

Hindu Temple Architecture: Pallava

In the last articles in the Hindu Temple Architecture series, we have seen the development of art and architecture in temples under the Chola, Chalukya and Hoysala rulers. There was a major movement under Pallavas even before the imperial Cholas, and the art and architecture under Pallavas co-existed in South India along with Cholas, Chaukyas and Pandyas. We shall see the prominent features of art and architecture of the Pallava dynasty in this article.

Pallava Architecture

The Pallava dynasty existed between the 3rd and 9th centuries CE, ruling a portion of what is today Andhra Pradesh (early Pallavas) and Tamil Nadu (later Pallavas). You may note here for comparison that early Chalukyas ruled in present day Karnataka. Kanchipuram was the capital of the Pallavas from 4th to 9th century. Huen Tsang had visited this city and wrote it a glorious city.

The Pallava architecture shows the transition from the rock cut temples to the stone built temples. The earliest examples of the Pallava art are the rock cut temples of the 7th century AD, while the later examples are of structural temples built in 8th and 9th century. The lasting monolithic temples known as *rathas* and *mandapas* provide superb skill of sculptors of Pallava period. The monolithic temples (Eg: Five rathas) gave way to structural temples like the Shore temple in Mammalapuram.

Major Pallava rulers who built temples

1. Mahendravarman : Mandagapattu rock cut temple.
2. Rajsimha (Narsimhamvaraman/Kalasangamudra/Mammalla) : Kailasanathar Temple, Kanchipuram, Shore Temple Mahabalipuram (Mammallapuram)

Mantapas and pillars

The mantapas and pillars of rock cut temples and ratha temples bear own distinctive characteristics.

Buddhist influence

The rock cut temples of the Mamallapuram show the influence of Buddhist rock cut caves. In ratha temples also, some ratha follows the Buddhist Vihara model central square hall supported by pillared roof. Some rathas (Bhima, Sahadeva, Ganesh) follows Chaitya model with oblong shape bearing barrel roof and Chaitya gabel.

Monolithic Indian rock cut architecture

The ratha temples or seven pagoda which are carved out in granite rock is the finest example of Indian monolithic rock cut architecture.

Free standing temples

The Pallava age shows the transition period from rock cut to structural temples. The ratha temples are attempt to free itself from the influence of rock cut 'Chaitya' and 'Vihara' . The structural detailing of the ratha temples that imitates wooden timber support, pilaster beams which are unnecessary in stone. This shows that they are not able to free totally from earlier wooden structured temples.

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Gavaksha motif

It is a symbolic window throughout which deities are believed to be looked out. It is found in the Chaitya arches that consists of deities below the crown of entablature.

Base of Dravidian sikhara

The square ground storey with open verandas in Dharmaraja rathas forms the initiation of pyramidal square of Dravidian tradition. Pallava temples in Kanchi are prototype of Vimana to be developed by the Cholas in the later period.

Base of Kalasa

In the pillars of the Mammalapuram group, above the kumbha or melon capital (a particular element in pillars that supports the below structure) a padma flares up to the palagai (abacus) and in varaha mandapa this flaring element is surrounded by thinnest abacus which later took the form of kalasa in Chola temples.

Yalis

The base of pillars of some structural temples bears architectural motif of lion later depicted by Cholas and this symbol of lion became the royal insignia of Pallavas.

Kudus

In the facades of the walls, Buddhist chaitya motif kudus is seen (later to be adopted by the Chalukya).

Decoration and ornamentation

The walls and pillars of cave temples and structural temples decoration with architectural designs are seen.

Pillars

The pillars can be studied and understood as part of three stages of development.

1. First stage : This belongs to the pillars of rock cut mantapa with 7 feet height

approximately. Here, brackets are seen towards the upper part of the pillar. Here, pillar has square shaft.

2. Second stage : Here, pillars were around 50 feet height with more ornate design. It shows the combination of shaft and capital. The lion motif is seen in the base of the shaft as well as in the capital.
3. Third stage: Here, pillars come under the mandapa of ratha temples. In this case, malasthana, a motif with bend of pearl festoon is seen in the shaft. It rises up to the pillar separated by an indentive structure called kumbha or melon capital above which a padma flares up to the palagai or abacus.

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Regional influence

The architectural design of one ratha in mahaballipuram with square hall along with curvilinear, overhanging roof shows the influence of traditional bengali hut. It suggest that the origin of Dravidian shikhara have had its origin from the bamboo hut.

Beginning of gopura

The architecture of gopura begins with the Pallava dynasty as the initiation is seen in shore temple of mahaballipuram.

Rock cut relief

The greatest sculptural development of the age is cutting out the cleft in Mamallapuram between the two huge granite boulders as descend of Ganga with presence of gods, demi gods, kinnar etc. It is variously known as penance of arjuna, kiratarjuna etc.

Influence of Amaravati school of art

In the relief of the Mahaballipuram, the shape of gods in the form of clouds shows the influence of Amaravati art.

Evidence of earliest portrait

In the Adivaraha cave , tow portraits of a Pallava king accompanied by his son and queens are believed to be earliest portrait sculpture after the Kushan images from Mathura.

Influence of Shaivism and Vaishnavishim

In the varaha mantapa of Adivaraha cave , a panel showing varaha lifting the earth goddesses is seen. The brahma and shiva is also sculpted around the main varaha but in small size and disposition. In the panel of a Mahaballipuram cave, Durga as Korravai is depicted. Durga as Mahismardini is also a theme of panel here.

The Descent of the Ganges /Arjuna's Penance

The huge sculpture of “The Descent of the Ganges” also known as Arjuna’s Penance was related to the system of water supply. There are clear traces of carefully designed system of water supply from Palar River to the ancient city. The large cliff, thirty yards long and twenty three ft high, represents naga and naginis which symbolize water, adoring both sides of deities along with animals.

Animal sculpture

The animal sculpture, specially the relief of monkey below the descent of Ganga, is noticeable feature of Pallava art.

Importance of Shore Temple, Mahabalipuram



Shore Temple is a granite made temple at Mahabalipuram built during the reign of Narsimhavarman. This group of temples is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and is oldest structural temple (in contrast with rock cut temples) in India.

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It is a beautiful 5 storied temple, which is a combined complex of 3 shrines; 2 dedicated to Shiva and one to Vishnu. The Shore Temple marks the culmination of the architectural efforts that began with the cave temples and monolithic rathas. 7 Pagodas is a term associated with the Shore Temple of Mahabalipuram. It is said that 6 more temples were associated with it, all now submerged in water. The term ‘ratha’ corresponds to free standing temples.

Summary

The Dravidian style of temple architecture began with the Pallava rule. It was a gradual evolution starting from the **rock cut- cave temples** to **monolithic rathas** which finally culminated in **structural temples**.

Pallava period is an age when architecture showed grandeur and beauty. The period is also known as the age of “poetry in stone”. The magnificent temple of Kailashnath, which is carved out in stone, bears the testimony of the period. The monolithic seven Pagodas or rathas named after Pandavas are architectural wonders, though sea-erosion has taken its toll.

Possible questions for UPSC mains from this topic

1. What does the huge sculpture ‘Descent of Ganges’ signify with respect to the drainage system under Pallava rule?
2. There was mutual exchange of architectural styles between the Pallavas and Chalukyas. Explain.
3. What does the term ‘ratha’ mean in Hindu temple architecture? Trace the evolution of Hindu temple architecture.
4. The mystery of 7 pagodas is linked with Pallava rule. Explain.
5. Though Chola architecture represents a water mark in Dravidian architecture, the Pallavas were equally impressive. Critically analyse.

Sample question for UPSC prelims from this topic

Qn: Which among the following statement is true regarding Pallava architecture?

1. Pallava art shows the influence of Amaravathi art.
2. During Pallava rule, temples were mainly rock cut and structural temples were absent.
3. Most of the Pallava rulers were devotees of Vishnu.
4. There is marked Buddhist influence in Pallava temples.

Options

- A) 1 only.
- B) 1 and 4 only.
- C) 1, 3 and 4 only
- D) All the above