Three Sanskrit Collections at the Danish Royal Library

The very notion of a library is one that is changing. With an increasingly rapid speed, the technological means in our electronic age are decisively influencing this change. At the level of interface between libraries and their users, it is a change which concerns particularly the means of access to a given library's collections, as well as the diversity of materials accessible at a modern library.

Hartmut Buescher

LIBRARIES ARE INTERCONNECTED within regional, national and global electronic networks. The specific geographical location of any given library has, in this respect, decreased in significance for the ordinary user. Given the virtual possibility of almost unlimited access to information, another aspect of the matter of restriction, of finding a balance between preventing misuse and retaining individual freedom, thus of an optimally qualified control of the access to information, is no exception in that respect. The initial acquisitions of collections, the Danish Royal Library (Det Kongelige Bibliotek), have interesting histories. That is, histories in terms of the constitution and organic growth of their individual genres (including epics, narrative literature, poetry, eulogies and ritual texts), but also, for instance, traditional Indian law, grammar and lexicography may be mentioned— and on the manner in which he made it available, first to himself and subsequently to the library. Just as he employed Indian artists for drawing and painting the plant specimens he had collected, he was able to get a number of texts copied by Indian scribes in Bengali script on locally produced paper cut out in the format of large notebooks and subsequently leather-bound in European style.

The Nepal Collection

Larger than both the previous ones, and altogether different in character from these, is the library's so-called Nepal Collection, a collection acquired in Nepal by the cultural anthropologist Werner Jakobsen (1914-1979). Jakobsen frequently travelled in various parts of Asia, both as a member of official Danish expeditions and privately. He spent the years 1957-59 in Nepal where he was employed in a large collection of archaeological, ethnographic, photographic and other materials, including a collection of Sanskrit texts.

Subsequently the leader of an ethnographic department at the National Museum of Denmark, Jakobsen's interest was not that of a specialist in either Nepali, indological or buddhological literature. Rather, the somewhat haphazard nature of the Nepal Collection of literary documents may perhaps be taken as likewise revealing the focus of a curator of an ethnographic museum, a curator with an eye for somewhat various objects which, in the course of time, might prove suitable for being attractively exhibited. Fragments of a delicate and carefully calligraphed manuscript of a Pāippāramātā text from the 11th century sit side by side with a sort of local magician's handbook, written (though hardly displaying any knowledge of orthography and grammar) in a gross script on thick paper, with the remains of ritual substances (such as feathers and animal hairs, once ingredients employed in magical rites) still sticking to the outermost sheet.

Among the texts collected by Jakobsen, one finds rational precocious codices of interest mainly to philologists, there are Buddhist and Hindu texts, Sūtras, Tantras and Dhāraṇas, texts related to various branches of traditional science as well as mythological materials, but also...