

The Contribution provided by University of Kelaniya for the preservation of Palm Leaf Manuscripts in Sri Lanka

W.M. Hiran Madhusanka Weerabahu (Research Officer)

Palm Leaf Manuscript Study and Research Library - Faculty of Social Sciences

University of Kelaniya - Sri Lanka

I. INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka: a country which has an ancient history on writing traditions preserves its uniqueness through the palm leaf manuscript. It can be considered that palm leaf manuscript had contributed in a massive scale in order to present the local historical knowledge from generation to generation. As a result of the invasion of European nations and the introduction of printing media, a clear degradation had been taken place in the writing tradition of palm leaf manuscript. Yet, though the printing media was introduced not that it could completely replace the use of palm leaf manuscripts until two more centuries. However, gradually the “paper” could replace the use of palm leaf manuscripts and consequently the attention held by palm leaf manuscript was diverted in to paper. by this time a great amount of palm leaf manuscripts were owned by ancient temples and secret personalities. Thus, with the degradation of the value possessed by the palm leaf manuscripts gradually they were destroyed. In order to get rid of this destruction, several parties had been engaged to preserve palm leaf manuscript. Yet, many of those had been limited only for bibliographies.

Therefore, for quite a long period of time, the need to implement a standard methodology to preserve the palm leaf manuscript of Sri Lanka had been an important concern in the context of Sri Lankan ancient history. This task had been easier with the invention of digitization which is done with the aid of computerized technologies. This digitization can be considered as a very cost effective and an efficient as a very preserve the palm leaf manuscript.

II. PRESERVATION

In ancient Sri Lanka the predominant medium of writing was palm leaf manuscripts. Since Anuradapura kingdom for almost all the writing palm leaf manuscript were used. The religious books, wamsakathā etc, were written on palm leaf manuscripts.

However two distinct methods can be identifies in the context of palm leaf writing. Those are;

- *Mahāsampradāya*
- *Chūlasampradāya (Ranasinghe,2010:XXI)*

Mahāsampradāya is similar to great tradition of palm leaf manuscripts and *chūlasampradāya* similar to small tradition. However the religious books sutta, grammar books, jāta stories and the other lengthy descriptive sources belong to the *mahāsampradāya*. Commonly those are big books. The books which belong to the fields of medicine,(human and animal) astrology “amulets and chants, snake physician, black magic books etc, are categorized under *chūlasampradāya*. Those are small books in the palm, leaf manuscripts culture in Sri Lanka.

Though the palm leaf manuscripts consist of immense knowledge on various disciplines in the modern era, this valuable resource is rarely being used for references. Neither the palm leaf manuscripts are being newly produced. The main version behind that is the popularity of printed media over palm leaves. With the Portuguese invasion which took place in 1505 AD, the popularity of papers as a printed media rapidly increased. This as a result, the method of writing palm leaf manuscript which had been coordinated for more than 22 centuries was degraded.

Insect hazards, environmental hazards, Ignorance are few facts which directly affect the derogation of the palm leaf manuscripts. Though the man should be the person who should be the main protector of the palm leaf manuscripts, in today’s context man had been the main reason behind the palm leaf manuscript derogation. Following descriptive factors can be identified as main causes for the palm leaf manuscript derogation:

- Biological Factors: Fungi, Algae, Bacteria, Mosses, Insects, Man
- Physical Factors: Humidity, Light, Fire, Temperature, Water, Usage
- Chemical Factors: Liquidity, Gasses and Other Environmental Pollution
- Natural Factors: Expiration of lifetime of palm leaf manuscripts (*Lagamuwa,2006:325*)

Though whatever the aforementioned factors contribute, ultimately it leads to the derogation of palm leaf manuscripts. Thus, there is an important need to preserve these manuscripts in order to protect them for the future. There are several traditional methodologies which are being done in order to preserve these manuscripts.

- Traditional Simple Preservation Methodology
- Modern Scientific Preservation Methodology (*Allepola,2007:15*)

Since the first step of writing the manuscripts and until the end, several preservation techniques are being implemented when using these methodologies. When following these steps, traditional simple preservation methodology is being used. (*Lagamuwa,2006:325*) Yet, with the time being this preservation technique seems to be very ineffective as a result of the expiration of the lifetime of the technique as well as with the influence of other external factors. Therefore, the need to invent new techniques to preserve the manuscripts had been an important concern. As a consequence, modern Scientific Preservation Methodology is implemented.

Moreover, there are several techniques which are introduced as Modern Scientific Preservation Methodologies to preserve palm leaf manuscripts. In the early days, “Microfilming” was one of the most popular methods. Yet, in today’s society Microfilming had lost its popularity and instead of that, digitization is being used. Therefore, many of those who are engaged in the preservation of palm leaf manuscripts are using the digitization method.

In modern days, there are projects which are being done in order to preserve the palm leaf manuscripts. Among them, “**The Palm Leaf Manuscript Study and Research Library**”(PLMSRL) which is affiliated to the Faculty of Social Sciences in University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka can be regarded as a predominant project with a wide scope of operation. Even in this library, the digitization method is being used.

The Palm Leaf Manuscript Study and Research Library does an immense service in order to preserve the palm leaf manuscripts for the future. In a much more precise way, it can be interpreted as an investment for the generations to come. In the present day context, this greatly aids the researchers who are studying about the ancient history. Yet the tendency to use the library seems to be very less, probably because palm leaf manuscripts were not in use for a long period of time. Even the inability to recognize the archaic language mentioned in the manuscripts can be another cause for not using palm leaf manuscripts for references. Thus, now a trend to refer the palm leaf manuscripts is growing in academics. Therefore, under this situation the implementation of the palm leaf manuscript study and research library can be considered as an answer to the current needs of the academic disciplines. Many researchers from University of Kelaniya find this library very productive as far as it solves their problem of not having enough primary sources for their academic researches. Reasons for that are;

- The ability to retrieve information from one place
- The ability to compare the manuscripts with primary sources
- Though there are several copies, all can be compared.
- If there are any unclear sections in the primary sources, they can be clarified using the manuscripts.
- The identical copy of the manuscripts can be obtained.
- Easy access to research materials through the help of computing technologies.

Sometimes the researchers have to go in order to collect the palm leaf manuscripts. But nobody can judge about the practical side of this. The reason why they have to travel far is that unknown people. Due to the above mentioned facts; our university is officially bound to collect information and protect the palm leaf manuscripts. Because of the facilities needed are provided here in our palm leaf manuscript library, the need to travel to distant areas to find palm leaf manuscript had been minimized.

The disciplines which are subjected to the studying of this palm leaf manuscripts are wider in scope. Hence, when a researcher is studying about this he has to explore into the depth of all these areas. Mainly it includes the Buddhist sutta, jātaṅka stories and etc. And other way of meditation, eye treatment, asterism, astrology, amulets and chants, charm, demonology, snake physician, black magic books and many more. (*Education Centuary,1969:218*)

III. BENEFITS

Whenever there is an edition to be made on printed books, to compare the information on the books, palm leaf manuscripts can be used. Thus, it will be difficult to travel to distant areas and visit the temples and individuals who own palm leaf manuscripts. Yet, digitization had made this task easier as far as the technologies of internet and email will aid the researcher to retrieve the information from anywhere in the world. Moreover, as a primary source of study palm leaf manuscripts will provide a great assistance. Especially the knowledge belong to *chūlasampradāya* is easier to be gained through the help of palm leaf manuscripts. Hence, this knowledge can be used to publish in new publications and reveal the hidden information of those disciplines.

Furthermore, the researchers who are following fields of Humanities and Social Sciences will be immensely benefited from palm leaf manuscripts. Thus, palm leaf manuscripts are a resource provider to these fields. How the palm leaf manuscripts are made is through the carvings of the letters in the leaves. Gradually these carvings can be faded. The time it takes for degradation of palm leaf manuscripts is quicker than the time it takes to the production of palm leaf manuscripts. However, if the manuscripts are destroyed, then the information on them too will be destroyed. Therefore, the best method is to copy down the manuscripts and preserve them for the future generations to come.

When we consider about the assistance given to the research by palm leaf manuscript book editions can be taken as an example. By now the book “*Mandārapura Puwatha*” is regarded as a precious and a rare book. The edition of this book is done by Rev. Labugama Lankananda thero. But this edition cannot be taken as a complete edition as some verses are incomplete. Hence, this can be a disadvantage for a person who is learning Sri Lankan History. For instance, if the missing verse can be found from palm leaf manuscripts then the book can be completed as an edition. For that either there should be a collection of palm leaf manuscript or a collection of copies of original palm leaf manuscripts. The help given by the palm leaf manuscripts to clear the obscure areas in history and several disciplines of study is massive.

IV. CONCLUSION

Moreover, the most predominated and the ultimate goal of this project is to establish a digital library for palm leaf manuscripts, digitization and classification which belong to several field and which are owned by individuals and temples. Hence it will be more convenient for the researchers. Even now, after granting permission from the Dean of Faculty of Social Sciences, anyone can use this palm leaf manuscript library in University of Kelaniya. Therefore, to conclude it has to be understood that the palm leaf manuscripts are not something to be stored in racks as a traditional inheritance, but it is a source to share in order to understand the value of our proud Sri Lankan history.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Allepola, deepanjani, (2007), *Thalpath Liweema*, Central Cultural Fund, Department of Cultural Affairs, Colombo, Sri Lanka.
- [2]. Ceylon Education, (1969), (*A Book of Education Centaury*), Department of Educational and Cultural Affairs, Sri Lanka.
- [3]. Kumaraswami, ānanda, (2010), *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art*, Department of National Museums, Colombo, Sri Lanka.
- [4]. Lagamuwa, āriya, (2006), *Palm Leaf Manuscript Culture in Sri Lanka*, Department of Cultural Affairs, Colombo. Sri Lanka.
- [5]. Ranasinghe, piyadāsa, (2010), *Foreword of the An Annotated Bibliography of Palm Leaf Manuscripts in the Library in the Colombo national museum*, Hettige Nilantha Indika, Department of National Museums, Colombo. Sri Lanka.