GENERAL STUDIES II

SAMHiTA Project 2026: How India and Sri Lanka Are Saving 100 Ancient Manuscripts

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The SAMHiTA Project is an India-supported initiative to preserve South Asia's manuscript heritage through digitisation. Launched at Gangaramaya Temple in Colombo, the project targets 100 ancient manuscripts relating to Buddhism, philosophy, languages and cultural practices, with completion targeted for November 2026. This article explains the project's objectives, implementing institutions, cultural diplomacy, digitisation benefits, preservation challenges and relevance to UPSC Prelims and Mains.

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UPSC Prelims | Mains | Current Affairs

ART & CULTURE | INDIA–SRI LANKA | DIGITAL HERITAGE

Executive Summary

The SAMHiTA Project, or South Asian Manuscript Histories and Textual Archive, is an India-supported cultural heritage initiative.

Launched at Gangaramaya Temple in Colombo, the project aims to digitise 100 ancient manuscripts.

These manuscripts cover Buddhist traditions, philosophy, languages and cultural practices.

The initiative is being undertaken by the India International Centre, New Delhi, with grant assistance from the Government of India.

The digitisation target is November 2026.

For UPSC, the project is an example of cultural preservation, India–Sri Lanka cooperation and digital heritage management.

100

Manuscripts Targeted

Colombo
Project Launch Location

Nov 2026
Target Completion

1. Why Is the SAMHiTA Project in the News?

India and Sri Lanka launched the SAMHiTA Project at Gangaramaya Temple, Colombo.

The initiative aims to preserve 100 ancient manuscripts through digitisation.

The manuscripts represent important aspects of South Asia's religious, linguistic and intellectual history.

The project also highlights the growing role of technology in protecting cultural heritage.

Its significance extends beyond preservation because it strengthens people-to-people and cultural ties between India and Sri Lanka.

2. What Is the Full Form of SAMHiTA?

SAMHiTA stands for **South Asian Manuscript Histories and Textual Archive.**

It is a cultural heritage initiative focused on the digitisation and preservation of ancient manuscripts from South Asia.

Its objective is to protect fragile historical documents and improve access to the knowledge they contain.

> **UPSC Prelims Fact:** SAMHiTA is associated with manuscript preservation and digital heritage. It is not a defence project, a satellite mission or a financial assistance scheme.

3. Key Facts About the SAMHiTA Project

Particulars	Details
Full Form	South Asian Manuscript Histories and Textual Archive
Nature	India-supported cultural heritage initiative
Implementing Institution	India International Centre, New Delhi
Financial Support	Grant assistance from the Government of India
First Sri Lankan Partner	Gangaramaya Temple, Colombo
Partnership MoU	July 2026
Manuscript Target	100 ancient manuscripts

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Particulars	Details
Target Completion	November 2026
Core Purpose	Preservation and digital accessibility of cultural heritage

4. What Are Ancient Manuscripts?

A manuscript is a document written or produced by hand, rather than created through modern mass printing.

Historically, manuscripts were used to record religious teachings, literature, medicine, philosophy, astronomy, law and other subjects.

South Asia has a rich tradition of manuscript production using materials such as palm leaves, birch bark and paper.

These materials can deteriorate because of humidity, insects, physical handling and environmental changes.

Why Manuscripts Matter

- They preserve historical knowledge.
- They provide evidence of linguistic development.
- They help researchers understand intellectual traditions.
- They preserve religious and philosophical teachings.
- They offer insights into social and cultural practices.

5. Why Is Manuscript Digitisation Important?

Digitisation means creating digital representations of physical documents.

For manuscripts, this generally involves capturing high-quality images and organising related information for preservation and access.

Major Benefits

- **Reduced Handling:** Researchers can consult digital copies without repeatedly handling fragile originals.
- **Improved Accessibility:** Digital records can support wider scholarly access, subject to permissions.
- **Research Support:** Scholars can compare texts, scripts and historical sources.
- **Digital Preservation:** Multiple managed copies can reduce the risk of losing recorded information.
- **Educational Use:** Digitised material can support teaching and cultural awareness.

However, digitisation does not replace the need to conserve the physical manuscript.

6. How Does Manuscript Digitisation Work?

A typical digitisation programme may involve several stages.

1. **Documentation:** Record the manuscript's identity, condition and basic characteristics.
2. **Conservation Assessment:** Determine whether the document can be handled and photographed safely.
3. **Digital Imaging:** Capture high-resolution images using suitable equipment.

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4. **Metadata Creation:** Record information such as title, language, script and subject where known.
5. **Digital Storage:** Preserve files using appropriate backup and data-management practices.
6. **Access Management:** Determine how digital copies may be used by researchers and the public.

These are general practices in heritage digitisation. They should not be interpreted as a confirmed technical workflow for every SAMHiTA manuscript.

7. Why Is Gangaramaya Temple Important?

Gangaramaya Temple is a well-known Buddhist temple in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

It has cultural and religious importance in Sri Lankan Buddhist society.

The temple became the first participating Sri Lankan institution under SAMHiTA, following an MoU signed in July 2026.

Its participation illustrates how religious and cultural institutions can contribute to heritage preservation.

8. India–Sri Lanka Buddhist Heritage

India and Sri Lanka share longstanding Buddhist cultural connections.

Buddhism originated in the Indian subcontinent and spread to different regions of Asia.

Sri Lanka became an important centre for the preservation and development of Buddhist learning and traditions.

Historical interactions helped create connections in religious thought, literature, art and monastic education.

Major Cultural Connections

- Buddhist teachings and philosophical traditions.
- Monastic institutions and scholarship.
- Pali and related textual traditions.
- Religious pilgrimage and cultural exchange.
- Historical literary and intellectual connections.

The SAMHiTA Project builds on this broader civilisational relationship.

9. Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power

Cultural diplomacy refers to using cultural exchange and cooperation to strengthen relationships between countries.

Soft power is the ability to influence others through attraction, values and cultural appeal, rather than coercion.

Projects such as SAMHiTA can contribute to cultural diplomacy by supporting shared heritage preservation.

Potential Benefits

- Stronger people-to-people relationships.
- Greater academic collaboration.

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- Preservation of shared historical knowledge.
- Improved cultural understanding.
- Opportunities for research and education.

> **GS Paper II Insight:** Cultural diplomacy can complement economic and political relations by creating long-term connections between societies.

10. India–Sri Lanka Relations: A Wider Perspective

India and Sri Lanka maintain relations across multiple areas, including trade, development cooperation, maritime security and cultural exchange.

Their geographical proximity makes bilateral cooperation important in the Indian Ocean region.

Cultural projects form one part of this broader relationship.

SAMHiTA demonstrates how heritage cooperation can support bilateral engagement without being a conventional trade or security initiative.

11. Digital Heritage and Emerging Technologies

Digital technology is becoming increasingly important for the protection and study of cultural resources.

Advanced imaging, digital archives and searchable catalogues can help researchers study historical materials.

Optical Character Recognition, or OCR, may assist in recognising text in some scripts.

However, ancient handwriting, damaged documents and complex scripts can make automated recognition difficult.

Human scholarly review remains important for accurate interpretation.

12. Challenges in Preserving Ancient Manuscripts

Challenge	Why It Matters
Physical Deterioration	Age, moisture and handling can damage manuscripts.
Specialist Skills	Conservation and interpretation require trained experts.
Language Barriers	Historical scripts and languages may be difficult to read.
Digital Storage	Digital files require long-term maintenance and backup.
Access Rights	Institutions must consider ownership, permissions and cultural sensitivities.
Funding	Long-term conservation needs sustained resources.

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13. What Is the Way Forward?

1. **Strengthen Conservation:** Protect physical manuscripts alongside digital copies.
2. **Develop Skilled Teams:** Train archivists, conservators and language specialists.
3. **Improve Digital Standards:** Use reliable metadata, storage and backup practices.
4. **Promote Academic Collaboration:** Encourage cooperation between scholars and heritage institutions.
5. **Respect Cultural Ownership:** Develop access arrangements with participating institutions.
6. **Expand Participation:** Encourage other eligible cultural institutions to explore cooperation.

14. UPSC Prelims Quick Revision

- SAMHiTA stands for South Asian Manuscript Histories and Textual Archive.
- It is an India-supported cultural heritage initiative.
- The project was launched at Gangaramaya Temple, Colombo.
- The target is to digitise 100 ancient manuscripts.
- The India International Centre, New Delhi, is the implementing institution.
- The Government of India provides grant assistance.
- The first Sri Lankan partnership MoU was signed in July 2026.
- The target completion is November 2026.
- The manuscripts cover Buddhism, philosophy, languages and cultural practices.
- The initiative is relevant to cultural diplomacy and digital heritage preservation.

15. UPSC Prelims Practice MCQs

Question 1.

The SAMHiTA Project is primarily associated with:

(A) Satellite-based agriculture
(B) Digitisation of ancient manuscripts
(C) Maritime defence exercises
(D) Financial inclusion

Correct Answer: B

SAMHiTA focuses on the preservation and digitisation of ancient South Asian manuscripts.

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Question 2.

Which institution is undertaking the SAMHiTA Project?

(A) Reserve Bank of India
(B) India International Centre, New Delhi
(C) National Disaster Management Authority
(D) Election Commission of India

Correct Answer: B

The India International Centre, New Delhi, is undertaking the project with Government of India grant assistance.

Question 3.

Gangaramaya Temple, associated with the SAMHiTA Project, is located in:

(A) Kathmandu
(B) Colombo
(C) Thimphu
(D) Bangkok

Correct Answer: B

Gangaramaya Temple is located in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Question 4.

Consider the following statements about manuscript digitisation:

1. It can reduce repeated handling of fragile originals.
2. It completely eliminates the need for physical conservation.
3. It can support wider scholarly access.

Which statements are correct?

(A) 1 only
(B) 1 and 3 only
(C) 2 and 3 only
(D) 1, 2 and 3

Correct Answer: B

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Digitisation can improve access and reduce handling, but physical conservation remains essential.

16. UPSC Mains Practice Questions

GS Paper I – Art and Culture

"Digitisation of ancient manuscripts is essential for preserving India's shared civilisational heritage with South Asian countries."

Discuss with reference to the SAMHiTA Project.

Word Limit: 150 words

GS Paper II – International Relations

"Cultural diplomacy can strengthen bilateral relations beyond conventional economic and security cooperation."

Examine the statement in the context of India–Sri Lanka relations.

Word Limit: 250 words

Suggested Answer Structure

1. Define cultural diplomacy.
2. Introduce the shared Buddhist heritage.
3. Explain the SAMHiTA initiative.
4. Discuss academic and people-to-people cooperation.
5. Identify conservation and implementation challenges.
6. Conclude with the importance of sustained cultural partnerships.

17. Frequently Asked Questions

What is the SAMHiTA Project?

It is an India-supported initiative to digitise and preserve ancient South Asian manuscripts.

What is the full form of SAMHiTA?

South Asian Manuscript Histories and Textual Archive.

How many manuscripts will be digitised?

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The reported project target is 100 ancient manuscripts.

Where was the SAMHiTA Project launched?

At Gangaramaya Temple in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

What is the target completion date?

November 2026, according to the 26 October 2026 current-affairs report.

Why is the project important for UPSC?

It connects Art and Culture, Buddhist heritage, India–Sri Lanka relations, cultural diplomacy and digital preservation.

18. Conclusion: Preserving the Past Through Technology

The SAMHiTA Project demonstrates how cultural heritage and modern technology can work together.

By targeting the digitisation of 100 ancient manuscripts, the initiative seeks to protect valuable records of South Asia's religious and intellectual traditions.

It also creates an opportunity to strengthen India–Sri Lanka relations through shared cultural heritage.

Long-term success will depend on careful conservation, reliable digital management and continued institutional cooperation.

Final UPSC Takeaway: The SAMHiTA Project is an example of how digital preservation can support cultural diplomacy, historical research and international cooperation.

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Editorial Disclaimer: This article is original educational analysis for UPSC preparation. Project facts reflect information reported on 26 October 2026. The November 2026 completion date is a target and does not establish that digitisation has been completed. General discussion of conservation methods and policy implications is explanatory rather than a description of confirmed project procedures.

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