

## Architectural and Historical Analysis of Pillars under the Madurai Nayaks

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**Abstract:** The present study analyses the pillars under the Madurai Nayaks, a dynasty that ruled Madurai from the 16th to the 18th centuries. The pillars, predominantly crafted from durable granite, display intricate carvings, featuring floral patterns, mythological figures, and geometric designs. The study explores the structural aspects, artistic motifs, and cultural synthesis evident in the pillars, showcasing the Nayak Dynasty's fusion of Dravidian and Islamic architectural styles. The study explores the evolution of Nayak art in various temples, emphasising the Meenakshi Temple and its depiction of Nayak rulers.

**Keywords:** Madurai Nayaks, Architectural Analysis, Pillars, Cultural Synthesis, Dravidian and Islamic Styles.

### Introduction

The Madurai Nayak Dynasty, which ruled over the city of Madurai in Tamil Nadu, India, from the 16th to the 18th centuries, left behind several architectural marvels. One notable aspect of their architectural legacy is the use of pillars in their constructions. Let's delve into an architectural and historical analysis of the pillars under the Madurai Nayaks. Pillars under the Madurai Nayaks were often made from granite, a durable and widely available stone in the region. Granite pillars provided structural stability and longevity to the architectural elements. Pillars were intricately carved with various motifs, including floral patterns, mythological figures, and geometric designs. These carvings showcased the artistic prowess of the Nayak craftsmen. Pillars typically had square or octagonal columns.

The capitals were adorned with decorative elements such as lotus petals, corbels, and miniature sculptures. Some structures featured balustrades with carved railings, adding a decorative and functional aspect to the pillars. These balustrades were often used as barriers or demarcations. The pillars were designed with careful attention to height and proportion, contributing to the overall aesthetics of the structures. Taller pillars were often used in grand halls and entranceways. Many pillars were integral components of temples and other religious structures. The Madurai Nayaks were known for their patronage of arts and architecture, and their constructions often had religious or ceremonial purposes. Pillars were also used in the construction of palaces and royal courts.

The Nayak rulers were keen on creating grand architectural spaces that reflected their power and prestige. Madurai Nayak architecture is characterized by a fusion of Dravidian and Islamic architectural styles. The pillars often incorporated elements from both traditions, showcasing the dynasty's cultural synthesis. The carvings on the pillars depicted not only aesthetic beauty but also conveyed cultural and religious symbolism. Mythological stories, deities, and historical events were often represented, providing a visual narrative of the times. In contemporary times, efforts have been made to restore and preserve these architectural treasures. Conservation initiatives aim to safeguard the pillars and their carvings for future generations. The pillars under the Madurai Nayaks stand as testament to the dynasty's architectural brilliance and cultural synthesis. Their intricate carvings, durable materials, and historical significance make them invaluable components of India's architectural heritage. During the Nayak period, the tradition of sculpting idols attained prominence,

with sculptures portraying diverse gods, goddesses, kings, and patrons offering devotions to the temples.

The Meenakshi temple serves as an illustrative example, showcasing an array of such artistic expressions. As the 16<sup>th</sup> century unfolded, a notable evolution occurred, wherein it became customary to integrate portrait sculptures depicting the Nayak rulers. A plethora of temples, dating back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, further epitomize the architectural brilliance of this epoch. Among these, the temples in Srirangam, Madurai, Rameswaram, Thiruvanaikaval, Tiruvarur, Thiruvannamalai, and Srivilliputtur stand as tangible testaments to the artistic prowess of the Nayak period. Notably, within the temple complex, the corridor of the third prakaram leading to the Gandhimati temple boasts pillars embellished with intricate sculptures. While the specific identities of these sculptures remain elusive, there exists a plausible conjecture that they may represent some of the Nayak rulers reigning up to the era of Pillaiyan. Furthermore, these frescoes exhibit a striking resemblance to the Pudumandapam at Madurai.

The pillars beneath the patronage of the Madurai Nayaks emerge as enduring symbols, epitomizing not only the architectural magnificence but also the cultural significance of the Nayak dynasty in Madurai. These pillars serve as a poignant reminder of the Nayaks' substantial contributions to the flourishing and rejuvenation of art and architecture during their reign, thereby leaving an indelible mark on the cultural landscape of Madurai.

### **Regular Pillars (Satharana Pillar)**

The Satharana Pillars, colloquially known as standard pillars, are characterized by their uncomplicated design and square configuration, comprised of unembellished rectangular columns. These pillars exhibit themselves in diverse artistic styles, such as Pallavar, Chola, and Pandyar, antedating the manifestation of the Visayanagara Nayak style. It is noteworthy to highlight that these plain pillars have endured as prominent features spanning various epochs, thereby attesting to their enduring significance within the domain of architectural history.

### **Icon pillars (Siththira Pillar)**

Pictorial pillars, adorned with a myriad of intricate designs and carvings, stand as exquisite examples of Vijayanagara Nayak art, showcasing a diverse range of forms. Among these, Dum stands out as a notable masterpiece, epitomizing the artistic prowess inherent in this distinctive style.

### **Square Pillar**

The simplicity of a square pillar is noteworthy, symbolizing a departure from the elaborate designs of the Visayanagara Nayak era. However, these pillars, predating the Nayak period, are presented in an adorned state, offering a unique perspective. Various decorative elements, including inlay decoration and naga decoration, embellish these square pillars. The complexity of the square, octagonal, sixteen-angled, square, octagonal, sixteen-angled, square-shaped pillar exemplifies the diversity within Visayanagara Nayak art. Each facet of this pillar reflects the intricate craftsmanship and attention to detail characteristic of this artistic style. Dum, in particular, stands as an exemplary representation of such elaborate forms.

### **Square Base with Top Sixteen-Angled**

Another intriguing example is the pillar with a square base and a top featuring sixteen angles. This design adds a layer of sophistication to the architectural landscape, further highlighting the nuanced expressions of Vijayanagara Nayak art. In the realm of square pillars, examples adorned with inlay decoration and naga decoration abound. Notably, flag decorations such as Vattapalala karuku and Odu karuku hold significance in the context of karakunai decoration. Patterned square pillars, characterized by their unique designs, are prominently observed in locations like Thiruvarangam, Mannargudi, Kumbakonam, Chidambaram, and Pattiswaram. The Chola region boasts a distinctive feature—an area dedicated to Madurai Nayak art, located in front of the

Kudumyanmalai temple. These specialized pillars are also prevalent within the hall area, adding a touch of artistic grandeur to the architectural landscape the Vijayanagara Nayak art encapsulates a rich tapestry of forms, as exemplified by the intricate pillars scattered across various locations, each narrating a unique story of artistic expression.

### **Anivetti pillar**

The Nayaks have significantly influenced the art of pillar sculptures. One particular type of monolithic pillar structure, known as Maatvetikkal or Maatatikal, features human-height sculptures. These structures can be found in Visayanagara Nayak, Tanjore, and Madurai Nayak. The sculptures on these pillars depict kings, princes, and lords, showcasing the artistic excellence of the Nayak period. Additionally, Aswapadham also includes sculptures at the base of the pillars. The lower portion of the sculptures and the area of the pillar behind them are square, octagonal, or hexagonal in shape, forming Bodhika. These types of pillars are most prominently seen at Pattiswaram, Kumbakonam, and Kudumianmalai. Notable male figures include Kudumyan Mountain Ganesha, Manmadhan, Rati, Kali, Shiva Parvati, and Tirumal, while the female figure is depicted with special attention to body parts. Furthermore, one of the pillars in the front hall features a statue of Anuman. Pateeswaram is known for its special sculptures of deities, women throwing palm leaves, as well as royal and princely figures. Another significant location showcasing Nayak art is the Kumbakonam Ramaswamy Temple, where sculptures of deities, societal reflections, and royal and princely figures can be found. Notably, the pillar sculptures in this temple include depictions of Cupid and a Chariot. These sculptures are typically placed on pillars from the Nayak period.

### **Composite Pillars (Koottu Thoon)**

During the Visayanagara Nayak period, one of the prominent features in architecture was the presence of joint pillars. These joint pillars consisted of a primary pillar surrounded by smaller pillars of equal or lesser height. This architectural composition can be observed in both Pan Dier art and Nayak art. The concept of joint pillars is extensively discussed in the Manasara, particularly in terms of their design and size. According to the text, the sub-pillars should be approximately three-fourths the size of the main pillar at the base. The dimensions of these sub-pillars are suggested to be half or proportional to the size of the main pillar. Furthermore, the text mentions specific names for joint pillars with varying numbers of sub-pillars. If a joint pillar has four sub-pillars, it is referred to as Brahmathun. A joint pillar with five sub-pillars is known as Shivathun, while one with six sub-pillars is called Kandhathun. Lastly, a joint pillar with eight sub-pillars is termed Vishnuthun.

In terms of ornamentation, these joint pillars were adorned with various patterns. Animal patterns, fanciful patterns, and ornate patterns were commonly incorporated into the design of the sub-pillars. This added a diverse range of visual elements to the overall structure. Overall, the Visayanagara Nayak period showcased a wide array of architectural structures, with joint pillars being a notable feature. These joint pillars were categorized into different types based on the number of sub-pillars they possessed. Additionally, the incorporation of intricate patterns further enhanced the aesthetic appeal of these pillars.

**First Type:** A part of the main pillar consists only of a minor pillar or sub-pillar design.

**Second type:** Sub-pillars around the main pillar. It will feature unique looking sub-pillars. The top and foot of these are connected to the main pillar.

**Third type:** At the foot of the main pillar there is a subsidiary pillar with art forms such as horse, yali etc. Associate

### **Paravai Pillar (Bird Pillar)**

A horse pillar refers to a pillar that showcases a sculpture of a horse, while a bird pillar is a pillar that is intricately carved in the shape of a bird. These particular types of pillars can be observed at the Kudumyanmalai temple. They can be categorized as pillars belonging to the Nayak art style. One section of these pillars at the temple exhibits a striking design featuring a parrot. Additionally,

Rathi can be seen seated in a chariot. On the opposite side of this pillar, sculptures of Cupid and Rati on a parrot are positioned facing each other. It is worth noting that pillars adorned with sculptures of Cupid and Rathi hold significant prominence in the Madurai Nayak art tradition. The Kudumyanmalai temple showcases pillars that are shaped like large birds, which are not commonly found in any other region of the Chola dynasty. The Kudumyan Hill Bird Pillar, with its square shape, is divided into two sections. It is adorned with a black garland and a two-sided flower buddhika. This pillar can be regarded as one of the distinctively designed pillars discovered in the Chola region.

### **Musical Pillars**

The architectural wonders of temples and the intriguing history of musical pillars in Tamil Nadu have not only captivated scholars but also stirred the fascination of enthusiasts. Renowned for their intricate designs, elaborate carvings, and grandeur, the temple architecture in Tamil Nadu stands as a testament to the rich cultural heritage and artistic prowess of the region. The musical pillars, known as Sthambhas or Swarastambhas, are a distinctive feature found in select temples. Beyond their visual appeal, these pillars possess the extraordinary ability to produce musical notes when struck. Each pillar emits a distinct sound, mimicking various musical instruments such as drums, flutes, and bells. The roots of these musical pillars extend back centuries, their origins veiled in myth and legend. According to popular belief, the technique employed to create these pillars was a closely guarded secret known only to a select group of craftsmen. It is said that these artisans infused the pillars with a combination of metals and alloys, thus bestowing upon them their remarkable acoustic properties. These musical pillars not only attest to the advanced architectural and engineering skills of the past but also hold profound religious and cultural significance. Associated with the divine, they are believed to create a harmonious atmosphere within the temple premises. Devotees and visitors alike are often mesmerized by the enchanting melodies produced by these pillars, adding to the overall spiritual experience.

The temples in Tamil Nadu are celebrated not just for their architectural brilliance but also for the captivating history surrounding the musical pillars. Spanning from Lebakshi to Suchindram, these pillars, capable of producing all seven Surams, were crafted by skilled sculptors who journeyed to the southern region. Prominent temples such as Meenakshi Temple, Alwar Thirunagari, Suchindram Temple, and Padmanabhaswamy Temple in Thiruvananthapuram feature these extraordinary pillars, serving as both a testament to artistic excellence and decorative pieces. Displaying various shapes and sizes, including cylindrical, square, octagonal, and fluted, the harmonious arrangement ensures the correct pitch relationship between each pillar, resulting in melodic harmony.

In the Padmanabhaswamy Temple, pillars adorned with sculptures of Gods and Goddesses produce musical sounds resembling different instruments. Conversely, the pillars in the Nellaipar Temple have lost their ability to produce vowels, some only producing the syllables "sa, ri, ka, ma, p." Notably, Mr. K. Sankaranar, a versatile scholar, has demonstrated that these pancha swaras can cover the ragas Harikambodhi and Karakapriya, preparing notes on the pillars for Samakana Slokam and other hymns broadcasted by Tirunelveli AIR. In the center of the temple, a massive pillar surrounded by 48 smaller round pillars creates musical notes. An inscription from Kollam 721 reveals that additions were made to the front hall of the center by the chief of Sangi Vira Marthandan Jailvai. If indeed added by the Kerala king, these pillars would predate those of Suchindram Temple, dating back to 1798 AD. The Gandhimati I Temple boasts two musical pillars adorned with carved squirrels, symbolizing a connection between the two swaras. Like other pillars, these not only support the roof but also contribute to the architectural beauty of the temple with intricate carvings of Padmapandham, kalasam, beard, jug, board, gandam pothikai, and yalis. The temples in Tamil Nadu with their musical pillars stand as a profound testament to the region's rich cultural heritage and artistic prowess. They illuminate the intricate craftsmanship, engineering techniques, and religious practices prevalent during different periods of history. Moreover, they serve as a poignant reminder of the imperative to preserve and appreciate these architectural wonders for future generations to admire and cherish.

### **Conclusion**

During the Nayak period, a diverse array of pillars emerges as a distinctive feature of architectural expression. These pillars manifest in various forms, encompassing both adorned and unadorned square pillars. Notably, square, kalasam, kumbam, and panhalla pillars are deemed as distinctive and noteworthy shapes within this artistic milieu. An intriguing variation observed during this epoch is the lattice column, characterized by a central pillar encircled by two flanking sub-pillars on either side, adorned with intricate flower heads. As the Visayanagara Nayak art progresses, decorative pillars adorned with flower motifs gain prominence, becoming a defining element in the later stages of artistic development. Music assumes a pivotal role in the artistic narrative of Vijayanagara Nayak culture, with the musical pillar standing out as a unique and distinct type. Belonging to the Kuttuthun category, this pillar is meticulously carved from a single stone, featuring a central pillar surrounded by small musical sticks.

The musical pillar, crafted in diverse shapes such as square, hexagonal, octagonal, and circular, emerges as a distinctive hallmark of Vijayanagara Nayak architecture. The pillars from the Nayak period exhibit specific characteristics, including the prevalence of square, octagonal, sixteen-angled, and circular pillars across all types. Noteworthy among these are the horse pillars, exemplifying the exquisite craftsmanship inherent in Nayak art. Collaborative pillars, showcasing the influence of Pandyar art, gain prominence, characterized by a subtle yet discernible level of decoration. Adding to the artistic tapestry is a decorated musical pillar, meticulously carved from a single stone and featuring multiple musical staves. This particular pillar facilitates the rendition of the seven swaras, adding an additional layer of sophistication to the artistic and cultural legacy of the Nayak period.

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