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Purāṇa as a Way of Worldmaking

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Abstract

Rather than approaching *purāṇa* as a static genre of Sanskrit literature, this introduction to the inaugural issue of *PURANA Media* reconceives it as a practice of world-making that operates across diverse media to render the primordial past proximate and experientially present. Drawing on theories of symbolic world construction and ontological “worlding,” we show how *purāṇa* fuses cosmology, narrative, and ritual into a generative cultural form that continually reconfigures ethical, political, and affective life. The contributions to this issue explore *purāṇic* practice through visual, performative, and ritual media, tracing the layered ways in which primordial time is made active in the relative present. Together, they invite a reorientation in method by foregrounding *purāṇa* as a plural and adaptive tradition whose meanings emerge through ongoing reinvention.

Keywords: narrative; cosmology; embodiment; Sanskrit; textual criticism

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“The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”
William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (1919, 85)

“Worldmaking as we know it always starts from worlds
already on hand; the making is a remaking.”
Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (1978, 6)

“Listen to this marvelous story which I tell, destroying all sins, wonderful, rich in meaning, corresponding to Vedic revelation.
Even a sinner who hears it will reach the highest state.”
Skandapurāṇa 3.1¹

Introduction: The Past in the Present

The past does not recede—it gathers, accumulates, and presses into the present.² In South and Southeast Asia, *purāṇa*, a Sanskrit term meaning “ancient” or “primordial,” describes a mode of storytelling in which time folds and the distant remains near. These narratives do more than recall what once was; they participate in what is and what will come. Through literature, performance, image, and ritual, *purāṇa* activates the senses, shaping how communities inhabit ethical, cosmological, and political worlds.

Despite their variety, these forms share a single temporal cadence in which the primordial is not past, but powerfully proximate. The *purāṇic* past—populated by humans, deities, sages, and an array of more-than-human agents—anchors communities within normative frameworks of meaning and authority. In this way, *purāṇa* functions as a vital social, political, and affective force not only in early South and Southeast Asia, but in the contemporary world as well. While often studied as a textual tradition, historically accessed through the genre of works known as the Purāṇas, *PURANA Media* reconceives *purāṇa* as a generative force that moves across expressive forms.³ By

1 Translation from the original Sanskrit in Adriaensen et al. 1998, 21:

śṛṇuṣvemaṃ kathāṃ divyāṃ sarvapāpaprāṇāśanīm |
kathyamānāṃ mayā citrāṃ bahvārthāṃ śrutisaṃmitām |
yāṃ śrutvā pāpakarmāpi gaccheḥ ca paramāṃ gatīm ||

- 2 This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under grant agreement no. 101054849 (PURANA). We thank Kristen de Joseph, Lisa A. Johnson and Devin Soper for their support in preparing this inaugural issue of *PURANA Media*.
- 3 To distinguish between the different frames of reference, we capitalize and de-italicize Purāṇa(s) when referring to the literary genre and its texts, while we use de-capitalized and italicized *purāṇa* to indicate the symbolic system and all that it entails.

attending to its broader symbolic and material practices, we seek to illuminate how *purāṇa* continues to shape cultural memory, narrate history, and imagine possible futures.

Across the various media through which *purāṇa* has been transmitted, the work of specific human agents is often obscured. Elided by the rhetoric of the primordial, the legacy of these practitioners, while rarely traceable as individuals, nonetheless reveals how those engaged in *purāṇa* have responded to shifting social and political conditions, ensuring its continued relevance. Artists, makers, and tellers continually adapt *purāṇic* material to meet the expectations of their audiences. This reciprocal practice of making, remaking, and remaking yet again produces an accretional cultural form remarkable for its breadth: *longue durée* projects spanning multiple generations and expansive geographies. Rather than preserving a past or *the* past, *purāṇa* gives rise to historical realities that are distinctly plural, continually shaping cultural and ethical worlds.

Purāṇic Worlds and Their Makers

Across its many media, *purāṇa* operates as a generative matrix, continually reconfiguring cultural memory. Recognizing this dynamism, the journal's inaugural issue positions *purāṇa* within theories of multiple "worlds," drawing on scholars who call attention to the active and pluralistic processes involved in constructing reality.

Our focus on the creative potential of *purāṇa* aligns with Nelson Goodman's *World-making* (1978), which foregrounds the symbolic and semiotic dimensions of reality construction, emphasizing how meaning is produced through representational and conceptual frameworks. Goodman builds upon the foundational work of Ernst Cassirer, whose *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (1923–1929) meticulously maps the ways symbolic forms generate systems of meaning across human experience.⁴ In this view, worldmaking is an act of creative composition, and an ordering of experience through narrative, visual, and discursive structures that generate and sustain realities. As Goodman writes, "worlds are made by making such versions with words, numerals, pictures, sounds, or other symbols of any kind in any medium."⁵ This approach invites us to understand *purāṇa* as a living, performative act of world creation, continuously shaping and reshaping cultural imaginaries by building on what came before.

Goodman's notion of weighting, the decision to emphasize certain elements over others, helps us see *purāṇa* as an ongoing process of cultural composition and recomposition. *Purāṇas* take shape through acts of selection and emphasis, as cultural agents interpret and reorder elements of the primordial past in response to contemporary concerns. A textual example of this process is the inclusion of the cremation ground (*śmaśāna*) in the religious fabric of Vārāṇasī, as recorded in interpolations and revisions

4 See Cassirer 2021 for a recent English translation.

5 Goodman 1978, 94.

in the transmission of the early *Skandapurāṇa*.⁶ The changes in the *purāṇic* text reflect the evolving significance of the cremation ground of Vārāṇasī in historical time. This process of “composition-in-transmission”⁷ is also dialogic—shaped through an exchange between tradition and context, between performers, artists, authors, and their audiences. It involves a negotiation between idiom and innovation, where creators work within shared symbolic frameworks responding to the needs of particular communities.⁸ *Purāṇa* narratives persist through patterns of transmission that allow for, even depend upon, both stability and reinvention. With their layered interpolations, regional variants, and evolving narrative structures, *purāṇic* manuscript traditions offer material evidence of this ongoing negotiation. Repetition anchors these revisions in a recognizable symbolic grammar, making innovation plausible or “worklike” within tradition.⁹ This adaptability extends to visual cultures, where iconic motifs retain continuity even as their configurations shift.¹⁰

Yet what distinguishes the *purāṇic* mode of cultural production from the ubiquitous kinds of borrowing and adaptation that we may observe in many kinds of cultural media is the way it fuses cosmology, narrative, and prescriptive knowledge into a recursive form that not only accommodates change but integrates it so seamlessly that the transformation rarely calls attention to itself. This process is enabled by the anonymity that is definitive of *purāṇic* traditions.¹¹ Without a singular authoritative source, new interpolations and local inflections can be introduced without the need for justification or even acknowledgment. *Purāṇa* renders revision invisible by embedding innovation within the unfolding of tradition itself.

While Goodman’s notion of worldmaking highlights the symbolic and representational dimensions of constructing reality, it does not fully capture the ways that worlds are lived and experienced. To nuance this perspective, we also consider the notion of worlding, which shifts attention from acts of symbolic mediation to the ontological entanglements that shape being in and with worlds. Theorized in affect studies and feminist and posthumanist thought,¹² worlding foregrounds the ways that worlds are

6 See Bakker and Isaacson 2004, 42–48.

7 This apt phrase was coined by Bakker 1989 to describe the *purāṇic* compositional process in its manuscript transmission.

8 See, e.g., Bisschop, Kafle, and Kiss 2025, which traces how a group of Purāṇas (the *Līṅgapurāṇa*, *Devīpurāṇa*, *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*, *Saurapurāṇa*, and *Nāradaṇḍapurāṇa*) have appropriated a shared framework from the text of the *Śivadharmasūtra* and reused it, each for their own individual purpose.

9 On the “worklike” quality of narratives, see LaCapra 1983, 30. Also apt here is Hayden White’s description of discursive traditions that, like *purāṇa*, gain rhetorical force through narrative emplotment (White 1973, 9).

10 See e.g. Greaves 2020 and Cecil 2024.

11 The exception that proves the rule are the Tamil Purāṇas based on Sanskrit sources (Buchholz 2023) and the Persian translations discussed by Kotler in this issue.

12 See Haraway 2008, 2016; Stewart 2010.

continuously co-constituted through material, affective, and relational processes. As Anderson and Harrison explain, “the term ‘world’ does not refer to an extant thing but rather the context or background against which particular things show up and take on significance: a mobile but more or less stable ensemble of practices, involvements, relations, capacities, tendencies, and affordances.”¹³ In this framing, worlding involves an ongoing engagement with reality as an emergent and evolving set of relations.

Significantly, the concept of worlding also provides us with a vantage point on the temporalities that shape these realities. Donna Haraway’s framing of speculative fabulation (SF) as “gone, here, and yet to come”¹⁴ offers a compelling parallel to the temporality of *purāṇa*, where the past is not archived but remains present and generative, continuously shaping future possibilities. Just as SF functions as a mode of worlding, patterning possible worlds and times through storytelling and fact-telling, *purāṇa* enacts a temporal logic that unsettles linear history. The *purāṇic* world is not a fixed inheritance but an unfolding process, where mythic pasts, ritual presents, and imagined futures remain entangled. This perspective highlights the ability of *purāṇa* practitioners to reify tradition, but also to generate new configurations of meaning.

Cosmology as Ontological Practice

The adjectival sense of *purāṇa* as “primordial” became associated with a specific genre of Sanskrit literature due in part to the techniques that the texts’ authors use to frame their narratives. Accounts of pilgrimages, ritual practices, divine manifestations, and the deeds of sages are embedded in cosmological cycles that, while addressing concerns of the relative present, find resolution and precedent in the past. Yet, as emphasized above, *purāṇic* temporality is not retrospective but immanent, continually unfolding, and shaping what will be. The cosmological structures that frame *purāṇic* narratives—cycles of creation and dissolution, divine genealogies, or the recursive interplay of mythic pasts and ritual presents—embody this temporal fluidity.

Earlier scholarship on *purāṇa* has stressed the immanent presence of the ancient past as a defining quality of this mode of cultural production. Ludo Rocher describes *purāṇa* as denoting things ancient that are “still in existence at the time when the speaker uses the term.”¹⁵ As James Fitzgerald has similarly noted, the *Purāṇas*, through

13 Anderson and Harrison 2010, 8

14 Haraway 2016, 31

15 Rocher 1977, 6. Rocher’s discussion is based on the use of the term in the *Rgveda*, where it is distinctive for its complexity. Later scholars like Coburn are critical of efforts to apply this Vedic sense of the adjective to the genre of texts, because in the textual case, *purāṇa* is used as a noun. But why can we not understand the noun as building on the earlier adjectival use? Cf. Coburn 1980, 343.

their genealogies and cosmogonies, demonstrate that historical events are not isolated occurrences: “Some uses of the word *purāṇa* also conveyed the additional, critically important sense of *being the first instance of something that is still current*—primacy, primordially.”¹⁶ The cultural relevance of the *purāṇic* account lies in its presentation of the past as cyclical and continuously unfolding in time and place. Fitzgerald adds that primordially not only contains within it a sense of the normative, but also evokes a feeling of awe or wonder.¹⁷

The rhetoric of primordially that structures the *purāṇic* worldview serves to anchor events, practices, and places in the timeless past, situating them within a larger cosmological framework of revealed knowledge. As Velcheru Narayana Rao has observed, “continuity is what the Puranic worldview promotes, and [. . .] it results from the ideological frame of Puranas.”¹⁸ More specifically, he attributes this ideology to “Brahminic time,” measured in vast cosmic cycles that, while regenerative, deteriorate over successive ages. Brahminic time, he observes, is one of three overlapping ways of recording time and human experience in South Asia—the others being folk time, governed by cyclical and seasonal rhythms such as agrarian patterns and the arrival of the monsoon, and colonial time, structured by the Gregorian calendar and a linear, “Western” temporality.¹⁹ This notion of gradual decline—an inherent feature of Brahminic time—adds another dimension to *purāṇa*’s presence in the contemporary world. Even as the primordial persists, it is experienced in a state of decay, a phenomenon that can itself inspire wonder. An apt example of this is the way that *purāṇic mātmyas* describe sacred sites. The same place may be known by different names in different cosmic eras (*yugas*), as illustrated in these verses from the *Glorification of Kāraṇa*.²⁰

Śaṅkara himself is present in bodily form in the holy *tīrtha* Kāraṇa.
This *tīrtha* is endowed with Śiva’s *śakti* throughout the four *yugas*.
It has been fashioned by Śambhu himself for the purification of Bhṛgukṣetra.

16 Fitzgerald 2014, 49. Italics in the original.

17 Fitzgerald 2014, 49–50.

18 Narayana Rao 1993, 85.

19 Cf. also Thapar 2009.

20 *Kāraṇamātmya* (ll. 5–9; Dalal 1920, 52):

śrīmatkāraṇe tīrthe mūrtimān śaṅkaraḥ svayam |
cāturyugam idaṁ tīrthaṁ śivaśaktiā samanvitam ||
bhṛgukṣetrapavitṛārthaṁ nirmitaṁ śambhunā svayam |
kr̥te icchāpurī nāma tretāyāṁ ca mayāpurī |
dvāpare meghavatī nāma kalau kāyāvarohaṇam |

Kāraṇa (also known as Kārohaṇa, Kāyāvarohaṇa, and Kāyāvatarāṇa) is a village in the Vadodara district of Gujarat. It is traditionally regarded as the birthplace of the Pāśupata movement (Cecil 2020, 11–47).

In the Kṛta (*yuga*) it is called Icchāpurī, in Tretā Mayāpurī,
in Dvāpara Meghavatī, in Kali Kāyāvarohaṇa.

Accounts like the one from the *Kāraṇamāhātmya* show how *purāṇic* traditions situate the past within an overarching cosmology while also actively structuring primordial time as something experienced in the present. This dynamic is evident in Narayana Rao's example of the "Purāṇizing" of a Telugu folk narrative about a lineage threatened with inter-caste marriage, which inspires an etiological myth about the apotheosis of their self-sacrificing patron goddess, who would rather die by fire than marry outside her *gotra*.²¹ In the *Vāsavakanyakāpurāṇa*, attributed to the *Sanatsujātīyakhaṇḍa* of the *Skandapurāṇa*, this Telugu oral tale is transformed within a *purāṇic* cosmology: the setting shifts to the sacred Naimiṣa forest, and celestial beings come to play central roles. While Narayana Rao does not use the term "worldmaking," his example illustrates precisely how *purāṇa* functions as a framework for organizing time, reconfiguring localized narratives within a broader cosmological order.

Primordial Places

Fitzgerald's invocation of wonder as part of the affective regime underpinning *purāṇa* marks a significant intervention that has not been sufficiently considered in the scholarship. Wonder—as Tulsi Srinivas has perceptively shown through her ethnographic work—invites us to rethink how such concepts resonate affectively, shaping how the past can give rise to intensely embodied experiences in the present.²² This interplay between past and present is vividly illustrated in her study of the Malleshwaram neighborhood of Bangalore, where the memory of mythic geographies underlies the urban experience of contemporary dwellers. Srinivas describes how long-time residents recall the sacred tanks, hills, and groves once integral to the city's ritual life and eulogized in *sthala purāṇas* (accounts of "primordial places"), but which are now paved over by high-rise apartment buildings: "For inhabitants, the landscape of the city was grounding—locational, emotional, dreamy, discursive, self-framing, protective, and prognosticatory. For them, the landscape and its connections with ecological and local divinity were real—sensual and visceral."²³ Far more than nostalgic, these memories invoke a mythic sense of place, where water once linked the human and divine, and where past sanctity lingers as a phenomenal reality amid urban change.

While deeply temporal, the primordial past is equally spatial. The localization of cosmological events across diverse landscapes reveals how *purāṇa* functions as a framework for lived ontologies that unfold through both place and time. In this way, *purāṇa*

21 Narayana Rao 1993, 89–92.

22 Srinivas 2018; 2023.

23 Srinivas 2018, 38.

continually affirms the presence of the primordial within the rhythms of everyday life and local terrains.

The well-travelled *purāṇic* image of the Gaṅgā's descent provides a vivid example. Though rooted in a mythic past, the event is repeatedly reinscribed in new geographies, as inscriptions and texts across South and Southeast Asia relocate its descent in new locations. In these places—whether on a rock relief in Mahabalipuram, a mountain in Southwest Laos, or a plateau in the Khmer kingdom—the descent of the Gaṅgā is a lived reality. Pilgrims who visit these sites do not encounter a transplanted North Indian geography; rather, they experience the localization of a primordial vision, a direct witnessing of cosmological wonder embedded in their present landscape.

Nepal's *Svasthānīvratakathā* tradition, analyzed by Jessica Birkenholtz (2018), showcases the same dynamic of localization in a different register. The *Svasthānīvratakathā* ("Story of the Ritual Vow to the Goddess Svasthānī"), originally a sixteenth-century Hindu narrative text but subject to numerous changes over the centuries, is recited annually during a month-long ritual dedicated to the goddess Svasthānī. This practice not only reinforces temporal cycles, but also sanctifies specific locales in the Kathmandu Valley. The town of Sankhu, for instance, becomes a focal point during the ritual period, transforming into a lived space where myth and geography converge. Devotees engage with the landscape as an embodiment of the goddess's narrative, illustrating how *purāṇic* texts and practices inscribe sacredness onto physical terrain.

A place-focused interpretation of *purāṇa* also resonates with contemporary uses of the term in India, particularly in relation to architectural heritage. Many temples considered *purāṇa* by their communities have been repeatedly renovated or rebuilt. Such practices can come into conflict with European-influenced models of heritage preservation, which prohibit devotees from modifying sites designated as archaeological monuments.²⁴ Here, *purāṇa* emerges not simply as a textual or historical category, but as a dynamic process of spatial and temporal worldmaking—one in which sacred landscapes are continually reimagined and reinscribed through ritual, narrative, and embodied practice. Similarly, in the case of Varanasi, Mark Twain's famous description—"older than history, older than tradition, older than legend, and [looking] twice as old as all of them put together"—captures the way *purāṇic* worldmaking renders certain places as sites of mythic antiquity, even when their material fabric is far more recent.²⁵ The city's waterfront, dominated by Maratha-period architecture, is perceived not as a product of early modernity, but as a landscape imbued with deep time.²⁶

This same logic of primordial presence extends beyond religious practice into political discourse, as seen in the nationalist rhetoric surrounding Ayodhya and the Ram Janmabhoomi movement. The claims of timeless sanctity used to justify the demolition

24 Cf. the example of Ellora discussed below.

25 Desai 2017.

26 On *purāṇa* and deep time, see Chakrabarti 2020, especially chapter 3.

of the Babri Masjid and the consecration of the Ram Mandir in its place illustrate the violent power of *purāṇic* temporality in the landscape of contemporary Indian politics.

Primordial Pasts and Ethical Futurism

The moments of wonder Srinivas describes—where the past becomes palpable in the present—align closely with the affective dimensions of *purāṇa*. As observed in the above-quoted passage from the *Skandapurāṇa*, the narratives themselves are wonderful, revelatory, and endowed with the power to effect salvation. The past is charged with ethical force. This raises a broader question: can *purāṇa* function as a form of ethical futurism, a mode of worldmaking that remembers the past yet envisions the world as it ought to be?

The cosmological frameworks that structure *purāṇic* narratives often naturalize social hierarchies, portraying them as extensions of an underlying cosmic order rather than historically contingent social constructions. Across multiple media, from Sanskrit text to temple architecture, *purāṇa* has historically reinforced Brahmanical preeminence, authoring restrictive social hierarchies that have been used to justify exclusion, oppression, and even violence. The case of Ayodhya, for example, illustrates how *purāṇic* narratives can be mobilized to inscribe territorial and religious domination in ways that invisibilize alternative histories.²⁷ The immanent presence of the past, then, is not merely a source of continuity, but also a contested site of power.

History shows that *purāṇa*'s ethical imagination can enforce rigidity and hierarchy, yet it also offers resources for more expansive futures. Viveiros de Castro's (2012) perspectivism reminds us that humans, gods, sages, and non-human beings inhabit overlapping realities, each with its own moral and epistemic frame. Arturo Escobar's pluriverse (2020) similarly posits a world of many interconnected ontologies. *Purāṇic* storytelling, too, operates in this pluriversal register. It aligns cosmological visions with social ideals, rendering the past as a living force that informs duty (*dharma*) and communal belonging. *Purāṇa* might then perform a pluriversal function by bridging ontological domains while embedding moral principles into the cosmological fabric of story. Haraway's insights resonate here: speculative narratives do not simply describe the world, they generate new ethical possibilities. The challenge lies in how *purāṇic* frameworks are activated—whether as instruments of closure, or as invitations to imagine more capacious futures.

27 The ways that *purāṇa* and related genres of Sanskrit literary production render invisible the subaltern and aestheticize violence are explored in Singh 2017, 2022.

The Separation of Text from Context

Recognizing *purāṇa* as a dialogic practice of worldmaking invites a reexamination of how it has been studied. Historically, scholarly approaches have often abstracted *purāṇa* from its social and material lifeworlds, focusing instead on individual texts and their internal structure and motifs. Most *purāṇa* scholars are concerned with the study of these texts, be it the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, the *Viṣṇupurāṇa*, the *Skandapurāṇa*, or any of its associated *khaṇḍas* and *māhātmyas*.²⁸ This separation of text from context has important consequences for how we understand both the tradition and its ongoing relevance.

As textual storehouses of Hindu mythology, ritual, and theology, the Purāṇas hold much value. However, the potential for progress in the contextualized and historical study of the Purāṇas has long been hampered by the absence of reliable editions. Individual Purāṇas have often gone through a centuries-long process of redaction and recomposition and are characterized by a high level of textual fluidity, resulting in a “dynamic canon.”²⁹ This dynamism has frequently left historians frustrated, since it is impossible to get a firm grasp of the time, place, and circumstances of composition of the texts involved and, as a consequence, of their teachings. Given their complex history and transmission, research on Purāṇas necessitates a close engagement with textual criticism and philological methods.

Scholarship on the Purāṇas has responded to these challenges in different ways (the examples that follow are necessarily selective). Many have used the Purāṇas as sources for Hindu mythology;³⁰ some have relied on the ambitious (but now outdated) attempts of R. C. Hazra to reconstruct a chronology of individual Purāṇas;³¹ others have meticulously traced the transformation and incorporation of semi-independent Purāṇic tracts and narratives in larger Purāṇic traditions;³² and certain scholars have stressed the unitary character of individual Purāṇas and advocated a narratological perspective.³³ A particularly controversial issue has been the extent to which, given their inherently fluid nature, it is possible to create a critical edition of a Purāṇa.³⁴ Ludo Rocher’s admission is representative of the ambivalence of many scholars: “I too have been trained in classical philology in Europe. I too have learned how to prepare

28 Hazra 1940; Rocher 1986. Cf. also, for example, the contents of the journal *Purāṇa: Bulletin of the Purāṇa Department, All India Kashiraj Trust* (1960 to 2010), or that of the various volumes of the *Proceedings of the Dubrovnik Conference on the Sanskrit Epics and Purāṇas (DICSEP)*.

29 Bonazzoli 1979.

30 Biardeau 1968–69; Doniger O’Flaherty 1973.

31 Hazra 1940; Rocher 1986.

32 Hacker 1959; Mertens 1998.

33 Bailey 1995–2008; Balkaran 2020.

34 Coburn 1980.

critical editions, comparing manuscripts and reconstructing THE original text—the archetype. But I am prepared to forget all that when it comes to the Purāṇas.”³⁵

Rather than continuing to invoke the stereotype of an “Ur-Text” or a Purāṇa in some pristine form as the textual scholar’s ideal, or that of supposed “‘old-school slicing and dicing’ for philological and historical aims,”³⁶ it is more productive to consider the need for textual criticism in the light of the Purāṇas’ inherently dynamic nature. They constitute a body of living texts that have been subject to continuous change and transformation.³⁷ A Purāṇa cannot be reduced to a single form. This is a false impression created by most Purāṇa editions that are largely based on a handful of recent manuscripts standing at the end of a centuries-long process of transmission. Critical editions of Purāṇic texts are indispensable, not because they promise access to a single, “original” version, but because they let us see how successive redactions, insertions, and regional inflections have been woven together over time. Tracing those layers makes visible the very process by which Purāṇas generate worlds.

The critical edition of the *Skandapurāṇa* provides an illuminating case.³⁸ By reaching back to the oldest surviving form of the text preserved in palm-leaf manuscripts in Nepal, the edition has revealed how the text known as the *Skandapurāṇa* has been subject to a long process of composition-in-transmission, attesting to its use by multiple religious communities in different times and places until, after the turn of the first millennium, it was replaced by newly composed texts that were attributed to it under the name of *khaṇḍas* (“parts”) or *samhitās* (“collections”). These individual sections were united for the first time in the nineteenth century, when they were published by the influential Venkatesvara Press under the collective name of “*Skandapurāṇa*,” while the earlier *Skandapurāṇa* recorded on the palm leaves was forgotten, known only obliquely from testimonia in medieval digests of Brahmanical customs and social regulations (the so-called Dharmaśāstras). This history of the transformation of a “single” Purāṇa has become known to scholars through the meticulous study of the surviving manuscripts and other sources. It also illustrates the significant impact that the printing press had on canonizing and fossilizing individual *purāṇic* texts. This break in a living textual tradition has hardly been theorized.

While the legacy of the Purāṇas as a literary genre is historically significant, approaching *purāṇa* primarily as a body of texts has significant consequences that require further consideration. By reading the Purāṇas exclusively as literary sources, there is a tendency for them to become separated from their socio-cultural context and

35 Rocher 1983, 72.

36 This is the rather unproductive language in the introduction to a new volume on Purāṇas (Balkaran and Taylor 2023), used to dismiss the work of historians and philologists in favor of an exclusively narrativist approach.

37 On the Purāṇas as living texts, see Bisschop 2019.

38 See Adriaansen et al. 1998 for a start. Five more volumes have appeared in the meantime.

environment; consequently, their dynamic historical character is obscured. Individual Purāṇas become worlds of their own, to be explored and savored by the scholar, without venturing beyond the text itself. This tendency to separate text from context is common in literary studies focused on Purāṇic narratives.³⁹ These studies often fail to examine the ways that texts are embedded in the worlds that they simultaneously help to create and constitute. Secondly, as in the case of other Sanskrit literary traditions, by regarding *purāṇa* as a literary corpus alone, *purāṇa* is confined to the premodern, a closed body of texts that, while important in early India, holds little relevance in the present. Modern scholarship's indifference to *purāṇa* as a living tradition has left the genre ripe for appropriation by "radical conservative" ideologues.⁴⁰ In postcolonial circles this neglect creates a blind spot: text-critics relegate the Purāṇas to antiquity, while cultural theorists simply ignore them. Combined with the common view that written Sanskrit belongs solely to a Brahmanical elite, *purāṇa* is too easily dismissed as an instrument of orthodoxy with little emancipatory power.⁴¹

Yet *purāṇic* pasts may also be used to constitute and emancipate "subaltern pasts," as formulated by Dipesh Chakrabarty in *Provincializing Europe* (2008). As Chakrabarty observes, "Elite and dominant groups can also have subaltern pasts to the extent that they participate in life-worlds subordinated by the 'major' narratives of the dominant institutions."⁴² If we approach *purāṇa* only as a bounded textual genre, we risk severing text from context, the premodern from the modern, and the elite from the subaltern. What is lost is an understanding of *purāṇa* as an ongoing, culturally potent practice of world-making, one that continues to shape lives and imaginations in the present much as it did in the past.

One persistent challenge is that most Purāṇas took shape in social worlds that are no longer accessible; the communities who composed and recited them are out of our historical view. Kirin Narayan's recent book, *Cave of My Ancestors* (2024), offers a rare glimpse into this history. Narayan follows the narratives and ritual practices through which her own family lays claim to having carved the celebrated cave-temples of Ellora. Their lineage history is recorded in the Gujarati *Viśvakarmapurāṇas* (the plural is intentional because these texts survive in multiple forms), which link the Suthars, a caste of carpenters and artisans, to the god Viśvakarma, the "Architect

39 As in the recent edited volume by Balkaran and Taylor 2023, in which many of the papers do not look beyond the world of the texts. In fact, this is the explicit aim of the volume, as stated in the editors' preface: "The chapters in this collection, while varied, all engage with narrative as literature in a broad sense. As pedestrian as it may sound, these stories are studied herein *as stories*" (Balkaran and Taylor 2023, 8). For similar criticism on the "literary turn"'s tendency to create a binary between literature and history, see McGovern 2025.

40 Lilla 2016.

41 Cf. Narayana Rao 1993 and Chakrabarti 2001.

42 Charabarty 2008, 101.

of the Universe.”⁴³ Because Narayan moves with the Suthars themselves, she is well-placed to address the concerns outlined above. Accompanying the Suthars on their pilgrimage to Ellora, she is able to connect the *purāṇic* stories with the concerns, practices, and attitudes of the devotees involved. The texts are cast as part of a living tradition that must be constantly negotiated. She also shows how the narratives recorded in the *Viśvakarmapurāṇas* circulate through modern channels—WhatsApp threads, YouTube recitations, and community Facebook pages—embedding the *purāṇic* past in a modern media ecology. Finally, Narayan exposes the community’s fraught status. The Viśvakarma Brahmins recognize their divine ancestor in the Buddha image of Cave 10 and wish to perform *pūjā* there, yet Ellora’s World-Heritage regulations bar ritual activity. Forced to negotiate with site guards and state rules, the Suthars explore work-arounds, even searching for an alternative icon of Viśvakarma.⁴⁴ The Viśvakarma case demonstrates that *purāṇa*, though ostensibly about the primordial past, is a resource mobilized in the present and oriented toward future possibilities. As the narratives move with the community they assume new technological forms and negotiate the strictures of contemporary heritage regimes. It is this combination of mobility and the varied modes through which *purāṇic* traditions are mediated that the essays in this issue explore.

Introduction to the Inaugural Issue of *PURANA Media*

Through analysis of visual paratexts, archival documents, embodied performances, ritual objects, and personal narratives, the contributors to the inaugural issue of *PURANA Media* show how the primordial is continually reactivated across media, addressing matters of community, diaspora, identity, lineage, memory, performance, translation, and, ultimately, worldmaking.

Ayelet Kotler’s article, “Mythical and Historical Time in the Author Portraits of the Persian Puranic Translator Anandghan ‘Khwush’ (*fl.* 1790–1795),” offers a nuanced reading of Khwush’s frontispiece illustrations. Kotler meticulously examines the seven surviving portraits—each depicting Khwush in mythic company with deities such as Rāma, Hanumān, and Kṛṣṇa—and argues that these images function as paratexts that blend historical record with mythic reenactment. By foregrounding elements like inscriptions, stylistic motifs, and the interplay of textual and visual narratives,

43 Remarking on the power of the *purāṇic* stories in the formation of community identity, Narayan perceptively notes, “The claim that ‘we’ made the caves seems to refer more to lines of shared stories across time than to a genealogy that might be proved through strands of DNA” (Narayan 2024, 244).

44 Here the art-historical and the communal perspective come into conflict. The Suthars still try to find a resolution, with one elderly Suthar reported as saying: “Why can’t a Murti be both [*banne*] Buddha and Vishwakarma?” (Narayan 2024, 227).

the article contends that Khwush's images collapse the distance between the *purāṇic* past and the relative present, creating an ethically charged world where translation becomes an act of worldmaking that rearticulates communal memory.

In her contribution "Churning the *Kalapani*: Dark Water Histories, Oceanic Origins, and Marine Deities of the Indo-Caribbean Madras Diaspora," Gaurika Mehta reconfigures colonial histories by reinterpreting archival and ethnographic materials through the lens of diasporic worlding. Drawing on primary sources such as the grim diary of Captain E. Swinton from the SS *Salsette* and detailed accounts of indentured voyages dating from the 1830s, Mehta approaches the *kālapāni*, or "dark waters," as both sites of historical suffering, and of transformation. The article further engages with contemporary rituals observed by Madras communities in Brooklyn, such as beach *pūjās* invoking submarine deities like Gangamma and Kateramma, to argue that these ritual acts invert traditional narratives of displacement, instead generating a fluid, interconnected map of the past that actively shapes ethical futures.

James Mallinson's "Joining the Clubs: Continuities between Pāśupata and Nāth Asceticism" brings iconographic and material nuance to the study of religious lineages. Mallinson draws on textual, epigraphic, and sculptural sources, including early Mathura inscriptions and temple reliefs at Kalinjar and Vijayanagara, to trace how ascetic symbols such as the club associated with the Pāśupata teacher Lakulīśa were preserved and reinterpreted within Nāth yogi traditions. He argues that these visual motifs are not remnants of the past, but active elements in a process of cultural adaptation. Through this lens, the material and visual legacy of the *purāṇic* tradition emerges as a living resource for shaping contemporary spiritual identities and cosmological frameworks.

In her photo essay, "*Avatāra* as Embodied Practice: Narrative, Performance, and Images," Arya Adityan traces expressions of divine embodiment in textual and ritual contexts. Focusing on the Varāha narrative in the *Skandapurāṇa* and the ritual performance of Bhūtakola in the Tulu region of South Karnataka, Adityan draws parallels between literary representation and performative practice. Through images that document gestures, adornments, and material objects involved in Bhūtakola, the essay explores how divine presence is narrated and materialized through bodily enactment. Adityan uses these sources to show that narrative, image, and ritual practice together constitute a grammar of embodiment that animates and reconfigures *purāṇic* traditions.

Avni Chag's photo essay, "Revering the Relic Manuscript in Contemporary Hinduism," examines the material presence and ritual significance of sacred texts. Focusing on the *Śikṣāpatrī* manuscript housed at the Bodleian Library, Chag documents its codicological features, inscriptions, and the traces left by ritual offerings such as *kunkuma* and flower garlands. In doing so, she shows that the manuscript is preserved for its historical value and simultaneously serves as an object of active veneration. Treating its relic status as central rather than incidental, she argues that this transformation emerges through practices of *darśana* that bring the *purāṇic* past into immediate view.

Her analysis demonstrates how text, image, and ritual intersect to animate history and sustain continuity within religious communities.

In her artist's essay, "I Feel Like My Ancestors Have Left Me a Thousand Voice Notes to Decipher," Samboleap Tol shares a deeply personal exploration that weaves together familial memory, diaspora trauma, and artistic innovation. Tol recounts her experience as a Khmer person raised in the Netherlands, detailing moments of silenced histories—from clandestine phone calls bearing ancestral messages to the transformative rituals of Pchum Ben—and documents how these experiences have fueled her creative practice. Her multimedia installations, which incorporate sound, interactivity, and visual performance, serve as both a personal and collective decoding of the past. Tol's work demonstrates that *purāṇa* operates through the interplay of diverse media that reanimate ancestral voices.

Kotler's examination of Khwush's myth-inflected author portraits and Mallinson's tracing of ascetic iconographies show how *purāṇic* symbols and narratives continue to exert transformative power, establishing a material lineage that encompasses past and present. Similarly, Adityan's photo essay and Chag's exploration of a relic manuscript underscore how visual, material, and performative media work together to render the past imminent, imbuing relic texts and ritual objects with divine agency.

Mehta's re-reading of colonial maritime records and Tol's intimate reflective installations further demonstrate how traumatic histories can be transmuted into spaces for ritual healing and community reimagining. This inaugural collection of essays positions *purāṇa* as a continuous process of worldmaking, where diverse media interact, generating future possibilities for ethical and cosmological renewal.

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