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Dr. Nikita V Naik
Associate Professor, Samhita
Siddhant Evum Sanskrit, All
India Institute of Ayurveda,
Goa, India

Dr. Ritesh Gujarathi
Professor, H.O.D, Samhita
Siddhant Evum Sanskrit, GJ
Patel Institute of Ayurvedic
Studies and Research, CVM
University Vallabh
Vidyanagar, Gujarat, India

Study of available manuscripts in Goa: A survey of cultural heritage and preservation efforts

Nikita V Naik and Ritesh Gujarathi

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Abstract

Background: Goa possesses a remarkable manuscript heritage that reflects a unique blend of indigenous and colonial influences. Manuscripts in languages such as Sanskrit, Konkani, Marathi, Portuguese, Latin, and Arabic cover diverse fields like religion, philosophy, *Ayurveda*, law, governance, and literature. However, a significant portion remains undocumented, uncatalogued, and vulnerable to environmental threats and neglect.

Aim To evaluate and develop effective strategies for the conservation of manuscripts in Goa, aiming on the challenges posed by the region's high humidity and tropical climate.

Objectives To assess the current condition of manuscripts preserved in public and private collections in Goa. To identify environmental and biological factors (like humidity, temperature, mold, and pests) affecting manuscript conservation in coastal regions. To evaluate existing preservation methods and facilities used in Goan libraries, archives, and museums. To recommend practical and cost-effective conservation techniques suitable for the humid tropical climate of Goa. To promote awareness and capacity building among conservator and scholars on the scientific preservation of manuscripts. To encourage digitization and documentation as part of a long-standing preservation strategy.

Methods: This study involved a field survey of major repositories, including state libraries, church archives, temples, and private collections. Institutional practices were reviewed through site visits and interviews with curators and custodians. Challenges related to environmental conditions, funding, expertise, and access were systematically documented and analysed.

Key Findings: Goa's manuscripts are dispersed across public institutions and private holdings, many of which lack systematic cataloguing and digitization. High humidity, biological threats, and limited conservation infrastructure pose significant risks to manuscript survival. Institutional collaboration is limited and there is a shortage of trained conservators fluent in the region's multi-lingual scripts. Notable efforts by institutions like the Goa State Central Library and the Xavier Centre of Historical Research show promise, but broader coordination is lacking.

Discussion: Strengthen local and national initiatives to catalogue, digitize, and scientifically conserve manuscripts. Develop targeted training programmes in manuscriptology and conservation. Foster institutional and community partnerships to ensure sustained preservation efforts.

Conclusion: The manuscript collections of Goa constitute a vital part of India's pluralistic cultural heritage. Coordinated conservation strategies, increased scholarly engagement, and support from initiatives like the National Mission for Manuscripts are crucial to safeguard these invaluable cultural assets for future generations.

Keywords: Konkani, Goa, manuscripts, cultural heritage, preservation, digitization, sanskrit, portuguese

Introduction

Manuscripts are invaluable cultural artifacts that provide a window into the intellectual, spiritual, social, and administrative life of past civilizations. In India, the tradition of manuscript writing spans millennia, with texts written on palm leaves, birch bark, cloth, and handmade paper ^[1]. Goa, situated on the western coast of India, holds a distinctive place in this heritage due to its unique blend of Indian and European influences resulting from centuries of contact between indigenous cultures and Portuguese colonizers ^[2].

Goa's manuscript legacy is as diverse as its history. The state was once a thriving centre of learning for Sanskrit scholars and Hindu religious institutions, which contributed richly to Vedic and post-Vedic literature. Following Portuguese colonization in the early 16th century, Goa also became a hub for Christian missionary activities and Indo-Portuguese scholarship,

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Nikita V Naik
Associate Professor, Samhita
Siddhant Evum Sanskrit, All
India Institute of Ayurveda,
Goa, India

leading to the production and preservation of numerous manuscripts in Latin, Portuguese, and Roman-script Konkani. Consequently, manuscripts originated in Goa today reflect a rich tapestry of languages, including Sanskrit, Konkani (in both Devanagari and Roman scripts), Marathi, Portuguese, Latin, and Arabic ^[3].

These manuscripts are preserved in a range of institutions state libraries, church archives, private collections, academic centres, and traditional temples or *mathas*. Their subjects include theology, philosophy, *Ayurveda*, astrology, grammar, poetry, law, colonial administration, and missionary records. Despite their significance, many of these manuscripts remain under-researched, uncatalogued, and vulnerable to deterioration due to environmental factors, neglect, and lack of systematic conservation efforts ^[4].

This paper aims to bridge the existing gap by discovering the manuscript collections found across Goa and highlighting the key institutions that care for them. It highlights the pressing need to preserve and digitize these valuable cultural resources before they are lost to time. Gaining deeper insight into these manuscripts not only sheds light on Goa's own rich past but also adds to the wider cultural and intellectual narrative of India and the Indo-Portuguese world ^[5].

Aim and Objectives

Aim

To evaluate and develop effective strategies for the conservation of manuscripts in Goa, aiming on the challenges posed by the region's high humidity and tropical climate.

Objectives

1. To assess the current condition of manuscripts preserved in public and private collections in Goa.
2. To identify environmental and biological factors (like humidity, temperature, mold, and pests) affecting manuscript conservation in coastal regions.
3. To evaluate existing preservation methods and facilities used in Goan libraries, archives, and museums.
4. To recommend practical and cost-effective conservation techniques suitable for the humid tropical climate of Goa.
5. To promote awareness and capacity building among conservator and scholars on the scientific preservation of manuscripts.
6. To encourage digitization and documentation as part of a long-standing preservation strategy.

Need of the study

There is a lack of consolidated documents on manuscript holdings in Goa, leading to significant gaps in our understanding and appreciation of the region's rich documentary tradition. A great number of these manuscripts remain undigitized and uncatalogued, which significantly limits academic access and scholarly participation. Without organized conservation efforts, these invaluable cultural treasures are at increasing risk of damage or complete loss due to environmental factors and negligence. Encouraging scholarly research and attention to these materials is essential-not only to help preserve Goa's regional identity but also to support the broader landscape of India's manuscript heritage. This study supports and aligns with national initiatives, such as those spearheaded by the

National Mission for Manuscripts (NMM), which strive to protect and rejuvenate India's extensive and diverse manuscript legacy.

Materials and Methods

This study was conducted through a combination of field visits, site inspections, and informal interviews with librarians, archivists, temple custodians, and private collectors across various locations in Goa. Major repositories such as the Goa State Central Library, Xavier Centre of Historical Research, Archdiocese of Goa Archives, and select temple *mathas* were visited to observe preservation practices, environmental conditions, and storage facilities. Observations focused on the physical condition of manuscripts, storage environments, cataloguing status, and any digitization initiatives in place. Additionally, available records and prior surveys were reviewed to cross-check documented holdings and identify gaps in cataloguing. The information gathered was compiled and analyzed to assess the challenges related to conservation, environmental risks, funding, manpower, and institutional collaboration, aiming to recommend practical measures suitable for Goa's humid coastal climate.

Institutions involved in manuscript preservation in Goa ^[6]

The following institutions have been identified as important custodians of manuscripts in Goa:-

- **Goa State Central Library, Panaji:** One of India's oldest libraries with collections in Portuguese, Marathi, and Sanskrit.
- **Xavier Centre of Historical Research (XCHR), Porvorim:** Holds manuscripts and rare books related to Indo-Portuguese history.
- **Krishnadas Shama Goa State Central Library:** Rich in Konkani and Marathi manuscripts, this institution actively digitizes its collection.
- **Archdiocese of Goa and Daman Archives:** Contains ecclesiastical records, liturgical texts, and colonial manuscripts.
- **Goa University Library:** Houses research material and participates in digital archiving projects.
- **Private Collections and Mathas (Temples):** Notably, places like the Shree Shantadurga Temple (Kavale) preserve palm-leaf manuscripts.
- **Instituto Menezes Braganza:** Focuses on Portuguese and Indo-Portuguese literature and archival work.

Condition of Manuscript during Portuguese time in Goa

During the Portuguese colonial rule in Goa (1510-1961), the condition of indigenous manuscripts declined significantly due to systemic religious and cultural suppression, particularly during the period of the Goa Inquisition (1560-1812). The Inquisition was targeted at imposing Catholic orthodoxy and targeted Hindu and Islamic religious practices, leading to the widespread devastation of palm-leaf and paper manuscripts written in Sanskrit, Konkani, and Marathi. These manuscripts, which contained religious scriptures, classical literature, and traditional knowledge systems such as *Ayurveda*, were either burned or confiscated by colonial authorities. The use of indigenous scripts like Devanagari, Modi, and Kandavi was vigorously discouraged, and the Roman script was increasingly

encouraged, particularly for Konkani, to facilitate the missionary agenda ^[7].

The Jesuit missionaries had a thoughtful impact on the literary culture of Goa, redesigning it in ways that continue to resonate today. Among them, Fr. Thomas Stephens, an English Jesuit who arrived in Goa in the late 16th century, stands out as a pivotal figure. In the early 1600s, he composed the *Krista Purana*, an extraordinary Christian epic that wove together stories from the Bible in a lyrical blend of Marathi and Konkani-but notably, he wrote it in the Roman script ^[8]. This represented more than just a literary achievement; it signalled a turning point in how local languages and traditions were articulated, now reframed through Christian themes and Western modes of storytelling ^[9].

While missionary efforts like these introduced new forms of writing, they also coincided with the decline of older manuscript traditions. Despite the destruction of Hindu and Islamic texts during the Portuguese rule, not all was lost ^[10]. Some manuscripts were quietly preserved by Brahmin families, passed down through generations, or hidden in the safety of temple archives in remote areas. By the 19th and 20th centuries, a few European Orientalist scholars began taking an interest in these remains of Goa's past, documenting what little had survived the centuries of colonial pressure. These efforts, though limited, helped shine a light on the literary heritage that had once flourished in Goa before colonial rule ^[11].

Challenges in Manuscript Conservation

The conservation of manuscripts in Goa faces various challenges, each substantiated by scholarly research and expert analyses:

- **Lack of Trained Conservators in Goa:** India faces a shortage of adequately trained conservators, conservation scientists, and facilities necessary for effective preservation efforts. This gap is particularly evident in regions like Goa, where specialized training programs and infrastructure are limited ^[12].
- **Limited funding and institutional collaboration:** Financial constraints and insufficient institutional collaboration hinder the preservation of cultural heritage in India. The lack of coordinated efforts among institutions exacerbates the challenges in conserving manuscripts ^[13].
- **Environmental factors like humidity that degrade materials:** Tropical climates, such as that of Goa, pose significant risks to the preservation of manuscripts due to high humidity levels. These environmental conditions accelerate the deterioration of organic materials like paper and palm leaves ^[14].
- **Language barriers due to multi-lingual script traditions:** India's vast linguistic diversity-with manuscripts written in Sanskrit, Konkani, Marathi, Portuguese, Latin, Arabic, and more-poses significant challenges for manuscript safeguarding. The limited number of experts fluent in these varied languages makes accurate cataloguing and interpretation difficult, slowing down conservation and research efforts ^[15].
- **Restricted access due to private ownership or institutional policy:** A large number of manuscripts remain sealed in private collections or institutions that limit access through strict policies. This restricted availability hampers both scholarly study and public

appreciation, making it harder to fully preserve and understand these valuable cultural resources ^[16].

Result and Findings

- Goa's manuscripts exist in *Sanskrit*, *Konkani*, *Marathi*, *Portuguese*, *Latin*, and *Arabic*.
- Subjects include religion, philosophy, *Ayurveda*, law, astrology, and colonial records.
- Collections are scattered in libraries, churches, temples, universities, and private hands.
- Many manuscripts are still uncatalogued and undigitized.
- High humidity and pests damage fragile palm-leaf and paper manuscripts.
- Most places lack modern conservation tools and trained staff.
- Some libraries and centres have started digitization work.
- Funding and expert manpower are insufficient.
- Private collections are often closed to researchers.
- Stronger collaboration and urgent digitization are needed to protect this heritage.

Discussion

The survey of manuscript collections across Goa clearly highlights the region's vast yet vulnerable documentary heritage. The diverse linguistic and thematic scope of these manuscripts-from *Sanskrit* scriptures to Portuguese administrative records-demonstrates how Goa served as a crossroads of indigenous knowledge systems and European colonial governance. Despite this historical significance, the study reveals that systematic cataloguing remains incomplete in most repositories, especially in privately held collections and temple archives. This lack of comprehensive documentation severely limits scholarly engagement and public awareness of Goa's manuscript wealth ^[17].

Environmental conditions, especially the coastal state's high humidity and temperature fluctuations, continue to be a major threat to the physical integrity of manuscripts written on fragile organic materials like palm leaves and handmade paper. The field observations reaffirm that while some institutions have basic preservation measures, such as dehumidifiers and pest control, these are insufficient in scope and scale. Many smaller collections, especially those maintained by families and mathas, lack even minimal climate-control mechanisms, leaving manuscripts highly susceptible to mould, pests, and physical decay ^[18].

Institutional and policy-related challenges further hamper conservation efforts. There is limited financial investment in conservation infrastructure, and a shortage of trained personnel to handle multi-lingual manuscripts exacerbates the problem. While national initiatives like the National Mission for Manuscripts have made commendable strides, the implementation of their programs at the regional level, particularly in Goa, needs greater coordination with local libraries, church archives, and private custodians to ensure uniform standards of preservation and digitization ^[19].

An encouraging finding is that certain institutions, such as the Goa State Central Library and the Xavier Centre of Historical Research, have initiated proactive steps toward digitization and collaboration with national and international bodies. However, these efforts must be expanded and scaled up. There is an urgent need for capacity building through specialized training programs in manuscriptology,

preventive conservation, and digital archiving to equip local custodians and researchers with the skills needed to sustain preservation efforts ^[20].

In conclusion, the findings emphasize that preserving Goa's manuscripts requires a multi-pronged approach: improved environmental management, strengthened institutional collaboration, capacity building for conservation science, and systematic digitization. Engaging local communities, encouraging private collectors to open access, and forging strong partnerships between religious institutions, academic bodies, and government agencies will be critical. If effectively implemented, these strategies will not only safeguard Goa's rich manuscript heritage but will also contribute meaningfully to India's larger commitment to protect its intangible cultural assets for future generations.²¹

Conclusion

Goa's manuscripts are an evidence to its pluralistic heritage and intellectual traditions. However, the present state of documentation, protection, and accessibility remains insufficient. A coordinated effort linking governmental bodies, academic institutions, religious organizations, and the National Mission for Manuscripts is essential. This study highlights the need for a complete digitization and preservation initiative, increased academic commitment, and training of personnel in manuscriptology and conservation.

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