

Political Propaganda by the Madurai Nayakas: Minakshi – Sundaresvara Temple

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Figure 1. Ariel view of Minakshi Temple

Madurai, located in the southernmost state of India, is more affectionately known as “The Temple City” for its thousands of Hindu temples on almost every street corner (Fig. 2). Located in the center is the most famous Minakshi – Sundaresvara Temple (commonly referred to as Minakshi Temple). Minakshi and Sundaresvara (the local forms of the Hindu gods Parvathi and Shiva) have long stood as the main deities of the city. They are often considered to share authority with the present government. Initial construction of Minakshi Temple began with the Vijayanagara Empire (1336 – 1565 CE) with the construction of the two main shrines. The majority of the expansions surrounding the shrines were built by the reigning Madurai

Nayakas who came to power in 1565 CE. During the rule of the Nayakas, the Mughal Empire in the north experienced great success and witnessed growth in Muslim art and architecture. Significant patronage by the Hindu Nayakas developed a period of artistic growth in the state of Tamil Nadu, with works easily identifiable by their architectural and iconographic style. Prior to the 16th century royal portraiture was not a prevalent art form in Dravidian temples. It is with the Nayakas’ expansions to temples that images of kings and political dignitaries find their place within the temple walls. The new architectural developments and insertion of royal portraiture into temple construction by the Nayakas was for political propaganda.



Figure 2. Map of India

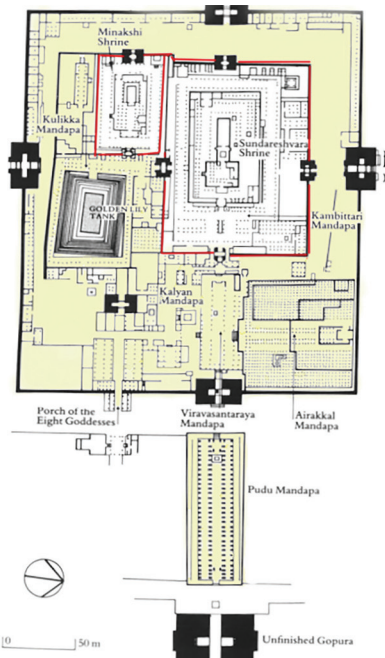


Figure 3. Floor Plan of Minakshi Temple

THE MYTH OF MINAKSHI

Minakshi's long presence in the sacred city of Madurai has established her as the main goddess of the land. The myth of Minakshi begins with an ancient Pandyan king and queen of Madurai. The queen was a faithful devotee of the goddess Parvathi, the consort of Shiva. One night, Parvathi, in the form of a young girl, came to the queen in her dream. Upon being asked her wishes, the queen requested that Parvathi be born to her in this same childlike form. In the following years the king and queen could not have a child, so they began performing *yagas* (holy fires). Parvathi then granted the queen her wish and appeared as a young girl in the fire.

Immediately the child ran from the fire to the lap of the queen. While happy to have a child, the king, looking for an heir to his throne was disappointed to see that it was not only a girl, but that she had three breasts. A divine voice then spoke to the king, telling him to raise the child as a fierce warrior and the third breast will disappear when she meets her husband. The king listened to this request and crowned the child as queen. The queen fought many battles on earth, defeating all her enemies. Unsatisfied, she then attacked Mount Kaila (Fig. 2), the home of Lord Shiva. Upon de-

feating all his soldiers, she then approached Shiva himself. Her third breast immediately disappeared. Knowing that this must be her fated husband, she dropped her weapons. The two fell in love and were married in Madurai, where they rule as Minakshi and Sundaresvara, the local forms of Parvathi and Shiva.¹

THE CREATION OF THE 'INTERSPACE'

With the long presence of these powerful gods in Madurai's history, it is understandable why so much attention and resources have been dedicated to their temple. The lengthy expansions of Minakshi Temple have resulted in a layout unlike other Dravidian style temples. The enlarged Temple has several *mandapams* (large halls) and processional spaces, separating the different areas of the temple with additional enclosure walls and four large gateway entrances with superstructures known as *gopuras*. Looking at the temple floor plan (Fig. 3) and structure formally, that the later additions to the temple, though individually constructed, enhance the connection of the worshippers to the deity by establishing a greater sacred ground for ritual movement. The *prakaram* or 'interspace' is the area between the outer walls of the Temple and the inner walls of the main shrine, highlighted in

yellow on figure 3. The additions by the Nayakas encourage more worshippers to spend time within the temple. The shared sovereignty between the Nayakas and the local deities was reinforced by allowing for political propaganda to be placed in the interspace through temple iconography. Instances of political propaganda are prominent in three areas of the temple. Puda Mandapam, a large hall outside of the main temple walls, the One Thousand Pillar Mandapam, in the north east corner of the temple, and the Golden Lilly Tank located in front of Minakshi's shrine.

Approaching the Minakshi Temple from the outer streets, little of the inside is visible. The massive outer walls and four large *gopuras* (built from 1570s-1590s) serve as a distinct marker between the sacred space of the temple and the profane space of the city streets. Standing five to seven stories tall, the *gopuras* signify the passage between the sacred and the profane that occurs during the entrance of the temple. The large towers are covered in stucco figures of gods, goddesses and mythical creatures, all representing the divine pantheon.

Once through the entrance of Minakshi Temple, the worshipper is now in the outer most enclosure of the temple, the interspace. In the

interspace that devotees circumambulate through the *mandapams*, going around the inner sanctums (outlined in red on fig. 3) instead of immediately walking straight to it. This circumambulation allows the devotee to appreciate the large amounts of edifices and iconography, helping in achieving the initial transition of mind from profane to sacred.² The interspace, however, is not considered the formal 'temple' but an extension of the temple proper (the *vimana*). By clearly acknowledging the difference between the enclosures, through the way they are designed and decorated, architects make the distinction between the final and completely transformed sacred ground of both Minakshi's and Sundaresvara's shrines and the interspace.

During the circumambulation, devotees enter through each *mandapam*, beginning at the east *gopura* and finishing in the One Thousand Pillar Mandapam (Fig. 4). Built in the early seventeenth century the *mandapam* is dimly lit and houses 985 columns seemingly spanning in every direction infinitely. With a surface area of 5000 m², it is dedicated to the cosmic form of Shiva, Nataraja (Lord of the Dance). Made with no limitations, the hall leaves the impression of overwhelming abundance.

The columned halls are often used for festi-

val celebrations and ritual processions. Worshippers fill the hall when the deity rests in the *mandapam* during festivals. The *mandapam* is constructed in a manner that allows for the easiest flow of movement. Typically rectangular in shape, a large processional aisle runs down the center, leading to the platform of the deity.³ The wide aisle creates a more open space during the processional and highlights the purpose of the hall. The *mandapams* were an addition to the complex that primarily focused on ritual movement rather than housing the deity. They are usually the sites of the most impressive stone sculpture in the complex. Carved in a way that interacts with the worshippers, The One Thousand Pillar Mandapam in Minakshi Temple houses statues of gods and goddesses, wealthy patrons, gypsies, and mythical creatures. All of whom are represented in local myths and ancient Hindu texts. Each one intricately carved in detail showing the skill of the sculptor. These ornate sculpture piers have become a sign of Nayakas artistic influence.

The final area of the interspace before entering the shrines of the deities is the long corridor in front of Minakshi's shrine. Therefore entire *prakaram* is filled with images of deities, heroes and *yalis* (mythical lion creatures) carved and painted

from the floors to the ceilings. The concept that Hindu temples are houses for the gods, removes the emphasis on congregational worship and instead places it on the paths and spaces used for ritual movement. The additional spaces used for circumambulation can be understood as functional for both the devotee moving inwards towards the main shrines and for the deity coming out to the people.⁴ During festivals the deities move from their shrine around the temple and city, highlighting the processional layout of the Temple. More frequently, worshippers who enter the temple utilize the paths working inwards as they circumambulate around the main shrines and throughout the entire temple. During the circumambulation the devotee witnesses the images portrayed throughout the interspace, achieving the transition of mind and witnessing the strategically placed propaganda by the Nayakas.

Within the interspace, a large amount of attention was paid to the surface decoration, especially columns. With the construction of the large *mandapams*, there was an increasing focus on the columns and piers that support them. The large blocks are wider at the top and further apart at the base, leading to a more spacious *mandapam*.⁵ The rectangular piers allowed for more variety in design

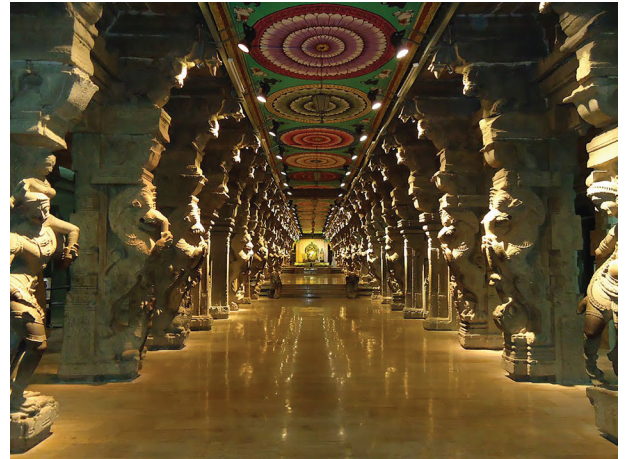


Figure 4. One Thousand Pillar Mandapam



Figure 5. Sculptural piers, One Thousand Pillar Mandapam, Granite



Figure 6. Rajendra Chola I sculpture at Brihadeeswara Temple

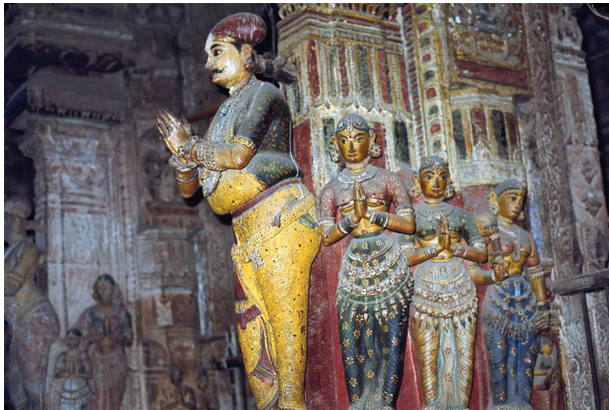


Figure 7. Portrait of Nayakas Kings, Puda Mandapam, Granite Sculpture.

(Fig. 5). By carving the shaft almost entirely, they can be made into inspiring works of art. It is the inspiring impact of the repetitive, ornate piers and carvings that achieve the purpose of influencing the devotee in their faith of the gods and the Nayakas.

NAYAKAS ROYAL PATRONAGE

Due to construction costs, large temples servicing the communities were typically built by royalty. The temples provided a space for the community to worship and express their devotion of the ruler to the gods. These acts, however, were more of a display of physical power and economic wealth. During the Nayakas Empire, the massive amount of patronage of the arts and temple construction seem less of an act of piety and more an exertion of power. The Nayakas primarily funded temple expansions rather than constructing on open plots of land. This served as a way to connect their rule to that of their predecessors as well as the divine. The stone construction of temples is the gift that creates a foundation for the shared sovereignty of the deity and the king. South Indian Chola Emperors, whose dynasty lasted from 300 BCE till 1279 CE, built many of the great Tamil temples, but they did not leave the same dominat-

ing portraits like the Nayakas in Madurai. Chola kings left little evidence of individual histories while the Nayakas constructed life size portraits of themselves and even their predecessors on the same scale of the divine.

This can be seen by a sculpture on the great South Indian Chola Brihadeeswara Temple in Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu. The sculpture depicts the patron king of the Temple Rajendra Chola I being garlanded by the Shiva (Fig. 6). The hierarchal scale shows a clear difference from Nayakas sculpture.

ROYAL PORTRAITURE IN NAYAKAS TAMIL NADU

Portraiture was not established in South Asian sculpture until the Nayakas in the 16th century. Before then royal portraiture was restricted to small wall paintings or textiles depicting kings in courtly, erotic and private settings. The presence of portraiture in Indian sculpture was rare and always small scale. The king was never seen as the same size as a deity, but depicted standing alone on the same levels as the gods. In a religious subject, any presence of a particular individual would always be a subordinate figure represented too small to have detail or any mark of individuality. Portraits are recognized by their secular dress and hand gesture

of devotion, *anjalimurda*.⁶ This is a significantly different portrayal than those of the Nayakas. A shift from the use of subtle inscriptions to large portrait sculptures displays the intention of the Nayakas to make themselves visible to daily worshippers. This prominence would have instilled a greater sense of relationship between the people of Madurai and their emperors (Fig. 6). During the reign of the Nayakas there was a constant threat of invasion by neighboring kingdoms, and multiple war-zones surrounded the city.⁷ While these may not always have been direct threats, the constant insecurity was calmed by the visual presence of an enlightened and strong emperor.

Prominent South Indian royal portraits began with the development of figural sculpture piers. Indian piers are often constructed with figural sculptures attached to inner side. During the 16th century the technical and artistic abilities of artists allowed the partially sculpted piers to become three-dimensional sculptures hardly attached to the pier they are carved from (Fig. 5).⁸ With this development the large pier sculptures of royals became not only possible but also popular. The presence of the sculptures on their own is less significant than looking at the portraits within the temple context, which highlights the relationship

of the kings to temples and their deities. The portrait sculptures portrayed in the Minakshi Temple were for the most part constructed during the lifetime of their models. Consequently, the sculptures were recognizable by the general public as the present royalty. Today the iconography identifies the figures as royalty rather than gods or common folk. The portraits are in contemporary dress, ornate jewelry and headdresses, with their bodies well fed and in a relaxed posture. The most obvious indication that they are not divine figures however is their devotional hand gesture, known as *anjalimurda*.

Portraiture in Minkakshi Temple is much more prevalent than other South Indian temples due to the Nayakas additions and vested interest in showing their presence. Therefore, not only an occasional wall-painting (though many are no longer present) but large figural sculpture piers depict life size royal portraiture throughout the temple. Puda Mandapam is a large hall that sits outside of the current temple walls. Built in 1635 by one of the last emperors of the Nayakas, Tirumala. The *mandapam* was intended to be a part of the next expansion of the temple, but it was never completed. The hall has a large center aisle flanked by two small side aisles and is filled with traditional images of

deities, *yalis*, and surprisingly a lineage of Nayakas emperors (Fig. 7). Flanking the center aisle are the large piers sculpted into portraits that arrange the rulers in chronological order. The emperors are distinguished by their large stomachs, royal garb and hands in *anjalimurda*.⁹

The Hindu temple is not designed for communal worship, instead it is viewed as a house for the gods. The main purpose for Hindus visiting the temple is that one may approach the deity and witness the divine essence. Known as *darshana*, the physical act of seeing the divine and them seeing the worshipper is the culmination of devotion.¹⁰ A visual recreation of the god allows the deity to be approachable to man and connect the devotee to their faith. This important aspect of Hinduism can be seen in the intricate and detailed carvings of the eyes of the king sculptures in Puda Mandapam, whose deep-set eyes are visible to even a far away viewer. The sculptures are life-size reaching 1.7 m tall in addition to sitting on a base that is 1.5 m above ground level. Showing the importance of depicting authority over reality are the multiple queens at the sides of each king, constructed on a much smaller scale. The large stature of the kings allows them to look down on the viewer, making it questionable who the devotional

gesture is intended.

According to Branfoot, the placement of these figures in a main festival processional area (noting the importance of movement within a temple) suggests that the rulers are strategically placed to greet the deity, as it would move in front of them.¹¹ When the deity is raised on a throne during festivals, the kings would be at the same height and able to worship. While this is a valid argument, so too is the importance of the location as a processional space for daily worshippers. The large portraits are not solely placed out for festivals when the deity would be moving. Every day when a worshipper visits the temple, they are confronted by a life size depiction of their ruler. These portraits would have had an impact on the general public, as it became a reoccurring theme in their temple worship. These sculptures show the Nayakas claim to their own divinity or at the very least the notion that the kings are on the same level as the deities. The visual recreation of the Hindu gods allows the divine to be approachable to man and connect the devotee to their faith, in the same way that these recreations of royalty would make them welcoming to the worshippers. Standing on their own, at the same level and scale as the deities surrounding them in the hall, makes a clear statement by

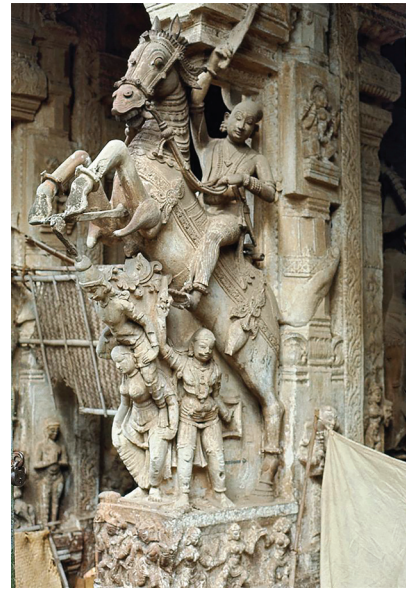


Figure 8. Tirumala Nayakas on horse-back, Pudamandapam, granite sculpture



Figure 9. The marriage of Minakshi and Sundaresvara, Golden Lilly Tank, wall painting.

the Nayakas. The portraits are placed within the temple complexes and assert themselves as the living presence of divine power to serve the general public.

Military scenes are a way to illustrate connections between the lives of the rulers and building of temples. In the One Thousand Pillar Mandapam, many believe the male sculptures on the columns to be military warriors serving for the Nayakas. In addition to these men, there is a sculpture at the entrance to the hall of the main patron, Ariyanatha Mudaliar, the prime minister and general to Viswanatha Nayak, the first Nayakas of Madurai (1559–1600). He was a great leader who helped develop the region through construction and authority. At the entrance of the 1,000 Pillar Mandapam is a statue of Ariyanatha Mudaliar seated on horse-back.¹² The sculpture is also debated to be Lord Sundareswara, but whomever the sculpture may be the local legend and adoration of the sculpture as Ariyanatha shows his political influence to the point of deification. His influence on the Nayakas Empire lasted until his death, and now has a cult status in southern Tamil Nadu, where he is the patron figure among many regional groups. This depiction of Ariyanatha is similar to the statue of Tirumala Nayakas outside of Puda

Mandapam where he is also portrayed on horse-back (Fig. 8). These sculptures show the political figures as warriors and protectors of the people, in the same way as Hindu deities. Branfoot notes Krautheimer's theory of:

The architectural copy joined with the notion of symbolism both to the intentions of the patron and to the response of the medieval onlooker...The associative power of architectural forms could thus be used by patrons to promote devotion, evoke holy sites, or...make political propaganda.¹³

This indicates the power in architecture to convey a message from the patron to the daily worshipers. The Nayakas did exactly this. The representation of Tirumala and Ariyanatha both imply the power of the form to promote both devotional and political propaganda.

One of the few remaining examples of painted royal portraits in the temple rests in a small portico on the western side of the Golden Lily Tank, it depicts the marriage of Minakshi and Sundaresvara attended by the Nayakas queen Rani Mangammal and her grandson, heir to the throne (Fig. 9).¹⁴ Present in the center of the painting are Minakshi, in her green fish eyed goddess form, and Sundaresvara beside her, painted white. The two are being wed by Vishnu (painted in blue),

Minakshi's brother and one of the three principle deities of Hinduism. In the bottom right corner, Queen Mangammal and her grandson can be distinguished by their secular garb (lack of divine headdress) and their *anjali murda* hand gesture. While the queen is off to the side of the painting and smaller to the principle deities, she is on the same scale as the rest of the gods in the divine pantheon. Were it not for her lack of divine headdress, she could not be distinguished from the crowd. This painting implies a personal connection of the queen to the divine. Therefore directly linking the power of the Nayakas to that of Minakshi and Sundaresvara, working as political propaganda inside the temple.

The Hindu temple is not solely connected to spiritual life. Mitchell expresses this when he writes, "The temple is the most characteristic artistic expression of Hinduism providing a focus for both the social and spiritual life of the community it serves".¹⁵ Devotees typically visit a temple once a day if not more, representing an important aspect of daily life and social interaction. Hours are spent with family and neighbors eating and worshipping in the temple complex. The presence of royal portraiture in the processional areas of the interspace would be constantly visible to devotees during

their large amounts of social time spent inside the temple.

CONCLUSION

Architecture was the Nayakas' most powerful artistic tool. Their temple construction resulted in a clear distinction between the sacred and the profane. The *mandapams* within the interspace created a new element to Minakshi Temple that included a transition area between the outside world and ultimate sacred space. The power of this space, is in its symbolism. The interspace represents the area where earthly beings surrounded by temptation are brought to enlightenment. Political portraiture in this space signifies that the Nayakas emperors are able to assist the people of Madurai in this process, but they also offer the same protection and enlightenment as the gods in the divine pantheon.

By erecting additions to the Minakshi Temple, the Nayakas created a space to host worshippers and their own politically motivated portraiture. The sculptured piers in Puda Mandapam and the 1,000 Pillar Mandapam and in paintings throughout the Temple forged a connection between the Nayakas and the long-standing deities of the city, Minakshi and Sundaresvara. Establishing

this connection gave the public a view of their emperors as enlightened, stable beings like the well-respected gods. The implied connections between the Nayakas and the deities show their divine right to rule and emphasize the shared sovereignty between the two. This was crucial to the Nayakas whose empire was not as stable as their large patronage of the arts would suggest. By creating an association with the divine powers who protect the people, the Nayakas were seen in the same light. Entering the temple brought the Nayakas directly into the heart of the people, stabilizing the public's faith in the empire.

GLOSSARY

Anjalimurda – A devotional hand gesture used by devotees as they approach the deities. The pressing together of the palms is a sign of respect and subservience which is also commonly used between people of different social status.

Minakshi – The local South Indian/Tamil Nadu form of the goddess Parvathi.

Sundaresvara – The local South Indian/Tamil Nadu form of the god Shiva.

Yaga – A holy fire created for prayer.

Darashana – The act of seeing, usually in reference to seeing the idol of the gods.

Puja – Ritual offerings to the gods performed by Brahmin priests.

Mandapam - Large pillared halls in a Hindu temple.

Gopura – Multi-storied superstructures above the entrances to a temple; typical of Dravidian style architecture.

Prakaram – The area of the temple between the outer enclosure and the main shrine; also known as the interspace.

Vimana – The superstructure above the main shrines.

Yali – Mythical beast like creatures with either the body or head of a lion combined with other animal.

ENDNOTES

¹ T.G.S. Balaram Iyer, and T. R. Rajagopalan. *History & description of Sri Meenakshi Temple*. (1987), 4-5.

² Peter L. Kollar. *Symbolism in Hindu Architecture: As Revealed in the Shri Minakshi Sundareswar*. (New Delhi: Aryan International, 2001), 26.

³ Crispin Branfoot. "Imperial Frontiers: Building Sacred Space in Sixteenth-Century South India." *The Art Bulletin* 90.2 (2008), 7.

⁴ Crispin Branfoot. "Approaching the Temple in Naya ka-Period Madurai: The Kūtal Alakar Temple." *Artibus Asiae* 60.2 (2000), 197.

⁵ Crispin Branfoot. "Imperial Frontiers: Building Sacred Space in Sixteenth-Century South India." *The Art Bulletin* 90.2 (2008), 2.

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⁷ R. Sathyanatha Aiyar. *History of the Nayaks in Madurai*. (London: Oxford UP, 1924), 113.

⁸ *ibid* 23.

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¹⁰ C.J. Fuller. *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1992), 50.

¹¹ Crispin Branfoot. "Royal Portrait Sculpture in the South Indian Temple." *South Asian Studies* 16.1 (2000), 25.

¹² "Inspired by a House of 1,000 Windows." *The Hindu*. (2008). N.p.

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¹⁴ *ibid* 241.

¹⁵ George Michell. *The Hindu Temple: An Introduction to its Meaning and Forms*. (Chicago: U of Chicago 1988), 19.