SOCIAL INEQUALITY AND RESOURCE MANAGEMENT:
GENDER, CASTE AND CLASS IN THE RURAL HIMALAYAS

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES
(Resource Management and Environmental Studies)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
(Vancouver)

November 2014

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Abstract

The management of irrigation water and other resources, as practiced by traditional farming communities in developing countries, is often presented as a model of an equitable system – especially when compared to systems managed by states. This study demonstrates that the resource management practices in two Himalayan farming communities are, in fact, *inequitable* in terms of local gender, caste and class roles. This thesis examines inequalities in the social organization of irrigation systems in two villages in Spiti Valley in India’s Himachal Pradesh state. Its key finding is that the social organization of irrigation management, particularly in terms of farmers’ gender, class and caste backgrounds, is best understood as part of a broader division of labor for farming and related resources (such as for the management of fodder, dung and firewood), which are all embedded in the local socio-economic structure. This finding, which is based on participatory observation and interviews with farmers, as well as an analysis of historical and legal documents, underlines the importance of studying management of different resource sectors *relationally* rather than *compartmentally*. In particular, this study identifies key functional linkages between the social organization of farming and different resource sectors and develops theoretical approaches to the study of resource management in rural communities.
Preface

This dissertation is an original and independent work by the author, T. Tsering. All of the content of the thesis is unpublished except for a section in Chapter 3 that discuss the historical origins on Khangchen households in Spiti Valley, India. That discussion is included in a published article by the same author as follows:


The fieldwork for this study was covered under UBC Ethics Certificate number H10-01404.
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Acknowledgements

During the course of my study and research, I have greatly benefited from many individuals and scholars who have generously provided support and shared their knowledge and expertise of the field. This study also benefited through the critical engagement of fellow graduate students as well as through the guidance of many experts.

I must begin by thanking all the people of Spiti who have contributed to this study and tolerated my intrusion into their daily lives. When I first visited Spiti, Lobsang Gelek took me to different corners of the valley and made sure that I had every possible reason to choose Spiti as my fieldsite. I thank Lobsang for his keen support of my research and for introducing me to the people and places of Spiti. Once my research started, the family members of Amchi Ngawang Tsering, Ngawang Samdup and Dr. Tsering Norbu were incredibly generous and supportive of the project. I cannot thank them all enough. During the course of my research in India, many people received me kindly and provided assistance: Kalzang Chokit, Rigzin Palmo, Kunsang Lhamo, Kalsang, Lobsang, Tanzin Dawa, Meme Teku, Lama Kalu, Chering Rapten, Evi Tashi Yangzom, Lossar Rinchen Dhondup, Phuntsok Rai, Drimed Lodoe, Thinley, Dorje Bodh, Amchi Tsering Tashi, Lari Kusho Lama, Munshi Padma Dorje, Meme Tashi Dhondup and Lama Dorje Bussso. I am also grateful to Lochen Rinpoche, Nono Sonam Angdui, Tsering Dorje, OC Handa and Vidya Sagar Negi for their advice and assistance regarding my research.

Here in Canada, my deep respect and heartfelt thanks goes to my wonderful thesis committee members: Tsering Shakya, Gunilla Oberg and Leila Harris. They come from very different
disciplinary backgrounds, which worked wonderfully in the case of this interdisciplinary study. Their critical input and helpful suggestions on the many draft chapters have significantly improved the quality of this thesis. When I first joined UBC, I was initially planning to do a study of international rivers. I am grateful to my former committee members, Richard Paisley, Hans Schreir, Pitman Potter and Milind Kandlikar for their support and understanding. I must also thank Felice Wyndham for serving on my committee for a year. I am grateful to Dan Martin, Brandon Dotson, Melvyn Goldstein and John Bray for their critical feedback and suggestions on the section concerning the historical origins of Spiti Valley’s Khangchen system in Chapter 3.

Funding for this study mainly came from UBC through the University Graduate Fellowship (2007, 2008 and 2009) and through the Dalai Lama Trust Graduate Scholarships (2010, 2011). In addition, I am grateful for funding support from Richard Paisley, Pitman Potter, John Lefebvre, D’Arcy Richardson, Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy and Tsering Shakya. Travel grants from UBC COSMOS International Research Travel Award, UBC Center for India and South Asia Research and UBC RMES helped pay for research and conference expenses.

Lastly, I want to thank my wife and family, whose love and support made it possible for me to complete this project.
1. Introduction

A gap in understanding

On a crisp early morning in a Himalayan Buddhist village in Spiti Valley, a group of women—young and old—gathered near the village irrigation reservoir to water the fields. After some time, one of them released water from the reservoir by removing a rock that was used to block the outlet hole. Water gushed out of the reservoir and poured onto an unpaved rocky surface that branched into several channels. Some women rushed to their fields while others stayed on to ensure that an adequate share of water entered the channels that supplied the fields. Two of these women had a brief argument as one of them used her adze hoe to push a loose rock near one channel mouth and the rock affected the flow of water into another channel. Another woman threw a large rock, the size of a soccer ball, into a newly constructed concrete channel to divert water into a side channel. The chaos that ensued after the opening of the reservoir subsided as the reservoir became empty and the women dispersed to water the fields. (Field observations, Tsering, Spiti 2007)

The group of women I witnessed that morning in 2007 belong to a historically landless class of households known as Dhutul (smoke-maker: *dud* = “smoke”, *thul* = “to make”). Traditionally, the land belonged to the Khangchen (Large Household, *khang* = “house”, *chen* = “big”), who still own the majority of the land in the Spiti Valley. While the Dhutul have access to irrigation water for only one day in a six-day cycle, the Khangchen
households have access five out of the six days. The socio-economic effects of this uneven distribution of land and irrigation water are amplified by the fact that the 50 Dhutul households significantly outnumber the 13 Khangchen households. In this community, there are also outcaste households, some of which do not have any right to communal irrigation water. The effects of these class-based inequalities are entangled with gender-based differences: while women do most of the irrigation and farming work, the land and water rights are legally held by men.

This picture of inequality, characteristic of the irrigation system of a Spiti village, is starkly different to past field research in the region – which describes local irrigation practices and systems as equitable (Gutschow, 1997, 1998; Labbal, 2000; Mankelow, 2003; Tiwari & Gupta, 2008). These studies have described the local irrigation system as equitable, mainly because of features such as the proportional allocation of rights and responsibilities between farmers according to their landholdings or the size of their field (i.e., the larger the field, the greater the rights as well as the responsibilities), transparency in allocation (farmers can see how much water is being used and by whom),

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1 When I observed the incident described above in 2007 there were 50 Dhutul households and 13 Khangchen households. In 2010, the number of Dhutul households sharing irrigation water had increased. The number of Khangchen households, however, remained the same. This case study of inequality in Zibug village in Spiti is far more extreme than other villages in the region, compare for example to that of Rinam village in Zangskar (Gutschow & Gutschow, 2003, p. 130).

2 There is one main reservoir in the village, which does not contain sufficient water for all the fields. The reservoir is emptied each day to irrigate the fields on a turn-by-turn basis. Water distribution is organized into a six-day cycle; that is, every farmer gets water on every sixth day. For 5 days, water is shared among the Khangchen households (3 Khangchen households receive water each day). The water on the sixth day is divided among 50 Dhutul households. Therefore, in terms of quantity, Khangchen households get approximately 1/3rd (33%) of the daily stored water whereas a Dhutul family’s share is 1/50th (2%).

3 As explained elsewhere in this study, the notion of “caste” in Spiti is different from that of the Hindu caste system. In Spiti, “caste” refers to two groups of households (i.e., musicians and blacksmiths), who enjoy lower social status as compared to other household types (i.e., Khangchen and Dhutul). Traditionally, Beda (i.e., musician) households did not own any farming land. It was only after the introduction of the 1969 Nautor land distribution program that they were granted the right and opportunity to own their own land.
and autonomous decision-making (farmers make decisions about the irrigation system themselves). These features are not unique to the Himalayan region nor to Tibetan Buddhist societies in general. Other “traditional” or “indigenous” irrigation systems, in contrast to state managed systems, have also often been described as models of an equitable system (e.g., Coward, 1979; Mabry & Cleveland, 1996; Trawick, 2001, 2003). While farmer-managed irrigation systems are generally more equitable in contrast to those managed by the state, I argue that allocation, decision making, as well as other aspects of irrigation practices at the village level are also inequitable in light of gender, socio-economic class and caste differences. For example, the principle of proportionality observed in many farmer-managed irrigation systems refers to the proportionality of farmers’ rights and responsibilities within the irrigation system according to their landholding only, and thus overlooks the un-proportional rights and responsibilities based on their gender, caste and other social differences. Similarly, aspects of local irrigation practice, such as autonomous decision-making and transparency in water distribution, have also been seen as markers of equity that have nothing to do with internal social differences between farmers. While feminist scholars have debunked the assumptions of equitable irrigation and resource management systems (discussed in the next section), the assumption still persists in Tibetan Studies.

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4 There are traditional irrigation systems where access to irrigation water is not equitable. For example, Haagsma (1995) notes that land distribution and access to irrigated land is “very inequitable” (p. 46) in Ribeira de Duque on the island of San Antao, in Cape Verde, where water rights are not based on plot size. As Haagsma speculates: “Probably, historical factors play a part. One supposition is that land owners have increased their area under terraces in the past hoping for a better water supply, but without formally acquiring water rights” (p. 46).

5 The assumption also extends to other resource management practices (see, for example, Mishra, Prins, & Wieren, 2003) as well as to agrarian life (Norberg-Hodge, 1991) in general.
This lack of attention to the social aspects of equity is pervasive in many studies of farming and resource management practices on the Tibetan Plateau. This is a significant gap, particularly given that water and related resource issues have commanded significant scientific and international media attention. Social science studies of irrigation and related farming and resource management in the Himalayas and the Tibetan Plateau are relevant to broader international interests in water and related climate change. This is particularly important in the context of the Tibetan Plateau, including the Himalayas, as these areas are the sources of many major rivers that flow into about a dozen countries, including India and China.6

This study provides a detailed historical, ethnographic and intersectional study of gender, caste and class roles of farmers living in Spiti Valley in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh. This study, to my knowledge, presents the first detailed intersectional analysis of inequality in the social organization of irrigation and, by extension, in farming and related resource management practices on the Tibetan Plateau. It analyzes power relations, as they pertain to local livelihood activities, between farmers in terms of their gender and other social differences. As such, this analysis responds to calls for the examination of inter-user group dynamics (Beck, 1999, Agrawal, 2003; Agrawal & Sivaramakrishnan, 2000), particularly at the intersections of gender and other social differences (Harris, 2000).

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6 The Tibetan Plateau is the world’s highest (with 4000 m being the average altitude) and largest (2.5 million square kilometers) plateau that serves as the source of the largest constellation of international rivers (Indus, Satluj, Brahmaputra, Mekong, Yellow, Yangtze, Irrawaddy, Salween) in the world. Downstream countries include Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and China. The plateau is also now referred to as the world’s “Third Pole” – because it has the largest ice fields outside of the Arctic and Antarctic. Downstream supply concerns are mainly focused on the impact of climate change on the glaciers that feed the rivers and upstream water control, as well as how these are related to certain development projects. This is an area that I have personally researched and contributed to since 1998. A brief discussion of this work is provided in this chapter.
within historical and other regional contexts (Agrawal & Sivaramakrishnan, 2000).

Here it is important to briefly clarify how this study uses the term “equity” as different from that of “equality.” Within the context of resource management, “equality” refers to a condition when all users have the same rights and responsibilities in accessing and managing local resources. As the case of Spiti village demonstrates, the power relations between different user groups are not equal due to social differences in terms of their gender, caste and class. This study uses the terms “(in)equity” and “(in)equitable” to highlight and examine structural inequalities of power and privilege between different user groups as they access and manage local resources.

Structure of thesis
This thesis has five main chapters that show how the social organization of irrigation, farming and resource management practices are linked to each other and are embedded in power relations between the different social groups residing in Spiti. Chapter 2 describes the research questions, presents a literature review, and discusses the methodology of the study. The remaining main chapters (Chapters 3 to 6) have three common descriptive and analytical considerations. First, they probe into the relevant historical and legal contexts to shed light on the evolution and changing nature of the relationships between different user groups (chapter 3), specifically regarding irrigation management (chapter 4), farming (chapter 3 and 5), and fodder, dung and firewood (FDF) management (chapter 6). Second, all the chapters provide an intersectional analysis of gender, caste and class
relations in terms of broader social relations (chapter 3), irrigation management (chapter 4), farming work (chapter 5), and FDF management (chapter 6). Third, all the descriptions of historical contexts and resource management practices follow a chronological order. These descriptions, although provided in separate chapters, can be overlaid to provide broader narratives of (a) the history behind local resource management customs and (b) farmers’ main livelihood activities from early April to late October. Below follows a brief description of each of these chapters.

Chapter 3 describes the setting and context of the study within the broader regional history and cultural geography of Spiti. This description informs how Spiti’s social structure and local power relations have been shaped by the policies of different regimes that ruled the region, which in turn were affected by Spiti’s peripheral location. Specifically, I trace the origin of Spiti’s Khangchen households as “tax payers” (Treba, khral pa) to the period of the Tibetan empire of the 7th-9th centuries. In order to support this hypothesis, I draw on the relevant history of the region as it is portrayed in English, Tibetan and Hindi language sources, which include relevant ancient Tibetan texts and studies on primary source materials. I also draw from knowledge acquired from my fieldwork, including interviews with farmers concerning the history of the region. This hypothesis provides a specific historical and legal context for understanding the origins of the privileged powers of Spiti’s Khangchen households as the sole group of farmers who own village agricultural fields and irrigation sources.\textsuperscript{7} The discussion then moves on to later regimes. First it provides a description of Spiti’s administrative structure under

\textsuperscript{7} By linking the origin of the institution of Khangchen system to the period of the Tibetan empire, this hypothesis also extends the current scholarly understanding of Spiti’s history, which is said to begin from the 10th century (Lahuli, 2002; Jahoda, 2009; Tsering, 2013).
Ladakhi rule. Then it discusses changes in socio-economic conditions and power relations among farmers that occurred during the British rule and later under Indian rule. This discussion shows how the seemingly rigid local socio-economic and power structures are always changing in response to larger political, economic and social forces.

Chapter 4 provides an intersectional analysis of the gender and equity dimensions of irrigation management practices and laws in the two case study villages. The Spiti case study is unique because irrigation is the general domain of women, whereas in many other parts of the world, irrigation is mainly the domain of men or of both men and women. The case study thus demonstrates the significance of intersectional analysis of equity issues among different groups of women, especially as contrasted with the common ‘men versus women’ approach. The study provides a detailed analysis of the related history, legal texts and farmers’ practices, to shed light on issues of equity between different user groups. This study, however, does not shed sufficient light on the relational logic by which different groups perform their roles. By this I mean that a descriptive understanding of irrigation roles and activities, including broader historical and legal contexts, does not explain the ongoing participation of marginal user groups in the irrigation system. These explanations are explored in the following chapters.

Chapter 5 consists of two sections. The first section describes how men and women of the different classes of households are responsible for different farming-related activities. The second section then goes on to demonstrate how these different roles come into play through a chronological description of all annual farming-related activities. These
descriptions are provided with an underlying objective to demonstrate how the irrigation-related roles are part of a broader division of labor in farming-related activities and are embedded in local social structures and power relations. Building on the last chapter’s intersectional analysis of gender in irrigation management, this chapter further explicates how gender is imbricated in all levels of the social structure and in farming-related roles, in particular. This chapter forwards three key arguments: (i) the division of agricultural labor is based on class, caste and gender relations; (ii) gender not only dwells within and outside the household (Agarwal, 2007) but is also imbricated in all levels of the social structure in terms of men and women’s agricultural labor roles; and (iii) the different types of farming-related roles ascribed for men and women appear to be equitable in terms of number but are in fact highly unequal in terms of the desirability and prestige associated with the roles.

Chapter 6 builds on the previous chapters to show that the social organization of irrigation and farming-related activities are not only linked to each other but also to the management of the other resources of the village (in this case FDF). The chapter provides a chronological description of customary practices and regulations related to the collection of FDF. It shows how FDF regulations are integrated with broader farming practices in terms of the timing of the regulations and the management roles and how this has different implications for different user groups. It also shows how, for example, women’s role in irrigation is related to men’s role in collecting traditional fuel sources. The first section of the chapter continues the thrust of historical analysis used in the study (especially in chapters 3 and 4) by examining how the laws and policies of different
regimes (mainly Ladakh, British and Indian) affected different user groups in terms of
their access to these resources. The next section provides a chronological description of
FDF collection practices and regulations from the beginning of the growing season to the
end of the harvest season. This case study shows how traditional resource management
customs that are benign and equitable on the surface can in fact be unfair and constitute
“very dangerous techniques” of controlling labor and access to resources. Confirming
those arguments forwarded by intersectional analysis, this chapter unravels how one
dominant group of households has always benefited from these customs and how others,
mainly poor households, continue to be disproportionately affected by the same customs.

In the conclusion, I address how the central argument of this study, along with the
consequent approach undertaken in the main chapters, provide answers to my three
research questions (detailed in Chapter 2). In addition, I will explicate the key functional
linkages between the different resource sectors that are observed in this study. Finally, I
present the main theoretical and policy implications of the study.
2. Research Questions, Objectives and Findings

There are three main objectives of this study. First, the study seeks to understand who (e.g. according to one’s caste, class and gender background) does what (which activity) in the irrigation system of Spiti Valley. Second, it examines factors that keep such an inequitable irrigation system functioning. Third, it examines the social organization of the irrigation system within its historical context. These objectives inform the three main research questions of the study:

1) How do farmers in the Spiti Valley allocate and manage irrigation water based on caste, class, gender, and linked differences?
2) What factors and socio-economic processes help explain the ongoing participation of disadvantaged groups?
3) How did the farmers of Spiti Valley come to practice such an inequitable irrigation system? This question can be broken down into two parts: a) When and how did Khangchen households became the sole group of users with legal rights to village irrigation sources and farming lands? b) How have contemporary inter-user group relationships evolved historically?

The study is informed by the theoretical framework of “agrarian environments” (Agrawal & Sivaramakrishnan, 2000) and directly relates to recent theoretical debates and approaches suggested by feminist political ecologists (e.g., Gururani, 2000; Harris, 2008; Nightingale, 2011; Hawkins et al., 2011). The framework of agrarian environments is chosen because it is regionally focused on South Asia and explicitly
emphasizes the historical and political dynamics of resource use, control and conflict
within communities in terms of local gender, class and caste relations, and how these
relations deal with the larger forces of state, economy and environment. While the body
of work represented in *agrarian environments* focuses on India, similar theoretical
approaches have been used more broadly by feminist political ecologists (e.g., Harris,
2008; Nightingale, 2011; Hawkins et al., 2011).

The main theoretical finding of this research is that the social organization of irrigation
management between farmers – which is based notably on gender, caste and class roles -
is best understood as part of a broader social division of labor developed for farming and
related resource management practices. It is within this understanding, along with an
understanding of how these relationships have evolved due to changing historical and
political conditions, that this thesis sheds light on all of its research questions.

**Theoretical considerations**

This study directly contributes to research and interdisciplinary debates on water
management in Tibetan society, on approaches to the study of resource management in
rural contexts, and to the project of intersectional analysis of gender and other social
differences in resource management.

**Water management in Tibetan societies**

Research and studies on irrigation management in Tibetan societies can be divided into

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8 This study uses the word “State” loosely to encompass pre-modern states or kingdoms (Ladakh), colonial
powers (British), as well as modern states (India).
three types based on periods of study and sources of data (Shakya, 1994). The earliest studies of water management in Tibetan areas are based mainly on travel books and gazetteers (Bell, 1928; Carassco, 1959) but suffer from a lack of field research access in Tibet. The second phase of studies also lacked fieldwork access in Tibet but were nevertheless unique as these were based on interviews conducted with Tibetan refugees in Nepal and India (Aziz, 1978; Ekvall & Downs, 1963), who arrived after China’s takeover of central Tibet in 1959. The third and most recent phase of studies on irrigation, to which this study directly contributes, is based on fieldwork in Ladakh after the opening of the region for tourism in 1974 (Norberg-Hodge, 1991; Gutschow, 1997, 1998; Labbal, 2000; Vohra, 2000; Gutschow & Mankelow, 2001; Gutschow & Gutschow, 2003; Mankelow, 2003; Tiwari & Gupta, 2008). These studies, which are highly relevant to Spiti because of its geographical and cultural proximity to Ladakh, include comparative case studies (Gutschow, 1998), analyses of government watershed programs (Mankelow, 2003; Gutschow & Mankelow, 2001), descriptions of the effects of globalization and tourism on irrigation (Tiwari & Gupta, 2008), and case study descriptions of irrigation practices, customs and taboos (Vohra, 2000).

**Intersectional analysis of gender and other dimensions of social difference**

Analysis of inequality in irrigation systems has by no means been ignored in literature outside the field of Tibetan Studies, but the number of such studies remains very small beyond those that focus on gender (e.g., Moser, 1993; Levy, 1996; Jordan & Zwarteveen, 1999; Vohra, 2000; Gutschow & Mankelow, 2001; Mankelow, 2003; Sorenson, 2004; Anjehok & Singh, 2006; Gupta & Tiwari, 2008; etc.).

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9 Many people have written about irrigation in Tibetan societies. See, for example, Bell, 1928; Carrasco, 1959; Ekvall & Downs, 1963; Aziz, 1978; Norberg-Hodge, 1991; Gutschow, 1997, 1998; Labbal, 2000; Vohra, 2000; Gutschow & Mankelow, 2001; Mankelow, 2003; Sorenson, 2004; Anjehok & Singh, 2006; Gupta & Tiwari, 2008; etc.
Although it is commonly acknowledged that gender operates in interaction with other social categories such as class, caste and ethnicity (Meinzen-Dick & Zwarteveen, 2001; Wallace and Coles, 2005),

Intersectional analysis takes analysis of inequality in irrigation and resource management beyond binaristic understandings of male-versus-female. Instead, such an analysis posits that although male-female based inequities represent an important issue, an examination of this issue is not sufficient to understand and address issues of inequity because sex-gender is only one of the many important intersecting layers of social relations. Intersectional theory argues that – and aims to show how – gender and other categories of social difference, such as race, class and ethnicity, do not act independently but interact with each other on multiple and often simultaneous levels, thereby ultimately contributing to systematic social inequalities. This analysis focuses on how people’s different identities or roles interact with each other and thus result in multiple advantages for some individuals and multiple disadvantages for others, with many others experiencing a mix of advantages and disadvantages. For example, it posits that experiences of an economically poor black women cannot be understood by only considering her experiences as economically poor, as a female, or as a black women, as if these categories were independent of each other (Crenshaw, 1991). Instead, intersectional

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10 For an excellent discussion of debates in intersectionality in feminist literature, see Fincher (2004).
analysis attempts to understand her experiences by considering how her different roles or identities interact and reinforce each other, thus putting her in a position where she faces multiple dimensions of disadvantage (i.e., of class, gender and race). In this way, intersectional analysis also avoids problems of assuming that all women face similar situations, as it is often the case that certain high-income or elite women may be in a very privileged position, particularly in comparison to lower caste women. The intersectional analysis of this study emphasizes both intra-category (different groups of women) and inter-category (gender, caste and class) differences (McCall, 2005).

This study will therefore conduct an intersectional analysis of equity in irrigation and farming-related resource management practices and analyze how certain user groups, such as Khangchen men, are multiply advantaged in these activities while others, such as women of outcaste households, face multiple disadvantages. Specifically, it has been pointed out that the intersection between gender and socio-economic class (Sultana, Mohanty, & Miraglia, 2013) or poverty (Harris, 2008), and observations of “ways in which boundaries between bodies, spaces, ecologies and symbolic meanings of difference are produced and maintained relationally through practices of work and ritual” (Nightingale, 2011, p. 153) are important areas for analysis and theorization. Building on these debates, this study unravels, for example, the covert but deeply significant ways in which members of underprivileged groups, especially those locally deemed “impure” (i.e., women and caste members), are discriminated against in ritual aspects of farming and related resource management practices. For example, in chapter 4, I have identified the irrigation inaugural ritual as an activity that is always undertaken by non-caste members -
although there are no explicit customary rules that bar caste (women) members from performing the ritual.

There are three key benefits of the intersectional analysis used in this study. First, as mentioned above, it provides a methodology of analyzing how different types of social inequalities interact with each other. Second, the study directly contributes to the lack of focus on inter-user group dynamics in the literature on irrigation (Beck, 1999; Harris, 2008) and resource management studies (Agrawal, 2003; Nightingale, 2011). Third, the understanding of how gender and other social differences interact to reinforce inequitable social relations in resource management and farming-related activities has important policy implications. This analysis contributes to policy interventions that argue that, unless development initiatives are tilted in favor of the poor, women and marginalized groups, such interventions are likely to compound local inequities (Beck & Fajber, 2006; Ribot, 2008). For example, as shown in the following chapters, government socio-economic development interventions in Spiti Valley have benefited different user groups differently; traditionally privileged groups, such as men of Khangchen households, are at an advantaged position to avail themselves of economic development opportunities because of their having better education and social connections, especially compared to the traditionally disadvantaged groups such as women and outcaste members.

**Approaches to the study of resource management**

In recent years, political ecologists have made a set of arguments against the two main schools of thought that explain cooperative communal action in irrigation management.
The first school, following Scott’s (1976) “moral economy of the peasant” argument, assumes that farmers cooperate out of a moral conscience arising from the small community’s need to cope with risks as well as their collective dependence on local resources, both of which are institutionalized in customs and tradition (Cleaver, 2000). The second school follows the work of Elinor Ostrom and uses an institutional-economic approach to study the cooperative management of irrigation by farmers. Both schools of thought tend to neglect issues of local politics within rural communities and also to overlook how these communities are changing in relation to broader regional contexts. In response, political ecologists have argued that rural communities are better understood not only within their historical contexts, but also within the local specificities of culture, politics and economy as these interact with state and market (Agrawal & Sivaramakrishnan, 2000; Agrawal, 2003; Mosse, 1997). This study contributes to this debate by applying the theoretical framework of “agrarian environments” (Agrawal & Sivaramakrishnan, 2000) to the study of irrigation in the Spiti Valley. This framework emphasizes the historical and political dynamics of resource use, control and conflict within communities in terms of gender, class and caste relations, and how the larger forces of state, economy and environment affect these relations. This framework is, as I demonstrate in the following chapters, closely linked to the work of certain ‘feminist political ecologists’ such as Andrea Nightingale, Bina Agarwal, Leila Harris and Shubhra Gururani.

While *agrarian environments* provides a helpful theoretical framework for uncovering micro-level issues of politics that exist between user groups in relation to macro-level
contexts of regional history, politics and economy, it misses a critical intermediary level of analysis: the local economy. As a result, the agrarian environments framework is not sufficient if one seeks to understand why people, especially marginalized user groups, participate in an inequitable resource management system. For example, the answer to why a member of a landless farmer group would participate in an irrigation system that discriminates against her cannot be meaningfully found in macro-level contexts of history, state or the environment. The answer must be found in the material and procedural contexts of the local economy, such as payment for labor services, reciprocity, etc. In order to complement this methodological gap in the agrarian environments framework, and in order to describe the functioning of these relationships across farming and related resource management practices, this dissertation draws on the Polanyian idea of economy as an “instituted process” (Polanyi, 1957).

Polanyi viewed “economic life as a totality of relations and institutions that goes beyond the transactions of goods and services” (Gemici, 2008, p. 19, emphasis in original) and differentiated between formal and substantive meanings of economy (Polanyi, 1957). This formal approach to economy is based on neo-classical economic theory, which assumes a condition of scarcity of means to satisfy unlimited wants in which rational individuals compete to maximize their interests. The substantive approach, on the other hand, views the economy “as an instituted process of interaction between man and his natural and social environment” (Polanyi, 1957, p. 248). By defining economy as an “instituted process”, Polanyi stressed the economic and non-economic institutions that facilitate the recurrent movement or circulation of goods and services. “The instituting of
the economic process vests that process with unity and stability” (Polanyi, 1957, pp. 249-250). This is achieved through three forms of integration: reciprocity, redistribution and exchange: “Reciprocity denotes movements between correlative points of symmetrical groupings; redistribution designates appropriational movements toward a center and out of it again; [and] exchange refers here to vice-versa movements taking place as between ‘hands’ under a market system” (Polanyi, 1957, p. 250). Unlike the formalist approach, Polanyi’s substantivist or anthropological approach is not interested in individual behavior but is concerned, rather, with organized structures, institutions and processes - an approach which is appropriate for this study as it focuses on relations between user groups.

While it is beyond the scope of this study to conduct a thorough examination of Spiti’s village economy as an instituted process, it borrows these theoretical principles to explain (in chapter 5) how different institutions (Chumpa or irrigator, Thongpa or plowman, Mugthul or group labor) bind different user groups across different livelihood (farming and resource management) activities through temporal (repetitive yearly activities), social (reciprocity), and economic (remuneration) processes. Polanyi’s substantivist theoretical approach therefore provides a critical middle level explanation that cannot otherwise be ascertained between the micropolitics and the macro-historical contexts of the agrarian environments framework that is required to answer the research questions.

**Methodology**

All observers of human behavior are conditioned by their own life experiences. In this
case, my life experiences as an exile-born Tibetan with significant past involvement in research and international advocacy work on Tibet’s water resource issues has impacted this research, particularly in terms of the choice of research topic and field site. Similarly, my past academic training has had a significant influence on my theoretical position and research approach. Needless to mention, the realities of my fieldwork experiences also sculpted this research by influencing the analytical focus of this research and data collection.

My past work and later training at UBC

Before joining UBC in 2006, I was engaged full-time in research and international advocacy work on Tibetan environmental issues that I started in 1998. During that time, although I kept a sustained research focus on Tibet’s water resource issues, my perspective was shaped by advocacy work to promote justice and environmental protection. In particular, there are two aspects of my past research and advocacy work that led me to this study. First, all of my past studies were based on secondary data, such as those published by the Tibetan Government-in-Exile, the Chinese government, the World Bank, and studies presented in peer-reviewed literature. As an exile Tibetan, I had never conducted fieldwork or lived in a traditional Tibetan society on the Tibetan Plateau. I wanted to gain field experience in order to gain a first-hand understanding of Tibetan water resource issues and a deeper understanding of the nature and functioning of Tibetan society. Also, as an advocate of the human development approach to the water resource management issues of the Tibetan Plateau (Tsering, 2003, 2011, 2012b, 2012c), I had long felt that there was a lack of studies that looked into the social aspects of water
resource issues on the Tibetan Plateau. As someone who has regularly advocated for the primacy of interests of the local people and their environments in debates over water resource issues, I felt that the lack of detailed information about how they managed water locally was a big knowledge gap. The second aspect of my past work that shaped this study is that I believed in a discourse that assumed Tibetans were ecologically aware and lived in harmony with nature. When I started my research and advocacy work on Tibetan environmental issues, this discourse was widespread among Tibetans (Atisha, 1991; Central Tibetan Administration, 1992 & 2000) and Western supporters (Yeshi, 1991; Rowell, 1990; Aptez & Edwards, 1998) and at the time also constituted a widespread perception of other indigenous peoples such as the Australian Aborigines and the native North-Americans (Ellen, 1986; Brosius, 1999). Consequently, my knowledge and assumptions were shaped by this dominant discourse, as I had not been exposed to critical literature on the topic.

Since coming to UBC, I have read a great deal of literature that directly confronts the assumption that Tibetans (or other pre-modern peoples) are ecologically more noble, such as Brosius (1999), Agrawal and Sivaramakrishnan (2000), Ellen (1986), Huber (1997), Huber and Pederson (1997) and van Beek (1996, 2001). For example, Huber (1997) traces the genealogy of the “Green Tibetans” representation to the mid-1980’s, as a creation of exile Tibetan elites in Dharamsala, the seat of the Tibetan Government in Exile. Huber situates this discourse as a part of the global environmentalist Zeitgeist and the greening of “identities” during the 1980s and 1990s. Perhaps, being “advised by various well-meaning foreign supporters”, exile Tibetan elites not only generated the
Green Tibetans representation but also “continue[d] to manipulate and disseminate [it]” as a way to raise awareness about Tibet’s environmental issues and to gain “international sympathy for the cause” (pp. 106-108). In other words, Huber argues that the representation of Tibetans as an environmentally aware people cannot be regarded as a form of benign romantic essentialism; quite the contrary, it was, to use Brosius’ term, a “strategic essentialism” (Brosius, 1999, p. 280) generated to garner international support for Tibet (Avedon, 1984; Gyatso & Shakya, 1998). In brief, my studies here at UBC have taught me the importance of critically understanding the genealogy of historical contexts and causes and have provided theoretical and methodological tools to overcome such assumptions.

**Critical study of one’s own culture: dilemmas of the “native anthropologist”**

The application of critical approaches to the study of Tibetan society was initially a moral dilemma for me. My family and exile Tibetan upbringing have always emphasized the importance of preserving Tibetan identity and culture. Faced with the same dilemma of critical study, a Tibetan friend asked in frustration: “How can we afford to criticize our own culture, instead of glorifying and protecting it, at a time when our nation is undergoing one of the darkest periods in its history?” While I greatly respect his sentiment, I personally feel that a more important question to put forward concerns whether and how this study will benefit the people it describes.

Nationalistic glorification of one’s culture will invariably lead to the attribution of certain reified characteristics - such as the portrayal of all Tibetans as “peaceful Tibetan
Buddhists” – in a manner that suggests that such characteristics are natural rather than socially constructed. In addition, essentialism often leads to the appropriation of that image as either the subject or object of political action (Brosuis, 1999; Phillips, 2010). For example, the use of contrasting essentialized images of peaceful Tibetans being repressed by violent Chinese soldiers has been a common strategy used by Tibetan rights activists to gain international sympathy. Furthermore, the politics behind these essentialized discourses undermine the role of those people who do not fit neatly into the category, such as the silenced stories or Arrested Histories (McGranahan, 2010) of members of the Tibetan armed resistance against China (Shakya, 1999).

While essentialist descriptions can be attractive for romantic, strategic or nationalist reasons (Brosius, 1999), I believe that, ultimately, a more nuanced understanding will be more useful for the people, even if the description may appear to be critical. Moreover, the approach of this study is not an exercise in the criticism of Tibetan society but rather the implementation of a set of critical theoretical and methodological tools that help us to gain a richer and more in-depth understanding of this society. As well, my own concern for Tibet is born from a broader concern with issues of inequality (and this is precisely the same interest that animates this study) as well as a desire to uncover certain inequalities as they operate across various socio-political dimensions. Political ecology, agrarian environments, and intersectional approaches all aim to help us better understand societal processes so that they might ultimately be changed for the better.

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11 Images that portrayed Tibetans as peaceful and living in harmony with nature (nomads milking their animals, or people praying to mountains, etc.) were common in the brochures and other information materials used by Tibetan rights groups. This is not unique to Tibet but common in broader environmental and indigenous rights movement literature (Huber, 1997; Lopez, 1998; Brosius, 1999).
Another example of how essentialism can be problematic, especially for those who do not fit neatly into the essentialized image, concerns this study in relation to my background as a Tibetan. Anthropological fieldwork has traditionally been a domain of the “Euro-American, white, middle-class male” (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997), individuals who traveled to isolated regions of the world to conduct, as many believed previously, objective scientific study of the native-Others. This essentialized image of fieldwork became “real anthropology”, providing the basis for an idea that all other kinds of ethnographic fieldwork that do not fit this image, such as that done by “native” anthropologists, are less than “real.” This idea has been challenged by a number of scholars (Narayan, 1993; Gupta & Ferguson, 1997; Weston, 1997; Bunzl, 2004). Gupta and Ferguson (1997, p. 16) point out that the problem originates from “ideas about Otherness [that] remain remarkably central to fieldwork ritual.” Echoing this point, Weston (1997) identifies the split between “Other” (the natives) and “self” (ethnographer), or “field” and “home”, as the site where the “virtual anthropologist” is produced. Pointing to the colonial contexts of the image, as well as the distinctions between “real” and “native” anthropologist, Narayan (1993) asks how “native” is “native anthropologist,” and how “real” is “real anthropologist” in today’s much different and fast-changing world?12 Instead of sticking to such inappropriate distinctions, Narayan (1993, p. 682) argues that in today’s changed setting, “it is more profitable to focus on

12 Some of the various issues that are completely different in today’s modern global context include the following: it is hard, if not impossible, to find places and cultures that are unknown or isolated; economic globalization and information technology, especially the internet, have greatly transformed societies around the world; the practice and idea of the objective scientific study of cultures has been debunked; the ethnographic gaze is not only used in reference to remote rural societies but also to modern societies and to the discipline of Anthropology itself; there are an increasing number of non-white male anthropologists dominating the field; etc.
shifting identities in relationship with [the] people and issues an anthropologist seeks to represent.”

Bunzl (2004) highlights an important point about these debates and offers a solution to overcome the key problem of the Self/Other or “real”/“native” divide in anthropological fieldwork. Bunzl notes that “even the most radical attempts to rethink the concept of ‘native ethnography’ [Such as Narayan and Weston] have fallen short” of providing methodological solutions to “the foundational Self/Other divide that organizes classical fieldwork and produces the native anthropologist as a virtual member of the discipline” (p. 436). A solution to this problem, Bunzl suggests, is in the use of the Boasian tradition of fieldwork - which seeks to understand other cultures as products of particular historical developments. This approach dislodges cultural difference from its position as the enabling principle of ethnography and turns it into the very phenomenon in need of historical explanation. It retains anthropology’s empirical focus on the present and helps scholars produce neither native nor non-native history but simply history—in this case the history of a particular present.

Bunzl’s “Neo-Boasian anthropology” resonates closely with the research approach of this thesis and its aim to understand and explicate how Spiti’s contemporary resource management customs and embedded social relations are rooted in its genealogical past and have evolved historically. Bunzl proposes this approach as a way to overcome the difference between the “insider-outsider” dichotomy by producing (historical) explanations that are hidden from both the outsider and the insider. Although this study,
like Neo-Boasian anthropology, also presents historical explanations regarding contemporary social relations and practices, when I conducted fieldwork I was not aware of Bunzl’s argument that the epistemological stance of such an approach overcomes the dilemma of the insider/outsider subject positions. Consequently, my fieldwork reflections often consisted of moments when I felt the insider-outsider differences, although not in the context of the “native anthropology” debate but more in the context of local knowledge and connections (i.e., the more the local knowledge and connections one has the more of an insider one is). It is therefore appropriate to share some reflections on the “shifting identities” (Narayan, 1993) that colored my experiences during my fieldwork. In doing this, I acknowledge that I was in some ways an insider, and in some ways an outsider. My goal has been to uncover explanations that have too often remained hidden to both.

**Outsider yet insider: reflections on my position as a researcher in Spiti**

As a researcher from a “foreign country” (farmers generally label all or most foreign countries as “phyi rgyal” and show no interest in naming specific countries) visiting traditional Tibetan Buddhist villages for the first time, I was clearly an outsider when I arrived in Spiti. I had no local knowledge and do not remember having met anyone from Spiti Valley, with the exception of my brother-in-law and his brother, before the commencement of the field research. As a Tibetan born and raised in India, I have long wanted to learn or experience how people actually live on the Tibetan Plateau and what Tibetan Buddhist villages are like. The fact that I spoke fluent Tibetan and Hindi helped me greatly in absorbing new knowledge. At first, I could not follow Spiti’s local dialect. I
was keen to learn it and, as it turned out, the dialect was not very hard to pick up as it was similar to the western Tibetan dialect that I speak.\textsuperscript{13} Right from my first field trip, I enjoyed using the local colloquial expressions that I was learning and kept a list of local words and expressions. My attempts to speak the local language usually had a disarming and humorous impact on the locals, which I found helpful in striking up a conversation or for breaking the ice in the interview process. Similarities in Tibetan cultural contexts also helped me participate in local religious and social gatherings in a more intimate manner than would have otherwise been the case for outsiders. The similarities also extended to more than language, religion and social variables. My name (there is a farmer in Khyung with the same first and last name and several others sharing my first or last name) as well as my physical features (such as eye, hair and skin color) were also similar to those of the locals. Upon at least two occasions, farmers told me that I looked like a local Spiti person (\textit{spi ti pa} or “Pitiya” in local dialect). In fact, the finest compliment that I received in Spiti was that I sounded like a local person, with a “soft” accent (“\textit{lab ‘bol mo drag}” in the local dialect).

In Spiti, being Tibetan comes with its own power implications. For hundreds of years, the people of Spiti had looked to Tibet as their cultural and religious center. For this reason, Tibetans are generally regarded as co-religionists (\textit{chos grogs}) and are treated with respect. On certain occasions this relationship could get awkward, at least for me, when

\textsuperscript{13} My parents and relatives speak a western Tibetan dialect. Although my own Tibetan is a mixed dialect, acquired completely in an exile context, especially in schools which children from all over Tibet attended, my accent still sounds closer to the western Tibetan dialect than to any of the other Tibetan dialects. This became clear to me after a radio interview in 2008. The interviewer, a reporter of Voice of Tibet radio, was a speaker of the central Tibetan dialect (“U kay”) and she remarked that I spoke a western Tibetan dialect (“Toepa Kay”). The main difference between Spiti’s dialect and the exile version of the Toepa dialect that I speak is that the former is more archaic.
people treated me with a respect that I felt I did not deserve. For example, one time, I was introduced to a group of elders as “His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s man” (*rygal ba rin po chen gyi mi*). This made many of the elders greet and touch me as if I were a holy person. On another occasion, the principal of a local school, a wonderful man from South India, invited me to speak about the Dalai Lama to his students on the occasion of the Dalai Lama’s birthday. I gladly obliged thinking that I would be speaking to a small group of students in a classroom. The actual event was held out in the open in front of the main school building. A special stage was set up, in the middle of which was a table on which a portrait of the Dalai Lama was kept with a flowerpot on each side. An unlit butter lamp offering was placed in front of the portrait. I was made the chief guest of the school event and was given the privilege of lighting the butter lamp on behalf of the school. First the principal gave a speech for a few minutes from the podium in front of the stage. Then it was my turn. After our talks, students and teachers performed dances and sang songs to us. These incidents made me uncomfortably reflect (internally) on my Tibetan identity and the school principal’s Indian identity as symbolizing the colonial forces to which the native children and staff members performed dances and paid respect.

It is also important to note that I was not a complete outsider. I was partly an insider due to the fact that my sister is married to a man from Spiti Valley. The family members of my brother-in-law were very gracious. For example, they called me a relative (*spun kyag*), and, on several occasions, I found myself being included in their Nyiring (*nye ring*) and Phiming (*phi ming*) kinship institutions.

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14 Within Nyiring relatives, blood relatives, especially those through the male line (*rus* or bone), are considered closest.
by marriage. Phiming includes Nyiring and one’s close network of friends (and their household members). The role of Phiming is to provide social support during sickness, deaths, marriage, etc. and to function as an institution for internal resolution of family disputes, such as the one I will describe below.\textsuperscript{15}

Having these relationships was immensely helpful for this research. My brother-in-law’s family belongs to the (traditionally landless) Dhutul class of farmers. Dhutul households represent an important part of Spiti’s demography, as they had increased exponentially in number and had accumulated substantial socio-economic status in the last half century (Jahoda, 2008). For example, this family includes a national award winning teacher, a local leader representing the Congress Party of India, an Amchi or doctor of Tibetan medicine, the first and only Ph.D. from Spiti, the founder of Spiti’s only elders’ home, and the vice principal of a popular private school, amongst others. My association with this family provided privileged access to information that would not otherwise be available to outsiders.

Since this family belonged to the traditionally landless Dhutul group of households, positioned at the middle of Spiti’s socio-economic structure (described in the next chapter), I felt that I was privy to a unique perspective, which in turn resulted in plenty of insights into local social relations. This middle level vantage point was illuminating for this research in several interesting ways. For example, my Nyiring informants did not

\textsuperscript{15} Kinship terms and institutions of Spiti, such as Nyiring, Phiming and Phaphed are similar to but slightly different from those of the other Himalayan Tibetan areas that I have researched such as \textit{pha spun} of Ladakh (Crook, 1994, pp. 501-507) and \textit{dga’ nye} of Dingri (Aziz, 1978, pp. 189-197). For example, \textit{pha phed} of Spiti is like \textit{pha spun} of Ladakh, with the exception that a farmer’s \textit{pha phed} could also include Zo (“caste”) members. Similarly, \textit{phi ming} is similar to \textit{dga’ nye} of Dingri.
hesitate to describe the various injustices and unequal treatments experienced by Dhutul farmers at the hands of the Khangchen farmers. Here, it is important to emphasize that many of them spoke of local farming and resource management customs as not only unequal but also inequitable and unfair. Their subjective perspective of “equity” was expressed clearly with observations such as: “it is unjust” ("drang gsum mi ‘dug” or “drang po mi ‘dug”) and “[the Village Council] discriminates against the poor” (“med po la dbang btang ‘dug”). Similarly, many of them harbored biases, consciously or unconsciously, against those who were less privileged than them - for example towards the caste members. Some of them told me about local practices of discrimination against caste members as if these were appropriate - as if lower caste community members deserved such treatment.

At the same time, my closer association with Nyiring locals might have been a hindrance in terms of accessing the other groups. For example, one of the Nyiring men, who I am personally fond of, is a monk who had once challenged the decisions and authority of the village council and the village deity. This incident had led to the involvement of the Indian police as well as a declaration made on the part of the village council ordering that the most severe punishment be enacted against the monk: complete social ostracism from the village (me lam chu lam). I think it is possible that my close association with this maverick monk could have affected the way some of the village leaders, mostly Khangchen men, interacted with me. Another example was the fact that most interviewees hailing from caste households could not share their accounts of inequality as openly as Dhutul or Nyiring members did with me. Two of the elderly low caste women
whom I interviewed explicitly expressed fear of the implications that the recounting of their personal experiences of discrimination might involve and chose instead to speak about other topics. I think that had I been a Nyiring of a caste householder, or even a female researcher, I would probably have heard more frank accounts from them. Similarly, had I been a Nyiring of a Khangchen householder, I would probably have heard more frank accounts about their privileges and responsibilities towards the village—even if it was not conveyed in those terms.

An incident that occurred in the autumn of 2010 was particularly indicative of my background both as an avid participant observer and as a partial insider of the local community. One of the male relatives of my brother-in-law, here called Sonam, was at the brink of divorcing his wife. One day, male Phiming members of his wife came from their village to Sonam’s village. That evening, Sonam’s male Phiming members gathered at his house. Two middlemen, described to me as those “who should not belong to either side or whose character is trusted by both parties to be unbiased in their roles”, were selected to go back and forth between the two groups, conveying the messages and trying to guide the parties towards a compromise. While this whole process was interesting to me,\textsuperscript{16} as an ethnographer I was also constantly mindful of issues of observer bias (i.e.,

\textsuperscript{16}This process was interesting for many reasons. Briefly, the members of Sonam’s phi ming who gathered together that evening were all men, about thirty of them, representing more than half of the village. They all huddled together in the main room (ma khang or “mother house”). Many of the men were drinking chang beer and having a merry time; perhaps the occasion constituted a social get together for some of them. The number of men gathered also seems to symbolize the stature of the household. The success of the process, measured in terms of how amicable, swift and long-lasting the compromise was, depends greatly on the skills of the middlemen, who at least in this case, were not only conveying messages between the parties but also counseling - in a patriarchal and communitarian language - as well as making personal requests to both sides. The middlemen and the phi ming members also serve as witnesses to the process and as a kind of social sanction to the outcomes, including the consequences of immediate or future failure of the compromise.
tendency of researchers to see more of what they want to see or are interactively influenced in time).

While my hybrid position as an “outsider-yet-insider” and other shifting identities had their advantages and disadvantages, I believe that I was able to make it more advantageous by constantly practicing reflexive thinking and by taking measures to counter the weaknesses of my own position. For example, I made a conscious effort to develop good relations with those farmers representing underprivileged groups by talking to them and showing interest in their activities. One of the best sites to develop closer relationship with the farmers, especially the underprivileged groups of the society, was the crop fields (zhing kha). Farmers who do the manual work in the fields neatly represented these groups, namely: women from all classes of society and men from Dhutul and caste households. I enjoyed working alongside them: digging dirt, carrying loads of fodder plants, taking out weeds, using adze hoes to clear irrigation canals, and pursuing my own research interests at the same time (i.e., asking questions, taking notes, etc.). Spending time with them in the field, including during the tea and lunch breaks, was helpful in developing friendships and cultivating trust on the part of the women and caste members, and this allowed these farmers to talk more openly with me than they might otherwise have done.

Fieldwork in Spiti Valley

It is difficult to conduct fieldwork inside Tibet due to political conditions. This is especially difficult, if not impossible, for me as a Tibetan refugee from India. Therefore,
in 2007, I conducted preliminary fieldwork in the Indian western Himalayan regions of
Ladakh and Spiti because of its cultural and geographical affinity with Tibet. I visited
Spiti Valley three more times (2008, 2010 and 2011) and spent over 6 months in the
valley in total.

On my first trip in 2007, I did a larger tour of the Buddhist western Himalayas of India. I
did this in order to gain a general understanding of the region’s culture and geography
and to choose a specific field site for research. After the tour, I chose Spiti Valley as I
observed that farmers’ lifestyle in Spiti is visibly more traditional and less affected by the
forces of globalization and tourism as compared to that of Ladakh. For example, except
in the villages of Kaza and Tabo, there were hardly any hotels or commercial billboard
signs in Spiti’s villages. This isolation is partly enforced by geography and politics. The
valley is surrounded by 6,000 m tall mountains on all sides and access to the region was
shut off by the Indian government from 1962 to 1993 due to political sensitivities
surrounding the Sino-Indian dispute. Most of the tourists who visit the region prefer to
visit Ladakh and Zangskar due to better transportation and tourism infrastructure. I also
noticed that the whole of the native population of Spiti were Buddhists, whereas in
Ladakh, the natives were a mix of Buddhists and Muslims. Although the mixed
population of Buddhists and Muslims is an interesting phenomenon, my research interest,
for the time being, was focused on Tibetan Buddhist villages. I was also touched by the
warm hospitality and expressions of support for my research that I received in Spiti. This
support comes partly from and because of my family connections in Spiti (discussed
above). Most importantly, the incident that inspired the research questions of this project,
described at the beginning of this chapter, was observed in Spiti during this (2007) trip. In 2008, I briefly returned to Spiti Valley to develop personal connections in anticipation of the research. I chose the village of Zibug, where I witnessed the irrigation incident, and the neighboring village of Khyung, as the sites of my ethnographic study.

Most of the ethnographic data was collected during three months in 2010 (August-October) and two months (April and May) in 2011. The 2010 fieldwork was done during the last phases of local agricultural activities and consisted mainly of festivals, rituals and work related to the harvesting of crops. The 2011 fieldwork was done during the beginning of the farming year, during which farmers were mainly occupied with rituals and activities related to tilling and irrigation. This fitted well with the timing of my two previous fieldwork periods in Spiti, both of which were done in the month of July, during which I engaged in farmer’s work in their fields, including irrigation.

The climatic conditions of 2010 slightly affected my research plans and activities. According to local meteorological records, there was 300 mm of rainfall and >60 mm of snowfall from May to September in Spiti that year. Local elders in Spiti told me that it was the wettest year that they could remember in their lifetime. I overheard villagers talk among themselves that some fields in the village of Gyu were swept by landslides and rising water levels. In the neighboring region of Ladakh, a disastrous flood caused by a cloudburst had killed many people and destroyed numerous houses. While the rains were not as destructive in Spiti, I also heard that many old houses, which are all made of mud, had collapsed.
The excessive rains had also largely freed farmers of their irrigation duties. This deprived me of my plans to conduct participant observation of farmers’ irrigation-related activities. However, since the farmers were mostly free and staying indoors due to the wet weather, I had excellent opportunities to conduct interviews. I was also able to travel widely in Spiti to learn more about the region and collect data, which I will return to later.

The rains also affected the harvest season of 2010. The initial part of the harvest season, which is dedicated to peas, was very intense that year. The rains had adversely affected the peas in some fields while in others the pea harvests were bountiful. The perishable nature of the peas, the large sizes of the fields in relation to the available labor, poor coordination between farmers and buyers, as well as poor road conditions due to landslides and floods, rendered this season most stressful for farmers. During these days, as the mother of my host family lamented, “we don’t have time to be bothered even if our heads were on fire.” However, the latter part of the harvest season, which is dedicated to barley, was more relaxed that year. This is partly because barley is a more resilient crop and partly because the extra water had allowed the crop to grow for a longer duration. This proved fortuitous for this research as the harvesting of barley and its threshing-related rituals were done in a less rushed manner, which worked well for me as a researcher interested not only in observing but also in constantly asking questions about every detail, in addition to seeking opportunities for interviews.

When I arrived in Spiti in the beginning of April 2011 for my final round of fieldwork for
this project, parts of the fields in Khyung and Zibug were still covered in snow. Work on
the fields began within a week as I observed some farmers throw ash and dirt on the
snow-covered fields so that the snow would melt faster and the fields would be ready for
tilling. As the days went by, farmers became busy with farming-related activities and I
had sufficient opportunities to observe who and how farmers tilled, as well as how they
sowed seeds and watered their fields. This continued over the next several weeks.

**Trips to all the villages of Spiti Valley**

In 2010 and again in 2011, I traveled throughout Spiti Valley to learn about the valley
more broadly and to look for internal differences within the valley (e.g., upper Spiti as
compared with lower Spiti). During these trips, I collected basic data from each village,
such as the total number of households, the number of old Khangchen households, the
number of Beda and Zo \(^{17}\) (the two “caste”) households, the number of village doctors and
tantric practitioners, the names and number of village deities, and the approximate area of
grazing land or village commons used for collecting firewood associated with each
village. During these travels, I had some general questions about Spiti that I was trying to
answer.

First, I was interested in learning if the number of old Khangchen households in each
village had been a constant or if it had changed. In the course of my research on the
history of Spiti Valley and my efforts to understand why Khangchen households enjoy
privileged access to irrigation and farming resources, I heard repeatedly from farmers that
their elders say “at first, there were 250 Khangchen households and 66 Za households.”

\(^{17}\) Zo is spelled *bzo pa* in Tibetan. Spelling of Beda is unclear.
Farmers also say that these 250 Khangchen households still exist and have not changed in number. So I collected data on the number of old Khangchen households from every village to see how close or far apart the total number was in relation to the local belief that the total number should be 250. Another question I was interested in concerned whether there are any other households besides the three main household types (Khangchen, Dhutul and caste households) that I observed in the two villages (here named Zibug and Khyung)\(^\text{18}\) where I conducted most of my ethnographic research. It was important to know if the social structure and relations that I observed in Zibug and Khyung villages were representative of other villages in the valley. If, for example, other villages have additional groups of households, I would know that the social structure and internal power relations of my case studies could not be described as being representative of the valley. During these trips, I was able to confirm that the village social structure comprised of the three basic household types in the valley.

Second, I was interested in finding out if it was customary throughout the valley to ascribe irrigation-related responsibilities to women. It was important to know this because, in the two village field sites, only women did the work of watering the fields. If irrigation-related roles are allocated to women throughout the valley, then the answers to my questions must also be applicable to and ascertainable from the perspective of all the villages. This study highlights similarities in the significance and requirements of irrigation and firewood collection, and also suggests how these and other features of these activities, including related cultural values, contribute to a gendered division of labor in

\(^{18}\) I have used fictitious names, Zibug and Khyung, to the two field site villages in order to protect informants.
which women become responsible for irrigation and men for firewood collection (discussed in Chapter 4 and 6, respectively). These trips helped me to confirm that the tradition of only women doing irrigation work was indeed common throughout the Spiti Valley. My understanding of the gendered nature of irrigation and firewood collection as being related grew stronger through interviews and discussions with farmers, as well as through my examination of British colonial records from the 19th century (discussed in chapter 6).

**Interview and participant observation data: from frustration to insight**

I began conducting interviews from the second week of April 2010. Kalzang, the daughter of my host family helped me update and organize a list of all the people in the two village field sites according to gender and household type: Khangchen, Dhutul, Zo and Beda. My plan was to interview randomly chosen people representing all the gender, caste and class groups (4 men and 4 women from Khangchen households; 4 men and 4 women from Dhutul households; and 3 men and 3 women from Caste households). In addition, I wanted to interview local elders, scholars and representatives of local institutions such as the village deity, village council, and members of the local monastery, as well as the Tibetan medicine practitioners and astrologers. As the research progressed, however, I decided that it was better to be more flexible with the selection of interview subjects. While I was determined to and did indeed interview men and women from all social groups in order to get representative perspectives, I realized that simply getting a set number of interviews from people representing all groups would not be sufficient. Moreover, I was not satisfied with the data I was collecting in many of the interviews. In
addition to getting viewpoints from all user groups, I was also interested in digging deeper, not only into issues of micropolitics between user groups but also into history and culture. For deeper issues concerning micropolitics, I had to rely more on people (e.g., male community leaders from Dhutul and Zo caste households) who were not afraid, and who were willing and had the time to share their views. For history and culture, I had to rely not only on elders, scholars and leaders but also on specific villagers who were unique experts in their own ways. For example, I learned many things about local culture and folk views on history from two senior Beda women whose names were not in the randomly selected list. Interviews with the Beda women were far less informative: one of them was relatively new (having come as a bride) to Spiti. I also interviewed, discussed and learned many things from farmers of other Spiti villages. For example, I interviewed a retired school teacher from Kyuling Village, upon a suggestion made by the current Nono (traditional ruler) of Spiti, who also himself provided valuable historical information for this study.

While I collected data on all kinds of topics (i.e., marriage customs, kinship, history, politics, demography, weather, folk stories, etc.), I focused my interviews and analysis on irrigation practices. Towards the beginning of my fieldwork, I was a bit frustrated with the brevity of and similarities in farmer’s descriptions of irrigation management. Farmers have a tendency to treat irrigation management roles as too ordinary and simple to deserve detailed description. Even those who admitted that irrigation is an important and complex task gave descriptions that were straightforward and not new to me. These were concerned with the mechanics of letting water flow from reservoirs into canals and then
into the fields, or about irrigation customs and institutions (mainly water turns and serpent spirits). I tried to probe further about issues of conflict and competition between irrigation water user-groups, but farmers always claimed that these issues were non-existent. Even the elder farmers said that they did not remember a single case of internal conflict regarding irrigation water or that of a violation of irrigation customs. This was surprising, as I had assumed that such cases are bound to occur, if not very often, then at least occasionally.

Another unexpected and frustrating experience with the interview data was that I was not getting a clear understanding of how and why, if at all, irrigation tasks are organized according to gender, caste and class roles. The problem began to emerge as it became clear that interview data and field observations were failing to provide an explanation of how irrigation labor relationships are organized on the basis of gender, caste and class. For example, data collected on water management did not add up to provide answers to questions such as: “why is the watering of crops only done by women and not by men?” or “why do some of the underprivileged farming households, including caste households, have access to irrigation water, while others are denied?” In other words, the data I collected on the social organization of irrigation management could not fully explain how and why the system was organized the way it was.

I asked some of my knowledgeable informants for help on this topic but in vain. I never got a clear answer. Their answers were usually pithy, such as “women do irrigation work because that has been the custom” or “caste and Dhutul women participate in irrigation
management because they get land in return.” Moreover they would not show much
interest in answering these questions. Their lack of interest seemed partly due to the fact
that the conceptual compartmentalization of irrigation management roles according to
different social categories was too alien to the farmers, and partly because irrigation
activities were too banal for them. A key reason, however, as I figured out months later,
was that the question – the research question itself – was not framed properly. My
assumption that the social organization of irrigation management tasks can be coherently
understood within a framework of caste, gender and caste relationships proved wrong in
the field. I came to realize that my assumption was wrong not because these relationships
do not exist in irrigation management, which of course they do, but because (as I came to
later understand) these relationships are part of a broader social division of labor in the
village that included farming as well as the management of other resources. I thus had to
expand the scope of my analysis from trying to understand the functional logic of
inequities in the social organization of labor in irrigation management only to seeing, and
continuing the intersectional analysis of, these relationships as part of the larger social
organization of labor for farming and related resource management practices.

What I therefore learned and show in this study is that irrigation management roles,
through the lenses of caste, gender and class relationships, are a part of and embedded in
relations of power in the village socio-economic structure. This sociological
understanding and description forms the core argument of this thesis for three key
reasons. First, a broader sociological approach, using a Polanyian approach to economy
as an instituted process (in Chapter 5), provides clear and rational answers as to why and
how inequitable relations operate in irrigation management (my core research questions, especially #2). This approach also provides answers to various case study specific questions such as why only women practice irrigation in Spiti or why certain landless and outcaste members of the village have a small piece of farmland and a share in irrigation water. Second, by expanding explication beyond irrigation to the broader agrarian livelihood practices of the villages, this study provides a more nuanced and complete understanding of the social organization of labor within the village context. Third, and more importantly, it is consistent with the application of formal theoretical principles of understanding micropolitics between user groups (Agrarian Environments, Polanyi, Intersectional theory) and bears important policy implications, especially for international development work. I speak to the implications of this work more specifically in the conclusion (Chapter 7).

Finally, some notes on the non-academic textual data collected and used in this study. From the beginning of the project, I have been obsessively collecting all kinds of textual data on Spiti. Several of my local contacts have helped me in this effort. I had asked them to collect “anything and everything related to Spiti”, including books, magazines, brochures, newspaper clips, etc. During fieldwork trips to India, I went to twelve local libraries (in Shimla, Dharamsala, Manali and Spiti), where I spent several days reading and copying relevant information. I also traveled to the different villages of Spiti Valley collecting textual (published and unpublished) and other materials related to Spiti, particularly concerning agriculture, society, politics and history. As a result, I collected a substantial body of non-academic textual sources on all aspects of Spiti: history, food,
music, culture, stories, songs, local laws, etc. Among the English language sources, the most relevant and the most extensive source of textual material related to Spiti and this study are the colonial British records and other publications (accounts of travel to Spiti, officer’s personal memoirs, etc.). These records have the most detailed accounts of all aspects of local history, economy, society, customs, administrative records, etc. These records include historical and legal documents such as the 1873 Spiti Regulation Act and the 1864 British House of Commons records outlining why Spiti was annexed to British India. Relevant Tibetan language sources include works on local history (a series of articles by Jhampa, 2008-2010; Tsetan, 1987; Gergan, 1976; Gyalpo, 2006; etc.) and histories of local temples (Tsering, 2000; Rigzin & Lodie, unpublished; Bhoti, 2010) as well as the biographies of Rinchen Zangpo19 and Rangrig Repa.20 The main Hindi language sources include a plethora of local publications, including different issues of *Kunzom* and *La-Dartse* magazines, as well as a “Rare Book Series” on Lahul and Spiti published by the Himachal Academy of Art, Culture and Language. These publications include many articles on local history, culture and farming practices. An important Hindi language source on local history is Rahul Sankrityayan (1994, 2002, 1948/2006). I have also collected and learned significantly from many unpublished primary sources, such as a detailed account of an injustice experienced by a local Dhutul monk imposed by the village council; file records of local Zo blacksmith leaders on their experiences of injustices from villagers; local revenue officer records of village irrigation and other resource management customs, etc. Except for sensitive materials, I will eventually make these resources publicly available either through a website or through a local Spiti library.

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19 Rinchen Zangpo is credited with having built many of the local temples, monasteries and other structures in Spiti Valley in the late 10th century and possibly also in the early 11th century.

20 A famous 17th century saint from Spiti Valley.
3. Village Social Structure: A Historical Background

Introduction

Central to issues of socio-economic inequality in the villages of Spiti Valley is the fact that most of the cultivated fields and associated irrigation sources belong to a minority group of households, the Khangchen. It was only in recent decades that the Indian government granted farming land to the traditionally landless Dhutul and caste households. Until then, Dhutul and caste household members depended on Khangchen households for sources of work.\textsuperscript{21} Even today, as I demonstrate in the following chapters, the Khangchen households not only own most of the village fields and associated irrigation sources but also dominate local farming and resource management customs and practices. This socio-economic inequality raises important questions regarding the legal and historical basis on which Khangchen households came to enjoy such privileged access to local resources. In interviews and conversations with farmers representing different local groups, the only relevant answer I received was that Khangchen households are the oldest households of the village. However, no one knows exactly when Khangchen households acquired their privileged status.\textsuperscript{22} In this chapter, I will propose a hypothesis that seeks to answer this question.

\textsuperscript{21} The two villages where I conducted fieldwork are considered historical or old villages. There are many newer villages, some of them very small, where any type of households can exercise ownership over the fields. It is only in the major villages of Spiti that the village fields are owned exclusively by one group of households. While some of the fields in these villages may belong to other households, these are recent creations that are negligible in size and number.

\textsuperscript{22} In their detailed description of irrigation systems in the neighboring region of Zangskar, Gutschow and Gutschow (2003, p. 117) also note that the “Zangskari house[hold] appears to be eternal, for its members can no more recall its origins than imagine their demise.”
This chapter has two main parts. The first section provides a brief introduction to Spiti Valley (mainly its geography, culture and history) and to the village socio-economic structure. The second section provides some historical background to the study. Specifically, it aims to historicize these social relations and structures, to be able to speak to how they change, and to highlight what aspects of these relations and structures seem to have been more enduring. Since this study concerns the micropolitics of village resource management and farming-related customs based on an individual’s gender, class and caste relations, there is a risk that these social relations, along with the local socio-economic structure, will be perceived as unchanging. It is therefore an important goal of this chapter to argue that the seemingly rigid local socio-economic and power structures that characterize the villages of Spiti Valley are always changing in response to larger political, economic and social forces. I argue that the social features that have persisted for long historical periods, such as the privileged status of the Khangchen households, are precisely those that were adopted (usually with certain modifications) or allowed to continue by the different regimes that held power over the region. This approach directly responds to calls for analysis of how changes at the micro-level are a part or a manifestation of – as sculpted by and in response to – larger political and economic changes (Marcus & Fischer, 1986; Agrawal & Sivaramakrishnan, 2000). It is also consistent with shifting anthropological paradigms of describing Himalayan communities. Several pioneering anthropological studies conducted in Tibetan Buddhist societies in the Himalayas have been criticized for presenting the cultural and historical ‘setting’ of their case studies as isolated societies untouched by forces of state and market (van Beek, 1996; Tsering, 2008). While this flaw has been redressed in many recent studies, Charles
Ramble (2008, p. 23) warns that there is an occasional tendency in recent studies to suppress the uniqueness of each individual case study. Martijn van Beek (1996), on the other hand, argues that the very practice of presenting objectified representations of people and places is part of the problem inherent in attempting to understand and address issues of identity representation, which is a major issue in the region (Shakya, 1993). Instead, van Beek advocates a study of the historical construction of objectified representations of people and place rather than the representations themselves. These debates in Tibetan and Himalayan studies represent broader debates concerning essentialist portrayals of indigenous cultures (Ellen, 1986), ascriptions of cultural characteristics to geographical spaces (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992), and portrayals of traditional societies as being untouched by larger political economies (Marcus & Fischer, 1986, pp. 77-110). Attending to these debates, this chapter shows how the society and culture of this relatively isolated valley are “always in a flux, in a perpetual historically sensitive state of resistance and accommodation to broader processes of influence that are as much inside as outside the local context” (Marcus & Fischer, 1986, p. 78, emphasis original).23

**Spiti Valley: the setting**

*Spiti, the valley of gods!*

*In summer, Spiti is filled with greenery of crops, like a valley of turquoise.*

*In autumn, Spiti is filled with mustard flowers, like a valley of gold.*

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23 The only exception to the treatment is van Beek’s (1996) call to analyze how the objectified identity of the region and people have been historically (and bureaucratically) constructed. While I have learned much from this approach to dismantling objectified identities, it is not undertaken in this chapter because the method does not fit the goals of this research.
In winter, Spiti is covered in snow, like a valley of silver.

~ Local Spiti saying ~

Spiti Valley is located in the present day Indian state of Himachal Pradesh. Currently, it has a population of around 12,000 people\(^{24}\) living in a 7,100 sq. km.\(^{25}\) territory. Geographically, it is situated in the rain shadow of the Himalayas, which deprives the valley of the Indian monsoon rains. Spiti’s extreme altitude (many villages in Spiti are situated higher than 4,000 meters above sea level, with the lowest villages in Spiti being over 3000m above sea level) and arid landscape distinguishes Spiti and its neighboring region of upper Kinnaur from other regions of Himachal Pradesh.\(^{26}\)

Partly due to its high and arid geographical conditions, Spiti is relatively isolated. Most tourists as well as anthropological researchers visiting the region choose to visit the neighboring region of Ladakh, which has similar cultural and geographical environments but is connected by an airport facility and better road infrastructure - and thus a stronger tourist economy. The road connecting Spiti to the nearest Indian town of Manali, much of which is unpaved, is normally closed from November to April every year due to snow. The 1962 border war between India and China resulted in Spiti, along with its neighboring region of Ladakh, being closed to tourists and Indians from outside the region. While Ladakh was opened to tourists in 1974, Spiti was kept off-limits to tourists,

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\(^{24}\) A local official who coordinated the 2010 population census said that Spiti’s population is 11,852. However, a government of Himachal Pradesh website presents the local population as being 12,445 (Accessed on January 3, 2014: http://hplahaulspiti.nic.in/fact_file.htm).


\(^{26}\) The latter are mostly green with vegetation due to their location on the south face of the Himalayas, a geographical situation which allows them to benefit from more sunlight and to receive the Monsoon rains.
as well as to non-local Indians, until 1993. The opening of Ladakh attracted substantial anthropological research in the region. In recent decades, research in Ladakh has continued, and includes a dedicated international association of scholars and even a peer-reviewed *Ladakh Studies* journal. In contrast, very little anthropological and sociological research has been carried out in Spiti (exceptions include Jahoda, 2007, 2008; and Dollfus, 2004). The most detailed academic research related to Spiti’s history and culture has been done in the field of Buddhist Studies, mainly through the study of Buddhist art, architecture, and manuscripts found in its ancient temples and monasteries.

Spiti is most well known for its old Buddhist temples and monasteries. These sites have attracted some of the pioneer scholars of Tibetan Buddhism (Tucci, 1935/1988;
Snellgrove, 1957/1995) and continue to draw researchers to Spiti (Klimburg-Salter, 1997; Tropper, 2008). Several of Spiti’s temples and monasteries are believed to be more than a thousand years old. During the 10th century, the Buddhist rulers of the newly founded Guge kingdom supported the Great Translator Rinchen Zangpo (lo tsa ba chen po rin chen bzang po) in a project whose objective was to translate all the major Sanskrit Buddhist texts into the Tibetan language and to build temples, monasteries and stupas in the region (mainly Ladakh, Zanskar, Spiti, Upper Kinnaur, Guge and Purang). These initiatives also promoted significant cultural and scholarly exchanges between Tibetan and Indian scholars and artists (Klimburg-Salter, 1997), as evidenced by standardized Tibetan translations of Sanskrit Buddhist texts from this time as well as by the Indian (Kashmiri) influenced art and iconography featured in the Buddhist temples of the Alchi Monastery in Ladakh and the Tabo Monastery in Spiti. Spiti was a key site of these initiatives (Klimburg-Salter, 1997; Tucci, 1935/1988),27 which laid the foundation for what is known in Tibetan Buddhist historiography as the “Second Diffusion of Buddhism”.28 The legacy of this period is such that even today Spiti and its neighboring regions (including Ladakh in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, Lahaul and upper Kinnaur in Himachal Pradesh, and the Ngari region of Tibet) share many aspects of

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27 Spiti became a key site of the scholarly, artistic and architectural activities of the “Second Diffusion of Buddhism” partly because it was located at the crossroads of Kashmir, India and Guge and partly because it was a stronghold of Bon religion (Tucci, 1935/1988, p. 15; Laxman S. Thakur, 2008), which the proponents of Tibetan Buddhism, specifically the Tibetan rulers who had established themselves in the region during this period, sought to subdue (Tucci, 1935/1988; Klimburg-Salter, 1997). Although many aspects of Bon religion - such as the propitiation of mountain deities and serpent spirits - are still practiced in Spiti and other Himalayan Tibetan Buddhist regions today, these deities and cults are either subdued or incorporated into the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon.

28 According to standard Tibetan Buddhist history, Buddhism first came to Tibet during the reign of Yarlung dynasty kings but much of Buddhist heritage was destroyed during and after the reign of the last anti-Buddhist emperor, Lang Darma (’u dum btsan po, who reigned from 841-842, according to Dotson, 2009, p. 143). This phase of Tibetan Buddhism is known as the “First Diffusion of Buddhism”. Tibetan Buddhism then reemerged mainly from Western Tibet, starting from the late 10th century, commencing the period known as the “Second Diffusion of Buddhism”.

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religious culture, social customs, institutions, belief systems, and language. The main features found in all these regions are the dominance of Tibetan Buddhism in all aspects of life, belief in mountain deities and serpent spirits, and agriculture as the economic mainstay of the people. Local notions of gender and gender roles in Spiti are also similar to those in the Tibetan-speaking regions of the Himalayas (Gyatso, 1987; Huber, 1994; Tsomo, 2004). In the following chapters, I show that local notions of gender roles relate very well to the larger literature on feminist political ecology and critical agrarian studies pertaining to South Asia in general.

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29 Another important feature of the Western Himalayan region of India, and Tibet more broadly, is the institution of monasteries. Monasteries play an important role in Tibetan Buddhist societies (Mills, 2003; Jahoda, 2007). Spiti has five monasteries: Tabo, Dhangkar, Kee, Tengyud and Gungri. Tabo (built in 996 A.D.) is recognized as the world’s oldest continuously occupied Buddhist monastery. These monasteries played two key roles: they were centers of religious practice and education, and they were powerful socio-economic institutions which owned large tracts of agricultural land. Each monastery also has its own base of affiliated villages. For example, several villages are affiliated with each monastery. Whenever there is a need for religious ritual performance (e.g., during sickness or death), farmers avail these services through their local or affiliated monastery. Farmers of affiliated villages in turn are responsible for supporting the monastery through different kinds of taxes, including the enrolment of their children as monks (Jahoda, 2007). Although the monasteries in Spiti are relatively small, academically inclined monks are able to achieve the highest levels of educational training because these centers of religious education are part of the larger Tibetan monastic education system. For example, it was customary for scholarly monks from Spiti to attend larger monasteries in Tibet, where all the major monasteries – Tashi Lhunpo, Sera, Gaden and Drepung – accommodated monks from Spiti and nearby regions into their residential colleges for natives of the Ngari region, of which Spiti historically formed a part (Tsetan, 1987). Since the closing of the India-Tibet border, however, monks from Spiti join monasteries established by Tibetan refugees in different parts of India.

The monasteries in Spiti traditionally held large tracts of agricultural land, which were cultivated by tenant farmers (Jahoda, 2007). However, much of the monastic estate lands were given to tenant farmers after the passage of the 1950 Punjab Tenants Act, which imposed a ceiling on the size of land holdings that any one individual or institution could occupy (Jahoda, 2008, p. 13). Although the powers of the monasteries have declined in recent decades due to the rule of modern secular states, they still remain powerful. For instance, even today, all non-caste households are required to admit their second son into the monastery. During my trip to Spiti in 2007, I learned from a Dhutul man of Tashigang village that he had to pay a fine of 40,000 rupees to Kee Monastery because he had chosen to send his younger son to school rather than to the monastery. Another example of the monasteries’ power and influence is evidenced by village laws that prohibit farmers from farming or other livelihood activities (such as collecting dung) when the head of the local monastery visits the village. Irrigation water that day flows freely without use. Everyone in the village must be engaged in activities (reception, cooking, dance, music, decoration, serving, cleaning, etc.) which honor the visiting lama.
While Spiti shares its high altitude mountainous desert landscape and Tibetan Buddhist culture with its Tibetan and Ladakhi neighboring regions, it also has distinct cultural and socio-economic characteristics. Some of these distinct attributes are a product of more recent history, while others are more ancient. Among Spiti’s distinct cultural features with ancient roots are its local dialect and calendar system. Although people in Spiti speak a Western Tibetan dialect, an Indian linguist who has compiled a substantial dictionary of Spiti words (Mathews, personal communication, May 6, 2011) mentioned that the Spiti dialect – with its own local variations – has its own distinctive linguistic characteristics that are not found in the Ladakhi and central Tibetan languages.30 Perhaps a more noteworthy and relevant cultural feature of Spiti is that Spiti has a unique system of timekeeping, with the names of the months of the calendar being based on ecological, seasonal and agricultural cycles (see Appendix 1 and chapter 5).31 Compared to both the Tibetan and Ladakhi systems, this calendar system is unique in terms of the timing of the year cycle (including the timing of the new year)32 and the names of the months (Gergan, 1978).

As indicated from Spiti’s naming of the months according to agricultural seasons, farming has been the main form of livelihood practice in Spiti from time immemorial. In addition to agriculture, people also engage in other livelihood activities such as weaving,

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30 The local language is called Bhoti. Bhoti is a generic term in Hindi for Tibet, meaning “of Tibet”; Tibet is known to Hindus as “bhot”. There are local variations in Spiti’s Bhoti: people in lower Spiti use more honorific language in their speech as compared with those in upper Spiti and those of Pin Valley.

31 Another unique aspect of Spiti, at least contemporary Spiti, is that it is rare to find polyandrous relations, which are common in its neighboring regions. In the two villages where I conducted this study, there was only one household with a polyandrous arrangement.

32 For example, while the Ladakhi new year starts in the 11th month of the Tibetan calendar (Gergan, 1978), Spiti’s starts in the 10th month.
Trade and pastoralism.\textsuperscript{33} Today, the government also plays a central role by employing a significant number of the adult population as road construction workers, teachers, nurses, and bureaucrats, as well as in a host of other capacities. Therefore, although I use the word “farmer” to generically describe the people of Spiti in this study, it must be pointed out that today people are engaged in a host of livelihood (income) sources in addition to their common occupation of farming. For example, the father of my host family is a local doctor, a farmer and a proficient local architect, all of which are closely tied to activities in the village. At the same time, he also works as an employee of the state government as a forest guard. In addition, during the four years when I was engaged in my fieldwork, he started and completed building a large four-story house, which he plans to run as a guesthouse for tourists.

\textbf{Social stratification and socio-economic structure of Spiti Valley}

Literature on social stratification in Tibetan (Carrasco, 1959; Goldstein, 1971; Aziz, 1978; Wiley, 1986), Ladakhi (Crook, 1994) and Spiti (Jahoda, 2008) societies shows similarities in socio-economic class structure, albeit with minor regional and local differences. Households with farming land and irrigation rights, with associated tax

\textsuperscript{33} Before roads connected Spiti, people made most of their own clothing, shoes and ropes - mainly from yak and sheep skin and wool (Harcourt, 1871, p. 77; Interviews, 2010 & 2011). Today, because people wear modern clothing (pants, shirts, etc., with most women wearing Indian \textit{salwar kameez}), weaving is limited to making carpets and ropes, an activity which is mainly done during the winter months. Women do most of the weaving, although men also engage in spinning wool with a spindle. In the past, trading was also an important activity in Spiti. Spiti traditionally formed a trade link (mainly for wool) between the plains of India and the highlands of Tibet and Ladakh (Thakur, 2001, pp. 5-17), which was the main reason for the British takeover of Spiti in 1846 (British Parliament, 1864, p. 26). Historically, people from Ladakh, Changthang, Tibet and India used to come to Spiti during an annual trading fair at La Dartse, near Zibug Village, during the late summer (Interviews, 2010 & 2011). Today, some farmers engage in the selling of Chumurti horses and yaks to Ladakhi and Tibetan nomads in the Changthang. During my fieldwork in 2010, a group of nomads from Changthang also came to Khyung, Spiti, with sheep and horses for trade. As for pastoralism in Spiti, Charudutt Mishra and his colleagues (e.g., Mishr et al., 2003; Mishra, Wieren, Ketner, Heitkonig, & Prins, 2004) have written extensively on the subject.
obligations, form the basic corporate entities of the Tibetan socio-economic system. A Tibetan village is typically comprised of several classes of households. These are, starting from the top: aristocrats, tantric practitioners (Joba or Ngagpa), Tibetan medicine practitioners (Amchi), taxpayer farmers, landless Dhutul (or Dhuchung) farmers, and outcastes. The minor differences at the regional and local level are mainly demonstrated in the compositions of different classes of people or households. Some regions and villages within a region have a greater percentage of one particular class of households, while others have less or none of these households. For example, the outcaste group of Beda, which is present in the western Himalayan regions of Ladakh and Spiti is absent in central Tibet. An example of differences in class structure within a region would be the fact that many villages in Spiti have only two kinds of households (i.e., Khangchen and Dhutul), while many others have three kinds of households (i.e., Khangchen, Dhutul and outcastes). These kinds of differences are further outlined in the chart below, which compares the social stratifications characteristic of Tibet and Spiti. The percentage of aristocrats in Spiti Valley (only one household)\textsuperscript{34} is significantly lower than that of Tibet. Another important difference is that Spiti has only two types of outcaste households (i.e., blacksmiths and musicians), whereas Tibet has several types of outcastes.

\textsuperscript{34} There are a few minor aristocrat households in Spiti. These are the “small Nono” of Pin Valley, Nono of Mane Village, Nono of Demul Village, as well as some households that claim to be descendants of the Lord of the Fort (\textit{mkhar spon}). The status of these households is lower than that of the main Nono (of Kyuling Village) of Spiti and generally equivalent to the Joba and Amchi households.
Table 1: Social stratification in Tibet and Spiti

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social classes</th>
<th>% of population in traditional Tibetan society (Gombo, 1983, p. 68)</th>
<th>% of population in Spiti Valley (according to 2001 Census)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>King or ruler</td>
<td></td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aristocrats</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>0.0003% (one Nono household)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxpayer Khangchen</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[including Amchi and Joba]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhutul (or Dhuchung)</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcastes</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the purposes of this study, the socio-economic structure of Spiti Village is best classified into three classes of households: Khangchen, Dhutul and outcastes (which are today known as “castes”). The following table shows three different types of social stratification characteristic of Spiti. At a broader level, the society is grouped into two endogamous classes: the outcastes and the Chechang. While this is an important classification for the locals, this study uses the next level of classification that further divides the majority of Chechang households, which form 95.4% of the population (according to a 2001 Census), into taxpayer Khangchen households and the traditionally landless Dhutul households. This is an important differentiation for the purposes of this study because socio-economic power dynamics between these two groups constitutes an important aspect of farming and resource management customs. Although the society can be further classified in more detail, as is shown in the third column of the table, such
detail is not necessary for the purpose of analyzing the social organization of farming and resource management customs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Broad stratification</th>
<th>Standard stratification</th>
<th>Detailed stratification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chechang/Yarab</td>
<td>Khangchen</td>
<td>Nono</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Joba, Amchi and minor aristocrats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Khangchen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dhutul</td>
<td>Dhutul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caste/Marab</td>
<td>Caste/ Marab</td>
<td>Zo blacksmiths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Beda musicians</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Social stratification in Spiti Valley

**Khangchen households**

Locals believe that Khangchen households are the founders and the oldest households of the village.\(^{35}\) That is why these households are also referred to as the “Old Households” (*khang chen rnying pa*). These households were also called “tax payers” (*khral pa*) because only this group of households was historically responsible for paying taxes to the ruler.\(^{36}\) The farming estates of these households formed the basic unit of agricultural production and taxation which constituted the traditional economy. As tax-payers, these

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\(^{35}\) Another definition of Khangchen is the “house of the eldest brother or son”, the person responsible for running the farming estate. When the eldest son marries and takes charge of running the farming estate, his parents (often with an aunt or younger sister) retire into a Khangchung (*Khang* = house, *chung* = small). Carasco (1959, p. 32), along with British colonial records, mention yet another household, Yangchungpa (“still-smaller-one”), where the members of Khangchung move if/when their grandson becomes head of the Khangchen and their son must move into the Khangchung.\(^{35}\) Khangchung and Yangchung households are thus extended residences of the Khangchen household.

\(^{36}\) Taxes include grains, corvee labor and military service. These taxes were abolished or exempted by the Indian government.
households (i.e., the men of these households) had legal rights to all of the arable land and irrigation sources of the village. These men also represented the Village Council and hence were the decision makers; they thus constituted the most powerful group of households in the village.⁴⁷

How did the Khangchen households come to own all the local resources and decision-making powers, and how does the Khangchen household system perpetuate this arrangement? According to common belief, the Khangchen households have privileged ownership over all farming land and irrigation water because they are (or are believed to be) the male descendants of the oldest households of the village. Locals believe that there were a total of 250 such households in the beginning, which were known as the “250 soldiers”⁴⁸ (Interviews, 2010, 2011). The old Khangchen households of today thus represent the descendants of the 250 soldiers. Local elders mentioned that these 250 Khangchen households still exist and that the number has not changed much in history, if at all.⁴⁹

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⁴⁷ This was the case until after the introduction of the 1968 Nautor land grant program, described below, which made it possible for poor farmers to become “full” tax payers to the village and thus to assume membership in the Village Council.

⁴⁸ “dang po dmag phed rang gsum brgya byung pa red zer gyi ’dug’”. Here, “phed” is the local pronunciation for “phyed” or half. I am not sure about the correct spelling of “rang” but most probably, it is “dang”, which would render the statement as “dang po dmag phyed dang sum brgya byung pa red zer gyi ’dug’”. The expression “half less than 300 hundred (phyed dang sum brgya) is consistent with classical Tibetan expressions such as “sde pa phyed dang bryad” for “half less than eight sets” of four alphabets, making up the 30 alphabets in the Tibetan language.

⁴⁹ During my fieldwork in 2010 and 2011, I travelled to all the villages in Spiti and collected data on the total number of Historical Khangchen households in each village, which totaled 269. Here, it must be noted that the numbers were collected by asking random villagers and trusting that there was a degree of veracity in their responses. Generally, all mature members of the village would have this knowledge and information. Also, there were several known cases in the historical memory of villagers that explained how the numbers had increased. In some villages, the numbers had increased through the fissioning of rich Khangchen households. In others, the number had increased after a Dhutul farmer bought land from the village and had joined the ranks of Khangchen householders.
Maintaining the continuity in the number and size of land holdings was an important characteristic of the Khangchen household system (Wylie, 1986, p. 6). This continuity is maintained by a system of primogeniture, whereby the property is passed on to the eldest son when he gets married. This practice continues from one generation to the next, with local laws existing to ensure that the property is not divided into smaller pieces. For example, while it is customary to give small pieces of land of Khangchen property to support certain family members, such as a monk brother (who is given a “monk field” or dra zhing) or elder parents, these pieces of land must be returned to the Khangchen household after the death of the family members to whom these were given.

_Dhutul households_

Dhutul households are generally described as those “who have nothing but a house, being literally a smoke-maker” (Gazetteer, 1883, p. 439). Members of Dhutul households were traditionally landless farmers who were dependent on Khangchen households for work (Lyall, 1874, p. 185). Although this class of household is socio-economically weaker than the Khangchen, members of both Dhutul and Khangchen households are considered equally pure, and known as Yarab (“good manners”), as opposed to the ritually impure members of caste households, who are known as Marab (“vulgar”/“immoral”).

The Dhutul class of farmers comprises the majority of the Spiti population. According to local history, in the beginning, there were 600 “Za” or Dhutul households along with the

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40 Historically, there were two types of Dhutul households in Spiti: those that were tied to a Khangchen household (rang gi dud ’thul) and those that were independent (Gazetteer, 1883, pp. 479-480). These two types of Dhutul are also found in other Tibetan societies (Goldstein, 1971; Aziz, 1978). However, no distinction is made between the two types of Dhutul households in Spiti today.
250 “soldier” or Khangchen households. Other historical data on Dhutuls is generally not available. That this group of households did not pay taxes to the ruler is probably why the British did not seek to provide census figures specific to this category. The Indian Government does not differentiate between Khangchen and Dhutul households because both categories (as well as everyone else in Spiti) have been exempted from taxation. Jahoda (2008) has shown that the number of Dhutul farmers has increased significantly since Spiti became a part of India, which is consistent with my field observations. The total population of Spiti has increased from 4,222 in 1951 (a figure based on independent India’s first national census) to 11,852 in 2010 (a figure based on the last national census). Given that the total number of Khangchen households has changed very little (as mentioned above) and since the caste population makes up only a small section of the local population (5.6%, according to the 2001 census), we can deduce that the number of Dhutul households has increased the most over the last few decades. This is consistent with studies done by Jahoda (2008) on demographic changes in Spiti’s Tabo village, which show that the majority of the increase in population belongs to the Dhutul category, formed mainly through the fissioning of Old Khangchen and Dhutul households. The main factor that made the increase in population socio-economically feasible was the 1968 Nautor land grant program (discussed below). After this program was introduced, all of the landless households in Zibug and Khyung villages were given land, which made it possible for many of them to formally enter the ranks of the Khangchen class by paying “full” village taxes. Thus, the socio-economic status or power of the Dhutul households

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41 The total population of Spiti in 2001 was 10,679 (5,574 males and 4,805 females), out of which “schedule caste” members comprised 600 (317 males and 283 females). (Data collected from Kaza office of the Additional District Commissioner, Spiti Valley).

42 Here, I am referring to the absolute number of individuals, not the percentage. I do not have sufficient data to compare in terms of percentage.
rose significantly after the passage of the Himachal Pradesh Nautor Land Rules act of 1968.

“Caste” or Marab households
At the bottom of the village social structure are the two outcaste Marab households: Zo blacksmiths and Beda musicians. It is unknown when and how Zo households came to Spiti but the Beda were introduced under Ladakhi rule (discussed below). Today, Zo and Beda households are more commonly known – in local speech and government records, as well as in academic publications – as “caste” or “Scheduled Caste” households. During my field research, I observed that farmers use the word “caste” more often than “Marab”, even while speaking in the local language.43

The use of the term “caste” to refer to these two groups of households in Spiti is also standard in academic publications (e.g., Mishra et al., 2003; Gutschow, 2006; Jahoda 2007 & 2008; Tsering & Ishimura, 2012), where it is normally clarified or implicitly assumed that the term specifically refers to local outcaste groups and does not concern the Indian caste organization.44 This study will also use the term “caste” to refer to Zo and/or Beda households/members; this is not to imply, however, that the system is the

43 The local use of the English word “caste” could have become popular only after the Indian Constitution Order of 1950, which designated “Bhot” (or Tibetan) people of Spiti under “Scheduled Tribe” and Beda and Zopa under “Scheduled Caste” categories. In other words, according to Indian government records (including the Census), all the Chechang members belong to “Scheduled Tribe” and all the Marab members belong to “Scheduled Caste”. These categories have become popular among people because members of Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes receive subsidized government aid and special “reservation” quotas in government offices and institutions. A telling example of the popularity of these terms is that local leaders often use the word “tribal” to describe Spiti as a “backward” region deserving of government aid, on the one hand, and attractive enough to generate tourism, on the other.
44 Caste is also used in studies related to Ladakhi (Gutschow, 2006) and Tibetan (Aziz, 1978; Ortner, 1973) societies more broadly.
same as the Hindu caste system. Here I want to emphasize that the uncritical use of the term “caste” can reify caste biases. Although an option to avoid such reification is to not use the term, I chose to actively use it because this study directly concerns socio-economic inequities experienced by Zo and Beda members precisely because of their outcaste status, which is more strongly expressed by the term “caste” than “marab.” More importantly, I believe that the reification of caste inequities happens when the term is used in an uncritical manner. This study, on the contrary, reveals and critically analyzes routine discrimination experienced by outcaste members in the domains of farming and resource management.

The social beliefs and practices concerning caste members in Spiti are similar to those concerning outcastes in Tibet (Carrasco, 1959; Aziz, 1978; Gombo, 1983; Childs, 2003) and other Himalayan Buddhist regions such as Ladakh (Rather, 1997) and Khumbu in Nepal (Ortner, 1973). In addition to lower social status, caste members are believed to be irreversibly defiled - according to local notions of purity. Members of Chechang households follow two main rules of exclusion against caste members: prohibition on marital relations and on sharing the same drinking cup. In the rare cases of marital relations or “mixing of mouths” between Chechang and caste members, the result is that the Chechang person involved permanently loses his or her status.45 Finally, it must be

45 As mentioned earlier, the caste groups form a separate endogamous group in Spiti. Here it must be noted that while members of Chechang and caste households are socially allowed to marry within their own social group, those belonging to more respected or higher status households, such as local doctors (Amchi) and minor aristocrats, prefer to marry among themselves or within the local elites. Similarly, within the caste group, Zo blacksmiths prefer to marry within their own social group, as Beda musicians are the lowest in social status. While marital relations between different classes of houses within Chechang households and within caste households are socially allowed, marriage between Chechang and caste members is strictly prohibited. Such a marriage would entail permanent loss of status for the transgressing Chechang member. Similarly, although people of Spiti do not normally share drinking cups or eating bowls
noted here that, in Spiti, caste is a stronger determinant of a person’s status than is gender.

This became clear to me after I interviewed a Zo man, who sat on my bed during the interview process. This came to the attention of the mother of my host (Dhutul) family. Speaking about the Zo man I interviewed, she said that he is “bad manners” (ma rabs). Consequently, she said that she never let them (i.e., caste members) sit above or next to her, a woman.

With this brief introduction, I will now describe the two caste groups of Spiti.

Zo blacksmiths

The blacksmiths are an important class of people in Spiti’s society. Locally known as “Zo” (Zo or Zo ba for “craftsman”), this group of individuals is traditionally responsible for making all kinds of metal implements used in Spiti society. Colonial British records speak highly of the skills of the blacksmiths of Spiti, who are known for making good quality “pipes, tinder boxes, bits, locks and keys, knives, choppers, hoes, plough-shares, and chains” (Lyall, 1874, p. 198). Since many Zo households traditionally had farming land (Zo zhing) in the village, which they received in return for their services, the Zo households paid a small “smoke tax” or Dhutral (dud khral), just as the Dhutul household members did. Therefore, Zo households were also considered as belonging to the Dhutul
category in terms of village tax contribution. However, for the purposes of this study, Zo households are viewed as belonging to the “caste” category because caste is a more important determinant of their social status than is Dhutul.

According to demographic data from 1868, there were 100 blacksmiths living in Spiti in 1868, comprising 3.3% of the total population of the valley, which was 3,024 (Lyall, 1874, p. 198). The combined population of Zo and Beda (see below) in Spiti has increased from 4.8% in 1868 (Lyall, 1874) to 5.6% in 2001 (government census data). To extrapolate an approximate current population of Zo people in Spiti from this limited information, assuming that they are more than the Beda people (Interviews, 2010, 2011), we can say that they constitute approximately 3.8% of the local population (+/- 1%). Zo households are scattered throughout Spiti Valley with varying numbers in different villages: with more in some (e.g., three households in Khyung in 2010), less in some (e.g., two households in Zibug in 2010) and none in others (e.g., Hanse in 2010). Today none of the Zo households in Zibug and Khyung villages engage in producing metal implements; this is due to the fact that mass produced tools are imported from the plains of India. Instead, their main source of livelihood is farming. However many members are also employed in the service sector (with government and NGOs) and some work as construction contractors.

46 The number of people representative of blacksmith households in 1868 (when the total population of Spiti Valley was 3,024) was 100.
47 According to 1868 data, Zo constituted 3.3% of the total population. In the same year, the total caste population constituted 4.8%. Since there are only two caste groups in Spiti, we can also calculate the percentage of the Zo population within the total caste population: if 4.8% of the caste population represented 100%, then the Zo population of 3.3% would equal 68.75% of the total caste population. Applying this percentage (68.75%) to 2001 caste data (i.e., 5.6% of the population), we get 3.85% (i.e., if 100% of caste is 5.6%, then 68.75% would equal 3.85%).
Beda musicians

Beda refers to the smallest and weakest group of households in Spiti. Owing to their small number, they are found only in some of the villages. In both Zibug and Khyung villages, there were two Beda households each. Their traditional profession is to play music during ceremonial occasions, such as in the presence of religious and political dignitaries or during festivals and rituals. The Beda are often described as “wandering minstrels” in British colonial publications. In return for their services, they were traditionally provided alms (bsod nyoms) in the form of food, grain and fodder (see chapter 6) by the Khangchen households mainly and, to a lesser extent, also by the Dhutul households. Until they received Nautor land, they had historically neither paid any tax to the village nor engaged in agriculture. Today, Beda musicians in many villages (including both Khyung and Zibug villages) are free from the customary obligation to play music for villagers in exchange for alms. Instead, Beda musicians provide their services on a “daily wage” (dihari in Hindi) basis. 48

The traditional Spiti musical ensemble, called “Hirib” or “Hiribpa”, involves the playing of three musical instruments: a Beda man playing a reed pipe (“sunna”), a Beda woman playing a large tambourine (about two feet in diameter, called “dawu”), and a Zo man playing a pair of kettle drums (“daman”). 49 Often, especially at marriage parties where

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48 Chapter 5 describes the historical circumstances that led Beda musicians of Zibug village to discontinue their customary obligations and to start the contemporary practice of playing for money.
49 The names of musical instruments have Persian meanings: “Sunna” is probably derived from Urdu/Persian words “shenai”/“surnay”). The tambourine or “dawu” is probably derived from the Persian word “daf” as it is the same instrument, same size and both use goat-skin. The kettledrum, daman, is “damana” in Urdu/Persian.
the musicians get paid well, there are more than three musicians and singers (Beda women). It is customary for the Hirib musicians to play at the public festivals of the local monasteries (religious dance, ‘chams) and for the village deities at the local temples. They also play music and sing for the people, mainly for the Khangchen households, during birthdays, weddings, parties and village festivals. The songs sung by Beda women at weddings and parties are regarded as auspicious (rlen ‘brel glu) and ancient (dang po’i glu). While Spiti women are known for their large knowledge of songs, only the Beda women know the many ceremonial songs of Spiti’s social and religious culture. Thus, when it comes to Spiti’s social and religious culture, the Beda musicians form an indispensable class of people. Yet they are treated with contempt and the Beda women (be mo), in particular, are at the worst receiving end of society’s prejudices and even hatred (Rather, 1997). An example was described to me by a local community leader (interview, 2010), who opined that it is not uncommon for Hirib musicians, especially the Beda woman, to be physically beaten by drunken men for not playing music or singing well during parties. He remembers witnessing a Beda woman playing the tambourine with blood all over her face during a community party.

One of my field informants had learned from a local elder that Bedas were introduced into Spiti when it was under Ladakhi rule (i.e., between 1630 and 1842) to play music for the Nono during ceremonial occasions at the Cliff Castle (brag mkhar) in Dhangkar village. Thus, according to my field informant, the first Beda of Spiti Valley lived in

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50 Once a year, there is a party of the deities (lha yi chang ka) which is held on the 17th day of the first month of the Tibetan calendar in Khyung and Guling villages. On this day, the deities dance to Beda women’s singing and those songs can only be sung on that day.

51 For a historical account of mistreatment of Beda women in the hands of Zo men, see Egerton (1864/2011, p. 50).
Dhangkar village, which is where the fort of the Governor was situated. Gradually, the population of Beda increased and they moved to different villages. This theory seems plausible because Beda are unique to Ladakh among Tibetan Buddhist regions and these musicians also served the kings and royalty of Ladakh (Rather, 1997, pp. 216-217; Jest & Sanday, p. 6). The fact that the etymology of Beda is unclear in the Tibetan language as well as in the local Spiti dialect—unlike Zo, Duthul and Khangchen, which are all Tibetan—also suggests their non-Tibetan origin.52

Having described the three different classes of households, I will now provide a discussion of the historical context in which this structure was shaped and how power relations have changed through the centuries.

**Historical background to local social structure and relations**

The following historical background to Spiti’s social structure and changing social relations is presented in three sections. First, I present a hypothesis that the institutional basis of Spiti’s Khangchen household as tax-payers (khral pa) and soldiers (dmag) was founded during the period of the Tibetan Empire (7-9th century). To make this link, I first cite 13th and 16th century Tibetan texts that establish that Spiti formed a part of a military administrative district of the Tibetan Empire. Drawing on studies based on primary textual sources from the time of the Tibetan Empire, I make linkages between the

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52 According to Rather (1997, p. 215) and Bhasin (2004, p. 136), Beda is a Tibetan word meaning “to live separately.” They say that “Be refers to separately and da means reside”. This meaning, however, does not make sense for native speakers and locals. None of the Beda interviewees and local scholars I asked were able to provide a meaning or spelling of the word with any certainty. There is no standard spelling of ‘Beda’ in Tibetan, which is evident in the “various different spellings” used in Tibetan language publications (Jahoda, 2009, p. 53). The word is most likely non-Tibetan. There are also Beda castes in other parts of India.
structure, function, size and service requirements of the military administrative system of the empire and those of Spiti under the Ladakhi rule (as described in British colonial records and in interviews with local people). I also show how the similarities between the taxation systems also find significant support in local oral history, language and social customs. The detailed hypothesis presented in the first section is important for this study, as well as for the early history of Spiti more broadly, because it suggests that the dominant social strata of the contemporary Spiti village, the Khangchen households, was instituted during the time when Spiti was under the Tibetan Empire. The second section describes the administrative power structure of Spiti under Ladakhi and British rule. This discussion is relevant because it directly relates to Spiti’s social structure and historical administrative system, which are central to this chapter. The third and final section describes some of the major socio-economic changes that occurred in Spiti after it became a part of India. These changes were mainly introduced or controlled by the Indian Government, which considers Spiti to be a sensitive border region. A discussion of these changes is relevant here because they have dramatically changed the socio-economic, educational and infrastructure conditions in Spiti, leading to significant changes in gender, caste and class roles.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time line</th>
<th>Powers</th>
<th>Main influence</th>
<th>Social relations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-7&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; century</td>
<td>Zhangzhung</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-9&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; century</td>
<td>Tibetan Empire</td>
<td>Soldier-Khangchen system of taxation</td>
<td>Soldier-Khangchen system of taxation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; century - 1630</td>
<td>Guge</td>
<td>Campaign to introduce Tibetan Buddhism</td>
<td>Cultural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1630-1683/84; 1705-1735; and from 1758-1842*</td>
<td>Ladakh</td>
<td>Peripheral region: largely ignored</td>
<td>Nono and Beda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1846-1947</td>
<td>British</td>
<td>Documentation of local customs</td>
<td>Consolidation and legitimization of Khangchen privileges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1947-now</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Distribution of land to landless; education; commercialization of agriculture; integration of local economy with larger political economy</td>
<td>Empowerment of underprivileged groups; socio-economic improvement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Historical timeline of Spiti Valley<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Major powers that ruled Spiti for more than 50 years. Dating for * based on Jahoda, 2007.
Spiti has a relatively coherent historical narrative from the 10th century onwards (Lahuli, 2002). Before the 10th century, the only thing generally known or accepted in Hindi (e.g., Sankrityayan, 1948/2006, 1994, 2002), Tibetan (e.g., mkhas pa’i dga’ ston; Gyalpo, 2006; Shastri, 2007) and English (e.g., Thakur, 2000; Petech, 1997) language sources is that Spiti once formed a part of the Zhangzhung kingdom (periodization unknown). This seems to have been the case until the region became a part of an expanding Tibetan Empire sometime in the mid 7th century (Sankrityayan, 1994, 2002).

For the purposes of this study, I will begin the historical discussion from the period of the Tibetan Empire because there are striking similarities between the military administrative system of the Tibetan Empire (on which there is a substantial body of literature based on primary sources such as texts and records from that period) and Spiti’s historical taxation and administrative system, especially those aspects associated with the Khangchen households. Based on these similarities or linkages, I hypothesize that the institutional basis of Spiti’s Khangchen system of taxation was introduced during the time of the Tibetan Empire (7th to 9th century AD).

Before I present the different arguments for the hypothesis, two important explanations should be made to prevent misinterpretation about this hypothesis. First, this hypothesis strictly applies to the case of Spiti and not to other Tibetan Buddhist regions. I point this out because similar taxation or administrative systems in other regions could have different origins. For example, Goldstein (1971, p. 14) has noted, in the case of Samada village in central Tibet, that a military service (dmag khral) system of taxation was
introduced in the early eighteenth century during the time of Mi dbang Pho lha nas.

Second, this hypothesis only concerns the historical foundation of the institution of the “250 soldiers” of Spiti Valley, not the ethnic or geographic origins of the soldiers per se. This is important to point out because there are many examples of prehistoric cave art and petroglyphs in Spiti (Thakur, 2000) that bear evidence that the valley was inhabited much earlier on. Currently, there is no information regarding whether the original group of 250 soldiers was selected among people already living in the valley or whether they were sent from elsewhere to guard the border region of Spiti.54

**Origins of household system of taxation during the Tibetan Empire**

A main source for this hypothesis springs from old Tibetan language sources, mainly *lDe’u chos ‘byung* (12th/13th century) and *mKhas pa’i dga’ ston* (16th century).56 Spiti is mentioned in these texts as part of the military administrative system of the lower Zhangzhung region of the Tibetan Empire. The reference in *lde’u chos ‘byung*, which is also quoted by Dotson (2006, p. 162), Iwao (2007, p. 212) and Shastri (2007, p. 59) says:

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54 Although the local historian Tsetan (1987) states that the people of Spiti migrated from the neighboring region of Guge (which constituted a kingdom from the 10th to the 17th century), he does not mention when they came. Moreover, while some scholars have argued that Tibetans migrated into the western Himalayan region (Denwood, 2008 & 2009), including Spiti Valley (Thakur, 2000, Sankrittyayan, 1994; 2002), during the time of the Tibetan Empire, there is no information about the ethnic or geographic origins of the 250 soldiers.

55 Some scholars (e.g., Shastri, 2007) consider the text to hail from the 12th century, while others (Dan Martin, personal communication, 2012) believe that the text was composed in the 13th century.

56 *Mkhas pa’i dga’ ston* is available online via the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center, see Threngwa (1986).
In the border region between Tibet and Nyipa, there are five thousand-districts of the lower Zhang-zhung. These are the two, Gu-ge and Gu-cog, the two, Spyir-tsang and Yar-rtsang and the little thousand-district of Spyi-ti.\(^{57}\)

A similar reference to Spiti as part of the administrative district of the Tibetan Empire is provided in \textit{mkhas pa’i dga’ ston} (p. 189):

In the border of Tibet and Nyipa, the two, Gu-ge and Cog-la, the two, Spyi-tsang and Yar-tsang, and the little thousand-district of Ci-di (Spiti) are the five thousand-districts of lower Zhangzhung.\(^{58}\)

The Old Tibetan Empire was divided into various regions such as “the four horns” (\textit{ru bzhi}) of central Tibet, Nyipa, and Zhangzhung, which were composed of units of “thousand-districts”.\(^{59}\) During the Old Tibetan Empire, the thousand-districts (\textit{stong sde}) were the “fundamental units” (Uray, 1982, p. 545) of military and economic administration (Takeuchi, 2004; Iwao, 2007; Dotson, 2006 & 2007). A thousand-district was comprised of a thousand households, responsible for supplying a thousand soldiers, i.e., one soldier from each household (Dotson, 2009, p. 39). It is thus possible to deduce from these Tibetan language sources and studies based on primary source materials (Uray, 1982; Takeuchi, 2004; Iwao, 2007, Dotson 2006, 2007 & 2009) that Spiti was not only a

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\(^{57}\) The Tibetan language source reads: “\textit{Bod dang sum pa’i so mtshaps na/zhang zhung smad kyi stong sde lnga yod de/gug ge gu cog gnyis/spyir rtsang yar rtsang gnyis/spyi ii stong bu chung dang lnga’o}.” Iwao (2007, p. 212) presents a similar translation. I am grateful to Melvyn Goldstein for editing and improving my translation to keep the style and language closer to the original.

\(^{58}\) The Tibetan language source reads: “\textit{Bod dang sum pa’i mtshaps na gug ge cog la gnyis spyi gtsang yar gtsang gnyis ci di stong bu chung ste zhang zhung smad kyi stong sde lnga}.”

\(^{59}\) The thousand-districts sometimes added up to ten thousand-districts (\textit{khri sde}, Iwao, 2007).
part of the Old Tibetan Empire but that it also provided taxes, including one soldier from each of the tax-paying households.

Before I discuss some similarities between the administrative systems of Spiti’s Khangchen household and that of the Tibetan Empire, I will first clarify that the two differently spelled names for Spiti in lde’u chos ‘byung and mkhas pa’i dga’ ston refer to the same region. Shastri (2007) discusses the different spellings used for Spiti in Tibetan language sources. These include spyi ti, spi ti, pi ti and ci di. Many writers believe that the authentic spelling is spyi ti, which is also consistent with the spelling in the oldest Tibetan language source, lde’u chos ‘byung (see, Shastri, 2007; Gergan, 1976; Rossi, 2002: Jhampa, 2008-2010; Tsetan, 1987). An important reason for the lack of a standardized spelling is that most Tibetan language readers will pronounce spyi ti as “Chi ti” or ci ti, according to the central Tibetan system of pronunciation, whereas locally it is known as “pi ti”. The people of Spiti do not pronounce the (superscribed) “s” and they likewise often do not pronounce the (subscribed) “y” (signs) that are featured in Tibetan texts (Jhampa, 2008-2010). Thus, if we take out “s” and “y” from spyi ti, we are left with “pi ti”, the local pronunciation. The lack of a standardized Tibetan spelling for Spiti can also be seen between the local monasteries: Kee Monastery uses spyi ti in its publications (Tsering, 2000), whereas Tabo Monastery uses spi ti on its website. Thus it is safe to conclude, as others cited above have done, that the references to “spyi ti” in lde’u chos ‘byung and “ci di” in Mkhas pa’i dga’ ston are to Spiti, especially because there is no other place in the region with the same name.
Functional similarities: Khangchen households as military regiments

According to an elder from Spiti’s Hansa village (interview, November 5, 2011), the historical Khangchen households are also known as “dmag” (meaning “army” or “soldiers”) because each of these households was required to provide a soldier in times of war. This claim is supported by British records as well as by the fact that I heard several stories from my interviewees about Spiti men having to go to Ladakh to serve as soldiers during times of war.60 For example, Trebeck (1841, p. 64) writes that “[e]very family [or household] subject to taxes possesses a matchlock, a sword, and a bow and arrows.” This observation suggests that members of these households did indeed serve as soldiers.

During my fieldwork, I found that only some of the Khangchen households still possessed such ancestral weapons as many had either sold or lost them.

A local custom linking Khangchen households with the “soldiers” is found in a tradition of the gathering of men of Khangchen households, which is referred to as Mag Zom (dmag ’dzom or “gathering of soldiers”). This meeting is generally convened when there is an infringement of traditional customs or an assault upon Khangchen mens’ power privileges. During my fieldwork, I heard several references to the meetings of Spiti’s Khangchen household representatives as the “gathering of soldiers”.61 Interestingly, the

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60 One of these stories, for instance, presents a theory as to why Spiti celebrates their new year earlier than is the general Tibetan custom. According to this theory, one year the men of Spiti were summoned by the king of Ladakh to fight a war. The timing of the situation was such that the men were unlikely to return by the new year, if they were to return at all. In order not to miss the celebrations, and for whatever other reasons, the people of Spiti decided to celebrate the new year months before the actual new year. Since that time, according to this story, Spiti’s new year came to be celebrated in the tenth month of the Tibetan calendar. There are also two other theories as to why Spiti celebrates their new year in the tenth month of the Tibetan calendar. See Tsering & Jhampa, 2011.

61 These meetings are almost always significant for the region. The nature of these meetings sheds light on the role of Spiti’s “army” as being one concerned with the contemporary internal protection of social-customs.
purpose of these meetings was orientated around safeguarding the traditional customs that privileged Khangchen households. In one instance, a “gathering of soldiers living above Sheela creek” was held in 2007 to discuss how to deal with caste members who had admitted their children into Buddhist monasteries despite it being against the custom for lower caste members to enter the monastery (see above and Tsering & Ishimura, 2012). A more recent “gathering of soldiers” was called as a show of force to dispute Kaza villagers, affiliated with another monastery, who had challenged the sale of a piece of land in the village in the name of the head lama of Kee Monastery. A third meeting was held a few decades ago to deal with certain Dhutul household men who were conspiring to challenge Spiti’s system of primogeniture in the Indian court of law. In all three instances, the will or the power of the “soldiers” prevailed. These instances are relevant here not only because the men of Khangchen households are called “soldiers” but also because these customary gatherings functioned as a show of force. The tone in which the stories were narrated to me, especially when references were made to the “gathering of soldiers”, implied that there could have been violence if the other party had not capitulated.

Having established that Spiti’s Khangchen households were known as and functioned in practice as a regiment in terms of their obligation and solidarity, I will now move on to arguments that link Spiti’s administrative system, as well as some aspects of local culture, to those of the Tibetan Empire of the 7th-9th century.
Structural similarities: administrative organization of the Tibetan Empire and Spiti

Spiti’s traditional administrative divisions were comprised of five subdistricts or subunits.
Each of these districts was in turn comprised of a group of fifty Khangchen households.
In other words, the original two hundred and fifty soldier households were divided into
“five groups of fifty households” (known as Inga bcu lnga), each comprising an
administrative district or unit. Spiti’s five groups are Upper (stod), Middle (bar), Lower
(sham), Pin (spin or sprin, a tributary of Spiti river) and Religious Estates (chos gzhis).
Similarly, according to Tsuguhito Takeuchi (1994) and Brandon Dotson (2007), the
Tibetan Empire of the 7th-9th centuries was also organized into subunits of fifty soldier
households, known as tshan.

One issue correlating Spiti’s five subdistricts to the Tibetan Empire divisions is that the
Religious Estates subunit in Spiti may not have existed during the time of the Tibetan
Empire because the oldest monastery of Spiti, Tabo, was built in 996 A.D. According to
Tibetan tradition, the main development of monasteries took place during the period of
the Second Diffusion of Buddhism. Here, I would argue that this does not necessarily
mean that the fifty tax-paying households were created anew with the institution of the
Religious Estates. It is more likely that the fifty households existed before that time as a
subunit group of tax-payers, and regrouped later as the Religious Estates. This is because
the basis of household taxation and administration is the farming land. All farming land
and irrigation sources in Spiti belonged to taxpayers. In order to institute fifty new tax-
paying households, these households had to be given new farming land – which would
also most likely entail finding new irrigation sources and building canals. This would
require a tremendous investment of resources from the state/kingdom, especially given the fact that there are many more and larger monasteries in the kingdom of Guge.\textsuperscript{62} Instead, it is more likely that the already existing tax-payers were assigned to different monasteries for their support. Additionally, the Tibetan Empire organized its administrative divisions according to geographical locations (Uray, 1982, p. 545), a practice which is also consistent with the administrative organization of Spiti. Except for the Religious Estates subunit, all other administrative subunits of Spiti are neatly grouped according to geographical locations. In the case of the Religious Estates subunits: all but two villages are neatly clustered together along the upper Spiti River.\textsuperscript{63}

In addition to the structural and functional similarities between the two administrative systems mentioned above, there are also other interesting similarities. These include the use of certain terms or uses of language and mountain top fire-raising stations that are also recorded in textual sources from the time of the Tibetan Empire. There are also other factors such as the fort-like architectural design of Spiti’s villages, which again hints at their military past, and social customs of inheritance that are believed to have been written during the time of the Tibetan Empire. After discussing these points, I will end

\textsuperscript{62} According to local belief, the builder of Tabo Monastery, Rinchen Zangpo, built a total of 108 temples in different parts of the kingdom.

\textsuperscript{63} The two villages that are not clustered with other villages of the subunit are Lithang and Tabo. Two subunits belonged to Lithang, situated in the middle of Spiti: Religious Estates and Lower Unit (sham). Lithang farmers paid taxes to both the monasteries and to the state (see, e.g., Appendix I of Punjab Government [of British India], 1897, for a list of the distribution and division of villages into different administrative units). As for Tabo village, there is an interesting local story I heard at Kyomo Village, which is also part of the Religious Estates unit. Seven households from Kyomo village pay tax to Tabo Monastery - even though the village and the monastery are located at opposite ends of the valley. The reason for this, I was told by a villager, is that the monastery was originally planned for construction at Kyomo but was later built at Tabo. I was also told that the ruins of the initial monastery are still visible at Kyomo.
this section by considering how the hypothesis fits in with the broader regional historical context.

*Council meetings (‘Dun ma) of Spiti and the Tibetan Empire*

In the course of my research and learning of the local language, I learned that the dialect of Spiti uses many words that are called *brda rnying*, or “archaic words”, by speakers of the central Tibetan dialect. These archaic words are found in Tibetan texts or used only in honorific form for sacred objects or in religious contexts among speakers of the central Tibetan dialect. For example, a Tibetan medicine practitioner from Spiti told me during an interview that the vocabulary of the Tibetan medical text, *rgyud bzhi* (the *Four Tantras*), will be more familiar to a speaker of the Spiti dialect than to a speaker of the central Tibetan dialect because the language used in the text is more similar to that of Spiti than to the central Tibetan.\(^{64}\)

An important archaic word that links Spiti directly to the time of the Tibetan Empire is *‘dun ma*. In the local Spiti language, the Village Council meetings are called *‘dun ma*. This word is rarely used in the central Tibetan dialect to mean “meeting” but is rather more commonly used to mean “advice” or “wish”. What is interesting in the case of Spiti’s usage of the word is that a very similar and common usage is found in the *Old Tibetan Annals*, Tibet’s oldest extant historical record dating to the time of the Tibetan Empire (Dotson, 2009). The *Old Tibetan Annals* is a document written by the court

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\(^{64}\) Although Tibetan medicine practitioners believe that the *Four Tantras of Tibetan Medicine* was composed in the eighth century by Yuthok Yonten Gompo, scholars have questioned this assertion. Todd Fenner argues that the text was “written at a time when the [medical] traditions of India, China and Greece met and blended together within a Buddhist framework” (Fenner, p. 467).
historiographers of the Tibetan Empire, chronicling the main bureaucratic and administrative activities of the kings and ministers of the Tibetan Empire. In this text, the word 'dun ma is used at least 35 times to refer to the “council meetings” of the ministers and soldiers. Considering the military regiment feature of the Khangchen men and that the Village Council meetings (‘dun ma) were traditionally only represented by Khangchen men, the contextual usage and meaning of the word is strikingly similar to those found in the *Old Tibetan Annals*. Thus, in the context of my proposed hypothesis, the use of the word ‘dun ma for Village Council in Spiti seems to be a remnant of an administrative terminology which characterized the military administrative system of the Tibetan Empire. Originally, this word would have referred to a “council meeting” of military officials.

*Fire-raising stations: a military alert system in Spiti and of the Tibetan Empire*

Several elders who spoke to me about Spiti’s early history mentioned that there are a few fire-raising stations situated on strategically chosen mountains tops and that these originally functioned as an alert system. According to local history, whenever Spiti was under attack or under the threat of attack from foreign armies or militia, designated firemen (*so pa*) would light huge fires at these mountaintop structures as a means to send warning signals to other parts of Spiti. According to a teacher in Kaza, the main fire-raising stations were located at every site through which an invading army could enter

65 The word ‘dun ma is mentioned in records of the *Old Tibetan Annals* for the following A. D. years: 673-674, 674-675, twice in 674-675, 682-683, 684-685, twice 694-695, 695-696, 698-699, 701-702, 702-703, twice in 704-705, twice in 706-707, 707-708, 708-709, 709-710, 710-711, 711-712, 714-715, 715-716, 717-718, 722-723, 723-724, 727-728, twice in 728-729, 730-731, 732-733, 733-734, 734-735, and 761-762 (Dotson, 2009). This is excluding the use of a shortened version of the word, the syllable ‘dun, which is also used numerous times in the text.
Spiti: near the head of the river valley (Losar village), near the end of Spiti’s traditional border along the river valley (Lari village), and near mountain passes such as Parang-La and Pin Parvati pass. In addition, there were several other sites in between these sites. They were located such that they could be seen by as many distant villages as possible and so that further signals could be sent to warn as many villages as swiftly as possible.

The mountaintop fire-raising stations are relevant to this hypothesis because the Old Tibetan Annals have three separate references to them (see Dotson, 2009). The first instance is most interesting. According to the Annals, in the summer of the year of the dog (674-675 A.D.), the emperor resided in Zrid. Then, Spiti’s neighboring region of Lcog-la - which is the same place as Gu-cog of lde’u chos ’byung and Cog-la of mkhas pa’i dga’ ston (see above) - revolted against the empire and the emperor departed to Tshang-bang-na. Thereafter the council meeting (‘dun ma) was convened, which took account of the fire-raising stations (see Dotson, 2009, p. 205, for an image of the original text of lines 60 and 61, or pp. 90-91 for an English translation and transliteration of the relevant lines). The second instance is recorded in the year of the hare (691-692 A.D.), when the council convened at Sky Bra-ma-tang and made a selection of fire-raising stations (Dotson, 2009, p. 97). Then, in the year of the bird (709-710 A.D.), the council (‘dun ma) convened at ‘On-chang-do, where they took account of the fire-raising stations of Rulag. These references to fire-raising stations in the Old Tibetan Annals, especially the first reference of 674-675, give strong indications that Spiti’s fire-raising stations are a remnant of the Tibetan Empire’s alert system. There is, however, one contradiction to this idea.
Tsetan (1987) provides the only published account of Spiti’s fire-raising stations. Tsetan (1987, p. 35) does not relate these to the time of the Tibetan Empire but refers to the fire-raising stations as evidence of a period when Spiti became a target of frequent attacks and robberies from its neighboring regions; this was due to the fact that the rulers of Guge and Ladakh did not pay attention to Spiti because of its remoteness. According to Tsetan, these circumstances – Spiti being left without protection and under the mercy of frequent attacks – necessitated the building of these “small houses on top of mountains, called So-sa, the ruins of which still exist” (p. 35). According to Tsetan, when these structures were lit up, the people of Spiti were required to go in the direction of the fire with bows, arrows, swords, spears and other weapons to fight against the intruders. Thus, despite Tsetan’s different idea of the origin of Spiti’s fire-raising stations, his description of the function of these structures as a part of an early alert system is similar to those provided by my informants and as indicated in the Old Tibetan Annals. As for Tsetan’s later periodization of the building of Spiti’s fire-raising system, it is not unlikely that the people referred to by Tsetan were rebuilding an older alert system.

Other similarities

There are several other features associated with Spiti that could also be connected with the Tibetan Empire. These include a system of corvee labor that existed in Spiti during British Ladakhi and British times (Bray, 2008; British records) but also extends back to the time of the Tibetan Empire (Dotson, 2009). Since the time of the Tibetan Empire, corvee labor was one of the many forms of taxation, along with military service
(discussed above) and the payment of grains, that taxpaying (*khral pa*) households were customarily obligated to contribute. Another aspect of local custom that seems to have originated during the time of the Tibetan Empire is the system of inheritance based on patrilineal descent and primogeniture, which included legal mechanisms to keep the family lands intact. According to Rebecca French (1990), these legal practices were “recorded as early as the period of the Tibetan Empire in the eighth century” (p. 470).

While I have not been able to locate any textual evidence associated with these specific legal records mentioned by French, I did observe in the *Old Tibetan Annals* that the Chief minister, Mgar Stong-rtsan, of the Tibetan Empire wrote the texts of the laws in the year of the hare, i.e., 655-656 A.D. (see Dotson, 2009, p. 85). Instead of simply discussing other examples that link Spiti to the Tibetan empire, I will now cross-check the hypothesis from a broader historical perspective.

**Cross checking hypothesis in the history of Spiti**

A key idea presented in the above discussion of the hypothesis is that the Khangchen system of administration in Spiti was instituted during the time of the Tibetan Empire. One method of checking this idea is to consider all the kingdoms, empires and states that ruled Spiti and to eliminate those that are unlikely to have introduced it. I have presented here a timeline of Spiti’s history according to the major powers that ruled over it. Since Spiti’s Khangchen system is based on Tibetan administrative laws and practices, we need

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66 Yet another example is the fort-like architectural design of Spiti’s villages. Houses in Spiti’s ancient villages, such as Khyung, were traditionally built very close or attached to each other and the whole structure was built such that there were a few (normally three) entrances with heavy gates that could be shut to keep intruders out. In other words, the village was a military fort (*mkhar*). In an interview with a Khangchen man of Khyung village, both the Tibetan word *mkhar* and the Hindi word *kila* were used to describe the historical housing structure of the village.
to only consider the Tibetan kingdoms and empires that ruled Spiti, which leaves us with five options: the Tibetan Empire (7th - 9th century AD); Guge (late 10th - 1630); Ladakh (from 1634-1683/84, and again, from 1758-1842); Tibet (1683/84-1787); and Purig (1734-1758). From this list, we can eliminate Tibet (1683/84-1787) because the period of rule (3 or 4 years) is too brief to have introduced a lasting system of socio-economic administration. We can also eliminate Purig (1734-1758) because the period of rule, 20 years, is still too brief. Besides, as Jahoda (2009) points out, Purig’s rule over Spiti was most likely only nominal: “as in later times when Spiti was under the authority of the kings of Ladakh, the functionaries of [Purig] were rarely present in Spiti and that the immediate exercise of his power was confined to the collection of the collective total sum of revenues” (p. 46).

After eliminating Tibet and Purig from the Tibetan (Buddhist) kingdoms and empires that ruled Spiti, we are left with three powers that lasted for centuries: the Tibetan Empire, Guge kingdom and Ladakh kingdom. Among these three powers, it is rather safe to assume that the two later kingdoms of Guge and Ladakh adopted or modeled their system of administration based on the earlier rule, i.e., that of the Tibetan Empire, especially because there is no published historical record that shows otherwise. The assumption that the Guge and Ladakh kingdoms adopted the administrative system of the Tibetan Empire seems plausible also based upon the fact that the Khangchen system of taxation is common to villages across the Tibetan Himalayas – an area stretching from Ladakh (Crook, 1994; Gutschow, 1998) in the western Himalayas, to Ding ri (Aziz, 1978) in

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67 The dates, starting from the kingdom of Guge of the late 10th century to the Ladakh kingdom of the 18th century, are based on Jahoda (2009).
central Himalaya, all the way to eastern Himalayan regions such as *Mdo mkhar* of *Mtsho sna rdzong*, which is close to the border of present day Arunachal Pradesh and Bhutan (Personal communication, Tsering Dolma, May 1, 2013). Although a shared culture and practice do not necessarily equate with common rule, it is probable that this system of taxation was created during a time when the Tibetans ruled a vast region extending from the western to the eastern Himalayas. Among the three powers that ruled Spiti for a long period, the Guge and Ladakh kingdoms were limited to Western Tibet and did not rule the central or eastern Himalayan regions. Thus, again, it is probable that it was the Tibetan Empire that first established the system of administration.

**Administrative power structure in the periphery: Ladakhi and British rule**

The oldest published record of Spiti’s internal taxation and administrative system comes from 19th century colonial British records (Moorcroft & Trebeck, 1841, pp. 69; Lyall, 1874; Egerton, 1864/2011). When the British took control of Spiti in 1846, their policy was to continue to use the Khangchen household as the basic unit of taxation and administration as had been the custom under the Ladakhi rule. The British officials prepared detailed records of the local taxation and administrative system, which they described as having come from the Ladakhi system. Using these records and other publications (Gergan, 1976; Jahoda, 2008), aided by interviews with local scholars and

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68 The system or the household types can have different names in these different parts of Tibet. For example, in *skyid grong*, Khangchen households are known as *khral ’dzin*, Khangchung households are called *rgan tshang* (“elder’s house”), and Dhutul households are called *dud chung* (see Childs, 2000).

69 The kingdom of Ladakh had lost power over Spiti to the kingdom of Jammu in 1842 after a treaty was agreed upon between the Dogras and the Tibetans that confirmed the deprivation of Ladakhi kingdom’s powers. This episode of Jammu’s rule over Spiti is not discussed here because Jammu’s rule over Spiti was for a short duration and it did not affect social relationships in Spiti. Of interest though is the fact that, according to the 1883 Gazetteer (p. 498), Spiti started paying taxes to Jammu in 1839. Another noteworthy point about the Jammu rule is that a Sikh force plundered Spiti during that time (Gazetteer, 1883, p. 498).
elders, especially those who personally knew the last Nono (local ruler) in charge and had witnessed his court in session, I will now describe the administrative system of Spiti during the 19th and the first half of the 20th century.

Spiti’s local administrative structure is comprised of three levels: village, subunit groups of fifty households, and the Spiti Valley as a whole. This three-tiered administrative structure functioned from at least the beginning of the 19th century (Lyall, 1874, p. 181; Egerton, 1864/2011) to the middle of the 20th century (interview, 24 October 2010).

At the village level, all internal matters – legal, economic and political – were overseen and controlled by the men of the Khangchen households, whose meetings (‘dun ma) constituted the Village Council. The other two classes of households—Dhutul and caste—did not enjoy a decision-making vote in the Village Council since they neither owned land nor were required to pay taxes to the state. A village chief, known as rgad po (“elder” or “old man”), headed the Village Council. The rgad po was assisted by two or three men (rgan las), including a bookkeeper (rtsis pa) and a storekeeper (gnyer pa). The rgad po and rgan las team represented the leaders of the village. They were mainly responsible for conducting Village Council meetings, maintaining village accounts and deciding upon the timing of communal activities (such as the commencement of the harvest season or the imposition of temporal bans on the collection of dung). Whenever the Village Council was unable to decide on a matter, it consulted the village deity (yul lha) through a spirit medium (lus g.yer). Therefore, although the Khangchen men held all

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70 The local names for these three units are yul for village, Nga bcu nga for the five Kothees, and spyi ti lung pa for Spiti Valley.
the powers, the village deity and its spirit medium constituted a separate (local religious) institution that advised, and sometimes even changed, the Village Council’s decision.

Above the Village Councils were five administrative subunits or subdistricts of fifty households, which have received a new administrative name, “Kothee”, since the British rule. Each group of fifty households was headed by a Great Elder (rgad po chen mo in the local language, or “lambardar” in the new administrative system), who acted as an intermediary authority between the ruler(s) of Spiti and the Khangchen households. The Great Elders represented their group of fifty Khangchen households to the Nono and conveyed orders or messages from the Nono to members of the fifty households under their authority. The Great Elders were also responsible for arranging the corvee labor requirements and for the collection of supplies on behalf of travellers (Lyall, 1874, p. 188). At the level of legal administration, the Great Elders were members of the Nono’s (also known by a new official title, “Wazir”, under the British) privy council, which often functioned as the local court to adjudicate petty local legal cases.

Above the Kothee was the privy council of the Nono, represented by the Nono, the five Great Elders and the Nono’s secretary (known as “munshi”, who also served as the revenue officer of “Patwari”) (see Gergan, 1976, p. 323). The powers of the Nono, or rather the limits on the powers of the Nono in the adjudication of legal cases, were set in the 1873 Spiti Regulation Act (Punjab Code, 1888, pp. 373-375). For example, serious crimes (such as murders or any offenses requiring fines in excess of two hundred rupees)

71 According to a local elder (Interview, 24 October 2010), these representatives were chosen on the basis of their ability to speak in public and their personality.
were to be reported to the Assistant Commissioner of Kulu. Therefore the privy council of the Nono, which was directly under the authority of the Assistant Commissioner of Kulu, served as the local court responsible for dealing with petty internal cases.

Prior to the British rule, i.e., when Spiti was under the rule of the Ladakh kingdom, there was at least one other official besides the Nono who held a position above the Great Elders. This was the “Lord of the Fort” (*mkhar dpon*), who served as the head of the military and who was “responsible for order and the administration of police and justice” (Egerton, 1864/2011, p. 51-52). The Nono, on the other hand, was the administrative head of civil and economic affairs. The position of the Lord of the Fort (*mkhar spon*) was deemed unnecessary and eliminated by the British authorities who considered that only one ruler was desirable (Egerton, 1864/2011, p. 51).72 There was however another position, that of the Secretary of the Nono (Lyall, 1974, p. 188), which apparently was slightly lower than that of the Nono, which, as mentioned above, was continued under the British rule.

Thus the British allowed the traditional system of taxation and administration to continue, albeit by eliminating the position of the Lord of the Fort and by consolidating the powers of the Nono.73 This description of Spiti’s old administrative structure, derived from all known sources, complements the information provided in the two previous sections. In

72 Egerton (1864/2011) also mentions the “Little” Nono of Pin Valley, who wanted to establish a separate jurisdiction in Pin Valley, independent of the Kyuling Nono. This request was rejected.

73 The Spiti Regulation Act was passed in 1873 (Punjab Code, 1888, p. 373-375) and outlined the powers and responsibilities of the Nono, and his relation to higher regional authority. The final clause of the Act shows that Spiti’s administration was unique and different from that of the rest of British India: “No law hereafter passed by the Governor General in Council shall be deemed to extend to the Pargana of Spiti, unless the same be specially named therein” (Punjab Code, 1888, p. 375).
what follows, I will describe some of the major changes that occurred in local social relations, first under colonial British rule and then under India.

*Impacts of colonial British rule*

One of the best ways to ascertain the social consequences of colonial British rule is by considering how its laws and legal practices would have impacted different sections of society. The most important aspect of British laws, especially in rural places like Spiti Valley, was the revenue settlement, which determined the tax obligations of landholders. The revenue settlement required not only the registration of all taxable land but also, in the case of what were the “tribal” areas of Himachal Pradesh, systematic documentation of all the local customs (including practices and laws). These later served as the legal administrative papers of the colonial government and aided in the resolution of conflicts. Although Spiti was not a major source of revenue for the British, it was nevertheless affected by broader colonial policies and practices related to revenue settlement and collection.

In Spiti, the first revenue settlement was done in the same year Spiti was incorporated into British India in 1846. The revenue settlement of 1846 lacked details and was conducted without sufficient understanding of local conditions – it had overlooked the existence of monastic tax system – which later became a cause of confusion for British officials and a matter of complaint on the part of the farmers (Lyall, 1874). In response, an official by the name of Lyall visited Spiti in 1867 to revise the revenue settlement and to ensure that the confusions and the complaints of farmers were addressed and resolved,
which he claims to have done successfully. Lyall also reports documentation of the customary laws of every village in Spiti (Lyall, 1874, pp. 234-235). Records of these documents are still used by the Indian Government today, and are directly relevant to and therefore analyzed extensively in this study (in chapters 4 and 6).

An important effect of British laws was that they introduced the “private ownership” of land. Prior to British rule, although tax-paying farmers (Khangchen households) enjoyed de facto ownership of land without interference from the state, in theory all land belonged to the king of Ladakh. The British laws changed the status of taxpayer farmers from being that of tenants under Ladakhi and Tibetan law (Jahoda, 2008; Pirie, 2005) to being that of formal landowners (Lyall, 1874; Jahoda, 2008). As a part of British policy regulating the expansion of agriculture to generate higher revenue, the British also introduced new laws in Spiti. These included the Nautor rule, whose objective was to break up wasteland for cultivation. A part of the regulatory procedures for the Nautor land grant required approval from the local Village Council, which was exclusively composed of men of Khangchen households (see chapter 6). The British laws

74 Wylie (1986, p. 6) describes the land tenure system of Tibet, which is similar to that of Ladakh, in the following manner: “As a general rule, the tax estate belonged to the [tax-payer or Khangchen man] and his heirs forever. It could be transmitted to his heirs either during [his] lifetime or at death. The property was forfeitable [by the state authorities or officials on behalf of the king] only in the event of chronic failure to pay taxes, conviction of treason or failure to have an heir. The [tax-payer] was entitled to quiet enjoyment of his land and to manage the farm as he liked without interference from the authorities.”

75 If the proposal for the Nautor land grant was approved by the Village Council, the proposal would then require the final approval of the Nono, who had the authority to grant land on behalf of the government. Although no data on the amount of Nautor lands distributed during British rule are available, people mentioned cases of Nautor land grants occurring during the period of British rule. For example, the Nono had granted himself Nautor lands in Dhangkar as well as in Kyuling village (interview, 24 October 2010). I also heard a dramatic story of a man who was believed to be the first man in Pin Valley, probably in Spiti as well, to get Nautor land during the British rule. According to the story (narrated to me by a farmer from Guling village of Pin Valley), villagers refused to acknowledge his Nautor land rights and even decided to attack him. The man escaped in the middle of the night and travelled on foot to Kulu to seek justice from a higher authority, which most probably was the Assistant Commissioner of the district.
legitimized and consolidated the traditional powers of these men through a number of ways. These included: codification of local customs that tended to privilege the men of Khangchen households, a change in their legal status from that of tenant farmers to official land owners, and the provision of new powers in the regulation of agricultural expansion. Consequently, the relative power positions of traditionally underprivileged groups, such as women and members of landless Dhutul and caste households, were undermined (Baker, 2003).

**Socio-economic development of a frontier region under independent India**

When India became independent in 1947, local socio-economic conditions were similar to those that existed centuries ago. The administration of the valley was still organized according to five groups of fifty soldier households under the Nono. There were no paved roads, cars, dispensaries, telephones, or electricity. The literacy rate was extremely low, especially for women and caste members. People’s main livelihood was based on subsistence agriculture and a significant portion of the population was extremely poor. Things began to change under Indian rule. Taxation was lifted so that no one had to pay taxes to the state anymore. In terms of local administration, India continued the British policy of governing the Himalayan “tribal” regions, including Spiti, through local customs, as recorded in administrative papers such as *Riwaj-i-am* and *Riwaj-i-Abpashi*. This policy allowed many aspects of Spiti’s traditional customs and practices, such as those of farming and local resource management (described in the following chapters), to

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76 The first dispensary in Spiti was built in Kaza in 1958 (Gazetteer, 1975, p. 247).
77 Telephone services were first implemented in the villages of Losar and Sagnam in 1999 by Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited.
78 The Rongtong power plant of Spiti was inaugurated in 1986 (interview, 21 August 2010).
continue as they had under Ladakhi and British rule. However, unlike the British and Ladakhi rulers, who took a distant approach to administration in Spiti and left local socio-economic conditions unaffected, India took a much more active role in the local administration of Spiti and invested heavily in the region to develop socio-economic and road infrastructure conditions, especially after the 1962 India-China war over border disputes. The Indian government’s active role in the region brought significant improvements to people’s socio-economic and living conditions, especially those of women, caste and Dhutul members.

Starting from the mid-1950s, a series of administrative and legal initiatives were implemented in Spiti. Jahoda (2008) has analyzed the socio-economic implications of some of these initiatives. He notes how the implementation of the 1950 Punjab Tenants Act set a limit on the amount of land held by the Tabo monastery (to 250 bighas or 50 acres), which resulted in the monastery’s registered tenant farmers gaining legal ownership of the land (Jahoda, 2008, p. 13). Another important change was the introduction of Indian Police in Spiti and the dissolution of the Nono’s official powers (interview, 21 August 2010). During the same period, the Panchayat system was introduced to replace the traditional administrative subunits of fifty households (Kothi) as well as the village headman (rgad po).79 Unlike the traditional administrative institutions (Village Council, Nono’s council, etc.), which were only reserved for men of Khangchen households, the leadership positions in the Panchayat system were open to men, as well as to women, from all types of households. However, based upon conversations and

79 According to the new Panchayat system, Spiti was divided into several small groups of villages or Panchayats. In 2011, there were 13 Panchayats in Spiti.
interviews, it seems that men of Khangchen households continue to dominate this local level of politics.

The Panchayat system, however, has not fully replaced the traditional systems of administration. Today, there is a co-existence of the Panchayat system with the local Village Council headed by Gadpo (rgad po or elders) (Jahoda, 2008, p. 13). The traditional administrative institutions did not disappear because they played an important role in aspects of people’s social, cultural and religious lives which are beyond the purview of the state. In other words, this led to the separation of the public and private spheres of interest; here the governance of public affairs of the state were taken over by the Panchayat committee and the governance of the private or internal affairs of the village continued to be undertaken by the Village Council. For example, farmers’ affiliation to local monasteries is organized on the basis of a fifty household subunit system, where different groups of fifty households are affiliated with different monasteries.  

80 Similarly, the village headman or the Gadpo was responsible for matters concerning the village temple, the village deity medium, as well as the performance of various rituals related to farming (see chapter 5) and other resource management (see chapter 6) customs. Therefore the new administrative system of Panchayat became formally responsible for administrative works related to the state - for instance, those related to development initiatives and public elections. On the other hand, the traditional Village Council became responsible for internal village matters and it continues to play a very important role in the customary lives of the farmers.

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80 Monasteries play an important role in farmers’ lives, including matters associated with the performance of rituals during important occasions, the compulsory admission of farmers’ sons to these monastic establishments and the collection/payment of monastic taxes.
Starting in the late 1950’s, the Punjab Armed Police (Spiti was then a part of the Indian state of Punjab) began road construction to Spiti (interview, 21 August 2010). At that time, there was an exodus of Tibetan refugees arriving in India, many of whom were hired to do road construction work in the region. Then, in 1962, war broke out between India and China over border disputes. Spiti was closed off to all outside visitors and designated an “inner line” area due to its proximity to the border, even though Spiti was not a site of any militant encounter. On the one hand, this law resulted in Spiti becoming more isolated from the rest of India and the world at large, but on the other, it attracted the government’s attention regarding the need for road infrastructure development in the region. Road construction work was speeded up, and thereafter came under the supervision of the Border Road Organization (BRO) of the Indian army. Despite Spiti’s difficult terrain, altitude and long snowy winters, the BRO was able to complete the work relatively quickly and the first public bus service connecting Spiti to the nearest Indian city of Manali was introduced in 1972 (interview, 21 August 2010).

In addition to the strategic development of road infrastructure around the border region of Spiti, the Indian government also invested heavily in socio-economic and educational development programs. The strategic thinking of the government was aptly described by a senior local leader, who was also a retired Indian army officer: “Ensuring continued human habitation in ‘border regions’ and improving local livelihood with integrated socio-economic development programs is beneficial for the security of the country” (interview, 21 August 2010). Starting during the time when Spiti was closed off from the
rest of the world (1962-1993) and continuing to this day, a series of government policy measures and development programs have been transforming a largely subsistence and barter-based economy into a cash economy that is more integrated with the larger political economy of the country. The first major socio-economic development initiative was the distribution of land to landless farmers - including distribution to women and caste members - through the 1968 Himachal Pradesh Nautor Land Rules. Significantly for the arid mountainous region of Spiti, the Nautor fields were connected with new irrigation canals to distant water sources, a project whose construction began in the early 1970’s (interview, 21 August 2010). The next major initiative was support for commercial crops. Today, green peas, introduced in 1986 (Mishra, 2000; interview, 21 August 2010), is the main commercial crop, grown throughout Spiti Valley. Farmers in lower Spiti have also successfully grown apples for at least two decades. Today, the extent of land cultivated in Spiti has more than doubled due to the Nautor land distribution, thereby bringing substantial cash income to the region (interview, August 2008).

Other major sources of cash income, in addition to those facilitated by the Nautor fields and cash crops, include government jobs, government aid money, and tourism. In the beginning, the locals were reluctant or did not want to work for the Indian government. As the British records tell, people of Spiti were not interested in things that were alien to their (Tibetan Buddhist) culture. This was confirmed in interviews, where people shared stories of how their family members first refused to work for the Indian government or to send their children to Indian government schools. Today, however, government jobs are
highly coveted and a common source of livelihood. For example, according to a statistic published by Jahoda (2008, p. 15), “[I]n 1993-94, out of 4,021 individuals aged fifteen and over [in Spiti], 1,541 were on the payroll of government agencies.” Similarly, education through government schools is a standard practice in Spiti. When India became independent in 1947, there was barely any school in Spiti.\(^1\) In 2010, by contrast, there were about a hundred schools in the valley (Tsering & Ishimura, 2012). As for an example of government development aid in the region, Rs. 841 million was reportedly invested in Spiti between 1978 and 1997 through programs such as Integrated Tribal Development Projects and Tribal Sub Plans (Jahoda, 2008, p. 14).\(^2\) While the government’s extensive investments in the socio-economic development of the region are appreciated by the local people, many local leaders expressed their disappointment with corruption in the system; as one of the locals claimed, by the time government aid reaches people, there is only 10% of the funds left. Similarly for education development, while one can boast about educational accomplishments in Spiti in terms of numbers, the quality of education is nevertheless poor (Tsering & Ishimura, 2012).

The impact of government socio-economic and education development investments in Spiti is at once significant, complex and still unfolding. While the general improvement in the socio-economic and living conditions of the people is undeniable, the benefits of government development programs, such as the Nautor land distribution, have affected the society unevenly. Men, especially those from Khangchen households are the main

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\(^1\) Bajpai (1987, p. 133) says that the first school in Spiti was established in 1932 in Kaza village. Local elders opine that there was “barely any school” (“na ke barabar” in Hindi) when India became independent.

\(^2\) This amount (Rs. 841 million) does not include funds invested into the region through another major project called the Desert Development Program.
beneficiaries, while women and caste members seem to have benefited less. This is not surprising considering the fact that men, especially those from the Khangchen and Dhutul households, are more educated and also better connected politically, as compared with women and caste members. Yet, curiously, caste and women interviewees seem to exhibit more gratitude toward the government, apparent from their more frequent use of the phrase “the gracious and kind government” (“Sarkar drinchen”), to give credit to the Indian government for the positive changes it has brought to their lives. This is understandable if one considers how the opportunities provided by the government are not only open to all the citizens, irrespective of caste, class and gender differences, but also to the fact that government programs (or positions) are often targeted at benefiting underprivileged groups. Therefore, despite the ability of the local elites to take greater advantage of opportunities provided by market and state led development programs, underprivileged groups have been greatly empowered under Indian rule.

As members of traditionally underprivileged groups became educated and started owning their own lands, traditional labor relations between different classes or groups of people in farming and resource management roles were also affected. As labor became more scarce, women, who customarily do most of the time-consuming farm labor, had to work more. Owing to the high demand for farm labor, it became common for girls from poor families to discontinue school in order to dedicate themselves to farming tasks (interview, 2010). As for Zo blacksmiths, their skills became obsolete as ready-made tools from the Indian plains became available in the market. Today, Zo households are actively involved

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83 In order to address the issue of poor girls being kept at home for farm labor due to a lack of proper schooling and hostel facilities, some locals have started a girls hostel project that I am supporting: www.spitivalley.org
in farming – both on their own fields and on other farmers’ fields in the role of plowmen and irrigators (discussed in the following chapters). Owing to the large number of landowners, many Beda musicians have decided that they are unable to perform according to the customary, non-monetary contractual relations of performing music on demand. Instead, these Beda musicians perform their musical services for secular celebratory occasions on a “daily wage” basis. However, Beda musicians continue to play music for religious and ritual purposes, especially for the village temple, according to custom. All these changes mean that the traditionally underprivileged groups are not as dependent on the Old Khangchen households for their livelihood as was formerly the case. Thus, the Old Khangchen households have lost some of their powers in village politics as many Dhutul and caste households, who have become economically well off, now pay “full” taxes to the village and thus have gained membership rights in the Village Council.

While Spiti has experienced significant socio-economic and educational development over the last few decades due largely to the investments made by the Indian government, there has also been a reinvigoration of Buddhism in Spiti in recent decades due to the involvement of Tibetan refugee lamas. Several senior Tibetan Buddhist teachers have visited Spiti several times, including six visits by the Dalai Lama. Some of these teachers stayed for long durations and gave extensive teachings. According to two local leaders, who spoke to me singly on separate occasions, the Tibetan Buddhist teachers who visited Spiti, especially the Dalai Lama, had a huge impact on the revival of Buddhism in the region. Referring to the implications of the exiled Tibetan leader’s visits to the
historically peripheral (i.e., to Tibet and India) regions of Ladakh and Spiti, Tenzin Tethong, the Director of the Tibetan language service of Radio Free Asia, made a poignant remark on the changing nature of “Greater Tibet”: he noted that now the center is coming to the periphery (Conference lecture, July 23, 2013). The same analogy of the center actively coming to the periphery could also be noted in regard to India’s attention to Spiti - not only in terms of development investment in the region but also because India’s Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, as well as several Chief Ministers, have also visited the region. All this reflects the attention Spiti has garnered in the last few decades, a particularly significant development after the centuries of neglect experienced by the region on the part of the central authorities.

Conclusion

The central argument of this chapter is that the power relations embedded in the local socio-economic structure of Spiti Valley have always been changing due to, and in response to, the administrative laws and policies of the different empires, kingdoms and states that ruled the region. After presenting a description of the village socio-economic structure, I have demonstrated how certain classes of households were introduced and local power relations affected by the laws and policies of different powers, which in turn were often affected by Spiti’s border location.

A major contribution of this chapter is the original hypothesis presented which answers the question raised at the beginning - that regarding the historical origin and legal basis of the Khangchen household’s privileged access to local farming lands and irrigation
sources. Drawing on ancient Tibetan texts, studies based on original source materials from the time of the Tibetan Empire and local oral history, as well as my own field research, I hypothesized that Spiti’s Khangchen system of taxation, which is directly associated with the privileges enjoyed by Khangchen households in terms of access rights to farming lands and irrigation sources, is based on the military administrative system of the Tibetan Empire that was established between the 7th-9th centuries A.D. This hypothesis is highly relevant for this study - not only because it provides a definite historical period and context for understanding the privileged powers of the contemporary Khangchen households but also for the light that it sheds on the origin of Spiti’s most prominent class of household.

After the collapse of the Tibetan Empire, the next major power that introduced important changes in local culture was the kingdom of Guge. Starting in the 10th century, the rulers of the Guge kingdom supported an active missionary campaign to introduce and establish Buddhism in the region, mainly through the construction of temples and monasteries, as well as through the translation of Sanskrit Buddhist texts into the Tibetan language. Spiti was an important site of these activities partly because it was located between the Guge kingdom and Kashmir. Kashmir was a center of Buddhist activity at that time, and a key source of Buddhist knowledge for the Guge kingdom. In addition to introducing Buddhism, the Guge kingdom also established monasteries in Spiti, and by implication, introduced the Monastic Estates taxation system. Guge was followed by the kingdom of Ladakh, which introduced the institution of the Nono, the local administrative ruler, who in turn introduced the Beda musicians into Spiti.
While all the classes of households in the hierarchical village social structure – Khangchen, Dhutul and caste – were established by the time the British took over Spiti in 1846, British laws resulted in rendering the dominant Khangchen households more powerful, thereby weakening the traditionally underprivileged groups (such as women and members of caste and Dhutul households). Under the previous Ladakhi and Tibetan legal systems, although Khangchen men normally enjoyed full rights over their estates, they were in fact legal tenants, as all land belonged to the state. British laws privatized land ownership, making the Khangchen men registered owners of their estates.

In addition, the British also documented and legalized local customs, including those related to the management of resources such as irrigation, fodder and firewood. These measures provided lasting legal protection for ancient customs that privileged certain members of society over others. These customs were and still are highly inequitable because the privileged group of Khangchen men are a small minority compared to the rest of the village population, which is composed of women, children and elders as well as members of Dhutul and caste households. As discussed in the following chapters, these codified customs, in the form of government administrative papers, are still valid and continue to affect local farming and resource management customs.

Spiti saw the greatest changes, both in terms of material economic conditions and in terms of local power relations, under the rule of the current Indian State. These changes, which are still unfolding, are a result of the Indian initiative aimed at developing and
integrating the local economy and administration with the larger Indian economy and administration. Certain policies have been implemented through significant economic investments and a variety of administrative measures introduced to consolidate state control over Spiti, which, since the 1962 India-China war, has been recognized as a sensitive border region. In terms of the impact on local power relations, these socio-economic development initiatives are being received favorably by the people, particularly by the underprivileged sections of the society, who often refer to the Indian government as “kind and gracious”. For the first time in history, women and members of Dhutul and caste households are not only able to own land and engage in commercial agriculture, but they are also able to acquire free education and get jobs in the service economy. However, the impact of the development initiatives on different sections of society are more complex and uneven than meets the eye. For example, the men of the Khangchen and Dhutul households have been able to take greater advantage of the opportunities provided by the state than men of caste households and women in general. Therefore, despite dramatic changes over the course of recent decades, the hierarchical social relations of power still persist, especially in the customary practices involving farming and resource management.
4. Inequalities Within Women-Managed Irrigation Systems

Introduction

Gender has become an important concept in the field of environment and development studies, particularly in those studies that examine the social and political dimensions of water issues. Drawing on broader feminist literature on environment and development (e.g., Agarwal, 1986, 1998), the literature on ‘gender and water’ emphasizes the unequal power relations between men and women, mainly in terms of access, management responsibilities and decision-making roles (Meinzen-dick & Zwarteveen, 2001; Upadhyay, 2003; Adams, Watson, & Mutiso, 1997). The general premise of gender approach to water management is that society assigns different expectations, roles and responsibilities to men and women in the arena of water use, access and management, and that these are often tilted against women in patriarchal social, economic and political contexts. As gender analysis has become more ‘mainstream’ in the last few decades, many frameworks, methods and tools have been developed for use by development practitioners to measure, understand and improve gender dynamics or to overcome inequalities. 84 For example, Moser (1993) has developed methodological procedures and tools for development planning focused on gender (i.e., “gender planning”) which has been put forth “with a goal to emancipate women from their subordination, and to embrace equality, equity and empowerment” (p. 89). Similarly, Levy (1996) has identified thirteen elements in the form of a “web”, where every element provides the conditions for the institutionalization of gender. The idea here is for development practitioners to use this as a methodology for gender policy and planning, as well as a

84 For an overview discussion of these frameworks and methods, see Wallace and Coles, 2005, pp. 6-7.
tool for gender diagnosis and procedural operations.\textsuperscript{85}

More recently, a set of critical arguments is presented as a response to these developments. At the level of discourse and practice, it is argued that ‘gender mainstreaming’ or attention to gender by organizations and institutions is increasingly being regarded as a technical issue, disassociating the gender agenda from its feminist transformative objectives (Wallace and Coles, 2005). Although it has commonly been acknowledged that gender operates in interaction with other social categories such as class, caste and ethnicity (Meinzen-Dick & Zwarteveen, 2001; Wallace and Coles, 2005), it has been pointed out that there are a lack of studies that investigate the intersection of gender and other social difference (such as class, caste, race and ethnicity) in development studies in general (Nightingale, 2011), and in irrigation studies (Harris, 2008) in particular.\textsuperscript{86} It is within this particular framework, which calls for an intersectional analysis of gender and other social differences in irrigation management, that I am situating this chapter. This chapter provides an intersectional study of gender and equity in irrigation management through a detailed study of the historical contexts, legal texts, and farmers’ practices concerning irrigation management in the Himalayas.

Intersectional theory argues that although gender has powerful outcomes on people’s lives, it does not operate alone. Gender always operates in relation to other social differences such as race, class, caste and ethnicity and this in turn results in a

\textsuperscript{85} The thirteen elements in Levy’s (1996) Web of Institutionalisation are resource, mainstreaming location of responsibility, political commitment, policy/planning, procedures, pressure of political constituencies, representative political structures, staff development, women and men’s experience and interpretation of their reality, delivery of programs and projects, methodology, research and theory building.

\textsuperscript{86} For an excellent discussion of debates in intersectionality in feminist literature, see Fincher, 2004.
multilayered system of disadvantage for some people and privilege for others. For example, in Canadian society, it can be said that aboriginal and black women from low-income households face multiple dimensions of disadvantage (of race, ethnicity and class) as compared to, for example, a white middle-class women. Therefore, intersectional approaches analyze the interplay of gender and other social differences and seek to unravel and shed light upon how certain groups are multiply disadvantaged while others are privileged. In this sense, the application of intersectional analysis to water management issues posits that although sex-gender based inequities around water issues are important, this alone is not sufficient to understand and address issues of inequity because sex-gender is only one of the many important intersecting layers of social relations that mediate different gendered water relations. Specifically, it has been pointed out that the intersection between gender and socio-economic class (Sultana et al., 2013) or poverty (Harris, 2008) is an important area for analysis and theorization. Validating these arguments, this chapter unravels intersectional differences among different groups of women, as contrasted with a men-versus-women approach, in terms of their socio-economic class and caste backgrounds.

This case study, which examines the inequality among women groups is significant in some ways. First, “too often, inequalities among women are overlooked in initiatives promoting women’s rights and interests” (Sultana et al., 2013, p. 13). This is true in general and for irrigation management in particular. Second, as the description of local irrigation activities in this chapter demonstrates, women are responsible for almost all of these activities. This is in contrast to the situation portrayed in the larger literature -
which generally assumes women’s secondary status based on exclusion from irrigation practices. In Spiti, irrigation is the domain of women. However it is nonetheless the case that important processes of social differentiation and inequalities operate through their engagement and are reinforced by it, as well as being additionally reinforced through state practices.

This chapter makes several additional general contributions, adding to a growing body of ethnographic literature on the traditional Tibetan irrigation management practices and customs (Carrasco, 1959; Ekvall & Downs, 1963; Aziz, 1978; Norberg-Hodge, 1992; Gutschow, 1997, 1998; Labbal, 2000; Vohra, 2000; Gutschow & Mankelow, 2001; Gutschow & Gutschow, 2003; Mankelow, 2003; Sorensen, 2003; Gupta & Tiwari, 2008) which were discussed in the previous chapter.

This chapter is composed of three main sections. The first section provides relevant historical and geographical contexts that form the basis of some of the main features of the social organization of Spiti’s irrigation system. The second section provides a translation and analysis of the text of codified irrigation customs of Zibug and Kyung villages in Spiti Valley. I pay attention to the historical context in which the irrigation customs were codified in order to shed light on the nature of the language of the legal text and its impact on local power relations. I also analyze how unequal power relations in access to and management of irrigation water in terms of gender and landholdings are cemented in law. The third section, presented in order to highlight the inequalities and internal politics embedded in these activities, provides a detailed ethnographic
description of irrigation-related activities performed by farmers (these practices are similar in both the villages) according to their ascribed gender, class and caste roles. The description of irrigation activities shows that women perform almost all of these activities. From an intersectional perspective, gender is unique because it exists in not only every household (Agarwal, 2007) but also in every socio-economic class, with each class often having a different set of expected roles. That is why one should not lump all women into one group and simply say that women perform irrigation-related tasks. Instead, one should analyze which categories of women perform which kinds of irrigation-related tasks; this is due to the fact that these tasks can be seen as hierarchical based on the ascribed roles of women belonging to different household types. In addition, inspired by Ribot and Peluso’s (2003) suggestions on empirically observing the differences between ability and right to benefit from things in understanding access to property, I analyze gender equity not only based on empirical observations of “who performs which irrigation tasks” but also on an analysis of “who are excluded and why”. I show how an analysis on exclusion, particularly covert exclusionary practices, can yield insights into deeper layers of micro-politics between different groups.

This chapter shows that the social organization of Spiti Valley’s irrigation system is based on social relations of gender, socio-economic class and caste. In the next two chapters, I show that these relations, including gender roles, can be better understood by situating these within the context of a broader division of labor. For example, in chapter 5, I show how agricultural labor roles – with irrigation being an important component of agriculture – are divided among farmers on the basis of their gender, caste and class
backgrounds, with important differences in the intersection of gender and other social notions of difference. Similarly, in chapter 6, I argue that women’s role in irrigation management is partly a result of a broader division of labor between men and women, where men are responsible for the equally necessary and time-consuming task of collecting firewood. Throughout this thesis, I emphasize the historical context and cultural beliefs that provide meanings regarding the nature of these roles, especially as they pertain to the local people.

Having introduced the contributions and contents of this chapter, and its relation to the thesis, I will now briefly mention some important features of the social organization of Spiti’s irrigation system, which will then be further explained, in terms of their historical contexts, in Section 1.

**Irrigation system of Spiti Valley and its social organization**

Kelly (1983) has noted that the “widely used concept of an ‘irrigation system’ typically conflates three distinct dimensions of agricultural water use: natural water flow patterns, physical networks of facilities and environmental modifications, and organization of configurations of irrigation roles” (pp. 880-881). It is therefore important to emphasize that this study is only concerned with the social organization of irrigation management.

Another analytical aspect of the study that must be clarified at the outset is that it is concerned only with irrigation systems related to old fields that are located next to the village. Generally, there are three main types of fields in Spiti: village fields, mountain
fields, and Nautor fields. Village fields are the traditional or historical fields that are situated in and around the immediate vicinity of a village. These are the fields to which all irrigation and farming-related customary laws apply. Mountain fields (ri zhing) are located a few kilometers away from the village and are cultivated by one or a few villagers. Although farmers of mountain fields irrigate and cultivate their fields according to customs, they are not obligated to follow every custom. Finally, Nautor fields are those that were allocated by the Indian government to landless and poor farmers after the passage of the Nautor Land Rules Act. Nautor fields are located several kilometers away from most of the villages, including Zibug and Khyung.

Though Zibug and Khyung farmers own all three kinds of fields, this study is concerned only with the historical village fields. I have focused on the historical village fields because farmers’ work on these fields is regulated by stringent traditional customs. In the mountain fields and Nautor fields, farmers are not required to follow all the traditional customs. Thus irrigation practices in the historical village fields, even though these are performed in a contemporary context, can nevertheless be considered “traditional” practices. In addition, the codified irrigation customs of Zibug and Khyung villages, which are translated and analyzed below, only concern the village fields. Another advantage of focusing on village fields is that these are representative of the village. Mountain fields are not the ideal sites for a study of village customs because these fields are like a family compound, belonging to only one or a small group of households. Nautor fields are not only recent creations and situated far away from the villages but are composed of fields belonging to farmers of many different villages.
Technically, as we shall see below, there are only two groups of irrigation users in the village fields: Khangchen households (representing one group) and members from the rest of village (lumped together and composing the second group). In terms of numbers, Khangchen households are the minority but they have most of the rights over irrigation water. Although the second group, comprised of Dhutul and caste households, are numerically much larger (numbers discussed below), they have very limited access to irrigation water. Other key features of the social organization of Spiti’s irrigation system include: 1) men of Khangchen households are the legal rights holders of irrigation water and they thus make most of the key decisions, such as the commencement timing regarding different irrigation activities; 2) women do most of the irrigation-related work; and 3) many women from Dhutul and caste households work as Chu pa (irrigators) for Khangchen households on a contractual basis. These features are explained in more detail in their historical and geographical contexts in the next section.

**Section 1: History of water management customs and their implications on society**

The earliest historical records pertaining to Spiti say that it was once a part of the Zhangzhung kingdom, before the region became part of the expanding Tibetan empire in the 7th century. The legacy of the Zhangzhung period, or the period before Spiti came under Tibetan rule, is relevant to Spiti’s irrigation management customs because farmers have certain pre-Buddhist water-related belief systems and practices. These include the

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87 The oldest textual evidence of Spiti belonging to the Zhangzhung kingdom is the 13th century Tibetan historical text *lde’u chos ‘byung* (discussed in chapter 3).
88 These belief systems are common throughout the Himalayan regions, including among Indians, Nepalese and Tibetan peoples.
belief in transworldly serpent spirits called Lu (klu), or “naga” in Sanskrit, which the farmers believe reside in irrigation water sources (i.e., springs) and have the powers to control weather conditions, specifically precipitation (Interview, October 2, 2010). Since springs constitute most of the irrigation water sources for Spiti – the two villages where this study was conducted are entirely dependent on springs for irrigation water – the beliefs, rituals and practices surrounding the transworldly serpent spirits form an important dimension of Spiti’s water management practices and customs. These beliefs, rituals and practices are described in more detail below.

The historical context and hypothesis presented in the previous chapter are relevant to irrigation because, as will be shown below, in the study of de jure, rights holders of the traditional irrigation system are the men of the Old Khangchen households. In other words, according to traditional customs, all of the farming land and irrigation supplies, as well as the decision-making powers concerning the management of local resources, were under the control of the men of Khangchen households. When I asked these men why they have such privileges, several of them told me that their ancestors were the first founders of the village (Interviews, 2010, 2011). My hypothesis links the historical and legal basis of their privileges to the time of the Old Tibetan Empire because these privileges are representative of the privileges of tax-payers which were instituted at that time. Even today, for example, Khangchen households are known both as “tax-payers” (khral pa) and as “soldier” (dmag) households.

Here it is necessary to briefly mention some historical contexts discussed in the previous
chapter. In the 10th century, after the collapse of the Old Tibetan Empire, Spiti became a part of a new regional and powerful Tibetan kingdom known as Guge. The kings of Guge kingdom played a leading role in reviving Tibetan Buddhism.\textsuperscript{89} Under Guge rule, Spiti became a key site of Tibetan Buddhist activity; this involved the construction and establishment of numerous monasteries, including the famous Tabo Monastery of Spiti, built in 996 A.D. (Klimburg-Salter, 1997).\textsuperscript{90} One of the customs associated with these monasteries is that the second or the middle son of the tax-paying Khangchen households must join the monastery as a monk. Even today, every non-caste household must enroll at least their second son in the local monastery. If they do not then they must pay a fine. From my field observations, it is common to find families where all the sons, with the exception of the eldest, who runs the household property, are monks.\textsuperscript{91} A latent function of the custom of monastic enrolment of younger sons was that this resulted in there being many unmarried women in society. These women formed the main labor force for farmwork (subsistence agriculture was the main source of livelihood). This partly explains why it is customary for women to perform the farm and irrigation work in

\textsuperscript{89} The first diffusion is referred to posthumously as the spread of Buddhism during the period of the Old Tibetan Empire.

\textsuperscript{90} Although Spiti was under Tibetan rule before the 10th century, there is evidence that suggests that earlier people spoke a different language, often referred to as that of Zhangzhung. Based on a study of various names and words written on the walls of the Tabo Monastery at different periods of time, which show a gradual transition from an older language into Tibetan, Klimburg-Salter hypothesizes that the period of construction of the Tabo Monastery (996 A.D.) represented the starting point of the Tibetanization of the region.

\textsuperscript{91} Two points are worth mentioning here. First, historically, only boys or men from Khangchen households were allowed to join the monasteries. Then sometime after the middle of the 20th century, boys or men from Dhutul households were allowed to join the local monasteries. Boys and men from caste families are still not permitted to join the local monasteries. Second, there were no nunneries in Spiti until the latter half of the 20th century. According to the census of 1891, only 1.4% of the female population of Spiti was literate. For a historical discussion of education and social change in Spiti, with a focus on intersectionality, see Tsering & Ishimura, 2012.
Another important factor that further explains why only women perform irrigation work in Spiti is its geographical and environmental contexts. Owing to its geographical location in the high Himalayas (both Zibug and Khyung villages are situated slightly higher than 4000 meters above sea level), Spiti has a short growing season and long snowy winters. Owing to these conditions, every household must collect a large enough stock of firewood and dung to ensure that their heating and cooking needs will be met throughout the long winter months. The small villages of Spiti are scattered along the river valley and each village has a relatively large commons areas within which farmers collect firewood and dung. Collection of firewood is a relatively challenging task, which, for various reasons (discussed in chapter 6), local custom has reserved only for men. One of the reasons is the physical difficulty of the task. The main sources of firewood are two thorny shrubs, Caragana versicolor (*gra ma*) and Lonicera (*brab*), which both grow in the highest and driest areas. The thorny shrubs are mainly uprooted with the hands, using brute physical force, and with the help of adze hoes. In addition, farmers must travel long distances with yaks to carry the collected firewood. The collection of firewood (and dung) from distant mountainous areas as an exclusive livelihood role of men has had direct implications for irrigation being the exclusive livelihood role of women. As mentioned earlier, farm work (except for activities that

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92 This is not to say that traditionally monks did not perform agricultural labor. For example, during my fieldwork, I observed a man who was also a monk helping his elderly parents with the harvesting of barley. I asked several farmers if it is common for monks to do or assist in agricultural work. The answer I received was that monks may assist in agricultural labor but only in exceptional or rare cases.

93 During the interviews, when asked if the villages have at least 15 square kilometers of commons territory, everyone who gave a definitive answer said ‘yes’.

94 Livelihood practices requiring long-distance travel with yaks (e.g., for collection of salt or for trade), were the domain of men throughout the Tibetan inhabited regions.
require the use of yaks for plowing and threshing crops) is mainly done by women.

During the short summer months, men have to go to the mountains regularly to collect (and stock) firewood, which leaves only women to do the irrigation work. The division of labor therefore had to be based on gender, as opposed to age, because both irrigation and the collection of firewood has to be regularly done by healthy adults as these tasks require skilled experience, as well as physical strength and endurance.

Returning to the historical context, the next important historical development that affected irrigation management customs - especially power relations between different user groups - occurred after 1846 when Spiti came under British rule. Under the traditional Tibetan (French, 1990), and Ladakhi (Pirie, 2005) legal system, the tax-payer Khangchen men served as tenant farmers. As noted earlier, under the British rule/policies, these tenant farmers became private landowners (Lyall, 1874, p. 181; Jahoda, 2008, pp. 10-11). This is related to the use of the term “Zamindar” in legal texts concerning the local irrigation system (discussed below). At this time, in 1867, Spiti’s traditional customs, including those of irrigation, were documented as part of a revised British revenue settlement. These documents have since served as local administrative papers and thus attained legal status. I will provide a translation and analysis of the relevant text concerning irrigation, known as “Riwaj-i-Abpashi”, “Riwaj-i-Abpashi” (the “Record of Irrigation Customs”), official copies of which are maintained by local revenue

95 Spiti’s irrigation customs were first codified in 1867 as part of a broader documentation project to prepare local administrative papers, known as Riwaj-i-Aam or the “Book of Customary Laws”, all of which were prepared during the same time (Lyall, 1874, pp. 234-235). As the name suggests, the Book of Customary Laws consists of all the main customs related to local livelihoods, including those related to the management of local resources (e.g., irrigation, farming, grazing, collection of medicinal plants, etc.) as well as social institutions (e.g., marriage, property ownership, religious institutions, etc.). These
Here I will briefly discuss how the process of codification impacted different sections of Spiti’s population, mainly in terms of gender and socio-economic (or class) background.

Baker (2003, p. 27), quoting Neeladri Battacharya, succinctly notes how the process concerning the documentation of customs in the Indian Himalayas had serious power implications for different sections of society: “[t]he ‘native voice,’ as it was filtered and interpreted during the codification and settlement process, was a ‘male, patriarchal voice, the voice of the dominant proprietary body speaking against the rights of non-proprietors, females and lower castes’.” This is evident in the language of the codified text discussed in Section 2. The power implications of the male patriarchal voice representing local customs were intensified by two other factors: 1) the use of legal terminologies that were borrowed from Indian contexts, and 2) the British policy of expanding agriculture (for tax collection) in India. In chapter 6, I discuss how these two factors rendered the men of Khangchen households more powerful while, at the same time, making women, Dhutul and Caste household members more disadvantaged at multiple levels. Here, due to space limitations, I will provide one brief example. Another example is apparent from the text of the codified irrigation custom translated below, which state that only the men of Khangchen households (called “Zamindars” in Urdu) are the holders of water rights or, practically, as owners of the irrigation system.

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96 There are several local officials, or Patwaris, in Spiti who are responsible for keeping land revenue records on behalf of different groups of villages. Zibug and Khyung villages belong to a single group and thus fall under one Patwari. This individual kindly shared and explained the technical terms used in the document.
The most recent historical turn that had a significant impact on irrigation was the government of India’s land redistribution program, which followed the Nautor Land Rules Act of 1968. Since the passage of this law, many landless farmers, including many women, have received land. There are important ways that the Nautor land redistribution program impacted Spiti’s society that are worth noting here. First, by making landless farmers landowners, the traditional landowners lost their supply of cheap local labor. As a result of this development, today it is much harder for Khangchen householders to find contracted irrigators (known as *chu pa*) and plowman (*thong pa*), which are traditional instituted systems of farm labor.

Although the Nautor land redistribution program was aimed at benefiting the weakest sections of society, the people who most benefited from the program were the relatives or family members of the local officials responsible for granting Nautor lands, all of whom were educated men from Khangchen and Dhutul households (Fieldnotes, September 2010). Several Dhutul and caste farmers said that the first and the better and larger Nautor lands were distributed among the relatives and close friends of these officials. The poorest or the weakest sections of society, such as low caste (especially musician householders) were the last to receive land and their lands were also smaller and situated far from the village. In other words, although the granting of land benefited the weakest sections of the society, it benefited the more powerful ones more by granting them more and better lands.
In sum, this historical discussion shows that the gendered nature of irrigation and farming labor relations is deeply rooted in history, and that it has been shaped under the influence of different kingdoms, states, empires and colonial interests. What is common among all these different kingdoms, states, empires and colonial powers is that they were all operating from a patriarchal mentality. Even the most liberating government’s (i.e., India’s) most generous and considerate programs (the Nautor land redistribution system), which were aimed at benefiting women, landless farmers and low caste members, resulted in compounding the traditional inequalities. I have also shown that the gendered nature of irrigation labor is also conditioned by environmental and geographic conditions. Furthermore, Khangchen men’s privileged rights regarding access to irrigation water have a historical and legal basis, for these men are (believed to be) the male descendants of the tax-paying households from the time of the Old Tibetan Empire.

Section 2: The codified customary laws of irrigation in Zibug and Khyung villages

In this section, I will provide translations of Riwaj-i-Abpashi, along with an analysis of the text of the codified irrigation customs of Khyung and Zibug villages. A study of the texts is important for several reasons. First, these legal texts are the only documented record of local irrigation customs. The language of these texts provides insight not only into the historical contexts but also into details regarding how the farmers organize themselves in terms of sharing water, and in repairing and maintaining the irrigation systems. From an ethnographic perspective, it also provides insights into how the farmers gauge their time before the introduction of watches. Second, these texts are important

97 The translations were done with the assistance of the local Patwari, the land revenue officer, and Dr. Tsering Norbu, a local school teacher.
because these are *de jure* in nature, which has historical implications for power relations between farmers in terms of their gender and socio-economic status, as discussed earlier. Third, as observed by Wacker (2008) in the case of Ladakhi irrigation records, “the practiced water rights of the villagers do not [always] correspond to the ones maintained in the official record” (p. 213). A comparison of the differences between codified customs and actual practice provides insight into historical changes that may have occurred in irrigation practices since the codification. It also sheds light on local politics as reflected in the internal agreements between farmers on how to deal with the changes.

The official document of codified irrigation customs of the two villages are handwritten in Hindi and are remarkably concise. The language contains many Urdu legal terms, the meanings of which the local revenue officer who maintains these records helped explain. In the translation below, I have attempted to stay as close to the meaning and style of the text as possible. The texts concerning irrigation customs for both the villages are provided under three sections: *source channel*, which identifies the main irrigation channel by its source name; *watering turns*, which describes how irrigation watering turns are divided among farmers; and *channel repair*, which describes how channel repair responsibilities are divided among the users. Below, I first provide translations of the three *Riwaj-i-Abpashi* documents (one for Zibug and two for Khyung ⁹⁸) and then provide an analysis of the text which aims at shedding light on actual practice and issues of equity. In the following translation, only the names of villages, fields and people have been altered.

⁹⁸ Khyung has three groups of fields: Hara, Dangpo and Nyipa, located on different sides of the village. Each of these groups of fields has its own irrigation (rotation) systems, which are recorded separately but in two documents (one for Hara and one for Dangpo and Nyipa) in *Riwaj-i-Abpashi*.
Document 1: Riwaj-i-Ahpaishi of Zibug village:

Source channel: This channel was built by us Zamindars from the spring named upper Shajog.\(^9\)

Watering turns: The watering turns is decided amongst the farmers. In one rotation, Zamindars get water for five days, who use it for irrigation on a turn-by-turn basis. On the sixth day, the small households get water for one day, which is used by everyone together. After this, the turn starts again in the order mentioned above.

Repair of channels: When repair of a channel is needed, we Zamindars work together to do the repair. If anyone is absent, a fine is charged according to labor time and the amount is used for channel repair expenses.

Document 2: Riwaj-i-Ahpaishi of Khyung—Hara fields:

Source channel: This irrigation channel was jointly constructed by the Zamindars from a stream named Rugolog.\(^10\)

Watering turns: The water from this kuhl is shared between 17 large householders or Zamindars within themselves on a turn-by-turn basis from the

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\(^9\) The main source spring for Zibug’s irrigation waters (“Shajog” in the text) is also known as the home of the serpent spirits (klu khang). Water from this and other springs are collected in a communal reservoir, which is distributed among the farmers according to the described watering turn.

\(^10\) The name of the stream, Rugolog (yur mgo log), is an interesting one. It literally translates as “Channel Head Collapse” and also names the main village deity, which the farmers literally worshipped. According to local legend, which many believe to be true, a long time ago, Khyung farmers were unable to channel irrigation waters despite many attempts. The channels would either run dry or break apart. Frustrated with the situation, the farmers performed rituals for divine intervention. As a consequence, a powerful mountain demon (btsan) came from Ladakh in the form of a raven. The raven landed on a sacred site high above Khyung and poked its beak on the ground, from where a spring miraculously emerged. Today, the source spring of the Rugolog channel is considered sacred, and women of Khangchen households perform annual rituals here, just as Khangchen women of Zibug village perform rituals for the serpent spirits living at the source spring.
morning till 5 pm. On the first day, nine Zamindars get water. On the second day, another nine households get water. And this turn goes on in rotation from the third day. Since there are 17 households, one household gets water twice during the first round. On the second round, another household will get water for both days. In this way, all the 17 households get their turn for two-day waterings on a turn-by-turn basis.

Small households get water after 5pm until it becomes dark. Water is shared among themselves on a turn-by-turn basis. After it gets dark, water is allowed to fill in the reservoir and the next day watering is done on a turn-by-turn basis.

During the season, every small household gives water once to the big households.

**Repair of channels:** When repair of a channel is needed, all the Zamindars work together to do the repair. If anyone is absent, a fine is charged equivalent to labor time and the amount is used for channel repair expenses.

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**Document 3: Riwaj-i-Abpashi Khyung—Dangpo (Source 1) and Nyipa (Source 2)**

**fields:**

**Source channel 1:** This irrigation channel was jointly constructed by us Zamindars from a spring [near] Ar.

**Watering turn 1:** This group has 20 households, out of which nine are Zamindar households and eleven are small households. The nine Zamindar households get water on a turn-by-turn basis, in which three households divide water equally for each day. Thus a watering cycle is completed in three days. On the fourth day, another turn begins. The timing of water for the Zamindar household is [from
morning] until shadow falls on Phalang [a pathway between the two mountains].
After that, until water is stopped for the next day’s collection in the reservoir, the
small households use [leftover] water. Water is given to small households
according to availability. This rotation system keeps going again and again.
However, from dawn until the [village] sheep and goats\textsuperscript{101} are sent to the “jungle”,
water is given to Mrs. Tenzin Dekyi, wife of Dorje.
Twice a year, small householders get to use water [during the day] after the
Zamindar rotation turn. And once or twice during the season, the small
households give water to the Khangchen households even after the shadow [falls
on Phalang].\textsuperscript{102}

**Channel repair 1:** When the irrigation channel needs repair, one or two members
from the Zamindar, as well as small households, go to perform the repair. If
anyone is absent, a fine is charged according to a day’s labor wage. The fined
amount is used for channel repair expenses and water is provided to the absentee.

**Source channel 2:** We Zamindars jointly constructed this irrigation channel from
a stream [near] Takmothang.

**Irrigation turn 2:** same as channel 1.

**Channel pair 2:** same as channel 1.

\textsuperscript{101} Every morning, villagers sent their animals (cattle, sheep, goats and donkeys) out for grazing on the
mountains under the care of two or three men (usually boys), who return with the animals in the evening. Thus the text above refers to the timing of these animals being taken/sent to the mountains, which is described more explicitly in the analysis below.

\textsuperscript{102} The two days when small households get water during the daytime, mentioned in *Riwall-i-Abpashi* of Dangpo and Nyipa fields, are the first two waterings (Yurma and Rhakti, discussed below). The first two waterings are critical for the crop’s healthy growth and these have to be done during the daytime. The other clause, which says that once or twice a year the small households give water to the Khangchen households, is irrelevant because the practice does not exist.
Analysis of Document 1: codified irrigation customs of Zibug village

The text uses the term “Zamindar” for the main rights holders of the village irrigation water. Zamindar is an Urdu word meaning “landowner”. However, it is important to point out that Zamindar is a masculine word, referring to a male landowner. The feminine or female equivalent of Zamindar is “Zamindarni”, which usually refers to the wife of the Zamindar. Therefore, the word Zamindar, as used in the text above, refers to the men of the Old Khangchen households. In the context of the Indian plains, from where the term is borrowed, Zamindars are aristocrats who held very large tracts of land (usually measured in square miles) that were leased out to peasants. In the case of Spiti, the Old Khangchen households were historically tenant farmers who had, on average, 3.5 acres of land that were cultivated jointly by family members as well as by hired laborers. Thus the use of the term Zamindar to refer to Khangchen household men had three important consequences: it (a) changed their status from tenant farmers to landowners, (b) elevated their status, at least in title, to that of Indian aristocrats, and (c) established them as the legal rights holders to the village’s irrigation sources.

From my field observations and after consulting with farmers, I found that the “small households” mentioned in the text consist of a mixed bag of mostly Dhutul and caste households. These households have relatively small plots (<0.5 acre) of land near or

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104 According to a retired teacher whose knowledge and accuracy of information is generally reliable (at least more so than the average Spiti informant), Spiti Zamindars have 15 to 20 bighas of land (5 bighas = 1 acre).

105 As mentioned above, the Khangchen households were tax-paying tenant farmers. The farming lands belonged to the state under the Ladakhi system. This changed under the British rule, which introduced a policy or law whereby farming lands were to be held independently by farmers (Lyall, 1874, p. 181; Jahoda, 2008, pp. 10-11).
around the main Khangchen fields.\textsuperscript{106} From a gender perspective, the patriarchal context of the text implies – according to local patrilineal customs of inheritance – that the men, not the women, of these “small households” hold the irrigation rights mentioned in the text. These points concerning local power dynamics, as they are reflected in the codified irrigation customs, also apply to Khyung’s irrigation system, as is discussed below.

The fact that the text identifies Khangchen men as the rights holders and lumps all other individuals and groups into the nebulous designation of “small household” is reflective of the historical power structure of Spiti villages. Under the traditional power structure, which continued through the period of British rule, Khangchen men enjoyed all the rights and made all the decisions on behalf of the village. All other individuals and groups, including all the women and men of the Dhutul households, had no formal rights or decision-making authority over local resources.\textsuperscript{107} This was confirmed by several local farmers, including a Dhutul woman who claimed that traditionally all other individuals and groups “had no worth whatsoever” (\textit{brtsis rug lding se med kag}).

In the description of watering turns, the text curiously does not mention the number of different households that share the water. It only mentions two groups of households: “Zamindars” (Khangchen households) and “small households”, thereby overshadowing

\textsuperscript{106} There are many ways that the small householders have come to own these small plots of land. According to a community leader from the village (Ngawang Samdup, personal communication, November 8, 2013), the majority were lands given to family members (younger brothers, sisters, aunts, etc.) of Khangchen households who had formed a separate home. Some households had established these rights through agreements that their ancestors had made with the village. In addition, a few were allowed to cultivate new fields under the Nautor Land Rules Act. Since these small household lands are not strictly regulated by the custom of primogeniture, the number of these small farming plots keeps increasing as lands get further divided between family members.

\textsuperscript{107} The formal decision-making mechanism for the village is the Village Council, which is comprised only of Khangchen men. After the 1968 Land Rules Act, however, many other households, including caste households, have begun to contribute full taxes to the village and thus have achieved representation in the Village Council.
the internal inequalities of irrigation access rights. In 2011, there were 13 Khangchen households and 60 small households. The 60 small households were comprised of 53 Dhutul, 4 Zo caste and 3 Beda caste households. While the 13 Khangchen households received water for five days out of the six-day cycle, the 60 small households received water for only one day out of the six-day cycle. Thus this system is highly inequitable in terms of the differences in the quantity and frequency of water available between Khangchen and small households.

Although the text says that the repair work of the irrigation channels is jointly performed by the Zamindars (i.e., Khangchen men, but perhaps referring to the household here), this may not have been the case then and it is certainly not the case today. In actual practice, as I witnessed on one occasion, channel repair work (in Khyung) is done jointly by men, women, young children and Indian laborers representing every household (including “small households”) with water rights. Since my participant observation of channel repair work was of Khyung farmers, I will elaborate on this (immediately) below in the discussion concerning Khyung’s irrigation customs.

108 The six-day watering cycle was divided as such: four Khangchen households get water on the first day; three Khangchen households on the second day; seven small households (belonging to Khangchen households) get water on the third day; three more Khangchen households share water on the fourth day; another three Khangchen households get water on the fifth day; and, on the sixth day, the sixty small households get water. This cycle is then repeated. Since the amount of water received by the four households sharing water for a day is relatively less compared to that of the other three Khangchen household groups, this group is compensated by three additional days of watering each year. These three days are: Mig chu, one day around the second watering, and on the fifteenth day of the sixth Tibetan month, which is also known as the fifteenth watering day (*bcu lnga chu res*).

109 Because the system of primogeniture does not allow for the division of land, the number of Old Khangchen households remains relatively constant. However, the number of small householders seems to increase with time as non-Khangchen householders often tend to divide their land between their children. This renders the situation of inequity worse as years pass by. For example, the number of small households had increased from fifty during my first visit in 2007 to sixty in 2011.

110 I was told by a Zibug farmer that the rules governing the social organization of channel repair work for Zibug are similar to those of Khyung.
Analysis of Document 2: Riwaj-i-Abpashi of Khyung Hara fields

The text on the watering turns of the Hara fields says that 17 Zamindars have the main rights to the water. Again, the only other group mentioned is a nebulous “small household”. In actual practice, in 2011, there were 13 small households which received water after 5pm (see table below). These 13 small households are locally referred to as *Chumed* (*chu med*, literally “no water”). There is also another user group that is not mentioned in the text. This other group is called *Tiping Langza* (meaning, “those who raise irrigation tool”). In 2011, there were 30 of these households. The Tiping Langza farmers get water from the share of the 17 Khangchen households in return for certain contractual services that they provide, such as that of tilling and irrigating. Both Chumed and Tiping Langza groups are comprised of a mixed bag of Khangchung (i.e., along with the separate homes of parents of Khangchen), Dhutul and caste (both Zo blacksmiths and Beda musicians) households. Between Chumed and Tiping Langza, the former has better (permanent) irrigation rights and the latter has only temporary (contractual) rights.

In terms of equity, the distribution of water and power neatly follows an intersectional power hierarchy, with Khangchen men being at the top and exercising both *de facto* and *de jure* rights, and Beda caste women at the bottom, and having the least watering turns and no legal rights. In the table presented below, it is clear that access to irrigation water for different households is consistent with the local socio-economic or power structure, starting from the top to bottom: Khangchen/(Khangchung), Dhutul, Zo blacksmiths, and

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111 When the eldest son gets married and assumes responsibility for the Khangchen household, the parents move into a smaller household known as a “Khangchung”. Many of these Khangchung households have their own small plots of land. Khangchung are technically a part of the Khangchen household.
Beda musicians. Khangchen households have the most privileged access rights, followed by those of the Dhutul, followed by Zo caste members, and finally by the Beda caste members.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number and type of irrigation users for Hara fields</th>
<th>Number/type of households</th>
<th>Irrigation rights</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17 Khangchen</td>
<td>17 Khangchen</td>
<td>From morning to 5pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Chumed small household</td>
<td>1 field shared by two Khangchen + 2 temple fields + 4 Dhutul + 5 Zo blacksmiths + 1 Beda musicians</td>
<td>After 5pm (Leftover water or “chu ljug”) until the reservoirs are empty. Permanent right.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 Tiping Langza small household</td>
<td>4 Khangchung + 11 Dhutul + 10 Zo blacksmiths + 5 Beda musicians</td>
<td>Temporary right: water share from Khangchen households on contractual terms.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Composition of Hara irrigation users

Although women on the whole are a minority group (in terms of power), because gender operates in interaction with socio-economic background, women of higher socio-economic status enjoy higher prestige. This is partly because of the privileged irrigation water rights of their households, as compared to the women of the traditionally landless Dhutul and caste households. While one may argue that women of Khangchen
households have more agricultural work responsibilities due to their larger fields (i.e., in comparison to poorer women farmers), one must bear in mind that the more mundane, difficult and time-consuming farming work is done by hired laborers, who are most often Dhutul or caste women. At the same time, from a socio-economic perspective, a larger field with more privileged irrigation access is more desirable than a smaller field with limited irrigation supply.

In terms of gender and caste intersection, as the chart above shows, there are six Beda irrigation rights, out of which one is permanent Chumbed and five are temporary Tiping Langza rights. Beda women of Tiping Langza not only have to do irrigation work on their own temporary contractual fields but often also on the fields of Khangchen households, which are much larger in area. The point here is to highlight their underprivileged status, rights and responsibilities due to the social structural relations of power. As we shall see in the next section, caste women are also discriminated against or excluded in the performance of irrigation-related rituals because they are regarded as being impure.

The text on the repair of channels, here again, speaks as if Khangchen men do all the work. As mentioned earlier, I had the chance to conduct participant observation of channel repair work with the farmers of Mara field in 2010. The de facto rule concerning who does irrigation channel repair is different from the official record. In reality, all Khangchen and small households that have a right to irrigation must send one representative to do the work. Although I found several members representing the Tiping Langza group, it seems to me that they came on behalf of their contractor Khangchen households. The people who came to work on irrigation repair were of all ages (from
about 10 to about 75), gender and socio-economic background, and even included Indian workers.¹¹²

_Analysis of Document 3: codified irrigation customs of Khyung’s Dangpo and Nyipa fields_

There are three notable things worth pointing out in the language of the codified irrigation customs of the Dangpo and Nyipa fields. One concerns a sentence (“Water is given to small households according to availability”) in the text that sheds light on the nature of the rights held by small householders in comparison to those held by Khangchen households. Second is a unique case of irrigation rights associated with an individual woman named Tenzin Dekyi. Third concerns the difference in the actual number of users mentioned in the text as compared to those in practice. I will discuss these three points one by one.

The irrigation customs for Dangpo and Nyipa follow the same unequal distribution pattern that we observed in Khyung’s Hara fields as well as in those of Zibug. The text says that Khangchen households get water from morning until the sun sets behind the Rhin-mo-kha-dang (srin mo kha gdang) mountain and its shadow falls on the Phalang area near the fields. After that, the text says that eleven small households get the leftover water. This pattern of small households getting “leftover” (chu ljug in local language) water after the Khangchen households are done watering is similar to that of the Khyung Hara fields. The text pertaining to the Dangpo fields has an additional sentence that raises

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¹¹² Among adult men, there were three Khangchen men, five Dhutul men, and one Zo blacksmith man. There were also nine adult women representing Khanchen, Dhutul and caste households. And there were thirteen young boys and girls, including six Indian boys.
questions about the nature of the irrigation rights of small households. It says: “Water is given to small households according to availability.”

As it turns out, upon asking farmers what happens to the irrigation rights of small householders in times when there is a lack of water, it was discovered that whether the small householders get water during times of scarcity is dependant upon the good will and wishes of the Khangchen households. Khangchen householders are not required to leave a share of the (reservoir) water for the small householders. This is evident in the language of the codified customs. It says: “Water is given to small households according to availability” [emphasis mine]. By using words such as “given [by Khangchen men] … according to availability”, the text implies that the Khangchen households are not obliged to leave water for small householders in times of scarcity. This tells us two things. First, that Khangchen household men are the supreme decision makers regarding the use of irrigation water in times of scarcity. Second, and perhaps more importantly, it informs us that irrigation rotation based on the morning-evening “leftover” use system (used in Khyung’s fields) can be highly disadvantageous for the evening users or small households, who may not get any water at all, especially in extreme conditions of scarcity. A better alternative system of irrigation rotation for secondary rights holders in such a case is that of Zibug village, where small householders (secondary rights holders) have their own separate day of watering turns. Although Zibug’s example is not very appealing because of the high number of small householders, the system nevertheless protects these users from complete deprivation.
The second thing worth noting in the text of *Riwaj-i-Abpashi* of Dangpo fields is the case of a unique water right associated with an individual woman named Tenzin Dekyi. The story behind Tenzin Dekyi’s unique water right is well known to the people of the village. It goes like this:113

Once two sisters went to release irrigation water to their fields. The sisters got into an argument over their share of water at a place where the main water channel divides into two channels: one flowing to the Hara fields and the other flowing into the Dangpo fields. The sisters argued that one was taking more water than her share. The argument escalated into a fight. In this fight, the sister from Dangpo fields, Tenzin Dekyi, was hit with a hoe by the sister from Hara fields and consequently died. Since Tenzin Dekyi had fought and lost her life over the water rights of Dangpo farmers, the nine Khangchen farmers of Dangpo fields thereafter decided to honor her sacrifice by giving the household to which she belonged a special water right. According to this decision, Tenzin Dekyi’s household was given the right to use the “overflow water” (*zag ti*) that flowed from the reservoir after it becomes full in the morning. The household can use this “overflow water” from dawn until the time when the sheep and goats of the village are sent to the mountains for grazing (in the morning). This water right was permanently given to Tenzin Dekyi, which meant that successive members of her household continue to have this right.

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113 I heard this story in detail from two farmers of Dangpo fields: a Khangchen woman (Evi Tashi Yangzom, 2011) and a Dhutul man (Amchi Ngawang Tsering, field notes, 2010). The details described by them were essentially the same.
Thus, ironically, the water right of Tenzin Dekyi was given after her death. The right actually belongs to the household where she lived at the time.\footnote{In addition, it should be pointed out from a gender perspective that since Spiti society is based on patrilineal inheritance, the irrigation rights of the household belong to the ‘head’ man of the household.}

The third notable thing in the codified irrigation customs of Khyung’s Dangpo and Nyipa fields is the issue of differences between codified customs and \textit{actual practice}. Specifically, it provides a case where the actual number of Khangchen rights holders has decreased from what was recorded in the document. What is interesting is that, despite the decrease in the number of users, the number of watering turns remains the same as that mentioned in the text. In 2011, there were six Khangchen households in Nyipa (Source 2) fields but the watering system was done according to the nine Khangchen system recorded in the text. The number of households had decreased because three households had ceased to exist. The fields and watering turns of two of the three deceased households now belong to their families – relatives who are the existing irrigation rights holders. As a result, two of the six Khangchen households had double turns. The share of the third deceased household does not belong to any single household but to the group as a whole, shared equally among the remaining six households. Thus the watering turn continues with the allotment of three shares per day over a three-day cycle, as written in the \textit{Riwaj-i-Abpashi}. In the case of the Dangpo fields (Source 1), there are the same six Khangchen households as in the Nyipa fields, plus two households from the Hara fields who jointly share one field (half each, in Dangpo). Again, the watering turn remains the
same as mentioned in the *Riway-i-Abpashi*: nine units divided into three watering turns per day in a three-day cycle.\footnote{In this cycle, four households own one turn each (4 households x 1 field each = 4 fields/waterings), two households own two fields each (2 households x 2 fields = 4 fields/waterings), and another two households share one field (2 households x \(\frac{1}{2}\) field each = 1 field/waterings).}

This example of the number of users changing while the watering system continues according to codified customs is similar to the reports of a case study of irrigation rights in the neighboring region of Ladakh done by Corrine Wacker (2008). In the Ladakhi case study (Wacker, 2008), the village of Tagmachig had an increase in the number of users but the allocation of water rights recorded in the legal documents were not altered and farmers had divided the water through an internal subdivision of the recorded rights, just as in the case of the Khyung’s Nyipa and Hara fields. This is done to ensure that overall water use remains the same and does not alter the water rights of existing users. The case of Nyipa and Dangpo provides some additional insights. When a household with water rights dies or ceases to exist, there are at least two possible ways this household’s water rights may be used: either the immediate relatives may take over the rights or the water rights may be shared by the remaining rights holders. This also suggests the unlikelihood of accepting new users (for example, a third party who is not related to the deceased rights holder).

Based on the textual analysis of codified customs, there are several take away points here. From an intersectional perspective, the powers and benefits (or the lack thereof) of irrigation rights of different categories of farmers, based on their socio-economic class, gender and caste backgrounds, neatly reflect the hierarchal social structure of the local
culture. The patriarchal social and legal contexts privilege men as rights holders and allocate women to a role as invisible workers. This is evident in the fact that nowhere in the text are women, or even anything to do with women, mentioned, or indeed even implied - even though women perform almost all of the irrigation-related work. The only exception is in reference to a special water right granted to a woman named Tenzin Dekyi, which in fact was given to her household (represented by men) as a result of her tragic death.

The above analysis of legal irrigation rights and actual practice also show, from an intersectional perspective, that men of the Khangchen households are privileged on multiple levels. While women in general are disadvantaged, we will see that in the realm of actual water management work (discussed in the next section), women of Dhutul and lower caste groups, are disadvantaged at multiple levels according to the broader socio-economic and gender power structures.

Section 3: Irrigation-related activities and roles in a calendar year

What follows is a description of all the main irrigation-related tasks and rituals that are undertaken in the two case study villages. The discussion is presented chronologically from the beginning of the year to the end, as will also be the case in the next two chapters. This allows for the ethnographic descriptions to be chronologically overlaid, thus providing a more complete description of the farmer’s customary livelihood activities. My sources for the following section include participant observation and interviews. In particular, I had the privilege of conducting a detailed (more than 75 minutes) interview
(on October 2, 2010) with the three irrigation group leaders (known as yur mgo pa, all
three of whom were women older than fifty years) of Zibug village for the year 2010.
The rituals and activities related to irrigation management in the two case study villages
are similar. The types of activities, their purpose and meaning, as well as the basis of the
division of the roles are the same. The only difference is timing: many of the activities
are performed a few days apart due to various reasons. The following discussion of these
two villages’ irrigation activities is therefore combined as one. After describing each
irrigation-related activity, I will highlight issues of equity and micropolitics as they are
related to the activity.

The focus of my analysis is on two things. As mentioned earlier, first, from an
intersectional perspective, I analyze which categories of women perform which kinds of
irrigation-related tasks. This is because these tasks, based on their desirability or prestige
in relation to the ascribed roles of women belonging to different household types, can be
seen as hierarchical. Second, I retain an empirical focus on issues such as who does (and
who does not do) what (Ribot & Peluso, 2003, p. 154), as well as “when, where, and
according to whom” (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 1995, p. 28). The objective here is to
unravel the intersectional dynamics of gender, class and caste as they relate to irrigation
management. In addition, I argue that attention to issues of who does not do what and
why is critical to understanding how inequalities are cemented.
Serpent spirit cake ritual (klu gtor)

On the 25th day of the first Tibetan month,116 farmers offer ritual cakes to propitiate the local serpent spirits. Farmers believe that these serpent spirits (klu or “Naga” in Hindi) reside in the springs and have the ability to influence water flow and weather conditions (Interviews, October 2, 2010 & May 5, 2011). The belief in serpent spirits predates Buddhism and is found in other religious traditions of South and Southeast Asia, especially among the Hindus. These spirits are believed to possess features of both animals (e.g., vulnerable to injury and disease, as well as having a propensity toward aggression, etc.) and gods (e.g., possessing supernatural powers to control weather or to harm or benefit people). Thus farmers believe that these serpent spirits are sensitive beings, who can cause the springs to dry up or bring skin disease and other sicknesses to people who pollute the springs (Interview, October 2, 2010).117 Ritual texts are read and special ritual cakes are offered to appease the serpent spirits so that the spirits will keep the springs perennial and not harm the locals.

To perform the ritual, monks are invited to a home to read ritual scriptures and to make

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116 In 2011, this day coincided with March 29 of the Gregorian calendar.
117 Tibetan belief systems concerning serpent spirits are widely known (e.g., see Trungpa, 1978). To provide some insight into the nature of this belief system, here is a snippet of a description that was provided by a Spiti woman (Interview, October 2, 2010): “One should not wash or drink near these springs [inhabited by serpent spirits] because one might end up breathing or contacting the serpent spirit (klu yi kha rlang phog yong nga). Human contact also pollutes the serpent spirit, which gets diseased. Once the serpent spirits get diseased, the polluter will also get diseased. It is said that people with high spiritual merit (pa ra / bsod nams) cannot be harmed by the serpent spirit. However, serpent spirits wait up to a period of nine years and nine days (lo dgu chos dgu) until a time when the polluter’s spiritual merit goes down and then makes that person diseased. Once the polluter gets sick or diseased, he or she will remain uncured until the serpent spirits get healed from the disease. The only cure is through a special ritual – klu yi gdon drol – that must be undertaken to appease and heal the serpent spirit. This is an elaborate ritual that must be done carefully. If the person affected is very serious, then an even more elaborate ritual called sa thag gdon drol must be undertaken.”
ritual cakes. During my field research, I observed that many of the households have their own little shrine dedicated to the serpent spirits. It was explained to me that certain households were particularly concerned with appeasing the serpent spirits, usually because the family members believed that the serpent spirits were responsible for giving them strange diseases. Any household can request that the monks perform this ritual upon their behalf. The ritual lasts one full day. After the ritual activities are completed at the home, the ritual cakes are taken to the spring and placed there as a symbolic gesture of offering to the serpent spirits that reside there. Since springs are the only sources of irrigation water in Zibug and Khyung, proper performance of this ritual is important to the farmers.

Belief in serpent spirits is an ancient, prehistoric phenomenon shared by people throughout the Himalayas, Tibetan Plateau and in many parts of South and Southeast Asia. Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to thoroughly analyze the politics of this belief system, it is interesting to note that the belief in serpent spirits is advantageous to the Khangchen households since it leads to the protection of their water sources. One of the key features of this belief system is that believers are deeply fearful of disturbing the natural integrity of the springs as well as any other place where the serpent spirits may reside. This leads people to abide by norms that guide against polluting the springs, which, in practical terms, benefits the irrigation rights holders the most. One farmer observed that there is also a tendency for the poorer sections of the community be more fearful of these spirits as they are more prone to diseases due to poor diet and hygiene. If

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118 According to local informants, all but two villages get their irrigation water from springs. The two villages that do not depend on spring water are Shichiling and Shego, which are low-lying villages that get their irrigation water directly from the Spiti river.
this is true, the implication of the belief system is uneven from an intersectional perspective. Additionally, the fact that only men of the Khangchen or Dhutul households read ritual texts and make ritual cakes reflect biases embedded in this irrigation-related ritual in terms of: gender (women’s role in this sacred ritual is minimal to non-existent); socio-economic class (e.g., historically all monks hailed from Khangchen households, although today there are also many Dhutul monks - but still none from caste households); and caste (neither gender of caste background engages in the reading of texts or the making of the ritual cakes).

**Drawing of irrigation channels in the field (rnang slang)**

The next irrigation-related activity I observed and that farmers confirmed (Interview, October 2, 2010) is the drawing of irrigation channels in the fields. This takes place after the fields are plowed and leveled, normally during the second week of April. The “drawing” (*ri mo bris*) of irrigation channels in the field is a technical task that is led by the most experienced woman in the household. She is normally the Khangchen woman or her mother-in-law. During the performance of this task, she, as the leader, is known as Bal go tsug khan (*bal mgo btsug mkhan*) and her main task is to figure out where the channel lines should be drawn. She takes a number of factors into consideration for drawing the lines. These include the slope and the size of the field, the location of sluices, and the direction of water flow. Once the Bal go tsug khan figures out where the Nang (rnang) channels should flow, she traces a line by dragging her foot in the field. As she

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119 This is normally during the end of *zhing 'debs* (“field cultivation”) month or the second Tibetan month.

120 *Bal mgo btsug mkhan* means “the one who initiates ‘bal’”. The meaning of bal is unclear.
traces the line, she sings: “rnang la, rimo la”, which is an instruction to draw channels (rnang) where she is drawing the lines (ri mo).

The leader’s customary instruction is followed by men or women known as bal lan rgyab mkhan, who dig channels along the line drawn by the leader. In the case of the large fields owned by Khangchen households, it is normally the men from Dhutul or Zo blacksmith households who assist in digging the channels with a yak plow. For smaller fields, a group of three or four women, normally from Dhutul and caste households, dig the channels with hoes. The hired plowman is known as Thongpa (thong pa), and he gets a plot of land for farming in return for his services (discussed further in chapter 5). The women helpers form a work team called Bhe (byed) and they also get reciprocal benefits for their assistance, such as the use of a plow (which belongs to the Khangchen household) on their fields or the sharing of irrigation water.

The dirt dug up by the plow or by adze hoes to make rnang channels is used to make earthen dikes on both sides of the channels. The rnang channels are designed in curved parallel lines, like lines of latitude, and situated about six feet apart. The curved design is made to affect the speed of flow and allows for easier manual watering control. After making the rnang channels, a series of smaller ‘vertical’ earthen dikes are constructed to form a series of rectangular subsections called sli ‘ungs.122 A sli ‘ungs subsection is the

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121 A translation of bal lan rgyab mkhan is “the one who answers ‘bal’”.
122 The purpose of watering in subsections is to achieve higher efficiency (less wastage) and effectiveness (better control) of water. This is achieved by allowing scarce water to flow slowly into a manageable patch of field. This also allows the farmer to provide better care for the crops, especially when they are young and delicate (discussed below). Work is done at a pace coordinated with the water flow in such a way that every area and corner of sli ‘ungs subsections are sufficiently watered and tended to, without any wastage.
smallest unit area of irrigation, which, on average, is around 8 feet wide by 6 feet long in size. Women helpers do all the work associated with the channels, including making the \textit{rnang} channels and \textit{sli `ung} subsections, using adze hoes. The making of \textit{sli `ungs} subsections completes the task of drawing channels in the field.

Activities related to the drawing of irrigation channels show that Khangchen women command great authority in the field, especially for their expertise in laying the ‘blueprint’ of the field irrigation channels. Women helpers, normally from Dhutul and caste households, do the manual work of digging, lifting and pushing dirt to make the channels and dikes according to the blueprint laid out by the expert Khangchen women.

\textit{Yurshag Shichu (yur zhag bzhi bcu) or 40 days to irrigation}

After making the irrigation channels in the field, it is customary to wait forty days before watering the fields. This custom is known as \textit{yur zhag bzhi bcu} (“forty days to watering”). The forty-day break is a traditional practice that people still follow for barley and other subsistence crops. For pea, which is a commercial crop, people simply study the size of saplings and irrigate the field if and when they decide it is needed.\footnote{The doing away of traditional customs for pea cultivation has led people to refer to green peas as “halla matar”. The term for green peas is “hara matar” in Hindi (“hara” is green, and “matar” is pea) but some locals call it “halla matar” as “halla” refers to the “noise” or “hype” that has developed around the crop.} During these forty days, farmers perform two key activities related to irrigation: repairing the irrigation channels and collecting plants (mainly Festuca or \textit{rtsa skya}) which are used for the first watering as mulch.
Irrigation channel repair

Repair of the canals mainly involves clearing rocks, building canal walls, collecting large pieces of sod and placing them on the canal walls. The codified irrigation customs mention that the Khangchen men do the channel repair work. However, the following detail of irrigation repair work will show that the work is done jointly by all the rights holders, including men and women of all ages and social backgrounds.

The decision regarding if and when to do irrigation repair work is undertaken by the village council leaders, who are all men. These men instruct the yur mgo pa (the head of irrigation works, who is almost always a woman) about a day when one person from every household will gather to repair the irrigation channels and reservoirs. The yur mgo pa is responsible for mobilizing labor for annual channel maintenance and repair. This includes conveying the message to the village by shouting loudly around the village on the eve of the gathering day. The yur mgo pa is also responsible for taking roll calls and collecting fines. The position of the yur mgo pa is served turn by turn among households. Women usually hold this position but it could be done by anyone, including Indian laborers supported by the household. In 2011, all of these positions in Zibug and Khyung were held by women.

A group of representatives (which could be a man, woman or child) from each household that gets water from the channel gathers the next day with pickaxes, hoes and spades. The yur mgo pa (or someone standing in on her behalf) takes a roll call. Often the group
will divide themselves into subgroups so that the work can be completed sooner and more efficiently. If there are three groups, one group will work on the head canals, another group will work on the mid canals and the last will work on the tail canals. Two individuals are selected, usually an elder and a helper, who will go straight to a designated spot near the head source to prepare tea. The three groups work – cleaning and repairing the canal – in the direction of the water source. In the end, they all meet at the designated spot for another round of roll call and a meal break with a communal tea. During one of these breaks (which I had a chance to observe firsthand), people take a rest on the ground and freely form into groups to eat food brought from their homes. There is no rule on group formation. However, groups tend to naturally form among those who are closer and friendlier to each other. For example, I noticed that one of the groups was mostly young boys, one group was all Indian workers, one group had a mix of young men and women from Khangchen and Dhutul households, one group had mostly adult Khangchen and Dhutul men, one group was composed of mostly adult women of Khangchen and Dhutul households, and one last group, which was the most unique, was that of the caste members. Caste members sat together under one group, and consisted of members of all ages and gender. I think that this is because people tend to share food within the groups. As is customary throughout the Himalayan regions and in South Asia in general, members of the caste group in Spiti are not allowed to share food with non-caste members (Interview, 2010 & 2011; Rather, 1997).

After the break, the groups continue to complete their leftover work. The groups that have completed their share of work will join other groups. Work must be done jointly.
After all the work is completed, a final roll call is taken and the group then disperses. Those who were absent, I was told, would be charged a fine of Rs. 50 and the money would be given to the village council leaders after subtracting the amount spent on the communal tea.

*Collection of festuca (rtsa skya)*

Farmers in Khyung and Zibug collect local varieties of Festuca and Polygonum (*snya lo*) during the first watering of the season. The use of these plants plays a crucial role in the most important (i.e., the first) watering of the season (described below). Polygonum is collected in late autumn after threshing the crops when all the farmers go to the mountains to collect plants (discussed in chapter 6). In the spring, farmers allot two or three days specifically for the collection of Festuca.

Festuca is a coveted and scarce \(^{124}\) plant, the collection of which is banned in Zibug and Khyung - except in an area that is commonly owned by the two villages and on the specific days (two or three days a year) that have been specifically reserved for their collection. The dates are decided at a village council meeting and announced at the same time so that all the villagers have equal access to the plant. On that day, men, women and children from all household types go to the mountains to collect the plant. After that, the mountains are sealed again and further Festuca collection is banned. If *sekya* growth is extremely sparse, villagers might impose a complete ban on the collection of the plant.

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\(^{124}\) According to local farmers, the plant became almost extinct in recent decades because farmers uprooted the plant indiscriminately. While the upper parts of Festuca that grows above ground are used during the first watering, its root was used to insulate bedding. Festuca roots were spread on the ground, on which farmers made their bedding for warmth.
until it revives. In years that the collection of Festuca is banned, farmers will use leftover barley and mustard hay.

The plants are chopped into small sizes (3 to 6 inches) and spread evenly over the fields a day or two before the first irrigation. This work is done by or under the close supervision of the main women of the household. The purpose of laying the chopped grasses in the field is to allow for an even flooding of the fields; this in turn allows for better watering control and for protection of the small shoots of crop that may otherwise be destroyed by sudden, forceful watering that comes from the abundant spring melt water. The grass also acts as mulch, conserving moisture in the soil and improving soil fertility at the same time. The need for close attention, expertise and skilled hands make this a task that is solely performed by the head woman of the (Khangchen) household (Interview, October 2, 2010). As Gutschow (1998, p. 464) noted, the main irrigation role of the Khangchen women continues into the first two or three waterings because these “should be done so precisely that even the wealthiest farmers do not entrust it to hired labor”.

Watering of fields

There are five main watering days in a year, which have their own names: Yurma (yur ma), Rhagti (sreg ti), Sumti (gsum ti), Zhiti (bzhi ti) and Minchu (smin chu). Other waterings do not have names. These five days, including their specific method of watering, are explained below. The system is similar to the watering system of Zangskar (Gutschow, 1998). The technique for the first four waterings is called Shag nang (gshag rnang), which is done by methodically opening and closing the sluices of each sli ‘ungs
subsection in the first two waterings and by sets of _nang_ channels in the third and fourth waterings. This technique requires that the farmer step inside the field to carefully adjust the water flow and ensure that it is evenly distributed into every corner of the field. This is a sensitive process because the shoots are young and delicate, and the soil is not accustomed to watering.

Another technique of watering that is used for _Minchu_ (seed ripening water), as well as the other six to eight nameless waterings of the year, simply allows the water to flow by itself throughout the field. This is accomplished by simply opening the main sluice of the field. For watering by this technique, known as circular watering (_kyir chu yi_), farmers simply prepare the sluices in such a way that water will flow to all parts of the field by itself once the water flow is allowed through the main sluice of the field. There is no need for the farmer to step into the field to control the force or the direction of the flow. By the time the circular watering technique is applied, the shoots are bigger and more able to withstand the stronger and more irregular flow of water. The hired irrigators can therefore apply this technique.

_The first watering of the year: Yurma_

Here, the name Yurma (_yur ma_) means “Mother Watering” (_yur_ for watering, _ma_ for mother).\textsuperscript{125} Farmers compare Yurma to the foundation of a house (_yur ma khang pas rmang yin_). Just as the quality of the foundation of a house determines the stability and quality of the structure that is built on top, how well Yurma irrigation is done determines how well the crop will grow on the field. This is expressed in a local saying: Yurma is

\textsuperscript{125} The word _yur ma_ can also mean “weeding”.

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like laying down the foundation of a house (*yur ma khang pa'i rmang gting gting yin*).

According to Gutschow (1998), “If the first watering is done properly, then the subsequent watering for the rest of the season is easy. Conversely, if the first watering is poorly done, the field suffers the entire season” (p. 464).

The first watering is also more challenging because the soil is soft and dry, which makes water flow harder to guide or control. Additionally, owing to the abundance of fresh melt water, water flow is more forceful at this time, and the saplings are therefore more susceptible to damage. So a highly skilled and careful irrigator is required for the first watering to not only manage the unruly flow and protect the young saplings but also to ensure that the watering is done in such a way that future waterings will be easier to control and more beneficial for the crop. Therefore, because Yurma watering requires precise control and technique, only the most experienced women of the household are allowed to oversee this process. Hired irrigators, known as *chu pa*, are only allowed to water the fields after the first few waterings.

Every village undertakes the actual process of Yurma in a coordinated manner according to stringent customary regulations. This involves starting on a designated day, guided by the Tibetan Buddhist almanac, and performing a ritual for irrigation inauguration. Thereafter the waterings are done on specific fields according to custom and decisions made by the village council, all of which are explained below.
Kirzin (skar 'dzin), the irrigation inauguration ritual and the exclusion of caste members

The day and manner of inaugurating Yurma is determined according to the prescriptions of the Tibetan Buddhist almanac (lo tho), as is the case with the start of all the major agricultural activities (on this, see the following two chapters). A local elder, normally an Amchi (doctor, who is almost always a male),\textsuperscript{126} consults the calendar to determine an astrologically auspicious day. By consulting the almanac, he also finds out what kind of person should perform the ritual for inaugurating irrigation for that particular year. The ritual is known as Kirzin, which literally means “star catching” or “making sure of a propitious constellation”\textsuperscript{127} by ensuring that the astrological sign (lo rtag) and element (khams) of the person who performs the ritual are the same as those prescribed by the almanac as the most auspicious for undertaking the ritual. Farmers also believe that a person who has both parents alive (pha ma mal ldan) should perform the ritual. This is because people having both their parents alive are regarded as fortunate and thus auspicious. If the gender of the person is not specified, preference is given for a female or a girl.\textsuperscript{128} If a suitable girl were not found, a boy meeting the criteria is chosen to perform the ritual. The ritual begins by reading prayers on behalf of the village. Then a person, usually a girl having astrological signs deemed particularly auspicious for the occasion,

\textsuperscript{126} Traditionally all of the village doctors are men from Khangchen households. Lately, some Dhutul men have also become doctors. And in Khyung, there is a unique case (the only one in Spiti that I know) of a female doctor. While Khangchen male doctors traditionally pass on their knowledge through a lineage system, from father to eldest son, the Dhutul and women doctors have acquired their training outside Spiti, mainly at an institute started by the late Amchi Sundar Singh in Manalai and at the Tibetan Medical and Astrological Institute in Dharamsala.

\textsuperscript{127} According to Nitartha online Tibetan dictionary, skar 'dzin is “star catching, making sure of a propitious constellation”. Retrieved from \url{http://www.nitartha.org/dictionary_search04.html}.

\textsuperscript{128} Farmers I interviewed were unable to explain the rationale behind the preference for a female in the performance of this ritual. Perhaps it is for convenience since women do most of the work. It could also be due to certain belief systems related to the association of feminine qualities with water (Choezin, 2003).
opens three sluices (*awad*) to allow water flow to the crops. When water flows through the sluices, the girl is taught to say certain prayers calling for a good irrigation season, a bountiful crop, and for good health. After that, the ritual is completed and the actual task of watering begins.

During one of the interviews, when an elderly woman was describing this ritual, I asked if the person or the girl considered auspicious for the performance of the irrigation ritual could be someone from a caste household. She did not answer with a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ but simply said that she had only seen non-caste members perform the ritual. I later posed the same question to several other farmers, including my research informants. Most of the farmers I asked gave answers similar to the elderly woman. Many simply said that they did not know. Only two of my informants, both educated men and informed about the intersectional focus of my research, concluded, after reflecting on the question and discussing possible scenarios, that non-caste (Chechang) farmers do not allow caste members to perform the ritual and that the main reason for this discrimination is that caste members are considered dirty or ritually impure. A scenario that helped them come to this conclusion is the following: what would farmers do if there is only one girl meeting the astrological prescriptions of the almanac and if she is from a lower caste? Would the farmers let the low caste girl perform the ritual or would they look for a Chechang boy who meets the criteria? When presented with such a scenario, two of my local informants, who can be considered as more modern and progressive individuals among the Spiti population, said that they thought that farmers would choose a Chechang boy who meets the criteria. Their answer is remarkable and strongly suggests that the
non-participation of caste women in performance of the Kirzin ritual is a discrimination based on local notions of purity.\textsuperscript{129}

Here, I draw on Nightingale’s (2011, p. 153) calls for examining “ways in which boundaries between bodies, spaces, ecologies and symbolic meanings of difference are produced and maintained relationally through practices of work and ritual.” An important aspect of this exclusionary discrimination in the performance of Kirzin irrigation inaugural ritual is that its practice, due to unquestioned customary practices, seems covert in nature. Since there is nothing to gain from being the chosen person for the ritual, no one really cares who performs the ritual as long as the astrological prescriptions of the almanac are fulfilled. People’s reluctance, or their apparent lack of a definitive answer to the question as to whether caste members can or cannot perform the ritual, shows that this discrimination is buried under the banality of customary practice. This study argues that even though the practice of this discrimination does not seem overt - i.e., it is not done (physically and verbally) in front of them - it is still arguably more powerful than the normal day-to-day aspects of discrimination, such as those that do not allow caste members to sit or eat with other social groups. It is in fact the very covert or overlooked nature of this discrimination, especially in the spatial context of sacred rituals related to scarce resources and important livelihood activities, that makes it powerful and deserving of attention. For it is these kinds of unquestioned practices of discrimination, particularly those in spatial contexts of sacred rituals, that rationalizes the overt everyday practices of discrimination. Here, irrigation water is a scarce and critical resource required for the

\textsuperscript{129} It must also be pointed out that another marker of social difference in Tibetan society, other than caste, where a group is generally considered to be ritually impure, is female-gender (e.g., Gyatso, 1987; Ortner, 1973; Huber, 1994).
survival of farmers living in the arid Himalayas. Water also has symbolic religious meanings associated with cleanliness and purification (e.g. it is used for purificatory rituals called khrud). Thus the ritual of irrigation inauguration is a highly sacred ritual, one that has deep spiritual meaning for the farmers. Martin Mills (2003), for example, calls this kind of ritual performed by farmers an expression of the “chthonic productive consciousness of the peasant”, which, he argues, “is truly hegemonic in Tibetan societies” (p. 345). Therefore, there are powerful and hidden symbolic and ritual meanings – as well as socio-political implications – behind the exclusion of a certain group of people from certain spatial and ritual contexts. The spiritual significance of the skar ’dzin ritual and the “chthonic productive consciousness” of the farmers are also evident in the fact that farmers emphatically mentioned that the ritual prayers are immensely important to them (Interview, October 2, 2010).

The order of performing Yurma in the village

After the ritual opening of the three sluices, farmers begin the first watering of the year, which is done in a customary order and takes a few days to complete. In 2011, the fields of the village doctor (Amchi) and deity medium (lus g.yer) were irrigated on the first day in both the villages. On the second day, the fields of those households where someone is sick were irrigated. In addition, in Khyung Village, the field of another Amchi was irrigated on the second day. This Amchi hails from a Dhutul household and hence does not belong to a traditional Amchi (of descent or gdung rgyud) household. He is given the privilege of irrigation water on the second day in honor of his medical services to the village.
The third day of Yurma was done differently in the two villages. In Khyung, the third day is reserved for the fields of small households in both Mara and Nyipa-Dangpo fields. In Zibug, the third day of Yurma watering is done on the fields of the rest of the villagers, with the turns being based on a throw of dice. However, some of the fields may have a more urgent need for watering. Owners of these fields may request permission (dgongs pa) for urgent access to irrigation water from their irrigation group leader (yur mgo pa). The requests are usually accepted with a charge of Rs. 60 (2011 rate) per household. Those who have dgongs pa will be given water first in an order determined by a throw of dice. After that the remaining fields get water, with the turns likewise being decided by a throw of a dice.

The instituted processes of performing Yurma in the first three days show how the social (fields of sick farmers, local doctors, and those of the village deity) and the economic (farming activity) dimensions of the culture are embedded in each other. This is an argument that I will develop further in chapter 5. It is important to note that adult women do all the work on Yurma, as well as on the following waterings. This partly explains why the division of labor within the household for watering and for the collection of firewood is based on gender and not age. Both activities require adult workers.

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130 This custom of giving Yurma watering to small householders in Khyung is also codified in Riwaj-i-Abpashi, which mentions that “Twice a year, small householders get to use water [during the day] after Zamindar rotation turn.” One of these two days is during Yurma and the other is during Rhagti.
In Spiti, the second watering is called Rhagti (sreg ti), referring to the condition of the saplings as “sun burnt” (nyima la sreg pa) and needing water. Farmers believe that the second watering must be done after an extended dry gap of 10-15 days, which creates an ideal condition for the crop to grow. A local proverb guides the timing of the second and third waterings: sreg ti la ki ya, gsum ti la stud (“Extend the duration for the second watering and shorten it for the third”).

Unlike Yurma, where the turn-by-turn order of watering customarily starts from the fields of the village doctor, deity medium, and other specific households (as described above), the water order for Rhagti starts from the highest altitude fields and on those fields where both laborers and crop conditions are ready. In other words, there is no specified order for Rhagti. The order is dependent on the conditions of the crops, farmers’ preparedness for irrigation, and altitude. Those that feel that their crops need watering earlier do so earlier, starting with those fields which are located on higher altitudes. If there is a serious shortage of water or if more farmers feel that they need water than what can be supplied at that time, a draw of lots is undertaken with the use of dice and an order is established. Rhagti is thus completed in three to four days. Thus in terms of equity, Rhagti does not exacerbate the general aspects of inequality characteristic of the irrigation system, such as women doing all the watering and Khangchen households having greater irrigation turns as compared with Dhutul and caste households.
The water source ritual: Chutsa (chu rtseg)

Once a year, women from Khangchen households perform an important ritual related to irrigation source control. There is no fixed day for this ritual as it may be done on any convenient day after the second watering. On this day, only Khangchen household women gather at the water source spring in order to propitiate the serpent spirits and to ensure that the spring rivulets flow into the main channel or the reservoir. The women may also give offerings of three white dishes and three sweet dishes (such as curd, butter, milk, sugar, honey, etc.) to the serpent spirits, which is a general practice in these rituals. An elderly Khangchen woman related that, in the past, the Khangchen women used to wear traditional attire, drink chang (local beer), sing songs and dance near the spring. It is not clear if the ritual singing and dancing was aimed at the appeasement of the serpent spirits or for their own entertainment. That they wore special attire and engaged in drinking and dancing tells that it had at least symbolic, if not ritual, significance.

The exclusion of Dhutul and caste women is not based on notions of purity because Dhutul and Khangchen women are ritually equal. Therefore, the performance of this unique ritual being the sole domain of Khangchen women marks their distinction as the highest socio-economic class of women. It symbolizes the power of the Khangchen women. For one, just as in the case of the first watering of Yurma, it shows that the Khangchen women do not trust any other women with the maintenance work of the irrigation sources. Second, it is also an occasion when Khangchen women discuss and decide on issues surrounding the management and use of the irrigation system. For example, during one of these meetings, held in recent years, the Khangchen women of
Zibug village had decided to do away with the custom of letting irrigation flow freely for use on certain days (Ngawang Samdup, personal communication, November 8, 2013). According to the custom, on certain days (e.g., when there is rain or on occasions marking the arrival of high religious figures to Spiti or to the village), irrigation water is allowed to flow freely and anybody can use the water. The water is allowed to flow freely because the people are busy attending (“making tea” for) the religious figure, or because there is an over abundance of water due to the rain. Today, however, Zibug farmers do not practice this custom: water in the irrigation channels is never free for use by non-rights holders.

*The third and fourth watering: Sumti and Zhiti*

Sumti (*gsum ti*) refers to the third watering of the year and Zhiti (*bzhi ti*) to the fourth watering. The order of watering for Sumti and Zhiti is the same as that of Rhagti. The method of Sumti is that this time, three sets of sli ’ungs subsections are flooded together from the bottom of the field to the top. Similarly, for Zhiti, four sets of sli ’ungs subsections are flooded, in the same order, from the bottom of the field to the top. The logic of gradually increasing the number of flooded subsections is that, with each subsequent watering, the saplings are now more able to withstand flooding.

In terms of equity implications, during this time, many Khangchen women pass over their irrigation responsibilities to contracted irrigators, who are usually Dhutul or caste women. Once the irrigator takes charge, they perform all the subsequent waterings - to the time of
the final “germinating water”. In other words, these irrigators perform all the “chu res” or watering turns for the Khangchen households.

_Determination of watering turns (chu res) and regular watering_

After the fourth watering, farmers determine irrigation turns for regular watering by throwing dice. This establishes the order of watering between households and will be done according to customs written in the _Riwaj-i-Abpashi_. The regular waterings (i.e., the watering after Zhiti and before the final watering, known as Minchu), do not have names. Hired irrigators (chu pa) belonging to Dhutul or caste households are mostly responsible for taking care of these waterings. In return for their contractual services, chu pa get a small plot of field and a share in the irrigation water. The chu pa’s contract is customarily valid for a year and is often renewed along with the hired tiller (_thong pa_, discussed in chapter 5).

In terms of equity, the caste and Dhutul women begin to take over their contractual irrigator (chu pa) responsibilities and perform the remaining waterings of the year, although some Khangchen women do all their own irrigation work themselves. Here the workload for Dhutul and caste women, who work as irrigators on behalf of the Khangchen households, must be noted, especially in terms of time. Watering responsibilities of irrigators include, in addition to watering the large fields of the Khangchen households, the opening and closing of the main reservoirs, some of which are situated quite far away and high up in the mountain. Irrigators must also open, close or adjust the different sluice gates of the secondary and other sub-channels to ensure that

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the right amount of water is flowing to the different channels and fields. The actual watering work on the fields is also time consuming, with the women having to manually channel the water with an adze hor or Tirping to different corners of the fields. All this takes several hours, often a whole day. Then in the evening, they must water their own fields in the same way. Dhutul and caste irrigators must regularly perform this routine, first watering all the Khangchen fields, along with performing the related watering responsibilities, and then watering their own field in the evenings. This routine is followed until the end of the last watering, known as the “germinating water”.

*The germinating water: Minchu (smin chu)*

The final watering is called Minchu (*smin* = “to ripen”, *chu* = “water”) because farmers use it to help ripen the seeds. The final watering of the year is done several weeks before the harvesting. The method of Minchu is different from that of Yurma, Rhagti and Sumti for this final watering does not require controlled precision and care. Water is allowed into the field in greater volume and velocity. Since the crops are fully-grown and sturdy, they are able to withstand such a flow. Locals also believe that the sudden surge of water assists in the quicker ripening of the seeds. Thus, there is less amount of work and time required for this watering. Farmers typically wait until at least a week after Minchu before harvesting. This provides sufficient time for the soil to become dry and ready for harvest.\(^{131}\)

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\(^{131}\) This process is just the opposite of the system employed in Zanskar as described by Gutschow: “The final watering just before harvest is called *bru chu*. This watering serves to loosen the soil and the roots, making it easier to pull out the entire plant as is customary in Zanskari harvests.” In Zibug and Khyung, it is customary to leave the roots.
Conclusion

Evidence from these case studies points to the need to go beyond general approaches to gender and equity in irrigation management. In the current literature on irrigation management, equity is generally theorized along an enquiry as to whether the fields get water with equal frequency and whether the allocation of water is proportional to the size of the fields (Trawick, 2001, 2003). This study shows that these two features are not sufficient to assess whether an irrigation system is truly equitable as these case studies satisfy these features but also have, for example, a small minority of farmers owning the majority of the fields and the water rights, while a vast majority of farmers have only negligible rights. In addition, these case studies highlight unequal decision-making powers and division of irrigation management roles in terms of gender and markers of social differences such as socio-economic class and gender. Moreover, in terms of theoretical approaches to gender and water, past approaches have mostly focused on “men versus women” issues as they are related to power relations in water use, access and management. While it is widely acknowledged that sex-gender is only one of the many intersecting determinants of social difference, any in-depth analysis of the multiple intersectionalities relating to water and gender issues is rare (Harris, 2008). These case studies from the Himalayan region of the Spiti Valley raise questions about general notions of irrigation management roles as they are dominated by men. The case studies show that in certain historical and geographical contexts, it is possible to find cases where women do most of the irrigation-related tasks. Although the discussion in this chapter does not shed light on why irrigation is the exclusive domain of women in Spiti, it does
highlight a need for a “within-different-groups-of-women” approach to intersectional studies of gender and equity in irrigation management.

These intersectional case studies of equity and gender in irrigation management have provided a detailed analysis of the relevant history and legal documents, as well as the farmers’ actual practices. There are several important take away points in each of these sections. The analysis shows that Spiti’s unique case of water management - as the exclusive domain of women - can be understood as being the result of specific historical and geographical factors. It also thus shows that the gendered nature of irrigation management is more complex than a straightforward power interplay between men and women. Another important lesson gleaned from the case study is that while the codification of customary laws led to the protection of traditional ways of life, it also helped maintain, and indeed even intensified, internal inequalities associated with gender, caste and socio-economic class. Additionally, while government projects of poverty upliftment, particularly through the granting of Nautor lands to landless farmers, led to overall improvements in poor people’s livelihoods, the benefits of the Nautor land distributions were better received by the dominant social groups (i.e., men of Khangchen and Dhutul households) than by the underprivileged groups (especially by women and caste household members).

Finally, this study shows that, in addition to the four key irrigation activities (source control, delivery, use and drainage) identified by Kelly (1983), it is important to include an analysis of the religious ritual and social institutional dimensions of irrigation
management; for these are critical sites where practices of discrimination and internal politics take place. Highlighting the deep meanings and significance of water and irrigation-related rituals, I emphasize the need to pay closer attention to the covert practices of exclusion involving lower caste members (and women in general) as being a more powerful but nevertheless overlooked dimension of discrimination, especially as compared to the more mundane practices of discrimination.
5. Gender, Caste and Class Roles in Farming Activities

Introduction

This chapter shows how farming-related roles in the Spiti Valley are embedded in local social structures and power relations. Building on the previous chapter’s focus on an intersectional analysis of gender in irrigation management, this chapter further explicates how gender is imbricated in all levels of the social structure, particularly in relation to farming-related roles. This chapter forwards three key arguments: a) the division of agricultural labor is based on gender, caste and class relations; (b) gender is not only an issue within and outside the household (Agarwal, 2007) but is also imbricated in all levels of social structure in terms of men and women’s agricultural labor roles; and (c) the division of farming-related roles between men and women are equitable in terms of their participation (accessed in terms of numbers) yet highly inequitable in terms of the nature (desirability/prestige) of their tasks.

This chapter consists of two sets of complimentary data presented in sections. In the first section, I describe how men and women of the different classes of households are responsible for different farming-related activities. In the second section, I provide a chronological description of all farming-related activities in a year to show how these activities are undertaken by farmers on the basis of their gender, caste and class backgrounds. The two sections are preceded by a discussion of theoretical considerations related to embeddedness and gender in agricultural labor.
Theoretical considerations: embeddedness

This analysis of the social organization of labor in Spiti’s agrarian society is based on Karl Polanyi’s premise that the human economy is embedded in social relations.\textsuperscript{132} Polanyi studied “economic life as a \textit{totality} of relations and institutions that goes beyond the transactions of goods and services” (Gemici, 2008, p. 19, emphasis in original).

Polanyi (1957) differentiates between formal and substantive meanings of economy. The formalist approach is based on neoclassical economic theory, which assumes a condition of scarcity of means to satisfy unlimited wants in which rational individuals compete to maximize their interests. The substantivist approach, on the other hand, views the economy as “an \textit{instituted process} of interaction between man and his natural and social environment” (Polanyi, 1957, p. 248, my emphasis). Unlike the formalist approach, Polanyi’s substantivist or anthropological approach is not interested in individual behavior but rather in organized structures and institutions.

By defining economy as an “instituted process”, Polanyi highlighted the economic \textit{and} non-economic institutions that facilitate recurrent movement or circulation of goods and services. “The instituting of the economic process vests that process with unity and stability” (Polanyi, 1957, pp. 249-250). This is achieved through three forms of integration: reciprocity, redistribution and exchange. “Reciprocity denotes movements between correlative points of symmetrical groupings; redistribution designates appropriational movements toward a center and out of it again; exchange refers here to

\textsuperscript{132} The concept of embeddedness became popular in the social sciences (especially in economic sociology) after the publication of Granovetter’s (1985) analysis of the degree to which economic action in modern society is embedded in networks of social relations. Granovetter’s influential paper raised some debates regarding certain terms that are discussed by Krippner (2001), Block (2003), Gemici (2008) and Machado (2011).
vice-versa movements taking place as between ‘hands’ under a market system” (Polanyi, 1957, p. 250).

A full substantive study of the Spiti village economy is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, it can be briefly stated here that Polanyi provides formal principles to describe the functioning of village economy in relatively simple terms. Building on the previous two chapters, this chapter will demonstrate two things: a) how farming-related activities commence and end together for the village as a single unit and, more importantly, b) how the social organization of agricultural work is facilitated through instituted processes of exchange and reciprocity between households. An important characteristic of Spiti villages is that these are relatively autonomous political and social units with their own geographical territory (for grazing and FDF collection) and local authority in the form of village councils (Pirie, 2005). Spiti’s relationship with the ruling regimes, before it became a part of independent India in 1947, was mainly based upon an annual payment of taxes (Pirie, 2005; Jahoda, 2009). Another important characteristic concerns farmers’ legal and economic relationships, which are based not on interpersonal relationships but rather on the relationship of one household to another household.

As the Khangchen households own most of the farming land, they need laborers to plow, irrigate, weed, and to form work teams at times when there is more work to do - such as during the period of harvesting and threshing. Traditionally, workers are acquired through three institutions: Thongpa (“plowman”), Chumpa (“irrigator”), and Mugthul

133 While a description of the means by which exchange and reciprocity facilitate social organization of labor is provided in this study, discussion of the third form of integration – redistribution - is beyond the scope of this thesis.
(“labor team”). Although it is not necessary, laborers for Thongpa, Chumpa and Mugthul are normally hired from the same group of households. For example, the plowman and the irrigator working for a Khangchen household are often a Dhutul or Zo husband and wife. Any of the laborers can discontinue their contractual relationship through customary processes (such as the example of Thongpa provided below). A “labor team” is required for each household during the busiest agricultural activities, such as tilling and harvesting. During these times, farmers work in small teams comprised of usually five to seven laborers of a mixed group of gender, caste and class. All the Mugthul team members are obligated to help each other until work on the fields belonging to all the members is complete. In this way, different Mugthul groups work on all the village fields. In return for the extra labor needed in the larger fields, the Khangchen household, which owns the larger fields, provide yaks and plows for the Mugthul team. Each Mugthul team includes the plowman and irrigator, who are also customarily remunerated with a small piece of land and proportionate irrigation water. The Mugthul team may also consist of landless farmers or hired laborers, who are remunerated in kind or cash. Before the middle of the 20th century, grains were the main medium of exchange. Cunningham (1854, p. 253) and Shuttleworth (1922) mention how goods (e.g., wool or shoes) and services (e.g., daily or seasonal agricultural labor) were bought and sold at set rates of standard measures of grain, known as “khal” (equivalent to a sheep-load, which is about 20 lbs) and “bre” (1/20th of a khal). Since the mid-20th century, the Indian rupee and the capitalist market system provide the main basis for exchange.
The reciprocal relationship between Thongpa, Chumpa and Mugthul household members goes beyond a simple exchange of goods and services related to farm work; it extends to non-farming work such as that related to the construction of each other’s homes, as well as to social and symbolic domains such as the exchange of gifts and general assistance during important occasions like marriages, births, and deaths as well as during important annual festivals and household religious rituals. “There is no implication of equality, justice or the golden rule [in these relationships]. Rather reciprocity implies only that there is a two-way or round-the-circle flow of goods [and services]” (Neale, 1957, p. 222).

The repetitive functioning of these institutions (Khangchen as landowner; Dhutul and caste as Thongpa, Chupa and Mugthul workers) for agricultural labor every year contributes to this “round-the-circle” flow of goods and services.

**Gender, agrarian socio-economic class and farming labor**

In the previous chapter, I showed how women do most of the irrigation work based on their class and caste roles. That irrigation is largely the domain of women raises an important question about gender power relations: is the custom of women doing irrigation-related work a manifestation of society’s oppression of women? This possibility was indeed suggested in some of the interviews with farmers. When asked why only women do irrigation and farming work and men do not help, farmers (mostly women farmers) simply say that this has been the local social custom. In this chapter, I will show that women’s irrigation role is part of a broader division of agricultural labor which is based on gender. Just as irrigation is the domain of women, there are other farming-related activities, such as plowing and the reading of ritual scriptures, that are
done only by men. This chapter will show that the number of agriculture-related tasks done by men is more or less the same as those done by women. However, this does not mean that there is gender equity in agricultural labor. As was the case in the previous chapter, this chapter will take a more complex approach to equity by undertaking an intersectional analysis of gender and socio-economic class in farming-related activities. To better understand the micropolitics of agricultural labor roles, I argue that there is a need for better theorizing around the role of the desirability or prestige associated with different tasks and the role of exclusion of underprivileged or weaker groups (especially in ritual-related activities).

Agarwal (2007) provides a helpful framework to think about how non-participation could be non-voluntary by differentiating between “voluntary cooperation”, “non-voluntary cooperation”, “voluntary noncooperation” and “non-voluntary noncooperation” in labor roles. Agarwal argues that attention to this differentiation is important because collective-action literature assumes cooperation or noncooperation to be a voluntary act, whereas in reality, “[i]t is possible … for people at the lower end of the economic and/or social hierarchy to be forced to cooperate [or not cooperate/participate] by those at the upper end of the hierarchy” (p. 275). Another benefit of this framework is that it points out that tradition and customs ascribe unequal roles and responsibilities to different sections of society.

In this chapter, I use the level of desirability or prestige (high or less) associated with

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134 A more complex quantitative analysis, which this study does not incorporate, could look at the number of hours and the amount of energy required for each activity and see which gender spends more time and energy engaging in their respective tasks.
different agricultural tasks to shed light on the voluntary or non-voluntary nature of cooperation by farmers. For example, since farmers consider plowing not only a physically strenuous task but also a highly sinful (causing the death of insects and sentient beings who live in the soil) activity, the plowman’s participation in this role is less voluntary or non-voluntary as compared, to say, the performance of religious rituals like reading scriptures, which is a prestigious role done by monks and men of spiritual learning. Similarly, I use the case of Beda low caste women playing music at the temple out of fear that the deity will otherwise harm them as an example of non-voluntary cooperation. There are also cases when certain categories of farmers are not allowed to perform certain agricultural tasks because they are considered ritually impure. I have used these activities as examples of non-voluntary noncooperation. Conversely, the non-participation of powerful or rich farmers in the performance of physically strenuous and spiritually impure activities is an example of voluntary noncooperation.

Two approaches can be used to understand the desirability or the prestige associated with a task and its ascribed role for different sections of the society. First, there is an obvious difference in power relations between those who perform hard physical labor (e.g., tilling, which is done by men of Dhutul and caste households) and time-consuming labor (e.g., weeding, which is done by women) versus those who require specialized religious roles (e.g., reading scriptures and performing rituals) and decision-making power (a domain of monks and men of Khangchen households). Similar to the relative value ascribed to blue collar jobs in relation to white collar jobs, in the Western world, physical farm labor roles are less valued than those associated with specialized knowledge and decision-making
Another way to understand what kinds of tasks and activities are more or less valued by farmers is to analyze the local discourses and beliefs around these tasks and activities. Within the local Buddhist worldview, certain farming-related tasks such as tilling, irrigation and weeding are considered more “sinful” (sdig las) and looked down upon because these tasks lead to the death of worms and insects. In contrast to these “sinful acts” are certain acts that are considered meritorious (bsod nam) or virtuous (dge ba), such as the performance of farming-related religious (chos) and purificatory (khrus) rituals. Section 2 below, as well as the previous chapter on irrigation, show that the “sinful” farming-related tasks of irrigation and weeding are performed by women (irrespective of household type) and the more laborious and sinful task of tilling is done by the men of Dhutul and caste households.

As one Khangchen man observed,

“Many of the Khangchen men do not know how to plow. They were sent to schools when they were young and now work as government employees. […] I have never held a plow in my life […] And my son, it seems, will also not touch the plow. He is busy with his studies” (interview, April 8, 2011).

The same Khangchen man told me he has never butchered any animal because, according
to Buddhist beliefs, it is considered one of the most sinful acts. He mentioned this as he pointed to a plate of fresh lamb sausage that was offered to me at his house. He explained that he had one of his “Gorkhas” (Nepali laborers) kill it for him. He said that he usually gets lower class (ma rabs) men (i.e., Zo and Beda men) to kill the animals. This seems to be a general practice because, in another interview, a Zo caste man (interview, August 12, 2010) mentioned that people of higher class (ya rabs) make them “commit the sin” (sdig pa gcod bcug) or do the butchering.

While tasks that are considered sinful are done by women or men of caste households, the meritorious or virtuous farming roles, especially those that require specialized knowledge such as the ability to do astrological calculation or perform religious rituals, are done by non-caste men, mostly of Khangchen backgrounds. The performance of these ritual activities is considered fundamental and meritorious because, from the perspective of the farmers, these activities relate to the most sacred and powerful forces that affect their

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135 According to Buddhist reasoning, killing an animal is more sinful than eating meat. Killing gives direct pain to the slaughtered animal, while meat is that of an already dead animal. The logic operative here is that the pain or suffering has already been caused and hence the sin of eating meat is indirect. Some people rationalize that the consumption of meat is necessary on the Tibetan Plateau due to the long cold winters, short growing season and lack of food (protein) variety. Another rationalization used by Tibetans is that the consumption of the meat of smaller animals will eventually add up to greater sin than that of larger animals. The reason for this, according to the rationalization, is that a greater number of smaller animals will have to be killed, as compared to the number of larger animals required to feed either an individual or a household. For example, a small animal such as a fish or chicken can be consumed by a person or household in a day, whereas a larger animal will last longer, thereby reducing the need to kill. In most Tibetan societies, butchering is considered a lowly and sinful profession, deemed suitable only for outcaste members of the society.

136 This is not to say that non-caste members do not engage in butchering. In fact, a Dhutul man told me that he once killed a cow for meat, and that sometimes young men of non-caste households do engage in butchering. In general, however, at least in the two case study villages, most of the butchering is done by caste men. I was also told that, in villages that do not have caste members, men of Dhutul or poorer households do most of the butchering.

137 It is customary that the village doctor and astrologer are men of certain lineage Khangchen households, similar to observations made in other Tibetan societies such as Dhingri (Aziz, 1978). The position or education of the village doctor and astrologer is passed down or passed forward to the eldest son by descent. Although this was traditionally not the case, there is now an increasing number of non-caste men from non-descent families becoming trained in Tibetan Buddhist medicine (gso ba rig pa).
livelihood. Farmers strongly believe in the existence of local deities, serpent spirits and other divine beings that must be appeased ritually so that these powerful beings will support the farmers’ livelihood. For example, farmers believe that the village lands belong to a local deity or deities first, which is clearly articulated in the local term for these deities: “owner of the lands” (gzhi bdag). Therefore, getting approval and blessings from these deities is considered necessary for all farming activities that must be performed on the deity’s land. Similarly, as pointed out in the previous chapter, villagers believe in serpent spirits, which they say are sensitive beings that control the water sources as well as the climate. Appeasement of these serpent spirits is thus also necessary to ensure adequate rain as well as a reliable supply of water in the mountain springs. The rituals for deity and serpent spirit propitiation are, however, technical religious activities that require specialized knowledge as well as the ability to read scriptures.

In the previous chapter, I argued that the exclusion of caste women from performing the irrigation inauguration ritual represents a covert act of discrimination based on a belief that low caste members are ritually impure. While caste women are considered particularly impure, all women are generally considered to be of inferior birth and impure (as compared to men). This is true in Spiti as well as in the broader Tibetan belief system (Aziz, 1987; Gyatso, 1987; Huber, 1994). As a result, women are prohibited from entering the ritually sacred inner sanctum of monasteries and sacred mountains (Huber, 1994), or even from touching sacred objects such as protection amulets. Building on the example of irrigation rituals that prohibit caste women from participating, this chapter

138 In four of the five monasteries in Spiti, I saw signs that say women are not allowed to go inside the monastery’s protector deity chapel.
will highlight several farming-related rituals, such as *lha gsol* (propitiation of deities) and *bum ‘khor* (circumambulation of fields), in which women are not permitted to participate. I argue that women’s nonparticipation in these rituals is nonvoluntary and based on stringent rules of exclusion.

**Section 1: Class, caste and gender in farming**

The previous chapter introduced the different household types that constitute the local socio-economic structure. This section will discuss the different farming-related roles for male and female members of each of these households. From an intersectional perspective concerned with gender, caste and class, it shows that gender is not only an issue within and outside the household (Agarwal, 2007) but that it is also imbricated in all levels of the social structure, especially in terms of men and women’s agricultural labor roles.

**1.1 Farming and labor for Khangchen householders: the rich peasants**

Khangchen householders, by their possession of large farming lands, require many laborers to work on their fields. In terms of gender labor roles, Khangchen men do the least amount of work in the field compared to men and women of all other classes and castes. In addition to being involved in other livelihoods, serving as the village doctor, astrologer, government employees, contractors, businessmen, traders, etc., Khangchen men are also the key decision makers and managers (at the village council, or within the context of other key offices such as that of the headman or *rgad po*, storekeeper or *gnyer pa*, helper for the deity or *lha yi mi*, etc.) of the household, including for farming-related
activities. Among their main responsibilities for farming is the employment of a variety of laborers, men as well as women, from Dhutul, Zo and Beda households (mostly from Dhutul and Zo households). The different types of laborers include those hired under customary labor relations such as the thong pa (tiller) and chu pa (irrigator), private laborers (simply called “workers” these days, but historically called “rang gi dud ‘thul’”), household-group labor arrangements (“Mugthul”), as well as ad hoc laborers (e.g., “dihari”, in Hindi, which means “daily wage” laborers).

Among the Khangchen householders, women do most of the farm labor (in terms of the amount of time spent in the field) and domestic work, including tending to and milking animals. Details of women’s farm work will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

Many Khangchen households have their own hired tiller (usually a Dhutul or “caste” man, known as the thong pa) and irrigator (a woman, usually the tiller’s wife, known as the chu pa), who work for at least one year according to customary contractual relations (discussed in more detail below). Private laborers currently include non-related men (mostly Indian “workers”; in the past these men were called las pa) or women who stay in the Khangchen household in exchange for a salary. In the past, there were landless Dhutul farmers who worked as private laborers attached to the Khangchen household; these were known as “rang gi dud ‘thul” (Lyall, 1874, p. 187-188).
In addition to owning most of the traditional fields and water sources of the village, Khangchen households also own most of the draft animals (yaks) and plows. The animals and implements are borrowed by poor farmers, i.e., the caste and Dhutul farmers, who in return do farming work for the Khangchen households. As Jahoda (2008, p. 15) notes, “[t]he exchange of means of production (animals, implements) by khang chen households for human labor from [other] households […] seems to be the determinant characteristic of a central form of traditional economic cooperation between khang chen and [other] households.” This cooperative exchange of labor is called “mug-thul” (Tibetan spelling unclear), in which two or three households of different types work together as a team during the main farming labor seasons (i.e., plowing and harvesting time). A “mug-thul” team will work together on all the fields belonging to the team members, with each member performing the same or similar roles in all the fields. For example, during plowing work, a Khangchen man may be responsible for performing religious rituals, Dhutul or caste men may be responsible for handling yaks and the plow, and usually a mixed group of women will work on breaking clumps of dirt and leveling the fields, etc.

1.2 Farming and labor for Dhutul householders

In the 19th century, British records show that Dhutul households were generally a landless class of farmers. This is consistent with the description, provided by Aziz (1978), of the “dud chung” in the Dingri region of Tibet as well as the description, provided by Goldstein (1971), of landless farmers in central Tibet. Aziz calls this class of people “itinerant labourers” (p. 71). According to British records, as well as the reports of local farmers, some of the Dhutul farmers had a small patch of land given to them based on the
understanding that they would provide labor services to the sponsoring village or the household. Dhutul farmers who were private laborers for Khangchen households were called “rang gi dud ‘thul” in Spiti, which is similar to the description of “mi ‘og” provided by Aziz (1978) and Goldstein (1971).

Dhutul household members, like the Dud chung of Dingri (Aziz, 1978), enjoy a higher degree of socio-economic freedom as compared to Khangchen householders. Their land is not so large that they need to depend heavily on others’ labor. Nor are they customarily obliged to provide any kind of services to the village or to any Khangchen household, unlike the Zo and Beda households. In recent decades, members of Dhutul households have been working on their own fields as well as in areas outside the domain of farming, such as in tourism, government jobs, construction, business, etc. However, they still retain labor relations with Khangchen households in some form, such as through the Mugthul teamwork arrangements discussed above.

Gender division of labor in Dhutul households is similar to that of Khangchen households, with the exception that Dhutul men and women tend to do more physical labor than their Khangchen counterparts. Many Dhutul men work as tillers (Thongpa or thong pa), while Dhutul women work as irrigators (Chumpa or chu pa) on behalf of Khangchen households. Thongpa and Chumpa are considered important roles, in return for which they are given a small patch of farming land for the contractual period (discussed below).
Women spend more time engaged in farming and housework than men; other than engaging in the traditional roles of tilling and collecting fuel, these days men seem to engage mostly in paid salary jobs with governments and private organizations\textsuperscript{139} as well as in construction\textsuperscript{140} and business,\textsuperscript{141} as indicated in previous chapters.

1.3 Farming and labor for Zo householders

The Zo blacksmith households also traditionally engaged in farming. In return for their service of making metal implements for the community, Zo households are often provided with a patch of farming land (\textit{Zo zhing} or “Zo field”) with a share in irrigation water. However, after the Nautor land redistribution program (see discussion in chapter 3), many Zo households chose to give up making metal implements and started to make their living as farmers.\textsuperscript{142} Interviews conducted with Zo members indicate that they are not proud of their traditional profession because of the social stigma associated with it. Farming labor for Zo men and women is similar to that of the Dhutul in terms of the division of tasks. However, Zo men and women work more for others - mainly for Khangchen households - than do Dhutul farmers. In addition to “mug-thul” arrangements, Zo men in Zibug, for example, work as \textit{thong pa} (tillers) for Khangchen households and their wives work as \textit{chu pa} (irrigators) for the same household.\textsuperscript{143} In return, the tiller and the irrigator each get a small patch of land for farming. The tiller’s main responsibility is

\textsuperscript{139} NGOs and private schools have many employees.

\textsuperscript{140} Construction of new homes is a very common activity. Most of the material and labor used are local.

\textsuperscript{141} Business types include mostly shops, tourism services, and animal (mostly yak and horse) traders.

\textsuperscript{142} The availability of commercial or factory-made metal implements in the market of a nearby village (Kaza) also allowed them to give up their profession. These households, including the Zos of Zibug village, had to give up their “Zo fields” since these were given on the condition of fulfillment of their customary roles.

\textsuperscript{143} In 2010, there were three Zo households in Zibug. Men of all three households were working as tillers. Their wives were also irrigators, however only one was actively working as one had died and the third had given birth to a child and was unable to work at the time.
to plow all the fields of the Khangchen twice a year and to carry manure on yaks or donkeys from home to the field after the agricultural season is finished (normally in October). The irrigator’s main responsibility is to water the fields during the Khangchen’s watering turn (chu res). Once a tiller and irrigator are hired, they must work through the year even if they are unhappy with their landlord’s treatment (or for any other reason that might make them wish to cancel their contractual labor relations). The relationship can be cancelled or renewed for another year on the day when manure is carried from the houses to the fields, which is normally done in October. Simply showing up for work that day ensures that the tiller and irrigator will continue to work for the next year, unless the Khangchen household refuses to hire, which is most unlikely. If the tiller wishes to discontinue this contractual labor work, he simply does not show up for manure collection (interview, Acha Utum, 2010). The tiller’s absence at work on that day will be understood by the Khangchen householder to be a cancellation of the contract and generally there will not be a need for explanation or any other formality.

There are no data on the amount of time Zo farmers work either on their own fields or on other’s fields. From my observations of fieldwork during the plowing season of 2011, most of the plowmen were from Zo households. The plowing season around the village fields takes about two weeks. During these two weeks, Zo men will be seen working every day. First they plow, level and dig irrigation canals in the large Khangchen fields and then they do the same on their patch of Zo zhing field. Judging by the size of the Khangchen households’ fields (being an average of 7 acres each) and those of Zo households’ (2 acres), it would seem that Zo households qualify as an “exploited class”
(Das, 2001, p. 156), defined as those who spend more time working for others than working for themselves. However, it should be noted that the ‘exploitation’ of Zo men and women’s labor is not done oppressively but in an appreciative manner. The tiller and irrigator are the two most important helpers to the Khangchen household’s farming work and, as a mark of appreciation, they receive a share of food and drinks during special occasions celebrated in the Khangchen household, “like they are family members” (interview, August 12, 2010). Although the Khangchen man described the tiller and irrigator being treated “like they are family members”, customary rules of exclusion against caste members are nevertheless upheld. For example, they will not share cups or plates, and as caste members, the plowman and irrigator will only sit near the entrance door and not sit anywhere further inside the Khangchen house. If the tiller and irrigator are not present at the celebrations, food is sent to their home. Today, some households simply give a stock of food rations (flour, rice, tea, biscuits, etc.) once a year to the Thongpa/Chupa household in place of the custom of sending food.

1.4 Farming labor for Beda householders

Beda musicians traditionally did not engage in farming. This is clear from a local proverb: “Dogs have no load: Beda have no tax” (khyi la ‘gel med, be da la khral med). That the Beda did not pay taxes shows that they did not have land, not even a small plot, which would have otherwise had them paying a “hearth tax” to the village. Unlike the tradition of village land grants made to the Zo blacksmiths for their services, there was no such tradition of land grants made to Beda musicians. However, in 2011, all the households in the two case study villages were engaged in agriculture, a situation made
possible by government land grants. Even in the village fields, there were only four small plots of lands that belonged to Beda households in the two villages. This shows that although the Beda did not practice farming in the past, they do so today, although they are the smallest group of farmers (in numbers as well as in size) amongst all other household types.

Although Beda members traditionally did not engage in farm work, as musicians, they have been an integral part of farming-related festivals and rituals (described in the next section). These include farming-related rituals performed at the village temple, farming festivals (such as mda’ chang, nam ‘gan) and other rituals (e.g., lha gsol, bum ‘khor). Although Beda musicians have terminated their traditional obligation to play music whenever the Khangchen households demanded, they are still obligated to play music for the village deity or the village temple, both of which are involved in most farming-related rituals and festivals.

In one interview (August 12, 2010) with a Beda woman, I asked what happens if the Beda does not play for the deity. The woman said that the deity harms (gnod pa btang) her if she fails in her responsibilities. She claimed that if the musicians miss playing music at the deity’s temple on every auspicious day (zhag bzang po), the deity gets angry and causes her or her family member to become sick or get bodily pains (zug gzer). She said that the deity itself told her, through a human medium (lus g.yar), that the pain and sickness is caused by her failure to play music on time at the temple. That is why, she said, the Beda’s “first responsibility” is to play for the deity (interview, August 12, 2010).
This is interesting because it looks like the custom of the Beda playing at the village temple or for the village deity will continue unchanged, at least as long as the fear of deity wrath remains with the musicians. Other customary roles of caste members have either changed, as in the case of Zibug and Khyung Beda playing music to villagers on “per day” rates, or have been discontinued, as in the role of Zo blacksmiths of Khyung and Zibug, who have stopped metal work altogether.

**Section 2: Farming related activities of a year-cycle**

As a way to explicate who performs what roles, this section provides a brief discussion of all the farming-related tasks, rituals and festivals in a year. It provides another set of data that sheds light on how farming-related activities are unequally divided on the basis of farmers’ caste, class and gender roles. As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, power relations become clear if we analyze which group plays what *kinds* of roles. For example, the power relations between those who perform manual labor versus those who make decisions regarding these activities are obvious. Similarly, we can extrapolate which tasks represent examples of “voluntary cooperation” versus “nonvoluntary cooperation” as well as which are “voluntary uncooperation” versus “nonvoluntary uncooperation” if we consider, for example, who performs “dirty” (manual labor, dealing with manure, etc.) and “sinful” activities (those that cause the death of insects in the soil, such as irrigation, tilling and weeding) versus those who read scripture and perform sacred rituals.
The description of farming-related activities provided below are presented chronologically from the beginning of the farming season to the end. The farming season starts roughly in early April and ends in late October. A discussion of farmers’ winter activities (encompassing the period from November to March) is omitted here as these do not directly concern farming-related activities. The description below, however, is presented according to the local month system, rather than according to the Western calendar, because farmers follow and organize their farming activities according to the local time-keeping system and not according to the Western calendar. Following the local month system is not only necessary but also highly informative from an ethnographic perspective, as evidenced by the meaningful names of the different months.

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144 These months are: Sun at home month (nyi khyim zla ba): November-December; New year month (lo gsar zla ba): December-January; Mother bird month (bya ma zla ba): January-February; and Baby bird month (byi'u phrug zla ba): February-March.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spiti / Gregorian months</th>
<th>Activity/festival name</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Main ‘actors’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Warm-sun” month</td>
<td>Arrows and beer</td>
<td>Festival</td>
<td>Village &amp; patriarchy</td>
<td>Men, deity, Hirib musicians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(‘de brya zla ba) March-April</td>
<td>Beer for guests</td>
<td>Festival</td>
<td>Anticipatory celebration</td>
<td>Khangchen men, Hirib musician</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Cultivate the fields”</td>
<td>Throwing ash</td>
<td>Agri task</td>
<td>Melt snow</td>
<td>Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(zhing ‘debs zla ba) April-May</td>
<td>Picking rocks</td>
<td>Agri task</td>
<td>Check moisturize, clean field</td>
<td>Women (children may help)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Circumambulation</td>
<td>Rel ritual</td>
<td>Bless the village</td>
<td>Men, monks and musicians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cutting yak hair</td>
<td>Ritual</td>
<td>Preparing yak for plowing</td>
<td>Men (women may help)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>First plow</td>
<td>Farming ritual</td>
<td>Permission from deities</td>
<td>Men and women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Plow training</td>
<td>Agri task</td>
<td>Get used to plow</td>
<td>Men and women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Plow away</td>
<td>Agri task</td>
<td>Plow</td>
<td>Men and women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leveling of fields</td>
<td>Agri task</td>
<td>Leveling of field</td>
<td>Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Drawing channels</td>
<td>Agri task</td>
<td>irrigation channels</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Blue skies green earth”</td>
<td>Repair canals</td>
<td>Agri task</td>
<td>Repair irrigation canals</td>
<td>Men and women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(gnam sngon sa sngon) May-June</td>
<td>Collection of sekya</td>
<td>Agri task</td>
<td>Collect mulch</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Naga ritual</td>
<td>Irrigation ritual</td>
<td>Appease serpent spirits</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>First weeding</td>
<td>Agri task</td>
<td>Soften soil, weeding</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>First watering</td>
<td>Agri task</td>
<td>First irrigation</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Flower” month</td>
<td>Second watering</td>
<td>Agri task</td>
<td>Second irrigation</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>me tog zla ba June-July</td>
<td>Circumambulation</td>
<td>Ritual</td>
<td>Bless the fields</td>
<td>Monks, men and musicians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Weeding</td>
<td>Agri task</td>
<td>Weeding</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Third watering</td>
<td>Agri task</td>
<td>Third irrigation</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Main agricultural activities (March-July)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spiti/Gregorian months</th>
<th>Activity/festival name</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Main ‘actors’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seed-ripening month</td>
<td>Watering of fields</td>
<td>Agri task</td>
<td>Ongoing irrigation</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(‘bras bu zla ba’)</td>
<td>Final weeding</td>
<td>Agri task</td>
<td>Final weeding</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July-August</td>
<td>Final watering</td>
<td>Agri task</td>
<td>Last watering</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Deity propitiation</td>
<td>Religious ritual</td>
<td>Thank the deities</td>
<td>Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Harvest festival</td>
<td>Festival</td>
<td>Celebration of harvest</td>
<td>Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Field plants</td>
<td>Agri task</td>
<td>Cut field plants for fodder</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Harvest peas</td>
<td>Agri task</td>
<td>Pluck pea pods</td>
<td>Women (men may help)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Harvest mustard</td>
<td>Agri task</td>
<td>Cut mustard plants</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Barley harvest</td>
<td>Agri task</td>
<td>Cut barley</td>
<td>Women (men may help)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mountain plants</td>
<td>Collect fodder</td>
<td>Collect mountain plants</td>
<td>Women (men may help)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Threshing</td>
<td>Agri task</td>
<td>Separate grain</td>
<td>Men and women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Winnowing</td>
<td>Agri task</td>
<td>Separate grain</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Washing grain</td>
<td>Agri task</td>
<td>Cleaning grains</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Collect dung</td>
<td>Fuel</td>
<td>Collect dung</td>
<td>Men and Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Take out manure</td>
<td>Prep work</td>
<td>Prepare manure</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Carry manure to field</td>
<td>Prep work</td>
<td>Load manure on animals</td>
<td>Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Manure mounds</td>
<td>Prep work</td>
<td>Spread manure in fields</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Roast barley</td>
<td>Make food</td>
<td>Cook barley grain</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grind barley</td>
<td>Make flour</td>
<td>Make tsampa</td>
<td>Men</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: Main agricultural activities (July-November)
2.1 Warm-sun month (‘de brgya zla ba)

The farming season begins from the fourth Spiti month of Degya.²¹⁵ Although the timing of the Spiti months shifts in relation to the Western calendar, the Warm-sun month roughly corresponds to the period from late March to early April. Degya refers to the longer duration of the sun’s light. “Lde” means to sit in the Sun and “rgya” means extent, hence lde rgya is understood as the time of the year when the sun is pleasantly warmer and the days get longer. The month of lde rgya normally includes the Spring Equinox (March 20). The main activities of the month include the performance of prayers and the making of certain festivals. From a desirability and prestige perspective, the performance of religious activities have high prestige in Spiti, and celebrating festivals through drinking and dancing are, needless to mention, considered desirable. Both drinking and dancing are mainly engaged in by men.

2.1.1 Dachang (mda’ chang), the “arrows and beer” festival:

Dachang is composed of two words: mda’ for arrow and chang for beer. Arrow alludes to an arrow shooting ritual that symbolizes the bringing of good fortune (rlung rta phar) and the sending away of misfortune (rnod pa dang bar spyed). Chang refers to the consumption of liquor, which follows the ritual for several days. Only men participate in these rituals as well as those celebrations that are undertaken for the village’s agro-pastoral livelihood. The festival starts from the third day of the (first Tibetan lunar calendar) month. Traditionally, the festival was celebrated for a week to nine days, but nowadays it is celebrated for three days.

²¹⁵ The fourth Spiti month coincides with the first Tibetan month.
Customary rituals for Dachang involve making an offering of the first un-tasted (“clean”) brew of barley beer (chang phud) and the shooting of arrows by the medium of the village deity (lus g.yar). These rituals are accompanied by music performed by low caste musicians, who are offered change by a group of households whose turn it is to host the festival. Since Zibug does not currently have a lus g.yar (“one who lends his body” to the deity), the rituals are performed by the village leader (rgad po, literally “old man” or elder). The village leader and account keepers (gnyer pa) change every three years on this day. In the case of the third year, the incoming leader performs the rituals. In Zibug village, all the key leadership positions (or the ‘executive committee’ comprised of the leader, two assistants and two accountants) are held by men, although women are allowed to attend the village council meetings and vote on behalf of their households.

For the ritual, a target (‘ben) is made of snow and placed at a height. In the opposite direction, at a gully below, some ritual cake offerings are placed. The head of the village recites a short prayer\(^\text{146}\) for the health and prosperity of the village and then shoots a white arrow of the deity (lha yi mda’) at the target. After shooting the white arrow, the head of the village makes another prayer\(^\text{147}\) and shoots a black arrow (gtor mda’) in the direction of the ritual cake offerings. Then the rest of the men shoot a white and a black arrow, following the village leader. Traditionally, I was told, only the Khangchen men shot the arrows.

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\(^\text{146}\) \textit{Lo phyugs rtag tu legs / char chu dus su ‘bab / mi nad phyugs nad gyi rgyun chad cig” (“May there be prosperity from crops and animals / May there be rain and water in time / May all disease cease in people and animals”).}

\(^\text{147}\) \textit{Mi nad phyugs nad khyer cig” (“Take away all the diseases of people and animals!”)}. 

After the arrow shooting ritual, the men gather at a place for dancing and drinking. They will invite people to join by shouting, “Come for Dachang!” (mda’ chang byon). All men between the ages 15 to 60 must contribute three jugs of the best chang (chang phud dang po, or the first distilled chang, which is considered the strongest and the best) to the gathering. Men wear their best traditional attire and perform Gar, an ancient Tibetan dance that dates back to the 7th century. Hirib musicians play music and sing for the gathering.148

2.1.2 Beer for guests (mgron chang)

Beer for guests is a celebration of the completion of common prayers for a prosperous agricultural year and for the well-being of all sentient beings. As mentioned earlier, the month begins with prayer rituals from the 1st to the 13th day. On the 14th and the 15th days, many people perform rites of fasting, silence and abstinence (smyung gnas). The 16th day is called Emerge (thon) as people come out of the rites of fasting and silence. On that day, Hirib musicians go around the village, from door to door, of the Khangchen households, singing and announcing that the following day will be the ‘Beer for guests’ festival (mgron chang). For this, they are given a bowl or a plate of barley flour, or some wood or barley beer from every Khangchen household.

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148 The music and singing of Dachang, also called Lha yi dus chos yi dus, is special for Spiti’s culture. In addition to special Gar songs, there are songs sung in honor of the local protector deities that are performed only on that day. People who know these songs, the Bemo or the senior Beda woman, are not allowed to sing this song on other days.

149 Hirib is comprised of a Beda woman on the tambourine, a Beda man on the pipe, and a Zo man on the drums.
Only the Khangchen households celebrate ‘Beer for guests’ festivals. Each Khangchen household contributes the equivalent of ten large ladle scoops of barley beer for this festival of drinking chang and dancing. Chechang men drink all the barley beer and dance to the tunes played by the Hirib musicians.

2.2 Cultivate-the-fields month (zhing ‘debs zla ba): April-May

During the next month, Zhing ‘debs (which means “to cultivate the field”), farmers prepare and plow the fields. The activities and rituals related to these tasks are done according to traditional customs. One aspect of the custom is that the village works as one unit; here farmers proceed to the next stage of activity only after everyone has completed the previous stage. There are three main activities during this month: throwing ash on snow, mixing manure, and springtime circumambulation.

2.2.1 Scattering ash

During this month, farmers prepare their fields and make their farming implements ready for the plowing season. The first activity is to throw or scatter ash (go thal) on the field covered in snow. The ash helps melt the snow faster so that the fields can be ready for plowing. Although ash is also a fertilizer, none of my informants mentioned it as such. In terms of desirability and prestige of the task, scattering ash is neither difficult nor too easy. It is neither undesirable nor particularly desirable. It is done by men for reasons that are not clear to me.
In order to commence this activity, the village headman visits the village astrologer, with a ceremonial scarf and local beer with a pinch of butter on top of the beer container. The headman requests that the astrologer find an auspicious day to start scattering ash on the fields. The astrologer consults the Tibetan almanac and advises the headman regarding a good day or date. In addition to the date, the astrologer also advises who or what type of person can ritually start the activity. On the chosen day, the first person to begin ritually scattering ash must meet certain conditions that are deemed favorable according to the Tibetan almanac. This person must have both parents alive, preferably be male, and must be born under certain astrological signs. The father or a male farm worker of the household performs the throwing of the ash. If the fields are distant or too large, and thus require assistance in carrying the ash, it is usually a woman or a child who helps in this task.

2.2.2 Picking of rocks, ensuring moisture in soil and mixing manure

When the fields become drier and the snow has melted, I was told (and my observations confirmed) that women and children go to the fields to pick up rocks and other unwanted debris from the fields. Depending on the condition of soil (how wet/dry) and the timing of the plowing season (how soon/late), the women will undertake important preparatory tasks related to ensuring moisture balance and fertility of the soil. These tasks include throwing snow in drier and sunnier parts of the field, breaking or throwing dirt over ice that may be covering water canals, and mixing manure into the soil. All over the field, there are mounds of manure, usually between one or two feet tall, and placed there since

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150 The beer is for consumption. Use of ceremonial scarves and marking offering containers with a small piece of butter are considered auspicious customary practices by Tibetans.

151 This activity is locally referred to as gsher zo cê (spelling unclear).
the last agricultural season. It is the women’s role to mix these mounds of manure with the soil. The balancing of moisture and the proper mixing of manure in the soil are considered critical tasks that will ultimately determine how easy and successful farming will be for that year. If not done properly, plowing will be harder and crops will not grow well. As important as it is, this task is relatively undesirable because of the physical labor involved as well as the fact that it involves working with manure.

2.2.3 Springtime circumabulation and purification (bum ’khor)

Every spring, farmers perform a village sanctification and purification ritual called Bumkhor (bum ’khor). As a religious ritual, the performance of this ritual commands respect or prestige. Only male members, monks as well as lay male members, perform this task.

This ritual, which is described by Ahir (1993, pp. 77-78), is done twice a year in Zibug. There is no set date for the ritual but it is done during the waxing moon phase before the plowing activities; this is because farmers believe that one’s actions have a spiritual impact during the first fifteen days of the lunar calendar month. The most visible part of the ritual is when young men and monks carry Buddhist texts on their backs and circumambulate the village. Since the fields are covered in snow in the springtime, the circumambulation is limited to the village. (The summer Bumkhor circumambulation, which happens when the crops bear flowers, goes around the village fields. This is discussed below in the Flower Month section.)
The Bumkhor ritual starts in the morning with villagers performing prayers at the temple. One person from every household participates in the prayer. Those who do not know the prayers help in the kitchen and in other works. Monks, village deity attendants and the Hirib musicians also attend prayers. In the afternoon, men, including young boys and monks, gather at the temple to carry sacred texts around the village. The Beda woman playing the tambourine only plays at the temple. When the procession moves, she stays back as only men perform this circumambulation and purification ritual.

The procession is headed by a man carrying a banner, followed by the two Hirib musicians, then monks, followed by other men or boys carrying religious texts on their backs. The procession stops to perform ritual ablutions (khrus) at ritually specified locations on their circumambulation route. The ablution rituals cleanse the village, the mountains and the air (ri khrus rlung khrus).

2.2.4 Cutting of yak hair and seeding

Soon after Bumkhor, the village headman consults with the astrologer to find an auspicious day on which to throw barley seeds in the field and to cut yak’s neck hair (rnya drag ce). The astrologer will provide a date and prescribe a kind of person most suitable to perform the ritual of throwing seeds. The prescribed person, who is usually a male, must have both parents living and must be of a suitable astrological sign. On the chosen day, a monk or the village astrologer will recite prayers, after which a man/boy throws seeds in the field and farmers cut the neck hair of their yaks. The cutting of yak

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152 People with both parents alive are considered more fortunate and hence more auspicious. Since such people are usually young children, the ritual is usually performed by a boy.
hair is necessary to prevent yak hair from getting stuck and pulled into the yoke. The ritual prayers are offered to the Earth-owning spirits (sa bdag) so that they will not harm the yaks and so that they will allow for the plowing of the fields. All of these ritual activities – offering of prayers, cutting of yak hair, and throwing of seeds – are performed by men, although women may help hold the yaks and carry the seeds to the field. From a desirability and prestige perspective, the cutting of yak hair ritual, as well as the first seeding, are both considered auspicious activities. Coincidentally, men perform the crucial acts involved in these activities. Women may only provide a supportive role such as holding the yak or bringing the seed.

2.2.5 The first plow: Rolha (rol kha)

Rolha is a set of rituals performed to commence plowing on the first day. These rituals and activities include offering prayers, burning juniper leaves, the offering and tasting of chang phud, plowing a small area, and leveling and seeding the plowed area – all of which are tasks divided on the basis of gender.

On the day of Rolha, farmers form into work teams and go to their fields to perform the first plow rituals. Each group consists of at least three men and three women, two yaks and some implements (e.g., plough, chang bottle, ropes, etc.). Members of the group or work team can be composed of any combination or mixture belonging to Khangchen, Dhutul and caste households, but they always have some men and some women. These work teams are formed to complement each other, mainly in exchanges of labor, land and capital. For example, the plowman provides his labor, for which he gets a small piece of
land. The Dhutul households often do not have yaks for plowing, so they join work teams with yaks and provide complementary labor services, whether the group needs a man to help with plowing or women to work with adze hoes. In other words, reciprocal relations of labor, land and capital bind the work team members to each other. Together, each group plows all the fields belonging to its group members. Although the reciprocal obligations are for plowing, the relationships tend to extend beyond plowing to other farming-related activities, such as irrigation and harvest, as well as to social events.

At the field, a man stands in front of the plow and holds a rope attached to the yaks’ noses. He leads the yaks and the plow in the preferred direction. Another man (the thong pa or tiller) stands immediately behind the plow and holds the plow handle. His role is to keep the plowshare in the soil and moving in the preferred direction. As noted above, locals believe that tilling is a sinful task as it results in the death of creatures living in the soil. The tiller therefore sings the mantra of compassion during the process, in addition to singing to the yaks. The tiller is followed by three women who break any leftover soil lumps and level the field with adze hoes. The women move in unison, keeping pace with the plough and singing as they work.

After tilling the soil for about half an hour, a man – normally the owner of the field or someone who knows the prayers – offers prayers and juniper incense to the gods of the fields (zhing lha), serpent spirits (klu), and the local spirits (gzhi bdag). After finishing the prayers, the man puts a small piece of butter (yar) on the forehead of both the yaks and all the parts of the plow. After that, he continues to put yar butter on people’s
forehead - first the person who pulls the yak, then the Thongpa or the tiller, then the seeder, followed by the women who level the field. After putting the butter on the workers’ foreheads, the man pours a little chang on people’s palms and prays that every implement and person be strong enough to complete the task ahead. Then the group ploughs some more, for about half an hour, after which they return to their homes.

Before moving to the next agricultural activity, let us consider the desirability and prestige associated with these tasks. The performance of rituals at the beginning is most prestigious, and is therefore all done by men, usually a monk or a man from a Khangchen or Dhutul household. Plowing, especially the role of the man holding the ploughshare, is one of the most difficult and least desirable tasks. This is therefore done by a man of a Dhutul or caste household. The leveling of the fields is a back-breaking and difficult task, and is done by a group of women. Seeding the plowed area is easy and considered an important (it requires specialized skill, for crop growth depends on proper seeding) and auspicious activity; it is done by a man, usually a Khangchen man. The same set of people perform the same tasks for the next few days, however long the plowing work takes.

2.2.6 Plow training (gnya’ byang)

The next day of plowing is called gnya’ (neck) byang (to get used to), which means to make the yaks get used to the extensive plowing work ahead. On this day, plowing is done for about half of the day, just a little more than the previous day.
2.2.7 Work on: (sder kya?)

On the third day, farmers work the whole day with yaks and plows, until all tilling work is complete. This activity normally lasts about a week.

2.2.8 Leveling the fields (sha la)

Once the fields are plowed, the next activity is to level the fields. Shala is the name of a plank made of wood and the twigs that are used to level the tilled field. The implement is about two feet wide and five feet long with 6-8 protruding “teeth”, each about four inches long. It is laid face-down on the field and tied to the yoke in place of the plow. One man pulls the yaks from the front while a younger man stands on the plank, using his weight to level the soil.

In terms of desirability and prestige, this is a physical activity that is neither as difficult as plowing nor as easy a task as the throwing of seeds. It is done by men, usually younger men from Dhutul and caste households.

2.2.9 Drawing of irrigation lines (sna lang)

The women take over the next stage, which is the drawing of the irrigation lines (discussed in chapter 4).

2.3 Blue skies green earth month (gnam sngon sa sngon zla ba): May-June

As the name of the month suggests, at this time of the year, the fields and the mountains start to look green from plant growth and the skies are blue and clear. After the irrigation
canals are drawn in the fields, farmers wait forty days to do their first watering. During this time, farmers engage in several activities related to irrigation (e.g., repair of the main irrigation canals, collection of plants for mulching, and propitiation of serpent spirit guardians of water sources), all of which were discussed in chapter 4. To quickly recount who does what in terms of these activities, the repair of irrigation canals are done jointly by men and women of all those households who get water from the irrigation canals. The collection of mulch plants is mostly done by women of Khangchen as well as Dhutul and caste households. The serpent spirit propitiation ritual, performed for the springs (those which feed the village reservoir), is done exclusively by the Khangchen women.

In addition, during this month, farmers also do a preliminary weeding and softening of the soil called Toglog. Toglog (tog logs) refers to the digging of soil and small plants and turning them over (sa logs rgyab pa) and breaking them apart with the use of adze hoes (tog tse). This task is necessary for destroying weed growth and using organic material to nourish the soil, and to make the soil softer in preparation for the first irrigation, which is done three days later. Only women do this task, which is an undesirable role because it takes a long time to finish the work and it is considered sinful because the churning of the soil with the adze hoes kills insects and organisms living in the soil.

### 2.4 Flower month (me tog zla ba): June-July

Metog means flower in Tibetan. As the name suggests, the Flower Month (me tog zla ba) is a time when crops and plants start to bear flowers. Bright yellow mustard flowers, white and dark red pea flowers, and deep green barley crops wash the fields in vibrant
colors. The main agricultural tasks for the month are irrigation and weeding, all of which are done by women. Farmers also carry religious texts around the fields and the village to ritually sanctify and cleanse the environment (bum 'khor). Irrigation during this month, including the second (sreg ti) and third (gsum ti) watering, is done by the main irrigator (always a woman) for the respective fields, a process which was discussed in detail in chapter 4.

2.4.1 “Purlog” weeding

Between the second and third waterings, farmers do the second weeding of the pea fields, called Purlog. Pea requires early attention because its branches start to attach, making it impossible to do weeding later on without destroying the crops. A small handmade tool that looks like a screwdriver is used to pull out the saplings (which are otherwise difficult to pull out with the hands). The tool also helps aerate and soften the soil. It is a laborious, time-consuming task that can take up to three days for one Khangchen household. Laborers who come to assist may be paid a daily wage or be part of a reciprocal relationship, but they are almost always women from Dhutul and caste households. The task of weeding, which requires digging the ground, is also considered sinful and undesirable from a religious perspective.

2.4.2 “Bumkhor” circumambulation

The Bumkhor circumambulation ritual of the summer happens sometime between the second and third watering of the crops. The day of the ritual is confirmed after consulting with the senior monks at the monastery, who determine a suitable day for fire-offering
rites (sbyin sreg) to be performed that day. On that day, monks from the monastery come to the village in the morning to perform the rites and offer prayers. The Hirib musicians play music before and after the fire-offering rite. After that, young men and monks go around the fields and the village carrying sacred Buddhist texts, stopping briefly at irrigation reservoirs, springs and Buddhist stupas to perform ablution rituals meant to cleanse and sanctify the ritual area and the surrounding environment (ri khrus rlung khrus). Men perform all these rites, and it is for this reason that the Beda woman who plays the tambourine does not join the circumambulation procession. This religious ritual, which commands respect and prestige, is thus performed only by male members of the village.

2.5 Seed-ripening month (‘bras bu zla ba): July-August

The Flower month is followed by the ripening of seeds month (‘bras bu zla ba). As the name indicates, it is the time when the crop seeds become ripe and ready for harvest. During this month, there are two main tasks: that of the late weeding (Phiyur or phyi yur) of barley fields and that of irrigation, including the final watering, which is referred to as the “ripening water” (smin chu).

Phiyur weeding is done when the barley grains start to grow tufts of hair. Women use their hands to do the weeding, as the plants are relatively easy to pull out, being neither too small nor too strong. By this time, the peas are almost ready for harvest. Again, this weeding task, which locals consider to be undesirable from a Buddhist perspective, is done by women.
2.6 Harvest month (sel zla ba): August-September

The harvest (known as sel in local dialect) month is one of the busiest and most labor-scarce months of the year. During this month, farmers perform rituals to supplicate local deities (lha gsol), celebrate the Namgan harvest festival, collect fodder (klungs rtsa), harvest peas (sran ma sgrug), and, if time permits, harvest mustard.

2.6.1 Deity propitiation ritual (lha gsol)

On the 15th day of this month, one man from every household goes up to the summit of a mountain believed to be the abode of the local deity (dam can rdo rje legs pa). Before these men go to the mountain, a chang phud ritual is performed on behalf of the village deity at the temple, where the Hirib musicians play their instruments. After the chang phud ritual, men go to the mountains to propitiate the deities for a bumper harvest.

Traditionally, when Zibug villagers kept horses, men went on horses to the mountain summit and Hirib musicians (without the Beda woman tambourine player) also rode on horses to the summit. These days, the Hirib musicians, without the Beda woman tambourine player, go up to a certain point playing the drum and pipe, and thereafter return to the village. The performance of this auspicious – and thus prestigious – ritual is limited to only men.

2.6.2 Namgan harvest festival

A week or two after the deity propitiation ritual, farmers celebrate the harvest season with a horse race. Again, the villagers first offer chang phud to the village deity at the temple,
where the Hirib musicians play their instruments. Afterwards, a group of males, mainly boys, go to a field to race among themselves. Traditionally, when Zibug villagers kept horses, farmers had a horse race and arrow shooting competition from atop their galloping horses. In 2010, there were no horses, so a poorly organized race was held between a few children. Again, only men participated in celebrating this festival.

After the Namgan harvest festival, farmers first harvest the peas. Since barley can stand much longer in the fields without being spoiled, it is harvested after all the activities concerning the harvest and sale of the pea crop are undertaken. There are no customary rules for the harvesting of peas. It is done by individual farmers, in consultation with their own informal work groups. The absence of ritual activities attached to the gathering of peas is due to this crop’s perishable nature and the need to follow the whims of the market. Peas are hand picked by men and women together, although about 70% of the laborers are women (field observation, 2010). As one woman from a Dhutul household sarcastically remarked, “men come to harvest peas because peas bring cash” (interview, October 2, 2010).

Unlike the harvesting of peas, which is done according to decisions made by individual farmers or households, the harvesting of barley is done according to stringent traditional customs. These customs and practices are discussed in more detail in the next chapter (6) as the timing and institutional arrangements for the performance of many of these customs are linked to those governing the collection of fodder, dung and firewood. In brief, the harvest season begins sometime in late August or early September, on an
auspicious day (zhag bzang po) chosen by the village council after consulting the Tibetan Buddhist almanac. This day also marks the end of a customary law that bans the use of the sickle (discussed under “sickle use ban” in chapter 6). Farmers first cut the field plants (rlungs rtsa). Then they cut mustard, and afterwards barley. This is done step by step, so that the work is completed together for all the fields in the village. For example, no one is allowed to start harvesting mustard until everyone has completed the cutting of the field plants. Similarly, the harvesting of barley begins only after everyone in the village has completed the harvesting of the mustard. Like the harvesting of peas, both men and women harvest barley, although women form the majority of the laborers.

2.7 Threshing month (khu yu zla ba): September-October

After the barley crops are cut, the sheaves are laid out in the field for drying in the sun. The sheaves are laid out on the field in rows touching each other and forming neat rectangular shaped patches known as karaltse. Due care is taken to cover the barley ears (nas mgo) from direct sunlight. This is done by laying the ear side of the sheaf on one side and the cut (stem) side of the sheaf on the other in rows. Each new row is laid such that the barley ears of the previous row are covered underneath the stem side of the new row of sheaves. This way, all the barley ears in the karaltse are hidden with the rest of the parts being exposed to the sun. This prevents the grains from excessive drying and falling off when the dried sheaves are carried to the threshing ground (g.yul thag/yul thang) for threshing. After a few days, the harvest is brought to ulthag, the threshing ground. Ulthag is a round piece of land with a sturdy central pole (ka), to which animals are tethered together so that they can then walk over the crops to separate the grains from the husk.
However, before ulthag is performed, the crops are dried in the sun. Only this time, the ears are exposed and the sheaves are spread out loosely all over the threshing ground. Women do most of this work.

After a few days, men bring animals to the threshing ground. Each ulthag uses about five to eight animals, which may be donkeys, yaks or horses. The animals are tied with a rope (skor thag), one end of which is hooked on to Ka, the pole in the center of the Ulthag. Men, usually those from Dhutul or caste households, use whips to make the animals move to thresh the crops. They also sing as the animals go round the threshing ground. When the animals go round and round, tromping the husks and the grains, a few women stand around with pitchforks (zar) to mix, push or spread the husks so that they are properly crushed.

After threshing, it is time for winnowing, which is again mostly done by women using pitchforks. The act of winnowing is done rhythmically by two to four women, who also throw the crushed ‘ong into the air at the same time. Throughout this process, farmers either blow whistle tunes or sing in order to attract the wind, which will help to separate the husk from the seed.

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153 The pole is attached to a round wooden piece called skor chog, which is attached to a rope that tethers the animals. Skor chog has a big hole in the middle that goes around Ka so that the rope does not get stuck or locked to the pole. The animals are arranged side by side, with the slowest animal being tied closest to the ka. The animal closest to the ka is called Mama, and is usually a donkey. The fastest or the most agile animal is tied at the other end, the outside end, and is known as tho bo. The animals are arranged this way because the outermost animals have to move the fastest when the animals are made to go around the Ka.
After all the grain and husks are separated, the same group of women sieves the mound of grain lying on the ground. After sieving, the grains are then collected in sacks called ‘ong phed by women with their hands. Women sing ritual songs seeking blessing and good luck. After the barley grains are collected in sacks, these are brought home to the granary (‘bru khang) by the men and on animals.

2.8 Shorter days month (nyi rug zla ba): October-November

The month of Nyirug gets its name from the time of the year when the days are short. During this month, farmers collect the leftover dung (discussed in chapter 6), take out and spread manure in the fields, fetch horses and yaks from the mountains, and make barley flour.

Women perform the undesirable task of preparing manure by first emptying the composting toilets and then mixing them with animal dung. Then the manure is loaded on to animals and taken to the fields by men. This is done by the Thongpas (tillers), who are usually men from Dhutul and caste households. Women pour the manure onto the fields in mounds at equal gaps or distances. Dirt is poured on top of the mounds so that the animals do not eat the manure. The mounds are left like that until the following spring in order to protect the manure from getting washed away or diluted by snow during the winter.

Another main activity during this month is the making of barley flour, Tsampa (stsam pa), the local staple food. To make Tsampa, the grains are first washed in a nearby stream or
river, then dried, roasted and finally ground in a mill. All the preparatory work done before grinding is performed by women. Washing is done by women in groups under a flowing stream. This process also helps get rid of small stones, straws and sticks that might have slipped in through the sieve. After *chum ston*, the grains are dried in the sun for a day or two. The dry grains are then roasted. Women also tend to the drying and the roasting of the grains.

After roasting, the grains are taken to the water mill to be ground into flour called *tsampa*. Grinding is mostly done in a watermill that is owned and run by men of Dhutul or Zo households. In recent years, many people have resorted to grinding their grains through Indians who have machines in the main bazar. However, many farmers mentioned that they prefer to use water-mills instead of electric-powered mills because the flour produced from water-mills tastes better and lasts longer as compared to the machine-made flour, which is finer in texture.

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</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>Circumambulation</td>
<td>Ritual</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>Deity propitiation</td>
<td>Ritual</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>Harvest festival</td>
<td>Festical</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7: High status farming roles
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Status role</th>
<th>Main (male)actor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>Tilling land</td>
<td>Labor</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Women, Dhutul and caste men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>First weeding</td>
<td>Labor</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>First watering</td>
<td>Labor</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>Second watering</td>
<td>Labor</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>Weeding</td>
<td>Labor</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>Third watering</td>
<td>Labor</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>Irrigation</td>
<td>Labor</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>Final weeding</td>
<td>Labor</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>Final watering</td>
<td>Labor</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>Harvest peas</td>
<td>Labor</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Women (men help)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>Harvest mustard</td>
<td>Labor</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Women (men help)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept.</td>
<td>Harvest barley</td>
<td>Labor</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Women (men help)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>Take out manure</td>
<td>Labor</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>Carry manure</td>
<td>Labor</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Dhutul or caste men (Thongpa)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>Manure mounds</td>
<td>Labor</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8: Low status farming roles

**Concluding discussion:**

A consideration of all the agriculture-related activities performed in a year demonstrates that the social organization of roles for these activities is based on one’s class, caste and gender background. In the case of Spiti, however, it must be noted that one’s household or class/caste background primarily determines these roles and relationships.

Consequently, the other main determinant of farmers’ identity, that is, gender role, is determined by one’s household type or one’s class and caste background. This is the case in all farming-related activities. From a male-versus-female perspective of gender, these
roles are relatively fairly distributed in terms of the numbers of activities allocated to the two different genders. Although the number of activities shown in Tables 5 and 6 is greater for women than for men, what is not noted in the chart is the fact that the timing of most of these activities is decided based on certain astrological and practical considerations of the village farming season, which are determined by men (mostly of Khangchen households). Therefore, gender difference in terms of the number of roles is not significant. However, if we consider who performs the relatively more desirable farming roles, we find that men, particularly Khangchen men, perform most of these activities (see Table 7). These high-status roles are those related to the celebration of festivals and the performance of religious rituals. It is worth noting here that another set of high status roles that are exclusively undertaken by men, but not shown in Table 7, are those related to decision-making and consulting astrological calendars. Almost all the men who perform these decision-making and astrological calculations are from Khangchen households. As Table 8 shows, all the main low-status roles that involve either “tiring”, “sinful” or “dirty” labor are the domain of women. Men of caste and Dhutul households perform roles associated with the institution of Thongpa (tiller), including transporting manure to the fields on animals.

In order to think critically about these roles, it is helpful to use Agarwal’s (2007) classification of different forms of participation and non-participation. For example, given the power and status implications of these ascribed roles, it is safe to say that Khangchen men’s role in decision-making and celebratory festivals is representative of “voluntary cooperation” (Agarwal, 2007). Other roles, such as the laborious tasks of
weeding and general farm labor that are undertaken by women, can be viewed as a form of “nonvoluntary cooperation”. Conversely, we can analyze the non-participation of men, especially that of Khangchen men, in tiring and sinful activities such as weeding and plowing as being representative of “voluntary noncooperation”, and extend this analysis to argue that the absence of women in decision-making roles is an example of “nonvoluntary noncooperation”. Table 4.2 presents a set of high-status farming roles in which women’s non-participation is presented as “nonvoluntary noncooperation.”

It is important to view this gendered division of labor more closely from the intersections of class and caste relations, for such an approach serves to shed light on which groups are most or least benefited by the system and how. The examples above clearly indicate that Khangchen men are the most privileged in terms of farming labor relations. Although the fields legally belong to them, most of them do not engage in any farm-related manual labor, except perhaps assisting in the harvest of perishable commercial crops (peas). Instead, they hire laborers such as the tiller (thong pa) to work on their behalf, and to do work that is considered not only physically taxing but also sinful. The responsibility of managing and performing farming-related work is borne by Khangchen women, each of whom is responsible for about seven acres of land. While the Khangchen men are largely free from farming labor roles, they are the beneficiaries of farming-related festivals (e.g., Arrows and beer, Beer for guests, and Harvest festival).

While Dhutul men and women are not as privileged as those of the Khangchen households, they are better off than caste men and women. Specifically, Zo (blacksmith household) men and women, speaking relatively in terms of their numbers, are most
heavily involved in farming-related manual work. In one of the case study villages, all Zo men worked as tillers and all Zo women served as irrigators for Khangchen households. All of them also had patches of land in the village provided by the Khangchen for their services, in addition to having their own government granted Nautor fields. The fact that both men and women from Zo blacksmith households are highly dependent on farming labor is also an indication of the lack of economic opportunities for both men and women of lower social status.

Women of the lowest social status in Spiti do the least amount of farming but they play an important part in farming-related rituals and festivals by playing music for these events. Intersectionally speaking, this study has shown that low caste women, particularly Beda women, uniquely face direct “nonvoluntary noncooperation” and “nonvoluntary cooperation.” For example, Beda women face direct discrimination or “nonvoluntary noncooperation” when the Beda woman is singled out from amongst the other (male) Hirib musicians who lead the procession of men around the fields in the circumabulation ritual. Similarly, their cooperation in playing music for the village is completely nonvoluntary in nature as they perform out of a sense of fear of the village deity.
6. Customary Regulations for the Collection of Fodder, Dung and Firewood

Introduction

A key finding of this research is that the social organization of irrigation management customs in rural communities, such as those for water, are related to the social organization of managing related resources such as fodder and firewood. I argue that gender, caste and class relationships in the management of these resources are better understood within the context of and as aspects of broader livelihood (farming) customs - which are in turn embedded in local social relations of power. The preceding chapters have shown that farmers’ irrigation management roles, especially in terms of local caste, class and gender relations, are integral aspects of farming-related tasks, rituals and festivals (chapter 5). This chapter further supports this argument by showing how the social aspects of managing fodder, firewood and dung (i.e., other resources), are also linked to water management and similarly integrated with broader farming practices - especially in terms of their timing and implications for different user groups.

This chapter discusses state laws, village customs and practices related to the collection of fodder, dung and firewood (FDF henceforth) in Zibug village in Spiti Valley in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh. The chapter shows how different users, particularly underprivileged user groups of landless Duthul (dud ‘thul) farmers, women and local “caste” (discussed later) groups, were affected by these laws, customs and practices. By

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154 Two meanings of the word Dhutul were given by local informants: dud ‘thul as in (once landless) households that merely “make smoke” from their hearth (“dud pa ‘thul yag ma gtoqs yod ma red”) and dud khral as in ‘smoke-tax’ or paying tax for having a hearth. This paper uses dud ‘thul since that is the common pronunciation used by the people.
doing so, it contributes to a growing body of literature on resource management in Tibetan Buddhist villages in the Himalayas (Brower, 1991; Bauer, 2004; Crook & Osmaston, 1991) and questions an assumption prevalent in the current literature: that local customs and practices related to the management of scarce resources such as fodder and dung (Mishra et al., 2003), as well as water (Gutschow, 1997; Labbal, 2000; Gupta & Tiwari, 2008), are based on the principle of equitable sharing. The chapter argues that this assumption represents the perspective of the dominant group of Khangchen (*khang chen*) households more than it does those of the traditionally less privileged user groups. This chapter borrows theoretical and methodological insights from a critical framework (that of *agrarian environments*) of understanding rural resource management practices in rural contexts (Agrawal & Sivaramakrishnan, 2000). This framework emphasizes the historical and political dynamics of resource use, control and conflict within communities in terms of gender, class and caste relations, and demonstrates how these relations deal with larger forces of state, economy and environment (and therefore have clear intersections with political ecology and allied approaches). This chapter discusses the implications of changing state laws and codification of Spiti’s resource management customs on different user groups, and provides an ethnographic analysis of local FDF management practices with a focus on local relations of power and micro-politics within the community.

The discussion is divided into two main sections. After an introductory description of the significance of FDF to local livelihood, the first section discusses how the changing state laws in the last two centuries affected the grazing rights and power relations between
local user groups. The second section discusses village level customs and rituals that regulate the collection of FDF.

Information was gathered from local farmers through participant observation of FDF collection practices and interviews (focused on related customs and practices) with farmers representing all user groups. This paper has also benefited greatly from a plethora of published sources, mainly government administrative records dealing with local customs and past academic works dealing with Ladakhi law (Pirie 2005 & 2006) and history (e.g., Bray, 2005; Jahoda 2008 & 2009).

**Fodder, dung and firewood in Spiti**

Winter in Spiti is long (5 months) and cold (with the average temperature being -17° C). During these months (December to April), farmers bring all their animals—goats, sheep, yaks, cows, dzomos and horses—into one side of the lower floor of their two story houses. The farmer’s family also moves to the lower floor, normally to the warmer (south) side of the house. Since the winter months are extremely cold with thick snowfall outside, every household must have, amongst other things, a sufficient stock of forage to feed the animals and fuel (mainly dry dung and shrubs such as “firewood” or ‘bud shing’) for cooking and heating. The stocks of FDF are as necessary as farmers’ stock of food supplies for their winter survival. Mishra et al. (2003, p. 601) found that “as many as seven species [of plants] are collected from the pastures” of Kibber village. The bulk of

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155 The coldest temperature recorded in Kaza, Spiti, during the year 2010 was -22.5° C on the 12th and 15th days of January. The mean minimum temperature for January 2010 was -17° C. Source: Kaza meteorological station.

156 Dzomo is a female hybrid of yak and domestic cattle.
these plants collected by farmers are used as firewood and fodder. However, farmers also collect a variety of food and medicinal plants (Besch, 2006) from the common areas, a discussion of which is beyond the scope of this chapter.

Research conducted by Rhode, Madsen, Brantingham and Dargye (2007) suggest that yaks and their dung may have played a key role in the prehistoric human habitation of the Tibetan Plateau. Even today, yak dung is a critical and preferred source of fuel for the farmers in Spiti. According to elders, the two main sources of fuel “in the past” were dung and the shrub Caragana versicolor (gra ma). Other sources include dwarf willow and Lonicera sp. (brab), which were used less than dung and Caragana because the limited supply of dwarf willow was also used for construction (roof support) and for making baskets and other tools. Lonicera fire also produced more smoke than dung and Caragana. Dung is the most preferred source of fuel because it is readily available, light and easy to collect and use, unlike Lonicera and Caragana, which are thorny bushes. Dung is thus used as fuel for cooking throughout the year, as well as for heating the house during the cold winter months. Compared to modern sources such as Liquified Petroleum Gas and electricity, traditional fuel sources such as dung, Caragana versicolor, Lonicera sp. and dwarf willow are freely available, more reliable in terms of supply and also more effective sources of fuel in Spiti. It is important to note that farmers’ preference for traditional fuel sources, and their related heating system, goes beyond issues of market price, convenience and practicality. In almost every house I entered in Spiti, I was taken directly into the “Mother Room” (ma khang). The Mother Room is the main “living room” and kitchen combined into one room. Somewhere in the middle of the Mother
Room is always a metal stove that burns dry dung and wood. The stove and the attached smoke exhaust pipe serves as the main heating system of the house. The family eats their meals and spends most of their indoor time together around the stove. The stove serves an important role of facilitating family conversations, just like the proverbial “family dinner table conversations” that were once part of Western societies.¹⁵⁷

Another important use of dung is manure. Farmers mix dung with soil and the mixture is kept in one corner of their traditional composting toilet. The toilet is a latrine pit, normally located on the upper floor of the house. The soil and dung mixture is added to human excreta to aid decomposition and to eliminate odors. The contents of the latrine, which can be accessed only from the outside at ground level, is emptied once a year and the contents used on the fields. Although chemical fertilizers are available, farmers in Zibug village only use animal dung as manure.¹⁵⁸ The importance of animal dung is demonstrated by the fact that two of my informants recounted, within just a few minutes, sixteen different types of dung.¹⁵⁹ The different Spiti names for animal dung tell us that...

¹⁵⁷ Appreciation of the cultural significance of these stoves is also important in the context of debates about the role of black carbon in climate change. Some environmental advocates suggest that Himalayan farmers should give up their traditional stoves and start using cleaner stoves. I believe that these advocates must also learn about local culture and people’s relationship to these fuels. For example, local belief systems suggest that fire from traditional fuel sources have special merit (bsod nams), especially as compared to the smokeless illusory fire (’khrul me) of LPG stoves or electric heaters. One woman said that she prefers her smoky kitchen stove because it provides better heat and cooks tastier food than LPG stoves and heaters. There is also the notion of the hearth god (thab lha) and certain rituals related to it that show that the people have deeper connections to traditional fuel sources than an outsider would assume.


¹⁵⁹ The most coveted or widely used dung is that of cattle (Yaks, cows and related breeds). This is indicated by the variety of names for cattle dung that exist in the Spiti dialect (e.g., g.yag lci ba, g.yag lci ba bar ma, ba lci ba, drid pa, bo krol tse, g.yag lci ba dron mo, ’bab rnyang, kob lci ba and lci ba thon sgrīb). Farmers have the ability, for example, to identify the seasonal and dietary causes of differences in yak dung sizes (kob lci ba).
dung from all domesticated animals, including the dung pellets of goats and sheep, are used.\(^{160}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spiti term</th>
<th>English translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yag chiya (g.yag\ lci ba)</td>
<td>Yak dung</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yag chiya barma (g.yag\ lci ba\ bar ma)</td>
<td>Medium thick yak dung</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bal chiya (ba lci ba)</td>
<td>Cow dung</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tal chiya (rta lci ba)</td>
<td>Horse dung</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bung chiya (bong lci ba)</td>
<td>Donkey dung</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rilma (ril ma)</td>
<td>Dung pellets, of goats and sheep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lugril (lug ril)</td>
<td>Sheep dung</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raril (ra ril)</td>
<td>Goat dung</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dridpa (drid pa)</td>
<td>Hand compacted dung cakes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Botol tse (bo krol tse)</td>
<td>Small yak dung</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yag chiya dronmo (g.yag\ lci ba\ dron mo)</td>
<td>Recently produced dung</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bab nyang (‘bab\ rnyang)</td>
<td>Fresh yak/cow dung</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nyang tra (rnyang\ sprag)</td>
<td>Dried up diarrheic excrement by yak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Langsa (langs sa)</td>
<td>Powdery mixed dung manure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kob chiya (kob lci ya)</td>
<td>Yak dung of early spring, smaller and drier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>due to lack of grass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chiya thondrib (lci ba\ thon sgrib)</td>
<td>Dung found after snowmelt</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9: Some types of dung used in Spiti

\(^{160}\) A unique use of dung pellets \(ril ma\), for example, is as a diaper for infants. The pellets are crushed and made powdery and filled in a bag made of animal skin. The bag and the powdered dung can be heated to keep the infant warm during the winter. Infant’s excreta is thrown away with the surrounding powdered dung and the remainder can be reused in that manner indefinitely.
As for fodder sources, these are collected from field weeds, plant growth near water channels and in between field slopes, as well as leftover shaft (hay) from crops. In addition, farmers may also cut whatever sparse vegetation they find (with the exception of restricted or protected plants), on the hilly common areas that are fit for fodder, fire and other domestic uses. An example of a popular domestic use of plants is that of a particular plant that locals call zhilim and use for insulation under mattresses during the cold winter months.

Most of the collected plant material is stacked on the flat rooftops, mostly around the four sides of the rooftop, known as Shingpen (shing spe or “pile of wood”). The “pile of wood” sticks out neatly around the edges of the roof to provide protection to these mud houses from severe winter precipitation. The pile of wood also adds to the aesthetic quality of these traditional houses by blending into and making the decorative parapet of black-died tamarisk brushwood (spen ’phyar) stand out more prominently. The thickness of the “pile of wood” also reflects the strength of the household.

Today, the consumption of traditional firewood has decreased considerably due to the availability of subsidized wood, which is brought in trucks and sold by the government. However, the collection of dry dung and traditional fuel sources such as Caragana continues to be an important activity. Young men, who these days are often Indian workers, bring large sacks called phad (approximately 7 feet long and 4 feet wide) filled with dry dung on donkeys. One time, I saw two young Indian workers bring four of

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161 The provision of subsidized wood in Spiti began in 1974-75 (interview, 21 August 2010).
162 All Indian workers in Zibug are male.
these sacks on four donkeys. A 63-year-old man belonging to one of the richer Khangchen households said he remembers that his father used to “bring 250 phad full of dung in one season” (interview, April 7, 2011).

While irrigation is the domain of women in Spiti, the collection of firewood and dung from far distances on draft animals is the domain of men. I discussed this particular gendered division of roles – why men in Spiti go to fetch firewood and dung from such distances – with many farmers, especially elders. The only exception I am aware of is the case of an elderly Beda woman of Zibug, who said that she used to go to the mountains with her husband to collect firewood and dung, which the two of them would then bring back to the village on donkeys. The Beda woman’s case shows that women may at times participate in fuel wood collection, though this appears to be only in rare and exceptional cases. This particular woman, for example, did not own any farming land and she and her husband, unlike other landless farmers, were not under any contractual farming roles.163

In a detailed journal of his tour through Spiti in 1863, Egerton (1864/2011) observed how collecting fuel was one of the main tasks for the men:

“The men are engaged chiefly in cutting and carrying fuel for the winter months, a large supply of which is piled on the tops of the house walls” (p. 47).

“The Spiti man uses the yak, both pure and half-bred, for carrying loads, chiefly in bringing fuel and fodder from the mountains to store up for winter” (p. 87).

163 Most landless farmers worked in various capacities for Khangchen households. These included roles ranging from daily wage labor to specialized contractual roles such as that of Thongpa (thong pa) or “tiller” for men and “Chumpa” (chu pa) or “irrigator” for women.
As locals explained, this gendered division of tasks was necessary and “natural” due to the unique social and resource conditions of Spiti, chiefly the lack of labour. First, since irrigation and collection of FDF must be industriously completed within the designated time of the short summer months, it was necessary to divide responsibilities between the two main workers in the household: husband (men) and wife (women). The division of labor between the various household members cannot be organized on the basis of age because children cannot (or are not allowed to) engage in irrigation or firewood collection. Irrigation, as it is done in the arid Western Himalayan villages, requires close attention, patience and great skill, which children generally lack. In addition, the collection of firewood not only requires skill but also physical strength (which is required to uproot the thorny shrubs, a task which is done with the help of adze hoes). The workers must also load and control the yaks. In addition, both Caragrana versicolor and Lonicera are extremely prickly. Moreover, these grow in the highest and driest areas. Farmers use adze hoes to dig up some of the ground around the plants and then use sheer muscle power to uproot the shrubs. Then the shrubs must be loaded onto yaks, a feat which also requires physical strength, especially to tie the firewood onto the yaks and to control the animals. Thus, the collection of firewood is also unsuitable for elderly and physically weak persons. While yaks were mainly used in the “old days”, today donkeys are more popular.\textsuperscript{164}

\textsuperscript{164} In 2010, Zibug farmers had a total of 81 yaks and 156 donkeys. The number of donkeys in Zibug has increased significantly in recent decades. In 1891, for example, there were a total of 132 donkeys in the whole of the Spiti Valley. The number of yaks, cows and bullocks in Spiti was 1,006. See: Punjab Government [of British India], 1897, pp. 105-106. Hay (1851) says that there were 439 yaks and 79 “asses” in Spiti.
According to Cunningham, in 1847, the year after Spiti came under British rule, there were 1,407 people living in the valley’s 7,100 square kilometer area, i.e., a density of population representing less than 1 person per 5 square kilometers.¹⁶⁵ Farmers opine that the physicality and dangers involved in traveling long distances with draft animals in the mountains made the collection of FDF a role more suitable to men than women. That the fields are close to home, where women do most of the domestic work, also seems to favor this division of roles.

The gendered division of roles between men and women for irrigation management and fuel collection in Spiti also fits in with certain local belief systems. According to the Tibetan belief system, which the people of Spiti share, mountains are considered masculine and water bodies feminine. This is apparent in the mostly male names that are given to the mountains¹⁶⁶ and the mostly female names that are given to water bodies in Tibet. Amnye Machen, Gang Rinpoche (Mt. Kailash) and Nyenchen Thangla are examples of mountain bodies with masculine names and Lhamo Latso, Tsari Yutso and Yamdrok Tso are examples of water bodies with feminine names. In addition, the deities and spirits that reside on mountains are most often considered to be masculine and those that live in water, such as klu (serpent spirits or Nagas), are believed to be feminine in nature (Choezin, 2003). In Spiti, only men climb those mountains believed to be the abode of the local village deity to perform invocation rituals (lha gsol, discussed in

¹⁶⁵ Cunningham (1854, p. 289) provides the earliest population figure for Spiti: 1,407 in the year 1847. The second earliest figure is provided in the 1883 Gazetteer of the Kangra District (p. 77) as 2,087 for the year 1855. These figures are not accurate and represent only rough estimates. Since Spiti was part of Ladakh in 1846 when the British took over, Cunningham’s rough population estimate for 1847 would be close to the final years of Ladakhi rule. The density of population then was less than 1 person for every 5 square kilometers (Population of 1,407 / Total area of 7,100 sq. km = 0.19 persons per sq. km.).

¹⁶⁶ Notable exceptions include Mount Everest (Jomo Langma), which has a feminine name and is associated with female guardian deities.
chapter 5) and it is customary for women to perform invocation rituals to appease the serpent spirits who reside at the irrigation sources (discussed in chapter 4).

Having described the significance of FDF to Spiti farmers, and how the collection of firewood (being the domain of men’s labor role) is linked to irrigation work (as being the domain of women’s labor role), I will now move on to the main content of this chapter, i.e., the customary laws related to FDF collection and their impact on different user groups. There are two levels of sanctioned customary laws that apply to FDF management in Spiti: customs sanctioned by state laws, analyzed below in Section 1, and customs sanctioned at the village level, analyzed in Section 2. An analysis of state laws related to FDF management (Section 1) will also form the broader legal and historical context for the customary practices at the village level (Section 2).

1: State laws related to Spiti’s commons resources from the 19th to the 20th century

Between the 19th and 20th centuries, Spiti was under three main powers or states: Ladakh (until 1842), the British Empire (1846-1947) and India (after 1947). For a brief period, from 1842-1846, Spiti was under the power of the Jammu kingdom, which, although it did collect taxes, did not seem to have impacted local laws and administration (Jahoda, 2008; Gazetteer, 1883, p. 498). Therefore, below, I will examine how the relevant state laws of the three main powers shaped and impacted customs of managing FDF and power relations between different sections of the community.
1.1 Under Ladakh rule (Until 1842)

There are three types of textual sources regarding the laws implemented under the Ladakhi rule that I have used, in addition to my field observations, to shed light on Ladakhi laws on the management of FDF and its implications on power relations at a village level in Spiti. The first sources are legal documents issued by Ladakhi authorities, mainly Dieter Schuh’s collection of 69 legal documents (as cited in Bray, 2010) as well as in A. H. Francke’s handwritten translations and notes on Joseph Thse-bstan’s copy of tax documents from Sabu and Hena-sku villages in Ladakh (1915, “Bonds and Contracts”, Shelfmark NL 256, Universitätsbibliothec Leipzig). Although no one has systematically collected and studied Ladakhi legal documents issued to people in Spiti, helpful references to such documents can be found in Egerton (1864/2011, pp. 51-52), Shuttleworth’s unpublished History of Spiti (British Library, OICC, Miss Eur. D722/25), and in Lyall (1874, p. 186). The second type of sources on Ladakhi law are the detailed records maintained by colonial British officers in the 19th century (Barnes, 1862; British Parliament, 1864; Lyall, 1874; “Gazetteer,” 1883; Punjab Government of [British India], 1897). The third type of sources are academic studies related to Ladakhi law, mainly those presented by Fernanda Pirie (2005, 2006).

Under the Ladakhi law, all land, including farmers’ fields and village commons, belonged to the King or the State (Pirie 2005). As indicated in British records (Lyall,

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167 I am grateful to John Bray for providing English translations of relevant German texts and for many engaging exchanges of ideas on related topics.
168 These are mainly charters, bonds and contracts that recorded land and taxation privileges and obligations, as well as agreements between parties (usually between the government and a subject).
169 Lyall (1874: 186) states: “At a place called Tashigong, a family of hereditary astrologers (choba) hold two [land] allotments granted to them by the kings of Ladakh free of demand for revenue or [corvee labor].”
1874, p. 182), farmers were “landholders” of their property (which nevertheless belonged to the king of Ladakh) but later became independent owners under British law. The exercise of the Ladakhi king’s powers, however, was mainly confined to the collection of taxes, which happened once a year in Spiti during (or probably right after) the harvest season (Trebeck, 1849, p. 69). Farmers enjoyed de facto autonomy regarding internal matters of the village (Pirie, 2005). Decisions concerning the regulation and enforcement of local laws, including those related to FDF collection (Punjab Government [of British India], 1897, p. 95; Mishra et al., 2003), were made by the village councils (ldun ma). Theoretically, the village council represented all the villagers (yul pa) as a community but, in reality, it was composed only of men holding the status of tax-paying (khral pa) landholders, namely those of the Khangchen households. Khangchen households constitute the main units of production and taxation in Spiti and many other Tibetan societies (Goldstein, 1971; Aziz, 1978). This means that female and male members of non-Khangchen households (i.e., people of Dhutul and caste households) had virtually no say in the formal decision-making processes related to the management of FDF.

170 “Each field belongs to a separate estate or house, and with other fields forms its allotment, supposed to have been originally conferred by the State, and to be now independently held of it” (Lyall, 1874, p. 181).
171 When describing local history under the Ladakhi rule, several farmers mentioned that they had heard their elders mention that a representative of the king of Ladakh used to come to collect the tax contributions. Such accounts match those written by Trebeck (1841, p. 69), who notes: “The authority of the Raja [King] of Ladakh […] is absolute, and is exercised through a chief, who seldom visits [Spiti], except at harvest time, to collect revenue.”
172 If someone from another village collects fuel, fodder and other resources from the village territory, the act is considered stealing. People caught stealing are usually charged a fine. In October 2010, I met two women from Hansa Village who were going to steal birch wood (shing stag pa) from Kyomo Village. They needed the wood for making sturdy brooms used for sweeping grains after threshing.
Before discussing the impact of law under the British rule, I wish to deliberate on the types of taxes that were paid by farmers during Ladakhi rule, including the FDF taxes. This will shed additional light on the significance of FDF and the material basis of the instituted power relations among different categories of farmers at the village level. This description will also contextualize and clarify some of the key local FDF management customs that will be discussed in the next section of this chapter. A better understanding of the different types of taxes paid by farmers is also necessary to clarify that it is not only the “taxpayer” Khangchen households that had tax obligations but also the Dhutul and caste households. The difference between theses households was in the type of taxes that they had to pay.

For the purposes of this study, one way to gain a deeper understanding of the different types of taxes paid by farmers is to look at ‘who pays what to whom’. By “who”, I mean what category of farmers, i.e., in terms of gender, class and caste. By “what”, I mean the type of commodity or service paid by the farmer. And by “to whom”, I want to focus on the kind or level of institution to which the tax is paid. By analyzing these distinctions, we can deduce the source and material basis of the instituted power privileges of different categories of farmers. For example, the higher the institution to which a tax is paid, such as the State at the highest level or the local monastery at the next level, the greater the power privileges (or prestige) of the tax payer.

Every household in the village had tax obligations. The key difference was ‘to whom’ the taxes were paid. There were three main institutions to which tax contributions were made.
These are, starting from the most powerful authority: the State, the local monastery\(^\text{173}\) and the village. Only the Khangchen households were obligated to pay taxes to the State and to the local monastery. The Khangchen households were known as tax-payers (\textit{khral pa}) because only they paid taxes to the state and the taxes were varied and heavy (Lyall, 1874; Goldstein, 1971).\(^\text{174}\) The tax obligations of Khangchen men toward the state mainly included in-kind payments of barley grains as well as the provision of services in the form of corvee labour (\textit{'u lag} and military service (\textit{dmag khral}). As discussed in Chapter 3, these taxes were the material and political basis for the legal privileges granted by the state to Khangchen men as the main property holders and decision makers of the village (also see, French, 1990). Since membership in the local monasteries was limited to the sons of Khangchen households, the tax obligations, which mainly included FDF and grains, were also borne by them (Interview, 2010). The monasteries were thus another major source of power and prestige for the Khangchen households. Having a religious family member (who would most often have been literate) was an important source of power and prestige for the household members. For example, as described in Chapters 4 and 5, the reading of religious scriptures for rituals related to farming and resource management customs are mainly done by monks and these roles represent the most meritorious activities, as opposed to the “sinful” activities that are generally relegated to women and caste members. Since women, as well as members of Dhutul and caste households, had no direct tax obligations toward the state and the monastery, they

\(^{173}\) Both Khyung and Zibug villages paid taxes to the Kee Monastery (\textit{dkyil dgon nor bu dge 'phel}).

\(^{174}\) Lyall (1874, p. 185) noted that the average tax borne by the Khangchen households was “a very heavy charge in Spiti”, especially given its poverty and remoteness. Bray (2008) describes how there was a constant demand for corvee labor, a tax obligation that was much loathed by the farmers. Moreover, the military service tax required that each Khangchen household must send one physically able man to join the Ladakhi army whenever summoned by the king.
exercised no institutional power. It was common for Khangchen households to use or hire members of these underprivileged sections of society to fulfill their tax obligations (Lyal, 1874; Bray, 2008).

It was towards the village that all households had tax obligations. The main tax items were FDF (for the village temple and village stud animals, discussed in Section 2) and barley grains. In addition, farmers also had to provide labor whenever there was a need, e.g., for road construction and for making preparations to receive important guests (e.g., religious and political leaders) to the village. The contributions of FDF and barley grain as well as labor services to the village were borne by all the households except the Beda musicians. Village taxes borne by Khangchen households, however, were more than those contributed by Dhutul and Zo households. Beda musicians were exempted from these taxes because they did not own fields. As noted above, there is a local saying that mentions Beda’s exemption from tax: “Dogs have no load: Beda have no tax” (khyi la ‘gel med, be da la khral med). However, the Beda musicians, as low caste members of the village, were also obligated to provide their professional services of playing music during special occasions and whenever demanded by the Khangchen households. This obligation to play music might be considered a kind of tax contribution by Beda musicians for which they were allowed to live in the village and given alms (bsod nyoms) and other privileges such as the provision of fodder (discussed below, in Section 2).

Similarly, the Zo blacksmiths were required to make metallic tools for farming and household use, which also can be considered a tax obligation, one for which they

\[175\] Taxes paid by Dhutul and Zo households were either called “hearth tax” (dud khral), or sometimes referred to as “small household tax” (khang chung khral). For more details, see Lyall (1874, pp. 184-185).
received a small plot of land for farming (Zo zhing). Thus, all households contributed to the village according to their resources and professions. The difference in the quantity of tax contributed by Khangchen and other households is representative of their greater wealth and power. One unique feature is the non-material nature of Beda’s tax contributions, which is perhaps a key reason why they are said to be “exempt” from taxation and therefore positioned at the bottom of the social structure.

While it is certain from interviews, textual sources and field observations that FDF were provided to the village temple and monasteries as tax, there is no evidence showing that FDF were collected by the Ladakhi state. Since FDF are found throughout Ladakh and are not as valuable in relation to their size and weight, it is very unlikely that these were collected in Spiti and then transported all the way to the capital of Ladakh, Leh, situated several hundred kilometers away. However, it is plausible that some farmers or households in Spiti were obligated to contribute FDF toward the maintenance of the Dangkhar fortress and other properties that belonged to the state, including perhaps for the maintenance of the Nono’s property and animals. At least two legal documents\textsuperscript{176} from the period of Ladakhi rule explicitly indicate that farmers in Ladakh had obligations to provide firewood and dung to the state.\textsuperscript{177} In addition, there are other references to

\textsuperscript{176}The first document, issued in April 1718, is a joint charter between King Nyima Namgyal and his son Dekyong Namgyal. See Schuh, 2008, p. 89. I am grateful to John Bray for pointing me to this source and for providing English language translations of the relevant texts. Although the document was issued nearly a century before the period being discussed in this section, the presence of this obligation in the 18\textsuperscript{th} century indicates a very high likelihood for also having such obligations in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. The second document is Francke’s handwritten translations and notes on Joseph Thse-bstan’s copy of tax documents from Sabu and Hena-sku villages in Ladakh (1915, “Bonds and Contracts”, Shelfmark NL 256, Universitätsbibliothec Leipzig).

\textsuperscript{177}In these legal documents, it is clear that farmers have had obligations to provide fodder, dung and firewood, or related services such as carrying or collecting them, amongst other things, in the form of taxes. For example, John Bray (Personal communication, 26 January 2013) has translated Schuh’s (p. 89)
FDF collection (such as the settlement of boundaries for FDF collection or for rights to collect FDF from certain areas) in several legal documents, including one granted to the Kee Monastery in Spiti. These legal documents thus show that FDF: 1) were essential resources, (2) collected as taxes, 3) led to conflicts among farmers, and 4) that adjudication of management rights and responsibilities often required intervention by authorities of the state.

1.2 Laws under British rule

The FDF management laws inherited from the Ladakhi rule continued under British rule. The main difference under the British rule was that these laws became codified and achieved *de jure* status. This, for reasons explained below, compounded the inequalities characterizing the power relations between Khangchen men and other categories of people living in the village.

An important year in Spiti and Ladakh’s history is 1842, the year when Ladakh lost its independence to the princely state of Jammu. Although Spiti remained under the rule of Jammu for only four years, this turned out to be a significant period because “it bound the

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commentaries on the “provision of liquid manure in spring” as a tax. In the same commentary passage, there is mention of “transport of mowing [as harvest] of lucerne fields in autumn, turn-by-turn securing of dung (from yaks and cattle for fuel) up to the Byang-la [pass], [and the collection of] dung on the hillsides in the valley. When the Changpa come on the outward journey accommodation and half of the [necessary] animal fodder is to be provided.” Similarly, in Francke’s notes on tax documents from Sabu and Hena sku villages, dung is mentioned in two of these documents. The first document (page 11, “No. 1”) concerns the settlement of boundaries between two men for the right to collect manure in Grod valley. The other document, from a tax register from Sabu village, mentions the obligations of certain people to collect and provide their animals for the transport of manure. Therefore, as a tax obligation, farmers in Ladakh had to either provide fodder, dung and firewood (or other services) for the procurement and transportation of manure.

178 See, Shuttleworth’s unpublished *History of Spiti*, British Library, OICC, Miss Eur. D722/25). In one of the notes, Shuttleworth mentions that monks of Kee Monastery produced a document issued by prince Bde-mchog-nam-rgyal of Ladakh sometime in the mid-17th century (“Iron Dragon Year”) that grants rights of pasture and the collection of firewood in upper Spiti, near Khyung, to Kee Monastery.
region once and for all to a South Asian polity rather than to Tibet or Central Asia” (Bray, 2008, p. 48). In 1846, Spiti was separated from Ladakh and annexed to British India according to the Treaty of Amritsar (same year). As an 1864 British House of Commons publication revealed, Spiti was “purposely annexed to British territory in 1846-47, in order to prevent the interposition of a foreign State between Rampur and the shawl-wool districts of Chan[g]than[g]” (British Parliament, 1864, p. 26).

British administrative policy in Spiti and the nearby Himalayan regions was developed to allow the continuance of traditional socio-economic institutions and customs. As a part of this policy, and in order to settle tax revenue issues in these regions, the British compiled administrative records associated with local customs, institutions and other relevant information. Soon after Spiti was annexed to British India, an official named Vans Agnew (Barnes, 136) demarcated the border and fixed a “Summary Settlement” (at Rs. 753) for Spiti. According to Lyall (1874, 183), Vans Agnew had not provided any records or reports of the settlement, which, not surprisingly, led to confusions and misunderstandings between farmers, monasteries and British officials. In 1867, Lyall (p. 234) visited Spiti with the intention to revise its revenue settlement and to compile administrative records of local customs and institutions.

Baker (2003, p. 32) notes the manner in which the 19th century documentation of local customs in Himachal Pradesh was done by the British during those days: “[t]he ‘native voice,’ as it was filtered and interpreted during the codification and settlement process was a ‘male, patriarchal voice, the voice of the dominant proprietary body speaking

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179 Bray writes in reference to Ladakh, which includes and thus applies to Spiti.
against the rights of non-proprietors, females and lower castes”. The new codified laws, as shown with an example of codified irrigation customs of Khyung and Zibug villages in chapter 4, treated Khangchen households as independent owners with a full title, now known as *Zamindar* or “landowner” in Urdu (Lyall, 1874, p. 181). Under the previous Ladakhi rule, the Khangchens were referred to as *khral pa* (“tax-payer” in Tibetan) and regarded as tenants or landholders (Jahoda, 2008). As discussed in chapter 4, the record of customary rights completely overlooked traditionally disadvantaged members of the society, i.e., women and members of Dhutul and caste households. Hence the British codification of customs legitimized and, as I will show below, strengthened, the power privileges of Khangchen men.

In chapter 4, I explained that the use of the term “Zamindar” for Khangchen men not only established them as *de jure* rights holders but also elevated their legal status from that of tenant farmers to that of private landowners. In a similar way, another Urdu term borrowed from the plains of India, called *Shamilat* for village commons (grazing) lands, came with specific legal and policy implications. In one of their measures, adopted to encourage the expansion of agriculture in India, the British “shifted the authority to control the expansions of agriculture into uncultivated areas from the ruler to the landholders of a hamlet” (Baker, 2003, p. 30). In Spiti, this meant that the Khangchen households’ usufruct rights to grazing lands were expanded to include the authority to control the breaking up of village common lands for cultivation. This is to say that, when a poor or landless farmer requested a piece of village common land to be given to him for cultivation according to the *Nautor* rules, the request first had to be approved by the
village council, which was composed of men of Khangchen households. After receiving the village council’s approval, the agreement then had to be approved by the Nono, also known as the Wazir or the honorary magistrate, on behalf of the government (“Gazetteer,” 1883, p. 484; Punjab Government [of British India], 1897, p. 95). Unfortunately, there is no record of these Nautor land grants. Two separate informants mentioned that the last Nono to have held power kept tax and other official records in a “red box” (sgam dmar po), which is rumored to have been misplaced and lost. Discussions with elders and leaders of Spiti suggest that the granting of Nautor lands under British rule was in fact very rare.

Thus, the codification of Spiti’s customary laws led to the legitimization and consolidation of powers held by men of Khangchen households, and, by extension, to the weakening of the already underprivileged groups of the society (Baker, 2003). This was caused, as shown above, by three factors: the process of elicitation and documentation, the introduction of a “Nautor” law to grant new agricultural land to farmers, and the expansion of Khangchen household’s userfruct commons rights to include the breaking up of village common lands for cultivation.

1.3 Laws under the Indian Government

After Indian independence, the new government continued to use the shamilat laws on grazing rights; this is described in the Village Administrative Papers (Wajib-ul-arz) that are held and used by the local officials responsible for land records (Patwari). For example, the text of Wajib-ul-arz mentions that villagers can continue to manage and
utilize their local plant resources according to customary laws without paying fees or taxes. Although there was a great deal of continuity between the system organized under British rule and that utilized by independent India, the Indian government enacted several important laws and injected significant development aid and investment into the region (e.g., over $13 million between 1978 to 1997: Jahoda, 2008). This led to noteworthy improvements in the socio-economic conditions of people, especially women, caste and Dhutul farmers. However, the traditionally powerful sections of the society (i.e., men and Khangchen household members) seem to have accessed the opportunities provided by government development and aid projects more than others.

Jahoda (2008) has discussed some of the Indian laws that brought important changes in Spiti’s administrative and socio-economic structure (pp. 12-15). These laws include the Himachal Pradesh Abolition of Big Landed Estates and the Land Reforms Act of 1953. Together these laws disbanded the large estates owned by the local monasteries. The introduction of the Panchayat administrative system aimed at replacing the traditional sub-district (kothee) system of local administration. It was the recognition of Spiti and nearby regions as “tribal” areas and the transformation of Spiti into a sub-district in its own right in 1960 that allowed significant government aid money to be directly administered to Spiti. Another important law that affected the region as a whole was the “inner-line” law, which, after the India-China war of 1962, demarcated Spiti as a sensitive border region. As a consequence, Spiti was closed to tourists and visitors until 1993. Foreigners were banned and special permits were required to enter Spiti during this time.
Perhaps the most important law passed by the Indian government, which affected power relations between different groups of farmers, was the Himachal Pradesh Nautor Land Rules of 1968. This revised law provided a clear-cut policy to grant land from the village commons, or government-owned “wasteland”, to landless and poor persons in the tribal regions of Himachal Pradesh.

According to one local *Patwari* (land record officer), a lot of land was granted in Spiti soon after the passage of the 1968 Nautor Act (Personal communication, April 2011). In Zibug, between 1968 and 1970, 37 new Nautor fields were distributed. The same *Patwari* mentioned that today there are more Nautor fields in Spiti than there are traditional farms. This suggests that agricultural lands in Spiti have more than doubled as a result of the Nautor Land Acts. This major change, however, does not seem to have benefited the weaker sections of the society any more than the stronger sections of the society. For example, according to an informant in Zibug village, there were three main Nautor land grants under India. In the first land grant initiative, 24 plots of land were granted to Zibug villagers, which were all allocated to Chechang or non-caste members - with the exception of one plot that was provided to a Zo blacksmith on the condition that he would make metal tools for the village. (However, this plot of land was later taken back by the village as the Zo blacksmith decided not to make the implements). In the second Nautor land grant initiative, there were 13 plots, out of which three were granted to Zo caste members. The poorest and the least powerful members of the village, i.e., the Beda, received Nautor lands only on the third initiative. My informant also mentioned that the
land the Beda received was smaller than that given to the others and that, among the three
groups of Nautor lands that were distributed, it was situated farthest from the village.
The fact that women, caste and the traditionally landless farmers had become landowners
had important impacts on social relations of power in the village. The biggest impact was
on labor relations between Khangchen and the poor farmers of the village. In the past, the
poor were so dependent on the Khangchen that, as one man from a nearby village said
(interview, September 2008):

We used to beg the Khangchen households for work despite meager wages. We
had no option. Today, owing to the benevolent government, circumstances have
reversed. They come to us, asking us to work for them.

As cultivated lands have expanded, labor has become more scarce. Scarcity of labor is
particularly strong for Khangchen households because they have the largest lands and
their traditional laborers, who were landless before and easily available, now own their
own land and thus are occupied with working on their fields. Thus, the Khangchen
households are having to go to the Dhutul and caste household members, asking them to
work for them. In order to compensate for labor shortages, today many households keep
paid workers who are from outside of Spiti. The increased scarcity of labor was created
not only by the expansion of Nautor agriculture but also due to the availability of
government jobs, ranging from administrative positions to road construction work. The
government also provided significant aid money to the region, which has in turn brought
many changes.

180 These workers are mostly young men from the Indian state of Bihar.
Jahoda (2008) provides some statistics that show the amount of economic aid poured into Spiti by the Indian government:

“Between 1978 to 1997 (that is, during the sixth, seventh, and eighth Five-Year plans) Rs. 841 million were invested in Spiti’s development” (p. 14).

“In 1993-1994, out of the 4,021 individuals aged fifteen and over, 1,541 were on the payroll of government agencies” (p. 15).

“The purchasing power of the population thus depends to a large extent on the jobs and work provided by the government. Data from the beginning of the 1990s show that approximately 76 percent of income in Spiti derives from salaries, wages, and pensions, while only around 22 percent is earned from agriculture and associated activities” (p. 15).  

Again, while government aid to the region has brought major improvement to people’s living conditions, the level of benefits received by the people is uneven. Informants mentioned that the traditionally powerful sections of the society, such as Khangchen and male members, seem to be the greatest beneficiaries of government aid while the benefits received by weaker members of the society, such as women and those from caste

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181 Jahoda has borrowed these statistics from an unpublished report by Deepak Sanan, an Indian official who had served as the administrative head of Spiti. While there is no reason to doubt the accuracy of these figures, the 22% value for income from agriculture and associated activities may not have included, for example, the value of meat, cheese, milk, dung, barley, fodder, peas, mustard and many other products that the farmers and their animals may have consumed directly. It is true, however, that most households have someone on government payroll, sometimes holding more than one position. For example, one Duthul farmer I interviewed derived his income from three sources: from two government jobs (one as a forest guard and one as a distributor of government subsidized rations) and from the sale of peas that he cultivates in his Nautor fields.
households, are less in terms of both quantity and quality. I provided the example of the Nautor land distribution program, which, although intended to benefit the poorer sections of the society, ended up benefiting the family and relatives of the more powerful members of the society more than the poorest and weakest members. To provide another example, in 2010, there were 36 people on government payroll in Zibug village. Out of the 36 people, 30 were men and 6 were women. Only one of the 36 government employees (male) was from a caste household. And not surprisingly, his position was one of the lowest paid positions: a “part-time-job” to provide drinking water to a primary school of seven children. This observation concerning the way government development programs ended up benefiting different sections of the society differently based on gender, class and caste backgrounds is consistent with intersectional observations made by Harris (2008) in her study of new irrigation projects introduced in Southeastern Turkey. His research likewise highlights the uneven benefits experienced by people based on gender, ethnicity, socio-economic background and other social differences.

Since the middle of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, when Spiti became a part of independent India, there have been no changes in state laws related to FDF collection. The main changes that occurred in Spiti were in the broader socio-economic conditions of the people, which saw significant improvements for all sections of the society. These socio-economic improvements were mainly brought through the granting of Nautor lands to the landless farmers and by pumping in significant government financial aid and investment into the region.
2: Village customs of managing FDF collection

In this section, I use Gururani’s (2000) insights about the significance of local institutional arrangements and de facto customary practices in order to gain a deeper understanding of the claims and contexts of resource use in rural India. Gururani has shown that the state laws of forest management in the Uttarkhand area are one set of *de jure* rules, at least on paper. In actual practice there is a different set of *de facto* claims made by the farmers who collect firewood from the forest and modify these rules on the ground. Specifically, Gururani (2000, p. 183) argues that the “structures and relations of patriarchy, hierarchy, and conflicts suggest that the relations of property are determined not solely by who owns property but more importantly by traditional and institutional arrangements that regulate who controls property” (Gururani, 2000, p. 183). Borrowing this analytical insight on the need to analyze the ‘traditional and institutional arrangements that regulate who controls property’, the following ethnographic study of FDF management in Zibug village in Spiti Valley finds that: (1) the traditional and institutional arrangements that regulate the timing of FDF collection - for example, the timing of the imposition and the lifting of bans on FDF collection - are dependent upon the completion of different stages of agricultural work on the fields owned by Khangchen households, due to which (2) members of Khangchen households are in an advantageous position in the procedural processes (e.g., by controlling the timing of the FDF bans) of these customary institutional arrangements, which, from the perspective of the underprivileged members of the society, are “dangerously” exploitative in nature. Thus, this case study contributes to Gururani’s argument by identifying and emphasizing the need to pay attention to the key linkage between questions concerning who owns certain
property (fields) and the customary institutional arrangements that regulate FDF collection (i.e., the timing of the regulations).

The collection of FDF from the village commons is regulated by two main prohibitory customs: “sickle use ban” (zor ba rgyag mi chog), to prohibit plant collection, and “bound by laws” (sgrigs sdam), to prohibit the collection of dung. There are also restrictions on collecting certain protected plants. For example, in 2010, farmers were not allowed to collect zhilim as this particular plant, traditionally used as mattress insulation, had almost reached a point of extinction within the village territory. Such restrictions will be lifted once the villagers decide that the plant has grown back in sufficient quantities.

In the following section, practices surrounding the imposition and lifting of the two main prohibitory customs (“sickle use ban” and “bound by laws”) will be explicated chronologically, from early spring, before the start of the farming season, to late autumn, or after the end of the harvest season. One of the purposes of this discussion is to highlight how the poor and landless farmers perceive the politics and impact of these customs differently from those of Khangchen households.

Collection of FDF in a calendar year

By early spring, when the snow begins to melt on the mountain slopes, some farmers may have exhausted or be near the end of their stock of fodder, dung, or firewood.\(^{182}\) During

\(^{182}\) My sources of information for this section mainly include participant observation and interviews. In the course of processing data from my fieldwork to writing this section, I have contacted several local farmers and experts numerous times for clarifications and for filling in various gaps in the data. I am thankful to them for providing me with the information and clarifications, and most of all, for their strong support, e.g., in finding out answers or getting information that they did not have. All errors are nevertheless my responsibility. I have also used Kalzang Chhokt’s (2012, Hindi language) description of Spiti’s customs related to agriculture.
this time, people are free to collect FDF in the common areas. However, the mountains are covered in snow and there are hardly any plants growing at this time. The kind of dung that is collected during this time is called *lcī ba thon sgrib* or “dung revealed from covering”, as these have been covered by snow from the previous year. Among the plants that grow in the mountains, only two species of shrubs, *gra ma* (*Caragana versicolor*), and *brab* (*Lonicera sp.*), are available for collection. Most other plants are all dead or without shoot and therefore not useful.

As the days become longer and warmer, farmers engage in preparatory activities for the farming season - such as throwing ash over snow-covered fields as a means to initiate the faster melting of the snow. By early May, farmers in Zibug start ploughing their fields. Owing to its higher altitude, Zibug’s farming activities follow a week or two after those of other villages, which are nearer to the valley floor.

The first main custom that imposes a restriction on the collection of local resources is “sickle use ban” (*zor ba rgyag mi chog*). The ban normally starts from the day of the Summer Solstice (*dbyar nyi ma log pas zhag*: June 21) and lasts for about two months. During the ban, as the name suggests, farmers are not allowed to use the sickle to cut any plant.183

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183 The ban on the use of the sickle applies even in areas that are otherwise outside of village law. For example, there is a strip of land (called *pha rag*) that is jointly owned by Zibug and its neighbouring village Khyung, where people of both villages are free to collect whatever and whenever they want. However, since the ban on the use of the sickle does not apply to territories but rather to the village residents (*yul pa*) themselves, no one is allowed to use the implement anywhere (including in the *pha rag* area).
Farmers believe that the use of the sickle hastens cold windy weather. The ban is lifted only after the crops are fully ripe and ready for harvest. The main purpose of this custom is to allow the plants to grow so that villagers can obtain maximum plant biomass by cutting fully-grown plants later. This purpose is thus a sensible one and also fair because it applies to everyone equally. However, certain customary ways by which the lifting of this ban is implemented, as discussed below, benefit Khangchen households more than others.

During the period of “sickle use ban”, two other customary restrictions are also applicable. People are not allowed to cut or bring wood near the village fields. This is because it is believed that cutting or bringing wood to the village fields during that time will disturb klu, which can dry up water sources and cause weather to get cold and crops to dry up prematurely. Another restrictive belief system that applies during these months is that against the cremation of dead bodies. It is believed that smoke from the cremation fire can pollute the fields, as a result of which crops might be damaged or “lose merit” (bsod nams).

When the time approaches for harvest, the village headman consults either the local doctor or the astrologer, one of whom chooses an auspicious day on which to lift the ban on the sickle and to start the harvest season. In the middle of the local month of Harvest (sel zla\textsuperscript{184} or the 15\textsuperscript{th} day of the sixth Tibetan month, roughly the last week of August), men go to a sacred mountaintop to supplicate the gods and deities (lha gsol) and ask for permission to cut the crops, as well as to thank them for the bountiful harvest in advance.

\textsuperscript{184} The spelling could also be btsas zla.
After lha gsol, farmers are allowed to pull out plants and weeds from the ground by hand (sbar brngas) until the ban on sickle use is lifted. The ban is lifted around the time of the Namgan festival (discussed in chapter 5), which comes a week or two after lha gsol. There is no fixed date for lifting the ban on sickle use. It is decided after taking into consideration crop conditions, water availability and weather. For example, in cases when there is more water or the weather is warmer, the ban is lifted at a later date.

On the chosen auspicious day, first the farmers propitiate\textsuperscript{185} the village deities (yul lha), the god of the land (sa bdag), and serpent spirits (klu) and ask for permission to start the harvest season. After the propitiation ritual, a male member of the village, whose parents are still living, and whose astrological sign meets certain criteria prescribed according to astrological readings, will ritually cut a handful of grass with a sickle three times. After this ritual, other people can use the sickle.

On the same day when the ban on the sickle is lifted, a different restriction is understood as now being imposed on the villagers. Hereafter farmers are not allowed to collect dung from the mountains. This custom is locally called ‘Bound by Law’ (sgrigs sdam) and extends through the time of harvest. This restriction can last from five to eight weeks depending on the weather and the amount of harvest work.

Also, from this day onwards (after lifting “sickle use ban”), farmers of Nautor and “mountain fields” (ri zhing) are free to cut their crops or plants any way that they like. By contrast, the farmers of the traditional fields near the village, which are owned mostly by

\textsuperscript{185} The main text they read is sde brgyad gser skyems or “Golden Beverage to the Eight Sets of Divinities”.

Khangchen households, must follow strict “laws” (khrim) associated with the cutting of plants and crops. Farmers first cut the fodder plants growing between field slopes (klungs rtsa: “field plants”), and then they cut the crops. Thereafter they cut the fodder plants growing on the mountains (ri rtsa). Farmers move from one stage of harvest to the next only after all other farmers have completed each stage. For example, until all the farmers have finished cutting the plants from their field slopes, no one is allowed to progress to the next stage of work.

The first day of cutting “field plants” for fodder is dedicated to the village doctor. This rule is considered a tax obligation (khral) towards the village doctor in return for his services. Labor for cutting “field plants” for the village doctor is provided by the villagers on a turn-by-turn basis or according to a throw of dice (cho lo).

On the second day, villagers cut the field plants of the village temple and of the medium of the village deity (lus g.yar). This is also considered a tax obligation of the village, paid in return for the services provided by the temple and the medium of the village deity. On the same day, villagers will also cut the “field plants” of anyone who may be sick and unable to work. As on the first day, labor needed is performed by villagers on a turn-by-turn basis or through a throw of dice.

Starting from the third day and continuing for the next two or three days is a custom called “Lungsa Gongwa” (klungs rtsa dgongs pa). According to this custom, farmers can make a request to the village council for labor assistance in cutting their field plants.
Approval is almost always granted - for the small fee of a jug of beer (chang rdza gang). In 2010, farmers had the option of paying a jugful of full barley beer or three bottles of alcohol or the equivalent sum of 60 rupees.

Khangchen households with greater cultivable land seek Lungsa Gongwa. For a small customary fee, these households will get assistance in their work and the rest of the village will wait until the Khangchen household’s work is completed. While Lungsa Gongwa benefits Khangchen households, the poor farmers feel they have no need for this custom.

As one community leader from a Dhutul household noted, Lungsa Gongwa and the larger restrictions on collecting dung (“bound by law”, discussed later) constitute a “very dangerous technique” (“bahut khatarnak tarika” in Hindi, personal communication, October 2010) of exploiting the labor of poor farmers. Although this prevails in a village context, his words reminded me of Foucault’s (1976) idea of “biopower”, the techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations by modern nation states. Lungsa Gongwa constitutes a “dangerous technique” of controlling and subjugating landless farmers to work on rich farmers’ fields because labor assistance is sought under conditions when the poor are made free of work through putting restrictions on the collection of dung and plants. Since the poor have no other work to do, they are compelled, by custom and by the power of the rich, to provide their labor. If, for example, the village commons were not sealed by ‘Bound by Law’ (sgrigs sdam), the poor farmers would have the option to collect dung. Similarly, if during the same time, villagers were
not restricted from using the sickle on the village commons, the poor farmers would have the option of collecting fodder. The poor farmers thus find themselves in a frustrating but inescapable condition. They have been stopped from using the village commons for fodder and dung collection for Lungsa Gongwa, a custom that serves only the rich farmers. They find themselves having nothing to do exactly when their rich landlords make formal (through the village council) requests for labor assistance. The customary practices and power of the rich obliges them to provide their labor for free. As the Dhutul community leader explained, “these customs are not good because the labor assistance is not provided out of freedom but because they have been compelled by social custom to assist those with more land” (interview, October 11, 2010).

After the completion of the Lungsa Gongwa work, everyone cuts plants on their own fields. This custom is called Jima (ji ma), which takes two to three days, after which another day or two is provided for carrying and stocking the fodder plants. As in most agricultural communities, women perform most of the labor in cutting the plants. This includes cutting plants, stacking, and carrying and stocking plants in storage. As previous discussions show, men perform most of the ritual and decision-making roles. After Jima, it is time to harvest the crops. Again crops are harvested according to strict customary regulations – first they harvest mustard (nyung dkar) and then barley – which are discussed in chapter 5. After the barley is harvested and left to dry, it is time for farmers to cut those plants growing in the village commons.
This custom of cutting plants from the village commons is known as “Risa” or mountain plants (ri for mountain and rtsa for plants). The cutting of plants in the village commons is normally done between the time of the harvest and the threshing of the crops, during which time the harvested crops are left out to dry in the sun. However, if the weather is cold, windy or possibly getting wet, farmers complete the crop-related work and ensure that the barley grains are stocked in the granary before the cold wet season ensues.

Risa are collected according to customary laws, similar to those concerning the collection of Lungsa or field plants. On the first day of Risa, farmers cut fodder for stall-feeding of the village stud animals, which are either kept at the village temple or with the lus g.yar (literally, the “one who lends his body” to the village deity or, simply, the village oracle). This is a requirement, a village tax (khral), for every household, which must contribute fodder equivalent to the weight of a heavy stone (rdo) balanced on a weighing scale (srang). That is why this tax is known as Dorang (rdo’i srang) or Stone Weight. In 2010, Zibug had an Indian bull and a stud yak, which are looked after by the deity temple caretakers (Limi or lha yi mi). At one time, Zibug village kept a stud horse but they do not do so anymore as most villagers have sold their horses.

On the second day, people go to the mountains to collect fodder for their own animals. After Risa is collected and the mountains are made barren of fodder plants and firewood,

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186 Although any plant that is good for fodder is cut, certain plants such as Sekya and Tsiri, which also have other important uses, are more coveted. For example, Sekya’s shoot is used as mulch during the first irrigation (Yurma, see chapter 4) and its root is used for bedding, which is spread on the floor and used as a mattress for insulation. Tsiri is used to spread over the roof because it makes the shoveling of snow easier during the snowy winter months. Unlike in Canada, where people shovel snow from their front walkways and driveways, farmers in Spiti shovel snow from the roof of their houses. Having Tsiri plants on top of their stack of plant materials on the roof makes the shoveling of snow easier.
farmers complete their remaining agricultural work such as threshing, winnowing, washing and storing of barley grains and leftover hay. Once the grains are washed (*chu thon*) and brought home, villagers convene a meeting to decide on a day to collect dung from the mountains. This custom of “finally” allowing people to collect dung, as emphasized by a Duthul informant, is referred to as the ‘opening of the laws’ for dung collection (*sgrigs phyed*).

The precise day of the commencement of dung collection is decided after a meeting. Like Lungsa and Risa customs, there is a purposeful order for the collection of dung. On the first day, dung may only be collected for village monks living at the local monastery. Since caste household members are not allowed to admit their sons to the local monastery, they are not allowed to collect dung on that day. In the past, only Khangchen household members were allowed to send monks to the monastery. Thus, the first day of dung collection was the exclusive privilege of Khangchen households. From the perspective of caste and Dhusul household users, this is an extremely unfair arrangement - because for months they have been waiting to collect dung due to the farming activities of Khangchen households. However, when the ban is finally opened, it is the Khangchen household members who get to collect the best and the nearest dung first.

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187 According to elders, in the past villages had to contribute FDF to the local monastery. All villages associated with a monastery made these contributions on a turn-by-turn basis. These days, villages are simply required to contribute some fodder and cash in place of firewood and dung. Monasteries now buy subsidized wood from the government.
Dhutul users have advocated for their rights at the village council. A village leader from a Dhutul household reported that he once “raised the issue of their disadvantaged position within the ‘Bound by Law’ custom at a village council meeting.” He had argued that “households with extra people who are free with no work should be allowed to collect dung during that time because these households also have more mouths to feed” (interview, October 11, 2010). After hearing his suggestions, the 56 member village council approved an exception to the Bound by Law custom to allow the collection of dung from a specific area that was commonly owned between Zibug and Khyung villages. This new rule was implemented for a few years but later removed after arguments erupted over accusations of collecting dung from restricted areas. This temporary amendment nevertheless shows that the embeddedness of resource management customs in social relations is not a fixed or permanent social reality but a set of evolving and negotiated relationships (Cleaver, 2000).

The second day of dung collection is reserved for the village temple. Every full-tax paying household must contribute a large sack (phad) of dung as a tax payment to the village temple. No one is allowed to collect more than his or her “tax” contribution for that day. People are allowed to collect for themselves without any restriction only from the third day until the next ‘Bound by Law’ is implemented.

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188 Another example of changing social relations in resource management institutions would be the role of Beda musicians. In the previous chapter, I described how a Beda man of Zibug village successfully negotiated with the village council and the village deity to free his class of people from traditional, secular musical obligations towards the village.
Conclusion

Like water, FDF are essential resources for farmers living in the arid and high Himalayas. FDF are collected during the summer months and stocked for use during the long snowy winters. In Spiti, it was customary for men to collect firewood. I have argued that men’s role in firewood collection was related to a broader division of labor in which women were responsible for irrigation work. This gendered division of labor was necessitated by many factors, including cultural practices (the traveling with yaks being the exclusive domain of men) and belief systems (ascribing masculinity to mountains and femininity to water bodies); geographical factors of climate (short growing seasons and long snowy winters) and resource endowment (water, FDF and labor being scarce in sparsely populated regions of the arid Himalayas); and finally, the skill and strength requirements needed for tasks that only adults can provide (irrigation requiring a high level of expertise and care, and firewood collection requiring physical endurance and strength).

The significance of FDF to traditional livelihood is underscored by the fact that centuries old legal documents from the time of the Ladakhi kingdom show that FDF were collected as taxes. Since the time of Ladakhi rule, regulation and management of FDF collection were done autonomously at the village level. During the time of Ladakhi rule, men of “tax-paying” Khangchen households made all decisions regarding the regulation and management of local resources, including FDF. These men enjoyed various power privileges including exclusive rights to all farming lands, irrigation sources and membership in the village council, where all village level decisions are made. Men of

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189 Although FDF is still collected as tax at the village level and these were also collected by the local monastery, there is no evidence that FDF was historically collected by the Ladakhi state in Spiti.
Dhutul and caste households, as well as women, did not have these power privileges - partly because they did not or were not obligated to pay taxes to the state. These practices and customs were allowed to continue under British rule. The British codified these practices and customs in law, and introduced new legal terminology (such as “Zamindar” and “shamilat”) and practices (such as the breaking up of wasteland for cultivation) in Spiti that legitimized and consolidated the power privileges of Khangchen men and thus further weakened the other sections of the society. In particular, the new laws transformed the Khangchen farmers, who had previously been tenants under the state, into official landowners (Zamindars). This put them in a position where they now had a say as to whether unused common lands (shamilat) could be broken up for cultivation. However, at the same time, the new laws remained silent on the rights of women and members of Dhutul and caste households.

Although the Indian government co-opted British administrative laws and policies for the region, the relative power of Khangchen households diminished as many other villagers became independent landowners and full tax-paying members of the village council. The customs regulating FDF collection are an integral part of the farming-related activities of the village. The timing of these regulatory customs are dependent on the completion of different stages of farming-related activities (specifically those of the Khangchen households). These household members can control the timing of FDF regulation customs by speeding up or slowing down their own farming work. In addition, these customs include specific regulations like lung rtsa dgongs pa and sgrigs spe yag, the costs and benefits of which are felt disproportionately between Khangchen and poorer
farmers. From the perspective of the Khangchen households, the FDF customs are fair and beneficial because these customs help them function as a community. However, from the perspective of poor farmers, these customs can serve as “very dangerous techniques” of controlling labor and access to resources. For example, at the beginning of harvest season, right when different restrictions are imposed to stop farmers from collecting FDF, the custom of Lungsa Gongwa is instituted; this benefits Khangchen farmers by not only making the rest of the village wait on their farming activities until their work is completed but also compelling other farmers, including landless farmers, to provide their labor for free.

To showcase all of this is to make two arguments. First, contributing to the body of literature concerning resource management in Tibetan Buddhist villages, this chapter argues that Tibetan Buddhist villages are hierarchical and male-dominated societies, where the management of resources is not equitable - especially if we look at its impact from the perspective and experiences of the less powerful sections of the society. This is to further argue an equally obvious point: that most aspects of Tibetan society - be they traditional education, music, mountain cult, or farming - impact different social groups differently. The benefits of analyzing the impact of different customs and practices on different sections of the society, particularly from the perspective of gender and of underprivileged members, is that it can help provide a more nuanced and accurate analysis. This in turn can help overcome problems associated with the kind of essentialist representations that are generally used to portray Tibet (Shakya, 2001).
Second, this chapter contributes to a body of literature that argues that resource management customs and practices in rural areas are better understood within their broader historical contexts (Guha, 2000; Baker, 2003), as well as within the local specificities of culture, politics and economy (Gururani, 2000). This chapter demonstrates that such an approach provides a richer appreciation of customs and practices, as well as changing regulations over time, thus helping us to understand the experience and impact of different resource governance regimes. The Himalayan case study shows that a key to understanding the micro-politics of FDF management is to examine which group(s) of users benefit the most by the traditional and institutional arrangements that control the timing of access to these resources. In the case study village, before Indian independence, the traditional Khangchen households constituted the village council and thus controlled all internal village affairs, including FDF management. In the current context, although the historical Khangchen households do not have exclusive control over the village council, the FDF customs continue to benefit them more than they do other users.
7. Conclusion

Studying different resource sectors relationally

This research has been inspired by a gap in the understanding concerning issues of inequity in the social organization of irrigation management in western Himalayan Buddhist villages in North India. Focusing particularly on users’ caste, class and gender roles, this study set out to critically examine issues of equity in the irrigation systems of two case study villages in Spiti Valley. The main argument of this thesis is that issues of (in)equity in the social organization of Spiti’s local irrigation system are best understood by expanding the scope of study beyond that of irrigation to include different resource sectors. These sectors (i.e., FDF), which are embedded in the local social structure, are then examined relationally and seen as part of a broader division of labor related to farming customs. This concluding chapter demonstrates how the central argument of this thesis is supported by the studies presented in chapters 3 to 6. After this synthesis, the chapter concludes by explicating the main theoretical and policy implications of the study and presenting further research recommendations.

Chapter 3 began with a description of the village social structure and presented an extended historical background as a means to understand the origins and the changing nature of the village social structure and the embedded power relations that exist between farmers based on gender, class and caste relations. The most important contribution of

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190 Here, it is worth clarifying once again that Spiti is not a caste-based society. The term “caste” is deliberately used in a critical manner alongside the broader category of “class” as a way to emphasize the fundamental forms of discrimination that members of Zo and Beda households experience, specifically as a result of their “caste” status. This term deserves to be a separate analytical category in this study because the material and symbolic aspects of inequity in resource management and farming roles are most severe and unique for these members. This local reality becomes extremely important from an intersectional
Chapter 3 is the development of a hypothesis regarding the Khangchen system of taxation as originating from the time of the Tibetan Empire (7th to 9th century AD). This hypothesis is in part based on a 13th century Tibetan historical text, *ldeu chos ‘byung*, which explicitly identifies Spiti as one of the “little thousand districts” of the lower Zhangzhung region of the Tibetan Empire. Since there are no primary textual sources concerning Spiti’s linkages to the Tibetan Empire, I draw on recent academic studies which are based on the primary textual sources of the Tibetan Empire. I use these texts to shed light on the meaning and characteristics of the “thousand district” and to elaborate on similarities in the functional and structural characteristics of the administrative system of the Tibetan Empire and that of Spiti’s old Khangchen system of administration. I argue that these similarities support the hypothesis, in particular because they do not coincide with any of the other regimes that have ruled Spiti. The hypothesis that the Khangchen system of administration was originally instituted during the Tibetan Empire is significant for this study because it provides a historical period (7th to 9th century AD) and context (military administrative system of the Tibetan Empire) for understanding the origin of Spiti’s most important class of household as well as the legal basis upon which these households first received rights to the farming lands and irrigation sources of the village. I conclude that the Khangchen system of administration and taxation in Spiti Valley has remained relatively stable because the different colonial regimes that ruled the region were not interested in uprooting the established socio-economic structures.

perspective because, unlike members of Khangchen and Dhutul households, who constitute the majority of the village, caste members are deemed to be an irrevocably “dirty” or “impure” group. As a result, they are not only socially forced to remain an endogamous group but are also not allowed to perform certain irrigation and farming rituals or to enter certain spatial contexts that are deemed sacred (for fear of pollution by their mere presence). In addition, as I argue below, these exclusionary customs have important theoretical implications.
Chapter 3 also described how the policies of different regimes have shaped and affected local gender, caste and class relations, which in turn sheds light on how contemporary inter-user group relationships evolved historically. I argue that the Khangchen administrative system has persisted to this day because the system was used as the basis of collecting taxes by all successive regimes that ruled Spiti Valley until the end of British rule in 1947. After 1947, the Indian government abolished taxation but continued the British policy of protecting and allowing local customary laws and practices, including the special privileges that are held by the Khangchen households, to continue. This analysis therefore suggests that the power relations that exist, at least between the Khangchen and the Dhutul households, have lasted for more than a thousand years.

While the overall village social structure, based as it is on the Khangchen system of taxation, has been relatively stable, Chapter 3 also emphasizes how internal gender, caste and class relations have been fluctuating due to the administrative policies enacted by the British, as well as by those of the current Indian government. I show how colonial British laws further legitimized and consolidated the powers held by the Khangchen households. The perpetuation of the Khangchen’s status occurred mainly through the conversion of this group from their traditional role as tenant farmers (under previous regimes) to that of private owners of the fields. In addition, under the British rule, Khangchen men also benefited from the use of new legal terminology (e.g., Zamindar and Shamilat) as well as certain procedural rights (e.g., requirement of the Village Council’s approval for the “breaking of wasteland”). The Independent Indian government, on the other hand, while
allowing the traditional laws to continue, introduced economic, educational and administrative measures that provided significant improvements in local livelihood, particularly for the traditionally underprivileged members of caste and Dhutul households. This government granted land to landless farmers, including women and caste members, such that all of the households in the two case study villages had their own land. The Indian government also established free secular schools, which served the community irrespective of caste, class and gender background. In addition, the Indian government has also invested heavily in local economic development, especially through the creation of bureaucratic, administrative and construction jobs. All of these changes have impacted labor relations between farmers. Through education, as well as the acquisition of new skills on the part of villagers, the labor market has widened. This trend is connected not only with new opportunities presented through government employment but also through opportunities associated with the growth of tourism. All of this has had an impact on local farming practices. For example, the supply of agricultural labor has become increasingly scarce due not only to the increase in the size of cultivated lands but also due to the expansion of the commercial farming of green peas and apples. As stressed in this study, the onus of farm labor in Spiti is borne mainly by women; this is increasinly the case as more men get involved in government administrative and construction-related jobs. Another important development is that the traditionally landless farmers, who once had no choice but to work on the Khangchen lands, are now more economically independent due to the fact that they now have their own land as well as the opportunity to engage in alternative sources of work. In order to make up for the shortage of farm
labor, a new practice of recruiting farm workers from outside of the valley has therefore become popular in recent decades.

In Chapter 4, I described Spiti’s irrigation system based on a detailed analysis of the relevant legal texts as well as all the irrigation management roles and activities that are performed in a year. This chapter describes how farmers in Spiti Valley allocate and manage irrigation water based on caste, class and gender differences. Based on observational studies and interviews, I demonstrated that water allocation is based on a rotational system that benefits Khangchen households; in this system, a larger number of “small households”, comprised of a mix of Dhutul and caste households, receive significantly less water than the (fewer) Khangchen households. I concluded that the management of irrigation-related tasks is largely the domain of women. However, there are intersectional differences between women groups in terms of the actual performance of these roles. The most powerful women, those of the Khangchen households, perform what is regarded as the most important work related to the irrigation system. This includes the annual ritual of connecting irrigation sources at the main spring, the “drawing” of blueprints of irrigation channels in the field, and the management of the first three waterings of the year. The hired women of Dhutul and caste households take responsibility only after the third or fourth waterings, as all subsequent waterings are considered relatively less technical or important. Women of Dhutul and caste households also assist the Khangchen women in digging, lifting and pushing dirt to make the channels and dikes according to the “drawings” or blueprints made by the Khangchen women. Caste women do not participate in the annual inauguration ritual, because of
purity stipulations. I conclude that such purity rules constitute a symbolically potent facet of discrimination (discussed below under theoretical implications).

Although the study of irrigation-related roles presented in Chapter 4 describes who does what in the irrigation system, as well as outlining how each task is done, the findings of this in-depth study of the irrigation-related laws, history and management practices do not shed any light on the processes that facilitate the ongoing participation of disadvantaged irrigation user groups in the system. The scope of study is then expanded from irrigation to that of broader farming-related activities (Chapter 5), in general, and to FDF collection practices (Chapter 6), in particular. Specifically, Chapter 5 shed light on the factors and socio-economic processes that help explain the ongoing participation of Dhutul and caste women in irrigation. Chapter 6 shed light on different factors, practices and belief systems that show gendered division of labor for irrigation (being mainly a domain of women) and firewood collection (being mainly a domain of men) being interlinked.

The study presented in Chapter 5 seeks to understand the functional logic that makes disadvantaged irrigation user groups participate in the system. When I asked lower caste and Dhutul households why they cooperate in the irrigation process, their answers suggested that they view it as a reciprocal exchange for land. A similar explanation was also provided when I asked caste or Dhutul men why they work as tillers for Khangchen households. In return for their services, the tillers get a piece of land and a proportion of irrigation water for farming. This exchange of goods (land and water in this case) and
services (tilling and irrigating) are best understood as examples of instituted processes of the local farming economy, which, according to Polanyi (1957), facilitate the recurrent movement or circulation of goods and services in the local economy through exchange, reciprocity and redistribution.

Based upon the material and analysis presented in Chapter 5, I concluded that the marginal user groups participate in the irrigation system because they are compensated through customary systems of exchange and reciprocity related to the institution of Chumpa (irrigator). Here, it is important to highlight that the institution of Chumpa binds the Khangchen and the irrigator’s household in more than an exchange of labor for land. The institution of Chumpa binds the two households in a repetitive exchange of material as well as symbolic social benefits. For example, it is customary - but not necessary - for the Khangchen to hire the irrigator’s husband as the Thongpa (Tiller). The Chumpa and the Thongpa also constitute the main members of the Khangchen households’ Mugthul (work team) during the two busiest farming activities of the year (i.e., tilling and harvesting). Because the Thongpa and Chumpa represent symbolic members of the Khangchen household, it is also customary for the Khangchen household to provide meals for them during special occasions such as weddings and prayer ceremonies. This mutual relationship also functions regularly in other contexts, such as the provision of assistance for the construction of homes or providing various forms of support during times of sickness and death. These examples illustrate how Dhutul and caste women’s participation in the irrigation system provides them with multiple and recurring socio-economic benefits through the reciprocal relationship of the Chumpa and the Khangchen
household. In other words, marginal user groups participate in seemingly inequitable resource management systems because it provides them access to other resources (e.g. land, yaks) and benefits (employment for other members of their household) through instituted processes of the local economy (Polanyi, 1957). It also shows that inequality in labor relations is normalized through institutions and norms.

While the study described in Chapter 5 shed light on the instituted processes by which marginalized user-groups participate in the irrigation system, it only shed some light on the gendered nature of irrigation-related activities. The description of broader farming-related activities and roles shows that just as women are exclusively responsible for irrigation, there are other farming-related activities that are done only by men (such as tilling and all other activities that require the use of yaks). While this suggests that irrigation roles as women’s domain is part of a broader gendered division of labor, it does not provide any explanation as to why irrigation is a domain of women and not men or both. This explanation is provided in Chapter 6.

Informed by field observations and discussions with farmers from throughout the Spiti Valley, as well as by British colonial records, Chapter 6 emphasized how the specific labor roles associated with firewood collection and irrigation management are closely linked. Both irrigation water management and firewood collection must be carried out regularly during the same short growing season because both are absolutely essential for survival (and neither of these roles can be carried out during the long winter months). This necessitates a customary division of labor amongst the household members to ensure
that the regular and often simultaneous performance of irrigation and firewood collection is successfully accomplished. Division of labor in the household is based on gender and not on age because of a combination of factors, including the technical proficiency of irrigation work, the difficult physical tasks associated with firewood collection, and, most importantly, local belief systems that characterize water as being feminine and mountains as being masculine. Here is a brief explanation of these factors based on considerations for demand for irrigation and FDF collection within any given household. Irrigation is a highly technical task that requires specific skills, specialized knowledge and close attention, which therefore requires that it be performed by strong capable adults. While there are some elderly women who do irrigation work, they either serve mainly as helpers or they have much smaller fields to irrigate. Irrigation for a Khangchen household’s large fields is a tiring task because the watering of the fields is done slowly and meticulously using basic hand tools like adze hoes—a task which requires constant bending for long durations of time. The element of physical difficulty is particularly pronounced for the collection of firewood, a task which requires uprooting thorny shrubs from high and distant mountains. Firewood collectors, who have traditionally been men, must also control and use yaks for the carrying and transporting of firewood (Egerton, 1864/2011), which again requires not only experience but also physical strength. Therefore, both irrigation management and firewood collection roles have unique technical difficulties and physical challenges that make these tasks the domain of strong, adult laborers, thus leaving out children and elders. Between the healthy and strong men and women, the division of roles becomes uniquely gendered as a host of local beliefs, customs and practical requirements support the delegation of tasks associated with irrigation to women
and those associated with firewood collection to men. Local beliefs include the characterization of water (the object of irrigation management) as feminine and mountains (the site of firewood collection) as masculine. Local customs include roles associated with controlling draft animals with men and farming-related roles with women. All these factors align to suggest that a gendered division of labor can represent a culmination of various factors - such as climate, history, geography, as well as certain cultural beliefs and practices.

**Theoretical implications**

There is a tendency to view local or traditional communities as practicing more equitable resource distribution and management, particularly as compared to state or industrial models. The present study shows that this assumption has persisted partly due to a lack of attention to the socially-ascribed nature of resource management roles that are based on farmers’ caste, class and gender backgrounds. Furthermore, I argue that the basis on which resource management is generally practiced in so-called “traditional” or “indigenous” societies has been at times depicted as equitable based on the principles of proportionality and transparency in the allocation of rights and responsibilities. Being general features of locally-managed systems, these may be misunderstood as representing particular regions (e.g., Himalayan, Andean, African, etc.) or cultures (e.g., Tibetan, Nepalese, etc.) - or even certain pre-modern groups (i.e., “traditional” or “indigenous” societies, etc.). This analytical distinction between features of locally-managed resources and internal inequities of gender, caste and class roles should be made explicit in the literature to help avoid misleading assumptions. The assumption is misleading because
while farmers’ local resource management practices may be described as equitable from certain perspectives - such as by those comparing farmer-managed models against state-managed models or from the perspective of local elites, such as Khangchen men (who are not only the main beneficiaries but also the main managers of the system) - this study emphasizes the perspectives of marginal user groups who experience different degrees of inequity in accessing and managing these resources.

Based on the critical understanding that society is structured according to relations of power, this analysis examined various intersectional dimensions of inequity in farming and resource management practices. It showed that the division of labor for all farming and resource management tasks are based on gender, class and caste backgrounds. It further demonstrated that equity dimensions in these relationships can be better explained through the understanding of various instituted processes that bind these roles to each other through local customs of reciprocal exchange across farming and related resource management customs. The implications of this approach are significant because most field-based studies focusing on rural resource management practices concentrate on a singular area, such as irrigation management (see e.g., Kelly, 1983 for a review of anthropological studies on irrigation). My study demonstrated that, even with knowledge of all irrigation activities and their social and legal contexts, only a partial understanding of the social organization of any given irrigation system can be cultivated. This is because, as demonstrated in chapters 4, 5 and 6, farmers’ gender, caste and class roles, as they play out in the local irrigation system, are linked to those in farming and related
resource systems through certain institutional processes that integrate and mobilize all these practices.

The insights gained in this research directly contribute to theoretical approaches and frameworks that emphasize the contextual understanding of resource management practices. A number of political ecologists (e.g., Mosse, 1997; Agrawal & Sivaramakrishnan, 2000; Cleaver, 2003; Agrawal, 2003; Harris, 2006, 2008; Agarwal, 2007) have argued that studies of resource management practices that overlook issues of politics and history will fail to account for local specificities. My study uses this approach, specifically the agrarian environments framework (Agrawal & Sivaramakrishnan, 2000), which was specifically designed for rural South Asian contexts and explicitly emphasizes the examination of agrarian class, caste and gender roles within historical contexts and as linked to influences of state and market.

In applying the theoretical framework of agrarian environments, this study found that while the framework is helpful in uncovering micro-level issues of politics that are conditioned by shifting political conditions, it suffers from a weakness in that it cannot explain why these relations operate within any given economy. In other words, there is a gap in the analytical focus between micro-level issues of politics between user groups and macro-level factors of state and environment. This medium level analysis highlights a critical gap for researchers interested in understanding how the social dimension of resource management actually functions. In order to redress this gap, this thesis adopted a Polanyian analysis of the economy as an “instituted process” (Polanyi, 1957) as a means
to explain the mechanisms by which the village economy continues to function despite internal conflicts or inequalities. While the benefits of the Polanyian approach have been acknowledged and demonstrated by Walter Neale (1957), this study also emphasized the theoretical strength of the approach in establishing how different resource sectors and farming activities are related within an integrated system. This study used this approach to show how the institutions of Thongpa, Chumpa and Mugthul bind rich and poor farmers in reciprocal relationships of labor exchange.

The analysis of the linkages between different resource sectors and farming-related activities constitute a key element of this study. Some of the functional linkages between farming and related resource sectors shown in this study can be made explicit here. The first area of linkage is in village institutions such as the Village Council, Village deity temple and village astrologer, each of which plays a key authoritative role, such as decision making or determining religious dedications, in the main aspects of farming and resource management customs. These institutions function at the village level and are responsible for the coordinated functioning of local livelihood activities according to customs. The actions and decisions made by these institutions in relation to one resource often affects other resource sectors as well. The second area of linkage that affects the functioning of different resource sectors in an inter-related fashion is the social organization of labor, which is based on the farmers’ gender, caste and class relations. This point does not require further explanation as it is described in detail in this study. Here an important observation is that each farmer’s livelihood roles are determined not so much by their individual capacity but by their gender, caste and class backgrounds. The
third area of operational linkage is observed at the level of instituted processes of local economy, here identified as the institutions of Thongpa, Chumpa and Mugthul, which bind farmers from all social classes across different resource sectors through customary practices of exchange and reciprocity. Fourth, as demonstrated by the instituted processes of Chumpa, labor roles in one resource sector (e.g., irrigation) are not only linked to farming activities (the irrigator gets a piece of land in return for her services, etc.) but also to the social organization of other resources (e.g., the gendered division of labor for irrigation and firewood collection). This indicates that the linkages in the social division of labor in farming and related resource sectors are multilayered and that their understanding demands an appreciation for the division of labor not only at the level of the village but also at the level of the household. Their understanding also demands a consideration of geographical, historical and cultural factors. Lastly, the linkages between farming and related resource sectors should not only be analyzed in terms of who does what, why, and where, but also when. The temporal aspect of the linkages is an important one because, as the discussions in chapter 5 and 6 show, farming and resource management activities are done according to stringent regulations that all villagers must follow. Many of these laws are related to the specific timing of different activities. For example, in Spiti, a new stage of farming work can only start when all the households complete all the work related to the previous stage. These timing regulations also directly affect what aspects of irrigation are engaged in and when irrigation management is done. As Chapter 6 demonstrated, the timing of farming activities also directly regulates what and when FDF can be collected. These linkages constitute the main findings of this study and can be used for comparison purposes for future studies.
The main analysis of this study is concerned with the intersectional dimensions of power relations between farmers’ gender, caste and class roles in farming, irrigation and FDF collection practices. This study found that the power dynamics between gender, caste and class categories are consistent across farming and resource management practices, which are all embedded in the local socio-economic structure. Supporting the main argument of intersectional theory, this study found that privileged groups (such as Khangchen men) enjoy multiple advantages, while certain intersectionally disadvantaged groups (such as caste women) face multiple disadvantages. The findings also validate arguments that emphasize the importance of analyzing the intersection of gender and poverty (Harris, 2008) or socio-economic class (Sultana, Mohanty, & Miraglia, 2013) as the main determinant of people’s status and livelihood roles in Spiti. However, this study also found that caste, which here refers to a unique class of households which are deemed irrevocably impure and thus permanently ascribed to low class or “caste” status, is the most revealing category of analysis from an intersectional perspective. This is especially true in the context of certain religious rituals in which caste members, particularly caste women, are not permitted to participate.

Chapter 4 provided a case study of an irrigation system managed by women. The Spiti case study is informative about gender and irrigation in many ways. It shows that women’s participation - and lack of participation - in irrigation should not be seen as being indicative of power (or the lack thereof). The study found that women’s exclusive management of irrigation is due to a broader division of household labor which is
conditioned by a complex of geographical, cultural and social factors in which men are responsible for collecting firewood. The case study also advanced the analysis of gender issues beyond the dichotomy of “male-versus-female” to an “intra-women” approach, exploring power relations between different groups of women based on their class and caste. The most important finding is that the main irrigation inauguration ritual is only undertaken by non-caste female members, or perhaps (if necessary) by a non-caste male member - but never by caste members. The non-participation of caste women in important irrigation (and also in key farming) rituals therefore represents an example of “non-voluntary noncooperation” (Agarwal, 2007), which is an indirect but significant form of discrimination. This form of exclusion in ritual activities has deep social implications that are more powerful than, if not the symbolic basis for, the various day-to-day discriminations vetted against certain target groups.

There are two theoretical implications of this finding. First, it suggests that, in certain contexts, caste women face greater discrimination from high status women than from men of their own caste. In fact, in day-to-day life, caste men can also face discrimination not only from non-caste men but also from non-caste women. These observations are comparable to the situation faced by African-American women living in North America; as noted by Angela Davis: “black women seem to achieve greater equality with men of their race relative to white women because [of] conditions of slavery and white supremacy” (1981, as cited by McCall, 2005, p. 1880). While slavery and white supremacy do not exist in Spiti, the non-caste members do believe that they are superior to caste members due to notions of purity, as well as the rigid social barriers that serve to
emphasize and maintain differences between these groups. Second, this approach contributes to recent calls for analyses of gender and social differences “to be grounded historically, geographically and *practically* – in relation to specific practices that hold importance for daily lives, work, and social relations” (Harris, 2006, p. 210). Specifically, this analysis responds to Nightingale’s (2011) calls for analyzing “the ways in which boundaries between bodies, spaces, ecologies and symbolic meanings of difference are produced and maintained relationally through practices of work and ritual” (p. 153). This study has emphasized that an analysis of the ways in which certain minority groups are barred from religious rituals connected to farming and resource management systems is particularly important when attempting to understand how discriminatory practices against low caste members, particularly female caste members, are produced and maintained. This angle of analysis has theoretical potential because of the symbolic significance of those rituals which are associated with water management and farming activities, specifically in the way in which these rituals act as latent forms of discrimination against individuals deemed “impure.”

The main policy implications of this study are for government and international developmental agencies that tend to see underdeveloped regions as being homogenous and do not take into account the existence of internal local disparities. For example, British colonial administrative and economic policies for the region studied privileged the powers held by local elites (Khangchen men), thereby further marginalizing traditionally marginalized groups (i.e., women and caste members). More recently, government development intervention, for example, through the Nautor land redistribution program
(mentioned in Chapters 4 and 6) or through government employment (outlined in Chapter 6), has benefited the local people in Spiti unevenly. As noted in this study, the caste households of Zo and Beda were not only the last to benefit from the Nautor land distributions but they also received smaller pieces of land which were located further from the village. Another example of the perpetuation of social inequities can be found in the government employment practices mentioned in Chapter 6, which show that women, particularly low caste women, are not receiving the coveted government jobs, as these are dominated by men from higher socio-economic classes.

These examples show that government development programs benefit different sections of the society based on gender, class and caste backgrounds – thereby perpetuating local inequalities. As such, they further validate the intersectional argument of this study. These observations are also consistent with observations made by other intersectional analysts, such as Harris (2008), on the uneven benefits of new irrigation projects in Southeastern Turkey. Here similar issues of inequity are experienced by people based on their gender, ethnicity, socio-economic background and other social differences. Together, all these examples and arguments suggest that government and international policy interventions are, unless the policy interventions are explicitly tilted in favor of the

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191 It is, however, worth noting that there are various improvements - from gender, caste and class perspectives - in the field of education, especially since Indian independence in 1947. “According to local elders, only the sons of Khangchen households were traditionally allowed to become monks. Since monasteries were the main centers of public education, this meant that three groups of people—caste, Dhutul and women—were denied access to formal education. Men/boys from caste and landless Dhutul households were denied admission to monasteries until recently. Women could not access formal education in Spiti as there were no nunneries in the past. According to the census of 1891, only 1.4% of females were literate. Since independence, the education system and access to it has changed greatly. By 2010, there were around a hundred schools in Spiti. Both boys and girls, including those from caste households, are receiving traditional Buddhist education in monasteries and nunneries started by Tibetan exiles in different parts of India” (Tsering & Ishimura, 2012, p. 6).
marginalized groups, likely to compound local inequalities of wealth and power (Beck & Fajber, 2006; Ribot, 2008). This is significant because most development interventions have a normative goal (although this is often presented implicitly) to reduce poverty and to support marginalized members of the community. This thesis points to the need for such policy objectives to be backed by specific implementation measures that privilege weaker groups, thus addressing the inter-category issues of equity raised in this study.

Work in this direction is being done by feminist scholars such as Margreet Zwarteveen, especially in the context of gender mainstreaming work in irrigation, as discussed in Chapter 4. However, this study suggests that the impact of gender mainstreaming work will be limited and skewed if it does not consider other social differences that interact with gender, such as caste and class. This is simply because women do not form a homogenous group; their interests are conditioned by their class and caste backgrounds, amongst other variables. As this study has repeatedly demonstrated, certain women groups (caste women) are more disadvantaged than and often discriminated against by others (Khangchen women). This study points to a direction in which gender-mainstreaming work should proceed, particularly through the development of new tools or methods which take into account an intersectional approach. The findings of this study suggest that systematic approaches that integrate both inter-category and intra-category issues of intersectionality (McCall, 2005) into gender mainstreaming work are required. Since different societies and regions have their own unique identities and values, rather than advocating a uniform framework that fits all cases, a gender-and-intersectional mainstreaming framework would most likely require case-specific intersectional studies.
Other research recommendations

This study has demonstrated that the Polanyian substantivist approach, specifically the theory of economy as an instituted process, provides formal theoretical principles that may be used to describe how the village economy functions. Although a full analysis of the village economy as an instituted process was not the focus of this study, future studies that do provide such an analysis would be greatly beneficial. As argued by Walter C. Neale (1957), such studies could redress the general tendency to define village economy simply as “traditional”, “indigenous” or even “pre-modern”. The great benefit of this approach is that the explanations are relatively simple and substantively rich. Such studies focusing on Tibetan villages, for example, would complement the pioneering work done by Aziz (1978) and Goldstein (1971) on social and administrative systems, respectively, and could explicate how different village institutions and processes function relationally, ultimately binding different groups in a shared socio-economic system. I emphasize that such studies are best conducted within broader historical contexts, thus serving to demonstrate how forces of state and market have sculpted contemporary relations.

This study focused on the farming and irrigation practices characteristic of two villages in Spiti Valley. As mentioned in Chapters 4 and 5, the government of India granted new “Nautor” fields, which are situated away from the traditional village fields, to landless farmers. The Nautor fields are large and therefore an important part of the local farming economy. However, so far there are no studies that examine how farmers practice
farming and irrigation work on these new Nautor fields. Such a study would provide an interesting comparative or complementary study to this thesis.

Other specific studies that would complement this thesis include an analysis of the role of the monasteries in local resource management and farming customs. Although I suspect that the linkages between monasteries and resource management and farming practices are not as significant in terms of the number of issues, especially in contemporary contexts, I do think that an in-depth study into the topic could shed new light on the history, economy and religious politics of the region more broadly, as well as the role of monasteries in resource management and farming practices in particular. Another specific study that would neatly complement this study would be an ethnographic study of farmers’ livelihood activities during the winter months. Such studies were not undertaken as a part of this thesis because they do not directly concern the research questions and arguments of this study. In the future, I am interested in conducting or following research on all of these topics.

This study contributes a different perspective to the body of knowledge on the irrigation management practices characteristic of rural communities in the Western Himalayas. While I set out to study intersectional issues of inequity in the social organization of irrigation management, I found that these are better understood in the context of the broader division of labor for farming and related resource management practices, which are in turn based on farmers’ gender, caste and class position and embedded in the local socio-economic structure of the village. This study therefore posits that researchers
examining issues of inequality or power relations in the social organization of resource management systems in rural contexts should not focus on a single resource, or indeed even a set of resources, but that they should instead study the different resource sectors and farming activities relationally. In order to support future researchers in this approach, this study has identified four main functional linkages between farming and related resource sectors, and recommended the development and application of a Polanyian substantivist approach to understanding local village economies as instituted processes. A key contribution of this study is that it has demonstrated the deficiency and inadequacy of portraying traditional resource management practices as equitable or egalitarian – for these are, in fact, as one informant described them in Hindi, “very dangerous techniques” (bahut khatarnak tarika) that serve to legitimize internal inequalities in favor of maintaining the status quo.
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### Appendix 1: Local Months and Calendar System of Spiti Valley

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Season</th>
<th>Months in Spiti dialect</th>
<th>English translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Winter</td>
<td>Losar (lo gsar)</td>
<td>New year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winter</td>
<td>Jama (bya ma)</td>
<td>Mother Raven (literally: Mother Bird)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winter</td>
<td>Jirug (byi phrug)</td>
<td>Baby Raven (lit: Baby bird)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring</td>
<td>Degya ('de brgya)</td>
<td>Warm Sun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring</td>
<td>Zhingdeb (zing 'dehs)</td>
<td>Field Cultivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring</td>
<td>Na-ngon sa-ngon (gnam sngon sa sngon)</td>
<td>Blue Skies Green Earth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer</td>
<td>Metog (me tog)</td>
<td>Flower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer</td>
<td>Drebu ('bras bu)</td>
<td>Seed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer</td>
<td>Se (rtsas)</td>
<td>Harvest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autumn</td>
<td>Khuyu (khu yu)</td>
<td>Threshing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autumn</td>
<td>Nyirug (nyi rug / nyi rub)</td>
<td>Short Sun (lit: Sunset)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autumn</td>
<td>Nyikhim (nyi khyim)^192</td>
<td>Circle Round the Sun (lit: Sun House)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

^192 According to the Tibetan astrological system, Nyi khyim refers to the 12 zodiac houses of the sun.