

ABSTRACT

Tibetan Medicine Off the Roads: Modernizing the Amchi's Work in Spiti, India

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This work explores the social and politico-economic situation of *amchi* medicine (*amchi* designates a practitioner of Tibetan medicine) in Spiti today. Despite all infrastructural attempts to unlock this valley in Himachal Pradesh, north-western India, it still suffers from particular geographic and climatologic conditions. This situation, posited on a historical plane, led to the local health tradition becoming peripheral to the main centres of Tibetan medicine, such as Dharamsala or Leh. During the last two decades, 'modernization' – in the form of school education, cash crop cultivation, new modes of labour and government administration and subsidies – rapidly changed the social, economic and political systems in Spiti. My analysis contrasts the medical practices and ideologies of the younger and older generations of *amchi*. I thus unpack the way they negotiate current circumstances and needs, especially in regard to educational modalities, the use of medicine, ritual healing and the introduction of payment for medicine.

I therefore answer the following questions: How do *amchi* reshape their living conditions and their medical practice to fit into Spiti modernity? The Tibetan medicine of the exile-Tibetans (in terms of education and medicine) and state requirements (for financial support and recognition) oriented towards biomedical guidelines form the crucial streams of demands approaching the Spiti *amchi*. Economic pressure and social ambiguities lead a few of them to institutionalize, and most of them to leave, their medical work. The people of Spiti face a considerable decline in health care. Therefore, this research has a potential applicability for organizations that attempt to find ways to break out of the critical situation of *amchi* medicine.