

## **Painting on the Bark of Aquilaria Tree: Traditional & Dying Culture of Art in Assam**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The Sanchi tree (Aquilaria Agallocha) bark has a rich history of artistic expression in Assam. From the fifteenth to the eighteenth century, the tradition continued until it was officially recognised as the Satriya School of painting. The Kamrupa kings of Assam in the seventh century were the first known practitioners of this artistic style. On the bark of the Aquilaria or Agar tree are depicted the main Hindu epic tales from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavata-Purana, Kalki-Purana, and an elephant treatise. The indigenous people painstakingly prepared the materials, which included a long-lasting locally created waterproof ink and colours derived from natural components. Aquilaria tree bark painting played an important part in the religious and social development of Assam via the medium of visual communication. When it comes to learning about and appreciating the rich cultural heritage of India's northeastern area, these paintings are invaluable. The art and research communities of today must acknowledge and disseminate the vital data on this dwindling body of knowledge about fine art practice if it is to have any impact on artists and art historians in the future.

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

### **INTRODUCTION**

The practice of painting in Assam was mostly documented in the form of colourful pictures inside manuscripts, showcasing a particular style, technique, approach, and materials. Indigenous scientific knowledge is crucial to this artistic practice; it governs every step of the process, from gathering raw materials to preparing them for use in the final product, and even their preservation and transmission from one generation to the next. It is well-known that the early people's written traditions evolved from their oral traditions in an effort to preserve their culture and its customs for future generations. The precise beginning of the manuscript writing history in Assam is not precisely pinpointed here. Up until now, it was thought that the oldest known written text, the Harshacarita by Sanskrit prose writer Banabhatta from the 7th century, was a manuscript carved into the bark of the Aquilaria tree. In Assam, the bark of the Aquilaria plant, often known as the aloe, was formerly known as Sanchipat. According to several experts, King Bhaskarvarmana of Kamrupa (595-650 A.D.) sent Harshavardana a book of exquisite verses bound with leaves of aloe bark (agar-vaikala) and dyed the colour of a ripe pink cucumber. Nash (2088) The technique of writing on aloe barks was highly

esteemed and served as a means for the aristocratic relatives and contemporaries of the Kamrupa monarchs to demonstrate their nobility. Thus, the practice of writing on parchment was also continued in Assam in the sixth and seventh centuries as a means of communication. Important events, such as the learning of Brahmins and academics and the land gifts by the monarchs of the Kamrupa, were recorded in a literary legacy. It is reasonable to presume that the Varman dynasty was the era when manuscript writing was invented. In addition, the Brahmins and court intellectuals who were patronised by the Kamrupa monarchs may have brought the tradition of writing to this country. A Hindu civilisation that has preserved its cultural homogeneity with the rest of India has supposedly been washing over the ancient Kamrupa or Assam kingdom "from time immemorial." (Goswami, XVendar) Here we can see how the erudite Brahmins and academics of Hindu origin may have brought the practice of writing on parchment to Assam. It is likely that ancient Assamis practiced writing on the bark of Sanchi trees, even if there is little literary evidence to suggest when exactly this practice began.

The most common languages utilised were Assamese and Sanskrit, and the themes inscribed on Sanchipat surfaced varied across religion, medicine, astronomy, and astrology. A notable fact is that "the Ramayana was first translated into any of the vernacular languages of India" (Assamese) by Madhav Kandali. The surface of Sanchipat had the writing (Nath, 211). Before Sankardeva's Neo-Vaishnavism resurgence in Assam, the translation was most likely completed in the fourteenth century A.D.

## **MATERIALS AND METHOD**

Museums, Vaishnava monasteries on Majuli Island, the Barpeta region, and the Nagaon area were among the many places visited during the field trips, as were public and private institutions housing extensive collections of Sanchipat paintings.

The pleasant handling and presentation of the artworks are subject to strong religious limitations. Photographs taken of the original paintings were then used to chronicle them in several volumes of aloe bark manuscripts discovered in Assam's Vaishnavite monasteries. We consulted the appropriate authorities and resource persons, and we combed through pertinent books, periodicals, bulletins, and catalogues to compile our findings. In order to delve into the local Assamese flavour, the article has used certain native names of the material alongside their English translations.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Painted on Sanchipat: a manuscript On the same surface of Sanchipat as the tradition of writing was also the tradition of painting. As the saying goes, "The unique tradition of writing and illustrating Sanchipat manuscript, continued throughout the centuries still the early 19th century." According to Dutta (240), Painting on Sanchipat, on the other hand, is an art form that developed much later than writing on Sanchipat. "In reaction to the unprecedented

religious movement, the practice of copying manuscripts in an overwhelming number began to flourish."According to Kalita (2007, 7). Historically, this religious group in Assam was known as the Bhakti-movement or the Neo-Vaishnavite movement. Countless Sanchipat manuscripts were created in Assam as a direct result of this Vaishnavite movement. Notably, these texts were venerated and recited in public to disseminate the teachings of the Bhagavata-Purana. Manuscript painting became an art form for depicting religious melodies, plays, and tales from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavat-Purana, and Kalki-Purana. A Vaishnava monastery called Dakhinpat Satra, which was founded in 1584 A.D. on the river island Majuli in Assam, has volumes of manuscripts with painted paintings on the bark of the Aqilaria tree. One of these volumes is Borgeet. One definition of "borgeet" is a devotional song on the life of the Hindu deity Krishna. Almost every folio of the Borgeet, the most famous Vaisnava devotional hymn in Assam, has an artwork. (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 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-Parba), 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.

Each of the many paintings that adorned the meticulously produced Sanchi bark folios had profound artistic, religious, and secular significance. An essential feature of Assam's

manuscript painting history is the visual and literary relationship that the Vaisnava saints were able to establish with the ordinary people.

From the 16th to the 19th century, many Sanchipat texts were produced by Vaishnavism and the Vaisnava monasteries. The art of painting on Sanchipat, also known as the Satriya School of painting, became one of the most prominent art forms of Satra when thousands of manuscripts were painted on it. Despite the fact that other surfaces were also used for text painting. Tulapat is the native name for a pressing mixture of cotton, Talpat (palm tree leaves), and Muga silk. However, Sanchipat was by far the most preferred choice for the painting's surface. The maximal availability of this carrier in the area can be the deciding factor in selecting it. The second advantage is that the Sanchipat surface is still a good, long-lasting surface for art and writing. It is also noteworthy that, despite the passage of centuries, the paintings' colours remained unchanged, and that no contemporary preservation processes were utilised to keep them in pristine condition. The surface, which every artist takes care of, is the most important factor in determining how long an artwork will last. As an analogy, using aloe bark as a platform for the paintings is a much more substantial way to ensure that they will remain vibrant for millennia to come. Thus, it is reasonable to presume that Sanchipat was the preferred medium of the painters and scribes of that period. The Sanskrit Vedas, an ancient Indian literature, mentions Sanchi wood, also known as "agar wood and its essential oil," which may be another explanation for its widespread religious and cultural importance in bygone civilizations. According to Akter, page 24, "Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus all use incense sticks or coils made of agar wood powder and dust for religious purposes and to fill their homes with a pleasant aroma." As stated by Akter (25). Bring attention to the Aquilaria tree's religious importance; the Vaishnava reformer may draw inspiration from the Vedas and use aloe wood, agar, or the bark of the Agaru tree as a medium for religious writing and painting. It is well-known that Sankardeva, the founder of the Vaishnava religious movement in Assam, was an accomplished Sanskrit and Assamese scholar. He delved into the ancient scriptures of the Vedas, Epics, Grammar, Upanishads, and Puranas, which may have provided him with the knowledge about the agar tree and its practical applications in social and cultural practices. Consequently, Sanchipat became well-known as a traditional type of painting within the Satriya culture of Assam, and thousands of manuscript paintings were created on it to disseminate knowledge of Hindu sacred texts visually. During the Bhakti-movement in Assam, the Vaishnava monasteries and the North-Eastern region's Ahom and Koch monarchs were known to support the art of manuscript painting.

### **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).*

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.

This means that surfaces that are white or contain moisture may dry up rapidly when exposed to sunshine. Two methods for drying bark have been discovered here. Two of them are "used to smoke the rolls and then put them under water for a few days to soften" (Gait 509) and one is "dried in the sun for several days" (Gait 509). According to Dutta, 243 Afterwards, place the bark on a hard board or wooden plank and massage its outside rough or hard surface by hand. To rub, the best instruments to use are a sharp knife or an iron rod called a "Jhao" that has been fixed with sand and glass powder. In his work, Dutta argues that Once the top layer has been removed or rubbed away, the bark should be left in dew for a night. It is planned to remove the remaining portion of the outer covering first thing in the morning. To separate the residual layer, which is referred to as 'nikari' (Gait 509), dew is an acceptable and vital component since it provides little moisture. The next step is to slice the bark. The artist or Khanikar decides on the size of the bark pieces based on the sort of work that will be done on them. The typical dimensions of the bark range from 7.62 to 45.72 cm in width and 22.86 to 68.58 cm in length. After the barks are cut to size, they are soaked in cold water for a while (about an hour) to remove any alkali or slippery compounds (Kash). Some people think that the colours and ink that are going to be put on it could be damaged by sticky or alkaline substances.

It is also possible to do this washing out by boiling in a mixture of water and other natural components. Tutia (blue vitriol, copper sulphate,  $\text{CuSO}_4 \cdot 5\text{H}_2\text{O}$ ), Chal-kunwari (Aloe barbadensis) leaves, and Kani-bhi Guti (seed of *Croton tiglium*) are among the components of the solution (Dutta, 244). An important Ayurvedic usage of *Croton tiglium* seed paste is for "skin diseases, painful swellings and alopecia," according to research (medplants. Blogspot. in/2013/04/Croton- tiglium-jayaphala-dravanti.html). To further enhance the Sanchi bark's ability to withstand future infestations, it is cooked in a solvent containing Tutia and Methi (Fenugreek). After this, the bark is dried to remove any leftover moisture. Once completely

dried in the sunshine, the bark was traditionally smoothed by rubbing it on a fragment of burned brick. In order to prevent the bark from shrinking during drying, it is necessary to apply a consistent amount of weight on it in a methodical manner. Matimah, also known as Vigna Mungo or black gramme paste, is applied on the bark after it has dried, and then it is dried again in the sun. To get a flawless finish, rub a seed or conch shell (Sankha) over the surface of the dry Matimah. The indigenous term for the seed is Ghila, which might mean sea bean, sea heart, *Entada rheedei*, or *Entada scandens* (Fig.6).



**Figure6.** *Sea bean or Entada rheedei locally called Ghila or Gila, Photography by: 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.** Figure 5 Hengul or Red Earth, Photography by: Author, Curtsey: Chittaranjan Bora, Kalang Museum, Puranigudam, Nagaon, Assam (India).

A thin coat of Haital or Hangul should be applied to the bark after it has been smoothed. The traditional colour palette of Sachipat paintings used these two natural pigments, Haital (Fig.6) for yellow and Hengul (Fig.7) for red, as the most prevalent colour pigments. The solid nature of Haital and Hengul necessitated a minor powdering of the components. The next step is to apply a mixture of gum, water, and fine Haital or Hengul powder on the bark's surface. In this case, the gum is likewise made from natural components, such as elephant apple, stone apple, and fiddlehead fern. After this layer of Haital or Hengul is applied, the bark is sun-dried once more and then rubbed with Ghila for a finishing touch. In addition to Haital and Hengul, S.K. Goswami said that turmeric powder was sometimes applied to the bark. A smooth stone should be used as a finishing touch to massage the bark after drying the Haital, Hengul, or turmeric coat, he said, in order to provide a slippery surface. What this implies is that the surface's brilliance and slickness are the result of a combination of materials. The artist or scribe probably preferred working on a smooth, glossy surface since it was easier to apply ink and colour. The bark is now prepared for use in text painting once it

has been appropriately polished and smoothed. The fact that Haital and Hengul's coats may ward against a variety of fungi is well-known as well.

## CONCLUSION

The ancient practice of painting manuscripts with Sanchipat has all but vanished from the current setting of Assam's cultural legacy. Compared to commercially accessible contemporary surfaces like paper and canvas, the indigenous knowledge of painting, surface selection (such as Sanchipat), and preparation processes from ancient Satriya culture is far more important. So, the most crucial feature of a painting—or any form of artistic work—is that it looks new even after all these years. Along with the surface quality and selection, the selection of subjects, such as religious and secular, and the visual portrayal of these things in painting were all ways that the ancient Assamese communicated with their illiterate and uneducated citizens. It is possible that the aesthetic worth of Assam's traditional technical expertise of painting surface preparation may inspire a new generation of artists and art enthusiasts, drawing on the region's rich social, cultural, and religious past. Manuscript paintings from Assam have a lengthy history and should be considered part of India's mainstream cultural legacy, much like other Indian painting traditions.

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