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The glory of Meenakshi Amman Temple, Madurai Tamil Nadu, India

Inder Janakarajan ^{1*}, Priyaranjan Behera ²

¹ Student, Bachelor of Design, SOD, Presidency University, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India

² Professor, Bachelor of Design, SOD, Presidency University, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India

* Corresponding Author: **Inder Janakarajan**

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Abstract

Temples, according to Hindu tradition, are the most deserving places of worship. A foundation upon which great kings and conquerors were built. The art of building temples is a well-known admitted fact that was followed by ancient Hindu Kings as a customary religion. Villages and towns are built around these temples, which serve as landmarks for them. Meenakshi Amman Temple is located in Madurai, Tamil Nadu, on the southern bank of the Vaigai River. The temple honours the goddess Meenakshi (a form of Parvati) and her consort Sundareshwarar (Lord Shiva.). The temple is located in the heart of Madurai, an ancient temple city mentioned in Tamil Sangam literature, with the goddess temple mentioned in 6th-century CE texts. One of the Paadal Petra Sthalam temples. The Paadal Petra sthalam is a collection of 275 Lord Shiva temples that are mentioned in the verses of Tamil Saiva Nayanars from the 6th to the 9th centuries CE. This document sheds light on its timeline and discusses the various aspects that contribute to the Meenakshi Amman Temple being a truly ancient, mythological marvel that has stood the test of time until the present day.

Keywords: Meenakshi, temple, glory, villages

1. Introduction

Meenakshi Amman temple, also known as Minaskshi Sundaraswera Temple, is one of the oldest, yet most important temples in India. According to legends and Indian mythology Lord Shiva (Sundareshwarar), also known as the handsome one married Parvati (Meenakshi) at the site where the temple is currently situated. The temple was nominated for one of the seven wonders of the world, but it did not make the cut. The temple is greeted by a 15-story-tall gateway adorned with over 1500 brightly painted sculptures of demonic and divine figures.

The shrines of the temple, the pillars, and the sculptures are occupied with extraordinary eye-filling gods and goddesses, divine beings who were engaged in various activities, manifesting in multiple guises and places at the same time, and are subject to dissolution and rebirth. The magnificent Meenakshi Amman Temple, with its rich taste in mythology and art, as well as an economic and spiritual heart, stands gloriously in the city of Madurai, Tamil Nadu. Its significance extends from the central shrines in Madurai to the entire region of south India and beyond.

2. Origin

Many sacred sites and structures in India have mythological origins, including the Meenakshi Amman Temple in the state of Tamil Nadu. According to one legend, more than 3500 years ago, Lord Indra built a small structure (tower) over a naturally formed rock structure (Also known as lingam) to show his devotion to God Shiva. (Shiva is also known as the god of destruction, and his other attributes include creation and virility.) Shiva is also regarded as the primary deity in the vast Hindu tradition/aggregation. Other gods quickly followed Indra's feat. When the gods were worshipping one day, a human witnessed it and immediately informed King Kulasekhara Pandya, who immediately built the temple there and people began to worship the site.

Another popular legend that continues to this day is that Lord Meenakshi emerged as a three-year-old girl from a sacred fire, also known as the "Yajna."

Malayadwaja Pandya, the King, attempted to have children who would rule his kingdom after he died as his heir.

However, the king was not blessed with any children who he could call his heir as well as the one who would lead the people of the place after him. In desperation, King Malayawja Pandya and his wife Kanchanamalai prayed to Lord Shiva, pleading with him to grant them a boy child. But, to their surprise, a three-year-old female child emerged from the sacred fire. What's incredible is that she was born with three breasts. When the King and Queen expressed their concern about the girl's unusual appearance, a divine voice instructed them not to be concerned. Instead of treating her as the King would treat a boy child, she assures the child that her third breast will disappear as soon as she meets her future husband. The relieved royal couple later named the child Meenakshi and crowned her as the heir in due course.

Meenakshi proved herself to be a fighter. She defeated armies, fought valiant battles, and ruled over Madurai, an ancient city. According to legend, she even captured Indralok, Lord Indra's great adobe. Lord Shiva confronted her when she attempted to attack Mount Kailasha to the north, deep in the Himalayas. Meenakshi's third breast vanished when she saw him, and she realised her prophecy had come true and she had met her better half.

Kumaraguruparar, a seventeenth-century Tamil poet and Shiva devotee, captures the moment in his poetry as follows: Your third breast vanished when you saw Shiva on the battlefield. You bowed shyly to him, surprised to see that you suddenly had two breasts.

Your heart was only filled with him. You felt shy as you looked at him sweetly with a nectar-like side glance.



Source image: Internet

Fig 1

Lord Shiva and Meenakshi returned to Madurai, where they married. This grand wedding was said to be attended by all the gods and goddesses. This ceremony is still celebrated every year as the "Chithirai Thiruvizah," also known as the Tiruklyanam (The grand wedding)

3. History

The legend dates back to the first century C.E., when Lord Shiva instructed King Kulashekarar Pandyan, who ruled the Pandyan dynasty in his dreams, to build the temple. The Meenakshi Amman temple is as old as the city itself, dating back to the first century C.E. Few religious texts from the first to fourth centuries C.E. mention the temple or describe the city's heart. In ancient times, the temple was a gathering place

for scholars to discuss important issues. The temple as it stands today, on the other hand, was rebuilt in the 16th century after being destroyed by Muslim and Mughal invaders.

The temple was put to the test between the 14th and 16th centuries C.E. Malik Kafur, commander of the Delhi sultanate, led his armies into most of south India and looted many famous temples, including the Meenakshi Amman Temple, with invaders from the 14th century C.E. The temples of the south were destroyed and left in ruins because they were laden with all gems and valuables such as gold, silver, and other rare earth metals. The same thing happened at the Meenakshi Amman Temple, where Malik Kafur looted the temple's valuables and later left it in ruins. Those numerous valuables were later transported to Delhi.

After defeating Ahsan Khan and his descendants, the Vijayanagar Empire led by Kumara Kampana took over Madurai. During that time, the temple was rebuilt and reopened. During the 16th and early 17th centuries, the temple was expanded further by Viswanatha Nayakar, King of the Nayakar dynasty. The Nayakar dynasty's rulers rebuilt the temple in the architectural style of the "Shilpa Shastras" (These are a set of ancient architectural laws found in the ancient texts.)

Thirumalai Nayak, who ruled Madurai from 1623 to 1655, expanded the temple once more. Many pillared halls (Mandapams) were built during his reign. Many Nayakar rulers expanded the temple again until it was destroyed by the British East India Company. Parts of the temple were later demolished after the arrival of the British East India Company. Restoration work on the temple resumed in 1959, with Tamil Hindus working alongside engineers and historians. They raised funds for this feat, and the temple was completely restored in 1995, and it still stands today.

4. Temple Architecture

The temple's earliest records date back to the 7th century C.E., but the majority of the temple that stands today was reconstructed during the 16th and 17th centuries by the Nayakar dynasty. Reconstruction entails expanding existing temple plans, erecting more pillars, reconfiguring layouts, and so on. The temple was rebuilt in accordance with Vastu Shastra's sacred tradition. The Hindu text Vastu Shastra prescribes the form, proportions, measurements, ground plan, and layout of architecture. When rebuilding the temple, the Nayakar dynasty followed these rules.

The temple covers 14 acres and occupies a large area in the heart of Madurai. The temple is surrounded by massive towering walls that were built during ancient times to shield and protect the temple from invaders and invasions. The entire structure when looked at from atop represents a mandala. A mandala is a structure constructed in accordance with symmetry laws.

A number of shrines are housed within the temple structure. The temple contains shrines to gods such as Ganesha and Murugan. It also has shrines for goddesses Lakshmi, Rukmini and Saraswati. Aside from these, the temple has two main shrines dedicated to Shiva (Also known as Sundareswarar or the attractive one) and Meenakshi.

The temple of Meenakshi Amman is a prime example of Dravidian architecture. This style of architecture is most common in southern India and can be found in many temples, palaces, and religious buildings. Tall entry gate towers, covered porches on temples, many pillared halls, and a water

tank for ritual and spiritual bathing are just a few of the features. The temple also has many places for worship as well as places where scholars and historians used to discuss important issues. The thousand pillar hall is one of the locations/halls. Despite the fact that there are only 985 pillars, the hall creates an impressive effect, with most of the pillars covered and intricately sculpted in high and low profiles depicting gods, demons, and divine entities. When it was first built, the site was used for religious processions, dancing, and musical performances for the King. It was also used to get an audience with the King. This hall now primarily serves as a museum, with exhibits of bronze sculptures, objects, and paintings from the temple's history.

5. The pond the golden lotus pond

The temple also has a pond known as Porthamarai Kulam. The term literally translates to "golden lotus pond." It is said that it was formed by a blow from Shiva's trident in order to appease some deities who were worshipping the sacred Lingum. It was one of the seven things that did not perish in the great flood. The pond is revered as a place of great sanctity. Another widely held belief is that the water in the pond is generated by the Ganges, which has been passing beneath the sea for ten thousand miles and reappears to keep the tank from drying out.



Source image: Internet

Fig 2

The golden lotus is said to be kept in the pond's centre. It is said that Lord Shiva blessed the pond and declared that no marine life will ever grow in it. The pond is thought to be an evaluator for determining the worth of Tamil folklore literature.

6. Significance and Worship

The Meenakshi Amman temple is the epitome of greatness, standing and towering tall until the present day, surviving many great invasions and battles. Because Meenakshi is the temple's main deity, the temple represents the importance of women in a Tamil Hindu family. The importance and friendly relationship between Shaktism, Shaivism, and Vaishnavism is also depicted here.

Lord Shiva, also known as the Sundareswarar shrine, is famous for having one of the five panch sabhas, which translates to one of the five courts where Lord Shiva is said

to have performed the cosmic dance.

One of the rituals involves placing sculpted figures of Meenakshi and Shiva in a swing and gently rocking them to simulate a gentle romantic period of time. Another ritual involves placing an image of Lord Shiva, which is then moved inside Meenakshi's shrine. Every night, it is returned to the shrine and presented to Lord Shiva in the morning. People and devotees worship Meenakshi before praying to Lord Shiva.

7. Gopurams

The gopurams, or entry gates into the temple, are one of the temple's most noticeable features. The term gopuram is derived from the Tamil words ko, which means "King," and Puram, which means "exterior" or "gateway." Another possibility is that the word was derived from the Sanskrit terms go, which means "cow," and puram, which means "town."

There are fourteen gopurams, each flanking either the temple of Meenakshi or the temple of Lord Shiva, or the walled compound. Another notable fact is that once a devotee enters the temple through any of the four gopurams leading into the temple, the devotee will be unable to exit through the same point of entry.



Source image: Internet

Fig 3

The compound grows in height as it moves further away from the complex's origin. This can be explained by the rulers later adding and increasing the height in the temple's outer sections to protect them from invaders and invasions as well as to prevent them. These structures were also commissioned to demonstrate to their era's rulers their subsequent wealth, power, and devotion.



Source image: Internet

Fig 4

The gopurams, which are covered in an intensity of brightly painted figures representing gods and demons, serve as a symbolic sacred space into which they are led. The temple has four entrance gopurams and fourteen towering gateways. Each gopuram is a multi-story complex containing mythological stories and various sculptures. The tallest gopuram stands about 170 feet tall and contains 1500 or more figures that are repaired and painted every 12 years. Some of the major gopurams are listed as: Kadaka Gopuram, Sundareshwarar Gopuram, Chitra Gopuram, Nadukkattu Gopuram, Mottai Gopuram, Nayaka Gopuram.

8. Festivals

Apart from the wedding ceremony (Thirukural) of Meenakshi and Lord Shiva (Sundaraweshwarar), the temple also celebrates a number of other festivals throughout the year. Some of them includes as: Vasantham Festival, Unjal Festival, Mulai-Kottu Festival, Arudha Dharshan Festival, Thai Utsavam, Kolattam Festival, Navarathri Festival, etc.



Source image: Internet

Fig 5

9. Conclusion

The Meenakshi Amman temple is a microcosm of the earthly and spiritual characteristics of the Hindu era in many ways. It is crowded with people from all walks of life. The temple discusses various periods in history as well as myths about its origin and true test in time. The paper discusses its origin, history, festivals, architecture, and many other topics. Through this, I have covered the parts that illuminate the Meenakshi Amman temple, shed light on its important parts, and given it a fresh look.

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