

Not just another temple

HERITAGE A mammoth project undertaken by IGNC A 20 years ago has resulted in an exhaustive multimedia DVD and an elaborate exhibition.

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Don't just land up at Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) to see the Brhadisvara exhibition if you happen to be in Lutyens' Delhi. Plan your visit so that you can enjoy watching this exhibition with as much love as it has been put up with. An elaborate affair, it can't be covered in a jiffy by anybody genuinely interested in art, design, architecture, music, dance and in fact any aspect of culture. Given that IGNC A has been working on the project — a complex multimedia programme on Brhadisvara Temple — for 20 years, an outcome of this scale was expected. So, there you have "Tanjavur Brhadisvara Temple: The Monument and the Living Tradition", an expansive exhibition accompanied by the launch of an interactive multimedia DVD and a set of seven DVDs which have the audio-visual documentation of the monument in Tanjavur, Tamil Nadu, that has been inscribed by UNESCO as a world heritage monument. The DVDs were launched simultaneously on the day when the exhibition was inaugurated, which was last week.

Covered in its entirety, the project looks at every possible aspect of the temple, considered an engineering marvel. "A temple is not about going and breaking a coconut there. A temple says so much and certainly this one. How did Rajaraja Chola, construct this wonder 1000 years ago when there was no machinery to aid his workers," says R.Nagaswamy, former Director, Department of Archaeology, State Government of Tamil Nadu, and also the Chief Coordinator of the Brhadisvara Project.

Employing myriad means, the project, led by Nagaswamy and guided by Kapila Vatsyayan, seeks to explore what makes the structure as the finest achievement of Chola art and architecture. "For that we had to undertake scientific investigation of the temple for which in turn we had to involve a lot of institutions. Great planning was done before the construction. We wanted to understand how

and why it was done. It is an engineering wonder which crystallised the whole concept of cosmos," explains Nagaswamy, believed to be an authority on the subject.

The exhibition attempts to give glimpses of the mammoth project by displaying architectural surveys, measured drawings of the monument, photographs of thousands of sculptures and murals spread across the structure, digital reproduction of the inscriptions and audio-visual documentation of the rituals, customs and fairs in the DVDs.

While the Cholas constructed the initial lay out, it was subsequently worked upon by Pandyas, Nayakas and Marathas. Organised on a linear plan, the exhibition presents drawings of different areas of the temple complex which is handled even more in-depth in the DVD.

Access to the temple is through two pyramidal entrances, towers called gopuras, which were built by Rajaraja. The most striking feature of the temple is the vimana or the main sanctuary tower, standing over 65 meters in height and built entirely in stone. Consisting of the inner and outer wall, divided by a corridor, the sanctuary tower encloses the sacred chamber called garbagrham which has the Linga, the main deity of the temple. The circular structure of the Maati Ghar tries to recreate the garbagrham "in terms of position. The photographs of the murals and figures appear at the same position as they are found on the walls surrounding the sanctum sanctorum." And then there is the Linga, which is exactly of the same size as the original.

The different shrines housed within the temple complex — Amman Shrine, Subrahmanya Shrine, Ganesa Shrine, Nataraja Shrine etc. — are equally well-documented. The DVD provides a virtual tour of the entire temple complex. A click on the shrine reveals to the visitor information about its architecture,



its iconography and murals associated with it. Murals are divided into various sections — faces, animals and birds, jewellery etc. "So many figures that you will feel are nude aren't nude actually, if you look closely. They are clothed in a very fine cloth, they wove at that time. So, our study gave us insights into various such things," says Nagaswamy.

Scenes of Shiva Purana from the Nayaka period found on the inside walls of the inner ambulatory, Maratha paintings, portraits of Maratha rulers done during the reign of Serfojee in 1855, metal images of Shivakami and Shiva, Tamil inscriptions recording different aspects of the temple constructions — the measurements and even the gifts and grants made by Rajaraja and his family towards the temple —

are just few of the treasures the temple houses in terms of art. Interestingly in the DVD, a click on the figures — various manifestations of Shiva — doles out information on the visual representation but also the shloka related to it. "There is an in-

terview with Kitappa Pillai, the late artiste, who talks about the association between his family and temple, where they have been performing for years. At the time of Rajaraja, there were 400 dancers and 250 musicians which indicates that music and

dance were intrinsic part of the temple life. Mahakumbhaabhishekam which happens after every 12 years is another integral part of the DVD. Then there are daily rituals and customs which make the temple a living tradition."

(The exhibition is on at

Maati Ghar, IGNC A, Janpath, till December 20. The interactive multimedia DVD (priced at Rs.300) and other 7 DVDs on the temple (priced at Rs.100 each) are available at the sale counter of IGNC A.)

A TREASURE TROVE OF ART (Clockwise from top right) Goddess Brahmanayaki to whom is dedicated the Amman Shrine; Nandi Mandapa inside the temple complex; a Maratha painting depicting a Kathak dancer; a Chola painting 'Kalyana Sundara'; Brhadisvara Temple (above) sculpture of the deity 'Ayudha-Purusa Shakti'.

