

Vijayanagar art and architecture an overview

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Abstract

The Vijayanagar Empire was a Hindu empire based in the Deccan plateau region of South India. Established in 1336 by Harihara I (who ruled from 1336–1356 CE), it enjoyed its greatest political and cultural prominence under Emperor Krishna Deva Raya (who ruled from 1509–1529 CE) and lasted until 1646, when it was conquered by the Muslim Sultans of Bijapur and Golkonda.

The empire's patronage enabled its fine arts and literature to rise to new heights, and its legacy of sculpture, painting, and architecture influenced the development of the arts in South India long after the empire came to an end. There were great innovations in Hindu temple construction during this period, and many diverse temple building traditions and styles in South India came together in the Vijayanagar style of architecture, the finest examples of which are to be found in the capital Hampi. Vijayanagar era architecture can be broadly classified into religious, courtly, and civic architecture. Its style is a harmonious combination of the Chalukya, Hoysala, Pandya, and Chola styles that evolved in earlier centuries and represents a return to the simplicity and serenity of the past. Preferred for its durability, local hard granite was the building material of choice, as it had been for the Badami Chalukyas; however, soapstone, which was soft and easily carved, was also used for reliefs and sculptures. Vijayanagar art includes wall paintings such as the Dashavatara (the Ten Avatars of Vishnu) and the Girijakalyana (the marriage of Parvati, Shiva's consort) in the Virupaksha Temple at Hampi; the Shivapurana murals (the Tales of Shiva) at the Virabhadra temple at Lepakshi; and those at the Kamaakshi and Varadaraja temples at Kanchi. The most famous of the manuscripts detailing the various nuances of the Mysore school is the Sritattvanidhi, a voluminous work of 1500 pages prepared under the patronage of Mummadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar. This pictorial digest is a compendium of illustrations of gods, goddesses, and mythological figures with instructions to painters on an incredible range of topics concerning composition placement, color choice, individual attributes, and mood. The seasons, eco-happenings, animals, and plant world are also effectively depicted in these paintings as co-themes or contexts. Other Sanskrit literary sources such as the Visnudharmottara Purana, Abhilasitarthacintamani, and Sivatatvaratnakara also highlight the objectives and principles of painting, methods of preparing pigments, brushes, qualifications of the chitrakar (the traditional community of painters), and the technique to be followed.

Key words: Vijayanagar Empire, Virupaksha Temple, art, architecture, Hampi

Introduction

Vijayanagaraarchitecture of 1336–1565CE was a notable building idiom that developed during the rule of the imperial Hindu Vijayanagar Empire. The empire ruled South India, from their regal capital at Vijayanagara, on the banks of the Tungabhadra River in modern Karnataka, India. The empire built temples, monuments, palaces and other structures across South India, with a largest concentration in its capital. The monuments in and around Hampi, in the Vijayanagara principality, are listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

In addition to building new temples, the empire added new structures and made modifications to hundreds of temples across South India. Some structures at Vijayanagara are from the pre-Vijayanagara period. The Mahakuta hill temples are from the Western Chalukya era. The region around Hampi had been a popular place of worship for centuries before the Vijayanagara period with earliest records dating from 689 CE when it was known as Pampa Tirtha after the local river God Pampa. There are hundreds of monuments in the core area of the capital city. Of these, 56 are protected by UNESCO, 654 monuments are protected by the government of Karnataka and another 300 await protection.

Vijayanagara architecture can be broadly classified into religious, courtly and civic architecture, as can the associated sculptures and paintings. The Vijayanagara style is a combination of the Chalukya, Hoysala, Pandya and Chola styles which evolved earlier in the centuries when these empires ruled and is characterised by a return to the simplistic and serene art of the past. For the approximately 400 years during the rule of the Western Chalukya and the Hoysalas empires, the most popular material for temple construction was chloritic schist or soapstone. This was also true for sculpture as soapstone is soft and easily carved. During the Vijayanagar period the local hard granite was preferred in the Badami Chalukya style, although soapstone was used for a few reliefs and sculptures. While the use of granite reduced the density of sculptured works, granite was a more durable material for the temple structure. Because granite is prone to flaking, few pieces of individual sculptures reached the high levels of quality seen in previous centuries. To cover the unevenness of the stone used in sculptures, artists employed plaster to give the rough surface a smooth finish and then painted it with lively colours.

Objective

This paper intends to explore the art and architectural advancements made during Vijayanagara empire

Edifice design

Vijayanagara temples are usually surrounded by a strong enclosure. Small shrines consist simply of a garbhagriha (sanctum) and a porch. Medium-sized temples have a garbhagriha, shukanasi (antechamber), a navaranga (antrala) connecting the sanctum and outer mandapa (hall), and a rangamantapa (enclosed pillared hall). Large temples have tall Rayagopuram built with wood, brick and stucco in Chola style. The term Raya is added to indicate a gopura built by Vijayanagar Rayas. The top of the gopuram has a shalashikhara resembling a barrel made to rest on its side. Large life-size figures of men, woman, Gods and Goddesses adorn the gopuram. This Tamil dravida-influenced style became popular during the rule of king

Krishnadevaraya and is seen in South Indian temples constructed over the next 200 years. Examples of Rayagopuram are the Chennakesava Temple in Belur and the temples at Srisailam and Srirangam. In addition to these structures, medium-size temples have a closed circumambulatory (Pradakshinapatha) passage around the sanctum, an open mahamantapa (large hall), a kalyanamantapa (ceremonial hall) and a temple tank to serve the needs of annual celebrations.

Temple pillars often have engravings of charging horses or hippogryphs (Yali) — horses standing on hind legs with their fore legs lifted and riders on their backs. The horses on some pillars stand seven to eight feet tall. On the other side of the pillar are usually carvings from Hindu mythology. Pillars that do not have such hippogryphs are generally rectangular with mythology themed decoration on all sides. Some pillars have a cluster of smaller pillars around a central pillar shaft. The bottom supports of these pillars have engravings of Gods and Goddesses. Carvings of hippogryphs clearly show the adroitness of the artists who created them.

Vijayanagar temples are surrounded by strong enclosures and characterized by ornate pillared kalyanamandapa (marriage halls); tall rayagopurams (carved monumental towers at the entrance of the temple) built of wood, brick, and stucco in the Chola style; and adorned with life-sized figures of gods and goddesses. This dravida style became popular during the reign of Krishnadeva Raya and is seen in South Indian temples constructed over the next two centuries.

Vijayanagar temples are also known for their carved pillars, which depict charging horses, figures from Hindu mythology, and yali (hippogriphs). Some of the larger temples are dedicated to a male deity, with a separate shrine intended for the worship of his female counterpart. Some famous temples exemplifying the Vijayanagar style include the Virupaksha Temple at Hampi and the Hazara Rama temple of Deva Raya I.

The most important feature of the Vijayanagara temple architecture is the use of granite for the temple structure, halls, gateways and enclosure walls. However, for the superstructures, the Vijayanagara architects preferred the brick and mortar and stucco carvings. The change in the building tradition, not only in the materials but also in the style from the preceding temple style of the geccan and southern Karnataka and Andhra requires explanation. # The granite replaces the soft stones like the sandstone, schist or basalt, in Karnataka and Andhra regions. Dr. A. Sundara observes that it is due to the topography of the Vijayanagara city which is full of granite hills. Due to this factor, architects skilled in working in granite were invited from the South from the southern Tamil country which formed part of the Vijayanagara empire. It may also be pointed out, in this context, ' that in the Hoyasala dominions the temple building activity had almost ceased after A.D.1268 .Similarly in the Kakatiya territory the construction of temples was not much in evidence in the late 13th Century A.D. The muslim invasions against Warangal and the Hoyasalas in the first two decades of the 14th Century were a major factor in the lull in the temple building activity. With the foundation of the Vijayanagara kingdom and the capital, the royal patronage to the building activity began which resulted in the migration of architects and sculptors from the South and Andhra where the granite building tradition prevailed. All these factors contributed to the major shift in the building materials. The use of brick and stucco for the superstructures of the temples and the gateways show the continuity of the temple building tradition of the Kakatiyas and the Telugu cola period in the Andhra region. The extensive use of schist in the temples and gateways at Tadapatri is an exception to the general trend.

The Mantapas are built on square or polygonal plinths with carved friezes that are four to five feet high and have ornate stepped entrances on all four sides with miniature elephants or with Yali balustrades (parapets). The Mantapas are supported by ornate pillars. The 1,000-pillared style with large halls supported by numerous pillars was popular. The 1,000-pillared Jain basadi at Mudabidri is an example. Larger temples have a separate shrine for the female deity. Some examples of this are the Hazara Rama, Balakrishna and Vitthala temples at Hampi.

Some shrines in the Vitthalapura area inside Vijayanagara were consecrated specifically for Tamil Alwar saints and for the great Vaishnava saint, Ramanujacharya. Architecturally they are different in that each shrine has an image depicting the saint for whose worship the temple was built. Each shrine has its own enclosure and a separate kitchen and pilgrim feeding hall. The water storage tank inside the royal center, the [stepwell stepped tank] called, "Pushkarni", is a recent archaeological discovery. The stepped tank is fashioned with finished chlorite schist slabs arranged in a symmetrical formation with steps and landings descending to the water on all four sides. This is clearly a Western Chalukya-Hoysala style tank and is seen in many parts of present-day Karnataka. The inscriptions on the slabs indicate the material was brought from outside the Vijayanagara area

The blueprint for infinity

Making a blueprint is the fundamental step to creating any type of architecture. And rightfully, under the Vastu-Shastra tradition, a temple cannot be built before its blueprint. But this blueprint is not necessarily one of the temples. A Vastu-purusha Mandala is a geometric diagram of the structure of the universe.

In Hindu architecture, this 'blueprint' is made before the house – as a forecast of the final designs. These principles laid out in the sixth-century architecture manual Vastu Shastra, give Hindu temples much in common with today's computer graphics.

It all starts with a square. This can be a grid of dimensions 1×1 or 32×32 – anything as long as it's initial idea starts with a square. Similarly, computers store memories on the basis of numbers being squared – hence the fixed RAM sizes of 512, 1024, 2048; numbers that are each perfect squares.

But temples are not made with squares alone. The cosmos, symbolically, is represented by a circle – the cosmic egg. Making this ellipsoid using squares alone is what gives Indian temples their ragged edges. A closer look at these edges reveals another aspect of temple architecture that computer graphics have taken a leaf from – fractals.

In “Hindu Temple: Models of a Fractal Universe,” professor Kirti Trivedi of IIT Madras writes: The sacred, self-similar, recursive geometries of temple art is rooted in Hindu thought. Hindu philosophy views the Cosmos as essentially holonomic (and as a consequence self-similar). Like a hologram, each fragment of the cosmos is believed to be whole in itself and to contain all the information of the whole.

When you look at the stepping tanks at Hampi or the Shikhara designs in Virupakshi temple, you can see how the design incorporates fractals into its mix. The temple’s Vimana – the house for God or sanctum sanctorum – is set with small shapes similar to the larger shape. Arranged in a pattern in layered horizontal levels, the repetitive shapes form a sort of garland, called Samvarna. In computer terms, this is a recursive process, starting from the inside and expanding outwards.

Operational since the seventh century A.D., the temple was built by order of the queen Loka Mahadevi. Its walls are lined with images of Shaivite and Vasihanvite deities; friezes that were exclusively hand-carved, some telling the story of Sita’s abduction by Ravana.

The mythology behind Virupaksha has to do with an ancient romance between Pampa – the local goddess of the river – and Virupaksha, an avatar of Shiva. Every year, to this day, the wedding of Virupaksha and Pampa is celebrated by pilgrims who come here.

Vijayanagara architects did not restrict themselves to Hindu influences either – they took cues from Bahmani, Islamic sultanates as well. As the UNESCO report said:

Vijayanagara architecture is also known for its adoption of elements of Indo Islamic Architecture in secular buildings like the Queen’s Bath and the Elephant Stables, representing a highly evolved multi-religious and multi-ethnic society.

The Vijayanagara architects added their own touches as well – Virupaksha temple’s entrance features a massive Gopuram, a unique facet of South Indian temple architecture. The city, unlike those in North India, is walled off – with seven fortifications in total. Its streets were wide enough for multiple chariots, and it was known that chariot festivals were popular at the time.

Though Vijayanagara is no more a city, it has long been host to the usual assortments that come with being a temple town; a bazaar, some shops, hotels. In the rush to conserve the site, the ASI evicted the bazaar and all its inhabitants; themselves all part of a historic culture that thrived in this land.

Other Structures

Much of what is known today of Vijayanagara palaces is drawn from archaeological excavations at Hampi as no royal palace structures have survived. Most palaces stand in their own compound defined by high tapering walls made of stone or layered earth. Palaces are approached through a sequence of courts with passageways and doorways requiring multiple changes in direction. All palaces face east or north. The larger palaces have side extensions giving the complex a symmetrical shape. Palaces were built on raised platforms made of granite. The platforms have multiple tiers of mouldings with well-decorated friezes. The decorations can be floral, Kirtimukha shapes (demon faces), geese, elephants and occasionally human figures. Pillars, beams and rafters inside the palace were made of wood as evidenced by ash discovered in excavations. The roof was made of brick or lime concrete, while copper and ivory were used for finials. Palaces commonly consisted of multiple levels with each flight of stairs decorated by balustrades on either side, with either yali (imaginary beast) or elephant sculptures. The entrance steps into palaces and temple mantapas were similarly decorated. Water tanks inside the palace complex have decorative water spouts such as the carved torso of the Nandi with a gaping mouth to allow water flow into the tank. Other structures commonly found inside a palace complex are wells and shrines.

No royal palace structures from the Vijayanagar period have survived intact, and most of what is known about them has been drawn from archaeological excavations at Hampi. Most of the palaces faced east or north and stood within compounds surrounded by high, tapering stone and earth walls. They were built on raised granite platforms with multiple tiers of mouldings decorated with carved friezes. Palaces usually spanned multiple levels and had tall flights of stairs flanked on either side by balustrades carved with yali and elephants. Pillars and beams were made of wood and the roofs of brick and lime concrete. The courtly architecture of Vijayanagar was generally made of mortar mixed with stone rubble and often shows secular styles with Islamic-influenced arches, domes, and vaults.

The courtly architecture generally show secular styles with Islamic influences. Examples are the Lotus Mahal palace, Elephant stables, and watch towers. Courtly buildings and domed structures were built with mortar mixed with stone rubble. The impact of this style of architecture was seen well into the 17th century when the successive Nayaka kingdoms continued to encourage pillars with hippogryphs and granite became the main building material.

Conclusion

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Today, Vijayanagara represents the richest, surviving monument to South Indian architecture. Every one of its temples represents the confluence of the finest influences in India at their time of creation. Those who are fascinated by fractals – a topic with its own philosophy on life – will have much to be amazed by at these elaborate and ancient sites.

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