Digitising documents of Tamil culture a unique experiment

Project aims to locate vulnerable documents in private homes and small institutions

S. PRASAD  
PUDUCHERRY

Historians, anthropologists and researchers dug deep into the importance of preservation and digitisation of documents and its relevance to various aspects of Tamil culture at the inauguration of a three-day seminar organised by the Department of Social Sciences of French Institute of Pondicherry (IFP) here.

Most of the documents collected from various parts of Tamil Nadu were digitised through a five-year project launched by the Department of Social Sciences and funded by the British Library's endangered archives programme Arcadia.

S. Ponnarasu and Zoe Headley, researchers attached to the Digital Archive of Tamil Agrarian History (DATAH) project said the project was a unique experiment and a team from the Department of Social Sciences set up the archive.

The main objective of the DATAH project is to locate vulnerable documents in private homes and small institutions, and to create a digital archive of documents of socio-historical relevance. Most of the documents digitised during this five-year project (2001-2016) are destined to disappear in the near future given both the very humid climate of southern India and neglected conditions in which they are stored.

The documents recorded on paper, palm leaves and copper plates are a treasure as they provide a rare and unique opportunity to have a peep into various aspects of social history of village life in remote parts of the Tamil region at a time when a new power structure and social identities were being forged both with and against local traditional and feudal systems and British colonial legislations, he said.

The digitised documents were scattered in the homes of villagers, more particularly descendants of traditional power holders. They were not aware of their importance and scholarly value and were not prepared to part with their forefathers' documents such as depositing them in local archives, he added.

The documents contained in the DATAH archive open new avenues of analysis at the level of micro-history of rural India.

DATAH presently contains 82 collections comprising 534 digitised documents and consisting of 83,378 images. The documents are also available on the website of the Endangered Archives Programme of the British Library, a release from the institute said.

Audrey Richard Ferroudji, Head of the Department of Social Sciences participated.