

**Architecture &  
Planning for Villages**



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Foreword by **Dr Radha Vallabh Tripathi**

# Conservation of *Chorten* (Stupa) by community initiative at Gya Village, Ladakh

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## Abstract

A community led conservation of a *Chorten* (Stupa) was undertaken by the villagers of Rumtse, Sasoma, Gya, Lato and Rong who volunteered unconditionally to complete the noble conservation work. The *Chorten* was damaged by a powerful flash flood on the 6th August 2014, the *Chorten* which is located on the bank of the Yabat stream on the outskirts of Gya village was also affected by it and a part of it got washed away in the flood, as seen in the picture below. The flash flood created a lot of havoc in the region, particularly in the village where lots of farmland and two houses got washed away. The traditional art, crafts and architecture of Ladakh is deeply rooted in the land, evolved from its own conditions; climate, religion and society, also traditionally construction and conservation activity were seen as community exercise, Ladakh holds many such architecture wonders, through community led conservation effort only it is possible that these structures can be safeguarded. The recent attempts to create a pan-Ladakhi style of architecture by using modern materials is creating a perplexing condition in the region. The ancient way of verbal communication is fast depilating, and the traditional arts and crafts are being replaced, without understanding the needs of the region. The traditional practises of building has always been a community work in Ladakh, from monasteries to small houses, the whole village or members of extended family works tirelessly. The paper highlights the fact that traditional wisdom and community participation have always been a very integral part of the socio economic structure of our villages, the villages in Ladakh are a testimonial to these practices which are slowly dying.

*Keywords:* Vernacular, Indigenous, Materials, Geography, Buildings

## INTRODUCTION

"Ladakh is not exotic simply because her way of life is lost to those who hold a monopoly over the world economy or mass communication. It is a living breathing culture. To study its history or portray it as a cultural museum piece is a gross injustice to its inhabitants and traditions. For we ought to regard Ladakh's meaningful existence centered on work, prayer and contemplation not as an antiquated rhetoric but rather as a classroom in and a reminder of a valuable way of life for all mankind"

-Siddiq Wahid, 1981, in *Ladakh between Earth and Sky*

*Chorten* is the combination of two words 'Chod' and 'r'Ten' means 'worship' and 'Base'. Therefore, it signifies 'A base of worship' or 'A worship place'. While constructing the *Chorten* the following things are being placed inside it.

## Religious Books

Ash of dead body or a bone segment of renowned person or well-known Lama or Rinpoche's dead body.

Small pieces of precious things/metals.

Small quantity of food stuff/ food articles.

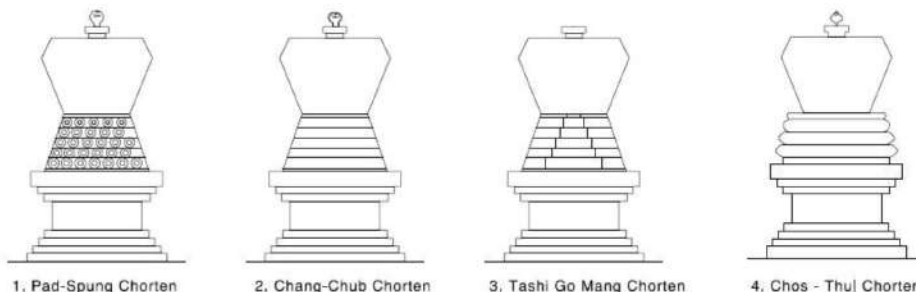
Mantras/religious scripts

Local tradition, not only in Ladakh but more broadly in the Himalayas, has always been based on oral knowledge and no books were written on the construction methods process. The rules fixing the proportions of images and stupas do not extend to temples and monasteries.

In the barren scenery of Ladakh's valleys, villages stand out from great distances. Vegetation might be the only vertical signs which introduce an agricultural village. The *Chorten*, and other manmade structures are the recognizable elements of landscape, all positioned at specific points.

## Chorten (Stupa)

There are three basic reasons for building stupas. Burial stupas hold relics from the funeral pyre. Commemorative stupas mark the place of an event or occasion in the Buddha's life. And, votive stupas are erected to make a dedication of good will or to accumulate merit. The latter type is a perfect outlet for lay people to connect with the Buddhadharmā; in the past, it was primarily the laity who were involved in constructing stupas.



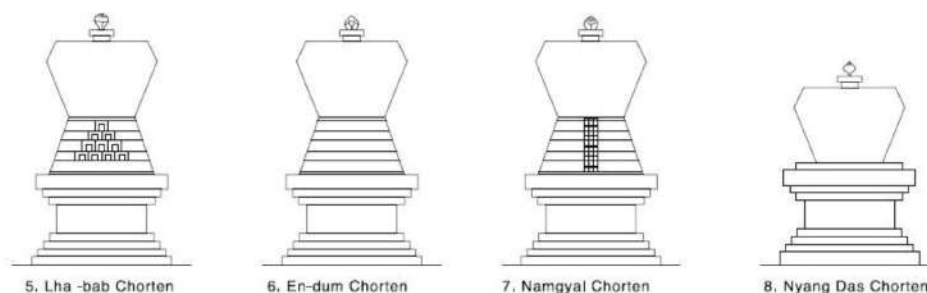


Figure 1: Different kind of chorten situated in ladakh source: development of ladakh himalaya

## INTRODUCTION TO GYA VILLAGE

Gya village is situated 73 kms south of Leh District of Ladakh, India. It is located in the Kharu tehsil, off the Leh – Manali Highway, close to Tso Kar.

The village overlooks the Gya river, between the Indus river valley and Tanglang La Pass, accessible from Upshi in the Indus River Valley, the village is located in the gorge created by the river Gya. Most of the people are engaged in agriculture activities.

Gya has 140 households. The effective literacy rate is 58.67%. Population: 658, 301 Male, 357 Females

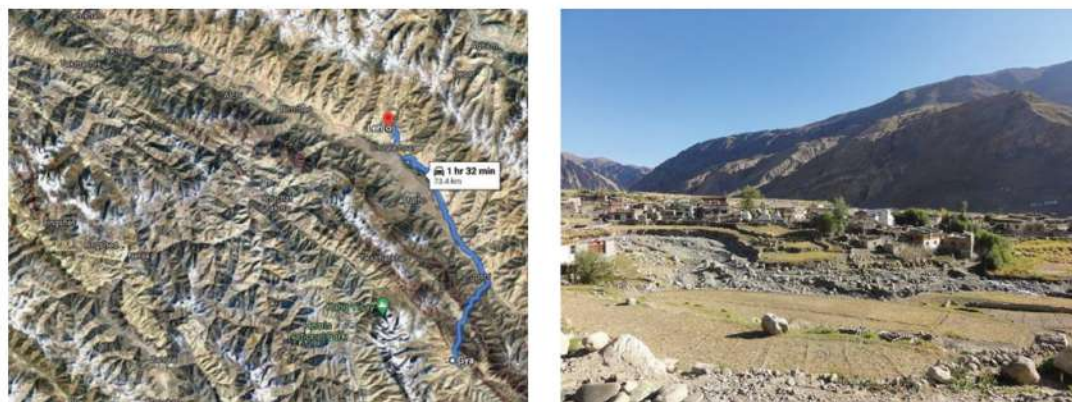


Figure: 2 and 3 : Google map showing distance of gya from leh, 73 kms approx.  
Source: google earth View of gya village from across the river source: karma sonam

## CONSERVATION INITIATIVE

A small conservation work had been taken by the villagers of Gya, Rumtse, Sasoma, Lato and Rong village in Ladakh, the paper tries to highlight 'how community participation and traditional wisdom, can help us create a resilient settlements, especially the ones which are situated in difficult terrain and where availability of resources are few and expensive.

Preparation for the consecration ceremony on 29th October 2020 blessed by H.E Khamtak Jigwang Rinpoche. On this auspicious occasion day, the villagers wholeheartedly grateful to His Eminence to grace the consecration of the renovated Chorten of Gya on 29th October 2020.

## DOCUMENTATION

Part of the Chorten was damaged by a flash flood in 2014. On the 6th August 2014, there was a powerful flesh flood occurs in the

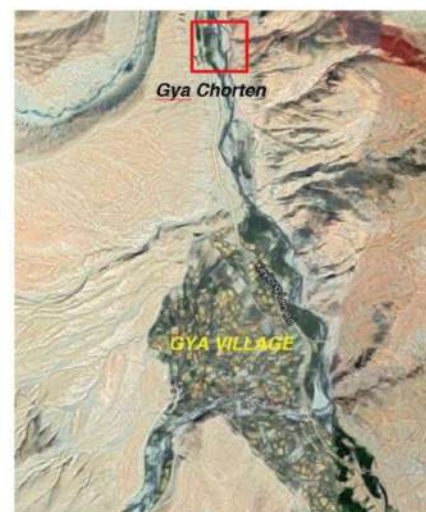


Figure 4: The chorten is located on the outskirts of the settlement between the highway and river  
Source: Google earth.

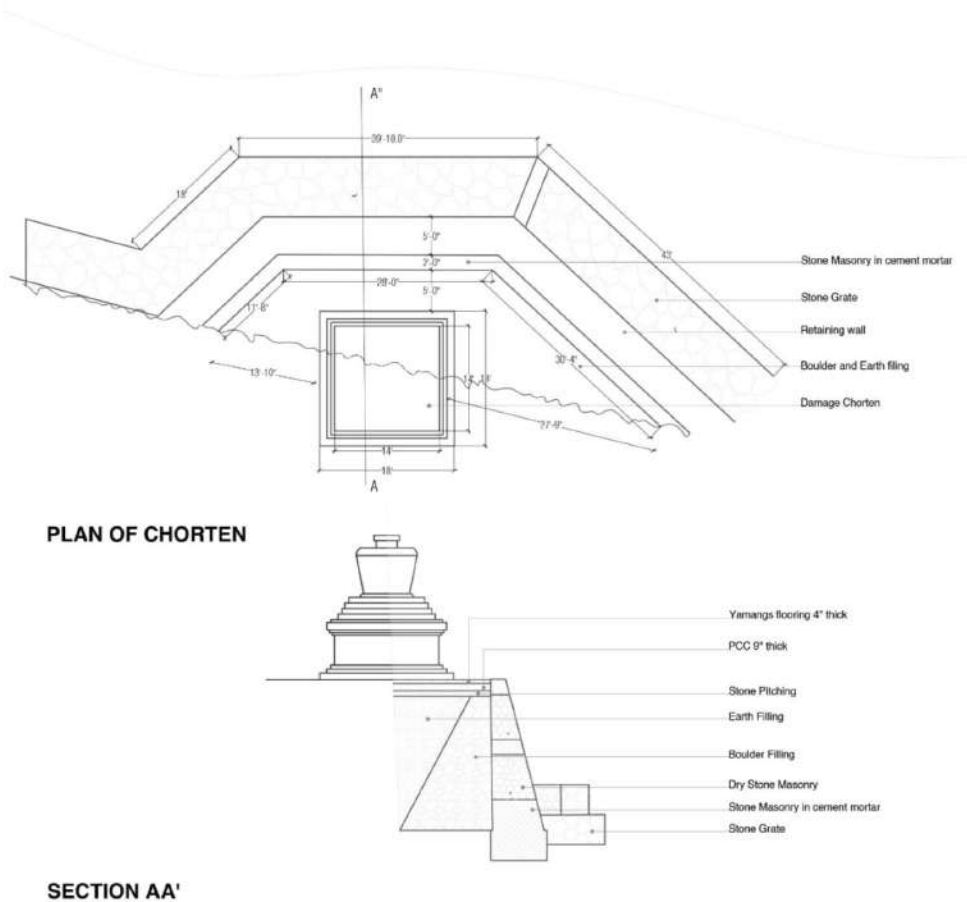
Yabat steam along with the Gya village. It is said to be the Glacial Lake outburst Flood. While lots of farmland and two houses also washed away but there was no casualty reported

**STRUCTURE ANALYSIS**

Structure analysis of the Stupa was done by Civil engineers and a team of Architects from INTACH, who showed special interest in the project and also arranged for funding. The Chorten is around four meter by four meter with a height of around 6.5-meter, A gabion wall was made so as to give strength and hold the structure which is adjacent to the water body.



Figure 5: A chorten on the way to nubra near khardungla pass  
Source: Karma Sonam



Drawing 1: Three stupas (mchod-rten) representing the protectors of three families (rigs-gsum-mgon-po) on the hilltop of pipiting,  
Source: High altitude houses, vernacular architecture of Ladakh.

**RENOVATION**

The conservation work started on 10th of July 2020 and the last completion day was 18th of October 2020. It took almost four months. During the course of the renovation work, the villagers witnessed various events which are considered as auspicious.



Figure 6: Photos depicting various phases of the conservation work, mud with the straw mixed silty clay mortar plastering holds its joints very strong  
 Source: Karma sonam

### Relics

The significance of Chorten is not measured by the scale of the built structure, but by the content, here some additional relics were added by the villagers during the conservation effort. All these objects are considered part of the holy relics of importance. Like Farm tools, weapons, swords all these elements offered to subdue our negative emotions, siad Dr. Sonam Wangchok founder HCHF Leh.



Figure 7: Some of the relics which were restored from inside the chorten  
 Source: Karma sonam

## Inauguration and Resurrection

The construction team has now submitted a proposal for another protection dam with a create-wire of 800 meters alongside the stream to the related department which is estimated to be built for around Rs. 8 lac is in the approval and tender stage. Hopefully In the summer the contractor will immediately start the work.



Figure 8: Inauguration day  
Source: Karma Sonam

From the 17th century the power of the monasteries increased and, together, increased and, with it, the position of the monasteries started becoming dominant, replacing the castles with their fortress –like mass on the hill-tops. A village can be influenced by different factors for its position within the terrain. In the past the main aspects were related to natural elements, while today villages are also influenced by new variables. The landscape of Ladakh witnesses a lot of these spiritual structures, this is testimony to the closed association of the people of Ladakh to nature and spirituality. Earth, stone and wood are the essential constituents of Ladakhi houses. The environment plays plenty of the first two items, though timber is rare especially at high altitudes. This very restricted list explains how very few materials were exploited for building not just houses, but sacred buildings as well, defense walls, fortresses and even royal palaces. Earth and Stone are present everywhere, this limitation of material is also one of the reasons how the residents are attuned to basic construction technique, and almost everyone in gya village had built by themselves or with the help of the community,

## CONCLUSION

The conservation effort by the villagers of Gya is a unique example of community participation in construction and renovation work; it has always been integral to the lifestyle of the rural population and brings a sense of ownership and joy.

In most of the Indian villages these traditional wisdom of conservation effort and community participation is vanishing due to rapid urbanization on one hand and the advent of new material for construction, alien to the region, hence in recent times Ladakh had seen many migration of construction workers from Nepal, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal, citing many issues in Leh, one of which is housing problem for these workers. Also the close association of villagers and interdependency is also going. If community participation is not encouraged in villages these traditional wisdom will not be able to survive for long and eventually the coming generation will end up making structures which are not resilient in the fragile region of Ladakh, the newly formed Union Territory can be helpful in devising policies and proposals to retain the craft and the craftsmen.

*“The involvement of local people in planning and management of natural resources is now widely recognized as critical to conservation and development.”*

Guidelines for Mountain Protected Areas (D.Poore 1992:19)

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