



THE MANUSCRIPT WRITING IN ANCIENT ASSAM: A STUDY

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Abstract: Manuscript means the hand written documents. These are the treasures of Indian heritage. Before the invention of printing technology, the literary works were manually prepared. The manuscripts are the object of high esteem. The other name of manuscripts is *Puthi* in Assamese language. The Assamese society worships it in place of any idol in the community prayer hall called "*Nāmghar*". Therefore, these manuscripts are preserved in places like *Satras* (Assamese institutional centers associated with the tradition of Vaishnavism), temples, museums, library etc.

This paper is an attempt to highlight the writing process of ancient manuscripts in Assam.

Keywords: Manuscripts, Painting, Writing, Assam etc.

Introduction: A manuscript is a *hastalipi* or hand written document. . All documents and books were in the form of manuscripts before the invention of the printing technology .The glorious past of the Indian culture and history lies in the ancient manuscripts. It is a combined hand written work with mathematical calculations, map, explanatory notes etc. It may be in a book form, scrolls or in codex format. Some manuscripts have pictures, border decorations, elaborately embossed initial letters or full-page illustrations¹.

Etymologically, a manuscript means something that is handwritten. Generally, the term manuscript relates to antiquity. It does not mean the write –up submitted by an author to a publisher. ‘Antiquity and the Art Treasure Act, 1972’ says that a manuscript is a hand written document, having scientific, historical, literary or aesthetic value, which is not less than seventy-five years old.

The word `manuscript` is a derivative from the Latin phrase *manu scriptum*. It means written by hand. Indian culture reflects the same system of writing. It is estimated that India possesses more than five million manuscripts which is probably the largest collection of manuscript in the world. These represent the artistic sensibilities of the people. These works are a means of conserving and transmitting culture of various people. Manuscripts are the medium of high-class painting. Almost 67% of the total manuscripts are in Sanskrit.

In Assam, the word manuscript mainly relates to Śaṅkaradeva and his Neo-Vaisnavite Movement. We can say that these manuscripts were the main vehicle of Sankardev's religious movement in Assam. The manuscript, which is called `Puthi` or `Sanchi Puthi` in Assamese, ensures for it a most venerable position in the minds of the people who worship it in place of any idol in the altar at the community prayer hall or *Nāmghar*. The manuscripts of ancient Assam are the effective and prestigious media of Śaṅkaradeva's Neo Vaisnavite Movement. Mahāpuruṣa Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva composed his *Ghoṣas, Pada, Bargeets, Nāts and Bhatimās* on these manuscripts². The *Sānchi Puthi* plays a significant role on the upliftment of the Assamese society. These are very sacred and worthy of veneration.

Methodology: I have applied traditional and historical methods in preparation of his paper. Explaining method used here to elaborate the subject. The study is mainly based on secondary sources like books, journals etc.

Objectives of the study: Following are the main objectives of the study-

- (1) To highlight the ancient manuscripts of Assam
- (2) To discuss the preparation of manuscripts
- (3) Discuss the painting of manuscripts.

Ancient Manuscripts of Assam: Some manuscripts of Assam are the manifestation of the *Satra* School. There are more than two hundred manuscripts, which are now available to see in the museum of Kalang Kalā Kendra, Nowgaong, Assam. The *Sānchi Puthi* i.e Assamese manuscripts are very rare thing and hardly found in *Satras*. There are some manuscripts, which are only private collection. These are important from the socio cultural viewpoint. We see the usages of posters; paintings etc in some Assamese manuscripts. Hence, we can say that these are the root of performing art³

The rainfall, water, chariots are also the subject matter of the ancient manuscripts of *Satrīā* School. The description of flood is the primary lines of the *Anādi-Patan*. It depicts the powerful description of nature. The illumination of the moon and stars by using white or yellow against a dark background is a feature of some *Satrīyā* manuscripts. The *Gīta- Govinda* (1695-1713) is the artistic culmination of this School. The drawings of these manuscripts are not restricted to human portrayal. The theme is imaginary and fantastic.

There is another style, called *Āhom* School or Court School. This style of manuscript writing started after the arrival of artists from *the* West. This school flourished under the patronage of king Rudrasimha. This style imported Muslim style and followed a superior technique. It became popular as the *Āhom – Court – School* because it developed under the reign of king Śivasimha (1713-1744). Manuscripts that survive from this period include the *Śaṅkhasurabadha* (1726), *Ushā -Haraṇa* (1730), *Hastividyaṛṇava* (1734), *ṣaṣṭha Skhandha Bhāgavata* (1734) *Dharma Pūrāṇa* (1735).

The first manuscript of this school was the *Gajendra-cintāmani* (1713). This treatise deals with elephants. Later, *Hasti-Vidyārṇava* or *Hasti-Puthi* was written on the same topic. There is no name of the artist. However, people believe that Sukumar Barkātha was the writer of this book. The style of execution, employment of color, line and form indicates its place in the *Āhom-Court-Style*. The *ṣaṣṭha Skhandha -Bhāgavata* and *Dharma-Pūrāṇa*⁴ were to illustrated experimental venture in part of the royal patrons. On the other hand, facial expression came up in both the *Satrīyā* and *Āhom-Court-Style*.

There was a famous *satra* of *Khanikars*, `The *Chalihā Bareghar Satra*` which was established in 1715. The *Khanikaras* of this *Satra* involved in the art of manuscript illustration, *Singhāsana* and mask making. The expression of art was also noticeable both in style and in output. The production of *Ajamilopākhyān* and *Ādhyātma-Rāmāyaṇa* (1713) by Viṣṇurāma are true examples of the *Satrīyā* School.

The two styles, *Satrīyā* and *Āhom* found parally in the *Ādhyātma-Rāmāyaṇa* of Pūrṇakānta Ātā. Hence, this creation is unique. Both, Mughal and Rajasthani styles are seen in the manuscript of *Rangoli Kīrtana* (1759), written by unknown artist during the reign of king Rājeśwarśimha (1751-1769). The lyrical postures and manual gestures of the *Rangoli Kīrtana* reflect the dance and dramatic traditions of the state. There are some other important works of this period which include Śāsadhara Ātā's illustration of *Pārijāt-haraṇa* and Ghanasyam Khargaria Phukan's *Kalki-Pūrāṇa*. The former was a play written by the Vaisnavite Saint Śaṅkardeva.

Preparation of Manuscript: In India, the earliest evidence of manuscript writing was confined among the Buddhist, which goes back to 5th century A.D. Among the Jainas, the earliest manuscript writing belonged to 6th century A.D. The earliest available manuscripts were of palm leaves and of brick back.

The production of aloe back leaves in Assam for writing is undoubtedly an important phenomenon in the history of writings in India. The manuscript tradition in ancient Assam was an independent development. It may also be pointed out that the existence of a Hindu tradition of writings prevailed in India Prior to the Buddhist tradition. It might have come to Assam with the earliest Aryan migration.

The Assamese manuscripts made out of various materials. These are –

1. *Sānchi Pāt* : The leaves of the *Sānchi* tree
2. *Sānchi bark*: It is an important writing material prepared from the thicker variety of the aloes wood.
3. *Tulāpāt*: It made by pressing cotton.
4. *Tālpāt*: The palm leaves, also used in rare occasions.
5. *Mugā Cloth*: Manuscript on *mugā* silk is very popular in Assam. The letters of this type of manuscript appear as if etched on gold.

Any one of these materials used like paper on those days. Besides these, tender bamboo slice, *bhuja* leaf etc were also use. However, the usages of *Sāncīpāt* and *Tulāpāt* were very common. The manuscripts, known, as *Sānchi Puthi* because of the primary material are *Sānchī* bark. The preparation of *Sānchi* writing material is a long process. Cotton is the chief component of *tulāpāt*. *Kathāgurucharita* reveals that Śaṅkardeva used *tulāpāt* while painting for his play *Chinha-Yātrā*.

Generally, the manuscript writer used thicker leaves or wooden pieces for covers. There were always some spare leaves to record changes of ownership. The important events of the owner's life and his family were written in these pages. These additional leaves were known as '*beti-pāt*' or '*betu-pāt*'. Lastly, the whole manuscript wrapped up in a piece of cloth and kept in a wooden box. These boxes were again colored and painted with some meaningful pictures.

Sānchī Pāt was the writing material, used only in ancient Assam. It was prepared from the bark of the *Agar* tree, found in upper and middle Assam. The manuscripts in Assam were written on this particular material.

There was a special kind of waterproof ink to write on *Sānchīpāt*. The ink was prepared with local products such as *Silikhā (harītakī) seeds*, *Kehrāj*, *ashes*, *minerals* etc. Normally, black ink was used for writing and painting. The ink was slippery and glossy. The main ingredient of this ink was *silikhā (terminalia citrine)*.

The ashes of *Barā Rice*, a few fruits like *Silikhā*, cow urine, blood of *Kuchiā Fish*, mango bark etc are boiled in a big pot. The boiled liquid is stored in a clay pot. It is to dew for a few nights with a non-process basin below it. The solution that turns black by this time, comes through the earthen bowl, and drops into the basin. It turns as very fine and deep black ink. Some people added iron and iron sulphate to it. The ink is applied with the help of bird's feather.

The scribe of the manuscript was *Lekhak*. Generally, he did the writing first and left blank pages for *khinakars* to fill with illustrations later. These *khanikars* were both artists and artisan.

Painting of Manuscripts: The origin of the traditional Assamese painting pushed back to the time of *Pūrāṇic* legend of Chitrlekha. She was an accomplished portrait painter.⁵ The history of Assamese painting traced back to the time of Kumār Bhāskarbarman, the king of ancient Assam. it is found in the *Harṣhasarita* , a seventh century chronicle by Bāṇabhaṭṭa that royal present which had been sent by Bhāskarbarman to Harṣabardhana included curved boxes of panels for painting with brushes. In the *Nidhānpur* copper plate inscription

of the early part of seventh century also recorded that Bhāskarbarman's picture was seen in the houses of kings. It is known from the *Uttarbarbil* inscription that the royal palace was decorated with pictures.

The Assamese manuscripts painting are broadly classified into two categories. It is mainly based on the style of its composition and the representations of man, nature and architecture. The tenth book of *Bhāgavat*⁶ and all other manuscripts with similar characteristics belong to this category, which represents the early phase of the Assamese manuscripts paintings. These are very simple and red, blue, black and yellow are the dominating colors. Generally, red background is used to depict day and blue to night and indoor scene. Majority of the pictures are on red background. All the manuscripts of this category are religious in their themes.

The other category of paintings is the development of the later period. These types of paintings are more complex. The architecture of the buildings depicted in these paintings. The *Rājasthānī* and *Mughal* paintings have played here a dominant role. Almost all the paintings of this category are also religious in nature. Secular themes are rarely depicted in this category. Colors used in these type of paintings are more wider. Besides the common red, green, yellow, black and blue, different shades and combinations of colors are noticed here. White is frequently used. In most of the pictures of these manuscripts landscapes, floods are painted in realistic manner, which reflects some similarities with the *Mughals*. Almost a similar treatment of landscape is observed in the manuscript of *Śaṅkhasura-Vadhakāvya*. Animals are depicted in realistic manner in the paintings of *Hāti-puthi*. Depiction of nature, particularly the landscapes, and the designs of the architectures are the main theme in the paintings of *Hāti-Puthi*.⁷

The main purposes of the traditional paintings of Assam were to supplement the text of the manuscripts. The Assamese manuscripts paintings derive its beauty from its uniqueness and simplicity.

Conclusion: The glorious past of Assamese culture and society lies in these manuscripts. This invaluable and unique tool of knowledge is under threat and the manuscripts are disappearing at an alarming rate. However, its preservation is the need of the hours.

Originally, all books were in manuscripts form. All private and the government documents remained hand-written till the invention of the typewriter in the late 12th century. A manuscript preservation centre was opened in the Normal School at Silchar in Barak valley in the year 1910. It functioned actively for two decades and preserved nearly 200 manuscripts, written mostly in Sanskrit and Bengali. On the other hand, B.C. Gupta Memorial Library, G.C. College Silchar established in 1935, is the oldest academic library of this region. The manuscript research and conservation centre of the library is assigned to 12 districts of Assam. This centre preserves almost 3000 rare Vaishnavit manuscripts at Mājulī. According to this centre, almost 10000 manuscripts are in possession of different Satras and private houses. These invaluable manuscripts need preservation.

Notes & References:

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