

**From Milton, FL to Mysore: An Intellectual Odyssey with AIIS**  
by Caleb Simmons



Coming from a rural Southern farm community (I was born in Jay, near Milton, in the Florida Panhandle), my path to the study of India was not as direct as some. After studying Sanskrit and written Hindi while working on my MA at Florida State University, I decided to attend an emerging Religion department with a young doctoral program (University of Florida). While I was growing intellectually through my coursework, the resources at my university were not always sufficient to support my academic needs, particularly in spoken language training. This led me to my initial experience with AIIS when I was funded to participate in the Summer 2010 Hindi program in Jaipur. This experience was indeed eye-opening to the resources that were available through AIIS. I'll always remember everyone's reaction when the group going to Lucknow was introduced, and we learned that the center taught not only Urdu but Mughal Persian as well! It was at

that moment that I realized AIIS had connected me with like-minded people. As the program continued, I realized that many of the language students were in similar academic situations as myself, and AIIS provided us access to language study that otherwise would have been impossible at our home institutions.

My intellectual interest, however, grew toward medieval Karnataka, and I realized that it was imperative for me to learn Kannada. After a year of self-study, I knew that I could not achieve my goals on my own; so once again I turned to AIIS for support and received fellowships to study Kannada in Mysore during Summer 2012 and the 2012-13 academic year. My time in Mysore showed me the variety of opportunities that AIIS provides. While the Jaipur program had over 50 students (my exact number could be wrong), the summer Kannada program had the only three, myself included, and the AYL program would only have two. The Kannada program provided an intimate course of study through which I formed adamant bonds with my fellow students that continue to affect my personal and academic life. It also gave me deeper insight into the mission of AIIS that includes understudied languages and regions. While these smaller programs pose their own set of difficulties, the experiences reaffirmed that AIIS was committed the smaller regional centers and the students who studied there. I was also extremely fortunate because the AIIS Kannada Center is located in Mysore the site of my fieldwork; therefore, not only was I able to exponentially grow as a language student but also the immersion experience allowed me to engage my dissertation topic on a much deeper level. This, of course, was buttressed by the field excursions during the program that for us included the Vijayanagara ruins at Hampi and the Yellamma *jātre* (festival) in Saundatti. The Yellamma *jātre* in particular was such a fascinating experience during which we were introduced to linguistic and ritual forms that were worlds away from life in Mysore.

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I then went on to receive an AIIS junior fellowship to carry out my doctoral dissertation research on "Camuṇḍēśvari and the Rise of the Woḍeyar Dynasty." The intellectual ferment that accompanied my year of language learning gave me the linguistic and cultural tools needed to fully examine medieval and early modern Mysore. As a result, I was awarded the first ever Daniel H. H. Ingalls Memorial Fellowship—to complete my dissertation research in 2013-2014. With the tools provided my AIIS, I was able to form deep networks within the Mysore royal and temple communities that included audiences with the (late) Mahārāja of Mysore Śrīkaṇṭhadatta Narasiṃharāja Woḍeyar and being asked to accompany the image of Cāmuṇḍēśvari from her temple to the Mysore Palace on Dasara.

Upon my return to the U.S. from the AIIS fellowship period, I received a tenure-track assistant professor position in the Religious Studies Program at the University of Arizona and am now able to share my passion for Indian Studies

with future generations. I am currently working on my book project related to my dissertation on the goddess Cāmuṇḍēśvari and the Wodeyar kings of Mysore, in the beginning phases of co-editing a volume on South Indian *mathas* with fellow AIIS Kannada alum Sarah Taylor, and an article that examines the urban histories of Mysore through folk devotional songs to Cāmuṇḍi tentatively titled “Singing Urban History: Devotional Folk Constructions of Mysore’s Past.” Additionally, I am planning to launch the University of Arizona’s India study abroad program in Mysore in the Summer of 2016. I am truly a product of the generosity and support of AIIS, without which I could never have come close to realizing my academic and career goals.