

Digital Preservation of Rare Manuscripts in Assam

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Abstract

Information technology has facilitated preservation of the documents, i.e. digital preservation. Manuscripts are the primary sources of historic information. With the deterioration of the Law of Nature, manuscripts are also deteriorating along with the time. Digital preservation of manuscripts restores it from loss, theft and decay. This paper highlights some of the initiatives taken in Assam for the digital preservation of manuscripts.

Keywords : Digital preservation, Manuscripts, KKH Library - Gauhati University

1. Introduction

In present age, the rapid development of information technology and communication system has brought revolutionary changes in the organization and management of information. The advance application of information technology has touched each and every activity of library and information centers. Now the information technology brings the unique opportunity to the field of preservation with the digital preservation facility of the non digital documents. Digital preservation of manuscripts is now given proper importance. Manuscripts are the first hand written documents which reflect our glorious past and tell the story of our forefather. These manuscripts are the basic and primary source of information for the researchers. Due to different reasons, these manuscripts are now in poor and fragile physical conditions and for its proper preservation at present stage for the future; many foundations, universities, and other institutions are now taking initiatives for digital preservation of these valuable manuscripts.

2. Digital Preservation

Encyclopedia of Information Technology defines the term digital reservation as “The process of



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maintaining, in a condition suitable for use, materials produced in digital formats. Problems of physical preservation are compounded by the obsolescence of computer equipment, software, and storage media. Also refers to the practice of digitizing materials originally produced in non digital formats (print, film, etc.) to prevent permanent loss due to deterioration of the physical medium.” Digital preservation has the two dimensions i.e. preservation of materials that are born in digital form and another is digitization for preservation of printed documents and the manuscripts which are touched by the hand of deterioration. Digital preservation facilitates the global accessibility of any form of documents. For the digital preservation, two processes in generally are followed; one is creating image file of the documents and second is scanned the documents and then using the OCR process for making the text file error free. These files are then stored in different secondary storage devices.

3. Manuscript Collection in Assam

Oxford English Dictionary defines manuscripts as ‘a very old book or document that was written by hand before printing facility was invented.’ Etymologically, the word manuscript has been

derived from the Latin word 'Manus' that means hand and 'Scribe' to write i.e. written by hand. Hand written documents are called manuscripts.

Manuscripts in India have a long tradition that was produced in all part of our country in different languages and in scripts. These manuscripts were regarded as rare commodities, produced with hard labour and cost. A sense of religious sanctity and reverence were associated with them and they were worshipped like holy relics, which are now stored in different temples, madrasas, museums, universities as well as in personal custody etc.

In Assam, the Satra institutes are the major custodian of the rare manuscripts, though some are preserved in different places, such as in temples, madrasas, museums, and universities as well as in personal custody. In ancient Assam, the bark of Agar was used to write on, which is locally called Sanchipat. It is a unique writing material only used in Assam.

In the middle of 15th century, Srimanta Sankaradeva and his disciple Madhabdeva, along with their other disciples initiated Vaisnava renaissance in Assam. They spread the fragrance of Vaisnava faith among the masses, by written different dramas, Bargeet, Geet, poem etc. mainly on Sanchipat, tulapat etc. These manuscripts have still a great role in the Vaisnava Society as well as in Assamese literature, which are now treated as the cultural heritage of the nation. It is proud for us that two manuscripts of Assam i.e. Chitra Bhagabata and Ratnamala Byakaran, written on Sanchipat have been selected as the National Treasure of India by the central government of India, both of them are now scientifically preserved in the archive of KKH Library, Gauhati University. More over other two manuscripts from this Library, i.e. Lava- Kusha

Yuddha and Sachitra Bhagawata were displayed at the World Book Fair-2006-07, held in Frankfurt, Germany.

Besides, the Satras and Namghars, institutions like KKH Library of Gauhati University, Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti, Department of History & Antiquarian Studies, Guwahati, are the main repositories of rare and valuable manuscripts in Assam.

In Assam, the Vaisnava people worship the manuscripts as the sacred things. Because of the religious beliefson, these manuscripts are accessible to the Hindus only within the Satra premises only. In such situation, the digital surrogate of these manuscripts may be the best way for their preservation and access. Once the digitization of these manuscripts is completed; the users can use them in digital format without the fear of degradation of its quality. The single of a particular manuscript may produce in unlimited numbers according to the users' needs and can disseminate them to the remote users too. The users can take their required manuscripts with them in digital form, which are generally kept away from the people. Digital preservation may facilitate the global accessibility of the manuscripts. Moreover the owner of such manuscripts may market their products to the user community worldwide by uploading them on web.

4. Initiatives in digital preservation of manuscripts in India

Thinking the importance of digital preservation, in India too, numbers of projects are taken by different organizations for the preservation of these valuable manuscripts in digital format.

In July 2000, a pilot project for digitization of rare manuscripts had been initiated by National Archives of India, collaboration with Department of Science and Technology and National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore. Under this project, rare manuscripts, viz. Bhagwadgita, Ramayana, Mahabharata, etc. have been digitized and stored in CD medium.

One of the major functions of the National Library of a country is to collect and preserve nation's intellectual and cultural heritage. Therefore National Library has taken several steps to preserve this heritage as well as to increase the accessibility and awareness of these records. National Library of India, Kolkata is the apex body of library services India. This National Library has about 3600 rare and historically important manuscripts in different languages. These manuscripts are preserved separately in the Rare Books Division. This library has initiated a digitization programme, known as 'Down the Memory Lane', to digitize these manuscripts along with other rare books and documents, from its collection. These scanned documents are archiving on CDs. Between the year 1999 and 2001 approximately 6601 books and manuscripts containing 2.5 million pages were scanned and archived in 548 CD-ROMs.

Established in 2001, Nanakshahi is a registered trust at Punjab for creating a comprehensive Digital Sikh Reference Library. This trust introduced a Project named Virsa under which one hundred fifty manuscripts of Sri Guru Granth Sahib and other manuscripts available in the Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh and Kurukshetra University are digitized.

In February 2003, the Department of Culture, Ministry of Tourism and Culture, Government of India lunched a national level mission for the

preservation of the manuscripts; India's real treasure of culture. The Mission has laid emphasis on digital preservation of rare manuscripts all over India and already completed a numbers of manuscripts are captured in digital form.

Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts (IGNCA) was launched on 19th November, 1985 by the late Prime Minister of India Shri Rajiv Gandhi and registered at New Delhi on 24th March 1987. This Center has taken a nation wide project for digital preservation of manuscripts. This Center is digitizing a number of manuscripts in Assam also.

Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library located in Patna, Bihar has taken a Pilot Project of Digitization of manuscripts in October, 2005, which has a mighty collection of about 21,000 manuscripts in Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Turkish, Hindi and Sanskrit written on Palm-Leaves.

5. Initiatives in digital preservation of manuscripts in Assam

In Assam, at the Guwahati based Srimanta Sankaradeva Kalakshetra (SSK), the National Mission for Manuscripts has established a temporary field laboratory for digitizing the valuable rare manuscripts of Assam. The digitization process is going on where a number of manuscripts are already digitized by the expert. According to a news-report titled as 'Digitalisation of manuscripts under way at Kalakshetra' published in The Assam Tribune, the leading English Daily of North East India, dated April 9, 2008, forty four thousands (44,000) manuscripts were selected by a survey carried out by SSK for digital preservation. The Private collectors or libraries may also contact the SSK authority for necessary assistance.

The Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) has been working for the digital

preservation of manuscripts in Assam. The news report 'Conservation of 6,548 sanchipats completed' published in the Assam Tribune, dated 17 September, 2008, informed that Cultural Informatics, a branch of the IGNCA has successfully completed the identification, conservation and digitization of 6,548 numbers of rare and valuable manuscripts of Assam. These manuscripts are available in different mediums like sanchipat, palm leaf, paper etc. Out of these above numbers of manuscripts, 4,396 were on sanchipat, 259 on paper pulp, 1,892 on modern paper and 1 on palm leaf, collected from 126 sources of the State, including the Satra institutes scattered in different places of Assam.

At present, digitization of manuscripts, which are available in Narayani Handiqui Historical Institute (Department of

History & Antiquarian Studies), Guwahati is going on by the IGNCA, which has also a mighty collection of rare manuscripts

Gauhati University, the leading academic and research institute of NE India is known for its central library i.e. KKH

Library, which is full of 2.5 lakhs valuable books. The Archival Cell is another important section of this KKH Library which is mainly working for the preservation and conservation of different valuable manuscripts. Now it has about 4,500 valuable manuscripts written on Sachipat, tula pat and paper and these manuscripts have been preserved in the manuscript section of the Archival cell of the library. Recently, digitization of around 2,000 has been completed under the National Mission for Manuscripts and the library will soon get the CDs of these manuscripts. It is better to mentioned that in Assam, KKH Library has been working as

Manuscript Resource Center (MRC) and Manuscript Conservation Center (MCC) from the very beginning of this Mission to carry out the preservation and conservation works of manuscripts of the State and the library has developed a bibliographic database including all total 25,480 manuscripts till 4.12.2008.

America based Assam Society of America, has been involving in preservation of manuscript in Assam. The Society had started a Project for the digital restoration of rare and ancient Assamese manuscripts, with Jugal Kalita as the Project Coordinator. The Kuruabahi Satra in Golaghat, Assam is one of the famous Satras in Assam, has a collection about 60 manuscripts. In 2005, the Society digitally photographed these manuscripts, as this Satra had published an advertisement in a newspaper, seeking help for preservation of these manuscripts.

In Assam, the manuscripts, whether stored in university library, in museum or in other organizations, are mainly originated in Satra institute. So, emphasis should be given on preserving these manuscripts first.

6. Conclusion

The deterioration is one of the major problems in organization and management of manuscript collection.

But deterioration is the rule of nature, so now emphasis is given on the preservation of the contents along with the physical preservation of the manuscripts; in some cases physical preservation of manuscripts is impossible too. The digital preservation is suggested and followed as it can preserve the manuscripts with its own physical features and contents.

Some people believe that if the manuscripts are digitized and made available on web, then they are easily accessible from every nook and corner of the entire world; the manuscripts users will not come to those places where the manuscripts are physically preserved and in such situation the organizations will lose its glory and also lose an amount of revenue from which those organization are getting financial support. The importance of digital preservation can not be ignored. The digitization should be the supplement for the electronic access of such manuscript collection and these digital forms of manuscripts should not be made available on open access, if the custodians of such manuscripts refuse to do it.

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