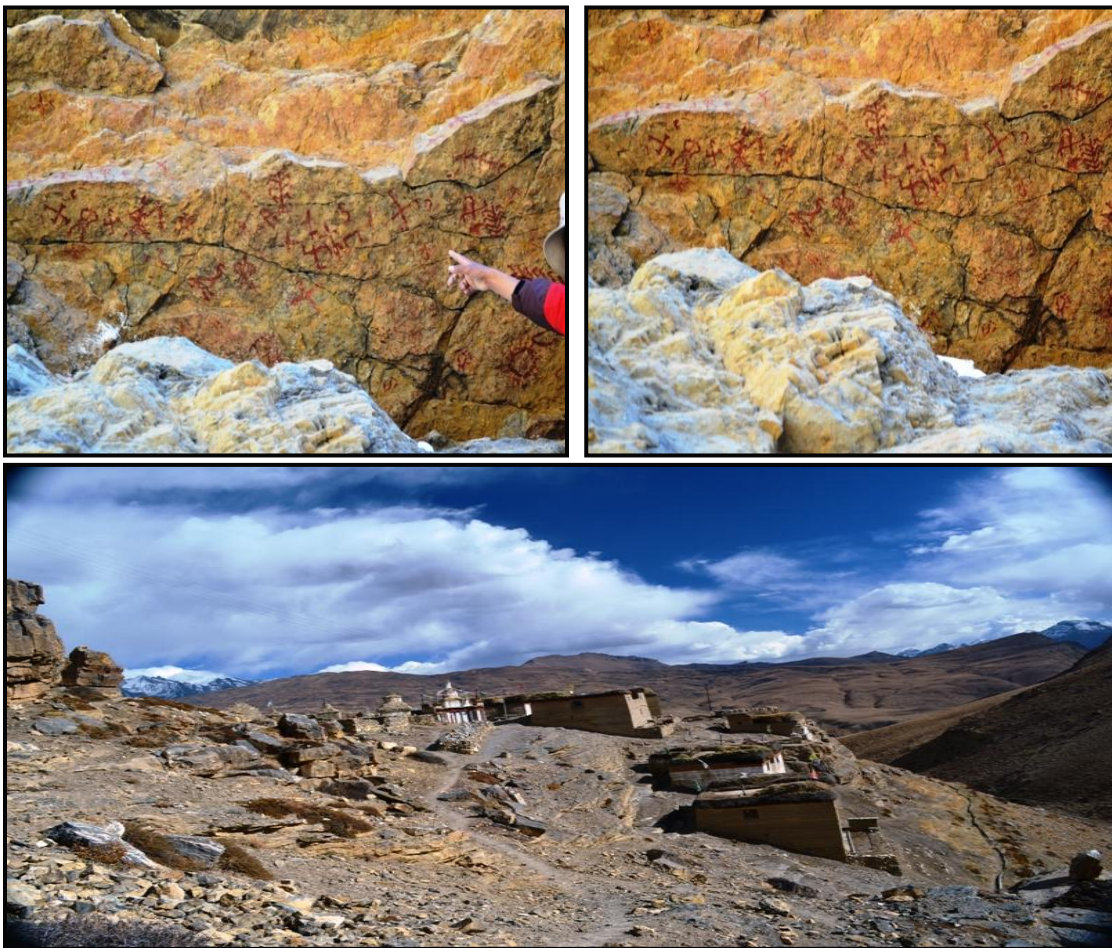


Paintings inside the cave (above), and a general view of the cave at *Nimaloksa*.

12. Srag-phuk and Tashigang

The first site, *Srag-phuk* is locally known as the retreat centre. The site is located (32° 14'26.4"; 78° 05'18.2") few meters below the ruins of an old monastery. It has 3 rock cut shelters facing south with mud brick stupas painted in white and red. The third shelter also has a number of paintings on its ceiling including the sun motifs, moon, trees, reverse swastikas, ibex, human figures, bird, geometric patterns and few unidentified motifs.

The second site, *Tashigang* is a small village with only 6-7 families. It has an old monastery dating back to 10th-11th century A.D. Few meters below this village is a rock shelter (32°17' 36.3"; 78°03'14.7") with paintings in red, the paintings comprises of a big swastika with dots, a handprint, few geometric patterns etc. Most of the paintings are faded due to weathering. This shelter is adjacent to the village and it is still used by the villagers for their daily cores.



Rock paintings at *Srag-phuk* (above) and a general view of the village *Tashigang*.

Along with the above mentioned rock art sites, several other sites with petroglyphs has been documented namely; *Lari Dogpo, Hurling, Drakto-khiri* and *Tipta* etc.

During its short but intensive Phase-I Field documentation of rock art sites in the Spiti valley, the IGNCA documented more than 20 rock art sites. Some of the sites were located at an altitude as high as almost 5000m i.e., *Srinmo-Khadang* and *Nima-loksa*. Besides, the rock art sites, the IGNCA team also documented 3 monasteries namely; the world famous Tabo monastery, Dhankar Monastery, an 11th century monastery at Village Dhankar and Komik Monastery including the local culture and traditions of the area.
