

Thanjavur's Brihadeeswara temple in photographs

Baishali Adak, Dec 12, 2013, DHNS :



A wonderful exhibition awaits art and history connoisseurs of Delhi at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA). As part of a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) project, IGNCA is showcasing over 100 photographs of Thanjavur's acclaimed Brihadeeswara Temple. Also on display are recreations of inscriptions found at the temple, murals, sculptures as well as a life-size lingam - the presiding deity of Brihadeeswara, the largest temple of India.

Brihadeeswara, built by Tamil king Rajaraja Chola in 1010 CE, is the finest specimen of Tamil temple art in the country. With a vimana (temple tower) 66 m high, Brihadeeswara has several layers of artwork to it. Successive rulers such as the Pandyas, Nayaka and Marathas also went on adding shrines, murals, inscriptions and sculptures to it, astoundingly perfectly-proportionate to the size of the original temple structure.

On account of its distinct form and beauty, UNESCO declared it a world heritage monument.

Despite excellent research done by scholars on individual aspects of the temple, no study had been commissioned on the structure as a whole. So in 2010, the central Government initiated a comprehensive and in-depth study of Brihadeeswara involving national and international experts. As part of popularising the findings, IGNCA has published three booklets on the subject so far and is now holding this exhibition along with a short film screening.

What is most remarkable about this exhibition is its display. The photographs have been arranged at Matighar, the beautiful domed gallery of IGNCA which has three concentric rings. Photographs have been put up on the walls of these rings and one walks along them to reach the innermost vault which has a large black shiv ling. This is imitating the structure of the temple which has outer and inner walls for circumambulations and then the sanctum sanctorum housing the Brihadeeswara ling.

So one starts with large photographs of the temple, charts explaining its dimensions, a beautiful cloth and paper recreation of an inscription and the various shrines – Amman, Ganesa, Subramanya, Nandi Mandap, Karuvur Devar etc. All of these are accompanied by detailed information boards. Then, the inner ring has photographs of the murals and designs. It is said that artists during the Nayaka era painted fresh murals on the inner temple wall without removing the ones created during Chola time. These were discovered only in 1930.

Then we come to sculptures of various forms of Shiva as etched on the temple walls – Chandrashekhara, Rudra, Isana, Vamdeva, Gangadhar etc. These are a pleasure to see and the text truly enlightening. At last, we pay our obeisance to the Shiv lingam in the inner vault.

It is akin to a virtual tour of the Brihadeeswara temple right here in Delhi, and a truly spiritual experience at that.