

MEMORY OF THE WORLD REGISTER

Manuscript Holdings of French Research Institutions in Pondicherry

REF N° 2004-29

Part A – ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

1. SUMMARY

Within a collection of 11 000 manuscripts that concern mainly the religion and worship of the Hindu God Siva, is included **the largest collection in the world of manuscripts of texts of the Saiva Siddhanta**. In the 10th century CE, this religious tradition, **a major current of Hinduism**, had spread right across the Indian subcontinent and beyond, as far as Cambodia in the East. It long represented the mainstream of Tantric doctrine and worship and appears to have influenced every Indian theistic tradition. Its surviving texts, the majority of them unpublished, range from the 6th century CE to the colonial period. This unique collection thus furnishes much of the **dwindling evidence remaining today** for scholars to reconstruct a chapter in the religious annals of humanity. The collection is presently housed in the French institutions of research in Pondicherry. Our ultimate objective: to put the whole collection online and so make it available to scholars throughout the world.

2. DETAILS OF THE NOMINATORS

2.1. Names

Dominic GOODALL, DPhil (Oxon), Dr Habil. (Hamburg),
Head of Pondicherry Centre of the Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient.
and

T. GANESAN, PhD (University of Madras), Chief Cataloguer at the French Institute of Pondicherry.

2.2. Relation to the documentary heritage nominated

Both persons have a responsibility for the maintenance and cataloguing of the collections involved; both, for more than 10 years have, been actively researching the field directly relevant to the major holdings of the collection: Tantric Saivism.

2.3. Contact Person

Jean-Pierre MULLER, Director of the French Institute of Pondicherry.

2.4. Contact Details

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3. IDENTITY AND DESCRIPTION OF THE DOCUMENTARY HERITAGE

3.1. Name and identification details of the items being nominated

Manuscript Collection of the IFP
Department of Indology
French Institute of Pondicherry

11, St. Louis Street
P.O. Box 33
PONDICHERRY 605001

Manuscript Collection of the Pondicherry Centre of the EFEO
Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient
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Pondicherry 605001

3.2. Description

Two large collections of palm-leaf and paper manuscripts that transmit principally Sanskrit, Tamil and Manipravalam texts are preserved in French research institutions in the south Indian town of Pondicherry. The 1662 palm-leaf bundles of the Pondicherry Centre of the Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) belong to a single collection from the Tirunelveli District in the south of India. More than a third of this material (about 650 bundles) relates to the cult of the Hindu God Visnu and at least 60 of these Vaisnava manuscripts transmit texts that have never been published.

The major collection, however, is that of the French Institute of Pondicherry (IFP), which comprises 8187 palm-leaf bundles, 360 paper codices and 1144 recent paper transcripts (i.e. post 1950 paper manuscripts commissioned or copied by employees of the IFP). The manuscripts have been collected from every area of the Tamil-speaking South of India and the collection contains texts of every branch of pre-colonial Indian learning. But nearly half of the material relates to the other major theistic tradition of India, that concerned with the worship of the God Siva. It is in fact the largest collection in the world of manuscripts of texts of the Saiva Siddhanta, a religious tradition that in the 10th century CE was spread right across the Indian subcontinent and beyond, as far as Cambodia in the East. This tradition long represented the mainstream of Tantric doctrine and worship and appears to have influenced every Indian theistic tradition. Its surviving texts, the majority of them unpublished, range from the 6th century CE to the colonial period.

3.2.1. History of the IFP collection

The manuscript collection of the French Institute of Pondicherry (IFP) was started in 1955 at the instigation of its founder-director, the polymath Jean Filliozat, who was at the time also overall director of the Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient. His starting point was the desire to explain the Hindu temple and what happens in it. He therefore initiated a project to collect all the materials bearing on the Saiva religious tradition in the South of India, of which the dominant school is the Saiva Siddhanta. The first reference to the existence of this school in the Tamil-speaking south is an allusion to be found in an inscription in the famous Kailasanatha temple in Kancheepuram (Tamil Nadu) to the **7th century** Saiva initiation in the of a king of the Pallava dynasty. In the 1950s, the agamas, the scriptures of the Saiva Siddhanta, were neglected and virtually unknown to most scholars of Sanskrit in India as well as in the West. The efforts of French research institutions in Pondicherry have brought them to the attention of the scholarly world and seen many of them published.

The palm-leaf manuscripts were gathered from the private collections of temples, priests and monasteries across South India. The principal collector was Pandit N.R. Bhatt, a scholar of the EFEO who has since become famous for his editions of Saiva texts published in the IFP series in Pondicherry. He regularly toured the Tamil country for years, always searching in particular for Saiva manuscripts, but often bringing back entire collections that also included a great variety of other texts, which explains why the library now contains so much besides Saiva material.

Owners were prepared to part with their manuscripts because they knew that the IFP was attempting to edit and publish for the first time the corpus of scriptures of the Saiva Siddhanta. But when the palm-leaf

manuscripts themselves could not be obtained, modern copies in Devanagari script – the script in which Sanskrit is commonly printed today – were commissioned, and this explains the large number (1144) of post-1950 paper transcripts in the collections.

Before the 1990s, when active collecting ceased, N.R. Bhatt would often return to the IFP from his trips with bundles of manuscripts tied up in jute sacks. The manuscripts were assigned accession numbers, the first being 999 and the last 67304¹. They were then roughly identified and the titles of the texts were entered into a typed hand-list, ordered by accession number. This hand-list remains to date the only complete record of the manuscripts of the collection. The transcripts were assigned a different number, from 1 to 1144, and their acquisition was logged in a separate hand-written list and in a card-index, ordered alphabetically by title.

Most of the IFP's codices are written in Grantha script, the script used by Tamilian Brahmins for writing Sanskrit; others are in Malayalam, Telugu, Nandinagari, Oriya and Tulu scripts. The 1144 transcripts of manuscripts, as mentioned above, are written on paper in Devanagari script.

Footnote

numbers in the same sequence. The manuscript acquisition numbers now double as shelf numbers.

The following rough breakdown of subject matter gives the approximate number of codices per subject. N.B. this is not the number of texts, because the majority of the codices transmit several texts.

- Canonical texts of Saivism (*Saivagama*, also known as *Tantra*) 1900 codices
- *Mantra*/Ritual manuals 1890
- Devotional Hymns/Legends of Holy places (*Stotra/Mahatmya*) 1360
- Astrology 435
- The literary epic about Rama (the *Ramayana*) 192
- Other Sanskrit epics, myths, legends (*Purana*) 230
- Traditional South Indian medicine 198
- *Veda* 187
- Literary works in Sanskrit 160
- Tamil devotional literature 1350

Thus the bulk of the IFP's collection comprises manuscripts of scriptures (Tantras/agamas) of the Saiva Siddhanta and of commentaries thereon or of Saiva ritual manuals, compendia, doctrinal treatises, handbooks, and notes of Saiva priests. In bulk alone the more than eleven thousand manuscripts of the French institutions in Pondicherry constitute a manuscript **collection of major importance** and a repository of many branches of learning. This joint collection also has the distinction of being the **largest assemblage in the world of manuscripts** of texts **of a major current in theistic Hinduism**: the Saiva Siddhanta.

3.2.2. History of the collection of the EFEO

A single collection of predominantly Vaisnava manuscripts from a village called Alwartirunagari, famed as the birthplace of the Vaisnava poet-saint Nammalvar, was acquired by N.R. Bhatt at some point in the 1960s (the memory of the institution no longer records exactly when) and deposited in the premises of the EFEO centre in Pondicherry. The entire collection belonged to a single Vaisnava family called Periyambiyar Tirumaligai. A typed hand-list was prepared that mentions only the titles of the works transmitted.

The Vaisnava material is in three languages, the third of which, Manipravalam, being really a literary hybrid favoured by Vaisnavas that combines Sanskrit vocabulary with Tamil inflections:

¹ 1 These acquisition numbers are not continuous for the manuscripts, because printed books were also assigned acquisition

- Vaisnava texts in Tamil 197
- Vaisnava texts in Sanskrit 135
- Vaisnava texts in Manipravalam 328

The non-Vaisnava material is in Sanskrit:

- Veda 80
- Smriti and Dharmasastra 150
- Epics, myths, legends 270
- Darsana (philosophy and grammar) 85
- Poetry and poetics 175
- Astrology 37
- Lexicons 29
- Medical works 22
- Hymns (stotras) 53
- Jainism 27
- Saiva 6
- Miscellaneous 68

3.2.3. *Cataloguing History*

As mentioned above, there are 3 hand-lists that cover the entirety of the collection:

- 1 The typed list of the 8547 palm-leaf manuscripts acquired over three decades from 1955 by the IFP.
- 2 The hand-written list of the 1144 transcripts commissioned by the IFP after 1955.
- 3 The typed list of the 1662 palm-leaf manuscripts acquired by the EFEO.

The following additional materials for the IFP manuscripts should be recorded:

1. Four published volumes of a Descriptive catalogue of the palm-leaf manuscripts of the IFP: V. Varadachari, ed. *Descriptive Catalogue of Manuscripts*, Vol. I, 1986; Vol.II, 1987; Vol. III, 1990; F. Grimal and T. Ganesan, eds. Vol. IV, 2002. Pondicherry, French Institute of Pondicherry. These volumes together cover 475 codices.
2. A hand-written draft of an unpublished 5th volume, covering another 100 manuscripts.
3. A card-index ordered by title of the 1144 transcripts.
4. A card-index of the palm-leaf manuscripts, covering about 4200 of the collection and furnishing further detail than the accession list (e.g. numbers of folios).

1999 marked a new departure: a pioneering database was designed, using the software Access, by the IFP to provide a searchable electronic catalogue describing the manuscripts and linked to a complete image record of the leaves of the manuscripts themselves (leaves scanned at 300dpi on a flatbed scanner). Into this database have already been entered the following data:

- All the data from the 4 published volumes of the catalogue, as well as from the unpublished 5th has been typed into the database.
- Complete cataloguing details of the 1144 transcripts (more informative than the hand-list and card-index).
- All the data from the card-index covering 4200 palm-leaf manuscripts.
- The cataloguing details of a further 450 manuscript bundles that featured in none of the catalogues.

A **pilot CD** was released, entitled *Parampara* ('Tradition'), presenting a portion of the pioneering database (66 records), in which the cataloguing details are displayed in a web-browser (XML) and hyperlinked to scans of the manuscripts leaves. (A copy of the CD *Parampara* is included in the dossier.) A descriptive

catalogue of the Vaisnava manuscripts of the EFEO was begun in 1999 and about 200 manuscripts have been covered. A smaller set of cataloguing details for a further 300 manuscripts have been noted and provisionally entered into an ISIS-based database using the same transcription scheme as has been used in the IFP.

3.2.4. Condition and storage of manuscripts

Although some of the texts transmitted are of very great antiquity, the South Indian manuscripts in which they are transmitted belong for the most part to the 19th century. Only a few manuscripts record their dates with sufficient detail to allow conversion to dates of the Christian era. Of those few, the earliest belong to the last quarter of the 18th century.

Palm-leaf manuscripts kept in South India can perish extremely rapidly. Unattended, they quickly become **the homes and feeding material of various types of insect larvae**. Once they have become perforated with holes by the larvae, they become so fragile that they are damaged each time they are handled. Typically they break into pieces along fault-lines, usually near the holes through which their binding strings pass, and the margins crumble away, taking with them fragments of writing. A specialist cleaner is employed who continuously takes out manuscripts, gently brushes them free of insects and their detritus, and applies lemon-grass oil (citronella). This repels insects and renders the leaves more supple. But such treatment only delays the decay for a while.

South Indian palm-leaves used for writing are of two types, a thin papery leaf (Talipot) that can, in optimal conditions (e.g. Nepal), be preserved for centuries, and a thicker, stiffer, usually smaller leaf (Palmyra) that is not found in the North and of which we are aware of no surviving examples older than 3 centuries. The greater part of the Pondicherry collection is of the latter type of leaf. The writing is incised in the leaves, rather than written upon them with a pen. A few hundred manuscripts are in exceptionally good condition, a few hundred are in exceptionally bad condition (the photos in the Reading Room illustrate both extremes) and the vast majority are somewhere in between.

As for the paper manuscripts of the collection, these are equally threatened. They have tended to be much more regularly consulted, being much easier to read, and the most used are now very fragile. In the IFP all the manuscripts have now been housed together in glass-fronted cupboards in a darkened room whose temperature is regulated by air-conditioning. The collection of the EFEO is in generally better condition, presumably because it was well-maintained when it was acquired. Air-conditioning for the EFEO manuscripts storage room has been budgeted for and will be installed at the beginning of 2005.

3.2.5. Referees

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4. JUSTIFICATION FOR INCLUSION

4.1. Authenticity

Yes. South Indian palm-leaf manuscripts of the 18th and 19th centuries might not be difficult to forge, but there would appear to be little motivation to do so. Manuscripts from the Indian subcontinent that find their way onto the international art-market tend to be brightly illustrated or in some other way visually appealing in a way that those in Pondicherry are not.

As for the authenticity of the texts transmitted, this cannot in most cases be established by independent means of proof but it has not been doubted hitherto. In certain rare cases it can be confirmed by the existence of manuscripts recording the same texts from the other extremity of the subcontinent. Two particularly dramatic examples are those of the Kirana-tantra and the Sarvajñanottara-tantra, each of which survives in a tenth-century palm-leaf manuscript from Nepal, as well as in numerous codices in Pondicherry.²

4.2. World significance, uniqueness and irreplaceability

The Sanskrit scriptures of the Saiva Siddhanta were widely spread over the whole of the Indian subcontinent ten centuries ago. Cambodian inscriptions attest to their having reached as far East as Cambodia in the same period and inspired there a literature of ritual manuals. Quotations from Sanskrit Saiddhantika literature are to be found in the Javanese Saiva ritual manuals of Indonesia. Traces of the influence of the Saiva Siddhanta can be found in the ritual traditions of all the Tantric and all the subsequent theistic traditions in India.

After a period of broad spread and therefore of wide-reaching influence, this religious tradition fell into abeyance everywhere but in Tamil-speaking southern India. Its texts continued to be cited in later periods for their technical prescriptions, for example about architecture and iconography, but after the 12th century there is no evidence that there were adherents of the Saiva Siddhanta remaining in any area outside the southeastern most corner of India. In other words, post-twelfth-century inscriptions alluding to the Siddhanta all come from the modern Indian states of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. Surviving post-twelfth-century ritual treatises, commentaries and other religious literature of the school all appear to have been written in the Tamil-speaking area.

A consequence of this shrinking of the Saiva Siddhanta is that almost all the surviving manuscripts that transmit its literature are from the far south. A few very early (pre-twelfth century) Nepalese and North Indian manuscripts have survived in Nepal, whose cool climate allows palm-leaves to survive undamaged for centuries, and a small number of dialectical texts of philosophical and theological interest have continued to be copied in Kashmir. Nothing remains in Central India, once the heartland of the movement.

Thus the bulk of the extant literature of the Saiva Siddhanta survives only in the Tamil-speaking South, and, although some of it is now in the large generalist collections of the South³ or in smaller monastic libraries, the greater part of that literature has been assiduously collected together and brought to Pondicherry by N.R. Bhatt.

Copying of these texts appears now to have ceased altogether. Even the Saiva priests, who keep alive the ritual traditions of the religion in South India, tend no longer to study the Sanskrit literature of the Saiva Siddhanta, but are taught instead a tiny syllabus of essential ritual acts and the mantras required for them.

The Pondicherry manuscripts appear to be the **last surviving witnesses to** many of the texts of a **major religious tradition**.

4.3. The criterion of subject and theme is satisfied.

The collection unites a body of material from which the still unwritten history of a major religious movement may be reconstructed that was spread across the Indian sub-continent and beyond in the 10th century and which has been one of the dominant religious traditions of southern India from the 7th century

² In each case, plausible reconstruction of the text requires the collation of the readings of both the Nepalese and Southern manuscripts

³ Eg. Government Oriental Manuscripts Library, Madras/Chennai, and Saraswathi Mahal Library, Tanjore/Thanjavur, Oriental Research Institute Library, Mysore

to the present day. There are other types of evidence that can be used to help to reconstruct the history of the religion (for instance inscriptions), but the literary sources transmitted in the Pondicherry manuscripts form the most informative and important body of evidence.

4.4. Issues of rarity, integrity, threat and management

4.4.1. Rarity

Many of the texts of this Saiva religion that are transmitted in the manuscripts of this collection have not been published and are not known to survive outside Pondicherry.

4.4.2. Integrity

Many of the manuscripts are extremely badly damaged. But we are fortunate in having several exemplars of some works, which often makes it possible to repair the gaps and errors in damaged sources by collating their readings with those of others.

4.4.3. Threat

The hot, humid climate of Pondicherry allows fungus to develop and encourages insect larvae to thrive, which gradually destroy the manuscripts. Handling of already insect-eaten leaves causes them to crumble.

4.4.4. Management

Regulating the temperature and humidity with air-conditioning and cleaning the manuscripts with lemon-grass oil reduces the damage inflicted by insects. But the already worm-eaten manuscripts continue to decay rapidly in spite of this treatment. At the end of the 1990s experiments were begun with scanning with a view to producing a **complete digitised image record** of the manuscripts. (See section 6 below.)

5. LEGAL INFORMATION

5.1. Owners of the documentary heritage

French Institute of Pondicherry,
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ifpdir@ifpindia.org

Pondicherry Centre of the EFEO,
Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient,
P.O. Box 151,
19, Dumas Street,
Pondicherry 605001.
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5.2. Custodians of the documentary heritage

Same as owners.

5.3. Legal status

(a) Category of ownership Public. The manuscripts belong to and are housed in French Government institutions.

(b) Accessibility The manuscripts are accessible for consultation during library opening hours (Monday to Friday, 8.30am to 5.30pm, except for the month of May) to readers who ask for them. Non-flash photography has long been permitted. Xeroxing and lending of manuscripts are not permitted.

(c) Copyright status None. The authors of the works transmitted are long deceased. The digital catalogue underway of the entire collection and the projected digital image record of the Saiva manuscripts of the collection would, however, be the copyright of the IFP and EFEO.

(d) **Responsible administration** The manuscripts are kept in locked storage and in relatively good conditions for preservation by the two institutions concerned. Cataloguing is well underway for the wider dissemination of information about the collections to scholars elsewhere.

6. MANAGEMENT PLAN

The IFP and EFEO have long been actively engaged with maintaining the literary heritage conserved in their manuscripts. The IFP employs a full-time conservator who brushes clean and oils the manuscripts. An employee of the EFEO works half-time to perform the same work. We have made no fresh acquisitions in recent years, and so no fumigation of the palm-leaves is considered necessary. 3 full-time employees of the IFP and one of the EFEO are engaged in cataloguing. It is proposed that two employees of the EFEO who were earlier cataloguing the Saiva collection should resume this work, having now received further training, on a half-time basis in 2005. The financial outlay over the last 50 years made by the institutions for the maintenance of the manuscripts is difficult to calculate (installation of air-conditioners, purchase and maintenance of computers, etc.) If we continue as now simply to maintain as well as possible the manuscripts without digitising them, then the annual running costs that we may anticipate from 2005 are as follows:

Overheads (running and maintenance of air-conditioning): \$ 1725

Salaries (cleaning costs): \$ 4875

Salaries (cataloguing: analysis, identification, data-entry) \$ 24375

Phased replacement of computer hardware (per year) \$ 2000

Stationery, oil, chemicals, brushes, etc. \$ 500

Air tickets for 2 experts from abroad per year \$ 2500

TOTAL Annual Management Costs \$ 35975

But since the palm-leaves are decaying, we wish to do more to protect them, to publicize their existence and encourage research about them. We are therefore planning a project the objective of which is to produce a complete digital image record of at least all the Saiva manuscripts of the collection and to display those images on the web, together with a **complete digital catalogue** (already well underway) of the entire collection.

7. CONSULTATION

This application is submitted on behalf of the French Institute of Pondicherry and the Pondicherry Centre of the Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient, who are the owners and the custodians of the heritage. Both Mr. Jean-Pierre Muller, Director of the French Institute of Pondicherry, and Mr. Franciscus Verellen, Director of the Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient (Paris), have discussed the possibility of registering the Pondicherry manuscript collection as *Memory of the World* heritage with Mr. Abdelaziz Abid.

PART B – SUBSIDIARY INFORMATION

8. ASSESSMENT OF RISK

The principal threat to the collection is that of decay through neglect and decay through handling. Neglected manuscripts may quickly be eaten away by insect larvae or rats. At the moment this threat is minimised by regular cleaning and treatment with lemon-grass oil and by storage in locked glass-fronted cupboards where the temperature and humidity are regulated by air-conditioning. But the decay continues at a noticeable pace (as can be determined from a comparison of some manuscripts with photographs of them taken ten years ago), particularly when manuscripts are handled that are already badly perforated with old wormholes. Although the collection as a whole is constantly being consulted, any one individual manuscript is unlikely to be handled several times in a year. Scholars who wish to work intensively with a given manuscript (for example for preparing a critical edition) typically take photographs of it, which means handling it only once. This is encouraged.

Registration of this documentary heritage with the Memory of the World is unlikely to imperil its security. The manuscript collection is already well known in the locality, particularly among Sanskritists, specialists of pre-modern Tamil and among the Saiva religious.

The French research institutions enjoy good relations with local Saiva monasteries, some of whose manuscripts the EFEO has recently been digitizing. Furthermore, the IFP was in 2003 designated a “**Manuscripts Resource Centre**” by the *National Manuscripts Mission*, a nationwide endeavour of the Indian Government to raise awareness about and so to save the national heritage of manuscripts. This meant that a grant of Indian Rupees 300 000 (approximately \$7,500) was accorded to the IFP, not for the conservation of its own manuscripts, but for helping to survey and list manuscripts in private collections in the area surrounding Pondicherry.

Some international publicity was attracted to the damage wrought upon a prestigious Indian manuscript library by a political mob in December 2003. The damage done to the Sanskrit manuscript collection of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (Pune, Maharashtra) was in fact minimal and the particular circumstances that produced this political gesture untypical. Damage by such freakish political disturbance is unlikely in provincial South India but cannot entirely be ruled out as a potential threat.

9. ASSESSMENT OF PRESERVATION

The point now reached with the cataloguing of the collection has been detailed above in 3.2.3. The condition and storage of the manuscripts have been detailed above in 3.2.4 and illustrated with some photographs.

In spite of what is being done by traditional methods (the application of lemon-grass oil) and by modern ones (air-conditioning), the palm-leaves are not an ideally stable material and they will inevitably continue to deteriorate. We therefore began to consider the option of ‘content migration’ (though without destroying the original supports) in the late 1990s and began experimenting with digitization using a flat-bed scanner. As detailed in the Project Description Form attached (*Ūaiva Siddhânta Manuscripts Publication Project*), we wish to continue in this direction: we would like to digitise as much as possible of the collection, but at least the Saiva manuscripts, using digital photography (rather than scanning), and we would like to publish a catalogue of the collection, integrated with the digitised images on the World Wide Web.