

Mamallapuram historical and cultural aspects

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Source: *The Hindu*

Manifest pedagogy UPSC has been looking at sites of cultural significance in the past few years prelims. A few examples of which are the Question on Mahabalipuram, Hampi and Lepakshi. A few of these sites form an essential part of Indian cultural identity. An awareness about these locations and their history is needed with the changing nature of Prelims. And the content can also be used for the questions like Dravidian Architecture which are being asked in Mains.

In news: Mamallapuram to host India-China second informal summit in October, 2019.

Placing it in syllabus: Pallava art and architecture (explicitly mentioned)

Dimensions:

- Pallava contribution to culture
- Mahabalipuram cave architecture (Mandapas)
- Mahabalipuram temple architecture (Ratha style)
- Mahabalipuram free standing temples
- Sculpture of descent of Ganga

Content: The historic coastal town of Mamallapuram is expected to be the venue for the second India-China informal summit between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping, scheduled in October, 2019. Mr. Modi will host Mr. Xi for two days – October 11 and 13. Mamallapuram also hosted the Defence Expo 2018 or known as Defexpo, the Union Defence Ministry's annual event with international participation.

Pallava contribution to culture: By the beginning of the 7th

century AD, the Pallavas with Kanchipuram as their capital emerged as an important power after replacing the Kalabhras. **Simhavishnu**, who ruled from AD 555 to 590, is considered the founder of the line of the Greater Pallavas and assumed the title of Avanisimha or lion of the earth. The Adivaraha temple at Mahabalipuram provides the relief of Simhavishnu, his two queens and his son Mahendravarman.

Mahendravarman I, son and successor of Simhavishnu, ascended the Pallava throne and ruled from AD 590 to 630. He was a renowned builder of rock-cut temples in Tiruchirapalli, Chengalpattu North Arcot and South Arcot districts. He also built temples in honour of Vishnu, Isvara and Brahma. His reign is famous for popularization of rock-cut architecture and his title Vichitrachitta or the man with new or curious ideas is indicative of his personality.

Mahendravarman's abiding and deep interest and love for fine arts is unparalleled. His title Chitrakarapuli is also very significant because he is considered a great painter. **Rock-cut temple at Sittanavasal in the Pudukkottai region** is attributed to him (Paintings in this cave are done by Pandyans). His proficiency in music can be known from his **Kudimiyamalai inscription** that contains a musical tabular note. He composed two works in Sanskrit, Mattavilasa Prahasana and Bhogavadajjuka.

Mahendravarman I was succeeded by his son **Narasimhavarman I**, who ruled from AD 630 to 668. He made himself eternally remembered by introducing the **Mamalla style of architecture**.

Mamallapuram bears eloquent testimony to his style of architecture. Narasimhavarman was succeeded by his son Mahendravarman II, who ruled only for a period of two years from AD 668 to 670.

Narasimha Varman II, who ruled for 28 years from about AD 700-728 assumed the titles of Rajasimha (lion among kings),

Agama Priya (lover of scriptures) and Shankara Bhakta (devotee of Siva). True to his title of Shankara Bhakta, he built the Kailasanatha temple or Rajasimha Varam at Kanchi, the Siva temple at Panamalai and a famous shore temple at Mamallapuram. He patronized the famous poet Dandin. He sent an embassy to China.

In difficult days, the Pallavas entered into matrimonial alliance with Dantidurga of the Rashtrakutas. Because of the marriage **Dantivarman** was born, who became the successor of Nandivarman Pallavamalla. The construction of Vaikunta Perumal temple at Kanchi and patronage of Tirumangai Alwar suggest that he must be a Vaishnavite. He is also said to have built a temple at Kanchi known as Paramesvara Visnagaram and a Kesavaperumal temple at Karam.

The social structure of the Pallava period witnessed the growing impact of the **Aryan culture**. During the Pallava period, the Brahmins superseded the Jains and the Buddhists in formulating policies. Though the Jaina and the Buddhist centres of education continued to exist, they lost the royal patronage. Every temple in general had a Ghatika attached to it. In those days, the **University of Kanchi** was the most well-known educational institution comparable to the Nalanda University.

Sanskrit continued to be the court language and the language of literature. **Bharavi's Kiratatjuniya and Dandin's Dasakumaracharita**, two outstanding standard Sanskrit works were produced in the South. On the other hand, the prominent Bhakti saints of this period popularized Tamil through their hymns and songs composed and sung in praise of the popular deities, Siva and Vishnu.

Tamil devotionalism that became very popular in the 6th and 7th centuries can be known from the Tamil songs and works of the **Nayanar and the Alwar saints**. Majority of these saints came from lower castes of artisans and cultivators. The **Bhakti**

movement led to the popularization of musical instruments like the flute, and the dance form of Bharatanatyam at temples.

Mahabalipuram Cave architecture (Mandapas):

The temple architecture of the Pallavas is divided into **rock-cut and structural**. The rock-cut temples are further divided into excavated **pillared halls** and monolithic shrines known as **Rathas**.



- **Mahendravarman I** started the building of the rock-cut temples in South India.
 - He built Mahabalipuram or **Mamallapuram**, an immortal centre of artistic excellence by making it '*the birth place of South Indian architecture and sculpture*'.
 - The excavated shrines initiated by Mahendravarman are **simple pillared halls called Mandapas cut into the back or sides of walls**.
 - The pillars can be studied and understood as part of **three stages of development**.
1. First stage : This belongs to the pillars of rock cut mantapa with 7 feet height approximately. Here, brackets are seen towards the upper part of the pillar. Here, pillar has square shaft.
 2. Second stage : Here, pillars were around 50 feet height with more ornate design. It shows the combination of shaft and capital. The lion motif is seen in the base of the shaft as well as in the capital.
 3. Third stage: Here, pillars come under the mandapa of ratha temples. In this case, malasthana, a motif with bend of pearl festoon is seen in the shaft. It rises up to the pillar separated by kumbha or melon capital above which a padma flares up to the palagai or abacus.
- An interesting feature of the cave temples built by him are the presence of inscriptions giving details about

them.

- Each mandapa was carved out of a single rock.
- On the side-walls of these mandapas, beautiful sculptures depicting Puranic stories had been carved.
- For example, the cave temple at Mandagapattu in South Arcot district refers to his construction of a temple dedicated to Vishnu, Shiva and Brahma without using brick, mortar, timber or metal.
- The scene depicting the Goddess Durga's attack on Mahishasura is seen in the **Mahishasuramardini Mandapa**.
- Such beautiful sculptures have also been carved in **Thirumoorthi and Varaha mandapas**.
- The most important among the Mamalla style of architecture is the Open Art Gallery. Several miniature sculptures have been carved beautifully on the wall of a big rock.
- The fall of the River Ganges from the head of God Siva and Arjuna's penance are notable among them.
- The images of deer, monkey, cat, mouse and other animals are beautifully carved on this huge rock.
- The upper rock-cut temple at Tiruchirapalli is considered by far the best of his cave temples which has the first representation of Gangadhara.
- As a Jain, prior to his conversion to Saivism, he built a cave temple at Sittanvassal.

Mahabalipuram temple architecture (Ratha style):

Pancha Rathas also referred as Pandava Rathas are the most excellent architectural edifices of the monolithic temples of Mahabalipuram. The five structures each are chiselled in the **shape of rathas or chariots** out of large block of stone or monolith of granite. The five rathas are named as 'Dharmaraja Ratha', 'Bhima Ratha', 'Arjuna Ratha', 'Nakula Sahadeva Ratha', and 'Draupadi Ratha'. These Rathas are part of the monument complex that is marked as 'Group of Monuments at Mahabalipuram' by 'UNESCO'. It is enlisted in UNESCO's World

Heritage sites.



The construction of the five rathas is traced back to the 7th century during the reign of King Mahendravarman I and his son Narasimhavarman I. An ASI inscribed tablet at the site mentions that the concept of carving the rocks in the shape of chariots or rathas was made by the Pallava dynasty keeping wooden rathas as prototypes. Construction work of the structures stopped after the demise of Narasimhavarman I in 668 AD.

Each of the five rathas is a monolith, carved whole from a rock outcropping of pink granite. They are carved over a common mounted plinth which is north-south oriented with a slight slope. Each has a different layout, such as square, rectangular, or apsidal plans. Most of the rathas are stated to be modelled on the Buddhist Viharas and Chaityas.

While Draupadi Ratha is a simple hut-shaped temple, the Arjuna Ratha is two storeyed, the Bhima Ratha is a rectangular Vimana and Dharmaraja Ratha is three storeyed. Their plans are also different. The Sahadeva Ratha is an apsidal temple with a portico in front. The other three Rathas are of Ganesha, Pillari and Valaiyam Kuttai.

Mahabalipuram free standing temples:

The Pallava age saw a transition from rock-cut architecture to free-standing temples. **Rajasimha** was responsible for this transition. He is credited with the construction of three structural temples at Mamallapuram. He also built such structural temples at Panamalai and at Kanchi.

The structural (free-standing) temples have been built with cut stones as building blocks, rather than carved into a rock (cave temples) or out of a rock (ratha temples). The **Shore Temple complex near the Mamallapuram** shore consists of a large

temple, two smaller temples and many minor shrines, open halls, gateways. The main temple is within a two-tier, compound wall with statues of Shiva's vahana (vehicle), Nandi, surrounding it.



The 60-foot high temple has a stepped pyramidal tower, arranged in five tiers with Shiva iconography. The temple includes a path around its main sanctum and a large, barrel vaulted roof above its doorway. Pilasters on the outer wall divide it into bays. An octagonal shikhara and kalasa- (pot)-shaped finials cap the tower. The main shrine has Vishnu and Durga images. The rear temple walls are carved with Somaskanda bas-relief panels depicting Shiva, Parvati and the infant Skanda.

Olakkanesvara temple: The Olakkanesvara temple is perched on the rock above the Mahishamardini cave temple. It is also known as the Old Lighthouse because of its conversion by British officials. The temple, built in the early 8th century from grey granite cut into blocks, is also credited to King Rajasimha. It is severely damaged, and what remains is a square building with its west entrance flanked by dwarapalakas. The **walls of the temple depict the Ravana Anugraha** legend from the Ramayana and a relief of Dakshinamurti (Shiva as a yoga teacher).

Mukunda Nayanar temple: This temple has ratha-like architecture. The temple, with a simple square design, is oriented to the east and its facade is supported by two slender, fluted, round pillars. Its sanctum is surrounded by granite walls, and its outer walls are articulated into pilastered columns. Artisans shaped the roof to resemble timber, and the corners have square, domed kutas (pavilions). The superstructure is tiered into squares, topped with an octagonal dome. The inside of the superstructure is cut to create a shikhara above the garbhagriha. There is a square

panel in the sanctum, but the image is missing.



Sculpture of descent of Ganga:

Descent of the Ganges is a giant open-air rock relief carved on two monolithic rock boulders at Mamallapuram. The legend depicted in the relief is the story of the descent of the sacred river Ganges to earth from the heavens led by Bhagiratha. It is one of the Group of Monuments at Mamallapuram that were designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1984. The relief was created to celebrate the victory of Narasimhavarman-1 over Chalukya king Pulakesin 2 .



The sculptures carved in the natural fissure that divides the cliff not only depict a cosmic event of Ganges descending to earth at the command of Shiva but also shows the event being watched by scores of gods, goddesses, mythical figurines of Kinnara, Gandharva, Apsara, Gana, Nagas, and also wild and domestic animals, all admiringly looking up at the scene. The total number of carvings are probably about 146. The carvings of elephants are almost life size.

Shiva is shown next to the Kinnaras who are depicted in large numbers in the upper portion of the relief. Shiva is carved in front of the river (to the right of the cleft) in a standing posture with Bhagiratha, the sage, standing on one leg offering him prayers to check the force of the Ganga as she descends to earth. Shiva is also shown with a weapon which is interpreted as Pashupati, which he gave to Arjuna. The ganas shown in the carvings represent the people who have spent their entire lives in dedication to Shiva, and are blessed with the boon to remain close to Shiva for all time to come.

Carvings of the divine nagas shown swimming in the river, as Ganga descends from the heavens, are also in anthropomorphic

form of a serpent and human, which has been a traditional style from ancient times in Indian art. They are believed to denote fertility and protective forces of nature. They are seen not only in the middle of the panel facing the cleft, which represents the river, but also at the top of the panel at the entry of water over the channel, marking the prevalence of naga worship in Hindu religious beliefs.

Sun, on the left and Moon on the right side are also depicted on the top part of the panel. A kim-purusha, meaning dwarf with elongated ears and wearing a cap on his head and beating a drum is also seen in the panel. In the upper part of the panel, Himalayas are shown which corroborates the theory of the panel representing the descent of the Ganges. Wild lions are also shown with large mane and also rams which are interpreted as representing the Himalayan habitat.