

Seismic Strengthening and Restoration of Lo Gekhar: US Ambassadors Fund for Culture Preservation

*Quarterly Report, Year 1, Quarter 1
(1st Oct - 31st Dec 2020)*

Project activities in the first quarter have been severely curtailed by the situation around Covid-19, which made any substantial research, documentation and planning work at the site impossible. Thus, our first focus was to further assess the condition and to enquire with the users and caretakers of the monument about their needs for this project. We have also been in contact with the Department of Archaeology, Government of Nepal, regarding the planning process and they agreed to send an architect and an engineer to support the planning on a travel cost basis.

The situation continues to be difficult into the second quarter and different options on how to proceed are currently being assessed.

Past Quarter

Report by: Laxmi Gurung

For this purpose, a Norbusum Foundation team, Kunjon Thakuri and Laxmi Gurung, visited the project site of "Seismic Strengthening and Restoration of Lo Gekhar" at Marang village, Mustang on the month of October 2020 between 8th to 12th. This was actually the second visit, as a first one took place immediately after we got the news that the grant for the restoration has been approved.

The project members started their journey from Jharkot, Varagung Muktichhetra Rural Municipality to Marang village in Lo Gekhar Rural Municipality, Mustang. The objective of this visit was to meet the community and other stakeholders to discuss the present needs, future usage, and maintenance of the monument in the light of the rapidly increasing accessibility of the site. During the visit, they spent two days in the monastery where damage occurred due to the impact of the 2015 earthquake as well as due to the changing pattern of the local climate. Damages to sacred land, buildings, and sacred images were documented by photographs. And besides, many stories and beliefs of local people and pilgrimage about the Gompa were collected.

Local Committee

The team also organized a meeting with the local stakeholders and explained the community about the objectives of Norbusum Foundation as well as about the approved project the "US Ambassadors Fund for Culture Preservation (2020) that will restore the monastic complex with the goal to preserve its

current characteristics at Lo Gekhar Gumpa. There were a good number of participants from 43 households of Marang village at the meeting (Figure 1). The participants were both male and female from all age groups. During the meeting, the discussion focused on authorization to start the project work in April 2021. At the meeting it was mentioned that documentation should be done because during another restoration in the region the monument was looted and no documentation of the objects contained was done at the beginning of the work. During the meeting a local committee was formed that represents the village in discussion with the Norbusum Foundation. Among others, the community asked that work wages should be the current rate of the local municipality, and that material available locally would be bought from Marang village. The community also asked to be informed about the yearly budget available for restoration. The meeting was very interactive as there was a lot of interest from the local communities and many questions asked. People from the local communities were very excited and look forward to beginning the work as soon as possible.

The local committee consists of ten village members plus Kunjon Thakuri namely:

- Chekap Sengge Gurung
- Karsang Gurung
- Kunga Tenzin Gurung
- Gyatso Gurung
- Nu Angchuk Gurung
- Sonam Dundu Gurung
- Tai Dondrup Thakuri
- Tenzin Angya Gurung
- Dawa Zangmo Gurung
- Dawa Gurung

One of these members needs to be present during the restorations. The documents of the meeting and an English translation are appended (Attachments 1 and 2).





Figure 1: Interactive sessions during Community Meeting at community hall

Interviews

Along with the group meeting, the team also organized home visits to each and every house possible to approach the families personally for the purpose of qualitative interviews. The team prepared a few questions focusing on the award and its advantages and disadvantages from each individual perspective. The interviewees were randomly selected. The questionnaire included questions such as:

1. What is your opinion on the US Ambassador's Fund that is awarded to Lo Gekhar. Do you think its impact will be positive or negative?
2. We heard there had been a lot of support coming from other organizations in maintenance of the Monastery but still Gompa's buildings are in degrading condition, who do you think is responsible for the Lo Gekhar Gompa?
3. What do you think about the accessibility of the road? To what kind of change will it lead?
4. Will the restoration of Lo Gekhar Gompa lead to an improved local community lifestyle and help in generating income?

The interviews started with ko-ngir (caretakers) of the sacred land, Lo Gekhar Gompa's (Figure 2). The first participant was Namgyal la, a ko-ngir who has been taking care of the monastery for 28 years. He is the 24th generation of ko-ngir from his family. When the team asked Namgyal la to share about his years of service as ko-ngir, he said, *"Though we have small financial support has been coming then and now but that was like putting patch on leakage hole or just for small maintenance but that never help to stop completely, instead it led to another place leakage. Especially, during winter we have lots of snow and that lead damaged and also untimely rain are main cause of decay of mud roof. Since long time Marang villagers are taking turn to throw snow in winter but still it keeps on damaging and now the leakage has reach till main lhakhang (god's temple) too and which is threat to the monastery. It will be very good if we get solid help in maintaining these so that we can focus on another area if any other help come in future. As being Ko-ngir I always wanted to do so many things but I cannot because at the end it's all about finance. We need proper way of drainage system too. We are very happy that USA embassy is helping us to preserve our own Heritage. They are helping us that are amazing. Actually, we should be doing that because that is our property, our identity and our pride, maybe it is the power of Lo Gekhar Gompa thukchekhhe (blessings). Compared to the past and now many things has been changed, there is*

road connection, this has made travel easier and many people are visiting the monastery. In the past only locals from Mustang area but now many domestic and international tourists also visit here.”

Namgyal la showed the team all damages that occurred in and around the monastery.

After the Gompa, the team proceeded further in the village area and went to an elderly women, aged around 75, Evi (grandmother) Kesang (Figure 2). In her house she happily welcomed the team in her kitchen. Her age did not matter, she was getting ready to send meals to her peasants in her farm, and the team quickly started their questions without wasting her valuable time. No matter what she did not rush much as she believes guests are god and she made tea and slowly told her story, *“Though I am too old to comment or say anything, I accept on what our community decides. I believe them as they know what is good and welfare of community. But if you still need my opinion, I look forward for the change or improvement. See, when we were kids there no road and life was very difficult, we have to walk for days to reach the nearest city. Life was harsh and everything was very raw but now we are connected with road and that is biggest change I have seen in my life (Sparkling in her wrinkle eyes). Now we can have goods from Kathmandu the capital city area available in here. These days many people are visiting our place. This is how I feel due to the blessings from our sacred land Lo Gekhar Gompa. In the past, very few people used to visit our place and no tourist at all then because they had to either walk or ride horse and many cannot come but these days, many visitors traveled by jeeps. This means there is definitely increased in number of pilgrimage. Now that leads to an obvious increase in the number of people that will light butter lamps in the main shrine of the monastery and I can see flow of income. I also see people are showing more faith on our gompa and it is good that the monastery is getting the popular among nearby villages, pilgrimage and trekkers. I am very positive and hopeful that with the blessings of our Lo Gekhar Gumba, our life style will improve. I personally feel that we will we always welcome good changes and development”*. Once evi stopped narrating the team left thanking her for her valuable time.



Figure 2: During home visits and face to face interviews with the local community

As the team approached another house in Marang village, the team were offered Cha, bhecha (butter tea) and tsampa (local roasted barley flour) typical Mustangi Tradition for guests. The tea and tsampa gave the team energy after a long day walk. While sipping tea the interview started with the head of the family, Dorjee. He narrated the story that he often heard when was kid, *"I heard that there were 108 small Chorten (stone stupas) outside of Lo Ghekar Gumba which are considered the territory of monastery in the past. Some what it makes sense that in our Buddhist religion 108 is always auspicious and considered very sacred but now I have not count how many are still existing, I guess some had ruined with changing climate. It is very kind of that Amercian Embassy to come with financial support to take care and used it for maintenance of our sacred gompa. The improvement in gompa will draw many pilgrimage and tourist in the region. As compared to the past, hardly any tourist visit our village except some local pilgrimage due to long days travelled but now a days the improvement in road is bringing many people in gompa and some stops for tea or coffee and lunch, though we do not have good access of restaurant and lodge. Now we need to think on accommodation too. Till date, we don't have any income here in village except small economic value on our farm agro goods but that is sufficient for our own consumption. Basically, in the winter, we go to southern Nepal or India to do petty business like selling local herbs or sweater business. This will help us to sustain our family for a year and escape harsh winter but this year due to covid-19, we will stay with no income at all. Seeing the condition of our village many youngsters had already left for USA, Europe and other foreign country for earning money. I am also worried, one day the village is left with only elders nobody to look after. Sometime, I wonder if our village is prosperous with tourist's destination like Lomanthang, Charang, Ghami, most our youngsters remain in the village. But now I am very hopeful that with the support from American Embassy on preservation of Lo Gekhar's monastery and its blessing, one day our life will improve and save it for our future generation. Simultaneously, income generating aspect for Marang village specifically and Mustang distance generally. This will definitely discourage youth to leave for outside the village to earn. I personally wants to thank US Ambassdor and Norbusum Foundation for the project and we want long term sustainability of project. The project should be transparent and genuine so the impact of it will remain within us forever"*.

With a full stomach from the previous visits, the team was again welcomed by an elderly couple, Tashi and his wife with butter tea. Inside the traditionally colored painted on the walls of homes with eight auspicious signs of Buddhism and eight auspicious signs around everywhere, outside and also inside the rooms in most of the houses in Marang made Laxmi and Kunjon feeling of very auspicious and positivity and Tashi shared his experiences of being born in sacred land of Lo Gekhar in Mustang, *"Lo Gekhar Gompa is a sacred place of Guru Rinpoche. We have strong connection with this land. Due to the blessing of Guru Rinpoche we got connected with road now. We got to see many people coming to this sacred land and feel very proud man (smile with wrinkle). These days, it is very easy to travel to Jomsom, Pokhara and Kathmandu. I like the idea of American Embassy helping our monastery in preservation of the gompa. If it is preserved then it will last long and what we have now can hand over to future generation and this sacred land will remain holy for our villagers, pilgrimage, travelers and guru rinpoche followers for years to come. Actually, we are the one who should take care of this sacred land in*

preservation but we do not have much money so we have to seek USA embassy help and they are very kind and very supportive and we should not let it go. In the past, we are foolish to refuse financial help from outsider due to our internal problem and now see, development in our village has delayed. If it was done before I guess our lifestyle would have improved and we would have much easier life as in other villages in Mustang. Sometime it's our fate, but there is saying-never too late, now you guys (pointing to Laxmi and Kunjon) have come to help and I guess you guys are sent by Guru Rinpoche and I have strong feeling that our Guru will take care of all good things. In past life was very hard and difficult. Now so many different people coming here and we feel happy to see them. Even though I am old but I am happy my children and grandchildren can started their business here and need not travel far and away from own house to earn as we used to do. It is always difficult to go to others place and sell things. Some customers are good, some are not good so they will shout at us Bhotey (local dialect- dirty and filthy) but (with smiling face) we have to take it as we don't have other source of income. I have suggestion that if you could plant more trees such as junipers, flowers in this sacred land, it will be nice as we do lack trees here in Marang and in Mustang. Lo Gekhar Gompa is very holy and sacred, it has four stupas in four corners and 108 chorten (stupa) in around the gompa". After the interview, Tashi and his wife offered a white khata (white auspicious scarf) to the team as a blessing.



Figure 3: Kids during lockdown

After continuing the visit, the team took a little break and went to the nearby school where the ladies met five children with their school bags playing outside of their school (Figure 3). Those children were very enthusiastic to go school but due to Covid-19 lockdown nationwide, no teachers were available in the school. The kids were playing games of school, such as students and teachers by themselves on open ground with no books, no dress, no desk but looking most content and happiest. The situation seemed serious, but the pleasant faces of the kids give hope for a brighter future one day in Marang village. Slowly the team was escorted by little kids to one of the kid's houses nearby. The mother of the kid Sangmo greeted and offered the team hot water and some khora (traditional flours cookies). She is also an active member of the mothers' group in the village, though her son had not been to school. Thus, she attended meetings in community development and tried her best to provide her opinion on important issues, *"Preserving on old stuff is always good idea and it will not only showcase our Heritage but also gives our identity to the world where we are from and who we are and it's our pride too. If our ancient old heritages are receiving external fund for its preservation, it is very good news and it will not only conserve our Lo Gekhar monastery but also help our community to uplift economically as many people are visiting. As a movement of more people means somewhat benefitting us directly or indirectly. The*

number of visitors visiting monastery has comparatively increased compared to the past. Even though this monastery is 8th century monastery and very sacred, many people in the past had visited by walking but these days, you see, road is connected and many people are visiting in jeep and the flow of people have dramatically increased in Marang. Now the locals are starting to build home stay concept which means it has touch local economy, and many people come to buy our agricultural goods which are sold in around village. For example, many visitors want to buy mustard oil, wheat and buckwheat that grows here. Till last year nobody came to buy such products and we never thought of selling so we go to Charang village (next touristic village) or lower mustang to sell these goods but now I think we need to keep these products here for sale. We never thought of planting apples but these year many villagers started to plant the trees. I guess in near future this will be great revenue for us. Many pilgrimage or visitor had fate in sacred land so they buy butter lamps and that's one way of income for the Gompa. Some people give some donation to rebuilt or renovate or as in form of donation, this has helped monastery to uplift financially slightly comparatively in the past. So I think development is also good and more people mean more publicity and this is always a power of Lo Gekhar Gompa. Though Lo Ghekar Gompa belongs to Lo Ghekar Rural Municipality, we the people of Marang had been taking care of the monastery at good and bad time. Rest of other villages comes here for special occasion such as during full moon day, no moon day and other festivals like yartung (summer/horse festival). Most challenge so far is, during winter as the buildings are made from mud roof, if snowed we need to throw otherwise it will damage the building with leakage, no good drainage system, so we take care during winter and small maintenance of the monastery every year by our community. If we do not do who will do? It is our duty for our heritage. We need save it for future generation. Well, few years back I heard small funding support had come to the monastery and from that money three buildings nearby main gompa were built and renewed over the year. I know small financial support has been coming in the monastery but it never gave solid grounding. We are very happy that USA Ambassadors Fund for Culture preservation is given to Lo Gekhar Gompa and we are very hopeful it will do good work and help to preserve our heritage". With this beautiful line Sangmo thanked the team.

Last but not least, while the team entered one local restaurant for food and waiting for the meals, Mr. Tsering resident of Marang and a farmer visited the restaurant and sat next to the team. The team made use of the time to start a conversation with Mr. Tsering and he promptly reacted to it and mentioned, "Lo Gekhar Gompa is sacred land and backbone of Marang Village. We are very happy USA Embassy is granting financial support in the monastery. We are happy to provide our service if required by Lo Gekhar gompa which we Marang people have been doing for years. Many budgets had come and gone. We have seen many good and bad things which I want to share with you only. For an example, there are concrete and beautiful taps were built in around the monastery but no drinking water till now, isn't that funny (he laugh). We are waiting for the taps to flow with water but when will we get to see is a big question mark for me. So what I am trying to say is building fascinating stuff and not meeting end needs is again another problem. We want good quality work as you have mention in our meeting and we are hopeful. So do that and you will be blessed by GURU Rinpoche and Thank you". With his two fold hands he thanked the team and left the room.

Once the interview was completed the next day the team went back to the monastery to take a few more shots of the idols and gumpa. A group of ladies pilgrimaging from Lower Mustang, Kagbeni came for kora (round) and one of the elder lady among the group was telling the young ladies to hide stone in another lady's bag who recently got married. Seeing the ladies, the team approached the elder lady and asked why so special about the stone. The elder lady responded, *"Well you guys may believe or not but we do. When we were kid we used to hear that Lo Gekhar has power to give kids as blessing to those who are infertile parents. Let's say example, if any married woman does not have kids, then her friends should take stone from this monastery's premises assuming as baby and also should name the baby and hide inside the lady's bag without her knowledge and after sometimes she will be pregnant and accordingly the baby will come to this world. This is not myth but real, I can name you few of those ladies and these kids too in my village. I have visited this place many a time and I have noticed many such incidents and check my hair (showing grey hair in her head) if you still do not believe me. It's not story but reality we have experience and seen those reality. If you still have doubt, you can experiment with your fellow friends who don't have children. We called it Bhu-ngutuk (bless to have kids)."*



Figure 4: Norbusum Team Interacting with ladies pilgrimages from Lower Mustang

Challenges

The visit of the Norbusum Team was very satisfactory and successful but the team faced few challenges during the visit. Although there was strong support and cooperation from the community, the team had problems in organizing a jeep due to Covid-19 lock down. The impact of lockdown has widely affected the Himalayan district of Nepal very badly. The local economy was shut down; tourism has stopped completely. In mountain areas, commuting from one place to another has always been very difficult; with lockdown it became even harder. Jeeps were not available and the team had to wait for a long time although it was booked. Sometimes the team had to walk for a few miles in order to replace the broken jeep. On returning, the team had to stay in quarantine in Jharkot for 14 days after returning from Lo Gekhar due to Covid-19 and local people trying to safeguard and minimize the spread of disease to community level. Although the concept of "Prevention is Better than Cure" is a good idea, the team had to go for 14 days unproductively.



Figure 5: Hardship faced during site visit, shortage of transport made the team walk few miles.

Conclusion

The visit of Norbusum Foundation Team to the “Seismic Strengthening and Restoration of Lo Gekhar” project was very fruitful. The team could select the committee members from the local community without any objections and the community was very supportive and positive in the project funded by US Ambassadors and looking forward to begin in March 2021. The team visit was not stopped by worldwide threat from Covid-19, lockdown, quarantine and hardship, faced during the visit. Rather, the visit was very successful, and the team could achieve the objective of the project as planned originally. The team observed the community facing many challenges in their life and hoping that the financial support from US Ambassadors of Culture for preservation will definitely help uplift the living standards of the local community in Marang, Mustang. The community seems optimistic that the 8th century monastic ambiance will be retained for generations and their happy days will come that provides income and avoids out-migration to lower lands or abroad.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

The interviews were recorded in local languages and notes were taken simultaneously. Later, the audio recordings were transcribed into English. The interviewee’s original names were changed to provide anonymity. All names were collected but retained in separate files from interview transcripts. For identification purposes, original names were changed into coded names in all documents in order to maintain confidentiality.

Financial Report

The only expenses in this quarter are the travel expenses for the actual visit to the monastery. There are no accounting or reporting expenses for this quarter as this work has been done by board members. Their efforts have been remunerated from the means available for project management (Attachment 3).

Current Quarter

This quarter the focus is twofold, namely buying the equipment necessary for the project and planning the summer campaigns. Accordingly, we have established the computer and camera needs and the identified equipment has partially been acquired already. We have also bought a domain for the website

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(www.norbusum.org) and designed its first pages to showcase this and other projects of the foundation. The website has gone public today with its first pages. Further, we are working on producing the project poster to set it up at the site at our next visit.

The remaining month of this quarter will be used to plan a variety of options for the summer campaign. With international travel severely curtailed due to Covid 19, it is still uncertain if on site planning work can begin in April or not. This will be depending on the availability of a suitable conservation architect during that time. Potential insurance and quarantine costs also need to be considered. John Harrison, our preferred choice for the architectural work, has received his first vaccination, but has to wait up to twelve weeks for the second one.

Kunjon Thakuri, January 29, 2021

