Wedding of the Goddess: Parts One & Two

Part of the South Asian Documentary Film Series, Presented by the University of Wisconsin-Madison Center for South Asia
WEDDING OF THE GODDESS:
PARTS I & II

Film Guide

Guide preparation: Joseph W. Elder

Date: 1991

Running time: Part I ... 36 minutes
Part II ... 40 minutes

Funding: National Endowment for the Humanities and Office of Education, U.S.
Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (under the authority of Title VI, Section 602, NDEA). The film and the film guide do not necessarily reflect the views of the funding agencies.

Executive Producer: Professor Joseph W. Elder
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Consultant: Professor A.S. Gnanasambandan
Madurai University, Madurai
Tamilnadu, India

Filming: Mira Reyym Binford
Michael Camerini

Music: T. Viswanathan and Douglas Knight

Research: Professor Dennis Hudson, Smith College

Inquiries: Distribution Office
South Asian Area Center
1238 Van Hise Hall
University of Wisconsin-Madison
Madison, Wisconsin 53706
(608) 262-9690
(608) 262-3209
SYNOPSIS

WEDDING OF THE GODDESS: PART I

Part I introduces various contexts within which the annual Chittirai festival of Madurai, South India, occurs. Dominating Madurai's skyline today are the five towers of the temple of the Goddess Minakshi and Lord Sundareshvar (the "beautiful Lord," Shiva). In the 16th century C.E. (Common Era) several of these temple towers were constructed, and the city of Madurai was rebuilt in a series of concentric streets around the temple, with the new street pattern resembling a ritual diagram (called a vastu-mandala) representing an ordered universe of gods and humans. Today, the temple encompasses a multitude of activities, many of them involving exchanges. In these exchanges, the people of Madurai present offerings to the gods, and the gods, in turn, bring blessings on the people of Madurai. Architecture and paintings within the temple retell various legends, including the legend of the founding of the city of Madurai, and the legend of the wedding of the Goddess Minakshi and Lord Sundareshvar. For centuries the citizens of Madurai have celebrated a festival reenacting this wedding.

In the Alagar Hills northeast of Madurai lies the temple of Lord Alagar, who is identified with Lord Vishnu. The site is referred to as "Alagarkovil" (Alagar's Temple). Lord Alagar is guarded by the God Karuppanaswami, especially patronized by members of the low-ranked Kallar castes. In the annual festival, Lord Alagar journeys from Alagarkovil to the Vaigai river adjoining Madurai to reenact a legend in which Lord Alagar released a saint from captivity. Lord Alagar's route passes through the countryside populated heavily by Kallar villagers. As he is transported along the route, Lord Alagar receives various contributions and acts of devotion from his worshippers.

In the 17th century Madurai's rulers passed ordinances changing the month of the Goddess Minakshi's wedding and altering the path of Lord Alagar's journey, so the two festivals more nearly coincided in time and place. Since then, despite priests' insistence that there are two separate, unrelated festivals, the public have blended the two festivals into a single "Chittirai Festival." Furthermore, they have reworked the festivals' explanations so that, in the popular mind, Lord Alagar (Vishnu), now identified as Minakshi's brother, comes to Madurai to give away his sister in marriage to Lord Sundareshvar (Shiva). Pictorial representations of the marriage show Vishnu at the wedding pouring water over the joined hands of Minakshi and Sundareshvar. However, the popular legend insists that Vishnu (Lord Alagar), upon reaching the northern bank of the Vaigai river, learned that he had arrived too late to attend the wedding. So he never entered the city of Madurai, and subsequently returned to his temple in the Alagar Hills.

The celebration of the Goddess's wedding lasts twelve days, overlapping by three days the nine-day journey of Lord Alagar from his temple in the hills to the riverbed adjoining Madurai. Each year, followers of Shiva and followers of Vishnu, villagers and city-dwellers, members of high castes and members of low castes, are brought together in common celebration of this "Chittirai Festival."
WEDDING OF THE GODDESS: PART II

After a brief recapitulation of the resemblances between the city of Madurai and a vastu-mandala (ritual diagram), Part II follows the main daily events of the Chittirai festival over its entire nineteen-day period. Part II includes the symbolic branding and "possession" of a young devotee of the God Karuppanasvami, the reenacted coronation of the Goddess Minakshi, her attempted conquest of the world, her marriage to Lord Sundareshvar, and the wedding-couple's triumphant tour around the city of Madurai in gigantic chariots, drawn through the streets by throngs of worshippers. The film also includes intimate views of public and private worship, glimpses of the gods as they are transported along the roads and sheltered in temples and shrines, and interviews with persons fulfilling vows as well as with spectators and other participants in the festival's many levels.

SUGGESTED USE

Anthropology/Sociology of Religion
Art History
Comparative Literature
Comparative Religion
Folklore
History of Religions
History of South Asia
Literature
Religions of South Asia
Sociology
South Asian Studies
World Religions

INFORMATIONAL FOOTNOTES (Note - The questions are arranged in the sequence in which the film presents the relevant material.)

1. As far as one can tell, what was Madurai's ancient history?

Madurai as a city, and the Pandiyas as a ruling family, emerge in the writings of travelers and storytellers before the birth of Christ. The Mahavamsa, a Pali chronicle of Sri Lanka, links Prince Vijaya, a 500 B.C.E. (Before the Common Era) contemporary of the Buddha and the legendary first king of Sri Lanka, with the city of Madurai as follows:

But the ministers [of Vijaya] ...sent people [from Sri Lanka], entrusted with many precious gifts, jewels, pearls, and so forth, to the city of Madhura in southern (India), to woo the daughter of the Pandu king for their lord, devoted as they were to their ruler. (1)

Around 300 B.C.E. Megasthenes, the Greek ambassador to the north-Indian court of Chandragupta Maurya, reported that:

... Herakles is held in especial honour by ...an Indian tribe who possess two large cities, Methora ([Madurai?] and Cleisobora ... [Herakles] had a very numerous progeny of male children born to him in India ...[but] he had only one daughter. The name of this child was Pandaia, and the land in which she was born, and with the sovereignty of which Herakles entrusted her, was called after her name, Pandaia ...(2)

The north-Indian Emperor Ashoka's Rock Edict II, inscribed around 257 B.C.E., refers to:

... the border territories of the Cholas, the Pandyas, the Satiyaputra, the Keralaputra ...

as well as the island of Sri Lanka and lands to the northwest of India, in all areas of which, according to the Edict, provision had been made for the medical treatment of animals and humans, wells had been dug, and trees had been planted along the roads for the comfort and enjoyment of the public. (3)

Around 77 C.E. the Roman scholar Plinius Secundus (the Elder Pliny) wrote that the nation of the Pandae was:

... the only one throughout all India which is ruled by women. It is said that Hercules had but one child of the female sex, for which reason she was his especial favourite, and he bestowed upon her the principal one of these kingdoms. The sovereigns who derive their origin from this female, rule over three hundred towns, and have an army of one hundred and
Wedding of the Goddess: Parts I & II

fifty thousand foot, and five hundred elephants.(4)

Later in the same treatise the Elder Pliny wrote of one territory in India where:

... king Pandion used to reign, dwelling at a considerable distance from the mart [seaport] in the interior, at a city known as Modeira [Madurai?].(5)

In the next century, the Egyptian astronomer and geographer Ptolemy, through mathematical calculations, placed Modura, the royal city of the Pandions, approximately 1,050 miles directly south of Taxila [contemporary calculations place Madurai approximately 1,650 miles south of the ancient city of Taxila].(6)

In the second century C.E. Polyaeus, a Macedonian who lived in Rome, recounted several tales of Hercules, including the following:

In India Hercules adopted a daughter, whom he called Pandae. To her he allotted the southern part of India which is situate towards the sea, dividing it into three hundred and sixty-five cantons. These cantons he charged with a daily tax; and ordered each canton, by turn, on their stated day, to pay the royal stipend. So that, which ever of them first refused the tax, as it rested on the others to make it good, the queen might depend on their aid and assistance in compelling the due performance of it.(7)

In addition to these indirect and not always consistent accounts of Hercules' daughter, the city of Madurai (Methora, Modeira, Modura), and the kingdom of Pandiya (Pandu, Pandaia, Pandae, Pandion), Roman coins from the time of Augustus Caesar found in the vicinity of Madurai suggest some degree of commerce between south India and the Roman empire.

According to Tamil legends, three ancient academies (sangams) were held in Madurai. The first Madurai sangam was attended by the gods and sages. No works have survived from that sangam. The second Madurai sangam left one major literary work, the Tamil grammar

Tolkappiyam (actual evidence suggests that Tolkappiyam is a later creation, appearing after some of the third sangam works). The third Madurai sangam is credited with producing the "Eight Anthologies" and "Ten Songs," together representing some 2,500 poems (which actually were probably composed at various times during the first three centuries C.E.).

The earliest extended description of the city of Madurai is found in the Tamil epic, the Cilappatikaram ("The Lay of the Anklet"). The authorship of the Cilappatikaram has traditionally been assigned to the first or second century C.E. Chola prince, Ilanko Atikal. Subsequent evidence suggests the Cilappatikaram probably took shape near the end of the third sangam period, perhaps around the 5th century C.E.

2. How completely was Madurai destroyed by Muslim invasions?

In 1320 C.E. the Muslim Tughluq dynasty replaced the Muslim Khalji dynasty in Delhi, North India, and the Tughluq dynasty began to expand the boundaries of the Delhi Sultanate. One of the Tughluq generals, Malik Kafur, extended the boundaries deep into the south, capturing the city of Madurai in 1323 and making it a part of the Sultanate of Ma'abar. Madurai remained under at least nominal Tughluq control until it was conquered several decades later by Kumara Kampana, a general of the "Hindu" Vijayanagara empire. Both the Muslim and the Hindu accounts describe considerable destruction of Madurai's Hindu temples and icons by the Muslim invaders.

However, there is hardly any physical evidence to support these accounts. For example, the Minakshi Temple appears to have suffered little damage at this time, and there is every evidence that worshippers continued to use the temple throughout the period of Muslim control.

The inaccuracies of the historical accounts might possibly be attributed to the ideologies of the account-writers. Islamically-correct Muslim rulers were supposed to smash icons and demolish temples, so Malik Kafur's chroniclers may have felt obliged to describe such events,
whether or not they happened. And the "Hindu" Vijayanagara empire, under whose aegis Kumara Kampana captured Madurai, wanted to glorify Kumara Kampana's actions. So its chroniclers praised Kumara Kampana for restoring Hindu rule to Madurai after years of so-called Muslim brutality and destruction.

As was the case elsewhere in India at this time, the relationships between Hindus and Muslims were often complex. Despite the existence of so-called "Muslim" and "Hindu" kingdoms, Muslims often fought in Hindu armies or as allies of Hindus, and Hindus often fought in Muslim armies. In fact, two of the Hindu founders of the Vijayanagara empire (Harihara and Bukka) became Muslims for a time and fought in the armies of the Muslim Tughluqs before being converted back to Hinduism and founding the "Hindu" Vijayanagara empire.

Even though the Vijayanagara empire claimed some of its legitimacy to rest on its Hinduism, this provided little comfort for any of its neighboring Hindu rulers. The Vijayanagara empire attacked Hindu rulers in southern India at least as frequently as it attacked Muslim rulers. When it came to warfare, political and economic considerations frequently outweighed religious considerations.

3. What is a vastu-mandala?

A mandala, "circle," is a symbolic diagram, frequently bounded by a circle, in which squares, triangles, and other patterns are often enclosed. A mandala is considered to separate sacred space from profane space; hence, the drawing of a mandala is often accompanied by prayers or other special rites.

In ancient India, priests lit the sacrificial fire on a square-shaped brick altar patterned to represent the cosmos. Texts from the 4th and 3rd centuries B.C.E. describe the geometry used to build these altars. By the time Hindu temples were being built in the 5th and 6th centuries C.E., ritual dimensions for the Vedic altar were well defined and were used as the basis for temple architecture. The peripheral squares of the mandala were assigned to lesser guardian deities; the central squares were reserved for the most powerful deities placed within the temple.

The vastu-mandala is a symbolic diagram used for the planning of houses, temples, palaces, and even cities. A 6th century C.E. text, the Brhat Samhita, for example, specifies that cities should be built on a 9 x 9 grid, while temples should be built on an 8 x 8 grid. The most sacred places of the city (or temple) should be in the middle; the less sacred places should be located on the periphery.

In the 16th century C.E., under the Telugu-speaking Naik kings, the street-grids of Madurai were redrawn to conform more closely to a vastu-mandala, with the palace temple of the goddess Minakshi and Lord Sundareshvar in the center of the grid. In principle, the priestly brahman castes were to live near the central temple, while the lower castes were to live nearer the city's periphery protected by a strong wall and moat. As the city expanded, the old walls were torn down and were replaced by additional concentric roads, while new walls and protective moats were built around the entire city.

Every year on the day before the Chittirai festival, priests in the Minakshi-Sundareshvar Temple draw a vastu-mandala on the temple floor. The vastu-mandala serves as a metaphor for an ordered universe with an established relationship between gods and humans. The Chittirai festival activities take place on a hypothetical vastu-mandala patterned by the streets of Madurai. For example, even today the gigantic temple carts are pulled around the city on those streets that marked the outer boundaries of Madurai at the time of the Naiks.

4. What are some of the legendary figures shown on the temple towers and in the temple shrines?

One of the figures is Narasimha, a man-lion who is seen disemboweling an evil ruler. The evil ruler had obtained a boon that he could be killed by neither god, man, nor beast. Vishnu, by taking the form of a man-lion (neither god, man, nor beast) was able to punish and slay the evil ruler despite the boon.
Another figure is Nataraja, a representation of Shiva as lord of the dance. Nataraja is seen with one foot raised, dancing on the back of one of his enemies, symbolizing the triumph of good over evil.

Still another figure is the elephant-headed Ganesh, son of Shiva and Parvathi. Ganesh is recognized as the remover of obstacles and the first of all deities to be addressed when one is worshipping a litany of deities.

5. What is meant by the statement referring to "those castes which could not worship in the temple...?"

Throughout most of the history of the Minakshi-Sundareshvar Temple, members of the lowest castes (some of which were considered ritually "untouchable") were prohibited from entering the Temple for fear their presence might ritually pollute the Temple and render it unfit for worship. But there was no prohibition against members of such castes standing outside the Temple walls and worshipping from afar the deities displayed on the Temple's towers. In the twentieth century, following the efforts of Hindus such as Mohandas Gandhi and Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar, temples such as the Minakshi-Sundareshvar Temple were opened to members of all castes. After India achieved its independence in 1947, discrimination on the grounds of "untouchability" was declared unconstitutional.

6. What is meant by the statement "temple activity is a process of exchange"?

In the Minakshi-Sundareshvar Temple an individual worshipper presents offerings to the gods through prayer, or by giving gifts such as food, coconuts, flowers, or silk. By being in the presence of the gods, the worshipper receives the gods' darshan ("auspicious sight"). Through the priestly intermediaries, the worshipper also receives a share of the offerings people have made to the gods. These returned-offering shares are called prasad ("that which is given out of divine favor"), and are considered to be especially blessed. On a larger scale, the people who come to the Minakshi- Sundareshvar Temple collectively maintain and enlarge the temple through their offerings. In return, Minakshi and Sundareshvar support the citizens of Madurai as a group, enabling their businesses to prosper, and bringing fertility to their families, lands, and cattle. Highlighting this special relationship between Minakshi, Sundareshvar, and the city of Madurai, on certain prescribed days of the ritual calendar, Minakshi and Sundareshvar confer special honors on the city's most prominent citizens.

7. What is meant by the statement "At the center of the temple is Minakshi. Although Sundareshvar's shrine is at the geographical center...?"

Both literary and archaeological evidence suggest that until about the 12th century C.E. the temple's sole main shrine was that of Lord Sundareshvar, located at the temple's center. Records indicate that in the 12th or 13th century a smaller and less elaborate shrine was built to the Goddess, facing the pond, and definitely out-of-line with both the north-south and east-west temple axes. In the 17th century the impressive building accomplishments of the Nayak kings retained unaltered the temple's geometric alignments. The major shrine to Lord Sundareshvar still lay on the north- south and east-west axes linking the four tall towers (gopurams).

Sometime in the next century the pattern of temple architecture began to shift. The corridor leading from the eastern street to the shrine of Minakshi was enlarged. An elaborately decorated archway with representations of the Goddess's legends was built to mark the eastern entrance to the corridor. And a tall tower (the fifth gopuram) was constructed over the corridor. All of these reflected the Goddess Minakshi's increasing importance within the temple complex.

While the entrance to Minakshi's shrine was growing in importance, the eastern entrance to Sundareshvar's shrine was undergoing a decline. The story spread that a temple servant, protesting an unauthorized tax, hurled himself from the top of the eastern gopuram to his
Wedding of the Goddess: Parts I & II

death on the stone floor below. These rumors led to the reluctance of many worshippers either to enter or to leave the temple through the eastern entrance -- the one that led directly to the shrine of Lord Sundareshvar.

Today most visitors to the Temple enter through the elaborately decorated archway and corridor that lead to the Goddess Minakshi’s shrine. Minakshi has become the central object of worship in the Temple; and the Temple is popularly referred to as simply the "Minakshi Temple." Sundareshvar’s shrine, however, still occupies the geographical center of the Temple.

8. What is the Tamil song that is sung while various representations of the Goddess Minakshi are shown? The song is that of an adoring and devoted worshipper addressing the Goddess Minakshi:

Give me a kiss.

O Divine Gem, acquired by the Master of Arts of the treasured Veda who transcends time and imagination;

O blossoming Divine Tree, bestowing fruits of grace and light of wisdom on those who water their soul with realization;

O Little Parrot, who utters tender and unwriteable babblings;

O Mate of the Soul-Mate;

O Primordial Being arising in the Primordial Sound;

O Three-Breasted One, feast for the Three-Eyed Lustre [Shiva];

Give me a kiss. Give me a kiss.

9. What are the probable origins of the Goddess Minakshi?

In the 7th century C.E. the Tamil saint, Gnanasambandar, made reference to a goddess named Angaiyarkanni, meaning (in Tamil) "one with fish-shaped eyes." This suggests one possible origin of the Goddess Minakshi. The little girl with three breasts who is described in the Tiruvilaiyatar Puranam, who grew up to be the martial ruler of Madurai and then set out to conquer the world and whose wedding is reenacted annually in the Chittirai festival, is referred to in the legends as Tatatakai (Irresistable Valor). Her name is also Tamil, suggesting her local origins. The name "Minakshi" is a Sanskrit translation of "one with fish-shaped eyes." This suggests that Sanskrit-knowing brahmans accepted the Tamil goddess Angaiyarkanni and then renamed her "Meenakshi" so that she could fit more readily into the major north-Indian Hindu pantheon. "Meenakshi" is seen as the consort of Lord Shiva. In this capacity, she is readily identified with other versions of Lord Shiva’s consorts, e.g. Uma, Parvathi, etc.

10. What are the markings on Minakshi’s forehead, and what is the relevance of her parrot?

The three horizontal white lines on Minakshi’s forehead indicate that she is a follower of Lord Shiva. Regarding the parrot, most deities in the Hindu pantheon are provided with a vehicle, linked to them through art and legend, with which they travel. For example, Shiva’s vehicle is a Nandi bull; Indra’s vehicle is an elephant; Ganesh’s vehicle is a rat; etc. The parrot is Minakshi’s vehicle.

11. What is the background of the sixty-four stories called "The Sports of Shiva"

Every major temple in South India is supposed to have its own sacred legends, incorporated into a so-called Sthala Purana, presenting the earlier history of the sacred location and describing heroic or miraculous deeds the chosen deities have performed in that location to improve the spiritual and physical lives of persons living in the vicinity. The Sthala Purana for the Minakshi Temple is entitled the Tiruvilaiyatar Puranam ("Purana of the Sacred Amusements," sometimes referred to as the Sixty-Four Sports of Shiva inasmuch as each of the sixty-four "Sports" involves Lord Sundareshvar [Lord Shiva] performing heroic
services for his people in Madurai).

It is uncertain who composed the original version or versions of the Tiruvilaiyatar Puranam. Many, if not most, of the sixty-four stories probably existed as folk tales for many years, transmitted orally by balladeers or passed on by word of mouth. A 13th-century Tamil version of the Sixty-Four Sports contains at least one story that seems to have been borrowed from earlier Tamil sangam literature. In this early Tamil version, the Lord is sometimes referred to by the name Chokanathan. Chokan in Tamil means "handsome;" Nathan is a Sanskrit word for "Lord." The 16th-century Tamil version is somewhat more elaborately constructed than the 13th-century version. A Sanskrit version of the Tiruvilaiyatar Puranam was also composed at about this time. Since the 13th century, various translations and up-datings of the Sixty-Four Sports have been published. Today translations exist in both English and French.

12. Is there any current significance to the legends describing Lord Sundareshvar's defeat of monsters that attacked Madurai?

The presence of unusually-shaped hills in the vicinity of Madurai is explained in the Sthala Purana. The 22nd of the Sixty-Four Sports describes what might actually have been a kind of "religious war" between the Pandiyan kingdom of Madurai and the Chola kingdom north of Madurai. King Vikkirama Pandiya ruled Madurai to the satisfaction of all his subjects. During his reign he drove Buddhists and Jains out of his kingdom and enhanced the worship of Lord Shiva. The Chola king, himself a Jain, resented Vikkirama Pandiya's attacks on his co-religionists. He called down from their mountain retreats 8,000 Jain priests and ordered them to use their magic skills to destroy King Vikkirama Pandiya. The Jain priests ignited an awesome sacred fire from which emerged a giant elephant in rut. The giant elephant, followed by Jain priests and the Chola armies, then set out to destroy Madurai. The citizens of Madurai called on Lord Sundareshvar to protect them. He told them to build him a multi-storeyed pillared mandapa (hall, porch) to the east of Madurai. Then Lord Sundareshvar, dressed as a hunter and standing on the mandapa, transfixed the giant elephant with his bow and shaft. The vanquished elephant sagged to the ground and turned into a rock hill that, to this day, looks like a dormant elephant beside the north-eastern road to Madurai and bears the name "Gnanamalai" (elephant hill). The armies of Madurai then drove the Jain priests and the Chola armies out of the land.

The 28th of the Sixty-Four Sports of Shiva again involved 8,000 Jain priests. On this occasion they created a fierce demon from a sacred fire and ordered the demon to destroy Madurai and its king. The demon assumed the form of a giant fire-breathing serpent and attacked Madurai from the west. The king of Madurai called upon Lord Sundareshvar who, with his bow and shaft, vanquished the serpent and saved Madurai. The dead serpent turned into a rock hill that today bears the name "Nagamalai" (serpent/snake hill) and still shows the serpent's striped markings in the form of unusual stripes of vegetation.

In the 29th of the Sixty-Four Sports of Shiva the Jains devised a plan they felt would surely destroy Madurai. From their sacred fire they created a demon in the form of a giant cow and ordered her to destroy Madurai. They knew that neither Lord Sundareshvar nor his followers would dare commit the sin of killing a cow. The cow set out for Madurai, destroying the fields and forests along the way. Lord Sundareshvar saw through the Jain plot. He sent his sacred Bull to meet the cow. The cow became so infatuated by the Bull that she swooned and fell to the ground. Her body turned into a harmless stone mound that today bears the name of "Pasumalai" (cow/cattle hill) and lies southwest of Madurai.

For the citizens of Madurai who wish to believe the literal accounts in the Stabha Purana, these three hills that circle Madurai serve as evidence of the historical presence of Lord Sundareshvar (Lord Shiva) in the city of Madurai, and of his concern for the citizens of Madurai.

13. Why do People in this part of India refer to
Lord Vishnu as Lord Alagar?

Just as there were probably one or more local Tamil goddesses in this area (e.g., Angaiyarkanni, Tatatakai) who were eventually given a Sanskrit name and incorporated into the north-Indian Hindu pantheon, so Lord Alagar (Beautiful Lord) was probably worshipped in this area by Tamil-speakers before he was given the Sanskrit name of Lord Vishnu and incorporated into the major north-Indian Hindu pantheon, and adorned (along with his followers and many of his possessions) with the various symbols of Vaishnavism (including the white U, V, or Y intersected by the vertical red line).

The major temple to Lord Alagar lies in the Alagar hills, twelve miles northeast of Madurai, at a site called "Alagarkovil" (Alagar’s Temple). There was once a palace here, and a fortified city, but now they are both in ruins. The priests who serve Alagar are from the brahman castes, and Lord Alagar’s ritual feedings and other ceremonies are strictly vegetarian.

The Sthala Purana for the Alagar Temple is in Sanskrit and is called the Vrshabhagiri Mahatmya ("The Greatness of the Bull Hill"). Unlike the Sthala Purana of the Minakshi Temple (The Sixty-Four Sports of Shiva -- presumably recounted by a single author either in Tamil or in Sanskrit), the Sthala Purana of the Alagar Temple is a collection of excerpts from four different Sanskrit Puranas. These excerpts describe the early presence of Lord Vishnu in the Alagar Hills and the sacredness of a spring of water in those hills. These stories also link various accounts of the birth of the Goddess Minakshi in Madurai with events occurring near the sacred spring in the Alagar Hills.

The Sthala Purana of the Alagar Temple includes different accounts of the saint Manduka. Manduka, in order to attain release from the cycle of reincarnation, continuously performed austerities at the sacred spring in the Alagar Hills. One day a group of prominent holy men arrived at the sacred spring. Manduka was so intent on his austerities that he failed to show them proper respect. In return for his inattention, the holy men cursed Manduka and turned him into a frog. Saint Manduka was dreadfully upset. The holy men took pity on him and modified their curse. If he bathed in a particular waterfall, he would regain his human shape. This he did, and, indeed, saint Manduka did regain his human shape. Thereupon Lord Alagar (Vishnu) appeared before him, and Manduka composed a song in honor of Lord Alagar.

Interestingly enough, the story of Lord Alagar’s pilgrimage to the Madurai riverbed to free saint Manduka from his frog body is not found anywhere in the Sthala Purana of the Alagar Temple. Instead, it can be found in several devotional poems that date from the last few centuries. These poems provide the popular basis for Lord Alagar’s annual pilgrimage to the Madurai riverbed. During the Chittirai festival that was filmed, the release of Manduka from his frog body was enacted by a priest releasing a crow that had been tied to a brick.

Despite the absence of any reference in the Alagar Temple’s Sthala Purana to Lord Alagar’s pilgrimage to Madurai, the Alagar Temple’s priests today support the more recent poems and agree (indeed insist) that Lord Alagar makes the annual pilgrimage to the Madurai riverbed to free the saint Manduka from his frog body. However, they deny any relationship between Lord Alagar’s pilgrimage to the Madurai riverbed and the wedding of the Goddess Minakshi and Lord Sundareshvar inside the city of Madurai. Nevertheless, the vast majority of participants in the Chittirai festival believe Lord Alagar (Vishnu) goes to Madurai primarily to give his sister, Minakshi, in marriage to Lord Sundareshvar (Shiva).

14. Who is Karuppanasvami, and how does he relate to Lord Alagar?

Karuppanasvami ("Black Lord") is a local god particularly linked to the low-ranked Kallar castes. The Kallars are the tribe-like dominant castes living in the area between the city of Madurai and the Alagar Hills. Any king of Madurai who hoped to expand his kingdom to include Alagarkovil (Lord Alagar’s temple) and
the country beyond, had to bring the Kallars under his control. In the past the Kallars had the reputation of being thieves, village guards, and soldiers. Today, though they may still serve as guards for village lands and accompany the village tax collector on his rounds, most Kallars are farmers. The Kallars still perform animal sacrifices (usually goats) for Karuppanasvami, who is not a vegetarian. And Karuppanasvami’s priests are from the potter castes rather than from the brahman castes. Nowadays, Karuppanasvami is the chief soldier and guard for Lord Alagar, just as the Kallars may have been for the kings of Madurai. Karuppanasvami’s shrines dot the landscape; some are even in the city of Madurai. But Karuppanasvami’s main shrine is at the doorway to the temple of Lord Alagar. The cultural integration of Karuppanasvami into the overarching Hindu pantheon is thought to reflect the social integration of the tribe-like Kallars into the Hindu caste system.

15. How could a secular king, Tirumal Naik, change the geographical location of one sacred festival and the calendar date of another sacred festival?

Tirumal Naik, of the Telugu-speaking Naik rulers of Madurai, ascended the throne in 1623 and ruled Madurai for the next 36 years. His reign was marked by extensive building projects, including additions to the Minakshi Temple and buildings in the vicinity of Lord Alagar’s Temple. Although they were "outsiders," the Naiks recognized that one way of winning the support of the Tamil-speaking citizenry was to become patrons of their deities, temples, and celebrations. South India had a long history of hostility between followers of Shiva and followers of Vishnu. The Naiks supported both faiths. Before Tirumal Naik’s time, the festival reenactment of the marriage of Minakshi and Sundareshwar occurred in a different month from the reenactment of Lord Alagar’s trip to the river north of Madurai. Perhaps as an expression of his power over both city and country, Tirumal Naik moved the path of Lord Alagar’s journey closer to Madurai, and he shifted the date of Minakshi’s wedding to the month of Chittirai (April-May) so that the two festivals now occur almost at the same time. Tirumal Naik’s enactments set the stage for the contemporary popularly-held view that there is only one, all-inclusive Chittirai festival in which Lord Alagar (Vishnu) comes to Madurai to give his sister, Minakshi, in marriage to Lord Sundareshvar (Shiva).

16. Who are the people with badges, batons, ribbons, and other insignia who are moving about the crowds?

A massive amount of citizen effort is organized each year in connection with the Chittirai festival. In the festival crowds one can see volunteers from the boy scouts, various schools, businessmen’s clubs, and other similar service groups. They join the traffic police (with tall red-and-blue-striped hats), regular police (in khaki uniforms), and reserve police (with one-flap-up Australian-style hats) in maintaining crowd movement and control, uniting children who have strayed from their families, and clearing entry ways into mandapas and temples for the arrivals and departures of the festival deities.

17. How closely are the Chittirai festival rituals repeated every year?

Although the Chittirai festival has been repeated for centuries, no single text exists that describes precisely how the various parts of the festival (or the two festivals) are to be reenacted correctly. Every generation tends to feel that the "traditional" Chittirai festival was what was done when they were children, and that subsequent modifications in the festival have "changed" those "traditions." Major planning for the festival is carried out every year by two different committees, one associated with the Minakshi Temple and the reenactment of the Goddess Minakshi and Lord Sundareshvar’s wedding, the other associated with the Alagar Temple and the annual pilgrimage of Lord Alagar to the Madurai riverbed and back to his temple in Alagarkovil.

In the early part of the twentieth century, during the Chittirai festival, devotees used to attach hooks to their abdominal or back muscles
and swing from high-strung ropes, or impale their cheeks or tongues with long needles, or carry elaborate headloads secured by lines and hooks attached to their bodies. Subsequent government legislation prohibited such acts and thereby "changed" the Chittirai festival.

Changes that members of the film crew have observed over the years include ending the reenactment of the Goddess Minakshi's loss of her third breast (symbolized at one time by a flower being dropped from Minakshi's bosom), Lord Alagar arriving at the riverbed on different vehicles, and Lord Alagar stopping at different shrines and mandapas on his way to and from Alagarkovil. In view of the constant changes in the reenactment of the Chittirai festival, it is difficult, if not impossible, to describe unambiguously what might or might not be a "traditionally correct" reenactment of the Chittirai festival.

18. Who are the men wearing colorful costumes and clown-like hats, and how do they relate to the Chittirai Festival?

Most of the men dressed in the colorful costumes are Kallar or other low-caste devotees of Karuppanasvami and Lord Alagar. Two weeks earlier many of them had made vows to honor the deities by performing certain acts at the time of Lord Alagar's pilgrimage. During the intervening two weeks they had fasted and participated in special devotions. In return they hoped the gods would grant them and their families protection and blessings throughout the coming year.

The full-moon day of the Chittirai festival was the time when the men had to carry out their promised acts. One popular promised act consisted of filling a goat-skin waterbag and carrying it slung at their sides. When the Lord passed by, they pressed their arms against their waterbags, squirting streams of water onto the Lord, cooling him off and bringing him pleasure. These same streams of water soaked the brahman priest accompanying Lord Alagar, as well as many of the bystanders and the men themselves. In the heat, no one objected. The ensuing puddles of water in the riverbed made it look like there had been a sudden cloudburst.

Some of the men in colorful costumes were samiyadis ("god-possessed" or "god-dancers"), a few of whom carried smoldering tightly-packed coils of cloth that had been soaked in oil. The samiyadis hoped -- or expected -- to be possessed by God during the celebrations, and a number of them engaged in acts of intense devotion (such as rocking vigorously back-and-forth) in order to help the Lord possess them. During the Chittirai festival several of them were initiated as devotees of Lord Alagar (Vishnu), including being symbolically "branded" with Vaishnavite markings on their shoulders and receiving a sacred mantra (syllable, phrase) from Alagar's brahman priest.

Crowds gathered around a samiyadi who was attempting to be possessed. They could infer a samiyadi had actually become possessed when the Lord (presumably Karuppanasvami) began to speak through that samiyadi's mouth. The sounds emitted by the possessed samiyadi sometimes had to be translated by another samiyadi. The curious could ask questions of the Lord through a possessed samiyadi. "Why has my work not prospered?" "Why have so many members of my family recently fallen ill?" "Will we have a son?" The replies often pointed out some recent failure on the part of the questioner to show proper respect to the Lord, and often recommended that the questioner sacrifice goats or chickens, engage in special devotions, or give gifts at particular shrines in order to restore his or her relationship with the Lord.

19. What can be inferred from the popular story that Lord Alagar spends the night in the village of Vandiyur with a Muslim concubine?

Numerous stories exist throughout India of Hindu deities having romantic relationships with high-born Muslim women. In the case of Lord Alagar, legend has it that the Muslim concubine in the village of Vandiyur is the daughter of a Delhi Sultan who fell deeply in love with the "Beautiful Lord" (Lord Alagar) and waits each year for her night in his arms. The story may be a throwback to the brief period in the 1300s when Muslims ruled Madurai for several decades. Or it might refer to a time...
when Hindu-Muslim distinctions meant very little, especially among the elite. Or it might suggest how attractive the Hindu religion is -- even for Muslims. Regardless of where the story comes from, it continues to be widely believed by the populace and strongly denied by the Alagar Temple priests.

Prior to the political separation of India and Pakistan in 1947, many Muslims participated in the Chittirai festival. Muslims in Madurai still participate in the Chittirai festival, but more as a cultural than as a religious event.

20. What are the "avatars" of Vishnu that Lord Alagar displays throughout the night in the Ramarayar mandapa?

According to widespread Hindu mythology, Lord Vishnu ("The Preserver") re-enters the world ten times in order to restore order and preserve morality, assuming different forms or incarnations (avatars) each time. His incarnations have typically included a Fish, a Tortoise, a Boar, a Man-Lion (Narasimha), a Dwarf, Lord Rama (of the epic tale Ramayana), Lord Krishna, and Buddha. Lord Vishnu has yet to appear in his final incarnation as Kalkin.

For many of Lord Alagar's devotees, the Chittirai festival reached its peak during the night Lord Alagar's image rested in the Ramarayar mandapa. Lord Alagar's accompanying brahman priest first presented Lord Alagar to his devotees as a king with a silk shawl and a footstool. Then the priest placed a curtain before the image of Alagar, changed Alagar's clothes and other objects (a procedure that took about half-an-hour each time), arranged for a loudspeaker announcement giving the name of the next avatar, and opened the curtain so that the waiting devotees could file past and receive the darshan (auspicious sight) of that particular avatar of Lord Vishnu (the Fish, the Tortoise, the Boar, etc.). This continued throughout the night. The climax occurred when the priest opened the curtain to reveal Lord Alagar dressed as Mohini, the female avatar of Vishnu who was so erotic that, according to legend, she succeeded in seducing even Lord Shiva.

When daylight came, Lord Alagar began his trip back to his temple in the Alagar Hills, along with his devotees and the money box into which devotees had dropped donations throughout the festival. Lord Alagar's return journey required two additional days and nights, with many stopovers during which thousands of devotees received Lord Alagar's darshan. When the procession finally reached Lord Alagar's Temple, the money box was opened, and the money was counted and placed in the Temple treasury. Lord Alagar's traveling image was then returned to its niche. And the Chittirai festival ended for another year.

Footnotes:


HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF THE MINAKSHI TEMPLE

Figure 1. 12th century and earlier. Golden lotus pond in foreground, shrine with Shiva linga in the background, dedicated to Lord Sundareshvar.

Figure 2. 13th to 15th centuries. East-west gopurams (towers) are built aligned with Lord Sundareshvar’s shrine. The Goddess Minakshi’s shrine is built facing the golden lotus pond.

Figure 3. 16th and 17th centuries. Major additions are built to the temple under the sponsorship of the Naik, Telugu-speaking rulers, including the north-south gopurams and the outside walls.

Figure 4. 18th to 20th centuries. In the eastern wall a major outside gateway is built aligned with the shrine of Minakshi, as the focus of the temple shifts from Sundareshvar’s shrine to Minakshi’s shrine.
Map of Madurai district showing the city of Madurai, the three neighboring hills mentioned in the Minakshi temple’s *Sthala Purana*, and, to the northeast, the Alagar Hills and Lord Alagar’s temple.

Map of Madurai town showing the central location of the Minakshi Temple and the series of concentric streets where the city walls were demolished as the city expanded.
QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION TOPICS

1. In the 16th century the Naik kings modified the streets and walls of the city of Madurai to fit the pattern of a Hindu ritual diagram (a vastu-mandala). Just as the main gods reside in the center of a vastu-mandala, so the palace-temple of the Goddess Minakshi and Lord Sundareshvar now formed the center of the city of Madurai, serving as a metaphor for an ordered universe with an established relationship between gods and humans. Can you think of any cities elsewhere in the world that have been built to represent a metaphor of moral or political order (e.g., Beijing, New Delhi, the royal cities of ancient Egypt, Inca and Maya cities, Athens, the Vatican City, Washington D.C., etc.)? In the case of each such city, what was the metaphor? How did the city's streets and walls represent the metaphor?

2. The Naik rulers, who came to Madurai as "foreign invaders," wholeheartedly supported the Goddess Minakshi, added substantial structures to the Minakshi-Sundareshvar temple as well as to the temple of Lord Alagar, and sponsored the overlapping of the two temples' major festivals. Why do you think the Naiks engaged in these costly practices? Can you think of other historical cases where invading rulers have become strong supporters of the religious practices of their subjects?

3. The Minakshi temple involves a process of exchange wherein worshippers present offerings to the gods, the gods receive the offerings, return a share to the worshippers, and support the worshippers in the worshippers' daily activities. In Europe and the United States to what extent is worship seen to involve (either directly or metaphorically) some system of exchange? If so, what does the worshipper "give," and what does the worshipper "receive?"

4. The Chittirai celebrations draw together hundreds of thousands of citizens each year, providing them with a break from everyday routines, retelling the shared epic legends, redrawing the moral lessons from those legends, and giving participants extra opportunities to donate to worthy causes. To what extent do Christmas and Easter celebrations among Christians, or Passover and Purim celebrations among Jews, generate the same kinds of activities? In what ways do they generate different kinds of activities? Why might there be differences between the nature of the Chittirai celebrations, on one hand, and of Jewish and Christian celebrations, on the other?

5. The film depicts many "layers" of participation in the Chittirai festival, from orthodox priests drawing sacred diagrams on temple floors and reenacting a complex marriage ceremony, to devotees pulling giant carts through city streets, to villagers seeking "possession," men squirting water on deities as a part of vows, and spectators watching fireworks and song-and-dance shows. Can one identify similar "layers" of participation in Jewish and Christian festivals in the United States? What might account for such different "layers" of participation? Do different sectors of the population tend to gravitate toward one or another "layer." The film describes how two different legends involving different temple deities and sets of devotees have become fused into one single "Chittirai festival" -- despite the efforts of the two sets of priests to keep the two celebrations separately identifiable. Can you think of any similar "fusions" of festivals in Europe and the United States -- despite the wishes of religious authorities to keep the two celebrations separate?

7. The Chittirai festival has undergone many changes from the days when there were two separate festivals -- one for the Goddess Minakshi and Lord Sundareshvar and the other for Lord Alagar. Can you trace major festivals in the West (e.g., Christmas, Hanukkah) that have undergone similar changes? Describe some of the more significant changes. What economic, social, or intellectual factors might account for these changes?

8. The Chittirai festival brings together in joint celebrations religious communities that otherwise are distant from one another (e.g., Shaivite city-dwellers, Vaishnavite villagers). Have you observed any religious festival in the West that brings together in joint celebrations
Wedding of the Goddess: Parts I & II

religious communities that otherwise are distant from one another? What do your observations reflect about similarities and differences between religious communities in India and religious communities in the West?

9. The legends of the Goddess Minakshi and Lord Sundareswar metaphorically place the city of Madurai in the center of the world (c.f., Minakshi's departure from Madurai to conquer the Lords of the Eight Directions). How typical is it for religious and/or cultural traditions to place the followers of those traditions in the center of the world?

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


Thiagarajan, K. (text), Meenakshi Temple: Madurai, Madurai : Meenakshi Sundareswarar Temple Renovation Committee, 1963 (?).