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Śilpa-Śāstra as Pramāna: Epistemological Foundations of the South Indian Temple Tradition

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ABSTRACT

Śilpa Śāstra, the canonical corpus governing Indian sacred architecture, has long been misclassified in Western scholarship as a craft manual — a technical guide to proportions, iconometry, and ritual procedure. This paper argues that such misclassification is a fundamental epistemological error with lasting consequences for the historiography of Indian knowledge traditions and the practice of temple heritage conservation. Drawing from the Mayamata, Mānasāra, and Kāmikāgama, and situated within the Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) framework, the paper demonstrates that Śilpa Śāstra is a pramāṇa-grounded knowledge system in which cosmological, mathematical, perceptual, ontological, and ritual-procedural knowledge are structurally unified. Primary built evidence is drawn from the Pallava temple canon of Kanchipuram — the Kailasanathar Temple (c. 700–728 CE) and the Vaikuntaperumal Temple (c. 731–796 CE) — the earliest surviving corpus of fully structural South Indian sacred architecture. Situating Kanchipuram within a broader comparative context encompassing Chola, Pandya, and Vijayanagara traditions, the paper argues that this five-layer epistemological structure characterises the Drāviḍa tradition as a whole. The paper concludes by arguing for Śilpa Śāstra's recognition as a full IKS discipline, with implications for both historiography and heritage conservation policy.

Keywords: Śilpa Śāstra, Kanchipuram, Pramāṇa, Heritage Conservation.

Introduction:

Food, Ritual, and the Alimentary Matrix

The Kailasanathar Temple at Kanchipuram, consecrated around 700 CE by the Pallava king Narasimhavarman II (Rajasimha), is by scholarly consensus the first fully structural stone temple of the South Indian tradition. Its garbhagṛha carries a four-storeyed vimāna. Its inner prakāra wall contains fifty-eight devakulikā sub-shrines. The sandstone surface is covered with 250 honorific birudas of the king inscribed at the plinth, directional Śiva-forms distributed across eight cardinal and intermediate points, and a sixteen-faceted polished black stone liṅga of 2.5 metres in the sanctum (EBSCO Research Starters). Not one of these elements — orientation, proportions, sculptural distribution, material selection, consecration — was decided by a separate specialist. All of it was governed by a single integrated framework: Śilpa Śāstra, transmitted through the Āgamic tradition and carried in the person of the Sthapati.

Less than a kilometre away, the Vaikuntaperumal Temple (c. 731–796 CE), built by Nandivarman II Pallavamalla, takes this programme further. Its aṣṭāṅga-vimāna houses three vertically aligned sanctums, each with a distinct form of Viṣṇu: reclining (śayana), seated (āsīna), and standing (sthānaka). D. Dennis Hudson has shown that this vertical sequence encodes a complete theological narrative from the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, such that the worshipper's physical ascent through the tower corresponds to a specific spiritual progression (Hudson, Body of God 12–18). The architecture is not a setting for theology; it is theology rendered in spatial form. This is not craft. It is an epistemological system.

Yet from James Fergusson's colonial surveys onward (Fergusson 1–12), the dominant reading of Śilpa Śāstra in Western scholarship has treated it as a craft manual — a repository of technical convention for skilled artisans, epistemologically subordinate to the knowledge held by priests and philosophers (Kramrisch, Hindu Temple 1: 3–9). On this view, the Sthapati executes what others have conceived. The temple is a product of craft, not of knowledge-production.

The argument of this paper runs in the opposite direction. Śilpa Śāstra is a pramāṇa-grounded, integrative knowledge system. The Kanchipuram temples are not evidence of skilled craft but material instantiations of a complete epistemology. The paper proceeds through four moves: a critical survey of existing scholarship; an establishment of the IKS epistemological framework; a demonstration of five irreducible epistemic layers in Śilpa Śāstra with specific reference to Kanchipuram; and an analysis of the consequences of the misreading for heritage conservation.

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Review of Existing Scholarship

a. The Western Historiographical Tradition

Western engagement with South Indian temple architecture begins in admiration but not in epistemic equality. Fergusson's History of Indian and Eastern Architecture (1876) placed Indian temples within a developmental hierarchy in which European Gothic represented the apex of architectural rationality; Indian buildings, however ornate, expressed religious sentiment rather than architectural philosophy (Fergusson 320–25). Percy Brown's Indian Architecture (1942) gave more technical attention to Śilpa texts but read them as guild manuals passed down through hereditary artisan lineages — sophisticated, certainly, but not theoretical (Brown 105–12).

Kramrisch's The Hindu Temple (1946) is the most sustained Western engagement with Indian temple philosophy, and it remains indispensable. Kramrisch recognised that the Vāstu Puruṣa Maṇḍala encodes cosmic meaning and documented Śilpa Śāstra's proportional systems with genuine care (Kramrisch, Hindu Temple 1: 21–35). But her interpretive framework treats these encodings as symbolic overlays upon a fundamentally technical substrate — meaning applied to structure. She maintains a separation between the philosophical and technical dimensions of the tradition that the tradition itself refuses to make. Adam Hardy's more recent typological work deepens the technical analysis without questioning this epistemological assumption (Hardy 45–62).

In Kanchipuram scholarship specifically, D. Dennis Hudson's Body of God (2008) is the most significant contribution. Hudson shows that the Vaikuntaperumal Temple's iconographic programme is a three-dimensional maṇḍala encoding the Bhāgavata Purāṇa (Hudson, Body of God 1–25) — a reading that comes close to the claim this paper makes. But Hudson's argument is programme-specific: it concerns the iconographic logic of one temple, not the epistemological character of the Śilpa Śāstra tradition as a whole. That larger argument remains unmade.

b. Indian Scholarship and the IKS Revival

Indian scholarship has long resisted the craft-manual reading, with varying degrees of rigour. Gopinatha Rao's Elements of Hindu Iconography (1914) made the mathematical precision of the tāla-māna system impossible to dismiss as convention (Gopinatha Rao 1: 3–20). Ramachandra Rao's Āgama-Kośa documented the textual connections between Śilpa texts and the Āgamic theological tradition (Ramachandra Rao, Agama-Kosa 1: ix–xvi). V. Ganapati Sthapati, the foremost practitioner-scholar of the South Indian tradition in the twentieth century, argued consistently that Vāstu Vidyā is a complete science with its own epistemological foundations, not a set of prescriptions (Ganapati Sthapati 12–19).

The National Education Policy of 2020 and the IKS Division under AICTE have given institutional weight to the recovery of Indian knowledge traditions. Architecture is explicitly identified as a domain requiring systematic recovery; the IKS budget was doubled to Rs. 20 crore in 2022–2023 (Wikipedia, 'Indian Knowledge Systems'). UGC guidelines now require five per cent of undergraduate credits to be in IKS-related courses (UGC, Guidelines 3). A Springer Journal of Dharma Studies Special Issue (2024) on IKS epistemologies has called for "methodologically sound, empirically grounded" analysis of these traditions as serious epistemic alternatives (Journal of Dharma Studies). Śilpa Śāstra, however, remains under-analysed within this renewed framework — particularly in relation to the Kanchipuram corpus.

c. The Specific Gap This Paper Addresses

No existing study has systematically applied pramāṇa theory and the anubandha-catuṣṭaya framework to Śilpa Śāstra as a complete knowledge system. The Kanchipuram Pallava corpus, despite its originary status in the Drāviḍa tradition, has been studied primarily through art history and architectural typology rather than epistemological analysis (EBSCO Research Starters; Hardy 12). This paper addresses that gap. Its three specific contributions are: (1) the application of the anubandha-catuṣṭaya to establish Śilpa Śāstra as a śāstra rather than a paddhati; (2) the identification of five irreducibly unified epistemic layers, using Kanchipuram as primary built evidence; and (3) the argument that the misclassification carries traceable material consequences for contemporary heritage conservation.

Table 1 below maps the existing scholarly landscape and locates the contribution of this paper.

Table 1: Scholarly Approaches to Silpa Shastra — A Comparative Overview

Scholar / Work	Period	Approach	Limitation
Fergusson (1876)	Colonial	Architectural survey; comparative typology	Eurocentric hierarchy; craft-level classification
Percy Brown (1942)	Colonial	Technical documentation of temple types	Guild-manual reading; no epistemological analysis

Kramrisch (1946)	Post-colonial	Cosmological symbolism; proportional systems	Symbol / structure split; epistemology not addressed
Gopinatha Rao (1914)	Revivalist	Iconometric precision of tala-mana	Mathematical, not epistemological, framing
Ganapati Sthapati (2002)	Practitioner	Vastu Vidya as complete science	Advocacy; lacks formal IKS pramana framework
Hudson (2008)	Iconographic	Vaikuntaperumal as 3-D mandala / Bhagavata Purana	Programme-specific; not a systemic epistemology claim
Hardy (2007)	Typological	Morphological analysis of temple forms	Technical typology without knowledge-system framing
Present Paper (2025)	IKS / Epistemological	Pramana + anubandha-catustaya applied to Silpa Shastra; Kanchipuram as primary built evidence	—

The IKS Epistemological Framework: Pramana, Shastra, and the Anubandha-Catustaya

a. Pramana as the Organising Principle of Indian Epistemology

Pramāṇa — valid means of knowledge — is the organising principle of classical Indian epistemology. The Nyāya school enumerates four pramāṇas (pratyakṣa, anumāna, upamāna, śabda); the Mīmāṃsā and Advaita Vedānta schools enumerate six, adding arthāpatti and anupalabdhi (Matilal 5–12). The key structural point for this paper is that Indian epistemology does not establish a hierarchy between theoretical and applied knowledge of the kind that characterises Western post-Cartesian thought (Mohanty 24–31). A claim produced by valid pratyakṣa — cultivated direct perception — is as epistemically reliable as one produced by valid anumāna. The Sthapati who perceives the structural integrity of a stone joint through trained expertise generates genuine pramā, not craft intuition.

This matters directly for Śilpa Śāstra. If the Sthapati's knowledge of proportion, material, orientation, and ritual procedure is generated through recognised pramāṇas — and this paper argues that it is — then it constitutes jñāna (knowledge) in the full Indian epistemological sense. The dismissal of Śilpa Śāstra as craft knowledge reflects a Western epistemological judgment, imported through colonial and post-colonial scholarship (Journal of Dharma Studies; Mohanty 44). Matilal's characterisation of classical Indian epistemology as a "source epistemology" — one that grounds validity in the reliability of the process producing a claim, not in the disciplinary status of the subject — is precisely what is needed to re-read Śilpa Śāstra correctly (Matilal 7).

b. The Anubandha-Catustaya: Identifying a Shastra

Classical Sanskrit śāstras are identified by the anubandha-catuṣṭaya — four connectives distinguishing a systematised knowledge discipline from a paddhati (procedural manual). The four are: viṣaya (defined subject domain), prayojana (goal or purpose), sambandha (relationship between text and subject), and adhikārin (the qualified practitioner the text addresses) (Mohanty 55–58). A text satisfying all four is a śāstra; a text that presupposes a śāstra and operationalises its prescriptions for specific contexts is a paddhati.

The misreading of Śilpa Śāstra as craft manual arose largely because Western scholars encountered paddhati texts — regional workshop guides, proportional tables for specific building types — without the śāstric framework that governs them. Ram Raz, the first modern Western scholar to engage seriously with a Śilpa text, noted in 1834 that he required the assistance of a living practitioner to interpret even a fragment of the Mānasāra (Ram Raz iv–v). The text presupposed an oral and epistemological context the written words alone could not supply. Reading a paddhati as the complete tradition is like reading a pharmacopeia as the epistemology of Āyurveda.

Table 2 applies the anubandha-catustaya to Silpa Shastra and demonstrates that it satisfies all four criteria for recognition as a shastra.

Table 2: Anubandha-Catustaya Analysis — Silpa Shastra as Shastra

Criterion	Definition (Mohanty 55–58)	Silpa Shastra Instantiation

Visaya	Defined subject domain	The construction of sacred space in alignment with cosmic order (rta); encompasses site selection, spatial orientation, proportional form, iconographic programme, material specification, and ritual installation (Mayamata, Ch. 1–6; Kamikagama, Purvabhaga)
Prayojana	Goal / purpose	Both abhyudaya (material well-being of patron and community) and nihsreyasa (liberation of the Sthapati who works in cosmic conformity) — the dual goal structure shared by all major Sanskrit shastras (Manasara, Ch. 2; Mohanty 57)
Sambandha	Relationship between text and subject	Cosmological first principles encoded in the Agama generate the textual prescriptions; the built temple instantiates those principles — the sambandha flows top-down from theology to built form (Kamikagama, Purvabhaga; Ramachandra Rao 1: xii)
Adhikarin	Qualified practitioner	The initiated Sthapati — not a generic craftsman but one who has undergone ritual initiation, mastered the textual tradition, and cultivated technical, perceptual, astronomical, and ritual competence as a unified qualification (Ganapati Sthapati 15–17; Kamikagama, Uttarabhaga)

c. The Shastra-Paddhati Distinction Applied to Kanchipuram

Applied to Kanchipuram, this framework has concrete implications. Both the Mayamata and the Mānasāra open with cosmological and ontological sections before turning to technical specification. This ordering matters: the technical prescriptions are explicitly framed as derived applications of the cosmological first principles in the opening chapters (Dagens, Mayamata xxiii–xxxi). The Kāmikāgama follows the same structure: its Pūrvabhāga establishes theological first principles; the construction prescriptions of the Uttarabhāga follow as necessary consequences.

The Sthapati who built the Kailasanathar Temple was not following a paddhati. He was applying a śāstric system in which every technical decision is derivable from — and justified by — the cosmological framework in the primary texts. This derivation is invisible to scholarship that starts from the built form and works back to technical sources. It becomes evident only when the śāstric texts are read in their own epistemological sequence (Ram Raz v; Dagens, Mayamata xxix).

The Five Epistemic Layers of Silpa Shastra: Kanchipuram as Primary Evidence

Śilpa Śāstra encodes five distinct but irreducibly integrated knowledge domains. These are not five separate subjects treated sequentially; they are five dimensions of a single knowledge system in which each presupposes and is presupposed by the others (cf. Ganapati Sthapati 22; Ramachandra Rao 1: xiv). Table 3 below maps the five layers against their primary textual sources and Kanchipuram built evidence before each is examined in detail.

Table 3: Five Epistemic Layers of Silpa Shastra with Kanchipuram Evidence

Epistemic Layer	Knowledge Domain	Primary Text Source	Kanchipuram Evidence
1. Cosmological	Cosmic order; spatial theology; directional mapping	Mayamata Ch. 5–6; Kamikagama Purvabhaga	East-west orientation; Vastu Purusa Mandala governing Kailasanathar ground plan; 58 directional devakulikas
2. Mathematical	Tala-mana proportional canon; applied geometry	Manasara Ch. 10–16; Mayamata Ch. 8–9	Four-storeyed vimana governed by nara-mana

			ratios; Vaikuntaperumal triple-sanctum vertical proportions
3. Perceptual / Aesthetic	Darsana theory; rasa; spatial cognition	Natyashastra; Agamic darsana chapters; Cilappatikaram	Spatial compression from maha-mandapa to garbhagriha; lion-pillar colonnade at Vaikuntaperumal calibrating approach rhythm
4. Ontological	Form-consciousness relationship; sannidhi; pratistha	Kamikagama — prana-pratistha chapters	16-faceted linga specifications at Kailasanathar; triple-level Visnu programme encoding Bhagavata ontology at Vaikuntaperumal (Hudson, Body of God 12–18)
5. Ritual-Procedural	Muhurta; pratistha ceremony; unified Sthapati practice	Kamikagama Uttarabhaga; Tantrasamuccaya	Dedicatory inscriptions recording consecration sequences; Rajasimha's 250 birudas as formal ritual-patron documentation

a. The Cosmological Layer

The Kailasanathar Temple is oriented east–west. The Mayamata treats this not as aesthetic preference but as a structural cosmological requirement: a site that fails to observe cardinal orientation fails to instantiate the cosmic order (ṛta) that makes a location fit for divine presence (Dagens, Mayamata 45–53). East is the direction of Śiva's creative energy; the temple must face it.

The fifty-eight devakulikā shrines distributed around the Kailasanathar's inner prakāra wall instantiate the Vāstu Puruṣa Maṇḍala in built form. Each maṇḍala position is associated with a specific deity-energy governing that directional sector. The Śiva-forms placed across the shrines — Somāskanda, Harihara, Ardhanārīśvara — enact in stone the theological geography of the Kāmikāgama (EBSCO Research Starters; Ramachandra Rao, Agama-Kosa 2: 34–41). The wall is a three-dimensional rendering of the two-dimensional maṇḍala.

In the broader South Indian tradition, this cosmological logic becomes more elaborate over time. The concentric prākāras of Chola and Vijayanagara complexes — Chidambaram, Madurai, Srirangam — map the graduated zones of Sāṃkhya cosmology from the outer material world to the innermost point of pure consciousness in the garbhagṛha (Hardy 108–15). Kanchipuram is the earliest surviving structural instance of this spatial thinking. Everything that follows is epistemologically continuous with it.

b. The Mathematical Layer

The tāla-māna system is the most quantifiably demonstrable evidence of Śilpa Śāstra's mathematical character. The Mānasāra devotes Chapters 10 through 16 to it. The base unit, the tāla, is the measurement of the face from hairline to chin; all other proportions are derived from it through ratios specified with arithmetic exactness (Acharya, Manasara 127–58).

The use of the human body as the proportional base is not arbitrary. In Śilpa cosmology, the human body is the microcosmic form of the cosmic Puruṣa; the temple is its macrocosmic built correspondence. The proportions governing the body therefore govern the temple because both express the same underlying cosmic ratios (Ganapati Sthapati 28–33). This is applied mathematics with metaphysical foundations — the structure of a pramāṇa-grounded discipline.

At the Kailasanathar Temple, the four-storeyed vimāna is among the earliest structural applications of the tāla-māna system. The proportions of each storey, progressively diminishing on ascent, follow the Mayamata prescriptions for the Drāviḍa vimāna type under the ekatāla module (Dagens, Mayamata 112–20). At the Vaikuntaperumal, the three vertically aligned sanctums apply the same proportional logic to encode a vertical theological progression from bhūloka to svarga to Vaikuṇṭha (Hudson, Vaikunta Perumal Temple 34–41).

Later Chola construction demonstrates the full reach of this mathematical tradition. The Bṛhadīśvara Temple at Thanjavur shows adherence to Mānasāra

ratios at a degree of precision that excludes approximation (Acharya, Dictionary of Hindu Architecture 210–18). But the tradition begins at Kanchipuram. Structural stone construction — unlike rock-cut — required all proportional relationships to be fixed before building commenced. The Pallava Sthapati had no margin for adjustment. The tāla-māna system had to be applied in full from the outset.

c. The Perceptual and Aesthetic Layer

Śilpa Śāstra contains a systematic theory of how built form and spatial sequence shape the worshipper's perceptual and devotional state. This is not aesthetics in the modern sense. It is closer to what contemporary environmental psychology calls evidence-based spatial design, embedded in a theological framework (cf. Matilal 88).

At the Kailasanathar Temple, this theory operates in the processional axis. Moving from the outer enclosure through the detached maṇḍapa added by Mahendravarman III, then through the ardha-maṇḍapa and into the garbhagṛha, the ceiling descends and the light withdraws. The worshipper arrives at the intimate, lamp-lit sanctum in a state of perceptual preparation for darśana — the reciprocal vision between devotee and deity (Studocu, Pallava Architecture Analysis; Dagens, Mayamata 180). This compression is not accidental. It is designed.

The lion-pillar colonnade of the Vaikuntaperumal's raised pillared veranda works differently but toward the same end. The vyāla-base motif and the rhythmic spacing of the columns establish a visual pulse that conditions the pace and attention of the approaching worshipper before any encounter with the deity (Hudson, Vaikunta Perumal Temple 22).

The Cilappatikāram offers independent literary evidence that this perceptual theory was culturally operative in South India well before the Pallava structural temples. Its accounts of entering sacred precincts encode the graduated psychological transformation that Śilpa Śāstra systematises (cf. Gopinatha Rao 1: 18). In the Vijayanagara period, the great gopurams of Madurai, Chidambaram, and Tiruvannamalai develop this perceptual layer to its fullest extent: the sheer visual mass of the tower triggers adbhuta-rasa (wonder) before the precinct is even entered (Hardy 142–49).

d. The Ontological Layer

The ontological layer of Śilpa Śāstra is its most philosophically demanding aspect — and the most resistant to Western secular architectural categories. The core claim is this: material form, shaped according to śāstric prescription and submitted to the prāṇapratiṣṭhā consecration ceremony, becomes a vehicle of divine consciousness (sannidhi). This is not metaphor or pious interpretation. It is the foundational ontological claim from which the architectural prescriptions are derived (Ramachandra Rao, Agama-Kosa 3: 88–95).

The sixteen-faceted polished black stone liṅga in the Kailasanathar's garbhagṛha is not a representation of Śiva. The Kāmikāgama states that following correct prāṇapratiṣṭhā, the liṅga becomes a stable vehicle of Śiva's presence. The sixteen facets correspond to sixteen aspects of the divine as specified in the Āgamic iconometric system. These proportions are not aesthetic; they are ontological requirements — the form must have these precise properties to sustain this mode of being (Ramachandra Rao, Agama-Kosa 3: 91–93; EBSCO Research Starters).

At the Vaikuntaperumal, the ontological dimension is vertical. Hudson shows that the three sanctums encode not just narrative levels of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa but distinct ontological modes of divine presence: śayana corresponds to cosmic dissolution (pralaya), āsīna to creation (sṛṣṭi), sthānaka to active cosmic maintenance (sthiti) (Hudson, Body of God 45–53). Ascending the tower, the worshipper traverses the structure of divine time. The architecture is ontology in space.

The irreducibility of this ontological layer is the paper's most critical analytical point. It is tempting to extract the proportional and geometric prescriptions of Śilpa Śāstra as the "real" technical content and treat the ontological framework as religious overlay. But the prescriptions are derived from the ontological theory. Remove the theory and they become arbitrary conventions. Retain it and they are theorems (Ganapati Sthapati 18; Mohanty 60).

e. The Ritual-Procedural Layer as Epistemically Unified

The ritual-procedural layer is the one most often treated as external to the intellectual content of Śilpa Śāstra — and therefore the most important to examine carefully. The Sthapati's competence extends to determination of auspicious timing (muhūrta) for construction, the bhūmi-pūjā (ground consecration), vāstu-śānti (site pacification), and the full prāṇapratiṣṭhā ceremony (Ramachandra Rao, Agama-Kosa 4: 120–28; Tantrasamuccaya). In the Āgamic tradition, the Sthapati holds both technical and ritual authority. There is no separate priest who consecrates what the architect has built.

The Kailasanathar's dedicatory inscriptions document this unified authority concretely. Rajasimha's 250 birudas, inscribed in four scripts at four levels around the plinth, are a formal ritual-legal record of the king-patron's qualifications and commitment — the sambandha between royal intention and the cosmic order the temple instantiates (EBSCO Research Starters; imp-

art.org). The inscriptions document not only what was built but the ritual conditions of its construction, treating building, dedication, and installation as a single integral act.

The Kāmikāgama's Uttarabhāga states plainly that a temple built with correct geometry but without correct ritual procedure is non-functional — unable to serve as a vehicle of divine presence (Ramachandra Rao, Agama-Kosa 4: 122). This is a systems-theoretic claim about integration: the five layers are not additive but constitutively interdependent. The system works only when all five are unified in a single practitioner — the Sthapati as ācārya, not as craftsman (Ganapati Sthapati 20; Mohanty 61).

Kanchipuram in the South Indian Epistemic Tradition: Comparative Context

a. Kanchipuram as Originary Laboratory

Kanchipuram holds a specific originary position in the South Indian temple tradition. The Kailasanathar Temple is the point at which the Pallava tradition — previously expressed in rock-cut form at Mahabalipuram — committed fully to quarried and assembled stone construction at architectural scale (EBSCO Research Starters; ClearIAS, 'Pallava Architecture'). The change of medium is also an epistemological event.

Structural stone construction forced the Sthapati to pre-determine all proportional relationships before a single stone was laid. Rock-cut temples could be corrected as work proceeded; structural stone could not. For the first time, the full tāla-māna system had to be applied as a complete mathematical framework from the outset (Dagens, Mayamata xxx; Hardy 42). The proportional system of the Drāviḍa vimāna, the organisation of the prakāra wall, the grammar of the processional sequence — all of these were resolved at Kanchipuram and became the canon for the tradition that followed (ClearIAS, 'Pallava Architecture'; Hardy 44).

b. Chola, Pandya, and Vijayanagara: Continuity of the Epistemic Structure

The five-layer structure identified in the Kanchipuram corpus is not specific to the Pallava period. It characterises the Drāviḍa tradition across a millennium. The Bṛhadīśvara Temple at Thanjavur (1010 CE) advances the mathematical layer at unprecedented scale (Acharya, Dictionary of Hindu Architecture 215). The Naṭarāja Temple at Chidambaram develops the cosmological layer: its golden roof encodes the 28 Āgamas as 28 golden tiles, and its ākāśa-liṅga (formless space-element) is the most abstract instantiation of Āgamic ontology in the tradition (Hardy 118).

The Meenakshi-Sundareshwara complex at Madurai develops the perceptual layer to its fullest expression: multiple concentric prākāras, gopurams of graduated scale, and a tank-centred spatial organisation create a darśana preparation environment at urban scale (Hardy 145–47). The Kerala Tantrasamuccaya demonstrates the epistemological structure is consistent even across different materials and regional ecological conditions: the timber-construction tradition maintains the same five-layer integration (Tantrasamuccaya; Ramachandra Rao, Agama-Kosa 5: 44). The tradition is structurally unified across time and region.

Table 4 maps the five-layer epistemic structure across the principal South Indian temple traditions, demonstrating systemic consistency.

Table 4: Five-Layer Epistemic Structure Across the South Indian Temple Tradition

Temple / Period	Dynasty	Primary Epistemic Emphasis	Textual Governance
Kailasanathar, Kanchipuram (c. 700 CE)	Pallava	Cosmological + Mathematical (inaugural structural deployment of Silpa Shastra)	Mayamata; Kamikagama
Vaikuntaperumal, Kanchipuram (c. 731–796 CE)	Pallava	Ontological (triple-level Bhagavata Purana programme; Hudson, Body of God 45–53)	Pancaratra Agama; Mayamata
Brihadesvara, Thanjavur (1010 CE)	Chola	Mathematical (tala-mana at maximum structural scale; Acharya, Dictionary 215)	Manasara; Kamikagama
Nataraja, Chidambara	Chola	Cosmological + Ontologic	Kamikagama; Shaiva Siddhanta

m (10th–13th c.)		al (akasa-linga; 28 Agamas; Hardy 118)	
Meenakshi-Sundareshwara, Madurai (Vijayanagara ext.)	Vijayanagara / Nayaka	Perceptual (multi-prakara darsana environment; Hardy 145–47)	Mayamata; regional paddhatis
Kerala regional temples (various)	Varied	Ritual-Procedural + Mathematical (timber tala-mana; Ramachandra Rao 5: 44)	Tantrasamuccaya

The Misreading and Its Material Consequences for Heritage Conservation

a. The Colonial Epistemic Filter

The misclassification of Śilpa Śāstra was not a neutral scholarly error. It emerged within a colonial project requiring Indian knowledge traditions to be sorted into legible administrative categories: religion, superstition, craft, art, science. Śilpa Śāstra fit none of them cleanly — too mathematical for religion, too ritual for science, too philosophical for craft, too technical for art (cf. Kramrisch, Hindu Temple 1: 3–5). Craft was the default classification. It marginalised the tradition epistemically and made it legally manageable under the colonial heritage framework.

The consequences were material. Colonial temple endowment legislation did not recognise the Sthapati as a knowledge-professional in the way it recognised physicians or advocates. His knowledge was classified as hereditary custom — protectable as cultural property but not recognisable as systematic expertise requiring formal qualification (Ganapati Sthapati 9–11). The Kanchipuram temples came under ASI jurisdiction under the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act of 1904, placing their conservation within Western heritage frameworks that the Venice Charter of 1964 later formalised (ICOMOS, Venice Charter).

b. The Venice Charter Incompatibility

The Venice Charter grounds conservation in material authenticity, minimal intervention, and reversibility — principles derived from a Western epistemological framework that locates the significance of a historic building in its physical fabric (ICOMOS, Venice Charter Art. 2, 9). For a Śilpa Śāstra-governed temple, this framework is structurally incompatible with the tradition that made the building. In the Āgamic framework, the significance of the temple does not reside in its fabric as such but in the living cosmological, mathematical, ontological, and ritual system the fabric instantiates (Ramachandra Rao, Agama-Kosa 3: 90).

A temple restored with historically accurate sculptural forms, but by craftsmen who lack the Sthapati's integrated knowledge — who have the technical layer without the perceptual, ontological, and ritual layers — has not been conserved within the tradition's own terms. The material has been maintained; the knowledge system has been severed (cf. Ganapati Sthapati 10). Documented interventions at the Kailasanathar Temple include iconographic replacements that violate tāla-māna proportions and material substitutions that are structurally sound but ritually and epistemologically dissonant (ASI Protected Monuments Database).

c. Towards an Epistemologically-Grounded Conservation Practice

Recognition of Śilpa Śāstra as a full IKS discipline would change conservation practice in specific ways. It would require qualified Sthapatis — with integrated knowledge across all five epistemic layers — as primary consultants in conservation decisions, not occasional technical advisors (Ganapati Sthapati 19–21). Conservation criteria would need to assess proportional integrity (tāla-māna conformance), spatial integrity (processional and perceptual sequence), and ritual integrity (the capacity of the temple to function as a vehicle of pratiṣṭhā), alongside material integrity.

The IKS Division's mandate to preserve and disseminate traditional knowledge for societal applications provides the institutional basis for this shift. The UGC's 2023 guidelines and AICTE's IKS mandate in technical education create pathways for training conservation professionals who can work within the epistemological framework of the traditions they are conserving (UGC, Guidelines 3; Ministry of Education, Guidelines). This is not revivalism. It is epistemological accuracy applied to practice (Journal of Dharma Studies).

Conclusion

This paper opened with two temples less than a kilometre apart in Kanchipuram. The Kailasanathar Temple (c. 700 CE) — the first structural stone temple of the South Indian tradition — and the Vaikuntaperumal Temple (c. 731–796 CE) — the first to encode a multi-level theological programme vertically (Hudson, Body of God 12) — together constitute the originary documents of an

epistemological tradition that produced, over the following millennium, the greatest corpus of sacred architecture in the world (Hardy 40–44; EBSCO Research Starters). Śilpa Śāstra is that tradition. It has been misread.

The anubandha-catuṣṭaya analysis demonstrates that Śilpa Śāstra satisfies all four criteria for recognition as a śāstra: a rigorously defined viṣaya, a dual prayojana (abhyudaya and niḥśreyasa), an explicit sambandha between cosmological first principles and built applications, and a demanding adhikārin in the figure of the initiated Sthapati (Mohanty 55–61; Ganapati Sthapati 15–20). Its five epistemic layers — cosmological, mathematical, perceptual, ontological, and ritual-procedural — are not additive subjects but irreducibly unified dimensions of a single knowledge system (Ramachandra Rao, Agama-Kosa 1: xiv–xvi).

Kanchipuram is the right starting point for this argument because it is where Śilpa epistemology first resolved the problem of full structural stone construction in the Drāviḍa tradition. Thanjavur, Chidambaram, Madurai, and the Kerala timber tradition are all epistemologically continuous with Kanchipuram (Hardy 44; Dagens, Mayamata xxx). The tradition is one. Kanchipuram is its material point of origin.

Three conclusions follow. For the historiography of Indian knowledge: Śilpa Śāstra deserves recognition as an IKS discipline of the first order — alongside Āyurveda, Jyotiṣa, and Gaṇita — as the tradition that addresses, most literally, the question of how cosmic order is made to dwell in the world (cf. Ministry of Education, NEP 2020; UGC, Guidelines 1). For scholarship: the reframing proposed here opens a research agenda — proportional analysis of South Indian temples against Śilpa Śāstra prescriptions, and recovery of living Sthapati knowledge before lineage rupture makes it irretrievable (Ganapati Sthapati 21). For conservation practice: methodology grounded in Śilpa epistemology would centre the Sthapati's knowledge, treat proportional and ritual continuity as material authenticity, and understand the living South Indian temple as a functioning knowledge system rather than a historical monument (cf. ICOMOS, Venice Charter; Ramachandra Rao, Agama-Kosa 3: 90).

The Kailasanathar Temple carries 250 names of its royal patron. None names the Sthapati who designed it. That silence is colonial, not ancient. Recovering the epistemological identity of Śilpa Śāstra is, among other things, a way of breaking it.

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