

## THE BRHADISVARA TEMPLE

The Brhadisvara Temple was built, in its entirety, during the reign of King Rajaraja (985 – 1014 CE) of the Cola Dynasty. At the onset of his political reign, the Cola kingdom was constricted to the Tamil country. Rajaraja implemented a rigorous twenty year military campaign which resulted in putting most of Southern India and some of North India under the rule of the Cola monarchy (Vasudevan 16).

The Brhadisvara Temple is considered a royal temple. A royal temple differs from a *bhakti* temple (or a non-royal temple) in that a royal temple is built by a monarch to their chosen gods and “were grand in design and execution,” while a *bhakti* temple usually originates as a small shrine built from brick (Vasudevan 152).

In 1003 CE, his nineteenth year of reign and near the end of his military campaign, Rajaraja commenced the construction on a grand temple located in the town of Thanjavur (in southern India). Upon completion, the temple was the most “massive temple in India” (Davis 4). It is said that King Rajaraja’s greatest achievement was this monumental temple, which he named Rajarajesvaram –known today as the Brhadisvara Temple or sometimes just referred to as the Big or Great Temple (Vasudevan 43).

Building a temple was a highly visible political act as well as a devotional one. It was said that “only the king of kings could be considered qualified to construct a preeminent temple” (Davis 6). One of several purposes for the construction of the temple is that it was a highly visible proclamation of Rajaraja’s political achievement.

Another, and more devotionally directed, purpose was to provide a home for a divinity that Rajaraja believed was the unsurpassed ruler of the cosmos. This temple was constructed in order to allow god to receive homage and offerings of devotion presented by kings, the kings' family and the kingdom. Only a supreme god could be worth such great devotion. Rajaraja built the most magnificent temple to Siva, which was believed to elevate Siva to the position of Supreme Deity. As Siva usually resides upon Mount Kailasa, or Northern World-Mountain, Rajaraja believed that by building this imperial temple he was giving Siva a home in the south, equal to his northern abode (Davis 6).

However, the main purpose that the temple was devoted to Siva was that the Colas believed in Bhakti Saivism. During the Colas' rule many shrines were built or remodelled to unmistakably show their devotion to Siva. "Through the adoption and patronage of the cult of *linga*, the Colas universalized a new aspect into the worship of Siva" (Vasudevan 101).

The temple was erected with two sets of outer walls – the most outer wall serving a defensive purpose. The Big Temple is the first temple in southern India that was built with any defensive apparatus (Vasudevan 44). The temple is made mostly of granite – a stone which was not indigenous to Thanjavur - had to be obtained from outside the kingdom making acquiring the building materials a difficult task. The temple sits on the side of a river that was specifically re-routed as to allow a moat to form around the temple. The temple tower is composed of 16 stories and stands an unprecedented 63 meters high and is was claimed to be among the tallest in the world (Vasudevan 153). The tower is topped off with a single spherical block of granite, which is known in Southern India as a *vimana* (Vasudevan 44). Pillars, piers, and pilasters are

placed all around the *sikhara*. Inside, entire wall spaces and ceilings were covered in exquisite paintings. Unfortunately, most of the original artwork has been obstructed since the time of original conception.

The primary icon in the temple is the gigantic *Siva-linga*, said to be the “the largest such *linga* in existence” (Davis 5). The *Siva-linga* is the principal icon because in its highest form Siva is said to inhabit it. The *linga* is the geographical centre of the shrine and is considered to be the generative source of the entire temple complex (Davis 7). By installing the massive *linga* in the royal temple, Rajaraja wanted to identify the *linga* with himself. The considerably large “*linga*, enshrined in the most majestic temple, built by the mightiest emperor of the south, bore a direct comparison to the glory and might of the Cola monarch” (Vasudevan 159). When Rajaraja’s subjects bowed to the *linga* in the temple they were indirectly showing their commitment and obedience to Rajaraja. By implementing the indirect action of showing dual allegiance and submission to Siva and Rajaraja, he was able to use the spiritual aspect of the royal temple to unite Cola control over his large empire.

To serve Siva and the other gods of the temple, Rajaraja and his royal entourage made extensive donations. Among Rajaraja’s personal donations were: gold artefacts, silver objects, Myriad jewels, and land. Dancers were also supplied from other temples throughout the empire to entertain Siva.

Even in a time where Hindu kings were trying to surpass each other in the lavishness and size of their temples (between 700 and 1200 CE), no temple comes close to the Brhadisvara Temple’s

opulence (Vasudevan 44). Vasudevan states that, “compared to [the Brhadisvara], other temples were like little churches before a cathedral” (43).

Rajaraja’s son and successor, Rajendra I (reigned in 1012-1044 originally with his father) extended the Cola Empire when he took power. He instigated a successful military mission that reached the Ganges. Rajendra I built a new capital city, Gangaikondacolapuram (“the city of the Cola king who took the Ganges”), and, replicating his father, he created another imperial scale Siva temple with a *linga* that is the largest monolithic *linga* in the Tamil country (Davis 6) (Vasudevan 46,106).

The Great Temple was not solely used for the purpose of worship and devotion. Personal and communal activities, the performing arts and the literary arts all took place there. The temple also functioned as an employer, a landlord, and a money lender. By these acts the Brhadisvara Temple turned into a major economic institution for Southern India.

Another difference between royal and non-royal temples is the way the administration staff was appointed/ hired. The administrative staff of the royal temple of Tanjavur worked within well-defined powers and responsibilities and were appointed directly by the government from anywhere in their territory. However, in *bhakti* temples the administrative workers were vested with local bodies. There were more than 800 personnel on the pay-roll of the temple (Vasudevan 93). Rajaraja was able to incorporate everything and everyone into the temple. He made the temple the centre of his empire. He brought in people from every corner of his kingdom. An example of this is that Rajaraja did not bring in resources that were close to the capital. He had material brought in from remote areas of his empire with the underlying idea

that this would bring the kingdom closer together. By bringing in resources from all over the kingdom, and not just from the capital, allows different parts of his empire to come into closer interaction with each other.

A large portion of the Temple's administrative work was done to administer grants and monitor services within the temple (Vasudevan 155). Since the administration employees were chosen by the government it was easy to obtain support of other government agencies, therefore allowing the administration of grants to occur flawlessly.

The Brhadisvara Temple had a large amount of wealth attached to it. No other temple had property, gold, and cash as much as a royal temple did. This is because King Rajaraja lavishly applied his wealth to the temple. Rajaraja used the Temple to unite the existing territories under Cola rule to the acquired territories. He combined his power by granting villages from these newly acquired regions as *devadanas* (gifts to the gods) to the temple. Religion had a powerful appeal to the people and Rajaraja translated this appeal into an organization that influenced and controlled various regions (Vasudevan 157). Rajaraja wanted to link every part of his realm to his temple. He made the royal temple a great organization that was worthy to be associated with his subjects. It is because of the temple's 'worthiness' that his temple is a symbol of his grand empire (Vasudevan 158).

### **Bibliography**

Davis, Richard H. (1991) *Worshipping Siva in Medieval India*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Vasudevan, Geeta (2003) *The Royal Temple of Rajaraja: an Instrument of Imperial Cola Power.*

Delhi: Shakti Malik.

### **Related Topics for Further Investigation**

Siva

*Bhakti*

*Vimanas*

*Linga*

*Devadana*

Gangaikondacolapuram

Rajendra

### **Noteworthy Websites Related to the Topic**

[http://www.sarasvatimahallibrary.tn.nic.in/Thanjavur/Bridadisvara\\_Temple/body\\_bridadisvara\\_temple.html](http://www.sarasvatimahallibrary.tn.nic.in/Thanjavur/Bridadisvara_Temple/body_bridadisvara_temple.html)

<http://www.asiarooms.com/travel-guide/india/temples-in-india/brihadisvara-temple.html>

[http://www.cultural-heritage-india.com/world\\_heritage\\_sites/brihadisvara-temple.html](http://www.cultural-heritage-india.com/world_heritage_sites/brihadisvara-temple.html)

[http://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chola\\_dynasty](http://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chola_dynasty)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rajaraja\\_Chola\\_I](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rajaraja_Chola_I)

Article written by: Kimberly Oliverio (March 2009) who is solely responsible for its content.