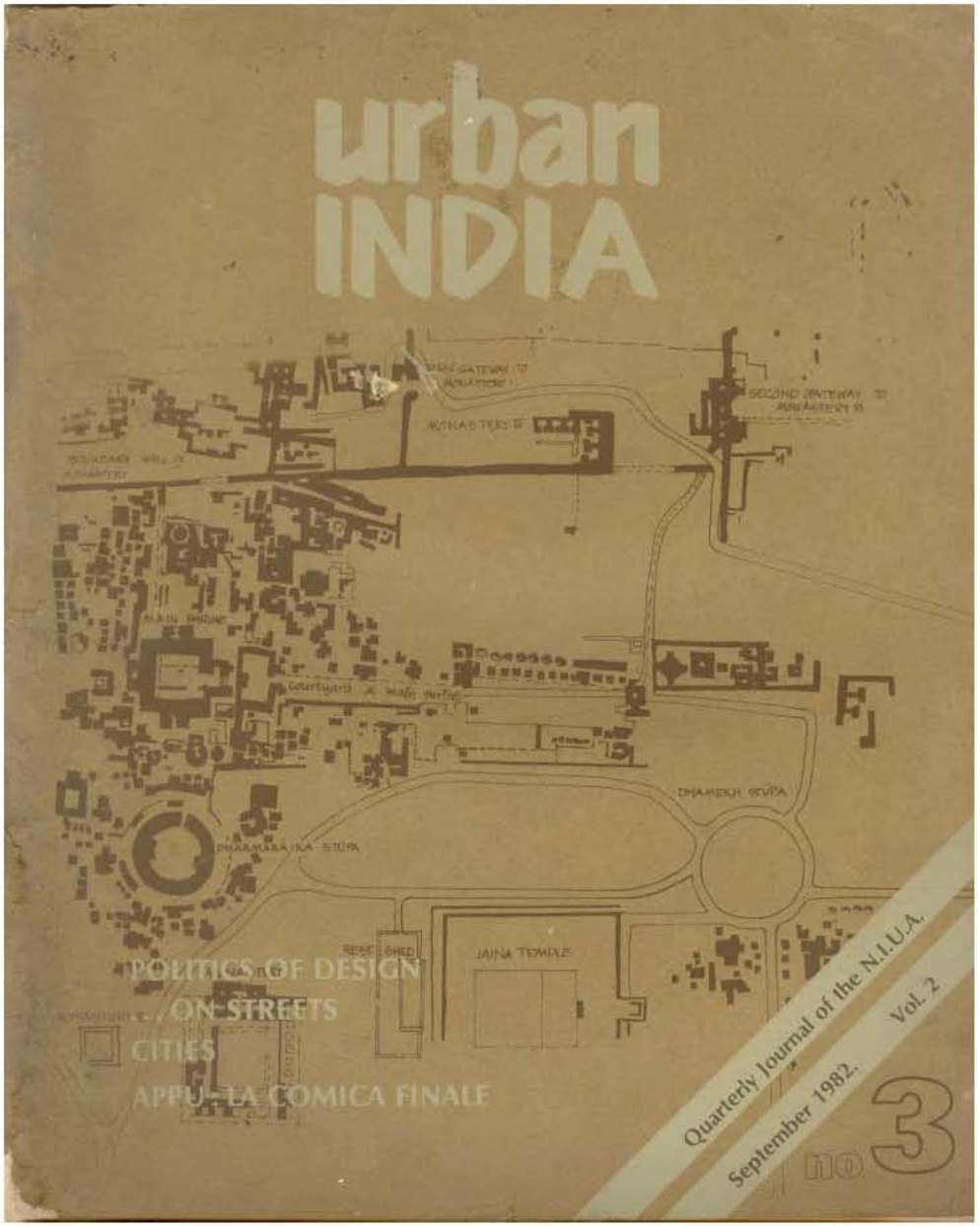

The Evolution of Indigenous Architecture

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INDIGENOUS architecture in India brings to mind a variety of striking images, be they the flat-roofed mud architecture of the gangetic plains of Uttar Pradesh, the stone work of Rajasthan, the beautifully textured mud walls of Gujarat, the timber work and tiled roofs of the west coast, the bamboo structures of the North-East, the slate roofs of Himachal and many other notable types. Such examples of indigenous architecture which are as rich in context as they are varied, have in common a quality that can be best described as belonging. They can be seen to have been shaped by the social, cultural, technological and geographical forces of their time and place and fashioned to perfection by successive generations of builders with the materials at hand and the cumulative practical experience of their forefathers. Such architecture is not foreign to its soil, nor is it a result of learned or intellectual activity; it has grown, quite literally, out of the earth, the rocks, the trees and the hills it is found in.

It is necessary to go back in time to establish a social perspective. We begin with the existence of the pre-Aryan, tribal and Dravidian cultures; the advent of the Aryans in India, their territorial diffusion and spread to all parts of the subcontinent and the eventual mix over time, to differing degrees, of Aryan culture with pre-Aryan societies, to produce a rich variety of disinctive subcultures. Let us freeze the picture here for the moment and look for the social and cultural patterns that emerge. At one end of our picture we have tribal cultures, self-contained and isolated, untouched by Aryan civilisation for a variety of reasons. At the other end are the Aryan cultures in forms that are more or less pure. Between these two extremes lie the vast number of subcultures which are predominantly Aryan, in that they have in common the unifying religious texts, the social order and the structure of some distinctive pre-Aryan social patterns and beliefs.

Though such a cultural classification is undoubtedly simplistic, the purpose in establishing this framework is only to begin to look for patterns

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and forces within these cultures that have helped to shape their architecture; to discover the precedents, rules and processes by which communities built, and to thereby understand the essential differences between what we see today as the divergent poles of indigenous, classical and modern architecture.

The architecture of tribal cultures which have remained isolated and untouched by the changing forces of civilisation until only very recently, is clearly an architecture of forms, elements and solutions, simple but ingenious, which evolved from tentative beginnings sometime in the dis-

tant past, and was perfected over generations of trial and error. Given their specific location, natural environment, available material resources and their specific cultural context, all of which have changed but little over centuries, it is inevitable that tribal societies should have perfected their shelter and settlement requirements in harmony with their physical, social and spiritual needs. What concerns us here, however, is the act of building and the involvement of such communities in this act. One can make the basic observation that the specialisation of occupations that exists in the more 'developed' cultures, does not exist in tribal societies where every man is to a necessary extent a hunter, forager, farmer, carpentar, craftsman, handyman and a builder. Every woman similarly may be a housewife, cook, weaver, tailor, farmer and decorator. And every child necessarily acquires these skills at an early age through observation, experimentation and participation. The act of building in a tribal society, therefore, is an act of self-help, the joint effort of various members of the social unit, each of whom makes his or her traditional contribution to the whole process because that is the way it has been, is and must remain. Building is as much an intrinsic part of tribal life and culture as are its arts and crafts. The house, like the weapons, the implements, the domestic articles, the clothing, the religious and the ceremonial items are all things to be made, decorated, used, given symbolic meaning and enjoyed according to the resources, skills, rules, taboos and beliefs of the culture in the ways it knows. It is this intrinsic strength of the tribal tradition, its natural evolution out of its setting and culture, and the continued involvement of its people in the act of making, that give tribal art, craft and architectural forms their timeless quality.

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Let us now move to the Aryan and post-Aryan cultures and look at the traditions and processes by which they built. In striking contrast to the tribal tradition of handed down skills, we see that the vedic or Aryan culture had formalised and verbalised its building tradition into an elaborate and ordered body of knowledge, the *Silpa-Sastras*. The *Silpa-Sastras* laid down the broad framework for all building activity, ranging from the selection of sites for settlements, settlement types and town or village planning principles, to building design rules, and the science of building construction and structure. The highly developed Aryan culture also had an ordered social structure based on occupations in its complex stratification of castes and sub-castes. Within the social framework, the *Silpa-Sastras* defined the four *varnas* or classes of of *silpis*—the builders. These four classes of *silpis* were:

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1. The *sthapati*, was versed in design and science.
2. The *Sutragrahi*, was versed in measurements, history of architecture and in drawings.
3. The *vardhaki*, was versed in measurements, the strength and quality of materials and in general literature.
4. The *takshaka*, who was versed in working on wood, stone, iron, brass, copper, gold and silver.

The spiritual qualities, the code of ethics, the knowledge and the skills that each class of *silpi* was required to posses was elaborately defined and handed down from father to son as a verbal and practical tradition of occupational heritage.

We see then that Aryan culture brought with it a coherent theory for the design and execution of

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buildings and settlements, a theory and practice that was in consonance with the totality of its social, cultural and spiritual framework, a set of rules that had grown out of its internal forces.

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It is out of this framework of the *Silpa-Sastras* that the later, post-Aryan development of the classical temple styles of Hindu architecture evolved. The classical development of Hindu temple architecture has been extensively chronicled by many architectural historians, but the parallel evolution in domestic buildings of varied and rich local traditions, which have grown out of the *Sastras*, is not immediately apparent. To recognise this we need to understand three basic facts: First, that the *Silpa-Sastras* laid down only broad rules and general principles of building design and construction. Unlike say, the Remaissance in Europe, these rules did not amount to a visual style. Second, because of this absence of a definitive stylistic dogma, the *silpis* or builders were free to adapt themselves to the variety of locations and climates in which they found themselves and the different materials that were available to work with. It is precisely because of the stylistic openness of the *Silpa-Sastras* that the descendants of the Aryan settlers in different parts of the subcontinent were able to evolve, over a period of time, architectural solutions that were apt in their specific context. Third, unlike the total control exercised over every aspect of the building design and details by the post-Rennaissance western architect, the Aryan *sthapati* conceived of the building only in terms of its broad outlines and guiding principles. The *sutragrahi* would then lay out the building and its component spaces on site, the vardhak would select the materials and establish the structural framework and the *takshaka* would finally build the building, with a total responsibility for its decorations, elements and details. This process or system of building conception and execution, undoubtedly helped to foster local and regional building craft traditions, both through formal and informal craft guilds, to create a diversity of building elements and textures that is apparent even today.

We see then that the Aryan building tradition, though it differed from the tribal tradition in that it was based on a formal body of learning and skills and relied on specialists for its conception and execution, did nevertheless achieve, within a unified framework, an appropriateness to time, place and social context, local variations of materials, form and expression and the quality of richness that is the hall-mark of any good Indian tradition.

The Moghul period, has created some of the greatest architectural monuments to be seen in India today. The Moghuls brought with them an architectural style that was perforce adapted to, assimilated and evolved by the Hindu craft tradition in the major religious and civic architecture of the period. In the established indigenous tradition of domestic architecture, however, the Moghul period has a less profound effect. The Moghuls did not bring with them any dramatically new building techniques and nor did they have an evolved tradition of domestic architecture. They were thus able to adopt and mould to their needs without much difficulty, the local building traditions they encountered.

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It was with the coming of the British to India, with their imperial style, and the advent of the industrial, scientific and technological revolution of the West, that dramatic changes began to take place in Indian society. The industrial revolution brought with it the growing dichotomy of urban

and rural societies, a dichotomy that had not existed in the monolithic Aryan society. Post-Independence developments have accelerated this process of change, taking the country firmly into the nuclear and space age. With the communications explosion, knowledge is percolating down to the remotest village. Such a dramatic rate of social and cultural change in a society that remained more or less stable and unified for centuries, cannot but take time to be assimilated and absorbed into a new social synthesis. So the picture we see today is one of social chaos and striking contrasts: the conflicts between tradition and change.

Inevitably, this catharsis is reflected in architectural development in the country. The elitist modern architecture is uprooting and destroying the established traditions. The new architecture that has been imported, indeed transplanted from a vastly different culture, is insensitive to local or regional needs, out of tune with social attitudes that still exist, and yet, it continues to march across the length and breadth of the country unchecked. We recognise the fact that modern buildings sit uncomfortably in their setting and we realise that we are uncomfortable in them. Yet we aspire towards them, consciously or unconsciously, because of the status they confer on us in this changing social scene.

The Indian traditions are today dead or dying. should we be nostalgic and romantic about this and advocate the continuance or renewal of tradition? Or should we welcome the new? Or are we perhaps moving towards a new synthesis of society and its architecture?