

Ecstatic Painting Tradition in Assam: A Study

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ABSTRACT

Since ancient times, the art of painting in Assam has evolved around the culture of adorning manuscripts with lines and colors. In other words, painting as an art form is a unique and significant resource of the Assamese cultural legacy. Since the turn of the 21st century, artists from Assam have absorbed and become acclimated to modern art practices such as installation art, performance art, and modern graffiti. My goals are to research art and artists in Assam who use a variety of methods and materials, particularly in relation to a regional context and new art genres in the midst of globalization, a complex socio-political landscape, and a zero-market for works of art and art connoisseurs.

Keywords: Manuscript, Contemporary, modernism, visual arts and North-Eastern India

OBJECTIVES

To find art activities since ancient period in Assam as well as North Eastern India as a manifestation of indigenous people, livelihood and also exotic surroundings

- To discuss prime credentials of creations regarding contemporary art practice in Assam

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The dataset comprises both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources consist of the artists' original artworks and various books, catalogues, and brochures that provide textual and visual material related to the artists. Secondary sources include books, journals, reviews, and online resources. This study places special emphasis on the original artworks of artists from different periods in Assam. The chosen methodology involves conducting interviews with individual artists, scholars, and academicians, visiting actual sites to gather necessary data and visuals, and utilizing the internet for research. This research is descriptive in nature. As the study concentrates on stylistic changes and technical innovations in art, particularly paintings in Assam, India, visits to various institutional art workshops and professional studios in Guwahati, Nagaon, and Jorhat have been conducted, with thorough documentation through photography and video.

Scope of the Study

The preferred focus of this research is on the art activities in Assam from ancient times. The foundational study also explores the remarkable creativity and pioneering contributions of these artists, which have shaped not only Assam but the entire North East. This may differ from other creators, as the available information and data on art activities in India suggest.

INTRODUCTION

The native stone monoliths, temple architecture, relief sculpture, terracotta, wood carving, mask-making, school of miniature, and manuscript painting traditions of Northeastern India, consisting of the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, and Sikkim, are also well-known. In addition to serving as the link between the sister states and the mainland, Assam is a source of innovative

concepts for individual and group inspiration in art, culture, and society. The bio- and crop-diversity of the area leads archaeologists to conclude that early inhabitants of Northeast India domesticated several significant plants. According to the authors, the writings of Chinese explorer Zhang Qian from 100 BC suggest an early trading route across Northeast India. (Lahiri, 1991, p.p 11-12) Currently, the entire Northeast region is connected to the rest of the nation via a shaky 22-kilometer land corridor that passes through Siliguri in the eastern state of West Bengal. This link has been dubbed the "Chicken Neck." (www.govtofassam.nic.in, 2020) The visual arts, such as painting and sculpture, have been practiced in Assam since very early times, as evidenced by references to their cultivation in literature and inscriptions, as well as in textiles, paintings, and engraving.

In Assam, medieval saint Srimanta Sankaradeva (1449-1568) and his Neo Vaisnavite Movement are nearly synonymous with the phrase "manuscript." The principles and values of this religious and cultural movement were transmitted through these hand written/painted manuscripts, and Sankaradeva and his successors were primarily responsible for their rise to prominence as a dynamic, successful, and esteemed medium. These manuscripts are precious and things deserving of devotion because the Master himself wrote all of his compositions, including Ghoshas, Padas, Borgeets, Nats, and Bhatimas, on them. S.K. Bhuyan writes significantly in the introductory note on Assamese manuscripts: "Assam, also known as Kamrupa, has been swept by a wave of Hindu civilization that has maintained its cultural homogeneity with the rest of India since time immemorial." Through *puthis*, or manuscripts, which were clarified by the learned people's oral remarks and explanations, Hindu civilization and culture were preserved and transmitted in a significant way. (Goswami, 2009, pp. XV-XX)

There was no evidence of a book on art in particular till the twentieth century. However, some important rhetorical words have been found in numerous old Assamese epic and poetry books, '*Charit puthi*'/biography, to signify various skills and aesthetic qualities of eminent personalities. In the context, the book entitled 'Descriptive Catalogue of Assamese Manuscripts, by Pandit Hemchandra Goswami, would be mentioned as the earliest, which was published by Calcutta University in 1930. As Dr. Naren Kalita describes, the effort of Pandit Goswami fructified in the formation of a repository with a few illustrated transcripts in the library of Kamrup Anusandhana Samiti, Guwahati, during the early part of the Twentieth Century. (Kalita, 2009, p.2)

"The publication of the Chitra Bhagavata with paintings (Plate 1) from the Bhagavata-purana, Book X (Adya portion) in 1949 was an epoch-making event. It was for the painstaking effort of Sahityarartna Harinarayan Dutta Baruah, a celebrated devotee of Srimanta Sankardeva's neo-Vaishnavism, that the original illustrated treatise in the name of 'Adi Dasham' of Bali Xatra in Nagaon was published. (Dutta Baruah, 1949) In addition, for the first time, the people of Assam came to know about a rich tradition of artistic activities around the culture of painting. The Chitra Bhagavata is also significant as the first scholarly introduction in the Assamese language to the growth and development of the painting tradition in India. The art of painting got a new life in the hands of the extremely skilled artist of this era, Srimanta Sankardeva. "He drew the pictures (pat) of seven Baikunthas/heavens for the performance of *Chinha Yatra Bhaona* (a folk theatrical performance) himself. Apart from these, the exquisitely painted 'Brindavani Bastra' (a kind of cloth) gifted by Srimanta Sankardeva to the king of Koch Bihar, Naranarayana, stands as a clear testimony to the excellence attained by this form during the medieval saint Srimanta Sankardeva era." (Bhuyan, 1962, p. 94)

In this context, the Sachiitra Puthis (books with pictorial illustrations) that have been found in various parts of Assam also prove the artistic talent of this land. Those pictorial illustrations were mainly found on Sanchi pat (i.e., the bark of the Sanchi tree, specially prepared for writing), tulapat (i.e., tula leaf), and mugā clothes. However, due to frequent calamities in Assam and inadequate preservation techniques, a large number of valuable manuscripts have become extinct. The Putichtras, or painted manuscripts that have been rescued till now, are: Chira Bhagavata (Dakham Skandha) (Plate 1), Hastividyārnavā (Plate 2), Mahabharata, Ramayana, Kirtanghokha, Adi Dakham, Bhakti Ratnawali, Kumar Haran, etc. Among these, Namghosa and Ahom Jyotish are inscribed on mugā clothes, and the others are inscribed on Sanchi leaves. Although most pictorial manuscripts are religious, a few are also secular.

STYLISTIC VARIETY OF PAINTED MANUSCRIPTS IN ASSAM

In medieval times, particularly among royal families and the Xatras, painting was widely practiced. Over time, the pictorial manuscripts in the two places acquired distinct styles. Dr. Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyaya has divided the two styles into-

Secular Royal style

Religious *Xatria* Style (Chatterjee, 1970, p. 56)

On the other hand, Dr. Rajatananda Dasgupta, who has done extensive research on Eastern India's *Chitraputhis* or *Puthichitras* (books with pictorial illustrations), has divided them into seven styles. Various other researchers have categorized the Puthichitras of Assam in their own ways. After analyzing the results of the various research, we can divide the medieval painted manuscripts into the following styles:

Tai Ahom style, based on the religious books written in the Tai-Ahom language

Imperial or court style developed through the patronage of the Ahom monarch.

Religious *Xatriya* style

Darangi style developed based on folk art (Das Gupta, 1982, p. 120)

Various Materials of Manuscripts

Mugā cloth (the Samaguri Satra contains a foldable manuscript on muga-silk), Tulapat leaves (made by pressing cotton), Tulapat (palm leaves; rarely used), Sanchi pat (the leaves of the Sanchi tree, also known as the Agar or *Aquilaria agallocha*), and Sanchi bark (the thicker variety, the Bible's aloes wood) are among the materials used to create Assamese manuscripts. Its letters seem to be engraved in gold. (www.tributetosankardeva.org/2026)

Sanchipat

The line-and-color illustrations of manuscripts served as the foundation for the development of painting in Assam. Sanchipat and Tulapat were the two materials used to make manuscript leaves in Assam. Tulapat leaves were produced by compressing cotton, whereas Sanchipat, the denser type, was crafted from the bark of the Sanchi tree, aloes wood, or *Aquilaria agallocha* (Plate 3) and (Plate 4). The manuscripts were composed by artists referred to as Khanikars. The subsequent steps are part of the elaborate and detailed procedure for preparing Sanchi literary materials.

Tulapat

Tulapat is also used for manuscript painting. Actually, Tulapat is a paper produced in Assam. It came from the cotton tree. Tulapat is a wood pulp paper. For the assignment, three different tree species were typically used. White tulapat was made from the "maihai" tree, dark brown tulapat from the "Yamon" tree, and red tulapat from an unidentified tree. Ramayana manuscripts are kept in the Guwahati University Library. (www.tributetosankardeva.org/2025)

Preparation of Colors

Colors used in painting are Hangul (mercury sulphide) is a kind of mineral product, Hangul is crushed and then it is grind on a stone daily for two hours along with water to remove impurities, Haital (arsenic sulphide) is also a mineral product, which is used for all manuscripts as base color, indigo is only color which is derived from indigo plant, khori mati (limestone) used for obtaining the color white and Sandalwood and Ash derived from silikha for use of black. The gum used in manuscript painting is derived from wood apple extract, and the mixture is diluted with water before applying the colors.

Hengul and Haital

The manuscripts typically used a dark crimson tint, such as Hengul (mercury sulfide) or Haital (arsenic sulfide) exclusively. Other colors used in Assamese miniatures are kharimati or dhabal (for white), hengul (vermillion red), haital (yellow arsenic yellow), and golden (either from gold or by blending red and yellow with lacquer coatine or la chaloa).

Preparation of Ink or Mahi

Ink or Mahi is necessary for writing or painting on materials like paper and script. The earliest reference to ink is found in the Grhyasutras. The use of ink is found in the 5th BCE at Sanchi. The earliest complete manuscript written using ink is the Kharosthi Dhammapada discovered in Khotan. Traditionally, Mahi was used in early and medieval Assam for writing on *Sanchipat* manuscripts.

The Current State of Assam's Manuscript Painting

As previously mentioned, the practice of painting manuscripts in Assam declined. Scholarly interest in the preservation and analysis of these documents, however, also grew throughout this period. These scholars sought to conserve and catalog Assamese manuscript paintings at various institutions, both during and after British rule. Only a small number of artists in Assam are currently engaged in painting and manuscript writing. At Kalang Kala Kendra, Puranigudam, Nagaon quarter, Assam, many artists had the good fortune to meet and learn about some aspects of handwriting, oil, and its fashion from one of the many surviving khanikars. The gallery has been working to restore this nearly defunct heritage through training programs. At Kalang Kala Kendra, the museum of Puranigudam, Nagaon district, Assam, a few artists had the good fortune to meet and learn about some aspects of manuscript painting and its technique from one of the few surviving *khanikars*/ indigenous artists. The museum has been working to bring back this nearly extinct legacy through training programs.

Contemporary Art and Artists in Assam

The term 'contemporary' refers to art of the post-1960s modernist era; it is roughly the same age, current, and modern. With the advent of contemporary art, artists were freed from the traditional pursuit of aesthetic purity and beauty to tackle political issues that impact the general public. (www.art.in, 2020) The emergence of "Modern art" in the early 20th century fundamentally altered traditional art forms like crafts, miniatures, manuscript paintings, murals, traditional sculpture, and others that had flourished for centuries, beginning to fall due to political upheaval and other factors. (Kandali, 2009)

Lakhi Ram Baruah, perhaps the first graduate from the whole northeastern region, studied at the Government School of Art in Calcutta in the second decade of the 20th century. (Keitzer, 2002) Sobha Brahma wrote about several famous people, including Suren Bardoloi, Mukta Nath Bardoloi, Bhavesh Chandra Sanyal, Birendralal Bhowmik, Jagat Singh Kachari, Sashidhar Saikia, Hemanta Misra, Asu Dev, and Jibeswar Baruah. (Brahma, 2007, pp. 2-3) Since the 1960s, rapidly developing communication systems, the bridge over the Brahmaputra, the expansion of the broad-gauge railway line to Guwahati and beyond, direct national road transport links, etc., have gradually influenced Assamese artists to display a contemporary temperament in their works. Their easy access to the mainstream of the country's several art centers has accelerated the process. Madan Mohan Lahkar, Sobha Brahma, Benu Misra (Plate 5), Mukunda Debnath, Neelpawan Baruah, Pranab Barua, Pulok Gogoi, Gauri Barman, Atul Barua (Sculptor), Samiran Baruah, and Noni Borpujari are notable early artists.

An Overview of Contemporary Artists in Assam

The vast majority of modern artists in Assam are engaged in a variety of artistic endeavors. Every artist in Assam and the cosmos is enmeshed in the culture and ideas of their own eras. Whether they decide to work within or try to escape their enslavement and become free will determine this. The artistic phenomenology and art of Shyam Kanu Barthakur, Utpal Barua, Dilip Tamuly, Lutfu Akhtar, Munindra Narayan Bhattacharjee, Nihileswar Baruah, Raj Kumar Mazinder, Kishor Kumar Das, Ganesh Gohain, Santana Gohain, Rashmi Nath, Robijita

Gogoi, Desire Machine Collective, Sansita Gogoi, Shilpika Bardoloi, Parismita Singh, Samudra Kajal Saikia, Chandan Bez Baruah, Anga Art Collective, Anupam Saikia, Bhaskar Hazarika, Mantu Das, Pinak Pani Nath, Binoy Paul, and Phanindra Talukdar are more well-known and varied in this context. According to prominent Assamese scholar and art historian Dr. Mousumi Kandali, these paradoxes of modernist experiences paradoxically form the basis of much of the violent socio-political ramifications in contemporary Assam. The opposing dichotomies of masculinising vs feminism, rural vs urban, or tribalism vs non-tribalism become even more challenging in such structural contexts of political upheaval. (Kandali, 2002, pp. 11-12)

Dilip Tamuly possibly considers the torchbearer of the contemporary art genre to be bringing the spark and experimenting with new ideas and processes, breaking previous artists' conventional, medium-centric, more rigid, and less flexible concepts and executions since the last decade of the last century. His installation titled *Particle of Brain* at State Art Gallery in 1990 broke the notion of a permanent material/ medium, using a painted sacred clay idol of knowledge wrapped in a mosquito net, along with other ready objects and texts. In the later period, he used the human body in his collaborative work of art with Robijita Gogoi, as the theatrical performance was *Gatha's* first text in 2002. Munindra Narayan Bhattacharyya is a distinguished painter, poet, and academician of this region. His artistic representation generates stark political satire, painting, and drawing into the social milieu through Marxist-socialist positioning. Munin's eclectic vision is exposed through subtle playfulness, pure humor, and irony. As eminent art historian Mousumi Kandali writes, the creative imagination of artist Munindra Narayan Bhattacharyya unfolds as a dialogic discourse between the visual and the textual, the textual and the spatial. (Bhattacharya, 2018) Nikhileswar Baruah, born in Assam in 1967, has vivid memories of his early years in Guwahati. The artist, who hails from Assam, has personally witnessed the effects of the conflict and violence. At the moment, Baruah primarily uses watercolors on paper, a medium he claims is "very flexible and allows you to experiment," while also working with other painting media such as oil, acrylic, and porcelain. (www.saffron.com, 2021)

One well-known artist who has consistently used his art to depict urgent social and political issues is Kishor Kumar Das. As renowned author Rupanjali Baruah correctly noted, Kishor Kumar Das examines the harmony between humor and socio-political commentary in his artwork. To find sarcasm in every minute detail, he presents realistic portrayals of real people facing inflated scenarios and challenges, inviting viewers to identify with them in life situations and draw inspiration from his social environment. (www.sentinelassam.com, 2021)

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The Desire Machine Collective, a group of media professionals, is based in Guwahati, Assam, India. Sonal Jain and Mriganka Madhukailya have been working together since 2004 as Desire Machine Collective. Their installations and artwork use space, photography, music, video, film, and objects. They have become one of the most well-known artist collaborations in India's modern art scene thanks to the political content of their stories and their use of experimental techniques. According to Sonal Khullar, "The camera lingers over enormous metal drums, rusted papers, peeling paint, and growing moss at an abandoned thermal power plant near Guwahati in northeastern India in *Residue*, a 35 mm film with sound by the Desire Machine Collective." (Khullar, 2015, p.3)

Anga is an art collective based in Guwahati since 2010, focusing on cultivating connections to excavate the problems of contemporary cultural production. The collective connects itself with the critical tendencies of contemporary art. Four members of the Anga Art collective, led by Dhruvajit Sarma, were arrested on November 20, 2020, as they were preparing to complete painting a mural of political activist and peasant leader Akhil Gogoi on one side of a flyover close to the Basistha Chariali crossroads in the capital of Assam (Plate 6). The young artists were held for four hours before being released from the Basistha police station after receiving uncomfortable legal advice. "You can paint a flower or a rhino, we were informed," Sarma said. However, since Akhil Gogoi has been arrested in connection with a National Investigative Agency (NIA) case, we are unable to portray him. To completely erase the last traces of writing on the wall, the artists insisted on applying a second coat of paint while the police watched. (www.article-14.com, 2020)

CONCLUSION

In the context of Assam's rich heritage of manuscript practice, the contemporary art of this region has not been discussed in detail. Ironically termed as Junglee, Chinky, the Northeast people are aware of the pros and cons of their identity and try to defend and sustain as a whole. As I wrap up my essay with a passage from Phanindra Talukdar's work that was included in the catalogue, The cultural dislocation and collisions in peripheral states like the North East of India is always an account of seeing subjected into the diverse methodological approach rather than a subject to be elevated by saying as multi-colorful cultural approach," he writes in "Contemporary Printmaking of North-East India. (Talukdar, 2019, p.1) Expectantly, at the outset of the century, people are aware and pay the necessary tributes and attention to the exotic, indigenous, and originality of the art and culture of Assam and North Eastern India. New generation of art activist/artists as Chitta Ranjan Bora (Kolong Kala Kendra, Nagaon), Diganta Hazarika (Jorhat) has not only practiced traditional manuscript painting on *sanchi-bark* and written book our heritage painting tradition in Assam as *Asomor Sachitra Puthi* by Diganta Hazarika (Plate 7).

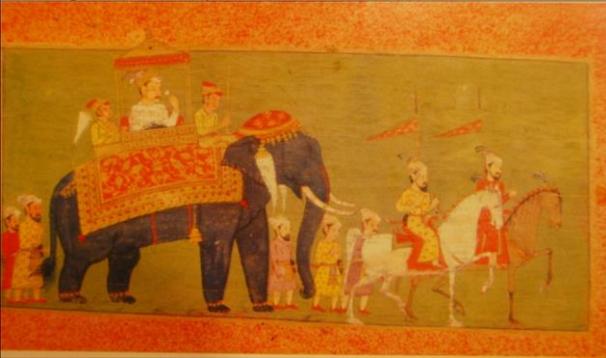
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22.

- a. Plate 1, *Bhagavata-purana (Adi-dasama)* popularly known as *Chitra Bhagavata*, Late 17th century (Image courtesy to Dr. Naren Kalita)



23.
24. Plate 2, *Hastividyārnava* manuscript, *Saka* 1636 (A. D. 1734) (Image courtesy to D. Naren Kalita)



25.
26. Plate 3: Cutting of *Sanchi* bark from the tree from a manuscript painting workshop held at Kolong Kala Kendra, Puranigulam, Assam, 2022 (Self photograph)



27.
28. Plate 4: finished painting in style of traditional manuscript painting of Assam at a manuscript painting workshop held at Kolong Kala Kendra, Puranigulam, Assam, 2022 (Self photograph)

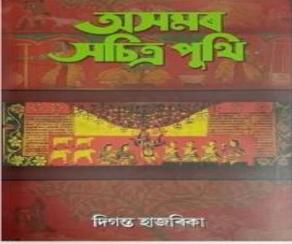


29.
30. Plate 5: Benu Misra's Painting titled *Death*, oil on canvas, 1980



31.
32. Plate 6: Wall graffiti on political activist Akhil Gogoi in Guwahati by Anga Art

33. Collective, 2020 (Image courtesy to Anga Art Collective, Guwahati)



34.

35. Plate 7: cover page, *Asomor Sachitra Puthi* (Image courtesy to Diganta Hazarika)