

Dravidian Style of Temple Architecture

The Dravidian style of temple architecture is a significant and influential architectural tradition that originated in the southern part of India. It reached its zenith during the Chola, Pallava, and Vijayanagara periods. The style is characterized by its grandeur, symmetry, and intricate ornamentation, with an emphasis on verticality and monumental structures. Dravidian temples are renowned for their towering gopurams (gateway towers), expansive courtyards, and intricately carved sculptures.

Features of Dravidian Style

1. Gopuram (Gateway Tower):

- **Description:** Gopurams are large, towering entrance gates that are a defining feature of Dravidian temples. These multi-tiered towers are adorned with intricate sculptures, depicting various deities, mythological scenes, and ornamental motifs. They serve as the main entrances to the temple complex and are often the most visually striking elements.
- **Function:** The gopuram symbolizes the transition from the mundane to the sacred space within the temple. It serves as a monumental entrance, guiding devotees into the spiritual sanctum.

2. Vimana (Sanctum Superstructure):

- **Description:** The vimana is the tower above the sanctum sanctorum (garbhagriha), where the main deity is enshrined. Unlike the gopuram, the vimana is typically more subdued in height but is equally intricate in its design. The vimana is often pyramid-shaped, with each tier becoming progressively smaller as it rises.
- **Function:** The vimana serves as the focal point of the temple complex, representing the abode of the deity. It is a symbolic representation of Mount Meru, the mythical mountain at the center of the universe in Hindu cosmology.

3. Mandapas (Pillared Halls):

- **Description:** Mandapas are large, pillared halls used for various rituals, gatherings, and ceremonies. These halls are often elaborately decorated with carvings and sculptures, and they may be open or enclosed. The mandapas serve different functions within the temple complex, including serving as spaces for devotees to gather, as well as housing processional deities during festivals.
- **Function:** Mandapas provide space for worshippers to congregate, perform rituals, and participate in temple ceremonies. They also serve as venues for cultural performances, including music and dance.

4. Garbhagriha (Sanctum Sanctorum):

- **Description:** The garbhagriha is the innermost and most sacred part of the temple, where the main deity's idol is enshrined. It is typically a small, square chamber that is devoid of

ornamentation to maintain its sanctity. The entrance to the garbhagriha is often flanked by dwarapalakas (guardian deities).

- **Function:** The garbhagriha serves as the spiritual center of the temple, where the divine presence resides. Only priests are allowed to enter this chamber to perform rituals and offer prayers to the deity.

5. Prakaram (Circumambulatory Path):

- **Description:** The prakaram is the enclosed pathway around the garbhagriha that allows devotees to perform circumambulation (pradakshina) around the sanctum. The path is often enclosed within walls that are adorned with sculptures and inscriptions.
- **Function:** The prakaram facilitates the practice of circumambulation, a ritual act of devotion in which devotees walk around the sanctum in a clockwise direction, symbolizing reverence and spiritual connection.

6. Sculptural Decoration:

- **Description:** Dravidian temples are renowned for their extensive sculptural decorations. The exteriors and interiors of temples are adorned with intricately carved sculptures, depicting gods, goddesses, mythological scenes, animals, and floral patterns. The sculptures are often highly detailed and expressive, showcasing the skill of the artisans.
- **Function:** The sculptures serve both decorative and didactic purposes, illustrating religious stories and principles while enhancing the aesthetic appeal of the temple.

7. Water Tanks (Pushkarini):

- **Description:** Many Dravidian temples are equipped with large water tanks or reservoirs, known as pushkarini or temple tanks. These tanks are often located within the temple complex and are used for ritual purification before entering the temple.
- **Function:** The water tanks serve a religious purpose, as devotees are required to cleanse themselves before worship. They also serve a practical purpose by collecting rainwater and providing a water source for the temple community.

Examples of Dravidian Style: Chola Temples

The Chola dynasty, which ruled southern India from the 9th to the 13th centuries CE, is particularly noted for its contributions to Dravidian temple architecture. Among the many temples built during this period, the Brihadeshwara Temple stands out as a masterpiece of Chola architecture.

1. Brihadeshwara Temple (Thanjavur)

- **Location:** Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu
- **Era:** Built between 1003 and 1010 CE during the reign of Rajaraja Chola I.

- **Significance:** The Brihadeshwara Temple, also known as Peruvudaiyar Kovil, is one of the largest and most important temples in southern India. It is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and is renowned for its architectural grandeur and historical significance.

Features of Brihadeshwara Temple:

a. Vimana:

- **Description:** The vimana of Brihadeshwara Temple is a towering structure, rising to a height of 66 meters (216 feet). It is the tallest of its kind in the Dravidian architectural tradition. The vimana is capped by a massive stone dome, which is a single piece of granite weighing approximately 80 tons.
- **Significance:** The height and grandeur of the vimana symbolize the temple's spiritual significance and the Chola dynasty's power and devotion to Lord Shiva, the presiding deity of the temple.

b. Gopurams:

- **Description:** The temple complex is accessed through two gopurams, the first being the Rajarajan Gopuram, named after the king who commissioned the temple. These gopurams are intricately decorated with sculptures depicting various deities and mythological scenes.
- **Significance:** The gopurams serve as grand entrances to the temple, emphasizing the temple's importance as a place of worship and a symbol of royal patronage.

c. Mandapas:

- **Description:** The temple features several mandapas, including the main assembly hall (mahamandapa), which is supported by massive pillars decorated with exquisite carvings. The mahamandapa is connected to the garbhagriha by a vestibule (antarala).
- **Significance:** The mandapas provide space for religious ceremonies and gatherings, as well as showcasing the artistic achievements of Chola sculptors.

d. Sculptural Art:

- **Description:** The temple is adorned with an extensive array of sculptures, including depictions of Shiva in various forms, the 108 poses of Bharatanatyam (a classical dance form), and numerous other deities. The sculptures are characterized by their realism, attention to detail, and dynamic composition.
- **Significance:** The sculptural art of Brihadeshwara Temple reflects the Chola dynasty's patronage of the arts and their devotion to Shiva. The depictions of Bharatanatyam poses also highlight the cultural significance of dance in the region.

e. Nandi Statue:

- **Description:** In front of the main sanctum is a massive statue of Nandi, the sacred bull and vehicle of Lord Shiva. This statue is one of the largest of its kind, carved from a single piece of granite.
- **Significance:** The Nandi statue is an important icon in Shaivism and symbolizes devotion and loyalty to Lord Shiva.

f. Temple Tank:

- **Description:** The temple complex includes a large water tank, known as Sivaganga, which is used for ritual purification by devotees before entering the temple.
- **Significance:** The tank serves both a religious and practical purpose, contributing to the temple's ritual practices and providing water for the temple complex.

The Dravidian style of temple architecture, as exemplified by the Brihadeshwara Temple, represents one of the pinnacles of Indian architectural and artistic achievement. The style is characterized by its monumental scale, intricate ornamentation, and harmonious blend of architectural elements. The Chola temples, with their towering vimanas, grand gopurams, and exquisite sculptures, continue to inspire awe and reverence, reflecting the cultural and religious values of the time. The Brihadeshwara Temple, in particular, stands as a testament to the Chola dynasty's devotion, artistic vision, and architectural prowess.

Nagara Style of Temple Architecture

The Nagara style of temple architecture is one of the three main styles of temple construction in India, prevalent in the northern and central parts of the country. Unlike the Dravidian style of southern India, the Nagara style is distinguished by its curvilinear shikhara (tower), compactness, and absence of elaborate boundary walls or gateways (gopurams). The temples built in this style are characterized by their intricate carvings, towering spires, and distinct layout.

Key Features of Nagara Style

1. Shikhara (Curvilinear Tower):

- **Description:** The shikhara is the most prominent feature of the Nagara style, characterized by its curvilinear shape that rises vertically and tapers at the top. The shikhara is often crowned with an amalaka, a circular or fluted disc-like structure, and a kalasha, a pot-like finial at the very top. In the Nagara style, the shikhara can be of various types, such as rekha-prasad (a simple curvilinear spire), phamsana (broader, shorter spire with several tiers), and valabhi (a barrel-vaulted roof).
- **Function:** The shikhara symbolizes the mountain peak, representing the abode of the gods. It draws the viewer's attention upwards, emphasizing the verticality of the temple and its connection to the divine.

2. Garbhagriha (Sanctum Sanctorum):

- **Description:** The garbhagriha is the innermost chamber of the temple, where the main deity's idol is housed. In the Nagara style, the garbhagriha is often square in plan and surmounted by the towering shikhara. The entrance to the garbhagriha is usually through a richly carved doorway, often adorned with images of deities, guardians, and decorative motifs.
- **Function:** The garbhagriha serves as the sacred focal point of the temple, where the deity resides, and is the primary area for worship. It is usually a dimly lit, small chamber, accessible only to priests during rituals.

3. Mandapa (Pillared Hall):

- **Description:** The mandapa is a pillared hall attached to the sanctum, used for various religious and cultural activities. In the Nagara style, temples often have multiple mandapas, such as the ardha-mandapa (entrance porch), maha-mandapa (great hall), and antarala (vestibule connecting the mandapa to the sanctum). These halls are intricately carved with depictions of gods, goddesses, and mythological scenes.
- **Function:** The mandapas serve as spaces for congregational worship, rituals, and ceremonies. They also provide shelter for devotees and are often used for cultural performances and discourses.

4. Jagati (Raised Platform):

- **Description:** Nagara temples are typically built on a raised platform or jagati, which elevates the temple structure above ground level. The platform is often surrounded by a series of steps leading up to the temple, and the base is adorned with carvings and sculptures.
- **Function:** The raised platform enhances the visibility and prominence of the temple. It also provides a circumambulatory path for devotees to walk around the temple, an important ritual in Hindu worship.

5. Sculptural Decoration:

- **Description:** The Nagara style is renowned for its intricate sculptural work. The outer walls of the temples are adorned with elaborate carvings of deities, celestial beings, mythical creatures, and ornamental motifs. These sculptures often depict scenes from Hindu epics, daily life, and nature.
- **Function:** The sculptures serve both decorative and symbolic purposes, narrating religious stories and illustrating philosophical concepts. They also contribute to the overall aesthetic appeal of the temple.

6. Horizontal and Vertical Projections:

- **Description:** Nagara temples often feature horizontal and vertical projections, creating a rhythm in the architectural design. The projections are known as rathas or bhadrads and are often adorned with niches containing images of deities. The temples may have

multiple shikharas, each projecting from the main tower, creating a clustered or layered appearance.

- **Function:** These projections enhance the visual complexity of the temple and create a sense of dynamism in the structure. They also allow for additional decorative elements and niches for subsidiary deities.

Examples of Nagara Style: Khajuraho Group of Monuments

The Khajuraho Group of Monuments, located in the state of Madhya Pradesh, is one of the most famous and well-preserved examples of Nagara style architecture. These temples, built between the 9th and 12th centuries by the Chandela dynasty, are renowned for their exquisite sculptures and intricate architectural design. The Khajuraho temples are a UNESCO World Heritage Site and attract visitors from around the world.

1. Kandariya Mahadeva Temple

- **Location:** Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh
- **Era:** Built around 1025-1050 CE during the reign of King Vidyadhara of the Chandela dynasty.
- **Significance:** The Kandariya Mahadeva Temple is the largest and most ornate temple at Khajuraho, dedicated to Lord Shiva. It is considered a masterpiece of Nagara architecture and is renowned for its towering shikhara and profusely carved exterior walls.

Features of Kandariya Mahadeva Temple:

a. Shikhara:

- **Description:** The shikhara of the Kandariya Mahadeva Temple rises to a height of approximately 31 meters (102 feet) and is composed of a series of ascending tiers. The central shikhara is surrounded by smaller spires (urushringas), creating a mountain-like appearance.
- **Significance:** The shikhara's verticality and tiered design symbolize Mount Kailash, the mythical abode of Lord Shiva. The clustered spires enhance the temple's grandeur and emphasize its spiritual significance.

b. Garbhagriha:

- **Description:** The garbhagriha houses a lingam, the symbolic representation of Lord Shiva. The chamber is simple and unadorned, contrasting with the elaborate decoration of the temple's exterior.
- **Significance:** The garbhagriha serves as the sanctified space where the divine presence is enshrined, making it the focal point of worship.

c. Mandapas:

- **Description:** The temple features multiple mandapas, including the maha-mandapa (great hall) and the antarala (vestibule). The halls are supported by intricately carved pillars and are richly decorated with sculptures depicting gods, goddesses, and celestial beings.
- **Significance:** The mandapas provide space for religious ceremonies, gatherings, and processional activities. They also showcase the artistic excellence of the Chandela sculptors.

d. Sculptural Art:

- **Description:** The outer walls of the Kandariya Mahadeva Temple are covered with over 800 sculptures, depicting various aspects of life, including scenes of gods and goddesses, musicians, dancers, lovers, and mythical creatures. The sculptures are characterized by their sensuous beauty, intricate detail, and dynamic composition.
- **Significance:** The sculptural art at Khajuraho is renowned for its expression of the human form and its celebration of life in all its aspects. The erotic sculptures, in particular, are believed to symbolize the union of the divine with the mortal, as well as the fertility and prosperity of the region.

e. Horizontal and Vertical Projections:

- **Description:** The temple's walls are divided into vertical sections by projections and recesses, creating a rhythmic pattern. The projections are adorned with sculpted niches, each containing an image of a deity or celestial figure.
- **Significance:** The projections add depth and complexity to the temple's design, creating a play of light and shadow that enhances the visual impact of the structure.

f. Platform (Jagati):

- **Description:** The Kandariya Mahadeva Temple is built on a high platform, accessible by a series of steps. The platform is decorated with carvings of animals, dancers, and musicians, and provides a circumambulatory path for devotees.
- **Significance:** The elevated platform elevates the temple above its surroundings, emphasizing its sacred nature and providing a space for circumambulation, an important ritual practice.

The Nagara style of temple architecture, as exemplified by the Khajuraho Group of Monuments, represents a pinnacle of artistic and architectural achievement in northern and central India. The style is characterized by its curvilinear shikharas, intricate carvings, and compact layout. The temples of Khajuraho, particularly the Kandariya Mahadeva Temple, are celebrated for their architectural brilliance, sculptural beauty, and the harmonious integration of form and function. These temples not only serve as places of worship but also as cultural symbols, reflecting the artistic and religious ethos of the time. The Khajuraho temples continue to inspire awe and admiration for their exquisite craftsmanship and their ability to convey profound spiritual and cultural messages through architecture and art.

Vesara Style of Temple Architecture

The Vesara style is a distinctive form of Indian temple architecture that emerged in the Deccan region, particularly in Karnataka, during the early medieval period. It is often considered a hybrid style, blending elements from the Dravidian architecture of southern India and the Nagara architecture of northern India. The Vesara style represents a synthesis of architectural techniques, forms, and aesthetic principles, resulting in unique and innovative temple structures.

Blend of Dravidian and Nagara Elements

The Vesara style is characterized by its combination of features from both the Dravidian and Nagara architectural traditions:

1. Shikhara (Temple Tower):

- **Nagara Influence:** The shikhara in Vesara temples often incorporates the curvilinear or beehive-shaped tower characteristic of the Nagara style, typically found in northern India. This gives the tower a vertically ascending, elegant profile.
- **Dravidian Influence:** However, unlike the purely Nagara shikhara, the Vesara shikhara may also feature horizontal tiers or segmented sections, reflecting the influence of the Dravidian vimana, which is more pyramidal in shape and common in southern India. The resulting tower is a unique blend, not fully curvilinear like in Nagara temples, nor fully tiered like in Dravidian temples.

2. Mandapa (Pillared Hall):

- **Dravidian Influence:** The mandapa in Vesara temples often resembles the open, spacious halls found in Dravidian architecture. These halls are supported by intricately carved pillars and are used for congregational worship and ceremonies.
- **Nagara Influence:** The mandapa's overall plan and layout might also reflect the influence of Nagara temples, with an emphasis on symmetry and axial alignment. Additionally, the external walls of the mandapa are frequently adorned with decorative carvings and sculptures, a feature common in Nagara temples.

3. Garbhagriha (Sanctum Sanctorum):

- **Nagara Influence:** The garbhagriha in Vesara temples is often more compact and simpler in design, reflecting the Nagara style's preference for smaller, more intimate sanctums. The sanctum is usually housed within the innermost part of the temple and serves as the focal point of worship.
- **Dravidian Influence:** Despite its compact size, the garbhagriha might also feature elaborate doorways and intricate sculptural decorations, influenced by the Dravidian tradition of ornate temple interiors.

4. Vimana (Tower Over Sanctum):

- **Hybrid Form:** The Vesara vimana often combines the stepped pyramidal form of the Dravidian vimana with the curvilinear outline of the Nagara shikhara. This results in a multi-tiered, but vertically ascending structure that combines the best of both traditions.

5. External Decoration:

- **Nagara Influence:** The external walls of Vesara temples are often richly decorated with narrative reliefs, ornamental motifs, and sculptural representations of deities, similar to the intricate carvings found on the walls of Nagara temples.

- **Dravidian Influence:** The use of large sculpted panels, monumental gateways (gopurams), and the presence of yali (mythical creatures) on the walls are features borrowed from the Dravidian style.

Temples of Karnataka: Exemplars of Vesara Architecture

The Vesara style is most prominently represented in the temples of Karnataka, especially those built during the rule of the Chalukyas, Rashtrakutas, and Hoysalas. These temples are celebrated for their architectural innovation and artistic excellence.

1. Chalukyan Temples:

- The early Chalukyas of Badami were among the first to develop the Vesara style, experimenting with a blend of Dravidian and Nagara elements. Their temples at Badami, Aihole, and Pattadakal are some of the earliest examples of Vesara architecture.

a. Virupaksha Temple, Pattadakal:

- **Architectural Significance:** The Virupaksha Temple at Pattadakal, built in the 8th century CE by Queen Lokamahadevi, is a quintessential example of Vesara architecture. The temple's shikhara is a perfect blend of Nagara and Dravidian elements, with a curvilinear outline that rises elegantly above the sanctum, combined with horizontal tiers reminiscent of a Dravidian vimana.
- **Ornamentation:** The temple is richly decorated with intricate carvings depicting scenes from Hindu epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata. The mandapa features intricately carved pillars, and the outer walls are adorned with a profusion of sculptures and relief work.

b. Lad Khan Temple, Aihole:

- **Early Experimentation:** The Lad Khan Temple is one of the earliest examples of Vesara architecture, dating back to the 5th or 6th century CE. The temple's flat roof and pillared hall reflect early Dravidian influences, while the overall plan and compact sanctum show the beginnings of Nagara influence.
- **Design:** The temple's design is relatively simple compared to later Vesara temples, with plain pillars and minimal decoration, but it is significant as an early experiment in blending architectural styles.

2. Hoysala Temples:

- The Hoysala dynasty, which ruled parts of Karnataka between the 11th and 14th centuries, took Vesara architecture to new heights. Hoysala temples are known for their star-shaped platforms, intricate carvings, and complex layouts.

a. Chennakesava Temple, Belur:

- **Architectural Brilliance:** The Chennakesava Temple, dedicated to Lord Vishnu, is a masterpiece of Hoysala architecture. Built in the 12th century CE by King Vishnuvardhana, the temple exemplifies the Vesara style's complex and ornate form. The star-shaped platform and profusion of sculptural decoration are hallmarks of Hoysala innovation.
- **Shikhara:** The temple's shikhara combines the tiered structure of a Dravidian vimana with the vertical ascension of a Nagara tower, resulting in a visually striking and harmonious design. The shikhara is richly adorned with sculptural work, including miniature shrines, deities, and decorative motifs.

b. Hoysaleswara Temple, Halebidu:

- **Twin Shikharas:** The Hoysaleswara Temple is notable for its twin shikharas, each over a separate shrine dedicated to Lord Shiva. These shikharas blend the curvilinear outline of the Nagara style with the tiered structure of the Dravidian style, creating a unique and imposing silhouette.
- **Sculptural Decoration:** The temple is renowned for its intricate carvings, which cover every inch of its exterior. The walls are adorned with scenes from Hindu mythology, including the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and the Puranas. The level of detail and craftsmanship in the carvings is unparalleled, making the Hoysaleswara Temple a true gem of Vesara architecture.

3. Rashtrakuta Temples:

- The Rashtrakuta dynasty, which ruled large parts of the Deccan between the 8th and 10th centuries CE, also contributed to the development of Vesara architecture. Their rock-cut and structural temples reflect a sophisticated blend of Nagara and Dravidian elements.

a. Kailasanatha Temple, Ellora:

- **Rock-Cut Marvel:** Although primarily Dravidian in its overall design, the Kailasanatha Temple at Ellora, built by the Rashtrakuta king Krishna I in the 8th century CE, exhibits Vesara elements in its shikhara and decorative motifs. The temple is carved entirely out of a single rock and is one of the largest monolithic structures in the world.
- **Architectural Innovation:** The temple's shikhara combines the stepped, pyramidal form typical of Dravidian vimanas with the curvilinear outline of Nagara shikharas, creating a unique and imposing structure. The temple's mandapa and sanctum are richly decorated with carvings and sculptures, reflecting the Vesara style's emphasis on ornamentation.

The Vesara style of temple architecture represents a remarkable synthesis of two major Indian architectural traditions: the Dravidian style of the south and the Nagara style of the north. This hybrid style flourished in the Deccan region, particularly in Karnataka, under the patronage of dynasties like the Chalukyas, Rashtrakutas, and Hoysalas. The Vesara style is characterized by its distinctive shikharas, which blend the curvilinear forms of Nagara towers with the tiered structures of Dravidian vimanas, as well as its richly decorated mandapas and compact garbhagrihas.

The temples of Karnataka, particularly those built during the rule of the Chalukyas and Hoysalas, are exemplary of the Vesara style. These temples not only showcase the architectural innovation of their time but also reflect the cultural and religious aspirations of their patrons. The Vesara style remains an important chapter in the history of Indian temple architecture, illustrating the dynamic interplay between regional styles and the evolution of a distinct architectural identity in the Deccan region.

