

Leaves that Speak: Documenting Kerala's Palm-Leaf Manuscript Libraries

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Abstract: Kerala possesses a rich legacy of manuscript traditions preserved in select institutional libraries across the state. This article examines selected manuscript libraries in Kerala with a focus on the nature of their collections, preservation practices, access facilities, and scholarly significance. The study highlights the diversity of manuscript materials—including palm leaf manuscripts and other non-book formats—and the efforts undertaken by these libraries to safeguard fragile cultural resources. By documenting current practices and challenges, the article underscores the role of manuscript libraries in preserving Kerala's intellectual heritage and supporting research, education, and cultural continuity.

Key words: Palm-leaf manuscripts, Kerala archives, cultural heritage preservation, Manuscriptology, Palm Leaf Manuscript Museum, Thiruvananthapuram.

Introduction

Kerala occupies a distinctive position in the intellectual and cultural history of India due to its long-standing tradition of manuscript production and preservation. For centuries, knowledge related to philosophy, medicine, astronomy, literature, linguistics, and ritual practices was recorded on palm leaves and other traditional materials. These manuscripts not only reflect the scholarly heritage of the region but also serve as primary sources for understanding Kerala's social, religious, and scientific developments.

Manuscript libraries in Kerala play a crucial role in safeguarding this fragile documentary heritage. Several institutional libraries, research centres, and cultural organizations across the state have undertaken the responsibility of collecting, preserving, and providing access to manuscripts. However, these collections face multiple challenges such as physical deterioration, environmental factors, limited financial resources, and the need for trained manpower and modern preservation technologies.

Review of Literature

Studies on palm-leaf manuscripts in India emphasize their role in transmitting religious, scientific, administrative, and cultural knowledge (Nair, 1997; Vaisalakhy, 2002).

Works on manuscriptology discuss preservation challenges including fragility, pest attacks, and climate sensitivity (Ghosh, 2000).

Kerala has been a key site for palm-leaf documentation, with scripts like Vattezhuthu, Kolezhuthu, Malayanma, and ancient Tamil-Malayalam (Menon, 2010).

UNESCO's Memory of the World programme (1992) underscores the global importance of safeguarding documentary heritage, including palm-leaf texts.

However, scholarly literature on museum-based manuscript preservation remains sparse, making the Palm Leaf Manuscript Museum a unique case for study.

Objectives of the Study

1. To document the historical and cultural significance of the Palm Leaf Manuscript Museum.
2. To examine the preservation and digitization practices adopted by the museum.
3. To analyze the challenges in curating fragile manuscripts for public display.
4. To assess the role in promoting research, education, and cultural tourism.

Methodology

This paper adopts a descriptive case-study approach. Data were collected through:

- Secondary sources including government reports, books, journal articles, and museum publications.
- Observation of exhibits and curatorial practices during museum visits.
- Review of archival records from the Kerala Archives Department.

Palm Leaf Manuscript Museum, Thiruvananthapuram

The **Palm Leaf Manuscript Museum, Thiruvananthapuram** is a unique cultural institution dedicated to preserving and showcasing Kerala's ancient palm-leaf manuscript tradition. Established in 2022 in the historic Central Archives building of Fort, Thiruvananthapuram, it is considered the **world's first and largest museum of its kind**. The museum exhibits select palm-leaf manuscripts from a collection of over **one crore (10 million) documents**, dating from **1249 CE to 1896 CE**, which reveal rich insights into the **administrative, socio-cultural, economic, and literary history** of the region, particularly from the Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar kingdoms. Organized into eight thematic galleries, the museum introduces visitors to the **history of writing, land and people, governance, war and peace, education and health, economy, and art and culture** through rare primary sources enhanced with explanatory displays and multimedia aids. The museum draws its strength from the vast collection preserved at the Kerala State Archives, which houses more than **one crore palm leaf documents** dating from the **thirteenth to the late nineteenth century**. These manuscripts serve as invaluable primary sources that document the administrative, legal, socio-economic, cultural, and intellectual life of Kerala, particularly during the periods of the Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar regions. Written in scripts such as **Vattezhuthu, Kolezhuthu, and**

Grantha, the manuscripts cover a wide range of subjects including land administration, taxation, governance, medicine, education, religious practices, treaties, and royal decrees. The museum is systematically organized into **thematic galleries** that guide visitors through the evolution of writing materials, administrative systems, and cultural practices of Kerala. By contextualizing manuscripts within broader historical narratives—such as governance, war and diplomacy, education and healthcare, economy, and art and culture—the museum transforms fragile archival records into accessible historical evidence for scholars and the general public alike. Modern exhibition techniques, including digital displays and interpretative panels, enhance user engagement while ensuring the physical safety of the original manuscripts.

Beyond its exhibition role, the Palm Leaf Manuscript Museum contributes significantly to **awareness creation, heritage education, and research facilitation**. It highlights the importance of scientific preservation, digitization, and documentation of palm leaf manuscripts, emphasizing their relevance in contemporary scholarship. As a specialized museum devoted entirely to palm leaf records, it represents a progressive approach to manuscript conservation by bridging traditional knowledge systems with modern archival and museological practices.

Exhibits and Thematic Galleries

The museum is organized into **eight galleries**:

- History of Writing
- Land and People
- Administration
- War and Peace
- Education and Health
- Economy
- Art and Culture
- Mathilakom Records

Storage & Protection

Controlled display cases: Manuscripts on display are kept in aerated glass cases with humidity control and pest protection.

The bulk of the collection, not exhibited publicly, is **kept upstairs in dedicated storage areas** where strict precautions limit access to authorised personnel to avoid damage.

Transliteration & context: Each manuscript comes with plaques, transliterations (ancient scripts into modern Malayalam/English), QR codes, and explanatory material to make the content accessible without handling the originals.

Conservation Methods

Pre-treatment prior to storage: Leaves are traditionally boiled, dried, and treated with natural oils (like citronella/lemongrass oil) to repel insects and strengthen fibers,

Regular monitoring: Climate conditions and pest infestations are monitored to slow decay.

Digitisation workflows: Scanning and digital archiving help reduce the need to handle originals and make content broadly accessible, though this work is ongoing.

Analysis and Discussion

Palm-Leaf Manuscripts and Preservation

The palm leaves used as writing material in Kerala are naturally fragile substances that face environmental risks from humidity and light exposure and insect attacks. Traditional knowledge together with locally available organic substances enabled the development of particular preservation techniques. Palm leaf manuscript preservation required the application of organic substances including neem oil and citronella oil as a fundamental preservation step. The application of oils functioned as a protective measure against insects and fungi which otherwise could harm the manuscript material.

Wrapping and Storage

The palm leaves underwent text inscription before receiving a cloth wrapping. This wrapping cloth served two purposes: it shielded the manuscript from exposure to dust and dirt and light while also providing protective padding against physical harm. The manuscript boxes served as protective containers designed to shield manuscripts against environmental hazards. The chosen containers served their purpose because they combined durable materials with protective properties against external elements.

Embracing Digitization

The current phase of manuscript preservation has witnessed a profound shift with the advent of digitization. By converting manuscripts into digital formats, libraries and archives can ensure the long-term preservation of the content, while allowing wider access to scholars, researchers, and the general public. Integration with Kerala University's planned manuscript research centre indicates future research potential. The major benefits of digitization include: Reduced physical handling, Long-term preservation and Reproduction and sharing.

Cultural and Educational Value

The manuscripts are exhibited and enhanced with commentary, translations, and interactive interfaces, allowing users to in new and engaging ways. These virtual exhibits help preserve manuscripts by reducing physical handling and provide a platform for showcasing rare and fragile texts to a global audience (Rajan, 2021).

The digital storytelling formats bring historical context and cultural significance to the forefront, helping audiences understand the importance of the manuscripts and their relevance to contemporary life.

The users can "flip through" palm-leaf manuscripts or "walk through" ancient scriptoria, experiencing historical spaces in a virtual environment. These innovations not only enhance public engagement but also contribute to preserving manuscripts by reducing the physical handling of fragile materials.

Sukrtindra Oriental Research Institute, Thrissur

The **Sukrtindra Oriental Research Institute** is an important centre for Indological studies and manuscript preservation in Kerala. Established in 1971 by His Holiness Shrimad Sudhindra Tirtha Swamiji of the **Shri Kashi Math Samsthan**, the Institute aims to promote the study of **Sanskrit, Vedic literature, Indian philosophy, and traditional knowledge systems**. It is recognised as a research centre for Sanskrit by both **Mahatma Gandhi University and the University of Kerala**, reflecting its academic standing in the field of oriental studies.

The National Mission for Manuscripts, Delhi (Government of India) has identified the Manuscript repository of this Institute to be one of the important repositories of Kerala.

There are about 2000 manuscripts available and almost 1402 have already been catalogued. The collection includes Sanskrit Manuscripts in Devanagari Script and others in Malayalam, Kannada, Tulu and Telugu scripts.

The catalogue of manuscripts has already been published, copies of which are available. The catalogued manuscripts cover the following subjects : Vedas, Ithihasa, Purana, Dharmasastra, Tantra, Mantra, Yantra, Stotra, Darsana, Kavya, Nataka, Champu, Kosa, Vratna, Vyakarana, Jyotisha, Vaidya, Niti, Kama, Sangita etc.



The Institute has been engaged in collecting manuscripts from individuals and institutions, identifying them and preserving them. A number of persons have donated their manuscripts to the Institute. The Institute welcomes donations of manuscripts from those who possess them so that they can be preserved for the benefit of the posterity. Currently digitalization of the manuscripts is in progress.

Aims & Objectives

The main objective of the Institute is to promote study and research in Oriental learning with special emphasis on Indological subjects like Sanskrit, Indian Philosophy, Culture, Literature, History, Arts, Architecture and so on, and thus to contribute towards the preservation and maintenance of India's rich cultural and spiritual heritage.

- To facilitate and advance the study and research in Sanskrit and other branches of oriental learning.
- To promote scientific methods of research by academic programmes etc for preparing students for higher qualifications in Sanskrit etc
- To establish reference library and resource centre for the benefit of students and scholars in Oriental studies.
- To prepare, compile and publish books and periodicals, and to bring out critical editions of ancient texts in Sanskrit and other Oriental studies.
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- To take up research schemes, execute projects and initiate such other programmes for the propagation of the objectives of the Institute.
- To institute professorships, fellowships and studentships for pursuing oriental studies.
- To cooperate with other organizations including Universities, Government and other agencies for achieving the objectives mentioned above.

Projects

- Transcribing, editing and publishing of rare manuscripts.
- Collecting and preserving manuscripts.
- Publishing more books on indological subjects.
- Expansion of library and computerisation
- To develop the Dept. of Vastuvidya into a National Institute of Vastuvidya.
- To collect recordings of the pravachans made by our Dharmagurus in various parts of India and also to publish them in Book form.
- Publication of rare manuscripts in Tantra and Mantra.
- To conduct intensive certificate course in Indian History and Culture.
- To conduct short term Courses in Vedas, Darshanas and Bhagavat Gita.
- To conduct periodical spoken Sanskrit Courses
- Research project on History of Gowda Saraswat Brahmin Community
- Research project on History of Kashi Math and Guru Parampara
- Research project on Study of G S B Temples
- Setting up of Permanent Photo Gallery – Hall of Fame (Kashi Math and Guru Parampara)
- Setting up of Reference Library (Books and other materials on G S B Community, Kashi Math and Guru Parampara)

Collections & Manuscript Repository

The Institute houses a reference library with around 13,000 books and journals in Sanskrit, Malayalam, English, Hindi, Tamil, and other Indian languages, covering subjects such as the Vedas, Puranas, Upanishads, Vedanta, Ayurveda, Jyotisha, and Indian history and culture.

Preservation & Digitisation

The Institute continues to engage in collection, identification, and preservation of manuscripts donated by individuals and other institutions. Its initiative to digitise and transcribe manuscripts aims to protect fragile texts from deterioration and make their contents more accessible. Several significant works such as Sabdabhedaprakasa and Vrttaratnakara have already been transcribed and published.

Sukrtindra Oriental Research Institute plays a dual role as both a preserver of traditional manuscript heritage and a study centre for classical Indian knowledge systems. Its recognition by national manuscript preservation authorities highlights its contribution to safeguarding Kerala's intellectual past and supporting ongoing scholarly engagement.

Guruvayur Devaswom Library, Thrissur

Guruvayur Devaswom library has a grand collection of Ramayanas, including those written as palm-leaf manuscripts. Devaswom has a well-equipped religious library with a wide range of books on religion, philosophy, art and culture. There are hundreds of rare palm-leaf manuscripts in the reference section. A wide variety of journals and most of the leading newspapers are available in the reading room attached to the library. The library is functioning in the eastern block of Sathram building.

Library New Block was formed in 1975. Sri. Puthur Unnikrishnan was the first librarian. Not only religious books, but wide range of books on Science, Biography, Culture, Literature, Philosophy, Art, History, Geography and Fiction both in English and Malayalam Literature also available. There is a wide collection of Poetry in Malayalam and Children's Literature. Books in Sanskrit and Hindi are also available. library is planning to have automation facility. Going to start CAS and SDI services so as to raise the library to an Information Center. Rare manuscripts inscribed in palm leaf and books for clarifying doubts are specialties of the library. It is being utilized by researchers and scholars. The reading room attached to the library supplies dailies, weeklies and monthlies in various languages.

Guruvayur Devaswom library has a grand collection of Ramayanas, including those written as palm-leaf manuscripts. There are 28 palm-leaf manuscripts and 800 copies of more than 30 different Ramayanas. A wide collection ranging from Adhyatma Ramayana, Valmiki Ramayana, Kamba Ramayana, Vasistha Ramayana, Kannassa Ramayana and Agastya Ramayana to Mappila Ramayana and children's Ramayana are here. Chithra Ramayana written on palm-leaf manuscripts is remarkable. The gramophone record of Ramavatara Charita is another attractive piece here.

Objectives & Services

- Preservation and promotion of religious, philosophical and cultural literature
- Supports scholarship, research and learning.
- Providing access to numerous manuscripts and temple documents related to Guruvayoor temple.
- Reference and consultation of original palm leaf manuscripts and non book materials thereby getting visual treat.
- Digitization of these rare documents for easy access and online availability.

Collections & Manuscript Holdings

Its collection comprises **about 20,000 books** covering religion, philosophy, art, culture, and literature in multiple languages such as **Sanskrit, Malayalam, English, Hindi, and Tamil**.

A notable sub-collection includes **28 palm-leaf Ramayana manuscripts** and about **800 printed copies of over 30 different versions** of the Ramayana, ranging from Adhyatma and Valmiki to Kannassa and Mappila Ramayanas. The Chithra Ramayana, a richly illustrated palm-leaf manuscript, is among its remarkable treasures.

Preservation & Digitisation Efforts

Recognising the vulnerability of palm leaves to environmental decay and pests, the Guruvayur Devaswom Library has initiated a digitisation project to preserve its old and rare collections for future generations. This effort involves scanning and digitally archiving materials to reduce handling of fragile originals and to safeguard textual heritage. The project is currently ongoing.

The Guruvayur Devaswom Library stands as a **unique hybrid institution** combining a religiously oriented reference library with a traditional manuscript repository. Its rare palm-leaf collections, especially the diverse Ramayana manuscripts, make it an important centre for those studying Indian epics, temple culture, and manuscript traditions in Kerala.

Central Archives, Thiruvananthapuram

The Kerala State Archives has in its custody a rich and enormous collection of documents dating back to 1424 A.D. These include Palm leaves, Bamboo splints, Copper plates, Paper records and Microfilms. These records are in various languages such as English Malayalam, Old Malayalam, Tamil, Vattezhuthu, Kolezhuthu, and Malayanma etc.

The Kerala State Central Archives functions as the principal archival institution for government documents, historical records, administrative files, and rare manuscripts. The archive houses a diverse range of materials: colonial-era correspondence, land revenue documents, maps, palm-leaf folios, and judicial records. These records are critical for historical, legal, and socio-economic research. Preservation at the Central Archives follows scientific protocols. Records are stored in climate-controlled vaults, and

materials undergo deacidification, fumigation, and microfilming. In recent years, the archive has initiated large-scale digitisation to safeguard fragile records and facilitate remote access. Metadata creation and digital cataloguing have been key components of this transition.

The important Travancore Archives & record series are mentioned below:

- Cover system files (1728-1913)
- Revenue and Devaswom sections (1908-1940)
- Public Works Department files (1904-1938)
- Development section files (1921-1956)
- Travancore Archaeological Series, Vols I – VIII, Trivandrum, (1910-1938)
- Legislative and Assembly section (1919-1949)
- Judicial section files (1904-1949)
- Local government section files (1921-1949)
- Madras files
- Maps and plans

The Central Archives, Trivandrum one of the Regional offices of this Department has in its possession a prestigious collection of Palm leaf records which is the largest one in Asia. This consists of more than 11000 churunas (palm leaf records kept in bundles each of which consists of about 2004-2005 for the scientific preservation, indexing and digitization of these records. Some important record series are mentioned below.

Palm leaf records

- Oluku (These are land records showing the extent of land and ownership details. Huzur Oluku, Taluk oluku, Nilam oluku, Puthuval oluku etc;)(1802-1837)
- Vilangipper records (These records show the details of land given as gift) (1837-1839)
- Huzur khajana eradavu (These are treasury accounts) (1818-1873)
- Pathivinpadi anu (These records relate to the assessment of tax (1818-1839)
- Ayakkettu (The details of land in possession of each tax payer is shown in these records) (1802-1939)
- Thandapperu (The details of tax assessed on each tax payer is shown) (1839)
- Huzur thirattu (Records showing the revenue receipt and expenditure of the state). (1798-1873)
- Taluk thirattu & Jamabandi rayasam (Records showing the revenue receipt and expenditure of each taluk) (1819-1870)
- Huzur rayasam (Orders issued by Diwan on administrative matters) (1844-1876).
- Boundary disputes (Correspondence between the Diwan of Travancore and Cochin on boundary disputes and certain letters sent to the British Resident on the above matter.) (1793-1873)

- High Court records (Judgements and decrees issued by the Hon. High Court of Travancore.) (1816-1873)
- Records of Head Sircar Vakil (Judgements issued in connection with adoption, family pension etc;) (1814-1877)
- Alleppy port records (The details of export and import of food grains etc;) (1812-1873)
- Nittus (Royal orders and proclamations issued to Heads of departments on administrative matters) (1756-1873)
- Mathilakom records (These records relates to the Sree Padmanabhaswami temple. Travancore was a temple-state. Hence the administration of the state and temple were interrelated. These records contain valuable information on state matters.)

Paper records

1. Kandezhuthu records of Travancore (Survey records) (1891-1910)
2. Ayakettu memo (Guidelines for imposing tax)
3. Jamabandi rayasam (Correspondence relating revenue matters) (1874-1906)
4. Kandezhuthu eraili records (Details of land given as gift with tax exemption) (1895-1905)
5. Judicial records (1865-1905)
6. Huzur treasury (1871-1908)
7. Ponnumvila case records (Land acquisition records) (1889-1907)
8. Travancore Government gazettes (1862-1949)
9. Cochin government gazettes (1867-1848)
10. Travancore-cochin Government gazettes (1949-1956)
11. Kerala government gazettes (1956 onwards)
12. Fort Saint George gazettes (1833-1948)
13. Mysore Govt. gazettes (1908-1922)
14. Regulations and Proclamations of Travancore (1835-1945)
15. Administration reports of Travancore (1892-1940)
16. Almanac (The Travancore Directories) (1849-1949)
17. Committee reports (1912-1945)
18. Census reports of Travancore (1891-1941)
19. Census Reports of Travancore-Cochin (1951)
20. Show-case records (The important Palm leaf and Paper records relating to the social, cultural, economic and other incidents in Travancore history)

Objectives & Services

- To scientifically preserve official manuscripts and non-book materials related to government.
- To acquire various records and integrate into the archives
- Digitize rare and fragile manuscripts to improve accessibility

- Awareness on Kerala's administrative and cultural heritage through exhibition and publications
- To conserve palm leaf, maps treaties, copper plates and old testaments
- Preservation through deacidification, lamination, fumigation and binding
- Guidance and reference assistance to scholars
- Training in archival science

Conservation & Access

The Archives plays a central role in the scientific conservation of rare documents, including climate-controlled storage and cataloguing. Access to these records for scholarly research is regulated; interested researchers can apply for permission to consult materials in the reading room during official hours.

Because the traditional palm-leaf materials are highly fragile — vulnerable to humidity, pests, and decay — many of the Records Department's ongoing efforts focus on **indexing, preservation, and transliteration** of ancient scripts into modern Malayalam and English. Where possible, digitisation is being pursued to protect originals and facilitate research.

The Central Archives, Thiruvananthapuram, stands at the **intersection of heritage preservation and historical scholarship** in Kerala. Its unparalleled collection of palm-leaf manuscripts offers an **irreplaceable window into the administrative, legal, social, and economic life of South India from the medieval through the colonial period**. Through both its archival functions and the public engagement afforded by the Palm Leaf Manuscript Museum, the Archives plays a pivotal role in safeguarding Kerala's documentary heritage for future generations.

Conclusion

These libraries are not only focused on preserving the manuscripts but are also working to make them more accessible to scholars, researchers, and the general public through digital platforms. They often struggle with challenges such as funding, infrastructure gaps, and lack of trained staff. The Palm Leaf Manuscript Museum, Thiruvananthapuram, stands as a landmark initiative in cultural preservation. By curating and showcasing fragile manuscripts with modern technology, it bridges the gap between intellectual and cultural legacy of Kerala.

Conflict Of Interest

The authors have no relevant competing interests to declare in relation to the content of this article.

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