

Chola Temples (India)

No 250 bis

1. BASIC DATA

State Party: India

Name of property: The Great Living Chola Temples
(1. The Brihadisvara temple complex, Thanjavur;
2. The Brihadisvara temple complex, Gangaikondacholapuram;
3. The Airavatesvara temple complex, Darasuram)

Location: Tamil Nadu state: Thanjavur and Perambalur districts

Date received: 29 January 2003

Category of property:

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this consists of three *monuments*. It is a serial nomination, proposed as an extension to the existing World Heritage site: *Brihadisvara Temple, Thanjavur*, inscribed in 1987 under criteria ii and iv. The property is now presented together with other two temple sites, all proposed under criteria i, ii, iii, and iv.

Brief description:

The three great Chola Temples include the Brihadisvara temples of Thanjavur and Gangaikondacholisvaram, and the Airavatesvara temple at Darasuram. The temples date from the 11th and 12th centuries. The first of them was built by King Rajaraja, founder of the Chola Empire which stretched over all of South India and the neighbouring islands. The others were built by his successors. Surrounded by rectangular enclosures, the Brihadisvara (the centre feature, built mainly from blocks of granite) is crowned with a pyramidal tower, the high-rising *vimana* topped with a bulb-shaped monolith. The walls of the temples are covered with rich sculptural decoration.

2. THE PROPERTY

Description

The three Chola Temples are situated in the south of India, in the State of Tamil Nadu, close to the Indian Ocean. The Brihadisvara temple complex at Thanjavur is already inscribed on the World Heritage List. It was built by Rajaraja I (985-1014), the ruler who created the Chola Empire. The Brihadisvara temple at Gangaikondacholisvaram was built by his son, Rajendra I (1012-1044). The Airavatesvara temple complex, instead, was built a century later by Rajaraja II (1143-1173). The temples represent the cosmic view of the Cholas, a restatement of the perennial principle as *Dakshinameru*, the cosmic mountain, the abode of the Lord Siva. While the Brihadisvara at Thanjavur marks the grand beginning

of the high Chola period, Darasuram represents the transitional phase toward its close.

The Brihadisvara temple complex is situated within the Sivaganga Little Fort in the residential area of the town of Thanjavur, located on the southern bank of the river Vadavaru, at the south-west limit of the Cauvery delta. From the time of Rajaraja I, this town became the royal temple town. Today, from the Chola period, there remain mainly the temple and its surroundings. The Fort, built in brick, which encloses the temple complex, is surrounded by a moat in the west, north and east, and the Grand Anaicut Canal in the south. The area of the Fort is ca 18 ha, of which the temple complex covers 2.85 ha. Inside the Fort there is now a municipal park, and it also contains a large water tank, the Sivaganga tank, and some modern buildings.

The temple was mainly built in granite-gneiss, from 1003 to 1010, and dedicated to Siva. It is approached from the east, and entered through a succession of three gateways. The plan of the temple enclosure has a ratio of 1:2, ca 240 m east-west and 120 m north-south, conceived with great precision. The most visible part of the temple is its *Vimana*, the 65 m tall sanctum tower (*Garbhagriha*), which is hollow and square in plan (30 x 30 m), centred in the western section of the enclosure surrounding the temple. The *Vimana* has 13 tiers, richly sculpted in architectural and figurative forms. The lower part (*Bhumi*) is 13m high, and has large niches of icons and *Puranic* (related to ancient mythology) or human figures. The tower is crowned by the *Shikhara*.

The temple is built on a podium, and the different elements of the construction are positioned along the east-west axis in linear succession, consisting of large pillared cult halls (*mukhamandapa*, *mahamandapa*, *ardhamandapa*), before arriving to the main sanctum. The temple enclosure is entered from the east through three gateways, each of them towered with a sculpted *Gopura*. The perimeter of the enclosure is defined by a *prakara*, a low two-storied cloistered structure against the outer wall. The inner *prakara* is enclosed by another surrounding wall. Inside the enclosure there are several small sub-shrines. The *Chandesvara shrine*, oriented north-south, and close to the main *vimana*, is coeval with the main temple. The others are built later, from the 13th to 18th centuries.

In the centre of the sanctum is the colossal *linga* statue, associated with deities. Within the dark circumambulatory passage around the sanctum are three colossal sculptures of Siva. Narrative wall paintings of the Chola period of Rajaraja I once covered the walls at the ground level, now over-painted by those of the Nayaks of the seventeenth century. Fragments of the fine, highly stylised Chola paintings in subtle earth colours are still discernible in portions, contrasting sharply with the comparatively crude ones of the later period.

The second Brihadisvara temple complex was built by Rajendra I at *Gangaikondacholisvaram*, a new capital of the empire, ca 85 km north-east of Thanjavur, at the north edge of the Cauvery delta. The name of the town means 'the city of the conqueror of the Ganges', after the king's successful expedition to the Gangetic plane. The town remained a major administrative centre of the Cholas till mid 13th century. Today, it is a rural settlement. The temple complex is surrounded by small houses of mixed

uses on north and east sides, while agricultural land extends to the south and west. The temple construction was completed in 1035, and its design followed the main characteristics of the Thanjavur temple by Rajaraja I. Its *Vimana* is 53 m high, and has nine receding tiers, over a two-tiered structure (*sandhara prasada*), all standing on a high terrace. Here, the *Vimana* has recessed corners and graceful upward curving movement, in contrast to the straight and severe pyramidal tower of the temple at Thanjavur. The superstructure of the entrance gate (*gopura*) has collapsed. The sculptures are less numerous than in Thanjavur, but of the same nature. There are six pairs of massive, monolithic *dvarapalas* guarding the entrances to the main temple. There are a few bronzes of remarkable beauty preserved in the temple.

The *Airavatesvara temple* complex at Darasuram, built by Rajaraja II, is located 40 km to the east of Thanjavur in the region of Palaiyarai. This town was the residential stronghold of the Cholas from the 8th and 9th centuries, and continued this function even later. The age of Rajaraja II marked the ascendancy of Saivism, the patronage of architecture and sculpture, and the encouragement of literature. While his grandfather and father had preferred to embellish existing temples, Rajaraja II built several new ones. The most important of these, the third in line of the great stone *vimanas*, was the temple at Darasuram. Here, there are two complexes: the *Airavatesvara temple* complex and the *Deivanayaki Amman shrine*.

- The *Airavatesvara temple* complex is enclosed within a compound wall (105 x 67 m), oriented east-west, like the other temple complexes. Here, the main temple takes most of the space within the enclosure. The *vimana* is 24 m high, and it has five tiers. In the west part there is a shrine attached to the south wall, enclosing a stone image of Siva as Sarabhamurti. The Sarabha cult represents a phase of the dominance of Saivism over Vaishnavism.

- The *Deivanayaki Amman shrine* is in close proximity, to the north of the previous, and it is slightly later in date. It is similar in plan and oriented in the same way, but is smaller, 70 x 30 m. Its *vimana* has two tiers, and there are Devi images in the niches. The shrine is a separate *vimana* with a *sala shikhara* dedicated to Devi as the divine consort of the presiding deity in the main *vimana*.

History

The Chola power emerged from 850 and it became the dominant feature in Southern India lasting 350 years, till 1200 CE. The Cholas conquered Thanjavur from the Pallava kings, who reigned the region from the 4th to 9th centuries. The Pallava rule was marked by commercial enterprise, and they supported Buddhism, Jainism, and the Brahminical faith, as well as being patrons of music, painting, and literature. The real greatness of the Chola empire dates from the accession to the throne of Rajaraja I, in 985, who ruled for thirty years constituting the Chola imperialism. He developed the relatively small and fragile state into an extensive and well-managed empire. The whole country south of the Tungabhadra was united and held as one state for over two hundred years.

The Cholas had some brilliant achievements in state affairs as well as in literary and artistic fields. Saivism was established as the dominant religion in the ninth century,

consolidated by Rajaraja I and his son as a royal cult. This period saw the culmination of *dravida* architecture, and high, refined attainment in sculpture, painting and bronze casting. The origins of the *dravida* architecture go back to the Gupta period, and were the common based for temple design from the 7th to 18th centuries. Stone building techniques had been developed in the Pallava period, but the Cholas developed this tradition, concentrating mostly on temples, where it reached its culmination. These temples are distinguished from earlier and later structures by their more restraint forms, and the dominance of the central shrine over the rest of the ensemble. From the Chola period, however, there is little or no trace of palaces, houses or other types of civil architecture, although their existence is known from inscriptions.

Management regime

Legal provision:

The proposed properties are all listed as monuments of national importance, under the protection of the Central Government. They are subject to the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act (AMASR 1958), and the corresponding rules (AMASR 1959 Rules). The Brihadesvara temple at Thanjavur has been protected from 1922, the Gangaikondacholapuram temple complex from 1946, and the *Airavatesvara temple* complex from 1954.

The three temples are 'live' in the sense that traditional religious rituals continue being performed there through an active participation of the general public. The properties are thus also subject to the Tamil Nadu Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Act (1959).

The areas that are not specifically covered by the notifications issued by the Central Government, but which are part of the proposed core or buffer zones, are covered under the Madras Ancient and Historical Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act (1966).

Management structure:

The Brihadesvara temple complex as well as of the *Airavatesvara Temple* rests with the Hereditary Trustee of the Palace Devasthanam. In fact, ever since these temples were built, the ownership has remained with the successive rulers. The last such rulers were the Marathas, who reigned until the British took over. On the basis of an agreement, the conservation and maintenance of the properties are the responsibility of the Archaeological Survey of India. The ownership of the Brihadesvara Temple Complex at Gangaikondacholapuram lies with the Government of Tamil Nadu, as it has not continued to enjoy continued patronage as the other two complexes.

Traditionally, living temples of Tamil Nadu have been administered by either individuals or committees. The 1959 Nadu Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Act brought all such properties under a single system regarding the regulation of administrative and religious activities. As a result, the general administration of the temples is the responsibility of the Department of Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments of the Government of Tamil Nadu, and the Archaeological Survey of India is responsible for the conservation management of the property.

The Archaeological Survey of India has detailed conservation plans for the properties, together with programmes for regular maintenance and upkeep, as well as mechanisms for dealing with emergencies and specific requirements.

The Department of Information and Tourism of the Government of Tamil Nadu, in collaboration with the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, has outlined a number of programmes regarding tourism on the three sites. The detailed plan for Thanjavur is in preparation, but basically all tourism is managed by local authority. In the case of Darasuram, the Airavatesvara temple complex is close to the town of Kumbakonam, and tourism falls under their responsibility. In the case of Gangaikondacholapuram, there is a plan to establish and equip a tourist centre, outside the buffer zone, to assist and also accommodate visitors.

The nomination documents inform that the local administrations of all sites are aware of the requirements of cultural properties of national importance, and cooperated fully in this regard.

It is noted that the sites have no ticketed entry. On special occasions, such as select full moon days, visitors exceed 60,000 a day.

Resources:

The Archaeological Survey of India has an annual budget for the maintenance and conservation of the properties, as well for the development of visitor facilities, documentation, exploration and excavations.

Justification by the State Party (summary)

The three temple complexes form a unique group, demonstrating a progressive development of high Chola architecture and art at its best, and at the same time encapsulating a very distinctive period of Chola history and Tamil culture. ...

Criterion i: The Brihadisvara at Thanjavur represents the zenith of the *dravida* type of temple in its purest form, precision of conception and execution, and magnitude of scale. The Brihadisvara at Gangaikondacholapuram and the Airavatesvara at Darasuram follow the same concept of monumentality, with a further rationalisation of structure, architectural form, distribution of sculptural content and surface treatment. It is only in this period of temple building of the high Chola period symbolised by the Brihadisvara at Thanjavur that the *vimana* or main shrine dominates the skyline, and not the *gopura* or gateways, and that these represent the *shuddha vimanas* or *vimanas* built entirely of stone, and not of brick and stucco.

Criterion ii: The construction of the Rajarajesvara or the Brihadisvara temple at Thanjavur by Rajaraja I (985-1014) signifies a great transformation in the history of South India in the early years of the eleventh century when Thanjavur emerged as a stronghold of Tamil culture at its most refined; a focal centre which interacted extensively with other regions of India and Asia. ...

Criterion iii: The Brihadisvara at Thanjavur represents the crystallisation of Tamil culture at its most refined whose traditions of the arts in all its forms - sculpture, painting, dance, music, literature - continue, and have gained

recognition not only in India but in other parts of the world as well. ...

Criterion iv: The Brihadisvara at Thanjavur is unarguably the finest example of temple architecture of the *dravida* type. Following ancient texts, it is significant that the iconographical system at once metaphorical and representative, architecturally planned and designed to represent cosmic structures, in keeping with the Chola ideology of equating temple/cosmos/territory, were integrated into the overall conceptual and physical form. The totality of this system formed the basis of subsequent creations, as in Brihadisvara at Gangaikondacholapuram and Airavatesvara at Darasuram.

3. ICOMOS EVALUATION

Actions by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited the properties in December 2003. During the mission, there was agreement with the authorities to make minor adjustments to the nominated area of the Brihadisvara temple at Gangaikondacholapuram. In response to ICOMOS enquiry, the State Party has also provided further guarantees regarding the protection and development control of the areas surrounding the temple areas.

Conservation

Conservation history:

The three temple complexes have been under protection: Thanjavur from 1922, Gangaikondacholapuram from 1946 and Darasuram from 1954. The temple complex at Thanjavur has generally been maintained from the time of its protection, though there was a lack of funds in the 1960s and 1970s, which caused problems of uncontrolled growth and in drainage of surface waters. In recent years, the maintenance has been restructured on the basis of a comprehensive programme.

At Gangaikondacholapuram, although the ASI has focused on the care of the structure of the temple, there have been various problems in the temple area. These have included encroachments, which have almost caused abutting the wall on the north side. Parts of the structures on the east side have collapsed. More recently, the encroachments have been removed with the assistance from the local government. The *mahadvara* and eastern *prakara*, which had remained in ruinous condition ever since the site was protected in 1946, have been reconstructed using the original stones. Surface drainage measures have also been taken. The stucco work on the Great Nandi has been conserved and restored after due analysis. The surroundings are now maintained as a continuous garden.

Since the temple was under protection, action has been taken to conserve the structure and timber ceiling of the temple. The buried Nandi *mandapa* and *balipitha* have been exposed. The removal of soil has led to the exposure of different elements previously covered. ASI has taken steps to remove encroachments, and to carry out archaeological explorations to establish the original layout of the temple complex. This led to the discovery of the *mahadvara* on the east, the conservation and partial restoration of which is currently under progress. The

protected surroundings are now being developed as a garden.

State of conservation:

The present state of conservation of the three temple complexes is considered reasonable. Parts of the areas have been in current use, and have been maintained normally a long time. Other parts have been excavated recently and are now presented to the public. Some of the earlier encroachments have been removed. The main activity required has been and will continue to be a regular maintenance. Attention will be needed especially to the surrounding areas, where the legal responsibility is now being discussed between ASI and the local authorities.

Management:

The management draws a tenuous balance between the requirements of traditional continuity and the current priority of living temples. The ASI has been long responsible for the safety and security of the structures, the day to day maintenance, and the formulation and implementation of all guidelines and management plans. The State Government is responsible for the administration of the function of the temple complexes. This includes the financial aspects, appointment of priests and other staff, and interacting with the public.

The nominated core areas of the three temple complexes are limited to the temple itself. The proposed buffer zones are relatively narrow areas surrounding the core zones. During the ICOMOS mission, these issues were raised with the authorities, who are taking steps to meet the observations. Consequently, at GKCP, the tank to the east of the main gateway to the Brihadhisvara Temple would be made a part of the monumental area. Current hutments in front of the tank and two old houses of the priests within the protected area will be relocated outside the buffer zone. Similarly, there were proposals to reorganize traffic on the access roads, to improve the garden layouts in the surrounding area, and to provide for the appropriate presentation of loose sculptures and fragments. The urban area around the Airavatesvara Temple complex at DSRM will be declared as a Heritage town area, and any development will be strictly limited within 1 km from the protected area. The ASI has taken steps to reinforce the law to control construction and mining activities within 100 m of the protected monument and to declare another 200 m as a strictly regulated area. At TNJR the moat area surrounding the Brihadhisvara Temple complex will be transferred to the responsibility of the ASI for renovation and maintenance.

The Town and Country Planning Department of the Government of Tamil Nadu has initiated a process to regulate and control an area of one kilometre radius surrounding the temple complex, which is declared as 'heritage zone'. The control regards land use, density of development and height restriction (limit of nine metres).

The management of the properties involves the Archaeological Survey of India, the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, and the South Zone Cultural Centre. From the State Government a number of agencies are also involved, e.g. the Department of Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments, the Department of Information and Tourism, the local revenue administration. In practice, the management of property will be coordinated by two

committees, one at a primary policy level, Apex Coordination Committee (ACC), and the other at field and execution level, the Field Coordination Committee (FCC).

Risk analysis:

The temple complexes are within urban or village areas, and there is a possibility for developmental pressures. Yet, the ASI in cooperation of the local administration has taken steps to control any development in the surroundings and eventually to extend the present buffer zone. The region is considered of low risk in seismic terms. There are heavy rains in the region, but floods have not caused any damage in the past. The temples are also visited by large crowds at the time of religious festivities. In this regard, action is foreseen in the management plan.

Authenticity and integrity

The three properties are considered to pass the test of authenticity in relation to their conception, material and execution. The temples are still being used, even though they have great archaeological and historical value. The temple complexes used to be part of major royal towns, but have remained as the only outstanding features in today's mainly rural context.

Comparative evaluation

The Chola temples are the result of the various developments in India. They are conceived as a representation of a 'cosmological world view', propagated in the Puranic religion and mythology. In southern India, the temple construction was established by the Pallava dynasty who ruled before the Cholas took over. The so-called *dravida* style was taken to its height by the Chola dynasty. The most outstanding of all was the Brihadisvara temple complex at Thanjavur, built by Rajaraja I. It also has the tallest sanctum tower, *Vimana*. The other two temple complexes represent complementary features and variations to the prototype established by the temple at Thanjavur. The temple at Darasuram, in particular, shows an example of the last phase of the most important period of this architecture.

The closest comparisons on the World Heritage List are the Khajuraho Group of Monuments built in the 10th-11th century (World Heritage 1986, criteria i, iii), belonging to Hinduism and Jainism, in North India, and the Brambanan Temple Compounds in Indonesia (World Heritage 1991, criteria i, iv), which was built in the 10th century and dedicated to Hindu divinities (Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma). These complexes however differ from the Chola temples in terms of their culture and architecture.

Outstanding universal value

General statement:

The three great Chola Temples are the most representative built testimonies of the Great Chola Empire, which governed the whole of Southern India and the surrounding islands from the 10th through the 12th centuries. Apart from the temples there are no other major structures surviving.

The tall *vimanas* with many tiers as the core feature of the temples and the elaborate sculpted decoration represent the divinities and mythological figures related to the Tamil beliefs. The Brihadisvara Temple at Thanjavur is the first and purest model of the dravida type of temple. The other two temples represent significant later examples, together illustrating the progressive development of high Chola architecture and art.

Evaluation of criteria:

Criterion i: The three Chola temples of the southern India represent an outstanding creative achievement in the architectural conception of the pure form of the *dravida* type of temple. This is also reflected in the magnitude of scale and the fine quality of execution in granite-gneiss, distinguishing them from the later brick temples.

Criterion ii: Based on the previous developments, the Brihadisvara temple at Thanjavur became the prototype of later Chola temples, a development of which the other two properties provide complementary witness.

Criterion iii: The three Great Chola Temples are an exceptional and the most outstanding testimony to the development of the architecture of the Chola Empire and the Tamil civilisation in Southern India.

Criterion iv: The Brihadisvara temple at Thanjavur became the outstanding example and a prototype for the realization of the architecture and the artistic features reflecting the Chola ideology of cosmos. The Brihadisvara temple at Gangaikondacholapuram and Airavatesvara temple at Darasuram are outstanding creations that complement the representation of this culture.

4. ICOMOS RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation with respect to inscription

That the property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of ***criteria i, ii, iii and iv:***

Criterion i: The three Chola temples of the southern India represent an outstanding creative achievement in the architectural conception of the pure form of the *dravida* type of temple.

Criterion ii: The Brihadisvara temple at Thanjavur became the first great example of the Chola temples, followed by a development of which the other two properties also bear witness.

Criterion iii: The three Great Chola Temples are an exceptional and the most outstanding testimony to the development of the architecture of the Chola Empire and the Tamil civilisation in Southern India.

Criterion iv: The Great Chola temples at Thanjavur, at Gangaikondacholapuram and Darasuram are outstanding examples of the architecture and the representation of the Chola ideology.

ICOMOS, March 2004