Manuscriptology with Reference to Ayurvedic Manuscriptology: An Overview

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ABSTRACT

AYURVED being a ancient science has got oral and written traditions of dissemination of the knowledge. This paper narrates the importance, mode, information about the written traditions and the scientific background of the relevant science of manuscriptology. Also the other aspects like basics of Ayurvedic manuscriptology, manuscript repositories have been covered.

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INTRODUCTION

Manuscriptology is a scientific and structured study of handwritten documents attributed with a fair antiquity. In a general sense, any handwritten document is called a “manuscript.” However, in a scientific context, certain rules regarding the age of a document for it to be considered as a “manuscript” must be put down. This is conventionally accepted as 75 years since the date of writing the document. Before the usage of paper became widespread probably around 13th century AD in India, a variety of materials were used as writing media. Rocks, clay tablets, metal plates, papyrus leaves, birch bark, animal skins and leather, cotton clothes, wooden boards, and palm leaves are some examples. In the southern states of India where the palm tree (Borassus flabellifer Linn) is widely distributed, its leaves were preferred as the writing media. The leaves of another species of palm known as Sritāla (Caryota urens Linn) were also used as writing media sparingly. In North India where Birch trees known as Bhūrja (skt) (Betula utilis D. Don) were available, its thin bark, cut into regular shapes, were used for writing. Inks, vegetable dyes for painting, scribbling with a metallic stylus, brushes, reeds, pencils, and wooden pens were all used for writing on these media. A multitude of languages and scripts, some of them now extinct, were used to put in writing information; some of these were personal, such as a horoscope or scientific as a medical or astronomical text. Professional or amateur writers known by various names, such as lipikā (4th century BCE), divirapati (8th century ACE), kāyastha (11th century ACE), kāraika, sāsanika, and dharmalekhin carried forward the valuable information for the use of future generations through the documents they wrote or copied.

SURVEY AND COLLECTION OF MANUSCRIPTS

Manuscripts are invaluable treasures in terms of the value of information they often contain, such as in a medical text or as a witness of rich cultural heritage and history. Therefore, their proper preservation is of utmost importance. In India, rich collections of manuscripts are often found in temples, monasteries, wealthy households, Brahim families, and palaces. Some families involved in specialized vocations also preserve traditional texts related with their professions. India being such a large country with a long, luminous history and heritage holds in its bosom a vast treasure of manuscripts dealing with a multitude of subjects waiting to be discovered, studied, and published. Surveys for manuscripts in the past years have identified and catalogued many such large collections and many are waiting to be discovered. The survey studies involve hard labor, manpower, and time. They need to be properly planned and executed to reap any success. The need to train survey officers for dealing with the possible challenges that might be social or technical is of utmost importance prior to sending them on their missions. The challenges to a manuscript survey may be twofold: Social and technical.

SOCIAL CHALLENGES AND THEIR SOLUTIONS

- Inherent suspicion on the part of the owners of manuscript collections about the authenticity and intent of the survey study.
- Expectation of monetary benefits
These problems can be addressed by issuing proper identification tags and documents to the survey officers and also availing the help of a local elder who is known and respected in the community to locate already known or new manuscript collections. The second issue needs to be addressed in case the authorities are intent upon collecting the manuscripts. These days the advent of information technology has opened up a large number of solutions to address such problems. For example, the manuscripts can be digitized “in situ” using appropriate cameras or scanners and a copy can be issued to the owner instantly. The need for setting up large collection centers is also annulled here.

TECHNICAL CHALLENGES AND THEIR SOLUTIONS

• Incompetency of the survey officer in terms of languages, scripts, or proper handling of manuscripts. Preferably, persons competent in reading various scripts and adept at various languages must be appointed as survey officers, though the chances of finding such competent people for doing such hard labor are very rare. A practical solution is to have competent resource persons appointed to deal with manuscripts in rare scripts and languages as consultants in the project.

• Lack of access to novel and better technologies since the advent of digital technology, older methods of accessing information contained in manuscripts have undergone vast changes. Earlier, microfilming was a preferred method, but this has given way to advanced imaging techniques. Today manuscript survey studies can be combined with digitization projects to enhance access and avoiding additional efforts.

SURVEY DATA ENTRY SHEET

The data entry sheet at the hands of the survey officer is the single most powerful tool that helps in garnering as much information as one can about the manuscripts and their condition. A data sheet must try to include all possible information that will help in locating the repository in the future and accessing the intended manuscript by a third party. The most important points to be included in a survey sheet are given below

• Name, address, phone numbers, e-mail ID of the owner
• Manuscript no. and title
• Material – palm leaf/paper/other materials (specific)
• Method of inscription – incised/painted/written with ink
• Author
• Language

• Script
• Number of folios, length and breadth of folios, number of lines in each folio
• Complete/incomplete
• Intact/damaged
• Colophons
• Date of copying/writing (if available)
• Scribe’s name (if available)
• Opening verse
• Closing verse
• Remarks (mistakes, legibility, written by single scribe or multiple scribes, grammatical integrity, peculiarities of manuscript)

Cataloguing

After the survey is concluded, these sheets can be compiled and assessed to bring out various types of catalogues for forming a central database of information on the region’s manuscript wealth.

Types of Catalogues

• Handlists
• Alphabetical index of manuscripts
• Author wise/title wise index
• Descriptive catalogue
• General catalogue

PRESERVATION OF MANUSCRIPTS

There are various factors that contribute to the damages that may happen to a manuscript. A proper method of preservation must necessarily nullify all of or at least most of these factors. The major factors that cause damages to the manuscript are

• Temperature
• Humidity
• Insects, particularly termites
• Fire
• Improper handling

By adopting proper care and appropriate techniques, the damages caused by these factors may be countered to a greater extent. Some of them are explained below.

• Air-conditioning can go a long way in battling extreme diurnal and seasonal variations in temperature and as it also dehumidifies air that is circulated, the humidity factor is also effectively countered.

• Insect attacks can be effectively warded off by storing the manuscripts in metallic shelves with a fair amount of clearance from the ground. The flooring must preferably be done with vitrified tiles to counter termites gaining access through cracks in the floor.
Insecticides must be placed around the room in potential points of entry.

In case of palm leaf manuscripts, a fair application of lemongrass oil not only helps in warding off termites and insects, but also in making the inscriptions more legible during reading or digitization. However, there is an underside to this method. The constant handling and careless application of oil can cause considerable damages to the manuscripts.

All possible care must be taken to avoid a fire. Proper fireproof electrification goes a long way in preventing possible outbreaks of fire. Timely servicing of air-conditioning equipments must be done. Round-the-clock security must be provided to the manuscript repository. This also helps in timely detection of fire outbreaks. Necessary firefighting equipments must be available within the premises. Proper gaps must be provided between the shelves to prevent the spread of fire.

Digitization helps the twin cause of preserving valuable information contained in old and fragile manuscripts and providing the manuscript researcher with a powerful tool to examine the folios that prevents unnecessary handling of original manuscripts.

MAJOR MANUSCRIPT REPOSITORIES IN INDIA

- Saraswati Mahal Library in Tanjavur, Tamil Nadu
- Government Oriental Manuscript Library, Chennai
- Oriental Research Institute, Thiruvananthapuram
- Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Pune
- Anandashram, Pune
- Samarth Vagdevata Mandal, Dhule, Maharashtra
- Oriental Research Institute, Mysore
- Asiatic Society of Mumbai and Kolkata
- Manuscript Repository, University of Calicut
- Deccan College, Pune
- Sanskrit College, Trippunithura, Kerala
- Hill Palace Museum, Trippunithura, Kerala
- Rajasthan Oriental Research Institute, Jodhpur
- Raghunath Temple Library, Jammu
- Banaras Hindu University BHU, Varanasi
- Sampurnand Sanskrit University, Varanasi
- Sanskrit College, Kolkata
- Vishweshwarananda Biswabandhu Institute of Sanskrit and Indological studies, Hoshiarpur, Punjab
- Oriental Research Institute, Sri Venkateswara University, Tirupati
- Orissa State Museum, Bhubaneswar

MAJOR COLLECTIONS OF INDIAN MANUSCRIPTS OUTSIDE INDIA

- National Library, Berlin, Germany
- Bibliotheque de Nationale, Paris, France
- India Office Library, London
- Kyoto University Library, Kyoto, Japan
- Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal
- Lahore University, Pakistan
- Vienna University, Austria
- Hamburg University, Germany
- Harvard University, USA
- University Library, Munchen, Germany
- Bodleian Library, Oxford
- Wellcome Institute Library, London
- Tubingen University Library, Germany
- University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, USA

Future scope of Ayurvedic Manuscriptology:

- Research of unexplored Ayurvedic literature
- Search for known literature but which is not available fully or partially
- Comprehensive cataloging of explored manuscripts
- Critical edition and history writing of existing manuscripts

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