

Rare digital archive of Kerala-related material in doldrums

Grandhapura, which has 2,000-odd documents dating back to the 1700s, needs resources to go on

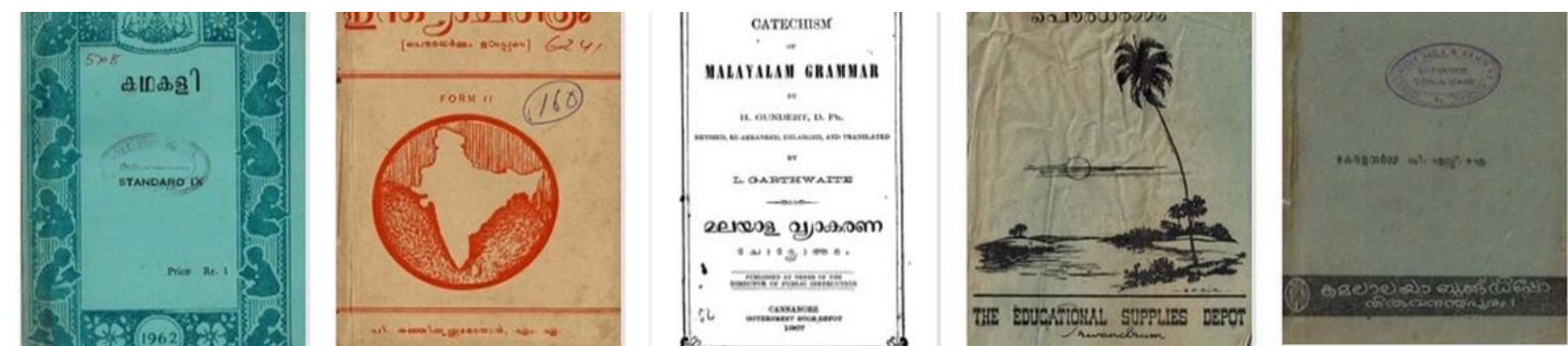
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Some of the documents uploaded on Grandhapura





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Not many would know that Kerala in the 1940s had a literary magazine named after Rabindranath Tagore. Nor would they know about the content of the school textbooks then. Grandhapura, one of the biggest free digital archives in Malayalam, which holds a rare collection of more than 2000 Kerala-related documents, including periodicals and school textbooks from the 1800s, has been making this possible over the past decade, with its ever-expanding archive of rare materials.

But, now Grandhapura is facing an uncertain future as archiving scholar Shiju Alex, who founded it and has been maintaining it for 12 years, has decided to discontinue the efforts due to paucity of resources and time, and the failure to scale up. A handful of his friends, who have been helping him in the initiative, have now come together to look at various ways of taking it forward, with the involvement of more like-minded history buffs and archiving enthusiasts.

"Though various universities and government institutions have taken up digitisation programmes, much of this is not accessible to the public. The quality of the documents uploaded is also poor, even if accessible. I had liked collecting and archiving work from a young age. But, later I realised that it all needs to be digitally archived, as there is no value to them unless it is accessible to the public, without any fee. I digitise only those documents which are out of copyright," says 45-year-old Alex, a native of Palakkad, now working in Bengaluru.

Documents uploaded

His collection, available at <https://shijualex.in/>, with the main archive uploaded at <https://archive.org/details/kerala-archives>, has become a treasure trove for researchers and students to study the changes in the language and content over the years, as well as for the lay person interested

in the literature and politics of the 1800s and 1900s. Among the documents he has uploaded are Clement Pianius's *Samkshepa Vedartham*, the first ever published Malayalam book, printed in Rome in 1772, *Ramban Bible*, the first Malayalam book printed in India, Benjamin Bailey's Malayalam-English Dictionary published in 1846, 12 volumes of *Hortus Malabaricus*, and rare missionary documents.

The collection of around 300 Malayalam periodicals, most of which are now discontinued, include *Keralopakari* from the 1870s, *Dharmadheeran* from the 1930s, *Lokavani*, *Granthalokam*, *Prasannakeralam*, Travancore Economic Journal, *Mappila Review*, *Aruna*, *Malayalarajyam* and *Kerala Bhooshanam* from the 1940s. Many of these magazines have the earliest works of popular Malayalam writers.

Textbooks from 1860

His collection includes more than 350 school textbooks from 1860 to 1980 and an archive of the publications and pamphlets of the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad. Shiju had also collaborated with the University of Tuebingen in Germany for the Gundert Legacy project, to digitise documents related to south India.

“To digitise each page, using a copy stand, digital camera and other equipment, takes 3-4 minutes. Over these 12 years, I have digitised around 2,000 documents running to 1.2 lakh pages. It is not sustainable to continue this project in this mode as it is fully dependent on me. It has to become a wider public project using the latest scanning equipment. For me, any document, be it a film notice or a pamphlet is valuable, the value of which will be known only years later. The only principle is that it should be freely accessible to everyone,” he says.

More than 700 documents sent to him from various sources are remaining in his house waiting to be digitised. However, for that to happen, people with a similar passion have to come forward.

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