
Illustrated Manuscripts at Auniati Satra of Majuli Island, Assam

Irfan Laskar¹ and Shahida Ansari¹

¹. Department of Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology, Deccan College Postgraduate and Research Institute, Pune, Maharashtra - 411 006, India (Email: irfanlaskar321@gmail.com; shahida.ansari@dcpune.ac.in)

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Abstract: The illustrated manuscripts of Assam have been one of the significant art forms and a religious tradition that has been followed since the medieval time period. There are evidences of illustrated manuscripts from the 7th century CE during the reign of King Bhaskaravarman from Bana's Harshacharita. But the art of preparation on illustrated manuscripts was popularized by Srimanta Sankardeva, who was the main figure for the rise of Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam. He used the illustrated manuscripts to recreate the scenes from the Purana and the Epics, which attracted the common mass. The Majuli Island came into repute during the 16th century CE due to the preachers of Neo-Vaishnavism who resided and established the religious and socio-cultural institution i.e., Satra. The island became a shelter for various art forms i.e., dance, drama, music, art and paintings (illustrated manuscripts). Sancipat was the most commonly used material to prepare the manuscript from the bark of Aloe tree (*Acquilaria agallocha*). Since the bark could not be used for writing and painting in its natural state, it has to undergo a particular process. The article highlights the illustrated manuscripts present in Auniati Satra of Majuli. It throws light on the method of preparation of the illustrated manuscripts along with the materials required, associated indigenous knowledge, and situating this art form through time. The study highlights intangible cultural heritage attached to the manuscripts i.e., gives a glimpse of the tradition of homage offered to the manuscripts since Medieval time period.

Keywords: Illustrated Manuscripts, Sancipat, Auniati Satra, Majuli, Assam Indigenous Knowledge, Script

Introduction

The study of ancient writing system is technically called palaeography, leads to the origin and history of the alphabets. The available manuscripts are generally not older than 600 years (only in a few cases, it may be 1000 years or more) because of the fragile nature of the material used for writing. The word 'Manuscript' has been derived from Medieval Latin word 'manuscriptus', equivalent to 'manu' means by hand and 'scriptus' means written (Murthy 1996).

The illustrated manuscripts are those manuscripts in which the text is supported by illustrations or depictions. The term manuscript is used in various Indian languages as

Hastalekha, Pandulipi, Matrka, Sancipat, Tulipat, Pustaka, Pothi, Potha, and Adarsa. Indian manuscripts are multilingual having varied scripts, covering religious, philosophical, historical, literary and scientific subjects. The popular medium employed are clay tablets, stones, metals, ivory, tortoise shell, tree barks and leaves, animal's skins, cloth and paper (Neog 2004).

Assam has a long drawn, golden history of art, culture and literature (Sah 2006). The art of manuscript illustration had remained a sealed book to the Art Historian of India. The *Harshacharita* of Bana, a 7th century CE work, has the earliest reference to the production of manuscripts on the bark of the Aguru tree (*Acquilaria agullocha*) from Assam during the days of King Bhaskaravarman (Neog 2004). The *Charajyapada* is a collection of mystical poems, songs of realization in the Vajrayana tradition of Buddhism from the tantric tradition during the Pala Empire in Ancient Assam, Bengal, Bihar and Odisha (Dasgupta 1969). These *Charjayapadas*, in Assamese language are believed to have been written between 8th to 10th centuries CE on *Sancipat*. In the 14th century CE, a pre-Vaishnavite literary age could be traced after a dark period of about four centuries after *Charjayapadas* (Sah 2006).

The art of painting in the form of illustrated manuscripts was mainly popularized by Srimanta Sankardeva in the 16th century CE during the propagation of the Neo-Vaishnavite Movement. The painting were attractive and an inspiration to many people throughout the Brahmaputra valley and known for its extraordinary quality of indigenous styles. This tradition has been an identity of the Assamese culture and its heritage for a long period of time (Gupta 1972).

The island of Majuli came into prominence in the sixteenth century due to the Vaishnavite preachers and practitioners who resided and established *Satras* in the island. Since the arrival Sankardeva, a Vaishnavite Saint, Majuli flourished. The island became a shelter for the numerous art forms like drama, dance, music, handicrafts, mask-making, architecture, and paintings (illustrated manuscripts) that are mainly based upon the religious ideology for the upliftment of the society (Nath 2009).

The research paper is based on the field work at Auniati *Satra* in the month of December 2018. The source material is sub-divided into two categories (a) historical and literary records and (b) field work and observation. The methodology includes interview method, direct investigations, survey schedule, and focused group interviews. The study focuses on the illustrated manuscripts in Auniati *Satra* which is a vivid art among the several arts forms contributed by Sankardeva and his philosophy of Vaishnavism. Established in the year 1653, the *Satra* is the biggest *Satra* of Assam and has been a storekeeper of hundreds of manuscripts. These manuscripts are of much significance as it contains various kinds of indigenous knowledge. It was observed that the manuscripts in the repositories are greatly affected from various deterioration factors (natural and manmade). Systematic documentation, careful storage is the need of hour. Scientific preservation and conservation demands our

utmost attention for safeguarding our invaluable cultural heritage for posterity. The present paper is a preliminary study carried out to catalogue the illustrated manuscripts like *Bhagavat Purana* Book-X (*Adi Dasam*), *Ekadasa Skanda Bhagavata*, *Bhagavat* Book XI and *Hastividyarnava* at Auniati Satra.

Auniati Satra

The Auniati Satra is situated in the Island of Majuli of Assam (Figures 1, 2 and 3). Majuli is situated between 26°45' to 27°12' north latitude and 93°39' to 94°35' longitude is the only island district of India. The foundation pillar of the Auniati Satra was laid by Ahom king Jayadhwaj Singha in 1653 CE. The conclusive evidence of the year on which the Satra was established is not exact, according to some Historians it was established in 1648 CE by Nariya Raja. The Satra has a proper structure that is headed by the *Satradhikar*. The roles of the office bearers of the Satra can be sub-divided into three parts, namely religious, civil and socio-cultural administration.

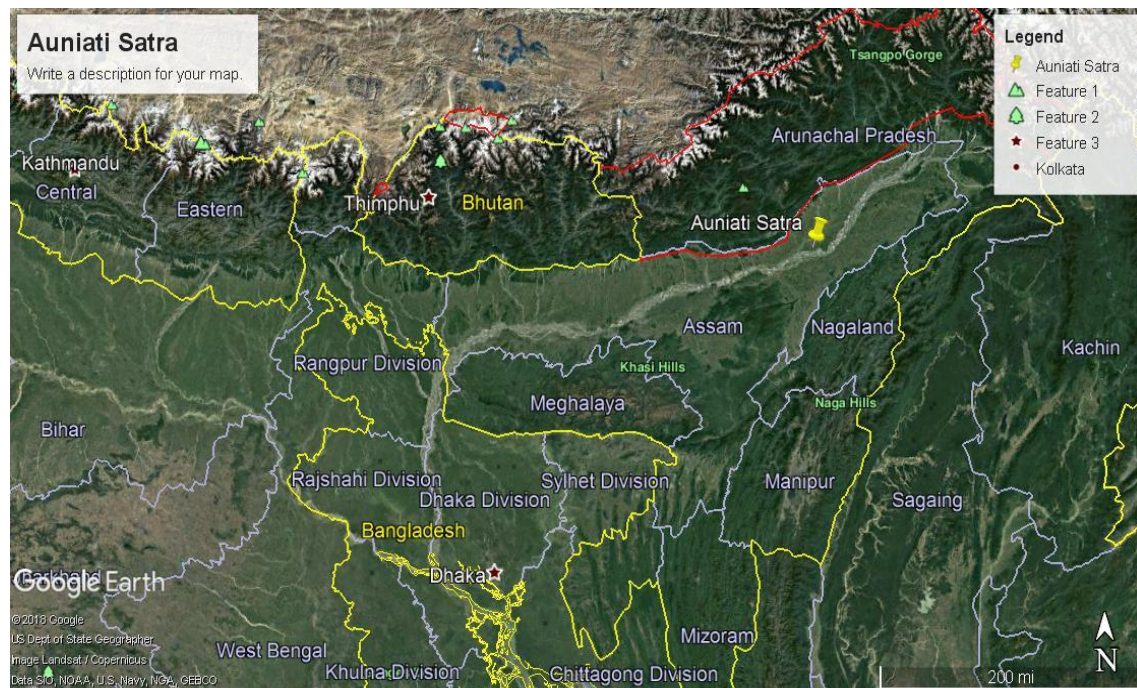


Figure 1: Study area located in the island of Majuli, Assam, India
(Courtesy: Google Earth)

The name of the Satra 'Auniati' is divided into parts, where 'Auni' means *pan* (betel leaf) and 'ati' means a 'higher place' viz. the Satra was established in a higher place where there was an abundance of betel leaf. The Satra in general is considered among the chief bearer of *Bhaktism* in Assam. It plays a vital role in propagating Neo-Vaishnavism and it is regarded as a socio-religious centre of culture. Due to its religious origin, the Satra is responsible for stabilizing and framing the Assamese society along with administration of the spiritual and cultural requirements of the people for more than 350 years from the time of its inception in the year 1653 CE by Jayadhwaj Singha (Goswami 2004).



Figure 2: Entrance to the *Namghar* of Auniati Satra



Figure 3: The *Guru Asana* inside the *Manikut* where the sacred scriptures are worshipped

The *Satra* not only influenced the religious ideologies and activities of the people but it influenced tremendously on the socio-cultural aspects of the society. The cultural activities included *bahona*, *ankiya-nat*, *Bargeet*, *Gayan-bayan*, and art forms. Apart from the cultural activities the *Satra* also contributes to the field of educational and has established many educational institutions and donated land for other institutions (Sarma 1975).

Manuscripts as Sacred Scriptures

The *Bhakti* movement inaugurated in medieval Assam by Srimanta Sankardeva (1449-1569 CE) gave birth to a vigorous culture of literature and art. The culture of producing manuscripts in countless number began to flourish in direct response to the unprecedented religious movement. One significant aspect of the movement is that it recognized the worship of sacred scriptures instead of any formal idol made of stone, wood or any other substance.

Another significant aspect of the movement which is noteworthy is the community service of the religious prayers-hall called *Namghar*. The devotees offer their prayers to the sacred scriptures enshrined in the altar of the *Namghar*. The practice of worshipping religious scriptures is not followed by everybody as such, and there are people who worship formal idols attributed to different names of God. But all sections of people have been retaining the practice of recitation of religious scriptures daily after the *Nama-Kirtana* and also on different occasions (Kalita 2009).

The Vaishnava creed as expounded by Sankardeva and his apostles enjoined upon the placing of a *Grantha* or religious manuscript in an altar whether for congregational worship in *Namghar* or family adoration in a domestic chapel. In every *Satra* or religious institution of the highest rank, a *Bhagwati* was attached, whose duty was to read aloud and explain to the devotees about the chapters from the *Bhagavata/Bhagwata* regularly, while a *Pathak* (Reader) was as indispensable member of the usual quota of the village functionaries. The people of Assam had a belief that an impending calamity, in the shape of the disastrous consequences of an illness and other misfortunes, can be averted by a solemn promise to arrange for the recitation of the chapters of the religious manuscripts. To touch the manuscripts of *Kirta*, the *Bhagwata* or the *Gita* is regarded as an infallible token of the sanctity of a man's oath or promise (Neog 2004).

Sankardeva, a revered figure, was solely responsible for the bulk of literary output of his time. He translated many chapters of the *Bhagavata-purana* into old Assamese verses, wrote several *Kavyas*, composed six dramas and inaugurated a new style of dramatic art, composed devotional songs and the most celebrated work, the *Kritana*, besides a *Khanda* of the *Ramayana* and the *Bhakti Ratnakara* (on *Bhakti*). The culture of vernacular literature launched by Sankardeva was vigorously pursued by his followers engaged in religious preaching and also by many learned people of Assam (Kalita 2009).

Method and Techniques of Preparation of Illustrated Manuscript on *Sancipat*

In Assam the most common carrier of manuscript was made from the bark of *Agar* tree and is known as *Sancipat*. During the period under review this type of writing material seems to have been profusely used in the writing and the preparing of copies of books, as it was easily available and it lasted sufficiently long, although it takes a great deal of patience in its preparation as a finished material. Since the *Agaru* bark cannot be used in its natural state for writing and painting, it is systematically processed before usage. Traditional knowledge methods employed to maintain for its posterity.



Figure 4: Rolled up strips of the bark removed from *Sancu* tree

An *Aguru* tree, not less than 15 to 16 years of life with a minimum 30-35 inches girth is selected for its bark, as the bark of immature tree is thinner and can easily be infested by insects. The selected tree is first measured; the preferred height above ground is about four feet. The tree trunk is marked and incised with a help of a knife. The incised portion in the bark is removed in strips i.e., of 6 to 18 feet length and 3 to 27 inches of breadth. The strips are removed from the trunk in an upward motion and the bark below the four feet mark around the trunk is not removed as this portion is very much uneven and not suitable for use. These strips are rolled up separately with the inner white part of the bark outwards and the outer green part inside (Figure 4). The rolled up strips are dried in the sun several days until they dry up well. The strips should either be tied in such a manner that the inner surface is exposed or should be placed in

a specifically designed wooden frame so that the strips do not develop cracks when they are dried in the sun for a longer period of time. These strips are then kept in the *Dhuachang* (a shelf above the hearth) for 2-3 months. After this process they are then taken out and rubbed by hand on a board or some other hard substance to facilitate the removal of the outer or scaly portion of the bark. Then the bark is exposed to dew for one night. Next morning the outer layer of the bark (*Nikari*) is carefully removed and the bark is properly cut into pieces of a convenient size of 9 to 27 inches long and 3 to 18 inches broad (Figure 5). The bark is then immersed in cold water for about a day and the alkali is extracted after which the surface is scraped smoothly with a knife. The bark is then dried again in the sun for at least an hour and when perfectly dried it is rubbed with a piece of burnt brick made of sand and potter's clay. A paste prepared from *Matimah* (*Phascolus radiates*) is then applied on the surface. The smooth bark (Figure 6) is then dyed yellow by means of arsenic sulphide (*haitel*) and vermilion (*hengul*) (Figure 7). The dye is not only for colouring but act as natural insecticide and protects it from various insects and microorganisms. The dyed bark is again dried in the sun, further the strips are polished to make it smooth as marble. The process is now complete and the strips are ready for use as a sheet to be written (Gait 1906).



Figure 5: A folio cut in size after drying in the sun

The treatment of the strips with alkaline preparation of *matimah* is known as *jao-diya* and this process is sometimes used on the beams of old-type houses so as to make them smooth and shining. The folios were given numbers and the figures were written on the second page of the folio. Each folio had a perforation on the middle to pass a string to fasten the manuscript. The strips which were thicker were often used as cover for the manuscripts and sometimes wooden pieces too were used as covers. The size of the manuscripts varied to different sizes, some could be the size of a person's

thumb like the pocket edition of the *mantra puthi* sacred to Manasa Devi had 60 folios measuring 1 ½ inches by 3 inches where else some could be 8 feet in length and 6 inches broad like the *Gitar Bakala* (Neog 1998).



Figure 6: Folios of *Sancipat* after smoothing the surface



Figure 7: The folios dyed with yellow arsenic (*haitel*) for preventing from microorganisms

Preparation of the Ink or Mohi

The ink that was used in old Assamese manuscripts was made of very peculiar ingredients, the formula which is known to elderly men. The chief characteristic of Assamese ink is its tenacity to glossy and slippery surfaces. Its durability has been proved by the old manuscripts whose ink has not appreciably faded though the folios have crumbled down through the destructive influence of insects other physical and chemical agents (Goswami 1930).

The basic ingredients of Assamese ink are *kehraj* plant (*Verbesina prostrate*), unripe green *xilikha* (*Terminalia citrine*), urine of cow, piece of rusted iron heated in fire, phosphorous extract from large earthworms (*bundakechu*), dew drops and ash of cooking pot. The *kehraj* plant is taken out from the ground along with its roots, washed properly and its juice is extracted by grinding it manually. The extracted juice is kept in an earthen pot. Green *xilikha* is ground and its extracted juice is mixed with the *kehraj* juice. This attributes a specific colour and permanency. Then urine of cow is mixed with the juices proportionally. This solution is heated in an iron pot and while heating a large amount of froth forms but gradually the froth subsides and the liquid turns thicker or denser. A rusted piece of iron is heated on fire until it becomes red and hot, then it is plunged into the solution which makes it darker in colour. The solution is then filtered with a cotton cloth to remove the unwanted elements. Two or three large earthworms are taken out from the ground and some salt is sprinkled on them. A white bright liquid which is probably phosphorous seeps out of the worm. This phosphorous substance is mixed with the prepared solution which brings a special sheen and permanency to the ink. Sometimes the blood of eel is also added to bring thickness of the ink. At this moment the ink may turn quite dense. It becomes very important to dilute it with addition of dew drops. There was also a specific process to collect dew drops. Dew drops usually form during the months of October to December in Assam. During these months dew is collected from the fields. A large sized, clean and starch free cotton cloth is stretched flat with the help of four wooden or bamboo posts in an open field overnight. A piece of small, clean and round pebble is placed in the middle of the stretched cloth. A clean pot is placed in the ground beneath the pebble. In the morning the pot becomes filled with water of dew which is equivalent of distilled water today. If the ink is found light in colour after dilution, smooth ash of iron cooking pots may be mixed with it. The ink is then filtered again with the help of cotton cloth to remove the unwanted element of the ash. The ink is now ready to use and stored in *Mohichunga* (Sah 2006).

Preparation of Colours

There were various types of indigenous materials used for preparing colours for illustrating the manuscripts. Prior to the application of the colours, different natural glues were applied. Colours may be of two kinds in respect to their sources of origin:

- a. Mineral origin
- b. Plant origin

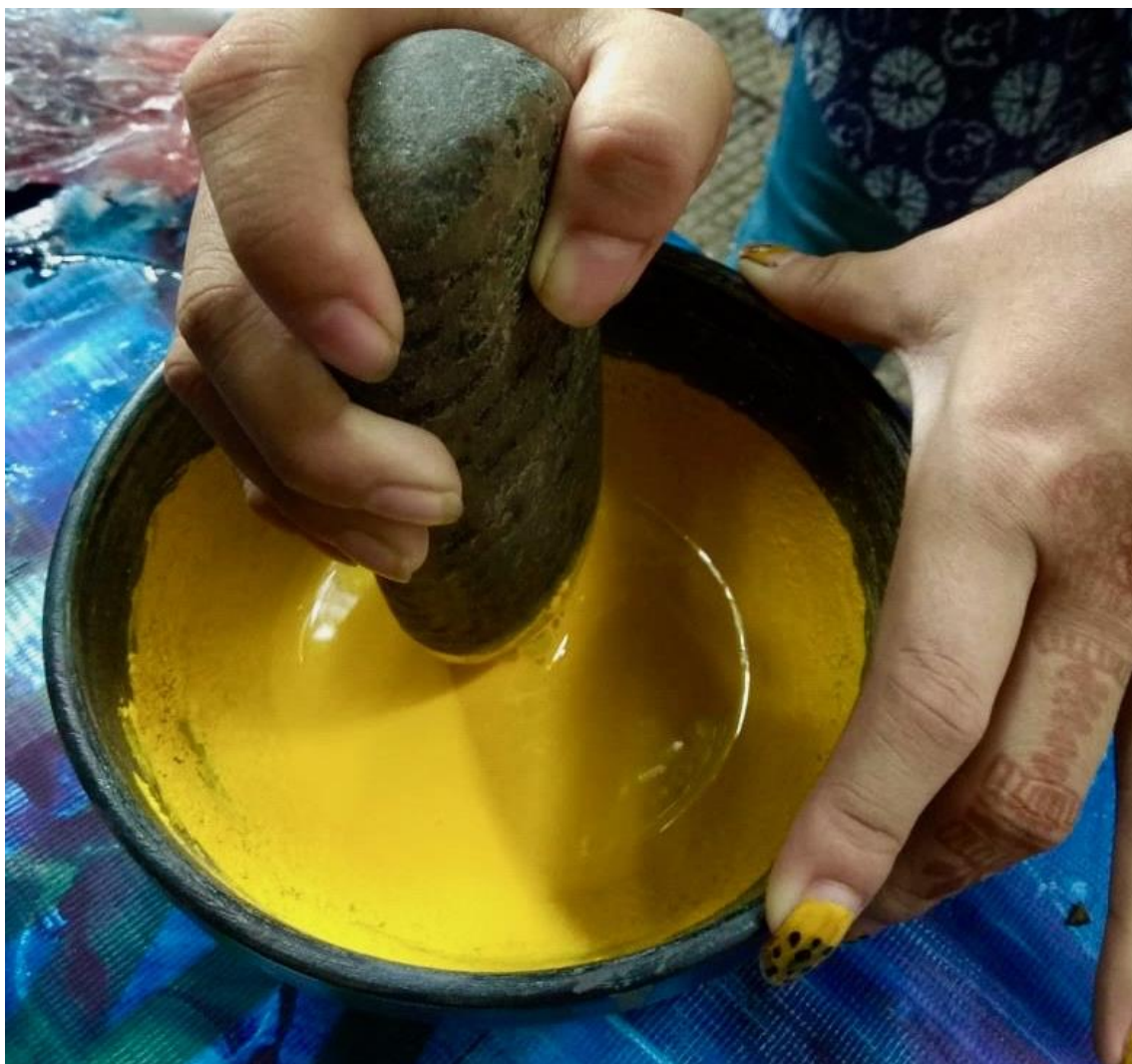


Figure 8: Preparation of *haitel* (yellow arsenic)

The illustrations painted with the colours of mineral origin (Figures 8-9 and 11) are the most valuable and permanent. Mainly there are two kinds of colours extracted from mineral origin, *hengul* and *haitel* (Figure 8). The *hengul* is a red colour substance which is naturally found as Mercuric Sulphide (HgS i.e., a compound of Mercury and Sulphur), commonly known as cinnabar. The method of preparing *hengul* (Figure 9) is taxing. Firstly, it has to be kept under water for some days, replacing with fresh water every day. Then it is grinded in perfectly in a stone mortar called *khol* or *kisti*. In order to acquire various shades of colour the number of days for replacing the water differs. After this the grounded *hengul* is mixed with natural glue before applying. The *haitel* is a yellow coloured substance, naturally found and known as Tri-sulphate Arsenic (chemical formula is As_2S_3), generally known as orpiment. The preparation of *haitel* is similar to the above mentioned process. Both *hengul* and *haitel* are inorganic compounds and are poisonous. Since they are used as dye on the surface of the manuscripts, no microorganism can either grow or penetrate in it. The sunlight also cannot lighten or fade away the colours (Bez 2003).



Figure 9: Preparation of *hengul* (Mercuric Sulphide) requires a lot of time



Figure 10: The *neel* (Indigo) colour being prepared

The colours of the plant origin were widely used in ancient Assam (Figure 10). These colours were obtained from roots, barks, leaves, fruits and flowers of plants. In order to protect the painted materials from insects, the juice of *tutiya* (*Croton tiglium*) was mixed

with these colours of plant origin. The roots of *mahaji* (*Rubia cordifolia*) were used along with some leaves to prepare red colour. The trunk and barks of some plants like *Halodhi* (turmeric), *Ram* (*Strobilanthes flaccidifolius*), and *Aeukath* (*Morinda augustifolia*) were used to prepare colours. The flowers and leaves of *Polakh* (*Butea frondosa*), *Sewali* (*Nectanthes arbour-tristis*), *Jafrang* (*Crocus satives*), *Jetuka* (*Lawsonia inermia*), and *Kehraj* (*Wedelia calendulacea*) were also used to prepare colours of various shades (Sah 2006).



Figure 11: White colour being prepared from *khormati* (chalky soil)

Pen, Pencil and Brush

The pen and pencils used for writing and painting were made from locally available materials. They were usually made from feathers of birds, bamboo, fern, and reeds. The outlines of the figures were drawn with help of lead pencils in the paintings but some artist preferred the use of pencils made of fern. Pens made of goose quill were mostly used. The pens made from bamboo were known as *jeng*. The native Assamese name for a pen, *Kap*, was possibly derived from the fern known as *kap-dhekia* which also served as pen. Pencils were also in use and were made from *Hemasila*, a kind of earth imported from Bhutan. As its name implies it might have had a golden or yellow colour (Gupta 1972).

The brush which was used for applying colours was the *lekhani* and sometimes also called *tulika*. The *tulika* was made from a thin bamboo rod with a copper pin and a small feather attached to it. In earlier days the artists used two types of brushes known as *mihilekhani* and *katlekhani* for painting in the *Bhaona* performance. *Mihilekhani* was made of cats's fur and *katlekhani* was prepared from jute, cotton, hair from horse tail and goat's beard. There was another type of brush known as *dubiralekhani* which was mainly used for painting manuscripts and it was prepared from the fur of cat and goat. The thickness of brushes varied from broad to light strokes (Baishya 2009).

Script

The origin of Assamese script is closely connected with the history of Indian scripts. All the scripts of modern Indian languages have descended from Brahmi. The history of Assamese literature began along with fully developed Assamese script in the 14th century CE (Goswami 1930). The variations and styles of the Assamese script, divides it into three distinct modes namely, *Gadgaya*, *Bamuniya* and *Kaithali* or *Lahkari* as it was known in the Kamrupa district. The *Gadgaya* style is centred on the Ahom capital i.e., Gadgao, and was connected with administration; but it became the most widely used script even in the *Satra* circles. This style was very popular in writing chronicles. The *Bamuniya* was the style of the Sanskrit *pundits* which was used by them in the copying of the Sanskrit lore. The *Kaithali* script probably originated with the *Kaiths* or *Kayasthas*, and was used by them in official documents and books of accounts. This might very well have been the script practiced by Srimanta Sankardeva. The famous metrical work on arithmetic, *Kitabatmanjari*, and Sukumar Barkaith's *Hastividyaarnava* with its calligraphy of a great charm has been found written in this style (Neog 1998).

The Khanikars

In Assam, the popular appellation for an artist was a Khanikar, who was responsible for the various art and crafts that included carpentry, sculptor, paintings, and mask-making and a person whose creative activities were varied and multi-dimensional. The association as an artist with Vaishnavite religious centre called *Satra* brought new bearing to the cultural heritage of Assamese architecture around the construction of *namghar* and also the execution of the sculptures in wood, mask making, and illustrated manuscripts (Tamuly 2013).

The association of painting tradition with Vasihnavite *Satras* of Assam inaugurated by the Khanikars of the *Satras* may be designated as *Sattriya*. They were professional group and never a caste group. The Khanikars of the *Satras* mostly believed it to be sacrilegious to inscribe their names in a literary work written by their gurus, even be it a manuscript prepared long after. It was their unflinching devotion which guided them to render overwhelming number of paintings in a single manuscript. The manuscripts carrying few incomplete paintings by some of the artist indicate that they could not complete it in their life time. It is really astonishing that the rendering of the illustrations in a single manuscript continue for several years together with the consistency of the style and fluency of execution (Kalita 2009).

Analysis of the Illustrated Manuscripts of Auniati Satra

The illustrated manuscripts (Table 1) were prepared with great sincerity in the *Satras* of Assam. These works of art were adorned on the folios of *Sancipat*, along with the religious matters. The paintings were used in order to bring life to the text and also to give a depiction of the scene described in the text. Along with the depiction of the text in the form of paintings, even the border of the folios itself were decorated with flowers and plants. There are many such works in Auniati *Satra*.

Table 1: Name of the Illustrated Manuscripts in Auniati Sastra

Sl. No.	Illustrated Manuscript in Auniati Sastra
1.	<i>Bhagavat Purana Book-X (Adi Dasam)</i>
2.	<i>Ekadasa Skanda Bhagavata</i>
3.	<i>Bhagavata Book XI</i>
4.	<i>Hastividya Yarnava</i>

Bhagavata Purana Book-X (Adi Dasam): The 10th canto of the *Bhagavata Purana* is an illustrated manuscript that describes about the birth of Sri Krishna and mentions the various miracles performed by him. There is an illustration about the previous incarnations of Lord Vishnu. Srimanta Sankardeva is the author of the of the Manuscript. The manuscript is illustrated on *Sancipat* which presently contains 128 folios measuring 58 cm x 21cm (Figure 12). The language used is old Assamese and the script used is Kaitheli. Each page of the folios contains 15 lines of writing. The characters are of the Garhgonya type and the writings are fairly free from orthographical mistakes. The copy was made in 1771 CE.

The whole of the tenth book of Bhagavata was translated into Assamese verse into three parts namely, *Adi Dasam*, *Majh Dasam* and *Sekh Dasam*. The first part *Adi Dasam* was translated by Sankardeva and the second and the third part was translated Ananta Kandali who translated other religious books in Assamese as well. There are some other copies of the manuscript as well but unfortunately those copies could not be traced.

Folio 1 of Bhagavata Purana Book-X



Figure 12: Folio 1 - Bhagavata Purana Book-X (Adi Dasam)

Brajawali: Dhorahudrotare Mantakepailokopora Edimankam Bularamram Hukhetoroniditora
 2492 Luke Hudehmadyaholotohodorlutopubohokollyogurukanudhar/
 Moyonnonkolenonntohoteritoantowabidhnotorehomahonnmoa.....
 etidokhrimakondhupushtokohomapto Saka 1693Mahmasron terikh 20 barorobi Mohajomokori
 Muhonutoguwari Likhilumadolsai Matobratuta Jitungayasoi Khemibeprotojuwai
 TimmohashiyaTanuporajoya Aemasaehakojani Mamimolopjon Shritiru Bitrom
 Atekedukhonamani.....

Translation in English: The scribe urges the readers to leave behind their work and chant the name of God (Lord Rama). The colophon states that this manuscript was prepared on Saka 1693 (1771 CE) on the 20th of the month of *Ashra* (June-July) which was Sunday. The scribe mentions about painting the folio while looking at a *madol* (a folk musical instrument used as a hand drum).

Depiction of the Painting: The incarnations of Lord Vishnu as Matsya, Kurma, Narasimha, Vamana, Parasurama and Harirama have been compressed in decorative frames which look like grand columns of Islamic architecture. Variety is achieved by changing the background colours. Folios are decorated with *merphul* in the margins.

Note: This manuscript was purchased by the erstwhile *Satradikar* in 1850 CE for Rs. 10/- from one Jaynath Das Patowari, an inhabitant of the village Dimaruwa, Majuli.

Ekadasa Skanda Bhagavata: There are two paintings in the cover folios of the manuscript (Figures 13 and 14). One of these depicts a two storied building, evidently a temple of Vishnu as suggested by the two idols of the Lord, decorated with copulas and the two doorways shaded by curvilinear chartist. The structure of the temple presents the impact of Islamic architecture in the arched doors. Architecture with a little difference may be observed in few panels of the *Sankhacuda-vadha-kavya* (1726 CE). The other painting is of perfunctory nature with four human figures and two spray like trees. The distinguishing feature of the manuscript is the *merphul* decorations added to the margins of each folio. The designs are exquisite for being reinforced by depth created colours.

Folio 1 of Ekadasa Skanda Bhagavata



Figure 13: Folio 1 of Ekadasa Skanda Bhagavata

Folio 2 of Ekadasa Skanda Bhagavata



Figure 14: Folio 2 of Ekadasa Skanda Bhagavata

Old Assamese: *Srisriprobhuishwardakhonadakh: Dondohuwatkoriribhumanlukhanikorirni rmito oi.*

Translation in English: An artist is ordered to prepare a manuscript by his master. If he does not prepare it he will be punished.

Bhagavata Book XI: The paintings have got no precise relationship with the text. One of the paintings depicts Lord Vishnu on his mount Garuda. He is flanked by three human figures inside architecture. Another painting recreates a scene of the Vrindavana with Krishna and Balarama standing in front of each other. There are two *gopa-yuvatis* behind Balarama and two cowherd boys and a cow behind Krishna (Figure 15). Clothes worn by Krishna reminds of similar costume encountered in the *Rangali-Kritana*. The mode of wearing of the *riha* and *mekhela* by the womenfolk with broad forehead resembles those encountered in *Bhagavata* paintings, while the cowherd boys present a type of similar costume to the one encountered in the *Banamalidevar-carita*. Most of the folios are decorated with *merphul* designs.

Folio 1 of Bhagavata Book XI



Figure 15: Folio 1 of Bhagavata Book XI

Hastividyarnava Folio 1: The manuscript of *Hastividyarnava* (Figures 16-21), a descriptive account of elephants, their diseases and treatment. The author of the work

is Sukumar Barkaith and painted by two Muslim artists Dilbar and Dosai. The manuscript was written and illustrated by the order of the Ahom King Siva Singha reigned from 1714-1744 CE and the manuscript was prepared in the 20th year of his reign. The *Hastiyadyarnava* in Auniati *Satra* is a copy of the original work prepared in the 2nd half of the 18th century which is probably a collection of the *Satra* or a gift received from one the nobles of the Ahom administration. The name of the owner of the manuscript is inscribed there in Tai-Ahom script to be one Cholahdhara Phukan of the family of Chiring Phukan of the Ahom administration (Nath 2009).

The manuscript is compiled on oblong strips of *Sancipat* of the size 60 cm x 19 cm. The manuscript contains 148 folios containing 288 paintings. The folios are profusely illustrated with illuminated paintings of superior skill and workmanship, representing various types of elephants and scenes from the Ahom royal court. The folios with illustrations contain few lines per folio while the ones without illustrations contain 14 lines per folio. The language of the manuscript is in Assamese prose and the characters are of the ornamental *Kaitheli* type and it is free from orthographical mistakes. One of the deciphered folios is given below (Figure 16).

Folio 1 of Hastividya



Figure 16: Folio 1 of Hastividya

Old Assamese: *Nomugonemayo Nomocaritrihu... Pranomogo bindo podabo bindo trishomonto nathetijona protityo (cari) Bibihastro nipuratronanigajendrachintamonimatnuti Aimahasatrakhonprithibijahanisanchiletahanilikhile bokhomotinankoro Rirokakot.*

Translation in English: Salutation to Lord Ganesha, Salutation to Lord Krishna. Laying prostate at the lotus feet of Govinda, the noted *pandita* Sambhunatha, after consulting the old scriptures, composed *Gajendra Chintamoni*. This treatise, a document of *Vasumati*, was composed at the time of the origin of the world. That princess Vasumati thought of giving one female boar, on hearing which Indra created one male boar. The pair was grazing on the outskirts of the forests, having an elephant creeper (*Argyrea nervosa*), upon eating up all its branches and leaves the female boar became pregnant, when they cohabited. On the expiry of twelve months, a pair of male and female elephants was born and from their progeny a large number of elephants were born in the forest.

Folio 2 of Hastividyarnava



Figure 17: Folio 2 of Hastividyarnava

Old Assamese: *Ekodoibonkounritro habir phulbarile-jautehatikolagopai heihabirphulbarirpora swargodeor habile aatorkoi khedile enerupe phulbariloi tinibar aahile tiniubar swargodeor habiloi khedale etekeritrobule tinibar khedi khedi pothaun Aakoiyeahidekhadiyo Jodi murtaloloi dekhadisa eta honkola hati hoi ahiba.*

Translation in English: One princess of gods met the elephants in a forest garden, drove them away into the forest of Indra. She did drive them thrice into the forests of Indra as they came back thrice to the garden. At this the princess remarked: "Thrice have I driven you, and still you have returned. If you have been so appearing as an auspicious (sign) for me, then come back as a white elephant".

Folio 3 of Hastividyarnava

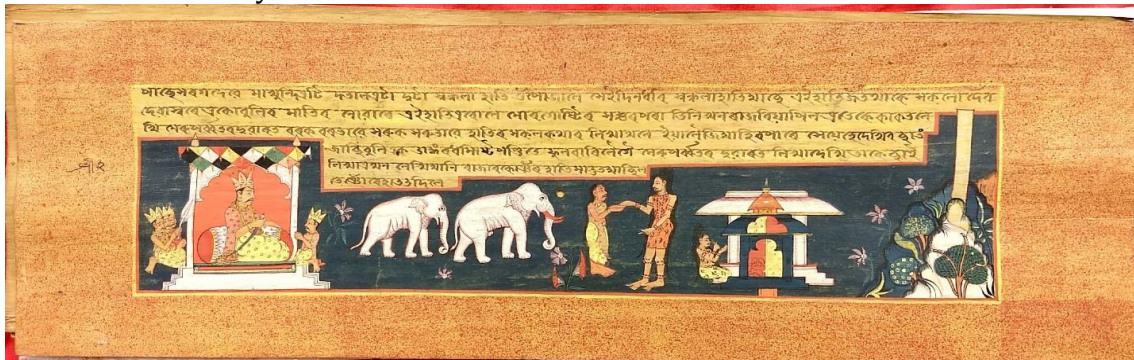


Figure 18: Folio 3 of Hastividyarnava

Old Assamese: *Pase swargodeye makhundieti dotal eta duta hukula Hati upojale heidindhori.....Hatiase aihatijot thakehokolu debdebasoretrokubukibo matibo nuware aihatiebule murogustir sancharpura tinikhonrajbiyapilo eteke katot lekhi meruporbottor duarot borko borbhabe horuk horutawe hatir hokolukothar likha.....le yaloijiahibopare heyehedekhibo satjasi buli eko.....pondite phulbarikoigoi meru porbottor duarot likha dekhi takei sai likha ekhon lekhiani rojarkonwar hatimantotasil teuhehatotdile.*

Translation in English: Thereafter Indra created a pair of white elephants. Since that time white elephants exist. The *devas* and *asuras* cannot raise their voice or do anything wherever this kind of elephants stays. This elephant said thus, as offspring from our

species have spread over the three worlds, so a treatise recording all details on the big and small elephants was hung up at the entrance to Mount *Meru*. One who can come up to this place, he alone can see the treatise. A pious *pundit* named Changjasi went to the forest garden and saw the treatise hung up at the entrance to the Mount *Meru*, copied it and handed it over to the Prince of the elephant rider.

Folio 6 of Hastividyaarnava



Figure 19: Folio 6 of Hastividyaarnava

Old Assamese: *Kherajar kakotkhon mantar rajatra pai hostito tuli manile pase hei kakot khon nesalot hosti hori khal honahoigol honna hoigol.*

Translation in English: The King of Mantara, mounting on the elephant got the (treatise) from the King Khe. As the treatise was not consulted, the elephant stable became empty on the death of the elephants.

Folio 8 of Hastividyaarnava

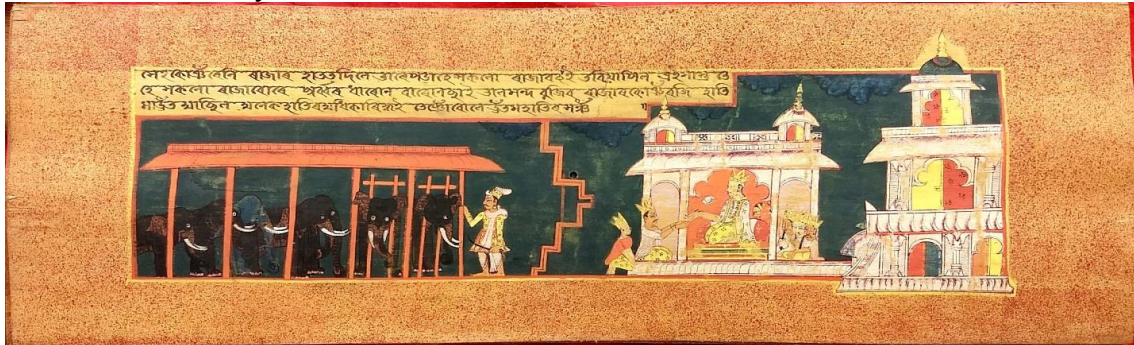


Figure 20: Folio 8 of Hastividyaarnava

Old Assamese: *Heikonwore ni rojar haatot dile tar porahe hokolu rajar thoit biyapil aimontrotehe hokolu raja bure purbor dharun barunsai bhalmondo bujiborajakunwar ji hatit mandot aasil anekhatir adkhikaringoi teu bule uttam hatir moncho...*

Translation in English: The court *pundit* made the King of Mantara have a strange dream to the effect that as his elephants died, he was advised to have the treatise consulted in the morning so as to find out the ways as stated there in. Then the King had the treatise consulted by the *pundit*. On consulting the treatise, the pundit found out that the elephant would not die if offerings be given to all *Devas*.

Folio 9 of Hastivid yarnava



Figure 21: Folio 9 of Hastivid yarnava

Old Assamese: *Porbotorpora ulai ahi hunor khor pokhuwe panir mukhot kotali khalehi heipokhure pora kotudin thaki dotal makhundi duta hati ai habit bon posola khai phure hokon juriye gujori fure tare pora anek lakh bilakh hati hol*

Translation in English: The golden deer came out of the mountain and stayed by the mouth of the stream. After some days, a pair of elephants was born of that deer, and they were eating the forest products and roaming about all the streams. From them sprang up to lakhs of elephants.

The manuscript deals with different types of elephants along with the diseases of the elephants and their treatment. It begins with an account of the origin of the treatise and further goes on to describe the four classes of elephants (1) tuskers, (2) elephants with one tusk (3) elephants without tusk and (4) female elephants with their peculiar traits and characteristics and their good and bad points. It contains elaborate instructions, about how an elephant should be tamed, trained and its vices corrected and also how it can be made to follow its master. There is some other information in the manuscript such as how the Ahom kings employed their elephants during war and how the age of an elephant can be ascertained from its height. The part of the manuscript which deals with the treatment contains several *mantras* in the Ahom language. The manuscript was specially compiled for the ease and benefit of the officer named *Hati Barua*, whose duty was the control and management of the elephants of the kingdom (Choudhury 1976).

The paintings can be attributed to the latter half of the 18th century CE. The pictures of the army personals with flint lock guns may be a clue to help assigning a date. Because the constitution of a standing army with flint-lock guns purchased in Kolkata for the Ahom territory was a development after the withdrawal of Captain Welsh's expedition of Assam to quell the insurgencies of the Maomaria. As a result, exodus of the artists might have taken place in search of alternate settlements in place of the royal court. Few painters might have immigrated to different places and flourished there. The Auniati Satra's manuscript of *Hastivid yarnava*, *Karchong Bhagavata*, *Sesa Kritana* and the *Udyogaparva* of Charigaon, Jorhat are some the examples in this regard (Goswami 1930).

The paintings of the *Hastividya* indicate that the artist had fair acquaintance with the works of his predecessors, Dilbar and Dosai. The landscapes have their parallels in the *Sankhachuda-badha-kavya* and the *Katha Bhagavata* of Barelengi *Satra*. The leaf of the trees looks like heart or fan shaped are mostly ornate. The rock formation is ancient and the winged lion has its source in the *Satra* rather than in the royal insignia of the Ahom kingdom. The architecture presents Rajput-Mughal influence modified by a curvilinear facade developed in Bengal and Assam under the Islamic impact and reinforced by local architecture of the *Dol* and *Namghar*. Bold contours with refinement in shading in the animal bodies' exhibit masterly handling of the brush for rounded more life-like and animated forms. The artist introduces new ones to contribute to exist from the time of the *Sankhachuda-badha-kavya*, the offering of betel-nut by a women in the royal pavilion is a new introduction. Lastly, naturalistic rendering and sophisticated modelling are two noteworthy features of the paintings (Kalita 2009).

Conclusion

The traditional paintings of Assam were mostly in the form of illustrated manuscripts. There are number of Assamese manuscripts, where the paintings reflect the folk tradition and the religious significance to a great extent. The illustrated manuscripts played a significant role in Sankardeva's Vaishnavite culture that began around the 15th century CE. As Vaishnavism flourished, the role of the manuscripts also increased in the religious aspects with the advent of time. The attractive paintings of the illustrated manuscripts have always been successful to appeal the attention of different scholars. Auniati *Satra* has always played a significant role as a socio-religious institution and also treasures a good collection of manuscripts.

Sancipat was the most popular medium used for writing. It was made from the bark of the *Sanci* tree which lasted adequately though it needed experience to prepare folios of *Sancipat* for writing and painting as well. The study describes in details about the methods, techniques and materials required for the preparation of the illustrated manuscripts, preparation of the ink, pen and various colours used. The study analyses nature of the illustrated manuscripts recovered from Auniati *Satra*, Majuli. The deciphering of some of the folios along with the description of the depiction has been carried out for the illustrated manuscripts of *Bhagavat Purana* Book-X (*Adi Dasam*), *Ekadasa Skanda Bhagava*, *Bhagavat* book XI and *Hastividya*. The paintings of the *Bhagavat Purana* Book-X (*Adi Dasam*), *Ekadasa Skanda Bhagava* and *Bhagavat* book XI gives a glimpse of the sequence of the tradition of the various indigenous art forms of Assam.

The art of preparation of illustrated manuscripts on *Sancipat* is a unique tradition that was introduced by this religion which occupied a crucial place as it is worshipped by the devotees. The art of illumination of these manuscripts developed in the *Satras* Majuli that mostly depicts the *Sattriya* School, the theme being the doctrines of Neo-Vaishnavism, a simpler form of Vaishnavism. Thus, the principal aim of the *Sattriya* manuscripts is to depict the narrations of the epics and the *Puranas* which tried to convey the doctrines of the *Bhakti* movement through the illustrated manuscripts.

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