Ayurveda Manuscriptology - Need of the Hour

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Abstract

India holds the largest collection of manuscripts in the world, with a significant portion dedicated to Ayurveda. These manuscripts are vital primary sources for understanding classical Ayurvedic knowledge. However, less than 2% of these manuscripts are critically edited or published, posing a threat to the preservation and advancement of the discipline. Manuscriptology—the science of handling and interpreting ancient manuscripts—thus becomes essential for the sustainable development of Ayurvedic literature. An exploratory literary research method was employed. Classical Ayurvedic texts, published research papers, institutional resources, and archival data were reviewed to synthesize a structured understanding of Manuscriptological practices. Particular emphasis was placed on the processes of collection, conservation, cataloguing, transcription, transliteration, translation, and critical editing.

The study outlined a structured framework for Ayurvedic manuscriptology, comprising primary stages such as collection, cataloguing, and conservation, followed by secondary processes including transcription, transliteration, translation, and preparation of critical editions. Techniques like lower and higher textual criticism are critical for reconstructing authentic versions of texts. Although initiatives such as the National Mission for Manuscripts have made significant strides, a large portion of Ayurvedic manuscripts still remains critically unedited and unpublished, limiting their academic and clinical utility. Incorporating manuscriptology into Ayurvedic education and research is vital for safeguarding classical knowledge systems while simultaneously enabling scholarly innovation and critical reinterpretation. This, research underscores the urgent need for scholarly engagement in manuscript-based studies to rejuvenate the foundational knowledge of Ayurveda and promote its global applicability.

Keywords

Ayurveda, Manuscriptology, Critical Edition, Literary Research, Indigenous Knowledge

Introduction

The word "manuscript" traces its origin to Latin, where manu refers to 'hand' and scriptus denotes 'written,' signifying a document that has been manually inscribed. Manuscripts, are handwritten documents that predate the invention of the printing press and serve as valuable primary sources for historical and cultural research. "Traditionally, they were written on materials such as tāla-patra (palm leaf), bhūrja-patra (birch bark), cloth, or paper[1,2].

According to the Antiquities and Art Treasures Act, 1972, a manuscript is defined as “a handwritten document of scientific, historical, literary or aesthetic value which has been in existence for not less than seventy-five years”[3]. India houses the largest repository of manuscripts globally, with over five million manuscripts, of which more than 20,000 are related to Ayurveda[4]. However, less than 2% of these manuscripts are available in printed form[5]. Thus, conservation, critical editing, and publication of Ayurvedic manuscripts are essential for the preservation and dissemination of this ancient knowledge system.

Materials and Methods

Materials

Literary data regarding Manuscriptology and its relevance to Ayurveda were compiled from classical texts, scientific journals, institutional databases, and related publications.

Methods

The compiled data were analyzed from the perspective of exploratory literary research in Ayurveda, focusing on the structured methodology of manuscript preservation, editing, and publication.

Results

Manuscriptology

Manuscriptology refers to the systematic science that deals with the collection,

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classification, conservation, transcription, transliteration, translation, critical edition, and publication of manuscripts[6].

Steps in manuscriptology

Manuscriptology involves two broad categories of steps:

Primary steps	Secondary steps
Collection	Transcription, Transliteration
Cataloguing	Translation
Conservation	Critical edition & Publication

Discussion

Primary steps

Collection

A substantial corpus of Ayurvedic manuscripts is dispersed across diverse repositories in India, including academic institutions, archival centres, temple libraries, private collections, and individual custodians. The collection of these manuscripts is a foundational step, considering their immense historical, medicinal, and philosophical value4.

Cataloguing

Cataloguing refers to the organized arrangement of manuscripts for easy identification. It includes simple, alphabetical, subject-wise, and descriptive cataloguing[7]. The New Catalogus Catalogorum, a 42-volume work published by the University of Madras, is a landmark in cataloguing manuscripts[8].



Conservation

Conservation involves techniques aimed at preventing or curbing further damage to manuscripts.

Preventive conservation - includes actions like digitization, photocopying, storage in climate-controlled environments, and regular inspection to reduce future risks[9].

Curative conservation - involves restorative methods such as fumigation, application of lemongrass oil, and removal of fungus to arrest active deterioration[10].

Secondary steps

Transcription

It is the accurate reproduction of the manuscript content in the same script as the original, preserving orthographic and phonetic characteristics.

Transliteration

This step involves changing the script (not the language) of the manuscript content. For example, converting a manuscript from Telugu script to Devanagari.

Translation

Translation enables the global dissemination of Ayurvedic knowledge by rendering local or classical languages (like Sanskrit) into widely understood languages, such as English.

Critical edition

Critical edition is a scholarly process that aims to reconstruct the most authentic version of a manuscript by comparing different manuscript versions and using internal and external evidence[11].

Need for critical edition

For example, if Student 'A' reads the original Charaka Samhita, and Student 'B' reads a modern compiled version, their interpretations will differ. Only through critical edition one can access the author's intended message.

Methods of critical edition

1. Lower criticism

Involves three main steps:

A) **Heuristics**: Methodological collection and study of all textual evidences. It includes further three sub-steps. They are as follows;
   a) Siglum: Codes given to manuscripts based on script - e.g., "De" for Devanagari), location - e.g., "Dk" for Dakshina Kannada, or age -e.g., "Dk13" for a 13th-century manuscript).
   b) Collation: Line-by-line comparison of variants in manuscripts, documented using a collation sheet.
   c) Secondary sources: Commentaries, translations, anthologies, and parallel versions - collectively referred to as testimonia.

B) **Recension:** It refers to the critical process of identifying and selecting the most authentic version among textual variants, aiming to reconstruct the reading that best represents the original intent of the author.

C) **Emendation**: Correcting errors based on grammatical and metrical appropriateness. These may require input from linguists or subject experts.

2. Higher criticism

This includes analyzing authorship, date of origin, linguistic style, literary impact, and historical relevance of the manuscript. It also explores socio-cultural influences and the originality of the text[12].

Example

The critical edition of Paryāyamuktāvalī, a regional Nighaṇṭu from Odisha, unearthed unique synonyms and formulations absent in other classical lexicons, demonstrating the potential of manuscript-based research[13].

Publication

This final stage is essential for accessibility. The National Mission for Manuscripts (NMM) has undertaken initiatives such as:

Kritibodha: Publishing critical editions of rare texts

Prakasika: Publishing facsimile copies, annotated critical editions, and translations

Kriti rakshana: An online database for manuscript access[14]

However, only a fraction (approx. 2%) of Ayurvedic manuscripts are currently available in print[15].

Conclusion

Manuscripts are invaluable cultural and scientific assets. While human neglect is a threat, active scholarly engagement can ensure their preservation. Public awareness through exhibitions, seminars, and academic inclusion is vital. Ayurveda scholars have a pivotal role in decoding and disseminating these texts. Manuscriptology not only preserves the heritage but also fortifies the literary and scientific foundation of Ayurveda. Digitization of manualscripts by authentic organizations can be instrumental in this direction.

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