



International Journal of Sanskrit Research

अनन्ता

ISSN: 2394-7519

IJSR 2021; 7(1): 501-504

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www.anantaajournal.com

Received: 18-10-2020

Accepted: 21-12-2020

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Illustrations on palm leaf manuscript: A unique art of Odisha

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Abstract:

India has inherited huge treasure of knowledge in the forms of manuscripts as gift from our ancestors. The glorious parts of Indian culture lie in these manuscripts. For centuries the manuscripts which have survived have significance of antiquity. Innumerable palm leaf manuscripts have been found across the country which shows the popularity of manuscript writing in India. Now after the advent of paper the palm leaf manuscript writings has stopped almost every parts of India, but it is a matter of fortune that, having a rich collection of palm leaf as well as illustrated manuscripts Odisha the only one state in country which is still carrying its way back tradition of palm leaf engraving. A village named as 'Raghurājapur' in 'Puri' district of Odisha still now practicing the palm leaf writings as well as palm leaf illustration. The entire village has devoted to this work and one can find at least one artist from every home of this village. The perfection in their paintings, the engraving style, knowledge of dyes, pigments and the manner in which the inks were prepared by Odia artists also have great historical significance. In this research paper an attempt has been made to analysis the methods and techniques adopted in the illustrated palm leaf manuscripts of Odisha.

Keyword: Palm leaf, illustrated palm leaf manuscript, artists of Odisha, engraving style, pigments, dyes

1. Introduction

Palm leaf manuscripts of Odisha are called 'Pothis', the word 'Pothi' being derived from the Sanskrit word 'Pustaka' meaning book. The palm leaf writing in this part of the country is considered probably the oldest form of writing. Preserving a palm leaf manuscript would be equivalent to retaining a piece of a three hundred years old history. In this part of the country, palm leaf engraving also called as 'Tālapatra-chitra' ^[1]. Odisha has a rich heritage with a horary beginning since ancient times. The ancient name of Odisha, 'Utkal' means the "Land of excellence in art". In every field of art whether it is sculpture, architecture, textile, handicrafts, music, dance and paintings everything is beautifully depicted by the Odia artists. From its beginning up to 20th century the ideas, style and pattern of palm leaf painting is almost same and it has been an integral part of the culture and tradition of Odisha. Through minute observation of these illustrated manuscript, one will find typical Odia style has been adopted in these paintings. Illustrated manuscripts can be find from all over India but here this art reached its perfection and excellence because the people of Odisha love their art like their life. According to scholars, the oldest palm leaf manuscript preserved in Odisha state museum is a copy of the poetic work, "Abhinav Gita Govinda" written by 'Kavi Chandra Ray Divakar Mishra' and the copyist or scribe was 'Sri Sridhar Sharma' completed on 6th April 1494.

2. Palm leaf and its nature

Palm trees are commonly found on the sandy soil in tropical regions. They are organic in nature and known for longevity. The composition of palm leaf is cellulose and lignin for which leaves can get darkened under UV light and can easily break in dry environment further the leaves are so sensitive to mechanical impact resulting in scratches, folds, breaks and split.

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¹ Tāla-palm, Patra- leaf, Chitra- illustration.

Before the arrival of paper palm leaf was the popular medium for both writing and painting in India as well as almost all the south Asian countries, such as Myanmar, Malaysia, Thailand, Sri Lanka and Indonesia. In India mostly southern and eastern region like Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka the palm leaf enticing reached its peak by reason of the easy availability of this material due to the geographical and climatic condition suitable for the growth of palm trees. It is very difficult to say exactly when the palm leaf first began to be used for writing. The first reference to writing in India was found in Pali Buddhist cannon of 5th century B.C.

2.1 Preparation of palm leaf for manuscript purpose

In Odisha, various methods have been implemented for the formation of the palm leaves to manuscript form. One of these methods is, people have chosen the fresh young palm leaves which are just about to open. Tender green leaves of different variety of palm tree are selected and cut. These matured fresh leaves are first cut and dried in the sun, then boiled or soaked in water, next dried again and in the end, after that they are polished with a smooth stone or conch shell and cut into proper size.

3. The engraving style and Skill of writing on palm leaves

The art of Palm leaf writings is different from place to place. One can not find the same process across the country. In every corner of India, the way of palm leaf writing is different. In northern parts of India, the ink is used the help of a brush to write the manuscript but when we come to southern parts especially in Odisha with a help of stylus first the letters are incised on leaves, then a mixture of powder charcoal with ghee is applied throughout the manuscript then wiped out with a piece of cotton cloth. After the removal of excess ink, the letters are clearly visible in the manuscripts. In some manuscripts we can find no ink has been used. With out the application of ink also one can read the manuscripts but inks make the manuscripts read better. To inscribe letters on the palm, a stylus was used. The palm leaf is to be supported by the help of fingers of left hand so that the leaf will not move while writing. After that the stretched fore fingers and the thumb pressed the palm leaf on the left hand by the scribe and in right hand the stylus was to be held in proper position and the right pressure to be applied for smooth writing and to avoid the chances of torn.

3.1 Significance of Illustrated palm leaf manuscripts of Odisha

It is hard to say the particular time period of origin of the palm leaf art, but on the basis of various evidence such as the sculptural depictions of palm leaf manuscripts with stylus in Parśurāmeśvar Temple, Mukteśvara temple of Bhubaneswar, and Konark Sun Temple indicates that this art was very popular in Odisha. However, it has not been possible to date any Chitra-Pothi to a period earlier than the later part of the 17th century. It is quite likely that popular Odia text of 15th and 16th centuries like the Mahabharata and the Bhagavata were being illustrated, though no copies of these manuscripts have survived. But during the period of Upendra Bhanja the art of palm leaf reached its zenith and continued till the end of the 19th century.

The painting style started its journey from cave walls in the primitive days, paintings on the temple walls and the walls of the individuals. Special kinds of designs portrayed in different festivals, have succeeded through the stylus of the passionate

artists and the application of color enhanced its beauty. The illustrated manuscripts played a significant part among the palm leaf manuscripts. This art developed as a secular art form, basically if we see there are various ritual purposes of palm leaf writing but here in this illustration on palm leaf there is no religious and ritual uses. The characteristics include drawing, linear forms of lyrical sensitiveness, typical treatment of landscape, architectural settings and special features of faces and the figures makes these manuscripts more valuable.

Among one thousand manuscripts of southern India one can merely find two or three illustrated manuscripts and those are on the cover pages of the text and at times some illustrations are without any relevance to the text, but in Odia manuscripts illustrations are in plenty, almost every page we can find illustrations depicting all most every story and sometimes containing the themes of one stanza of the text. The credit of these artists is that their paintings convey the true meaning of the text. As example the text of 'Amaru Śataka' perhaps it is the only copy with illustration available in the entire country now preserved in Odisha state museum. In this particular manuscript the artist was truly able to portray the difficult slokas of Amaru with exactness. The reader who is unable to understand the slokas can easily understand the text by looking at the picture. One more interesting thing to note that in most of the illustrated manuscript the captions to the pictures were always in the Odia language, even when the text was written in Sanskrit.

Creating illustrations in palm leaf were expensive rather than the plain manuscripts. So, the rich, the kings, nobles they alone could afford it and they were the patron and sponsors of these manuscripts. Earlier illustrated manuscripts were given as dowry to a daughter with the purpose that the son-in-law's family members will think the bride's family a cultured one with sound literary background. This practice was in craze with the substitution of books in the place of manuscripts till the eighth decade of 20th century.

3.2 Way of painting

Palm leaf art not everyone's cup of tea only the expert in drawing and painting were able to draw pictures on a palm leaf and paint it. Only a handful of many artists could handle illustrations. If the poet himself is not an artist then he hired some artist to communicate his feelings, and after getting the final approval of the author the artist can draw necessary drawing and painting on palm leaf. Again, the artists have certain limitation of freedom to draw figures on the palm leaf. with a help of sharp iron stylus to draw a picture on the surface of the palm leaf is not an easy task too, because of this reason most of the manuscripts of Odisha the side face of a person is drawn instead of front face. This is the unique characteristic of Odia painters that they draw the side face of a person, where as the painters of other parts of the country show the front face. By the drawing of side face the artist was able to display a good view of the trees, different kinds of hairstyle for example in 'Uṣāvilāsa' manuscript we can find the onion shaped hair bun, the majestic bun style (judā) and the twisted braid style (Beṅī) in 'Lāvanyavati' manuscript.

4. Colour analysis in the palm leaf manuscripts

The letters written with stylus are themselves legible but to make incised letter appear clear colours were used on the palm leaf. There were two types of colour material through

which the manuscript illustration has been done, one was pigment another one was dye or ink.

- **Pigment:** It is a coloured material which is completely or nearly insoluble in water. They are often inorganic in nature.
- **Dye/Ink:** Dyes are typically soluble and they are organic compounds.

4.1 Pigments used in palm leaf manuscripts

The pigments were prepared in a traditional way and applied on the manuscripts. They were mixed with locally available gum or adhesive as binding medium before application. The pigments which have been used in decorating the leaves were basically red, green, black, blue, white, yellow in color. It has been found that these pigments were extracted naturally from locally accessible materials. To make the illustration attractive artists use different colors like blue, yellow, green, black and white by preparing a mixture of forest and mineral products i.e – Hingula, Haritāla, Haridā leaf juice, Goracana, Kasturī, Cuna with Bela, Keṇḍu, Baburi glue. From these artists make the color substance of the illustration, which is indelible or permanent in nature.

For example,

- **Black:** has been extracted from lamp black ^[2] mixed with Wood apple gum ^[3].
- **Red pigment:** Locally known as ‘Hingula’. This pigment prepared from ground Cinnabar ^[4] also known as vermilion. It is a vibrant red mineral that contains a mixture of mercury and Sulphur. It is widely used as a coloring agent.
- **White pigment:** It was prepared from conch shell powder mixed with plant gum. Another process of making this pigment was the artists prepare a mixture of Cuna ^[5] and Bela ^[6].
- **Yellow pigment:** It is made from Haritala ^[7], also known as Orpiment the king stone ingredient for yellow color. The yellow pigment is also prepared from ‘Goracana ^[8]’. One more method to prepare this was adhesive of wood apple mixed with turmeric powder.
- **Blue** was made from ground juice of indigo plant leaves mixed with some plant gum.
- **Green pigment** extracted from ground bean leaves mixed with plant gum.
- Admixtures are prevalent throughout use indigo and orpiment for green and white is added to many of the pigments for varying shades.

4.2 Ink used in palm leaf manuscripts-

In Sanskrit language the dye or ink is called ‘Masi ^[9]’. The lexicons record a few other words like, ‘Melā’, ‘Masijala’, ‘Patrāñjanam’. Of these ‘Patrāñjanam’, as the word itself

² carbon

³ Locally known as kaintha.

⁴ Red Sulphide of mercury (HgS)- Heavy, soft in grinding and bright red in appearance.

⁵ Limestone – Calcium Carbonate (CaCO₃)

⁶ Wood Apple

⁷ Arsenic Trisulfide (As₂S₃)

⁸ An Indian pigment made from the urine of cows. This pigment collected from the crystalized urine of cows fed on a special diet of only mango leaves. This pigment is deep mustard yellow in appearance.

⁹ मस्यते परिणमते इति॥ लिपिप्रयोजना लेखनद्रव्यम् इत्यमरतीकायां भरतः॥ तत्पर्यायः मसिजलम् पत्राञ्जनम् इति त्रिकाण्डकोषः॥ मेला काली अञ्जनम् मसी इति शब्दार्त्नावली॥ रञ्जनी इति स्वामी॥ मलिनाम्बु मशी इति हेमचन्द्रः॥

refers is a paste used to blacken the letters incised on a palm leaf (Patra-leaf and Anjana-Black). There were two types of ink employed,

- **Delible ink** – It was used for ordinary day to day purpose.
- **Indelible ink** – It was mostly used for writing documents and manuscript. This ink was permanent in nature and prepared in various ways.

As an alternative to regular ink or as a convenient, fresh juices were used. Tamala ^[10] rasa (juice of tamāla leaf) and alaktaka rasa (juice of alaktaka) red in color which is referred by Bāna Bhatta ^[11].

4.3 Ink Preparation Techniques

In Odisha the ink is prepared in several ways by the artists followed by different regions. Various methods have been adopted by the artists to make good quality of ink for writing as well as painting purpose.

- The ordinary kind of ink is prepared by mixing lamp black with gum, water and some other sticky substances.
- The process of making indelible ink start with the charcoal of certain plants or nuts which is boiled with oils like almond or sesamum to prepare the ink. The charcoal of Peepal tree is baked with water with gum and collyrium from sesamum oil lamp is mixed with this. Like this the ineradicable ink is prepared.
- Another kind of ink making process was extracted bean leaf juice mixed with charcoal made of burnt coconut cells then sesame oil and turmeric added to it to prepare the ink.
- One more technique the scribe artists followed was they burnt a cow-ghee lamp underneath a plate, after an hour or so a layer of some black power type elements takes shape in the interior portion of that plate. Then they mixed black powder with kaintha mucilage and slicks the mixture for an hour to get the finer quality ink.

4.4 Significance of color application in illustrated manuscript

To make the illustration prominent various shades of colors used by the artists like blue, red, green, gold, white, black and yellow by preparing a mixture of locally available vegetable and mineral colors. There was some specific purpose of each ink to colored the manuscript.

- **Black Ink:** It is widely used to write the manuscripts.
- **Yellow Ink:** This yellow sulfate of arsenic was mostly used for removing unwanted letters. It was also used as decorating and painting the manuscript.
- **Red Ink:** This was used for red paints, writing colophons of manuscripts, drawing border lines on the sides of folios and for drawing circular figures and straight lines in geometrical figures. It was also used for preparing colours like orange and pink.
- **Golden and Silver ink:** These inks were very costly in those days also. Hence, were generally used in writing important scriptural works, especially by the Jainas and Budhhas and rarely by Hindus. The time-consuming process of preparing these inks required leisure.

¹⁰ Cinnamomum Tamala- Indian Bay leaf.

¹¹ धूमरक्तालक्तकाक्षर तालपत्र कुहुकतन्त्रमन्त्र पुस्तिका संग्राहिणे पट्टिका लिखित दुर्गास्तोत्रेण

5. Conclusion

As a part of Odia culture palm leaf etching are more intimately associated with the socio-religious life of the people. It is vibrant and living even today but the purpose, context and content of writing on palm leaf are radically changed. Though the artists are following this traditional writing system but the purpose is by some means commercial. Nowadays the scribe-artists are mainly concentrating on popularise illustrated works rather than the work of literature. The only original documented kind of work on palm leaf a scribe follows today is the horoscope. Many social organizations now working in Odisha for the promotion and development of this art. Through various workshops, seminars, conferences people from various countries are showing interest to learn this unique art.

6. Acknowledgement

The author is grateful to Professor K.E Dharaneedharan for his expert advice, encouragement and active guidance and also thankful to the anonymous referees for their useful suggestions.

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