

Temples of Pondicherry

A Heritage Guide by INTACH Pondicherry



Temples of South India

Through the centuries temples have occupied a central position in the lives of Indians. In addition to being places of worship, they have also served a role in the following areas

Economic development (a source of livelihood for those associated in the running of the temple)

Aesthetic enjoyment (sculptors, painters, and craftsmen of yore showcased their artistry on the temple walls and structures)

Entertainment (with special mandapams for dance and vocal performances)



Centres for community interaction (acted as the nucleus of the village or town, where people gathered for activities such as community meetings, marriage ceremonies, popular games like Aadupali, etc.)

Recording information of public or political importance (the wall inscriptions contain a wealth of information on public welfare works/ schemes, taxes, grants, local water bodies, etc.)

Elements of a Temple

Gopuram



Entrance Towers

Mandapam



Columned Halls

Vahanam



Vehicle of Main Deity

Dwajasthambam



Main Flagstand

Dvarapala



Guardian Figure

Vimana



Tower over Main Sanctuary

Kulam



Temple Pond

Kalagam

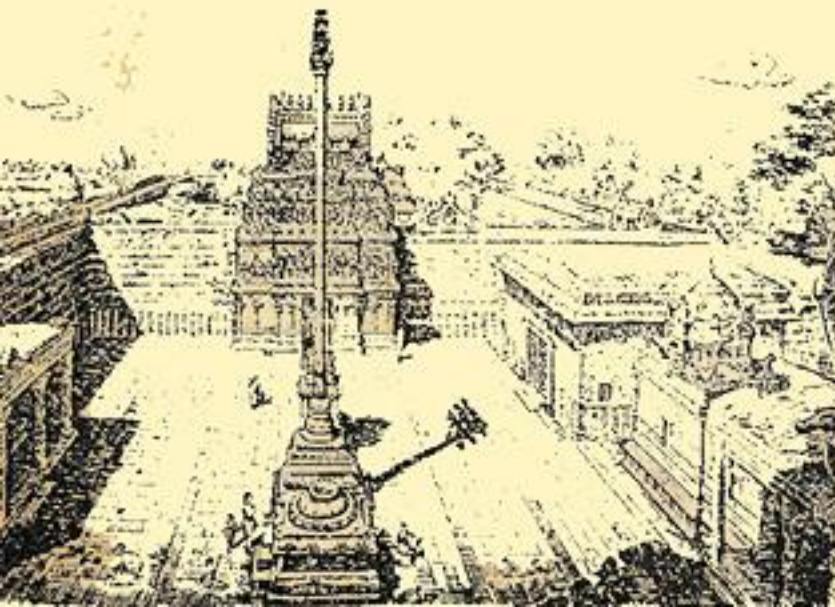
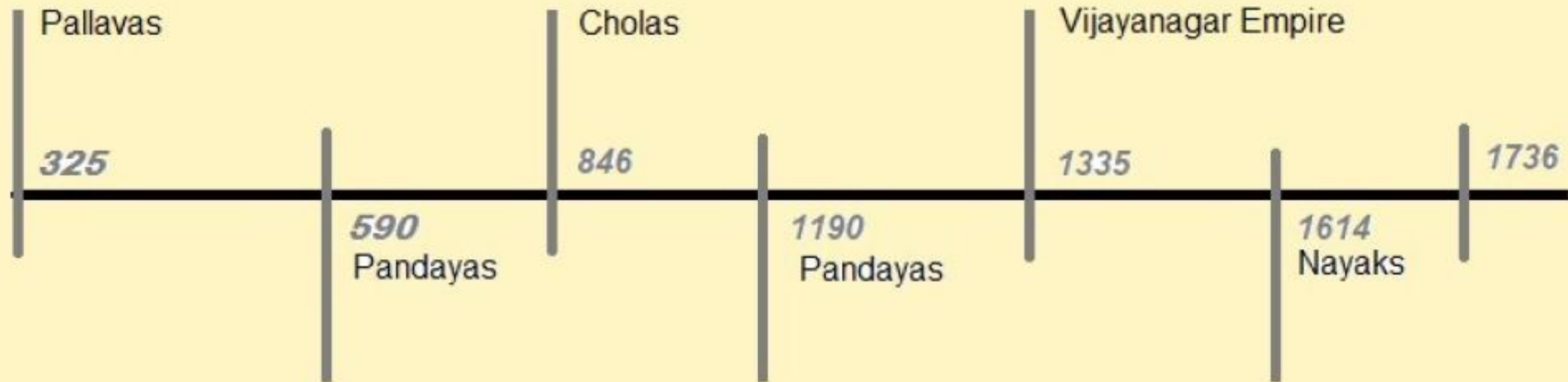


Ornamental Pot at the Top of the Shikhara

The Great Builders

Five ancient ruling dynasties have left monumental Temples in Pondicherry:

Of these, the Cholas were the more prolific builders, perfecting the art of temple construction. Chola architecture was grounded in the prescriptions of sacred texts and had a purity of style. Sometimes they gave a distinct form to the older temples built by preceding dynasties and sometimes they founded new ones.



Most of the temples in the region were enhanced and enriched by a number of dynasties as time went by. So, it is quite possible to see Pallava, Pandya, Chola, Vijaynagar and Nayak styles in one single temple. Since, worship never ceased in many of these living temples it is not unusual to see the central shrine or base in stone and addendums in cement, brick or plaster.



Varadaraja Perumal Temple

This Vishnu temple is located in Thirubhuvanai in an ancient city-complex (taniyur) of the Chozas that was once called Tribhuvana-Mahadevi Chaturvedimangalam, named after a Chola Queen, Tribhuvana - Mahadevi, wife of Parantaka I. The foundations of this temple were laid in the time of Parantaka I but further construction work was carried out under subsequent Chola kings such as Rajaraja and Rajendra. Currently, the temple has a relatively modern Vimanam and according to the local know-how, the latest structural renovation work was completed in the 1930s.



The central deities - Vishnu, Bhudevi and Sridevi
 Subsidiary shrines - Varmangai Tayar, Andal and Narasimha



Highlights of the Temple



The carvings on the steps leading to the Mandapam and Garbagriha. This is intricate work done with a great precision.



Frieze around around the main structure of the temple. The sculptures include: scenes from lives of Krishna and Vishnu, and the Ramayan.



The inscriptions indicate that at one point in this village must have been the hub of the district. One of the texts states that Rajendra I. had placed this temple under the protection of two regiments, indicating that it was an important religious centre.



The mythical figures such as Yaalis, Kamadhenu and Leogriffs too abound the temple walls.



Adapuli was an ancient board game played by people especially during Vaikuntha Ekadashi (late December - January). The game is between two people but the spectators could join in by supporting participants. There are stone carvings right at the entrance which show how popular this game was. One can easily conjure up a gathering of men seated near the entrance enthralled in the game and cheering their respective players.

Some Details around the Temple - do you find all of them?



Panchanadisvarar Temple

The foundations of this Shiva temple were laid at the time of Parantaka I. This temple encapsulates most elements of Chozan style notably the Bhutanga and Yali friezes below and above the cornice.

Central shrine - Tiruvaiyaru Udaiya Mahadevar (form of Shiva)
 Subsidiary shrines - Murugan, Shiva Chandikeshwar, Ganesha, Surya & Navagraha



Highlights of the Temple



Devakoshtas (Special niches of the deities) - The main structure has niches in which are enshrined the different forms of Shiva:

South - Bhishantanar & Dakshinamurthy

West - Lingodbhavar

North - Ardhanarisvarar and Rishabharudha

Statues of Ganesha, Durga and Bhrama are also encased in the niches.



Carvings on the boundary wall - Noteworthy carvings are found on the east and west boundary wall. The fish and the tortoise on the west wall are quite spellbinding.



Dwarapala - The garudians of the main diety

Pillars of the subsidiary shrine dedicated to Murugan - The antique pillars of this shrine are a fine example of supreme artistry of the time.



Some Details around the Temple



Tirukundagudi Mahadeva Temple in Madagadipattu

The earliest inscription in this Shivan temple indicate that it was venerated since the time of Rajraja 1. As it is not a 'living' temple and the central shrine is not open to public, one must visit the temple to relish in its antiquity and serene atmosphere imbued with piety. This stone temple is untouched by modern embellishments and construction. The temple has mandatory Shivan temple sculptures, such as Bhutanga, on the the main structure. The derelict ruins outside the Garb Grihya indicate the presence of a square ardhmandapa and two subsidiary shrines.



Highlights of the Temple



Vimana - The temple has a relatively short vimana as it has not been extended by modern construction. It's circular, reminiscent of the Buddhist stupas, and then extends into a conical shape. It is delightfully adorned with statues of four primary deities facing four directions.



Panels on main structure - There are tiny panels running along the main wall of the temple with detailed carvings depicting stories and legends associated with devotion of Shiva.



Human faces - Just below the cornice there are semi-circular carvings with human faces. The master artisans used their skill to create most singular expression on these stone faces.



Some more details around the temple - do you find all of them?



Mulanathaswamy Temple in Bahour

The antiquity of this temple can be traced to the 9th century as it is mentioned in the copper plates belonging to the Pallava king Nripathungavarman. This was the place where an ancient Sanskrit college was supposedly situated. The main shrine dates to the Chozan times.

Currently, the temple is an unconventional mix of French and ancient Tamizh style of construction. In the late 19th century, the French renovated the temple and added protective elements to stall further deterioration. The front body and Vimana of the temple are recent addendums under the French. The rear part is in stone and has all the elements of the Chozan iconography such as the bhutamala along with traditional deities (Ganesha, Durga, etc.).

Central shrine - Sri Mulasthanam Udaiya Perumandigal (or Paramesvarar)

Subsidiary shrines - there are about eleven subsidiary shrines belonging to different deities like Murugan, Shiva, Navagriha, Vinayaga, etc.



Highlights of the Temple



Antralya & pillars : The interior of the temple has the original stone work and hence has a powerful ambience usually associated with hoary places of worship. The pillars just before the Garba Griha are simply an outstanding example of the proficiency of the sculptors. The carvings depict both religious, mythical and social aspects of ancient life. here are two ancient pillars in the shrine dedicated to the Navagrihas. These pillars were added by the Nayaks and have an elaborate intricacy which is impressive.

Vimana: The modern Vimana of the temple is built under the French aegis and one can actually spot a French man carved at the rear end. In fact, the mandapam leading into the Antralya and Garb Griha is noteworthy because it has French style arches.



Upapitha: The temple stands on a well proportioned base (upapitha) of the Pallava style. The carving on the upapitha is of Pallava style. The sculptures depict beings as well as humans busy with dance and music; it is high on the cultural note rather than religious note.

Some more Details around the temple - do you find all of them?



Overview - Spot Pondicherry's temples on the map





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