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Role of Panjab Digital Library in Digitizing Manuscripts: A Case Study

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Abstract

A manuscript is basically a hand-written or inscribed piece of information on bark, leaf, cloth, metal, paper or any other material in any composition. This may be a combination of letters, pictures, symbols, maps, figures etc. with knowledge content about the art, culture, history and science of a civilization. The word manuscript was originated in 16th century from Medieval Latin word “*Manuscriptus*” from *Manu* by ‘hand’ + *Scriptus* ‘written’. The preservation of manuscripts is of utmost importance to protect and save the rich cultural and heritage history of a civilization/ nation. The paper in hand is an attempt to carry forward and sensitize the stakeholders about the initiatives taken up by Punjab Digital Library (PDL) in locating, preserving and digitizing the manuscripts thereby providing a global access to the scattered, hidden or accumulated treasures of information of Punjab.

Keywords- Manuscripts, PDL, Manuscript preservation, Digitization.

Introduction

Manuscripts perhaps are the oldest written or recorded pieces of information in the world. A manuscript encompasses the unique and variety of formats which includes scripts, textures, symbols, pictures and language etc. These depict the old age history, art and heritage of a nation. India possesses about five million manuscripts which is largest treasure of its kind a country has in the world¹. The manuscript may be in the form of a book, loose or bound pages, or in codex form. The study of writing of manuscripts is called *paleography* and the study of manuscripts is termed as *manuscriptology*.

Unfortunately these meticulously written, unique and wonderful pieces of literature were lost during wars or because of natural reasons. These treasures need to be preserved and conserved at

any cost to carry over the traditional ancient literature to next generations and these occupy a place of great significance for researchers, educationists, historians, art lovers and archivists.

Definition

National Mission for Manuscripts (NAMAMI, www.namami.org), India which was established in February 2003 by the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, Govt. of India to locate, find and preserve the enormous hidden and known wealth of manuscripts terms manuscript as “A handwritten composition on paper, bark, cloth, metal, palm leaves or any other material dating back at least seventy-five years that has significant scientific, historical or aesthetic value.”²

Online Free Dictionary while providing a modern dimension states manuscript as “a book, document or other composition written by hand, a typewritten or handwritten version of book, an article, a document or other, especially author’s own copy, prepared and submitted for publication; and handwriting.”³

The Antiques and Art Treasures Act, 1972 says that a hand written document which has scientific, historical, literary or aesthetic value and which is at least 75 years old may be categorized as a manuscript. The manuscript may include scratching or chiseling recorded on surface with a device, tool or otherwise.

Preservation and Digitization of Manuscripts

Preservation of any form of document has been of paramount importance for information scientists, scholars, researchers and librarians. The rare documents such as manuscripts have always acquired the centre stage for their preservation since the mankind acquired the art and knowledge of writing. Owing to its status of National Heritage and importance in the fields of literature, linguistics, art and culture, the manuscripts need to be preserved and protected as recorded marvels of information from known or unknown scholars for the use of future generations.

Barbara W Tuchman (1912-1989), American Historian and teacher in Author’s League Bulletin, 1979 underlines the need, necessity and importance of books which is equally true for any manuscript as,” Books are humanity in print.” She further asserts that,” Books are the carriers of civilization. Without books, history is silent, literature is dumb, and science crippled, thoughts and speculation on a standstill. Without books, the development of a civilization would have been impossible. They are the engines of change, windows on the world and lighthouse erected

in the sea of time. They are the companions, magicians, bankers of treasures of mind.”(‘Wisdom Well Said’ p.48, 106, books.google.co.in/books).

Sahoo and Mohanty⁴ in Orissa Government’s magazine strongly opined that indigenous and traditional methods of using herbs and natural products should be used to preserve manuscripts for their damage from heat, light, dust and humidity. The authors further suggest that the traditional methods of preserving documents have an advantage over the modern methods as these do not pose any health hazard and have no adverse effect on materials.

Maniatis,et.al (2005)⁵ in LOCKSS peer to peer digital preservation system emphasized the need to preserve the rare documents digitally because digital preservation prevents any type of damage to documents for fairly a longer time and it replicates the original with the use of available techniques.

Ross (2012)⁶ has advocated that the digital preservations are an asset for free access to rare documents such as manuscripts and these will have a longer sustainability in the global information world.

Digitization is the creation of computerized representation of an information source and it can prove to be the best digital library project as far as digitization of manuscripts is concerned. It helps to preserve the original documents allowing people to get access to unique information by keeping intact the originality of that source. It also facilitates to serve multiple users at the same time at remote locations. The invaluable information lying in manuscripts and the information sources with limited permission of access needs to be digitized for their free and global access which saves them from potential damage and serves the posterity.

Digitization requires physical checking of documents. The white, plain and clean documents with simple layouts having a few pictures, shades are easier and economic to digitize as compared to documents which are damaged, coloured with multiple shades and pictures or have complex layouts and tables.

Punjab Digital Library (PDL)

Punjab Digital Library (PDL) project was initiated in the year 2003 at Chandigarh as a stepping stone with its motto “*Revealing the Invisible Heritage of Punjab*”. It is established with a mission to find, locate, preserve and digitize the lost or disappearing heritage of Punjab region due to environment, ignorance or destruction. True to its mission PDL undertakes the digitization of documents of ‘Punjab region without distinction as to script, language, region,

nationality or other physical conditions’⁷. The mandate of PDL for initiating the digitization of treasured manuscripts is ‘free access for all to support life- long learning.’ PDL takes into its account the digitization of manuscripts, rare documents, books, magazines and photographs. It also provides services like data mining, sharing, uploading, preservation, exhibitions and training on digitization. Of the 704 records available with PDL on its website more than 75% are in Gurumukhi script either in Punjabi or Hindi language.

PDL is a non-profit Non- Governmental Organization that started its operations in 2003-04 with a meager budget of INR 10,000 and staff strength of only two people. In the initial stage it digitized only 5000 pages per month but gradually the capacity rose to 25,000 pages per month in the very next year 2005-06. It did not accept any financial assistance from any outside agency but the rising operational costs forced the PDL to accept donation from 2007 onwards and from this year the product was raised to 5000 pages/day.

The digitized collection of manuscripts at PDL dates back to 15th century on a variety subjects which includes theology, history, philosophy, medicine etc. in different scripts and languages with a thrust on Gurumukhi. Over 4500 manuscripts have ben digitized so far and it includes 1000 sacred scriptures of ‘Guru Granth Sahib’ and the oldest scripture is of 1653. Besides Gurumukhi, manuscripts in Sharda, Devnagri, Punjabi, Urdu, Sanskrit and Farsi scripts and languages have also been digitized at PDL. A complete **metadata** is available with PDL for each of the digitized manuscript including title, year, description, keywords, script, language, author, custodian, completion status, condition, orientation and pages. Many digitized works however needs attention for description and year but it seems so for the reason that PDL’s present focus is on DIGITIZE FIRST.

The need for digitization of manuscripts was felt because a majority of manuscripts were paper and papyrus based which have limited shelf life in spite of their preservations. The ageing and natural factors limits the life of fragile materials like paper. These are also affected by weather, temperature, humidity, fire, water, insects and human handling. The digitization helps to display the data on computer screen which can be further reprinted on any material.

The Milestones achieved by PDL are many as on 11-01-2013 Panjab Digital Library managed to digitize 7 million pages without charging a sinle penny from the custodians of these precious treasures of knowledge. About 2 million pages are available at www.panjabdigilib.org for free global access. The project due to limited funds at their disposal at present has a pendency of 100 million pages to be digitized in spite the fact that the library has sought consent and permission for their digitization. The PDL endeavors to digitize entire stock of documents available with

them in next 15-20 years while raising their product capacity to 50,000 pages/ day but such a long period to clear pendency shall further pile up more documents to be digitized.

Some of the accomplished projects of Panjab Digital Library includes the collections from Government Museum and Art Gallery , Chandigarh; Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra; Nirmal Sanskrit Vidyalaya, Varanasi; Shiromani Gurdwara Prabhandak Committee, Amritsar; Punjab Languages Department, Patiala; Anandpur Sahib Foundation, Anandpur Sahib; St. Stephen's College, New Delhi; and over 100 personal libraries.

Some of the current projects under scanner of PDL are Punjab Archives Department, Patiala; Institute of Sikh Studies, Chandigarh; The Tribune an English daily from Chandigarh; Chandigarh Architecture Museum, 14 personal libraries and PDL's own ever growing collection.

In 2006, in an understanding with Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra, PDL has digitized 430 manuscripts in different scripts.

It also initiated the process of digitization of entire collection of 604 manuscripts with a data collection of 170000 folios of Punjab Languages Department, Patiala on the initiation of the then director in 2006 and the project was completed in 2008.

The precious collection of 29 manuscripts with Chief Khalsa Diwan, Amritsar, has been completely digitized with the efforts of PDL. 37000 folios have been created and a digital library has been established at the headquarters at Amritsar.

Punjab Virasat Charitable Trust, Chandigarh has been able to complete digitization of 650 manuscripts out of a collection of 800 manuscripts with the help of PDL that started in 2007. The total collection comprised 58000 folios covering subjects of medicine, literature, religion and language.

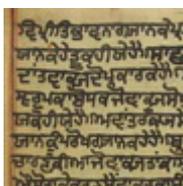
The year 2008 saw digitization of 36 manuscripts available with Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee, Delhi culminating into 23000 folios.

Shrimoni Gurdwara Prabhandak Committee, Amritsar has offered PDL in 2008 a massive project of digitizing complete treasure of manuscripts and other literature and the project is running in the Parikarma of Golden Temple at Amritsar. A total of 300 manuscripts and 114000 folios have been digitized and work is being carried out for rest of the 435 manuscripts at Darbar Sahib (Golden Temple).

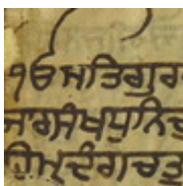
The PDL under a project undertaken in January 2012 has digitized complete collection of manuscripts, coins, rare books and has created 81 000 folios at Govt. Museum and Art Gallery at Chandigarh. The collection also includes about 50 manuscripts and over 100,000 pages on the making of city beautiful, Chandigarh along with the letters of Partap Singh Kairon – the architect of post independence Punjab, Le Corbusier- the French architect who designed the modern Indian city Chandigarh, Dr. M. S. Randhawa and Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru.

Besides the above projects completed and undertaken by PDL, it is also helping a number of scholars from and outside Punjab in digitizing their private collections. A request of digitizing 6500 manuscripts is pending with PDL because of paucity of funds. PDL has come a long way in digitizing manuscripts of Punjab region and has established many benchmarks in preserving invaluable heritage of Punjab.

The complete list of digitized manuscripts along with the photographs is available at www.panjabdigilib.org. and the complete list is not possible to include in the present paper but for illustrations a few of the Gurumukhi digitized manuscripts in Punjabi and Hindi languages are listed below:-



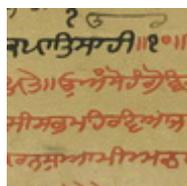
Vichar Sagar



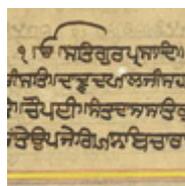
Kakkar Bichar



Krishan Chander Chanderaka



Gita (Atharavan Adhyay)



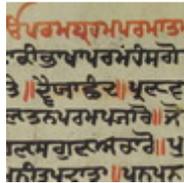
Bhagwat Mahapurane kasdes Sakand



Sikandri Kitab



Jhagra Sona Chandi da by Bir Prakash



Ashev Binod by Tara Chand



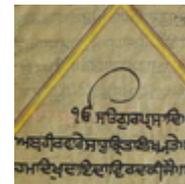
Kissa Raja Rasalu by Kishan Singh



Hanuman Natak by Hirde Ram



Janam Sakhi Bhagat Kabir ji



Heer Varis Shah by Varis Shah

Page 18 on the site of PDL on manuscripts has been devoted to Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji showing different descriptions for different scriptures.

Conclusion

Every information source is a live entity which is vital to all human activities and the same is also true for manuscripts. The information seeker must carefully handle any document while retrieving information of his/er interest so that it should remain within the original document for the use of posterity. The following lines also call for dutiful handling of information sources:

“Jaladraksha Taliadraksha rakhsha man

Sholatha Vandanat

Ashubhya parahastebhya

Ebam badati pustkam”,

Means, The document itself appeals to its owners to protect it from water, oil, loose binding, and rodents and from those people who are casual in handling the books.

The 3rd President of United States of America, Thomas Jefferson (1801-1809) and a political philosopher long back in 1791 had suggested a roadmap for preservation and access to information sources when he said ,” let us save what remains...not by vaults and locks which fence them from the public eye and use in consigning them to waste of time , but by such multiplication of copies as shall place them beyond the reach of accident.”(www.goodreads.com/quotes).

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