

BETWEEN THE EARTHQUAKES STANDS A MONASTERY

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In late December 2011, during the Lepcha Namsong (New Year) festival, the annual village Cham was celebrated at the monastery on the hill at Hee Gyathang, in Lower Dzongu, North Sikkim. The Cham is a Buddhist ritual—a masked dance intended to remove obstacles and protect the monastery and the village from misfortune. During a Cham masked dancers whirl slowly around the monastery ground, appeasing troublesome local deities, and attracting benevolent deities that bring peace and prosperity for the year ahead.

This Cham would have been the last held at Hee Gyathang but the foresight and perseverance of a small group of villagers who have extended the life of this old stone and timber building. Like the Cham they have gathered to witness, they have removed obstacles to protect the monastery and in so doing, have protected an important symbol of Lepcha social history.

The lifecycle of the old timber and stone monastery in Hee Gyathang can be measured between two of Sikkim's devastating earthquakes. It was built to replace the former village monastery, which was destroyed by an earthquake in the early 1930s, and its life was almost ended in 2011, before the September 18 quake, when it was slated for demolition and replacement.

A new concrete monastery was proposed for the same site but this news stirred community discussion about what makes an old—albeit damaged—building more important than a new one and the historical markers that make it worth saving and restoring.

The decision to build a new monastery was made before the 2011 earthquake, but damage sustained in the quake made it a safety risk and the argument for replacement gained strength.

But the prospect of a new monastery left many villagers concerned that a rich history of community and cultural engagement would be lost

¹ The author acknowledges the significant contribution to this article from Tenzing Gyatso Lepcha who researched and recorded the history of the Hee Gyathang monastery.

for the Hee Gyathang monastery has a unique history: It was built entirely by Lepchas and the cost contributed to by every village in Dzongu.

Tenzing Gyatso Lepcha was one of the villagers who fought hard to retain the existing monastery and described the heritage value of the building in community rather than religious terms. “This is the only monastery that was entirely built by Lepchas. The grandfathers of almost everyone in this village carried stones on their backs to the top of the hill where the monastery stands.”

Tenzing’s grandfather was village *mandal* (village headman) at the time and was instrumental in getting the monastery built. He also worked with the Lepcha community in Dzongu who contributed to the cost of the monastery. Tenzing raised the broader significance of the building when advocating for the monastery’s restoration. “This monastery was built by all the people from Dzongu. They made the tools, they contributed money to buy the materials; they carried the stones. It is a significant community building,” he said.

Tenzing and fellow villagers who wanted to save the monastery discussed alternatives with neighbours, the panchayats (elected village representatives) from Hee Gyathang and neighbouring cluster villages, the contractor/builder and Dzongu’s Member of Legislative Assembly. As the cost of demolition of the old building wasn’t included in the budget for building the new, they negotiated that the new building could be constructed alongside the old—an approach that appeased those who wanted to keep the old monastery and those who supported a new monastery. They lobbied for funds to stabilize the old monastery, which were spent on steel scaffold erected one month before the 2011 earthquake, thereby saving the building.

One of the village panchayats, Norzing Lepcha, said the monastery is an important building because it was built by the village ancestors. He suggested when the new monastery is constructed the old can be converted into a prayer room. He appreciates the community sharing ideas for its cultural preservation and would be happy to see it used as a museum.

Chetan Shrestha, a heritage architect and Partner at Sanctum Conservation Works, who consulted with the Lepcha community on the historical value and condition of the monastery, noted the Hee Gyathang monastery is one of the few in Sikkim built exclusively from stone and mud mortar that survive. “Sikkim has already lost a majority of its archi-historical heritage. The good sense shown by Hee Gyathang village could prove to be an example of the positives of sensible conservation. If it were also to fall, there might be nothing left for the

future generations to learn about ancient building practice”. [see earlier article ‘Broken Shrines’]



Hee Gyathang monastery, Dzongu, North Sikkim

The Hee Gyathang monastery was built under the leadership of twelve *mandals* representing all parts of Dzongu who divided the responsibility for its construction. Some were responsible for the building of a wall of the monastery; others were responsible for the middle part; others for the wooden structure. The people at Hee Gyathang served food to all the people involved in the construction until the monastery was completed in 1936.

Saving a religious building for its community history is rich in spiritual practice. Consider the devotion to Buddhism by the Lepchas of Dzongu who decided the monastery should be on the top of the hill so every person could hear the sound of monastery activities. This site was higher than the monastery they replaced and involved significant hardship for the construction. It took several months to cut the hill, level the ground and men and women had to carry the stone and white mud from up to three kilometres to the construction site.

The commitment to the building and Buddhist practice is etched in

the ten main wooden pillars for which the timber was brought from a forest three kilometres away. Local people also made the tools required to work the timber into pillars.

The Hee Gyathang monastery is now safely clad in scaffold. But while it may have been given a reprieve, to be truly safe it needs to be restored. This will require considerable funding, that in modern Sikkim won't be raised by twelve *mandals* with labour provided by community volunteers.

Tenzing Lepcha and his friends are forming a committee to work on the restoration of the monastery. The committee will create fundraising proposals and opportunities. They hope to emulate their ancestors and create an inclusive community response to safeguard the future of the monastery on the hill.