PREFACE

It always dragged me near my mother, in my childhood days, when she occasionally opened her small wooden decorated box, full of ornaments and antique coins, mostly gold, some silver and copper. Each piece was wrapped with a red paper with little amount of red vermillion inside it. The aroma of camphor coming from inside the box and the bright red colour of vermillion in it engrossed me and engaged me in putting many question to her but in vain.

My curiosity for conservation got a spark with the excellent demonstration of various preservation techniques at the Jadavpur University Central Library situated at Kolkata, when I visited the University as a student member of an excursion team from the library science department of Gauhati University in the year 1995. I was overwhelmed by one Mr. Arun Roy, a senior library staff, for describing lucidly the preservation techniques and preservatives to control environmental and biological factors that could save invaluable testimony of stratified knowledge of human civilization, millions and millions of entities of cultural heritage and hundreds and thousands of valuable documents bearing thoughts of great men of the world from being damaged.

After that memorable educational tour, it took 10 long years to add wings to my curiosity and enthusiasm on conservation of writing materials when I got opportunities to meet and hear great personalities like Prof. Irfan Habib, Dr. Lokesh Chandra, Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan, Prof. R. Champakalakshmi, Lama Doboom Tulku Rinpoche, regarding the vast manuscript wealth of India where the 'memory of the world' are depicted. In India, over thousands of years, manuscripts have been written in a vast number of languages and there is an urgent need of conservation of such manuscripts, lying neglected in numerous institutions and homes around the country.

In 2005, I became the Project Coordinator of Manuscript Resource and Conservation Centre at Gurucharan College which was established in...
collaboration with the National Mission for Manuscripts, an agency under the Ministry of Culture, Government of India for conducting survey, documentation and conservation of old manuscripts. As a coordinator of Manuscript Resource Centre, I got the rare opportunity to visit various places of Assam in search of old and rare manuscripts and this exposure, helped me to appreciate the vast existence of the rare intellectual wealth, which are very important not only from the point of view of literature and history, but also in understanding the technologically advanced pure indigenous methodology which was used to prepare such breed of unique writing materials. It is then that the importance of caring, preserving and saving such entities (in the knowledge as well as in physical form) conceived in my mind. As a coordinator of Manuscript Conservation Centre, I had several rounds of training programmes at NRLC, Lucknow that consolidated my knowledge on conservation of manuscripts. A Pilot Project conducted during 28-11-2005 and 05-12-2005 by the National Mission for Manuscripts in 26 districts of Assam (excluding N.C. Hills) to survey the existing manuscripts revealed that there are 36,930 manuscripts found lying in 4,973 repositories in Assam and predicted that there may be more manuscripts hidden in many places. Though bulk of the manuscripts found belonged to Saci Tree origin (the product locally called Sanchipat), manuscripts made of handmade paper (the product locally called Tulapaat) were also found abundantly. This vast treasure, featuring hundreds of themes and sophisticated ideas, each in itself embodies her history, lying in disuse, neglected and without any preservation policy and methods. As a result, this incredible and fabulous pool of knowledge is under threat and is disappearing at an annoying rate. In the light of such a painful observation of the dilapidated state of manuscript's, I realized the necessity of undertaking further research on the preservation aspects of manuscripts and therefore, decided to take up the study of manuscript preservation in my doctoral research after consultation with my guide, Prof. Alaka Buragohain. In this regard, my educational qualification of having a post graduate degree in life-science with chemistry background in graduation; groomed and gave direction to the in-depth nature of experimental investigations demanded by
my doctoral study. During, the tenure of my research, I had an opportunity to attend an invited lecture at the Centre for Study of Manuscript Culture, University of Hamburg. This venture provided me the scope to observe and review the cutting-edge technology employed to preserve the age-old Egyptian, Greek, Coptic and Arabic manuscripts.

It is said that the spoken and written language is the most important cultural attribute of a race. Therefore, the nation and the state, and all of us as citizens of a civilized nation, has a role to play to protect and preserve this most valuable, but less visible, of our cultural legacy. Contextualizing the task of preservation of old manuscripts, I assume that it will not only protect the physical form and knowledge content of the manuscript for long, but also will help to create digital reproduction of it, to help scholars around the world gain access to the rich heritage of Assam, for their use in education and research.