Manuscript Collection in the Punjab University Library: Assessing Management Issues

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ABSTRACT: This study explores the issues of conservation and preservation of the rare manuscript collection in the Punjab University Library. The Library has the largest collection of manuscripts in Pakistan, comprised of more than twenty-two thousand items. The collection is multilingual and multi-format, including palm-leaf manuscripts. In this study, the data about the collection, acquisition, organization of materials, methods of conservation, and digitization of manuscripts were obtained from a focus group of relevant library staff. The Library provides the listings of manuscripts in Arabic, Sanskrit, Punjabi, Persian, and Urdu as well as a Sanskrit catalogue on its website. The task of preserving the manuscripts will go through a strategic planning process and then be taken as a project. Some measures have been made for the conservation and preservation of such precious items for the benefits of future generations. The study identifies the need for a proper planning to preserve and maintain this rare collection and the issues faced by the staff to digitize the manuscripts.

I. Introduction

Libraries exist since antiquity. From the past to the present, the mission of libraries is to maintain a records archive, scholarship and research, religious and personal status, public use or national pride. Scholarly use and preservation of record archives of the world history was always the foremost mission during Muslim rule in different continents. They introduced the calligraphic art in the sub-continent that resulted in the production of Quranic and other manuscripts in different languages. The Punjab University library has a big share of the rich Indus Valley Civilization in the form of manuscripts and other rare materials.

The University of the Punjab, the oldest in the country (1882), comprises of 4 campuses, 13 faculties, 9 constituent colleges, and 64 departments, centers, and institutes. It has a central library, in addition to forty-five independent libraries in the teaching departments, constituent colleges, and institutes.

1. Punjab University Library

The Punjab University Library (PUL) was established in 1873 as the "Punjab College Library". With the Punjab College was raised to the status of a university in 1882, the Punjab College Library became the Punjab University Library. There are ten service sections or units in the Punjab University Library, including Acquisition, Cataloguing, Circulation, Multimedia and Microfilming /IT, Manuscripts, Oriental, Information Resource Centre (formerly Reference), Serials and Periodicals, and United Nations' Reports and Government Publications (Punjab University Library, 2005).

The Iranian Culture Center and the Digital Library in the Library are established with the cooperation of the Iranian Government.

2. Manuscripts Collection in Punjab University Library

The Manuscript Section was set up on 31st July, 1920 and now it manages the largest manuscript collection in Pakistan. The total manuscript collection in the Library is more than 22,000 titles. The number of manuscripts including dissertations in Urdu, Arabic, Persian and local languages is about 13,167 while the collection of manuscripts in Sanskrit, Hindi, etc. is 8,671 volumes (Punjab University Library, 2009).

In 1936, the Sanskrit Manuscripts collection of Punjab University Library was named "Woolner Collections" in recognition of Dr. A.C. Woolner's invaluable and remarkable services for the Sanskrit language (Qarshi, 1997). In Punjab University, scholars have compiled a list of manuscripts in different languages (See Appendix).

According to Kanwal (2009), a vast number of manuscripts are collected by different university libraries in Pakistan: Sindh University Library (625), Quaid-e-Azam University Library (266), Peshawar University Library (685), Punjab University Library (20,000+), and Hamdard University Library (1,500+).

As university libraries in Pakistan hold a significant number of manuscripts, it has a great potential for digitization. Digital information has common characteristics and qualities, regardless of storage media. There are many benefits of digitizing manuscripts and rare materials. Lee (2001), Mat & Koleg (2005), Hughes (2004), and McMenemy & Poulter (2005) point out that digitization has revolutionized the way libraries store, preserve, and provide access to rare materials without degrading the quality of the original by physical handling or display. Besides, digitization projects can raise the profile or reputation of an institution. It also plays an important role in the human resource development in libraries.

A large number of digitization activities have been initiated in academic libraries in the developed as well as the developing world. Libraries in Pakistan are also involved in digitization activities. The United Nations' Digital Library, Islamabad is engaged in

digitization activities (United Nation Organization, 2006). The majority of university libraries in Pakistan show the availability of digital resources and rare materials on their webpages.

II. Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To analyze different aspects of manuscript management in the Punjab University Library
2. To identify the current status of manuscripts collection, their preservation and digitization
3. To discuss issues affecting the digitization activities
4. To suggest measures for the proper conservation of manuscript collections

III. Research Methodology

A qualitative research method in the form of focus group is used to collect data. A group interview was designed to explore in-depth feelings and beliefs people hold and to learn how such feelings shape overt behaviour. They are called focus groups because the discussions start out broadly and gradually narrow down to the focus of research (Powell & Connaway, 2004). A search of library literature shows that the focus group has typically been used in public service assessment. Focus groups are extremely useful for exploring how patrons respond to new ideas, service or product. The evaluation comes directly from the participants' observations and discussions. A focus group provides researchers with in-depth insight of an issue. In general, a group of no more than 10 to 12 people is recruited on the basis of some common characteristics. This is referred to as "purposeful sampling".

A group of 7 people were selected from the main library, who are directly involved in manuscript acquisition, preservation, and digitization. Of the 7 participants, 5 were professionally qualified librarians and two were non professionals who have been involved in manuscript conservation and digitization activities in the Punjab University Library.

IV. Research Instrument

Focus group technique is more labor intensive than other qualitative research techniques. Before the study began, the researcher pre-tested a list of questions. To get more information from a focus group, the participants' willingness was sought out.

The researcher designed a set of nine open-ended questions to provide an environment conducive to free discussion. The last question is to provide an opportunity for the respondents to raise any new issues. The questions are as follows:

1. How do you catalogue and classify the manuscripts?
2. What kind of devices do you use to preserve manuscript collection?
3. What types of problems are faced by library staff to maintain the collection?
4. What services are offered in the manuscripts section?
5. Which new service would you like to introduce to provide better access for users?
6. What are the criteria to digitize the manuscript collection?
7. What is the procedure of digitization?
8. Which information from the manuscript can be made available through digitization?
9. Is there anything else you would like to tell about the manuscript collection?

This process involved intensive data analysis, comparing phrases and sentences, and then organizing viewpoints into emerging themes.

V. Findings

1. How do you catalogue and classify the manuscripts?

This question is only for the staff who manages the shelving of the 107 shelves which contain more than 22,000 manuscripts in different languages. Classification is not required because of the close shelf system used. But different classification patterns are used for the manuscripts of different languages. In general, the scheme of Lala Labu Ram serves this purpose well. For example, the notation for an Arabic manuscript is:

Serial # of Manuscript = 64
Accession # = 1441
Subject = Arc (Beliefs). I=?

Arc I
64
―――
1441

But no subject is given in the listing of Sherani collection as he himself devised the categories by subjects of manuscripts. For example,

4108=Accession, 1056= Serial in specific subject.   4108/1056

The listing of Sanskrit manuscript is based on accession number due to staff language deficiency. The Library has stopped purchasing manuscripts in Sanskrit and Hindi languages because no staff is proficient in these languages.

Comments by some participants include:

"Manuscripts reading is an art, only specialist can do that".

"Retrieval of manuscripts is very easy because of self-made classification schemes".

"I find it easy and less time consuming because of signage on each cupboard."

There are number of listings and catalogues of manuscripts available in different languages. The catalogue/listing of Sanskrit manuscripts is available on the Punjab University's website (http://www.pulibrary.edu.pk). However, that list is not searchable.
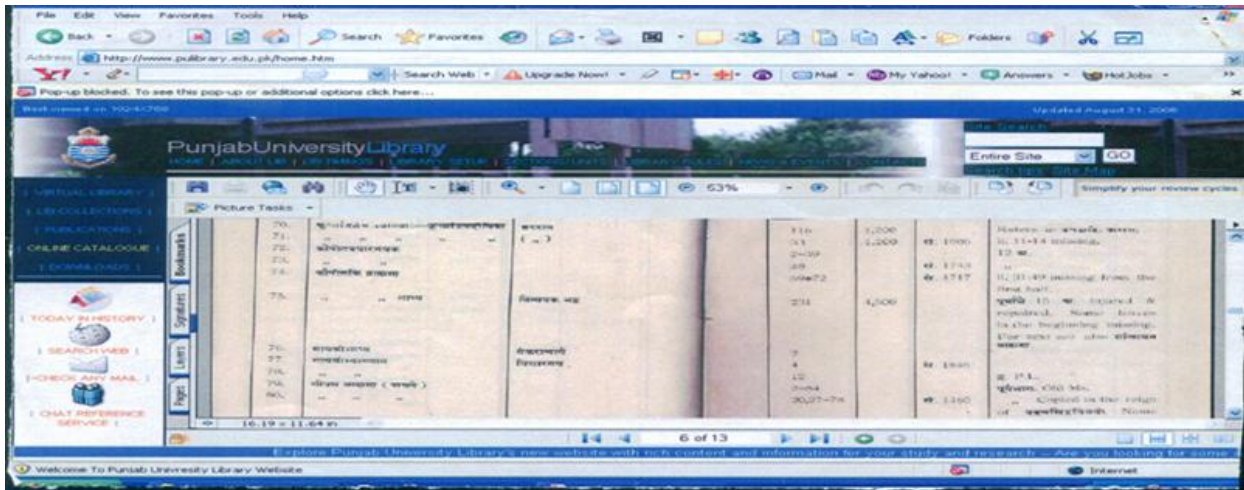

Fig. 1: Catalogue of Sanskrit manuscript on Punjab University Library website

The scanned listings of Sanskrit Manuscript are also available on the Punjab University Library website.
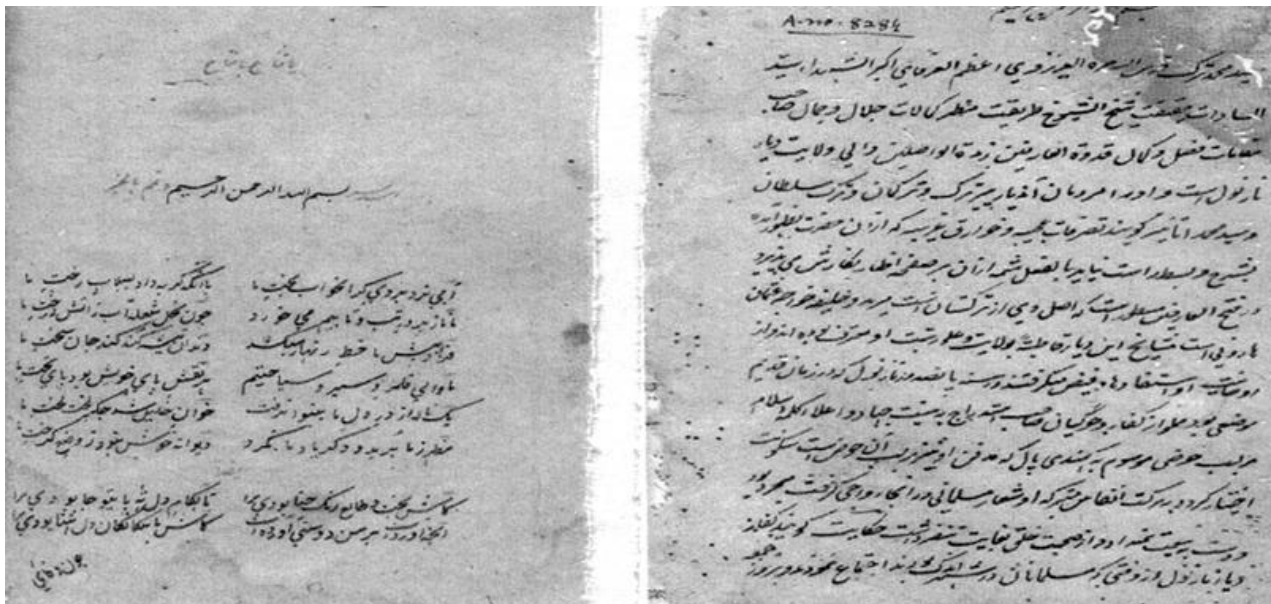

Fig. 2: Copy of rare Islamic Persian manuscript

2. What kind of devices do you used to preserve manuscript collection?

The participants in the focus group mentioned different preservation methods for manuscripts. The digital reproduction can be considered as a safe archive of original manuscripts. Microfilming, photocopying, use of fumigation chamber, binding, and dusting are also used for preservation due to the nature of manuscripts.

The Punjab University Library has no preservation unit for the proper care of its precious and unique collection of manuscripts.

Fig. 3: Palm-leaf manuscripts

The Library has only one locally prepared fumigation cupboard. For the preservation of such a large collection, one fumigation cupboard is not sufficient as it can treat only a few manuscripts at a time. Ass there is sufficient ventilation and daylight in the storage area, medicated sprays and tablets, etc. are used to prevent insect infection.

However, it should be emphasized that the originals are irreplaceable. Therefore, access to them should be limited.

3. What types of problems are faced by library staff to maintain the collection?

The participants in the focus group raised different issues they face. The most common problem is lack of language proficiency. Besides, there are no facilities to train staff how to handle manuscripts and rare materials. There is no separate budget for preservation. There is no air conditioning in intense heat.

Comments by focus group participants include:

"I don't know Sanskrit. How can I handle fifty percent of the manuscript collection that is in this language?"

"How can the 107 shelves of rare manuscripts be maintained properly in the temperature of 50 degrees Celsius?"

"We haven't any long- or short-term plan or vision for their preservation and marketing."

"I often do not give permission for photocopy, because my main duty is to preserve/maintain them."

"I can't satisfy the readers who want a damaged manuscript immediately."

There is a long list of comments about issues. But the most important is the lack of proper planning for the preservation and maintenance of such a rare collection only to provide better access today but also to save for future generations.

4. What services are offered in the manuscripts section?

The Manuscripts Section provides access to rare material only for researchers and university teachers. It makes available the original manuscript for them in the specific reading room under the supervision of staff. In most cases, staff supplies a photocopy on payment when the original piece is in a fragile condition. . A digitized copy is provided at the request of a researcher, with a recommendation from the Section head and the permission by the chief librarian. Sometimes, the Library provides translation services to researchers on special cases.

5. Which new service would you like to introduce to provide better access for users?

This question helped to highlight the main concerns of the focus group participants. A new service is not possible to introduce without financial and human resources as well as proper planning.

But the most important service which is really needed is the digitization of manuscripts with digital camera. With the purchase/use of a quality digital camera, the process of digitization will accelerate. It simply captures the image without placing stress on the binding of manuscripts as it would be with flatbed scanners. The digitization of manuscripts with digital cameras should be a priority.

Typical comments include:

"Digital camera will reproduce damaged manuscripts more safely and have least chance of damage."

"I experienced this advance digital camera when a team of Korean researchers visited the library and scanned manuscripts on experimental basis. It was really amazing for me."

"I wish the library would purchase that camera to digitize its rare collection."

6. What are the criteria to digitize the manuscript collection?

The manuscripts are digitized on demand. A digital copy instead of the original is provided to users. In order to make this duplicate copy acceptable and to diminish the

use of originals, it is necessary to comply with the following basic conditions for digitization according to the survey participants:

- The manuscript should be in good condition and will not be damaged in the process of digitization.
- The binding of the manuscript should not be subject to excessive stress.
- The images which cover some portion of the opposite page are produced, resized, and gone through the normal processing.
- The images are checked for any deviation in terms of clarity, legibility, and colour.
- The metadata about the images must be made available in due time.
- The basic image metadata and the secondary image metadata (physical information) are desired.
- The users must be willing to accept the digital duplicate.

7. What is the procedure of digitization?

The digital images of the manuscript are processed with the HP Director software and Adobe Photoshop Version 6. A flatbed scanner is used for scanning. It was observed that on average, 200 pages of manuscripts in good condition are scanned daily. If a manuscript is in a feeble condition, it will take two to three hour to scan. The English text of rare material scanned is processed via OCR while text in other languages is saved as JPEG. The image scanned is previewed first, and then edited or trimmed and scanned again.

Fig. 4: Digitized copy of Palm leaf manuscript in PUL

This process will be more self-explanatory in the following steps:

1. Document Assessment (condition of the document, sequence of pages, and original page numbering order)
2. Image Identification Tagging (images are renamed according to page sequence)
3. Image Quality Check (clarity, legibility, and colour).
4. Basic Editing (error correction, noise reduction, stain removal, etc.)
5. Final Editing (image comparison with the original)
6. Format Conversion (JPEG converted to PDF with Acrobat and password assigned)
7. PDF Type (Composite PDF file used to preserve the original document pagination and sequence)
8. Image Storage (images saved on CD-ROMs or Internet)

8. Which information from the manuscript can be made available through digitization?

The responses to this question indicate that the medium of a manuscript is as important as its contents. The digitized manuscript differs substantially from the original as far as the medium is concerned. There is a successive loss of information until its final printing. The manuscript is an inseparable combination of the medium and the recorded information. The medium itself carries important and interesting information. Any damage to the medium is an irrecoverable loss of information.

Comments by participants include:

"It is not clear whether it (the original manuscript) is on paper or palm leaf."

"The digitized copy can't tell us anything about the binding of original, ink used or history of manuscripts."

A manuscript shows the details of the materials used, detritions, damage, and repairs. Such information can be called secondary image data. There is also a lot of other information contained in the manuscript such as its physical and technological characteristics, and information conducive to the discovery of the history of the manuscript. This type of information can be called physical data.

So it is concluded that there should be information not only about the content but also the physical and secondary image data about a digitized manuscript.

9. Is there anything else you would like to tell about the manuscript collection?

Two thousand manuscripts in palm leaves are unique in character, and the Arabic and Persian manuscripts bear beautiful illustrations, fine calligraphy, and elegant bindings.

There are more than nine thousand manuscripts in Sanskrit and Hindi, including the Vedas. Loose letters, diaries and some magnificent correspondences represent interesting and authentic records of important personalities.

Comments by participants include:

"The library's new Visual Basic and MARC-based software M-LIMS has manuscript data entry templates."

"Library plans to add its catalogue to the National Union Catalogue of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC)."

"Data of seventy rare manuscripts are available on CD."

A project called "Online Manuscript Digital Gallery of illuminated and illustrated manuscripts" is designed, which will be executed with the collaboration of Kung University of Korea and Vienna University. There is a plan for fee-based access to the "Manuscript Digital Gallery".

Participants also made the following suggestions and recommendations:

- The listing and catalogue records of manuscripts in different languages should be uploaded to the Punjab University Library website like that of the Sanskrit manuscript catalogue.
- There should be a scholar librarian who is an expert in manuscript management so he or she can classify, catalogue and evaluate manuscripts and facilitate their use by researchers.
- Listings of manuscripts should be available to researchers either on CD/DVD or the library website.
- Advanced training for relevant library personnel on preservation and record management is needed to ensure the long-term preservation of the rare materials.
- There should be an active unit of "archival and manuscript collection" that digitize the manuscripts.
- Special equipments are needed for digitization and microfilming of the rare material and manuscripts.
- For security and preservation purposes, this unit should have central air conditioning and furniture to display the manuscripts in a better way.
- As the environmental conditions effect badly on the rare materials which are already in poor conditions, a moderate temperature should be maintained in all seasons.
- There is no much research on manuscripts in Pakistan. The Punjab University Library should make efforts in this area, as it has such rare manuscripts that are unique in its contents and medium.

VI. Conclusion

The manuscript collection at the Punjab University Library is the richest one in Pakistan. This collection is managed by the Oriental Section staff who face many problems in maintaining and providing services to researchers. They work hard to follow new techniques to preserve this rare collection of manuscripts. They digitize the manuscripts of different languages on demand by researcher and save the digital contents on CDs for future use. The Library provides the listings of manuscripts in Arabic, Sanskrit, Punjabi, Persian, and Urdu as well as Sanskrit catalogue through its website. The task of preserving the manuscripts will go through a strategic planning process and then be taken as a project. Relevant library staff should be trained or developed to manage the manuscript collection. Marketing this precious collection will increase public awareness of such a treasure and facilitate its use by researchers.

Appendix: List of researchers/sources regarding the manuscript collection in PUL

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