DISTANT NEIGHBOURS EITHER SIDE OF THE OMASI LA:
THE ZANSKARPA AND THE BOD COMMUNITIES
OF PALDAR

Isabelle Riaboff

Apart from a few allusions here and there, Western literature does not say much about Paldar.1 Until today, this Himalayan region, which lies in the southernmost part of Jammu and Kashmir, has remained off the ethnologists’ tracks, so much so that one has to turn back to the 19th century to find worthwhile written information. This we mainly—not to say exclusively—owe to Frederic Drew. Having entered the Maharaja of Kashmir’s service in 1862, Drew travelled extensively in the Jammu and Kashmir Territories, first as a mineralogist and later as the Forest Department manager. Fortunately, far from confining his observations to the minerals and trees, he was also very much interested in history and geography. With respect to Paldar, his report remains the only available general written account.2

As for me, I happened to hear about Paldar when staying in Zanskar, a Tibetan-speaking enclave (mainly Buddhist) situated to the north-east of Paldar.3 During my long and repeated Zanskari stays through the 1990s, I did not inquire systematically about this distant neighbouring region. Nor did I spend much time in the villages of Sani, Ating or Bardan which, for geographical reasons, have more connection with Paldar than any other Zanskari village has. Nevertheless, several anecdotes aroused my curiosity. For instance, the only hens which I ever saw in Zanskar, except for those carried on horseback for tourists’ consumption, had been bought in Paldar, I was told. I also remember

1 Written reports usually speak of Pādar. The variant Paldar, which I prefer, corresponds to the Tibetan pronunciation, spelt in various ways (Pa ldar, dPal dar, dPal dhar).
2 In 1848, some twenty years before Drew, the botanist Thomas Thomson, who had been appointed as commissioner for the purpose of laying down the ancient boundary between Ladakh and Tibet, crossed Paldar in a few days’ walk. Coming from Lahul, he continued his way towards Zanskar. Thomson did narrate this journey, but his description was a travelogue only concerned with the route, the terrain and the vegetation. It did not say anything about the villages and their populations.
3 Zanskar belongs to Kargil District. It is inhabited by more than 12,000 people.
the ‘treasure’ which an acquaintance of mine kept in a handkerchief:
a handful of small uncut sapphires from Paldar. And monks in Kar-
sha recalled the harsh time when, following a fire in their monastery,
they had to go to Paldar from where they carried back wooden pillars
to replace those which had gone up in smoke. Paldar was, indeed,
described as a forest-covered and grassy place. Yet the Zanskarpa (the
people of Zanskar) did not say much about its inhabitants, whom they
indiscriminately call Paldarpa (the people of Paldar). The only infor-
mation I could trust for sure was that some of them spoke Zanskari,
and that they were Buddhist. One of the monks of Bardan monastery
was, indeed, a native of Paldar.

When I eventually decided to visit Paldar, with a view to probing into
its Tibetan-speaking communities, the monk in question spontaneously
accompanied me from Zanskar, so that I had the great opportunity to
discover the region with a home-born guide and to stay for one month
in his valley, Kabön. The next summer, back among the Bod of Paldar,
I spent another three months in Kabön. Of course, much work has
yet to be done. Still, regarding the relationships between the inhabit-
ants of Kabön and the Zanskarpa, several observations can already
be made which indicate the multifaceted dimension of these bilateral
links. However, before we come on to this subject, some historical,
geographical and ethnological details must be presented.

THE SETTING

Administrative Frontiers

The present position of Paldar within India stems from its military and
political history. In 1664, Paldar, which had previously been divided
between several petty chiefs, was annexed by the Chamba Kingdom,
recently strengthened in power. Opposite the hillside where present-
day Atholi is situated, the Raja (H. Rājā, King) of Chamba founded

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1 The famous so-called ‘Kashmiri sapphires’ are, indeed, extracted from small
deposits laid in Paldar mountains.

2 Fieldwork in Paldar was carried out in the summers of 1998 and 1999, under a
grant from the Fonds Louis Dumont d’aide à la recherche en anthropologie sociale, Paris.

6 See map on p. 3.

7 Phonetic spelling is used for all vernacular terms. The phonetic forms of the
common nouns are followed by the proper transliterations, either Tibetan (T.) or Hindi
(H.). Phonetic forms and transliterations are all italicised.