

Cultural Expressions of Scriptural Cosmology: Case Study of Temple Art of Select Temples in Kumbakonam

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Abstract

This research article explores how complex linguistic elements of scriptural cosmological aspects manifest as cultural expressions through a case study of the creation legend associated with select temples at Kumbakonam in Tamilnadu. While the extant works spotlight the creation myth associated with Kumbakonam and some of its famous temples, the scriptural connections still needed to be established. The current research paper leverages this opportunity and endeavors to connect key cosmological aspects of Vedic and Puranic scriptures with the creation myth linked to some of the temples of Kumbakonam. This paper uses field visits to select temples to study their paintings. It also analyses the narratives available in the digital media to complement the field studies. Based on the analysis, this paper concludes that the creation legend of Kumbakonam links back to Vedic and Puranic cosmological concepts with temple art, enhancing the value of the narration. The scriptural connection of the Kumbakonam creation myth aligns explicitly with the Nasadiya and Hiranyagarbha Suktas of the Rig Veda and the Puranic concept of cyclic creation-sustenance-dissolution-re-creation. This research article also emphasizes the need to restore and preserve such invaluable artistic communication at temples for a more effective cultural continuity so that such legends can thrive in the digitally oriented third millennium.

Keywords: Temple Art, Cosmology, Vedas, Puranas, Cultural Expressions, Kumbakonam, Vedic Cosmology, Puranic Cosmology

1. Introduction

Kumbakonam, in the southern Indian state of Tamilnadu, is a cultural capital of excellence. It has temples for pilgrimage, a sacred tank for holy dips, exquisite temple art, artisans making Divine idols using metal casting (Bhoopathi et al., 2020), architectural marvels of temple construction, traditional handloom silk and cotton weaving, and many unique cuisines.

Historically, the city has gone by different names – kudavayil, kudamukku, kudandhai, and presently Kumbakonam (Champakalakshmi, 1978) – all names geographically symbolizing (Nanda, 2012) a pot-like landscape. The city is the mouth of River Kaveri in the form of an opening of a pot (tip of a triangle), which further expands into a pot-shaped delta (base of a triangle) towards the East before draining into the Bay of Bengal.

Kumbakonam (Aniruddh, 2022; Kumbakonam and mahamagam, 1933) is also closely associated with ancient creation myth (from now on referred to simply as 'myth'). A pot (Kumba in Tamil) containing the nectar of immortality (*amṛta*) and the seed of creation (*sṛṣṭi bhīja*) rested here after floating from the sacred Meru Hill in the great deluge during the process of dissolution (end of an eon – implying the previous) and before the next creation cycle (beginning of next eon – the present) can commence. Lord Shiva (one of the Hindu Trinity) broke open the pot with an arrow so creation could begin again in the new eon (the present). The nectar spilt over various parts of Kumbakonam, where temples exist today (in addition to a temple at the spot where Lord Shiva aimed at the pot with an arrow) and a sacred pond, Mahamagham.

To commemorate the significance of this myth (Selvakumar & Thangaraju, 2016), Kumbakonam celebrates the Mahamagham festival (symbolically the KumbhMela of the South) every 12 years. The festival occurs on a full moon day, with the Sun transiting the Aquarius zodiac sign (Kumba raasi in Tamil language) and Jupiter and Moon transiting the Magha nakshatra (popular view is that the Magha corresponds to Regulus star) in the Leo sign (Simha raasi).

Unlike the KumbhMela in the North (Haridwar, Ujjain, Prayagraj, Nashik), where sacred rivers flow through the cities, Kumbakonam's festival is unique because, as per the legend, sacred rivers arrive at the holy Mahamagham pond (where drops of nectar from the pot fell). Even today, pilgrims take a sacred dip on a specific date every 12 years to cleanse their sins. With such religious, historical, mythological, and cultural significance, Kumbakonam is almost synonymous with the Mahamagham festival (Balasubramanian, 2016).

The association of Kumbakonam with a creation myth inspires intriguing questions, especially around the extant literature's interest in analyzing cosmogonical narratives in Hindu texts¹. Is there a connection between this myth and the texts? If so, what texts and what concepts? Integrating this curiosity with artistic expressions found at Kumbakonam's

¹ González-Reimann, L. (2009). Cosmic Cycles, Cosmology and Cosmography. Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism, vol. 1, 411-28. Editor-in-Chief Associate Editors Knut A. Jacobsen, Helene Basu, Angelika Malinar, Vasudha Narayanan. Leiden: Brill. http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2212-5019_BEH_COM_1020020; Kak, S.C. (2001). Yajnavalkya and the Origins of Puranic Cosmology. arXiv: History and Philosophy of Physics.; Brereton, J. P. (1999). Edifying Puzzlement: Rgveda 10. 129 and the Uses of Enigma. Journal of the American Oriental Society, 119(2), 248–260. <https://doi.org/10.2307/606109>; Kak, S.C. (2002). The Cyclic Universe: Some Historical Notes. arXiv: History and Philosophy of Physics.

temples leads one to another enticing and plausible dimension at the intersection of myth-scriptures-art. Is there an association? If so, in what way?

The connection of the Kumbakonam creation myth with texts and temple art is the premise the current research seeks to explore to understand how literature and arts converse and converge in ensuring the cultural legend thrives for millennia.

2. Scope, Aim and Method

This study aims to pivot on the cultural legend of the Kumbakonam creation myth and explore its connection with the Hindu texts and temple arts. This topic can bring multiple domains of knowledge on the same interaction platform. Accordingly, the scope of this work involves analyzing the temple art available at select Kumbakonam temples associated with the myth through field study and correlating it with the cosmogonical notions found in the Vedic and Puranic literary genres. Accordingly, this research paper sets the following objectives,

- a) to understand how digital media represents the myth using textual and literary analysis. (sec. 1.2)
- b) to analyze temple art depicting the myth through field study. (sec. 1.3)
- c) to connect artistic expression with cosmogony-related textual passages in the Rig Veda and Puranas using textual interpretation conducive² to understanding scriptural cosmogonical notions that are amenable to correlating with temple art. (sec. 1.4)

3. Creation Myth of Kumbakonam

3.1 Representation in Digital Media

The analysis of how digital media represents the myth involved using a combination of 'textual and literary analysis methodology for qualitative research' for reviewing digital media. The scope included searching for a combination of keywords (temple art, cosmology, vedas, puranas, cultural expressions, Kumbakonam, creation, myth, legend) in books, web, images, and videos in digital format. The following are the key findings from this analysis.

- Digital traceability of Puranic poetry literature (Kumbakonam Puranam in the Tamil language) in praise of the city's legendary religious significance. Notably, only one of the four or five such works by Sokkappa Pulavar is now traceable in digital media. (Supplementary Readings).
- Other related books (digitally accessible) focus on the history of temples or the Mahamagham festival.
- The Kumbakonam legend surrounding the creation myth is intrinsically associated with Mahamagham festival (as observed in the Google Trends summary – Figures 1, 2, 3 below).

² Engler, S., & Stausberg, M. (Eds.). (2021). The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003222491>; Murti, S.M. (2018). Methodology in Indological Research. India: Bharatiya Book Corporation. ISBN:9788185122694; Kashyap, R. L. (2017). Semantics of Rig Veda (revised ed.). India: SAKSHI.; New Horizons of Indological Research. (2013). Adat, D. (Ed.). India: Kunjunni Raja Academy of Indological Research & New Bharatiya Book Corporation; Kuiper, F. B. J. (1970). Cosmogony and Conception: A Query. *History of Religions*, 10(2), 91–138.

- There are numerous representations of the legend in digital media (images, videos, online blogs) as a pilgrimage tourism status of a recurring cultural event of the Mahamagham festival.
- There is no research article or web blog available on connecting the legend of Kumbakonam, surrounding the creation myth, with the scriptures, Vedic/ Puranic, except for the specific Tamil poetry literature available on Kumbakonam Puranam, which has limited presence in digital format (one of four or five such books).

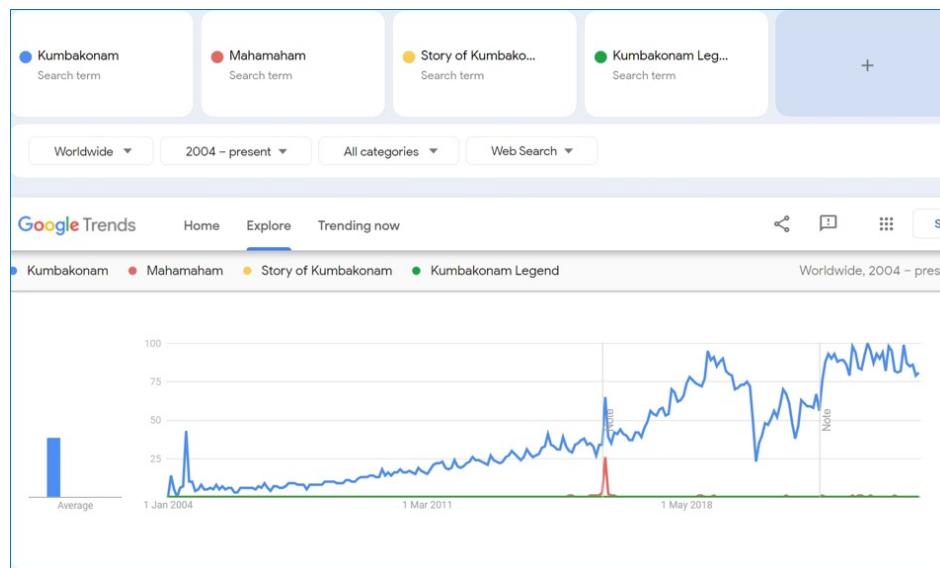


Figure 1: Google Trends Summary – Web Search

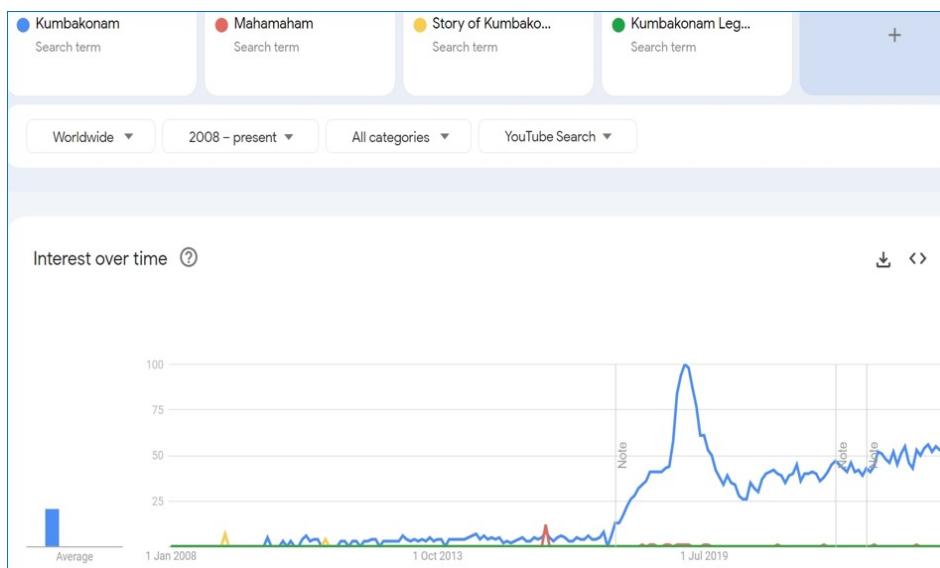


Figure 2: Google Trends Summary – YouTube Search

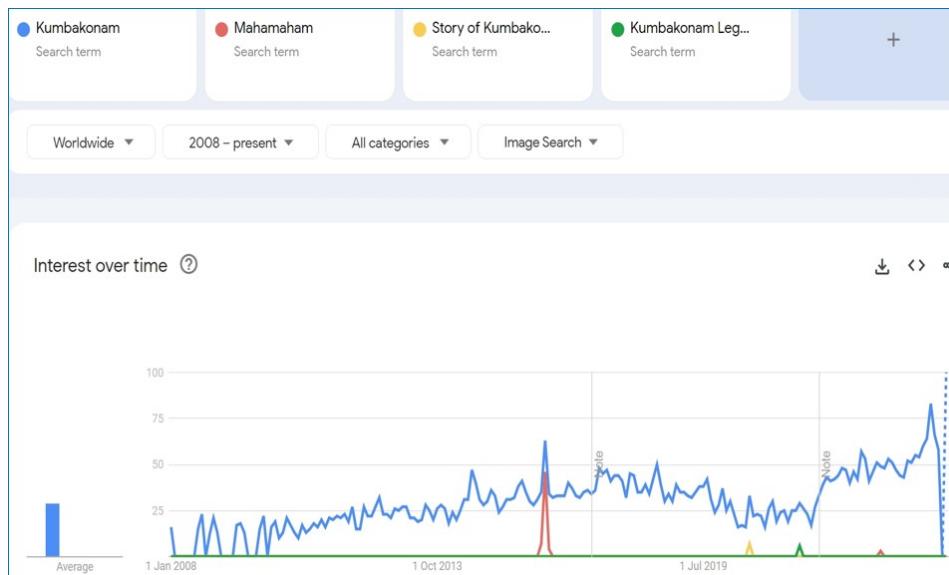


Figure 3: Google Trends Summary – Image Search

3.2 Illustration of Temple Art

Fulfilling the second objective of this research paper necessitated detailed fieldwork at temples in and around Kumbakonam city to analyze the art representing the creation myth. Four temples aligned with the scope of this work: two specifically covered reasonably well-preserved art illustrating the myth, and the other two highlighted the connection with the Vedas.

The following art (Figure 4) is at Sri Aadi Kumbeshwar Temple (<https://maps.app.goo.gl/HNKhSAWYaZMcHcp8>). The pictorial explanation is available in both English and Tamil. This art has eleven images sequentially narrating the myth. Remarkably, the first, second, and eighth pictures spotlight the Puranic-style narrative of the myth, with the involvement of Lord Brahma and Lord Shiva in the Hindu Trinity.



Figure 4: Art at Sri Aadi Kumbeshwar Temple

The explanation of the first picture suggests that saving the creation from destruction is equivalent to beginning the creation again after dissolution (*pralaya*). The subsequent pictures clarify that re-creation after dissolution is possible by using the contents of the pot –

nectar of immortality (*amrita* in Sanskrit and *amudha* in Tamil) and the seed of creation (*srsti bhīja* in Sanskrit). Picture five is directly associated with the temples today at those five locations where the open pot's contents settled after it broke.

The following art (Figure 5) is a combination of four pictures displayed at Sri Banapureeswarar Temple, from where Lord Shiva aimed an arrow at the pot with an arrow located north of Sri Aadi Kumbeshwar Temple (<https://maps.app.goo.gl/aZ8f1xB349rpU88g9>). From left to right, this art starts with the picture showing the deluge, then Lord Brahma praying to Lord Shiva to safeguard creation, followed by the sacred pot floating in the flood, and with the last image depicting Lord Shiva breaking open the pot with an arrow.

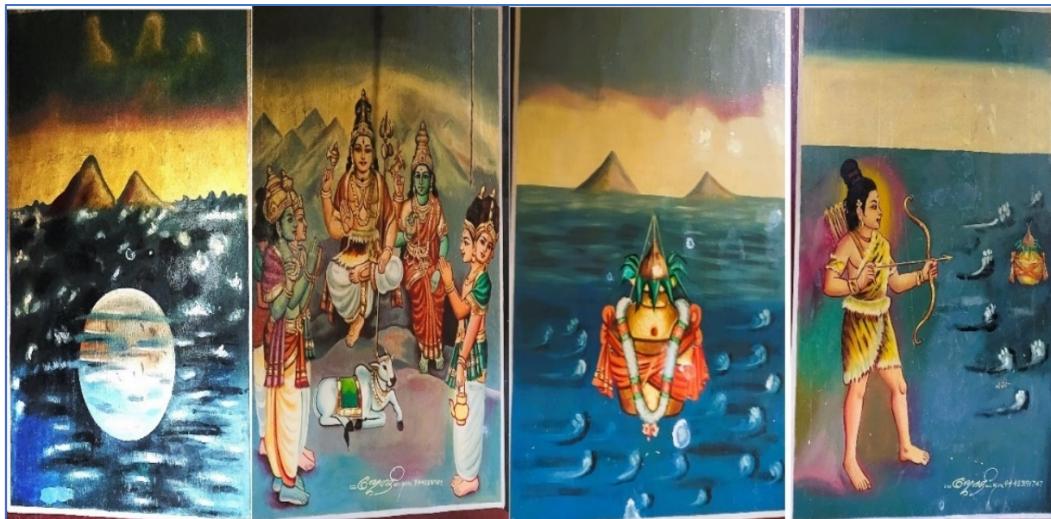


Figure 5: Art at Sri Banapureeswarar Temple

Unlike the previous two, the following depictions (Figures 6 and 7) do not directly depict the myth but instead focus on the significant role of Vedas in the Puranic cyclic creation-dissolution-re-creation process.

The art (Figure 6) found at Sri Veda Narayana Perumal Temple in the vicinity of Sri Aadi Kumbeshwar Temple (<https://maps.app.goo.gl/K5mgKaD4xejgisQF6>) spotlights Lord Brahma praying to Lord Vishnu, who, at the end of the prayer, helped restore the Vedas – a Puranic idea involving two of the Trinity but connecting to the Vedas' role.



Figure 6: Art at Sri Veda Narayana Perumal Temple

The next image (Figure 7) is not actually a temple art but the architectural design of a unique chariot-styled sanctum sanctorum at Sri Vedanta Nayaki and Sri Viswanatha Swamy Temple at Thepperumanallur, near Kumbakonam (<https://maps.app.goo.gl/5h4mWhbwNuF5Z6HQ9>).

According to local legend, there is a belief that the Goddess Vedanta Nayaki is reciting Vedas until the next eon, and when the recitation stops, the dissolution of the present eon begins.



Figure 7: Unique Chariot-Styled Architecture of Sanctum Sanctorum at Sri Vedanta Nayaki and Sri Viswanatha Swamy Temple, Thepperumanallur, Near Kumbakonam

3.3 Connection With Vedic and Puranic Cosmology

For the third objective of this research paper, this section proceeds to analyze the following scriptural texts based on the Kumbakonam creation myth described in digital media that corroborates well with temple art. The textual passages chosen (purposeful sampling) for a thorough consideration align well with the central theme of the creation myth – commencement of re-creation (breaking the pot to bring out the seed of creation) after dissolution (*pralaya*). Such a purposeful sampling is easily feasible based on the extensive work on cosmological aspects of Vedas and Puranas that is available as part of this thesis³.

nāsādāśīnno sadāśīttqdānīm nāsīdrajō no vyōmā pāro yat | kimāvārīvāh kuhā kasyā śarmannambhāh kimāśīdgahānām gabhīram (RV_10.129.01 – first verse of Nasadiya Sukta of the Rig Veda Samhita)

The above verse is from the most popular Nasadiya Sukta (hymn), cited and analyzed extensively for cosmogony. It describes the state of the cosmos before creation began, primaeval origin. Specifically, the beginning of the hymn with complex usage, ‘*nāsādāśīnno sadāśīttqdānīm*’ is relevant for correlation with the Kumbakonam creation myth. As it posits

³ Sivaram, S. (2023). Cosmological Aspects in Scriptures limited to Vedas Puranas and Yoga Vasishta. [Doctoral thesis, Assam University]. Shodhganga@INFLIBNET. <https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/handle/10603/523872>

that neither *asat* nor *sat* existed before creation, the implication is profound as *asat* and *sat* must always be considered together. Such an interpretation is consistent with other Vedic and Puranic textual references. Decoding *asat* and *sat* require analysis of another Rig Vedic hymn on cosmogony.

devānām pūrvye yuge'sātāḥ sad ajāyata (RV_10.072.02b)

devānām yuge prāthame'sātāḥ sad ajāyata | tadāśā anvajāyanta tadūttānapādaspari (RV_10.072.03)

The phrase “*sātāḥ sad ajāyata*” means *sat* arose from *asat*. In the above verse, not only do *asat* and *sat* occur together, but they also indicate a possible mutual relationship. This Vedic usage is particularly useful to apply to the Kumbakonam creation myth, where the pot can symbolize *asat*, and the seed of creation and the nectar of immortality that the pot contains can symbolize *sat*.

Intriguingly, the interpretation of *sat* arising from *asat*, akin to the seed of creation and nectar appearing from the pot after an arrow breaks it, has a connection to another important cosmogonic hymn of the Rig Veda, the Hiranyagarbha Sukta.

hiranyagarbhah samāvartatāgrē bhūtasyā jātah patirekā āsīt | sa dādhāra prthivīm dyāmūtemāṁ kasmai devāyā haviṣā vidhema (RV_10.121.01a)

It describes the creator god’s emergence from the golden cosmic embryo at the beginning, primaeval origin. The purport is that the creator god, *sat*, appeared from the golden cosmic embryo, *asat*, except that the Kumbakonam creation myth occurs between the dissolution of the previous eon and the re-creation of present eon. Hence, instead of the creator god (*sat*) arising from a golden cosmic embryo (*asat*), the seed of creation (*srṣṭi bhīja* as *sat*) emerges from the pot (*asat*). Thus, the myth and its expressions through temple art correlate directly with these Vedic passages.

While the select Vedic texts shed light on one part of the Kumbakonam creation myth (seed of creation, *sat*, arising from the pot, *asat*), they do not discuss the other part involving time as *pralaya*, dissolution of the previous eon through the great deluge. The discussion of *asat-sat* as ‘pot-seed of creation’ is inseparable from dissolution (*pralaya*). Without safeguarding the seed of creation in a pot, the re-creation of the current eon is not possible, whereas without *pralaya* occurring, safely storing the seed of creation in a pot is not required.

So, the two-way consideration of *asat-sat* adds a third, *asat-sat-pralaya*. Such a three-dimensional approach is consistent with the Kumbakonam creation myth elaborated in digital media and represented in temple art. According to the myth, the pot gets carried away in the flood waters and stops at Kumbakonam, so *pralaya* is synonymous with the great deluge. Therefore, bringing in the third dimension of *pralaya* to arrive at a comprehensive scriptural connection coherent with the myth without invoking Puranas is not easy. Another way of looking at the three-way association of *asat-sat-pralaya* is how it is analogous to space-life-time, where *asat* symbolizes five great elements, including space, *sat* represents all life forms, and *pralaya* represents time. Notably, space-time continuum is a vital concept in physical cosmology.

Puranas elaborate on the cyclic process of creation-dissolution, which eventually leads to re-creation (*sarga-pralaya-pratisarga*). Bhavishya Purana (BhvP) talks about countless cycles of time in which creation and dissolution occur. Also, this verse uses *samhāra* for dissolution instead of the commonly used *pralaya*. BhvP clarifies that creation happens when a new period begins, and dissolution happens when it ends. Brahmanda Purana (BndP) supports the cyclical Universe with repetitive cycles of creation-dissolution-re-creation using the phrase *punah punah* (again and again). Markandeya Purana (MarkP) states that time (*kāle vai pralayasyānte*) triggers and controls the process of creation-dissolution-re-creation.

manvantarānyasamkhyāni sargah samhāra eva ca tathāpyahe sadā brāhme manavastu caturdaśa (BhvP_1.2.107)

kalpādau srjate tāta ante kalpasya samharet dinam tasyeha yattāta kalpāntamiti kathyate (BhvP_1.2.85)

trisu kālesu tasyaitā brahmamastanavo dvijāh / manvantaresviha sraṣṭumāvarttante punah punah (BndP_2.3.107)

vyākhyātumupacakrāma punah sargapravarttanam / atra vo varttayiṣyāmi yathā sargah prapatsyate (BndP_3.4.9)

etadicchāmyaham śrotum tvatto bhṛgukulodbhava / yadāna srṣṭirbhūtānāmasti kinnu na cāsti vā / kāle vai pralayasyānte sarvasminnupasamṛhte (MarkP_46.2)

Based on these Puranic passages, this research infers that the Kumbakonam creation myth refers to the timeline where re-creation (*pratisarga*) happens with the breaking of the pot containing the *sṛṣṭi bhīja* at the end of pralaya. The myth occurs at a point in time among the repeating cycles.

The following image (Figure 8) summarizes the connection of the Kumbakonam Creation Myth with Vedic and Puranic cosmological aspects.

Kumbakonam Legend	Vedic-Puranic Cosmology
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Name is associated with an ancient creation myth involving a pot carrying the nectar of immortality and seed of creation. Many temples and a sacred pond exist today as symbols of cultural continuity where this nectar fell when the pot was broken open by Lord Shiva, one of Hindu Trinity. Surrounding temples are connected with both the Vedas and Puranas. 	<p>Vedic-Puranic Cosmology</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nasadiya Sukta (Rig Veda Samhita-RVS 10.129) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Very popular and most analysed cosmogonic hymn dealing with creation and considered a deeply mystical and symbolic hymn. Spotlights neither '<i>asat</i> – denotes the pot' nor '<i>sat</i> – denotes the seed of creation and nectar of immortality' existed before creation and '<i>tad ekam</i> – that One' caused the creation to commence. Another sukta (RVS 10.72) mentions '<i>sat</i>' arose from '<i>asat</i>', thus aligning with how seed of creation arose from the pot. Hiranyagarbha Sukta (RVS 10.121) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Spotlights a golden cosmic embryo from which the creation began, thus aligning with how seed of creation arose from the pot. Puranas-Cyclic Cosmology <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Repetitive Creation-Sustenance-Dissolution-Re-creation. (Kumbakonam creation myth legend happened before re-creation of present eon after a great dissolution of the previous eon, a mahapralaya)

Figure 8: Connection of Kumbakonam Legend With the Vedic and Puranic Cosmology

4. Conclusion

This explorative study of correlating the temple art at selected temples in Kumbakonam with the cosmological notions of scriptures leads this research to conclude that the creation myth of Kumbakonam connects both the Vedic and Puranic ideas with temple art, therefore complementing the value of the textual narration. Moreover, the myth's scriptural connection corresponds with the ideas expounded specifically in the Nasadiya and Hiranyagarbha Suktas of the Rig Veda, as well as the prominent theme of cyclic creation, sustenance, dissolution, and re-creation highlighted in the Puranas.

While the Kumbakonam legend's foundation is the Puranic genre in terms of its narrative style that influenced the development of temple art, there is a conceptual alignment to the core principles of the Vedic hymns. Such a result is possible by the fact that certain temples in the area emphasize the importance of Vedic texts in the process of re-creating the next eon following the dissolution of the existing one, implying that Vedas play a vital role in the execution of the Puranic cyclic process.

This work also finds that digital media, although having several narrations on the myth associated with Kumbakonam, has an extensive link to the pilgrimage status of the Mahamagham festival but relatively limited coverage of the myth's conjunction with the temple art and scriptures.

Thus, this research underlines the significance of restoring and conserving such invaluable creative communication at temples for more efficient cultural continuity so that scriptural ideas in the textual format appeal more effortlessly and powerfully to the technologically leaning third millennium with increasing reliance on digital media.

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