

# **MADURAI MEENAKSHI TEMPLE**

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. GENERAL

Meenakshi Amman Temple (Other names : Meenakshi Sundareswarar Temple or Tiru-aalavaai or Meenakshi Amman Kovil) is a historic Hindu temple located in the southern bank of river Vaigai in the temple city of Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India. It is dedicated to Parvati who is known as Meenakshi and her consort, Shiva, named here as Sundareswarar. The temple forms the heart and lifeline of the 2500 year old city of Madurai. The complex houses 14 gateway towers called gopurams, ranging from 45-50m in height, the tallest being the southern tower, 51.9 metres (170 ft) high, and two golden sculptured vimana, the shrine over sanctum of the main deities. The temple is a significant symbol for the Tamil people, and has been mentioned since antiquity in Tamil literature, though the present structure is built during 1623 to 1655 AD. The temple attracts 15,000 visitors a day, around 25,000 during Fridays and gets an annual revenue of sixty million ₹. There is an estimated 33,000 sculptures in the temple and it was in the list of top 30 nominees of the "New Seven Wonders of the World". The annual 10 day Meenakshi Tirukalyanam festival celebrated during April–May attracts 1 million visitors.



## **Fig 1.1 Meenakshi Amman Temple**

### **1.2. HISTORY**

The Meenakshi temple is believed to be founded by Indra (king of Devas, celestial deities) while he was on a pilgrimage to cure his misdeeds. He felt his burden taken off nearing the swayambu lingam (self formed lingam, a representation of Shiva used for worship in temples) of Madurai. He ascribed this miracle to the lingam and constructed the temple and enshrined the lingam there. Indra worshipped Shiva, who caused golden lotuses to appear in the near-by pool. Tamil literature speaks about the temple for the last couple of millennia. Thirugnanasambandar, the famous Hindu saint of Saiva philosophy, mentioned this temple as early as the 7th century, and described the deity as Aalavai Iraivan.

Kulasekara Pandian, the Grandfather of Queen Meenakshi constructed a small temple with a Lingam. Around 300 B.C Meenakshi reigned the Pandyan Kingdom, and ordered the massive construction of this Temple. The Temple was further expanded by the newer generations of Pandyan kings by clearing the forest of Cadamba trees (Kadambakaadu). The temple was partially destroyed by the Muslim Invader Malik Kafur in 1310 A.D. A restoration project was undertaken by first Nayak king of Madurai, Viswanatha Nayak (1559–1600) under the supervision of Ariyanatha Mudaliar, the prime minister of the Nayak Dynasty and the founder of the Poligar System. The original design by Vishwanatha Nayak in 1560 was substantially expanded to the current structure during the reign of Thirumalai Nayak (1623–55). He took considerable interest in erecting many complexes inside the temple. His major contributions are the Vasantha Mandapam for celebrating vasanthorsavam (spring festival) and Kilikoodu Mandapam (corridor of parrots). The corridors of the temple tank and Meenakshi Nayakar Mandapam were built by Rani Mangammal.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE TEMPLE

#### 2.1. ARCHITECTURE

The temple is the geographic and ritual center of the ancient city of Madurai and one of the largest temple complexes in Tamil Nadu. The temple complex is divided into a number of concentric quadrangular enclosures contained by high masonry walls. It is one of the few temples in Tamil Nadu to have four **gopurams** facing four directions **and five entrances**. Vishwantha Nayaka allegedly redesigned the city of Madurai in accordance with the principles laid down by Shilpa Shastras (Sanskrit: silpa sastra, also anglicized as silpa sastra meaning rules of architecture) relevant to urban planning. The city was laid out in the shape of square with a series of concentric streets culminating from the temple. These squares continue to retain their traditional names, Aadi, Chittirai, Avani-moola and Masi streets, corresponding to Tamil month names. Ancient Tamil classics mention that the temple was the center of the city and the streets happened to be radiating out like lotus and its petals. The temple prakarams (outer precincts of a temple) and streets accommodate an elaborate festival calendar in which dramatic processions circumambulate the shrines at varying distances from the centre. The vehicles used in processions are progressively more massive the further they travel from the centre. The complex is in around 45 acres (180,000 m<sup>2</sup>) and the temple is a massive structure which dates back to 2500 AD. The temple is known for its beautiful architecture and has 12 gateways (Gopurams), which are 45 to 50 metres in height. The tallest Gopuram of the temple is the southern Gopuram. This gateway is as high as nine storeys, with images of numerous gods and goddesses.

The temple comprises 985 pillars and 14 towers, with two towers dedicated to the main deities. The present structure of the temple has been built in 16th century by Nayak King of Madurai Vishwanatha Nayak. Tourists can also get a bird's eye view of the city from the southern Gopuram of the temple. Figure 2.1 shows an aerial view of Madurai city from a top of the Meenakshi Amman Temple.

The temple is designed based on the human body. There are 5 main entrances based on the human senses (see, hear, smell, taste and touch). There are 9 smaller entrances to the inside complex that denote the 9 orifices of the human body (2 eyes, 2 nostrils, 2 ears, mouth, urethra and anus). In Hindu culture, it is believed that the air travelling through these 9 entrances (orifices) was the soul itself. If the air stopped flowing, your soul would leave the body. The streets of Madurai are constructed as concentric circles, with the temple at the center. This is also thought of as a "Lotus Formation". The temple is one of the masterpieces of Dravidian architecture and many recent temples abroad were constructed based on this style. SivaSubramanya Temple in Fiji is such an example.



**Fig 2.1 An aerial view of Madurai city from a top of the Meenakshi Amman Temple.**

### **2.1.1. Gopurams**

The temple is surrounded by gopurams (gateway tower), - There are 5 outer towers ranging from 147 feet to 170 feet height. The tallest is the southern tower which is 170 ft (52 m) tall and was built in 1559. The oldest gopuram is the eastern one, built by Maravarman Sundara Pandyan during 1216-1238. There are 9 smaller towers inside the temple complex. All the towers have huge gateways at the bottom to allow visitors. Each gopuram is a multi-storeyed structure of hollow chambers inside for the priests and sculptors to do worships and reparations. The mid portion of the towers are decorated with stucco work of thousands of deities. Every twelve years, these figures are repaired, repainted and reconsecrated. The top level of the towers are adorned with fierce monster deities. These fierce figures are considered to guard and support the top level.. The outer gopuram presents steeply pyramidal tower encrusted with plastic figures, while the inner gopuram serves as the entrance to the inner enclosure of Sundareswarar shrine.

### 2.1.2. Shrines

The central shrine of Meenakshi Amman temple and her consort Sundareswarar are surrounded by three enclosures and each of these are protected by four minor towers at the four points of the compass, the outer tower growing larger and reaching higher to the corresponding inner one. The Meenakshi shrine has the emerald-hued black stone image of Meenakshi. The Sundareswarar shrine lies at the centre of the complex, suggesting that the ritual dominance of the goddess developed later. Both the Meenakshi and Sundareswarar shrines have gold plated Vimanam (tower over sanctum). The golden top can be seen from a great distance in the west through the apertures of two successive towers. The area covered by the shrine of Sundareswarar is exactly one fourth of the area of the temple and that of Meenakshi is one fourth that of Sundareswarar. Figure 2.2 shows the golden shrine over the sanctum of Meenakshi



**Fig 2.2 The golden shrine over the sanctum of Meenakshi**

The tall sculpture of Ganesh carved of single stone located outside the Sundareswarar shrine in the path from Meenashi shrine is called the Mukuruny Vinayakar. A large measure of rice measuring 3 kurini (a measure) is shaped into a big ball of sacrifice and hence the Ganesh is called Mukkurni Vinayagar (three kurinis). This deity is believed to be found during a 17th century excavation process to dig the Mariamman temple tank. Figure 2.3 shows the shrine of Mukkurni Vinayagar inside the temple



**Fig 2.3 The shrine of Mukkurni Vinayagar inside the temple**

### **2.1.3. Temple tank and surrounding portico**

The sacred temple tank Porthamarai Kulam ("Pond with the golden lotus"), is 165 ft (50 m) by 120 ft (37 m) in size. Figure 2.4 shows the Porthamarai Kulam. According to legend, Shiva promised a stork that no fish or other marine life would grow here and thus no marine animals are found in the lake. In the Tamil legends, the lake is supposed to judge the worth of a new piece of literature. Authors place their works here and the poorly written works are supposed to sink and the scholastic ones are supposed to float, Tirukkural by Tiruvalluvar was one such work.



## **Fig 2.4 The Porthamarai Kulam**

Only a fraction of 17th and 18th century paintings of Nayak period survives and one such portion is found in the small portico on the western side of the tank. It depicts the marriage of Sundareswarar and Meenkashi attended by Vijayaranga Chokkanatha and Rani Mangammal. The painting is executed on a vivid red background, with delicate black linework and large areas of white, green and ochre. The celestial couple is seated inside an architectural frame with a flowering tree in the background.

### **2.1.4. Halls**

The corridor surrounding the sanctum of Meenakshi is called kilikoondu Mandapam ("bird cage corridor"). The space was once used to keep green parrots that were trained to utter the name of Meenakshi. There are two large cages full of squawking green parrots.

The Kambatadi Mandapam ("Hall of temple tree") with its seated Nandi (sacred bull) has various manifestations of Shiva carved and also contains the famous "Marriage of Meenakshi" sculpture. Sculptures of Shiva and Kali trying to out-dance one another are pelted with balls of ghee by devotees. A golden flagstaff with 32 sections symbolizes the human backbone and is surrounded by various gods, including Durga and Siddar.

The Meenakshi Nayakkar Mandapam ("Hall of 100 pillars") has two rows of pillars carved with images of yali (mythological beast with body of lion and head of an elephant), commonly used as the symbol of Nayak power. It is situated to the north of Sundareswarar flag staff hall.



**Fig 2.5 Sculptures inside the temple**

The Puthu Mandapam ("new hall") constructed by Tirumala Nayak contains large number of sculptures. Figure 2.5 shows the sculptures inside the temple. It is situated opposite to the east gopuram.

The Ashta Shakthi Mandapam ("Hall of eight goddess") is the first hall in the entrance of Meenakshi shrine tower near to East Tower. Ashta indicates eight and Shakthi refers to goddess - the hall has statues of eight goddesses. The gopurams (towers) can be viewed from this hall. The passage was named for eight forms of goddess Sakthi carved on its pillars. Other sculptures and paintings depict the Tiruvilayadal (holy games of Shiva). The sculptures of heroes of Mahabharata, the Pancha pandavas can be seen in the Pancha Pandava Mandapam (Hall of Pandavas).

The Viravasantharaya Mandapam is a large hall with huge corridors. To the south of this hall is the kalyana mandapam, to the south of the pillared hall, is where the marriage of Shiva and Parvati is celebrated every year during the Chithirai Festival in mid-April. The golden images of Meenakshi and Sundareswarar are carried into the

16th century oonjal mandapam (swing corridor) and placed on the swing every Friday at 5:30 p.m. The shrine has a 3-storied gopuram guarded by two stern dwarapalakas (guardians) and supported by golden, rectangular columns that bear lotus markings. Along the perimeter of the chamber, granite panels of the divine couple are present. The hall is situated in the western bank of the temple tank.

The Mudali Pillai Mandapam or Iruttu Mandapam (Dark hall) is a wide and long hall built by Muthu Pillai during 1613. On the pillars of the halls, there are fine sculptures depicting the story of Shiva taking the form of Bikshadanar to teach the sages a lesson.

The Mangayarkarasi mandapam is a newly built hall situated opposite to the marriage halls and bears the name of saintly queen, Mangayarkarasi who contributed to Saivism and Tamil language. To the south of Mangayarkarasi mandapam lies the Servaikarar Mandapam, a hall built by Marudu brothers in 1795. The Nagara mandapam (Hall of beating drums) lies opposite to Sundareswarar shrine was built by Achaya Rayar, the minister of Rani Mangammal in 1635. The Kolu Mandapam is a hall for displaying dolls during the Navarathri festival celebrated during September–October. This hall is situated in the second corridor of the Meenakshi shrine at the western side.

### **2.1.5. Hall of Thousand Pillars**

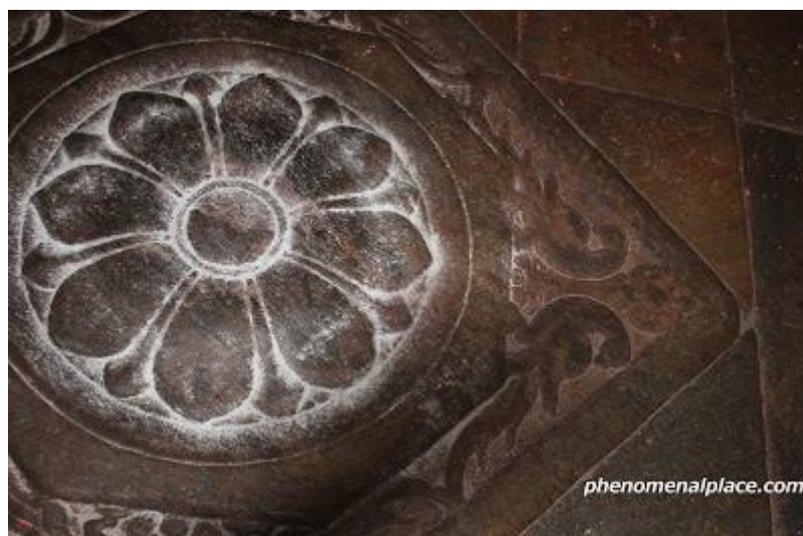
The "Aayiram Kaal Mandapam" or Thousand Pillar Hall contains 985 (instead of 1000) carved pillars. The hall was built by Ariyanatha Mudaliar in 1569 and it is a structure where the engineering skill and artistic vision are blended. Ariyanatha Mudaliar was the prime minister and general of Viswanatha Nayak, the first Nayaka of Madurai (1559–1600). He was also the founder of Poligar System, the quasi-feudal organization of the country, which was divided into multiple palayams or small provinces and each palayam was ruled by a palayakkarar or a petty chief. At the entrance of the hall the statue of Ariyanatha Mudaliar seated on a horse-back is present, which flanks one side of the entrance to the temple. The statue is periodically garlanded by worshippers. Each pillar in the hall is a carved monument of the Dravidian sculpture. The more prominent among the carved figures are those of Rati (wife of Kama), Karthikeya, Ganesha, Shiva as a wandering mendicant and endless

number of yalis (mythical figures of lions). There is a Temple Art Museum in the hall where icons, photographs, drawings, and other exhibits of the 1200 years old history of the temple is displayed. Just outside this hall, towards the west, are the Musical Pillars. Each pillar, when struck, produces a different musical note. Figure 2.6 shows a section of the Thousand Pillar Hall.



**Fig 2.6 A section of the Thousand Pillar Hall**

**Other interesting info:**



*Above: Hollow 'Lotus Rocks' found in Madurai Meenakshi Temple indicate underground passages*

**Underground Mystery:** The floor of the entire temple is covered by neatly cut rectangular rocks. These rocks are mostly plain, devoid of any carvings. If you tap on these rocks, it does NOT sound hollow. But, every certain number of rocks, there are square rocks with a lotus carved on them. If you tap on these "lotus rocks", they sound hollow! This supports the theory that there are hidden, underground structures in the Madurai Meenakshi Temple. These "lotus rocks" could be secret gateways into underground passages or cellars. It is well documented that most Indian Kings had secret escape

routes and hidden treasures underground.



*Above: "Rotating Lingam" is a painting on the ceiling, with optical illusion elements*

**The Rotating Lingam:** On the ceiling between the Meenakshi and Sundarar Sanctum, you can spot the rotating lingam painting. The painting is done in Trompe-l'œil style which depicts three dimensional objects on (2 dimensional) the ceiling. The Mayans had used the same style of painting in Mayapan. No matter which angle you see this lingam from, you will see that the spout at the base always points towards you. The painting was not recently done, but is centuries old. It is merely being repainted every 12 years to look new.



*Above: A Golden Lotus in the temple tank is now going to be buried in clay, due to renovations*

**Legend of the Temple Tank:** Indra had once committed a terrible sin, and had to do a major penance to redeem himself. He came to Madurai, and decided to worship lord Shiva by offering 1000 lotuses. He was able to pluck 999 lotuses from the lake, but he couldn't find one more lotus. Heart broken, Indra wept and prayed to lord Shiva. A golden lotus bloomed from the center of the pond and

Indra was able to redeem himself from his sin. That is why the temple tank is called Potramarai Kulam (Pon = Gold, Thamarai=Lotus).

## CHAPTER 3

### RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TEMPLE

#### 3.1. GENERAL

A distinct feature of Meenakshi in terms of iconography is the presence of parrot in her right hand. The parrot is generally associated with the Vaishnavaazhwar saint Andal. "Pancha Sabhai" refers to the five royal courts of Nataraja(dancing form of Shiva) where he performed cosmic dance. The Tamil word velli means silver and ambalam means stage or altar. This massive Nataraja sculpture is enclosed in a huge silver altar and hence called "Velli Ambalam" (silver abode). This is a special figure of Nataraja which usually differs from Chola bronzes; in the Chola images, Nataraja is shown dancing with his left leg raised, but this sculpture has the right leg raised. According to the Tiruvilayaadal Puranam (Shiva's sacred games), this is on the request of Rajasekara Pandya, who was a sincere devotee of Shiva. He requested the deity to change his position, as he felt that keeping the same foot raised would put enormous strain and got a graceful acquiescence from the divine master.

#### 3.2. RITUALS

##### 3.2.1. Worship

There are close to 50 priests in the temple who perform the pooja (rituals) during festivals and on a daily basis. Like other Shiva temples of Tamil Nadu, the priests belong to Shivaite to the Adishaivas, a Brahmin sub-caste. The priests live in a closed area north of the temple. The temple has a six time pooja calendar everyday, each comprising four rituals namely abhisheka (sacred bath), alangaram (decoration), neivethanam (food offering) and deepaaradana (waving of lamps) for both Meenakshi and Sundareswarar. The puja(worship) ceremonies are held amidst music with nagaswaram (pipe instrument) and tavil (percussion instrument), religious instructions in the Vedas by priests and prostration by worshippers in front of the temple mast. The common practise is to worship Meenakshi before Sundareswarar. Margazhi (December – January) ritual is prominent one for winning a perfect, god-like husband

- it is Meenakshi's ennai kappu festival. Aligned with the cardinal points, the street plans forms a giant mandala (group) whose sacred properties are believed to be activated during the mass clockwise circumambulations of the central temple.

### 3.2.2. Festivals

Festivals are held every month in the Temple of Madurai. Each Tamil month is adorned with a festival. The month of Chithirai is the grandest of them all, as Meenakshi-Sundarar wedding is celebrated at this time. Here is the list of all the festivals celebrated in Madurai Meenakshi Temple.

1. Float Festival – Thai month – January
2. Maasi Mandala utsavam – Masi month – February
3. Summer Vasantham Festival - Panguni month – March
4. Meenakshi Thirukalyanam Festival - Chithirai month - April
5. Vasantham Festival – Vaikasi month - May
6. Unjal Festival - Aani month - June
7. Aadi Mulai Kottu Festival - Aadi month – July
8. Aavani Moolam Festival – Puttukku Mansumantha Leela Festival – Aavani month - August
9. Navarathri Festival – Purattasi month – September
10. Kolattam Festival –Aippasi month – October
11. Kolattam Festival - Karthikai month – November
12. Thiruvathirai – Arudhra Dharsan Festival and Thiruvembavai and Thiruppavai Festival – Margali month – December

The most important festival associated with the temple is the "Meenakshi Thirukalyanam" (The divine marriage of Meenakshi) that is celebrated in April every year. The marriage of the divine couple is regarded as a classic instance of south Indian female -dominated marriage, an arrangement referred as "Madurai marriage". The male dominated marriage is called "Chidambaram marriage", referring to Shiva's uncontested dominance, ritual and mythic, at the famous Shiva temple of Chidambaram. The marriage brings together rural and urban people, deities and mortals, Saivas (those who worship Shiva) and Vaishnavas (those who worship Vishnu) in order to celebrate Meenakshi as the royal monarch. During the one month period, there are a number of events including the "Ther Thiruvizhah" (chariot festival) and "Theppa Thiruvizhah" (float festival). Major Hindu festivals like Navrathri and Shivrathri are celebrated in the temple. Like most Shakti temples in Tamil Nadu, the Fridays during the Tamil months of Aadi (July–August) and Thai (January - February) are celebrated in the temple by thousands of devotees.

"Avani Moola Utsavam" is a 10-day festival mainly devoted to Sundareswarar describes his various Thiruvilayadal meaning Shiva's sacred games).

### **3.3. LITERARY MENTION**

Down the centuries, the temple has been a centre of education of Tamil culture, literature, art, music and dance. All three assemblies of Tamil language, the Tamil Sangam (about the 3rd century BC to the 3rd century AD), were held at Madurai. Tamil poets of different epochs participated in these assemblies and their composition is called Sangam literature. During the third Tamil sangam, the comparative merit of the poets was decided by letting the works float in the lotus tank of the temple. It was believed that a divine force would cause the work of superior merit to float on the surface while the inferior literary work would sink. Tevaram, the 7<sup>th</sup> - 8<sup>th</sup> century Tamil canonical work on Shiva, are works by the three prominent Nayanars (Saivites) namely Appar, Sundarar and Thirugnanasambandar. The temple has been glorified by the hymns of Tevaram by all the three poets. Different hymns of Sambandar on the temple mention the queen of Pandya Nadu, his desire to defeat Jains in debate, the miracles performed by him curing the king's fever, the Jains' provocation of Sambandar by burning his house and challenging him to debate, and Sambandar's eventual victory over them.

There are few poets in Tamil history who sang about goddess Parvati. The notable among them is Kumaraguruparar, a 17<sup>th</sup> century Tamil poet, who composed Meenakshi Pillaitamil on Meenakshi of this temple. King Tirumalai Nayak's patronage of Kumaraguruparar has an important place in the history of pillaitamil (a genre of Tamil literature). Kumaraguruparar visited a lot of temples and when he visited this temple, he composed Meenakshi pillaitamil on Meenakshi. Legend has it that goddess appeared in the dreams of Nayak directing him to arrange the recital of Kumaraguruparar before a learned assembly. The king made elaborate arrangements for the event. Meenakshi impersonated herself in the form of a small girl and enjoyed the recital. As Kumaraguruparar was explaining the 61<sup>st</sup> verse, the goddess appreciated by garlanding the poet with a string of pearls and disappeared.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION

The Meenakshi Temple complex is literally a city - one of the largest of its kind in india and undoubtedly one of the oldest too. The temple grew with the contribution of each dynasty and victorious monarchs, into an enormous complex extending over an area of 6500 sq m. This is an interesting departure from the evolution of the temple from early times. Pillared halls here, -now become more and more elaborate with pillars showing donor couples, kings, queen, mythical animals with fantastic shapes and size. The paintings over these as well as over the pillars and ceiling are very colourful. It is a legendary, architectural and cultural heritage / national heritage to our nation. Also it is the most beautiful architectural monument and a vast concept of Dravidian architecture in India.

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