



Cultural Rituals in Vernacular Spaces of Himachal Pradesh

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Abstract

Rituals are not merely practices of faith—they are spatial performances that connect people, place, and memory. In Himachal Pradesh, vernacular architecture provides the stage for these acts, where homes, courtyards, and temples become living theatres of culture. Far from static shelters, these spaces pulse with festivals, daily routines, and seasonal gatherings that sustain identity and continuity across generations. This study emphasizes how construction itself embodies and enables cultural life. Kath-khuni construction, a distinctive technique of the region, alternates timber and stone to create structures that are both resilient and expressive. Its framework, with wooden corners and carefully defined thresholds, directs movement, shapes communal areas, and sets the stage for ritual practices. Spatial layouts within homes and courtyards are designed to accommodate ceremonies and gatherings, making architecture an active participant in cultural expression rather than a passive backdrop. The research methodology for this study adopts a qualitative approach, focusing on the intersection of culture, environment, and vernacular architecture in Himachal Pradesh. The process begins with a contextual review of the region's cultural and historical background, identifying traditions, rituals, and community practices that have shaped its architectural identity. For contemporary design, these insights extend beyond aesthetics or sustainability. To design with an understanding of ritual and spatial culture is to create environments that foster resilience, continuity, and social cohesion. By documenting these practices, the research highlights the deep interconnection between culture, environment, and architecture, thereby offering insights into the sustainable and context-responsive nature of vernacular structures in Himachal Pradesh.

Keywords: spatial, architecture, interiors, construction, rituals.

1. Introduction

Vernacular architectural traditions are shaped by the use of locally available materials, indigenous construction methods, and cultural practices that have evolved over generations to meet both environmental demands and social needs. These traditions highlight the intimate relationship between people, place, and material, resulting in structures that are sustainable, resilient, and culturally meaningful—whether expressed through timber-stone houses, earthen dwellings, or communal temples across mountainous regions. In Himachal Pradesh, such architecture reflects a deep sensitivity to climate and terrain, with settlements often arranged along sunlit slopes and

organized around temples that serve as focal points for both spiritual life and community interaction. Together, these built forms embody a living dialogue between culture and environment, reinforcing architecture as a vital expression of identity and harmony with nature [1].

1.1. Aim

This study aims to analyze how rituals have shaped the spatial form of the buildings, why particular materials and layouts were chosen, and how heritage villages like Garli and Pragpur, Sangla and many other preserve these practices and embedding rituals, beliefs, and daily practices into architecture and

settlement patterns [2].

1.2. Objectives

- To investigate the influence of cultural rituals and traditional belief systems on the spatial configuration of vernacular architecture in Himachal Pradesh, with particular emphasis on elements such as verandahs, courtyards, and communal spaces.
- To critically analyze indigenous building techniques and craft practices—including Kath-Kuni construction, weaving, woodwork, and metalwork—as manifestations of both adaptive resilience and cultural expression within vernacular environments.
- To examine vernacular spaces as repositories of intangible heritage, wherein historical narratives, rituals, and traditions are embedded, thereby reflecting and sustaining the socio-spiritual and functional values of local communities Shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1 A Typical One Storey House Source- Himalayan Traditional Architecture

1.3. Need of Study

Festivals and rituals further strengthened the bond between people, their environment, and their heritage, acting as anchors of identity and continuity within the natural landscape. Factors such as family income, landholding patterns, geography, and the physical environment dictated house typologies, while openness and community life were often symbolized through the verandah culture. Thus, vernacular structures in Himachal Pradesh are not merely functional shelters but also tangible

embodiments of intangible heritage, where culture, beliefs, and traditions are expressed through material forms.

1.4. Scope and Limitations

The document emphasizes on how do the rituals and practices shape spatial organization of a built structure. Though it focuses on the vernacular spaces, but it does not focus on the structural techniques that led to the construction. At the same time, it also emphasizes on how it continues to function as cultural landscapes that embodies but tangible and intangible heritage. Due to the evolving cultural practices, this study does not focus on the contemporary changes that are occurring in the state. Along with that, this study only focuses on Himachal Pradesh and not on all the hilly terrains [3].

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This research adopts a qualitative approach to explore the relationship between cultural rituals and vernacular architecture in Himachal Pradesh, employing ethnographic and case study methods to understand how traditional architectural forms and community practices intertwine Shown in Figure 2.

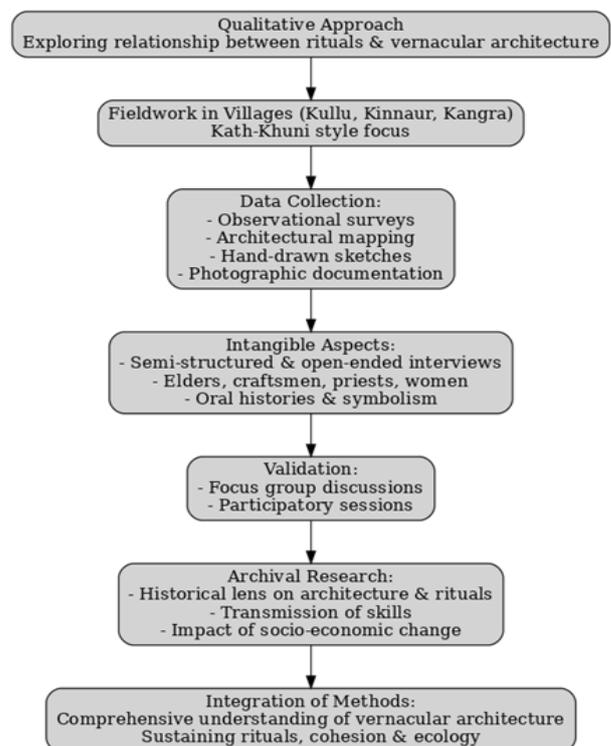


Figure 2 Research methodology Source- Author

3. Theoretical Framework

Vernacular practices in relation to culture have increasingly become a subject of contemporary discussion. According to Laurie Baker (1999), every place carries its own traditions, where communities, over thousands of years, have learned through trial and error to adapt architecture to the site, topography, geology, environment, vegetation, locally available materials, and religious as well as cultural ways of living. This perspective highlights how materials in Himachal Pradesh are not only used for construction but are deeply contextual, reflecting both environmental conditions and cultural patterns. The present study seeks to explore the deeper dimensions of these traditions and cultural practices as expressed within vernacular spaces. Singh et al., (1996) argues that the connection between the tradition and Himalayan settlements have not been established and recognized [4]. The author acknowledges that, despite the vastness and richness of the subject, their research is one step—an earnest contribution—towards uncovering, understanding, and valuing the wisdom embedded in the traditional homes of the Himalayas. It emphasizes that the study aims to bring attention to and preserve the knowledge and cultural significance of these dwellings, but does not claim to be exhaustive or the final authority on the subject. Instead, it respectfully positions itself within a broader ongoing effort to recognize and document the importance of Himalayan vernacular architecture Shown in Figure 3.

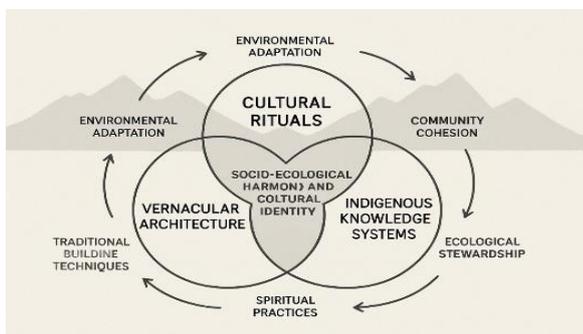


Figure 3 Theoretical framework
Source- Author

This study, therefore, mainly focuses on the cultural facets traditional society of western Himalaya where

innovation of science and technology is not bringing significant change in their day-to day life style but rejuvenation of their indigenous knowledge based conservation practices and pertaining value addition could be a viable mechanism of sharpening and strengthening of overall socio-economic condition and livelihood of the tribal communities. Through this study, we aim to understand that how, even in the modernization era, the natives seek to keep their heritage alive. O.C Handa (2013) states- “The present study on the traditional Himalayan domestic architecture is a humble effort to that end”.

3.1. Case Studies

3.1.1. Primary Case Study – Site Visit, Photographs, Drawings, Observations.

3.1.1.1. Schools

Pragpur, a heritage village in Himachal Pradesh, stands as a remarkable example of how vernacular architecture and cultural heritage can be preserved and meaningfully integrated into contemporary life, with its government school serving as a key illustration. The school embodies traditional building wisdom by employing local materials such as timber, stone, and mud, combined through layered mud-stone wall techniques that provide natural insulation and a sloping slate roof designed to withstand the harsh Himalayan climate of heavy snowfall and monsoon rains. Traditional craftsmanship is prominently displayed in the finely detailed wooden windows and doors, constructed using nail-free joinery methods that highlight both skill and sustainability. The architectural layout prioritizes community interaction through open courtyards and shaded verandas, which not only improve natural ventilation but also double as gathering spaces that strengthen social bonds. Functioning beyond its educational role, the school acts as a cultural nucleus where rituals, seasonal festivities like Baisakhi and Lohri, and other communal gatherings are actively celebrated, ensuring the continuity of traditions across generations [5]. Symbolic elements, such as intricately carved wooden brackets and painted motifs on beams, further reflect local beliefs and offer spiritual protection, embedding cultural identity within the built environment. Collectively, the Pragpur school illustrates the successful melding of

vernacular knowledge with modern needs, demonstrating that traditional architecture is not only a response to environmental challenges but also a vital medium for fostering sustainability, cultural resilience, social cohesion, and meaningful public spaces within the rural Himalayan landscape Shown in Figure 4.



Figure 4 Government Girls School, Courtyard in Pragpur Source- Author

3.1.1.2. Hooks In Houses

Field observations in Pragpur revealed the presence of metal and wooden hooks attached to the structural forms of several traditional houses. While these may appear to be ordinary construction details, community members explained their cultural significance. The hooks are intentionally designed to support the erection of tents across streets during ceremonies, rituals, and festivals. By providing anchor points, they allow narrow lanes and open spaces to be temporarily transformed into sheltered communal venues where food can be prepared, served, and shared among villagers and guests. This practice demonstrates the adaptive and multifunctional character of Pragpur's vernacular architecture, where even structural elements are designed to accommodate social and ritual life. The integration of hooks reflects a pragmatic response to climatic conditions by enabling shade or rain protection, while also reinforcing the cultural ethos of inclusivity, as celebrations extend beyond private homes into shared public spaces. The use of hooks for tenting underscores how architecture actively anticipates and facilitates collective rituals, embedding cultural practices into the very fabric of the built environment. Thus, the findings suggest that the architectural design of Pragpur is not limited to

structural resilience or aesthetic expression but also embodies a deep sensitivity to social cohesion, hospitality, and cultural continuity Shown in Figure 5.

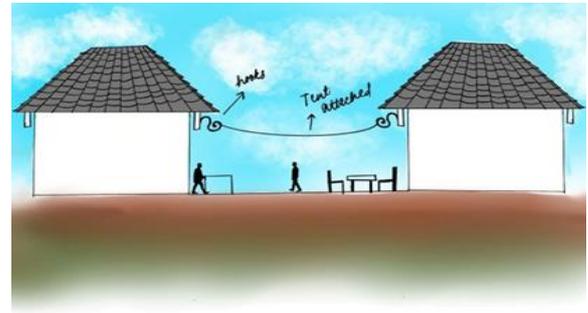


Figure 5 Hooks in Houses Source- Author

The presence of hooks exemplifies how small but purposeful architectural features sustain traditions of communal feasting and ritual gatherings, ensuring that the built form remains a living participant in cultural life [6].

3.1.1.3. Community Space

Observations in Pragpur reveal that many houses are strategically arranged around lakes and parks, emphasizing the role of communal natural features in vernacular settlement planning. These shared open spaces were not incidental but central to the cultural and social life of the village. The lake served dual purposes—utilitarian, as a source of water, and ritualism, as a site for purification ceremonies, seasonal festivals, and religious observances. Parks and open grounds functioned as flexible cultural arenas where fairs, folk performances, and communal gatherings were regularly held Shown in Figure 6.

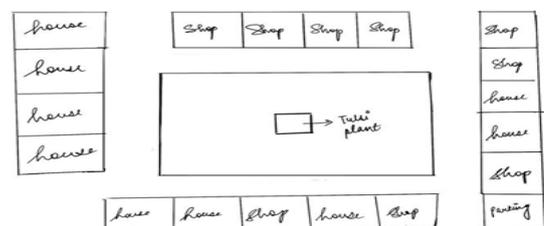


Figure 6 Community space around the built structures Source- Author

The spatial organization of homes around these features ensured both accessibility and visibility,

embedding community interaction into the daily rhythm of life. During rituals and festivals such as weddings, Baisakhi, or deity processions, lakesides and parks became vibrant cultural hubs where food was prepared, served, and shared, and performances and rituals unfolded in collective participation. This arrangement reinforced the values of inclusivity and hospitality, extending the domestic sphere into the public realm. These findings highlight how Pragpur's vernacular practices integrated natural landscapes with cultural rituals. By positioning homes around lakes and parks, the village created multifunctional spaces that sustained ecological balance, supported social cohesion, and embedded intangible heritage into the physical fabric of the settlement. The practice illustrates how architecture and planning in Pragpur actively facilitated rituals, ensuring that cultural traditions remained deeply connected to both place and community Shown in Figure 7 & 8.

3.1.2. Secondary Case Study – Existing Documented Examples, Published Sources



Figure 7 Holi from the courtyard Source- Author

3.1.2.1. Bering Nag Ji Temple



Figure 8 Courtyard centric streets in Sangla Source- Author

The study villages of Sangla Valley in Kinnaur district, Himachal Pradesh, reveal how architecture and culture are deeply intertwined. Homes with flat or sloping roofs blend with the natural environment, while decorative carvings and materials embody ancestral ties and local beliefs, turning dwellings into cultural memories. Faith in local deities (deotas) guides not only architectural features but also the protection of ritual platforms and sacred groves. Central to this landscape is the Bering Nag Temple, built in the seismic-resistant Kath-Kuni style of wood and stone interlocking, adorned with serpent motifs for Bering Nag Ji, solar and lunar symbols, and floral carvings reflecting agrarian life. The streets of Sangla are the main approach and centre of attraction for the tourists, due to great spatial planning of centralizing the courtyard in the middle of the streets. Each year during the Phulaich Fair, its courtyard and verandahs transform into communal spaces for music, dance, and offerings, showing how sacred architecture integrates with everyday life. Similarly, in Shimla—the colonial-era capital—traditional practices coexist with modern influences, expressed through temples, courtyards, verandahs, and bazaars [7].

3.1.2.2. Bhimkali Temple

The Bhimkali Temple Complex illustrates how vernacular architecture in Himachal Pradesh is simultaneously shaped by environmental conditions and enriched with spiritual meaning. Built in the resilient Kath-Khuni style, the temple responds to seismic activity, heavy snow, and monsoon rains through its timber–stone interlocking system and sloping roof forms. However, its significance extends far beyond structural adaptation, functioning as both a sacred space for worship and a cultural anchor for the community. The spatial configuration of the complex—its courtyards, thresholds, and verandahs—facilitates a wide range of rituals, from daily offerings to large-scale festivals where music, dance, and communal feasting occur. These spaces blur distinctions between the sacred and the social, reinforcing the temple's role as a nucleus of collective cultural life. Associated craft traditions further enhance this ritual environment. Wood carvings, stonework, and metal craft—often produced during long winters—depict deities,

agrarian symbols, and ancestral narratives, embedding intangible heritage into the physical fabric of the temple. These elements transform architectural features into carriers of cultural memory, linking devotion and daily life with artistry and tradition. Together, the temple complex and its associated practices embody what Rana describes as a “cultural landscape”—a continuous interaction between people and nature where architecture sustains ritual, ecological adaptation, and community identity. These findings underscore how vernacular spaces like Bhimkali function not only as places of worship but also as enduring expressions of cultural continuity and social cohesion Shown in Figure 9.



Figure 9 Bhimkali Temple Complex Source- Adotrip

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

The study reveals that vernacular spaces in Himachal Pradesh function as dynamic cultural landscapes where architecture and rituals are inseparable. Ritual practices are not confined to religious occasions but are embedded in daily life, transforming homes, courtyards, verandahs, and temples into stages for community expression and continuity [8]. The Kath-Khuni style, materialistic knowledge and others technique emerge as both a structural and cultural marker. Its interlocking stone-and-timber system not only ensures resilience against seismic activity and climatic extremes but also reflects symbolic meaning through decorated beams, thresholds, and carved motifs that guide spatial organization and ritual movement. Case studies highlight these findings in context. In Pragpur, the government school integrates vernacular principles through mud-stone walls, slate

roofs, and carved wooden joinery, demonstrating how educational infrastructure can simultaneously serve as a cultural hub for festivals and social gatherings. Similarly, in Sangla Valley, the Bering Nag Temple and courtyard-centric settlement patterns illustrate how sacred architecture accommodates both ritual and everyday activities, while decorative motifs and seasonal festivals such as the Phulaich Fair sustain cultural memory Shown in Figure 10.



Figure 10 Communal space used by people Source- Author

Across the region, crafts such as wood carving, weaving, stonework, and metalwork act as tangible carriers of intangible heritage, narrating ancestral stories and reinforcing community identity. Collectively, these results emphasize that vernacular architecture in Himachal Pradesh is not a passive backdrop but an active participant in sustaining rituals, ecological balance, and social cohesion Shown in Figure 11.



Figure 11 Community space Source- Author

4.2. Discussion

The Pragpur government school demonstrates how vernacular architecture can harmonize community



life, environmental adaptation, and cultural continuity. Constructed with locally sourced stone, clay, and wood, the building embodies the resilience of Kath-Khuni traditions, ensuring durability against seismic activity and harsh Himalayan climates while maintaining ecological sensitivity. Spatial features such as open courtyards and shaded verandas provide natural ventilation and simultaneously serve as cultural gathering spaces for festivals [9].

Conclusion and Considerations

This research demonstrates the wisdom present in the vernacular architecture of Himachal Pradesh, which combines cultural traditions, environmental awareness, and communal resilience. Local materials and traditional building methods address the Himalayan climate and seismic difficulties in residences, schools, temples and public areas. These buildings are living manifestations of history, moulded by generations of craftspeople and locals who have preserved and modified their traditional wisdom. This study provides architects and interior designers with important insights into designing with culture and place in mind. Sustainable environments, nurturing, and closely tied to their location are produced by embracing local resources like wood, stone, and mud as well as by designing spaces that promote ritual use and social contact. Designers can create environments that honour the rhythms of nature, promote communal well-being, and celebrate identity rather than imposing generic or globalised forms. In order to incorporate these vernacular concepts into a variety of architectural typologies and urbanising situations while including the local populations in the design process, more research is required. It will be important to look into ways to strike a balance between tradition and modern demands, particularly when it comes to maintaining materials and skills in a changing socioeconomic environment. Future projects can make a significant contribution to resilient, prosperous Himalayan communities by respecting vernacular architecture as a living system of sustainable and cultural knowledge, in addition to being a stylistic choice.

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