

Ramalingeshwara Temple, Kolar, Bengaluru: A Case Study of Dravidian Architecture

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Abstract

Dravidian architecture has been widely spread in southern India, and most of them originate from the chola dynasty. Most of the Dravidian architecture has its significant qualities and features in terms of planning, construction technique, carvings, and sculptures. The present study highlights some of these elements in Dravidian temples of India along with more insights towards the Ramalingeshwara temple, Avani, Kolar. Many famous temples in southern India of Dravidian architecture have been documented to preserve the cultural and spiritual legacy, but still there are many temples that, despite their significant features, and associated famous mythological stories are still undocumented. Ramalingeshwara Temple in Avani, Kolar district of Bengaluru, is one such temple, which is also called the Gaya of the South and is famous due to the place known for Valmiki Ashram. Also, it is said that to pacify the rites that originated due to Luv Kush unknowingly capturing the horse, Ram, Bharat, and Shatrughan worshipped Bhagwan Shankar by making various lingas. The temple thus carries some of the well-known stories of the Hindu epic Ramayana. The aim of the paper is to showcase the significant features of this temple that originate the need for its preservation.

Keywords: Dravidian architecture, heritage conservation, spiritual legacy, intricate carvings, heritage documentation, Chola dynasty

INTRODUCTION

Indian temples represent one of the great architectural traditions of the world. Dravidian architecture, also known as southern Indian temple architecture, is most commonly seen in the temples of south India. This style has unique features that make southern Indian temples different from those in other parts of India. The Pallava dynasty played a big role in creating and developing this architectural style. Other empires and kingdoms, like the Cholas, Kakatiyas, Vakatakas, Reddis, Rashtrakutas, and Chaulakyas, also contributed to its evolution. The Cholas are celebrated as the

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foremost supporters of religious art and architecture in medieval Tamil Nadu [1]. A distinctive architectural feature of the Cholas period, different from the Pallavas style, is the elaborate ornamentation of temple walls [2]. This includes the use of deep niches with entablatures. These niches, called Devakushtas, are designed to house deities and are flanked by demi-pilasters, appearing on the walls of Cholas temples. The pilasters of these niches are topped with a curved roof molding adorned with two kudus featuring lion heads, and the bases often include motifs of the mythical sea monster, makara, and warrior heads. The Cholas style is marked by the absence of the Pallavas yali, or lion, at the bases of pillars and pilasters, and the pillars themselves are more detailed and refined (Figure 1). Depicts some of the characteristics features of Cholas style. The

characteristic notch in the Dravidian pillar shaft, which flares slightly above it, is transformed under the Cholas into delicate vases (kalash). Another elegant feature is the kudu decorative element, used as a roll molding atop the pillars. Cholas gateways are more prominent than the smaller Pallavas ones, and the Cholas Dwarpalas (gatekeepers) are depicted as fierce figures with tridents, tusks protruding from their mouths, rolled eyes, and threatening gestures [3].

In the 11th century, the Chola rulers constructed the Brihadeshvara Temple in Thanjavur, which was one of the tallest temples of that era, reaching a height of 60 meters [4]. Every part and decoration of the Brihadeshvara Temple is crafted for maximum impact. It represents the pinnacle of Dravidian architecture, with all its features at their most refined and impressive (indianculture.gov.in). The current study is to highlight features of the Dravidian temples, that evolved under Chola dynasty with more insights towards study of Ramalingeshwara Temple, Kolar, Bengaluru.

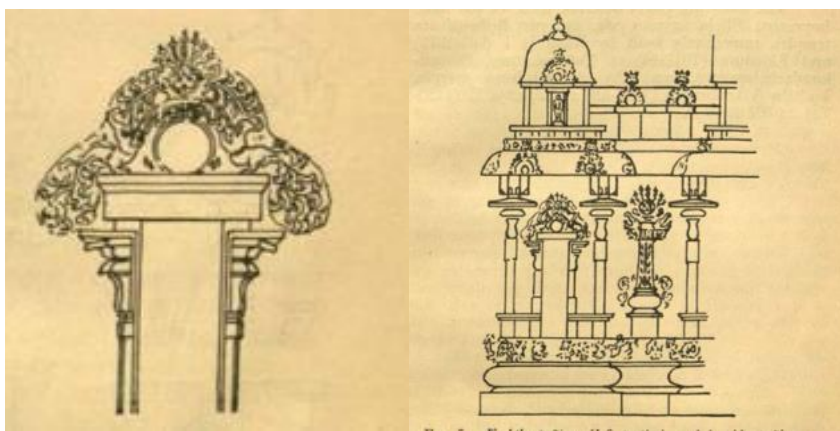


Figure 1. A typical niche in Chola period.

Source: G. Jouveau-Dubreuil, *Archeologie du sud l'Inde*, pt. I (Paris, 1914) pp. 71–145 as per <https://www.indianculture.gov.in/flipbook/28238>

DRAVIDIAN TEMPLE ARCHITECTURE OF CHOLA DYNASTY

Dravidian temples developed under the Chola dynasty exhibit a remarkable blend of religious symbolism, architectural innovation, and artistic excellence. These temples are distinguished by their imposing scale and intricate design elements that set them apart within the south Indian architectural tradition [5].

Key features include gopurams – lofty entrance towers richly adorned with detailed carvings – and vimanas, the vertical structures rising above the sanctum, reflecting both structural prowess and spiritual significance. The walls and pillars are extensively ornamented with sculptures depicting gods, goddesses, and mythological scenes, often narrating stories from Hindu epics. These carvings serve not only decorative purposes but also function as visual scriptures for devotees [6].

Chola temples are also renowned for their bronze icons, particularly those of deities like Nataraja, representing Lord Shiva in his cosmic dance form. These bronzes, celebrated for their craftsmanship and symbolic depth, were integral to ritual practices and temple ceremonies [7].

Architecturally, the temples feature mandapas or pillared halls used for religious and cultural activities, further emphasizing their role beyond mere places of worship. The temple complexes are typically enclosed within multiple concentric walls, each with its own entrance, guiding devotees inward toward the sanctum. Sacred tanks are often incorporated within the temple grounds, highlighting the ritual importance of water in purification practices.

Decoration extends to elaborate friezes, motifs, and narrative panels, showcasing a high degree of artistic skill. These temples also functioned as vibrant cultural centers, fostering music, dance, literature, and education under royal patronage [8].

Prominent examples of Chola temple architecture include the Brihadeeswarar Temple at Thanjavur, the Gangaikonda Cholapuram Temple, the Airavatesvara Temple at Darasuram, the Kampahareswarar Temple at Thirubuvanam, and the Vijayalaya Choleeswaram Temple at Narthamalai (see Table 1). Each of these monuments embodies the core elements of Dravidian design while offering unique regional and stylistic variations [9].

Table 2 provides photographic documentation of these architectural elements, and Figure 1 illustrates the fundamental layout and features common to South Indian temples, offering a visual understanding of their spatial and symbolic hierarchy.

Table 1. Architectural characteristics of Dravidian style temples belonging to Chola dynasty.

S. N.	Architectural Feature	Description
1	Grand Vimana and Massive Vimana:	The temple features a towering vimana (central tower). Vimanas are usually very high. In Brihadeeswarar Temple, Thanjavur the top of the vimana is capped with a large dome-shaped shikhara, which is intricately carved and dominates the skyline.
2	Granite Construction:	The temple is primarily constructed from granite, a material that was not locally available, indicating the Cholas' advanced transportation and construction capabilities.
3	Intricate Sculptures	The walls, pillars, and towers of the temple are adorned with detailed carvings and sculptures depicting various Hindu deities, mythological scenes, and intricate patterns.
4	Spacious Courtyard:	The temple complex includes a large, open courtyard that is surrounded by pillared corridors and subsidiary shrines.
5	Nandi Statue:	A massive statue of Nandi (the sacred bull of Shiva) is located at the entrance. This statue is carved from a single block of granite and is one of the largest Nandi statues in India.
6	Mandapas	The temple features multiple mandapas (pillared halls), including the Ardha Mandapa and Maha Mandapa, used for various rituals and gatherings
7	Bronze Icons	The Chola dynasty was renowned for its bronze work, and the temple houses several exquisite bronze icons of Hindu deities.
8	Sculptured Parapets: T	The parapets of the vimana and other parts of the temple are richly sculpted with figures of gods, goddesses, and other religious themes.
9	Symmetry and Proportion	The temple's design follows strict principles of symmetry and proportion, typical of Dravidian architecture, resulting in a visually harmonious structure.
10	Siva Lingam	The main sanctum houses a huge Shiva Lingam, which is the primary deity of the temple.

Sources: Hardy, 1995; Sivaramamurti, 2004; Krishna, 2025; Uday, 2022; Janaki, 2024.





















CASE STUDY OF RAMALINGESWARA TEMPLE, KOLAR, BENGALURU

The Ramalingeshwara Temple complex at Avani is an architecturally significant example of Dravidian temple design, comprising four principal shrines dedicated individually to Lord Rama, Lakshmana, Bharata, and Shatrughna. Complementing these are smaller shrines devoted to Vali and Sugriva, further emphasizing the temple's mythological association with the Ramayana.

The Ramalingeshwara shrine features a clearly defined spatial hierarchy with a sanctum (garbhagriha), a connecting vestibule (Antarala), and a pillared hall (mandapa), all exhibiting classic Dravidian architectural proportions. Decorative pillars within the hall are adorned with intricate

reliefs, while the temple base displays carvings of Kirtimukha and lions, traditional motifs symbolizing protection and strength [10].

Table 2. Significant features belonging to Dravidian style in various temples of southern India.

S.N.	Name of Temple	Significant Architectural Features (Vimanas/Gopuram/Sculptures)				Source
1	Brihadeswara Temple at Tanjavur					(Source: Indian Culture Repository INDIAN CULTURE).
2	Gangaikonda Cholapuram Temple					(Source: Indian Culture Repository INDIAN CULTURE).
3	Airavatesvara Temple, Darasuram	 Other side of the gopuram sculpted with beautiful sculptures.	 Stone chariot mandapam detail.	 Columns with Dravidian reliefs and carvings.	 Sculptures carved on the walls.	
4	Kampahareswarar Temple, Thirubuvanam	 Main entrance and Rajgopura.	 Vimana	 Image of Sarabeswarar.	 Sculptures in the panels of the temple	Source: Kampaheswarar Temple, Thirubuvanam – Wikipedia.
5	Vijayalaya Choleeswaram Temple, Narthamalai	 Image of temple with shrine around it.	 View from hilltop.	 Live size Images of Lord Vishnu.	 Image of pilasters on the lower part of Vimana.	Vijayalaya Choleeswaram – Wikipedia.

The temple’s outer walls are articulated with pilasters, surmounted by miniature Dravidian-style superstructures (shikharas), enhancing both verticality and ornamentation. The Lakshmanalingeshwara shrine, notable for housing the largest linga in the complex, features a unique wall sculpture of the 10th-century saint Tribhuvanakarta, depicted holding a Rudraksha necklace – an important iconographic detail that enriches the temple’s historical and devotional context.



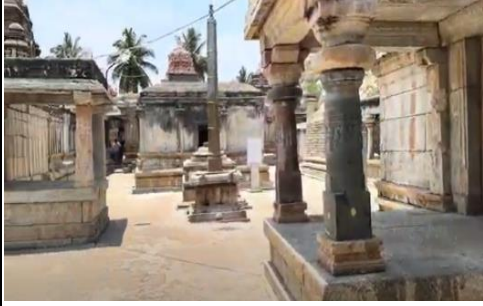


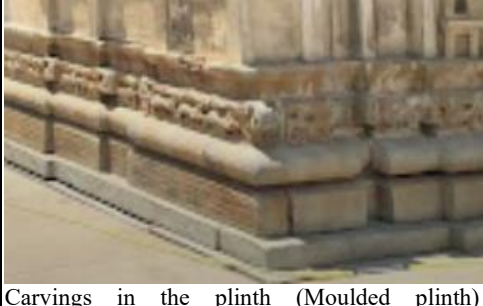
In both the central mandapa and within the Bharatalingeswara shrine, the pillars are embellished with a variety of sculptural reliefs, illustrating religious and mythical themes. A particularly distinguished ceiling panel depicts Lord Shiva seated with Parvati, encircled by the Ashta Dikpalas – the eight directional guardians – demonstrating a high level of artistic and symbolic sophistication.

The complex also includes a separate shrine for Goddess Parvati, affirming the temple’s inclusive devotion to divine consorts. Across all shrines, decorative elements, such as elephants, lions, and

mythical creatures are recurrently featured, symbolizing guardianship and auspiciousness. Above these, the outer walls bear additional reliefs and pilasters, including depictions of Yakshas, Dvarapalas (temple guardians), and various deities including Shiva, Bhairava, Bhairavi, Vishnu, and Ganesha – each rendered with distinctive iconographic precision [11].

Photographic documentation illustrating these architectural and sculptural elements has been compiled in Table 3, serving as a visual reference for the temple’s adherence to and interpretation of the Dravidian style.

Table 3. Photographic illustrations of various features at the case study site.

S.N.	Typical Architectural Element in View	Name of the Architectural Element in Dravidian Temple Architecture
1	 Massive and sculptured Vimana.	 Pilasters as seen in the exterior view.
2	 Ramalingeshwara temple surrounded by many shrines (A typical Dravidian style feature).	 Nandi (bull) in front of pillared Mandapa.
4	 Sculptures at the base of column.	 Carvings in the plinth (Moulded plinth) or Adhishthana.

Source: Authors collection and copyright.

CONCLUSIONS

This research paper critically examines the defining characteristics of Dravidian architecture, with a concentrated focus on the architectural legacy of the Chola dynasty and the distinctive features of the Ramalingeshwara Temple in Avani, Kolar. Dravidian architecture, a hallmark of South Indian temple design, is distinguished by its monumental scale, towering Gopurams, intricately carved stonework, and elaborate ornamentation. These elements not only reflect a highly developed aesthetic sensibility but also embody the cultural, religious, and historical ethos of southern India.

Within this broader architectural tradition, the Ramalingeshwara Temple in Avani emerges as a site of considerable historical and mythological relevance. Closely associated with narratives from the Ramayana, the temple complex stands as a testament to the spiritual and cultural tapestry of the region. Despite its architectural merit and cultural importance, the Ramalingeshwara Temple remains underrepresented in scholarly discourse and heritage documentation, especially when compared to its more prominent counterparts from the Chola period.

This study aims to underscore the necessity of documenting and conserving such lesser-known monuments, which are integral to a holistic understanding of Dravidian architectural heritage. The Ramalingeshwara Temple exemplifies the urgent need for inclusive preservation efforts that extend beyond the most iconic sites to encompass the broader spectrum of India's architectural legacy.

In conclusion, the research affirms the architectural brilliance and cultural contributions of the Chola dynasty while advocating for the recognition and protection of relatively obscure yet significant heritage sites, such as the Ramalingeshwara Temple. Preserving these monuments is imperative not only for maintaining historical continuity but also for enriching the cultural narrative and ensuring the enduring legacy of Dravidian architecture for future generations.

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