**EAP 1304**

**“Palm-Leaf Manuscripts from the Śaṅkaran Institutions of Kerala”**

The aim of this Major project, which followed a smaller-scale Pilot project devoted to the same collection of palm-leaf manuscripts (EAP 1039, “Sanskrit and Malayalam manuscripts from the Thrissur monastic complex” – https://eap.bl.uk/project/EAP1039), was to investigate the historical documents preserved in four major Hindu “monasteries” (Mal. *maṭham*) situated in Thrissur, in Central Kerala (India). These include:

* 748 manuscript bundles, each containing at least one historical “text” (ritual manual, philosophical treatise, literary work, etc.), generally more than one and sometimes a full “library” on a given topic.
* A small number of inscriptions in Malayalam and Sanskrit on stone or copper-plates.
* A large repository of administrative documents on palm-leaf, containing records of accounts, donations, etc. related to the life of the monasteries.

Due to the team’s interest and competence, it was decided to concentrate the efforts on the first set of documents, and to leave others (especially the last set) for future projects.

Despite initial difficulties (documents written in scripts by then unknown to us, damaged bundles, uninked bundles, etc.) the choice was made not to exclude any document of this first set from the survey and digitisation programme. The rationale here is primarily conservation: documents which are not digitised now will probably not be readable at all in ten years, and it is unlikely that resotoration techniques will improve enough in the near future to compensate this loss. Scientific coherence (the aim being the historical study of a complete collection), as well as an initial engagement with the owners that the whole collection would be digitised and made freely available online, also encouraged the team not to neglect any document preserved in Thrissur.

One difficulty regularly encountered were bundles with shuffled leaves (a frequent case in the collection). Here, the question of reordering the leaves posed itself: on the one hand there is no point in preserving mistakes, on the other the way leaves are re-ordered might sometimes be historically significant (for instance, to determine that a given manuscript is the direct copy of another because it reproduces a certain wrong order in the text). Decision was made to reorder the leaves whenever numeration was available, and only if there was reasonable certainty about the original order of the leaves. In other cases (no original numeration, numbers destroyed through damage, etc.), the original order was preserved and the manuscript was digitised exactly as it was found.

Minimal intervention on the artefacts was sometimes necessary, such as applying a mixture of lamp black and lemongrass oil on the leaves (“inking” the manuscripts), or minimal restoration with Japanese paper, before digitisation. Before doing any of this, the team had numerous discussions with curators in Europe – especially colleagues from the Department of Oriental Manuscripts at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France – and in India, with representatives of other institutions hosting large manuscript collections (the French Institute of Pondicherry, the Saraswathi Mahal Library in Thanjavur and the Pondicherry Centre of the École française d’Extrême-Orient). These discussions, which were always very worth while, convinced the team that conservation and digitisation could only be carried out at the same time, and that the strictly “non-interventionist” policy which is generally the rule in European oriental libraries (no new inking, no lemongrass oil, preservation in closed boxes, etc.) may not be the most adapted in India, for documents quickly deteriorating in a hot and humid climate.

Work with the authorities of the Vadakke Madham Brahmaswam, and especially with those of the Vedic Research Centre, has always been quite easy, as everyone in Thrissur was supportive of the EFEO’s work on the manuscripts from its very inception in 2018. This, however, was greatly favoured by three factors: the presence since the 1960s of a well-known branch of the EFEO in Pondicherry, providing institutional support and the necessary guarantees for stakeholders (most of whom would not accept to work directly with a foreign institution, that has no representative in India), the constitution of a team of local researchers trained in the Universities in Kerala, and the indispensable support of renowned Indian academics (Prof. C.M. Neelakandhan, from Sri Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kalady and S.A.S. Sarma, from EFEO, Pondicherry), which greatly facilitated exchanges between the applicants and local authorities.