

“The Lord of the Pot”: Purāṇa, Memory and the Religious Landscape of a South Indian Town

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Wednesday, April 17, 4PM
Melville Library, Room E4340
(Center for Italian Studies)

The city of Kumpakonam in Tamil Nadu owes its name to a popular Śaiva legend — according to the purāṇic legends of the city, Śiva destroyed a pot (tamil *kumpam*, Sanskrit *kumbha*) containing the “seed of creation” (*srstibīja*) over the area which would eventually become the town itself. The broken pot and its contents were spread over the region, and the places where each piece fell became the sites of the shrines and sacred tanks (*kuṭam*) that constitute a Śaiva pilgrimage circuit. In this way, an entire urban sacred landscape is established in large part by a set of narratives. In addition to the Sanskrit and Tamil purāṇic texts that related this story (as well as many others that establish the sacrality of the town’s shrines), it is recounted in murals, other works of literature, and in contemporary manuals that serve as guides to pilgrims visiting the area. Collectively, this material not only provides a justification for the rituals associated with each site, but also seeks to engender the affective, devotional experience of sacred space. By surveying some of this material, I argue that “purāṇa” constitutes a uniquely South Asian mode of envisioning the past, and is perhaps best explained less as a textual genre than as a form of cultural memory.

Jay Ramesh is a lecturer in the Department of Asian and Asian-American Studies at Stony Brook University and is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Religion at Columbia University. Previously, he was the Daniel H.H. Ingalls Memorial Fellow at the American Institute of Indian Studies. His research focuses primarily on the history of the purāṇic tradition in South India, on the connections between Sanskrit and Tamil religious poetry, and more recently, on medieval and early modern literary representations of the natural world.



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