

Temples of a dynasty

Devotion was a family trait of the Cholas and they did more than build places of worship — they created works of art

Long after I returned from Thanjavur, I kept telling friends, the Cholas were dudes. Most, predictably, gave me strange looks but there were a few who understood; like me, they had travelled to Chola territory. Take, for instance, 'the big temple' in Thanjavur. Ask anyone for the Brihadeeswara temple and chances are you will draw a blank look, as I did. "The big temple," I clarify quickly, and the auto driver nods his head in immediate

comprehension. The first sight itself of the *gopuram* that towers at a height of 216 feet (about 70 m) is enough to make you understand why big barely describes this temple. The *kalasam* (dome) sits heavy at over 80 tonnes and historians believe that it was hoisted on to the top on a 6 km long ramp—a technique the Egyptians adopted for building their pyramids. Like I said, the Cholas were dudes.

Continued on P 10

The sun sets on the Darasuram temple built by Rajaraja Cholan II, with the Nandis on the temple wall throwing long shadows; (Below) Devotees at an *abhishekam*





The Gangaikondacholapuram temple is every bit as grand as the big temple in Thanjavur



The Darasuram temple is really pretty, if such an adjective can be used for temples



Continued from P 9

Mythical origin

Legend has it that Thanjavur is named after a demon — why that is so in a country with enough gods to name each town and have some left over, I cannot say — the *rakshasa* Thanjan was supposed to have lived there. As with all self-respecting *rakshasas*, he terrorised the people, who implored the gods to save them. Lord Vishnu duly heeded their prayers and destroyed Thanjan on the banks of the Cauvery river. Why he should, the story does not explain, but Vishnu granted the dying demon a boon and the city Thanjavur — *thanjai* in Tamil means refuge — was born.

If it was a demon who gave life to the city, it was a great ruler Rajaraja Cholan (985 to 1014 AD) who gave it form and flesh. Born Arulmozhiarman, he went on to conquer large parts of south India, to be called Rajaraja Cholan, the king of kings. One of Tamil Nadu's favourite works of literature, *Ponniyin Selvan* features the big temple as a dream in the young prince's sleep.

Inside the prince's dream

A smell of the ground washed by mild rain mixed with the heady fragrance of burning camphor greets us when we enter through the main gate of the temple in the early evening. The temple elephant is busy blessing passers by and pilgrims for a few rupees. The massive Nandi statue is being bathed with milk, honey and all things sweet, in a monthly cleansing ritual. A hundred odd people are seated in front of it, unmindful of the wet mud.

The big temple is not painted in bright garish colours in the manner of other popular temples of the region. It stands stark but welcoming, its walls washed clean by the unseasonal rains. The rain water has formed small puddles all over the sides of the temple, catching broken reflections of the tower, with all its intricate carving. There is grace in every corner. Art historian Fergusson put it well. The Cholas, he said, "conceived like giants and finished like jewellers". Sitting in one corner, we watch



The Gangaikondacholapuram temple complex, with families picnicking on the lawns



the local crowd walk about in their best Friday evening temple attire. The sounds of the priests' chants reach us in a low buzz, while the temple bells ring out periodically to signify the beginning or end of a particular ritual. Three young locals sitting next to us exchange notes in Tamil about their teachers. Ahead, an old woman prostrates in front of the main temple and when she gets up, her eyes are brimming over. This is *kanneer bhakti* or worship with tears.

As we leave in search of dinner, the temple elephant at the gate continues to do brisk business, taking and handing over the coins he is receiving to his young owner, while children shriek in terror and delight as he brings his mottled trunk down to their heads to bless them.

Another forgotten temple

The next morning we head out of town, in search of the 'other big temple', built by Rajendra Cholan. The junior Chola outdid his father Rajarajan in his conquests and marched victoriously all the way to the shores of the Ganga (West Bengal today), earning himself the tongue-twisting sobriquet of gangaikondacholan (or 'GKC' as I took to calling him fondly, and conveniently) — the Chola who conquered the land of the Ganga.

Gangaikondacholapuram is a dusty non-descript village; it is impossible to imagine that this served as the Chola capital for over two centuries. It lies forgotten, even



Children shriek in terror and delight as the temple elephant brings his mottled trunk down to their heads to bless them

by locals many of whom stare at us in surprise before pointing in the general direction. We take a tentative turn off the main highway leading towards Chidambaram and Chennai, and follow the path that seems to lead nowhere. And suddenly, the driver veers sharply into a narrow lane to the left, and the temple appears in our view, quiet and forgotten, a lesser loved step-child.

In structure and size, this temple is similar to its more famous counterpart in Thanjavur. Almost. For 'GKC', apart from being a victorious ruler, was a respectful son. The main tower is made of fewer tiers — eight — as compared to thirteen, making the structure shorter at 185 feet (although the Shiva *linga* inside

is larger, both in height and circumference). This temple too is dedicated to Brihadeeswara, but is considered more 'feminine' as it replaces sheer straight lines with curves.

The atmosphere too is more relaxed here; a few families are picnicking on the neat lawns inside the temple complex, the children teasing monkeys with scraps of food. Near the entrance, a bunch of boys have found a rusting wheelbarrow to play with and pose for my camera even as the caretaker runs towards them waving a stick.

Restored glory

And then on to Darasuram.

If the temples at Thanjavur and 'GKCpuram' are grand and elegant, it is the one at Darasuram near Kumbakonam that can be called pretty, a term rarely used to describe places of worship. Built in the mid 12th century by Rajaraja Cholan II (a successor), this temple was neglected for a long time. It was renovated by the Archaeological Survey of India recently. It is late in the evening as I walk into the temple premises.

The setting sun casts eerie shadows on the row of Nandis on the wall around the temple complex. There are a few worshippers here too. The presiding deity is Shiva as Airavateshwara, because he was worshiped at this temple by Airavata, the white elephant of the king of the gods, Indra. The front *mandapam* (hall) built to look like a

THANJAVUR TAMIL NADU



• GETTING THERE

You can fly to Trichy/ Tiruchirappally with Kingfisher Red or take a train. Thanjavur is 55 km from Trichy. Gangaikondacholapuram is 61 km from Thanjavur and Darasuram is 34 km in the other direction. You can visit all three temples in one day if you hire a car. In Thanjavur, Hotel Sangam is overpriced but the only large hotel for tourists; a better option is Ideal River View Resort, just outside the city.

chariot, resembles the one at Konark several thousand miles away.

As I walk around the main temple, the carvings on the wall call out; apart from the usual suspects of gods and goddesses, there are interesting ones of dancers with limbs twisted in impossible positions, and combinations of animals, including the *yaazhi* (a mythical animal combining the features of a lion and an elephant) at several places, yet another similarity with Konark.

In the fading light, it is difficult to sort out which limbs begin from where and belong to what, and I soon give up. I'm happy to just be in the company of the Chola dudes who knew what they had to do, and did it right.

Charukesi is a market research consultant, traveller and photographer based in Mumbai