

History of Architecture and Culture – II

Unit 4

Temple Architecture – Southern India

Lecture 2

Chola Temple Architecture

Let us have an introduction about, who Cholas were;

So basically, the Chola kingdom ruled in the southern parts of India, they were as powerful as the Pandyas and the Pallavas. Their peak period was around 10th Century BC. If you look at the map, you can see the areas in which the Cholas established their power. Their main capital was around here, in Tanjavur in Tamil Nadu and from here, they started conquering many parts of Sri Lanka and also as far as Indonesia. You can see the map, the extent to which they conquered various places of Asia. In terms of architecture, Cholas were not only powerful emperors, they also had very strong administrative skills. Their political system was one of their interesting things, it formed as a model to many other dynasties and many Chola kings were art lovers. They appreciated architecture and they wanted to create more interesting monuments. So, the contribution of those kings is very important in the development of Chola architecture.

Chola Temple Architecture - characteristics:

If you see the characteristics of the Chola temple architecture, in particular, basically these are the main characteristics;

- Chola art is a continuation of the pallava times. Initially Chola temples began in a very modest size and later they started to increase in grandeur.

- Began modest in size, and later ones were with huge Vimanas and the Gopuras dominating landscape.
- They introduced, Pillared halls called Mandapas.
- One feature about Chola temple architecture was that, the Main shrine are the most dominant feature and also they were very sculptors.
- You would notice the Exquisite sculptures as well.

In the image, you will see of the earliest temples of Chola architecture. It is a temple in Pudukottai district in Tamil Nadu, Vijayalaya choleswaram. If you see, this is a very simple structure, this is how they stuck to being modest in size. Again if you see, the Vimana over the Garbhagriha is the most dominant feature here, in the entire temple complex. You have the Nandi in front of the Garbhagriha.

This is another initial Chola temple, the Koranganatha temple, Srinivasanallur in Trichy. If you see, the Gopurams all have similar style. They are stepped pyramidal in nature with an octagonal dome kind of top. Again, most towering features will above the garbhagriha. If you would recall the Pallava style of architecture, we saw about the various rathas in Mahabalipuram, one of the Rathas were stepped pyramidal kind of Gopurams. This Chola architecture was actually inspired from the Pallavas, whatever they left, they continued from that.

This is another early Chola temple, Moovar Kovil, Kodumbalur in Pudukkottai. Here, you can see an example of the multiple shrines

present, slowly the concept of multiple shrines being enclosed in a temple complex, came into picture.

After this, the Chola architecture reached its peak and there are three stone temples built by the Chola Kings, which are architectural marvels that exist at Thanjavur, Darasuram, near Kumbakonam and Gangaikondacholapuram in Perambalur district. These three temples are important in the Chola style of architecture. They are all very similar in architectural style and in terms of sculptures and epigraphs.

So, first let us start with the Brihadeeswara temple. Let us have a look at it in detail. The image that you see is the Thanjavur temple. It was built back in 1010 CE, Rajaraja Chola 1, the great. The very interesting fact about this temple is that, a monument of such a huge scale, built about thousand years ago in a record time six years. During that time, building of this scale to be completed in six years is not a small thing. This temple is built entirely of granite stone. The material used for construction, the granite was not available immediately in the surrounding areas. It was brought and quarried from long distances. There were huge ramps that were built of mud and elephants and workers were employed to carry the stones from huge distances to build this particular temple. You can see the scale of the model, it is one of the finest examples of perfect proportion and geometry. This is the longitudinal view of the temple, you can see that, there is a pavilion here. It is a pavilion here, meant for Nandi statue. This is how you approach the temple from the east. So, you approach the temple through this direction, you a small nandi pavilion and then you climb up and go to the main shrine. This tall towering, Vimana is placed over the garbhagriha. The most important fact is that, this entire gopuram was built with a single stone of 80 tonnes. Also the octagonal dome that is

finished on top is also again made of a single stone which weighs about 25 tonnes. So, this is a view of the overall temple complex, this is the entrance Gopuram and from here you can see the main vimana. In the entire surrounding, it is the most dominant feature. Also, in the temple complex, there are other smaller shrines as you can see here. Small shrines for other idols.

This is the plan of the temple. You can see that this is entrance gopuram, the nandi pavilion and then you approach to a pillared mandapa and from there you again enter another hall and then a small ante chamber and then through this narrow corridor, you enter the main garbhagriha. If you take a look at the gopuram, it starts at a squarish base and then goes to a pyramidal structure and on top of it, it becomes an octagonal dome. This base alone is 82 feet in size, the square base. So, you can imagine the scale of the structure.

Inside the temple you have, the cut isometric view of the garbhagriha. Here you have a huge colossal linga of 3.66m (12') high, an idol which is placed inside. This is how you climb the steps and enter through the two mandapas and this is the main garbhagriha. You can see the section of the stepped pyramidal gopuram here. So, the entire vimana is around 66 meters i.e more than 200 feet in height. This linga itself is around 4 meters in height. This is another view. There are various parts within the temple like different shrines located within the temple, the nandi pavilion, and shrines for other idols. Overall, the complex gives a very organic visual appearance not only visually but also in terms of scale and proportion. It gives us an organic feel. Two significant changes that happened in the temple complex is that; the multiplication of shrines, the number of shrines were increased. Earlier temples, there was just one shrine and a vimana over the garbhagriha. Now, temple was being

enclosed in a compound wall like structure, there were other shrines located within the complex. This was one significant change that was introduced in this time and also for the first time, there was a separate shrine for the female idol. So if you take a shiva temple, shiva and parvathi there was no particular shrine for the female idol earlier. There was only a shrine for the male idol. This was the first time, there was a separate shrine for the female idol as well. These were the two major changes that were introduced. Apart, from the various shrines, there were also other buildings within the temple complex, like treasury and museum. Even today, the museum is functioning, there are artifacts and various manuscripts that were collected thousands of years ago.

Next on your screen, you will see the picture of the Airavatesvara temple, in Darasuram. This is another good example of Chola architecture. If you see in this image, the entire temple is made on a base like a chariot. It is conceived to be a chariot being pulled by an elephant and horse with a fleet of steps is no doubt a repository of our art and culture.

You can see the plan of the temple here in this image. This portion is where the chariot is, what we saw in the image previously. This is the chariot mandapa and from here you enter another mandapa, the front mandapa. From here, you enter another mandapa, the second mandapa and this is passage through which you enter the vestibule and then finally to the garbha griha. This is how the spaces are organized in the Airavatesvara temple in Darasuram. Again, this temple is well known for the kind of sculptures which are exquisitely carved on the surfaces. This is one interesting feature in the temple, flight of steps called the musical steps. In many south indian temples, you will find an important feature called the musical pillars i.e the pillars are meant to produce

music and musical sound, so similarly in this temple there was a flight of steps that produces musical sounds. The reason for this temple having very intricate carving and sculptures is that a particular material called charconite, is a black stone while most temples in south India are mostly built with granite stone. But in this temple in particular, for the sculptures alone they have used, the stone called charconite which is similar to granite but can be easily chiseled and carved. So, finer details of sculptures can be done using this material. So, that is what we have used in this temple.

Next we come to, Gangaikondacholapuram temple, Tanjore. As soon as you look at this image, you would notice that it is very strikingly similar to the temple in Thanjavur. The temple in Thanjavur was built by Raja Raja Cholan and this temple in Gangaikondacholapuram was built by his son, Rajendra Cholan. He infact, wanted to exactly replicate what his father did in the Brihadeswara temple. This temple is very similar to the Thanjavur temple. Though, the Vimana is not as tall as the Brihadisvara temple, but it is almost of the same height. Similarly, the stepped pyramidal Vimana with an octagonal tomb. Again the planning is very simple to the Thanjavur temple, you can see everything is along the same axis and symmetrical in nature. The thing is that, you have the nandi here, the huge pillared halls, then the garbha griha and also the different shrines located in the complex.

One of the western historian who studied Gangaikondacholisvaram compared the structural difference of this Sri Vimana with that of Rajaraja-I's Brihadisvara temple at Thanjavur and mentioned that this Sri Vamana is of feminine structure and the Tanjore Sri Vamana as masculine in nature. The main difference that is obvious is this Sri Vimana has 8 sided (Octagonal) in structure and Thanjavur Sri Vamana

has 4 side (Quadrangular) in structure. This has a more feminine kind of visual quality when compared to the Thanjavur, Brihadeeswarar temple. So we saw about the various examples of the Chola architecture.

Temple Towns

Now we are going to see about temple towns. Basically when we saw right from the Vedic civilization, the temple architecture started with a basic shrine just to house an idol and from there, it started affecting the social life of people. Soon, it started evolving to a maximum level that it became part of the urban life itself i.e the entire urban structure of the city itself was based on the temple. So, temples were becoming an important part of everyday life that time. So, under that category, Madurai and Srirangam are two major examples of temple towns. Before we begin to understand the architectural style in Madurai, we need to understand Nayak style of architecture and how it originated.

If you take a look at the map above, you would notice the Nayak portion, the green portion shows the extent to which the Nayaks ruled. The Nayak's came in the 16th - 18th Century i.e much later than the Chola period. Their capital was Madurai. This succeeded Vijayanagara Empire. The Nayak rulers started with Madurai as their capital. In 1616, Muttu virappa Nayak shifted the capital to Tiruchirapalli, but Thirumalai Nayak moved it back to Madurai in 1634. In 1665, Thirumalai Nayak's grandson, Chokkanatha Nayak once again shifted the capital to Tiruchirapalli and built a palace inside the Fort. Irrespective of the location of the capital, the region was known throughout the period as 'Madurai Country', and all rulers held their coronation in Madurai, which served as their religious and cultural capital.

The Nayak temple architecture - characteristics:

- The elaborate mandapas of the 'hundred-pillared' and 'thousand-pillared' types. This was a characteristic features in many temples.
- The high gopurams with stucco statues on the surface.
- The long corridors.
- The development of Tanjore paintings.
- The expansion of temple precinct due to enlargement of Hindu rituals corresponding to the deity.
- The Courtyards began to expand, surrounding the shrines to accommodate large crowds during processions.
- The high boundary walls with towers at principal points.
- Rectangular towers, concave in profile surmounted by hull shaped roofs.
- These towers are different from the Chola architecture, they are very concave in nature and not stepped pyramidal. They have this concave profile and hull shaped roof on top of the gopuram.
- In contrast to the Chola architecture, we saw that the main vimana was over the garbhagriha was the most dominant one but in the nayak style of architecture, the towers that are along the boundary walls, are more dominant than the main shrine.

- They began to add temple tanks as well and within the outer walls of the temple compound, there is the central shrine through a network of covered courts and colonnades. So what happened was, the temple which was just one shrine and as we saw earlier in the Brihadeeswara temple, how it started expanding into a compound wall like structure.
- Now, in Madurai, the temple began to expand to a complex itself since there were more people gathering for processions and various functionalities of the temples started changing and evolving. So we needed temple tanks for rituals, huge courtyards for people to gather, large mandapas, these 1000 pillared walls and 100 pillared walls was an excuse made by people to gather together for dance performances, music programmes etc.

This is the overall view of the temple complex in Madurai. you can see that the boundary towers are more dominating than the tower over the Garbhagriha. In this temple complex, on all four cardinal directions i.e north, south, east and west, you have four towers.

This is the city plan of Madurai and you would notice that the temple is the geographic and ritual center of the ancient city of Madurai. If you see that, the entire city itself is based on the location of the temple. The temple is actually the core of the city as you see in the image, the streets were laid out in concentric squares surrounding the temple itself. This temple is the core of basic, city planning element in the old Madurai city. This is the plan of the temple complex. This is one of the most largest temple complexes in India, it covers almost 15 acres. You can enter via all four directions. There is a huge pillared hall here called the puthu mandapa, this huge gopuram is unfinished even today. The

Sundareswarar shrine is the main shrine of the idol Shiva and this is the Meenakshi shrine which is next to it and there are other mandapas, this is thousand pillared hall as you can see. This is the marriage hall in which rituals happen every here. This is the famous water tank. So out of all the four towers, totally there are 12 gopurams in number. The gopuram which is located in the south direction, is the tallest which has nine storeys and all these concave profiled gopurams, are filled with stucco sculptures of various idols. So, initially this Meenakshi temple was started by the Pandyan kings but later it was abandoned because of the muslim invasion but the entire complex was actually rebuilt and expanded majorly by the nayak kings. This is a view of the temple tank, similarly you can find one in Rameshwaram also. This temple tank was also a place where people could come over and sit, because there were long pillared corridors all along the temple tank. This is the thousand pillared hall, that is within the temple complex. These different mandapas that we saw earlier actually have a principle like, before you enter a particular shrine from the entrance gopuram, you have to enter through a particular mandapa. For example, this Ashta Shakti mandapa is placed before the meenakshi shrine, so when a person enters the temple, he enters through the mandapa and then enters the shrine. This is an interesting structure if you see this image. This Ashta Shakti Mandapa actually has a hemispherical ceiling which is very rare in these type of temple structures, usually they have either a pyramidal roofing or a flat roof. But this particular roof had a hemispherical ceiling. Similarly, all these major shrines had a preceding mandapa through which people enter. Another example of a temple town is The Sri Ranganathaswamy temple or Thiruvaramam is a Hindu temple in Srirangam, Tiruchirapalli, Tamil Nadu, India. This temple is a very huge complex. You can see in the image, the entire city, the gopuram is visible, you can imagine the scale of the temple complex, it covers an

area of 156 acres (631.000 mcube) with a perimeter of 4,116m (10,710 feet) making it the largest temple in India and one of the largest complexes in the world.

Here, you can see the plan of the Srirangam temple. Again, similar to the meenakshi temple, it was the nayaks who actually rebuilt and expanded the temple complex at Srirangam. It was originally started by the Chola kings but later Vijayanagara and the Nayak kings contributed architecturally to them and they expanded the temple complex into a very huge and elaborate one. So, if you see the plan, the temple complex is not just a complex but is a town in itself. Basically it is divided into seven concentric squares with tall gateways or gopurams in the middle of four sides. In each enclosure there is a gopuram that marks the next level of enclosure. So, totally there are 21 Gopurams (towers), 39 pavilions, fifty shrines, Aayiram kaal Mandapam (a hall of 1000 pillars) and several small water bodies inside. The space within the outer two prakaram (outer courtyard) which is occupied by several shops, restaurants and flower stalls.

In this image you can see that this is the entrance, this is the bazar street, you have the 1000 pillared hall here, the main Vimana is here, Vasantha Mandapam is another hall and then this is the shrine of the idol. The largest gopuram that you see in this image is the Rajagopuram. Out of the 21 gopurams, this is the most tallest and it is around 236 feet in height. Here, you can the overall view of the Srirangam town itself. The seven concentric rectangular enclosures that we were seeing, the inner four rectangles constitute the temple complex and the outer three delineate the various precincts of the town fabric. In all four direction you will see the gopurams, they are receding in size as it progresses

toward the centre and it serves as both an urban marker and architectural transition.

The symbolism of the temple complex as an urban institution:

Here you can see Madurai temple plan on the top and below, you can see the Srirangam temple plan. Research says that, during the vedic times, worshipping ritual was mostly started from a tree, a tree was a focal point, man circulated around a tree, then slowly the idol was given a human form and it was housed in a shrine. So, in the image in the right you can see how it started with a tree and it gradually grew. A tree, a small shrine, a compound wall surrounding the shrine, the compound wall grows into a huge complex and then how it has grown into a temple town itself. A tree, a small shrine, a compound wall enclosing a shrine and that compound wall is growing into a huge complex like the one in Madurai, then that grows into a temple town itself. You can see how gradually the temple has impacted the lifestyle of the people and the society and the urban fabric itself. So, it was not just meant for worshipping it was all also a part of the social structure of the people.