Towards Information and Digital Literacies on the Preservation of Palm Leaf Manuscript Libraries in Tamil Nadu: A Survey

Dr K Baskar★

Librarian, Madras School of Economics, Kotturpuram, Chennai, TN, IND.

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Libraries and archives are essential for conserving and making available a society's cultural and historical artefacts. In today's world of constant technological advancement and many informational resources, it's more crucial than ever to be literate in both traditional and digital forms of information processing. This paper surveys the existence of Palm leaf Manuscript Libraries in Tamil Nadu; finds out the status of digitization, microfilming and digital preservation measures taken in palm leaf Manuscript libraries under survey; identifies the issues and challenges involved in the digitization of those collections; offers solutions for the digitization and digital preservation of palm leaf manuscript libraries and suggests measures to initiate Information and Digital Literacies on palm leaf manuscript libraries.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Libraries and archives are essential for conserving and making accessible our collective cultural and historical memory. Libraries and archives have been able to preserve this vast collection of printed, handwritten, and mechanically recorded information for the benefit of both academic specialists and the general public. Recent decades have seen a rise in the number of official preservation programmes at both physical and digital libraries and archives. Libraries and archives have new difficulties in meeting their preservation obligations as a result of the widespread use of digital technology in the information creation, transfer, and storage processes.

1.1 Information and Digital Literacy

Information Literacy (IL) refers to a set of competencies that requires persons to be able to understand when information is needed and have the capacity to search, assess, and apply the

---

★ *Corresponding author's e-mail:* kalabaskar@gmail.com (Dr K Baskar)

required information successfully. In today's world of constant technological advancement and many information sources, IL is more vital than ever.

Bundy (2004) defined information literacy as "an intellectual framework for recognizing the need for, understanding, finding, evaluating, and using information. These are activities which may be supported in part by fluency with information technology, in part by sound investigative methods, but most importantly through critical discernment and reasoning. Information literacy initiates, sustains, and extends lifelong learning through abilities that may use technologies but are ultimately independent of them". According to Pérez Torero (2004), digital literacy is more than a basic operational and technological awareness comprised only of technical knowledge. Individuals that are digitally literate have developed their perceptual, cognitive, and emotional capacities, as well as their ability to apply them to real-world situations (physiological and motor). These changes correlate to the technological shift that occurred in the latter decades of the 20th century, namely the shift that occurred in technology associated with the Information Society.

1.2 Scope and Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the paper are as follows:

1. To survey the Palm leaf Manuscript Libraries in Tamil Nadu.
2. To find out the status of digitization, microfilming and digital preservation measures taken in palm leaf Manuscript libraries under survey.
3. To identify the issues and challenges involved in the digitization of those collections.
4. To offer solutions for the digitization and digital preservation of palm leaf manuscript
5. libraries
6. To suggest measures to initiate Information and Digital Literacies on palm leaf manuscript libraries in Tamil Nadu.

In Tamil Nadu, there are 36 manuscript libraries as per the report prepared by the French Institute of Indology, Puducherry. The list of the libraries is given in Table 1.

Table 1 – Manuscript Libraries in Tamil Nadu under Survey

Sl. No.	Name of the Library	District
1	Dr. U. V. Swaminatha Iyer Library	Chennai
2	Central Research Institute for Siddha Medicine	Chennai
3	International Institute of Tamil Studies	Chennai
4	C. P. Ramaswamy Foundation	Chennai
5	Government Oriental Manuscript Library	Chennai
6	Kuppu Swami Sastry Research Institute	Chennai
7	Annamalai University, Chidambaram	Chidambaram
8	Sri Kumara Thevar Matam, Viruthachalam	Cuddalore
9	Velakkurcci Adheenam, Tirupugalur	Nagapattinam
10	Dharumapuram Adheenam, Myladuthurai	Nagapattinam
11	Sridhara Venkatesa Aiyyaval Matham, Thiruviyalur	Thiruvarur
12	Saraswati Mahal Library, Thiruvaduthurai Adheenam	Tanjore

13	Raja Veda Patasalai	Tanjore
14	Kasimatham	Tanjore
15	Tiruvidaimarudur Kovil Devasthanam	Tanjore
16	Govindapuram Matham, Kumbakonam	Tanjore
17	Svamprakasa Swamikal matham, Thirumazhapadi	Tanjore
18	Tirumanturai Amra Vanesvara Tirukkovil, Lalgudi	Trichy
19	Sri Ranganatha Paduka Vidyalaya, Srirangam	Trichy
20	Sri Kumara Thevar Matam, Thuraiyur	Trichy
21	Government Museum Palani	Dindigul
22	Malayala Krishnaiyar Padasalai	Madurai
23	Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary	Madurai
24	Saurashtra Sabha	Madurai
25	Government Museum Madurai	Madurai
26	Department of Tamil Studies, Madurai Kamaraj University	Madurai
27	Suthamalli Padasalai	Tirunelveli
28	Vanamamalai Matham, Nanguneri	Tirunelveli
29	P. S. Krishna Iyer Memorial Trust, Nainaragaram	Tirunelveli
30	Sankarameshvarar Kovil Devasthanam, Thoothukudi	Thoothukudi
31	Kovilur Matham, Karaikudi	Sivagangai
32	V. V. V. College	Virudhunagar
33	Government Museum, Erode	Erode
34	Kalaimakal Kalvi Nilayam, Erode	Erode
35	Sri Kaumara Matham, Chinnavedampatti	Coimbatore
36	Kunampatti Adheenam	Coimbatore

1.3 Digitisation Activities Undertaken

In survey of the manuscript libraries in Tamil Nadu (Baskar, 2013), it was found that the following libraries have taken initiatives towards the microfilming and digitization of palm leaf manuscripts:

- Dr. U. V. Swaminatha Iyer Library, Chennai
- Central Research Institute for Siddha Medicine, Chennai
- International Institute of Tamil Studies, Chennai
- Government Oriental manuscript Library, Chennai
- Adyar Theosophical Society Library, Chennai
- Sankara Mutt, Kancheepuram
- Kuppu Swami Sastry Research Institute, Chennai
- Saraswati Mahal Library, Tanjore
- Kovilur Matham, Karaikudi

The application of ICT has given opportunities for libraries to design and develop digital libraries and also to undertake digitization activities. Since both the palm leaf manuscripts and paper manuscripts represent age-old factors and they need to be preserved for posterity. Hence two techniques have been adopted to preserve those rare collections microfilming and currently undertaking digitization. In this study, the librarians were asked to state the digitization initiatives and the results are shown in the following tables.

Table 2 – Digitisation Activities Undertaken

Sl. No.	Type of Library	Do you have a digital library			Do you use digital library software			DL – Open-Source Software
		Yes	No	Total	Yes	No	Total	
1	Government	1	7	8	1	7	8	1
2	Society / Trust	0	19	19	0	19	19	0
3	Others	1	8	9	1	8	9	1
	Total	2	34	36	2	34	36	2

The data in Table 2 reveals that very bad shape of affairs with regard to digitization activities.

Only two libraries, *i.e.,* one Government and Annamalai University library have initiated the digital library and developed the digital library using the software. The remaining thirty-four libraries did not make any attempt in this direction. On enquiry with the librarians, it was found that the financial provision and lack of application of ICT and manpower are the main reasons for such a sad situation.

Further, the librarians were asked to state the methods of converting the conventional media into electronic media and the data has been presented in Table 3. The various methods are conversion by keying or scanning or by using a digital camera. It is interesting to note that seven libraries are using a digital camera for converting conventional media and only one library uses the technique of scanning.

Table 3 – Methods Used to Convert Conventional Media to Digital Media

Sl. No.	Type of Library	Conversion by scanning	Digital Camera	Conversion by Scanning and Digital Camera	Total
1	Government	0	1	2	3
2	Society / Trust	0	4	0	4
3	Others	1	2	0	3
	Total	1	7	2	10

1.4 Microfilming of Palm Leaf Manuscripts

Microfilming of manuscripts and palm leaves has been undertaken at the long-term preservation policy even before the emergence of digitization. In the literature, a lot of debate is being gone on about the pros and cons of digitization versus microfilming. Many experts in the conservation field suggest and recommend microfilming for long-term preservation and digitization for access mechanisms. Considering the above points, the librarians are asked to state the extent of microfilming work done in their respective libraries. The data in this regard is shown in Table 4. It is found that only one library that is Sri Kaumara Matam (Siravai Adheenam), Coimbatore having 460 works has microfilmed its collections completely. On the other hand, three libraries namely Central Research Institute for Siddha Medicine, Chennai, Saraswati Mahal Library, Thiruvaduthurai Adheenam, and

Annamalai University, Chidambaram have done microfilming of one-fourth of their collections and two libraries have done up to 75% of their collection namely Dr. U. V. Swaminatha lyer library has done microfilming of manuscript completely and Government Oriental Manuscript Library, Chennai.

Table 4 – Microfilming of Manuscripts

Sl. No.	Type of Library	Whether Microfilming of manuscripts is done completely				
		Yes	No	Upto 25 Percentage	Upto 75 Percentage	Total
1	Government	0	6	1	1	8
2	Society / Trust	1	17	0	1	19
3	Others	0	7	2	0	9
	Total	1	30	3	2	36

The data in Table 4 provides the infrastructure for microfilming activities. It is interesting to note that none of the libraries has microfilming unit and also trained staff for undertaking the microfilming process. But as noticed in Table 4 only six libraries have initiated the microfilming process. This shows that there is a lack of work culture on part of the staff with regard to microfilming activity which is a long-term preservation method. Further, it is noticed in Table 3 that even amongst six libraries which have initiated the microfilming activities, only one library under the category of "Others" namely Annamalai University, Chidambaram preserved the microfilmed documents in an air-conditioned environment.

Table 5 – Microfilming Work Undertaken

Sl. No.	Type of Library	Microfilm Unit	No. of trained staff in the microfilming process	Whether the microfilm documents are preserved in an air-conditioned environment		
				Yes	No	Total
1	Government	0	0	0	8	8
2	Society / Trust	0	0	0	19	19
3	Others	0	0	1	8	9
	Total	0	0	1	35	36

1.5 Towards Information and Digital Literacies on Palm Leaf Manuscript Libraries

The term "library literacy" refers to a set of skills related to the use of libraries (both their collections and their services), specifically the capacity to conduct an organised search for and assess the quality of information available on a certain subject (Humes, 1999). One of the most important skills for success in the 21st century is digital literacy. Without proficient and ethical use of digital media, success on the international stage is quite unlikely. It's the knack for processing data supplied digitally in a variety of ways and making effective use of it (Gilster, 1997). In today's world, not being able to use digital technologies effectively might hinder both social participation and individual growth. Foundational knowledge of information and communication technologies underpins this. Those who are proficient in the use of digital technologies are better able to collaborate with those who share their expertise. It's one of the most important skills you can have in the 21st century.

Users and library staff need to work together to effectively plan, design, and provide training and materials for users to improve their information literacy.

Library personnel may provide insight into learner characteristics and the learning environment, as well as programme recommendations from information literacy professional organisations. In this context, it is recommended that an Institute for Information Literacy be established to commence development and educate information literacy and associated skills with the following objectives:

- To instruct librarians to become competent IL programme instructors.
- The goal is to encourage librarians and other educators and administrators to take part in creating and implementing IL programmes.
- In order to focus on IL curriculum creation, we must forego forming new relationships within the educational community (Babu, 2008).

2.0 CONCLUSION

Digital conversion initiatives will only be economically feasible if they concentrate on choosing and generating electronic resources for long-term usage', which still holds true in the current day. The future seems promising for those who work in the information field. Dr. U. V. Swaminatha Iyer Research Library is making microfilms and digital copies of its most precious manuscripts to ensure their survival for future generations. It is recommended that 35% of un-microfilmed manuscripts be microfilmed and converted to digital format for library patrons to use. In order to prevent further destruction of the original manuscripts, it is imperative that the remaining 95% be digitised. Once a strategy has been developed for digitising the manuscripts, work may begin on the project. It is high time now not only to know and appreciate the information that was passed down via the palm leaf manuscript legacy, but also to use it, and as a result, it should be conserved in the appropriate manner.

It is recommended that libraries that have not yet begun microfilming operations do so promptly, since the storage and preservation of manuscripts, both on paper and palm leaves, may take a very long time. To preserve India's cultural and intellectual heritage, it is recommended that facilities, funds, and manpower be made available to undertake preservation programmes at manuscript libraries and information centres, museums, and archival institutions across the country, and in Tamil Nadu in particular. The manuscript libraries need to create a collection and growth strategy that serves a purpose. The concept of preserving the original documents by duplicating them on stable media not only ensures their long-term preservation, but also enables users to locate, retrieve, analyse, and change the information in their preferred environment.

REFERENCES

Astle, P. J., & Muir, A., (2002) "Digitization and Preservation of Public Libraries and Archives", *Journal of Librarianship, and Information Science,* 34(2), pp. 67-79.

Babu, R., (2008, Mar) "Information Literacy—Competency Standards and Performance Indicators: An Overview", *DESIDOC Journal of Library & Information Technology,* 28(2), pp. 56-65.

Baskar, K., (2013) *"Manuscript Libraries in Tamil Nadu: A Study of their Organisation and Preservation in the Digital Environment Chennai"*, University of Madras, (PhD Thesis, Unpublished).

Bundy, A., (2004) *"Australian and New Zealand Information Literacy Framework: Principles, Standards and Practices"*, 2nd Edition, Australia: Library Publication, University of South Australia.

Gilster, P., (1997) "An Excerpt from Digital Literacy", *Meridian: A Middle School Computer Technologies Journal,* 2(2), 1-20.

Humes, B., (1999) *"Understanding Information Literacy"*, Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED430577.pdf.

Pérez Tornero, J. M., (2004) *"Promoting Digital Literacy"*, Brussels, Belgium: European Commission.