



WORLD HERITAGE SITES OF CHOLAS AND THEIR ARCHITECTURE

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Abstract

Cultural Heritage sites includes Monuments a group of buildings and sites that have a diversity of value. Heritage is our legacy from the remote past. What we lived with today is passed on to the future generations. Our cultural and natural heritages are both irreplaceable sources of life and inspiration. World Heritage sites glorifies in its exceptional universal application. World Heritage Sites belong to all the people of the World irrespective of the territory in which they are located. ***The United Nations Educational Scientific Cultural Organization (UNESCO) seeks to encourage the identification, protection, preservation of cultural and Natural Heritage around the World.*** They are considered to be outstanding value to humanity. This is enforced in an international treaty called the convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and National Heritage "adopted by UNESCO in 1972..Its Objective is to encourage countries to sign the World HERITAGE convention and to ensure the Protection of their natural and cultural Heritage. It helps the concerned countries to safeguard Heritage monuments by providing technical assistance and Professional training. Organization takes immense measures to protect one of the World Heritage Sites are among the most valuable man-made treasures across the world. SEVEN UNESCO Cultural Heritage Sites are located in Tamil Nadu, a state with a long and distinguished history of rich heritage and culture. Among these, the Great Living Chola Temples stand out as remarkable masterpieces of architecture and engineering. These UNESCO World Heritage Monuments each tell a unique story and reflect the glory, artistic excellence, and enduring legacy of the Chola emperors in the annals of history.

Key Words: Unesco Heritage Sites, Great Living Chola Temples, Brahadeeswarar Temple, Chola Architecture

Introduction

The Chola Empire occupies an important place in the history of South India because of its remarkable achievements in administration, religion, art, and architecture. Between the tenth and thirteenth centuries , ***the Cholas emerged as one of the most powerful dynasties in Indian history and made significant contributions to temple architecture. The temples***



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built during the Chola period were not only centres of worship but also important centres of culture and administration.

Built in the Dravidian style, these temples are known for their towering cupuras the Great Living Chola Temples are distinguished by their towering **vimanas**, intricate sculptures, inscriptions, and advanced engineering techniques. Among the finest examples of Chola architecture are the **Brihadisvara Temple** at Thanjavur, the **Brihadisvara Temple** at Gangaikondacholapuram, and the **Airavatesvara Temple** at Darasuram. Recognized as UNESCO World Heritage Sites, these magnificent temples stand as enduring monuments to the architectural brilliance, artistic excellence, and engineering ingenuity of the Chola dynasty. They continue to preserve and promote the rich cultural and artistic heritage of Tamil civilization for future generations. These temples are referred to as “Living Temples” because worship and religious rituals have continued uninterrupted for more than a thousand years. Even today, they remain active centres of devotion and cultural heritage. Therefore, the Great Living Chola Temples stand not only as architectural masterpieces but also as enduring symbols of Tamil civilization, spiritual tradition, and the cultural glory of the Chola Empire.

Objectives

- To study the history of the Chola Empire.
- To examine the architecture of the Chola temples.
- To understand the features of Dravidian architecture.
- To analyse the sculptures, inscriptions, and paintings.
- To study the cultural and religious importance of the temples.
- To highlight the UNESCO World Heritage value of the temples.
- To understand the contribution of the Cholas to Tamil culture.

Early Phase:

The Thirukkalukunram stone structural temple was the earliest one belonging to the period of Aditya I He also constructed the Kannanur Balasubramanya temple. The Thiukkodikavatbriek temple was converted into a stone one by Chembiyan Madevi The Kerenganatha temple at Srinivasanallur is also the work of the early cholapered The temple architecture of the period was in a transitional stage. The chotapiltara contain the figures of lions at the bottom. The Upapidam was a decorative ane The main shrine was in square shape. The griva, sikara, stupa were arranged we eta specifications The Narthamalai Vijayalaya Choleeswara temple, Kanehguramukteeswara temple, Matangeswara temple and Thipurantakeswaraify to the early chola art. Minor deities or parivaradevats ad small separate s oueide the main shrine. There were towers in the prakaras. Deities are tae on agamieprmpoles Panagudi, Agasteeswara temple, Tinakkattalaiareara temple too belonged to this period. Saptamatirkas, Sarya, Ganesha, ubramanva, Jeyastha were primary deities. The Octogonal pita bears the Mahaaawamy temple at Tiruvidaimarudur. The kodumbalur Muvar temple is also abuled to the period of SndaraChola. Siva was installed in different periods. Pamangal Brahmmapuriswara temple, Kodubalur Mukdeeswara temple, PuncahiNaunailawaralempole, Chittoor Agneeswara temple are all temples belonging to the perred between 850 and 985 A.D.

MEDIEVAL PEIOD (985-1070 A.D)

Chola temple architecture reached its zenith during the reign of the imperial Cholas. Numerous temples were constructed during this period, distinguished by their monumental scale, architectural precision, and artistic excellence. Among them, the **Brihadisvara Temple** at Thanjavur, built by **Rajaraja I** between A.D. 1003 and 1010, is regarded as the crowning achievement of Chola architecture. The temple commemorates Rajaraja I's military victories and stands as a lasting symbol of the power and prosperity of the Chola Empire. the temple is renowned for its magnificent granite **vimana**, which rises to a height of about 66 metres (216 feet) and is crowned by a massive monolithic **shikhara** and a copper **kalasam**. According to popular belief, the shadow of the vimana never falls directly on the ground at noon. The temple complex also includes numerous subsidiary shrines, spacious courtyards, and beautifully sculptured mandapas. The thirteen-tiered vimana is an outstanding example of the Dravidian style of temple architecture. The sanctum enshrines a massive

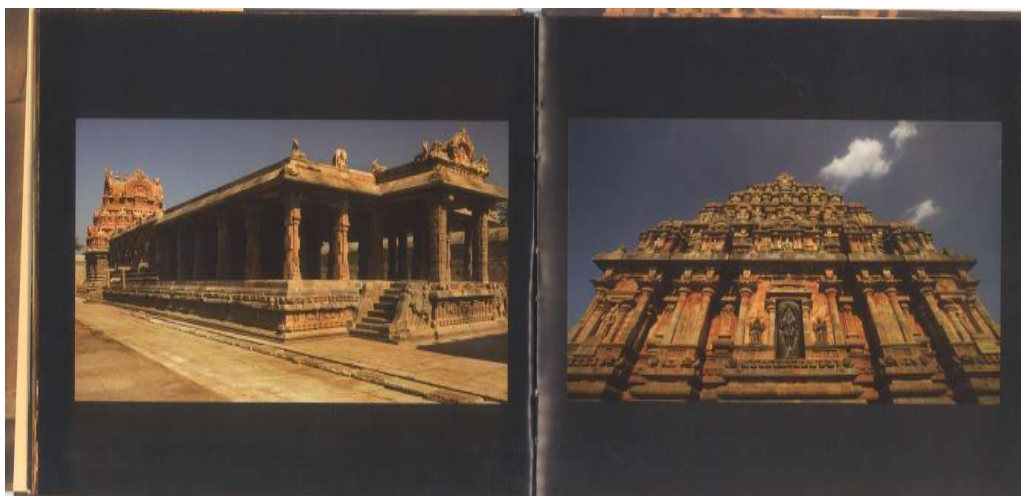


Shiva Linga, carved from a single stone, making it one of the largest lingas in India. Facing the sanctum is the monumental **Nandi**, measuring approximately 12 feet high, 19½ feet long, and 8½ feet wide, also carved from a single block of stone. The temple's walls are adorned with exquisite sculptures, inscriptions, and Chola frescoes depicting religious themes and classical dance postures. The **Keralantakan Tiruvasal**, **Rajarajan Tiruvasal**, and **Tirumaligai Vasal** are among the notable gateways of the temple, while the **Balasubramanya Shrine** is an important later addition within the complex. Another remarkable example of Chola architecture is the **Brihadisvara Temple** at **Gangaikondacholapuram**, constructed by **Rajendra I** after his victorious northern campaign. Although slightly smaller than the Thanjavur temple, it is admired for its refined proportions, graceful sculptures, and exceptional artistic workmanship. The temple represents the maturity of Chola architectural tradition and remains one of the finest monuments of medieval South India.

LATER CHOLA PERIOD:

This period witnessed further additions and developments. Raja Raja I's Iyaravadeswara temple of Dharasuram was a unique one of this period. This temple is also equal to the Tanjore Prgadeeswara temple. The mandapas and pillars are the revelatins of the artistic qualities. Sundarar's life sketch is drawn in the form of painting in this temple. The corbels are also of great artistic value. There are 36 shrines within this temple. Kulottunga III's Kambahareswara temple or Tribhuvana Vireswaa temple is yet another work of artistic glory. The chola sculptors were experts in their workmanship. They did their best for the execution of different images. They have crafted the image and the forms to the poetical desriptions of different deities sung by the Nayanmars and Alwars. the pillars, manapas, temple walls, ceilings and roofs contain sculpture. The sculptors were given a free hand to produce images. They caused the development of iconography. The different figures of various deities available in the temples of the Cholas expose the contributions of the monarchs. The bronze and copper icons attained greater perfection during the chola period. The images of Natarja, Gradhamurthi, Alinganamurthi, Pitchadana are quite promising. The images of Subrahmanya, Uma etc too testify to the artistic value. The icons at places like Cheranmadevi. Thirukkadayur stand testimony to the superior nature of the chola architecture. The age of cholas was known for its painting. On the surface of mortar plasterings, paintings are done. After while washing colour paintings are carried out. Tampana style is used in painting. At Tanjore Pragadeeswara temple the paintings are wonderful. Black, yellow, red, blue, green colours are used. They have adopted a specific technique in painting. Minute details of dress foldings, eye balls etc., are wonderfully depicted. The paintings centre around religious themes, Sundaramurthy's visit to Kailash is depicted in a wonderful manner. The beautiful sketches of the horse, elephant are worth noticing. Sages, dancing girls are all painted in a wonderful way.

CHOLA TEMPLE ART





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The Chola period of South Indian History, from 10 to the temple of 13th centuries is regarded as the Golden epoch of medieval times. It was a period of Political stability and economic prosperity as also the culmination of the achievement of artistic endeavours in South India. The Chola rulers were devotees of Siva and built a number of temples dedicated to their God. The greatest king of the Dynasty was Rajaraja who was also known as RajarajaSivaoada at the whose crown is at the feet. He raised a mannificant temple of Siva at Thanjavur which is named as *the Great temple or Birahadeswara (Great Lord) in reference is greatness.*

This temple which is contemporary with the temples at Tamilnadu had many architectural skills which could be classified as a wonder that is they are more than a continuum of artistic from earlier periods. Alone was the criterion for the art, there is no doubt that the temple at the Thanjavur would stand as the foremost architectural produced in the World prior to the twentieth century indeed at the time it was built, *it was not only one of the largest buildings in South Asia but in the world itself.* This temple was built approximately seven years from 1003 to 1010 a significant achievement for such a vast undertaking it was thus that the product of a unified concerted building effort, conceived and executed nearly at the same time Perhaps the most impressive aspect of the Great temple is the vimana which reaches a height of nearly 60 meters. Consisting of the base mouldings a two tired wall and a super structure rising in a series of 14 diminishing tires, the temple as capped by a monolithic sikara reputed to a weight 80 tonnes. It is traditionally held that this sikara was set into its present position after having been Hauded up on an inclined plane about six kilometerslong, the length necessary to make the slope gradual enough for the stone to be moved. The tower is pyramidical and straight aised in profile,in contrast to the curved shape of northern style super structures and it is clearly based on South Indian precedents consisting of multiplication of elements rather than creation of a new form.

The Birahadeswara temple marked a departure from the earlier south indian temples which had been smaller in scale, more personal in feeling and simpler in form and simultaneously paved the way for super structure also of grand scale. Such influence was felt almost immediately Rajaraja's son who was made heir appeared in 1012 soon followed his fathers example and constructed another great temple also called Brihadeeswara at Gangaikondacholapuram, Rajendra I made victorious campaign into northern India and brought back water from the holy Ganges to South India, thus sancifying `the Chola lands. Because of this he called himself the conquer of the Ganges and founded a new capital Gangai konda cholapuram City of the Chola who conquered the Ganges to commemorate the event.

These and the other chola temples have been established with a wealth of sculpture on the wall surfaces of the foundational parts and of the main towers The basement of the Thanjavur and Gangai kondacholapuram temples, consisting of panelled recesses occupied by full length statues of deities from the Hindu Pantheon in the way it is arranged in rathas at Mamallapuram in another level, a friez of unfinished busts of lions decorates the space under the lowest row of niches. The divine figures are in high relief, almost gigantic in proportion and very powerfully built. But although the individual works like the Dancing Siva and suggestive of warmth and dynamic animation, taken as a whole, the stone sculpture of Chola period is found wanting in the chaste refinement of the classical period.

The divine figures are in high relief, almost gigantic in proportion and very powerfully built. But although the individual works like the Dancing Siva and suggestive of warmth and dynamic animation, taken as a whole, the stone sculpture of the Chola period is found wanting in the chaste refinement of the classical period . departure in temple design, fashioned entirely out of granite, brought from quarries quite some distance away at a time when no motorized transport was possible, the Big Temple is truly a wonder, its spire rises to 208 feet. The temple is remarkable for the wealth of stone carvings, its second storey corridor with Chola style paintings and an incomplete depiction of the 108 postures in South Indian classical dance. The shine has witnessed additions by Pandya's, Vijayanagar rulers, the Nayak's and the Maratha-s, spanning from the 13th to the 19th centuries and yet it is one integrated whole. The walls are filled with inscriptions from the time of Rajaraja an offer complete story on how the temple was built. They go to the extent of naming the artisans involved and even the dancing girls transferred to this temple's service.



FAÇADE

As it appears at present, the temple is shaped more like a fortress than a shrine. It is accessed by a bridge across a moat, which leads to the first entrance, built by the Nayaks in the 16th Century, High walls enclose the entire shrine complex, once again erected by the Nayaks and the original Chola design did not provide for this, it is only after this is crossed that we come to the first Chola structure - a five tiered gopura known as the keralanthaka Gate, in commemoration of Raja Raja's defeat of the Kerala ruler. The next is a three-tiered gateway known as the Raja Raja Gate. Made of granite and stucco, it has two guardian deities, each of 18 feet height, we are then in the vast temple courtyard.

A SAGA IN GRANITE:

The shrine proper is made of granite and legend has it that much of the stone was brought from near Pudukottai. The actual shrine rose in stages, after the Shiva Linga was placed in position. The persistent tale is that a slope was built from a neighbouring village called Sarapallam and the stone was rolled up using elephants and manpower. This is however disputed today, and modern thought has it that technology akin to what was adapted for the great pyramids at Egypt was used here. The temple rose in tiers and a firm sand enclosure was structured around it that kept increasing in height with the shrine. This was later dismantled on completion.

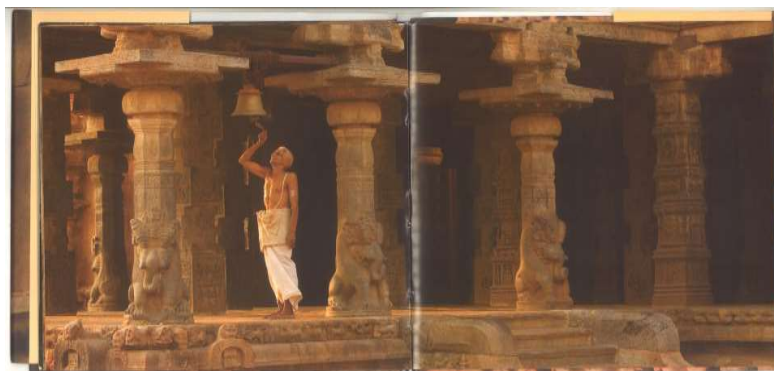
INTERIORS AND IDOLS:

The Shiva Linga in the centre of the sanctum is 12 feet high and is a monolith. The base is of 16 feet width and 7 feet height. All around the temple proper are niches with plenty of carvings depicting Shiva in various moods, sports and postures. There are in addition, numerous sub shrines had once depicted various guardian deities. The second level of the sanctum has carvings depicting almost all the 108 dance postures of Shiva. The reason for their being left incomplete is a mystery. There is also a chamber of paintings and this has an interesting historic story. It was discovered in the 20th century that the artwork here, of the Nayak era, was done over an earlier set of paintings, belonging to the Chola period. The overlapped artwork has since been removed and preserved, exposing the original Chola work. Access to this corridor is however restricted in order to preserve the paintings. Three are important. The Murugan shrine was built by the Nayaks while the sanctum to the Goddess was by the Pandyas. An independent sanctum to Ganesa was the gift of the Marathas.

WAKKS AND ENGRAVINGS

The temple walls have numerous inscriptions in Tamil and Grantha scripts, many of these begin with historical introductions in Tamil and Sanskrit to the king who authorized them, The temple complex has sixty-four inscriptions of RajarajaChola I, twenty-nine inscriptions of RajadraChola I, one each of VikramaChola ,Kulottunga and Rajendradeva (RajendraChola II), three of a probable Pandyan king, and two of Vijayanagara rulers namely, AchyutappaNayaka and Mallapa Nayaka.

TEMPLE & ITS SURROUNDINGS:





Thanjavur 'periyakovil' (big temple) stands amidst fortified walls that were probably added in the 16th century. The temple tower (Vimana) is 216 ft (66m) high and is among the tallest of its kind in the world. The Kumbham (Kalasha or Chikharam, the apex, or the bulbous structure on the top) of the temple is assembled out of several individual pieces of granite, with the interstices filled with brick rubble and smoothed over with stucco. There is a big statue of Nandi (sacred bull), carved out of a single rock, at the entrance that is about 16 feet long and 13 feet high. This was placed here by the Nayak, rulers.

HISTORY



GangaiKonda Choleeswarar temple is the biggest temple constructed during the reign of Rajendra-I in Ariyalur region. Following the conquest of the Gangetic plains in A.D. 1023 Rajendra - I built a great city called GangaiKondaCholapuram and a Siva temple GangaiKonda Choleeswarar and dug a lake called CholaGangam in commemoration of his victory. The place, the temple and the lake (CholaGangam) are the living embodiments of the heroism of Tamils who unfurled the Chola's Tiger flag on the banks of the River Ganges. He also shifted his capital from Thanjavur to this newly built town. From his period to the end of the Chola family rule in A.D. 1279 this city was the capital for the Chola Empire for a period of 256 years. The gigantic stone temple which he built in this place is a rich repository of beautiful sculptures of the middle Chola period.

For about 250 years, the Chola clan ruled a large part of South India. In those times the Chola dynasty was at its apex and conquered many parts of the northern territory. The wealth was brimming due to the outcome of their booming war operations. On one of the expeditions, Rajendra Chola brought Ganga water in a golden reservoir 'Ponneri or Chologanga'. Consequently, Rajendra was titled Gangaikondan' (the one who brought the Ganges). The king wanted to erect a larger than life' temple correspondent to the Brihadeeswara Temple. During 1020-29AD, GangaiKondacholapuram saw its construction.

TEMPLE TOWER & BACKDROPS





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At present the temple stands tall amongst wall ruins. The temple tower here measures 55 m in height and is like the Brihadeeswarar Temple at Thajavur. The temple is constructed on an elevated structure along with a courtyard which measures 170 m in height and 98 m in width, The main section of the structure measures 341 ft in height and 100 ft in width with an east-west axis, Like in all other temples, Shiva is represented in the form of a lingam which is 13ft tall.

THE IDOLS & CARVINGS

The lingam here is considered as the largest one to be found at any temple in Tamil Nadu. The idol of Nandi is sculpted in such a way that it reflects the sunlight to the sanctum, The Nandhi sculpted in stucco, is said to be comprised of stones from the conquest. A stone known as Chandrakanta is said to have been laid in the sanctum, which helps the area remain cool during summers and warms the area during winter.

The sanctum sanctorum embraces the four-meter-high lingam (phallic form) of Lord Shiva, To provide worship area for the royal family, the sanctum is encircled with two walls. The stately entrance of the sanctum is adorned by the beautiful image of Goddess Saraswati, (Sunworship) and 'Navagrahas' (Nine planets).

SANCTUMS:

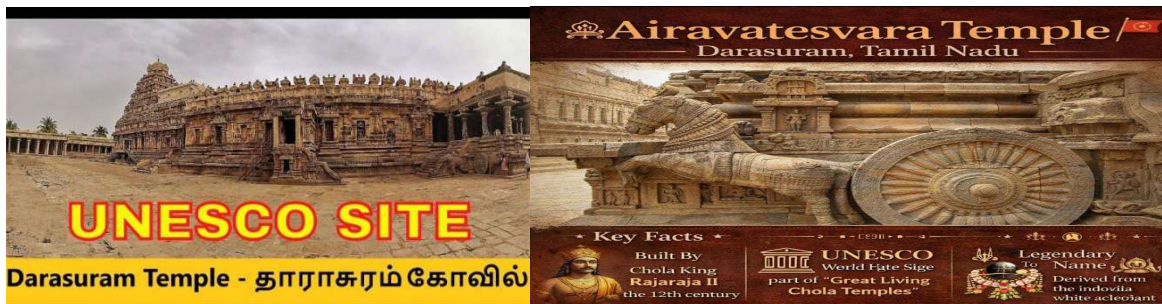
Oen can find five shrines here and a lion well, which is said to be added during the 19th Century, Apart from these, these, there are around 50 add sculptures around the walls of the sanctum, in which the sculptures of Nataraja, Saraswati and Shiva garlanding a devotee is, one says it is Chandesa, who was one among the 63 canonized followers of Shiva and the second version considers it as king Rajendra I himself.

ART AND ARCHITECTURE:



The temple architecture attained significance during the chola period. The chola temples could be divided into early, medieval and later chola temples.

AIRAVATESWARA TEMPLE





DARASURAM

The Airavadeswara temple is a great masterpiece located near Kumbakonam of Tamilnadu. Constructed during the rule of powerful chola dynasty majestic place of worship is in dharasuram near the temple town of Kumbakonam. A temple dedicated to Lord siva this was built under the ruler of Raja Raja chola II back in the 12th century. It has been named Airvateswara after the white elephant which is the vehicle of Lord Indra.. The elephant is said to have worshipped Lord Sive at this location in order to regain its white colour after having after having suffered a curse from Sage Durvasa. The beautiful and serene location with its historic significane is a place to be visited. This is one among the three famous temples in Tamilnadu .

ELEGANT INTERIOS OF THE TEMPLE

The temple is a storehouse of art and architecture and has some exquisite stone carvings. Although this temple is much smaller when compared to many others in Tamilnadu. It scores with its beautiful stone .carvings as well as dedicated story depictions. It is believed that this temple was built with Nitya Vinodha(perpetual entertainment) in mind The Vimana (tower) of this temple is 24 m(80 ft.) High.

The south side of the front mandapa is in the form of a huge chariot with large stone wheels down by horses. The temple sanctum is a 12 meter sided (39 feet) square have thick walls on which the vimmana superstructure Rises to a height of 24 m(79 feet)the circumambulatory point is not provided immediately around the sanctum as is found in the Tanjore big temple and the Gangaikondacholapuram temple. Rather this path is outside in the courtyard.

The sanctum Garbhagraha is connected to the mukha mandapa through the artha-mandabha supported on pillars and flanked by two massive dvarapalas. The mahamandapa is a rectangle of about 24 meters (79 ft) by 18 meters(59 ft) with six rows of eight pillars (forty eight...a bulls body a lions head a rams horns and a pig's ears.

The steps to the temple are interesting feature of the structure. Those are musical steps that produce all the seven SWARAS (notes) of music when tapped on different points of the step The temple was much larger than it is now. It had sapta veethis(seven streets Seven courts like the srirangam temple according to the inscriptions. All are gone except the one court with the main temple that survives.

INSCRIPTIONS ON STONE

There are various inscriptions in the temple. One of these recors the renovation of the shrines by Kulothunga chola III The north wall of the verandha consists of 108 sections of inscriptions each containing the name and description and image of the 63 saivacharya(saivaite saints)

ANTIQUITY OF AIRAVATESWARA TEMPLE.

The Temple was built by Rajaraja II. He ruled the chola empire between 1146 and 1172 CE. The established capital for his predeceasors was Gangapuri, also refered in some insceptions as Gangaikondacholapuram named after the holy north Indian Ganges river and Godess. Rajaraja II howeveer spent miost of the time in the secondary capital city of Ayirattall also called palayarai and Rajarajapuri. The urban cimplex included Darasuram, the site of Airavateswarar terme Rajaraja was II was a patron of Tamil literature and sponsored new Hindu temples in the empire instead of enhancements and expansions supported by his father and Grandfather. The temple of Ayirattall which comes to be known as Airavateswarar temple in inscriptions is one of his legacy.

CONCLUSION

The Great Living Chola Temples represent the pinnacle of Chola architecture, artistic excellence, and heritage. Constructed between the eleventh and twelfth centuries CE in the Dravidian architectural style, these monuments reflect the



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architectural brilliance, religious devotion, and cultural achievements of the Chola rulers. The Brihadisvara Temple at Thanjavur, the Brihadisvara Temple at Gangaikondacholapuram, and the Airavatesvara Temple at Darasuram continue to stand as enduring symbols of Tamil civilization and the prosperity of the Chola period. Recognized as UNESCO World Heritage Sites, these temples hold exceptional historical, architectural, and cultural importance. They served not only as centres of worship but also as important institutions of administration, education, art, and social life. Thus, the study of these temples and their architecture provides valuable insights into the rich traditions and lasting contributions of the Chola Empire to Indian history and heritage. The Airavatesvara Temple at Darasuram stands as an enduring symbol of the cultural heritage and architectural excellence of the Chola dynasty. Its historical significance, artistic splendour, and recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage Site establish it as an invaluable monument for historical research, cultural preservation, and sustainable tourism. Continued conservation of this architectural masterpiece will safeguard its legacy and promote a deeper appreciation of Tamil Nadu's rich historical and cultural traditions.

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