

EMKP SMALL DOCUMENTATION GRANT 2025-2026

The Endangered Material Knowledge Programme (EMKP) supports knowledge holders, practitioners and scholars with grants to conduct new research on critically threatened material knowledge globally, especially in understudied areas and where local funding opportunities are limited. The programme was established in 2018 with funding from Arcadia - a charitable foundation that works to protect nature, preserve cultural heritage, and promote open access to knowledge - and is hosted by the Department of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas at the British Museum. Based on the recommendations of the EMKP Expert Panel, Deshabandhu Mahavidyalaya has received a small grant project on Dashavatara Cards aimed at promoting awareness, appreciation, and understanding of Bengal's rich cultural heritage.

PROJECT DETAILS

As Gods come to Play: Preserving the Legacy of the Endangered Dashavatara Cards of Bishnupur

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At dawn, the lotus blooms,

As does the avatara of Jagannatha...

As it becomes sunnier

The anger of Parasurama takes hold of the game.

In the once historically significant princely state of Bishnupur, in rural Bengal, Dashavatara Cards (gaming cards designed around the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu) is on the verge of oblivion. The erstwhile courtly game with layers of stringent, almost ritualistic rules that change during the hours of the day and the season in which it is played is a memory of grandeur dimly remembered by a few remnants of an erstwhile generation. Whatever survives is zealously guarded by a single custodian family, resisting the dilution of the ancient art of card making for more than half a millennium. Derived from the Dashavatari Ganjifa from Rajasthan, these cards stand apart in the rules of the game and also in its singular leitmotif from any other known gaming cards. This project intends to digitise and preserve the quickly disappearing legacy of making Dashavatara Cards in the city of Bishnupur in West Bengal, India. While meagre efforts were made to study the art forms in the 1970s, there has not been any digitised or physical repository of the ritual of card-making or even the process of gaming