Locating Lore in the Monkey Kingdom
by Anthony J. Evensen

“All sacred things must have their place.”

View of the Tungabhadra River and Hampi
environ from Anjanadri Hill, birthplace of the monkey god Hanuman.

Last summer, I spent five weeks in south India. It was my ninth trip to the subcontinent and for this visit I had a specific research objective in mind: to locate as many versions as I could find of a medieval Sanskrit text called the Pampā-māhātmya, or “The Greatness of Pampā.” None of the available manuscripts or print edition versions is complete or available in English translation. My current project includes preparing a critical edition and English translation of the select sections of the Pampā-māhātmya that pertain to my research interest.

Pampā in the title refers to the local river goddess associated with a rural temple town situated on the shore of the Tungabhadra River called Hampi—a variant of her name as rendered in the local language. Visitors are immediately impressed by a landscape of orange-brown, boulder-strewn hills, groves of coconut palms, bamboo, and

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1 Cited in Jonathan Z. Smith, To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), xii. See Smith’s footnote commenting on the history of appropriation of this citation, beginning with a native Pawnee informant to A.C. Fletcher to Claude Lévi-Strauss to Smith himself.
banana trees, as well as by the ancient ruins of a once-great south Indian kingdom called Vijayanagara, the City of Victory. Chattering monkeys, free-roaming packs of wild dogs, roosters, cows, and goats live side-by-side with the small shop vendors and farmers of the village. The natural tropical landscape, rich history, and religious significance of Hampi combine to make it a thriving pilgrimage center, a popular tourist destination, and a recognized UNESCO World Heritage site. Even after so many visits, Hampi never fails to stir my excitement and win me over with its charm.

The status of the site as a sacred center linked to the goddess Pampā is attested in historical records dating back to the seventh century CE, although it is surely much older than that. Sometime later in its history, Hampi became a home also for the gods Virūpākṣa and Rāma. Virūpākṣa is the local version of the god Śiva, the antinomian Hindu god of death and cosmic destruction who stands in as the third leg of the classic triad of Hindu divinities that also includes Brahmā, the creator, and Viṣṇu, the preserver. He is the consort of the goddess Pampā and together they represent the main cultic focus of Hampi to this day.

Hampi, however, is also an important center for the god Rāma, since it is the traditional location of Kiṣkindhā, the monkey kingdom found in the great Indian epic the Rāmāyaṇa. For more than 2000 years, Indians have told and retold the tale of Rāma, a divine-king and avatar of the god Viṣṇu. His story goes as follows: On the eve of his installation as king of Ayodhyā, Rāma is forced into exile as a result of a plot by one of the queens to have his younger half-brother placed on the throne instead of him. Righteous and dutiful, Rāma willingly enters the forest together with his wife and closest brother. The trio settles in to a near-idyllic forest life until, one day, Rāma is lured away from his jungle hut in pursuit of a magical deer that turns out to be a demon in disguise. While he is away, his beautiful wife Sītā is abducted by the demon-king Rāvaṇa, who is overcome by lust for her. He carries her away to his kingdom in Laṅkā across the sea. Meanwhile, Rāma roams about the forest half out of his mind with grief in search of his wife. Eventually he and his brother arrive at the monkey kingdom Kiṣkindhā on the banks of Pampā. After forming a pact with the monkey king, Rāma heads to India’s southern shore together with the simian troops, builds a bridge to cross the ocean, and kills Rāvaṇa in an epic battle. He reunites with his wife and they return to Ayodhyā to rule over an ideal kingdom.

Although an example of great world literature, the Rāmāyaṇa is no mere literary work. Like all foundational religious texts, its importance is noticed in many areas of cultural life. One of these areas is what I have come to call a “Rāmāyaṇa mythic topography tradition,” which is widespread in India. By this I am referring to the locative tendency in Indian religious practice of attaching mythological lore to specific places, including even distinct features of the landscape. So, for example, the deep crevices noticed in a rock face at a pilgrimage site might be explained as being the ancient claw marks left by Rāma’s vulture-friend who once fought at this spot to prevent the abduction of Sītā by Rāvaṇa. Or a particular cave is identified as the place where the monkeys stored the ornaments Sītā discarded while being carried away in Rāvaṇa’s flying chariot. The archipelago joining the Indian subcontinent at Ramesvaram to the island of Sri Lanka is believed to be the remnants of Rāma’s bridge built ages ago to reach the demon-kingdom. As one of India’s holiest sites, Ramesvaram memorializes the place where Rāma set up a shrine.
for the god Śiva prior to his assault on Rāvana’s kingdom. The very name Ramesvaram, in fact, is a combination of the names Rāma and Īśvara, the latter being a common title for Śiva. Rāmāyaṇa mythic topography sites such as these thus represent excellent south Indian instances of the construction of richly imaginative hybrid-local theologies, bringing together in the same place localized forms of the pan-Indic traditions associated with the gods Śiva and Viṣṇu.²

The popular appeal of these places extends beyond that of its Hindu pilgrims. Not without some hyperbole, no doubt, travel guidebooks such as Lonely Planet describe Hampi with its natural setting and historic ruins as “unreal and bewitching,” its “magical atmosphere” captivating visitors, leaving them “spellbound,” “wondering,” and “mesmerized.”³ I suggest that its charm is derived not only from its rustic village setting or its archaeological remains, however. It results in no small way also from the rich lore and mythic history attached to nearly every nook and cranny of its landscape. Events described in sacred texts that “took place” so many ages ago now “take place” here in the sense of assuming an assigned place at specific locales. The task of linking story and site, location and lore, is precisely the sort of work achieved by a sthala or “site” text such as the Pampā-māhātmya.⁴

Written in Sanskrit verse, the Pampā-māhātmya is a lengthy medieval travel “guidebook” of sorts, replete with all the lore and ritual traditions associated with hundreds of sacred sites found throughout the greater Hampi area. These sites consist not only of shrines and hermitages, but also of natural features of the landscape such as mountains, caves, trees, forest groves, rivers, and standing bodies of water. The text is organized around a storyline in which the guardian of the sacred area conducts a tour for seven visiting ancient seers who have heard of its reputation for sanctity. As they progress site-by-site, the guard tells the stories of the adventures of gods, demons, and holy men and women that once took place at each location. After hearing each account, the seers then perform rites of ablation and worship before moving on to the next place. Thus the story progresses as a sort of pilgrimage itinerary. It is precisely this locative quality of mythology that in large part constitutes the sanctity of these locations, and thus the cumulative sanctity of the Hampi area overall. It is less a definition of the sacred that comes to us from on high, than one derived from events on the ground, even though celestial beings sometimes participate.

I find this nexus of lore, local topography, and the sacred to be especially fascinating, not only as a scholar of religion but simply as a Westerner drawn to India. I have been greatly moved by my Indian experiences and year after year I have struggled to articulate for myself exactly what it is about my travels that have had such a profound effect on me. The culture of South Asia certainly casts my American identity into relief. Without question, India is racing fast to become a full-fledged Western-style modern society and a key player in the global economy. Yet, in this still largely agrarian society, one still finds in many places a slower and less urgent pace of life centered on family and community, uncluttered still by the busyness and buzz of a modern consumerist culture that increasingly tends to direct our energies away from the local and concrete and toward an abstract world of virtual hyper-realities. Something about this not-yet-fully modernized India speaks to me and stirs some deeper part of me. I have no doubt that it is an experience that says as much about what I bring to the encounter as a modern and relatively affluent Westerner as it does about what India has to offer.

I have sometimes remarked to friends, half-seriously, that my research really just gives me an excuse to roam the byways, small villages, and beautiful countryside of rural India in search of temples well off the tourist track, encountering along the way all kinds of interesting people and places. This exploration indeed is a big part of what

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² Diana Eck’s recent book summarizes several sacred landscape traditions in India. Hampi and Ramesvaram are only the last two sites in a greater Rāmāyaṇa-based set of pilgrimage centers that follow Rāma’s route; cf. Diana Eck, India: A Sacred Geography (New York: Harmony Books, 2012).
⁴ Such locative assignments of lore are especially prominent in the sacred landscape traditions of Australian aborigines; cf. chapter I of Smith, To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual. A good biblical example would be the story of Jacob’s theophany at Bethel in Genesis 28.
I enjoy about the work. Last summer, as I sat on a Hampi rooftop restaurant overlooking the Tungabhadra River, however, I realized that the academic and the more personal reasons for my interest in India were perhaps not so unrelated. My recent work with the Pampā-māhātmya has underscored the importance of particular places, each with its own story and spirit. I realized that my interest in this medieval document may have something to do with the fact that it articulates the same sort of soulful intimacy of place that stands at the heart of my own experience of India.5

Experiences of this sort do not require travel to India, of course. Nor are they limited to Hinduism. Intimate experiences of place are implicit in Christian contemplative traditions, for example, as well as in its sacramental theology, understood especially in its more general sense of the co-presence of the divine, the natural, and the human all around us.6 Places like Hampi remind me how any truly local theology and praxis necessitates that one be present to the particulars of a place, seeking and finding connection with its spirit, its aesthetic charm, its history, and its people along with their stories and traditions. It is such things as these that constitute the soul of any community in situ, whether that be a rustic Indian rural village or a poor urban neighborhood on Chicago’s south side.

Reflecting further on another aspect of this, I am reminded of the words of the German sociologist Max Weber, who famously described modernity as the “enchantment of the world” that results from the elimination of magic in the wake of a new “spirit” of scientific rationalism.7 I wonder whether the ongoing currency of descriptions such as “magical” and “enchanted” found in travel guidebooks might not point to something more than some mere nostalgic wish to turn back the clock and return to a bygone premodern era of enchanted worlds. It may be that such sentiments point forward to another kind of desideratum akin to a Barthian sort of re-mythologization or the “second naïveté” described by Paul Ricoeur.8 Or perhaps such descriptions register a response to a movement between one sort of mythological world and another, bearing in mind that Western modernity too is guided by its own kind of myth, which envisions a development of unabated progress and growth toward an imagined utopian future. To complicate matters further, the sort of cultural hybridity noticed both in the Śiva + Rāma sthala or “site” mythologies at Hampi as well as in the modern traveler’s experience—who mine included—of differing cultural worlds is quite at home with life in the postmodern age.

5 Smith summarizes some of the work done by humanistic geographers such as E. Gibson and Yi-Fu Tuan on place as a “locus of meaning,” or as “a focus of value” and of “intimacy.” To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual, 28-29. Tuan notes that, whereas abstract space “allows movement, place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place.” This is a near-perfect description of the tempo of itinerary stops experienced by the sages in the Pampā-māhātmya.

6 In the Psalms we hear how the hills, pastures, valleys, trees of the forests, and the seas joyfully sing the glory of God (Ps 65:13-14; 69:35; 96:11-13). The power of place has been somewhat muted in the course of Christian history as the pilgrimage sites pertaining to the life of Jesus were transposed from specific assigned places to assigned moments in the liturgical calendar, such as Jesus’ trial in the stark Judean wilderness that is commemorated during Lent. Smith, To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual, chapter 4. Such power of place was poignantly expressed by a friend who recently returned from a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. When asked how it went, he replied enthusiastically, “This stuff actually happened!”


8 “For the second immediacy that we seek and the second naïveté that we await are no longer accessible to us anywhere else than in a hermeneutics; we can believe only by interpreting. It is the ‘modern’ mode of belief in symbols, an expression of the distress of modernity and a remedy for that distress.” Paul Ricoeur, The Symbolism of Evil, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 352.
Unfortunately, this is not the forum to explore such intriguing ideas further. Taking my cue from Weber, I wish to suggest by way of conclusion that sthala texts like the Pampā-māhātmya can be understood on one level at least as performative source texts giving rise to mythic landscapes of a sort that could be aptly described as enchanted. The fact that these texts are composed in metered verse and recited as rhythmic chant reinforces this. The Pampā-māhātmya thus affords moderns a glimpse into the religious universe of a premodern society that placed a premium on particular places in its definition of the sacred. They who read or hear it become more keenly attuned to how the very hillsides and waterways around Hampi proclaim the glory of Pampā . . . and Śiva . . . and Rāma. The sacred landscape invoked by this premodern “travel guidebook” echoes loudly enough to be reported still in its modern analogues; it is surely an important part of what makes a place like Hampi special for those who visit—enchanted even. I foresee no good reason yet to cease making my own annual summer pilgrimages to the Monkey Kingdom.