

HENRI SCHILDT

The Traditional Kerala Manor: Architecture of a South Indian Catuhsala House. (Institut Francais de Pondicherry and Ecole Francaise D'Extreme Orient, Collection Indologie 117.) xiv, 473 pp. Pondicherry: All India Press, 2012. ISBN (IFP):978-81-8470-189-0. ISBN (EFE0): 978-2-85539-126-7

This book's aim is to describe a particular variety of manor house found in Kerala, known as *catuhsala* in Sanskrit and *nalukettu* in Malayalam. These palatial, four winged mansions were constructed for *Namputiri* Brahmin families, but they were also used by Kerala's Ksatriya ruling class. Schildt looks at data from three sources. First, he looks at the houses themselves, describing the criteria they had to meet for inclusion in this study, and the data he gathered on them. Second, he looks at recent anthropological research on the families who inhabit these houses and their socio-ritual use of space. Third, he looks at Sanskrit texts on building and construction, and tries to reconcile *Sastric* principles with the practical dimensions of the Kerala *catusala* house.

Schildt's field data was gathered from 32 manor houses that met his research criteria. These were size, historical importance, an undisturbed location and continuous habitation by one family. The oldest houses that he considered were probably about 500 years old. Schildt documented these houses through drawings, photographs and measured plans. The 436 black and white plates at the back of the book are the condensed results of this documentation, and form the body of his research data.

To interpret and enhance this data, he considers recent anthropological work on *Namputiri* Brahmins. This anthropological research looks at the institutional importance of the Kerala house, but not at its architecture. In his survey of anthropological research, Schildt begins by looking at the work of Louis Dumont, then he considers how the *Namputiris*, and the non-Brahmin households under study, fit into Kerala's Hindu class structure. Aspects of purity, and the house as a ritually meaningful property unit are also considered. This anthropological research is then applied to the houses under study to show variations of the standard house plan, and the relationship between these variations and caste.

Perhaps most ambitiously, Schildt looks at the theoretical side of the *catusala* house, by looking at the principles outlined in Sanskrit *sastras*. He begins by looking at the ritual, grid-style diagram used in the house plan. He then looks at the many descriptions of doors, columns, roofs, elevations, and other constituent elements of a house. He looks at a number of texts, including the *Mayamata*, the *Brhatsamhita*, the *Matsyapurana*, the *Silparatna* and the *Tantrasamuccaya*.

It is extremely ambitious for Schildt to take on the examination and application of *Sastric* principles in this study. Ever since Stella Kramrisch wrote her book 'the Hindu Temple' in 1946, researchers have tried to apply the principles laid out in Sanskrit texts on the transformation of space for human habitation to practical studies of South Asian architecture and architectural practices. Sometimes the alignment of theory and practice, as found in Sanskrit texts and actual buildings, works. This is evidenced in some of Michael Meister's work on

Hindu temples. In Schildt's book, he has embraced these textual principles and placed them alongside the practices and traditions that gave rise to the traditional Kerala Manor.

Schildt's efforts are admirable. He has identified a conservative, Brahmin led domestic building tradition, and he has relentlessly researched and documented it from a number of angles to identify the connections between theory and practice. He identifies a generous handful of characteristics that the houses he has researched hold in common, and the texts where these common characteristics are described. This study does not give a coherent final analysis of the traditional Kerala manor and its connection with Sastric texts, but it represents a herculean effort to do so. For this reason, Schildt's book is an important landmark for researchers of South Asian architecture.

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