

# **RECORDS PRESERVING AND CONSERVATIVE ENDANGERED SCRIPTS VIA ELECTRONIC ARCHIVE OF NORTH EAST REGION OF INDIA: WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ASSAM.**

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## **Abstract**

Present study examines the preservation and conservation of manuscripts in Assam, India, with a focus on linguistic diversity, temporal distribution, and script variations. The objectives include analyzing the linguistic diversity of manuscripts, investigating their temporal distribution, and examining script variations to understand the region's cultural heritage. Data was collected from the Endangered Archives Programme webpage of the British Library, and findings reveal that Tai language manuscripts predominate, particularly from the 18th century, predominantly written in the Ahom script. The study emphasizes the importance of preserving Assam's manuscript heritage to safeguard its cultural diversity, and recommends comprehensive digitization efforts, community engagement initiatives, interdisciplinary research collaborations, and policy support to ensure long-term conservation.

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## **Introduction**

The preservation and conservation of old heritage culture are indeed vital aspects of maintaining the identity and history of any civilization. Manuscripts serve as invaluable sources of information about human heritage and the past history of civilizations. In the context of ancient civilizations like the Paranoiac civilization, the use of papyrus manuscripts demonstrates the importance of written records in preserving cultural heritage.

In India, the collection and preservation of manuscripts hold significant importance in understanding its diverse cultural, religious, linguistic, and political landscape. With over 1950 mother tongue languages spoken across India, the recognition of various languages as official languages under the Indian Constitution highlights the country's linguistic diversity.

Despite constitutional provisions and efforts to preserve cultural heritage, many manuscripts have faced destruction, particularly during medieval periods. However, efforts by ancestors have ensured the protection of these manuscripts, both within India and abroad. Ancient centers of learning like Nalanda and Taxila played crucial roles in preserving manuscripts, although they were destroyed during medieval times.

Today, the Indian cultural heritage faces threats due to the lack of adequate protection for these manuscripts. It is imperative to recognize the responsibility of preserving manuscripts to maintain the textual tradition's value and inspire further research.

Preservation efforts not only safeguard cultural heritage but also provide opportunities for deeper insights into history, traditions, and societal norms. Governmental and non-governmental initiatives should prioritize the conservation and digitization of manuscripts to ensure their accessibility to future generations and researchers.

In conclusion, the preservation of manuscripts is essential for safeguarding India's rich cultural heritage and inspiring further research. By understanding the importance of these historical documents, efforts can be made to protect and conserve them for future generations.

## Background

The decline of linguistic diversity in India has been a concerning trend over the past several decades, as evidenced by census data and surveys. According to statistics from the 1961 census, India boasted approximately 1,652 languages spoken across its vast expanse. However, a stark reduction was observed by the 1971 census, which reported that only 808 languages remained in use. This rapid decline in linguistic variety underscores the loss of cultural heritage and diversity within the country.

In 2013, the People's Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI) shed further light on this issue, revealing that around 220 languages had disappeared in the preceding 50 years alone. Additionally, the PLSI categorized 197 languages as endangered, indicating a critical situation for linguistic diversity in India. These findings highlight the urgency of addressing the factors contributing to language endangerment and implementing measures to preserve and revitalize endangered languages.

One significant factor contributing to the discrepancy between government-recognized languages and those identified by the PLSI lies in the criteria used for language recognition. The Government of India only acknowledges languages with over 10,000 speakers, effectively excluding numerous smaller languages from official recognition. This narrow criterion leads to

an underestimation of linguistic diversity and hampers efforts to preserve and protect endangered languages.

The UNESCO classification system provides further insight into the extent of language endangerment in India. Recognizing languages as vulnerable, definitely endangered, severely endangered, or critically endangered, UNESCO has identified 42 Indian languages as critically

endangered. This designation underscores the urgent need for action to prevent the loss of these languages and preserve India's rich linguistic heritage for future generations.

Several underlying causes contribute to the decline of languages in India. Government policies that prioritize majority languages and exclude smaller ones, coupled with migration patterns leading to the dispersal of traditional communities, play significant roles. Economic factors also come into play, as changing employment patterns often favor dominant languages, further marginalizing minority languages economically. Moreover, shifts in social and cultural values, including the growth of individualism and consumerism, contribute to the erosion of linguistic diversity by overshadowing traditional cultural and linguistic practices.

In light of these challenges, concerted efforts are required to address the decline of languages in India. This includes revisiting language recognition criteria, implementing policies to support endangered languages, and promoting linguistic and cultural diversity as integral components of national identity and heritage. By recognizing the importance of linguistic diversity and taking proactive measures to preserve and revitalize endangered languages, India can safeguard its rich linguistic heritage for generations to come.

### **Endangered Archives Programme**

The Endangered Archives Programme (EAP) stands as a beacon in the preservation of global heritage, offering a platform to safeguard forgotten narratives and marginalized histories. Lisbet Rausing, the Co-founder of EAP, aptly describes it as a means to give voice to the voiceless and initiate a dialogue with humanity's diverse pasts. By capturing and digitizing archives that face the threat of destruction, neglect, or physical deterioration, EAP ensures that these invaluable sources of knowledge and cultural heritage are not lost to time.

Central to the success of EAP is the generous support from Arcadia, a charitable foundation dedicated to preserving cultural heritage and promoting open access to knowledge. Through Arcadia's funding, EAP has been able to provide grants to nearly 500 projects across more than ninety countries worldwide, spanning over a hundred languages and scripts. This substantial support has enabled the digitization of a wide range of archival materials, including rare printed sources, manuscripts, visual materials, and audio recordings.

Since its inception in 2004, EAP has made significant strides in its mission, digitizing over thirteen million images and 35,000 soundtracks. These digitized archives are made freely

accessible through local archival partners, the EAP website, and are discoverable via the British Library catalogue. This extensive and continually expanding online collection serves as a valuable resource for researchers, historians, and enthusiasts alike, providing opportunities for exploration, research, and enjoyment.

Through its efforts, EAP not only preserves tangible records of our shared heritage but also fosters global collaboration and engagement with diverse cultural narratives. By making these archives accessible to a wider audience, EAP contributes to the enrichment of scholarly research, inspires creativity, and promotes a deeper understanding and appreciation of humanity's collective history.

### Research Objectives

- Analyze linguistic diversity and prevalence of language based manuscripts in Assam.
- Investigate temporal distribution of manuscripts across periods.
- Examine script variations and their significance in manuscript preservation.
- Determine digitization requirements through quantifying total TIFF images for preserving Assam's cultural heritage

### Methodology

Collect data from the Endangered Archives Programme webpage of the British Library, specifically focusing on manuscripts related to Assam.

Include all documented manuscripts of Assam from the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme in the study.

Gather data directly from the British Library's website (<https://eap.bl.uk/>) to ensure accuracy and reliability of information regarding endangered manuscripts in Assam.

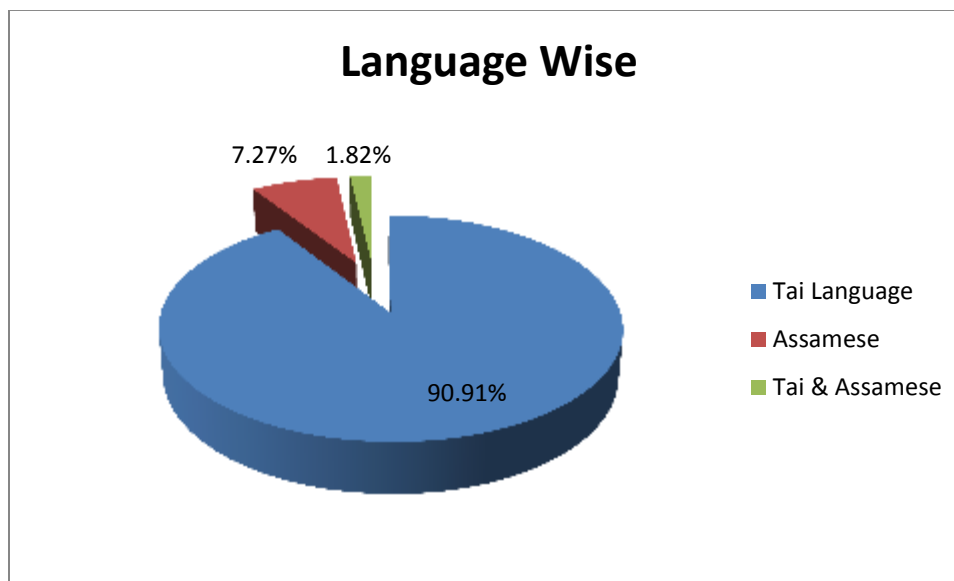
### Results

**Table 1**

| LANGUAGE WISE ANALYSIS OF MANUSCRIPT |                    |            |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------|------------|
| Language                             | No.of. Manuscripts | Percentage |
| Tai Language                         | 50                 | 90.91%     |
| Assamese                             | 4                  | 7.27%      |
| Tai & Assamese                       | 1                  | 1.82%      |

The above table no. 1 on Language Wise Analysis of Manuscripts reveals the distribution of manuscripts from Assam based on language categories. The interpretation indicates a predominant presence of manuscripts written in the Tai language, constituting 90.91% of the total. This suggests a strong historical and cultural significance of Tai linguistic heritage within Assam. Conversely, Assamese manuscripts represent a smaller proportion, accounting for 7.27% of the total, indicating a lesser but still notable presence. Additionally, a minimal number of

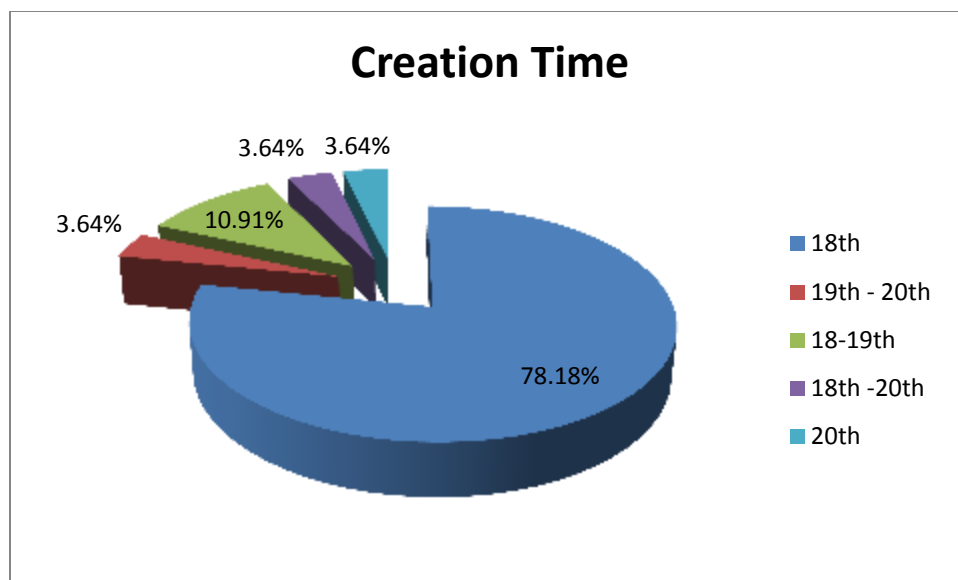
manuscripts (1.82%) feature both Tai and Assamese languages, showcasing linguistic diversity within the archival collection.



**Table 2**

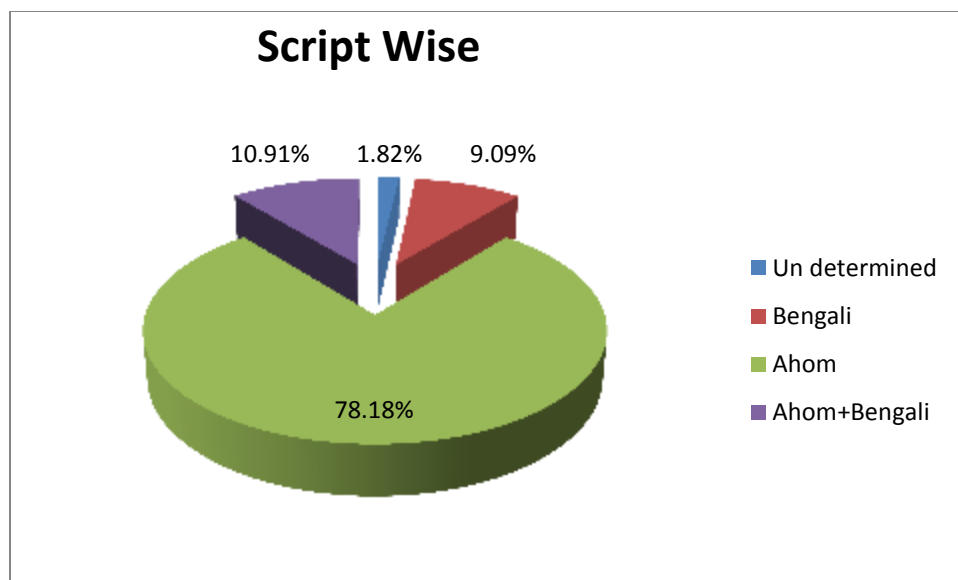
| CREATION TIME WISE ANALYSIS OF MANUSCRIPTS |                    |            |
|--|--------------------|------------|
| Period                                     | No.of. Manuscripts | Percentage |
| 18th                                       | 43                 | 78.18%     |
| 19th - 20th                                | 2                  | 3.64%      |
| 18-19th                                    | 6                  | 10.91%     |
| 18th -20th                                 | 2                  | 3.64%      |
| 20th                                       | 2                  | 3.64%      |

Table 2 provides a breakdown of the temporal distribution of manuscripts from Assam. The majority of manuscripts, totaling 78.18%, were created during the 18th century, indicating a significant output during this historical period. A smaller proportion of manuscripts were produced during other time intervals: 3.64% in the 19th-20th centuries, 10.91% in the 18th-19th centuries, and 3.64% each in the 18th-20th and 20th centuries individually. These findings underscore the diversity of creation times within Assam's manuscript collection, reflecting varying historical epochs and cultural contexts.

**Table -3**

| SCRIPTS WISE ANALYSIS OF MANUSCRIPT |                    |            |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------|------------|
| Script                              | No.of. Manuscripts | Percentage |
| Un determined                       | 1                  | 1.82%      |
| Bengali                             | 5                  | 9.09%      |
| Ahom                                | 43                 | 78.18%     |
| Ahom+Bengali                        | 6                  | 10.91%     |

Table 3 presents an analysis of the scripts used in the manuscripts from Assam. The majority of manuscripts, comprising 78.18%, were written in the Ahom script, reflecting its significant historical and cultural importance in the region. Additionally, 9.09% of the manuscripts were composed in Bengali script, indicating its presence as another prominent script utilized in manuscript production. Furthermore, a subset of manuscripts, accounting for 10.91%, featured a combination of Ahom and Bengali scripts, showcasing instances of linguistic hybridity within Assam's manuscript tradition. A small percentage (1.82%) of manuscripts fell under the category of "Undetermined," indicating uncertainty regarding the script used.



**Total Number of Tiff Images = 15088**

### Findings:

**Linguistic Diversity:** The majority of manuscripts from Assam are written in the Tai language, comprising 90.91% of the total, followed by Assamese manuscripts at 7.27%. Bilingual manuscripts combining Tai and Assamese languages represent a smaller proportion at 1.82%.

**Temporal Distribution:** The 18th century emerges as the period with the highest manuscript production, constituting 78.18% of the total. Other periods, including the 19th-20th century, 18-19th century, 18th-20th century, and the 20th century individually, have smaller representations ranging from 2% to 10.91%.

**Script Variations:** The Ahom script dominates the manuscript collection with 78.18%, followed by Bengali script at 9.09%. Additionally, manuscripts featuring a combination of Ahom and Bengali scripts account for 10.91%, while a small percentage (1.82%) remains undetermined.

### Discussion:

The findings indicate a rich linguistic and temporal diversity within Assam's manuscript heritage. The prevalence of Tai language manuscripts suggests the significance of Tai linguistic traditions in the region's cultural history. The concentration of manuscripts from the 18th century underscores the prolific manuscript production during this period, reflecting a vibrant intellectual and cultural milieu. The presence of Ahom and Bengali scripts highlights the linguistic interchange and syncretism within Assam's manuscript tradition, underscoring the region's multicultural heritage.



## Conclusion & recommendation

The study reveals the importance of preserving and documenting Assam's manuscript heritage to safeguard its linguistic and cultural diversity. The findings underscore the need for comprehensive archival initiatives to digitize and conserve manuscripts, ensuring their accessibility for future generations. Assam's manuscript heritage serves as a valuable resource for scholars, historians, and the community, offering insights into the region's rich cultural tapestry. It is recommended to prioritize comprehensive digitization efforts for preserving Assam's manuscript heritage, ensuring their long-term accessibility and conservation. Community engagement initiatives should be fostered to raise awareness and encourage participation in preservation activities. Furthermore, interdisciplinary research collaborations with international institutions should be promoted to deepen understanding of the linguistic, historical, and cultural significance of Assam's manuscripts. Additionally, policy support is essential to provide funding, legal frameworks, and institutional partnerships necessary for effective manuscript preservation and conservation efforts.

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