

# Documentary Heritage of UNESCO and Sanskrit Manuscripts

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## Abstract

UNESCO created the MOW register in 1992 to list the documentary heritage which met the criteria of world significance. The criteria are influence, time, place, people, subject, form and style, social value, integrity, and rarity of the material. India too occupies a distinct position in documentation account as it holds important clues to the intellectual traditions. It can be categorized as (1) Sanskrit Manuscripts, (2) Documents submitted by India and (3) Documents that hold matters about India. With state-of-the-art technology, wider accessibility of the items inscribed on the Register is ensured. Here it examines the Indian heritage recognized and documented globally between 1997 and 2017 with special significance to Sanskrit Manuscripts.

The Śaiva Manuscript, The collection of Ṛgveda Manuscripts, Laghukālacakratantrarāja ṭīkā (vimalaprabhā), Śāntināthacarita and Maitreyavyākaraṇa are the Sanskrit Manuscripts included in Memory of World. Vedic chanting, Kūṭiyāṭṭam and Rāmalīlā, are also recognized as the Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO.

**Keywords:** UN Documentary Heritage, Indian documents, Sanskrit Manuscripts, Memory of World Register

## Introduction

jalādrakṣettailādrakṣecchithilabandhanāt |  
mūrkhahaste na māṃ dadyāditi vadati pustakam ||

Above is an anonymous verse frequently found at the end of Sanskrit Manuscripts which means protect me from water, protect me from oil and protect me from loose-binding, do not give me to the hands of those who do not understand my value, thus says the grantha or book.

It is a lament to the readers for the protection of invaluable treasure of knowledge for the sustenance of future generations. In this context, it is a matter of pleasure that UNESCO initiated the Memory of World (MOW) to protect the documentary heritage of humanity. MOW is a collection of documents, Manuscripts, oral traditions, and archival holdings of worldwide import. Manuscripts have artifactual value and convey diversity of information. The unfathomable depth of the Indian knowledge system is evident from the collection of more than five million manuscripts in India alone. Now some of them have a global presence in this digital era as a result of the stupendous effort that has been put worldwide into their preservation.

### **Significance of Documentary Heritage**

Every revolutionary realizes the importance of developing pride in the past among the masses. And the past could be explored only if it is documented and preserved properly. Today there is a mounting demand worldwide for traditional knowledge. For thousands of years, Indian knowledge got recorded on palm leaves, which were readily available once. These records reflect India's vast intellectual inheritance, and the diversity of language, people, and culture. These kinds of documentary heritage are owned not only by India but by the entire mankind. So it is high time to preserve these endangered treasures. It is in this scenario that UNESCO, with its Memory of World (MOW) programme, intervened to safeguard the documentary heritage against all kinds of negligence, and deliberate devastation. MOW register created in 1992 lists documentary heritage that met the criteria of world significance. One of its regional projects named 'Palm-leaf Manuscripts' helped to safeguard and digitize more than 100,000 palm-leaf containing century-old traditional knowledge across South East Asia including India.

Indian Manuscripts occupy a distinct position as they hold important clues to intellectual and religious traditions. These Manuscripts are spread all over the world and the compositions are in languages like Sanskrit, Prakrit, and many regional languages. They bring forth much information about a region as they capture the pulse of a bygone era. In India, to document and protect this precious wealth, National Mission for Manuscript (NMM) was created in 2003 under the Ministry of Tourism and Culture. NMM has taken the initiative to nominate Indian Manuscripts for inclusion in UNESCO's Memory of World Register.

### **Role of UNESCO in preserving Documentary Heritage**

MOW executes the programme through existing institutions at the national and regional levels. In connection with the administration of compiling registers, there is a three-tier link at the world, regional and national levels. In the National Register individual countries set up their documentary heritage register. NMM records the manuscripts of India. In the Regional Register nations within a region compile a register to list documentary heritage integral to the collective memory of a particular region. Among the five UNESCO regions, India belongs to the Asia Pacific region. In the World Record Register, the documents are compiled at the international level. The value of the register lies in its selectivity and its indication of priorities. The decision as to the choice of materials for inclusion in the World Register is subject to appraisal standards that have been decided and agreed upon by the International Advisory Committee (IAC). The criteria in short are influence, time, place, people, subject, form and style, social value, integrity, and rarity of the material. Thus the MOW recognizes the documentary heritage of international, regional, and national significance and maintains registers of the same, and awards a logo to identify it.

### **Indian Actuality in UNESCO's Initiative**

An attempt was made to identify Indian presence in MOW by searching 427 documents that got registered between 1997 and 2017. It was observed that the Indian initiative resulted in the inclusion of nine Manuscripts; amongst which five are in Sanskrit. They can be summarized in the categories of Sanskrit Manuscripts, Non- Sanskrit Manuscripts, and documents that contain matters related to India, but entered by other countries as shown below.

Documents submitted by India between 1997 and 2017		Documents that hold matters about India
Sanskrit Manuscripts	Non- Sanskrit Documents	
The Śaiva Manuscript 2005	The IAS Tamil Medical Manuscripts collections 1997	The Collection of the Al-Biruni Institute of Oriental Studies 1997 submitted by Uzbekistan
The collection of Ṛgveda Manuscripts 2007	Archives of Dutch East India Company 2003	Tanjur 2011 submitted by Magnolia
Laghukālacakratantrarāja ṭikā (Vimalaprabhā) 2011	Tarikh-E-Khandan-E-Timuriya 2011	Niśvāsataṭvasaṃhitā 2013 submitted by Nepal
Śāntināthacarita 2013	Gilgit Manuscripts 2017	The Indian Ocean Tsunami Archives 2017 submitted by Indonesia & Srilanka
Maitreyavyākaraṇa 2017		Album of Indian and Persian Miniatures from the 16th through the 18th Century and Specimens of Persian Calligraphy 2017 submitted by Russian Federation

## Sanskrit Manuscripts

### The Śaiva Manuscript

The Śaiva Manuscript on palm leaves of the French Institute of Pondicherry (IFP) is declared a 'National Treasure of India' (vijñānanidhi). These are texts on Śaivasiddhānta a religious tradition that existed in the 10<sup>th</sup> century and represented the Tāntrik doctrines. The mantra and ritual manuals, devotional hymns, and legends of holy places are some of the topics dealt with in this work, which were unknown to most scholars till 1950. The collection unites a body of material from which the still unwritten history of a major religious movement may be reconstructed that was spread across the Indian subcontinent.

### The collection of Ṛgveda Manuscripts

Among the 28000 Manuscripts of Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (BORI), Pune, 30 manuscripts are of Ṛgvedic evinces. Among the 30 manuscripts in Sanskrit, one is written on birch bark with śāradā script, and the other on paper in Devanagari. Sixteen of the manuscripts contain the Sāyanabhāṣya. Five of the manuscripts contain the Padapāṭha. In the history of Manuscript collections, the availability of a complete and intact text is a rare achievement. These are preserved carefully for the last 90 years. The collection called ṛgvedasaṃhitā, ṛgvedasaṃhitāpadapāṭha, and ṛgvedasaṃhitābhāṣya is a valuable aid to interpret and understand Ṛgveda. Prof. F. Max Muller used a Manuscript in this collection as a source for his edition of the Ṛgveda, first published in 1849.

**Laghukālacakratantrarāja ṭīkā (vimalaprabhā)**

The Asiatic Society, Kolkata has the Vimalaprabhā, commentary on the Laghukālacakratantra on palm-leaf folios. These are unique and distinguished pieces as the most important commentary of kālacakratantra. The text discusses Astrology and Astronomy along with a lesser known and rare wisdom of svarodaya – the ‘science of breath’. Ayurveda occupies a prominent position in this work besides many philosophical concepts. Measurement of the globe is given in a detailed manner. Techniques of a variety of yantras – a kind of technological machine and device for the building of castles are developed in the text. This Sanskrit work with Gaudi – Bengali and Newari script is divided into five pāṭalā viz. lokadhātupāṭalā adhyātmapāṭalā, abhiṣekapāṭalā, sādhanāpāṭalā and jñānapāṭalā. The Vimalaprabhā is significant because it is a treatise complete in itself and encapsulates a wide variety of themes and domains of learning.

**Śāntināthacarita**

This Manuscript is donated to the Lalbhai Dalpatbhai Institute of Indology, Ahmedabad by Muni Shri Pujya Vijayji in the year 1961. This is a text in Sanskrit written in Devanagari that describes the life and times of Śāntināthacarita, the sixteenth Jain Tirthankara. This work was composed in the late fourteenth century. The author of the work is Ajithaprabhuasuri. It is written on handmade paper and contains 156 folios (312 pages) of texts and illustrations. It also contains ten images about the life of Śāntinātha in the style of Jain paintings from Gujarat. The ink used in the Manuscript is gum lampblack and white paint made from mineral silver. The text illustrates the importance of non-violence, compassion, and friendship. It also emphasizes the importance and conservation of the environment. The total number of manuscripts is four, one original and three copies. Manuscripts have historical, intellectual, and aesthetic significance. There is a universal message of friendship, global peace, and unity with integrity in this narrative. All the illustrations are the rarest of the rare, hence their preservation and protections are necessary for humanity. It is an example of the finest expression in the art of miniature paintings in Manuscripts. These are the best and oldest examples of miniature paintings while the story itself is of lasting value to mankind. The text is in Sanskrit verse of high literary caliber.

**Maitreyavyākaraṇa**

It is possessed by The Asiatic Society, Kolkata. It is about the birth of enlightened Buddha in the future to teach Dharma. It is a very short text with less than a hundred verses written on a palm leaf. It is a manuscript of the Pala period (8-12 century CE) when Buddhist literature faced a transition from the Sthaviravāda to the Mahāyāna school. As per the Mahāyānic concept, Vyākaraṇa signifies the special type of Avadhāna-Literature relating to future Buddha in a particular world.

Vedic chanting, the Sanskrit oral tradition, Kūṭiyāṭṭam, the tradition of Kerala Sanskrit theatre and Rāmalīlā, the traditional performing art that depicts the story of Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa were recognized as the HERITAGE OF HUMANITY by UNESCO.

**Non- Sanskrit Documents****The IAS Tamil Medical Manuscripts collections**

These Tamil Manuscripts are preserved at the Institute of Asian Studies (IAS), Chennai. This documentary heritage is a collection of palm-leaf Manuscripts on the medical practice prevailing in

South India. This collection includes individual Manuscripts concerning the nature and symptoms of diseases, methods of cure, and methods of preparing medicines following the systems of Siddha and Ayurveda.

### **Archives of Dutch East India Company**

About 25 million pages of records of this European trading company have survived in different parts of the world including Chennai in India (The Special Commissioner of Archives and Historical Research, Tamilnadu). It provides information regarding the history of hundreds of Asians and Africans and trading regions. These archives contain thousands of documents written in the language of the regions of the trading posts by local rulers and local traders. For instance, the oldest handwriting in the Tamil language can be found in the archives in the Netherlands. Some of these documents are still recognized and often used as legal proof in court cases. This documentary heritage was submitted by India along with Indonesia, Netherlands, South Africa, and Sri Lanka.

### **TARIKH-E-KHANDAN-E-TIMURIYA**

This Manuscript is preserved by Khuda Bkshi Oriental public library, Patna. This is a Persian Manuscript in Nastaleeq script that deals with the history of Timur and his descendants in Iran and India, including Mughal rulers Babar, Humayun, and Akbar. Mughal art is the peculiarity of this Manuscript. The Tarikh--e Khandan-e-Timuriyah is one of the finest collections of original Mughal paintings prepared in a highly finished style by the foremost painters of Akbar's court at a time when the Mughal art of painting was at its zenith. The manuscript is part of the most precious documentary heritage of the world representing the most exquisite cultural history of the Timurids and their artistic genius which influenced not only India but the world as a whole. Since it is the only extant copy, its loss or any damage caused to it would amount to an irreplaceable loss of a unique heritage.

### **Gilgit Manuscripts**

It is the oldest Manuscript surviving in India and Pakistan. The evolution of Asian and Sanskrit literature, the Buddhist studies including the Lotus sutra form the corpus of this Manuscript. It is written on birch bark in the Buddhist form of Sanskrit in the śāradā script. It also covers a wide range of themes such as Iconography, Philosophy, medicine, and several related areas of life. Apart from the literary significance of these Manuscripts, they also provide examples of fine artwork in the painted wooden covers of the Manuscripts that are found in Kashmir. They mark an important phase in the art of the book in India, for they were seen not merely as records of information but also things of beauty in themselves. The Gilgit Manuscripts are in the possession of the National Archives of India and the Department of Archaeology, Archives and Museums, Jammu and Kashmir.

### **Documents that hold matters about India**

#### **Album of Indian and Persian Miniatures from the 16th through the 18th Century and Specimens of Persian Calligraphy**

The album of Indian and Persian miniatures known as the "St. Petersburg Muraqqa" is a unique collection of art created in the course of the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries by 17 artists of the Mughal and Deccan schools of India, and the Isfahan school of Iran.

### **The Indian Ocean Tsunami Archives**

They are a set of archives in any medium that recorded the event, disaster response, and mostly about rehabilitation and reconstruction regarding the tsunami on December 26, 2004, inflicting 18 countries including India.

### **Tanjur**

It contains a large collection of over 3427 works on ten disciplines created by ancient Indian and Tibetan scientists.

### **Niśvāsātvasaṃhitā**

This is one of the earliest surviving tantric manuscripts that have had a great influence in shaping other tantric texts. Tantrism has had an impact on many major Asian religions and even influenced Islam practiced in India.

### **The Collection of the Al-Biruni Institute of Oriental Studies**

This is one of the most important collections of Central Asian manuscripts. The Collection is of great significance for the study of the history and culture of the people of Central Asia, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and the Arab world, and of the political, diplomatic, and cultural relations between them.

### **Conclusion**

Thus the Memory of the World Register is a compendium of documents, Manuscripts, oral traditions, audio-visual materials, library, and archival holdings of universal value. Inscription on the Register leads to improved conservation of the documentary heritage and a platform to exchange information and raise resources for the preservation, digitization, and dissemination of knowledge. The program also has the aim of using state-of-the-art technologies to enable wider accessibility and diffusion of the items inscribed on the Register. Any organization or individual can nominate a documentary item for inscription on the Register. During its meetings, the IAC examines the full documentation of the item's description, origin, world significance, and current state of conservation. UNESCO, through its Memory of the World Programme, promotes the preservation of this heritage for future generations and encourages universal access to it. MOW is bridging the past and the present, thus, fostering a mutual understanding between people and cultures for the past thirty years.

India which has such an incredible documentary heritage can claim only nine inclusions as already pointed out earlier. This startling fact points to the deficiencies in collecting, collating, and conserving our documented knowledge and that the present systems are not up to international standards. A coordinated and sustained effort is required to preserve our documentary heritage for future generations.

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In 2010 the Czech Republic submitted a Collection of 526 prints of university theses from 1637-1754 of Charles University, the oldest university in Central Europe. It provides information about the nature of Philosophical studies in the University and the official University ceremonies of the 17th and 18th centuries.

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