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## From the Sentinels of Rumsu

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Mr. Ajinkya Kanitkar holds a Bachelor's degree in Architecture from Visvesvaraya National Institute of Technology, Nagpur (2010-15) and a Master's degree in Urban and Regional Planning from School of Planning and Architecture, Bhopal (2018-20). His professional experience between the years 2015 and 2017 includes working on various projects such as Industrial, Hospitals, Commercial, Residential, Interior and Space Design. He has handled these projects from pre-design to execution and completion stages. He has also worked as a lecturer (2017-18) at the department of Architecture NIT Hamirpur, Himachal Pradesh as Lecturer. Between the year 2020-21, he has contributed to a performance assessment system project for 30+ ULBs in Maharashtra.

### **Abstract :**

The state of Himachal Pradesh has a vibrant mix of geolocations that gradually change from plains to rolling terrain to hills. The elevation ranges from 300 MSL to whoppingly high 6000+ MSL above Shivalik and Dhauladhar ranges. The moment the elevation of 1500 MSL is crossed, one can notice the change in the language of the natural and built environment. Beautiful façades of snowclad mountains cover the realities of extreme weather conditions and subsequent hardships. Yet for ages, people of the hills that thrive here have developed peculiar systems that help them sustain these unfavourable conditions. This article studies these systems used by the people of the Rumsu village.

### **Keywords :**

Vernacular, Social Hierarchy, Natural Environment, Protection

Rumsu is situated in breathtakingly beautiful laps of Great Himalayan ranges at an approximate elevation of 2200 MSL in Kullu district near Naggar block. After crossing prominent landmarks at Naggar - Naggar castle and Tripura Sundari temple, one can reach the village by the motorable Pulag road. But if time and efforts are at one's disposal, one can always follow a serpentine trail starting just opposite the temple, navigating through wildflowers and turning around a few short storage sheds occasionally popping up as markers that guide the way to the terraced fields of Rumsu village.

The settlement is a Heritage site with mesmerising Kathkuni architecture forming residences, storage sheds, animal yards and religious structures. Availability of a constructible landmass is extremely limited in a hilly terrain, and snowfall, landslides along with frequent earthquakes make it even more difficult to find safe, habitable pockets. One can find structures popping up wherever the slopes mellow down a bit for construction. Thus, the structure of settlements in hills becomes heterogeneous. What gives it a definitive identity is the built-form called Kathkuni architecture. The construction technique of Kathkuni, developed over several centuries, is a true reflection of the ability of people to adapt to, and sustain through a challenging context.

These rich architectural specimens are constructed with locally available stone and timber. Granite stone platforms



Figure 1: Terraced fields at the entry of Rumsu village from trail

are constructed to level the floor along a slope on top of which a load bearing structure is constructed. Deodar (cedar) trees which are abundantly available here, become a source of monolithic timber joists spanning from 12ft to 16ft. With skills developed over the ages, the craftsmen, 'Thavu', build structures that can last thousands of years. Alternate courses of timber joists are interlocked with various timber joinery systems, some of which are unique to the hills. The gaps are infilled with flat granite slabs or slate slabs.

One of the intriguing facts about the construction process is

that the entire production happens piece-by-piece at a nearby construction site which is then collected and assembled stagewise on the actual site. The oldest of the specimens are constructed simply with timber joinery and are famous as 'nail-less' or 'glue (mortar) less' architecture. This structural system that counters dynamic loads during earthquakes in an excellent manner. These innate heavy structures behave in such a way that in case of an earthquake, the individual member vibrates at its place. They may sway or bend, but never collapse completely.

Traditionally, the entire process used to become an affair of the community where everyone helped in the assembly with their respective ability, and the tacit knowledge of construction used to be transferred from generation to generation. A fun fact is that the entire structures are dismantlable if needed, and the material of dilapidated structures can be salvaged for new structures. This is the biggest of the boons in a context like this. The technique responds well to the present ideas associated with the term sustainability.

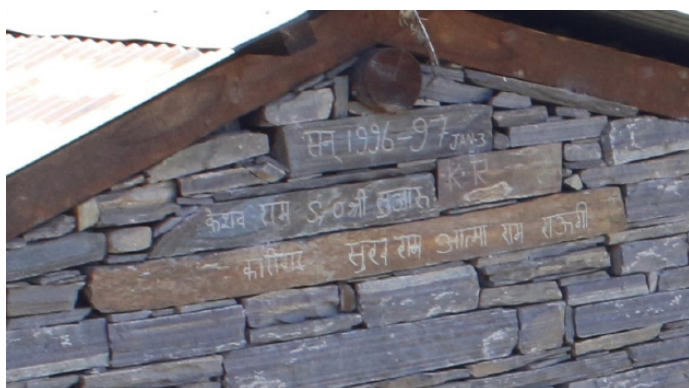


Figure 2: Documented name of the head craftsman



Figure 3: Typical Kathkuni house- animal shed at base, living areas at the upper levels with cantilevered rooms

Another peculiar characteristic of the technique is that structures are constructed with a smaller base and wider upper floors by adding cantilevers. This allows for the construction of multistorey structures with a limited footprint. Usually, cattle and storage rooms are constructed at the ground level and the habitable spaces for people start from the first story onwards. The wall thickness, usually one and half feet and more, enables much desired insulation against harsh winters. By simply adding a layer of mud plaster or hay lining along with timber planks, protects the interiors from subzero temperatures outside. All one needs is a small stove called 'Bukhari' in the local language, that heats up the interior spaces.

Look and feel wise, complex timber joinery which itself ends up becoming a design element, along with intricate patterns and carvings over timber fascia, complement the rugged and robust stone and slate palette. Various typologies of structures which include residential single units, multistory units, palaces, religious structures like temples, shrines, storage sheds, animal yards, etc. have been constructed in Kathkuni.

There are usually three sub styles of Kathkuni architecture seen in the region viz., Pagoda style which is seen in temples as well as monumental structures, Pahadi style that is traditional cuboid type and widely used for all sorts of structures and Shikhara style which is mostly seen in temple architecture.



Figure 4: Old sacred tree and structure for 'Devta'



Figure 5: Local community god or 'Devta' temple

While interacting with the natives, one can easily sense the boundaries created by the locals, especially at remote locations like Rumsu. Historically, most of Himachal Pradesh is believed to be an unconquered territory up till the British started settling near Shimla or Dharamshala. Even then, the rest of the remote areas remained untouched. A local Himachali takes immense pride in this. Some even address themselves as truly 'free' Indians.

A former Pradhan (traditional elder leader) at Rumsu narrated an interesting story of untouchability. No outsider is generally allowed to enter the settlement or even touch the locals. Gestures like shaking hands or even touching during exchange of money if the visitor is buying anything there used to be prohibited. This 'touch me not' rule includes the structures too. The violation of this rule is taken very seriously even today in some settlements. If it is a local structure, the penalty includes a few hundred rupees but if it is an important religious structure or an old tree, the penalty can become as hefty as an actual feast to the entire settlement.

Other rules include not wearing leather near religious sites and spots, not burning campfires in the woods, not defecating near settlements, etc. which have other similar penalties associated. With a change in time and exposure to contemporary building materials, percolation of RCC, concrete and steel in newer structures is visible even here, which is highly questionable especially at such elevations. The Pradhan brought forth interesting insights of how the government policies affect building construction. One of the major reasons for divergence from vernacular building techniques was told to be the government policies. Traditionally, a God's wood of protected trees by the community was present where each family was allowed to cut a tree for repairs or expansion of their existing house once in 50-60 years against a promise to replace the fallen tree.

With later changes in regime and stringent implementation of laws, the concept of god's woods started vanishing away, affecting traditional supply of timber. A false narrative of 'permanent' or 'pukka' construction fooled the people into opting for alien construction techniques, until they realised the problems and inefficiencies of it especially in colder regions.

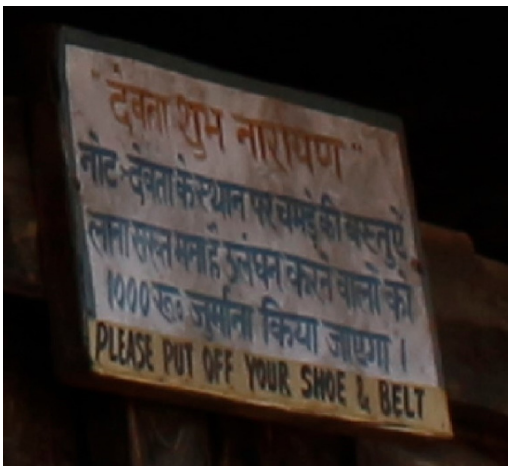


Figure 6: Warning signs of local rules



Figure 7: RCC framed structure vs. Kathkuni Structure

Himachal Pradesh is famously known as 'Devbhoomi' Himachal and there is a reason for it. The role of a 'Devta' and its wishes are a royal and sacred matter in Himachali culture. Their hierarchy of priests, local temples and connected temples is a unique system of faith that motivates a local Himachali to face all the adversities at otherwise absolute beautiful locations. Even the head craftsman of the village is addressed and respected as 'Vishwakarma,' the architect of the gods.

Interestingly it is also an intangible system of governance. These 'Devta' and their priests and Pithu (porters) roam the regions from village to village, temple to temple and gather annually at Kullu Maidan for a Dussehra Mela. The belief is that it is here where they ponder upon the region, people, and its changing landscape. When it comes to protecting their built and natural environment, people of Himachal redefine the meaning of possessiveness. Usually, the laws and rules mentioned before are directed by these 'Devta' with the intent of protection of nature, culture, and people, from invading evil forces. They are the essential soft mechanisms of preservation and protection of their way of life and built environment and have worked wonderfully for centuries gone past!

Who are these invaders in present times? A one-time visitor today can have as many reservations about such practices as one wants but for a community who has been living here for ages, battling its own struggles of sustenance, these rules make perfect sense.

The heaps of non-biodegradables saturating in valleys near all tourist spots, the amount of infiltration of these pollutants deep in forests, snows and the water channels harm the locals first on grassroot levels, before wreaking havoc at regional scale. Today the tourism economy might have opened the gates of the world to local Himachalis, but it also poses an imminent threat to these areas, the structures, the systems, and the people themselves.

When it comes to the protection of the built and natural environment, where the regional governance cannot percolate, the local governance takes over, which is a silver lining of such traditional practices. But that is not the solution to the status quo either.

One needs to understand that sustainable development is neither a brand-new term that will suddenly change how settlements and people function or suggests going back to the lifestyle of the ages gone. The responsibility to bring in the innovation in current and future practice that is informed by the knowledge of the region lies on the shoulders of professionals from all fields, from architecture to governance. Fortunately, we have the foundations for sustainable future practices owing to systems of the vernacular developed over ages. All that is needed now is an attempt at research by these professionals- to observe, learn and implement.