

Hengul-Haital: Traditional Colours of Medieval Assam

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Abstract

Assam, one of states of India, has been very rich in art and culture since ancient times. The history of Assamese fine arts can be traced back to the middle ages period. Basically, kingdoms and Satras were the main centre of attraction where fine arts had been practiced. Generally, the pictures found in manuscripts written in Sanchipat and Tulapaat were the sign of evidences of the existence of art education in Assam. In those arts, the ability to use the perfect combination of colours was really appreciated. The artists used mainly two colours in their pictures, they were: *Hengul* and *Haithal* to enhance the aesthetic beauty of those artistic creations. Besides, the exploitation of these two colours Hengul and Haithal was also evident in Shankardeva's period. These two colours were seen in furniture, different instruments used in music, *Bhaonas* etc., those found in Shankardeva's Satras, Naamghars. Hengul and Haital represent especially the characteristics of the middle Assamese period. These two colours gained popularity due to its durability and preservative qualities. The present paper is attempted to discuss mainly the identity, procedure of production, practical application those colours in the creation arts of the middle age period of Assam.

Keywords: Assam, Assamese, Colour, Hengul, Haital, Shankardeva, Traditional,

Introduction

Assam, one of the states of Northeast India, has a unique and valuable cultural heritage. In Assam, the tradition of art, painting, sculpture, architect etc. had been practiced since ancient times. The art of writing and painting were found prevalent during the reign of the king Bhaskarvarma (595-650 B.C.). According to Puranas, Chitrlekha the friend of King Bana's daughter Usha, was known as an expert in art and painting. The tradition of pictorial book was found in the Harshacharit of Banabhatta. During the Bhakti Movement led by Shankardeva and Madhavdeva, the pictorial books played a significant role. It was found in the *Charit puthis* that Shankardeva was very expert in art and paintings. Shankardeva had drawn the paintings of *Chihnayatra*, the first *Bhaona* in Assamese language himself. The ancient pictorial books are different from the traditional Indian art and paintings. The structure of face was cut parallel in shape and the use of colours given according to the characters which characterized these paintings. Apart from their different form, shape, structure, the styles of these paintings were very praiseworthy. The artists used the locally available material for the making of these art and paintings and also the colours used to enhance its beauty were also made naturally. The colours were prepared with the help of different plant leaves, fruits, stones, soil etc. and this tradition had been maintained since ancient times in Assam. In Middle period, specifically during the reign of Ahom Kings the history talked about that different colour had been used in the arts, paintings and sculptures. Basically, the use of Haital and Hengul were mentioned. The colour of Hengul is red and the Haital is yellow. These were very natural colours. The two colours were naturally purified and used in those paintings. These colours were preserved and kept safe from worms, ants etc. for a long period of time. That is why these colours were very popular among the artists of the medieval Assam. The Hengul- Haital colours were significantly applied in the creations of Shankardeva like the making of *Agnigarh*, the *Singhashan* of Naamghar, various wooden furniture, doors, idols, the make-up of the characters in the *Bhaonas* and also in the pictorial manuscripts. The *Sachitra Bhagavat*, *Gitgovinda*, *Anadi Patan*, *Parijat Haran Naat* etc. also mentioned the history of paintings in Assam. The Hengul- Haital was also exploited in the making of various pictures and paintings used in the *Bhaonas* of Shankardeva's creation *Chinhna Yatra*.

Methodology

In this study, different methodologies are adopted for the completion of the research work. Primary, secondary data collection and analysis have been adopted and results are evaluated. Investigators visited different Satras of Majuli and Nagaon and collected data on use of Hengul and Haital. Collected data were analyzed using descriptive method and case analysis.

Results and Discussion

Hengul is a derivative in nature. It is redish in colour. Instead of dark red, it is a combination of two colours: red and orange. In Assamese culture the Hengul has played a vital role. The ancient sculptures of Assam were found to make use of this colour. Mahapurush Shankardeva had also used this colour in make-up of the characters in *Bhaonas*, masks, lion's chair of *Naamghar*, different wooden furniture, doors etc. In the *Bhaonas*, the actors were given marks on their foreheads for the better performance in the dramas. Like Hengul, Haital has a great significance in the Middle Assamese period. Haital is yellow in colour. It is made up of a natural yellow matter. It is a yellow arsenic chemical

element. But there is not much difference between the Hengul and Haital in usage. Apart from painting Haital was basically used as a based colour applied in the surfaces of *Sanchipat*, *Tulapat*, wooden furniture's, sculptures etc. This Haital was also used in wooden boxes where Manuscripts were kept so as to protect them from insects. Just because of its preservative qualities in Hengul- Haital, the mediaeval sculpture and paintings are still fresh and well in condition without any damage. Yet the making process of these two is a little bit different.

Process of making:

The equal quantity of *Para* (Mercury), *Gandhak* (Sulfur) and *Shih* (Lead) is grinded on the stone palate. Then, the grinds are soaked in water overnight. On the next day, the water is removed and the grinds are kept under water for another three to four days. In this process it removed all the pollutants and the Hengul becomes brighter. In order to get the true colour of it, one *tola* (160 grains) Hengul is mixed with half *tola* gum. The artists prepared bright pale red colour by mixing of Haital with Hangul. Similarly, it is stated that soil (Khal) and different kinds of fruits, flowers were mixed together with Hengul and Haital. The paintings found during Medieval Assam showed the excessive use of Hengul colour. Presently, the tradition of using Hengul is seen in the mask culture of Samguri Satra at Majuli. It is also found that Hengul and Haital are use in making of traditional wooden sculptures like *Singhashan*, *Bishnu*, *Garuda*, *Bamon*, *Joy-Bijoy* in various satras of Assam.

Haital is made from natural dye which is grinded on a stone plate and mixed with gum. The natural yellow colour is derived from mixing it with other colours. Chalk and Haital are mixed to get pale yellow colour; Haital and Hengul are mixed to produce pale red, and green is derived from mixing of blue and Haital. If we spread sparkles on Haital, it becomes brighter.

Application:

During Medieval Assam, various paintings and pictorial books were found to make use of Hengul and Haital. Apart from the Ahom king, under the patronage of Koch and Darangi King Krishnanarayan these paintings were created. The tradition of pictorial books during the times of Shankardeva and Madhabdeva had contributed largely to the rise and development of the of Satriya style of art and painting tradition in the later stage. The paintings were portrayed in the manuscripts. The artists used Hengul and Haital colours in those paintings. Therefore, the importance of Hengul and Haital was very much in the Assamese pictorial books. Due to the natural calamities and invasion of Maan most of the pictorial books with illustrations were lost and the remaining ones postulated the unique and richness of those art of painting. The different colours used according to the subject matter, characters, the skillful use of derived colours etc. were worth mentioning in the study of Assamese art of painting. The artists made prepared derived colours by mixing of natural colours with Hengul and Haital. The renowned pictorial books with illustrations were: *Chitra Bhagawata*, (written in *tulapat* and preserved in Balisatra in Nagaon), *Dasham* (portrayed by Ruchibapu in 1765), *Adi Dasham* and *Ajamil Upakhyan* (preserved in Dakkhinpaat Satra), *Shastwa skandha of Bhagawat* (Bhagawata-VI, preserved in Museum of art and paintings in Tezpur), *Bhagawat Purana* (preserved two in British Meseum of London), *Astam Skandha Bhagawat* (Bhagawata-VIII, preserved in Brahmadesh), *Sachitra Dasham* (preserved in Gosaibari Satra of Goalpara), *Rangali Kirtan* (Satra of Madhav Aata, Pubthariya), *Chitra Kirtan* (in Madupur and Karanga Satras), *Sachitra Parijat Haran Naat* (in Aibheti Na Satra), *Sachitra Ramayan* (in Ahatguri Satra of Nagaon), *Sundarkanda* of Ramayan, *Lav-Kushar Yudhdha* and *Karnaparva* (preserved in the Library of Inquiry Committee of Kamrup), *Lankakanda* (in Tula leaf collected by Upendranath Lekharu), *Adhyatma Ramayan* (Satra of Bareghar), *Sri Bhagawat*, *Matshya Charit and Kumar Haran* (Satra of Mayaram Dinjoy), *Bhakti Ratnawali* (Satra of Karatipaar), *Nimi Navasiddha Sangbad* and *Bhakti Pradip* (Satra of Nagaon Chamguri) etc. Later many books were composed on the style of Gargaya. The pictures in those books also made use of Hengul and Haital. Some of them were: *Hastibidyanarb*, *Shankhachur badh*, *shastha Skandha* of Bhagawat, (Bhagawata-VI) and *Chahapari* etc. Apart from the above mentioned pictorial books, these books are preserved in the various Satras, private and public museums. In those pictures the use of Hengul-Haital was perceived.

Apart from the pictorial books, the use of Hengul and Haital was found to be used in the ancient sculpture and architecture. These two colours were also being used in the paintings and wooden sculptures of various Satras of Assam. The wooden sculptures are - Idle of Bishnu, Sri Krishna, sculpture of *Garuda*, *Borah*, *Mayur*, *Matchya avatar*, *Kurma Avatar*, *Gopabalak*, *Balaram* and *Singhashan* of various Satra and Naamghar etc. Likewise, wooden equipments pera (box), *dola*, *bhogjara* (Water vessel with a spout), *bankanhi* and *banbati*, (traditional Assamese dish and bowl with stand) almirah, gate, door, wall, *Sharai* (Assamese tray), *Thoga* (wooden stand to keep religious books) etc. was painted by these two colours. The different kinds of masks used in the *Bhaonas* were also painted with Hengul and Haital. The actors in Bhaonas also used these colours as makeup to beautify themselves. It is also use in *agnigarh*, *phuljari* and *mahta* used for lighting in bhaona. The wooden folk musical instruments were also painted with these colours to enhance the aesthetic quality as well as to protect those from decay.

The below mention figures of pictorial manuscripts, wooden sculpture and instruments are painted with Hengul and Haital.



Fig.1 Hengul



Fig.2 Haital



Fig. 3 Illustrated manuscript of Bhagawata ChitrBhagavata



Fig. 4 Bhagavata-purana (Adi-dasama) popularly known as (Dakhinpat Satra)



Fig. 5 Hastividyanavamanuscript, AuniatiXatra, Majuli, late 18th century



Fig. 6 Anadi-patana, Kuji Xara, Nagaon, mid-18th century



Fig. 7 Bhagavata-purana (Adi-dasama) popularly known as ChitrBhagavata, Late 17th century



Fig. 8 Parijata-harana , 1836 A. D.



Fig.9 Hemchandra Goswami, Mask maker, Samaguri Satra and Mask Maker



Fig.10 Mask, Garuda

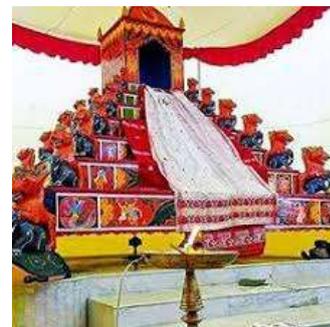


Fig. 11 Singhasan of Namghar



Fig.12 Carved line throne of Kamalabari Satra, Fig.13 Image of Garuda, Garmur Satra, Fig.14 Wood carvings of Sualkuchi State museum, Assam Majuli Satra, Assam



Fig. 15 Khol (a musical instrument)

Fig. 16 Dhol (a musical instrument) Fig. 17 Tokari (a musical instrument)

Conclusion

Hengul and Haital played a significant role in the history of Assamese culture and art. The colours used during the medieval Assam were derived from the natural elements. Painters and sculptors had given emphasis basically on the use of Hengul and Haital. They used these two colours in manuscripts, *singhashan* of Satras, Namghars, wooden box, gate, door etc. Because the Hengul and Haital made the arts long lasting and kept away from insects biting these paintings, sculpture and other bits and pieces are still available in the museums, Satras and Namghars. But due to the increasing demand of chemical colours the use of Hengul and Haital has diminished gradually. The artists also preferred easily available chemical colours rather than Hengul and Haital as these are very expensive and involve a complex making process. Presently, Hengul and Haital are still being used in the masks making tradition in New Chamguri Satra. Recently, new industries have emerged to practice of using Hengul-Haital in art of painting. Many workshops on manuscripts preparation, pictorial books production and Hengul-Haital colours making process and their application have organized with the effort of Srimanta Sankardev Kalakshetra, Tezpur University, Srimanta Shankardev Society (Batadrava, Nagaon) etc. The study should be carried out to focus on the development of art of painting during medieval Assam, its characteristics and relevance. Moreover, it need more research and study on the pictorial manuscripts, history books and *Charit puthis* to know the various aspects of Hengul and Haital,

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