Documentation of Traditional Knowledge with respect to Preservation of Manuscripts of Assam, India: Problems and Prospects

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Abstract

Traditional Knowledge system of indigenous people are gaining importance of late and thus documenting those for study and research are also gaining momentum. However, there are always lots of challenges for proper documentation of the whole system of knowledge.

Assam in the north eastern part of India is culturally rich with lot of indigenous groups having distinct cultural traditions over the ages. In this paper, attempts have been made to discuss the problems encountered during documentation of traditional knowledge system related to preservation of manuscripts in Assam, India. Most of the times, the informants omits some information thinking those to be quite obvious, thus, loss of some valuable information during documentation which sometimes can do havoc. Being an insider having some background knowledge, sometimes helped to attempt some of the problems encountered however, documenting some processes need year round observations. Preparation of proper format for documenting varied forms of Intangible Cultural Heritage is also a challenge. Thus, making the process accessible to other researchers and audience is a challenge as it is sometimes not easy to record each and every bit of information observed in the field, which again creates a gap between the actual procedure and the documented version.

1.00 Introduction

Traditional Knowledge of the indigenous people constitutes a major part of intangible heritage as defined by UNESCO convention, 2003. Regions like north eastern India are still rich in traditional knowledge. However, with higher rate of socio-economic changes over last two decades or so, this knowledge is disappearing very fast. Thus, we need to think of a methodology to use this knowledge base to be safeguarded for the future

generation. This present paper deals on the issues in documentation of traditional knowledge of the Assamese community regarding preservation of manuscript prevalent in the region.

2.00 Background:

The state of Assam extending from $89^0 42'$ E to 96^0 E longitude and $24^0 8'$ N to $28^0 2'$ N latitudes lies beneath the foothills of the Eastern Himalayas and is bounded on the north by Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh (formerly known as NEFA), to the east by Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, and Manipur to the south by Mizoram and Meghalaya and to the west by Bangladesh and Tripura. Positioned in close proximity to four foreign countries China, Bhutan, Burma and Bangladesh, geographically, Assam is connected to the central India only by a narrow corridor running through the foothills of the Himalayas that connects the state with West Bengal.

Assam, is a meeting ground of diverse races over the ages giving shelter to streams of human waves carrying with them distinct cultures and trends of civilization. Austro Asiatic, Negritos, Alpines, Dravidians Indo-Mongoloids, Tibeto-Burmese and Aryans penetrated into Assam through different routes in different periods of time and contributed towards the unique fusion of a new community that came to be known as Assamese in the later periods. The composite culture of the region owes its origin to a varied source which gives rise to a unique culture of the region. The dress patterns, food habit, belief system, material culture, rituals and festivals of the region are a testimony to this fact.

In Assamese, manuscript is known as *"puthi"*. Manuscripts from Assam can be classified on the basis of theme or content, script or language, style, the carrier, etc. These manuscripts are generally on the themes of epics, *purana*s, *upa-purana*s; on the subjects of *Jyotisa* (Astrology), *Ayurveda, Tantra* (magic), history and chronicles etc. On the basis of carrier, the manuscripts of Assam can be divided as *sanchipat* manuscript, *tulapat* manuscript, bamboo-strip manuscript, palm-leaf manuscript and manuscripts on other materials. Both non-illustrated and illustrated (*Chitraputhi* or *Sachitraputhi*) manuscripts are available in Assam.

From the available resources, it can be said very safely that manuscripts were quite prevalent during the 7th century A.D. as the *Harsacarita* of *Banabhatta* has direct

references to the existence of manuscript in Assam at that time. The stock of manuscripts prevailed at present in Assam however, are the creations from 17th ct. A.D. onwards.

Manuscripts in Assam have been a part of living tradition for a considerable period of history. The preparation method, methods used for its care and up-keeping are weaved in ritualistic behaviours and religious norms. It is to mention here that the religious manuscripts are still worshiped in the region with great devotion. The entire intangible heritages related to it (process of preparation, customs, rituals beliefs related to the manuscripts) too contribute to the colour of the tradition. In the cross-road of modernisation and globalisation, community people are losing their traditional knowledge very fast. Although on the other hand, thinkers, academicians and policy makers of late, realised the importance of traditional knowledge of the communities of the world and trying to find out how these can be used for sustainable development particularly in developing and under developed countries. Thus, the safeguarding these knowledge base is gaining momentum and given due importance by international bodies like UNESCO and ICOM. The definition of heritage, as we know, has been changed over the years and now it gives due importance to intangible heritage. Likewise the definition of museum is also been redefined by ICOM to include "intangible heritage" and "natural heritage".

The project for *Documentation of Traditional Knowledge on Preservation of Manuscripts of Assam* was carried out as part of my PhD project under the Department of Conservation, National Museum Institute, New Delhi with a research fellowship from University Grants Commission. During this project, with no specialised training on documentation of Intangible Cultural Heritage except a background of field work for documentation of folklore materials during my Masters, I felt it hard to formulate the framework for documentation of the traditional knowledge. However, during the course of time, with several trial and error methods, I completed my work. Present paper is a humble attempt to outline the issues I faced during the project and relate it to the theoretical framework outlined for documentation of intangible heritage by UNESCO and ICOM.

3.00 Problems in Documentation of Traditional Knowledge:

3.01. The first step of documenting intangible heritage is 'to capture it while protecting its ownership'. According to the UNESCO convention not all the intangible heritage are safeguarded but only the one, which recognized by its community as theirs and that provides them with a sense of identity and continuity is to be safeguarded. Here

appears the first problem. This community, having the rich tradition of manuscript preservation, is not aware of the need of protection of the traditional knowledge. Probably, due to ignorance or thinking this to be obsolete knowledge not required any more. Some community prohibits taking photographs and recording of their rituals and performances and thinks these activities minimises the sanctity of their rituals.

3.02 Moreover, documenting traditional knowledge on preservation of manuscripts in Assam is not very simple in the complex socio cultural situation (as discussed in the background) with varied groups with their own set of tradition and a set of shared/ common tradition. This put forward the problem of ownership. The ownership should be two layered—the ethnic community and also the Assamese community. Some situation arises where more than one ethnic community share the same knowledge and it is not possible to ascertain whether it is the result of assimilation or the case of multiple origin of the same knowledge. However, it needs a thorough thinking for structuring a flawless model.

3.03 During my project of documentation of traditional knowledge on preservation of manuscripts of Assam, I noticed that there is omission of information on the part of the informants. This is not intentional as I realized during the course of the study. These omissions of information are rather the result of the thinking that these are quite obvious, and need not require mentioning. However, that is not correct on part of the researcher who is not familiar with the culture of the community. What is obvious on part of the informants are sometimes quite new and uncommon on part of the researcher. Thus, it results in loss of some valuable information during documentation

3.04 Documenting traditional knowledge is not an easy and short time affair. It needs several visits to the field, observation over the year at least. Some of the procedures are not complete in performing a single ritual (?) --- which no one mentions during interview/ interaction. It is the duty of the researcher to establish the co-relation between two or more rituals performed during different seasons of the year and for this we have to see the ritual by ourselves as sometimes only getting oral information/ narration about a ritual is not enough. For example, we can mention about the *puthisnan* ritual and *puthi-mela* ritual in relation to storage of the manuscript in traditionally prepared wooden boxes. Let me explain in detail. The *sanchipat* manuscripts in Assam are stored in a specially designed wooden box. The preparation of this box and how this helps in preservation of the manuscript is being discussed in a different paper presented in the post-workshop

conference "Managing Indoor Climate Risks" organized jointly by CECI, RCE and ICCROM in Olinda, Brazil. (20-25th March, 2011). Only thing I would like to mention here is that the box is air tight and wood being buffer for slight variation of RH helps in maintaining a good micro-climate for the manuscript. But if we think that storing the manuscript in this box will save the manuscript for eternity then, it will be our fault. However, this does not mean, the traditional knowledge of storing the manuscript in that special box is not effective. It only means that we are not careful enough in documenting the total knowledge or we miss to establish the link between different segments of traditional knowledge helping to preserve the manuscripts. The two rituals *puthi snan* and *puthi mela*, I just mentioned have also to be performed as part of the storage procedure. *Puthi snan* is bathing or sprinkling the manuscript with a specially prepared liquid. The ingredients used in preparation of that "holy" liquid contains antifungal and antibacterial properties. Thus, before storing the manuscript in the wooden box there is a treatment for inhibiting bacterial and fungal attack. Again, *puthi mela* is a ritual of showing the manuscript to slight sunlight during the Assamese month of Bhada (August- September) i.e., just after the rainy season. Thus, it is clear that information on only one of the three segments will not be complete and we need to document all the related information.

3.05 Preparation of proper format for documenting: Selecting the right format for documentation is very difficult. Most of the time, we don't want to miss information and use all the available tools for documentation; for example still photography, videography, audio recording and writing the observations with text. However, not a single tool is complete and also this creates too much of data which put problems of proper storage and also accessioning during future need. Creating a crisp and economic yet full proved method for documentation is a problem. This is felt tremendously while trying to compile my field notes and documented data for the final report

3.06 Gap between the actual situation/ matter and the documented version: It is very much difficult to document everything as it is. This is not only because, we tend to put our own understanding about the issue, knowingly or unknowingly, but also because of lack of proper documenting tool like exact words in the language used for text documentation etc. This may be put in another way also. There is always a lag between the information shared by the informant and the information received by the researcher which again has a lag with the information documented. In case of traditional knowledge on preventive

conservation of manuscripts in Assam, the language of communication between the researcher and the informant is Assamese whereas the language used for documentation and information sharing (like this presentation) is English. Thus, it is hard to find exact English equivalents in some cases, as we know, language has a strong cultural relevance. This case gets more complicated if we think of a situation where the informant, belonging to an ethnic community with their own language thinks in his ethnic language, communicate with the researcher in Assamese, being the lingua-franca and the researcher understand it in Assamese and document in the language for academic communication in India, English

3.07 Making the information accessible to other researchers and audience is a challenge: We felt during the report preparation of my project that it is a challenge to transfer all the field data without any loss of information to an accessible format. Thus, the use of the results of this research by other researchers and audience is always under question.

4.00 Conclusion

According to UNESCO Convention (2003), safeguarding intangible heritage is about the transferring of knowledge, skills, and meaning. Transferring of knowledge and skills need careful planning otherwise it will create havoc with mis-information and half-knowledge. Thus, in conclusion, formulating a clear model for documentation of traditional knowledge is not easy and need thorough thinking and should be done in consultation with experts in the field. Moreover, the documentation of the traditional knowledge should benefit the community concerned and should help in maintaining the knowledge intact. But what is the way out if the community is not willing or not aware of the need? Should we stop documenting in the expense of valuable knowledge stock or is there exists a middle path?

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