



Research Article

Reading Stones: Architecture As Social History in Ancient India

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Abstract

For a long time, people studying ancient Indian buildings have mainly looked at the art and symbols in temples and stupas. This is important for learning about art and religion, but it has hidden the bigger story of how ordinary people lived. This paper says that buildings are not just old objects. They are real clues that can help us understand the social life of ancient India. If we stop looking only at big temples and palaces and instead look at simple homes, markets, and streets, we can learn a lot. We can see who was rich and who was poor, how people worked and traded, how different religions lived together, and what life was like for men and women. From the planned cities of the Indus Valley, to the hero stones in the Deccan, to the Brahmin villages called aghaharams in Tamil Nadu, all types of buildings show us how society was set up. But there is a problem. Most simple houses were made of mud and wood, so they did not survive. The buildings we still see today mostly belonged to kings and rich people. Still, if we use buildings along with old writings and inscriptions, we can write a better history of ancient India, one that includes everyone and shows how people really lived.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Ancient Indian history has traditionally been written using two main sources: literary works such as the Vedas, Puranas, and epics, alongside epigraphical material including royal inscriptions and copper-plate grants. Although essential, these records mostly capture the worldview of elites like priests, monarchs, and affluent traders. The experiences of peasants, artisans, labourers, and women remain largely silent, represented only through prescriptive texts that describe an idealised society rather than its actual workings. Architecture fills this gap. As art historian V. S. Pramar observed, buildings serve as “social documents.” They arise from collective and often unnamed labour, reflecting the economic constraints, labour systems, and social norms of their period. Structures like granaries, wells, fortifications, market stalls, and ordinary dwellings reveal much about power distribution, work organisation, and everyday routines. This article examines three ways architecture contributes to ancient Indian social history: by exposing social and political hierarchies, by charting economic and urban patterns, and by showing how religious and social life intersected.

1. Encoding Social Stratification: From Palace to Hut:

The most direct way architecture reflects social history is by physically manifesting hierarchy. The scale, material, and location of a building were direct indicators of its occupant's status.

A. The Political Elite and Monumental Ambition: Royal palaces, often built of perishable wood, brick, and plaster, have largely vanished. However, their impact is inferred through literary descriptions and the grand gateways (toranas) that survive. In contrast, the monumental temples built by rulers are eloquent statements of political power. The early Western Chalukyas (c. 540–757 CE) at Badami, Aihole, and Pattadakal did not simply build places of worship; they built architectural laboratories. By experimenting with and fusing northern (Nagara) and southern (Dravida) styles, their temples directly expressed a political ideology: that of a powerful Deccan dynasty bridging and claiming legitimacy over both northern and southern India. The very stones proclaimed their cosmopolitan authority.

B. The Commoner's Record: Hero Stones: If palaces are scarce, the architecture of the commoner is often non-existent in permanent materials. Yet, one remarkable class of monument provides a direct window: hero stones (viragallu). Scattered across the Deccan and South India, particularly from the 6th century CE onwards, these are memorial stones erected for individuals, often non-elite, who died defending their community, livestock, or village. A 9th-century hero stone from Begur (near modern Bengaluru) is not a grand temple but a humble slab. Its relief carvings depict a man wielding a sword against a tiger or a cattle-raiding party. These stones are architectural sources for social history in the truest sense: they reveal the martial values held by agrarian societies, the importance of cattle as wealth, and the honour

accorded to those who sacrificed themselves for the collective good.

C. Domestic Space and the Agraharam: The most intimate social history is encoded in house plans. The traditional Agraharam of Tamil Nadu, a single street of Brahmin houses flanking a temple, is a built expression of social and ritual hierarchy. The houses are arranged in a linear row, with their back walls forming a continuous compound, emphasising community over individuality. Internally, the layout is governed by purity and pollution. The front rooms, open to the street and the temple, were male and public spaces for receiving guests and conducting rituals. The inner courtyard and rear kitchens were the domain of women, sequestered and associated with food preparation, a highly pollutable activity in Brahminical orthodoxy. Thus, the very plan of a house was a map of gender relations and caste purity, a silent but powerful social charter.

2. The Economic Pulse: Urban Planning and Guild Patronage: Architecture provides crucial evidence for economic history, from large-scale urban management to the rise of mercantile capitalism.

A. The Indus Valley Civilisation: The earliest and most dramatic evidence comes from the Indus Valley Civilisation (c. 2600–1900 BCE). The cities of Mohenjodaro and Harappa were not organic, chaotic growths. They were meticulously planned on a grid system, with standardised, kiln-fired bricks of a consistent ratio (1:2:4). This level of standardisation across a vast geographical area suggests a highly organised state apparatus capable of mobilising labour and enforcing building codes. The advanced drainage system, with covered drains running beneath main streets and individual houses connecting to them, is a feat of civic engineering. It indicates a society that valued public health and possessed a strong, centralised municipal authority, a stark contrast to the contemporary textual emphasis on kingship and sacrifice in other parts of the subcontinent. The great granary at Harappa, though its function is debated, points to the centralised storage and redistribution of grain, a key mechanism of economic and political control.

B. Temples as Economic Hubs: By the early medieval period (c. 600–1300 CE), the temple had become the central economic institution in many regions. The temple town of Srirangam in Tamil Nadu grew according to a sacred mandala plan, with a series of concentric rectangular streets (prakarams) around the central shrine. However, this sacred geography was simultaneously a social and economic one. The inner streets were occupied by the temple priests and nobility, while the outer streets housed artisans, traders, and service castes. The temple's massive kitchens fed thousands daily, creating demand for grain, ghee, and vegetables. Its treasuries accumulated vast wealth, gold, jewels, and land grants, which were then loaned out or used to finance irrigation projects and trade caravans. The architecture of the temple complex, with its multiple halls (mandapams) for dance, music, and

commerce, was a built environment designed to facilitate and legitimise economic activity under the aegis of divine protection.

- C. **The Guilds of Aihole:** The commercial town of Aihole (Karnataka) offers a different perspective. Beyond its famous temples, inscriptions record the presence of the Ayyavole 500, a powerful medieval merchant guild operating across the Indian Ocean. While no guild-hall survives, the sheer number and size of the temples in Aihole, a modest settlement point, point to the immense wealth generated by this guild. The guild members' patronage of temples was not merely pious; it was a public display of their economic power and social status, literally chiselled into the architectural landscape. The temples they funded became the permanent, stone record of a non-royal, commercial elite.
3. **Religious and Social Syncretism: The Cave and the Shrine:** Architecture is the most tangible proof of how religious ideologies were negotiated and adapted in the social sphere.
- A. **Co-existence at Badami:** The cave temples of Badami (6th century CE), carved into a sandstone cliff, are a stunning example. In one compact site, Cave 1 is dedicated to Shiva, Cave 2 to Vishnu, Cave 3 also to Vishnu (the largest), and Cave 4 to the Jains. This is not a chaotic jumble but a programme of state patronage under the Chalukya king Mangalesha (c. 597–610 CE). The architecture itself—the same cliff, the same pillar styles, the same rock-cut techniques forcibly asserts a royal ideology of tolerance and equal respect (sarva-dharma-samabhava). Furthermore, the sculpture of Hari-Hara (a composite of Vishnu and Shiva) found in Cave 1 enshrines a theological syncretism, suggesting that for many patrons and worshippers, the boundaries between major sects were fluid and complementary. The architecture does not just tell us that multiple religions existed; it shows how they were spatially and socially integrated under royal patronage.
- B. **From Normative Text to Lived Practice:** A crucial methodological point is distinguishing between the prescriptive architecture of texts and the descriptive architecture of reality. The Vāstu Śāstra treatises contain chapters on caste-based housing, specifying different sizes, orientations, and materials for Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. For example, a Shudra's house might be prescribed to be lower, made of mud, and placed downwind. However, when we look at the actual archaeological and standing evidence from ancient settlement sites, this neat hierarchy is rarely so clearly manifested. The reality was messier, more pragmatic, and shaped by local geography, material availability, and economic necessity. The lived architecture of ancient India, uncovered by excavation, often contradicts or complicates the idealised rules of the texts. This very contradiction is itself valuable social history, revealing a society where theory and practice were in constant negotiation.

Challenges and Future Directions

Any attempt to use architecture for social history must confront significant challenges.

1. **The Bias of Survivorship:** Stone survives. Wood, brick, and thatch do not. Therefore, the vast majority of surviving ancient Indian architecture is religious (temples, stupas, monasteries) because these were built to last for eternity. The houses, markets, and workshops of the common people have almost entirely disappeared, creating a profoundly elite, monumental bias in our data.
2. **The Silence of the Subaltern:** Even where domestic sites survive (e.g., the Neolithic-Chalcolithic settlements of Inamgaon), interpreting them is difficult. We can see the size and layout of huts, but we cannot easily determine kinship patterns, access to resources within the household, or the lives of women and labourers without careful, and sometimes speculative, ethnoarchaeological analogy.
3. **Text vs. Context:** Over-reliance on later canonical texts to interpret earlier buildings can lead to anachronism. A temple from the 8th century Common Era (CE) does not necessarily reflect social conditions described in the 2nd-century Before Common Era (BCE) Manusmriti.

Future research must focus on vernacular architecture, the non-monumental, local building traditions. Excavations of ordinary neighbourhoods and satellite settlements, combined with the analysis of domestic artefact assemblages (pottery, tools, hearths), will yield richer social data. Furthermore, the application of digital technologies like 3D modelling and GIS (Geographic Information Systems) can analyse spatial relationships within a city, such as who lived next to whom, which streets led to the market, and where water sources were located, reconstructing the social geography of ancient urban life with unprecedented precision.

CONCLUSION

Architecture is far more than a source for art history; it is a primary, if challenging, source for social history. The walls of a Harappan drain, the carving on a Deccan hero stone, the spatial logic of a Tamil agraharam, and the syncretic plan of a Chalukyan cave temple all speak directly to the structures of power, economy, family, and belief. When read not just as objects of beauty but as documents of social practice, these built spaces allow us to hear echoes of voices rarely recorded in royal inscriptions or priestly liturgies. They reveal a world of negotiation between ruler and ruled, man and woman, orthodoxy and practice, theory and lived necessity. By consciously shifting our gaze from the towering shikhara to the modest hearth, and by critically integrating architectural with textual and archaeological evidence, we can write a social history of ancient India that is more inclusive, more democratic, and closer to the complex realities of the past.

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