

“Materials Used For Writing In Epigraphs Of Ancient Assam And In The Manuscripts Of Mediavel Period”

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Assam, the “Queen of Nature” is one of the greatest routes of migration of mankind. In ancient time, Assam was known as Prâgijyotisa, or Kâmarûpa. Assam, the name has been prevalent since thirteen century A. D. The natural sight of Assam is extremely beautiful. The name Assam is derived from the word a-sama. In Sanskrit, the word a-sam means none the second. According to Dr. Banikanta Kakati the word Assam means unconquered and none the second.

Like any other ancient Indian history it is a difficult task to know about the reconstruction of early Assam history i.e. Prâgijyotisa or Kâmarûpa. It is held mainly because of the deficiency in authentic historical materials. For the pre-historic period, we are to depend only on the Stone Age or neoliths. Even for the historical period, we have only a few inscriptions scattered in different places which are preserved by various persons and scholars. The existing manuscripts are represented as a source of information of the medieval period.

The existing inscriptions and manuscripts of our period may give us some idea of the writing materials used. The inscriptions were consisted of stone, metal, clay etc. For instances Nagâjarî- Khanikargâon Fragmentary Stone Inscription, Umâcal Rock Inscription, Bargangâ Rock Inscription of the time of Bhutivarman, Tezpur Rock Inscription of Harjjaravarman, Stone Inscription of Samudrapâla found at Âmbarî, Gâchtal Pillar Incription, Kânâibaraû Rock Inscription, Inscribe Stone Pieces, Copper Plate Inscriptions of some kings such as king Bhâskaravarman, Harjjaravarman, Vanamâladeva, Balavarman- III, Ratnapâla, Dharmapâla, Gopâla, Indrapâla etc., prescribed images on Hari- Har, Sun Images, Copper Bell Inscription of Úrî Kumâra, some seals attached with the copper plate inscriptions of the kings etc. were

the existing writing materials of ancient Assam where the records were engraved. They cannot be tempered; crash and they are not easily perishable with or without detection. Consequently, we can be sure while using the material from the epigraphs that they contain what were originally written. While in the case of books, there is the possibility of epigraphs by known to unknown authors, i.e. not the case with the epigraphs. The inscriptions also give us a correct idea of the method of writing followed at a time when they were actually inscribed. The character of their script also enables us to fix their approximate age.

The engravers of these epigraphs were known as lipikâras and the writers were known as Kâyasthas, Karanas or Karanikas sekyakâras, úúúayitâs, taksakaras, Lekhakas etc. The duties of the engravers are to engrave or transliterate the documents. Engraving the documents is an artistic skill. The Nidhânpur Copper Plates Grant mentions Kâliâ1 as a sekyakâra or transliterates who engraved the inscription. The Puspabhadra Copper Plates Grant refers to taksakâra (engraver) Úrî Vinîta2. On the other hand, the Kamauli Copper Plates Grant of Vaidyadeva provides Karnabhadra3 as a highly intelligent engraving artist. It is presumed that the engravers were non- BrâhmaGa profession who were specially engaged in the profession of engraving on copper, on rock or on other metals, etc.

Engraving on the stone inscriptions the scribes used big stones of various shapes, special types of chisel and hammers, iron, copper etc. The copper inscriptions were inscribed by copper metals which were prepared as like pen. The people of ancient Assam also possessed knowledge on bronze work. Discovery of a number of bronze icons, some bearing inscriptions proves the work on bronze in ancient Assam. Minting of bronze coin in ancient Assam is indicated by the metallic composition of the Nakuchi Bargâon coins. One of the Nakuchi Bargaon coins bearing the letter ta was noticed to be shinning like silver and very different from the copper coins of the Tulip hoard. The Tulip hoard coins were made of 99. 9 % copper while in the Nakuchi Bargaon copper coins present only 62 29 % copper and 28. 23 % are tin4. It appears that at a certain stage the Mleccha kings changed from a copper to a bronze alloy for their coins. Bronze was not found as a natural alloy, so the tin and the copper must have been mixed intentionally. The clay seals were made of by special kinds of burnt earth and chalks.

The manuscripts were consisted of inner bark of the Bhûrjapatra, aloe wood and sañcipât (aquilaria agallocha), tulâpât (leaves made by pressing cotton) or cotton cloth, wooden – board, palm leaves, animal substances, etc. The Yoginî Tantra makes an important reference to writing and engraving on materials like clay, bark- leaves, gold, copper and silver.⁵ The use of aloe bark is evidenced by Bâna, who states that among the presents from Bhaskara to Harsa contained “volumes of fine writing with leaves from aloe bark and of the hue of the ripe pink cucumber.”⁶ This testifies the high antiquity of the method of using sañcipât as a writing material. Tulâpât was also most common writing material at that time. These manuscripts were inscribed by pen or pencils. A scientific method was adopted in the preparation of the sañci bark to make it fit for writing, and it was really an arduous task. During the Âhom period, the art of preparation of sañcipât was well-known.⁷ Most of the Sanskrit and Assamese manuscripts, so far discovered, have been found written on this material, and some of them are in their original condition with fast coloured ink.

Pen and pencils were made of bamboo, wood, reed, animal horns, chalk, etc. and were commonly known as lekhanî or varnaka. The ingredient of the use of pen is ink. In Assam, ink was usually prepared from ûilikhâ (terminalia cibrina) fruit and bull’s urine. The use of the sap of earthworms for invisible writing is also found⁸. As the existing manuscripts show ink prepared in Assam, is marked by its lasting and glossy character. The Yoginî – tantra⁹ refers to the holders and pens of bamboo, reed, copper, bell metal, iron and even of gold. In Assamese the pen is known as kalama and the ink is famous as mahi or ciyâhî.

The existence of the script is the prerequisite requirement of imparting formal education. The art of writing was introduced during the early Vedic period. Teaching was orally transmitted. The Brahmî script is regarded as the grandmother and first Indian script of all regional scripts. According to the scholars in Assam this script was introduced with the Umâcal Rock Inscription round about the sixth century about. In the Kânâi- Baraûi Rock Inscription discovered at North Guwahati recorded in the first decade of the thirteenth century we notice almost all the alphabets or the letters used by the writers of the late medieval period. Though we have not found about the preservation of these writing documents, yet, references to writers and other officers,

particularly during the Âhom period, who may have been associated both with their composition and preservation. The keeper of grants was commonly known as Aksapatalika. The epigraphs scattered here and there are also discovered by various persons at the time of digging the land or in the pond etc. Though these epigraphs were under ground for natural calamity or war or for other various reasons, yet, they are in good position. The scribe inscribes in the inner side of the first plate, both sides of the second plate and in the obverse side of the last plate. These plates were attached with a seal and bounded by a ring which contains an elephant emblem the head of which is facing front which contains about the success and welfare of the patronage king. Some of these epigraphs were also discovered in some boxes. From these it can be proved that though at that time preservation system was not available as like modern library, yet, the court poet and the scribe inscribed these epigraphs carefully and with scientific method for preserving them. It gives a vivid picture of the past and forgotten people of the land that we have been able to draw here. No doubt it gives an impression of the remarkable achievement of the artists in the scheme of cultural evolution, which has become our own, vitalizing and enriching Assamese life and conditions, and weaving a new pattern in the cob-web of the variegated cultural life of India.

1. Nidhanpur Copper Plates Grant, line 35
2. Puspabhadra Copper Plates Grant, line 45
3. Kamauli Copper Plates Grant, v. 35
4. Rhodes, N. G. & Bose, Coinage of Assam (Pre- Âhom Period), vol. I, 2003, pp. 34 -35
5. II/ VII, 14-16.
6. Harsacarita, edited by E. B. Cowell, P. 214
7. Sir Edward Gait, History of Assam, p. 375
8. Des, Catalogue of Assamese Manuscripts, Introduction, pp. XV-XVI
9. Yoginî – tantra, II/VII, V/IX

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