

Kumauni Housing Architecture: Regional variation

Madan Mohan Joshi

Assistant Professor (History) Uttarakhand Open University Haldwani (Nainital) India

Abstract

Lies in the Central Himalayas, Kumaun has been a center of human activities since time immemorial. Kumaun has a long tradition of housing architecture and factually it was based on standardized rules of architecture. This architecture provides interesting information about different aspects of ordinary life. Different habitats of Kumaun have ample examples of how the residents have modified stereotype architecture according to their functional utility and working needs. this research paper is based on the preliminary information gathered about regional diversity so far. This paper is solely based on field survey work, thus lacks references.

KEYWORDS: Kumaun, Habitats, Regional Variation, Buildings, functional utility Standardized, Professional groups, house construction

Introduction:

Unlike earlier, when history was thought to be all about kings and their princely states, courts, their harems (a place for their queens and concubines) and their life-styles, has assumed a new definition now. Peoples are more inclined to know about the history of masses. In the last quarter of 20th century, historians and anthropologists turned their attention toward those habitats which were built by human being for their residing needs in South-East Asia. Close look at these habitats provide abundant interesting information about different aspects of ordinary life. Archeologists have dug out solid proofs of human activities in Uttarakhand since prehistoric period (Joshi 1974, 1987, 1988). Archaeologists are in hot pursuit to find out, since when man built permanent habitats in this area. Ranihaat excavation (Nautiyal et al 1977) and Bagwalipokhar-Dhankhal excavation (Joshi et. al. 2006) provide important information in this regard.

Area of Study :

In this present study-paper, It is tried to highlight one of the important aspects of the research-work, which has been going on for many decades. The research-work is still on and this research paper is based on the preliminary information, which have been gathered about regional diversity so far. In this study many ancient habitats of Kumaun have been included like Almora town and other villages such as Danya, Dhoora, Jhijhad, Galli, Kafada, Dhankhal and many other villages whose names ending with agar, township of Dwarahat, Champawat, Bageswar, Askot, Chaukhutiya, Devidhura-Mornaula region etc.

Regions with Ancient habitats covered in this study have many single storied, double storied and triple storied traditional residential buildings. Use of ground floor as

gwad or goth (a place for keeping pet animals like cow or buffalo) and first floor for self housing, construction of kholi (main entrance) at the front portion of building, provision of angan/ patangan (courtyard of grey stone) in front of ground floor, front portion of building having valla-chaakh (right side room /closed varndah with wooden window at front), and palla-chaakh (left side room / verandah with wooden window at front) and right behind them positioning of other rooms at second story, small size of rooms and doors, and building itself being of small height, quite thick walls (approximately up to 2.5 feet), roof covered with slate stones, mixture of stone, small wood pieces and clay along with cow dung, wheat chaff, iron in limited quantity used as mortar for construction purpose are some special features of these housing architectures. During research-work when a comparative study carried out of these traditional structures, an interesting fact, came across that architecture of these buildings is amazingly uniform. It is quite possible that crafts-men of these areas had developed a standardized method of house construction.

Despite amazing similarity in housing architecture, it is apparent that many structural changes were made according to professional needs of different professional groups. It seems that construction of houses as per professional-needs and working-facilitation led to regional variation in this area. To highlight the regional variation in traditional Kumauni housing architecture, houses of these professional groups can be exemplified.

Field Study:

In Devidhura-Mornaula region, single storied houses of farmer-rancher community came across. This is the first example of professional need based house construction. These houses have their own specific structure according to the community needs. The rear walls of these houses have been chiseled out of hillocks in such a way that the upper portion of the hill becomes protrusive over the roof. Side and front walls have been constructed by nailing wooden planks horizontally on vertical wooden beams erected on ground. For constructing the roof, horizontal wooden beams have been tied or nailed on vertical wooden beams and then this structure is covered horizontally in such a way that the length of each wooden plank lies on both side walls and second plank overlaps a bit on first plank and so on... until the roof is fully covered. This covering process is initiated from the frontal portion of the roof and it is to be noted that the last wooden plank of the roof is tightly fixed under the protruding portion of the hill so that water flowing from the hill does not enter in the house. We found that these houses are of very low height and a man with average height will find it very difficult to stand erect in these houses. The main entrance is also small. These were the common shelters for ranchers and their pets. Devidhura-Mornaula region is blessed with lush green jungles having varieties of trees and shrubs. Therefore it seems that these wooden houses go well with and fulfill the environmental and financial needs of rancher community. This housing style is limited to a small area and we have not come across such structures in other areas.

To describe the regional variation more vividly, we must go through the ancient habitats of Kumaun . These habitats are abundantly dotted with double storied residential

buildings. The traditional houses belonging to metal workers found in villages ending with Agar names can be quoted as first example of such double story buildings. The upper portion of these buildings is similar to other houses belonging to other communities but the 'gwad' or 'goth' (a place for keeping pet animals like cow or buffalo) situated at lower portion or ground floor is used as workshop by traditional metal-workers. According to their work and functional needs they have made some alterations in this lower portion. The workshop floor has been kept bit lower than ground level and also the courtyard with grey stones (angan/patangan) is used for anfer or bhatti (blast furnace), The length of aangan is also comparatively more than their houses. It is seen that the outer Stairs have been built in the front portion of the house to enter the first floor.

The second example pertains to residential houses of traditional Kumauni goldsmiths. We found these ancient habitats of goldsmiths in places like Champawat, Dwarahat and Bageshwar. This community has used the lower portion of their house as workshop. They have converted talla 'goth' (room made for cows at ground floor) or 'gothamwal' (open room in front of goth) as their workshop. They needed small furnaces to melt gold or silver for making ornaments. Unlike Agaries, they have installed their small furnaces in 'gothamwal' and floor has only been lowered at a particular place where bhatti (small furnace) is installed. Gothamwal (open room in front of goth) in other houses are generally open but here, for the security purpose, provisions have been made to close this room. In these houses, stairs to reach first floor have been built in workshop situated at ground floor.

Almost in all old habitats, we also find bakhalinuma (adjacent houses built in lined-up shape) double story houses. Increase in family size led to this bakhalinuma buildings. The architecture of such bakhalies (lined-up houses) is similar to the initially built double story house. With the increase in family size, more and more place was need to live and another double story house came up adjacent to previous one and so on... Which led to these bakhalinuma (lined-up houses) double story houses.

In the context of professional variation, it will be appropriate to discuss about the habitats belonging to Nayakas of Naikana at Chaukhutiya. Here also, the basic structure (lower portion and upper portion) is same but chaakh (room or three side covered verandah with a window at front) built in upper portion is quite big in size and has been converted in to a big hall. The main profession of Nayakas is singing and dancing. Keeping it in view, they have converted the chaakh at upper portion into a big hall. Such houses are not found in Almora.

The above habitats covered in our research-work show-case the regional variation in traditional housing architecture. But this variation is not limited to above habitats only, many such examples can be seen in Almora town also. After shifting the capital to Almora by Chand dynasty, Government officials/employees, professionals, craftsmen who came from different places and settled in Almora, built their house in the town. The tradition of khaukiya-gusain (bonded worker-master) relationship was quite prevalent in Kumaun and for constructing their houses, many house-owners brought craftsmen from their original villages. It is also seen that these house-owners had titled their local habitats in Almora in the name of their original villages. Thus, Almora town has developed as a conflux place for Kumauni housing architecture.

Houses of traditional coppersmiths are situated at Tamata mohalla (colony) in Almora town. In these houses also, 'gwad' (room for pets at ground floor) has been converted in to a workshop. For ease of work and professional need, they have kept the floor of the workshop situated at ground floor lower than the ground level, so that the copper vessels can be arranged in a specific way to shine. Like Agaries, they use aangan (courtyard) for aanfar or bhatti (blast furnace or furnace). The courtyard is also comparatively bigger than the size of their house. The outer Stairs have been built in the front portion of the house to enter the first floor. Houses of coppersmiths situated at Tamata Mohalla (colony) are quite similar to those of Aagari metal workers. It seems that coppersmiths and ironsmiths who came to Almora, have followed the housing architecture of Aagari peoples for ease of work and professional need. It is to be noted that the aagaries are the traditional metal workers of kumaun region.

Houses of traditional goldsmiths situated at Jauhari mohalla (colony of ornament makers) of Almora town are also worth quoting. Ground floor of these buildings has been converted in to workshops and it is found that stairs to reach first floor have been constructed in workshop or 'gothamwal' (room in front of goth) situated at ground floor. Here also, provision has been made to close the workshop from the front entrance. These buildings and the buildings situated at Champawat, Bageshwar and Dwarahat are amazingly similar. It seems that the ancestors of goldsmiths who came to Almora town had followed the housing architecture of their original village for functional utility and professional need.

With the passage of time, descendants of different higher officials to lower employees of Chand period settled down in different mohallas (colonies) of Almora town and one can see their houses in these colonies. Architecture of these houses indicates that the lower part of the house was used as gwad' (room for pets like cows at ground floor) and the upper part (in this case first floor or story) was their residence. Apart from bedrooms, provisions of 'Paan' (kitchen), 'Thya' (a place earmarked for prayer or worshiping), 'Bhanaar' (store room), valla-chaakh (right side room /closed verandah with wooden window at front) and palla-chaakh (left side room /closed verandah with wooden window at front) have also been made in this upper part. It is found that if building is triple storied than keeping in view the easy entrance and functional facilitation, some utilities like 'Paan' (kitchen), 'Thya' (a place earmarked for prayer or worshiping) and 'Bhanaar' (store room) has been shifted to top floor (in this case third floor). It is also seen that at ground floor, upper room (goth) and lower room (goth) or 'gothamwal' (room in front of goth) has been provided with chakki or chaak (stone mill). At ground floor, an okhal (cup mark) in the courtyard can also be seen. It was also found that courtyards situated in front of ground floor were covered from three sides, The height and width of this covering wall was approximately 1.5 feet and 1.5 feet respectively. While comparing the architecture of these houses with houses situated in their village of origins, they were amazingly similar.

Findings :

on the basis of architecture of Kumauni traditional houses, it is quite difficult to assess the socio-economic disparities prevalent in this region We did not find any specific differences in the houses of socially well-off and weaker sections, The main building at bakshi khola (bakshi house) which belongs to a higher-up of Chand period is a tell-all example of this reality. This three storied building with simple architecture is of

small height and have no vivid wood-work. It is an interesting fact that the structure of houses belonging to craftsmen in Rajpur mohalla (colony) of Chand period and architecture of houses of ordinary peoples in other colonies are almost similar. On the basis of wood-craft and wood-work also, we cannot distinguish socio-economic disparities. Almost all houses have more or less similar wood-craft or wood-work.

It seems that the local environment and ecology has also impacted the traditional Kumauni housing architecture. It is quite possible that, to provide extra warmth to bedroom situated at upper floor, the room just underneath was provisioned as shelter for cows and other pet animals (gwad). Low height, quite thick walls and other features of housing structures were fully compatible to seismic and environmentally sensitive nature of this area. Extensive use of wood components in the front portion of houses has been a special feature of traditional Kumauni architecture. Wood carving or crafting may be the reason behind it but it made the frontal rooms like valla or palla chaakh comparatively colder and they were used as sitting rooms. To prevent the cold of frontal rooms to seep in, the divider wall between frontal rooms and internal rooms used as bedrooms has also been kept quite thick like other walls by local architects. It seems that apart from it, frequent earthquakes in Himalayas also are one of the reasons for building thick solid walls. Likewise, provision of 'paati' (falls roof made of wooden planks) can also be seen in these traditional houses. This provision in bedrooms prevents the cold to seep in from the roof. 'Paan' or 'risyakhand' (kitchen) has been built on top floor. Firewood was the main source of cooking food. Therefore, we find the provision in the 'paakh' (roof) for smoke to let out. In most of the houses, we find a 'jaal' (hole) of 6" diameter, provided for extra light. This hole can be opened or shut by a sliding slate. It can be seen that for the provision of fresh air in the top floor, a 6" wall with small holes has been built on both the sides of 'paakh ki dhuri' (Central wooden beam on roof).

Despite being much concerned about environment and ecology, vastushastra has not been given much importance in house construction. Utility and needs has been main concern. Therefore, it seems that the use/construction of different blocks was based on needs and functional ease. For example, according to vastushastra 'paan' or risyakhand' (kitchen) should be built in east-south direction, but usually it is not so and 'thya or poojagrah' (place earmarked for worshipping or prayer) should be positioned in north or north-east direction, but often it is not so. Similarly, we find that the architecture of these houses is lacking in attempts to prevent or safeguard from cold winds of Himalaya. Almost all villages and many traditional houses in townships are facing Himalaya. The best example is 'Pahal Gaon' near Almora. Not only this village but almost all the houses of this village are facing north at Himalaya. It is contrary to the belief that kumauni housing architecture avoided facing north direction.

khaukiya-gusain (worker-master) relationship or 'Jajamaani' system has played an important role in traditional Kumauni housing structure and because of this we find amazing uniformity between their original village and their houses in colonies at Almora town. These relations started vanishing with the passage of time. It seems that availability of cash or expansion of monetary economy was one of the reasons for weakening these relationships. With the availability of easy cash, now house owner or developer was free to choose their workers or craftsmen and likewise, craftsmen and workers also became independent to work on the basis of their wages. Monetary

economy might have effected in many ways too, but breaking of these relationships has certainly ruined the long tradition of housing architecture in this region.

Thus, there was a long tradition of housing architecture in Kumaun and factually it was based on standardized rules of architecture. Communities made interesting alterations in their housing architecture as per their work and functional needs. Advent of British rule gave boost to monetary economy. Many new concepts and designs such as increase in the height of buildings, sitting rooms converted into big Drawing rooms, for fresh air and day-light ventilators with doors, fire point, use of metal sheets instead of stone slates in roof construction etc. were incorporated in the housing architecture. During British period, many affluent peoples had incorporated some of these designs in their houses.

Foot note:-

1. The dharamshalas (inns) situated in different places of Kumaun are the examples of single story buildings. Keeping in mind the functional use, these buildings have been constructed with stones only and these buildings have their own specific architecture. Details are available in another research-paper.
2. Late Shri Chiranji Lal Shah's house is situated near Raghunath temple in khjanchi mohalla (colony) in Almora town. Since british period, this house is known as gol chhajje vala bhawan (a house with circular balcony) . The first floor of this house has been converted in to sitting room, Shri Chiranji Lal Shah was decorated with Rai Bahadur title by British rulers. Although this house structure is traditional but It seems that he followed the English style and according to his social status, converted the ground floor into sitting room (Drawing room), During British period, to showcase the social status, buildings with drawing room can be found in other places also.
3. Gothamwal (room in front of goth) had many functional uses. It was used for milling the food grain, keeping the agricultural implements, etc. Khaukiya or haliya (bonded worker) was also allowed to stay here. Women during their menstrual period were treated as untouchable and stay put here because the cow urine can easily be had from goth (cowshed situated just behind the gothamwal) for physical purification after bath. Thus communities used gothamwal as per their functional and working needs and this is the room where we find several architectural changes made.
4. There are still many villages in Kumaun, where okhal (cup mark) is used for grinding food grain as per their daily needs.

References

- Joshi, M.P. 1974 Newly Discovered rock-paintings from Kumaon Hills, in Gopikamohan Bhatt Acharya (ed.), Summaries of papers, All Indian Oriental Conference XXVII Session: 219-20, Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra.

- Joshi, M.P. 1987 : Dots, Cup-marks and pits, vis-a-vis the megaliths, new evidences from kumaon, Puratattawa, 16:25-28.
- Joshi, M.P.1988 : Early burial practices in Kumaon: some recent discoveries. Bulletin of Museums and Archaeology in U.P., 41-42: 23-30.
- Nautiyal, K.P. and B.M. Khanduri 1977: “Ranihat and its environs, excavation of an early historic site in Garhwal”, The Himalaya, I (i) : 22-38.