

[Salvaging India's Hand-Written Heritage](#)

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Heritage

Salvaging India's Hand-Written Heritage

For 70 years Sanskrit scholars have toiled to complete half of a master catalog that, when finished, will preserve an intellectual treasure nearly lost

Hinduism is famed for preserving its key scriptures, the Vedas, for thousands of years entirely by rote memorization. There remain today hundreds of pundits who can recite the Rig, Sama, Yajur or Arthava Veda entirely from memory. This feat, a key factor in the preservation of the faith over the centuries, obscures the reality that all the rest of the Hindu scriptures were, in fact, written down. They were usually etched into specially prepared palm leaf strips and recopied generation after generation. Millions of these manuscripts, mostly in Sanskrit, now languish in libraries across India, Europe and America.

Late in the 19th century, scholars in India realized the importance of keeping track of these manuscripts, and the first attempt was made to create a Catalogus Catalogorum, literally, a "catalog of catalogs," indexing all the collections. The project was abandoned in 1903 after just two volumes were published. Then in 1935, the New Catalogus Catalogorum was launched by the University of Madras. Headed by Prof. Kuppaswami Sastri, the NCC project, as it is known, published its first volume, "A," in 1949.

NCC researchers collected catalogs and simple "hand lists" issued by India's various institutions. The latter contain little information beyond titles. In some cases the workers personally inventoried entire collections. They supplemented this information with citations to manuscripts referenced in research journals but not listed anywhere else.

The NCC project has suffered from paucity of staff and funds over the decades, publishing as of 2009 19 volumes of a total of 40 that will constitute the entire work.

Indologist Dr. Klaus Klostermaier called those books "the most valuable bibliographic resource for professionals." Dr. Abhiramasundaram of Chennai calls NCC a "wonderful project" of immense help to researchers. The latest volumes were funded with grants from India's freshly launched National Mission for Manuscript (www.namami.org) and produced under the new direction of Dr. Siniruddha Dash (www.unom.ac.in/marinaksanskrit.htm), head of the Madras University Sanskrit Department.

Methods: Cataloging Catalogs

When Hinduism Today's staff visited the project in early 2009, some 15 scholars and students were busy sorting by hand the hundreds of thousands of entries that make up the total catalog. Immersed as we all are in the computer world today, it is easy to forget just what is required to create a database "by hand." In this project, they began in the 1930s by copying catalog entries onto small slips of paper, which were then sorted alphabetically by title. The process has taken decades and is far from over. Dozens of armoires line the project's main rooms, each containing tens of thousands of slips of paper in various stages of sorting. Some slips are now so old that they are disintegrating.

Once the titles have been assembled for the one or two letters of the Sanskrit alphabet that will comprise the next volume, Dash's staff tediously cross-check each entry with the original source. It is particularly critical that the Sanskrit entries be spelled correctly, a proofreading task which Dash himself undertakes at the end when the information is entered into a computer database prior to publishing.

The project remains underfunded. The present staff has been working unpaid for 18 months, awaiting a promised grant. Behind Dr. Dash's desk is displayed a large list of needs, money for scholars, assistants, computers, etc., and the need for funding is never far from his mind or conversation.

Project Importance

"Together, these millions of manuscripts constitute the 'memory' of India's history, heritage and thought. They lie scattered across the country and beyond, in numerous institutions as well as private collections, often unattended and undocumented," states the National Mission for Manuscripts website.

There are historical causes for this neglect. Throughout the ages, Sanskrit was the common language of India's literature, both sacred and secular. But in the 19th century, under British rule, an abrupt change took place which had devastating impact upon the very continuity of the Indian civilization: Sanskrit ceased to be the medium of education. This decision, decreed by Lord Macauley, was as far-reaching as his simultaneous, but better known goal: to create "a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect," set forth in 1835. As a result, English replaced Sanskrit as the lingua franca of India's educated classes, and all the history, law, culture, science and religion contained in the Sanskrit literature withered.

A related impact came from the introduction of printing. The palm-leaf writing technology was slowly abandoned--and few of its texts were ever put into printed books. The recopying ceased. Today all the manuscripts are at least a century old. Depending on the level of care, a palm-leaf manuscript can last up to several centuries.

Critical Editions

Modern scholarship emphasizes the creation of critical editions of ancient texts. These are made by comparing all known manuscripts of a certain text. When ambiguities appear, the scholar takes his best guess as to the intent of the original author, and lists all other possible interpretations in footnotes. It is a tedious process which can take ten to twenty years for a lengthy text, and there are today few scholars with the skill.

To compare all known manuscripts, one has to find them, hence the need for the New Catalogus Catalogorum. It is a scholar's map to resources. Slowing the scholar down in his task is the requirement to personally visit the repository of each version of his text--an issue which now stands to be revolutionized by digitization. Under both government and NGO auspices, projects are underway across the world to preserve the world's ancient texts in digital format. The effort has become much easier and cheaper with the advent of low-cost digital cameras, which replace expensive customized scanners.

Digitization addresses two priorities: preserving the manuscripts and preparing critical editions. As the digitization efforts accelerate, more and more collections will be available on the Internet. No longer will a scholar have to spend weeks at an institution to study a single palm-leaf bundle. He will read it right on his computer,

removing an immense impediment to his work. In an ideal vision of the future, entries in the online version of the New Catalogus Catalogorum would be linked to digital files of the manuscripts.

Only through this process of creating critical editions and subsequent translations will a large portion of Hindu scripture become available. For example, critical editions exist for only a handful of the 28 Saiva Agamas, and even fewer have translations. Yet these scriptures, and corresponding Shakta and Vaishnava Agamas, are the procedural and philosophic basis of temple worship--the mainstay of Hindu religious practice. Hindus complain that no one can explain to them the mystical reasons for ritual worship; that is because the Agamas are not readily available.

Unknown Texts

It was only in 1904 that the Artha Shastra came to light, a remarkable text over 2,000 years old that details the advanced political knowledge of India at the time. Just recently, evidence was discovered in Kerala that Jesuit priests sent accounts of Indian discoveries in mathematics to Europe as early as the 16th century. There is a new theory that Isaac Newton used the information in developing calculus, but that the Indian source of his discoveries remained unrecognized. No one knows what other great knowledge may remain hidden in an ancient manuscript on a dusty shelf, or what key discovery will be proven to be Indian in origin. The cataloging and digitizing of manuscripts will greatly increase the likelihood of new discoveries.