Spiti (population = 12,445) is a remote desert region of the Trans Himalayas and despite its geographical and temporal isolation, its peoples’ indigenous ways of life are threatened. The complex interdependence of education and indigenous food sovereignty is realized as the “colonization of indigenous peoples in the twenty-first century” manifests itself in everyday lives through the imposition of “foods that cause debilitating diseases” (FAO, 2014, Kassam et al., 2017). Yet, there is hope as Spiti’s children return home after educational pursuits, joining their families’ commercial green pea farming practices. Hence, this project will employ the interdependence of health and education as a tool toward food sovereignty using an educational curricula designed to integrate indigenous plant knowledge in Munsel Ling Home School, Rangrik, Spiti Valley.

Background

In Spiti, focusing on people’s diets, there is a transformation from subsistence to commercial food, which poses a challenge to their food sovereignty, plant diversity and indigenous land-use techniques (Singh et al., 1996). Simultaneously, the enrolment of children in schools has significantly increased wherein nationalized education systems are embraced in Spiti as a “notable positive social change” (Sharma & Chauhan, 2013). Evidence from other indigenous and rural societies suggests reason for concern. Standardized education has historically been deemed as a “systematic effort at cultural genocide [or]… as a pedagogy of erasure (Simpson, 2017; Kassam et al., 2017). While it is evident that bio-cultural transformations are challenging the community’s sovereignty, there is a need to investigate the impacts of nationalized curricula on Spiti Valley.

This project focuses on wild foods and indigenous plant knowledge to propose a pedagogy rooted in human-ecological consciousness, such that cultural identity paves a path toward health sovereignty. Hence, the objective is not to diminish the value of a strong education, but to situate learning in the socio-cultural and ecological context of Spiti so its children truly become global citizens because of the diversity of their bio-cultural knowledge systems (Kassam et al., 2017).

Methodologies and Prospects for Impact:

I conducted a literature review (reading relevant articles from the first 50 pages on “Spiti Valley Himalayas” search on Google Scholar), and visited Spiti Valley for preliminary research in August 2019: I engaged in participation observation (homestays & festivities), surveyed about 50% of households in Chicham (a higher altitude village in the valley), and visited Munsel Ling Home School to interview Lama Tashi (the director). I have tried to employ methodologies to gain a longitudinal understanding of Spiti Valley through two visits (June - July 2016, August 2019); to connect with locals in Hindi (which is my native language and their second fluent language); to forge a multidimensional understanding of family structures using surveys that explore socio-economic structures; and finally to ground my understanding of Spiti and its peoples, I engaged with locals in within their everyday life (participation observation).

As a result of land-use changes, Spiti is experiencing a loss of agrobiodiversity, loss of indigenous knowledge, and food, water and health insecurity. Furthermore, climate variation is exacerbating anxiety. The importance of reviving indigenous knowledge is realized in the attainment of anticipatory capacity in the face of wicked problems, which is the aim of this project.

Education has the capacity to affect indigenous food sovereignty. With this project, I have chosen to collaborate with Munsel Ling Home School, in Rangrik, which boards children from all across Spiti Valley. Children here begin their schooling as early as kindergarten and until the 10th grade. Lama Tashi Namgyal is the principal at Munsel Ling and the Founder & Director of the Rinchen Zangpo Society for Spiti Development (with Munsel Ling School as a branch), which aims to “preserve and promote enjoyment of Spiti’s peaceful, Buddhist culture.”

During my preliminary visit, I noticed that children’s health was a major concern and conferred with Lama Tashi to confirm that flu-like symptoms are observed in majority children all-year round. Upon further discussion, I learned that even though there is a humble space for a clinic in the school’s compound, no doctor visits regularly to prescribe medicines. Lama Tashi expressed the dire need for facilities offering medical attention in Spiti Valley, which substantiates on data from surveys. Data from
surveys also indicated that the majority of villagers find their local medicine man to be the most trusted and seek him as the first avenue for medical attention.

I proposed to Lama Tashi a potential collaborative project to develop a curricula focused on indigenous environmental studies when Lama Tashi excitedly adds, “if we start now, younger generations can inherit knowledge.”. Simultaneously, I also suggested the idea of mirroring the significant role of local medicine men in Spiti within Museln Ling Home School. This idea encapsulates the role of a medicine man as a regularly visiting doctor at the school to prescribe medicines for both children and staff; furthermore, it emphasizes the role of a medicine man as an educator of indigenous plant knowledge and ethical harvesting. In addition, we discussed the involvement of local Spitians as facilitators to teach and train young Spitians about the indigenous plants and animals, and traditional farming methods. In Summer 2020, we will strengthen the School’s relationship with indigenous elders, medicine men and local conservationists so as to reintegrate the context of Spiti meaningfully into the education of its children, who can embrace the intergenerational transmission of traditional ecological knowledge.

The hurdles to self-determine and achieve food and health sovereignty are challenged by socio-political structures that extend far beyond Spiti and govern Spiti despite lacking context-specific grounding. Economic forces such as market prices determine what food to be grown, when each agricultural practice occur and where food must be exported. The prices of foods that come into Spiti affect the self-determination over agricultural practices. This project will fundamentally work against the overarching socio-economic factors of food imports and exports to and from Spiti that implicate people’s food and health sovereignty.

We must note the implications of this wicked problem such that structural violence is a constant possibility especially in vulnerable communities and that the “denial of self-determination over food and medicine is a repudiation of fundamental rights of autonomy as guaranteed by Article 24 Section 1 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples:

*Indigenous peoples have the right to their traditional medicines and to maintain their health practices, including the conservation of their vital medicinal plants, animals and minerals. Indigenous individuals also have the right to access, without any discrimination, to all social and health services.*

**Conclusion**

The deleterious effects on Spitians’ health will have a domino effect on Spiti’s social capital, which would negatively impact the local economy. Despite the complex web of challenges that Spitians face, there is hope in Spiti as educated youth return to villages and farming. We can invest in initiatives to include indigenous plant knowledge in schooling to emphasize agrobiodiversity in order to advocate for self-determination and to pave the path towards food, water and health sovereignty, especially in the face of wicked problems such as climate change.

This project will provide indigenous students with the tools needed to strive and succeed within modern society, utilizing the skills of indigenous knowledge that surrounds them in everyday livelihoods while making conceptions around health sovereignty relevant. Projects for Peace and its mission to support grassroots and philanthropic projects aligns perfectly with the aims of lifting up indigenous voices and pedagogy. I am fortunate to conduct this project with Professor Karim-Aly Kassam, who has prepared me to do community research and outreach. He works with indigenous communities globally, advocating for Indigenous Knowledge Systems to address wicked problems such as climate change. The sustainability of Kassam’s initiatives has made communities resilient to potential threats such as mining activities by establishing indigenous land-use rights and self-determination. This project will encourage stewardship in Spiti by building context-specific indigenous knowledge to attain sovereignty.

**Citations**


