

## ***DD India's Spectacular India Series 'Divine Marriage'***

One of the greatest achievements of the Nayaka period in Tamil Nadu is the making of the Meenakshi Temple at Madurai. It was made in the reign of Tirumalai Nayaka in the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century and is one of the largest temples ever to be made. The great Meenakshi temple is like a city in itself. It has two shrines, one to Shiva and one to Parvati: Parvati as Meenakshi, the beautiful one, the fish-eyed one.

The abstract concepts of the formless eternal, Nirguna or Arupa, are difficult for the mind to grasp. Therefore deities are made in order that people are able to relate to them. Shiva is a personification of qualities within us. We look upon Shiva we mediate upon him to awaken those qualities within us. Qualities of nobility, qualities of courage with which we must face the demons of our ignorance. Families are made around the deities in order that we are able to relate to the deities in a more human way, relate to them even through our own emotions. Therefore Parvati is made as a spouse of Shiva. Here she is as Parvati with the focus on her beauty: Meenakshi, Parvati the beautiful one.

There are great festivals in this temples, annual festivals, monthly festivals, even daily festivals. One of the wonderful daily festivals is in the evening when Shiva is taken with the great deal of fanfare to the shrine of Parvati where he will spend the night with her. In the morning they are woken up with sweet bhajans, divine songs and Shiva is then taken back to his own shrine. As you might imagine this temple is a great favorite with honeymooning couples.

At 5:30 in the morning Lord Shiva is brought back from the shrine of Parvati to his own shrine. It is wonderful to see how humanly and with how much warmth they are treated. In fact in some Tamil temples when Lord Shiva is taken to the shrine of Parvati her large nose ring is taken off so that it may not scratch him at night.

The vast temple has eight impressive gateways, one rising to almost 200 feet. These gateways or "gopurams" are covered with several hundreds of sculptures. Temple authorities estimate that there are thirty-three million sculptures in the Meenakshi complex.

In the Nayaka period, large tanks were also made within the temple complexes, where the devotees washed their hands and feet. We see here in the Meenakshi temple, how people spend time relaxing within the temple compound. Indeed, besides being a place to meditate and to gain knowledge, the temple had grown to accommodate all aspects of life. Thereby, the temple also serves to remind us of the divinity which pervades all moments of our existence.

Spectacular halls with numerous sculpted pillars were made in the Nayaka period. This 16<sup>th</sup> century Hall of a Thousand Pillars has almost exactly that number of massive sculpted columns. Carved out of a single slab of granite, each pillar is a monumental work of art.

The Meenakshi Temple at Madurai is a world complete in itself. Within its vast spaces we are taken far from the confusions and concerns of the material world. It celebrates the divinity which is in all aspects of life. The ancient rituals of the temple awaken the sense of joy which can be found deep inside us. A sense of joy which color our lives completely.