Bhakti Demands Biography: Crafting the Life of a Tamil Saint

a talk by
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The Tamil Saiva saint Cheraman Perumal is said to have lived a life rich in history and in the god Siva's blessings. A ruler, it is said, of the western Chera country sometime in the closing centuries of the first millennium, the Cheraman made pilgrimage to various Saiva shrines throughout the Tamil country as the beloved companion of the great saint Sundarar, and authored three devotional texts now set in the Tamil Saiva canon. He is also held to have ascended to heaven in his living body, where he lives together with Sundarar as Siva's faithful steward. Little of the saint's biography appears subject to documentary evidence. Yet Cheraman Perumal, perhaps more than any other of the Tamil Saiva saints, appeals to the historical turn. Might he indeed have been a ruler over the Chera country, who established deep bonds with Chola lords through a shared devotion to Nataraja in Chidambaram? Inscriptional evidence from both Kerala and Tamilnadu, hints from the chronicle Keralolpathi, and longstanding associations between this legendary king and the western city of Tiruvanaiyarkalam may indeed suggest a layer of historical truth.

But why did Cheraman Perumal later gain a distinguished biography in Tamil Saivism, invested with the rich details of sainthood described in Periya Puranam, Cekkilar's magisterial twelfth-century account of the lives of the Saiva saints? This presentation traces the signal moments in this history of sainthood, as the bhakti texts associated with his name are imbued with an author whose life affirms the truth of their verses. How, it asks, did the construction of an author for texts being set in an emerging canon speak to the concerns of the twelfth-century present, when Chola rule sought to declare the unity of a southern Saivism that stretched from coast to coast?

Bio
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