

Tanjavur
Brhadīśvara temple **The Monument and
the Living Tradition**

Architecture

The Brhadīśvara temple at Tanjavur is unanimously regarded as the greatest masterpiece of Cōḷa art and architecture. This is with regard to its plan for which there is neither antecedents nor successors. Long after the construction of the initial layout by the Cōḷas, works were undertaken by the subsequent Pāṇḍyās, Nāyakas and Marāṭhās, which to a considerable extent respected the initial plan.

The Brhadīśvara temple is organized on a linear plan corresponding to the design which was already prevalent at that period. Around the sanctuary tower in front of the long and low hall, the enclosure describes a spacious rectangular courtyard extending from east to west and accessible by gateways which determine the centre of the eastern face. The major axis defined by this gateway and the main shrine coincides exactly with the symmetrical axis of the enclosure. Several structures constructed subsequent to the Cōḷa period have modified the character of the courtyard. Inside the enclosure, only the small Caṇḍikēśvara shrine, belong to the original design. Later, until the 19th century, several structures were added.

The scale of the architectural layout exceeds significantly that of the large temples built more than two centuries earlier. The builders of this temple, despite little experience of raising high vimānas, could successfully develop the technical expertise to achieve solutions. They also incorporated the architectural and decorative elements already developed in temples.

