

Conservation and preservation of special collections to sustain the cultural heritage by Eastern University library

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Abstract

Special collections are a priceless heritage of mankind and preserving those collections of intellectual and cultural heritage become not only an academic commitment but also the moral responsibility of librarians. As the Library of Eastern University is the heart of the University, it plays a major role in providing resources and services not only for the staff and students but to the community as well. Therefore, this study focuses on special collections of the Eastern University library and the objectives of the study are to explore how to conserve and preserve those collections and identify the challenges during the processes. The data was collected through observation and content analysis. It was found that, the Library of Eastern University is enriched with valuable, unique and rare collections. It includes Ceylon collections, Batticaloa collections and Eastern University Sri Lanka collections, (EUSL) manuscripts, antique collections, wooden collections and periodicals. It was recommended that the special collections should be conserved and preserved through maintaining suitable environmental conditions, harmless chemical treatments and efficient use of human resources. The study concluded that the library of Eastern University has immense collections on the cultural and historical heritage of the Eastern region as well as at national. It maintains and sustains these historical and cultural records cultural heritage through the conservation and preservation practices for the benefit of the both present and future.

Keywords: *Conservation, Preservation, Cultural Heritage, Special Collections, Rare Collections, Ceylon Collections, Batticaloa Collections, EUSL Collections*

1.0 Introduction

The library plays a significant role in bridging information resources of the past, present and future. Therefore, the EUSL library provides easy access to cultural materials and makes them available for use of future generation. The library materials are exposed to slow decay caused by acidity of the paper, infestation of insects, improper handling and storage and excessive temperature, humidity and polluted air. To ensure the special collections remain available to present and future generations of library users, the library engages to conserve and preserve the materials and make the collections more durable.

The EUSL library as the Centre of information resources facilitates the academic and research activities of the University teachers' and students'. Apart from this, it has a major responsibility to conserve and preserve the cultural heritage of the eastern region of Sri Lanka. The EUSL library has not only the eastern collections but it also preserves the national heritage of Sri Lanka. To sustain conservation and preservation practices of the cultural heritage the EUSL library has numerous special collections which comprise rare collections, Ceylon collections, Batticaloa collections, EUSL collections, manuscripts, bronze collections and wooden furniture.

The Conservation and Preservation Unit in the EUSL library aims to acquire preserve and provide access to rare and unique materials to smooth the progress of academic and research activities of all faculty staff and students and also to enable access to the public if needed. The uniqueness and rarity of the regional collections add more cultural value to the materials which strengthen the written heritage of the region. The traditional methods of conservation treatment are done as there is no conservator to treat the rare collections with chemicals. This research is aimed at investigating the methods and techniques of preservation and conservation of library materials, practiced in the EUSL library.

2.0 Objectives

- To study the special collections of the library.
- To organize those special collections by verifying subjects and sources of materials.
- To conserve and preserve valuable and rare collections for the benefit of researchers and academics who engaged in this field and for the use of future generation.
- To identify the challenges during the process of conservation and preservation.

3.0 Literature Review

Preservation can be defined as all managerial, technical and financial considerations applied to retard deterioration and extend the useful life of (collection) materials to ensure their continued availability. Conservation is the treatment of artifacts by interventive procedures. It should be seen as one option in a programme of collection care (Eden, et.al., 1998).

Ogunmodede, T.A. and Ebijuwa, A. S. (2013) did a study to investigate the preservation and conservation problems of library materials in African Academic libraries. It was found out that there is no written policy on preservation and conservation in Academic libraries. It is impossible to cultivate the culture of preservation and conservation in such libraries which places information bearing materials at a high risk of extinction.

The main constraints to proper preservation and conservation in academic libraries are lack of funds, lack of qualified conservation librarians, non-committal attitude of staff and lack of adequate and dependable storage facilities. Very few librarians are conversant with preservation management and thus are against any comprehensive preservation programme. There is a need to improve library materials in libraries; conduct orientation programmes for staff, provide training on the care, preservation and conservation of library materials, invoke a positive attitude in the government.

Santharoban, S., Gayathiri, T. and Prashanthan, B. (2012) did a pilot survey of palm leaf manuscripts in Batticaloa district and stated that some of the manuscripts are properly maintained and protected while others are not and therefore, they suggested that manuscripts should be preserved in a common place with government support.

Nirmal, R.M. (2009), based on the study of Digital Preservation of rare manuscripts in Assam, stated that the deterioration is the major problem in organization and management of manuscript collection and suggested digital preservation to preserve manuscripts with its original physical features and contents.

4.0 Methodology

To fulfill the objectives of this study, the methods used are observation and content analysis. The content analysis of key documentary sources and their cultural value were identified. The steps involved in these methods are, identifying the collections, classifying the collections according to the source of materials, classifying the collections according to the subject, accessioning the materials, conservation treatment for the materials and proper storage of the materials.

5.0 Results and Discussion

The Eastern University acts as a major institution for the development of the community by providing graduates as human resources to serve the community through its academic programmes. As the Library is the heart of the University, it fulfills the needs of the scholarly or academic community of the University.

The Eastern University Library is a rich source of the written heritage of the region and our country. While the library is enriched with a vast number of printed and non-printed collections, it also has valuable, unique and rare or special collections. The special collections showcase the cultural and historical identity of the region.

The Conservation and Preservation unit provides the suitable environmental conditions to conserve and preserve those special collections and thus sustain the cultural heritage and safeguard them for future generation.

The heritage provides backward and forward linkages between generations. Thus, the preservation and conservation of heritage is a solemn obligation that must be undertaken by librarians or information managers. Failure to do so will lead to considerable and irreplaceable loss of heritage. The Eastern University library preserves a valuable record of culture that can be passed to the succeeding generation. If the cultural records are continued in books or in electronic formats, the library ensures that the record is preserved and made available for later use.

5.1 The available special collections

Our collections have been developed by knowledgeable selectors in collaboration with members of the academic departments of EUSL. The total value of the collections including the value of the items themselves and the intellectual effort in selecting and making them available to the public is incalculable. Since all library materials are subject to deterioration and ultimately destruction through use, natural decay of organic material and technological obsolescence, the Eastern University library reinvested in these intellectual resources through a systematic preservation programme.

The Ceylon collections available at the library are precious and priceless. The library has the Batticaloa collections which show the detailed information regarding the heritage of the culture and history of Batticaloa. The Eastern University collections provide immeasurable value to the materials which have been published by the scholarly community of the University. The conservation and preservation unit of the library provide services to conserve and preserve those special collections in the library.

5.1.1 Printed books collections

The Conservation and Preservation unit of the EUSL library consists of 2889 printed books as rare collections. Among the rare collections there are collections of Dravidian literature (744), Hinduism (204), English fiction (77), Islam (33), Animal husbandry (22).

Ceylon collections consist of 1745 collections which include Dravidian literature (294), history of Sri Lanka (166), Social groups in Sri Lanka (115), Hinduism (84), Education(50), Civil and Political Rights (49), Production (45), Political Science (44) and Economics of Land and Energy (36).

5.1.2 Printed periodicals collection

The Conservation and Preservation unit has the precious rare periodicals collection. These valuable journals are available as bound volumes.

5.1.3 Manuscripts collection

The manuscripts made of Ola leaves are available at the library and they consist of ancient Epics such as Ramayana and Mahabharata.

5.1.4 Antique collection

The antique collections are collected from the region which reflects the cultural heritage of the region. But, more infrastructure and other facilities have to be improved further in future.

The antique collections are made of metals such as bronze and copper and are available at the conservation and preservation unit of library.

The bronze collections like utensils of the ancestors are also available and have been displayed in the Conservation and Preservation unit.

5.1.5 Wooden collection

The valuable wooden furnituresuch as almirahs with fine finishing is part of the rare materials available in the EUSL library.

5.1.6 Other collections

Large old dictionaries including those from the year of 1914 are available. The photographs and sound recordings maintained are those which are related to heritage, history, identity and culture of our country and region.

5.2 The conditions of conservation and preservation

The air conditioners are able to effectively cool and dehumidify the air. The temperature of 20 – 22 °C (68 – 71.6 °F) is maintained for the conservation and preservation of the rare or special collections. The relative humidity is maintained from 45 – 50 %. The temperature is kept to a maximum of 25°C with humidity not exceeding 60% RH. Tightening of windows is needed to ensure a good seal. Floor tiles are easily cleanable. Air conditioners must be equipped with effective dust filters which should be regularly maintained. All chemical reactions are speeded up by heat and takesplace in the presence of humidity. Therefore, temperature should be kept low. Also, too low a humidity level causes drying of the materials. Therefore, temperature and humidity should be maintained at a proper level.

Documents are susceptible to both inherent and environmental factors. The factors which cause deterioration of paper materials may be chemical, biological and physical or mechanical. The chemical factors which affect the printed library materials are high temperature (above 25°C), high relative humidity (above 50%), low relative humidity (less than 40%), acidic gases such as NO₂, NO₃, CO, CO₂, SO₂ and SO₃ and also UV rays. The symptoms of chemical deterioration on the collections are discolouration, yellowing of paper, brown spots or foxing and brittleness. The chemical deterioration due to acidity can be identified through a pH meter.

The biological factors causing damage to library collections are insects, microorganisms, rodents, vertebrates (birds). Among the insects are silverfish, cockroach, book lice, book worm and termites. The physical deterioration happens by careless handling, wrong storage method and transportation of the collections. To minimize physical deterioration there should be proper storage, care handling procedures and archival book binding. The natural disasters such as floods, Tsunami and earthquakes are the extreme external factors which can cause damage to library collections. Dust plays a major part in causing damage to materials in the library.

5.3 The conservation treatments

Fumigation is normally practiced in the library to treat the library collection to conserve and preserve them. Fumigation is the process of exposing documents to chemical fumes known as fumigants in order to arrest biological infestation of microorganism such as fungi and insects and rodents. The naphthalene balls are used to avoid some insects which causes damage to the rare collections. The walls of the conservation and preservation room are coated with antifungal paint to avoid the deterioration by fungi.

5.4 Importance of conserving special collections to sustain cultural heritage

The special collections are a rich supply of unique, rare and primary sources, from which new knowledge, dynamic discovery and intense learning experience can be generated. Organization of cultural heritage is our responsibility as we are librarians who should be the curators of those valuable collections. The special collections are distinctive signifiers of excellence and trademarks of cultural and historical identity. It is very important to assess and optimize the value of special collections in supporting University's missions in particular research, teaching and learning. Resource allocation and identification of new directions could be prioritized.

The rare or special materials collected are rich accumulations of materials significant to its specific constituencies. Therefore, the conservation and preservation of special collections are value adding activities in which the rare and unique materials are very valuable resources of the country or region.

Through effective works of curator the special collections should be sustained with cultural heritage by estimation of value needs. Enhancing heritage is way to contribute to the revitalization of communities. As we are the custodian of cultural heritage assets there is the possibility of integration of cultural heritage in the domain of community development, education and tourism. And also, preserve and disseminate local and traditional know-how.

5.5 Challenges during the process of conservation and preservation

Special collections are rare, unique and distinctive. Long held assumptions and practices are being challenged to increase the care of collections. Preserving both print and non-print materials is a huge task at the same time poses great challenges.

The challenges are the housing of the special collections under the most suitable conditions for preservation and longevity. And also, the human resources involve in conservation and preservation such as curators or the conservator should be deep and broad expertise in collecting and know impact of collection on research based subject knowledge and experience.

The better infrastructure facilities for the curative practices should have to be furnished and enforcing trained personnel could lead to progressive outcomes and defend the rare collections' durability.

Availability of funds and smooth financial conditions are primitive to improve the functions and activities of conservation and preservation in the library.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

The library of the Eastern University conserves and preserves the cultural heritage through its special collections which reflect the value and nature of the region. Those valuable and rare library collections of written heritage should be preserved and conserved as it provides backward and forward linkages between generations.

The library of Eastern University serves as the centre which represents the uniqueness of written heritage of the country and region as well. Through the activities of conserving and preserving the special collections it maintains the cultural heritage of regional and national heritage and also plays a vital role to serve the community in maintaining the historical and cultural records of the region. The available challenges of lack of infrastructure facilities and trained human resources in the library should be eliminated with the proper utilization of available financial condition in the near future. As librarians are the custodian of information resources it's their responsibility to conserve and preserve the regional and national sources of information which have to kept for next generation too.

It was recommended that the special collections could be conserved and preserved through various methods such as provision of suitable environmental conditions, application of chemical treatments for the biological degradation of materials and efficient use of human resources during conservation and preservation processes. The better way to safeguarding these priceless collections is digitization and establishment of digital repository in EUSL library could enable to reach more than a user at a time and available at any time with increasing longevity of collection because of avoiding mechanical injuries to the collection.

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