CHAPTER TWO

ON THE JOHAN VAN MANEN COLLECTION:
ITS ORIGIN AND BACKGROUND

Saraju Rath

1. Two crates of sanskrit palm-leaf manuscripts arrived in Leiden at the Kern Institute in 1929. Seventy five years later, in January 2004, a project started that had as aim to prepare a Catalogue of these manuscripts which Johan van Manen and a helper of his collected in India. The workshop on the “production, distribution and collection of manuscripts in ancient South India” (International Institute for Asian Studies, Leiden, 20-21 April 2007) was organized in connection with this project. The studies in this volume were first presented and discussed at this workshop.

The problems addressed in this workshop apply very much to the manuscripts of the van Manen collection.\(^1\) Thanks to the good care taken of the manuscripts over the decades, they are physically preserved quite well. However, the collection is relatively poorly documented and we have practically no direct information on the time and circumstances of the production of these manuscripts, nor do we know in sufficient detail how they were distributed and collected perhaps first in pre-modern times and next, at the request of Prof. J.Ph. Vogel, by the manuscript collector employed by van Manen. Finally, after their arrival in Leiden they have received limited scholarly attention as they are in majority

\(^1\) I will focus here on an overview of the origin and the Dutch and European context of the Johan van Manen collection. 395 texts were known to be included in the collection. In the cataloguing project 193 additional texts (almost 50% of the initial number) have been discovered in the manuscripts. A complete list of titles of these texts (588 in total) is available at http://www.iias.nl/profile/saraju-rath. A Catalogue providing more details on the manuscripts and the texts they contain is under preparation.
in some of the less accessible, and currently obsolete, South Indian scripts.

2.1 For a discussion of the origins of van Manen’s collection of Sanskrit manuscripts a few biographical remarks on Johan van Manen are required. Johan van Manen was born on 16 April 1877 in Nijmegen and died in Calcutta on 17 March 1943, almost a month before his sixty-sixth birthday. At the age of eighteen, Johan van Manen got interested in theosophy and enthusiastically joined the Theosophical Society which was founded in New York in 1875 and which had a branch in the Netherlands since 1881. In 1908 van Manen left for India where he arrived in February 1909 at the Theosophical Society’s International Headquarters in Adyar near Madras, India. He became the joint-librarian of the Adyar Library which at that time contained already a large number of books on theosophy and philosophy, and a collection of 16,000 manuscripts. Van Manen adds another thousand manuscripts with the help of an Indian collector whose assistance he will invoke again fifteen years later. In 1916, after a conflict with the then president of the Theosophical Society, Mrs. Annie Besant, he leaves Adyar. He moves to Darjeeling in order to familiarize himself with the Tibetan language and with Tibetan Buddhism on the basis of a direct study of the sources. In 1918 he became Ordinary Member of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, and at the end of 1918 he started to replace the acting Librarian of the Imperial Library in Calcutta. In this period he co-organized the collection of a large number of Tibetan

---

2 In 1903 van Manen had the opportunity to go to the Dutch East Indies where he participated actively in newly founded lodges of the Theosophical Society. After his return to Europe in 1904 he was involved in the organisation of the annual congress of the federation of the Theosophical Society’s European Sections in 1904 in Amsterdam, in 1905 in London, and in 1906 in Paris. At the latter occasion, Dr. Steiner, the later founder of Anthroposophy, expressed on behalf of everyone his satisfaction with the hard work of van Manen.

3 He must have witnessed the discovery in 1909 of the young Krishna who was selected to become the new world teacher by C.W. Leadbeater but who, as Krishnamurti, rejected not only the role of world teacher but also the Theosophical Society in 1929.

4 In this function he helped many scholars in their research; the German Sanskritist and main librarian at Adyar, F. Otto Schrader, writes in his work on Minor Upaniṣads (1912, p. liv): “I am further under deep obligation to my assistant and friend Mr Johan van Manen for his useful typographical suggestions and the pains he has taken in reading the proofs of the larger part of this volume.”