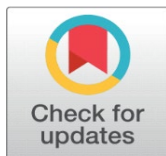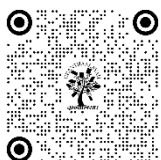# MODERNITY AND KERALA'S VASTHUVIDYA TRADITION

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ABSTRACT

Modernity and modernization emerged in Europe, transforming all aspects of life. Modernity has made a significant leap in the field of knowledge, leading to a radical transformation in all human affairs. The ideas of European modernity were introduced to India and Kerala through the colonial education project. As a result, we examined the ancient knowledge project of Vasthuvidya through the lens of scientific logic inherited from European modernity. Consequently, Vasthu Shastra has been labeled as a pseudoscience lacking scientific basis. However, we are currently experiencing a period where the limitations of the anthropocentric view promoted by modernity are being exposed. The new paradigm challenges modernity and its paradigmatic projects. The new premises have sparked widespread discussion about Kerala's Vasthuvidya tradition and associated concepts as an alternative to modern architectural styles. This article explores how modernity's worldview has perceived our Vasthuvidya and the relevance that the new environment has brought to our architectural heritage.

Keywords: Modernity, Modernization, Vasthuvidya, Relativity Theory, Enlightenment, Renaissance

1. INTRODUCTION

The term "modernity" is generally used to refer to the material and ideological environment that developed in Europe after the Enlightenment and later spread to other countries through colonial interactions. It represents a system that extends to all aspects of life, including art and literature. The Enlightenment, which emerged in 17th and 18th-century Europe and had a profound influence on Western thought, served as the foundation of modernity. When the complexities of the unique situation that arose in Europe after the Enlightenment entered a place like Kerala, it took on the guise of a Renaissance. The awakening triggered by the Renaissance movements, which were active from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century, was what instilled a sense of modern consciousness in Kerala. The notions of "new" (navīnam) and "contemporary" (samakālikam), as well as the concept of "modernism" in literature — which is referred to as "ādhunikatā" in Malayalam — are not assigned to the term "modernity" as used in this study. Instead, "modernity" is considered here to denote both a period that followed the European Enlightenment and the distinct atmosphere visible in Kerala from the second half of the 19th century, which has been described as progressive and Renaissance-like.

2. MODERNITY: HISTORY AND POLITICS

Modernity and modernization first emerged in Europe as comprehensive transformations across all areas of life. The Renaissance movements that began in the 13th century, along with the intent to question existing worldviews, mark the initial signs of Western society's shift toward a new awareness. By the 17th and 18th centuries, this shift had evolved into modern scientific rationality. This development paved the way for technological innovations and the discovery of machinery, ultimately leading to the Industrial Revolution. The expansion of printing and publishing played a significant role in reinforcing a new worldview. "Key elements that shaped modernity include the rise of science, conceptual shifts in philosophy, colonization, and the formation of nation-states" (Radhakrishnan, 2012: 92).

Modernity sparked a significant leap in the realm of knowledge. While many intellectual currents remain confined to their place of origin and historical period, modernity transcended the boundaries of time and space, transforming the world as a whole. It brought about profound changes in all aspects of human interaction. The discoveries of scientific and technological knowledge, along with the development of new ideas, led to the unification of social and economic matters during the modern era. "The fundamental beliefs of modernity include the pursuit of knowledge about science, technology, and society; the idea that all knowledge is based on an understanding of ultimate reality; a belief in progress; an optimistic view of the future; and an emphasis on rationality. These principles have been widely highlighted as the core tenets of modernity" (Radhika C. Nair, 2001: 111).

3. MODERNITY IN KERALA

The conceptual frameworks of European modernity entered India, particularly Kerala, through the backdoor of colonial education systems. Kerala's modernity was shaped by the forces of anti-caste struggles, social movements against superstitions and regressive practices, and the activities of leftist movements. This combination of social reform efforts, colonial rule, Western intellectual influences, the unification of the working class, and leftist movements laid the foundation for Kerala's unique form of modernity.

The Renaissance in Kerala can be viewed as having two distinct phases. The first phase, lasting from the final decades of the 19th century to the 1930s, emphasized a worldview rooted in humanism. This period was marked by anti-feudal and community reform movements. The second phase was characterized by the evolution of anti-imperial struggles. A close examination of these two phases of the Kerala Renaissance reveals that, despite the specific context of Kerala, the ideological underpinnings of the Renaissance were rooted in the principles of colonial modernity. It is observed that "the experiences of the Kerala Renaissance and modernization were intertwined. The social forces that paved the way for modernization can also be seen as extensions of the initiatives that drove the Renaissance" (Sunil P. Ilayidom, 2011: 29).

Kerala's progress and Renaissance were founded on the very principles of colonial modernity, which emphasized the development, acceptance, and glorification of science and technology. " The new social order, which was grounded in secularism, scientific consciousness, and humanism, was, in every sense, a colonial construct" (Yacob Thomas, 2011: 7). The scientific model that became the basis of Kerala's modernity adhered to the methodology of experimentation, observation, inference, and theory.

4. MODERNITY AND VASTU SHASTRA

The traditional knowledge system of Vastu Shastra was deconstructed and analyzed within the framework of the scientific rationality introduced by European modernity. This approach led institutions like the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishath to label Vastu Shastra as pseudo-science. "While the term "shastra" is a direct translation of the English word "Science", in the Indian context, many traditional systems of knowledge are also referred to as "Shastra" (science). Terms like *Pakshi Shastra*, *Gowli Shastra* and *Hastharekha Shastra* reflect this tendency to label different streams of knowledge as "shastra," regardless of whether they meet the criteria of modern scientific rationality. The same logic is applied to Vastu Shastra" (Ruju M., 2008: 12).

When modern science evaluates the conceptual foundations of Vastu Shastra, it often juxtaposes them with the principles of rationality and logic. This process attempts to explain the negations and prohibitions in Vastu through modern scientific reasoning. Such an approach, however, disregards the ontological nature of Vastu and views it as something fundamentally different from what it was originally intended to be.

The modern knowledge revolution emphasized empirical and objective scientific knowledge systems, elevating them to positions of central importance. Without devaluing earlier knowledge traditions and epistemological frameworks, modernity would not have been able to assert its own legitimacy.Science thus became a tool for institutional dominance. As a result, Kerala's traditional architectural heritage, rooted in Vastu Shastra, was marginalized, while the European architectural tradition associated with modernity gained ascendancy. The Eurocentric architectural model, which accompanied European modernity, celebrated external forms, often sidelining indigenous architectural concepts. Traditional construction methods and Vastu-based principles were subsequently labeled as superstitions, further marginalizing them.

5. THE CONFLICT OF CONTRADICTIONS

Key concepts promoted by modernity included universalism, scientific logic, humanism, and secularism. When applied to Vastu Shastra, these concepts highlighted certain inherent contradictions, which can be categorized as follows:

1. Universality vs. Particularity
2. Human Centric vs. Nature Centric
3. Scientific Logic vs. Vastu Logic
4. Secular vs. Religious

5.1 UNIVERSALITY vs. PARTICULARITY

During the era of modernity, the Western human being was regarded as the ideal model of humanity. It was believed that all humans worldwide should strive to follow this model. Under the guise of universality, the Western world promoted its knowledge systems and ideological frameworks among colonized societies. This idea created a belief in our society that Western ideals were universal and superior, and adopting them became a sign of progress and modernity.This led to the rejection of Kerala's own Vastuvidya (traditional architectural science) and the associated cultural beliefs. The Western narrative of modernity labeled Kerala's Vastu traditions as irrational, unscientific, and backward. The acceptance of Western standards and methods of construction was seen as an indicator of progress and modern thinking.

As a result, imported western construction style like Victorian architecture were embraced in Kerala. This change overlooked Kerala's unique local construction knowledge and the climate-appropriate design Principles of Vastuvidya. While Vastuvidya emphasized structures that were climate responsive, context specific and spiritually aligned, the Western approach imposed a single, uniform design that was completely disconnected from Kerala's natural, environmental, and cultural conditions. Western construction methods replaced Kerala's Vastuvidya, and a homogeneous style of architecture was promoted. This shift was justified by associating it with modernity and rationality, while Kerala's traditional architectural principles were dismissed as primitive or unscientific.

5.2 HUMAN vs. NATURE

Modernity introduced a human-centric world view. It propagated the idea that nature exists for the benefit of humans and that humans have the right to dominate and exploit nature. This notion led to unrestricted exploitation of natural resources and the development of construction methods that disregarded nature. As a result, the concept of separating human life from nature became a defining characteristic of the modern approach. On the other hand,Indian Vastuvidya never viewed nature as a collection of lifeless objects. Instead, Indian philosophy perceives the material universe as a reflection of a larger dynamic cosmic order. Vastuvidya is rooted in the concept of an active and harmonious relationship between humans and nature. From the Vedic era itself, efforts were made to align human progress with the principles of nature. According to Vastu principles, when a structure is built following the natural laws of the universe, it becomes fully in harmony with nature. This means that the man-made structure and the natural environment are in perfect balance. Therefore, Vastu-based construction is essentially seen as a "segment of nature itself ".It is on this foundation that the Indian Vastuvidya System is established (Mohanakshan Nair, 2007:13,14).

The *Tachu Shastra* (ancient texts on carpentry and construction) emphasize the unity between humans and nature. Every stage of house construction — from site selection to housewarming — reflects this deep respect for nature as a co-living entity. In Vastuvidya, the goal is not just physical comfort but also the spiritual elevation and mental well-being of the occupants. Before starting construction, the natural features of the site are carefully examined. This includes the

region's topography, climate, wind flow, solar exposure, water availability, and soil fertility. This process ensures that the building is fully compatible with its natural environment. The relationship between the land, the house, and the family is at the heart of Vastuvidya. This philosophy is reflected in the belief that the house is not separate from the land on which it stands but an integral part of it. While traditional Vastuvidya prioritized the unity of land, house, and family, modernity did not recognize this interrelationship. Instead, modernity viewed nature as a resource for human consumption.

The concept of harmony between humans and nature was the foundation of the traditional house design. However, modernity promoted a different ideology that positioned nature as something that exists "for humans alone." This idea disrupted the reciprocal relationship between humans and nature. The Vastu-based model of interconnectedness became irrelevant, as modernity shifted the focus to human dominance over nature.

5.3 SCIENTIFIC LOGIC vs. VASTU LOGIC
Modern science is widely regarded as being based on sensory perception (what can be perceived through the five senses) and logical reasoning. In contrast, ancient sciences, including Vastu Shastra, often rely on principles that are beyond sensory perception and sometimes do not conform to the logical frameworks of modern science. This difference in approach is one of the key reasons why Vastu Shastra is often dismissed as pseudo-science.

However, it is unfair to judge a centuries-old system of knowledge using the rigid frameworks of contemporary logic and rationality. Vastu Shastra is a comprehensive system that integrates various disciplines like *Shilpakala*, engineering, *Manapramanam*, *Jyotisha*, *Nimitta Shastra*, *Tantra*, Indian philosophy , spirituality, and ultimately, an ancient way of life rooted in Indian culture. This fusion of diverse fields led to the formation of the holistic discipline of Vastuvidya.

5.4 SECULARISM vs. RELIGIOSITY
The concept of secularism is one of the key contributions of modernity to the world. Modernity advocates for a secular social structure and seeks ways to achieve it. This idea of secularism gradually permeated into various aspects of human life, including modern approaches to house construction and architecture. With this shift, the traditional Vastu system, which was rooted in religious and faith-based foundations, began to be seen as regressive and opposed to progress. The secular worldview questioned traditional Vastu concepts that were often intertwined with caste and religious beliefs. For instance, homes built during the 19th century often reflected caste-based designations and construction methods. The transition to colonial modernity led to the devaluation of caste distinctions in architectural design. As a result, the distinct house models that were earlier linked to caste and social hierarchy were abandoned. Under the influence of European architecture, more uniform building designs were introduced, replacing the caste-specific architectural styles that had previously existed. This transition marked a shift from caste-based distinctions to class-based categorization. With wealth taking the place of caste as the key marker of social status, housing models began reflecting this new order. The spread of modernist thought, driven by European colonial ideologies, led to a reorganization of housing patterns. The influence of colonial architecture encouraged the acceptance of a uniform, standardized architectural style. As a result, traditional Vastu-based construction methods were regarded as outdated and even irrational. Traditional Vastu designs, which were aligned with nature and specific regional contexts, were seen as incompatible with the universalized logic of modernity.

Modern knowledge systems and their architectural ideologies stood in direct opposition to the Vastu principles of natural harmony and regional uniqueness. Modernity's rise was accompanied by an erosion of trust in Vastu. The principles of Vastu, which were once seen as natural, harmonious, and community-specific, were now perceived as irrational, outdated, and superstitious. The process of modernization, led by the Eurocentric ideals of progress, influenced the reform movements in Kerala and other parts of India. Reformers and progressives, viewing the world through the lens of the European model of modernity, further discredited Vastu as an outdated system.

6. FRACTURES IN MODERNITY
The core ideas of Western Enlightenment were not unshakable truths as they were often portrayed. The first major critique of these ideas was introduced by Karl Marx, who exposed the limitations of Western Enlightenment. Marx analyzed the material foundation of the emerging bourgeois class in the social context of Europe, which had given birth

to the ideals of Enlightenment and modernity. His critique was a direct challenge to the Enlightenment's portrayal of the human ideal, marking one of the first philosophical confrontations with modernity. After Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche launched a more radical attack on Western modernity. Nietzsche questioned the absolute standards of truth, morality, and individuality that modern European society had established. His critique shook the very foundations of what was considered eternal and unchanging ideals. Unlike Marx's critique, Nietzsche's arguments were more focused on the conceptual and philosophical aspects of modernity. Although both these critiques challenged the core principles of modernity, they did not question the infallibility of scientific rationality. However, in the 20th century, revolutionary discoveries in the field of science itself began to expose the instability and incompleteness of the so-called "scientific truth."

The cosmological model of the universe that had been accepted till the 19th century was subjected to intense scrutiny in the 20th century. The scientific worldview, which was based on the principles of Newtonian physics, was overturned with the advent of Einstein's Theory of Relativity. Einstein's theory challenged the previously held notions of space, time, and gravity, which had been seen as absolute and inviolable.

Until then, scientists believed that no force could break the rigid framework of natural laws, but Einstein's theory revealed the relativity of time and space. This theory challenged the idea of fixed, immutable laws, introducing concepts of uncertainty and randomness. This change in perspective forced the scientific community to confront the fact that the universe operates in a far less predictable manner than that was previously believed.

Another landmark shift came with the introduction of Quantum Mechanics, which proposed that uncertainty is a fundamental aspect of nature. According to this theory, the behavior of particles at the subatomic level is governed by probabilities, not certainties. These ideas were in stark contrast to the determinism of Newtonian physics.

Even the concepts introduced by Einstein, which had been accepted for a century, have recently been challenged. Neutrino particles — subatomic particles — were observed to be traveling at speeds faster than light, contradicting one of the core principles of Einstein's theory of relativity. This discovery had caused a major rethink of the belief that the speed of light is the absolute upper limit of velocity. It also called into question the infallibility of scientific rationality and the assumed certainty of scientific truths.

These paradigm shifts in scientific thinking hold important implications for how we perceive Vastu Shastra. Critics often argue that Vastu lacks scientific validity because it does not conform to the rules of modern rationality. However, the very foundation of scientific rationality, which these critics rely on, has been shaken by modern discoveries in physics and quantum mechanics. If science itself is confronting uncertainty and randomness, it becomes difficult to dismiss Vastu Shastra solely on the basis of its lack of scientific logic.

Just as the Newtonian model of certainty and deterministic concept has been replaced by a model of uncertainty and probabilities, the critics of Vastu Shastra must be approached with caution. The principles and traditions of Vastu may not align with classical scientific methods, but the evolution of modern science shows that even scientific certainties are not absolute.

7. REALIZATION AND REVIVAL

We are currently moving through a period where the limitations of the anthropocentric worldview promoted by modernity are becoming increasingly evident. The lifestyle introduced by Western modernity, which went against the natural order, is now being abandoned as the modern human begins a return to nature. The alternative lesson proposed by the contemporary era emphasizes the necessity of human-nature coexistence. As a response to the critique of the modernist approach, which ignored nature, there is now a growing consideration for nature-aligned construction practices.

The concept of the "school" is itself a product of modernity. Such schools, conceptualized through modernist ideologies, propagated the architectural styles of European construction traditions. A generation that embraced modern engineering technology popularized building styles that rejected indigenous traditions. These construction styles,

promoted in the name of universalism and convenience, were widely adopted. However, the inadequacies of this European construction style are now being exposed. There is a shift towards reimagining house construction concepts with an emphasis on considering the individual needs of each person. This marks a shift from the monolithic construction model proposed by modernity to an approach that is more diverse and personalized. The present era reflects a retreat from an aggressive, one-size-fits-all project. Today, most people have begun to question the concepts of knowledge proposed by Enlightenment philosophy. The cracks in the modern consciousness, which was presented as a progressive ideology by Western Enlightenment, have become apparent. It is these realizations that have fueled the return to tradition and the exploration of alternative approaches.

8. CONCLUSION

The fundamental concepts that once defined the very existence of the modern human — such as the self-evident nature of the objective world, the unwavering consciousness of the individual confronting that world, and the universality of logical reasoning that validated these ideas — have now been destabilized. The emerging scenarios of new environment pose a challenge to modernity and its model projects. The emancipatory principles put forward by modern science are now subject to re-evaluation and reconsideration.

Many projects once considered as progressive within Kerala's modernity were, actually influenced versions of colonial modernity. Reformists, leftist movements, and progressive thinkers also carry the limitations of this colonial inheritance. Today, the core tenets of modernity that were once celebrated as foundational principles are being subjected to critical reassessment. This favorable environment for re-examining modernity has created a distinct situation where Kerala's architectural tradition is being widely discussed and reconsidered.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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