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Pandit Bidhushekhar Shastri: A Luminary From Harishchandrapur, Malda, West Bengal

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Abstract: Born at a village Harishchandrapur, Malda, West Bengal, Pandit Bidhushekhar Shastri (1878–1957) became one of the most eminent Sanskrit academics and ideologist in early 20th-century India. *Kavyatirtha*, who was recognized as a prodigy at the age of 17, was proficient in different languages like Tibetan, Avestan, Pali, Prakrit, Sanskrit, French, German, and Chinese. In addition to writing or editing seventeen important books on logic, grammar, Buddhism, and philosophy, he was instrumental in the recovery of lost Sanskrit literature from Tibetan translations. He taught at Santiniketan as a Sanskrit professor and later held the prestigious Asutosh Professorship at Calcutta University. Among the accolades he received were the titles of *Deshikottama* from Visva-Bharati (1957) and *Mahamahopadhyaya* (1936). His early Harishchandrapur upbringing, academic background, diverse contributions to Indology, institutional involvement, and enduring influence in Bengal's scholarly heritage are all studied in this paper.

Index Terms - Pandit Bidhushekhar Shastri, Harishchandrapur, Sanskrit, Tibetan

INTRODUCTION

In Bengali and Indian intellectual history, Pandit Bidhusekhar Sastri's contributions to the subject of ancient Indian studies are unmatched. He was a renowned scholar, writer, linguist, and indologist. He gained widespread reputation both domestically and abroad for his knowledge, love of old languages, and dedication to conserving India's academic legacy. His proficiency in languages like Sanskrit, Pali, and Prakrit soon became apparent while he was a student at Kolkata's esteemed Sanskrit College. He later conducted in-depth studies in Buddhist writings, ancient Indian philosophy, and Vedic literature. He was able to study rare manuscripts and texts in their original forms because of his proficiency in Tibetan, German, and even Chinese languages in addition to Indian ones. Sastri's proficiency in multiple languages allowed him to connect Indian knowledge systems with international research, enhancing both. Reviving interest in India's ancient literature and cultural traditions was greatly aided by his work at the Asiatic Society of Bengal and his editing of important texts such as the *Mahāvastu*, *Bodhisattvāvadānakalpalatā*, and *Charyāgīti*. Additionally, he mentored a generation of students and researchers while working as a librarian and researcher at establishments like the University of Calcutta and the National Library. In addition to his academic endeavors, Pandit Sastri was a reformer and educator who supported the general public's access to knowledge. He promoted Sanskrit and classical studies among younger generations and was connected to several literary forums and educational organizations. Both in Bengali and English, his writings demonstrated a synthesis of scholarly depth and approachable language. He also took part in national scholarly discussions on the evolution of Indian education and culture and made a substantial contribution to the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute. Both in Bengali and English, his writings demonstrated a synthesis of scholarly depth and approachable language. He also took part in national scholarly discussions on the evolution of Indian education and culture and made a substantial contribution to the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute. Bidhusekhar Sastri received multiple distinctions for his exceptional academic accomplishments, including the esteemed title of *Mahamahopadhyaya* and several honorary degrees. Even with his widespread fame, he never lost sight of his modest beginnings in Harishchandrapur, where his legacy is proudly preserved. The life and contributions of Pandit Bidhusekhar Sastri serve as a tribute to India's rich cultural and intellectual

heritage. Many generations of academics, teachers, and cultural enthusiasts around the world are still motivated by his unwavering commitment to the preservation and dissemination of old knowledge.

EARLY LIFE AND LINGUISTIC PROFICIENCY

In 1878, Bidhushekhara Shastri was born as Bidhushekhara Bhattacharya in the remote village of Harishchandrapur in the British Indian province of Malda. He was upturned in a traditional Sanskrit-learning (pandit) household and got early teaching at a nearby *tol*, or Sanskrit school, where, at the age of 17, his literary skills earned him the appellation *Kavyatirtha*. Patronage from local landholders (Zamindars), especially Raja Saratchandra of Chanchal estate, enabled his tenure at a township *tol* renamed Sibpada Chatuspathi in his memory. He was given a four-year tutoring appointment by Raja Saratchandra, indicating early local awareness of his academic potential. Following his *Kavyatirtha*, Bidhushekhara pursued further education in Benares (Varanasi), where his proficiency with Sanskrit scriptures earned him the official title of "Shastri." He expanded his linguistic competence by learning Avestan for comparative Vedic studies, and extensively studied French, German, Tibetan, and Chinese to engage with Buddhist and Pāli literature. His ability to edit and reconstruct Sanskrit works that were lost in India but were preserved through Tibetan translations was made possible by his extraordinary breadth.



Fig.1: Birthplace of Bidhushekhara Shastri at Harishchandrapur (Ref: Viswa - Barenya Prachyavidyabid M.M. Vidusekhara Sastri by Dr. Samar Kumar Misra, 2013)

ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENTS

Due to Shastri's outstanding knowledge in Sanskrit, Rabindranath Tagore and Bhupendranath Sanyal invited him to teach Sanskrit at Brahmacharya Vidyalaya in Santiniketan in 1905, which was his first academic position. Later, he was appointed as Principal of Vidya Bhavana, where he taught Tagore's family's children as well as others Sanskrit, Pali, and Prakrit. When Visva Bharati started its higher education program in 1919, he was instrumental in creating the curriculum and delivering traditional education by selecting the institution's motto from a Vedic verse: *Yatra visvam bhavatyekaniyam* ("Where the world becomes one"). He later became the Asutosh Professorship in Sanskrit and Pali at the University of Calcutta (1936–1942), solidifying his standing as a distinguished scholar and classroom instructor. Shastri restored Sanskrit texts that had disappeared from the Indian subcontinent by utilizing Tibetan transliterations and manuscripts. His reviews brought back religious and philosophical writings that had only been preserved in Tibetan archives. Seventeen authoritative volumes in Bengali and English was edited by him covering topics such as:

- *Yogachārabhūmi-śāstra* of Asanga (Part I)
- *Bodhicharyāvatāra* with Tibetan commentary
- *Nāgānanda* Nāṭaka (a classic Sanskrit drama)

- *Gaudapādīya Āgamaśāstra*, *Catuḥśataka* of Āryadeva (Part II)
- *Madhyāntavibhāga-bhaṣyatikā*, *Mahāyānavin imśaka* of Nāgārjuna
- Introductions to *Mīlinda-pañha*, *Upaṇiṣat*, logic, grammar, and history of Buddhism.



Fig. 2: Sastri at Santiniketan (Ref: Viswa - Barenya Prachyavidyabid M.M. Vidusekhar Sastri by Dr. Samar Kumar Misra, 2013)

He restored works such as *Yogachārabhūmi* and *Nāgārjuna's* treatises by recreating Sanskrit texts from Tibetan source material. Buddhist and Sanskrit studies were both enhanced by this comparative textual scholarship. Scholars were able to understand complicated Sanskrit-Buddhist texts for his clear editing in Bengali and English. The outstanding contribution in the academic world ultimately earned him the prestigious title *Mahamahopadhyaya* conferred by the Government of India in 1936. He received Visva Bharati University's highest academic honor, the honorary *Deshikottama*, in 1957, at the end of his life.



Fig. 3: Conferment of *Mahamahopadhyaya* by the Government of India (Ref: Viswa - Barenya Prachyavidyabid M.M. Vidusekhar Sastri by Dr. Samar Kumar Misra, 2013)

Shastri impacted generations by teaching Sanskrit, Pali, and Prakrit at Tagore's Santiniketan and then Visva Bharati, incorporating a classical basis into contemporary comprehensive education. He influenced academic standards and curriculum while holding the Asutosh Chair at Calcutta University. At his birthplace, the Harishchandrapur College library was named in his honor by his hometown village shows how proud the area is of his heritage. At University of Gour Banga, Malda, the library was also named in his honour.



Fig. 4: Library in the name of Pandit Bidhushekhara Shastri at Harishchandrapur College, Harishchandrapur, Malda





Fig. 5: Library in the name of Pandit Bidhushekhar Shastri at University of Gour Banga, Malda

TRADITIONAL REMINISCENCE AND INHERITANCE IN MALDA

His legacy is being honored at Shastri's hometown of Harishchandrapur, where the Harishchandrapur College library is named after him and seeks to motivate upcoming generations of academics. His status as a cultural icon in the area was highlighted in 2023 when the 35th Malda Book Fair was dedicated in his honor. His work, which covered Baroda's Sanskrit, Pali, Buddhist studies, and world philology, represented a link between contemporary institutional research and traditional *tol* education in rural Bengal. Shastri represented the shift from formal academic scholarship to classical *tol* (traditional) education. He was knowledgeable about contemporary academic research and cross-linguistic studies, but he was also deeply rooted in the traditional stewardship of Sanskrit learning. His proficiency in both western and eastern languages enabled him to engage in comparative philological and religious studies that was uncommon among his peers.

CONCLUSION

In Indian scholarship, Pandit Bidhushekhar Shastri (1878–1957) is a singular personality. Through conventional Sanskrit instruction, he advanced from his Harishchandrapur origins to international linguistic prominence and scholarly acclaim. His extensive edited output and retrieval of lost Sanskrit-Buddhist writings bolstered traditional academia. He serves as a link between tradition and contemporary Indological thought thanks to his positions at Santiniketan, Visva Bharati, and Calcutta University, which are topped with academic and national accolades (*Mahamahopadhyaya*, *Deshikottama*). His memory is upheld in Malda today through educational establishments and cultural activities that bear his name, inspiring future generations to study Sanskrit, comparative religion, and intercultural studies.

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