

THE IMPORTANCE OF PALM-LEAF MANUSCRIPTS AS A LITERARY AND LINGUISTIC RESEARCH TOOL: A CASE STUDY OF SELECTED PALM-LEAF MANUSCRIPTS

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Introduction

There are plenty of resources available in today's libraries to conduct research, and there is no information access barrier either. Under this state of affairs, most academic libraries tend to develop their secondary resources as much as possible by spending their entire allocations of funding on these. But many of these are secondary resources and edited texts based on several primary texts. Palm-leaf manuscripts are a major step in the path of development of literary and linguistic trends, and they give us insights into the social life of medieval people and their beliefs and attitudes and their ways of life. These manuscripts were an influential medium for the transmission of knowledge, and culture of the ancient Sri Lankan society. Preserving and conserving these manuscripts would enable them to be used as historical document for literary and linguistic research purposes. This study explores the types of research that can be conducted by using these palm leaves as primary sources.

Objectives

The main objective of this study is to identify the types of literary and linguistic research that can be conducted by using these manuscripts. The other objectives are to identify the subject areas on which palm leaf manuscripts are written in various

languages, to find out the punctuation used in the palm leaves, to study the barriers that affect the conduct of research with the palm-leaves, and finally the reasons for the development of palm leaf collections in academic libraries.

Methodology

The findings of the paper are entirely based on quantitative data gathered in the form of direct and indirect interviews conducted mainly with subject experts in the social sciences and humanities. Library palm-leaf collections are also used to support the findings.

Discussion

The following subject areas can be considered as the major themes on which palm-leaf manuscript have been written. Mainly Buddhist canon -*Pali Tripitaka* Texts, *Sutta*, Sinhalese literature - prose and verse, *Jatakas* etc. History- Demarcating boundaries, incidents, Tradition, Grammar and Lexicography- Prosody, Art- rules followed by artists and preparation of paint, Indigenous medicine for all kind of deceases, Veterinary medicine, Science, Astrology, Demonology, Arts, Architecture, Geography, Folklore- Drama and song, Non Buddhist Materials, Demography- deaths and births registrations written in various languages. (Davids, 1947)

In these manuscripts there are a few common marks of punctuations used in the texts. These marks show the identity of the usage of punctuation in the Sinhalese alphabet, and help identify the ancient bibliographers work, and provides an opportunity for the study of professional scribes of ancient Ceylon. Some of them are named as *Kakapada*, *Hamsapada*, *Kundaliya*, *Orahana*, and *Peyiyala*. All these indicate the various meanings of the text.

Though the palm-leaf manuscripts are untouched, uncatalogued, unclean and uncared for in the libraries it is obvious that they are important for the research needs of the country. Due to these reasons students or researchers of Sri Lankan studies still confront practical problems related to the use of material contained in the literary documents. A Sri Lankan anthropologist says, "the best sources especially for the study of the recent history of the Buddhist order in Ceylon are to be found in monastic libraries of varying sizes scattered throughout the island. But as they are so scattered and are not maintained on professional lines it is completely beyond the capacity of a single student even if he has access to them to study their rich collections within a reasonable period of time". (Malalgoda, 1976) Though some consider that these have only exhibition value and are irrelevant, important details are contained in these oriental manuscripts. Another fact is when a beginner using the Manuscript should learn the text variations, punctuations and the method of writing on a palm leave before undertaking a critical or deep analysis of the study.

So far not even tentative surveys have been undertaken to ascertain how much of this valuable cultural treasure of palm-leaf manuscripts in Sri Lanka have been printed. In some instances the surveys could be handled by the pool together with various scholars engaged in academic research on the multifarious aspects of the manuscripts (Samuel, 1996) in the Sinhalese language. It would enable them to exchange among themselves ideas and knowledge about the research in manuscriptology undertaken by the various linguistic communities of this nation. Some scribes include bibliographical information in regard to the books. This information is very useful for both historical and literary purposes though books that belong to these periods are anonymous. Also a researcher, who is interested in textual criticism or critical editing, should have more opportunity to convert unpublished texts into published texts. There would be extraneous material included in the main text of these manuscripts. It always creates a good opportunity to identify the extraneous materials, which are included in these manuscripts by comparing the original texts of these collections. As more than half of the collection available in the country has not yet been printed there could be manuscripts, which are the sole representative of the original work of any subject. It may have depicted newer paths than the so far identified steams of the palm-leaf manuscripts. The regional variations of the texts and relating to such differences the regional distinctions of languages, scientific history of the language, cultures, beliefs and other norms can be identified and such surveys and researchers would make new thinking

in areas that have already published referring the palm- leaves.

It is well known that academic libraries are the places from where knowledge is disseminated. These libraries create opportunities to conduct research, and generate learning and new thoughts. Therefore, these specialized collections of manuscripts and related material, which have been gathered over a long period of time for the purposes of preserving the records of civilization and making those records available for research, are very important. Why does one need to develop a worthy and nationally important palm-leaf collection in academic libraries? It is to enhance the strength of being, of a collection, while accumulating its value for the purposes of study and research. The following methods can be applied to develop the collection of palm leaves in the academic libraries. Most often manuscripts are typically acquired through generosity of local donors and through purchases. In this context, the libraries have a major role to play to safeguard the existence of such material. The donors' intention in presenting the collections to a library is for their safe-keeping. Thus it becomes a responsibility of the librarians to discover other such collections that have come under personal custody. Therefore the librarians need to investigate the important, valuable, unpublished manuscript collections of palm leaves which are hidden in some places in Sri Lanka. Another method is to publicize need of palm leaves through paper advertisements; these can be acquired as gifts, last wills or as purchases. Moreover, access can also be gained

for confiscated material through the airport customs. However, responsibility rests with librarians, cataloguers, bibliographers, archivists, and scholars to prepare descriptive catalogues, indexes, and bibliographies as an academic exercise in these academic institutions. The usage of modern technology could also apply to transfer information without less fatigue for the original manuscripts.

Conclusion

The accumulation and the rehabilitation of manuscripts become very important as they are the genuine sources of original texts of Sri Lanka. It is vital for us to search for ways and means to safeguard the manuscripts, to prepare catalogues, indexes and bibliographies in order to invite research. At the same time, unavailability of policy statements for preservation of palm-leaves in the academic libraries was also a critical problem to be dealt with.

References

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