

HALJIMONASTERY-A HIDDEN HERITAGE IN NORTH-WEST NEPAL

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Location

The Monastery of Halji is located in the middle of the village of Halji, one of the three villages in the Limi Valley, at an altitude of 3660 meters. It is largest of the three monasteries in the valley. The village has a beautiful setting on the bank of Limi River surrounded by the hills with farmland to the south.

It is six days walk from Simikot to Halji village. From Halji, the village of Til, is three hours walk to the southwest and the village of Jang is also three hours walk to the northwest.

Halji village lies to the north of the trekking trail leading to the village of Jang and is linked with the approach road to the village. There are a number of gateways Chhortens and Mani walls on the way to the village. The village settlement is consisted of 85 houses and 400 inhabitants live there.

Monastery Complex- Architectural Description

The monastic complex which dates from thirteen century consists of two buildings; a monastery (Gompa) and a Mani Lhakhang. The Mani Lhakhang is the village temple, which is used sometimes for ceremonies. It is located to the south of the monastery complex in

front of the monastery building. The monastery structure overlooks a courtyard with a centrally placed player flag. Ritual dances are performed in this courtyard.

The Monastery Building

The monastery is a three storeyed rectangular structure (36m×32m) planned around a courtyard. It is south facing and approached through its southern gateway, which leads on to a courtyard measuring approximately 18m×11m. The courtyard is the Centre for communal gatherings, ritual dances and festivals. The gateway is flanked on either sides by a series of rooms, which are currently used as stores. In the western wing there is a big hall the *Ba-Khang*, which is a store for the traditional dresses, mattresses and weapons used in traditional dances. The eastern wing houses the main kitchen of the monastery, which is usually used for communal cooking. There is a grain store adjacent to the kitchen to the south. The northern wing has a storeroom for the kitchen, a firewood store and a preparation room. In the middle of the northern wing, there is a shrineroom. It consists of an image of the four directional divinities called Nambar Nangje in the middle of the room and images of disciples of Nambar Nangje surrounding the main shrine. The images are said to be as old as the gompa.

In the northwest corner of this wing, there is a room with no access. No one knows the exact use of this room but it is said that it might be a storeroom for valuable things belonging to the monastery. Entrance to this room is by opening up the floor on the first floor above.

A flight of stairs on the northern side of the courtyard leads to the balcony in front of the main assembly hall (Tshog-Khang/Du-Khang) on the first floor. The balcony is protected against rain and dust by a black and white Yak-hair curtain called a brayel. This is heavy and waterproof. On the exterior of the flanking wall on either side of the door of the Du-khang, there are original murals (circa 13th century) depicting the four guardians. This room is the most sacred part of the whole complex. The room houses the large gilded image of Sakyamuni and other deities from the Dikung-Kagyul sect. In addition there are brass and silver chhortens and an image of Tara. The interior east and south walls have murals, which are in poor condition. Wooden racks on the west wall hold volumes of Tanjurs. The pillar in the room are rich in carvings. The floor is boarded with timber planks. The Gon-khang on the first floor houses the fierce divinities. There are more murals of the circa 13th century depicting the divinities on the east and the northern part of the west wall of the room.

The rooms in the northeast corner of the first floor are the winter quarters (Winter Zimchung) of the Lama of the monastery. There are four rooms: altar room, bedroom, kitchen and firewood store and an attached toilet. The room below the vestibule of the Zimchung is a store for the head Lama and is accessible through the first floor.

Three sides of east, north and west wings on the first floor house monks' cells and there are small rooms with small kitchens and bedrooms, shared by the monks in the monastery. One set of cells has a kitchen, a store for firewood and bedroom.

The northern wing is three storeyed. The Rolmo-khang on the third floor is the store for musical instruments. The small room adjacent to the Rolmo-Khang is a bookstore. There is a large library hall next to the bookstore where the volumes of Kunjur are stored. The hall has richly carved and well painted columns and

brackets. The eastern part of the wing on this floor has summer quarters for the Head Lama (Summer Zimchung) which consists of a bed room, a kitchen, an attached toilet and an open to the sky hall where meetings and religious teachings by the head Lama (sometimes by guest Lamas) are held. The southwest and southeast corners of the complex have toilets, which seems quite problematic because these are open toilets and used by community living in surroundings.

Mani Lha-khang

The Mani Lha-khang is a village temple and is run separately by the local people. It consists of the vestibule and a Mani room, which houses a large Mani (Prayer wheel), 2 meters in diameters. The room contains images of Guru Rimpoche, Chyaranji, Chanptong Chengtong (Avalokitesvara) and Sakyamuni. The vestibule has six small prayer wheels. The western part of the Lha-khang has three rooms: a kitchen, a preparation room and a store and are used during certain ceremonies.

Historical Background

The Halji monastery, known also as Rinchenling Gompa, is said to have been built during the reign of one of the Sinjali kings (1327 A.D.- 1391 A.D.). Monks from the monastery relate that Gompa was built at the same time as Thuling Gompa in Ghuki Village in Tibet. A pilgrim's guide to the Tise region reports that the Dri-gung Lama Spyan-Snga was given Limi by one of the Malla Kings (circa thirteenth century)*. According to local informants, one of the Malla kings from Sinja sponsored the Gompa construction and people from Jang, Halji and Til village built it with the help of the people from Mugu.

Religious and Cultural Aspects

The monastery belongs to the Dri-gung Ka-gyugpa sect. It has for centuries been the religious and cultural center for the inhabitants of the Limi Valley. Local people accept that the Gompa is a protector of the three villages in the valley and believe that they couldn't have been there without the monastery.

*Monuments of Northern Nepal by Corneille Jest, p48.

people from the village visit the monastery and offer scarfs (khata), butter lamps and money for the blessing of good health and prosperity when they are away from the village. Each year, boys from the village go to India in winter in search of work and at that time a communal puja is performed once a week (sometimes once a month) for family members in India. When people get sick, they visit to the monastery and pray for their recovery. Before and after marriage people visit the monastery and offer something in the hope of a happy marriage. When someone dies, a puja is performed by the Lamas and members of the family for the betterment and rebirth of the deceased.

Besides these occasional offerings, worships and regular Kanso Puja (Regular puja in the gompa) by Lamas, the following ceremonies are performed during a year.

The 2nd Tibetan Month (March)

1st- 15th (Kanjurs are read by the Lamas)

The 10th Tibetan Month (November)

25th-29th (write here what do they do ?)

The 12th Tibetan Month (December)

9th-26th (Rimju Pooja)

27th-29th (Ritual Dance)

The Rimju Puja is the major festival of the community.

The Monastery- Its Ownership and Community

The present ownership of the land and building within the monastery complex is with the monastic society. The monastery also has a small amount of endowed agricultural land. At its peak the monastery has 150 monks, but currently this number had dwindled to 35. At the moment there is only one monk called konyer who takes care of monastery. The rest of the monks are away from the village and stay at Taklakot (a town in Tibet) and other places. They stay in the monastery only during the 4 month period in winter when the main ceremonies take place.

Building Construction

Structure

- Roofs

The roofs in all these structures are a typical flat roof construction. The beams support the joists

above it. Small tree branches are laid on the joists and about 10cms to 150 cms thick clay provides as a top layer to the roof. Most of the timbers used are Chir pine although sometimes cedar is used.

The roof structure over Rolmo-Khang (7m×7m) is supported by a central grid of four columns and has two skylights. This part of roof was repaired 6 years ago. Similarly the roof over the Kanjur store was repaired 12 year ago and the roof structure of summer Zimchung was repaired this year. The roof here in Zimchung was raised by 50cms due to a height problem. There are still leakage problem in all the rooms even though they were repaired quite recently.

- Walls

Basically the main structural walls are constructed of random rubble stone masonry set on a very thin layer of mud mortar; in some places on the first floor there are some sun dried mud brick walls, which act as structural walls. Wall thickness varies from place to place ranging from 50 cms. to 85 cms and even more in some places on the ground floor. The thickness of mud brick walls is of 30 cms. *Internal partition walls are of ston walls with timber framing and mud infill with a thickness of 10 cms* Mud brick walls are found in some places and function as both structural and partition walls. Only internally walls have been plastered with mud in most of the rooms as well as externally on walls facing onto the courtyard except the storerooms. The half portion of the main structural wall to the east of the Ding room was totally rebuilt in 1995 A.D. from the ground floor to the top. Similarly the south wall of the Kanjur room on the second floor was repaired at the same time. On the ground floor, the main structural wall to the south of the store room (Nirchang) was in a poor condition. Sixteen years ago, local people built a new structural wall parallel to this wall to support the load coming from above and save the wall paintings on the first floor above it.

- Columns

There is no standard module of columns in this structure. The columns have been introduced to support larger spans and in places they support structural walls on the upper floors. Due to lack of

sufficiently sized timbers, a combination of up to 4 pillars can be found to support large beams in some places. The columns are square and circular in section. Most of the columns seem to be undersized. In the corridors on the first and second floor of the temple wing local people have added some new supports adjoining the old pillars so that load from the upper floor is supported by both old and new pillars.

- **Upper Floors and Ceilings**

The construction of the upper floor is the same as that of the roof. Th Gho-khang has pine planks laid over the joists, which are set directly on the raised solid floor. The Tshog-Khang has stone slabs as a floor covering material. All the other rooms have mud floors. The ceilings are an integral part of the roof. Over the rafters are laid split branches that are exposed and left undecorated. The main shrine rooms have cotton cloth as decorative elements to hide the undecorated ceilings.

- **Ground Floor**

All the rooms and covered passage around the courtyard on the ground floor have mud floors.

- **Platform**

The platform on which the building is set is about 80 cms high on the west and 55 cms high on the east, south and north of the courtyard. It is a solid platform built of random rubble stone.

Decorative Elements

- **Doors and Windows**

The door of the Tshog-khang is elaborate and richly carved. The joinery and profiles of the door is complex, whereas the other doors are plain. The windows follow the standard pattern. They have standard module and when larger windows are required the same module is repeated. One module consists of a trellised shutter, which is covered by cotton cloth and fixed on to the window frame. The bottom part of the module is just a timber member fixed directly to the window frame. Nowadays the cotton cloth is replaced by glass during repair and new construction work. Above the doors and windows there are one or two layers of decorative beams (bepo) projecting from the wall and covered

with mud on the upper surface: which worn for decorative purpose and as rain and sun protection for the window.

Wall Coverings

All the internal walls on the ground floor except, for the Ding Room and the kitchen, are unplastered because they serve as storage areas. The Ding Room is internally plastered with a thick coat of mud and is blue washed which gives a good background for the colorful images of the divinities and is very impressive. The external plastering towards the courtyard is simple, but there is no plaster on the peripheral walls of the monastery, which have exposed stone surfaces. The first floor rooms are on both sides plastered, as they are significant. Gon-Khang and Tshog-Khang have specially prepared mud plaster on the walls for their murals. The Zimchung on both first and second floor and the other rooms at the top are also plastered with mud.

- **Furnishings**

The Tshog-khang has some prayer benches and a richly carved and well-painted raised seat for the head Lama. The altar containing the principal statue is very rich in carving and looks impressive. The raised platform for the rest of divinities and chortens are made of wood and is rich in details. The Tanjur shelves hold 215 volumes and in the middle of the shelf there is a niche with an image of Lord Sakyamuni. There is a very beautiful stand for the drum (musical equipment used for praying).

The monastery is rich in masks, which are used during the traditional dances. In Kanjur Room, there is a specially designed shelf for the storage of masks but due to the problem mice it is not being used. Masks are hung on the walls and columns. The library has a beautiful bookshelf, very rich in carving, which holds 108 volumes of the Kanjurs.

- **Divinities**

The main divinities are all made of clay and it is said that they were moulded and painted at the time of the Gompa's construction. All the paintings of the images except in the Ding Room are said to be original. Following the tradition, the images in the Ding Room were repainted last year.

PRESENT CONDITION

The survey of the Monastic Complex reveals a unique architectural masterpiece that is in need of urgent repair. In essence, the major area of concern is the poor state of the roof, which is leaking in many places and is, in certain parts, structurally weak. Although all the roof structures of the northern wing of the complex have been repaired in different times, there is still leakage problem in all the rooms on the top floor which not only caused damage to the wall surfaces but also to the valuable paintings on the walls in the Tshog-Khang. The same problem exists in the east, south and west wings of the complex. The level of sagging of the roof over the covered corridor around the courtyard and monk cells is very marked. Due to lack of periodic maintenance of the roof have failed causing heavy water percolation. The floors need regular cleaning and maintenance. There is a considerable amount of rainwater splash around the walls on the south and west peripheral wall. Over time the murals on the wall in the Tshog-khang, the Gon-khang and outer walls flaking the main entrance of Tshog-Khang have Cracked and there are lots of cracks. The paintings in the Tshog-Khang are deteriorating due to leakage of water from the roof. The plaster on the interior walls in most of the monk cells is falling off. The toilets for the monks are of open type and are used in a communal practice, with no protection from the rain, thus causing environmental degradation.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The Halji Monastery is undoubtedly a gompa of considerable distinction not because of its religious

importance only, but also for its historical and architectural value. So it is felt urgent to start the "Emergency Repair Work" that integrates the roof repair and protection of wall paintings.

It is essential to save the wall paintings, which are very important part of the Gompa's history. It is recommended to call an expert on painting restoration to provide options for conserving and protecting the paintings that survive.

The repair and modification works that were done on the initiative of the local people should be acknowledged, but the conservation norms must be followed with traditional design. During the conservation and repair works, the local people must be trained so that they can repair the gompa themselves in future.

CONCLUSION

Halji Gompa is a place of great beauty and it exudes a sense of peace and tranquility. The Gompa requires significant repair and, because of its great historical significance, deserves to be revitalized and re-established as a meaningful religious center. The people from Limi Valley have requested that suitable year round accommodation is provided to ensure stability and obviate the need for a general exodus to monasteries. Halji Gompa could succeed as one of the monastic communities to revive this trend and to reactivate Buddhist ritual in the west Nepal Himalaya.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Jest, Corneille. Monuments of Northern Nepal, UNESCO, Paris, 1981.