

## Bhoj Patra – The Paramount Reason why Ved Vyas Wrote the Mahabharata at Badrinath

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### Abstract

### Review Article

Before the invention and prevalent use of paper, writing was an arduous process, accessible to only a few, and to those few also, it was time-consuming and onerous. Hence, availability of writing material was of paramount importance for authors and playwrights, such as Kalidas and Charak. Bhoj-patra, the bark derived from the Himalayan Birch tree, is a suitable writing material, but available only at great heights in the Himalayas. It is obvious, that to write huge fables and scriptures, the Bhoj-patra was the most suitable material in ancient times. Hence, to pen down the voluminous Mahabharata epic, easy access to Bhoj-patra was a prerequisite, and must have formed an important reason for Sage Ved Vyas to put down his thoughts into words in the high Himalayas near Badrinath.

**Keywords:** Ancient writing materials, Bhoj-patra- the ancient paper, Himalayan Birch bark, Badrinath, Mana village, Alaknanda valley.

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## INTRODUCTION

Knowledge in ancient times was transmitted orally, from teacher to pupil. This transmission of knowledge was a continuing chain over dozens of generations, and this was how the knowledge of the Vedas created by Lord Brahma was transmitted down the ages. This oral tradition continued for thousands of years, until the son of Sage Prashar and Matsyagandha, christened as Krishna Dwaipaine at birth, segregated the colossal Vedic knowledge into four parts, which became known as the four Vedas. Since Dwaipaine managed this gargantuan task, he was henceforth referred to as Sage Ved Vyas (Vyas in Sanskrit means compiler, arranger or separator).

The story of the birth of Ved Vyas is also enigmatic [1]. Born with a very dark hue at birth, Ved Vyas was named Krishna (dark in colour), and since he was born on an island, he was also called Dwaipaine-*Dweep* in Hindi means island. The entire voluminous text of the Mahabharata revolves around the character of Lord Krishna and his role in the great Mahabharata war. Thus, one great Krishna (Sage Ved Vyas) wrote about the other great Krishna (Lord Krishna Vaasudeva). It is because of the great war which involved the whole of *Bharata-varsha* that the text, originally named as Jaya

(victory) by Ved Vyas, is commonly called as Mahabharata.

Muni Ved Vyas partitioned the immense ancient Vedic knowledge into four parts for better comprehension and systematic propagation. Later, to make the Vedic knowledge even more accessible, he wrote the Jaya (popularly known as Mahabharata), and the Puranas. In order to write the humungous and encyclopaedic Mahabharata, Ved Vyas elicited help from Lord Ganesha, who agreed to transcribe under the condition that Vyas would keep the dictation going on continuously from beginning to end. But to keep the process of writing going on continuously, a plentiful supply of writing material was required. And in ancient times, in the absence of paper, writing material was either leather, copper sheets, clay tablets or Papyrus in Egypt [2]. Since clay tablets and copper sheets require time consuming engraving, and papyrus was not available in India, the only feasible material available in abundance for quick writing was Bhoj-patra (bark of *Betula utilis* or Birch tree). And this tree only grows in the Western Himalayas at very high altitude, in the area around Gangotri and Badrinath [3].

### Badrinath Dham and Mana village

Badrinath is one of the holiest pilgrimage spots of Hinduism, and is located at an altitude of around 10,000 feet in a wide valley of the Alaknanda. Around 4 kms further up the Alaknanda Valley, lies the village of Mana, the last inhabited spot until the Tibetan border. Beyond Mana, there are high glaciers and very difficult

terrain. The older name of Mana was Manibhadrapur. It was at this village that Muni Ved Vyas wrote the huge epic known as the Mahabharata [4]. The name of the village, Mana, is also enigmatic, and is probably so called because a spring in a cave right above the Saraswati river is supposed to arise from Lake Mansarovar (of Kailash-Mansarovar fame).



Figure 1: The Alaknanda valley at Mana village, showing the confluence of the Saraswati with the Alaknanda, the cave from where the Saraswati emerges, and the locations of the Vyas cave and Ganesha cave near the banks of the Saraswati

The Saraswati river emerges at Mana as a fierce cascade with great velocity, from a deep cavern in a mountain adjacent to the village, and only flows for less

than a kilometre before merging with the Alaknanda at the Keshav Prayag, as the confluence is called (Figures 1 & 2).



Figure 2: Showing the topography of the area, amidst which Badrinath and Mana are located. High, snow clad mountains surround the Alaknanda valley on all sides. Inset shows a magnified view of the locations of Vyas and Ganesh caves, alongwith Bheem bridge over the Saraswati gorge, Shri Badri Narayan temple, Is located on the Alaknanda 4 kms downstream from Mana and Keshav Prayag

### Bhoj-patra (Birch) tree

The Himalayan Birch, locally known as **Bhoj-patra**, grows at altitudes of 10,000 to 14,000 feet [3]. It abounds in the forests around Badrinath and Gangotri (Figure 3). Since the writing of the Mahabharata was going to be a very long and continuous process, there was need to have an ample supply of material to write on. The bark of the Bhoj-patra tree is just like paper [5], and is an

ideal material to write on (Figures 4 & 5). Alongwith writing material, there was also the need for shelter and food. The caves at Mana, being reasonably big, provided adequate shelter to the authors and to the material being written down. The wide Alaknanda valley provided adequate food-grains and vegetables during the warm season.



**Figure 3: A plantation of Himalayan Birch, called Bhoj-patra, the bark of which can be used to write on [5]**



**Figure 4: Rolls of the bark of Bhoj-Patra can be created, making it easy to use for writing**



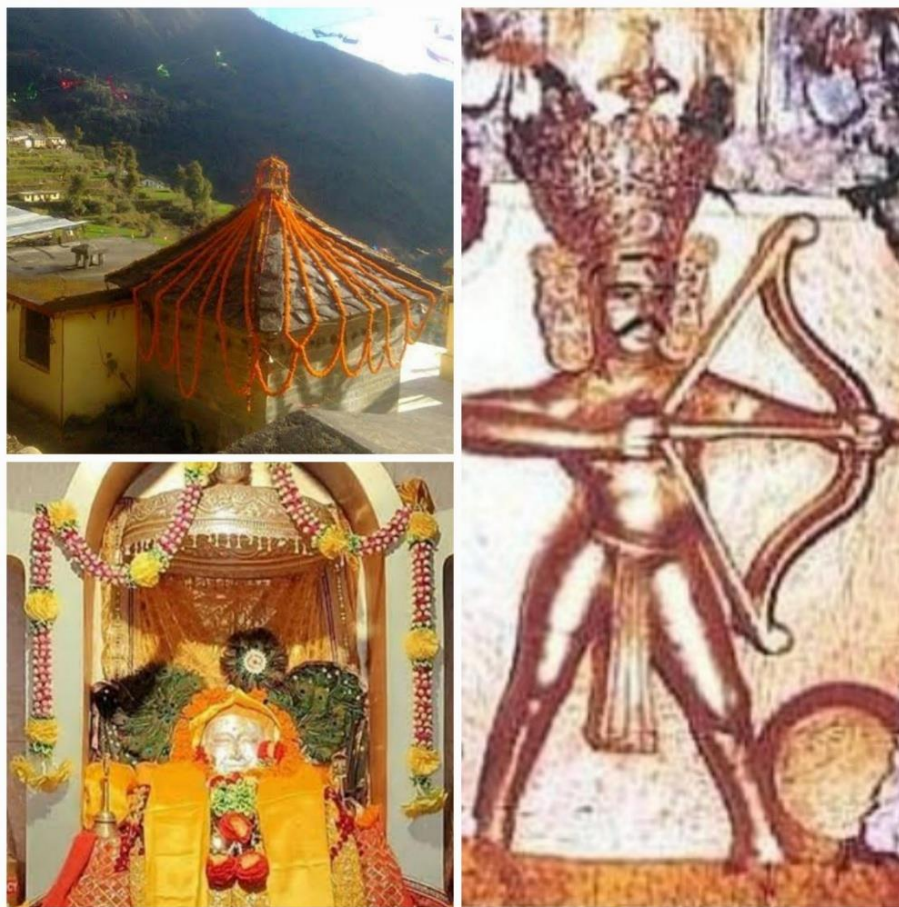
**Figure 5: Paper-like bark of Birch tree is shown peeling off by itself**

### Lord Ghanta-karan, the Protector (*Khsetrapal*) of Badrinath

The presiding deity of village Mana is Lord Ghantakaran, and a beautiful wooden temple dedicated to him is located in the midst of the village. Lord Ghantakaran is also one of the fifty two *Viras* (protector deities) of Jainism, and is known by the name Ghantakaran Mahavir [6, 7]. Ghantakarna is invoked for protection from variety of obstacles and difficulties such as epidemics, diseases, fire, invasions and ghosts. His ears are as large as bells, hence the name (*ghanta*=bell, *karan*=ear). He is the protector of Badrinath dham, and

is worshipped at Badrinath during the prayers, with several hymns being dedicated to him.

Once every twelve years, the Devra Yatra of Lord Ghantakaran takes place. This Devra Yatra is a celebration where the Utsava Murthi of this deity makes a journey from Lord Ghantakarna temple in Pandukeshwar, Uttarakhand to Vasudhara falls near Badrinath. The villagers walk barefoot, even through snow, and during the Yatra, Lord Ghantakarna visits villages located in Badrinath Dham such as Mana and Bamni while stopping for rituals along the way and seeking final blessings from Lord Badri.



**Figure 6: The temple of Ghantakaran Mahavir at Mana village (top left). The deity installed inside the temple (bottom left). In paintings, he is shown standing, holding the bow and the arrow aimed towards left, having a crown on his head and bell-shaped earrings**

### The Vyas and Ganesha Caves

Both these caves are located very close to the Saraswati river, which emerges in the form of a furious cascade from a deep cavern in a mountain overlooking the village Mana. It cascades down a gorge for around 5-600 metres, and then becomes a gentle stream which

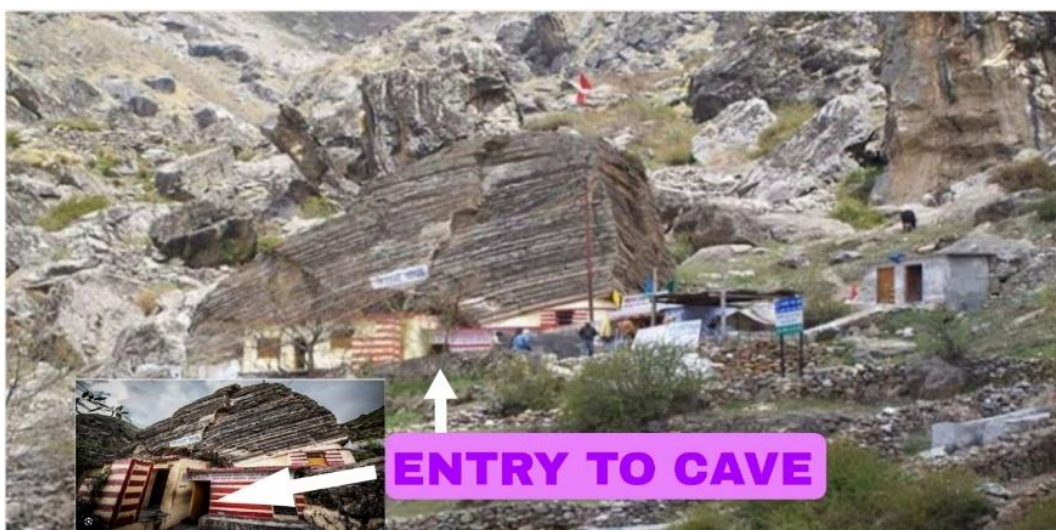
merges with the Alaknanda. Very close to its emergence from the cavern, the Saraswati has a rock bridge over the gorge, known as Bheem pul. The small village of Mana is located on the left bank of the Saraswati, and is inhabited by tribal folk, mainly Bhutias. The Pandava Bheem is associated with having erected this bridge.



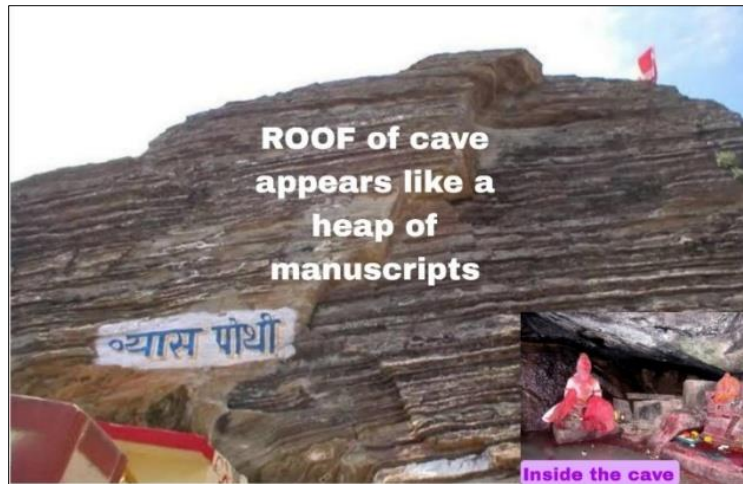
**Figure 7: The ancient texts mention that Ved Vyas wrote the Vedas and the Mahabharata on the banks of the Saraswati. This co-relates with the location of the caves at Mana**

The Vyas cave is larger than the Ganesha cave, and has a very peculiar “roof”. The cave is located inside a huge boulder that is separate from the surrounding mountains

(Figure 8). This huge boulder looks as if the pages of a rock manuscript have been stacked in a huge heap (Figure 9).



**Figure 8: The Cave of Muni Ved Vyas is located at one edge of the Mana village, at a slighter higher point than the village**



**Figure 9: The vault of the Vyas Cave looks like a stack of rock sheets, piled on top of each other. In Hindi, it is known as Vyas Pothi, the scripture written by Vyas**

The cave of Lord Ganesha is close to the Vyas cave, and the small hamlet of Mana is located between the two caves and the Saraswati river. Lord Ganesha is invoked at the beginning of any auspicious ritual or Pooja by Hindus. Muni Ved Vyas could think of no better scribe than Lord Ganesha, and that is why the massive scripture known as the Mahabharata (Jaya) was penned down by Ganesha at the behest of Ved Vyas. It must be kept in mind that apart from a phenomenal memory possessed by the Elephant-headed God, Ganesha also had the added facility of a versatile and long trunk, with whose help Ganesha could far outperform any regular writer of manuscripts, since the trunk could function as a third arm.

Upon being requested by Sage Ved Vyas to transcribe the text, Lord Ganesh agreed to become the scribe under the condition that Ved Vyas would not pause, and keep dictating continuously (without interruption) until the very end [8]. Muni Ved Vyas agreed, but requested Lord Ganesha to first fully comprehend the *Shloka*, before penning it. So, whenever the Muni wanted some time off to perform his daily ablutions and rituals, he would concoct up a very complex Shloka, and while Lord Ganesh worked through the deliberate convolutions, taking time to comprehend the complexities, in this time interval the Muni would get the break he wanted.



**Figure 10: The Lord Ganesha Cave**

## CONCLUSION

In ancient times, material to write on was a luxury that was not easily accessible. Though various modalities like palm leaves, papyrus, clay tablets and copper sheets were used, these were not easily available and the process of writing by engraving was very time consuming. Under such circumstances, to write a huge text required huge quantities of suitable writing material alongwith pen/stylet and ink. Such a suitable material around 5000 years back, was the bark of the Silver Birch, which was pretty smooth with few blemishes. Hence, to write the voluminous text of the Mahabharata, Rishi Ved Vyas chose Badrinath area, which abounded in Birch (Bhoj-patra) trees, and also had required ancillary facilities like drinking water, food, firewood for cooking, and shelter.

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