

Architecture

Brihadeeswara Temple: "Dakshina Meru"



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Picture 1. Brihadeeswara Temple. (Courtesy, Anuradha Dooney)

The Brihadeeswara Temple stands as a supreme example of Chola architecture. Built on a scale appropriate enough to house the presiding deity, Sri Brihadeeswara, or the Lord of the Universe, the temple continues to excite wonder at its many unique architectural features and living presence as a centre of Saiva devotion. During the period when Chola power was in the ascendant, (around 850-1350 AD) architecture in the Tamil country went through dramatic changes. Indeed before the time of the most famous Chola king, Rajaraja I, gopurams in temple complexes were not built on a very grand scale. During the reign of Rajaraja I, the temple at Tanjore was built not only as a monument to the sway of Chola power over many southern lands but as a living sign of Saiva concepts and beliefs. It was called 'Dakshina Meru' as a complement to the 'Uttara Meru' or the sacred mount of Kailasa, thought of as the spine of the universe. The Dakshina Meru was thought to be a centre of divine power analogous to the

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northern centre of Sri Kailas. Many inscriptions of Rajaraja I (A D 985-1012) reveal him to be a great warrior and an ardent devotee of Shiva. It is this spirit of ardent devotion that visualizes the entire temple complex itself as a visible symbol of the divine presence. Over the centuries the successive powers of the Nayakas and the Marathas added smaller shrines and other embellishments to the temple complex in a manner that is a tribute to the original founder as well as the spirit of Saivism.



Picture 2. *Gopuram* or entrance gate to the temple. (Courtesy, Anuradha Dooney)

Mythical accounts of the actual building of the temple and the underlying puranic accounts for the source of sacred power vested in this site abound. These sthalapuranas of varying antiquity contain narratives about the sacred geography of the location of the temple, anecdotes related to the building of this complex, accounts of kingly lineages and some canonical literature. Foremost among these texts is the *Brihadeeswara Mahatmya*, forming an extract of the *Bhavishyottara Purana*. It contains many legends related to the construction of the Brihadeeswara temple. The text, attributed to the legendary Vedavyasa, gives a mythical account of sixteen Chola kings and the temples they built. It describes the festivals and fairs held in the temple along with the *Kumbhabhishekham*. Another text of puranic nature is the *Parasara kshetra mahatmya*, which describes the greatness of Sri Brihadeeswara. The Tiruvisaippa of Karuvur Devar, is part of the Saiva canon and describes in ten cantos, each of the sacred spots visited by the saint. The ninth canto titled, *Tanjai Rajarajesvaram* speaks of the temple and its presiding deity with great lyrical beauty.

The saint Karuvurar played a pivotal role in the installation and consecration of the main Linga of the temple.

The temple complex is called 'Rajarajeswaram' after its founder, the great Chola monarch Rajaraja I. It is encompassed by the smaller fort called the Sivaganga fort believed to have been built by Sevappa Nayaka. There are three main entrances to the shrine called the *Keralantakam*, *Rasarasan* and *Tiruanukkam*. All the three entrances are guarded by *Dwarapalakas* or ferocious doorkeepers of huge proportions, all monoliths. The main entrance called 'Keralantakam', so named to commemorate Rajaraja's victory over the Chera king, leads to a majestic gopura measuring 90 feet in height. This second entrance, called 'Rasarasan' opens into a large central area housing the main shrine and the unique sub-shrines built during various successive stages of history. The outer part of the gopura contains the magnificent sculpture of Shiva seated in *sukhasana* and many scenes from the *Shivapurana*. The northern entrance to the temple complex is called 'Tiruanukkam'. Though it does not have a gopura over it, some sculptures of women holding auspicious objects such as *kalasams* etc. can be seen here. It is thought to have been embellished in the Kerala style with wooden pavilions overlaid with gold leaf in ancient times.



Picture 3. Nandi or Sacred Bull. (Courtesy, Anuradha Dooney)

The main shrine housing the unique and extraordinary shivalinga resonates with the serene power of its majestic scale and imposing proportions. It is divided into five areas, namely the *Garbhagriha* or the sanctum, the *Arhda-Mandapa* or the corridor encircling the sanctum, the *Maha-Mahamandapa* or the open aisle-like area, the *Stapana-Mahamandapa*

or the structure that houses the shrine of

Tyagaraja and the *Nartana* and *Vadya* Mandapas which are enclosed spaces that were presumably intended for musicians. The shivalinga itself is a very grand presence and is believed to house the powers of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva in its three divisions respectively. The topmost division is further sub-divided into ascending tiers of energy beginning with Rudra, Mahesha, Sadashiva, Parabindu, Paranadam, Parashakti and Parasivam. A remarkable feature of the structure over the main lingam, called the *Srivimanam* is that it is thought to enclose a sacred space within it. This sacred space around the lingam and within the soaring *Srivimana* is thought to be permeated with the sacred presence of Shiva in the form of the subtlest of all elements, space. The *linga* is an aniconic form of Shiva and the space within the *Srivimana* resonates with

the presence of the 'Adalvalla' or the Lord of the Dance. The height of the Srivimana is around 216 feet and has fourteen storeys, decorated with niches and images from the pantheon. A cupolic dome resting upon a single block of granite measuring around 25 square feet crowns the Srivimana. The base of the dome is beautified by two Nandis at each corner. The manner in which this massive block of granite was conveyed to the top of the structure is an architectural marvel by itself and a continuing source of wonder.

Apart from the main shrine there are many remarkable smaller shrines within the complex built at various stages of history. The shrine of Sri Subrahmanya, in the north-west corner has been celebrated in three verses by the saint Arunagirinatha. This shrine built on a base of around 45 square feet, is believed to date from the Nayaka period. The sanctum houses Subrahmanya with six faces, seated in sukhasana on his mount, the peacock. The deity, peacock and the Tiruvasi around the deity have all been carved from a single stone. On both sides of the deity are sculptures of his two wives, Valli and Devasena in standing poses. The entire shrine is a masterpiece of carved stone sculpture and a wealth of rich detailing. On the south western corner there is the shrine of Ganapati, dating from the time of the Maratha ruler, Serfoji II. It houses a large sculpture of Ganapati and has a wealth of Marathi inscriptions on the steps leading to the shrine. Behind this shrine, a hundred and eight Lingas are installed in a part of the circumambulatory corridor. It is said that the Serfoji II brought these Lingas from a village called Veerasingampettai and had them reconsecrated in the new premises in 1801. The shrine of



Picture 4. (Courtesy, Anuradha Dooney)

Goddess Brihannayaki, in the main courtyard of the temple is believed to date from the Fifteenth Century. The image of the presiding deity, measures up to more than seven feet and exudes serene majesty and grace. The goddess is standing with her two upper arms holding an arghhyamala and lotus and the two lower arms displaying the abhaya-varada mudras. Perhaps the oldest shrine in this complex is that of Sri Chandesvara in the north-central part of the compound. It is thought to have been built at the same time as the main temple. The massive Nandi image presiding

majestically inside a mandapa dating from Nayaka times, is a monolith with a height of around 12 feet. This pavilion, resting on sixteen pillars is in between the Rasarasan gateway and the Mahamandapam.

The temple has many niche-sculptures of the forms of Shiva. The figure of Lingodbhava is in a niche in the western side of the Srivimana. The knee-length form of Shiva is seen within a pillar like structure which represents the great column of fiery light.



Picture 5. Frescos in the pillared cloister.

Vishnu in the form of a wild boar dives low to find the base of this column and Brahma in the form of a Swan glides up into the heavens to discover the topmost limit of this column which is indeed shiva himself. Both Vishnu and Brahma are unable to measure the dimensions of this column of light. The northern part of the Srivimana has the exquisite niche-figure of Ardhanarisvara, with his right arm resting on Nandi's head. The Nandi is sculpted behind the figure of Ardhanarisvara. This part of the Srivimana also has the niche figure of Alingana Murti or Gouri Prasada Murti. Shiva is shown here with his left arm around Uma maheshvari's shoulders. Both figures exude a languid and reposeful grace.

The circumambulatory corridor around the *ardhamandapa* contains frescoes from the Chola period. They were discovered in the early half of the last century and display a variety of secular themes along with those that ardently celebrate the tenets of Saivism. Before the discovery of these frescoes, the Pallava paintings found in the Sri Kailasanatha Swami Temple of Kanchipuram were thought of as the main representatives of South Indian painting. The walls of the corridor are covered with paintings from floor to ceiling. The crumbling outer layer of the frescoes revealed a much older layer of frescoes underneath. The frescoes forming the outer layer contain labels in Telugu characters and mention the names of Sevappa and Achyutappa Nayaka. The older frescoes believed to have been executed at the time of the completion of the building of the Temple by Rajaraja lie underneath and portray many interesting scenes.

There is the remarkable scene of Siva at Kailasa sitting in a relaxed pose, attended by a group of dwarves behind him with Nandi the bull couching nearby. On the northern wall, there is the *puranic* scene of the destruction of the three cities by Shiva in the form of Tripurantaka, depicted on a grand scale. The central figure of Shiva radiates power with his arms wielding various weapons. An army of demons confronts him with some fearful and stricken rakshasa women clinging to them. On the west wall there is a painting on a grand scale of Nataraja dancing in a pavilion which clearly resembles the Golden Pavilion of the Nataraja shrine at Chidambaram. Though the figure of Nataraja is discernible only in part, the onlooker shares the spirit of serene devotion with the groups of devotees portrayed in the fresco. He is worshipped by a group of three women with folded hands, dancing girls drawn in smaller scale, and some male devotees in worshipful poses drawn below. The wall opposite the Nataraja figure, there are some exquisitely graceful drawings of seated female figures. The fingers caught in a sinuous gesture evoke refined grace.

From the times of the Cholas the temple and its surrounding environs have been a cradle of music and dance traditions. The panels of karana sculptures in the first storey of the temple illustrate eighty one of the hundred and eight karanas codified in ancient texts such as the Natyashastra. These are thought to have been executed at the same time as the temple was built. The temple has various inscriptions which confirm that elaborate rituals including dance and music were part of its observances. Generous endowments were bestowed upon the artists for their ritual services. Through the centuries the temple has been a towering presence with its presiding deity inspiring many literary and musical compositions. The continuation and revival of older temple traditions by the Nayakas and Marathas inspired many compositions such as the Kuravanji etc. to flourish. Many of the compositions of the Tanjore Quartette, dating from the early to mid Nineteenth Century are in praise of Sri Brihadeesvara and his consort, Goddess Brihannayaki.

The temple recognized by the UNESCO as a World Heritage site, is a living monument which draws to itself devotees, lovers of literature, music and other arts, scholars and historians. It completed a thousand years of existence in the year 2010, and this occasion was observed with great fanfare by the state with many artists and scholars gathering there to pay tribute to its magnificent presence.

Acknowledgement

Pictures 1, 2, 4. Courtesy Anuradha Dooney, <http://anuradhadasi.wordpress.com>.

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