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# Preservation Conservation and Use of Manuscripts in Aligarh Muslim University Library: A Case Study

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## ABSTRACT

Fundamental functions of library: preservation cum conservation and access of the resources to its patrons on time. This study investigated the kinds of manuscripts available in this well-known library, and who are the users and what are the techniques incorporated by the library for preservation and conservation of manuscripts. A questionnaire was distributed among the seven library staff in manuscript section of Maulana Azad Library. Another questionnaire was distributed randomly among 80 research scholars from different departments of the University. Observation and interview methods were also entertained. The findings of the study are only limited to this library.

## KEYWORDS

Aligarh Muslim University; conservation; manuscript; Maulana Azad Library; preservation

## Introduction

The current study aims to investigate the conservation, preservation and use of manuscripts at Maulana Azad Library (MAL), Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), one of the historical and well-known universities in India

The history of communication is as old as the history of Homo Sapiens themselves. As life advances, the mode of communication keeps changing. A very affluent reservoir of information has been kept, passed on from generation to generation either in oral or traditional written form, through a number of writing materials such as various kinds of metallic plates, parchment, papyrus, vellum, palm leaves, birch bark, and many more ancient materials (Suryawanshi 2000; Ganapathy 2016). However, in present days, these above-mentioned writing materials are very rare since, the printed documents/books, and ICT related tools have been put to use to communicate.

It is believed that the libraries in early days were merely considered as a reservoir of knowledge and not meant to disseminate information to others (Saharkhiz, Valizadeh, and Salamat 2017). However, the library of today is

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not only storehouse of knowledge, but it has other prime functions, such as preservation cum conservation and access to the stored documents (Olatokun 2008). Preservation and conservation are techniques or methods that are used to prolong the life of library resources, usually manuscripts, since they are highly organic and perishable. Once the maintenance work is done, the library should make these valuable resources accessible to the users who will benefit from this cultural heritage. The notable activities as pointed out by Malešič (2015) for preserving and conserving manuscripts in the library should be: upgrading the storage conditions of library collections, digitizing the most frequently used library resources, conservation of the most damaged artifacts, de-acidification of the copies endangered by acids or by some insects, and providing the training on preservation for the concerned library staff.

## **Background information**

### ***What is a manuscript?***

The term manuscript originated from the Latin word “manu scriptus,” meaning “written by hand.” Hence, it refers to the hand written documents before being published. According to Raval (2016) (as cited by Sinha 2016) “A manuscript is any document written by hand or type written, as opposed to being mechanically printed or reproduced in some automated way.” (p.1)

Manuscripts are considered the primary sources for knowing our scholarly historical work and creation irrespective of any land or geographical region (Butdisuwan and Babu 2014).

### ***Preservation vs conservation***

Preservation of written records is just about as old as written records themselves. The early Mesopotamians were bothered by termites, who bored tunnels through soft clay writing tablets before they were hardened in the sun and even nibbled the surface of the baked tablets, defacing the markings. These clay tablets were also easily chipped and broken by rough handling. To preserve these they stored in lidded jars. Then the pots were organized in a systematic order with labels affixed with straw (Mukherjee 1973).

Preservation is intended to prevent decay or deterioration of materials, while conservation is an act of maintaining and preserving materials to increase the life expectancy (Patidar and Soni 2016; Sawant 2014; Gunselman 2007). In a literary sense, both terms “preservation and conservation” have been used in two different contexts, though it seems they are inter-related. However, preservation is generally used to keep an object away from harmful effects, such as loss, damage, destructions, and so on.

On the other side, conservation is the combination of three major aspects, namely examination, preservation, and restoration.

According to ALA Glossary Young, Belanger, and Corbin (1983) (as cited by Sarasvathy 2007, p.10) of Library and Information Science “the emerging distinction between conservation and preservation is that conservation refers to the techniques and procedures relating to the treatment of books and other formats to maintain as much as possible their original physical integrity; while preservation includes conservation measures but also encompasses the techniques of partial preservation of the physical objects, such as rebinding, as well as the procedure for replacing the original by converting it to other formats preserving the intellectual content as much as possible.”

### ***Importance of preservation and conservation of manuscripts***

Manuscripts are considered the most important and authentic source to know our ancestors’ intellectual output. It can also be said that the manuscript is the boon from our predecessors, based on which we can connect our history with the present. Moreover, manuscripts have blood-bonding relations with our cultural heritage. The importance of maintaining manuscripts is clearly indicated by Rachman (2017) “cultural heritage is fragile and could be ruined in a night or a week by natural disasters or over a period of time by sheer neglect. There is a need to conserve manuscripts with appropriate methods.”

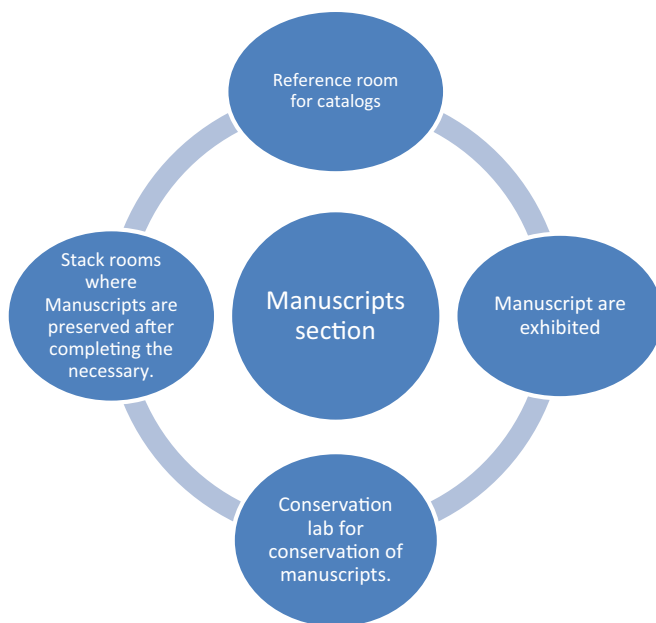
### ***Manuscript section***

Maulana Azad Library is one of the famous libraries in terms of storage of rare collections, holding 16,000 manuscripts available mainly in Urdu, Persian, Arabic, and Hindi languages. It is extensively involved in the preservation and conservation of these rare scriptures (Figure 1). The Manuscript Division is headed by Dr. Shayesta Bedar, who has a master’s in the field of Oriental Librarianship and 25 years of experience. Six staff work in this section with Dr. Bedar (Kailas and Bedar 2017).

### ***Deterioration factors of manuscripts***

The agents, which are responsible for the degrading, damaging, and deteriorating can be divided into broad four categories:

1. **Physical factors:** air condition, dust, darkness, temperature, flood, earthquake, fire, cyclonic disaster, and humidity.
2. **Chemical factors:** different gases which damage the quality of manuscripts like SO<sub>2</sub>.



**Figure 1.** Manuscript Section of Maulana Azad Library, AMU.

3. **Biological factors:** all types of insects like book-worms and, silverfish, bacteria (Kailas and Bedar 2017; Sawant 2014).
4. **Human Factors:** mismanagement, theft, tear off the pages, vandalism, etc.

### ***Methods of preservation and conservation***

1. **Indigenous Methods:** techniques that have been practiced since the very early period, such as dusting and cleaning of the manuscripts, wrapping the manuscripts with clothes to save from dust and insects, keeping manuscripts in the open sky for sunlight, and using Ajwain powder, Custard Apple Seed, Neem Seed, and Black Cumin to protect the manuscripts from the harmful insects.

2. **Modern Methods:** techniques such as low temperature, moisture absorbents, microfilming, and xeroxing manuscripts. Digitization of manuscript is also one of the latest techniques that is being used by various libraries and organizations (Figure 2).

### **Maulana Azad Library, AMU**

The Central Library of Aligarh Muslim University is well-known as Maulana Azad Library (MAL) and is considered as one of the largest university libraries in South Asia, holding approximately, 1,800,000 volumes of



**Figure 2.** Steps followed by MAL for Preservation & Conservation of Manuscripts.

books, 6000 e-journals, and 700 print journals. This central library has almost 110 sister libraries (seminar/departmental library, college and others). The present beautiful seven-storied building was inaugurated by Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, then Prime Minister of India (M.A. Library 2019).

### **Research Questions of the Study**

This study sought the answers of the following research questions:

RQ-1. What kinds of manuscripts are available in Maulana Azad Library (MAL), AMU?

RQ-2. What are the primary causes of degradation of manuscripts?

RQ-3. What are the techniques being followed for preservation and conservation of these old manuscripts?

RQ-4. Who are the primary users of these manuscripts in Maulana Azad Library?

RQ-5. How frequent do primary users visit the collection and why, and what reference sources they use to locate the manuscripts to study?

## Literature review

Many works have been done in this respective field but rarely focused on preservation, conservation and use of manuscripts. Mishra (2017) stated in his study that libraries are the storehouse of knowledge where knowledge is stored in the form of print or digital documents. Preservation and conservation was also considered to be an arduous and monotonous task. It also pointed out that preservation deals with continuous maintenance of manuscripts whereas conservation is a remedial treatment. The prime aim of library was to keep safe the library resources from the degradation or deterioration which is caused by several environmental and biochemical factors. Therefore, it was library professionals' responsibility to take a proper care of manuscripts, but unfortunately, they unable to preserve and conserve the manuscripts because of inadequate knowledge of preservation and conservation methods.

Mahawar and Kuriya (2013) basically focused on the importance of manuscripts. He stated it has immense significance for human society, that is, only a resource person can realize or understand its importance, not a layman. The Rampur Raza Library was a vibrant library in terms of the collection of manuscripts in different languages including Hindi, Urdu, Persian, Punjabi, Arabic, Sanskrit and Pushto, etc. Besides, there were different types of manuscripts available such as the miniature painting of the Mughal era, Historical coins, Astronomical instruments and Islamic calligraphy. Furthermore, Narang and Singh (2014) analyzed the deterioration factors of the manuscripts based on the Sikh Reference Library at Golden Temple in Amritsar. This study unfolded some new facts like the building location, its structure and the way to keep the manuscripts and provided the services. It also highlighted various kinds of preservation and conservation techniques to prevent the rare scriptures of fragile nature and to safe their deterioration that can be reduced a lower level by using the appropriate expertise.

Nonetheless, Iyishu (2013) attempted to explain the methods and techniques of preservation and conservation of the manuscripts to keep them in their original form as possible. By doing this, it examined the quality of paper, handling of rare scriptures, knowledge of disaster and pests management, the way of digitization and its strategies. If all these things are not done efficiently and effectively or if there is lack of these, then the manuscripts will be damaged at a rapid rate. This article also highlighted manuscripts in digital age to keep the rare documents in their original format. National Archives of India (NAI) has formed necessary experts for the restoration and maintenance of different archival materials. Hussein Moustafa (2015) explored that majority of the libraries, information centers and archives of Middle East were not having a proper protocol to preserve and

conserve their valuable documents or manuscripts. Ganapathy (2016) determined the problem regarding preservation of manuscripts at Mysore University by using Google search engine. He pointed out that Optical Character Recognition (OCR) can identify old hand writings if the hand writing becomes normal/regular. But if the writings are not normal, then it was very difficult task. It further added the digitization manuscripts may create awareness among the scholars and masses as well. Devanathan (2012) pointed out the natural ways of preservation of manuscripts. The study revealed that dried powder of Aswagandha (*Withania Somnifera*), oil of Piper Nigrum, powder of Custard-apple's seed, mixture of Azadirachta Indica leaves and oil helped to preserve the manuscripts naturally. Moreover, the article also shown that still a bulk of manuscripts in India are unexplored.

## Methodology

A questionnaire, prepared and verified by the expert, was distributed among the seven library staff members in manuscript section of Maulana Azad Library to obtain information (RQ-3) about the collection and the current preservation and conservation techniques used. A separate questionnaire was constructed and randomly distributed among 80 research scholars from different departments in Aligarh Muslim University to determine frequency of use of the library, which reference source they used to find material, and why they used the manuscripts (RQ-5). Likert's 4 point rating scale was used. Observation method and interview method were also applied among the staff in the manuscript section of MAL. All questionnaires were successfully returned to the investigator for a 100% response rate.

## Results and discussion

The first four questions from the staff survey related to language of the collection and chemicals and techniques used. Ninety percent of the collection is in Persian or Arabic and nearly 9% is Urdu. The library uses the normal techniques for conservation and preservation except for microfilming techniques. And the collection is nearly 100% in paper format, with other media, such as parchment and palm leaf almost unrepresented (Tables 1–4).

In the survey of users, participants were asked about frequency of visiting the library and the manuscript section, what reference source they used to find the materials they needed, and why they use manuscripts. Seventy-five percent of those surveyed have used the collection. About half of these active patrons are using the collection for research and primarily use the card catalog to locate the manuscripts they need. About 30% of the users are just visiting the collection (Tables 5–7).



**Table 1.** Manuscripts available in different languages.

S. No.	LANGUAGE	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
1	PERSIAN	9200	57.75
2	ARABIC	5400	33.75
3	URDU	1400	08.75
4	HINDI	200	01.25
5	SANSKRIT	100	0.62
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>16000</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 2.** Chemicals used.

S. No.	CHEMICALS	YES	NO
1	Silica Gel	Yes	–
2	Thymol Gel	Yes	–
3	Ethylene Oxide	–	No
4	Napthalene Ball	Yes	–
5	Paradichloro Benzene	Yes	–
<b>Others</b>		<b>Yes</b>	<b>–</b>

**Table 3.** Techniques used.

S. No.	TECHNIQUES	YES	NO
1	FUMIGATION	Yes	–
2	WASHING	Yes	–
3	pH-TESTING	Yes	–
4	DEACIDIFICATION	Yes	–
5	LAMINATION	Yes	–
6	RESTORATION	Yes	–
7	MICROFILM	–	No
8	MICROFISCHE	–	No
<b>OTHERS</b>		<b>Yes</b>	<b>–</b>

**Table 4.** Manuscripts available in different forms.

S. No.	FORM	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
1	PAPER	15998	99.98
2	PARCHMENT	01	Trace
3	CLOTH	00	Nil
4	VELLUM	00	Nil
5	PALM LEAVES	01	Trace
6	OTHER	00	Nil
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>16000</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 5.** Frequency of visiting manuscripts section.

S. No.	FREQUENCY	NO. OF USERS (N = 80)	PERCENTAGE
1	EVER	60	75
2	NEVER	20	25
<b>Mean = 40</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 6.** Purpose of using manuscripts.

S. No.	PURPOSE	NO. OF USERS (N = 60)	PERCENTAGE
1	FOR RESEARCH WORK	32	53.33
2	TO SEE THE MANUSCRIPTS	18	30
3	OTHERS	10	16.6
<b>Mean = 15</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 7.** Consulting media to reach the manuscripts.

S. No.	REFENCE MEDIA	NO. OF USERS (N = 60)	PERCENTAGE
1	LIST	12	20
2	CATALOG	36	60
3	ANY OTHER	12	20
Mean = 20	TOTAL	60	100

## Findings

The present study has undertaken to make an empirical analysis of the preservation, conservation and use of manuscripts in Maulana Azad Library, AMU and its manuscript collection. After an analysis of both surveys, the study has found:

- More than 99% of the manuscripts are in the form of paper.
- More than 50% of the manuscripts are in Persian.
- Paradichloro Benzene, Naphthalene Ball, Thymol Gel, Silica Gel, etc. are used to preserve and conserve the manuscripts.
- Seventy-five percent of the users surveyed have used the collection and primarily use the collection for research.
- The study found, from the interviews, that the manuscripts are accessible only to the faculty members and research scholars of the university.
- From the interview with the head in charge of the manuscript section, the study discovered that few manuscripts are kept in exhibition room, which remains open for the visitors.
- The interviews also discovered that fungus, bacteria, temperature, and mishandling of manuscripts are the primary causes of degradation.

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