INTRODUCTION

Brihadeeswarar Temple also known as Peruvudaiyar Kovil, Periya Kovil, Rajarajeshwara Temple is a Hindu Temple dedicated to Lord Siva. This temple is constructed in Thanjavur in the basin of Kaveri River in Tamil Nadu. It is one of the larger temples in India and is a true example of Dravidian architecture and built during the chola period.

Though the history of Thanjavur dates back to the Sangam age, it was between the 10th and 14th centuries that Thanjavur reached its zenith, becoming the centre of Tamil learning and culture. Modern Thanjavur is a fertile plain and was as popular as the cave paintings of Ajanta. This temple was completed in 1002 CE. This was the first among the Living Chola Temples, the others being the Airavatesvara Temple and the Vanvavan Mahadevi Temple.

ABOUT THE TEMPLE

This temple stands amidst fortified walls that were likely added in the 16th century. The Vimanam (temple Tower) is 216 ft. (66 m) high and is the tallest in the world. The Kumbam (the apex or the bulbous structure on the top) of the temple is carved out of a single rock and is the largest monolithic cupola. The structure is made from granite and the nearest rock measuring about 16 ft. (4.9 m) long and 13 ft. (4 m) high at the entrance. The entire thing is made out of granite and the nearest source of which is from Tiruchi, about 60km. to the west of Thanjavur. This temple is one of the most visited tourist attractions in Tamil Nadu. A symmetrical and axial geometry rules the layout of this temple. The temples from the same period and the two following centuries are expressions of Tamil Chola power, artistic expertise, and wealth. Emergence of these types of features, such as multifaceted columns along with projecting signals of square capitals signifies arrival of Chola style, which was new along with projecting signals of square capitals of similar type, such as multi-faceted columns along with projecting signals of square capitals.

The great Chola had the dream of establishing such a huge temple for Lord Siva. Brihadeeswarar Temple is the first among all buildings which make use of granite fully and it finished within five years from 1004 AD to 1009 AD. The greatest Chola Emperor Rajaraja I (985 AD – 1012 AD) the son of Sundara Chola (Parantaka II) and Vanvavan Mahadevi built this magnificent temple at Thanjavur, the capital of the Chola Dynasty. The inscriptive evidence, it is known that Rajaraja I started building this temple on his 19th year and completed it on the 275th day of his 25th year. It took just six years to complete this work and on 1010 AD.

The inscriptions and paintings on the walls of the Brihadeeswarar temple record the rise and fall of the city’s fortunes. Lord Siva’s representation is as a Gigantic Stone Lingam. This is covered by a Vimanam that extends to 216 feet. It is built with stones that are bonded and notched without any mortar. The top most stone, an engineering marvel, weighs about 80 tons.
The precincts of this temple are surrounded with cloisters covering an area of 120m by 240m and are also surrounded on the outside with heavy brick walls for an area of 350 square meters including a large tank (reservoir).

There is a Nandi Shrine, two continuous extensive Mandapams (worship rooms), an Antarala (ante-chamber), and a Vimanam with a high tower all in line on the east-west axis. On the same axis stand Gopuram (temple gateway) of the early phase at the eastern centre of the cloister and the brick wall. They are the sole entrance spots to the temple precincts. Though they are embellished with sculptures, they took much lower than Gopurams of huge temples in South India, as the height of the Vimanam is great in contrast. The second Gopuram on the line of the cloisters is 24 m in both width and height, lower than the first Gopuram, but its sculptures are larger, with a pair of started at the small temples at Mahabalipuram, reached their summit here. It became the model of the temples to be built in South India and Southeast Asia in the Chola Dynasty period. This Thanjavur Periya Kovil is the greatest creation of the Cholas and it is visible from any area in Thanjavur, perhaps the only temple with such a characteristics.

This temple became popular all over the country on its 1,000th birthday in September 2010. In its commemoration, a one Rupee postage stamp featuring the 216 feet tall Rajagopuram (Vimamam) was released by the Indian Postal services. A 5 Rupees coin was released by the Reserve Bank of India. A 1,000 Rupees commemorative coin with the same picture as was on the 5 Rupees coin of the Thanjavur periya Kovil was released by the Republic of India Coinage, but was not for public circulation. In April 1954, the Reserve Bank of India had released a 1,000 Rupees currency note with the panoramic view of the temple. But later during the Indra Gandhi rule, all 1,000 Rupee notes were demonetized to curtail black money. Thiruvavar, the most important Saptapitha Vitanka Sthalam, which had the patronage of the Cholas right from the days of Manuneedhi Cholan and Musukanka Cholan was also nearby. So were numerous temples referred to as Poalal Petra Sthalam, the temples where the Saivite Saints, Appar, Sundarar, Sambhandar and Manickavasagar, also popularly called the Nalvar, had sung Thiruvaiyur Hymns (religious hymns praising the deeds of Lord Siva). Then, what made Raja Cholan build a massive temple in his capital city? Few centuries before, the Pallavas had given a new dimension to art and architecture. Under their patronage rose the Majestic Ratas, Shore Temple and Yuli Caves at Mamallapuram. Rajasimha Pallavan built two splendid temples in Kancheepuram Parameswara Vinnagaram and Kailasanathar Kovil. The latter dedicated to Lord Siva, held Rajaaraja Cholan’s dreams and aspirations were always huge. The visionary he was in all matters, there is no wonder that he envisaged a huge temple to celebrate the power of divinity. By building all these, did he want to stamp his authority and tell the world, Look what I have accomplished? May be the reason was simple. He wanted to show the whole world the towering presence of God that is everlasting against human life that is highly evanescent.

Some Interesting things near this temple

The Palace

Near the temple is the palace built partly by the Nayaks sometime around 1550 and partly by the Maharrattas. These buildings have huge corridors and spacious halls. The armoury and observation towers are visible from all parts of the city.

Art Gallery

The palace houses an interesting art gallery which contains several granite and bronze statues from the 9th and 12th centuries.

Library

The Sarawathi Mahal Library in the Palace dates back to about 1700 and has over 30,000 palm leaf and paper manuscripts in Indian and European languages.

Hall of Music

The Sangeetha Mahal in the Palace is an acoustically perfect music hall that is remarkable for its engineering skills.

Schwartz Church

Towards the east of the palace is a church that was built in 1779 by Raja Serfoji as a token of affection and esteem for the Rev. Schwartz of the Danish mission.

The Tank

The Sivaganga tank nearby was built in 1777 and is well known for its sweet water.