

Structural Temples: Thanjavur



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Structural Temples: Thanjavur

Table of Contents

- Chapter 2: Structural Temples
 - 2.1: Thanjavur
 - 2.1.1: The Brihadishvara temple: a royal temple-complex
 - 2.1.2: The Cholas as patrons of great temple art
 - 2.2: The Brihadishvara Temple
 - 2.2.1: The Brihadishvara temple – an introduction
 - 2.2.2: Temple Architectural Plan and layout
 - 2.2.3: Temple ornamentation – sculpture and iconography
 - 2.2.4: Temple staff and functionaries
 - Summary
 - Exercises
 - Glossary
 - References

Structural Temples : Thanjavur

2.1.1 The Brihadishvara temple: a royal temple-complex

In the previous lesson, we learnt about the development of rock-cut architecture that eventually gave way to the first example of free-standing temples at Mahabalipuram. Just a few centuries later, one of the finest examples of free-standing temples in the Indian subcontinent, the Brihadishvara Temple was built at Thanjavur (the ancient name of Tanjore), in Tamil Nadu. This temple is significant not only for its architecture, but also as an economic institution and we will study both its aspects.

Although Thanjavur was a small settlement in pre-Chola times, the Chola rulers transformed it into a major royal city. The nucleus of this flourishing centre was the temple dedicated to Brihadishvara. The residences of the royal elite and religious functionaries were situated close to the temple. The temple also spurred the development of urbanisation in the region as it was a major employer. Hundreds of crafts-specialists were required during its construction. Several objects were needed for the daily worship performed at the temple. Also, a class of specialists existed for the performance of various kinds of services that were required for the daily rituals and activities performed at the temple.

2.1.2 The Cholas as patrons of great temple-art

The Cholas, as their political history shows, were a power to reckon with in early medieval South India. The dynasty, founded by Vijayalaya was located in the Thanjavur region. This line of kings ruled in South India for 430 years – from 850 CE to 1280 CE. The power of the Cholas reached new heights during Rajaraja's reign (985-1014 CE) the chief patron of the Brihadishvara Temple. He was an able commander and enlarged the Chola empire to include

Structural Temples: Thanjavur

parts of Sri Lanka and Maldives. His son Rajendra I proved to be similar to his father when it came to military exploits and together their time was the most glorious for the Chola empire.

As we discussed in the introduction to the previous lesson, the early medieval period saw political patronage to architecture and art on an unprecedented scale. The Cholas in particular are remembered not only as great conquerors, but also as the builders of the largest number of temples in south India. The period between 985 and 1070 CE is the most prosperous period as regards temple building. The ruler and patron made a strong statement by commissioning a project of such monumental proportions and the political symbolism is mirrored in the sculptural ornamentation and painting at the temple.

The temple was visited by many other kings and was given several endowments even after Rajaraja's time. The kings of following dynasties enlarged the temple complex by building subsidiary shrines. The inscriptions tell us that several endowments of land-grants and gifts of jewels to the deities were made at later dates by royal personages who sought to be connected with this special temple.

2.2 The Brihadishvara Temple

2.2.1 The Brihadishvara Temple – an Introduction

The Brihadishvara temple at Thanjavur is the most striking example of architecture under the Chola rulers. The most obvious feature of the temple is its grandiose scale. Even though temple building activity was prevalent during the rule of Chalukyas and the Pallavas, never before had a project on such a massive scale been envisaged and executed. The temple-complex is five times larger than any monument of the preceding two centuries. It covers a rectangular area measuring approximately 240.79 m east to west and 121.92 m north to south – and this makes it one of the most gigantic building projects in the world of the pre-modern era. The building is a testament to the glory of the monarch who patronized it and the deity, Shiva that is enshrined in this mammoth temple.

Undoubtedly, this building project would have required a large amount of resources and planning. This would include a master architect with a master plan, tons of building material, hundreds of masons and craftspersons. The successful completion of this monumental building reflects the prosperity of the times and the richness of the Chola coffers as well as advances in building technology. What is quite fascinating is that this gigantic project was completed by Rajaraja Chola's men in the seven years between 1003 to 1010 CE. We know this from an inscription dated in the twenty-fifth year of Rajaraja's reign that records the placing of a gold-covered copper finial on the vimana. As the finial is the top-most part of the temple, it can be safely assumed that the temple building was complete by 1010 CE.

The Brihadishvara temple is made of large granite slabs that were not available in the area. A very large amount of stone would have been required to build this colossal monument. The plinth of the central shrine measures about 46 square metres in area. There is no use of

Structural Temples: Thanjavur

cementing mortar in the construction of this temple and the large granite blocks were rested on each other. Sockets and dowels and iron beams were used in some portions. The use of mortar was yet unknown to Indian builders, and it was introduced only by the time of the Islamic influence.

Apart from the costs of building this project, its maintenance required large resources that came from revenue from villages, even from Sri Lanka.

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/fabindia/2365321352/> temple picture



Structural Temples: Thanjavur

2.2.2 Temple architectural plan and layout

A deep moat goes around the outer higher walls of the entire Brihadishvara temple-complex. A brick palace would have once existed alongside the temple, but it is now non-existent. The temple is built in pure **Dravida** style and is oriented to the east. Two gopuras lead into the temple premises. The five tiered gateway is named as Keralantakan-tiru-vasal ('tiru' means sacred and 'vassal' means gateway) (Dehejia 1990, 52-53). Although temple gateways are not a new feature, the gopuras are slightly different in form and are more elaborate than the Pallava examples. According to an inscription, their construction was completed by 1014 CE. Two large four-armed and fanged **dvarapalas** flank either side of the inner **gopura** and guard the temple premises.

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/fabindia/2365315220/in/photostream/> dvarapala **PI Check Copyright**

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/fabindia/2365305072/in/photostream/> gopuram **PI check copyright**

Video

Click on the link to a video-clip on the Thanjavur Brihadishvara Temple.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cruwhRpBcwo>

Source: www.youtube.com

On passing through the gateways, one enters the expansive rectangular enclosure of the temple. When divided into two exact squares, the **garbha griha** lies in the middle of one square and the nandi gopuram in the centre of the other square. The **Nandi** gopuram is encountered by the visitor on entering the temple. The colossal kneeling Nandi, measuring about six metres in length is sheltered under the canopy of a mandapa that was built in the Nayaka period in the seventeenth century. Nandis or kneeling bulls are an essential feature of all temples dedicated to Shiva, as Nandi is Shiva's vehicle. This Nandi sculpture is monolithic, that is, carved out of a single, huge piece of rock.

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/yves-benoit/3278898676/> nandi under mandapam **PI check copyright**

The temple itself consists of a number of areas that precede the main shrine. A pillared porch, two large mandapas – the **mukhamandapa** and the **ardhamandapa**, an **antarala**

Structural Temples: Thanjavur

finally lead to the main shrine, all on an axis, that is on a straight line. Such an arrangement of the different parts of a temple are characteristic of Dravidian style temples.

The two mandapas lead to the sanctum sanctorum, the most sacred part of the temple. The temple is dedicated to Shiva as the linga is installed in the sanctum sanctorum or the **garbha griha**. The temple was named as Rajarajesvaramudayar after Rajaraja I. This was a common practice in early medieval India – where the central deity was named after an individual, usually the patron of the temple.

The base of the tower has upper and lower storeys. The outer walls are decorated with large sculptures in niches. All around the massive plinth, inscriptions are engraved in an elegant script. The sanctum sanctorum is topped by the star attraction of this edifice – the tall shikhara or tower that must have been visible even from kilometres away in ancient times. The pyramidal roof has innumerable miniature edifices. The shikhara is the tallest ever built, almost 61m high, with 13 receding tiers. It is indeed an engineering marvel of the pre-modern world and has survived ravages of time.

Interesting detail

Inscription – Reading art and inscriptions

The inscription

A long and detailed inscription comprising of 107 verses was engraved on the temple plinth on the orders of the builder of this temple – Rajaraja I. It records the various gifts made by him and others between his twenty-fifth and twenty-ninth regnal years to the temple.

http://www.google.co.in/imgres?imgurl=http://farm4.static.flickr.com/3366/3492084914_f2f75ce77f.jpg&imgrefurl=http://flickr.com/photos/29877454%40N04/3492084914&usq=boZRV-e2ZQVL-9Yjt1le0KVP0SI=&h=333&w=500&sz=210&hl=en&start=6&zoom=0&um=1&itbs=1&tbnid=uMMdksM9bx4IYM:&tbnh=87&tbnw=130&prev=/images%3Fq%3DBrihadishwara%2Btemple%2Binscription%26um%3D1%26hl%3Den%26sa%3DN%26tbs%3Disch:1 IMAGE of inscription **PI Check copyright**

Source: Original

Video

<http://www.youtube.com/watch#!v=cruwhRpBcwo&feature=fvw>

Structural Temples: Thanjavur

Source: www.youtube.com

The capping stone of the temple is huge, and weighs a whopping 81 tonnes. Architects have several theories regarding how the stone would have been towed up to a height of 61m. Placement of the enormous monolithic stone would have required the construction of a ramp and elaborate scaffolding. The stone may have been dragged up the slope by elephants and men. Another view is that the stone is in fact not monolithic, that is, it is not made of a single slab of granite, weighing 80 tonnes, but comprises of several constituent parts instead, over which a substantial brick and stucco layer has been added.

A platform measuring 24 feet square caps the tower and the sanctum sanctorum is precisely the same size, but located some 183 feet below it. On top of this flat platform, was placed the enormous copper stupa, 12.5 feet high that was originally plated in gold and upon this was placed the copper kudam by the emperor. From the base to the tip of the copper kudam, the temple measures 216 feet.

There are other shrines in the Brihadishvara temple-complex. A shrine dedicated to a Bhakti saint is coeval with the main temple itself. Adjacent to the Nandi-mandapa are temples of a later date – the temples of Devi (built by a Pandya king of the thirteenth century) and of Subrahmanya (built during the Nayaka period of the seventeenth century.) The shrine of Ganesha and the mandapa of Nataraj were built by the Marathas in the eighteenth century.

2.2.3 Temple Ornamentation – sculpture and iconography

The sculptural embellishment

The walls of the lower tiers of the vimana have several niches that contain large carved figures. The sculptural embellishment is quite elaborate, with a deeply carved frieze or row of *yalis* that is decorative and also serves to separate the vimana from the base of the temple. The sculptures show Shiva in several of his aspects.

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/djmomaya/2906965198/> plinth and frieze of yalis **PI Check copyright**

The lower tier mainly contains representations of Shiva and also several dancing icons. The upper tier presents many images of Siva as **Tripurantaka**, the form in which he destroys the forts of three demons with a single arrow. The representation of Shiva as Tripurantaka is dominant in the sculptures that embellish the Brihadishvara temple. R. Champakalakshmi (See Champakalakshmi 1996) suggests that the repetition of this theme needs to be seen in the overall iconographic programme of the Brihadishvara temple. This image that shows Shiva's victory over evil demons may have been favoured by Rajaraja as a symbol of his own military might. The same scene may as well emphasize the superiority of the Shaiva cult over others that were practiced in the early medieval period.

Structural Temples: Thanjavur

Another feature of the temple is the 18 large dvarapalas or door-guardians that guard various entrances to different parts of the temple.

There are shrines for eight dikapalas that is a guardian of each one of the directions or quarters. Images of dikapalas were believed to protect spaces from demons.

The linga housed inside the garbha griha of the Brihadishvara temple complements the overall scale and size of the temple. Its cylindrical part rises to 3 metres and the girth measures 7 metres. This icon of Shiva is monolithic – that is, it is carved from a single piece of stone. It rises to a height of two-storeys, corresponding to the storeys of the garbha griha.

Interesting fact

Buddha images in a Hindu temple?

As we discussed above, the early medieval period was one of interaction, syncretism or even hostility between different cults and sects. A co-existence and overlap between Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism is seen in the texts that were written in this time. At the Brihadishvara Temple at Thanjavur, we can see a large seated Buddha image to the right of the main gateway. Also, some shallow relief carvings show the Buddha seated under a Bodhi tree.

Source: Singh (2009:604)

Murals at the Brihadishvara temple

In 1931, large paintings covering the walls of the dark circumambulatory passage of the Brihadishvara temple were discovered. In some places, a layer of paint peeled off to reveal the Chola paintings that were painted over in the seventeenth century during the Nayaka period. The paintings depict scenes showing religious themes but representations also include elaborate scenes of palace and courtly life of the Chola ruler Rajaraja, who commissioned them. The paintings are very large and well-executed, with vivid characters.

A huge panel on the western wall shows Shiva as Dakshina-murti, seated on a tiger-skin. Beyond this, one can see the exquisite depiction of Shiva as Nataraja, dancing in the golden hall of Chidambaram. A portrait of Rajaraja I, shown as a prince along with his three queens and a retinue of kanchukis and other attendants is another beautifully painted scene.

The depiction of Shiva as Tripurantaka is regarded as the finest painting among the group of Chola paintings at the Brihadishvara.

Another finely painted panel shows Rajaraja I and Karuvur Devar, his preceptor. Here, Rajaraja is attentively listening to his guru.

Structural Temples: Thanjavur

The details of the finely painted figures in the scenes is noteworthy. The figures are adorned with exquisite jewellery, the women wear jasmine-bedecked hairstyles and diaphanous costumes. The faces show a variety of emotions – the anger of Shiva, the compassion of Rajaraja's guru, or the animated dance of Nataraja, all bring alive the artist's compositions.

The walls are painted in true fresco style – that is, two thin layers of lime plaster were laid on rough stone surface and painted over while the plaster was still wet. This technique makes the colours insoluble in water. As the lime plaster could not have remained wet for long, the artists would have had to work quickly.

The colours used are subtle and earthy and they were derived from natural materials. Blue was extracted from imported lapis lazuli, white from lime, black from lamp black, yellow and red from yellow and red ochre, green from Terre verte and the colours were mixed to produce other shades.

Temple deities – Chola Bronzes

During Chola times, Thanjavur was a centre of bronze image production, with several workshops and artisans. Inscriptional records speak of 66 bronzes that were gifted to the Thanjavur temple by Rajaraja and his queens and officials, but today only two can be traced. These include a Shiva Nataraja in worship at the temple and the Tripurantaka Shiva now displayed at the Thanjavur art gallery.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Bronze_siva.png – bronze icon copyright **Pls check copyright**

Metal images of deities were housed in the temple womb or garbha griha to be worshipped by devotees who visited the temple. Processional Icons of gods and goddesses were specially made for special occasions like festivals, when images were taken around the temple complex during processions, amidst much fanfare.

Images of the various aspects of Shiva and his consort Parvati were frequently made by Chola artists. The artists' skill imparted grace, dignity and sensuality to the bodies. The expression of the deities is serene and benevolent. The detailing with regard to the jewellery worn by the deities and their poses and gestures also points to excellence in craftsmanship in metal-working.

The bronzes frequently depict Shiva with Parvati and Somaskanda. Another group of figures shows Shiva's marriage with Parvati. Other bronze images include – Shiva as Bhikshatana, shown as an enchanting mendicant or as the fierce Tripurantaka, the destroyer of forts of the three demons. The most magnificently depicted aspects of Shiva show him as Nataraja. Here Shiva is shown performing his cosmic dance. Shiva as Nataraja, literally means 'the lord of dance.'

FAQs

Structural Temples: Thanjavur

How were Chola bronzes made?

The technique of bronze image-making during the Chola period is known as cire-perdue or the Lost Wax process. First, the chosen image, is carved out of hard beeswax using fine and sharp tools. Next, this is coated with layers of clay. This model is then heated and all the wax is extracted from it. The sculptor is left with a mould into which molten metal is poured through the channels made in the mould. Next, the mould is left to cool and thereafter the clay casting is broken away to reveal the metal image. After some finishing touches are applied by the artist to the image, it is polished and ready to be delivered to its patron. As new moulds were made each time, each Chola bronze is unique in its details.

While the sculptors worked on the images, at appropriate times in the process, priests are required to chant sacred mantras as laid out in the texts. The consecration or bringing to life of a deity involves elaborate puja and ritual on a special date selected by astrologers, after which the image becomes endowed with life. Once in his home, the deity receives ritual adoration every day. The images were clothed in expensive silks and decorated beautifully with ornaments made of gold and precious stones.

Source: John Guy (2007:60)

Video

Click on the link below to watch the process of the making of Chola bronzes.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?gl=US&hl=hi&v=Xrire4qPFpY>

Source: youtube

Did you know?

The Mystery of the Missing Chola Bronzes

Only 2 out of the 66 bronzes that were donated to the Brihadishvara Temple are traceable today. Where are the rest? During the Muhammadan invasions of the South in 1310, several bronzes were hidden and buried to save them from loot and destruction. Once the danger had passed, the images were reconsecrated and some of the earlier images were restored into their temple-homes under the Hindu Vijayanagara kings. However, a large number of the icons were buried and forgotten about. This is evident from the several hoards of hidden Chola bronzes that have been found around a few of the temples. Several hidden treasures are probably still waiting to be revealed.

Source: (Dehejia 1990, 123-125)

Structural Temples: Thanjavur

2.2.4 Temple staff and functionaries

A large temple such as the Brihadishvara temple required a large force of workers to look after its functioning and administration. A retinue of men and women functionaries were attached to the temple. This included priests and religious functionaries who performed the daily rituals of the deity. Dance and music were also important part of temple ritual. Out of the total 800 employees recorded in the inscriptions, 400 were dancing girls and 67 were musicians.

Other functionaries of the temple included – accountants, astrologers, watchmen, lamp-bearers, potters, tailors, carpenters, jewellers among others. Interesting evidence from inscriptions points out that appraisers of jewellery were an important class and that all the jewels endowed to the temple were evaluated by them and the entire details of the weight and purity of the metal of the jewels was carefully recorded. There were 65 varieties of jewelled ornaments recorded and one can imagine that the deities were beautifully ornamented.

Inscriptions tell us that Rajaraja made arrangements to ensure that 158 lamps illuminated the grand temple, its large halls and inner sanctum each evening. Decorative lamps of different kinds were used for this purpose. Cattle and cows were gifted to shepherds who were assigned the duty of providing ghee so that lamps may be ever burning.

Interesting detail

Festivals and Festivities

The building of a monument as imposing and vast as the Brihadishvara temple would have been an extraordinary achievement during the period of the Cholas. It was only befitting that a play was written describing this event. The Rajarajeshvara Natakam described the events around the building of the famed temple. An inscription of Rajaraja's grandson's time mentions that elaborate arrangements were made to stage this play at a great festival organised at the temple. Indeed the temple would have been a place where grand festivals would have been held from time to time and would have been abuzz with cultural activity – drama, dance and music.

Source: Dehejia (1990:52)

Structural Temples: Thanjavur

Summary

- The period from the ninth-twelfth century saw the rise of a powerful line of kings – the Cholas, who were great military commanders as well as connoisseurs of the arts.
- The sixth-ninth centuries saw the rise of Bhakti movements pioneered by Shaiva and Vaishnava saints. These movements envisaged a close, direct and reciprocal relationship between the worshipper and the lord. The Bhakti movements and saints became so popular that their images were housed in temples.
- The Brihadishvara Temple built in the eleventh century, is dedicated to Shiva. The most obvious aspect about the temple is its grand scale and monumental proportions. A large amount of resources were required for its building and maintenance.
- The temple is built in pure Dravida style. The outer and inner gopura and the Nandi mandapa lead to the main temple. The key architectural features of the Brihadishvara temple are – the ardhmandapa and mukhamandapa followed by the antarala and the garbha griha. The most striking feature about this temple is vimana topped by the thirteen-tiered shikhara.
- Another important feature about the temple is the inscriptions that have been left behind by the patrons of the temple. These give us a great deal of information about the dates when the temple was built, its patrons, the endowments it received etc.
- The sculptural embellishment on the temple shows Shiva in his various forms. The other significant figures sculpted in the temple are those of Dvarapalas and Dikapalas. The paintings discovered in the circumambulatory passage of the main shrine are remarkable for their finesse and portray several religious and courtly themes. The art of bronze casting was also a highly specialised art during the Chola times. Several metal icons were donated to the Brihadishvara temple. These idols were consecrated and then worshipped in the sanctum each day.
- The temples were not just places of worship but also functioned as money-lenders, banks and educational institutions. They employed a large number of people who performed different services for them.

Structural Temples: Thanjavur

Exercises

- 2.1 Write a short note on the political history of the Cholas.
- 2.2 Describe the plan and layout of the Brihadishvara temple at Thanjavur.
- 2.3 What are the main features of the sculptural ornamentation of the Brihadishvara temple at Thanjavur.

Glossary

Ardhanarishvara: "the Lord who is half-woman", A representation of Shiva combined into a single body with his consort Parvati.

Brahma: A Vedic and Hindu god; the god of creation.

Durga: The supreme goddess in Hinduism; she combines aspects of a warrior goddess and a mother figure and is Shakti of Shiva.

Durgamahishasuramardini: Durga as supreme victor over the buffalo headed demon, Mahishasura.

Dvarpala: Door guardian.

Linga: The aniconic symbol of Shiva depicted as a phallus

Mandapa: A pillared hall.

Nandi: "The happy one", Shiva's bull vehicle.

Parvati: The principal consort of Shiva.

Prakara: An enclosure wall of a south Indian temple.

Shikhara: The spire or tower over the shrine of a temple.

Somaskanda: Shiva with Uma and his son Skanda.

Stupi: Pinnacle: The finial atop the super structure of a south Indian style Hindu temple.

Vyala, Yali: A horned lion.

Structural Temples: Thanjavur

Ardhamandapa: A closed hall joined to the main shrine of a temple by an antarala or vestibule.

Dikapala: The guardians of the eight directions.

Vimana: The shrine portion of the temple and its superstructure.

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Suggested Readings

Structural Temples: Thanjavur

