

# Breaking the BHU-*mudrā*: Acquisition of Sanskrit-Manuscript Scans in Varanasi

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May 19, 2025

(Last Revision: May 20, 2025)

*Saving the Kashmirian  
Sanskrit Heritage*

An ERC Advanced Grant

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## Acquisition of Sanskrit-Manuscript from the BHU for the Ka-Sa-Ha-Rakṣā-Project

In the spring of 2025, I travelled to India as part of the Ka-Sa-Ha-Rakṣā project. The aim was to acquire digital reproductions of Śāradā manuscripts from several locations across the country – from Kolkata to Varanasi, Srinagar, Jammu, Jodhpur, Nagpur, and Pune – all within a maximum of six weeks. Although many Śāradā manuscripts are already accessible through online archives, a significant number of important manuscripts can currently only be obtained offline. The journey turned out to be a great success, and there are countless small, entertaining stories I could share. Anyone in Indology who has ever tried to obtain copies of manuscripts in India will know how unpredictable things can get.

One such episode stands out in particular: my odyssey at Banaras Hindu University (BHU). BHU holds a substantial collection of Sanskrit manuscripts, including many from Kashmir written in the Śāradā script. The bulk of these Kashmiri manuscripts arrived in Varanasi between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, mainly through deliberate acquisitions by Indological institutions and waves of migration by Kashmiri Brahmins – particularly during or as a result of Afghan rule.

All of my colleagues expressed clear doubts about my plan to visit BHU. The reason? Generations of Indologists before me had already tried – and failed – to obtain digital or physical copies of Sanskrit manuscripts from BHU. At least, anything more than 20% of a manuscript. Yes, you read that correctly: the maximum allowed is just 20% – even less than the 30% permitted at the Asiatic Society in Kolkata. No one, not even the staff of the BHU themselves, seem to understand the logic behind this rule, but there it is. Nevertheless, the temptation to try was too great to resist. Nearly everyone on the project was keen to consult BHU's holdings, but for my part in particular – an edited volume of critical editions and translations of largely overlooked or unedited Kashmiri yoga texts – the BHU collection is an absolute treasure trove. It houses key witnesses for several important texts, including the *Amaraughaśāsana*, *Matsyodara*, and *Ṣaṭcakanirṇaya*, among others.

So, of course, I couldn't help myself. I had to try. And, well – here's how it went:

My arrival in Varanasi was, to put it mildly, far from pleasant. The city is famously chaotic and overcrowded at the best of times. But as luck would have it, my very first visit to this fascinating place coincided with the 2025 Mahā Kumbh Melā – not just any Kumbh Melā, but the particularly auspicious one held in Prayagraj, the great gathering that takes place only once every 144 years due to a rare celestial alignment. It's an event that practically every Hindu who can afford it aspires to attend – and unsurprisingly, many pilgrims also seize the chance to perform the

sacred city circumambulation (*pradakṣiṇā*) in Varanasi while they're nearby. The result? According to the government of Uttar Pradesh, over 660 million people – more than the entire population of the European Union – were packed into a few square kilometres in the course of the 45 days, many of them, it seemed, trying to pass through Varanasi at the same time as I was.



Figure 1: Very crowded Varanasi *ghāṭs* during 2025 Mahā Kumbh Melā.

The city was, quite literally, bursting at the seams. Not only was my flight from Kolkata to Varanasi as expensive as flying from Frankfurt to Kolkata (thankfully covered by the university), but from the moment I landed at Varanasi airport, it took me a full six hours to reach my guesthouse near Assi Ghat – a journey of less than 20 kilometres. That included two hours of waiting, four hours in a taxi, and one final hour in a cycle rickshaw. Needless to say, the atmosphere in the city was, well – let's call it intense.

## Day 1: The Mystery of the Indian Archive

The next morning, fuelled by a disappointingly weak Nescafé, I headed straight for the BHU campus. To its credit, the university grounds offer a much-needed escape from the chaos of Varanasi: lush greenery, noticeably less noise and traffic, and significantly cleaner air.



Figure 2: Main Gate, Banaras Hindu University.

Upon arriving at the Central Library, I had to surrender my backpack. After a prolonged negotiation with the gatekeeper, I was eventually allowed to take in my laptop. I then had to enter all my personal details into a large, public ledger—an act of data protection heresy, to say the least—before being granted access to the building. At the reception desk, I was greeted by an exceptionally friendly staff member who, after hearing my request, was more than willing to assist. Once I had copied my passport, filled in a convoluted form, and paid a small fee, I was officially permitted to use the library.

I made my way straight to the Manuscript Section, where I met Sanjay Kumar Singh, the kind and helpful head of the department. I think we're friends now. I introduced myself, explained the purpose of my visit, and expressed my wish to acquire digital copies of manuscripts for our project. He asked me to provide a list and pointed me toward the catalogue. I thought, "Well, this is going surprisingly smoothly." To his astonishment, I was already prepared—with a full list of desired manuscripts on my laptop. Unfortunately, there was no printer. No internet. No mobile signal. The Wi-Fi, I was told, had given up the ghost for the day. And so I painstakingly transcribed the rather long list by hand. When I handed him our list—73 manuscripts in total—he gave me a long, bewildered look. Going in bold seemed like a gamble worth taking. After all, Dr Jason Birch had advised me to start with only a handful of key manuscripts and then gradually request more—the classic salami-slice tactic. But knowing that even he hadn't had much





Figure 3: Entrance Banner of Central Library of the Banaras Hindu University.

luck at BHU, I figured a bulk request might lend an air of professionalism.

Sanjay Kumar Singh's look of bewilderment quickly turned to open disbelief. "What? So many? Are you serious?" he asked, clearly stunned. He explained that he'd love to help, but the policy only allowed 20% of each manuscript to be shared. I told him that 20% of a text was about as useful to us as a tuk-tuk with no petrol and no driver – utterly unusable for serious academic work. He understood, but said the decision wasn't his to make. He then took me to meet Dr Pravin Kumar Singh, the Assistant Librarian.

Now this fellow struck me as a bit stern and sceptical. I explained my case again, but he, too, insisted on the 20% rule. To be fair, he was polite—despite his rigid formality—and he repeatedly told me he wished he could help. But no matter how I argued, he wouldn't budge. Still, I remained persistent. After all, India has official traffic laws too, and we all know how much weight those carry. I reiterated that 20% of a manuscript was not enough for sound scholarly work and reminded him I had come all the way from Germany for these digital copies. Though he couldn't grant an exception, I think he began to feel a twinge of sympathy. He suggested I return the next day at 11 a.m. to meet Dr Devendra Kumar Singh, the Head Librarian, who, for reasons unknown, hadn't shown up that day.

A bit frustrated, though still holding on to a shred of hope, I made my way back to my guesthouse. I ended the day with a sweat-drenched yoga session and a gen-



Figure 4: Inside the Central Library of the Banaras Hindu University.



Figure 5: Sanjay Kumar Singh and I.

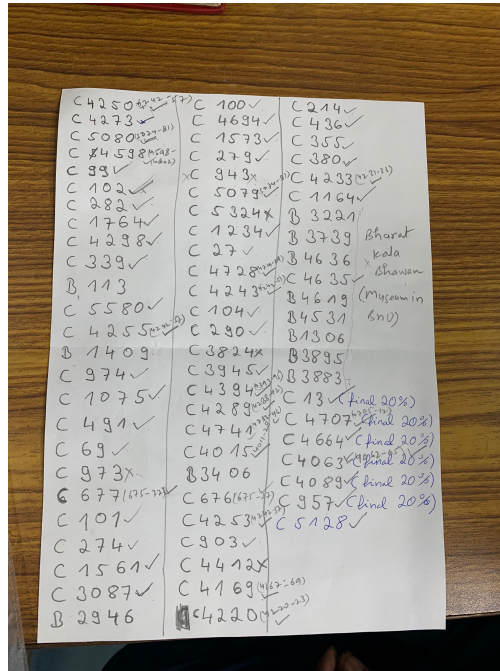


Figure 6: The handwritten list of our manuscript-order.

erous meal—both of which did wonders for my spirits.

## Day 2: The Coffee Quest and the Vanishing Librarian

The day began with an important mission: to find a better cup of coffee than the one I'd suffered through the day before. I finally succeeded at Assi Ghat and could indulge my caffeine addiction in peace. With slight inner restlessness - the coffee was quite strong - and since running a bit late, I hurried back - this time on foot, for the sake of my health - to the BHU Central Library. I couldn't afford to miss the Head Librarian; this was about manuscripts, after all. I arrived, covered in sweat, just five minutes behind schedule - still within the academic quarter, which surely applied here too.

Backpack deposited, forms filled out, library card renewed — I was in. My punctuality was rewarded with waiting: the “academic quarter”<sup>1</sup> — a phenomenon I

<sup>1</sup> The typical German academic excuse for being 15 minutes late to class, originally derived from the monastic “Stundengebet” (fixed-hour prayer). At our university, the origin has long been forgotten, but the delay is so common that any attempt to start on the hour is doomed to fail. This practice is sometimes referred to as the “akademisches Viertel” (academic quarter).

was already accustomed to from the German university system — now seemed to stretch closer to a third of the working day. The librarian had yet to show up. I tried to calm my nerves and settled into some work on my laptop.

Three hours later, he finally appeared. My eye was twitching slightly by then, but I introduced myself cheerfully, explained our project, showed him the letter from Prof. Dr. Jürgen Hanneder, and presented my case. I stressed that having only 20% of a manuscript was practically useless for philological research.

He responded that he might be able to give me one, maybe two or three manuscripts in full, but seventy-three? Impossible. I insisted, as politely persistent as ever, and asked whether an exception could be made for our case. Eventually, he told me the only person who could grant such an exception was the Vice Chancellor, Prof. Sanjay Kumar.<sup>2</sup> I was advised to write him a detailed email, attach the letter, explain the matter, and wait two or maximum three days for a response — since the university would be closed over the weekend. I did just that, writing the email right there in the librarian's office. Then I returned to the guesthouse, ending the day with yoga and a big meal.

## Day 3 & 4 – Waiting and Wandering

The next two days passed as I waited for the Vice Chancellor's reply. I used the time to explore the *ghāṭs*, do some sightseeing, and get work done on my laptop. One day I set out to visit the Saraswati Kala Bhawan Library, but after an hour — long auto-rickshaw ride through the chaotic Kumbh Mela traffic, I discovered it was closed. Disappointed, I headed back.

## Day 5 – Rough Air, Rougher Throat

The air quality was awful, my throat was sore, and it felt like I'd swallowed pack of sandpaper. I stayed in my room, working on my laptop. In the evening, I ventured out — only to be dragged, against my will, to a Hindu wedding. But that's a story for another time.

## Day 6 – Down the Rabbit Hole

After three days, I began to suspect I'd never hear back from the Vice Chancellor. I decided to go find him myself. I headed to the Central Office and repeated my request. I filled out multiple forms and signed my name on more lists than I could

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<sup>2</sup> I learned that at BHU, the Vice Chancellor is indeed the highest authority—not the Chancellor.





Figure 7: Sādhu practicing *śīrṣāsana* at the *ghāṭs*.





Figure 8: Burning bodies at the *ghāṭs*.



Figure 9: Hindu wedding against my will.

count—each one carefully placed behind every security guard and doorway. At the Vice Chancellor's reception, I filled out yet more paperwork and submitted a written version of my request. Eventually, someone took the documents to him. The message came back via his secretary: he couldn't decide alone. I should visit Dr Rajesh Singh at the International Centre – he handled international cooperation.



Figure 10: Handshake with Dr Rajesh Singh.

Nothing could shock me anymore. Or so I thought. Dr Singh welcomed me warmly, offered chai and biscuits, and told me stories about his time in Germany – physics projects with German universities, which was a good sign for me.

Then I explained my request. He paused. And then said – brace yourself – I should write a detailed letter to the Vice Chancellor. I felt like I'd stepped into The Twelve Tasks of Asterix, where they try to obtain Permit A38 from a madhouse of an office. I explained that I had already written to the Vice Chancellor – and that he had sent me here. Dr Singh asked me to print the letter again, along with my passport and the recommendation letter from our project head. He scribbled a note of support on it and signed it. Then he sent me back to – brace yourself – the librarian. Some aspects of Indian bureaucracy defy understanding. Or perhaps I just don't want to understand them. Does anyone? Would this ever end? Unfortunately, by the time I returned, the librarian had already left for the day.

## **Day 7 – No Librarian Today**

I returned the next morning after my now-essential coffee. But the librarian was out all day.

## **Day 8 – A Glimmer of Hope**

The same routine again, but this time the librarian was in. I updated him on recent developments. He seemed more sympathetic now – but, unsurprisingly, said Dr Singh's recommendation wasn't enough. He still wanted written approval from the Vice Chancellor. I explained that I'd written, visited, gone to the Central Office, seen Dr Singh, and so on. Finally, after some firm but polite negotiation, he agreed to contact the Vice Chancellor directly himself. He said he'd call me the next day. I went home, frustrated.

## **Day 9 – Radio Silence**

I heard nothing the next day. Perhaps I should give it up.

## **Day 10 – Final Attempt**

Would he ever call? I had serious doubts. Experience told me: no, he wouldn't. So I made one last, desperate attempt. Back to BHU. I bought a new library card. Straight to the librarian. He looked genuinely surprised to see me again – had he hoped I'd given up? I (diplomatically) urged him to call the Vice Chancellor in my presence. At long last, he did. The Vice Chancellor said there must be written rules on this somewhere. So the librarian had one of his staff dig through a mountain of yellowing papers stacked in a corner. It took an hour—felt like four—but eventually they found the relevant sheet. And there it was: BHU is allowed to sell digital copies of manuscripts for non-commercial academic purposes, provided the research is credible, the university is credited in publications, and BHU receives three copies. The final decision? Rests with the librarian. Relief flooded through me. I had made it. I felt like Drew Carson in American Shaolin, finally admitted to the Shaolin temple after endless trials.

## Day 11 – Victory at Last

At last, I was able to collect the digital copies. There were a few minor hiccups with the payment, but nothing worth mentioning.



Figure 11: Paying the digital copies of the manuscripts at BHU Central Library.

## Conclusion – The Path of Persistence

Acquiring the digital copies was a wild ride I won't soon forget. Patience and persistence paid off. And now I understand why so many Indologists before me gave up at this stage. But I like to think my efforts have paved the way. Those who come after me might find the doors a little more open – because the yoga researcher has finally broken the BHU-*mudrā*.