

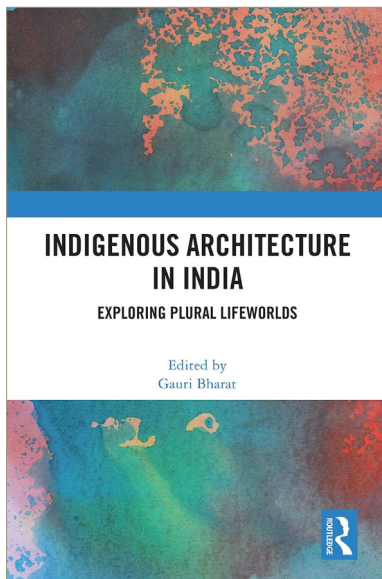
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Indigenous Architecture in India: Exploring Plural Lifeworlds

Edited by Gauri Bharat

Routledge, 2024, 214 pp.



Gauri Bharat's recent book, *Indigenous Architecture in India*, addresses a question I have been mulling over this past decade—how the seamless integration of vernacular, traditional, tribal and Ādivāsi, and local built environments in our conception of Asia's 'indigenous' architecture has disadvantaged First Nations groups. Bharat offers an in-depth analysis of these various terms and their genealogies in relation to India—where constitutional recognition of scheduled tribes has produced a distinct category of tribal architecture. She notes that “the word indigenous is not common to administrative parlance here and the term *adivasi* is used instead” (2), a distinction important to recognise as different from its usage in Oceania. This terminology introduces another more nuanced layer of identification between colonial and First Nations cultural identification based on millennia of interactions, varied degrees of acculturation and combined anticolonial resistance whereby Ādivāsis are deeply embedded within a colonial-indigenous binary that diminishes their particularity.

From the viewpoint of our disciplines, both vernacular and traditional architecture have been elevated through their championship of cultural recovery but remain inextricably linked to their discursive genesis in the British arts and crafts movement and feudal religious and political structures from the past. When culturally neutralised through scientific approaches, they are reduced to exemplifying grass roots technologies and approaches to sustainability. They are increasingly fetishised and decontextualised. Bharat points out that all these efforts at interpreting and fixing indigenous architecture reduce its dynamism as a practice that remains open to diverse influences and is shaped by individual intentions. She argues that these are not mutually exclusive categories. Her interpretation of the terms suggests their grounding in the local to provide a situated analysis of each case within its sociopolitical context, prioritising place epistemologies rather than phenomenological readings of place. Central to this approach is the recognition of the plural lifeworlds that Indigenous people inhabit and the intersections of these in their everyday lives. As Bharat argues, the architect's gaze frames the Ādivāsi landscape as located outside modernity but, in fact, these are dynamic and changing environments where community aspirations and expectations are equally important for any analysis.

Given these conceptual anchors, the collection's emergent themes advance a value system very different from those found in conventional architectural writing or pedagogy, including those of the established vernacular canon (Rapoport, Rudofsky, Oliver) which are indelibly tied to contrasting modes of property ownership.¹ The book outlines what can be achieved if the concept of property can be suspended in favour of the affective relations sustained through the creative labour of everyday life. Unlike *Design and the Vernacular*, also reviewed in this issue of *Interstices*, and the inclusion of architecture in its title, it is not concerned with responding to any conventional disciplinary norms. The overlap instead is in a new sensitivity to the differentiation between the identification of 'indigenous' as not being colonial and 'Indigenous' as First Nations or Ādivāsi identities with very particular cultural traits. These distinctions have been delineated by scholars interested in the anthropology of architecture, for example, Roxana Waterson, Paul Memmott, and Marcel Vellinga, with fresh impetus for such efforts fired by Indigenous rights discourses globally.²

The book organises its nine chapters under five themes. Ādivāsi lifeworlds are portrayed in the first two chapters through the hidden interior art practices of Bachchom Bayer Ba, created annually for the *mage parab* festival (Sanjay Nath and Rinu Kumari) and the sacred grove *jaher* that is central to the organisation of Santal Ādivāsi community life (Sumit Hembram and Amit Kumar Kisku). The theme "Understanding the Socio-Spatial in Indigenous Lifeworlds" includes a chapter by Sprya Sharma which explores the cycle of dismantling and rebuilding homes along the flood plains of the River Kosi in North Bihar. These unlikely entry points into an architectural study set the pattern for exploration of material and spatial practices, relationships to and with the environment, ephemeral and nomadic occupations of places and buildings, and modes of self-representation, many of them shaped by and shaping contemporary economic and material practices that are, in the book's argument, equally instrumental in shaping Ādivāsi lives. Bharat has no qualms in redefining the meaning of architecture as an approach and a discipline based on the plural lifeworlds of these historically and currently marginalised groups. Neither are their worlds essentialised as rural and remote. Halfway through the volume the discussion shifts to urban contexts with an interlude by veteran educator Neelkanth Chhaya.

An important aspect of the collection is in recognising the intersection of Ādivāsi lifeworlds with labour and craftsman/woman-ship, as important aspects of their modernity and integration into urban life. Jigna Desai's study of Kachchhi crafts at Nirona reveals that they are a sum of many migrant material cultures that become situated as Indigenous knowledge. Anjali Mittal writes of how glass bangle making in Firozabad has shifted to a semi-industrial process, without disrupting community agency. Chintal Sharma travels with the Rabari, nomadic pastoralists whose minimal transient modes of living produce a different model of domesticity networked across a number of places and services. Priya Joseph describes how terracotta technology was transformed by entanglements of Indigenous with colonisers. As the study moves towards craft and materiality, the distinction between Ādivāsi and indigenous becomes blurry. Sankalpa's dialogue between masons from Telangana and Goa focuses on mud and timber technologies, while Smit Vyas's chapter on Chota Oda residents' adaptation to urban influences, and the changed place of livestock, are as much about the sudden onset of contemporary norms in places that were unchanged for generations. The final chapter

on the museumisation of a semi-nomadic Ladakhi village by Manvi Seth, speaks to how these changes inspire self-conscious efforts at recognising and protecting built and material heritage.

Gauri Bharat was an associate professor at the CEPT University Ahmedabad when she published this anthology, following on from her own seminal work on the Santal communities, *In Forest, Field, and Factory: Adivasi Habitations Through Twentieth Century India* (SAGE/Yoda Press, 2019) and *The Social Life of Streets in India: Histories, Contestations, Subjectivities* (Bloomsbury, 2022) with Sadan Jha. She is currently professor and dean of the School of Architecture at Anant National University. Her focus on architecture as a critical creative practice illuminates the selections for this book. The collection also highlights important considerations when focusing on First Nations communities in Asia: that they cannot be differentiated based on race, social disadvantage, cultural marginalisation, customary laws and sustainable practices, ontological connections to land, claims of autochthony, or many of the highly essentialist binary tropes applied to and by First Nations communities in settler colonial societies. These categorisations are applicable to many minority groups who may or may not be Ādivāsis, and the levels of cultural absorption may make such identitarian claims difficult to ascertain. But this is exactly the complexity of Asia that constitutes its cultural richness and demands interpretation of the built environment as a socio-spatial practice.

NOTES

1. Amos Rapoport, *House Form and Culture* (Prentice-Hall, 1969); Bernard Rudofsky, *Architecture Without Architects* (Museum of Modern Art, 1964); Paul Oliver, *Dwellings: The Vernacular House World Wide* (Phaidon, 2007).

2. Roxana Waterson, *The Living House: An Anthropology of Architecture in South-East Asia* (Tuttle Publishing, 2014); Paul Memmott, *Gunyah Goondie + Wurley: The Aboriginal Architecture of Australia* (University of Queensland Press, 2022); Marcel Vellinga, *Atlas of Vernacular Architecture of the World* (Routledge, 2007).