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Temple architecture in the Shimoga District region of Karnataka

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Abstract
Shimoga District in central Karnataka preserves a layered and regionally distinctive temple, building tradition shaped by successive political regimes, evolving material cultures, and long, standing religious practices. This paper examines the major architectural styles and temple typologies of the region, tracing their development from early Kadamba and Chalukya traditions through strong Hoysala influences, and later Keladi Nayaka and Vijayanagara adaptations. The study highlights how local factors such as patronage patterns, availability of building materials, and ritual requirements, contributed to variations in temple plans, elevations, and ornamental programs. Three representative case studies, the Rameshwara Temple at Keladi, the Aghoreshwara Temple at Ikkeri, and selected village temple typologies are analysed to demonstrate regional diversity in architectural expression and the continuity of ritual use across historical phases. Based on field survey observations, district heritage records, and published scholarly studies, the paper situates Shimoga's temple architecture within the broader framework of South Indian architectural history while emphasizing its local specificity. The study seeks to contribute to regional architectural historiography and serve as a reference for heritage scholars and students of Karnataka's temple traditions.

Keywords: Shimoga District, Karnataka, Hoysala, Keladi Nayaka, Dravidian, South Indian, temple architecture, regional identity, temples

1. Introduction
The district of Shimoga lies in the transitional zone of Karnataka where the western-ghat fed plateaus of the Malnad meet the Deccan interior. The geography, forest resources, and local stone availability influenced not only settlement patterns but also temple-building technologies and patronage networks.

1.1 Aims and Objectives
Aims: To investigate and analyse the origin and development of temple architecture in Shimoga District.

Objectives
- To map the principal architectural influences visible in Shimoga's temples,
- To describe characteristic typologies and materials,
- To examine conservation and documentation gaps.
- To study the local and unrecognized temples of Shimoga district.

1.2 Review of Literature
Dr. PB Desai in his work, which was published in 1969, titled "The Early Temple Architecture in Karnataka and Its Ramification" gives detail information about the Temple construction tradition and culture in ancient and medieval Karnataka state. His work is very helpful in understanding the evolution of temples in Karnataka and different technical aspect of ancient and medieval Karnataka. His work is restricted to the Chalukyas temples only and there is little reference to the other dynasties temple construction efforts. It gives information about the Aihole, Padadakalu and other Chalukyas temple construction centres details. (Desai, 1969) [2].

Robert Swell in his work "the Forgotten Empires" provides us information about the decline of Vijayanagara Empire and emergence of dominant Nayaka rule in South India. First published at the turn of the 20th century, the book compiles political narrative and primary sources including Portuguese travelogues and epigraphic evidence to reconstruct the rise, zenith, and decline of Vijayanagara from its founding in 1336 to its catastrophic collapse in 1565 at the Battle of Talikota. Sewell vividly portrays the splendour of the capital, Hampi, its military campaigns, administration, economy, and cultural life, offering readers a foundational overview of the empire's significance. We get information about the Keladi and Ikkeri dynasty also and how they dominate the political scene of Shimoga and surrounding regions. (Swell, 1900) [14].

1.3. Research Methodology

- **Research Design:** This study adopts a descriptive and exploratory research design to investigate how the temple architecture in shimoga district of Malnad region. The approach combines both qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze architectural features.
- **Data Collection Methods:** Literature Review: Comprehensive analysis of existing scholarly articles, books, and reports on temple architecture and traditional construction techniques in shimoga region.
- **Field Surveys:** On site visits to selected temples to observe and document architectural features, materials used, and structural adaptations. Interviews: Semi structured interviews with local historians, architects, temple authorities.
- **Sampling:** Selection of Temples: Purposeful sampling of representative temples along the Malanad Karnataka belt, based on historical significance, architectural diversity, and accessibility. Participants for Interviews: Selected experts and stakeholders with knowledge about temple architecture.
- **Data Analysis:** Qualitative Analyse Thematic analysis of interview transcripts and architectural observations to identify patterns of climate adaptation in temple design.
- **Tools and Techniques:** Use of architectural photography, sketches, and measurement tools during field surveys. Software for data organization and thematic coding.

For a robust regional programmer the following methodology is suggested

- **Survey Mapping:** GPS-tagging and photographic inventory of all known temples, village by village across Shimoga district.
- **Measured Drawings:** Plans, sections and elevations for a representative sample of temples (major, minor, vernacular).
- **Epigraphy and Inscriptions:** Systematic reading, photographing, translating and publishing of any Kannada, Sanskrit, Telugu inscriptions in situ.
- **Material Analysis:** Petrographic study to identify stone sources, decay mechanisms, and stratigraphic phases of building & repair.
- **Oral Histories:** Recording of temple custodians' memories, local festivals, repairs and patronage history.
- **Comparative Typology:** Mapping of plan/ornament typologies across the district, identification of diffusion routes of artisans from Hoysala centres, and changes under Keladi patrons.

Such a methodological programme will help close the documentation gap around village shrines and lesser-known monuments, and contribute to a more regionally grounded architecture history of Shimoga.

1.4 Statement of the problem

The temples of Shimoga represent a rich cultural and architectural heritage that has evolved over centuries in response to the region's unique climatic conditions. However, despite the apparent influence of the Malnand climate characterized by heavy monsoon rains, high humidity, there is limited systematic research exploring how these factors have shaped the design, materials, and construction techniques of these temples. This gap in understanding poses challenges for the effective conservation and restoration of Shimoga temples, this study seeks to address the problem of insufficient knowledge regarding the specific ways in Shimoga temple architecture, with the goal of informing more sustainable conservation practices and deepening appreciation of the interplay between environment and cultural expression.

1.5 Need of the study

Shimoga District temple architecture is a vital part of Karnataka's cultural and historical legacy. These temples not only serve as places of worship but also as monuments showcasing ancient craftsmanship and sustainable architectural practices. However, there is a critical need to understand how ancient builders adapted temple design and construction techniques to withstand these climatic conditions. Such knowledge is essential for several reasons

- **Preservation and Conservation:** Insight into climate, responsive architectural features can guide effective restoration and conservation efforts, ensuring the longevity of these heritage sites.
- **Sustainable Architecture:** Studying traditional climate adaptations provides valuable lessons for modern sustainable building practices, especially in regions facing similar environmental challenges.
- **Cultural Awareness:** Understanding the influence of climate on temple architecture deepens appreciation of the interplay between environment, culture, and technology in historical contexts.
- **Policy and Planning:** The study can inform policymakers and heritage authorities in formulating climate sensitive preservation policies and resource allocation. Given the increasing threats from climate change and environmental degradation, this research is timely and necessary to safeguard Shimoga's temple heritage for future generations. Here are some ideas & directions for further research on how climate has influenced temple architecture in Shimoga. You can frame them as research questions, comparative case studies, or thematic investigations. If you want, I can also suggest sources / methods.

1.6 Conservation Status & Research Gaps

While many major monuments (Keladi, Ikkeri) have been documented and attract visitors, the following issues remain:

Many village temples remain under documented: measured drawings, stratigraphic analysis of materials, and epigraphic publication are lacking.

- **Conservation challenges:** weather-damage, inappropriate repair (cement plastering, modern tiles), loss of original ornamentation, and lack of protective buffer zones.
- **Scholarly gaps:** Much of the scholarship tends to focus on site descriptive tourism write ups; systematic regional architectural studies (with drawings, site series, contexts) are missing. For example, the official Shimoga heritage summary mentions the 'hybrid Hoysala, Dravidian' nature of certain temples but calls for more detailed documentation.

Oral history and custodial memory are rarely incorporated into temple-heritage documentation: many village temples have local ritual continuities which are not captured in the architectural record.

A programme of documentation combining GPS tagging, measured drawings, material analysis and local oral histories is strongly recommended.

2. Temple Architecture in the Shimoga District Region of Karnataka

2.1 Historical background-political patrons & chronology

The culture and tradition of any land profoundly influenced by the geographical uniqueness of that area. In his edited series of research papers, Dr. P.B Desai, discussed about the river system of Karnataka and its influence on the temple architecture in these words "In a land of many rivers, that is India, Karnataka constitute a territory which is plateau land in physio morphology, while the unique distinction of river system cutting in all directions, but essentially dividing the gone into three areas, viz., that to the north led by Krishna and its tributaries the Varada and Tungabhadra; that on Mideastern fringe which is inundated by the northern flowing Pennar river system; and that further south fertile by river Kaveri". (Desai, 1969) [2]. Besides this the topography of land is not uniform, in western portion of the land we can see the connectivity of this land to the sea routs, towards east of this sea the gigantic and resourceful western Ghats, sometime called the Sahayadari mountain, to the east of this land lies the Deccan plateaus and in south the eastern ghats. So, topographically, this land very rich and this became the reason for the rise some of the famous monarchical states like Satavahanas, Kadambas, Gangas of Talakadu, Chalukyas of Badami, Hoysalas of Dowarasamudra, Chalukyas of Kalyani, and Vijayanagara empires. These monarchical states played important role in development of unique art and architecture of South India in form of Dravida architecture and Vesara architecture. Besides, the Indo Islamic architecture also had profound influence in the long annals of temple architecture of Karnataka in general and Shimoga district in particular (Desai, 1969) [2]. Temple architecture in Shimoga reflects successive waves of political control and patronage:

The early Karnataka dynasties such as the Kadamba dynasty (4th - 6th century CE) established foundational forms that later schools adapted (Badiger, 2021) [1]

The western Chalukya (Badami/Kalyani) era (7th - 12th century CE) brought in pan Deccan sculptural vocabularies and structural solutions (Someshwara Temple, Bandalike, Shikaripura Taluk), (SAHASA, 2025) [10].

The rise of the Hoysala dynasty (11th - 14th century CE) saw high end craftsmanship in Karnataka; though Shimoga does not rival Belur or Halebidu in scale, Hoysala workmanship or its echoes appear in large temple complexes and migrated artisan traditions (Badiger, 2021) [1].

In the 15th - 18th centuries the regional power of the Keladi Nayaka dynasty (centred near Sagara/Ikkeri) left a distinct hybrid Dravidian Hoysala idiom visible in the Keladi Rameshwara and Ikkeri temples. The Keladi dynasty was founded and the Vijayanagara Empire became its overlord and dominated the political seen for about two hundreds year. In this, Robert Swell gives details information about the foundation of the Keladi Kingdom and its perseverance from 15th century CE to early 18th Century CE in Shimoga district and also their role in the development of art and architecture. (Swell, 1870) [13].

2.2 Materials and Technology in Temple construction

Regarding the use of material and technical application the temple architectures Dr. PB Deasi in edited works gives information about the materials used in Chalukyas, Hoysala and later monarchical dynasties in construction of temple. From simple garbhagriha to complex temple structures, helps us to understand its evolution in brief. (Desai, 1969, p. 19-35) [2]. In Shimoga district, local stone dominated structural material. Granite and schist were common for sancta and structural elements; timber and brick also survive in vernacular shrines and ancillary structures. (SAHASA, 2025) [10]. The use of locally available stone allowed for robust temples but also imposed regional stylistic adaptations.

The Keladi Nayakas employed a diverse range of construction materials that reflected both regional availability and architectural traditions inherited from earlier South Indian dynasties. Granite was the principal building material and was extensively used for major structural components due to its durability and load-bearing capacity. This preference closely followed the architectural practices of the Vijayanagara Empire, under whom the Keladi Nayakas initially functioned as feudatories, and whose temple building idiom emphasized massive granite construction (Michell, Architecture and art of southern India and Vijayanagara and the successor states, 1995); (Hardy, 1995) [5]. Prominent examples include the Aghoreshwara Temple at Ikkeri, which was largely constructed of granite and exemplifies the robustness, monumentality, and axial planning characteristic of Nayaka period temple architecture (Foekema, 2003) [4]; (Rao H, 1995) [8].

Alongside granite, laterite stone, readily available in the Malnad region, was widely employed, particularly for fortifications, outer enclosures, citadels, and subsidiary structures. In the Aghoreshwara temple complex, laterite was used for peripheral architectural elements and defensive features, indicating a pragmatic adaptation to local geological conditions and construction economics (U Kamat, 2001) [16]. Invalid source specified. Additionally, greenish grey schist (soapstone) was selectively used for finer sculptural and decorative work. Although granite remained the dominant structural material, soapstone facilitated intricate carvings and ornamental detailing, as observed in the sculptural components of the Rameshwara Temple at Keladi (Foekema, 1996) [3]; (Rao MN, 1997) [9].

Timber constituted an important secondary material, reflecting long standing building traditions of the Western Ghats and coastal Karnataka. High quality woods such as teakwood and rosewood were employed for pillars, beams, ceilings, and other structural and ornamental elements, particularly in mandapas and palace interiors. The Keladi temple complex notably preserves an exquisitely carved rosewood ceiling in the Parvati Temple, which exemplifies the advanced woodcraft and aesthetic refinement patronized by the Nayakas (Michell, 1988) [6]; (Soundara Rajan, 1972) [11].

Bricks and lime mortar were commonly used in smaller shrines, superstructures, and later architectural additions. Lime mortar of this period was technologically sophisticated, often incorporating organic additives such as plant extracts containing carbohydrates and proteins to improve binding strength, elasticity, and longevity (Thakur, 2007) [15]; (Srinivasan, 1971) [12]. Stucco was extensively applied over brick and stone surfaces, particularly on gopurams, to create elaborate figures of deities, demons, animals, and mythological narratives, which were frequently painted in vivid polychrome hues (Michell, 1995) [7]; (Soundara Rajan, 1972) [11].

Other materials, including stone and wood, were used extensively for sculptural embellishment, and the possible use of ivory in decorative contexts reflects the long distance trade networks and material culture of the Keladi Nayaka period (Varma, 1992; Kamat, 2001) [17, 16]. Overall, the Keladi Nayakas synthesized architectural elements derived from Kadamba, Hoysala, Vijayanagara, and Dravida traditions, skillfully combining them with locally sourced materials to create distinctive, regionally adapted, and enduring temple complexes across coastal and Malnad Karnataka (Hardy, 1995) [5], (Michell, 1995) [7].

2.3 Plan typologies

Single cell (ekakūṭa) temples constituted one of the most fundamental architectural forms patronized under the Keladi Nayakas. These temples consisted of a single garbhagṛha (sanctum) surmounted by a vimāna, accompanied by a modest antarāla and Mandapa. The Ramesvara Temple at Koodli represents this typology, characterized by its compact plan, restrained ornamentation, and emphasis on ritual functionality rather than monumental scale. Such ekakūṭa shrines reflect continuity with earlier Hoysala and Vijayanagara traditions, wherein simplicity of plan was often balanced by symbolic and structural clarity (Michell, The Hindu temple: An introduction to its meaning and forms, 1988); (Foekema, 2003) [4].

More architecturally elaborate were the dvikūṭa and trikūṭa temples, comprising two or three principal shrines arranged around a shared mandapa or courtyard. The Keladi Rameshwara temple complex exemplifies the trikūṭa type, housing shrines dedicated to Rameshwara, Veerabhadra, and Parvati. Such multi shrine arrangements enabled the integration of Shaiva, Shakta, and heroic cults within a single ritual complex, reflecting both theological inclusivity and ceremonial complexity. Structurally, these temples reveal Vijayanagara influences in axial planning, granite construction, and the hierarchical articulation of vimānas (Hardy, 1995) [5]; (Michell, 1995) [7].

Beyond individual shrine structures, the Keladi Nayakas also patronized courtyard, enclosed multi shrine temple complexes, in which multiple subsidiary shrines, pillared mandapas, prakāras, and ceremonial spaces were integrated within fortified or enclosed precincts. These complexes served not only as centers of worship but also as socio cultural institutions, accommodating festivals, processions, and administrative activities. The emphasis on enclosure and spatial hierarchy within such complexes reflects both Dravida temple planning principles and the political need for defensible sacred spaces in the post Vijayanagara period (Rao MN, 1997) [9]; (Varma, 1992) [17].

At the village level, guardian shrines and local temples represented a simpler architectural typology. These structures were characterized by basic plans, limited sculptural ornamentation, and the extensive use of brick, laterite, and timber, often combined with sloping tiled roofs suited to the heavy rainfall of the Malnad region. Such shrines were closely associated with folk deities, village protectors, and ancestral cults, underscoring the Nayakas' accommodation of indigenous religious practices alongside formal temple traditions. Their material economy and architectural restraint highlight the adaptive and vernacular dimensions of Keladi Nayaka temple architecture (U Kamat, 2001) [16]; (Soundara Rajan, 1972) [11].

2.4 Ornamentation and Sculpture

In the higher status temples, one finds lathe turned pillars, Rich frieze bands, narrative panels and star shaped platforms that are hallmarks of Hoysala tradition though the Shimoga versions often adapt rather than replicate. In village temples ornamentation may be minimal or local tradition driven.

3. Case Studies

3.1 Keladi Rameshwara Temple Complex

Location and Date: The Rameshwara Temple Complex is located at Keladi in Sagara Taluk of Shivamogga district. It was constructed in the sixteenth century CE under the patronage of Chowdappa Nayaka, one of the early rulers of the Keladi Nayaka dynasty.

3.2 Layout and Planning

The complex consists of three principal shrines:

- Rameshwara (Central Shrine).
- Parvati (Left Shrine).
- Veerabhadra (Right Shrine).

The Parvati shrine is an independent structure, while the Rameshwara and Veerabhadra shrines share a common mukhamandapa and other ancillary spaces. This planning reflects hierarchical organisation and ritual differentiation within a single temple precinct.

3.3 Architectural Features

The temple is constructed primarily of greenish-grey schist. Ornamentation is restrained, with emphasis on structural clarity, noteworthy features include:

- Carved ceilings with floral and flower-petal motifs in the Parvati shrine
- Sculptural representations of Navagrahas and Nagamandala motifs in the Veerabhadra shrine
- A prominent 24-foot-high mahasthambha featuring an image of Rani Chennamma paying homage to Ganesha
- Significance-the Keladi Rameshwara Temple Complex demonstrates how local Rulers adapted pan-Karnataka

architectural idioms while asserting regional identity through material choice, sculptural themes, and historical symbolism.

3.4 Aghoreshwara Temple, Ikkeri

- **Location and Date:** Ikkeri, located near Sagara in Shivamogga district, served as the capital of the Keladi Nayakas between approximately 1560 and 1640 CE. The Aghoreshwara Temple is the most prominent architectural monument of the site.
- **Layout and Planning:** The temple is built on a raised granite platform and follows a predominantly Dravidian plan. The axial organisation and spacious mandapas reflect Vijayanagara influence, while sculptural and structural details indicate earlier Hoysala traditions.

3.5 Architectural Features

Key architectural elements include:

- A large Nandi pavilion with Indo-Islamic style arches
- Lathe-turned pillars and sculptural friezes
- Exterior reliefs depicting deities, dancers, animals, and mythological scenes
- Accounts of thirty-two seated female figures (Shakti Peethas) around the sanctum

The temple's architectural language reflects deliberate stylistic synthesis rather than adherence to a single tradition.

Significance

The Aghoreshwara Temple exemplifies architectural hybridisation under the Keladi Nayakas and highlights the cultural interactions and adaptability of temple architecture in the Malanadu region.

3.6 Stylistic Analysis

Some diagnostic features that help scholars identify the architecture of Shimoga district include:

- The "Kadamba shikhara" (pyramidal stepped tower) which characterises early Karnataka temples.
- The lathe turned pillar, a hallmark of Hoysala work, which appears in some of the higher status temples of the region.
- The use of star shaped or stellate platforms, albeit less elaborate than in major Hoysala temples.
- Hybrid forms, Dravidian vimana structures with Hoysala ornamentation, often in later period temples (Keladi, Ikkeri).
- Courtyard oriented layouts with multi shrine compounds, indicative of Keladi Nayaka patronage.
- Use of local schist/greenish grey stone or granite instead of the soap stone of Belur/ Halebidu; material affects surface carving quality, and thus regional variation becomes visible.
- Influence of Indo Islamic arches and tunnel vaulted Nandi porches in 16th century temples (Ikkeri) which reflect a period of cultural exchange.
- Together these features show how Shimoga's temples are not simply "smaller copies" of the great Hoysala or Chalukya monuments, but reflect a regional adaptation, synthesising tradition and innovation.

4. Conclusion

Shimoga District's temple architecture is best understood as a palimpsest: Kadamba and Chalukya foundations, Hoysala craftsmanship, and Keladi Nayaka/Vijayanagara era re working co-exist across village shrines and larger complexes. The hybrid forms at Keladi and Ikkeri are exemplary of how local rulers appropriated region wide architectural idioms to assert legitimacy and identity. The lesser known village temples similarly show continuity of craft, settlement and ritual in the Malnad region. For heritage management and academic purposes, the immediate priorities are systematic documentation, sensitive conservation of material fabric, and integration of ritual use into conservation frameworks.

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