Palm - Leaf Manuscripts: The Proud Possessions of Orissa

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Orissa is the land where dry leaves speak about every aspect of life, starting from poignant emotion of love to the hard rules of arithmetic, from canons of law to the riddle of Tantra, Mantra and Yantra. It may sound incredible, but it is true in every sense of words that the palm-leaf manuscripts vividly depict the theme of religion, architecture, medicine, astrology, astronomy, grammar, details about war, arms and armoury, geography, trade routes, occult practices, temple rituals, crafts, literature and so on. The illustrated miniature paintings on the palm leaves also provide a living record of the saratorial styles, cosmetics and coiffure, dance forms, myths and legends and above all, our rich heritage of socio-cultural traditions.

The very thing that Oriya alphabets have no headmarks like that of Bengali or Nagari Script can safely be attributed to the long and continuous practice of writing on palm leaves. The stones of Konark, Muktesvar and Rajarani display the union of couple, the Amaru Sataka, the Gitagovinda palm-leaf manuscripts describe the moments of love. Here passion has been translated both in words and forms. The Orissan artists have shown their excellence in these miniature paintings in the palm-leaves. Unique in their style and forms, they constitute as significant part of the glorious Orissan tradition and are similar to the tradition of dance and sculpture. The features of the human figures as well as the flora and fauna are sharp and well-proportioned and display the same precision and neatness which one can find in the motifs drawn in the textiles in the typical Orissan tie and dye tradition. Women are usually represented with full bosoms and big bottoms and slender waists and are stylistically very close to the finely chiselled sculptures of Konark temple.

Epigraphic evidence of the use of palm-leaf for writing goes back to the sixth century A.D. The Kurud Charter of Maharaja Narendra issued from his camp of victory at Tilakeswar records the renewal of the grant of village Kesavaka. This village had been formerly granted in a palm-leaf charter to one Bhasrutaswami by the previous
king, but as the palm-leaf was destroyed in fire, Maharaja Narendra regranted it in a copper plate charter in favour of Sankhaswami, son of Bhasrutaswami. Maharaja Narendra was a Sarabhapuriya king of South Kosala in the 6th century A.D.

There are also many sculptural evidences regarding the use of palm-leaf manuscripts. The earliest of these can be found in the Parsuramesvar temple at Bhubaneswar which was built during the rule of Sailodhava dynasty (7th Century A.D.). Similar representations can be observed in the Muktesvar temple (10th century A.D.) and also the famous Sun temple of Konark (13th century A.D.). Another important sculptural evidence is an image of Buddha found at a temple in Haripur near Khurda. In this sculpture one finds in the pedestal a scholar studying some holy scriptures in the shape of a stringed palm-leaf manuscript placed on Vyasaasana. There is a beautiful presentation of a scribe writing with a stylus on a palm-leaf in a sculpture of Jagannath temple of Dharakot.

The entire Buddhist scripture “Avatamsaka Sutra” was written on palm-leaf manuscript and it was presented to Chinese emperor Te-Song by Subhakara Deva, the Bhaumakara king of Orissa with his own autograph. This was an event of eight century (798 A.D.).

The oldest datable palm-leaf manuscript now exant in Orissa State Museum is a copy of the poetic work ‘Abhinava Gita Govinda” by Kavi Chandra Ray Divakara Mishra, inscribed by one Sri Sridhara Sharma. The date of the manuscript has been established as 6th April, 1494. The poet has offered the work in the name of Gajapati Purushottama Deva.

The concluding portion of the manuscript is called Pushpika or Colophon. It gives the name of the scribe and the date of copying just as we have today the name of the author and the publisher and the date of the publication of a printed book on its title page. In recording the date in the colophon, the scribe followed the anka or the regnal year of the Raja of Puri. The colophon sometimes mention the Oriya Sala or Sana year of an era which started on the twelfth day of bright fortnight of the Bhadra month of 593 A.D. During the reign of Akbar, Hijra or Amali Era was introduced in the manuscripts. In a few latter manuscripts, the Christian era called Samvatsara and the Christian month are given in colophon. The Saka Era (Starting in 78 A.D.) has also been used. Sometimes the year has been given in a riddle or chronogram.

In case of illustrated palm-leaf manuscripts, the introduction was always made with the picture of Ganesha, the god of learning and well being with the words Shri Ganeshaya Namah (Salutation to Ganesha) and Shri Shubham astu (let it be auspicious). Some Chitrapothis also had the picture of Sarasvati, the goddess of learning on the front page. If the manuscript contained erotic text, (Rati-bandha) - it invariably had a picture of Kandarpa, the God of love. In many of Upendra Bhanja’s Kavyas, the poet is shown paying his obeissance to Rama, Vishnu and other Gods.

Palm-leaves and stylus were adopted as the sole writing material for writing the charya-Songs which are believed to be the oldest Oriya literary works. These were composed in a period between 9th to 12th century A.D. Between the Charya Songs and Sarala Das’s Mahabharata, no Oriya literary works have come to notice except some prose writing and a poem called “Kalasa Chautisa”. During this period, however, Orissa produced an enormous amount of Sanskrit literature, which includes books on astronomy, astrology, medicines, grammar, religion and law.
Several commentaries were written on well-known Sanskrit works. There were also an outpouring of literary works, the best known of which are Anargha Raghava of Murari Mishra, Gita Govinda of Sri Jayadev and Sahitya Darpana of Viswanath Kaviraj.

By the fifteenth century the art of palm-leaf writing had attained great excellence. The innumerable copies of Sarala Mahabharata were written on palm-leaf manuscripts and spread throughout Orissa. By the way, the great poet and the great monarch, Gajapati Kapilendra Dev of Suryavamsi dynasty, who ruled Orissa at that time became indelible in history. The manuscripts of Bhagabata of the poet Jagannath Das, had still far greater influence over the common people of Orissa. Balaram Das’s Jagamohan Ramayana was also accepted with much reverence for its lucid style. Practically speaking, these three were the most widely read books in Orissa by that time. With the advent of Shri Chaitanya to Orissa in 1510 A.D. and the spread of Vaishnavism, the Oriya Bhagabata achieved unprecedented popularity. Community houses called Bhagabata Gharas or Bhagabata Tungi sprang up in the villages of Orissa where copies of Bhagabata were kept and recited daily. The reading of the chapters of the holy scriptures became a daily ritual in the homes of Oriya people. Thus, the Bhagabata Pothi brought profound vibration in the entire social life of Orissa.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries a large number of Kavyas or long episodical poems were written in Oriya, all based on Krishna theme.

The most outstanding of these Kavyas are Bhakta Charan Das’s Mathura Mangala, Rupa Goswami’s “Bidadha Madhava” and Dina Krishna Das’s Rasa Kallola. Several other translations of Ramayana also appeared, the more popular ones being the versions of Adhyatma Ramayana by Gopala Telenga and Haladhara Das and Vichitra Ramayana by Viswanath Khuntia. Another popular manuscript of this period was Sishu Shankar Das’s Ushabhilasha, based on a story of Sarala Mahabharata. New poetic forms also emerged during this period viz, Janana (song of prayer), Chautisa (songs which followed the thirty-four consonants of Oriya alphabets) and Poi (referring to the number of verses in the poems), i.e. Dasa Poi - meaning a ten-verse poem.

Orissa lost her independence in 1568 A.D. and was successively overrun by Afghans, Mughals and Marathas. Till the British conquest in 1803, Orissa was a veritable cockpit of rival warlords. There was no peace and security. In the absence of a stable central power, Orissa broke up into a number of semi-independent principalities under local Rajas. The feudal chiefs patronized art, music and literature as pastimes.

The brilliant literary figures of this period was Upendra Bhanja, who was a prince himself. A prolific poet, he created volumes of literary works. He was the master of ornate poetry and each of his work is an example of his mastery over some particular versifying skill or other. Through clever manipulation of words and with a liberal use of puns, alliterations, assonances and figures of speech, he built up a body of poetry which was gaudy and grandeloquent and at the same time pedantic and unintelligible. He composed songs, Kavyas, epics, fictional poems, rhetorical compositions. Chitra-kavya (picture-poem) and even a dictionary of verse for the use of poets. “Vaidehisha Vilas”, ‘Koti Brahmanda Sundari, ‘Prema Sudhanidhi’, ‘Lavanyabati’ are some of his memorable works.

The style of Bhanja prevailed till the second half of the 19th century. All the poets who emerged after Upendra Bhanja followed his style.
The name of Brajanath Badajena, an eminent poet of post-Bhanja era can be cited as an example. During this said period, thousands of palm-leaf manuscripts were copied for large scale circulation. Numerous Chitra-pothis were also prepared during this period, though many of the extant chitra-pothis seem to have been done towards the later part of the 19th century A.D. Though paper was in use during this time, poets did their writing on palm-leaf as this was considered sacred. The Oriya script used in Pothis did not undergo much of a change from its fifteenth century form.

Oriya printing was introduced by Christian missionaries after the British conquest of 1803. An Oriya type-face was devised in 1804. Today, the use of palm-leaf and stylus has been diminished a lot. Now at the outset of twenty-first century, when the world has become technocratic, the use of fragile palm-leaves has become irrelevant. But the age-old practice of writing on palm-leaf has not been extinguished from our cultural heritage. Writing on palm-leaf has many ritual uses in Orissa. On Raksha Panchami day (fifth day of the dark of fortnight of Bhadra month), painting of Batuka Bhairava (an aspect of Siva) is done on doors with an invocation to Siva written on it.

In the Jagannath temple of Puri, a letter is written on palm-leaf on behalf of Rukmini to be delivered to Jagannath on the eleventh day of bright fortnight of Jyestha month (also known as Rukmini Harana Ekadasi). In Orissa, horoscopes of new born babies are also written on palm-leaves. Similarly, the invitation sent to the deities, known as ‘Diyan Nimantrana” as well as the ceremonial invitation to the bride-groom from the bride’s family is generally written on palm-leaf in Orissa.

Thus, the tradition of palm-leaf writing is still alive. In the past, the palm-leaf manuscripts were the medium of learning, while in the changing scenario of present, it has become the object of analysis and retrospection.

References:
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