
BUDDHIST MANUSCRIPTS OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH AND MANUSCRIPTS OF MANIPUR: PROBLEMATICS OF RESTORATION AND DIGITIZATION

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Abstract

The present paper is a joint venture of two authors who worked differently on manuscripts of Manipur and rare Buddhist manuscripts of Arunachal Pradesh, and the problematic of restoration and digitization in modern context. The major objective of the proposed study would be to delineate the modus operandi for the restoration of the rare Buddhist manuscripts in Arunachal Pradesh and rare manuscripts of Manipur, involving such scientific methods as electronic scanning, digitization, etc. However, these scientific methods would be complementary to the time-tested, indigenous and traditional methods of physical preservation in order to make these manuscripts available in its original or the simulated formats for the next generation. The electronic rendition of the calligraphies and art forms would be hosted on the web or it can be preserved in repositories by using D-Space software, so as to facilitate the entire world to comprehend the essence and tenets of manuscripts.

Keywords : Digitization; Manuscripts; Manipur

1. Introduction

Manuscripts are one of the precious materials of our cultural heritage. They are valuable sources for the reconstruction of the history and culture of a country. It reveals their contemporary society and provides vital link to culture and knowledge. These precious materials are scattered everywhere in every nook and corner and are slowly decaying and vanishing due to improper handling. In order to manage and preserve our cultural heritage for use now and for future generation, it is necessary to create the context in which cultural heritage agencies and organizations can pursue the rising standard of intellectual stewardship. A great deal of work has to be done to improve the level and profile. The public access to these information resources has become one of the priorities for those providing services. It is quite obvious that the most effective way to achieve the stated objective is to create digital libraries to distribute information system ensuring reliable storage and effective use of various collection of electronic document via global telecommunication network in a way convenient for the end user.

2. The History and Geographical Distribution of Buddhist Manuscripts of Arunachal Pradesh and Manipuri Manuscripts

The seed of Buddhism in Arunachal Pradesh was sown in the 8th C, by Padmasambhava, who was responsible for preaching the teachings of Buddha and invoking the tenets of Buddhism in the state. However, with the advent of Christianity and the subsequent fragmentation of the traditional Arunachali society into various tribal and religious groups, Buddhism, with the passage of time, has been largely confined to the districts of Tawang, East Kameng, West Kameng, Upper Siang, Dibaung Valley and Changlang districts, with the fringes of the same scattered around the other districts of the state as well.

A majority of these manuscripts are confined to the districts of Tawang, East and West Kameng respectively, primarily due to their geographical proximity to Tibet and China. The spread of Buddhism in these districts got a major boost in the post-1959 period after the Dalai Lama was exiled to India, and for a brief period stationed at Tawang.

The Tawang monastery in Arunachal Pradesh is one of the major hubs of the Buddhist manuscripts in the state. However, it is difficult to ascertain the origin or the 'root' country of these manuscripts. It is widely perceived that some of the earliest Buddhist manuscripts have landed in the state during the period of Padmasambhava's preaching and a host of others were later recorded by the local Buddhist acharyas or rinpoches, who were the devout disciples of Padmasambhava. Most of these manuscripts are hand-written on the paper which was also hand-made from the bark of a tree called 'sheng'. This is evident from the word "shegu-shang", the dialectical equivalent to the word 'manuscript', in which "shegu" and "sheng" are denotives of 'paper' and 'tree' respectively.

Late Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru referred to Manipur as 'A Jewel of India'. Indeed Manipur is one of the India's most precious assets. Its natural beauties bewitched the beholders and its cultural paraphernalia have been one of the wonders of the world. The term Manipur comes from the words 'Mani' meaning 'Jewel' and 'Pur' means "full of" but the exact meaning is yet to be known. Manipur was known by different names in the past by a number of countries. The early Manuscript and chronicles had recorded the names like Poirei Meiteileipak and Kangleipak among a host of others. According to a writer of the early British administrators "Manipuris are the descendants of a Tartar colony which probably emigrated from the north-west border of China during the sanguinary conflicts for supremacy which took place between the different members of the Chinese and Tartar Dynasties"(Pemberton, 1966 37). The royal chronicle Cheitharol Kumaba maintains an uninterrupted historical record of the land and its people since 93 AD. Throughout the history, the valley continued to be the core region where the distinctive Manipuri culture and way of life took shape and where political developments having repercussion throughout the Indo-Burma region often originated. The time periods cover 18th -20th century. Studies on the information contents of Manipuri Manuscripts are very rarely found in literature. However works related to preservation, conservation and digitization identified in the survey of literature is emphasized in the present study. However certain historical incidents make a break between the past and present. As a result, the present generation doesn't have complete access to such a rich heritage.

3. Methodology of Study

The work has been carried out using different methods and techniques like scanning of manuscripts, conducting extensive surveys, interviews, discussion for collection of data. Custodians and renowned scholars of the state are also interacted for collection of the first hand knowledge. To scan and record the information contents of the manuscripts, the thought content of the same are read very carefully to draw the conclusion of that particular manuscript. It is further categorized according to the subject and subsequently analyzed chronologically. Efforts were made to identify the location of manuscripts, i.e., the custodians' name for easy reference.

4. Findings

The study shows that there are about one thousand manuscripts in Manipur which are mostly in private custody. The manuscripts were written in Meitei scripts. Many eminent scholars have collected the Meitei scriptures of the early medieval period which are the Meitei counterparts of the classics. These classics were translated into Bengali. The variety and richness of these Meitei classics is a striking feature of early Manipuri literature.

The findings of the present study has called for improving

- (i) the services provided to the scholars;
- (ii) the awareness campaign to safe the invaluable heritage;
- (iii) the accessibility for the present and the succeeding generations;
- (iv) the descriptive cataloguing by subject/author/period/size/context;
- (v) the conservation and preservation of existing manuscript wealth;
- (vi) the ready access to these manuscripts through digitization and publication;
- (vii) Scholarship and research based on material available in the manuscripts.

The Manipur State Archives, Imphal, along with the National Mission for Manuscripts took up the cause to maintain all these valuable entities and provide services to the scholars efficiently and effectively. But still a separate establishment is required to satisfy the information needs of the research scholars.

The initial study in Arunachal Pradesh also finds that there are more than five thousand Buddhist manuscripts in the Parkhang (Library) of the Tawang Monastery. These manuscripts are written in Boti (Tibetan) language and are scattered around few districts as well as under private custody.

5. Conclusion

Both studies find that manuscripts are the indicators of our heritage, culture, history, language, and literature and of course, civilization. It could be a better and a more informative source of knowledge. It has its importance in the field of education and research of Indian history, culture and civilization. They should not be allowed to perish or decay. The information contained in the manuscripts must be made available to the scholars or users who need them. Thus, accessibility, availability and permanence are the major factors to be considered.

The manuscripts are the integral part of our cultural heritage .If there is a loss, it means an irreparable loss to certain subject, religion, or country. India is a land of many languages and religions and there is no dearth of manuscripts in our country. Therefore, proper preservation of the same is the need of the hour. The electronic rendition would be hosted on the web or it can be preserved in repositories by using D-Space software, so as to facilitate the entire world to comprehend the essence and tenets of manuscripts in its digital form.

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