Professor Completes Major Preservation Project of Bengali Manuscript Collection

According to Rebecca Manring, it was a project that “began rather casually and over time became an obsession.” Now an assistant professor in the Department of Religious Studies at Indiana University Bloomington, she can look back with a sense of enormous satisfaction on a preservation project that took the better part of eight years to accomplish, from 1993 to 2001. During those years, Manring was busy researching and writing her dissertation; teaching undergraduate classes; taking short field trips to India; locating funding, equipment, and collaborators; and handling all the logistics necessary to carry out the project.

The project was the cataloguing and microfilming of an important private but recently neglected collection of some 900 handwritten manuscripts of Middle Bengali literature. Now, thanks to Manring’s efforts, the microfilm master negatives of the Sukumar Sen (Barddhamān Sāhiya Sabhā) Manuscript Collection are stored at the South Asia Microforms Project (SAMP) housed at the Center for Research Libraries in Chicago. A circulating copy is available to scholars at SAMP, with a second copy for use at IU libraries. A third set will eventually be placed in an appropriate library in Kolkata (Calcutta). This preservation project represents one of the first large-scale collaborative manuscript preservation projects undertaken to date in South Asia.

Through a series of fortuitous events and some crucial networking with Indian and U.S. scholars, Manring’s original search for certain obscure, unpublished Bengali texts eventually took her to the city of Barddhamān near Kolkata to the closed-up home of Sukumar Sen, one of the India’s most noted Bengali scholars, who had died in 1992. Not finding what she was seeking but noting the size of Sen’s manuscript collection and that it was under attack by humidity, insects, and dust, she realized what a treasure the collection represented and that something should be done about it. “A sense of responsibility kicked in,” she remembers. She then began to conceive of a plan to catalogue, preserve, and somehow make the manuscripts more widely known and available to other scholars.

At a time when most scholars were not interested in non-Sanskrit, postclassical literary traditions, Sen, a professor of Indian linguistics and literature at the University of Calcutta, devoted himself to the study of Bengali literature, one of South Asia’s richest and oldest vernacular traditions. Throughout his long and prolific career, Sen worked on and collected numerous manuscripts, some of whose texts originated in the 13th century and some being the sole examples of their kind. Sen ultimately published a definitive five-volume study of this body of literature, which includes epics, poetry, as well as devotional and other materials.

Because climate and other environmental conditions in India adversely affect paper, Indian manuscripts do not survive long and have to be recopied every 100 years or so. Manuscripts, which may vary considerably in size, consist of loose sheets of hand-made paper, typically three times as wide as they are high, that are bundled together, sometimes between two wooden book covers, and tied. When Manring first saw the Sen collection, the manuscripts were deteriorating and in considerable disarray; sheets had fallen out, some were

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missing or simply misfiled, and the manuscripts were stacked without any apparent order. Furthermore, although Sen had catalogued his materials, a complete list has never been found.

Once Manring had secured the approval of the Sen family, her first task was to begin identifying and cataloguing these materials on-site in the family home, working a few weeks at a time over a period of years and as often as she could take time away from her duties at IU. At the same time, she and others whom she consulted realized that microfilm was the best and most cost-efficient form of preserving these manuscripts and making them accessible to other scholars. She then obtained two major sponsors, SAMP, which had ongoing microfilming projects in the area and was able to provide a portable microfilm camera, film, and technical assistance to do the microfilming, and the local Kolkata office of the American Institute of Indian Studies (AIIS), which awarded her with a senior research fellowship.

Although Manring’s first plan was to complete all microfilming of the delicate manuscripts on-site, the house was in need of major repairs. In readying the collection to be moved, a few hundred more manuscripts were found, hidden behind a bookcase. The entire collection of catalogued and uncatalogued materials had to be carefully wrapped, boxed, and moved to Kolkata. There, the AIIS allowed her to use their guest house, which she and a team of local researchers were able to convert into a makeshift darkened microfilm studio with a steady supply of electricity. Other members of the team were Hena Basu, Sundar Ganesan, Mahesh Kumar, Susmita Roy, and Bharati Roy. Working with surgical gloves and masks and using delicate paint brushes to clean off the dust, cobwebs, and bits of paper on some thousands of manuscript sheets, the team was able to complete the microfilming in just four weeks, a record time. Once filmed, each individual manuscript was then wrapped in handmade, low-acid paper, placed between pieces of strong lightweight particle board, wrapped again in traditional red cloth—a color that apparently repels insects—then tied and labeled. The original manuscripts are now back in the Sen family home in Barddhamān. Manring states that only 68 out of the hundreds of manuscripts remain unidentified. Of those, some are simply incomplete; others are fragmentary bits from different texts inappropriately bundled together.

For Manring, the project was truly an international collaboration combining U.S. and Indian resources and personnel. Most importantly, she says, SAMP’s preserving the entire collection on 46 microfilm reels “has made it possible for future scholars to have a glimpse of Sukumar Sen’s vision of Bengali literature in its entirety.” Her catalogue of the collection, which includes some material about Sen and his scholarship, is currently under prepublication review.

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