



Book review

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SILENT SENTINELS Traditional Architecture of Coorg

"Architecture is a social art and the material theatre of human activity"

When Vikram Somaya used the above words of eminent architectural historian Spiro Kostof to begin his speech at the launch of 'Silent Sentinels: Traditional Architecture of Coorg', he epitomised the transcendent efforts of the instigator of the book, Brinda Somaya: architect, restorer, author, concerned denizen, daughter and mother; each a contributor in the understanding that their role allowed best.

Hailing from Kodagu (also known as Coorg) and having been long associated with it through familial ties, Brinda was alarmed at the manner in which a sociological and architectural landmark was pulled down in the district. While the architecture of Coorg is not conventionally magnificent, for someone who has grown up there and is well-versed in the subject, it was the realisation that its rich legacy of vernacular vocabulary and sociological pattern was crucially in need of an exhaustive documentation lest its cultural heritage disappeared altogether or before physical interventions "plasticized" it. As she highlights, "It is no longer safe to assume that the cultural sanctity and community sentiments would suffice to ward off the threats confronting such buildings".

The coffee-table book is a detailed attempt at that storyboard, threading the 'living heritage' of Coorg through the identified traditional homes and temples and the lives that hold it together. With information collated over three years, the pages thread the architectural evolution of Coorg over three hundred years with tales of people who have grown up and lived a lifetime in it. Detailing the three traditional building morphologies namely the *Aine mane* (the ancestral house of the Kodavas), the independent houses (built during the colonial period) and the Kerala-Dravidian temples, the book traces the inter-relationship of the development of the forms with the customs and practices of the largely agricultural population. Stunning images in sepia and black and white along with colour visuals tie in beautifully with the spanned eras and generations.

As a labour of love, Brinda's collaborative effort with Poonam Verma Mascarenhas, Kuppanda G. Premnath, Dyan Belliappa, Mallikarjun B. Katakol and Gita Simoes does not aver to be just a record but also an initiative in comprehending the value that heritage beholds. ■

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