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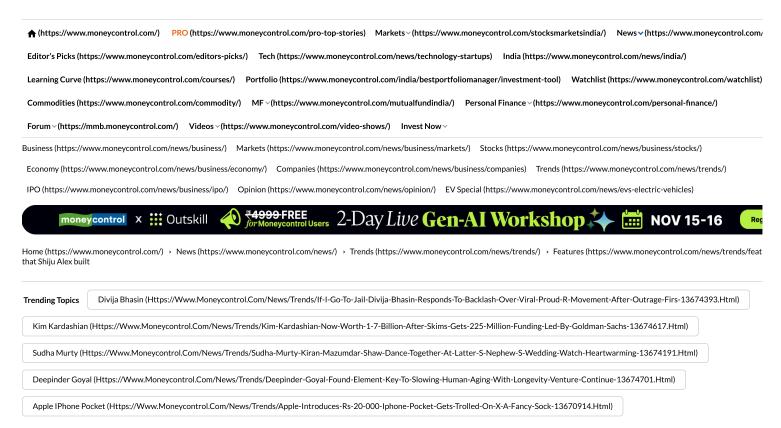
The digital archive that Shiju Alex built

Grandhapura is a digital archive of old books and documents related to Kerala dating back to the 18th century built by one man over a decade. It is 120,000 pages today, and needs help.

FAIZAL KHAN
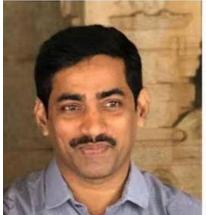(HTTPS://WWW.MONEYCONTROL.COM/AUTHOR/FAIZAL-KHAN-9601/)
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(clockwise from top) The masthead of a Malayalam magazine digitized as part of Grandhapura; among the books in Grandhapura are the famous 'Hortus Indicus Malabaricus', published in the 18th century; and Samkshepavedartha; and Kerala-born Shiju Alex built Grandhapura single-handedly over a decade ago.
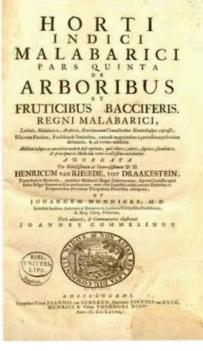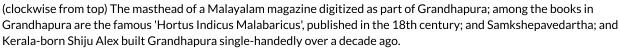
Twelve years ago, Shiju Alex began a journey that one imagined only multibillion-dollar companies, big universities and ambitious governments would dare to undertake.

A technical writer at a private company in Bengaluru, Alex launched a digital archive to house thousands of books and manuscripts relating to Kerala dating back to the 18th century. He called it Grandhapura, which in Malayalam means The House of Books, a home where anyone could access and download documents and books not available in the public domain for free.

More than a decade later, Alex's archive has grown into a digital home for 120,000 pages. It has Samkshepavedartham, a concise study of Christian moral theology, printed in Rome in 1772 and considered the first printed book in Malayalam, Ramban Bible, the first book in Malayalam printed in India (in Mumbai in 1811), the first Malayalam dictionary (1846), the first book in Malayalam with colour pictures (1860), several manuscripts of books and even a few works on palm leaves.

Nearly all of Grandhapura's documents were printed before 1960, in line with Indian copyright laws that cover books for 60 years after the death of the author. All the Grandhapura documents are available on American non-profit site archive.org and an announcement is made on Alex's website (www.shijualex.in) every time a document is uploaded to archive.org.

Unique archival project

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There are no known records of previous attempts by individuals to digitally archive documents related to Kerala, making Grandhapura the first digital archive in India to be built by a single individual based on books about one state and language. There have been similar initiatives in the

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country like the Project Madurai for ancient Tamil literature, but none of them is run by a single individual, and at the scale and size of Grandhapura.

"Grandhapura's focus is on all documents related to Kerala," says Alex, who was born in Palakkad, Kerala. "The main goal is accessibility by the people. In Kerala, several government institutions and universities have digitised centuries-old books and documents. But these are not available to a wider section of people," he adds. "Handwritten documents, price lists of shops and even shopping lists found inside old books have a lot of value after decades."

Alex says there are only two factors in favour of what goes into Grandhapura. "There are two filters, one copyright, and two, it should be related to Kerala," says the champion of open source who was drawn into the world of old objects early in his childhood. "From childhood I used to collect old things like letters kept by my grandfather. I had no interest in contemporary objects."

His first encounter with archiving came when as a new college graduate, Alex joined the Wikipedia in Malayalam as a volunteer one-and-half decade ago. "We typed text from Malayalam books available in the public domain into the Wiki Malayalam Granthasala. I realised then that there was no original Malayalam text available online. It was a big blank area in the language," says Alex, who specialised in astrophysics for his Master's Degree from the University of Bangalore.

In early 2012, a year after he left his voluntary work with Wikipedia, Alex began building Grandhapura. The process of creating a digital archive was simple on paper though it required days of work for each book. First he took pictures of each page of a book with a digital camera. Next, these images were processed using a software to create an ebook. In the last stage, the ebook was uploaded onto archive.org. Alex also launched a blog to make announcements about books available for the public. "The archive.org is an ocean. Therefore, I made an announcement about a new upload on my website everytime a new book was digitised," he says.

"Everyday, thousands of documents are getting lost. The digital archive related to Kerala is a great work for humanity," says Jisso Jose, founder of the Bangalore-based software product engineering firm Totient Business Solutions, who has helped Alex procure digitising equipment, including a German-made Bookeye scanner a few years ago. "Technology has helped overcome the challenges in accessing Malayalam language and Grandhapura is a major tool in this change," says Kannan Shanmugham, a former master trainer with Kerala Infrastructure and Technology for Education, which provides teacher training in new education software.

"Alex insists on the quality of archiving. When I used to send him scanned copies, he would promptly send them back. I had to scan three-four times before he was satisfied," says Tony George, Principal, Government Teacher Training Institute in Kottayam, Kerala, who gave a first edition copy of Sabdatharavali, a Malayalam dictionary first published in 1918, for the digital archive.

Amassing digital wealth

The books and manuscripts came from different sources, including libraries, private collections, teachers
and families of authors who are no longer alive. Samkshepavedartham, the first printed book in Malayalam,
%0D%0A%0D%0Ahttp://m.moneycontrol.com/mom)
was located in a Christian seminary in Bengaluru. It took Alex one week to scan its 200 pages. As many as
293 books, including some on palm leaves, came from Alex's collaboration with the Gundert Legacy Project
by the Tübingen University in Germany, which came in possession of several manuscripts and books printed
by German missionary and linguist Hermann Gundert in Kerala in the 19th century.

"The accessibility of these early texts in print in Malayalam cover all kinds of subjects. In terms of the social
history of a region/language I see the great potential to understand the development of the language and
the script much better," says Prof. Heike Oberlin, head of Department of Indology at the Tübingen
University. "Important pieces of the puzzle that have been missing for a long time in the formation of
Malayalam become tangible, which also influences the self-image of Malayalam speakers. At the same time,
documents are digitally saved that may no longer be available in a few years," adds Prof. Oberlin. "It never
ceases to amaze me how persistently Shiju Alex, a layman, pursues these goals. Naturally, one would expect
a highly decorated university professor, endowed with research funds, but that is not the case."

"Grandhapura is immensely important for a wide range of research concerns related to Kerala and
Malayalam, not only in social history, but also in environmental history, education, language and literature,
folklore, history of science, postcolonialism, and digital humanities to name a few," says Ophira Gamliel,
Lecturer in South Asian Religions at the University of Glasgow. "This is an exemplary, world-class
digitisation project in terms of its professionality, foresightedness, and breadth of vision," adds Dr Gamliel,
who has worked in locating and digitising Arabic-Malayalam manuscripts in Kerala as part of the British
Library Endangered Archives Programme. "Our project was definitely inspired by Shiju Alex and his work."

Grandhapura, Dr Gamliel says, is "uniquely managed voluntarily by a single person with no institutional or
financial support, which is absolutely astonishing". "Moreover, its vision goes beyond open-access; it is more
akin to the open-archive policy with no restriction for the usage and reusage of the digital images. And this
is an exemplary open-archive approach that is the ideal approach to developing and transmitting
knowledge, in any language and culture," she adds.

Call for help

With all the praise and popularity, Grandhapura should have been setting its eyes on achieving further
heights. Instead, in December last year Alex said on his blog that he would be discontinuing work on the
archive. He listed three reasons: rapid increase in the volume of documents awaiting digitisation, lack of
proper equipment and complete absence of financial support.

The announcement shocked fans and followers of Grandhapura. There were soon letters, emails, messages
and phone calls asking him to reconsider. Bowing to calls for continuing his archive project, Alex has now
drawn up a proposal to convert Grandhapura into a non-profit organisation and appeal for community
support to continue the digitisation drive.

"The aim is to establish state-of-the-art digitisation centres and build and maintain a high-quality open
digital library of books, audio, video, images, and other cultural artifacts related to Kerala," reads the
proposal, which advocates bringing in directors and creating an advisory board and a panel of leading
archivists.

After providing tens of thousands of people, including students, teachers and research scholars, historical content for more than a decade, only financial support from community members, leaders and entrepreneurs can stop Grandhapura from disappearing into the virtual void.

FAIZAL KHAN *is an independent journalist who writes on art.*

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Girija Oak Godbole's sudden internet spotlight, sparked by one blue saree photo, brought a surge of admiration while also reviving interest in her strong body of work across Marathi theatre, television, and films like Taare Zameen Par and Jawan.

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