



KUMAON AND ITS HOUSES

THE VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE OF KUMAON



Village of Gallagaon. New houses are built along the highway, Old Gallagaon is below, surrounded by trees and terraces.

It was in September 2001 that I first came to Kumaon at the invitation of K.S. Bohra, whose extended family lives at Gallagaon, a hamlet 7km north of Lohaghat, the nearest town with shops, a market, hotels institutes of higher education and hospitals. During the two weeks of my stay there we went on several trips, mainly to places of pilgrimage, of which there are many in Kumaon.

We visited the area between Almora and Champawat, with its deep river valleys and the countless small terraced fields on the steep mountain slopes, with the deodar woods on the higher sections. On many days we enjoyed a splendid view of the majestic snow peaks in the direction of Tibet. As I got to know the region and its people better I discovered many similarities between Kumaon and certain mountain regions of my own country, Switzerland.

Many people in these regions are poor. Their fields are small, the soil of inferior quality, and mostly there is no irrigation. Those who own larger fields with better soil grow vegetables, for which there is a market. There are few jobs to be had apart from those in administration and teaching (Kumaon's literacy rate is 72%, quite a bit above the national average). The upkeep of the roads furnishes some job opportunities, jeep drivers are in demand, and some people make money by keeping a tea stall or a small shop. At the side of the road

you will sometimes find people splitting stones to make gravel that can be sold for building purposes.

The women will generate a small income by selling the milk of their cows. It is hard earned money. Most cows can't be put out to pasture, they are fed with the grass and the leaves that the women have to collect every day. Every evening you can see women cutting grass on steep slopes with small sickles and carrying home big bundles of leafy twigs. Apart from these meagre sources of income there are the remittances from male family members working in the lowlands, many in hotels and restaurants or as taxi drivers, like K.S. Bohra, who used to come across fellow Kumaonis wherever subsequent trips took us. Then there is also the tradition of Kumaoni men joining the army – another similarity to my own country, which in the past centuries used to be a source of mercenaries for foreign armies.

The material poverty of Kumaon is offset by a wealth of religious customs and festivals. Traces of the great Hindu mythology are found in many places where the Pandavas are supposed to have roamed. Many of the festivals – some lasting up to three weeks – are devoted to local deities and haven't changed much since Edwin T. Atkinson described them in his Himalayan Gazetteer, whose six volumes were published between 1881 and 1886. I started reading them in search of more information on the history and the buildings of Kumaon. Parts of the region were and still are administered partly from Champawat and partly from Almora. Kumaon used to be ruled by the Chands, a land owning family whose leaders assumed the title of „Raja“ and resided in Champawat. The remains of their fort there are still to be seen as is the temple complex, Baleshwar. In the middle of the 16th century the Chands moved their capital to Almora. „The tradition regarding the transfer of the Chand capital there also points to Almora as being then covered with timberDeodar grows well when planted and many of the old houses are built of this wood, which would so far bear out the tradition“. Atkinson writes and also remarks that the hillsides around the town were now bare. This observation points to the central problem of the vernacular architecture of Kumaon today: wood and its availability.



Festival in Barakot.



Town of Champawat.

During my stays in Kumaon I became interested in and fascinated by the different types of houses and settlements in the Champawat – Almora region and hoped to find remarks on and descriptions of vernacular buildings in the Gazetteer. In this respect I found Atkinson disappointing. Of Champawat he simply wrote that it was “ a village of about 358 inhabitants “ – he did mention the fort and the temple. There is more information about buildings when we get to his description of Almora. However, what he mentions are mostly colonial buildings such as churches, schools and administrative buildings. There is just one passage with a description of the old town houses: „The houses are from two to four stories high and are substantially built of mica slate and roofed with slabs of the same material and profusely carved and some bear decorative lamp-rests of deer’s antlers. The windows are more apertures for the most part resembling pigeon-holes cut in the wooden panels and closed by a slide. The general appearance of the town is compact and clean“. And outside the town: „On both sides of the town on the northwestern and eastern slopes the hill side is adorned with very fine substantial isolated native houses and also villages embosomed in orchards of tun (Cedrela

toona), walnut and cherry, Australian jack and apricots....There are several Hindu temples in Almora but none with any pretensions to architectural merit“. There is no description of these native houses, neither the ones near Almora nor the ones at Bageshwar („ ...a few street of substantially built houses „). The ones at Munshyary seem to have impressed Atkinson more: „The wood-work and the masonry employed are both richly and tastefully carved in the principal houses“. That was the situation around 1880. The description of Almora holds true today. The old town houses still present their beautifully carved facades, and the famous slate paving (not mentioned by Atkinson) still exists.

When you look at the new houses in Kumaon you realise that the old building tradition has been abandoned. Has had to be abandoned because wood, the chief building material of a Kumaoni house, is now so expensive that most people can’t afford it and resort to concrete when there is building or repairing to be done. This is one reason why old buildings are doomed. The other reason is migration. People leave mountain villages in search of work, and those who stay on prefer a new, comfortable concrete house to the traditional house with its small, dark rooms. Sooner or later the traditional houses will disappear, and if no effort is made at least to document the Kumaoni building tradition it will be lost forever. As a great admirer of old Kumaoni buildings I have decided to contribute my own modest efforts at documenting such buildings. I hope there will be a general drive – originating perhaps in universities? - to document the prevailing house types in detail and if possible to restore the more outstanding ones and give them a new function. There are actually two travel agencies to be found on the internet, which offer hikes with overnight stays in modified old houses in the area around Almora. Someone else must also have realised Kumaon’s potential as a tourist destination. Above the cricket ground in Abott Mount, in October 2014, we found a tourist camp being constructed. A number of wooden prefab huts with shiny green roofs had been imported from Finland.



Façade in Almora.

ROW HOUSES



Village of Old Gallagon



Village of Old Gallagaon.

The first old buildings I ever saw in Kumaon were the row houses of Old Gallagaon, which show all the typical features of Kumaoni row houses. The walls are built of rubble stone, the open-fronted ground floor houses the animals, the dwelling place of their owners above rests on mighty wooden beams, more sturdy wooden beams form the framework of the roof, which consists of slate tiles. The area in front of the row houses is neatly paved with slate slabs, and stone stairs lead from there to the first floor. As can be seen in the picture, the angles of these stairs aren't uniform. The front of the first floor dwelling place consists partly of rubble stone, partly of wood and looks like the window feature described by Atkinson for the Almora houses, « the windows are mere apertures ...resembling pigeon holes cut in the wooden panels and closed by a slide » They are surrounded by pretty, carved frames. I've often wondered if the town row houses were modelled after the village ones or if the development happened the other way round. The similarities are in any case surprising.



Slate Roof, village of Old Gallagaon.



Row house roof structure, village of Old Gallagaon (same house).



Ground floor of abandoned row house, village of Suie.



Village of Kalakot.

Row houses form the majority of the buildings of the hamlet of Kalakot, uphill from Gallagaon, which is losing its inhabitants. In other hamlets we see a mixture of row houses and free standing buildings, e.g. in Sera, where there is an extremely long row house with a few special features: the paved area is to be found at the back of the houses where there are annexes resembling small verandas. There we were also able to find out a little more about the inhabitants and the age of the building. The row house belongs to the members of one family, the older half was built about 60-70 years ago, the newer half is about 40-50 years old. Information concerning ownership and age of such buildings is in most cases difficult to come by. Seri, a hamlet inhabited by builders and carpenters, has two two-floor row houses. The downhill one used to have a grand wooden portico. To our regret we found that this noble piece of architecture had succumbed to decay, and has been replaced with a concrete structure that has retained some of the original features (bottom part) but has been topped with a kind of loggia that is glaringly different from the rest of the building.



Row house in the village of Sera, front.



Row house in the village of Sera, back.



Portico in the village of Seri.



Village of Barakot.



Cascade of squares along hill spine, Village of Barakot.

Barakot sits on the spine of a hill and looks – to a European eye – like a medieval town. It consists of a long line of row houses of different types, most with their own paved courtyards separated by low boundary walls. Their levels differ, and stone steps lead from one to the next. Barakot may look like a small town but it has no town functions. There are no shops or workshops on the ground floor. There are some byres and some houses do have the typical steps to the first floor but there are also houses of a type you wouldn't find in a farming community, houses whose first floor sits on columns, houses with two floors, with bay "windows" and one grand house which must have been built by a rich and influential person. Barakot is a bit of a mystery and invites research into its history. –Situation of B./ Columns and bays (opposite page, top) the grand house (opposite page, bottom).



Grand house bordering cascade of squares along hill spine, Village of Barakot.



„The Gambler’s house, outside of the Village of Old Gallagaon.



Balcony house in the village of Isera.

BALCONY HOUSES

Balcony houses are free standing houses with a balcony running around the four walls of the upper storey, a feature that can also be found in modern houses. The first example whose photo I wanted to present is the modest “Gambler’s House” on the slope between Gallagaon and Old Gallagaon. Alas, when we went to take a photo of it the “Gambler’s House” in its original form didn’t exist anymore. Its owners, needing more space for the extended family, had added an extension and taken off part of the balcony. Balcony houses are far less common in the hamlets than row houses, they tend to stand outside the hamlet cluster as e.g. at Isera and Kimtoli. They can be found in towns, e.g. at Pulla, a small town with old commercial ties to Nepal, and at Lohaghat in the main market area. The most grand balcony house I ever saw is an old holiday home at Deoli. It has an upstairs drawing room with two elegant fireplaces and the most amazing, carved wooden ceiling. What is going to happen to this outstanding old building?



Row of balcony houses in the village of Isera.



Balcony house in the village of Kimoli.



Balcony house in the small town of Pulla.



Balcony house in the village of Kimoli.



Balcony house in the town of Lohagat.



Old holiday home at Deoli.



Old holiday home at Deoli, interior.



Old holiday home at Deoli, interior.



Two painted houses in the village of Bhanar.

SOLITAIRS

Painted houses are rare in Kumaon so it is a surprise to find two large family houses decorated with paintings in the small hamlet of Bhanar, both still partly inhabited. A grand old house in Sui Village stands empty. There are painted motifs on its façade and the carved wooden panels show traces of multicoloured paint (MG 7320/ 7291) Also in Sui Village there are substantial row houses with very intricate carvings on their wooden panels (MG 7382) Champawat, similar to but smaller and more modest than Almora boasts a free standing house with an unusual upper storey (MG 7128). Does this show the influence of colonial architecture?



Grand old house in Sui village.



Free standing house in Champawat.



Grand old house in Sui village, detail.



Elaborate wood carvings on row house in Sui village.



Bungalow on Mount Abbot.



Anglican Church on Mount Abbot, choir.

COLONIAL ARCHITECTURE

According to Atkinson a Mr. Abbot bought a vast plot on a hill near Lohaghat and had a number of bungalows built there. One of them has been turned into a hotel the others are mostly hidden in their vast plots. I have been unable to find out if they used to be inhabited the year round or if they were holiday homes of British administrators. A little church for the community was built in 1941. The Kumaoni stairs were used as a motif on the building

CREDITS

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Village of Sul