Not just another temple

HERITAGE A mammoth project undertaken by IGNCA 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 Delhi. Plan your visit so that you can enjoy watching this exhibition wish 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 IGNCA 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 Brhadesvara Temple: The Monument and the Living Tradition", an 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 Brhadesvara Project.

Employing myriad means, the project, led by Nagaswamy and guided by Kapila Vatsyayan, seeks to explore what makes the structure the finest achievement of Chola art and architecture. "For the first time, we had a 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, who, according to the project, is the only 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 temples. 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 sanctu- ary tower, standing over 65 metres 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 garbagham which has the Linga, the main deity of the temple. The circular structure of the Masti Ghar tries to recreate the garbagham "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, Ganesh Shrine, Nataraja Shrine, etc—are equally well-documented. The DVD provides a virtual tour of the entire temple constructions—the measurements and even the gifts and grants made by Rajaraja and his family towards the temple—are just a few of the treasures the temple houses in terms of art. Interestingly in the DVD, a click on the figures—various manifestations of Shiva—displays out the information on the visual representation but also the shloka related to it. There is an interview with Kitappa Pillai, the late artist 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. Mahakumbhabhishekam which happens 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 Mastring Ghur, IGNCA, 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 IGNCA.)