CHAPTER II

PUJAS AND RITUALS
PUJAS AND RITUALS

Madurai is also known as ‘Jeevan Muktipuram’. The God at Madurai gives Mukti (Salvation) to the devotees when they perform puja in their mind. Puja is the Sanskrit term for worship (poosai in Tamil). It has been used to designate those rituals which constitute worship. Worship is an act of praise and adoration of God and an act of devotion to the Supreme Being. Worship has different meanings: proceeding on the way, following reverence, adoration and ritual worship. Ritual is a very multifaceted term that has been defined in many ways.

Puja in the Madurai temple is a ritual worship with abisheka (oblutions) and floral offerings to the accompaniment of chanting of mantras (sacred syllable). It is the core-ritual of the temple worship. It has a powerful sensual impact on the devotees. This is enhanced by the sound of musical instruments combined with the ringing of bells and the chanting of sacred texts. Scented smoke emerging from the burning of camphor, mingled with the heavy perfume of sandal wood, jasmine and roses further enhance the sensual impact. The bright silks and jewels covering the images scintillate as the priest waves the oil lamp inside the dark chamber. The showing of the camphor flame is the end of the puja, when the devotees forget

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145 S. Krishnamoorthy, Op.cit, p.27
themselves at least for a fraction of a second and essentially they cry the name of the God aloud, and lift their hands above the head to offer worship.\textsuperscript{147}

The universally omnipresent God is welcomed to be present in the icon by means of prayers. According to the \textit{Agamas}, man can elevate himself to Godhood by means of penance, prayers and austerities. As a preliminary to this ascent of man, the descent of God becomes essential. The \textit{puja} is the method for calling the omnipresent to confine itself in the \textit{garbhagraha} (literally the womb-house; the dark sanctum of the temple) for the benefit of the creature. When once the deity is visualized as a king, He is also thought to be pleased with offerings\textsuperscript{148} with which man is pleased. In the Hindu temple, the daily offerings of worship to the various deities are of fundamental importance. The day-to-day ceremonies connected with the worship are called \textit{Nitya –Puja}.\textsuperscript{149} The reciting of the \textit{Tiruppadigam} or the sacred hymns to the accompaniment of musical instruments before Gods during worship formed a regular feature in the worship.\textsuperscript{150}

\textbf{Types of worship}

The Madurai temple \textit{pujas} fall under three categories, namely, \textit{Nitya Pujas} which are done daily, \textit{Masa visesham} which are performed once a month and thirdly, \textit{Aandu visesham} or festivals which are celebrated once a year. The

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{147} ARE 401of 1929-30
  \item \textsuperscript{148} Ibid
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
expenses for these were borne by the temple itself from the income of lands owned by it or from the many endowments and grants made to it by the rulers or the public.

Daily *pujas* are offered according to the agamic shastras and are practically the same as they are in many Saiva temples. The ritual today is practically what it has been for hundreds of years past. The monthly festivals referred to certain fixed festivals which occurred once every month. For instance, the ‘*masa sankaranti*’, i.e., the first day of the Tamil month, the *Karticai nakshatram*, being 24 days in the year, *Sukravaram*, being 52 days in the year, and Full Moon days. The monthly festivals also seem to be conducted more or less in the same manner today.

An important part of temple ritual is the *Ashtabhandhanam* or the fixing of idols which has to be done strictly according to the *agamic Shastras*. The *Ashtabhandhanam* refers to the fixing of Mulava bheras, of stone images on their pedestals. The *chedibhandanam* refers to the fixing of the professional or bronze images on their pedestals.

Sri Meenakshi temple is compared with human body- *Ashta Sakti mandapam* as leg, *Veda mandapam* as ankle, *Meenakshi Nayakkar Mandapam* as thigh, Dark Mandapam as waist and Golden Lilly tank as stomach and so on.\(^{151}\) Thirumoolar in his Thirumandram compares mind and body to temple,

mouth to entrance of the Gopuram, Soul to Lingam and the five sense organs to temple bells and lights. Mandiram1823\textsuperscript{152} tells that:

The mind is the temple high; the fleshy body is the shrine

To the magnificent Lord the mouth is the tower- gate

To those who indubitably realize the soul is Shiva Linga

The deceitful senses fixe are the elegant lamp

For realized souls, the temple and the deity are all within oneself. The body made of flesh is the shrine, or the temple proper. The mind is the temple high, which means the sanctum or elevated structure in the temple. The Lord’s grace is bounteous, and like a true philanthropist He showers love without any discrimination or reservation. The temple’s tower- gate is the personification of His mouth.

Those who discern and realize the reality in an indubitable manner, identify Shiva Linga in the soul. All the five senses are deceitful, preventing the soul from having true vision of the Lord. But in the presence of the Lord, purified, they serve as elegant lamps which show the Lord clearly.

**Pujas in Agamas**

The *pujas* in the Meenakshi Sundareswarar temple are performed according to the *Saiva agamas*. Basically there are twenty eight *agamas*. They belong to

3rd to 7th century A.D.\textsuperscript{153} According to the \textit{agamas}, the \textit{pujas} held in the temple are of three components namely \textit{Nityam} – ritual which are performed daily. \textit{Naimittikam} - occasionally and \textit{Kamyam} - privately. Daily worship is conducted according to \textit{Parartha Nitya Puja} rules expounded in the Saivite \textit{Kamika} and \textit{Karana – Agamas}. The concerned priests of the temple should perform these \textit{pujas}. The method of these three \textit{pujas} are of again three types; - \textit{Saangam}, \textit{Upangam} and \textit{Pratyangam}. \textit{Saangam} consists of eight parts namely \textit{Abhishekam}, \textit{Padhyam}, \textit{Aasamiyam}, \textit{Arkkigam}, \textit{Vasthram}, \textit{Aparnam}, \textit{Sandanam} and \textit{Pushpam}. \textit{Upangam} consists of \textit{Toopam}, \textit{Deepam}, \textit{Vibhuti Anivithal}, \textit{Kudai}, \textit{Kannadi}, \textit{Samaram}, \textit{Visiri}, \textit{Viyagnam}, \textit{Nartanamand Geethavatyam}. \textit{Pratyangam} follows six types: namely \textit{Nivetyam}, \textit{Pali}, \textit{Homam}, \textit{Nityotsavam}, \textit{Sulukotakatanam} and \textit{Swastivasanam}. All these twenty four types of \textit{pujas} together are called as \textit{Saangopanga Pratyangam}.\textsuperscript{154}

Basically, \textit{puja} consists of sixteen acts of worship, collectively known as adoration ceremonies (Sanskrit – \textit{SadopaKaram}: Tamil – \textit{Upakaram}). Thus, worship might be described as the giving of homage to the presiding deities in the temple. These sixteen acts which are considered to be central to worship are \textit{Avakanam} (invocation), \textit{Stapanam} (fixing), \textit{Pattivam} (water for foot-washing), \textit{Asamanam} (water for sipping), \textit{Arikkiyam} (water for hand-washing), \textit{Abisekam or Snanam} (anointment), \textit{Vastiram} and \textit{Kandham Sattutal} (dressing and perfuming),

\textsuperscript{153} C. Nagaraja Pillai, \textit{Deviyin Thiruppaniyalargal}, Folklore Resources and Research Centre, Pallayamkottai, 1999, p.172.

\textsuperscript{154} Interview with K. Ganesh Bhattar on 19.01.2011.
Pushpam Sattutal (offering of flowers), Tupatipam Samarppittal (offering of incense and light), Naivettiyam (offering of food), Pali (sacrifice), Homam (oblation through fire), Nityotsavam (daily festival), Vattiyam (music), Nadanam (dance) and Utvasanam (send off or end). The tradition of the Upahara Puja is continued to this day in the Meenakshi Sundareswarar temple. The above sixteen rites are variously combined in a wide variety of specific ritual contexts in the temple.

Tamil Vidu Tutu, a literary work mentions that during the Upahara Pujas, Upakara Deepas were lit and other Upahara materials were also offered. It also listed out the Upakara materials used in the pujas and the lamps with their significance. The first to be shown was the Arakku Deepam which indicates the cosmos studded with stars. The second one was the Thanga Deepam which represents the Sun. The third was the Aarat Deepam which represents the Moon. The fourth to be shown was the Idaba or Rishaba Deepam (bull). The fifth was Purusha Marga Deepam. The sixth was the Plate Deepam (Irusudar) namely a plate with two wicks. The seventh was an Akkaratti Deepam which meant Akshara Deepam evidently with fifty one lamps representing the fifty one Aksharas (letters) of the Sanskrit language. The eighth lamp to be shown was Kumba Deepam (pot lamp). The ninth was a plate with camphor (karpurathattu). After this the following honorifics were also waved before the deity: mirror (kannadi),

umbrella (*kudai*), fly whisk (*vensamarai*), *alavattam* and the finis was with a fan. The waving of these lamps is continued to this day. The materials are still in use.

**Daily Worship**

Daily worship is to be conducted according to *Parartha Nittyam Puja* rules expounded in the Saivite Kamika and Karana Agamas. These rules suggest three governing principles for daily worship. *Puja* must be regular and daily; *Puja* must be fixed and pre arranged; and *Puja* must be on behalf of and for the benefit of the cosmos from its inception to its end.

In the Meenakshi Sundareswar temple, the daily worship (*Nityam*) is conducted according to Kamika- Karana Agama rules and is practically the same as they are in many Shiva Temples. There are Shivachariyars (Saiva priests) who learned Vedas to perform *puja*. Seven main shrines where daily *pujas* were offered are mentioned in the *Srithalam* and in the early records of British administration. These shrines refer to Sundareswarar and Meenakshi Shrine, Siddhi Vinayakar, Dakshinamurthi, Sataiyappar, Bhairavar and Surya- Chandrar. A number of minor shrines which are mentioned are the Hanumar temple near the main guard, Viyasaraya Hanuman, Narasimha Swami, Sellathamman, Kasi Visvanathar, Sanjivarayar, Pandyara Vinayakar, Arasadi Vinayahar, Elukadal Vinayakar,

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Hanumar temple at the North Gate, Virabhadraswami and Pathinettampadi Karuppan.\textsuperscript{157}

The \textit{Abhisheka} materials includes honey, tender coconuts, two sorts of sandal, plantain fruits, patcha karpuram, civet, sugar, curds, parimala dravyam (scents) and vibhuti. During the day the \textit{Nityotsavar} (Pallakku Chokkar), was taken in procession three times a day round the \textit{prakarams} of the temple with music and all honours. These \textit{pujas} and customs are still observed every day.

Rani Mangammal built a \textit{mandapa} infront of the Meenakshi temple’s eastern side of entrance in the \textit{Chithirai} Street. It is called as \textit{Nagara mandapam}. In this \textit{mandapa} a drum (murasu) is kept which makes a loud musical sound. It indicates the time of the \textit{pujas} in the Meenakshi temple to the devotees. In order to beat this drum, the Telugu \textit{melakkarar} family was invited from Kumbakonam by Acharya, the minster of Rani Mangammal. Both of their statues are found in the pillars of the \textit{Nagara mandapam}. They are employed hereditarily here drearilly and still that family members are serving at the temple and the murasu is beaten at about 5.00 am and 5.00 pm every day.

The Meenakshi Sundareswarar temple receives six time \textit{pujas} every day, namely \textit{Thiruvananthal, Vila Puja and Kalasanthi, Thirikalasanthi} and Uutchikalam, \textit{Sayarachai, Aarthajama Puja} and \textit{Palliarai Puja}. It is unique that during each \textit{puja} Goodness Meenakshi reveals in various forms.

\textsuperscript{157} D. Devakunjari, \textit{Madurai through the Ages}, Arulmigu Meenakshi SundARER\textsuperscript{2} swarar Thirukkoil, Madurai, 2004, p.296.
Thiruvananthal

Thiruvananthal is the morning puja. The temple is opened at 5.00 am and Thiruvananthal puja starts at 5.30 am with the worship of Siddhi Vinayakar. Lord Sundareswarar and Goddess Meenakshi are woken up from the Palliarai and it is called Thirupalli Ezhuchi. Lord Sundareswarar’s feet, which were kept in the previous night, are brought in a palanquin to the sanctum of the Godshrine from Palliarai ceremonially. Then the puja starts for Goddess Meenakshi. The carbuncle (a precious stone) nose stud of the Goddess Meenakshi which was removed and placed on the forehead in the previous day night is transferred to the nose again in the morning. It emphasises that the power of the Mulavar Amman is transferred to the Urchava image in the night and is brought back in the morning. This is called as ‘Mookkutti Deeparatani’. This is a unique event only in the Madurai temple. When the palanquin reaches the God’s shrine at about 5.45 am, the sanctum Santorum is opened and puja is performed for Sundareswarar. During the Thiruvananthal Puja Goddess Meenakshi is in the form of ‘Maha Sodasi’. There is no bathing ceremony during this puja. At the end of this puja, sacred milk (gnanapal) is distributed to the devotees as prasadham at Nalvar Shrine.

Vila Puja and Kalasanthi

This puja is held between 6.30 and 7.10 am for Goddess Meenakshi and 6.40 am and 7.20 am for Lord Sundareswarar. Abhishekam (Holy bath) is held for Vinayaga, Subramaniar, Goddess Meenakshi and Lord Sundareswarar. Holy water
is brought from the river vaigai for the Abhishekam. It is performed with the rituals like Snapanam, Punyakavasanam and Agni kariyam. Nithyakni and Nitya Pali are given during this puja. Sri Pali Nayaki is taken in a palanquin around the second prahara of Amman Shrine and reaches the Pali Peedam (Altar platform) in the flag staff. Nitya pali (boiled rice ball) is offered and shown Deeparatanai (Harathi). Then it is taken to the sanctum-sanctorum of the Goddess Meenakshi shrine and Puja is performed. The same procedure is followed in the Sundareswarar Shrine. Then Gaja (Elephant) Puja and Ko (cow) Puja is held. Sri Meenakshi worship Lord Shiva in the form of a cow, is called as Ko Puja. According to puranas, cow is the living place for all Gods and Devas. It emphasizes that when Sri Meenakshi worship Lord Shiva, it is like worshipping by all living being and the Devas. It also denotes that like the mother takes medicine for the disease of her child Goddess Meenakshi worship Lord Shiva for the sake of her children in the world. Worshipping a cow is equal to worshiping all the Gods. At this time a priest brings a cow to the altar of the Goddess Meenakshi shrine, wears garland, do special puja and feed the cow. This puja is performed between 6.30 am and 7.10 am behind a curtain cloth. It is a convention that Goddess Meenakshi takes the form of Paalai and Bhuvanai during this time. Puja is performed between 6.40 am and 7.30 am for Lord Sundareswarar.
Thirukalasanthi and Utchikkalam

This *puja* is performed at the day time from 10.30 am to 11.10 am at MeenakshiShrine and 10.40 am to 11.20 am at Lord SundareswararShrine. Two *puja* pots are filled with water at *Yagasala* and Vedas are recited by the priest to bring holiness. Then *Abhishekam* is held for both Goddess and God by that holy water. *Soda Soupasara Deeparathanai* is shown during this *puja*. After performing *puja* to the Goddess a priest surrounded by persons playing *Nathaswaram* and *Tavandai* (a drum like musical instrument), *Theevatti* (a torch with fire), water in a small *kalasa* and boiled rice as *nivedyam*, goes round the *praharas* and performs *puja* for all the *parivara* deities, and again reaches the Meenakshi Shrine.\(^{158}\) *Nathaswaram*(air), *Tavandai*(sound-sky), *Theevatti*(fire), Boiled rice(which come from land) and water denotes the *Pancha bhuthas* or five elements namely wind, sky, fire,land and water. It emphasizes that Goddess Herself worships all the parivara deities. This is called as ‘*Alavattam’.*\(^{159}\)

In the early days the priest went with a picture of a cow during this *puja*a assuming that Goddess Meenakshi Herself, in the form a cow does the *puja*. This was called *Ko Puja*. *Nivedyam* is offered to the deities and *prasadam* is distributed to all the devotees. A scheme has been started for this *prasadham* distribution by the temple authorities. The donors who are willing can invest

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\(^{158}\) Interview with N. Ramakrishnan- Nathaswara Vidhvan and R. Ganesh- Thavandai Vidhvan of Meenakshi SundARE swarar Temple, on 9- 8-2012.

Rs.5000/ in the bank. Every year, on the day which he mentions prasadham will be distributed in his name from the amount of interest. During this puja Goddess Meenakshi is in the form of Shyamala and Matangi.

Sayaratchai Puja

This puja is held between 4.30 pm and 5.00 pm in Goddess MeenakshiShrine and between 4.40 pm and 5.20 pm in God’sShrine. It is also called as Evening pujaand pradosa period puja. It is performed with Avahanam and Abishekam. The same procedure of Utchikala Puja is followed during this time also. Goddess Meenakshi gives dharshan in the form of Suha Shyamala at this puja.

Artha Jama Puja

The Artha Jama puja is held from 7.30 to 8.10 pm for Goddess Meenakshi and from 7.40 to 8.20 pm for Lord Sundareswarar. This puja is famous in the Madurai temple. During this puja Goddess Meenakshi is weared white silk saree and white flowers. She is in the aspect of Panchata Satchari with gracious look. At this puja also Abhishekam is done to the deities.

Palliarai Puja

Palliarai (bed chamber) puja is performed prior to the closing of the temple at night. When the puja bell ring at about 9.00 pm at the Anukkai Vinayaka Shrine at the second prahara of Chokkanatha shrine, the feet of Sundareswarar are carried in a silver palanquin to the shrine of Meenakshi. After the removal of the
Lord’s feet the sanctum doors of God’s shrine are closed. The procession goes around the second prahara and reaches the *Kambattadi mandapam*. There the temple accountant reads the account of the day. Here Vedic hymns, *Tevaram* and *Tiruvasakam* songs are recited. After performing *Upakara puja* at this place, the palanquin accompanied by music of *Nathaswaram* and chanting *Thirumurai* by *Othuvars* moves over a cloth spread on the floor to the entrance of Meenakshi shrine. On the way *Deeparathanai* is shown at some places. Then *Deeparathanai* is shown to Goddess Meenaskshi. Her carbuncle nose stud is removed and placed on Her forehead. This is called ‘Mookkutti *Kalattal’*. There is a convention that the power of Mulavar Amman is transferred to the *Palliarai Amman* by doing so. During this time a *puja* is held to the feet of Lord Sundareswarar in the palanquin by a priest and then the priest carries the Lord’s feet to the *Palliarai*. The doors of Meenakshishrine are closed. After *Upakarapuja* with *Sodasobasara Deeparathanai* and music, the doors of the *Palliarai* are closed. *Prasadhams* of boiled cereals (*sundal*), milk and sacred ash (*vibhuthi*) are distributed to the devotees. (*Vibhuti* is distributed instead of *Kumkum* in the Goddess Meenaskshi shrine during this *Palliarai puja* only).

The *Palliarai puja* though common in all Shiva temples, it is at Madurai it seems to have originated, known from the fact that in all Shiva Shrine the *Palliarai* deity is called *Amsabhudi Chokkar*, irrespective of the name of the Lord of the shrine. Chokkar being the name of the deity of Madurai, it means that the
Palliarai puja in all temples repeated the myth of the Madurai temple.\textsuperscript{160} Again the Lord’s feet are removed from Palliarai and returned to the Lord SundareswararShrine ceremonially in the next morning.

Thus the temple doors are opened at 5.00 a.m and starts with Thiruvanantalar puja at 5.30 a.m at Goddess Meenaskshishrine. When the Palliarai palanquin reaches the Lord Sundareswarar shrine the day puja begins. From 12.30 to 4.00 pm. the temple doors are closed and again opened at 4.00pm and pujas are performed. At 10.30pm the temple doors are closed at night. The time schedule of the daily puja may be changed during the festival time. If the procession goes to other mandapas outside the temple it starts only after the evening puja. Arthajama and Palliarai pujas will be held after the deities return to the temple.\textsuperscript{161} The following table shows the daily pujatimings of Goddess Meenakshi and Lord Sundareswarar.\textsuperscript{162}

\begin{table}
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{Time} & \textbf{Puja} & \textbf{Location} \\
\hline
5.00 a.m & \\
\hline
5.30 a.m & Thiruvanantalar puja & Meenaskshi shrine \\
\hline
12.30 p.m & & Sundareswarar shrine \\
\hline
4.00 p.m & & \\
\hline
10.30 p.m & & \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{161} S. Meiyappan, \textit{Madurai Meenatchi}, Manivasakar Pathippagam, Chennai, 2009, p.95.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl.No.</th>
<th>Name of the Puja</th>
<th>Goddess Meenaskshi shrine</th>
<th>Lord Sundareswarar shrine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Thiruvananthal</td>
<td>5.30Am</td>
<td>5.45 Am Godshrine is opened and Puja is performed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Vila Puja and Kalasanthi</td>
<td>6.30 Am to 7.10 Am</td>
<td>6.40 Am to 7.20 Am</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Thirikalasanthi and Utechikalam</td>
<td>10.30 Am to 11.10 Am</td>
<td>10.40 Am to 11.20 Am</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Sayarachai</td>
<td>4.30 Pm to 5.10 Pm</td>
<td>4.40 Pm to 5.20 Pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Arthajamam</td>
<td>7.30 Pm to 8.10 Pm</td>
<td>7.40 Pm to 8.20 Pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Palliarai and Pallakku Ceremony</td>
<td>Palliarai Puja is performed at about 9.30 Pm and the temple is closed at 10.00 Pm</td>
<td>At 9.15 Pm Lord Shiva starts in the Pallakku (His feet) towards Meenakshi shrine and Godshrine is closed at 9.20 Pm</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The expenses for these were borne by the temple itself from the income of lands owned by it or from many endowments and grants made to it by the rulers or the public. On Fridays the *Arthajama puja* and *Palliarai puja* is held one hour latter from the prescribed time.¹⁶³

Naimittikam

Rituals which are performed occasionally are called *Naimittikam pujas*. This ritual includes reconsecration and renewal ceremonies such as *Kumbhabishekam*, ceremonies marking events either in the cycle of nature, like new and full Moon days and eclipses of the Sun and Moon.

Weekly Pujas

Every Monday at the end of *Kalasanthi puja* and *Sayratchai* (evening *puja*), Meenakshi Amman is decorated with diamond crown and gold *cavacha*. These adorn the Goddess from 7.00 am to 10 am and from 4.30 pm to 7.30 pm to witness the devotees. This practice was introduced by P.T.Rajan in 1972.  

*Pujas* are performed for Goddess Durga on every Tuesday and Friday at the *Rahu kalam* which comes between 3.00 -4.30 pm on every Tuesday and between 10.30 and 12.00 am on every Friday. Lemon is cut into half and made as a small bowl like. In that, oil or ghee is poured and lit as a lamp which is placed on a platform in front of the Goddess Durga. They decorate the place with *kolam*.

The *Unjal mandapam* contains a swing on which the golden image of Lord Shiva and Goddess Meenakshi are placed on every Friday for the weekly *darshan* (glimpse). The appropriate *Tevaram* songs are recited while swinging the Unjal.  

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165 *Temple visit* on 17.05.2013
Pradhosha Puja

A special *puja* known as ‘Paksha Valipadu’ (Pradhosha Puja) is performed once in fifteen days. It denotes the meeting time of day and night. When the day time ends and the night time starts, it is called the dusk time and is also called ‘*PratyushaKalam*’. *Pradhosham*\(^{166}\) is a period of three hours- 11\(\frac{1}{2}\) hours before and 11\(\frac{1}{2}\) hours after the sun set\(^{167}\). Lord Shiva swallowed poison at this time. Every month *Pradosham* occurs in *Chaturthi*, two days before the new moon day and at *Thriyodasi*, two days before the full moon day. On these days the *Pradhosha* time comes from 4.30 to 6.00 pm. This *puja* is performed for Lord Shiva. *Abisheka* is performed with sandal paste, rose water, milk, *panchamirtham*, *vibhuthi*, honey, sugarcane juice, rice flour, curd and tender coconut.\(^{168}\)

The saivites, during that time, should worship God Nandhi, by adoring the God with a garland of *arugampul*, vilva leaves, jasmine and *marukkozhundhu*. A *virata*, strictly speaking means a vow, and the devotee is expected to take up a moral decision on that day which he should follow in his life. Such a devotee will be blessed with a banded grace of God Shiva.

God Shiva swallowed the poison on a Saturday, hence, the saivites consider this day as a very auspicious day. God Shiva performed *Aananda Thandavam*,

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\(^{166}\) Pradhosham is a Sanskrit word. Pra-huge or big, dhosham- harm.


after swallowing the poison. At pradhosha period when parameswara was dancing between the two horns of Nandi, Goddess Saraswathi was playing Veena, Goddess Mahalakshimi was singing songs, Lord Brama was keeping up the tala (laya) beats and Lord Narayana was playing miruthangam. All the heavenly beings, Devas, Shiddars, Yaksha kinnaras, Ashtadigpalas and others merrily witnessed the sight. Only after that event, it is said the custom of observing pradhosham came into practice. At pradhosham time, the devotees should have a darshan of Shiva through the gap between the two horns of Nandideva and that is supposed to be beneficial. On that day, while going for worship in the temple we should light the ghee lamp for Nandi Baghavan and offer rice and jaggery as nivedyam. Icon of Lord Chandra Sekaramurthi is taken out on procession in Rishaba vahana after performing deeparadhanai. Milk, panchamirtham, curd rice and tamarind rice are distributed as prasadham.

Monthly Pujas

The monthly pujas refers to certain pujas which occur once in a month. In the Meenakshi Sundareswarar temple the maha sankranthi puja is performed on the first day of every month. On this day, the Urchava Amman is placed in a golden car and taken into procession around the four Adi Streets at the end of the evening puja. The procession car reaches Thirukkalyana mandapam and special

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*puja* is performed there. If a devotee wishes to see and pull the procession car other than the first day of the month, he has to pay Rs.2000/ to the temple.

The *Pournami puja* is performed on the full moon day of every month. In the evening, a special *puja* is performed for Goddess Meenakshi with *kumkum archanai*. *Lalita Sahshra Namam* and other devotional songs are recited during this time.

**Renovation Ritual**

The word *Kumbhabishekam* literally means “great water-pot bathing ritual”. In principle, a temple should have a renovation ritual (*kumbhabishekam*) in every twelfth year (counting inclusively). This ritual was an occasion for extensive refurbishment of the temple, including repairing the damaged parts, cleaning and repainting the towers and many inner halls and outer walls. The word *Kumbhabishekam* is mentioned as ‘*Kadavul Mangalam*’ and ‘*Perum Santhi*’ in Tamil literature and ‘*Neer Theliththal*’ in inscriptions in the early period.¹⁷¹

*Saiva agamas* mention the temple activities under three categories: *Karshanathi Prathishtantham, Prathishtathi Utsavantham* and *Utsavathi Praayachithantham*. That is from the cleaning of the earth to build the temple to the installation (*Prathishtai*) of the idols, from the installation of idols to the festivals and from the festivals to rectifying the mistakes (*Prayachittam*). *Kumbhabishekam* comes under the first category. *Kumbabishekam* is mentioned as

¹⁷¹ Thirukoil (a monthly magazine), Meenakshi Sundareswarar Temple, Madurai, March, 1963, p.545.
‘Pradhishta’ in Saiva agamas. Shivapradhishta Vidhi mentions that to bring the energy (sakthi) of the Omnipresent in a particular place as ‘pradhista’

Pradhistai or Kumbhabishekam are of four kinds: Aavardham, Anavardham, Punaravardham and Andharitham.

Aavardham is performed after building a new temple. Anavardham is performed after building the temple when it was destroyed by the natural calamities and the idols are found or if the temple is found without idols. Punaravardham is performed after renovating the damaged portions of the temple like gopuras, vimanas, painting etc. Andharitham is performed to purify the temple if any death happened inside the premises or after the renovation of any damages which has to be rectified immediately. The Kumbhabishekam performed in Madurai Meenakshi temple is called as Punaravadhana Pradhishtai.  

An important part of the ritual is the ashtabhadanam or the fixing of idols which has to be done strictly according to the agamic shastras. The ashtabhandanam refers to the fixing of mulava bheras, or stone images with eight powers on their pedestals. The srithalam says that the temple authorities when the abhishekam is performed, the water with the abhisheka materials may stay in between the image and pedestal and it give way to grow micro organisms. To avoid this Ashtabhanadanam or Marundhu Sattutal (applying eight materials of medicinal value) ritual is performed. Kombarakku, Chukkanthul, Kungiliam,

Karkaavi, Sempancha, Jathilingam, Thenmelugu and Erumai vennai (butter from Buffalo’s milk) are grounded seven times, made as balls and are kept for few days to mingle with each other completely. Lastly, again that balls are mixed with butter and grounded eighth time till it comes warmer. Then it is applied to fix the image with the pedestal, before it becomes cooler. For instance, in the Ashtabandana Swaranabandana Kumbabishekam held on 08.04.2009, 728 kg (1040 balls of 700 gms each) of medicine was used to fix 513 mulava images of the Meenakshi temple by the Nagarathars.¹⁷³

During the Kumbabishekam ritual temporary pavilions are constructed which contains fire-sacrifice halls (yagasala) and fire pits (kunda) made in various specified shapes by building low, enclosing brick walls. For instance during the Kumbabishekam of 1963, 110 fire pits were made and 203 Shivachariyars from all over TamilNadu along with Thiruvaduthurai Adhinam and 103 Shastries were brought from various Districts to chant the four Vedas, Othuvars to sing Tevaram and Thiruvasagam with musical instruments. During the Kumbabishekam of 1974, 128 Shivachriyas from various temples of Tamil Nadu came for Yagasalai puja, 30 priests for reciting Vedas and 50 Othuvars for reciting Thirumurais.¹⁷⁴

After a series of preparatory rites, the priests ritually moved the deities’ power (sakti) from their images inside the temple into water pots (kumbha) which are then carried to their respective alters in the fire- sacrifice halls. The images inside

the temple are now ‘empty’ artifacts, and Meenakshi Sundareswarar and other subsidiary deities are now installed in the yagasala. A series of eight rituals of sacrifice worship (Yaga Puja) begins and on the following three days the ritual (lasting about one to two hours) are performed in the morning and evening. Each sacrificial fire—one in each pit—is the responsibility of a single priest, although two men, the principal priests (PradhanaAcharyar) of Meenakshi and Sundareswarar have particularly important role.

During the course of the fire sacrifice each priest spend most of his time spooning ghee in the fire, periodically adding more wood and dropping in different items (grains, legumes, cooked rice, fruits etc.,) as oblations. Towards the end of the sacrifice, the pradhana acharyas lowered silk sarees and dhothis (vesti) offered to Meenakshi and Sundareswarar into the fire, before the entire priest made the final oblations. The ritual concludes with the display of lamps that ends any act of worship in the temple. In the series of fire sacrifices, the divine power in the water pots are progressively augmented; this process—compared with recharging a battery by practically minded priests—is crucial in the renovation ritual.

After the deities power has been moved into the water pots, worship inside the temple are stopped. The empty images can be repaired by artisans and re-fixed to their bases with special medicine of eight materials. After the last sacrifice worship, groups of priests carries the water pots in procession into the temple and
up to the narrow roofs of the twelve gateway towers. At an auspicious time; a priest pours the first pot of water over the gilded finial (vimana). A green flag is waved to tell others to pour their pots over Sundareswararshrine’s vimana and on the other towers; at the same time, the priests inside the temple pour their pots over the images.

This vast simultaneous effusion, the concluding climax of the renovation ritual is greeted by excited cheering from the crowds in the temple and on the surrounding buildings and those lucky enough to be near the towers try to douse themselves in the water sprinkled down. By emptying the pots, all the increased power in the water is made to flow back into the temple as a whole both to the towers and the newly secured images housed with inside the main shrines, worship then starts. Thus the Kumbhabhishekam comes to an end. The deities and the temple has been restored to normal, but the divine power contains within its restored fabric has been enhanced.

**Services of Bhattars**

In Meenakshi Sundareswarar Temple the bhattars services (Kainkariam) consist of two classes of rights: Puja rights and sthanam rights. Pujarights involve attending to the worship ceremonies and ritual conducted in the temple. In these ceremonies the needs of the deity are tended: bathing (abishekam), adorning (alankaram), offering (nivedyam), praising (archanam), and showing the light (diparathanam) to both the sanctum sanctorum image (mulavar) and to the
movable, processional image (*utsavar*) of Meenakshi and Sundareswarar. *Sthanam* rights, on the other hand, consist of superintending and managing certain of the internal operations of the temple.

The distribution of these *puja* and *sthanam* rights among the *bhattars* of Meenakshi Sundareswarar Temple is determined by hereditary membership in one of two groups: the *Vikrama Pandya Bhattars* and the *Kulasekara Bhattars*. The Vikrama Pandya branch controls the rights to perform priest duties for the original, immovable image of the deity in the sanctum sanctorum. They also have a monopoly on the archanam rights for the processional deity. The Kulasekara *Bhattars* branch holds rights for the office of *alankarathar*. This office consists of adorning the processional image on festival occasions (*kaivistharam*). Each branch has attached to it two *sthanikar* offices. The individual *bhattars* in both groups may be identical as the same man in some instances holds rights in both divisions due to mortgage or to alienation of those rights.

**The Order of Worship in the Temple**

It is a convention in this temple, different from that followed in other temples, that the devotees offer worship first to Goddess Meenakshi. Therefore, while there are four other entrances into the temple, under large gopuras in the four cardinal directions, it is customary to enter not through any of them but through the *Ashtasakthi mandapa*, with no tower above it. This entrance leads to
the Goddess.\textsuperscript{175} Crossing the \textit{Ashta Sakthi mandapa} the devotees enter the Meenakshi Nayakkar \textit{mandapa}. The \textit{chitra gopura} stands over the entrance, from this \textit{mandapa} into the shrine complex of the Goddess. The \textit{Mudhali Pillai mandapa} follows the \textit{chitra gopura}. The lovely and historic Golden Lilly Tank then comes into the view. It is from its bank that most popular photographic views of the temple are taken showing the gigantic south outer gopura. The northern corridor leads directly to the Shrine of the Goddess.

The regular worship starts from Lord Vinayakar. The image of Siddhi Vinayakar is worshipped first and going round the \textit{palipeedam} the devotees worship the image of Lord Muruga, then they go to the Shrine of Goddess Meenakshi. Two beautiful paintings relating to the coronation and wedding of the Goddess Meenakshi are seen at the entrance. The \textit{darshan} of the marvelous idol of the divine mother, the first-eyed Goddess, instills into any pilgrim a divine thrill. The Goddess stands in full grace of glory, blessing the devotees with love. When they come around the first \textit{prakara} of the Goddess shrine, they worship Iravata Vinayakar in north east side, Vallabha Vinayakar and Nirutha Ganapathy in south west, Kumara Swami and Sandikeswarar in north-west side.\textsuperscript{176}

At the eastern end of the second \textit{prakaram} of the Meenakshi shrine, there is a beautiful sculpture of King Thirumalai Nayak and his two wives. After completing a round of the shrine of the Goddess the devotees step into the south

\textsuperscript{175} N. S. Ramaswami, \textit{Temples of South India}, Maps and Agencies Publications, Madras, 1984, p.145.

second prahara of the Shrine of Lord Sundareswarar. Here they offer worship first to the Mukkuruni Pillayar, a great monolithic figure. The devotees then walk through these *prakaras*. At the North – Western end is the chapel of famous *Tamil Sangam*. The *Sangam*, a great Tamil academy is a very ancient institution.\(^{177}\) They come to the famous hall known as *Kambathadi mandapam*, the central portion of which rests on eight monolithic pillars. The different aspects of Shiva as explained in the Shivapurana are carved on these pillars. In the centre of the hall are a Nandhi and a *mandapa* cut out of a single stone. Each *dwarapalaka* at the entrance to the shine is 12’ high. On the eastern side of the hall are four huge figures of Agni Veerabdra, Agora Veerabdra, Kali and Shiva in dancing pose, carved out of the pillars themselves. Navagrahas, Palani Andavar and Vinayakar are the other Gods worshipped in this hall. The sculptures of Ardhanareswara and Sankara Narayana have been carved with meticulous care. The sculpture depicting the wedding of Goddess Meenakshi is another classical one. Mahavishnu as the brother of the Goddess is pouring water into the hands of the bridegroom, Brahma is performing the *homam* and Vasishta is conducting the marriage. Other sculptures in this hall are those of Thripuranthaka, Kalasamhara Murthi, Ravana lifting the Kailasa, etc.\(^{178}\)

The devotees worship Lord Sundareswarar in the form of a *Lingam* at the Sanctum. While going round the first *prakara* of the shrine they can witness the

\(^{178}\) *Ibid*, p.132
beautiful depiction of images of some of the Lord’s divine sports on the outer walls, Nataraja with his right foot raised, the idols of the 63 Nayanmars, Saraswathi, Dakshinamurthi, Somaskandhar, Lingodbhavar, Kasi Viswanathar, Durgai and Mahalakshmi. When the devotees come near the flag staff the men perform *Ashtanga Namaskaram* (eight parts of their body – head, two hands, two legs, chin, two shoulders touching the floor they lay down and worship) and women perform *Panchanka Namasharam* (five parts of their body – head, two hands, two knee – touching the floor they lay down and worship) and then sit there for few minutes, uttering the name of the God.\(^{179}\)

The depiction of dancing Nataraja with his right foot raised is a unique feature of this temple. The hall where Nataraja is said to have danced is known as *Velliambalam* or *Rajatha Sabha* or Silver Hall. On the northern corridor there is a stump of the sacred Kadamba tree. On north eastern side of the Kambathadi mandapam is the hundred pillar hall. From *Kambathadi mandapam*, the devotees come out the eastern gopura way and enter the thousand – pillar mandapam with marvelous sculptured pillars. From there they visit to *kalyana mandapam* where the anniversary of the marriage of Goddess Meenakshi and Sundareswarar is celebrated. They cross through the *Nadukkattu mandapam* and *Ashta Sakthi mandapam* and return outside of the temple.

Joint prayers

To get the blessings of the deities for the quick recovery of patients at the emergency wards of the Government hospitals, Madurai joint prayers are conducted at 5.30 p.m. on every Fridays. These unique prayers were inaugurated on 8.11.2001 under the chairmanship of Minister for Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowment, Hon. P.C. Ramasamy in the presence of the HR and CE Secretary Mr. P.A. Ramiah IAS and other officials.

On every Friday morning, representatives from the temple would proceed to the government hospital and get a list of patients under emergency care, their names, lagna, star, etc. In the evening in the presence of city dignitaries and doctors from the hospital, stanzas for cure of illness by Oduvar moorthies are uttered and then the names of patients are read in the sanctums of Goddess Meenakshi and Lord Sundareswarar. The following morning, priests would proceed to the hospital and hand over the ‘prasadam’ individually to the patients and they are consoled.

Moreover patients at other hospitals and homes, who send their names, stars, lagna and addresses, are dispatched ‘prasadam’ by post after archanas in their names. This joint prayers system had won the appreciation of people from all over Tamil Nadu which is reflected in the numerous letters that the temple authorities receive daily. Those patients who wish to get cure through this joint prayers could send their names and other details to the temple authorities, their
names will be included in the joint prayers and archanas and the ‘prasadams’ would be sent to them.

**Private Worship**

The final category of worship is private worship. Under the rubric of *Kamiya pujaor archanai*, single persons tender their offerings of select *upakaram* items such as flowers, fruits, incense and saffron to the divine couple. This is done while the names of or titles of Goddess Meenakshi and Lord Sundareswarar are being recited either 108 or 1008 times. In two respects, *archanai* ritual is distinct. First, an *archanai* offering is made in the name of a person designated by the donor. Unlike daily worship, which is intended to be for the entire cosmos, *archanai* worship is meant to be for the benefit of the single person. Second, because *archanai* is the concern of the individual, its regularity depends on the prerogative of the worshipper. The motivation behind the presentation of *archanai* offerings is diverse and varied. They are occasioned by a crises (illness, court case, poverty and so on), a change in status (marriage, parenthood, student hood and so on) and out of gratitude on the part of a worshipper for a boon or blessing received from the divine couple.¹⁸⁰

Since 1939, a ticket system for private worship has operated in the Meenakshi temple.¹⁸¹ These tickets are used by the devotees to avoid standing in

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queue. They have to buy a ticket from a counter run by the temple. Tickets at different prices are sold for different types of private worship and offerings. For each type separate lines are formed. The devotees give ticket to the priest before he carries out the worship.

Over twenty four months in 1992-94, according to the figures provided by the administration the average monthly sale of archanai tickets was 21 percent higher than in 1980-82, itself 36% higher than in 1975-77. However the number of priests working regularly in the temple had risen by about 1/3 by 1994 compared with a decade earlier.\

\[182\]  

Ibid.