

## Palm Leaf Inscriptions and Ancient Odia Heritage

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As examples of the conversion of verbal works of art into lines and paintings the illustrated manuscripts of Odisha occupy a unique place. The history of such transformative representations of art in Odisha is yet to be traced in a coherent manner. These drawings engraved with iron stylus on palm leaves are painted and filled with colours prepared with natural ingredients. If one studies the style of paintings and the representation of *bhava* in them, the similarities with Odishan architecture and sculpture can be traced well. From such a perspective, the composition of illustrated manuscripts may be said to have been contemporaneous with the practice of stone engravings in the temples of Lingaraja (Bhubaneswar), Srimandir (Puri), Sun Temple (Konark), Rajarani Temple (Bhubaneswar) etc. It might have been that the artists drafted their artistic thoughts on leaves and then translated the thoughts in stone. Whereas the leaves were prone to decrepitation because of air, heat, water and insects the stone carvings could withstand the travails of time and hence preserve the ancient art for all ages. Therefore the illustrated manuscripts are the representatives of the tradition introduced above.

Of all the rich and rare treasures of the Odisha State Museum, the best and the most

unique is the large collection of palm leaf inscriptions which has the largest such collection not only in the country but perhaps in the entire world. The collection includes a variety of items like manuscripts of ancient texts both illustrated and non-illustrated, covering a wide variety of subjects like poetry, music, astrology, philosophy, mathematics and medicine etc., some rare etchings and paintings, calligraphed palm leaf wall pieces, garlands, fans and items in miscellaneous other shapes. In itself, the collection constitutes a most comprehensive record of the history and culture of the State spreading over several centuries and therefore is an excellent source material for research and scholarly studies. It is difficult to determine the exact place and time of the origin of the art of palm leaf inscriptions but it is well known that in the Vedic times there was no system of writing and the Vedas were disseminated through the word of mouth and therefore were called *sruti*. The earliest forms of writing known to us are rock edicts and among these, the most famous Asokan rock-edicts date from the third century B.C. However, from these rock edicts no evidence is available regarding the prevalence of palm leaf writing or about the use of iron stylus. However, from one of the copper plate inscriptions of Sailodbhava dynasty, it is learnt that the script was first written on a palm leaf and then

transcribed on to the copper plate as a copy. The noted historian Dr. Satyanarayan Rajguru refers to this in his book on the origin of Odia script and therefore we can safely assume that by the sixth century A.D. the art of palm-leaf writing was well established. There are also many sculptural evidences regarding the use of palmleaf manuscripts. The earliest of these can be found in the Parsuramesvara temple at Bhubaneswar which is believed to have been built in the seventh century. We also find similar representations in the nearby Muktesvara temple of tenth century A.D. and also the famous Sun temple of Konark of the thirteenth century. Another important sculptural evidence is an eleventh century image of Buddha found at Haripur near Khurdha road railway station. In this sculpture one finds in the pedestal a scholar studying some holy scripture in the shape of a stringed palmleaf manuscript placed on Vyasasana. In a sculpture from the Jagannatha temple at Dharakot one can find a beautiful presentation of a scribe writing with the stylus on a palmleaf. It is also interesting to note that the art of palmleaf inscription is used even today for recording the horoscope of new born babies. Similarly, the invitation sent to the deities, known as *diyannimantrana*, as well as the ceremonial invitation to the bride-groom from the bride's family is generally written on palmleaf in Odisha.

However, by its very nature the palm leaf cannot be preserved over a long period and for this very reason there is a tradition of copying manuscripts before they reach an irreparable condition and after copying, the older manuscripts are destroyed. The earliest dated palm leaf manuscript available in the Odisha State Museum is only five centuries old. This manuscript is a copy of the poetic work *Abhinava Gita Govinda* by Kavi Chandra Ray Dibakar Mishra and was

inscribed by one Sri Sridhar Sharma and the date of the manuscript has been established as 6th April, 1494 and the poet has dedicated the composition to Gajapati King Sri Purushottam Deva. This is an imitation of the more famous twelfth century Sanskrit lyric *Sri Gita Govinda* by the first major Odia poet Jayadeva. Although we have quite a large number of collection of palm leaf copies of Jayadeva's work, none of them is older than the *Abhinava Gita Govinda*. It may be mentioned here that by the fifteenth century the art of palm leaf writing had attained great excellence and was also quite widespread. The next major literary work which spread through copies of palm leaf writing was the Sarala Mahabharata or the Odia rendering of the Sanskrit epic by Vyasa. This epic work which was written during the reign of Kapilendra Deva, the famous Odia King of Solar dynasty of the fifteenth century marks the full flowering of the Odia language. Next comes the *Bhagabata* of Atibadi Jagannatha Dasa which is not only the first Odia rendering of the Sanskrit original but also the first in entire Eastern region. It may be of interest to note that the reading of chapters of this holy scripture was a daily ritual in the homes of the Odias and also in the village gatherings. In fact the scripture was considered to be an incarnation of God and was installed ceremonially in our villages in a separate village-hall called the *Bhagabata Tungi* where the villagers gathered together to hear readings from the scriptures. The seat of the scripture known as *Bhagabata Gadi*, literally meaning the throne of Bhagabata, is found even today among the more orthodox Odia families and traditional villages. There was a time when it was said that there was no Odia house without a copy of *Bhagabata* and there was no village without a copy or two of *Sri Gita Govinda*. Thus it can be safely said that palm-leaf writing was intimately and inextricably

intertwined with the cultural heritage of the State. As late as the beginning of twentieth century, several lakhs of these manuscripts were still available as mentioned by Prof. Macdonalds and Hara Prasad Sastri regarding their visit to Puri in 1916. (Ref. to Rev. J. Long's article in the *Journal of Asiatic Society* and also Sri M. M. Chakravarty). Not many of these numerous manuscripts have survived but quite a sizeable number have been procured and preserved in the State Museum and the collection today exceeds 50,000 in number covering about 15,000 titles.

The first systematic efforts for documentation of the available palm leaf manuscripts was started in the years 1935-1938 under the auspices of the then Director of Public Instructions. After detailed survey of the manuscripts available in the State, a catalogue was prepared, of which nine volumes have been preserved in the State Museum, although the total number of volumes was much larger. The actual collection of the palm leaf manuscripts however started much later in the year 1950 when the Museum started a separate section for the palm leaf manuscripts. Over the period of three decades however the Museum has acquired an enviable collection of 50,000 manuscripts. Mention must be made here of the great contribution of the Late historian Sri Kedarnath Mahapatra who was the first Curator of the Manuscript Section of the Museum and who spared no efforts to organise the collection and bring out its importance. This vast collection of the manuscripts has been organised into twenty-six sections, namely: 1. Veda, 2. Tantra, 3. Sanskrit Puranas, 4. Religious texts, 5. Philosophy, 6. Astrology, 7. Ayurveda (Medicinal texts), 8. Lexicon, 9. Grammar, 10. Sanskrit poetry, 11. Poetics, 12. Music, 13. Crafts, 14. Mathematics, 15. Paper manuscripts (Odia),

16. Paper manuscripts (Sanskrit), 17. Manuscripts in Bengali Language, 18. Manuscripts in Sanskrit, 19. Manuscripts in Sanskrit Bengali script, 20. Manuscripts in Telugu, 21. Manuscripts in Persian, 22. Odia poetry, 23. Odia Puranas, 24. Odia Prose compositions, 25. Odia historical poems, 26. Illustrated manuscripts. The rich collection is not only in Odia language but in Telugu, Bengali, Tamil, Persian and Devanagari scripts. While the bulk of the collections have come from Puri and Ganjam districts of the State, a few have been collected from Bhubaneswar, Manjusa, Srikakulam, Midnapur and Delhi.

A mention has been made already about the importance of these manuscripts as source material for research and scholarly studies. Already the manuscripts have thrown light on several aspects of history and literature of which the most important is perhaps the discovery in this Museum of the *Paipalad Samhita* of the Atharva Veda and Sayana's commentary of the second part of the Yajurveda. For a long time till the discovery in the Odisha State Museum, it had been presumed that no copy of this important Vedic literature existed. This has since been published and has enriched the knowledge of the Vedas to a great extent. As for the Odishan history and culture is concerned, these manuscripts provide a fund of information and evidence enriching our understanding of the past. Particular mention may be made of the extensive details about the wars, war preparations, arms, geography, trade routes, astrology, occult practices, medical beliefs, temple rituals, crafts, music and dance, astronomy and Mathematics.

A note on the craft of palmleaf painting, etching and painting on palmleaf is one of the most ancient art forms not only in Odisha but also in the whole country. The birth of this artform marks

the beginning of the dissemination of written words and is therefore closely inter-twined with the literary traditions of the country. While palmleaf inscriptions and paintings are available in several states of India, it is in Odisha that the art reached perfection and great excellence. The numerous illustrated manuscripts in the collection of the Odisha State Museum embody the rich artistic traditions of the State. This tradition continues even today and thrives among the handicrafts artisans of the State, particularly in the district of Puri. The art form essentially consists of inscribing letters and artistic designs on palmleaf, mostly cut into standard sizes. While for manuscripts the leaves are cut in rectangular sizes held together with two wooden plank covers stringed through a hole in the centre, for paintings the leaves are stitched vertically and folded like a bellow. However, instances of cutting the leaves into fancy shapes like balls strung into a garland or leaves cut into shapes of animals and other objects are also not wanting. The process of preparing the palmleaf to make it ready for etching is quite elaborate and time taking. The unripe leaves of the tree are first cut into the required shapes and are sun dried. However, the leaves are not to be exposed to intense heat and should not be completely dried. Once this initial preparation is complete, the semi-dried leaves are buried in muddy swamps and left there for four to five days for further seasoning. After these are retrieved and washed they are once again dried but this time they are air dried and are not exposed to the sun. After this, these dried leaves are kept inside the grain stores and put inside the paddy heaps. This treatment is the final seasoning of the leaves which makes them insect proof and stiff. These seasoned leaves are then stitched or stringed together as needed. The etching whether of words or of artistic designs is done with the help of an iron stylus. Great concentration and planning is

required before any design can be engraved as no alteration is possible on account of the very nature of the material. After the etching is complete the leaf is rubbed with a paste made of bean-leaves, charcoal made of burnt coconut shells, til oil and turmeric. The leaves are then wiped with a piece of cloth and the paste deposited in the etched portions of the palm-leaves reveal prominently the engraved design. For painting the palm-leaves, vegetable and mineral colours are used. While writing of texts, including illustrated texts, was popular and wide-spread in the ancient times, after the discovery of paper and printing this has become more or less extinct. However, it is worthwhile to mention that the rich collection of the Odisha State Museum contains a large number of illustrated texts both plain and painted of which the more prominent ones are Jayadeva's *Sri Gita Govinda*, *Bidagdha Madhava* of Rupa Gosvami, *Amara Sataka* of Amaruka and *Ushabhilasa* of Sishu Sankara Das. The themes of these manuscripts are mostly the love episodes of Radha and Krishna as well as other mythical and legendary incidents. The paintings and drawings also present excellent scenes of nature. As the art form is practised today, mostly large drawings are made on the rectangular palm leaves stitched together vertically. The major motifs are drawn from the rich legends, myths and folklore of the State. The various gods and goddesses from the Hindu pantheon are represented either singly or in groups. More prominent of these being Radha and Krishna, Durga, Ganesa and Saraswati. The figures are highly stylised and embody the traditional concept of beauty. The figures usually have a sharp pointed nose, long eyes and well proportioned bodies. The figures are usually represented in profile.

Odishan Painting Traditions: It would be appropriate to give a brief idea at this juncture

about traditions of Odishan painting vis-a-vis the illustrated palm leaf manuscripts which is the subject of the present collection. The ancient name for Orissa is Utkala, land of the excellence of art. In every field of art whether it be sculpture, architecture, textiles, handicrafts, music, dance or painting, Odisha has a rich heritage continuing from the very ancient times which is vibrant and living even today. As for painting, Odisha is one of the few states in the country where pre-historic cave murals have been found in places like Ulapgarh, Bikramkhol in the district of Sambalpur, Manikmada and Ushakothi in the district of Sundargarh and Gudahandi and Jogimath in the district of Kalahandi. At least one major painting of the Gupta period still remains on the ceilings of a cave at Sitabinji in Keonjhar district and this is the only known painting of this period in eastern India comparable in its excellence with the more famous paintings of Ajanta in western India. The traditions have continued and flourished in shape of murals in the public buildings like temples, maths and palaces, in patta paintings, palmleaf etchings and illustrations of manuscripts. The ravages of time have destroyed evidence of continued traditions over centuries and after the Sitabinji paintings, records are available only from the sixth/seventh century onwards. Wall murals played a very important role in the Odishan painting traditions. The mural paintings of the famous Biranchi Narayan temple at Buguda depicting the various episodes in the life of Rama and Krishna as well as the Ten incarnations of Vishnu are a feast for the eyes. These paintings are a shining example of the very best in the styles, colour combination and motifs of traditional Odishan painting. The paintings in the *jagamohana* of the temple of Lakshmi within the Puri temple is another group of paintings distinguished for its subject and styles. The depiction of Nrusingha, Panchamukha Ganesa (five-headed Ganesa), Ramanuja with the

halo of serpent heads, Hanumana and the small panel depicting Buddha Vijaya or the victory of Brahminism over Buddhism are a living record of the rich heritage of Odishan painting. Although these are being periodically repainted their antiquity is unquestioned and finds mention also in such famous works as the *Antiquities of Orissa* by R. L. Mitra. Another such group of paintings is found in the *jagamohana* of Vimala temple depicting the Dasa-Mahavidya or the ten aspects of Goddess Durga. Another very important painting within the Puri temple is the representation of the *dvarapalas* (gate-keepers) at the entrance point of the sanctum sanctorum. These two paintings have a distinctive style as the robust and strong figures primarily represent the heroic element and are similar to the representation of the Jagannatha, Balabhadra and Subhadra in the patta paintings during the annual convalescence of the deities. It is to be mentioned that in these patta paintings, otherwise known as Anasara Patti, the three deities are represented in their Bhairava aspects and are totally different from the shape in which they are worshipped daily. Traditions of these mural paintings are found in the *mathas* of Puri and in south Odisha in general. Patta painting is another typical Odishan artform in which artisans using natural, vegetable and mineral colours, paint on cloth stiffened with tamarind starch and chalk and finish with a coat of lacquer. Using a totally free-hand style the painters rely for their motifs on our rich myths, legends and folk-lore. It needs to be mentioned that as for most other artforms in Odisha, the temple of Puri has played a dominant role in the efflorescence of Odishan painting and particularly the preparations of small and inexpensive patta paintings representing the three deities for sale to the pilgrim visitors, popularly known as Yatri Patti, was responsible for taking the Odishan painting

to the farthest nooks and corners of the country. A detailed note has already been given on the craft of palmleaf etching which is also a very important form of traditional Odishan painting. However, what has not been mentioned and needs to be highlighted is the special features of illustrated palmleaf manuscripts and their place in the Odishan painting traditions. The palmleaf manuscripts which had a few standard sizes in the rectangular format hardly ever exceeding one and half inches in width was a natural extension of the painting tradition into a miniature form. These illustrated manuscripts which contain the very best of the engraved paintings had also many coloured illustrations. They had a long and continuous tradition and the records of about three centuries which are available to us for study indicate that miniaturisation had reached great heights of excellence in Odisha. An exhibition on “Gitagovinda and Sri Jayadeva” organised by the Department of Culture had displayed some of these palmleaf illustrations along with a few blow ups in colour and black and white. The theme photograph of the exhibition depicting a picture of Krishna painting leafy designs on the full rounded breasts of Radha after their long and passionate love play of the night before, illustrating the first stanza of the last song of Jayadeva’s Gita Govinda “Kuru YaduNandana” brought out the richness of the stylistic and pictorial excellence of Odishan miniature painting at its colourful best. The blow up also brought out the perfection which the artists had achieved in the miniature style as in spite of being enlarged by several times, one could not find any distortion of shape, size or form.

Odishan miniatures are unique in their style and features but they are an integral part of the glorious Odishan tradition in its totality and are similar to the traditions of sculpture and dance. The features of the human figures as well as the

flora and fauna represented in the miniatures are sharp and well proportioned and display the same precision and neatness which one can find in the motifs drawn in textiles in the typical Odishan tie and dye tradition. Women are usually represented with full bosoms and big bottoms and slender waists and are stylistically very close to finely chiselled sculptures of the Konark temple. The figures are always represented in profile but nevertheless one can feel the three dimensional modulation of the characters distinctly. These paintings done centuries before the modern concept of cartoons was known are perhaps the earliest examples of repetitious presentation of different characters in exact proportions. The leaves of *Bidagdha Madhava* are the most exquisite example of the perfection achieved in this respect by ancient Odishan artists. The miniaturisation in Odisha had reached such great perfection that the artists were able to represent entire *slokas* of *Gita Govinda* in small round pieces of palmleaf the size of a rupee coin. The author had an opportunity of seeing in the possession of a traditional artist Sri Ananta Maharanaa heirloom in which on the tip of a small stick of wood almost as thin as a paint brush, a representation of the three deities of Jagannatha, Balabhadra and Subhadra could be distinctly seen through the small spherical glass attached in front. Such was the height of perfection reached by Odisha miniature artists. These illustrated miniature paintings in the palmleaves provide for us a record of the sartorial styles, cosmetics and coiffure, dance forms, myths and legends and above all our rich heritage of socio-cultural traditions.

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