

## **The Illustrated Manuscripts Of Assam: A Brief Study**

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**Abstract:** The ancient land Assam has an old tradition of art of illustration too. Manuscript illustration was a unique form of painting in Assam. From ‘*Phung-Chin*’ dated 1437 A.D. to bhakti movement inspire illustrated manuscripts till the eighteenth century A.D. it was a vibrant tradition of Assam. The practice left impact on society and economy too. Illustrations were done on locally available ingredients native to this land such as ‘*sanchipat*’ or bark of aloe wood(*aquilaria agallocha*), ‘*tulapat*’ or pressing cotton pieces, bamboo strip folios etc. People engaged in the creation of manuscripts, painting equipments were organised under various ‘*khel*’ or professional groups that forms an important part of the society. The unique tradition started decline during moamoria rebellion in eighteenth century A.D. that shook the very foundation of six hundred years long Ahom rule in Assam. At the present date a handful of persons engaged in reproduction of old paintings and create new.

**Keywords:** Illustration, painting, *sanchipat*, manuscript, bhakti movement

**Introduction:** The finest pieces of manuscripts that preserved our past heritage are the treasure trove of this ancient land Assam. The indigenous products stored history, culture, society of Assam in it and some of them includes decorative elements that were known as illustrated or painted manuscripts. Dearth of source and humidity of this region made it difficult to gather much information about painting in early Assam. The tradition has been gain an important status in the medieval Assam under the patronage of Ahom rulers and

under the umbrella of neo-vaisnavism which flourish in Assam in 16<sup>th</sup> century A.D. However the age old tradition came to a gradual end with the British occupying of Assam in the year 1826. This study aims to look into the history and development of illustrated manuscripts in Assam along with its various stages.

**Materials and Methods:** This study is conducted on the basis of both primary and secondary data. Primary data are collected through archival records. Secondary data are books, journals, articles by noted writers and scholars and analyze through historical method.

**Results and discussion:** The earliest reference to painting in Assam (pragjyotisha) is to be found in *Harivamsa* and *Dwarika-Lila* both ultimately derived from the *Mahabharata*.<sup>1</sup> Chitrlekha of Sonitpura mentioned as a noted painter who prepared a sketch of Aniruddha, the grandson of srikrisna. Another notable reference was made in Banabhatta's *Harsacharita* composed in 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. King Bhaskara of Kamarupa who was a friend of King Harsa of Kanauj ;presented the king “Carved boxes of panels for painting with brushes and gourds.”<sup>2</sup>

In the medieval period three distinct school of painting prevailed in Assam. *Tai-Ahom-style* presented the earliest example of manuscript illustration. With the influence of Bhakti movement of Sankardeva in Assam from 16<sup>th</sup> century another style was came into front as *Satriya style* .In the early 18<sup>th</sup> century under the patronage of royal court a new style was emerged as *Garhgaon style*. ‘*Phung chin*’ a manuscript in Ahom language and script dated 1473A.D is the earliest example of illustrated manuscript of Assam. It gives a description of sixteen heavens and sixteen hells of Ahom conception. Another Tai-Ahom manuscript is ‘*Suk-Tanta-Kyempong*’.

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<sup>1</sup> H.K.Barpujari, The Comprehensive History of Assam, vol-3,p.369

<sup>2</sup> H.K.Barpujari, ibid,p.371

In the early of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Sankardeva propagate Bhakti movement in Assam. Bhakti movement brought about a revolution in many aspects of Assamese society. The main organs of vaisnavite movement the *Namghars* and *Satras* became the cultural hubs where along with religious teachings ;music, drama, dance etc. were cultivated. Under the influence of Bhakti movement religious art illustration reached to a new phase. '*Chitra Bhagwata*' or 'The *Bhagawata Book* x is the earliest example of illustrated manuscripts '*satriya style*' from Bali Satra of Nowgong district. The technique and finish of this work exhibit strong Rajput-Mughal influences, although here and there local elements are naturally to be expected.<sup>3</sup>

Painting was practised in the numerous *Satras* and in the Ahom and Koc royal court circles, where the artist enjoyed royal patronage. In some of the bigger *Satras* the visitor's eye with pleasure catches the sight of mural paintings and wood-carving of beauty with folk-art elements, depicting figures of gods and scenes from the vaisnava scripture.

The Ahom kings of Assam and Koc rulers of Koc Behar and Darrang extended patronization to the field of paintings too. '*Gita Govinda*' of Kabiraj Chakraborty was an illustrated manuscript containing miniature paintings composed by the order of the king Rudra Singha. Suryakhari Daivagna's '*Darrang Raj Vamsabali*' was a example of patronisation of Koc rulers to painting. Other illustrated manuscripts of this period are- *Bhagavata book six*, *Lava-Kusar- Yuddha* by Harihara Vipra, *Banamali- deva- charita* by Ramakanta Dvija and illustrated by Vijay Khanikar, *Kumara-Harana* or *Brihadukha-Harana* by Ramananda kayastha, *Sankhachud Badh* by Kaviraj Chakravarty, Ananta Acharyya's *Ananda Lahari*, Madhava kandali's Assamese verse of Ramayana, *Lanka Kando*, Nityananda Kayastha's *Sri-Bhagavata-Matsya- Charita* etc. Among the secular manuscripts '*Hasti-Vidyarnava*' of Sukumar Borkaith is most remarkable. It is a treatise on elephants; illustrated with various

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<sup>3</sup> Maheswar Neog, Sankardeva and His Times, p. 304

types of elephants and scenes of Ahom court. The manuscript was compiled in 1734 A.D by the order of king Siva Singha and queen Ambika. The illustrations were done by two craftsmen namely Dilbr and Dosai. Some manuscripts were illuminated with margins and known as *Lata-Kata-Puthi*. *Sahapari Upakhyan* dated 1790 A.D, of Dvijaram is an example of *Lata-Kata-Puthi*.

Manuscripts leaves in Assam were made of locally available ingredients. *Sanchipat* or bark of aloe wood was used widely. The process of preparing *sanchi pat* was discussed by Sir Edward Gait in his book '*History of Assam*'. Another important material but not used as wide as *sanchipat* was *tulapat*. Use of *tulapat* was deeply connected to paintings. Manuscripts like *Phung-Chin* and *Chitra –Bhagawarta* were written in *tulapat*. *Tulapat* manuscripts were made by pressing cotton. Bambo strip folios as well as the palm leaves were produced mainly by the Buddhist of upper Assam who belonged to Ahom, Khampti, Tai-Phake or Phakiyal, Nara, Aitonia, Turung and Khamgangiya.<sup>4</sup> They produce manuscripts on *Pat* and *muga* silk also. *Tai-Ahom* style of manuscripts used a thick variety of colours made of burnt hide of buffalo. The ash was added to blue or red colour extracted from berries. The Buddhist of Assam used gold paint to illustrate Theravada manuscripts; the oldest specimen of which, the *Phung-Chin* is dated 1473 A.D. To the Buddhist who were mostly of tai extraction gold as well as gold paint is known as *Kham* whereas the Assamese termed the art of gilding *Sonar-pani-charowa*.<sup>5</sup> In the medieval period, under the influence of *satriya-style*, the most prominent colours available were yellow and green. The materials used for colour the manuscripts were- indigo, *geru mati* or yellow ochre, *hengul* or vermilion, *haital* or yellow arsenic, lamp-black, *dhol mati* or chalk etc.

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<sup>4</sup> H.K.Barpujari, op.cit.p.379

<sup>5</sup> H.K.Barpujari, op.cit, p.379

The painters involved in the creation of paintings were organised under a *khel* during the medieval period. They were known as *Khanikar*. *Khanikar*'s done their job under the supervision of an officer called '*Khanikar Boruah*'. The skill of a painter was generally requisitioned to decorate the labours of penmanship. The scribe was sometimes a painter himself; and if not, a regular painter supplemented the work of the transcriber by sketching an appropriate picture on spaces left blank for the purpose.<sup>6</sup> *Khanikars* besides drawing pictures, knew the art of making idols both of wood and of earth and masks for the theatrical performances. They could draw mural paintings, wood carvings and also do other coloured and artistic materials such as *Sarai* (raised tray made of wood), *Singhasan*, *Tamulipira* etc.<sup>7</sup>

The vibrant manuscript painting tradition of Assam started its decline by the devastation caused by Moamaria rebellion. The collapse of administration and lack of patronisation called for the ways for decline of creative activities. With the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 the control over this land goes to the hands of British. The British brought along with them a printing press in 1836; first in the region. The neat products of the printing press have displaced the use of manuscripts where toilsome practice is necessary.

From '*Phung-chin*' to vaisnava inspired illustrated manuscripts till 18<sup>th</sup> century A.D the journey of illustrated manuscripts of Assam was great. Distinct styles enriched the art of illustration. Bhakti movement under the perception of Sankardeva left a huge impact on manuscript illustration. *Chitra-Bhagawata* is the perfect example of such illustration. People engaged in the art of painting were settled under various '*khel*' or occupational groups that formed an important part of the society as well as economy of Assam.

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<sup>6</sup> S.K.Bhuyan, Descriptive Catalogue of Assamese Manuscripts, p.xvii

<sup>7</sup> Sarbeswar Rajguru, Medieval Assamese Society, p.415

**Conclusion:** With the growth of liberalism and rationality in religious matters, the performance of ancient rites and ceremonies necessitating a recital from manuscripts has diminished to a great extent.<sup>8</sup> In present a few persons practicing the almost lost tradition of painting. Some of them are associated with satra and some are not. They engaged in reproduction of old paintings and creating new.

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<sup>8</sup> S.K.bhuyan,op.cit, p.xxviii

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