

Art And Architecture Under Imperial Cholas - A Study

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Abstract

The period of the imperial Cholas (c. 850 CE - 1250 CE) in South India was one of continuous improvement and refinement of Chola art and architecture. They used the wealth gained from their extensive conquests to construct long-lasting stone temples and exquisite bronze sculptures in an almost entirely Hindu cultural setting. The Cholas built their temples in the style of the Pallava dynasty, which was influenced by the Amaravati school of architecture. Chola artists and artisans drew further inspiration from other contemporary art and architectural schools, elevating the Chola temple design to new heights. In addition to temples, the Cholas constructed hospitals, public utility buildings, and palaces. Many such structures are mentioned in inscriptions and in contemporary accounts. The golden palace allegedly built by Aditya Karikala for his father Sundara Chola is an example of such a structure. However, such structures were made of perishable materials, such as wood and fired bricks, and have not withstood the test of time.

Keywords: *Temple Architecture, perishable, temple designs, Amaravathi school of Architecture*

INTRODUCTION

The Chola kings constructed numerous temples throughout their kingdom, which typically included the plains, Central and Northern Tamil Nadu, and at times the entire state of Tamil Nadu, as well as adjoining parts of modern Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Three major phases in the evolution of Chola temple architecture, beginning with the early phase of Vijayalaya Chola and continuing until Sundara Chola, the middle phase of Rajaraja Chola and Rajendra Chola when achievements scaled heights never reached before or since, and the final phase during the Chalukya Chola period of Kulottunga I until the Chola empire's demise.

The architecture of the Cholas, as expressed in the features of temples, is divided into three divisions:

- 1) The early Chola temple architecture starting from 850-985 A.D. (from Vijayalaya Chola to Rajaraja I)
- 2) The medieval Chola temple architecture from 985-1070 A.D.(from Rajaraja 1 to Kulottunga 1).
- 3) The later Chola temple architecture from 1070-1250 A.D. (from Kulottunga I to Rajendra III).

The early Chola Temple Architecture:

The replacement of brick by stone structure went on steadily under the Cholas. The Anbil Plates of Sundara Chola mention that Aditya I covered the banks of the Kaveri with temples of Siva. Many of them were replacements of old brick temples.¹

The early Chola temple:

About the early Chola temples Percy Brown observes: "All the small structures are very complete in their formation and display a freshness of spirit in marked contrast to the last productions of the declining style of the Pallavas. They appear to herald a new movement." The Vijayala-Cholesvaram of Narttamalai is the first of the early Chola temples. The main temple is built entirely of stone.² The Vijayala-Cholesvaram of Narttamalai is the first with an area of 1240 sq.ft. The garbhagriha is circular and enclosed by a solid wall of five feet thickness. The circular wall is enclosed square structure of twenty nine feet, which leaves a narrow circumbulatory between the two walls. The Vimana rises in the diminishing tiers and is hollow and diminishing in size. The sikhas smooth doom circular in section. The pillars within the antards square in section. There are seven sub-shrines, all replicas of the m shrine.³

A distinctly recognizable phase in the history of Chi architecture is seen with the accession of Aditya. The temples iKilaiyur, Tiruchchendurai, Lalgudi, Kadiyur, Kumbakonam and Pullalamangal belonged to Aditya's period. The Tirunageswara temple at Kumbakonam is well-known for its devakosta sculpture. The figur of the Queen and the Ramayana panels are notable. In Viralur, the small Siva temple has a circular Vimana. The Balasubramaniyatempl of Kannanur is marked by entire yalis in the frieze of the entablature It carries, at the four corners of its aditala four elephant figures symbols of Kartikeya, Most typical of the transition period is the large and well preserved temple at Tirukkattalai built by Aditya. The central shrine comprises a square garbhagriha and an ardha mandapa. On the niches in the tiers of the Vimana are found seated Dakshinamurti and Bhiksataṇamūrti in the south Varahamurti, Vishnu on the west and two Brahmas in the south. Like Nandi of the earlier times, Chandesa has a more honoured place during this period.

The later Chola temple architecture:

In the later Chola period (1070-1250A.D.), temple construction was as active as ever. Two large temples - Airavatesvara Temple of Darasuram and the Tribhuvanam Temple of Kulottunga III - are landmarks in the evolution of Chola architecture.⁴

Main features:

- The central corbel develops into madalai and later into pushpapodigai.
- The walls of the Later Cholas temples have a greater number of niches and are decorated with a new feature known as tiruvachi.
- Another feature introduced during this period was the kumbhapanjara between the niches. It is so called because it is in the form of a pillar or tree rising from Kumbha.
- The elaboration of the gopura was another major development in the later Chola phase.

The best known examples of later Chola gopura are Tiruchchengattangudi and the eastern tower in the Nagesvara temple, Kumbakonam. The gopura's height is greater than that of the Vimana. Most of the gopuras of the period are five-storeyed. Dressed And curved stones are used for building them upto kapota and, above it; the construction is done with brick, mortar and plaster. The rising tiers are decorated with salas, kutus and sculpture.⁵ It is from this phase that the gopuras in the Tamil country became huge and massive. The extent of the later Chola tower shows that the number of talas in the gopura should be in accordance with the number of Storeys in the Vimana.

Kampaheswara Temple, Tirubhuvanam:

The Kampaheswara Temple in Tirubhuvanam which is described as Tirubhuvanavireswara in the inscription was built by Kulottunga III. This temple is much similar to the Airavateswara temple including its wheeled porch mandapa and is a veritable museum of sculptures of varied iconography that includes some fine dance poses. Of the maingopuras, the inner one in front and the rear one are ruined on top and the taller outer-front gopura has the characteristic square shape of the period. ⁶ The pilasters of the basement carry scroll

work (Kodikkarukku) while the recesses are adorned by dancing figures representing Bharatanatya poses. The Vimana is larger (120 feet in height) than that of Darasuram temple Vimana. The Vimana is a tapering pyramid of six diminishing talas of which the two lowest cover the ardha mandapa also. The ardha mandapa itself is a multiwheeled chariot with two elephants in front of the steps and the projecting axles are supported by rampant lions. The Devi Shrine in front of the north and the Chandeswara Shrine to the north of the Vimana are both coeval with the main temple. Sculptured panels depicting scenes from the Ramayana adorn the base of the temple. This is the last temple to preserve the predominance of the Vimana characteristic of the Chola style of architecture.⁷

The Cholas also built many buildings such as public utility buildings and palaces. Many such buildings find mention in their inscriptions and in contemporary accounts. The golden palace Aditya Karikala built for his father Sundara Chola is an example for such a building. The excavations at GangaikondaCholapuram reveal a part of the Chola palace. However, such buildings were of perishable materials such as timber and burnt bricks and have not survived the ravages of time. As builders, the Cholas improved on the excellent architectural tradition of their predecessors. The spirit displayed by the Chola monuments is absent in the larger temples of the later periods which, though noted for their scale and majesty, do not show much innovation in architectural details.⁸

The Icons:

The Chola artists showed their skill in executing icons in stone and metals. The stone images are installed in the walls of temples. Icons of the pre Rajaraja period are seen in the Tiruvalisvaram – temple. Generally the Saiva forms predominate in the Chola period. The earliest Chola sculpture is the statue of the mother goddess in the temple of Vijayalaya – Choleswaram at Narttamalai. The images of VinadharaDakshinamurthi of the Tirukkattalai and Koḍumbalar temples and that of Ardhanareswara at Kodumbalur are early works of Chola sculpture.⁹ The two Brahadisvara temples at Thanjavur and GangaikondaCholapuram contain numerous icons of a large size. The outer wall of the garbhagriha in GangaikondaCholapuram is adorned with the icons of Harihara, Nataraja, Vishnu, Lingodhbava, Dakshinamurthy, Brahma and Kartikeya. The most admired sculpture known as Chandesh anugrahamurthi is on the north side. The Kankalamurth and Gajasamharamurthi sculptures in Darasuram are other examples of Chola iconography. Sarasvati, Kalarimurthi, Tripurantaka of Thanjavur, Nataraja, Chandeshanugrahamurthi, Harihara and Surya of GangaikondaCholapuram, and Biksataṇa with Rishipatnis and Mohini in polished black stone in Darasuram are notable works of Chola sculpture.¹⁰

The Metal icons:

Along with temple art and architecture, the art of metal casting also received extensive royal patronage. Bronze was used for metal images, and the metal icons that were made by the cire perdu process were solid, hollow or semi-hollow. Chola period bronzes were created using the lost wax technique. It is known in artistic terms as Cire perdue. Beeswax and kungilium (a type of camphor) are mixed with a little oil and kneaded well.¹¹ The figure is sculpted from this mixture fashioning all the minute details. This is the wax model original. The entire figure is then coated with clay made from termite hills until the mould is of a necessary thickness. Then the whole thing is dried and fired in an oven with cowdung cakes. The wax model melts and flows out, while some of it vapourises.¹² The metal alloy of bronze is melted and poured into the empty clay-mould. This particular bronze alloy is known as Panchaloham. When the metal has filled all crevices and has settled and hardened and cooled, the mould is broken off. The bronze figure thus obtained is then cleaned, finer details are added, and blemishes are removed, smoothed, and polished well. Hence each bronze icon is unique and the mould cannot be used to create copies. Quantitative and qualitatively the Chola iconography reached a great height. The reigns of Rajaraja I and Rajendra I mark the golden age bronze images in south India as the metal images are mostly cast in bronze. The Chola bronze Images vary in size. Many of the first specimens are large and heavy. The number of images in the period from 940-970 A.D is

comparatively less. But with the accession of Rajaraja I the classical school of Chola bronze icons commenced.¹³

The icons of Minor Deities

The Chola period is important for the prolific production of icons of minor deities in metals. Images of Kali, Ayyanar, Chandesa, Nandi and Surya were made. The Tiruvīḍaikali temple has Subramaniya as Devasenapati with a prabhavali encircling him. Since the Cholas were powerful warriors, the concept of Subramaniya was popular. The largest bronze of Subramaniya of this period is at Gangaikonda Cholapuram. The same temple has a metal image of Durga.¹⁴

The icons of saints

From the eleventh century onwards, the bronze images of saints also became popular. Almost all big Siva temples have the idols of the four NayanmarsAppar, Sundarar, Sambandar, and Manikavasagar. Kannapar, Kotpuli, Sundarar's consort ParavaNnachchiar and Tirumangal Alvar were revered with the installation of their idols.¹⁵

Decorative Motifs

Dvarapalakas figures at the side of the gateways and entrances of the temple belong to this group. They differ with the cult followed in the shrine of the temple. The mouldings in the temples have friezes of birds and animals.¹⁶ The plinth was also often broken by niches of varying sizes and designs. The Narttamalai and Tribhuvanam temples are noted for their flight of steps and the ornamental balustrades on their sides. In the Darasuram temple, the RajarajagambhiraTirumandapa resembles a chariot on wheel drawn by elephants. There are panels of puranic stories on the plinth. The Periyapuram sculptures in the Darasuram temple are well-known. One hundred and eight Bharatanaty dancing poses are sculptured on the eastern gopura of Chidambaram temple. The Thanjavur temple has eighty one poses in the inner-pradakshana path while the remaining (in the one hundred and eight) are left incomplete. Thus the various forms of icons of the Chola period are known for their aesthetic beauty and religious purpose.¹⁷

CONCLUSION

The Chola temples differ from the structural temples of Pallavas. The lowermost tier of the Vimana which is extended to the ardha mandapa in front of the garbhagriha in the Pallava temple is restricted to the garbhagriha alone in the Chola temple. The rounded Kumuda with two horizontal figures in the shape of lotus petals and Vyala-nala on the base is one of the interesting changes effected during the period. The Chola temples are devoid of extravagant sculptural decoration on the exterior walls above the base. It indicates the appreciation of plain space. The cornice above the wall gets a fixed appearance in the Chola temple. The pillars and pilasters that articulate the wall space are comparatively much expanded with changes in the shape of the idol below. The space in niches in the walls of the early Chola temple is narrower unlike in the Pallava monuments. In the place of shovel-headed finials of the Kudus of the Pallava time, one now finds lion-headed Kudus. In this period there was a main temple with auxiliary temples around it. In the Garbhagriha Devagostas bold sculptures are enshrined. Adisthana has comic features, Bodhaganas and Yalis. The Chola order of the capital differs from that of the Pallavas two respects a neck moulding (Padmabandha) is introduced between the shaft and the capital, another addition at the lower end in the form of a pot (kalasa); the abacus or palagai becomes much expanded with a thick square slab of stone which together with the moulding (idal on its lower side) becomes the most striking feature. The palagai becomes thinner later and the idal undergoes modification.

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