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Q11

"Though the great Cholas are no more, yet their name is still remembered with great pride because of their highest achievements in the domain of art and architecture." Comment.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · GS I · 15 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

- Comment on the claim that the great Cholas are remembered with pride mainly for their highest achievements in art and architecture
- Show what those achievements were, and how far the praise is fair

Revision summary

The Cholas are remembered for the living temples at Thanjavur, Gangaikonda Cholapuram, and Darasuram.

Rajaraja I and **Rajendra I** used the granite vimana as a royal and sacred statement.

Lost-wax bronzes, especially Nataraja and processional icons, are the other half of that achievement.

Painting and inscriptions show the temple as court, archive, and cult.

The praise is fair on artistic quality. It is incomplete if navy, irrigation, and agrarian order are left out.

Later builders enlarged the Dravida form. The Chola high point remains the imperial vimana and the bronze.

Introduction

The **Chola dynasty** of the Tamil country, especially under **Rajaraja I** and **Rajendra I**, is remembered in India for large stone temples and bronze images. Those kings built temples that are still used for worship. Their sculptors made the **Nataraja** bronze that is now widely known. The same state also kept a navy, a land-revenue system, and a ritual form of kingship. Pride in Chola art is justified. A complete comment must also name the political and economic power that paid for that art.

Body**Imperial temples as state and stone**

The **Brihadisvara** temple at Thanjavur was built by Rajaraja I. It is a granite **Dravida** temple with a tall **vimana**, a large **Shiva** image, and walls that still hold painting and inscriptions of court life. **Gangaikonda Cholapuram** was Rajendra's new capital after his Ganga expedition. He built a second great linga shrine there. **Airavatesvara** at Darasuram, built under a later Chola, is smaller and more finely carved. Together these three are the **Great Living Chola**

Temples, a UNESCO set, because worship has continued in them. The temple was also a political building. It held treasure, staged public ritual, and showed the king's claim to cosmic order. The **Dravida** form of a storeyed vimana, an enclosed prakara, and later gateway growth is taught in these courtyards.

- **Thanjavur:** The temple shows large scale, axial planning, and a royal cult of Rajarajesvara.
- **Gangaikonda:** Military success in the north was marked by a second sacred capital.
- **Darasuram:** Later Chola work refined the earlier height and mass of Thanjavur.

Bronze, painting and processional images

Chola **bronzes** were made by the **lost-wax (cire perdue)** method. They are the other half of the artistic achievement. The **Nataraja**, the processional **utsava murti**, and the **Uma-Maheshvara** groups were meant to be carried in festival streets. They were not meant only to sit in a garbhagriha. This was art used in public religion. Murals in the Thanjavur circumambulatory, where they survive, and temple jewellery complete the same programme. Stone sculpture of dvarapalas, narrative panels, and portraits of donors is strong. It is less erotic than Khajuraho. The Chola wall is more hierarchical and dynastic.

- **Lost-wax icons:** Portable metal images served a mobile bhakti public.
- **Nataraja:** Chola-period bronzes fixed Tamil Shaiva thought in metal in a lasting form.
- **Painting and inscription:** The temple recorded land gifts, dance, and court life.

How far the praise is complete

The comment is fair on quality. Few Indian dynasties left a sacred landscape that is still so fully in use. It is incomplete as history. Chola pride also rests on the **navy** in the Bay of Bengal, the **Sri Lanka and Srivijaya** campaigns, **irrigation** of the **Kaveri delta**, and a **brahmadeya-nagaram** agrarian order. Art was the visible surplus of that order. Later Vijayanagara gopurams grew larger than Chola gateways. Pallava Mamallapuram had already shown how to cut stone. The Cholas stand at a high point in a longer South Indian line. They did not invent temple building in a vacuum.

- **Not only art:** Water, war, and temple urbanism funded the vimana.
- **Living continuity:** Pride survives because worship continued.
- **Balanced comment:** The stone and bronze deserve praise. The state that paid for them should also be named.

The sentence in the question is therefore a right emphasis for GS art history. It is only a partial portrait of the Chola century.

Flow diagram

Chola state surplus -> Thanjavur Brihadisvara
 Chola state surplus -> Gangaikonda Cholapuram
 Chola state surplus -> Darasuram Airavatesvara
 Chola state surplus -> Lost-wax bronzes Nataraja
 Thanjavur Brihadisvara -> Pride in living temples

Conclusion

The great Cholas deserve the pride attached to Thanjavur, Gangaikonda Cholapuram, Darasuram, and the bronzes. Those works are among India's highest temple achievements. They were also paid for by a delta empire. A full account keeps both the Nataraja image and the **Kaveri agrarian base**.

Facts & figures

Brihadisvara, Thanjavur

The Rajarajesvara temple of Rajaraja I, a granite Dravida vimana still in worship.

Great Living Chola Temples

UNESCO listing covering Brihadisvara at Thanjavur, the temple at Gangaikonda Cholapuram, and Airavatesvara at Darasuram.

Lost-wax bronzes

Chola sculptors used cire perdue casting for processional images, of which Nataraja is the most widely recognised type.

Rajendra I

Built Gangaikonda Cholapuram as a new capital and linked military success in the north and overseas to temple building.

Kaveri agrarian base

Delta irrigation and land grants to temples underwrote the surplus that paid for stone and metal.

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