

Textual Scholarship in the Digital Age: A Comparative Analysis of Bichitra: Online Tagore Variorum and BLEAP 1612

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Abstract

This article seeks to examine the interaction of institutional power, technological use and political ideology in the preservation of South Asian literature, specifically Bengali literature. A comparative analysis of the digital archive of Rabindranath Tagore's works, Bichitra: Online Tagore Variorum, funded by the Ministry of Culture, India and supervised by a team of experts from Jadavpur University, and the manuscript digitisation and preservation project of Kazi Nazrul Islam, BLEAP 1612, funded by Arcadia is presented here. While Bichitra has emerged as a self-contained digital island to showcase the aesthetic evolution of Rabindranath Tagore's writings, BLEAP 1612 is working to save the neglected manuscripts of the Rebel Poet from destruction in Churulia near Asansol. The differences between these two projects have been identified in the light of digital representation and archival noise theories. The main objective of this article is to bring forward the marginal and unique struggle of Kazi Nazrul Islam in the discussion of digital humanities and to establish that BLEAP 1612 is not just a simple digitisation project, but rather a very crucial post-colonial initiative to break the elitist or metropolitan-centric narrative of the history of modern Bengali literature.

Keywords: Rabindranath Tagore, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Bichitra Online Tagore Variorum, BLEAP 1612, Digital Humanities, Post-colonial Preservation.

Introduction

Just as the blue sky and the red earth are different, two different poetic personalities have captured the minds of the people of Bengal for many ages. On the one hand, one would find the highly acclaimed, almost deified Nobel laureate poet Rabindranath Tagore. His elegant and vast literary creation is considered the best product of the Bengal Renaissance. On the other hand, is Kazi Nazrul Islam, who has secured a place in the hearts of the people of Bengal, in both India and Bangladesh, as the Rebel poet. Nazrul's songs and poems were not merely art. These were weapons to break the chains of British imperialism in India. While he was prolific in Shyama Sangeet and Bhajan, he also created with the same ease and skill modern Ghazals and Islamic songs and called for the formation of a non-communal society.

In this digital age, when the original manuscripts of these two poets are gradually deteriorating due to the laws of time, their digital transformations have taken two different turns. In the field of Digital Humanities, preserving a cultural heritage does not mean just taking images with a camera or a scanner. Behind this entire process various equations of power work. The main aim of this article is to evaluate Nazrul's Digital Humanities Archive (at Kazi Nazrul University and Banwarilal Bhalotia College, as well as the British Library in the UK) from the context of a marginal area like Churulia in Asansol, going outside Kolkata. We wish to analyse and understand in detail how the decaying documents of Nazrul are being preserved through an international rescue operation, emerging from the shadow of the

vast institutional infrastructure allotted to Rabindranath Tagore.

Digital Representation and Archival Noise

To understand the theoretical aspects of digital preservation, one must first know what happens when a paper manuscript appears on a computer screen. Emma Stanford argues that digitisation or digital transformation is not a neutral or transparent process. The image or picture we see on a computer is not an exact copy of the original paper; it is a digital surrogate or alternative form. The digital form is created based on the light of the scanner or camera lens, the resolution, and the software used to reduce the file size. Stanford warns us that researchers overlook the historical wear and tear of the original document, the feel or smell of the paper, and the various marks of time, which were, in fact, living evidence of history, as they look at the clean computer images. (Stanford 203 - 214)

Stanford's theory leads us to another important concept, which researchers Ana Dot and Pablo Santa Olalla call archival noise management. The torn parts, ink stains, or insect-eaten holes on a document are seen as distractions in the archive. Digital archives spend a lot of money, time and energy to remove all these blemishes with the help of various software. They often try to create a beautiful and smooth digital form (178-188). But as we understand it, in the case of the manuscripts of a powerful yet greatly unacknowledged genius like Nazrul, this noise is probably the greatest evidence of his life struggle.

At this point, Langmead and Newberry's "Pointers and Proxies" concept becomes relevant. They say that digital databases essentially hold some signs or 'proxies' of the real world. Therefore, the way we try to create a database or website reveals our social values. (358-373) If we design a technology or database that can only hold perfect and neat literary works, then the fragmented, messy and sometimes controversial works of poets like Nazrul will be left out of that archive. Therefore, it is necessary to examine how the Bichitra and EAP 1612 projects are using these digital alternatives and historical scratches.

The Bichitra Online Portal

In the year 2013, Bichitra: Online Tagore Variorum was launched with the financial support of the Government of India and the initiative of the School of Cultural Texts and Records (SCTR) of Jadavpur University. Led by Professor Sukanta Chowdhury, about thirty researchers, computer scientists and linguists worked tirelessly for two years to develop this huge portal. About 140,000 pages of original documents have been scanned and arranged here, which include Rabindranath Tagore's manuscripts, first edition books, articles published in newspapers and the poet's own English translations. (Risam)

The biggest technological achievement of Bichitra is its own collator or text-comparison software, called Praved. A major feature of Tagore's writing was that he repeatedly revised his own drafts and published works throughout his life. For

example, a short poem may have been rewritten twenty years later as a song for a play, or its meaning may have changed completely during the English translation. It is impossible to show these complex changes in a regular paper book. The Praved software solves this problem by using three levels of comparative analysis. These are the levels of gross collation, segment collation and word collation. At the first level, the software compares entire chapters or scenes. It highlights the similarities and differences between different versions on the screen through coloured horizontal bands, allowing the reader to understand at a glance how the writing structure has changed over time. On the second level, a reader clicks on a particular paragraph or stanza of the poem, and lines appear on the screen showing where it is in other versions. And on the final level the original text is compared with another text in a four-pane window, and each change is indicated by a colour. It appears that the huge amount of government funding and institutional opportunity that went into creating this technological infrastructure could only have been afforded by a world-renowned poet like Rabindranath Tagore. His manuscripts were collected from secure and protected places like the Rabindra Bhavana in Santiniketan and the Houghton Library at Harvard University. This is why Roopika Risam describes Bichitra as a digital island. It is indeed a luxurious island that is completely isolated from the wretchedness of real-world archives. It assumes that all the material is already preserved and catalogued, so researchers can engage in high-quality

theorising directly. But it seems to us that this model is impossible to apply to other marginalised and less acknowledged writers of India and South Asia.

Kazi Nazrul Islam and the EAP 1612 Project

While Bichitra is a well-decorated palace, the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme Pilot Project 1612 is a desperate struggle to save some priceless treasures from destruction. Kazi Nazrul Islam's life was a burning history of poverty, struggle, war and protest. Born into a very ordinary family in the village of Churulia, he spoke for the exploited masses throughout his life. But in 1942, at the age of just 43, he was struck by a mysterious and incurable disease and lost his speech. Probably, his untimely silence caused a great disaster in the preservation of his literary legacy. It would not be unfair to say that unlike Tagore, he did not have a zamindari estate or a well-organized institution like Visva-Bharati behind him.

As a result, some portion of Nazrul's original manuscripts, personal diaries, letters and photographs were lying in an unreceptive environment at the Churulia Nazrul Museum near Asansol, and outside Kolkata. Due to the bad weather of Bengal, polluted air, termite infestation and lack of proper infrastructure, these pieces of paper were almost destroyed. In this situation, with a special grant from the British Library and Arcadia and through a joint initiative of researchers Dr Santanu Banerjee (of Kazi Nazrul University) and Rajarshi Das (Banwarilal Bhalotia College, Asansol) and assistants Suvojit Chatterjee, Ashutosh Sarkar and Tridev Ruidas, this rescue project was

initiated. The priceless gems recovered from the Churulia and converted into digital media are astonishing. As per the BL EAP website, this project digitised the poet's personal notebooks and drafts, personal Quran Sharif, historical letters, and rare photographs. Through this archive, one would see how Nazrul used to compose melodies, experiment with the ragas and talas of songs and how he wrote the first drafts of his many famous lyrics. Nazrul's family Quran Sharif shows how his religious generosity and depth of spiritual consciousness brought together Islamic tradition and global humanity. The letters exchanged between contemporary political activists, writers and the poet's family members, are a living document of both independence movement and post-independence scenario of this country. Some pictures of the poet's family and social life at various times, reveal which have never been seen before by the general public. (Methodology)

However, the nature of the work of the BLEAP 1612 project was not as comfortable as that of Bichitra. Here, the first task of the researchers was to clean the dust, fix each torn piece of paper with a special soft brush and use a chemical process to protect it from insect attacks. Then, with the help of a special camera, photographs of each page were taken with great care. The biggest aspect of this work is its local capacity building. This work was not done by a research team from a major university in Kolkata; rather, local students and researchers from Asansol were trained for this work. A skilled local workforce is developed through this project to preserve

other historical elements of the region in the future.

If we look closely at these two initiatives side by side, the deep social and class disparities in the digital preservation system become clear. The first disparity is undoubtedly of institutional and financial power. Bichitra is a symbol of national prestige. Who knows, the main objective of the huge amount of money poured into this project by the Ministry of Culture of the Central Government of India was to re-present Rabindranath on the world stage as a great icon of nationalism. On the other hand, BLEAP 1612 is a project dependent on international emergency grants. It is not a state pomp. It is a desperate attempt to save a waning heritage from extinction. Secondly, there is a difference in the use of technology. Bichitra created Praved software which assumes that the text or writing is already completely healthy and protected. But in the BLEAP 1612 project, the function of technology is to rescue and give permanence. Here, the biggest challenge is to capture the decaying body of paper in the camera frame before exploring the complexity within the text. Here, the stains of worn paper, torn corners or the dirtiness of ink are not erased, because this dirtiness is the truest form of Nazrul's historical pain. Finally, Bichitra is physically located at Jadavpur University, which is by common consent the main centre of intellectual power in Bengal. But Nazrul's field of work and current centres of preservation are in Asansol — an industrial and mining area located far from Kolkata. EAP 1612 is a movement to spread the map of

Bengali knowledge and culture beyond Kolkata.

Liberation of Marginalised Culture

Perhaps it will not be improper to say that models that have been developed for the digital preservation of Bengali literature for so long have basically followed the customs of the bhadralok culture of Kolkata. As a result, Tagore and the intellectual community around him have repeatedly come under the spotlight. Nazrul has often been kept in a limited context. Even though he was accepted as the national poet of Bangladesh, his roots in the soil of Churulia in India and many aspects of his diverse creation have remained in the dark. It appears that the BLEAP 1612 project has created a post-colonial resistance against this historical neglect. It teaches some very important lessons. Nazrul's digital archive is extremely important in the current political scenario of both India and Bengal. When the manuscripts of his family Quran Sharif as well as Islamic verses and lyrics are displayed alongside his works centring on Hinduism, on the digital screen, they serve as living proof of India's and Bengal's actual secular and pluralistic spirit. This is not a theoretical statement; it is irrefutable evidence of direct documentation. Moreover, regional institutions like Kazi Nazrul University and B. B. College in Asansol, apart from the renowned institutions of Kolkata like Jadavpur or Presidency, complete this international archival work, and prove that the talent of digital humanities practice exists equally in the remote areas of Bengal. Additionally, based on Emma Stanford's observations, we can

surmise that the scars on Nazrul's paper are his true identity. The Nazrul manuscripts are both palimpsests and habitus. The poet who went to jail for sedition, whose works were confiscated by the police, whose poverty was his daily companion — if his manuscripts were as smooth and nice as Tagore's, it would be an injustice to history. BL EAP 1612 has preserved those wounds with dignity. To understand Kazi Nazrul Islam's manuscripts properly, we must look beyond their literary meaning and examine their physical reality, for his social conditioning is physically stamped onto the very paper of his manuscripts. The cheap quality of the paper, the hurried ink strokes, and the sweat stains are not accidental blemishes. They are physical expressions of his habitus.

Equality of Two Eyes

Digital humanities have opened the door to a new possibility before us. Through it, just as we can build a huge palace like Bichitra, similarly through projects like BL EAP 1612, we can raise humble huts of marginalised and neglected voices like Nazrul from the ground and deliver them to the court of the world. If Rabindranath is the calm river of Bengal, then Nazrul is the turbulent wave crashing on earth. Without one, the other is incomplete. The digital recovery of these dusty and worn-out manuscripts of Nazrul next to Bichitra reminds us that true history does not reside only in palaces, but also in the rural abodes of ordinary human beings. Only through the combination of these two can the digital archiving reach its full potential — where the verses of the Rebel will play with equal dignity alongside the

mellifluous songs of India's greatest intellectual.

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