

Painting on the Bark of Aquilaria Tree: a Traditional & Dying Culture of Art Practice in the Assam State of North-East India

Bikramjit Sarkar

Research Scholar, Department of Fine Arts, Tripura University, Tripura, India

**Corresponding Author:* Bikramjit Sarkar, Research Scholar, Department of Fine Arts, Tripura University, Tripura, India

ABSTRACT

Assam has a long tradition painting on the bark of Sanchi trees (*Aquilaria Agallocha*). The tradition flows between 15th to 18th centuries to achieve the recognition as Satriya School of painting. The earliest evidence of this art practice traced back to the time of 7th-century Kamrupa rulers of Assam. The depiction of great Hindu epic stories from Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavata- Purana, Kalki- Purana and a treatise on elephants have been portrayed upon the barks of Aquilaria or Agar tree. A long-lasting local made waterproof ink and colors from natural ingredients were used followed by an indigenous laborious process of their preparations. The use of Aquilaria tree bark for practicing painting had a significant role in visual communication for the socio-cultural and religious development in Assam. These paintings are the most valuable resources to understanding and feel the pleasure of early art and cultural practices of the North-Eastern region of India. It is very important to recognize and generalize the valuable information about this rare and dying knowledge of fine art practice in today's art and research world which may influence and discover a new way of thinking and awareness for the artist and art historians.

Keywords: *Aquilaria tree, Manuscript Painting, Vaishnavism, Cultural Practices, Sanchipat, Assam.*

INTRODUCTION

The art of painting in Assam mainly introduced and practiced in between the surface of manuscripts in the form of colorful illustrations with maintaining a local style, techniques, method & materials. This tradition of painting is totally depends on the indigenous knowledge of science, that is, from the selection of natural ingredients to their uses for getting an appropriate carrier for the work and their preservations and transfer from one generation to another.

It is known that the tradition of oral practices was transformed into written characters with a sense of preservation of the early culture and their practices for the upcoming generations. Here, it is not certain to mark out the actual time of the beginning of the manuscript writing tradition in the land of Assam. But it had been assumed so far that, the Harshacarita written by 7th century Sanskrit prose writer Banabhatta is the earliest evidence of written document found in the form of manuscript written on the barks of Aquilaria tree. The Aquilaria barks or Aloe barks were locally called as *Sanchipat* in Assam. Many scholars has opined that, the 'king Bhaskarvarmana (595-650 A.D) of

Kamrupa, presented to Harshavardana a volume of fine writing with leaves made from aloe bark (agar-vaikala) and of the hue of the ripe pink cucumber.' (Nath, 208) It indicates that, the culture of writing practice on aloe barks was an important and valuable medium to show dignity among the aristocratic families and contemporaries of Kamrupa rulers. Thus the tradition of manuscript writing was also retained as a medium of communication during the 6th, 7th century in Assam. The Kamrupa rulers had a textual tradition to maintain records of their important events like scholarship of the scholars and *Brahmans* and the land grants by the rulers. It can be assumed that the manuscript writing was developed during the kingdom of Varman dynasty. It may also possible that the tradition of writing was introduced in this land by the Brahmins and court scholars those were patronized in the *Kamrupa* kingdoms. It is said that 'From time immemorial the ancient kingdom of *Kamrupa* or Assam has been swept by a wave of Hindu civilization which has maintained its cultural homogeneity with the rest of India.' (Goswami, XV)

In this sense the tradition of writing manuscript might be introduced in Assam by the Hindu

learned Brahmins and scholars. Though there was not much manuscript found in proof that the actual time of the origin of the tradition of manuscript writings in Assam but it is certain that there was a tradition of writing practices on the bark of *Sanchi trees* in ancient Assam. Through this tradition a variety of subjects related to religion, medicine, astronomy, and astrology were written on the surface of *Sanchipat* and the language used maximum in Assamese and Sanskrit. It is important to mention that '*Madhav Kandali's* translation of the Ramayana into Assamese was the first translation of the epic into any of the vernacular languages of India.'(Nath, 211) and it was written on the surface of *Sanchipat*. The probable date of translation was 14th century A.D. that is before the revival of Sankardeva's Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

The field visits have been carried out in different corners in Assam such as museums and Vaishnava monasteries at the Majuli Island, Barpeta, and Nagaon district along with Government, and private museum, where large number *Sanchipat* paintings are in collections. There are very religious restrictions in comfortable handling and in the display of the paintings. However the original paintings were documented through photography from the different volume of aloe bark manuscripts found in the Vaishnavite monasteries in Assam. Discuss with the concerned authority and resource person along with some of the relevant books, journals, Bulletins and catalogues have been reviewed as a source of data collection. Some local name of the material has been used in the article with their English translation in the sense of exploring the flavor of local Assamese language.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Manuscript Painting on *Sanchipat*

Adjacent to the tradition of writing, a tradition of painting was also getting space on the same surface of *Sanchipat*. It is observed that, 'The unique tradition of writing and illustrating *Sanchipat* manuscript, continued throughout the centuries still the early 19th century.'(Dutta, 240) However, the art of painting on the surface of *Sanchipat* is started long after the writing practice on *Sanchipat*. 'The culture of copying manuscripts in countless number began to flourish in direct response to the unprecedented religious movement.'(Kalita, 7) This religious movement had been populated as a Bhakti-movement or Neo-Vaishnavite movement in the cultural history of Assam. This *Vaishnavite* movement is directly accountable for the production of large numbers of *Sanchipat* manuscript painting in Assam. It is significant to say that these manuscripts were worshiped and recited publicly to spread the thoughts of the Bhagavata-Purana among the people. So that many devotional songs, dramas, stories related to the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavat-Purana, Kalki-Purana were illustrated in the form of manuscript painting. Such as *Borgeet* is a volume of manuscripts with illustrated paintings on the bark of Aquilaria tree, which have been found in a Vaishnava monastery locally named as Dakhinpat Satra established during 1584 A.D., situated in the river island Majuli in Assam. *Borgeet* means the devotional song related to the life of Hindu god Lord Krishna. *Borgeet* is the most popular Vaisnava devotional song in Assam and all most all the folios contain illustrated paintings (Fig.1).



Figure1. Title of the Manuscripts: *Borgeet* (A Devotional Song), Number of Folios: 51, Number of Painting: 99, Medium: Natural Colour on *Sanchipat*, Size: 22 cm X 9 cm, Date: N/A, Photography: By Author, 2016, Courtesy: Dakhinpat Satra, District: Majuli, Assam.

The paintings related to the great Hindu epic Mahabharata have been found in a Vaishnava

monastery so called Barpeta Satra which is a well-known Satra situated in Barpeta district in

Painting on the Bark of Aquilaria Tree: a Traditional & Dying Culture of Art Practice in the Assam State of North-East India

Assam and was established in the year 1583 by a another follower of the Assamese Vishnavism, saint Madhavdeva. This volume of manuscripts is a part of Mahabharata titled as “Santi Parva”

which depicts the last part of the Mahabharata and it has been written around 1836 A.D. on the bark of Sanchi tree or Aquilaria agallocha (Fig.2).



Figure2. Title of the Manuscripts: - Mahabharata (Santi-Parva), Number of Folios: 116, Number of Painting: 100 (Approx), Medium: Natural Colour on Sanchipat, Size: 53 cm X 16 cm, Date: Around 1836 A.D. (According to Authority), Photography: By Author, 2016, Courtesy: Hemen Burha Bhakat of Barpeta Satra, Assam.

A volume of painted manuscript, which is a treatise on elephants known as Hastividyanava compiled during and under the patronage of Ahom king Siva Singh in the year 1734 A.D. on the bark of Aquilaria Agallocha. The paintings, mainly depict different subjects related to

medicinal cure, types of elephants found in different region, physical and mental characteristic of the elephants, different rituals for the well being and production of the elephants and as a symbol of royalty and power of the Ahom kingdom in Assam (Fig.3).



Figure3. Title of the Manuscripts: - Hastividyanava, Number of Folios in the Volume: 128, Number of Painting: 171, Medium: Natural Colour on Sanchipat, Size: 58 cm X 16 cm, Date: 1734 A.D., Photography: By Author, 2016, Courtesy: D.H.A.S. Govt. of Assam.

There are many more such paintings with greater aesthetic, religious and secular values were painted on the hand prepared folio of Sanchi bark. Through which the Vaisnava saints were able to make communication, both visually and textually with the common people of the society which is a most significant characteristic of the manuscript painting tradition of Assam. Through Vaishnavism and in the Vaisnava monasteries a large number of Sanchipat manuscripts were created during the time of the 16th to the 19th century. Thousands of manuscript painting had been done on Sanchipat

and the art of painting on Sanchipat become one of the most important art forms of Satra, popularly designated as Satriya School of painting. Though there was existence of other surfaces used as a medium of manuscript painting. A medium locally called Tulapat made up by pressing cotton, Talpat (leaves of the palm tree), and Muga silk. But the use of Sanchipat as a surface of the painting was much more popular comparing to any other. The reason behind giving preference to this particular carrier may be depend on its maximum availability in the region. Secondly

Painting on the Bark of Aquilaria Tree: a Traditional & Dying Culture of Art Practice in the Assam State of North-East India

the surface of the *Sanchipat* remains more durable and comfortable base for writing and painting. Another most important observation is that the colors used on the paintings were still glazing after many centuries of its execution; whereas there is no such modern techniques had been applied for their preservations. To think about better longevity of any art works depends on the surface which every artist taking care of that. Similarly, the folio of Aloe bark as the surface of the paintings is much more significant so that the paintings were still existed brighter even after many centuries. Hence, it can be assumed that the artists and scribes of that time used *Sanchipat* as a most preferable medium for their work. Another reason may also possible that the *Sanchi* wood or “agar wood and its essential oil gained great cultural and religious significance in ancient civilizations around the world, being mentioned throughout one of the world's oldest written texts – the Sanskrit Vedas from India.”(Akter, 24) ‘Agar wood powder and dust is used to make incense sticks or coils for indoor fragrance, and are used for religious purposes by Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus.’ (Akter, 25)

Point to the religious significance of this *Aquilaria* tree, the *Vaishnava* reformer may inspire from the Vedas and select the bark of aloe wood or *Agar* or *Agaru* tree as a medium of writing and painting in religious purpose. It is also known that, Sankardeva the founder of the *Vaishnava* religious movement in Assam was a great scholar of Sanskrit and Assamese who studied most of the ancient scriptures of the Vedas, Epics, Grammar, *Upanishad's* and *Puranas* from where he might get the significant knowledge of agar tree and practically used it as

a medium of communication in social-cultural practices. So that, thousands of manuscript paintings had been done on *Sanchipat* to spread the knowledge of Hindu religious text in visual form and got popularity as a traditional painting into the *Satriya* culture of Assam. The art of manuscript painting developed during the *Bhakti-* movement in Assam was known to be practiced in the *Vaishnava* monasteries and also under the patronage of *Ahom* and *Koch* kings of this North-Eastern region.

Process of Preparing the Sanchipat

The surface of the manuscript was made from the bark of *Aquilaria agallocha* or *Sanchi* tree, *Agaru* tree or agar tree (Fig.4). It is well known as *Sanchipat* in Assam. Preparation of the *Sanchipat* followed a lengthy and laborious process of curing, seasoning and polishing of the cut out piece of aloe bark. Selection of the aloe bark in Assam is particularly from the fast growing *Sanchi* tree. This fast growing *Sanchi* tree is categorized as ‘*Bhola Sanchi*’. Another is *Jati Sanchi* or *Jatiya Sanchi*.

‘The bark of *jatiya Sanchi* develops holes also as it is attacked by insects.’(Dutta, 243) ‘The bark of the *Bhola Sanchi* is smoother than that of *Jatiya Sanchi*’ (Dutta, 243) so that, the smoother quality might become more preferable for the artists and scribes to make use the bark of *Bhola Sanchi*. It can be understood that the use of fine and flowing lines in the manuscript is possibly for the significant characteristic of the *Bhola Sanchipat*. It has been pointed out that ‘Out of two species of *Sanchi* tree, namely, *Bhola Sanchi* and *jatiya Sanchi*, the bark of the former is preferred for making *sanchipat*.’ (Dutta, 243)



Figure4. *Aquilaria* tree or *Sanchi* tree (*Bhola Sanchi*), Photography by: Author, Courtesy: Chittaranjan Bora, Purani Gudam, Nagaon, Assam (India).

Painting on the Bark of Aquilaria Tree: a Traditional & Dying Culture of Art Practice in the Assam State of North-East India

The traditional process of preparing the *Sanchipat* begins with a selection of fifteen to sixteen year edge *Bhola Sanchi* tree with thirty to thirty-five inch gear (Fig.4). The selection of a specific *Bhola Sanchi* tree is quite important for getting smooth surface and flexibility during handling. So that's a piece of bark measuring six to eighteen foot length and three to twenty seven

inches, width is needed to be taken out from a particular portion, which about four feet height from the earth's surface. Choosing of that particular portion may remain appropriate for the method which is going to be applied on it. It is also possible that the thickness, quality and maturity of the fiber in that certain area is perfect for making a quality *Sanchipat*.



Figure5. Removed Sanchi Bark, Photography by: Author, Courtesy: Assam State Museum, Guwahati, Assam (India)

After removing a strip of bark (Fig.5), it has been rolled up keeping inner side outward. Thus, the white surface or the surface containing moisture may dry quickly when it is exposed to sunlight. Here two process of drying bark has been found. One is 'dried in the sun for several days' (Gait 509) and another is 'used to smoke the rolls and then put them under water for a few days to soften'. (Dutta, 243) After that the outer rough or hard surface of the bark is to be rubbed by hand placing on hard board or wooden plank. The preferable tools applied for rubbing is pointed knife, or using iron rod containing fixation of sand and glass powder so called '*Jhao*'. (Dutta 244) After removing or rubbing the outermost surface, the bark is to be kept in dew for one night. In the morning the remaining part of the outer layer is to be taken out. Dew is an important factor to give minimum moisture and is quite appropriate for separating the remaining layer which is called as '*nikari*' (Gait 509). Then the bark is used to cut into pieces. The size of the pieces of bark is depending on the artist or *Khanikar*, and the type of works going to be done on it. The average sizes of the bark are from 22.86 to 68.58 cm long and 7.62 to 45.72 cm broad. After getting the convenient sizes, the barks are placed in cold water for some time (approximately for an hour) So that the Alkali or slippery (*Kash*) substances are easily washed out from the bark. It is believed that, the sticky or alkali substances can cause damage to the

colors and ink which is going to be applied on it. Sometime this wash out process is also done by boiling in a water solution made by mixing some natural ingredients. The solution contains a mixture of ingredients such as '*Kani-bhi Guti* (seed of *Croton tiglium*), leaves of *Chalkunwari* (*Aloe barbadensis*) and *Tutia* (blue vitriol, copper sulfate, $\text{CuSO}_4 \cdot 5\text{H}_2\text{O}$)' (Dutta, 244). It is studied that the seed paste of *Croton tiglium* is significant as an Ayurvedic use 'for skin diseases, painful swellings and alopecia' (medplants. Blogspot. in/2013/04/Croton-tiglium-jayaphala-dravanti.html). The washout *Sanchi* bark or alkali free *Sanchi* barks are also boiled in a solvent of *Tutia* and *Methi* (*Fenugreek*) so that the *Sanchi* bark become insect proof or insect resistance in the future and again the process of drying takes place for the evaporation of remaining moisture from the bark. After absolute dry in front of sunlight, the bark used to be smoothed by rubbing a piece of burnt brick. The bark might possibly shrink during drying so that to avoid the shrinking some weight must be placed systematically upon that bark. This drying is followed by an application of *Matimah* (*Vigna Mungo* or black gram) paste on the surface of the bark and again dried in sunlight. Then the dried *Matimah* surface is to be rubbed by a seed or conch shell (*Sankha*) for getting a smoothing surface. The seed is locally called as *Ghila* (sea bean, sea heart, *Entada rheedei* or *Entada scandens*) (Fig.6).

Painting on the Bark of Aquilaria Tree: a Traditional & Dying Culture of Art Practice in the Assam State of North-East India



Figure6. Sea bean or *Entada rheedei* locally called *Ghila* or *Gila*, Photography by: Author, Courtesy: Author.

Ghila is also used in other cultural activities in Assam. 'A traditional Assamese game called *Ghila Khel* played during the *Chandubi festival* at *Chanddubi Lake*' (Bharali). This *Ghila* is also found to be used among the other community rituals. During the worshipping of goddess *Durga* it has been touched up on the feet of idol *Durga* as a symbol of good luck and also used during the rituals of *Karmapurusher Broto*. The *Sankha*

is and was also remain a very popular musical instrument in Assam as well as a very sacred material of the Hindu religion and cultural practices. 'It is so played that it may evoke devotional feeling of the devotees towards their deities. It is also played on the battlefield in such a way that it may inspire a feeling of patriotism.' (Barthakur 119)



Figure7. *Haital* or Yellow arsenic, Photography by: Author, Curtsey: Chittaranjan Bora, Kalang Museum, Puranigudam, Nagaon, Assam (India).



Figure8. *Hengul* or Red Earth, Photography by: Author, Curtsey: Chittaranjan Bora, Kalang Museum, Puranigudam, Nagaon, Assam (India).

After smoothening, the bark is to be coated with a thin layer of *Haital* or *Hangul*. These two natural pigments are also the most common color pigments of the traditional color palates of the *Sachipat* paintings, where *Haital* (Fig.6) used to get yellow and *Hengul* (Fig.7) used for Red. Basically *Haital* and *Hengul* were appearing in solid form so that these ingredients were needed to be lightly powdered. Then this fine powder of *Haital* or *Hengul* mixing with

water and gum is to be applied on the surface of the bark. Here, the gum used is also erected from the natural ingredients like from *outenga* (Elephant apple), *Bel* (Stone apple) and *Dhekia* (Fiddlehead fern). This coat of *Haital* or *Hengul* is followed by again sun drying and rubbing with *Ghila* as a final touch for smoothening the bark. S.K. Goswami said that, sometime the turmeric powder was also used to coat the bark beside the *Haital* and *Hengul*. He

further said that, after drying the coat of *Haital*, *Hengul* or turmeric, the bark has to be rubbed by a smooth marble as a final touch to get slippery surface. That means, there was a variety of material used to make the surface shine and slippery. Now, it can be assumed that, the artist and scribe only preferred the shiny and slippery surface for the application of ink and color. Finally, after appropriate smoothing and shining, the bark is ready to use for manuscript painting. It is also known that the coat of *Haital* and *Hengul* can also protect the barks from various fungus.

CONCLUSION

In the present context of cultural heritage of Assam, the art of practicing manuscript painting using *Sanchipat* in the past is almost disappeared. It has been observed that the indigenous knowledge of painting, selection of surface like *Sanchipat* and its process of preparation existed in the past *Satriya* culture is much more significant compare to modern surfaces like paper and canvases available in the markets. Thus the centuries old paintings are still alive in fresh looking which is a most important quality of a painting or for any kind of art works of an artist. Beside the quality and selection of surface in the past, the selection of subject like religious and secular, and representation of the same thing in a visual form of painting for communicating with the illiterate and uneducated people of the past society of Assam. The traditional technical knowledge of the preparation of a quality surface of the painting and its aesthetical value in social, cultural, and religious heritage of Assam may inspire a whole younger generation of artists and art lovers in the future. Like the other painting traditions of India, the long tradition of manuscript paintings of Assam is also need to be counted as one of the mainstream of cultural heritage of India.

REFERENCES

- [1] Nath D. Pre-modern writing culture in Assam: the tradition of Manuscript Writing. In: Nath D. (eds.) Religious Tradition and Social Practices in Assam. Guwahati: DVS Publishers; 2016. p. 207-238.
- [2] Goswami H. Descriptive catalogue of Assamese manuscripts. Assam: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies; 2009.
- [3] Nath D. Pre-modern writing culture in Assam: the tradition of Manuscript Writing. In: Nath D. (Eds.) Religious Tradition and Social Practices in Assam. Guwahati: DVS Publishers; 2016. P. 207-238.
- [4] Dutta RK. The science in the traditional manuscript-writing aids of Assam: Sanchipat, Mahi and Hengul-Haital. In: Nath D. (Eds.) Religious tradition and social practices in Assam. Guwahati: DVS publishers; 2016. P.239-262.
- [5] Kalita N. An alphabetical index of illustrated manuscript of Assam. New Delhi: IGNC; 2009.
- [6] Akter S, Tanvir I, Mohammad Z, Khan SI. Agarwood production- a multidisciplinary field to be explored in Bangladesh. 2:1. International Journal of Pharmaceutical and Life Sciences. 2013; January (22-32): 2305-0330. Available from: ijlsbd.com/010403.pdf.
- [7] Akter S, Tanvir I, Mohammad Z, Khan SI. Agarwood production- a multidisciplinary field to be explored in Bangladesh. 2:1. International Journal of Pharmaceutical and Life Sciences. 2013; January (22-32): 2305-0330. Available from: ijlsbd.com/010403.pdf.
- [8] Dutta RK. The science in the traditional manuscript-writing aids of Assam: Sanchipat, Mahi and Hengul-Haital. In: Nath D. (Eds.) Religious tradition and social practices in Assam. Guwahati: DVS publishers; 2016. P.239-262.
- [9] Dutta RK. The science in the traditional manuscript-writing aids of Assam: Sanchipat, Mahi and Hengul-Haital. In: Nath D. (Eds.) Religious tradition and social practices in Assam. Guwahati: DVS publishers; 2016. P.239-262.
- [10] Dutta RK. The science in the traditional manuscript-writing aids of Assam: Sanchipat, Mahi and Hengul-Haital. In: Nath D. (Eds.) Religious tradition and social practices in Assam. Guwahati: DVS publishers; 2016. P.239-262.
- [11] Gait E. A history of Assam. Guwahati: Banimandir; 2010.
- [12] Dutta RK. The science in the traditional manuscript-writing aids of Assam: Sanchipat, Mahi and Hengul-Haital. In: Nath D. (Eds.) Religious tradition and social practices in Assam. Guwahati: DVS publishers; 2016. P.239-262.
- [13] Dutta RK. The science in the traditional manuscript-writing aids of Assam: Sanchipat, Mahi and Hengul-Haital. In: Nath D. (Eds.) Religious tradition and social practices in Assam. Guwahati: DVS publishers; 2016. P.239-262.
- [14] Gait E. A history of Assam. Guwahati: Banimandir; 2010.
- [15] Dutta RK. The science in the traditional manuscript-writing aids of Assam: Sanchipat, Mahi and Hengul-Haital. In: Nath D. (Eds.) Religious tradition and social practices in

Painting on the Bark of Aquilaria Tree: a Traditional & Dying Culture of Art Practice in the Assam State of North-East India

- Assam. Guwahati: DVS publishers; 2016. P.239-262.
- [16] Medicinal plants: Croton tiglium, Jayaphala, Dravanti, Neervalam, Nepalam, Jamalgota. Available from: <http://medplants.blogspot.com> [Accessed 2nd March 2017].
- [17] Wikipedia. GhilaKhel.jpg. Available from: https://as.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghila_Khel [Accessed 26th May 2012].
- [18] Barthakur DR. The music and musical instrument of Northeast India. New Delhi: Mittal Publication; 2003.

Citation: Bikramjit Sarkar. "Painting on the Bark of Aquilaria Tree: a Traditional & Dying Culture of Art Practice in the Assam State of North-East India". *Journal of Fine Arts*, 1(3), 2018, pp. 8-15.

Copyright: © 2018 Bikramjit Sarkar. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.