



# Evaluation Of Temple Architecture Of Rajendra Chola

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**Abstract:** Temples are a crucial archeological source of information for the study of ancient Indian history. As we talk about the ancient India, the cholas happen to be a crucial, yet underestimated dynasty in India. The Chola dynasty reigned in the southern part of India during the period of 8<sup>th</sup> century to 13<sup>th</sup> century AD, however the earliest traces of cholas are found as early as 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. A prominent king of the empire was Rajendra Chola. He was a military might and naval genius. Started as a commander to his father's army, he, as an imperialist, occupied lands of Sri Lanka, laccadives, Maldives, Cambodia, Thailand and Peru. But his military power was not the only great thing. Rajendra Chola was also a patron of art and architecture. The south India during this period had a rich culture and heritage. Temples were a part of it. The prominent style of temple architecture was the Dravidian style, which is why it is also called as south Indian style of temples. Though the Dravidian school was created by the Pallavas, many Chola kings like Rajendra Chola and his father, Rajaraja Chola had followed the Dravidian style of architecture in their temples. The temples built by kings are a crucial and undeniable source of information. Therefore, this makes the temples built by a king as mighty and strong as Rajendra Chola, important to history. So in the following paper, is an attempt to evaluate the temples that were built under the kingship of Rajendra Chola.

**Index Terms** - Rajendra Chola, Brihadisvara temple, Gangaikonda Cholapuram, Dravidian style of temple architecture

## I. A BRIEF BACKGROUND OF GANGAIKONDA CHOLAPURUM

The great Chola king, Rajaraja I built the big Brihadisvara temple at Thanjavur, but did not live to see it completed. Just a couple years after Rajaraja I built the temple, his proud son, Rajendra I become the next Chola emperor (1014 to 1044). He ruled jointly along with his father until his death in 1016. He had served as a military commander under his father and led many successful campaigns.

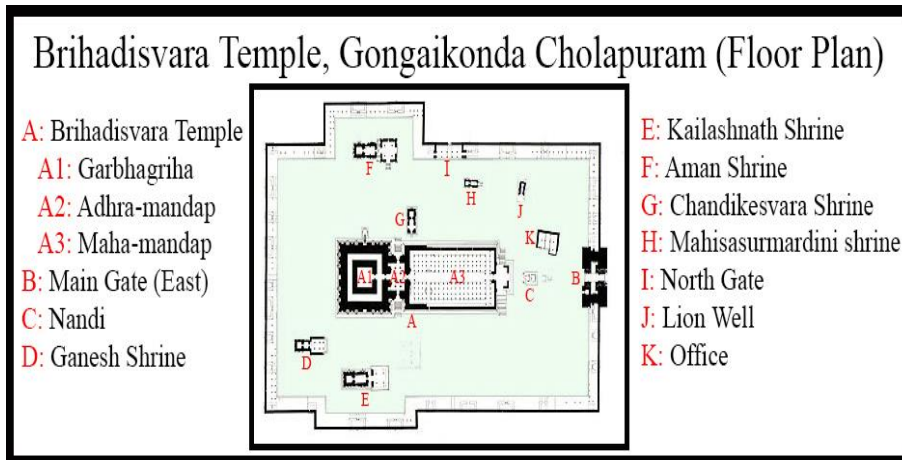
Rajendra Chola became more ambitious in conquering the northern and north-western parts of India. He commenced his war expedition in this direction in 1021, capturing the south of Chhattisgarh. Then, he sent part of his forces to the Ganges river in the north and the other in a north-westerly direction. At the same time, he stationed himself at South Chhattisgarh until the two expeditions were complete. They captured the regions of Odisha, northern Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and in modern-day Bangladesh, and reached the Ganges. The Chola Indian Mainland expedition ended in 1022. With his return, Rajendra claimed a new title, "Gangaikondaan", and given the title "Gangaikonda Cholan" (the Chola who captured Ganges)

He established a new capital city called "Gangaikonda Cholapuram" AKA Gangaikondacholeswaram, about 70kms from Thanjavur and had a royal temple by the same name built in it. The temple is commonly called as Brihadisvara temple now. This new city of Gangaikonda Cholapuram remained the capital of cholas for the next 250 years.

The earliest inscriptions that mentions this city by its name is dated 1029, while the oldest mentions of Rajendra's expedition towards Ganges is 1023 and the first gift towards the newly built Gangaikonda Cholapuram is dated 1035.

## II. The Layout of the Gangaikonda Cholapuram temple

**Fig.1 Floor plan of the Brihadisvara temple at Gangaikonda Cholapuram**



**Fig.2 aerial view of Brihadisvara temple at Gangaikonda Cholapuram**



## III. The Architecture of the Brihadisvara temple at Gangaikonda Cholapuram

Gangaikonda Cholapuram Temple is the pinnacle of the achievements of Rajendra I, the mighty Chola King, who established his new capital here with the magnificent city and temple dedicated to Lord Siva. The temple follows the Dravidian style of architecture like many of the southern India temples.

The temple is massive and richly carved with sculptures. The architecture has complex carvings on the hard granite stones unlike the customary simple style of the Cholas. The sculptures that adorn the walls and ceilings of Gangaikonda Cholapuram are exquisite. The temple is famed for its bronze sculptures, artwork on its walls, the depiction of Nandi and the scale of its tower. As well as its notability for having been built by Rajendra I, the temple is also noteworthy for its numerous inscriptions, although none of them are his. The Gangaikonda Cholapuram Temple is smaller yet more refined than the Thanjavur Big temple. Because

of its delicate appearance and gentle curve, this temple is often called the feminine version of the one in Thanjavur.

**Fig. 3 East entrance of Gangaikonda Cholapuram temple**



*The East entrance* called as “**Mahaduvar**”, leads to the temple complex. As the word says, it is located at the east of the temple premises. An important feature of Dravidian architecture is that the temple is well surrounded by walls. As seen in Fig.1, the east entrance surrounds the temple walls.

**Fig.4 Dvaja sthamba or Flag post placed in front of the temple**

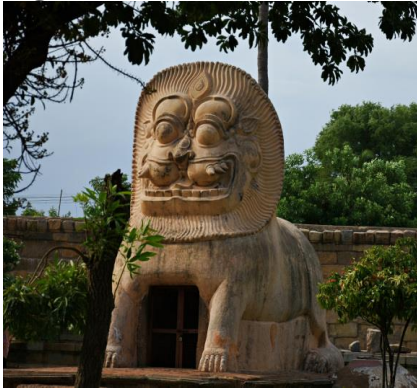


The next we see as we enter from the east entrance towards the temple is a **Dvaja sthamba** or Flag post. It is placed in front of the temple. It has a height of 40ft and has been plated with brass. In this flag post, there are four images sculpted, Siva Parvathi, lord Karthikeya, Nandi and Lord Ganesh.

**Fig.5 the seating statue of Nandi, facing towards the temple sanctum**



In front of the flag post is a statue of **Nandi**, (Fig.1) the loyal mount of Lord Siva. The “Couchant bull” or Nandi, aligned axially 200m or 660ft and is placed facing West, towards the Garbhagriha or the main sanctum of the temple.

**Fig.6 the lion well**

Moving towards the east of the Nandi, is the **lion well**, AKA, **singhamukha kinaru**. (Fig.1) The lion faced entrance to the well has steps leading to the water level. After his victory in the Ganges, Rajendra Chola demanded that the defeated kingdoms send pots of water from the holy river and pour them into the temple well.

**Fig 7 the Globular Shikhara****Fig.8 the Sri Vimana**

*The Sri Vimana of the temple* catches the eyes as we move past the lion well. It is a pyramid like structure above the sanctum of the temple (Fig.8). The temple tower or the Vimana is 55 meters or 180 ft in height, which is 3 meter or 10 ft shorter than the Vimana of Thanjavur temple. Historian believe that the height of the Vimana is deliberately kept lower than Thanjavur temple by Rajendra Chola as a mark of respect towards his father Rajaraja Chola.

The difference in the structure of this Sri Vimana and that of Thanjavur is that this Vimana is a feminine structure while Thanjavur's Vimana is masculine in nature. This Vimana is 8 sided (octagonal), while Thanjavur's Vimana is 4 sided (quad agonal) The Sri Vimana at Gangaikonda Cholapuram has nine storeys (talas), in contrast to the thirteen storeys of Thanjavur temple.

The sculptures in the lower courses, of the Sri Vimana depict various aspects of Siva and also the subsidiary deities who include Ganesha, Vishnu, Subrahmanya, Durga, Brahma, and Bhairava, supplemented by Lakshmi, Saraswati, and Durga in the niches of the great mandapa. The sculptures were made separately and fitted into the niches.

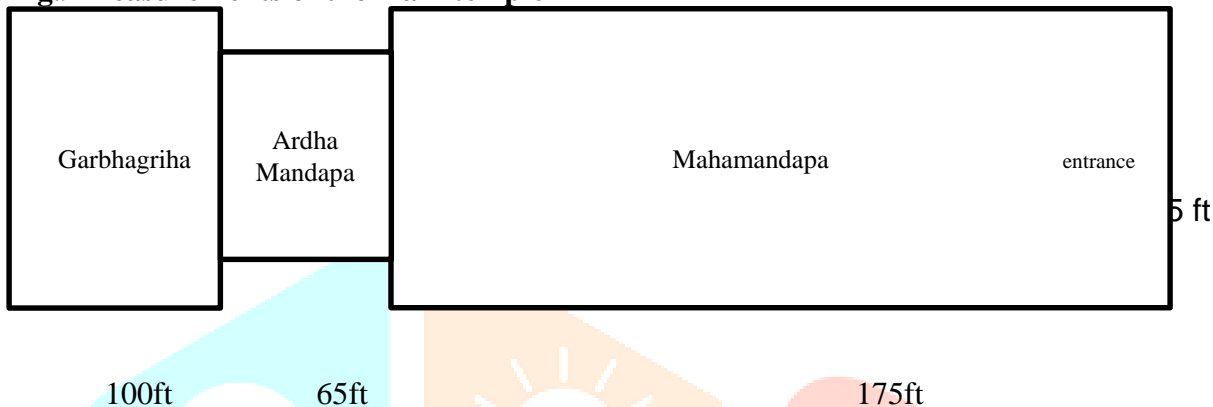
The globular element on the top of the Vimana is called Shikhara, which according to the tradition is made of one stone weighing many stones (Fig. 7). However, the fact is that it is made of many pieces of cut stones and is molded to fulfil the purpose. At the top most is the metal vase or the Kalash, with a lotus bud design at the top.

#### IV. Understanding The Main Temple

The main temple consists of a sanctum tower called Sri Vimana, a big rectangular mandapa called the mahamandapa (Fig.1) with a small passage between the mahamandapa and the main sanctum, called as Ardha mandapa (Fig.1). The main temple is built on an elevated structure with a courtyard measuring 560ft by 320ft. The front entrance to the great mandapa is approached by steps from north and south. As the flooring of the mandapa is on a high elevation, the steps rise to a considerable height forming a high platform in the front.

The temple is 340 ft long and 100 ft wide. This gives, the sanctum or Garbhagriha of 100ft long, the square Ardha mandapa 65ft long and 175 ft of mahamandapa.

**Fig.9 measurements of the main temple**



#### Mahamandapa and Ardha mandapa

If the original mahamandapa had been preserved, it would have retained the grandeur of its conception and beauty. But as it is, only the portion up to the main base is original. However a part of the original has survived up to the ceiling at the western end. From the surviving portion it may be seen, the roof (prastara) of the mahamandapa was in level with the prastara of the ground floor (adi bhumi) of the main Vimana.

As it stands today the inner side of the mahamandapa has a central passage, leading from the front to the sanctum, flanked by two raised platforms and a passage running around. This Ardha mandapa connects the sanctum or the Garbhagriha with the great hall (mahamandapa). Two massive dvarapalas are seen guarding the entrance to mukhamandapa (see Fig.10).

**Fig.10 the two dvarapalas guarding the northern entrance to Ardha mandapa**



**The main sanctum or Garbhagriha** holds the main deity of the temple, which here is Brihadeshwara Shiva in the form of Lingam. The inner sanctum houses a very big Siva lingam, of around thirteen feet. It is said to be the biggest lingam in a sanctum of any south Indian temple.

The entrance of the sanctum is guarded by the massive doorkeepers, dvarapalas. The mandapa immediately preceding the sanctum is approached by steps leading to it from the north and the south sides and also from the great mandapa in the east.

#### V. The other shrines around the Brihadisvara temple

Along with the Brihadisvara temple, there exist some smaller shrines around the temple complex. These are the Ganesha shrine, Chandikesvara temple, Amman temple and the Kailashnath temple.

##### The Ganesh shrine:

It is a small shrine located to the south western corner of the main temple. (see Fig.1). it is a small shrine dedicated to Lord Ganesha. Like a usual Dravidian temple, it has a sanctum preceded by a mandapa. As per the style, it could be a construction of 13<sup>th</sup> century.

**Fig.11 the Ganesha shrine, at the southwest of the main temple**



##### The Chandikesvara temple:

It is located towards northern entrance of the Brihadisvara and in north east from the main temple. (see Fig.1). this little temple is dedicated to the saint of Siva, Chandikesvara. The sanctum of this temple is approached by the side steps. Inside the sanctum is an image of Chandikesvara coeval with the temple. The outer walls of the temple carry the sculptures of Chandikesvara. He is a principal subsidiary deity in the temple and until 13<sup>th</sup> century all the crucial transactions were made in his name, thus a separate shrine.

**Fig.12 Chandikesvara temple**



##### The Amman temple:

It is at the north of the main shrine. (see Fig.1). it houses Goddess Brihannayaki, consort of Gangaikonda Cholesvara. The temple resembles southern Kailasa in every aspect and is so called Uttar Kailasa. It has a sanctum, preceded by the mandapa, with steps on side. In front of it is a mahamandapa or great hall, which is well preserved, unlike its southern counterpart.

Though the separate shrines came to be built only during the reign of Rajendra I, this temple is clearly a later addition to the complex. The original temple should have had images of Siva lingam, where now is the beautiful image of goddess.

**Fig.13 Amman temple, dedicated to Goddess Brihannayaki**



### **The Kailashnath temple.**

The Kailashnath temple is located far north of the main temple. (see Fig.1). it is also called as southern Kailasa or the Dakshina Kailasa. The temple carries Dakshnamurti in the south and the Lingodhbhava in the west. The inner sanctum and other parts of the temple are now in ruins.

**Fig.14 the Dakshina Kailasa or the Kailashnath temple.**



## **VI. Sculptures at Brihadisvara**

The Brihadisvara temple has proved to be an extraordinary piece of architecture. However, architecture of the temple is not the only fabulous thing about the Rajendra Chola temple. The sculptures at this temple are equally mind blowing. There are around 50 sculptures around the walls of sanctum. The collection of sculptures include those of Siva, Parvathi, Ganesha, Nataraja, Karthikeya, Nandi, and many more of such. Some of the best are described ahead.

**Fig.15 Siva and Parvathi, with Chandikesvara****Fig.16 Goddess Saraswati**

Outside the main sanctum, near the northern entrance of Ardha mandapa, this, seen in fig.15, is the most famous scene sculpted in the temple complex. In this sculpture, a seated Siva is seen with his hand lowered to garland Chandikesvara. Meanwhile, Chandikesvara can be seen in worshipping posture with his both hands folded. It is suggested that King Rajendra himself has carved his own image and shown his benevolence towards Siva.

On the west wall is the sculpture of Goddess Saraswati, the Goddess of knowledge, see Fig.16. She can be seen seated on a lotus throne with four arms. She is holding the Mala in one hand and the Amrit Kalash in other upper hand. The lower hands hold palm leaf and one rests in china mudra pose.

**Fig.17 Nataraja dancing over the demon of ignorance****Fig.18 Nataraja surrounded by Parvathi and other deities**



**Fig.19 Kalan taka legend, dance of time and eternity by Siva**

## VII. Conclusion

So far a research, one can conclude that Brihadisvara temple is indeed a marvelous work of King Rajendra Chola. It is a classic Dravidian style of temple, that is often found in south India.

Made to celebrate the victory of Rajendra Chola in the Ganges, the temple was built on the outlines of Thanjavur's Brihadisvara temple that was built by Rajaraja Chola. It has all the elements of a Dravidian temple. A Sri Vimana that is 180 feet tall, a Garbhagriha that houses the deity of the temple and a mahamandapa or the great hall that precedes the sanctum. A crucial element that distinguishes a Dravidian temple from a Nagara temple is a wall or boundary around the temple. The wall adjacent to the eastern entrance fulfills this requirement.

However, if compared with the Brihadisvara temple built by Rajaraja, the temple of Gangaikonda Cholapuram is significantly different, though it was built after it. Where the Thanjavur temple is masculine in nature, the Gangaikonda Cholapuram temple is often quoted as its Feminine counterpart. This feminine element can be visibly seen in the structure of Sri Vimana. Compared to the Thanjavur Temple, which has straight contours, this temple has a curvilinear contour, slightly concave towards the top, that gives it its feminine look.

The Garbhagriha of this temple hold the biggest Lingam that is ever housed in any temple in south India. This Lingam is 13 feet in length. Apart from the main temple, the complex also has many smaller shrines dedicated to Ganesha, Kailashnath, Brihannayaki and Chandikesvara.

One of the major architecture development made by Rajendra Chola was building a well in the temple complex. He demanded the defeated kings to send pots of water of river Ganges and pour it into this well. This well is called as Lion well.

Apart from the architecture of the complex, the sculptures of the temple hold their own beauty. One of the famous sculpture here is one outside the main sanctum, that depicts King Rajendra Chola himself, in worshipping posture. It is said that the sculpture was carved by king Rajendra himself. His was to show his devotion to Siva.

Therefore, Brihadisvara temple stands as a witness to king Rajendra's sense of art and architecture. The temple like any Dravidian temple is a dedication to Siva and is also a UNESCO World Heritage site

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