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# The Ancient Ceramic Tradition of the Trans-Himalayan Region of Spiti Valley, Himachal Pradesh: Based on New Findings

Ekta Singh<sup>1</sup>, Nagendra S. Rawat<sup>1</sup>, Rakhi Burfal<sup>1</sup> and R. C. Bhatt<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>. Department of History and Archaeology, Hemvati Nandan Bahuguna Garhwal University, Srinagar – 246 174, Uttarakhand, India (Email: singhehta1091@gmail.com, Nagendra.rawat957@gmail.com, rakhiburfal@gmail.com, rcbhatt59@gmail.com)

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**Abstract:** Ceramics has already been identified as one of the most important chronological parameters in archaeological studies. The study of pottery in archaeological research is often seen as an "indicative" factor in archaeological culture. It is the replication of not only technological information of the people but also their community status, artistic sense and cultural prosperity. This paper presents a report on ceramics collection spread across the Spiti valley. It is an outcome of an exhaustive village to village survey to trace the archaeological evidence in the valley. This study tries to link the pottery found in funerary material reported across the valley with the surface collection which is further correlated with other pottery from various archaeological sites of Trans-Himalayan Region such as Kinnaur and Malari in India, Tibet and Nepal. This indicates the significance of the Spiti valley in Trans-Himalayan Archaeological complex.

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**Keywords:** Pottery, Red Ware, Spiti Valley, Trans-Himalayas, India, Tibet, Nepal

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## Introduction

Spiti valley is located in the high-altitude region of Lahaul and Spiti District of Himachal Pradesh. It is bounded by Lahaul on the west, Kinnaur in the south, and western Tibet on the north and east. The Parang-la pass (5580m ASL) connects it to Laddakh and the Kunzum Pass (4590m ASL) to Lahaul. Geographically it lies between 32.2461° N, 78.0349° E at an average elevation of 12,500 ft from ASL. The area of 120 km of the Spiti valley spreads from Kunzum pass to Sumdo. Its location deprives it of the monsoon and thus leaves it dry and barren, devoid of vegetational cover. Many tributaries like the Pin River, the Lingti River joins Spiti River in its course. This region is also known as "Middle Land" as it lies between two lands of India and Tibet.

Pottery is one of the important archaeological remains which has been manufactured among all the cultures and is available globally. To study the past, its features like perseverance, endurance and its worldwide availability makes it a significant aid for

archaeologists. Pottery analysis is, therefore, a very useful tool to rebuild the symbolic aspects of life and death of those who were buried in the tough and inaccessible mountain slopes. There cannot be two opinions about the great potentialities of pottery as one of the fundamental sources of historical reconstruction, for ceramic types were closely related to the day to day life of the society. It hardly needs to be emphasised that every type of pot had a specific function in the socio-economic structure of the occupants.

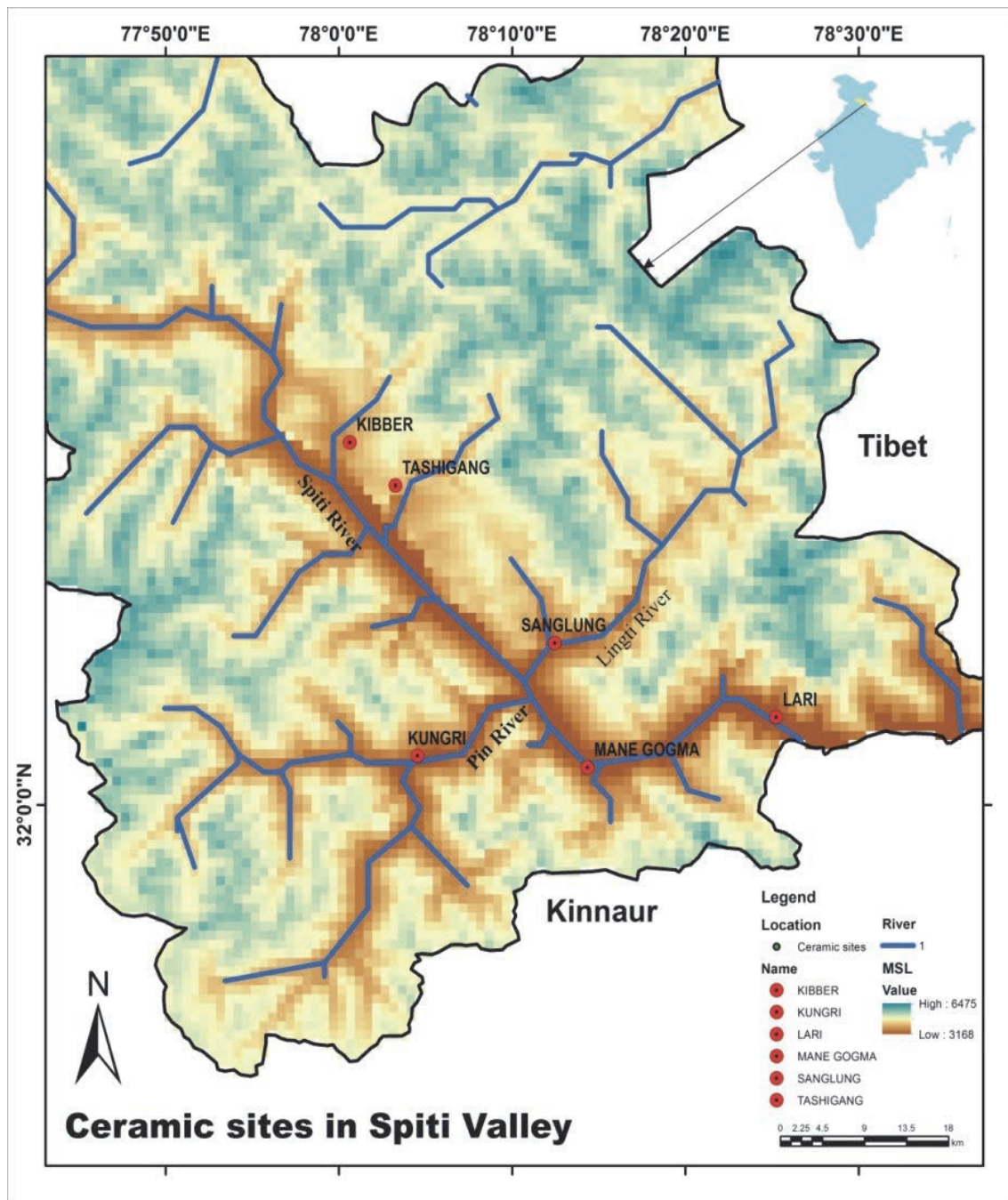


Figure 1: Map of Ceramic Sites Explored in Spiti Valley (Courtesy: Raman Patel)

## Review of Literature

In the Spiti valley, ceramics research has remained untouched. Only John Bellezza (2016) has written about burials in the Spiti valley which also covered ceramics recovered from various places by Tsering Norbu and Michael Dowad (Members of Spiti Rock Art and Historical Society). However, there are many studies available on the ceramics of the adjoining area Ladakh and Kinnaur (Francke 1914; Ota 1993; Howard 1999; Nautiyal et al. 2014). Initially, the Department of History and Archaeology of HNB Garhwal University has started working on the high altitude of Garhwal and discovered Malari site of Uttarakhand (Bhatt and Nautiyal 1987; Bhatt and Khanduri 2002; Bhatt et al. 2008; Bhatt 2011; Bist and Rawat 2013; Bhatt et al. 2014a; Bhatt 2015; Bist Unpublished). Furthermore, the department teamed up with Himachal State Museum and extended the investigation of burial culture in Kinnaur of Himachal Pradesh and later on extended it to the Spiti valley as well (Nautiyal et al. 2014; Bist Unpublished; Chauhan et al. 2014, 2015; Singh and Saklani 2017).



Figure 2: Pottery found with the skeleton at Tashigang (Courtesy R. C. Bhatt)

## Methodology

Initially, the research work was initiated with the exploration of villages and the areas nearby in the Spiti valley to locate the archaeological sites. With the help of the team of 'Spiti Rock Art and Historical Society', a detailed exploration was carried out in villages of Lari, Kibber, Sanglung, Mane Gogma, Kungri, and Tashigang. However, the abundance in which potsherds were spread in the valley was interesting and so a selective collection of potsherds was done. During the sample collection *in situ*



photographs were also taken to understand the context of the ceramics. Later, samples were documented (Cataloguing, Drawing and Photography) site-wise. The intact vessels were found exclusively from the burials while potsherds were spread across the surface in the valley. It is pertinent to mention here that these sites came into light due to the ongoing constructions in the area. A provenance and stratigraphic context of the archaeological remains is missing as it is rescued under salvage archaeology as shown in Figure 2. These remains were either collected by local villagers or by the survey team during exploration.



Figure 3: Vase with protruding rim and handle



Figure 4:  
A wide mouthed vase



Figure 5:  
Bowl with vertical sides

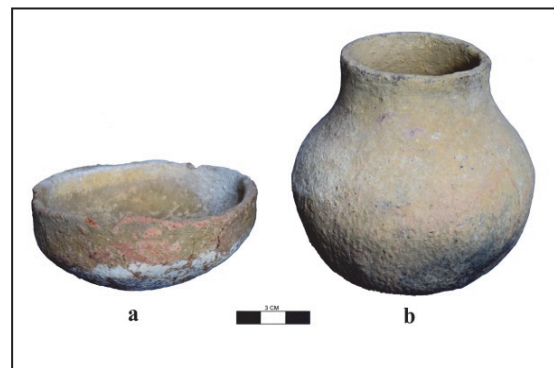


Figure 6: (a) Plain Bowl, (b) vase with partial Cord Marks

## Findings

The artefacts studied in this paper denote a minor portion of the collection of grave's belongings revealed in recent years, its true range and the configuration of which is obscure.

## Tashigang

Tashigang (32°17'35.08"N 78° 3'14.98"E) is one of the highest villages in the Spiti valley which is situated at an altitude of 4650m. The burial site at the village came in to light

during road cutting which contains two skeletons which were identified as juveniles and 7 ceramics including the three bowls, one dish with pedestal, one channelled pot with handle, one round pitcher and one wide mouthed jar with a handle (Chauhan et al. 2014). While exploring the area similar cord-marked potsherds were also observed on the surface.



Figure 7: Cord marked bowl

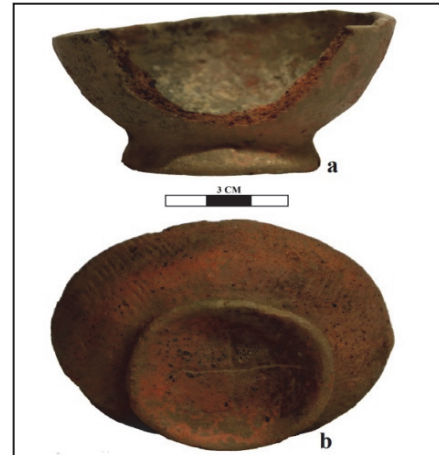


Figure 8: Bowl with ring base

### Pottery Description

Figure 3: A Handmade vase of Red Ware with protruding rim, having a slightly concave neck with handle; uneven bulging profile with round base; decorated with cord marks at the bottom and the base.

Figure 4: A handmade pot of Red Ware, having a wide mouth; featureless rim; concave neck with handle, round bulged body and round base. Decorated with cord marks in profile as well as the base.

Figure 5: A handmade bowl of dull Red Ware, it has a featureless rim and convex profile; flat base; decorated with cord marks on the profile. Some soot mark can also be noticed on the profile.

Figure 6 (a): A handmade bowl of dull Red Ware; featureless rim; convex profile; round base.

Figure 6 (b): A handmade vase of dull Red Ware. It has a featureless rim; short vertical neck; globular profile and round base; decorated with cord marks.

Figure 7: A handmade bowl of dull Red Ware. It has a vertical sides, flat featureless rim mild carination at the waist and rounded base. Decorated with cord marks on the exterior.

Figure 8: A handmade bowl of dull Red Ware having a flat featureless rim with tapering profile and ring base. Decorated with cord mark on the exterior and incised swastika design on the base.



Figure 9:  
Vase with cord mark and flat base



Figure 10:  
A bowl with cord mark

## Kibber

Kibber (32°19'57.58"N 78°0'36.95"E) is another village where burial was discovered while making a terrace farm. The excavation was done by the team of State Museum of Himachal Pradesh. The excavation yielded a human skeleton along with some faunal remains and two Red Ware. The AMS analysis of human bone collagen calibrates the date AD 690 to 750 (Cal BP 1260 to 1200) and Cal AD 760 to 885 (Cal BP 1190 to 1065) of the Kibber's burial (Chauhan et al. 2015; Singh and Saklani 2017).

### Pottery Description

Figure 9: A handmade vase of Red Ware decorated with cord marks; it has a flowering featureless rim with concave neck; uneven globular profile; flat base.

Figure 10: A handmade bowl of Red Ware with featureless rim; convex profile with round base; decorated with cord marks.

## Lari

During the exploration, a few potsherds of Red Ware were found from the agricultural fields of village Lari (32° 4'49.11"N 78°25'13.41"E). Some of the pottery fragments were handmade while others are wheel turned treated with a red slip. Many potsherds were decorated with cord-impressed and some are simply plain Red Ware. No intact pot has been recovered from Lari.

## Mane Gogma

Mane Gogma (32° 2'3.33"N 78°14'19.38"E) is an important village as an ancient route connects Spiti valley to Kinnaur Via Ropa Valley which is still being used. Interestingly, a significant amount of pots has also been discovered from Ropa Valley (Bhatt et al. 2014). The importance of this village is also confirmed by the recent archaeological findings of burials. The discovery of the grave by the residents yielded funerary material like pots, gold objects along with human bones.



Figure 11: Potsherds collected from Kibber village and nearby area

### Pottery Description

Figure 13: A wheel turned vase of Red Ware with concave neck, globular profile, round base, incised lines on shoulder. Interestingly, a small piece of copper is pasted on its bottom.



Figure 14: A handmade spouted vase of Red Ware. It has a wide-mouthed featureless rim, long slanting neck with handle and a mark of the damaged spout which might be supported with a latch. This pot has globular profile with a round base decorated with incised geometric lines on the profile and cord marks only at the base with thumb impression.

Figure 15: A handmade double handled Jar of dull Red Ware. It has a wide mouthed featureless rim, long vertical neck, uneven globular profile with a round base. It is decorated with cord marks at the profile and incised lines on the neck.

Figure 16: A copper bowl having an incurved rim, tapering profile and flat base.

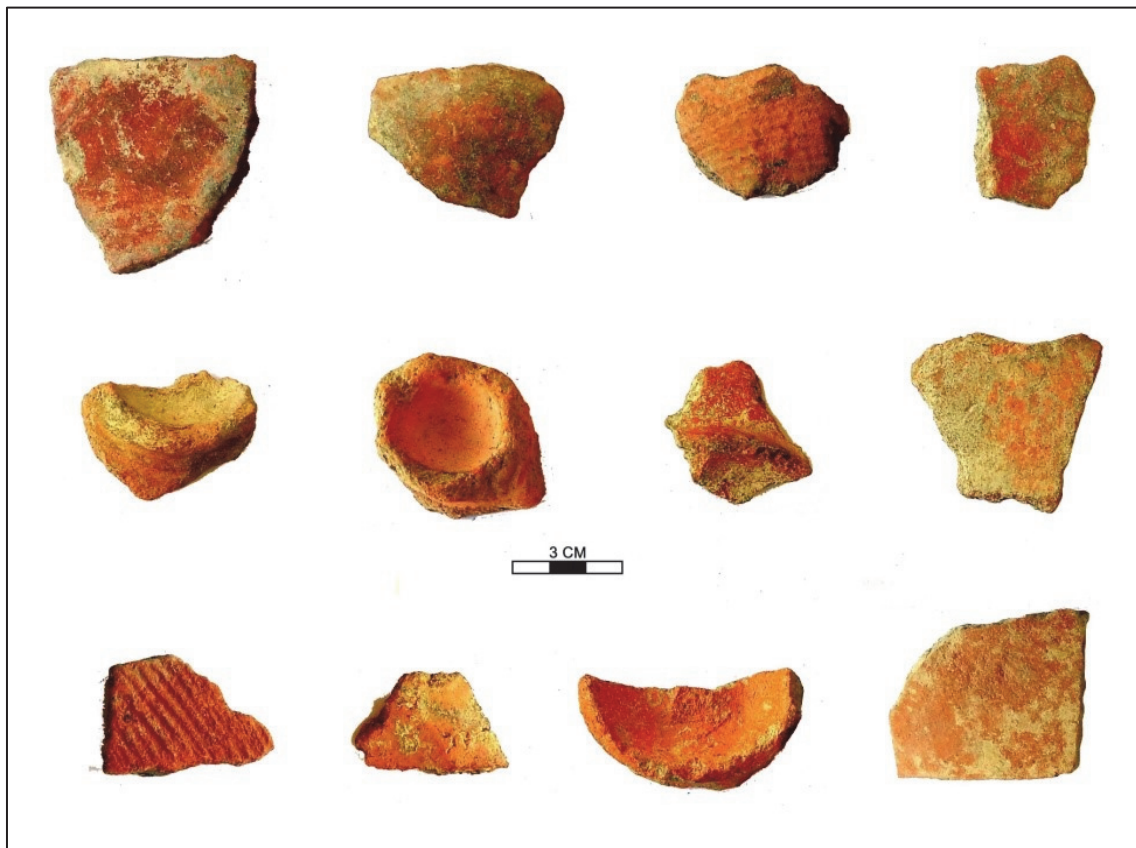


Figure 12: Potsherds collected from Lari village and nearby area

## Kungri

The village Kungri (32° 2'41.76"N 78° 4'31.92"E) is located in Pin Valley which is a tributary of the Spiti River. A few graves were discovered in the vicinity of the village during construction and therefore, most of the graves were destroyed in the process. Consequently, the site was additionally explored and few handmade Red Ware potsherds were collected along with broken handles and latches of the pot. Various type of decoration is observed on these fragments such as matt impression, incised dots, few with painted with slanting parallel lines and some of them are cord-marked along with some plain ware.





Figure 13: Vase with copper patch and round base

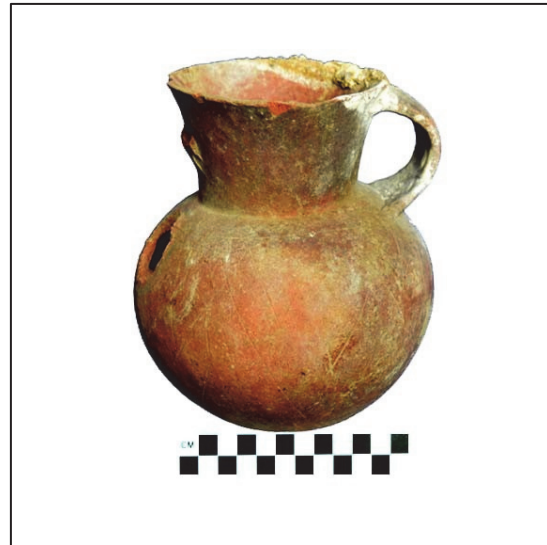


Figure 14: Spouted vase with handle and round base



Figure 15: Globular pot with handle and round base

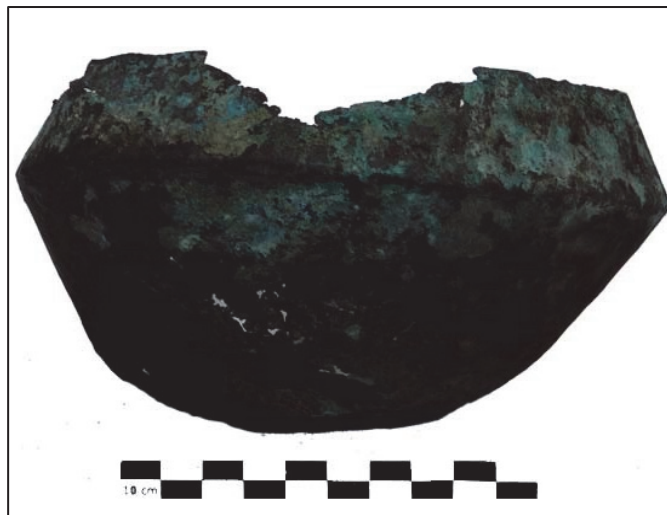


Figure 16:  
Copper bowl

## Sanglung

Sanglung (32°8'54.83"N 78°12'27.21"E) is located beside River Lingti which is a tributary of the Spiti River. The burial came into light during a road cutting in which a Red Ware was found as grave goods. Two pots found in the grave have cord-impressed decoration. Thumb impression can be noticed prominently at the base of both the vessels. A cord impressed potsherd was also found on the surface.

### Pottery Description

Figure 18: A handmade Red Ware with featureless rim, convex profile with a round base, decorated with cord marks at the exterior and with curvilinear incised lines at the interior. The round base is with thumb impression.

Figure 19: A handmade vase of redware with flaring mouth featureless rim, short concave neck bulging profile with flat base and thumb impression. Decorated with incised geometric lines at the neck and cord marks at the profile and base. Burnt mark can be noticed.

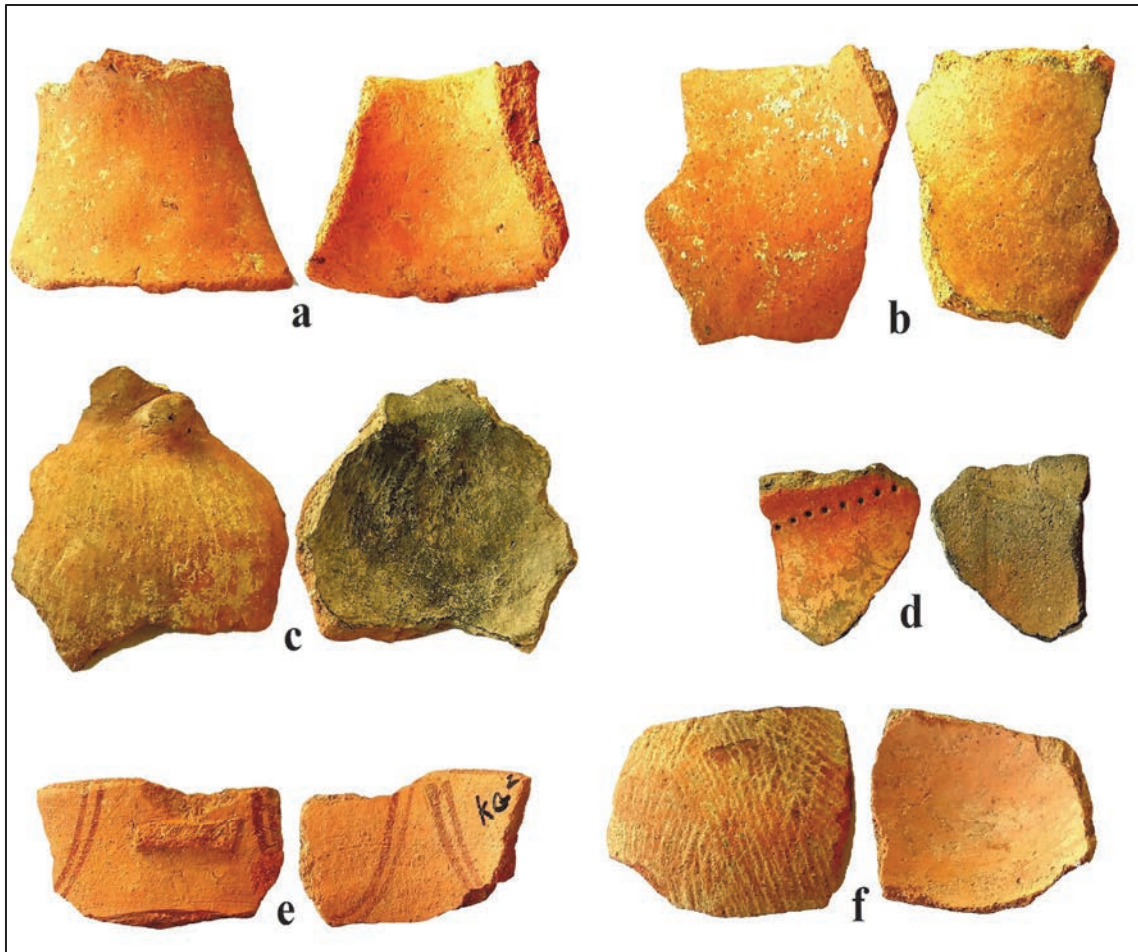


Figure 17: Potsherds collected from Kungri grave site



Figure 18: Bowl with cord mark outside and incised marks inside



Figure 19: Vase with partial cord marks and round base



Figure 20: a) Vase from Mane Gogma (b) vase from Malari, Uttarakhand  
(c) vase from Chu-vthang

## Discussion and Conclusion

The archaeological expedition carried out in Spiti valley yielded ceramics in two forms, i.e. intact pottery and fragments of pots. All the potsherds were collected from the surface whereas all intact pottery was recovered from inside the burials.

The prevalent type of pottery found in the Spiti Valley is hand-made Red Ware except a wheel turned pottery found from Mane Gogmaas shown in Figure 12. The pot found from Mane Gogma has a unique characteristic of repairing through a piece of copper. However, the practice of repairing pots was very prevalent in ancient time but the use of copper on clay pot seems very rare, particularly in the Himalayan region. This finding shows the technical cum craftsmanship skill of inhabitants and also indicates the social, symbolic and ritualistic significance of pottery in the culture.

There are several features found on the ceramics of Spiti valley which are useful to identify its relationship with distant geographies. For example, a vase with handle from Mane Gogma has a hole in it which also has a mark of latch, suggestive of a possibility of having a spout on it, though it was broken. It bears resemblances with a Spouted Pot supported with latch found from Malari in Uttarakhand (Bhatt and Nautiyal 1987; Bhatt 2011; Bist Unpublished) and from Chu-vthag and Quta in Tibet (Linhui 2011) (Figure 20). Apart from this, it was equally important to recover an open-spouted vase as shown in Figure 3 from Tashigang in Spiti. A similar open spouted vase was found from Chogong (Bellezza 2015) and from Malari (Bhatt 2011) which shows an intriguing parallel of pottery within Trans-Himalayan region.

The pot in Figure 14 recovered from Mane Gogma with a handle on both the sides and is of around 33 cm. A similar vase with the same form and decoration has been recovered from Gurgyam in Tibet as well. According to Belezza, who has observed both the pottery personally has opined that the only difference in them is the colour,



otherwise both the pots are similar, and can be dated back to the same period, i.e. 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century AD (Bellezza 2016).

Another common characteristic is the decoration of the ceramics with cord marks on the exterior surface either partially or fully. The corded ware is generally found in coarse fabric. The production technique of this ceramic remained more or less unchanged and mainly bowl and vases were produced during the Neolithic and Chalcolithic period. Most of the sherds collected during exploration are unglazed hand-made vessels in which maximum are cord-marked. So, the question of whether the surface potsherds are related to burials is answered through the similarity between the intact pottery found at burials with the potsherds spread across the surface. The cord-impressed pottery from the burial complex from western Tibet and also from Indian sites like Malari, Kinnaur and even Spiti burials suggest that this tradition was quite prevalent in the Trans-Himalayan region (Bhatt 2011; Bhatt et al. 2014; Bist Unpublished). Decoration with incised lines can also be observed inside of a few bowls like vase of the Sanglung as shown in Figure 17, curvilinear lines can be seen inside the bowl surface as well. The incised lines can also be noticed on the neck of vase in Figure 14 and 18 as well as on the profile of Figure 13.

Another prominent feature is the coarse texture of the ceramics which suggests that the ceramic has no utilitarian function. Though the globular pot at Mane Gogma shown in Figure 14 might have been used like for storage purpose because of its huge size. It looks like the intact pottery found in burials which are only used for the ritualistic purpose and is specially made for this occasion. The thumb impression on the base of the pots and vase was noticed in almost all the intact ceramics which could be interpreted as potter's mark or it could be an indigenous technique to keep the pottery in an upright position. Among the pottery sherds, a portion of handled pottery, bowl and cord-marked pottery were recognized as important findings. The adornment of these pottery parts for added features like a spout with latch, pedestal and handles replicate the proficiency of pottery makers. Use of the thumbs in manipulating the shape of the pottery is noticeable on many pots. All these attributes are suggestive of the high craftsmanship of the people in pottery making, particularly the special pottery for funerary and ritualistic purpose in the region.

The pottery remains from Spiti show that the pottery tradition was very developed during that time. Even though the potters that make this type of pottery live in a remote region of Trans-Himalayas, they cannot be considered primitive. Their pottery specimens are well thought out and show highly skilled artistry, definitely these are the best which can be easily compared to mainland. Although any habitation site has not been discovered in the valley, the available funerary material proves that these people were advanced in technology. The specimen of copper patch on the vase shows that along with ceramic tradition the potters were skilled in metallurgy as well. The swastika is an important symbol of pre-Buddhist community and presence of it in the

base shows its significance in their culture as well, the symbol is also present in rock art of the valley.

Certainly, on the basis of common typological features like the coarse fabric, spouts, latches, handles, cord marks in the ceramics of Spiti has relation to other Trans-Himalayan region of Kinnaur and Garhwal in India (Bhatt and Nautiyal 1987; Bhatt 2011; Bhatt et al. 2014a; Bist Unpublished; Nautiyal et al. 2014), in Chokopani and Mebrak in Nepal (Simons et al. 1994a, 1994b), and Gurugyam, Quta and Chuythang in Tibet (Wei 2001; Aldenderfer and Yinong 2004; Aldenderfer 2007), as similar ceramic attributes can be observed in other parts as well.

In a larger context, a preliminary study of ceramics allowed us to use evidence from Spiti to interrelate the cultures of Trans-Himalayan Region because of their special ritualistic importance for these communities in the high altitude and therefore, it is quite possible that such types of pottery must have been distributed amongst people through trade or cultural contacts. A Chinese scholar LU Hongliang has termed "West Himalaya Archaeological Complex" which proposes to focus mainly on archaeological remains present in the western Himalayas (Hongliang n.d.) and if we see the link and commonalities among the ceramics of Spiti and other parts of western Himalayas, Spiti fits perfectly in that archaeological Complex, though the relation between them is highly debatable.

The available data on other parts of the Trans-Himalayas and the recent discoveries in Spiti can lead to an effective comparative study of ceramic tradition in the whole Trans-Himalayan region as well as any connection with other areas can also be traced efficiently. Various questions need to be answered like the authorship of these ceramics, whether there is a specialized community which made these ceramics and then went to sell it in different regions or they used to go to various villages and then make it over there, Is pottery a part of trade connections between different cultures in the Trans-Himalayas and other regions?

According to Bellezza (2016) "These kinds of ceramics have been collected all over Spiti, helping to define the region culturally as well as technologically in antiquity. This coherence in the assemblage of ceramics is demarcating a cultural province allied with adjoining regions." Although there is no range of absolute dates for the burials found from Spiti valley except one from Kibber which is 690-750 AD (Chauhan et al. 2014) to put this ceramic tradition in any particular cultural phase however, there are ample dates for archaeological findings available from the burial sites spread across the Trans-Himalayan region such as dates from Kinnaur is 600 BC to 100 AD, Malari in Uttarakhand is 200 BC to 100 AD, Quta, Chuythang and Gurugyam in Tibet is 100 AD to 300 AD (Bist Unpublished). Taking into consideration the above-mentioned dates it can be assumed that the Spiti valley was also inhabited with similar culture for a long span of time, thus shows a continuous connection with Trans-Himalayan region. The ceramic tradition in the Trans-Himalayan region has very scanty data, and due to lack

of archaeological excavations, the stratigraphy is also missing which leads to unorderly chronology. Funerary materials have great potential to reconstruct the past. Whatever work has been done until now is based on the typological basis. This raises an alarm to improve the situation and focus on more findings from well-stratified archaeological context. A more vigorous investigation will lead to efficaciously follow the domestic traits of the valley as well as the impression of other cultures could also be traced through it. Further research is needed to identify the procedures of manufacturing the ceramics.

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