

Noolaham Foundation
Project Report



Project title	Manuscripts Archive Jaffna Public Library 2012
Project number	NF/PG/2012/0007
Project location	Jaffna
Sector	Manuscripts Archive - Ola leaf
Implementing agency and contribution	Noolaham Foundation (NF)
Grant Agency and Contribution	Noolaham Foundation
Total Budget and Expenditure	Not Recorded
Start and End date	September 2012 – December 2012
Responsible Stakeholders	Jaffna Public Library, Volunteers of Noolaham Foundation

Summary

The **Manuscripts Archive Jaffna Public Library 2012** was carried out by Noolaham Foundation in 2012 to digitize and archive the collection of palm-leaf manuscripts held at Jaffna Public Library. This type of project was the second project carried out by Noolaham Foundation in the same year. To maximize use of palm-leaf manuscripts through online access of the digitized documents and increase the life of the collections are the main objective of the project.

Through this project 5 manuscript volumes were digitized. A web portal also will be created. These precious collections consists of information on Tamil literature, prose and verse, history and tradition, grammar and lexicography, art, indigenous medicine, astrology, science, architecture and folk-lore. These document collections will be made freely accessible and downloadable in the user-friendly interface of Noolaham Foundation's Digital Library and most of the knowledge seekers will have easy access to these services. This project was a successful initiative and received special appreciation from scholars.

Introduction and Background

Palm leaves occupy a significant place among the manuscripts available in South Asia. As in any part of the world, palm leaves were one of the main sources for writing before the advent of paper in South Asia. Due to the absence of a proper solution to store of data in bulk, over the past years, thousands of palm leaf manuscripts were perished even without retaining a copy or image for future use. A study was conducted to find out whether the digital archiving is a solution to preserving the contents of the palm leaf manuscripts and what are the prevailing issues in digitizing the manuscripts as a whole. Palm leaves were among the first writing materials to be used, and some sources say that Tamil was written on this material more than 2,000 years ago.

Palm leaf manuscript is one of the oldest medium of writing in Sri Lanka as well. In Jaffna Northern part of the Sri Lanka, a large number of medieval and late modern Tamil palm-leaf

manuscripts are held by individuals and organizations. Jaffna was the land of scholars, teaching and studies and had a rich tradition in preserving ancient knowledge in the form of palm leaves. It is unfortunate that a large number of manuscripts have got perished irrecoverably, and many have been lost over the past years

These palm-leaf manuscripts cover a variety of subjects including traditional medicine, law, history, technology and religion. Majority of these works have not been published in print. There were more than ten thousand rare books, documents and manuscripts, and they were written on palm leaves and stored in the Jaffna Public Library. It had been one of the biggest and finest library in Southeast Asia in 1960-70s and until it was burnt on 31 May 1981 by hooligans. The Jaffna public library had around 97,000 volumes of books and rare and important palm leaf manuscripts, which disseminate information about Jaffna's Culture and personal collections of famous scholars. But at the moment the collections of palm leaves available are very few and they are easily affected due to deterioration such as discoloration, damage by insects, fungal effect, splitting of the surface layer, fading of writing and brittleness and weakening of the leaves. These factors necessitate the digital archiving. Therefore Noolaham Foundation Archive's project identifies, digitizes and makes these works accessible to the wider scholarly community and the public.

Objective/s and Achievements or Results

This project was taken place under the Noolaham Foundation's Manuscripts Archive Program - preservation and digital archiving of manuscripts and other handmade documents related to Sri Lankan Tamil speaking communities. 5 manuscript volumes were digitized and will be made available online through Noolaham Foundation's Digital Library at (www.noolaham.org). They are rare and endangered documents.

The collections were digitized according to generally accepted professional archival standards on high resolution, so scholars can access high resolution images of the manuscripts on palm leaves and ancient coins which yield greater detail than can be seen with the naked eye. The scanning was conducted using the scanner model provided by EAP 458 (Endangered Archive Program of British Library) team of French Institute of Pondicherry, India.

Constraints / Challenges

- NF is yet to develop a metadata scheme for the management of digitized Palm leaf manuscripts to increase efficiency in the search, access, management and use.
- During the project period Noolaham foundation observed that there were not many persons who could read the native script and understand content. We need to find out ways in which these palm-leaf manuscripts could be read. This was true not only for Jaffna but for all other parts of Sri Lanka. Thus to get basic information (metadata information) and rights about all the collection seemed to be hard job.
- Noolaham Foundation started the process of digital archiving without good answer to such questions like whether to archive all the available manuscripts, question about the property right, data portability, inter-operability, platform independency, technological

obsolescence, storage media to be used, etc. But NF believes whatever be the questions and threats, digital archiving is the commonly accepted and immediate remedy in front of information seekers and information scientists to preserve the contents in palm leaves.

- During the project climatic threats include severe variation between the wet and dry seasons and related challenges of insects, dust, humidity and variations in temperature posed a challenge. Measures are being taken to offset these factors, including attention to cleaning, but they still remain a significant challenge and they must be handled with the utmost care.

Suggestions and Recommendations:

- Adequate online metadata is an essential condition for good quality access to digitized versions of material. Minimal description is far better than none. So basic information about all collections should be made available online as quickly as possible for public access.
- Special collections professionals should take a lead in researching and developing new forms of access and digital storage, and finding opportunities to apply them to special collections. The relevant libraries and other repositories need to make the necessary investment in technology to advance the creation of tools, and support their staff in taking this lead.
- During the project numerous risks were taken to handle the manuscripts during digitization, but the reward is that the images can now be used for research and learning purposes.
- Still there are a large number of palm leaves manuscripts in many parts of Jaffna that remain un-identified. The findings can be practically applied to solving the existing problems in creating a digital library or a consortia based sharing resources using the digital image so created and also to find out the possibility of bringing the material under a common roof.
- The identified and available thousands of palm leaf manuscripts need to be published in modern media. There needs to be a basic system to recollect these misplaced, scattered and hidden materials in addition to a space, where such materials could be made available for researchers and inventors.
- Noolaham Foundation will have to provide awareness creation through continuous lobbying to facilitate manuscripts holders to continuously provide support in the collection of documents, to obtain permission and approvals from respective contributors, and to seek help from all relevant stakeholders such as scholars to digitize and archive relevant documents
- In Jaffna palm leaf manuscripts have not been explored and researched, so all the repositories have to do something by increasing trained staff, fund allocation, and enhance related studies and then the problems could be addressed.
- Digitizing palm leaf documents has a large set of challenges associated with it. They need to be handled with enormous care as they are delicate and irreplaceable. As of now, the palm leaves are being photographed one at a time, but better methods have to

be invented to improve the rate and quality of digitization. Better scanners, which can take high definition colour images of the palm leaves while causing no damage to the bundle, have to be designed for this purpose. The processing of the palm leaf images needs special features and the image processing algorithms must be well tuned to handle tear, cut and background features.

Acknowledgments

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