

PALM-LEAF MANUSCRIPTS

What are Palm-leaf manuscripts?

These are manuscripts made out of *dried palm leaves*. They were used as **paper** by the people of Ancient India. The Palm-Leaf manuscripts have great importance as they serve as *authentic and are our primary source of knowledge and information*. Hence, they need to be preserved and conserved.

PALM-LEAF MANUSCRIPTS OF TAMIL NADU

Manuscripts found in Tamil Nadu have been preserved in *institutions, libraries and mathas*. Such manuscripts are termed as ‘**seasoned palm-leaf manuscripts**’. *Seasoning* is a process by which the leaves are able to withstand the effects of the environment, thus prolonging the life of the leaves.

This can be done by *boiling the leaves* in water, milk or turmeric solution. Also by applying gingeli oil that the leaves would absorb.

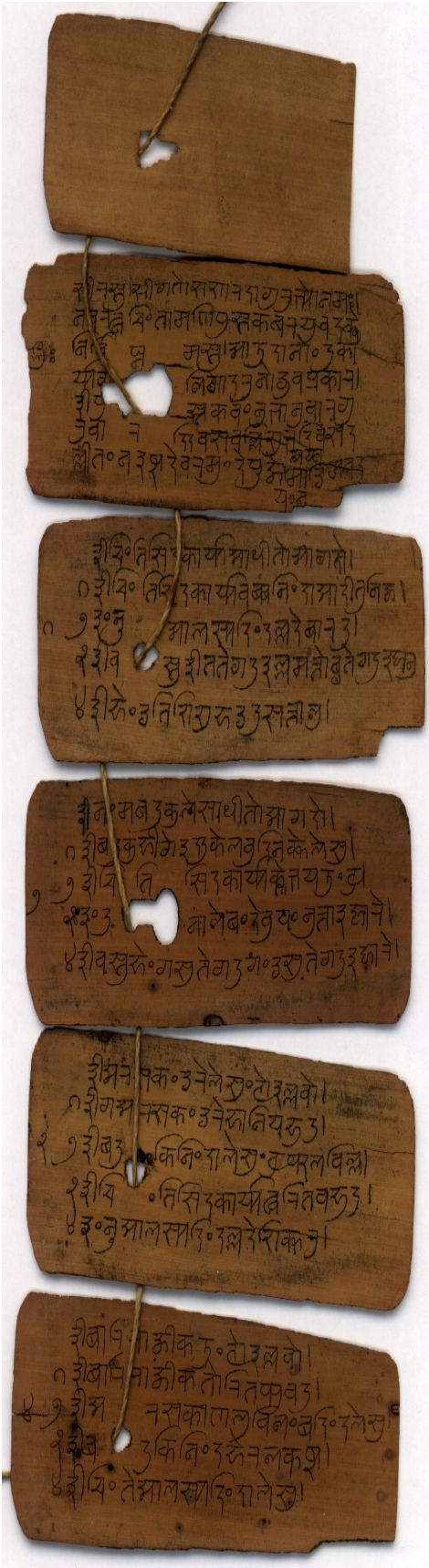
There were various types of oils that were used to preserve the manuscripts, such as **cedar wood oil, citronella oil, lemon grass oil and olive oil**.

The manuscripts have been traditionally been *stored in kitchen lofts* where the smoke from cooking fires safeguarded them from insects and fungi.

Though palm leaf writing was practiced since the ancient times its precise origin is still unclear.

DID YOU KNOW!

Palm leaf manuscripts were a major source for writing and painting in South and Southeast Asian countries including Nepal, Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Indonesia and Cambodia.



Like many ancient traditions, palm leaf manuscripts too need a lot of time and effort to make them. The process has been described below-

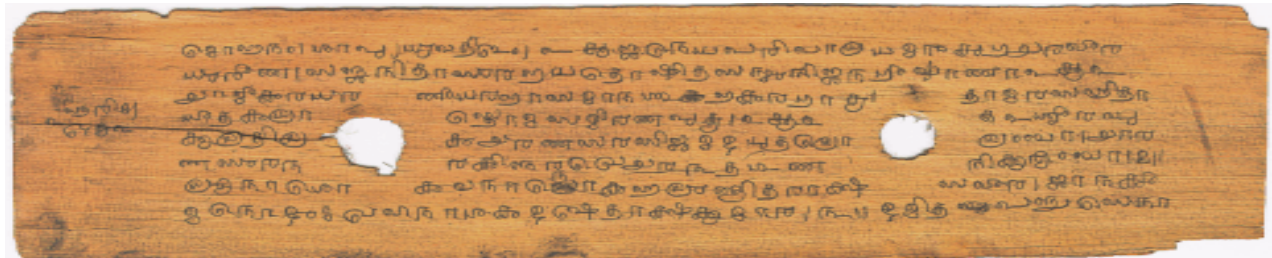
Traditional Processing of Palm-Leaves- The Palm leaflets are coiled into loose rolls and are boiled in water for 4 hours. After taking the leaves out, they are placed in the gentle sun for 2-3 days. Once they are dried and stiff, they are exposed to dew for 3 nights. Later once the leaves become light and strong, they are assembled together as a bundle and perforated with a heated iron rod. These bundles were covered with good quality wooden boards.

Writing on the Palm-Leaf- The normal writing instrument used is a steel stylus called the Panhinda. Interestingly, there are 5 features of the stylus- Chatra, Patra, Nala, Ganda, and Lekhanya.

Traditional Inking Method- The writing on the palm-leaf was always scratched with a stylus and the faintly visible letters need to be inked by lampblack.

Traditional Oiling Methods- Oils have helped in the effective preservation of these manuscripts. Such oils are usually distilled from various trees/seeds/resin.

Traditional Storage Methods- (i) The palm strips are tidily rolled into big reels and put into storage in kitchen lofts (ii) Also between two stiff flat wooden boards (iii) Kept in closed boxes/chests.



Themes depicted in Manuscripts of Orissa- gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon including Krishna, Durga and Ganesha. They were highly stylized.

What is the purpose of a manuscript?

The process of creation of a manuscript can broadly encompass **aspects of education, communication, record keeping,** selfless service as well as conscious efforts to earn temporal or spiritual merit.





PALM LEAF MANUSCRIPTS OF ORISSA

Orissa has a vast and exquisite collection of palm-leaf manuscripts. The **Orissa State Museum** has a collection of 11,000 such manuscripts. Some of the vast range of subjects covered by the painted manuscripts are **Veda, grammar, Tantra, astronomy, medicine, religion, philosophy, epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata, Puranas, etc.**

Sanskrit Buddhist Manuscripts- can be found in the National Archives of Nepal. Such rolled palm leaf manuscripts are called **tāmsuks** and have been used mainly for legal deeds. They are written in the **Bhujimol** script and date back to the 14th century.

INTERESTING FACT!

Horoscopes were traditionally written on palm leaves by professional horoscope makers known as **nahakas**. They were considered so sacred that even after printing presses began operating in Orissa, important texts continued to be printed on the leaves instead of paper. The printing of New Year cards and wedding invitations on palm leaf is still popular in Orissa.

Make your own manuscript-WRITE IN AN INDIAN LANGUAGE IN CALLIGRAPHIC STYLE WITH A TRADITIONAL DRAWING IN THE SPACE BELOW