

# Lomanthang Town Wall: A Living Monument Awaiting Conservation

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## Context

One day in late 1999, children were playing under the shade of the town wall in Cheode, Lomanthang. Suddenly someone fore-cried of wall falling down. The fortunate children could run away and the wall crumbled down alarming the future of the only walled town in the Himalayas. Built five and half centuries ago, this town wall had well protected the then capital of kingdom of Lo. To date, it is functioning as the shelter to the palace, two old gompas, one living monastery, some chhortens, mani wall and more than 180 residential houses. Though the palace, the two gompas (Thubchen and Jhyampa) are of prime cultural value, it is, in fact, the town wall that gives Lomanthang its identity.

The wall is made up of rammed earth (*gyang*) construction with 1.5-meter width at base and an average height of 8 meter. The height of the bastions are 10m. Towards the top, it slightly tapers and forms a walkway of 60-cm. width with a 50 cm. high parapet (like crenellation) above it. This rammed earth technology was the original walling technology

of Lo and can still be seen in old monasteries, palaces. Wherever there are repairs done on the town wall, these are done in sun-dried mud bricks (*pops*) as can easily be seen on close inspection of the present state of wall.

Lomanthang (upper Mustang) had been a forbidden and lost kingdom as the writers termed it. Only after 1992, it has been opened for restricted tourism with a fee of 70\$ per day per person for foreign travelers. It is clear that the climax of this expensive trekking is the walled town of Lomanthang.

After considering these historic, cultural, architectural and tourism values, it is necessary, if not late, to put forward an sustainable conservation programme for the town wall. The town wall is given emphasis here because other important buildings (Thubchen and Jhyampa gompas) are now being conserved with a funding of American Himalayan Foundation through King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation, for which Sanday Kentro Associates (with John Sanday as the team leader) is acting as conservation consultant.

### **Early Conservation work by the Department of Archaeology (DOA).<sup>1</sup>**

Earlier in 1984-85, followed by the His Majesty's visit to the western region, Department of Archaeology was directed to carry out some repair works to the Lomanthang town wall. A team from the department made a visit and came up with a programme of intervention, which was soon amended by another team from the same department. Both teams presented their own conservation notes and the government, any way, released some fund for the repair. Due to some administrative and practical problems, the team from DOA worked on site for a short period and finally a committee for the repair of the town wall was set up under the chairmanship of the then C.D.O. (Chief District Officer). The other members of the committee included the *District Panchayat* Chairman, L.D.O. (Local Development Officer), *Pradhan Pancha* of Lomanthang and other local representatives along with one assistant engineer from the Department of Building, Housing and Urban Development. It shall be noted that no competent technical person was involved permanently in the team except one archaeologist from the department attended some meetings. The committee received just 15% of the total estimated budget and accordingly reported the progress to the government (DOA). There is no proper record of the works carried out, however, a report (Letter) from the then *Pradhan Panch* of Lomanthang to the DOA exists, which mentions the successful closing of 31 illegal door punctures to the wall. It further suggested the removal of 7 houses built on outside attached to the wall. The continuation of the works further dealt with some works on the main gate and ultimately 6 out of 8 bastions were repaired (?). The other two bastions were left untouched declaring it unworkable due to lack of space to work. (May be it was the problem due to the houses built attached to the wall.) Further more, all the repairs were carried out using the mud

bricks (pops) instead of the original *gyang* constrããããããããããction.

The biggest issue is that the threat to the original appearance of the wall still exists.

### **Recent Activities Concerning the Future of the Wall**

#### — **Road**

Recently, a motorway has been made from Korela (the Nepal-Tibet border) to Lomanthang, which aims to reach up to Jomsom. Its haphazard construction once planned to pass right to the east of the walled settlement, in which case it would completely destroy the eastern section of town wall along with damages to other monuments. After a long discussions about the realignment of the road, now it is principally agreed that it will go from far west making sure that it will not cause any negative impact to the wall. But, one cannot be sure until that proposed alignment is realized on ground.

#### - **Direct destruction to wall**

Just within two years since Lomanthang saw the collapse of a section of wall to the east of Cheode monastery, it is hurt with another destruction of a section of wall to the east. The owner of the house just inside that section, who also owned the corral outside pulled that section of wall down, saying that it was threatening to his house, which was not the case at all. Instead, due to his demolition work, a nearby section collapsed by itself. This act of the resident of Lomanthang is one step further than what many of them have already done by making a puncture to wall for putting a private door.

#### - **New building works**

The building activities just outside of the wall, within the disappeared line of Mani wall, have been increasing rapidly since past few years.

Let us look at some other causes of deterioration

1. This information is based upon the study of the documents in DOA, for which the author sincerely acknowledges the cooperation of Mr. Prakash Darnal, archaeological officer in DOA.

of wall and possible steps to be taken for an effective conservation.

### **Other Causes of Deterioration**

The cause of 1999's collapse seems to be the improper drainage, due to which the water got ponding near the wall and ultimately deteriorated the wall leading to the structural failure.

In fact, there are also other causes of deterioration of the town wall.

- **Drainage**

This is the most prominent cause of deterioration to date. The original system of canals for water supply/ irrigation is still functioning well. But the low maintenance, lack of up gradation and particularly the blockage of existing drainage system at some places may cause a great loss in long run.

- **Water spout projection**

As can be seen on the outer face of the town wall, many outlets have been projected out puncturing the town wall to drain the water out from the roofs of houses that are built inside adjacent to the wall. This not only has destroyed the aesthetic value of the walled town, but also has been a cause of erosion of the mud wall. (See figure 4)

- **Corrals adjacent outside of the wall**

Some unplanned activities of the local people have now become the great issue of Lomanthang. Except the portion of the wall surrounding the Cheode monastery on northern part of the town, all other sides of town wall are encroached by these corrals. (Refer to Fig. 5) The high walls of corrals now act as visual barrier to the real town wall. More over, the animals' urine etc. is the cause of deterioration of the wall.

- **Illegal Puncture in town wall for private access**

After the placement of the corrals encroaching the wall, the next step happened to be the desire to have a direct access to these corrals from the respective houses inside the town. Thus to puncture the wall for totally private purpose had been a common practice

of the local people, the result of which is the 25 door openings on the wall. (Refer to Fig. 6)

- **Low maintenance and random repairs**

Lack of interest on maintenance is the prime cause of deterioration of the wall. Particularly, the stones missing on the top walkway, when not replaced in time, leads for further erosion. On the other hand, random repairs done in past in mud bricks (replacing the gyang) are not coherent to the original structure and thus are segregating. The west wall at Cheode monastery is the best illustration of this (see Fig. 7).

### **Approach for Conservation**

The conservation of wall may need the following actions:

- **Emergency repair to the endangered portions of the wall**

Along with the repair of the collapsed portion, the two most endangered portions should be consolidated; otherwise a series of collapse may occur in future.

- **Removal of existing corrals and houses encroaching the wall.**

This action shall immediately be taken as it is diluting the aesthetic value and supporting the deterioration process.

This would then demand a substitute solution for all those shifted. For this, a proper land use plan for the valley shall be prepared; otherwise to relieve the wall from encroachment would be another problem owing to the scarcity of cultivable land.

- **Revival of traditional construction technology (rammed earth or gyang construction) and traditional maintenance rule.**

It is very important that the traditional gyang construction be revived with an intense research work for the improvement of this technology. This technology is no more in practice today except occasionally for building a 30-cm. thick field boundary walls. But that skill is not sufficient to restore the 5 times thicker wall that has been standing for centuries.

More important is the transfer of this revived

technology to the local people.

There are some traditional rules that aim for up keep of the town. Some of them are

- No windows or doors or openings shall be put to the wall.
- No ha (roof drain spouts) shall be projected to the wall.
- Nobody except the king is allowed to ride horse inside the town. etc.

These traditions added with some technical guidelines can be given a form of building byelaws that is necessary for a sustainable conservation.

#### • **Documentation**

An ice breaking phase of any conservation work is the documentation. To date, no detail documentation of Lomanthang wall and the settlement has been done officially. Michel Piesel had presented a rough sketch of the walled settlement in his book "Mustang: The Forbidden Kingdom"; later John Harrison and others made a drawing of wall and streets inside with the major buildings (the palace, the Gompas and chhortens). Kai Weise also did some works in this regard. An approach of recording households inside the wall is done by Navin Rai. The issue to be raised here is the fact that this unique heritage existing since past five and half centuries is not shown in the official cadastral map. According to the map, there is no land where this wall exists. So, the author submitted a proposal for documentation of wall and the walled settlement recently to the Department of Archaeology.

#### • **Research supported by archaeological excavations.**

To avoid the conjectural conservation and add to the knowledge about this heritage, some trial excavations shall be carried out. One prominent place for such excavation would be the open field near Choede monastery. This may justify the supposition of some scholars who assume the original north wall to be there, forming a perfect square plan

of the town. Present state of the wall differs in some places with what Michel Piesel has described dating 1964<sup>2</sup>. To revive the wall to its original design, the original footprints shall be discovered.

In this context, no conjecture shall be done.

#### **Financial and technical Matters**

In the context of conservation of our heritage conservation, we often wait for a foreign aid and do not initiate ourselves unless the heritage unfortunately take refuge to the ground. One possible option to avoid this situation in case of Lomanthang may be to channelize some fund from the revenue collected from tourists' fees up on entering to this area. At present Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) is working in different sectors in the region and the DOA is the government authority to look after the conservation works. So, a collaboration of DOA and ACAP can be effective, but of course, with some conservation professionals' support.

During the follow up of the above-mentioned repair works by DOA following the His Majesty's direction, the decision to form a 'local' committee without any technical person was based on the assumption that there are no architects who know about the building technology of the region. May be it did hold true at that time (?), but now a days, there are Nepalese architects who have done research and other works in the region. So, a multidisciplinary team can easily be formed for executing these actions.

#### **A BEGINNING**

Finally, a good move has been done by ACAP in summer 2001 by initiating the repair works to the wall. It called for interested contractors to repair the collapsed section of wall, to the east of Choede monastery. The conventional 'low bidding and getting the contract' system was avoided in this case and it intended to encourage the local participation.

So, today's need is to continue this beginning and bring it to a destination of a proper conservation of this unique heritage.

2. Piesel, Michel; Mustang, The Forbidden Kingdom; New York; E.P. Dutton; 1967

Fig. 4 Water spout projection

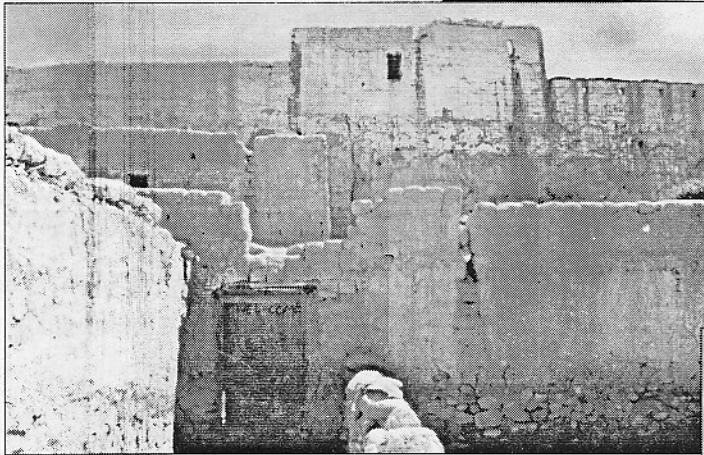
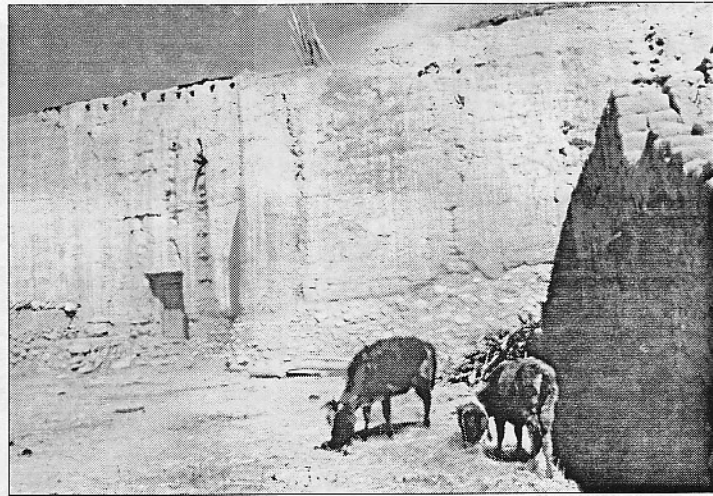
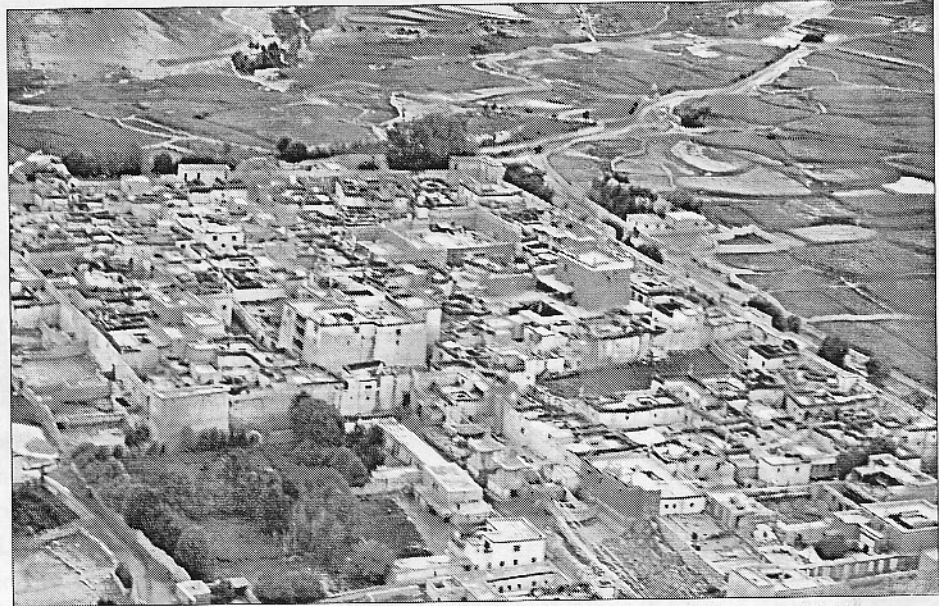


Fig 5. Corrals adjacent outside of the wall.



Fig 6. Illegal Puncture in town wall for private access.



Aerial view of Lomanthang

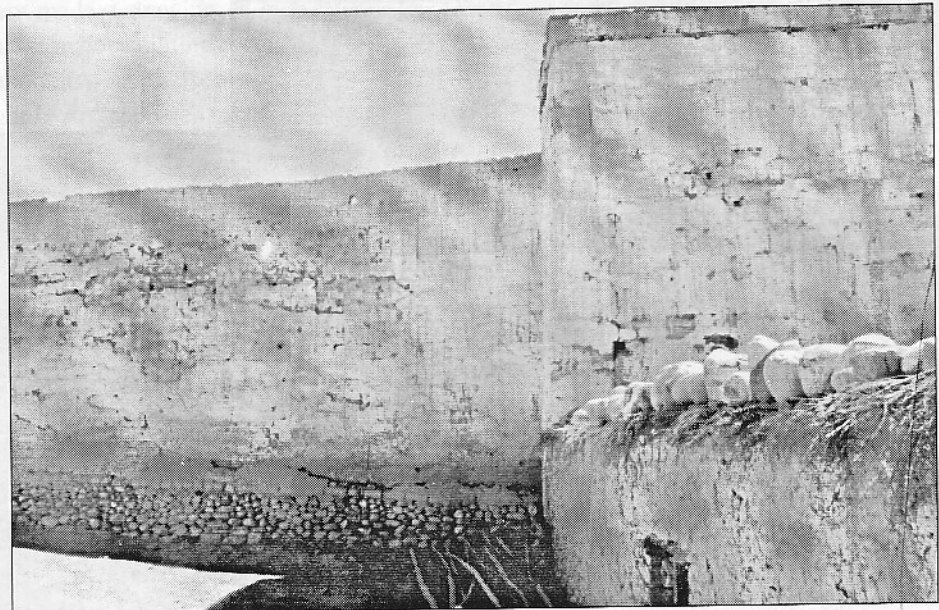


Fig 7. Low maintenance and random repairing