
***AUTHENTIC DWELLING OF HUMAN EXISTENCE: A COMPARATIVE
APPRAISAL OF VĀSTU ŚĀSTRA AND HEIDEGGER'S PHILOSOPHY***

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Abstract:

This research paper attempts to make a comparative and critical analysis of the Vāstu Śāstra, an ancient Indian architectural system, and Martin Heidegger's phenomenological view of architecture. Both philosophical systems of thought have defined architecture as an existential and spiritual connection between the human and their environment, challenging the modern definition of architecture as mere shelter or a place to live. Because, after World War II, modern architecture shifted towards a more technological, functional building design. Unlike this view, Vāstu Śāstra and Heidegger explained it as a spiritual and existential connection between men and their environment. The origin of Vāstu Śāstra is the Vedas, and it emphasizes designing spaces that harmonize with nature and the energies of the Pañcamahābhūtas by using a specific set of geometrical and metaphysical grids known as the Vāstu-Puruṣa-Mandala. This metaphysical grid is structured in a way that connects human energy with cosmic energy. In comparison, Heidegger's philosophy is an ontological exposition that can be examined through its etymological roots, in which 'Building' is inseparable from 'Dwelling', reflecting the relationship between the cosmos and beings. For him, true dwelling refers to sparing and preserving the fourfold- the earth, sky, mortals, and the divinity.

And building becomes a gathering site for these elements, which makes the earth a meaningful place for humans by safeguarding their true essence. In this context, resemblances may be seen between Heidegger's "Building, Dwelling and Thinking" and the principles of Vāstu Śāstra, though there is a chronological gap. The ultimate goal of these two lines of thought is to bring harmony between humans and their surroundings by connecting their inner selves to the external world. This analysis will also find parallels as well as the differences between the philosophy of Vāstu and Heidegger, both of which prioritize aligning ordinary human life with universal laws to achieve an authentic existence in this world.

Keywords: Vāstu Śāstra, Heidegger, Building, Dwelling, Pañcamahābhūtas.

Introduction:

Architecture refers to the art and techniques of designing and building, which have been employed since the prehistoric era in human civilization. In the modern world, the meaning of architecture has been reduced to the mere construction of walls and floors, thereby estranging human beings from their surroundings. As a result, human beings gradually lose their connection to their environment and believe only in concretization. This paper seeks to address the idea that a building is more than a mere concretization by conducting a comparative analysis of two profound philosophies of the East and West: Vāstu Śāstra and Martin Heidegger's concept of building and dwelling. Though these two thoughts originate from distinct regions, both systems hold that architecture is not limited to construction and shelter; it goes beyond conventional thinking. It is an existential and spiritual process that connects the human being with their nature or environment.

Vāstu Śāstra is an ancient Indian architectural science based on texts and wisdom on the design, layout, and measurement of buildings. The term Vāstu Śāstra is composed of two Sanskrit words, 'Vāstu' and 'Śāstra', which mean 'nature' or 'surroundings' and 'system', respectively. (Batra N. 681) And also the word 'Vāstu'

is derived from the root ‘Vās’, which means ‘to be’ or ‘to dwell’. It is the science of architecture that seeks to create a harmonious, pleasing environment for inhabitants to live a healthy, prosperous life. For this, Vāstu Śāstra follows certain geometric rules and measures. The metaphysical grid, which Vāstu Śāstra follows to ensure the alignment of human dwelling with the environment, is known as the Vāstu-Puruṣa-Mandala.

Similar to this, Martin Heidegger (1889 – 1976) challenges the modern idea of ‘Dwelling’ by defining that building is not just a shelter for living. He argues that to live as a human in this world, we must dwell here as a mortal. This dwelling means to safeguard and preserve the fourfold, which are the unity of Sky, Earth, Mortal, and Divinities.

Heidegger was a German philosopher who was mainly associated with phenomenology and existentialism. He was deeply influenced by the renowned phenomenologist Edmund Husserl. Phenomenology is the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person standpoint. On the other hand, existentialism is a philosophical trend that emphasizes existence over essence. So, both trends are related primarily to our existential status in the concrete world. Heidegger’s seminal work ‘Building, Dwelling and Thinking’ delves into the problem of building and dwelling by tracing the importance of the realm to which everything that ‘is’ belongs. He tries to interpret the inherent relation between Being and the world in which it exists. ‘Being-in-the-world’ implies an inseparable connection between human and the environment.

Here, it is evident that both thoughts have synergy in considering that human beings need an environment to realize their ‘existential foothold’ and to connect with their surroundings. Because, in contemporary times, with the development of science and technology, human beings have faced some critical existential crises, and day by day, they are losing connection with their surroundings. They feel homeless even though they have a home to live in. In this context, both Vāstu Śāstra and Heidegger emphasize the importance of spiritual connectedness between

humans and their surroundings. This paper is an attempt to see how Vāstu Śāstra's canonical principles and Heidegger's hermeneutical approach of architecture can be a sacred means to achieve harmony between humans and the universal force.

Origin and Principles of Vāstu Śāstra:

Vedas are the base of Hinduism, which means knowledge. There are four Vedas, viz. Ṛg Veda, which comprises hymns or verses, Yajur Veda consists of some sacrificed formulas, Sāma Veda depicts melodies of the chants, and magical spells and incantations are found in Atharva Veda. These four Vedas have some supplementary texts which are known as Upa Vedas. The most important Upavedas are: Āyur Veda, Gandharva Veda, Dhanur Veda, and Sthāpatya Veda. Sthāpatya Veda is a subordinate of the Atharva Veda and deals with architecture (Patra 199-218). Here, the Vedic origin of Vāstu Śāstra can be noticed. Sthāpatya Veda is the science of establishment, which provides knowledge about architecture and art for aligning humans and the environment. And Vāstu Śāstra is the practical application of the knowledge derived from Sthāpatya Veda.

Vāstu Śāstra is an applied knowledge of designing and constructing buildings, evolved continuously over a period of time. The evidence of the following Vāstu Śāstra is found in the epics Mahābhārata and Rāmāyana, and also in the cities of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappan civilization. In literature, Mayamata and Mānasāra are the two ancient texts that emphasize the validation of the construction of buildings (Patra 199-218).

The foundation of the Vāstu Śāstra can be considered as Pañcamahābhūtas i.e., five gross elements- earth, water, fire, air, and ether. The world is made up of these five elements. Each of these elements possessed a specific type of energy. Hindu mythology believes that the human body is made up of these five elements and is related to the five senses. The sense associated with ether is hearing, air with touch, fire with sight, water with taste, and earth with smell. Therefore, human beings and the world possess an inherent connection between them, because both

human and environment are made up of these five elements. But the earth and the humans can survive and co-exist if there is harmony between them. For balancing nature and its inhabitants, these elements- earth, water, fire, air, and ether are placed on a cosmological grid, and it is known as the Vāstu-Puruṣa-Mandala (Karani 21). A mandala is like a pattern of the universe. This Mandala is based on geometry. It divides a site into a grid of squares. The number of squares is typically 64 to 81, which are known as padas. The central area in the grid is known as Brahmasthana, from which divine energy flows. It is the most sacred, open, energetic space of a site. Most of the temples in India place the idol or the place of worship in the Brahmasthana of the site. 'Vāstu', 'Puruṣa', and 'Mandala'- these are the components of this grid which reflect the nature of existence in terms of mind, body, and spirit. This concept of Vāstu-Puruṣa, on which Vāstu-Puruṣa-Mandala is based, is a mythological deity that is present in every site or building. It is believed that to protect the house from evil, Vāstu-Puruṣa is pinned face-down to the ground by the gods, head towards the northeast side and feet in the southeast side.

It is already mentioned that Vāstu Śāstra is a science of direction, and the basic principle of Vāstu is based on the eight directions. All the directions of Vāstu Śāstra are based on the flow of energy. According to the principle of Vāstu Śāstra, a site or a building, proper orientation or systematization means the proper knowledge of the eight directions (Batra N. 681). The eight directions are- North, East, West, South, North-east, South-east, North-west, and South-west. These cardinal directions are connected to the five elements. The North-east direction is associated with the water element, and it is the most auspicious direction for a building, from which divine and cosmic energy flows. The Southeast direction is suitable for the kitchen, because it is the direction of the fire element. Likewise, North-west and South-west directions are associated with earth and air elements, which are suitable for bedrooms and toilets. The navigation of these directions in Vāstu Śāstra aims to create a balance between the human and their building by co-existing with the energies of the Pañcamahābhūtas. Thus, it can be said that Vāstu Śāstra is beyond the spatial and technical arrangement of architecture, but a philosophical attempt to harmonize

human beings with the cosmic order. A similar attempt at harmonizing human life with the environment has been made by the Western philosopher Heidegger. His concept of 'dwelling' holds that humans should not just live, but meaningfully and peacefully inhabit their environment. However, it is crucial to understand his concept of 'Being' before comprehending the notion of 'dwelling'.

Philosophical Standpoint of Heidegger:

The central problem of Heidegger's metaphysical treatise is the analysis of the concept of Being. He goes beyond the conventional view of Being as 'Substance' or 'thinghood'. Heidegger says, "All serious problems in philosophy are forms of the problem of Being." (Sinari) His philosophy starts with an inquiry into the relation between 'Being'(Sein) and 'beings'. According to him, 'Being'(Sein) is the highest of all, which is inconceivable by mere externality. On the other hand, 'beings'(Seindes) is a particular entity. It denotes every particular existing object in the world, such as a tree or a book. 'A being' refers to the individual or human existence. And 'Being' manifests itself through the individual. In this context, Heidegger points out that 'Being' is both 'self-revealing' and 'intra-related'. He named the 'Being' as 'Dasein'. (Sinari 38-68) This difference between Being and beings is known as the ontological difference of Heideggerian philosophy.

To explain Being, Heidegger analyzes human existence, which he calls Dasein. Etymologically, it means 'being-there'. Dasein is not a biological or a particular person, but it is a way of life shared by everyone in a community. Dasein, according to Heidegger, is transcendent yet destined to be in the world. It does not refer to a particular person, but reflects the way in which beings exist in the world.

The essence of Heidegger's Dasein is 'to be outside itself'. Dasein is present in time and space; for that, the qualities of temporality and spatiality can be attributed to it. If it is not ontologically temporal and spatial, it would never have been in the empirical world. The world, comprising a mass of heterogeneous objects, has no self-evident meaning. Besides, such a world is indifferent to the very act of

‘comprehension’. For how can we think of a world of different objects, gathered in a unified whole, only in the act of understanding, unless the characteristic of togetherness were already innate in Dasein’s encounter with things themselves? Dasein’s exteriority, spread in and around itself with the effect of forming an environment in several different forms, must be understood as the world. Thus, the phenomenon of the physical world is a sort of realization of Dasein’s being outside itself and as such accounts for man’s inborn capacity of perceiving or unifying (Sinari 38-68). The most important feature of Dasein is its capacity to question all existence. And this power separates Dasein from other existing beings, such as a table or a chair. Also, this process of questioning prevents Dasein from being complete or stagnant.

Again, Heidegger points out that the meaning of Being cannot be determined independently from the meaning of Dasein. Being presents itself through Dasein. The essence of human existence can be understood as a phenomenon in time and space. It implies that Dasein manifests itself in time and space. Here, he uses the word ‘manifest’ in a phenomenological sense. The phenomenological Dasein of Heidegger is Husserlian in character, i.e., ‘Being of Existence’. For Husserl, the most important aspect of human existence is the ‘worldliness’. ‘Being-in-the-world’ is the first and foremost element of Dasein. It is the a priori mode of Dasein. But nothing can force Dasein to be in the world. It is the ontological status that necessitates Dasein's being-in-the-world (Sinari 38-68). Dasein’s existence in this world is not a matter of choice or free will, but it exists within this world ‘as it is’.

Here, a fundamental question arises about the nature of the ‘World’. Heidegger’s view is that the world refers to the ontic sphere of beings, comprising all that exists in it. Dasein can't remain isolated, as hinted at. In this context, he shows the interconnectedness of Dasein with the world and the things that reside in it. Every object in the world possesses the quality of ‘worldliness’ in it. It implies that human existence, or Dasein, can be understood through its relation to all surrounding things in the world. And here, Heidegger establishes the relation among the concepts of

man, environment, and the building in which it dwells, based on his ontological view of Dasein. (Sinari 38-68)

Building and Dwelling according to Heidegger:

Heidegger is of the view that the nature of building cannot be understood merely in terms of architecture or the construction of buildings. The nature of building is always connected to the dwelling, or to the raising of locations by joining their spaces. The theme of Heidegger's lecture on "building dwelling and thinking" delivered on 5th August 1951 is 'man and space'. In his lecture, he says that "building is an essential activity of man. By joining the special figure, man builds. Building is possible if we are capable of dwelling." (Heidegger M.).

He shows the connectivity between building and dwelling. Building, according to Heidegger, is not only the set of architectural ideas or construction rules. He asks:

- What is to dwell?
- How does building belong to dwelling?

Heidegger in his essay stated that "Only by the means of building, we attain dwelling. Dwelling is the goal of building. But not every building is a dwelling. Bridges, hangers, and stadiums are buildings but not dwellings. We inhabit them and yet do not dwell in them. But according to Vāstu Śāstra, dwelling implies a harmonious balance between men, nature, and building. The truck driver is at home on the highway, but does not have a shelter there; the worker is at home in the spinning mill, but does not have a dwelling place there either; the chief engineer is at home in the power station, but does not dwell there either. To dwell in them, we have to take shelter in them. In today's society, we find well-designed, attractive houses around us, but do they guarantee that dwellings occur in them? Thus, we can say that building and dwelling are related to each other as means and ends." (Heidegger M. 1).

Heidegger uses the word 'Bauen' for 'building'. 'Bauen' may be considered as the Old English and High German word for building, which means 'to dwell'. It means to stay in place or to reside. When we speak of dwelling, we usually think of an activity that man performs along with many other activities (Patra 209). "We work here and dwell there. We cannot merely dwell there. This word 'Bauen', however, also means at the same time to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for, specifically to till the soil, to cultivate the vine." (Heidegger M. 2) But if we have a close look at the meaning of the word 'Bauen', we shall have three basic meanings of it. These are:

1. Building means dwelling.
2. Through dwelling, mortals exist on the earth.
3. Building, as dwelling, unfolds in two ways: the building that develops and the building that raises structures.

If we analyze these three meanings, the first, then we shall notice that to build means, fundamentally, to dwell. Heidegger tries to re-interpret his view on the existence of the world in his essay "Building Dwelling and Thinking". Especially by redefining the roots of the terms 'to build' and 'to dwell', he has discovered the original meaning and true nature of these terms, and their role in our 'Being-in-the-world'. Dwelling, according to him, is not just an activity of living, but it is the essential feature of human existence. Heidegger states that "We do not dwell because we have built, but we build and have built because we dwell, that is, because we are the dwellers." (Patra 210) That means we are already dwellers, so we build. The building is a means to achieve the goal of dwelling. It is not just a concrete shelter, but involves a meaningful and poetic way of living. Sparing and preserving are the essential characteristics of dwelling. Heidegger uses the Gothic term 'Wunian', which means 'to be at peace', to understand dwelling. And again, he uses the 'Friede' word for 'Peace', which is related to the word 'free' (das frye). The word 'fry' means protecting and safeguarding from any danger. (Wrathall) So, dwelling means to

remain in preserving peace. Sparing is a positive way of living in harmony with nature. It is not merely the absence of harm, but it is a positive act, and it is possible when we allow every being to exist according to their nature. Dwelling means the meaningful existence of mortals on this earth. The mortals mean the humans, because they live and die on this earth. It signifies that admitting the existence of humans entails the existence of earth, sky, and divinity where they are born and die. Dwelling occurs when we preserve the unity of these four elements- Earth, Sky, Mortals, and the Divinity. Heidegger explains this process of preserving and gathering by the example of a bridge. He states that a bridge is not just a mere infrastructure; it is a medium where the fourfold gathers. Because a bridge not only connects the two banks, but it also brings the stream, the bank, and the surrounding land or earth, sky into a neighborhood. Also, it grants a way to mortals so that they can travel from shore to shore. Therefore, a bridge can be called a room or a location for gathering of fourfold. And like this, the building is a means for dwelling, because it creates a space for the fourfold, where it can spare and preserve. (Wrathall)

Comparative Appraisal:

It can be said that Heidegger and Vāstu Śāstra emphasize the connection of architecture through conceptualization, which provides clear insight into the world we live and build in. Their thought goes beyond the process of construction; it also involves shaping and transforming the world into a peaceful and blissful space. Their concept is much wider than that of architecture. Heidegger and Vāstu Śāstra believe that the building serves a purpose and provides solutions for living. It is not a concrete solution, but illustrates how our personal living can be carried out with the vision of expressing life measures and lifestyles. Living and building are inextricably connected with humans. Humans live to lead a life. For this, the measure of a building should be the human and the environment in which they live, and these should be suitable for them.

Heidegger argues that dwelling involves the gathering of the four-fold element of earth, sky, people, and a sense of spiritual reverence, or ‘the gods’, as he

signifies higher realities. Here, a point of similarity found between Vāstu Śāstra and Heidegger is that both interpret the relationship between environment, place, and building by referring to ‘Being-in-the-world’ and a higher reality. We have seen that the Vāstu Śāstra describes five-fold elements known as earth, water, air, sun, and space for building a house comfortable for our living. Likewise, Heidegger also holds that building is a gathering site for the unity of fourfold- earth, sky, mortals, and divinity. It is the cornerstone of their philosophy that the dwelling environment should always be suitable for human beings to live comfortably and beautifully (Patra 211,212).

Vāstu Śāstra, as well as Heidegger, points out that architecture connects our inner being with the outer world. It creates a harmony between them. Both the systems pointed out that human can realize their authentic existence in their environment if they feel connected to their surroundings, specifically home. And this connectivity is not external; it is internal. This is the spiritual aspect inherent in both systems.

According to Heidegger, Architecture reveals humanity not in time but made of time, not in space but radically embodied and existing in a thick, vivid present, between the earth and the sky, as a unique place in the universe, always subject to forces larger than ourselves that in fact make us human, calls us to take measure and yet always lays beyond the reach of calculation. To accomplish this aim, architecture must understand itself differently (Patra 212). Buildings protect us from the elements and provide space and privacy for our activities. We feel safe in the house we built. We create some impression in our senses and arrange it in our mind. A room without furniture and pictures, or one that expresses emptiness, cannot be called a room. The artificialness of the room is demonstrated by the materials around it. It signifies the aesthetic nature of the architecture. Humans not only live, but they also experience it. This is the aesthetic aspect of Heidegger’s philosophy. And it resonates with Vāstu Śāstra’s concept of orientation. Again, Heidegger’s poetic explanation shows the beautiful relationship between ‘building’ and ‘dwelling’. Not every building is

capable of dwelling, and humans should dwell poetically. Thus, both Vāstu Śāstra and Heidegger explain the 'aesthetic' of building and the poetic relation between building and dwelling.

Relevance of Vāstu Śāstra and Heidegger's philosophy in the modern world

It has become a matter of concern that people are gradually becoming more civilized and progressive, but it seems they are losing the connectivity with their surroundings, i.e., the environment. In this context, Vāstu Śāstra becomes more relevant and prominent because it provides the way of inner connectivity of human existence with nature. At present, due to the excessive pollution of air, water, and land, everyone is concerned about their environment. As Vāstu Śāstra explains the direction, location, and disposition of the construction, it is very necessary to have a balanced environment in connection with the growing artificial constructions. Vāstu Śāstra is not like a conventional magical system; rather, it is a physical, psychological, and spiritual order for the built environment. Its main purpose is to avoid negative energy and to add positive forces in building for a blissful and harmonious life. Also, it is best for orientation and can make the best use of the area according to the parameters of the environment.

Within this frame, it can be pointed out that Heidegger was ultimately concerned with the inseparable relationship between man and their environment. This relationship of man and their environment inheres in its dwelling. To be human or Dasein (being-there) signifies its essential embeddedness or presence in the world. This thought of Heidegger echoes the importance of understanding human consciousness and the ethical responsibilities towards the environment. But a question can be raised about how Heidegger's idea of fourfold, sparing, and preserving can solve the ecological problems of the modern world. As we have seen, ecological problems are intensifying in this modern world due to the depletion of natural resources, climate change, pollution, loss of biodiversity, etc. It has created serious concerns for biodiversity as well as human health. Some major steps have been taken by the governments of different countries to tackle this environmental

crisis. In that respect, Heidegger's idea of dwelling can be a solution for these ecological problems. Since his idea of human dwelling asserts that sparing and preserving is the essential character of human existence. It denotes an idea of safeguarding the earth. But it is not a mere conservation of nature; it involves deep meaning. It means that to set the earth free from our control. Also, respect the independent existence of nature, rather than exploiting and mastering it, which provides a framework for environmental ethics. A perfect example of this is the 'Chipko Movement' of 1973 in Uttarakhand. It is a well-known environmental movement in India for the protection of the Himalayan forest from destruction. Excessive exploitation of forest resources has increased natural disasters like floods and landslides. Therefore, the locals from the Chamoli district of Uttarakhand started this movement of 'Chipko', literally meaning 'to hug' the trees that were threatened by axes. This movement reflects the close internal connection of man with their environment. It shows that humans should act as stewards of the environment. Likewise, Vāstu Śāstra aims to establish an equilibrium of the natural elements with human health. As the human body is made up of these elements, any destruction in this environment will break the balance in man, both spiritually and physically.

Conclusion

Thus, we see that although the language and approach of Heidegger and Vāstu Śāstra differ, their concepts are closely connected. Vāstu Śāstra is as ancient as the Veda, but it also has an impact in the present time. There are some convergences between both Heidegger's phenomenological and ontological interpretation of 'Building, dwelling and thinking' and Vāstu Śāstra. The science behind Vāstu Śāstra itself shows the richness of the Ancient Indian Knowledge System, which reasonably expresses the harmony of every natural element that belongs to a particular ecology. Every element of nature maintains a balance of pressure among them through constant mutual action and reaction. So, to create an artificial structure amidst this balance, certain measures needed to be taken, which Vāstu Śāstra emphasizes scientifically. Here, the natural forces and the mundane world are given priority.

Heidegger, in his philosophical standpoint and the essay referred to, focused on the priority of the “world of being” without which the “idea of Being” cannot be realized. As an existentialist philosopher, he had given more importance to this existential mundane world, and through realizing its importance, he was advocating his idea of Dasein. With his ontological discussion from an existential outlook, he emphasizes the importance of building, dwelling, and thinking, which can be considered as a parallel line of thinking with Vāstu Śāstra. The goal of both systems is to solve the problem of ‘homelessness’ and the spiritual disconnection of human beings with their building, as well as the environment. Modern man does not know how to dwell because they see building as a mere shelter. The reason behind this is the lack of internal and spiritual rootedness of humans, which is a major concern in modern-day society. Thus, it can be said that Vāstu Śāstra’s spiritual and geometrical principles and Heidegger’s existential and ontological expression of dwelling can be used as a remedy for existential crisis for the human being in this world, where they will finally feel at home.

Notes:

- 1) *Dasein*: A German word which means ‘existence’. It comprises of two words: *Da* and *Sein*. *Da* means ‘there’ and *Sein* means ‘being’. It is the fundamental concept in the existentialism of Husserl and Heidegger.
- 2) *Seiendes*: A German word which can be used in two aspects. *Sein* means ‘Being’ and it is the ultimate reality and *Seiendes* means ‘a being’ that signifies human existence.

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