The History of the Book in South Asia

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LITERARY CULTURE AND MANUSCRIPT CULTURE IN PRECOLONIAL INDIA

SHELDON POLLOCK

I HAVE BEEN ASKED to provide a grand view of the world of literary culture in south Asia. It is a vast and complicated world, most probably the longest-lived continuous multi-language literary culture we have, and one whose materialities are only now beginning to be explored.[1] The task is a challenging one, then, but it is a critical challenge, since a number of the generalizations about the world we are prone to accept on the basis of a rather thin slice of human experience in the West are likely to be unsettled or at least complicated.

In the last several decades scholarship on the invention, diffusion and eventual triumph of print culture has had a considerable impact on the writing of literary, social and even political history. Even scholars like me who do not concern themselves with the study of modernity except in so far as it requires a counter-narrative of the pre-modern, cannot have escaped the arguments of Benedict Anderson, Roger Chartier, Elizabeth Eisenstein and the rest. Today the question is no longer whether or to what degree print changed the world; it is only how it did so, how 'increased circulation of printed matter transform[ed] forms of sociability, permit[ted] new modes of thought, and change[d] people's relationship with power' – with the clear implication that such relationships, modes and forms had never changed before, or at least never so profoundly.[2] My problem with this literature is not just that, for a region like India, the obsession with print falls victim to the tiresome colonialism-invented-everything syndrome, whereby all that has been consequential in the last two centuries – the idea of vernacular language, or caste, or supralocal political sentiment – is supposed to have resulted from the confrontation with colonial modernity. More worrisome is that in looking for phenomena familiar from elsewhere we not only inevitably find what we are looking for but in the process often fail to see what is actually there. An alternative case could certainly be argued, that the event which was truly historic for literary cultures in India and defined them in the peculiar contours they often still bear, was the invention, diffusion and eventual conquest of manuscript culture, in its specific symbiotic relationship with the antecedent oral culture. The epistemic revolution of literacy, the production of manuscript books (over thirty million manuscripts are still extant), their dissemination in often massively reproduced and relatively stable form and, perhaps most important, their oral performance before large audiences over long periods of time, have had an effect

on shaping imagination, sociality and power that is arguably deeper and more extensive than any attributable to print, middle-class book consumption (stunningly low in India), or the culture of private reading reinforced by print (though hardly generated by it).

The case could be argued, I say, but has never been. It has astonished me to realize, as I have come to realize during the course of research on science and scholarship in India 1500–1800, how few sustained analyses are available of the core dimensions of manuscript culture in the subcontinent, aside from old-style text criticism.[3] Almost no detailed work has been done on the time–space matrix of text diffusion, that is, how quickly, how far and along what routes a text was circulated, and what relationship the resultant spatio-temporal map bears to the genre in question and its language. It is not that we don't have data to get some answers to these questions; rather, the questions have simply not been raised. What I aim to do in this short essay is to outline what I see as key developments and try to formulate good questions to ask of them.[4]

Prior to the arrival of printing with missionary and colonial expansion, the history of literary culture in south Asia was shaped by two momentous events: (1) the invention of the Indian writing system in the third century BCE, setting the stage for the creation of the Sanskrit cosmopolitan culture-power formation, and (2) the vernacular revolution of the early centuries of the second millennium CE, associated with the newly consolidated regional kingdoms. (The expansion of Persianate culture in India from about 1000 CE onward added remarkable new resources but did not introduce any *morphologically* new dimension to literary culture.) These two events are more closely related than might be assumed. The vernacular revolution, as I have tried to make sense of it, consisted in the breakthrough to literary writing in what were called the 'languages of Place' (*desa-bhasa*), which, self-evidently, only the earlier event could have made possible. At the same time, the practices of orality, which elsewhere in the world have typically been threatened if not eradicated by the inauguration of writing, have maintained themselves in India as both fact and ideal; the continuing valorization and cultivation of oral performance would inflect literary culture in uniquely Indian ways into the modern period. That said, *literary* culture in south Asia was actually constituted by a manuscript culture that, in its material and economic aspect, was also specific to the subcontinent. These themes – the interplay of the oral and the written; the materiality of manuscript culture; what might be called script-mercantilism – along with the peculiar mix, discernible throughout, of a dynamism that was measured and considered, and a stasis that may have been less a sign of deficiency than a sort of cultural strategy, form the armature of the following survey.

1. THE ORAL AND THE WRITTEN

The inaugural moment of writing in south Asia and its impact on Sanskrit literary culture are crucial to understanding long-term developments, and there-

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fore merit at least brief notice. Scholars have long debated the origins of writing in India, but a new consensus has recently emerged locating the invention in the chancery of the Maurya king Asoka around 260 BCE (a late invention, viewed from the Near East or China). The purpose of the invention of the script, now known as brahmi,[5] was to promulgate the royal edicts of the king, partly in imitation of the imperial model known from the Achaemenids, rulers of the Persian empire that extended into present-day northern Pakistan. The distribution of Asoka's edicts around the subcontinent, from northern Afghanistan to southern Karnataka, ensured that brahmi would become the foundation of every script in south Asia and of most scripts where south Asians travelled, including inner Asia (e.g. Tibetan), and south-east Asia from Burma to Champa and as far as Java[6] – further evidence of the monogenetic rather than polygenetic character of Indian literacy: it was invented in one place and diffused from there throughout the sphere of Indic cultural influence.

The new consensus on the invention of writing carries two implications pertinent to the concerns of this essay, one concerning old forms of memory, the other concerning new forms of literary culture. The first implication is that all textual traditions of pre-Asoka India were completely oral, and thus that the feats of Indian memory, of which earlier scholars were so often incredulous, were real and consequential. The vast corpus of liturgical texts known as the Veda, and even portions of its exegetical tradition, were transmitted without the use of writing and in exceptionally stable form, deriving largely from the belief that the texts were metaphysically efficacious only if exactly reproduced. The mnemonic proclivities involved here marked many areas of non-liturgical culture, too, such as the stable oral performance of written literary texts. It has also become clearer that Vedic communities knew about writing but chose to ignore it. Panini, the Sanskrit grammarian of the fourth or fifth century BCE who lived in Taxila in today's northern Pakistan within the power-ambit of the late Achaemenids, was certainly aware of writing (in Aramaic), but chose to make no use of it. Here is the first of a number of what appear to be conscious refusals of technology marking the history of literary and manuscript culture in India, in this case due to characteristic satisfaction with suitably sophisticated oral practices.

The cultivation of memory that was central to the Vedic tradition (and imitated, as much was imitated, by other religious traditions, including Theravada Buddhists and Jains) would continue to be valued as a core cultural attainment in both the performance and the ideology of textual culture long after that culture had been completely permeated by literacy. Thus in the seventh century CE the pre-eminent scholar of Vedic hermeneutics reasserted, in writing, of course, that learning the Veda from a concrete text-artefact – 'by means contrary to reason, such as from a written text' – could never achieve the efficacy of the Veda learned in the authorized way, 'by repeating precisely what has been pronounced in the mouth of the teacher'. Such a valorization of memory left clear traces in secular written culture. A story instructive about such memory as well as its peculiar relation to writing is told of the early-eleventh-century poet

Dhanapala: enraged that his patron, King Bhoja, demanded to be made the hero of his new romance narrative, the *Tilaka-manjari*, Dhanapala destroyed the work by burning its single manuscript before Bhoja's eyes – an act that makes sense of course only if the text had come to be seen as identical with the written text-artefact. But the poet's daughter had committed the entire work to memory (its modern edition runs to 250 closely printed pages), and so could reconstruct it in toto. In addition to the continuing valorization of memory far into the age of literacy, the oral performance of literature, typically on the basis of a memorized text or, more often, of a physically present manuscript-book, would characterize Indian literary culture into the modern period.[7]

The second implication of the new consensus is that what Indians called 'literature', *kavya* (as it was named first in the Sanskrit tradition, spreading thence to all southern Asian languages, e.g. *kakawin* in Javanese), was a new cultural form in post-Asoka India. Although the fact is not always acknowledged in Western scholarship, it was writing that made kavya historically possible at all; pragmatically, 'kavya' was the name given to a literary text that was written down and transmitted primarily in written form – indeed, the text was the kind it was, in complexity, magnitude and variety, precisely because it was written down. The Indian intellectuals who theorized kavya as an expressive, imaginative, formally ordered type of language use, while saying little about its written embodiment, understood full well that it was a historically *new* type.

The history of the text of Valmiki's *Ramayana*, which Indian tradition from the second century onward has unanimously regarded as the first work of kavya, seems to confirm this fact of novelty. For in contrast to the manuscript record of the second great epic, the *Mahabharata*, which shows that it was transmitted entirely in writing (with the exception of a few of its books), that of the *Ramayana* testifies to a *transitional* relationship to writing. The manuscripts are independent transcriptions of an oral version of Valmiki's text that was passed down with considerable stability in largely memorized form. The firstness of the poem may therefore lie, in part at least, in its being the first major literary text committed to writing. On this interpretation, the *upodghata*, or prelude, to the *Ramayana*, which was a later addition to Valmiki's work, takes on an unanticipated significance: when the poet is shown to compose his poem after meditating and to transmit it orally to two young singers, who learn and perform it exactly as he taught it to them, what we are being given is, not an authentic image of a purely oral culture, but a sentimental 'fiction of written culture', as the phenomenon has been described for the remarkably parallel case of the *chansons de geste*. For here orality as such is being observed from outside orality, so to say, in a way impossible to do in a world ignorant of alternatives – ignorant, that is, of writing. Nostalgia for the oral and a desire to continue to share in its authenticity and authority, with the same lingering effects of a remembered oral poetry, mark other first moments of literacy across Eurasia, most memorably, in the English tradition, with Caedmon, whom one scholar recently described as an 'exemplum of grammatical culture'.[8]

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From the beginning of the Common Era kavya was always committed to writing and always circulated in manuscript form. Again, this is not to deny a continuing role for the oral performance of these written texts, or for the memorizing of such texts, let alone to deny a continuing vitality of primary oral poetry, which remains strong to this day in many communities in south Asia.[9] But from the moment writing was invented the *literary* culture that resulted, the culture of kavya, became indissolubly connected with manuscript culture, so much so that the history of the one becomes unintelligible without taking into account the history of the other.

II. COSMOPOLITAN MONOPOLIZATION OF LITERARY LITERACY, AND VERNACULAR DEFIANCE

One thing that has remained unintelligible in the history of literary cultures precisely because of insufficient attention to writing is the phenomenon of vernacularization. All of literary culture in southern Asia prior to the vernacular revolution of the early second millennium was composed in a language that was written and read across this entire space, namely Sanskrit (though restricted use was also made of Prakrit and Apabhramsha, Middle-Indic literary dialects used largely as 'rustic' registers of what was actually court poetry). I call this 'cosmopolitan' language in large part because it was language that could 'travel well'; indeed, it became cosmopolitan precisely because it could travel well, as later Persian or English, for their different reasons, were able to travel (Sanskrit was linked to no particular religious formation, and certainly not to colonial expansion). Sanskrit's monopolization of literary literacy was challenged around the beginning of the second millennium. It was literary *inscription*, the act of *writing* kavya, in regional languages – languages that did not travel well, that were 'languages of, or in, Place' – that constituted the essential component of the challenge, and that alone allows us to grasp it in its historicity.

This development was characterized in most places in India by a time lag between what I have called literization, the committing of local language to *documentary*, non-literary, written form, and literarization,[10] the development of literary expressivity in accordance with the norms of a dominant literary culture. The interval between these two moments is often substantial and dramatic. Three to four centuries, as in the case of Kannada and Marathi, is not uncommon (for the first, literization in the early sixth century, literarization in the late ninth; for the second, late tenth century and late thirteenth respectively); more extreme cases include Khmer and Newari (for the former, literization in the seventh century, for the latter, in the ninth; literarization for both only in the seventeenth).

How do we explain this interval between the moments of writing as such and of writing literature? One answer may lie in the dialectical relationship between the literary function and the political function in India. Culture recapitulated power, and power underwrote culture, and so long as power meant trans-regional

rule, or empire, as it meant until the end of the first millennium CE, literature required a trans-regional mode of expression. The regionalization of political power enabled – or even required, in ways we still do not fully understand – the regionalization of culture. Prior to that point documentary writing in the vernacular, the recording of deeds and benefactions and so on, was entirely acceptable (contrast the very slow and reluctant acceptance of the vernaculars as languages of record in late medieval Europe). At the same time, the moment of literarization constituted something of a defiance against the established cultural order.

It is important to realize that this defiance was typically not a matter of social status or religious resistance, despite received views about a demotic vernacularity or anti-Brahman insurgency.[11] In most parts of India vernacularization was a project promoted by the royal court, and often by Brahmans themselves. Yet the authorization to write vernacularly, in the face of deep and long-term cultural-political prejudices to the contrary, was not ready to hand for anyone, even the royal court. The decision to make the vernacular speak literarily was often so fraught that it required the direct intervention of a power beyond that of the dominant cultural order, often the power of a divine being. Only in this way could the king of Vijayanagara himself, Krishna Deva Raya, be authorized to write his remarkable *Amukta-malyada* in Telugu in 1517. A god comes to the author in a dream – a god significantly localized as 'The Great God Visnu of Andhra' (Andhra Pradesh being the region of Telugu) – and announces,

> You astounded us with honeyed poems in the language of the gods [i.e., Sanskrit] ...
> Is Telugu beyond you? Make a book in Telugu
> now, for my delight.
> Why Telugu? You might ask.
> This is the Telugu land.
> I am the lord of Telugu.
> There is nothing sweeter ...
> Don't you know?
> Among all the languages of the land, Telugu is best.[12]

If the king was to compose a poem in Telugu, and not just compose but write it down in a book – and a fortiori a poem that attempts to offer, as the *Amukta-malyada* does, a total vision of political governance – he needed less the inspiration of the god than his permission, and of a sort he would never have needed for the creation of political literature in Sanskrit itself, the language of the gods. Similar stories of divine visitations (and of threatened destruction of the manuscript-books that resulted) are told of poets from all social and religious orders, from Vedic Brahmans like Srinathudu (Telugu, fl. 1450), or devotional ones like Eknath (Marathi, fl. 1575) or Krsnadasa Kaviraj (Bangla, fl. 1600), to Shudras like Tukaram (Marathi, fl. 1625). To write vernacular literature, even as late as the seventeenth century, was for traditional communities almost to turn the cultural world upside down.[13]

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Very different is the history of the second, or *regional*-vernacular revolution, that followed upon, and often seems to have directly rejected the aims and practices of, the first, or *cosmopolitan*-vernacular revolution, as I have called it, since the project was to reproduce the Sanskrit cosmopolitan literary culture at the vernacular level. The later revolution, in many cases, rejected not only the cosmopolitan vernacular in substance (its *laukika*, or worldly, orientation), but also in its forms, especially its literacy: thus the 'Militant Saivas,' with their *vacana*s (sayings) in late-twelfth-century Karnataka, Narasimha Maheta with his *prabhatiya*s (spiritual aubades) in fifteenth-century Gujarat, or Kabir with his *pad*s (songs) about the same time in Avadh, rejected the values, and the very fact, of manuscript culture. In the case of Kabir, the first manuscripts of works attributed to him do not appear until 150 years after his death; in the case of the *vacana* makers, the interval was twice as long.[14]

Many readers will find parallels here with Latin and medieval European literary cultures. These include the invention (or at least far wider use) of writing in the fourth and third centuries BCE in Rome, and the invention of literature around 240 BCE with the adaptations by Livius Andronicus of Homer and the Attic tragedians; the subsequent cosmopolitan career of Latin, and the uniformity and wide diffusion of Latin literary culture; the vernacular transformations in the north of Europe in the ninth century (first at Alfred's Wessex) and in the south in the twelfth-fourteenth (Sicily, Occitan), which uncannily parallel Indian developments in the south in the ninth century (Karnataka) and in the north in the twelfth-fourteenth (Gujarat, Orissa, Assam, Bengal); the place of Islamicate literary cultures in the vernacularization processes in northern India and southern Europe, Islam's eastern and western frontiers up to the fifteenth century; and the second, or spiritual, vernacular revolution in India that bears comparison with the Reformation. Whatever causal factors may lie behind this larger Eurasian literary-cultural history, the local differences in developments are as significant as the parallels.[15] Such differences mark their respective manuscript cultures, too.

III. MATERIALITIES OF MANUSCRIPT CULTURE IN INDIA

The propagation of the courtly-vernacular revolution required a set of correlative transformations in the more concrete aspects of literary culture. Centrally important were the development of vernacular orthographies and of the grammatical, lexicographical and other philological appurtenances upon which such orthographies rested. Orthographical reform turned out to be far less problematic than in Europe, not only technologically, since brahmi could easily be adapted to vernacular phonologies, but also ideologically. We find in India nothing similar to the situation in thirteenth-century Castile, where the archbishop was in charge of the chancery *ex officio*, and the reform of spelling in the service of vernacularization bordered on sin.[16] The development of a vigorous vernacular philology is to be found across southern India from the beginning of

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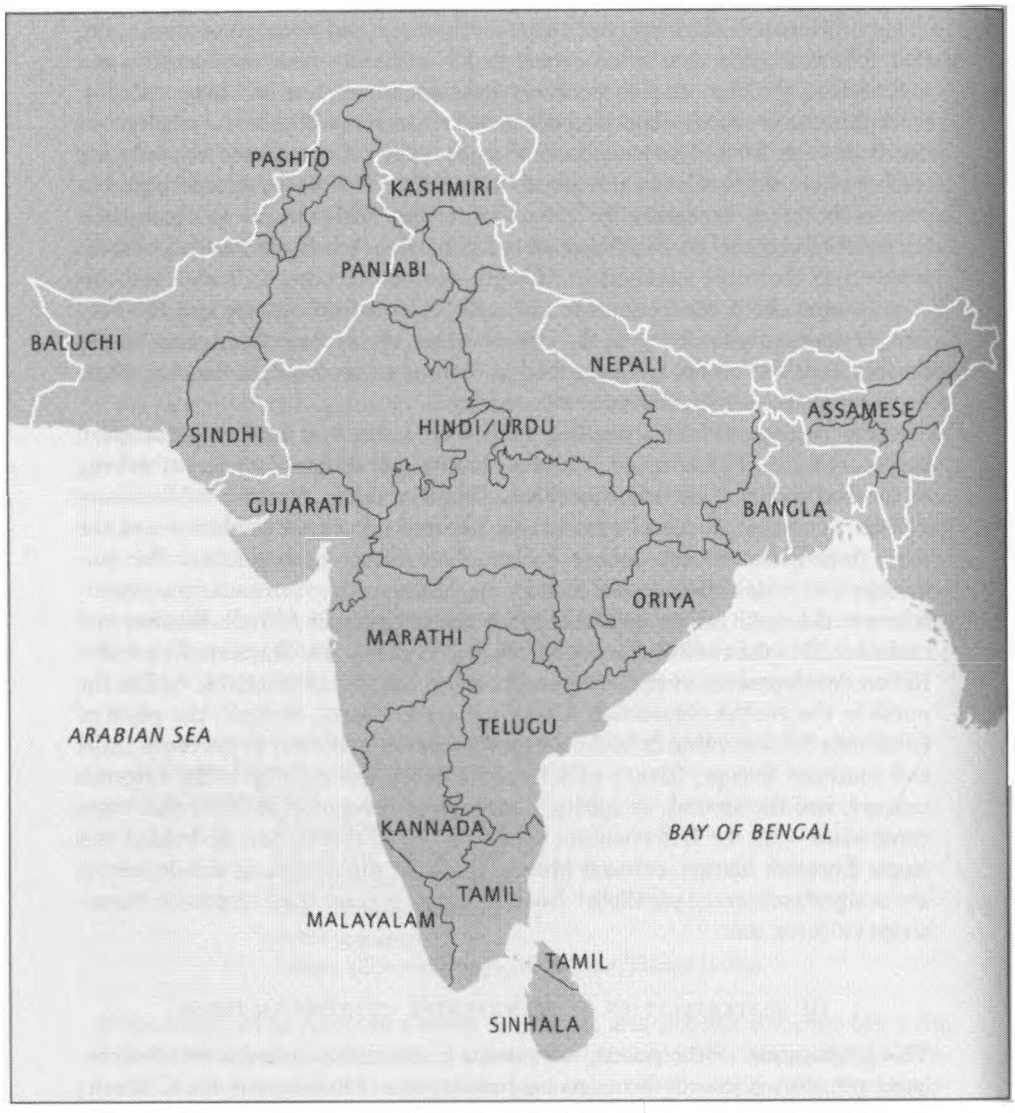

Figure 1. Language map.

the vernacular age, but the situation in the north is far more obscure to us. For Brajbhasha (the literary language of what is now often called the 'Hindi belt'), scribes and commentators seem to have been perfectly aware of regional grammatical norms, but aside from the production of a few lexicons this knowledge was almost never systematized, not even by poets and scholars who were steeped from their childhood in the systematicity of the Sanskrit tradition, and in some cases dramatically espoused systematicity when it came to other disciplines, such as vernacular rhetoric.[17] It is puzzling that not a single north Indian precolonial grammar was produced, in a culture where language analysis had attained an uncommon degree of sophistication and where examples of such grammars abounded in the south. Similarly in Europe, it was in England under King Alfred in the early ninth century that one of the earliest grammatical cultures was promoted, which formed the background for Aelfric's English *Grammatica* a century later (995). By contrast, Italian grammars would not appear until the beginning of the sixteenth century (starting with Fortunio's *Regole* in 1516). Substantial evidence exists nonetheless to suggest that, whether textualized or not, such forms of philological knowledge in India served to 'assemble' and standardize the vernaculars in a way that upends most theories of vernacular standardization that depend on printing.[18]

Of a piece with the individuation of vernacular languages through philological attention is the development of regional scripts. As noted earlier, all south Asian and south-eastern Asian scripts derive ultimately from brahmi in one or other of its forms. The great move toward a more regularized and definitive regionalization of scripts coincided with the revolution in vernacular literary culture.[19] There are two tendencies in these developments that seem to me important for a larger cultural theory and that are intriguingly the inverse of developments in Europe. First, the cosmopolitan languages (above all Sanskrit, but also Prakrit and Apabhramsha) could be and were (and often continue to be) written in any of the regional scripts. We thus find Sanskrit epigraphs inscribed in what we can by the eleventh or twelfth century justifiably name the bangla, javanese, kannada, khmer, oriya and telugu scripts.[20] Second, script and vernacular language took on an increasingly one-to-one fit, and, correlatively, scripts were ever more carefully differentiated among each other: kannada from telugu, malayalam from tamil, bangla from hindi or rather devanagari. This was a tendency only consummated and not commenced in modernity.[21] The contrast with Europe is stark: Latin followed the rule of the non-arbitariness and non-substitutability of the sign, as Anderson has called it, of all cosmopolitan languages other than Sanskrit such as Arabic, Chinese or Greek. To be sure, modifications in the Latin script itself did occur, including the important simplification from Merovingian cursive to Caroline miniscule, but mutually unintelligible written forms of Latin never developed; late-medieval scribes were perfectly able to read earlier manuscripts.[22] By contrast, among western European vernaculars the tendency, intensifying in modernity, has been toward increasing commonality by the uniform use of the Latin alphabet.

Two qualifications to this picture of Sanskrit ecumenicism and vernacular difference need to be made. First, the one-to-one relationship between vernacular language and script was relatively slow in consolidating. In multilingual Vijayanagara, the last imperial formation in pre-Mughal India (*c.* 1340–1565), the relationship was still fluid to some degree. Thus we find Sanskrit documents issued by the court in kannada, nandinagari (a form of southern devanagari), telugu and devanagari; Kannada in kannada, telugu, devanagari; Telugu in kannada, telugu and devanagari, and so on.[23] In north India the language-script relationship was even more variable. Manuscripts of the Hindi (and very Hindu) *Ram-carit-manas* (discussed below), were written not only in devanagari but also in kaithi (a cursive 'clerk's' script widespread in north India), and perso-arabic; whereas Sufi works like *Candayan* (1379, whose author, Maulana Daud, wrote the original, as he tell us, in 'Turki' letters) circulated not only in perso-arabic but also in devanagari. By contrast, accounts of the history of the Bangla *Caitanya-caritamrta* (also discussed below) seem to suggest that copies had to be in bangla characters, which could not easily be prepared in Vrindavan to the west, where the work itself was composed and where its custodians, the Gosvamins (spiritual masters of the Vaisnava tradition), had settled.[24]

The second qualification is already inferable from the above: there was a distinct tendency, found from a relatively early period and sometimes it seems reinforced by phono-graphic considerations, to write Sanskrit in a script other than that employed for the local language. Grantha was thus used consistently for Sanskrit in Tamil country (instead of vattelutu and later tamil, both scripts lacking signs for the aspirated stops of Sanskrit) and in nandinagari in the Deccan. This tendency contributed toward the trans-regional spread of devanagari in Karnataka already in the ninth century. Again we can observe that what has become something of a literary-cultural norm in modern nationalist India – the concomitance of Sanskrit and nagari – was a strong tendency already in the medieval period.

We may also perceive further evidence of the persistence of traditional technologies in the face of the innovations that eventually became central to modern literary cultures. The indifference to writing prior to the mid-third century BCE, as evinced by the grammarian Panini, has already been suggested. Of a piece with this is the general unconcern with paper. Although this was introduced into the subcontinent sometime in the thirteenth century, it had no consequences in India remotely comparable to the European and Islamicate experience, where by providing a cheap alternative to parchment it opened up communication practices. Scribes in many places in India continued to prefer traditional writing materials, especially palmyra leaf in the south and birch bark in the north, well into the modern era. (It was the Mughal state, by contrast, in its desire to imitate the glories of Baghdad and Cairo, that came to be known as Kaghazi Raj, or Paper Kingdom.)[25]

More speculative is the case of block-print technology. It is likely this was made known to north Indians after Tibetans learned of it from China in the ninth

century, though actual proof of the existence of xylographic printing for Tibetan is not available until the fifteenth century, when the Tibetan Buddhist canon was printed under the Ming dynasty. 'Indian Buddhist pandits in Tangut realms during the eleventh century (e.g. Jayananda) and later Indian visitors to the Mongol empire would likely have been among the first Indians to be aware of printing, though perhaps even someone like Devaputra, who was active in the Dunhuang area in western China in the mid-tenth century, would have known of printed Buddhist *dharani*s (mystical formulae). The numerous Varanasi pandits who visited the Fifth Dalai Lama's court from 1642 onwards included some who helped to correct texts published in Lhasa (e.g. the bilingual *Avadanakalpalata*) so we can be sure that some of them were entirely aware of xylography.'[26] As for movable-type printing, a few books were produced by the Portuguese in Goa in the 1550s, but significantly the experiment was shortlived and did not spread. As for the Mughals, it is doubtful they knew about printing at first hand, but they must have been exposed to printed books brought by European travellers, though they too had no interest in making their own. One may suppose the Mughals' indifference was related to their calligraphic tradition, which was unsuited to mechanical reproduction, but this would not explain the indifference of Hindus, for whom calligraphy was never a central cultural value. At all events, it seems clear that printing was another of the technologies that people in south Asia rejected as inferior or irrelevant to the material realities of their literary cultures. As Fernand Braudel once perceptively noted, 'civilizations' are defined as much by what they refuse from others as by what they borrow.[27]

IV. SCRIPT-MERCANTILISM

As I suggested at the start, the effects of print often seem to be exaggerated in scholarship, as least from the perspective of a student of south Asia. Here the true watershed in the history of communicative media was the invention, not of print-capitalism, but of script-mercantilism, so to call it, of the sort found in both Sanskrit and vernacular cultures. (The commercial side of this development became increasingly dominant in the course of the late medieval period, though I use the phrase here more broadly to include pre-print publishing sponsored by the court or religious institutions.) This manuscript culture was enormously productive and efficient. The more than thirty million manuscripts estimated still to be extant (eight million in Rajasthan alone), along with many hundreds of thousands of inscriptions, represent the merest fraction of what must once have been produced. (Consider that for all of Greek literature, classical, Hellenistic, and Byzantine, some thirty thousand manuscripts are extant – a figure that the Indic materials thus exceed by a factor of 1000.)[28] This was a cultural economy constituted by professional scribes and patrons who purchased their wares as well as by non-professionals who copied for personal use or for family members or teachers.

As in the case of the vernacular revolutions and the script transformations that

accompanied them, we have no good accounts of the pre-print publishing industry of south Asia, least of all of such core features of manuscript culture as the conditions of manuscript diffusion. For very few texts do we have any sense of the pace or networks of manuscript distribution, or how language and genre affected these. As a kind of prolegomenon to a fuller account, four brief case studies are offered here, of four different socio-cultural publishing contexts: one courtly-literate, one religious-literate, one religious showing mixed oral-literate transmission, and one that might be called the market context of the early-modern intellectual economy. Although several of the works in question are not in fact kavya, they serve to illustrate the kinds of circuits through which kavya also was distributed.

(1) The story of the production and dissemination of the Sanskrit-Prakrit-Apabhramsha grammar of the Jaina cleric and scholar Hemacandra, the *Siddha-Hemacandra-Sabdanusasanam* (*c.* 1140), is told in a fourteenth-century collection. The place of state patronage, the conditions of mass production and the remarkable expanse of the Sanskrit cosmopolitan order within which it circulated are explicitly addressed:

> Now, the venerable Hemacandra, having examined the collection of grammars [obtained by his king, Jayasimha Siddharaja of the Caulukya dynasty of Gujarat, who had been eager to create a new grammar for his kingdom], made a new, glorious, miraculous text known as the *Siddha-haima* [the Grammar of Hemacandra and Siddharaja]. ... It consisted of *sutra*s and an excellent commentary thereon, a dictionary of nouns, and a synonym lexicon. It was the very crest-jewel of grammatical texts and [came to be] held in esteem by scholars everywhere. ... The king spent 300,000 coins to have the book copied in the course of a year. At the king's command, officials from every department zealously summoned three hundred scribes and showed hospitality to them. The books were copied, and one set was given to the most energetic scholar of each and every school of thought.
>
> The text circulated and grew famous in all lands [regions from Nepal to Sri Lanka, and from Persia to Assam are listed]. Twenty copies along with explanations were sent by the king with great gratitude to the Kashmiris [from whom he had borrowed the Sanskrit grammars on which he modeled his own], and the text was deposited in their library.

(2) Books were produced and disseminated not only by political orders but also by spiritual lineages. In the Jaina tradition, lay communities regularly commissioned the copying of canonical and paracanonical texts and presented them to mendicant orders 'for reading and [public] exegesis'.[29] The most remarkable example of religiously motivated, and tightly controlled, text-reproduction in pre-modern India is offered by the Bangla-language *Caitanya-caritamrta* (Immortal Deeds of Caitanya) of Krsnadasa Kaviraj, a poetic biography of the religious reformer Caitanya (died *c.* 1533), composed around 1600, not in Bengal, but far to the west in Vrindavan, an important sacred centre of Vaishnavism. This is one of the most often reproduced texts in the history of Indian manuscript culture, now existing in more than two thousand copies – virtually identical copies. There is none of Eisenstein's 'textual drift' here; print was not the sole

bulwark against variation. The publication history of this text has recently been reconstructed:

> A single copy of the work was hand carried back to Bengal by a trio of 'missionaries' sent to reorganize the Bengali community. The leader of that group, Srinivasacarya, was a professional scribe and 'publisher', already prominent in Vaisnava circles for that expertise. (The Gosvamis, spiritual masters of the sect, complain of the impossibility of getting good copies of texts made anywhere in the Braj vicinity far to the west of Bengal, so they send back to Bengal for copies; it is not clear if this was because of script issues or something else.) Their cart of books containing the *Caitanya-caritamrta* was stolen near Visnupur, only to reappear in the treasury of local raja Vira Hamvira, who was eventually converted and 'initiated [into the Vaisvana faith] with the book'. Srinivasa instructed Vira Hamvira to finance copies so that the book could never be lost again. The first copies were dispatched back to Braj and to the trio. Sometime between 1600 and 1620, a series of festivals was organized to celebrate the death anniversaries of the last devotees to have known Caitanya. At every festival, copies of the book were distributed to each lineage as its representatives left for home. Copies of the *Caitanya-caritamrta*, among other texts, were ceremonially distributed to each lineage. Copies of the text of the *Caitanya-caritamrta* and other key Vaisnava texts (some twenty-five are listed in the sources) were repeatedly copied for consumption all over Bengal, northern Orissa, and Braj. Because of the tight control of Srinivasa in the reproduction of the *Caitanya-caritamrta* (and other texts), there is decidedly little variation in the manuscripts – a critical edition of the *Caitanya-caritamrta* would in fact make no sense, because copies are virtually identical, with variation consisting of nothing more than the occasional spelling error, the insertion of paratextual material in the form of chapter/verse citations, or the appending of commentary.[30]

(3) Undoubtedly the most popular poem composed in Hindi (more strictly, Avadhi) in the precolonial period is Tulsidas's *Ram-carit-manas* (Holy Lake of the Deeds of the God Ram), *c.* 1575. This was a work produced by a literate poet in written form, but it was the lips of wandering performers rather than palm leaves that ensured its vast dissemination and enormous popular impact (even within the poet's lifetime his fame had spread a thousand miles to the west). This is in keeping with the spirit of the work, which refers to itself as a story-to-be-performed, a 'telling' (*katha*), rather than a book (*granth*), and from an early period accounts are available of the lives and lineages of those who won fame as oral performers or expounders. All that being readily admitted, the manuscript history of the work is also immeasurably vast, remarkably stable and entirely *literate* (the modest variations, aside from scribal error and occasional sectarian interpolation, have persuasively been attributed to different *authorial* versions). There is no evidence whatever of oral transmission of the sort made familiar in the combined work of Parry and Lord.[31] Equally important, it was often the manuscript book of the poem that formed the basis of the kind of exegesis typical of performances: the first written commentary (late eighteenth century) was produced by an expounder who claimed to have in his possession the poet's autograph manuscript: 'Early expounders and commentators, not yet influenced by Western textual criticism, put great emphasis on obtaining the earliest and most

authentic manuscripts.'[32] Perhaps no better example exists of the peculiar relationship between oral and written in the 'publication' history of a late-precolonial Indian text.

(4) Around 1625 a scholar from the southern region of Andhra but residing in Varanasi wrote an introductory textbook on logic and ontology called the *Tarka-samgraha*, or 'Compendium of Reasoning'. Such textbooks in the different scholarly disciplines were a new genre in Sanskrit intellectual history, designed to meet the needs of what was apparently a new pedagogical market. The precise nature of this market remains obscure to us, but its demand for manuscript books was clearly intense, and this was met by a production owing neither to royal nor to religious patronage, but to the efforts of autonomous scribes. These were often the individual readers themselves, who copied (as colophons so often tell us) 'for my own reading', 'for teaching children', 'for my son', 'for helping others', 'for my own pleasure'.[33] But books were also purchased from professional scribes (often belonging to a caste specializing in clerkly culture, the *kayasthas*), often at very substantial cost.[34] For the *Tarka-samgraha*, we cannot trace the publication history in the first two generations (the earliest extant manuscripts of the work and its auto-commentary date to the second decade of the eighteenth century), but the work had moved swiftly across all of India by about the mid-eighteenth century. More than four hundred manuscripts are extant (and these are only the manuscripts that have been catalogued) in at least five scripts, with more than twenty-five commentaries.[35] And we should remember that in a traditional Indian educational environment, one manuscript went a long way: only one copy of the work would typically be required, being read aloud to the class by a student while being continuously commented on by the teacher.

This was a literary culture, one would have to conclude, for which an entirely adequate and appropriate technology had been developed and maintained for centuries.

V. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Literary culture and manuscript culture in pre-modern south Asia were largely co-extensive. Much was produced in writing that was not literature, but literature, as locally defined, was always inscribed and what was not was not literature (but song or hymn or something else again). The old ways of orality, both as a phenomenon preserved from the Vedic world and as a feature of popular culture, continued to play a major role in how the literary text was actually experienced. But it is only an appreciation of the central place of writing in the constitution of regional literary cultures – something of which vernacular poets and intellectuals were fully conscious – that allows us to chart the revolution of the 'vernacular millennium' and the supplanting of the old cosmopolitan regime of culture and power that this revolution often represented.

Understanding pre-modern literary culture means also understanding the

pragmatics of manuscript culture both internally and externally. Internally, we find an ever-intensifying process of cultural differentiation. A kind of synecdoche for this phenomenon (which comprised also a regularization of orthographies, lexicology and other elements of standardization) is the regionalization of scripts, which sought an ever-tighter one-to-one correspondence with regional languages through the late-medieval period. Externally, the life of the manuscript book can be mapped according to a time-space matrix of dissemination where language and genre were shaping factors, and where a wide spectrum of modalities in patronage and in the sphere and form of circulation is visible: from royal support to religious sponsorship to market forces; from limited geocultural domains to the vaster world of south and south-east Asia; from oral performance of a memorized text to texts meant for the peculiar oral-literate pedagogy of India, and even for private consumption. Whatever other conclusions we may wish to draw from these data, they suggest how uncertain it remains that the print-capitalism of modernity – with the obliteration of oral text performance, the privatization of reading and the hyper-commodification of the book – has had in India anything like the historic impact, in depth and extent, of pre-modern script-mercantilism.[36]

NOTES

1 See *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, ed. by Sheldon Pollock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

2 Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 3. See also Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983) and Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

3 Information on the project 'Indian Knowledge Systems on the Eve of Colonialism' is available at www.columbia.edn/sanskrit

4 Some of the materials and formulations contained in this essay are adapted from my *Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). See also my 'Cosmopolitan and Vernacular in History', in *Cosmopolitanism*, ed. by Carol Breckenridge and others (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 591–626, and my 'India in the Vernacular Millennium: Literary Culture and Polity, 1000–1500', in *Early Modernities*, ed. by S. N. Eisenstadt et al. (*Daedalus*, 127, 3 (1998)), 41–74. All Indic diacritics have been omitted here.

5 Script names are given in lower-case, language names in upper-case, throughout.

6 Fundamental is Harry Falk, *Schrift im alten Indien: Ein Forschungsbericht mit Anmerkungen* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1993). On Asoka's inscriptions see my 'Axialism and Empire', in *Axial Civilizations and World History*, ed. by Johann Arnason and others (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

7 On the oral transmission of the Veda see Kumarila Bhatta, *Tantravarttika* (Pune: Anandasrama, 1970), vol. 1, p. 123 (his stricture was a response to the fact that Vedic texts had in fact come to be written down, as early as the fifth century CE). The story

of Dhanapala appears in *Puratanaprabandhasamgraha*, ed. by Jinavijaya (Calcutta: Abhisthata-Singhi Jaina Jnanapitha, 1936), p. 41, no. 60. The publishing of a literary work was typically its first oral performance, see my 'Sanskrit Literary Culture from the Inside Out', in *Literary Cultures in History* (note 1 above), pp. 39-130 (specifically pp. 89-90). For an account of the *arankerram*, or oral-performative literary debut, in the Tamil tradition, which was fully alive at late as the 1860s, see Norman Cutler, 'Three Moments in the Genealogy of Tamil Literary Culture', in *Literary Cultures in History*, pp. 271-322 (specifically pp. 282-5).

8 On Valmiki see 'Sanskrit Literary Culture', pp. 80-4; on the *chansons de geste*, Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht, 'Schriftlichkeit in mündlicher Kultur', in *Schrift und Gedächtnis: Beiträge zur Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation*, ed. by Aleida Assmann and others (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1983), pp. 158-74 (p. 168); on Caedmon, Martin Irvine, *The Making of Textual Culture: 'Grammatica' and Literary Theory, 350-1100* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 431-5.

9 And often with modalities specific to south Asia. On Rajasthani epic (and the oral recitation of a stably memorized text), John D. Smith, *The Epic of Pabuji: A Study, Transcription, and Translation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); on Tulu epic (and the Heisenberg principle at the level of textual transcription, where the observer affects the thing observed), Lauri Honko, *Textualising the Siri Epic* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia/Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1998). For a general account, *Oral Epics in India*, ed. by Stuart Blackburn and others (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

10 I felt forced to coin (as I thought) this rebarbative term (in 'The Cosmopolitan Vernacular', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 57,1 (1998), 6-37), but others also appear to have found it unavoidable, e.g. Pascale Casanova, *Republique des lettres* (Paris: Seuil, 1999), pp. 188-93.

11 For references see 'The Cosmopolitan Vernacular', pp. 28-32.

12 Trans. V. Narayana Rao, 'Coconut and Honey: Sanskrit and Telugu in Medieval Andhra', in *Literary History, Region, and Nation in South Asia*, ed. by Sheldon Pollock (*Social Scientist*, 23, 10-12 (1995)), 24-40 (specifically p. 24); see also V. Narayana Rao and others, 'A New Imperial Idiom in the Sixteenth Century: Krishnadevaraya and his Political Theory of Vijayanagara', in *South Indian Horizons*, ed. by Jean-Luc Chevillard and Eva Wilden (Pondicherry: Institut français, 2004), pp. 597-625.

13 On Srinathudu and Krsnadasa Kaviraj see *Literary Cultures in History* (note 1 above), pp. 419-26 and 518-21 respectively; for Eknath and Tukaram, Shankar Gopal Tulpule, *Classical Marathi Literature: From the Beginning to A.D. 1818* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1979), pp. 354-58 and 286-91 respectively.

14 *The Millennium Kabirvani: A Collection of pad-s*, ed. by Winand M. Callewaert and others (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 2000), pp. 1-26; Prithvidatta Chandrashobhi, *Premodern Communities and Modern Histories: Narrating Virasaiva and Lingayat Selves* (University of Chicago dissertation, 2005).

15 These are spelled out in *The Language of the Gods* (note 4 above), chapters 7 and 12, and some are touched on briefly below. See also my 'The Transformation of Culture-Power in Indo-Europe, 1000-1300', in *Eurasian Transformations*, ed. by Björn Wittrock and others (*Medieval Encounters*, 2004).

16 Roger Wright, 'Latin and Romance in the Castilian Chancery (1180-1230)', *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* (Liverpool), 73 (1996), 115-28.

17 Allison Busch, 'The Anxiety of Innovation: The Practice of Literary Science in the

Hindi Riti Tradition', in *Forms of Knowledge in Early-modern South Asia*, ed. by Sheldon Pollock (= *Comparative Studies in South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, Vol. 24, 2 (forthcoming)).

18 See for example John Earl Joseph, *Eloquence and Power: The Rise of Language Standards and Standard Languages* (New York: Blackwell, 1987), and of course Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (note 2 above), pp. 41-9. A certain standardization has certainly been achieved by Kannada, Gujarati and other vernaculars by the fourteenth century.

19 Very little good work exists on the development of post-brahmi scripts, certainly none that moves beyond positivist paleography. The best in the latter category remains A. H. Dani, *Indian Palaeography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963). He points toward 'proto-regional' developments centuries before vernacularization (p. 108) but offers no good hypothesis to account for it, aside from variation according to new writing tools, and the rather vague categories of 'taste for ornamentation', and the 'tendency to simplification' (p. 113). One ambitious recent overview, in *The World's Writing Systems*, ed. by Peter T. Daniels and William Bright (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 371-430, ignores every question of cultural-theoretical interest.

20 Note that with very few exceptions (e.g. brahmi itself, and siddhamatrka) there are almost no pre-modern descriptors for Indic scripts.

21 In 983 CE, the patron of the colossus at Sravanabelgola in Karnataka signed his name on the statue's foot in three languages and four scripts: Kannada in kannada characters, Tamil in grantha and vattelutu, and Marathi in devanagari (*Epigraphia Carnatika* 2: 159-60, nos 272, 273, 276).

22 See David Ganz (pages 147-56). On the non-arbitrary sign see Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, pp. 20-1.

23 The information is derived from B. Gopal, *Vijayanagara Inscriptions* (Mysore: Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Karnataka, 1985-).

24 Tony Stewart, personal communication (see n. 30 below).

25 Bimal Kumar Datta, *Libraries and Librarianship of Ancient and Medieval India* (Delhi: Atma Ram and Sons, 1970), p. 131. See in general P. K. Gode, 'Migration of Paper from China to India – AD 105-1500', in *Studies in Indian Cultural History*, vol. 3 (Pune: BOR Institute, 1969), pp. 1-12, especially pp. 4-5.

26 Matthew Kapstein, personal communication.

27 Fernand Braudel, *On History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 203-5. The remarkably slow acceptance of printing in Japan (see Peter Kornicki, this volume) is a striking parallel.

28 And possibly, by a factor of three, 'all that the scribes of Europe had produced since Constantine founded his city in AD 330' (see Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 13). The estimate on Indic manuscripts comes from the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts. The Greek comparison I owe to Christopher Minkowski.

29 *Jainapustakaprasastisamgraha*, ed. by Jinavijayamuni (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidyabhavan, 1943), e.g. no. 166 (p. 120), 180 (p. 122). For a convenient recent account of Hemacandra and his works see R. C. C. Fynes, tr. *Hemacandra: The Lives of the Jain Elders* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

30 I am very grateful to Tony Stewart for allowing me to cite this account from his work in progress. See also Edward C. Dimock and Tony Stewart, trans. *Caitanyacaritamrta of Krsnadasa Kaviraj* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999).

31 Albert Lord, *Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1960).

32 Philip Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text: Performing the Ramcaritmanas of Tulsidas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 141; see also pp. 9, 117, 13-31 and 11 for other points made in the paragraph. Useful on the transmission of the text is Sambhunarayan Chaubhe, *Manas Anusilan* (Varanasi: Nagari Pracarini Sabha, 2024 = 1967), especially pp. 40-5. Imre Bangha's work on Tulsi's *Kavitavali* shows that the extant manuscripts 'stem from written versions, and no phase of oral transmission was involved'. See 'The Dynamics of Textual Transmission in Pre-modern India', in *Forms of Knowledge in Early-modern South Asia* (note 17 above).

33 *atmapathanartham; balapathanartham; paropakarartham* (*Descriptive catalogue of Sanskrit manuscripts in the Adyar Library*, ed. by K. Madhava Krishna Sarma [Adyar, Madras: Adyar Library, 1942-], vol. 5, pp. 305, 100); *putrasya pathanartham; atma-manoharartham* (*A descriptive catalogue of Sanskrit manuscripts*, ed. by Hara Prasad Shastri [Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal,1917-], vol. 7, no. 4985; p. 286).

34 Some data for the 12th to 16th centuries are collected in *Jainapustakaprasastisamgraha*, e.g. nos 191 (p. 123), 333 (p. 142) (*kayasthas*); e.g. nos 84 (p. 78), 256 (p. 132), 285 (p. 136) (*mulyena grhita*); no. 78 (p. 74) (*dravyam bhuri vitirya pustakam idam ... lekhitam*).

35 It is unclear what the manuscript history of the *Tarka-samgraha* might tell us about the question of textual drift, since no one has examined the manuscripts of the work in detail. One study of a seventeenth-century work on language philosophy (what might be called a monograph rather than a textbook) shows just how vulnerable the text was to invasion by scholiasts' comments. See Gerdi Gerschheimer, *La théorie de la signification chez Gadadhara* (Paris: Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales, 1996), pp. 103-72, especially pp. 158-66. Some suggestions on the relationship between genre and textual stability and criticism are offered in Gérard Colas, 'Critique et transmission dans la littérature sanskrite', in *Des Alexandries I: Du livre au texte*, ed. by Luce Giard and Christian Jacob (Paris: Bibliothèque national de France, 2001), pp. 309-28 (pp. 319-23).

36 I am very grateful to Ian Willison and Graham Shaw for their criticisms of earlier drafts of this essay. I also wish to express my sincere gratitude to Wim Stockhof and the staff of the International Institute of Asia Studies, Leiden, which hosted me as visiting senior fellow during the drafting of this essay in June 2004.