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SERVANTS OF THE GODDESS
Servants of the Goddess

The Priests of a South Indian Temple

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To the priests
and all those who work
within the Minaksi Temple
Contents

List of illustrations viii
List of tables ix
Preface xi
Notes on transliteration, references and Indian currency xiv
Glossary xvi
Key to maps 2 and 3 xx

1 Minakshi, Sundaresvara and their Temple in Madurai 1
2 The priests and hierarchy within the Temple 23
3 The relative inferiority of the Brahman temple priest 49
4 Kingship, the law and the priests’ rights and duties 72
5 The government and the Temple 112
6 The Āgamas and temple reform 135
7 Conclusion 162

Appendix 1: The pattern of daily worship 168
Appendix 2: Tickets for private worship and offerings 171
Appendix 3: Sales figures for tickets for private worship and offerings 174
Appendix 4: The inām villages of the priests and other officiants 177
Appendix 5: Title-deed for inām villages granted to priests 180

Notes 182
References 213
List of cases 223
Index 225
Illustrations

Plates to appear between pages 110 and 111
Street processions during the Cittirai festival
1 Bhikṣātana (Śiva as the beggar)
2 Naṭarāja (Śiva as lord of the dance)
3 Sundareśvara on Nandin (the bull)
Consecration of two young priests and their wives
4 Before the bathing ritual
5 Climax of the bathing ritual
6 Procession in a palanquin

Maps
2 The Minakshi Temple. (Adapted from the plan dated 1896 and included in W. Francis, Madura, vol. 1, Madras, 1906) xxv
3 The Minakshi Temple: enlargement of central area xxvi

Figures
1 Genealogy of Vikkira Pantiya chief priests’ clan 79
2 A joint family at the point of partition 85
3 Genealogy of part of Kulacekara clan 87
# Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Festivals in the Minakshi Temple</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Personnel working permanently or regularly in the Minakshi Temple (1980)</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The pattern of daily worship</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Tickets for private worship and offerings</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Ticket sales figures: all tickets and <em>aśṭottiram</em></td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Mean numbers of <em>aśṭottiram</em> tickets by days of week</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Highest daily sales of <em>aśṭottiram</em> tickets</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>The inām villages of the priests and other officiants</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Preface

This book is principally a study of the priests in one of south India’s largest and most celebrated temples, the Minakshi Temple in the city of Madurai. The field research on which it is based was carried out over twelve months from August 1976 to July 1977, followed by another two months between July and September 1980.

Most of the data were collected from the priests themselves, although a great deal of information came from other officiants who work with the priests. Some was collected too from devotees and various other people connected with the Temple. This book is, however, intended first and foremost to be a description and analysis of the priesthood, and of the priests’ views of themselves, the Temple and their position in the Temple and society. I do not attempt to deal with all the other groups which have a role in the Temple; nor do I imagine that this study could pretend to be an analysis of the Temple as a whole. It is in relation to this stated intention that I hope the book will be judged. Because the subject-matter is undoubtedly rather specialised in some respects, I have placed an unusually high proportion of the detailed data in the notes and appendixes. There they can be found by the specialists without intruding upon the attention of readers less concerned with the intricacies of the material.

Clearly, the Minakshi Temple cannot be given a pseudonym. In presenting my material for publication, I have therefore been faced with serious problems. The names of persons mentioned in court records and newspaper accounts are, of course, reproduced, but most of them are now dead. Throughout my text, I avoid identifying by name specific living individuals working in the Temple. Names in themselves, however, are not the major difficulty, which is rather that much of my information was supplied on the explicit or implicit understanding that it would never be published in any way that might be detrimental to the interests of the priests or others. The fact is, as the reader of this book will see, that the priests’ position in the Temple is not secure, so that most of them are justifiably worried about the effect of publishing potentially damaging information. In several places I
Preface

have therefore had to choose my words very carefully and on some issues I have had to suppress information or omit relevant evidence. As I am not prepared to break promises of confidentiality, I can only ask the reader to believe that the material accuracy of the text has not been affected. I must also make it plain that, for various reasons, I did not have close contacts with the Temple administration’s officials, although they were always formally polite to me. However, this does mean that their side of the picture is largely unreported. Certainly, I should admit that I have much sympathy for the priests in their less than ideal contemporary situation, but I have endeavoured always to ensure that I have not confused my stated aim of presenting the priests’ views by any lapse into partiality on their behalf.

Almost every priest and officiant in the Minakshi Temple was unfailingly courteous and friendly to me and I am deeply grateful to all of them. I cannot mention all their names here, but I do owe special thanks to S. Sathasiva Bhattar, S. Nagarajan and V. Subramaniam. As a token of gratitude, however, I dedicate this book to all those who work within the Minakshi Temple.

Much of the information I collected during fieldwork pertains to the Temple’s ritual cycle, and although little of it is published here, I mention it because I should state that, as a non-Hindu, I was not allowed to enter the Temple’s inner areas. This is actually a less serious handicap than it sounds, as few rituals are not also performed outside the inner areas. I do, of course, only know this because I could rely on an assistant to make observations for me in the inner areas. My assistant also acted as an interpreter, because my command of Tamil was unfortunately never as good as it should have been, so that I was unable to carry out detailed interviews unaided. My thanks go to my first assistant, Rm. Shanmugam, but I must especially thank my second assistant, K.S. Saisisakan, who worked with me for the greater part of my research. He easily established excellent relations with everyone in the Temple and I was always grateful for his energy, cheerfulness and perceptive intelligence.

As I cannot thank everyone who has helped in my research, I apologise to those whose names are omitted. I must, though, thank the following: the staff of the record rooms of the Madras High Court, E.R. Section, Madurai District Court, and the Madurai and Ramnad Collectorate for their helpfulness; Mme Hélène Brunner, Professor J. Duncan M. Derrett and Professor Burton Stein for their invaluable guidance to an anthropologist inexpert in their respective fields of knowledge; Carol Breckenridge, for sharing her knowledge of the Minakshi Temple with me; for reading and commenting on drafts of this book and for discussing its content with me: Arjun Appadurai, Maurice Bloch, Jean-Claude Galey, Tony Good, who also traced some records for me in India, Penny Logan, whose listing here understates how much I owe her. Chris May, Liz Nissan, Amrit Srinivasan,
Preface

and particularly Johnny Parry, whose knowledge and critical insights I have continually exploited. Alison Fisher kindly drew the maps and figures. Illustrations 4 and 5 are reproduced by kind permission of M. Manikkasundara Bhattar and S. Ugrapandia Bhattar, and map 1 by kind permission of Julian Smith. Special thanks must also go to Pauline Asher, my parents Christine and John Fuller, and Andrew and Angela Wingate.

I am also fortunate to have been invited to present versions of parts of this book at seminars in Britain, France, Sweden and the United States, and have greatly benefited from comments made by participants at them.

The research in 1976–7 was financially supported by the Social Science Research Council of Great Britain and leave of absence for the year was granted by the University of Manchester, my employer at the time. The research in 1980 was financially supported by the British Academy Small Grants Research Fund in the Humanities. I thank these bodies for their support.

Table 1 was originally published in History of Religions, vol. 19, 1980. Parts of chapters 2 and 4 will be published in different form as ‘The king, the law and the priests in a south Indian temple’ in Purusārtha 8 (Paris) in 1984. An earlier version of chapter 5 was presented as a paper at the Seventh European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies (London, 1981) and is being published in its proceedings; it is reprinted by permission of the School of Oriental and African Studies. An earlier version of chapter 6 is published in J. Davis (ed.), Religious organization and religious experience (London, Academic Press, 1982) and is reprinted by permission of Academic Press Inc. (London) Ltd.

London, February 1983

C.J.F.
Notes on transliteration, references and Indian currency

Transliteration

The majority of technical ritual terms used in the Minaksi Temple, as well as the names of deities and texts, are Sanskrit (Skt.) in origin and in the speech of Temple officiants (though not always in that of ordinary people) their pronunciation does not deviate very far from Sanskrit. However, Tamil orthography often makes these words, when transliterated, almost unrecognisable by other Indianists. For these reasons, all ritual terms and deities’ and texts’ names (and those of historical figures) are transliterated from the Sanskrit form, except where indicated on first appearance as Tamil (Tam.) or, rarely, another language. Where appropriate, Tamil terms are transliterated from the Sanskritised spellings (which employ the ‘borrowed’ letters ‘j’, ‘ś’, ‘s’, and ‘h’) or from spellings deviating from ‘strict’ Tamil. Words in all Indian languages are transliterated with diacritical marks according to the modern, conventional system; in transliteration from Tamil, short ‘e’ and ‘o’ are indicated as ‘ē’ and ‘ō’. The exceptions are the very frequently repeated names of the goddess and god of the Temple – Minākṣi and Sundaresvara – and the name of one of the groups of Temple priests – Vikkira Pāṇṭiya – which are printed without diacritical marks. (The other group’s name – Kulacekara – has no marks anyway.) Personal names, geographical names and the names of castes are, however, spelt in their most common, modern anglicised forms. Indian words are pluralised by ‘s’. Throughout the book, I have sought to be consistent, except where rigid consistency would become pedantry and obscure clarity.

References

All references to works listed in section 5 of the list of references are given in the author/date form, except for the frequently-cited History of Dharmaśāstra by P.V. Kane, whose various volumes and parts were published over several years. For this work, only the volume number (and
Notes on transliteration, references and Indian currency

not the date) is given; thus ‘Kane (2: 468)’ refers to p. 468 of volume 2. Because they do not lend themselves easily to the author/date system, the works listed in sections 1–4 of the list of references are referred to in notes by title, etc.

References to law cases are made according to the standard legal system, for which see p. 223.

Indian Currency

The Indian rupee (Re, Rs) is divided into 100 naya paise (n.p.); it used to be divided into 16 annas. In 1980, the exchange rate was approximately Rs 19 = £1.
Glossary

All names and terms listed in this glossary are transliterated from their Sanskrit forms, except where otherwise indicated (see ‘Note on transliteration’, p. xiv). The glossary is selective in two respects. First, it excludes names or terms only appearing once or at one place in the text; secondly, it only supplies the translation(s) strictly relevant to this book and omits other meanings that the words may also have.

- **abhiṣeka**: bathing or besprinkling ritual; consecration
- **ācārya**: master or guru; priest
- **Ādiśaiva**: ‘first Śaiva’; the Tamil Śaiva temple priests’ subcaste
- **Āgama**: text prescribing ritual in Śiva’s (sometimes Viṣṇu’s) temples
- **aṅkāra**: decoration ritual
- **amman (Tam.)**: goddess; the term commonly used to refer to and address Minaksi
- **amman koyil (Tam.)**: Minaksi’s temple
- **arcaka**: temple priest
- **arcana**: worship; in the Temple usually specifically private worship offered by or on behalf of an individual devotee
- **ātmārthapūjā**: personal worship performed at home
- **attiyāṇa paṭṭar (Tam.)**: Veda-chanting [Skt. adhiyāṇa] priest
- **bhakti**: devotion
- **bīlva**: a tree (*Aegle marmelos*) whose leaves are used in Śiva’s worship
- **cāstiri (Tam.)**: chanter; Brahman domestic priest [cf. Skt. śāstṛī]
- **cutantaram (Tam.)**: honorific payments
- **cuvāmi (Tam.)**: lord [Skt. svāmi]; the term commonly used to refer to and address Śiva/Sundaresvara, and address his priests
Glossary

cuvāmi koyil (Tam.) Sundaresvara's temple

dakṣīṇā remuneration made to priest

dāna gift

darśana sight, vision (of deity)

devadāsi dancing girl in temple

dharmakarta minister responsible for temples; temple trustee or manager

dharmasāstra Hindu religious law

diśpārādhana ritual of waving of lamps

gotra exogamous grouping of Ādiśaivas claiming descent from single sage

guru master; preceptor

inām grant, specifically of land [revenue terminology]
kattālai (Tam.) endowment in temple

koyil (Tam.) temple

kuṇkuma red powder sacred to and used in worship of goddess

līlā play, sport of gods; play enacted during festival depicting specific scene in play of gods

liṅga phallic emblem of Śiva

māmūl custom; tradition

(Tam., in origin Arabic)

maṇḍapa hall

mantra ritual formula, chant

mirācū hereditary right to land or office, whose holder is mirācutār [revenue terminology; often: mīrās, mirāsdār]

muṟcai (Tam.) turn, rota; in Minaksi Temple, specifically rota of rights to open sancta doors

mūrti image of deity; form of deity, especially Śiva

Murukaṇ (Tam.) name of Subrahmanya

naivedya (ritual of offering of) food

nakṣatra lunar asterism, one of 27 'houses' through which moon orbits earth

nampiyār (Tam.) priest in sole charge of important festival in Minaksi Temple

Nāyaka name of dynasty ruling Madurai c. 1529–1736

nirvākar (Tam.) custodian of jewels in Minaksi Temple holding nirvākan rights [cf. Skt. nirvāha]

otuvār (Tam.) devotional singer

paddhati Āgamic ritual manual

Pāñcarātra Vaiṣṇava sect (the other being Vaikhānasa)
Glossary

panḍa (Hindi) Brahman pilgrimage specialist
Pāṇḍya name of dynasty [Tam. Pāntiyαn] ruling Madurai in ancient, mythical times, and also historically in approximately 6th-10th and again in 13th centuries
parārtha pūjā public worship performed in temples
paricāraka (Tam.) Brahman temple servant [Skt. paricāra]
pāṭhaśālā religious school
paṭṭar Śaiva temple priest [Skt. bhaṭṭa]
prasāda grace; substances offered to deity and ‘re-turned’ to devotee imbued with grace
prāyaścitta reparation ritual
pujā worship; in the Temple usually specifically public, daily worship
Purāṇa mythological text; collection of myths
rudrākṣṇa berry of shrub (Elaeocarpus ganitrus) sacred to Śiva
Śaiva of or pertaining to Śiva; worshipper of Śiva
śakti power of deity; the goddess (especially the consort of Śiva) as personification of power or energy; feminine power
Śaṅkarācārya the pre-eminent monk in Tamilnadu and spiritual successor of the philosopher Śaṅkara
Śiva one of the two great gods of Hinduism (the other being Viṣṇu)
śrāddha ritual of offering to ancestors, first performed at close of funeral
stāṅgika (Tam.) chief priest of temple [Skt. sthānika] holding stāṅgika rights
Subrahmanya Śiva’s second son in Śaiva temple cult; also known as Murukaṇ, Skanda, etc.
tāstik (Tam., in origin Arabic) allowance paid to temple by government [revenue terminology]
Tēnkalai (Tam.) section of Vaiṣṇavas upholding authority of Tamil scriptures, opposed to Vaṭakalai
tsāvā valley
vaidika ‘Vedic’; specifically religiously orthodox and learned
Vaikhānasa Vaiṣṇava sect (the other being Pāṇcarātra)
Vaiṣṇava of or pertaining to Viṣṇu; worshipper of Viṣṇu
Vaṭakalai (Tam.) section of Vaiṣṇavas upholding authority of Sanskrit scriptures, opposed to Tēnkalai

xviii
Glossary

Veda the four earliest and most authoritative Hindu sacred texts

vibhūti white ash sacred to and used in worship of Śiva

Vināyaka Śiva’s elder son in Śaiva temple cult; elephant-headed god, also known as Ganeśa, etc.

Viṣṇu one of the two great gods of Hinduism (the other being Śiva)

yajamāna originally patron of Vedic sacrifice; patron of worship
Key to maps 2 and 3

On map 3, AM and MM indicate the ardhamaṇḍapa and maḥaṁaṇḍapa respectively, and F the two main and eight subsidiary flagstaffs. In the key below, the directions in which images are facing is noted in parentheses: (N), (E), (S) or (W). Unless otherwise indicated, all images are immovable and housed within shrines. It has proved impossible to avoid a sometimes odd mixture of Sanskrit and Tamil forms of names in this key.

Minākṣi’s temple

1 MINĀKṢĪ (E), main image in sanctum
2 Iraṭṭai Pillaiyar (E), ‘twin Vināyakas’, not in shrine
3 Caṇḍesvarī (S), form of goddess to be worshipped after Minākṣi
4 Nandin (W), the bull who is Śiva’s vehicle and devotee, not in shrine
5 Nrṛta Gaṇapati and Ucchiṣṭa Gaṇapati (E), ‘dancing Gaṇapati (Vināyaka)’ and ‘remainder Gaṇapati’ (i.e. ‘impure’ form), together in shrine
6 Muttu Kumāra (E), ‘pearl Kumāra (Subrahmanya)’, with his consorts Tēyvayāṇai (Devasaṇa) and Vaiṭṭi
7 Bedchamber (palliyaṟai) with movable image of Minākṣi (Palliyaṟai Amman) inside
8 Vināyaka (E)
9 Śaṁmukha (E), ‘six-faced’ Subrahmanya, with his two consorts
10 Main flagstaff (dhvajastambha) of Minākṣi’s temple, with sacrifice stone (balipiṭha) to W. side and Nandin (W) to W. side of stone, not in shrine
11 Kōlū Maṇḍapa, in which Minākṣi’s festival image is placed during festivals celebrated for her alone
12 Kūṭal Kumāra (E), ‘Kumāra of Madurai’, with his two consorts
13 Sacrifice chamber (yāgaśālā), in which the ritual of oblations into the sacrificial fire (homa) is performed for festivals celebrated for Minākṣi alone

xx
Key to maps 2 and 3

14 Kumāra (E), with his two consorts
15 Parrot cage (kiliikkūtu), in which parrots offered to Mīnākṣī are kept
16 Siddhi Vināyakā (E), ‘Vināyaka with all the powers’
17 Ūṇcal Maṇḍapa, the ‘swing’ hall in which the weekly festival for Mīnākṣī–Sundaresvara is held
18 Kāśi Viśvanātha shrine, a replica of the Viśvanātha temple at Benares (cf. no. 46)
19 Sacrifice stone and Nandin (W) to W. side, not in shrine

Javandiśvara temple

20 Javandiśvara liṅga (E), a form of Siva. (This temple was built by one Kallīr Cēvvantu (Palaniappan 1970: 72) and Javandi appears to be a corruption of his name.)
21 Javandiśvarī (S), consort of Javandiśvara

Sundaresvara’s temple (Inner area)

22 SUNDAREŚVARA liṅga (E), main liṅga in sanctum
23 Manonmanī (S), in NE. corner of sanctum
24 Cōkkar, movable image of Sundaresvara taken to bedchamber at night and kept in chamber in ardhamaṇḍapa during day
25 Nandin (W), not in shrine
26 63 Nāyaṇmār (Śaiva ‘saints’) and 10 Tōkai Atiyārkaḷ (‘assembly of servants’ of Śaivism) (N and W), movable images
27 Nāṇacampanṭar, Appar, Ćentarar and Māṇikkavācakar (N), four leading ‘saints’ of Tamil Śaivism, movable images
28 Bhairava (N), the dreadful form of Śiva, movable image
29 Siddha (E), ‘Śiva with all the powers’, movable image
30 Candraśekhara (E), ‘Śiva with moon in his crown’, with his consort, movable images
31 Veḷḷiyaippalām (‘silver stage’) Naṭarāja (S), ‘Śiva as lord of the dance’, with his consort Civaṇāmi (W); movable images of couple at front of shrine
32 Dakṣināṁurti (S), ‘Śiva as the ascetic guru’
33 Liṅgodbhava (W), ‘Śiva within liṅga of flames’
34 Siddha (E)
35 Durgā (N), fierce form of goddess
36 Caṇḍeśvara (S), form of Śiva to be worshipped after Sundaresvara
37 Adhiṅkāri Nandin (N), Nandin as chief of temple
38 Śūrya (W), the Sun with Įugas, the Dawn
39 63 Nāyaṇmār and 10 Tōkai Atiyārkaḷ (N)
40 Sarasvatī (N), goddess of learning, etc.
Key to maps 2 and 3

41 Captakaṇṭikaḷ (N), ‘seven virgins’ (equivalent to saptamāṁśkā, ‘seven mother goddesses’)  
42 Utsava Nāyakar (E), ‘lords of the festival’; this shrine contains the movable images of Somāskanda (Sundaresvara) with Minākṣi to his right at the front; Muttu Kumāra with his two consorts, Subrahmanya alone, Cāndesvara and Vināyaka from N. to S. at the rear; Adhikārī Nandī and another unused Somāskanda along the southern wall  
43 Kārttikeya Subrahmanya (E), movable image of Subrahmanya with his two consorts used for certain processions  
44 Mahāliṅga (E), ‘great liṅga’  
45 Bhikṣāṭana (E), ‘Śiva as supreme beggar’; movable image also in shrine  
46 Kāśi Viśvanātha shrine, contains Viśvanātha liṅga, image of consort Viśālakṣi and other images; the principal replica of the Viśvanātha (Śiva) temple at Benares (Kāśi)  
47 Stump of kadamba tree, sacred to Sundaresvara  
48 Kaṇakacapai (‘golden hall’) Naṭarājas (S), three movable images of Naṭarāja with his consort  
49 Aksara liṅga, ‘sacred syllable liṅga’  
50 Sacrifice chamber, as no. 13, used for festivals celebrated for Minākṣi and Sundaresvara  
51 Mahālakṣmī (S), goddess of good fortune, etc.  
52 Irattinanacapai (jewel hall’) Naṭarāja (S), movable image with consort  
53 Bhairava (W)  
54 Candra (W), the Moon, with his consorts

Sundaresvara’s temple (Outer area)

55 Bāla Murukāṇ (E), Murukāṇ (Subrahmanya) as a child  
56 Kaḷukumalai Kumāra (E), Kumāra at Kaḷukumalai temple  
57 Taṇṭāyutapaṇī (E), the ascetic Subrahmanya at Palani temple  
58 Aṉukkai Vināyaka (E), ‘Vināyaka as grantor of permission’  
59 Mukkurūṇi Vināyaka (S), Vināyaka whose belly is equal to ‘three kurūṇi (measures of rice)’  
60 Navagraha, ‘nine planets’; images on square pedestal surrounded by railings opening on W. side; in centre of W. side is the inauspicious Śani, Saturn  
61 Kampattaṭi Maṇḍapa, contains main flagstaff of Sundaresvara’s temple on E. side, sacrifice stone, Nandī (W) and subsidiary flagstaff on W. side; pillars carved with massive images of forms of Śiva  
62 Cattiyappar (W), image on pillar (identity of deity unknown)  
63 Agnivirabhadra (W), massive image on pillar of the fiery form of a destructive manifestation of Śiva

xxii
Key to maps 2 and 3

64 Aghoravirabhadra (W), similar image of the euphemistically named ‘non-terrifying’ form; nos. 63 and 64 surrounded by railings
65 Ērdhva Tāṇḍava (W), similar image of Śiva dancing with leg erect
66 Bhadrākāli (W), similar image of Kāli dancing; nos. 65 and 66 surrounded by railings
67 Naṉacampantar Temple, images of Naṉacampantar and seven other Śaiva ‘saints’ (N)
68 Āraivācal Piḷḷaiyar (N), small image of ‘kitchen-gate’ Vināyaka, not in shrine
69 Caṭkappulavarkal Temple, images of deified poets of Madurai Śaṭgam
70 Naṭarāja (S) with his consort

Outer precincts

71 Vināyaka and Subrahmaṇya (E), flanking entrance-gate
72 Vināyaka and Subrahmaṇya (E), flanking entrance-gate
73 Vannī-tree Vināyaka Temple, a small modern temple built in a garden
74 Naṭarāja (S) with his consort
75 Kaśi Viśvanātha shrine, a replica of the Viśvanātha temple at Benares (cf. no. 46)
76 Nandin (W), not in shrine
77 Maṅkaiyaṛkkaracī shrine, modern shrine with images of Śaiva ‘saint’ Queen Maṅkaiyaṛkkaraṇī and others (W)

Outside Temple

78 Shrine of Mōṭṭaikkopuracuvāmi, ‘lord of mōṭṭai (northern) tower’, a deity believed to live in the tower
79 Shrine of Madurai Viraṇ, deified warrior whose cult is popular in the region
80 Shrine of Kaṟuppacuvāmi, village deity known as the ‘black god’ whose cult is widespread in the region; as ‘non-Brahmanical’ deities, nos. 78–80 are excluded from the Temple itself and have their own non-Brahman priests, but many devotees visiting the Temple also worship them.

xxiii
Map 1 Madurai: old city centre
Map 2 The Minaksi Temple

xxv
Map 3 The Minaksi Temple: enlargement of central area

xxvi