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Kashmir's changing architecture: Losing gold for glitter

In its 'march towards modernity' Kashmir is losing its traditional houses, giving way to environment-unfriendly brick and mortar structures without any provision for even the high danger seismic zone the valley sits on. Shahnawaz Khan reports.

Srinagar, June 08, 2014:



An old Kashmiri four/five story house built in Taq system stands tall in the background of some new constructions in a Srinagar market

Muhammad Hassan's family in downtown Srinagar moved into their newly constructed house two years ago. The family razed their old three-storied house built in Kashmir's traditional Taq system – wall masonry construction with timber interlacing – to make way for a new three-storey concrete house. The new house, a modern one has washrooms on all floors.

The old house was still in a good condition when they dismantled it, but it was not what the family calls 'modern'. So wooden ceilings and brick work in mud mortar gave way to concrete ceilings and cement mortars.

Hassan is happy in his house built in a new style – brick work in cement, plastered walls, concrete floors, a marble paved kitchen and bathrooms on all floors.

"Everyone here wants to build a modern house and changing times have changing needs," Hassan said.

Hassan's is not a lone case. In fact almost all the new houses built in Srinagar and other towns for the last four decades have been built on the new pattern.

Cement has replaced mud mortar and timber laced masonry has given



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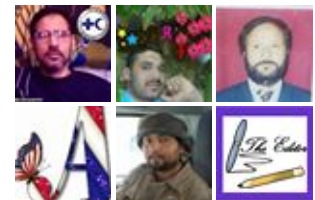
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July 3, 2013

<http://kashmirnewz.com/f000118.html>

India has released a postage stamp featuring most famous pro-freedom poet of Kashmir, Mahjoor, who strongly detested Kashmir's accession with the country. Is it a goof up? Haroon Mirani reports

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way to concrete and reinforced concrete.

Ghulam Nabi Bhat of Iddgah locality in old Srinagar is a mason. He has been in this profession for last three decades. "Who would like to build a house on the traditional pattern nowadays," Bhat said. "At least I don't get to work on any now."

The few old pattern houses Bhat does get to work on are the one's that need repairing.

"It is usually people who don't have resources for building a new house approach me to make repairs in their existing houses," Bhat said. "And to tell you frankly we do the repairs using modern day materials."

Like Bhat, many masons otherwise get to work on pulled down old structures raised in mud mortars, bricks and timber to be constructed anew in cement.

While many, like Hassan, are content with the new houses they live in but of late some people have started to express nostalgia for the traditional houses.

In Kashmir traditionally the houses were usually build in either Taq system or the Dhajji Diwari.

Taq system is a bearing wall masonry construction with timber interlacing and Dhaji Diwari is a type of mixed timer and masonry construction.

Variants of Dhajji Diwari have been found around the world across Central Asia and Europe in traditional building systems.

Both Taq and Dhajji Diwari employ heavy use of wood, and effectively survive earthquakes because of their flexibility rather than strength.

"The traditional houses carried a feeling of home, that is absent in the modern day concrete structures," said Bilal Ahmad, a resident of Baramulla town, 52 km northwest of Srinagar city. Ahmad lives with his family in a two-storied concrete house. He acknowledges the new houses have a clean look to them, but said the old ones were suited for the climate of Kashmir.

Still Ahmad is more inclined towards living in a modern house than a traditional one.

"We used to have mud flooring, which was not washable like concrete, there were no attached baths, in fact baths and toilets were outside the house," says Ahmed.

The climate in Kashmir usually remains cold except for summer months. During winters the region witnesses the harshest spell of winter, the 40-day cold spell of winter, locally called Chillai Kalan.

During this period residents face upheavals due to sub zero temperature and freezing water bodies and pipes carrying drinking water to a solid mass.

Besides this, Srinagar falls in Seismic Zone-V and other parts of state in Seismic Zone IV.

Experts say the traditional building architecture of Kashmir developed over centuries had basic elements that were in tune with the climate and seismology of the region.

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The unique systems (Taq system and the Dhajji Diwari) incorporated heavy use of wood as structural element of the houses, along with fired or unfired bricks raised mostly in mud mortar. The interiors were plastered with a mix of mud and straw/hem.

“The traditional architecture has been the result of the centuries of evolution in building construction on soft soils and making the structures earthquake resistant in Kashmir,” said Saima Iqbal, an expert with Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) Kashmir. “The construction techniques focussed on the use of available materials and the methods of construction gave structures some kind of flexibility which was essential.”

Iqbal has done masters in Conservation from Oxford Brookes University and has been with INTACH documenting architectural heritage of Kashmir. According to her the heavy use of mud mortars, mud plasters and wood also insulated the houses from outside temperatures, far better than the present day concrete structures.

Almost all the traditional houses in Kashmir followed one of the two traditional systems, with the houses of the poor and the well off varying only in the choice of material and ornamentation detail. While the houses of the poor would make more use of unfired bricks, the well off would use small sized fired bricks on the facade occasionally in a limestone mortar.

Despite the nostalgia that some share for the traditional houses in Kashmir, almost no one is ready to build a new house on the same old pattern.

Construction industry is brimming in Kashmir, and the city is fast replacing its face. Swanky commercial malls are coming up in hitherto residential areas, and old houses are rapidly giving way to new ones.

Cement plants have taken top positions among the very few profitable sectors in Kashmir. Use of timber has drastically declined, partly owing to its exorbitant prices.

In the process the traditional construction patterns and practices are simply dying unsung.

While, replacing old techniques with new and modern ones may be true for most cities in flux. However, what adds weight to Kashmir's nostalgia is the fact that current trends seem to be totally out of sync with the climatic and geological requirements.

Sameer Hamadani is an architect with INTACH Kashmir and aptly makes a distinction between modern architecture and the current practices in Kashmir.

“Modern architecture refers to an international movement in architecture, which never picked up in Kashmir. In the transition what happened in Kashmir is that we are only using modern material and modern techniques,” Hamdani said referring to use of cement and iron over mud and timber.

Kashmir's traditional architecture patterns, according to him had evolved into the social milieu of Kashmir and were adapted to the place.

“Architecture is a reflection of social needs. The traditional housing architectures were evolved over times and were based on inherited experience. It reflected a respect for space efficiency, energy conservation multiplicity of usage and other factors,” Hamadani said.

Chief Town Planner Kashmir Iftikhar Ahmad Hakim rues the unplanned growth of Srinagar and other towns.

"We have moved from a very good system to a very bad one," says Hakim referring to the change in architecture and building patterns.

"Our traditional systems had norms and standards, nowadays it is free for all, with no pattern, no aesthetics," he said.

Hakim is not sure when the shift began, but says there has been a gap in the transfer of the traditional building craft to the next generation.

The shift towards concrete in Kashmir began some four or five decades back, slowly, owing more to perception than actual advantages.

"The concrete had a perception of sturdiness, and cleanliness associated with it and it was less fire prone," explains Hamadani.

"Moreover, wood was subject to age and decay, and maintenance protections through paint coats was not a norm. In run up to the modern day constructions, a complete abandonment of traditional practices over time was apparently witnessed, which experts attribute to the lack of knowledge about efficacy and advantages of traditional practices.

Historically Kashmir culture has been largely influenced by Central Asia, in the spheres of culture, religions, crafts, and trade. It was an important post on the silk route.

But, following the partition of Indian-subcontinent Kashmir's ties with the Central Asia got severed and the only link to the outside was now through India. Indian architectural systems slowly made inroads replacing the traditional practices.

Iqbal says the shift began with the introduction of architecture as a profession.

"The shift began somewhere in 1970's. It was the time, when architects trained outside of Kashmir began to introduce the latest building patterns here," said Iqbal.

According to her, professional architectural trainings and studies had no references to the traditional building patterns in Kashmir. "Nobody looked at it (traditional architecture) as a science. So it was completely ignored and abandoned in the new constructions," said Iqbal.

The first serious studies on Kashmir's traditional architecture, she says were done by Randolph Langenbach a US based architect, who visited Kashmir first in 1984.

Langenbach's studies are a rich resource of information on the traditional architecture of Kashmir. He advocates preservation of the traditional systems and its adaptation with modern requirements.

"The change hasn't happened overnight. We are not suddenly moving away from traditional architecture patterns. It has been going on for over four decades, so it is not easy to return to it," said Iqbal.

Experts like Iqbal and Hamdani admit there is hardly any inclination towards the reversal of trends or return to rich traditional systems. Until that inclination grows among residents, the return to traditional in Kashmir seems a lost case on ground.

In a 2007 study report sponsored by UNESCO post Kashmir earthquake 2005, Langenbach describes in detail the richness of Kashmir's

traditional Taq and Dhajji Diwari constructions and attributes its displacement by reinforced and unreinforced concrete to 'misconceptions '.

"Reinforced concrete is often viewed as strong and 'modern' while traditional construction including taq and dhajji dewari, is seen as obsolete, insubstantial and symbolic of poverty.

A large part of this misconception comes from constant pressures from the construction industry, commercial interests, and agencies of the government, including some international agencies and NGO's which work hard to convince people that such traditional buildings are unsafe as well as obsolete." Langebach writes.

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