



Palm Leaf Manuscripts Tradition of Odisha

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Abstract – Odisha, a land rich in cultural heritage, has long cherished palm leaf manuscripts as a vital link to its past. These fragile yet enduring leaves hold stories of love, war, medicine, religion, and daily life, etched with iron styluses and sometimes adorned with delicate illustrations. This paper explores the tradition of palm leaf manuscripts in Odisha, tracing their origins from ancient times to the present. It draws on historical records, epigraphic evidence, and preserved collections to show how these manuscripts shaped Odia script, art, and knowledge systems. The discussion covers the materials used, writing techniques, key subjects like Tantra and Puranas, and the role of institutions in preservation. Challenges such as decay from insects and humidity are highlighted, along with modern efforts to digitize them. Through simple narratives and examples, the paper reveals how these manuscripts reflect Odisha's unique blend of Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain influences. They not only preserve wisdom but also inspire contemporary artists in villages like Raghurajpur. In conclusion, this tradition stands as a proud possession, urging us to protect it for future generations. By understanding its depth, we honor the scribes who turned leaves into living history.

Keywords: Palm leaf manuscripts, Odisha heritage, Talapatra–chitra, Engraving techniques, Cultural preservation, Odia script, Illustrated pothis, Tantric texts, Epigraphic evidence, Manuscript collections.

1. INTRODUCTION

Odisha, once known as Kalinga, Utkala, or Kosala, sits on India's eastern coast like a quiet storyteller. Its sandy shores and lush forests have nurtured a tradition that whispers secrets through dry leaves. Palm leaf manuscripts, or pothis in Odia, are more than old books. They are windows into a world where poets sang of gods, healers mixed herbs, and artists drew dreams on fragile strips of green. Imagine a leaf from a palmyra tree, smoothed and etched with a sharp iron tool, holding verses from the Gita Govinda or recipes for forgotten cures. This is the heart of Odisha's manuscript tradition.

The story begins long ago, perhaps before written words had firm shapes. In ancient India, knowledge passed from mouth to ear, like the śruti of the Vedas. But in Odisha, writing found a home on palm leaves around the 6th century CE. Epigraphic clues, like the Kurud Charter of Maharaja Narendra, tell us of grants recorded on these leaves, only to be lost in fire and rewritten on copper (Panigrahi, 2018). Temples at Parasuramesvara and Muktesvara show carvings of scholars poring over strung leaves, proving their everyday use (Rath, 2005). By the 8th century, King Subhakara Deva sent the Avatamsaka Sutra on palm leaves to China's emperor, a gift of wisdom across seas (Tripathy, 2019).

Why palm leaves? They grew wild in Odisha's tropical soil, tough yet flexible, three times stronger than handmade paper (Meher, 2009). Scribes etched letters without ink, using a stylus to scratch lines that could be rubbed with charcoal for darkness. This shaped the Odia script round and flowing, without the flat heads of Bengali or Nagari, to avoid tearing the leaf (Das, 1977). No headmarks meant smoother writing, a practical choice born of nature.



These manuscripts cover vast ground. From Tantra riddles and Mantra chants to astronomy charts and love poems, they mirror life's full circle. Illustrated ones, like those from Amaru Sataka, show women with full forms and slender waists, echoing Konark's stone dancers (Panigrahi, 2018). They record saris, dances, and myths, preserving sociocultural threads. In a land of temples and rituals, they guided kings and farmers alike.

The British arrival in 1803 spotlighted this treasure. Scholars like Andrew Stirling and Rev. James Long collected pothis from Bhubaneswar's mathas, publishing early reports (Tripathy, 2019). Today, the Odisha State Museum holds over 40,000, a global jewel (Patel, 2011). Yet, many lie hidden in village homes, eaten by silverfish or drowned in monsoons.

This paper dives into that world. It unpacks the history, craft, and content of these manuscripts. Through their lens, we see Odisha's soul dynamic, devout, and deeply human. By guarding them, we keep the past alive, turning dry leaves into voices for tomorrow.

2. EARLY ROOTS AND HISTORICAL EVOLUTION

Palm leaf writing in Odisha did not spring up overnight. It grew from a soil rich in oral lore and stone inscriptions. The earliest hints come from the 3rd century BCE Asokan edicts, but those were on rock. Palm leaves, softer and portable, likely entered use by the 6th century CE, as seen in the Sarabhapuriya king's charter (Panigrahi, 2018). This document renewed a village grant after a fire destroyed the original leaf version, showing how common they were for legal records.

Sculptures add color to this tale. At Bhubaneswar's Parasuramesvara Temple (7th century), a panel shows a sage with a bundle of leaves on a vyasasana seat, deep in study (Rath, 2005). Similar scenes grace Muktesvara (10th century) and Konark's Sun Temple (13th century), where a scribe etches a leaf with stylus in hand. Even a Buddha image from Haripur depicts holy texts as strung leaves. These carvings are not just art; they are proof of daily life, where knowledge traveled on leaves from temple to home.

Buddhism played a key role early on. In 798 CE, Bhaumakara king Subhakara Deva gifted the Avatamsaka Sutra a massive Buddhist text on palm leaves to Chinese Emperor Te-tsung, complete with his autograph (Tripathy, 2019). This export highlights Odisha's role as a knowledge bridge to Southeast Asia. Jain and Hindu texts followed, with the Panchatantra by Vishnu Sarma (5th century) possibly scribed here, describing Kalinga's rivers and forests (Das, 1977).

The Gajapati era (15th–16th centuries) was a golden age. Kings like Purushottama Deva patronized poets, leading to works like Abhinava Gita Govinda by Divakara Mishra, dated April 6, 1494, in the Odisha State Museum (Moharana, 2021). Colophons, or pushpikas, end these pothis with scribe names, dates in Oriya Sala (from 593 CE) or Saka era, and even Christian calendars under Mughal rule (Panigrahi, 2018). This mix shows cultural layers Hindu roots with Islamic and colonial touches.

Colonial eyes opened wider doors. After 1803, British officials like Colin Mackenzie sent pundits to collect from Ganjam and Koraput, now in Chennai's libraries (Tripathy, 2019). Rev. Long's 1859 survey in Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal listed Bhubaneswar's treasures (Das, 1977). Post-1936, when Odisha became a province, the Education Department and Ravenshaw College gathered thousands, forming the State Museum's core (Patel, 2011).

Today, villages like Raghurajpur keep the flame alive. Entire families engrave and paint, turning talapatra-chitra into a living craft (Moharana, 2021). From ancient sruti to digital scans, this evolution mirrors Odisha's resilience.



3. MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES, AND ARTISTIC FEATURES

Crafting a palm leaf pothi is an art of patience and precision. The palmyra (tala) or date palm provides leaves, organic and long-lasting due to cellulose and lignin (Meher, 2009). Harvested young, they are boiled in water with turmeric to prevent insect bites, then dried under shade for weeks. This yields strips 2-3 feet long, 2 inches wide, smoothed with sand or pumice (Malla, 2017).

Writing starts with an iron stylus (lekhani), held like a knife to scratch letters into the surface. No ink at first just the groove. Then, a soft charcoal or lampblack paste is rubbed in, staining the lines black. For colors in illustrations, natural dyes rule lampblack for outlines, orpiment yellow, indigo blue, vermilion red from minerals, and green from copper (Moharana, 2021). These are mixed with gum arabic, applied with thorns or fine brushes. The result? Vibrant scenes that glow without fading.

Odia script suits this medium perfectly. Its curves avoid snags, unlike angular Devanagari (Das, 1977). Letters flow left to right, leaves strung on cords through holes at ends, bound in wooden covers etched with motifs. A full pothi might hold 50-100 leaves, like a modern book but alive with texture.

Illustrations elevate many pothis to masterpieces. In Gita Govinda copies, Radha and Krishna dance amid lotuses, figures sharp and balanced, echoing temple friezes (Panigrahi, 2018). Human forms show Odia ideals: women with ample curves and slim waists, men heroic yet graceful. Flora and fauna peacocks, elephants bloom in precise detail, akin to tie-dye sambalpuri patterns. These miniatures, unique to Odisha, blend poetry and painting, much like Odissi dance fuses rhythm and pose (Rath, 2005).

Artists in Raghurajpur still follow old ways. They engrave outlines, ink them, then fill with pigments ground on stone (Moharana, 2021). No erasers here mistakes mean starting over. This rigor birthed a style close to sculpture: bold lines, vivid emotions, and harmony with nature. Yet, leaves yellow under UV light, crack in dryness, or split from handling (Meher, 2009). Preservation demands care fumigation, controlled humidity, and now, digital imaging.

These techniques are not just craft; they are culture. Each stroke carries bhava emotion from a lover's glance to a god's wrath, linking scribe to reader across centuries.

4. CONTENT AND THEMATIC DIVERSITY

What secrets do these leaves hold? A universe, from sacred chants to everyday wisdom. The Odisha State Museum's 40,000 pothis span 27 subjects: Vedas, Tantras, Jyotisha, Ayurveda, and more (Patel, 2011). Sanskrit dominates, but Odia, Telugu, and even Persian appear, showing trade and conquests.

Religion leads the list. Tantric texts like Uddisa Tantra and Yogini Tantra detail rituals for deities like Vimala and Viraja, Odisha's Bhairava-Bhairavi pair (Das, 1977). Puranas abound Skanda Purana's Utkala Khanda glorifies local pilgrimages, while Ekamra Purana praises Bhubaneswar's groves (Majhi, 2023). Vaishnava works, like Baladev Vidyabhusana's Govinda Bhasya, blend philosophy with devotion. Jain and Buddhist remnants, such as Paippalada Samhitas, recall ancient faiths (Tripathy, 2020).

Science and lore follow. Astronomy shines in Siddhanta Darpana by Mahamahopadhyaya Chandrasekhara Simha Samanta (19th century), mapping stars with math (Das, 1977). Ayurveda texts like Madhava Nidana by Madhava Kara offer herb cures, while Chikitsarnava by Visvanath details diets. Grammar books, from Sarasvata Vyakarana to Raghunath Dasa's commentaries, refine language (Patel, 2011).

Literature blooms in epics and lyrics. Jayadeva's Gita Govinda has countless illustrated copies, its verses



alive with spring's passion: lalita-lavanga-lata (creeper of sweet clove). Panchatantra fables teach morals through animal tales, rooted in Kalinga's wilds. Odia works like Sarala Dasa's Mahabharata weave local rivers into Vyasa's yarn (Das, 1977). Champu poems, chautisas, and pois mix prose and verse, sung in rasas.

Even daily life appears trade routes in geographies, weapon sketches in war manuals, festival rites in Dharma Shastras. Women scribes like Madhavi Dasi added voices, penning bhajanas on Krishna (Das, 1977). This diversity paints Odisha as a crossroads Hindu heart with Buddhist echoes, royal courts mingling with village hearths.

From Adbhuta Ramayana to Bhagavata Mahatmya, themes unite devotion, duty, and delight in the divine. These pothis are not dusty relics; they pulse with rasa, flavoring Odisha's soul.

5. ART IN MINIATURE: THE ILLUSTRATED LEGACY

Illustrations turn leaves to jewels. Not mere pictures, they breathe text alive. Odisha's style sharp lines, balanced forms links to temples. Lingarāja's walls, Puri's Śrīmaṇḍir, Konark's wheels: same poise in leaf lovers (Malla, 2017a).

Gītagovinda leads. 377 illustrated pothīs in the Museum; more in universities (Malla, 2022). Bi-colored ones use black and red; multi-hued add greens, yellows. Radha's eyes well with longing, Kṛṣṇa's flute calls bhāva in every curve. Scenes from Rāmāyaṇa, Mahābhārata, Bhāgavata: Daśavatāra panels show Viṣṇu's forms, vivid as festival masks.

Other stars: Amaruśataka's couples embrace; Rāsakrīḍā swirls dancers; Na' Poi sketches village joys (Chapter V, 2023). Arttatṛaṇa Cautisa a poet's plea paints distress turned delight. Hasti Citra elephants march; Gopālīā cows graze with flute boys.

Artists' touch? Patience pure. Stylus first for outlines, then pigments: kajjala soot black, gorocanā yellow bile, kumkuma saffron red (Moharana, 2021). No blends just earth truths. Figures proportioned: heads one-eighth body, eyes almond-wide, like Odissi poses.

Raghurajpur holds the key. This Puri hamlet, "village of artists," engraves for Jagannātha's cars. Each home a studio grandfathers guide, children mix dyes. Perfection? From medieval patterns to now, unchanged (Moharana, 2021). Yet, leaves decay: heat brittles, water molds.

These miniatures are Odisha's pulse. Verbal art to visual śruti to sight they draft thoughts for stone, outliving leaves in temples (Malla, 2017a).

6. PRESERVATION CHALLENGES AND MODERN EFFORTS

Treasure demands guardians. Palm leaves, though sturdy, face foes: silverfish munch cellulose, monsoons warp them, fires devour bundles (Meher, 2009). In villages, many rot in lofts, uncared for amid poverty. Colonial hunts scattered collections; wars and floods claimed more.

Institutions rose to the call. The 2003 National Mission for Manuscripts surveys and digitizes, bridging ancient to digital (Tripathy, 2020). Odisha's State Museum, started in 1947, fumigates and climate-controls its hoard (Patel, 2011). Universities like Utkal, Sambalpur and Berhampur add sections, while private libraries in Puri thrive.

Raghurajpur's artists train youth, blending tradition with tourism (Moharana, 2021). Digital tools scan



leaves without touch, making pothis global via apps. Yet gaps remain only 11,000 of 15,000 surveyed titles are safe (Patel, 2011). Community drives, like matha donations, urge sharing. Preservation is stewardship. It honors scribes' labor, ensuring talapatra-chitra speaks on.

7. PALM LEAF MANUSCRIPTS AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS (IKS) IN ODISHA

In Odisha, palm leaf manuscripts are more than old writings they are the heartbeat of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS). IKS means the wisdom of local people, passed down like family stories, blending everyday life with deep spiritual truths. Here, there is no wall between sacred chants and simple farming tips. A pothī might hold a Tantric mantra on one leaf and a recipe for monsoon herbs on the next. This mix shows how Odishan knowledge flows seamless, from gods to granaries.

These leaves capture what elders knew by heart. Before scribes etched words, knowledge lived in songs and talks sruti style, ear to ear. Palm leaves made it last, turning whispers into records that families guarded like treasures. In Odisha's villages, a father hands a pothī to his son, just as he learned from his own father. This chain keeps IKS alive: rituals for river floods, dyes from forest barks, dances that heal the soul. Texts like Smaradīpikā or Pañcasāyaka mix love lore with life lessons, all in Odia script that locals could read.

Odisha's IKS shines in how these manuscripts tie people to place. They map sacred groves in Ekāmra Purāṇa, teach āyurveda cures from coastal plants, and sketch mudrās from Kāma Sūtra that echo temple dances. No big divide between holy and home knowledge is one big river, feeding all. The State Museum's 40,000 pothīs hold this Odishan system: over 100,000 unpublished worldwide, waiting to teach modern minds about sustainable ways, lost arts, and inner peace.

This tradition proves IKS is not frozen in time. It grows, like palm fronds in rain. In Raghurajpur, artists engrave new pothīs with old dyes, sharing IKS through school programs and eco-crafts. By saving these leaves, we save Odisha's unique knowledge web practical, poetic, profound.

8. CONCLUSION

Odisha's palm leaf manuscripts are more than pages they are breaths of a land that loves its lore. From 6th-century grants to 19th-century stars, they cradle Tantra's fire, Gītagovinda's grace, healers' herbs. Crafted with earth colors and iron tips, illustrated with temple souls, they reflect a people who see divine in daily dew.

Challenges bite bugs, rains, forgetting. But museums guard, villagers engrave, digits whisper. In Raghurajpur's hum, in Museum's hush, the tradition lives. These pothīs teach wisdom shared endures. Let us listen to their rustle, turn their leaves light, and pass the story on. Odisha's dry leaves still speak of roots deep, skies wide, hearts full.

These pothis teach us: knowledge endures when shared. In the digital age, they remind of roots human, humble, profound. Let us turn their pages gently, listening to leaves that still speak of love's bloom and life's dance. Odisha's heritage thrives not in silence, but in stories retold.

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