

FUTURE OF THE PAST: MANUSCRIPTOLOGY IN UNIVERSITY CURRICULUM IN INDIA

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There has always been a contestation of the past, its representation and communication in an effort to shape the future. The past or the awareness of where one comes from—loosely termed heritage— is therefore an important constituent of making people critically conscious. India has perhaps one of the richest knowledge traditions in the world. India's rich resource of knowledge lay scattered across several fields of study in ancient Indian texts available to us in different languages and scripts in the form of manuscripts.

The pursuit of manuscriptology seeks to engage with intellectual heritage as not something that is frozen in time but as something that is open to constant re-interpretation. Apart from the knowledge on different scripts and languages, manuscriptology also helps to impart skills in critically editing, translating and interpreting manuscripts in a range of disciplines. In India, in recent times, the education system has generally neglected Manuscriptology and Paleography in favour of other subjects with more job potential. And yet there are thousands of manuscripts discovered that need transcription, translation, publication and dissemination.

India being a historically multi-lingual society with manuscripts found in several dozen languages and scripts, is today faced with an alarming lack of scholars and capacity in the area of deciphering scripts and languages. There are a lot of unknown and unpublished manuscripts, which contain much knowledge that needs to be brought out and made public. Scholars with the requisite training are required for this task. At present, there is a shortage of young scholars with training in wide range languages and scripts. The vital link between scholars with these skills and the younger generation of researchers is missing.

Widespread education through manuscriptology courses introduced through a formal system of education offered through the university curriculum at different levels can become a contribution to bringing in new professionalism in the area, helping students from different disciplines to engage with manuscripts. This would also bridge the gap between what is perceived as "traditional" and "modern" scholarship in areas like medicine, physical and social sciences as well as humanities in India.

The paper discusses the possibilities for a new pedagogy based on manuscriptology in universities in India, and would draw on the experiences of the author as head of the National Mission for Manuscripts for over four years, and her present stint as National Fellow in the National University of Educational Planning and Administration, New Delhi.

Sudha Gopalakrishnan completed her Masters in English Language and Literature and did her PhD in the area of Comparative Drama. She has worked with the Sahitya Akademi and Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, and with the National Mission for Manuscripts as its founder Mission Director (2003 – 2007). She represented India in UNESCO for developing the Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage. She has coordinated the nomination of three expressions of heritage from India as UNESCO “Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity”, as well as that of the Rigveda Manuscripts from the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute as “Memory of the World”. She has several publications to her credit, including books, translations, edited volumes and research papers. She is a trained dancer of Kathakali and is conversant with Sanskrit, Malayalam languages apart from English and Hindi.

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