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Thematic panel: Manuscripts: fieldwork, conservation, digitization (organized by Saraju Rath and
Kenneth G. Zysk)

– Abstract –

*From palmleaves to a multimedia databank –
a note on the ‘Bhāsa-project’*

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The ‘Bhāsa-Project’ was initiated in the early 1990’s, when Prof. Dr. Heidrun Brückner (now Würzburg University, then University of Tübingen) started to document Kūṭiyāṭṭam-performances of the plays ascribed to Bhāsa and to examine palmleaf-manuscripts containing the text of the ‘Bhāsa-Plays’ kept at various libraries and in private collections. With the continued support of the DFG (German Research Foundation) and the close cooperation with Indian colleagues a campaign to locate and photograph handwritings on palmleaf and to document Kūṭiyāṭṭam performances was conducted in the years thereafter. Some of Brückner’s students and colleagues took an interest in the plays, the texts, manuscripts and the performance tradition of Kūṭiyāṭṭam. They prepared new critical editions and translations, worked on the Prakrits used, on the performative complex called ‘Kūṭiyāṭṭam’ and on the problems of digitization. Since the late 1990’s, a databank has been built up and is now freely accessible to a larger public on the Internet at <<http://www.indologie.uni-wuerzburg.de/bhasa/rahmen.html>>. At present, the databank contains the texts of all thirteen plays ascribed to Bhāsa as well as the dramas Abhijñānaśākuntala of Kālidāsa and Mudrārākṣasa of Viśākhadatta. It further provides comprehensive indices of all Sanskrit and Prakrit words. Exemplary scans of manuscripts are linked to some of the texts. Furthermore, visual material was added and linked. To explain the basic performance techniques of Kūṭiyāṭṭam, a description with pictures and a subtitled videoclip was prepared. Today the database contains an almost complete digitized collection of all manuscripts of the plays ascribed to Bhāsa. For the first time it tries to connect dramatic texts of Kerala with their performing tradition, Kūṭiyāṭṭam, by using the potentials of modern techniques, such as video-clips. Detailed lists of the collections (manuscripts, video-recordings) as well as an annotated bibliography concerning the ‘Bhāsa-problem’ are currently being prepared for publication. In my paper I will present the work of the project-group, the difficulties it had to face and the solutions found while collecting, photographing, digitizing and analysing the manuscripts. According to the panel the keywords of the speech are fieldwork, conservation and digitization.

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