

Tradition of Palm Leaf Manuscripts in Orissa

Ramesh Meher

Introduction

The word "Tradition" comes from the Latin word "Traditio" which means "to hand down" or "to hand over". In Archaeology a tradition is a set of cultures which appear to developed from one another over a period of time. Traditional knowledge is an authority system. It set out the rules governing the use of resources, respect, and an obligation to share. It is dynamic, cumulative and stable. It is truth. Some time tradition is preserved in artifacts handed over by father to son and mother to daughter. In indigenous knowledge systems, there is usually no real separation between secular and sacred knowledge and practice. They are one and the same. In virtually all of these systems, knowledge is transmitted directly from generation to generation. The history of writing in Orissa is very old, maybe it is older then the script.¹ The process of writing was started when figures, decoration and different types of letters were inscribed on the stone, soil, sand or imperishable material. As time passed, they were written on the materials which were easily available and durable at the same time. In this process, sometimes the leaves of certain trees were also used. In Eastern Orissa palm leaves and bamboo leaves were used as a writing materials where as in Western Orissa were used only palm leaves as a writing material.² In

North India, Birch bark or Bhuja patra was used as a writing element. Like many other eco-friendly inventions of ancient and medieval India, the discovery of palm leaf as a medium had far reaching consequences. Above all this tradition ensures continuity of the habits of mind, which is called the mental culture of a community.

Sources of palm leaf manuscript

Before the advent of paper, palm leaf was one of the most important source of writing element. This was used for writing and painting in South and South East Asian countries. Orissa is not an exception to it. Absolutely large collations of palm leaf manuscripts are preserved in the custody of many of the old libraries, temples, monasteries, learned institutions and in a few cases private individuals.³ They depict various aspects of ancient Orissan history and culture. Therefore, the preservation of palm leaf manuscript is an obligation and a responsible duty.

Characteristic features of palm leaf as a writing element

Palm leaf is an extent element for record. When compared with good quality hand made paper, it is found three times stronger then the hand made paper.⁴ Palm leaf having very good tensile strength, is even better than that of good quality ledger paper. Its folding endurance is

almost nil in the case of very old and dry leaves.⁵ It has poor resistance to wear and tear and hence it is not suitable element for histological study. The palm leaf consists of epidermis consisting of thick walled cells.

Choice of leaf

In Orissa, people have chosen the palm leaves to prepare the manuscript which are just about to open. Tender green leaves of different varieties of palm trees are selected and cut. These cut leaves are then dried in a controlled manner and seasoned.

Processing of Palm leaves

For the preparation of palm leaf as writing material, it is processed in order to make the leaves suitable for writing. It is known as seasoning. Several methods of seasoning are applied to the palm leaves in various regions. In Western Orissa people hang their palm leaves in their kitchen, take them out and apply turmeric paste to them. In some parts, leaves are dried completely under the sun and are then kept under the mud or silt of a pond for 10-15 days. After this, they are removed cleaned and dried again under the sun for some time and finally a paste of turmeric is applied on the surface of the leaves. In some parts of Western Orissa, the palm leaves are allowed to boil with paddy husk and then they are cleaned with soft cloth and kept alternately under dew and sun for a few days. They are polished and cut into the required size.

Skill of Writing on Palm leaves

The art of writing on these leaves was unique for which no ink or pen was required. The stylus (thick metal needle with a sharp point) was used to inscribe or engrave letters on the palm leaf. To write on the palm leaf, the leaf is to be supported by the fingers of the left hand. The stretched forefinger and the thumb pressed the

palm leaf so that the leaf will not shake or move during the time of the writing. The thumb and the forefinger are kept on the leaf in a "V" shaped angle.⁶ The middle finger of the right hand moves the stylus, using the cut thumbnail as a lever, in smooth, light pressured, rounded movements to incise evenly sized writing in the leaf. It was expected that the stylus was to be held in proper position by its user and the right pressure to be applied so that the leaf would not be torn. Then lamp black is applied on the surface of the palm leaves. In doing so the letters became more conspicuous and they could be read more easily.

Drawings and Images

Besides floral designs, animal and bird motifs were used sometimes for the borders of palm leaf pages. Nature has been depicted in various ways in those folios. For example in Vaishnava texts symbols like Shankha (conch), Chakra (wheel) and Nama (red mark on forehead) are drawn which are associated with Lord Vishnu. Similarly a manuscript of Ramayana possess the coronation picture of Lord Ram on the cover. Shaiva text are generally decorated with Shivalinga as well as with sketches of the sacred bull called Nandi.

Colour used and Their Composition

- Black: Lamp (carbon) black mixed with wood apple gum.
- Red pigment: Ground Cinnabar (iron oxide) it is locally known as Hingula.
- White: Burnt conch shell powder mixed with plant gum.
- Yellow: Prepared out of the adhesive of wood apple mixed with Turmeric powder.
- Blue: Ground juice of Indigo plant leaves mixed with some plant gum.

Green: Ground bean leaves, mixed with plant gum.

Name of the Adhesives and Process of making

In ancient and medieval periods, people were using original plant adhesives, such as starch paste, wood apple gum, Bel gum, etc. Starch is a commonly used adhesive material which is applied as a binding factor for ink. It is a slimy substance of rice, maize, wheat and potato etc. Wood apple gum is also a plant gum which is nearly colourless and soluble in water. Bel gum is also a plant gum. It is collected from Bel fruits.

Name and Types of Tools used

In early times people were using iron tools, sharp pointed iron stylus for engraving and hatchet for cutting leaves from the tree. Terracotta pot was used for boiling water, chisel, bodkin and drill for preparation of wooden cover board. Stone plates and stone were used for preparation of pigments.

Technology of Storing Palm leaf Manuscripts

In ancient and medieval periods most of the manuscripts are stored in the temple or in the place of worship of the house. The stake or wooden planks were used for the storage of the palm leaf manuscripts. For the preservation of the manuscripts the indigenous materials such as Ghodabacha powder, Emblic myrobalan powder, Belleric myrobalan Powder, vitex negundo leaves Powder, Neem Leaves powder, Cinamon oil powder, black pepper powder, pipali powder etc were kept beside the manuscripts for better protection. Some people were storing their manuscripts in the bamboo baskets. They were keeping storage area clean. During the Nabanna Ceremony they were cleaning all their manuscripts and the store. At that time, all the palm leaf manuscripts were properly read and recited by

the people. Till now we follow the above indigenous materials in the manuscripts storage to protect manuscripts from the damaging agents.

Role of Copyist

Copyists, known as *Lipikaras* or scribes (writers) were divided into three categories. Some were professionals (self employed). Some were appointed by the king and the administrators to do this job, while some others undertook it as a hobby and practice copying leisurely at home, in *mathas* or in other educational centres. Since the third group was not that qualified or experienced as the first two, they were generally committing grammatical as well as linguistic errors. The palm leaf manuscripts on Shrutis (Vedic Texts), Smritis (Dharmasastra), the Puranas including Ramayana as well as Mahabharata and Bhagabata were presented to scholars of respective field, so that they could recite and interpret them during public discourses. This undertaking was meant to achieve merit (punya) and to spread popular education. Most of the temples, mathas had a specific time in the afternoon or evening for this purpose. *Agnipurana* records an important verse in this regard.

"Puranam bharatam Vayapi Ramayanam tathaiva Cha Likhitva pustakam datva muktibhuktim avapnuyat".⁷

Importance of Palm leaf Manuscripts

The palm leaf manuscripts are most important sources of the historical events. Many scholars refer the manuscripts for their research works. In the palm leaf manuscript we find most important knowledge of our traditional life style. In Ayur Vedic and medicinal manuscripts we can find the names of medicinal trees, which are available in our environment. Till now, we use these types of trees for medicinal purposes in our life. In "Bhagabata", "Ramayana", "Mahabharata",

"Vayupurana", "Matsya purana" etc. we also do find evidences of certain historical events, which are very much helpful in our research work.⁸ It may be said that without reference of the palm leaf manuscripts a research work is said to be incomplete. So, the palm leaf manuscripts are very important sources of our research works.

Conclusion

In Orissa, palm leaf manuscripts were in use at large till the reign of Rama Chandra Deva, Mukunda Deva, Divyasimha Deva, etc.⁹ Foreigners (whether travelers or ambassadors) were very much impressed with the tradition of writing and copying on palm leaf manuscripts in India. Quite often they wrote about this in their travelogues. In 1442 C.E. the Persian ambassador Abdur Razzak wrote about a *dafterkhana* (wing or annex of documents) where a number of writers were engaged to write down accounts on palm leaf.¹⁰ Similarly the Portuguese traveler Duarte Barbosa has expressed surprise over the scribe's briskness of writing with the stylus on long and rough palm leaves.¹¹ From the above discussion it is clear that the palm leaf writing tradition was very old in India as well as Orissa. In Orissa also palm leaves were being used as writing materials since very early period. A large number of palm leaf manuscripts are also available in these parts. It is time now to preserve and save valuable treasures of our nation.

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Ramesh Meher is a Conservator in the Manuscript Conservation Centre, P.G. Department of History, Sambalpur University, Jyoti Vihar, Burla, Sambalpur.