

## A STUDY ON SRI MUKTHEESWARAR TEMPLE AS A PANCHABHOOTA STHALAM IN MADURAI

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### ABSTRACT

Temples are everywhere in Tamil Nadu from large monumental structures to small stone buildings, each having a certain significance and greatly influencing the lives of the people who regard the temple as a place where they could be close to God. It is a land of intense spirituality and religious faith reflected in the profusion of temples present in this region. Temples are the visible symbols of the earth's prayer to heaven. Temples are the great teachers of piety to all classes of people. Construction of temples, installation of idols, renovation, preservation, and conduct of rituals and festivals are deep-rooted and are important aspects of Indian culture. Madurai is called 'Temple City'. The impressive temples in Madurai showcase the enduring legacy of Dravidian art and culture. Throughout history, the Pallavas, Cholas, Pandyas, Vijayanagar rulers, and the Nayakas have all played significant roles in shaping the remarkable architecture of the temples in Madurai. Each dynasty had its own way of designing these beautiful masterpieces. In Panchabhootha Sthalam in Madurai, Sri Muktheeswarar temple is represented by Air. Those who pray to the lord and goddess Maragathavali attain salvation after life and peaceful life during their lifetime. This temple has many shrines such as Dakshina Moorthi, Sri Durgai Amman, Vinayagar, Lord Muruga, and the idol statue of Indira. This temple Thala Virucham is VilwaTree.

**KEYWORDS: MADURAI, SHRINES, ARCHITECTURE, PUJAS, TEMPLE, LORD SHIVA**

### INTRODUCTION

The cultural prominence of Madurai in ancient times has earned the city the epithet "The Athens of South India". It has been a great center of learning from very early times. As the seat of the Tamil academy called the *Sangam* it wielded great influence in the literary and cultural fields. Whether as a temple city or as a capital city, the history of Madurai is distinct from that of other cities. The rich Dravidian art and culture is reflected in the standing temples of Madurai. The architecture of the Madurai temples was significantly influenced by the Pallavas, Cholas, Pandyas, Vijayanagar rulers, and the Nayakas, all of whom made important contributions. These impressive structures reflect the unique imprint of each dynasty that was involved. The temples found in South India are predominantly constructed using stones and are built in the Dravidian architectural style. The temples come in various shapes such as rectangular, square, star-shaped, and octagonal. These temples typically feature gopurams, which are large towers located above the entrances. Additionally, they have a vimana, which is a tower situated over the sanctum housing the Deities, as well as spacious pillared halls and corridors. In the past, the gopurams were always the tallest structures in the town, and no other building was permitted to exceed their height. The most revered area within the temple is the Pida (altar) or pedestal of the Deity.

In Madurai's Panchabhootha Sthalam, the Sri Muktheeswarar temple represents the element of Air. Pancha Bhoodha Sthalas represents the five great elements. It refers to five great temples dedicated to Lord Shiva, each representing a manifestation of the five prime elements of nature: The Earth, Water, Fire, Air, and Sky. "Panch" represents "five," "Bhootha" means "elements," and "Sthala" indicates "place." The five basic elements are believed to be enshrined in the five lingams of the temples, with each lingam named after the element represented.

**நிலம் தீ நீர் வளி விசும்போடு ஐந்தும்**

**கலந்த மயக்கம் உலகம் ஆதலின் (தொல். பொருள். மரபியல் - 635)**

The Tholkappiam contains the idea that the world consists of air, fire, water, land, and ether, which is also known as Panchabhootham. Generally, the temples in Madurai are in the Dravidian style comprising the towering gopurams (entrance towers), which are adorned with intricately carved sculptures and brightly coloured paintings that depict stories from Hindu mythology. The outer walls and pillars of temples also feature intricate carvings of gods, goddesses, and other mythological figures. The architectural style temples in and around Madurai primarily belong to the Dravidian style, which originated in the southern part of India and is characterized by its grandiose structures, elaborate carvings, and vibrant colours.

Temples in South India are mainly formed of stones, following the Dravidian style of architecture. The shape of the temples may be rectangular, square, star-shaped, or octagonal. These temples usually have gopurams, which are large towers over the entrances; a vimana, which is the tower over the sanctum (the Deities); and large pillared halls and corridors. The gopurams in the past were always the tallest structures in town and no other building will be built over the height of Gopuram. The most sacred place is the Pida (altar) or pedestal of the Deity.

There are five temples from Madurai as Pancha Bhoodha Sthalam and they are situated around Sri Meenakshi Amman Temple. It is believed that this is the reason Madurai Meenakshi Amman holds a Panchavarna parrot with white, purple, green, red, and yellow colours in it, in her hand. Lord Shiva has also performed 64 Thiruvilayadalgal in Kadambavanam in Madurai. Among them, the Sri Muktheeswarar Temple, Theppakulam, Madurai is represented by the Air.

## **METHODOLOGY AND SOURCE MATERIALS**

The present study is an attempt to identify, describe, and analyze the history of Sri Muktheeswarar Temple as a Pancha Bhoota Sthalam in Madurai. The data gathered from fieldwork and the available literary sources are subjected to intensive examination to analyze the aspects that pertain to the topic. The researcher followed the narrative and descriptive methodology. The availed sources for the study could be broadly classified into primary and secondary sources. The primary source consists of inscriptions and archival records. The secondary sources include published works, magazines, website data, and the like.

## **AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

**“A Study on Sri Muktheeswarar Temple as a Pancha Bhoota Sthalam in Madurai”** forms the title of the study. The basic aim of the study is to understand the history of the Temple, art and architecture, pujas, and festivals of the Temple.

- i. The study attempts to bring out the history of Sri Muktheeswarar Temple in Madurai.
- ii. The study aims to trace systematically the architecture of the temple.
- iii. The study intends to critically examine the pujas and festivals of the temple.

## **1. THE TEMPLE OF MUKTHEESWARAR - GOD OF SALVATION**

There are 64 Thiruvilaiyadalgals of Lord Shiva and this temple is related to eliminating the white elephant's curse according to the Madurai historical epics. One day Saint Dhurvaasar was worshipping the Lord at Kaasi and a fragrant heavenly lotus fell from the Lord's body to Dhurvaasar's hands. The Saint proudly took the flower to heaven and he saw the Head angel Indhra riding on his divine vehicle Ayravadh Elephant. He was tired from winning the battle with the demons. The Saint praised Indhra and presented the lotus to him. But he was exhausted, so he placed the flower on the elephant's forehead. Naturally, the elephant didn't know the value of the flower. The elephant took it with its trunk, dropped it, and crushed it with its feet.

Dhurvaasar considered this as disrespect and cursed them for disregarding the divine flower. So Indhra lost all his land and the Ayravadh elephant had to be born and live as a normal elephant in the forest for a hundred years. The elephant crossed many forests before reaching Madurai where it drank and played in the golden lotus pond. Then it prayed at the temple which was north of the pond's shore. Hence its curse was lifted. It wished to be one of the elephants carrying the sanctum sanctorum of Lord Shiva in all directions. So, it prayed earnestly and became an elephant in the east direction. But Indra wanted Ayravadh back in heaven and so the elephant heeded to his words and returned.

Before returning, it made a temple in its name in the southeast direction of Madurai. It instated a linga of Lord Shiva calling him Ayravadheeswarar and the temple was named Ayravasisuram. The place came to be known as Ayravadhanallur. When Madurai was ruled by Nayakars, the temple was expanded and worshipped by Muthu Veerappa Nayakar, the elder brother of Thirumalai Nayakar. He named the lord as Muktheeswarar in the remembrance of his name. Later people called him Muktheeswarar meaning "the god who bestows salvation". Lord Shiva is located in the sanctum sanctorum of the temple and Ambal is situated adjacent to that. Ambal is facing south direction with both her hands up in offering blessings. This is the site of Vaayu (the element of air), one of the Pancha Bhutas. Sunrays spread on the Shiv Linga and the deity of Nandhi on specific days of the year. This proves to be an example of the skills of sculptors of Tamilnadu. Temples that have sun rays falling upon their deities on certain days every year are known as Sun worshipping sites. According to astrology, people who have a descending sun in their horoscope can visit this temple as a remedy.

From March 10, 11 to March 22, 23 and from September 19 to 30, from sunrise at 6:15 to 6:25 the sunrays fall on Muktheeswarar and from 6:40 to 6:50 they reach inside the sanctum sanctorum of Lord Shiva. This miracle is published in the local newspapers. Thus, the people of Madurai crowded at the temple to witness it. Special pooja and Abhisekha are offered to the gods during this time. Religious experts say that the sun worships the god in the form of light. The temple pond opposite this temple was expanded during Thirumalai Nayakar's reign. The pond has 3 steps on each side totalling 12. The courtyard has herbal plants. History says that Thirumalai Nayakar and the Kings after him used to enjoy full moon days in a boat on the pond.

Every year during the Tamil month of Thai, a festival is held on the day of Poosam Stars as King Thirumalai was born on that day. Meenakshi Sundaeswarar circles the pond thrice. The people gather around the temple pond to celebrate this festival. This pond is called Maariamman Theppam while others argue that it's Muktheeswarar Theppam.

During the Chola era, in the Brahmotsavam period, the deities of Shiva and Sakthi are taken to the middle of the pond to bless the worshippers throughout the night. But there's a story among people that Alagar doesn't cross the North shore and Meenakshi Sundaeswarar doesn't cross the South shore because the South shore is bestowed on Meenakshi by Thirumalai. Alagar doesn't come to the south shore as that would be equal to taking back what he's gifted. The temple is 3 km away from Periyar and buses are frequently available.

## **2. ART AND ARCHITECTURE**

As the Sun God himself is worshipping the Lord with his rays submitted at His feet, there is no special shrine for the Navagrahas-9 planets. It is also believed that a direct prayer to Lord Muktheeswarar would relieve the devotee from the adverse effects of the planets. There are Vinayaka shrines in the Northeast and Northwest. There are four varieties of Vilwa trees here Nelli, Kiluvai, Mavilangai, and Vilwa. The Vilwa tree and the Vinayaka in the Northwest grace the devotee his needs who commences lighting a deepa before this Lord on any bright moon day and come round thrice and continue it of 48 days. The temple had no gopuram. The Lord Shiva's Thiruvilaiyadals are depicted on the

pillars of the temple. The idol of Egabhadramurthy was installed in this temple accompanied by Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva.

The shrines of this temple have so many shrines are there, Dakshina Moorthi, Lord Hanuman, Durgai Amman, Vinayaka, Moolavar Muktheeswara, and Maragathavali Amman.

### **2.1 Dakshina Moorthi**

The lord Dakshina Moorthi idol is facing toward the South Direction. The worshipping of Dakshina Moorthi is extremely beneficial in reducing the effects of mourning, death fear, indecision, disease, guilt, and the eradication of sins. This puja ritual gives relief from problems, fears, and stress. Dakshina Moorthi Puja is beneficial to excel in studies and education and very beneficial for panic and psychic attacks. When the student is weak and is in doubt about clearing the exam, this puja bestows enormous confidence and power to the student.

### **2.2 Sri Durgai Amman**

The Durga Amman in the temple is facing the east direction. The height of the statue is approximately six feet in height. Many devotees come and visit them.

### **2.3 The Vinayakar**

The Vinayaka is under the Pipal trees which are facing in the east direction. The many devotees come to pray to lord Vinayaka. Many rituals are held under the trees. The Vinayakar Chaturthi festival is celebrated here.

### **2.4 The Lord Murugan**

The Lord Murugan statue is facing south in the temple. Lord Muruga is the son of Lord Shiva and Parvati Devi. “**Thaipooam**” is celebrated as the birth anniversary of Lord Murugan.

### **2.5 The idol statue of Indira**

King Thirumalai Naicker committed to building a tank for Mother Meenakshi and the land chosen was in front of the Muktheeswarar temple, hence the temple could not be extended further. As there was no Rajagopuram(main tower) for the temple, the one constructed in the center of the tank would look like a tower built for Muktheeswara Temple if viewed either from within the temple or from the eastern side.

Indira’s vehicle Iravadham the white elephant was relieved of its curse in this shrine. Of the Panchabhutha shrines in Madurai (Panchabhuhas –Air, Fire, water, earth, and space making this universe), Muktheeswarar temple represents Vayu-Air. This is one of the temples worshipped by the Sun.

Indira’s vehicle, the while elephant Iravadham ignored a flower used in Shiva Pooja. It was cursed by Rishi Durvasa. It wandered among the wild elephants and finally was relieved of the curse. It worshiped Lord Shiva for his grace. As Indira could not find the Iravadha elephant even after the term of the curse, he set out in search of the animal. Before returning to the upper world with his Master Indira, the elephant wanted to worship Lord Shiva. It created a place after its name and worshiped Muktheeswarar. Even today, according to the documents of the temple, the place is known as Iravadha Nallur.

## **3. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TEMPLE**

Lord Muktheeswara relieves his devotees from the affliction of adverse effects caused by the nine planets. Those who pray to the lord and goddess Maragathavali attain salvation after life and peaceful life during their lifetime. The devotees are graced with good martial alliances, wise children, etc. Offering Vastras (clothes) to the lord is considered a means to accumulate the goodwill of the almighty. This is known as the great Punniyam during a lifetime. Those seeking higher education seek the blessings of the lord here. Those aspiring for the benefits of performing Aswametha Yoga bathe the (Abhishek) the lord with tender coconut, those aspiring for a berth in Mount Kailash, the abode of lord shiva bathe him with pure rice and those seeking the benefits of performing a consecration of the temple in do the panchamirtha abishek.

It is noteworthy that the rays of the Sun fall on the Presiding Deity Muktheeswarar during the days from 10/11 to 22/23 in March and again between September 18 to 30 and these rays remain for about 20 minutes each day. The Thiruvilayadals (miracle deeds) of Lord Shiva are very beautifully sculpted in the pillars of the temple, besides the scenes of penance of Rishis. There is also an idol of Ekabadramurthy combining the forms of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva with only two feet.

The Vilwa tree and the Vinayaka in the northwest grace the devotee his needs who commences lighting a deepa before this lord on any bright moon day and comes round thrice and continue it for 48 days.

## **4. POOJAS AND FESTIVALS**

In all the Hindu temples, the daily offer of worship to the various deities is of fundamental importance. The day-to-day ceremonies connected with the worship are called *Nitya-puja*. The daily offerings are obligatory and are very essential to preserve the sanctity of the shrine. There are six *kala poojas* are performed every day to the deity. Weekly and monthly pujas are also celebrated in the temples.

The temple priests perform the pooja (rituals) during festivals and daily. The temple rituals are performed four times a day: *Kalasanthi* at 9:00 a.m., *Uchikalam* at 12:00 p.m., *Sayarakshai* at 6:00 p.m., and *Arthajama* at 8:00 p.m. Each ritual has three steps: *alangaram* (decoration), *neivethanam* (food offering), and *deepa aradanai* (waving of lamps)

for the main sanctum and sub-deities of this temple. There are weekly, monthly, and fortnightly rituals performed in the temple

#### **4.1 Adi Pooram (July-August) (Tamil Month: Aadi)**

Aadi Pooram Day is celebrated in the Tamil month of Aadi. In English month, it is celebrated between July to August. This day is also known as the Andal Jayanthi. The Pooram is the Thai birth star of Andal. One among the 12 Alwar saints in the Vaishnava tradition. Andal is believed to be the incarnation of the goddess Lakshmi, and being a young girl to attain sainthood by choosing lord Vishnu himself as her beloved.

#### **4.2 Pradosha days**

##### **(13<sup>th</sup> day from the New Moon or Full Moon days each month)**

Pradosham is celebrated every month. Pradosham is an auspicious 3-hour period, 1.5 hours before and after sunset, and is observed bi-monthly on the 13th day of every fortnight. Therefore, there are two Pradoshams observed in a month, one in the waxing phase and the other in the waning phase of the Moon. The day is considered highly auspicious for the worship of Lord Shiva and his vehicle represented as Nandi.

In Sanskrit, “Pra” means remover, and “Dosham” means inauspicious events or Karma. As the name implies, Pradosham is the day when Lord Shiva will dissolve all your Karma and sins and fulfill your wishes. When the sun sets on the horizon, the mind calms down and is the ideal time to settle for a deep meditation for the Supreme Lord Shiva.

The time between 4.30 PM – 6.00 PM is observed as Pradosham. The smaller energy level Pradosham occurs every day during this time window. Middle energy level Pradoshams occur twice a month on the 13th lunar phase after a New Moon and a Full Moon. A larger energy level Pradosham occurs when one of the 13th lunar phases falls on a Saturday. During the Pradosham period, many devotees fastened to the lord shiva. The special ritual will be held for lord Shiva in the temple.

#### **4.3 Aadi Fridays (July to August) (Tamil month: Aadi)**

Aadi Friday is observed every Friday in the Aadi month of the Tamil calendar. The special poojas are observed on this day. The first and third Fridays in the month of Aadi are even more auspicious than all four Fridays.

#### **4.4 Thai Velli (January to February) (Tamil month: Thai)**

This festival is celebrated from January to February (Tamil month: Thai). Thai Fridays in January to February are the special pujas celebrated in the temple. This festival celebrates the event of Lord Subramanya receiving the vel from his mother, Goddess Parvathy, to kill the demon Narakasura. The Vel was given to Lord Murugan to vanquish the three asuras, Surapadman, Singamugan, and Tarakasuran. These demons are said to represent the negative traits of hatred, greed, and arrogance.

Thaipusam is a festival marked by acts of penance such as carrying the kavadi. “Kavadi” is usually a simple branch of a tree with two pots of milk tied at either end and decorated by a wooden arch, flowers, and peacock’s tail feathers.

#### **4.5 Navarathri (Tamil Month: Puratasi)**

The Navarathri festival is celebrated in Puratasi from September to October.

### **CONCLUSION**

Madurai is called ‘Temple City’. Most of the temples in Madurai are standing testimony to the rich Dravidian art and culture. The most commendable contributions to Madurai temple architecture were made by the Pallavas, Cholas, Pandyas, Vijayanagar rulers, and the Nayakas. Each dynasty had its own way of designing these beautiful masterpieces. Every dynasty that ever ruled this land has left an indestructible impression on the unique architecture. Madurai is one of the oldest cities in South India with a glorious history. In Panchabhootha Sthalam in Madurai, Sri Muktheeswarar temple is represented by Air. Those who pray to the lord and goddess Maragathavali attain salvation after life and peaceful life during their lifetime. This temple has many shrines such as Dakshina Moorthi, Sri Durgai Amman, Vinayagar, Lord Muruga, and the idol statue of Indira. This temple Thala Virucham is Vilwa Tree. However, the temple trust and government must take steps to the preservation of temples for future generations. This temple is a well-known and popular religious place as well as a tourist attraction. Still, this wonderful historic temple needs the Tourism Department of Tamil Nadu Government to make an intensive campaign to promote it among the people of India as well as foreign countries. This not only creates more awareness worldwide about our history of culture, art, and architecture but also generates revenue for the public and government.

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