

Chola Temples Of Tamil Nadu- UPSC Arts & Culture Notes

Recently, 'Kumbhabhishekam' ceremony was held at the 'Brihadeeswara temple' in Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu after 23 years. Kumbhabhishekam is a part of the consecration ceremony of Hindu temples. 'Kumbha' means the Head and denotes the Shikhara* or Crown of the Temple and abhishekam is ritual bathing.

Relevance of the Topic

This topic was in the news and hence, is important for the UPSC exam. Read our Issues in News segment for insights into topics that make headlines and are important for the IAS exam.

*In Dravida style temples the spire/deul or tower which surmounts the sanctum sanctorum (Garbhagriha) is pyramidal in shape and together are known as the 'Vimana'. The top end of the vimana is called 'Shikhara', whereas in Nagara style temples the spire on top of the garbhagriha is itself called the 'Shikhara'.

Introduction

- The Cholas of the Tanjore line, also known as the Imperial Cholas ruled over most of South India for about four centuries ie, 875 -1175 AD.
- The political and ceremonial centre of the Cholas was Thanjavur (Tanjai). The Cholas linked themselves to the Solar dynasty.
- The Cholas conquered parts of the Gujarat, Malwa, Deccan and Indonesia, Lakshadweep, Maldives and Sri Lanka in entirety.
- Bay of Bengal came to be known as the 'Chola Lake' as they dominated the area with their powerful navy.
- The entire coast from Kanyakumari to Bengal came to be captioned 'Cholamandalam'. Coramandal is the anglicised name of Cholamandalam.
- It is also noteworthy that they dominated the other two seas.
- Owing to the Chola rule, during this period, there was remarkable political stability in South India. That very period was a flourishing time of a great and sophisticated culture in South India.
- Construction of some of the finest temples and sculptures took place during this period.

Change in spiritual practices

At the beginning of the medieval period, there were changes in spiritual practices all over India. In the ancient times, the kings did not directly patronise monuments of any faith, even those of deities whom they personally worshipped. Inscriptions reveal, only indirect support, through the revenues of villages

were granted to establishments of all faiths. A huge number of laypersons and monks made donations for the creation of temples. Sculptors and guilds of architects were instrumental in building the temples.

According to the inscriptions at Nagarjunakonda in the state of Andhra Pradesh, by 3rd Century CE, members of the royal family and the queens began supporting monuments of different faiths through direct donations. In the 7th and 8th centuries, beginning with the Pallavas in South India, kings directly began to patronise the making of temples.

- While in Eastern India, during the Gupta and Pala periods from the 4th to the 12th centuries, vast monastic universities came up.
- Here, the focus was on the dynamism of the intellect, which analyses the various qualities that lead one to nirvana or moksha.
- In Southern part of India, particularly in the region of Tamil Nadu, it was seen that under the guidance and direct patronage of the grand Pallava and Chola dynasties there was an increasing sophistication in temple building and art.
- By the 8th century, the Dravida style of temples had fully evolved in Tamil Nadu.
- Beautiful temples were built at Kanchipuram and Mamallapuram (Mahabalipuram) by the Pallavas.
- Under the Pandyas of Madurai, the Vattuvankovil Temple at Kazhugumalai had been hewn out of a hill face. Here, the sculptures are carved in a naturalistic style.
- In about 850 CE, Vijayalaya, a Chola chieftain took control of Thanjavur and ushered in an era of unsurpassed prosperity in Tamil Nadu.
- Under the patronage of Cholas, the largest and most impressive temples of South India were made. Almost all their temples were dedicated to Lord Siva, their patron deity.

Under the patronage of Chola Kings, temple building activity can be seen in 2 stages:

1. Early Chola Temples: Mid 9th century – 10th century AD
2. Later Chola Temples: 11th century onwards

Early Chola temples

- The early Chola temples were not large.
- The purpose with which the temple was built was to transport the onlooker to the world of gentleness which can be found within.
- Many dwarfish figures of ‘*ganas*’ are depicted on the temple walls.
 - Siva’s *ganas* are those who are most devoted to him and have won the right to be perpetually close to him.
 - The *ganas* have been depicted on all Siva temples belonging to the early Chola period.
- Jewel-like perfection could be seen in the temples, with the carved details of the various parts coming together to form a harmonious whole.

- The figures evoke peace, grace and are covered with the miracle of creation.

Important among the early Chola temples are:

- **Vijayalaya Cholisvara Temple:** this temple is located at Narthamalai. Vijayalaya Cholisvara Temple was built by Vijayalaya Chola or by the Muttaraya chieftains before his rule. The temple is dedicated to Shiva, faces west. One of the hands of Lord Shiva displays the gesture of *vismaya* or wonder.
- **Brahmapurisvara temple :** This temple is located at Pullamangai. The temple presents a tradition which develops further in later Chola temples. The deities are carved in niches on the walls and attendant figures are made in adjoining niches. Every part of the temple wall has dressed stones. A favourite motif in Indian art, from north to south, is seen here: a human figure riding on a *vyala* or leoglyph.
- **Mooverkovil :** This temple is located at Kodambalur.
- **Koranganatha Temple :** This famous Chola temple is located at Srinivasanallur.
- The second half of the 10th century saw many temples being built, during the time of **Sembiyan Mahadevi** who was the queen of Gandaraditya Chola.
- The queen was a great patron of art whose influence was predominant until the early part of the rule of Rajaraja (end of the 10th century).
- **The Umamaheshvara Temple** at Konerirajapuram is one among the temples which belong to her period. The temples of her time lay emphasis on a very personal devotion to the divine.
- Appar, a Tamil saint, wrote many verses in praise of this form of Siva performing Ananda Tandava (a cosmic dance performed with joy), a characteristic image of Shiva carved during this time.

Later Chola Temples

By the beginning of the 11th century, large temples were built, owing to royal patronage, which had already been seen during the Pallava period.

- Rajaraja Chola (Arumolivarman), in the year 1009-10, completed **the Brihadeeswara Temple**, dedicated to 'the Great Lord Siva' was made to express the king's own power and military might as much as the grandeur of the lord.

- The Brihadeeswara temple was made to celebrate Rajaraja's achievements (His empire was expanded in all the directions).
- The temple is 5 times the size of previous Chola temples and its 'Vimana' stands 216 feet tall.
- Its stupid, or crowning element, weighs 80 tonnes.
- According to the inscriptions, 400 dancers were brought from 91 temples from all over the empire, to dance in the temple complex.
- In this temple, Shiva is represented on the walls in many forms such as Bhairava, Ardhanarishvara, Nataraja, Lingodbhava and Harihara.
- The temple walls also depict Saraswati, Gajalakshmi, Durga, Vishnu and Ganesha.
- What stands out is the Tripurantaka form of Lord Shiva.
- Kunjara Mallan Rajaraja Perumthachan was the architect of this temple.
- The Brihadeeshwara temple is part of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site among the "Great Living Chola Temples".
- The other two among these temples are the Gangaikonda Cholapuram and Airavatesvara temple)
- On the walls of the ambulatory path (Pradakshinapatha) around the sanctum is found the portrait of King Rajaraja along with his Guru Karuvurar. This is considered to be the earliest surviving royal portrait in painting in India.

From the Brihadeeswara temple began the development of the temple as the centre of cultural activities. Grand Gopuras, or gateways made in this temple paved the way for the later development of gopuras as the predominant architectural feature of Tamil temples.

Gangaikondacholapuram:

Rajendra I (Son of Rajaraja) made the first victorious campaign of a southern ruler into north India. Holy water was brought from the Ganga and a new capital was founded near Thanjavur. It was named *Gangaikondacholapuram*, literally translating to the city of the Chola ruler who had captured the Ganga.

- He made a temple on a vast scale at his new capital, following the example of his father dedicated to Brihadeesvara. (the temple was not as tall as the earlier temple).
- The Vimana of this temple is profusely carved and has an unusual concave shape.
- Among the finest iconic sculptures made in numerous niches around the vimana is a panel depicting Siva conferring grace upon his devotee Chandesha.
- It has been suggested that this image has another meaning and could also be read as Rajendra I receiving Siva's blessings.

In the 12th Century, King Rajaraja Chola II built the *Airavatesvara Temple* at Darasuram. The temple comprises of a 'mandapa' (entrance porch) made in the style of a ratha, or chariot with wheels. The concept was later expanded in the Sun Temple of Konark, of the 13th century.

The power of Cholas had declined by the 13th Century.

Conclusion

Till the coming of Cholas, common people and the community sponsored the art. However, during the reign of Chola Kings, the Kings themselves guided as well as advanced huge donations for the building of grand temples. The atmosphere of the imperial court was reflected in the sophistication of art in these temple structures. As time passed by, the size and grandeur of the temples began taking over the earlier focus on art. It is seen that the Chola temples built in the later half were vast structures proclaiming the majesty and power of the deity and also at the same time, depicting the majesty of the rulers that built them.