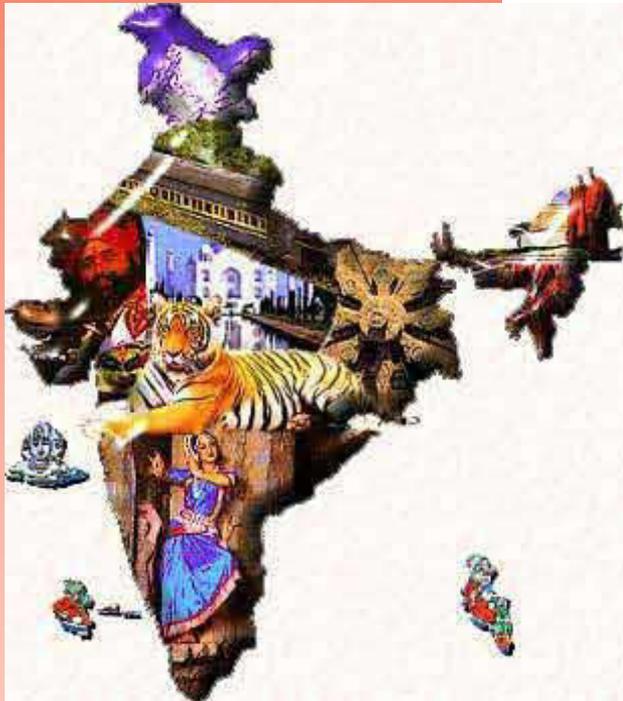


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Temples in India

Temples Of India

For centuries temples have remained integral to the Indian society. As the nerve centres of Indian religious life, these temples came to wield enormous powers. The role of the temples did not remain confined to catering to the religious needs of man. They went on to dominate the socio-economic and political life of the community while profusely contributing to the cultural and architectural heritage of the country. Unparalleled in their beauty and artistic grandeur these temples have survived as exquisite works of art and given birth to different architectural styles which have evolved over hundreds of years. It is against this backdrop that we introduce you to some of the most famous temples of India.

Badrinath Temple | Badrinath, Uttarakhand

The Badrinath temple also known as Badrinarayan is dedicated to Lord Vishnu, particularly his dual forms of Nar and Narayan. Badrinath was re-established as a major pilgrimage site by Adi Shankara in the 9th century. In the 17th century the temple was expanded by the Garhwal kings. Lord Vishnu is found here in a meditative posture flanked by Nar and Narayan. Badrinath is a significant pilgrimage centre for the Vaishnavites. It is also the most important of the *Char Dhams*.

Kedarnath Temple | Kedarnath, Uttarakhand

Located at the highest altitude among the Char Dhams, Kedarnath is the seat of Lord Shiva, the protector and the destroyer. Extremely ancient, the temple has been continually reconstructed over the years. Set amidst snow-capped mountain peaks, the Kedarnath temple presents a magical spectacle.

Gangotri Temple | Gangotri, Uttarakhand

The birthplace of the holy River Ganges is in the picturesque mountains of the Himalayas. Gangotri temple is dedicated to Goddess Ganga. The captivating and magical surrounding landscape is breathtakingly beautiful.

Yamunotri Temple | Yamunotri, Uttarakhand

Located opposite to Gangotri is the sacred shrine of Yamunotri which is also the source of River Yamuna. Surrounded by mountains, the actual source of the river, a frozen lake and a glacier (Champasar) located at an altitude of 4421m is inaccessible. For this reason the shrine is placed at the foot of the hill. The shrine is dedicated to Goddess Yamuna and the deity is made of black marble. The sanctity of the place combined with an ambience of absolute purity and bliss creates a deep feeling of reverence.

Har Ki Pauri | Haridwar, Uttarakhand

As one of the oldest living cities of India, Haridwar or the Gateway of the Gods finds a mention in the ancient Hindu scriptures. Haridwar has several bathing ghats and the most sacred among them is Har Ki Pauri, constructed by King Vikramaditya. Taking a dip in the holy waters here is believed to help achieve salvation of ancestors. The evening prayer or Aarti that is performed at dusk on the banks of River Ganges is a hair-raising experience.

Neelkanth Mahadev Temple | Rishikesh, Uttarakhand

Located on the outskirts of Rishikesh atop a hill at a height of 1675m is a temple dedicated to Lord Shiva. According legends, during Samudra Manthan venom that oozed out was ingested by Lord Shiva at this very place and hence the name Neelkanth Mahadeo.

Naina Devi Temple | Nainital, Uttarakhand

Nainital is named after Naina Devi. It is considered to be one of the 52 shakti peeths where the eyes (Naina) of Goddess Sati are believed to have fallen when Lord Shiva carried her body. The Naina Devi temple is thus considered scared by Hindu devotees. The temple was reconstructed after the landslide of 1880 which had devastated it.

Kashi Vishwanath Temple | Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh

Kashi Vishwanath Temple is located on the banks of River Ganges at the heart of the oldest surviving city of the world, Varanasi, the cultural capital of India. The *Jyotirlinga* of Shiva, Vishweshwara or Vishwanath is enshrined in this temple. It is believed that a *darshan* of the *Jyotirlinga* will liberate man from the bondages of *maya* or the earthly entanglements of the world. Millions of devotees undertake a pilgrimage to the Kashi Vishwanath temple for a *darshan* that will absolve them of their sins and also, if possible, to pour the remains of their cremated ancestors in to River Ganges.

Golden Temple | Amritsar, Punjab

The Harmandir Sahib also popularly known as the Golden Temple is a prominent Sikh Gurdwara located in Amritsar. The Gurdawara is not only a place of worship but a symbol of brotherhood and equality. Everyone irrespective of their cast, creed and religious affiliations can seek solace here. The upper floors of the Gurdwara are covered with gold which has lent it the name Golden Temple. The temple is adorned with exquisite gold and marble work.

Amarnath Temple | Pahalgam, Jammu & Kashmir

Located at an impressive altitude of 3888m, 141km from capital city of Srinagar, this cave temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva. The cave enshrines a *lingam* which is naturally formed of an ice stalagmite. The cave is covered with snow for major part of the year except for a short period in summer when it becomes accessible to pilgrims. Millions of devotees undertake a challenging journey to Amarnath every year to offer their prayers. It is one of the most fascinating temples of India.

Vaishno Devi Temple | Vaishno Devi, Jammu & Kashmir

Located at an altitude of 5300 feet near Katra, Vaishno Devi temple is dedicated to *Shakti*. Vaishno Devi, also referred to as Mata Rani and Vaishnavi is a manifestation of Mother Goddess. Considered extremely sacred, the Vaishno Devi Temple is visited by approximately 8 million devotees every year. It is the second most visited shrine after

Shankaracharya Temple | Srinagar, Jammu & Kashmir

Overlooking the city of Srinagar at a height of 1000 feet is the Shankaracharya temple which dates back to 200 B.C. The temple in its present form has been in existence since the 9th century A.D and is dedicated to Lord Shiva. The temple was visited by Adi Shankara and since then it has been associated with him.

Akshardham Temple | New Delhi, Delhi

Spread over an area of hundred acres, the Akshardham temple inaugurated in 2005 is a tribute to and epitomises a millennia of Indian culture, ancient architecture and spirituality. There are various structures within the temple complex which depict history and culture of Indian religion. The impressive monument can be seen as a fusion of different architectural styles from across India. Built of Rajasthani pink sandstone and Italian Carrara marble, the main temple is dedicated to Lord Swaminarayan.

Lotus Temple | New Delhi, Delhi

Lotus Temple is a Bahai House of Worship that was completed in 1986. Bahai Faith is a world religion which seeks to unite all races and people under one common faith. Built in the shape of a lotus flower, the temple has won accolades since it came into existence and has

become a major tourist attraction of the capital city. The temple has nine doors which lead to a central hall devoid of pictures, statues or idols. The temple along with the surrounding ponds and gardens spread over an area of 26 acres.

Birla Mandir | New Delhi, Delhi

Birla Mandir also known as the Laxminarayan temple is dedicated to Laxminarayan. Built in the 1930s the *mandir* was inaugurated by Mahatma Gandhi and has since become a major tourist and pilgrim destination of Delhi. On Hindu festivals of *Janmashtami* and *Diwali*, thousands of devotees visit the temple to offer their prayers. Built in the *Nagara* style of architecture, the temple is adorned with rich carvings depicting scenes from the Hindu mythology.

ISKON Temple | New Delhi, Delhi

Sri Sri Radha Parthasarathi Mandir also known as ISKON temple located at Hare Krishna Hills is a Vaishnava temple dedicated to Lord Krishna and Radharani. The ISKON temple boasts of one of the largest temple complexes in India with rooms for priests, service renders etc. The temple follows a strict standard of worship with six *aratis* and six *bhoga* offerings made to the deities each day.

Jwalamukhi Temple | Kangra, Himachal Pradesh

In the Kangra Valley of Himachal Pradesh lies the temple of Jwalamukhi, the Goddess with flaming mouth. In the temple there is a copper pipe through which natural gas comes out and the priest lights this. This is taken as a manifestation of the goddess Jwalamukhi. The temple houses no deities. The Goddess is worshipped in the form of the flames that come out from the crevices of the rock. The temple is also considered to be one of the 52 *Shakti Peethas*.

Konark Sun Temple | Konark, Orissa

A dream crafted in stones, Konark Sun temple is a stunning creation of man. A 13th century construction, the Sun Temple marks the culmination of temple architecture of Orissa. Even in its ruins today the Konark Sun Temple is magnificence personified. Located 65km from the capital city of Bhubaneswar in Konark, the temple is dedicated to the Sun God. The temple built in the shape of an enormous chariot, with twelve pairs of wheels and drawn by seven horses is a stunner.

Rajarani Temple | Bhubaneshwar, Orissa

A symbol of perfection, beauty and grace, the Rajarani Temple is considered by many as a masterpiece. Many refer to it as a 'love temple' owing to the erotic carvings on the walls of the temple. The temple has no presiding deity.

Lingaraj Temple | Bhubaneswar, Orissa

The Kalinga style of architecture which developed in Odisha is nowhere better manifested than the Lingaraj Temple dating back to 1000 A.D, dedicated to Lord Shiva. Built of sandstone and laterite, it is the grandest, most fascinating and undoubtedly the largest temple in Bhubaneswar.

Mukteswar Temple | Bhubaneswar, Orissa

Dedicated to Lord Shiva, the Mukteswar Temple is the Gem of Odisha. The exquisite carvings and sculptures that adorn the temple are spellbinding and charming. The temple is essential in any study of the development of Hindu temples in Odisha. It marks the culmination of all earlier artistic initiatives and stylistic developments of temple architecture in the state.

Jagannath Temple | Puri, Orissa

The sacred abode of Lord Jagannath or the Lord of the Universe, the Jagannath Temple is one of the most renowned temples not only in Orissa but in India. Thousands of devotees pour in from different parts of the country and the world to pay their homage to the presiding deity. The temple is an architectural splendour towering over its surroundings.

Kalighat Kali Temple | Kolkata, West Bengal

Located in Calcutta on the banks of River Hoogly, Kalighat temple is dedicated to Goddess Kali. One of the 51 *Shakti Peethas* where the various body parts of Goddess Sati are believed to have fallen, Kalighat is the site where the toes of Sati fell. Considered extremely sacred, thousands of devotees throng the temple irrespective of sectarian differences. Originally the temple dates back to the 16th century though in its present form the Kalighat temple is only 200 years old.

Dakshineswar Kali Temple | Kolkata, West Bengal

Located in Dakshineswar near Kolkata on the banks of River Hoogly, the Dakshineswar temple is the abode of *Bhavatarini*, an aspect of Kali. The temple was built by Rani Rashmoni in 1855. In 1856 Ramakrishna Paramhans became its head priest. It was his association with the temple which accounts for the fame and popularity of Dakshineswar temple. The temple complex also houses twelve identical temples dedicated to Lord Shiva. The temple is one of the primary pilgrimage centres of eastern India.

Kamakhya Temple | Guwahati, Assam

An ancient *Shakti Peetha*, Kamakhya temple is situated on the Nilachal Hill in western Guwahati. The inner sanctorum or the *garbha griha* has a *yon*i-shaped stone filled with water located in a cave below the ground level. The temple is a renowned pilgrimage centre for general devotees as well as for *Tantric* worshippers. Dating back to several centuries, the temple was destroyed twice before the revised temple structure was constructed in 1565.

Dwarkadhish Temple | Dwarka, Gujarat

Dwarkadhish Temple is dedicated to Dwarkadhish or the 'King of Dwaraka' which is Lord Krishna. Dwarka is believed to have been the capital of Lord Krishna's terrestrial kingdom. The temple is one of the *Char Dhams* in India and the 108th *Divya Desam* of Lord Vishnu. The architecture of the temple is beautiful with strong Chalukyan influences. 51.8m high it has 60 exquisitely carved pillars and sculptures adorning the temple. The deity of Lord Dwarkadhish made of black stone is 2.25ft in height.

Akshardham Temple | Gandhinagar, Gujarat

Temple is considered a masterpiece of modern India. The imposing 10 storey high building with intricate carvings, sculptures and filigree works is an architectural marvel bearing witness to the amazing craftsmanship. The presiding deity, like Delhi Akshardham is Lord Swaminarayan and the temple enshrines a golden idol of the deity. The temple seeks to celebrate the Indian culture, its glorious past and spirituality, address its present and bless its future.

Somnath Temple | Junagadh, Gujarat

Located on the western coast of Gujarat, the Somnath temple is one of the 12 *jyotirlinga* shrines of Lord Shiva. It is also the sacred soil where Lord Krishna took his last journey to *neejdam*. Several centuries old, this ancient temple suffered desecration and destruction repeatedly before it was rebuilt and restored after independence in 1947. The present temple structure is built in the Chalukyan style of architecture.

Shani Shingnapur | Ahmednagar, Maharashtra

The presiding deity of Shingnapur is Sri Shaneshwar or Lord Shanidev who is the personification of the planet Saturn. Shanidev is worshipped with much devotion and held in reverence by the people. The shrine is a five and half feet black rock installed on an open-air platform symbolising Shani. The spectacle of the deity is quite overwhelming. Visited by thousands of devotees every day, the temple attracts largest number of visitors on *amavasya* or new moon day. *Amavasya* is considered the most auspicious day for appeasing Lord Shani.

Siddhi Vinayak Temple | Mumbai, Maharashtra

Commanding utmost reverence and devotion of the people of Mumbai is the temple of Shree Siddhi Vinayaka or 'Ganesha who grants your wish.' Built in 1801 the temple was reconstructed to accommodate more devotees. Sculpted from a single black stone, the 2.5 feet tall idol of Ganesha rests within the 2550 sq meter temple complex. Enjoying its pride of place at the heart of the city of Mumbai, the temple is visited by thousands of devotees everyday to offer their prayers. Politicians and Bollywood celebrities are regular visitors to the temple, seeking blessings before the launch of their new ventures. It is also the richest temple in Mumbai.

Shirdi Sai Baba Temple | Shirdi, Maharashtra

Shirdi Sai Baba temple owes its origins to Sai Baba, an Indian guru or yogi. Sai Baba attained popularity and substantial following through his teachings and religious messages. His teachings combined elements of Hinduism and Islam. Shirdi became an important pilgrimage centre because of Sai Baba. The temple or *mandir* is visited by thousands of pilgrims each day and its fame and name has crossed the borders of Maharashtra.

Nathdwara Shrinathji Temple | Nathdwara, Rajasthan

Dedicated to Shrinathji or Lord Krishna, the Shrinathji temple was built in 1672. The temple has been designed on the lines of the temple of Nanda Maharaj in Vrindavan and hence it is also known as Nanda Bhavan or Nandalaya. The idol of Lord Krishna is carved in Bas-relief out of a monolithic black marble. The temple draws large number of devotees on *Janmashtami* (birth day of Lord Krishna), Holi and Diwali.

Dilwara Temples | Mount Abu, Rajasthan

The Dilwara Temples are an architectural marvel and one of the finest specimens of Jain temples in the world. Built between 11th and 13th century AD these gorgeous and stunning temples are set amidst lush green surroundings. The interior of the temples are adorned with extraordinary marble stone carvings that are breathtakingly beautiful. The intricate carvings on the ceilings and pillars are some of the best one will come across in India bearing testimony to the skill and level of craftsmanship achieved during that era. The Dilwara temple complex houses five temples devoted to five Jain *tirthankaras* or saints.

Jain Temple | Ranakpur, Rajasthan

The Jain Temple of Ranakpur is dedicated to Adinatha. Made of light coloured marble the temple is a majestic architectural piece complete with domes, turrets, *shikhara* and cupolas. The temple houses 1444 exquisitely carved pillars, each distinct from the other. No two pillars are alike in design and sculptures.

Sanchi Stupa | Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh

At Sanchi one comes across some of the oldest Buddhist monuments or 'Stupas; in the country. The 'Great Stupa' at Sanchi is the oldest stone structure in India, dating back to the 3rd century BC. Commissioned by Ashoka the Great, it is a simple hemispherical brick structure built over the relics of Buddha. In the 1st century BC four ornamental gateways and a balustrade encircling the hemispherical structure was added. These later additions were commissioned by the Satavahana rulers. These monuments are important Buddhist pilgrimage centres.

Khajuraho Temples | Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh

A UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the 'seven wonders' of India, the Khajuraho temples are a dream crafted in stone. Unparalleled and undisputed in their creativity, grace, elegance and sheer beauty the Khajuraho temples are breathtakingly beautiful. The erotic sculptures and carvings that adorn the exterior of the temples are bewitching and captivating and will leave you craving for more. An architectural wonder, the complex includes several temples including the famous Kandariya Mahadev Temple, the Chaturbhuj Temple, Lakshman Temple etc. Khajuraho has the largest group of medieval Hindu and Jain temples, each a masterpiece and a stunner.

Tirupati Temple (Tirumala Venkateshwara) | Tirumala, Andhra Pradesh

The world famous sacred temple of Sri Venkateshwara is located atop the Tirumala Hill near Tirupati. Lord Venkateshwara is a form of Lord Vishnu and is known by several other names like Balaji, Govinda and Srinivasa. After Sree Padmanabhaswamy Temple in Thiruvananthapuram, Tirumala Venkateshwara Temple is the richest pilgrimage centre with assets worth more than Rs. 50,000 crore. It is also the most visited place of worship in the world with 50,000 to 100,000 devotees visiting the temple almost daily. The idol of Sri Venkateshwara studded with precious stones is awe-inspiring and dazzling. No happy occasions like marriage or child birth are considered complete without a visit to the temple.

Virupaksha Temple | Hampi, Karnataka

Virupaksha temple also known as Pampapati temple is considered the most sacred of the temples at the ancient town of Hampi. Situated on the southern bank of Tungabhadra and

north of the Hemakuta hill, the temple complex is a long rectangular enclosure. The sanctum enshrines the Virupaksha *linga* (a representation of Lord Shiva). The *vimana* or the temple shrine towers over the surrounding landscape. Exquisite carvings and sculptures adorn the temple walls and ceilings. The *mandapa* (pillared outdoor hall) and *ardhamandapa* have intrinsically carved pillars, a common feature of all temples at Hampi.

Vitthala Temple | Hampi, Karnataka

Perhaps no other structure or building in Hampi can compare with Vitthala temple in terms of its magnificence. It is the culmination of the Vijaynagar style of art and architecture. It is situated inside a rectangular enclosure and all along the enclosure walls are pillared colonnades. The *gopura*, the hundred-pillared *mandapa*, indeed, each structure within the complex are exquisite displays of craftsmanship, symbols of perseverance and architectural brilliance of the artists at Hampi.

Pattabhirama Temple | Hampi, Karnataka

The Pattabhimara Temple with its spellbinding architecture is another stunner from Hampi. The richly carved and highly ornamental pillars of the *mandapa* facing the courtyard are mesmerising creations and a superb example of the Vijaynagara style of composite pillar architecture.

Chamundeshwari Temple | Mysore, Karnataka

Located atop Chamundi Hills 13 km from Mysore is the temple of Chamundeshwari or Durga, a fierce form of Shakti. The hill is named after Goddess Chamundi, an incarnation of Lord Shiva's consort, Parvati. She was the patron goddess of the Wodeyar dynasty who ruled Mysore. A popular pilgrimage centre, pilgrims believe that a *darshan* of the goddess will help fulfil their desires. A flight of 1000 steps take the visitors to the hill top where they are greeted by the sight of the towering *gopuram* of the temple. The *gopuram* is one of the finest examples of the Dravidian style of architecture.

Padmanabhaswamy temple | Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala

Dedicated to Lord Vishnu in Thiruvananthapuram, the Padmanabhaswamy temple is one of the 108 *Divya Desams* or holy abodes of Lord Vishnu. The temple though has references in Epics and Puranas has its origin lost in antiquity. The majestic and impressive idol of Sree Padmanabhaswamy is seen reclined on the five hooded serpent Anantha in a conscious cosmic slumber. The granite stone pillars with rich and elaborate carvings that adorn the temple corridor stand as a testimony to the architectural brilliance of the Vishwakarma sthapathis. Recent revelations about the temple's assets have solidified the status of

Padmanabhaswamy temple as the wealthiest temple in India, surpassing Tirumala Venkateshwara Temple.

Sabarimala Temple | Pathanamthitta, Kerala

Located in the Western Ghat mountain ranges of Pathanamthitta district in Kerala, Sabarimala Sri Dharmasastha Temple is open to all faiths. The temple is believed to be the place where Hindu God Ayyappan meditated after killing the demon Mahishi. Surrounded by dense forests and mountains, the temple is the largest annual pilgrimage in the world with 45-50 million devotees visiting annually. It is open for worship only during the days of *Mandalpooja* (from November 15 to December 26 approximately), *Makaravilakku* (January 14-*Makar Sankranti*), *Vishu* (April 14) and the first six days of each Malayalam month.

Ranganathaswamy Temple | Srirangapatna, Tamil Nadu

Sri Ranganathaswamy temple located in Srirangam is dedicated to Ranganatha, a reclining form of Lord Vishnu. It is considered to be foremost among the 108 *Divya Deshams* or holy abodes of Lord Vishnu. Spread over a sprawling 156 acres, the Ranganathaswamy temple is the largest temple in India, largest functioning temple in the world and one of the world's largest religious complexes. The temple, also known by the names, Thiruvaranga Tirupati, Periyakoil, Bhoologa Vaikundam and Bhogamandabam is renowned for its architectural splendour. The 72m high Rajagopuram is an impressive structure towering over its surroundings. The Hall of 1000 Pillars with beautifully carved pillars is another magnificent feature of this temple.

Meenakshi Temple | Madurai, Tamil Nadu

Located in the temple city of Madurai on the banks of River Vaigai is Meenakshi Amman Temple dedicated to Parvati who is referred to as Meenakshi. Ancient, majestic and gorgeous, Meenakshi temple is revered by the people of Tamil Nadu and forms the lifeline of the 2500 years old city of Madurai. Embodiment of spirituality and peace, the temple is an exquisite work of art. It is one of the finest examples of Dravidian architectural style. The temple has enormous *gopurams* towering over the city with rich carvings. The *mandapam* consists of 985 pillars some of which produce music. Each pillar is carved out of a single block of granite. The image of Meenakshi is believed to be carved out of a single emerald. According to mythology the marriage of Meenakshi and Shiva took place in Madurai which is still celebrated every year with much pomp and show.

Ramanathaswamy Temple | Rameshwaram, Tamil Nadu

Rameshwaram is a small island connected to the mainland by a causeway where Lord Rama is believed to have worshipped Shiva after crossing over from Sri Lanka. The Ramanathaswamy temple located in Rameshwaram is dedicated to Lord Shiva. It is one of the 12 *Jyotirlinga* temples where Shiva is worshipped as a pillar of light. There are two *lingams* inside the sanctum, a small one built by Sita and a larger one which Hanuman brought from Kailash called *Vishwalingam*. The latter is worshipped first. The temple is another architectural masterpiece from the south. It boasts of the largest temple corridor in India. The 1219m long pillared corridor is an awe-inspiring structure.

Shore Temple | Mahabalipuram, Tamil Nadu

Located on the shore of the Coromandel Coast of the Bay of Bengal in Mahabalipuram, the Shore Temple is one of the oldest known stone temples of South India. It is one of the Group of Monuments at Mahabalipuram that have been classified as UNESCO World Heritage Site. The five storey temple dates back to 8th century A.D built under the patronage of the Pallava rulers. The main shrine is dedicated to Lord Shiva.

Sripuram Golden Temple | Vellore, Tamil Nadu

Stretched across 100 acres the Golden Temple at Sripuram in Vellore is a spiritual park that was inaugurated in 2007. The temple owes its name to the *vimana* and *ardhamandapa* of the Lakshmi Narayani Temple which is coated in gold both in the interior and the exterior. The temple is headed by spiritual leader Sri Sakthi Amma.

Brihadeshwara Temple | Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu

The Brihadeshwara Temple is a masterpiece and one of the finest living artistic creations of the Chola period. It bears testimony to the architectural brilliance that was attained by them. One of the cornerstones of Indian craftsmanship, the Brihadeshwara Temple is a part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site 'Greatest Living Chola Temples.' Built in 1010 A.D the entire temple made out of granite is dedicated to Lord Shiva. The Brihadeshwara Temple also marks the culmination of the Dravidian style of architecture that dominated temple architecture of the south.

Chennakesava Temple | Belur, Tamil Nadu

A stunner from the Hoysala period, the Chennakesava Temple at Belur will sweep you off your feet by its sheer beauty and grandeur. The temple structure has elaborate filigree works which gleams and shines like metal. Ornatly sculptured pillars adorn the open *mantapa* which, according to art critic Gerard Foekema, is the most magnificent in all

of medieval India. The Chennakesava Temple dedicated to Lord Vishnu is part of the temple complex which is listed under UNESCO World Heritage Site at Belur.

Thillai Nataraja Temple | Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu

The Chidambaram Temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva. The presiding deity here is Thillai Koothan or Thillai Nataraja or Shiva, The Lord of Dance. It is in Chidambaram that the representation of Shiva as the cosmic dancer took shape. It is a Tamilian concept in Chola art that has now become a symbol of Hinduism. Chidambaram is one of the five holiest Shiva temples, each representing one of the five natural elements. Chidambaram represents *akasha* (ether).

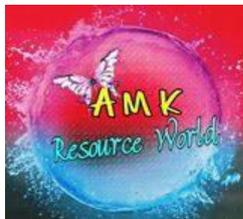
Annamalaiyer Temple | Thiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu

Located at the base of Annamalai Hills in Thiruvannamalai, the Annamalaiyer Temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva. Spread out over 10 hectares, the temple is one of the largest in India. It has four *gopurams* the tallest being the eastern tower which is 217ft making it one of the tallest towers in India. The temple houses numerous shrines and halls.

Kailashanatha Temple | Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu

Built under the patronage of the Pallava rulers, the Kailashanatha Temple is the oldest temple of Kanchipuram dedicated to Lord Shiva. Famous for its architectural splendour, the temple marks the evolution of Dravidian Architecture. The temple is a poetry in stone, unparalleled in beauty, grace and grandeur. It is a cultural and architectural treasure trove which even after centuries can sweep you off your feet with its elegance and craftsmanship.

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