



Traditional Domestic Architecture of Assam

Archana Talukdar

Research Scholar, Mahatma Gandhi University, Meghalaya, India

Early Assam, the present North East India is a land of rich cultural and natural diversity. A large number of different communities with different cultural identities are living in this part of the country. Different communities living in different environments and they build different types of traditional houses. Different cultural groups of people use materials available in nature like wood bamboo and other building materials available in different part of the region for construction of domestic houses.

Wood and bamboo structures were made both for religious and lay purpose by common folk as well as by the royalty until the Tungkhungiya period. Even in the Tungkhungiya period no commoner was allowed to build in stone and masonry or to make houses with domes (Barua,1961:129). These were privileges of the royalty. The huge Satras like the Kamalabari were almost wholly built in wood and embellished lavishly with carvings and paintings.

Keywords: Domestic architecture, bamboo, naora, namghar, plinth.

I. Introduction:

In domestic architecture there was a general plan, though individual variations were often seen. In a land lashed for half the year by torrential rain, every thought was given to this phenomenon of nature in house building. Thus in many ways house plans corresponded rather to those of China and Japan than to those of the rest of India. Tribals built Chang-ghar or houses raised on platforms. But non-tribals always shunned such houses, even though geographical reasons demanded their use.

Even then, everybody raised the plinths as much as possible in proportion to the house. This was done to protect from clogged rain water and dampness. The plinth was often reinforced with bamboo mats and frames. Usually the rural houses were plain and planned with utilitarian motives.

The commonest materials after earth were wood, bamboo, ikara (reeds) and straw for roofing. In the plains too, where the land was low, people raised Bharal Ghars or grain-stores and those on the principle of the Chang-ghars of the tribals. In the hills tribals built their



Chang-ghar on very tall poles so that wild animals would pass under them and leave the houses alone. Wood was easily available and hence people built mostly in wood (Gogoi,1957:48).

II. Units of the premises of the Houses

In the premises of the house the following separate units were raised:

Chara Ghar or Alahi Ghar.

This was the guest room. It had two sloping roofs and was at right angles with the rest of the house. It was connected with the rest of the house by means of a corridor known as the Naora or the Dighali Bat. A separate door opened to the outer courtyard. Different types of rooms in a common Assamese house are :bar Ghar (the main room.), baru ghar (the lesser room.), maral ghar (the store room.), sowani ghar (the bed room.), bulani ghar (the living room or the lounge), randhani ghar (kitchen.), pak ghar (kitchen), dhekisal (the husking shed), Tantsal (the loom-shed), Gohali Ghar (the cow-pen), Bharal Ghar (the grain store), Bat-chara (the gate house), Nam-ghar (the private chapel) .

All the rooms had two doors, one at the front and one at the back. Normally there were no windows. But due attention was paid to ventilation. Open passages were left between the roofs and the top of the side walls. But in some houses a bamboo lattice was fixed up in this space known as the Dhapalika or Sial tati. Usually all the Ghars were divided by partitions to increase the number of rooms. But the Chara-Ghar was not so divided and was reserved for receiving guests and accommodating them. In winter members of the family gathered in the evening around the fireplace there. The kitchen was on the last row and was a little detached from the rest of the house for reasons of cleanliness. Nobody was allowed to enter the kitchen without taking a bath and changing his dress, for the same reason. The cow-pen was further back but it normally had no side walls.

Plinth :

In the process of building, the first step was raising the plinth after enclosing the plinth area with bamboo matting about two feet high. This enclosure was filled with earth, which was usually brought from some good field. Before filling the plinth area was dug over and searched for skeletal or other remains of men or beasts, as these were regarded as inauspicious. The section of the plinth which was outside the actual matting walls was the Pirali or Kathi.



Posts : The next stage was planting the central post. It was called Ghai Khuta, Bar Khuta, or the Mula Khuta, all meaning the chief pole. In Assam and Cooch Bihar people tied a piece of red cloth around the top of the Bar-Khuta for auspicious reasons. Other poles were known as Mudhar Khuta, Kumar Khuta, Panir Khuta or Parir Khuta.

Sometimes the bottom ends of the poles were burnt a little to check the attacks of insects, and before planting sand was put into the holes instead of earth for the same purpose. When the holes went too deep for the hands to reach then bamboo contraptions with one split end were inserted to catch the loose earth in order to remove it. These were called Thorka or Khonkauri.

For fixing the central pole of the roof and the triangular sections of the gable, various types of slot were made on the respective poles. These were of three types, aal, kan, and kukur. The gable triangle was the Chati. The simpler type was the Bharahua Chati, while the elaborate type, with a king-post and two queen-post, as in Chinese architecture, was the Phul Chati or the Saru-chati. There were thus chatis in a building - one in the middle and two at the ends. The two long poles running length wise along the bottoms of the chatis were known as Panipotar marali. The Maralis are either 3 to 5 in number. To prevent sagging of the roof bamboo of the breadth of the roof were laid across joining the central and side Maralis. These were the Jati Banh. The wooden chatis were often decorated with carvings of lotuses etc.

Roofs : The roofs were usually sloping with only two slanting members. This type is known as the Duchalia. The lattice-like framework of the roof was covered with various kinds of thatch. Thicker varieties of bamboo like the Bhaluka and Jati were split to make the kami, ruwa or Jethi, the strips of the frame. The thinner bamboos like Bijali or Mutukia were used whole for this purpose. To prevent the Kamis from decomposition due to rains and insects, these were immersed in water for a few days for seasoning. The horizontal strips were known as Kamis while the vertical ones, which were split and interlaced with the Kamis were the Ruwas or Jethis. Roofs were of two kinds depending on the technique of binding the frame, Hendali Chal or Sitali Chal. Various kinds of vines and vegetable fibres were used for binding the different members of the roof as well as other members of the structure. The commonest were scrapings from bamboos, called the Tamal or Tangal, cane and the Dhekia vine. The knots were also varied, Mata,, Rupahi, Tapa, Thop, Randhani, and Hatisangora. The roof was



fixed in two separate places, which were never joined first and then raised up to the framework.

For thatching, straw of the Ulu, Saran and Barota was used. Old Buruli straw was also used for a lower stratum on which the new straw was laid, tightly bound between the Kamis and then tied with Tamals of two different kinds, Nalia and Patia or Pathis. Other materials for thatching were leaves of the Takau and Jengu. While laying the bundles of straw, they were first arranged at the Panipota and then gradually laid towards the top or Mudhach. These were summed by tying and this was known as Madaliwa. The protecting straw from the Panipota was the Aola and these were to be trimmed only on an auspicious day. When complete the house was sprinkled with a little water.

Roofs were also of other types: Dui Chalia, Tini Chalia or Chauchalia, and Tup-dia or domical. The donis were of two types, e.g., Golmuria and Kokaria. The general process of roofing is the same. The shed which was sometimes attached to the Mudha was called the Chali. When a house had a low Mudha such a house was called the Chandapara type. The plinth and the floor area were trampled hard by tying cattle there for some days. This was also considered auspicious.

Naora : Naoras were inserted to protect the space between two rooms from rain water. These were made from the carved trunk of the Chowa tree, cut in half length wise. The dhapalika fixed at the tup was known as the chhoi. The dhapalika when used for the Namghar was called the dhekeri chali.

Store house: The bharal was made in a little different manner. It was built on a raised platform for keeping paddy, on posts called dhum or thum, and made of trunks of trees or stone. On these were laid length wise planks of wood or dham. This was called the gadhoi or the dadhari. On it was fixed a bamboo matting wall or choudhala. The upright sticks were known as litikai. The two ends of the choudhola were joined by means of a splintered bamboo called pota. The inner walls of the bharal and those of the mer and the duli or the paddy silo were all plastered with cow dung only.

Goat shed: Goats were kept on a raised platform or chang of bamboo for resting. Sometimes a separate shed was constructed with a chang for goats, or a chang was made in a section of the gohali itself. Pigeons were kept in the tangi-ghar which was a small box-like structure on the top of a long pole. Otherwise old broken earthen pitchers were hung from the roof with the



mouth parallel to the ground, for the birds to enter. Ordinarily, a bamboo was hung horizontally from the roof to serve as a roost for pigeons, which were often domesticated. The manuscript of the Lanka Kanda of the Ramayana from the Gauhati University Library shows the various contraptions for keeping pigeons. Ducks, chicken and pigs were kept in round shelters covered on the top and having a small semi-circular entrance. These garals were of woven bamboo matting fixed to poles in the ground.

Partitions were either of bamboo matting fixed to frames and poles or were made from Ikara (reeds) and bamboo splinters and scrapings. The bottom of the partition was protected from direct contact with the clay floor by inserting it into a long bamboo pole split length wise and cleaned inside. This bamboo pole was the barta or the garila. It was raised on a low bamboo leg kukur, cut in a special way. At the corners where the two walls meet, the Pola bond, already described, was used. It, as well as the walls, were plastered with cow dung and clay. To this mixture, rice-husk and crushed oil seed cakes were also added. Coloured earth or earth of ant hills was sometimes added in the plaster to colour the walls. In some places earth from crab holes was also used for the same purpose.

Doors and Windows : Doors and windows were usually of wood and are made by the village barhoi or carpenter. But simpler and cheaper houses used bamboo and leaves for the same purpose. Such doors and window panes were made from leaves of bamboo or Takou trees. Doors were of different types, namely- the dang-dia (where two wooden hinges support a long bamboo or dang as an obstruction), salakha lagowa (an arrangement made with bamboo and a bamboo nail to be used as a bolt). Doors with the dang or bamboo bolt for closing at night to be closed from within. The door step was fixed with a bamboo pole gar ali or duar-dali serving as the threshold. A bamboo lattice was attached at the top of the door in the manner of the Pan - light of Western architecture. The door was made to revolve on a bamboo hinge or ghur-ghuri. Inside a room, bamboo mezzanine floors or Atal were sometimes fixed for keeping things not in constant use. The floor was usually stretched from one choli to another.

Front and back yards: The front and back yards were as important in Assamese domestic architecture as any of the ghars or other units. Here people relax, do their household work, arrange for cultural performances (Bihu, Huchari dance) and hold nam kirtans or community prayer meetings. People celebrate on entering a new house (ghar-loa-sabah) and the bride also had to undergo rituals on entering her new home. It is believed that the divinities Ghar-Jeuti



(Griha Jyoti) or Lakshmi and Isvara reside at the door step and so nobody sits there or kicks at a door. In the front yard people plant Siju and other medicinal plants like Akan and Bahak . But some trees like Ou and tamarind are avoided. In the back yard Tamol or areca nut palms are planted in a row along the compound. No construction work is done in the months of Bhadra, Kartika, Pusha, Magha and Chaitra. It is also avoided on Amavasya (new moon) day and during the period of Agnisara. On the day of the New Year or 1st of Bahaga, a mantra propitiating Agni is written in a special ink on the leaves of the Nahar (*Mesua ferra*) tree and these are tucked into the thatched roof. The ink is prepared by mixing gorachana and kumkuma. It may be noted that, New Year messages and sayings were hung in Chinese houses also.

House building was always a co-operative venture in Assam. People helped each other in every job including procuring raw materials like wood, bamboo and straw from the forests in the month of Phagun . The house was not only a place to live in, but also an institution in itself, in a society where the joint family system prevailed. Each family depended on the other for the construction, maintenance and repair of their houses.

The Nam Ghar (Prayer Hall): Every village or community has its prayer hall or Namghar. In the Satras, however, the Namghar is called the Kirtan Ghar. Some people also call it Gossain Ghar. The adult population divides itself into groups and they work voluntarily for the construction of the Namghar. Such voluntary labour is known as xaj.

The Namghar complex consists of three or four rooms and structures. They usually consist of the batchara, chon-ghar and the manikuta. The batchara is simple and has only a duchalia form. Sometimes it is further simplified into the dhekeri chali.

The Namghar faces the east. At the western end of the building is the tup or the tope or dome. The tup is formed by means of curved kamis which are wrapped with jute or cane. Where the tup begins, a round piece of wood with a handle is inserted into the poles of the mudhach. The door towards the tup, being the main door, is called the mukh-duar. The jambs and the lintel are carved with various designs and this kind of carving is called meharaji. Doors with carvings of lions are known as simha-duar and those with floral scrolls are the phul-tetelikata-duar. Open faced lotus flowers were also common motifs.

A Namghar consists of three, five or seven chambers. In the last room, leaving the area under the tup is kept the daba or the drum, either at the northern or the southern end. The daba



is kept on a platform with three legs. The doors are fitted with bolts for closing from within and are fitted with kalasa (pitcher) shaped handles on the outer side. The doors on both sides of the length of the building are called the petduar. The wood of the chati is carved with lotus designs. The date of construction is cut into the bar chati or the main chati which is held by the lai-khuta or the main pole. An aatal is made, joining the chatis on which are kept the chons and the mukhas, the masks and other accessories for the bhaonas or dramatic performances, based on the epics and the Puranas.

In a Namghar, the first chamber from the east is reserved for the Asana or the Simhasana containing the Bhagavata Book X. Of the next pair of poles, the one to the north is the Lai Khuta. To the south, near the Asana, the Brahmanas and women sit to the north of the room. The other devotees sit to the westwards of the Lai-Khuta.. In this arrangement, people who are directly connected with the Namghar, like the Udasinas and the Bhakats, get the front rows. But people of lower classes and tribals occupy the back rows. Although, ekasarana-nama-dharma denounces caste distinction it persists even in the religious life of Assamese Vaisnavism.

In the chamber containing the asana are placed wooden sculptures of Garuda, Hanuman and Larua-Gopal or Gopala holding a ball of butter. To the left of Asana is kept the gacha or the main lamp either of wood or of metal such as iron or brass. The elaborate ones have many branches and some even contain a hundred lamps. Such gachas are known as the Saikiya gacha. To the south of the Asana is kept the thaga or the thagi, the wooden stand for keeping the Bhagavata while the prayer goes on. In a Namghar with no Manikuta, arrangements for the prasada etc. the utensils and ritual objects are kept in the first chamber. In the section to the west of the Laikhuta sits the main reciter or the nam-lagowa, and to his right sits the group of repeaters. During a Bhaona, the Gayan-Bayan, or the choral and orchestral group sit in the section ahead of the one under the tup. The centre is left free for the actors or the Bhaorias to act. The Manikuta is to the east of the Namghar across the main structure. The Manikuta has a duchalia roof. This chamber is like the Garbha griha in a Hindu temple. In this chamber is an Asana, Gacha, Thaga, Tal or brass cymbals for use at special services for the members of the inner circle, such as the Udasinas and others. Women are not allowed in this sanctum sanctorum. In more elaborate structures there is a special chamber for depositing the padasila



and the kharam or wooden sandals. A separate choan ghar or greenroom is attached sometimes in greater and richer satras and their Namghars. (Dasgupta,1982:47-49)

References:

- [1] Bahadur,Mutua,1996,*Tribal Art of Manipur, Mutua Museum, Imphal*
- [2] Barpujari,H.K.,1990, *Comprehensive History of Assam, Vol.-IV, Guwahati.*
- [3] Barua,B.K.,1961, *Asomor Loka Sanskriti, Guwahati.*
- [4] Bhuyan, S.K1962,, *Deodhai Asom Buranji, Guwahati*
- [5] Choudhury,P.C.,1959, *The History of Civilisation of the people of Assam, Guwahati.*
- [6] Dalton,E.,1960, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal, Calcutta.*
- [7] Dasgupta, R.,1982, *Art of Mediaeval Assam, Cosmo Publication, New Delhi.*
- [8] Gurdon, P.R.T,1985 (*First Publication:1914*),*The Khasis, New Delhi.*
- [9] Gogoi,L., 1957, *Buranji Parasa Nagar, Guwahati*
- [10] Handique,B.C.,1959, *Purani Asomor Silpa, Guwahati.*
- [11] Handique, B.C., 1959, *Edited, Chang-rung Phukanar Buranji,*
- [12] Hanney, ,1851, “*Architecture in Ancient Assam*”, *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal.*
- [13] Havell, E.B., 1915, *Ancient and Mediaval Architecture of India, London*
- [14] Hutton, J.H.,1969, *The Angami Nagas, Oxford University Press, Bombay.*
- [15] Nath,R.M.,1948, “*The Background of Assamese Architecture*”, *JARS. Vol. V.*
- [16] Rajguru,S.,1975, *Asomiya Probachan, Nowgaon .*