A Study of Medieval South Indian Temples

Priyanka Kumar

A detailed study of five temples, belonging to medieval south Indian dynasties, which aimed to compare and contrast the approach to art and architecture in these two kingdoms, as well as derive an understanding of the life of people and societal mores in that period through the study of the temples.
A Study of Society in Medieval South India through a Study of Temples

CONTEXT TO RESEARCH

Indian history can neither be completely written down nor fully documented because of its vast expanse and rich diversity. Consequently, there are some periods in Indian history that people don’t know very much about and so this project will cover two south Indian kingdoms that despite being very powerful in their time, very powerful, have not been given their due in the annals of history: - The Hoysalas and The Cholas. These were kingdoms that flourished in medieval India: the Hoysalas from 1000 CE to 1346 CE and the Cholas from 850 CE to 1278 CE.

The Cholas, with their capital in Thanjavur, ruled over the modern state of Tamil Nadu, parts of Andhra Pradesh, parts of Karnataka, the whole of Kerala, parts of Malaysia, parts of Indonesia, at their height. The Hoysalas ruled over the modern state of Karnataka. The reign of these two dynasties overlapped. Also, with their kingdoms bordering each other, there was bound to be interaction and influence of one on the other. Equally important, these kingdoms were highly influential in their times and hence they made interesting subjects of study.

![Map of South India](image)

Temples were an interesting choice in deciding on the aspect of these kingdoms to study. With Hinduism being a dominant religion, India is a land of temples. Temples were however more than a symbol of religion. Temples formed the epicenter of societal activity. They were the center of positive and spiritual energy. Arts, livelihoods and businesses developed and flourished around this very structure. Dance and music were promoted in temples; vendors and traders would set up shop outside the temple since crowds were drawn to the structure. Due to this, temples formed the point of convergence of different aspects of society such as political (kings) social (people, crowds) economic (vendors) cultural (dance and music) and so on.

This is what made the temple the perfect candidate for exploration and study.
Scope of this research project

To study prominent temples of the Chola and Hoysala period with an aim to

- Compare and contrast the approach to art and architecture in these two kingdoms that were fairly close to each other in South India
- Derive an understanding of the life of people and societal mores in that period through the study of the temples

From the Hoysala kingdom temples built by Vishnuvardhana were chosen and for the Cholas, temples built during the reign of Raja Raja Chola I, Rajendra Chola I and Raja Raja Chola II were chosen. These kings ruled during the heyday of their respective dynasties, with Raja Raja Chola II and Vishnuvardhana’s periods overlapping. Hence some interesting insights into the life of people in neighbouring regions in medieval south India are proposed to be drawn.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Detailed literature survey was done both on the overall approach to art and architecture and more specifically to the temples chosen for the study. A detailed list of references is provided at the end of the paper.

Second, field visits were done to the temple sites-

1. Belur
2. Halibed
3. Thanjavur
4. Darasuram
5. Gangaikondacholapuram

These visits were both to study the temples as well as collect pictorial evidence for what was studied in preparation.
THE HOYSALAS

While their name has been recorded as early as the 10th century CE, the Hoysalas ruled from around 1000 CE to 1346 CE. The empire of the Hoysalas extended in Southern India from Mamallapuram and Kanchipuram in the east to the present state of Kerala in the west. The dynasty is said to have comprised 14 kings. The most famous is Vishnuvardhana, a Jain who converted to Hinduism, and worshipped the God Vishnu. It was in his rule that the Hoysalas really flourished. After his rule ended, the empire started disintegrating and in 1336 A.D. Muhammad Bin Tughlaq (a Muslim ruler from North India) attacked the Hoysalas, ending their reign.

There are many stories surrounding the origin of the name “Hoysala”. All relate to the founder of the dynasty-the tribal head of a village called Angadi (now part of the Chikkamagalur district in Karnataka State) - Sala. Legend says he once tackled a tiger with his bare hands as a boy, and came out unscathed. Thus, the name “Hoysala”: “Hoy” meant kill in the old Kannada language, and “Sala” for the name of the founder. The story is highly plausible given that the emblem of the royal family is a boy fighting a tiger.

Characteristics of a Typical Hoysala Temple

- A typical Hoysala temple is built of stone called schist. This was earlier used by the Chalukyas of Kalyana.
- Hoysala temples are not very tall. They are mostly situated on a platform which is 3-5 feet in height. The temple from the base to the crown is approximately 36.6 feet in height.
- The platform of the temple is never seen to be rectangular or square. It always has many sides, and follows the outline of the outer wall of the temple.
- Most of the temples built by the Hoysalas have identical outer walls. They all have a similar structure and arrangement to them.
- There are towers called *sikharas* which rise above the sanctums, which are generally of the height of 15 to 20 feet. Many temples also are covered by enclosed corridors called *prakaras*. These are open on one end and closed by shrines on the other.
- Temples have ornate niches carved into their walls at regular intervals, and an equal number of them are also found at the entrance to the temple.
- The Sala or family emblem of the Hoysalas- a boy slaying a tiger is present in most temples built in the 12th and early half of the 13th century.
- The interiors are also similarly structured and, many a time, have the same number of halls, shrines.¹

The typical Hoysala temple consists of a *vimana* connected by a short *antarala* to a closed *navaranga* which can be preceded by another *mandapa*. This provides a large surface area for the carvings and sculpture that the Hoysala temples are so renowned for. The Hoysalas preferred a front entrance to the temple.

Horses and cavalry are a prominent feature in the friezes displayed. Lions and lion motifs are also dominant. They are shown in both conventionalized and symbolic forms.

¹ Somnathpura by S Settar
Makaras (water monster) are also extensively used in reliefs. Lions and Makaras are more ornamented than horses and elephants. Other animals used in reliefs are bulls, buffalos, rams, monkeys, camels, mice, swans and peacocks. Makaras are mythological creatures which are a combination of both land and sea creatures. There are many variations in their form. Makaras designed during the Hoysala period were a combination of crocodiles, pigs, elephants, and peacocks. They were considered sacred and were the vehicle of Lord Varuna. They are found in basement cornices, doorways, ceilings and so on.

The most elaborate ones, however, are found in the “Makara-Torana”, a panel above the door way.
Sculptors were credited for their work, in inscriptions on the pedestals in the temple. This was a common practice in the Hoysala kingdom. This is seen a lot in the Chennakeshava temple.
**Hoysaleshwara, Halebid**

### History of the Temple

Hoysaleshwara is one of the largest temples of Lord Shiva in India. This temple was commissioned by an officer of the King Vishnuvardhana called Kettamala. It is said he wanted to build the temple to show his devotion towards the king and queen. The building of this temple commenced in 1121 A.D. and went on for 150 years, but was never finished, because towards the end, Muhammad Bin Tughlaq destroyed the Hoysalas, and plundered the temple.

### Location

Halebid is located in Hassan District, Karnataka. It was the capital city of the Hoysalas in the 12th century, and prior to being ravaged by Muhammad-Bin-Tughlaq was called Dvara-samudra.

### Layout and Structure

The temple is a dvikuta- vimana (double-shrined) temple. This means there are two temples on the same platform. There are two separate shrines with a cruciform platform resting on cruciform shaped plinths. Both of the temples are preceded by a Nandi pavilion containing ornamented but realistic Nandi bulls. The sikharas are not to be found. The mandapa is a hall which is held up by pillars, also known as a hypostyle hall. The spaces between the peripheral columns have been closed off with stone slabs. There are 10 internal pillars around the four much larger ones at the centre. The latter marked the area reserved for dancers and musicians.

The Hoysaleshwara temple is a composite of two similar vimana units, both dedicated to Shiva. These units are placed next to each other on a raised platform. The platform is a combination of two stellate upa-pithas, with each vimana unit having a star shaped plan with an antarala and a navaranga in front, facing the eastern direction. The adhishthanas of both vimana units are made of elaborate animal or narrative friezes. The walls of the vimana, the inter-connecting transept, and the walls of the mandapas are covered with large sculptural reliefs of female figures.

Bulbous pillars are found inside the temple, which have carvings that are so precise, they were incorrectly even thought to be done using the lathe machine; however, the pillars are 2-3 feet wide and 8-10 feet tall leading us to infer that the original stone must have been at least 4-5 feet in width and 12 feet in length. This would mean that the machine had to have been made only of a metal, to have been able to support so large a stone vertically.
Temple Art

Hoysaleshwara exemplifies the schema of the tier designs completely on the outer wall of the temple. There are layers of animals and designs, each representing a certain aspect of the Hoysala kingdom. The bottom, the elephants, shows strength, the next layer, lions, shows bravery, the third from the bottom— the symbolic view of flowers- shows beauty, the fourth- cavalry, and then another layer of flowers, to again bring in the idea of artistic beauty. The layer after that is comprised of soldiers, and the second from the top is the layer of makaras. And the top most layer consists of peacocks to portray beauty and elephants for strength.

The doorways have four units- sill, jamb, lintel and architrave. The Hoysala sill is always plain and low. Lintels and jambs are usually relieved and jambs bear reliefs of dvara pala. The upper sections are decked with floral and creeper designs.
Dvarapalas at Halebidu are more elaborate than those at most temples. They are seven feet in height and fierce in appearance. They wear skull studded crowns with snakes peeping through lacing through; they are endowed with four arms in which they typically hold Shaivite attributes.

The garbagriha doorways of the Hoysaleshwara temple are divided into six vertical sections. There are reliefs on Manmatha and Rathi at the base. The six sections are decked in the following orders. The first from the outer side is decked with lions alternated with warriors and an elephant at the base. The second band is star shaped with the usual horizontal grooves and a bell mould on it. Third is a creeper with a variety of birds pecking and playing with convolutions of the scrolls. Fourth is plain pilaster which is moulded into kumbha, chakras and other motifs. Fifth is similar but has yakshas and gandharvas instead of the birds.
The outer wall paint is creamy brown, and the tallest outer wall reliefs are found in Hoysaleshwara. There are 594 varieties of reliefs found in Hoysaleshwara. Among these, one also finds Vishnu reliefs in the temple which is surprising to most since it is dedicated to Lord Shiva.

The Hoysaleshwara temple has no less than 1248 carved elephants. They always appear like a disciplined herd, and their positions are related to battle. They are all ridden by warriors or mahouts and are not decked with houdas. There are 1460 lions in the temple. Almost all of them have raised their tail and coiled them in identical fashions.
The Hoysaleshwara shows the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata in detail, and was one of the first Hoysala structures to do so. The tale of the churning of the ocean is also depicted in a band six feet long followed by musicians in a band of nine feet. Bhima’s encounter with Bhagadutta runs for about seven feet. The battle of Karna and Arjuna has also been portrayed and is 10 feet long.
Chennakeshava, Belur

History of the Temple

The Chennakeshava temple in Belur started being built in 1117 AD after the Hoysalas victory over the Chalukyas. It was begun in the period called vijayotsava where Vishnuvardhana celebrated the liberation of his kingdom from Chalukyan over-lordship. The temple took 119 years to build and was spread across three generations of rulers - Vishnuvardhana, his son Narasimha I and Vira Ballala II.

The main deity in the Chennakeshava temple is Lord Vishnu (called Keshava). The temple is completely unimpaired (except for the little degradation with time, local vandalism dating back to before the 1930s, and British looting). Most of the statues are intact, with all the intricate carvings still in place.

Location

Belur is located in Hassan District, Karnataka. It currently serves as a town municipal council. It was an early capital of the Hoysalas. Inscriptions state it was also referred to as Velapuri.

Layout and Structure

The temple’s base is a stepped diamond. It consists of a shrine, an open hall and a platform. The shrine measures 10 by 10 meters. Its architectural style is North Indian; however, with the loss of the tower, this has become hard to see. The mandapa is the open sort and originally had a parapet. The platform is an essential part of the temple. It outlines the shrine and the hall and provides a walkway around the shrine. There are three entrances to the hall, each with two flights of steps. One leads up to the platform of the temple, and the next to the floor of the hall.

The roof of the Chennakeshava is supported by bracket figures called salabhanjikas. There are 40 of these all around the temple of which only three are men, and the rest are women. There are four more inside the navaranga, of which one of them depicts the queen Shantala herself. The hall of the temple is large and extremely ornate. Initially, it was open on the sides, without full walls. It only had parapet walls and a roof resting on pillars. The parapet wall is two meters high and is topped with a slanting seat-back. This is decorated with panels showing mythological scenes. Below these panels are
numerous horizontal bands with intricate and sophisticated sculptural decorations and depictions. Later, in the 12th century, elaborate screens were added, darkening the halls and adding an air of mystery to them.

The top of the parapet-wall is a seat; and small steps are provided to reach the top. In its day, this hall could house hundreds of people who would collect to watch dance performances.
The sanctum consists of an antarala and a garbha griha. On either side of both entrances are dvarapalas. In the garbha griha is an image of Vishnu—extremely large, holding a chakra, a gada, a padma and a shankha.

**Temple Art**

Similar to Halebid, there are also dvarapalas at Belur at the doorway. These dvarapalas have more Vaishnavite attributes since it is a Keshava temple. The doorways also show avatars of Vishnu flanked on either side by two makaras.
The Chennakeshava temple has a lot more work done on the interiors, as compared to the Hoysaleshwara temple, while the latter has much more work done on its outer wall. The interior has a number of pillars, all of them unique and extremely large. One of the most famous ones is the Narasimha pillar, which back in the day was able to rotate on its base.

The four central pillars in the hall are the heaviest pillars of the lot. They are large specimens of the supposed lathe turned pillars. Their manufacture and production was a massive technical achievement. The pillars support a very elaborate, majestic ceiling- one of the most intricately decorated in India.
Two of the most interesting carvings on the outer wall of the Chennakeshava are court scenes of the kings, Vishnuvardhana and Vira Ballalla II.

Unlike the Hoysaleshwara temple, the elephants shown here are in a ceremonial procession and not engaged in war. Both the mahouts and soldiers are absent, depicting the differences in situations of building both temples.
Interpretations on Life and Society during the Hoysala period from the study of the temples

Secular outlook

One of the first things that is evident is the secularism very prevalent at that time. Both temples not only had relics of both Vishnu and Shiva (each being a temple specifically dedicated to only one of the Gods) but they also had statuettes of Jain monks. This originated from the fact that Queen Shantala was a Jain.

Open mindedness of society and status accorded to women

The next most prominent idea about the Hoysalas that is seen is the major role and importance of women in their society. There are innumerable reliefs that consist of women in various stances and positions. In fact, most of the salabhanjikas in the Chennakeshava temple are women, with only four male figurines. We also see that society was very accepting of ideas that even today are considered taboo at times. The temples also have erotic reliefs, showing the open-mindedness of the people back then. Subjects that are considered vulgar today were taken as natural.

While that is one part to the information we get from the reliefs, they also give us insight into what the style during that period was like. The reliefs of the men and women would reflect what men and women wore. On further inspection, we see that the kind of reservations that many people have with respect to length of clothes and type of garments didn’t exist then.

Active promotion of fine arts and culture

We also see that the Hoysalas were intent on promoting cultural aspects of their societies in their temples. All the reliefs in the temples all have the women and men either in scenes from daily life or in various poses from traditional temple dances that were performed then, and of which queen Shantala was a patron of. The reliefs also have figures holding musical instruments, weapons and in some cases vanity items in order to portray the idea of their culture perfectly. Another common practice in the Hoysala kingdom was the artisans getting recognized for their work and their efforts. There are many places in the temple where we see the signature of the artisan engraved into the temple wall in the Kannada script. This promoted their skills and encouraged more artisans to join in the building of the temples. It is said generations of artisans had to work on the same temple to the extent that it became a family business! Temples reflect the mood of the kingdom at the time.

The friezes in the temples hint at the sort of conditions the temples were built. For example, the Chennakeshava temple has only ceremonial elephants- they are not prepared for war and have no mahouts. However, the elephants in the Hoysaleshwara temple have mahouts and also look prepared to go to war. The cavalry look ready for battle, saddled up, with soldiers, while this is not the case in the Chennakeshava temple. This helps to give us an idea of what times were like during the period of the building of the temple.

Advanced Engineering skills

The Hoysalas were also highly skilled engineers, as evident from the architecture seen in context of the technological advancements of the time. Firstly, the aforementioned ‘lathe carved’ pillars. These pillars are said to be so perfectly carved and rounded that historians speculate they were aided by machines.
called lathe. These pillars weigh over a thousand kilos, and it has been proved that it is impossible for them to have been made with modern technology like lathe.

Secondly, one particular pillar in the Chennakeshava temple, the Narasimha pillar is a major engineering feat. This when it was first made, would rotate on its axis. And, like all the others, weighs around a thousand kilos. The engineers had the foresight to plan the pillar being fitted onto its axis while the ceiling was being built right at the beginning of construction.

Lastly, the architecture itself, as mentioned before, was completely visualized and put into stone without any modern day aids or technologies. Each pillar was fitted in perfectly without cranes, and is unique in its design. Temples which were built over hundred to hundred fifty years due to their sheer size and magnificence were visualized right at the beginning and set in stone at the end of that time period. Not to mention, there were no sophisticated engineering drawings- it was all in their heads. One of the ways we know that the temples actually took this long to build is because at the side of the temple where construction began, there is a carving of King Vishnuvardhana’s court. And, at the other end of the temple, there is a similar carving but of King Vira Ballala III’s court- the last king of the Hoysalas.

**Temple as the hub of society**

The temple was also an important meeting point for people. This is evident from the fact that the temple had the capacity to hold thousands of people. While today, many a time, temples’ main purpose is religious, back in those days, temples also served a social function. People would come together to watch dance and music performances, to pray, to be married, and just to meet each other. The temple was the massive positive aura and power around which a village or town developed. Hawkers would bring their products to sell outside the temple, and the place was a site of vibrant activity.

**Conclusion**

The Hoysalas were by far one of the most accomplished kingdoms in their heyday. They were an evolved society. They were very artistic and knowledgeable and knew how to accomplish great feats with the few materials they had. They were truly one of the greatest unsung heroes of the vast and rich Indian historical saga.
THE CHOLAS

The history of the Cholas falls into four periods: The Early Cholas, the Interregnum, the Medieval Cholas, and the Later Cholas. The Chola Kingdom was dominant from the years 850 AD till 1200 AD, during the time of the medieval Cholas, having risen under the rule of King Vijayalaya Chola. While inscriptions are found dating back to the third century BC, these 350 years are the most prominent times of Chola rule. The Cholas, after their downfall, continued ruling until the 13th century AD. For about 200 years the entire south of India after the River Tungabhadra was under Chola rule. And, after a victorious expedition to the river Ganga, this included those regions as well. It was after this celebrated expedition that the Chola king who undertook it (King Rajendra Chola I) built Gangaikondacholapuram both as a tribute to the Thanjavur temple as well as a representation of his success. Raja Raja Chola I and Rajendra Chola I both brought the Golden Age of the Cholas.

The temples that are explored include the Brihadisavara temple at Thanjavur, the Airavatesvara temple at Darasuram and temple at Gangaikondacholapuram. These are the biggest temples from the dynasty of Chola rule, and provide a vast sea of knowledge about the Cholas and their way of life.

Typical Characteristics of a Chola Temple:

Chola temples emulated Dravidian sthapathi style of architecture. Each temple had these main features:

- The porches or mandapas, which always cover and precede the door leading to the cell.
- Gate-pyramids, gopuras, which are the principal features in the quadrangular enclosures that surround the more notable temples. Gopurams are very common in Dravidian temples.
- Pillared halls (Chaultris or Chawadis) are used for many purposes and are the invariable accompaniments of these temples.
- A temple always contains tanks or wells for water – to be used for sacred purposes or the convenience of the priests.\(^2\)

\(^2\) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dravidian_Architecture
The Brihadisvara Temple, Thanjavur

History of the Temple

The temple was commissioned in 1003 AD by Raja Raja Chola I, who reigned from 985 AD to 1014 AD, and was reportedly finished by 1010 AD, in 6 years. The temple was built during a time of major expansion of Chola territory. The Cholas at this point had advanced their sphere of influence. There were Chola possessions in Sri Lanka and outposts in Java and Sumatra.  

The Cholas were the major economic and military power of the region, and the temple was built as representation of that prosperity and opulence of the time. The planning of the temple was done very meticulously. In fact, there are records stating that King Raja Raja Chola I sat in the Eastern Wing of his palace in Sri Lanka, planning out the layout of the temple.

Location

The temple is situated in Thanjavur, a former capital city of the Cholas. Thanjavur lies 322 km south-west of Chennai.

Layout and Structure

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3 Hindu India by Henri Stierlin, Page 91.
The temple has two entrances, the first one called Keralanthagan Tiruvayil, which has five tiers, and the second called Rajarajan Tiruvayil which has three tiers. In addition to these two gates, there are four more small gateways without *gopuras*. An entrance was added later by the Marathas when they conquered Cholanadu.

The complex of the temple shows some of the most mathematically and geometrically accurate architecture in history. The wall compound measures 241 metres by 121 metres which is proportional to double square.\(^4\) The temple is surrounded by a vast court yard, which has two walls. The outer wall is defensive in nature, having bastions.

The primary building material of the time was granite, which, it is speculated, was obtained from one of two places. Local folklore says the granite was taken from hills approximately 45 kilometres north east of Thanjavur. It was also suggested by Pierre Pichard that the stone was quarried at a site overlooking the south bank of the Kaveri river, upstream from Thanjavur. His theory implies the rocks could have floated downstream on the river, on specially constructed coracles.\(^5\)

The slabs of granite are laid on top of each other without any lime mortar filling. The pressure each of the rocks exerted on each other was sufficient to hold the structure in place.

Around the main temple Rajaraja also had shrines for Chandikeswara: the steward of Lord Shiva and the Big Nandi in a Mandapa, eight shrines for the dikpalas, and a shrine for the royal precept Karur Devar.

\(^4\) The Great Temple at Thanjavur by George Michell and Indira Viswanathan Peterson, Page 41
\(^5\) The Great Temple at Thanjavur by George Michell and Indira Viswanathan Peterson, Page 43
The temple complex is surrounded by two walls, the outer one was meant to be a protective bastion and was also surrounded by a moat.

**Temple Art**

**Sculptures:**

The art work seen in the temple is said to have originated in the 8th and 9th centuries from the Pallava temple work.

One of the sculptures seen a lot in the Thanjavur temple is the Tripurantaka. The sculpture is even said to have special importance to the king. There is a possibility the king even considered it his personal sculpture, and wanted to be identified with it. Tripurantaka was the God in armed combatant form.
Metal Casting:

Use of metal casting was a common practice during the Chola time. Some of the most famous statues specific to the Thanjavur temple are the 135 cm high copper Nataraja, which is used for worship even today; the smaller Shivakami statue next to the Nataraja, the Vinadhara Dakshinamurti (Shiva playing the veena). Inscriptions talk about statues of Panchadehamurti (formed of five bodies, with ten arms, donated specifically by Raja Raja for the worship of the lord Sadashiva), a tableau of Dakshinamurti surrounded by rishis, animals, a tree and a mountain; and images of Vishnu, Ganapathi and Uma-Parmeshvari. In addition to the statues of deities, inscriptions also mention castings of Raja Raja and his principal queen Lokamahadevi.

A special alloy called panchaloha was used to make the statues of the deities. The making of the alloy was kept secret for a very long time. It is a mix of five main metals- gold, silver, copper, lead and iron. The composition of this alloy was laid down in the Shilpa Shastras a Sanskrit text on idol making.

Painting:

Murals at Thanjavur are executed in a fresco manner, with the paint having been applied directly onto wet plaster: demonstrating the skill of the Thanjavur artists and speed. The murals extend more than 4 metres above floor level. They are crowded with humans, deities, attendants, sages, musicians, and dancers. Various settings are painted as backgrounds: the palace, the temple, and the forest. They are said to be the counterpart to the contemporary bronze sculptures.

Polychrome Plasterwork:

This is the final kind of art work characteristic to the Thanjavur temple. However, this work wasn’t characteristic to the Cholas, but the Marathas. It is possible the plasterwork formed a large part of the renewal of the temple by Serfoji I.
**Inscriptions**

A notable feature of the temple is the inscriptions etched on the temple wall. The entire wall surrounding the garbagriha is filled with inscriptions for which reportedly an official engraver had been engaged. The inscriptions are in Tamil, unlike Pallavas who used Sanskrit.

The inscriptions serve as an authentic source of information on the rule of the Cholas and some later dynasties also.

Thus, the temple is the perfect representation of Chola wealth, prosperity and success. It is the embodiment of the spiritual connection between God and the king and shows the complete and utter submission and devotion to the Lord Shiva.
The Gangaikondacholesvaram Temple, Gangaikondacholapuram

**History of the Temple**

Gangaikondacholapuram was built by Rajendra Chola I, the son of Raja Raja Chola I, in the 11th century. He built it after he overpowered the Palas in the war, when he marched to the Ganges. Gangaikondacholapuram was the second capital of the Cholas, built by Rajendra Chola I for strategic and administrative purposes.

**Location**

It is in the Udayarpalayam taluk of the Ariyalur district. It is 61 kilometres north east of Thanjavur and 35 kilometres northeast of Kumbakonam.

**Layout and Structure**

The temple is almost a replica of the Brihadisvara temple built by Raja Raja Chola I. There are a few minor differences in the temples other than the obvious difference in size. The temple appears to reiterate Chola supremacy.

Like the Brihadisvara temple, this too has shrines of other deities surrounding the main temple- the southern shrine is called Southern Kailasa or Ten Kailasa, and the northern shrine is called the Vada Kailasa or Uttara Kailasa.
**Temple Art**

The temple has a number of friezes and sculptures matching the style of the Brihadisvara temple. The level of detail and care is seen amongst the art work seen here is more than that of Brihadisvara temple.
**History of the Temple**

The temple was built by Raja Raja II. The Airavatesvara temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva. Shiva is known as Airavateshvara, because he was worshipped at this temple by Airavata, the white elephant of the king of the gods, Indra. Legend has it that Airavata, while suffering from a change of colour curse from Sage Durvasa, had its colours restored by bathing in the sacred waters of this temple. This legend is commemorated by an image of Airavata with Indra seated in an inner shrine. The temple and the presiding deity derive its name from this incident.  

**Location**

The temple is three kilometres from Kumbakonam city.

**Layout and Structure**

The temple complex is situated on a high platform enclosed in a massive compound wall of dimensions 107.5 m by 69.4 m. The temple is designed so as to resemble a chariot. The area covered by the temple measures approximately 23 m by 63m.

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Temple Art

The temple is best known for its architectural beauty and the intricately carved pillars.
Interpretations of Life and Society during the Chola period from a study of the temples

Religious affiliation and spirituality

First and foremost, we know that the Cholas were Shaivite.

The inscriptions in the Brihadisvara temple also provide insights into how connected King Raja Raja Chola I was connected to the God. Inscriptions in the temple state the deity in the temple is referred to as Rajarajeshwaram Udaya: Supreme Lord of Rajarajeshvaram. The connection by name tells us that Raja Raja Chola considered his terrestrial realm of the kingdom to intersect with the celestial realm of the Lord Shiva. The king connected himself and transacted with his personal God in a very public manner, for divine protection. A further link was established between the God and the king by the statues. Many of the sculptures of Lord Shiva see him dressed in royal garb characteristic to the Chola court of King Raja Raja’s day.7

Despite the fact that they were a strong Shaivite family and the temple being dedicated to Lord Shiva, there are also statues of Vishnu. In fact, of the four walls of the temple, it is found the north wall is dedicated to Lord Brahma, the south wall to Lord Shiva, the west wall to Lord Vishnu and the east wall to Lord Shiva and his consort Parvathi. Apart from that, however, there is not much evidence of secularism with all royal temples being Shaivite temples.

Supremacy of the monarchy – the temple and political power

The Chola empire grew substantially under Raja Raja Chola I. It spread to Kannada, Telugu regions as well as Ilam (Sri Lanka) in the South. Rajaraja took steps to establish his supremacy as a monarch in the extensive empire and evidence of this are seen in the way the temple also evolved from being a religious and social center to also embed political messages.

7The Great Temple at Thanjavur by George Michell and Indira Viswanathan Peterson, Page 50
The Brihadisvara temple may be seen as the first Royal temple of the Cholas. In fact it was named Rajarajeswaram after the king, to ascertain his power and supremacy.

The administrative powers of the temple were significant.

To quote Geeta Vasudevan from her book *The Royal Temple of RajaRaja*, “The Rajarajesvaram of Thanjavur provides us with one of the most detailed lists of temple authorities/functionaries. The manner in which the arrangements for its administration were made, and the minute details that were attended to, bespeak of the efficient and tight administrative machinery of the Cholas under Rajaraja and his son, Rajendra.” The inscriptions also mention details about the temple’s construction, daily rituals to be performed for the linga and details of the offerings. There are even inscriptions where the king mentions he built the stone temple called “kattrali”; he states how his order should be implemented, and a list of the gifts his sister Kundavai, his queens and he have given to the temple. From the records it is estimated that the king and royal family gifted 41500 *kalanjus* of gold, 50650 *kalanjus* of silver, and jewels worth 1308 *kasus*. The inscriptions also reveal that the temple was made solely for royals. By being the chief patron and key donor to the temple and recording this meticulously in the inscriptions, the royal family sought to gain more acceptance from its people. In addition, the inscriptions contain historical records (*meykritis*) of political achievements, economic and social achievements of the time.

The presence of a bastion and moat around the temple, for the first time in a south Indian temple, also indicates that the temple was more than a religious symbol. This may have also been because the temple was in the capital city and could be subject to attacks.

There are some structures common to all temples which specifically connote certain aspects of the kings. For example creatures called the *yellis* were symbolic of the wealth and military strength of the Cholas.
The dvarapalas of the temples are also common to all the temples, and again, due to sheer size and grandeur portray the power and wealth of the Chola kingdom.

Also, with the scale and importance of the temple growing, Thanjavur grew into a temple town, with all activity of people centred on serving the temple.

From the inscriptions on the Brihadiswara temple, historians have learned about the appointment of approximately 400 women assistants (tali-pendugal or tali-pendir) to this temple. These women had to perform various duties of the temple including singing and dancing in front of the deity.

In addition, there were also many men who were appointed as cooks, accountants, treasurers, dancers and musicians. There were 48 musicians (pidarar) to recite the Tiruppadiam. There were altogether nine hundred and 85 employees attached to this magnificent temple. These employees were accommodated in residences close to the temple and compensated in kind (measure of paddy)

The emergence of such temple towns further stamped the authority of the monarch.

**Progress of society**

**Economic status**

The inscriptions detailing the donations by the royal family give a good indication of the wealth and prosperity of the kingdom. In addition, the remuneration for the employees of the temple was handsome; people who had to relocate from other places were compensated well and provided a place to live- all this again shows the meticulous planning as well as economic supremacy of the Chola regime under RajaRaja I.
The inscriptions also throw light on the revenue earned by the ‘Big temple’ which was nucleus of society at that time. In his 29th year of rule, he issued a royal order which serves as a record of all donations and land grants made to the temple.

Inscriptions found in Gangaikondacholapuram also showed that a distinction was made between wet lands which yielded two crops a year and those where a single crop was grown (the former having a higher tax rate).

The temples of the Chola kingdom also served as banks. The grants given to the temple were often loaned for interest. The inscriptions provide details of donors as well as borrower details, the amount and whether the interest was paid in cash or kind.

According to George Spencer, “Owing to the numerous activities that had to be supported, the temple provided employment to many communities. The shepherds, for example, supplied milk, curd and ghee to the temples. So, in some sense, the temple invested in the prosperity of the agrarian or pastoral community. In other words, the temple served as a means to redistribute wealth and resources through society and overall led to an upward economic mobility.”

**Engineering and mathematical prowess**

- An axial and symmetrical geometry rules the temple layout.
- The gopura does not cast a shadow at any time of the day outside its perimeter - a testament to the early Dravidians' mathematical prowess.
- Temple Tower is capped by an 81.3 tonnes round monolithic cupola. This enormous piece of stone is said to have been was moved into position by moving it along an inclined plane 6 kilometres long (from a nearby village known as Vallam).
- It is one of the rare temples which has statues for "Ashta dik paalakas" [Lords of all Eight Directions [Indra, Varuna, Agni, Eesana, Vayu, Niruthi, Yama, Kubera], each of which is a life like status i.e approximately 6 feet tall.
- The Keralaanthakan gopura is constructed on the same architectural concept of the Srivimana. Firstly, the load is distributed on two huge granite walls and the walls are merged into single structure as it approaches the height.
- A gigantic stone “lingam” fills the sanctum sanctorum, sheltered by a vimana (towering roof) which pierces the sky at 216 feet.

The significance of the number nine was subtly emphasised by many features in the Brihadisvara temple. For example, there are 1008 Nandis built on the inner most compound wall of the temple.
There are 252 lingas in the temple.

Local guides even say the *vimana* of the temple weighs approximately 81 tonnes, the first *gopura* of the temple is 63 feet tall and the second, 54 feet tall. All of these figures add up to nine, what is today thought to be an emphasis on the *Navagraha* system.

In addition to this, the outer walls of the *garba griha* are situated on a square grid measuring 30 by 30 units- covering a 900 units$^2$ area. Similarly, the adjacent *mandapa* measures 24 by 48 units, covering an area of 1152 units$^2$. The columns used in the hall are 6 by 6 columns. The areas of all these measurements all add up to nine. This demonstrates a distinct connection between the *Navagraha* and the lives of the people.

**Conclusion**

Thus, it is clear from the study that Chola temples were very demonstrative of the life lead by the Chola kings and their subjects. They show not only the religious beliefs of the people at the time, but also the great economic wealth of the dynasty. The temples demonstrate both the careful craftsmanship and skill of the workers of the temple. The Chola dynasty’s power is exuded and lives on until today in these structures. They were without a question one of the most powerful and accomplished dynasties of all time.
Comparing Life in the Hoysala Empire and Chola Empire

The similarities

Since all temples that were studied were built under the patronage of the kings that brought the Golden Age to their respective kingdoms, the temples reflect the wealth, and prosperity that both dynasties had during those periods. For example the *yalli* is symbolic of wealth in the Chola empire, and the creature was seen in all temples, in abundance. Similarly in the Hoysalas, wealth and prosperity were demonstrated in the friezes that contained celebratory elephants, and were displayed in the detailing of some *salabhanjikas* and statues.

Another very important similarity seen between the two dynasties is that there was complete devotion and faith entrusted to and in the king. He was seen as the protector and the ultimate overlord of the people, with the only exception being God. In fact, the Halebid temples were built in honour of King Vishnuvardhana and Queen Shantala.

Both dynasties were also patrons of art and architecture. While the styles employed in both temples are distinctly different, both temples have a wide display of their respective kinds of work. The Brihadisvara, Gangaikondacholesavara and the Airavatesvara were carved from granite and therefore focus more on grandeur and size than fine details; while the Chennakeshava and Hoysaleshwara both built out of soap stone (which can be easily moulded) are more focused on minute details down to the nails on the fingers.

The differences

As mentioned before, the styles of art and architecture are very different.
Shown above are the representations of Shaivite dvarapalas of both dynasties. The differences in style come through very clearly - the Chola dvarapala is less detailed, but is bigger than the Hoysala dvarapala.

The Hoysalas appear more secular dynasty than the Cholas. This can be concluded due to the fact that the Cholas were solely Shaivite though they were accepting of other deities. Shiva was accepted as the supreme Lord. There is even a sculpture of Vishnu worshipping Shiva in the Brihadisvara temple.

The Hoysalas however advocated many deities. Statuettes of Jain monks are found in both temples. It is also to be noted both the Hoysaleshwara and the Chennakeshava are dedicated to different deities.

From the architecture another observation that can be made is that perhaps the Cholas were more prosperous. This is due to the focus on large, imposing structures as opposed to the Hoysala focus on details and beauty in precision and intricacy. It is also seen that the Cholas seem to have focused more on showcasing economic and political supremacy whereas for Hoysalas the temples remained a work of art.

Overall, both serve as showcases of well-run kingdoms of South India.
Glossary

1. **Adhisthanas**

   It is the base of a temple. It consists of several layers or mouldings that developed into various shapes over time. It is one of the elements that can be used to identify the period of construction of a temple.

2. **Antarala:**

   It is a small corridor between the *garbagriha* and the *mandapa*.

3. **Architrave**

   The word is used generally to refer to the mouldings framing doors, windows or other rectangular openings.

4. **Ashta dik paalakas**

   These are the guardians or deities who rule the eight directions of space, in both Hinduism and *Vajrayana* Buddhism.

   *Vajrayana Buddhism is the third branch of Buddhism practiced mainly in Tibet, Mongolia and adjacent parts of China and Russia.*

5. **Chakra**

   It is the Sanskrit word for wheel.

6. **Dvarapala**

   They are sentinels who guard the temple.

7. **Dvikuta Vimana**

   It is a temple plan with two shrines and superstructures.

8. **Gandharva**

   A name used for distinct heavenly beings in Hinduism and Buddhism; it is also a term for skilled singers in Indian classical music.

9. **Garbagriha**

   It is the sanctum sanctorum or shrine which houses the deity.

10. **Gopura**

    Temple gateway.
11. **Hypostyle hall**
It is a hall that has a roof supported by columns.

12. **Kasu**
A unit of currency during Chola period

13. **Kumbha**
The word refers to a pot or vessel. It is also applied to pot-shaped decorative elements such as the upper part of a pillar.

14. **Linga**
A representation of the Hindu deity Shiva

15. **Makara**
It is a sea-creature of Hindu mythology. It is generally depicted as part terrestrial animal and part aquatic animal. In the frontal part, the animal forms used are of elephants, crocodiles or stags and in the hind, a fish tail or seal. Sometimes, even a peacock tail is depicted.

16. **Mandapa**
It is a porch-like structure between the *gopura* and the *garbagriha* and leads to the temple. It was used for religious dancing and musical performances and is part of the basic temple compound.

17. **Nandi**
The name of the bull that served as Lord Shiva’s mount.

18. **Nataraja**
The Lord of Dance - the dancing form of Lord Shiva.

19. **Navagraha**
The nine celestial bodies of Hindu astronomy

20. **Navaranga**
Closed hall where devotees gather for prayers.

21. **Panchaloha**
It is the name of the traditional five-metal alloy used for making Hindu temple idols.
22. **Prakaras**

It is a circumambulatory passage around a temple, sometimes just a corridor, sometimes a large temple courtyard.

23. **Shaivite**

A follower of Lord Shiva

24. **Salabhanjikas**

It is a common form of Hoysala sculpture. They served the function of bracket figures for pillars inside the mandapa. These are *madanika* figures which were sculpted to demonstrate artistic activities such as music and dance.

*Madanika figures are decorative objects put at an angle on the outer walls of the temple near the roof so that worshipers circling the temple can view them.*

25. **Shikhara**

The cupola or dome that forms the roof of a vimana

26. **Shilpa Shastras**

It is an umbrella term for numerous Hindu texts that describe manual arts, the standards for religious Hindu iconography, as well as rules of Hindu architecture.

27. **Tali pendugal**

Women of the temple

28. **Tirupurantaka**

He is a manifestation of the Hindu god Shiva. In this aspect, Shiva is depicted with four arms wielding a bow and arrow.

29. **Tiruvayil**

Entrance of temple

30. **Upa pithas**

Upa- pithas are the places of worship consecrated to the Goddess Shakti (Parvati).

31. **Vaishnavite**

Followers of Hindu deity Vishnu.
32. Vijayotsava

Triumph.

33. Vimana

The pyramid shaped roof of the sanctum sanctorum.

34. Yaksha

The name of a class of nature spirits.

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