

Hindu Temples of South India



Introduction

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South India is **the premier area in which to experience the architectural tradition of the Hindu temple**. Given that the Hindu empires of the South were able to hold off the imperial expansion of Islamic forces, Hindu architecture in South India did not suffer the same destruction as that in the North. As a result, the South's religious complexes remain largely intact, offering an abundance of temples from all time periods and empires.

This guidebook begins with an **introduction to Hindu architecture**, exploring its history and defining characteristics. With the fundamentals in place, we then go one level deeper, distinguishing between the two prevailing styles of Hindu temples: North Indian and South Indian.

We then turn our focus to the South specifically, looking at temples built by eight of the most powerful Hindu empires in **Tamil Nadu** (Pallava, Pandyan, Chola, and Nayak) and **Karnataka** (Chalukya, Rashtrakuta, Hoysala, and Vijayanagar). For each empire, we review the defining features of its architectural style, with a focus on innovations and trademark elements. The goal is to provide travelers with an appreciation of both what makes each empire's architecture unique, as well as what connects it to that of those empires that came before and those that would come after.

With this stylistic foundation in place, this Approach Guide takes travelers on **a tour of twenty-four Hindu temples in South India**, walking step-by-step through their distinctive architectural and artistic elements. Each temple's detailed profile includes **high-resolution images and floorplans** that reveal salient features with color highlights to ease identification. This tour includes the following locations:

- **Aihole (near Goa)**. Visit the site of the earliest temples in South India, the Chalukya-built Ladh Khan and Durga Temples, that bridge the gap from early Buddhist to Hindu forms.
- **Belur (near Mysore and Bangalore)**. Explore the Hoysala's Chennakeshvara Temple, a decorative masterpiece.
- **Ellora (near Mumbai)**. The stunning, rock-cut Kailasa Temple is the best example of the Rashtrakuta Empire style.
- **Halebid (near Mysore and Bangalore)**. Yet another Hoysala site, the Hoysaleswara Temple demonstrates a major step forward in the layout of the Hoysala floorplan.
- **Hampi (near Goa)**. This Vijayanagar architectural site — with its Virupaksha, Vitthala, and Hemakuta Hill Temples — makes for a really cool stop, combining a wealth of cultural sites with a laid back vibe.
- **Kanchipuram (near Chennai)**. Visit this Pallava architectural site's three impressive temples that went on to influence all future ones in South India: Kailasanatha, Vaikunthapuram, and Varadaraja Temples.
- **Mahabalipuram (near Chennai)**. This Pallava site offers some of the earliest architecture in South India, the Rathas Temples, and one of the most picturesque, the Shore Temple.
- **Madurai**. Madurai is a very religious city and offers you a great opportunity to experience an active Hindu community, best witnessed at the enormous Meenakshi Temple, constructed

in the Nayak style; however, the decoration of the little-known Kudal Alagar Perumal Temple makes it a highlight stop as well.

- **Pattadakal (near Goa).** At this site of the mature Chalukya temple style, visit the Virupaksha, Jambulinga, and Galaganatha Temples.
- **Somnathpur (near Mysore and Bangalore).** This site's Keshava Temple represents the high point of the Hoysala style; its star-shaped, triple-shrine arrangement was a breakthrough.
- **Thanjavur.** The Brihadeshvara Temple, with its massive tower, represents the Chola architectural style par excellence.

Intuitively organized and loaded with over 100 photos, this guidebook serves as an ideal reference, both for pre-travel research and on location touring.

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We hope you enjoy what we believe is a totally unique guide to the Hindu temples of South India.

Have a great trip!



David and Jennifer Raezer
Founders, Approach Guides

Hindu Temples of South India

Version 1.2

by [David Raezer](#) and [Jennifer Raezer](#)

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SITE PROFILES

Map of Temple Sites in South India

Aihole (near Goa) : Durga Temple

Aihole (near Goa) : Ladh Khan Temple

Belur (near Bangalore) : Chennakeshvara Temple

Ellora (near Aurangabad) : Kailasa *

Halebid (near Bangalore) : Hoysaleshvara Temple

Hampi (near Goa) : Overview

Hampi (near Goa) : Hemakuta Hill

Hampi (near Goa) : Virupaksha Temple

Hampi (near Goa) : Vitthala Temple

Kanchipuram (near Chennai) : Kailasanatha Temple

Kanchipuram (near Chennai) : Vaikunthaperumal Temple

Kanchipuram : Varadaraja Temple

Madurai : Meenakshi Temple

Madurai : Kudal Alagar Perumal Temple

Mahabalipuram (near Chennai) : Rathas

Mahabalipuram (near Chennai) : Shore Temple

Pattadakal (near Goa) : Galaganatha Temple

Pattadakal (near Goa) : Jambulinga Temple

Pattadakal (near Goa) : Virupaksha Temple

Somnathpur (near Bangalore) : Keshava Temple

Thanjavur : Brihadeshevara Temple

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History of Indian Temple Building

Inspired by Buddhist sanctuaries and monasteries carved into hillsides in the 3rd-2nd centuries BCE, the Hindu temples of South India represent India's grandest architectural legacy (see Fig. 1). This section provides an overview of the origins and development of the longstanding Hindu temple building tradition.

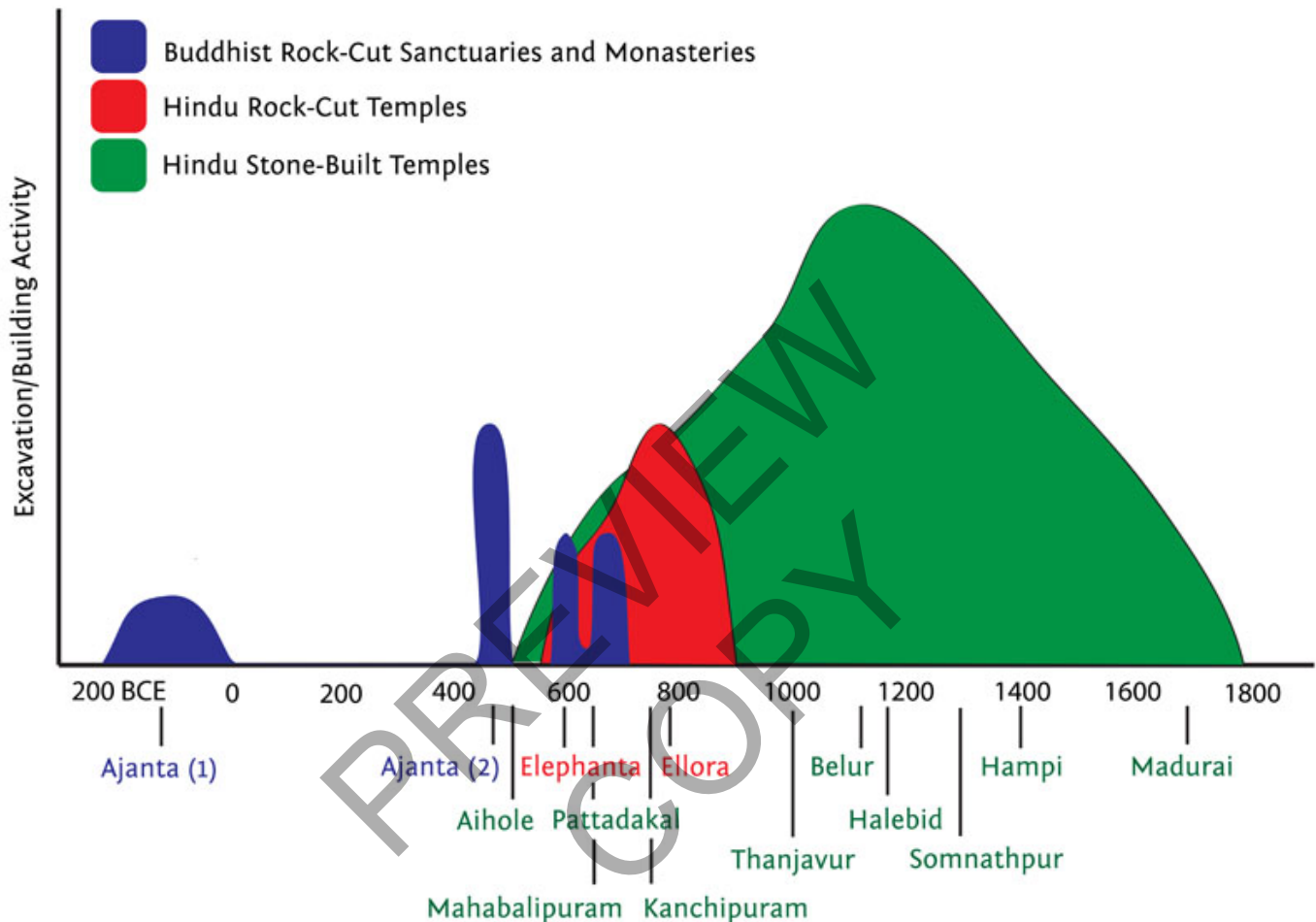


Fig. 1. Timeline of stone architecture in India.

Buddhists Pioneer Stone Architecture in India

Types of stone architecture

There are two types of stone architecture:

- **Rock cut.** Rock-cut architecture is made by carving into natural rock. Usually hewn into the sides of mountain ridges, rock-cut structures are made by excavating rock until the desired

forms are achieved.

- **Stone built.** The focus of this guidebook, stone-built architecture, on the other hand, involves assembling cut stone pieces to form a whole.

Buddhism gets the ball rolling

The first stone architecture in India was rock cut and executed by Buddhist monks; prior to these structures, all architecture had been made of wood. The most impressive examples were rock-cut religious sanctuaries, excavated directly out of the basalt mountains lining the western edge of the **Deccan Plateau**, the elevated, v-shaped landmass that comprises most of the Indian peninsula. The **caves at Ajanta** — as well as those at nearby Bedsa, Bhaja, Karla, Kondane, Nashik, and Patalkhora — were part of this **initial wave of excavations**.

Inspiration for India's rock-cut architecture

- Early Buddhist architecture was likely **indirectly inspired by that of the Egyptians**. The Egyptians were probably the first civilization in the world to construct stone architecture; they began with stone-built pyramids in the 27th century BCE (Djoser's Step Pyramid in Saqqara) and continued with rock-cut tombs in the 16th century BCE (Valley of the Kings in Luxor).
- At the same time, similar stone-built pyramids, called **ziggurats**, were being built not too far away in Mesopotamia (modern day Iran and Iraq); the earliest probably date from the late part of Sumeria's Early Dynastic period (2900-2350 BCE). The ziggurat pyramid design, however, was never transformed from stepped to smooth edged, as was the case in Egypt.
- **Egyptian and Mesopotamian forms and building practices were borrowed by the Persians, who embraced rock-cut architecture.** In fact, the royal tombs of Darius (522 BCE to 486 BCE) and the rest of the Old Persian (Achaemenid) Empire were rock cut; they are located just outside of the ancient city of Persepolis in modern-day Iran.

Most likely drawing on Persian precedent, India's earliest stone architects commenced building rock-cut architecture in the 3rd-2nd centuries BCE. These architects adapted Persian forms — infusing them with local design preferences derived from their existing wood-based architecture and introducing entirely new features to suit their unique religious practices — to create rock-cut caves with an entirely new aesthetic.

Why were the Buddhists the first to build in stone?

It appears that the Buddhists just happened to have the support of rulers and rich merchants during the critical period in which Persian rock-cut architectural practices began to trickle into the subcontinent.

Keep in mind, although the Buddhist faith was founded in India in the 6th century BCE, it did not gain widespread adoption until it received imperial sponsorship by the powerful Mauryan Emperor, Ashoka, who converted to Buddhism and ruled most of the Indian subcontinent from 269-232 BCE. The faith garnered subsequent momentum as a rising merchant class were attracted to Buddhism

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Basics of Hindu Architecture

Hindu Cosmology Shapes the Temple Form

The Hindu temple recreates the universe and every person's struggle, occurring over multiple lifetimes, to cast aside illusion in order to realize divine truth and oneness with an infinite god.

- **The mountain residence of the gods.** Under Hindu cosmology, the gods have always been associated with mountains. The temple's overall form, dominated by its large central tower (*vimana*), recreates the appearance of god's mountaintop residence.
- **God's cave.** The temple's dark inner sanctuary is designed to represent the cave into which god descends from his mountain home and becomes accessible to human beings.
- **The sacred world axis.** In the Hindu temple, the worlds of the divine and living connect at the intersection of god's vertical axis (mountaintop to cave) and humans' horizontal axis (temple entrance to cave). The entire universe emanates from this intersection, as unity with god is the goal of earthly existence. Remember, in Hinduism, god is believed to temporarily physically inhabit his representation in the sanctuary; the Hindu temple is arranged to enable the **direct devotee-to-deity interaction** that necessarily follows. Unlike other faiths, there is no religious intermediary and no abstraction; god is manifest before the devotee's eyes, a profound encounter.

Temple Layout

East-west alignment

The Hindu temple — set upon a high plinth or platform to symbolize its significance — is laid out in an east-west alignment, with the entrance on the eastern side and the sanctuary on the western.

God's mount at the temple entrance

The approach to the temple entrance (*ardha-mandapa*) is indicated by the presence of the resident divinity's mount or transport:

- **Temples venerating Shiva** (and his consort, Parvati) display stone images of his mount, Nandi (a seated bull), facing the main shrine. See [Fig. 2](#).
- **Temples dedicated to Vishnu** (and his consort, Lakshmi) display stone images of his mount, Garuda (a mythical bird), facing the main shrine.



Fig. 2. Nandi bull outside a Shiva temple. Halebid, Karnataka.

Primary Temple Structures

Hindu temples consist of a standard set of religious structures. Moving from east to west, they include:

- **Ardha-mandapa.** This is a largely open entrance pavilion, entered by passing under a *gopuram* (arched gateway), symbolic of the passage from the world of the profane to the sacred. Temple-goers ascend stairs, pass under the gopuram to the level of the ardha-man-

dapa, and then proceed into the mandapa. See **green** highlights in Fig. 3.

- **Mandapa.** The *mandapa* is positioned between the entrance pavilion and the sanctuary; it is a hall in which devotees assemble to view the deity in the sanctuary. Since ritual dances were often performed here, it is sometimes called the dancing hall. Some more advanced temples have a second larger mandapa — called a *maha mandapa* — that is located in between a smaller mandapa and the sanctuary. See **blue** (mandapa) and **yellow** (maha mandapa) highlights in Fig. 3.
- **Sanctuary.** The square-shaped sanctuary is the cave-like abode of the deity. The vimana, the main tower of the temple, rises directly above. See **red** highlights in Fig. 3.
- **Circumambulation corridor.** Circumambulation (in a clockwise direction) around the deity's internal sanctuary is critical to the faith, symbolizing the repetitive process of rebirth until illusion is cast aside. After circling the sanctuary, the faithful stand before its entrance to engage with the deity directly. The circumambulation corridor — not present in all temples — is marked with **light blue highlights** in Fig. 3.

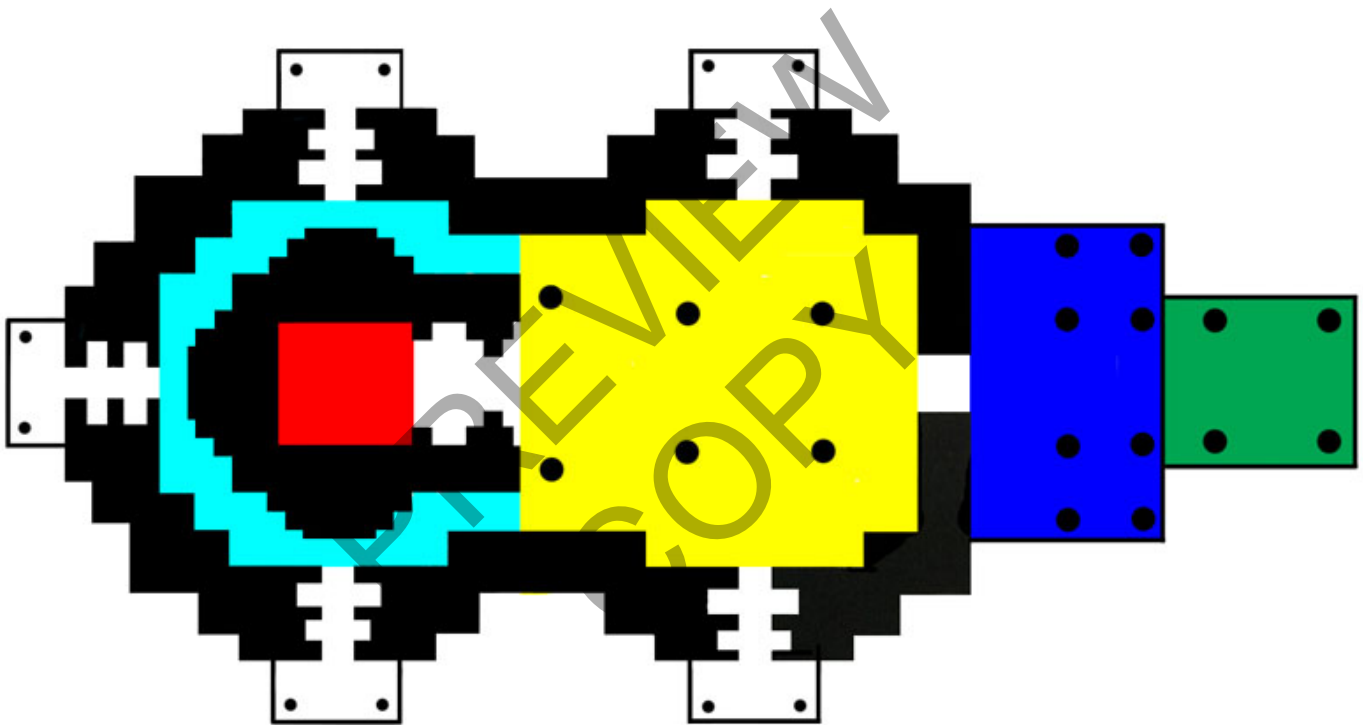


Fig. 3. Floorplan, Hindu temple (Kandariya Mahadeva, Khajuraho). Highlights added.

Recurring shapes: square and circle

Squares and circles form the basic building blocks of Hindu temples. And there is cosmological basis for this: in Hinduism, the **square is associated with the divine world** and the **circle with the human world**.

- **Square sanctuaries.** As the residence of gods, temple sanctuaries are typically square in plan (see red highlights in Fig. 3).
- **Moonstones.** Moonstones — half-circle stones that sit at the entrances to temples' ardha-

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Chalukya Empire Style

History

Two time periods and their regional contexts

- **Badami Chalukya Empire.** The early Chalukya Empire, with its capital in Badami, Karnataka, existed from the mid-5th to the 8th centuries. The Empire arose out of the ashes of the Golden Age Gupta Empire (320-550) and experienced significant cultural exchange with Tamil Nadu's Pallava Empire (discussed in the next section).
- **Interregnum** due to the rise of the Rashtrakuta Empire.
- **Western Chalukya Empire.** The later Western Chalukya Empire, with its capital in Kalyani (now Basavakalyan), Karnataka, lasted from 973 to 1180. The Empire had ongoing battles with the Tamil Nadu-based Cholas for control of the peninsula; it gave way to the Hoysalas by the end of the 12th century.

Linkage with Tamil Nadu's Pallava Empire

As mentioned earlier, there was **great cultural exchange between the Badami Chalukyas and the other leading Hindu empire of the time, the Pallava Empire** located in India's Tamil Nadu region. In fact, although there are arguments supporting the fact that both the Chalukyan and Pallava architectural styles arose independently, it is quite possible that the Pallavas gained inspiration from the Chalukyan temples in Aihole, as the Pallavas sacked and occupied Chalukyan lands in 642. This occupation lasted for thirteen years and could have been the point of transfer of Chalukyan architectural forms to the Pallavas. This argument is worth considering, particularly since no Pallava temples currently extant pre-date this occupation.

Architecture Overview

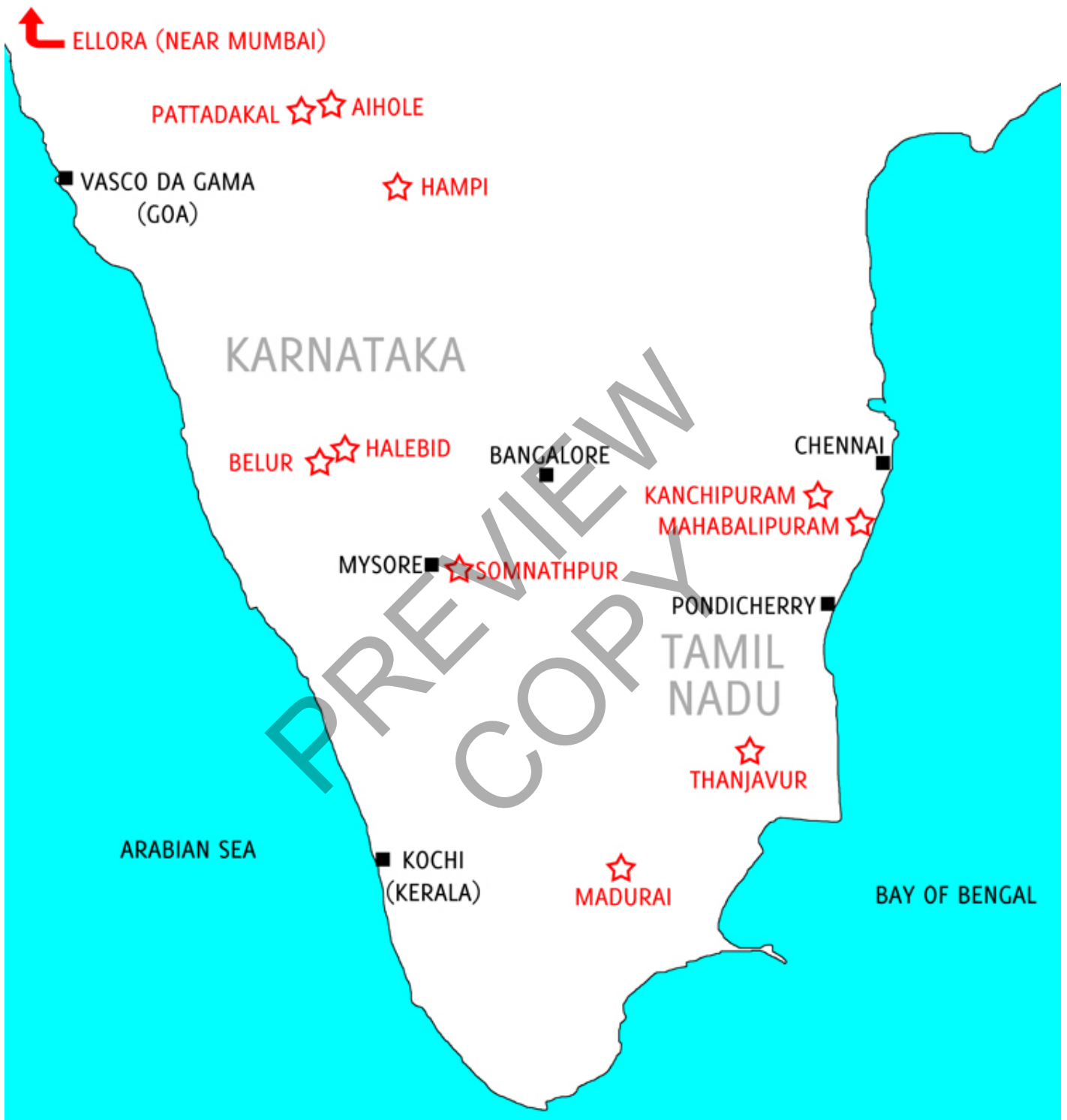
This is **one of the greatest Hindu temple building empires** and is responsible (along with the Pallava dynasty) for creating the temple design traditions that have come to characterize the Hindu temple style.

- Most important, the Chalukyas were certainly **one of the first to translate the rock-hewn Buddhist monastery (vihara) and sanctuary (chaitya) cave forms into stone-built architectural forms**. We see the first experimentation with this transformation from rock-hewn to stone-built structures in Aihole — the influence of the earlier Buddhist structures is clear, most notably in the temple floorplans.
- The Chalukyas created what evolved into both the North and South Indian temple styles. As such, the architecture of the Chalukyas is known as “**vesara**”, a blended North-South style. Albeit still in experimental form, elements of both styles are apparent, most clearly so in

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Map of Temple Sites in South India



Aihole (near Goa) : Durga Temple

Location: Aihole (near Goa), Karnataka. The temple was built from 733-44.

Style: Chalukya Empire

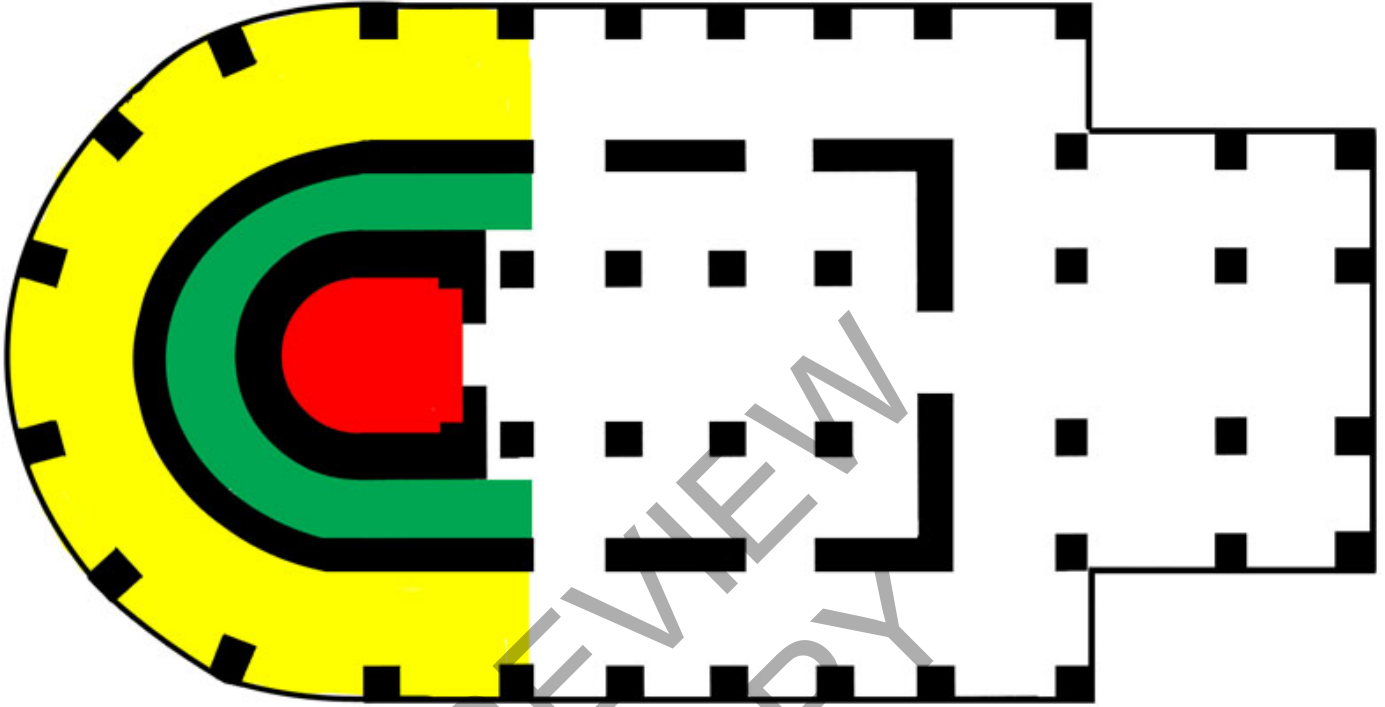


Fig. 17. Floorplan, Durga Temple, Aihole. Highlights added.

Profile

- The **curved, apsidal shape of western side of the core sanctuary** (red highlights in **Fig. 17**), echoed in its surrounding walls, is the most recognizable feature of the temple. This shape was clearly **inspired by earlier Buddhist structures**. However, unlike Ladh Khan that was influenced by the square shape of the Buddhist monastery (called a **vihara**), this temple was influenced by the other primary Buddhist form, the apsidal sanctuary hall (called a **chaitya**). To demonstrate the borrowing, we have also included an image of such an earlier structure, specifically, a chaitya in Ajanta, India (see **Fig. 19**).
- The temple arrangement provides both **internal and external ambulatories** (green and yellow highlights, respectively, in **Fig. 17**) for circumambulation of the sanctuary.
- While still rudimentary, the **vimana tower superstructure** (red highlights in **Fig. 18**) **has advanced considerably since Ladh Khan**. That said, it remains unbalanced and incongruent in shape relative to the underlying temple structure; this will gradually morph into more balanced tower forms in the future. This tower structure is “vesara” in that it likely gave form to the towers of both North and South India.



Fig. 18. Durga Temple, Aihole.

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Thanjavur : Brihadeshevara Temple

Location: Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu. This magnificent temple, dedicated to Shiva, was built in 1000 by Rajaraja Chola I, the greatest of the Chola king-builders.

Style: Chola Empire

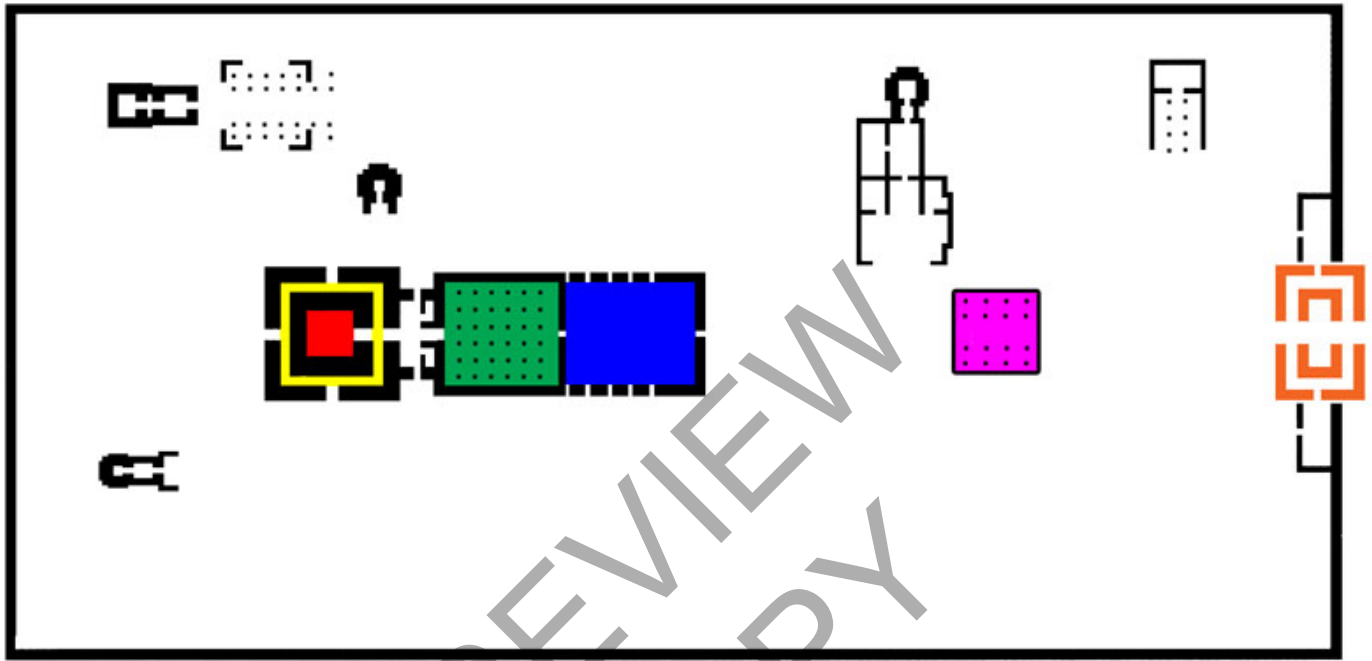


Fig. 113. Floorplan, temple compound, Brihadeshevara Temple. Highlights added.

Layout

- Visitors to the temple enter through a **large gopuram** (orange highlights in Fig. 113).
- A 16th century Nayak Period **Nandi pavilion** (pink highlights in Fig. 113) stands to the east of the primary temple.
- The temple itself has an open **entrance hall** (ardha-mandapa; blue highlights in Fig. 113 and Fig. 114 for location; and Fig. 115), also dating from the Nayak Period (1559-1736), that affords access to the original, enclosed **hypostyle hall** (mandapa; green highlights in Fig. 113 and Fig. 114).
- The hypostyle hall, in turn, leads to the square garbha-griha **sanctuary** (red highlights Fig. 113 and Fig. 114), which is surrounded by an **ambulatory** (yellow highlights Fig. 113 and Fig. 114).
- The **entrances to the core sanctuary** are flanked by enormous guardian figures wielding clubs.

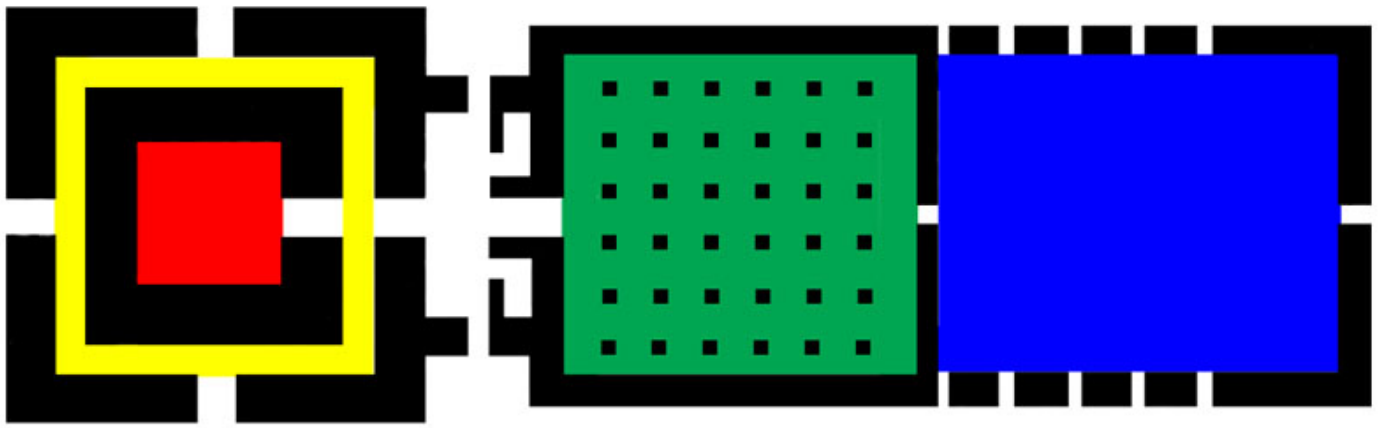


Fig. 114. Floorplan, core temple, Brihadeshevara Temple. Highlights added.

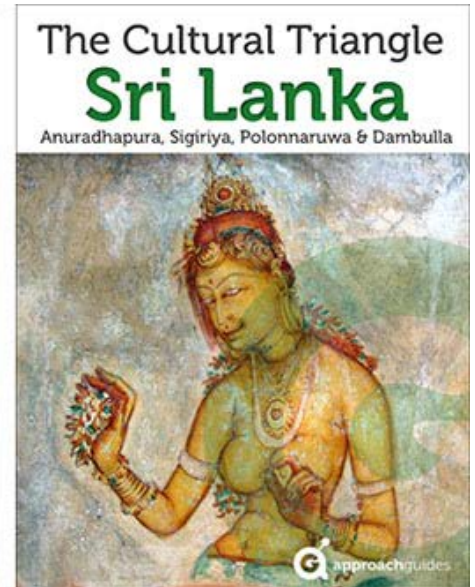
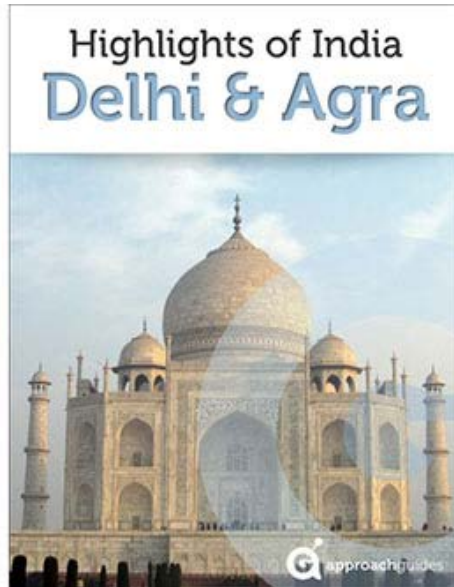
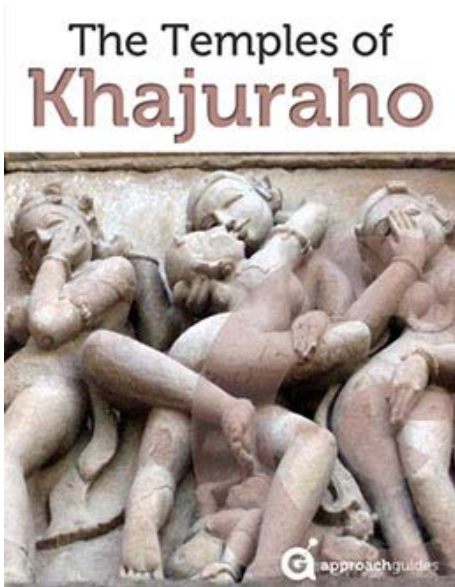
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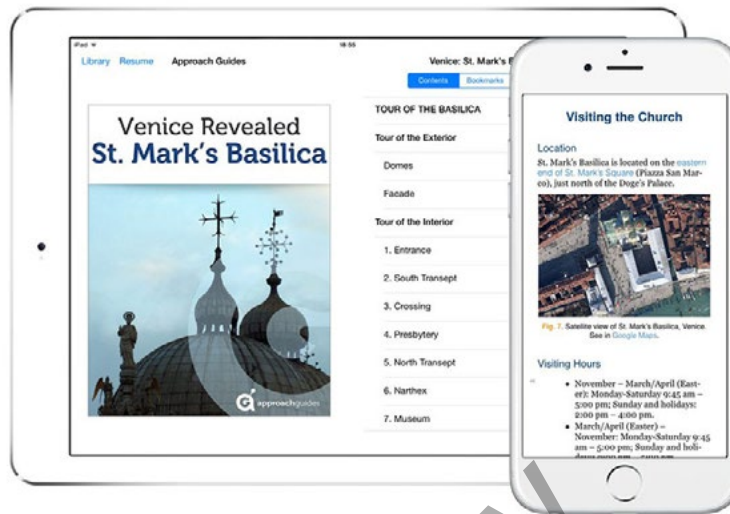
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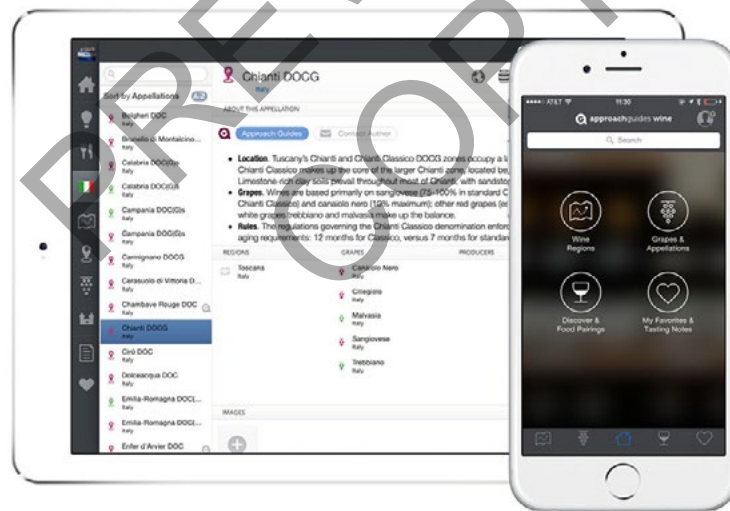
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