



## Exploring the Ancient Temples of South India: A Review

Nirmala Chandrasekaran<sup>1</sup>, Dwarav Anand<sup>2</sup>, B.L. Divya<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ragas Dental College and Hospital, The Tamil Nadu Dr. M.G.R Medical University, Chennai, India.

<sup>2</sup>Class 8, Abacus Montessori School, Chennai

<sup>3</sup>3<sup>rd</sup> year B.A. Tourism & Travel Management, Ethiraj College for Women, Chennai

**ABSTRACT:** South India is home to some of the most exquisite and architecturally significant temples in the world, dating back to the Pallava, Chola, Pandya, and Vijayanagar dynasties. These temples not only serve as places of worship but also as repositories of art, culture, and history. This review explores the historical evolution of South Indian temples, their architectural marvels, and the religious and cultural significance they hold. Key architectural features, such as gopurams, vimanas, and intricately carved mandapas, reflect the ingenuity of ancient craftsmen and their alignment with spiritual and cosmic principles. The temples also served as centres of education, art, and socio-economic activities, sustaining traditional dance forms like Bharatanatyam and fostering community cohesion. Today, these temples are integral to cultural tourism, attracting millions of visitors who seek to experience their spiritual and historical heritage. By examining these enduring legacies, the review highlights the profound role of temples in shaping South India's cultural identity.

**KEYWORDS:** Cultural Heritage, Dravidian Architecture, Religious Significance, South Indian Temples, Sculpture, Temple Art.

### INTRODUCTION

South India, with its rich history and vibrant culture, is home to some of the most exquisite and architecturally significant temples in the world. These temples, which date back to various dynasties such as the Cholas, Pallavas, and Vijayanagar Empire, are not merely places of worship but also repositories of art, culture, and history. Through their inspiring architecture and intricate craftsmanship, these temples offer a window into the region's glorious past and its deep spiritual heritage. This review explores the historical context, architectural marvels, religious significance, and cultural impact of the ancient temples of South India, highlighting their enduring legacy.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

South Indian temple architecture evolved over millennia, with significant contributions from powerful dynasties such as the Pallavas, Cholas, Pandyas, and Vijayanagar Empire. Each dynasty left behind a legacy of artistic grandeur and innovation, shaping the temple landscape that we admire today.

**Pallavas (3rd–9th century CE):** The Pallavas were pioneers in transforming rock-cut caves into exquisite temples. Their early monuments, such as the Shore Temple in Mahabalipuram and the rock-cut temples of Kanchipuram, were carved directly from granite. These temples featured simple yet profound architectural elements, laying the foundations for the grand temple complexes that would follow. The introduction of gopurams (gateway towers) and vimanam (tower above the sanctum) in their designs marked the beginning of a new architectural era.

**Cholas (9th–13th century CE):** The Cholas elevated temple architecture to new heights, creating some of the largest and most intricate temples in India. The Brihadeeswarar Temple in Thanjavur, built under Raja Raja Chola I, stands as a testament to the dynasty's mastery of engineering and artistry. Known for its sheer scale, symmetrical precision, and detailed carvings, this UNESCO World Heritage Site remains one of the greatest architectural achievements in India.

**Pandyas (6th–14th century CE):** The Pandyas were known for their temples in Madurai and Tirunelveli. The Meenakshi Temple in Madurai, with its towering gopurams adorned with thousands of colourful sculptures, remains an iconic symbol of Pandya architectural excellence. The Pandya contributions to temple architecture include the proliferation of elaborate mandapas (halls) and the use of vibrant, intricately detailed sculptures.

**Vijayanagar Empire (14th–17th century CE):** The Vijayanagar rulers contributed to the expansion and embellishment of many existing temples, including those in Hampi, Tirupati, and Kanchipuram. The sprawling temple complexes from this era, such as the



Virupaksha Temple in Hampi, stand as evidence of the empire's immense wealth and devotion to art, religion, and culture. The Vijayanagar temples are characterized by their towering gopurams, intricate carvings, and the harmonious blend of various architectural styles.

## ARCHITECTURAL MARVELS: STYLES AND INNOVATIONS

The temples of South India are typically built in the Dravidian style, which is characterized by towering structures, intricate carvings, and complex layouts. These temples are architectural marvels that showcase the ingenuity and creativity of their builders.

**Gopurams (Gateway Towers):** These towering structures often serve as the most visually prominent feature of South Indian temples. Elaborately sculpted and painted, gopurams are symbolic gateways to the divine, depicting various deities, mythological tales, and spiritual themes. The Ranganathaswamy Temple in Srirangam boasts the tallest gopuram, standing at an imposing 237 feet, exemplifying the grandeur and scale of Dravidian architecture.

**Vimana (Sanctum Tower):** Above the sanctum sanctorum (garbha griha), where the deity resides, lies the vimana. In Chola architecture, vimanas are monumental and intricately carved, often topped with kalashas (pot-like structures). The Brihadeeswarar Temple's vimana is a masterpiece, rising over 200 feet and capped with a massive dome carved from a single stone, reflecting the pinnacle of Chola architectural achievement.

**Mandapas (Halls):** Temples feature vast pillared halls known as mandapas, where devotees congregate for prayers and festivals. These halls are typically supported by intricately carved stone pillars that depict scenes from Hindu mythology, gods, and celestial beings. The mandapas in temples like the Varadaraja Perumal Temple in Kanchipuram showcase a blend of sculpture and functionality, serving both religious and social purposes.

**Intricate Sculptures and Reliefs:** Temples are adorned with carvings that tell stories from Hindu epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata, along with representations of gods, goddesses, and animals. The Chennakesava Temple in Belur stands out for its detailed sculpture work, where scenes from everyday life, mythology, and divine acts are carved with precision and vitality, making the temple walls come alive with narratives.

## Religious Significance and Ritual Practices:

Temples in South India are central to the spiritual life of millions of devotees. Each temple is a microcosm of the universe, with architecture and rituals aligned according to Vastu Shastra (traditional Hindu architectural principles) and Agama Shastras (scriptures governing temple rituals).

Daily rituals, known as pujas, are performed multiple times a day, accompanied by chanting, music, and the offering of flowers, food, and incense. The main deity, or presiding God /goddess of the temple, is treated as a living being—bathed, adorned, and offered food. Major festivals like Pongal, Navaratri, and Vaikunta Ekadashi see an influx of thousands of pilgrims, where temples become focal points for elaborate celebrations.

Additionally, many South Indian temples are associated with specific forms of classical music and dance. The Bharatanatyam dance form, for instance, originated as a devotional performance art in Tamil Nadu's temples, where dancers would perform in the mandapas as offerings to the deity. These traditions continue to thrive, with temples hosting annual festivals that attract artists and devotees from around the world.

## CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE: CENTRES OF ART, LEARNING, AND POWER

Temples were not only places of worship but also centers of cultural life, serving as hubs of education, arts, and community gathering.

**Preservation of the Arts:** Temples played a pivotal role in the preservation of traditional South Indian arts such as classical music, dance, and sculpture. The temple sculptures themselves are an art form, capturing scenes from everyday life, religious iconography, and representing the complex symbolism of Hinduism. Many temples also served as training centres for artists, musicians, and dancers, ensuring the continuity of these art forms.

**Role in Literature:** Many South Indian temples were patrons of classical literature. The Nataraja Temple in Chidambaram is closely associated with Tamil Shaiva poetry, and temples across Tamil Nadu served as places where Sangam literature was composed and recited. These literary traditions, preserved through oral and written forms, were integral to the cultural fabric of the region.



## Temples as Economic and Social Centers:

Throughout history, temples were powerful institutions, controlling vast land holdings and acting as economic powerhouses. Temples were often the largest landowners in their region, with lands donated by kings and wealthy patrons for the temple's upkeep and to support the artisans, priests, and laborers dependent on them.

Temples also played a significant role in the agricultural economy, as many had large tracts of fertile land under their control. They contributed to the development of irrigation systems, helping sustain farming communities. The wealth generated from these lands was used to fund temple activities, festivals, and charitable works, further solidifying the temple's role as a central institution in society.

## The Role of Temples in Modern Tourism:

In contemporary times, the ancient temples of South India have emerged as important tourist attractions. Visitors from across the world come to admire the intricate architecture, experience the spirituality, and learn about the rich history these temples represent. The temples are included in popular cultural tourism circuits, drawing millions of domestic and international tourists annually. Sites such as Hampi, Mahabalipuram, and Madurai are UNESCO World Heritage sites, recognized globally for their historical and architectural significance. These temples not only serve as religious centers but also as symbols of India's rich cultural heritage, attracting scholars, historians, and tourists.

## Comparative Analysis: Architectural Styles and Common Motifs (Table 1)

The temples of South India exhibit a rich diversity of architectural styles, reflecting the cultural and historical influences that have shaped the region over millennia. From the towering gopurams of the Dravidian style to the intricate carvings of the Pallava and Chola architectures, each temple showcases a unique blend of artistic expression and religious symbolism.

While some temples, like the Brihadeeswara Temple in Thanjavur, adhere closely to traditional Dravidian principles with their imposing vimanas and elaborate sculptures, others, such as the Mahabalipuram Shore Temple, display a fusion of architectural elements influenced by maritime trade and cultural exchange. By comparing and contrasting these architectural styles, we gain a deeper understanding of the diverse cultural heritage that defines South India's ancient temples.

Despite the diversity of architectural styles, South India's ancient temples share common themes and motifs that reflect the region's religious and cultural beliefs. Intricate sculptures depicting gods, goddesses, and celestial beings adorn the temple walls, narrating stories from Hindu mythology and providing devotees with visual representations of divine grace and power. Symbolic motifs such as the lotus, the kalasha, and the naga reflect themes of purity, prosperity, and protection, while geometric patterns and floral designs adorn the temple ceilings and pillars, symbolizing the cosmic order and the cycle of life and death. By analysing these common themes and motifs, we uncover the underlying spiritual and philosophical principles that have guided temple construction in South India for centuries.

## CONCLUSION

The ancient temples of South India are more than just places of worship. They are living symbols of the region's rich history, artistic brilliance, and spiritual traditions. They have shaped the cultural identity of South India, acting as hubs of community life, devotion, and creative expression for generations. Even today, these temples remain central to the lives of millions, offering a space for worship, celebration, and a connection to the past.

This article highlights the timeless significance of these temples and their role in preserving South India's cultural legacy. Future research could focus on the sustainability of temple conservation efforts, the impact of modern tourism on these historic sites, and the role of temples in fostering cultural continuity.



Table – 1 : Architectural styles and features of 30 South India temples

S.No	Temple Name	Location	Historical Significance	Architectural Features	Cultural and Spiritual Significance	Materials Used	Age of the Building	Notable Rituals or Festivals Associated with the Temple
1	Mahabaleshwar Temple	Gokarna	Ancient temple, significant Shaivite site, associated with the Ramayana	Atma Linga, Dravidian structure, simple design	Major pilgrimage site, sacred to Lord Shiva	Granite	4th century	Maha Shivaratri, Shrivana Masa
2	Aihole Durga Temple	Aihole	Built by the Early Chalukya dynasty, significant example of early Chalukyan architecture	Horse-shoe shaped structure, early example of Chalukyan architecture	Major historical site, early architectural style	Sandstone	7th century	Maha Shivaratri, local festivals
3	Bhutanatha Temple	Badami	Built by the Badami Chalukya dynasty, significant historical temple	Rock-cut architecture, located near a lake, simple yet elegant design	Dedicated to Lord Bhutanatha (Shiva)	Sandstone	7th century	Maha Shivaratri, annual festivals
4	Annapoorneshwari Temple	Horanadu	Ancient temple, significant for Goddess Annapoorneshwari	Simple structure, wood carvings, traditional Kerala-style roof	Center for Annapoorneshwari worship, known for annadanam (free meal)	Wood, laterite	8th century	Navaratri, Rathotsava
5	Kailasanathar Temple	Kanchipuram	One of the oldest temples in Kanchipuram, built by the Pallava dynasty	Sandstone construction, richly carved, multiple shrines	Significant example of early Dravidian architecture	Sandstone	8th century	Maha Shivaratri
6	Padmanabhaswamy Temple	Trivandrum	Mentioned in ancient texts, rich historical connections	Gopuram, intricate carvings, mural paintings	Major pilgrimage center, Vishnu worship	Granite, stone	8th century	Alpashi and Painkuni Festivals
7	Shore Temple	Mahabalipuram	Built by the Pallava dynasty, UNESCO World Heritage site	Rock-cut architecture, proximity to the sea, early Dravidian features	Significant early Dravidian architecture, dedicated to Lord Shiva and Vishnu	Granite	8th century	Mahabalipuram Dance Festival



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S.No	Temple Name	Location	Historical Significance	Architectural Features	Cultural and Spiritual Significance	Materials Used	Age of the Building	Notable Rituals or Festivals Associated with the Temple
8	Thirunelli Temple	Wayanad	Ancient temple, significant for its location in a forested area	Ancient Kerala temple, forest setting, unique circular sanctum	Major pilgrimage site, sacred to Vishnu	Wood, granite	Ancient, pre-9th century	Puthari Festival, annual rituals
9	Arunachaleswar Temple	Thiruvannamalai	Associated with the five elements (Pancha Bhoota), significant Shaivite site	Massive gopuram, extensive courtyards, sacred fire	Important Shaivite pilgrimage site, sacred to Lord Shiva	Granite	9th century	Karthigai Deepam, Girivalam
10	Ekambareswarar Temple	Kanchipuram	One of the Pancha Bhoota Sthalams, dedicated to Lord Shiva	Tall gopuram, massive courtyard, ancient mango tree	One of the largest temples in Kanchipuram	Granite	9th century	Panguni Uthiram, Aadi Festival
11	Murugan Temple	Tiruchendur	One of the six abodes of Murugan, significant for its coastal location	Coastal temple, tall gopuram, extensive courtyards	Major Murugan temple, important pilgrimage site	Granite	9th century	Skanda Sashti, Thai Poosam
12	Parthasarathy Temple	Aranmula	Ancient temple, significant for the Aranmula Boat Race	Traditional Kerala architecture, boat race connection	Major Krishna temple in Kerala, cultural significance	Wood, laterite	9th century	Aranmula Boat Race, Onam
13	Thiruvalla Temple	Thiruvalla	Ancient temple, significant for its traditional Kerala design	Traditional Kerala design, intricate woodwork	Major Vishnu temple, significant for local culture	Wood, laterite	9th century	Utsavam, annual festivals
14	Vadakkunnathan Temple	Thrissur	One of the oldest temples in Kerala, traditional Kerala temple architecture	Traditional Kerala architecture, mural paintings, massive stone walls	Dedicated to Lord Shiva, center for Thrissur Pooram festival	Wood, laterite	9th century	Thrissur Pooram, Maha Shivaratri
15	Vaikom Mahadeva Temple	Varkala	One of the oldest temples in Kerala, significant for its traditional architecture	Traditional Kerala architecture, massive courtyards	Major Shaivite temple, significant for Vaikom Ashtami	Wood, laterite	9th Century	Vaikom Ashtami



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16	Venkateshwara Temple	Tirupati	Important Vaishnavite temple, built by various dynasties over centuries	Vimana covered in gold, gopuram, mandapams	One of the wealthiest and most visited temples in India	Granite, gold	9th century	Brahmotsavam, Vaikunta Ekadasi
17	Ranganathaswamy Temple	Trichy	Largest temple complex in India, dedicated to Lord Ranganatha	Gopurams, intricate carvings	Major Vaishnavite shrine, annual festival	Granite, sandstone	10th century	Vaikunta Ekadasi, Panguni Uthiram
18	Brihadeeswarar Temple	Thanjavur	Built by Chola King Raja Raja Chola I, UNESCO World Heritage site	Tallest vimana in South India, monolithic Nandi, Chola frescoes	Major example of Dravidian architecture, dedicated to Lord Shiva	Granite	11th century	Maha Shivaratri, Natanjali Festival
19	Sabarimala Sastha Temple	Pathanamthitta	One of the largest annual pilgrimages in the world, significant Ayyappa temple	Traditional Kerala architecture, sacred pilgrimage site, set in forest	Major Ayyappa temple, pilgrimage site	Wood, granite	Ancient, pre-12th century	Mandala Pooja, Makaravilakku
20	Chennakeshava Temple	Belur	Built by Hoysala King Vishnuvardhana to commemorate victory	Soapstone construction, star-shaped platform, intricate sculptures	Significant example of Hoysala architecture, Vishnu worship	Soapstone	12th century	Vishnuvardhana Festival
21	Ramanathaswamy Temple	Rameshwaram	Built by the Pandya dynasty, part of the Char Dham pilgrimage	Long corridors, massive sculpted pillars	Pilgrimage site for Hindus, sacred to Lord Shiva	Granite, sandstone	12th century	Mahashivaratri, Thai Poosam
22	Sarangapani Temple	Kumbakonam	Built by the Chola dynasty, one of the Divya Desams (108 Vishnu temples)	Large gopuram, Vijayanagara period sculptures, tank	Important Vishnu temple, pilgrimage site	Granite	12th century	Vaikunta Ekadasi, Panguni Brahmotsavam
23	Sri Krishna Temple	Udupi	Significant for the Kanakadasa window and the Madhwa Brahmin traditions	Kanakadasa window, Krishna idol, Madhwa Brahmin traditions	Major Krishna temple, significant pilgrimage site	Granite	13th century	Krishna Janmashtami, Panyaya Festival



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S.No	Temple Name	Location	Historical Significance	Architectural Features	Cultural and Spiritual Significance	Materials Used	Age of the Building	Notable Rituals or Festivals Associated with the Temple
24	Veera Narayana Temple	Belavadi	Built by the Hoysala dynasty, significant for its architectural style	Soapstone construction, trikuta (three shrines), intricate carvings	Major Vishnu temple, significant for Hoysala architecture	Soapstone	13th century	Annual festivals, local rituals
25	Attukal Bhagavathy Temple	Trivandrum	Known as the "Sabarimala of Women," significant for the Attukal Pongala festival	Traditional Kerala design, Pongala festival, extensive wood carvings	Major temple for women, significant for the Pongala festival	Wood, laterite	14th century	Attukal Pongala, Annual Festival
26	Guruvayur Temple	Guruvayur	Ancient temple with significant historical and spiritual importance in Kerala	Traditional Kerala architecture, tiled roofs, extensive wood carvings	Major Krishna temple in Kerala, center for Kerala culture	Wood, laterite	14th century	Guruvayur Ekadasi, Chembai Music Festival
27	Sri Krishna Temple	Guruvayoor	Ancient temple, significant Krishna temple in Kerala	Traditional Kerala architecture, tiled roofs, elephant sanctuary	Major Krishna temple, center for Kerala culture	Wood, laterite	14th century	Guruvayur Ekadasi, Chembai Music Festival
28	Meenakshi Temple	Madurai	Built by the Pandya dynasty, significant Tamil Nadu landmark	14 gopurams, thousand-pillar hall, vibrant sculptures	Dedicated to Meenakshi (Parvati) and Sundareswarar (Shiva)	Granite, sandstone	16th century	Meenakshi Thirukalyanam, Chithirai Festival
29	Murudeshwara Temple	Murudeshwar	Significant coastal temple, known for the world's second tallest Shiva statue	Tall gopuram, large Shiva statue, coastal location	Major pilgrimage site, scenic location	Granite, concrete	20th century	Maha Shivaratri, Ratha Yatra
30	Sivagiri Temple	Varkala	Built by Sree Narayana Guru, significant for the teachings of Sree Narayana Guru	Modern design with Kerala architectural influences	Center for Sree Narayana Guru's teachings	Concrete, granite	20th century	Sivagiri Pilgrimage, Guru Jayanthi



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