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Description and Rationale

Title

Pedagogy and scribal culture in pre-colonial Bengal: Digitization of 2500 manuscripts from Nabadwip Sadharan Granthagar

Project Description*

Nabadwip, a small town in the Nadia district of West Bengal (India), is said to have been the capital of the Sena kingdom of Bengal until the 13th century and was well into the 20th a preeminent center of Sanskrit learning. Traditionally held to be the birthplace of Chaitanya (circa 1486-1534), the founder of the Gaudiya Vaishnava movement, Nabadwip remains a very important pilgrimage center for Hindus across the world. Nabadwip's reputation as a center of Sanskrit learning however was not dependent solely on the Gaudiya Vaishnava networks and in fact predated the birth of Chaitanya. As demonstrated by historians such as Dineshchandra Bhattacharyya, Jonardon Ganeri, Joel Bordeaux, and Samuel Wright, the scholarly networks centered in Nabadwip and adjoining regions excelled in several disciplines of Sanskrit learning including *Vyakarana* (grammar), *Alankara* (poetics), *Smriti* (law), and *Nyaya* (logic).

In the early modern period, scholars based in the town who were almost without exception Brahmin men experienced unprecedented success as Nabadwip emerged as the main center of *Navya-nyaya* or "new reason" school of Sanskrit thought. The emergence of *Navya-nyaya* scholarship in the Nabadwip region impacted not just the discipline of logic but changed for good the methodologies of several other disciplines as well. Patronized by the landholding and mercantile elites, the Sanskrit educational institutions or *chatushpathi*s in the Nabadwip region attracted students from all over South Asia and even Tibet. Nabadwip was also home to Vaishnava theologians and Tantric scholars. Given Nabadwip's preeminence as both a center of learning and Vaishnava devotionalism, the town was also a hub of manuscript production and a home to scribal communities.

As several surveys since the 19th century have evinced, Nabadwip and its adjoining regions were exceptionally rich in Sanskrit manuscripts, most of which were in custody of Brahmin scholarly lineages that presided over the educational institutions on a

hereditary basis. As Sanskrit learning declined, many of these families donated their manuscript collections to public libraries in the region. Nabadwip Sadharan Granthagar, a public library in Nabadwip town owned by the Government of West Bengal, is one such repository and has in its collection more than 2500 manuscripts. Upon request, the Government of West Bengal's library administration in the Nadia district has granted us permission to digitize for open access the entire collection of manuscripts in the custody of Nabadwip Sadharan Granthagar. We have closely examined the collection. Many manuscripts are severely damaged and they need to be urgently digitized. The library does not have the requisite infrastructure or financial resources to have the manuscripts restored and store them in climate-controlled facilities. The manuscripts, which are on various media such as hand-made paper, Palmyra-palm leaves, and Birch tree barks, are increasingly becoming fragile and need to be digitized without any further delay. The library authorities fear that the manuscripts may be even stolen or forcibly taken away.

Reasons for Consideration*

The hand-list at Nabadwip Sadharan Granthagar has entries for around 894 manuscripts. However, on closer examination, we found that there are over 2500 manuscripts. The folios were all wrapped up in bundles. Once the folios were disaggregated and serially rearranged, it became quite clear that the actual number of manuscripts in custody of the library far exceeded the count provided in the hand-list.

Almost without exception, all the manuscripts are brittle, and since none of them are stored in climate-controlled facilities, their condition is worsening with passage of time. A lot of the manuscripts show stains and smudges indicative of extensive water-damage. Since the building is damp and poorly ventilated, some of the other manuscripts are spoiled by dirt and mould. Unless digitally preserved immediately, these manuscripts will be lost forever. The library, which is over a century old, is decrepit and there is hardly any chance that it will be able to raise money to restore the manuscripts. It currently has only one member of staff on its payroll and that person alone is entrusted with all responsibilities of running the institution on a quotidian basis.

Since Sanskrit learning in Nabadwip is all but extinct, the library has hardly any readers who are equipped with skills to read the manuscripts. Consequently, hardly anybody in that small town has any interest in preserving or restoring the manuscripts. It is no exaggeration that this chronic disinterest in Sanskrit manuscripts is the result of some long-term structural reasons, and it is next to impossible to reverse this unfortunate trend in the foreseeable future. Thus, the only way to bring scholarly attention to these 2500 manuscripts is to digitize them and to upload the images on various open access platforms.

These manuscripts are among the last few material traces of the scribal communities and the vibrant manuscript culture that had thrived in early-modern Nabadwip. They are vestiges that evidence the academic excellence that the institutions of Nabadwip had attained almost four hundred years ago. Taken together, the manuscripts enable us to reconstruct the whole spectrum of scholarly and religious engagements that shaped academic and devotional pursuits in the region. Since a lot of the manuscripts are manuals for Brahmanical, Gaudiya Vaishnava, and Tantric ritual practices they should

be also useful to understand the anxieties and aspirations that characterized quotidian lives in the region during the pre-colonial period.

Authors

As mentioned above, the hand-list of manuscript with the Nabadwip Sadharan Granthagar is hardly exhaustive. Combining information provided in the hand-list with data culled from our own notes on the collection, it can broadly be said that the manuscripts cover a subject-range from Vyakarana, Kavya, Purana, Samkhya, Yoga, Vedanta, Smriti, manuals for various kinds of funerary rites, Nyaya and Navya-Nyaya, Jyotisha, Tantra, Ayurveda, manuals on worship of Hindu deities, lexicons, Vedic suktas, Gaudiya Vaishnava theology, collations of authoritative decisions by scholars of Nabadwip on Smriti-related problems, manuals of laws related to adoption, manuals on wedding rituals, aesthetics, manual on propitiatory rituals for meteor-sighting, genealogies, satire, cantos of Ramayana and Mahabharata, manuals on Hindu ritual lunar calendar, a manual on urine-examination, etc.

As is clear from the discussion above, the manuscripts belong to texts composed between the Vedic period (circa 1500–1000 BCE) and the nineteenth century CE. Thus, for many of the texts, it is not possible to assign authorship in accordance to modern norms and criteria. Anyhow, the authors of some of the texts are Valmiki, Vyasa, Kalidasa, Shankaracharya, Keshavacharya, Jayadeva, Vidyapati, Bharavi, Vachaspati Mishra, Mahadeva Bhatta, Bopadeva, Jimutavahana, Chandeshwar Thakur, Rupa Goswami, Bhanudatta, and Raghunandana Bhattacharya. The collection is exceptionally rich in manuscripts of sixteenth and seventeenth century Navya-nyaya texts by Gangesha, Raghunatha Shiromani, Jagadish Tarkalankar, Gadadhara Bhattacharya, and Mathuranath Tarkavagisha. While an overwhelming majority of the texts are in Sanskrit, there are a few texts in Bangla, mostly belonging to the Gaudiya Vaishnava sect. Among the authors of such texts in Bangla are Brindabandas and Lochandas. Some manuscripts also provide the name of the scribe and the date of the copy.

Publishers

Not applicable

Proposal Contributors

This proposal is being submitted on behalf of the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, a SAMP member institution. The following members of the Archive, the Administration, and the Faculty of the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta were actively involved in the preparation of this proposal - Abhijit Bhattacharya, Rajarshi Ghose, Tapan Paul, Gopal Adak, and Sourav Mandal.

The CSSSC proposes to collaborate with the Nabadwip Sadharan Granthagar for the proposed digitization of manuscripts held in the collection of the library. Information about the holding institution and its collection are as follows:

Name of the Institution: Nabadwip Sadharan Granthagar

Foundation Year: 1907

Approximate number of manuscripts: 2500

Approximate number of folios: 125000

Approximate number of digital images to be generated: 250000

Dates of manuscripts: 18th to 20th century (texts belong to the period from circa 1500 BCE to nineteenth century CE)

Languages: Mostly Sanskrit and a few in Bangla

Scripts: Bangla and Devanagari

Media of manuscripts: Hand-made paper, Palmyra palm leaves, and Birch tree barks

Details and Sources

Resource Types*

- Other (Manuscripts on hand-made paper, Palmyra palm leaves, Birch tree barks)

Regions*

- South Asia

Countries of Origin*

- India, Bangladesh

Major Languages

- Sanskrit and Bangla

Source Format*

- Other (Manuscripts on hand-made paper, Palmyra palm leaves, Birch tree barks)

Target Format

- Digital (400 DPI TIFF with JPEG derivative file)

Identifiers

- No such explicit ID is available as the manuscripts have not been surveyed and catalogued by the concerned agencies.

Links

http://vvsindia.com/scllibrary/books3/index.php/site/index/2307

Source and Holdings

Location	Format	Holdings/Range	Notes
Nabadwip Sadharan Granthagar, Nabadwip, Nadia district, West Bengal, India	Manuscripts on hand-made paper, Palmyra palm leaves, and Birch tree barks	The manuscripts belong to the 18th to 20th century period. The texts belong to the period from circa 1500 BCE to nineteenth century CE.	Most manuscripts are brittle and the stains on them are indicative of water, dirt, termite, and mold damage over a long period. They are held in a building that is damp and lacks ventilation. None of the manuscripts have been restored and there is no facility for climate-controlled storage.

Source and Holdings Notes

All manuscripts that we propose to digitize are currently held in Nabadwip Sadharan Granthagar in rather precarious condition. Since the building is dilapidated, the manuscripts may have to be relocated in the future and may possibly be lost in transition. Given the nature of the collection, there are no gaps in the holdings per se. However, as explained above, folios of the manuscripts are wrapped in bundles, and they have to be serially rearranged before the commencement of digitization. Some manuscripts are incomplete and some of their folios are not traceable.

Physical Details

The manuscripts are held in precarious condition without any climate-controlled facilities. They are on hand-made paper, Palmyra palm leaves, and Birch tree barks. They are all brittle and full of stains. The stains on them are indicative of water, dirt, termite, and mold damage over a long period of time. None of the roughly 2500 manuscripts have been restored. We propose to digitize about 2500 manuscripts consisting of 125,000 folios and generate 250,000 digital images.

Existing Reformatted Materials

No other institution has digitally copied the manuscripts in the collection of the Nabadwip Sadharan Granthagar. Thus, to the best of our knowledge, there is no chance of duplication.

Intellectual Property Considerations

The concerned texts are not copyright material. Thus, none of the material that we propose to digitally reproduce comes under the purview of the intellectual property

rights. Most importantly, the owner-custodian of the manuscripts has permitted us to digitally copy the contents of all manuscripts for unrestricted open access.