

Dhaka University manuscripts

SERWAR HOSSAIN

Knowledge exists in two forms: (1) "active knowledge" which is found in the brains of living human individuals and available to them at any given moment as bases for actions, and (2) "passive (or potential) knowledge," which exists in the great reservoir of documents in which the experiences, observations, thoughts and discoveries of other men, chiefly those of the past, have been recorded. Human progress has been dependent upon the growth and availability of this great reservoir of passive knowledge.

The Encyclopaedia Britannica (11th ed) defines a manuscript as "any document written by human hand with the aid of pen, pencil or other instrument which can be used with cursive facility, as distinguished from an inscription engraved with chisel or graver, worked laboriously. By usage the word has come to be employed in a special sense to indicate a written work of the ancient world or of the middle ages; collection of such ancient manuscripts bring highly prized and stored for preservation in public libraries." The typescript is strictly not a manuscript, but in practice due to its unique quality, libraries often accord it the prestige and special treatment of a manuscript.

Manuscripts may be of three groups namely artistic manuscripts, literary manuscripts and archives. Some matters are common to all types of manuscript. Different materials namely bark, clay, walls, wood, wazen tables, papyrus, skins and paper were used in writing or illumination. They are in various forms namely rolls, codices or volumes, single sheets etc. The artistic manuscripts were eventually killed by printing. In contrast to the fate of the illuminated manuscripts, the importance of the literary manuscripts was enhanced by the growth of book selling and publishing. The principles of textual criticism demand that the

scholar must return to the original or early manuscripts, however, many printed texts may exist.

Archive is the third group of manuscripts. The word is derived from the Greek "archeion" meaning that which belongs to an office. The Oxford English Dictionary's definition of archive is troublesome, because of its double meaning. According to this definition archive means both a place and a document at the same time. The definition of the word varies from place to place and time to time. F. R. Schellenberg, the American archivist defined archives as "those record of any public or private institution which are judged worthy of permanent preservation for reference and research purposes and which have been deposited or have been selected for deposit in an archival institution." This definition clearly states the nature and purpose of archive. Records deliberately created and preserved by an office, an agency or an organisation for reference and research are its archives.

All these types of manuscripts are found in a variety of different types of institution, including libraries. It is said that there are 20,000 manuscripts in the Manuscript Section of the Dhaka University Library. No official figure is yet published by the authority. Dr. A. B. M. Habibullah, formerly Chairman, University Grants Commission compiled two printed catalogues of Persian, Urdu and Arabic manuscripts only. Here the number of manuscripts is 526. Dr. Ahmed Sharif, formerly Dean of the Faculty of Arts, University of Dhaka, edited a book where we find references of 525 manuscripts (Puthis). Except these two there is no other printed record of the manuscripts of the library.

What are the enemies of manuscripts? They are time, fire, water, light, heat, dust, humidity, atmospheric gases, fungi, vermin, "acts of god"

and, last but not the least, human beings. All these have deleterious effects on manuscripts and unless timely steps are taken to neutralise these effects, the manuscripts are destined to perish. Most of these factors present more acute problems in a tropical country like Bangladesh.

First of all dust must be removed from the manuscripts. In absence of any mechanical instrument, employees are using ordinary cotton duster which is not absolutely effective in removing dust from manuscripts. Cleaning with a duster takes much time and labour and manuscripts may sustain damage due to friction. Vacuum cleaners have been used in many libraries with good result. University authority should immediately purchase vacuum cleaners for cleaning the manuscripts.

So far as light is concerned, ideal conditions for manuscripts should be provided with completely windowless room lighted by low powered bulbs only when necessary. plain glass does not cut off the injurious rays of light, therefore, care must be taken that direct sunlight even through the glass panes does not fall on the records. The windows may be draped with heavy curtains which will cut off light or diffuse it. Yellow panes help in keeping out some of the injurious rays. Manuscripts may also be kept in closed container.

Excessive heat has the effect of making the paper and other material brittle. Due to excessive heat palm leaf manuscripts become extremely brittle. In the manuscript room the temperature should be between 70F and 80F and the humidity should be 50 per cent, during twenty-four hours of the day all the year round. In Bangladesh such optimum conditions cannot be met normally. Therefore, manuscript room must be air-conditioned. It is a necessity not a luxury. Air-conditioning will also help in neutralising the effects of

atmospheric gases and keeping out dust. At present there are some air-coolers which are used only for some hours of the day. They should immediately be substituted by air-conditioners, which should be used 24 hours all the year round.

Manuscripts are eaten up by insects. It is painful that due to lack of proper care many important and rare manuscripts are being destroyed by insects. As to moulds and insects the only safe and effective way is fumigation. It will not cause any damage to palm leaf manuscripts. Vacuum fumigation will kill the insects as well as their larvae in a very short time. Thymol fumigation is an immediate and effective measure against mildew which may crop up in moist and warm weather. In order to keep the stacks free from infestation certain definite measures can be taken. In the first place the whole place should be fumigated and cleaned. After that it should be ensured that no harmful material comes into it. As a safety measure all new accessions should be fumigated before sending into stack of the library.

There are also other fumigant namely hydrocyanic acid gas, ethylene oxide-carbon dioxide etc. They also kill insects within 24 hours and leave no detrimental effects on paper.

Some repellents should always be kept on the shelves like pyrethrum, sodium fluorides, soda and starch mixture or naphthalene bricks or balls. It should be remembered that some repellents are also toxic to human beings and necessary precautions should be taken when employing them.

The next stage in preservation is to consider the physical damage already sustained. If the manuscript is stained, it has to be cleaned, if torn it has to be repaired, if weakened, it must be reinforced and finally if loose manuscripts

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