

**EXPLORING THE ARTISTIC AND ARCHITECTURAL OF
MADURAI NAYAK DYNASTY**

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Abstract:

The art and architecture of the Madurai Nayak dynasty represents a significant phase in the history of South Indian culture and creativity. The Madurai Nayak rulers, particularly Tirumalai Nayak, made significant contributions to the development of Dravidian architecture. They expanded existing temples, built new mandapas (halls), and erected impressive gopuras that became iconic symbols of South Indian temple architecture. These architectural marvels blended intricate sculptural details with grandeur, reflecting the deep-rooted religious and cultural traditions of the region. In addition to their temple constructions, the Nayaks also left their mark on secular architecture. The Tirumalai Nayak Palace in Madurai is a prime example of their architectural prowess. Religion played a pivotal role in the Nayaks' patronage of the arts. They had a strong affinity for both Saivism and Vaishnavism, leading to the construction of palatial temples dedicated to these faiths. Their reign saw the inauguration of numerous temples, stupas, and monastic structures, each with its distinctive style and artistic exuberance. Nevertheless, the Madurai Nayaks' contributions to South Indian art and architecture remain commendable and continue to be celebrated for their enduring impact on the cultural heritage of the region.

Keywords: Madurai Nayak, Art and Architecture, Thirumalai Nayak

Introduction

Religion and spiritual pursuits have been integral to human existence since the earliest days of civilization and recorded history.¹ Science and spiritualism can be seen as complementary, like twin guiding principles necessary for the advancement of humanity. The spiritual aspect of human nature aspires to attain devotion and inner peace, leading to the formation of numerous faiths and beliefs rooted in spiritualism. Temples and divine imagery are the tangible manifestations of human imagination, rich in symbolism, artistry, and philosophy. Consequently, their sacred significance is intrinsic and undeniable. Simultaneously, it's important to acknowledge the profound value of these sacred spaces, which continue to captivate the hearts and minds of people.²

Temples and divine imagery stand as enduring monuments to culture. In the realm of Hinduism, the fusion of natural beauty with human concepts and ideas has given birth to a myriad of architectural marvels. The arts and architecture, born from the artist's unfettered expression, serve as a canvas for showcasing their talents, displaying both their aesthetic prowess and their dedication to religious ideals. Religion seamlessly interweaves with art and architecture, encouraging people to behold these creations and pay reverence to them.³ In the ancient days, Indian artists placed significant emphasis on natural elements as symbols, even revering nature itself as a focal point of worship. Indian art remains intimately entwined with the spiritual life of its people, illustrating the undeniable connection between religion, society, and artistic expression.

This inseparable relationship is a recurring motif in the history of Indian art and architectural heritage, substantiated by archaeological excavations and the enduring presence of these monuments.⁴ Temple architecture plays a pivotal role in understanding India's rich cultural heritage. In its early stages, the religious beliefs of the Indian people served as the driving force behind the development of this heritage. At that time, architectural structures were characterized by simplicity in design, lacking ornamental and decorative elements. During the Mauryan period, particularly under the leadership of Ashoka, we witnessed the advent of Rock Cut Architecture. Ashoka initiated the carving of Buddhist Chaityas and Viharas near Gaya, and this practice gradually spread to the peninsular and western regions of India. The Buddhists were pioneers in using stone for their artistic

endeavors, a trend later adopted by Hindus and Jains. Utilizing stone for monument construction endowed these structures with enduring longevity and encouraged the exploration of new and innovative techniques. The focus primarily revolved around religious architecture, which played a central role in shaping India's architectural and cultural heritage.⁵

Starting in the early sixth century A.D., both Hindus and Jains displayed a strong inclination toward using stone as a primary medium for architecture. This inclination led to the excavation of rock-cut cave temples and the creation of monolithic rock temples, serving as foundational models for subsequent structural temples constructed by various rulers. In the northern regions, temple architecture thrived under the Sungas and Guptas, while in the south, the Sathavahanas, Chalukyas, Rastrakutas, and Pallavas introduced temple architecture. The Pandyas, Cholas, Vijayanagar rulers, and the Nayaks also contributed significantly to the development of temple architecture. Remarkably, Hindu temples dating back to the sixth or seventh centuries continue to stand to this day, enduring certain inevitable challenges posed by foreign invaders.⁶

Hindu rulers, nobles, merchants, artisans, and the general public played active roles in revitalizing temple architecture. Countless temples, both small and grand, underwent development and modification, with ceremonies and rituals persisting over time. These Hindu temples became a revered and integral part of life, with a particularly strong presence in South India, earning it the reputation of being a temple paradise and fostering the evolution of temple architecture.

Significance of temple Architecture

The evolution of temple architecture captivated the attention of the Indian populace, thus fostering the proliferation of daily rituals and ceremonies. These advancements led to the construction of numerous Mandapas, including the Ardha and Muha Mandapas, the Nirukta Mandapa, Vasantha Mandapa, Kalyana Mandapa, and Thousand Pillared halls. Separate shrines for the deity's consort and Parivara devadas also emerged as a result. This expansion paved the way for the development of iconography and icnometry. During the medieval period, deities began to be represented in various postures, further enriching the religious landscape. Additionally, each deity became associated with a specific mount; for example, Shiva with the bull, Vishnu with the eagle mount, and Subramanian with the peacock mount. These associations deepened the reverence of these deities among the people.⁷

In the performance of rituals, it became customary to display sacred objects known as "mangala vastus," including the Conch, Chakra, Umbrella, Snake, Tortoise, and Puranakumbha. Each temple also adhered to specific agamas, representing the distinctive characteristics of various Indian religions. Consequently, these objects and practices became synonymous with sanctity and played a significant role in the religious traditions of India. Temples in Tamil Nadu are strategically located in areas that provide a refreshing atmosphere. The various prakaras (enclosures) within the temples encompass clean, untainted air, infused with the freshness of nature. Additionally, the gardens and tanks surrounding these temples contribute to the availability of pure, unpolluted air. In the state of Kerala, temple roofs are not flat; they are designed with a slanting position to prevent rainwater stagnation. Nevertheless, it remains evident that temple architecture serves as a testament to the scientific and technological prowess of the skilled artisans who crafted them.⁸

Hindu temple Architecture

In the annals of Indian art history, it was the Guptas who pioneered the construction of Hindu temples. They marked a significant shift by introducing stone as the primary material for temple construction, departing from the use of perishable materials that lacked durability in earlier temple structures. Thus, understanding the temples that preceded the Gupta era becomes essential. Given that the Gupta period represented a flourishing era for Hinduism, considerable efforts were dedicated to the advancement of Hindu temple architecture during this time.

South Indian Temple Architecture

In the southern region of India, the Chalukyas, Pallavas, Cholas, Pandyas, Hoysalas, and Vijayanagar rulers played a pivotal role in expanding the horizons of temple architecture. This tradition, which had humble origins in proto-historic times, eventually reached magnificent heights during the

Imperial Pandya Period. Even during the Sangam Age, there existed temples and idols, indicating a familiarity with architecture and sculpture in some form.

Notably, Tamil literature such as Silappadikaram, Manimekalai, and the Purananuru shed light on temples and deities of that era, revealing an awareness of three-dimensional representations of Gods. However, it's worth mentioning that these temples and idols were constructed using perishable materials, and as a result, the entire temple complexes from the Sangam Age have vanished without leaving a trace. The only surviving structures of historical significance from that period are the rock-beds, hewn from natural rock formations, primarily meant for the use of ascetics. These rock-beds do not showcase advanced engineering skills nor do they represent specific phases of indigenous art.⁹

Chalukyas

The Chalukyas, adherents of the Brahmanical sect, played a pivotal role in the initiation and expansion of temple construction. Notable rulers like Pulikesin I, Kirthivarman, Mangalesa, and Pulikesin II dedicated their efforts to temple architecture.¹³ Among their accomplishments, the Chalukyas established around seventy temples in Aihole. The Ladhkan temple, one of the earliest in the Aihole group, takes the form of a square-shaped structure adorned with unadorned pillars and a colossal Nandi statue. It can be traced back to the mid-fifth century A.D. and stands as the largest and most significant of the early temples. The temples in Kontigudi, the Hucchimalligudi temple group, as well as the Narayana and Tarabasappa temples, represent exemplary Chalukyan temple architecture. Meanwhile, the Papanath, Jambulinga, and Karimatha temples showcase Indo-Aryan architectural styles. On the other hand, the Sanghameswara, Virupaksha, and Mallikarjuna temples are constructed in the Dravidian architectural style.

Pallava Style

The Pallava architectural style encompasses both rock-cut and structural temples. The latter phase, entirely structural in nature, began with the construction of the Shore Temple in Mahabalipuram. The pinnacle of Pallava architecture is exemplified in the Vaikunta Perumal temple in Kanchipuram. During the Pallava period, spanning from Mahendra Varman I to the end of their reign, distinct architectural styles emerged. The initial style, characterized by rock-cut structures, is well-recognized, with minor variations like the Mahendra style and the Mamalla style. Notably, the Mahendra style features Pillared Mandapas as a distinctive element. In contrast, the later structural style includes monolithic temples commonly referred to as Rathas.

Chola Style

The Imperial Chola dynasty thrived from 850 to 1259 A.D., with the initial period of Chola architecture spanning from 850 to 907 A.D. During this phase, several remarkable temples emerged, each with its distinct style. These included the Misumba Sudani temple in Tanjore, the Kannasur Balambraman temple, the Tiruppurambiyam Adhiteswaram temple, the Nataraja Temple in Chidambaram, the Koranganatha temple in Srinivasanallur, the Mahalingeswara temple in Tiruvidai Marudur, the Brahadeswara temple in Tanjore, Gangaikondacholeeswaram, and the Kempahareswara temple in Tribhuvanam. This period represents a pinnacle in Indian architecture and marks a unique phase in the evolution of temple architecture.

The temples of Nellaiapper and Kanthimathi, two separate structures with open space between them, were built in 1647 A.D. by Vadamalaiappa Pillaiyan, a devoted follower of Shiva. Adjacent to the Chain Mandapam, a stunning flower garden took root in 1756 A.D., gracing visitors with a profusion of colorful and fragrant flowers. Within this garden lies a square Vasantha Mandapam featuring a hundred pillars, adorned with beautifully carved depictions of the Nayak rulers. A prominent highlight of the temple is its magnificent carving from a single stone, featuring the Peacock Vaganam, Valli, and Deivayanai idols.¹⁰

Pallava Style

The Pandya architectural style was distinguished by the emergence of monumental gateways, which overshadowed the towering sanctuaries and became the dominant feature of temple complexes. These gateways were adorned with intricate and rich plastic decorations, showcasing the zenith of

Dravidian architecture during the Pandya period.¹¹ In each temple, multiple prakaras, shrines for various deities, and towering structures were characteristic elements, beginning in the seventh century. The development of temple architecture under the Pandyas is documented in inscriptions such as the one at Malayadikkurichi and the Anaimalai Narasinga Perumal temple inscription. Prominent examples of Pandya architecture include the Malayadikkurichi cave temple, the Anaimalai Narasingaperumal temple, the Tirupparamkuntram Subramanya temple, the Tenparkuntram Umayandevan temple, the Kalugumalai Subramanya cave temple, as well as the cave temples at Sivalapperi, Sendanmaram, Thirukkolakka, and Chokkampathi.¹²

Tiruthalinatha temple in Tiruppattur, Ambasamudram temple in Erichchamudayar, Valiswara temple in Thiruvalliswaram, Madurai Kudal Alagar temple, Tirukkoshiyur Sowmiya Narayana temple, and the Kurrianatha temples stand out as prime examples of structural stone temples from the Pandya period. In their architectural designs, they seamlessly combined elements from both the Nagara and Dravida styles. The Pandya rulers dedicated much of their reign to the construction of the Prakaras (enclosures) of temples in Srirangam, Chidambaram, Madurai, Tirunelveli, and Tenkasi. These temples boasted artistic features like decorated pillars, motifs resembling flowers, and ornate corbels, all highly esteemed for their artistic value.

The Thirukkurungudi Perumal temple, dating back to at least 700 A.D., marked another significant milestone in Pandya architecture. Its grand gopuram, with five tiers, captivated onlookers with its exquisite beauty and served as a visual feast for art enthusiasts. The temple's sirpamandapam, adorned with sixteen pillars, featured striking figures of dancers in the rathi mandapam and gypsies in the sirpa mandapam, thanks to the contributions of the Nayaks and the Vijayanagar kings. Notably, Krishnadevaraya, a prominent builder of South India, made significant contributions to the temple's development. The Ambasamudram Thiruppudaimarudur temple represents a unique blend of four distinct temple architectural styles: Pandya, Chera, Chola, and Vijayanagara, showcasing the rich architectural diversity of the region.¹³

Nayaka Style

Under the patronage of the Nayaks of Madurai, South Indian architecture reached its zenith. During this era, the gopurams (towered entrance gateways) soared to impressive heights, ranging from ten to over one hundred and fifty feet, often encompassing as many as sixteen stories. Pillars adorned with rearing dragons and imaginative creatures became a hallmark of this architectural style. This period was also characterized by an abundant use of figurative sculpture, seamlessly integrated into the overall architectural composition. Prominent examples of this style include the temples at Srirangam and Jambukesvara, both in close proximity to Tiruvannamalai, as well as those in Srivilliputtur and Madurai. The Venkadachalapathy temple in Krishnapuram stands as a rare specimen, showcasing architectural marvel and grandeur. It serves as a veritable treasury of stone sculptures, featuring intricately carved granite sculptures that attest to the exceptional craftsmanship of the time. This temple was constructed during the reign of King Krishnappa Nayak of the Nayak kingdom in the latter half of the sixteenth century (1565 A.D.). It is believed that the remarkable collection of sculptures was commissioned by King Krishnappa Nayak himself, reflecting his unique artistic vision. Another significant temple, the Vanamamalai Perumal temple in Nanguneri, Tirunelveli district, is renowned for its extraordinary architecture, particularly its 200-foot ornamental gopuram. This temple exhibits a fusion of influences from the Vijayanagara and Nayak styles, creating a unique architectural blend. Its design incorporates elements from both the Pandya and Dravidian architectural traditions.¹⁴

Animals

The depiction of animals in Vijayanagar and Nayak art reveals a captivating and informative aspect of their artistic heritage. South Indian engravers displayed a remarkable proficiency in representing the animal kingdom, comparable in breadth to the depictions seen in Buddhist sculpture. This proficiency is best exemplified in the panels of Vijayanagara art, where various domestic animals were skillfully carved, capturing the essence of nature with unwavering vitality. The Indian engraver

in this context benefited from religious traditions that associated certain animals and birds with specific deities. Among these creatures, animals like the swan (hamsa), elephant (hasti), bull (nandi), horse (ashva), crocodile (majara), snake (naga), cow (go), boar (varaha), eagle (garuda), and lion (simha) held particular significance.

In the Nayak sculptures, particular attention is drawn to the depiction of animals in scenes of war, transportation, and hunting. These animals are rendered with great intensity, capturing their movements and postures in various situations. In battle scenes, the horses seem to respond dynamically to the actions of the warriors astride them, while elephants under the guidance of their Mahouts exude a majestic presence. In hunting scenes, the boar, tiger, and deer are portrayed in alert and vibrant postures, while the monkeys convey a sense of jubilation. These motifs find representation in Nayak sculptures, including the striking image of a lion in a seated position on its hind legs, with its front legs touching the ground, often accompanied by hybrid or fantastical creatures. These motifs were integrated into the supporting pillars of the Mandapas (halls) in Nayak-era temples, where figures of elephants, horses, and lions are positioned in unconventional and imaginative arrangements, giving them an almost whimsical quality. Notably, these animal motifs and depictions can be predominantly observed in the Nellaiappar temple in Tirunelveli, Thirupparakundram, the Meenakshi-Sundaresvara temple in Madurai, and Srirangam.¹⁵

Decorative motifs

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Paintings

Decorative motifs in South Indian art encompass various elements, one of which is the lotus flower. This motif finds its place on pillars, mandapa ceilings, and basement moldings. On pillars, it is intricately carved either in the upper or middle section of the lower part, typically reserved for vegetal scrolls. In cases featuring mythological figures, it often accompanies salabanjikas and lalasundaris. Another frequently employed decorative motif is the creeper design, which is employed for decorative bands. These creeper designs, varying in width and thickness, adorn different elements such as basement moldings, pilasters, pillars, and doorways. Creepers serve a specific purpose as divisional elements, separating various scenes within narrative panels depicted in the frieze of structures like the Pudu Mandapam in Madurai.

Foliage tufts emerge from the mouths of makaras, yalis, and kirta makutas. These tufts of leaves are represented in kudas and the kumbhapanjara, a popular decorative motif in Vijayanagara architecture. The Amaravati lotus, also known as the lotus medallion, appears as concentric circles on the pillars. This circle or square-shaped geometrical design adorns the pillars of the Thousand-pillared mandapa in the Meenakshi-Sundaresvara temple in Madurai. The art of painting held a significant place in the Indian way of life, a fact well-documented in ancient and medieval literature. References to "Chitramatam" or niche painting, for instance, are found in Sangam literature, indicating its prevalence in the Pandya court during that era. Early mentions of art galleries, referred to as "Chitrasala," can be traced back to the Ramayana and Mahabharata.¹⁷

Ancient historical painting in India can be traced back to the Satavahana period. The Satavahanas wielded considerable influence in the Deccan from the 2nd century B.C. to the 2nd century A.D. During their reign, numerous Buddhist caves were excavated in the living rock in Western India, including sites like Nasik, Bedsa, Bhaja, Karle, and Kondane. The earliest caves at Ajanta also date back to the Satavahana period. These paintings bore a striking resemblance to the early sculptures found at sites like Bhaja, Amaravati, and Sanchi in Ajanta. Notably, these paintings are predominantly located in caves nine and ten. The painting technique employed at Ajanta was fresco-buono, where pigments were mixed with water and applied over wet plaster. Most of the themes depicted at Ajanta revolved around the Jataka tales and avadanas of Buddha. The majority of the paintings are attributed to the Satavahanas, marking the initial phase of painting in Ajanta.

Nayak Architecture

Nayak Architecture, particularly under the Madurai Nayakas, stands out as a significant contributor to the realm of Art and Architecture in South India. This period, often referred to as the Nayak phase, represents a remarkable and integral extension of the preceding Vijayanagar architecture. During this era, many existing temples underwent expansion with the addition of new structures, including gopuras (towers) and mandapas (halls), in response to the growing demands of temple rituals and ceremonies.

Prominent Temples of the Nayak Era

Under the patronage of the Madurai Nayak rulers, extensive enhancements were made to temple complexes through the construction of mandapas and prakaras in various temples within their dominion. Notably, some of the major temples that benefited from their patronage and underwent expansion were located in Madurai, Srirangam, and Tirunelveli.

Secular Architecture

In addition to overseeing the construction of various temple structures within his Nayakdom, Tirumalai Nayak also undertook ambitious projects involving palaces and forts. One of the most renowned palaces in Tamil Nadu, known as the Tirumalai Nayakar Palace, is attributed to his rule.

Tirumalai Nayakar Palace - Madurai

The Tirumalai Nayakar Palace in Madurai stands as a testament to Tirumalai Nayak's grand architectural vision. This magnificent palace, completed in 1636 A.D., is a prime example of Indo-Saracenic architecture. It is particularly celebrated for its exquisite stucco work adorning its domes and arches. Constructed using foliated bricks and finished with stucco mixed with shell-lime and egg whites, the palace boasts a smooth and glossy texture. It is widely regarded as one of the most splendid secular buildings in South India. Tirumalai Nayak also erected another palace in a similar architectural style in Srivilliputhur, further contributing to the architectural heritage of the region.

The original palace complex spanned over five acres of land, making it four times larger than its current size. Today, only one section remains, known as Swarga Vilasam, along with a few adjacent buildings. The palace was divided into two parts: Swarga Vilasam and Ranga Vilasam. Apart from the royal residences, it featured a theater, a palace shrine, accommodations for queens, an armory, a structure for housing palanquins, a pond, and a walled garden.

The central courtyard, measuring one hundred and sixty feet in length and one hundred feet in width, was surrounded by arcades on all sides. The arches, supported by substantial pillars, stood at a towering forty feet in height and had a circumference of four meters. As noted by Zimmer, "the arches display a Hindu form but employ a Muslim application, while the columns that uphold them follow Western influences, resulting in an overall European character to the building."

Currently, the palace boasts two hundred and forty-eight pillars of varying sizes. The Swarga Vilasam Darbar hall, a true architectural marvel, measures seventy-five meters in length and fifty-two meters in width. Remarkably, it features a central dome that stands seventy-five feet above the floor without the need for a single rafter or girder. This dome is supported by twelve columns connected by arches, creating a stunning visual and structural masterpiece.¹⁸

Tamukam

Paranthamanar suggests that Tamukam is a Telugu term referring to a summer palace. The Tamukam is a two-story structure situated on the northern bank of the Vaigai River, commissioned by

Tirumalai Nayak as a grandstand from which he could observe wrestling matches and combat events involving wild animals. Tamangata, on the other hand, is a Sanskrit word denoting an elevated platform where kings traditionally sat to enjoy various forms of entertainment. According to Vijayavenugopal, Tirumalai Nayak's pioneering efforts in constructing civic buildings represent a significant milestone in the architectural history of Tamil Nadu

Resting Stones or Load-Relieving Stones (Sumaithanki Kal)

Along the way, travelers encountered resting stones known as Load-Relieving Stones or Sumaithanki Kal. These were simple stone structures featuring a horizontal stone slab supported by two vertical stone posts, each measuring five to six feet in height. These stones served as a practical aid for travelers, enabling them to unload and load the items they carried on their heads without requiring assistance from others.

Interestingly, it wasn't just rulers but also common people who planted these resting stones along the way, often as a way to commemorate their loved ones. The Rajakkalpatti copper-plate inscription of Tirumalai Nayak, for instance, mentions a resting stone planted by Tiruvathudevan and Peyadevan at Kovalan Kannavai, highlighting the significance of these markers in the local landscape.

The architectural style of the Madurai Nayaks represents the final phase of Dravidian architecture. Under their patronage, existing temples were extensively expanded with the addition of numerous mandapas. This architectural style was embraced and further developed by their subordinate rulers. Additionally, their secular constructions exhibited distinct architectural characteristics, exemplified by the Tirumalai Nayak Palace.

Furthermore, the Nayaks were responsible for the construction of various mandapas (halls), chatrams (rest houses), and padithurai (landing points) that are scattered throughout southern Tamil Nadu. These structures served the daily needs of the common people and remain as enduring markers of their architectural legacy.

Conclusion

In matters of religion, the Nayaks held a strong affinity for both Saivism and Vaishnavism. However, the majority of them were followers of Vaishnavism, and thus, they undertook the construction of grand temples and monuments dedicated to this faith. During their era, a multitude of architectural marvels came into existence, including Mandapas, Stupas, Royal Gopuras, and an array of temples, such as the Meenakshiamman Temple in Madurai, the Rameswaram Temple, and the Andal Temple in Srivilliputhur.

Beyond these well-known temples, they also initiated the construction of several other temples in places like Cholavanthan, Tirunelveli, and Madurai, among others. These temples were celebrated for their distinctive style and opulent appearance, embodying magnificent edifices. It is important to note that the funds for these constructions were primarily sourced from the contributions of the general public.

However, despite their impressive architectural achievements, certain communities, particularly the less privileged and marginalized, were often excluded from worshipping in these grand temples. Nevertheless, the Nayaks left an indelible mark on the art and architecture of South India, earning lasting admiration and respect for their contributions to the region's cultural heritage.

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