

# DECONSTRUCTING THE STYLISTIC INTERSECTIONS OF THE *CHATHRAMS* OF TANJORE THROUGH HISTORIC TRAJECTORIES

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Author: Roshni Kannan | Word Count: 3184

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## **Deconstructing the Stylistic Intersections of the**

### **Chathrams of Tanjore through historic trajectories**

In 1674, the seat of power of the diminishing Nayak Dynasty that was then ruling the Kingdom of Tanjore was annexed through a siege by Venkoji, a Maratha general (Hemingway, 1906). This siege uprooted the last of the Nayaks and established the Marathas as the rulers of Tanjore, marking the beginning of the Tanjore Maratha Dynasty, glorified in history as the patrons of art, literature and architecture after the Cholas. Throughout their rule (both as an autonomous seat of power and as a Princely State under the paramountcy of the British Raj), the Maratha kings contributed generously to the beautification of their kingdom.

The kings of Tanjore, as was the case of the kings of the Princely States during this time, were well travelled. Their royal lineage and wealth gave them the opportunity and the responsibility to develop their state with the help of their expanded knowledge. All these kings commissioned and built structures of varying scales for public use that would, for years to come, define the patronage of the kingdom. For the monarch, this act of patronage gave a claim over the land that they ruled over, but more importantly, it validated the coming together of foreign knowledge systems in local environments. The monarch, through these buildings and public projects, aimed to expose his subjects to the culture and practices that lay outside the geographical boundaries of the kingdom. The Maratha kings of Tanjore carried forward the legacies of the previous dynasties by building structures like temples and smaller spaces for devotional and congregational purposes like tanks and public squares that could be used by the subjects of the kingdom. In addition to all these buildings and spaces that the Marathas commissioned and built specifically keeping the subjects in mind, they also patronized, commissioned and built *chathrams*, or a typology of charitable rest houses built for travellers passing through the land on their pilgrimages (Hemingway, 1906). These rest

houses of Tanjore were built along the Kasi-Rameshwaram pilgrimage road that connected several temple towns of the Coromandel Coast.

Brick making was an important part of the livelihood of the people of Tanjore. The *chathrams* of Tanjore were predominantly built out of brick. Tanjore during the time of the Marathas lay along the banks of the River Cauvery which was flowing in full capacity. The river bed and banks of the Cauvery were rich and had fertile soil deposits. The people who settled around the banks of the Cauvery in certain pockets had begun making brick through indigenous techniques and equipment which have changed over time (Selvaraj, 2019). These bricks were rich in their composition – from clay to silt to sand; the raw material that was extracted from the river bed and banks was in the perfect ratio to use for brick making (Subramanian, 1928). Due to the superior quality of soil available along the banks of Cauvery, the locally developing practices of brick making, the affordability and the practicality of working the material, it is possible that this could have been a dominant reason for brick to be used in the construction of these *chathrams*.

Out of the twenty-five *chathrams* originally built by the Marathas (Baliga, 1957), only seven are still standing – and these have been neglected for many years now. A majority of these *chathrams* are declared to be of the “Maratha style” of architecture. This definitive term given to these built examples is contestable, especially when the individual elements of the *chathrams* are isolated and traced back along both their local and global historic trajectories. These structures were built as a result of the coming together of two or more cultures, as the collective result of many years of peace treaties, invasions, political asylums, diplomatic relations and the resultant knowledge transfer between kingdoms. Arches that have their stylistic origins in 8<sup>th</sup> century Persia adorn the façade of the Vennar *Chathram*, vaults that evolved in Europe during the Renaissance for the roofing systems of the Yamunambal and Thiruvaiyar *Chathram*, and materials (like steel) that are characteristic of England’s

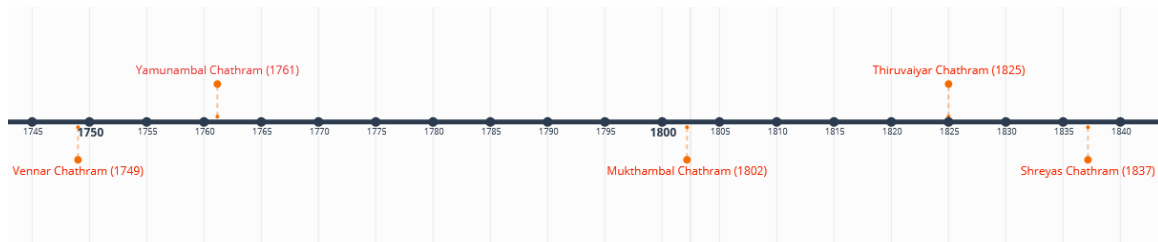
Industrial Revolution form integral parts of the roofing systems of the Shreyas *Chathram*. The course of these elements, materials and methods of making across geographies and kingdoms to reach Tanjore where they then took on the local characteristics of architecture and making – contributed to by the historical, socio-political and economic factors, craftsmen and technology available – created several overlaps within themselves which manifested as the stylistic intersections that are reductively known as the “Maratha style” of architecture.

## **1. The *Chathrams* of Tanjore**

Tanjore occupied a vital role – both by resource and by geography – in the political landscape of South Indian Princely States. By commissioning and developing public infrastructure for the state, the royal family ensured that there was a visible manifestation of the ruling dynasty within the boundaries of the state, thereby cementing their identity with respect to the subjects and the invaders. Oftentimes, the queens of the Maratha Dynasty would commission *chathrams* for the travelling pilgrims (Baliga, 1957) working actively towards consolidating the power of the monarch as the political scenario of Tanjore was very volatile throughout the period of reign of the Marathas.

The five *chathrams* contribute largely to the historic legacy of the dynasty – the Vennar *Chathram* (Tanjore, 1749), Yamunambal *Chathram* (Nidamangalam, 1761), Mukthambal *Chathram* (Orattanadu, 1802), Thiruvaiyar *Chathram* (Thiruvaiyar, 1825) and Sirase Raja (Shreyas) *Chathram* (Tanjore, 1837). From a larger narrative of architectural and tectonic study, these *chathrams* inevitably act as a link between events in history and the indigenous practices of the residents of the State, thereby opening up portals of understanding the building and the rationale of construction through historic evidences. Factors like the capacity of the royal treasury, the patronage, availability of resources, trade routes, neighbouring settlements and external influences of either hostile or diplomatic nature directly had an

effect on the form and style adopted and of the labour that was employed to make these *chathrams*.



**Fig 1: Timeline of Existing Chathrams of Tanjore (as of 2019) (Graphic by Author)**

These five *chathrams* collectively have their construction distributed over ninety years, with intermediate gaps ranging from ten to twenty years between each of them. Each of these was constructed for a specific purpose different from each other, ranging from political alliances and dedications for and by the queens to housing concubines for royal indulgences. For example, the Yamunambal *Chathram* was built as a charitable contribution to the state of Tanjore by Raja Pratapsingh's wife Yamunambabai due to the increased influx of pilgrims through the town during religiously important times of the year (Baliga, 1957) and the Thiruvaiyar *Chathram* was built by Raja Serfoji II as a seraglio to house all his mistresses (Subramanian, 1928). These *chathrams* today stand, being used for completely different purposes than the ones they were constructed for. The Yamunambal *Chathram* stands dilapidated and occasionally occupied by homeless people and Thiruvaiyar *Chathram* functions as working women's hostel. Thiruvaiyar, Mukthambal and Shreyas *Chathram* have been partially renovated in order to continue being in use, while Vennar and Yamunambal *Chathram* have been abandoned.

## **2. Decoding Materiality and Making**

Of the five *chathrams* that have been studied, the Vennar *Chathram* is the oldest. Built in 1749, it now stands along the banks of the now-dry River Vennar which is a subsidiary of the

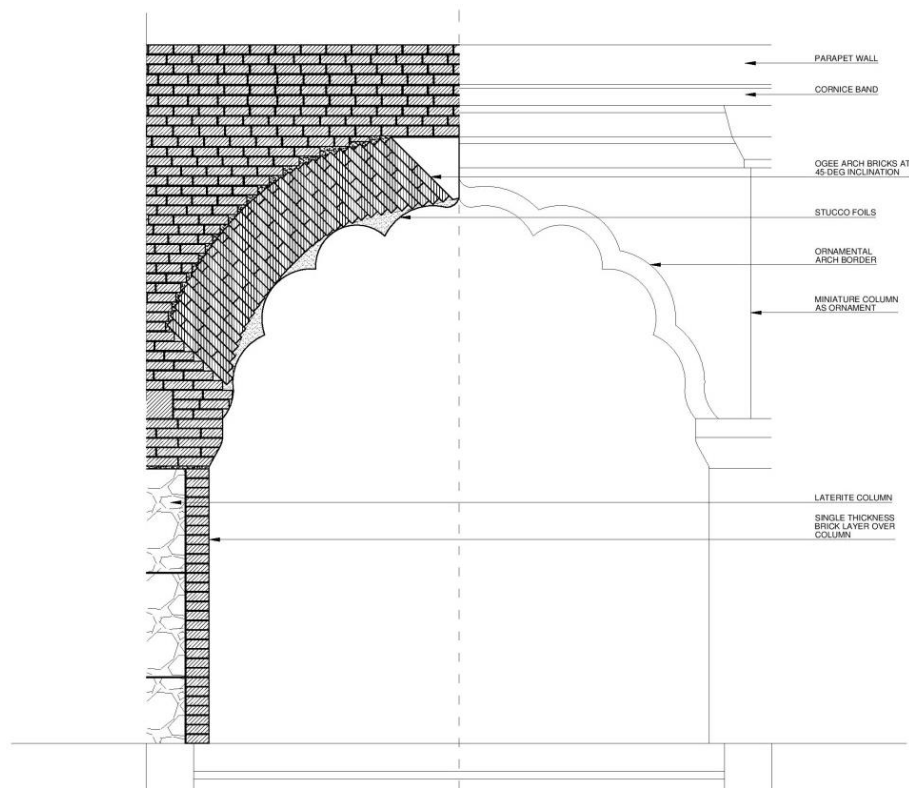
River Cauvery, exuding an air of neglect. Brick manufactured along the banks of this river were used in its construction (Selvaraj, 2019). Alongside brick, there is evidence of other materials like laterite stone used in select structural elements like the columns. The decision of choosing laterite stone to make these structural elements comes from the increased load-bearing tendencies that it offers as opposed to bricks used in the same manner, but could also be attributed to its extensive availability in the Cauvery Delta at the time. The red soil that laterite stone is usually found along with is conducive for the production of bricks of rich composition, enhanced strength and easy workability.



*Fig 2: The front façade of Vennar Chathram (Photo by Author)*

The façade and the exposed surfaces of this *chathram* are devoid of any embellishment that emerges from the surface as a plastered or attached entity, but the arches that line the front façade and the columns that these arches spring from have an identity of their own which has been derived out of specific foreign influences. When the Battle of Ambur took place in August of 1749, Chanda Sahib proclaimed himself as the Nawab of the Carnatic and expelled Muhammed Ali Khan Wallajah from Arcot. While fleeing to Trichinopoly, Wallajah halted in Tanjore as the Raja's guest for three months. During this period and against this socio-political backdrop, Muhammed Ali Khan acted as one of the many external influences on the

cultural practices of the resident subjects that manifested in the art and architecture of the State (Subramanian, 1928).



*Fig 3: Drawing showing the constituent elements and their arrangement in the entryway arch (Drawing by Author)*

The multi-foil arches that form the entryway of this *chathram* are commonly found used in Moorish architecture of the Spanish and al-Andalus regions, although their origin dates back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD Islamic Syrian baptisteries (Petersen, 1996). Extensively used there onwards in the artwork of the Moorish and Persian cultures, this motif slowly spread through the East from Persia, particularly through trade routes that linked the West to the East (like the Silk Route and Muscat). The Mughals used this arch in almost all of their buildings of importance like forts, *hammams* and *darbar* halls. Since the diplomatic relations between the Mughals of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the South Indian Princely States were strong, there is an evident transfer of these motifs to regions like Tanjore.

The other arches that are flanking the multi-foil arch of the entryway are Ogee arches. Their origin also lies in the geographies of Persia, but owing to trade, wars and diplomatic exchanges it had spread to parts of Europe by the 14<sup>th</sup> century (particularly in Venice and England) where they began being used in late Gothic architecture (Przybylek, 2003). The motif of this arch, similar to the multi-foil arch, was carried towards the East through various trade routes and resulting cultural exchanges. There are evidences of this arch – the origins of which are unclear – predating its usage in the Vennar *Chathram*, in Gingee, a kingdom 250 kilometres north of Tanjore. This was the kingdom that offered Raja Pratapsingh political asylum against the invading forces of the Nizam of Hyderabad before he assumed power in Tanjore.

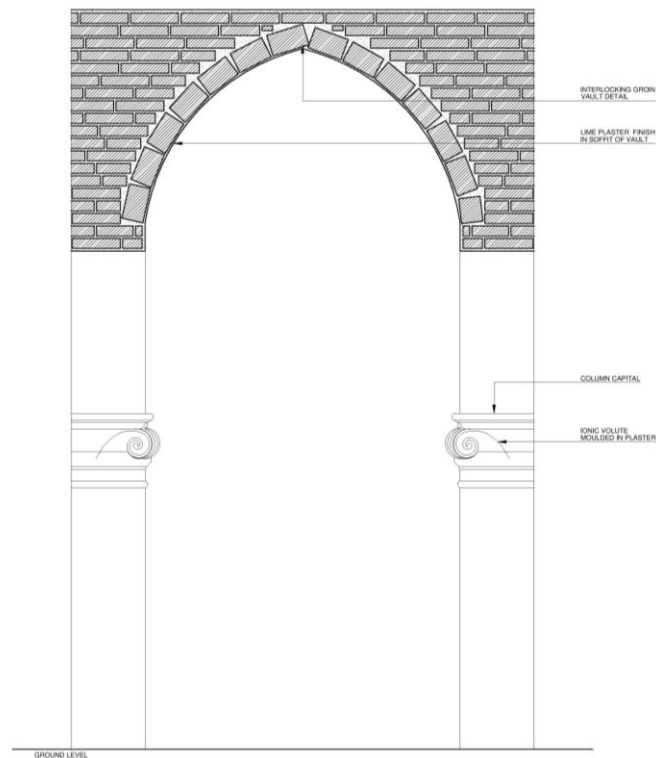


*Fig 4: The river-facing façade of the Thiruvaiyar Chathram (Photo by Pruthvi Thakur)*

Constructed 75 years after the Vennar *Chathram* stands the Thiruvaiyar *Chathram* in the village of Thiruvaiyar, 15 kilometres away from the town of Tanjore in present day. It stands along the banks of the now-dry River Cauvery. Commissioned and built under the patronage of Raja Serfoji II in the year 1825, the *chathram* was built as a seraglio to house the multiple concubines of the monarch. It is currently in use as a women's hostel for the students and women working inside the town. During the Maratha reign, the Princely State of Tanjore



contained this small village under its jurisdiction. Thiruvaiyar *Chathram* is also made predominantly out of brick, but there are no explicit evidences of other materials being used in the construction of this *chathram* as seen in Vennar *Chathram*. The bricks used in the construction of this *chathram* were also made along the banks of the River Cauvery.



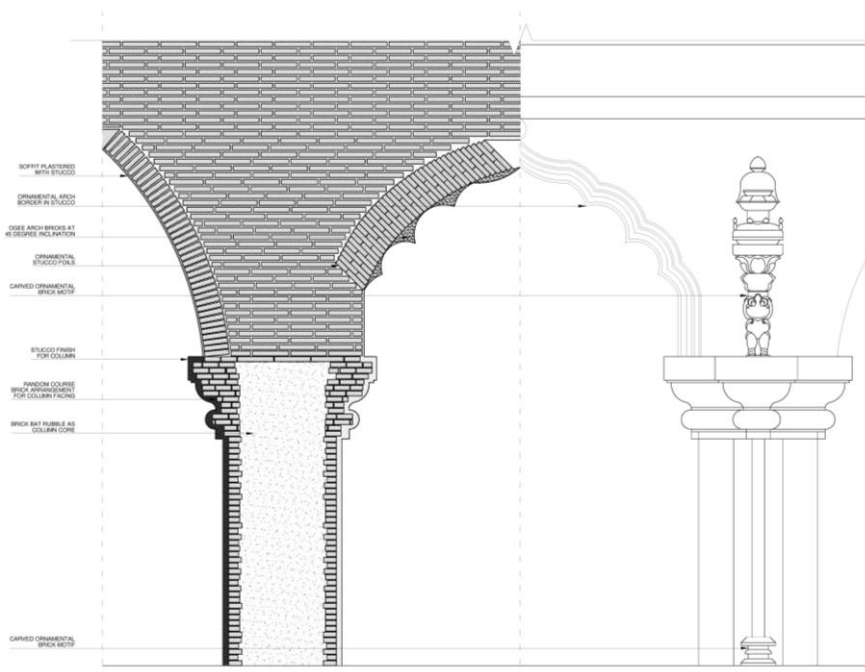
**Fig 5: The vaulting system and Ionic volute replicas in Thiruvaiyar Chathram (Drawing by Author)**

The most noticeable element that stands out here are the disproportionated Ionic volutes that adorn the column capitals. Their origin lies in 6<sup>th</sup> century BC Greece, from the islands of Ionia and the analysis of its stylistic features is one of Vitruvius' subjects of theoretical discourse. Originally, while volutes lay in a single plane, the evolution of the design (like Vincenzo Scamozzi's Renaissance adaptation) began placing the volutes at the corners which made them easily readable from either façades. Being an indispensable part of the ancient Greek Orders which dictated proportioning systems in all architectural manifestations, it was revived during the Renaissance Era and again during the Neo-Classical Movement in 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe, especially Britain. During the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and early 19<sup>th</sup>

century, this movement began taking root in the port presidencies of the East India Company, and through channels of trade and transfer of labour and knowledge between the coloniser and various groups of the colonised, Western thought spread itself across the land and merged with existing indigenous knowledge to give rise to newer styles and standards.



**Fig 6: The ornate columns of the Yamunambal Chattram (Photo by Pruthvi Thakur)**



**Fig 7: The motifs and ornamental arch in the courtyard of Mukthambal Chattram (Drawing by Author)**

The façade ornamentation and the interior elements of the chathram – both structural and decorative (like the columns and the balusters) are present in a larger capacity than it is present in the Vennar *Chathram*, but is downplayed in intricacy as compared to the Mukthambal *Chathram* (1802) or Yamunambal *Chathram* (1761). The craftsmanship and skill that was expressed through the ornate surfaces as well as structural members in these two previous *chathrams* suggest the increased involvement of the craftsman and subjects of the kingdom who possessed mastery over combining craftsmanship with tectonics, with Raja Serfoji II's extended travels acting as a heavy influence on how the *chathram* took shape.

### **3. The Craftsman vs. The Machine: Effects of the Industrial Revolution**

In 1799, as a gesture of political insurance and goodwill towards the British East India Company for extending their help in reclaiming the throne, Serfoji II ceded power of the throne to the British, following which in 1800 Tanjore was included in the Madras Presidency as a town (Hemingway, 1906). Much before these events transpired, the British had begun structurally infiltrating the ranks of the military and administration of India. Their generals now held important positions in the Army, and their engineers now were an indispensable part of the Central Public Works Department, imposing newer materials and Western standards into the built infrastructure of the sub-continent (Hemingway, 1906).

The Industrial Revolution of Britain began in the 1780s but its effect in the country was not fully felt until the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This movement, preceded by movements such as The Arts and Crafts Movement and The Art Nouveau Movement both in Britain and the rest of Europe, saw the transition from hand production methods to machine-made and mass-produced goods. Trade between England and India acted as a conduit for the transfer of these paradigm shifts in making, and since the British already had dominion over almost all the affairs of the sub-continent, it was easier for these ideas to be enforced within India.

Modernism enforced the ideas of a universal human, and this approach of larger unification of thought and practice with standards (in society, in architectural practice, in construction, in trade, etc.) was what was encouraged to be adopted in India as well. This was a prominent change with respect to how society then began to function because, although within the Indian colony, the idea of standards was not exactly new, but the idea of one universal standard dictating all practices was. This was what happened when the CPWD started taking infrastructural development under their belt; Tanjore being under the Madras Presidency was no exception. Now the local craftsmen had limited to no say in the way they worked – while they previously used to play a key role in imagining, conceiving and making buildings, now their freedom to express themselves as both individuals and a representative of a community vanished. Instead, they replicated standards and inserted materials into buildings that were in accordance with the British way of thinking. These enforcements gave way to a new style of building and tectonics which can be seen in the nascent stages in the Thiruvaiyar *Chathram* and very strongly in the Shreyas *Chathram*.

#### **4. In Conclusion**

Sontag in her seminal essay “On Style” says that “speaking about style is one way of speaking about the totality of art...the notion of style, generically considered has a specific, historic meaning.” (Sontag, 1966). The “style” of a piece of work or a building or art is always identified in history, with respect to other points in time and the dominant prevalent discourse. All styles that are recorded in history are subversions from its predecessors or contemporaries in varying degrees.

The regional architecture of Tanjore contributed by the Marathas, characterised by its rich brick construction techniques were at that point, a style that emerged out of multiple factors. There was trade happening with the Western societies like the Dutch and the Portuguese,

Christian Missionaries were emerging locally, there was the depletion of local resources like stone and wood. Local wars between the Princely States, and the overtaking of the Company during the later years meant that now there were foreign settlements in these lands. The interaction of craftsmen in these landscapes enabled knowledge transfer and a resultant intermingling of styles. The identification of the Cauvery Delta and its fertile soil combined with the slowly depleting resources of stone and wood in the region allowed brick to take over the dictation of the next style of the region.

Renaissance in architecture referred back to Classical architecture, but between these two points in history, the meaning of these icons that dominated the discourses of these styles (like the proportions of the columns or the design of the capitals) had evolved in their meanings. While in the ancient systems, the appearance of these elements emerged as a direct product of structural necessities, the Renaissance re-invented these elements for the mere purpose of aesthetic. There were similar ideas in British Neo-Classical movement (1730-1850) which developed as a response to Neo-Palladianism. The position of Neo-Classical architecture was politically elevated by the conservative factions of 18<sup>th</sup> century Britain, associating Neo-Classical architecture with power and superiority. The adoption of these elements like the multi-foil arch or the Ionic volute of the in the *chathrams* of Tanjore comes from recognition of – for example – the Mughal palaces and fortifications and Indo-Saracenic buildings of the Madras Presidency respectively, as buildings of great power and repute. The patron king, upon being exposed to the idea of expressing power and influence through built elements, adopted it in the local context of Tanjore.

The *chathrams* of Tanjore are products of these stylistic intersections which identify as what they are specifically because they are surrounded by certain historical narratives that accompany these built expressions. By studying these *chathrams* and other similar structures in the surrounding geographical areas through these discourses and evidences, it can be

conclusively stated that the specific semantic of “local style” attributed to them through history is, in its existence, a melange of various cultures and their indigenous adaptations and therefore the validity of “local architecture” as an identity is heavily contestable in both theory and in practice.

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