

HISTORIC EVOLUTION OF THE SIKKIMESE MONASTERY ¹

GARY CHOPEL
Senior Architect
Building and Housing Dept. Govt of Sikkim

Tiny, landlocked and unpredictable, Sikkim the Himalayan kingdom of yesteryears was inhabited by the Lepchas until the Bhutias came from Tibet around the thirteenth century and the Nepalese around the nineteenth.

The migration of these two communities were very important to the Sikkimese heritage as they brought with them two very important practices to the state which indicated the direction of the Sikkimese culture to follow. While the later introduced the practice of terrace farming in the state, it was the former that laid the blueprint for the architectural style of Sikkim.

Sikkimese architecture is complex as it shows influences of its neighbouring regions and because of this feature, it is all the more interesting to study. While influences from Nepal and Bengal could be seen in its local vernacular vocabulary, the Bhutanese and the Tibetans had a more serious role to play with its presence distinctly visible in its monastic form and also in the more elaborate *kothis* (Tibetanised domestic house style) of the state.

Religion effects architecture and as the ruling class was from a Buddhist based society, its influence was vocal in dictating its style and the design of the Sikkimese monasteries or *gonpas*, which were commissioned with special patronage from the royal family.

Religion was a new concept to the animist Lepchas and thus commissioning of the *gonpas* was important so as to ensure that the entire state was united under one religion.

After Phuntsog Namgyal (1604-1670) was consecrated the first Chogyal of Sikkim in the early 1640s, the first *gonpas* were built in

¹ This research is a draft report based on personal research material of the author and is part of his ongoing Sikkimese architectural evolution studies. The classification of era, time and categories are his own and not adhering to any norms or standard.

what is now West Sikkim, a trend followed by subsequent Chogyals who set out missionaries to different parts of Sikkim to establish shrines and propagate the dharma. In a similar manner the first Shabdrung Rinpoche had used religion as the main tool to unify early Bhutan.

Complexes were built on hill tops for purity and also for visual connection with other *gonpa* and this was most prominent in the monastic circuit of West Sikkim which covered the *gonpas* at Pemayangtse, Sangha Choeling, Kechupalri, Dubdi, and Tashiding. This 'golden circuit' went on to become the most important corridor in the state with the Pemayangtse - Sangha Choeling ridge as its centre as it was visually linked with other important *gonpas* at Risum, Rinchenpong, Dubdi, Hungri, Silnon, Ralang, etc.



The golden circuit (source - Sikkim: Eicher Goodwill)

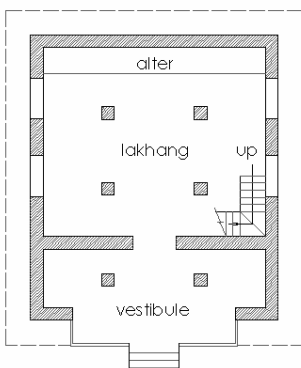
The site chosen for Dubdi, Sikkim's first *gonpa*, was a hill top above Yuksom in West Sikkim. The Dubdi and Shanga Choeling *gonpas* laid the foundation of the Sikkimese monastery's architectural evolution. Below follows a brief description of Sikkim's three main styles of monastic architecture.

1. *The shrine style gonpa* (1650 – 1750)

The ‘shine’ was the first style to be built in the state. Its layout was very simple as it was a small square building which was mostly made of stone masonry laid in mud mortar. The original roof was of thatch and even wooden planks in some cases.



Dubdi Gonpa, above Yuksom, West Sikkim



Plan of Dubdi Gonpa

The shrine had a simple one room layout with a small vestibule in the front flanked by *mani* wheels on either side which led to the room which housed a *lhakhang* or *dukhang* (the prayer hall) on the ground floor with the altar on the opposite side facing the entrance door. The layout of the *lhakhang* was done in the traditional *kawa zhi dung gyed* principle (which when literally translated means ‘pillar four beam eight’), that incorporated four columns and eight beams in its structural design highlighting the fundamentals of Buddha’s teachings. There

was a small wooden staircase usually on the right side of the *lhakhang* that led to the first floor which had a store room and also housed the Kangyur and Tengyur collection of manuscripts and was more like a special library floor. The raised attic of the *gonpa* could be accessed from here and was at times used to store the *gonpa*'s precious artefacts. The roof of these structures was four way sloping with a heightened attic for maximum light and ventilation.

These structures were simple in design with beautifully carved beams and columns all made of wood which was a local material and historically cheaper.

The *gonpas* of Dubdi, Sangha Choeling, Tashiding and probably Pemayangtse's original structure were built along these lines and are thus amongst the most important *gonpas* in the state. The Third Chogyal Chagdor Namgyal (1686-1717) was perhaps the most important ruler of this early era who personally took much interest to their commissioning or reconstruction.

2. *The dzong style gongpa (1750 – 1850)*

These were made during the time when the Sikkimese *gonpa* design was at its evolution peak and was at its experimental best in terms of architecture. The *gonpas* built during these times are perhaps some of the most beautiful structures to be commissioned in the state.

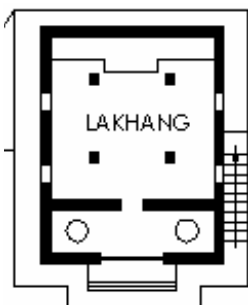
The *gonpas* were more rectangular in shape (due to the need to house a larger *dukhang*), very well detailed (in terms of iconography and colour) and made in random rubble masonry laid in mud mortar. The ground floor still had a similar approach with a vestibule flanked by *mani* wheels on both sides which connected to the main *dukhang*. The *dukhang* was more organized and it had a clean floor with the staircase absent on its right side. The layout still was based on the *kawa zhi dung gyed* principle and had a special three tier bracket design which is most visible above the openings at the vestibule and main door. These *gonpas* were also used as a *dzong* or administrative centre and the first floor was thus accessible to the priests, the landlords and the royalties, therefore the staircase was now made external usually on the northern wall of the building which connected to the first floor. This perhaps was one important development in the evolution and provided us with a hint that the *gonpa* apart from being a centre of religion was also gaining importance in its function as the administrative centre while the ground floor still remained accessible to the public.

The first floor now had two rooms that were used as the Kangyur-Tengyur room and the other as a private room for the priests, the landlords or members of the royal family. The roofing was still four-way but the attic space was not defined here as the structure was a dual purpose building and the attic could no longer be used as store. These *gonpas* were examples of some of the best architectural and iconographical works that can even be seen today.

In this stage the *gonpa* is now taking the shape of a monastery with *thrashas* or smaller dwellings for monks being introduced around the main temple and laying the blueprint of a complex.



Rinchenpong Gonpa, West Sikkim



Ngadak Gonpa

Special features of these *gonpas* are their wooden balconies and other projections which are finely carved and detailed. The Rinchenpong, Risum, Tholung and Namchi Ngadak *gonpas* were all built in this era and are thus considered masterpieces of Sikkimese architectural endeavour. The size also remained larger and though the building now was more rectangular, it still remained true to its design simplicity and adhering to religious texts.

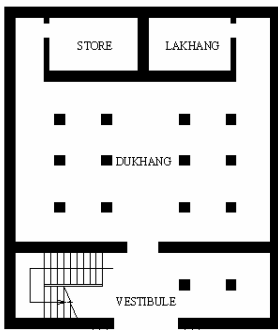
3. *The enclosed style gonpa* (1850 – 1950)

As the kingdom was constantly threatened by the invasions of the Nepalese from the west and the Bhutanese from the east, security was one of the primary concerns in the region and this can also be seen in the *gonpas* of this era as it is very much visible in its layout.

The *gonpa* here adapts a more institutional look with a large ceremonial courtyard in the front flanked by a *yabring*, a covered structure providing seating for high lamas and dignitaries, and subsequently surrounded by *thrashas* to give it a fortress type configuration.



Phodong Gonpa, North Sikkim



Phensong Gonpa

On an individual level the main *gonpa* now looks more solid with the staircase absent from the side and all entries are from the front vestibule which could be shut and locked. The vestibule here is more versatile space as it is flanked by a staircase usually on the left with a store below and a large space for *mani* wheel on the other side. The vestibule connects to the *dukhang* which is much larger to house more people in the assembly and

incorporates necessary structural changes with introduction of more columns and beams thus terminating the traditional *kawa zhi dung gyed* theory—Enchey and Labrang, however, are special as they still have the four column eight beam configuration. There is a private shrine room behind or besides the altar that houses a second prayer room.

The staircase in the vestibule leads ones up to the first floor lobby called the *rapshay* that opens to a daily ritual room, the Kangyur-Tengyur room and a store or a treasure room. The staircase further continues up to the second floor that is usually used as a store and ends at the heightened attic space.

This type of planning is seen in the more recent *gonpas* which incorporates the use of cement and other historically alien material.

The walls of these structures were made of stone laid in traditional mud mortar. These structures were made as an institution and thus its size is the biggest of all. The *gonpas* at Phodong, Phensong, Rumtek, Enchey, etc. belong to this era.

General observations

Though the *gonpa* layout went through a series of changes, there were a few features that remained more or less constant.

Firstly the Sikkimese *gonpas* always portray the three tiers ‘man-monk-god’ concept that could be seen in its planning. The ground floor was usually the *dukhang* and represented the common man. The first floor housed the manuscripts and was meant for the scholars or the monks. The heightened open attic space was called the *sangdopalri* and represented the space for god. The best examples of the Sikkimese roof can be seen at the *gonpas* of Phodong, Pemayangtse and Tashiding. This thus defined the roof form of the building which was usually stepped in three layers.

Secondly the *gonpa* always has very strong cardinal directions and the main front façade usually faces towards the east or south depending on the area and its historic relevance.

All the *gonpas* have a multipurpose courtyard in the front and a *yabring* flanking one of the sides of the courtyard.

The *chortens* and *mendang* are towards the north-eastern edge of the site or in a separate complex and never in front of the main courtyard.

Many of the *gompas* are designed in the traditional *rinchen surgyed* layout or the diamond shaped eight corner layout which is considered

to be most auspicious and perfect planning wise as it is based on the principals of a Buddhist mandala with very strong cardinal points.

The main structure is designed in the traditional *kawa zhi dung gyed* layout. This arrangement is considered to be most ideal for the main prayer hall as it represents the Buddha's theories of the Four Noble Truth and the Eight Fold path which remain the fundamental principles of Buddhism.