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Architecture of the Sacred: An IKS Perspective on Indian Temple Architecture

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Abstract:

Indian Knowledge System (IKS) represents a rich and diverse body of knowledge that has evolved over millenia in the Indian sub-continent. It encompasses a wide range of disciplines, including science, medicine, architecture, art, cosmology and so on. Indian architecture, as an integral component of IKS, is deeply rooted in the philosophical and spiritual traditions of the subcontinent and is guided by foundational concepts such as dharma and vāstu. Classical treatises including Vāstu Śāstra (the science of architecture) and Śilpa Śāstra (the art of sculpture and ornamentation) provide the governing principles for architectural form, proportion, and symbolism. Within the context of temple design, ancient Indian temples functioned not merely as sites of ritual devotion but as multifaceted architectural institutions that supported social, educational, and economic life. Temple architecture reflects a profound synthesis of spiritual symbolism, geometric precision, and environmental consciousness, wherein cosmology, mathematics, art, and ecology converge as sacred design principles. The diversity of temple forms across the subcontinent emerged from variations in geography, climate, cultural practices, and regional traditions. Broadly, Indian temple architecture is classified into two major orders: the Nagara and the Drāviḍa styles. The Drāviḍa tradition, representing the distinctive South Indian temple idiom, is characterised by its monumental scale, axial planning, and geometric rigor and the Nagara style of temple architecture represents the predominant North Indian architectural tradition and is distinguished by its curvilinear śikhara, cruciform ground plan, and emphasis on verticality. This study examines select South Indian temples, tracing their historical evolution and cultural significance within the framework of Indian Knowledge Systems.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), Temple Architecture, Vāstu Śāstra and Śilpa Śāstra, Drāviḍa and Nagara Styles, Sacred Geometry and Cosmology

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Introduction:

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) constitutes an integrated corpus of ancient wisdom, empirical knowledge, and cultural traditions cultivated across millennia in India. Its roots trace back to the Vedic period with foundational texts like the Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda, and Atharvaveda addressing cosmology, ethics, and spirituality, supplemented by Upanishads exploring metaphysics. The Indian Knowledge System draws its foundations from ancient scriptures and heritage practices. It profoundly influences the nation's practices and cultures.

The key concepts in this system are dharma, karma, and moksha. These ideas are important today, highlighting India's rich spiritual and philosophical history. History plays a significant role in shaping modern academic pursuits. IKS is a varied collection of wisdom. This history of ours includes different cultures like European ideas and Buddhist philosophy, and this is proof of our inclusivity and accepting nature.

A temple is a purposefully constructed sacred space where human communities gather to express devotion, perform rituals, and seek connection with the transcendent across cultures and throughout history. It has been evident that temples and civilizations have always shared a symbiotic relationship, balancing spirituality and economic sustenance thoroughly. "Mandir" or 'Mandira" is the Sanskrit word for 'Temple' in English, meaning a place [dir] where the inner-self [mana] lives in. Temples exemplify the Indian Knowledge System [IKS] through their precise Vastu Shastra alignments, yogic geometry and various other aspects. IKS is about understanding our unique Indian perspective and approach on learning any subject, such as Mathematics, Astronomy, and Architecture. Temples prove to be a vast repository of information, thereby being integral in the studies of our country's historical knowledge

Objectives:

- Finding out why temples were built
- How the temples played the role as a source for holistic development
- Understanding the basic layout of temples
- Learning more about Dravidian style of temples with examples
- Getting to know about the architectural marvels that proved to be way ahead of their times

Purpose of Temples:

Historically, temples in India served various socio-economic purposes apart from being places of spiritual significance. Initially, they were built as just simple structures, but later evolved into various elaborate designs and architectural marvels. Today, Indian temples serve to attract devotees worldwide, offering a glimpse into the cultural and religious traditions. Every temple is renowned for its profound symbolism, each detail intricate with intent. The Vastu Shastra is a major deciding factor in the planning and orientation of most of the buildings, even in modern times. Similarly, Shilpa Shastra offers a deep insight into the carvings and their meanings, lost to translations and time.

Temples have been sacred sanctuaries of the soul, where worship and self-surrender find expression in architectural symbolism. They have always held distinct positions in Indian societies, also serving as multifaceted hubs for social engagement and community. The original concept of temples comes from the Vedas and Yajnas, an elaborate concept of sharing where all the strata of communities come together and serve for the welfare of society. They also served as gurukuls, where young students learnt to become scholars and martial artists practised at the heart of the temple, which doubled as training grounds in some cases. They also helped in urbanisation, for they

were important centers in the trade routes and even helped in preserving the law. This whole concept is known as a Temple Ecosystem, which dates back to times past.

Styles of Temples in India:

Depending on the geographical location, the temples in India are broadly divided into three types. The Nagara style, predominantly seen in the north, and the Dravidian style is more observed in the south. The Vesara style is an intermediate style that combines both of these styles, flourishing mainly in the state of Karnataka. These styles were influenced by a variety of factors like religious focus, climate, materials available, techniques used and by the royal patronage that nurtured unique artistic and regional traits to showcase the wealth, power and faith of the ruling dynasties.

The temples of the North symbolise grandeur and splendour. The materials used were mostly durable, like sandstone or granite, occasionally paired with wood. Greater permeance allowed more intricate details to be carved. This style features curvilinear shikharas and lacks boundary walls. Depending on the type of Shikhara {tower}, there are a number of subdivisions. The Guptas developed this style, which evolved over centuries, between the 8th and 12th centuries CE. The artistry varies, depicting the different eras and regions, all the while with fascinating temple iconography.

Dravidian Style of Temples:

The Dravidian style of architecture is observed in the temples of the South. Magnificence decorates every inch of them, from pyramidal vimanas to shrines. The Cholas mainly shaped this style, transitioning from the rock-cut prototypes of the Pallavas. Rajaraja Chola I was instrumental in advancing Dravidian temple architecture as he commissioned the monumental Brihadishwara temple, with its 66m Vimana at Thanjavur. The primary material was granite, owing to its plenty of availability in the plateau region. Metals like bronze were ornamental in nature and wood was used as a

supporting structure. These materials allowed architectural marvels to be materialised from ideas.

Basic foundation:

The Dravidian-style temple's basic foundation is similar to that of the other two styles, with Garbhagriha as the main room for the deity; then the small entry space, Antarala, that joins the Sabhamandapa and the Garbhagriha. And lastly, the Mukhamandapa is the extra space where the gopuram is situated. The temples in the south are largely constructed in Dravidian style, and their main shrine called as Vimana, which means dwelling of god, is situated directly above the main shrine, which is the Garbhagriha. One of the best defining features of the Dravidian temples is the gopuram, a monumental, ornate gateway tower at the temple entrance, which often becomes taller than the vimana in later periods. Dravidian temples are enclosed within compound walls and include multiple prakaras [concentric enclosures] and mandapas [pillared halls] for various rituals and gatherings like yagnas, yearly procession etc. The pushkarinis and the chariot pathways are also a part of the temples.

Gopuram [tower]:

In Dravidian-style temples, there is only one tower, which is; a single shikara, shaped like a pyramid, and it is the most prominent part of the temple. The boundaries are given very high importance in the Dravidian temples, and the gopuram is a major part of it. Unlike the Nagara style, the deities are carved outside the temples too. The iconography of the temple plays an important part in the expression of the temple's history and purpose.

Garbhagriha [main shrine]:

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The main shrine or room where the deity resides is called the Garbhagriha. The room is not as intricately decorated on the inside, but the pedestals are carved into various designs. The idol of the deity is placed upon this pedestal. These are said to be at ground level in the Dravidian temples. The garbhagriha is constructed by a sacred geometry, and access is usually restricted for civilians, barring the temple priests who perform the pooja daily, fostering deep spiritual connection and reverence for the divine essence.

Antarala:

This is the passage or the doorway that joins the sabhamandapa and the garbhagriha. The doors for the garbhagriha are constructed here and differ for each temple. Depending on the temple history ; i.e. the Sthala purana and the directions given by scholars, the doors are stationed in the antarala. There are temples that open directly into the garbhagriha with either the sabhamandapa or the mukhyamandapa. For instance, The Thalupulamma thalli temple in Lova, Andhra Pradesh has no doors which was decided based on the Sthala purana.

Sabhamandapa:

A spacious open hall with intricately carved pillars, often depicting lions, deities, or floral designs, supporting richly decorated ceilings. The place where devotees gather, meditate and participate in religious austerities like yagnas, rather and other rituals. Features like inverted lotus carvings on ceilings, stencilled pillar appearances, and detailed sculptures of mythological scenes are common in the mandapam . In a few goddess temples, the Sri Chakra, which depicts the divine mother and the union of Shiva and Shakti, is placed in this mandapa parallel to the deity. An example of this is the Srichakram in Kanchi Kamaakshi temple in Chennai ,India. Few temples, like the 1000-

pillar temple, give more significance to the sabhamandapam . An extension to the Sabha mandapam, the area between the boundaries of the temple and the Sabha mandapam is the mukhyamandapam.

Pradakshina maargam [circumambulatory pathway]:

Pradakshina [or Parikrama] is the sacred clockwise circumambulation of a deity, temple, or holy object in Indic religions, symbolising a spiritual journey placing God at the centre, moving forward while keeping the divine to the right; said to be auspicious. The circumambulatory pathway, which is present in the temples with sandhara-style construction, gives devotees a path to walk around the garbhagriha as a small austerity. The walls of the pradakshina marga in few temples have scriptures or Sthala puranam carved on the walls. Usually, the pradakshina marga is said to be a part of the garbhagriha in a few temples and the outer part of the garbhagriha in a few others.

Shikaram [tower on the main shrine]:

In Dravidian temples, the shikara refers specifically to the crowning element atop the main tower, which is called the vimana; a stepped, pyramidal structure rising geometrically. The Vimana itself is often multitiered, with intricate sculptures, ending in a distinctive octagonal dome; stupika and a finial kalasha. This contrasts with the North Indian Nagara style, where the curvilinear Shikhara is the main tower. In most of the Dravidian temples, at the top of the shikara, the kalash are placed, which are usually odd in number. These kalash are made up of five different metals [panchaloha], and different seeds are stored in them.

Dwajasthambam:

A Dwajasthambam [temple flagpole or the spine of the temple] is built from a single, strong wood log [like teak] or stone, often covered in metal [gold, silver, copper] and placed directly in line with the sanctum, featuring a base with carvings and three perches at the top pointing inward, symbolizing divine connection and attracting cosmic energy. In a temple context, the horizontal branches or rods at the top of the Dwajasthambam symbolically represent the Trimurtis [Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva] or signify righteousness, reputation, and propriety. With construction following rigorous agamic rituals for stability and spiritual significance. The Dwajasthambam acts as an antenna, drawing cosmic energy and conducting electrical charges from lightning to the ground, protecting the temple. It links heaven and earth, with deities sculpted on it representing various divine aspects. There are small bells present on these Dwajasthambam in most of the Dravidian-style temples. In ancient times, our temples were built with precise acoustics, and the bells' sound travelled at the frequency of "Om", which instantly calms one's mind and brings peace.

Spiritually, it invokes divine energy and drives away negative ones. These bells are made of specific metals like copper, bronze or zinc; thus, when rung, they create a resonance that lasts for seven seconds, symbolising the seven chakras of the human body. Hence, these are placed in temples specifically.

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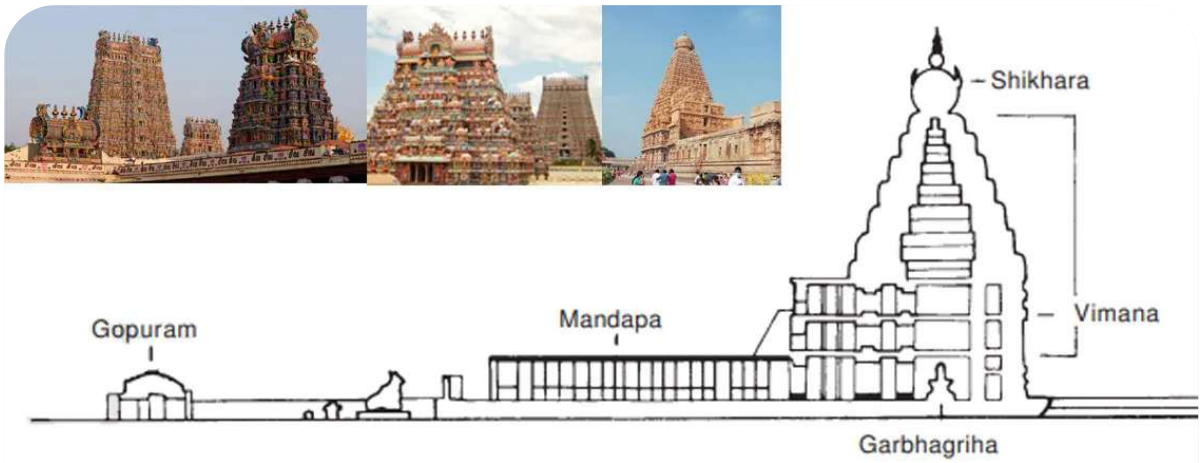

DRAVIDA STYLE OF TEMPLE ARCHITECTURE

There are several fascinating temples in India, each serving divinity that graced mortals. Most of them employ stunning mastery of architecture, cosmology, geometry, iconography and such sciences. A few of them will be discussed below. Let's revisit the wonders crafted by our ancestors and bring them back to life in our memories momentarily.

BRIHADEESWARALAYAM

The Brihadeeswaralayam, also known as Brihadisvara Temple, is located in Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, India. It is a prime example of the Dravidian style of Architecture that marks the temples of South India. It was inaugurated by the Chola Emperor Rajaraja, in his 19th year of reign and has been regarded the "Landmark in the

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evolution of Building Art in South India". It is said that it took only seven years to erect the temple.

It is the best example of the orthodox South Indian style of architecture.

The Vimana extends to 216 feet. It is built with stones that are bonded and notched without any mortar; with the top most stone, an engineering marvel, weighing about 80 tons. The inscriptions on the walls record the rise and falls of the city's fortune. Historical accounts suggest that there might be underground passages originating from the temple, connecting to sites like the Cholapuram temple or the likes of them, underscoring the temples multifunctional design beyond surface worship

The Vimana features various carvings representing the cosmos, deities and mythical creatures on each tier.

It is built to symbolize the connection between the heaven and earthly realms, slowly extending upwards. It also served to represent the scale and grandeur of the Cholas, all the while reflecting the emperor's devotion to Lord Shiva. The engineering manifestation of the granite construction was possible due to the 6km long ramp which the mounted to slowly hoist the 80 tons stone onto the top of the Vimana.

A prominent attraction within the temple complex is the Nandi statue, the divine vahana of Lord Shiva, positioned in the Nandi Mandapa adjacent to the main gateway. Sculpted from a single granite block, this colossal figure measures approximately sixteen feet in length and thirteen feet in height, ranking among India's largest monolithic idols. The garbhagriha enshrines an immense Shiva Lingam as the central object of veneration, underscoring the site's Shaivite sanctity.

The shadowless Vimana Design: The temple's towering 66-meter vimana, constructed from a single 80tonne granite capstone, exhibits a phenomenon where no shadow falls on the ground at noon, particularly during equinoxes. This arises from the structure's broad base tapering upward, causing the shadow to project inward onto itself under sunlight, a feat attributed to precise astronomical alignment and symmetrical proportions. Scholars debate intentionality versus geographical coincidence, yet it symbolizes Chola mastery over light, geometry, and celestial observation.

SRI YAGANTI UMA MAHESWARA TEMPLE

The Sri Yaganti Uma Maheswara Temple, situated in the Yerramala Hills of Nandyal district, Andhra Pradesh, exemplifies South Indian Shaivite architecture through its Ardhanarishvara deity and Vijayanagara-era expansions, paralleling the Chola ingenuity of Brihadeeswaralayam.Lord Shiva is worshipped as Uma Maheswara

(Ardhanareeshwara), a rare idol form instead of a Linga, along with Goddess Parvati. The temple is surrounded by natural caves and ponds {like Agastya pushkarini} to add to its picturesqueness.

According to Hindu mythology, Sage Agastya desired to construct a temple dedicated to Lord Vishnu at the site; however, the deity's installation proved impossible due to a fractured toenail on the idol. Lord Shiva manifested before the sage, declaring the location more appropriate for Shaivite worship, and upon

Agastya's entreaty, bestowed a singular stone-carved idol of Ardhanarishvara. Tradition holds that Lord Shiva manifested this svayambhu idol from one undifferentiated rock, likely local granite in the Yerramala Hills, showcasing Vijayanagara sculptors' mastery in achieving fluid asymmetry without joints or assemblies.

The temple complex includes a sacred pushkarini, a compact perennial pond situated on its grounds, fed by fresh water streaming from the hillside base through a sculpted Nandi's mouth. Sourced from the hills, this inflow maintains consistent freshness and sweetness throughout the year, its perennial mechanism remaining a mystery. This feat of sculptural finesse exemplifies the proficiency of ancient Vishwakarma sthapatis in temple architecture.

Measuring roughly 15 feet in length and 5 feet in height, a black stone bull occupies the Nandi Mandapa near the temple entrance. It is said to grow at the rate of one inch every twenty years, necessitating the removal of pillars by the temple authorities due to it blocking the pradakshina path. It is said that when the statue outgrows the Mandapa, it would signify the nearing end of Kali Yuga. This steady increase in the size can be attributed to the hygroscopic expansion in the statue's silica-rich basalt, where moisture absorption swells mineral lattices incrementally, about 1 inch per two decades;

exacerbated by Yerramala Hills' microclimate and iron oxide catalysis, a phenomenon paralleling natural stone exfoliation

LEPAKSHI TEMPLE

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The Veerabhadra Temple is located at Lepakshi in the Anantapur District of Andhra Pradesh, India, about 15 km east of Hindupur and approximately 120 km north of Bangalore .It was constructed in 1530-1540

CE by brothers Virupanna Nayaka and Viranna Nayaka under Achyuta Raya's reign, The temple honors Veerabhadra, Shiva's fierce manifestation, with its name deriving from Rama addressing Jatayu saying "Lepakshi" ("rise, bird") during the Ramayana. This Vijayanagara-era temple integrates Dravidian trikuta style, featuring mukha-mandapa, ardha-mandapa, and garbhagriha amid expansive prakaras. Lepakshi exemplifies Vijayanagara architectural ingenuity through several distinctive elements that defy conventional engineering norms.

The most interesting point of the temple is that it constitutes a Hanging Pillar, which also serves as a tourist attraction. The pillar is located in the Natya Mandapa, elevated several inches from the food. It is carefully crafted through corbelled construction, meaning an architectural member that projects from within a wall and supports a weight. The pillar employs offset granite blocks that transfer load through interlocking joints and subtle cantilevers [a rigid body fixed at one end]; achieving gravitational equilibrium without ground anchorage on one side.

One theory states that it was dislodged from its place due to a curious experiment by some British Officer who tried to bring the pillar down, which ended up causing a perceptible roof sag, and thus underscoring its perfectly curated balance. Another proposition says that it was an anomaly that was more adaptive than premeditated, owing to the unstable bedrock on the Kurma Shila.

Other than that, the temple has the largest monolithic granite bull, 10m in length and 6m in height. As one circumambulates the outer wall, a large footprint can be found, which is said to belong to Devi Sita, and also two red spots on the walls, which are said to be caused due to Virupanna gouging his eyes out of shame, unable to meet the King after committing theft from the treasury. The frescoes of Lord Rudra on the ceiling are the largest in the whole world, and there are multiple carvings too, which are lost to time due to aging.

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SRI PADMANABHASWAMY TEMPLE

The Sri Padmanabhaswamy Temple in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, represents a pinnacle of Dravidian-Kerala architectural synthesis, enshrining an 18-foot reclining Vishnu (Anantasayana) on Adisesha, with vaults revealing unparalleled treasures. The earliest documented reference to the temple dates to the 8th or 9th century CE, though its origins likely predate this period. Successive reconstructions spanned centuries, culminating in extensive renovations by Travancore ruler Marthanda Varma, who dedicated his kingdom to the deity in 1750. In 2011, global attention focused on the site following the discovery of vast treasures like jewels, precious metals, and artifacts

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within its vaults, valued at approximately 1 trillion rupees or $22 billion, alongside ongoing legal disputes over administrative control.

The temple has a corridor with 365 and one-quarter sculptured granite-stone pillars with elaborate carvings, which is the ultimate proof that the Vishvakarma sthapathis sculpted this piece. The gopuram comprises seven tiers, each featuring paired central window-like apertures on opposing faces, except the base level where the primary opening serves as the temple's majestic entrance. These portals and the entry align in perfect vertical sequence from foundation to summit, decorated by seven evenly spaced kalashas. Twice annually during equinoxes, the setting sun sequentially illuminates these openings over approximately five-minute intervals, covering the tower's axis with astronomical precision before the sun gets blocked again post-equinox. This spectacle underscores the sthapatis' mastery of archaeo-astronomy.

The six subterranean vaults, renowned for their immense wealth that garnered global attention, constitute the temple's most enigmatic aspect. Accumulated across centuries through devotees' offerings to Padmanabha, these chambers designated A through F purportedly contain gold and gemstones valued in crores, with Vault A yielding the largest hoard including jewelry, coins, pearl necklaces, diamonds, golden lotuses and silver ingots. Vaults C and F have undergone occasional entry, alongside Vault A pursuant to Supreme Court orders, yet the controversial Vault B remains sealed amid disputes. This 2011 revelation in Thiruvananthapuram's Padmanabhaswamy Temple prompted unprecedented security measures, with police establishing fortified perimeters to

safeguard the estimated trillion-rupee ($22 billion) trove.

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The Vault B remains unopened for various reasons, like the threat of a looming disaster and not enough security. The issue has been taken to the court many a time, often at the heart of dispute. But legends surrounding the temple, as well the people are against opening it, lest they incur the wrath of the one protecting it. It is estimated that this Vault too, has unprecedented amounts of treasures, but it isn't quite established yet.

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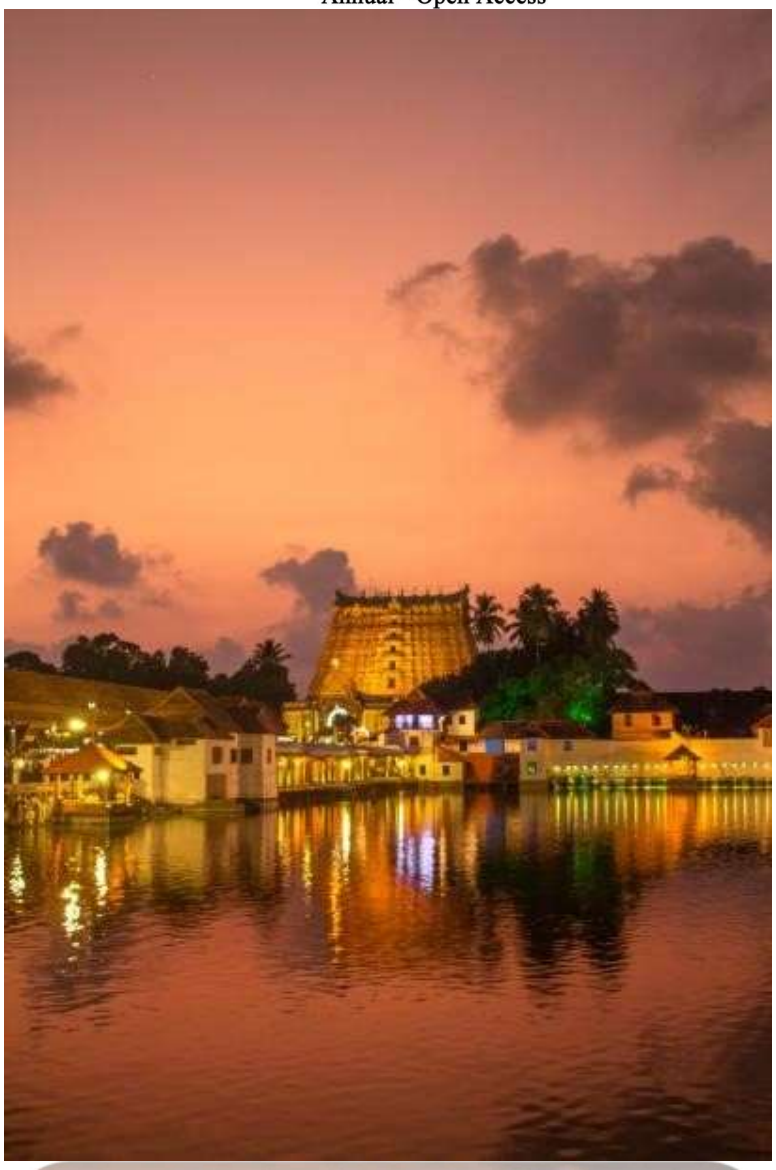

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RAMPAPPA TEMPLE

Ramappa Temple also known as the Rudreswara Temple (built by Kakatiyas) of Telangana has been selected as a World Heritage Site by the UNESCO. It is also known as Ramalingeswara Temple ; located in the village of Palampet in Telangana. The Ramappa Temple incorporates earthquake-resistant design through lightweight bricks composed of clay, acacia wood, chaff, and myrobalan fruit (related to amla), rendering the gopuram sufficiently buoyant to float on water. This material innovation minimizes structural mass, substantially reducing collapse risk during catastrophes. Construction employed the sandbox method, the filling foundation pits with a sand-lime blend incorporating jaggery and black myrobalan fruit to create a resilient cushion that absorbs shocks. Such Kakatiya engineering exemplifies advanced geophysical adaptation, ensuring longevity amid Telangana's tectonic vulnerabilities. The pillars are also designed in such a way that, when sunrays hit one pillar, it creates a brilliant play of light, illuminating the whole temple. Additionally, there is also one pillar, that has Lord Krishna carved onto it, which upon being hit, produces musical notes.

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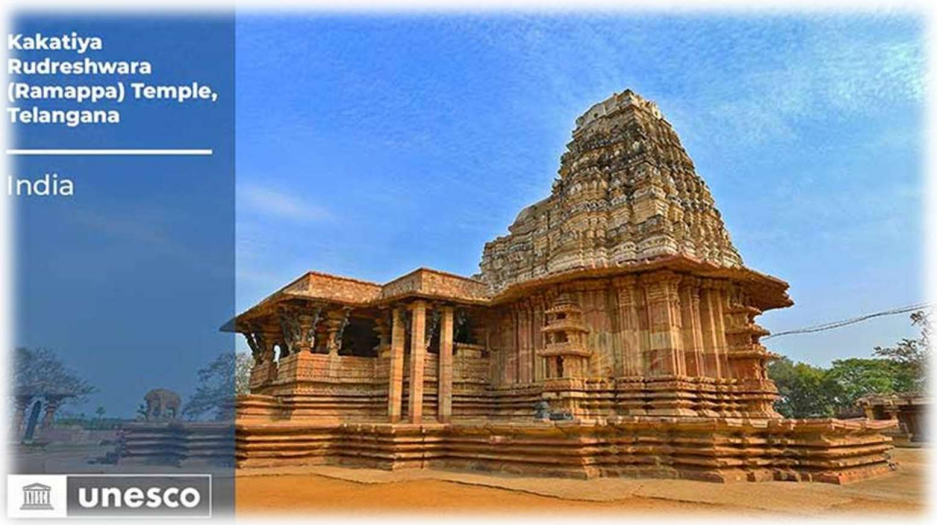

Image Credit:

THOUSAND PILLARS TEMPLE

The Thousand Pillar Temple in Hanamkonda, Telangana, features over 1,000 intricately carved granite pillars supporting its expansive mandapas in classic Kakatiya trikuta style. The designation "Thousand Pillar Temple" proves somewhat hyperbolic, as approximately 280 exquisitely sculpted granite columns actually sustain this architectural gem, artfully arranged to evoke an infinite illusion. Far beyond mere loadbearing elements, these pillars function as chronicles, embellished with meticulous details portraying Hindu mythological episodes, divine entities, and snippets of royal assemblies. Devotees and scholars alike linger amid the halls, deciphering the stone narratives and admiring the Kakatiya artisans' talent in carving these intricate details on granite. Another prominent highlight of the temple is its star-shaped sanctum dedicated to Lord Vishnu, showcasing extraordinary architectural precision. This temple is made of not just stone, but culture and legacy materialized.

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CONCLUSION:

The examined temples i.e. Brihadeeswaralayam, Yaganti Uma Maheswara, Lepakshi Veerabhadra, Padmanabhaswamy, Ramappa, and Thousand Pillar Temple, collectively manifest South Indian architectural genius, fusing Dravidian precision with Kakatiya-Vijayanagara innovations across eras and alignments. They encode Indian Knowledge Systems through shadowless vimanas, a growing Nandi, hanging pillars, floating bricks, and equinox illuminations, where engineering intersects mythic cosmology, ensuring persistence amid invasions and tectonics. Future interdisciplinary probes merging archeoastronomy, petrology, and epigraphy must prioritise non-invasive documentation to decode these Vishwakarma legacies.

Global temple traditions reveal universal architectural principles transcending religious boundaries: sacred geometry fosters harmony, symmetry manifests divine order, and spatial progression facilitates spiritual journeys. Amidst contemporary challenges of urbanisation, environmental threats, and cultural erosion, comprehending these foundational principles proves essential for temple preservation and restoration. Let's worship our culture, and respect it as it is due.

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