

A Conservation Status Report on Indian Illustrated Manuscripts

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ABSTRACT

The paper comprises of a short history of Indian illustrated manuscripts and their importance in Indian heritage and Indian history as India is said to have the largest collection of manuscripts including the illustrated ones, in the world scattered all across the country. The preparation process of both illustrated palm leaf and handmade paper manuscripts, the writing and illustration techniques of them are briefly noted in this paper with the references of some famous illustrated Jain and Mughal manuscripts, that have been found in India. This paper takes an investigative approach into the damages found in illustrated manuscript collections in India indicating the most important deteriorating causes. This paper also takes an investigative approach into the application of leaves, bark, seeds, wood and roots of different medicinal plants having toxic effects on different museum pests for the protection of these valuable manuscripts from the attack of different types of biodeteriogens. Finally, the paper spells out the storing process of illustrated manuscripts following some traditional methods and some suggestions are given regarding the basic preventive conservation steps of preserving illustrated manuscripts.

Keywords: India, Manuscript, Illustration, Tradition, Indigenous, Prevention, Preservation.

I. INTRODUCTION

The term 'Manuscripts' refers to a document which is handwritten by an author. The noun manuscript evolved from the Latin *manu scriptus*, meaning "written by hand." Manuscripts are found in every part of the world where human beings put their thoughts and experiences into a written form that has significant scientific, historical or aesthetic value. Lithographs and printed volumes are not manuscripts. Some of the varieties of materials that have been used to write on from the earliest times were stone, clay and wood. Later they were replaced by plant material --- either a leaf that had been specially prepared for writing. This material can be the bark of trees (birch bark); it can also be the pulp of plant material that has been dried in the form of thin sheets in the tradition of handmade paper.

The manuscripts are available in different types. They comprise various themes, textures and aesthetics, scripts, languages, calligraphies, illuminations and illustrations. These manuscripts cover subjects as diverse as astronomy, mathematics, medicine, music, literature, grammar, history, astrology. Manuscripts may be in loose leaves, scrolls or in codex format (bounded book). Illustrated manuscripts are enriched with pictures,

border decorations, elaborately embossed initial letters or full-page illustrations.

II. ANALYSIS

The Indian Manuscripts are the examples of richest collection of written documents, texts and scripts. Manuscripts created before printing can tell us much about language, its development and evolution, about the development of writing and about various social, religious, and cultural interests and preoccupations of the peoples of the past. From the illustrated manuscripts we can learn much about art from them and even about fashion and house construction. India is said to have the largest collection of manuscripts in the world scattered all across the country. The Indian heritage and Indian history of is well documented in these treasures.

An illustrated or illuminated manuscript is a manuscript in which the text is supplemented with such decoration as initials, borders (marginalia) and miniature illustrations. Sometimes gold and silver were also used for gilding.

Recording and documenting history and culture were not restricted to the Indian subcontinent. The ancient

Egyptians were using a similar technique on papyrus and the Mesopotamians as well. During the rise of Christianity around 400 AD, manuscripts began to feature small images. This tradition came to India by 800 AD. Jain, Hindu, and Buddhist traditions of illustrated manuscripts exist in various parts of India. However it became the dominant style of creating manuscripts during the Mughal period. Akbar the great was by far the biggest patron of illustrated manuscripts in India. He had studied painting himself in his youth and had inherited his father's library. After he moved his capital to Fatehpur Sikri he set up a school dedicated to miniature painting under the tutelage of Persian master artists. The Illustrated manuscripts mirror the cultural legacy and spirit of the Mughal art. Several Illustrated Manuscripts like Dastan-I-Amir Hamza (Hamzanama), the best known for the enormous illustrated manuscript commissioned by the Mughal Emperor Akbar in about 1562. Tutinama (1555-1560 AD), Anvar-I-Suhaili, Razm-Nama (1584–1586), Babur-Nama (1589–90), Akbarnama (1590 and 1596), and Tuzuk- I-Jahangiri (1909) executed during the Mughal Period are mainly notable for their pictorial or illustrated documentation. The Mughal illustrated manuscripts was written and painted on wasli / vasli (made of traditional handmade paper). The nature, illustrations of the both flora and fauna, celebration of some festival, picture of Mughal court, battle, lifestyle and stories and memories of patrons etc. are mostly depicted through the illustrations.

This style soon spread to the surrounding Hindu courts and the Hindu epics of the Ramayana, Mahabharata, smaller fables and fairy tales began to find themselves in this format in all languages and scripts. In case of illustrated manuscripts, Jain manuscripts are also notable. In India illustrated manuscripts are mostly found on palm leaf (mostly Jain and other Hindu manuscripts) and handmade paper.

The earliest Jain illustrated manuscripts usually are inscribed and illustrated on prepared palm-leaves and bound with cords, passing through holes in the folios. The manuscript folios are mostly encased in wooden covers, which are often decorated with various famous religious or historical themes related to the text. The major centers of production of Jain manuscript were Ahmedabad and Patan in Gujarat. Other centers included Jaisalmer, Gwalior and Delhi. The subject of these

paintings either related to daily activities, stories and folklores, religious rituals or merely the patrons.

The earliest painted palm-leaf manuscript known is an *Oghaniryukti*, dated 1060. One of the identifying features of fifteenth century Jain manuscript painting is the increasingly lavish use of gold. A unique illustrated Kalpasutra manuscript from Jaunpur, Uttar Prades (CA 1465), displays a calm and highly effective use of gold and an intense blue sourced from lapis lazuli. The use of both these colours had resulted from an awareness of Persian painting. Kalakacharya Katha (1399 -1502), Uttaradhyayana Sutra (15th century), Sangrahani Sutra (18th century) etc are also notable illustrated Jain manuscripts.

Palm leaf manuscripts are usually seen in the form of bundles of 50 to 100 neatly shaped leaves of even size strung together with a cord and pressed between two wooden boards. These manuscripts are in very commonly found South India, Bihar, Bengal and other sea side areas.

The leaves of the Palmyra or Talipot palm are dried in a controlled manner and then prepared for writing on by submerging in ponds, boiling in water and rubbing spices like turmeric on them. The midrib is often removed and the leaves are cut to make a bundle of folios of even size.

In case of surface writing, the text was written with ink on the leaf using a pen or brush. In incised writing the text was incised in the leaf using a sharp iron stylus. At the beginning stage both the incised illustrations and text are barely visible. In order to make them legible, carbon black is mixed with a binder is rubbed into the incisions and then wiped off with water, rice bran or hot sand. Common binder is gum acacia or *gingili* oil. While most palm leaf manuscripts contain only text, many are illuminated with exquisite images. After inking was completed, illustrations were either incised or surface drawn and then gum tempera paints using vegetable pigments, were filled within the incised designs. Sometimes incised illustrations having no ink are also found. In some cases gold or silver gilding is also found in illustrations.

Manuscripts made of handmade paper can be found either as bundles of folios kept between wooden boards and wrapped in cloth, or they are often also bound as books. Manuscripts on handmade paper are found all over the country.

Sometimes a number of thin papers were pasted together to form a stiffer writing or painting support called wasli/vasli.

The text was written on the surfaces of the folios with ink using a pen or brush. Images or illustrations were painted using earth and mineral pigments with plant gum binders. Sometimes portions of the illustrations were also gilded with gold and silver dust. Traditional pigments were used in these illustrations like, lapis lazuli (a costly blue mineral), indigo (a plant dye producing blue) orpiment (a yellow mineral) vermilion (a red mineral) carbon black (usually produced from charcoal) shell gold (gold powder bound with gum Arabic or egg).

Basic damages found in an illustrated manuscript collection are as follows:

- Being hygroscopic in nature the materials have poor resistance to wear and tear and the folios are easily damaged by constant handling.
- In some cases the folios (mainly palm leaf folios) become very dry and brittle and difficult to handle and get damaged at the edges.
- Folios are badly damaged by insects.
- The wooden planks are damaged by insects and microbes activities.
- Stains on folios.
- Dust has accumulated on folios and wooden planks.
- Mud deposition on folios and wooden planks.
- In some manuscripts the text is illegible either due to fading away of ink or non application of ink.
- Illustrations become faded.

These problems are generally raised due to:

- Improper and Constant Handling.
- Aging.
- Improper storage.
- Professional apathy and carelessness.
- Public apathy and carelessness.

- Fire, water, natural calamities.
- Insect attack, microbiological attack.
- Dust, environmental pollution and light.
- Fluctuations in temperature and relative humidity.
- The nature in which the manuscript material is prepared and the ink or paint is applied can also be a danger to manuscripts.

Care of illustrated manuscripts was a major concern in the past and different efforts were made to protect them from various agents of deterioration. One of the most important of these deteriorating agents was biological growth in Indian climate, which is still a major problem. Simple measures of strict cleanliness and the use of appropriate insecticides protect the objects from insect attack. In India, since ancient times some indigenous methods are followed for proper preservation of these valuable manuscripts, which are also effectively been used still now in some places in our country.

A wide range of natural materials can be safely and easily applied for control and elimination of insects. The use of herbs and local techniques are neither hazardous for human and nor for the manuscripts' materials. At the same time these methods do not need much tool, equipment, expertise or money. It is therefore a necessary starting point in this study to identify the traditional methods that are still used to preserve the palm leaf collections in various parts of India. Some of the relevant methods are suggested here, which will be adopted by the custodians of these valuable illustrated manuscripts for preservation purpose:

- ✓ After fixing the paint of illustrations, the dry and brittle palm leaves can be made flexible by introducing some of the essential oil such as camphor oil, citronella oil, clove oil or mustard oil of which camphor, citronella and clove oil have insect repellent property also.
- ✓ Fine silk cord should be used for binding the leaves together by replacing the old damaged one.
- ✓ The most delicate part of the folios are the edges in most cases it is friable and damaged by handling; it is therefore necessary that the folios always are placed between 2 stiff flat seasoned wooden boards of Sal (*Shorea robusta*), Segun

(*Tectona grandis*), Neem (*Azadirachta indica*) or of Jackfruit (*Artocarpus heterophyllus*) slightly larger in size than the leaves as was the custom in ancient times. These also prevent wrapping of the folios.

- ✓ Instead of open racks or shelves, the manuscripts should be kept in close hard boxes or chest of seasoned Neem, Sandal (*Santalum album*), Sal, Segun or Camphor (*Cinnamomum camphora*) wood. It will provide the protection from external deteriorating agencies and also produce a suitable microclimate around the documents to check fluctuations of temperature and humidity.
- ✓ The manuscripts will be housed in single rows in horizontal position in steel sliding drawers.
- ✓ Neem leaves (margosa leaves), Tobacco (*Nicotiana tabacum*) leaves and ghoda bach (*Acorous calamous*) should be placed on and below the manuscripts which are tied in bundles to keep insects away. Also, a combination of cumin seeds (*Cuminum cyminum*), cloves (*Syzygium aromaticum*), black pepper (*Piper nigrum*), cinnamon (*Cinnamomum zeylanicum*), camphor and *Acorous calamous* can be used in several sachets for the same purpose by placing them within the storage cupboards.
- ✓ Citronella oil, having insect repellent properties, should be applied in the wooden storage boxes and cupboards to repel insects from the manuscripts or they should be made of Neem wood, which are considered termite proof.
- ✓ The boxes of the illustrated manuscripts should be wrapped in red or yellow cloth, which will protect them from insects, dust and humidity, this wrapping controls the air circulation. The red is believed to be an auspicious and also as a repelling colour for insects. The yellow cloth will be dyed with turmeric (*Curcuma longa*) paste, which will also have an insect repellent property.
- ✓ Pressure must be avoided on the edges at the time of reading, storage and handling.
- ✓ To retard mildew attack from dampness, the manuscripts should be periodically dried under the sun in the month of August; this will also helps in eradication of insects from the objects.

Besides all these traditional methods of illustrated manuscript preservation techniques there are some simple preventive measures which should also be adopted to protect the manuscripts from different deteriorating agencies. Insect and mildew menace is greater in tropical climates because high humidity and temperature favours insect and mildew growth, so optimum temperature should be of 20-22⁰C and 55-60% of relative humidity. Here some basic preventive conservation steps in an illustrated manuscripts collection are suggested:

- Inspection of manuscript collection from time to time will help preventing their damage.
- Manuscript folios also become easily stained and dirty. They should not be touched unclean, perspiring or wet hands. Periodic dusting is also very necessary.
- The staff of the collection should have been trained to execute the preventive conservation steps on their own.
- The collection storage, display and reference areas should be clean.
- The loose folios in the illustrated manuscript sections should have been placed in labeled boxes.
- Direct light should not be falling on the illustrated manuscripts.
- The room should be well ventilated, and free from dampness.
- The risk from fire or disaster should have been minimized.
- Process of updating the accession and location registers should have commenced.

III. Conclusion

The dangers to an illustrated manuscript collection can be termed as factors of deterioration. The biggest danger to collections is the human factor, as humans can destroy entire collections by their inaction as well as by their wrong actions. Humans if they want can also ignore their power to exercise control over the effects of the natural factors and thus allow the collections to be destroyed forever. Alternatively, humans can also be the biggest protectors of illustrated manuscripts if they take correct action. So it is all of our duty to take care of these valuable collections.

IV. REFERENCES

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