

Nandināgarī manuscripts : distinctive features, geographical and chronological range

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Manuscripts in Nāgarī, Nandināgarī, and Devanāgarī, which were prevalent in the North, South and Central part of the Indian subcontinent respectively, have been intensively used and studied in modern indological studies of sanskrit texts for at least two centuries. It may therefore come as a surprise that till now the distinctive features of these scripts have hardly been analyzed, and that their mutual relations and development from early stages in the second half of the first millennium till their pre-modern and modern forms have not yet been systematically and comprehensively studied. Such a study is very promising in several respects, especially for Indian manuscriptology. It can be expected that such a study, if conducted with sufficient thoroughness, will enable us, for instance, to assign a relative chronological place to a manuscript on the basis of the calligraphic style of the script.

In a contribution in the new handbook on The Indo-Aryan languages (Cardona and Jain, 2007), Richard Salomon made the following observation:

“The field of Indian palaeography has been heavily dominated by studies with historical and antiquarian inclinations, so that in general the earlier the period, the better the documentation in scholarly literature. Indeed, the palaeographical development of the modern scripts on the basis of manuscript sources is still virtually an untouched field” (Salomon 2007: 75) What Salomon says here on the development of the modern scripts applies equally to the scripts known as Nāgarī, Nandināgarī, and Devanāgarī used to write sanskrit texts. While manuscripts in the first millennium of the Common Era have rarely survived to the present day due to reasons such as the climatic conditions of India, the amount of manuscripts of the second millennium is simply staggering; however, the palaeographic study of their major scripts has hardly begun. Studies of Indian scripts focus mainly on inscriptions.

From statements in various early and recent secondary literature which I will briefly discuss in my paper one could infer that Nandināgarī, Nāgarī and Devanāgarī are very close and show only minor distinctions. From a study of the available evidence in manuscripts, however, it is clear that the scripts are indeed related as sister scripts, but that there are significant and systematic differences which justify us in considering them as different scripts. In the case of Nandināgarī the separate status is very clear but because of neglect and misleading statements in secondary literature it is frequently noted that scholars who try to read the script without proper preparation fail and have to give up. With the help of slides of relevant manuscripts I will demonstrate the major distinctive features of Nandināgarī, the links of its letters and numerals with neighbouring scripts, and its varying geographical range over a period of around 1200 years, from the seventh till the nineteenth century. The presentation (power point) will contain area maps, comparative and chronological charts, and images of manuscripts.
