

Temple Architecture of South India–Dravidian Style Natthu S. Girde

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ABSTRACT:

The Dravidian style of temple architecture in South India represents one of the finest achievements of Indian art, culture, and spirituality. Evolving under the Pallavas, Cholas, Pandyas, and Vijayanagara rulers, these temples embody grandeur through lofty gopurams, majestic vimanas, finely carved mandapas, and intricate sculptures that narrate mythological and cultural stories. Beyond their architectural brilliance, Dravidian temples served as centers of education, music, dance, literature, and community life, becoming the heart of social and religious activities. They remain timeless symbols of devotion, creativity, and heritage, standing as monumental bridges between history, faith, and artistic excellence.

KEYWORDS:

Darasuram, Gopuram, Mandapas, Temples, Vimana.

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Introduction:

Architecture has always been an impression of a human being's healthy state of mind. With special reference to India, a variety of architectural developments we can trace. The Dravidian style of architecture is a unique architectural style that is found predominantly in South India. The style is characterized by the use of stone, intricate carvings, and a focus on symmetry and proportion. One of the most significant contributions of the Dravidian style of architecture is the construction of temples. These temples are not just places of worship but also serve as architectural marvels and historical landmarks.

Historical Background of Dravidian Temples

The Dravidian style of architecture dates back to the 3rd century BCE. The temples of the early period were built of wood and brick. However, with the advent of stone, the temples began to be constructed using this material. The Chola dynasty, which ruled from the 9th to the 13th century, is considered to be the golden age of temple construction in South India. During this period, many great temples were constructed,

including the Brihadeeswara Temple in Thanjavur and the Airavatesvara Temple in Darasuram.¹

The Vijayanagara Empire, which ruled from the 14th to the 17th century, also made significant contributions to the construction of Dravidian temples. The Hampi temple complex, which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, was constructed during this period. The Nayak dynasty, which ruled from the 16th to the 18th century, continued the tradition of temple construction. The Meenakshi Temple in Madurai is a significant example of the architectural style of this period. These type of temples are characterized by intricate carvings, towering gopurams and spacious mandapas. Here are some notable Dravidian temples in South India. ²

Brihadeeswarar Temple, Thanjavur: This is one of the most famous and impressive Dravidian temples in India, and it is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It was built in the 11th century AD by the Chola emperor Raja Raja I and is dedicated to Lord Shiva.

Meenakshi Amman Temple, Madurai: This temple is dedicated to Goddess Meenakshi, who is believed to be an incarnation of Parvati, the wife of Lord Shiva. It was built in the 17th century AD and is renowned for its magnificent gopurams and intricate carvings.

Sri Ranganathaswamy Temple, Srirangam: This temple is dedicated to Lord Vishnu and is located on an island in the Cauvery River. It is one of the largest temple complexes in India and is renowned for its ornate gopurams and intricate carvings.

Thillai Nataraja Temple, Chidambaram: This temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva in his form as Nataraja, the Lord of Dance. It is famous for its intricate carvings, especially those depicting the cosmic dance of Lord Nataraja.

Kailasanathar Temple, Kanchipuram: This is one of the oldest Dravidian temples in South India, dating back to the 8th century AD. It is dedicated to Lord Shiva and is renowned for its intricate carvings and beautiful architecture. These are just a few examples of the many impressive Dravidian temples in South India. Each temple has its unique history, architecture, and significance in Hindu mythology and culture.³

Architectural Features of Dravidian Temples

The Dravidian temples are known for their unique architectural

features. These temples are typically constructed on a raised platform, with a series of entrances leading to the sanctum sanctorum. The temple complex usually includes a mandapa, a pillared hall used for public rituals and gatherings. The temple is surrounded by a high wall, which encloses the entire complex.⁴

The gopuram, or tower, is the most distinctive feature of Dravidian temples. The gopuram is usually located at the entrance to the temple complex and serves as a gateway to the temple. The gopuram is typically pyramidal in shape and is adorned with intricate carvings of gods, goddesses, and mythological creatures.

The vimana, or the main shrine, is located at the center of the temple complex. The vimana is typically a pyramid-shaped tower, which houses the main deity of the temple. The vimana is adorned with elaborate carvings of gods and goddesses and is often covered in gold or copper plates. The pillared hall, or mandapa, is used for public gatherings and rituals. The mandapa is usually located in front of the vimana and is supported by numerous pillars. The pillars are adorned with intricate carvings and sculptures of gods and goddesses.⁵

Cultural Significance of Dravidian Temples

Dravidian temples are not just places of worship but also serve as cultural landmarks. The temples are often associated with the social and cultural fabric of the local community. The temple festivals are an integral part of the cultural calendar of the region and are celebrated with great fervor.

The temple festivals are often marked by elaborate processions, cultural performances, and feasts. The festivals serve as a platform for artists and performers to showcase their talents.

The Dravidian temples of southern India are some of the most impressive architectural and cultural landmarks of the country. Spread across the states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh, these temples showcase a unique blend of art, architecture, and religious beliefs that have evolved over thousands of years.⁶

The Dravidian style of temple architecture is characterized by its towering gateways, intricate carvings, and vibrant colors. The temples are often built on large, open spaces and feature multiple levels, with each level representing a different aspect of the divine. The use of granite and

other stone materials in the construction of these temples has ensured their longevity and has allowed them to survive for centuries, standing as a testament to the rich cultural heritage of the region. Apart from their architectural splendor, Dravidian temples have played an essential role in the social, cultural, and religious life of the people of southern India. The temples have served as centers of learning, art, and music, and have provided a platform for the exchange of ideas and traditions.⁷

One of the most significant cultural aspects of Dravidian temples is their association with classical dance forms like Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi, and Mohiniyattam. Many of the temple festivals feature performances by skilled dancers who bring to life the stories and legends associated with the temple and its deities. These performances are often accompanied by live music, and the intricate footwork and hand gestures of the dancers add to the overall aura of the temple. The temples also play a crucial role in promoting the local arts and crafts of the region. Many of the sculptures, carvings, and paintings found in these temples are the works of local artisans who have been practicing their craft for generations. These art forms are not only aesthetically pleasing but also serve as a valuable record of the region's cultural heritage.⁸

The Dravidian temples have also played a significant role in the propagation of education and learning. Many of the temples have attached schools and colleges that teach not only religious texts but also subjects like medicine, astrology, and music. The temple libraries are also an excellent source of ancient manuscripts and texts, some of which date back several centuries.

In addition to promoting learning, the temples have also played a significant role in social welfare and community development. Many of the temples have attached hospitals, orphanages, and old age homes that provide free medical care and support to the less fortunate members of society. The temples have also been instrumental in the promotion of local handicrafts and industries, providing employment opportunities to the people of the region. Apart from their cultural and social significance, the Dravidian temples also have a deep religious and spiritual meaning for the people of southern India. The temples are believed to be the abodes of the deities, and millions of devotees visit them every year to seek their blessings and offer their prayers. The temples also serve as a platform for various religious and cultural festivals, which are celebrated with great

fervor and enthusiasm.⁹

Conclusion:

The Dravidian style of temple architecture stands as a majestic symbol of South India's cultural identity, artistic genius, and spiritual devotion. With its towering gopurams, intricate carvings, and harmonious blend of sculpture and symbolism, it reflects not only the engineering brilliance of its builders but also the deep-rooted values of dharma, faith, and community life. These temples are living monuments bridging the divine with the earthly, the past with the present—reminding us that South India's Dravidian heritage is an eternal treasure of Indian civilization.

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