

Brihadisvara Temple: An Architectural Marvel Hailing From Thanjavur in India

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Did you know there is a temple that does not cast a shadow at noon at any given time of the year? Did you know the *vimana* or tower in the temple is more than 200 feet long, equivalent to a 20-story building? Did you know the same temple has survived a fire accident, nearly six earthquakes, storms, and other harsh climatic conditions only to be long-standing for over a millennium? All of these marvels are of none other than the legendary Brihadisvara Temple, situated at the banks of the Kaveri River in Thanjavur, a city in Tamil Nadu, India.

Rise of the Big Temple in the Chola era

In the 9th century CE, there lived a Tamil king, Arulmozhi Varman, popularly known as Raja Raja I. The king of kings achieved many feats during his 29-year rule, from conquering various territories across India and Southeast Asia to promoting economic growth in his kingdom. While stories of his valour and administrative competence are inseparable from him, he is also remembered for his contributions to arts, architecture, literature, and music, with the Brihadisvara Temple being a living example.

Raja Raja I commissioned the making of the Brihadisvara Temple at his capital, Thanjavur, in the 11th century CE, during the second half of his reign. As he called himself *Shivapada*

Shekhara, literally translating to "the one who places his crown at the feet of Shiva", he dedicated the temple to Lord Shiva.

The Brihadisvara Temple is a combination of two Sanskrit words: 'Brihat', meaning great, and 'Isvara', meaning God. Thus, it means The Great God. The temple takes two other names. First, 'Rajarajeswaram' after King Raja Raja I and second, the *Peruvudaiyar Kovil*, meaning the 'Big Temple'.

Decoding the architectural masterpiece: A 1000-year journey from granite stones to UNESCO World Heritage Site

The Brihadisvara Temple has entered the books of architectural marvels of India for all the right reasons. Many experts have racked their brains over the years trying to unravel the secrets of the complex Dravidian-style temple. However, the question, 'How did they make this?' continues to haunt them with many unanswered doubts.

The Big Temple, spanning over 29 hectares of rectangular space, comprises five main sections: the sanctum with the 29 ft Shivling covered with the towering superstructure (*Sri Vimana*), the Nandi hall in front (*Nandi-Mandapam*) and in between these, the main community hall (*Mukha Mandapam*), the great gathering hall (*Maha Mandapam*) and the pavilion that connects the great hall with the sanctum (*Antrala*). Besides that, the temple courtyard houses shrines of the Varahi shrine, Ganesha, Karuvur Thevar, Subramanya, Chandikesvara, and Amman. The multiple majestic gateways or gopurams erected in honour of the magnificent Shiva temple reflect the grandeur and splendour of the sacred site.

How did they make the Nandi? The Nandi, Lord Shiva's *vahana*, stands tall at the temple entrance, protecting the land. The 13-foot-tall and 16-foot-long structure is sculpted from a single rock weighing nearly 25 tonnes, making it one of India's most giant monolithic statues.

How did they make the Sri Vimana? The *Sri Vimana*, a 216-foot tapering tower structure, is constructed entirely by interlocking granite rocks without binding material such as cement. Legend has it around 1,30,000 tonnes of granite was used, the sources of which were at least 60 km from the temple! On top of the *Vimana*, the shikhara, or the dome-shaped structure, weighs around 80 tonnes! Atop sits the *kalasam*.

How did they make the Shivling? The stone for the Shivling, about 2 stories high, is believed to have been brought from Saurashtra in Gujarat, nearly 2100 km away from Thanjavur.

No quick means of transportation. No modern machinery. No technology. The mediaeval engineers and architects made the impossible possible using their knowledge, skills, and sheer determination! In 1987, The Brihadisvara Temple rightly earned the UNESCO World Heritage Site status.

It's all in the details: History etched, carved, and painted on stone.

The Brihadeeswarar Temple is not only an architectural marvel but also an important repository of historical information. Looking beyond its magnificent appearance and getting a closer look reveals so much more about the cultural, administrative, and economic details of the Chola era.

Murals: Huge fresco paintings adorn the corridors and ceilings of the temple. They depict Goddess Durga, Ganpati, Lord Vishnu, Krishna and Balram, Lord Shiva, Goddess of Fire, and even Raja Raja I. The painters used natural pigments extracted from herbs, leaves, and flowers and applied them on fresh lime plaster.

Inscriptions: The outer temple walls are lined with numerous inscriptions in Tamil and Grantha scripts. The beautiful calligraphy engravings give out information about Raja Raja I, gifts received by the temple, names of temple personnel, loans offered to villages, and food offerings.

Carvings: The temple structure is enriched with intricate and extensive stone carvings and sculptures showcasing aspects of Hindu mythology, dance poses, nature, and epic scenes.

The lesser-known stories of the Brihadisvara Temple

Several interesting anecdotes about the Brihadisvara Temple have been passed down for ages. No one knows how much truth they hold. Nevertheless, the historical tales are worth retelling.

As the story goes, after the Brihadisvara Temple construction concluded, the gigantic temple bell had to be rung to begin the daily temple rituals. However, no one was able to triumph in the task. Baffled and depressed, the devotees prayed for a solution and soon got the answer that the bell would sound only when someone who had indeed worked for the construction of this temple rang it. King Raja Raja I, donors, artisans, workers, saints—everyone tried their hand at the task but to no avail. That's when an older woman walked in, bowed, joined her hands in reverence, and tugged the bell cord. It rang and echoed loud and clear, lighting everyone's faces in unison. No one recognized her, yet the Great God identified her as who built His temple.

Another exciting tale surrounding the well-known fact of the temple's shadow never touching the ground goes like this. King Raja Raja I asked Kunjara Mallan Raja Rama Perunthachan, the temple's architect, "Will the temple ever fall?". The master craftsman, with much confidence in his masterpiece, promptly replied, "Even its shadow will not fall on Raja."

Legend also has it that the Big Temple had more than a hundred underground secret tunnels that led to the palace of Raja Raja I, temples, historical sites, and other vital places in Thanjavur. These passages were used for emergency escapes and safe traverses.

Beyond the Big Temple: Culinary delights and Tanjore artistic creations

Thanjavur has more to offer than rich cultural heritage. First up, the city has delicious food. From savoury treats like *sambar*, *idli*, *vada*, *rasam*, *thavala adai*, and seafood to delectable sweets such as Ashoka *halwa*, *pal payasam*, *surul poli*, *sojji appam* and *kozhukkatta*, the food scene in Thanjavur is worth exploring.

When it comes to taking a part of Thanjavur back home, the arts and crafts of the city make the perfect souvenirs. Whether it's the Tanjore bobblehead dolls that cutely rock from left to right or the Tanjore paintings with stone and gold embellishments, these unique creations will surely bring everyone joy.