Amazing archives of Shiju Alex

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30 April 2022, 01:59 PM IST   ⏱ 5 min

Shiju Alex | Mathrubhumi

Once there was a boy in the obscure village of Karimba in Palakkad who was so different from other children. While most of his friends pined for new toys or dresses, this boy was excited only by things old; worn-out books, crumpling magazines, fading photographs or even dusty old letters in his grandpa' s collection.

The "old-is-gold bug" never left the boy but grew inside him as he grew up. Today, Shiju Alex,45, runs the world's largest digital archive of books and documents put together voluntarily by a single individual. Clearly, one of the greatest contributions by a Malayali of our time. This technical writer professional could be contemporary Kerala's representative in the pantheon of the builders and nourishers of Malayalam language and literature.

Scholars globally are astounded by Alex's incredible effort that only governments, universities, or well endowed private trusts would dare to do within a much longer period. Aptly named Grandhapura, the archives of rare and archival books, palm leaves, manuscripts, and other documents related to Kerala and published from the 16th century onwards run into more than a whopping 1,20,000 digital pages. And the entire treasury has been almost single handedly created by Alex at an enormous personal cost and time. The materials are related to virtually every aspect of Kerala's history- language, literature, religion, education, environment and what not.

Notably, Alex, a postgraduate in physics, has salvaged and preserved them by investing his savings and time spared from his job as a technical writer with ABB at Bengaluru. And most importantly, Alex has made this lifetime effort freely accessible in the public domain for the entire world and the posterity even when most archives across the world are fast going behind a paywall!

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Alex's passion for achieving began during his college days and after he joined Wikipedia in Malayalam as a volunteer. There was no original Malayalam text available online then and volumes of work were being lost every day. He began by taking pictures of printed pages on a digital camera and processing them using a software to create an e-book. Today Alex's open-sourced digital

materials are uploaded to the US-based non-profit internet library site- **https://archive.org/**. The trove contains various categories of materials- ancient books and materials printed in Malayalam language and script like Benjamin Bayley's Bible, documents published in other languages or partially in Malayalam script like *Alfabatum Grandonico Malabaricus* or *Hortus Malabaricus*, published in Malayalam language but in non-Malayalam scripts like Roman or Arab like the *Muhoiyuddeen Mala* all with detailed metadata. The oldest material digitized so far is *Krishna Pattu* written on palm leaves and dated between 1400 and 1800. Other gems include the first Malayalam book printed in India, the first Malayalam dictionary, the first book printed on Malayalam in Europe, periodicals, textbooks, souvenirs, leaflets, notices, pamphlets, etc the collection has Gundert's Malayalam-English dictionary, the first Malayalam-Portuguese dictionary, History of Muhammed (*Muhammadacharitram*) *Paschimodayam,* the first Malayalam newspaper, *Samkshepavedartham, Sabdataravali,* first Economics textbook, *Dhanatatva Niroopanam,* voluminous accounts of Missionaries, etc.

 According to Alex, he is guided in this mission by three founding principles; quality of the digitization that cannot but be world-class, strict open-access policy and no digitization that requires the public to pay for access. No book published after 1960 finds a place in his project to avoid getting hit by the Indian Copyright laws. Alex's path-breaking work has won recognition from many global institutions. Those who have collaborated with him and opened their archives to Alex for digitization include the University of Tuebingen (Germany) for the Gundert Legacy Project, British Library for its Endangered Archives project, etc. Alex's digital archives have been uploaded to several global university libraries at Oxford, Texas, and Harvard. (**https://shijualex.in/list-of-malayalam-public-domain-books/**)

Like all things good, there is a dark side too to Alex's story. Last December 16, Alex issued a post on his website that shocked all who followed his work in admiration. He informed that he was being forced to stop his voluntary mission! The prime reasons

were the ever increasing number of documents waiting for digitization and the lack of financial support for scaling up the project. "I am forced to put an end to the work I have been doing in my free time for a decade, driven by the immense passion for digitizing Kerala documents. The reasons are the sheer meaninglessness in a single person making such physical effort and my disappointment over the inability to scale up my operations. He also mentioned other reasons, like the lack of help from even those who use his work, financial constraints, health, lack of time for the family, etc. Given the cost of equipment and technology to sustain the high-quality project, it was impossible for a single individual with only a salary to carry on any longer. ((**https://shijualex.in/kerala-documents-digitization-notification-2021-dec/**). More than 2000 books are awaiting digitization with him.

Alex didn't receive much support, except for a few individuals like Jisso Jose, the founder of a software firm, and others. None of those who became my FB friends after seeing my work responded to my message. The response from the research community to my documents was quite cold.

Though months have passed, no significant help has come from the state government, universities, philanthropists, foundations, or corporate groups. This writer contacted two most well-known Malayalis on the Forbes billionaires list for Alex's project, as they are also known to support good causes. (*Disclaimer*: Alex and I have not known or even met each other). After a couple of my reminders, one replied that it was not his area of focus, while the other promised to consider.

However, fortunately for us and our coming generations, Alex has decided to carry on his work with help from a few individuals. (**https://shijualex.in/credits/**). They plan to form a non-profit company to carry on and upscale. The estimated total cost is barely Rs 50 lakhs. Less than peanuts. Will our governments, universities, the corporate world, or billionnaires take note?

Literary critic PK Rajasekharan has written how ungrateful we were to Sreekanteswaram G Padmanabha Pillai, the lexicographer who put together *Sabdatharavali*, the most comprehensive dictionary of the 20th century. Pillai, who wallowed in poverty working twenty years on his legendary book, wrote in the preface; "*I have given the meaning in my book for the word "sukham" (pleasure). But I have never experienced that in my life. My family, relatives, and friends would stand witnesses to it*". Hope Keralam will not do the same to Shiju Alex.