

Preservation of Sanskrit Buddhist Manuscripts In the Kathmandu Valley: Its Importance and Future

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Introduction: Background

We come to know through Buddhist history that enormous amount of Buddhist literature that was created in Sanskrit beginning right from the period starting from Buddha's Mahaparinirvana and continuing till the 11th century AD. Out of this vast literature only a small portion of it was translated into Tibetan between 7th and 11th century. Unfortunately, with the passage of time, the great treasure of Buddhist Sanskrit literature was lost or destroyed due to various historical conditions.

An exhaustive history of the Sanskrit Buddhist literature has long been needed. The reasons behind the scarcity of research in Sanskrit Buddhist literature are many. One of the major reasons is the disappearance of Buddhism from major parts of India and the unavailability of the original Sanskrit Buddhist works.

In 1824, Mr. Brian Hodgson, a British diplomat in Nepal, discovered a great number of Sanskrit Buddhist manuscripts in Nepal. The existence of these before his time was unknown, and his discovery entirely revolutionized the history of Buddhism, as it was known to Europeans in the early part of this century. Copies of these works, totaling 381 folio manuscripts have been distributed so as to render them accessible to European scholars.

Of these eighty-six manuscripts comprising 179 separate works, many were presented to Asiatic Society of Bengal: 85 to the Royal Asiatic Society of London; 30 to the Indian Office Library; 7 to the Bodleian Library, Oxford; 174 to the Societe Asiatique, and to French scholar Eugene Bernouf. The last two collections have since been deposited in the Bibliotheque National of France¹.

Prof. Jaya Deva Singh writes in his Introduction to Madhyamika Philosophy:

Books on Mahayana Buddhism were completely lost in India. Their translation existed in Chinese, Japanese and Tibetan. Mahayana literature was

¹ See R.,L.,Mitra's The Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal, Calcutta (reprint) 1971,p.xxxv-vi .

written mostly in Sanskrit and mixed Sanskrit. Scholars who have made a study of Buddhism hardly suspected that there were also books on Buddhism in Sanskrit.

In a similar manner Suniti Kumar Chatterji writes:

One great service the people of Nepal, particularly the highly civilized Newars of the Nepal Valley, was to preserve the manuscript of Mahayana Buddhist literature in Sanskrit. It was the contribution of Sri Lanka to have preserved for human kind the entire mass of the Pali literature of Theravada Buddhism. This went also to Burma, Cambodia, and Siam. It was similarly the great achievement of the people of Nepal to have preserved the equally valuable original Sanskrit texts of Mahayana Buddhism.

It is in Nepal that most of the Sanskrit Buddhist documents have been found. Concerning Nepalese Buddhist literature, as many as 20 reports have been published¹:

Most of the manuscripts originally preserved in Nepal have been carried out of the country by the pioneers of the modern Indology. An earliest illustrated Manuscript of Astasahasrika Prajnaparamita dated 1015 AD is now in the collection of the Cambridge University Library. This Manuscript offered new material to students of South Asian and Central Asian art history. It is difficult to know exactly when the tradition of illustrated manuscripts began. But from available documents it seems that copying and writing manuscripts began as early as the tenth century in Nepal, i.e. during Narendra Deva's reign (998 A.D.)². These include miniatures and painted book covers.

One peculiar feature of Newar Buddhism is that the Buddhist priest called *Vajracarya*, does not stay in the monastery or temple but with his family and performs the rites dressed in everyday clothes. Only those who belong to the *Vajracarya* family can become a priest, but they must have already gone through a form of initiation called *Acarya abhiseka* and been married.

Another peculiarity of Newar Buddhism is its ritual and its sacred literature, which are written in Sanskrit language, because of which we can call Newar Buddhism "Sanskrit Buddhism." We have discussed about the status of Newar Buddhism elsewhere³.

² See *Le Nepal* by Prof. sylvain Levi. It is stated that during Narendra Deva's deathbed he seemed to have handed over two important things to his daughters. One is his own crown and another was the Manuscript of Prajnaparamita scripture.

³ See the Proceedings of 1999 EBTI, ECAI, SEER, & PNC Joint meeting, Jan 18 -21, 1999, p.365-372.

With the collapse of Indian Buddhism, some of the Buddhists escaped from suppression in India and fled to Nepal. The Newars of Kathmandu Valley accepted them and their religious and cultural inheritance. The two groups intermarried and their religions and cultures merged to become Newar Buddhism. This happened from 9 century to 13 century A.D. They have continued to copy Sanskrit manuscripts repeatedly up to the present day. All Buddhists owe a debt to the Newars, the through whose efforts we can study these Sanskrit manuscripts today.

Scripts used in Nepalese Manuscripts

Four types of script were generally used to write the Manuscripts, they are *Pracalita*, *Newa Ranjana*, *Bhujimole* and *Devanagari* script. Among these, Newari script was used for most of the manuscripts. Ranjana is used for books used for worship such as *Prajnaparamita* and so forth. They were often written on Indigo-paper in gold or silver.. The *Bhujimole* script was used in ancient times (11th to 17th c.) and was written mostly on palm leaves. *Devanagari* script is used in modern times both by Hindus and Buddhist alike.

(See Charts of Evolution of Scripts)

Types of Nepalese Manuscripts

1. Palm-leaf Manuscript⁴:

The *Sritala* Palm leaves are used for writing and painting, because of their thin and flexible qualities. From early 11th to 17th centuries manuscripts were written on palm leaves called *Tadapatra*. 1084 number of rolled palm leaf manuscripts are held by the National Archives of Nepal alone. These written during the 14th century, one of the oldest among these dates from 1334 CE, it is excellent material for writing and remains preserved in rather excellent condition. It is safe from worms and also can be scrolled into a small bundle. Most of them are written in Bhujimole script. Most of the historical documents of early medieval period were found in these palm leaves. Some of the RPLM are also in the custody of British Library.

Rolled palm leaf manuscripts are placed in small pigeonhole boxes. These are made of straw board and bucrum. These boxes are stored inside a steel cabinet rack to protect from dust, dirt and thieves.

Problems and causes of deterioration:

Observation data of RPLM in the National Archives show the 37.8% are

⁴ See the article "Conservation of Rolled Palm leaf Manuscript(RPLM)"by Mr.Griha MAn Singh in "Abhilekh" published by The Nepal Archive 1996.

deteriorated by following factors, whereas rest of them are in good condition.

Insects:	only insect holes are seen on RPLM
Fungi:	Grey and white color powders are distinctly visible on reverse side of the tails.
Dried and inflexibility:	Due to low temperatures and low relative humidity, the majority of RPLMs are dried and inflexible.
Difficulties in opening:	Due to their rolled condition, researchers and photographers have faced problems in this task.
Broken pieces:	Some of the broken pieces are joined together using sellow tape and masking tape.

Protective measures:

Experiments have demonstrated that citronella oil and polypropylene glycol relax slowly. Some force is required to open them, whereas water-based items open fully and do not need any force to open them. Cracked and weaken RPLMs are strengthened with the help of Archibond. Experiments demonstrate excellent results.

From the early 11th to 17th centuries, manuscripts were written on palm leaves called *Tadapatra*. This too is excellent material for writing and preserves well. It is safe from worms and also can be scrolled into a small bundle. Most of the historical documents of early medieval period were found in this type of palm leaf.

Haritalika Paper Manuscript⁵:

Haritalika is yellow in color, has a crystalline solid structure, is odorless, water insoluble and impervious to inorganic salt. *Haritalika* is used in hand-made paper (Nepali paper) with some binding agents or media to make it more durable and insect resistance. Nepali hand-made papers are made from the bark of *Lokta* plant. It contains sheets of cellulose compound. It is creamy in color and contains some small pieces of solid dark brown raw materials due to impurity of pulp. It is supposed to be made from the bark of the *Lokta* plant. Microscopic study of paper clearly indicate that it contain long fibers, arranged irregularly, having a rough surface. Due to this, it offers a premium coating of *Haritalika* paste. The majority of hand-made papers are physically and chemically of good quality, high strength, and a strong ph factor of 7-9. These have a high value of tensile strength, folding endurance, and bursting strength.

Manufacture of *Haritalika* paper

Starch paste is prepared by using rice flour, water, formaldehyde (1:5:0.1) in a

⁵ See the article "*Haritalika* coated envelop is a means of document preservation" by Mr.Griha Man Singh in " Abhilekha published The Nepal Archive 1994.

thick aluminum vessel. Nepali hand-made paper is flattened on a smooth board using a small quantity of water. Then a coating of the prepared paste described above is applied uniformly using long brushes very attentively. Another sheet of Nepali hand-made paper is placed and press over it. In this way the number of hand made papers is pasted down according to the required thickness of the paper. In freshly prepared paper, the paste is added and finely grounded Haritalika powder (2:1) mixed and stirred thoroughly in a porcelain mortar with a pestle.

The paste is coated upon a freshly prepared layer of Nepali hand-made paper with the help of a long brush and dried at room temperature. The dried paper is peeled off and trimmed as per the required manuscript size.

Use of *Haritalika* paper

Haritalika coated paper is used for writing valuable documents and books to protect it from biological agents that might lead to its deterioration.

It seems that this type paper is convenient for handling. That's why around 17th century most of the Nepalese manuscripts were written on handmade paper called "Nepali paper" produced in the Himalayan foothills around the 16-17th centuries. Since the manuscript is written on both sides, a single layer of Nepali paper is too thin to write on and not fit for writing manuscripts. It was made thick by pasting 3-5 layers of paper together. This thick, pasted paper is cut into a long rectangular shape. Nepali paper is usually given a layer of yellow coating of *Hartala* (As₂S₃) on one side or on both sides of the leaves for protection from worms.

***Thyasaphu* Paper Manuscript**

The long rectangular folding books are mainly employed for rituals, *Dharani* recitation and *Stotra gita* or hymns.

Scroll Manuscript:

It is used most for writing VamSelvalts or chronicles or genealogical records of royal family.

Bound Book Manuscript:

The bound book is quite new and was most probably copied from Western examples.

Preservation Measures:

1. Buddhist Library, Nagoya: A report

In the early seventies Mr. Hidenobu Takaoka, a Japanese Buddhist priest, visited the Kathmandu Valley and investigated thoroughly the status of Nepalese Buddhist culture. Lamenting the situation of the multitude of scattered manuscripts and the condition of Buddhism in Nepal, he undertook to preserve the Nepali Manuscript heritage by taking microfilms of Sanskrit and Newar Manuscripts. It took him a decade of effort to microfilm the Buddhist Manuscripts exclusively from private collections rather than certain public archives. Due to fear of theft or trafficking he kept hidden the names of the collectors and simply mentioned as A, KA, KH, GA, GH, CH, and DH. It was a judicious decision. In his catalogue he had been able to microfilm 1521 titles of Buddhist Manuscripts. There are yet number of private collectors the manuscripts that were not microfilmed yet. This was not possible because of conservative behavior from the part of the owner or for some unknown reasons.

In 1981, he published "*A Microfilm Catalogue of The Buddhist Manuscript in Nepal*" from Buddhist Library, Japan. In his collection of Manuscripts, the subject matter consists of Mahayana Sutras, Jataka-avadana, Sastras, Tantra, Purana literature, Strotra, Caryagita, Pujavidhi, Dharani-mantra, tantra commentaries and so forth.

2.The Asa Archives: A report on manuscript preservation⁶

The Asa Archives is a public library of Nepalese Manuscripts named after the late Mr. Asha Man Singha Kansakar, father of the late Mr. Prem Bahadur Kansakar (1917-1991). Mr. Kansakar was prominent activist, social worker, educationist and Newar writer who had founded several social, cultural, literary and educational institutions. The nucleus of this was donated by Prem Bahadur Kansakar to Cvasa Pasa, a premier literary association of Newar writers on august 16,1985. To this personal collection were later added the donations of valuable manuscripts and palm leaf documents by several well-wishers and friends. Among them mention should be made of Mr. Ian Alshop, an American student of Kansakar, Dharma Ratna Vajracarya, Guru Sekhar Rajopadhyaya, Rev.Hidenobu Takaoka, Gyan Ratna and Dr. Kamal Prakash Malla. Similarly, more than a dozen other donors have helped this archive with gifts from their personal collections of manuscripts.

The Archives were inaugurated by Prof. Yujiro Hayashi, the Executive Director of the Toyota Foundation, Japan on December 7,1987. It was made accessible to the public since that time. The Toyota Foundation had made a generous grant to purchase, innovate and furnish the house where it is now located. The Foundation has also supported the documentation of the manuscripts and initial operation of the archives

⁶ Based on personal communication with the Librarian Mr. Raja Shakya.

with a fund deposited as seed money and endowment.

The Collections

In this archive there are several valuable collections of palm leaf, loose-leaf *pothi* and folded manuscripts. There are more than 6,700 manuscripts and about 1100 palm leaf land grant documents. These manuscripts belong to various sects and genres written in different languages and scripts. Largest among these are the ritual texts, medical texts, manuals of magic and necromancy, astrology/astronomy, Vedic and *Purānic* texts, and Tantric texts of the *Saiva*, *Bauddha*, and *Sakta* sects. A large number also come from the Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism. There are technical and symbolical drawings and architectural designs of religious and secular structures, painted covers, and book illustrations of great beauty and delicacy. Perhaps the most important component of the archives is the literary texts, hymns, songs, plays, popular narratives, didactic tales and Buddhist *avadanas* in the Newar language. One can find specimens of beautiful calligraphy in the collection written in plain black ink, silver and golden letters.

The Archives has also a collection of nearly all Nepal *bhasa* books in print, journals, magazines and newspapers in Nepal *bhasa*. There is also a small Nepal collection, consisting of books on Nepal in English and other languages which will be of great interest for study and research on the culture and heritage of the Nepal valley.

Catalogues

The archive is preparing a systematic and descriptive catalogue of all its collections. Presently, several types of temporary catalogues are available. There is a handwritten catalogue in the form of a ledger of the collection, with running numbers, classification by religion, language or genre with a workable amount of information. This is also available in the form of a card catalogue. There are at present two printed catalogues available. One was prepared by Mr. Charles M. Novak, *A Catalogue of the Selected Buddhist Manuscripts in the Asa Archives*, (1986). The other catalogue is the *Descriptive Catalogue of Selected Manuscripts in the Asa Archives* prepared by Dr. Janak Lal Vaidya and Prem Bahadur Kansakar (Kathmandu, Cvasa pasa 1991). This is a descriptive catalogue of the 547 most important manuscripts in the collection. There is also a descriptive monograph on the Asa Archives (1996), containing important speeches, and articles all edited by the librarian Mr.Raja Shakya. A short title catalogue of 5382- catalogued manuscripts in the collection is in press and will be out in February this year.

Digitalization of the Collection

In collaboration with the Buddhist Library of Japan, Nagoya, the ABI Archives is completing the digitalization of its entire collection of manuscripts. When the project is completed at the end of this month, all the manuscripts including their paintings and illuminations will be available on CDROM. [Demonstration of CDROM on the collection of Manuscripts]

3.Nepal Research Center

Nepal German Manuscript Preservation Project: A report⁷

A principal task of the Nepal Research Center is to house and support the Nepal-German Manuscript Preservation Project (NGMPP). The NGMPP was established in 1970 by an agreement between His Majesty's Government of Nepal and German Oriental Society. It is a joint venture between the Department of Archaeology, the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Culture (up to 1995 it was under the Ministry of Education and Culture), His Majesty's Government and the German Oriental Society. It is designed to preserve on microfilm Nepal's extraordinary wealth of manuscripts and historical documents, thereby contributing considerably to the preservation of the country's cultural heritage and identity, as well as providing invaluable opportunities to explore virtually all aspects of its manifold literary, religious and historical traditions.

All equipments and materials necessary for the execution of the NGMPP are provided by the German Oriental Society with financial assistance from the German Research Council. In consultation with its Nepali counterpart, the society set up a photographic section in the National Archives. Run by experts and technicians provided by His Majesty's Government, it microfilmed the collections of the Nepal Archives, and develops and copies all films of the project, including those produced by a separate microfilming unit located at the Nepal Research Center. According to the agreement, one positive copy of each film, together with the original negative, remains in the National Archives, while a second positive copy is handed over to German Oriental Society for preservation in the Staatsbibliothek Berlin PreuBischer Kulturebesitz, the former Prussian State Library.

During its first phase, from 1970 to 1975, the activities of NGMPP were limited to the collections of the National Archives. The subsequent extension of the agreement provided for the inclusion of all public libraries and private manuscript collections within the Bagmati Zone. To date, around 155,000 manuscripts with nearly five million folios have been microfilmed in the whole of Nepal.

⁷ Based on Nepal Research Center, an updated report on its activities (1960-1997)

With the second extension of the agreement, the restriction to the Bagmati zone was lifted. From 1982 onwards, the NGMPP undertook various exploratory tours opened temporary microfilming stations in other parts of the Kingdom. Up to February 1987, the Sanskrit section alone microfilmed 2,267 manuscripts with 74,487 folios outside the Kathmandu valley, namely in Kaskikot (1982), Gorkha (1983), Janakpur (1984/85) and Rajbiraj (1986/87). It should be pointed out that, through these activities of the NGMPP, many texts have become available for the first time outside what may have been a very limited area of dissemination.

This wealth of manuscripts is not only distinguished by its exceptional range of diversity - nearly all sub-fields of Hindu and Buddhist Sanskrit literature are represented - but frequently also by the rarity and greater antiquity of individual pieces. In many cases, the microfilmed manuscripts represent the oldest available sources for a given text, and this holds true not just for the Buddhist Sanskrit texts, but also for many Vedic, Brahmanic and Hindu works which are extant elsewhere, if at all, only in later copies.

4. The Nepal Archives: A Report on Preservation of Sanskrit Buddhist Manuscripts

Recently, The Nepal Archives has published a catalogue of the entire Sanskrit Buddhist Manuscripts in the collection with a view to facilitate scholars and researchers. It also includes a catalogue of microfilm reels prepared by Nepal German Manuscript Preservation Project acquired through its missiwork in the different districts of Nepal. This does not mean that the catalogue was the first of its kind. It has published several catalogues previously. One special feature of this catalogue is that it exclusively addresses Buddhist manuscripts along with additional manuscripts microfilmed in Nepal German Manuscript Preservation Project.

The number of Buddhist manuscripts in the possession of the Nepal Archives totals 889 plus the 940 acquired in different mission by the NGMPP thus the grand total of 1829 manuscripts.

Another catalogue, *A catalogue of The Buddhist Tantric Manuscripts in the National Archives of Nepal and Kesar Library*, deals specifically with this excellent collection of Tantric Buddhist manuscripts (See bibliography). This most valuable catalogue was compiled by Prof. Mitutoshi Moriguchi from Taisho University.

It would be befitting to give the classification of Buddhist manuscripts with regard to its subjects:

Buddhist Mahayana Sutras

Sastras:

Avadana

Karmakanda

Mahatmya and Purana

Jataka

Katha or stories

Tantra

Dharani

Stotra

Caryagita (music)

Paintings

5.Nagarjuna Institute: A Report on Buddhist Dharani Input Project (BDIP).

Since the inception of Buddhist *Dhavani* Input Project in 1999 Jan., Nagarjuna Inc. has input titles from 100 *stotras* and 80 *Dharanis*. Our aim is to input the entire collection of *Dharanis* (more than 600 titles) from the collection of Nagarjuna Inc., The Asa Archives, and The Nepal Archives. We are informed that by the end of February, The Asa Archive is giving its service to the researchers the Manuscript on Dharanis and *Stotras* to produce a CDROM version.

The Nepal Archive has already put their entire collection of Buddhist manuscripts in Microfilm, so it is a matter of purchasing the microfilms. Since resources are desperately lacking wherewith to purchase the microfilm copies, the completion of the input project has been delayed. Should funds become available, it is certain that we could complete this first phase of our input project at the end of this year.

Conclusion:

The importance of Sanskrit Buddhist Manuscripts and their future

The importance of inputting these Sanskrit Buddhist texts into a digital format cannot be over-emphasized, for it was from these valuable Sanskrit originals that entire Mahayana and Vajrayana *corpi* were translated into the Chinese and Tibetan languages, and derivatively, into Korean, Japanese and Mongolian. With the Sanskrit originals in our possession, the translated versions are of secondary importance. The corpus of Sanskrit Buddhist literature found in Nepal is remarkably greater in number than the pali literature available today. It is imperative that these Sanskrit originals should be preserved in digital format so that they are accessible to the many varieties of

researchers.

The purpose of my presentation is to appeal to you as representatives of the scholarly world to facilitate the compilation of the Sanskrit Buddhist *Tripitaka* in whatever manner possible for you. A Sanskrit Buddhist *Tripitaka* should be compiled in a digital format (CDROM) including all the aforementioned texts. Were UC Berkeley or other foundations interested in funding this project, our hope of creating a Sanskrit Buddhist *Tripitaka* can be realized.

Thank you very much.

ⁱ List of Catalogues and reports:

1. Sanskrit Buddhist literature of Nepal
by Rajendra Lal Mitra, Calcutta 1882
2. Catalogue of the Buddhist Sanskrit Manuscripts in the University Library,
Cambridge
by Cecil Bendall, Cambridge 1883
3. Catalogue of Sanskrit Manuscripts in the British Museum,
by Cecil Bendall, London,1902
4. A Catalogue of Palm-leaf and selected paper Mss, belonging to the Durbar
Library, Nepal
by Hari Prasad Shastri, Calcutta Vol.I,1905
5. do, Vol II, 1905
6. Buddhist Manuscripts of the Bir Library,
by the Sanskrit Seminar of Taisho University, Memoirs of Taisho University,
No.40, 1955
7. *Buddhist Manuscript Texts of Kathmandu*,
Gajin Nagao, 1963, (Japanese).
8. *Catalogue of the Buddhist Sanskrit Manuscripts in the Library of Tokai
University*
by Yutaka Iwamoto,
Proceedings of the Faculty of Letters, Vol.III, Tokai University, Tokyo 1960.
- 9 *Samksiptasucipatram*
by Buddhi Sagara Sarma
Nepal, Nepal Vira Pustakalapa, Samvat 2020(A.D.1963)
10. *Sucipatram-part I*
by Srinarayana Prasad Sharma, Nepal 1964
11. *Brhatsucipatram part I*

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- by Buddhisagara Sharma
Nepal, Virpustakalaya, 1964
12. *Brhatsucipatram part II*
by Buddhisagara Sharma
Nepal, 1966
13. *Brhatsucipatram part III*
by Buddhisagara Sharma
Nepal, 1966
14. *Brhatsucipatram part IV*
by Pandit Deviprasad,
Nepal Rastriyapustakalaya, 1967
15. *A Catalogue of the Sanskrit Manuscripts in the Tokyo University Library,*
Seiren
Matsunami, Suzuki Research Institute, Tokyo 1965
16. *Buddhist Sanskrit Manuscripts. A title list of the Microfilm Collection of the*
Institute for Advanced Studies of World Religions. 1975
17. *A Micro-film Catalogue of the Buddhist Manuscripts in Nepal*
Buddhist Library by H.Takaoka, Nagoya 1981
18. *A succinct Catalogue of the Sanskrit Manuscript in the Possession of the*
Faculty of letters, Kyoto University,
Compiled by Kiyotaka Goshima and Keiya Noguchi, Kyoto 1983
19. *Catalogue of Selected Buddhist Manuscripts in Asaphukuthi 1986*
20. Descriptive Catalogue of Selected Manuscripts in the Asa Archives prepared
by Dr. Janak Lal Vaidya and Prem Bahadur Kansakar Kathmandu, Cvaspasa
1991
21. A Catalogue of the Buddhist Tantric Manuscripts in the National Archives of
Nepal and Keshar Library
by Mitutoshi Moriguchi
Sankibou Busshorin, Tokyo 1989