

## Manuscripts and Indian Knowledge Systems: The Past Contextualising the Future

### Abstract

*The paper seeks to examine the significance of India's ancient knowledge systems in contemporary life. India has a rich tradition of intellectual inquiry, and a textual heritage that goes back to several hundreds of years.*

*In an attempt to probe how India's knowledge systems may become the foundation for future research, the paper is set in the context of the work done by the National Mission for Manuscripts, India from 2003 to 2008. The paper also probes issues relating to the access, documentation of manuscripts and how sharing and dissemination of information can be facilitated through the appropriate use of the digital technology.*

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### The Context

The future is invented through a dialogue with the past engaged in the present. Memory is the reservoir from which any society or individual draws the resources to be able to shape that future. The obliteration of memory by time or historical events is a challenge for any society especially those societies that have witnessed the forced reshaping of their cultures through events like colonization. An act of *remembering* and a careful sifting of knowledge systems of the past is therefore a logical response in post-colonial situations. In the current context of knowledge production and dissemination consequent on globalization it also becomes a radical response to engage in a countervailing struggle for retaining and asserting cultural identities and local intellectual traditions.

### India's Knowledge Tradition

India was magnificently advanced in intellectual activity during the ancient and medieval times. The intellectual achievements of Indian culture lay scattered across several fields of study in ancient Indian texts ranging from the Vedas and the Upanishads to a whole range of scriptural, gnostic, scientific and artistic sources. In India, there is wide variety and multiplicity of thoughts, languages, life styles and scientific, artistic and philosophical perceptions. The rich classical and regional languages of India, which are repositories of much of the ancient wisdom, emerge from the large stock of the shared wealth of a collective folklore imagination. In ancient India, the development of the six traditional branches of knowledge (Vedanga-s), and gradually other scientific disciplines like arithmetic, algebra, astronomy, medicine, chemistry, biology, astrology, logic and grammar

are the result of painstaking, accurate observation of natural phenomena. A tradition like India that saw knowledge (*vidya*) as the only real wealth (*dhana*) can now legitimately take some pride in the fact that the world has come to recognize knowledge as the key resource for change—it has overtaken other factors of production like land, labour and capital as people talk today of a knowledge economy, or more appropriately, a knowledge society.

For centuries, the knowledge systems in India were passed down from generation to generation through schools called *gurukula-s* ("family of the guru") and transmitted entirely from mouth to ear in an unbroken oral tradition. Gradually, they came to be written down on different materials such as stones, copper plates, birch bark, palm leaves, parchments and paper. Even after the texts started to be written down, the oral teaching continued to be the means employed for the learning of the Vedas. The treasure of the wisdom containing the ancient knowledge systems has come down to us in the form of manuscripts. Composed in different Indian languages, these manuscripts are spread all over the country in different institutions, libraries, mutts, monasteries, temples and in several private collections spread across the country. In fact, India has possibly the oldest and the largest collection of manuscripts anywhere in the world. However, India has possibly lost a vast amount of this wealth.

### **The National Mission for Manuscripts**

The force of globalisation is forcing communities and governments across the world to adopt strategies for safeguarding endangered their cultural heritage. A national effort in the form of a Mission for Manuscripts is therefore a logical, radical, and urgent response to a very contemporary challenge of reclaiming inheritance of the knowledge contained in manuscripts, often in a bad state of preservation. This is the objective behind the setting up of the National Manuscripts Mission by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India.

The National Mission for Manuscripts launched in February 2003, to develop a holistic approach in protecting, and making accessible the significant elements of India's manuscript heritage. Some of the main objectives of the Mission are to survey, document, preserve and provide access to the existing collection of Indian manuscripts. The corpus of manuscripts in India has so far defied accurate estimate or cataloguing. There are several invaluable collections of manuscripts scattered across the country which are in private custody. The National Mission for Manuscripts is a challenging task. It opens a door to an engagement with the preservation of our knowledge and heritage. It is conceived in a Mission-mode to signal priority and urgency, facilitate inter-sectoral and collective action, and specify clear time frames with milestones. It provided opportunity for all-governments at Central and State levels, cultural and knowledge institutions in the government and private sector and all concerned citizens to come together to make it realize its objectives.

The Mission seeks not merely to locate, catalogue and preserve India's manuscripts, but also to spread awareness about the existence of this heritage, enhance access to manuscripts and encourage their use for educational purposes. Working with specially identified Manuscript Resource Centres (MRC-s) and Manuscript Conservation Centres (MCC-s) in States all over the country, the Mission has collected data on manuscripts located in a variety of places, from universities and libraries to temples, private collections, ancestral holdings and those belonging to religious institutions such as *mathas*, *madrasas*, *viharas*, temples and monasteries.

The Mission's key objectives are:

1. Survey and Locate: The Mission launches massive surveys around the country and abroad to locate manuscripts in the care of a variety of custodians.
2. Catalogue and Compile: Through extensive cataloging it creates a national electronic database of manuscripts.
3. Conserve and Preserve: By networking with the leading conservation agencies in the country, it conserves damaged or threatened manuscripts and sets standards for manuscript conservation.
4. Promote Access: Through ready availability of its database on the website, the Mission is improving access to information relating to repositories and individual manuscripts.
5. Promote Scholarship: By digitally documenting and preserving manuscripts, and with research and publication as well as training programmes on manuscriptology and palaeography, it seeks to promote their use to increase knowledge and improve learning.
6. Outreach: The Mission carries out a variety programmes to enlist the cooperation and assistance of all members of the public through lectures, seminars, workshops, bi-monthly newsletter, children's programmes to encourage participation at the widest level to ensure the future of manuscripts in India.

As an extensive programme, over the last five years it has involved more than 18,000 persons in survey through which more than 50,000 manuscript repositories were identified. It was a door-to-door survey across the different parts of India, combing the region for manuscript collections, as is perhaps the most extensive cultural mapping exercise that has happened in India. As a result, more than 2 million manuscripts have been catalogued in *Kritisampada*, the electronic database of the Mission, of which the first cache of one million manuscripts is available on the web at [www.namami.org](http://www.namami.org). It is an extensive programme that has so far linked with more than 500 institutions for work relating to documentation and conservation, conducted more than 200 training

workshops on conservation and manuscriptology, created a digital library comprising digital scanned versions of 300000 manuscripts, held more than forty academic lectures, six seminars, a major international exhibition at Frankfurt and conducted specifically targeted programmes for school children. Due to the efforts of the Mission, the corpus of the Rigveda manuscripts at the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Pune were inscribed in the Memory of the World Register in 2007.

### **Gaining Access—A Critical Issue in Documentation**

Manuscripts are scattered in India in state-sponsored repositories and archives, private, religious and educational sources as well as individual or family collections. Perhaps it is for the first time that a systematic search and documentation has happened in India of all the manuscript repositories in the privately collections. The experience in approaching these collections has been diverse. While many of them are welcome to the idea of being part of a national effort to establish a database, many have been reluctant to give information. Sometimes it would take several visits by the documenter to convince the owner to agree to offer information. Some people have expressed fears that since it is a government-sponsored initiative, once documented, the manuscripts would become public property that may be taken away at will by the government. As a result, all the publicity pamphlets insist that the Manuscripts Mission does not intend to take away manuscripts, but only document them. Other reasons are culture-bound, that a specialised knowledge from a particular community or faith, if shown publicly, would lose its value. Presently, there is no contract or memorandum of understanding exchanged between the parties, which set out the terms on which such access is negotiated.

To address this problem, the Mission seeks to develop a legally sound and ethically nuanced policy on promoting access to its manuscript database and library. Such a policy should disseminate the cultural knowledge gathered in the widest possible way while ensuring that the interests of holders of the manuscripts are not sacrificed and that nobody is allowed to make illegitimate gains out of the database. For the documentation and protection of the knowledge content of these valuable texts, digitization has emerged as the possible solution, and in India, there are several efforts at the national, regional levels to take up digitization of individual collections. However, issues of getting access and sharing of knowledge have not yet been resolved. If the manuscript is sought to be digitized then significant legal questions arise. The creation of a digital impression of the manuscript creates new legal rights relating to the digital impression. Moreover, the digital copy should ideally be authorised by the holder of the manuscript.

The work in documenting and preserving manuscripts must be situated in the context of several similar initiatives in the state and non-governmental sector. A good example is the Traditional Knowledge Digital Library (TKDL) in India which has been documenting traditional medicinal knowledge and preparing

elaborate electronic databases which translate Indian systems of Ayurveda, Unani and Siddha into the vocabulary of Western pharmacopoeia. The TKDL initiative is inspired by the need to prevent patenting of Indian medicinal knowledge in the developed world. Biodiversity documentation and conservation has developed into a significant field of activity in the state and non-governmental sectors. There have been several efforts at the international and national level to create new legal regimes to ensure that this knowledge is not expropriated in an unethical manner. All these initiatives are bound to develop a form of knowledge regulation: through the use of formal laws on intangible property, by extending these property rights through contract, or creating new sector specific laws to support these initiatives. In the future, for gaining access to important manuscripts, The National Mission for Manuscripts has to confront this complicated interface between the legal norms and the imperatives of preserving culture and promoting its widespread dissemination.