Mahabharata, Arthashastra, Rajatarangini manuscripts join UNESCO Asia-Pacific memory register

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News

Three ancient Indian manuscripts were announced on 5 November 2026 as added to UNESCO's Memory of the World Asia-Pacific Regional Register. The decision was taken at the 11th session of the Memory of the World Committee for Asia and the Pacific (MOWCAP) in Jakarta, Indonesia. They are the birch-bark (bhurjapatra) Mahabharata manuscript at the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (BORI), Pune; Kautilya's Arthashastra palm-leaf manuscript at the Oriental Research Institute, Mysuru; and Kalhana's Rajatarangini manuscript at the Oriental Research Library, Srinagar. The Arthashastra manuscript is a complete 16th-century palm-leaf copy in Grantha script; the Rajatarangini is in Sharada script. The Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) prepared the nomination dossiers for all three. India now has six entries on this regional register; in 2024 the illustrated Ramcharitmanas manuscripts of Tulsidas, the Panchatantra and the Sahrdayaloka-Locana were added. Union Culture Minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat called it a landmark recognition of India's documentary heritage.

Key facts for the exam

Point	Details
Register	UNESCO Memory of the World – Asia-Pacific Regional Register
Decision	11th MOWCAP session, Jakarta; announced 5 Nov 2026

Point	Details
Mahabharata	Birch-bark manuscript – BORI, Pune
Arthashastra	16th-c. Grantha palm-leaf – Oriental Research Institute, Mysuru
Rajatarangini	Kalhana (1148–49 CE); Sharada script – Srinagar
Nominated by	IGNCA, New Delhi
India on regional register	6 in all (3 in 2024, 3 in 2026)
International register (2025)	Bhagavad Gita, Natyashastra

Background

- UNESCO Memory of the World: launched in 1992 to protect documentary heritage (manuscripts, archives, audio-visual records). It has international, regional and national registers. World Heritage (1972 Convention) covers sites; Memory of the World covers documents. UNESCO is headquartered in Paris.
- History – Rajatarangini: Kalhana wrote this Sanskrit history of the kings of Kashmir in 1148–49 CE in eight 'tarangas' (about 7,826 verses); it is hailed as India's first systematic historical work. The Arthashastra, a treatise on statecraft and economy in 15 books, is attributed to Kautilya (Chanakya/Vishnugupta), minister of Chandragupta Maurya. R. Shamasastry identified its manuscript at Mysuru in 1905 and later published it.
- Mahabharata – BORI: Founded in 1917, BORI, Pune, began the Critical Edition of the Mahabharata in 1919 with V.S. Sukthankar as general editor and completed it in 1966. The birch-bark manuscript acquired in Kashmir in 1875 by Indologist Georg Bühler is the most authentic witness of the old Kashmiri version. BORI's Rigveda manuscripts entered the international register in 2007.
- Science – writing material: Bhurjapatra is the inner bark of the Himalayan birch (Betula utilis), used for writing in Kashmir and north India. In south India palm leaf was the main medium; most old Tamil texts survive as palm-leaf manuscripts.

Tamil Nadu link: Tamil Nadu: India's first entry on the international Memory of the World Register was the Tamil medical palm-leaf manuscript collection of the Institute of Asian Studies, Chennai (1997). The Saiva Siddhanta manuscripts of the French Institute of Pondicherry followed in 2005. The Arthashastra manuscript is in the Grantha script, widely used in Tamil Nadu.

Frequently asked questions

What is this news about?

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What are the key facts to remember for the exam?

Register: UNESCO Memory of the World – Asia-Pacific Regional Register; Decision: 11th MOWCAP session, Jakarta; announced 5 Nov 2026; Mahabharata: Birch-bark manuscript – BORI, Pune; Arthashastra: 16th-c. Grantha palm-leaf – Oriental Research Institute, Mysuru.

What is the background to this news?

UNESCO Memory of the World: launched in 1992 to protect documentary heritage (manuscripts, archives, audio-visual records).

Practice questions (with answers)

1. Who wrote the 'Rajatarangini', the Sanskrit chronicle of the kings of Kashmir?

A) Banabhatta

B) Vishakhadatta

C) Bilhana

D) Kalhana

Answer: D – Explanation: Kalhana, 1148–49 CE. Banabhatta wrote Harshacharita, Vishakhadatta Mudrarakshasa, Bilhana Vikramankadevacharita.

2. Which scholar identified the manuscript of Kautilya's Arthashastra at Mysuru in 1905 and later published it?

A) Max Muller

B) James Prinsep

C) R. Shamasastry

D) R.G. Bhandarkar

Answer: C – Explanation: R. Shamasastry, librarian at the Mysore Oriental Library. James Prinsep deciphered Brahmi in 1837; Max Muller edited the Rigveda.

3. Who was the first general editor of the Critical Edition of the Mahabharata prepared by BORI, Pune?

A) C. Rajagopalachari

B) V.S. Sukthankar

C) P.V. Kane

D) D.D. Kosambi

Answer: B – Explanation: V.S. Sukthankar (from 1925 until his death in 1943); the work began in 1919 and ended in 1966. P.V. Kane, author of 'History of Dharmasastra', received the Bharat Ratna.

4. Which was India's first entry, in 1997, on UNESCO's international Memory of the World Register?

A) Tamil medical manuscripts

B) Rigveda manuscripts

C) Gilgit manuscripts

D) NAM archives

Answer: A – Explanation: The Tamil medical palm-leaf collection of the Institute of Asian Studies, Chennai (1997). The Rigveda followed in 2007 and the Gilgit manuscripts in 2017.

5. The 'Natyashastra', added to the international Memory of the World Register in 2025, is attributed to whom?

A) Panini

B) Kalidasa

C) Jayadeva

D) Bharata Muni

Answer: D – Explanation: Bharata Muni – an ancient treatise on drama, dance and music that sets out the 'rasa' theory. Panini wrote the Ashtadhyayi; Jayadeva the Gita Govinda.

Sources: PTI via The Week; ThePrint; UNESCO; UNESCO Memory of the World Register. © Shanmugam IAS Academy.