

## **Odia Script in Palm-leaf Manuscripts**

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Orissa is the land where dry leaves speak about every aspect of life, starting from poignant emotion of love to the hard rules of arithmetic, from canons of law to the riddle of Tantra, Mantra and Yantra. It may sound incredible, but it is true in every sense of words that the palm-leaf manuscripts vividly depict the theme of religion, architecture, medicine, astrology, astronomy, grammar, details about war, arms and armoury, geography, trade routes, occult practices, temple rituals, crafts, literature and so on. The illustrated miniature paintings on the palm leaves also provide a living record of the saratorial styles, cosmetics and coiffure, dance forms, myths and legends and above all, our rich heritage of sociocultural traditions. The very thing that Oriya alphabets have no headmarks like that of Bengali or Nagari Script can safely be attributed to the long and continuous practice of writing on palm leaves. The stones of Konark, Muktesvar and Rajarani display the union of couple, the Amaru Sataka, the GitaGovinda palm-leaf manuscripts describe the moments of love. Here passion has been translated both in words and forms. The Orissan artists have shown their excellence in these miniature paintings in the palm-leaves. Unique in their style and forms, they constitute as significant part of the glorious Orissan tradition and are similar to the tradition of dance and sculpture. The features of the human figures as well as the flora and fauna are sharp and wellproportioned and display the same precision and neatness which one can find in the motifs drawn in the textiles in the typical Orissan tie and dye tradition. Women are usually represented with full bosoms and big bottoms and slender waists and are stylistically very close to the finely chiselled sculptures of Konark temple. Epigraphic evidence of the use of palmleaf for writing goes back to the sixth century A.D. The Kurud Charter of Maharaja Narendra issued from his camp of victory at Tilakeswar records the renewal of the grant of village Kesavaka. This village had been formerly granted in a palm-leaf charter to one Bhasrutaswami by the previous Documents PDF Complete Click Here & Upgrade Expanded Features Unlimited Pages 38 Orissa Review \* November - 2005 king, but as the palm-leaf was destroyed in fire, Maharaja Narendra regranted it in a copper plate charter in favour of Sankhaswami, son of Bhasrutaswami. Maharaja Narendra was a Sarabhapuriya king of South Kosala in the 6th century A.D. There are also many sculptural evidences regarding the use of palm-leaf manuscripts. The earliest of these can be found in the Parsuramesvar temple at Bhubaneswar which was built during the rule of Sailodbhava dynasty (7th Century A.D.). Similar representations can be observed in the Muktesvar temple (10th century A.D.) and also the famous Sun temple of Konark (13th century A.D.). Another important sculptural evidence is an image of Buddha found at a temple in Haripur near Khurdha. In this sculpture one finds in the pedestal a scholar studying some holy scriptures in the shape of a stringed palm-leaf manuscript placed on Vyasasana. There is a beautiful presentation of a scribe writing with a stylus on a palm-leaf in a sculpture of Jagannath temple of Dharakot. The entire Buddhist scripture 'Avatamsaka Sutra' was written on palm-leaf manuscript and it was presented to Chinese emperor Te-Song by Subhakara Deva, the Bhaumakara king of Orissa with his own autograph. This was an event of eight century (798 A.D.). The oldest datable palm-leaf manuscript now exant in Orissa State Museum is a copy of the poetic work 'Abhinava Gita Govinda' by Kavi Chandra Ray Divakara Mishra, inscribed by one Sri Sridhara Sharma. The date of the manuscript has been established as 6th April, 1494. The poet has offered the work in the name of Gajapati Purushottama Deva. The concluding portion of the manuscript is called Pushpika or Colophon. It gives the name of the scribe and the date of copying just as we have today the name of the author and the publisher and the date of the publication of a printed book on its title page. In recording the date in the colophon, the scribe followed the anka or the regnal year of the Raja of Puri. The colophon sometimes mention the Oriya Sala or Sana year of an era which started on the twelfth day of bright fortnight of the Bhadra month of 593 A.D. During the reign of Akbar, Hijra or Amali Era was introduced in the manuscripts. In a few latter manuscripts, the Christian era called Samvatsara and the Christian month are given in colophon. The Saka Era (Starting in 78 A.D.) has also been used. Sometimes the year has been given in a

riddle or chronogram. In case of illustrated palm-leaf manuscripts, the introduction was always made with the picture of Ganesha, the god of learning and well being with the words Shri Ganeshaya Namah (Salutation to Ganesha) and Shri Shubham astu (let it be auspicious). Some Chitrapothis also had the picture of Sarasvati, the goddess of learning on the front page. If the manuscript contained erotic text, (Rati-bandha) - it invariably had a picture of Kandarpa, the God of love. In many of Upendra Bhanja's Kavyas, the poet is shown paying his obeisance to Rama, Vishnu and other Gods. Palm-leaves and stylus were adopted as the sole writing material for writing the charyaSongs which are believed to be the oldest Oriya literary works. These were composed in a period between 9th to 12th century A.D. Between the Charya Songs and Sarala Das's Mahabharata, no Oriya literary works have come to notice except some prose writing and a poem called 'Kalasa Chautisa'. During this period, however, Orissa produced an enormous amount of Sanskrit literature, which includes books on astronomy, astrology, medicines, grammar, religion and law. Documents PDF Complete Click Here & Upgrade Expanded Features Unlimited Pages 39 Orissa Review \* November - 2005 Several commentaries were written on wellknown Sanskrit works. There were also an outpouring of literary works, the best known of which are Anargha Raghava of Murari Mishra, Gita Govinda of Sri Jayadev and Sahitya Darpana of Viswanath Kaviraj. By the fifteenth century the art of palmleaf writing had attained great excellence. The innumerable copies of Sarala Mahabharata were written on palm-leaf manuscripts and spread throughout Orissa. By the way, the great poet and the great monarch, Gajapati Kapilendra Dev of Suryavamsi dynasty, who ruled Orissa at that time became indelible in history. The manuscripts of Bhagabata of the poet Jagannath Das, had still far greater influence over the common people of Orissa. Balaram Das's Jagamohan Ramayana was also accepted with much reverence for its lucid style. Practically speaking, these three were the most widely read books in Orissa by that time. With the advent of Shri Chaitanya to Orissa in 1510 A.D. and the spread of Vaishnavism, the Oriya Bhagabata achieved unprecedented popularity. Community houses called Bhagabata Gharas or Bhagabata Tungi sprang up in the villages of Orissa where copies of Bhagabat were kept and recited daily. The reading of the chapters of the holy scriptures became a daily ritual in the homes of Oriya people. Thus, the Bhagabata Pothi brought profound vibration in the entire social life of Orissa. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries a large number of Kavyas or long episodic poems were written in Oriya, all based on Krishna theme. The most outstanding of these Kavyas are Bhakta Charan Das's Mathura Mangala, Rupa Goswami's 'Bidagdha Madhava' and Dina Krushna Das's Rasa Kallola. Several other translations of Ramayana also appeared, the more popular ones being the versions of Adhyatma Ramayana by Gopala Telenga and Haladhara Das and Vichitra Ramayana by Viswanath Khuntia. Another popular manuscript of this period was Sishu Shankar Das's Ushabhilasha, based on a story of Sarala Mahabharata. New poetic forms also emerged during this period viz, Janana (song of prayer), Chautisa (songs which followed the thirty-four consonants of Oriya alphabets) and Poi (referring to the number of verses in the poems), i.e. Dasa Poi - meaning a ten-verse poem. Orissa lost her independence in 1568 A.D. and was successively overrun by Afghans, Mughals and Marathas. Till the British conquest in 1803, Orissa was a veritable cockpit of rival warlords. There was no peace and security. In the absence of a stable central power, Orissa broke up into a number of semi-independent principalities under local Rajas. The feudal chiefs patronized art, music and literature as pastimes. The brilliant literary figures of this period was Upendra Bhanja, who was a prince himself. A prolific poet, he created volumes of literary works. He was the master of ornate poetry and each of his work is an example of his mastery over some particular versifying skill or other. Through clever manipulation of words and with a liberal use of puns, alliterations, assonances and figures of speech, he built up a body of poetry which was gaudy and grandeloquent and at the same time pedantic and unintelligible. He composed songs, Kavyas, epics, fictional poems, rhetorical compositions. Chitra-kavya (picturepoem) and even a dictionary of verse for the use of poets. 'Vaidehisha Vilas', 'Koti Brahmanda Sundari', 'Prema Sudhanidhi', 'Lavanyabati' are some of his memorable works. The style of Bhanja prevailed till the second half of the 19th century. All the poets who emerged after Upendra Bhanja followed his style. Documents PDF Complete Click Here & Upgrade Expanded Features Unlimited Pages 40 Orissa Review \* November - 2005 The name of Brajanath Badajena, an eminent poet of post-Bhanja era can be cited as an example. During this said period, thousands of palm-leaf manuscripts were copied for large scale circulation. Numerous Chitra-pothis were also prepared during this period, though many of the extant chitra-pothis seem to have been done towards the later part of the 19th century A.D. Though paper was in use during this time, poets did their writing on palm-leaf as this was considered sacred. The Oriya script used in Pothis did not undergo much of a change from its fifteenth century form. Oriya printing was introduced by Christian missionaries after the British conquest of 1803. An Oriya type-face was devised in 1804. Today, the use of palm-leaf and stylus has been diminished a lot. Now at the outset of twenty-first century, when the world has become technocratic, the use of fragile palm-leaves has become irrelevant. But the age-old practice of writing on palm-leaf has not been extinguished from our cultural heritage. Writing on palm-leaf has many ritual uses in Orissa. On Raksha Panchami day (fifth day of the dark of fortnight of Bhadra month), painting of Batuka Bhairava (an aspect of Siva) is done on doors with an invocation to Siva written on it. In the Jagannath temple of Puri, a letter is written on palm-leaf on behalf of Rukmini to be delivered to Jagannath on the eleventh day of

bright fortnight of Jyestha month (also known as Rukmini Harana Ekadasi). In Orissa, horoscopes of new born babies are also written on palmleaves. Similarly, the invitation sent to the deities, known as  $\mu$ Diyan Nimantrana' as well as the ceremonial invitation to the bride-groom from the bride's family is generally written on palm-leaf in Orissa. Thus, the tradition of palm-leaf writing is still alive. In the past, the palm-leaf manuscripts were the medium of learning, while in the changing scenario of present, it has become the object of analysis and retrospection. References : 1. Chitra Pothi - Dr. J.P. Das, New Delhi, 1985. 2. Illustrated Palm-Leaf Manuscripts of Orissa (A selection from Orissa State Museum), Bhubaneswar, 1984.

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## **II. ANCIENT LITERATURE ON PALM-LEAF- WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ODIA LITERATURE**

In ancient India, various materials like stone and copper plates, wooden plates, palm leaves, birch-bark, ivory plates and animal skins were used for writing. The most rare and valuable works on literature, art, science and technology were written on these materials. Official documents, archaeological designs and diagrams and such other types of work were also written on the materials mentioned above. So, a large number of collections of manuscripts on birch-bark especially on palm leaves, are found everywhere in India.

But palm leaves, plentifully available in the coastal regions, were used for purposes of writing. In case of Odisha palm leaves are for used as writing surfaces even today. Palm leaves are now used for engraving and painting by artists, preparing horoscopes of newborn babies and writing invitation on social and religious functions in Odisha. Odisha is exceedingly rich, since ancient times, in exquisite and excellent palm leaf manuscripts. Even now hundreds of thousands palm leaf manuscripts are in the private possession of brahmins, zamindars, eminent persons living in rural area.

The palm-leaf manuscripts, now found in the collections of museums, private institutions and individuals, amply testify to the exuberance and efflorescence of this great tradition from about 10th century A.D., as is evident from the epigraphic reference to Odia language and Kutila script found in an inscribed sculpture of the Jaina monk Kumarasena, discovered from Gandi-bedha in Balasore (now Bhadrak) district. They form a treasure house of wisdom and knowledge on different aspects of Odishan history, culture and its rich artistic and architectural legacy. During the 19th century A.D., European scholars studied Odia palm-leaf manuscript collections with great interest. Rev J. Long published the first research article in the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal and subsequently, scholars like Col. Makenji, Sir John Beames, the then Collector of Balasore, R. L. Mitra, M. M. Chakravarti, H. P. Shastri and Prof. Macdonnel and many others contributed significantly to the study of and research on the palm leaf manuscript tradition of Odisha. In the area of Indian philosophy, Odia palm-leaf writers have carved a permanent niche for themselves. Since the advent of Buddhism, philosophers like Dharmakirti, Indrabhuti, Laxmikara, Kavi Dindima, Jivadevacharya, Acharya Narsimha Vajpeyi, Gaudiya philosopher Baldeva Vidyabhusan etc. have contributed immensely to this field of study. Odia dictionaries that were compiled in Odisha, such as Trikanda Sesha and Haravali of Purusottama Dev and Medini Kosha of Medini Kara, received wide recognition in

India since the early medieval times. Pre-puranic palm-leaf manuscripts are found in plenty in almost every Odia house. Some manuscripts of the Yajurveda and the Atharvaveda have been brought from Midnapur, which was then a part of Odisha. The script of these manuscripts is Odia written by Odia pundits. Pandit D. N. Bhattacharya, an erudite scholar of Bengal, discovered a complete set of manuscripts of the Atharva Veda of the Pippa\_lâda Sâkhâ from Jagannathpur in the district of Puri, which was not available in any other part of India. Only few kandas of this unique Vedic work have been published so far. There are a number of these manuscripts in Odisha containing different archas (chapters).

There are three manuscripts containing Sayana's bhasya on the Kanvasamhitâ. Odisha was a popular centre of Tantric cults from the 6th century A.D. Baladeva Rath and Gaurahari Parichha, etc. contributed enormously to the Odia literary culture of this epoch. Their activities inspired a number of followers to compose creative works in the field of art and literature. Besides Odia epics and kavyas, a few poetic compositions having historical value like Jagannath Charitamruta and Bhaktamala, copies of The Vedas, texts on tantra, dharmashastra, jyotisha, vyakarana, 59 prosody and alankara etc. have enriched the manuscript legacy of Odisha. They have been written in Sanskrit in Odia scripts. Charles Fabri remarks that those who carved the masterpieces of sculpture in the 9th, 10th and 11th century A.D. must have also been able to carve lovely pictures on their palm leaf manuscripts. However, we find lively specimens from 15th century A.D. onwards, as reported by Prof. Ganguly. Thus, the history of the incised drawings on palm-leaf manuscripts goes back to a definite datum line.

### III. ODISIA SCRIPT IN PALM-LEAF MANUSCRIPTS

Orissa is the land where dry leaves speak about every aspect of life, starting from poignant emotion of love to the hard rules of arithmetic, from canons of law to the riddle of Tantra, Mantra and Yantra. It may sound incredible, but it is true in every sense of words that the palm-leaf manuscripts vividly depict the theme of religion, architecture, medicine, astrology, astronomy, grammar, details about war, arms and armoury, geography, trade routes, occult practices, temple rituals, crafts, literature and so on. The illustrated miniature paintings on the palm leaves also provide a living record of the saratorial styles, cosmetics and coiffure, dance forms, myths and legends and above all, our rich heritage of sociocultural traditions. The very thing that Oriya alphabets have no headmarks like that of Bengali or Nagari Script can safely be attributed to the long and continuous practice of writing on palm leaves. The stones of Konark, Muktesvar and Rajarani display the union of couple, the Amaru Sataka, the GitaGovinda palm-leaf manuscripts describe the moments of love. Here passion has been translated both in words and forms. The Orissan artists have shown their excellence in these miniature paintings in the palm-leaves. Unique in their style and forms, they constitute as significant part of the glorious Orissan tradition and are similar to the tradition of dance and sculpture. T

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Differences between stylus-incised line -drawings and coloured paintings are enormous. They seem to belong to two worlds, even if one recognizes the elements of hieratic drawings, the ready-made formula for eyes, hands, lips etc. of the line drawings being re-employed as a basis for paintings. The Odia poets have experimented with the use of music in traditional Odia lyrics. This indicates that music was prevalent in the country prior to Jayadeva. From the style of collection of this text, it is believed that Southern Odisha and Puri

were the main centres of this musical culture, where regular musical performances along with textual discussions were being held. From the days of Bharatmuni, Odisha had a special style of music. The Natya Shastra of Bharat has given special importance to the Udra style of music. It is pity that old Sanskrit texts dealing with music are not available in Odisha. Such texts generally belong to late medieval times. They include Samgita Kaumudi (15th C A.D), Gitaprakash(1565), Sangeeta Muktabali (1590), Sangeeta Kalpalata(1635) Sangeetarnaba Chandrika(1689), Natyamanorama(1697), Abhinaya Chandrika(17th C A.D.) and Sangeeta Narayana(1718) etc. Odisha, the land of temples and shrines, has also a rich tradition of palm-leaf manuscript art. However, only a few texts are now available, among which Bhuvana-pradipa occupies a conspicuous place. N. K. Bose refers to some of the palm leaf manuscripts and says that they are written with an iron stylus.

Thus, according to this view, we need not be surprised that no early specimens of Indian writing have survived and their absence does not prove that they never existed” (Salomon 1998:14-15). The magnitude of this medium is such that its composition and method of writing has remained unchanged right from its known existence. People still prepare and use palm leaf manuscripts the way our ancestors used centuries ago. Types of palm leaves There are many varieties of palm-trees. However, the leaves of only a few have been used for writing.

There are several ways of processing palm leaves, these methods differ from region to region. In South India, different method is adopted whereas in Orissa and other Southeast Asian countries different technique is adopted. The basic method of palm leaf preparation for writing is as follows: Palm leaves are first cut from the trees before they could dry up and become brittle. Only a half opened young shoot of palm leaves are suitable for making manuscripts. These are cut into required sizes and then boiled in water to the required temperature in order to render them soft. The softened leaves are then dried in the shade or mild sunshine. The unwanted middle ridge is removed from the main leaf. The desired portion is pressed, polished and trimmed to size. Then holes are made on either side of the leaves with a red hot wire. A cord is passed through the holes to hold the leaves together. Two wooden planks of leaf dimension are then placed above and below the manuscript as covers to protect the leaves and stored in dry place. After sometime the leaves are taken out which by now would have become flat and smooth for writing. The total number of leaves in a manuscript depends on its content. To the above descriptions Agrawal further adds on its binding system, “Palm leaves could not be bound like a book. Therefore, they were stored between two wooden panels that were slightly larger in size than the leaves. These wooden boards were sometimes painted or decorated with ivory and mother of pearl inlay work. To keep the leaves together, holes were punched in the leaves: in the centre, if the leaf was small; otherwise at either end of it. A cord was passed through the holes and bound around the manuscripts to keep the leaves in position. The wooden holders were polished with insecticide oils prepared from lacquer and minerals. Illustrations are also seen on the cover boards, the drawings were based on the contents of the book. Finally, the bundle is wrapped in cloth to keep it free from dust”.

Wooden planks slightly bigger than the leaves dimension are placed above and below the manuscripts as a protective cover. A cord is passed through the holes made to binds the leaves. Preservation Palm leaf manuscripts are organic in nature and are susceptible to different types of deterioration. If not preserved properly they are subject to physical damage and decay. Some of the most common deteriorating agents are climatic factors (e.g. variations in relative humidity and temperature), light, insects, constant handling and adverse storage. To prevent from such defects, palm leaves are treated with special preservatives. T. Ganesan states , “At present, to preserve palm leaves lemon grass oil is applied to each leaf, then dried and kept under air condition at low temperature. Each state and region has its own indigenous method of preparing, writing and preserving the palm leaves.” Few methods to conserve manuscripts are: 1. The use of natural herbs like sweet flag (ghorabach) or margosa leaves with the manuscripts to keep insects away. Palm leaf manuscripts

Application of citronella oil, camphor oil, or lemon grass oil on the surface of the leaves to keep it flexible. This prevents physical damage due to brittleness. 3. Fumigation with thymol vapors helps to prevent fungus 4. Fading of ink is restored by applying carbon black mixed with oil to the leaf. Writing system Traditionally, palm leaf writing has been passed on from generations to generations through scholars and scribes. It was a customary practice that whenever a palm leaf decays, its contents are transferred on to fresh new leaves. And that was how our written ancient literature was passed on to the newer society. John Samuel says, “Lifespan of a palm leaf manuscript is about 300-350 years. The present manuscripts are mere copies of the earlier manuscripts which are also replications. Manuscripts have been copied from generations to generations by a set of people. Each time a manuscript gets old or decays it is transferred on to a new leaves, these new ones are then preserved. The old manuscript is either burnt in ghee or thrown into the river”. Writing on palm leaf is a skilled activity which requires patience, practice and training.

A common man cannot easily take to writing on palm leaves. In olden days, writing on palm leaf manuscripts was practiced as a profession by some, they were called lipikaras – copyist. There are even references of families who belong to the generation of palm leaf manuscript writing. T. Ganesan refers , “In olden days only a section of people specialized in writing on palm leaves. Knowledge in written form was

passed on by copying the text from old manuscripts to new manuscripts. At present, very few people know the technique of writing on palm leaves; the tradition has come to an end. The practice doesn't exist as people no more understand what's written on the palm leaves. Some even throw the manuscripts in the river without making a copy of it. Thus some of the most valuable resources and knowledge are lost forever".

In general, there are two main techniques of writing on palm leaf manuscripts. They are: 1. Writing with a pen or brush as done on paper, normally seen in North India. 2. Writing by incision with a pointed metal stylus. This method is predominant in South India. Tamil palm leaf manuscripts are normally written using this method. The current research is based on this type of Tamil manuscripts.: Illuminated palm leaf manuscript of 18th century from Eastern India. The text is written using brush and ink: Tamil palm leaf manuscript written using incision with pointed metal stylus. On the right is a cross section of the written palm leaf showing incision and deposition of black powder. Palm leaf manuscripts Design Thoughts ... July 2009 5 In the method of writing with ink, a brush or a reed pen was used. The writing was done in the usual manner as with pen on paper. Since palm leaf is less absorbent than paper, the ink remains on the surface. This method was mostly prevalent in North India. In south India, incision with metal stylus was the most common method of writing. Even within the incision method there are two ways of scribing. a. In one method, the stylus is held in the right hand, at a fixed place on the leaf. The leaf is held in the left hand and is moved backwards and forward to make the incision. In this method, both hands are actively involved in the writing process and their coordination is important to scribe letters. In right hand, the stylus is held upright between the ring finger and last finger.

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