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## ***Indian Architectural Theory: Contemporary Uses of Vastu Vidya.* By Vibhuti Chakrabarti with a foreword by Giles Tillotson. pp. xxii, 212. Richmond, Curzon Press, 1998.**

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Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland / Volume 11 / Issue 02 / July 2001, pp 300 - 302  
DOI: 10.1017/S1356186301420268, Published online: 22 October 2001

**Link to this article:** [http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract\\_S1356186301420268](http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S1356186301420268)

### **How to cite this article:**

Crispin Branfoot (2001). Review of Vibhuti Chakrabarti 'Indian Architectural Theory: Contemporary Uses of ' Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland, 11, pp 300-302 doi:10.1017/S1356186301420268

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INDIAN ARCHITECTURAL THEORY: CONTEMPORARY USES OF *VASTU VIDYA*. By VIBHUTI CHAKRABARTI with a foreword by Giles Tillotson. pp. xxii, 212. Richmond, Curzon Press, 1998.

Vibhuti Chakrabarti is to be commended for this study of the Indic theory of architecture, *vastuvidya*, and its uses and interpretation in modern India by architects, traditional craftsmen, astrologers, *vastu* consultants and architectural conservators. *Vastuvidya* is first mentioned in the *Rig Veda* and is known from its expression in texts, such as *Manasara* and *Mayamata*, that have been the focus of study from Ram Raz's 1834 publication, *An Essay on the Architecture of the Hindoos*, to the present. With a formal training as an architect and knowledge of Sanskrit, Chakrabarti is well placed to make a critical assessment of *vastuvidya* as a body of knowledge about architecture, and its contemporary relevance.

The aims of the book are to understand *vastuvidya* as a programme of architecture and to analyse its contemporary applications and relevance. Rather than focussing on a single text as previous authors such as P. K. Acharya and Bruno Dagens have done, Chakrabarti examines six key texts dating from the sixth to the fifteenth century AD, and refers to others in order to demonstrate that they are different expressions of a single tradition of knowledge that accommodates both regional diversity and historical change. She is further convinced that *vastuvidya* is a complete system of architectural design, however fragmentary the textual record may be. The structure of the book is based around a paradigmatic *vastuvidya* text, with chapters on the training of the architects, systems of measurement, selection and preparation of the site including its consecration and laying of the plan, orientation, the choice of materials and the classification of building types.

This material is valuable for anyone wishing to understand the main elements of *vastuvidya* as an overall theory rather than its fragmentary expression in the available literature. There are useful summaries, for example, of the main principles of astrology and its architectural applications, the characteristics of particular directions, and the importance of relative proportion throughout the architectural design. Some art historians have discussed Sanskrit texts in an effort to illuminate India's rich traditions of temple architecture. Whilst giving a good sense of the complex philosophical background and its technical vocabulary, such works do not necessarily help in the interpretation of actual buildings, simply serving to mystify the subject. As the author notes, Stella Kramrisch's description in her monumental two-volume *The Hindu Temple* (1946) of the *vastupurushamandala* as a "magic diagram", together with more impressive terminology tends to overwhelm more than help an architect (or indeed art historian) wishing to learn about the Indian way of building (p. 86). Chakrabarti's study goes some way towards convincing the reader how the philosophical background can actually help in our interpretation of Indian architecture, both in general and specific examples.

The presentation of the key elements of *vastuvidya* as a design system is followed in each chapter by a discussion of the contemporary application of *vastuvidya* to secular, domestic projects. These are the most lively and stimulating sections of the book, providing an interesting critique of architectural practice in India in the past century, the tensions between tradition and modernism, and the fragmentary use of *vastuvidya* chiefly by the architectural profession, pundits or *vastu* consultants, and traditional craftsmen.

Architecture as a profession in India has western roots with the European Classical tradition at its heart and any study by Indian architects of the rich and varied history of architecture on the subcontinent over the past two thousand years has been seen through a western eye. As Chakrabarti aptly writes, whilst Independence gave architects an opportunity to start afresh, in practice ". . . the freedom of India heralded complete freedom from traditional Indian architecture" (p. 26). The embrace of Modernism in the 1950s, seen in the construction of the Punjabi state capital at Chandigarh by Le Corbusier, has led in recent decades to a more receptive attitude to India's own architectural tradition. Architects, such as B. V. Doshi and Charles Correa, have examined the

indigenous traditions of architecture and *vastuvidya* in their search for an alternative to Modernism as a means of expressing the Indian identity of their buildings. Chakrabarti is critical of their understanding of *vastuvidya*, however, stressing that it is fragmentary and amounts to little more than “curry powder”, Indianising an essentially foreign recipe for architecture (p. 195).

Similarly selective in their knowledge of *vastuvidya* are the *vastu* consultants who cater to the growing urban elite, advising them on the correct and most auspicious orientation for the rooms and buildings of their homes and factories. In the last decade they have emerged as a popular profession, with many publications on *vastuvidya* appearing, mostly in English or Hindi. While Chakrabarti is critical of the architectural profession for their inadequate grasp of *vastuvidya* and their selective use of it in their architectural designs, she reserves her most damning criticism for the *vastu* pundits. In an amusing passage, she writes:

“Incorporating the principles of *Vastu Vidya* as advocated by its popular consultants is likened to being on a moral high ground, religious and righteous. Some *Vastu* consultants project themselves as the ‘do-gooders’ of society, upholders of tradition, taking upon themselves the onus of uplifting humanity. They hold responsible ‘Western materialism’, the invasion of science and technology, economic opportunity, ‘mass media’, and Western life-styles and values, for the erosion of belief in traditional systems, yet their own life-style and way of working is not outside the influence of so called materialistic approaches and opportunism. They often lean on modern scientific proofs to reveal the scientific validity of the prescriptions, quote appreciation by ‘Western’ authors to elevate its status; while maintaining that the principles of ‘*Vastu*’ are known to only a blessed few, charge exorbitant fees that makes their advice revered as almost the words of God; and yet, interestingly enough, do not promote traditional architecture and building methods – as when it comes to architectural design their schemes seem to be the result of ill-digested modern architecture.” (p. 183)

The author clearly did not find the *vastu* consultants she met during her research very informative or helpful.

Chakrabarti conducted fieldwork among traditional craftsmen and astrologers in Rajasthan during the course of her research and this has resulted in some of the most interesting comments on *vastuvidya* and architectural practice. Comparing the Rajasthani *haveli* or courtyard house with the traditional Keralan house she notes the adaptability of *vastuvidya* in regions with different climate, topography, available building materials and cultural needs of the people (p. 10). The research with traditional craftsmen in Rajasthan, only one of whom is named, seems to have been profitable but is less in evidence than the discussion of architects and *vastu* consultants and their published work in journal and newspaper articles and architectural studies. Several interesting observations of traditional practices and understanding are relegated to footnotes. More would have been good on these traditional Rajasthani craftsmen, quoting them directly together with observations of their current practices and work. Further fieldwork with perhaps craftsmen in Kerala would also have strengthened this element of the book. There are many useful technical diagrams and tables, though a few photographs of some traditional buildings and men at work would have enlivened the text.

The book is produced to a high standard, though readers with knowledge of Sanskrit may miss the accuracy of diacritical marks for primary sources and technical terms. It is well written, though the Rajasthani proverb about expensive materials being considered a good thing is unnecessarily repeated on p. 34 and p. 150.

Vibhuti Chakrabarti’s study is complemented by a seven-page foreword by Giles Tillotson, introducing the debates around the study of *vastuvidya* and the chief contributions that the author makes to them. The book has a bold polemical purpose in seeking to demonstrate that *vastuvidya* has a

role to play not only in interpreting the architecture of the past but also that of the future, and that this should be based on a holistic understanding of *vastuvidya* as a design system and not a fragmentary selection of convenient details. Whether this has been achieved is hard to judge: that *vastuvidya* is important to our understanding of the past and indeed the present is clear, but how an art historian or an architect should incorporate that understanding into his or her approach is less so. No doubt the author's further research will address this important issue. Overall, this is a useful critical study of *vastuvidya* as a theory of architecture and its contemporary use particularly by architects, *vastu* consultants and traditional craftsmen.

CRISPIN BRANFOOT

MEMSAHIBS ABROAD. WRITINGS BY WOMEN TRAVELLERS IN NINETEENTH CENTURY INDIA. By INDIRA GHOSE, pp. xvii, 298, 11 illus. Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1998.

Travel-writing tends to reveal as much about the country concerned as about the person who is doing the writing. In *Memsahibs Abroad: Writings by Women Travellers in Nineteenth Century India*, Indira Ghose offers a chorus of female voices describing, praising and judging British India, its peoples, arts and cultures, as well as British society in India. Although only four of the 23 women whose impressions were put together for this volume, were "designated" travellers or journalists, almost all were prompted by their experience of India to write and publish their adventures at the end of their stay. In selecting excerpts from these accounts Ghose offers us a wide range of views and opinions on topics such as visits to zenanas and harems, the management of servants, social conventions of colonial society but also pointed criticism of the raj.

The diversity of outlooks presented is one of the strengths of this book. The memsahibs whose viewpoints we encounter came to India for different reasons and with many diverse expectations. Together their writings cover the period from 1806 to 1909. There were those who had come to the subcontinent out of spousal obligation, the wives of army officers, judges and civil servants; there were those who came to campaign on, or report about, issues of social reform such as female education or the right of women to divorce; and there were those who came simply to travel or as big game hunters seeking exposure to the exotic and the other. Marriage was the main reason for spending time in South Asia; only two of our writers had been born and gone through childhood in India. These divergent backgrounds and the varied positions occupied in British Indian society provided them with distinct insights into Indian life and culture and also brought them into contact with different layers of Indian society. The picture which emerges from their writings is that of India through manifold female gazes.

The eleven themes around which this anthology is organized can be broadly divided into things Indian and things British Indian. Under the headings "first impressions", "arts and culture", "religion", and "encounters with 'natives'", Ghose collates female perceptions of India and Indians. We hear the initial voices of delight on seeing the subcontinent: "Everything is so strange and wonderful on first landing on a new continent!" (p. 43) – Mary Carpenter (1807–1877); "What bits to sketch! what effects here! what colouring there!" (p. 22) – Amelia Cary Falkland (1803–1858); as the visitors sat "watching, watching, listening, listening, listening" (p. 37) like Flora Annie Steel (1847–1927), taking in the sounds and sights of India. Thomas Moore's poem *Lalla Rookh* was evoked a number of times by the women, "Oh! if there be an Elysium on earth, It is this, it is this!" (p. 24). But we can hear, too, statements of shock and revulsion as "natives" and their habits came into view: "the extreme horror which I felt when I first visited an Indian bazaar" (p. 42) – Mary Martha Sherwood (1775–1851); as well as their "abominable" or "debasement superstitions" (pp. 42,