



# The University of Chicago NEWS

University News Office • 5801 South Ellis Avenue • Room 200 • Chicago, Illinois 60637-1473  
Tel: 773-702-8360 • Fax: 773-702-8324 • World Wide Web: <http://www-news.uchicago.edu/>

September 13, 2000

Contact: William Harms  
(773) 702-8356  
[w-harms@uchicago.edu](mailto:w-harms@uchicago.edu)

## **University of Chicago leads international effort to rescue rare books damaged by Indian flood**

The University of Chicago, in cooperation with Columbia University and a number of other American universities, has organized an international effort to rescue one of the world's finest collections of rare books and journals in the Urdu language from a devastating flood in Hyderabad, India.

The collection of 26,500 books and about 60,000 magazines, journals and other periodicals in Urdu, a major language spoken throughout South Asia, is owned by a consortium of American universities. Most materials date from the 19th and early 20th centuries and very few are available in any U.S. library.

The flood, which was the result of a monsoon rain, left nearly 100 people dead and inundated a large portion of the city including the library housing the rare Urdu collection. The books and periodicals were covered in 9 feet of water and mud. As a result of the international effort, the damaged books have been shipped to freezers throughout Hyderabad, where they are being stored until conservators can begin working further with them. The freezing preserves the books and prevents the development of mold. The books eventually will be carefully dried before they are microfilmed.

In 1996, the consortium purchased the collection from a private owner and began the long-term project of microfilming the entire collection. The consortium also is working to make select portions of the collection available world-wide via the Internet. The microfilm will be housed at the Center for Research Libraries in Chicago and the books will remain in the Sundarayya Vignana Kendram building, a library in Hyderabad, which is a close collaborator on the project.

At the time a flood hit Hyderabad on August 24, the Indian staff had microfilmed about 2,000 of the rarer books.

"We are most concerned about the journals and other periodicals, which are quite rare," said James Nye, Bibliographer of the South Asian Collection at the University of Chicago libraries and Director of the South Asian Languages and Area Center at the University.

According to David Magier, director of Area Studies at Columbia University, the collection is invaluable. "This collection represents a cultural treasure for the South Asian region as a whole, particularly India and Pakistan, and provides a unique window into a field of study that is central to Columbia's academic programs in South Asian history and culture, and Urdu language and literature, one of the strongest in the United States," said Magier.

Among the 26,500 books that were damaged are volumes that are particularly important to scholars. Those books cover the history of India and include government records. Additionally there are 12,000 titles alone that deal with the literature and development of the language. There are books that deal with religion and biography as well.

"The periodicals cover a wide range of topics, going back to about 1850, and are an invaluable source of information for anyone studying Urdu and the region," Nye said. The periodicals cover traditional medicine, culture and other aspects of life throughout South Asia.

"We are determining which books might have duplicates elsewhere and concentrating on saving those that are most rare," Nye said. Assisting local experts on book preservation are a team of conservators who have worked on previous projects, such as the rescue of material from a 1966 flood in Florence, Italy.

Urdu, also known as Hindustani, is spoken by more than 56,000,000 people worldwide. It was the lingua franca of northern India during most of the 19th century, used by both the Muslim and Hindu communities. In addition, Urdu was the primary South Asian language used by colonial rulers for administrative purposes during that early period. It is usually written and printed in the Perso-Arabic script.

The University of Chicago ranks among the world's leading centers for South Asian Studies. Since the 1950s, its innovative scholarship, teaching and public service have set new standards in the United States and abroad for knowledge about the Indian subcontinent. Faculty and programs added in the 1990s have provided depth and vision to interpretations of contemporary cultural and economic developments. In the academic, private sector and public arenas alike, the program's graduates have made South Asia accessible to wider audiences, encouraging appreciation of its distinctive ways of life.

From reinterpretations of the Ramayana to studies of Islamic law and of political ritual; from fresh insights into sufi and bhakti poetry to the exploring of diasporic film; from inquiries into the origins of literary traditions to analyses of the party systems and market economies of the 1990s, University of Chicago scholars have been at the forefront of research and scholarship on South Asia. Thirty-eight faculty at Chicago regularly teach two classical languages (Sanskrit and Pali), six modern (Bengali, Hindi, Persian, Tamil, Tibetan and Urdu) and offer courses that place their literatures and cultures in critical and comparative contexts. More information about South Asian studies programs at the University of Chicago is available at <http://humanities.uchicago.edu/southasia/>.

Columbia University has had a strong academic program in South Asian languages and cultures for more than 150 years. The School of International and Public Affairs has also fostered advanced studies in the current affairs and social sciences with focus on India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the Father of the Indian Constitution and renowned champion of human rights, studied at SIPA, and received his honorary law degree from Columbia in 1952.

Currently, Columbia's Southern Asian Institute (which can be found at <http://www.sipa.columbia.edu/REGIONAL/SAI/>) brings together a large interdisciplinary grouping of scholars and students in many different fields who come together to study the heritage and current significance of this important world region. The Institute was founded in the early 1950s, and coincided with the creation of the Pakistan Studies Center at Columbia. The Urdu language has been taught at Columbia since 1952.

In addition to the University of Chicago and Columbia, other institutions involved in the consortium are the University of Michigan, University of Minnesota, University of Wisconsin, University of Washington, University of Pennsylvania, Harvard University, the University of California at Berkeley and the University of Texas at Austin.

Further information concerning the rescue and preservation efforts is available at <http://dsal.uchicago.edu/flood/>.

###