

International Memory of the World Register

Nisvasattatvasaṃhitā

(Nepal)

2012-73

1.0 Summary (max 200 words)

The nominated document is a palm-leaf manuscript called *Niśvāsattatvasaṃhitā*, preserved in the National Archives of Nepal in Kathmandu. The manuscript is from the 9th century is the earliest surviving tantric manuscript, and it has had a great influence in shaping other tantric texts. It has also played an especially important role in discovering and explaining the history of Śaiva tantra, the tantric texts of the people who worshipped Shiva as their main god.

Tantrism is the name of an inter-religious spiritual movement that flourished in medieval India around the fifth century. It is expressed in scriptures called tantras. Tantrism was practiced either for gaining worldly or celestial enjoyments or for gaining the state of shivahood, i.e. oneness with the supreme god.

Tantrism has had impact on many major Asian religions; even Islam practiced in India was influenced by tantrism (Fic 2003:60). The Western World has been influenced by tantras through the practice of yoga, which has its roots in tantrism (Bjonnes) as well as through the New Age groups in America (Wikipedia).

The manuscript consists of 114 folios written in a Nepalese “Licchavi (Kutila)” script with 6 (occasionally 5) lines to a side. On the paleographical evidence the manuscript is from the 9th century. The text of the “Niśvāsattatvasaṃhitā” consists of five books: *Niśvāsamukha*, *Mūlasūtra*, *Uttarasūtra*, *Nayasūtra* and *Guhyasūtra*.

We nominate Niśvāsattatvasaṃhitā to the Memory of the World register for the following reasons:

- It preserves the earliest account of Śaiva tantra as the earliest part of the text was written between 450–550 AD. As this text is so early this is an important source for the early history of tantrism. (See Goodall and Isaacson 2007:4–5)
- It is the only one existing manuscript of this text from the 9th century.
- This is a fundamental tantra of the Śiva Siddhānta, one of the main branches of the Śiva religion, one of the earliest religions on the Indian subcontinent.
- It contains a great amount of unparalleled material that is important to understand the Śaiva religions and other religions such as Buddhism and Jainism (See Goodall and Isaacson 2007:4–5).

2.1 Name of nominator (person or organization)

National Archives, Kathmandu, Nepal

2.2 Relationship to the nominated documentary heritage

Owner

2.3 Contact person(s) (to provide information on nomination)

Mr. Prakash Darnal, Chief, National Archives

2.4 Contact details

Name	Address	
National Archives	Ramshaha Path Kathmandu, Nepal	
Telephone	Facsimile	Email
977 01 4264353		mail@nationalarchives.gov.np

3.0 Identity and description of the documentary heritage

3.1 Name and identification details of the items being nominated

If inscribed, the exact title and institution(s) to appear on the certificate should be given

Title: *Niśvāsatattvasaṃhitā*

Institution: National Archives , Ramshah Path, Kathmandu Nepal

3.2 Catalogue or registration details

Title: *Niśvāsatattvasaṃhitā*

Subject: *Tantra*

Script: *Licchavi*

Materiel: Palm-leaf with wooden cover

Manuscript no. 1-277

Reel no. A 41/14

Folios: 114

Size: 50.0 x 4.0 cm

Language: Sanskrit

State: partly damaged, some pages are missing.

Date: C. 9th century

Owner of the Manuscript: Nepal National Archives

3.4 History/provenance

On palaeographical basis it can be said that *Niśvāsatattvasaṃhitā* was written in 9th century (see 5.1 below for more information). According to the history of Nepal, Licchavi Dynasty was in power from about 185 to 750 AD. A transitional Kingdom was in power from 750 to 1200 AD until the Malla Dynasty came in power. The first monarch of the Malla Dynasty, Ari Malla ruled in Kathmandu Valley from 1200 to 1216 AD. There was neither a government body for collecting and preserving the manuscript, books or other documents at that period nor a body for its collection. The history doesn't say where these documents of that era, which are now in the possession of National Archives, were kept or preserved. They might be in the

collection of the King or someone who held the power at that time, or in the collection of individual people.

In 1812 AD, Girwarnayuddha Bikram Shah ordered through a decree to keep the documents at the Basantapur Durbar (royal palace) in a systematic order and to preserve them. Later they were transferred to Thapathali Durbar by Janga Bahadur in 1847 and again to Durbar School after its completion in 1853. In 1900, after Bir Samsher constructed a library at Ghanta Ghar, the books were moved there and the library was named the Bir Library. *Nisvasatattvasamhitā*, with many others, which are in the collection of National Archives till date, were transferred into National Archives with its establishment in 1967 AD (VS 2024) from Bir Library (a. k. a. Darbar Library).

4.0 Legal information

4.1 Owner of the documentary heritage (name and contact details)

Name	Address	
National Archives	Ramshah Path, Kathmandu, Nepal	
Telephone	Facsimile	Email
+ 977 (0)1		mail@nationalarchives.gov.np

4.2 Custodian of the documentary heritage (name and contact details if different from the owner)

Name	Address	
Telephone	Facsimile	Email

4.3 Legal status

The submitted manuscript is part of the collection of the National Archives and the property of State of Nepal.

The activities which are connected to the manuscripts of the National Archives are directed by "Archives Preservation Act 1989 " and "Archives Preservation Rule 2006"

This manuscript falls under the subsection 2.1.1 of section 2 (definitions):

Hand-Written manuscript, book, report, financial statement, treaty and agreement, newspaper and magazine, letter, deed, drawing, photo, map, plan, chart, file, case file, register or any publication.

Archives Preservation Act 1989 article 3.1 has provisioned that there shall be a National Archives for the preservation of Archives in systematic way. Similarly, article 3.2 states that the National Archives established prior to the commencement of this Act, shall deemed to have been established under this Act.

This proves that the only authentic body having legal and administrative responsibility for the preservation of this manuscript is the National Archives of Nepal.

4.4 Accessibility

A microfilm of this manuscript is publicly accessible for reading and studying. It can be studied in microfilm reader within office hours free of charge. Copies of the manuscript

can be obtained in the following three ways:

- CDs or in DVDs (digital copy);
- Paper print from microfilm reader;
- Positive reel developed from negative.

These copies will be charged in accordance with the Archives Preservation Rule 2006.

4.5 Copyright status

National Archives has full copyright of this document.

5.1 Authenticity.

Inscriptional history began in Nepal since 255 BC and in Kathmandu since 185 AD. On the palaeographical basis together with some hints from the text, we can say that this document was written in or nearby Kathmandu Valley as this script was only used in the Kathmandu Valley area. This is the only existing manuscript of this text (see Sanderson, 2006: 152 or Goodall and Isaacson, 2007:4).

The authenticity of the document, as well as dating it to the 9th century has been agreed upon by many international experts, such as Śāstrī (1905:lxvii), Bagchi (1939:3-4), Sanderson (2006:152) and Goodall and Isaacson (2007:2). Nirajan Kafle, in his unpublished doctoral thesis (2012:5), writes about the date of the manuscript:

“Since the manuscript is not dated we have to rely on the paleography to date the manuscript. On the paleographical evidence, the manuscript of the *Niśvāsa* is bit late than the manuscript of the old *Skandapurāṇa* which is dated to 810. Furthermore, the manuscript is again later than the Nepalese manuscript of the *Pārameśvara* manuscript dated with 'saṃvat 252' which most probably is the era of the Mānadeva¹, that is to say, 828 AD. Our manuscript is certainly not of the 10th century since (1) it is written in transitional Gupta character (after Gupta and before Newari) and (2) the manuscript from the 10th century are written in a Newari-styled script than to a Gupta-styled². Thus, on the paleographical evidence we can say that the manuscript is from the 9th century. See also Śāstrī 1905:lxvii, Bagchi 1939:3–4, Professor Sanderson (2006:152) and Goodall and Isaacson (2007:4–6).”

5.2 World significance

The nominated document is a 9th century palm-leaf manuscript called *Niśvāsattatvasaṃhitā*. The manuscript is the earliest surviving tantric manuscript, and it has had a great influence in shaping other tantric texts. It has also played an important part in discovering the history of Śaiva tantra and other tantras.

Tantrism is the name of an inter-religious spiritual movement that started in medieval

1 We have the manuscript of the *Suśrutasaṃhitā*, which is quite close to the paleography of the *Pārameśvara* manuscript, is dated to 252, in Mānadeva era. See also Goodall 1998:xlili, fn. 97.

2 An early 10th century manuscript of the *Laṅkāvatāra*, which is the first dated manuscript in Nepal Saṃvat, is dated to NS 28 which would be 908 AD.

India in the fifth century. It is a practical philosophy that seeks liberation (*mukti*) through enjoyments (*bhukti*). Tantra represents physicality; Mantra represents the mind or sense. Together they form yantra, a complete machine that is formed by mantra and tantra.

Tantrism is expressed in scriptures called tantras. Tantrism was practiced either for gaining worldly or celestial enjoyments or for the sake of the liberation. The main message of tantrism is that universe is the nothing else than consciousness.

Tantrism has had impact on many major Asian religions; even Islam practiced in India was influenced by tantrism (Fic 2003:60). The Western World has been influenced by tantras through the practice of yoga, which has its roots in tantrism (Bjonnes) as well as through the New Age groups in America (Wikipedia). All of the practices known to be Yogic in nature, for example asanas (physical yoga exercises), pranayama (breathing exercises), and samadhi (spiritual ecstasy), are Tantric, not Vedic, as often taught by Western Yoga teachers (Bjonnes).

It has also played an especially important role in discovering and explaining the history of Śaiva tantra, the tantric texts of the people who worshipped Shiva as their main god.

This manuscript is from the 9th century and also the oldest surviving Śaiva Tantra, the tantric texts of the people who worshipped Shiva as their main god. Therefore it has a great significance in studying the history of Tantrism and other schools of philosophy within and outside Asia. The original texts of the manuscript have been written between 5th and 7th century. Therefore the manuscript preserves a lively Tantric culture of that period, which needs to be understood in order to understand other schools of tantra and the whole history of India and its subcontinent. It is a unique example of Tantric literature and it has greatly influenced later tantric texts. One of these texts is *Svacchanda*, one of the most important Śaiva tantras. All existing tantric rituals of the Śaiva religion have been written based on *Svacchanda*.

This document is also the principal source for the information about the cosmologic system as understood by the Pāśupatas, one of the earliest branches of Śaivism. The system describes the cosmologic system starting from the very bottom of the universe, a hell called *avīci*, and ending with Dhruva, the highest god with whom people wanted to achieve oneness in order to reach liberation.

Pāśupatas is believed have flourished as early as the second century (Sanderson 2006:147). Only few text of this system has survived to date.

Scholars, beginning with Hara Prasad Śāstrī in 1905, Bagchi in 1939, Professor Sanderson in 2006 and Goodall and Isaacson in 2007, have taken the notice of the manuscript of *Niśvāsa* and its significance. Below is a list of quotations from their publications:

Śāstrī 1905:xxvii : “*Niśvāsatattvasaṃhitā* [...] is written in transitional Gupta character which may be a century older, then the *Pārameśvara* tantra, copied in 859 AD.”

Bagchi 1939:3–4: "One of the oldest Tāntric texts preserved in the Nepal Darbar Library is the *Niśvāsatattvasaṃhitā* written in the Gupta script of the 8th century AD (page, 4fn.1).

Professor Sanderson (2006:152): "The principal source of the evidence I shall present is *Niśvāsaṃhitā*. This work, which appears in all lists of the Sāiddāntika Śaiva

canon of scripture as one of the eighteen Rudratāntras, survives in a single palm leaf manuscript preserved in the Nepalese Archives in Kathmandu. It is not dated but it is written in a Nepalese "Licchavi" script which can be assigned approximately to the period 850–900 AD."

Goodall and Isaacson (2007:4) write: "It is the manuscript of the *Niśvāsa* now transmitted to us in a single beautiful Nepalese manuscript of perhaps the 9th century, one of the unique treasure of the National Archives, Kathmandu, microfilmed by the NGMPP (NGMPP A41/14). "

5.3 Comparative criteria:

1 Time

Nisvasattatvasaṃhitā was discovered in 1905 by Hara Prasad Sastri, and it has changed that history of the Tantric studies. It preserves archaic features such as:

1. Total absence of *mala* (defilement), which plays a central role in later tantric texts.
2. Absence of animal sacrifice
3. It contains only 5 *aṅgamantras* (*hrdaya*, *sirah*, *sikha*, *kavaca* and *astral sivastra*), while most of later texts contain six. The missing *aṅgamantra* is called *netra*.
4. It mentions only two *nāḍīs* (tubes), *suṣumnā* and *iḍā*, whereas in later text there are normally three *nāḍīs*.

Nisvasattatvasaṃhitā preserves the original ideas of tantra.

The document also illustrates the use of supernatural powers, such as subjugating Guhyasūta (10.18, 11.88), killings (10.19ff) and other powers by which one becomes *siddha* (accomplished one, see Guhyasūtra 11.89ff). Based on historic references, it can be assumed these powers were used in the many wars between the kingdoms of the Indian subcontinent. The earliest part of the text must have been composed between 450-550 AD (See Goodall and Isaacson 2007:4–5) and the whole corpus must have been composed before 8th century since the *Svacchanda* tantra which is believed to be composed around 8th century borrows chunks of text from the *Niśvāsa*.

2. Form and style

The material used for the *Nisvasattatvasaṃhitā* is palm leaves, one of the oldest mediums of writing in South Asian countries including Nepal, Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Indonesia and Cambodia. Palm leaf manuscripts are found in linear horizontal format due to the natural size of the leaves. The length of the leaves vary from 15cm-60cm and width between 3cm-12cm. Before using palm leaves, they have to be processed to prepare them for scribing. First the leaves are cut into required size and boiled in water to make them soft. After boiling they are dried in the shade or mild sunshine. Once dry, the leaves are pressed, polished and trimmed to size.

Although the lifespan of a palm leaf manuscript is considered to be about 300-350 years, in Nepal they have remained longer due to the suitable climate of Kathmandu

valley.

The text in this documentary heritage has its own style and language, not following the standard Sanskrit language or the grammar of Pāṇini. We find many non-standard forms in this corpus - *Nisvasattatvasaṃhitā* is an outstanding example of *aiśa*, - *when we find non-standard forms in tantric text call them aiśa*- i.e. the speech of god, which does not have to follow the standard grammar rules. Likewise there is a great influence of the *prākṛt* in the text, such as the use of *sāyojya* for *sāyujya* and so forth. The text is mainly written on lively Śloka-style (*anuṣṭubh*) meter with abundant use *vipulās* ("extended"). As Goodall (1998: lxxi) observes some of relatively later tantras, such as Kiraṇa and Svāyambhuvasūtrasaṃgraha are bland in using *vipulās* and *Parākhya* occasionally uses them. Surprisingly we even get some use of *sa-vipulā* which is of course rare and authenticity of it is questionable too.

3. Spiritual significance

Before tantric philosophy came into being in India, it was generally believed that there existed only one type of the Vedic initiation (*dīkṣā*) that grants liberation (*Niśvāsamukha* 1.7). *Niśvāsattatvasaṃhitā* introduces its own tantric initiation (*dīkṣā*) that grants liberation more efficiently, without long ritual procedure. This document represents the view of the people who thought that the liberation is also possible through tantric initiation. Since this text is so early, this is the source for us to understand now type of philosophy and a new looks over spirituality that flourished during the time when text was written. This text is an example of the setting down of the Vedic system and the rise of the tantric one.

In the Vedic religion only certain castes were allowed to practice religion. *Niśvāsattatvasaṃhitā* was one of the first tantric texts that changed this tradition, stating that all people, including women and people from the lowest castes have the right to practice religion. This was a major change in many peoples' lives as they were for the first time given the opportunity to be initiated to a system that had a huge importance in the lives of the people. This change has made it possible for women and people from lowest castes to be gurus of their religion in today's world.

6.0 Contextual information

6.1 Rarity

Niśvāsattatvasaṃhitā is from 9th century, and the only existing manuscript of this text. There are no other texts from this period in this field that would have been found.

There are only three apographs of this manuscript in the world (In Wellcome Institute, London, date of written: VS 1912 AD; In National Archives, date of written: 1925 AD; and in Tucci's collection, Italy)

6.2 Integrity

Niśvāsattatvasaṃhitā is written on palm leaves which are covered by two beautifully painted wooden covers. These two covers contain pictures of tantric deities. This manuscript contains 114 folios. Considerable amount of the text has been lost: the text is incomplete and the leaves are damaged on margins. The original foliation has

been lost due to the damage on the margins and it is foliated in modern style in a different hand. The later foliation continues up to the end of the manuscript, but some folios have been lost in the middle. Most likely the lost section covers *śaktisāmarasya* (oneness with śakti, i.e. female power).

The manuscript is covered with wooden covers that are a little longer than the leaves. There are two binding holes on both the covers and the leaves. There are 9 pictures of deities on red-colored background in the inner side of the front cover. On the inner side of the back cover there are 10 fully visible deities and 2 deities only partly visible due to scratching on the areas. The scratched part of the cover is white on the red-coloured background.
