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The magnificence of Brihadeeshvar temple, Thanjavur

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Abstract

Temples were built for religious and spiritual activities, worship, and sacrifice. In India, there are numerous magnificent temples. Tanjore Big Temple is one of the most ancient and popular. It is one of the most visited and ancient temples in India, located on the south bank of the Cauvery River in Trichy, Tamil Nadu. Raja Raja the Great (985-1014 AD) built the Brihadeeshwara Temple (or Rajarajeshvara) in Tanjore, the Chola dynasty's capital. The temple, dedicated to Lord Shiva, dates from the 10th century.

They are a magnificent innovative achievement in the architectural conception of the Dravida temples' pure form. This innovative architectural style, known as the Dravidadesha style, was practised only in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu during various dynasties. It was built over a six-year period out of granite stone and reflects the Chola kingdom's success and wealth. It is still a mystery how it was built and how the construction was carried out without technology 1000 years ago. Every time they visit the temple, people are amused by its construction.

Keywords: Brihadeeshvar, magnificence, Temple, Raja Rama

1. Introduction

Heaven and Earth are brought together in the temple. India is said to be a land of temples. As we all know, there are numerous temples throughout India. Basically, different dynasties build temples to various gods based on their beliefs, culture, and sometimes to celebrate victory, and so on. India's temples have a few thousand years of history behind them. So, the Brihadeeshwara Temple in Tanjore, Tamil Nadu, India, is an ever-amazing monument built in the 10th century by Raja Raja Chozhan. It is also one of the three Chozha kingdoms in South India known as the 'Great Living Chola Temple,' along with Brihadeeshwara Temple in Gangaikondachozhapuram and Airavadeshwara Temple in Darasuram. This temple is commonly referred to as 'Thanjai Periya Koyil' ^[1].

The monument not only symbolises Chozha's power. The massive temple is surrounded by a massive colonnaded 'prakara' with sub-shrines dedicated to the 'ashta dikpalas' and a main entrance with 'gopura' (known as Rajarajanthiruvasal). The main temple's inner sanctum, or Vimana, is 66 metres high and made of granite stone, housing the Shiva deity in a hollow Garbhagriha. On top of this tower is a granite capstone weighing approximately 80 tonnes. A massive stone bull known as 'Nandi' stands right before the entrance to Lord Shiva's main shrine. It is large and massive, carved out of a single rock, i.e., monolithic, and measures about 16 feet long and 13 feet tall ^[2].

Many mysteries and secrets remain unsolved. It is both a temple and a beautiful tourist attraction. Many tourists from all over the world come here to see the incredible architecture, figurines, and to learn about a few mysteries ^[3].

2. Objectives

The main objective of this paper is to study about the beauty and construction of Tanjore Big Temple located at Trichy in the state of Tamil Nadu ^[4].

3. An Overview of the Area

Tamil Nadu is a state in southern India, bordered by the Indian Ocean to the south and east, Andhra Pradesh to the north, and Kerala to the west. The state's culture and heritage are extremely rich. The Hindu temples and monuments in this area have also become popular tourist destinations. Tamil Nadu is the home of many tales that are mystic and other-worldly; the land where elaborate architecture and beautiful sculptures of its ancient temples leave all tourists spellbound with their astounding beauty.

Tanjore is the 11th most populous city in Tamil Nadu. The city is an important agricultural centre in the Kaveri Delta and is commonly referred to as the "Rice Bowl of Tamil Nadu." Tanjore is an important centre of South Indian religion, art, and architecture, as well as a major pilgrimage site and tourist destination in Tamil Nadu. The Brihadeeshvar Temple, which is described in this paper, is Thanjavur's most visited monument. Percy Brown, a historian, described its construction as "a watershed moment in the evolution of building art in South India."

4. History

According to the Vedas, there were two predominant castes in ancient times: Saiva and Vainava. Those who worship Lord Shiva as their supreme deity follow Saiva, while those who worship Lord Vishnu as their Supreme power follow Vainava. Previously, several countries around the world practised the Saiva religion. So, in essence, the people who spread this religion and its way of life were known as 'Cholas.' They spread the glory of the Saiva religion throughout many empires around the world.

The great Raja Raja Chozhan was a powerful descendant of the great Cholas who built such a beautiful architecture- the Brihadeeshvar Temple. Kunjara Mallan Raja Rama Peruthachan designed the structure.



Source image: Internet

Fig 1: Raja Raja Chozhan

The Brihadeeshvar temple was built as a dedication to Lord Shiva between 995 and 1025 CE, using valuables won during the Chozha war and tribute from Sri Lanka.

6. The Astonishing Architecture

The structure is 63 metres tall, making it the tallest temple building in India. The temple's design and development clearly adhere to the rules of symmetrical and axial symmetry. The temple complex is entirely rectangular, giving the appearance of two stacked squares. The rectangular complex is approximately 140*75 metres in size and is surrounded by a wall with beautiful interior niches. Inside this space, there are five main sections namely:

- Sanctum with great tower structure (*Sri Vimanam*)
- The Nandi Hall (*Nandi-mandapam*)
- Between the above two, there lies the main community hall (*Mukha-mandapam*)
- Great gathering hall (*Maha-mandapam*) and
- A canopy that connects the great hall with the sanctum (*Antrala*).

6.1. General outlook

The temple contains numerous wonders. It is built in the style of a rock. The temple was built on a precise plan of 16*16 squares, a design known as padmagarbhamandala in South Indian Dravida architecture. It's amazing that they used bipolar technique so meticulously back then. The temple faces east and was once surrounded by a water trench. It is built on a platform with a high dadoed base. The Sri Vimanam, a granite tower with 13 levels above the garbhagriha or inner shrine, is topped by a dome structure that rests on a single 7.7 m square granite box weighing nearly 80 tonnes.

The structure features a front entrance (a mandapa) with 36 columns. The rocks and other materials needed for this construction were brought in from neighbouring states and countries. It took nearly 25 years to sculpt these rocks and another 9 years to properly arrange and construct them. It took 34 years to build this massive structure.

6.2. The Temple Tower or the Sri Vimanam

The structure Everyone is fascinated by the techniques used in the construction of the Vimanam. It is one of the tallest structures in South India, standing 216 feet tall and weighing approximately 80 tonnes. First, a tank-like structure was carved out for about 350 feet depth and filled with sand brought from rivers in the Western Ghats. This structure is similar to the well-known 'Tanjore doll' (Thalaiyatti Bommai). In short, the structure's foundation is made of sand and is built and designed in such a way that it adjusts to the movement of the Earth.



Source image: Internet

Fig 2: The Temple Tower or *The Vimana*

6.3. The Maha Nandi

The Maha Nandi, also known as the Holy Bull, is the vehicle of Lord Shiva. It's in the Nandi Hall, a 16-legged mandapam directly across from the Main Shrine's entrance. The Nandi is unique in that it is carved out of a single rock that weighs approximately 80 tonnes. And the Nayak Emperors of the Vijaya Nagara Dynasty sculpted this statue in the 16th century AD.



Source image: Internet

Fig 3: The Maha Nandi

6.4. The Mandapas

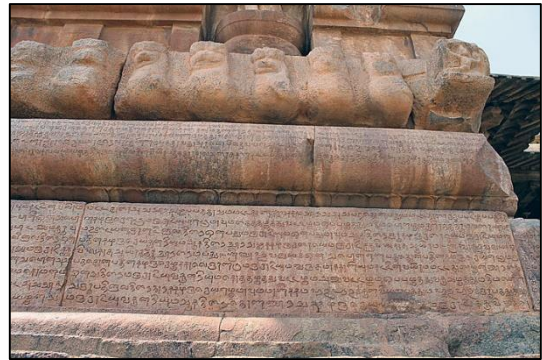
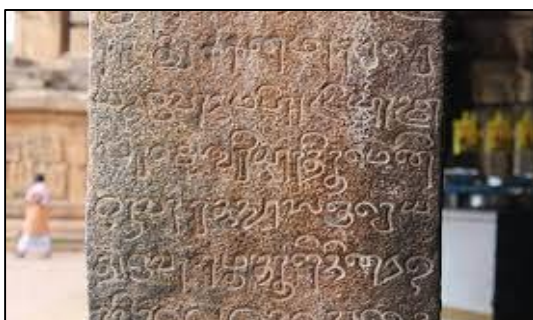
The Maha-mandapa and the Mukha mandapa are the two most prominent mandapa. These mandapas are arranged in an axial pattern between the Vimanam and the Nandi Hall. The Maha-mandapa, for example, has six pillars on each side and many artworks. It's surrounded by two dvarapalas. The Mukha-mandapa follows, which is connected to the Maha-mandapa via stairs. It is also surrounded by dvarapalas and has artworks.

6.5. Main Deities

Lord Shiva is the main deity of Tanjore Big Temple. The statue stands 12 feet tall and is one of the tallest in South India. The temple's other main deities are Parvati, Ganesha, Murugan, Dakshinamoorthy, and Varahi. There are also eight small shrines to Agni, Indra, Varuna, Kubera, and other deities at the Mukha-mandapa. These deities are also referred to as the guardians of each direction.

7. Inscriptions

The Tanjore Big Temple is not only a magnificent example of their beautiful architecture, but it is also very rich in Tamil inscriptions engraved on the temple's pillars and stones. In Tamil and Sanskrit, each inscription begins with an introduction to the king or donor who authorised it. These inscriptions mostly describe the temple's many gifts of land, silver, gold, money, precious gems, and jewellery. There are also culinary inscriptions all around the temple, which I find fascinating.



Source image: Internet

Fig 4: Inscriptions of Tanjore Big Temple

8. Secrets of the Tanjore Big Temple

The temple has many secrets in it, some solved and some unsolved.

1. At noon, the Vimana's shadow never falls on the ground. This is because the tower is built perpendicular to the earth with not even a single degree of inclination, and findings also indicate that the base is much larger than the Vimanam.
2. The stone used to create the main deity, Lord Shiva, was brought from Saurashtra in Gujarat in West India. The astounding fact here is that the distance between Tanjore and Gujarat is 2100 kilometres. It is surprising how it was possible 1000 years ago with no transportation technologies. It remains a mystery till date.
3. It is well known that the temple is entirely made of granite. A staggering 1,30,000 tonnes of granite were used in the construction, but there is no trace of any granite quarry within a 50-kilometer radius.
4. No binding material was used to connect the rocks; instead, interlocking stones were used to construct this 216-foot-tall structure. Until now, the brilliance of architecture has not been matched by our modern

techniques.

5. Certain doors in the temple passages could only be opened after reciting sacred mantras. These secrets were only known to the great Raja Raja Chozha's closest associates.
6. The main shrine's entrance is flanked by two Ganesh, Lord Shiva's son, idols. When the two are tapped, it is discovered that the sound travels through stone in one and metal in the other.
7. This grand premise celebrated its 1000th year in September 2010.

9. Conclusion

Tanjore Big Temple is a gift from our brilliant ancestors to us. Behind each brick, there is a wealth of creativity, intelligence, and stories. It serves not only as a spiritual site, but also as an art gallery, a tourist attraction, and so on. It makes us think about how buildings were built 1000 years ago, the techniques and equipment used. The temple is one of three 'Great Living Chola Temples,' which are still active in cultural, pilgrimage, and worship practises.

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