

Collaborative research on the Meteorological and Botanical History of the Indian Ocean, 1600-1900 (MBHI Network)

Minutes of Meeting between the British Library (BL), University of Sussex and Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU)

4th February 2013

Attendees:

British Library: Penny Brook (PB), Antonia Moon (AM)

University of Sussex: Vinita Damodaran (VD), George Adamson (GA – minute taker)

Jawaharlal Nehru University: Deepak Kumar (DK)

Existing Projects

The first part of the meeting concerned existing digitisation projects that the network are involved in, or may be interested in becoming involved with. PB outlined a project funded by the Qatar Foundation to digitise India Office Records material relating to the Gulf. The MBHI Network may be involved in the second phase of the project to digitise pre-18th century material. VD mentioned that the Hooker project is closing in February. The project uses the template from the Wallich project. AM pointed out that this is oriented towards pictures rather than archives so is tricky to add text to.

DK mentioned that it would be interesting to digitise the papers of George Watt and Hugh Cleghorn. The Watt ledgers are at the Botanical Survey of India Industrial Botany Branch. AM mentioned that India may be able to provide funding, however PB noted caution regarding this based on previous BL experience. The papers of William Sykes were also noted as a useful future project. Later, VD mentioned the possibility of incorporating Lyall and Griffiths, as well as Flemming, Hardwicke and Hodgeson (information for whom is contained within the Natural History Museum).

Surveying Collections

The meeting then addressed the survey of existing archives. PB noted that the BL could contribute to this due to the professional knowledge within the BL. It was mentioned that the Institute of Asian Studies at Leiden were looking to do a top-level survey of data. This could be combined with the MBHI Network, thereby alerting people to resources. Fatini would be a good person to involve.

VD mentioned that Paramjit Singh had talked about project for linked network of Indian herbaria. This could incorporate Buchanan's project and material of the Agricultural-Horticultural societies (AHS). DK mentioned that proceedings of the AHS in Calcutta are available from 1818 onwards. This contains information like how particular ornamental and personal plants were introduced in India, and can be used to see how the floral landscape of India was changed. The society also used to organise agricultural fairs where plants and livestock were discussed. The material is run by a trust and not under Government control. The later Pune Society would be a valuable archive, as well as the Ootacamund Botanical Garden, AHS in Bombay and Bombay Natural History Society. DK warned that the latter were predominantly concerned with birds, not Botany. The Buitenzing Botanical Garden in Batavia was also mentioned in order to incorporate Southeast Asia. Peter Boomgaard is an important contact for this. DK mentioned that Saharanpur Botanical Gardens, where many experiments on acclimatisation were undertaken. It may be possible to visit Saharanpur as part of the Delhi meeting.

DK suggested the possibility of funding a PhD student to work in the National Archives in Delhi on a project tentatively entitled "*Botanical Collections in the National Archives, 1820-1900*". Unfortunately our contact at the archives Mushirul Hasan may be retiring in May. VD also mentioned the possibility of bringing James Hamilton in as a PhD researcher. A collaborative grant would be possible, although PB stated that this would have to be applied for via the BL as the rules had changed. VD urged the possibility of exploring the CDA should be explored as an avenue for a PhD proposal on botanical collections and India.

Possible avenues for research

It was agreed by all that the research goals of the network need to be established. AM suggested a history of plants transfers and fruits, such as Mango. Other projects that could be linked up with the Victoria and Albert Museum include a history of cotton. The Wellcome Trust could be approached for funding. VD also suggested a history of the elephant.

DK suggested that it would be hard to find the documentation for private transfer, however AM noted the existence of local business archives such as in Hackney. Information on archives is contained within the Gavin Brigson guide to Natural History Sources in the UK, although it is around 30 years old now. PB mentioned that Nalini Prasad had used this material, but that now a new lead curator was being appointed. It was agreed that this person should be involved in the network. DK mentioned the Royal Agricultural Society in Seven Sisters. JA Voelker also visited India in 1892 to give a report on agriculture. When he died he had established a seed company called Voelker Seed Company, which is in London and will probably have an archive.

AM suggested it would be useful to put existing information onto the CWEH website. VD mentioned that a meeting between VD, GA and the CWEH web coordinator was being planned. Dhir Saranji is going to undertake a survey of Jesuit materials and this will also be placed on the website.

Network aims

The aims of the network were finally discussed. VD stated that our intention is to highlight under-utilised materials. PB also mentioned improved cataloguing, digitisation and interaction with users of the materials. AM and PB mentioned the importance of allowing curators of smaller archives internationally (for example the Manipur archive) to approach the network. DK mentioned that a key aim was to create decentralised archives.

Finally PB mentioned that UKIRA UK Information Resources on Asia. This is a 10-year old project that could be a template for what is occurring now. Botany is not listed on there at the moment within the IOR. AM suggested that we involve Sandeep Hazareersingh at the Open University.

Meeting adjourned at 14:30.