

**TEMPLE ARCHITECTURE OF THE TAMILS – A STUDY****Dr.R.Suji**

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The aim of this Paper is to describe the development of Temple Architecture of the Tamils from ancient period to the 1735 A.D. "Live not in the place where there is no temple" is a traditional proverb which emphasize the importance of the temple in the life of Tamils. Tamil Nadu is a land of temples with innumerable huge towers. These temples are the result of the gradual development from time immemorial. The earliest Tamil literature Tolkappiam contains the references to the Gods and Goddesses of the ancient Tamils. The fivefold geographical divisions of the land and their chief Gods "Seyon, Mayon, Indran, Varunan and Korravai" are mentioned in Tolkappiam.

In the earlier days, the images might have been simply enshrined under the trees. The early reference to "Alamar Scivan" may simply refer to the God enshrined under a banyan tree. The "Sthalavrkshas" or the sacred trees of the temples emphasize the fact of its association with the temples.¹ "The Tillai (Excoecaria Agallocha) of Chidambaram, the Amra (mango) at the Ekambaranata temple at Kanchi, the Al (banyan) at Kilapaluvur. Pullamangai and other places, the Marudu of Tiruvidaimurudur and the Jambu of Tiruvanikka are some examples of temples housed, in the past under the shade of these trees".

Sangam literature also speaks of the Gods and their temples some iconographical features of Siva, Vishnu and Muruga are referred to in Purananuru, Pattinappalai, Mullaipattu, perumpa-narrupadai, Maduraikanchi, Tirumurugarrupadai and Paripadal make a mention of several temples. The two epics Silappatigaram and Manimekalai also establish the fact of the existence of temples in the Sangam period. The experts of the building art and sculpture were called Noolaripulavar.

The later literature refers to one Kocenganan, a chola king who had built seventy temples. Devaram hymns also refer to many types of temples namely Ilankovil, Alakkovil, Manikkovil, Madakkovil. Karakkovil, Kokudikovil and Nalarkovil, But unfortunately, these buildings were built with perishable materials like wood and bricks and so all the ancient temples prior to the pallavas could not be traced.

Pallava Period 600 to 900 A.D.

Of all the great powers that together made the history of Southern India, none had a more marked effect on the architecture of this region than the earliest of all, that of the Pallavas, whose productions provided the foundations of the Dravidian style². From the beginning of 7th century A.D. the temples were cut out in the existing rocks and later built with dressed stones It is also inferred from the Mandagapattu inscription of Mahendravarman that the building materials used for the construction of ancient temples were of perishable nature.

The rock-cut mandapas excavated during the time of Mahendravarman consisted of a rectangular pillared hall in front and the sanctum with single or more cells. The pillars and the entire scheme of the building explain that it is a lithic copy from the wooden structures.

The same scheme of rock-cut architecture was followed by Narasimhavarman-I and the improvement is to be noticed only on the decorative elements of the pillars and the development of facade with 'Kudus'. The most important contribution of Narasimha-I is the monolithic rathas of Mahabalipuram. They are not like the mandapas of the previous phase, but completely excavated temples like the structural ones. All these temples reveal the fact that they were the copies from the wooden structures and they detain the evidences of wood-architectural features. "The seven pagodas" are different from each other in their size, ground and elevational aspects. Percy Brown considers each architectural type as a full sized model or as a standard pattern for the guidance of the temple builders, in future³.

S K. Saraswati, opines that these architectural types may be of experimental stage. But the literary evidences of the pre-Pallave phase prove that the Tamils had advanced knowledge in the field of building art. So, Thiru Ganapathy, the Principal of the School of Sculpture at Mahabalipuram consider that the various types found in the seven rathas may be the models that were followed in every geographical division of ancient Tamil Nadu. The people of Kurinji, Mullai, Marudum, Neital and Palai might have followed specific form of temple and all those types are to be found in these rock-cut rathas. This view is to be further studied.

Draupati ratha is the smallest one of all and it is of square plan with a curved thatched roof which is the imitation of a grass roof of a wooden hut. Arjuna ratha is also of a square plan with a two storeyed pyramidal vimana. But a shallow portico supported by two pillars has been projected in front. The Bhima and Ganesa rathas are rectangular in plan. The superstructure is also of oblong plan and it rises in diminishing tiers and is topped by a rectangular barrel vaulted roof with gables at either end.

Dharmaraja ratha is square in ground plan and has imposing pyramidal Vimana in gradually diminishing tiers. The Nakula and Sahadeva, ratha resembles the Buddhist chaitya hall with its apsidal back and vaulted roof. Since, this form looks like the backside of an elephant; it is referred to in Tamil as 'Tunganaimadam'.

Mention is also to be made regarding the authorship of these rathas. The scholars like J. Dubreil and Percy Brown opine that they were the creations of Narasimhavarman-I, But Thiru. Nagasamy former the Director of Archaeology, had expressed a new view that they were the contributions of Narasimhavarman-II, the Rajasimha. Prof. T. V. Mahalingam explains the difficulties in accepting the new view. He further observes, "An important feature discernible in Rajasimha's monuments is the shape of Vimana with the elimination of the hara of Kutas and Salas on the first and last storey. An iconographic characteristic noticed in the temples of Rajasimha is the representation of conch-blowing gava or Nandi in the 'talas' below the griva (neck) a feature not to be seen in the excavated caves. Further such iconographic themes as the Saptamatrakas and Ganesa found among the sculptural embellishments in Rajasimha's temples are conspicuously absent in earlier caves."⁴

Rajasimha introduced the new type of building art. It was the construction of structural temples with dressed stones. It has been established that Rajasimha was the author of Talagiriswara temple at Panamalai, the shore temple at Mahabalipuram and the Kailasanatha temple at Kanchipuram. The shore temple at Mahabalipuram consists of three shrines and Percy Brown considers that the plan of the temple is not according to the custom. The shrine facing the sea is the tallest one and it also served the purpose of a light-house in the harbour. This shrine is called Kastriyasimhesvara. The shrine attached to Kastriyasimheswara and it faces the town in the west. Its tower is smaller than the previous one. "The slender and the elegant towers of these shrines and their proximity to the sea have added a unique charm and fame."⁵ The third shrine is without the superstructure and there is the rock-cut image of Anantasayi.

The other important feature of this temple according to Percy Brown is the ground plan of the enclosure consisting of a system of shallow cisterns, which could be flooded on occasion. "Half way along each of the long sides of the corridor, there was a pillared arcade containing an alter, possibly provided for Naga worship, as all the courts and passages around could be filled with water."⁶ Kailasanatha temple at Kanchipuram is named after Rajasimha, as Rajasimhesvara. The main temple is situated in a rectangular court. The formation of the enclosure is a noteworthy feature. It is formed by a series of small shrines arranged so closely side by side. The sanctum has the pyramidal tower while the pillared hall is provided with a flat roof. On the three sides of the wall and at the four corners, the subshrines have been erected. The Vimana seems to be the prototype of Dharmaraja ratha at Mahabalipuram.

Talagirisvara temple at Paranalai is a very small temple and it is important only for the painting. Vaikundaperumal temple at Kanchipuram is notable for its three storeyed shrines one above the other. It is square in plan and on the east towards the entrance a portico is provided. The pyramidal vimana is of four storeys topped by an octagonal dome. Each storey is made as a shrine. The shrine at the ground level has two covered circumambulatories. The second one is provided with an ambulatory and a balcony and the third and top one is only with balcony. Each storey is separated by a roll cornice. All the parts of the temple are disposed in such a way to reveal the sense of single unit. This temple has been praised by Tirumangai Alwar who was the contemporary of the founder Parameswaravarman-II.

Chola Period 1100 A.D. to 1300 A.D.

The Cholas who succeeded the Pallava continued the development of Temple architecture and it reached its height under Rajaraja-I and Rajendra-I. Most of the early temples of the Pallavas were built with a kind of soft stone. But the Cholas used the strong granite stone, Vijayalaya, the founder of later Chola empire had built the Nisumbhasudani temple at Tanjore and it is supported by the Kanyakumari inscription of Vira Rajendra.

"The identification of this sculpture of this Goddess was a matter of controversy, but this can be considered to be almost set at rest by the discovery, near what is called the potter's street, Tanjavur, of the figure of Ugrama Kali at the eastern gate of the old fort of the Cholas at Tanjavur. The broken image has survived but the original temple has gone out of existence."⁷

The Vijayalaya Cholisvaran temple is important from the architectural point of view. At present there are six subshrines facing the main shrine which faces the west. The sanctuary is circular in form and it is situated within a square structure. In front of the sanctum, there is a covered ardhmandapa. The pillars and the images found in the subshrines and niches are important for the study of early chola sculpture. The Muvar Kovil at Kodumbalur shows a different ground plan. All the three main shrines are built within a rectangular courtyard. In front of this uniform sized shrines, there is a common big mandapa. The enclosure seems to have consisted of many subshrines.

Korangaratha temple at Srinivasanallur is the next important temple in the development of Chola style. It is a temple of modest proportions, and has a simple design. The main shrine has the appearance of double storeys because of the cornice in the middle. There is antarala in front supported by four pillars. Along with the projected niches in the middle of the exterior walls, the value of plain space is a notable feature. The Chola style of temple architecture reached its zenith during the reign of Rajaraja-I and his son Rajendra-I. The great temple at Tanjavur built by Rajaraja-I at present consists of a sanctuary, Ardhmandapa, Snanamandapa, Narttanamandapa and a vatyamandapa. Some of them are latter additions like the Subbranya and Karuvur devar shrines.

The exterior of the rectangular courtyard is 793×397 feet. The sanctum is of a square plan enshrining a big linga. An inner circumbulatory around the sanctuary is important for its architectural feature and Chola painting. The 216 feet high vimana is completely built with stone. It has 13 diminishing tiers topped by a monolithic doms weighing 80 tons and a golden Kalasa.

The monolithic Nandhi in front is of 19 feet length, 3 feet width and 12 feet height. There are huge dvarapalaka images measuring 18 feet height and 8 feet width on either side of the entrances. The temple contains many images of Gods and Goddesses. Abulling the enclosure, there runs a cloister. Two gopuras have been erected at the entrance. The outermost gopura is taller than the inner one, which has a better decorated work. The temple at Gangaikonda Cholapuram was built by Rajendra-I the son of Rajaraja, the Great. The city and the temple were named after his title 'Gangaikonda Cholan' which denote his North Indian victory upto the river Ganges.

The outer enclosure with its gopura seems to have completely disappeared. Immediately after the present gopura, there are the big Nandhi and balipitha. But this huge bull is not monolithic like that of Thanjavur. The Mahamandapa is of 175 feet length and 35 feet width "The plinth of the entire mandapa upto the ardhmandapa and mukamandapa of the main temple is a part of the original structure itself, though its wall appears to have been renovated; the pillars and the platform are later additions."⁸ Among the sculptures found in the mandapa, the image of Sambandar and the sun in the form of a chariot are important.

There are the two flights of steps on either side to the Ardha mandapa. The huge dvarapala images on either side of the entrances remind the Thanjavur examples. The sanctum is a hundred feet square with twenty feet height. The huge linga is enshrined in the sanctum. The Vimana rises to the height of 190 feet. The external angles of the pyramidal form being made slightly concave while the surfaces between have been embowed so as to become slightly convex. Such curves give the mass an increased richness, but detract from its power. There is voluptuousness in the latter structure, the beauty of ripe femininity, in contrast to the masculine strength of the earlier type."⁹ There is a rich iconography all over the exterior walls. The Chandesanugraha-murti panel is a masterpiece of Chola sculpture.

Airavateswara temple at Airasuram was built by Rajaraja-II (A. D. 1146-1163). The important feature of the temple is found in the mandapa extension which gives the semblance of a chariot. On either side of the extension, there are the galloping horses to draw the chariot. The pillars of the mandapa are important for the narrative sculptures. The life history of the sixty-three saiva saints was the subject matter.

Introduction of a separate Amman shrine in this temple adjacent to the main shrine is a new feature in the development of later Chola style of architecture. The Kampaharesvara Temple at Thirubuvanam is attributed to Kulottunga-III. The pyramidal vimana of this temple is of six diminishing tiers. The Mahamandapa and the agramandapa are like that of previous examples. The porch to the South of the agramandapa resembles the portico of Airavatesvara. But, this is a multi-wheeled chariot and the wheels are detachable. There are the two elephants on the two sides.

The Devi shrine in front on the north and the Candeswara shrine to the north of the Vimana are both coeval with the main temple. Unlike its counterpart in the Airavatesvara which retains some features of a time earlier, than the age of the vimana, the Candesvara shrine here shows certain advanced characters. This is the last temple to preserve the predominance of the vimana characteristic of the Chola style of architecture.¹⁰

Pandyan Period 1300 A.D. to 1500 A.D.

The later Pandyas succeeded the Cholas and the sphere of temple architecture was further enlarged. The Dravidian style continued to develop in a different method during the

rule of Pandyas. The previous rulers both the Cholas and the Pallavas had concentrated on the sanctum proper. Both the architects and the sculptors had shown their mastermind in the execution of vimana. The sanctum was considered as the most divine and sacred centre of the temple and so a profused skill from the aesthetic sense and strength had been shown on it. But during the same of Pandyas, the entrance gateways and the mandapas became the centre of architectural and sculptural activities. These gateways and mandapas were made as predominant parts of the temple.

"One of the reasons for this change of objective was that of sentiment. Distributed throughout the country on sites of great religious antiquity were a number of buildings of no particular artistic character, but on the other hand of marked sanctity, because enshrined within them were images of deep and lasting veneration...Religious emotion with regard to such edifices had however to find some form of expression, and it did so by exalting their environment, surrounding them by high walls to emphasize their sanctity and making the entrances to the enclosures thus formed into gateways of imposing size and rich appearance.¹¹ These enclosures steadily grew up, like the annual rings formed on a tree trunk. "But there are also examples to the contrary, in which an entire town, complete with a tiny cell and gigantic gopuras, was designed and built in one bout of activity." There should have been some other reasons also for this change of temple scheme. It is true that the Kailasanatha temple at Kancheepuram and few other early temples had the beginning of the gateways. But it should be noted that there is no gradual development. It appears to be a sudden rise during the time of later Pandyas.

The plinth of a gateway or gopuram is of a rectangular plan and its two lower most stories are raised vertically, while the remaining other stories are diminishing tiers and topped by a barrel-vaulted roof with gable ends on the two sides. Thus the temples of Tamil Nadu had developed two types of towers, one above the sanctum and the other above the entrance of the enclosures. The Vimana is square in ground plan and its pyramidal tiers as they ascend, topped by a domical or octagonal cupola with a Kalasa finial. Thus whatever be the size of the square at the bottom, it is reduced to a single pointed Kalasa at the top. On the other hand, the tower above the enclosure entrance or gopuram is oblong in ground plan and rise the diminishing tiers topped by a barrel vaulted roof with its gable ends on two sides. The number of Kalasas above this roof is according to the length of the vaulted roof. Thus the Dravidian architecture had developed appropriately fitting types of towers in an attractive manner.

The gopuram above the second enclosure wall of Jambukeswara temple near Trichy is the first Pandyan tower. "There are several features in this gopuram which are clearly a 'carry over' from the preceding style of the Cholas, so that it is really an illustration of the transition between the two modes." Another gopuram, known as Sundra Pandyagopuram was added to Jambukeswara temple.

The eastern gateway of Chidambaram temple has the inscription of Sundara Pandya and it rises to the height of 135 feet. The eastern gopuram of the inner enclosure of Tiruvannamalai temple and the gopuram of Kumbakonam temple are the other Pandyan contributions to the development of Dravidian architecture.

After the fall of the Pandyas, the Vijayanagar rulers of Deccan extended their sway all over Tamil Nadu and ruled it for about two centuries. Though the Vijayanagar rulers were aliens to Tamil Nadu, they continued the traditional development of temple architecture of Tamil Nadu. The Vijayanagar rulers to some extent followed the methods of Pandyas by enlarging the existing temples with more and more concentric enclosure walls. The increased and elaborate festivals also demanded such new additional parts of the temple as an elaborated temple scheme. "In addition to the main temple in the middle, there are separate

shrines, pillared halls, pavilions and other annexes, each having its special purpose and each occupying its appointed position in the scheme."¹² Kalyanamandapa had become an important introduction in the Vijayanagar scheme. The other important feature of this style is the varieties of beautiful pillars in the mandapas. Every pillar seems to be an art treasure. The sculptor or a group of sculptors who had been assigned one or two pillars had produced the pillar with all their masterminds in a kind of competitive spirit. As a result of such an attitude, every pillar is turned out as a miniature monument.

Many temples all over south India have been attributed to Vijayanagar period. But in Tamil Nadu, there are only a few complete examples. The temples at Kanchipuram, Kumbakonam, Tiruvanna- malai, Srirangam and Rameswaram were enlarged by the enclosure walls and mandapas during the Vijayanagar rule. But the temples at Vellore fort and Virinjivaram both in . the present North Arcot district and the Sucindram temple are the complete examples of Vijayanagar style of architecture. The Kalyana mandapa at Vellore is an excellent masterpiece of Vijayanagar sculpture and architecture. Nothing could exceed the spirit or vigour of the hippogryphs and dragons of its pillars, or the fineness and prodigality of the ornament.

After the fall of Vijayanagar empire, the Nayak chieftains established their independent principalities all over Tamil Nadu. Thus Madurai, Tanjore. Gingee and Vellore became the Nayak kingdoms and they ruled over Tamil Nadu for about one and a half centuries. The enlargement scheme of the temple almost attained perfection during the Nayak period and it is considered as a final phase of Dravidian architecture.

The covered courtyards and the corridors cover the major part of the temple scheme. The next enlargement of the temple is the construction of huge walls which provide open courtyards all around the main temple. Some buildings are also built in these open courtyards. These enclosing walls have four gateways invariably in the four directions and all these gateways above each enclosure are of uniform height, nearer the main shrine, smaller is the gopura. The Nayak gopuras reveal a different kind of surface treatment. The four corners of the gopuras are made concave and this arrangement adds attraction and beauty to the gopuras which are decorated with beautiful sculptures from Hindu mythology. The other notable feature of the Nayak style is the provision of big water tanks inside the temple itself.

The temples at Rameswaram, Srirangam, Jambukeswara, Tiruvarur, Chidambaram, Tiruvannamalai, Srivilliputhur and Madurai have the contributions of Nayaks. The Meenakshi temple at Madurai is a good example of Nayak style of Dravidian architecture. It consists of two shrines of Meenakshi and Sundaeswar, Chitramandapam, Servaikaranmandapam, Viravasantarayamandapam, Kalyanasundara mandapam. Nandhi pavilion, Poets College and a tank. Many subshrines are also found in the covered courtyards. The wall surfaces and the pillars contain beautiful sculptures. The mandapa in front of Sundaeswarar shrine is famous for its rich sculptures. On the whole the temple complex looks like a city. At the end, a mention must be made about the present plan to complete the gopuram of Srirangam temple which was left unfinished. When the construction is over, it will be the tallest gopuram in India.

END NOTES

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