

***Landscapes in India: Forms and Meanings.* Amita Sinha. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2006. 228 pp.¹**

Reviewed by Catherine B. Asher

Amita Sinha's book has virtually no precedent. Without solid foundations from which to work, *Landscapes in India: Forms and Meanings* lacks some of the historical precision that a reader might expect. The title is somewhat misleading for it addresses only the Hindu and Buddhist landscapes of India, and it is not until page 15 that Sinha clarifies what her text covers. She thus leaves the reader for the first 14 pages mystified at the assumption that India's built environment only consists of temples and shrines dedicated to multiple Hindu and Buddhist deities, while ignoring the built environment of the rest of subcontinent. She neglects structures of Jains, neo-Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, Parsis, and Indians of Chinese origin who follow their own religious traditions; she also neglects the extraordinary secular built environment. The thrust of Sinha's argument is that Indian society is driven by religion, and she seems to suggest that one's religious upbringing shapes perceptions of India's landscape. This is problematic, for Sinha makes no account for common cultural understandings. In addition, no attention is paid to class, education, or economic factors. Rather, while Sinha acknowledges that there are multiple landscapes in the enormous landmass of the subcontinent, the landscape she discusses in this book is presented as a timeless essentialized one where age old tradition is continuous. She admits to change in cities, but never discusses those landscapes, and while she admits early in the text that change has occurred even in villages she writes the remainder of her text as if, in fact, rural India is frozen in time.

Sinha's book has merit as well as flaws, for she introduces the reader to the rich mythological and epic lore that inform the Indic traditions of the subcontinent. She divides her volume into four sections with multiple chapters in each one. Part one is an introduction to the entire book. She draws heavily on the work of earlier scholars such as Ananda Coomaraswamy, Mircea Eliade, and Stella Kramrisch, all of whom also subscribed to the view of a timeless India. She argues that India's natural landscape of mountains, hills, rivers and caves informs both India's built environment of temple and shrine as well a pilgrimage ritual.

Part two concerns nature and specifically how nature as described in the *Ramayana*, in Buddhist stories, and in the legends of the Hindu god Krishna has served as the focus for pilgrimage sites. This section's success varies with how critically she uses her sources. Her discussion of Kishkindha, a site associated with events of the *Ramayana*, relying on the excellent work of Phillip Wagoner and J. Malville, is well argued as is her understanding of the cosmic tree in Buddhist landscapes. However, her discussion of Ayodhya, another site associated with the god Rama and the epic named for him, is flawed, for Sinha accepts without critical reflection common beliefs about this site that in fact are late 19th-century inventions. Her evaluation of Braj, the site associated with the childhood of the Hindu god Krishna, is also problematic, for

¹ Posted to *Museum Anthropology Review* April 7, 2007. See: <http://museumanthropology.net/2007/04/07/mar2007-1-13/>. © 2007 Catherine B. Asher.

Sinha seems to believe that the area called Braj was always recognized as such, failing to realize the geographical area today known as Braj was only “discovered” in the 16th century.

Part three concerns the built environment, which Sinha relates to ancient Indian texts known as *Vaastu shastras* on the ideal layout of temples, houses, and towns. While Sinha’s argument that these texts inform temple construction is probably accurate, the claim that they drive domestic dwellings or urban layout is more problematic. She cites the planned 18th-century city of Jaipur as an example; however, that city is unique, and opinion on how much the *Vaastu shastras* had a role in its design is open to scholarly debate. Other examples cited, for example, villages in south India are too random, and too few samples are provided to know if this is a sustainable argument.

The last section of the book moves away from the thrust of her earlier arguments and concerns attempts to make heritage sites historically accurate and viable as pilgrimage and tourist sites. This section appears to be rooted in her own successful work as a designer in the University of Illinois’s Department of Landscape Architecture. Members of this department including Sinha, developed plans for the Buddhist site of Sarnath and Pavagadh Hill, a site sacred to multiple Indian religious traditions. In her final chapter Sinha discusses the work of India’s most famous living architect, Charles Correa, whose buildings takes into consideration the traditions of each area where he is commissioned to build. Thus his art center for Jaipur reflects the city’s grid plan layout; his Aga Khan Award winning Vidhan Bhavan (State Assembly) in Bhopal recalls a nearby Buddhist stupa; while his low-cost housing development in New Bombay uses the layout of village houses to create affordable yet livable housing.

In spite of the flaws noted above, Sinha is to be credited for beginning to think about cultural landscapes in the Indian context. This field is rich with potential and Sinha has provided ways to begin considering these issues.

Catherine B. Asher is an Associate Professor of Art History at the University of Minnesota. She specializes in Islamic and Indian art from 1200 to the present. The second edition of her book Architecture of Mughal India was published by Cambridge University Press in 2001. Her most recent book, co-authored with Cynthia Talbot, is India before Europe (Cambridge University Press, 2006). Her current work focuses on issues of identity and patronage in the arts of India since the 12th century.