

CULTURAL ECOLOGY OF BHIL HOUSE TYPE OF THE NARMADA VALLEY :

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ABSTRACT: House types are one of the many individual expressions of culture implanted in a landscape. A close study of house type is also an integral part of the study of regional economy. The study area, Narmada Valley, is quite well known for its rich ancient traditional and cultural traits. In such a region it is expected that the transmission of ideas in the intergeneration direction will be more pronounced than the horizontal diffusion. Bhil house type is associated with the Bhil tribe. Its distribution corresponds to that of the Bhil ethnic group, who are the inhabitants of lower Narmada Valley.

The present study is entirely based on field-work. Some information has also been collected from historical records. For the analysis of house type culture-ecological approach is applied.

After keen observation and analysis of facts, it was found that Bhil house type is the consequence of cultural heritage of the people, which they have acquired through ages. Thus, it disproves the concept that attributes of a house are consequences of physical characteristics of the area concerned. Physical factors affect the house pattern to a small extent, whereas cultural factors help in interpreting the house to a greater extent.

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Rural dwelling is a cultural artifact and the basic component of the system of rural settlement. The House Types, field pattern, and the cluster of houses are intimately related to the culture of the people occupying the area. The settlement is a collection of houses (Brunhes, 1952, 189) and the settlement structure is made up of interactions and interrelations among houses, streets, fields and other components of settlement. The house has a place of primacy in the settlement structure and therefore should be given special attention in a culturo-geographical analysis of a rural settlement. A traditional rural house express 'the distinctive social organisation of its inhabitants' (Houston, 1953, 109). Thus, the analysis of the house types may also lead to the discovery of the social organisation of its occupants (Wagstaff, 1965, 69).

Genre de vie, that is, the mode of living of the people is an element of culture which has great impact on house types and settlement structures. As assemblages of techniques, **genre de vie** are active expression of the adoption of the

human groups to their natural settings. The specialization and stability of this adoption depends on the specialization, stability and durability of the *genre de vie*, and the local changes in the former are expressed in the variations in the latter (Sorre, 1948, 399). Thus, the settlement structure, and for that matter house types, are an expression of the interaction between the milieu and *genre de vie* of the people. The rural house is an important key to clarifying a settlement structure. The roof and plan of rural house varies from place to place as they reflect the condition as well as the specific way of living of the people of an area and thus house type is a regional indicator, although not in the holistic sense (Marh, 1978,2)

THE STUDY AREA

The Narmada Valley is a long and narrow strip along the Narmada, the Ganga of Western India. In terms of geomorphological features and human occupation it stands out as a unique area. It covers an area of about 98,800 square kilometres. The valley is quite well known for its rich ancient traditional and cultural traits. In such a region it is expected that the transmission of

ideas in the intergeneration direction will be more pronounced than the horizontal diffusion. The study area has considerable ecological and cultural diversity. It is inhabited by several castes and tribes which constitute distinct cultural groups. They have interacted differently with the ecological diversity. The interaction has resulted in a variety of house types of which Bhil House type is one. Its distribution corresponds to that of the Bhil ethnic group. Bhils are the inhabitants of Betual, Dhar, Jhabua, Raisen, Sehore, Khandwa, Khargone districts of Madhya Pradesh, Dhulia district of Maharashtra and Bhoroch and Vadodara districts of Gujrat.

METHODOLOGY AND APPROACH :

In the present study I have applied the cultural-ecological approach, the major thrust of which is on the study of cultural heritage of the people, which they have acquired through the ages. The principal methodology adopted in this study has been field work, augmented by material available in the historical records. Some information was collected through questionnaire. Photographs were taken and house sketches were prepared on the spot. This material formed the basis of the analysis of the house type.

HOUSE FORM :

The Bhil houses are usually located on the hill slopes and near some streams. They are generally, not arranged in groups or in rows but are scattered over the whole area of the village. A typical Bhil house (known as **tapra**) is generally rectangular in shape, and consists of a single hut with an attic. The richer Bhils, however, have three to six rooms in their houses, which are bigger and better. The hut is usually divided into three compartments. The total living area is approximately 100.0 square metres. The walls are mostly 2.0 metres high from the ground and are made of bamboo-splits. The roof of the houses are two-gabled and are made of bamboo, wood, leaves and wild grasses. Since they cultivate the land, they possess some cattle, for which they construct a cattle-shed either in front of, or on one side of or within a part of their huts.

BUILDING MATERIAL :

The building materials of the Bhil house is derived from the local region. The major requirements of the Bhil houses are wood and bamboo which they use for various purposes. Other construction materials are mud, straw, tiles, stones, yellow and grey soil. The use of any building material, even locally available, depends on the people's perception of the material as capable of being manipulated and used in a particular manner. Thus, it depends on the culture of the people of the area.

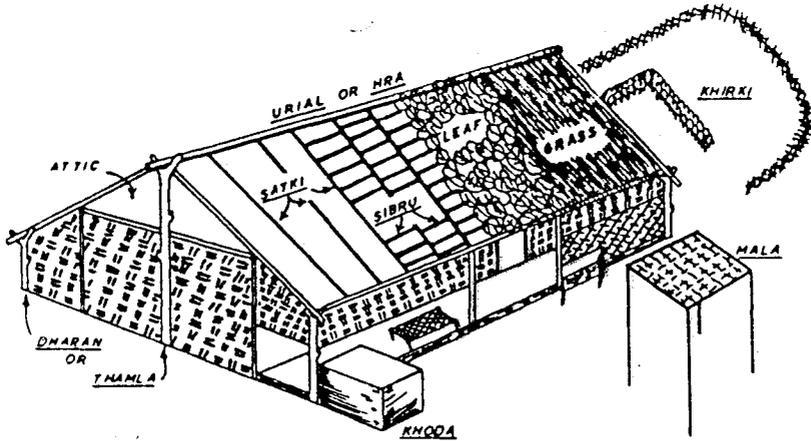
CONSTRUCTION OF THE HOUSE

When a Bhil decides to build a new house he does not consult a priest, as is the custom with some of the tribes. However, on an auspicious day he worships **Ganpati** and offers him a coconut before starting the construction. The village elders and traditional leaders are invited to attend the ceremony. It is commonly believed that by offering **puja** (worship) no calamity will befall their household during the construction period. Every Bhil is expected to be skilled enough to build a house of his own. Some technical work is also done by the aged and skilled hands of the village.

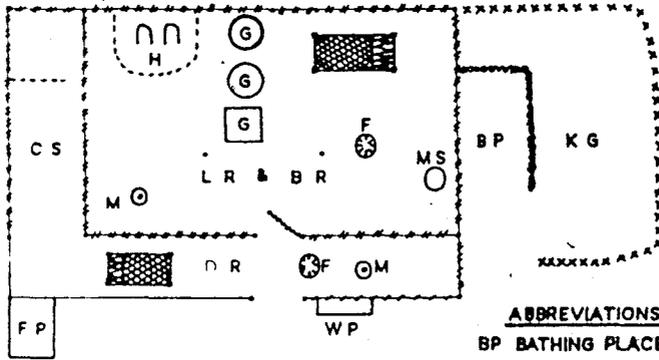
Since the design of the house is very simple, no plan of the house is made. The site is measured with hands and the marking is done with ash. No Bhil house, if possible, should face north or west, as it is considered inauspicious to dwell in it. If any proved 'inauspicious' the Bhil would immediately change the site and erect a new one (Doshi, 1971, 28).

The house of an ordinary Bhil is just a small bamboo structure. So there is no necessity to dig foundation. For the structure of house, at first, four strong **dharan** or **thamla** (forked top wooden logs) are fixed on the four corners of the ground, two bigger one are posted in the middle of the side walls. Three **urial** or **hara** (ridge poles) are placed above the middle and side **dharans**. The **dharans** and **urials** are fastened together by hemp rope. On this skeleton, the

BHIL HOUSE TYPE



Ground Plan



ABBREVIATIONS

- | | |
|------------------|-------------------|
| BP BATHING PLACE | G GRANARIES |
| BR BED ROOM | H HEARTH |
| CS CATTLE SHED | KG KITCHEN GARDEN |
| CY COURT YARD | LR LIVING ROOM |
| DR DRAWING ROOM | M MORTAR |
| FP FOWL PEN | MS MILL STONE |
| F FIREPLACE | WP WATER PLACE |

RSP

bhil house is built. The walls are raised with the bamboo knitted between regularly arranged wooden pillars. The walls are plastered with black earth and cow dung which make a dull appearance. The roofs are low, covered with local flat tiles, but in some cases, these are covered with leaves and thatched with grass. The height in the middle of the hut varies from 2.5 to 5.0 metres and on sides it gradually declines to 1.5 to 2.0 metres. The plinths are seldom above the grounds, except in the houses of better placed Bhils. The absence of plinth keeps the floors damp (Doshi, 1971, 28). In all these houses there is no window but only a front door. In some of the houses a rear door is found which is used only by the inmates of the house. The smoke can escape with difficulty through the open space left at the junction of the wall and the roof. The door consists of a single shutter, **Wayna**, with a bamboo net work on a wooden frame.

Before entering a newly constructed house, the women of the house-hold give it finishing touches by smearing the walls and floors with yellow soil and cowdung paste. The front walls of the houses are very often decorated with paintings in lime and red ochre which are generally crude and primitive. Man with bows and arrows, birds, tigers and panthers are generally sketched on the walls.

GROUND PLAN AND PARTITIONING OF DOMESTIC SPACE :

The ground plan is an important element in the identification of a particular house type. It is constituted by the domestic and social space of the family (Pawar, 1985, 182). The plan of the house indicates the rural dwelling to a functional unit, related to agricultural economy, the population density, and standard of living (Houston, 1953, 109). But the consideration of the plan of a house type only in terms of functions results in a grossly inadequate use of its significance in the field of cultural geography, for, in addition to rationally explained functions there exist elements of culture woven in the pattern which may be nonrational and can be understood through history and speculation (Mukerji, 1967, 17). The

division of the total family space into different functional parts is guided by the cultural beliefs of the people and is as such an expression of their culture.

A typical Bhil house comprises only a big hut. It is usually divided into three compartments which are separated from each other by split bamboo, plastered with mud and cowdung. One part of it is used as a cattle shed, known as **bed**. The rear part of the **bed** is used for stabling calves and goats. The other part of the hut is a multipurpose room serving as storage, cooking and sleeping space. Usually three or four granaries, **kuthla**, constructed of bamboo plastered with mud and cowdung, are placed width wise in a row to separate this room into two parts : kitchen and living room. These granaries are about 2.0 metres high with a radius of 1.0 metre are used for storage of grain for the whole year. The kitchen, **randhkhanyo**, is generally in one corner of the house and is provided with two hearths. In the kitchen may be seen the suspended ears of maize and bundles of tobacco. There is no sacredness attached to the kitchen of a Bhil house. In the living compartment small bamboo baskets, **bhaniya**, are usually found in every Bhil house for storing the corn and vegetables of daily use. The boxes used for preserving the ceremonial dress and ornaments are also found here. In a corner of the house, hollow gourds are kept tied to the roof to preserve the vegetable seeds. A millstone, **ghatti**, for grinding corn and a bamboo cradle for babies are the other belongings of the house. Although there is no specific indication of the sleeping room, the dwellers recognise a specific part intended for this purpose. It is indicated by the placing of cots.

The third part of a Bhil house is an extension of the domestic space into the social space known as **baithak** (drawing room). It is actually the extension of the roof. This social space protects the family from external interference in social terms. Some cots are kept here and they sit here together with their friends and relatives during the leisure hours. It is also used for sleeping. Somewhere on the floor a small mortar is dug for

crushing corn. A portion of the **baithak** is used as a fireplace **dhuni**, where they keep a fire burning during the night to keep themselves warm.

In front of the Bhil house there is an open space which is used as a courtyard, known as **angan**. In the courtyard, a wooden structure, **mala**, about one metre high, supported by four teak pillars, **bel**, and covered with bamboo net work, is constructed for storing grass and watching the crops. The space below is used for keeping a cart, if any, or animal. somewhere in this openspace a fowl-pen, **khoda**, and a water place, **madhi** is erected. There is no bathroom in the house. Normally their bathing place is a well or tank or streamlet. For attending to nature's call limitless open space is available. A kitchen garden, **khirki**, is also attached to the house where chillies, brinjals, tomatoes and other vegetables are grown. There is an attic in each Bhil house. It is constructed between the roof and the floor of the house, usually at a height of 2.00 metres from the ground level. For the construction of the attic, wooden rafters are placed width wise at an interval of about 0.5 metres. On these rafters bamboo reapers are placed closely in transverse direction. It is entered by a staircase known as **pagthani**.

Attic is also observed by Naik and Vidhyanath in their studies. (Naik, 1956, 31; Vidhyanath, 1962,60). The Bhil house is not very spacious. It is a flimsy bamboo structure and as rightly observed by Carstairs, and this inconvenience is one of the reasons why they soon build a separate hut inside the old house fence, still sharing a communal hearth, and move out to a house of their own". (Carstairs, 1953, 179).

The Bhil houses are at present undergoing a great change. Instead of single thatched houses, they now build separate huts for various purposes. Some of the Bhils have mud or brick walls in their houses. The roofs are covered with tiles or corrugated tin sheets, through, the design and lay-out remain the same.

On the basis of form, function and structure Bhil houses have been identified as a type. It has a traditional design which retains the same characteristics over a long period of time. It bears the stamp of the cultural heritage of the people. Thus, it disproves the concept that attributes of a house are consequences of physical characteristics of the area concerned. Physical factors affect the house pattern to a small extent, whereas cultural factors help in interpreting the house to a greater extent.

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