Brief History of Madurai

Madurai, one of the oldest cities in southern India, is regarded as the cultural centre of Tamil Nadu. The Pandya dynasty, with Madurai as its capital, was known to the ancient Greeks. Madurai appears on Ptolemy's map of the world. It was considered by foreigners as 'Athens of the South.' Known as the 'temple city,' it is a sacred centre or a cosmic centre (i.e., not a centre in any economic or political sense). "A sacred centre need not be in the crossroads of trade routes or the seat of power, though many like Peking or Madurai are both." A sacred centre has a "vertical dimension" linking this world with the world of the heavens. This is true in the case of Madurai where the celestial wedding of Lord Siva with Meenakshi, the local Goddess, is believed to have taken place. This marriage is nothing but a link between the earth and heaven.
Temple, the fulcrum

The *Meenakshi Sundareswarar Temple* is clearly the geographic and ritual centre of the ancient city of Madurai. The temple walls, the city streets and finally the city walls were built around the temple in concentric squares. Tamil literary works of the first three centuries of the Christian era mention about the layout of the city. According to them, the temple was the nucleus of the city and streets were laid around it. They compare the city layout to a lotus at the centre with its petals around it. Of the Gopuras of this temple, the eastern one was erected by Sundarapandya. The Western Gopura is the work of the fourteenth century A.D. by Parakrama Pandya. Other Gopuras are probably the works of the Nayak rulers. The thousand Pillared Hall of this temple constructed by the Nayaks is a museum by itself with exuberant sculptural carvings. There are about sixty and more inscriptions belonging to the later Pandya and Nayak period. Madurai is considered as the city of festivals in view of the grand celebration of Chitra festival, Car festival and the procession of the images of the God and Goddess on the streets of the city.

The streets were named after Tamil months, rituals that took place in each street and occupations of the inhabitants. This tradition is continued to this day though it is 2,000 years or more old. This physical expansion from the centre shifted as a ritual expansion binding the surrounding regions to this city. Chithirai festival, celebrated in April, is the best example of this ritual expansion process. During this festival, the Lord of Alagarkoil (Vishnu) travels to Madurai to witness the celestial wedding of his younger sister Meenakshi (Parvati) with Siva. This festival marks the harmony which prevailed among the three Hindu sectarian groups, i.e., Saivites, Vaishnavites and Sakthas. On this occasion, people from far off places congregate, creating a social and religious harmony. This is actually a transformation of the abode of the god, temporarily, from the elitist dominated temple to the common placement for all sections of society.

Tiruvilayadal Puranam

Though inscriptions and Greek and Roman reports consistently associate Madurai with the Pandyas, the most popular myths associate the founding of Madurai with divine acts which are described in the medieval sthalapuranas (local legends). The most famous sthalapurana of Madurai is the Tiruvilayadal Puranam (Siva's sacred games) by one Paranjoti Munivar (15th century). This purana frequently emphasises Madurai's sacred nature and the site's ability to "purify" mortals and immortals and release them from their sins.

The inner city of Madurai, as it exists today, is believed to have been built by the Nayak rulers (between 16th and 18th centuries AD). The Meenakshi temple complex, occupying about 14 acres, is approximately square in shape and bounded by four 'outer' corridors. It has five gateways. Immediately outside the corridors are thin strips of fenced-in gardens, next to which are the East, South, West and North Chithirai streets. This is followed by the four Avani Moola streets. Then come the four Masi streets, followed by the four disjointed, narrow Perumal Maistry streets and finally, where the ramparts once stood, the four Veli (outer) streets. These expanding, roughly concentric streets are interconnected by a plethora of parallel streets, cross streets and a maze of lanes and by-lanes. Thus, the temple is not only the spiritual nucleus but also the physical centre of Madurai.

What legends say

There are three legends in the Sacred Games which show how this city has a miraculous beginning. The first legend says Indra, the king, committed a great sin by killing a demon. Brihaspati, the preceptor of gods, advised him to find his purification in the world of humans. After a long wandering, Indra found a sense of "purification" in a forest of Kadamba trees. On close examination, he discovered that a miraculous Linga and a 'golden lily pond' beside it were the sources of his purification. He bathed in the pond, worshipped the Linga and pledged to return to this spot every year at full moon time in the month of Chithirai (April-May) for thanks-giving.

According to the second legend, Airavata, a white elephant, the vehicle of Indra, once disregarded a sage's gift. The sage, Durvasa, cursed the celestial elephant to be born on earth as a wild elephant and wander for ages. This Airavata, while wandering, happened to come to the same Kadamba forest and bathed in the golden lily pond. Immediately, it regained its celestial beauty. Siva appeared out of the Linga and asked Airavata to return to its celestial master. Thus, even before the town of Madurai became a human habitation, the spot had a claim to sanctity. Its purifying power was there since time immemorial, even before human beings discovered that power.

The third legend mentions that long ago there was a Pandya king called Kulasekara, who had Manalur as his capital. One day, a merchant told the king of a marvellous Linga in a nearby Kadamba forest. That same night, Siva appeared to the king in a dream and advised him to clear the forest and build a town there. Thus, Madurai was founded and the royal capital was shifted to it.

Not only the founding of the city has sacred connection, but also many features in and around this city have a sacred origin, according to the texts. The river Vaigai was created by Siva from the Ganges flowing in his hair. Besides the Vaigai, the three important hills around Madurai — the Anaimalai (elephant hill), Pasumalai (cow hill) and the Nagamalai (snake hill) — were also created by Lord Siva under strange circumstances.

Thus the sacred geography of Madurai becomes the vehicle by which the sacred history is communicated to the devotees. These features are reminders of and testimonies to Siva's involvement in the wellbeing of Madurai and her people. This testimony is the basis of the religious experience of the Hindus even today.

Meenakshi's Madurai

Thus Siva's many sacred games have been the reason for the sacred geography of Madurai. Yet, Meenakshi, his consort, is regarded as more important and dear to the people, though the text gives primary position to Siva and to subordinate Meenakshi to Him (In the Saiva text, Siva defeats and dominates Meenakshi, but in reality Meenakshi dominates the folk memory).

In fact, Meenakshi was a more ancient local Dravidian goddess, who later was subordinated to Siva, a Sanskritic male god, by means of a wedding. By this wedding, a beloved thirsty female deity is transformed into a benign mother; Siva, an outsider, becomes acceptable not as an intruder but as a ' son-in-law of the soil,' who in the local Hindu tradition is entitled to all honour and welcome. The Pandyan dynasty and subjects are divinised and Madurai becomes the locale of this "multifaceted sacred transformation." In the temple rituals, Meenakashi is given precedence. In common talk, people refer to this temple complex only as "Meenakshi temple" or "Meenakshi Amman temple." Apart from its numerous temples, Madurai has a rich heritage of village ballads, folk dance, dramas and songs. Age-old folklore, religious festivals and rituals have helped Madurai to design and develop handicrafts which are used and worn on special occasions. Madurai is known for literature, music and drama.

'Maduraikkanchi,' one of the longest poems in the collection of Ten Idles, contains a graphical pen picture covering 370 lines on Madurai city in the early centuries of the Christian era. According to it, Madurai was a large and beautiful city with a palace, a number of temples, two large-crowded bazaars and many well-laid streets, with lofty mansions. The Vaigai river skirted the city walls and formed a natural defiance on one side. The houses on either side were well-planned. The reminiscence of the old streets is still in vogue.

Of all the other factors, it is true that Madurai is always busy both in the daytime and at night from the very ancient period. People used to say that Madurai never sleeps.

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