

[Searching for the Agamas - Part III](#)

Category : [November 1987](#)

Published by Anonymous on Nov. 02, 1987

Searching for the Agamas - Part III

Standing like fossilized sentinels and informally lining the driveway to Benares Hindu University's (BHU) museum are a collection of fractured sculptures from India's fecund past. Inside, past rifle-bearing police, there's the real nice stuff-steel grey granite statues and dusty brown sandstone friezes freezing divinity in stone. The Maurya empire pieces excel. They reflect the marriage of Greek anatomical realism and the Hindu sense of contemplative repose-a marriage that occurred when Macedonia Greeks, left by Alexander the Great, were absorbed into northwest India's Hindu society 23 centuries ago. During this same period the Saiva Agamas were eclipsing brahminism, spawning specific schools of Saivism and shaping Shaktism.

The oldest and clearest window into the Agamic wisdom is the Tirumantiram, "Holy Garland of Mantras," written by the Natha Sivajnani, Tirumular, around 200 B.C. Tirumular, a man of phenomenal Siva realization and siddha power, is well known in South India-the Tirumantiram is composed in the South Indian language of Tamil-but unheard of in the North. This just demonstrates how biographical history in India is so elusive, for Tirumular was originally from the Himalayan fastnesses of Kashmir, North India. His name was Sundaranatha, and he was a disciple of Nandinatha, the oldest known Sat Guru of the Natha Sampradaya (teaching/lineage of the Siva masters), living a thousand years before Matsyendranath and Gorakhnath would make the Adinatha lineage of the Natha Sampradaya famous.

The Tirumantiram contains 3,300 verses divided into nine sections called "Tantras," serving as enlightened compilations of pure Agamic teachings. A good 80% of it is devoted to the esoterics of kundalini yoga and the rarified stratosphere of Siva cosmology. With many of the Agama jnana and yoga sections literally consumed by white ants or lost, the importance of the Tirumantiram with its detailed yogic and jnanic knowledge is unequaled. Yet, in Hindu scholastic circles it's almost unknown and many Agama researchers haven't yet employed it as a magnifying lens.

The Agama molding process of Hinduism vibrantly continued for 13 centuries, until the appearance of Abhinavagupta in the 10th century, a profound yogi and prolific writer of the Kashmir Saivite school. He wrote the last great treatise (Tantraloka) on the Kashmir Agamas or Tantras, as Agamas are also termed. It is these Kashmir Agamas that have far better survived the older Saiva Agamas. And the scholastic dredging of the Kashmir Agamas has been far deeper, with BHU as the epicenter of this important work.

In an ironic twist, the actual practice of Kashmir Saivism is in its sunset while its scriptures have survived well. The Saiva Siddhanta of the Saiva Agamas is in a sunrise while much of its root scripture is gone.

These thoughts are occupying us (two Saivite Swamis hunting down the Saiva Agamas) as we walk with Dr. Tripathi, the university's chief Agama scholar. "When I first met Gopinath Kaviraj (late, preeminent Kashmir Agama scholar) he asked me, 'Do you want to study or do you want to become absorbed.' I said absorbed. He said, 'That's good. I only teach absorption.'" Now, Dr. Trivadi, is getting absorbed in the Saiva Agamas. Our main target at BHU is a private collection of Hinduism's best scholastic mind from the 1920's to 50's: Surendranath Dasgupta. His magnum opus was a 5-volume work on The History of Indian Philosophy. The final volume, "Southern Schools of Saivism," was completed by Dasgupta on his deathbed the day he died. He had intended to do a sixth volume, "Northern Schools of Saivism." His private library, including many Agama texts, was bequeathed to BHU, yet everybody from the museum and manuscript director to Dr. Tripathi went blank on the subject. One person said they thought they knew of it, but that it would take an act of God to get to them as quickly as we wanted.

So, feeling an act of God was a little beyond our means, we had to leave Benares for Mysore in Southwest India. We arrived in Mysore, a beautiful city, in the twilight just as jet black clouds were ripped by incredible pink lightning forking horizontally across the sky. The Mysore Oriental Research Institute, a small, colonial-style building not far from the fabulous Mysore palace, is one of the most important scholastic publishers in India. Here, in five minutes flat - a record for our search - we happily discover they are just in the process of printing three major Agamas. These will be available in a few months. From Mysore, we wind further south and east to the French Indological Institute of Pondicherry.

Pondicherry's charm is in its cleanliness, and the French quarter is tr[?]'s

Mediterranean. The only spiritual oases in this French province are an innercity Ganesha temple and Ananda Ashram on the city's outskirts. But the French Indological Institute is the world's major force in Saiva Agama research and publication. Of all the Agama scholars, one is the Galileo or Newton of the field: Dr. N.R. Bhatt, Director of the Institute. His personal mission in life since 1955 has been recovering the lost Agamas, and it is here at Pondicherry that the best collection is housed. The Institute has published six Agama texts and Dr. Bhatt's introduction to the Institute's Saiva Agama catalog is extraordinary. But, despite our best efforts at good timing, Dr. Bhatt was up in Madras when we arrived in Pondicherry. Without a personal meeting, we had no chance of securing permission to photocopy the Institute's collection, though we had purchased their published works five years earlier. C'est la vie. But we did spend the entire day with Dr. Bhatt's exceptional staff, establishing a liaison that should bear fruit in the future. Recently, a young scholar, Mark Dyczkowski, authored a pioneering book entitled. The Canon of the Saivagama and the Kubjika.

Article copyright Himalayan Academy.