Meenakshi Amman Temple

View of the temple

Location in Tamil Nadu

Coordinates: 9°55′10″N 78°07′10″E / 9.91944°N 78.11944°E

Name

Other names: Meenakshi Sundareswarar Temple
Proper name: Tiru-alavai

Location

Country: India
State: Tamil Nadu
District: Madurai
Location: Madurai

Temple Details

Primary Deity: Meenakshi
Consort: Sundareswarar
Temple Tank: Potramarai Kulam
**Poets:** Sundarar, Appar, Manikkavacakar, Thirugnanasambandar

**Important festivals:** Chithirai Thiruvizha

**Architectural styles:** Dravidian architecture

**Website:** [1] http://www.maduraimeenakshi.org

**Meenakshi Sundareswarar Temple** or **Meenakshi Amman Temple** or **Tiru-alavai**[1][2] (IAST mīnākṣī Amman Kovil, Tamil: மீனாக்ஷி கோவில்) is a historic Hindu temple located in the south side of river Vaigai[3] in the temple city[4] of Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India. It is dedicated to Parvati who is known as Meenakshi and her consort, Shiva named here as Sundareswarar(beautiful deity). The temple forms the heart and lifeline of the 2500 year old city[5] of Madurai. The complex houses 14 gopurams(gateway towers) ranging from 45-50m in height, the tallest being the souther tower, 51.9 metres (170 ft) high,[6] and two golden sculptured vimana(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 A.D.[6][7][8] The temple attracts 15,000 visitors a day, around 25,000 during Fridays[9] and gets an annual revenue of sixty million INR. There is an estimated 33,000 sculptures in the temple[9] 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.

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### History

#### Legend

![Deity of Meenakshi in the temple](image-url)
Meenakshi (IAST: mīnākṣi, Tamil: பூம்பாளையில் லோகத்தில் உள்ள பௌத்த கோயில் மிகுதியானவர்) is an Avatar of the Hindu Goddess Parvati, the consort of Shiva. She is also one of the few Hindu female deities to have a major temple devoted to her. The name Minachchi (meaning fish-eyed) is derived from the words mina (meaning fish) and akṣi (meaning eyes). Meenakshi (the lady goddess) is the principal deity of the temple, but not Sundareswarar - this is unlike most Shiva temples in South India where Shiva is the principal deity.[4] According to Hindu legend, in order to answer the prayers of the second Pandya king Malayadwaja Pandya and his wife Kanchananalai, Goddess Parvati appeared out of the Holy Fire of the Putra Kameshti Yagna (sacrifice for childhood) performed by the king.[10] According to another legend, the goddess herself gave a boon to Kanchananalai in one of her previous births that she would have the privilege of mothering the goddess. This woman, who came out of the holy fire had three breasts. A voice from the heavens told the king not to worry and added that the third breast would vanish soon the girl meets her future husband.[11] The happy king named the girl as Tadaatagai[1] and being the heir to the throne, Tadaatagai was trained carefully in all the 64 sastras (fields of science). As the time came when Tadaatagai was to be coronated, she had to wage war on the three worlds across eight directions. After conquering Sathyaloka (Brahma's Abode), Vaikuntal (Sanskrit: श्रीवाइकुण्ठ, vaikuntha meaning Vishnu's Abode) and Amaramati (the abode of the Devas), she advanced to Kailasha (Shiva's Abode).[5] She very easily defeated the bhoota gana (IAST: Bhūtagana, meaning Shiva's army) and Nandi (the celestial bull of Shiva) and headed to attack and conquer Shiva. The moment she looked at Shiva, she was unable to fight and bowed her head down due to shyness; the third breast vanished immediately.[6][12] Tadaatagai realized that Shiva was her destined husband. She also realized that she was the incarnation of Goddess Parvati. Both Shiva and Tadaathaighai returned to Madurai and the king arranged the coronation ceremony of his daughter, followed by her marriage with Shiva.

Temple View
The marriage was supposed to be the biggest event on earth, with the whole earth gathering near Madurai. Vishnu, the brother of Meenakshi, prepared to travel from his holy abode at Vaikuntam to preside over the marriage. Due to a divine play, he was tricked by the Deva, Indra and delayed on the way. The marriage was presided over by a local god from Thirupparankundram Pavalakanivai Perumal, an incarnation of Vishnu. After the marriage, the pair ruled over Madurai for a long time and then assumed divine forms as Sundareswarar and Meenakshi who are presiding deities of the temple.[13] Following the tradition, every evening, before closing the temple, a ritual procession led by drummers and a brass ensemble carries the image of Sundareswarar to Meenakshi's bedroom to consummate the union, to be taken back to his day setting the next morning in dawn.[7] The marriage is celebrated annually as Chithirai Thiruvizha (Tamil: சித்திரை திருவிழா, meaning Chitirai festival) in Madurai. During the period of Nayakar rule in Madurai, the ruler Thirumalai Nayakar linked the Azhakar Thiruvizha (Tamil: அழகார் திருவிழா, meaning Azhagar festival) and the Meenakshi wedding ceremony.

The Temple

Inside the Temple
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 near 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.[15][16] 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. The temple was believed to be sacked by the infamous Muslim invader Malik Kafur in 1310 and all the ancient elements were destroyed.[17] The initiative to rebuild the structure was taken by first Nayak king of Madurai, Viswanatha Nayak (1559-1600 A.D.) under the supervision of Aryanatha Mudalai, the prime minister of the Nayak Dynasty and the founder of the Poligar System. The most valuable contributions was from king Thirumalai Nayak (1623-1659 A.D.). He took considerable interest in erecting many complexes inside the temple. His major contributions are the Vasanthorsavam (spring festival) and Kilikootu Mandapam (corridor of parrots). The corridors of the temple tank and Meenakshi Nayakar Mandapam were built by Rani Mangammal.

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 masonary walls. Designed in 1560 by Vishwanatha Nayak, the present temple was substantially built during the reign of Thirumalai Nayak (1623-55 A.D.). Vishwanatha Nayaka allegedly redesigned the city of Madurai in accordance with the principles laid down by Shilpa Shastras (Sanskrit: śilpa śāstra, 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.[8] 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 circumabulate the shrines at varying distances from the centre. The vehicles used in processions are progressively more massive the further they travel from the centre.[19] The complex is in around 45 acres (180,000 m²)[7] and the temple is a massive structure measuring 254 by 237 meters.

An aerial view of Madurai city from atop of Meenakshi Amman temple

Gopurams

The temple is surrounded by 12 [gopurams](gateway tower)[21] the tallest of which, the famous southern tower, rises to over 170 ft (52 m) and was built in 1559 A.D. The oldest gopuram is the eastern one, built by Maravarman Sundara Pandyan during 1216-1238 A.D.[20] Each gopuram is a multi-storeyed structure, covered with thousands of stone figures of animals, gods and demons painted in bright hues.[21] 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.[18]

Shrines

The golden shrine over the sanctum of Meenakshi

The shrine of Mukkurni

Vinayagar inside the temple

The central shrine of Meenakshi 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 [vigor] growing larger and reaching higher the corresponding inner one.[21] The Meenakshi shrine has the emerald-hued black stone image of Meenakshi providing captivating vision,[20] The corridor surrounding the sanctum of Meenakshi is called kilikottu Mandapam(parrot 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.[22] 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 shrine 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.[23] Kambatadi Mandapa[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.[20] Sculptures of Shiva and Kali trying to out-dance one another are pelleted with balls of ghee by devotees. On the left are two sculptures of Shiva killing the demon child. A golden flagstaff with 32 section symbolizes the human backbone and is surrounded by various gods, including Durga and Siddar. The inner chamber contains the image of Sundareswarar and an image of Nataraja. The Meenakshi Nayakkar Mandapa(also called hall of 100 pillars) has two rows of pillars carved with images of vall(technological beast with body of lion and head of an elephant), commonly used as the symbol of Nayak power.[22] The 7-foot tall sculpture of Ganesh carved of single stone lies outside the shrine is called the Mukuruny Vinayakar. A large measure of rice measuring 3 kurini( a measure) is shaped into a big ball of sacrifice[24] and hence the Ganesh is called Mukkurni Vinayagar(three kurinis).[20] This deity is believed to be found during a 17th century excavation process to dig the Mariamman temple tank.[22]

Porthamarai Kulam
The Porthamarai Kulam

Porthamarai Kulam (Pond with the golden lotus), the sacred pond inside the temple, is 165 ft (50 m) by 120 ft (37 m) in size. 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.[25] In the Tamil legends, the lake is supposed to be a judge for judging a worth of a new 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.[20] 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 Meenakshi 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.[26]

Halls inside the Temple

A section of the Thousand Pillar Hall

The Aayiram Kaal Mandapam or Thousand Pillar Hall contains 985[13](instead of 1000) carved pillars. [17] The Thousand Pillared Hall was built by Ariyanatha Mudaliar in 1569.[27] and it is a structure where the engineering skill and artistic vision are blended.[20] Ariyanatha Mudaliar was the prime minister and general of Viswanatha Nayak of the first Nayaka of Madurai (1559-1600 A.D.). 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.[28] 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.[27] 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 Cupid), Karthikeya, Ganesha, Shiva as a wandering mendicant and endless number of yalis (mythical figures of lions).[20] 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.[20] Just outside this hall, towards the west, are the Musical Pillars. Each pillar, when struck, produces a different musical note.[20]

Sculptures inside the temple

Puthu Mandapa (new hall) constructed by Tirumala Nayak contains large number of sculptures. [25] The kalyana mandapa, 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 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. [28] The passage was named for eight forms of goddess Sakthi carved on its pillars. Other sculptures and paintings depict the Tiriviayadu (holy games of Shiva).[25] The sculptures of heroes of Mahabaratha, the Pancha pandavas can be seen in the Pancha Pandava Mandapam (Hall of Pandavas).[29]

Viravasantharaya Mandapa is a large hall with huge corridors.[28] 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 (gateway tower) guarded by two stern dwarapalakas (images of watchmen in Hindu temple sanctums) and supported by golden, rectangular columns that bear lotus markings. Along the perimeter of the chamber, granite panels of the divine couple are present.[22] Mudali Pillai Mandapam or Iruttu Mandapam (Dark hall) is a 25 feet wide and 60 feet long hall built by Muthu Pillai during 1613 A.D. On the pillars of the halls, there are fine sculptures depicting the story of Shiva taking the form of Bikshadanar to teach sages. [30] Mangayarkarasi mandapam is a newly built hall that bears the name of saindy queen, Mangayarkarasi who contributed to Saivism and Tamil language.[31] To the south of Mangayarkarasi mandapam lies the Servai Karar Mandapam, a hall built by Marudu brothers in 1975.[32] Nagar mandapam (Hall of beating drums) lies opposite to Sundareswarar shrine was built by Achaya Rayar, the minister of Rani Mangammal in 1635.
A.D. 33: Kolu Mandapam is a hall for displaying dolls during the Navrathri festival celebrated during Sep-Oct.

**Pancha Sabhai**

Image of Nataraja

*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. The Five Dance Courts of Shiva in Tamil Nadu:

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**Worship**

There are close to 50 priests in the temple who perform the pooja (rituals) during festivals and on a daily basis. The temple has a six time pooja calendar everyday, each comprising four rituals namely *abhisheka* (bathing), *alangaram* (decoration), *neivethanam* (food offering) and *deepa aradanai* (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 (Dec-Jan) ritual is prominent one for winning a perfect, god-like husband is Meenakshi's *ennai kappu* festival. Aligned with the cardinal points, the street plans forms a giant *mandala* whose sacred properties are believed to be activated during the mass circumambulations of the central temple, always conducted in clockwise direction.

**Festivals**

Vishnu hands over his sister Meenakshi to Shiva

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 "Mudurai 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 that one month period, in which most Tamil Nadu temples celebrate their annual festivals, there are a number of events including the *Ther Thiruvizhadha* (chariot festival) and *Theppa Thiruvizhadha* (float festival). Major Hindu festivals like *Navratri* and *Shivratri* are celebrated in a grand manner. Like most Shakti temples in Tamil Nadu, the Fridays during the Tamil months of *Aadi* (July-Aug) 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).

**Literary Mention**
Image of Sundarar, Appar and Thirugnanasambandar in the temple tower

Down the centuries, the temple has been centre of academy of learning of Tamil culture, literature, art, music and dance. All three assemblies of Tamil language, the Tamil Sangam (about the 3rd century BCE to the 3rd century CE), were held at Madurai. Great Tamil poets of different epochs participated in these assemblies and their composition is called Sangam literature. During the third Tamil sangam, the comparative merits 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 7th-8th century Tamil compositions 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 miracle of 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 17th century Tamil poet who composed Meenakshi Pillaitamil on Meenakshi of this temple. In pillaitamil (a genre of Tamil literature) history, the king Tirumalai Nayak's most crucial act of patronage was his link with Kumaraguruparar. Kumaraguruparar visited lot of temples and when he visited this temple, he composed pillaitamil on Meenakshi. Legend has it that goddess appeared in the dreams of Nayakka directing him to arrange the recital of Kumaraguruparar before learned assembly. The king made elaborate arrangements for the event. Goddess was enjoying the recital and she impersonated in the form of a small girl. As Kumaraguruparar was explaining the 61st verse, the goddess appreciated by garlanding the poet with a string of pearls and disappeared.

Gallery

Wall Sculpture of Hanuman Swami at Madurai Temple

The East gopuram

The South gopuram

The South Gate
The West gopuram

The North Gopuram

One of the Temple entrances

Notes

1. V. Kanakasabhai 1904 Refer Appendix for mention, p. 13
2. Soundara Rajan 2001, p. 51
3. Editors of Time Out 2010, p. 194
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5. National Geographic 2008, p. 155
7. Brockman 2011, pp. 326-327
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15. Sehgal 1999, p. 554
16. Cotterell 2011, p. 190
17. Eraly 2008, p. 332
18. Selby 2008, p. 149
19. V.K. 2003, pp. 96-98
20. Anon, Thomas Higginbotham & Co 1991, p. 68
22. Anon, Thomas Higginbotham & Co 1991, p. 70
27. Saints, Goddesses and Kings By Susan Bayly
29. Ki(snip view) 1963, p. 93
31. Iyer 1987, p. 43
32. Awakened India, Volume 112, 2007, p. 76
33. Kumar 2001, p. 184
34. Smith 1996, pp. 10-48
References

Meenakshi Amman Temple (aka) Meenakshi Sundareswarar Temple, dedicated to Lord Shiva and His wife Goddess Parvati, lies on the south of Vaigai River in the city of Madurai. Madurai is also often referred to as the Athens of the East. The temple is the nerve center of this city and has been referred to in ancient Tamil literature and in several religious manuscripts spread through different eras. With a feature in the list of the ‘New Seven Wonders of the World’, this temple is visited by approximately 15,000 devotees per day.
Meenakshi Temple is open daily from dawn until 10 p.m., except for when it closes between 12.30 p.m. to 4 p.m. This is because Hindu scriptures specify that an abode of Lord Shiva must not remain open in the afternoon. It's best to visit the temple once in the morning and once in the evening (for the night ceremony). The Madurai Meenakshi Amman Temple is now under the administration of the HR and CE department of Tamil Nadu. Latest Events. Odhuvar Training classes. 25 Jul. Odhuvar Training classes will be conducted in this temple. For more details ‘Click here’ ‘Click Chithirai Festival AMST 2019. Meenakshi Temple (also referred to as Meenakshi Amman or Meenakshi-Sundareshwara Temple), is a historic Hindu temple located on the southern bank of the Vaigai River in the temple city of Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India. It is dedicated to Meenakshi, a form of Parvati, and her consort, Sundareshwar, a form of Shiva. The temple is at the center of the ancient temple city of Madurai mentioned in the Tamil Sangam literature, with the goddess temple mentioned in 6th century CE texts.