

A New Note On Gangaikonda Cholapuram Temple

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The Imperial Cholas of Thanjavur (A.D. 850-1270) who succeeded the Pallavas, continued the architectural and artistic activities of the Pallavas and their contributions reached the high watermark of Dravidian temple architecture.¹ The stimulus given on solid foundation, bore fruit during the early Chola period and marked its zenith during the middle period ranging from **Rajaraja, the Great** to **Kullotunga** (985-1070). This became the golden age of the Chola art and architecture, as it included the two magnificent **Brihadeeswara temples**, one at **Thanjavur**² and the other at **Gangaikonda Cholapuram**.³

Dotted with sleepy small villages and surrounded by undulating paddy fields, about 35 km. from Kumbakonam is the insignificant **Gangaikonda Cholapuram** village, a place that was in the by gone era the great capital of a mighty empire.⁴ During the reign of king **Rajendra Chola** (1012-1044 A.D.), an expedition was undertaken to the banks of river Ganges in North India and won a tremendous victory. In celebration of this victory, he assumed the title '**Gangaikonda Chola**' and also founded the capital city of **Gangaikonda Cholapuram** which means "the city of the Cholas, the Bringer of water from River Ganges".⁵

Several areas in this region have been excavated from time to time by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). As the capital of the Cholas, **Gangaikonda Cholapuram** flourished for about two and a half centuries, holding its sway almost over the whole of South India. It was meticulously planned and designed to suit the needs of a capital.⁶ Two rings of strong fortifications encompassed it, the inner one protecting the royal palace. The recovery of burnt bricks, tiles, wood and granite pieces that turned into posts, pillars and foundation reinforcements prove that flat tiles were laid in several courses and in fine lime mortar covering the large ceilings. The buildings were massive and the palace was multi-storeyed, comprising several mansions. A lofty tower, tapered from it was visible from a great distance.⁷

Today, nothing of the earlier edifice remains. The capital itself has now disappeared, even the old palace does not exist. The ruins are marked by a heap of brick debris, a little away from the temple.⁸ Only the magnificent **Brihadeeswara Temple** has survived through the vicissitudes of time. Standing all alone in forgotten majesty with a huge quadrangle, the grand structure has a 'Vimana' that soars to a height of 60 metres against the blue backdrop of the sky. It follows the same arrangement as the 'Big Temple' at **Thanjavur**.⁹ But this temple is shorter with its contours more graceful and delicate and somewhat feminine,

possessing a rich ornamentation. Beyond the '*Palipeda*' at the entry is a huge monolithic '*Nandi*'. Two beautifully sculptured '*Dwarapalakas*' guard the entrance to the long closed mandapa.¹⁰ The outer walls of the temple are decorated with sculptural depiction of puranic episodes. But, what distinguishes this temple and sets it apart even from its precursor, is an amazing array of grand sculptures discerningly carved, conceived by a great mind and executed by a genius of a sculptor architect, on the four outer walls of the "sanctum sanctorum".¹¹ They number as many as fifty. Of all these enchanting lithic exuberances, three stand out as superb specimens of the Dravidian atelier - **Chandesha Anugrahamurthy, Nataraja and Saraswathi**, which have not been touched by the hand of time or the vandal.¹²

There are two smaller shrines around the main temple, dedicated to Goddess - **Brihannayaki**¹³ (the consort of Siva locally known as **Periyanayaki**) **Mahishasuramardini, Chandikeswara and Ganesa**. In the sanctum of the main temple is the huge '**Siva Linga**' four metres high, which is still under regular worship. Further beyond in the enclosure is a large representation of a **sphinx-like lion** (yali)¹⁴ in plastered brick work, through the body of which a flight of steps lead into a large tank known as '**Simhakinaru**', the sacred water source of the temple. The popular story says that many pots of water from Ganges were poured into this well, so that there could be a

perpetual supply of Ganga water for the ‘**Abisheka**’ of the main deity at the temple.¹⁵ The majestic ‘gopura’ entrance into the temple was a heap of ruins, as well as the battered walls. A portion of its cloistered corridors still stand to tell the tale of its former grandeur. The vast ruins have now been cleared by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) which has taken up a detailed scientific excavation of the entire area.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the magnificent temple still stands and silently speaks of the glory that reigned around it hundreds of years ago.

END NOTES

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