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The Art and Architecture of the Shore Temples of Mahabalipuram: An Ancient Treasure by the Sea

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Abstract: *The Shore Temples of Mahabalipuram, a UNESCO World Heritage site, are an exemplary representation of the artistic and architectural prowess of the ancient Pallava dynasty. Situated along the Coromandel Coast of the Bay of Bengal in Tamil Nadu, India, these temples showcase a unique fusion of Dravidian architectural styles, reflecting the historical context and cultural influences of the time. This article provides an in-depth exploration of the Shore Temples, Arjuna's Penance, Pancha Pandava Rathas, cave temples, and their conservation efforts, as well as the cultural significance and history of the Pallava dynasty.*

Key Words: Shore Temples, Mahabalipuram, Pallava dynasty, Dravidian architecture, Rathas, cave temples.

Introduction- The Shore Temples of Mahabalipuram, also known as Mamallapuram, are a breathtaking testimony to the architectural prowess and artistic sensibilities of the ancient Pallava dynasty. Situated on the Coromandel Coast of the Bay of Bengal, in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, these temples have been classified as a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1984. The Shore Temples, dating back to the 7th and 8th centuries, are a stunning example of Dravidian architecture and have, over the centuries, attracted numerous travelers, scholars, and art enthusiasts from around the world.

Historical Context- The Shore Temples are part of the larger Group of Monuments at Mahabalipuram, built by the Pallava kings during the 7th and 8th centuries. The Pallava dynasty was a powerful South Indian dynasty that ruled over the region from the 3rd to the 9th century. During their reign, the Pallavas made significant contributions to the fields of art, architecture, and literature. It was under the rule of King Narasimhavarman II, also known as Rajasimha, that the Shore Temples were built between 700 and 728 CE.

The construction of the Shore Temples coincided with a period of increased maritime trade between South India and Southeast Asia, which contributed to the spread of Indian culture and the evolution of temple architecture in the region. The Pallavas took inspiration from their contemporaries and integrated various architectural elements from other regions, creating a unique style that continues to inspire admiration today.

The Monuments- The Shore Temples complex consists of three primary temples, dedicated to Hindu deities Shiva and Vishnu. The primary temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva and features two sanctums, while the secondary temples are dedicated to Lord Vishnu and Shiva respectively.

1. The Shiva Temple: The main temple, dedicated to Lord Shiva, is the largest and most magnificent of the three. This temple is a structural masterpiece, featuring an east-facing sanctum with a 16-sided Shivalinga and a west-facing sanctum housing a Somaskanda panel. The temple's vimana (tower) rises to a height of approximately 60 feet, adorned with intricately carved sculptures and friezes, which narrate tales from Hindu mythology. The temple complex also includes a large Nandi bull, the mount of Lord Shiva, carved out of a single rock. The temple is surrounded by smaller shrines and subsidiary structures, which add to the grandeur of the complex. Among these structures is a shrine dedicated to the goddess Durga, which houses an intricately carved panel depicting the deity slaying the demon Mahishasura.

2. The Vishnu Temple: This smaller temple, dedicated to Lord Vishnu, is situated between the two Shiva temples. The temple houses a reclining Vishnu sculpture, known as Anantasayana, which represents the deity in a state of cosmic slumber. The temple's outer walls feature exquisite carvings of various incarnations of Vishnu,



including Varaha, Narasimha, and Trivikrama.

3. The Second Shiva Temple: This temple is located to the north of the main Shiva temple and features a sanctum with a Shivalinga. The temple's outer walls are adorned with intricate carvings of Shiva, his consort Parvati, and their sons Ganesha and Kartikeya.

The Shore Temples also exhibit a wealth of art, ranging from intricate bas-reliefs to larger-than-life sculptures. They represent a confluence of the artistic styles of the Pallava period, blending elements of naturalism, symbolism, and narrative storytelling. The temples showcase intricate carvings and iconography that reflect the religious beliefs and cultural practices of the time. The complex also features numerous inscriptions in ancient Tamil and Grantha scripts, which provide valuable insights into the history and administration of the Pallava dynasty.

4. Arjuna's Penance- Arjuna's Penance, also known as the Descent of the Ganges, is an extraordinary bas-relief situated close to the Shore Temples in Mahabalipuram. Measuring approximately 96 feet in length and 43 feet in height, it is one of the largest bas-reliefs in the world. Carved on two massive boulders, the relief represents a significant episode from the Indian epic Mahabharata. According to one interpretation, the relief depicts Arjuna, one of the Pandava brothers, standing on one leg to perform a severe penance to please Lord Shiva. Arjuna seeks Shiva's aid to obtain the divine weapon Pashupatastra, which he needs to win the impending Kurukshetra war. In another interpretation, the relief represents the descent of the sacred river Ganges from the heavens to the earth, brought about by King Bhagiratha's penance.

The carving is a masterpiece of visual storytelling, featuring over a hundred figures of gods, celestial beings, animals, and humans. It showcases the artistic brilliance of the Pallava sculptors, as well as their deep understanding of nature, which is evident in the realistic depiction of animals like elephants, monkeys, and deer. The relief is also a testament to the technical skill and knowledge of the ancient craftsmen, who employed innovative techniques to create depth and dimension in the composition.

Architectural Features and Cultural Significance- The Shore Temples and other monuments in Mahabalipuram exemplify the Pallava dynasty's architectural innovations and mastery over stone carving. The Dravidian style of architecture, which is prevalent in these monuments, is characterized by the use of sandstone and granite, intricately carved columns, pilasters, and capitals, as well as elaborate gopurams (entrance towers) and vimanas (temple towers). The Shore Temples also display the early stages of the development of the Dravidian style, with the influence of other regional styles evident in their design and ornamentation.

The fusion of architectural elements from different regions and cultures is a hallmark of the Pallava period. The Shore Temples incorporate features from the Gupta and Chalukya architectural traditions, such as the square sanctum, the circumambulatory passage, and the pyramidal tower. The decorative elements, such as the ornate carvings and relief sculptures, reflect the Pallavas' deep understanding of Hindu iconography, mythology, and aesthetics. The cultural significance of the Shore Temples extends beyond their architectural and artistic achievements. As centres of worship and religious activity, the temples played a crucial role in the spiritual life of the people during the Pallava period. Additionally, the temples served as a symbol of the political power and authority of the Pallava kings, who commissioned their construction as a demonstration of their patronage of the arts and their commitment to the propagation of Hinduism.

The Shore Temples and other monuments in Mahabalipuram also reflect the cultural exchanges that took place during the Pallava period, as a result of increased maritime trade and contact with other regions. The art and architecture of the temples were influenced by artistic traditions from Southeast Asia, as well as by the Gupta and Chalukya dynasties of northern India. The Shore Temples, therefore, stand as a testament to the cosmopolitan nature of the Pallava dynasty and the cultural syncretism that characterized this period in Indian history.

Conservation and Threats- The Shore Temples, along with the other monuments of Mahabalipuram, have



withstood the ravages of time, weather, and natural disasters for over a millennium. However, they continue to face various threats, including erosion from the sea, environmental pollution, and damage from tourism. Conservation efforts have been undertaken by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and other organisations to protect and preserve these ancient treasures.

In recent years, efforts have focused on preventing further erosion of the temple structures, caused primarily by the encroaching sea. Sea-wall construction and sandbagging have been employed to safeguard the temples from further damage. Additionally, restoration and preservation work has been carried out on the sculptures and bas-reliefs to ensure their longevity.

The ongoing conservation work at Mahabalipuram also includes measures to manage and regulate tourism, as the increasing number of visitors poses a threat to the delicate structures and artwork. Education and awareness programs have been initiated to inform visitors about the importance of preserving these ancient monuments and the responsible tourism practices they should follow.

Conclusion- The Shore Temples of Mahabalipuram, along with the accompanying monuments of Arjuna's Penance, the Pancha Pandava Rathas, and the cave temples, stand as an enduring testament to the artistic and architectural achievements of the ancient Pallava dynasty. As a UNESCO World Heritage site, they continue to captivate visitors with their intricate art, ornate carvings, and majestic structures. These ancient temples not only offer a glimpse into the past but also serve as a reminder of the importance of preserving our cultural heritage for future generations to appreciate and admire. By exploring the rich history of these monuments, we can gain a better understanding of the diverse artistic traditions and architectural innovations that have shaped India's cultural landscape over the centuries. With ongoing conservation efforts and responsible tourism practices, the Shore Temples of Mahabalipuram and their accompanying monuments can continue to enchant and inspire visitors for generations to come.

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