

1. Manuscript Heritage - History

The Ministry of Culture has launched a first-of-its-kind, three-month nationwide survey to map India's vast manuscript heritage.

Gyan Bharatam Mission & Manuscript Heritage

1. Background of the Initiative

1. Ministry of Culture has launched a nationwide 3-month survey to map India's manuscript wealth.
2. It is part of the Gyan Bharatam Mission announced in Union Budget 2025–26.
3. Financial outlay of ₹491.66 crore for the period 2025–2031 has been approved.
4. It represents a first systematic effort to create a comprehensive national inventory of manuscripts.

2. Gyan Bharatam Mission- Key Features

1. Covers survey, documentation, digitisation and dissemination in an integrated manner.
2. Proposes creation of a National Digital Repository for manuscripts.
3. Focuses on traditional knowledge systems such as Ayurveda, astronomy, mathematics and philosophy.
4. Encourages integration of AI tools for decipherment, restoration and translation of manuscripts.

3. Significance of the Initiative

3.1 Preservation of Cultural Heritage

1. Manuscripts made of palm leaf, birch bark and cloth are highly fragile.
2. Digitisation ensures long-term protection against decay, disasters and neglect.

3.2 Enhancing Research and Knowledge Access

1. Provides centralised and democratic access to scholars and the public.
2. Promotes interdisciplinary research across history, science and linguistics.

3.3 Preventing Intellectual Piracy

1. Proper documentation creates legal ownership and metadata records.
2. Helps prevent misuse of traditional knowledge and biopiracy.

3.4 Cultural Revival and Soft Power

1. Revives India's civilisational knowledge traditions.
2. Strengthens India's cultural diplomacy and global academic engagement.

4. Understanding Manuscripts

4.1 Definition and Characteristics

1. Manuscripts are handwritten documents on palm leaf, birch bark, paper, cloth or metal.
2. They must be at least 75 years old to qualify as antiquities.
3. They possess historical, scientific, literary or aesthetic significance.

4.2 Civilisational Importance

1. Reflect India's philosophical traditions such as Vedanta and Buddhism.
2. Contain scientific knowledge related to astronomy and medicine.
3. Showcase linguistic diversity and script evolution.

5. Case Study- Gilgit Manuscripts

1. Considered the oldest surviving manuscript collection in India dating to the 5th–6th century CE.
2. Written in Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit using Gupta and post-Gupta Brahmi script.
3. Provide insights into the spread of Buddhism across Asia.

4. Highlight India's role in shaping philosophical traditions in China, Korea, Japan and Tibet.

6. Existing Institutional Mechanisms

6.1 National Mission for Manuscripts

1. Established in 2003 to identify and conserve manuscripts.
2. Documented over 44 lakh manuscripts.
3. Developed the digital repository Kriti Sampada.

6.2 Abhilekh Patal

1. Initiative of the National Archives of India.
2. Provides online access to archival records and manuscripts.
3. Enhances transparency and research accessibility.

6.3 Gyan-Setu

1. National initiative to develop AI-based solutions.
2. Focuses on restoration, decipherment and access to manuscripts.

7. Legal and International Framework

7.1 Antiquities and Art Treasures Act, 1972

1. Prevents illegal export and smuggling of manuscripts.
2. Recognises manuscripts older than 75 years as antiquities.

7.2 UNESCO Memory of the World Programme

1. Promotes preservation of documentary heritage globally.
2. Recognises rare and valuable manuscripts.

8. National Archives of India

8.1 Historical Evolution

1. Established in 1891 in Kolkata as the Imperial Record Department.
2. Shifted to Delhi after the capital transfer in 1911.
3. Building designed in 1926 and records fully transferred by 1937.

8.2 Institutional Role

1. Acts as the nodal agency for Public Records Act, 1993.
2. Implements Public Records Rules, 1997.
3. Preserves government documents, manuscripts and private papers.

9. Challenges in Manuscript Conservation

1. Physical deterioration due to climate, insects and humidity.
2. Lack of awareness leading to manuscripts remaining in private custody.
3. Difficulty in deciphering ancient scripts and languages.
4. Absence of unified inventory, now being addressed.
5. Shortage of funding and skilled manpower.

10. Way Forward

1. Strengthen collaboration with universities, libraries and private collectors.
2. Expand use of AI in digital humanities and script recognition.
3. Build capacity of conservators, archivists and researchers.
4. Encourage public participation through awareness and incentives.
5. Promote global partnerships with international archival institutions.

Conclusion

1. Gyan Bharatam Mission represents a shift towards a comprehensive and technology-driven preservation strategy.
2. It integrates digitisation, AI and institutional mechanisms for safeguarding heritage.
3. It transforms manuscripts into a dynamic knowledge resource strengthening cultural identity and global engagement.

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