

Introduction

Sovereignty's Trace in Architectural Forms

This book begins with a popular legend about an heir apparent, an illness, and a dream. In the seventeenth century, Tirumala Nāyaka, crown prince of the Madurai Nāyaka dynasty in the Tamil region of southeastern India, suffered from chronic catarrh that left him with an upper respiratory infection that neither doctors nor the gods from neighboring temples could cure (Figure I.1). As he journeyed to Madurai for his coronation, Tirumala collapsed from fatigue. That night, goddess Mīnākṣī (Tamil, ‘the fish-eyed one,’ a manifestation of Pārvatī) and god Sundareśvara (‘the beautiful lord,’ the local form of Śiva) appeared in his dream: they promised that if Tirumala moved his kingdom’s capital from Tiruchirappalli to Madurai, where the deities dwelled in their temple, they would relieve him of his ailment. After consulting with his Brahmins and court ministers, Tirumala accepted the gods’ request—he vowed that when cured, he would not only make Madurai his permanent home, he would also spend lavishly on the temple by financing its restoration and sponsoring its rituals. According to legend, Tirumala was immediately restored to health, and as Madurai’s ruler from 1623 to 1659, he became Mīnākṣī and Sundareśvara’s most ardent devotee.

The setting of this book is one of Tirumala’s promised projects: the Pudu Maṇḍapam (‘new hall’). Built in the 1630s as a major addition to the Mīnākṣī-Sundareśvara temple complex under Tirumala Nāyaka’s patronage, the Pudu Maṇḍapam is one of the best-known monuments from the Nāyaka period (spanning the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries) and one of the largest festival *maṇḍapams* (‘pillared halls’) in the Indian subcontinent (Figure I.2). While the god’s *mūla mūrti*—its immovable ‘root or original image’—remains in the temple’s *garbhagrha* (Skt, ‘inner sanctum’), the deity also takes the form of a bronze, movable festival image, or *utsava mūrti*, which travels from the temple’s main shrine and stays in the *maṇḍapam* during ritual performances. In addition to a stage for religious functions, the Pudu Maṇḍapam boasts massive granite pillars sculpted with gods, mythological figures, and fully modeled portraits of the Nāyaka royal lineage arranged in chronological order—with Tirumala, the patron



Figure I.1 Tirumala Nāyaka, ivory, seventeenth century, Temple Art Museum, Mīnākṣī-Sundareśvara temple, Madurai

Source: Photo by author.

of the project, at the end. The temple and its pillared hall are the religious and cultural hub of Madurai, and a popular site for tourists and Hindu devotees making pilgrimage. Tens of thousands of people visit daily, particularly on Friday (believed to be the goddess's day), and many more arrive during temple festivals—such as the annual Cittirai festival in spring, when over a million devotees throng the temple town to celebrate the celestial wedding between Mīnākṣī and Sundareśvara.

In the Tamil country, perhaps more than any other part of the Indian subcontinent, the king's relationship with the temple was the defining characteristic of sovereign power. Arjun Appadurai's classic history of the Śrī Pārtasārati Svāmi temple in Madras (now Chennai) clarifies the enduring relationship between human kings and temple gods in the pre-colonial period, where the temple served as a sacred domain in which transactional and redistributive roles were performed by ruler and deity, mediated by the ritual exchange of gifts. In the cycle of exchange that defined south Indian temples, the local deity was the "paradigmatic" sovereign whom the king serves; the king, in return, received special honors that defined his participation in the deity's sovereignty.¹ British colonization severed the links between gods and kings, in part, by directly intervening in the indigenous



Figure I.2 Archaeological Survey of India, General view of the Pudu Maṇḍapam from the north-east with the eastern *gōpura* of the Mīnākṣī-Sundareśvara temple, Madurai, in the background, 24 × 28.5 centimeters, 1899

Source: © The British Library Board, Photo 1008/4(355).

management of temples through bureaucratic apparatuses that interfered with the traditional mechanisms of redistribution. Nicholas Dirks' analysis of the Tamil princely state of Pudukkottai is an important study of how British administrators introduced bureaucratized revenue systems and altered palace rituals that severed the south Indian king from the source of his religious authority, leaving him with a "hollow" crown.²

In ancient Tamil, the king (*kō*) was considered a representative of god on earth and lived in a *kōyil* ('palace,' 'residence of a king'). Old Tamil words for a ruler or eminent person, such as *kō* ('king,' 'emperor'), *īraivan* ('chief,' 'master', 'superior'), and *āṇṭavan* ('master') are now words for god; the Tamil word for temple has become *kōyil*, which means 'the residence or house of god.'³ This linguistic mapping links the *ruler*, the *master*, the *palace*, and the *temple*: it emphasizes the central importance of *architecture* in analyzing the problem of sovereignty in the context of ancient and contemporary south India. We can gain profound insight into the configurations of technologies of power by studying the temple, its political and ethical claims, and its aesthetic representational forms. Work on Nāyaka visual culture by Crispin Branfoot and Anna Lise Seastrand illustrate the affective and spatial dimensions of power encoded in temple architecture: temple

murals and statues as well as representations of deities that circumambulate during rituals and festivals invoke the “real presence” of the figures depicted, and generate a spontaneous affect and embodied immediacy for the devotee within the temple, turning the temple into a space of kinetic self-transformation modulated by the divine temporality of the sculpture and paintings.⁴ Research by Lennart Bes and Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam on the Nāyakas’ complex relationship to the Vijayanagara empire offer important insights into the idiosyncrasies of Nāyaka architectural forms;⁵ in the corpulent shapes of the figures that line the Pudu Maṇḍapam, we see how the Nāyakas interrupted imaginations of the ideal ‘royal body’ in south India and produced new conceptualizations of ‘kingship’ in the seventeenth century.

Colonial representations of the pillared hall—as travel narratives, watercolors, engravings, maps, poems, and photographs—rendered ‘Indian civilization’ as a curiosity for European scholars and middle-class consumers, and thus produced ‘British India’ as an object that could be rationally administered from afar. The proliferation of diverse forms of visual and textual representation traces transformations in the material conditions and self-imaginings of both colonial subjects in south India and metropolitan subjects in Britain, whose destinies were intertwined by the mechanisms of empire. The Pudu Maṇḍapam, as a religious architectural site, offers a fertile context for rethinking the concept of ‘sovereignty,’ not only in south India from the seventeenth century, but also in the global context of postcolonial societies with complex attachments to their former metropolises. The contemporary social sciences are preoccupied with discourses of sovereignty that shaped early modern European forms of government in which “sovereignty” is often reducible to *state* sovereignty, and its genesis as a political question is typically credited to English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, for whom sovereignty is the “soul” of the Leviathan, the supreme authority of the ruler over its subjects.⁶ Even popular narratives about sovereignty, which theorize its movement *away* from the nation-state (for example, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s thesis that state sovereignty has evolved into a global empire⁷), nevertheless fail to detach the concept from a distinctly European, state-centric historical context. A proper genealogy of sovereignty requires analyzing configurations of power outside the dominant Eurocentric scene, before colonization transplanted the European forms across the globe, and it must contemplate more seriously the complex ways the European forms were, in turn, profoundly changed by the colonial encounter.

Today, the Pudu Maṇḍapam is the site of renewed political conflict as Madurai’s elites seek to convert the pillared hall into a museum, and thus remake Madurai into an appealing global tourism destination. The Pudu Maṇḍapam

may appear, to different observers at different times, as a resting place for a revered goddess, a historical archive of a royal genealogy, a performance of a sacred scripture, a crowded and dirty marketplace, or a lucrative real estate investment. In the pillared hall, each observer *sees* something entirely different—the complex and antagonistic political claims about the Pudu Maṇḍapam must be analyzed in terms of the aesthetic representations that render those claims intelligible. “Aesthetics,” in a simple sense, refers to what we deem *beautiful* or *desirable*, the criteria according to which we make such judgments, and the media through which these judgments are exercised and shared. Aesthetic representations function in a cyclical relation to the exercise of power: power relations constrain the objects we consider beautiful and desirable, and representations of desire and beauty constrain the forms of power we consider legitimate and acceptable. The realm of aesthetics intimately informs how we become *subjects* of political claims, how we understand our relation to rule and recognize our obligation to it. A sanitary exhibition of sculptures encased in glass is beautiful to some; the crowd and cacophony of petty merchants is beautiful to others. Which of these forms the Pudu Maṇḍapam will take in the future is a question in which aesthetics and power are interconnected.

This study is informed by recent work on the “scaffolding of sovereignty,” which focuses on the aesthetic dimensions of power and rule.⁸ Here, the “aesthetics” of sovereignty refers to an anthropological category that encompasses both the phenomenology of power (the *sensations* and *experiences* in which power relations become embedded) and the art of power (the *rituals*, *customs*, and *symbols* through which power relations are mediated). In tracing the aesthetic contours of “sovereignty,” we search for the scenes in which power is expressed not as brute force and naked coercion, but as “regimes of truth”: the mechanisms by which certain statements are accepted as ‘true’ or ‘false,’ and the practical obligations set in motion when a certain discourse is acknowledged as authority.⁹ Ritual performances of power in South and Southeast Asia have long been a source of fascination for anthropologists, such as Clifford Geertz’s “theatre state” in Bali—in which kings were “impresarios,” priests were “directors,” and peasants were “supporting cast, stage, crew, and audience.”¹⁰ However, where this anthropological tradition starts with the identification of dominant customs and symbols, and then describes the social phenomena that gave them ‘meaning,’ my investigation follows the inverse path, by concentrating on the ‘meaning-giving’ forces and disciplines that give certain customs and symbols an authoritative status.¹¹ The emphasis of this work is on the *media* through which power relations are inscribed and ethical commitments are defined. In the Tamil context, the *temple* offers a site of

‘meaning-ful’ conflict and contestation, in which diverse aesthetic representations were formed and acquired the status of ‘truth.’

This book is a contribution to the genealogy of technologies of power in a global context, through an analysis of formally and temporally diffuse aesthetic representations. My aim is not to excavate the ‘true’ identity of the Madurai temple, nor to reclaim some transcendental religious meaning that was ‘lost’ to the violence of colonization. Rather, I will demonstrate through several scenes how aesthetic considerations about a pillared hall in a small temple town informed the practical exercise of power within much broader dynamics of empire—first the south Indian kings who shared the ‘world empire’ of Vijayanagara, then the British empire and its global networks of labor and capital, and finally the postcolonial state and its nationalisms formed by the twin legacies of colonization and globalization. The Pudu Maṇḍapam, as a living temple and an architectural monument, provides a context for rethinking the demands, entitlements, and constraints of power from the early modern to colonial to post-independence rule in south India, offering insight into unfolding transformations in relationships between aesthetics and politics over the long duration of South Asian history.

A brief history of Madurai and its temple

Madurai is one of the oldest urban settlements in South Asia, located about 300 miles southwest of Chennai, the capital of the modern state of Tamil Nadu in south India.¹² The densely populated core of the city lies on the southern banks of the Vaigai, the river that flows eastward from the Western Ghats to the Bay of Bengal (Figure I.3). The story of Madurai is intertwined with the stories of the *talapurāṇam* (‘place-history’) that describe Śiva’s “sacred games,” the deity’s exploits that formed the city and molded its various features: its hills, rivers, ponds, and temples. According to popular legend, Madurai was once a forest of *kaṭampu* trees, where Lord Indra traveled in search of purification for his sins; there, Indra discovered a stone *liṅgam*, the aniconic representation of Śiva, beside a golden pond, in which Indra bathed and collected lilies to decorate the *liṅgam*. In an early chapter of Parañcōti Muṇivar’s seventeenth-century version of *Tiruvīlaiyātal Purāṇam* (‘Story of Śiva’s sacred games’), a merchant stumbles upon this same *liṅgam* by chance, and informs the Pāṇḍyan king Kulacēkaraṇ of his discovery—the king orders the forest cleared, and a temple constructed around the *liṅgam*. Later chapters describe how Śiva dons myriad disguises and intervenes in the lives of rulers and inhabitants of the city; eventually, Śiva himself becomes king of Madurai after being married to the Pāṇḍyan princess Mīnākṣī. Śiva created the Vaigai, it is said, by asking the Gaṅgā river in his hair to quench the thirst of

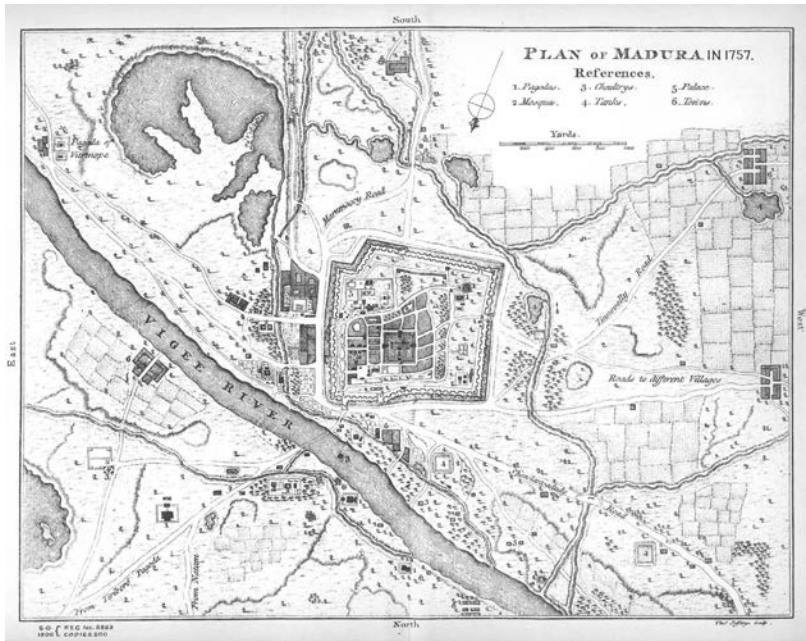


Figure I.3 Plan of Madura in 1757

Source: W. Francis, *Madras District Gazetteers: Madura*, vol. I (Madras: Printed by the Superintendent, Government Press, 1906), between pages 264 and 265.

a guest at their wedding. It is impossible to identify a precise ‘origin’ for these ancient stories, which appear in various Sanskrit and Tamil *purāṇas*—however, some scholars suggest the tale of a Pāṇḍyan princess who married a deity was recorded as early as the fourth century BCE, by the Greek traveler Megasthenes. Tamil-Brahmi cave inscriptions from the second century BCE refer to *matir-ay*, translated as ‘walled city.’ The name “Madurai” may alternately derive from a story in the *purāṇams* of Śiva purifying and blessing the new town by showering drops of nectar full of sweetness (Tamil, *maturam*; Skt, *madhura*) from his matted locks.

The ancient city of Madurai was the seat of the Pāṇḍyan dynasty, a line of kings referenced in Greco-Roman texts as early as the fourth century BCE, which survived in the southeastern region of the Indian peninsula, with varying periods of dominance and decline, until the sixteenth century.¹³ Greek and Latin accounts, including the works of Strabo (64 BCE–24 CE), Pliny the Younger (61–113 CE), and Ptolemy (100–170 CE), describe imports of pearls and textiles from Madurai and the reception of a Pāṇḍyan assembly by Augustus Caesar. Ancient Tamil literature from the early centuries CE name Madurai as

a meeting place of poets in legendary scholarly assemblies called Tamil Saṅgam. Along with the Cōlas and Cēras, the Pāṇḍyas were one of three royal lineages of ancient south India, comprising a triumvirate of rival dynasties known as the Mūvēntar, or ‘Three Crowned Kings.’ The Pāṇḍyas practiced Jainism, but later became devotees of Śiva, as recorded in seventh-century hymns by itinerant poet-saints who sang of Hindu shrines in Madurai. In the late twelfth century or early thirteenth century, the Pāṇḍyan king Kulacēkaraṇ (r. 1190–1216 CE) constructed the current Mīnākṣī-Sundareśvara temple as an abode for the Pāṇḍyan queen who became a goddess after her marriage to Śiva. The Venetian explorer Marco Polo wrote a vivid description of Madurai and the Mīnākṣī temple during his visit in the thirteenth century.

In the early fourteenth century, Muslim invaders from northern India ransacked Madurai and its temple, and established a Madurai sultanate.¹⁴ During this period, the Moroccan Arab explorer Ibn Baṭṭūṭah visited Madurai en route to China, and his *Rihla* (Arabic, ‘journey’) documents a great plague and the exceptional tyranny of a short-lived sultan who died of poisoning by aphrodisiac. By the end of the century, an army from Vijayanagara captured Madurai again, and restored worship in Hindu temples and the kingly tradition of temple patronage. Vijayanagara (Skt, ‘city of victory’) was a city in the Deccan Plateau in modern-day Karnataka, founded by brothers Harihara and Bukkarāya, that grew into a formidable empire spanning the southern peninsula. The Vijayanagara emperors managed the far-flung territories under their rule through a system of subordinate ‘kings’ engaged in a delicate balance of power. In the Tamil region to the south, they appointed Nāyakas, Telugu-speaking outsiders, as their regional military and administrative governors. The Vijayanagaras encouraged rivalries and destructive wars between the Muslim kings of the five Deccan sultanates bounding the empire’s northern territory, but this condition did not last: in 1565, the sultanates formed an alliance and destroyed the Vijayanagara capital in Hampi. Seizing upon Vijayanagara’s weakness, the Madurai Nāyakas severed themselves from the empire in the early seventeenth century. During this period, the rulers of Madurai invented novel expressions of independent Nāyaka kingship, which included major expansions to the Mīnākṣī-Sundareśvara temple.

In the tumultuous late seventeenth century, as the army of the Mughal empire appeared poised to conquer the southern peninsula, the Madurai Nāyakas escaped Mughal invasion by paying tribute to Aurangzeb and supporting his capture of Senji from the Marāṭhās. The waning rulers of Madurai, already tributaries of the Mughal subordinate ruler, were wiped out by the Nawāb of Arcot in 1736. The next several decades were a period of intense struggle over the southern peninsula, entangling the Nawāb, the English East India Company, the French East India

Company, and the Marāṭhās, during which time Madurai changed hands multiple times. After falling heavily into debt, the last independent Nawāb of Arcot, Muḥammad ‘Alī Khān Wallajah, assigned revenues from his territory to the British in 1781 to defray the cost of a 1780 war against Mysore ruler Haider ‘Alī Khān and the French—for the first time, there was a British revenue collector in Madurai. After Haider ‘Alī Khān’s son, Tipū Sultān, was killed in the last Anglo-Mysore war at the 1799 siege of Seringapatam in the southern part of modern-day Karnataka, Madurai was captured by the English East India Company in 1801 and annexed to its Madras Presidency.

The British instituted ambitious programs of urban redevelopment in Madurai (now called “Madura”) in the early nineteenth century. Collector John Blackburne, who administered the Madura Collectorate from 1835 to 1848, demolished the old Pāṇḍyan forts, laid down new roads, and expanded the city. A railway line was opened connecting Madurai to Tiruchirappalli in 1857, the same year as the Sepoy Mutiny, which caused the British crown to abolish Company rule and assume direct control of India’s administrative and taxing authorities. Madurai was constituted in 1866 as a municipality under the Town Improvement Act of 1865, which created a system of municipal taxes for services like street lighting, water supply, and sewage; the Act was amended in 1871 to include issues like birth and death registration, sanitation, and vaccination. Under pressure from Christian missionaries, the British had initially resisted active involvement in the affairs of the Mīnākṣī temple—now they invalidated temple land grants made under the *inām* (Arabic, ‘gift’) system and passed a law stipulating that temple oversight be given to local management committees, which were broadly perceived as corrupt institutions. In 1937, the provincial government in Madras assumed supervision of the temple through the Hindu Religious Endowments (HRE) Board, tasked with handling widespread mismanagement. After India’s independence in 1947, Madurai became a major district and the third most populous city in the postcolonial state of Tamil Nadu—the colonial institutions were reconfigured for use by the independent government. The city of Madurai is now administered by the Madurai Corporation, an upgrade of the municipal institution formed under British rule. The Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowment (HR & CE) Department, which replaced the old Board, now controls the Mīnākṣī temple administration as a branch of the Tamil Nadu state government in Chennai.

The power of place

The Tamil *talapurāṇam* is a history (*purāṇam*) of a specific sacred place or a pilgrimage site (*talam*). Many sculptures and paintings in the Mīnākṣī temple and its Pudu Maṇḍapam are recreations of stories from Śiva’s “sacred games” in

Madurai, narrated in Parañcōti Muṇivar's seventeenth-century *Tiruvīlaiyāṭal Purāṇam*, Perumparrapuliyūr Nampi's thirteenth-century *Tiruvālavāyūṭaiyār Tiruvīlaiyāṭarpurāṇam*, and other Tamil and Sanskrit *purāṇas*. The earliest references to Madurai as a temple site can be found in the sixth- to eighth-century tradition of Śaiva *Tēvāram* poetry, where traveling saints praised shrines visited in *tala yāttirai* ('a tour of sacred places').¹⁵ British academic interventions in India were guided by a belief that narrative genres like the *purāṇas* indicated an absence of historical consciousness, and India thus lacked 'history'—indeed, several chapters in this book focus on the archival technologies introduced by the British in order to ameliorate this 'lack,' which sought to extract India's 'lost' history from visual records of its religious architecture.¹⁶ In navigating the divine temporality of the *purāṇas*, the historiographic interventions of European scholars, and my own ethnographic research in Madurai, I am writing the history of the Pudu Maṇḍapam as a critical geography of a place. The task of a geographer and historian is to map the domain of these social constructions: to scrutinize the dominant meta-narratives about a place, the local and everyday uses of a place, and all the (often fleeting) representations that fall in between.¹⁷

The multifarious perspectives on the Pudu Maṇḍapam are significant to understanding the broader political and cultural history of south India, from the Nāyaka period to the present. This book delves into the concept of 'sovereignty' through the lens of the pillared hall by examining its aesthetic representations and ethnographic narratives. I am indebted to a tradition of "humanistic geography," which analyzes geographical phenomena not only in terms of their physical attributes, but also in terms of the human meanings and values ascribed to them.¹⁸ I also utilize J. Nicholas Entrikin's definition of "place" as a site socially constructed within a particular context and period, where 'meaning' is produced by the particular concerns of the *subjects* of that place.¹⁹ From this perspective, the "place" is inseparable from the "thoughts, feelings and experiences that make up the consciousness of inhabitants...place is not so much a location as a setting, less a thing than a relationship."²⁰ My task is to navigate the web of "relationships" bundled at the Mīnākṣī temple through the Śaiva poets who made pilgrimage there, the Nāyaka kings who left their likenesses there, the British travelers who captured photographs there, the petty merchants who traded their wares there, and so on. This book traces transformations of societies—both the present-day south Indian state of Tamil Nadu and its distant British colonial metropole—through the complex, and often contradictory, texts reflecting diverse experiences and relationships with the Pudu Maṇḍapam. This history is told through an analysis of letters, travelogues, bronze models, paintings and drawings, photographs, temple