

Many Forms of Siva--34

Siva as Kalyana Sundara

As Lord Siva steps in to marry Meenakshi, the austere *digambara* turns magnificent.

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Lord Siva in popular perception is an ascetic living away on the mountains. Hence, his appearance as Kalyana Sundara is an unusual role, and his marriage to Meenakshi, the Mother Divine, revered as the queen of Madurai in the south, is a celebrated event.

Madurai in Tamil nadu, situated on the banks of the sacred Vaigai river, was the capital of the illustrious Pandya king, Malayadvaja. His queen Kanchanamala was endowed with divine virtues. The pious king ruled in the name of Siva, and his mind was saturated with images of Devi. He prayed intensely for progeny who would take care of his kingdom after him.

During a *yajna* performed by the king, a pretty three-year-old girl wearing fish shaped eardrops and a shimmering green silk skirt emerged from the homa flames as 'ayonija' (not born from a womb) and sat on Kanchanamala's lap.

While the king was disappointed that he was not blessed with a son, a celestial voice commanded him to "bring up the little girl just as if she were his male heir," and prophesied that she would meet her consort during a war.

Malaydwaja obeyed the command and brought up the child with a great deal of attention. He taught the young princess the art of war, statecraft, governance and various skills usually associated with a prince. Meenakshi grew up to become a courageous and skilled warrior, besides being an extremely beautiful young lady.

Malayadvaja relinquished the kingdom and merged into the figure of Siva, who appeared before him in the form of Chandra-mouli-isvara. Meenakshi then took over the reins of the Pandya kingdom with Lakshmi as Finance Minister, Saravati for Education, Annapurna in the Food ministry and Durga in Defence. It was an all-ladies' cabinet!

Love on Battlefield

Meenakshi, adored for her fish-like eyes, was ever compassionate and greatly liked by her subjects. She embarked on a *digvijaya*, to establish her sovereignty over all regions of the earth. Ultimately, she attacked Mount Kailas, the abode of Lord Siva. After she defeated all the soldiers and generals at the place, Siva himself came to fight the undaunted queen. As soon as Meenakshi saw him, the prophetic words uttered

at her birth came true as she was overpowered with love for Siva.

Siva asked Meenakshi to return home and promised to come after eight days as her bridegroom. In an elaborate wedding ceremony, Vishnu officiated as the bride's brother and gave away Meenakshi to Siva.

Meenakshi and Sundara Pandya (Siva) ruled over the city of Madurai for a long time. The temple today has come to be known as the abode of Meenakshi Sundaresvara.

Digambara to Somasundara

The sacred text, *Halasya Mahatmya*, describes Meenakshi's wedding scene eloquently. The marriage was to be the biggest event on earth, with all celestial and other beings gathered near

Madurai to witness the rare occasion.

The text says that the bridegroom's garments are of the finest golden texture. Siva in minimum clothing as *Dig-ambara* (Space of the Directions being his raiment) in his usual form is now transformed with a golden lustrous fine garment. He is the handsome Lord Sundaresa (Sundara + isa), with large attractive eyes (*sundara-ayata lochana*), and with supremely charming limbs (*sundara avayavaih paraih*). He is the beautiful Lord with the moon glistening on his head (*Atyanta Sundaraakaro Bhagavan Soma-sundarah*).

Pravaram is the traditional practice of recounting the family lineage of the bride and the groom



during weddings. The *Halasya Mahatmya* lists the family lineage of this divine marriage in loving detail.

It says that the bridegroom Sundaresvara is the ‘maternal grandson’ of *Paripoorna advaita nirguna nirasraya jyotisvarupa* (the all pervasive Light that is beyond earthly qualities).

He is the paternal grandson of Sacchidananda Svaprakasa Parabrahmam, that Ultimate Power that is self-luminous and filled with *sad-chid-ananda*.

The bride’s maternal grandfather is Chidakasa, and her father is Chidagni.

Brahma officiates as the priest at the wedding and chants *mantras* in front of the holy fire. As the brother of the bride, Vishnu gives her away and pours the sacred water in the joined palms of the couple to seal their bond as the divine couple.

The priest tells Parvati, “The fire is the witness to your marriage; you must practise your *dharma* along with Siva as a *grhastha*.”

The description of the holy event needs to be absorbed with piety and understanding of the context. *Lalita Sahasranama*, the Vedic text that lists the thousand names of the Divine Mother, refers to her as ‘Sri Sivaa Siva Shaktaihya Roopini.’

Meenakshi Kalyanam is an event that symbolises the union of Shiva and Shakti. Even today it is celebrated annually at Madurai and the ten-day festival is looked forward to by everyone with great anticipation.

Penance and Wedding

In north India, the event is observed in a different style. Parvati’s penance and attainment of Siva as her consort is enacted during all marriages. The bride wears a simple yellow saree for a few days before the wedding to recall Parvati’s rigorous penance (*vrata*).

Kalidasa’s *Kumara Sambhava* describes Parvati’s penance and the promise of marriage by Siva. This celebrated work describes in loving detail the courtship of Siva and Parvati. Both Siva and Parvati cleansed themselves by fasting and meditation before they started life as the divine couple. They were blessed with a son whom they named as Kartikeya and who grew up to rule over everything and restore order.

Siva as Somasundara thus helps us to meditate on the very origin of human birth and the beauty of life.

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