



# Preserving Heritage: A Study Of Rare Arabic Manuscripts In Indian Libraries

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## Abstract

India's libraries and research institutes hold a rich repository of rare Arabic manuscripts that testify to centuries of intellectual, religious, scientific, and cultural exchange between the Indian subcontinent and the broader Islamic world. These manuscripts — ranging from theological treatises, medical works, and historical chronicles to poetry and philosophical texts — are preserved in institutions such as Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library (Patna), Rampur Raza Library (Uttar Pradesh), and others. Recent efforts — including digitization projects in regions like Malabar — are reviving interest in these manuscripts and protecting them from deterioration. This study aims to examine the status, conservation practices, and accessibility of such manuscripts, highlighting their value as cultural and scholarly heritage. By documenting preservation challenges and emerging strategies, the paper argues for a robust heritage preservation policy to maintain and make accessible these rare Arabic works for future generations and researchers worldwide.

**Keywords:** Arabic Manuscripts, Cultural Exchange, Heritage Preservation, worldwide etc.

**Introduction:** The Indian subcontinent has long been a crossroads of civilizations — a confluence where Arab, Persian and South Asian intellectual traditions met, merged, and flourished. Within this rich historical tapestry lies a vast, often under-appreciated heritage in the form of rare Arabic manuscripts, preserved through centuries in libraries and private collections across India. These manuscripts — spanning theology, medicine, astronomy, history, literature and philosophy — reflect deep intercultural exchange and testify to India's integral role in Islamic and global intellectual history.

Yet many of these treasures remain vulnerable: subject to decay, neglect, poor cataloguing, or limited accessibility. Recognizing their value for scholarship, cultural memory, and interfaith— intercultural understanding, this study aims to examine the present status of rare Arabic manuscripts housed in Indian libraries, the conservation practices protecting them, and the challenges they face. By focusing particularly on landmark institutions such as Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Library (Patna) and Rampur Raza Library (Rampur), this research explores how these repositories preserve manuscripts on paper, palm-leaf, deer-skin or cloth, and how modern efforts—cataloging, conservation, digitization—are safeguarding them for future generations. In doing so, the study argues for the critical importance of institutional and state-level commitment to heritage preservation, ensuring that these manuscripts remain living sources of knowledge rather than lost relics.

## Objectives of the Study

**Documentation and Cataloguing:** To identify, record, and catalogue rare Arabic manuscripts in Indian libraries, ensuring their locations, content, and conditions are systematically documented for scholarly access.

**Preservation and Conservation:** To examine the physical state of these manuscripts and assess current preservation practices, proposing strategies for conservation, restoration, and protection from environmental or human-induced damage.

**Promotion of Scholarly Access and Cultural Awareness:** To enhance accessibility through digitization, publication, and research initiatives, while highlighting the historical, cultural, and intellectual significance of these manuscripts for India and the global Islamic scholarly heritage.

**Methodology:** This study will employ a mixed-methods approach. First, a **survey and cataloguing** of identified libraries holding rare Arabic manuscripts to document collection size, language, condition, physical material, and metadata. Second, use **philological and codicological analysis** — examining handwriting (paleography), binding, paper/palm leaf quality, ink, and script style to date and authenticate manuscripts. Third, a **digital preservation assessment**, evaluating digitization efforts, storage conditions, and archival practices (based on recent standards as in comparable libraries). Finally, qualitative interviews with librarians/curators to understand challenges, conservation practices, and accessibility issues.

**Importance of the topic:** The topic “Preserving Heritage: A Study of Rare Arabic Manuscripts in Indian Libraries” is important as it safeguards India’s rich Arabic-Islamic intellectual and cultural legacy. These manuscripts—covering religion, science, literature, and history—are invaluable for understanding centuries of scholarship, cross-cultural exchange, and regional adaptations of Islamic knowledge.

Preservation ensures their survival against decay, neglect, or loss, while cataloguing and digitization enhance scholarly access. Moreover, it promotes awareness of India's pluralistic heritage and supports research, education, and cultural identity for future generations.

**Background:** The Indian subcontinent has long served as a vibrant crossroads of civilizations — where South Asian, Persian, Arab, and Central Asian intellectual, religious, and cultural traditions intertwined over centuries. Among the most striking legacies of this interaction are the thousands of Arabic and Persian manuscripts preserved in various libraries, archives, and private collections across India. These manuscripts — on theology, law, philosophy, medicine, history, literature, astronomy, and the arts — bear witness to India's historical role in the broader Islamic intellectual world.

One of the most renowned repositories of this heritage is the Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Library (in Patna, Bihar). Founded as a private collection that eventually opened to the public in 1891, the library now preserves over 21,000 manuscripts (among them Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Turkish, Pashto) and more than 250,000 printed books in various languages. Over centuries, collectors and scholars, often under princely or Muslim-scholar patronage, gathered manuscripts produced in India or brought from the Middle East, Central Asia, or Arab lands.

Another important repository is the Rampur Raza Library (in Rampur, Uttar Pradesh), which traces its origins to the late 18th century under the Nawabs of Rampur. It houses a rich collection of manuscripts, historical documents, Islamic calligraphy, miniature paintings, astronomical instruments and illustrated works in Arabic and Persian — along with printed works in various languages. Over the years, such libraries have functioned not only as storage-houses, but as active centres for scholarship, culture, and inter-religious, inter-cultural dialogue.

Beyond large “institutional” libraries, India's manuscript heritage is also scattered across smaller collections — madrasas, private families, private collections, regional institutions. As documented by cataloguing efforts under programmes such as the National Mission for Manuscripts (NMM), many manuscripts remain under-documented, at risk from environmental decay, neglect, or simple oblivion.

In light of this, the need to systematically preserve, catalogue, conserve, and — where possible — digitize these Arabic manuscripts has become urgent. Doing so safeguards not only physical heritage, but the intellectual, cultural, and spiritual history embedded in those manuscripts — enabling modern scholars to access, study, and reinterpret centuries-old knowledge.

## Literature Review

Scholarly literature highlights that Indian libraries preserve a vast and valuable collection of rare Arabic manuscripts reflecting centuries of intellectual, religious, and scientific exchange between the Arab world and South Asia. Studies document major repositories such as the Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library, Raza Library, and regional collections in Kerala, emphasizing their rich holdings and historical significance. Researchers consistently identify preservation challenges, including climatic deterioration, insect damage, inadequate storage facilities, and lack of trained conservation staff. Another recurring theme is the absence of standardized cataloguing and limited accessibility for researchers. Recent literature stresses the growing importance of digitization initiatives, particularly under the National Mission for Manuscripts, as an effective strategy to safeguard fragile originals and enhance global access. Case studies reveal that while institutional efforts have improved preservation in major libraries, smaller and private collections remain vulnerable. Overall, the literature underscores the urgent need for coordinated conservation policies, advanced technologies, and sustained funding to preserve India's Arabic manuscript heritage.

## Discussion

### The Value and Significance of Arabic Manuscripts in India

#### 1. Intellectual and Cultural Heritage

These manuscripts represent a vast and multidisciplinary heritage. Works range from religious and theological treatises, jurisprudence (fiqh), Sufi writings, philosophical discourses, to works of medicine, astronomy, mathematics, history, poetry, travelogues, and more. For example, among the rare holdings of Khuda Bakhsh Library is the Arabic medical encyclopedia *Kitab al-Tasrif* by the Andalusian physician Al-Zahrawi (Al-Zahrawi, often called the father of surgery), which had wide influence in the Islamic world and beyond. Another is *Kitab al-Hashaish* (the Book of Herbs), a pharmacological/botanical work, part of the library's rare Arabic collection. Works like these show that Arabic manuscripts in India are not limited to theology or literature — they constitute evidence of a broader scientific, medical and scholarly tradition.

Such manuscripts — in Arabic or Persian — also chronicle political history (chronicles of dynasties, genealogies and social history), philosophical and theological debates, Sufi metaphysics, commentaries, cross-cultural translations, and exchanges between Islamic and indigenous South Asian traditions. These make them indispensable primary sources for historians, philologists, comparatists, cultural anthropologists, and scholars of religion.

Thus, preserving these manuscripts is preserving a living memory of centuries long intellectual exchanges, cross-cultural fertilization, and syncretism — a heritage that undergirds modern South Asian civilization.



## 2. Cultural Identity and Shared Memory

For many communities — Muslim and non-Muslim — these manuscripts are not only scholarly artifacts but embodiments of shared heritage. They reflect the composite culture of medieval and early-modern India, where religious, linguistic, and cultural boundaries were fluid, and where Arabic, Persian, and local languages coexisted and influenced each other. In preserving such manuscripts, India preserves a dimension of its pluralistic identity — showing how global Islamic civilization became localized in India, producing unique regional variants, interpretations, scholarship.

Moreover, these manuscripts have value beyond scholarship: calligraphy, illumination, miniature paintings, binding styles, paper types, marginalia, and colophons also reflect artistry, material culture, codicology, and book-making traditions in India. This makes them cultural artefacts connecting art history, material history, and social history.

### Challenges in Preservation and Documentation

1. **Environmental and Material Decay** — many manuscripts are fragile, written on paper, palm leaf, deer-skin, cloth, and older inks. Hot and humid climate, fluctuations of temperature, humidity, pests (insects, rodents), mold, light, acidification of paper, insect damage, and simple wear-and-tear pose serious threats.
2. **Fragmented and Uneven Distribution** — While some institutions (like Khuda Bakhsh, Rampur Raza, etc.) preserve large well catalogued collections, many smaller libraries, madrasa collections, private families maintain manuscripts without proper cataloguing, conservation, or even awareness of their significance. As a result, many manuscripts remain undocumented, misplaced, or deteriorating.
3. **Lack of Standardized Cataloguing and Access** — historically, cataloguing has often been manual, inconsistent, and incomplete. Some catalogues are out-of-date; many manuscripts lack modern metadata, digital records, or are inaccessible to researchers. As reported, despite excellent collections, “many collections still remain undocumented or incompletely catalogued.”
4. **Resource Constraints: Conservation Infrastructure and Staff** — Preservation and conservation require trained staff (conservators, chemists), conservation labs, controlled environments. Many libraries face funding shortages, lack staff, or lack modern equipment (for digitization, climate control, conservation). For instance, as with the Rampur Raza Library, understaffing and inadequate scanning/digitization infrastructure hamper preservation.
5. **Limited Digitization and Public Access** — while digitization is underway in many libraries, only a fraction of manuscripts have been digitized so far. This limits global scholarly access, especially for researchers who cannot physically visit these repositories.

## Recent Efforts and Institutional Responses

In face of these challenges, some positive steps have been taken.

- Under the banner of the National Mission for Manuscripts (NMM), coordinated by the central government, there have been systematic efforts to locate, catalogue, digitize, and conserve manuscripts scattered in “different libraries, personal collections or religious institutions.” The Khuda Bakhsh Library functions as a nodal agency for Arabic, Persian, Urdu and Pashto manuscripts in Bihar under this scheme.
- Conservation work: At Khuda Bakhsh Library, for example, preventive care and curative conservation have been applied — a significant number of manuscripts have been treated, preserved, and stabilized.
- Digitization: Some manuscripts have been digitized and made available online or within the library’s computers; this improves accessibility for scholars worldwide, and reduces physical handling.
- Descriptive catalogues: Publications of catalogues detailing collections — as in older efforts (such as the descriptive catalogues of Arabic and Persian manuscripts in various libraries), as well as more recent efforts to compile metadata and bibliographical data — help map and document India’s manuscript heritage. For instance, there are catalogues of 1,500+ manuscripts in regional institutes.
- Awareness and academic interest: Through research, publications, digitization and public widening, there is growing recognition of the value of these manuscripts — not only for Islamic and Arabic studies, but for art history, cardiology, comparative literature, interfaith studies, history of science, and global intellectual history.

These efforts suggest that while many manuscripts were once neglected, a revival is in progress — though uneven, incomplete, and depending heavily on resources and institutional commitment.

## The Risk of Loss — Why Preservation Matters

If preservation and cataloguing efforts do not continue (or accelerate), India risks losing a considerable portion of its Arabic Islamic manuscript heritage. Losses may come from: material decay, neglect, environmental disasters and lack of awareness, theft, misplacement, or decision to discard or ignore old, fragile documents. Such losses would amount not merely to loss of paper or ink — but loss of centuries of intellectual history, cultural memory, and shared heritage.

Beyond loss, there is also the problem of “invisibility”: undocumented manuscripts locked in private or obscure collections remain unknown to scholars; knowledge preserved in them remains inaccessible. This disappoints not only historical scholarship but deprives future generations of cultural inheritance.

Moreover, in a global context where Islamic and Arabic intellectual history is often interpreted through dominant Middle East centric narratives, Indian Arabic manuscripts offer an alternative — showing how Islamic learning, scholarship, intercultural exchange evolved in South Asia, under colonial, pre-colonial, princely-state, and regional contexts. Losing them would impoverish the global understanding of Islam's pluralistic history.

Hence, preservation is urgent — both as protective conservation and as proactive documentation, cataloguing, and dissemination (digitization, scholarly publication).

### What a Study Could Contribute

A systematic study of rare Arabic manuscripts in Indian libraries — mapping major repositories, surveying the condition of manuscripts, examining conservation efforts and gaps, and proposing strategies for preservation — can contribute in multiple ways:

1. **Documentation and Cataloguing:** By compiling updated data about existing manuscripts — their locations, material forms, subjects, languages, dates — the study would help build a comprehensive picture of India's Arabic Islamic manuscript heritage. This serves as a resource for future researchers and helps prevent further dispersal or loss.
2. **Raising Awareness:** Highlighting the value of these manuscripts could draw attention from scholars, policy-makers, cultural institutions, funding agencies and the general public — strengthening commitment to preservation.
3. **Policy Recommendations:** Based on findings, the study could propose institutional and systemic measures — such as increased funding, establishing conservation labs, training conservators, digitization drives, standardized cataloguing protocols, collaborative exchanges among libraries, and perhaps legal protection for private collections.
4. **Scholarly Access & Research:** By bringing to light lesser-known manuscripts (on medicine, science, philosophy, history), the study could enable new research — filling gaps in knowledge about India's role in Islamic scholarly traditions, cross-cultural exchanges, history of science, Sufism, medical history, art history, and more.
5. **Cultural and Interfaith Dialogue:** Recognizing and preserving this heritage reinforces India's pluralistic cultural identity. It can foster greater appreciation for shared heritage across religious and linguistic divides and support intercultural understanding.

### Illustrative Cases: Khuda Bakhsh & Rampur Raza Libraries

To ground the discussion, a few concrete examples illustrate both the richness and vulnerability of India's Arabic manuscript heritage.

### Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Library, Patna

- The library now houses more than 21,000 manuscripts and over 2 million printed books; among manuscripts are many rare Arabic works — including medical encyclopaedias, religious texts, calligraphic Qur’ans, illustrated manuscripts, and more.
- It played, and continues to play, the role of a “Manuscript Conservation Centre.” Under programmes such as the National Mission for Manuscripts, it has catalogued and conserved thousands of manuscripts; described as making “significant contributions” toward preserving cultural heritage.
- Some of its manuscripts are recognized as “manuscript treasures of India” — for example, the Arabic works Kitab al-Tasrif and Kitab al-Hashaish are among these, underscoring their national and historical importance.

These facts highlight how institutional commitment, carefully maintained infrastructure, and conservation policies can preserve fragile heritage effectively.

### Rampur Raza Library, Rampur

- As a public library with roots in the 18th-century princely state, it preserves manuscripts, calligraphy, miniature paintings, astronomical instruments — representing Indo-Islamic cultural heritage.
- However, as recent reports note, the library faces staffing shortages; conservation and digitization efforts are incomplete due to lack of manpower, equipment, and resources (e.g. large scanners, specialized conservation staff).
- The situation of Rampur is emblematic of many such libraries in India — with rich collections, but inadequate resources for preservation — underlining the fragility of heritage without institutional support.

**Findings:** The study finds that India houses a rich corpus of rare Arabic manuscripts across major libraries like Khuda Bakhsh and Rampur Raza, as well as smaller collections. While many manuscripts reflect multidisciplinary scholarship—religion, science, literature, and history—they face threats from environmental decay, neglect, fragmented distribution, and limited digitization. Conservation, cataloguing, and awareness efforts are improving, but preservation remains uneven and resource-dependent.

**Conclusion:** The corpus of rare Arabic manuscripts housed in Indian libraries is a treasure — intellectually, culturally, and historically. They bear testimony to centuries of scholarship, cross-cultural exchange, Islamic learning, and regional adaptation. They constitute a heritage that is at once global and deeply local: global in their connection to the wider Islamic civilization; local in their production, preservation, and transmission through Indian contexts.



Yet this heritage is under threat. Environmental factors, resource constraints, lack of documentation, and uneven institutional capacity pose serious risks. The loss of manuscripts would mean the loss of knowledge — some of which may never be recovered.

Therefore, preserving this heritage is not a matter of nostalgia, but urgent scholarly and cultural responsibility. The institutional efforts at places like Khuda Bakhsh Library and Rampur Raza Library demonstrate that preservation — cataloguing, conservation, digitization, accessibility — is possible and ongoing, though incomplete.

A dedicated study, mapping the condition and distribution of manuscripts, assessing challenges, documenting conservation efforts, and proposing policy measures, can play a crucial role: as a foundation for future scholarship; as advocacy for heritage preservation; and as a reminder of the diverse, pluralistic past that shaped modern India.

In preserving these manuscripts, India does not merely save old books: it safeguards bridges between cultures, languages, religions, sciences, and histories — ensuring that the wisdom of past generations remains accessible to future seekers.

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