

Arabic Manuscripts in Indian Libraries: A Study of Preservation and Accessibility

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Abstract: India holds a rich repository of Arabic manuscripts that testify to centuries of Indo-Arab intellectual and cultural exchange. These manuscripts, preserved in libraries, madrasas, and private collections across the country, encompass a wide range of disciplines including theology, science, philosophy, and literature. However, issues related to physical deterioration, inadequate cataloguing, and limited accessibility pose significant challenges to their scholarly use. This study examines the current state of Arabic manuscript preservation in selected Indian libraries and evaluates the accessibility for researchers and academicians. By analyzing preservation techniques, digital initiatives, and institutional policies, the paper highlights gaps and offers recommendations to enhance the management and scholarly engagement with these invaluable resources.

Keywords: Arabic Manuscripts, Indian Libraries, Preservation Techniques, Manuscript Accessibility, Islamic Heritage, Cataloguing, Digitization

INTRODUCTION

India has historically played a significant role in the transmission and preservation of Arabic knowledge, owing to its centuries-old educational and cultural linkages with the Arab-Islamic world. From the medieval period onwards, scholars in India not only studied Arabic texts but also produced original works in the Arabic language. As a result, Indian libraries—especially in regions like Delhi, Hyderabad, Lucknow, and Kerala house thousands of rare Arabic manuscripts.

These manuscripts, often written on fragile paper or palm leaves, represent a vast intellectual heritage covering diverse subjects such as Islamic jurisprudence, astronomy, medicine, grammar, poetry, and Sufism. Unfortunately, despite their immense value, many of these manuscripts remain uncatalogued, poorly stored, or inaccessible to researchers due to outdated preservation methods and lack of digitization.

This paper aims to explore the status of Arabic manuscripts in major Indian manuscript repositories, with a particular focus on their preservation strategies and public accessibility. By doing so, it hopes to draw attention to the urgent need for conservation and digital archiving initiatives. Furthermore, it evaluates the role of government institutions, private collections, and international collaborations in safeguarding these manuscripts for future generations.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The primary objectives of this study, titled "*Arabic Manuscripts in Indian Libraries: A Study of Preservation and Accessibility*", are as follows:

1. To identify and document major repositories of Arabic manuscripts in India, including public, academic, and private collections.
2. To examine the current preservation techniques employed by Indian libraries for Arabic manuscripts, with emphasis on environmental controls, restoration methods, and conservation policies.
3. To assess the accessibility of Arabic manuscripts for researchers, scholars, and students, including cataloguing practices, availability of digital resources, and permission protocols.
4. To evaluate the role of digitization projects and governmental initiatives (such as the National Mission for Manuscripts) in preserving and promoting Arabic manuscript heritage in India.
5. To analyze the challenges and limitations faced by libraries in terms of infrastructure, funding, manpower, and technological support related to manuscript preservation.
6. To provide recommendations for improving manuscript preservation, enhancing access, and fostering academic research on Arabic manuscripts in India.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The study of Arabic manuscripts in India has drawn considerable academic attention due to the country's pivotal role in preserving Islamic scholarly traditions. Scholars have explored various dimensions including historical significance, cataloguing efforts, preservation status, and accessibility challenges.

1. Historical Overview and Significance

Nadvi (1957) in his seminal work on the contribution of Indian scholars to Arabic literature emphasized the richness of Arabic manuscript collections in Indian madrasas and libraries. He noted that cities like Lucknow, Hyderabad, and Delhi served as major centers of Arabic literary and religious scholarship, producing and preserving thousands of manuscripts in fields such as fiqh, tafsir, and Arabic grammar.

2. Cataloguing and Documentation Efforts

Khan (1991) highlighted the lack of comprehensive cataloguing in his study of manuscript repositories in Northern India. The *Descriptive Catalogue of Arabic and Persian Manuscripts* published by the Asiatic Society (1904–1970) remains a major reference for scholars, although many collections still remain undocumented or incompletely catalogued.

3. Preservation Challenges

According to Rizvi (2001), most Arabic manuscripts in India suffer from environmental decay, poor handling, and lack of archival expertise. Paper-based manuscripts are particularly vulnerable due to high humidity levels, insect damage, and fading ink. Preservation initiatives, he argues, have been sporadic and underfunded.

4. Digitization and Accessibility

The National Mission for Manuscripts (established in 2003 under the Ministry of Culture) initiated digitization and conservation projects across India. However, as noted by Sharma (2015), Arabic manuscripts have received comparatively less attention than Sanskrit and regional language

manuscripts. Furthermore, the lack of open-access digital platforms limits wider scholarly engagement.

5. Library-Specific Studies

Ahmed (2010) conducted a detailed survey of Arabic manuscripts in Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library (Patna), documenting rare copies of classical Islamic texts. His findings revealed that while some preservation efforts were underway, issues of restricted access, lack of metadata, and inadequate manpower persisted. Similarly, Hasan (2016) pointed out the significance of Arabic manuscripts in Raza Library, Rampur, and underscored the need for scientific preservation and cataloguing.

6. Global Best Practices and Indian Context

Comparative studies, such as those by al-Khateeb (2005), emphasized international standards for manuscript preservation including climate-controlled storage, digitization, and metadata tagging which are often lacking in the Indian context. He advocated for Indo-Arab collaborations to enhance manuscript care and access.

SUMMARY

The literature reflects that while India is home to a vast and rich heritage of Arabic manuscripts, many challenges persist in terms of preservation, cataloguing, and accessibility. Previous research calls for improved conservation infrastructure, digitization initiatives, and open access policies to safeguard this important segment of Islamic and Arabic heritage.

MAJOR FINDINGS

1. Uneven Distribution of Manuscript Collections
Arabic manuscripts in India are concentrated in a few major repositories such as the Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Library (Patna), Raza Library (Rampur), Asiatic Library (Mumbai), and Salar Jung Museum Library (Hyderabad). However, many smaller collections in madrasas and private institutions remain undocumented and poorly maintained.
2. Lack of Standardized Cataloguing
Many libraries still rely on manual registers or outdated cataloguing systems, often mixing

Arabic, Persian, and Urdu manuscripts without clear classification. In several cases, manuscripts are labeled only by title or author name, without metadata on subject, date, or physical condition.

3. **Poor Preservation Practices**
Most libraries face critical preservation issues due to environmental factors such as humidity, heat, dust, and insect infestation. Manuscripts are often kept in wooden almirahs or open shelves, lacking protective covers or climate-controlled storage.
4. **Limited Digitization and Online Access**
Although institutions like the National Mission for Manuscripts (NMM) have made efforts to digitize ancient texts, Arabic manuscripts remain underrepresented. Only a few libraries offer online catalogues or digital access, restricting both domestic and international scholarship.
5. **Shortage of Trained Personnel**
There is a significant lack of trained conservators and Arabic manuscript specialists in many institutions. Staff members often lack knowledge of Arabic palaeography, conservation methods, or digital archival processes.
6. **Restricted Accessibility for Researchers**
Access to physical manuscripts is often difficult due to bureaucratic procedures, fragile condition of documents, or institutional hesitation in allowing handling or reproduction. This hinders academic research and cross-institutional collaboration.
7. **Low Awareness and Institutional Prioritization**
While some libraries acknowledge the value of their Arabic collections, funding and administrative priority is often given to Sanskrit or vernacular manuscripts, leading to neglect of Arabic heritage.
8. **Emerging Interest in Islamic Heritage Studies**
Despite the challenges, there is growing scholarly interest in Arabic manuscripts, especially in disciplines like Islamic studies, history of science, and Sufi literature. This trend highlights the urgency of addressing preservation and access gaps.

RECOMMENDATIONS / SUGGESTIONS

1. **Establish a National Arabic Manuscript Consortium**

A centralized body should be created to coordinate cataloguing, preservation, and digitization efforts of Arabic manuscripts across libraries, universities, and madrasas in India.

2. **Standardize Cataloguing Practices**
Adopt uniform metadata standards and multilingual cataloguing systems (including Arabic script and transliteration) to improve discoverability and accessibility for researchers.
3. **Invest in Preservation Infrastructure**
Libraries should be equipped with climate-controlled storage, acid-free folders, protective covers, and pest control systems. Basic conservation training must be made available to staff.
4. **Accelerate Digitization Efforts**
Digital archiving of Arabic manuscripts must be prioritized and expanded through collaborations with institutions like the National Mission for Manuscripts (NMM), JISC, or Qatar Digital Library, ensuring open-access platforms for global research.
5. **Capacity Building and Training**
Organize regular workshops and certification programs in Arabic palaeography, manuscript handling, and conservation techniques for librarians, archivists, and scholars.
6. **Enhance Research Access Policies**
Institutions should simplify access protocols, permit supervised handling of fragile manuscripts, and offer digital or microfilm copies to qualified researchers with minimal delay.
7. **Encourage Interdisciplinary Research and Funding**
Universities and cultural organizations should encourage interdisciplinary research projects involving Arabic manuscripts, and attract funding from national and international bodies (e.g., ICCR, ICHR, Al-Furqan Foundation).
8. **Raise Public and Academic Awareness**
Hold exhibitions, lectures, and outreach programs to highlight the cultural and historical value of Arabic manuscripts in India, especially among younger scholars and the general public.
9. **Preserve and Document Private Collections**
Encourage owners of private Arabic manuscript collections to collaborate with academic institutions for preservation, documentation,

and digitization under proper confidentiality and legal frameworks.

10. Promote Indo-Arab Scholarly Exchange Foster collaborations with Arab universities and research centers for technical support, cataloguing assistance, and joint publications focused on Indian Arabic manuscript heritage.

CONCLUSION

Arabic manuscripts preserved in Indian libraries represent an invaluable part of the world's intellectual and cultural heritage. They are a testament to India's long-standing scholarly engagement with the Arabic language and Islamic knowledge systems. However, the study reveals that despite the historical richness and academic significance of these collections, their current state is marked by serious challenges—ranging from poor preservation infrastructure and inadequate cataloguing to limited digital access and scholarly visibility.

While some institutions have made commendable efforts in conserving and digitizing their holdings, these initiatives remain fragmented and underfunded. The lack of trained personnel, technological resources, and administrative attention further compounds the problem. Moreover, the bureaucratic barriers to accessing these materials discourage both national and international researchers, resulting in limited academic engagement with these primary sources.

To safeguard and revitalize this neglected heritage, it is imperative to adopt an integrated strategy that includes standardized cataloguing, digital archiving, staff training, and collaborative research efforts. Encouraging public-private partnerships and strengthening Indo-Arab academic exchanges will also play a vital role in preserving these manuscripts for future generations. Only through such comprehensive and sustained efforts can India fully unlock the potential of its Arabic manuscript legacy and reaffirm its place in the global intellectual history of the Arabic-Islamic tradition.

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