



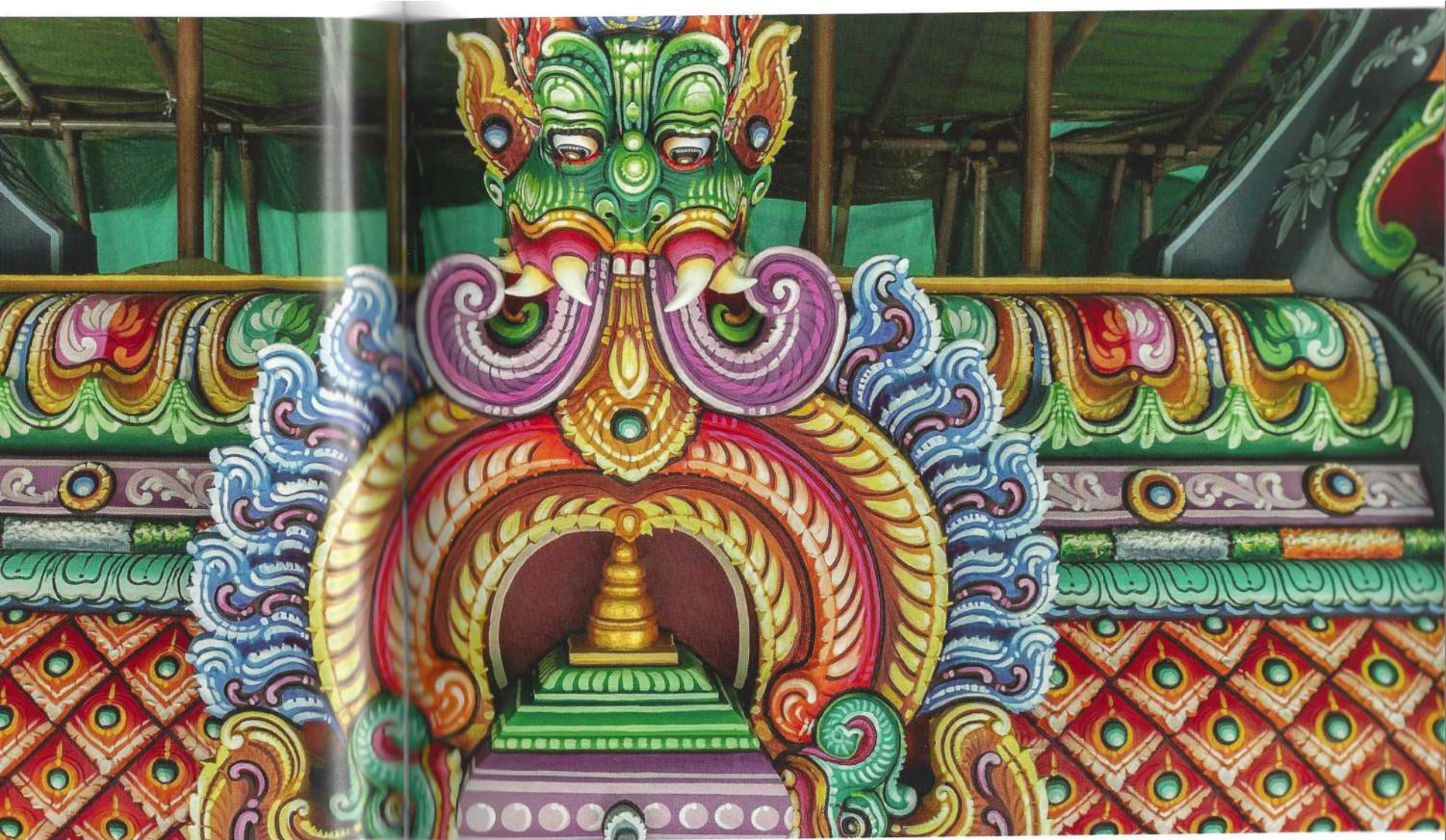
சக்தி

Shakthi



Architecture of Sri Mariamman Temple

Ms Chandra Ravi



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Ms Chandra Ravi

Sri Mariamman has touched the lives of everyone who has sought blessings at her altar, and over the course of recent decades, she has been witness to Singapore's rise as a nation. Considered the reigning Goddess by many Hindu families in Singapore, this iconic temple is a unifying force for the local Hindu community, and the custodian of ageless practices such as Theemethi or Firewalking Festival and Shakti Karagam, a form of folk dance performed during the Theemethi festival.

Upon entering the temple, a devotee immediately senses the powerful gravitational pull of the presiding deity, Sri Mariamman. Tradition has Sri Mariamman serving as the grama-devatha or presiding deity of a village. The deity has been associated strongly with curing from diseases that were common during the 18th and 19th century. And indeed this has resonance in Singapore, as long-

time devotee Ms. Kokilam Marim after the Japanese occupation in outbreaks of diseases like chickenpox, affected families would look to Sri and cure".

The architecture of the temple is a supreme deity, with the five-tiered entryway enhanced with stucco, ancient Hindu texts, to the mandapam pillars creating a rhythm and adding the ornate colorful ceilings. Together, the temple is an architectural jewel of Singapore.



Kalasam or finial

Shikara or crown

Alpanasai at Tier 2

Mughasalai at Tier 2

Hara or parapet

Tala or Tier 1

The gopuram or “imperishable gateway” is a significant threshold a devotee crosses marking the journey outer to the inner realm, both metaphorically and physically. The gopuram at Sri Mariamman Temple is an imposing masonry structure with five receding stories, and its pyramidal shape is an amalgamation of several vertical and horizontal elements that follow the formal structural hierarchy prescribed in the Shilpi Agama Shastra, the sacred text of temple architecture.

Architecturally, each tier of the gopuram is called a thala, and is delineated by a parapet or the hara. The uniquely shaped barrel-vaulted roof, otherwise referred to as the shikara, is the pinnacle of the gopuram, with the finial or the kalasam being the crowing jewel of this gopuram. This copper- and gold-plated vessel is shaped like an inverted pot and encrusted at the top of the gopuram, and interestingly serves an important practical function as a lightning conductor. On the horizontal plane, at the center of the gopuram is a mini pavilion called the salai, easily recognized as an aedicular structure that is rectangular or oblong-shaped and mimics the shikara of the gopuram. In turn, the center of the mini pavilion has an aperture referred to as the mughasalai, a buttress wall designed to handle wind resistance, at the top of which is a decorative horse-shoe shaped arch called maha nasi.



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Along the main sanctum are ghosha-mandapams or pavilions located
arch at the top as seen on either side of the main sanctum featuring Sri
Sri Mariammam, and Sri Viswanathar-Visalakshi to her left.

Another distinct aspect of Sri Mariammam Temple's architecture is the
with brick and mortar. There are three important places where we get the
the maha mandapam in the longitudinal axis, second above the platform
latitudinal axis, and finally above the artha mandapam adjacent to the
structures are engineering marvels, given they are built with brick and
has been a part of temple architecture for thousands of years and has by
it is great to see that same style continues to exist in Singapore," say
The ceilings come alive in a kaleidoscope of colors depicting various of
the ten incarnations (avatars) of Sri Vishnu, and several geometric mat
From a temple architectural perspective, Sri Mariammam Temple is v
Mariammam is a grama-devata or village-deity, and accordingly her te
architecture. Marveling at Sri Mariammam Temple's architecture, A
striking to see that they have replicated the same spirit of a village te
with fusion elements such as the pointed arches and the corbeling deta
in Dravidian architecture." Another notable construct is the unique (f
(flagpost) in front of the Draupadi Amman sanctum: where the Dwajast
of the presiding deity, this unusual feature at Sri Mariammam Temple
prominence of the deity and Her role presiding over iconic occasions



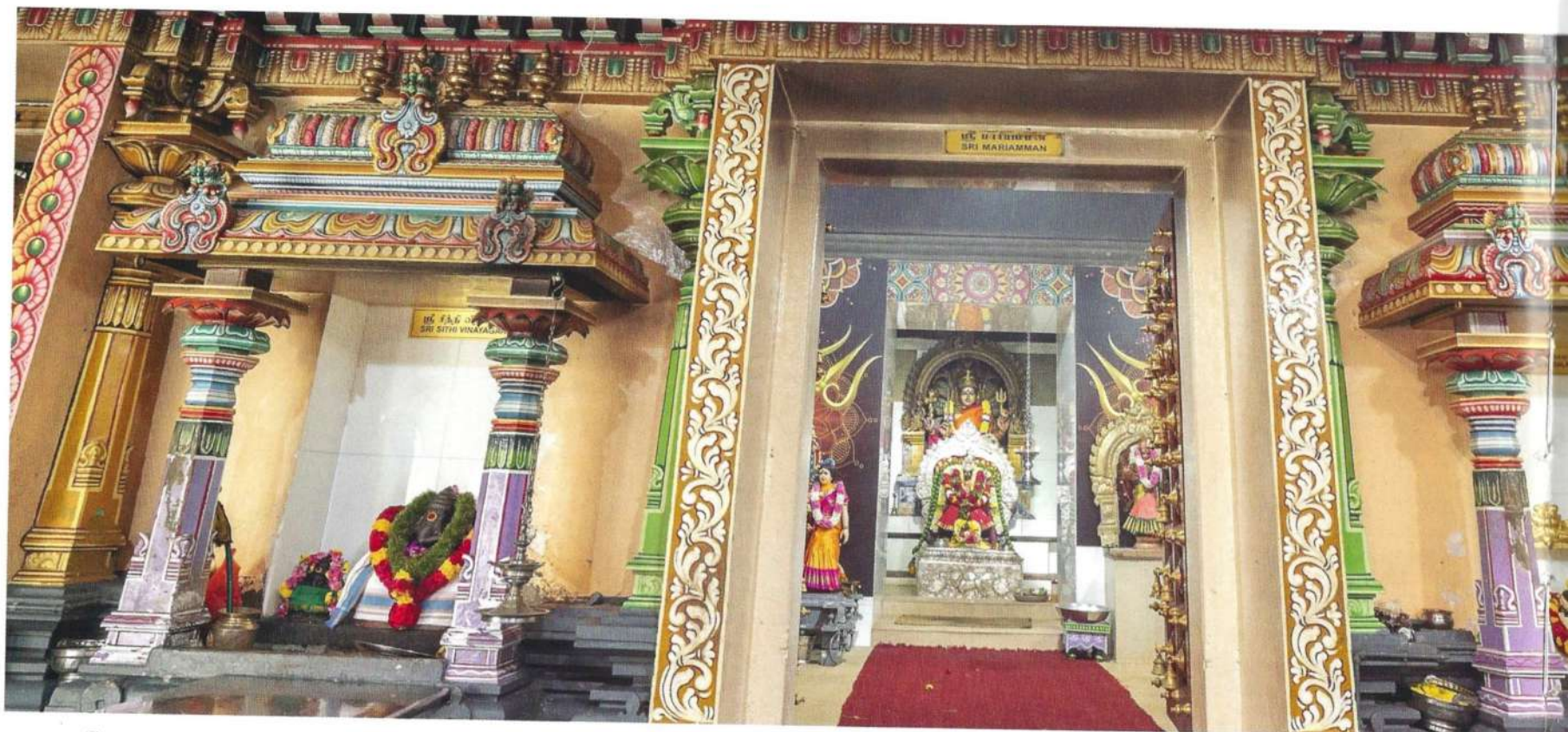
A striking feature of the temple is the mandapams or “various columned halls.” The wide-open space between the entry point to the main sanctum creates a sense of rhythm and provides a panoramic view of the temple. These mandapams are arranged in order of their hierarchy with the munn mandapam or the front hall located near the entryway, and the maha mandapam or the “main pavilion” being closest to the main sanctum. The placement of the Kazhumaram and Balipeedam (sacrificial altar) on this central axis emphasizes the symmetry of the overall layout. The mandapams are designed to create a sense of progressive enclosure, culminating in the fully enclosed garbhagriha or sanctum sanctorum. The vestibule before the garbhagriha is called the artha mandapam, an antechamber that can only be accessed by the priest. The pillars supporting the mandapams are decorated with simple corbeling details and feature pointed arches.

The main sanctum at the most elevated point in the temple is called the garbhagriha, from the words “garbham” or womb and “aahaara” (abode), in other words, “the chamber where the deity is placed.” This sanctum, considered the most sacred space in a Hindu temple, is designed to shield the deity from natural elements and any negative or destructive energies that could affect the aura of the deity. Naturally, this space is well protected, with window-less walls

on three sides. The inner sanctum is square in shape and features a circular Vimana or tower at the top. As Mr. Dakshinamoorthy as the lead architect, explains, “geometric shapes in temple architecture have attributes associated with them. Nagara is expressed as a square and is associated with satvik attributes and Vesara emphasizes forcefulness in circular forms. So, in this context, the Sri Mariamman Temple’s main sanctum is a combination of Nagara-Vesara geometric forms.”

From a legacy perspective, the well-preserved wooden Kazhumaram at the entryway is significant. Elaborating on this, the temple’s chief priest Chandrashekar Gurukkal states, “Karthavarayan is a village deity, and traditionally devotees prayed to Him when they lost an object of importance to them. As a part of their prayer, people sacrificed animals and tied them to the hooks seen on the Kazhumaram. While this practice has long been discontinued, this tangible piece of heritage is still preserved.”

In front is the Balipeedam or sacrificial altar, and food is offered to ghnas or beings who need to be invoked and worshiped as a part of daily temple ritual. The Balipeedam sits on a base atop which is a pair of lotuses.



The architecture of Sri Mariamman Temple is to be celebrated for its blend of traditional Dravidian architecture that has been tastefully fused with a few unusual (and non-traditional) elements that combine to create a wonderfully exquisite temple like none other. But what matters most is the spiritual aura that a devotee experiences at Sri Mariamman Temple, and no matter what prompted a devotee to visit, each person leaves the place feeling peaceful and blessed. As another chief priest Ganesh Kumar Gurukkal observes, "One interpretation of Mari in Tamil is repetition, and anyone who comes to her altar keeps coming back as their prayers are always answered." That then is the essence of this sacred place, where people walk in with faith and experience her assuring presence.

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