Three Malayalis digitise over 4,800 books to preserve Kerala's literary legacy

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Jiso Jose, Shiju Alex, Kailas Nath

Kollam: A silent revolution in the preservation of Kerala's literary history is unfolding, thanks to the efforts of three passionate persons. Together, they have digitised an impressive 4,863 books, which contain around 4,59,067 pages, and are still adding more each day. This extraordinary task is being carried out by Shiju Alex from Karimba, Palakkad, Kailas Nath from Paroppadi, Kozhikode and Jiso Jose from Kuthuparamba, Kannur.

The initiative for this mission took root when Shiju Alex was unable to locate a specific book he needed for personal use. Driven by this challenge, he decided to digitise rare Malayalam texts to make them accessible to everyone. The first book they uploaded was Grammar of the Malabar Language by Robert Drummond, printed in Mumbai in 1799, which was the first book ever printed in India using the Malayalam script. Shiju had previously tried and failed to locate another rare text, Saṅkṣēpa Vēdārthaṃ, printed in Rome in 1772, believed to be the first-ever printed Malayalam book.

Upon learning that this rare text was preserved at Dharmaram College Library in Bangalore, Shiju travelled there, scanned the book, and uploaded it online. The team also found a list of early printed Malayalam books in the work Aadimudranam: Bharathathilum Malayalathil, written by K.M. Govi, which helped guide further digitisation efforts.

Scanning and uploading a 200-page book typically takes three days. When time and financial constraints became a burden, Shiju considered halting the project and shared his dilemma on social media. However, he was met with overwhelming support from the public urging him not to stop.

Moved by the response, Kailas Nath, the brain behind the Malayalam dictionary app "Olam", and Jiso Jose, an enthusiast of the mother tongue, joined hands with Shiju. Together, they launched a non-profit initiative called the Indic Digital Archive Foundation and created a website named Granthappura (meaning library)

Granthappura is now a growing digital archive that collects and organises books related to Kerala, regardless of the language they were originally published in. The platform features not only books but also rare collections like old newspapers, periodicals, songbooks, and government reports.

Currently, a seven-member team based in Bengaluru, Thiruvananthapuram, and Chennai is proceeding with the digitisation work. The team uploads books that are in the public domain or those whose copyright owners have voluntarily waived their rights. The digitised content is available for free public access, making it a valuable resource for researchers, readers, and future generations.