

National workshop on preservation of metal manuscripts held

Staff Reporter

Five-day event being attended by experts, curators and others



CONSERVING KNOWLEDGE: Students of city colleges look at ancient metal manuscripts on display at the Government Museum for the national workshop on conservation of manuscripts with special reference to metals. — Photo: S. Thanthoni

CHENNAI: The total number of manuscripts in the country was at least 10 times the initial estimate of five million, said Neeraja Gopi from the National Mission for Manuscripts at the Government Museum here on Monday morning. Around one million should be available online soon.

On display

Placards with a step-by-step guide to the preservation of metal manuscripts, adorned the centenary exhibition hall for the national workshop on the topic that began the same day. Among the valuable ancient metal manuscripts on display was one of seven copper plates strung together on a ring with two 'Nandi' bulls on it, recording the grant of lands to a Siva temple by Tappunatta Mumma Nayanar during the reign of Kulothunga Chola in 1078 A.D. in Grantha and Tamil script.

The five-day workshop is being attended by experts, curators and those interested in the conservation of manuscripts from across the country, and would be observed by students of chemistry and history from city colleges.

The museum established a laboratory in 1930 to study the preservation of metal icons, said V. Jeyaraj, Co-ordinator, Government Museum Manuscript Conservation Centre.

Manuscripts were part of the national wealth, and would act as source material for growth, said S. Ignacimuthu, Director, Entomology Research Institute, Loyola College.

Manuscripts could be made freely available online upon the condition that scholars participate in the documenting of internal discrepancies, which were probably introduced during the copying process that was carried out every two to three centuries by rulers, suggested R. Kannan, Special Commissioner & Commissioner of Museums, Government Museum.

He said that failing to preserve and decipher manuscripts could lead to the loss of valuable knowledge in the classical languages of Sanskrit and Tamil, especially relating to the medical and physical sciences. Manuscripts of Siddha medicine, for instance, documented the medicinal use of mercury.

The National Manuscript Mission was initiated in 2003 as a five-year project to survey, document, preserve and digitise manuscripts in the country's public and private repositories, said Ms. Gopi.

While it was uncertain whether the term of the National Manuscript Mission would be extended, it has succeeded in documenting at least a fourth of available manuscripts on a variety of media including metal, cloth, ivory, papyrus and sanchipat (made of the inner bark of the aloe tree) through manuscript resource and conservation centres across the country. The Mission has also initiated manuscriptology courses in universities and research into the indigenous and traditional processes of preservation of manuscripts.