

## VIMANA ARCHITECTURE UNDER THE CHOLAS

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### Abstract

The Chola kings ruled from 848-1280 A.D. The Cholas were prolific temple builders right from the times of the first king VijayalayaChola. RajarajaChola I and his son RajendraChola who built temples such as the Brihadeshvara temple of Thanjavur and Brihadeshvara temple of GangaikondaCholapuram, the Airavatesvara temple of Darasuram and the Sarabeswara (Shiva) temple at Thirubhuvanam.<sup>1</sup> These temples are titled Great Living Chola Temples among the UNESCO world Heritage sites. Thus the Cholas continued the temple building traditions of the Pallava dynasty, who were influenced by the Amaravathi School of Architecture.<sup>2</sup> The Chola artists and artisans further drew their influences from other contemporary art and architectural schools and elevated the Dravidian temple design to greater heights.<sup>3</sup> Vimanas were the important part of temple Architecture of Cholas.<sup>4</sup> The vimanas majestically continues to dominate in the subsequent period.<sup>5</sup>

**Keywords:** VijayalayaChola, RajarajaChola, Amaravathi, vimanas, dravida, Punjai, garbagraha

There are different views regarding the term '*vimana*'. Some are of the view that it refers to the sanctum sanctorum, with its superstructure, including the *Sikhara*. Others are of the opinion that it denotes the entire structure from the basement to the crown<sup>6</sup> and which seems to be the accepted one. In temple architecture, the *Vimana* consists of six parts namely the base (*Adhithana*), the wall (*bhitti*), the roof cornice (*prastara*), the neck (*griva*), the crown (*sikhara*) and the final (*stupid*), Upa-pits is an optional one.<sup>7</sup>

As regards the types of the *Vimana*, it is said that one which has hexagonal or octagonal *sikhara* is termed as *dravida*. The one which has four-sided *sikhara* is circular.<sup>8</sup> Lal Mani Dubet says that the classification of *vimanas*, on the basis of the shapes of the *sikharas* is not only theoretically enunciated but is also archaeologically verifiable.<sup>9</sup> This view seems to be the most probable accepted one, even though scholars like T.P.bhattacharyaM.A.Dhaky and D.N.Shukla declare that *nagara*, *dravida* and *vesera* are the regional styles and not the styles based on the shapes of the *sikhara*. Thus further says that the *nagaravimanas* are present in the north, the *dravidavimanas* in the south, and the *vesara* in the Deccan regions.<sup>10</sup>

As regards the *vimana* architecture of Tamilnadu, it is said that dharmarajathartha is the forerunner of the later developed Dravidian vimanas.<sup>11</sup> It is said that in plan, section and in design, the shore temple *vimana* is purely a structural development of the monolithic Dharmarajathartha.<sup>12</sup> The *vimanas* of the structural temples of the Pallava period namely Koilasanatha and VaikunthaPerumal temples at Kanchi and the shore temple at Mahabalipuram, are mainly three storeyed. But E.B.Havall admits the presence of five

storeys in the case of the Shore temples.<sup>13</sup> The decorative element in the case of both the Siva temples are the only kneeling bulls, that too on the topmost floor.

In the Chola period, foremost importance is meted out to the development of *Vimana* architecture. The words *Srivimana* and *Sri Koyil*<sup>14</sup> found in the inscriptions of the Cholas at the first time itself reveals its primary place. The Vijayalayacholisvaram temple at Narthamalai is one of the earliest and grandest of the structural stone temples built during the time of Vijayalaya. The presents of divine sculptures like Umamahesvaramurti enhance the beauty of the *Vimana*. In the case of the Koranganatha temple at Srinivasanallur, the inner portion of the sanctum is in circular form, even though it seems to be square outwardly. The circular shape, may perhaps be intended to represent *pranava* or *Omkaara*, the mystic spiritual symbol of the Hindus. The height of the *Vimana* is 50 feet. Among the temples of Aditya II, the Naltunailsvaram temple at *Punjai*, Thanjavur District, occupies the predominant places. The presence of miniature sculptures illustrating the stories of Ramayana, on the *adhithana* portion, highlight the beauty of the *vimana*. This seems to be the first temple to have such penals. But, so far the sculptures have not been fully studies. The outer walls of the Sanctum contain the usual images of Dhakshinamurti, Lingodbhavamurti, and Brahma. The pilasters show interesting dancing figures. One such figure exposes the minute and delicate workmanship of the sculptor. If one inserts a small needle through the ear, it comes out of the mouth easily. The *vimana* of the Brahmapurisvara temple at Pullamangai also exposes the sculptured penals on the basement of the *vimana*, illustrating the figures like Gajasamharamurthi, Kalarimurti, Andakasura, Vasha Vishnu, the Tandava figures of Siva, which are almost unsurpassed in the field of decline miniature plastic art.<sup>15</sup>

In the middle Chola period (AD.985-1070), architectural advancement is visible in the *Vimana* portions mainly in the two temples, one is the Brihadeeswarar temple at Thanjavur and the other is the Gangaikondacholisvaram temple at Gangaikondacolapuram. The *Srivimana* of the Big temple raises to a grand height of 63.41 metres; from the floor of the inner courtyard. The *garbhagraha* measures 30.18 metres by 30.18 metres at the base, according to the latest measurement taken by the Archaeological Survey of India. The cella is double - storeyed, each storey being indicated by a massive over-hanging cornice. This double storeyed cells, seems to be the further development of the same principle found in the Koranganatha temple at Srinivasanallur. The sculptures which decorate the first of the *garbhagraha* are Bhikshatana, Virabhadrar, Harihara, Lingodhbavar, Ardhanarisvara, Gangadhara, Dakshinamurthi, Kalantaka, Nataraja and Candrasekharamurti. In the corresponding riches of the second tier above the intervening cornice, Siva as Tripurantaka is repeated in different poses. Presence of more artistically beautified sculptures add beauty to the *Vimana* structure. This is the highest Dravida *vimana* having thirteen tiers.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, it is the mightiest temple construction of the south. Topping the storeys of the *Sri Vimana* is a single block of granite 7.77 metres square estimated to weigh about eighty tones. This is really a 10 innovation of the mastermind of the architects of the Cola period.

Over this blocks which forms the floor of the griva are nandis in pairs adorning the four corners, each nandi measuring 1.98 metres by 1.68 metres. Representations of nandis further embellish the beauty of the *vimana*. It is on this granite slab, that the griva, the *sikhara* and the final stand. Each storey is adorned with ornamental *salas* and *kutas* combining strength and grace. The gradual upward sweep of the *Srivimana* towards the sky is breath-taking and in this respect, it outrivals the Pallava shore temple at Mahabalipuram, and even the grand *srivimana* attempted by his son at GangaikondaCholapuram. The Cupola shaped *sikhara* and the golden stupid give a fitting crown to all stone edifice, which is a marvel of engineering skill, unparalleled by any structure anywhere in India built during the period. That this monument has so splendidly survived for about a millennium now, inspite of the ravages of time, the political vicissitudes and the utter misuse to which the temple campus was put during the wars between the French and the English is itself a tribute to the skill and attainment of the Dravidian sthapati in building a stone structure, so solid, so perfect and of such magnitude.<sup>17</sup>

The *garbhagraha* rests on a high moulded upa-pita and *adhithana*. The upa-pitha measures 140 cms in height and the *adhithana* measures 360 cms, the entire basement thus measuring 500 cms. There runs a corridor between the inner (Bahyabhitti) walls of the *garbhagraha*. The surface of the inner wall is decorated with the beautiful paintings of the Chola and Nayak periods. This seems to be the first temple to have the paintings of the outer surface of the sanctum sanctorum. In the corridor, corresponding to the second storey of the *aditala* of the *vimana*, there is a set of panels of store sculptures in high relief depicting 81 *Karanas* of the *bharathanatyam*, out of the total of 108; this would really mark the first (known) plastic representation of these *karanas* anywhere in India. This is a full-fledged *vimana*, in all respects of height, decoration, execution, etc. A mature style is visible in all the parts of the *vimana*. In comparing the GangaikondaCholisvaram temple with the Big temple, Percy Brown says that the former is the feminine counterpart of the later. The pyramidal shape of the superstructure of the Big, temple, as well as the sculptures of Siva in the Tripurantaka aspect add: masculine character to the Big temple. The concave shape of the superstructure and the graceful poses of the sculptures like Nataraja, Candesanugrahamurti, Brahma with Savitri and Sarasvati emphasise the feminine character of the GangaikondaCholisvaram temples. Unlike the other previous Chola temples, the jagathi portion of the *adhithana* of Big temple is fully occupied by the inscriptions. One more unique feature of the temple is that sanctum sanctorum *ardhamandapa*, *mahamandapa* and *muhamandapa* are in the same alignment. In the other temples, *mahamandapa* and *muhamandapa* are wider than the *sanctum sanctorum*.<sup>18</sup>

The *Vimana* of the Gangaikondacholisvaram temple contains nine diminishing tiers. The ornamentation consists of square and oblong pavilions; the central and intermedists ones on each side project forward beyond the alignment of the corner *kutas*. This planned symmetrical unevenness of surface treatment lends sinuousness to the tower that we do

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not have at Thanjavur. That is why, it is said that the *vimana* with its recessed corners and upward movement presents a striking contrast to the straight sided pyramidal tower of Thanjavur.<sup>19</sup> Thus the concave shape of the *vimana*, really speak of its uniqueness. The *griva* is one embellished with niches in the four directions and at the four corners of the square platform supporting it, there are four nandis. The grive niches are crowned with *Kirtimukhas*. The *vimana* rises, to a height of only 48.77 metres (160). The sanctum sanctorum houses the linga measuring 13 ½ feet high.

In the later Chola period (AD 1070-1280) temples like Armrtaghatesvara temple at Melakkodambur, Airavatesvara temple at Darasuram, and the Kampharesvara temple show architectural novelties, especially in the treatment of the *vimanas*. The amritaghatasvara temple is highly advanced in many aspects. The *vimana* rests on an *upapita*, on whose sides are placed the wheels of the chariot on axles, realistically carved. This *ratha* shaped *vimana* seems to be the earliest experiment in this new style of architecture so far known. Above it raises the *adhithana*, consisting of a few mouldings, the upana the padman the Kantha, the Kumuda with ribbed edges and agarppattiyal. There are bas-reliefs between the last two. They reveal the lives of the Tamil saints. In one panel, is depicted a linga, worshipped by the devotees. In another an old man is shown prostrate before young man who wields an axe. It seems to tell the story of Candesvara, who cut off his father's leg. One panel portrays a person, trying to take out an eyeball with an arrow, in the presence of the linga. It is an illustration of the story of KannappaNayanar, one of the sixty three Nayanmars. by its side, there is a linga in a slanting position and a person with the help of a rope tries to restore it to its upright position. This illustrates the legend of a female devotee named Titakai, connected with the Lord of the temple of Tiruppanandal. She used to adorn the Lord with a garland every day. If so happened one day that her saree slipped at the time of her adoration. The Lord to protect her modesty, turned his face away. The efforts of all the local people, including the king, failed to bring the lings, to its original upright position. Atlast, the efforts of KunkiliyakkalayaNayanar were crowned with success. Another important feature of this *vimana* is the presence of series of sculptures of *rishis* and *devatas* who are believed to have done penance in this place during the various *yugas*. Under the base of each figure, there is a label in Tamil and Grantha characters of the twelfth century giving the name of the figure. The names inscribed are Devendra, Surya, Candra, Parvataraya and Patanjali.

The second *tala* of the *vimana*, show some advancement in its style. In earlier Cola temples, generally a series of miniature shrines called *salas* (rectangular in shape and wagon footed) in the centre and *Karnakutas* (square shrines with cruvi-linear *sikharas*) on either side of the *sala* are mounted in the first *tala* over the *garbhagraha* wall. Here there are no such miniature shrines. But there are four figure-niches (*Koshtas*) in each of the main cardinal points, further, there are four *pancaras* ( a single *tala* porch with cornice, *griva*, cupola-like *sikhara* and circular stupid) one at each of the four corners, between the Kostas. There is a rearing lion on either side of the *Pancara*. The arrangements of the

second *tala* here, is unique and marked a new stylistic development in Dravidian *vimana* architecture.

Over the yali frieze of the cornice of the second *tala*, rests the griva. There are four riches and four sculptures in the round. The present *sikhara* is circular, with four Kudus at the cordinal points. It is however, of recent origin, and it seems likely that the original *sikhara* was also octagonal, so as to be in harmony with the cornice of the second *tala*.<sup>20</sup>

The *vimana* of the Airavatesvara temple at Darasuram has a total height of 63.5 feet (19.3 metres) and is in five *talas* or tiers. Due to the presence of five *talas*, the *vimana* comes under the group called *Jativimana*.<sup>21</sup> The first two *talas* are adorned with *pancaras*, in front. The steep, graceful, profile of the *vimana* makes it a close parallel to the Rajarajesvaram temple at Thanjavur, with the difference that in the last *tala* below the griva, there are *Karnakutas* here instead of the nandis as at the upa-pitha carry named panels depicting scenes from the lives of the saiva saints, which really exposes the architectural significance of the *vimana*. The *vimana* of the Kampharesvarar temple at Tribhuvanam, measures 126 feet high and is in seven tales. Sculptures illustrating the stories from both *Ramayana* and *Mahabaratha*, decorate the *adhithana* portion. Unlike the Nalthunailsvaram temple at Punjai, here the sculptures show advancement in the style. The figures are more prominent.

During the periods of the kings like Rajaraja III and Rajendra III, temples, having *vimanas* of architectural workmanship were not constructed, as their period was pre-occupied with political chaos and confusion. Even in the subsequent periods of Pandyas, Vijayanagar and Nayaks, *vimanas* lost its significance.

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