

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

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As our jet's wheels skidded on the Madras Airport tarmac, we were back in India - 20th century India where the National Physics Lab in New Delhi is making breakthroughs in high temperature superconductors and excimer (ultraviolet light) lasers and where some million Hindu scriptural and scientific texts are cached away in library precincts.

"I'm sorry, but this one isn't available for photocopying," said Dr. Salem Janaki, matronly head of the Kuppuswamy Research Institute in Madras. "It's too delicate." She was holding a threadbare book edition of the Mrigendra Agama, which contains a beautiful discussion, over 2,300 years old, of Siva Nataraja, the Cosmic Dancer. She was right. Thin and crackly, the pages were yellowed with the slow burn of atmospheric oxygen. Any mishandling and they would tear. Even the catalogs that simply index texts are delicate-no facilities in India are air-conditioned-and in one incautious moment we ripped a catalog page. For the two Saiva swamis searching out the Saiva Agamas in India, Dr. Janaki's denial was a first, but relatively fleeting, disappointment.

Kuppuswamy Research Institute is more mind than matter. It's one small, white building in a white-dust compound next to a charming Sanskrit school and a larger library building. Dr. Janaki is literally married to her work. She never married in the normal sense. Majoring in physics and Sanskrit in college, she ended up giving up physics for Sanskrit and philosophy. Now, 30 years later, she and her research assistants are slowly transforming archaic texts into modern scholastic editions. For the Saiva Agamas this process includes transcribing the texts from Grantha - the South Indian script for Sanskrit - to the common Devanagiri script. One of the hurdles to studying the Agamas has been the fact that since most of the extant texts are in South India they are in Grantha. Very few scholars know Grantha.

Dr. Janaki became involved in Agamic study only a few years ago when she collaborated with Wayne Surdam of the University of California, Berkeley, U.S.A., on

an Agama-related project at the Kuppaswamy Institute. Dr. Surdam, in his mid-thirties, is the most avid Agama enthusiast in the U.S., lecturing on them at nationwide campuses and, in a refreshing break from scholastic objectivity, privately placing his faith in their wisdom. Surdam has an extensive private collection of Agamas. And even he admits, "I'm not really sure what I have till I get around to unpacking all my trunks from India."

Dr. Janaki's collection was small, but she did provide one excellent connection. A Sivachariya priest at a temple just down the street from her home had a tattered copy of the worship portion of the Karana Agama, the most widely used text for temple worship. He was willing to let us photocopy it. This Karana Agama would reveal a fascinating feature of how much the four padas or sections - chariya, kriya, yoga, jnana - of the Agamas interweave one with another. The Karana section on the priest's tantric preparation for puja is rather amazing, as this verse exemplifies: he should flow his thoughts towards the white lotus surrounding the mantra Aum and the yogapitha (vessel of yoga) hanging above it. Filling his head with the subtle bliss of amrita from kundalini rising up the sushumna, he meditates upon Atman, pouring amrita on the Atman.

We left Madras by train for Benares or Kasi - Siva's city of light - India's oldest living city curving round the river Ganga. It is the middle of the lu season, when hot winds laden with dust from Northwestern India sweep over the Gangetic plain. On the town's edge is Benares Hindu University (BHU),- a sprawling campus that widens out in concentric circles like a giant chakra or mandala. Through a series of professorial contacts and after several failed attempts to look at the huge text catalog of BHU, we fortuitously connected with its compiler, Dr. K.D. Tripathi, a redoubtable scholar fluent in many scripts of Sanskrit. He was disciple of the famous Gopinath Kaviraj in the study of Kashmir Saivism. We ran into Dr. Tripathi at a BHU college of Sanskrit and Oriental Learning. A man of fine, intelligent features and melodious diction, he immediately led us upstairs to a private room where he excitedly laid out his plans for a Department of Dharma and Agama he was just then proposing to the university board. Our presence from America, to him, was timely and auspicious for the event. He also had in the works a major Agama conference to be convened late this year or in 1988.