The Study of Inter-Relationship between Spaces and Stories Case of Meenakshi Temple, Madurai

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Abstract: This study explores the inter relationship between spaces and narratives. The primary methodology adopted is by collecting the narratives present in the temple complex- narratives of the art forms in some of the temple spaces. These narratives are further studied and disintegrated through the theory suggested by Vladimir Propp in his research 'The morphology of a folktale.' The analysis thus achieved is then mapped on a layout of the Meenakshi temple. And through this, it is derived that the space and the story have an interesting cyclic relationship- one does not exist without the other.

Keywords:
Meenakshi temple, Narrative mapping, Madurai, Vladimir Propp, Stories, Culture, Interdisciplinary, Temple art,

I. Introduction

Narratives are an excellent means of understanding the local histories of any given region. These local histories are taken up as a medium of analysing the spaces and the sculptures of the *Meenakshi* Temple at Madurai. One of the major cues to commence this study is the impact of the local myth of the goddess *Meenakshi's* life on the urban design of the city. Here, a belief manifests itself in the city physically! This journey of a belief translating into an urban design policy is something that is fascinating.

The morphology of a folktale by Vladimir Propp is used as a research tool to analyse this idea. And through this, it is derived that the space and the story have an interesting cyclic relationship- one does not exist without the other.

Vladimir Propp quotes in his study 'The morphology of a folktale'

"We shall insist that as long as no correct morphological study exists, there can be no correct historical study. If we are incapable of breaking the tale into its components, we will not be able to make a correct comparison."

Hence the study of narratives facilitates a better understanding about the ideas of the society in the temple town of Madurai. This further helps in the understanding of the art and architecture of the temple.

The 48000 square metres of temple complex of *Meenakshi* was not built at once but was an evolutionary process. It appears that there is no process to the complex and addition of the spaces appears random. But through this study it can be interpreted that there exists a subconscious undercurrent that is exposed through the sculptures and the spaces of the temple. The same is understood better through the connected narratives.

II. Material and Methodology

Literature Review

Studies on the *Meenakshi* temple at Madurai are widely taken up. Art and architectural Historians like George Michell (1988), James Fergusson (1967), and Percy Brown (1956) describe the spaces here technically; through use architectonics. They compare the spaces with the other similar temples like Chidambaram and Suchindram. They even talk about the art found here but as two separate entities.

Samuel Parker (2007) talks about the idea of inside and outside reflected in the Tamil poetry with the setting of Madurai. The art of painting, iconography, colous, dating of the temple etc is studied in detail by authors like Crispin Branfoot (2011). There are also studies that observe how the temple responds or blends with and to the urban fabric, to the city of Madurai. (Hudson, 1993)

Methodology

The approach here is to study the narratives of the temple ethnographically with a background of the built. The method as suggested by Propp (1968) is applied over the narratives of the art as found in the *Meenakshi* temple.

The narratives are available as a part of the promotional literature translated from Tamil to English, published by the temple trust on a yearly basis.

The paintings and sculptures are mapped on a map of the temple. Each art form is then related to its narrative. The Proppian method is then applied on the narrative and analysed. The data for analysing and studying is thus through graphical maps, history and evolution of the temple complex.

Through the above-mentioned techniques, the two aspects- narratives (art) and the typology of spaces (architecture) are studied understand the inter-relationship of the stories and the spaces.

Limitations

The narratives mentioned here are local 'myths' or stories. The source of which is taken from a source that the temple promotes.

The marking of these myths on a map of the temple is also based on the actual existence of the art in the temple and hence a fact. The main focus is to study the narratives of the art present in the temple.

The spaces that are largely visited by devotees are shortlisted. And only some narratives that appear in these spaces are picked (20 narratives). These 20 art forms and their corresponding stories, which are diverse in content, and location, are picked for analysis.

Propp is a structural folklorist. His thesis is based on the fairy tales of Russia; wherein he studies around 1000 stories to arrive at a method of studying the fairy tales. He positively puts that the method is applicable to any narrative all around the world at any given time.

His method is taken up to break down the stories. The types, functions and dramatis personae are that are defined by him are limited to fairy tales, hence are edited on basis of common observation.

The method avoids context. The chronology of the narratives too is not considered. He looks at the stories devoid of any impact or implication. Instead the stories help arrive at an implication and understanding of the Russian culture.

III. Results and Tables

At the *Meenakshi* temple, all spaces in the temple have gained more significance due to the narrative attached to it. The simple sculpted column shafts are converted into major sub shrines- only since the form represents an important myth.

Art + Narrative=Shrine
Sub shrine →Devotion →Sanctity

(Art =sculpted column, paintings, bas reliefs; Narrative= stories from scriptures, local myths, folktales, beliefs)

As Joseph Campbell puts in very beautifully (Campbell, 1991) [Regarding a sacred place]

You must have a room, or a certain hour or so a day, where you don't know what was in the newspapers that morning, you don't know who your friends are, you don't know what you owe anybody, you don't know what anybody owes to you. This is a place where you can simply experience and bring forth what you are and what you might be. This is the place of creative incubation. At first you may find that nothing happens there. But if you have a sacred place and use it, something eventually will happen.
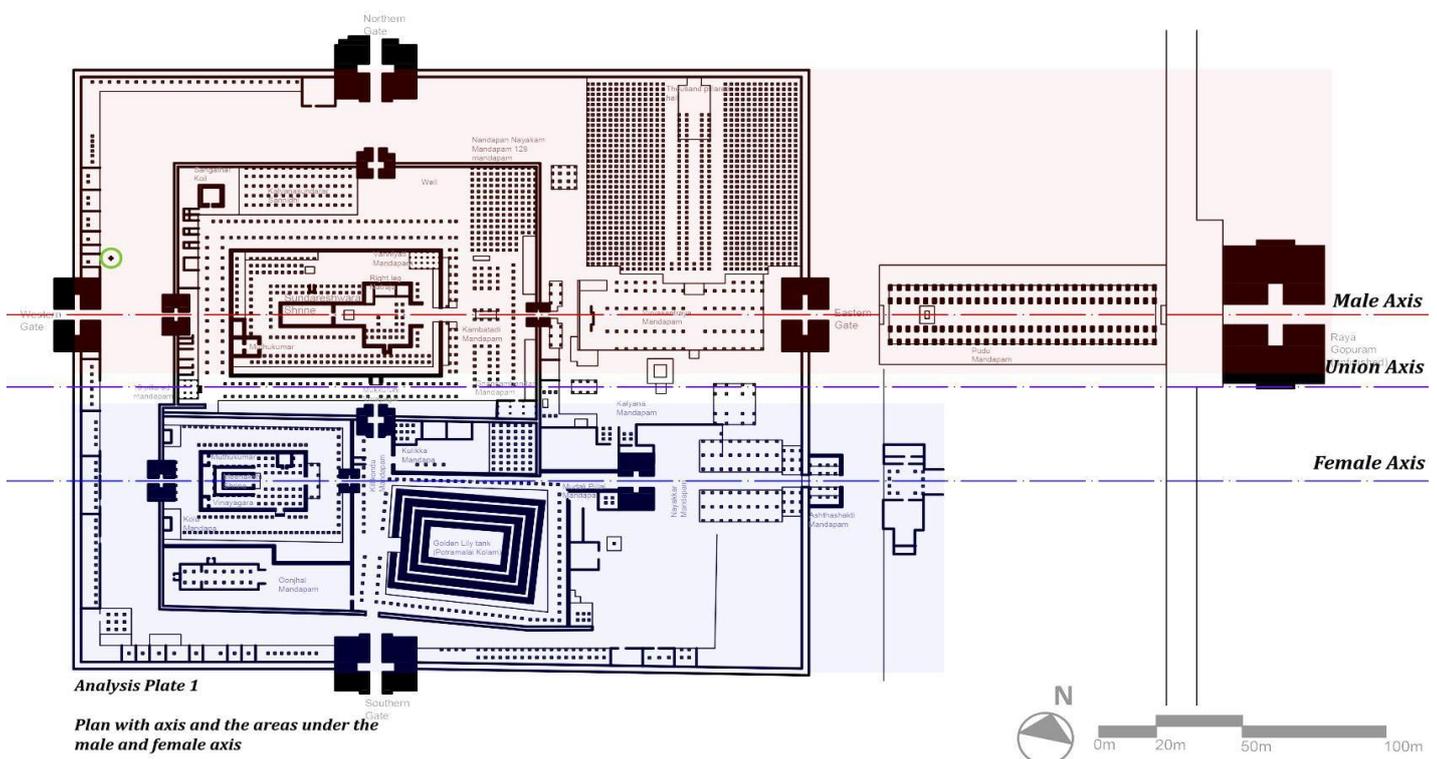
The tangible, measurable built spaces are also protected by mythology. Mythology and belief systems retained the temple of *Meenakshi* in spite of the Muslim invasions and loots. If Malik Kafur had not experienced the presence of an old man and if he had not believed that the old man could be Shiva we would not have seen the face of *Meenakshi* temple today!
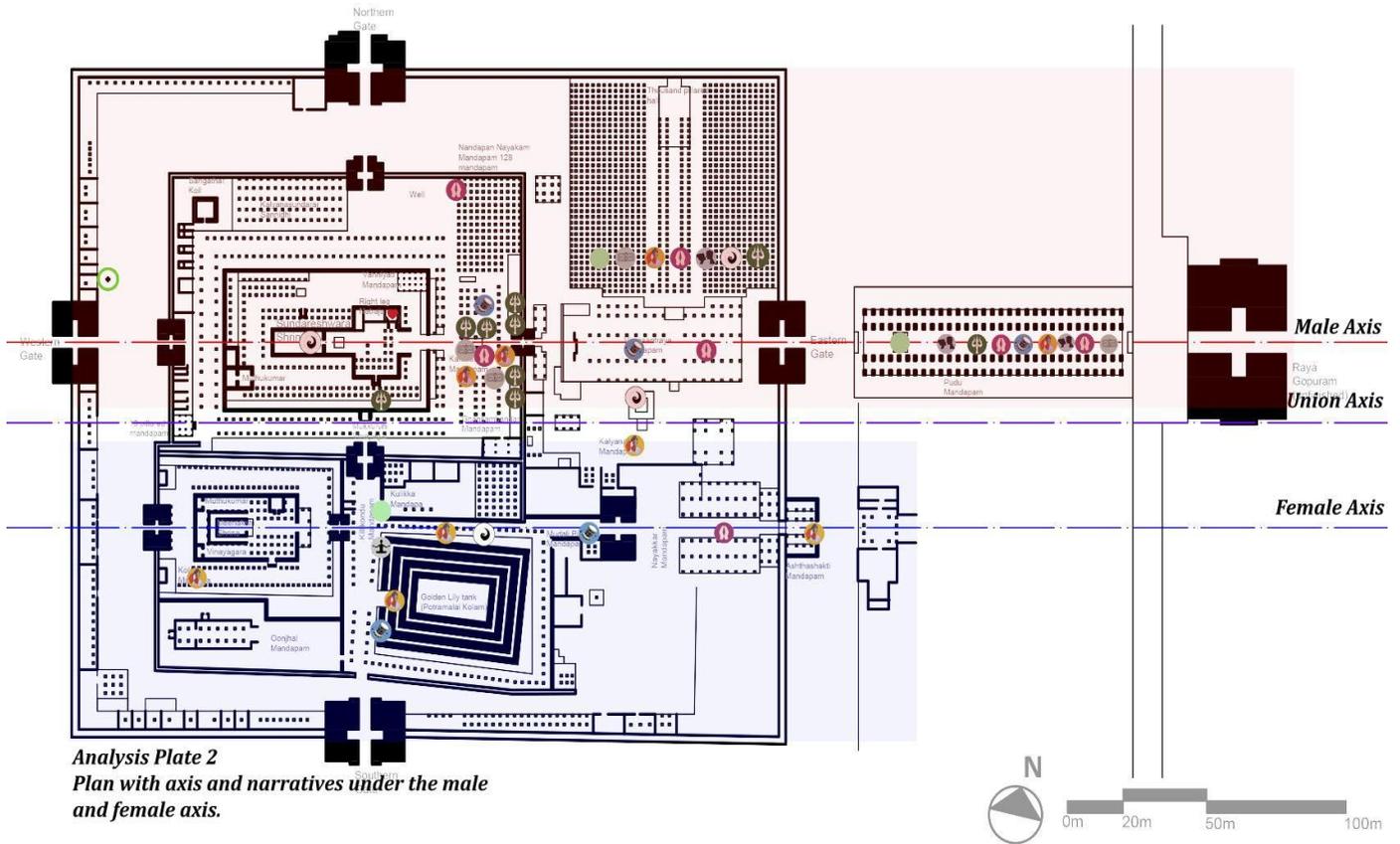
Facts say that the temple remained shut for a number of years during the rule of the Muslims. The priests made a *linga* of sand in the *ardhamandapa* of the temple for people to pray. But when the shrine reopened; the *linga* was already adorned with fresh flowers and sandal paste. This again added an element of mystery to the temple. Hence, intangible aspects of mythology and narratives saved the built and tangible temple. (Venketesh, 2013)

Mythical belief + Narrative = Protection of built
Protection of built space →Addition to Sanctity

The parallel presence of myths along with the built spaces and sculptures, is essential, to experience the spaces better. For any space to have a living experience, it hence has to be accompanied with myths. And at the same time to give any narrative a physical experience, a realistic experience- the spaces are necessary.

Narrative + Space=Experience of narrative
Experience of narrative →Enhancement of Sanctity

Analysis Plate 1

Plan with axis and the areas under the male and female axis

Analysis Plate 2
Plan with axis and narratives under the male and female axis.

*'Myths are public dreams,
Dreams are private myths.'*

IV. Conclusion

The interrelationship between stories, spaces and sanctity is a circle. Spaces lead to stories, stories to sanctity, sanctity to stories, sanctity to spaces and so on. Each inspires and generates the other. The two art forms of stories and spaces are constantly in a cycle of give and take from each other. These forms are constantly changing the realms of existence for each other- through the presence of one- the other is highlighted and vice versa; sometimes one art form becomes the background and sometimes the foreground. This constant dialogue between the art forms hence contributes to create an enriched visual and sensorial experience.

Myths hence help give an edge, a life, an experience, sanctity, and eternity to spaces. Spaces can be enjoyed well with myths and myths better understood through spaces. Through the thesis it can be therefore be implied that the aspect of the sanctity and mystery related to the temple continues to live on even today, after 13 centuries of the founding of the Shiva linga.

Indian temples have several such transcendental forms of art- music, dance, poetry, literature etc from which the built constantly derives and borrows. May be temples were built as a means to communicate the art forms or maybe to narrate the deeper meanings or maybe for a rich and pleasurable experience. Or may be we are only overlaying our ideas on the simple built forms. One way or the other, the thesis definitely enriched my experience to look at the spaces of the temple differently and to read stories differently.

Thus ending this with a very intriguing thought by Joseph Campbell (Campbell, 1991)
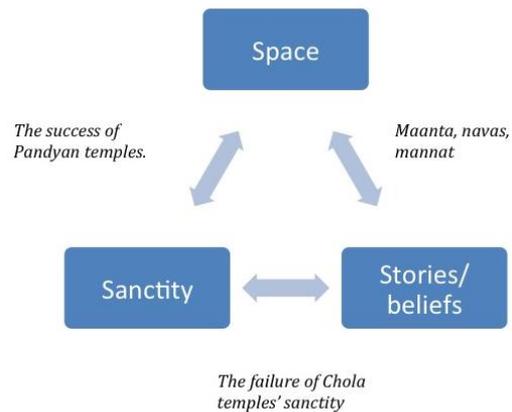
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