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Mulling over Manuscripts

Palm leaf manuscripts have many stories from the past and Mysore has an entire research center dedicated to them.

BY BINDU GOPAL RAO



As I drive into the lawns of the 132-year-old Oriental Research Institute (ORI), University of Mysore, I am struck by the magnificence of ochre hued architecture. Despite it being a rainy day, the building stands tall, belying its age.

A curvy stairway leads me to the office of the director, Dr. K.V.

Ramapriya, Director who assigns a colleague to show me around the place. I am here to find out more about the work the Institute does with ancient palm-leaf manuscripts.

For the uninitiated, these are manuscripts made from dried palm leaves that were used as writing materials in India (prior to 5th century BCE). Typically, the palms of Borassus

species (Palmyra palm) and Ola leaf (*Corypha umbraculifera* or the talipot palm) were used to write.

At ORI there are over a whopping 40000 rare palm leaf manuscripts and paper manuscripts. This institute was established in Mysore by Sri Chamarajaendra Wadiyar, who was the ruler of the princely state at that time. The foundation stone of Jubilee Hall



(that houses ORI) was laid in 1887 and commemorates the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria's accession to the British throne.

The main purpose of the Institute is to translate these manuscripts and publish a set of rare, previously unpublished books. These manuscripts have been collected across South India after a lot of research. There have also been some donations of manuscripts.

Currently, the Institute only has Sanskrit manuscripts and it has the distinction of publishing Kautilya's Arthashastra. Kautilya, also called Chanakya, lived in 350-275 BCE) and was the Prime Minister of King Chandragupta Maurya, founder of the Mauryan Empire (322-185 BCE).

One of the other important publications is Sritattvanidhi, a scholarly work of Krishnaraja Wadiyar III, that has nine volumes spanning several aspects of Indian traditional knowledge. This book has some fine examples of traditional paintings and illustrations that make this an excellent collection.

The manuscripts span a variety of topics including science, medicine, vedas, poems, Ayurveda and the like. These have been divided by subject and a study of the author and whether it is complete, or incomplete has been documented. Some manuscripts are available in duplicate as well.

The writing has been done using an iron stylus and the writing is all essentially carved and carbon rubbed inside to blacken the text. The 20-member staff includes 7-8 research scholars who also analyze the manuscripts.



One of the largest manuscripts here is 30 cm long and the precision of the writing, without a pen and without any errors is nothing short of amazing. The large collection of paper manuscripts here are also over 500 years old. Some paper manuscripts also have some fine artwork that must not be missed.

Interestingly, the same manuscript can be found in different scripts and the team compares between them, to find out which is original. Likewise, if one manuscript is damaged, it is possible to check the other one, provided the sentences are identical. It is a task that needs much precision and effort.

The manuscripts are bound together tightly using thick cotton thread and wrapped in red cloth as these are said to make them resistant to pest attacks. Citronella oil and lemon grass oil are used to protect the palm leaf manuscripts. A fumigation chamber is used to dry the fabrics. They also use neem leaves stored in polythene bags to help with pest control.

The in-house library has over 40,000 books in Sanskrit, English, Kannada and other languages. It is thronged by teachers, students, research scholars and scholars. Within the library is a display of instruments, raw materials and more that give you an insight into the creation of the manuscripts.



The Institute has taken up the mammoth task of digitising the manuscripts available in the library. The descriptive catalogue of Sanskrit manuscripts I saw had the minutest of details: serial number & subject, manuscript number, title of work, name of the author, name of the commentator, material (palm or paper manuscript), size in centimeters, number of folios, lines per page, letters per line, condition and age and additional particulars (if damaged, complete and the like).

I spent several hours at the Institute both intrigued and amazed at the way people documented their thoughts in the past. Also, it is the work done to preserve the manuscripts and make them accessible to the larger public that deserves appreciation of the highest order. As I bade goodbye, all I could do was be grateful to be able to write by simply using my laptop's keys so easily and vowed never to complain that writing was hard!