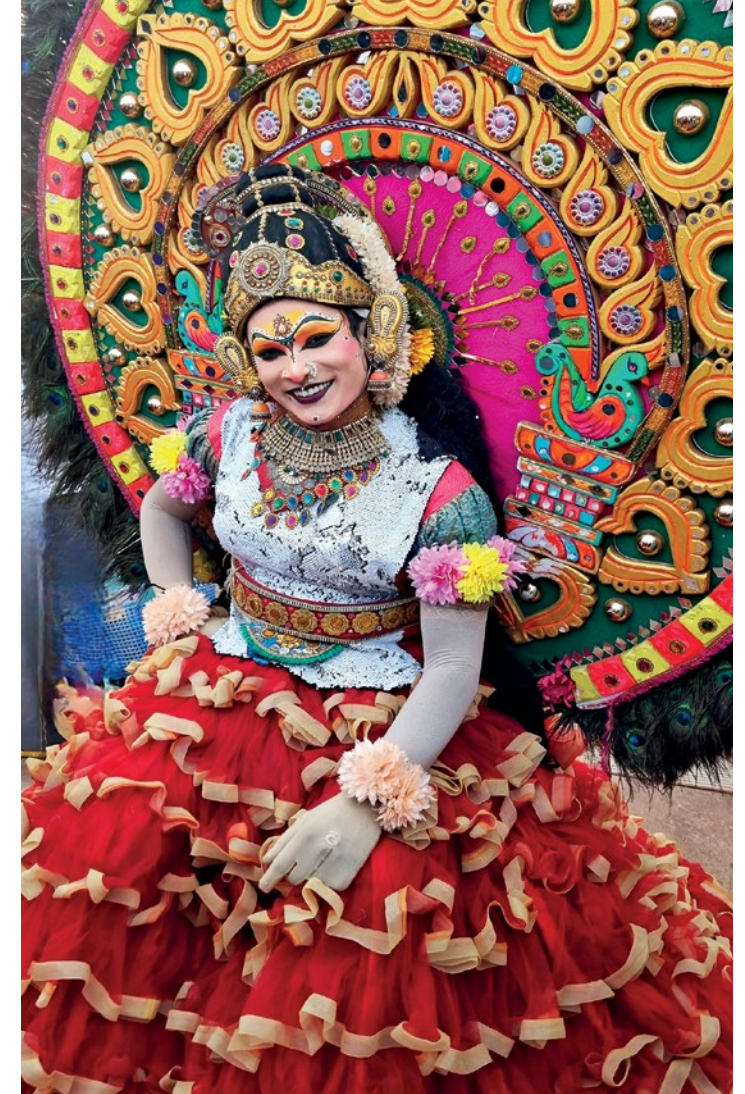


SPIRIT & STORIES OF STONE

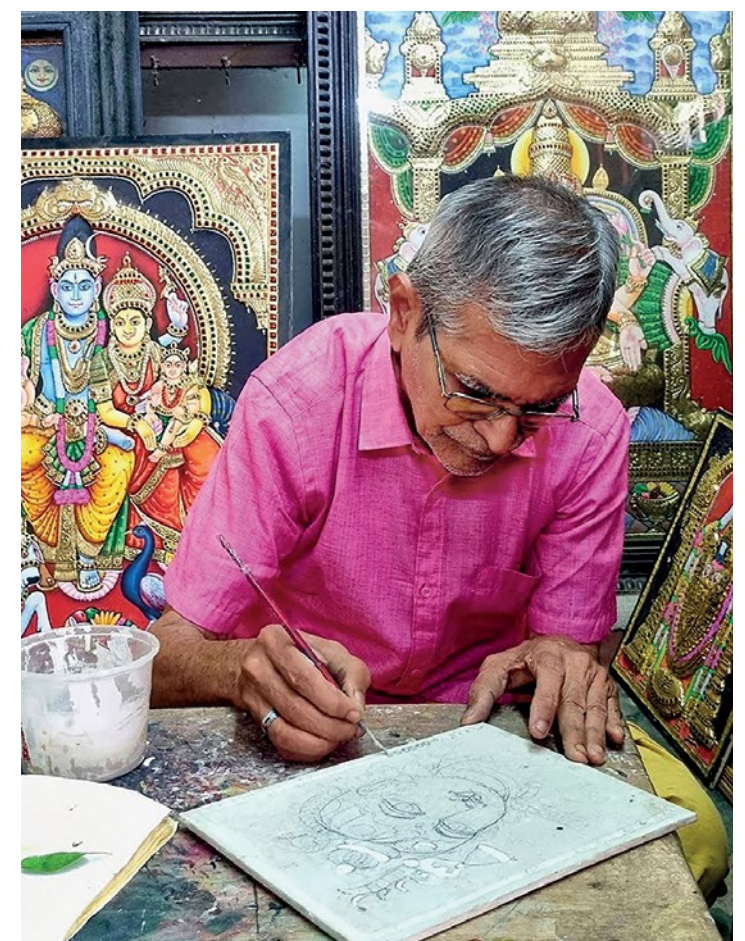
Across Tamil Nadu's temple towns, ancient monuments, artisan traditions
and living rituals keep the legacy of a great empire alive.
Photographs and text by Hema Narayanan



One of the three Great Living Chola Temples, the Airavatesvara Temple is a 12th-century UNESCO World Heritage Site and part of a larger cluster of medieval Shiva temples. Its distinctive chariot-like structure features two sundials, with the morning and evening dials carved into the wheels of the stone chariot. The temple is also adorned with sculptures of major Vedic and Puranic deities. Monsoon rains during my visit created striking reflections that accentuated its architectural grandeur.



Clockwise from top:
The 16th-century Ramaswamy Temple houses an extraordinary visual retelling of the Ramayana across its inner *prakaram* walls. As one walks through the corridors, the murals, sculptures and painted scenes unfold like a graphic narrative of the epic. Often called the "South Ayodhya", the temple is believed to allow devotees who complete three *pradakshinams* of the corridor to symbolically journey from Ayodhya to Lanka; the author's visit to Thanjavur's Periya Kovil coincided with the concluding days of Varaha Navaratri, a significant cultural celebration of the region. Seen here is a performer participating in rituals associated with Varaha, the boar incarnation of Vishnu. The festival also features Vedic chanting, classical music and traditional drum performances within the temple precincts; at Thanjavur Heritage Village, artist Victor demonstrates the painstaking process behind Tanjore painting, a South Indian art form dating back to the 17th century. After the initial sketch, raised gesso work, 22-karat gold foil, rich colours and embellishments of glass or semi-precious stones are layered to create artworks renowned for their richness and longevity; by evening, Periya Kovil had been transformed by the rituals, music and ceremonial processions of Varaha Navaratri. Honouring Lord Varaha, the festival unfolds across the historic spaces of the Royal Palace and Periya Kovil, reviving traditions that reflect Thanjavur's royal and cultural heritage.





Clockwise from left:
At Gangaikonda Cholaipuram, a monolithic Nandi faces the sanctum housing a 13-foot-tall Shivalinga. Built by Rajendra Chola I in the 11th century, the temple forms part of the UNESCO-listed Great Living Chola Temples and marks the imperial capital established after his northern campaign to the Ganga; built by the Thanjavur Nayak rulers in the 16th century, the Ramaswamy Temple is known for its intricately carved pillars, each sculpted on all four sides; a completed Kalamkari textile created using hand-drawing, block-printing and natural dyes. Practised alongside Thanjavur's bronze casting, silk weaving and veena-making traditions, the craft is known for its intricate depictions of mythological and religious themes.





The Thanjavur Periya Kovil is renowned for its sculptural richness, with its *vimana*, *gopurams*, and surrounding walls adorned with intricate carvings depicting deities, celestial beings and scenes from mythology.



At a workshop in Thanjavur, an artisan works on a traditional *veena* carved from a single block of jackfruit or teak wood. The resonator, neck and tuning box are fashioned from the same piece, a process that demands considerable skill and precision. Adorned with motifs of flowers, birds, and deities, each instrument can take several weeks to complete, reflecting a craft tradition that continues to thrive in the city.



Darasuram is known for its silk handloom weaving tradition, with many families continuing to work from home-based looms around the temple town. Local weavers specialise in the intricate Korvai technique, in which the border and body of a saree are woven separately before being joined with remarkable precision. Nandhini, one of the weavers, offered a glimpse into the craft behind the region's distinctive Vathina silk sarees.

THE CHOLA DYNASTY ruled much of southern India for nearly four centuries, leaving behind some of Tamil Nadu's most enduring monuments. At the heart of this legacy are the three Great Living Chola Temples—the Brihadeeswara Temple at Thanjavur, the Airavatesvara Temple at Darasuram and the Brihadeeswara Temple at Gangaikonda Cholapuram. Together, they represent a high point of Chola architecture and craftsmanship. Even after three visits with my camera, these temples continue to reveal new details.

I based myself in Kumbakonam, often called the Temple Town, where centuries-old traditions such as bronze casting, silk weaving and *veena* making continue alongside everyday life.

Thanjavur announces itself long before one reaches the temple. The soaring *vimana* of the Brihadeeswara Temple, or Periya Kovil, dominates the skyline much as it has for over a thousand years. Built by Rajaraja Chola I in the 11th century, it remains one of India's great architectural achievements. I stood in awe of the 216-foot tower and the massive monolithic Nandi at the entrance, both carved from single blocks of granite.

My visit coincided with Varaha Navarathri, when visitors and devotees gathered amid drumbeats, singing and classical dance performances. Standing within the temple complex, I was drawn to a monument that feels as imposing today as it must have when it was first completed.

A short drive away lies Darasuram and the Airavatesvara Temple. Smaller in scale but rich in detail, it rewards slow exploration through sculptural panels depicting mythology, music and everyday life. Darasuram is also known for its Vathina silk weaving traditions, and I spent time with weavers working on home-based looms. Their intricate Korvai technique remains a

hallmark of the region's weaving heritage.

Further north lies Gangaikonda Cholapuram, built by Rajendra Chola I after his victorious campaign to the Ganga. While it shares a lineage with Thanjavur's Brihadeeswara Temple, the atmosphere is quieter, with fewer crowds and a slower pace. Facing the temple stands a massive monolithic Nandi, while the towering *vimana* reflects the ambition of an empire whose influence once stretched across much of South and Southeast Asia.

Yet the Chola story is not confined to grand temples. Across the Kumbakonam region, it survives in workshops, homes and family-run enterprises where traditional crafts continue to be practised. In a nearby heritage village, I watched artists create Thanjavur paintings, layering relief work, gold foil, colour and glass embellishments into artworks known for their richness and detail. The process offered a reminder that many of these traditions demand extraordinary patience.

One of the most unexpected discoveries of the journey was the Ramaswamy Temple in Kumbakonam. Often referred to as the "South Ayodhya", it houses a remarkable visual retelling of the Ramayana across painted walls and sixty-four intricately carved stone pillars. Walking through its corridors felt like moving through the epic itself.

As the days passed, I realised that the Chola Trail is far more than a collection of celebrated monuments. History and art remain woven into everyday life—in the clang of a bronze workshop, the rhythm of handloom weaving, the strokes of a Thanjavur painting and the rituals that continue within these thousand-year-old temples.

Perhaps that is the enduring appeal of the Chola Trail—not merely what it preserves from the past, but how effortlessly it remains part of the present. ☸