

Review on Ancient Tamil Architecture: A Immortal Heritage of Creativity and Artistic Perfection

OPEN ACCESS

Manuscript ID:
ASH-2024-11047348

Volume: 11

Issue: 4

Month: April

Year: 2024

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

Received: 12.01.2024

Accepted: 25.03.2024

Published: 01.04.2024

Citation:
Ramalingam, Arulraj.
“Review on Ancient Tamil
Architecture: A Immortal
Heritage of Creativity
and Artistic Perfection.”
*Shanlax International
Journal of Arts, Science
and Humanities*, vol. 11,
no. 4, 2024, pp. 121–27.


DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v11i4.7348>



This work is licensed
under a Creative Commons
Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0
International License

Arulraj Ramalingam

Puduvai Tamil Sangam, Puducherry, India

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1412-0623>

Abstract

Ancient Tamil architecture spans millennia, and it is an acknowledgement of the rich cultural and creative legacy of the Tamil people and Tamil community. Originating from the Sangam period (300 BCE to 300 CE) the architecture of Tamil Nadu is deeply intertwined with the rich cultural, social, and political developments that shaped the region over centuries. The architectural legacy of Tamil Nadu, best known for its Dravidian-style temples, has taken shape throughout different periods, leaving a unique imprint on the terrain. Also, ancient Tamil architecture is characterized by its use of granite, delicate carvings, mandapa (pillared hall), vimanas, ornate detailing, and deep spiritual and religious meanings. These ancient temples act as cosmic blueprints, outlining cosmology and showing the soul's journey to enlightenment. However, these historical sites are under threat from urbanization, environmental degradation, and neglect. Conservation and preservation initiatives are vital for preserving cultural heritage places. In this review article, will help to learn how Tamil architects continue to be inspired by the creative structural components, elaborate carvings, and spiritual symbols found in Tamil temples, thereby contributing to the preservation or evolution of Tamil architectural traditions.

Keywords: Ancient Tamil Architecture, Sangam Period Architecture, Pallava Dynasty Architecture, Artistic Heritage of Tamil, Engineering Marvels of Tamils, Chola Dynasty

Introduction

The ancient Tamil architecture, which flourished over ages, is a reflection of the cultural and creative wealth of the liberal Tamil people. Despite its Sangam age roots (300 BCE–300 CE), it is clear that the art style encompasses creativity, spirituality, and aesthetic prowess (Jesudasan). The symbol of Tamil Nadu, the Dravidian-style temple, has undergone several variations over the ages, leading to the emergence of a distinct architectural culture prevailing in the state (Hardy; Kramrisch; Tillotson). However, ancient Tamil architecture is distinguished by its use of main stone, known as granite, as a building material, miniature carvings of mythological stories, artistic ornamentation, and temples built in various directions. Temples in ancient Tamil architecture contain profound connotations that are related to spirituality and religious purposes, and they also serve as cosmic maps that follow Hindu cosmology and depict the road to the soul's journey toward enlightenment. The complex stone works shown on pillars and walls depict religious events, and the sculptures are employed in temples to teach children about their culture.

Also, Tamil architecture is an array of different periods of time that describe people's cultural and artistic abilities in Tamil region. This culture was from the Sangam Age; it reflects a synthesis strives to maintain progress, spirituality, and elegance (Sullivan). The historic inheritance of Tamil Nadu, which is commonly recognized as Dravidian-style temple, has been constantly developing since early times, thereby generating a unique cultural impression of the area. It consists of a mandapa (pillared pavilion) with anthypade decorative elements.

Temples in the ancient Tamil region had both spiritual and spiritual value, which was expressed through constructions exhibiting Hindu cosmology (Sastri and Ramanna). These structures and texts reveal the soul's path toward spiritual enlightenment. Pillars and walls have been decorated with complex sculptures reflecting scenes from sacred scriptures and narrations. Temple sculptures are also used to aid young children who are learning about their culture.

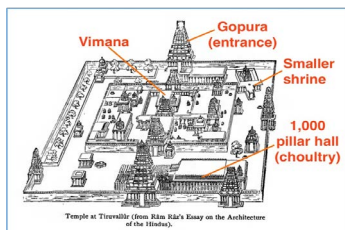
Despite its long-term presence in the modern world, the collection of ancient Tamil architecture remains vulnerable, influenced by the damaging effects of urbanization, environmental degradation, and a lack of care. The ideal strategy for preserving our cultural excellence is through government funding, community education, and international cooperation.

Today, the influence of Tamil architecture not only lies in history but also shapes modern architecture. Architects will remain inspired by the innovative structural elements, intricate carving, and symbols of spiritual aspect as the Tamil temples blend traditional and modern architectural ideas to reflect the past and be part of the process that either will keep the Tamil architecture styles adjacent or alter them.

Historical Context

Sangam Period (300 BCE-300 CE) Architecture

The origins of ancient Tamil architecture can be traced back to the Sangam period, when the Tamil people thrived in a civilization dominated by trade, literature, and arts patronage (Singh).



Courtesy: wikipedia.org

According to Tamil traditions, there were three Sangam periods: the head Sangam, the middle Sangam, and the last Sangam. Historians refer to the latter of these as the Sangam period, whereas the first two are legendary. The Sangam literature, which comprises poems and epics, provides unique insights

on the building techniques of the time (Jesudasan). The sangam era poems regularly describe majestic mansions, assembly halls, and metropolitan centers, illustrating how society loved the elegance of architecture.

Pallava Dynasty (3rd-9th Century CE) Architecture

The Pallava dynasty, a South Indian region of Tamil Nadu, ruled from the 3rd to 9th centuries CE. They were skilled warriors and patrons of art and architecture, leading to a unique style of rock-cut architecture (Lochtefeld). The iconic structures at Mahabalipuram, such as the monolithic rathas and the Shore Temple, showcase the Pallava's commitment to aesthetic excellence and innovative architectural forms. These temples, carved from solid stone, feature intricate sculptures and reliefs representing Hindu mythology (UNESCO). The Shore Temple, an iconic example, embodies the Pallavas' commitment to spiritual beauty.



Courtesy: www.google.com

Chola Dynasty (9th-13th Century CE) Architecture

The Chola rule, lasting from the 9th to the 13th centuries CE, was a significant period in Tamil architecture (Sastri). The reign of Rajaraja Chola and Rajendra Chola marked the golden era of detail-oriented paintings, concrete sculptures, globular designs, and ornate figures. The Chola rulers were noted builders of temples, known as Dravidian architecture, which reached its peak during this time. The Brihadeshwara Temple in Thanjavur, built by Raja Raja Chola I, is an impressive example of Chola architecture (UNESCO; Sastri). The tower 'vimana' and sculptures representing the height of the temple showcase the splendor and artistic perfection of Chola architecture. The Brihadeshwara Temple in Thanjavur is a testament to the elaboration and technical precision of the Chola temples.



Courtesy: www.google.com

Nayak Dynasty (16th-17th century CE) Architecture

Another dynasty known as the Nayak dynasty, the period after the end of the Vijayanagara Empire, is also responsible for the development of Tamil architecture (Kandavalli). That is the case for the Meenakshi Amman Temple in Madurai, which was built by Nayak rulers, and it showcases their proficiency in art and innovation in architecture. The temple complex with its gopurams soaring into the air and sculptural designs provides an example that the traditional Dravidian architectural tradition (specifically naming them) has continued. The Vijayanagar Empire, also known as the Vijayanagara Empire, is landmark architecture of Tamil art that emerged from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century and with its own brilliance added to the South Indian architecture (Saletore). The Virupaksha Temple in Hampi a UNESCO World Heritage Site portrays the Vijayanagara architecture that is spacious courtyards, decorated pillars and lots of carvings. The Nayak Dynasty in its turn added something from Tamil architecture, namely gopurams and carvings.



Courtesy: www.google.com

Architectural Innovations and Engineering Marvels

The accomplished work of the early Tamil builders in the rock-hewn temples of Mahabalipuram through the engineering demonstration of their great wisdom highlights the engineering virtuosity of the

people of that time (Michell). The monolithic rathas indicate to the audience that the Pallavas were not only experts in the arts but also in engineering. In James C. Harle's *The Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent*, not only does he describe the temple's sculptures, but he also emphasizes the relationships between these ornaments and temples' architecture (Harle). The Chola king Raj Raja 1's Brihadishwara Temple in Thanjavur, who built it for a very long time and there is a very elaborate story behind its construction and this terrific building is a marvel of engineering with its high soaring shikhara and a gigantic monolithic dome. Dr. S. R. Balasubrahmanyam's studies in *Middle Chola Temples*. This accompanying artwork highlights the architectural complexities and methodologies used in temple construction.

Artistic Flourish and Iconography

The Tamil architecture of the ancient period is also highlighted by the sophisticated sculptures and fine engravings, which, in addition to looking decorative, are interpreted in symbolic form as well. Not only do they offer rich decorative value, but these depictions of deities, religious narratives, and celestial beings equally convey spiritual messages of the highest philosophical order. In his book 'Temples of South India' that earned him fame, eminent art historian Srinivasan K.R goes deep into the unique artistic characteristics showcased in the Tamil temples through a straightforward analysis of the iconography and symbolism woven into the sculptures (Srinivasan: *Temples of South India*).

The artistry in Nayak architecture reached its zenith at the Meenakshi Amman Temple in Madurai. Vidya Dehejia's academic work titled *Art of the Imperial Cholas* is a study of the meaning of the Chola temples' iconography, which emphasizes transmitting religious and cultural teaching through them (Dehejia). The sophisticated complexities of Meenakshi Amman Temple's gopuram and mandapam not only display Tamil mythology and spirituality but also function as a living canvas for it.

Spiritual Significance and Ritual Practices

The architecture of ancient Tamil not only embodies the divinity of art, but its structural and

ritualistic features make it a hallowed precinct dedicated to religious cults and spiritual thought processes. The cosmic symbolism culminating in temple layouts, the interior space of the sacred shrine, and the various social acts done in the different sections of the complex are all common places of spiritual experience. George Michell's book identifies the spiritual aspects of architecture exemplified by Hindu temples, which connect the internal phenomenon to the exterior (Michell).

The sanctity of the Brihadeshwara Temple is discussed in detail by Chitra Madhavan in her work Brihadisvara Temple. Madhavan is researching the World Heritage Monument, the ceremonies and their sacred meanings, the architectural components, and the mystical atmosphere that have attracted pilgrims here for ages, just to name only three of the themes she hopes to present. It allows you to learn about the religious and spiritual features of Tamil architecture, which improves the relevance of its cultural significance.

Conservation Challenges and Initiatives

Concerning the issue of safeguarding the Tamilian ancient architecture remains a timely question for advancements aided by urbanization, climate change, and abandonment. The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), which is considered the key player in the conservation of monuments, both tangible and intangible, heritage sites, and historical relics, The article by R. Nagaswamy that deals with The Crisis in Art Conservation in Tamil Nadu is an exposure of the critical undertakings done to preserve Tamil art and architecture; it provides a glimpse of importance of art conservation in Tamil Nadu (Nagaswami).

The conservation project of the Hindi Virupaksha Temple is one of the numerous examples that legitimize this point. The project is described in the report conducted by John Sanday Associates titled Conservation of Living Religious Heritage. The project has a multidisciplinary approach. It strives to combine the historical preservation of the buildings with community participation. It can serve as the best example of preserving structures of historical importance in the world.

Contemporary Adaptations and Global Influence

The lasting footprint of ancient Tamil architecture has surpassed the limits of the Tamil region. The footprint is transcending the boundaries of Tamil territory and influencing contemporary architectural styles all over the world. Architect A. P. Kanvinde's Indian Temple Architecture. Form and Transformation is a journey of blending traditional Indian architectural concepts, those of Tamil Nadu emerging as prominent among others, and contemporary design in one (Balasubramaniam). And one of the most celebrated examples of this influence is given by Adam Hardy in his paper, Dravidian Theory and Practice of Temple Architecture in Medieval India.

In Washington DC, the BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir showcases characteristics of Tamil architecture through its modern architecture (Hardy). Recreating the basic architecture of the traditional Indian temples and bringing in the detailed carvings and arch-manish Tamil temple designs has been employed in the building of this mandir. Modern-day architects are now aware of Tamil classical designs and heritage as they combine them with new designs while attempting to preserve the cultural values that the architecture embodies.

Architectural Symbolism in Ancient Tamil Temples

The subtle ornamentation of the indigenous Tamil temples, together with the sophisticated sculptures and carvings, do not confine themselves to mere decoration. These bear deep connotations and spiritual messages. Dr. R. Nagaswamy's extensive research in Tamil Nadu Temples: The Javanese term "Kebaya Sejarah" translates as "A Treasure-Trove of Art" and, as such, explains the symbols found in temple architecture. After discovering the plan's role in the layout of a temple, the location of deities, and the themes of choice of iconography, it unfolds a multilayered story of coherence with the philosophical and spiritual ideas of Hinduism.

The Brihadeshwara Temple, meticulously analyzed in Douglas Barrett's "Early Cola Architecture and Sculpture," is the very one that illustrates the Cholas' artistic symbolism in architecture. The temple has a vimana that is placed

above the main sanctum sanctorum. This vimana is believed to be similar to Mount Meru, which is the cosmic mountain in Hindu mythology. Barrett pursues cosmic symbolism, which is seen as the meta-language of architecture. Therefore, Barrett teases out the sacred concepts of space in the temple's structure.

Engineering Marvels of Pallava Rock-Cut Temples

The Pallava rock-cut temples, especially the ones in Mahabalipuram, offer sight-seeing tours of outstanding engineering wonders. "The Pallavas" is a book by K. R. Srinivasan that studies the history of the Pallavas and their role as builders and architects of sculptures. In turn, the research shows the engineering problems solved by cutting delicate details in the hard stone as well as the craftsmanship underlying the fine work of sculptors and architects (Srinivasan: *Cave-temples of the Pallavas*).

The book Mahabalipuram, Unfinished Poetry in Stone, authored by S Swaminathan, depicts largely the rock-cut temples of Mahabalipuram in detail (Swaminathan). As deep as their research is, they are scrutinizing the interior design and manners of building that the Pallavas used. Perhaps the book discusses how nature's morphology can be used to produce remarkable pieces with a strong foundation that lasts over time.

Dravidian Temple Architecture and Its Philosophical Underpinnings

Typical of the Dravidian style of temple architecture, as displayed by temples erected by the Chola dynasty, is a deep commitment to philosophical and religious principles. The South Indian temples described by Dr. K. R. Srinivasan provide readers with a detailed overview of the evolution of Dravidian temple architecture. Srinivasan's work focuses on the Chola's philosophy behind the temple's design and layout, an approach that integrates ideas from ancient Agam texts, imparting her temple with something more than just a material structure and the representation of immaterial spiritual ideas (Srinivasan: *Temples of South India*).

The philosophical underpinnings of Dravidian architecture are further explored by Dr. Adam Hardy

in Indian Temple Architecture, The Form and Shape of Things. Hardy's work is based on the cultural tradition of the vimana, the use of mandapas in the rituals, and the idea of the temple as a miniature replica of a universe (Hardy). Knowing the phosphhectical principles of Dravidian architecture increases our sensation of these buildings as more than just temples; they are the human manifestation of spiritual ideas.

Nayak Architecture and the Meenakshi Amman Temple

The Meenakshi Amman Temple, which is a masterpiece of the Nayak architectural style in Madurai, is actually a mini-mirage of technical and artistic genius. The book Madurai, The Statue of Architecture in the Meenakshi Temple by Dr. R. Nagaswamy reports an extensive interpretation of the historical context, the architectural designs, and the cultural meaning. Nagaswamy's precise research reveals the veil of symbols in the temple figures and reliefs, which gives a critical insight into the sculptural method Nayaka cities employed.

This monograph on Nayak architecture is part of a larger volume on the art and architecture of the Indian subcontinent, which is authored by James C. Harle. Harle puts a spotlight on the various ways through which the Nayaks reinvent and rejuvenate the idea of space and the intricately detailed gopurams, accompanied by the figurative art sculpture that is incorporated into the building's design (Harle). In fact, the goddess Mekankshi Amman temple, as well as the Nayak kings' artistic expressions, run parallel.

Conservation Challenges and Initiatives: A Critical Assessment

Maintaining the old Tamil architecture remains an uphill battle, despite the fact that many works out there are dedicated to this. Dr. Shikha Jain's paper, Conservation Challenges and Management of Living Temples in Tamil Nadu, evaluatively investigates the conservation issues faced by the temples in these places. Through his work, Jain addresses the issues of the interplay of urbanization, changeable climate plans, and the lack of funding on the issue of the protection and preservation of architectural heritage. With the concern of a holy approach that

combines both cultural and environmental aspects of conservation, her work emphasizes this concept.

The importance of community involvement in conservation is emphasized in *Community Involvement in the Conservation of Built Heritage: The Interface of Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu* by S. Mahalingam. The paper presents successful cases when local communities have still had the chance to be stakeholders in the important historical structures within their area. This can be seen in the research of Mahalingam as a case in point where he points out the importance of community fit and social participation as the instruments to guarantee the conservation of ancient Tamil architecture in the long term.

Global Recognition and Influence

The impact of the Tamil architecture that is associated with antiquity occupies the field of view of different researchers from around the world. Diana L. Eck's *A Sacred Geography* digs into the global fascination with Indian temple design, which is clearly obvious, as evidenced by the popular Dravidian architectural style. Eck's comment on the hidden meaning of the spiritual effects present in the temple will give insights into the reason why these magnificent works are dear to a diverse society (Eck).

The influence of Tamil architecture on contemporary design is discussed in *The Art of Indian Asia*. In Heinrich Zimmer's 'Symbolism of Myth and Transformation', the art and architecture of India, which is Zimmer's topic, find multiple expressions, with the richness of culture in focus (Zimmer). Tamil traditions, being the core part of modern structures both in India and abroad, support the assertion that Dravidian architecture is not only the manifestation of historical heritage but also a timeless and universal philosophy.

Future Prospects and Challenges

Facing the challenges of the future regarding the ancient Tamil architecture, we don't have any choice but to consider and employ new directions to resolution. In the article *Archaeology and the Public in India*, K. R. Srinivasan investigates the cross-points of archaeology, public engagement, and cultural heritage management. What is very

interesting about Srinivasan's views on general public laws for preserving archaeological sites is that they are so relevant at the moment of Tamil architecture civil discussions and debates.

The digital preservation of architectural heritage is a frontier explored by Dr. Alok Tripathi in *Strategy and Implementation*, which is one of the contents of the paper *By using technology such as virtual reality and 3D modeling to maintain and exhibit our heritage sites* (Wu and Din). Tripathi puts emphasis on the deployment of technologies such as virtual reality and 3D modeling in conserving and showing heritage sites. The addition of digital platforms can not only open new ways of conserving, educating, and providing access to ancient structures but also widen the horizons for reading about this legacy from far-off places.

Conclusion

The ancient Tamil architecture should be studied as a discipline that combines the analysis of chronological data with philosophical questions and adapts new insights to the present time. A researcher is responsible for covering scholars and researchers, as well as ethical principles and art, in order to completely understand the cultural, spiritual, and artistic foundation of Tamil temples. The ancient Tamil architecture does not just remain an episode from the past; it is a living tradition that has a definite bearing on our sheds today and into the future. It joins the indigenous ethos and modern trend of spirituality with technology, symbolism, and aesthetics to create timeless beauties, representing Tamil principles. If we want to take care of this valuable cultural heritage, we must apply efforts on the part of national governments, local communities, and international agencies. The pragmatic choice to combine traditional principles with a contemporary approach is the accurate manifestation of Tamil architectural culture, expressing its vitality in all modern days. The ancient Tamil architecture study of is a venturesome journey not to confederate solely history; it is rather a probe into the soul of a society that formed a incredible collection of sculptures, culture, and spirituality.

Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References

- Balasubramaniam, Chitra. "Achyut Kanvinde: The Man behind Sustainable Designs." *The Hindu*, 2019.
- Dehejia, Vidya. *Art of the Imperial Cholas*. Columbia University Press, 1990.
- Eck, Diana L. *India: A Sacred Geography*. Harmony/Rodale, 2013.
- Fergusson, James. *The Rock-Cut Temples of India; Illustrated by Seventy-four Photographs taken on the spot by Major Gill*. 1864.
- Hardy, Adam. *Indian Temple Architecture: Form and Transformation: The Karnata Dravida Tradition 7th to 13th Centuries*. Abhinav Publications, 1995.
- Hardy, Adam. *The Temple Architecture of India*. Wiley, 2007.
- Harle, J. C. *The Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent*. Yale University Press, 1994.
- Jesudasan, Dennis S. "Keezhadi Excavations: Sangam Era Older than Previously Thought, Finds Study." *The Hindu*, 2019.
- Kandavalli, Balendu Sekaram. *The Nayaks of Madura*. Andhra Pradesh Sahitya Akademi, 1975.
- Kramrisch, Stella. *The Hindu Temple*. Motilal Banarsidass Publications, 1976.
- Lochtefeld, James G. *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Hinduism*. Rosen Publishing Group, 2002.
- Michell, George. *The Hindu Temple: An Introduction to its Meaning and Forms*. The University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- Nagaswami, R. *Art And Culture of Tamil Nadu*. Sundeep Prakashan, 1980.
- Saletore, B. A. *Social and Political Life in the Vijayanagara Empire (A.D. 1346-A.D. 1646)*. B.G. Paul & Company, 1934.
- Sastri, K. A. Nilakanta, and H. S. Ramanna. *Historical Method in Relation to Indian History*. 2019.
- Sastri, K. A. Nilakanta. *A History of South India: From Prehistoric Times to the Fall of Vijayanagar*. Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Singh, Upinder. *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12th Century*. Pearson Education, 2008.
- Srinivasan, K. R. *Cave-temples of the Pallavas*. Jon Press Private Limited, 1964.
- Srinivasan, K. R. *Temples of South India*. National Book Trust, 2005.
- Sullivan, Bruce M. *Historical Dictionary of Hinduism*. Scarecrow Press, 1997.
- Swaminathan, S. *Mahabalipuram Unfinished Poetry in Stone*. Arkey Graphics, 2010.
- Tillotson, G. H. R. "Svastika Mansion: A Silpa-Sastra in the 1930s." *South Asian Studies*, vol. 13, 1997, pp. 87-97.
- UNESCO. "Group of Monuments at Mahabalipuram." <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/249>
- UNESCO. "Great Living Chola Temples." <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/250>
- Wu, Steven, and Herminia Din. *Digital Heritage and Culture: Strategy and Implementation*. World Scientific Publishing Company, 2014.
- Zimmer, Heinrich. *The Art of Indian Asia: Its Mythology and Transformations*. Pantheon Books, 1955.

Author Details

Dr. Arulraj Ramalingam, Pudukottai Tamil Sangam, Pudukottai, India, **Email ID:** arulraj108@gmail.com