

Unveiling The Glorious Reign Of The Chola Dynasty In Tamil Nadu – A Case Study In Vellore

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Abstract

Chola territory grew along the eastern seaboard (from northern Andhra Pradesh to northern Tamil Nadu). Chola art and architecture. Three main phases can be distinguished in the development of Chola temple architecture: the early phase, which began with Vijayalaya Chola and continued until Sundara Chola; the middle phase, which included Rajaraja Chola and Rajendra Chola, during which the accomplishments reached unprecedented heights; and the final phase, which lasted from Kulottunga I's Chalukya Chola period until the fall of the Chola empire. The paper aims to understand how the Chola dynasty in South India underwent constant development in terms of administration, education, military, etc, and to see how Chola's architecture has created a distinct vocabulary across the world. Secondly, to document and analyze the spatial organization of the Somanatheswarar temple, Melpadi, Vellore, Tamil Nadu.

Key Words: Chola Dynasty, Southern India, Vellore, Melpadi, Somanatheswarar temple

1. Introduction

One of the most notable and significant empires in South Indian history, the Chola dynasty is well-known for its outstanding contributions to art, culture, and territorial development.

Gaining knowledge about the beginnings and lasting influence of the Chola dynasty might help one better understand the historical evolution and social structure of South India.

Early Tamil inscriptions from the third century BCE are thought to represent the earliest evidence of the Chola kingdom in South Indian history. These documents imply that the fertile areas of modern-day Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh are where the dynasty originated. The Cholas were originally minor chieftains or local leaders who progressively grew their power over adjacent lands (Srinivasan, 2017).

Through military skill and strategic alliance, the Chola clan rose to dominance by the early centuries CE. Their expansion of authority from upland to coastal areas was essential for both political and commercial dominance. The Pallava and Pandya kingdoms were also subjugated during the early Parantaka period (907–955), when the Chola domain extended to Kalahasti (southern Andhra Pradesh) and Chennai (Madras) on the east coast. Chola territory expanded along the eastern seaboard (from northern Andhra Pradesh to northern Tamil Nadu) with the creation of the Chola-Mandalam, which is now anglicized as Coromandel. Chola architecture and art (Ganapathy, 2004)

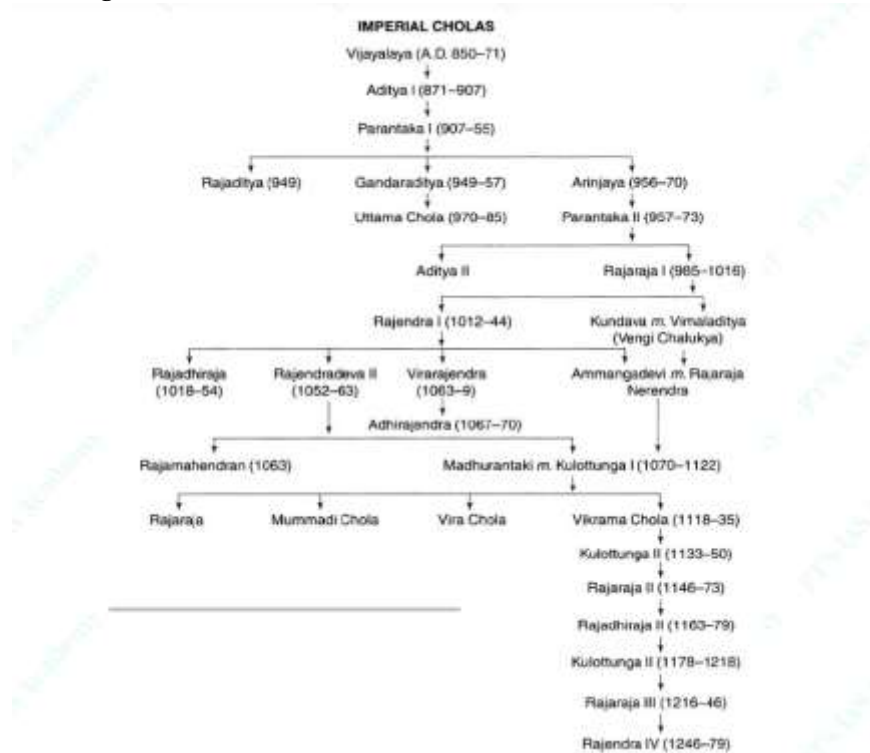
The period of the imperial Cholas (c. 850 CE - 1250 CE) in South India was an age of continuous improvement and refinement of Chola art and architecture. In the evolution of the Chola temple architecture, we can roughly see three major phases, beginning with the early phase, starting with Vijayalaya Chola and continuing till Sundara Chola, the middle phase of Rajaraja Chola and Rajendra Chola when the achievements scaled heights never reached before or since and the final phase during the Chalukya Chola period of Kulottunga I till the demise of the Chola empire.

Intent of the paper

The paper aims to understand how the Chola dynasty in South India underwent constant development in terms of administration, education, military, etc, and to see how Chola's architecture has created a distinct vocabulary

across the world. Secondly, to document and analyze the spatial organization of the Somanatheswarar temple, Melpadi, Vellore, Tamil Nadu.

2.0 History of Chola Kingdom



Rulers	Ruling Periods
Vijayalaya Chola	848-871
Aditya I	871-907
Parantaka Chola I	907-950
Gandaraditya	950-957
Arinjaya Chola	956-957
Sundara Chola	957-970
Uttama Chola	970-985
Rajaraja Chola I	985-1014
Rajendra Chola I	1012-1044
Rajadhiraja Chola	1018-1054
Rajendra Chola II	1051-1063
Virarajendra Chola	1063-1070
Athirajendra Chola	1067-1070

Fig. 1 History of Chola Kingdom (Source: author)

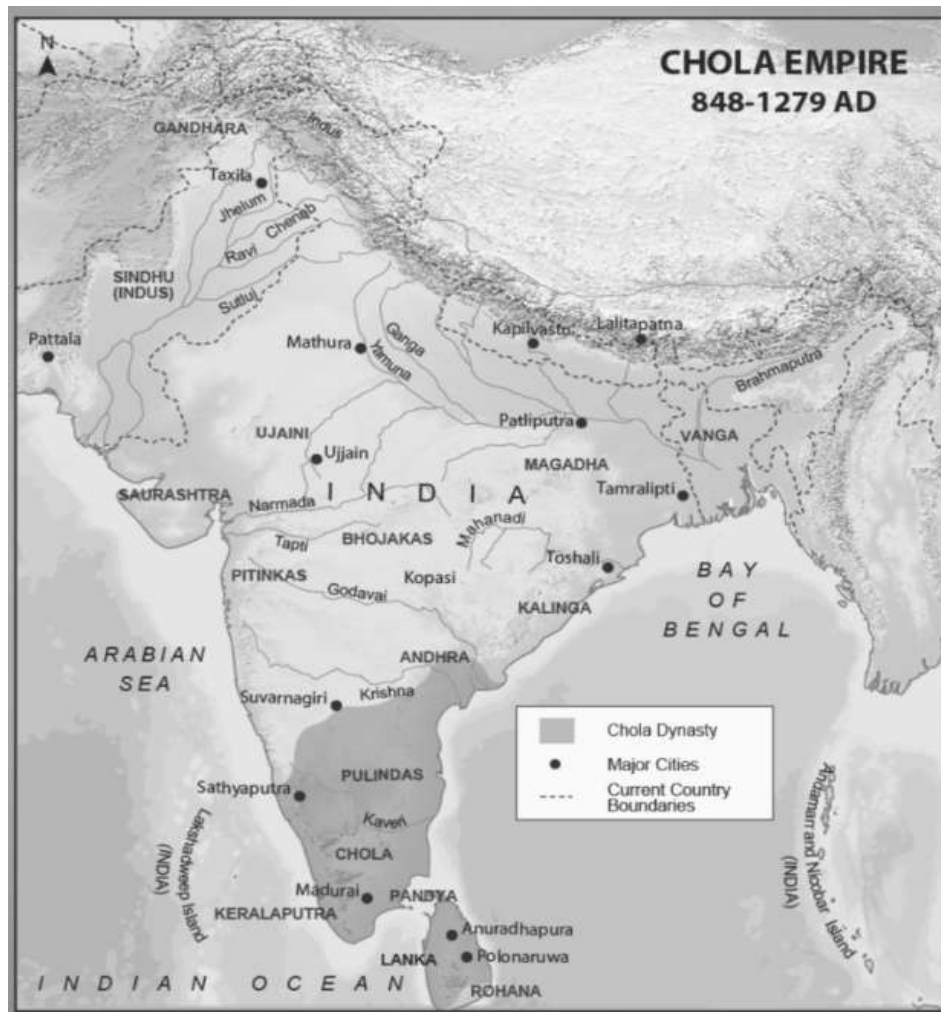


Fig.2 Map shows the extent of Chola Empire in Indian and Sri Lankan Context

3.0 The Legendary Chola Emperors and their contributions in terms of social, economic and cultural aspects (Khokar, 2025)

3.1 Karikala Chola:

The Chola dynasty's most notable early ruler was Karikala Chola. He is credited with building an embankment next to the Cauvery River and establishing the settlement of Puhar near its mouth. Additionally, he demonstrated a strong commitment to enhancing irrigation systems and reclaiming land. Although the Chola monarchs have Mauryan ancestry, nothing is known about their post-Sangham history or their relationship to the Cholas of the early Middle Ages .



Fig. 3 Kallanai (Source: author)

Vijayalaya Chola (850–871 AD)

- The Chola dynasty was established by overcoming the Pallavas.
- Thanjavur was designated as the capital along the Kaveri River.
- A temple was constructed in Thanjavur in honour of the goddess Nishumbhasudini.



Fig.4 Notable Vijayalaya Choleeswaram Temple, Narthamalai, Pudukottai by Vijayalaya Chola (848–891 CE) (Source: author)

3.3 Aditya I (871–907 AD)

- Succeeded Vijayalaya as the sovereign and broadened the Chola Empire.
- Defeated the Pallava monarch Aparajita, thereby reinforcing the Chola's supremacy.
- Conquered the Pandya and Vadumba kingdoms, thereby solidifying Chola influence in the area.



Fig.5 Notable Aaditheswarar, Peravur, Thanjavur by Aditya I Chola (Source: author)

3.4 Parantaka I (903–957 AD)

- His reign is characterized by the Uttermerur inscription located in Chingleput, Tamil Nadu, which records the organization of the Sabha.
- He adopted the title "Madurai Konda" following his conquest of Madurai.
- He placed metal images of the saints Appar, Sambandar, and Sundaram within a Shiva temple.



Fig. 6 Pundarikakshan Perumal temple or Thiruvellarai in Trichy, by Parantaka I

3.5 Parantaka II (Sundara Chola) (957–973 AD)

- Reinforced the Chola navy, greatly improving the empire's naval capabilities.

3.6 Rajaraja I (985 – 1014 A.D.)

- The Chola empire reached its zenith during the rule of Arumolivarman, who adopted the title of Rajaraja I upon his ascension to the throne.
- Rajaraja I was the son of Parantaka II, and he established a formidable empire while implementing a highly efficient administrative framework.
- His inscriptions in Tanjore provide a detailed account of his military victories, as well as the regions he subdued and integrated into his realm.
- Rajaraja decisively defeated the Chera navy at Trivandrum and subsequently launched an offensive against Quilon.
- The Pandyan king was captured after he had seized Madurai. Moreover, he invaded Sri Lanka and claimed the northern territory for his empire.
- His ambition to control trade with Southeast Asian nations was a significant motivation behind these endeavors.
- The primary commercial centers of India in relation to Southeast Asia were located along the Coromandel Coast and in Malabar.
- One of his notable naval triumphs was the invasion of the Maldives. Rajaraja also conquered Vengi and seized the Ganga kingdom situated in the northwest of Karnataka.



Fig. 7 Brihadeeswarar Temple Thanjavur (Source: author)

3.7 Rajendra I (1012-1044 A.D.)

- Rajendra Chola (1012–1044) governed a territory that encompassed the eastern archipelago and the Malay Peninsula.
- This particular monarch's military achievements suggest that he successfully subdued the entire region, stretching from Andhra to Orissa, along with parts of Madhya Pradesh and Bengal, which earned him the title Gangaikondan, meaning "conqueror of the river Ganga."
- "Rajendra was designated as the heir apparent during his father's reign and possessed significant experience in both administration and military affairs prior to ascending the throne."
- He defeated the Pandya and Chera kingdoms, integrating them into his empire and furthering Rajaraja's expansionist policies.



Fig.8 Gangaikonda Cholapuram Brihadeeswarar Temple, Thanjavur(Source: author)

3.8 Kulathunga Chola 1

- The numerous achievements of the Cholas were facilitated by recent advancements in agriculture.
- While agricultural practices had been established earlier in various regions of Tamil Nadu, this particular area was not available for large-scale farming until the fifth or sixth century.
- In the Srivijayan province of Kedah on the Malay Peninsula, he established the dominance of the Chola dynasty.
- During his reign, Kulottunga conducted a significant land survey, which laid the groundwork for taxation.
- Kulatunga passed away at the age of 97 around 1122 CE, although this date is subject to debate. Consequently, he is recognized as one of the longest-living rulers of the Middle Ages.



Fig. 9 Amrithakadeeswarar Abhirami Temple, Thirukkadaiyur (Source: author)

3.9 Rajendra III

- During the reign of Rajaraja III, the Hoysalas allied with the Cholas to depose the Kadava ruler Kopperunjinga and the Pandyas, ultimately conquering the Tamil nation.
- Rajendra Chola III, who succeeded Rajaraja III, proved to be a significantly more capable king, making bold decisions to revive the Chola dynasty's fortunes.
- His inscriptions, some of which have been found as far away as Cuddappah, provide evidence of his successful northern expeditions.
- Moreover, he defeated two Pandya princes, including Maravarman Sundara Pandya II, and temporarily compelled the Pandyas to submit to Chola authority.

3.10 Virarajendra

- He triumphed over Someshwar II and established the groundwork for a Vedic institution of education.

Athirajendra

- He passed away while quelling one of his insurgents.

Kulottunga I

- Kulottunga I dispatched a significant delegation of 72 merchants to China and fostered amicable relations with the kingdom of Sri Vijaya.
- He consolidated the Vengi kingdom of the Chalukyas with the Chola empire.
- The renowned author Kamban, who composed the Ramayana in Tamil, was present at his court.

4.0 Chola Dynasty period: (300 BCE – 13th Century CE)

The Chola Dynasty reigned supreme in South India for over a millennium, leaving an indelible mark on the region's history. Here's a breakdown of their remarkable journey:

Rise to Power:

- **Early Cholas (3rd century BCE – 9th century CE):** Although the origins of the dynasty can be traced back to 300 BCE, it is King Vijayalaya Chola, who reigned in the 9th century CE, that is recognized for establishing the foundation of the Chola empire. He achieved significant victories and designated Thanjavur as the capital.
- **Imperial Grandeur (9th – 13th century CE):**
- **Golden Age under Rajaraja Chola I (985-1014 CE):** This emperor heralded a magnificent period. He greatly enlarged the Chola domain and commissioned architectural wonders such as the Brihadeeswara Temple (a UNESCO World Heritage Site).
- **Rajendra Chola I (1014-1044 CE):** Rajaraja Chola's offspring, Rajendra Chola I, expanded the empire's territory, extending its influence into Southeast Asia.

Decline and Legacy:

- **Later Cholas (13th century CE):** The dynasty experienced a gradual decline in the 13th century as a result of invasions by the Pandyas and Chalukyas. Nevertheless, the Cholas bequeathed a substantial legacy:
 - **Thriving Arts and Literature:** They actively promoted artistic expression, literature, and temple construction.
 - **Architectural Marvels:** Chola architecture is celebrated for its unique features, often incorporating water tanks.

4.0 Overview of Chola Dynasty through the lens of Sangam Literature

The Chola monarchs referenced in Sangam literature cover the timeframe from 200 BCE to 300 CE. Although the literature does not offer a chronological order of the rulers, several distinguished Chola kings are particularly noteworthy:

Karikala Chola:

As discussed above Karikala Chola, esteemed as the most prominent of the Early Cholas, governed southern India and is celebrated for his construction of flood banks along the Kaveri River. The name 'Karikalan' is interpreted by certain Tamil scholars as 'the slayer of elephants'. According to legend, Karikala's father,

Ilamcetcenni, a valiant king of Uraiyur (present-day Tiruchirappalli), wed Princess Velir, who bore him Karikala. Following the premature demise of Ilamcetcenni, Karikala was deprived of his rightful throne due to political unrest and was forced into exile. Subsequently, Chola ministers sent an elephant to locate him, finding him concealed in Karuvur (now known as Karur, Tamil Nadu). His political rivals imprisoned the prince and ignited the jail. Despite managing to escape the inferno and vanquishing his foes with the assistance of his uncle Irum-Pitar-Thalaiyan, the prince sustained burns to his leg, which led to him being called Karikala. He fought in numerous battles against Tamil monarchs, asserting his supremacy over the Pandyas and Cheras.

Nalankilli and Nedunkilli:

As per Sangam literature, Nalankilli and Nedunkilli were competing Tamil monarchs from the Chola dynasty. The poet Kovur Kilar illustrated their rivalry in two distinct poems. Nalankilli laid siege to Nedunkilli with his troops, compelling the latter to take shelter in a fort located at Avur. Nalankilli issued a challenge to Nedunkilli, urging him to confront him bravely. In another poem, the poet implores both kings to put an end to their conflict, highlighting that irrespective of the result, the defeated would still be a Chola.

Cholan Dynasty: Capital

The Chola Dynasty, a significant power in South India for more than a thousand years (300 BCE – 13th Century CE), was not limited to one capital city. Their center of power changed and developed, mirroring their growing influence and strategic needs. Let us take a journey through the intriguing history of the capitals of the Chola Dynasty. Early Cholas: Laying the Groundwork for the Chola Dynasty (Up to 9th Century CE) Although information regarding the earliest Cholas is somewhat vague, historical records indicate:

- **Uraiyur (Present-day Trichy):** Some scholars believe Uraiyur, an ancient city located in present-day Tamil Nadu, might have served as a capital during the pre-classical era. However, concrete evidence to solidify this claim is limited.

Imperial Cholas: Thanjavur – The Jewel in the Crown (9th – 13th Century CE) of the Chola Dynasty

- **Thanjavur (Tanjore):**

This city, located in the fertile region of the Cauvery delta, became the unquestionable capital during the golden age of the Chola empire (9th – 13th century CE). Vijayalaya Chola, recognized as the founder of the historical Chola empire, seized Thanjavur in the 9th century CE and designated it as the administrative hub. The city thrived under Chola governance, experiencing the erection of splendid temples such as the Brihadeeswara Temple, which is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Strategic Significance of Thanjavur:

5.0 Multiple elements played a role in establishing Thanjavur as the capital of the Chola dynasty:

Central Location: Located in the core of Tamil Nadu, Thanjavur offered convenient access to various regions of the empire, enhancing governance and communication.

Fertile Land: The area surrounding Thanjavur, particularly the Cauvery delta, was abundant in agricultural resources, which greatly supported the Chola economy.

Cultural Hub: Thanjavur emerged as a focal point for art, literature, and temple architecture, showcasing the cultural prosperity of the Chola period.

Beyond Thanjavur: Temporary Capitals and Shifting Power In Chola Dynasty

The Cholas also established temporary capitals in strategic locations during military campaigns or to assert control over newly conquered territories. Some examples include:

- **Gangaikonda Cholapuram:** Built by Rajendra Chola I to commemorate his victories in North India, this city briefly served as a capital in the 11th century CE.
- **Kanchipuram:** This ancient city played a significant role during the Chola reign, particularly in the later centuries.

The capital cities of the Chola Dynasty exemplify their growing influence and strategic foresight. Thanjavur is particularly notable as the most significant capital, representing the zenith of the Chola empire. Gaining insight into the changing capitals offers important perspectives on the dynasty's growth, governance methods, and the cultural heritage they established in South India.

6.0 Administration of the Chola Dynasty

The Chola Dynasty's rule was not solely characterized by military strength and impressive structures. Their achievements were also dependent on a highly organized and effective administrative framework. Let us explore the complex system that regulated the Chola kingdom for many centuries.

1. Irrigation and Agricultural Prosperity: The Chola kingdom thrived due to comprehensive irrigation systems that greatly enhanced agricultural output.

2. Social Hierarchy: Villages were mainly populated by Brahmins, whereas areas known as Ur were occupied by peasants. Clusters of villages constituted administrative divisions referred to as Nadu, and village councils, typically composed of Brahmins, oversaw justice and tax collection. Wealthier peasants from the Vellala caste wielded considerable power in local governance.

Administrative Hierarchy: The Chola administration was meticulously organized, consisting of several bureaucratic tiers:

- Udankuttam: The immediate attendants of the King.
- Perundanam: Senior bureaucrats overseeing larger regions.
- Sirudanam: Junior officials responsible for local administrative duties.

Military Organization: The Chola military comprised infantry, cavalry (kudirai sevagar), and an elephant corps (anaiyatkai), in addition to archers, swordsmen, and spearmen. Soldiers were ranked as perundanam (upper) or cirudanam (lower), and were allocated military holdings referred to as padaipparru. The main cantonments were designated as padaividu, while outposts were termed nilaipadai. Captains of regiments were known as nayagam and padaimudali, with the commander-in-chief titled Senapati or dandanayagam.

Administrative Units: The empire was segmented into Mandalam (provinces), Valanadu (districts), Nadu (territories), and Kurram (sub-districts).

Village Self-Government: The Chola kingdom prioritized village independence, as recorded in the Uttaramerur Inscription from Kanchipuram. The Kudavolai system facilitated the election of representatives from 30 wards within each village. Assemblies, referred to as Ur in non-Brahmin villages and Sabha or Mahasabha in Brahmin villages, governed local matters. An executive committee, known as Variyam, supervised assembly activities, with members selected by lottery. Various committees were responsible for specific tasks, including water management (Tottavariyam).

Key Terms and Taxes:

- Muvendalam: A peasant serving three kings.
- Araiya: The chief.
- Nagaram: An association of traders.
- Taxes included Vetti (forced labor) and Kadamai (land revenue).

Land Types:

- Vellanvagai: Land owned by non-Brahmin peasant proprietors.
- Brahmadeya: Land bestowed upon Brahmins.
- Shalabhoga: Land allocated for the maintenance of schools.
- Devadana and Tirunamattukkani: Land donated to temples.
- Pallichchhandam: Land contributed to Jain institutions.

Religion and Society: The Chola rulers endorsed both Brahmanical and Bhakti traditions, providing land and constructing temples dedicated to Vishnu and Shiva, including those located in Chidambaram, Thanjavur, and Gangaikondacholapuram. Under royal patronage, Tamil Shaiva hymns were incorporated into temple practices. Saliya weavers from Thanjavur and Uraiyur crafted both fine and coarse cotton textiles for the elite and the general populace. In Swamimalai, skilled sculptors (Sthapatis) produced remarkable bronze idols of Shiva utilizing the lost wax technique.

Cultural Practices: The societal structure of the Chola period encompassed the sati and devadasi systems, which were widely practiced during this era. The Chola administration functioned through a well-defined, three-tiered structure:

Central Administration: The king oversaw the administration, supported by a council of ministers. Essential positions such as the Olaiya Maakan (Chief Secretary) and the Perundanam (Head Accountant) were crucial for effective governance.

Provincial Administration: The empire was segmented into provinces, known as Mandalams, each overseen by a viceroy or governor—typically a member of the royal family—who possessed considerable power but ultimately reported to the central government.

Local Administration: At the grassroots level, village assemblies like Ur (general assembly), Sabha (for Brahmin landowners), and Nagaram (for merchants) addressed community issues, including taxation, irrigation, and public infrastructure.

Naval Power of the Chola Dynasty

- **Innovative Naval Power:** The Chola Empire was among the earliest in South Indian history to create a formidable naval force, which allowed them to assert dominance over maritime territories.
- **Command of the Bay of Bengal:** Their robust navy empowered the Cholas to control the Bay of Bengal, safeguarding vital trade routes that reached Southeast Asia.
- **Regional Authority:** The Chola navy safeguarded merchant vessels and broadened the empire's influence to adjacent island nations, including regions of Sri Lanka.
- **Cultural and Commercial Growth:** Via their naval capabilities, the Cholas disseminated Indian culture, religion, and trade networks throughout Southeast Asia.

7.0 Education in the Chola Dynasty

- **Limited Access:** Education during the Chola period was predominantly confined to the upper class, particularly Brahmins and Kayasthas, with minimal accessibility for the general population. Subjects of Study:
 - The primary fields of study encompassed the Vedas, grammar, logic, philosophy, mathematics, medicine, and politics.
 - Nitisara, a political treatise authored by Kamandaka, was also included in the educational curriculum.
- **Gender Restrictions:** Women were largely barred from studying the Vedas, a tradition that persisted throughout the medieval era.
- **Educational Centers:** Educational institutions were founded in locations such as Ennayiram, Thirumukkudal, and Thirubuvanai, which functioned as centers for learning and intellectual discourse.
- **Literary Achievements:** Notable literary contributions arose during this period, including Kampan's Ramayana and the Nalayira Divya Prabandham, a highly esteemed collection of 4000 Tamil verses, which continues to be valued by literary scholars today.

Culture and Society of the Chola Dynasty

- Under the Chola dynasty, culture and society reached extraordinary levels, with temples acting as the primary centers for social and religious interactions.
- Temples additionally served as educational institutions where Holy Scriptures and ancient Vedas were imparted to students, offering a safe refuge during periods of conflict and turmoil. The Chola social structure was divided into Brahmins and Non-Brahmins, with a variety of gods and goddesses being venerated, among which Shiva was particularly esteemed.

- The process of Sanskritisation commenced during the Chola period, coinciding with the widespread establishment of the caste system.
- Chola society experienced the categorization of caste into “Idangai” and “Vadangai,” leading to conflicts between Vaishnavites and Shaivites.
- The devadasi system, a novel social custom, also surfaced during this era.
- Chola monarchs were ardent adherents of Shaivism, with Shiva being of utmost significance. He was worshipped in two separate manifestations.
- This era also witnessed the formation of Saiva Siddhanta, a significant philosophical framework linked to Shaivism.

Literature of the Chola Dynasty

- Throughout the Chola period, both the Tamil and Sanskrit languages flourished, signifying a golden age for Tamil literature.
- Prominent Tamil literary pieces from this time include Kampan’s Ramayan, Sekkilar’s Periyapuram, and Kalladanar’s Kalladam, among others.
- In the realm of Sanskrit literature, Kesava Swami created the important work Nannaranava Samkshevam.

Comparison of the Chola Dynasty with Other Contemporary Empires

- The Chola Dynasty interacted with various South Asian kingdoms during a period of significant dynastic diversity. A brief comparison is as follows:
- The Cholas ultimately became more powerful than the Pallavas, seizing control of the region.
- The Chola Dynasty frequently engaged in conflicts and negotiations with the Chalukya Dynasty, primarily concerning the governance of the Deccan area.
- The Cholas emerged as the dominant force in the southern Deccan.
- The Pala Dynasty held sway over parts of Bengal and northeastern India, whereas the Cholas were situated in the southern part of the subcontinent.

8.0 Economy of the Chola Dynasty

- The Chola emperors were motivated to extend their rule throughout the Indian subcontinent by capturing strategically important trading hubs.
- While the state primarily derived its revenue from land transactions, the taxation system was meticulously crafted to enhance income through various avenues.
- The process of income extraction in the Chola Kingdom functioned through two primary tiers: local and supra-local. The most commonly imposed tax on farmers was referred to as Kutimai.
- Local taxation encompassed a range of labor obligations, with irrigation labor (Vetti/Vettinai) at the village and nadu levels being the most common. Taxes on residences and communal spaces were collectively termed Natacci.
- A variety of trade and artisan taxes were also enforced, including Cunkam (toll), tattar pattam (tax on goldsmiths), Kurai kacu (tax on textiles), verrilai (tariff on betel leaf), vannar parai (tax on washermen), and paci pattam (tax on fishing).

Decline Of the Chola Dynasty

- Conventional histories frequently highlight the decline of the Chola Kingdom in the late 12th century, attributing this to poor leadership.
- The subsequent ineffectiveness of Rajaraja Chola III and Rajendra Chola III resulted in extended conflicts within the Chola territory.
- During this time, Kopperunchinga I, a chieftain of the Kadava clan, temporarily captured Rajaraja Chola III.
- The Hoysalas had a notable and controversial influence on the political dynamics of the Tamil region during this period.
- By taking advantage of the fragmentation among the Tamil kingdoms, the Hoysalas obstructed the Cholas and Pandyas from realizing their full capabilities.

9.0 The Decline of the Chola Empire

The Chola Empire faced destruction at the hands of Malik Kafur, a general serving under Alauddin Khalji, in 1310. Kafur orchestrated a series of military campaigns against the Pandyas, Hoysalas, Kakatiyas, and Yadavas in southern India. The decline of the Chola Empire commenced following the reign of Kulottunga I. Several factors contributed to the weakening of the empire, including:

Conflicts with the Chalukyas: The Cholas and Chalukyas were engaged in a fierce competition for dominance over vital ports and fertile riverine deltas.

Less capable rulers: After Karikala's reign, the Chola dynasty was ruled by less capable rulers who couldn't maintain the same level of power.

Destruction of the capital: The destruction of the capital, Kaveripattanam, crippled the Chola economy.

Expansion of neighboring kingdoms: The Chera and Pandya kingdoms expanded their territories at the expense of the Cholas.

10.0 Comparison of Brihadeeshwara Temple with Melpadi Chola temple

General features of temples in Chola Dynasty

Chola Temples held a pivotal and influential position within Chola society, serving as venues for religious ceremonies, social gatherings, and cultural events. Community schools that were established around these temples offered education on the Holy Scriptures and ancient Vedas. The Chola people exhibited profound devotion to various deities, especially Shiva, who was regarded as a primary source of spiritual strength. Numerous temples were dedicated to Shiva, with the Sri Venkateshwara Temple having significant connections to the Chola Dynasty. Prominent temples, such as the Srirangam Temple, which was submerged underwater for years prior to its restoration, serve as enduring symbols of the Chola's architectural brilliance. The Chola Empire was also celebrated for constructing magnificent temples along the Kaveri River, including the iconic Brihadeeshwara Temple in Thanjavur, recognized as India's tallest and largest temple. These temples are renowned for their extraordinary architecture, particularly their natural-colored murals that continue to be revered today. Many of these temples, including Airavatesvara, Gangaikondacholisvaram, and Brihadeeshwara, have been designated as UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Furthermore, the Chola period represented a golden age for the arts and sculpture, producing remarkable bronze statues of deities such as Lakshmi, Vishnu, and Shiva. The craftsmanship and intricate detailing found in these sculptures are held in high regard. This era also made significant contributions to literature, encompassing religious texts and works associated with Jain and Buddhist traditions. One of the most treasured literary achievements of this period is the *Nalayira Divya Prabandham*, a compilation of 4000 Tamil poems that continues to be an important cultural and historical asset.

One of the most notable Chola temple is Brihadeshwara and referred to as Rajarajisvaram or Brihadeeshwara Temple, this structure exemplifies the brilliance of Chola architecture in Thanjavur. Constructed by Raja Raja Chola, it features a shadowless vimana with a sanctum that rises to 190 feet, topped with an 80-ton stone. Notable characteristics include sculptures of deities such as Lakshmi, Vishnu, Ardhnarisvara, and Bikshadana on the temple's outer walls. Fresco paintings and miniature sculptures illustrating scenes from epics and Puranas embellish the temple walls, showcasing the religious beliefs and ideologies of the Chola dynasty.

Chola Architecture Features (Sivaramamurthi, 2004) :

The temples of Cholas were all constructed using the "Shilpa Shastra," or Vastushastra, as their foundation. The following paragraph gives the lists of elements of Dravidian architecture. Fig 5 shows the layout of Dravidian temple and its elements.

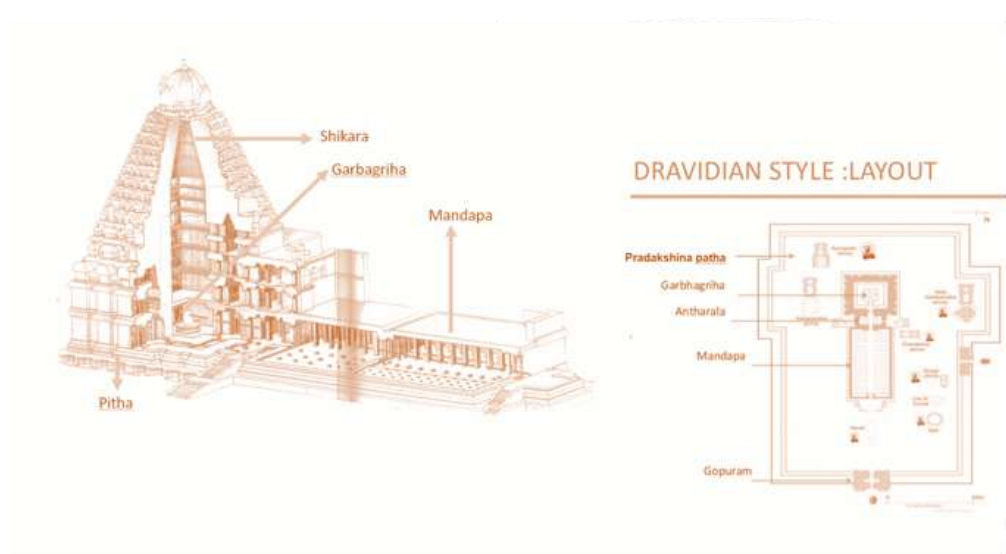


Figure 10 Elements of Dravidian Temple Architecture (Source: Jagadisan and Sharmila, 2023)

Elements of Dravidian Temple Architecture

Walls: Chola temples were characterized by tall boundary walls encircling the temple.

Vimana: The vimanas ascended above the sanctum sanctorum (garbhagriha) of the temple, taking the form of a stepped pyramid that rises linearly rather than in a curved manner. There was a single vimana atop the main temple.

Gopurama: The front wall featured a prominent entrance gateway known as a gopuram.

Panchayatan style: The temple complex was designed in the panchayatan style, comprising a principal temple and four subsidiary shrines.

Shikhara: The crowning feature, shaped like an octagon, is referred to as the shikhara. **Antarala:** This is the vestibular tunnel that connects the assembly hall with the garbhagriha.

Mandap: It is a pillared hall adorned with intricately carved pillars and a flat roof.

Sculptures: The entrance to the garbhagriha was embellished with statues of Dwaarpal, Mithun, and Yaksha.

Water tank: A distinctive aspect of the Chola style was the presence of a water tank within the temple enclosure.

History of Vellore



Fig. 11 Location of Vellore

Vellore, the headquarters of Vellore District located at 12° 35' N and 79° 9' E, possesses a captivating history of its own. This strategically positioned town is well-connected by rail and bus routes to major towns in neighboring states such as Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Kerala. The history of the district holds great significance and relevance as we reveal its glorious past. It was influenced by various dynasties and rulers, with the most notable being the Pallavas, Cholas, the Rashtrakuta dynasty of Malkhed, Sambuvarayar, the rulers of Vijayanagara, the Nawabs of the Carnatic, and the British. The monuments found within the district vividly illustrate the town's evolution through the ages. In the 18th century, Vellore District was the site of several decisive battles fought in

Ambur (1749 A.D.), Arcot (1751 A.D.), and Vandivasi (1760 A.D.), stemming from the prolonged struggle for supremacy between the English and the French. One of Vellore's notable monuments is the fort, although its exact date of construction remains undetermined due to a lack of proper records. A thorough examination of the stone inscriptions indicates that the fort was likely constructed during the reign of Chinna Bommi Nayak (1526 to 1595 A.D.). This fort stands as one of the finest examples of military architecture in South India. Situated in the northeastern region of Tamil Nadu, Vellore is a city that showcases a rich tapestry of history, culture, and tradition. Renowned for its historical landmarks, educational institutions, and healthcare facilities, Vellore has established a unique place for itself in the chronicles of South Indian history. This blog explores the intriguing history of Vellore, delving into its ancient origins, medieval splendour, colonial impacts, and contemporary significance.

Ancient Roots: The Dawn of Vellore

The origins of Vellore can be traced back to ancient eras, with archaeological findings indicating that the area was settled as far back as the Stone Age. Its advantageous position, situated between the Palar and Ponnai rivers, rendered it an ideal location for early civilizations. The term "Vellore" is thought to have originated from the Tamil words "Vel" (spear) and "Oor" (place), denoting a town of warriors. During the Sangam era (3rd century BCE to 4th century CE), Vellore was incorporated into the Tondaimandalam region, governed by the Tondaiman rulers. This area was recognized for its fertile soil, prosperous trade, and rich cultural heritage. Ancient Tamil literature, including the Sangam poems, alludes to the wealth and bravery of the inhabitants of Tondaimandalam, which encompassed Vellore. Chola Architecture in Tamil Nadu concerning the region of Vellore: Vellore, also referred to as Vellur (during the Chola period), has been influenced by numerous dynasties, notably the Chola dynasty from 850 to 1280, when the entire region was under the dominion of the Chola monarchs. Subsequently, it fell under the control of the Rashtrakutas, the later Cholas, and the Vijayanagar kings. In the 17th century, Vellore came under the authority of the nawabs of the Carnatic.

Chola Architecture periods:

1. The Early Cholas of the Sangam literature, during the interregnum following the decline of the Sangam Cholas.
2. The emergence of the Imperial medieval Cholas under Vijayalaya, the dynasty of Vijayalaya.
3. Lastly, the Later Chola dynasty of Kulothunga Chola I.

Vellore is situated within the Medieval and Later Chola Period dynasties. The Chola edifices in Vellore are based on data from the ASI in Melpadi, Vellore.

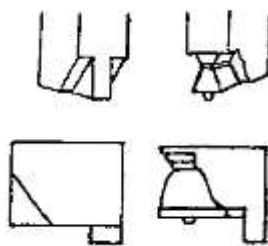
These temples were constructed by the kings Rajaraja I and Arinjaya Chola. The notable structures include the Somanatha temple and Cholesvara temple.

There are additional temples and edifices erected by the Cholas in proximity to Vellore, which are outside the scope of my study. The Tiruvalam temple, built by the Chola kings, is among these structures.

Architectural Elements of Chola Structures:



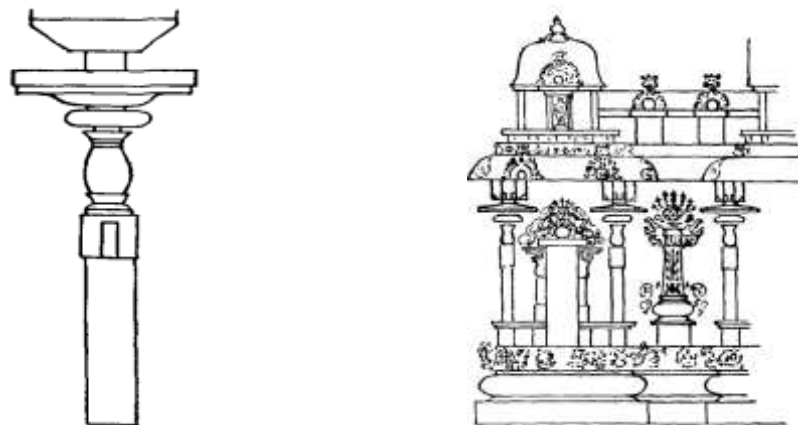
Niches



Kudus



Pillar Capitals



Pillar Koshtha-paitjara (left portion) and kumbha-paitjara (right portion)

Fig. 12 Chola Architecture Features (Source author)

My current research is focused on identifying and gathering detailed information about Chola-era temples in the Vellore region, specifically focussing on the Melpadi Somanatheswarar Temple. The goal is to identify three such temples and then delve into their historical context, architectural features, inscriptions, scholarly discussions, and current preservation status. The first phase of my research is to document Melpadi Somanatheswarar Temple, Vellore

Melpadi is a very historic place located in Walajah Taluk of Vellore District. The great King Raja Raja Cholan raised a temple here for God Somanathar. He raised a Pallipadar temple for his grandfather Arinjaya Cholan over his cemetery. It is named after the king as Arinjaya Choleeshwaran. The commendable aspects are that both the temples are located near the banks of the river Nuga.

The history of Rajaraja-I, Rajaraja-II ,Koperunsingan, Sambuvarayargal, Kings of Vijaya Nagar could be found in the stone inscription of the temple, which is yet another unique feature of this monument.

The Seven Mothers statues and other statues of Somanathar temples serves as a best example of sculptures found in Melpadi.

The Somanatheswarar Temple in Melpadi, Vellore, is a significant example of Chola architecture, showcasing the grandeur and artistic prowess of the dynasty. While the exact initial construction is debated, it is believed to have been started by Parantaka Chola I (907-953 CE) and later significantly developed and completed by Raja Raja Chola I (985-1014 CE). Some sources even suggest it might have been constructed during the time of Aditya I.



Fig. 13 Interior of Melpadi Somanatheswarar Temple



Fig. 14 Gopuram of Melpadi Somanatheswarar Temple(Source author)

The Sri Somanadheeswarar Temple is situated in Melpadi, in close proximity to the River Ponnai. This ancient temple was constructed during the Chola dynasty. It was initiated by King Paranthaka Cholan I, with significant contributions from King Raja Raja Cholan in its completion. The Vijayanagara Kings later added several sub-shrines and demonstrated a strong interest in the promotion of Hindu temples. Unfortunately, this temple suffered damage, and many idols found within were mutilated during the invasions led by Malik Kafur and other Mughal forces. The presiding deity of this temple is Somanadeeswarar, an incarnation of Lord Shiva, represented as a Shiva Lingam in the sanctum sanctorum. His consort is Thapaskrutha Devi, an incarnation of Goddess Parvathy. This temple faces south, and the first concentric wall lacks a Rajagopuram; instead, it features a flat Gopuram adorned with several idols. Upon crossing this, the second concentric compound reveals a three-tiered south-facing Rajagopuram. Beyond this, there is a large multi-pillared mandapam on the left, which is currently unused, and on the right, another four-pillared mandapam. The area between these two mandapams is lush and green. At the entrance stands a medium-sized Ganapathy idol carved from black stone. The goddess Thapaskrutha Devi Ambal is located in a multi-pillared mandapam, accompanied by an engraved Ganapathy and a Murugan idol resembling the Dwara Baalakas. The Ambal faces east and is depicted in a standing posture. There is a granite Thulasi Maadam, a Bali Peedam, and a Simha Vaahanam positioned in front of the Ambal's shrine. At a considerable distance from the Ambal Sannadhi lies the Navagaha Sannadhi, which is notably distinct from those in other temples due to its sharply defined and appealing facial features. Adjacent to this is a Yaaga Mandapam, where homams and yaagams were conducted in the past. Outside the Madapalli, or temple kitchen, there is a broken yet sturdy-looking Shiva Lingam.

The Temple Kitchen has remained unused for several decades. In front of the Moolasthanam stands a Bali Peedam, accompanied by a tall Dwajasthambam, and nearby is a Nandhi Vaahanam situated within a four-pillared Mandapam. The Sanctum Sanctorum is constructed within a large multi-pillared Mandapam, and at the entrance are a pair of impressive Dwara Baalakas. Sri Somanatheeswarar, represented as a Shiva Lingam, faces East. Just outside the Moolasthanam is another Shivalingam referred to as Muneeswarar. In fact, during the Moghul invasions, the Main Somanatheeswara Shiva Lingam was enclosed with a wall, and this Muneeswara Shiva Lingam was presented as the Main Shiva Lingam to protect the original Shivalingam from destruction and mutilation due to the Moghul attacks. There are Sub Shrines dedicated to Narthana Ganapathy, Dhakshinamoorthy, Maha Vishnu, Brahmma, Aadhi Vinayagar, Vaayu Lingam, Nandhi Bhagwan, Vishnu Durgai, and Chandikeshwarar. Just outside the Main Shrine, rows of Idols representing Aadhi Iyyappan, Sapthamathas, and other deities are housed in a Mandapam that is secured with a lock. An additional notable feature of this Temple is that the Vimanam has been constructed using solid rock, without the use of any metal. At the Temple's entrance, there are several large Trees, and beneath one of them, the Idols of Naaga Devathas are placed. This Temple is presently under the supervision and management of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI).

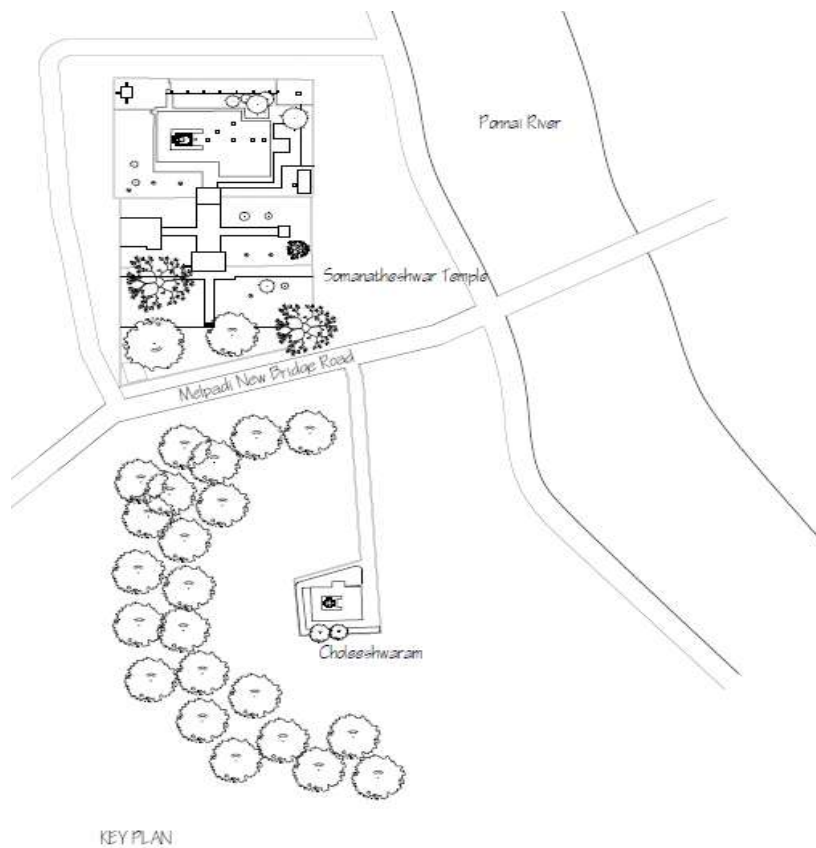
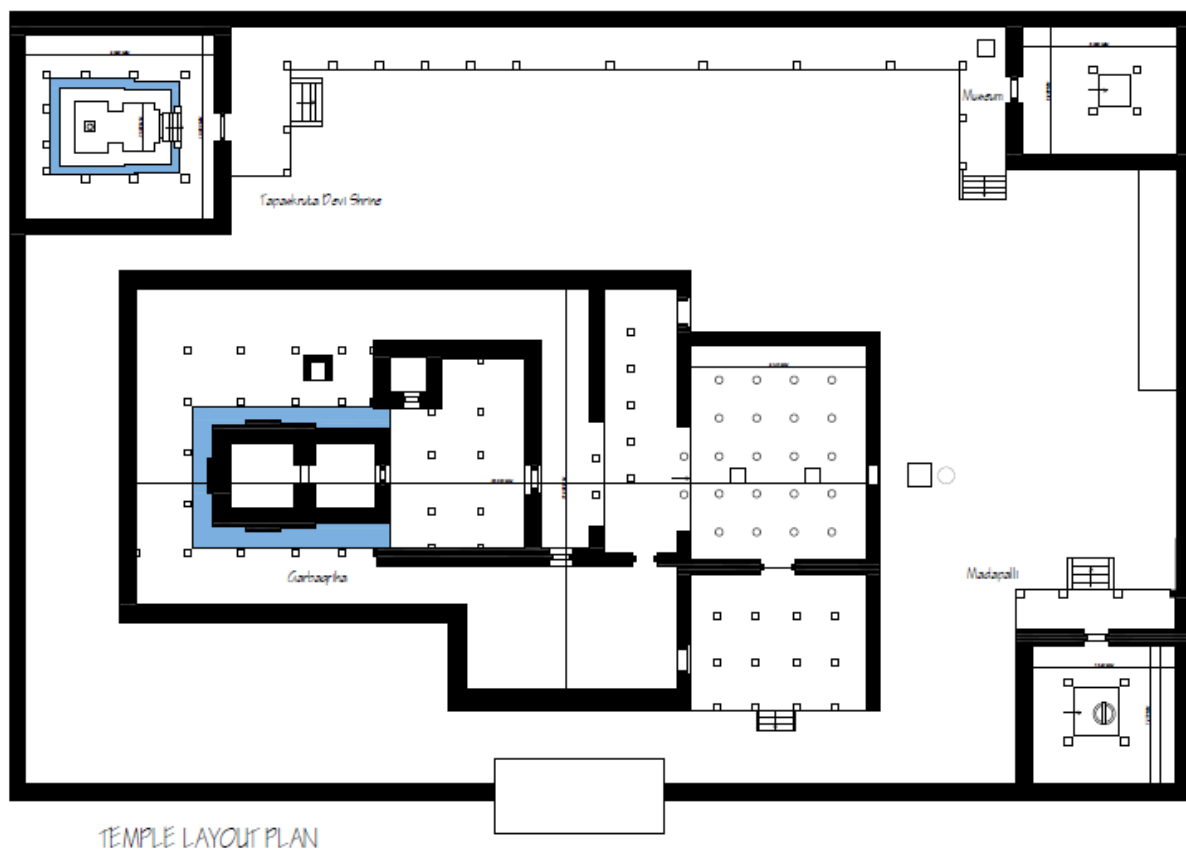


Fig. 15 Site plan of Melpadi Somanatheswarar Temple (Source author)



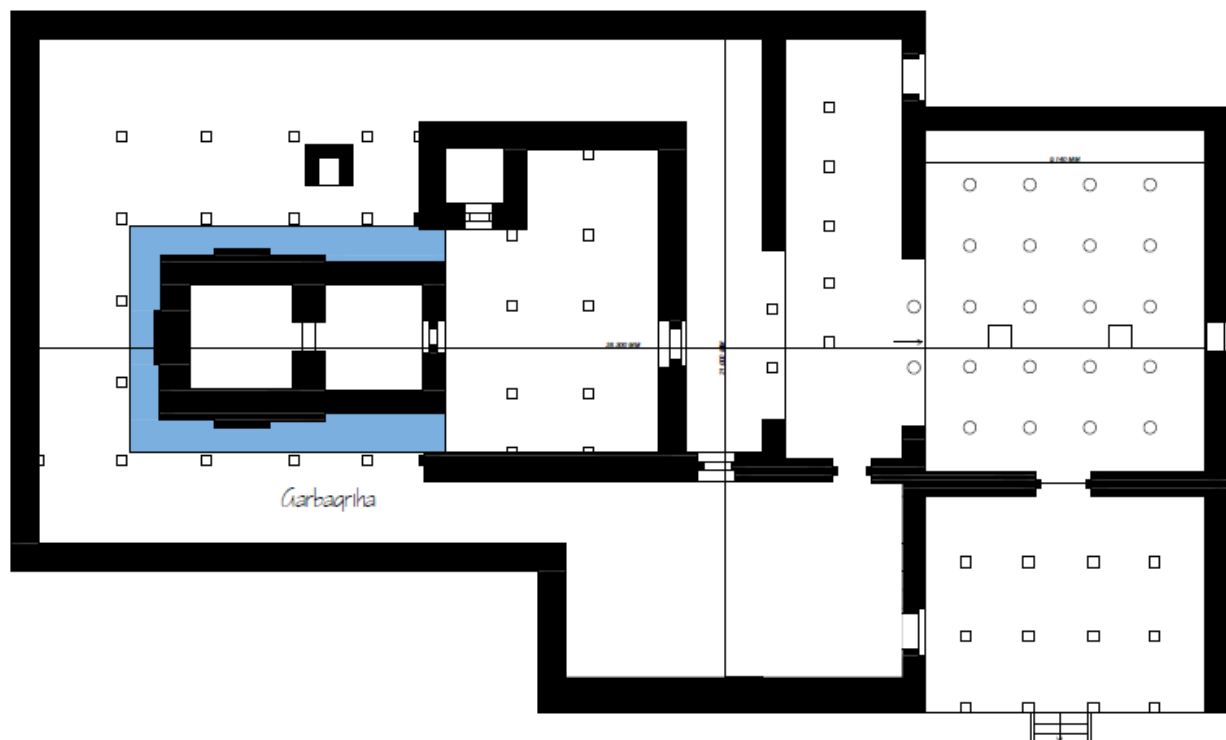


Fig. 16 Layout Plan of Melpadi Somanatheswarar Temple (Source author)

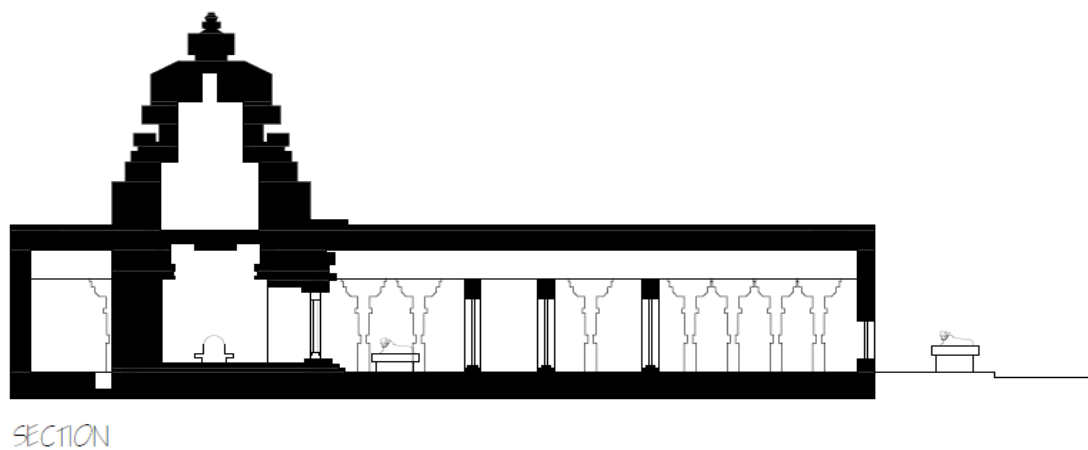


Fig. 17 Section and Vimana of Melpadi Somanatheswarar Temple (Source author)

Here are some key aspects of its Chola architecture:

Vimana: A notable feature is that the vimana (the temple tower above the sanctum sanctorum) is built entirely of stone, a characteristic of Chola architecture. It rises in a stepped pyramid shape. The kalasam (crowning element) is also made of stone, often in dark black or green.

Material: The Cholas heavily favored the use of stone, particularly granite, for their temples due to its durability, and this is evident in the Somanatheswarar Temple.

Dwarapalas: The entrance to the sanctum features impressive figures of Dwarapalas (guardian deities), which are characteristic of Chola temples.

Niche Images: While some niche images like Ganesha, Dakshinamurti, Vishnu, Brahma, and Vishnu Durga are present, some sources suggest they might be later additions and not original to the Chola period. However, stone sculptures in niches are a common feature of Chola temples.

Mandapams: The temple complex includes mandapams (pillared halls). The Mukha Mandap (front hall) has beautiful round pillars (vratta stambha). There is also a Kalyana Mandap and other mandapas within the temple, some featuring beautiful sculptures on their pillars.

Inscriptions: The temple houses significant stone inscriptions, including those from the reign of Raja Raja Chola I (one dated to his 14th year mentions the conquest of the Kudamali region and the Pandyas, and another from his 29th year) and Rajendra Chola I. These inscriptions provide valuable historical context and confirm the Chola patronage.

Fortress Walls: The entire temple complex is surrounded by wide fortress walls, reflecting the defensive aspects of these temple towns during the Chola period.

Layout: The sanctum faces east, while the outer gate has a south-facing entrance. The outer gate generally lacks a tall gopuram (gateway tower), which is a later addition to many Chola temples. The inner entrance, however, might have a three-tiered tower as a later addition.

Pallipadai Temple: It is a Pallipadai temple, meaning it was built over a samadhi (burial or memorial site). Raja Raja Chola I built this temple in memory of his grandfather, Arinjaya Chola, who is believed to have died in Melpadi. The temple was originally called Arinjigai Ishwara or Arinjishwara.

The Somanatheswarar Temple, along with the nearby Choleswara Temple, stands as a testament to the architectural legacy of the Cholas in the Vellore region. It is currently under the care of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI).

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