

# White Paper on Conservation of Medical Manuscripts

## 1. Background

The Indian medical heritage has been extremely productive. India has one of the largest collections of medical manuscripts of any civilization in the world. While there is no precise enumeration of the number of manuscripts, estimates vary widely, putting it in the region of 20000 to 100,000 manuscripts. Several of these manuscripts are now in institutions such as – Oriental Manuscripts Libraries, Indological Research Institutions, Universities, Mutts and Archives and many are still in private collections. Manuscripts are also available in foreign libraries in U.K., France, Germany & USA and in Asian countries like, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Burma, Bhutan, China (Tibet), Thailand. Unfortunately there is no detailed and accurate data about the number, extent and distribution of the medical manuscripts of India.

The presently available published medical texts, which are in contemporary use, represent less than 2% of the medical literature that is available in the form of manuscripts.

### *Past attempts to catalogue Indian Manuscripts*

Through the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries a large number of manuscripts began to get accumulated in public collections and catalogues with varying degrees of completeness and reliability. The first attempt to compile a master list of manuscripts in any area was the one made by Theoder Aufrecht in 1890s. After an exercise lasting nearly thirty years Aufrecht produced a master list of all Sanskrit manuscripts in public collection, which he called as – “Catalogus Catalogorum”. Subsequently during a twelve-year period two supplementary volumes were produced (3).

However, with a large number of new catalogues accumulating, Aufrecht’s work soon became outdated. In 1935 A.L. Woolner, Vice Chancellor of Punjab University mooted the idea of preparing a fresh edition of Catalogorum. In 1937 the University of Madras decided to take up the work of producing a “New Catalogus Catalogorum” of all Sanskrit manuscripts in public collections all over the world. Initially when the work was undertaken a list of 394 catalogues were collected. A master alphabetical author / title list was compiled. Each entry gave the distribution of manuscripts giving the name, specified the location of the manuscript (in terms of the name of the collection and the serial number) as well as the broad subject classification wherever known. The entire corpus was divided into forty-eight broad subject headings for this purpose. The first volume was published in 1949 covering all manuscripts under the alphabet ‘a’. During the period 1949 – 1991 thirteen volumes of the New Catalogus Catalogorum have been published covering the manuscripts under the letter ‘a’ to ‘ba’ (4). As per the original estimate twenty

volumes are required to completely list this corpus.

The only attempt to catalogue Indian **medical** literature was by the department of History of Medicine that was started in Osmania University in 1958. The work commenced with the identification of twenty-four catalogues of manuscripts including two catalogues of collections from Nepal and one from Germany. When only about one thousand entries had been compiled, the department was suddenly closed down in 1966. Later, the department was transferred to the Indian Council of Medical Research in 1969 and then to the Central Council for Indian Medicine. In 1970, the material was transferred to the – “Institute for History of Medicine” in Hyderabad. The Institute published an incomplete work in 1972, which gives a list of 1082 entries along with the titles (7). This was perhaps the first and only attempt to compile a partial list of manuscripts in the area of medicine.

Similarly no reliable estimates are available on the corpus of regional medical manuscripts in Indian languages. Some time ago the Tamil University at Tanjore had compiled a list of all Tamil manuscripts in public collections. Out of the 24,000 manuscripts listed about 4,000 are in the area of medicine.

## **2. The reason for urgency**

Manuscripts in general and the medical manuscripts in particular form a precious part of India’s cultural heritage. The urgency for initiating a program for conservation of medical manuscripts is firstly because there exists a real danger of losing a large number of manuscripts due to neglect.

On the other hand, access to manuscripts will provide theoreticians & practitioners of the Indian Systems of Medicine valuable knowledge that can be put to contemporary use.

## **3. Types of Manuscripts**

In India the subject of manuscripts relates to the following few categories of Traditional Medicine:

Ayurveda – Spread all over India since antiquity.

Siddha – Confined to South India

Gso-rig-pa - Confined to Tibetan plateau

Unani – Tibb – This is the Greco-Arabian system of medicine, which came to India along with Muslim rulers and forged linkages with Indian Medicine,

Regional works – These works were composed in different parts of India mainly during medieval period and up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These works represent accumulated therapeutic experience of different regions of India.

### **3.1 Nature of manuscripts**

1. Palm-leaves
2. Bhurja Patra
3. Old hand-made paper, and
4. Commonly available paper

### **3.2 *Languages used for their writings***

1. Sanskrit, Brahmi, Pali, Prakrit, Burmese, Sinhalese and Tibetan
2. Hindi and other regional languages of India, including Nepalese and Newari
3. Urdu, Arabic, Persian and
4. Old Grantha Scripts

### **3.3 *Locations of manuscript collections***

1. Archaeological departments, Museums and Libraries under the management of Central and State Governments
2. Libraries of Universities
3. Libraries managed by Public Trusts
4. Libraries of private persons
5. Libraries maintained by religious institutions
6. Individual physicians and lay persons having a background of medical practice and
7. Libraries in foreign countries. A large number of manuscripts are also currently available in overseas libraries in Europe (England, Scotland, France, Germany etc.), U.S and some South Asian countries. Suitable scholars and institutions can be identified in these countries as collaborators for this effort.

## **4. Plan of Work:**

### **4.1 *Creating a Global Medical Manuscript Conservation Network***

Indian medical manuscripts are located in public and private collections in different parts of India and abroad. Therefore it is necessary to design a coordinated program for the survey, cataloguing and digitization of medical manuscripts via a *global network*.

### **4.2 *Key tasks***

The key tasks to be performed by members of the network are listed below:

#### **4.2.1 *Survey of Manuscripts***

Manuscripts available with different sources should be surveyed and catalogues prepared. Catalogues from existing institutions in India and abroad should be collected and, consolidated after a critical review

#### *4.2.2 Preparation of Bibliography*

With the help of information collected, a bibliography of medical manuscripts in various institutions in India and abroad should be prepared and published.

#### *4.2.3 Collection of manuscripts*

Manuscripts available with private individuals and libraries should be collected, purchased or digitized.

#### *4.2.4 Collations and Editing*

With the help of experts on the subject, unpublished manuscripts should be collated and those works needing new critical editions should be identified.

#### *4.2.5 Indexing & mining knowledge using I.T*

Manuscripts should be properly indexed on medical themes, language, scripts, geographical origin, chronological variants of particular texts with suitable cross-referencing so that the corpus of manuscripts can be efficiently searched for various indices. IT tools also need to be applied for preparation of concordances, cataloguing, transliteration, creation of databases, and expert systems.

#### *4.2.6 Physical & digital preservation and storage*

Original manuscripts, after proper indexing, should be properly preserved and stored in their original host institutions & in digitized form in a central and regional repositories.

#### **4.2.7 Translation**

Some of these important works should be translated into Indian Vernaculars and English and foreign languages, so that scholars not acquainted with the original language could study them.

#### **4.2.8 Critical Translations**

This will necessary for prioritized texts, which are central to the understanding of the Indian systems of medicine.

### **4.3 Establishment of a Training School in Manuscriptology – a key intervention**

The various activities under this project will require the involvement of a large body of personnel with technical skills in varied areas such as manuscriptology, which is the “Reading” (and interpretation) of manuscripts in scripts or languages that are not in active use, or those that are archaic, or in a language and script that is no longer extant. Another subject is the training in physical preservation techniques. The most important topic for training is the application of IT for digitization and mining of manuscripts to create indexes, concordances, cataloguing, transliteration, databases, and expert systems.

It is therefore absolutely essential to urgently establish a school for manuscriptology with multi-centric nodes that may be located in different parts of India and abroad.

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