

Mahabalipuram: An Architectural Extravaganza

The second India-China informal summit took place at Mahabalipuram (a [UNESCO World Heritage Site](#)) in Tamil Nadu, near Chennai between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping in October 2019, owing to its historical link to China and President Xi's interest in history and culture.

Historical Connection between China and Mahabalipuram:

During the rule of the [Pallavas](#) (600-900 AD), Mahabalipuram was one of the major ports in South India and the main connecting point for trade with China. Many articles including pottery have been found here and in the neighbouring areas showing close trade relationships with the Chinese.

- A Pallava prince, whom the Chinese call Bodhidharma, is said to have travelled to China from Kanchipuram via Mahabalipuram, as a messenger of Buddhism and reached Guangzhou in 527 AD.
- He went on to become the 28th patriarch of Buddhism succeeding Prajnatara.
- The form of Buddhism that Bodhidharma taught in China came to be known as Chan (corrupt form of Sanskrit word Dhyana) Buddhism.
- It reached Japan, Thailand, Indonesia and other parts of the Far East. As it spread, it came to be known as *Zen Buddhism*.
- He also is said to have taught a silent form of martial arts to the monks at the Shaolin temple.

The choice of the second India-China informal summit venue is said to be also due to the current Chinese President who was earlier governor of Fujian, a province to the south-east of China's mainland and a region that had intense cultural exchanges with Tamil Nadu.

Archaeological Importance:

- Mamallapuram or Mahabalipuram in Tamil Nadu is a temple of art, created by the Pallava rulers.
- It is a virtual treasure trove of sculpture and architecture. It is a shining example of Dravidian culture and of the ancient civilization of the Tamils.
- Temple architecture which is a unique feature of Tamil culture was born in this place.
- There are 4 types of sculptures in India: Cave temples, Carved monoliths, Sculptured scenes or Bas relief and Masonry temples. All these 4 types are found here.

The Imperial Pallavas ruled from the 6th century AD for about 400 years. Their **capital city was Kanchipuram** and **Mamallapuram was their seaport**. The word 'Pallava' in Sanskrit means 'sprout'. As per mythology, Ashvatthama, son of Drona and a character in the epic Mahabharata, fathered a son through his liaison with a snake princess. The child was named Pallava after the lotus 'sprouts' upon which he was laid at birth. As per mythology, the dynasty which this Pallava founded became the Pallava dynasty.

History of Mahabalipuram:

- The history of Mahabalipuram dates back to 2000 years.
- It was a flourishing seaport even at the beginning of the Christian era.
- There were references to it in the Greek work 'Periplus of the Erythraean Sea' of the 1st century AD and also by Ptolemy, the Greek geographer of the 2nd century AD.

- In ancient times even before the Pallavas came on the scene, the place was known as Mallai or Kadalmallai.
- Vaishnava saint Bhoothath Alvar was born here.
- This was also a pilgrimage centre and Saint Thirumangai Alvar has rendered hymns in praise of this place.
- Hiuen Tsang, the Chinese traveller of the 7th century AD mentions that this place was the sea port of the Pallavas.
- It has also been referred in European literature of the 14th century as the 'Place of 7 Pagodas' or the place of 7 temples.
- Many Indian colonists had travelled to South East Asia from this port town.
- After the Pallavas, Mahabalipuram had prospered under the Cholas and the Vijayanagar Empire.
- Europe knew of it as early as the 13th century when, following Marco polo's visit, it appeared in the Catalan Map of 1275. The first European to mention it directly did so in 1582.
- The first English visitor was William Chambers in 1788.
- When the first British visitors went to Mahabalipuram in the 18th century, they found the monuments under the sand, a few completely so. It must have fallen into neglect after the fall of the Vijayanagara Empire. One of the earnest antiquarians Colin Mackenzie dug out some of the monuments from the sand and deputed assistants to collect its traditions and coins. This way, Mahabalipuram became one of the classical sites of Indian historical archaeology.

Mahabalipuram was essentially a victory memorial city. Narasimhavarman I of the Pallavas defeated the Chalukyan King Pulakesin II in the battles of Manimangala and Pariyala in 642 AD, killed him and sacked his capital Badami or Vatapi. He took the title 'Vatapikonda' (Conqueror of Vatapi) and Mamalla (the Great Warrior). Earlier, this port town was called Maamalai or 'Great Hill'. He expanded the facilities of the port and changed its name to Mamallapuram, or 'City of Mamalla'. With the enormous fortune that he brought from his conquest, he embellished the city of Mahabalipuram with several beautiful buildings and monuments.

The monuments and the temples of Mamallapuram were designed by the Pallava rulers during the 7th and 8th century AD. Mention should be made in this regard about Mahendravarman I, his illustrious son Narasimhavarman I or Mamalla, Mahendravarman II, Parameswaravarman and Narasimhavarman II alias Rajasimha. The majority of the monuments belong to the times of Narasimhavarman I. The rest of the monuments belong to the period of his successors Parameswaravarman and Rajasimha.

Important Monuments found here are:

1) Shore temple: Is a masonry temple complex constructed by Narasimhavarman II also called Rajasimha. In its courtyard can be found in a row, sculptures of nandis'. There are 3 temples in this complex:

- *Kshatriyasimha Pallavesvara temple:* It is dedicated to Siva and is the main temple facing east and also the sea. It has a narrow and elongated Vimana and contains a fluted Siva linga made of granite known as 'Dhara Lingam'.
- *Vishnu temple:* It is called Narapathi Simha Pallava Vishnu shrine and contains the figure of Seshasayi Vishnu (locally called Palligondaruliya Deva). While the image of Vishnu and the base of its shrine are carved out of the bed rock, much of the Shore temple is a masonry one, built out of quarried blocks of rock. Hence, the Shore temple is considered to be partially rock hewn and partially constructed out of stone blocks.
- *Rajasimha Pallavesvara temple:* This is a west facing Shiva temple and contains a smaller spire.

The narrow pointed towers, the corridor or Prakaram (parikrama) for circumambulation all around, the boundary walls like the ramparts of a fort, the beautiful lion and nandi sculptures all along represent a

temple structure complete in all respects. Rajasimha is believed to have established the tradition of building structural stone temples in Tamil Nadu. Hence, the Shore temple can be considered as a forerunner to the great temple architecture of Tamil Nadu.

2) 5 Rathas: These are monoliths, i.e., free-standing temples cut out of the solid rock of a hillock. These are popularly known as Rathas, the chariots or temple carts but without wheels. They only housed the images of deities and no worship was done during those days. These were carved out during the reign of Narasimhavarman I in the 7th century AD and are regarded as the earliest monuments of their kind in India. These monoliths can be placed subsequent to the cave temples. They are known as Pancha Pandava Rathas, after the Pandava brothers and their common queen. However, their names are without any historical basis whatsoever. These temples progressively become smaller from south to north.

i) **Draupadi Ratha:** Is a temple dedicated to Goddess Durga. It is in the shape of a south Indian hut and has a curvilinear roof. There are makara torana decorations all around outside, with images of Durga. In the cell inside, there is the 4 armed standing Durga, adored by two male devotees kneeling at her feet and four dwarf ganas flying overhead. There are 2 dvarapalikas on either side of the entrance. In front is the majestic lion vehicle of Durga.

ii) **Arjuna Ratha:** Is dedicated to Lord Shiva; the blocks at the top are octagonal in shape and its roof pyramidal consisting of a series of diminishing storeys each having a row of pavilions anticipating the later day Vimana; is almost a replica of the Dharmaraja ratha.

iii) **Bhima Ratha:** Is dedicated to Vishnu in repose; replicates a Buddhist chaitya; is devoid of any figure carvings. Its roof is shaped like the hood of a country-wagon.

iv) **Nakula-Sahadeva Ratha:** Is dedicated to Indra, the rain god; is apsidal in shape with ornamental features and is devoid of figure carvings. An elephant statue has been placed next to it. The temple has an arched roof like the back of an elephant. This type of Vimana is known by the name *Gajaprashta*.

v) **Dharmaraja Ratha:** Is dedicated to Hari-Hara (Vishnu-Shiva) and Ardhanareeswara (Siva-Parvati combine). The blocks at the top are octagonal in shape and its roof pyramidal consisting of a series of diminishing storeys each having a row of pavilions anticipating the later day Vimana.

An interesting feature to note about these Rathas is that the crown or stupa (pot-finial) that has to remain on top of the temple tower has instead been placed on the ground. The Rathas were executed as prototypes of South Indian temples and were not consecrated as places of worship then. That is the reason these crowns, though carved completely, were neither separated from the bedrocks nor were fixed on the towers. A temple which is to be used as a place of worship is supposed to attain completeness and divinity, only after the positioning of such crowns or stupis on the towers.

3) Arjuna's Penance or Descent of the Ganga—Its Interpretation:

- This 7th century AD masterpiece of sculpture carved by Maandhaatar is 25 metres in length and 12 metres in height and is regarded as the world's largest Bas Relief.
- Here Arjuna is seen as doing penance for obtaining the powerful Pasupatha Astra (this powerful weapon in the possession of Siva is supposed to generate a continuous stream of arrows once fired) from Lord Siva for the ensuing war with his cousins, the Kauravas.
- Siva is shown with his trident, axe and the cobra twirled around his neck. His foremost left hand is in the position of granting a boon to his devotee. Above him is Chandra, the moon god and below him and on his sides are the dwarves.
- There are more than 150 beautiful, life-like figures in this monument and can be termed as a virtual exhibition of sculptures.
- Apart from the gods and goddesses {Siva, Vishnu, Surya, Chandra, celestial musicians like Kinnaras

- and Gandharvas, Bhuta ganas (dwarves)), there are sages doing penance, hunters, ordinary human beings, serpents, wild animals like lion, elephant and deer and domestic animals like cat and mouse.
- Right in the middle of the monument, dividing it vertically into 2 halves can be seen a narrow fissure which is believed to stand for the holy river Ganga. Some scholars believe that this monument may also represent the 'Descent of the river Ganges' from heaven to the earth. Archaeologists claim that once upon a time, water really flowed in the cleft of the rock.
 - Most of the living beings in the monument are seen facing the river and many appear to be rushing towards it. This monument symbolizes the fact that there cannot be any life in this planet without water.
 - The 5 dwarves behind Siva stand for the 5 material elements- air, earth, space, fire and water which are also the correlates of the five senses.
 - The belly masked dwarf under the extended hand of Siva is Pasupatha weapon personified, thus representing the boon itself that Siva grants to Arjuna.
 - The carving of huge elephants on the relief is regarded as the finest elephant sculptures in India. The largest elephant clearly exhibits bifurcated tusks, an attribute characteristic of Airavata, the mount of God Indra.
 - A cat is shown doing penance just like Arjuna, with hands raised surrounded by the mice. This is a representation of the Panchatantra story.
 - The relief also depicts the Badari hermitage scene organised around a Vishnu temple.
 - The lion and deer are shown co-existing.
 - Arjuna is shown seated as an ascetic in his earlier incarnation as Nara, representing the human aspect.
 - He is in the company of his friend Narayana or Vishnu, enshrined in the temple, being the divine representation.
 - There are worshippers depicted as standing in ankle-deep water, one raising his arms overhead to worship the sun, while the other bowing towards the sacred river. Close by are 2 bathers performing activities common to any river bank. One wrings out a garment after bathing while the other fetches water in a pot. The one with the pot points his 2 fingers at one of the headless figures.
 - According to some scholars, the 2 headless figures maybe that of Agasthya, the sage and Drona, the teacher, both born out of pots as per mythology.
 - The headless figure with a yoga-patta, a band across his waist and legs is believed to be King Narasimhavarman himself, who was the patron of the relief.
 - The 2 other headless figures facing him are believed to represent his father Mahendravarman and grandfather Simha Vishnu.
 - These figures are believed to be decapitated by the Chalukya forces, the sworn enemies of the Pallavas [In 674 AD, thirty two years after the sack of Vatapi (642 AD) by Narasimhavarman I, the Chalukyan king Vikramaditya I, son of Pulakesin II, exacted revenge by invading and conquering the Pallavas]
 - Some scholars believe that this Great Bas Relief is a simultaneous double narrative, depicting the stories of both Arjuna and Bhagiratha. As regards its primary objective, its subject is none other than king Narasimhavarman himself and the Arjuna or Bhagiratha like ascetic stands only as a paragon of the victorious king Mamalla. Thus, it is actually a triple narrative, whose purpose is to glorify the succession of kings of the Pallava dynasty.
 - Here the descent to earth of the holy river Ganges is compared to the descent of the Pallavas, from their mythical ancestor Lord Vishnu himself.
 - Also, in another dimension the Bas Relief is believed to be an inspiration of the Sanskrit literary masterpiece Kiratarjuniya by the great poet Bharavi. The Great Penance Relief is regarded as a visual Kiratarjuniya which narrates the story of Arjuna and Lord Shiva, who came in the guise of a Kirata, the hunter. The intense penance that Arjuna did and how Lord Shiva blessed him and granted him the mighty Pasupatha weapon form the story. The hero of the work is Arjuna, who is believed to be

the ascetic doing penance in the Great Relief. That he is Arjuna is also indicated by the presence of the monkey below the ascetic and the snake princess in the fissure. Arjuna's flag has a monkey in it and the naga (snake) princess is Ulupi, one of the queens of Arjuna.

The names of the Pallava kings generally end with the word 'Varman'. Varman literally means 'he that is protected by'. The headless figure of king Narasimhavarman is placed under the temple of Lord Vishnu, right beneath Vishnu's protective upraised palm, implying that the entire succession of the Pallava kings was under the protection of none other than Lord Vishnu, their mythical ancestor.

- According to some scholars, the 2 headless figures facing king Narasimhavarman are 'doubles', representing both the Pallava kings Mahendravarman and Simha Vishnu and also sage Agasthya and Drona.
- Agasthya is represented here to show that Mamalla destroyed the city of Vatapi, just as Agasthya destroyed the demon by the same name Vatapi.
- Drona, the father of Ashvatthama is given importance here as an illustrious ancestor of the Pallavas.

Some other monuments at Mahabalipuram include:

i. **Krishna's Butterball:** Is a huge boulder that stands precariously on a rock and formed due to weathering. It is named so after the prodigious fondness for butter of Lord Krishna.

ii. **Pancha Pandava Cave**

iii. **Trimurthy cave:** Is dedicated to the Trimurtis- Brahma, Vishnu and Siva.

iv. **Mahishamardhini Cave:** Contains 3 cells in the cave and on the back wall of the central cell is the representation of Somaskanda (ie, Lord Skanda sitting between his parents Siva and Parvathi). The figure of Somaskanda is a Pallava speciality. At either end of this cave are 2 large panels, one representing Mahishamardhini and the other Seshasayi Vishnu.

v. **Tiger Cave:** Is a rock-cut shrine of Goddess Durga belonging to the period of Rajasimha. And nearby is found a Subramanya temple.

vi. **Athiranachandha Cave:** Is a cave temple dedicated to Siva and named after King Athiranachanda, one of the surnames of king Rajasimha.

vii. **Krishna Mandapam:** Depicts in sculpture Krishna effortlessly lifting the Govardhana hill to protect the people from the severe storm caused by Indra. This representation of the Govardhana scene is regarded as the best in India.

viii. **Varaha Mandapam:** Is a 7th century cave temple of the period of king Narasimhavarman and dedicated to the 3rd incarnation of Vishnu namely, Varaha. One of its panels contains a beautiful sculpture of Trivikrama, the giant form which Vishnu assumed to subdue the demon king Mahabali.

ix. **Adi Varaha Mandapam:** This cave temple was begun by Narasimhavarman and completed by his grandson Parameswaravarman and hence named 'Parameswara Maha Varaha Vishnugriham'. In the sanctum made of mortar (and not stone) and brightly painted is found the figure of Varaha, the boar, raising the mother earth from the ocean. It also contains the royal portraits of Simhavisnu and Mahendravarman and therefore is considered to be the royal family shrine (Chapel Royal).

x. **Elephant Group:** Includes images of adult elephants, 2 little ones, a monkey and a partridge which some scholars believe is the depiction of a Jataka story related to the Buddha.

xi. **The Ganesha Ratha:** Is a monolithic temple constructed during the reign of Parameswaravarman in the latter half of the 7th century AD. Its roof is designed like the hood of a country wagon and has 9 vase shaped finials and can be considered as a precursor of the temple towers, which developed later.

xii. **Vishnu temple:** The lord is locally known as Sthalasayana Perumal who is shown carved lying on the floor with one hand supporting his head and the other in the traditional gesture of invitation. He is without his usual serpent couch and the conch and discus. His consort is known by the name of Nila Mangai. The Lord here is said to have manifested for the sake of his devotee sage Pundarika. This temple is one of the 108 places regarded as sacred by the Vaishnavites and is an important centre of pilgrimage for them. This temple belongs to the Vijayanagar period (14th century AD) and raised by king Parangusan.

xiii. **Raya Gopuram:** Is an unsuccessful attempt by the Vijayanagar rulers who came later at erecting a tall gopuram, ie an entrance tower. Only its foundation is seen.

xiv. **Lion Throne:** Is the beautiful sculpture of a majestic lion whose back has been made flat to serve as a seat and is believed to be the throne of the Pallavas. Some archaeologists believe that this sculpture and the platform on which it stands must have been the site of a Pallavan palace. Very close to the throne, right beneath the palace floor is the excavated remains of a rock cut treasury crypt in which king Narasimhavarman is believed to have stored the enormous fortune that he brought from the Chalukyan capital Vatapi after its conquest.

xv. **Old Light House:** Is a cave temple dedicated to Siva and excavated by Parameswaravarman. Its upper storey functioned as a lighthouse being the highest point of the town. In its premises is also found a masonry Siva temple called Olakkanatha temple, belonging to the period of Rajasimha.

Thus, Mahabalipuram invokes a certain kind of mystery with its sculptural extravaganza depicting the strong artistic temperament of the Pallavas, who were the pioneers in South Indian art.