

# Grandeur of the Chola temples

Images of 1,000-year-old temples in South India leave **Aneeta Sundararaj** amazed and intrigued

ONCE upon a time, almost 1,000 years ago, the Tamil king, Raja Raja Chola, founded the Chola Empire. He also built a beautiful temple called, Brihadisvara in his capital, Thanjavur.

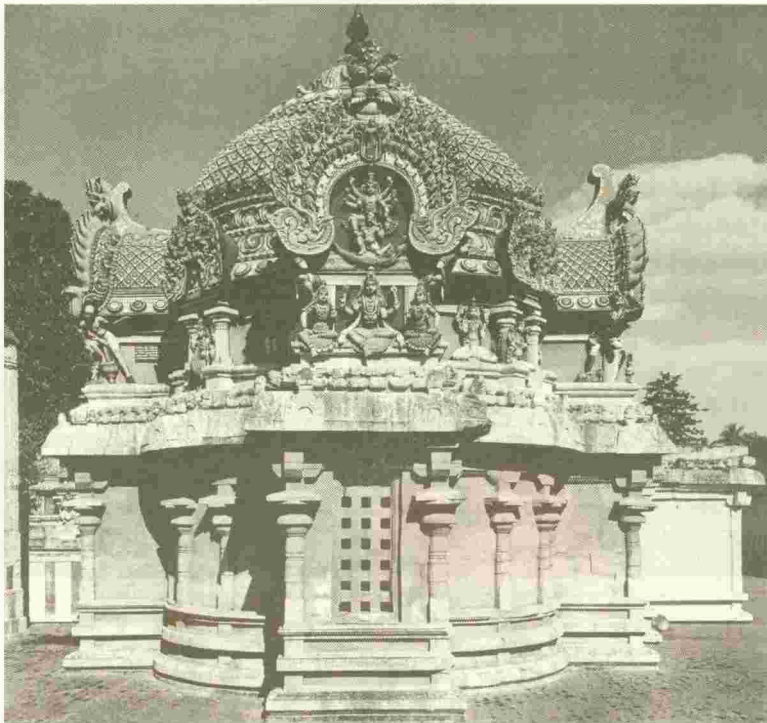
Later, his son, King Raja Rajendra Chola built his own capital called Gangaikondacholapuram. This king also built a temple and called it Brihadisvara as well. This temple was completed in 1035 AD. Their descendant, King Raja Raja II built one more stunning temple at Darasuram.

The three temples, part of a complex of temples gazetted as a Unesco World Heritage site since 1987 (called "The Great Living Chola Temples"), are the subject of a photo exhibition, Grandeur Of The Chola Temples Of India, sponsored by India's Ministry of Culture and Tourism.

This exhibition, which has been travelling around the country, showcases 65 photographs from a vast collection of more than 2,000 images of the temples, the sculptures, paintings and bronze artefacts. The exhibition is curated by Dr Vandhana Sinha and her team at the Centre For Art & Archaeology, American Institute of Indian Studies in New Delhi.

The 45-year-old curator explains during our meeting: "We found the negatives of these photographs from our archives and digitally restored them. It was hard to choose just 65 from over 2,000 negatives. So we chose those which represented the best elements and features of these structures."

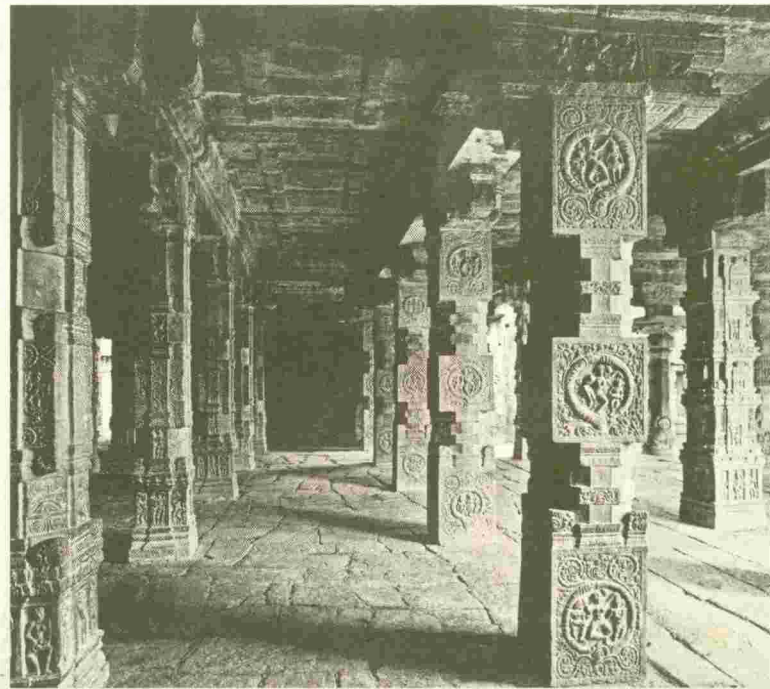
Raju Mansukhani, 52, a former



General view of the shrine from the west (11th century).

journalist who is also involved in putting together this exhibition, shares that after the images were digitally restored, they were printed onto canvas sheets and shipped to Malaysia for this exhibition.

The chatter among guests at the launch recently was that the walls of these Chola temples reveal a fascinating piece of history that has



Interior of a colonnade at the Airavatesvara temple, Darasuram. (12th century).

a direct link with Malaysia and, in particular, the archaeological site in Bujang Valley, Kedah.

To understand this link, it's important to keep in mind that, at first, King Raja Raja Chola conquered the whole of South India, present-day Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Then, his son, King Raja Rajendra Chola expanded the Chola kingdom northwards. In fact, the temple-city he built, Gangaikondacholapuram, was said to mean City Of The Chola Who Brought The Ganges.

He also launched a naval expedition to Southeast Asia. In 1025 AD, he conquered the maritime power Srivijaya and many other port cities on both Sumatra and the Malay peninsula. Details of this expedition, a description of Kadaram (present-day Kedah) and the Bujang Valley are inscribed on the walls of these temples.

"I wish we could have printed

these images to scale to show Malaysians just how enormous these buildings were," says Mansukhani. "I mean, they were 366m by 244m. Imagine that. There is nowhere in the world you can find such engineering marvels."

His excitement is infectious. He adds: "Each temple-city was a boost to the local economy. The entire area was very fertile with paddy fields. They were rich. These temple-cities were also the royal seats of power for

each of these kings and they built these temples as their symbols of power."

Describing these temples as the zenith of Chola architecture, Mansukhani suggests an interesting angle when he says that

a map showing the distribution of religious monuments in India will reveal a remarkable fact: While the rest of India have monuments that are spread out, the Chola kingdom has hundreds crowded in a small space. This is because for close to 400 years, Tamil Nadu remained free of foreign invaders that destroyed a large number of sacred monuments in northern India.

Finally, Mansukhani makes the following pertinent statement: "These temples have lasted for more than 1,000 years. How many other structures can you say lasted this long? In fact, how many built today can you say will last 1,000 years?" None of the guests listening to him have a suitable answer.

The exhibition will continue in Sungai Petani from May 23 for 10 days. Details at <http://indianhighcommission.com.my>

General view from the south east of the Brihadisvara temple at Thanjavur (11th century).

