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Q2

Estimate the contribution of Pallavas of Kanchi for the development of Art and literature of South India.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · GS I · 10 marks · Indian Heritage and Culture

Indian culture will cover the salient aspects of Art Forms, literature and Architecture from ancient to modern times.

Core demand of the question

- Estimate the Pallava contribution to South Indian art
- Estimate the Pallava contribution to South Indian literature

Revision summary

The Pallavas moved South Indian temple building from rock-cut caves to monolithic rathas and then to structural stone temples.

Mahabalipuram and the Kailasanatha temple at Kanchipuram are the main sites of that change.

Mahendravarman's Mattavilasa and the Sanskrit writers of Kanchi stood beside Tamil Bhakti hymns.

Alvars and Nayanmars used Pallava-period temples as places for Tamil devotion.

Grantha script and temple inscriptions carried both Sanskrit and Tamil into the Chola age.

Later Cholas built on a larger scale. They did not have to invent the basic temple form.

Introduction

The **Pallavas of Kanchi** ruled the Tamil coast from about the sixth to the ninth century. In that period they changed how temples were built in stone, and they also supported writing in Sanskrit and in Tamil. Their art stands between the early cave shrine and the later structural temple. Their literature stands between court poetry and the growth of **Bhakti** songs in Tamil. Any fair estimate must cover both art and literature. **Mahabalipuram** is their best-known site, but it is not their only work. The Tevaram hymns belong to the same centuries, but they are not the only literary voice of the Pallava age.

Body

Stone: cave, ratha, structural temple

Mahendravarman I cut early **rock-cut mandapas**. The **Mandagapattu** inscription names him as a king who built a shrine without brick, timber, metal or mortar. **Narasimhavarman I (Mamalla)** developed **Mahabalipuram**. There he left the **Pancha Rathas**, the open-air relief of Arjuna's Penance (also called the Descent of the Ganga), and a port that faced the sea. **Narasimhavarman II (Rajasimha)** built **structural** stone temples. The **Shore Temple** at Mamallapuram and the **Kailasanatha at Kanchipuram** belong to his reign. **The sequence is clear: first the cave, then the monolith, then the dressed-stone vimana. Later Chola**

and **Rashtrakuta** builders used this sequence as a model.

Pallava sculpture tells stories. It does not only show a single god in a still pose. Gods, animals and ordinary people share the same cliff face. The **Dravida** vimana with storeys became a standard South Indian form. The habit of placing a royal temple in the capital also became a lasting practice.

- **Experiment:** **Mandagapattu** and other mahendra-style caves show a new way of cutting a shrine from living rock.
- **Open-air composition:** Mamallapuram's rathas and reliefs taught later sthapatis how to arrange figures in stone.
- **Capital temple:** Kailasanatha shows the move from experiment to a finished royal style.

Letters: Sanskrit court and Tamil devotion

Pallava kings were **literate patrons**. Mahendravarman wrote the satiric play **Mattavilasa Prahasana**. **Dandin** wrote Kavyadarsha and Dashakumaracharita. Memory of **Bharavi** also belongs to this Kanchi Sanskrit setting. The **Grantha** script wrote Sanskrit in the Tamil country. At the same time the **Alvars** and **Nayanmars** sang in Tamil. The **Tevaram** and Vaishnava hymns used Pallava-period temples as places of worship and song. Art and bhakti supported each other. A stone scene of the Ganga's descent and a Tamil hymn both pointed worshippers to the same sacred landscape.

- **Sanskrit drama and poetics:** The court made Kanchi a southern centre of classical letters.
- **Tamil Bhakti:** Temple and hymn grew together. The Pallava shrine became a hall for Tamil devotion.
- **Script:** Grantha and Tamil inscriptions carried both languages into the Chola age.

The estimate of Pallava contribution is high, but it is not exclusive. Chalukya and later Chola work surpassed the Pallavas in scale. The Pallavas still remain the first dynasty to fix the coastal **Dravida** temple kit in stone and to keep a bilingual literary court.

Flow diagram

Pallavas of Kanchi -> Mahendra rock-cut caves
 Pallavas of Kanchi -> Mamalla Mahabalipuram
 Pallavas of Kanchi -> Rajasimha Shore and Kailasanatha
 Pallavas of Kanchi -> Sanskrit Mattavilasa Dandin
 Pallavas of Kanchi -> Tamil Alvar Nayanmar

Conclusion

Pallava Kanchi showed South India how to cut a cave, how to stand a ratha, and how to raise a structural vimana. It also housed Sanskrit poetics beside Tamil Bhakti. Later dynasties built larger temples. They still used the forms that the Pallavas had first set in stone and in writing.

Facts & figures

Mandagapattu

An inscription of Mahendravarman I records a rock-cut shrine made without brick, timber, metal or mortar.

Shore Temple and Kailasanatha

Structural stone temples of Narasimhavarman II (Rajasimha) at Mamallapuram and Kanchipuram.

Mattavilasa Prahasana

A satiric Sanskrit play attributed to Mahendravarman I, evidence of a literary court.

UNESCO Mamallapuram

The Group of Monuments at Mahabalipuram is listed for the Pallava rock-cut and structural corpus.

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