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HOLY COW!

by Ed Vermue

In 2005 I applied for and was awarded a travel grant by Oberlin Shansi, an independent Oberlin based not-for-profit that seeks to promote understanding and communication between Asians and Americans through the sponsorship of individual and group educational programs and community projects. I was selected on the basis of invitations I had received from both Lady Doak College and American College, both of which reside in Madurai, India. The purpose of my visit was to conduct Preservation Needs Assessments of the library systems of the two institutions. I traveled there in January of 2006.

The preservation challenges facing these libraries in the extreme south of India are no “paper tiger.” They are the real thing and a great “what if” lesson for me. The equatorial climate in South India is an oven of high heat and humidity. Even though I was there at the coolest time of the year, the temperature indoors at midday reached into the 90s Fahrenheit. In the hottest times of the year, the temperature can rise to over 110 degrees, often accompanied by monsoon rains and high humidity. What’s more, very little indoor space has air conditioning. Where I observed them, window air conditioners were cooling computers and not paper-based collections. Windows – rarely closed - do provide a surprising amount of natural ventilation, but this also means that swings in temperature and humidity are hardly buffered at all by the library building. There are ceiling fans everywhere, but these were shut off the moment staff left the area in order to save electricity.

While helping with one problem, the open windows create another by allowing a fine red dust to coat everything inside buildings. Indeed, many departmental libraries in their highly decentralized libraries house their book collections in closed cabinets. Pests can also move freely in and out of the library, as does the air pollution, which is quite severe in large urban settings. Filtering of fluorescent light is unheard of. There were other preservation issues, but these are too numerous to list here.

Of all of these problems however, none does more mischief than the acidity within Indian paper. As far as I was able to observe, and my informants able to advise me, there is still no acid-free paper manufactured in India, and there seems to be little concern among politicians or industry to alter this situation. Indian libraries rely heavily on the cheap domestic supply of books, even English language books, so there is little acid-free paper coming in from abroad. As a result, books that by our standards would still be considered relatively young and flexible (even those on acidic paper), in tropical India already show the darkened and brittle consequences of acid deterioration. In many instances, books have already been damaged to the point where paper so many fragments have been irretrievably lost that even reformatting poses limits to what can be saved. That is, of course, provided the money, technology, and training exists to enable reformatting on a large scale.

The situation is a difficult one to say the least, however there were occasions for hope. The English speaking staff is extremely eager for information, supplies, and skills. They were quick to understand preservation problems and quite earnest in their desire to preserve their holdings. At American College, in response to my images and comments the staff undertook some collection and building housekeeping work with a speed that was startling. At a basic book repair training session at Lady Doak College the whole staff turned out on a national holiday. At a commercial (hand) bindery I was introduced to a brand of wheat paste that had an extract of the neem tree as an additive to deter insects. However, without change in the underlying problems of acidic paper, no environmental controls, and poor funding combined with off shore prices, there is little that even an enthusiastic library staff can do.

My trip left me with the impression that the South Asian holdings of Western libraries are potentially as important to India as to us. It will be very difficult for most Indian libraries to ensure the long-term survival of their own paper-based heritage. In the future, they may well look to us for surviving copies of their books, or help in building facilities, which will allow them to do the necessary conservation and preservation work. One hopeful sign of things to come is the great spirit in which India has become an IT powerhouse. I had many discussions with people about India’s digital ambitions. Indeed, although it conflicts with what we’ve been taught as librarians, it may well be that online access to full text libraries of digital facsimiles is the most rational direction for libraries in India to pursue. If that’s the case, I hope they continue to proceed quickly, for they are racing custodians for the right to claim the contents of their library shelves.

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