

CONSERVATION OF ASIAN DOCUMENTS ON PAPER AND PALM-LEAF

O.P. Agrawal
Director General
Indian Council of Conservation Institutes,
Lucknow. INDIA

INTRODUCTION

There are hundreds of thousands of old manuscripts written on paper and on palm-leaf in almost all countries of Asia. Before the advent of paper in various countries palm-leaf was the most popular material used for writing particularly the countries of south-east Asia like Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. Palm-leaves were also used for writing of manuscripts in Sri Lanka and India especially in the coastal areas. In India, *bhoj-patra* (birch bark) was used for writing side by side with palm-leaves, before the advent of paper sometime in the 11th century A.D. In Indonesia barks of certain trees, besides paper and palm-leaf, were in use.

On account of the vast literary activity through the centuries in these countries, we find huge collections of early manuscripts everywhere.

It is difficult to make even a rough estimate of the number of manuscripts available in each country. But one thing is certain that the number is huge. In a recent survey conducted in various states of India, over one million manuscripts have already been catalogued. There certainly are several millions more, waiting to be enlisted. There is no doubt that the number of manuscripts in other Asian countries is equally large.

During the survey in India, it was observed that a large percentage of manuscripts was badly in need of conservation. We have to evolve a strategy to meet the needs of the vast situation. The problems differ from country to country, but in general one can say that there is a lack of awareness, lack of understanding of methods of preventive conservation, shortage of conservation facilities, and lack of funds.

LACK OF AWARENESS

There seems to be a lack of awareness of the importance of manuscripts in the general public as well as in the authorities of institutions, which own vast collections of manuscripts. In India, for example, we had done a survey of manuscript-collections in the towns as well as in the villages of some states like Orissa and Karnataka and Rajasthan and U.P. We had received funds for this

exercise from the Norway Agency for Development (NORAD). Several teams were appointed to go to various villages and a proforma was prepared, which the team members were supposed to fill and gather information. Extensive data information has been collected and has been compiled. In the team were included conservation specialists and a language expert also. We found that many persons were keeping the ancient manuscripts because they consider them to be sacred and religious. They offer salutations to them without understanding their importance. Most of them were not clear about their utility. Most frequently asked question was 'Why should we preserve them? What is the use?' Many of them thought that we had come to take away their valuable manuscripts and were not willing to show them.

In order to partly solve these problems, we organized 2 or 3 days workshops teaching them rudimentary methods of preservation.

The situation was not only in villages, but also in several temples in the cities, where manuscripts were preserved as a part of their "*Dharma*", which means religious duty. The question often asked in such temples was also similar, "What is the use?"

I have faced similar situation during my travels in other countries of Asia, like Thailand, and Indonesia, and Malaysia, and Lao.

We have therefore to find a suitable solution to this problem.

LACK OF TRAINING IN CONSERVATION

We also find that in most Asian countries there is a lack of training in conservation. As we know conservation has two aspects, namely:

1. Preventive Conservation
2. Curative Conservation, which means conservation treatment.

Preventive Conservation is the process by which one takes care of the collections so that they do not deteriorate further. This type of training is required by all those who handle the manuscript collections at any stage. In a library or a museum, it would mean the training of librarians, curators, archivists, attendants, photographers and so on. Probably it is easy to organize this course for organized institutions like museums and libraries. As we have seen manuscript collections are also available in temples, churches, monasteries and with private owners. We have noticed that collections in these places are managed mostly by volunteers, devotees, who spare some of their time as a sort of social service. In their case the problem is that they cannot give full attention to attend a workshop. To meet this situation we try to work out a different policy for our workshops.

This situation exists in other countries of Asia as well. In Thai monasteries for instance, monks look after the manuscripts. Time available with them, away from their religious duties is rather limited. In the Nepalese temples also, there are thousands of religious manuscripts, written on Nepalese paper, mostly managed by priests or volunteers. These volunteers come from different strata of the society. In India a survey showed that a devotee managing the manuscripts could be a shopkeeper, an industrialist, office-goer and sometimes a retired person. Even when the person is interested in preserving, the collections, time he/she can devote seems to be limited.

In such a scenario, getting a meaningful audience for a training workshop becomes problematic. It is a question of priorities. For a businessman, his business is more important than the preservation of manuscripts. An office goer must attend the office, because he gets his livelihood from there. Such persons are interested but can possibly devote one day or half a day in a week. But it has to be ensured that the half-day he is willing to give for the preservation of manuscripts is efficiently utilized. For this reason, we thought that training in preventive conservation, which is the first step for preservation, was extremely important. In organizing the program, therefore we fixed the timing of the workshop in such a manner that as far as possible, the time of the office or of the business, would not clash with the training program. Our 3 days workshop was conducted mostly in the morning hours, from 8 a.m. to 10 a.m. This strategy worked very well and we found that the attendance was much higher than on the occasions when the workshop was for full day.

Similarly, while organizing workshops for housewives, who also volunteer to work for the preservation of manuscripts, the timing of the workshop was from 11 a.m., after their household work was over, and they could spare time for training. The duration was for 2 hrs.

ICCI also organized a number of workshops in villages for rural people. The training time for them was mostly in the evenings, when the villagers were free from their farming and agriculture activity.

In many a case, after the workshop, we gave some materials for preventive conservation to the participants. This material was very simple, like cotton, soft brush, some paper, a pair of scissors, knife and similar other material. But the strategy was found to be extremely useful for achieving our ultimate goal, which was preservation.

We found that by adopting this type of techniques, the message of conservation was more widely spread than was otherwise possible.

I remember that in Thailand several years back special meetings of Buddhist monks were held for making them aware of the treasures of, wall paintings and other art objects, which their monasteries and temples possessed. At that time, the emphasis was mostly on wall paintings. I was invited as a special guest. I remember that such meetings had a great impact and large amount of could be done for conservation of wall paintings in Thailand. I think there is a need of adopting a similar strategy for conservation of manuscripts in all Asian countries.

I have a feeling that unless the people are involved with a conservation program there will not be much success. There is therefore an urgent need for taking up training programs making them convenient according to the need of the community.

LACK OF CONSERVATION FACILTIEIS IN EACH COUNTRY

We are all aware that whatever precautions for preventive conservation, do we take, manuscripts whether on paper or on palm leaf, get deteriorated and become weak. At that stage they need to be strengthened and repaired. Presence of acidity in the paper is a big source of problem. Insects infest pal-leaf manuscripts. Their edges get broken they get damaged and their flexibility decreases and they get brittle. In order that the defects which take place in the manuscripts are rectified, we need to give to them conservation treatment. For that we need a proper conservation facility, with well trained personnel, some basic tools, and above all a will to get the deteriorating manuscripts treated. If we look around in the Asian countries such conservation centres are very few. In India, luckily the position is much better than in most Asian countries. The central government museums like the National Museum, New Delhi; Indian Museum, Calcutta; Salarjung Museum, Hyderabad; Victoria Memorial, Calcutta; National Archives, New Delhi have very good conservation Centres for objects including manuscripts, but even then the facilities available are not enough to look after even their own collections, what to say of caring for the objects of other institutions. The National Archives, New Delhi and national Library, Calcutta are other institution with very good facilities for paper conservation. Situation with States of India is not so happy. Several of them have conservation Centres in the State Archives, but many of them need to be developed.

The INTACH Indian Council of Conservation Institutes has established ten Art Conservation Centers in various regions of the country, out of which five function as Manuscripts Conservation Centers. They send teams for survey of manuscripts collections, take up preservative conservation and also undertake conservation treatment of manuscripts which are in need of conservation. These centers receive manuscripts not only from various institutes but also from private owners. The Lucknow and Bhubaneshwar Centre carry out training programmes in Conservation of Manuscripts while the Indian

Conservation Institute, Lucknow in paper conservation. The ICI Orissa Art Conservation Centre, Bhubaneswar takes up training of conservation of palm-leaf manuscripts. In the past, the Bhubaneswar Centre received financial as well as technical assistance from the Japan Foundation. In these courses participants from India and other Asian Countries come for training. Person from Sri Lanka, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Iran, Nepal and the Philippines came for training at these centers.

While in the first three years, assistance was received from the Japan Foundation, subsequently we got financial assistance from Norway Agency for Development (NORAD), which is still continuing.

Training workshops of short durations were arranged outside India Also. Thus several workshops were held in Sri Lanka and one in Indonesia.

The advantage of ICCI is that it is not attached to one particularly institution, it is free to take up conservation of collection from any institution or individual.

Lately, a very good development which has taken place in India, is the launching of the National Mission For Manuscripts (NMM) by the Department of Culture of the government of India. Fully financed by the Government it is an independent mission with the objective of surveying, cataloging and preserving manuscripts all over India. In order to do conservation work, 28 conservation centers have been set up by the NMM. However barring a few, most of them are still groping to have a foothold in the conservation field. The programme is so vast and extended so much that these centers themselves are finding it hard to get good experts of conservation of manuscripts. To meet this need, some Teachers Training Courses were also organized by NMM. We hope that eventually these centers will be fully developed.

As far as I know, the situation of conservation centers in other Asian countries is more or less similar. In Sri Lanka, National Archives has a very big unit for paper conservation. The National Museum, Colombo also has a conservation center mainly developed for conservation of art objects and wall paintings. It is also trying to set up a unit of palm-leaf conservation.

In Nepal, there is a Central Conservation Laboratory under the Department of Archaeology. It is mainly for conservation of archaeological objects like sculptures, paintings and so on. There is a National Archives which does some amount of paper conservation.

In Thailand the National Library in Bangkok has with it a paper conservation unit.

The Department of Fine Arts, Thailand has a Central Conservation Laboratory, which is especially active in the field of conservation of art and archaeological objects.

In Malaysia, the National Archives has a very good unit of paper conservation. The Department of National Museum has also set up a conservation center but mainly devoted to museum objects. The Museum of Islamic Art in Kuala Lumpur has recently established a conservation unit devoted to paper conservation.

In Indonesia, the National Archives, Jakarta has with it arrangements for paper conservation, doing very good work. But apart from that there is no other institution.

From the above description it will be evident that in each country there is a great dearth of facilities of conservation. Collections everywhere are so large that without proper and sufficient preservation support, they are dwindling and falling to pieces. The need is for more trained staff and for proper guidance and supervision.

LACK OF INTEREST IN OLD TRADITIONAL LITERATURE

Quite often, while going for survey of manuscripts for awareness campaigns we came across very peculiar but genuine problems. Many times it was mentioned to us that no one was interested in old manuscripts, there are very few people who come to consult the literature. The manuscripts are rarely opened and as such what was the use of preservation. As objects of worship they serve a need, but beyond that they have no value. Frankly speaking I have no answers to such question. It is true that in temples *shastras* (religious texts) are kept in cupboards and very rarely consulted. Devotees offer *roli* (a red powder used for worship) rice, flowers on the bundles of manuscripts as a mark of respect but otherwise they remain closed. In some Indian religions like the Jains, it is considered to be a pious act to recite a few verses or a chapter every day.

It is evident that in the absence of genuine interest in the reading of old literature, interest to preserve the manuscripts is also very much lessened. I have no solution to offer to this sociological problem but it is there.

LACK OF FUNDS FOR CONSERVATION

Since much importance is not attached to manuscripts, funds allotted by the Government for conservation activities are also very much limited. According to general thinking in administrative and political circles, subjects like agriculture, health, transport are important subjects, needing greater attention. On the other hand cultural heritage and manuscripts are almost always the last priority. To some extent it is also true if some manuscripts are lost now, they will be lost forever. Quite often so much ancient wisdom is buried inside them that their decipherment can bring about phenomenal changes in the lives of the people. First need is their preservation and for this funds are required. Constant dialogue with the politician, administrators and the people is perhaps the only way out.

ACTION PLAN

It will be evident from the above that each country has to prepare an Action Plan to deal with the following situations:

- i. Creation of awareness through lectures, exhibitions, special programs not only in big cities but also in the villages.
- ii. Organize short training programs to impart knowledge of preventive conservation. The timing of these workshops must be arranged to suit the needs of a particular group or a particular community. A system should be developed for keeping in touch with those who are trained to have continuous feed back from the owners.
- iii. Work out a strategy for the establishment of manuscripts conservation in each country. A proper strategy should be worked out so that the quality does not suffer.
- iv. To work towards the goal of study of traditional literature to make it more gainful.
- v. Try to create interest in the Government as well as Non-Government circle to get more funds available.