

## THE SRI MINAKSI SUNDARESVARA TEMPLE

The Sri Minaksi Sundaresvara temple of Madurai is one of the most beautiful examples of Hindu architecture. This temple is dedicated to the god Siva and the goddess Minaksi, and was built to honour their sacred marriage.

Madurai is a city situated on the banks of the Vaigai River in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. Madurai's skyline is principally characterized by the Sri Minaksi Sundaresvara Temple's four major *gopurams* (entry towers), since "Madurai Municipal code forbids construction of any building higher than the four temple towers" (Harman 101).

The Minaksi Temple has twelve *gopurams* in all, four of which are main entrance points into the temple. The four outer *gopurams* are placed in the cardinal directions and act as portals into the sacred building. The tower portion of a *gopuram* is built in pyramid like fashion that stretches nine stories high. Each tower is elaborately decorated with carved stucco images and figures of *suras* (deities).

At the peak of each *gopuram* there are four Kirttimukha figures, which are statues carved in the shape of lion-headed demons. The Kirttimukha figure acts as the temple's spiritual guardian (Kollar 15). The relationship between the Kirttimukha and Siva, and consequently the reason for the Kirttimukha's instalment as the temple's guard, is revealed in the following myth as told in L. Peter Kollar's book, *Symbolism in Hindu Architecture*. A great titan named Jalandhara had accumulated great power (15). He sent a messenger-demon, Rahu, to challenge Siva to give up his "shining jewel of a bride" to Jalandhara (15). Siva, in his fury, emanated an energetic burst from his spiritual eye, which instantly formed into a demon with the head of a lion (15). In terror, Rahu took refuge in Siva, who told the demon to desist (15). Since the lion-headed demon had an irrepressible hunger, Siva sentenced it to eat its own flesh (15). The demon

eventually ate every part of his body except his face (15). Siva “declared [to the creature]: ‘You shall be known, henceforth as Face of Glory (Kirttimukha) and I ordain that you shall abide forever at my door. Whosoever neglects to worship you shall never win my grace’ ” (15).

Hindu temples are constructed with the intention that visitors will circle through the inside in a spiral and eventually make their way to the inner sanctum (*garbha-grha*). Circulating through the temple prepares one mentally and spiritually for worship (*puja*) in the *garbha-grha*. Circulating through the temple towards the *garbha-grha* represents a journey to the “primordial womb, [and] to the primordial substance, *Prakrti*” (Kollar 67).

Therefore, in the Minaksi temple, after demonstrating ones respect for the Kirttimukha, and entering from the east *gopuram*, one encounters the Thousand Pillar Mandapam (a pillared hallway). This hallway has 985 richly chiselled pillars that display the *suras* that are part of the Saivite family. Some examples of *suras* found in the Thousand Pillar Mandapam, and the temple’s six other *mandapams*, are a great statue of Ganesa and Nandi, Siva’s bull mount (*vahana*).

After circling the inside of the temple, and absorbing the atmosphere and the artistry of the sacred building, one is ready to enter the *garbha-grha*. The *garbha-grha* is the essence of the temple, and the abode of the god of the temple’s designation. There are two *garbha-grhas* in the Sri Minaksi Sundaresvara Temple, one dedicated to Minaksi (the fish eyed goddess), and another dedicated to Siva, who is in the form of Lord Sundaresvara. Each of these sacred rooms is covered by gold roofing in pyramidal form; these golden pyramids symbolize Mount Kailasa, the mythical abode of Siva (Kramrisch 161). The interior of the *garbha-grha* has four plain walls; the only light that enters these chambers is through the entrance in the front wall (Kramrisch 162). The entrance to both Lord Sundaresvara and Sri Minaksi’s *garbha-grhas* face east, which

indicates orthodoxy. Although it is usually dark, oil lamps are often used during ritual worship (*puja*). Inside these four plain walls stands a *linga-yoni*; this statue is the phallic and vulval symbol of Siva and his consort. It represents the erotic half of Siva's bipolar character, creation, and Prakrti (the primordial substance).

The temple was constructed to honour the sacred marriage of Sri Minaksi and Lord Sundaresvara (Siva). Siva's appearance, marriage, and exploits in Madurai are "narrated in a document entitled *Tiruvilaiyatarpuranam*" (The Story of The Sacred Games) (Harman 21). In his book, *The Sacred Marriage of a Hindu Goddess*, William Harman writes that the *Tiruvilaiyatarpuranam* describes that Malayadhvaja Pandya, the king of Madurai, has no sons and fathered only a daughter with three breasts (45). The distraught king receives orders from Siva to name his daughter Tatatakai, and to raise her as if she were a son (45). Siva also tells the king that when the woman meets her Lord, her third breast will disappear (45). After her coronation and the death of her father, Tatatakai rules as an unmarried queen, and attempts to conquer as much territory as possible (47). Her army is so impressive that even Indra fled at the sight of it in battle (47). Her army receives no resistance until an attempt to conquer Mount Kailasa goes awry at the appearance of Siva (47). When Tatatakai sees Siva for the first time her third breast disappears and she becomes bashful and passive (47). Her prophecy has come true, and she falls in love with the deity.

Siva orders her to return to Madurai, and await him there to be married; he arrives later with Brahma on his left side, and Visnu on his right. As Tatatakai's father is dead, Visnu acts as the father of the bride during his absence (48). "Siva, who rules all the worlds, who is supreme among the thousands of deities, takes his place on the throne [...] in the town of Madurai" (48).

The marriage changes the city, the Pandya Dynasty, Siva and Tatatakai; yet, “[h]er transformation is the most dramatic” (49). Her third breast disappears and she is deified as Minaksi, the fish eyed goddess (49). Her epithet of the fish eyed goddess is unflattering in western standards yet it is “complimentary in the Indian context: large, unblinking eyes with dark pupils are considered a mark of human beauty” (24).

On a superficial level, it appears that Siva possesses a more important role in Madurai than Minaksi, as his shrine in the Sri Minaksi Sundaresvara temple is larger than Minaksi’s and is located closer to the centre of the temple (23). However, it is important to note, “devotees concentrate their worship on the Goddess” (23). Her shrine is visited before Siva’s; “[i]n a strict sense, the Goddess is closer to the people” (23). “She represents qualities of nurturance, compassion, mercy, affection, and accessibility” (24). She is referred to as Mother, while Siva is addressed in less compassionate terms, as Lord (24). Another example of how Siva is subordinate to Minaksi in Madurai is in the designation of the festivals. There are twelve major parts of the annual Wedding Festival in the city; four of them are exclusively dedicated to Minaksi, while Siva enjoys no such exclusive honour (66).

The Citra Festival is the main annual celebration of Sundaresvara and Minaksi’s marriage. It is titled the Citra Festival because it takes place during Citra, a month which begins in mid-April and ends in mid-May in the Western calendar (64). The three main events of the festival celebrate Minaksi’s coronation, her conquest of the world, and her marriage (67). The celebration of her coronation occurs on the eighth day of the festival; on the ninth day, her conquest of the world is celebrated. The tenth day of the festival marks the commemoration of the wedding (66). This festival is not only the celebration of the sacred wedding; it “brings

together deities and mortals, rural and urban, Saiva and Vaisnava in order to celebrate the goddess as royal monarch and the city as a sacred centre” (66).

## **FURTHER READINGS AND WORKS CONSULTED**

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## **Related Topics**

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Lord Sundaresvara  
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## **Notable Websites**

<http://www.madurai.com/>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madurai>

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