

Contributions of the Pandyas to the Meenakshi Sundareswarar Temple, Madurai

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Abstract

The MeenakshiSundareswarar temple is a treasure house of art. This temple is the abode of Lord Sunareswarar and his divine consort Goddess Meenakshi. It attracts around ten to fifteen thousand visitors a day and it was in the list of top 30 nominees of the ‘New seven wonders of the world’. The origin of the temple goes back to the Pandya king KulasekaraPandya. Most part of the temple which was built by the Pandyaswas destroyed by the Muslim invasion except the inner most sanctums of the Lord Sundareswarar and Goddess Meenakshi and the present temple was contributed by the Nayak rulers of Madurai.

Key Words: Meenakshi Sundareswarar temple, vimanas, prakaras, gopuras, mandapas, Thirupanimalai, ThirupaniVivaram and Srithalam

Introduction

The MeenakshiSundareswarar temple is a vast complexcontaining 12 *gopuras*, two *vimanas*, a beautiful tank, numerous *mandapas* with fine pillars and an abundance of fine sculptures in stone and in mortars. Essentially it contains the two important shrines of Lord Sundareswarar and of Goddess Meenakshi. Of these the Sundareswarar shrine is the older, going back to the legendary times. The Meenakshi temple adjoins the Sundareswarar temple and stands to the south of the Sundareswarar shrine. The sanctum of the Sundareswarar shrine is a square structure, the exterior walls measuring 33 feet on all four sides. The Meenakshi shrine and its *prakarams*are smaller than those of the Sundareswarar shrine. The sanctum sanctorum is almost a square measuring about 25 feet each side with the *ardhamandapam* on its front. The architectural features of the Meenakshi sanctum seem to indicate that it may belong to the first half of the Vijayanagar period about the 15th century.¹

Apart from the towers and two *vimanas* there are numerous smaller shrines to other deities. Many *prakaras*, *gopuras*, *mandapas*, corridors, doors and staircases were added along with sumptuous grants, offerings endowments etc. by the rulers. Even a casual visitor is fascinated by the many paintings and sculptures in this shrine. The ceilings are decorated with large paintings showing saivite and Vaishnavite themes. There is a beautiful painting of the marriage of Sudareshwarar with Goddess Meenakshi.

The temple is located in an area of approximately 14 acres and the outer walls of the temple form a rectangle, 847 feet by 792 feet.² Immediately within the wall are the *Adi* streets and running around the temple just outside the wall are the *Chithiraist* streets. Outside the *Chithiraist* streets are the *AvaniMula* streets and then the *Masist* streets, which enclosed most of the built-up area of the city until at least the mid-eighteenth century. The outer most *Velist* streets run alongside the line of the old city's fortified walls, which were demolished in the early nineteenth century by the British. Hence the basic grid of the city, which is still clearly apparent, is defined by a set of concentric squares around the great temple at the centre, whose axis of orientation lies almost east – west. The geometry of this scheme is further emphasized by the streets aligned with the four principal *gopuras* of the temple. The lofty elegant towers of these gate ways structure punctuate the urban skyline, dominating the life of the city.

Objectives

The main objectives of the study is

To find out the origin of the MeenakshiSundareswarartemple

To trace the Pandyasinscriptional evidences of the temple

To analyze the contributions of the Pandyas to the temple

To study the later developments of the temple

Evolution of the Madurai temple under the Pandyas

The origin of the temple is traced in *Thiruvilayadalpuranas*, both in Sanskrit and Tamil. What we do gather from these puranas is that there was at first a Siva Lingam under a Kadamba

tree in a forest of Kadambavanam. The earliest worshipper of this Lingam on record was Indiran who built the sanctum sanctorum and a *vimana* above it. Dhananjayan, a merchant came across this temple and informed to Kulasekarapandyan, the ruler of Manavur. Kulasekaran cleared the forest around the temple and built a city which was named as Madurapuri.

The Meenakshi Temple which is in the style of Dravidian architecture was not built in a day.³ The early temples are said to be made of perishable materials like bamboo or wood.⁴ Since stone was not used for temple building until the reign of Pallavas, it may be assumed that the temple was made of wood at first and subsequently it might have been made of burnt brick.⁵ They were simple and single-celled structure with a small verandah like *mandapa* in the front. The small shrines in times were expanded by the additions of *praharas* enclosed in concentric rings of larger walls. Gateways developed into monumental rectangular pyramids with hundreds of feet of brick super structures called *gopuras* and their outer surface covered up by stucco figures of Gods and other religious minor deities.

Early Period

While the temple originated in times to which no date can be assigned, the greater part of the temple with the exception of the innermost shrines of Meenakshi and Sundareswarar is believed to have been built between the twelfth and eighteenth centuries.⁶ The massive outer walls of the temple form a rectangle, covering an area of about 14 acres. There is little doubt that the temple stands on the same site as it did in the earliest Pandya times.⁷ It is said that it took 120 years to complete the temple. The temple is carved with plaster figures alone number over 33 million. The total cost of construction is about 12 million rupees.⁸

The earliest literary reference to the Meenakshi temple occurs in the Maduraikkanchi⁹, a sangam work written by Mankudi Marutanar, dated to 1-2 century A.D. In the 7th century A.D ThiruGnanasambandar, who visited the Madurai temple, sang many hymns in praise of Lord Shiva as *Alavai Iraivan* and *ThiruAlavai Chokkanand* His consort as *Ankayarkanni* and the temple wall was referred as '*Kapali Madil*'. The present inner walls of the Lord's Shrine bear this name today. Gnanasambar visited the temple during the time of Maravarman Arikesari (640 – 670

AD).¹⁰ The temple in the 7th Century AD was a single celled santum with shrine of *Alavai Iraivan* and a compound wall. In the early times the entire temple must have been confined to the area between these walls. Kumara Kurubarar also mentions the God as *Alavai Annal* and the Goddess as *Angayar Kanniammai*.¹¹

ParipadalThirattu, another literary work compares the Madurai city to a lotus flower. It depicts the temple as the central part of a lotus flower (nucleus), its petals as streets, pollens as the citizens.¹² Kalladam, a 9th Century AD literature also refers to the temple as well as the thirty *Leelas* (divine sports) of Lord Shiva.¹³ This work is said to have been a translation of a Sanskrit work namely '*Sarasa Machchaya*'.¹⁴

Twelfth Century

Thirupanimalai, *ThirupaniVivaram* and *Srithalam* give a detailed account of the kings and devotees who carried out the works in different parts of the temple in different periods. The second Pandyan kings ruled Madurai from 1190 to 1313 AD.¹⁵ Pandya king JatavarmanKulasekara¹⁶ (1190-1216 AD) built a great temple for Lord Shiva, a *Suyambulingam*, once worshipped by Indra, king of God.¹⁷ The earliest buildings in the temple which exist to this date, including a three storied *gopura* at the entrance of Lord Sundareswarar Shrine and the central portion of the Goddess Meenakshi Shrine were constructed by KulasekaraPandya. He is also said to have built temples to guardian deities to the North, South, East and West of the city. These were the *Ayyanarkoil* (temple) in the East, *VinayagarKoil* in the South, *KariamalperumalKoil* in the West and *Kali Koil* in the North. He also erected the parivara deities like Surya, the shrine of Natarajar and Sandeswara and a *Mahamandapam*. KulasekaraPandya was also a poet and he composed a poem on Meenakshi named *AmbikaiMalai*.¹⁸ Towards the later part of his reign (1205 A. D.) KulasekaraPandya was defeated by Kulothunga III¹⁹ who then performed *Virabhishekam* and *Vijayabhishekam* in Madurai city.²⁰

Thirteenth Century

The next builder to leave an indelible impression on the Madurai temple was the great monarch MaravarmanSundaraPandyan²¹. He ascended the throne in 1216 AD.²² He defeated

Kulotunga III, the Cola ruler in 1219 AD.²³ In his 15th year of rule he constructed a *gopura* in the name of *Avanivendaraman*²⁴ and that *gopura* is named as *SundaraPandyaThirukkopuram*.²⁵ This was the earliest of the *gopuras* constructed in the Madurai temple.²⁶ The *gopura* was started by MaravarmanSundaraPandyan I and completed by JatavarmanSundaraPandyan (1251-1268AD). In the temple MaravarmanSundaraPandyan II (1238-51AD) enlarged the *Swami Koil*(god's shrine) by adding the outer corridor around which he built the wall now known as the '*SundaraMaranMathil*'. He built the other walls of the Amman temple and built the *SannadhiMandapam* known as *SundaraPandyanMandapam*. He also built a seven tiered *gopura* (Chitragopuram), a *mandapa* for *AtiraveesiAaduvar*²⁷ and completely renovated the temple. *Chitragopuram* is the only seven tiered *gopura* in the temple. It is also known as '*MuttalakkumVayil*'. A three tiered *gopura* in the Amman Shrine, (on the way to Amman shrine from KilikuttuMandapam) was constructed by VembaturarAnandaThandavaNambi in 1227AD. So it is also called as '*VembathurarGopuram*'.²⁸ He was a descendant of PerumbatraPuliyurNambi who wrote the *ThiruvallavayudayarThiruvilayadalPuranam*. The work mentioned above was released in the court of Varathunga Rama Pandyan in Karivalamvanthanallur. The king gave the author many gifts including the area in which he lived which was known as Selli Nadu. They were thus a wealthy family. The building of the *VembathurarGopuram* is ascribed by some to AnandaThandavaNambi, and by others to his wife.

Fourteenth Century

During the fourteenth Century the *MelaiGopuram*²⁹ (Western Tower) in *AdiStreet* was constructed by ParakramaPandya (1323AD).³⁰ The five tiered eastern tower at Lord Sundareswarar Shrine was built by Vasuvappan in 1372AD.³¹ The five tiered western tower of the Shrine is said to have been built by one Mallappan in 1374 AD.³²

The old temple was destroyed in 1311AD during the Malik Kafur's invasion. The outer wall with 14 towers was pulled down and the temple was closed for forty eight years.³³ Only the two shrines of Lord Sundareswarar and Goddess Meenakshi survived, but the buildings which immediately surrounded them were collapsed along with arts and sculptures.³⁴ After the fall of Madurai Sultanate in 1365 AD to Kumara KampanaUdayar, the Vijayanagar King, most parts of

TamilNadu came under Kumara Kampana in 1366 AD.³⁵ Then he came with a large army to Madurai in 1372 AD and defeated Ala-ud-din Sikkandar Shah and captured Madurai and annexed it as a part of Vijayanagar Empire. His aim was not only to annex the Southern parts with the empire but also to renovate the temples at Srirangam, Chidambaram, Kannanur and Madurai which were destroyed by the Muslim invasion. He made arrangements for the regular pujas in these temple³⁶ and people were allowed to worship. In view of the fact that the city was under Muslim rule until 1373, when Kumara kampana drove away the invaders, it is difficult to conceive of this having been built on the date assigned. However it is generally agreed that architecturally it belongs to this period. It is therefore quite possible that it was built soon after Kampana's victory over the Muslims.³⁷ According to *Thirupanimalai* Kampana rebuilt the compound wall, brought back the idols, which were hidden in Nanjil Nadu during the Muslim invasion and donated jewels. He also gave some villages for performing the daily pujas in the temple. '*Mathura Vijayam*' written by his wife Gangadevi mentions about the invasion of his husband to Madurai.

Inscription of the Pandyas

The rulers of Later Pandyas mentioned in the inscriptions are SadayavarmanKulasekaraPandya I (1190 – 1216AD) MaravarmanSundaraPandya I (1216-1244 AD), MaravarmanSundaraPandya II (1238-1255AD), MaravarmanVikramaPandya II (1250-1276AD) KulasekaraPandya I (1268-1318 AD) SadyavarmanVeeraPandya III (1315-1334AD) and ParakramaPandya (1323AD). Among the Pandya's inscriptions, the inscriptions of MaravarmanSundaraPandya II are found more in the temple. This shows that he contributed more for the growth of the Madurai temple.

Conclusion

The renowned temple of Lord Sundareswarar and Goddess Meenakshi form the nucleus of the Madurai city and a great source of attraction to every tourist who visits South India over the centuries. The most part of the present temple was built between 1200 and 1800 AD. The gopuras are monumental entrance to the temple. It was one of the main contributions of the

Pandyas The main shrine, its *Vimanaor Sikhara* were left untouched but pylon- like entrance was introduced into the temple scheme in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries of Pandyasupremacy.The Pandyas constructed the temple and the Nayaks of Madurai enriched it to the present position.The temple was renovated then and there and protected from damages. Earlier the Pandyas and Nayak rulers renovated the *gopuras* and *mandapas*which were in dilapidated condition.The recent renovation work was started from 2007 and the *Ashtabandana*and *SwarnabandanaKumbhabishekam* was performed on 08.04.2009.MeenakshiSundareswarar temple shines as a precious diamond in the crown of the city of Madurai.

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