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The Features of Madurai Meenakshi Amman Temple - A Study

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Abstract

Madurai "Athens of South India" occupies a pride of place in the Indian subcontinent. Its age-old history, cultural resources, and strategic location are the responsible factors for its growth as a tourist center. In the domain of the Hindu religion, Madurai occupies a unique place. Its popular deity Goddess Meenakshi is very famous. Madurai is the second biggest city in Tamilnadu, and it is located on the banks of river Vaigai. It is situated between 7°57' and 11° 10' and north latitude and 77° 50' and 79° 85' east longitude. Madurai has many names like Kudal Manager, Nanmadakkudal, and Tiruvalavai. Madurai is a well-planned city, just like Mohenjodaro. Meenakshi Amman Temple is located at the heart of the city. The temple is surrounded by streets named after Tamil months Adi, Avani, and Masi. Most of Sri Meenakshi Temple was built between the 13th and 19th centuries. This paper "the features of Madurai Meenakshi Amman Temple" deals with the features and contribution of Thirumalai Nayak to the temple.

Keywords: Meenakshi Amman, Temple, Madurai, festivals, Thirumalainayak

Archaeological Evidence of Madurai

Alagarmalai inscription may be the early form of the word Madurai, in the present name of the city. Hence we came to understand the least 2300 years the city called the Madurai. Early stone age remains at Aviyur 12 miles south of Madurai, and middle, and later stone age remains were founded in Thidiyan, T. Kallupatti, and Bodi Nayakkanoor. Further, Neolithic finds were made by Bruce Foot at Vellankulam south of Madurai, and earthen tombs have been located near Kulasekarankottai in Nilakottai Taluka, Paravai, Thovariman, Dadampatti and Anuppanadi in Madurai Taluk and Sengulam in Thirumangalam Taluk.

Further megalithic urns are founded in almost all the places of Madurai. In 1887 Alexandar Rea had unearthed many earth ware Sarcophagi in Anuppanadi, Dadampatti, Paravai, and Tovariman. In 1887 Mr. Bartel, the Divisional Inspector of Police, discovered a large number of Jars and many earthen Vessels of Tovariman. Yet the unearthed archaeological remains have reflected the Madurai and its surrounding areas served as well known living place of humanity since the Eolithic age.

Meenakshi Amman Temple

According to the legend, Madurai was ruled by Malayadhwaja Pandya. His wife Kanchanamala was an ardent worshipper of Goddess Parvati. They had no children, so they performed a "Putira Mette Yaga." While they were doing "yoga," a young girl appeared in the yoga with three breasts. At that time, the king and queen heard a divine voice, which said that the third breast would disappear as soon as she saw her husband. The king and the queen named the child Thadadhagai. The king declared Thadadhagai as his successor. She reached Mount Kailash and defeated all generals of Lord Siva.

So Siva himself came to fight with the queen when she saw Lord Siva, her third breast disappeared, so she came to know that Siva was her husband and threw down the weapons. Lord Siva ruled the Pandya kingdom under the name Sundara Pandyan for some years. After he coronated his son Ukkirapandya (Murugan), he and his wife entered the temple and changed themselves into Sundareshwarar and Meenakshi.

Sculptures in Temple

The temple is now popularly called Meenakshi temple, but in the temple, records are mentioned as Meenakshi Sundaresvara temple, Madurai. The main deity of this temple from ancient times is Siva. Siva said to be in the company of Devi with beautiful eyes resembling fish, Ankayar Kanni Meenakshi. Such references to Siva being in the company of Uma, are innumerable and are only in the general nature.

Sakthi Images

In the great temple of Madurai, Sakthi images are found in considerable number and deserve mention. One significant aspect is the absence of Durga images prominently. The Kali images predominate, especially about the dancing form of Siva, often in urdhva tandava pose. As mentioned earlier, both the Vimanas of Lord Sundaresvara and Goddess Minakshi were built by Visvanatha Nayak in the middle of the 16th century. In the Vimana of the Goddess, the main devakoshtas carry Icca Sakthi, Kriya Sakthi, and Jnana Sakthi, all the three being shown standing, two-armed, holding a flower in the right arm and keeping the left in hanging position. It is also interesting to mention that the main image of Minakshi is also in standing form with two arms. There is a group of Saptamatas in this temple, which are the earliest sculptures to have survived. They are to be assigned to the 8th century A.D. and are the finest representations of Pandya art. The group is not complete. The sculptures are said to have been elsewhere and brought to the temple with in the living memory.

Sculpture

In front of the Kambattadi mandapa, in the Sundaresvara temple, Madurai, are four remarkable

sculptures that deserve special mention. They are over seven feet in height with multiple arms and are known for their powerful delineation. Two of them are now called Virabhadra images, one Agni Virabhadra, and the other Aghora Virabhadra. Of the other two, one represents Siva dancing the Madhava Pandava and the other Kali.

Dhvaja Sthamaba

There are various representations of Siva, shown around the dhvaja Chamba. These are intended to portray all the known iconographic forms of Siva under one roof. The sculptures though interesting from the iconographic point of view, lack artistic expressions and are generally dull except perhaps the Kalyanasundaram group. Flanking the entrance to the Sundaresvara shrine, are two interesting iconographic representations. On to the right of the entrance is Sadasivamurti with his consort, and the one of the left represents a Goddess now adored as Gayatri Devi.

Agni Virabhadra

This fine image of God is shown with a Jvalamakuta, and in the center is shown a prominent skull. The protruding teeth and prominent mustache, heighten the terrific nature of the scene. The kundalas in the ears are formed with coiling snakes. Behind the jatamakuta, a snake moves around. The Lord is eight-armed piercing with the sula, the dying Asura the right arms hold, Sula damaruka, sword, and a human figure, probably Kampala. The left arm carries kapala, shield, and bell, and the fourth left arm holds the handle of the Sula. Around the lower right arm is a serpent. Snakes are also seen as anklets. A garland of bell worn around the neck extends up to the knee. High heeled sandals are worn in the feet. The left foot are pressing the dying asura, whose neck is pierced by the Sula. Below this sculpture is shown eight Bhairavas on these four faces of the pillar.

Aghora Virabhadra

This sculpture standing close to the Agni Virabhadra wears Jatamakuta and is endowed with ten arms; the upper right arm draws the arrow. Other right arm hold para sus, Sula, damaruka, and a long-bladed sword, piercing the neck of the dying figure

below the feet. The left arms hold the bow, deer, a small ring in the pointed finger, Ankush, and shield. The shield is highly ornate and bears a figure of Virabhadra; high sandals are worn on the feet. A two-armed figure wearing a crown and carrying sword and shield is falling dead, pierced by the sword.

Urdhva Tandava

The Urdhva Tandava Siva of this group is an imposing sculpture, with ten arms. The following emblems are seen in the right arms damaruka, para sus, arrow, sword, and Sula. The left-arm holds fire, deer, bow, shield, and bell. The lifted right leg reaches the face band. The left leg is planted on the back of the dwarf, musalaka, who holds a sword and shield. To the left of Siva is shown Nandi seated, with bovine head and four arms. The upper right arms are held above the head in Anjali, and the lower ones are playing on kudamuza. To the right of Siva is shown the skeletal figure of Karaikkal pay the woman saint playing cymbals.

Immediately below is shown Narada. On the left face of the pillar is Vishnu, four-armed, playing on a drum called Idakkai. To his left is shown a bearded sage. On the right face of the pillar is shown the four-headed Brahma, playing cymbals.

Bhadra Kali

This Kali is greatly venerated by the local people. She has urdhvakesa, and is eight-armed, holding prayogasula, in the right arm. The emblem in the second right arm is broken. The third arm holds a weapon made of flowers. The Devi has placed her left leg on the lifted palm of a game. On the left face of the pillar, is a human figure, playing a mandala. On the right face of the pillar is Kuli, holding sword and shield.

The representation Pudumandapa-Dancing Siva

The representation of Urdhva Tandava Siva and Kali, have assumed great significance during the Nayak period. A somewhat similar representation is now to be seen in the Pudumandapa, erected in the 17th century by Thirumalai Nayak. At the western end of the mandapa are the sculptures of Urdhva Tandava Siva and Kali. Siva with his leg lifted above the facial band is shown with ten arms; holds

damaruka, para sus, sword, Sula and Abhaya mudra in the right arms; fire, deer, shield, vrshadvaja, and gajahasta in the left arms. The verse, held on a long shaft, is reminiscent of the dancing Siva found in the Thirupparankunram, assignable to 8th century A.D. Below the planted leg is the dwarf holding a snake. To the right of the feet of Siva is Karaikkal ammai, and to the left is a four-armed figure playing kudamuza. Unlike the figure described in the previous Urdhva Tandava form, where Nandi with a bovine head is shown playing kudamuza, here the figure is shown with a human face. Nandita is shown playing mandala below. He is four-armed, holding deer and ax in the upper arms and playing maddala with the lower arms. On either side are shown Ganas playing conch.

On the right face of the pillar is shown Vishnu, four-armed, wielding chakra, sankha, the drum Idakkai and beating stick. Below Vishnu is shown Tumburu and Narada, carrying Vinas. Behind them is shown the ruler Thirumalai Nayak standing in adoration with his consort. On the left face of I In-rock is the four-armed Brahma, with akshamala and kamandalu in the upper arms, and playing. Mughals with the lower arms. Below Brahma is shown sages in Anjali pose. Behind Brahma are in two portraits of women among whom the first has manly head-dress and lower garment.

Kali

Facing Siva on the other side is shown Kali, with urdhvakesa, she has eight arms. In the right arms are prayogasula, arrow, cakra, and sword. While in the left are bow, pasa, shield, and kapala, A female attendant supports the left leg of the Devi. Further below are shown another female attendant holding Sula and Agni. On the left face of the pillar is shown a female playing maddala, and on the right face is a big Kuli carrying sword and shield. A female figure is shown offering incense.

Bhairavi

The mandapa before the asthma Sakti mandapa carries sculptures, one representing Bhairavi and the other a Kirata. The Bhairavi is on the southern side. She is two-armed, holding Sula in the right arm and kapala in the left arm. The hair is tied as a

knot to the side. Vibhuti is seen on the forehead. A point of interest is the presence of five hooded Cobra over the head of the Goddess. This is an important iconographic feature. In later temples, which are now worshipped as Man Amman, Mundakanni Amman, Ankalamman, or Pachaiyamman, we find in variably the presence of the five hooded cobras. What is the meaning of this association? While discussing Takkayagapparani, we have mentioned that Kali is endowed with many aspects of Vishnu, and one such association is Vishnu's serpent Ananta, acting as the seat of the Devi. A Chola sculpture now preserved in the Siva temple at Thirukkattupalli shows the Devi seated under a single hooded cobra. The sculpture is assignable to 10th century A.D. We have also shown the association serpents legend with Devi, mentioned in Periyapuranam, a 12th-century work.

Festivals of Temple

No month passes without festivals in Madurai Meenakshi Temple, an important one being Chithirai Festival. It may be regarded as the second biggest festival in India, next to Prayag Maha Mela. The present system of the festival marks its beginning during Tirumalai Nayak's period. The most auspicious part of the festival is the wedding of Goddess Meenakshi with Sundareswarar (Siva) and the Algar's journey from Alagar Koil to Madurai. It attracts several millions of people to Madurai every year in the month of Chithirai. Many of them got an opportunity to meet and mingle together, exchange their views freely and frankly, and enrich each other's cultural ethos. It enables them to develop mutual understanding and broaden their friendship and relationship.

Contribution of Thirumalai Nayak

Madurai has rightly named as "Festival City" the credit goes to Thirumalai Nayak the great Nayak ruler festivals are:

Chitra Festival

The history of the Chithirai festival can be trace back to the period of Thirumalai Nayak. He first organized this festival in commemoration of his coronation. Meenakshi's Pattabhishekam: On the eighth day of the criteria festival, they

celebrated Pattabhishekam of Goddess Meenakshi. Vasanthotsavam: During the months of Chithirai and Vaikasi (April-June), most of the temples dedicated to Lord Siva celebrate the Vasantotsavam. This celebration takes place in every temple in a specially appointed place called the Vasantha mandapam. In the more famous temples, Vasantha mandapam is an integral part of the general lay-out known as 'Thirumalai's Choultry.' Thirumalai built this Mandapa for the reception of the presiding deity of the place. Navaratri Festival: During the time of Thirumalai Nayak, it was celebrated grandly in Madurai. Float Festival: Thirumalai Nayak, dug up a teppakkulam (tank) at Vandiyur and initiated a float festival to synchronize with his natal star Pusa in the month of Thai

Conclusion

Meenakshi temple, which spreads the fragrance of Bliss, shines not only as a temple for grace but also as a repository for artistic beauties. The sculptures that adorn the gopuras, vimanas, the stucco images, of the pillars and walls are a feast to the eyes. The paintings found in this temple are of superb caliber and possess artistic excellence. By these above-mentioned statements, one can make an assessment that Meenakshi temple has contributed a lot to the development of tourism in India.

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