

ORIGINAL ARTICLE | Received: 16th September, 2025 | Revised: 20th October, 2025 | Accepted: 14th November, 2025 | Published: 26th December, 2025

Iconographic Composition on the Walls of Hoysala Temple

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the architectural and iconographic transformation of temple walls in Hoysala architecture within the historical and cultural context of medieval Karnāṭaka (twelfth–fourteenth centuries CE). Emerging from the Karnāṭa Drāviḍa tradition of the Western Cālukyas, the Hoysalas developed a distinctive architectural idiom characterized by innovative construction techniques and an intensified sculptural articulation of exterior walls. Structural features such as double-wall construction, rhythmic projections, and stellate plans generated expansive surfaces that enabled the systematic integration of sculptural programs. The research explores how these architectural developments intersected with theological frameworks derived from the Āgamas and Śilpāśāstras, alongside the growing influence of Vaiṣṇava traditions, particularly the Pañcarātra doctrine associated with Śrī Rāmānuja. The proliferation of divine imagery—including the Daśavatāra, Vyūha manifestations, and Caturviṃśati forms of Viṣṇu—demonstrates the translation of metaphysical concepts into standardized visual forms.

By analyzing architecture and iconography together, the study argues that Hoysala temple walls functioned not merely as structural components but as dynamic theological and narrative media that articulated religious ideology, artistic innovation, and emerging regional identity.



Keywords: *Iconography, Hoysala Architecture, Āgamas, Śilpāśāstras, Pañcarātra.*



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INTRODUCTION

In the eleventh century CE, peninsular India was dominated by two major imperial powers—the Western Cālukyas of Kalyāṇa and the Cōḷas of Tañjāvūr of Thanjavur. These dynasties were engaged in continuous conflict for political supremacy, while smaller kingdoms such as the Cēras, Kadambas, and Western Gaṅgas functioned under the suzerainty of one or the other.

Amid this political landscape, around 1000 CE, a relatively small principality known as the Hoysalas emerged under the leadership of Nṛpakāma, based at Śaśakapura (modern Sōsavūru). Consolidating support from the Malnad region and reportedly uniting a modest military force, the Hoysalas initially rose as feudatories of the Western Cālukyas. Their political alliance was strengthened through matrimonial relations, notably the marriage of the Hoysala princess Mahadevi to the Cālukyan king Sōmēśvara II ([R.Gopal, 2000](#)).

Over the following century, the Hoysalas engaged in a series of military campaigns against the Cōḷa and Paramāras and secured victories over regional powers such as the Pandyas and Alupas, gradually establishing firm control over the Malnad region of southern Karnāṭaka. A decisive turning point came during the reign of the celebrated king Viṣṇuvardhana, whose victory over the Cōḷa confederacy elevated the Hoysalas from subordinate chiefs to an independent and powerful kingdom, enabling their expansion into the fertile Kaveri basin.

The Cālukya-Chola feud was not limited to political power, but also involved art and architecture. The Cālukyas had created the Karnāṭa Drāviḍa idiom using soapstone, whereas the Cōḷa had the skill of devising Drāviḍa tradition on granite. The Hoysalas used their political position in the Cālukyas and took over their architectural

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design, but developed it into a more sophisticated, complex, and elaborate form. From the twelfth century to the mid-fourteenth century, they built many temples, which became an architectural style of their own.

The cultural achievement of Hoysaḷas, a kingdom created by the mind of King Viṣṇuvardhana, was the first to have been envisioned by him as a sophisticated cultural and artistic hub, rather than as just a political entity. The Cennakeśava Temple, at Belur (1117 CE) and the Hoysalesvara Temple, Halebidu (c.1120 CE) were his symbolic expression of triumph over the Cōḷa. These sculptures represented a new level of imagination, size, and artistic accomplishment and heralded the new era in which the Hoysaḷa kingdom became a significant cultural power in medieval South India.

Decorative innovation of Hoysaḷa Temple Walls

Building upon the already established Karnāṭa Drāviḍa architectural tradition, the Hoysaḷas introduced new concepts in planning, composition, and advanced construction techniques that gradually evolved into a distinctive architectural idiom, often identified as the Hoysaḷa or Vēsara style. They adopted the earlier traditions and transformed them significantly, making a definite stylistic shift and developing a distinct regional character. Perhaps the most important change is in the use of wall construction and wall decorations in temples.

Structurally, the Hoysaḷa wall is a continuation of the Karnāṭa Drāviḍa of the Cāḷukya period, wherein the wall thickness has been different in various architectural sections. The central offset (bhadrā) segments are made thicker than the corner (karnā) segments (Fig 1a, b). This is accomplished by a double wall construction system: The outer wall is articulated and ornamented, while the inner wall remains simple and plain, and the space between the two is filled with rubble masonry (K.G. Maithreyee, 2025, p.156).

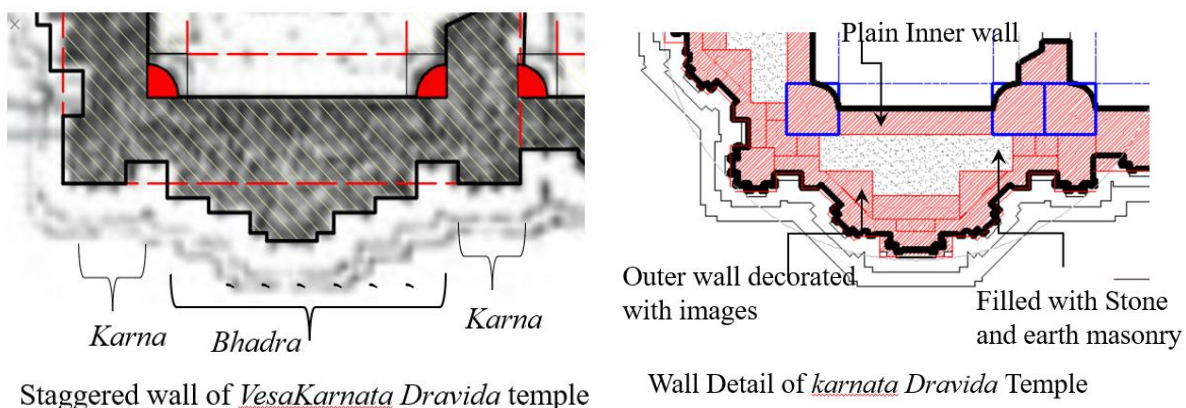


Figure 1a & b, Wall detail of KaranataDrāviḍa and Hoysaḷa Temples

Although the Hoysaḷas adopted this structural principle, they significantly transformed its visual expression. Exposed, outer walls at Cāḷukyan temples are usually embellished with miniature temple structures (pañjaras), set atop of pilasters. Hoysaḷa builders, on the other hand, introduced a greater amount of sculptural decoration with emphasis on the narrative and iconographic content, rather than on architectural similarity.

Construction methods also exhibit variations. The outer walls of the Cāḷukyan are made up of horizontally laid stone courses with interlocking systems (Fig 2) in which the stone blocks have been decorated with pañjara. The walls of the Hoysaḷa temples, however, are distinctly divided into two parts, the Keḷa -jaṅghā (lower wall) and the upari-jaṅghā (upper wall). The decorative themes on the lower jaṅghā are mostly Hindu deities and mythological scenes, and the architectural features of the upper jaṅghā include pañjaras (Fig. 3 & 4). A projecting cornice called kūṭa-chādyā over the lower segment of Keḷa -jaṅghā, a feature not found in Cāḷukyan temples. Another cornice called chādyā is placed above the upper zone, so that there is a clear horizontal articulation in the façade.

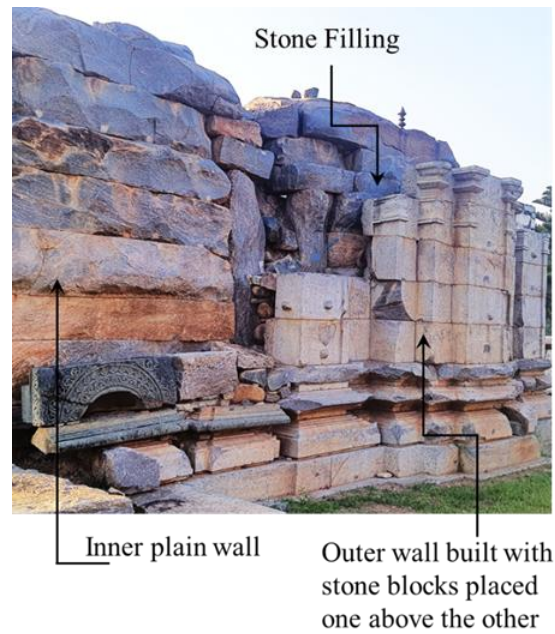


Figure 2: Wall detail of Kalyana Cālukyan Temple.



Outer wall composed of vertically placed single stone slabs intended for carving.

Figure 3: Wall detail of Hoysala temple



Figure 4: Wall detail of Hoysala Temple.

Outer wall Decoration

In plan, the exterior walls are articulated with a rhythmic sequence of projections and recesses which are derived from the earlier Cālukyan architecture, and are termed as outer wall Decoration. Often, they also produced stellate (star-shaped) plans, which included several faces and corners, adding to the play of light and shadow on the planigraphy. The wall section is known as jaṅghā, and it is now the most significant field of sculptural expression, being elaborately decorated with Hindu gods and pictorial elements that tell a story. The Hoysalas' introduction of the systematic incorporation of devotional and narrative sculpture into the jaṅghā is one of the most unique artistic developments to appear in the temples.

Theoretical background of wall imagery

The development of staggered or stellate plans, together with multiple sanctums—ranging from eka-kūṭa, dvi-kūṭa, tri-kūṭa, caṣṭh-kūṭa, pañca-kūṭa, ṣaṭ-kūṭa, sapta-kūṭa, aṣṭa-kūṭa, and nava-kūṭa types—generated an increasing demand for large numbers of sacred images. In the Indian architectural tradition, such images are not merely decorative but are grounded in theological doctrine articulated in the Āgamas. These texts address the philosophical, ritual, and practical dimensions of temple construction and are generally divided into four sections: jñāna Pāda (theoretical and metaphysical principles), Yoga Pāda (spiritual communion), Charya Pāda (ritual practice and conduct), and Kriya Pāda (temple construction and iconography).

Architects and sculptors relied closely on both the Āgamas and the Shilpashastras, which provide detailed prescriptions on design principles, iconometry, Bījamantras (a sacred syllabic sound), and Dhyāna-śloka that guide the visualization (Rūpa-dhyāna) of divine images prior to sculpting. As temple architecture evolved across different regions of India, these textual traditions likewise developed regional adaptations suited to local architectural practices and artistic idioms.

Following the historic victory of King Viṣṇuvardhana over the Cōḷa in the Kaveri basin, the commissioning of monumental temples to commemorate this triumph marked a significant cultural and religious transformation in the Hoysala kingdom. This phase appears to have coincided with the arrival of the eminent Vaishnavite philosopher Śrī Rāmānujācārya, whose propagation of Viśiṣṭādvaita philosophy based on the Pañcarātra doctrinal tradition profoundly influenced religious practices of the period. The systematization of Pañcarātra Āgamic traditions provided a strong theological framework that supported the proliferation of divine imagery on the walls of Hoysala temples.

Simultaneously, several architectural and constructional modifications within the Vēsara tradition led to the emergence of a distinct Hoysala architectural idiom, first fully realized in the temples of Belur and Halebid.

Folklore attributes the initiation of this stylistic transformation to the celebrated sthapati (traditional architect) Jakanācāri or Jakanācāry, who is believed to have played a pivotal role in shaping the new artistic direction.

The iconographic program of Hoysala temples reflects the prominence of Vaishnava traditions in South India, particularly the Pañcarātra theology by Śrī Rāmānujācārya. In South India, the Vaishnavism was primarily influenced by Vaikhānasa, Bhāgavata, and Pāñcarātra theologies. Despite certain doctrinal and ritual differences among them, core concepts such as the Daśāvatāra, the Vyūha doctrine, and the twenty-four Caturvīṃśati forms of Viṣṇu remain consistent, and their iconographical standards are largely uniform.

Vaishnava Iconography on the walls of Hoysala Temples

The walls of Hoysala temples are richly adorned with representations of Lord Viṣṇu's avatāra and vyūha forms. Under the theological influence of Śrī Rāmānuja, a coherent and systematic corpus of Vaiṣṇava imagery appears to have developed, rooted in Pañcarātra doctrine and supported by narratives drawn from the Purāṇas as well as the epics, the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata. Among the most well-known manifestations of Viṣṇu is the concept of the Daśāvatāra, comprising the ten principal incarnations—Matsya, Kūrma, Varāha, Narasiṃha, Vāmana, Paraśurāma, Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, and Balarāma (Jnanananda G, 2000) (or Buddha in certain traditions). Beyond these major incarnations, Vaiṣṇava theology also recognizes numerous other manifestations, including Prādurbhāva avatāras such as Padmanābha, Dhruva, and Kapila; the Guṇāvatāras, embodying specific divine qualities; and the Aṃśāvatāras (Rao, Vol. IV 2005), in which partial aspects of Viṣṇu manifest to accomplish particular cosmic functions.

The Vaishnava traditions also have forms of avatars, and the Vyūha doctrine is represented theologically through them. The transcendental form is Paravasudeva, or the primordial and unmanifest state of Viṣṇu, which has manifested in a series. During the Vyūha mode, Viṣṇu takes the form of four different forms – Vyūhas—Vyūha-Vāsudeva, Vyūha-Saṅkarṣaṇa, Vyūha-Pradyumna, and Vyūha-Aniruddha (Fig 5). These are symbolic of the four states of consciousness- Turīya (transcendent), Suṣupti (deep sleep), Svapna (dream), and Jāgrat (wakefulness), and are cosmic principles that govern the process of creation and evolution. Each embodies the various combinations of the six divine attributes Ṣaḍguṇas: Jñāna (knowledge), Aiśvarya (sovereignty), Śakti (power), Bala (strength), Vīrya (valor), and Tejas (radiance).

These four Vyūhas further emanate to subsidiary forms or Vyūhantara. They manifest in twenty-four forms, grouped together as the Caturvīṃśati murtis. The role of these forms is central in the temple worship and the ritual practice; they are concrete iconographic expressions of theological concepts and an explanation of the exceptional richness of images of Viṣṇu on the temple walls of the Hoysalas. (Rao, Vol. IV 2005).

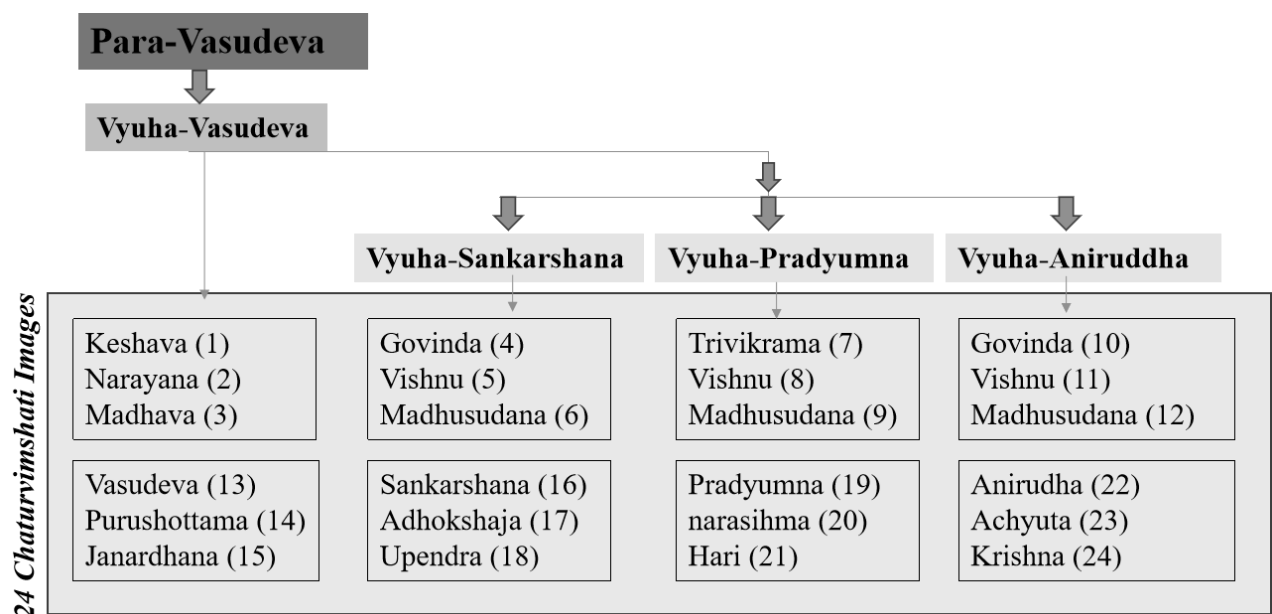


Figure 5: Vyūha Doctrine

This theological framework and ritual prescriptions provided by Ramanaujacharya enabled traditional śilpis to conceptualize and execute images within a standardized sacred canon. Folklore associates the master craftsmen with the famous sthapati Jakanācāri, who transmitted this knowledge to his pupils in the śilpa gurukulas, through the medium of precise Śilpaśāstra norms, which led to the large-scale production of sculptural imagery (Padigar, 1996).

As a result, the avatāra manifestations, the Vyūha forms, and the full set of twenty-four Caturvīṃśati icons were carefully designed and created, and are prominently featured in the Hoysala temples at Belur and Halebidu for the first time. These forms are configured in a consistent manner as the four-armed Viṣṇu (Fig 7) holding śaṅkha, cakra, gadā, and padma, and are distinguished by the regular permutation of these attributes. The four-armed Viṣṇu of 'Paravāsudeva' (Fig 6), gracefully seated on the coils of the 5 hooded Ananta, represents the transcendental form.



Figure 6: Para-Vasudeva

The religious perspective of that time, shaped by part of the Vaiṣṇava theological vision of Rāmānuja, not only limited the artists to creating Vaiṣṇava images. The sculptural programs of the Hoysala temples were also a blend of Śaiva and Śākta elements. Numerous forms of Śiva, such as Gajāśura-saṃhāra, Tāṇḍava Śiva, Harihara, Bhairava, Umā-Maheśvara, Kārttikeya, and Nāṭya-Gaṇapati, along with different forms of the Goddess, including the Saptamātrkāś, Mahīśāsuramardīnī, Durgā, Nāṭya Sarasvatī, Nāṭya Pārvatī, and Bhairavī, were incorporated into the walls of the temples, creating a pluralistic sacred setting.



Figure 7: Vyūha – Vasudeva

The sculptures produced by the Hoysalas constitute an outstanding peak of artistic perfection, where the articulation, ornamentation, and technical accuracy are unmatched. Tradition says that over a period of about two to three centuries, over a thousand temples were built, but a great deal of architectural and iconographic literature related to this tradition has been lost. Of the few remaining textual sources, the Śrī Brāhmīya Citrakarma Śāstra edited by Dr. G. Jñānānanda is an important reference for Vaiṣṇava iconography from the Pañcarātra Āgama.

CONCLUSION

The development of the Hoysala temple walls represents a remarkable turning point in the history of the temple architecture of South India, where the creative use of structure, thought, and imagination in the sculptural art has led to the creation of a singularly unified artistic language. The Hoysalas, building on the Western Cālukya tradition of Karnāṭa Drāviḍa, applied the basic architectural principles of their heritage in a fresh and innovative way in plan, construction, and surface decoration. The temple's facade was then set in motion with stellate compositions, rhythmic projections, and horizontal divisions of the walls, so that the architecture itself was able to be part of the religious story.

The evolution of Hoysala temple walls marks a decisive moment in the history of South Indian temple architecture, where structural ingenuity, theological thought, and sculptural imagination converged to produce a uniquely integrated artistic language. While firmly grounded in the Karnāṭa Drāviḍa tradition inherited from the Western Cālukyas, the Hoysalas reinterpreted established architectural principles through experimentation in plan, construction, and surface articulation. Stellate layouts, rhythmic projections, and horizontally organized wall divisions transformed the temple exterior into an active visual field, allowing architecture itself to participate in religious narration.

The architectural change must be interpreted in the context of the intellectual and devotional environment of the time. The conceptual and technical framework for image-making was given by the prescriptions of the Āgamas and Śilpāśāstras, while the increasing diffusion of Vaiṣṇava theology, in particular the Pañcarātra system of Śrī Rāmānuja, facilitated the systematic visualization of divine manifestations. But the recurrent theme of avatāras,

vyūha forms, and Caturviṃśati icons illustrates the way by which metaphysical teachings are packaged into programmatic iconography, making the walls of the temple the medium for the transmission of those teachings.

An important catalytic influence was exerted by the royal patronage. The rise of King Viṣṇuwardhana to the political heights and his cultural ideals created a situation where building temples became a vehicle for devotional expression and royal self-representation. The monumental works at Belur and Halebidu marked not only a political victory but also the beginning of a new style of art. The figure of the ‘master sthapati’ Jakanachari, which continued to be preserved in the regional tradition, represents the creative agency of the Hoysaḷa craftsmen who were proficient in their technique, and thus could bring doctrinal ideologies to life in sculptural form.

The wall of the Hoysaḷa temple, then, became a site more than just an architectural boundary; it became a place of interplay, where form, likeness, and function converged. The Hoysaḷa period architects and sculptors were able to combine the traditional elements of their ancient architectural tradition with local innovation and create monuments that express a sense of cultural identity and represent one of the most refined forms of medieval Indian temple art.

AUTHOR DECLARATIONS

CREDIT AUTHOR STATEMENT / AUTHORS’ CONTRIBUTIONS

Maithreyee KG: Conceptualization, Methodology, software, validation, investigation, resources, data curation, writing original draft, visualization.

Acknowledgment: The authors would like to state that no specific funding or support was received for this study.

Conflict of interest: The author(s) declare no conflicts of interest.

AI statement: AI-assisted tools were used exclusively to enhance language quality, clarity, and presentation. Grammarly, Paperpal, and QuillBot support grammar, style, and paraphrasing. Scopus AI and Scholarcy assisted literature exploration. Turnitin was used to check plagiarism and AI-generated content. No AI tool generated original scholarly content, data, analyses, or conclusions. The author retains full responsibility for the manuscript’s originality, accuracy, and integrity.

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