

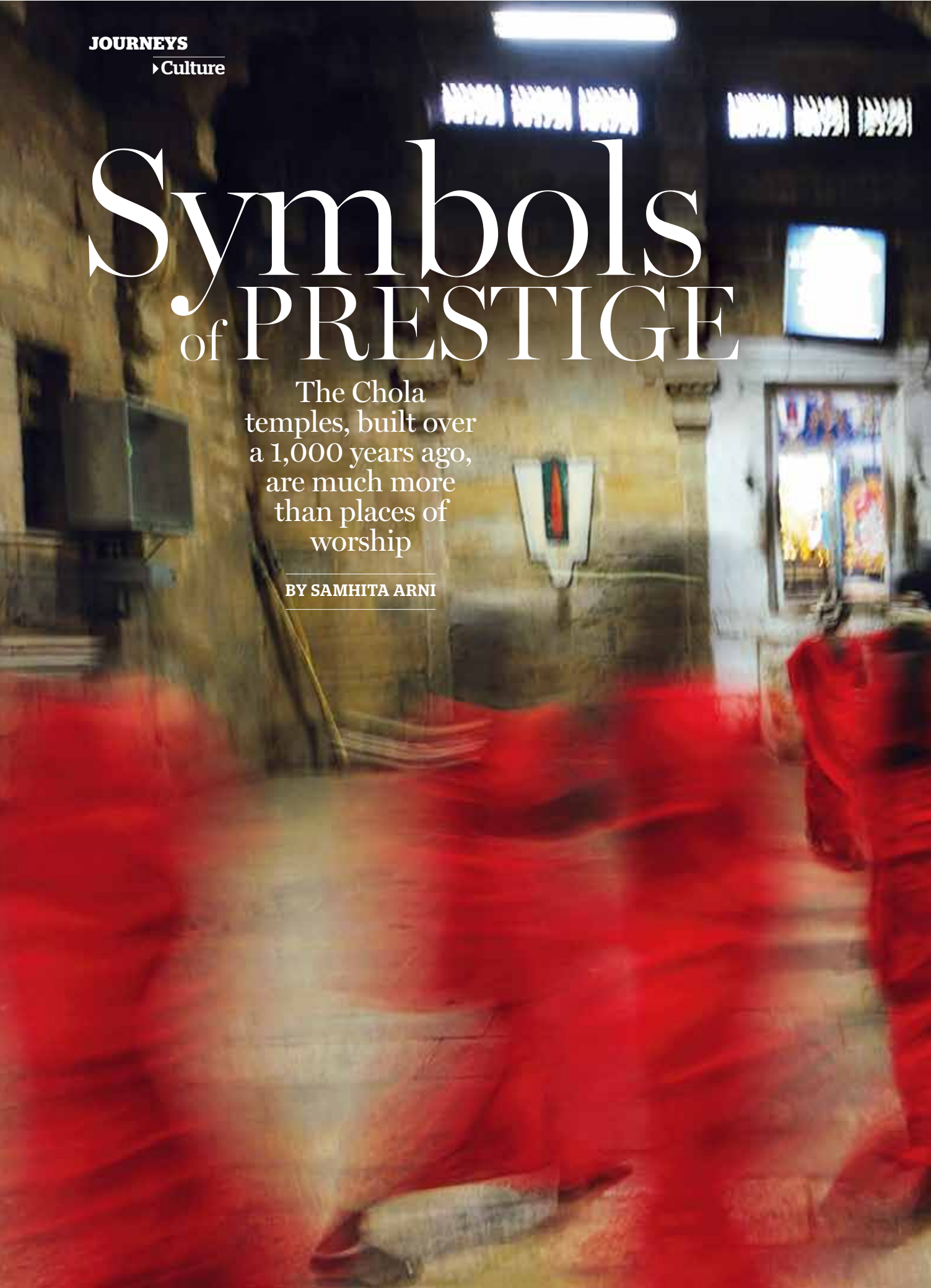
# Symbols of PRESTIGE

The Chola  
temples, built over  
a 1,000 years ago,  
are much more  
than places of  
worship

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BY SAMHITA ARNI

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Each January, devotees across South India visit temples dedicated to Lord Vishnu.

My great-grandmother was married at the age of 12. On the night of her wedding, Thanjavur's most famous *devadasi* came to dance. "She was a little on the large side," my great aunt tells me, "but she was so graceful." The next day, the *devadasi* sent over a tray of sweets—after dancing the whole night, she had delivered a healthy baby boy.

The tale seems too fabulous to believe. Yet my great-aunt speaks of the incredible discipline and training of the *devadasis*. Sometimes described as courtesans, *devadasis* were also hereditary temple servants. They were dedicated to the service of the temple deity, trained in dance and music, and would perform in temples. At the Brihadeshwara temple in Thanjavur, for instance, *devadasis* would trapeze repeatedly around an iron rod suspended horizontally beneath the *gopuram* (temple's tower). These acrobatic feats were performed to fulfil vows that either the *devadasis* or their patrons had taken. A misstep meant a fall and horrible injury or even death. Large crowds would gather to watch this spectacle.

When I visit the Brihadeshwara temple, there are no crowds. Perhaps it's the time of day, but legends of bad luck have hung over the temple ever since Indira Gandhi and MGR, the then chief minister of Tamil Nadu visited the temple in 1984. Months later, Indira Gandhi was assassinated, while MGR suffered a kidney failure that led to his death three years later. Since then, VVIPs avoid the temple. The lack of crowds is a blessing—there are no long queues, none of the pushing and shoving that sometimes makes visits to temples so arduous. The temple is stunning—the intricately carved *gopuram*, made of golden-brown stone, is breathtaking against a clear blue sky, and the graceful, curvaceous Chola sculptures transport visitors to another time.

Guides point to a carving on the outer wall of the temple, and a knot of tourists throng the spot, clicking pictures. It's the carving of a man with a hat. Speculations run rife, but the consensus seems to be that it is the image of a European traveller or trader, sculpted over a thousand years ago, when Raja Raja Chola I built this temple in 1025 A.D. An inscription on the temple wall lists far-flung Chola conquests—naming places in Malaysia, Sumatra and the Nicobar Islands.

The endowment and construction of temples like these by the Cholas was a major landmark in the development of South Indian spiritual traditions of *Bhakti*. But the spectacular acrobatic activities of *devadasis*, and the fact that temple carvings record oddities and idiosyncrasies like European travellers, suggest another function of the temple—imperial prestige.

Not far from Thanjavur, is another, smaller temple constructed by some of the artisans who worked on the Brihadeshwara temple, during the reign of Rajendra Chola, who shifted his capital to Gangaikondacholapuram from Thanjavur. The tongue-twister name means 'the city of the Chola who conquered the Ganga,' and commemorates the king's northern conquests and an expedition to the northern river. It is said that Rajendra Chola brought thousands of litres of Ganga water here, to fill the five-kilometre-long temple tank.

A sense of what the Chola period was like can be found in the verses of the Tamil *Ramayana*, or *Iravataram* (also called *Kambaramayana*) which was composed by the poet Kambhan. Said to be the son of a temple drummer, Kambhan was born in Therazhundur, a village outside Thanjavur. The Cholas honoured him with the title *kavichakravarty*—emperor of poets. The *Iravatram* begins with a description of a prosperous, gleaming country where gems are found in dust-heaps, and little girls playing in the sand discover pearls. Ships



*Guides at the Brihadeswara Temple relate an interesting fact about the main gopuram of the temple—it supposedly never casts a shadow on the temple grounds at any time of the day; The Chidambaram Temple (facing page), is one of the few temples where Shiva isn't represented as a traditional lingam. Instead He takes the form of Nataraja, the lord of Bharatnatyam.*

## Spirituality and sensuality were not perceived as irreconcilable, and both were celebrated in temples and in literature.

from distant lands arrived here, bearing exotic goods. The women were beautiful, chaste and “the only small things in this kingdom were the waists of irrepressible maidens”.

But today, little is left of the glory of Gangaikondacholapuram. There's just a temple amidst paddy fields. Gazing at the trickle of the river and paddy fields, it's hard to imagine the glamour of the Chola metropolis. An old man from the Archaeological Survey of India guides me around. He saves the most intriguing bit for last, taking me up a rickety ladder and many series of stairs to a spot inside the *gopuram*. It's a windowless, dark space covered by bat droppings—a stark contrast to the manic, writhing frenzy of the carvings on the exterior.

The next day I am at another Chola-era temple, the Nataraja temple in Chidambaram, which is much more alive. A young priest, his hair pinned to a bun on the side, performs an *arti* in front of a curtain, as devotees offer prayers. He then pulls the curtain back to reveal the deity to whom we have prayed and I witness the *rahasyam*. There is nothing there. Chidambaram is one of the few temples where Shiva and Vishnu are worshipped in the same place. The *rahasyam* (representation of the element of space) I witness, symbolically tells me that the ultimate deity (or reality) transcends all distinction, pervades the universe and is formless (*nirguna brahman*).

Chidambaram differs remarkably from Gangaikondacholapuram and Thanjavur. It's a busy, active temple with sprightly, smart priests. I talk to one young priest, who is self-assured, savvy and has an email address. Crowds surround each *mantap* (altar). Inside the enormous temple are several platforms, shrines and intricately-carved pillars.

Chidambaram is traditionally managed and administered by a community of priests, known as the *Deekshithars*. There's a wonderful story that the scholar AK Ramanujan relates: The poet Kambhan, after

composing his version of the *Ramayana*, needs to gain approval of all the 3,000 *Deekshithars* at Chidambaram. He runs from pillar to post trying desperately to speak to all the priests, until he is advised to attend the funeral of the chief *Deekshithar's* son, who has just died from snakebite. All 3,000 priests are expected to assemble for the last rites. As the boy's corpse lies on the pyre, Kambhan approaches the priests, who are taken aback by his effrontery. Undaunted, Kambhan proceeds to recite from his poem—starting from the verse where Lakshman, struck by the *naga-astra* (a powerful mythical weapon, in the form of a snake), falls unconscious. Hanuman is dispatched to procure the Sanjeevani herb and returns with the whole mountain, and Lakshman is brought back to life. As Kambhan recites these verses, a cobra appears, slithers over to the body of the dead boy, and sucks out the poison from the snakebite. The boy comes back to life. The astounded priests give Kambhan's poem their approval. He's told to also obtain the approval of the Jain community, and recite it to a *devadasi*, for she is a critical, educated audience, a storyteller, well-versed in literature.

It strikes me later, that the detail of the man with his hat, and the anecdote above, reveal that the Cholas were a society that was pluralistic and cosmopolitan. They revered *devadasis* not just for their dancing and talent, but also as literary critics and storytellers in their own right. As the eroticism and focus on love in the *Iravataram* and the sensuality of Chola sculptures suggest, spirituality and sensuality were not perceived as irreconcilable, and both were celebrated in temples and in literature. ■

*Samhita Arni* is a Bangalore-based writer and author. Her graphic novel *Sita's Ramayana* (Tara Books) retells the *Ramayana* from *Sita's perspective*.



### THE VITALS

#### ORIENTATION

All three temples are near the east coast of Tamil Nadu. **Thanjavur** is about 330 km south of Chennai. **Gangaikondacholapuram** is 71 km northeast of Thanjavur, 32 km north of the city of Kumbakonam, and 240 km from Chennai. **Chidambaram** is 120 km northeast of Thanjavur, 66 km south of Pondicherry and 225 km south of Chennai.

#### GETTING THERE

**Tiruchirapalli** is the closest airport (65 km west of Thanjavur, 108 km and 195 km southwest of Gangaikondacholapuram and Chidambaram respectively). Thanjavur has a railway station which connects to Tiruchirapalli and Chennai; frequent buses are also available to these cities and many major cities in Tamil Nadu.

#### HOURS

**Brihadeshwara** (UNESCO World Heritage site)

6 a.m.-noon and 4-9 p.m.

**Gangaikondacholapuram** (UNESCO World Heritage site)

6 a.m.-noon and 4-9 p.m.

**Nataraja** 6 a.m.-noon and 4-10 p.m.