

INDIGENOUS PRACTICES AND MATERIAL FOR PRESERVATION OF MANUSCRIPTS IN MANIPUR

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ABSTRACT:

Manipur has a two-thousand-year long history, and as the Meiteis who are the indigenous and majority ethnic people have a rich culture and tradition, they have a rich language and script. As a result of this, many people of this land are keeping in their custody many Manuscripts which had been composed by their forefathers through several generations in their own language and scripts. As a result, therefore, the archaic Manuscripts which we call Puya have become a rich heritage of Manipur. So, we should make an attempt to know how these Manuscripts were maintained and conserved, what measures and methods were undertaken to keep them intact and why they have been preserved for so long.

The old Manuscripts reveal the past history of a land or a kingdom, throwing light on the socio- cultural, socio-political, economic, and cultural lives of a people or a nation. The old Manuscripts, therefore, become concrete evidences of the past humanistic and artistic activities. The preservation and conservation of the Manuscripts is highly essential for an ethnic community or a race of people who possesses a language of their own and a script to write the language.

METHODOLOGY:

Methodology adopted in this paper writing are mainly visiting in State Archives, Secretariat Libraries, Manipur State Museum, State Kala Academy and some private custodian's and check the record keeping method whether it is in the proper way or not. Sometimes the researcher herself joined in the National workshops on Manuscripts conservation and preservation which were organised or conducted by the Government agencies or in private custodian from time to time. After studying all the methodology followed by them either scientific or not, the researcher observed the situation and tried to follow the universal conservation process. The published materials are also exclusively used for this work. Available Manuscripts in the private custodians are also incorporated. State archival sources have

thoroughly been studied and incorporated. The researcher has also attended for three months conservation work for Manuscripts which was held at Manipur State Archives followed by many short term conservation and preservation workshops organised by National Mission for Manuscripts, New Delhi, in collaboration with Directorate of Art and Culture, Government of Manipur. These workshops gave a thorough knowledge in connection with present research work.

Manipuris, in specific the ethnic Meiteis, had the sense of keeping record with reference to the accounts or happenings of past events, such as military expeditions of a king or important socio-political happenings in the kingdom. The written records such as *Manuscripts* (old Manuscripts), paintings in miniature like *Subika*, and *Paphal* paintings are found scattered in Manipur, particularly in the central Manipur valley areas. On the basis of these material properties, the history of Manuscripts in Manipur can broadly be divided under two phases, namely, the traditional Meitei religious period and the Meitei Hinduised period.

The written records are in different kinds or made, such as of handmade paper, palm-leaf, birch-bark, stone, map, documentary material, etc. The royal chronicle of Manipur, *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, recounts that the Meiteis started recording the chronicular events of Manipur since the time of the king Nongda Lairen Pakhangba in 33 A.D. It clearly shows that our forefathers were quite conscious of keeping records with an idea of preserving their history. They also had a sound knowledge of preserving these Manuscripts with their indigenous methods. Most of the custodians or writers of the Manuscripts applied their indigenous skill and knowledge. In later periods they practiced imported techniques for the preservation of the Manuscripts.

Most of the old Manuscripts written on handmade paper, birch bark, Tengna leaves and bamboo, etc. are languishing because of the ignorance of the climatic conditions of Manipur on the part of the custodians. Almost all of the custodians of old Manuscripts are relatively unaware of the new scientific knowledge on how to maintain the Manuscripts, as well as the preservatives to be used in order to maintain them properly without further deterioration. Due to their poor knowledge and understanding of maintaining and conserving the written records, many of the old Manuscripts are affected by several deteriorating factors mostly arising out of unsuitability of climatic conditions. Though these are some of the factors faced by the local custodians, they do practice the indigenous methods of preservation of Manuscripts based on the oral traditions.

Most of the old Manuscripts found written on handmade paper, Tengna leaves, birch bark and bamboo, etc. are languishing because of the ignorance, neglect and improper care by their custodians in an environment setting that is not favourable to the fragile documents. It is a well known fact that preservation of Manuscripts is a serious concern for their

custodians. They consider the old Manuscripts as their most precious material and cultural properties. Ever since human beings acquired the knowledge of writing, the problem of preservation of such priceless cultural properties has been a major issue.

As the Manipuri script, which is known as *Meetei Mayek*, was developed in the 15th Century A.D., the old Manuscripts so far collected and documented are found mostly written on handmade papers. Manuscripts written on seasoned bamboo splits, Tengna leaves and other material are found to have been in use prior to handmade paper in Manipur.

An attempt has been made here to highlight the effectiveness of the indigenous methods of preservation of Manuscripts on locally handmade papers based specifically on the oral traditions. Before moving in depth into the subject, it would be appropriate to examine the followings. i) The prevailing eco-climatic conditions of Manipur, meaning thereby the sub-tropical climatic condition, the high humidity, and the polluted environment which are primary factors not conducive to the conservation of the old Manuscripts particularly written on handmade paper. ii) The established basic knowledge, that is, the sources of the known and the unknown, or the factors of damage or deterioration of the Manuscripts, such as light, heat, dust and humidity.

INDIGENOUS PRACTICES FOR PRESERVATION

The skill and knowledge of preservation and conservation of Manuscripts in Manipur by the local custodians or writers are unique practices to upkeep their Manuscripts. The valley based inhabitants are quite aware of the basic factors of deterioration of important documents such as the old Manuscripts from factors such as light, dust, heat and humidity. The practices of conservation of Manuscripts is quite indigenous and far from influence from outside. Our revered forefathers had preserved centuries old Manuscripts for the benefit of the posterity and endeavored to enhance their durability by applying indigenous technique of preservation. It is due to their selfless dedication that thousands of manuscripts are still exist. By virtues of these preserved Manuscripts the present generation has been able to make research on the ethnic culture, history, ancestry, custom and tradition (N. Indramani, S.P., 2005).

Generally, rainfall in Manipur was high, humidity also high, because of which the Manuscripts were damaged and impaired by the mould and mildew. The silverfish which is the greatest enemy of Manuscripts bit and bored the leaves of the Manuscripts rendering them unreadable. Rats and termites also greatly harmed the Manuscripts. Against these dangers, our forefathers tried their level best to protect and preserve the Manuscripts (Sorojini, 1984;16). The Manuscripts were mostly written on Meitei che (Manipuri paper) and Agarbak. The number of Manuscripts written on Meitei che was far greater than that of the Manuscripts written on Agarbak. And the number of Manuscripts written on Tengna leaf and

bamboo split was very few. The writing materials were mostly of plant products. So, a very small insect, called mite used to attack and damage the Manuscripts written on these writing materials.

For protection against mould, and insects, Puya experts and custodians resorted to indigenous preservation technique. The preservation of Manuscripts for a long time can be studied on two ways. They are, (1) presence of self preservation quality in the Manuscripts themselves, and (2) measures undertaken by Puya experts and custodians for permanent conservation.

1. Presence of self preservation quality in the Manuscripts:

Preparation for preserving the Manuscripts for a long duration has already started from the very moment the Manuscripts are written. Almost all the Manuscripts extant in Manipur were written on Meitei che. For manufacturing this very essential writing material, the fibres/pulps to be moulded are first soaked in water. On account for this tradition of soaking the fibres/pulps in water, acid is almost absent in the Meitei che. Paper which we obtain from the mill in the market generally contains acid. Acidless paper is very costly and hard to obtain. If acid is present in the paper meant for writing, its white colour will disappear after some time and red colour will appear instead. Finally the paper will become brittle. In short, acidic paper cannot be conserved for a long duration. Since Meitei che is moulded in the water, it is free of acid, of course and can be conserved generation after generation in a healthy condition. This is the special quality of the Meitei che.

After the moulding of Meitei che is finished, it is indispensable to treat it with the starch of rice in order to stiffen and strengthen. But the mite and other insects are very fond of rice starch. In order to eat the starch, they will bore the paper and the book written on that paper will be rendered illegible. The starch to be used to treat the Meitei che should be of the most tasteless varieties of rice, namely, Iroiya and Tumai. Mites and other insects are very much averse to starch made from the cooked rice of Iroiya or Tumai. Therefore, Meitei che, treated with the starch of Iroiya or Tumai rice, can endure for centuries and for many generations. This is, indeed, an example of the technique, farsightedness and extreme carefulness on the part of our forefathers (N. Indramani, S.P., 2005).

Next to Meitei che, the important writing materials used in plenty is Agarbak. As Agarbak is made from the bark of agar (aloes), it is prey to the mite. Therefore, to prevent it from being eaten by the mite, it is soaked in cow urine for about one week. By seasoning thus, it may be used as a writing plate (Ng. Kulachandra, 2006). Tengna leaf also an important writing material used as a writing plate. Tengna is very much prone to mite attack. Therefore, to prevent it from mite attack, it is at first seasoned in cow urine for about one week. Then only, it is prepared for using as a writing plate. This method of seasoning the tengna leaf for protection from the attack of the mite was a technique to conserve the

Manuscripts for a long time. The paper and Agarbak was written on in ink which was manually self made. If the writing ink contains acid, the book written in that gets abraded in the spaces where letters are marked. The book will then be full of cavities and its life becomes short. So, when our elders make ink, they add into it the lye made from the ash to burnt Khujumpere (chaff plant) or plantain starch or pea plant. Instead of the lye, Khari (sodium bicarbonate salt cake) may also be used. Since the lye contains alkali, the indigenous Meitei muk (Manipuri ink) is acid free. So, the letters written in the Puya with acid free ink are not damaged and impaired. Also the bamboo strip pen can write with ease, if acid free ink is used. In making Meitei muk, live lac secreted from the tree is also mixed. This enhances the fastness of colour and the tightness of the ink itself (N. Indramani, S.P. 2005).

2. Measures undertaken by Puya experts and custodians for permanent conservation:

Our venerated forefathers undertook the following measures for conservation and preservation of the Manuscripts for the future generation.

(a) Binding the Puya with thread: We have already discussed how the leaves of the Manuscripts are handed in two ways. Since the leaves of the Manuscripts in 'Latam' are apart from one another, if they are not maintained properly, they may become mixed up, displaced and quite confused. As a result, the Manuscripts may become rendered quite useless. To avoid this inconvenience, the books in 'Latam' are kept separately after the leaves of each book are separately bound by thread. This measure will help to prevent the Manuscripts from being mixed up (N. Indramani, S.P. 2005).

(b) Compressing the puya between the planks: Another method of conserve the Manuscripts for a long time is to compress each of them separately between two planks having the size of the respective books. Then the planks are bound with a rope tightly. This measure helps to keep the leaves of manuscripts fresh, stiff and straight. The binding of the planks tight by the rope prevents the water vapour in the air from coming into contact with the moisture present in the book itself. [Humidity in Manipur is very high.] This measure also prevents the Puya between the planks from absorbing the water vapour in the air. This prevention of water vapour absorption protects the Manuscripts from the mould which can damage the leaves of the Puya.

This method also greatly helps to prevent the leaves of the manuscript from decaying due to the mould. The compression by the planks prevents insects from entering the leaves of the book very easily and hence from biting and harming the leaves. Further, this measure keeps the necessary moisture content in the book itself balanced and constant. Moreover, fire cannot burn the book suddenly and immediately as it is protected by the planks (N. Indramani, S.P. 2005).

(c) **Wrapping of the Manuscript with cloth:** Wrapping of the Manuscript in cloth served to protect them from dust, worms and to a great extent from the effects of humidity and absorption of acidic fumes. The wrapping cloth was usually red in colour. After the completion of carpentering the wooden boards of the Manuscript, it is then carefully placed between the two boards. A sheet of cloth measuring around 50x60 centimeters is stitched in the right size for wrapping the Manuscript along with the boards. The borders of the cloth is to be stitched with needle. A string made from rolls of cloth, about the size of half a centimeter, is also stitched along one of the four corners of the cloth. The string is also made from strands of thread which is then tied to one of the corners of the sheet by knotting together so as to form a tail. After the stitching of the wrapper is completed, the Manuscript that had been placed in between the wooden boards is set at the centre of the wrapper cloth which is arranged in a horizontal position. The conical ends of the spread wrapper that lies on either sides of the Manuscript are folded over and across the Manuscript in such a way that they cover the best part of the Manuscript except for backside or the underlying side of the Manuscript. Thereafter, the conical end of the cloth which lies opposite to the body of the custodian is also folded in a proper way. The conical end which has the string lying on the side of the writer is folded in the roll. The string is then encircled around the breath-wise feature of the wrapper so as to fasten the cover of the Manuscript (N. Indramani, S.P., 2005). Our elders used to wrap the Manuscripts with cloths all round the planks tied very tightly. This measure again prevents the water vapour outside from coming into close contact with the Manuscripts. Outside weather condition also cannot affect them. Moreover, insects like the bright. Silverfish are rendered unable to enter the book and bite and impair it. Further, this step protects the book from dirt, dust and decay (N. Indramani, S.P., 2005).

(d) **Keeping the Manuscript inside a Tabu (a basket with a cover) :** Our elders used to keep the Manuscripts, that had already been clasped with planks and further wrapped with cloths all over, in a Tabu made of 'Kanam Paya' (thin, long bamboo slice made from outer layer of bamboo). This measure was a further step to protect the Manuscripts from the harmful effects of day-to-day weather conditions, and to prevent the absorption of water vapour by the Manuscripts from outside. This measure rendered the destructive rats and mice unable to bite and damage the Manuscripts. Moreover, insects could not infiltrate the Manuscripts (N. Indramani, S.P., 2005). The elders kept the basket (Tabu) containing the Manuscripts on a type of scaffold made of wood, raised high from the ground. This raised, scaffold was known as 'Lop'. In early days, most people dwelt in the traditional Meitei house called Meitei Yumjao (big house), with a front slanting roof called 'Laikhan'. At that time every house had this 'Lop' built over the kitchen. This 'Lop' was meant for storing or preserving articles, grains and the like. Since there was always fire in the kitchen for cooking morning and evening meals, the Manuscripts in the 'Tabu' kept on the 'Lop' got heat daily, regularly. This made the Manuscripts inside the Tabu (bakset) dry and desiccated. As a result, mould and mildew could not impair and damage the leaves of the Manuscripts. Being raised high from the ground, dampness of the ground could not dampen the

Manuscripts and during flood, water could not swamp them (N. Indramani, S.P., 2005). This measure was a great help towards the conservation of the Manuscripts permanently.

e) To read the Manuscripts by opening regularly and constantly: A very effective measure of conserving Manuscripts permanently was to read the Manuscripts by opening regularly and constantly. The elders had the tradition of opening the Manuscripts regularly on auspicious days in order to them. Opening the Manuscripts regularly and constantly would help to drive out hostile enemy of Manuscripts like the silver-fish. Again, while opening the Manuscripts, one would have the chance to finding the leaves of the Manuscripts infected by fungus mould and mildew on the surface of the writing plate. This chance would help him to expose the affected leaves in the sun and cure them of the disease. Further, the opening of the Manuscripts would give the opportunity to clean dirt and dust. But the Manuscripts should not be opened for reading with wet hand in order to avoid acidic perspiration or oil accretions especially during summer months. The cotton gloves should be used in this case (Dwivedi, 1980;192). Therefore, the opening and reading the Manuscripts is a very effective means of conserving them permanently.

Our venerated forefathers had conserved and preserved the sacred Manuscripts written centuries ago, by using different technique of preservation in the indigenous way and then handed them down to the coming generation intact and in fine fettle. It is because of their dedicated devotion and selfless labour that the present generation has inherited the heritage of the sacred Manuscripts. Therefore, the present generation also should endeavour to preserve this heritage by exploiting different advanced, scientific techniques for the future generation to come.

FILLINGS IN THE WRITING MATERIALS

Most of the Manipuri Manuscripts were found to have been written on the handmade papers with indigenously developed ink and pen made by them. As the Manipuris care for their Manuscripts to endure a bit longer time from the normal life of the writing materials, and to protect from damages due to insects and other animals, they started using preservatives and conservative materials in the preparation and making of the writing materials especially ink, handmade paper, and *Agarbak* or pieces of wooden plank sheets (B. Kulachandra Sharma, 1999; 11).

PREPARATION PRIOR TO FORMING OF MANUSCRIPTS

The Manipuris had developed indigenous methods for conservation of the Manuscripts prior to their forming. The processes described earlier and the procedures of making handmade ink and paper are also a part of these measures. After making the paper into a broad sheet it is to be rubbed with the hard seed of Kangkhill (Elephant creeper, family Mimosaceae, <http://medicinalplants.co.in/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/...>) so as to level the face of the sheets. This rubbing with

Kangkhil is to make the paper smooth for writing but would also stick the pigments of the ink properly on the surface of the paper. The broad sheet of the paper is to be cut with scissor into smaller pieces which would be the leaves of the Manuscripts. This is then a brief description of the processes of locally handmade paper (N. Gejen, 2013, demo.).

PROCESS OF CONSERVATION AFTER WRITING

The process for indigenous conservation and preservation of Manuscripts in Manipur appeared to be of simple methodology. The processes are as follows:

1. Rubbing with *Nungshil* (alum): There were two types of *Nungshils* found in Manipur. These are the *Nungshil angouba* (white alum) and *Nungshil ahangba* (green alum or blue vitrol). The solid potash alum in dry state is rubbed softly to have adherence of its elemental particles on the surface of the paper. By so doing, it is said that this action helps in warding off insects, thereby discouraging them to lay eggs on the paper or to bite the paper (B. Kulachandra Sharma, 1999; 12).

2. Carpentering of wooden shelves: After the completion of writing of the Manuscript, and consequently, smearing of the preservatives, local scholars normally do not keep the Manuscript in an open condition. As a next step the work of carpentering of shelves is done for storing of the Manuscripts. Wooden planks are usually used for making the shelves. The shelves are normally designed to hold the different sizes of the Manuscripts. Most of the shelves locally made are a bit broader and longer by about 1 to 2 cm around the Manuscript. Two pieces of wooden board are sawn and the surface is levelled. Out of these two pieces of wooden board, one is kept below the Manuscript so as to serve as the back cover, while the other is placed over the Manuscript so as to serve as the front cover of the Manuscript. As the surface of the wooden boards are smoothed with plane, the title of the Manuscript is usually written on the frontal or the outward side of the shelf which serves as the front cover of the Manuscript (Ratna, Karunasindhu, 2005;137).

It is believed that the use of camphor by extracting the substance from *karpur* plant (*Blunea densiflora*) as protective material, commenced since the time of the Manipur King, Meidingu Chandrakirti (1850-1888 A.D.). Whereas, even as late as the reign of the king, Sir Churachand Singh (1891-1941 A.D.) in the early twentieth century, it is believed none in the nation state had the knowledge of using *Karpur Akhaba* (Naphthalene). However, much later on, this material began to be used commonly by the people for protecting their clothes kept in cupboards against insect bites. The *Heedaak-manaa* (leaves of tobacco plant) was considered as an effective medium for repelling insects and flies (Lm (L) Ibungohal Singh and N. Khelchandra Singh, 1989; 56).

3. Receptacle of Manuscript: The receptacles of the old Manuscripts appear to have been used in different structure of baskets with or without covers, such as *Lubak* (square shaped horizontal shallow box basket), *Tabu*

(cylindrical or rectangular horizontal form of basket), *Thop* (shallow cylindrical basket) or *Thoplang*, *Chengbon* (storage basket that is square shaped vertical structure with stands), and *Thummok* (storage basket). All the baskets, excepting the *Thummok*, have lids. The Manuscripts that are stored in these receptacles are affected by atmospheric pressures, climatic phenomena and the effects of varying room temperature.

WARMING OF MANUSCRIPTS:

By warming of Manuscripts, it means that the documents are exposed to heat energy. Such treatment reduces the elemental characteristics and properties of the documents to lead to the extinction of all the capacities and capabilities possessed by the documents in their elemental state. The warming of the Manuscripts was employed by the local scholars as a means of preservation and of the Manuscripts. For this purpose, the local custodians places the receptacles of the Manuscripts near the hearth or fireplace ('phungga' in the vernacular), or the containers of the Manuscripts are hung over the fireplace called "Lop". This method was assumed by the local custodians would prevent the documents from infection by insects and other pests and would also refresh the Manuscripts by the heat received (Harinarayana, Jeyaraj, 1995; 44).

From the above findings, it may be pointed out that the indigenous methods of preservation and conservation of the Manuscripts as prevailing in Manipur in the olden days were rather unsystematic and unscientific. The indigenous practices for conservation and preservation of Manuscripts from other environmental factors as were used in Manipur were quite different from that of the indigenous practices in other parts of the country. Information on the indigenous techniques needs to be properly documented and, consequently, revived. There is a need to scientifically determine the best methods of preservation and conservation treatments so that the traditional methods may still retain their traditional values. In spite of the introduction of suitable chemicals for preservation of documents in the modern context, the traditional methods of preservation cannot be ignored. So, preservation of Manuscripts is a serious problem for the custodians of Manuscripts throughout the world. Comparative reviews with the rest of the country's resources on the indigenous methods of conservation and preservation of Manuscripts will help focus on the traditional practices in the State vis-a-vis the important role played by local scholars for the long time preservation of the old Manuscripts which today form an important asset of the State's material heritage.

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