



National Journal of Hindi & Sanskrit Research

ISSN: 2454-9177

NJHSR 2020; 1(32): 209-211

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Importance of the *Hasti-vidyārṇava* in the Genre of Animal Studies

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In medieval times, so many treatises on practical knowledge on various themes were composed in Assam. A few manuscripts with pictures relating to health and treatment of horses, elephants and other animals were discovered in the twentieth century by scholars and researchers. Again, some books on techniques of building of temples, tombs, houses were also composed during this period. Though, these did not come in pure literary form, but these books on practical knowledge may be identified as 'Practical Literature'. The *Hasti-vidyārṇava* of Sukumāra Barkāith, an eighteenth-century writer is a notable work under this genre. In the year 1734 (Śaka 1656), the work was commissioned at the behest of Ahom King Śiva Singha (1714-1744 C.E.) and his queen consort Ambikā. The book primarily deals with care and management of elephants in royal stables. Dilbar and Doṣāi, the two artists had painted the manuscript, wherein images of the author, the two artists, king Śiva Singha, his chief queen Ambikā and their son prince Ugra Singha were found. In the past times, Assam was a land inhabited by elephants in abundance. A lot of elephants were there in this region, even today, there are many. Elephants were there in the houses of every aristocratic family. In the marriage ceremonies, cultural processions etc. elephants were used and this tradition continues even today. Elephants were needed for travelling to places situated in far distance. Again, in the battle fields, elephants were indispensable part. There were so many treatises written in Sanskrit language reflecting upon the training, pulling of timbers by elephants, remedy of diseases of elephants etc. such as in the *Hasti-āyurveda* of sage Pālakāpya, *Mātāṅgalīlā* of Nīlakaṇṭha, *Gajendracintāmaṇi* etc. Author Sukumāra Barkāith, the Assamese expert on elephants' scripture, besides consulting various Sanskrit treatises also looked into several books and treatment procedure prevalent among various tribes and incorporated that information in his book. The introduction of the book is very much captivating. Again, the pictures, those were found in this book are very significant. The book is written in prose form and language of the book is also lucid. Thus, the *Hasti-vidyārṇava* is a treasure of the sacred land of Assam and the identity of its inhabitants, which got recognition for its extraordinary Art form even from celebrated personalities like Mahātmā Gāndhī, Paṇḍit Jawāharlāl Nehru and Dr. Rājendra Prasād etc.

Key Words: *Hasti-vidyārṇava*, elephants, Animal Studies, genre, Assam**Introduction:**

In medieval times, so many treatises on practical knowledge on various themes were composed in Assam. A few manuscripts with pictures relating to health and treatment of horses, elephants and other animals were discovered in the twentieth century by scholars and researchers. Again, some books on techniques of building of temples, tombs, houses were also composed during this period. Though these did not come in pure literary form, but these books on practical knowledge may be identified as 'Practical Literature'. The *Hasti-vidyārṇava* of Sukumār Barkāith, an eighteenth-century writer, is a notable work under this genre. In the year 1734, the work was commissioned at the behest of king Śiva Singha (1714-1744 C.E.) and his queen consort Ambikā. The book primarily deals with care and management of

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elephants in royal stables. Dilbar and Doṣāi, the two artists had painted the manuscript, wherein images of the author, the two artists, king Śiva Singha, his chief queen Ambikā and their son, prince Ugra Singha were found.

Objectives:

The present paper tries to generate an idea about the genre viz. animal studies with examples of some significant works dealing with this field of animal studies, exhibiting extra-ordinary art form. The *Hasti-vidyārṇava*, having immense importance is a prominent treatise in this field. The paper focuses on the books on practical knowledge, which may be identified as 'Practical Literature', especially on the traits of the *Hasti-vidyārṇava*.

Methodology:

The present work will pursue a few steps of organized studies. The methodology of the research is purely qualitative in nature. Pertinent materials, books and other information are thoroughly studied. The study materials gathered are compared, cross-checked and hence critically examined from the point of view of the objectives of the present work.

Analysis:

In the past times, Assam was a land inhabited by elephants in abundance. A lot of elephants were there in this region, even today, there are many. Elephants were there in the houses of every aristocratic family. In the marriage ceremonies, cultural processions etc. elephants were used and this tradition continues even today. Elephants were needed for travelling to places situated in far distance. Again, in the battle fields, elephants were indispensable part. Elephant catching was a very old practice in Assam. It was not only a pastime or recreation, but was intended for enhancing wealth and power of the rulers and their monarchy as well as for ivory-works from their tusks, an excellent art form of Assam, exhibiting unprecedented workmanship, which had evolved from very olden times, the age-old tradition which is still prevalent, emerging into an ornamental art, the products of which are in high demand in foreign lands as well.

In Assam, the people hailed from the tribes like Khāmti, Cīngfau, Marāṇ etc. were well versed about the elephants. *Māhut* or *Fāndī* was normally chosen from these communities. Again, the sons of kings, officers etc. were also expert in directing an elephant. As there were profuse numbers of elephants in past times, therefore kings of medieval times of Kāmarūpa used elephants as their symbol of power and affluence and they were known as *Gajadhvaja*. Thus, Assam was a place famous, for abundance of elephants from the past times.

Again, according to the *Raghuvaṃśa* of Mahākavi Kālidāsa, in Indumatī's *Svayamvara*, prince Aja had got

down from elephant's back by holding the hands of the king of Kāmarūpa, in the wedding hall, to marry Indumatī, the princess.

References of elephants in some treatises of Sanskrit Literature:

In the ancient Copper plates and historical treatises, there were copious references and descriptions of use of elephants in Assam. There were so many treatises in Sanskrit language reflecting upon the training, pulling of timbers by elephants, remedy of diseases of elephants etc. such as in the *Hasti-āyurveda* of sage Pālakāpya, *Mātāṅgalīlā* of Nīlakaṇṭha, *Gajendra-cintāmaṇi* etc. Moreover, there were long references of *Gajaśāstra*, in the works like *Vṛhat Samhitā* of Varāhamihira, *Yaśastilaka* of Somadeva, *Arthaśāstra* of Kauṭilya and *Kāmandakīya Nītiśāstra* etc. Author Sukumāra Barkāith, the Assamese expert on elephants' scripture, besides consulting various Sanskrit treatises also looked into several books and treatment procedures prevalent among various tribes and incorporated that information in his book.

Hasti-vidyārṇava of Sukumāra Barkāith:

The treatise *Hasti-vidyārṇava*, an important treatise, in manuscript form was in the custody of late Mohidhar Burhagohain, grandson of Purnananda Burhagohain, the historic Prime Minister of Assam (A.D. 1783-1817). Subsequently, the copy was handed over to the Department of Historical & Antiquarian Studies, Guwahati, Assam. The original manuscript of the book had 193 folios. The extant folios, numbering 135 are of the measurement of 58x16 cm. The manuscript up to folio 163 deals with various types of elephants and from folio 164 to the end, deals with the illness and healing of the elephants.

The introduction of the book is very much captivating. The text starts with a salutation to Lord Gaṇeśa and Śrī Kṛṣṇa as well as there is the mention of the composition of previous work on similar subject by Sambhūnātha. It is possible that Sambhūnātha may be hailed from this ancient land of Kāmarūpa and it is apparent that author Sukumāra Barkāith had drawn information profusely from the treatise *Gajendracintāmaṇi*. About the lineage and life of author Sukumāra Barkāith, very little is known.

Significant Paintings of the treatise:

Again, the pictures, those were found in this book are very significant. The paintings are considered as most important part of the treatise, done by Dilbar and Doṣāi, whose identity is not precisely known. They were probably painters, invited by Śiva Singha for the painting purpose or already inhabited in this land. Undoubtedly, they were expert in their work as well as their illustrations are specimens par excellence. They used black ink which was

prepared from *śilikhā*, bull's urine, indigo, ochre (yellow), *hengul* (vermilion), green and lamp-black etc. The specimens speak clearly of a long-established tradition of the art of painting in Assam.¹ That the art of painting was fully blossomed in Assam is certified among others by the treatise in hand on elephant lore. The illustrations are based on various types of elephants, described in full detail in the work. The folios, without exception depicts the colourful pictures bearing on elephants. The painters have not forgotten even to describe the picture of the author of the work and those of their own, not to speak of the patron king, the most enlightened one, Śiva Singha and his equally enlightened queen consort Ambikā Devī, along with those of the nobles, courtiers and other attendants. Royal processions and recreations are also noticed delineated in detail, showing performances by musicians and dancers, dressed in garbs representing different parts of India, wrestling, fights between two elephants and an elephant and a buffalo.

Medicines Prescribed for elephants:

The book is written in prose form and language of the book is also very lucid. The book is a mine of prescriptions for the well being of the elephants. These are as follows: 1. Medicines prescribed for making the elephants rutted and strong, 2. Medicine for increase of ruttish water, 3. Medicines prescribed for making the elephants healthy, 4. Medicines prescribed for making the elephants sharp-witted, 5. Medicines prescribed for making the elephants successful in warfare, 6. Medicines prescribed for curing the habit of taking earth, 7. Medicines prescribed for curing diarrhea, 8. Medicines prescribed for worms, 9. Medicines prescribed for curing loss of appetite, 10. Medicines prescribed for curing fermentation in the stomach, 11. Medicines prescribed for making an elephant pass excreta, 12. Medicines prescribed for curing choleric diarrhea, 13. Medicines prescribed for curing jaundice, 14. Medicines prescribed for heart disease, 15. Medicine prescribed for syphilis and other disease of the organ, 16. Medicines prescribed for curing frequency of rutting, itches, skin disease associated with stoppage of urine, 17. Medicines prescribed for curing the disease of the flowing of pus from the vital parts and other diseases, 18. Medicines to be applied for cooling the temperature of a newly caught elephant, 19. Medicines to be used for making a hot tempered and restless elephant calm and quiet, 20. Medicines to be used for curing the diseases of the temples, 21. Medicines to be used for controlling the rutting stage, 22. Medicines for gout, 23. Medicines for swelling, 24. The Medicines prescribed for diseases of the legs, 25. Medicines for headache, 26. Medicines for stomach pain, 27. Medicines for ear diseases, 28. Medicines for neck

diseases, 29. Medicines for the treatment of trunk disease, 30. Medicines for curing uneasiness like the state of trembling, 31. Medicines for eye diseases, 32. Medicines for curing sores and wounds, 33. Medicines for two rutted elephants fight and stop fighting, 34. Medicines for making two medicated, rutted and unwarring elephants fight again, 35. Medicines for improving motion etc. Similarly, there are numerous medications for elephants in every page of the treatise, which are of great value for elephants' overall health and thereby contributing for prosperity of a given kingdom.

Conclusion:

The importance of the book *Hasti-vidyārṇava* is immense as the resultant form of all the knowledge about elephant scattered in different countries. Thus, the *Hasti-vidyārṇava* is a treasure of the sacred land of Assam and the identity of its inhabitants, which got recognition for its extraordinary Art form, even from celebrated personalities like Mahātmā Gāndhī, Paṇḍit Jawāharlāl Nehru and Dr. Rājendra Prasād etc.

Thus, the book demands more attention and serious study from researchers and general readers of this field.

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2. *The Elephant in Assamese History and Mythology*, by M. Barua, *Kaziranga National Park Centenary Celebration Volume*, pp. 34-39, Forest Department of Assam, Govt. of Assam, 2005.
3. *Hasti-vidyārṇava puthi* by Dr. Surya Kumar Bhuyan.

Endnote:

¹ "Though the art of painting in Assam may be said to have been developed along indigenous lines, the sublime ideals of the Indian tradition was kept in view, and its adaptation became more marked during the time of the great munificent Ahom rulers, whose aim had been to produce something of an everlasting nature, both spiritual and mundane, expressed through indigenous literary products, brought out by their liberal patronage and fine arts, even by inviting masons, sculptors, musicians, painter and the like from outside their territory, and in so doing they followed but the Vaisnava tradition of creating a broad-based Assamese society within the variegated patterned Indian cultural texture of universalism." Introduction, p.v, *The Hasti-vidyārṇava of Sukumāra Barkāith*.