



## **Socio-economic organisation of village communities and monasteries in Spiti and Upper Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh, India**

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Spiti and Upper Kinnaur are famous for their Buddhist monasteries and temples most of which (e.g. Tabo) have been founded during the time of the ancient West Tibetan kingdom. Research conducted in the area during the last 15 years has been focussed mainly on the art history, architecture, inscriptions and texts of these Buddhist monuments. Since 1997 investigations into the economic history of Tabo village and monastery brought to light documents pertaining to the economic relationship between the monastery and the lay population of Tabo and other villages in Spiti valley during the third quarter of the 20th century. These documents are the latest evidence for a special system of economic support for the monastery by a special class of lay people (khral-pa) before it came to an end during the 1970s as a result of the overall transformation of the administrative and socio-economic order in Spiti and Upper Kinnaur.

Based on the example of Tabo this paper will explore this economic system in its historical development since the middle of the 19th century. This will be done with the help of historical sources of different languages and origin, including reports by British settlement officers and tax registers found in Tabo monastery. These registers – one of them being entitled *Dus-mchod kyi yig-tho* or *lTa-po mgon-gyi bon-tho bskod-pa bzhugs-so* – record goods collected by the monks from lay villagers which were spent for the celebration of major religious festivals.

In the 19th century this economic system was organised within a special administrative unit (*chos-gzhis*) set up to support four major monasteries in the area (including Tabo). Lay people from villages all over Spiti Valley belonged to this unit. The structure and organisation of monk communities as well as their relationship with the lay communities will be examined. It will be shown how the economic organisation of the *khral-pa* belonging to this unit was determined by their duties as members of the *chos-gzhis*. Comparative analysis of the socio-economic organisation of village communities in Upper

Kinnaur supports this hypothesis and makes it possible to explain the relatively higher importance of trade in this neighbouring area. The system of land tenure and the tax system including obligatory transport (begar) will also be treated from a comparative view.

The results of the investigation into the historical development of the socio-economic organisation of Tabo village and monastery will be the basis for a re-evaluation of statements and hypotheses on the system of land tenure and political organization in Western Tibet formulated by Pedro Carrasco in his *Land and Polity in Tibet* as well as a discussion of theoretical approaches based on respective studies in other areas.