

Text, Textuality and Digital Media
Prof Arjun Ghosh
Department of Humanities and Social Science
Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi
Lecture 7
Manuscript culture: India

Welcome, today we will follow up on our discussion on manuscripts. As I have been repeating time and again in this in my lectures. The reason why we are going through the history of various kinds of textual production is that we want to understand how technological changes have affected histories of our processes of production of texts and distribution and understanding of texts, because we are currently going through a similar change for moving towards digital media.

So, we want to look at look closely at various instances of these changes and the kind of large sweeping changes that these changes would have brought about at various instances in history. We had in one of our previous lectures looked at the history of morality—in the western context, and then we paid some attention to the tradition of Dastangoi specifically, which is a voice of was a practice of oral transmission, oral narratives, within the subcontinental context.

In our previous lecture we looked at very closely at manuscript production but we did so primarily in our a European context, you know in a western European context. While discussing manuscript production within a western European context, I did also suggest that it was not something that was happening only in Western Europe, many of these changes were happening through contact with other parts of the world, primarily with Central Asia, the Middle East, a Egypt, China.

So, when paper comes in from China, some of the manuscript traditions coming from Central Asia, pPapyrus came in from Egypt, ink comes from some of the inks material to produce the inks comes in from Afghanistan and various other places. So, trade was very important, contact with the rest of the world was very important in the development. These contactexts also aeffected other parts of the world and including the subcontinent. So, today we will look a little closely at what was happening within the context of manuscript production, within the Indian subcontinent. Of course this is a very vast field and I will just give you a very sShort introduction to this.

The principal aim of this introduction is not to go into the factual processes of what kind of manuscripts are there other, who produced this manuscript, who were the principal authors, who where the patrons sent, this is not what interest us in this particular course. What is of interest for us is to understand the technological processes which were necessary for textual production to take place, and therefore the important point really is, that we must have a fathomed idea that, textual production it's not merely that the author thinks and write, there are many steps towards textual production and the specific steps of textual production or in the context in which they are circulated and received determined the way the text actually is constructed or written, the words themselves are constructed and written. And this is something that we will try to understand as we go through this course.

Now, the origins of writing in India are a matter of dispute, of course this would be the case and this is of course true also in any other context, it is not only true of India but because what we are talking about is a history of very early times, thousands of years ago, and very little evidence actually is available to us.

As I have mentioned earlier that records would primarily be oral records, I mean it's an oxymoron, oral is not a record because it does not ~~(())~~ (5:28) is ephemeral, it does not last, and therefore we do not have any evidence, what we try to gather from where is any remnant of any tales, any images that may have been produced which talks about textual production or from within the narratives that are still extant, some of them written down hundreds of years later, after hundreds of years of circulation they may carry traces of contemporary events which will help us date those narratives. But unlike manuscript records, oral records are very difficult to actually trace and also lays them within the chronological order.

So, what I am going to talk about in terms of the origins of writing and the irre movement from morality to geographic chirographic traditions within India, within the Indian subcontinent, we need to talk about subcontinental context because obviously the modern-day India, the political India, is a very recent phenomena,

1

(Refer Slide Time: 6:38)



-This subcontinent has hundreds of years of history of various empires, various civilizations and which have interbred and intermingled and interconnected for hundreds and thousands of years, so **wethey** will talk about the sub continental context rather than specifically the political India.

One point that we need to note here which would be true of any society is that, in a primarily oral society before the coming of written texts, even learned people would be illiterate, even the elite within the society would be illiterate because literacy really means that you know the alphabet, you are able to read **orand** write and you are able to create or receive texts. But in a world which is oral there is no need for this kind of literacy, so people may be very learned but they would be learned through oral means, through the embodiment of knowledge rather than the textualization of knowledge.

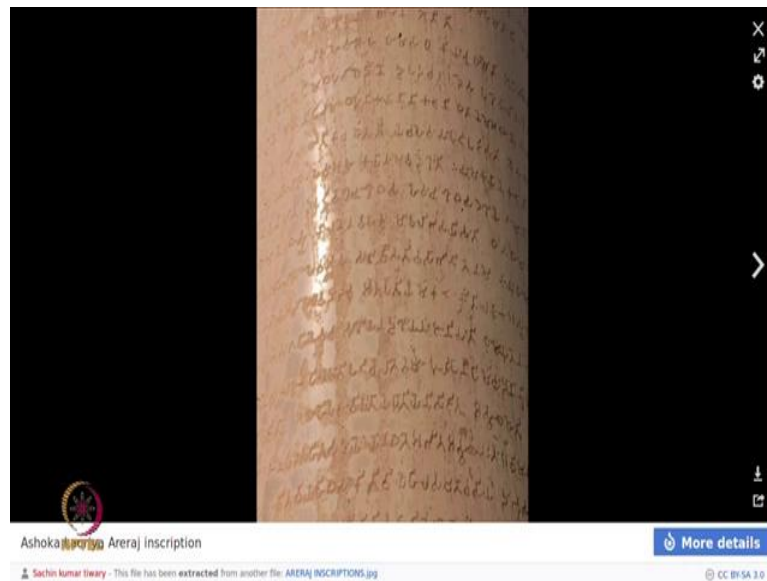
So, therefore we should not measure you know knowledge bases of oral societies on the basis of literacy, in an oral society, in a predominantly oral society illiterates are not ignorant, you know if you look at history, many of the great emperors would have been illiterates **soave** to say, I mean many of the poets would have not written their own poetry, they would have used scribes to do that. So, illiteracy is not a mark of ignorance, I would argue even today, many people **who are** very knowledgeable, extremely wise may still be illiterate, so I think that is something that we need to keep in mind.

(Refer Slide Time: 8:52)



Now, the earliest examples of writing within the Indian subcontinent surely is that of the Indus Valley civilization where you have the seals in which there are markings. That was around one can place them at around 2600 to 1900 Before the Common Era right, that was the kind of period in which these seals were found. ~~But this will~~ Now these were largely one would say principally for purposes of record keeping, of trade, -and economic in nature, they would not have been used to tell stories in all probability.

(Refer Slide Time: 9:21)



And then the next real significant instance of writing is whether were the Ashokan pillars which were created round about 250 years Bbefore the Common Eera, before the year 0.

So, and in between there were Vedic writings before the onset of Buddhism, so you understand the Ashokan pillars were created clearly after the onset of Buddhism,

(Refer Slide Time: 9:56)



But before the onset of Buddhism also there were Vedic writings which were available and most probably the Vedic script that was used was a Brahmin script, all-right., very rare documents pass on to us and manuscripts doare not last very long and so a lot of this, it takes a lot of archaeological and expert kind of work to be able to trace and time these documents.

But you must understand when we say that there were instances of Vedic writings does not mean that it was largely a chirographic society because the culture was largely oral

(Refer Slide Time: 10:39)



Visitors to India, to the subcontinent who came in from other countries and maintained records, other countries which did actually had practice of writing before writing originated in India or became prevalent in India, noted that in the courts and legal proceedings were largely oral, testimonies ~~wouldy is where~~ largely be oral, that would be true, we have evidence of it till about 300 years Before the Common Era.

Now, it does not mean there ~~wasere~~ absence of writing, it was that writing was primarily restricted to other domains like trade, but in legal proceedings or artistic creation, you know literary creation you did not have the use of writing. The date that I just discussed was 300 years Before the Common Era and however some as I said there is a great dispute over when exactly writing did comments, we really do not know. Some experts contest this and claimed that, there is evidence of codification in the Rigv-Veda which starts emerging at around 1200 years Before the Common Era.

So, that is a higher test of about 900 years. Now, the reason why other set of historians and scholars have questioned this dating or up to 1200 years is because that codification is possible even without the coming of writing, now one of the points that we would have figured out from our earlier lectures is that, it is with the coming of writing when the written text actually moves away from the speaker, from the immediate speech community, that you have the need for grammar, the codification, right.

However, it is possible to argue that this kind of codified techniques could be possible also within oral practices, it varies from context to context, now it would be like this, for example if you can think of ~~18-year~~ it in your own mind, ~~that~~ what is it that we recall easily? How many popular songs do you remember, the lines of how many popular songs do you remember? May not be fully but a large extent, that you keep may-be humming to yourself or sing among friends and gatherings and how many prose passages do you ~~the~~ actually remember? ~~right~~.

So, this shows that poetry, ~~in a~~ verse is actually codified together in the form of the rhyme and the rhythm and becomes easier to remember.

So, there is a certain degree of codification which is possible even within oral practices, so therefore codification though becomes much more regimented much more stringent in the written era, it does not mean that codification itself would be something that is an ~~une~~ evidence of a written tradition. So, if there is be in a ~~the~~ codification of the Rig v ~~V~~eda at around 1200 years B ~~b~~efore the Common E ~~e~~ra, does not mean that it is evidence of a literate society.

So these disputes are there, some of the important implications of this is that, if we ~~you~~ look at certain passages and they talk about instances, you know many of these ~~is~~ passages are also talking about practical life, things that are happening around, they are ~~have~~ contemporary references, so some of them carries these ~~is~~ evidence of the fact, that someone who is reciting a certain passage and forgets a certain part of the passage the ~~an~~ what would they do?

They are advised within that particular text to actually then start reciting something similar but maybe a different text, they are not advised to immediately refer to the written text and learn it by heart and then recite it again, as one would do in a literate society or another suggestion is, if monks did forget a certain passage or certain track they would then have to travel to a greater scholar and undertake a process of learning of that track before they participate in recitation once again.

As I have noted earlier, that in an oral society it is important to constantly keep reciting and repeating in order to keep the text in circulation, it is only by recitation that the text remains in circulation because that is how the human brain works, the more you keep practicing, the more you keep revising and recalling, you will be able to remember a whole lot more, the moment there is no revision, no repetition, that particular knowledge is within the danger of getting lost. With writing of course the need for repetition or the need for revision is reduced.

So, you would recall that in some of the religious practices, people would have to recite a certain holy text or a set of holy verses every single day, maybe more than once a day, that is a practice to ensure that, that text actually keeps getting perpetuated and keeps remaining in circulation. Within the subcontinent ~~_writing_~~, evidence of writing really started gaining ~~interaction~~traction, started increasing in evidence within the first 500 years of the Common Era.

(Refer Slide Time: 17:24)



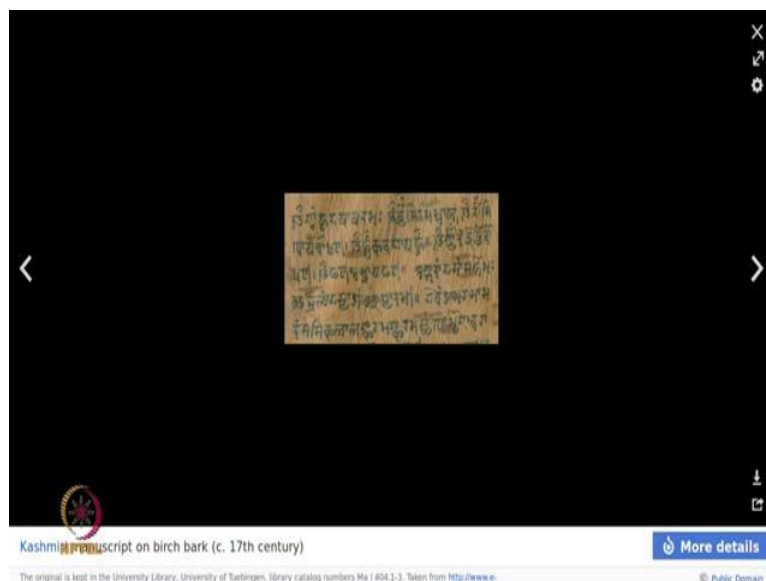
And writing took various forms, there would be inscription on rocks

(Refer Slide Time: 17:29)



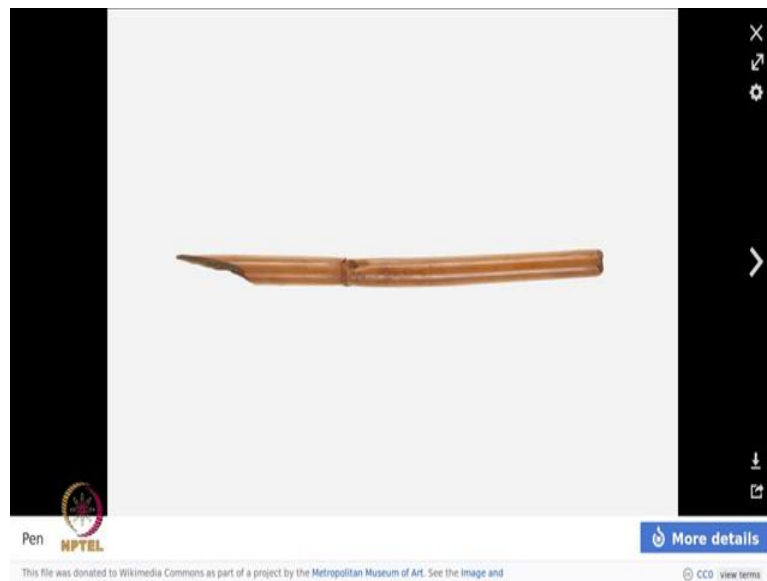
Inscription on copper plates— tambra patra— and palm leaf manuscripts, palm leaf manuscripts could have been of various kinds

(Refer Slide Time: 17:39)



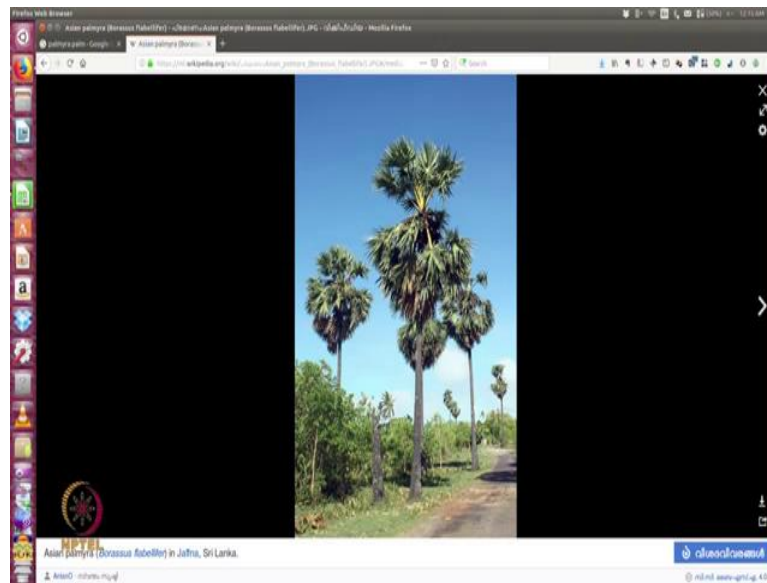
Or there would be the *Bhurja Patra* or the birch bark manuscripts, primarily found in the Himalayan region, both in Kashmir as well as in Assam, and ~~people~~paper really comes into being only by about the fourteenth and fifteen centuries from Central Asia through the various rulers who came in from Central Asia or traders and other scholars. There is also the Sanchi Pat the bark of the Agarwood tree, primarily, predominantly in Assam, this would be used. Across the Himalayas in China, they would use bamboo to write on

(Refer Slide Time: 18:23)



Which was not so much of a practice in India, in India they did use bamboo but only as a pen, -
~~of~~ a writing equipment.

(Refer Slide Time: 18:36)



Palm leaf where of various kinds, you know there was Palmyra palm or the Tarigach which produced the ~~writing~~-written sheets which is the Kharatal, it also be called the tali the name of the leaf of the plant was the Borassus flabellifer

(Refer Slide Time: 18:52)



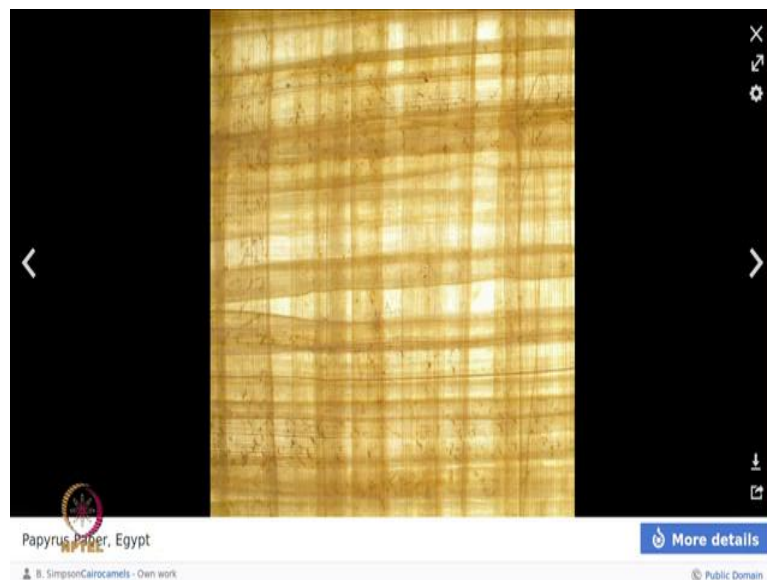
And the other leaf that was used, other palm tree that was used, the Corypha leaf or the Talipat. Now, these were of different sizes you know, the Palmyra ~~aa was one point, is is of~~ one and half to one and three-quarter inches wide, ~~where a is~~ the Talipat is one and three quarters to about 3 inches wide, it's wider.

Since ~~wethey~~ find that manuscripts under 1.75 inches, that is, one and three quarter inches, are very uncommon, so obviously one can assume that it is the Corypha leaf which is most prevalent but ~~very asvarious~~ parts of the country used various kinds of leaves. Also the Palmyra is more prone to insect attack, ~~or~~ Corypha is less prone to insect attack, so Corypha is the one that is more widespread, more favorite among the scribes.

Once the leaf is cut, the mid leaf is removed, you know the leaf comes in a kind of a star, sort of pattern each of the branches the mid leaf is removed, the leaves are boiled and ~~dr~~ried multiple times to harden, this is a certain process as we saw, even in ~~within even when~~ Western Europe we saw how the parchment ~~(-)~~ ~~(20:14)~~ making process was, you know a certain laborious process which is theire, similarly here the preparation of the writing surface takes a certain amount of time, various kinds of techniques were developed in various parts of the world.

We know that in Egypt when they prepare Papyrus, they would take papyrus, the leaves and then they will soak them in water and then put them across in a criss-cross pattern you can check online sources these are very easily available pieces of knowledge

(Refer Slide Time: 20:49)



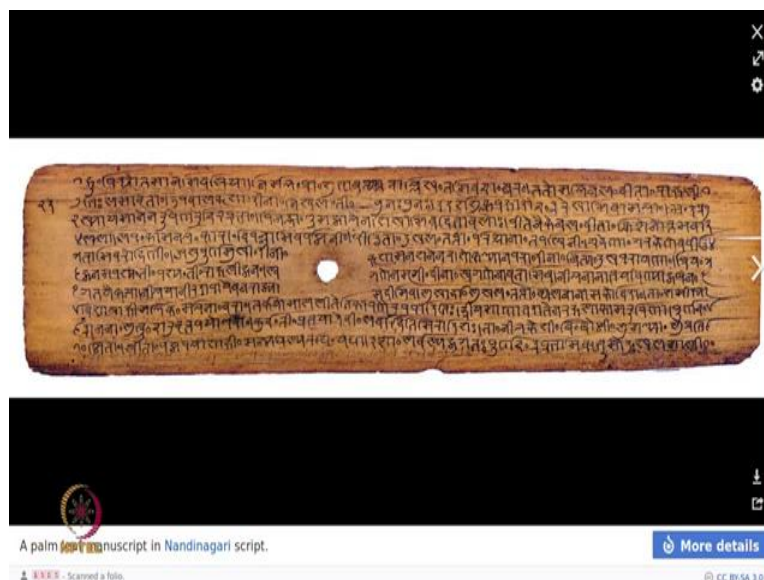
Put it in a criss-cross fashion and beat them so that they mergeust into a larger piece, but here we find that most of these, the palm leaf documents are elongated, they are long pieces

(Refer Slide Time: 21:02)



We talked about the shape of paper in the previous lecture, you know the fact that the shape of paper takes from the shape of parchment and is handed down in traditions, so when the Europeans comes into our country the shape of the writing material changes, whereas traditionally, within India, because of the use of palm leaf as a writing surface the shape of the writing surface was very different from than the one that we are used to today,

(Refer Slide Time: 21:31)



The shape e, that paper really takes, paper can really be cut and put across wood, it can be cut into any shape that you want but it is nearly a tradition that allows. And also the other point is that you know within the CodiCodexes, that the predominant technique is to open it across

from right to left, whereas within the palm leaf manuscripts they would open from bottom to the top, of course we know in various Arabic and Central Asian documents they would open

(Refer Slide Time: 22:07)



From left to right instead of right to left. So these are various kinds of traditions which are there with various kinds of conventions. Certainly the history of colonialism plays a very important role in universalizing in the European tradition.

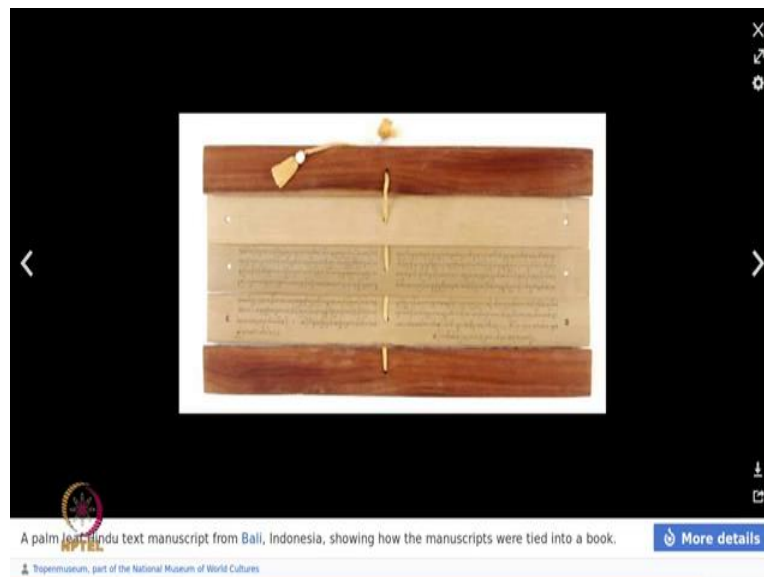
So, therefore even in the creation, in the technology behind the production of text, the certain cultural, conventional instances play a very important role.

(Refer Slide Time: 22:35)



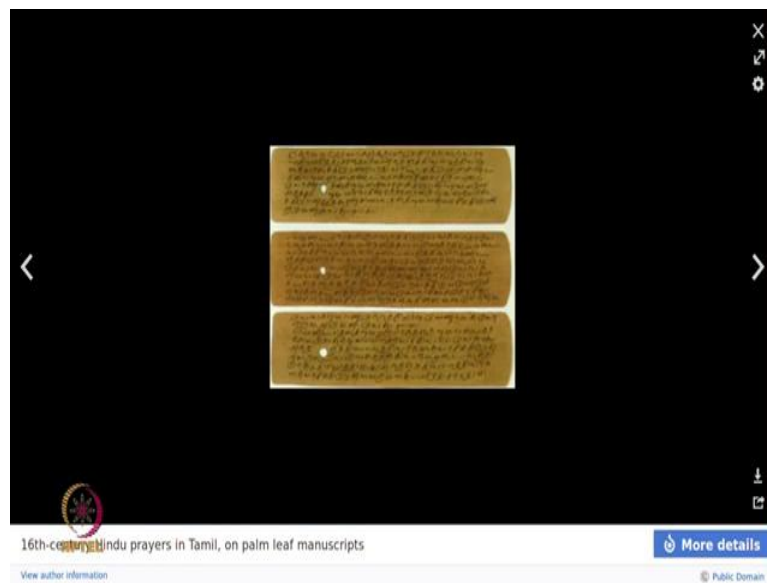
So, as I was talking about the preparation of these, the palm leaf for writing, the mid leaf is removed it is cut with a sharp knife and the leaves are boiled and dried multiple times to harden, they are dried in the shed and not in the sun, because the heat of the sun if it is too much, could actually cause the palm leaf to shiver.

(Refer Slide Time: 22:58)



In some parts of the country the palm leaves could be kept under mud for a longish period of time and then dried, various traditions are there, they would be smoothened, the surface needed to be smoothened, they would use a kind of a stone, maybe pumice stone to smoothen it, then the leaf would be cut to the certain size, all the leaves would be cut to a standard size. As I said in Assam they use the Sanchi bark the bark of the tree

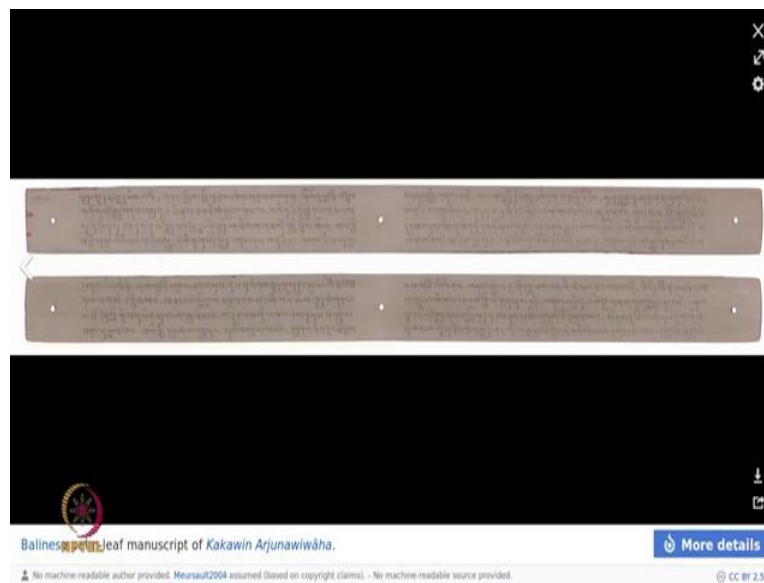
(Refer Slide Time: 23:28)



Which would again be dried in the sun for about 10 days and both surfaces should~~would~~ have to be cleaned, the outer surface needed to be shaved off to remove the outer darker layer and then they are smoothed and polished and made ready for writing and painting, right.

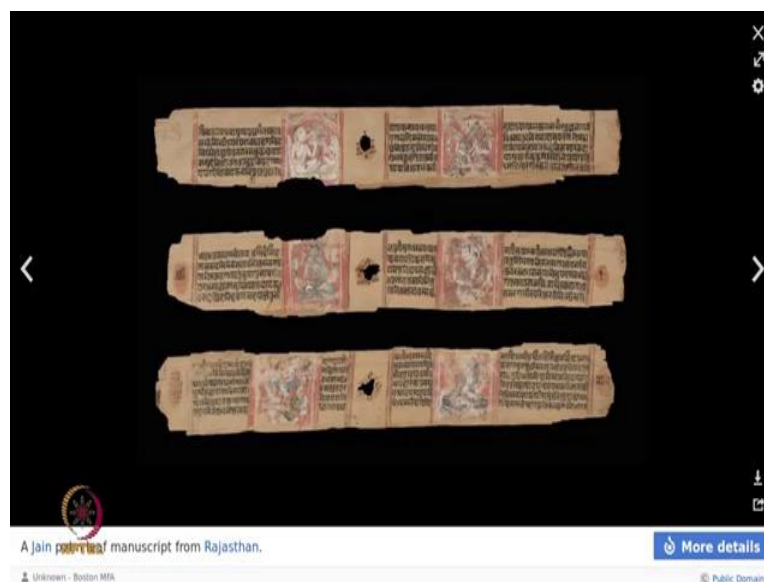
Now, colours for writing would be prepared by the scribes

(Refer Slide Time: 23:53)



~~Now, colours for writing would be prepared by the scribes~~ and these colours are by and large similar to the kinds that ~~were as~~ there in the European context because ~~these~~ colours would have a certain material that is used for ~~these~~ colours would be something that is a part of that trade network and they would be very expensive, the ink would be very expensive.

(Refer Slide Time: 24:18)



Mostly black would be used for writing, yellow and red for painting, decoration, gold and silver was primarily used for the ~~b~~orders, they would be used for the more ~~and~~-more sort of special documents that is prepared, the manuscript that could be prepared.

Now, to put these leaves together, keep these leaves together, holes would be made with a stylus in the middle of the palm leaf

(Refer Slide Time: 24:49)



Palm leaf manuscript of an ancient Odia poem on the Mahabharata called Draupadi Lakhindha. This manuscript is preserved in Gyana Mandira library, Koraput.

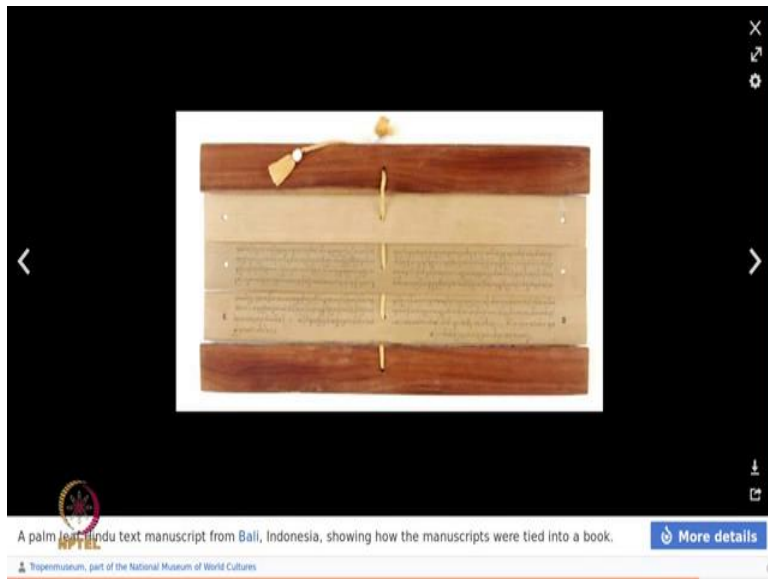
Prateek Pattanaik - Own work

[More details](#)

CC BY-SA 4.0

And a cord would be passed through these holes and they would be tied together, the palm leaf sheets would be bound between two strips of wood and there could be up-to a 100 leaves in one set you know and they would be bound between the two woods and then tied, that cord would be tied across the entire thing and kept together and they would also be wrapped with cloth.

(Refer Slide Time: 25:14)



And it is only then that the writing really starts, after this entire process, and there is a lot of use of organic repellents to keep insects and worms away from the sheets and because they there could be termite tree-eaten, most of the times would what happens is these

(Refer Slide Time: 25:39- 26:05)



Manuscripts would not last very long, they would maximum last for about 200 years which is quite long, I mean how many books do last for 200 years, they get moth eaten. So we do understand that these are organic materials and therefore manuscripts which are older than let's say 4 to 500 years would be very rare manuscripts, they rarely would survive, they

would also be not complete manuscripts, some parts of it may have survived the others have to be ~~(())~~ (26:06) deciphered.

(Refer Slide Time: 26:07)



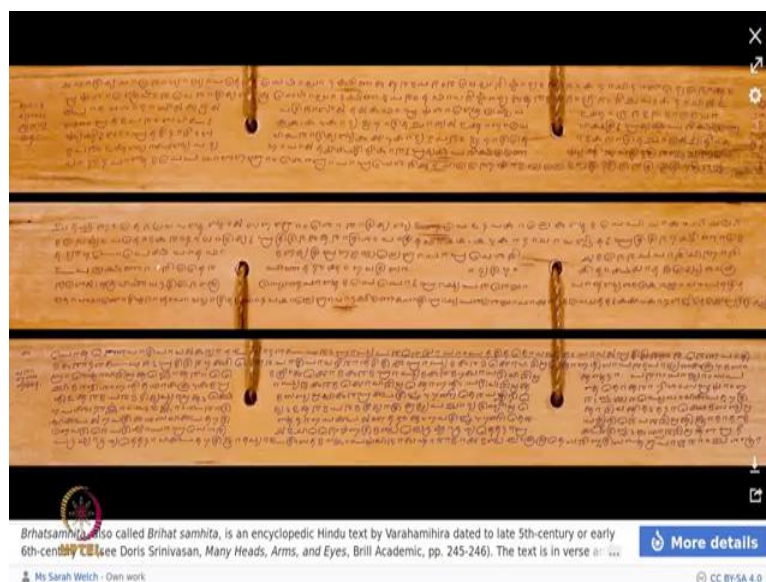
The tradition would be that almost, so every family would have their own manuscripts or they would be wealthy families or maybe royal families or maybe some monasteries would have their own manuscripts and when a manuscript really reaches towards the end of its life someone-ummoned the scholar, the scribe_ -actually makes a new copy of it, a fresh copy of it.

(Refer Slide Time: 26:33)



So, that is the tradition through which these manuscripts continue to survive, not that it is produced once and it remains, but it is constantly reproduced again and again and that's how the manuscript really gets handed down, now you would imagine that while it is getting copied and rewritten, there are various kinds of interpolations, interjections, changes, contemporary references, styles of writing, handwriting, various kinds of things would undergo a change.

(Refer Slide Time: 27:05)



So, though a story a particular narrative or a particular piece of spiritual set of doctrines could be noted down which could be passed down for generations for hundreds and thousands of

years but the particular, the physical sort of representation of it the manuscript that we are talking -about that would not be really very old.

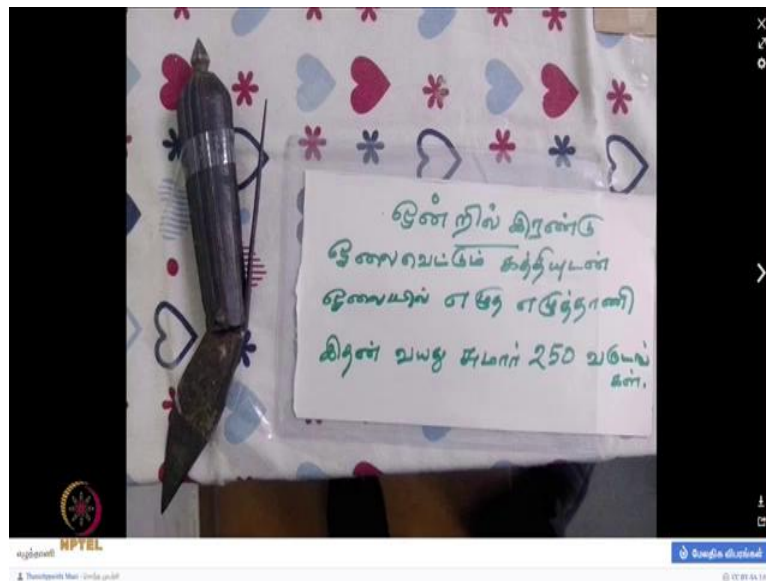
Now, what kind of writing implements would be used, primarily they would use a stylus, stylus was also used to make the hole in the manuscript to pass the cord.

(Refer Slide Time: 27:39)



They would also use pens and brushes, primarily read pens would be used which would be made of bamboo or other kinds of sticks and the metal stylus would be used to also write on the palm leaf primarily in Southern India and this is a very interesting process, a very interesting process

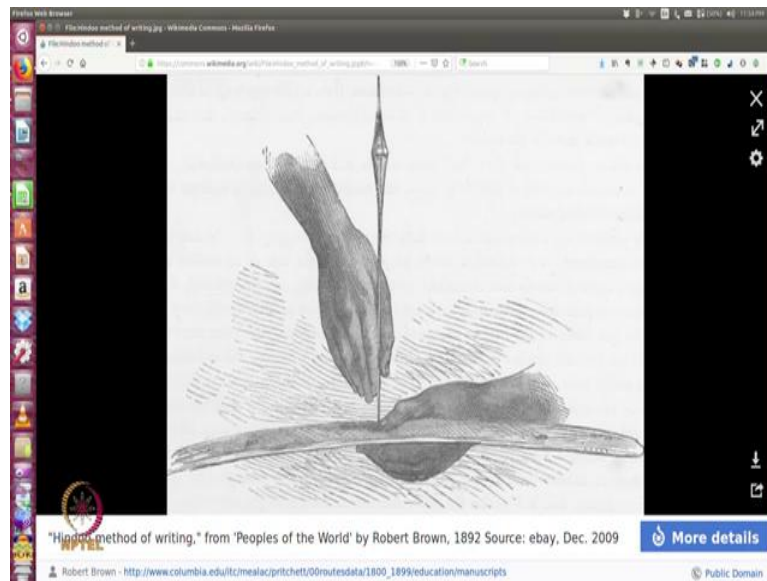
(Refer Slide Time: 27:59)



The stylus would really be held either like this or you know it could be held if a ~~w~~hole has to be made a lot more pressure has to be put with a thumb on the top and the little finger will ~~come~~inside in order to hold it together, so various kinds of techniques, but in order to write, they could write with their entire fist in place and they would usually take the piece of paper within the hand, hold it like this and keep inscribing, right.

Very interesting that when we are writing on paper it is the hand that moves, the paper remains stationary, so even if I am writing on the board at the back, it is the hand which would be moving and not the writing surface but on the palm leaf, it's actually the writing surface that moves, as the scribe holds the stylus at the same place and slowly with his thumb and forefinger keep moving the palm leaf from one end to another, right. This is also true of mediaeval scrolls, ~~you know~~ the writing would happen at the same place but the scroll will keep on scrolling from one side to another, and-in the writing surface being long, this is a very convenient thing to do.

(Refer Slide Time: 29:33)



And what was happening with these sharp stylus really is that it actually creates ~~our~~ groove on the surface, it creates a certain groove on the surface and there is no mark, after this they would take a paste of carbon, ~~you know~~ some kind of ~~soot~~ or ink and rub it over these grooves and then the excess carbon will be wiped off, that will leave a black marking of the entire written space, right.

So, that is a very interesting form of the way in which most palm leaf documents, of course ~~they~~ were other forms, various, Indian subcontinent is a very large geography, various other kinds of this, the way modern kind of writing that is with ~~the~~ ~~read~~ pen, who ~~would~~~~could~~ also be used, ~~a~~ bamboo pen would be prepared first, sharpened and dipped in ink and writing would also happen, calligraphy would happen, manuscript would be prepared.

So, there are various, multiple kinds of techniques which we used for ~~the~~~~ise~~ manuscript writing and the scribe had to learn this process, it was not something that any writing process is not very natural though we do learn the use of pencil and then in a very early on in our childhood, these are certain techniques which people have to gather, people have to learn without which they are not able to use them, all right.

(Refer Slide Time: 31:08)



Important point to note here is that there were no gaps between the words usually, the letters were joined because you know the gaps between the words becomes a much later modern innovation, it was not there in the very early days.

Point to be noted as I said is that these manuscripts did not last very long, you know in the humid climate, the survival rate of manuscripts would be very little, in fact most palm leaves did originate from the southern part of India, interestingly, it is in the southern part of India that you have a more humid climate, you know the coastal regions and the manuscripts would there would survive a lot less, er, but more if you move towards the drier climate, more towards northern + India or even if you move towards Central Asia where these armpalm leaf ves writing surfaces would travel before the manuscript is created there, it's almost like supply of raw paper and supply of palm leaf surfaces would be there through the trade routes.

Documents produced in Central Asia, documents produced within the drier climates of the northern India survive a lot more than they would survive in southern India and also another important point to be noted ias that these writing processes, they were time-consuming, they required leisure, so people who are engaged in manual labor would not be able to do it, certainly literacy was the-a matter of the elite, it was socially stratified.

So therefore it required the patronage of royal families, who would fund various centers of education, various (()) (33:01), g Gurukuls and various other kinds of maybe even centers of learning. Where -were these manuscripts production would take place, but even though manuscripts did exist, the culture still remained largely of oral one, in which text would be

used to commit to memory, manuscripts ~~w~~eould not be used, would not be sort of in kind of daily use because monks, priests and learned people would know these lines, texts by heart, they would be committed to memory and they would keep on reciting it and committing it to memory.

Because y~~ou~~ are still talking about a largely ~~overall sort of~~ oral universe and ~~you know~~ that is the kind of universe that it is. W~~H~~e will through this course keep on returning to this theme of what happens within manuscripts in print and textual circulation within the Indian subcontinent, to keep a note of what changes were happening within the place which is around us, the Indian subcontinent. However, ~~we~~ you must understand that many of the issues ~~that going to~~which concern us are actually resultant of a modern Western civilization and therefore the focus of this course will continue to be to understand western processes a whole lot more and we will see how they get translated within the subcontinent from time to time. Thank you.