

A historical perspective on indigenous knowledge preservation through different forms in Manipur

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ABSTRACT

In ancient time knowledge retained in memory was disseminated to a chosen few through oral teaching. Invention of the art of writing and its materials as well contributed a lot for recording the knowledge. During the early stage, man used to write on stones, rocks, sand, etc. The invention of paper in China became a turning point in the history of knowledge preservation and development of recording forms. In this backdrop, the present study has been made to assess the historical account of preserving indigenous knowledge through different forms that prevailed in Manipur. The same has studied related authoritative historical documentary resources and persons associated with the matter have also been contacted visiting different museums, manuscript libraries and archival institutions to collect information. The findings of the study have given us many clues about different systems followed by our forefathers to preserve indigenous knowledge through stone inscription, iron plate, bronze and copper plate, Gold Plate, Birch Bark, Kona and Tengna leave Bhajabutra leaf Meitei Che, painting, etc. But today new digital formats as storage media like CR-ROM, DVD, Pen Drive, Memory Card, etc, are available which can be adopted. The paper is expected to serve the needs of historical researchers in various fields of studies.

Keywords: Indigenous Knowledge, Preservation Methods, Digital Formats, Manipur.

INTRODUCTION

In ancient time, man tried to retain their knowledge in memory and the same retained memory was transmitted or narrated to a chosen few in a more traditional way of teaching as we learnt from the pages of the early history. In early Manipuri society, the disciples were staying at the residence of their teacher till the completion of their course. During this period they used to help in various house works like gardening, cutting of fire woods, fetching water and even in agricultural works also. The relationship between teacher and disciple was

just the relation of father and son. It was, over and above, a spiritual one. Whereas, whole knowledge of the teacher, as a technique for possessing supremacy, were not taught to all. Ultimately, he would disclose everything to someone else who was faithful and competent to become his successor. As such the indigenous knowledge so developed was not possible to retain any longer in memory of the selected

few scholars and due to other factors thereby they endeavored to search for methods of retaining their knowledge in the midst development of other means of recording the

knowledge as for instance in physical form. This was the first concept of invention and emergence of writing materials. In the early stage, recording of knowledge was done on sand, rock, stone, using signs and symbols, pictographic and ideographic characters, etc. Due to experience and gradual expansion of human knowledge, development of writing scripts were changed from pictographic to present day phonic characters and writing

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material also changed from sand to paper then to digital materials.

DEVELOPMENT OF DIFFERENT FORMS

The history of writing and writing materials were inseparable entities. In the beginning, before having writing scripts, our forefathers would surely try to express or communicate their ideas or thoughts using pictograms and ideograms. Then they would start to search the suitable writing/drawing surface. This journey itself is the history of writing materials from sand to paper and including the history of scripts from prehistoric pictograms to our present day phonic characters. "Writing was started universally by 5500 BC". So far as the development of writing is concerned, writing on stone is the oldest example of writing which has survived the vagaries of nature through centuries. The "Rosette Stone" of Egypt which is more than 5000 years old, is one such typical and valuable.

Whereas, in the context of Manipur, according to the Meitei Literary Sources (*Nongpok Haram Script, Sorarel Macha Khunkumba Script MSc.*), writing was started in the 15th Century. In the opinion of some scholars it was started around the beginning of the Christian era. But it is rather difficult to exactly trace back the age of beginning of writing in Manipur. Even though, the Meitei society, at the very early stage, with developing the art of writing, the recording of their thoughts, feelings and historical events were started.

So, it is quite natural that if there was writing then there were writing surfaces/sheets of different forms. Before, the production of handmade paper (*Meetei che*) the then people of Manipur used materials like stone, copper sheet, gold sheet and wood board, etc. for writing purpose. During the ancient time the work of writing was done by only royal scribes and few scholars. Some of the important materials which were extensively found to be used in the state for writing purposes are being discussed in the following sections.

STONE INSCRIPTION

Writing on stone could not achieve the status of writing on other materials like wood board, palm leaf, metal plate and paper for disseminating knowledge and information. The purpose or aim of the inscription is also somewhat different from those of other materials. By observing the text of the inscription we know that it bears a special value, royal annals, religious codes or conduct and some such things like agreements of interstate boundary. Regarding the erection of boundary stone there was a rule that the face of the stone should be directed towards the neighbour country so that the people of the same knew the boundary. The stone for writing can be categorized into two kinds. One is stone slabs and another is stone pillar. Most of the stones found in Manipur are sand stone. So, hard stones are selectively used. The stone inscriptions found in the southern part of Manipur are of red colour and these are probably from Myanmar. Writing on stone had to be done painstakingly with the help of chisels or some sharp tools. The faces of the stones are slightly tilted down so as to protect from any damage. These stone inscriptions are the primary source of information for historians of modern age. By studying the honourific words of the inscription, the oldest inscription recovered as on today is of King Meidingu Sameirang period (518-568) found at Khoibu.

IRON PLATE

Meitei rulers used iron plate as writing materials for having its positive values i.e. convenient to transport, durable, feasible to rewrite, etc. They used to serve notice or order to a particular village or community. Those notices were hung up at the gate of the village. Now-a day the same are kept in the custody of head of the village. We may give an example that the notice issued by the then King Maharaja Ghambhir Singh to Chothe tribe of Lumlangpokpi Lamangdong have been preserving by the authority of the village till today. Now, the reading of such inscription is done with a ritual performing. These sheets are

quite thick and inscribed with the help of stylus or sharp tools.

BRONZE AND COPPER PLATE

Besides the iron sheet, bronze and copper sheets were also used to record the historical accounts, important events. Another uses of these materials is in writing the certificate of honours and rewards. It is difficult to confirm the period from which these sheet were started to use but they may predate the Hindunization period because of some writings are found to be in Meitei Mayek (the original Manipuri script). These inscriptions were preserved after wrapping them with white cloth .

GOLD PLATE

It was also used in writing but not extensively because of its expensive value. This metal was used by the traditional physicians mainly for a particular purpose i.e. writing the text of mantras for amulets. For writing, the stylus was simply used.

BIRCH BARK

Before invention of Meetei che (hand made paper), writing on agar bark was practiced in Manipur. It is not known since when the same was started to use. Whereas, it may be presumed that as late as before the king Khagemba period.

KONA AND TENGNA LEAVE (LEAVES RESEMBLING PALM LEAF)

Writing on these leaves was very rare in Manipur. The writing was done using indigenous ink and writing instrument made of bamboo stick .

BHAJABUTRA LEAF

This leaf was also one of the materials used in writing before invention of paper (Meetei che) and contemporary. This is, whereas, being used even today also by Meetei local healers in writing mantras for amulets. (*Narrated by Nameirakpam Ibochouba Singh, Konung Pandit*

Anishuba on the 12th May2003). The writing instrument is same as that of the tengna leaf.

COINAGE

Coinage may also be considered as one of the materials used in preservation of our knowledge of the past though the purpose was different when they made. By studying the coinage of early Manipur, we are able to get some knowledge to reconstruct the history of Manipur. The coin itself (its material and depicted letters) reflects the economy, technology, social and political condition of the contemporary period.

MEITEI CHE (HAND- MADE PAPER)

Paper the most suitable, familiar and favourable material for writing was invented by Chinese for the first time. They claimed the date of invention of the same is in the first Century A.D. Then, the art of making paper spread to all over the world. "In the course of time, the art of manufacturing paper using Chinese technology and style entered into Manipur during mid sixteenth century. Even the word "Che" meaning "paper" seems to be borrowed from Chinese word. The introduction of paper was a turning point in knowledge preservation by recording details of contemporary life. Most of the manuscripts being found today are written on the said hand made paper. Quill of some birds and bamboo made pen were commonly used as writing instruments with indigenous ink. And there was a practice to protect the manuscripts from rodent, ant, worm and other insect etc. They are kept in between the two planks of same size and again wrapped with a white cloth. After that the whole things was kept inside a Tabu (Bamboo basket or wooden box).

PAINTING

It is also one of the techniques/media/forms on which our knowledge is preserved. The antiquity of Manipuri painting dates back to the time of Meidingoo(*King*) Pakhangba who reigned in 33 AD and can be categorized as (a) Ancient (b) Medieval and (c) Modern.

The salient feature of the ancient paintings is their pictorial composition and selection of folk, tantric, astrological and religious themes. Most of manuscript paintings focus mainly on the evolution of the Universe and life, the prediction of future happening and cause of diseases etc. Colours are of indigenously prepared from red earth, flowers, leave, lamp soot and bark of trees. Natural gum obtained from the Acacia and Silver Oak trees are used as binding medium. The medieval painting evolved as from the 18th century till the early 20th century. In this period the adoption of Vaishnavism was started in Manipur. This changing of religion was reflected on the theme of the then painting also. Rare mural painting of Ningthoujam Bhadra Singh, court painter in the service of Maharaja Churachand are still found decorating the walls of the session court at Uripok, Imphal. The themes of these paintings depict punishment given to the sinners in the land of Yamaraj (God of dead) and the failure of Nongbal before righteous Khamba in the legendary Story. These had been sanctioned by the royal authority to up keep moral standard of the people in this region.

CONCLUSION

The history of indigenous knowledge preservation in Manipur began since ancient times through different forms. Though the journey of development is sluggish in comparison to the rest of India and the world, Manipur has also traveled in this direction.

The development of human civilization in every fields and the importance of information/knowledge have been increasing day by day and it is much needed to record them on convenient and suitable forms with proper organization for easy access and retrieval in future. All these are invaluable assets of knowledge contributed by our forefathers. So all the available documents (may be in any forms) must be preserved in its original forms and shapes as well as in suitable format using modern technology for the use of various purposes in future. It is obvious that there will be a lot of knowledge among the old records from which we can extract the knowledge of herbal medicine, astrological practices, cultural and religious aspects,

economy, and genealogical history, relationship of neighboring countries and historical and political aspects of the then particular period. This contribution of past knowledge will enhance the treasury of modern knowledge society. Today, the emergence of ICT and its application in the knowledge sector is a boon for recording the vast information and knowledge resources for the posterity. Consequently new sophisticated formats of information storage and recording media like DVD, Pen Drive, Memory Card, etc, have evolved to sustain the pressure of the development of knowledge. This also has enhanced in the process of capturing old data, storing and preserving the same for future use contributing the society in various aspects which has a great significance in the emerging knowledge society.

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