

Digitization of Heritage Documents in Cooch Behar District, West Bengal: A Prototype Framework

Mr Soham Roy¹, Mr Niren Barman²

¹MLIS Student, Department of Library and Information Science, Coochbehar Panchanan Barma University

²Assistant Professor & Co-Ordinator, Department of Library and Information Science, Coochbehar Panchanan Barma University

Abstract

The district of Cooch Behar is a unique entity: a former princely state, which is heavily influenced by its geography, being situated on an international border, and which between 1960 and 1990 generated a fair amount of literature which has never been considered as documentary heritage until today. Little magazines, community newsletters, and small-press newspapers generated during this time frame are the closest thing to a written account of what is going on in this district at that scale of detail which will never be documented officially or by any other publication. This documentation is in critical physical state, dispersed in personal possession and ill-equipped public libraries without proper cataloging and climate control.

This article situates that problem within the wider governance structure that already exists for documentary heritage in India, from the national to the district level, and within the tangible built heritage of Cooch Behar itself, before setting out a prototype digitization framework grounded in the established literature of digital preservation and library science but built around what a district-level institution can realistically afford and manage. Thus, it is not an empirical study but a literature-based argumentative review. It aims to identify what such a program would require in practice, which authorities would be responsible for its various components, and demonstrate that the evidence base to justify its initiation already exists.

Keywords: digitization; documentary heritage; local publications; Cooch Behar; preservation; West Bengal; library science.

1. Introduction

Nobody pays district-level publishing much attention, even though it is one of the more important categories of documentary heritage India has. Little magazines, political periodicals, community bulletins, and small-press newspapers from locales such as Cooch Behar during the years 1960 to 1990 captured the debate, experimentation, and change on the ground that no other literature did. Printed in limited editions and circulated through informal networks and word-of-mouth alone, they were never archived at any national level or bibliography. In an earlier work, Conway (1996) noted that local material captures historical and political events with precision which is not possible elsewhere, and that when the material has been lost, it has been lost forever. That is almost exactly what is at issue here. Most of the material

published in Cooch Behar over these three decades has been lost forever. What remains is in poor condition, scattered around in homes and small local libraries which lack the funding and personnel to take proper care of them, and as such, inaccessible for consultation. Feather (2004) makes a similar point: local print materials have a connection to communal identity and shared memories which cannot be replaced by material preserved in some distant central archive. Therefore, their disappearance is not merely an administrative problem but a cultural one as well.

Within this context, the next section will build the case for developing a digitization program for the local publications of Cooch Behar, 1960–1990, within a proposed operational framework that outlines how such a program would operate and who would be responsible for its various aspects. which has been lauded over the past decade or so by such scholars as Kenney and Rieger (2000), is the best form of preservation precisely because it works on two levels simultaneously: it is protective against physical deterioration and offers increased accessibility. Thus, these aspects ideally suit materials that are fragile and, to date, inaccessible. What follows in this article is a discussion of what the framework of such a program might look like, who would be responsible for which stage, and the fact that one does not have to start at square one in building the case.

2. What Is Documentary Heritage? Order and Responsible Authority

The UNESCO Memory of the World Program has defined "documentary heritage" since its inception in 1992 as recorded information and the physical object on which it is recorded, including manuscripts, books, periodicals, photographs, sound recordings, and digital-born files. Documentary heritage is, therefore, distinguished from the other category of heritage that is generally associated with the term—standing monuments and archaeological sites, although at the level of institutional management, the two are not always separate and have overlapping vocabularies. At this level of heritage practice in India, this categorization manifests itself in two ways: first, at the level of tangible heritage, which is physically present, measurable, and conserved, as opposed to intangible heritage, which survives through practice and performance, such as language, ritual, oral tradition, festivals, and the skills of craftsmen; second, within tangible heritage, at the level of the immovable—buildings, monuments, and sites—versus movable heritage, including artifacts and documents that are movable, digitizable, and reproducible. Periodicals published at district level like the one analyzed in this article clearly belong to movable, Tangible Documentary Heritage: Paper objects whose value resides in the text and image it

holds and which are different from the palace or the temple as it cannot be moved from one place to another. This particular heritage in India passes through four levels of administration as compared to a single office. The Ministry of Culture, Government of India makes policy and provides funding for two institutions that deal with this kind of heritage: National Archives of India which keeps and maintains the records and National Mission for Manuscripts which works under the jurisdiction of Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts for surveying and conservation of manuscript and rare print materials other than those under the control of the Government (Ministry of Culture, n.d.). On the other hand, at state level, the Information and Cultural Affairs Department, Government of West Bengal, through its Directorate of Archaeology and Museums and West Bengal Heritage Commission, established under state legislation in 2001, identifies and registers heritage buildings and sites, It is the district level administration which takes care of the local coordination level, and in the instance of Cooch Behar, the custody of the materials is in the hands of individual libraries, colleges, and individual houses as opposed to an authority dedicated to heritage preservation. This hierarchy and cross-border nature of the system need to be kept

in mind while formulating a digitization strategy, as none of the above agencies can manage it independently.

3. Cooch Behar District: Historical Profile and Heritage Landscape

However, Cooch Behar doesn't fall into the category of a typical Bengali district; this will become important later. In any case, as Majumdar's district gazetteer (1977) – the most detailed institutional history of the place that has been published – reveals, there was an exceptionally strong tradition of schooling and bureaucracy in the area, dating back to the former princely state. This resulted in a local intellectual tradition that was relatively early established and survived for a long time in the district and was far more resistant to discontinuity from the accession of this part of the territory to India in 1949 than one might have assumed. It and was far more resistant to discontinuity from the accession of this part of the territory to India in 1949 than one might have assumed. On the contrary, the following turbulent years gave even more scope to local publishers.

There has been significant activity in small-press publishing in the period 1960-1990. As noted by Bandyopadhyay (2004), local periodicals in Bengal became the most important source of political debate and literary innovation in the time when the Congress and the Left competed for dominance. For Cooch Behar, this broad historical context was marked with some local peculiarities. First, refugees migrated in two waves, first after the partition and then in 1971 because of the Liberation War. Second, after 1977, the victory of the Left Front changed the political map once more. Despite this, from the 1950s to the late 1980s, one could still trace a history of cultural activism concerning identity issues within the district. One of the key all-India historical events of this period was the Emergency between 1975 and 1977, during which periodicals were almost the only means by which critical views could be voiced without immediately attracting the wrath of the authorities.

This is precisely what Deegan and Tanner (2002) meant when they noted that local publications of poorly resourced organizations will inevitably be the first on the list to be deaccessioned in times of budgetary constraints. This is exactly what happened in Cooch Behar in the last three decades, without anyone's knowledge.

The district's tangible heritage is better documented than its documentary heritage, if only because monuments attract attention that paper does not. The Cooch Behar Palace, also called the Victor Jubilee Palace or Rajbari, was built in 1887 by Maharaja Nripendra Narayan in the Italian Renaissance style, modelled loosely on Buckingham Palace, and stands on the Archaeological Survey of India's list of Monuments of National Importance in West Bengal; part of the building has functioned as a public museum since 2002 (Cooch Behar Palace, n.d.). Close by, the Madan Mohan Temple, built by the same ruler in the late nineteenth century, remains the district's principal seat of devotional life and the focal point of the annual Rash Mela festival, and the Banerwar Shiva Temple, roughly ten kilometres from the town centre, is known for a naturally formed lingam and a temple tank regarded as sacred (Cooch Behar Palace, n.d.). Beyond these individually listed monuments, the West Bengal Heritage Commission has formally notified the whole of Cooch Behar town as a place of heritage buildings, temples, precincts, and sites under its governing Act, placing a defined list of structures, from colonial-era bungalows to the Sagar Dighi tank complex, under a development-control regime administered jointly with the district's urban authorities (West Bengal Heritage Commission, 2019). As of the department's own reporting, 228 buildings across the state had been declared Heritage Buildings and a further 110 sites declared State Protected Monuments by 2021-22, giving a sense of the scale at which this machinery already operates in

West Bengal (Information & Cultural Affairs Department, n.d.).

This entire system of protection and recognition of built heritage is yet to percolate down to the documentary heritage of the district. There is no similar institutional mechanism to recognize, protect, and conserve what could be called the district's 'documentary heritage' that has come into being after the period of the 1970s, even though it is located within a building that is not much more than a few streets away from one of those colonial bungalows listed as heritage. This goes a long way toward explaining why the material on which this article focuses has remained so long unprotected.

4. The Problem of Physical Deterioration

The vast majority of journals produced in India between 1960 and 1990 were printed on acidic paper, and that was just the inexpensive standard for the time, but acidic paper deteriorates by oxidation and hydrolysis even under decent storage conditions. The state of Northern West Bengal does not allow for good storage conditions by definition, because the humidity varies a lot depending on the season, the temperature changes dramatically, and there is always an abundance of insects and fungi. Add those factors together, and the rate of degradation increases considerably. That kind of degradation was highlighted by Conway (1996) as one of the major problems associated with the degradation of paper collections of that era all around the globe. In Cooch Behar, no efforts have been made to stop it.

None of this stuff is housed in a properly maintained archive. It is in peoples' homes and in libraries that lack air conditioning and do not have a proper preservation program. In research done by Waters & Garrett (1996), they found that bad housing, bad environment, and bad paper chemistry do not merely work independently, but rather their cumulative effect causes losses much greater than each in itself.

The frightening aspect of the matter is that nothing whatsoever has been done in an organized manner. A statement from Mukherjee (1966), valid even today, rings true – regional and local collections of libraries in India have never received the necessary amount of funding or professional attention despite their vulnerability. So far as one is aware, no survey has ever been undertaken to gauge the condition of local periodicals in Cooch Behar. What cannot be assessed cannot be preserved, and what is not preserved continues to get ruined until, finally, the object itself disappears beyond retrieval.

5. Methodology: Constructing the Condition Assessment

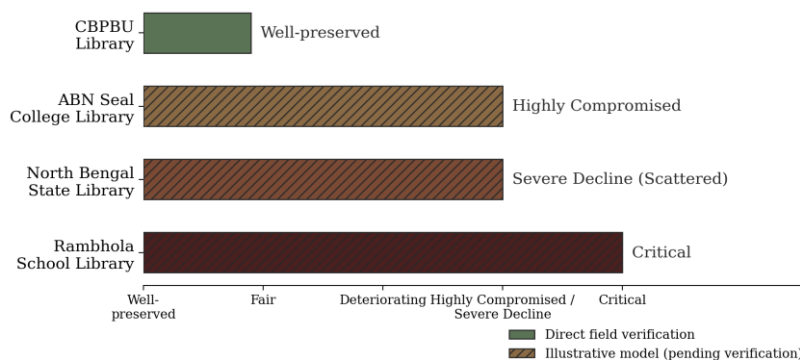
The fourth section closes with an uneasy recognition that never has there been conducted a complete survey of the condition of these collections. Addressing this problem will take nothing less than a complete, item-by-item inventory of all institutions housing this material, and such a survey will require resources that this study currently lacks. What comes next will be a smaller but more realistic step: verification at one of the four institutions in the district housing these collections, accompanied by a model derived from regional data of what is probably going on at the other three.

The Coochbehar Panchanan Barma University (CBPBU) Library is where this direct verification took place. In visiting the library to determine how the university currently stores the 1960-1990 material as opposed to assuming how the university stores it based on the regional norms used in the rest of this article, findings revealed inconsistencies with the assumptions. It was done through a process that adheres to condition survey procedure of paper-based holdings and not a walkthrough process, whereby sampled documents were visually checked for any brittleness caused by acidic papers through the corner fold test as a measure of tensile strength (cracks as opposed to bending), and for any foxing.. Storage furniture and enclosures were inspected directly rather than assumed, to confirm that rehousing had actually taken place

and that boxes, folders, and shelving met archival rather than merely administrative standards. The collection has since been relocated into a dedicated, climate-monitored section of the library and rehoused in acid-free archival enclosures, and every periodical in scope has been entered into the university's OPAC. Some yellowing and embrittlement consistent with the collection's age is still visible on individual items, since rehousing cannot undo decades of earlier open-shelf storage, but the conditions that would otherwise drive further loss have been substantially addressed. Confirmed on site rather than assumed, CBPBU's holdings can accurately be described as well-preserved and organized, with remaining risk limited to standard aging rather than the active, compounding decay documented elsewhere in the district. It is also a useful complication for Mukherjee's (1966) broader point about institutional neglect: under focused administrative attention, a district-level institution can hold this material properly after all.

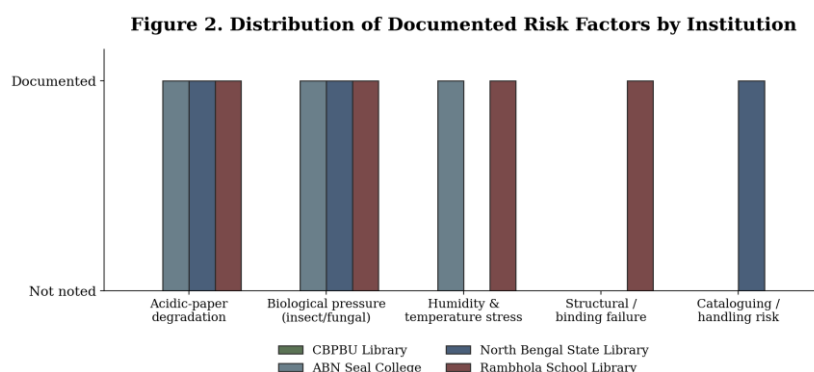
The remaining three institutions, ABN Seal College Library, North Bengal State Library, and Rambhola School Library, have not yet had the benefit of that kind of direct, item-level inspection, and this article does not pretend otherwise. In its place is an illustrative model, built from the same regional baselines established earlier in this article: the acidic paper stock Conway (1996) identifies as endemic to this printing period, and the combined pressure of seasonal humidity and fungal growth that, per Waters and Garrett (1996), compounds with poor paper chemistry rather than simply adding to it. Applied to what is generally known about how these three sites store their holdings: closed cabinets without climate control at ABN Seal, large general-purpose stacks at North Bengal State Library, and no dedicated preservation budget of any kind at Rambhola, that model projects a severity of decay consistent with what three decades of this kind of storage would be expected to produce. Figure 1 sets the two evidentiary tracks side by side; Figure 2 breaks the specific risk factors down site by site.

Figure 1. Deterioration / Preservation Status by Institution



Qualitative status scale, not a measured instrument

Figure 1. Deterioration / preservation status by institution (CBPBU verified; others modeled).



CBPBU's absence across all categories reflects verified remediation (climate-controlled rehousing, complete cataloguing), not missing data. Remaining entries are illustrative modeling pending verification.

Figure 2. Documented risk factors by institution (CBPBU verified; others modeled).

That projection is a model, not a measurement. Where the CBPBU findings can be cited as confirmed fact, the picture at the other three sites should be read as a plausible, literature-grounded illustration of what a full inventory would likely find there, not as a substitute for one. The distinction is not a technicality. It is what lets this framework argue for district-wide digitization on the strength of real evidence at one site and a defensible projection at three others, rather than asking either to carry more weight than it can.

6. Digitization as a Preservation Strategy

The case for digitization has been made before, and it is certainly not based on conjecture. The basic point was made all the way back in 1996 by Waters and Garrett: make a digital copy, manage the files appropriately, maintain metadata consistency, and store it for the long run, and the intellectual content of vulnerable materials will be preserved even after the physical source material is gone. No amount of evolution over thirty years changes this basic prescription.

Arms (2000) provides a useful definition of a digital library as being an organized and networked collection of digital information with user services, reminding us of the goal of this effort. A file of scanned images is not the aim. An accessible archive that can be researched is. Chowdhury and Chowdhury (2003) tackle the more difficult task of achieving this goal with scarce funding, advocating a scale that is achievable instead of copying those that have been developed by the well-funded programs of national institutions. This is precisely the situation of Cooch Behar.

Conway's (1996) separation of digitization for preservation from digitization for access is useful here. The first creates a surrogate that keeps intellectual content safe from physical loss; the second gets that content to people outside the institution that holds it. Cooch Behar needs both, since its publications are physically deteriorating and also already out of reach for almost anyone who might want to read them. Deegan and Tanner (2002) make the point that the benefits of conversion only hold up if an institution keeps managing formats, maintaining metadata, and paying for storage year after year. A one-off conversion nobody looks after afterward is not really preservation at all. UNESCO and IFLA (2002) set out the international benchmark for this kind of project, with clear priorities for at-risk public material and detailed guidance on technical standards, metadata, copyright, and access.

7. Proposed Digitization Framework: Workflow and Institutional Responsibility

Turning the argument made so far into something a district-level institution could actually run requires two separate diagrams rather than one. The first sets out the sequence of technical steps a given item passes through, from initial survey to long-term access. The second sets out which office is answerable for which

part of that sequence, since a workflow with no assigned custodian tends to stall at the first budget cycle. Both are prototypes rather than a fixed procedure: the intention is to show that a coherent, accountable structure exists in outline, in a form CBPBU or a comparable institution could adapt to its own staffing and resources, not to prescribe a rigid sequence that leaves no room for local judgement.

Digitization Workflow: Baseline Survey to Long-Term Access

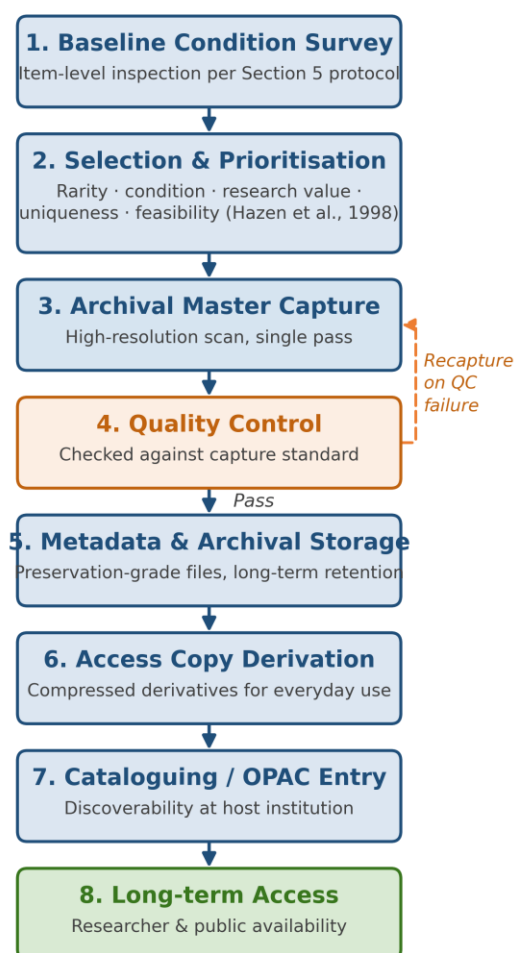


Figure 3. Proposed digitization workflow, baseline survey through long-term access (dashed path: recapture on QC failure).

The workflow in Figure 3 follows the two-tier logic Kenney and Rieger (2000) set out for imaging programmes generally, archival masters captured once to a high standard, access copies derived from them for everyday use, adapted to the selection criteria Hazen et al. (1998) proposed for deciding what gets converted first: rarity, condition, research value, uniqueness, and practical feasibility. Quality control sits deliberately close to the start of the pipeline rather than the end, since re-capturing a fragile periodical a second time is far more damaging to the object than catching a capture error early.

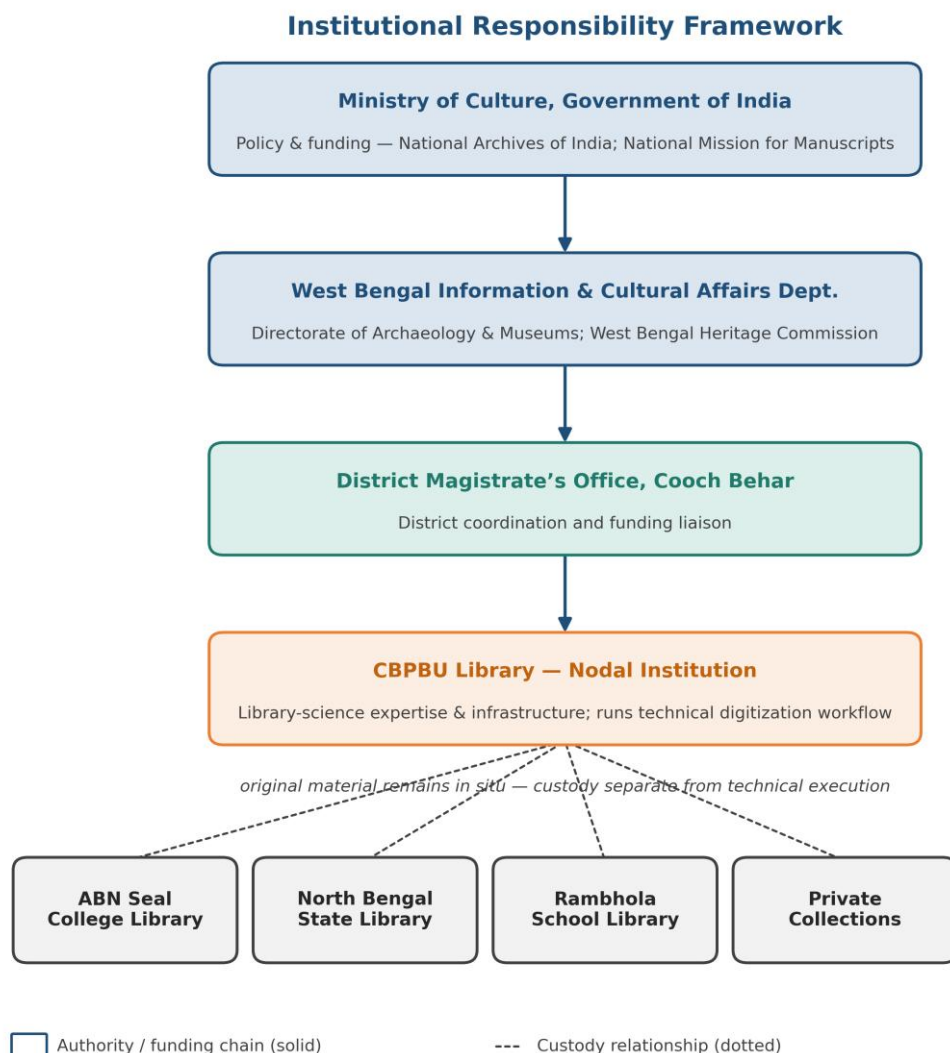


Figure 4. Institutional responsibility framework linking national and state heritage authorities, district administration, the host institution, and holding libraries.

Figure 4 answers the question the technical workflow leaves open: who is actually responsible for making this happen. Policy and funding schemes originate at the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, level, filter down through the West Bengal Information and Cultural Affairs Department and the West Bengal Heritage Commission described in Section 2, and reach Cooch Behar through the District Magistrate's office, which is the natural point of coordination and funding liaison at district level. Two existing channels are directly relevant to financing rather than merely coordinating this work: the National Mission for Manuscripts extends conservation and cataloguing grants, along with preventive-conservation training, to non-government custodians willing to survey and preserve at-risk material outside government custody, and the West Bengal Information & Cultural Affairs Department separately administers its own restoration and conservation grant scheme, through which a district-level institution could seek support for rehousing and stabilisation work ahead of any digitization pass. CBPBU Library has been identified as the nodal institution – an institution with the required library science knowledge and facility for managing the technical aspects of the project, while the source material remains under the custody of the institution,

which has that material, ABN Seal College, North Bengal State Library, Rambhola School Library, or any private collection. This segregation of custody and technical processing is important as it would mean that the structure of the project does not need any institution to give up its holdings to join the project, but just make those holdings available for scanning.

8. Technical Standards and Project Management

Decisions that are made right at the beginning of a digitization process are more important than those that are made later. Fixing mistakes related to format, resolution, or quality assurance is much easier before the project starts rather than afterwards. The technical standards for this field were established by Kenney and Rieger (2000): resolution, file format, color management, compression, and quality assurance – everything that was mentioned above. Two-level system of creating archival masters and access copies independently from each other became a kind of standard for proper preservation. This approach will suit the situation in Cooch Behar very well, because it maintains long-term durability and does not increase the costs of access.

At district level there is never enough money to convert everything at once, so selection has to follow some kind of principle rather than guesswork. Some of that funding gap could plausibly be narrowed rather than closed outright: an application to the National Mission for Manuscripts' grant-in-aid scheme, or to the West Bengal Information & Cultural Affairs Department's restoration and conservation grants noted in Section 7, would be unlikely to cover a district-wide programme in full, but could realistically underwrite a pilot phase confined to the highest-priority material. Hazen et al. (1998) put forward criteria that have since been picked up widely: how rare and unique the material is, what condition it is in, how significant it is scholarly or culturally, whether copies exist elsewhere, and how practical conversion would actually be. Several of those line up for the Cooch Behar material without much ambiguity. It is locally unique, it is decaying, and it is unlikely that copies exist anywhere else. None of this settles every hard case, but it gives whoever runs the project something defensible to point to.

Sitts (2000) wrote about the practical side of running these projects, staffing, buying equipment, quality control, choosing a metadata schema, arranging long-term storage, in a way that holds up regardless of how big or small the institution is. Tanner (2001) lists the obstacles that come up again and again: not enough money, not enough technical skill, and no institutional policy to lean on. All three are real problems in Cooch Behar. Library budgets are thin, nobody locally has the specialist training, and there is no existing policy on preserving locally produced material. Feather (2004) pushes the point further, arguing that preservation work only survives long-term if it has legislative backing and professional advocacy behind it, not just technical effort. A Cooch Behar initiative that wants to last, rather than fizzle out after one grant cycle, would eventually have to deal with state-level library and cultural policy too, not just the scanning itself.

A further challenge that any framework at the district level would have to address is that of copyright, as opposed to just physical condition, of this material. As per Indian copyright law, the term of protection lasts for sixty years following the author's death, or sixty years from the date of publication, in case of anonymity or pseudonymity, meaning that a substantial part of this material, especially those dating from the 1970s and 1980s, is currently under protection and cannot be considered in the public domain. It is not the existence of such rights that presents a practical problem, but the fact that it is impossible to identify who owns them: many of these publishers have ceased to operate decades ago and have left no legal successor, and there is no way to trace them as their identities and contact information was not recorded

systematically, which is the definition of an orphaned work. It could, for instance, record a conscientious effort to trace rights holders prior to conversion, limit access copies to preservation and non-commercial research purposes when no rights holder can be located, and keep that record such that access could be expanded in the future should the rights holder come forth. It is not a legal strategy but a risk management approach, however, and it is in keeping with the position UNESCO and IFLA (2002) take regarding copyright, viewing it among the various practical constraints of the digitization process.

9. The Indian Library Science Tradition

Not only is there an international context for this argument, but there is also a professional tradition from within India itself. The "Fifth Law" by Ranganathan (1931), stating that every book should find its reader, established the principle of universal accessibility as a core value of the library profession in India. Translate this to material falling apart in unclassified collections in Cooch Behar and the result follows logically: material that cannot be located and material that cannot be read fails at the one task that libraries were established to achieve. Thus digitization is not an additional technology added on to the practice of librarianship, but one of the field's core values.

Mukherjee's (1966) concern with the under-emphasis on regional and local collections in Indian libraries was raised decades ago and he has emphasized the need for a planned approach rather than the issue solving itself on its own. The situation has not changed much since then, meaning that the idea suggested here fits in very well within the traditional thinking in India.

Nothing like this means nothing has been achieved at the national level. The National Library of India, and the infrastructure created by the INFLIBNET initiative, represent tangible success, and the National Mission for Manuscripts outlined in Section 2 has carried out a survey of manuscript holdings within the nation. However, district-level publishing has remained beyond the purview of these initiatives. Deegan and Tanner (2002) point out that digital library projects undertaken by developing nations tend to be focused on material which has been deemed nationally significant already, leaving community and local collections to their own devices. Cooch Behar is a good example of how this needs to change, and it will help with more than just the local record keeping; it will assist the greater objective of a comprehensive preservation program.

10. Conclusion

The local publications produced in Cooch Behar between 1960 and 1990 are primary historical sources in their own right. No other record captures the changing social, political, and cultural life of this district during these three critical decades in such detail, for Cooch Behar has had a most unusual history. Today, however, they are in a poor state, with no organized mechanism to protect them and remain inaccessible to the public. Part of this loss is already beyond repair. This article focuses on what is left to be saved.

The argument does not rest on shaky evidence. The technical and methodological background has been very well elaborated in an empirical context by Waters & Garrett (1996), Conway (1996), and Kenney & Rieger (2000). The criteria for selection have been taken from Hazen et al. (1998). The institutional context comes from Tanner (2001) and Feather (2004), while the professional context is drawn from Ranganathan (1931) and Mukherjee (1966). The top-level international standard of selection has been considered in the Guidelines of UNESCO & IFLA (2002). Section 2 outlines a governance framework that starts at the Ministry of Culture and is channeled down to the West Bengal Heritage Commission and finally reaches the district administration. This means that there is an appropriate hierarchy of responsible authorities for

such material, which, however, has never been applied to a periodical collection at the district level. None of these ideas was developed especially for this article; they exist and have simply been attached to Cooch Behar.

As an example of direct verification undertaken at CBPBU, Section 5 has already partially made this case. Indeed, Section 5 describes a micro-level active management process, and the three other locations presented in Section 5 give this argument an element of scale. The workflow and accountability framework presented in Section 7 now bring this argument closer to the operational plan. It now needs a systematic, item-level inventory that is local libraries' responsibility and those private collections willing to cooperate on a Hazen et al. (1998) criterion basis, institutionally organized along the lines shown in Figure 4. This article proposes a framework, not a plan. This is realistic, considering the constraints under which the district-level institution works, yet it conforms to international standards and the context of domestic heritage governance.

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