

Rare Historic Manuscripts enter Digital World

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Maintaining archival records of the past has always been a major concern and requirement in historical preservation. In a scenario with limited time and scarce resources, the battle between time and technology is decided by a single crucial factor – timely initiative. The pages of many old and rare documents are aging quickly and daily. The sources must be preserved in their original color and texture along with text and graphics.

In the given scenario, my collection of manuscripts having already been digitized, and now gracefully seated in the manuscript section of the Chandigarh Museum and Art Gallery, is very fortunate in this respect. Though these manuscripts have survived all odds, defying time and age, yet they are not immune to the Nature's laws of decay and deterioration. Without digitization, the originals would have disappeared into the oblivion of history just in a matter of time, with no trace of existence left behind.

This is where digital technology comes into action. In a sharp contrast to the west, the Indian subcontinent has just woken up to this technological reality. Thankfully mine were the first to gain from it!

The Sikhs Reference Library, Amritsar is a good case study on the issue. A huge collection of rare Sikh artifacts and archives, the library was established in 1929. According to a 1968 publication of SGPC "**Sada Hath Likhat Sahit**", the library contained 383 volumes that covered 980 different topics, several Hukamnamas, 2500 hand-written Guru Granth Sahib, and other such vast material. On 7 June, 1984, Sikh Nation saw their biggest and the richest treasure, being stolen and torched at a time when Microfilming technology was available in India. Now, there is no possible replenishment to this immense loss.

However, having learnt no lesson, tracing the history of the manuscripts placed in the museum, and many others in the region, opens yet another chapter of human indifference and dereliction towards their upkeep and preservation. These manuscripts were once proceeding on their final journey to the "pyres" with the order from SGPC, the then custodian of the manuscripts. At that time, I personally contacted Sardar Shamsheer Singh Ashok, a close friend of mine, who helped me save them and acquire their custody.

Having survived odds of Nature and human negligence, the manuscripts now left, are thus a big asset. The UT administration has done a commendable job in their maintenance. The manuscripts have been placed in close safes over a carpet and under a canopy with full respect. The environment of the place is being controlled with the help of air conditioners installed therein.

What is Digitization?

Synonymous with image capture through scanning and photography, digitization is transforming data, information, knowledge, or physical objects into digital files (computer format). In this process, the original is represented as a picture that can be displayed on a computer screen or reproduced on any other media.

Why Digitize?

Digitization is an important precursor to a variety of applications and projects. Specifically, it increases the ease and efficiency of document transmission in a number of ways. Images can be: displayed on a computer screen, distributed to multiple destinations via e-mail, reproduced through printing onto any paper-based format.

Benefits

The use of digitization can help with the preservation of original manuscripts. Many historical documents are so fragile that the slightest manual contact can cause damage.

Digitization has the potential to change the way scholars utilize historical documents. Once a document has been successfully digitized, many benefits can be realized, such as: preservation of originals through reduced handling, unlimited data life span, wide availability to the public, reproduction of any number of copies for simultaneous access, ease of access through digital libraries and online access, powerful searching and browsing capability, aid in research, education and awareness programs.

Here, at this point, I am pleased to introduce '**Nanakshahi**', a SAS Nagar based NGO, that has wonderfully completed the task of digitizing these manuscripts and preserved them in digital format, as mentioned above. The task was completed in March 2005.

Today access to a large collection of such rare historical documents is quite difficult because of their widespread distribution throughout the region. Many such manuscripts and objects are still not catalogued or replicated and simply remain unknown. **This is primarily due to lack of interest, means and knowledge. Often stored in poor conditions, these precious articles are prone to irreparable damage. Further, the handling of originals establishes risk of permanent loss, because no duplicates exist.**

Digital technology and integration to reference tools has revolutionized the ability to create electronic replicas of print materials, and institutions around the world are moving ahead with projects to digitize books, manuscripts, photographs, maps, architectural drawing, films, and sound recordings in their collections.

Recently, Professor Stephen Brown and a team of IBM technicians were able to assist the Vatican digitize its resource library. Hewlett-Packard is working with Vatican to provide public online access to the Vatican's Apostolic Library founded by Pope Nicholas V. But unfortunately Punjab is still in a deep slumber.

'*Nanakshahi*' introduced '*Project Virsa*' on the same basis, to improve expertise in the field and to establish common grounds for future collaborative work by specialists from the global community.

In the Manuscript section, '*Nanakshahi*' has digitized about 34,000 folios of 33 different volumes, from Museum's collection apart from manuscripts loaned by myself, Prof Pritam Singh and Dr Madanjit Kaur.

The Trust aims to digitize manuscripts and other archives maintained by the SGPC, Guru Nanak Dev University, Khalsa College Amritsar, Panjabi University, Language Department and Patiala Archives. Private collections are also being sought. **The main purpose of the project is to immortalize all manuscripts, rare historical documents, old printed posters, maps, photographs, contemporary documents, etc.**

Further, the Trust wishes to expand this project to create an Online Digital Library of the entire digitized collection, which will be readily available to the public. Since these originals are rare and fragile, they cannot be borrowed through an interlibrary loan system. Thus, many manuscripts contain a vast amount of unexamined information, as many scholars cannot study them closely due to limited time and travel constraints. A Digital Library will allow scholars to view the images of rare manuscripts via the Internet, a great benefit for scholars.

Commendable and praiseworthy, '*Nanakshahi*' had offered us this service free of any charge, and to our great satisfaction, they stood by their word and delivered the final product without putting any financial burden on the Museum or myself. Furthermore, they accomplished all the work without accepting any support or monetary assistance from any outside source. Founded in 2001, the young and determined professionals of the '*Nanakshahi*' provide the digitization facility to individuals and institutions free of cost – an inspiration of selfless service. This service absolves the manuscript custodians from the

burden of finances and effort in terms of keeping employees, buying or hiring equipment, time, money, energy, and other resources.

About 'Nanakshahi'

A non-profit body registered at Sahibzada Ajit Singh Nagar (Mohali), Panjab, 'Nanakshahi' is a group of young, full time professionals seeking to save the vast amount of hand written, rare literature and art scattered in and around Punjab. To this end, the Trust offers services through its distinguished **Project Virsa**. '*Nanakshahi*' seeks to accomplish three goals of service, awareness, and preservation through this project.

Since its inception in 2001, Nanakshahi has worked to ensure that the rich history and heritage of the region is not lost. Thus far, the Trust has digitized over half a million folios of different manuscripts and documents besides converting over 75,000 pages from different important books and newspapers to searchable PDF format.

Major works digitized to date include: some copies of Guru Granth Sahib dating back to as early as 1653, a hukamnama by Guru Gobind Singh Sahib, Granth bearing a mark by Guru Tegh Bahadur Sahib, *Gian Ratnavli* by Bhai Mani Singh, *Siyar-ul-Mutakhrin*, most of the issues of *The Spokesman Weekly* from 1979 to 1993, *Khalsa Akhbar* from 1893 to 1903; over twenty books by Giani Dit Singh and a few hundred other important ones.

'*Nanakshahi's*' collection consists of a wide and expanding genre of documents, including manuscripts, books, magazines, news, articles, maps, pictures, journals, chronicles, memoirs, diaries, letters, audios, videos, documentaries, and other rare historical documents.

'Nanakshahi' dreams of a digital resource center, where people communalize and digitize material with professional help from site experts. Users will be able to utilize the resource center with complete peace of mind and freedom from any charge or fee. Anybody wishing to avail the services can certainly contact the Trust without hesitation.

Taking a leap into the new era of digital technology, the organization seeks to promote a whole new culture of awareness, where the masses contribute in safeguarding of old texts. '*Nanakshahi*' needs your support in this huge task that certainly cannot be accomplished without public participation. You can help them by providing digital access to valuable collection you might have, and by providing information regarding the whereabouts of such articles in your knowledge.

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