

Landscapes in India: Forms and Meanings

The author suggests that landscapes can be read like languages—as arrangements of symbols that reveal cultural values. Archetypal forms form the ‘roots of words’ of this language. Focusing on the landscape of the Indian subcontinent, Hinduism and Buddhism and their transcendental view of nature, the author describes natural and spatial archetypes evolved over millennia. She explores the meanings of these forms as described in Indian mythology and literature, thus, introducing the reader to significant sacred and secular landscapes of the subcontinent.

The author divides the book into four sections where she in good scholarly tradition presents her thesis, outlines the contents and establishes the methodology adopted at the onset. She uses ‘landscape’ “in an inclusive sense — open spaces and structures ranging in scale from a grove of trees to a region, from a building to a city,” and uses ‘archetype’ “broadly to describe physical symbols — natural elements and spatial patterns. The first section introduces natural archetypes and transcendental views of nature in Hinduism and Buddhism. It describes the deification of the earth, symbolism of the cosmic tree and the cave and the concept of ‘centre’. A site’s sacred energy encourages myths and beliefs over millennia, which the author credits to certain topographic features. The book illustrates these sacred meanings and beliefs attached to nature’s flora, fauna and landscapes.

The second section of the book places natural archetypes in the context of real sites associated with Indic mythology and epics—particularly the Ramayana, Krishna’s life story, goddess (Devi) traditions and the legends of Buddha’s life. The author believes the sites possess inherent sacredness and examines their evolution, layouts and topography and notations.

Part three of the book reviews spatial archetypes that organise space. In keeping with ideal settlements discussed in the vaastu shastras, the Indian village is a divine creation in which every caste is assigned its place in the social and spatial hierarchy. The author analyzes courtyard dwellings through examples from various regions, showing the importance of the concept of the void as centre.

Part four considers contemporary relevance of the archetypes — implications for pilgrimage sites, environmental design and visions for the future. Lamenting the degradation of pilgrimage sites, the author suggests what could be done through examples of work undertaken by the Department of Landscape architecture at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign at Sarnath and Pavagadh. She believes that grounding an environmental movement in faith and belief systems has a better chance of success.

In the evolving cultural landscape of India, the author feels that the clarity of archetypal symbols is losing ground, as society modernises and alien concepts such as the grid layout make inroads. As she concludes with visions for the future, the author reiterates the importance of understanding meaning of landscapes. Through this book, the author hopes “that reading landscapes will allow a richer understanding of society and the culture that sustains them and will give a direction to those involved in designing landscapes of the future.”

reviewed by Shubhada Wavikar George

book review

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