



Open Library of Humanities

Learning to See the Goddess Again

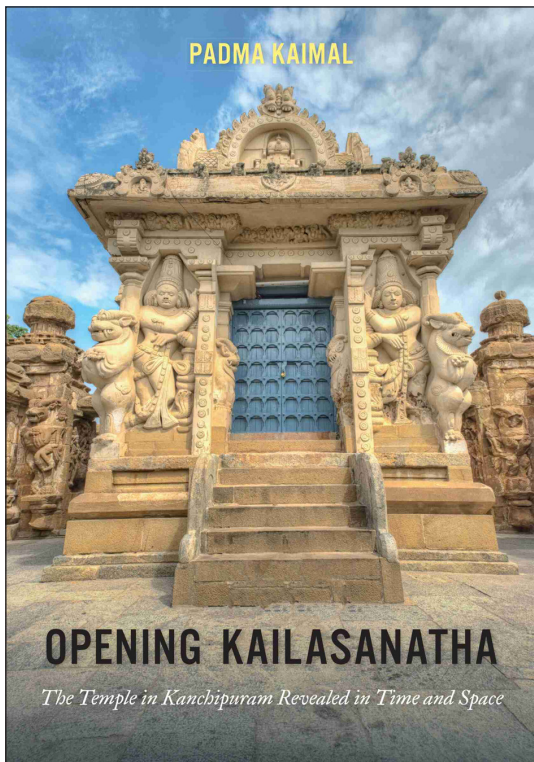
Tamara I. Sears, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, USA, tamara.sears@rutgers.edu

A review of Padma Kaimal, *Opening Kailasanatha: The Temple in Kanchipuram Revealed in Time and Space*, Seattle: The University of Washington Press, 2020, 288 pages, 62 b&w illus., 19 color plates, ISBN: 9780295747774.

An important contribution to South Asian architectural history, this book is well worth reading for both its content and methodology. Through a complex interweaving of thick description and analysis, the author destabilizes traditional ways of approaching temples and invites readers to encounter the goddess through multiple historical frames.

Keywords: Kanchipuram temple; Kailasanatha; early medieval architecture; India





The Kailasanatha temple at Kanchipuram is among one of the most important early medieval monuments still standing in South India. Although small in size in comparison with the city's more famous sacred complexes today, it stood among the largest temples in India at the time of its creation. Built by King Narasimhavarman II Rajasimha (r. 690–728) of the Pallava dynasty and further embellished with additions and alterations by other members of the royal family, its structure, sculpture, and form present crucial insight into its patrons' interweaving of royal and religious agendas. Although positioned along the western outskirts of the capital of Kanchipuram, its spatial orientation reinforced its association with the earlier Pallava shrines that stood

closer to the city's center. Because of its removed location, the Kailasanatha temple was slow to pique the interest of colonial-era archaeologists and travelers, but since its rediscovery in the late 19th century, it has been widely recognized for its architectural innovation. The release of Padma Kaimal's impressive and long-overdue new book is not merely the first major scholarly effort to understand the underlying conception, religious experience, and political ramifications of this major monument, but it is also timely, its publication coinciding well with Kanchipuram's recent submission for consideration for nomination to UNESCO's World Heritage List on April 13, 2021.

The book's title fruitfully mirrors Kaimal's approach to the temple, which is akin to the act of opening the monument and inviting the reader to enter and experience its unfolding. In encouraging the viewer from the outset to embrace a non-linear and dialogical understanding of spatial design and sculptural programme, Kaimal effectively destabilizes traditional ways of approaching temple architecture as static and fixed. Instead, she argues that the activation of sculptural programs through movement engenders both a multiplicity of meaning and reveals 'consistent and complex categories of thought' (8). Throughout, she finds new ways to engage readers through her style of writing, which frequently inverts the agency of the material. Inscriptions do not merely reveal historical information but 'ask to be looked at', drawing a viewer's gaze through

their aesthetic flourishes and placement on the temple wall (132, 156). Kaimal invites us to 'see' like a Pallava (12) and to move around the complex along multiple different paths. The book's effort to frame new approaches is reinforced through the format of the table of contents. Instead of listing chapters in numerical sequence, she lays them out following a circumambulatory spatial logic. Centered at the top, the first chapter serves as the book's proverbial gateway (*gopuram*). The remaining four chapters take the eye on a circular journey, moving clockwise down the right side of the page and then circling back up on the left in emulation of the experience of walking around a temple. This visual and spatial ordering requires a form of mental callisthenics that break apart expectations and open the reader's mind to new forms of understanding.

The book's chapters emulate several journeys into and around the temple complex, each of which reveals another layer of interpretation. A brief introduction establishes the main actors and setting: a newly emergent and highly erudite dynasty establishing new principles for visual programs and architectural design. Chapter 1 lays out a chronology for construction, with a focus on the *prakara* (enclosure wall), the two *vimanas* (temple body or shrine), and the eastern façade. Kaimal frames the sequential expansions as 'neither linear nor concentric' (19) but rather as a process of reframing the viewer's approach by reshaping the path from the east toward the tall *vimana* and, by extension, toward the enshrined icons of the god Shiva, who presided from the center over an orderly cosmos and heavenly court, populated by other deities. The four chapters that follow function as two sets of pairs, each of which are framed around a set of complementary oppositions.

Chapters 2 and 3 layout distinct themes articulated through the temple's iconographic and visual program. The first engages the dynamic tensions between celibacy and sexual intimacy, serving as metaphors for spiritual struggle and divine grace, as paired on the north-facing and south-facing walls respectively. The north-facing imagery was rendered in an angular and jagged style that enhanced the ferocity of the violently embattled deities, empowered through asceticism and segregated by sex, depicted in the process of destroying enemies and transcending time and death. By contrast, the south-facing imagery was dominated by coupled gods and goddesses, engaged in soft embrace. Kaimal suggests that the logic underlying this opposition can be found in the concepts of *mangalam* (auspiciousness) and *amangalam* (inauspiciousness), which, in Tamil literature, formed necessary complements in the ongoing cycle of *samsara* (birth and rebirth). Whereas the south-facing *mangalam* imagery reinforces the perpetuation of life, the *amangalam* character of the north-facing figures heralds the inevitable destruction leading to rebirth. The second, examined in chapter 3, embraces analogies between royal patron and divinity unfolding through the alternation of Somaskanda

reliefs, representing Shiva and his wife Uma holding their son, and panels depicting childless royal couples. Underlying this juxtaposition is the significance of succession and lineage. Somaskanda images, Kaimal suggests, materialized the potential for progenation and the production of a royal heir (105). Two other sets of repeating images, including Shiva's dance and the descent of the Ganges River from heaven to earth, worked together with the other panels to connect past with future and to reinforce aspects central to the Pallava's claims to power, including martial prowess, the ability to manage water resources, and the continuity of lineage.

Chapters 4 and 5 turn to the dynamics of movement, and more specifically to the monument's capacity to engage both auspicious clockwise (*pradakshina*) and transgressive/esoteric counterclockwise (*apradakshina*) circumambulation. Pointing to cues embedded within architectural form, sculptural programs, inscriptional text, and the surrounding landscape, Kaimal suggests an intentional pairing of complementary motions. Both chapters emphasize a close relationship between inscriptional text and sculptural imagery, which acted together not only to shape meaning but also to direct viewers through the temple complex. In extending this argument, she considers both narrative content and visual cues as well as questions of visibility and orality. Whereas chapter 4 follows the convergence of two key narrative sequences — that of Shiva's wanderings in the myth of the Pine Forest and the emergence of the Great Goddess in the hymns of the *Devi Mahatmya* — chapter 5 moves spatially, following a counterclockwise movement to examine the dialog between text and image around the *vimana*'s walls. In the case of the latter, the underlying logic is not narrative. Instead, the pairing of text and image emphasizes similar kinds of actions (e.g., martial conquest), establishes analogies between kings and gods, reinforces parallels between human and divine lineages, and sets up a larger chronogram, through which the historical time of the Pallavas emerges from the cosmic time associated with the telling, and depiction, of divine events.

This discussion leads to a brief conclusion, which reinforces Kaimal's innovative methodology and her larger underlying argument that the temple was designed to establish close connections between royal and divine power through not merely a static visual program but its activation through movement. The conclusion, however, also highlights one of the few critiques that can be levied; it introduces, almost as an afterthought, a brief discussion of Shaiva Siddhanta, a major school of Shaiva religious practice that was closely associated with royal power in later centuries. Although many of the textual sources associated with Shaiva Siddhanta date from the 10th century onward, it was already emerging across the Indian subcontinent by the seventh and eighth centuries. Notably, its earliest inscriptional reference is from the *vimana* of the Kailasanatha temple, in which the patron, Rajasimha, is described as an initiate into the practice. While the chronology of surviving sources admittedly makes it challenging

to offer an explicitly Shaiva Siddhanta reading of the Kailasanatha temple, it would have been useful to have a consideration of its potential connections integrated more thoroughly elsewhere in the book. In her defense, Kaimal rightly points out that scholars have yet to determine what constituted Shaiva Siddhanta theology and practice in the 8th century. However, that is precisely what makes the Kailasanatha temple potentially illuminating as an early source for a ritual system that remains otherwise elusive.

One of the more refreshing elements of the book is Kaimal's continual engagement with her own writing and thinking about the Kailasanatha temple over the course of many years. Throughout, the chapters are short interludes in which the author consciously reflects on arguments that she has extended and lays out how and why she has come to see the material differently. These interludes are not mere reflections. They are lessons in methodology, and they offer one model for incorporating, and perhaps even foregrounding in future writings, a form of self-critical reflection and a willingness to experiment with new ways of thinking about old material. Indeed, like the temple that resides at the center of the book, the process of producing knowledge is layered and always changing. One of the most striking processes is Kaimal's revision of her earlier argument, that the Kailasanatha be seen as a feminist monument. Whereas then she had seen the preponderance of goddess imagery as reflecting 'a subtle dance of constantly shifting dominances' (54), a balance between male and female, here she more convincingly recognizes the ways in which the presence of strong female divinities served to reinforce the power of male gods and royal lineages (14, 46, 48).

In sum, the book represents an important contribution to the literature on both the Kailasanatha temple specifically and Indian architectural history more broadly. It is well worth reading for both its content and methodology, and it can serve as a fruitful introduction to South Indian temple architecture for specialists and non-specialists alike. Specialists will find in it a worthy pairing to D. Dennis Hudson's magisterial posthumously published 2008 monograph on the Vaikuntha Perumal temple at Kanchipuram, from which Kaimal takes duly noted inspiration, as well to Emma Stein's recent book, *Constructing Kanchi* (2021), which contextualizes temple building within a broader urban history. In addition to the many matte photographs and diagrams interspersed throughout the text, a grouping of crisply produced 19 plates, mostly in color, is inserted towards the end. As is the case with most of the book's illustrations, these include explicatory captions that both reinforce the key arguments and serve as a useful guide for the reader. A set of four appendices provide English translations of key inscriptions, and a glossary of Sanskrit terms at the very end enhances the accessibility of the book.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

References

Hudson, D. 2008. *The Body of God: An Emperor's Palace for Krishna in Eighth-Century Kanchipuram*. Edited by M. Chase. Oxford University Press: New York. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195369229.001.0001>

Kaimal, P. 2005. Learning to see the Goddess. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 73(1): 45–87.

Stein, E. 2021. *Constructing Kanchi: City of Infinite Temples*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv21r3jh7>



Typesetting queries

1. The following items have been included within the reference list, but are not cited within the text. For each un-cited reference, please advise where it should be cited in the text, or confirm that it can be removed from the reference list.
 - a. Ref. "Kaimal, P. 2005."