

## **Preserving The Manuscript Heritage for Posterity: An Evaluative Examination of Manuscript Conservation Efforts in Maharashtra, India**

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### **Abstract**

*The geo-cultural landmass of the Indian subcontinent was the fountainhead of an illustrious civilization that held sway over greater part of the world economically, culturally and intellectually for well over two millennia. This great civilization of the ancient world produced enormous literature on virtually every subject under the sun which was enshrined in manuscripts and transmitted to generations after generations. However, owing subjugation of people of this region by invading cultures for several centuries as well as ushering and transitioning into the new world, the local populace of this region lost interest in preserving their cultural heritage and so, the manuscript wealth in these countries took a bad hit. Several hundreds of thousands of manuscripts were lost to the pilferage and arson of the invading forces as well as ravages of time in the last couple of centuries. Oflate, thankfully, there is a renaissance and 'waking up' in these countries about their 'forgotten heritage' and the governments, institutions and individuals are taking renewed interest in the preservation of their cultural heritage. The present paper describes a first of its kind research about the conservation activities of the National Mission for Manuscripts (NMM), a government of India initiative and its partner centres in the Indian state of Maharashtra. This study may be replicated to know the current state of affairs of manuscripts in other parts of the world as well.*

**Keywords:** Cultural heritage, manuscript custodianship, maharashtra, manuscript conservation.

## **Introduction**

Just as the stone-monuments and other antiquities, the literary treasure enshrined in manuscripts help us to understand the history and the cultural heritage of a country. India has more manuscript collection than any other country in the world and there is no other world civilization which has produced such a proliferation of hand written literature. Manuscripts are found on a variety of material ranging from the palm leaves (tala-patra), birch bark (bhurja-patra), stones, metals (like tamrapatra) and lastly from 10th century A.D. onwards, on paper.

According to a conservative estimate there are over five million manuscripts in India in various forms and scripts, 60,000 in European countries and 1.5 million in South Asia and Asian countries. Sanskrit manuscripts form 67 per cent of the total number (“National Mission for Manuscripts,” 2002). Of these 5 million manuscripts in India 67% are in Sanskrit and 25% in Indian languages such as Bengali, Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, Oriya, Pali, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu etc. The rest 8% are of non-Indian languages (Nandi & Palit, 2010). In India, only a small percentage of manuscripts available have been surveyed and catalogued. Catalogues are perhaps available for not more than 20-25% of the manuscript collections in the country (Rani, 2010). It is roughly estimated that over 3.5 million manuscripts are preserved by agencies and 30% of the remaining total manuscripts are stored in temples, Mutts and in private hands (Singh et al., 2010). In 2003, the government of India has set up National Mission for Manuscripts (NMM aka NaMaMi) to locate, document, conserve and digitize the manuscript heritage of India by partnering with local manuscript custodians.

## **Problem Statement**

Evaluative Study of Manuscript Conservation and Digital Preservation Efforts by National Mission for Manuscripts (NMM) and Its Partner Centers in Maharashtra.

## **Objectives**

- To study the present status of conservation and preservation of Indian Cultural Heritage in general and efforts of National Mission for Manuscripts (NMM) in particular.
- To study the availability of manuscripts, type of collection and efforts taken in preservation of heritage collections (Manuscripts) in Maharashtra.
- To ascertain the availability of infrastructure (Building, furniture, equipments, Human resources and budget) for the conservation and digital preservation of heritage collections in NMM centers in Maharashtra.
- To examine traditional as well as modern procedures and practices adopted in conserving the heritage collections (Manuscripts) in NMM centers in Maharashtra.
- To understand the challenges for conservation and digital preservation of heritage collections faced by NMM in general and partner centers particularly in Maharashtra.

## **Materials and Methods**

The data for analysis is collected through questionnaires, and direct interaction with the Heads of the partner centers, interviews and observation. Data is also collected by means of surveying various

official documents published by NMM and its partner centers such as annuals reports, procedure guidelines, and brochures, Websites, etc.

### **Significant of the Study**

Maharashtra, like any other state in the historically and culturally rich nation of India, the state of Maharashtra also produced very rich literature that was preserved in manuscripts, thanks particularly to the rich legacy of saints and seers of this land. Nashik, one of the four sites of *Kumbh Mela* has been a place of pilgrimage for the people across the country thereby becoming home for vast manuscript collection. Owing to the hard work and dedication of stalwarts like Bhandarkar, Rajwade, Apte and others in the late 19th and early 20th centuries several thousand manuscripts were collected and preserved which later became institutional repositories of manuscripts. The National Mission for Manuscripts (NMM) has tied up with 13 such centres having considerable manuscript collection across Maharashtra as Manuscript Resource Centers or Manuscript Conservation Centers. The present research conducted during 2018-21 examined the manuscript collections of these institutions and evaluated their strengths and weaknesses in respect of their objectives, manpower, budget, financial standing, conservation equipment and facilities, facilities for the researchers, organization and technical procedures carried out on the manuscripts such as classification, cataloguing, shelving, publication of catalogues and books, disaster preparedness and future plans, etc. (Author 2022).

### **Results and Discussion**

1. Of the 13 NMM partner centers, only 3 centers (23.07%) are established in the last 25 years. 2 centers (15.38%) have been

established between 25 -50 yrs., 4 centers (30.76%) between 76 -100 yrs., 2 centers (15.38%) between 101-125 yrs., and 1 center each are established between 126 -150 yrs., and 150 - 175 years.

2. It is found that all the NMM partner centers in Maharashtra (100%) acquired their MSS collection through voluntary donation by individuals and sometimes by institutions. Very few centers actually spent money in acquisition.
3. Almost all partner centers suffer from inadequacy of funds. 6 out of 13 centers (46.15%) are operating using their own funds and only 3 centers receive fund from NMM in the capacity of Manuscript Resource/ Conservation Center. 6 centers (46.15%) have received funds from other government agencies in the past. 5 centers (38.46%) rely on the donations received from time to time from the donors. The budgetary allocations of these NMM partner centers range from 2 lakhs per annum to 9 lakhs per annum. 9 out of the 13 centers (69.23%) claim inadequacy of funds and 10 centers maintain that they have not received regular funding from the NMM. 11 centers (84.61%) are located in their own building and 12 centers (92.30%) report that the condition of their building is good. 8 centers (61.53%) point out need for repair of their existing infrastructure. Two centers are located in leased premises.
4. Only 2 centers (15.38%) have 3 trained personnel and 2 (15.38%) other centers have 2 and 3 (23.07%) centers have one trained personnel in manuscript conservation. 11 of the 13 centers (84.61%) point out that their staff members did not receive adequate training in manuscript conservation. 10 out of

13 centers (76.92%) maintain that their staff members do not get exposed to periodic training with regard to preventive and curative procedures and latest trends and developments in conservation of MSS.

5. The primary collection in all the NMM partner centers is of paper MSS. The number of paper MSS possessed by the partner centers vary widely with MJC having least number of MSS (339) and BORI having the highest number (30000). Other centers have MSS between 3000 to 12000 numbers. Apart from paper MSS, almost all the centers (12 out of 13 – 92.30%) have rare books and other antic collections. On an average about 20% MSS bundles in the collection of various centers are found to be incomplete. Subject wise on an average each partner center has about 17 subject heads under which their MSS collection is classified. Most of the MSS primarily belong to the period 1601 AD to 1900AD. Sanskrit and Marathi are the predominant languages with Farsi MSS also found in many partner centers. Devanagari, Modi are the most common scripts found in the MSS. Only 2 of the 13 centers (15.38%) claim to have a written collection development policy.
6. It is observed though every partner center claims a particular figure as the total number of their collection, a close inspection in almost every case revealed disparity in numbers. It is a fact that most of the MSS custodian centers do not have exact number of their MSS collection.
7. Of the thirteen centers, ten centers (76.92%) report their MSS collection to be reasonably in good condition. Two centers

(15.38%) consider their collection to be average in condition and only one center (7.69%) reports its collection to be in bad condition. All the centers (100%) identify aging and environmental factors are the main reason for the deterioration of their MSS collection.

8. 8 centers (61.53%) use steel almirahs for storing their MSS and 4 centers (30.76%) use wooden almirahs. 2 (15.38%) centers are using mobile compact storage system for stacking their MSS collection. 6 centers (46.15%) have showcases to exhibit their MSS collection. 12 out of 13 centers (92.30%) claim adequacy of storage facilities. As regards to equipment and conditions for maintenance of MSS in good conditions, only 2 centers (15.38%) have Air conditioning to control the room temperature and none have humidity control mechanisms in place. 6 centers (46.15%) have fumigation chambers and 12 (92.30%) have fire extinguishers installed. Except for one center none have smoke alarms. While 11 centers (84.61%) have CCTV cameras set up, only 3 centers (23.07%) have thermometers to measure daily temperature variations and 3 centers (23.07%) use pH strips to check acidity of MSS. Only 1 center (7.69%) has hygrometer installed.
9. Seven centers (53.84%) use one or other form of traditional methods of conservation and six centers (46.15%) employ modern methods such as sprinkling of pesticides, use of fumigation chamber and use of naphthalene balls. Five centers (38.46%) have fumigation chambers which are sparingly used. Barring three centers (23.07%), none of the centers have neither

the wherewithal nor the expertise in employing the modern methods of conservation of MSS using chemicals. 12 out of 13 centers (92.30%) wrap their MSS with red/yellow/white cloth to prevent exposure to dust and insects. Of the thirteen custodian centers, only five centers (38.46%) have been practicing conservative practices in their respective centers.

10. Eight out of thirteen custodian institutions (61.53%) have published both descriptive catalogues and books based on their manuscript collection. In all 29 catalogues and 470 books were brought out by the custodian centers.
11. Eleven out of 13 centers (84.61%) have digitized their manuscript collection either partially or completely. However, digital copies of only 4 out of 11 centers have been uploaded either on internet or on intranet.
12. It is disheartening that very few researchers take interest in the MSS. The number of visitors in last 5 years in 8 centers (61.53%) is less than 30 per year even though 6 centers (46.15%) even offer boarding and lodging facilities to the visitors.
13. Seven out of 13 custodian centers (53.84%) have envisioned definite future plans for their institutions.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The above evaluative study throws light about the strengths as well as the shortcomings of various partner centres of NMM in Maharashtra and points at what is desired to be done. All the partner centres of NMM complain of inadequacy of funds and trained manpower. The NMM may chalk out separate budgetary provisions in line with the National



Archives of India for preservation and extend financial support to these partner centers. Instead of making the training voluntary, the NMM should ensure that mandatory periodic training is imparted to all technical staff members of the custodian institutes, particularly the manuscript conservation staff. The centers will have to be encouraged to make the mss content openly available to the researchers. Training is utterly inadequate. Hardly very few staff members of resource centers have any knowledge of preventive conservation, leave alone curative aspects of conservation.

Periodic meeting with all the MCC and MRC Coordinators is to be conducted on a single platform at least once in three months so that NMM officials come to know the practical difficulties faced by various partner centers.

The NMM must publish a hand book with specific guidelines and supply it to partnering agencies containing every detailed dos and don'ts starting from guidelines on surveying, locating, acquiring, accessioning, cataloguing, digitizing, conserving, storing, transporting and plethora of other issues that require professional counseling. The handbook must also contain all the formats, condition reports, proposals, contact details of conservation professionals and experts, other partnering agencies, etc.

Financial discipline must be practiced by all those involved in the noble task of heritage conservation, including the employees of the apex agency. A lot of money is spent on conducting workshops on preventive and curative conservation by the NMM. The trainers, NMM staff spend a lot of money on air travel and luxurious stays during such training programs. The auditing agencies must advise the NMM and its training

partners to practice reasonable austerity in their spending particularly on such spending which does not have direct bearing on the actual act of conservation.

The NMM must tie up with National Information Networks (NIC) or Information and Library Networks (INFLIBNET) center which have huge cloud storage facility used for storing the national repository of theses and dissertations produced in Indian universities. This cloud storage facility is to be used for storing the digitized MSS content.

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