INDUSTRY VISIT REPORT

INTACH Art Conservation Centre, Kolkata

Date of Visit: 6th April 2026

The INTACH Art Conservation Centre at Hastings is a rigorous, working conservation laboratory where India's artistic and documentary heritage is systematically saved from the ravages of time.

Conservation in Practice: Prevention, Curative Treatment, and Preservation

The lab's entire approach rests on three principles. Prevention comes first — controlling temperature, humidity, light, and pests before any damage occurs. It is the most cost-effective intervention because it eliminates the need for treatment altogether. When damage has already happened, curative treatment takes over: cleaning, deacidification, structural repair, and stabilisation of deteriorating surfaces, always with minimal intervention and reversibility as the guiding rules. Preservation then maintains treated objects in conditions that extend their life indefinitely. These are not interchangeable concepts — conflating them is a common mistake, and the conservators here are emphatic about the distinction.

A standout example was the conservation of Tal Gach paintings — works executed on palm leaf, a fragile organic medium deeply embedded in Eastern Indian artistic tradition. These require consolidation of flaking pigment, controlled humidification to relax brittle or warped leaves, and archival enclosures with strict environmental monitoring. Losing them is permanent; every treatment decision is therefore made with exceptional care.

Enemies of Paper: Light, Humidity, and Insects

Paper has no shortage of enemies. Light — particularly ultraviolet radiation from sunlight and fluorescent sources — causes irreversible photochemical damage: pigments fade, cellulose chains break down, and paper yellows and becomes brittle. Damage from light is cumulative and cannot be undone, which is why UV-filtering glazing, low lux levels, and limiting exposure duration are non-negotiable in any responsible collection environment.

Humidity is equally destructive. High relative humidity promotes mould growth, biological activity, and acid hydrolysis; too little causes paper to crack and parchment to split. Fluctuating humidity is worst of all, as repeated expansion and contraction cycles physically stress and weaken fibres. The ideal storage range is 45–55% RH — a challenge in Kolkata's climate, but one the lab manages rigorously. Insects round out the threat: silverfish, bookworms, cockroaches, and termites all target organic materials, feeding on cellulose, starch-based adhesives, and bindings. The lab employs integrated pest management — environmental controls, regular inspection, and anoxic treatment for active infestations — avoiding toxic chemicals that could themselves damage the collection.

Paper: Types, Making, and Use in Conservation

Paper-making itself was covered as essential background. The process runs from fibre preparation and beating to sheet formation on a mould, pressing, slow drying, and surface

sizing with starch or gelatine. The fibre source and manufacturing method determine the paper's longevity — cotton and linen rag papers last centuries; cheap wood-pulp papers loaded with lignin acidify and crumble within decades.

In conservation, paper choice is decisive. Japanese tissue (kozo/washi), made from mulberry fibre, is the primary material for lining and repair — extraordinarily thin, long-fibred, and strong, it reinforces damaged paper without adding bulk or rigidity. Acid-free archival board and buffered enclosure papers (pH 7.5+, lignin-free) are used for storage, as any acidic housing material will migrate harmful compounds directly into whatever is stored inside it. Blotter paper handles moisture absorption during washing and flattening treatments; glassine protects fragile surfaces during handling; handmade Indian rag paper provides in-fills that closely match original historic material.

Key Treatments: Lining, Stain Removal, and Other Interventions

Lining is one of the most significant structural interventions a conservator can perform. When a document or painting on paper is too fragile to support itself, a secondary backing of Japanese tissue is adhered using wheat starch paste or methyl cellulose — both reversible adhesives. The long kozo fibres distribute stress evenly, stabilising the object without creating rigidity. Critically, reversibility is mandatory: any lining must be removable by future conservators without damaging the original. A badly applied or irreversible lining can cause more harm than the problem it was meant to fix.

Stain treatment using dilute ammonia-based solutions was another technique demonstrated. Ammonia acts as a mild alkali, neutralising acidic degradation products and addressing certain organic stains and iron gall ink corrosion. It demands precision — concentration, contact time, and the stability of inks and pigments must all be assessed beforehand through test patches. This is highly skilled, documented work. Other treatments covered included deacidification to slow acid-driven deterioration, aqueous washing to remove soluble degradation products, consolidation of lifting media, in-fill of missing areas with toned matching paper, and encapsulation in polyester film for extremely fragile documents requiring protection during handling.

What We Saw: Objects, Artefacts, and Live Demonstrations

Beyond the technical explanations, the lab gave us a chance to actually see conservation in action, which made everything land differently. We watched a book conservation demonstration where a badly deteriorated bound volume was being carefully taken apart — spine removed, pages separated, cleaned, and prepared for rebinding using archival methods. It sounds straightforward but watching it done with such precision was genuinely impressive. Every fold, every adhesive choice, every decision had a reason behind it.

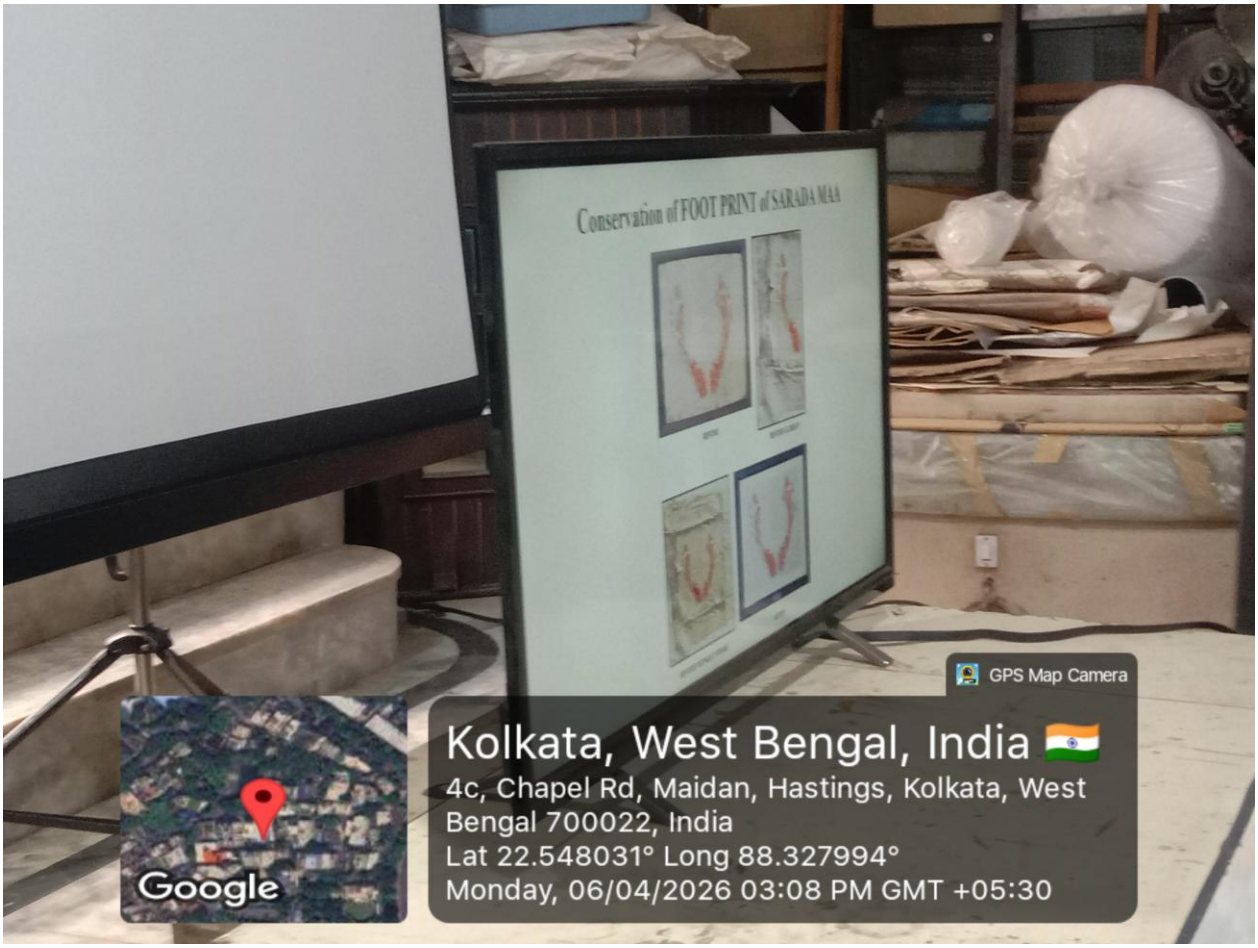
The lab also had in their care a remarkable old map of Calcutta — the kind that makes you stop and stare. Seeing the city laid out in an earlier era, streets and landmarks rendered in aged ink on fragile paper, was a quiet reminder of exactly why this work matters. Alongside it were property deeds from the Port Trust — official documents of real historical significance. We were told these were not confidential records, but photography was not permitted, so we took it all in without lenses.

Among the objects on display was Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's suitcase — a personal artefact with obvious emotional and historical weight. Seeing it alongside other items in

the lab's care was a reminder that conservation is not just about paper and pigment; it is about preserving the physical traces of real lives and real history. We also got to observe the ongoing restoration of a painting — old varnish being carefully removed and areas of paint loss being stabilised. Watching the original colours slowly re-emerge from beneath years of grime was, honestly, one of the more memorable moments of the entire visit.

The visit made one thing unmistakably clear: conservation is forensic, patient, and unforgiving of shortcuts. The work at the INTACH lab — preserving manuscripts, painted leaves, archival records, and more — is indispensable to ensuring that India's material heritage survives beyond the present generation.




Conservation of FOOT PRINT of SARADA MAA
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