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The Penniman-Gribbel Collection of Sanskrit Manuscripts

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The University of Pennsylvania Library possesses a collection of almost 3,300 Indic manuscripts, the largest such collection in the Western hemisphere. While the vast majority of these manuscripts are from India, there are also a number of manuscripts from Burma, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Tibet.

Some of the manuscripts had been acquired in chance fashion by the Library and the University Museum before 1930, but in that year, at the request of Professor W. Norman Brown (1892-1975), Provost Josiah Penniman provided a sum of money to purchase Indic manuscripts. Shortly thereafter he obtained a donation from the late Mr. John Gribbel. Substantial contributions from Dr. Charles W. Burr, the Faculty Research Fund, and the Cotton Fund soon followed. The bulk of the manuscripts are the result of purchases made using these funds in India, between 1930 and 1935, under the direction of Professor W. Norman Brown. How this collection of manuscripts came to Penn is a story worth recounting.

Since the collection consists primarily of Sanskrit manuscripts, we need first to consider the beginning of Sanskrit Studies at Penn during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Sanskrit is an Indo-European language, cognate especially to Ancient Greek and Latin. Moreover, Sanskrit remains to India what Latin was to the West: the language of educated discourse and the critical link among the diverse linguistic and regional communities of the subcontinent. One cannot study the cultural heritage of South Asia without recourse to Sanskrit.


Opposite page: Illustration depicting the marriage of Nāgavantī and Nāgajī.
It was primarily for the first reason that Sanskrit began to be taught at Penn in the early 1880s. Prof. Morton W. Easton, Professor of Comparative Philology, taught the Sanskrit courses. Easton was Professor of Philology from 1883-1892, Prof. of English and Comparative Philology from 1892-1912 and emeritus from 1912-1917. He had studied Sanskrit at Yale under W.D. Whitney (1827-1894). Upon completing his dissertation on the evolution of language, Easton was awarded the first American doctorate in Sanskrit in 1872. (Penn was one of the first American academic institutions to offer courses in Sanskrit; in fact, during the 1880s Penn offered a major and a minor in Sanskrit.) Easton retired in 1912 and was replaced the following year by Franklin Edgerton. After Edgerton left for Yale in 1926, W. Norman Brown came to Penn as his replacement.

Brown’s interest in manuscripts was first piqued one December morning in 1922, while he was staying at Benares. An Indian gentleman appeared at his door, unwrapped a cloth and showed Brown a lavishly illustrated manuscript of a Jain text. It was the first illustrated manuscript Brown had seen, and he purchased it on the spot. Bequeathed to Penn at Brown’s death, the Kālakārtyakathā, is a fine example of the Western Indian school of illustration.³

Early in his career at Penn, Brown cultivated a relationship with Provost Penniman, from whom he soon began to solicit funds for a major Sanskrit manuscript acquisitions project. In a letter to Provost Penniman dated December 5, 1927, Brown outlined a proposal for acquiring manuscripts in “Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit, and other languages of India that would easily surpass any other collection existing in the United States, or even all such collections combined.”⁴ He noted that for a very modest sum of money, Penn could easily acquire a collection of manuscripts

³ Much of the information on Dr. Brown and Pandit Khiste was obtained from the University of Pennsylvania Archives and Records Center.

⁴ The Jains constitute an important religious group in India. Their founder Mahavira slightly antedates Gautama Buddha. They are particularly well known for their adherence to the doctrine of non-violence.
such as would make it immediately the largest in the country. To underscore his point, he drew attention to the Prakrit Kālakācāryakathā manuscript, which he had purchased in Benares for a mere $7. He argued that the value of the collection would be twofold: It would be a teaching asset for advanced study because it would attract more students to its program; and the manuscripts would provide a much needed resource for scholars seeking to edit unpublished texts or critically unedited texts. He then suggested a sum of $5,000 be allocated for this purpose.

Penniman liked the idea and wrote Brown on December 7, 1927: “I am taking up actively the matter we talked about, with particular attention to the suggestion I made that we send a representative to India with funds to purchase as many Indian manuscripts as may be available and the money will pay for.” Since the money for such a project would not be forthcoming from the University, Penniman alludes to the need for a benefactor: “I have written to one person, hoping that I may get a sympathetic reply.” That person was John Fredrick Lewis, a well-known collector in Philadelphia whose large collection of illuminated manuscripts is now at the Free Library of Philadelphia. Penniman also suggested that Brown dine with Lewis and him. However, the evening did not produce the desired results. In a memo of January 10, 1928 Penniman expresses his regrets at not being able to find a donor.

Brown went to India in 1928 on a Guggenheim fellowship and continued to correspond with Penniman, still pressing his case for the acquisition of original source material. That manuscripts were very much on his mind is clear from a letter

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5 This manuscript resulted in an important publication for Brown: The Story of Kālaka : Texts, History, Legends, and Miniature Paintings of the Svetāmbara jain Hagiographical Work The Kālakācāryakathā, (Washington: Freer Gallery of Art, 1933).

6 W. Norman Brown Papers, University of Pennsylvania Archives and Records, Folder inventory, Box 1, FF 17.
to Penniman of November 2, 1928, which begins: “Since I have arrived in India and have been making inquiries about manuscripts for sale and find that there are a good many available. This is especially true of western India where I am at present.” He refers to his reliable contacts with a Jain community and notes that for $500–$1,000 he could acquire some very good manuscripts. Apparently Penniman had not dropped the project idea either, because Brown noted: “If you can get the lady who promised you money conditionally, for the purchase of manuscripts, to give the money with the need for you to get more, I think we could make a good start on a collection of Indian manuscripts for the University.”

Penniman responded to Brown’s February 8, 1929 letter with more disappointing news. The $500 was not to be forthcoming but he would attempt again to find it from some source. Penniman commented on a picture of Jogeshvari Cave which Brown had sent him: “I wish that we had money with which to undertake some archaeological work in India. Unfortunately with money all around us, it is difficult to interest the possessors of it in the problems that affect pure scholarship and apparently have any, if little, utilitarian value. Medicine is the subject for which it is easiest to secure money.” Finally, after nearly three years of attempts, Penniman informed Brown (May 2, 1930) that he had obtained $1,000 for the purchase of Sanskrit manuscripts. Over the next several years, Brown was at last able to acquire the nearly 3,000 manuscripts that form the bulk of the collection. It is clear that Provost Penniman continued to take an interest in this enterprise. He wrote to Brown: “I am delighted also by the fact that the collection of Indic manuscripts, which I was incidentally able to obtain for the University, has proved so important.”

In India the manuscripts were purchased for Penn by Brown’s former teacher, Narayana Shastri Khiste (1886–1961). Khiste was a Maharashtrian brahmin from Benares. He received an excellent Sanskritic education in the classical tradition, studying under several of the respected pandits (a Hindu learned in Sanskrit philosophy and religion and Indian law) of his day, and completed his studies with an emphasis on grammar and literature. A respected pandit himself, Khiste became the manuscript curator at the Sarasvati Bhavan in Benares. Khiste was an ideal agent for Brown’s ambitious project. His experience and the number of his contacts were virtually unmatched: not only had he already acquired nearly 30,000 manuscripts for his own institution, but he had also edited a large number of texts.

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7 He was in Ahmedabad.

8 W. Norman Brown Papers, University of Pennsylvania Archives and Records, Folder inventory, Box 1, FF 17.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid. Author’s boldface.

12 Brahmins are the priestly class in India.
Brown first broached the proposal that Khiste be his agent in a letter dated January 16, 1930, where he wrote that Provost Penniman had sent him $50 as a personal gift to begin his purchases and that more money would follow.\textsuperscript{13} The first batch of manuscripts, nearly 550 or so, was acquired by September of that year. Khiste writes that these manuscripts were obtained from the “high families of Pandits of Benares, Allahabad, and Rewah State.”\textsuperscript{14}

The correspondence between Brown and Khiste records the process and progress of this remarkable project. It also preserves an interesting, and sometimes amusing, glimpse of Khiste’s own personality and ambitions. In several letters he appeals to Brown to bring him to America, which surely has a need for a kāvyā ṣhastri classical Sanskrit literature master-teacher. In a letter of February 12, 1931, he requested that Brown make him a “manuscript officer.” Clearly unhappy with his position in India he wrote: “In acting so your mission [that is, collecting manuscripts] must be fulfilled and I myself am released from this prison [his job at the Sarasvati Bhavan!]” And, added: “I have so many hopes upon you, and have a great confidence upon your good wishes for me, the misfortune of daridrata (poverty) is always troubling me. The dhanakubera-s [wealthy patrons] of America can help as I can produce best kāvyas [lengthy poems] like Kalidasa, Bharavi, and Bhavabhuti.”\textsuperscript{15}

Khiste never came to America—apparently his situation at the Sarasvati Bhavan improved—but he did succeed in collecting for Brown and Penn a solid collection of manuscripts that represent virtually the entire range of traditional learning.

Brown’s activities for Penn can be placed within a general context of large-scale manuscript acquisition projects. Collecting manuscripts became a well established endeavor in India during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Scholars and pandits scoured the entire subcontinent for manuscripts, and the accounts of these journeys often make fascinating reading.\textsuperscript{16} Most of the manuscripts acquired in this literary dragnet remained in India in newly founded research institutions.

The political and cultural turbulence of the period during which the manuscripts were acquired worked in favor of Brown’s project. Civil unrest, especially labor strikes and public boycotts throughout India, made travel frequently hazardous, and Khiste refers to these uncertain conditions in his pursuit of manuscripts.\textsuperscript{17} However, precisely because of these unsettled conditions, families with manuscripts often preferred to sell

\textsuperscript{13} Brown Papers, Box 2, FF 7.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., Box 1, FF 17.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., Box 2, FF 7.

\textsuperscript{16} The following two works provide background here: Donald Clay Johnson, Government concern for the development of libraries: Sanskrit manuscript libraries in India, 1858-1937 (Ph.D. Thesis–University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1980); Archibald Edward Gough, Papers relating to the collection and preservation of the records of ancient Sanskrit literature in India (Calcutta: Office of Superintendent of Government Printing, 1878). This work contains much important material on the nature of the manuscripts themselves as well as the concern of the government for their collection and preservation.
them for fear of losing them altogether to theft or destruction. Thus, through a curious accident of history for Penn, this is probably the only period in the twentieth century when the library could have acquired a collection so remarkable in scope and quality.  

Despite the fact that there are perhaps upwards of 30 million (!) extant Indic manuscripts—the single largest group of handwritten documents anywhere in the world—there are surprisingly few critical editions of Indic texts, that is, texts that have been edited following the accepted canons of textual criticism. Printed texts are often referred to as samshodita, (purified, cleansed), but this usually reflects the editor’s personal alteration of the text rather than the careful collation of manuscripts.

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries increasingly recognized that primary documents are essential for the systematic study of cultural history. But the study of a culture by means of its texts involves many distinct scholarly activities; among these textual criticism plays an indispensable role. In our age of readily available books, we rarely consider the origin of a text. It is precisely the role of textual criticism to answer basic questions: What is this artifact before us? Is it unique? How does it compare with other copies of the text? Where does it fit into the overall body of literature of which it is a part? What was the likely nature of the “original” text? Can we determine the authorial intention? Of the materials that we have from South Asia, many texts are anonymous and this fact alone raises a host of questions. Since the task of textual criticism remains a fundamental element in the ongoing activities of scholars, collections such as this play a vital role in scholarly research. G. Thomas Tanselle eloquently expresses the goal of textual criticism:

> Textual criticism cannot enable us to construct final answers to textual questions, but it can teach us how to ask the questions in a way that does justice to the capabilities of mind. It puts us on the trail of one class of our monuments and helps us to see the process by which humanity attempts, sometimes successfully, to step outside itself.  

Brown always had a deliberate plan for the kind of collection he envisioned for Penn. He wanted a collection of texts that would evenly represent the traditional areas of knowledge: the epics, puranas (important class of Hindu texts), religious texts,
literature (poetry, prose, and drama), poetics, philosophy, grammar and linguistics, law and politics, mathematics, astronomy and astrology, and medicine. Because he bought complete family libraries, the collection easily succeeded in reflecting the broad subject range that Brown felt essential. While the majority of the works do deal with Hinduism (including here the Vedas), the other two great Indic religions, namely Jainism and Buddhism, are also represented.

Most of the collection has been cataloged in H. Poleman’s *Census of Indic Manuscripts in the United States and Canada*. Poleman gives the title, author (when known), material, number and size of folios, number of lines per folio, script, date (when given), copyist (when named), and the library number. There is also a complete microfiche set of the manuscripts entitled *The University of Pennsylvania Indic Manuscripts*. This microfiche set was filmed under the auspices of the Institute for Advanced Studies of World Religions.

**Languages**

The language of most of the manuscripts is Sanskrit. Among the modern languages, there are manuscripts in Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, Gujarati, Tamil, Telugu, and Nepali. There is also a rather rare manuscript in Oriya, a language of Eastern India. For the Buddhist material, there are manuscripts in Pali, Burmese, Sinhalese and Tibetan. For the Jain materials in the collection, there are texts in Jaina, Maharashtrian, Prakrit.

**Scripts**

A collection of this sort is quite valuable for paleography, the study of scripts. While various scripts are still in use in South Asia, even more were used in the past. The Penn collection allows students and scholars to study and compare the different scripts and the different manuscript traditions they so often represent. Although the majority of the manuscripts are in the Devanagari script, the collection contains manuscripts written in Jainanagari, Grantha (the Tamil script used for Sanskrit), Kaithi, Sharada (from Kashmir), Bengali, Malayalam, Tamil, Telugu, Sinhalese, and Tibetan scripts. From Southeast Asia come Burmese, Khmer Mul, and Lao Tham.
Materials

The manuscripts from western, northern, eastern and central India are generally written on paper and in black ink. Jain manuscripts, while usually written in black, use other colored inks including red with gold leaf. Most of the paper is usually what is called “country paper,” that is, handmade paper. It often appears yellow because it has been sized with yellow arsenic which is applied to keep away insects and worms. However, some of the manuscripts use European paper. Frequent British watermarks belong to John Miller, Glasgow, and Limsden and Son, but French watermarks are found as well. A Burmese medical manuscript is on mulberry paper.

Paper was introduced into India around the time of Mahnud of Ghazni (997-1030), by Muslims from Central Asia. Samarkand was especially well-known for its paper. The earliest known paper manuscripts are from Gujarat in Western India and date to 1223-24 AD. But it was mainly during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that the craft of papermaking spread throughout northern India.

The other most common material for writing was the palm leaf, which is also well represented in the collection. Palm manuscripts come mainly from southern and eastern India and other outlying regions of “Greater India” including Sri Lanka. The palm leaves are cut, dried, boiled, and dried again. They are then smoothed out with stones or shells. As a writing material, palm leaf requires a very delicate hand because a sharp stylus is used to make shallow incisions in the leaf. Special training was therefore necessary to be able to write on palm leaf.


leaf. To bring out the contrast between the writing and the leaf itself, lampblack or some similar substance was then often rubbed over the leaf. Palm leaves usually have one lateral hole in the center of the frondes, but can have two lateral holes for a tie cord. Wooden boards were also often used as covers, and for further protection, the manuscript would be wrapped in a heavy cloth.

The palm leaf provided such a strong model for the appearance of texts that, even with the introduction of paper, the form of the palm leaf continued to be the norm for manuscripts. The typical paper manuscript is cut oblong like the palm leaf and often a space is left in the middle for the hole which, although not punched out, remains as a reminder of the earlier medium.

**Time Period**

The manuscripts date from the middle of the fifteenth century through the early twentieth century; however most are from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. One of the oldest dated manuscripts is the Nyāyamakaranda by Anandabodhacarya, a work on logic, of which three other manuscripts are listed in Aufrecht’s *Catalogus Catalogorum* of Indic manuscripts. The colophon of our copy gives a date equivalent to 1505 A.D., which is a very old date for a paper manuscript in India, except in western India, and indeed old for manuscript anywhere in India except western India and Nepal.

Only the leaves (pattra) are numbered and not the pages (prṣṭha). In the South the number is on the first page of each leaf, whereas in other parts of India it is on the second page.

*Brahmasutravṛtti*. Sanskrit commentary on classical philosophical text. Example of palm leaf with lateral holes for tie-string.
Editing Texts and the Scribal Tradition

Bent is the neck, spinal cord, and back,
And a fixed gaze while looking down,
Thus only with difficulty does one copy a text.
Please make an effort to preserve it.\textsuperscript{25}

The Indic manuscript tradition represents one of the two ways in which knowledge was preserved and transmitted in South Asia. The other method, memorization, deserves special mention because of its relationship to the written traditions. Memorization was practiced to a degree that is quite foreign to western methods of education. Pre-modern education in South Asia consisted almost entirely of a memorization system in which young boys of priestly families (the brahmans and the other twice-born castes) would commit to memory entire texts, line by line, word by word, syllable by syllable. Indeed, a bahuśruta (one who has heard much) would be the Sanskrit translation of a “well read person” and even the English verbal phrase “to read a Sanskrit book” in Sanskrit implies that it has been memorized.\textsuperscript{26}

Memorization was the means by which “texts” were faithfully preserved through the centuries with an accuracy that is nothing short of remarkable. The most notable example of this is the fidelity with which the \textit{Rgveda}, a text of the greatest importance in the Hindu religious tradition and composed most likely during a period from 1500–1100 BC, has been faithfully transmitted through the centuries down to the accent and smallest particle. It is also important to note the tension, if not the hostility, that existed between the remembered and the written word. Up until two centuries ago it was forbidden to make a written copy of the \textit{Rgveda}. Fortunately, the prohibitions were eventually abandoned, and we have in the collection a number of the essential Hindu sacred texts.\textsuperscript{27}

However, the tension between the spoken and written word did not impede the actual copying of most texts: it was a common belief that merit was attached to the copying and preservation of manuscripts. The ambivalence to the written word in the Hindu tradition did not apply to the two other great religious tradition of India. Jainism and Buddhism took to recording their sacred texts in manuscripts with great enthusiasm. Because of Brown’s interest in Jainism, the collection contains a number of fine Jain illustrated manuscripts.


\textsuperscript{26} See L. Rocher, “Sanskrit literature.” In \textit{Scholarly Editing}, ed. D.C. Greetham (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1995):57. This emphasis on the memorization of texts over merely reading them is also found in the Jewish tradition.

\textsuperscript{27} One of our Rgvedi manuscripts comes from the library of the famous Sanyasi (religious mendicant) Kavindracharya Sarasvati who was famous for having the pilgrim tax on Hindu at Benares revoked.
Our present age of information glut, with its easy availability of texts mass-produced in identical copies, contrasts markedly with the ancient and medieval world of hand-copied texts. A hand-copied text is vulnerable to scribal errors, regional preferences, and physical degradation. It is one goal of textual reconstruction to find the “original” text or at least the most authoritative form of the text. In order to do this, multiple copies of the same text are required to make the requisite comparisons.

Wherever anything written is devoid of meaning
Because of illegibility or
Because of a misunderstanding,
You should correct the mistakes and
Not be upset with me, the copyist. \(^{28}\)

Multiple copying was essential in the harsh climate of India: insects, humidity, the material itself (paper, palm leaves, cloth) made manuscripts vulnerable.

Protect me from spilled oil, from water,
From being tied too loosely—
Above all: don’t hand me over to careless fools!
Thus says the manuscript. \(^{29}\)

Overview

It was mentioned at the outset that Brown sought to have a collection that would represent the traditional universe of knowledge in South Asia. \(^{30}\) In the collection there are copies of the standard texts, such as the Rgveda, some of the brahmanas, the epics, and legendary histories called puranas, legal texts, philosophical works, grammatical treatises, belles lettres, hymns of praise to various deities, and sectarian religious books. Many of these texts remain unpublished or only inadequately published and thus unedited.

One of the most important classes of material in the collection covers medieval domestic religious rites or sacraments. The oldest texts of this area of Indian religions have been fairly well explored, but the later rites, which differ from the earlier as modern Christian rituals—baptism, marriage, funerals—differ from those of early Christianity, have not been covered so well.

The collection is also an excellent source for the study of medieval law. The most outstanding item in this category is the code

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30 The caveat here is that while Brown acquired materials documenting Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, he did not collect materials for Islam.
of the great Sivaji (1627–1680), a Maratha chieftain of western India who bitterly fought the Muslims and was instrumental in bringing about the downfall of the Mughal empire. He sought to re-establish Hinduism and advocated the protection of the cow and the honor of the Brahmans. He modeled his legal code on the earlier orthodox Hindu codes with relevant variations for his period. We have a rare Sanskrit manuscript copy of this code written by one of his Brahman ministers that contains his system.

There are a number of valuable manuscripts dealing with Indian medicine, some of them coming from Nepal, and one being devoted particularly to the use of mercury. It was (and continues to be) believed that mercury could provide an effective cure for impotency.

Another category Khiste collected was tantric studies, a cultic Hinduism centering usually on the worship of Shakti, or “divine female power” wherein the male creative principle and female energization of it constitute inseparable associates. There are nearly 250 such works in the collection, many of them unpublished. Philosophy, or darśana, especially the Vedānta, is found in a number of our texts, again many of them unpublished. Another branch of Indian philosophy called Nyāya (logic) is also represented.

One of the most famous Indian story collections, compiled about a thousand years ago, is the Brhatkathā, (Great Tale), and a version of this, by Kshemendra of Kashmir, of which perhaps only six other manuscripts have so far been reported, is represented in the collection.
A curiosity is an anonymous and probably incomplete text in dialect Hindi on omens, possibly a village soothsayer’s pocket guide to bird omens. In it, the birds are crudely illustrated and they are identified with onomatopoeic names not appearing in Hindi dictionaries. The manuscript discusses birds that are favorable or unfavorable for such things as starting on a journey or entering into a business association. Another illustrated manuscript in Old Gujarati has an illustration showing a couple playing the Indian game of Parcheesi.

Another notable small collection of manuscripts comprises Sinhalese painted wooden book covers. These are quite rare in the West, and Penn has one of the largest collections. The wooden covers are either painted or lacquered, often with geometric or floral designs. One of the texts, in Pali, is on the life of Christ and, interestingly, the book cover design differs from other Buddhist book covers by having a series of rosettes of a more western style. Also from Sri Lanka are small diagrams incised on palm leaves that are meant to ward off danger.

**Conclusion**

Because of their uniqueness, manuscripts are intimately linked to their holding institutions. Nevertheless, the digital age is beginning to change this location-bound aspect of special collections. We are beginning to offer these
manuscripts on the internet as scanned images (see URL: http://www.library.upenn.edu/etext/collections/sasia/skt-mss/index.html). Scanned images provide a reader with a virtual facsimile of the text. Here the researcher has access to a text that can be enlarged for close examination. Furthermore, providing the virtual text also begins to change the very nature of text editing. An editor has to make choices, and the results are then incorporated into the critical edition, either as an accepted reading or as a variant. Sometimes, having access to the virtual text means seeing the same text as the editor, and readings can be accepted or questioned based on the manuscript evidence itself and not simply on the word of the editor. Or an editor of a text can solicit opinions on a particular passage from the global scholarly community, thereby making the editing process itself, till now often a highly individual practice, a collaborative effort.

We are also able to provide an on-demand publishing service for these texts. Since we began adding these texts to our web page, we have had requests for specific manuscripts from scholars not just from the United States but from Europe and India. We are thus able to provide these texts in a virtual facsimile format for scholars. Providing these texts is also a contribution to the cultural heritage of a very significant and important culture. As more South Asians come to reside outside of the subcontinent, these texts will provide an important link to their own intellectual past.

Another project under way is to create an online manual of Indic handwriting. A corpus of materials this size provides us with a variety of different scribal hands over several hundreds of years from different regions in India. This allows us to examine a number of variations in the individual letter forms which often vary from the forms encountered in printed texts. In this way we can provide a useful pedagogical tool to facilitate the study of these texts. This type of information can only be found scattered in various manuscript catalogues and occasional journal articles.

Owing to the persistence of Brown, a sympathetic administrator, and a knowledgeable and well-placed pandit, Penn was able to acquire a formidable Indic manuscript collection. We are able to continue Brown’s vision for the study of India’s past in ways of which he, Penniman, and Khiste had not even the faintest inkling. They surely would have been delighted to know that these manuscripts, acquired at such an effort,
now have a global presence linking the past to the present not just for scholars, but for anyone with access to a computer and the internet.