

UNDERSTANDING THE SITUATION OF RURAL SETTLEMENTS IN THE MOUNTAINOUS REGION

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Abstract

Rural settlements are the most typical form of the cultural landscape. The main objective of this paper is to show that nature has a tendency to mold the lives of the humans who inhabit it. In history, special traits have been attributed to specific groups of people inhabiting a specific geographical landscape. People's natural surroundings have been found to have an impact on their food, clothing, housing, social bonding, economy, culture and attitudes. Thus nature becomes an all-encompassing presence that gives meaning and definition to the lives of humans. It is in this context that the influence of nature on rural settlements in mountainous regions is investigated here.

Introduction

Every natural environment has an impact on the civilization that inhabits it and studies on mountainous regions all over the world have substantiated this claim. The impact can be seen on the architecture, life and culture of mountainous regions. The influence on architecture is physical and caused by the geography and climate of a mountainous region and the practical difficulties involved in constructing buildings there. The impact on life of the people relates to the isolated nature of living on mountains, the need to stand together to have better security, less access to governmental welfare and resources, the subsequent poverty caused by geographical remoteness and the greater insecurities caused by life on the borders of nations. Nature also influences the activities of these people in that the major vocation is cattle-rearing and agro-forestry. The attitudes of the people are also supposed to be affected by the natural surroundings as people have limited expectations, which imparts a slower pace to life. The cultural attributes of mountain people are also a reflection of their natural ambience, which

imparts color to their visual arts and costumes, adds distinctiveness to their folk culture and food habits, and also makes them a distinct ecologically sensitive civilization. But all these factors have contributed to mountain people being more vulnerable to exploitation attempts by outsiders.

Architecture

The typical character in the architecture of mountainous regions is that "the lack of technology is substituted by creativity and through trial and error in using available materials and basic building structures" (Habitat, 2001, pp.3). This is evident when we find that people use stones more in constructing their houses because that is the most easily available material. Another feature is that very little mortar is used in bonding the stones used to build the walls, which means they provide good thermal control. A negative aspect of such stonewalls is that they are prone to destruction by natural forces (Habitat, 2001, pp.23).

To cope with the "contour layout" of the land, the houses in mountainous regions are usually arranged in a semicircular design. Mud brick or brick are also used in construction, because mud is the cheapest building material available. A house using these materials also suits the cool climate of mountainous areas. By placing the houses along the valleys, the damage from wind is minimized and more sunlight falls on the houses so that people can cope with the cool climate.

In the study conducted by Habitat (2001) in Kurdistan Region-Iraq, it was found that houses were constructed facing southwards so that they get maximum sunlight (pp.10). The contour design is also useful in

preventing landslides and allowing drainage of excess water during rains. This design, which is defined as "housing aggregation" becomes necessary because such a structure is more convenient to defend, when there is an outside threat (Habitat, 2001, pp.10). The Kurdistan province of North West Iran is another example of a mountainous dwelling place. Here the houses are oriented towards the south because there they get maximum sunlight in winter and minimum sunlight in summer and the shape of the windows is kept vertical for the same effect (Bahrami, 2008, pp.3). In the Kurdistan region, the houses are generally placed "along the ground steps design". The interesting factor of this design is that each house can use the rooftops of the house above as its courtyard (Habitat, 2001, pp.10). This is unique in the sense that a community aspect is added to the concept of a house, which is generally considered strictly private property. This is called a "terrace" design and is preferred because in a mountainous region, there is very little land available for human use, hence people have to minimize their use of land for dwelling purposes and leave more land for productive activities (Habitat, 2001, pp.10). This is the same reason why there is very little space around the dwellings (Habitat, 2001, pp.10).

In the mountainous regions of Kurdistan, concrete slabs were laid on the floors of the majority of houses but in many other mountainous places, mud floors are common (Habitat, 2001, pp.23). To prevent cold, the windows are usually small openings or may even be reduced to ventilation holes (Habitat, 2001, pp.24). It is also common to provide cross ventilation through vent holes (Habitat, 2001, pp.24). But in Kurdistan, the design of the houses cause conditions of humidity and cold inside which make people sick (Bahrami, 2008, pp.6-8). In Kurdistan, roofs are generally made of wood and mud as simple thatched roofs might fall off in the wind and because wood is a cheap raw material. There will be a layer of thatching in between the wooden beams and the mud coating above.

Life

Living in mountainous regions enhances community livelihood. This is evident when we consider the fact that people in such regions use their houses only minimally, i.e.; for the purpose of sleeping and sometimes for cooking (Habitat, 2001, pp.10). In many cases, cooking and sleeping are carried out in the open, particularly when there is an amicable climate. In summer, people can be seen sleeping on rooftops and cooking in their courtyards on make-shift fireplaces. A major portion of life is lived in common spaces, like courtyards, under a tree, in the farm and in village meeting places (Habitat, 2001, pp.10). This kind of open living is reflected in the character of houses which have fewer rooms compared to houses in the plains (Habitat, 2001, pp.12). Most often there will be collective laundry washing near the river or the village pond, group prayers in the place of worship and collective cooking in the "public oven" (Habitat, 2001, pp.10). Despite these positive elements, poverty has been a common bane of people living in mountainous places. In the Kurdish mountain villages of Kurdistan, less than 10% of the food intake comes from agriculture and more than half of the food is received from relief activities (Kirk and Sawdon, 2002, pp.27). Around 40% of the Kurdish population in the mountain villages are in poverty (Kirk and Sawdon, 2002, pp.42). When the global scenario is examined, it is found that "more than half of the mountain population in developing and transition countries...is vulnerable to food insecurity (Huber and Reasoner, 2005, pp.648). This is because the people get few opportunities for education and development, which is caused by the difficulty of governance reaching such difficult terrains. The geographically isolated nature of such dwelling places add up with the cultural isolation that such a people face. As the mountains are often the borders of nations, in the past and even in the present, the people of such places would always be prone to external attacks and threats (Kirk and Sawdon, 2002, pp.2). Rebellious elements inside a nation might have a tendency to settle down in borders, which again will make the people of those regions less secure. Hence these people are always under the threat of misplacement in many

parts of the world (Kirk and Sawdon, 2002, pp.2). When the Iraqi government constantly tried to destroy Kurdish settlements in Northern Iraq, the people were left with very little land for agriculture and hence the poverty became worse (Kirk and Sawdon, 2002, pp.8). This is a typical example of the problems faced by people who live in the borders in the mountains.

Activities

The major activities of mountain people have been listed as “pastoralism and agroforestry activities” (Price and Butt, 2000, pp.87). The rearing of livestock is a major activity because they have nearby expanses of forests and pastures for grazing (Kirk and Sawdon, 2002, pp.16). A recent study found that milk and meat from livestock balance the nutritional requirements of a mountainous population, which has very little land available for agriculture (Kirk and Sawdon, 2002, pp.16). But the shortage of animal fodder is a constant problem and limits their income-generation capabilities (Kirk and Sawdon, 2002, pp.5). Firewood collection and collection of forest produce are other activities. These impart a nomadic character to the people. Tourism and mining have also been catching up as non-agricultural activities (Price and Butt, 2000, pp.88). The lack of basic infrastructure like roads, electricity, water and fuel make these populations very sturdy and capable of hardships. Walking long distances to fetch water and food becomes a routine for them. Another interesting aspect is that women in mountainous regions are under immense workload and emotional pressure because the men from mountains have been migrating to cities so that they can find a livelihood (Price, 2004, pp.11). This is evidence to the fact that the income-generating activities of mountain people are on the verge of stoppage because the “most valued mountain resources, such as forests, minerals and water are expropriated and exploited by outsiders” (Price, 2004, pp.11).

Attitudes

The sense of community is deeply rooted in these people because of these environmental factors. The welfare of the community will be put above the welfare of

the individual while taking collective decisions. Sharing things and spaces will be an internalized value (Habitat, 2001, pp.10). The attitudes of mountain people towards nature are totally different from that of the people in the plains. Mountain people are closely connected to nature and often view nature as sacred because they depend solely on nature for their survival and livelihood (Huber and Reasoner, 2005, pp.552). They are supposed to have an eco-centric view which is very important for the future of humanity.

Humanistic landscape

The villages are usually organized as scattered homesteads in and around the valleys (Habitat, 2001, pp.8). The resource crunch generally prompts people to live in a more scattered way than in the plains. The insecurities generated by the difficult terrain lead people to consolidate their dwellings as villages. House plots and agricultural plots are usually not fenced because in such a terrain, fencing will create difficulty for the movement of people and cattle (Habitat, 2001, pp.10).

Agriculture

The major income-generating activity of the people of mountainous region is farming (Habitat, 2001, pp.8) because these regions lack in technologies to develop productive areas other than farming. The remoteness of these places limits the educational opportunities of people and hence they are usually not aware of any other vocation other than farming. They do not usually indulge in intensive agriculture, possibly because of the difficult terrain and the limited needs that they feel inside the isolated lives that they live. Even when a person saves some money, there might not be any extra consumer items available to buy apart from things which are needed for day-to-day life. This might make them a peace-loving people and their civilization slow-paced (Kelley, pp.54).

Culture

McCauley 1995 observed that “mountain people are religious” while writing about the people of Appalachian people (pp.52). The religious practices of these people are

usually organized around a community level mosque, temple or church (Habitat, 2001, pp.8). The place of worship is the most important and centralized structure in a village and imparts a common pattern in design to these villages. This is also one factor that causes a semicircular shape in the design of dwelling places (Habitat, 2001, pp.10). The religion of mountain people has been described as a “plain-folk camp-meeting religion” with a distinct simplicity and straight forward nature inherent in it (McCauley, 1995, pp.54). Mien, the mountain people of Thailand, have been branded by many as “lacking in development, manners and loyalty to the nation” (Jonsson, 2005, pp.4). Mountain people have been accused of being “closed to outsiders” in an American narrative while talking about the people of Florence (Denzin and Lincoln, pp.64). But the cultural distinctiveness of these people has to be understood in relation to their ground realities rather than merely based on the mechanical concept of integrating them into the nation.

Yet another characteristic of the culture of the mountain people is the use of colorful costumes and ornamentation as is evident in Tibet and the Himalayan tribes (Bernier, 1997, pp.149). This is supposed to be the influence of the colorful natural beauty that abounds in their surroundings. Their food habits are also very different from the people of the plains. For example, it was the “ramps (that) rescued many a vitamin deficient mountain family from a hard winter’s vegetable fast” (Joslin and Joslin, 1985, pp.5). The more affluent groups who inhabit the mountain regions are found to have sporting activities like skiing and mountaineering (Joslin and Joslin, 1985, pp.3, 12).

Ecology

The destruction of the environment and especially of forests has increased the frequency of landslides and other natural calamities in mountainous regions. Global warming also adds up to natural calamities in such vulnerable geographic regions. The reduction in forest cover has affected their livelihood. It is in this backdrop that it is

concluded, “High vulnerability and declining resilience have become typical features of many mountain livelihood systems” (Huber and Reasoner, 2005, pp.648). The forest produces have diminished in quantity and the availability of pasture-lands for their cattle has decreased. Relief measures by governments in the face of poverty and natural calamities reach these people very late. Altogether, living in mountainous regions in modern times has made these people one of the most vulnerable groups on earth.

Conclusion

Thus it is clear that nature imparts an inherent rhythm, style and character to the lives of the people and settlements. This is because humans are not separate from nature. The influence of the natural environment on the rural settlements of mountainous regions is greater because they are generally isolated from modern influences. This is what makes theirs a unique civilization. But the attempts of outsiders to exploit the resources of mountain regions are posing a threat and affecting the naturalness of the lives of mountain people. The increasing vulnerability of this people is a serious matter of concern and needs to be addressed immediately.

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