



ISSN Print: 2394-7500  
ISSN Online: 2394-5869  
Impact Factor: 8.4  
IJAR 2021; 7(7): 09-11  
[www.allresearchjournal.com](http://www.allresearchjournal.com)  
Received: 07-05-2021  
Accepted: 09-06-2021

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## Significance of preserving manuscripts: A study in Indian context

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### Abstract

Manuscripts represent centuries of accrued sources of knowledge in various areas; such as literature, science, philosophy, arts, documents for civil or criminal matters, social contacts, individual records and family records and above all of all pluralistic faith systems of a mass people of India and abroad. These are really more important than a just historical records preserved in any way. They also contain the collective wisdom and experience of long generation of thinkers for a society. Further, it can be found out a right way and explore the knowledge with the help of manuscripts to utilize them for a sustainable development of the human being in every possible sphere in one hand and of the whole creation on the other.

In this connection, the importance of various government and non-government bodies, institutions, universities, individuals, trusts, etc. is very significant since the colonial and pre-independence of undivided Bengal. Recognizing the need to encompass and preserve this kind of knowledge source for an important social documentation, the Government of India provides various funds for the conservation of manuscripts. A lot of surveys have been launched to enhance various awareness programmes, symposiums, etc. among the people concerned about the worse condition of palm leaves, paper manuscripts and the need for preventive conservation from its dispersing in many scattered places throughout the regions.

So, this paper will highlight the definition of manuscript, need and importance of study manuscriptology and the role of various bodies in this regard.

**Keywords:** manuscript, pluralistic faith system, undivided Bengal, record, preserve, govt. agencies

### 1. Introduction

The term '*manuscript*' etymologically means something written in hand. Here it is related with antiquity also. In a broader sense, it can be said that manuscript is a handwritten composition on paper, bark, cloth, metal, palm leaf or any other material dating back at least seventy five years which is of significant scientific, historical, literary or aesthetic value.

As the invent of printing or paper is not so old, our ancestors were not able to preserve their valuable knowledge or various records of their contemporary events in different fields of wisdom, they had to find out themselves a unique way to preserve it in every possible manner which would be of a sure-fire effect on the next generation people coming up after them in near or far future. However, the history of human civilization was gradually developed acquiring a higher gradation centuries after centuries which was based on the exploring knowledge and wisdom found in different custody. That kind of wisdom naturally needed to be preserved sufficiently. So, they began to write on the aforesaid materials or curve on stones or like so, and also, in some cases, painted in various ways reflecting their ideas and thoughts. Later on, when paper was somehow invented people started to write on them with quill or some other domestic instrument. All these things we know as manuscripts.

### 2. Objectives

The main objective of this paper is to discuss and analyze how far manuscripts play a vital role as social documents mostly in the context of India and also to throw an overview on the various available manuscript repositories.

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### 3. Material resources and Methodology

Both the primary and secondary sources of data available in Sanskrit, Arabic, English, Persian and Urdu languages will be consulted for the study of this topic. As to follow up the methodology to this article, both descriptive and historical analyses research design will be accepted.

### 4. Results and Discussion

We know that manuscripts are found in hundreds of different languages and scripts which vary from country to country, race to race, region to region and era to era. Often one language is written in different scripts. In India, we find that Sanskrit is written in Oriya script, Devnagari script and many others. We also see that manuscripts are somehow distinct from those of historical records, such as epigraphs on rocks, revenue records which provide direct information on events and processes. All these have knowledge contents. Further, manuscripts contain centuries of accrued sources of knowledge in various areas: as religious preaching, literature, philosophy, science, arts, documents for civil or criminal matters, social contacts, individual records, family records, rituals and above all different faith systems of a mass people of the past age. We find no religious book or scripture of a considerable time which is written on a paper or any so called systematic metal as it is found in today's world. To get knowledge about the origin of language, culture, religion, race or community we should not rely on the printed matters only, but we must study the original manuscripts from which all these are transmitted from time to time. This is really more reliable object and source. Manuscripts have also economic and philosophical values. As per the international socio-political context is concerned, we get a series of philosophical notes written by Karl Marx in 1844. This manuscript shows Marx's thoughts at the time of its early genesis. In this manuscript, he exposes his theory of alienation which he adopted from the book 'The Essence of Christianity' written by Feuerbach.

Through the study of manuscripts, it is possible to know the origin of a nation or community which is essential to understand and compare the socio-political conditions of that nation or community analytically with those of others, modern or ancient. Recognizing this fact, *Gurudeva* Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) has rightly observed, "To know my country one has to travel that age, when she realized her soul and thus transcended her physical boundaries, when she revealed her being in a radiant magnanimity which illumined the eastern horizon, making their recognized as their own by those in alien shores who were awakened into a surprise of life; and not now when she has withdrawn herself into a narrow barrier of obscurity, into a miserly pride of exclusiveness, into a poverty of mind that dumbly resolves around itself in an unmeaning repetition of a past that has lost its light and has no message for the pilgrims of the future."

In European countries, the transition from this kind of manuscripts to printed ones had begun since as back as 1470. Particularly, the trade related books underwent drastic changes. By 1500, print had stopped imitating the manuscripts, and manuscripts were imitating the print. Sometimes, many printed books and manuscripts were even created with the same paper. The manuscripts were still written and illuminated well in sixteenth century. In that region, the 'Book of House' had been the most commonly produced manuscript from the 1450s onward, and was

among the last manuscripts ever created. However, these manuscripts were retained by the nobles and royals only by the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Thus that type of manuscripts was not intended for the mass people.

As per the Indian context is concerned about the preservation of the manuscripts, it can be said in a broader sense that India's glorious past history in every branches of wisdom lies in the manuscripts of its great thinkers. Our beloved country has a unique position in the world in respect of paying attention to this kind of knowledge source. India always believes that these manuscripts are the basic historical evidence having great research value for her cultural heritage and social documents. It is estimated that India possesses more than five million manuscripts, making her the largest repository of manuscript wealth in the world. Though our ancestors had tried their best to preserve the manuscripts, thousands of such valued unpublished Indian manuscripts on varied subjects are lying scattered or fragmented in India and foreign collections and some of these are no longer accessible to research scholars. This invaluable and unique pool of knowledge is about to be under threat and as such the manuscripts are disappearing at an alarming rate if no proper measure is followed in time.

In this regard, the role of various government, non-government bodies, institutions, universities, individuals, trusts, etc. is very significant since the Colonial period in India particularly, and since the pre-independence Sylhet or undivided Bengal in general. Recognizing the need to encompass and preserve this kind of knowledge resource for an important social documentation, Government of India provides various funds for the preservation of manuscripts. A lot of surveys have been launched to enhance various awareness programmes, symposiums, etc. among the people concerned about the worse condition of palm leaf and paper manuscripts and the need for preventive conservation from its dispersing in many scattered places throughout the country.

So in a survey made during last 1988-1990 and on the basis of scrutiny of about 1100 printed catalogues and hand lists belonging to 70 libraries, institutions and individuals, we can find the following estimates:

1. Total number of manuscripts in 5,000,000 India
2. Indian manuscripts available in 60,000 European countries
3. Indian manuscripts in South Asia 150,000 and Asian countries
4. Number of manuscripts recorded in 1,000,000 Catalogues
5. Percentage of manuscripts (language wise)
 

Sanskrit	67%
Other Indian languages	25%
Arabic/Persian/Tibetan	8%

We also see that the life of a palm leaf manuscript is far longer than a modern day device like CD or microfilm. Furthermore, the tradition of manuscript preparation, preservation and copying continued in full strength till the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The downfall started since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *i.e.* just before the independence of undivided India, when printed book started to gain popularity. After that the old tradition ceased to be practiced and it took a long time to adopt and utilize a new practice to preserve manuscripts. It is because of this vacuum or otherwise in this transitory period after

independence that the half of the manuscripts reserve in the country was lost.

To meet the twin objective of preservation and access and also being awakened by the alarming rate of destruction of the manuscripts, modern devices and techniques are being developed and so utilized. So preventive and curative treatment of original manuscripts, microfilming and digitization are resorted to ensure the preservation and access to them.

#### 4.1 Some major initiatives in independent India

##### 4.1.1 National Mission for Manuscripts (NMM)

The National Mission for Manuscripts is another autonomous agency initiated in February 2003 by the Ministry of tourism and Culture, Govt. of India and Indira Gandhi National Centre for arts (IGNCA) to survey, locate and preserve the Indian manuscripts with a view to enhance its access, awareness and use for educational purposes. It works with the help of 54 Manuscript Resource Centres and 49 Conservation Centres established across the country. There are 13,80,205 manuscripts available in Manuscript Resource Centres. The Mission organizes workshops, seminars and trainings on regular basis for capacity building activities. The NMM emphasizes on publishing manuscripts, seminar papers, lectures, etc. on the titles like Tattvabhodha, Samrakshika, Samikshika, Kirtibodha, Prakashika, etc.

#### 4.2 National Archives of India (NAI)

Originally established in 11 March 1891 at Calcutta (Kolkata) as the Imperial Record Department, the National Archives of India has become the custodian of the records of enduring value of the Government of India. The core mandate of NAI is to act as a central repository of public records. However, NAI has taken some initiatives for preservation and cataloguing of manuscripts. It has been implementing a project called National Register of Private Records (NRPR) since 1957. Under this, it undertakes surveys and listing of private papers, manuscripts and historical documents. It is the biggest archival repository in South Asia. Situated in New Delhi, the Department functions as an Attached Office of the Ministry of Culture, Govt. of India. NAI has published 19 volumes of the NRPR till date, containing over 34000 entries. The Director General of Archives, heading the Department has been given the mandate for the implementation of the Public Records Act 1993 and the rules made there under, the Public Records Rules, 1997 for the management, administration and preservation of public records in the Ministries, Departments, Public Sector Undertakings, etc. of the Central Government.

#### 4.3 Museums and Libraries under Department of Culture

The manuscripts are available with some of the following organizations under the Ministry of Culture, Govt. of India:

	Organizations	Number of Manuscripts
1	Rampur Raza Library	15,000
2	Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library, Patna, Bihar	20,060
3	Asiatic Society, Kolkata	32,000
4	National Library, Kolkata	3,258
5	Central Institute of Buddhist Studies, Leh	10,000
6	Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, Sarnath	1,028
7	Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad	10,000

#### 4.4 State Archives, State Libraries and State Museums

According to information compiled by IGNCA, the holdings of some of the state administered data are as follows:

	Organizations	Number of Manuscripts
1	Adyar Library and Research Centre, Chennai	40,000
2	Andhra Pradesh Oriental Manuscripts Library and Research Institute	23,115
3	Delhi Archives	171
4	Goa Central Library	50
5	Govt. Manuscript Library, Allahabad	11,000
6	Manipur State Archives	334
7	Manipur State Kala Academy	1,636

#### 5. Conclusion

Since manuscripts form an invaluable part of India's documentary heritage and it has a long tradition, produced in almost all parts of India being in various languages and scripts and on many valuable religious, philosophical, historical and scientific facts; so, it is our own duty to preserve these assets and document for getting rare information all about our past history. Further, the concerned institutions and agencies should take necessary action and play vital role for proper utilization of the thoughts and funds provided by the government.

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