

[Why is the US Stockpiling India's Literary Treasurers?](#)

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Why is the US Stockpiling India's Literary Treasurers? National Library in D.C. Holds World's Largest Collection of Hindu Books

Want to keep up with the latest in books, periodicals and monographs published in India? You need look no further than "The Library of Congress Accessions List South Asia" for the most comprehensive compilation of everything newly printed, not only from India, but also Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Maldives. Published quarterly, this list of thousands of selected titles in dozens of languages is the work of the 60-plus staff members working in book-lined catacombs at the New Delhi Field Office of the United States "Library of Congress" [LC]--the largest library in the world.

In addition to this on-going cataloging, the LC has embarked upon a project to locate and microfilm India's major publications from 1900 to 1950 (as listed in the National Bibliography of Indian Literature). This single project alone will save thousands of books which are rapidly disintegrating. Modern printed books are unfortunately far less durable than our ancient ola leaf manuscripts.

Up until the middle of this century, it was the British Museum that was the definitive source for Indian publications. But as the British Empire contracted, so did the ambitions of their national library. Still today no one can best their extensive

collections of 19th century and earlier Indian literature. But since 1962 the great resource of 20th century literature has been the LC. Even India's major libraries and universities rely upon the Accessions List ("accessions" in this usage means "a list of recent acquisitions").

Wheat--yes, the plain grain of chappatis--is responsible for this ongoing American project. In the 1950s the US had accumulated a substantial amount of unrepatriatable rupees from the sale of wheat to India. Western scholars saw an opportunity and boldly proposed that the rupee fund (and similar funds in other countries) be used to stock American libraries with international publications, which were at that time sorely lacking. Six "field offices" of the LC resulted--Brazil, Egypt, Kenya, Indonesia, India and Pakistan. The consequence to date is that not only the Library of Congress, but several US university libraries, most notably the University of Chicago, have better collections of Indian books than can be found anywhere in India. "The Library of Congress program has driven South Asian studies in the US," explained Prof. Barrier, scholar and proprietor of South Asia Books, one of the largest specialized book distributors in America. John F. Richards, Chairman of the Committee on South Asian Studies at Duke University, said, "It is only because we have access to these important publications found by the LC that we have been able to carry out significant teaching, research and writing about India, as well as attract distinguished visiting scholars from India."

Library of Congress, New Delhi

The Delhi Field Office, recently relocated to the "American Center" on Kasturba Gandhi Marg, is under the guidance of

career librarian Lygia Ballantyne and her deputy, Alice Kniskern, who together oversee a staff of 71, the largest LC field office. The job of the office is to select, catalog and make available to US libraries important works published in India and neighboring countries. Though simple in concept, the execution of this mandate is no small mental or physical task. Consider, for example, that they are searching out not only books, but newspapers, magazines, official gazettes, government documents, maps, posters, political party publications and audio and video cassettes--much of it published in very small quantity. Since 1962 the office has acquired roughly 3 million individual publications of which a total of 17 million pieces were sent to participants. In recent years, they have become more selective in their acquisitions: the total individual pieces for 1995 was 95,000; participants received 204,000 pieces. A substantial amount (mostly newspapers) is put on microfilm--750,000 pages in 1995 and 4.9 million pages since 1989.

The initial selection is done by representatives stationed across India and neighboring countries who are in contact with publishers, governments and other sources. The Delhi office staff also makes special collection trips. The assembled materials are then reviewed in Delhi for inclusion or not in the Accessions List. Those selected are cataloged and described. This is a truly arduous job, for materials arrive in 145 languages and 26 different scripts. One thousand copies of the Accessions List are distributed in India, and 200 sent to the USA. [See sidebar below on how to find the books on the list in a library.]

Like most ambitious undertakings, it is not a perfect process,

and complaints are occasionally made that a worthy publication has failed to make the Accessions List. Most recently the Encyclopedia India 2001 was so shunned, while being avidly received elsewhere. Ms. Ballantyne responds, "We looked at the volumes not once but three times and concluded each time against acquiring it [as] most of the information can be found in other sources previously acquired."

Of Lists and Acquisitions

The LC office is providing two distinct services. First is the creation of the Accessions List. It is the only current listing of new publications in India and is used by many Indian libraries to plan their own acquisition. For US institutions, the LC office actually acquires requested materials on the Accessions List.

Major libraries, for example, sign up and pay fees in advance to be sent all material in certain categories, such as "Nepalese Monographs/Serials." The list of customers is a "Who's Who" of America's top universities: University of California, Yale, Chicago (which buys everything), Harvard, Duke, Cornell, etc.

These are bought by the Field Office, cataloged, sometimes rebound, packaged, preaddressed and shipped to the USA. The present rate is 11,000 pounds of books a month--a sea-going shipping container load every five weeks. When these containers arrive in the USA, the crates are broken down and the individual packages shipped on to the libraries. The process is fast--two months from Delhi to delivery.

Currently the LC office receives US\$1 million in allocated funds

from America, \$300,000 in payments by library participants in the purchasing program and Rs13 million/year (\$382,000) from the wheat-related US rupee funds in India. However, that fund expires at the end of this year, and how the shortfall will be met is not known. The present budget crisis in the United States does not auger well for liberal funding of such a far-flung project. And raising fees to participating libraries is not a welcome option either. According to Ballantyne, some scaling back is expected, and they are looking for other libraries to share the collecting responsibility and expense in cooperative programs.

Benefits for Hinduism

The LC field office collects material on all subjects. If it has any preference we could discern, it was for current political developments such as the publications of the various political parties. In 1995 the 3,833 English-language acquisitions within India comprised:

History & Social Science: 35%
Science & Technology: 14%
Language & Literature: 10%
Economics: 10%
Religion: 9%
Development: 7%
Law: 5%
Art: 4%
General: 4%
Education: 2%

The percentages vary with languages. In general the regional Indian languages are about 10% religious, with Sanskrit publications running a strong 60%.

A cursory scan of the 1995 first quarter accessions list quickly reveals a number of just published books on Hinduism. For example: The Agama Encyclopediaby the Kalpatharu Research Academy; new volumes of Puranas released by Motilal Banarsidass; a book on the artisan caste of South India; Car Festival of Lord Jagannath, Puri; Vrndavana in Vaisnava Literature; Divine Hymns and Ancient Thought (on the Rig Veda); Monolithic Temples of Madhya Pradesh--and that only takes us through "D" of the authors in the English section. The more common entries are for books like The Politics of Land Reform; the Changing Scene in Rural Bengal and the Fauna of Andhra Pradesh. There are also some really intriguing titles such as Global Parasites: 500 Years of Western Culture[which we ordered].

Among all English-language books listed in the first quarter of 1995, 6.8% were Hindu-related, 1.6% Buddhist and 0.8% each Christian, Sikh and Muslim, which, except for under-represented Islam, roughly reflects the area's demographics.

Overall, the Library of Congress Field Office performs a critical, literary and intercultural service. It makes available thousands of books and other materials published in Southeast Asia to not only the American public, but also to libraries and research institutes throughout the world. In doing so, it facilitates the global flow of information and knowledge which brings our

world closer together in mutual understanding.

Sidebar: Preserving India's Books for Five Hundred Years

In the 1960s and 70s Sri B.S. Kesavan, director of the National Library in Calcutta, headed up a project to identify the most important books published in South Asia in the first half of the 20th century. The resulting National Bibliography of Indian Literature listed 55,000 titles in 16 Indian languages and covers one of the most exciting periods of modern Indian history. Libraries which possess copies of any of these titles have found them in such consistent demand that the books themselves are deteriorating rapidly, some to the point of unuseability. Many of the books were rare in the first place and now virtually impossible to locate. To solve both the problems of preservation and availability, the Government of India entered into a joint project with the LC to locate and microfilm all 55,000 books.

Microfilming is the process of taking much reduced and very high definition pictures of documents such as books and newspapers. The resulting film, usually 35mm, is stored in rolls and can be read in a machine which enlarges or prints the image at a readable size. It has a useable life of at least 500 years. When the four teams of microfilm operators complete their task, every participating library in India will receive a complete set of films for the 55,000 books. It is the most ambitious preservation project ever undertaken in India. As of January 1996, 8,000 books had been completed. A one-hundred-foot reel can hold 1,500 pages and take one day to record. In most cases the books have to be disassembled and later rebound. Three teams are working in Bombay and one in Madras and are receiving enthusiastic cooperation from

India's libraries. Books which can't be located in India will be sought at the British Library and the LC in America.

We inquired why they don't attempt to digitize the books instead of microfilming them. Lygia Ballantyne replied that "the future of data storage on computers is not settled. No format has been decided upon which can be counted upon to last."

Sidebar: Meet the Library of Congress

The United States Library of Congress is the largest library in the world. Its collection of 100 million items, managed by a highly skilled staff of 5,000, comprises not only books but maps, printed and recorded music, motion pictures and television programs. Of all cataloged items, 3.2% or 3,200,000 have been published in India--arguably the largest such collection in the world. Hindi, with 96,843 titles, is the 12th largest language represented. The LC occupies three giant buildings near the US Capitol in Washington, DC. Unlike other national libraries of its stature, anyone can walk in the door and use its services.

The LC commenced services modestly in 1800 with an appropriation of \$5,000 to buy books for the use of the US Congress, the legislative branch of the US federal government. It almost ended in 1814 when the British army--still smarting from its earlier defeat in America's War of Independence--invaded Washington. They burned the library (also the White House and most other government buildings) to the ground. This was a blessing in disguise, as the library was begun again by the acquisition of the personal bibliotheca

of Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence and third president of the USA. Jefferson's library was vast in scope, far beyond the narrow legal, economic and historical focus of the original collection. He was a renaissance man with encyclopedic interests, and his books included works on architecture, the arts, science, literature and geography. Thus were planted the seeds of the now near-universal LC collection.

Its international acquisition programs were vigorously expanded after World War II. About this time too, the LC adopted a policy of cultural reparation, that original source materials belong to the country of their creation and as a result several important manuscripts in the LC were returned to the countries of their origin. At the close of this century, the LC is doyen of American libraries, repository of all books printed in the country, definitive promulgator of cataloging and bibliographic systems and world leader in both the preservation of old books and the transfer of books to long-term storage media such as microfilm.

But how do you actually get a book from the LC? Well, if you're too far away to walk in the door in Washington DC, your best method is to go to the largest library in your area, such as at a college or university. There you should solicit the assistance of a reference librarian with access to massive cataloging systems such as "OCLC" which contains not only LC books but those in 21,000 other libraries in 63 countries. The LC considers itself the "library of last resort," meaning that its collections are called upon only if a book can't be found anywhere else. With the LC cataloging number given in the Accessions List, finding a book should take just a matter of

minutes.