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# A Study Of Sanchipat Manuscripts Found In Assam: Techniques Adopted For Preventive Conservation Of Manuscripts By Different Institutes Of This Region

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** The present study is made to document old and rare Sanchipat manuscripts found in different parts of Assam and to highlight the role institutions of this region are playing in creating awareness among the local people regarding its significance.

**Methodology:** For the present study, information is collected through a personal interview with the management authority of The Research institutes and Museum. Secondary sources (Books, e-journals, Newspapers) are also been consulted for obtaining secondary information.

**Findings:** reveals that numerous important manuscripts are lying untouched and in a deteriorating condition which needs to be taken care of to preserve it for generations to come. Various techniques adopted to conserve and preserve manuscripts by various institutes (Research Centers, Museums, Special Libraries, and Archives). Institutes operating locally are working towards it but still a lot more to go. Individuals, communities, and Governments need to go hand in hand to preserves this asset.

**Originality:** It has been seen that various beliefs and notions of local people are associated with keeping manuscripts that gave a new direction to carry out the study. The Study will help the other researchers to carry out their research in a similar field by showing the current picture of the condition of the manuscript in which they are kept and what more needs to be done.

**Keywords:** Manuscripts, Sanchipat, Preservation, Conservation, Assam, Tai manuscripts.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

There is an anonymous verse generally found to be written at the end of manuscripts, in which, the Manuscripts itself appeal its readers to save it from water, from oil and lose binding and to protect it from falling into the hands of fools; indicating how delicate and

precious manuscripts are in nature. If we go back and look at the history of writing then we will find that its' early period is closely associated with the history of writing materials and among them, the manuscript is one. Manuscripts in simple words can be defined as a document written by hand or it is a handwritten composition on various tools as paper, bark, palm leaves, or cloth. It tells us about the origin of a particular race inhabiting an area, which can be said as a sole and reliable record of events that took place during the time the concept of the printing press has not even emerged. Language and literature is the symbol of identity, and manuscripts as a document preserve this identity. Considering the value of manuscripts, it is felt that conservation of this asset is necessary for the generations to come, to let them know their origin, the vividness, and richness of their culture and society as a whole.

### ***Conservation and Preservation of Manuscript***

Any direct or indirect action on a damaged or undamaged manuscript or collection of the manuscript to enhance the life (longevity) of the manuscript can be termed as Conservation. Conservation can occur in two forms-(i) Curative Conservation and (ii) Preventive Conservation. In curative conservation, the action being taken to cure the damaged manuscript of further deterioration while preventive conservation aimed at preventing the damaged or undamaged manuscript from future risk of decay. Here, a preventive method of conserving manuscripts is discussed and an attempt is being made to throw light on how different measures can be taken to protect invaluable manuscripts from decay.

Causes behind deterioration or decay of manuscripts and its remedial measures

- Flood and earthquake as natural causes of destruction
- Biological factors- Microorganisms (Virus, Algae, Fungus), Insects (Grasshoppers, silverfish, flies, etc.), Rodents (Rats, mice, etc.)
- War Between countries leading to the devastation of institutions( as we can see in the case of Nalanda University in the past)
- There may be cases of vandalism and stealing in a library or museum preserving manuscripts.

Along with the common causes mentioned above, there are some professional causes

- Improper handling of manuscripts
- Improper method of storage
- Lack of professional training
- Lack of communication among professionals within the institution and institutions sharing the same objectives. Some basic remedial measures that are being adopted by curators or conservator are:
- Use of Naphthalene Balls, Citrus fruits, Basic Acid, Table Salt, Lemongrass oil, Neem Extract or oil.
- Periodical Sunbath of Manuscripts under shade on minimum temperature.
- Wrapping of the manuscripts with acid-free red cloth.

### **A glimpse of Manuscript Found in India**

The manuscript as defined by Manuscript Mission “ is a handwritten composition on paper, bark, cloth, metal, palm leaf, Sanchipat or any other material dating back at least 75 years that has significant, scientific, historical or aesthetic value.” India is believed to have the largest collection of manuscripts in the entire globe. All these are

written in a variety of languages and scripts that still exists, considered as 'Treasures of India'. The major Indian manuscripts are found written in the Sanskrit language. A few that can be mentioned – 'Natyashastra', 'Gitagovinda', 'Arthashastra', 'Ramayana', 'Baburnama' and others.

Before the advent of mass production of papers, the commonly used material for writing purposes were- Birch Bark, Palm leaves, Sanchipat, and Clay tablets. All these forms an invaluable part of India's documented heritage. Written in a variety of languages, these are scattered all over the country in monasteries, temples, museums, archives, Special libraries, and with individuals.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Mazumdar (2009) in the paper 'Digital Preservation of Rare Manuscripts in Assam' says that with the deterioration of the law of nature manuscripts are also deteriorating. Hence, digital preservation can recover and restore it from loss, theft, and decay. Digital preservation of manuscripts is facilitated with the advent of Information technology. Here, the author has highlighted the initiatives taken in the state of Assam for the preservation of manuscripts in digital mode. Devi (2018) in her article on Documentation of traditional knowledge discusses the challenges of proper documentation of the traditional knowledge systems concerning the preservation of manuscripts in Assam. It has raised questions for its readers as to what is the way out if the community is not willing or not aware of the need for manuscripts. Should the process of documentation be stopped or is there exists a middle path for it? Kalita (2015) made an in-depth analysis of the state of affairs of the preservation and conservation of manuscripts of Assam. Here, the author says that unless these age-old records are protected from the onslaught of weather, the thought content embodied in the manuscript would fade away. Goswami (2020) put forth that Assamese culture and society have their glorious past that lies in these manuscripts. However, this unique and invaluable tool of knowledge is under threat; manuscripts are disappearing and its physical condition is deteriorating at an alarming rate. Hence, its preservation is the need of the hour. This paper talks about the beliefs, thoughts, sentiments of local people associated with the preservation of manuscripts. Boruah, M (2018) in her article outlines the historical development of manuscript painting in Assam as well as its attempts to throw light on the status of manuscript painting. This paper provides insight into the development and changes that are taking place among a countable number of existing artists of manuscript painting in Assam.

## **3. Sanchipat: Writing Material For manuscript in Assam**

It can be said that it is because of the efforts of Sankaradeva and his successors that the word 'manuscript' gained its importance. They were the vehicle for transmission of the ideals of his Neo Vaisnavite Movement. Sankaradeva himself wrote almost all his compositions on these manuscripts, as- Ghoshas, Borgeets, Nats, etc. The Assamese manuscript is made out of various writing materials as- Sanchi pat (leaves of Sanchi tree), Sanchi bark (bark of Sanchi tree), Tulapat leaves (leaves of Tula from which cotton is prepared), talpat (palm leaves), and other materials. Although, Sanchipat and Tulapat were largely used the primary media for writing is Sanchi bark that is why the manuscript has come to be known as 'Sanchi puthi' or 'sanchi book'.

Sanchi manuscripts were in use since the age of Ramayana i.e., around the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Since that period, Assam has a history of its scripts. Madhavkandali is translated to Assamese around the 4<sup>th</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Earlier, it was to be 100 years back but now it needs to be 75 years old to be considered as a Manuscript.

**Stages of Preparation of Sanchipat:** The process of preparing the bark for use as a writing material goes through the following stages

- **Selection** is a very careful task of selecting the particular tree(Agaru Bansal), which must not be less than 15 or 16years old
- **Removal of Strips** i.e., the bark of the tree is removed to a minimum of 6 feet long and 3inch in breadth. The bark below 4 feet of the ground is not removed as that portion is uneven and not suitable for writing.
- **Rolling of the Strips**\_with the inner part inside and allow to be dried in the sun for a few days.
- **Removal of the outer portion** of the bark by rubbing with hand or with the help of other substances.
- **Cutting into pieces**\_after removal of the outer layer, the proper bark is cut into convenient sizes of 9 to 27 inches long and 3 to 18 inches broad. They are then put in cold water to extract the alkali
- **Smoothing of the surface** with a knife and for about half an hour dried in the sun. After getting perfectly dry-rubbed with a piece of burnt brick.
- **Applying a paste** prepared from matimah and the bark is dyed yellow using arsenic sulfide or by vermilion.
- **Finishing Touch** The bark strips are then rubbed as smooth as marble with a 'Ghila' a smooth fruit of a wild creeper.

### **The Process of Preparation of Ink for writing**

The pens were prepared from 'fern' which is called 'dhekya' and 'Chip Kathi' a kind of a wild creeper. A wing of big duck, vulture, hen, and the peacock was also used for this purpose.

The black color ink used was of a very fast color and a deep one. It is waterproof and does not fade easily. The ingredients of this ink-

- Juice of silikha( Terminalia citrine)
- Cow urine
- Mango bark
- Addition of dewdrops( in case the ink becomes thick)
- Ashes of iron cooking pot( if the ink is found to be light in color)

### **Scripts Used In the Manuscripts**

Generally, four types of scripts can be traced out seeing the styles used in these manuscripts:

- Kaitheli, very artistic, clean, and wavy
- Gadganya Scripts is a simple and straight one

- Bamuniya Script resembles Devanagari and kaitheli script
- Lahkari is similar to Maithili found in the Kamrup region

#### 4. Problems of Preservation of Sanchipat manuscript

- **Ignorance** on the part of owners of the manuscripts regarding biological and environmental risks. They are unaware of the temperature and range of humidity required to be maintained in the room where manuscripts are kept.
- **There is an inadequate facility for storing the valuable manuscripts.** Sometimes they are kept one over the other; again in places where they are easily exposed to various insects attack like (silverfish, cockroach, and book lice) and many others.
- **Innumerable Superstitious beliefs** are associated with possessing manuscripts. Some believe that it can cause damage to individuals or it can bring sorrow to the family owning the manuscripts. Manuscripts have already been either thrown to the river or burnt down into ashes.
- **Another barrier that comes out while conserving manuscripts is the religious faith of the manuscript holders.** Manuscripts are mainly owned by villagers (especially the high caste people) among which there is a line of demarcation regarding caste, class, etc. Because of which manuscripts are not allowed to be touch by the people who do not belong to the same class.
- **The technique of conservation requires professionals,** who are experts in handling manuscripts (giving the proper treatment to the damaged manuscripts, their documentation, etc.). However, in Assam, there is a dearth of trained conservators, curators, archivists, who are aware of the art and science of manuscript conservation.
- **Manuscripts are available in different languages** having their scripts (Tai Khamti, Tai Ahom, Urdu, Assamese, Devanagri, Pali, etc.). Within a particular community, a limited number of people can read the language of the manuscript and its meaning. Therefore, the knowledge contained in the manuscripts is not yet disseminated.

#### 5. Efforts of Various Local Institutes in Preservation of Sanchi Manuscripts

Manuscripts play a crucial role to build up a bridge between past, present, and future, bringing back information related to social, historical, spiritual events and happenings. Realizing the utmost importance of manuscripts, institutes have been involved in adopting modern means of preserving this asset. Even, various local institutes have also come up in various regions of Assam, showing their keen interest in protecting and caring for manuscripts. The names of a few mentioned here

- a. **Institute of Tai Studies and Research:** A research institute in Moranhat, Charaideo district of Assam since working towards the protection of endangered languages of Assam. It maintains a separate room for manuscripts written in different languages of Assam in a controlled temperature and humidity as required. From time to time, it organizes workshops, seminars relating to preservation and conservation where resource persons come from

various reputed institutes like IGNC (Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts). It has also been sanctioned a Manuscript Resource Centre by NMM under the Ministry of culture.

- b. **Manuscript Conservation Centre, Department of Cultural Studies, and Tezpur University:** It has started under National Mission for Manuscripts intending to locate and conserve manuscripts to enhance its access, awareness, and use by the upcoming generation. The center has undertaken various related projects involving the new generation so that they can have an idea of the changes in history and politics of the different eras.
- c. **Satras of Majuli:** Satras are Institutions where Vaishnavism or vaishnavite culture is propagated. They housed numerous old and rare manuscripts of which many are believed to be written by Sankaradeva and Madhavdev, saint scholars of Assam. The number of manuscripts is estimated to be around 4,000, mostly written on Sanchipat. These manuscripts are written on themes like religion, astrology, medicine, disease, and its treatment. The head priests in the Satras worship the manuscripts as sacred objects at least two times a day chanting some sacred mantras.

Apart from these institutes, the manuscript is also preserved in various places as the **Uttaran museum** in the Sivasagar district where manuscripts and other art objects are kept beautifully showcasing Assamese culture and reflects the picture of the day-to-day life of Assam in a true sense.

Some others can be found in the Museum of Anthropological department of Dibrugarh University, an anthropological museum of indigenous people. A Manuscript Conservation center is also set up in Government Sanskrit College, Guwahati inaugurated by Governor of Assam, Prof. Jagdish Mukhi. Again, Krishna Kanta Handique Library of Gauhati University is also identified as MRC for The State of Assam and Meghalaya under National Mission for Manuscript (NMM). The center is bestowed with the responsibility of surveying and documenting every manuscript in their area.

The state government of Assam has passed a new act in the last assembly session i.e., 'The Assam Heritage (tangible) protection, preservation, conservation, and maintenance bill 2020.' in order to preserve and conserve ancient heritage. This heritage includes remains such as artifacts, archaeological sites significant to human community such as monasteries, xatras, namghars (places of worship) that have been in existence of not less than 75 years having historical and aesthetic value.

## 6. Measures To Be Taken On The Part Of Different Stakeholders:

- **An individual** owner of manuscripts should do the following duties- Collection of manuscripts from different places, serially listing them, keeping them in a safe place.
- **Institutions** dealing with the preservation of manuscripts and other rare art objects (as Maps, paintings, gramophone, etc.,) need to professionally train their staff( Conservators and Archivists) on the need to examine the condition of the manuscript before giving any treatment.
- **State** in its part needs to organize awareness program on the importance of preserving manuscripts and basic remedies that can be taken at home, make arrangement for training programs, facilitate the opening of conservation

laboratory; MRC( Manuscript Resource Centre ) of the state should be strengthened to document the undocumented manuscript.

- **On the Central level**, financial assistance to be given by the Ministry of culture for various training programs; provide the facility to open a national-level repository (to store objects of different communities and cultures).

It is required that all the important manuscript be digitized by institutes which will lessen the risks of further deterioration and also it provide a convenient way of preserving the old and rare manuscripts for a longer period; Workshops on Manuscriptology need to be organized at regular intervals and professional resource person (preferably from different linguistic communities) should train the participants. Again, professionals working in various MRCs have also their huge role to play in taking the initiative of creating awareness among indigenous people regarding - the significance of manuscripts, how they can prevent manuscripts( kept at their home)from being deteriorated using basic remedial measures.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Assam has been blessed with a unique and vivid culture, traditions, and its values. For protecting its integrity, uniqueness, and to communicate its richness to our next generations, manuscripts being preserve and conserve by various institutes and on a personal level by individuals is an incredible medium. Manuscripts tell us about our origin, which has tied us to our roots. National Mission for Manuscripts established under the ministry of culture working for protecting indigenous language, its symbol, and identity through numerous MRCs set up in different regions of the country bestowed with the task of making a survey and documenting all the manuscripts( from Universities to Temples, Monasteries, Madrassas, and private collections) of their areas.

Libraries, Research institutes, museums have been working towards adopting new techniques of preserving the manuscripts as per the changes in both environmental conditions and biological conditions. In line with the present scenario, Digitization of old Manuscripts is one simple step undertaken by various institutes of this region towards preserving this asset providing widespread access that is as old as human civilization itself.

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