

Digitization and digital preservation of cultural heritage in National Archive of India: A case study

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Abstract

The result of the new change in technology is easier access to information. Digitization is a new change in this age. By digitizing old documents and heritage collection there will be easier access to information. Heritage collection is our culture so it must be kept in the right way. For this purpose, digitization and digital preservation are required. This paper discusses about cultural heritage, collection in National Archive of India (NAI) and details about the ongoing program in NAI.

Keywords: Digital preservation, Cultural Heritage, National Archive, India

INTRODUCTION

The term Cultural Heritage denotes all kinds of archival material related to cultural traditions of various civilizations of the world. It refers to knowledge created by the people associated with art, culture and other allied areas. Cultural Heritage may be classified as tangible cultural heritage and intangible cultural heritage. Tangible cultural heritage may be further divided as moveable, immovable and natural heritage. Moveable Heritage includes works of arts, books, manuscripts, artifacts, art objects, artwork etc. Immoveable Heritage refers architecture, monuments, archeological sites and buildings of historical significance.

According to the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, the intangible cultural heritage (ICH) – or living heritage – is the mainspring of our cultural diversity and its maintenance a guarantee for continuing creativity. Intangible Heritage includes those knowledge resources, which are not formally documented and may not be available in any form of a material. The Government of India has ratified the UNESCO Convention for safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage. It also agreed to contribute to the "Fund for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage" at least every two years (Guar, 2009).

The National Archives of India is the repository for the non-current records of the Government of India which are being held in trust for the use of administrators as well as Scholars. It is an Attached Office of the Ministry of Culture. It is an implementing nodal agency of the Government of India for the Public Records Act, 1993 and Public Record Rules, 1997.

Collection in National Archive of India

The records holdings in the National Archives run into 40 km of shelf-space area. They are in a regular series from the year 1748 onwards though there are stray records of the earlier period as well. These are in English, Arabic, Hindi, Persian, Sanskrit, Modi, Urdu etc., Apart from records on paper, they also have records on palm leaf, birch bark, etc. The records are broadly of four categories: Public Records, Oriental Records, Manuscripts and Private Papers. These records throw light on the activities of the later Mughals, the East India Company and British Rule and the emergence and growth of the freedom struggle in India. They also shed valuable light on social, political, economic and cultural life. In addition, there is a rich collection of Private Papers and more than 7500 microfilm rolls of records acquired from different countries such as Canada, Germany, Malaysia, Myanmar, United Kingdom, United States, France, Russia etc.

The total holdings in the custody of National Archives of India comprise the following :

38, 75,332 files

64,221 volumes

1, 10,332 maps and cartographic items

3,601 Bills assented to by the President(s) of India

1,065 Treaties

2,442 rare manuscripts

Microfilms: 35,000 Negative and Positive approximately. [Contains 4.9 million pages approximately]

Microfiches: 9000 [0.9 million pages]

Digital Images: 2, 60,000 [TIFF and PDF format]

Microfilm Programme

For preserving the cultural heritage of the country, NAI has taken up the mammoth task of creating a back up of the originals by microfilming the entire collection of documents and keeping them away from the originals in its Regional office at Bhopal where in the temperature and humidity is controlled 24 x 7, 365 days.

This practice is being followed internationally as the life expectancy of film medium is more than 500 years as compared to the other media. In order to keep pace with the changing environment in the field of Information Technology, NAI has taken up the conversion of the analog microfilm images into digital and has integrated the same with the meta data of the record holdings ever since 1998.

The present Archival Information Management Software developed by NAI in 1998 and recently upgraded by NIC has a total of 23,000 lakh data entry of reference media of records and the same is available in the intranet of NAI for retrieval by scholars and users of Archives.

Digitization Programme in National Archive

National Archives has developed a tailor-made software; "Archival Information Management System" (AIMS) for the creation of a data base for the reference media of records [catalogue of record holdings] in collaboration with ET&T, New Delhi in 1998. The AIMS software was developed in visual basic front-end and MS Access back-end for a 'stand alone system'. An intranet version of the AIMS was also developed in 1999 with 'ASP front-end' and 'SQL back-end' and the software is being used for retrieval of information in the intranet of the National Archives.

The AIMS software has been updated keeping in pace with the latest technology, i.e. in 'dot net' technology by NIC in 2007 to facilitate data entry of Private Archives, Cartography, Oriental Records and Reprography. National Archives has also created a data base of its library holdings in the "Libsys"

Software in 1999. The details of library holdings are available online for retrieval by scholars in intranet. The National Archives has also undertaken a new project of digitalization of rare and valuable manuscripts with the assistance of National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore. It has initiated a project of outsourcing the preparation of Negative and Positive Microfilms of 65 lakh pages within a period of 2 years. A pilot project for the preparation of first digital images of 5 lakh pages and then converting them to analog medium i.e. microfilm is also being initiated.

Digitization of Rare Manuscripts in National Archives of India

In July 2000, the National Archives of India initiated a pilot project for the digitization of rare manuscripts with the help of Sony Digital Camera (Figure 1). This Unit was established in collaboration with the Department of Science and Technology and the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore. Rare manuscripts such as Bhagwadgita, Ramayana, Mahabharata, etc., have been digitized and stored in CD medium.

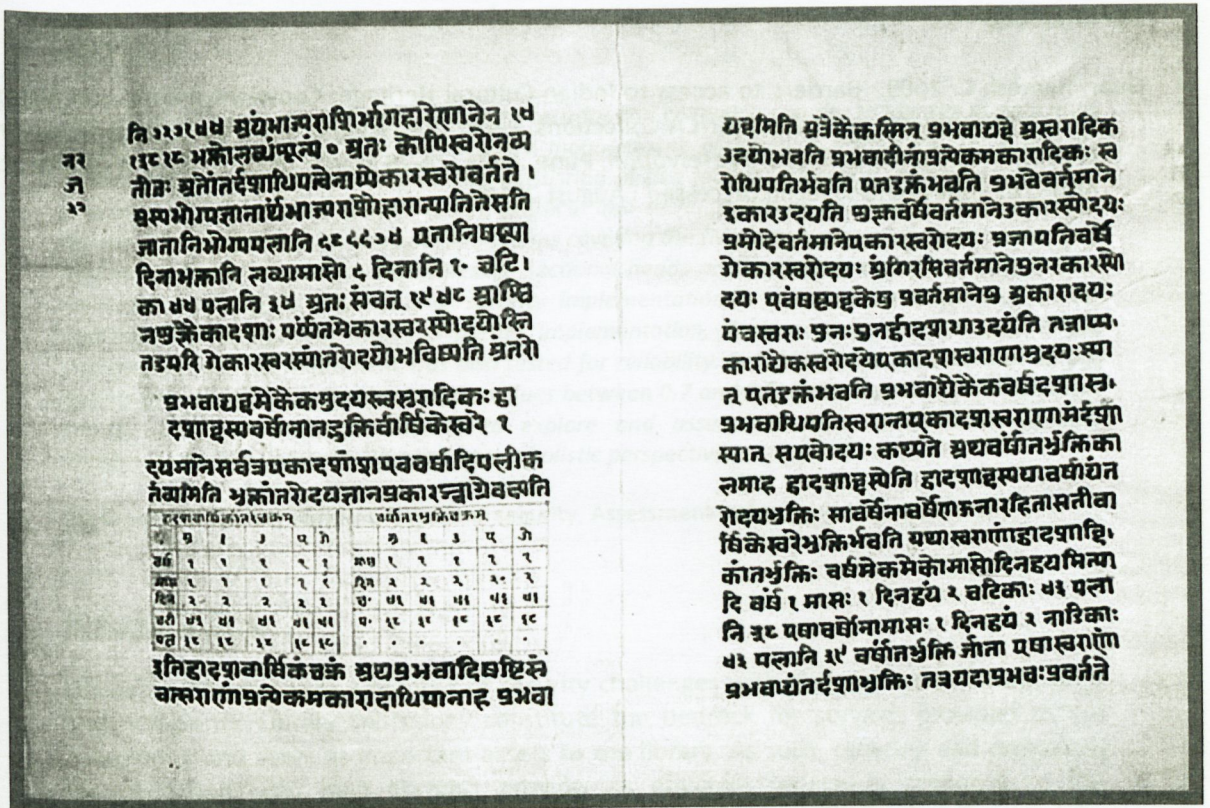


Figure 1 : Digitization of rare manuscripts

Long Term Preservation

National Archives is creating a replica of original documents in microfilm format and is keeping them away in ambient conditions for posterity and for effective disaster management. Positive microfilm copies are prepared from the original negative microfilms and supplied to scholars and users of the Archives for consultation, thus avoiding the handling of old and fragile documents.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the reasons for digitizing materials are as follows :

- i. To save space by replacing printed originals
- ii. Provision of high resolution research tool with full text searching.
- iii. A quick overview or browsing tool as an aspect of preservation and conservation.

India is rich in arts and cultural heritage resources (including manuscripts, works of art and artifacts) as well as scholarly resources generated in educational institutions. Many organizations possess such resources. It is therefore, important for a Digital Preservation Policy to ensure the preservation of valuable information and cultural heritage resources for their long-term preservation in digital format.

REFERENCES

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