

Traveling manuscripts: an attempt to map contamination in the *Mahābhārata* textual tradition

It is well known that the *Mahābhārata* has a long and complicated history of transmission. One of the most cumbersome issues is contamination, namely the fact that a large number of manuscripts contain readings from more than one exemplar.

Contamination was greatly promoted by the practice of revising manuscripts against each other. As confirmed by the multiple annotations found in the majority of extant manuscripts and by instances of marginal notes being absorbed into the text, it is safe to affirm that this practice of comparison was quite common and widespread across the subcontinent.

In spite of the relevance that this practice may have had we have not yet asked the question: what sort of cultural mechanisms could have kept this process of comparison thriving for centuries? What makes this question particularly interesting is that it suggests that manuscripts may have had a mobility that we have failed to incorporate into our notion of text evolution. Of course it has never been considered too strange that manuscripts may have travelled from one place to another. Nevertheless, to acknowledge that they may have followed constant patterns of circulation for many centuries, where they may have been systematically revised against copies of other provinces, is a different story altogether.

One simple fact we can presume is that if manuscripts travelled they certainly travelled with people. A second fact is that if someone was to undertake a trip, no matter the purpose, he would probably do it through the more or less established paths rather than going through the wilderness. Therefore, it could be that the routes that people used to move around the Indian subcontinent may have also served to disseminate variant readings.

Indeed, the phylogenetic analysis of 1000 lines of the *Dyūtaparvan* suggests that contamination did not spread out evenly throughout the *Mahābhārata* tradition. Certain families of manuscripts, located in specific geographical areas, appear to have had more mobility and therefore more opportunities to propagate their readings and to gather some others.

Thus, this paper aims to explore the seeming correlation between the distribution pattern of contamination in *Mahābhārata* manuscripts and the two main routes of communication between North and South of the Indian subcontinent.