



Preserving a dying craft - sâncî paat' and development of a herbal ink

SPECIAL HONOUR FOR REVIVING TRADITIONAL TECHNOLOGY

Bishnuram Handique (75) lives in Tekalagaon village, about 40 kilometers away from the main town, in Jorhat district of Assam. He studied up to the eighth standard and is a farmer by profession. He lives with his wife and two sons. His sons are unemployed and have not been able to complete their education due to adverse economic conditions that continue to be the plight of the family. Though primarily a farmer, Bishnuram was a very popular hunter in the past and is reputed to have caught six tigers. He still keeps the cage in which he used to capture tigers, in itself an antique piece.

Though age is catching up with him, Bishnuram doggedly continues working in the field of preservation and maintenance of antique pieces. His contribution to conserving our ancient culture and rich traditions, in spite of adversity, remains an example to all.

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Sâncî Paat and its journey through time

Perhaps the strangest of all of man's writing materials is the Sâncî Paat, made from the bark of "Sâncî gosh". In the Assam valley of the Brahmaputra, the inner bark of the agar or aloe tree (*Aquilaria agallocha* [= *A. sinensis*]) locally known as the sâncî was used as writing material. Sâncî Paat is inextricably linked to Assam's rich cultural heritage. In ancient times, Assam's monarchs employed the use of the bark of the Sâncî gosh to chronicle their royal circulars and diktats. Sheets of Agar were also used by the revered Vaishnava saint-reformer and literary giant Srimanta Sankardeva and Vaisnavite saint Shri Shri Madhab Dev for giving written expression to their sermons and sacred scriptures. Sankardeva is also believed to have said that agar and chandana are the two divine trees capable of fulfilling human desires. Religious puthis

and history were also written and copied on specially treated bark of agar trees, known since time immemorial as Sâncî Paat and puthis. Numerous puthis, some dating to as far back as 500 years, are still preserved in quintessential Assamese sacred repositories such as Than, Satras and Namgarh.

Although no extant manuscript appears to be earlier than the 15th century, one of the first historical biographies in Sanskrit, the Harsha Charita written by Bana in 652 AD, chronicles the fact that King Bhâskaravarman of Assam sent 'volumes of fine writing with leaves made from aloe bark, and of the hue of the ripe pink cucumber' as gifts to the great King Harsha of Kanauj among many other gifts.

Genesis Twenty five years ago, a person named Bapuram Saikia gave some manuscripts to Bishnuram. Bishnuram did not know what these manuscripts



contained, until one day, out of curiosity, he sat down to read the material, which was in an ancient traditional language (Brajaboli). These manuscripts explained the way in which paper could be made by hand. His interest aroused, Bishnuram started experimenting with the technique. Despite initial setbacks, he eventually succeeded in gaining mastery over this dying craft. He is the only person now maintaining and preserving Sâncî Paat, otherwise perhaps an almost extinct art. He has also developed a herbal ink for writing on the Sâncî Paat. Bishnuram has also got a collection of the ancient manuscripts of the Ahom reign.

The Innovation

Process of making and preserving Sâncî Paat

For the preparation of the paper, the bark of a local tree called Sâncî gosh is used. After the bark is removed, it is dipped overnight in water and taken out the next day to dry. Wetting and drying are done at night because it is believed that if it is dried during the day it gets crumpled and the texture of the end product will not be smooth. After drying for one night, the bark pieces are kept horizontally and screwed in tightly under a paper press, which is a device of just two slabs of wood with a gap in between. The bark pieces remain like this for two to three days. After that, the pieces are dipped in water for about seven days. These are then dried again. The surface of the bark is then painted with the help of an organic dye locally called “hengool”. These papers are not used for another 15 days. The edges of the paper pieces are painted with another organic dye known as “haital”. The pieces of bark are kept like this for two to three days. In the process, the material turns grey or pale yellow and becomes resistant to insects. These sheets of bark after being suitably prepared are cut to a uniform size. The writing on these strips is done with a sharp pointed implement. Pigment is then rubbed into the finely incised lines to make them visible.

The “barks” are drilled with holes and bound on cords in the centre of the leaf, traditionally often ornamented and threaded with a string or nâdî. The Sâncî Paat leaves have a tendency to split at the edges, but are otherwise tough and durable. These barks are usually kept in piles. The upper and lower covers are usually thick leaves of the same bark, with the outer layer still on, around which are wound the ends of the string.

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Preparation of the herbal ink

For preparation of the Herbal ink, the fruit of Hilikha (*Terminalia chebula*) (100g), Bark of Jamun Tree(100g), Kehraj grass (*Eclipta alba*)(100g) and Manimuni leaves (*Hydrocotyle rotundifolia*)(50g) are ground together and mixed with pieces of rusted iron (5g). The mixture is then placed in an earthen pot to which water is added and this preparation is kept untouched for a period of ten to twelve days. When the mixture starts emitting a foul odour, cow urine is added to this mixture and it is then kept in a cool place. Earthworms are now added to impart a shining colour to the ink. The earthen pot is then kept closed. The earthen pot becomes hot due to the cow urine and the ink drops start dripping from the earthen pot. The ink is now ready for use.