

A Study on the Temple Architecture of the Vijayanagar Empire - The Madurai Phase (1600-1700)

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Abstract

Tamil Nadu, often described as the “land of temples,” preserves one of the richest continuities of Dravidian sacred architecture, with thousands of temples functioning historically as centres of worship, education, social life, festivals, craft production, and even emergency relief. This study examines temple architecture under the Vijayanagar Empire, with particular attention to the Madurai phase (1600–1700) under the Nayaks, when Dravidian forms reached their most expansive and elaborate expression. After the defeat of Vijayanagar at Talikota (1565), artistic patronage shifted from imperial rulers to regional powers, and the Madurai Nayaks emerged as crucial patrons who transformed earlier shrines into vast temple-cities. The paper traces stylistic development across the Sangama, Tuluva, and Nayaka periods, highlighting continuity with Chola and Pandya prototypes alongside innovations that emphasised monumental scale and complex spatial planning. Key architectural elements —soaring rayagopuras with multi-tiered brick-and-stucco superstructures, massive enclosure walls, ornate mandapas (including kalyana and thousand-pillared halls), and long pillared corridors — are analysed as both functional responses to increasingly elaborate ritual processions and as statements of political authority and religious identity.

Keywords: Vijayanagar Empire, Nayak Dynasty, Dravidian Temple Architecture, Rajagopura, Mandapa, Temple Complexes and Enclosures

Introduction

Tamil Nadu is known as the land of temples. There are more than 30,000 temples in Tamil Nadu built by various dynasties. Tamil Nadu is known as the 'land of temples'. There are more than 30,000 temples in Tamil Nadu built by various dynasties. Tamil Nadu reflects early Dravidian art and culture, characterised by ornamented temples with soaring towers known as gopuras. These temples share the same physical features, such as the gopuram over the entrance gates in all four directions, the vimana, the tower over the sanctum, and the spacious halls and corridors. The temples were not just a place of worship but also a place for social gathering, education and celebration. The temples also acted as the storehouses for emergencies, and many a temple also maintained hospitals. The art and craft flourished and were encouraged in the temples. Art was performed in all the forms, i.e., music, dance, drama and handicrafts. The great Vijayanagar Empire, which owed its origin to Muslim aggression in the fourteenth century, was itself defeated and eclipsed in 1565 on the battlefield of Talikota by a confederacy of Muslim rulers of the Deccan¹. The artistic traditions of the Hindus, which had so far flourished in the warmth of royal patronage, now depended for encouragement on the rulers of new principalities that had originally been united under Vijayanagar. Of the several states into which the empire splintered, the contribution of Madurai was by far the most significant for the further advancement of the Dravidian style.

Vijayanagar Empire

The Vijayanagar Empire was a Hindu empire based in the Deccan Plateau region of

South India. Established in 1336 by Harihara I (ruled 1336-135 CE), it enjoyed its greatest political and cultural prominence under Emperor Krishna Deva Raya (ruled 1509-1529 CE) and lasted until 1646, when it was conquered by the Muslim Sultans of Bijapur and Golkonda. The Vijayanagar Empire ruled in South India from 1336 until 1646 and left a lasting legacy of architecture, sculpture, and painting. The empire's patronage enabled its fine arts and literature to rise to new heights, and its legacy of sculpture, painting, and architecture influenced the development of the arts in South India long after the empire came to an end. There were great innovations in Hindu temple construction during this period, and many diverse temple-building traditions and styles in South India came together in the Vijayanagar style of architecture.

Religious foundations in the growing cities and popular pilgrimage sites of the Tamil country were repeatedly renovated and extended throughout the Vijayanagara and Nayaka periods. Temples were transformed into vast complexes, with multiple sanctuaries, subshrines, mandapas, corridors, court-yards, tanks and gopuras. These architectural components survive in a diversity of styles that encompass all of the centuries under investigation here. Disentangling the successive building phases is no easy task since there is rarely any simple coordination of chronology and overall layout. While it is true that religious monuments generally expanded outwards during this era, with the latest additions being located at the peripheries, much activity was directed towards replacing earlier structures at the core and filling in the open spaces in between. The Rayas had a profound impact on temple building in the Tamil zone, but their contribution is difficult to estimate; many Vijayanagara structures, especially those from the Sangama period, are obscured by later, larger additions. Gopuras and free-standing mandapas commissioned by the Nayakas are easier to distinguish because they are larger and more conspicuous. Building construction seems to have reached a peak of activity towards the middle of the seventeenth century when temples attained their greatest extent and elaboration.

Stylistic Development

Temple building in the Tamil zone displays a stylistic consistency, evolving without major interruption over more than four hundred years. The architecture of the Sangama period opens with a revival of Chola and Pandya plan types, basement mouldings, wall treatments and column forms. So truly do Sangama temples imitate earlier models that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish Vijayanagara constructions from these prototypes? The problem is intensified by the fact that fourteenth- and fifteenth-century projects are generally simpler and more modest in scale than those of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; only in the sixteenth century, under the Tuluvas and their successors, does religious architecture match and ultimately surpass earlier achievementsⁱⁱ. Temples dating from this time onwards are committed to grandeur of effect, the emphasis being on soaring gopuras and spacious mandapas.

Style developments during the Vijayanagara and Nayaka periods are best appreciated in gopuras, mandapas and corridors. Gopuras erected in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries steadily grow in scale and elaboration. Granite walls are doubled and heightened, the pilasters becoming increasingly slender and delicate, often with part-circular, multi-faceted and fluted profiles. Double-curved leaves overhang passageways and openings in the upper storeys of the towers. Brick and plaster superstructures extend dramatically upwards, with seven, nine and eventually eleven superimposed storeys, as at Srivilliputtur. Pyramidal profiles are gradually replaced with more gracious ones, weeping curves; diminishing storeys

and shifting sequences of levels create perspective-like effects by which towers are made to appear taller. This illusionistic quality is a unique characteristic of gopura designs in this era.

Mandapas progress from hundred-columned halls to, literally, thousand-columned halls- columned halls. Multiple aisles define axial corridors and wrap around spaces intended to accommodate large numbers of worshippers. Raised platforms at the ends of aisles and corridors are for ceremonial displays of religious images. As has been observed for temples in the Kannada and Telugu zones, the popularity of marriage halls, or kalyana mandapas, is a typical feature of religious architecture in this era. These and other such mandapas served as settings for elaborate sculptural programmes, with exuberant figures and animals carved onto columns and piers. The kalyana mandapa in the outer enclosure of the Varadaraja temple at Kanchipuram may be taken as one of the finest examples of the era.

Long pillared corridors linking the different parts of the temple, creating architectural frames to unify earlier ensembles of structures, are a significant architectural invention. Galleries in many temples surround sanctuaries and subshrines on four sides, serving as ambulatory passageways crowded with worshippers; they also create transverse axes within temple interiors, with spacious crossings that act as ritual focal points. Colonnades also define open spaces within the complex, surrounding open courts with tanks, flag-poles and altars.

Three distinct stages can be noted in the history of Vijayanagar architecture. In the early stage, the Vijayanagar Kings were concerned about the restoration of old temples. When the empire rose into prominence, the second phase began, marking the zenith of temple construction with gopuras and mandapas. When the empire crumbled, the importance shifted to the provincial Viceroy or Nayaks, who also left creditable landmarks in architectureⁱⁱⁱ.

If the Vijayanagara style of architecture and arts reached the zenith of its glory, it was in the Tamil Country. In comparison with other regions of the Empire, architectural monuments and artistic productions in the Tamil province were not only more numerous and varied but also more massive and spectacular. This is attributed to the surrender of the inhabitants to the Brahminical Order, extensive mobilisation of forced labour and widespread exaction for over four centuries. The Rayas, because of their Kannada-Telugu origin and affinity, never venture into the employment of forced labour on such an extensive scale in their home provinces as they did in Tamilakam. Though Kerala was treated as part of the Empire, the rayas gained no firm control over the rugged terrain. Hence, a similar experiment as in the eastern region could not be implemented in the western region.

The Rayas built temples, palaces, forts and other structures on a large scale all over Tamilakam. They promoted the growth of architecture, sculpture, painting and fine arts. Among the different centres of cultural activity were Vellore, Kanchi, Chidambaram, Srirangam, Tiruvannamalai, Madurai, Srivilliputhur and Rameswaram.

It cannot be denied that the South Indian style of art and architecture was marked by regional influences. The Pallava and Chola styles had their definite imprint upon arts and architecture in South India. Yet certain features gave the Vijayanagara style its distinct character. Thus, the Vijayanagara builders developed a temple complex in the place of a unitary temple. In the temple complex, there came into existence subsidiary shrines, halls and mantapas. The wheel and horses were attached to the Kalyana Mandapa to convey the impression of a chariot. The pillars were provided with an inverted world, such as panels of elephants, horses, bears, monkeys and bird lotus below and ornamental brackets above. Scenes from animation are carved into stones to give a unique distinction in sculptural art. The dance forms like kolattam were carved entrance to a temple under a gopura was often

provided with two dwarapalakas representing Ganga and Yamuna, to symbolise the sanctity of the shrine. The gateways were surmounted by gopuras. Compared to similar structures in Karnataka, Andhra and Kerala regions of the Empire, the gopura was of a higher level with seven, nine or eleven tiers, superimposed by a sikhara. These characteristics imparted grandeur to the Vijayanagara art and architecture in the Tamil Country. However, in regard to themes, there came no significant departure from past feminine figures traditions.

Salient Features of the Vijayanagar Empire Temple Architecture

The Vijayanagara architecture is a vibrant combination of the Chalukya, Hoysala, Pandya and Chola styles, idioms that prospered in previous centuries. Its legacy of sculpture, architecture and painting influenced the development of the arts long after the empire came to an end. Its stylistic hallmark is the ornate pillared Kalyanamantapa (marriage hall), Vasanthamantapa (open pillared halls) and the Rayagopura (tower)^{iv}. Artisans used the locally available hard granite because of its durability, since the kingdom was under constant threat of invasion. While the empire's monuments are spread over the whole of Southern India, nothing surpasses the vast open-air theatre of monuments at its capital, Vijayanagara, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Vesara and Dravidian Style

In the 14th century, the kings continued to build Vesara or Deccan-style monuments, but later incorporated Dravida-style gopurams to meet their ritualistic needs. The Prasanna Virupaksha temple (underground temple) of Bukka Raya I and the Hazare Rama temple of Deva Raya I are examples of Deccan architecture. The varied and intricate ornamentation of the pillars is a mark of their work. At Hampi, though the Vitthala temple is the best example of their pillared Kalyanamantapa style, the Hazara Ramaswamy temple is a modest but perfectly finished example. A visible aspect of their style is their return to the simplistic and serene art developed by the Chalukya dynasty^v. A grand specimen of Vijayanagara art, the Vitthala temple, took several decades to complete during the reign of the Tuluva kings.

Large Monoliths

Another element of the Vijayanagara style is the carving of large monoliths such as the Sasivekalu (mustard) Ganesha and Kadalekalu (Ground nut) Ganesha at Hampi, the Gomateshwara statues in Karkala and Venur, and the Nandi bull in Lepakshi. The Vijayanagara temples of Bhatkal, Kanakagiri, Sringeri and other towns of coastal Karnataka, as well as Tadpatri, Lepakshi, Ahobilam, Tirupati and Srikalahasti in Andhra Pradesh, and Vellore, Kumbakonam, Kanchi and Srirangam in Tamil Nadu are examples of this style. Vijayanagara art includes wall-paintings such as Dasavathara (ten avatars of Vishnu) and Girijakalyana (marriage of Goddess Parvati) in the Virupaksha temple at Hampi, the Shivapurana paintings (tales of Shiva) at the Virabhadra temple at Lepakshi, and those at the Jain basadi (temple) and the Kamaskshi and Varadaraja temple at Kanchi. This mingling of the South Indian styles resulted in a richness not seen in earlier centuries, a focus on reliefs in addition to sculpture that surpasses that previously seen in India.

Secular Structures

An aspect of Vijayanagara architecture that shows the cosmopolitanism of the great city is the presence of many secular structures bearing Islamic features. While political history concentrates on the ongoing conflict between the Vijayanagara empire and the Deccan Sultanates, the architectural record reflects a more creative interaction. Many arches, domes and vaults show these influences. The concentration of structures like pavilions, stables and towers suggests they were for use by royalty. The decorative details of these structures may have been absorbed into Vijayanagara architecture during the early 15th

century, coinciding with the rule of Deva Raya I and Deva Raya II. These kings are known to have employed many Muslims in their army and court, some of whom may have been Muslim architects. This harmonious exchange of architectural ideas must have happened during rare periods of peace between the Hindu and Muslim kingdoms. The "Great Platform" (Mahanavami dibba) has relief carvings in which the figures seem to have the facial features of central Asian Turks who were known to have been employed as royal attendants.

The Vijayanagar rulers were great builders. They were the inheritors of the rich traditions of their predecessors, the Cholas, Pandyas and the Hoysalas. They carried on the architectural activities with such modifications as the changing of the Vijayanagara Architecture. Some of the nayaks who were feudatories of the Vijayanagar rulers constructed their palaces, of which Timura Nayak's palace at Madura is most important. Its main characteristics are "heavy columns, high arches with beautiful stucco ornamentation and towers." Besides the secular architecture, the most important contribution of the Vijayanagar rulers was in the domain of religious edifices. Temple architecture reached to new heights under the patronage of Krishnadevaraya and Achyuta Raya. It received a new impetus and did not remain stagnant. The new elements were introduced, which added to its variety and richness. The elaboration in rituals of worship necessitated an increase in the number of buildings within a temple. In addition to the main shrine, many other buildings were provided, such as the Amma shrine, where the Lord's consort, the main deity, resided. This practice, which began in the late Chola period, has now become the rule.

Kalayanamandapa

It was customary to build this smaller temple in the north-west. The other building was known as Kalayanamandapa. This was an open-pillared pavilion with a raised platform where the main deity and his consort were shown on important ceremonial occasions^{vi}. To this was added the rath or the temple car, which was a chariot usually made of stone with requisitely designed wheels.

Massive Walls around the Shrine

Another feature of the temple architecture in this age was the construction of massive walls around the shrine as a safeguard against intruders. The Vijayanagar style of architecture abounds in ornamentation but a balance is kept between structure and decoration. The pillars are the most prominent feature of these temples. As observed by Prof. S.K. Saraswati, "The most frequent design is one in which the shaft becomes either a central core. Several temples were built during this period at various places in the far south, such as Vellore, Kumbhakonam, Kalahasti, Virinchipuram, Srirangam and Conjeevaram. Kalayanmandapa, or large open halls, invariably form a part of the Vijayanagar temple architecture style. Irrespective of the number of pillars, these halls are known as thousand-pillared mandapas. The pillars and the ceilings are all ornamented. The best examples of these mandapas are in the Jalakanthiswara temple at Vellore, Varadaraja and Ekambranatha temples at Kanchipuram, Jambukesvara temple near Virinjipuram and Parvati temple at Chidambaram in the south Arcot district. Percy Brown has described the Kalayanmandapa at Vellore as the "richest and most beautiful structure of its kind." The mandapa in the Jambukeshwara temple near Trichy is elegant and majestic, while that of Jalankanthiswara in Vellore is known for its carvings.

Gopurams

The Gopurams are, in fact, the entrances to the courts and are a unique feature of the South Indian temples, particularly those of the Vijayanagara Architecture built by the Vijayanagar rulers. These colossal gateways lend prestige and glamour to the temples and

were "covered by a lofty pyramidal tower rising in storeys and ultimately crowned by a barrel-shaped vault." The gateway was usually built in stone, while the upper storeys and the tower were in brick and plaster. The latter portion was ornamented with impressive sculptures and other beautiful designs in stucco. The most remarkable of them is the gopuram in the temple of Ekambaranath, which had ten storeys rising to the height of 188 feet. It was constructed by Krishnadevaraya and is the most massive and decorative structure of its kind. To quote Prof. Saraswati, "Every motif, whether figured or decorative, is beautifully adjusted to the scale of the monument and of the section in which it is placed. Therefore, despite exuberance, there is no sense of extravagance, nor lack of clarity; everything is an integral part of the design as a whole". These gopuras are merely ornamental but are also a help to understand the distinctive features of various sects, their difference as well as common points. 'Corbel', which is placed below the pillars, is an important feature of the buildings of Vijayanagar. However, it had undergone several changes in design and decoration. In the Vijayanagar period, it transformed to the form of falling flowers instead of ordinary decoration in earlier periods. In the closing years of the empire, the drooping flowers were separated from the rest of the stone. It had at its end a sort of finial (pumunai).

Granite Stones

The stone used for many of the buildings of Vijayanagar is granite. However, some of the idols of gods and goddesses in the temple are made of dark green chlorite stone. It is interesting to note that mortar was not used in the earlier buildings of Vijayanagar. Slabs of granite stone were fitted so accurately that the use of mortar was not required. But it was a serious drawback as grass and plants grew in the spaces between granite stones, weakening the whole structure.

Gopuras

Tall gopuras, popularly called Rayagopuras, were built during this period. The term Raya is added to indicate a gopura built by the Vijayanagar Rayas. They are nine or eleven-storeyed, displaying the mighty and pomp of the Vijayanagar power. These gopuras found in Kanchi, Tirupati, Sriperumbudur, Chidambaram, and Vellore have an ornamental granite base. The brick super-structure carries several opulent door-frames of the gopuras, which is graceful

Pillars

The pillars are of the ornate cubical variety. They have the *pushpapodigai* (flower-bud) corbel. The pumunai or pendant corbel, already introduced by the second Pandyas, attained its full form in this period. A series of small, slender columns is cut around the main shaft. When struck, they give out musical notes. All are made in monolithic stone. The *aniyottikkal*, as they are called, are characteristic of the Vijayanagar style. Temple pillars often have engravings of charging horses or hippogryphs (Yali) - horses standing on hind legs with their fore legs lifted and riders on their backs. The horses on some pillars stand seven to eight feet tall. On the other side of the pillar are usually carvings from Hindu mythology. Pillars that do not have such hippogryphs are generally rectangular with mythology-themed decoration on all sides. Some pillars have a cluster of smaller pillars around a central pillar shaft. The bottom supports of these pillars have engravings of Gods and Goddesses. These magnificent horse pillars are seen in the famous horse courts in Srirangam, Kanchi and Vellore. Percy Brown observes that the motifs of the rampant horsemen reveal the spirit of the time. The richly curved pillars with different types of ornamentation give the Vijayanagar temples intricate decorative richness. The pillars fronted by statues such as rearing lions, Yalis (lion with elephant trunks), are the most conspicuous.

The Upapitha or plinth is highly ornamental, as in Hoyasala models. It has six projected tiers or mouldings and five recessed sculptured intervals alternating. They are friezes of horses, elephants and lotuses. The top panels illustrate episodes from the Puranas.

The step leading to the mandapa has sculptured ramps decorated with mythical animals of hybrid form. Decorative friezes are found horizontally on the plinth mouldings and the pillars in the interior of a temple. They appear vertically on composite pillars. These friezes are also found on the walls and doorways.

During the Vijayanagar period, Amman shrines were built on the south-west corner, though the practice was existent even in the later Chola and Pandya period. Separate shrines for Alvars and Acharyas were constructed.

The traditions of Vijayanagar were continued by the Nayak rulers, who set up their power in different parts of the empire. Temple architecture was greatly elaborated. Gopuras were constructed at the four cardinal points and temple enclosures increased in number. The temple at Srirangam, which is the largest of South Indian temples, has seven enclosures. Tirumala extended the Minakshisundara temple and built the statues of the Nayaka kings outside the temple.

The Madurai Phase of Vijayanagar Architecture

The Tamil country, with Madurai as its capital and extending as far south as Kanya Kumari, was ruled by the Nayak dynasty. The final form which the Dravidian style assumed under these rulers and flourishes to this day is, in principle, a continuation of the building methods of the Pandyas (1150-1300), who lavished most of their skill and resources on the architecture of the gopuram and extended and improved the shrines already in existence^{vii}. Under the Nayaks of Madurai, the temple came to be developed into a vast network of structures with imposing gateways and towers. The scheme of growth in most cases can be chronologically traced into its various stages, although examples are not wanting of the entire temple scheme being planned and executed, which had witnessed great elaboration in the temple festivals and ceremonies, which involved the temple deity or deities being taken out in procession quite often^{viii}. This had, in turn, necessitated considerable amplification in the building scheme of the temple. This complex of structures grew around the main shrine, which was the nucleus, and developed occasionally into the dimensions of a minor township with residential houses and bazars being located in its outer enclosures. Naturally, therefore, the unity of design and architectural effect was sacrificed to size and expansiveness. The temples belonging to the Madurai group, built either wholly or in part during the period considerable in number. The most outstanding of them are those at Madurai, Srirangam, Tiruvarur, Rameswaram, Chidambaram, Tirunelveli, Tiruvannamalai and Srivilliputtur^{ix}.

The Meenakshi Sundareswara temple of Madurai

The Minakshi Temple at Madurai was of Pandya origin, and as it stands at present, it belongs to the Vijayanagara period. The Rayas and the Nayaks greatly improved upon the ancient shrine and rendered it into a massive complex. It is rectangular in shape; two sides measuring from east to west 852 feet and 834 feet, and from north to south 729 feet and 720 feet. There are two sanctum sanctorums, one for Sundareswarar and another for Minakshi. These are surrounded by three enclosures, each of which is provided with four small towers. Pyramidal towers, rectangular enclosures, multi-faceted mantapas and richly carved pillars are the typical features of the temple.

The outer walls enclosing the shrines and other structures measure 259x221 metres with four large gateways on the four sides. As the entrance of the main gateway from the east, it led through a pillared corridor into another gateway surmounted by a gopuram. This

gateway has its counterparts on the other three sides, and each has a gopuram smaller than the main ones on the exterior walls. A flat roof mostly covers this inner enclosure. Within this second enclosure is a covered court with an entrance only on the east. In the third and the innermost enclosure, which has only one entrance on the east, is situated the sacred shrine which consists of the familiar three compartments, the cella, vestibule and the assembly hall. The sanctum has a small vimana rising above the flat roof of the other two compartments. All the courts and halls situated within the three enclosures have colonnades of pillars of bizarre designs^x. The most exquisitely wrought pillars belong to the covered court (Swami Singothanam), which is immediately outside the entrance to the innermost enclosure.

There are nearly 2,000 pillars in the Madurai temple^{xi}. Although they do not all have the same florid exuberance of their Vijayanagar forbears, they retain a good deal of their vigour and boldness of conception. The simplest of them have square mouldings, while the more intricate ones have rampant dragons, figures of deities or sculptures of their patrons for motifs. These figure-sculptures attached to the main shafts are of more than lifesize and quite elaborate in workmanship.

To the south of the main sanctuary is the shrine dedicated to Meenakshi, the consort of the deity. This structure, with its two concentric enclosures, is about half the size of the main shrine. In front of the Meenakshi temple is the beautiful "pond of the Golden Lilies", whose waters reflect the great tower on the south entrance.

There are in all eleven gopurams to the Madurai temple, the largest and the most beautiful of them being the one on the southern doorway. Taken seriously, this is the most impressive of the structures belonging to the Meenakshi temple^{xii}. By far the most massive and ornate of the Dravidian gopurams, this tower is also very high, rising to a total height of about 60 metres. Its summit is a barrel roof with the usual Chaitya gable at the ends. The lofty base and the concave curves of the whole structure give to it a soaring quality greater even than its height suggests. The central rib of the tower is a pile of miniature pavilions rising one upon another and adding greatly to its massiveness and strength. The surface is covered all over with plastic figures of deities and semi-divine characters freely drawn from the inexhaustible Hindu mythology and presents the appearance of a pulsating mass of masonry.

Srirangam Ranganatha Temple

Two and a half miles north of Tiruchirapalli is Srirangam, an island formed by the two branches of the river Cauvery. It is famous for its Ranganatha temple, the largest of the Dravidian temples, and is dedicated to Vishnu in his recumbent form. Unlike the Madurai temple, this has only one sanctuary, an ancient structure small in size and architecturally insignificant. The seven concentric enclosures, twenty-one gopurams, bazars and residential colonies laid out within its walls, it looks more like a township than a temple. While the sanctuary dates back to about the 11th century, the surrounding enclosures and the pavilions inside were put up in the 17th and 18th centuries. The sanctuary is a square apartment of no great architectural merit, and the cells within have the unusual quality of being circular, resembling a Chaitya Hall. Of the thirteen gateways that lie axially to the main shrine (north-south), at least six are notable for their size and workmanship. Architecturally, the finest part of the temple is the "hall of a thousand pillars" situated within the fourth enclosure. Its pillars are carved of granite monoliths, a stupendous undertaking which impresses one not only by its size but also by the quality of craftsmanship. The 'horse court' is the best part of this pillared hall. Within the third enclosure are to be found the Garuda Mandapam, which is another beautiful pillared hall, and adjacent to it is the 'Surya Pushkarani', a covered pond named after the sun. At the northern end of this enclosure is the 'Chandra Pushkarani', the

'moon-pond'. The second enclosure has a covered court with pillared pavilions. Belonging to the same period and style, but much smaller in size, is the Jambukeswara temple at Tiruvanaikkaval, situated about a mile away from the great temple at Srirangam. It has four concentric enclosures, of which the two inner ones have covered courts. Although not comparable in size to the Ranganatha temple, it far surpasses it in the beauty of its architecture. The Srirangam Temple complex, enclosing an area of 156 acres, is the biggest of the shrines in South India. The Vijayanaga emperors made vast additions, as represented by the gopuras, prakaras and mantapas. What is Srirangapatnam to Karnataka, it is Srirangam to Tamilakam, both situated on the islands formed by the river Kaveri. The Ranganatha Temple at Chidambaram, which was one of the Dravidian temples, too received Vijayanagara patronage. The shrine is surrounded by double-storeyed galleries. Krishna Deva Raya constructed a major part of the northern gopuram. The Thousand construction. The ornamentation on a portico adjoining the pillared Mantapa in this temple was another Vijayanagara Subramanya Shrine, suggesting that it was erected by a later ruler of the Empire.

Rameswaram temple

Another well-known example of this style and of the same period is the Rameswaram temple near Adam's Bridge, which separates Sri Lanka from India. The site is hallowed by legendary associations with Rama, the epic hero who defeated Ravana, the Demon King of Lanka. This temple, like that at Madurai or Tanjore, was built on a settled plan, but with results which are very different. While the Tanjore temple, which is hardly half the size of the Rameswaram temple, produces the effect of a unified architectural entity, the latter fails to convey that impression. Like the Meenakshi temple, the Rameswaram temple also consists of two shrines, which are enclosed by three concentric walls. The outermost enclosure, which measures 268 metres in length and 205 in width, is a plain wall six metres high, and has four gopurams^{xiii}. The gopuram, which crowns the eastern entrance, is imposing, being 46 metres high. It is built in the best traditions of the 17th century. By far the grandest part of the Rameswaram temple is the pillared corridors that surround it. They extend to nearly 1,220 metres in length, the breadth varying from 5.2 to 6.4 metres. Their height from floor to roof is about 9 metres. The pillars, about 3.6 metres high each, are enormous blocks of granite, richly decorated and well-proportioned. Set close to one another, they run along the entire corridor. The perspective presented by these richly carved pillars running uninterruptedly to a length of about 210 metres is a breathtaking sight. The devoted patience of thousands of skilled craftsmen and the labours of many more apprentices who have gone into this stupendous structure is a testimony to the religious fervour that characterised the builders of the sixteenth century^{xiv}.

Nataraja temple at Chidambaram

The Nataraja temple at Chidambaram (in South Arcot District), whose growth into its present dimensions extended over a period of nearly seven centuries, from the 10th to the 17th century. Tradition has it that early in the 10th century, Parantaka, the Chola King, saw on the sea shore a divine vision of Siva who, attended by Parvati, danced with his Damaruka (a small drum). The king instantly decided to construct a 'Kanaka Sabha' or golden hall at Chidambaram to commemorate this unique vision. The Nataraja temple consists of a number of structures apart from the main shrine. Although these were put up at various times as structural accretions to the main temple, they retain a surprising element of symmetry in plan and functional unity in their disposition. The centre of the large enclosure is occupied by the sacred tank (Sivaganga), around which other structures are grouped in an orderly manner.

The 'hall of the thousand pillars' (the Raja Sabha) for which the temple is famous was built in the 17th century. It consists, as elsewhere, of pillars carved out of granite monoliths. The finest part of this temple, however, is its porch, which consists of fifty-six pillars, each 2.4 metres high, all delicately carved. The stylobate on which they rest is ornamented with gracefully carved female figures in various dance poses.

Later Dravidian style

A few more comprehensive examples of the later Dravidian style are to be found, among other places, at Tiruvarur (Tanjore District), Tiruvannamalai and Srivilliputtur (Tirunelveli District). The original shrine at Tiruvarur dates back to the 9th century, and its deity has been the subject of praise in innumerable compositions of great poetic excellence produced by the saints of Tamil Nadu. The temple consists of twin shrines dedicated to Siva and his consort Parvati. They are placed side by side in a cloistered court, and three concentric walls enclose the entire complex of structures. The three-storeyed eastern gateway, built in the 18th century, is the finest part of this temple. Here we see the pilasters, the sunk recesses, the rearing hippogryphs and the pillared niches enshrining sculptured images employed to maximum aesthetic effect. The other temples are more or less repetitions of the same style with minor variations. Tanks, pillared pavilions, towering gopurams, and concentric compound walls are their main characteristics. The temple at Srivilliputtur is famous for its massive gopuram, which is about 60 metres high. It is built in thirteen storeys, exclusive of its barrel-shaped roof.

Findings

The rulers of Vijayanagar and the Nayaks of provinces tended and enriched the existing temples. They provided their structures with massive towers called rajagopurams and multi-tiered halls known as mantapas. The temples at Madurai, Ramanathapuram, Chidambaram and Kanchipuram were among the great shrines that benefited. Among the other shrines were the temples at Ambasamudram, Nanguneri, Chinnamanur and Thirupattore. The towers and mantapas that were erected during this period added to the extent of the temple complex, greatly contributing to the grandeur as well as complexity. In fact, the rulers made numerous additions and reconstructions of temples in the Tamil Country. The Rayas of Vijayanagar, as staunch Hindus, employed artisans and workers for the development of temples and enrichment of religion. The saintly men of Vijayanagar found the Tamils highly devoted to religion, worship, rites and ceremonies, as their land was frequently afflicted with the ordeals caused by vagaries of nature. Famines, epidemics, poverty and ignorance made the country not only a land of misery but also an abode of tribalism. As a result, the inhabitants were in constant need to appease their gods and goddesses and to win their favours. In this background, the influence of the Brahminical Order added to the incentive. In fact, the temple, though it was controlled by the priest and the king, served as the centre of religious, social and cultural activity. To the rayas of Vijayanagar, association with the temples of the Tamil Country served a two-fold purpose - religious and political. As defenders of their religion, they wanted to promote worship. With the favour of deities, they sought to ensure their own security and welfare. Secondly, period when people were guided by blind faith, patronage of toying the support and loyalty of the inhabitants, The Telugus, on and support to worship offered the effective means for a strangers to the land, needed the loyalty of the Tamils lenges, Building places of worship meant giving employment to sustain their existence against external threats and internal Brahmins, who were the spiritual leaders of the society, pertaining the nobles through the davadasis and creating awe d the common people. Therefore, the Telugu rulers made it their

endeavour throughout their rule to extend and promote the ways and forms of worship. As a result, the manufacture of idols and construction of temples became a major field of state activity.

Conclusion

There are many temples of the 19th century built in the Dravidian style, structures which conform to the same pattern but which come nowhere near their predecessors in size or architectural effect. The art of temple-building is still known to many families in South India, to whom it is a bequest from generations of ancestors. Proof of their inherited talents is to be found in the innumerable towers and gopurams which have been, and are being renovated by them, although new constructions are not rare. Religion is still a living force with the people, and it is not unusual for wealthy persons to demonstrate their piety by patronising the construction of new temples.

End Notes

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- ^{vii} *Temples of South India*, Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, New Delhi, 1906, p.24.
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- ^{ix} *Temples of South India*, op.cit, p.26.
- ^x The Researcher personally cited the Madurai Meenakshi Sundareswara Temple on 03.03.2026.
- ^{xi} Interview with Dr. M. Maruthupandian, Curator, Government Museum, Sivaganga District, dated 11.05.2026.
- ^{xii} Meena. V., *South India: A Travel Guide*, Hari Kumari Arts, Kanyakumari, 2012, p.35.
- ^{xiii} Interview with Mr. M. Mani, Assistant Tourism Officer, District Tourism Office, Madurai, dated 04.05.2026.
- ^{xiv} The Researcher personally cited the Rameswaram temple on 03.06.2025.

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