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Abstract
The gopura is a tall pyramidal temple gateway that has been a distinctive feature of South Indian religious architecture for the past millennium. This essay examines the circumstances under which the gopura evolved within the Tamil country during the tenth to thirteenth century. Most gopuras were built for Hindu temples. A few are located in front of Jain temples, although none are known from Buddhist structures, despite the transmission of the Tamil Drāviḍa language to neighboring Sri Lanka. An important juncture in the gopura’s development was the adoption of the Tamil Drāviḍa language of temple architecture at the height of Vijayanagara authority across most of southern India in the fifteenth and especially sixteenth centuries. The subsequent fragmentation of the Vijayanagara Empire in the later sixteenth century resulted in the former governors or Nayakas (nāyakas) of Tamil Nadu overseeing the creation of the greatest number, scale, and prominence of the gopura in its Tamil birthplace during the seventeenth century. These developments established the foundation for the gopura’s global dissemination beginning in the nineteenth century under British colonial rule, a visual proclamation of South Indian identity and of the deep, historic roots of Tamil culture in the global diaspora.

In August 1948, a year after India attained independence from Britain, the government of Madras declared that henceforth the state emblem would be the gopura, a tall pyramidal temple gateway.¹ Today, across the globe, temples are constructed wherever South Indian communities have been established, and the gopura is the most visible manifestation of their presence. This distinctive pyramidal temple gateway evolved within the Tamil country during the tenth to thirteenth century. Most gopuras were built for Hindu temples, a few for Jain temples. The absence of significant Buddhist structures in South India, and their prevalence in neighboring Sri Lanka, enables a consideration of the historical context within which the Tamil Drāviḍa language of architecture and the gopura were disseminated to Sri Lanka, especially between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, as well as the religious associations of both building vocabulary and use of space. But the important juncture in the gopura’s development was the adoption of the Tamil Drāviḍa language of temple architecture at the height of Vijayanagara authority across most of southern India in the fifteenth and especially sixteenth centuries. The subsequent fragmentation of the Vijayanagara Empire in the later sixteenth century resulted in the former governors or Nayakas of Tamil Nadu overseeing the creation of the greatest number, scale, and prominence of the gopura in its Tamil birthplace during the seventeenth century. These developments established the foundation for the gopura’s global dissemination beginning in the nineteenth century.
century under British colonial rule, a visual proclamation of South Indian identity and of the deep, historic roots of Tamil culture in the global diaspora.

**Approaching the Temple: The Genesis of the South Indian Gopura**

The huge, towering gateways of the South Indian temple are a striking feature of the landscape—the first sight of the temple seen by approaching devotees—and they tower above all surrounding structures (fig. 1). Though present from at least the eleventh century, their great number and scale are characteristic of the temple complexes built in South India in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The earliest temples in the area built in stone date to the sixth and seventh centuries in two regions, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Although they share a common origin and interacted thereafter, each region developed its temples in parallel, resulting in a Karnataka Drāviḍa and a Tamil Drāviḍa language of architecture. Each is based on the morphology of a pyramidal shrine (vimāṇa) with a distinct sequence of base moldings; a pilastered wall with an overhanging eave featuring horseshoe motifs (kūḍu); and an upper pavilion with a domed, apsidal, or barrel-shaped roof, a kūṭa, pañjara, or śālā respectively. More elaborate vimāṇas pile these pavilions up in tiers or stories (talas) with corresponding projections in the elevation below; typical patterns have three pavilions with a corner kūṭa on either side of a central wider śālā, or five projections if two narrow pañjaras are inserted between them. This is repeated in successive, narrower tiers up to the summit.

The two architectural languages were closely related until the tenth to eleventh century. During that period, the Karnata Drāviḍa language developed a more complex arrangement of staggered and radial geometry, which led in the eleventh to thirteenth century to stellate vimāṇas based on a rotated square plan. Some scholars consider such geometrical and architecturally dynamic complexity to represent a new language of architecture, the Vesara alongside Nāgara and Drāviḍa. Others see the gradual emergence of these tendencies within the later development of Karnata Drāviḍa, before the thirteenth- or fourteenth-century disappearance of the language of architecture in the Deccan. The more inherently conservative Tamil Drāviḍa retained its orthogonal and relatively static character, but the eleventh century marked a moment of change in the increasing prominence, scale, and number of gopuras. They would come to dwarf the diminutive vimāṇas at the temple’s heart, resulting in the characteristic Tamil conception of the temple as a complex of structures entered through great pyramidal gateways on one or more sides.

A gopura has a large rectangular stone elevation on a molded base, supporting a towering brick and plaster superstructure capped by a barrel-shaped śālā roof, which is an architectural form with a long history in Indian architecture. On the basis of both textual descriptions and the architectural form, it has been suggested
that gopuras are based on vimāṇas, the main shrine of the Drāviḍa temple: a gopura is a vimāṇa split in half with the garbhagrha surviving as a largely redundant small chamber on either side of the gopura entranceway.¹ Unlike vimāṇas however, gopuras are always rectangular with two equal sections on either side of the gateway (figs. 2, 3). Such a conception of splitting dynamic form to reveal the deity within has a counterpart in exterior wall niches (devakoṣṭha) containing images of deities framed by the two halves of a split column. When a śālā replaced the relief makaratoraṇa² over these niches in the thirteenth century, the conceptual relationship between niche and gopura was enhanced. The devotee approaching one of the later South Indian temple complexes would proceed through a series of gateways that conceptually divide to gradually reveal the deity at the temple’s heart. The multiple gopuras embodied the unfolding nature of the divine and the oscillating, expanding energy of the sacred site made manifest in architectural form.

The stone elevations of many gopuras are very similar to vimāṇas, though some gateways are so high, they are composed of two distinct elevations of base (adhiḥṣṭhāna), optional sub-base (upapiṇṭha), and pilastered wall on top of one another. This is comparatively unusual in vimāṇa design, the Rajarajēśvara at Tanjavur being a notable exception. The gopura’s elevation at times is enlivened, as are vimāṇas, with a series of niches that may have contained figural sculptures, though they often are too narrow or shallow.⁶ The gopura entrances are as high as the base beneath the superstructure and about half as wide as high; in many cases, they are redundantly large. The upper superstructure rises up in a series of receding stories (tala)—which, unlike those on vimāṇas, are always uneven in number—to the capping śālā roof. Modest examples may be only five to six meters tall, while the largest gopuras may be more than sixty. There is a general trend toward taller superstructures; some built in the sixteenth to seventeenth century have concave profiles to enhance the upward sweep of the eye. Gopuras initially were built entirely from stone, but from the twelfth century they had superstructures constructed largely from brick, similar to vimāṇas, perhaps for reasons of economy as much as for reduced load-bearing. Maratha period temples around Tanjavur were built almost wholly of brick in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; stone was retained only for the most important load-bearing elements, such as the jambs or lintels of gopuras and other entrances. The gopura of the early eighteenth-century Bhūlōkanātha temple at Kilkoyilpattu near Papanasam is an example (fig. 4).⁷ Several massive unfinished gopuras dating to the sixteenth–seventeenth century have
soaring monolithic jambs, demonstrating that stone was important only for this part of the structure (fig. 5). In addition to being a gateway into the temple’s inner enclosures, the gopura may have interior steps leading to the upper levels of the tower. These staircases are used by priests during the periodic reconsecration of the temple (mahākumbhābhiseka), which has taken place at twenty- to thirty-year intervals since at least the early-mid-nineteenth century. On these occasions, water is poured over the pot-like finials, usually one for each of the uneven number of stories, on the śālā roof. The gopura’s upper stories are not otherwise used for any clear purpose.

Elements of the gopura’s form can be traced back to the earliest free-standing Tamil Dravida temples built in stone by the Pallavas at Mamallapuram and Kanchipuram in Tondaimandalam, the northern region of Tamil Nadu bordering Andhra Pradesh.9 Just in front of and on axis with the main east-facing Śaiva shrine of the early eighth-century “Shore” temple at Mamallapuram there is a small opening in the enclosure wall above the usual base moldings (fig. 6). Over this gap in the wall is an enlarged barrel-roofed śālā that is wider and higher than the adjacent smaller śālās along the parapet. The opening’s location and form anticipate a gopura even if it were not designed as a separate structure inserted into the wall, as later examples were, and was not intended to be used as a functional entrance. Built shortly afterward at the nearby Pallava capital at Kanchipuram, the Kailāsanātha temple has śālās located in the enclosure wall on the north, south, and west sides and a barrel-roofed shrine on the east side, all carefully aligned with the main vimāna. The western śālā was originally over a gateway that was later blocked up, though the other three are not over such an entrance. These structures’ forms and alignment with the śālās embedded at the center of each projecting side (bhadra) of the vimāna itself clearly anticipate the later distribution of the gopura, facing the cardinal directions. Modest gopuras are also located in front of the late ninth-century Āvani Kandarpa Īśvara temple at Kilaiyur, north of Tanjavur, and at the late tenth-
The tenth-century Nilakanṭēśvara (or Irungōlēśvara) temple at Laddigam farther north on the Tamil-Andhra border (fig. 7). But it was at the Rājarājeśvara (Bṛhadīśvara) temple at Tanjavur, consecrated in 1010, the largest temple built in South India to that date, that the form and distribution of the gopura was firmly established. Two stone gopuras, constructed by 1014 as distinct structures within the prākāra walls, are aligned with the much larger vimāṇa on the main east–west axis into the temple. They are of similar design, though the outer is higher at approximately thirty-three meters with five stories; the inner gopura has three stories. Yet both were built around the same time (fig. 8). This makes it clear that the presence of larger gopuras over smaller inner ones cannot be accounted for solely by a later date or a desire to overshadow earlier achievements; the aesthetic principle was clearly established in the eleventh century. Three additional small doorways in the prākāra wall on the north, south, and west sides, all aligned with the vimāṇa, anticipate later temple complexes with gopuras facing the cardinal directions. Often considered to be the culmination of several centuries of development and representing the “mature” Tamil Drāviḍa temple, the Rājarājeśvara temple is a notable aberration to the general trend that retained a smaller vimāṇa. Thereafter, most temples built in the Tamil region, even quite modest-sized ones, were architecturally dominated by their ever-taller gopuras, now constructed with brick superstructures on a stone base rather than wholly from stone. These may be located on one, two, or four sides of the temple, which may be enclosed in one, two, or as many as seven concentric enclosure walls (prākāras), and the gopuras increase in scale toward the exterior. Clearly established by the seventeenth century, when the number of gopuras and scale of the Tamil temple reached its greatest extent, this idea of the temple was first formed in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Following the political disruptions in the region during the fourteenth century and the rise to regional dominance of the Vijayanagara empire, the Tamil gopura ultimately became a central element of all major temples across southern India (see the section titled “Imperial Designs,” below).

Between about 1150 and 1300, four gopuras were constructed in the irregular third and outermost enclosure or prākāra wall surrounding the Naṭarāja temple at the centre of the Tamil town of Chidambaram. In contrast to the earlier
temple at Tanjavur, these four gopuras on the north, south, east and west sides gave the temple greater spatial emphasis to the four cardinal directions. This was the first temple to arrange multiple gopuras in this fashion. However, in contrast to the careful axial arrangement of later temple planning, these gopuras, the first seven-story examples built, are aligned neither with each other nor clearly (except for the southern one) with the main shrine or other structure. It is therefore not clear which is the main ritual axis or even the primary entrance to the temple for all the gopuras are of similar size. Chidambaram is important for its four gopuras, but the plan of the temple is far from typical of the late Chola period or indeed thereafter. Other late Chola period temples in the central Kaveri delta—such as those around Kumbakonam at Darasuram, Tribhuvanam (fig. 9), Kil Palaiyarai, Tukkachi, and the thirteenth-century layout of Vriddachalam further north—retain the emphasis on a single east–west ritual axis marked by one or two gopuras within rectilinear walled enclosures. These temples are more representative of the period than Chidambaram alone.

The arrangement of gopuras spreading out on all four sides from the main shrine was still in its infancy in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Others examples include the huge temple complex at Srirangam; it reached its current seven-prākāra form in the seventeenth century but by the thirteenth century clearly had gopuras spreading out in all four cardinal directions, perhaps in five prākāras. The geographical center for these developments was central Tamil Nadu, the Chola heartland along the Kaveri River. But the developing conception of the Tamil temple was part of a shared religious culture across the region, including Pandya Nadu further south, and cannot be tied to dynastic patronage or the flow of master-archi-
tects from an imperial center. The expansion of Chola hegemony in the later eleventh and twelfth centuries cannot fully explain the diffusion of the gopura across the Tamil country. Though now it is largely a sixteenth- and seventeenth-century construction, the Minākṣī-Sundareśvara temple in the Pandya capital of Madurai may have encompassed a similar area in the thirteenth century as it does today, but with fewer gopuras—perhaps only four aligned east to west—than the thirteen built by the seventeenth century. The earlier temple may have been damaged during the fourteenth-century rule of the Madura Sultanate, even before the renovations and expansions of the Nayaka period, and thus the layout of this earlier temple and its relationship with the current one cannot be clearly ascertained. In the thirteenth century, the tenth-century Nellaiyappar temple in Tirunelveli further south was entered through a single east gopura and two prākāras.14

**Religious Identities and the Gopura**

While the genesis of the Tamil ķa language of architecture cannot be geographically located in any single region—whether Tondaimandalam, the Kaveri delta, Pudukkottai district, or Pandya Nadu—it also cannot be defined along religious or sectarian lines. Primarily used for religious buildings before the late twentieth century, when ķa motifs were adopted for public buildings such as railway stations and universities, this design language or building vocabulary is not specifically Hindu. Furthermore, there is no distinction between the structures, such as gopuras, for Śaiva and Vaishnava temples, except in details of the sculpture, where present, whether the painted plaster figures over the pyramidal superstructure or the regularly spaced images in niches within the stone base.
Jain communities have been present in the Tamil region from at least the earliest centuries CE: the earliest written records in Tamil, Brahmi inscriptions, are located in a number of partially modified natural caves and caverns used by Jain ascetics. Jains later built temples in the same style and language of architecture as Hindus. Though there may be a spatial distinction in the layout of Tamil Jain temples in comparison with contemporary Hindu ones, the use of the gopura as a gateway is shared to some extent. The twelfth-century-and-later Vardhamâna temple at Tirupparutikkundram (Jina-Kanchi) is entered through one. Other Jain gopuras are to be found at the tenth-century-and-later Kundavai Jinalaya temple at Tirumalai and the ninth-century-and-later Parsavanâtha temple at Melsittamur: the gopuras at these sites date to the twelfth century or later. The gopura of the Jain temple at nearby Tachambadi in North Arcot district has an inscription from the 1440s, during the reign of Devarâya II, stating that it was built with the stones of a ruined Śiva temple. Jain temples in the Tamil region, however, do not have multiple gateways in a series of enclosure walls in the manner of the massive Hindu examples built from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, for few are of any great scale. The absence of a series of large gopuras in Jain temples can be partially explained by a different conception of temple symbolism. One explanation for the presence of several increasingly large gopuras in Hindu temples is the architectural expression of the unfolding, expanding energy of Śaiva Siddhânta and Śrīvaishnava cosmologies and the creative potential of the site on which the temple is built. The symbolism of the Jain temple is less explicitly dynamic, a consequence of a more static underlying cosmology and the conception of the temple as modeled on both the world of perfect order and the samsavarana, the preaching hall from which a Jina delivers his first teaching following his enlightenment to an assembly of gods, humans, and animals.

But what of the Buddhist temples of the Tamil region? Buddhism’s place within the Tamil religious landscape from perhaps as early as the first century CE and certainly from the fourth until at least the fourteenth century is now more clearly established. Literary references, especially the sixth-century poetic narrative text the Manimêkalai, have been joined by a substantial body of both stone and bronze sculpture, largely dating between the ninth and thirteenth centuries, as well as inscriptions from many sites across the region, especially Tondaimandalam, the Kaveri delta, and around Madurai. However, absent are the remains of temples or image-houses within which these Buddhist images were placed; furthermore, the remains of stupas from the Tamil region have not survived. Some Buddhist temples were undoubtedly destroyed or simply neglected; others were converted or reused as temples for Hindu deities after Buddhism’s decline in the thirteenth century. The discovery of a massive, more than life-size Buddha image in the
Kāmākṣi temple in Kanchipuram has been cited as evidence of the temple’s later conversion to Śaivism. But the scale of some surviving stone images measuring more than a meter high and the numbers of metal images—around 350 Buddhist bronzes were excavated at the well-known monastic site on the coast at Nagapattnam alone, the majority in 1926 and 1934—makes it unlikely that they were used in solely a monastic or domestic environment for which there is little surviving trace. Although inconclusive without more surviving structures, whether brick or stone, it is probable that Buddhist temples were also designed in the Tamil Drāviḍa language of architecture. The situation in neighboring Sri Lanka is suggestive and offers evidence for the mobility of architectural design across geographical, political, and religious boundaries.

In the 1340s, two large stone Buddhist image-houses were built in the hills west of Kandy in central Sri Lanka, the Laṅkāṭilaka at Handessa (fig. 10) and another at Gadaladeniya three miles away (fig. 11). Large inscriptions on the rock surface in both Tamil and Sinhala confirm what is evident from their architectural design: South Indian architects were involved in the creation of both royal temples in the opening years of nearby Gampola’s status as the Sinhala capital. Tamil communities were in Sri Lanka possibly from as early as the beginning of the first millennium ce, though the evidence is sparse before the tenth century, and the island was integrated into the political dynamics of southern India under the rule of the Pallavas, Cholas, and Pandyas. Material evidence for the cultural interaction between South India and Sri Lanka can be seen in the construction of the eighth- or ninth-century Nalanda gedige between Kandy and Sigiriya in central Sri Lanka, a wholly stone Buddhist temple of rectangular plan with a barrel-shaped śālā roof similar

Lankatilaka near Kandy, Sri Lanka
to the monolithic seventh-century Bhima and Gaṇeśa rathas at Mamallapuram. During the Chola occupation of northern Sri Lanka between 993 and 1070, at least fifteen Hindu temples in the Tamil Dravida language of the Kaveri region were constructed, most at the Chola capital at Polonnaruwa. Some were made wholly from stone and others from brick and stone. The construction of the stone image-houses in the Kandyan highlands in the fourteenth century marks a further stage in the transmission of the Tamil Dravida language of architecture outside South India, the inclusion of Sri Lanka into a wider religious architectural culture, albeit one in which Buddhism, not Hinduism, was dominant. The huge dual-language Sinhala and Tamil inscriptions on the rock surfaces are striking features of both sites. These date both temples to circa 1344, the third year in the reign of Bhuvanaikabāhu IV (reigned 1341–51), and suggest that Tamil architects had migrated to the central highlands from either southern India or northern Sri Lanka. One “Sthapatirayar” is named as one of the artisans at Handessa. At Gadaladeniya, the chief architect of a group of master-artisans (sthāpati) was Gaṇeśvarācāri. He was said to be well versed in architecture and image making (vāstuśāstra and pratimāśāstra), which suggests his South Indian, perhaps Tamil, origin. There is little evidence for the circulation of such South Indian śāstras in textual form in Sri Lanka; shastric architectural knowledge was transmitted in the body of its practitioners, such as this sthāpati.

But although the Tamil Dravida language may have been appropriated in an ongoing dialogue between South India and Sri Lanka, the characteristic Tamil temple planning of the thirteenth century and later—with a series of concentric high-walled enclosures entered through towering gopuras—was not. This may have been a consequence of the different ritual requirements or symbolic meanings of the Buddhist image-house, in contrast to the Hindu temple in the fourteenth–fifteenth century.

Now if the Tamil Dravida language of architecture was not seen as distinctly Hindu in fourteenth-century Sri Lanka, then it would seem that the Tamil temple
plan—with *gopuras* and high concentric walls—was considered unsuitable for a Buddhist *vihāra*. The elite patrons of these Gampola period Buddhist monuments may have wanted the temples at Gadalađeniya and Laṅkātilaka to be recognizably different in layout to the contemporary Hindu temples of both the mainland peninsula and those in northern Sri Lanka. Pandya invasions of Sri Lanka in 1258 and 1263 led to the establishment in the late thirteenth century of an independent Ārya Cakravartti or Jaffna Kingdom in the far north.26 The two Buddhist temples near the new highland Sinhala capital at Gampola were built just when the Jaffna polity was at its expansionist height, ruling parts of the northwest coast as far south as Puttalam before subservience to Vijayanagara from the 1370s, conquest by Parakramabāhu VI from his new coastal capital at Kotte in the 1420s, and the execution of the last king by the Portuguese in 1620.

Temples established in the tenth or eleventh century during Chola rule on the island—such as the Tirukkētīśvaram at Mantai near Mannar and the Tirukkōśēvaram in Trincomalee, celebrated by the *mūvar*, the three preeminent Śaiva poet-saints Appar, Cuntarar, and Campantar—undoubtedly were expanded and new ones built in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Portuguese iconoclasm in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries resulted in the destruction of many of Sri Lanka’s major coastal Hindu temples.27 The parts of these structures that survived suggest that thirteenth-century Tamil Drāviḍa design was transmitted to northern Sri Lanka, possibly under Pandya patronage, as suggested by the presence of the Pandya double-fish-and-crook dynastic symbol on stone doorjams and ceiling fragments. The great degree of late sixteenth- to early seventeenth-century damage means that the fourteenth-century layout of these temples cannot be determined accurately. But *gopuras* would have been a standard element in common with South Indian practice in the same period: the Nakulēśvaram temple at Kīrimalai, north of Jaffna, is said to have had three *prākāras* and five *gopuras* before the Portuguese destroyed it in 1620.28

**Imperial Designs: The Tamil *Gopura* in the Vijayanagara Empire**

If the two Tamil *sthāpatīs* in highland Sri Lanka in the 1340s had migrated from mainland India rather than the north of the island, then it may have been as a consequence of the dearth of architectural patronage in the Tamil country in the late thirteenth to fourteenth century. Following the Chola Empire’s disintegration in the 1280s, a series of incursions into the Tamil country by the Hoysalas of southern Karnataka and others were followed by raids by the Khalji and Tughluq sultanate from Delhi in 1310–11, 1318, and 1323. The conquest of Madurai by Jalāl al-Dīn Ḥasan Shāh in 1327, and his establishment of the Madura Sultanate (or Sultanate of Ma’bar) independent from Delhi in 1333, displaced the last Pandya rulers of
Madurai further south. Within a short time, all the old polities of southern India disappeared. This long period of political upheaval in the Tamil country continued from the 1360s, as the newly founded and expansionist Vijayanagara Empire extended its rule over northern Tamil Nadu from its capital in northern Karnataka. Under the leadership of Kampana, eldest son of Bukka I (reigned 1354–77), Vijayanagara forces moved south, overthrowing the Madura Sultanate. Few temples or even modest additions date to this period of disruption, but this changed in the fifteenth century, especially in the Vijayanagara Empire’s eponymous capital.

In the fifteenth century, little was built within the empire, except at the capital; only in the early to mid-sixteenth century did temple construction pick up, and then on a massive scale. The source of this monumental architectural language was not in the vicinity of the metropolitan capital in the northern Deccan, but one region of the diverse empire: the Tamil country. As is well known from the extensive research on the architecture at Vijayanagara conducted since the 1980s, the temples built in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, such as those on Hemakuta Hill, continued a local, Deccani mode of design. The foundation of the Rāmacandra temple—built between 1406 and 1417 under the patronage of Devaraya I (reigned circa 1406–22) and located in the heart of the “royal” zone—marked a new architectural departure in the capital. This was the case both in planning—the temple was set in a walled complex with multiple shrines, halls, and aligned gateways—and design, for it was based on the Tamil Drāviḍa tradition of architecture. Given the temple’s distinctive elevation of basement moldings, engaged column design, and stepped pyramidal vimānas, the source of its design is clearly farther south. Yet Deccani modes of design are still evident, such as the śukanāsa, a wagon-roofed projection on the east side of the superstructure above the ardhamaṇḍapa, the enclosed hall adjoining the main shrine, and the square outer hall (mahāmaṇḍapa) entered on three sides. Although built within a walled enclosure, the Tamil form of gopura was not included: the eastern and northern gateways do not have a soaring superstructure but are flat-roofed. Whether the temples built in the new manner were designed by Deccani sthāpatis conversant in the new architectural language or by mobile Tamil ones is unclear, given the paucity of evidence. The small Saumya Someśvara temple at Nimbapuram, the location of Valli’s cremation after he was shot by Rāma, five kilometers from the Virupākṣa temple in Hampi’s sacred center, was built in a similar modified Tamil tradition around 1450. The presence of Tamil characters and numbers on almost all the architectural elements, including doorjambs, pilasters, and slabs, of this modest temple suggests that these are masons’ marks made by sthāpatis migrating to the imperial capital to assist in its construction, and that the architectural elements were designed elsewhere.

Over the course of the fifteenth century, and especially in the early sixteenth
century, coinciding with the establishment of the third Tuluva dynasty of Vijayanagara kings, there was a transformation in scale, design, and elaboration of imperial temple construction. Additions were made to both the Virūpākṣa and Viṭṭhala temples, followed by the establishment of major new temples, many of them Vaiṣṇava: the Kṛṣṇa (1515), Anantaśayana (1524), Tiruvenagānātha (1534; fig. 12), Paṭṭābhīrāma, and Raṅganātha, both in the 1530s. The adoption of the Tamil Drāvida language of architecture and the Tamil mode of temple planning—with concentric walled enclosures entered through gopuras and containing many detached columned halls for use during festivals (utsavamaṇḍapa), architecturally defined processional routes, and festival tanks (teppakulam)—all emphasize the break with past architectural traditions and the creation of a new imperial language of temple architecture in the early sixteenth century at the capital. The Tiruveṅgānātha was one of the few temples entirely built in this period that had more than one gopura aligned on the same axis. Two gopuras were built in the early sixteenth century on the east side of the Virūpākṣa temple, though the current structure of the outer one, the largest at the site, primarily dates to the early nineteenth century. The major contribution of the Tuluva period in architectural terms, when the empire under Krishnadeva and Achyutadeva was at its height of power and territorial extent, was the adoption of the Tamil Drāvida temple form and layout at the capital, its adaptation in both design and scale at the imperial center, and its subsequent dissemination across the empire in the sixteenth century.

This was the moment when the gopura became not simply a regional, Tamil architectural form but a broader southern Indian one that transcended geographical, ethnic, and linguistic diversity across the wide and disparate empire. Though many historians have criticized Burton Stein’s model of the “segmentary state” and
its application to the Vijayanagara Empire, noting a much greater degree of imperial integration than his ritual emphasis would suggest, he was correct to note that changes in architectural style were one of the chief ways in which Vijayanagara as a state made a difference.34 To some extent, the empire under Krishnadeva and his successors was unified, albeit briefly, and established a long-term legacy through the visual coherence of monumental religious architecture across southern India, with the towering gopura as its most visible manifestation. The study of the visual culture of the Vijayanagara Empire has tended to emphasize the arts of the capital at the expense of the different imperial regions across modern Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu, and discussions of the varied patterns of building activity over two centuries usually mention only the peak of activity in the early sixteenth century. Artistic development across the wide region in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is not simply about centrifugal diffusion away from the capital. In many regions of the empire, provincial emulation and adoption of those metropolitan forms joined the continued development of existing local traditions, especially in Kanara, the lowland coastal strip of Karnataka beneath the Western Ghats, and the Tamil country. Was the gopura one element in an “imperial language of art” during the sixteenth century?

Broadly speaking, the answer would be a cautious affirmative, but a detailed examination of the architecture of this wide region over two hundred years is nevertheless informative. Outside the capital, in central and southern Karnataka, there are very few sites with substantial building activity from the mid-fourteenth right through to the mid-sixteenth century; the paucity of substantial construction is striking after the richness of the capital. At Chitradurga, for example, a great hill fort enclosed a large inhabited area that was a major urban center throughout the Vijayanagara period. While the fortifications are fifteenth or sixteenth century, temples were clearly not a priority at the site, for there is no great multi-enclosure temple complex with towering gopuras as one might expect after seeing the similar urban landscape of Vijayanagara. With the notable exception of the Cenna Keśava temple at Belur with its single gopura, few of the large number of temples built during Hoysala rule in southern Karnataka (circa 1006–1346) have any significant later additions or became the nucleus for a later temple complex of substantial proportions with one or more gopuras, as occurred with similar earlier temples in the Tamil region.35

The greatest architectural activity was around the periphery of Karnataka, the Kannada-speaking region—along the western coast and the borders of the Telugu and Tamil countries. In Kanara, the coastal strip between Goa and Mangalore, large numbers of Hindu and Jain temples were built in the fifteenth and through the mid-sixteenth century. Temple construction in this region flourished as a result
of its ports’ importance to inland, coastal, and Indian Ocean trade. Most temples in
the region were built in a distinctive regional tradition of architecture with steep,
pitched roofs in stone that imitated earlier wooden construction. They are almost
all built on a relatively small scale and do not demonstrate any clear architectural
connection with the imperial center. The increasing use of stone, rather than the
ephemeral and more readily available wood, is one of the few clear signs of change
as a result of the Vijayanagara conquest of the region in the 1340s, though stone had
been used for basements and a very few complete, though modest, temples before
this.36 But the conception of the temple as a complex of structures entered through
a series of gopura did not take root in this region in the fifteenth and sixteenth
centuries.

On the border of the Telugu and Tamil countries to the east and southeast of
Vijayanagara—modern Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu—there are further clear
signs of Vijayanagara temple construction. It was modest in the later fourteenth
and fifteenth centuries and on a widespread and monumental scale in the first
half of the sixteenth century, demonstrating a similar pattern to that at the capi-
tal. The modest Madhvarāya temple at Gorantla, dated circa 1354 (Ś. 1276), is an
early example, though the small foundation of a gopura probably dates to a century
later or more.37 The shift toward the later adoption of the Tamil Drāviḍa architec-
tural language is more clearly evident in the example of the Rāma and Śiva tem-

dles at Penukonda (late fifteenth or early sixteenth century) and the Virabhadra at
Lepakshi (1530s).38 However, no gopuras were built in front of either temple at
Penukonda, and at Lepakshi the two stone gopura basements on the north side
remain without towering pyramidal superstructures to this day. In a cluster on
the border with the Tamil region south of Mysore, the Lakṣmi-Varadarāja and
Gopālaswāmi at Terakanambi; the Vijayanārāyaṇa and a further cluster of four
temples at Gundlupep; and the Triyambakeśvara at Triyambakapura all date to the
first half of the sixteenth century and include gopuras as part of their design.39 But
given their proximity to the Tamil region, there is no reason to assume any centrifu-
gal dissemination of architectural knowledge from the capital. The Cholas occu-
pied this part of southern Karnataka in the eleventh century, and prior to that the
Ganga dynasty constructed many Drāvida temples.40

Across the Deccan plateau, in Andhra, is the most substantial evidence for
Vijayanagara period temple construction outside the capital itself—at temples
established before the fifteenth century, such as Ahobilam and Srisailam, and new
foundations, for example, Tadpatri, Vontimitta, and Somapalem. Far fewer temples
were constructed in the sparsely populated areas of the eastern Deccan, and so the
new ones built in the Vijayanagara period, especially in the early sixteenth century,
had a greater visual impact, including the establishment of the gopura as a standard
design element. The east-facing Kodaṇḍarāma temple at Vontimitta is located in a large, open prākāra with gopuras on the north, east, and south sides (fig. 13). Though there is no foundation inscription, this temple is undoubtedly a new structure of the mid-sixteenth century, judging by the architectural forms. Next to the east gopura, two stele, just over 1.5 meters high, have inscriptions recording land grants to the temple dated 1555/56 and 1558/59. A magnificent, open mandapa, with good examples of figural composite columns, is comparable to the contemporary mandapa of the Vīṭhala temple at Vijayanagara. Tadpatri illustrates both the absence of a single, creative artistic center disseminating architectural knowledge across the imperial territories of the empire and also the localized creativity in the “margins.” Together with the distance, circa 120 miles from the capital, this may explain the unparalleled sculptural density of the unfinished north and south gopuras of the Rāmaliṅgeśvara at Tadpatri, built by circa 1510 (fig. 14). The temples at Vontimitta and Tadpatri lie on the road between Vijayanagara and the great pilgrimage center at Tirupati, suggesting the routes along which architectural ideas traveled.

The dissemination of Tuluva monumentality and the establishment of a Vijayanagara presence in the Tamil country are evident from the construction of wholly new temples and the extensive expansion of existing ones. Very little was built before the sixteenth century, and what was built in the first half of the sixteenth century was largely in the Tamil-Andhra border area around Tirupati/Tirumalai, anticipating the shift of the capital’s center there in the 1590s. One example will suffice here: the massive expansion between 1514 and 1530 of the west-facing Vedanārāyaṇa temple at Nagalapuram. A modest eleventh-century shrine was enclosed within three concentric prākāras—more than the usual one or at most two of other Tuluva-period temples—and entered through a series of three gopuras in the west wall and two further aligned gopuras in the north and south outermost walls. The stone base of the outermost gopura on the west side is among the larg-
The Tamil Gopura

The gopura is a building type that developed in the Tamil region in the eleventh to thirteenth century and was built on a monumental scale at Vijayanagara before it was disseminated south both back to its source region and across wider South India. But one specific type of gopura seems to indicate Vijayanagara innovation. This is what may be termed a “porch-gopura,” in which the stone base is divided into two levels with an extended porch supported by columns on the outer side and sometimes also the inner side, creating a squarer ground plan than usual. The supporting columns of such gopuras are typical of the early sixteenth century, with an attached rearing yāli (mythical lion-like animal) or with three smaller colonettes around a larger core column supporting a deep S-curved stone eave, another feature of the period. The genesis of this gopura type seems to be firmly Tuluva. As with much of Vijayanagara imperial design, however, the sources appear to be both the temple architecture of eleventh- to thirteenth-century central Tamil Nadu and regional Deccani architecture, in this instance, a form of entrance pavilion. At Sirkali, south of Chidambaram in the Kaveri delta, the main entrance to the first prakāra of the Brahmāpuriśvara temple has porch extensions on the inner and outer sides that date to the eleventh to twelfth century. Further south in the Svētāranyēśvara temple est built in the early sixteenth century, measuring approximately thirty by twenty meters, and is to be compared with the similarly dated inner, south example at the Ekambaresvara temple at Kanchipuram; the detached gopura at Srikalahasti; and further afield in southern Karnataka, the detached gopura at Melukote. In contrast to this expansion of an existing temple, the two Kalyāṇa Venkatesvara temples at Narayanavanam and Mangapuram were entirely new.44 Perhaps the Vijayanagara period temples in this region were more familiar to the later Nayakas and their sthāpatīs than those in the capital itself. Indeed, the Madurai Nayakas’ inscriptions mention the lineage as coming from Kanchipuram.45

Architectural Innovation and Religious Change

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15 “Porch-gopura” of Tyāgarāja temple at Tiruvarur

16 “Stone palace” (kalla upparige) on Hemakuta Hill, Vijayanagara
at Tiruvenkadu, two modest gopura foundations to the east and west of the first prākāra similarly date to this period and include a columned extension on one side. The Tyāgarāja temple at nearby Tiruvarur also has a “porch-gopura” dating to the twelfth to thirteenth century among the eight gopuras of this large temple (fig. 15). At the capital, the prototype of this gateway can be traced to the Rāmacandra temple, like the Tamil Drāviḍa tradition itself. For though this temple does not include a gopura, two of the flat-roofed entrances have extended porches.

A type of entrance pavilion that predates the fifteenth-century arrival of the Tamil Drāviḍa language of architecture at Vijayanagara may have been the precursor for the new form of porch-gopura in the early sixteenth century. This is the “stone palace” (kalla upparige) discussed by Philip Wagoner, of which four examples survive at Vijayanagara (fig. 16) and two at the fortified citadel of Chitradurga, dated circa 1250–1400 (fig. 17). These square, originally three-storied, free-standing entrance-pavilions were used as temporary residences for deities from the adjacent temple; lamp-columns and stone swings were placed alongside. The later examples of the six such entrances identified have a projecting extension to the base, similar to some later porch-gopuras, suggesting their morphological relationship.

Several examples of this new gopura type at the capital date from the first half of the sixteenth century. Perhaps the earliest is the great east gopura of the Kṛṣṇa temple (1515/16). It is followed by the gopura of the south-facing Rāmānuja temple in Vitthalapura, the inner of the two gopuras on the north side of the Tiruveṅgalanātha temple (1534), and the large south gopura of the Raghunātha temple on Malyavanta Hill (fig. 18). The latter two temples demonstrate that this form of gopura was one option, for the standard rectangular form was used alongside the porch-gopura in the same temple. The greater scale of the southern gopura of the Raghunātha temple in comparison with the more modest eastern one may suggest it was the primary entrance. Wagoner notes that the southern approach to temples often was favored over the eastern in the Deccan, a pattern shared with the entrance pavilions discussed above.
This characteristically early sixteenth-century Vijayanagara gopura type spread to outlying sites in the eastern Deccan during the same period. At the Saṅgamēśvara temple at Animela, gopuras with porches on the inner and outer sides were placed in the north and south walls (fig. 19) of the single prakāra alongside normal rectangular ones without the porch to east and west. An additional porch-gopura was built on the west side of the mandapa in front of the north-facing cave dedicated to Nārasimha at Upper Ahobilam, one of the Tuluva period extensions to the site in the 1530s–40s. Further south in the region, around Tirupati, which received much patronage and architectural activity in the Tuluva period, porch-gopuras were built at Srikalahasti, Nagalapuram, and Narayanavanam. At Srikalahasti, the entrance to the inner prakāras, largely rebuilt in the early twentieth century, is through an unusual porch-gopura with an upapitha-extension on three sides with six yāli columns. Inscriptions from the reigns of Achyutadeva and his successor suggest a construction date in the 1530s. Similarly dated and also of this type is the north Bhikshala gopura through which most pilgrims continue to enter the temple’s outer enclosures near the detached Krishnadeva gopura. Four columns with lion-based, single colonettes support the deep eave of this square gopura; eight Vijayanagara boar-and-sword symbols on the jambs and doorframes corroborate the Tuluva period dating. Of the five gopuras of the Vēdanārāyaṇa temple at Nagalapuram, which was massively expanded between 1514 and 1530, only the innermost is the porch type. Unusually, the extension is at the level of the upapitha (fig. 20) rather than higher up, and thus it has much taller supporting columns, a gopura design that is repeated at nearby Narayanavanam.

Further examples of a Vijayanagara addition to the Tamil sculptural repertoire are the high-relief women on the jambs of gopuras built across southern India. Within the gateways’ entrance corridors, women standing on makaras clutching sinuous creepers were included on the few gopuras built in the Deccan beginning in the fifteenth century. But from the early to the mid-sixteenth century these sculpted women were prevalent across the whole South. This is in contrast to pre-sixteenth
century Tamil gopuras, which omit such figures, an example of the dissemination of a motif from the capital region across the empire. Furthermore, the pre-fifteenth century distinction of these threshold women as the river goddesses Gaṅga and Yamuna on their respective makaras and kurma vāhanas was lost with the diffusion of this North Indian and Deccani iconography to the far south at the height of the empire. Gopuras in sixteenth-century Tamil Nadu frequently included women on all four jambs, similar to gopuras across the empire. Many dispensed with the makara, however, making any identification with Gaṅga unlikely; thus, they are identified as more generic lāṭasundaris (auspicious women holding foliage). The eleventh- to thirteenth-century temples in Tamil Nadu are places to search for the origin of many characteristic and widespread Vijayanagara period developments, including the detached festival mandapa and the composite columns with yālis and figural sculpture that fill these halls in many sixteenth- and seventeenth-century temples across southern India.

If it is clear that the Tamil Drāvida language of architecture was transmitted beyond the Tamil region and adopted by the rulers of Vijayanagara in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, then the reason why is less certain. The chronology suggests a connection with the move from a conquest state in the fourteenth century to a tributary empire. It has also been suggested that the adoption of a Tamil mode of architecture was a conscious move on the part of the Vijayanagara rulers, who sought to visually emulate the power and prestige of the former Chola empire that had dominated South India for several centuries.54 However, Leslie Orr persuasively suggests that if Vijayanagara emulated a Tamil model of imperial temple culture, then the Pandyas, rather than Cholas, may be a more appropriate model. During the fourteenth century, the Pandyas’ concentrated and strategic donative activity at specific sacred sites in newly conquered areas, especially Chidambara, Srirangam, and Tiruvanaikka, was in marked contrast to the comparative absence of such actions by Chola monarchs.55 As discussed above, the developing Tamil temple complexes with multiple gopuras of the thirteenth century and later were the models for sixteenth-century temple construction at Vijayanagara and across the Deccan. The striking and suggestively imperial “Vijayanagara symbol,” the boar in profile alongside an erect sword and often with an adjacent sun and moon,56 may have been deployed, however occasionally, on temples in imitation of the Pandya dynasty’s use of its own symbol, the two fish beside a crook, on some of their temples. Sites of the Pandya symbol from the late twelfth–thirteenth century include the outer west gopura of the Minākṣi-Sundarēśvara temple in Madurai, the ceiling beams of the outer east gopura of the Svētāranyeśvara temple at Tiruvenkadu, and the fort wall of Trincomalee Fort in Sri Lanka. By the sixteenth century, memory of the Cholas and
their empire had dissipated to a much greater degree than that of the Pandyas at the height of power and authority across southern India, and with subordinates in northern Sri Lanka, more recently in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. The memory of past Pandya power lingered longer in the Tamil country than the Cholas; indeed, several figures claiming Pandya royal descent were still issuing inscriptions in the early eighteenth century.57

The wider dissemination of the gopura and the Tamil conception of the temple-city occurred within the Vijayanagara empire’s territories. But a further reason for its adoption may have had less to do with any political associations and more to do with the increasing prominence of Vaiśṇavism across the South, especially Tamil Śrīvaisnavism, during the fifteenth and sixteenth century. Veṅkateśvara at Tirupati is among the most important Tamil Śrīvaisnavāva pilgrimage sites, and though established by the tenth century, the temple gained the preeminence it maintains to this day under the patronage of Krishnadeva and Achyutadeva, both great devotees of Tamil Śrīvaisnavism.58 The Śrīvaisnavāva turn and the increasing popularity of Tamil forms of Viṣṇu, such as Veṅkateśvara, at the imperial capital is evident from the eight temples identified as dedicated to the deity, known there as Tiruvengalanātha, from the mid-fifteenth century on. The most notable of these is the large north-facing Tiruvengalanātha temple founded in 1534 by Achyutadeva’s brother-in-law, Hiriya Tirumalaraja. The Rāmacandra temple built between 1406 and 1417 was the first temple at Vijayanagara both to adopt the Tamil Drāviḍa tradition of temple architecture and to be dedicated to Rāma. Another large temple, dedicated to Paṭṭabhirāma (Rāma after his coronation) or Raghunātha, was built at the capital in the 1530s.59 Raṅganātha of Srirangam and Varadarāja of Kanchipuram were also important Śrīvaisnavāva forms of Viṣṇu, whose presence at the capital is evident from material remains, though neither were as important as Venkateśvara.60 It would be misleading to suggest that Vaiśṇavism at Vijayanagara and across the empire was equated with Tamil Śrīvaisnavism, for other Vaiśṇava sects, such as the Madhva sampradāya, emerged in this period. But it was the most popular tradition from the late fifteenth century. Furthermore, temples for deities of other non-Tamil sects, including Kṛṣṇa from Udayagiri and Viṣṭhala from Pandarpur—and indeed Shaiva temples—were built in the Tamil-derived language of architecture at the capital.

The selective adoption of a Tamil language for the temple architecture of the imperial center and its subsequent dissemination, with the political and religious associations that followed, is all the more striking when compared to contemporary palace and courtly architecture. As George Michell has demonstrated, the courtly architecture of Vijayanagara and other sites, such as Penukonda and Chandragiri,
Crispin Branfoot

is an original synthesis of Bahmani courtly and religious architecture and the language of South Indian temple design. The history and culture of the Deccan is no longer considered in terms of opposing monoliths, Hindu Vijayanagara versus the Muslim sultanates. Recent scholarship has instead emphasized the cosmopolitan and culturally fluid character of court cultures in this region during the fifteenth to seventeenth century; Vijayanagara courtly architecture demonstrates this.

Tamil Temple Cities and the Nayaka Period *Gopura*

The greatest number and boldest-sized *gopuras* were built as part of the many temple complexes in the Tamil region that were founded or substantially added to in the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This was a period of enormous architectural energy, especially when compared to any century going back to the late thirteenth century. The growth in number, size, and grandeur of temples coincided with the increasing independence of the Nayaka governors from their Vijayanagara overlords, especially following the disastrous defeat of the rāya (king) and the sack of the capital in 1565. This suggests that the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries should be regarded as a distinct “Nayaka period” and not simply as “late Vijayanagara.” Three Nayakas dominated the Tamil country from their respective centers at Gingee (or Senji) in the North, and the older seats of power at Tanjavur, the Chola imperial capital, and Madurai, the Pandya capital. In the Deccan, the Nayakas ruled from Ikkeri or nearby Keladi in the Western Ghats and from Mysore and Bangalore in the South. The increasingly tense and ambiguous political relationship between the nominal overlord and the supposedly subservient Nayakas was brought to a head in a major civil war that lasted intermittently for more
than a decade following the death of Venkata (reigned 1586–1614). The Aravidu dynasty of Vijayanagara survived until the death of Sriranga III in 1672. The civil war that began in 1614, however, clearly demonstrated that the Aravidu monarch was just one among several regional rulers competing in a shifting “hierarchy of kings,” although he was the heir to a distinguished but distant imperial legacy. The political, religious, and cultural legitimacy of the Nayakas was based on both their relationship with the Vijayanagara emperor and the imperial center, and their association with the cultural traditions of their adopted territory.

The temple architecture of the Keladi Nayakas in the sixteenth century combined elements of the regional Kanara and Malnadu tradition with the Vijayanagara palace architecture, with its parapets of merlons and cusped arches and other features ultimately derived from Bahmani sultanate architecture in the Deccan.63 The gopura was not a prominent element of Keladi Nayaka architecture. In Mysore and Bangalore, the Tamil mode of temple architecture was firmly established by new temples built by the Wodeyars and Gowdas in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which included the gopura as a standard.64 In the Tamil country, the Nayakas’ relationship with the declining authority of Vijayanagara and established local Tamil traditions was expressed through their patronage of temple rituals and regional religious institutions; the additions, expansions, and renovations of old temples, especially the great pilgrimage sites; and the foundation of new temples.

The many gopuras constructed in this period, many bigger than anything built before, are one visual expression of these political and cultural changes, as the Vijayanagara empire fragmented.

The paradigmatic late South Indian temple complex is often said to have a series of gopuras of increasing height on four sides, spreading out toward each of the cardinal directions from the comparatively diminutive main shrine at the heart of the temple (fig. 21). Some seventeenth-century gopuras were more than sixty meters in height; the eleven-tala gopura before the Vatapatraśāyi temple at Srivilliputtur is a good example, compared in an undated inscription to Mount Meru
in place of the vimāṇa that once claimed such a distinction in many temples (fig. 22). However, this is not typical of all Tamil temples built in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which exhibit a much greater variety of plan: there is no consistent layout, whether by region or in terms of dynastic patronage. While there are many temples with three or more concentric rectilinear enclosures (prākāras), only some of these have gopuras on four sides. Fewer still have as many gopuras as the Minākṣi-Sundaresvara in Madurai with thirteen (fig. 23), the Rājagopāla temple at Mannarkuti with fifteen (fig. 24), and the Ranganātha temple at Srirangam with nineteen—temples that all reached their greatest extent in the seventeenth century. The number, size, and distribution of gopuras in a temple complex with three or more prākāras vary from temple to temple, each placing differing emphasis on three planning principles: the main ritual axis leading to the vimāṇa, the three less prominent cardinal axes, and the concentric plan of the prākāras. The first two prākāras may have one or two gopuras on the main ritual axis, and only from the third enclosure wall will additional gateways be added to indicate the other remaining cardinal directions. Thus, while the outermost prākāra suggests the equality of each side, the temple spreading out to all directions from the sacred center, the axis leading directly into the temple remains preeminent, as the largest number of gopuras along that route indicates. Many more temples have gopuras on either a single side marking the main ritual axis and pilgrims’ route inward. Or if they have two or more prākāras, on just two sides, with gopuras in front of and directly behind the main, central shrine and on one clearly defined axial alignment. The rear gopura of such temples with pyramidal gateways on two sides serves no clear purpose as a gateway to lead devotees toward the ritual, sacred center; instead, it seems to be there to ensure balance in the overall plan.
A further group of temples have a series of one or more gopuras marking the main axis into the structure but are joined by a single additional gopura in the north wall of the first or second prākāra. This is the Vaikuṇṭha-vacal, corkkavācal, or paramapatavācal, literally “heaven’s gate,” a feature unique to the many Vaiṣṇava temples built in this period. It is an exit for Viṣṇu during a specific annual festival performed in every Srivaṁśava temple, the Festival of Recitation (Adhyayanoṁsavam). Architecturally, the “heaven’s gate” is undistinguishable from other gopuras, though it is always located on the north side of a temple, whatever the overall orientation. Viṣṇu’s heaven, Vaikuṇṭha, is understood to lie to the north. Sometimes it is just a gate and not a gopura as such. It is usually located in the first or second prākāra wall, which may not be the temple’s outermost wall. While many gopuras are placed in pairs in opposite walls, a corkkavācal is placed only in the north wall and has no southern counterpart. The Raṁanātha temple at Srirangam, for example, faces south, and its corkkavācal is in the north wall of the second prākāra. The wholly Nayaka period Bhū Varāha temple at Srivushnam faces west, but the corkkavācal remains in the north wall of the second prākāra. Corkkavācal are used once a year during the month of Mārkali (December–January), when they are opened for ten days from the early morning of Vaikuṇṭha ēkātaci, the eleventh day after the full moon. During this time, Viṣṇu leaves the temple via this exit to a particular maṇḍapa used for the festival, where the temple’s priests recite the entire Śrиваṁśava canon, the Nālāyiradvīpyaprabandham (Divine Collection of 4,000 [Hymns]) in the deity’s presence. A small, four-columned maṇḍapa may be located directly outside the corkkavācal in which images of the ālvārs, the Tamil Vaiṣṇava poet-saints, are placed to greet Viṣṇu upon his first departure from his temple on Vaikuṇṭha ēkātaci. The Aṁṭal temple at Srivilliputtur and the Alakar temple at Alagarkoyil both have such a maṇḍapa (fig. 25). Tamil Vaiṣṇava temples are now divided between those following the northern Vaiṭakalai or southern Teṅkalai doctrine of Śrivaṁśnavism. Many Vaiṭakalai temples omit this gateway; for example, the preeminent Vaiṭakalai Varadarāja temple at Kanchipuram and the Vaiṣṇava temples of Kumbakonam, all now Vaiṭakalai, do not have a corkkavācal. In contrast, most
Teṉkalai temples do have such a northern gateway. The emergence of such a ritually determined gopura is indicative of the growing architectural and sectarian distinction of Teṉkalai from Vaṭakalai temples of the sixteenth–seventeenth century, a period of increasing Vaiṣṇava sectarianism across India.69

Throughout this period, the relationship between gopuras—with the largest toward the outside, a principle established in the early eleventh century at Tanjavur—was consistently maintained. The gopuras were similarly the most visible and architecturally impressive elements of the temple, towering over the comparatively diminutive vimānas, increasingly roofed in at the heart of the temple and not visible from outside. Several of the largest gopuras were unfinished, huge stone bases with tall, monolithic jambs reaching up to an absent superstructure. Both of the largest temples in South India, the Raṅganātha and Jambukēśvara on Srirangam Island, as well as those at Narayanavanam, Tirukkurunkudi, and Rameshvaram have monumental, unfinished gateways. In Madurai, the massive foundations of the rayagopura marked the proposed expansion of the Minākṣī-Sundareshvara temple east in the 1620s and 1630s. If this huge gopura had been completed, then its associated enclosure wall might have encompassed an even greater area within the temple precincts, including the concentric streets currently surrounding the structure at the heart of the old city. Gopuras within high walls would thus have architecturally defined as sacred space what festival processions of the deities could only periodically claim.

The Global Gopura

If the sixteenth century was the moment when the Tamil gopura became a widely South Indian architectural form, then the nineteenth century was the age of its global dissemination as South Indian communities migrated overseas. The decline of the Nayakas in the later seventeenth century resulted in the diminution of temple construction in the Tamil region. Still, the rulers of Maratha Tanjavur, Pudukkottai, Ramnad, and Shivagangai, as well as merchant communities in colonial cities like Madras, continued to be the patrons of temples through the eighteenth century and gopuras continued to be built.70

The transmission of South Indian architectural knowledge, including the distinctive gopura, occurred across colonial India, as is evident from the construction of South Indian temples in North India, especially at pilgrimage sites. The largest temple at the preeminent Vaishnava pilgrimage site of Vrindavan, the Raṅganātha (Rangji) temple, was constructed between 1845 and 1851; its gopuras in two large rectangular prākāras transformed the North Indian urban landscape (fig. 26). The distinctive South Indian tower-gateway, the expansive walled enclosure of sacred space, and the lavish festival processions distinguish this temple from its North
Indian neighbors. These include both the seventeenth-century red sandstone temples, such as the monumental Govindadeva temple (circa 1590), and their later haveli-temple successors built from the eighteenth century in the form of a courtyard house with no prominent tower (śikhara) rising above the sanctum. The merchant-patrons of the Rangji temple were lay followers of a Teṉkalai Śrīvaiśṇava ācārya (teacher) in Hyderabad.71 Members of the same family of Marwari merchants from Shekhavati in northern Rajasthan were the patrons of another Rangji temple in Pushkar, built in the 1840s.72 Separation from the distant Tamil homeland has resulted in gopuras that have soaring superstructures but rest on plainer stone basements with minimal Tamil Drāvida moldings or wall treatment; examples can be found at Vrindavan and in other modern gopuras and vimānas.

In the early years of the twentieth century, British archaeologists were outraged by the number and scale of temple renovations taking place across the Tamil country. Surveys of historic monuments and the colonial authority’s efforts to conserve and understand the architectural history of South India—which started in the 1850s and was established on a more professional footing in the 1880s—were seemingly threatened by native Tamil patronage for the renovation and construction of Hindu temples. Singled out as responsible for most of these temple-building projects was the Nattukkottai Chettiar (or Nakarattar) community, a group of merchants and moneylenders who became very wealthy within the colonial economy of British India, Burma, and Malaya.73 Their successful business activities led not only to local investment in colonial Southeast Asia but also to a flow of wealth back
to their Tamil homeland, the remote, arid region of Chettinadu in southern Tamil Nadu between Madurai and Tirucchirappalli, south of Pudukkottai. The material evidence for this can be seen not only in the large and elaborate mansions each family built in its clan villages in Chettinadu, but also in their extensive collective patronage of major temple renovations across the Tamil country and the construction of substantial new temples in Chettinadu itself, whose scale and number seems to defy the isolation and low population of the region (fig. 27).

In Tamil-speaking Madras Presidency and Ceylon, the later nineteenth century marked a period of regional renaissance and revival for Tamil literature, culture, and religion, stimulated by the scholarly declaration of the ethno-linguistic distinction of the “Dravidian” South. If Chettiar patronage and the Tamil renaissance resulted in the construction and renovation of temples in South India, then the nineteenth century was also when the **gopura** became a feature of the wider British Empire with the migration of many South Indians, especially Tamils, to British overseas territories, including Sri Lanka, Burma, Malaya, Mauritius, South Africa, and the Caribbean. Although some migrants returned to India after a few years, temples provide evidence for the establishment of South Indian communities in new lands, sometimes earlier than other written sources, such as Tamil-language newspapers. The **gopura** was often the most visible declaration of South Indian identity, an affirmation of the cultural connection with the Tamil homeland (**Tamiḻkam**) and its deep-rooted historic traditions.

A second wave of global migration of South Indians to Europe and North America in the late twentieth century, especially the Tamil diaspora following the outbreak of civil war in Sri Lanka in 1983, has resulted in the further construction of
temples beyond South India (fig. 28). The *gopura* is a clear, distinguishing expression of the South Indian identity of the deities and the worshipping community of the temple, in contrast to the Nāgara temples constructed for North Indian Hindu and Jain communities in the transnational diaspora. Tamil architects, craftsmen, and indeed priests are more mobile than ever, so the requirements for traditional design can be easily effected in the global diaspora. If there are insufficient funds or indeed space for a full-size *gopura*, then simply adding a pyramidal tower over the temple’s entrance, divorcing the basement from the superstructure, or even just a *gopura*-façade on an existing building are sufficient indicators of religious and regional identity.

Some in Tamil Nadu now debate which *gopura*, one in Madurai or in Srivilliputhur, was the model for the state emblem or indeed whether it is appropriate to have such an overtly religious, and explicitly Hindu, symbol associated with the secular state. Yet the *gopura* remains a potent symbol of South Indian cultural and religious identity in both India and in the transnational diaspora.

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3 While the meaning of the Sanskrit gopura—Tamil kōpuram, anglicized as gopuram—as a gateway to a temple or town is established, the word’s etymology—literally “cow-city”—is less certain; see James C. Harle, Temple Gateways in South India: The Architecture and Iconography of the Cidambaram Gopuras (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1963), 1. The Tamil kō meaning “lord, king” is often cited as a partial explanation, kōyil being the Tamil for temple.

4 Harle, Temple Gateways, xxiv, 1–5.

5 A cusped arch motif in relief with mythical aquatic monsters (makara) at each side, issuing foliage from their mouths and usually with a grimacing kirtimukha (‘face of glory’) at the top.

6 Though occasionally sculptures have been removed from vimāna or gopura niches, it is common practice to omit them entirely from gopuras. The Chidambaram gopuras’ extensive iconographic program is thus unusual. See Harle, Temple Gateways, and Gerd Mevissen, “Chola architecture and sculpture at Chidambaram” in Chidambaram: Home of Nataraja, ed. Vivek Nanda and George Michell (Bombay: Marg, 2004), 82–95.


The stone temple at Laddigam is variously dated to circa 1000, following the earliest inscription on the mandapa dated Rajaraja year 9 (circa 994; see ARIE, no. 551 of 1906), or to Kulottunga year 16 (circa 1086; see ARIE, no. 553 of 1906) given the earliest dated inscription on the vimāna itself. The style of the building’s design suggests an earlier tenth-century date for both the vimāna and the adjoining mandapa. There are no dated inscriptions on the wholly stone gopura itself, which, even if dated to the late eleventh century, preserves an earlier gopura design.

Six inscriptions on the inner gopura are dated to Rajaraja’s twenty-ninth year (circa 1014): South Indian Inscriptions 2, inscription nos. 24–28, and 90, on pp. 121–33, 413–14. For a summary, see George Michell and Indira Viswanathan Peterson, The Great Temple at Thanjavur: One Thousand Years, 1010–2010 (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 2010), 176. Though inscriptions on the outer gopura do not establish a date, there is little formal evidence to suggest the two gateways are not coeval.

Though none of these openings have sālas above, they do project beyond the wall: for illustrations, see Pierre Pichard, Tanjavur Brhadisvara: An Architectural Study (New Delhi and Pondicherry: IGNCA & EFEO, 1995), 215.

A greater degree of rebuilding in southern Tamil Nadu between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries may be responsible for the comparative paucity of ninth- to twelfth-century temples in Pandya Nadu as opposed to Chola Nadu; see Crispin Branfoot, “Remaking the Past: Tamil Sacred Landscape and Temple Renovations,” Bulletin of SOAS 76, no. 1 (2013), 21–47.


Though there was probably a temple on this site in the sixth century, judging by its mention in a Pallava copper-plate inscription, the current temple dates much later. See T. N. Ramachandran, Tiruparuttikunram and Its Temples (Madras: Government Press, 1934) and K. V. Soundara Rajan in Jaina Art and Architecture, vol. 2, 324. An undated inscription in grantha script records the construction of the gopura: see ARIE, 1923, no. 98.

17 ARIE, 1941, no. 155. Further west at Vijayamangalam, twenty miles west of Erode, the tenth-century Candraprabhā basti was enclosed within a prākāra entered through a single gopura built in the fifteenth to sixteenth century. Cf. I. K. Sarma, Temples of the Gangas of Karnataka (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1992), 171–74.


19 T. A. Gopinatha Rao, “Bauddha Vestiges in Kanchipuram,” The Indian Antiquary 44 (1915), 127–29. R. Nagaswamy is skeptical of this claim, however; Schall and Velupillai, Buddhism among Tamils, 128. K. Sivaramalingam (Archaeological Atlas, 63) goes further in considering that many of Kanchipuram’s temples were originally Buddhist or at least were built on the site of former vihāras.


21 The Islamic architecture of Tamil Nadu, including that of the fourteenth-century Sultanate of Ma’bar, also adopted some aspects of the Tamil Drāviḍa language of architecture, especially the massed stone columns with bevel-edged bracket-caps and later, from the fifteenth century, the “flower” bracket-capital (puspapatikā). Some Islamic structures included Drāviḍa moldings and wall articulation too. The late seventeenth- to early eighteenth-century Jami masjid at Kilakkarai near Ramnad is a good example; J. Raja Mohamad, Islamic Architecture in Tamil Nadu (Chennai: Government Museum, 2004), 46–48. Cf. Mehrdad Shokoohy, Muslim Architecture of South India: The Sultanate of Ma’bar and the Traditions of the Maritime Settlers on the Malabar and Coromandel Coasts (Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Goa) (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003).


23 P. L. Prematilleke, Nalanda: a short guide to the “Gedige” shrine (Colombo: Ministry of Cultural Affairs, 1985), and H. C. P. Bell, Archaeological Survey of Ceylon,


Such marks, largely unknown in Tamil Nadu, suggest that the temple may have been created elsewhere and moved, the labels guiding its reconstruction. Wagoner’s discussion of the Kannada labels on a large stepped tank in Vijayanagara’s “royal center,” which had been removed from an earlier site west of the capital, demonstrates that such labeling and architectural transport was possible before the colonial period, when people began to collect antiquities, including whole structures; Phillip B. Wagoner, “Revising the Chalukya Past in the 16th Century Deccan: Archaeological and Literary Perspectives,” *South Asian Studies* 23 (2007), 1–29.


Belur’s gopura may have been constructed as early as the fourteenth century, although the current structure probably dates to at least the late fifteenth century. Crispin Branfoot, “Regional Pasts, Imperial Present: Architecture and Memory in Vijayanagara-Period Karnataka,” in *The Temple in South Asia*, ed. Adam Hardy (London: British Academy & Society for South Asian Studies, 2007), 105–25.


ARIE, no. 92 of 1912.

Lepakshi has been dated to the 1530s based upon several grants made in honor of Achyutadeva by Virapanna, the governor of Penukonda: see ARIE, nos. 88–90, 569–80 of 1912.


The circa ninth-century Sōmēśvara temple at Gangavara, northeast of Bangalore, includes a wholly stone proto-gopura similar to that at Laddigam around fifty miles to the east (see above). I. K. Sarma, *Temples of the Gangas of Karnataka* (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1992), 58–63.

In ARIE, nos. 411–12 of 1911, they are dated Ś.1480 and Ś.1477.

V. Jayaprada, *Vijayanagara Temples at Tadapatri* (New Delhi: Bharatiya Kala Prakashan, 1998), 7, notes that the earliest inscription is dated 1507; one dated 1509 mentions the grant of villages after the...
construction of a bhogamandapa, gopura, and prákāra.

43 ARIE, nos. 619–29 of 1904.

44 A clear foundation date of Ś.1463 (1531/32), in the reign of Achyutadeva, for Narayananam is given in a Tamil inscription that wraps around the central shrine (ARIE, no. 373 of 1911), although the presence of a slab in the mandapa floor dating to the reign of the Chola Raja (reigned 985–1012) suggests there was an earlier temple on the site that was replaced in the sixteenth century. The single recorded inscription at Mangapuram refers to the installation of images of the ālvars and ācāryas by 1537/38 but gives no indication of the temple’s founding (ARIE, no. 247 of 1904).

45 ARIE, nos. 255 of 1930, 245 of 1933, 111 of 1939.


47 Wagoner, “Kannada Kalla Upparige,” figs. 12c, 12d.


49 Inscriptions record grants to the temple between 1531 and 1592; see ARIE, nos. 197–98 and 200–202 of 1937–38.


51 This gopura, one of the finest monuments of Krishnadeva’s reign, collapsed on May 26, 2010; when last visited by the author in January 2011, the site had been cleared and nothing remained.

52 At Nagalapuram, a modest eleventh-century shrine was enclosed within three concentric prákāras, more than the typical one or two of other Tuluva period temples, and entered through a series of three gopuras in the west and two further aligned gopuras in the north and south walls of the outermost wall. The stone basement of the outermost gopura on the west side is among the largest built in the early sixteenth century, measuring approximately thirty by twenty meters, and is to be compared with the similarly dated inner south example of the Ekambaresvara temple at Kanchipuram, the detached gopura at Srikalahasti, and further afield in southern Karnataka, the detached gopura at Melukote. See ARIE, nos. 619–29 of 1904.

53 One exception is the fourth gopura on the main south axis of the Raṅganātha temple at Srirangam, which has niche sculptures identified as Gaṅgā and Yamunā on either side of the entrance.


56 The boar or Varaha avatāra as a royal symbol was used by a number of dynasties in the Deccan and South India from the seventh century, but not in combination with the sword, which was new in the Vijayanagara context. The sun and moon are included with inscriptions to indicate their perpetuity. R. N. Sletore, Vijayanagara Art (Delhi: Sundeepl, 1982), 183–84.

57 T. A. Gopinatha Rao, “Some Inscriptions of the later Pandyas or the Decline of the Pandya Power,” Travancore Archaeological Series 1, no. 6 (Madaras: Methodist Publishing House, 1910–12); Crispin Branfoot, “Dynastic Genealogies, Portraiture and the Place of the Past in Early Modern South India,” Aritus Asiæ 72, no. 2 (2012), 323–76. For later Pandya temple architecture dating to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, see Crispin Branfoot, Gods on the Move, 19–22.


59 Viruṇāka as the state deity at the heart of the capital never seems to have acquired a substantial following across the wider empire, as might be expected. A Viruṇāka temple was built at Kolar in the southeast Deccan in the 1440s; only four recorded early Sangama period inscriptions from three sites in northern Tamil Nadu suggest the limited dissemination of the deity’s cult to part of the Tamil country. See ARIE, nos. 50, 96–97 of 1940–41, and South Indian Inscriptions 1, no. 55.


The transformation in scholarly understanding of the Deccan from the Vijayanagara and sultanate perspectives is evident in the numerous publications, conferences, and PhD dissertations on this region in the past decade, and the major exhibition *Sultans of Deccan India, 1500–1700: Opulence and Fantasy* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (April 20–July 26, 2015).


The Minākṣī-Sundarēśvara in Madurai is an exception to this pattern, i.e., the presence of gopuras on four sides from the second, rather than the usual third, concentric prākāra wall counting outwards.

For a plan and discussion of the temple at Srimushnam, see Crispin Branfoot, “Dynastic Genealogies, Portraiture and the Place of the Past in Early Modern South India,” *Artibus Asiae* 72, no. 2 (2012), 323–76.

Pika Ghosh’s examination of Gaudiya Vaiṣṇava temples in contemporary Bengal—with a ritually determined design around two axes plus an accommodation of increasingly congregational worship—is a good parallel with the South Indian context; Pika Ghosh, *Temple to Love: Architecture and Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Bengal* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).


Contemporary temples (especially in North America) have been studied by a growing number of scholars, but few architectural historians.

Ganapathi Shapati (1927–2011) and his successors have played a leading role in transmitting Tamil temple architecture abroad. For a list of their international projects, see www.vastuved.com/vastu-overseas.htm, accessed June 13, 2014. A comparable role has been occupied by the Sompuras of western India, constructing Nāgara temples for Jain and Swaminarayan communities in their transnational diasporas.