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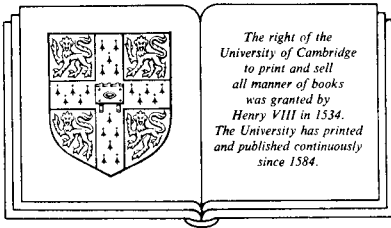
# Servants of the Goddess

## The Priests of a South Indian Temple

C.J. FULLER

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

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## Preface

This book is principally a study of the priests in one of south India's largest and most celebrated temples, the Minaksi 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 Minaksi 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



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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 Minaksi 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 Minaksi 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. Sasisekaran, 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 Collectorates for their helpfulness; Mme H el ene 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 Minaksi 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,

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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 *Puruṣārtha* 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.

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## 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', 'ṣ', 'ś', 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 'è' and 'ò'. The exceptions are the very frequently repeated names of the goddess and god of the Temple – Mīnākṣī and Sundarēśvara – and the name of one of the groups of Temple priests – Vikkīra 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 Dharmasāstra* by P.V. Kane, whose various volumes and parts were published over several years. For this work, only the volume number (and

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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.

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

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<i>cuvāmi koyil</i> (Tam.)	Sundaesvara's temple
<i>dakṣiṇā</i>	remuneration made to priest
<i>dāna</i>	gift
<i>darśana</i>	sight, vision (of deity)
<i>devadāsī</i>	dancing girl in temple
<i>dharmakarta</i>	minister responsible for temples; temple trustee or manager
<i>dharmasāstra</i>	Hindu religious law
<i>dīpārādhana</i>	ritual of waving of lamps
<i>gotra</i>	exogamous grouping of Ādiśaivas claiming descent from single sage
<i>guru</i>	master; preceptor
<i>inām</i>	grant, specifically of land [revenue terminology]
(Tam., in origin Arabic)	
<i>kattalāi</i> (Tam.)	endowment in temple
<i>koyil</i> (Tam.)	temple
<i>kuṅkuma</i>	red powder sacred to and used in worship of goddess
<i>līlā</i>	play, sport of gods; play enacted during festival depicting specific scene in play of gods
<i>liṅga</i>	phallic emblem of Śiva
<i>māmūl</i>	custom; tradition
(Tam., in origin Arabic)	
<i>maṇḍapa</i>	hall
<i>mantra</i>	ritual formula, chant
<i>mirācu</i>	hereditary right to land or office, whose holder is <i>mirācutār</i> [revenue terminology; often: <i>mirās</i> , <i>mirāsār</i> ]
(Tam., in origin Arabic)	
<i>murai</i> (Tam.)	turn, rota; in Minaksi Temple, specifically rota of rights to open sancta doors
<i>mūrti</i>	image of deity; form of deity, especially Śiva
Murukan	Tam. name for Subrahmaṇya
<i>naivedya</i>	(ritual of offering of) food
<i>nakṣatra</i>	lunar asterism, one of 27 'houses' through which moon orbits earth
<i>nampiyār</i> (Tam.)	priest in sole charge of important festival in Minaksi Temple
Nāyaka	name of dynasty ruling Madurai c. 1529–1736
<i>nirvākar</i> (Tam.)	custodian of jewels in Minaksi Temple holding <i>nirvākam</i> rights [cf. Skt. <i>nirvāha</i> ]
<i>otuvār</i> (Tam.)	devotional singer
<i>paddhati</i>	Āgamic ritual manual
Pāñcarātra	Vaiṣṇava sect (the other being Vaikhānasa)

*Glossary*

<i>paṇḍa</i> (Hindi)	Brahman pilgrimage specialist
Pāṇḍya	name of dynasty [Tam. Pāṇṭiyaṅ] ruling Madurai in ancient, mythical times, and also historically in approximately 6th-10th and again in 13th centuries
<i>parārthapūjā</i>	public worship performed in temples
<i>paricāra</i> kar (Tam.)	Brahman temple servant [Skt. <i>paricāra</i> ]
<i>pāthasālā</i>	religious school
<i>paṭṭar</i>	Śaiva temple priest [Skt. <i>bhaṭṭa</i> ]
<i>prasāda</i>	grace; substances offered to deity and 'returned' to devotee imbued with grace
<i>prāyaścitta</i>	reparation ritual
<i>pūjā</i>	worship; in the Temple usually specifically public, daily worship
Purāṇa	mythological text; collection of myths
<i>rudrākṣa</i>	berry of shrub ( <i>Elaeocarpus ganitrus</i> ) sacred to Śiva
Śaiva	of or pertaining to Śiva; worshipper of Śiva
<i>śakti</i>	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)
<i>śrāddha</i>	ritual of offering to ancestors, first performed at close of funeral
<i>stāṇīkar</i> (Tam.)	chief priest of temple [Skt. <i>sthānika</i> ] holding <i>stāṇīkam</i> rights
Subrahmaṇya	Śiva's second son in Śaiva temple cult; also known as Murugaṅ, Skanda, etc.
<i>tastik</i>	allowance paid to temple by government [revenue terminology]
(Tam., in origin Arabic)	
Tēṅkalai (Tam.)	section of Vaiṣṇavas upholding authority of Tamil scriptures, opposed to Vaṭakalai
<i>utsava</i>	temple festival
<i>vaidika</i>	'Vedic'; specifically religiously orthodox and learned
Vaikhānasa	Vaiṣṇava sect (the other being Pāñcarātra)
Vaiṣṇava	of or pertaining to Viṣṇu; worshipper of Viṣṇu
Vaṭakalai (Tam.)	section of Vaiṣṇavas upholding authority of Sanskrit scriptures, opposed to Tēṅkalai

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Veda	the four earliest and most authoritative Hindu sacred texts
<i>vibhūti</i>	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 Gaṇeśa, etc.
Viṣṇu	one of the two great gods of Hinduism (the other being Śiva)
<i>yajamāna</i>	originally patron of Vedic sacrifice; patron of worship



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## Key to maps 2 and 3

On map 3, AM and MM indicate the *ardhamanḍapa* and *mahāmanḍapa* 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.

### Mīnākṣī's temple

- 1 MĪNĀKṢĪ (E), main image in sanctum
- 2 Irattai Piḷḷaiyār (E), 'twin Vināyakas', not in shrine
- 3 Caṇḍeśvarī (S), form of goddess to be worshipped after Mīnākṣī
- 4 Nandin (W), the bull who is Śiva's vehicle and devotee, not in shrine
- 5 Nṛtta Gaṇapati and Ucchiṣṭa Gaṇapati (E), 'dancing Gaṇapati (Vināyaka)' and 'remainder Gaṇapati' (i.e. 'impure' form), together in shrine
- 6 Muttu Kumāra (E), 'pearl Kumāra (Subrahmaṇya)', with his consorts Tēyvayāṇai (Devasenā) and Valli
- 7 Bedchamber (*paḷḷiyarai*) with movable image of Mīnākṣī (Paḷḷiyarai Ammaṅ) inside
- 8 Vināyaka (E)
- 9 Ṣaṇmukha (E), 'six-faced' Subrahmaṇya, with his two consorts
- 10 Main flagstaff (*dhvajastambha*) of Mīnākṣī's temple, with sacrifice stone (*balipīṭha*) to W. side and Nandin (W) to W. side of stone, not in shrine
- 11 Kōlu Maṇḍapa, in which Mīnākṣī'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 (*yāgāsālā*), in which the ritual of oblations into the sacrificial fire (*homa*) is performed for festivals celebrated for Mīnākṣī alone

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- 14 Kumāra (E), with his two consorts
- 15 Parrot cage (*kilikkūtu*), in which parrots offered to Mīnākṣī are kept
- 16 Siddhi Vināyaka (E), ‘Vināyaka with all the powers’
- 17 Ūñcal Maṇḍapa, the ‘swing’ hall in which the weekly festival for Mīnākṣī–Sundareśvara is held
- 18 Kāśī 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

**Javandīśvara temple**

- 20 Javandīśvara *liṅga* (E), a form of Siva. (This temple was built by one Kallūr Cēvvanti (Palaniappan 1970: 72) and Javandi appears to be a corruption of his name.)
- 21 Javandīśvarī (S), consort of Javandīśvara

**Sundareśvara’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 Sundareśvara 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 Aṭiyārkaḷ (‘assembly of servants’ of Śaivism) (N and W), movable images
- 27 Nānacampantar, Appar, Cuntarar 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 Veḷḷiyampalam (‘silver stage’) Naṭarāja (S), ‘Śiva as lord of the dance’, with his consort Cīvakāmi (W); movable images of couple at front of shrine
- 32 Dakṣiṇāmūrti (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 Sundareśvara
- 37 Adhikāri Nandin (N), Nandin as chief of temple
- 38 Sūrya (W), the Sun with Ūṣas, the Dawn
- 39 63 Nāyaṇmār and 10 Tōkai Aṭiyārkaḷ (N)
- 40 Sarasvatī (N), goddess of learning, etc.

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- 41 Captakaṇṇikaḷ (N), 'seven virgins' (equivalent to *saptamāṭṛkā*, 'seven mother goddesses')
- 42 Utsava Nāyakar (E), 'lords of the festival'; this shrine contains the movable images of Somāskanda (Sundareśvara) with Mīnākṣī to his right at the front; Muttu Kumāra with his two consorts, Subrahmaṇya alone, Caṇḍeśvara and Vināyaka from N. to S. at the rear; Adhikāri Nandin and another unused Somāskanda along the southern wall
- 43 Kārttikai Subrahmaṇya (E), movable image of Subrahmaṇya 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 Kāśī Viśvanātha shrine, contains Viśvanātha *liṅga*, image of consort Viśālakṣī and other images; the principal replica of the Viśvanātha (Śiva) temple at Benares (Kāśī)
- 47 Stump of *kaḍamba* tree, sacred to Sundareśvara
- 48 Kaṇakacapai ('golden hall') Naṭarājas (S), three movable images of Naṭarāja with his consort
- 49 Akṣara liṅga, 'sacred syllable *liṅga*'
- 50 Sacrifice chamber, as no. 13, used for festivals celebrated for Mīnākṣī and Sundareśvara
- 51 Mahālakṣmī (S), goddess of good fortune, etc.
- 52 Irattiṇacapai ('jewel hall') Naṭarāja (S), movable image with consort
- 53 Bhairava (W)
- 54 Candra (W), the Moon, with his consorts

**Sundareśvara's temple (Outer area)**

- 55 Bāla Murukaṇ (E), Murukaṇ (Subrahmaṇya) as a child
- 56 Kaḷukumalai Kumāra (E), Kumāra at Kaḷukumalai temple
- 57 Taṇṭāyutapāṇi (E), the ascetic Subrahmaṇya at Palani temple
- 58 Aṇukṇai Vināyaka (E), 'Vināyaka as grantor of permission'
- 59 Mukkuṇi Vināyaka (S), Vināyaka whose belly is equal to 'three *kuṇi* (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 Sundareśvara's temple on E. side, sacrifice stone, Nandin (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 Agnivīrabhadra (W), massive image on pillar of the fiery form of a destructive manifestation of Śiva

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- 64 Aghoravīrabhadra (W), similar image of the euphemistically named ‘non-terrifying’ form; nos. 63 and 64 surrounded by railings  
 65 Ūrdhva Tāṇḍava (W), similar image of Śiva dancing with leg erect  
 66 Bhadrākālī (W), similar image of Kālī dancing; nos. 65 and 66 surrounded by railings  
 67 Nāṇacampantar Temple, images of Nāṇacampantar and seven other Śaiva ‘saints’ (N)  
 68 Aṛaivācal Piḷḷaiyār (N), small image of ‘kitchen-gate’ Vināyaka, not in shrine  
 69 Caṅkappulavarkaḷ Temple, images of deified poets of Madurai Śaṅgam  
 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 *Vaṇṇi*-tree Vināyaka Temple, a small modern temple built in a garden  
 74 Naṭarāja (S) with his consort  
 75 Kāśī Viśvanātha shrine, a replica of the Viśvanātha temple at Benares (cf. no. 46)  
 76 Nandin (W), not in shrine  
 77 Maṅkaiyaṅkaraci shrine, modern shrine with images of Śaiva ‘saint’ Queen Maṅkaiyaṅkaraci 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 Vīraṇ, deified warrior whose cult is popular in the region  
 80 Shrine of Kaṛuppacuvāmi, 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.

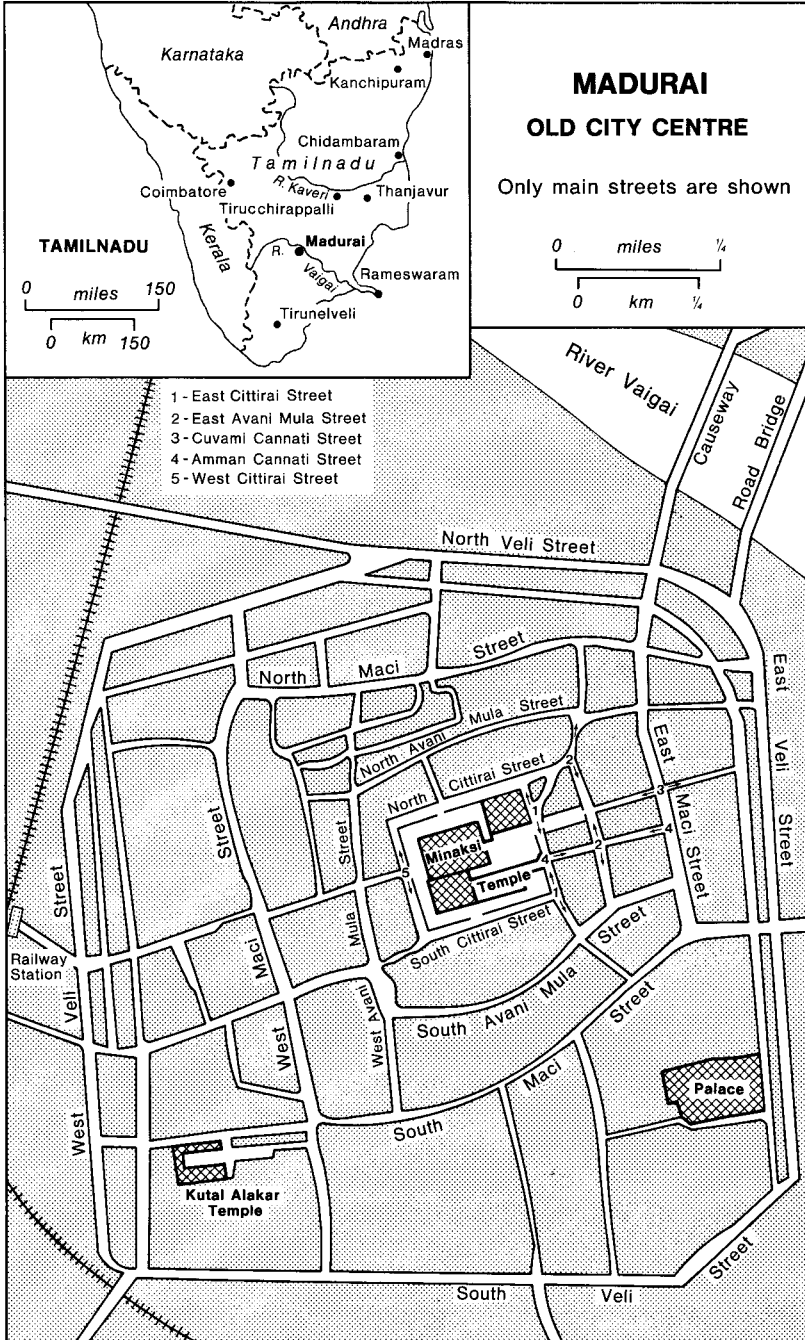
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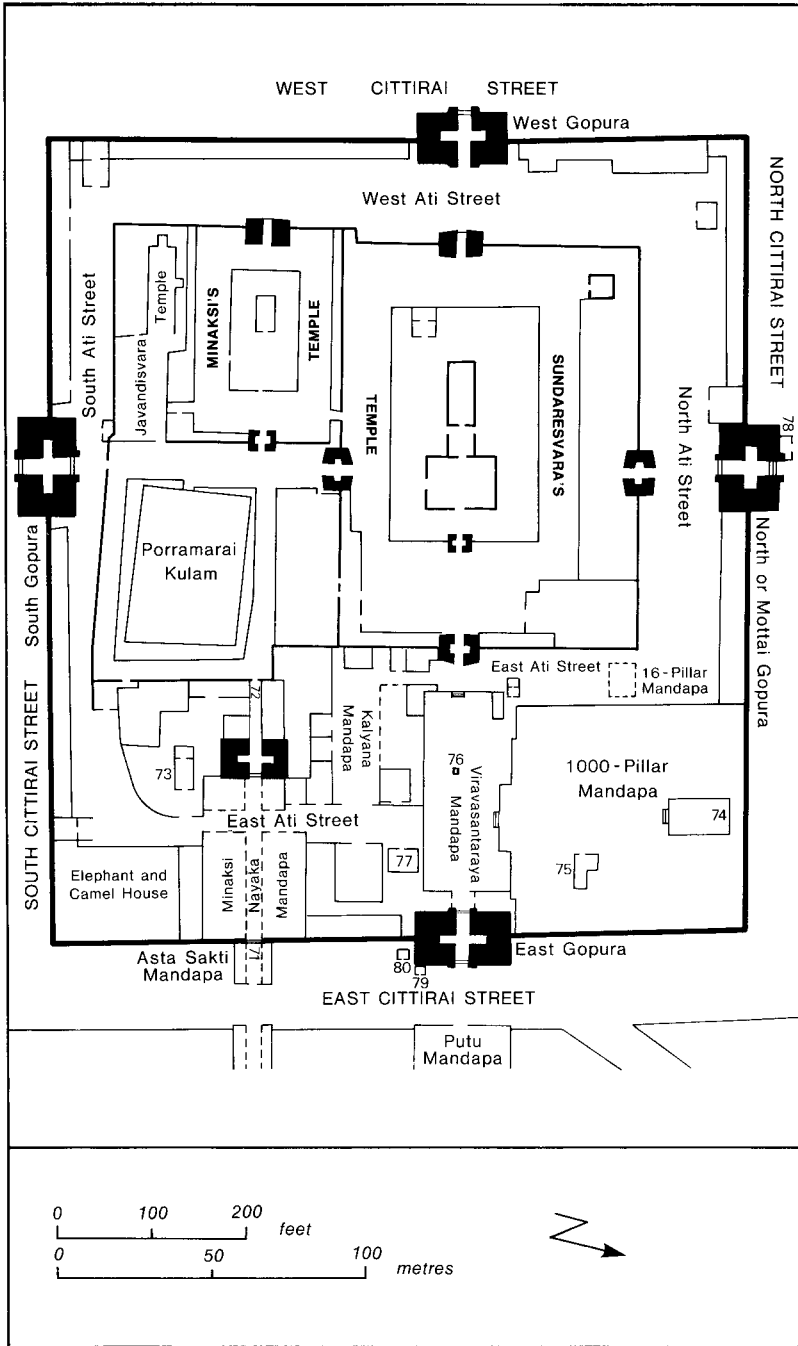
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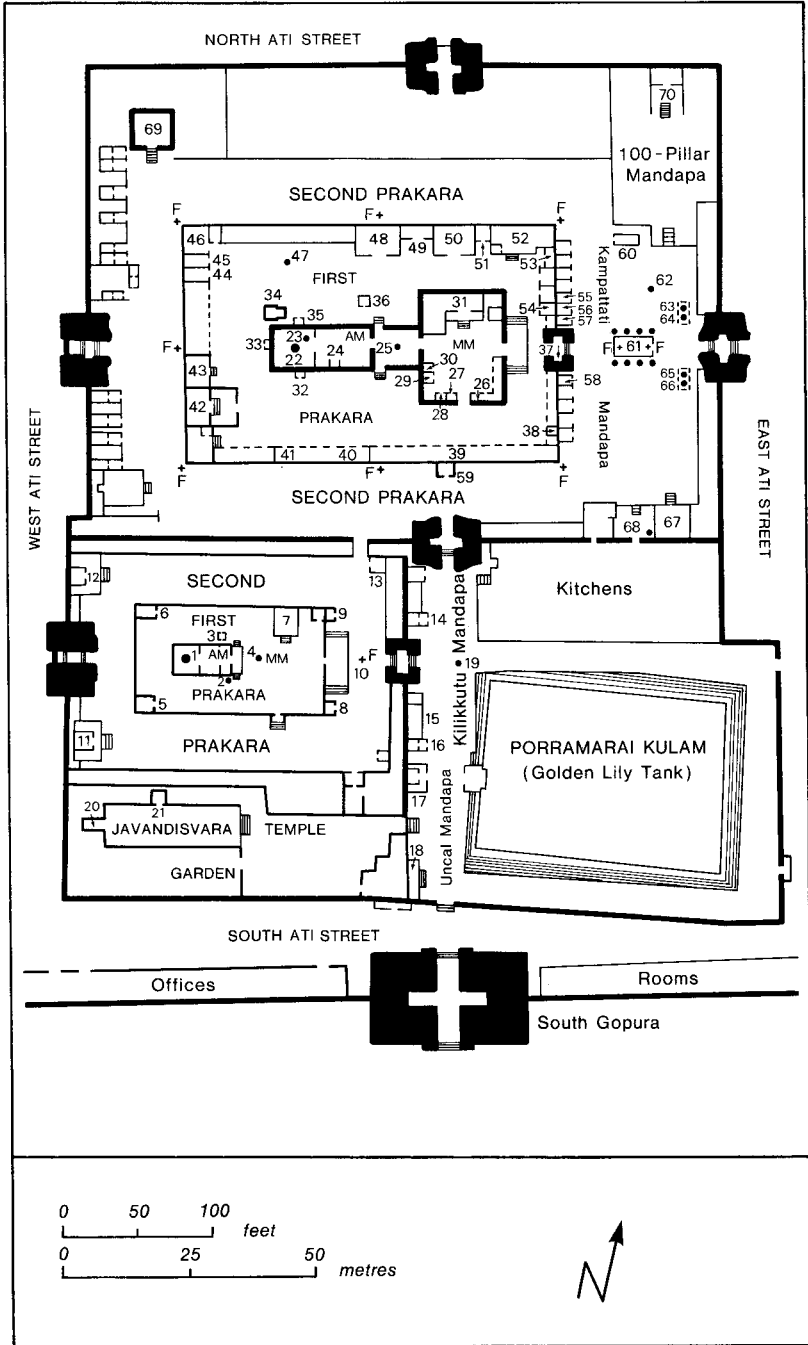


Map 1 Madurai: old city centre



Map 2 The Minaksi Temple

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Map 3 The Minaksi Temple: enlargement of central area