

Culture in Crossroads: Architecture of Natha Devalaya of Kandy, Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

Natha Deviyo is Kandyan national guardian deity, connected with the Bodhisattva cult of Mahayana Buddhism and transformed into the next Buddha Maitre. The cult of Natha was popularized and established in the Kandyan era (15th CE to 18th CE) in Sri Lanka. One of the first Devalaya for the god Natha is situated in front of the Temple of tooth relic at Kandy. The architecture of Natha Devalaya represents Dravidian architecture of South India in its form with Vimana, Eddupattai pillar with the motifs of Dravidian architecture. This architectural format questions the authentic Arya - Sinhala Theravada Buddhist nationalist hegemonic claim of the Sri Lankan state and the historical narrations of Sri Lanka. Because of the architecture of 'Arya' is Nagara style and the North Indian origin. This also suggests the possibilities of the shared cultural past and memories of connected communities and ethnicities in terms of accommodation and assimilation of diverse cultures.

INTRODUCTION

This article talks about the architectural pattern of Natha devalaya of Kandy. Many popular articles about Natha deviyo, like '**The cult of Natha**' by Derrick Schokmam¹ are written in either English or Sinhala, mainly recycling the primary historical data. Compared to these writings, scholarly works on this subject are sparse. At this juncture, John Clifford Holt's anthropological reading '**Buddha in the Crown: Avalokitesvara in the Buddhist traditions of Sri Lanka**'² was a predominant and influencing work covering up many avenues of Natha worship and its social fabric. Similarly, A. Dilani³'s '**An investigation on the origin of the concept of God Natha in Sri Lanka**' traces the origins of Natha and attempts to understand it from a religious perspective.

This research concentrates on the built environment for Natha **devalaya** of Kandy. There is no single article dealing with the architecture of Natha **devalaya**. Comparatively, 'The art and architecture of the Gampola Period' by Nandasena Mudiyanse illustrates the architecture of Natha **devalaya** along with other buildings of the period but in a limited sense. This article explores the architecture of Natha **devalaya** in detail on the background of its socio-historical context. It focuses on the morphological and stylistic aspects of the building.

The journey leads us to identify its stylization regarding fusions and appropriation of its socio-cultural context. This investigation leads to the understanding the historical factors involved in its formation and the cultural politics of erasing or ignoring the factors under the mono-nationalistic framework.

At the first level, the article maps the Sri Lankan Buddhist pantheon to understand its nature and aspects. This inquiry cultivates the space to understand the **bodhisattva** Avalokitesvara cult and its assimilation into the Theravada Buddhism of Sri Lanka. In the next level, the essay

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elaborates on the transformation of Avalokatheswara into Natha and its monarchical politics. Finally, it deals with the architecture of Natha **devalaya** through that architectural scheme and its shared and connected nature.

SRI LANKAN BUDDHIST PANTHEON

Sri Lanka is known as a Theravada Buddhist country, and Theravada Buddhism is celebrated for its doctrinal purity in the religious world. However, over the course of time, Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka has assimilated, accommodated and mixed with other religio-cultural expressions in Sri Lanka within its soteriological framework.

Observable within literary, iconographic, inscriptional, political, and ritual expressions of Sinhala religious culture, these patterns and processes reveal a religiocultural propensity for inclusivity. In addition to the conservative ethos of Theravada Buddhism per se, Sinhala cultural inclusivity has been one of the primary reasons for longevity, vitality, and continuity of Sri Lankan religious culture as a whole, and Theravada's privileged survival in particular.⁴

The Buddhist religious practices are derived from a variety of sources and formed into a composite system. It crosses, overlaps and accommodates diverse religious practices such as Mahayana, Vajrayana Buddhist sects, Yaksha, Naga cults, Brahmanical and Saiva religious practices of South India and the indigenous beliefs with folk deities and spirits.

Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka has always coexisted with various forms of other religious practices oriented to deities, planets, astrology and demons (yakku), and some of these often figure in the Hindu tradition as well. However, the Buddhist doctrine in its canonical form stands apart from the culturally specific forms of popular religious practices. Beliefs in gods and other supernatural powers and rituals are, in theory, inappropriate to be considered as part of Buddhism. But many anthropologists and sociologists who have spent extended periods of time in Theravada Buddhist societies have shown that Buddhists do believe in various types of supernatural powers and the magical efficacy of rituals which are outside the Buddhist doctrine⁵

In this background, the Buddhist religious pantheon of Sri Lanka is fabricated by the different divine representations in a hierarchical order. This fabric included Buddha, Bodhisattva, Gods/ Deva, Bandara Deviyo and Demons, respectively.⁶

	Bodhisattva	Gods	Bandara Deviyo	Demons
Buddha	Maitreya Tara Vajirapani Manjushri Avalokitasvara	Vishnu Natha Kadirahama Pattini Saman	Gale Bandara Rajjuru Bandara Dedimunda	Kalu Kumara Mahasona Yaka Reeri Yakseya Wesamuni

Buddha occupies the topmost position in Buddhism and represents the 'Buddha hood' of Nibbana, or the ultimate state of soteriological release or liberation from the life cycle⁵. At the same time, that Buddhism believes many Buddhas in the past and future. The Bodhisattvas are the next position of Buddha and the next Buddhas in salvation order by the Mahayana Buddhist sect, and it was assimilated by the Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhists as part of their Buddhist practice. Gods or Deviyo are at the next level of the hierarchy of the Sri Lankan Buddhist pantheon. Gananath Obeyesekere believed that the god or deva /deviyo tradition in the Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhism is rooted in Brahmanism⁷. Saivism and Vedda⁸ traditions also contributed the Vedda tradition to the deviyo tradition. The Bandara deities were local and regional in their origin, belonged to royalty, and were identified as Chieftains of local courts.

In Sinhala Buddhist tradition, the gods are mainly positioned as guardian powers, safeguarding the Buddha sasana in Sri Lanka. They were listed as four but it has interchangeable based on the periods and regions. Viṣṇu, Nātha, Vibhiṣaṇa, Saman (Lakṣmaṇa), Skanda, and the goddess Pattinī are usually in this list⁹.

In this context, one can identify the Theravada Buddhism of Sri Lanka as a Sri Lankan version of Theravada Buddhism or the Sri Lankan School of Theravada Buddhism rather than Theravada Buddhism in general.

NATHA DEVIYO: OFFSPRING OF AVALOKITESVARA

Natha is one of the guardian deities of the Sri Lankan Buddhist pantheon and believed that Natha was a transformation of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara¹⁰ of Mahayana Buddhism. John Clifford Holt identified that Natha is a Kandyan form of Avalokitesvara¹¹. The evolution and assimilation of *Avalokitesvara* as *Natha* in the Sinhalese Buddhism, Udaya Prasanta Meddagama explain as follows:

Natha Deviyō, the highest of the four national guardian deities in the Sinhala pantheon as it is conceived by traditional upcountry Kandyan village Sinhalese. Before the late medieval period Natha was not included in the cult of national guardian deities. But Natha whose original identity is the Mahayana *Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara*, became the patron deity and legitimator of Kandyan Kings in the medieval period¹².

Based on Shu Hikosaka's research¹³, Holt argued that the Bodhisattva worship in *Mahayana* originated from Tamil Buddhism¹⁴ and Lokesh Chandra suggested the *Saiva* interaction and *Avalokitesvara* cult¹⁵. The only *Mahayana* deity that has worshipping by the ordinary Buddhists in most of the *Theravada* countries is *Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara*¹⁶ and, who is identified as a 'cult of Half Asia'¹⁷.



4th CE, (Gandhara/India) Bronze 750 CE (Sri Lanka)
Lanka)

Bronze 9th century, (Sri Lanka)

The Bodhisattva ('enlightened being') is a concept of proto-Buddha hood of Mahayana Buddhism that was assimilated into Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhist tradition deeply as a part of its acculturation nature of diverse religious practices.

In early Indian Buddhism and in some later traditions—including Theravada, at present the major form of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and other parts of Southeast Asia—the term bodhisattva was used primarily to refer to the Buddha Shakyamuni (as Gautama Siddhartha is known) in his former lives¹⁸.

The Chinese monks Faxian in the 4th century CE and Xuanzang in the 7th century CE, visited India and witnessed the practice of the *Avalokitesvara* cult in India¹⁹. Much earlier than the 4th century CE, Holt traces the textual evidence for the *Avalokitesvara* cult citing some of these from the early Sanskrit sources²⁰. Apart from these readings, the French scholar Mallman, primarily through his readings on Indian iconography, identified that the *Avalokitesvara* tradition was connected with the solar worship of the Zoroastrian culture of Indo - Iran²¹.

Apart from these, the cosmic reality of the 'Hindu' religion is also one of the many roots of the formation of the *Avalokitesvara* cult, explained by Holt²². The Brahmanical and Saiva religious traditions jointly participated in this process. Many scholars have identified the role of influences of Siva worship and the *bakthi* cult specifically²³. These diverse roots of the cult of *Avalokitesvara* from the pre- Mahayana phase witnessed the multi - cultural connection, formation and transformation of the *Avalokitesvara* cult through the years. Apart from Mahayana, *Vajrayana* and *Theravada* also adapted and shared the cult of the *Avalokitesvara* in their theological framework.

In the 5th CE century, Chinese pilgrim Fa Hien noticed *Avalokitesvara* worship in coastal Sri Lanka. In the 8th CE to the 10th CE centuries the *Avalokitesvara* cult became popular and entered Anuradapura monasteries. The Mahayana Buddhist nun Sangamitta's visit to Sri Lanka and her efforts to establish Mahayanism in Sri Lanka also expanded the space to establish Mahayana Buddhism in Sri Lanka and the bodhisattva cult²⁴. Nevertheless, until the time of the Gampola (1341CE–1408CE) and Kandyan (1597CE–1815CE) periods, the Sinhala Buddhist communities did not accept much of the worship of *Avalokitesvara*. Later, the Bodhisattva cult entered into and assimilated by the *Theravada* Buddhist School and was powerfully connected with the notion of King became a Bodhisattva of the local Buddhist beliefs of Sri Lanka and many kings have tried to establish bodhisattva images²⁵. The efforts to spread bodhisattva images and circulate the notion of interconnection between the Bodhisattva and the King firmly tie the monarchy and religion very tightly as well as politically in terms of gaining and implicating power.

The monarchical interest in gaining political power from religion reflects the iconography of the bodhisattva. It overlaps the elements of King and bodhisattva visually.

BIRTH OF NATHA

After the downfall of Mahayana Buddhism in Sri Lanka, bodhisattva *Avalokitesvara*, transfigured into the Sinhala guardian deity Natha in the fourteen and fifteen centuries has been identified with Metteyya in the emergent modern Sinhala Buddhist tradition.²⁶

The late medieval Gompola era (AD 1341-1415), it resulted in the transformation of *Avalokitesvara's* identity. Thereafter, *Avalokitesvara* was known in Sri Lanka almost exclusively as Natha, a shortened form one of his best known epithets, *Lokesvara Natha*. Though the bodhisattva's original identity was soon forgotten, Natha eventually

became a powerful national deity of political legitimating in the up country Kandyan Capital²⁷.

Most of the time, the same body of Avalokitesvara was taken or shared by Natha. However, in later times, Natha images showed more royal attributes than the ascetic aspects of early Avalokitesvara images. Sariputra, the Sinhala canonical text for image making, talked about the iconography of Natha.

The first pieces of evidence of Natha were found in the 14th CE century inscription in the Gampola period (1341CE–1408CE) which has close political and cultural ties with South India. It is evident from an oral tradition that King Gajabahu brought Natha worship when he returned from South India. Later on, Natha became a god of 'Senkadagla' (old name of present Kandy). Apart from this, the historians of Sri Lankan Buddhism and the scholars of iconographical styles identified the similarities between Pallava sculptures and the early period *Avalokitesvara/ Natha* sculptures of Sri Lanka²⁸ widely. But later period *Avalokitesvara/ Natha* sculptures especially, in the Kandyan era, reflects another South Indian style by the Cholas of *Nagapattinam* or *Nagapattinam Chola style*²⁹. The *Natha deviyowith rajalilasana* and *vithrka mudraat Kandy Natha Devalaya* was identified by Holt as Chola Style.³⁰ Also, the Natha images predominantly positioned in *samabhanga* posture with *vidarga* and *katala mudra* and his *jadamakuta* contains a lightly embedded Amitabha figure; royal jewelries and *mahapurisha lakshanas* mixed in his appearance³¹.

NATHA / KING: POLITICAL DYNAMICS OF IMAGING

The image of Natha in the 14th century moved firmly into the political spire with a religious flavor and signified the presence of the King and thus marking the divinity and the power of Kingship. In the later period, through these practices, the Sri Lankan monarchies legitimized their reign. The Kandyan Kings systematically used the Natha worship for safeguarding and promoting their royalty.

Under the influence of Southeast Asia ideas of divine Buddhist kingship and the three parts of the system – cult of Buddha, of the gods and of the king merged more and more during the 13th – 14th century Ceylon. The temples which used to be separate were now combined in one building, the rituals, became identical, though the Buddha himself retained his Theravada identity and the bodhisattvas were incorporated into the rank of the gods as Natha and probably Saman³².

This phenomenon of 'God and King' spread the Natha cult deeply and widely in the Kandyan Kingdom and became a 'god of Sengadagala', and the Mahayana bodhisattva Avalokitesvara identity in Kandy was eventually forgotten over the centuries³³ and stood as Natha only.

All the Royal events connected with Natha and the *Natha Devalayas* became ritual and ceremonial centers of Royalty. The grand religious procession of the present Tooth relic temple was started and centered on *Natha Devalaya*.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF NATHA DEVALAYA OF KANDY

Most scholars believe that the *Natha Devalaya*³⁴ of Kandy is the oldest surviving architectural piece of Kandy. The Temple is located in front of the Royal Palace complex and the Temple of Tooth Relic and it was said to be an older than the Temple. King Vikramabahu III built it in the 14th century³⁵.



Natha Devalaya Kandy

In his monumental book '*Buddha in the Crown: Avalokitesvara in the Buddhist traditions of Sri Lanka*' John Clifford Holt introduces the architecture of *Natha devalaya*, which helpful for further exploration. He writes:

The architecture of *Natha devalaya* is unique and constitutes yet another example of the assimilative nature of institutionalized religion at this time. It's architectural outline remembers the typical structure of all *devalayas* in Sri Lanka in that a drumming hall is situated in front of the *digge* (the fore chamber in which devotees present their petitions to the *kapurala*) which turn abuts the sanctum sanctorum. The sanctum sanctorum, however, uniquely with a two storied *sikaraya* that takes the shape of a *stupa*. This room that continues to house of magnificent bronze image of *Avalokitesvara*³⁶

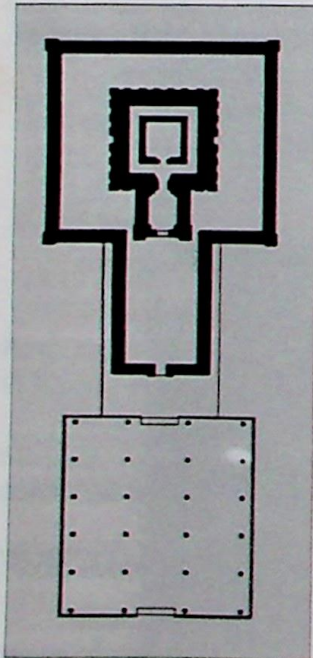


Natha Devalaya, Kandy(sideview)



Natha Devalaya, Kandy(Frontview)

Its body predominantly carries the Dravidian architectural style, which Gilbert Holt identifies as the origination of Hindu architectural tradition³⁷. However, the term 'Hindu architecture' is complex, for it this style was used not only by the Hindus but also by Jains and Buddhists in Southern India. Apart from this, Hindus practice three significant styles in architecture in India named Nagara, Dravida and Vesara;³⁸. It is highly important to understand its structural body.

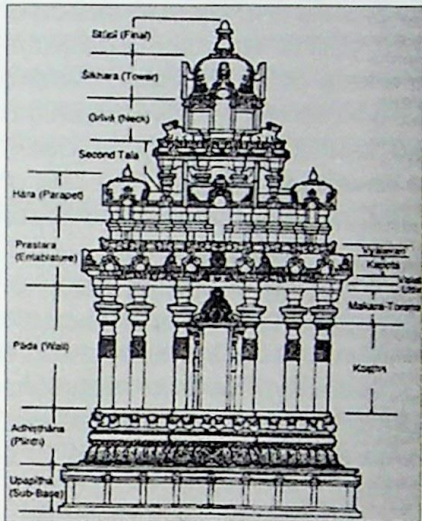


Morphologically speaking, the schematic arrangements of the architectural units of Natha *devalaya* followed the Dravidian architectural order³⁹. *garbagirha* (shrine), *antarala* (vestibular tunnel connected the *garbagirha* with *artha mandapa*) *artha mandapa* (intermediary space between the *garba girha* and *mahamandapa*) and *maha mandapa*.⁴⁰ The Sinhala Buddhist context the above architectural units of Dravidian architecture named as '*garpaya*' (*garbagirha*), '*handun hudana*' (*artha mandapa*) and '*digge*' (drummer's hall)⁴¹.

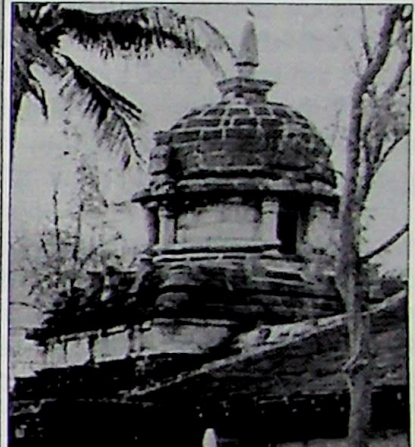
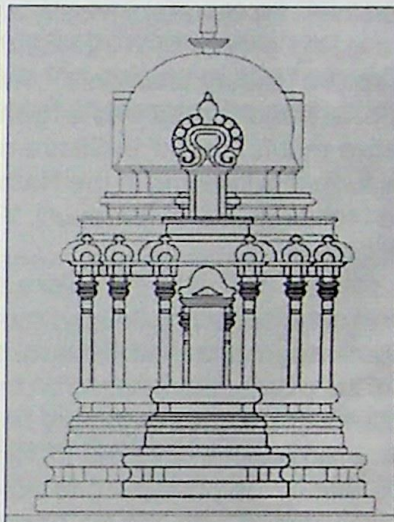
The Natha – *devalaya* consists, on ground plan, of a *garbha graha* with porch in front. Externally it measures 20-1/2 ft x 19 ft. with a projection 10ft x 6-1/2 ft. Internally the cellar is square of 10ft, each side and ante-chamber 7-1/2ft x 6ft. The wall of sanctuary have been built into a thickness of 4ft... the walls of ante chamber ... 1-1/2ft..⁴²

The outer wall of *Garbagirha* in the Dravidian order contains three central architectural units named Pada, Adistana and Uppa pitea, and every unit has sub units. Natha *devalaya* followed the same format of Dravidian architectural order in a

simplified format. The Pada of Natha devalaya carries pilasters and gostapanjara as same like Dravidian architecture. The bottom of Natha *devalaya* is a simple adistana (plinth) with several bands of different lengths and widths as the base of the main structure.



Dravidian Vimana



Vimana, Natha devalaya drawing & Photo

The vimana, the crown structure of this building, was placed on the top of Garbagirha (shrine), another predominant structure of Dravidian architecture. Vimana of Natha devalaya is 35ft from the ground to the top⁴³. It is, based on the *Kuta vimana* variety of Dravidian *Vimanas*⁴⁴.

The pillars in the drummer's hall show another interaction with Dravidian architecture. These pillars are called 'eddupattai thoon' (eight-sided pillars). The bottom of these types of pillars is primarily rectangular, and the rest of the pillar has square projections with eight-sided connected areas in regular equal intervals. It carries naga panntm (snake motif) in the corners of square projections.

The roofing style of this temple usually known as Kandyan roof. Ananda K.Comaraswamy's *Medieval Sinhalese Art* popularized the term Kandyan roof⁴⁵. Nevertheless, the Kandyan period roof shared the East Asian hip-and-gable roof system. This roof system 'consists of a hip roof that slopes down on all four sides and integrates a gable on two opposing sides'⁴⁶. Architecture scholars pointed out that it originates from China⁴⁷ and spread to India, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Mongolia, Tibet, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and the Philippines. At the same time, some Sri Lankan scholars also underline its interconnections with East Asia⁴⁸, which could have been the result of Buddhist communities; the missionary activities of Buddhism and the maritime networks. Subsequently, someone can identify the similarities between the Kandyan roof and mansard roofing pattern. Mansard-type roofs generally have two slopes on every side, the lower slope being considerably steeper than the upper⁴⁹.

The hip-and-gable roof with the elements of the Mansard roof of the Kandyan period and its roof frame and rafter designs showed many similarities with the traditional Kerala roofing. Especially, the patterns of edges of wooden rafters, anatomy of the roof frame, its engineering and other related ornamentalations are highly related to traditional Kerala roofing patterns or the patterns similar to it, which is the result of physical and cultural proximity and the interconnections.⁵⁰. The similarities found between the two places are essential in this context. The timber roof frame, its stylistics, and its engineering are connected with Kerala significantly rather than the Chinese or other East Asian countries. In this light, we have to suggest that the whole morphological and stylistic aspect of Natha devalaya can be included with the pan Dravidian architecture.

REGIONAL TURN AND ARCHITECTURE OF NATHA DEVALAYA

Natha devalaya strikingly modified some of the stereotypical characters of Dravidian architecture which led to a regional variation. This is evident in the Vimana structure. The top unit of the Vimana in Dravidian architecture is 'stupi'; this part in Natha devalaya modify as a smaller and simpler version of top units of the Buddhist Stupa structure in Sri Lanka, which includes 'koth kerello' (pinnacle), dewatha kottuwa (image chamber) and hathras kottwa (square chamber)⁵¹. The 'Sikara' of the Dravidian *Vimana* slightly modified its appearance and scale and turned into a 'garbahya' (dome) of the Sri Lankan Stupas. At the same time, the decorative motifs 'koodu' in Sikara and 'Devakostam' in 'girva' (neck) same like Dravida Vimana in a simple format is keeping in the Natha devalaya vimana⁵². The rest of the structural units of Dravida Vimana including 'Hara' (parapet), 'Prastara' (entablature) and *kapta* (flat roof) are represented in a simple form.

The drummer's hall is an open pillared hall, and the pillars are basically 'ettupattai thoon' of Dravidian architecture. It is in scale and conditioned by its high roofing system of the hip-and-gable roof. This elongation of pillars, in the same way, happened in Kerala architecture because of the same roofing system. However, the volume of the pillars differs based on their spatiality. The ornamentations on the body of pillars are regular patterns like a lotus with new regional additions like stylized leaf designs. It also places in the eight cornered spaces between the square units in the pillar body. The leaf design in Sri Lankan Buddhism is one of the principal characteristics.

These pillars are ended up or connected with the tie beams which are directly connected with the roof frame. The roof frame or rafters creates the roof ceiling as a rib vault, not directly in western architectural terms. However, it has its terms for making ripped vault; and the rafter eaves of this vault carry unique carved patterns. This wooden vault also reflects the characteristics of the architecture of Kerala. Nelliypar Temple at Thirunelveli in Tamil Nadu was another best example of the same mannerism of vaulting⁵³.

At times the tie beams rest on pillars which creates square bays. The space, scale and volume of wood structures increase the visual weight of the ceiling through the tie beams and the wooden bays. This intermediate frame between the lower and upper part of the drummer's hall divides and connects the space simultaneously and creates a spectacle for the visitors.

CONCLUSION: NATHA DEVALAYA - SUB STYLE OF DRAVIDIAN ARCHITECTURE?

The Kandy Natha devalya represents the characteristics of assimilation, accommodation, adaptation and modifying the nature of art through the diverse creative possibilities under socio-historical condition. It shows the unique turn in the 'Dravidian style'. Speaking in a broader sense Natha devalaya blends the dominant Dravida style (in the canonical sense) and the Kerala/Chera Dravida regional style and it contextualizes the building under the Buddhist visual vocabulary. Finally, it presents the Natha *devalaya* as another version of Dravidian architecture. At this juncture, can we identify Natha *devalaya* as one of the sub-styles of Dravidian architecture?

Dravidian architecture is an umbrella term; it has many sub-styles regarding region, place, period, religious context, patronage and artists. All these sub-styles are diverse and rooted in the conceptual framework Dravidian school of architecture. The sub style is understood in the realm of art as follows:

A sub style is a minor style that falls under a large umbrella style. These styles still follow a larger style and are not unique enough to be considered their own style. A substyle can be created when a style is unique or of a different nature than what is considered normal

for the style it originated from. Substyles are also formed when a style is split into two or more minor styles based on color, theme or other aspects⁵⁴.

When the cultures meet, share and overlap, their cultural productions also reflect the same socio-historical reality in their production and witnessing the particular time, place and community. This reciprocity between cultures results in hybrid forms and representations. One can understand architectural style of Natha devalaya in this cultural context as well as the nature of birth of sub styles and crossing and merging the different styles and the production of new forms in the participation of diverse factors and communities.

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