

THE PALLAVA ARCHITECTURE

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Abstract

Temple construction was known to the Tamils several generations prior to Mahendravarman I and is referred to in the Sangam and post-Sangam literature. These were however made from wood, brick, mortar and other perishable materials and could not withstand the ravages of weather and time. Senganan constructed 70 temples of Tirumangai Alvar. The Pallavas of Knachi excavated a series of about thirty-four cave temples in hard granite. So far as the plan is concerned, the cave temple of Mahendra's time may be divided into three categories. The speciality of these mandapas lies in the shape and design of their pillars, roll cornices and the harmonious blending of figure- sculpture with the architecture. A Pallava Grantha inscription is found on the step in front of Muruga shrine. This ratha is a small square hall in the centre with pillared verandhahs below and a pyramidical pinnacle above. Its plinth has many mouldings and its porticos with lion pillars give a pleasing appearance with the upper section adorned with salas and kudus. Its outer wall is adorned with eight sculptures --- three Siva images, Harihara, Brahma, Subrahmanya, Narasimha Pallava and Arthanareeswara.

Introduction

The history and development of the Pallava art and architecture constitutes a fascinating chapter in the annals of Indian art history. The constructions carried out by the Pallavas laid the foundation of the Dravidian style. In the beginning, Indian architecture was concerned with temple architecture only. With the Pallavas, the great age of temple-building began. According to Percy Brown, "Of all the great powers that together made the history of Southern India, none had a more marked effect on the architecture of the region than the earliest of all, that of the Pallavas, whose productions provided the foundations of the Dravidian style".

Temple construction was known to the Tamils several generations prior to Mahendravarman I and is referred to in the Sangam and post-Sangam literature. These were however made from wood, brick, mortar and other perishable materials and could not withstand the ravages of weather and time. Senganan constructed 70 temples of Tirumangai Alvar. The avoidance of stone, according to some scholars, is due to a prejudice that it was used for funeral ceremonies. Mahendravarman introduced a revolutionary change by means of Dravidian architecture.

Rock-cut Temples

The Pallavas and their powerful contemporaries, the Pandyas, have left a large number of excavated cave temples in the northern and southern parts of Tamilnadu respectively. Monolithic temples excavated from solid rocks were first introduced in the Tamil land by the illustrious Pallava king Mahendravarman I, who succeeded in creating 12 rock-cut temples with the help of special craftsmen presumed to be brought from the lower

Krishna valley where such rock-cut temples had already come into vogue during the reign of Vishnakundin kings. According to T.V. Mahalingam "It was Mahendravarman who handled hard rocks perhaps for the first time after Asoka, and achieved a success that has carved for him a niche in the temple of Indian art."

Rock-cut Features

- Boulders were used for the rock-cut temples which are usually rectangular and pillared with the sanctum scooped at the hind-wall.
- The pillars are massive and divided into three parts ---- the top and bottom being cubical and square, the intervening parts were bevelled at corners so as to provide eight faces. The cubical and square - shaped section of the pillars was adorned with large circular lotus modallions.
- There were cornices in the early temples. Role mouldings were added in the cornices in the latter period.
- The door-keepers are single-handed with a characteristic pose, their arms resting on a massive club. The door-keepers of earlier cave temples such as Vallam and Kuranganimuttam are horned in addition.
- Irrespective of the direction that the cave entrance faces, the garbhagraha faces east or west only (if the cave temple faces south or north, the garbhagraha is located on the side well).
- In a cave temple with a single shrine, the front mandapa has two pillars and two pilasters having equal distance as in Valla, Mahendravadi, Mamandur, Vishnu and Seyamangalam cave temples.
- If the cave temples have three, five or seven shrines, the front mandapa is broad with four, six or eight pillars.
- The cave temples are divided, either by the inner row of pillars or by the differences in the floor levels or the ceiling heights, into two sections ---- the front and the rear called muhamandapa and arthamandapa respectively.
- The entrance has three steps. The Garbhagraha has no lingas or pidas.
- The Pallavas of Knachi excavated a series of about thirty-four cave temples in hard granite. So far as the plan is concerned, the cave temple of Mahendra's time may be divided into three categories: single-shrined, triple-shrined and multi-shrined, the last mentioned being really an innovation. The three-shrined cave temples are in Mandagappattu, Mamandur, Rudravalesam, and Kuranganimuttam. A five-shrined cave temple is in Pallavaram. A seven - shrined cave temple is in Villappakkam.

Narasimha Style of Rock-cut Temples

Following the footsteps of his father, Narasimhavarman too excavated rock-cut temples. But he initiated new and more ornate techniques. The main features are as follows:

- The pillars are slender with the bases often shaped like squatting lions.

- The top of the pillar has the variously-moulded capital member like kalasa, tadi, kumba and palaka – an imitation of their wooden prototypes.
- The adhistana (plinth) has all the mouldings of a fully developed structural temple such as Upana, Jagathi, Kumuda, Kanda, and Padma.
- The facade has a fully-represented prastara (entablature) with a kapota (cornice), kudus and a string of salas (barrel – vaulted roof). The kudus are decorated.
- Besides dvarapalakas (door-keepers), the caves have large and fine sculptures.

Narasimha's cave temple found at Mamallapuram show a variety of form. There are 8 such caves at Mamallapuram --- the Koneri Mandapam, the Varaha Mandapam, the Mahishasuramardini Mandapam, an unfinished cave temple next to Koneri Mandapam, the Pancha Pandava Mandapa (near Arjuna penance), the Adivaraha cave temple, the Ramanuja Mandapa and the Trimurthi cave. The most remarkable of them are the Mahishamardini cave, the Varaha cave, the Adivaraha cave and the Trimurti cave. The finest specimens of sculptural motif are found in these mandapas.

Mandapas

The rock-cut caves in Mamallapuram are popularly known as mandapas which are no higher than fifteen or twenty feet. The Varaha and Ramanuja mandapas are undivided. The Koneri Mandapa and the Adivaraha cave temple have their mandapas divided into ardhmandapa and mukha-mandapa by an inner line of pillars. The Mahishasuramardini Mandapa's central shrine has a square – pillared portico projected into a large mandapa. The Pancha-Pandava Mandapa has a square central shrine with a surrounding cloister in the form of mandapa having two rows of pillars running all around. This is the biggest cave temple in Mamallapuram. The Varaha Mandapa and the Adivaraha cave temple have a single-shrine cell each. The Mahishasuramardini and the Ramanuja Mandapa have three-shrine cells in them.

The speciality of these mandapas lies in the shape and design of their pillars, roll cornices and the harmonious blending of figure- sculpture with the architecture. The Pillars, particularly those on the facade of the mandapas dedicated to Mahishasuramardini and Varaha with the lion motif for their base are remarkable for their elegance and beauty.

Cave Temples of the Later Period

Several cave shrines, both single-shrined and multi-shrined, came up during the period of Rajasimha. The cave temples of Kilmavilangai and Vallam, and the Tiger cave at Saluvankupam are one-celled without any columns. The unfinished cave temple near Koneri Mandapa with five cells also belongs to his period. The Mummoorthy cave (Tirumoorthy mandapa), situated on the northern part of Mamallapuram, has three cells with the engraved images of Muruga, Siva and Vishnu. A Pallava Grantha inscription is found on the step in front of Muruga shrine. The nearby Kodikal Mandapa was excavated for Koravai. The Dharmaraj Mandapa near the Arjuna Penance was excavated by Ranajaya.

Tirumoorthy Mandapa

The Adi Varaha Mandapa has certain unique features. The deity in the mandapa is worshipped. It has the sculptures of two Pallava rulers. Though dedicated for Vishnu, an inscription in it extols the glory of Siva. Nandivarman Pallavamalla's sixty-fifth regnal year inscription is found here. Another inscription mentions the ten avatars of Vishnu in which Buddha is considered as one of the avatars. In the inscription, the temple is referred to as 'Paramesvara Mahavaraha Vishnu Gragam'. The south and north walls of the arddhamandapa have almost life-size royal portraits of the Pallava rulers Simhavishnu and Mahendravarman I with their queens. The label inscriptions over them indicate their identity.

The unfinished caves of Mamallapuram reveal the method of excavation. The surface of the rock was divided into square grids, and deep grooves were chiseled along the outline of the squares. The cubes thus formed were removed.

Cut-out Temples

The cut-out temples are small temples cut-out of single boulders of rock. Unlike the rock-cut temples, their interior as well as exterior are scooped out from the rock in the form of a miniature temple. They are best known as rathas but the term rathas which means chariot is a misnomer as these little shrines have nothing to do with chariots.

The best known of these is a group known as Panchapandava Rathas. Four of the five rathas have been cut from a single boulder. The fifth is from an isolated boulder. Besides them, there are four others namely the Ganesha Ratha, two Pidar Rathas and the Valayankuttai Rathas. All the Pallava rathas are confined to Mamallapuram.

Pancha Pandava Rathas

Dharmaraja Ratha and Arjuna Ratha represent the typical South Indian temple in its very initial stages. Dharmaraj Ratha, the tallest and most completed of all, is a three-storeyed temple with an octagonal sikhara and garbhagriha in each storey. This ratha is a small square hall in the centre with pillared verandahs below and a pyramidal pinnacle above. Its plinth has many mouldings and its porticos with lion pillars give a pleasing appearance with the upper section adorned with salas and kudus. Its outer wall is adorned with eight sculptures --- three Siva images, Harihara, Brahma, Subrahmanya, Narasimha Pallava and Arthanareeswara. The titles of Rajasima I Pallava are found inscribed on the wall. Dharmaraja Ratha is called Atyanthakama Pallaveswara Griham in the inscription. It must have been a Siva temple carrying lovely sculptures on the upper tiers. It is the earliest madakoil type of temple in Tamil Nadu.

Draupathi Ratha, the simplest and smallest of all the rathas, is an artistic replica of a hermit's hut containing only a cell. Its cornices are adorned with kodikkarukku and it has the kutu of parnasala type of vimana. It is dedicated to Durga. The rear wall of the cave has figure of Durga standing on the head of Mahisa with her attendants. In front of Durga, there is a sculpture depicting the performance of navakanda by a warrior.

Nakula-Sakadeva Ratha is apsidal in form and is called Thunganai-madam in Tamil and Gajaprishta (elephant back) in Sanskrit. Immediately besides this ratha, there is the image of an elephant to point out the similarity. It has three talas with a wagon-shaped sikara similar to those of the latter Pallavas and Chola apsidal temples such as those in Tiruttani and Tirukkalukunram.

Structural Temples

The Pallavas started employing stone for the entire construction of temples from the base to the top. They initially chose sandstone and imitated the stucco art in the exterior decoration. According to some scholars, the first important landmark in the structural architecture was during the time of Parameswaravarman I. He constructed a Siva temple known as Vidya Vinita Pallavesvara Griham. The superstructure of the temple was largely made of mortar and brick. The temple has disappeared except the lower part of the plinth.

Rajasimha Style

The era of the most spectacular temple-building of the Pallavas belonged to Rajasimha. During his period, the practice of creating temples out of living rocks was almost given up and was substituted by the construction of structural temples built of stones placed one over the other. He constructed the Shore temple at Mamallapuram, the Kailasanthar temple at Kanchipuram and the Talagirisvara temple at Panamalai. The Shore temple is the earliest temple in stone.

The Shore Temple

The Shore Temple is called so because it stands by the sea. An inscription in the temple states that it was built by Rajasimha. It is a complex of three shrines. The larger vimana facing the sea on the east is called Kshatriya Simhesvara. The smaller Vimana at its rear facing west is called Rajasimhesvara. Both these temples are dedicated to Siva and the cells have the Somaskanda relief panel in the rear wall and a prismatic ling without any pedestal on the centre floor.

Kailasanatha Temple

The great masterpiece of Rajasimha temple is the Kailasanatha Temple at Kanchi. In this work, not only Rajasimha, but also the Prince Mahendravarman and Queen Rangapataka participated. It was built on the model of Dharmaraj Ratha. The vimana and arthamandapa seem to have been erected separately and then connected into a single structure. The foundation is of granite and for the superstructure the Pallavas used sandstone. The principal parts such as the cloisters, partico, and the sanctuary make an organic composition.

The temple reveals a new architectural style having the features of a rearing lion in the place of squatting lions, the prismatic linga, and the images of Somsakanda in the temple sanctuaries, pyramidal tower and a pillared hall.

The Talapurisvara Temple, Panamalai

The Talapurisvara Siva Temple at Panamalai was also constructed by Rajasimha. It is smaller in size. Its inner walls of its cells and the sanctum were covered with painting but now there are only traces. The beautiful painting of Parvathi beneath a royal parasol is a classic example of Pallava painting. She is wearing a tall crown and jewellery. It has a painting of Siva in the talasamspotita. His posture prasasti is given in Pallava-Grantha characters.

Vaikundaperumal Temple

The Vaikundaperumal Temple at Kanchi was built by Nandivarman Pallavamalla and dedicated to Vishnu. It faces the West and is built in sandstone with an admixture of granite in the top and bottom courses of its adhishtana. It has a square four-storeyed main vimana. The first three storeys contain superimposed garbha-grihas to enshrine the three forms of Vishnu --- the standing, sitting and reclining postures. It is thus a forerunner of many such Vishnu temples. The vimana is 90ft. high and the principal parts such as the cloisters, portico and the sanctuary make an organic composition.

Aparajita Style

In the second half of the ninth century, a new style of temple construction was introduced. It had certain special features:

- The upper portion of the temple is apsidal resembling the sahadava Ratha at Mamallapuram.
- These temples have cylindrical lingams.
- Images of Someskanda, a common feature in Rajasimha's period, are totally absent.
- The doorkeepers are provided with four hands.
- The base of the pillars is devoid of the rearing lion motif.
- Pranala (water outlet) is introduced.

The customary method of installing a particular deity in arthamandaa and garbagraha devakostas was introduced. South Vinayaka and North Durga were installed in the arthamanda. In the garbhagaha walls, from the south onwards, Dakshinamoorthy, Vishnu and Brahma were installed. Temples came to be built entirely of granite blocks, cut, moulded, carved and sculptured.

Mamallapuram

Mamallapuram is situated 40 miles south of Chennai city. During the Pallava period it was a busy sea-port. It is cultural emporium of the Pallava architecture. The Pallavas, the pioneers of the Dravidian architectural style, selected this site to display their different architectural styles. There are roughly thirty-five mounments scattered around the city. Two of them --- the Panchapandava Rathas and the Shore temples --- are under the care of UNESCO as World Heritage Sites. Mamallapuram was also known as Kadalmallai, Jananathapuram, Mallapuri, Mahabalipuram, Mavelinagaram and Mavalipuram.

Mamallapuram was named after Mamalla (great wrestler), one of the titles of Narasimhavarman I, the Pallava ruler. Dandin of the eighth century A.D. refers to this city as Mahamallapuram in his the Avanthi Sundarikathasara. An inscription of Rajaraja Chola as well refers to it as Mamallapuramana Nagaram.

Mounments of Mamallapuram

The mounments of Mamallapuram belonged to the Pallava period (7-8 century A.D.). They are of different types and divided into four categories.

- Rock-cut temple
- Monolithic – small shrines cut out of single boulders of rock. They are popularly known as Pancha Pandava Rathas.
- The structural temple – The Shore temple.
- Sculptural panel – Arjuna Penance.

These mounments are scattered around Mamallapuram. One half of them are unfinished.

Rock – cut Temples

Mahendravarman I initiated the rock-cut temple architecture in Tamil Nadu. Narasimhavarman I continued the tradition of his father with slight modifications. The rock – cut temples in Mamallapuram are popularly known as Mandapas.

(For the three stages of the mounments, Cf.Pallava Architecture and for Arjuna Penance Cf. Pallava Sculpture)

Cave Temples near Mamallapuram

Tiger caves and Atiranachanda Mandapa are found in Salluvankuppam, 3km. north of Mamallapuram.

Tiger Cave

The Yali Mandapa is popularly known as Tiger Caves. It is a small, oblong, shallow pavilion or mandapa. It has a moulded adhisthana and a facade of flanking pillars. They are adorned at their bases by rearing lions. The whole structure is surrounded by an arched frieze of eleven large vyala (mythological lion-shaped animal) heads mistakenly called ‘tiger heads’. To the south of the pavilion, there are the reliefs of two elephants. The northern face of the rock is roughly carved out into a large, squatting lion-front with a relief panel of Mahishasuramardini. The Yali Mandapa obviously served as a resting place of the processional idols or the place for the royalty to witness the celebrations during festivals.

Atiranachandesvare Mandapa

To the north of Yali Mandapa, there is the Adiranachand Mandapa. The oblong mandapa has a cell at the centre. The Somaskanda panel is on its hind wall. At the centre of the cell, a prismantic linga is installed. On the southern and northern outer wall of this

temple, a Grantha inscription and Nagari inscriptions are engraved. The name of the shrine is mentioned as Adiranchandesvaram (the ruler Rajasimha I, who is called Adiranchandan Atyandankaman, excavated the shrine). The battle scene of Korravai with Mahishasuran is beautifully engraved on a slab in front of this temple.

Conclusion

The Pallava builders paved the way for a great movement in temple architecture, which in subsequent centuries produced some of the most imposing edifices to be found anywhere in India. As a foundation for the Dravidian architecture, the Pallava architecture proclaims the pomp, power and pageantry of the Pallavas.

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